

A Cold Day In . . .

A Divergence of the Legion of Super-Heroes
by David Meadows

Brek Bannin walked out of the Legion of Super-Heroes clubhouse with one word thundering in his ears: accepted.

Accepted!

ACCEPTED!

Brek could scarcely believe it. All the hard work, all the training with his powers, the hopes, the dreams, the ambition, the burning desire to join his idols in the Legion of Super-Heroes ... and in just a few minutes on this sunny morning in Metropolis, all his ambitions had come true.

He thought about the stern faces of the admissions panel. Only Bouncing Boy showed a hint of a smile. Saturn Girl had faced him coldly, arms folded in an unwelcoming manner. But Brek understood her attitude—he had seen the news vids. Seen? He always scrutinised and picked apart every scrap of information regarding the Legion. So he knew that he was effectively applying for the place left vacant by the death of Lighting Lad. And how could he ever live up to the memory of that great Legionnaire?

But he had swallowed his nervousness, and calmly demonstrated his cold-generating power. Resisting the urge to open up his full power, he demonstrated his finesse and control, freezing small items and condensing frost from the air. The Legionnaires had seemed cautiously impressed.

‘But what if your power freezes and disables us at a critical moment?’ Sun Boy had asked.

Saturn Girl had snorted derisively. ‘We might ask the same of yours cooking us, Dirk. Polar Boy obviously has the ability to control his power. As leader I have the casting vote, and I say ... welcome to the Legion, Polar Boy.’

After the test, the induction had passed in a whirl. Polar Boy had received his anti-gravity flying-belt and was given the clubhouse access codes. He was quickly shown around the clubhouse, which was a lot bigger than the exterior suggested, with a maze of underground levels below the famous rocket-ship shell. Brek found all of it fascinating. The rooms where they stored Earth’s most powerful weaponry, the science lab used by Brainiac 5 (though Brek noticed the Coluan scientist had a tendency to leave experiments in progress all over the clubhouse—there was even a mass of chemical apparatus in the main meeting room!), even

the oddity of the lever used to summon Superboy from the 20th century ('It looks cool on the vids when we throw a big lever,' Bouncing Boy explained breezily).

They had started running through various emergency procedures with him, but when Saturn Girl saw his attention beginning to flag—he had queued all night to earn his place in the trial, and was starting to feel exhausted—she kindly suggested he take a break and continue tomorrow, where there would also be more Legionnaires present for him to meet.

So, as darkness fell, Brek wandered outside the clubhouse and along the Avenue of Super-Heroes, wondering what to do now. He had no money—every last credit had gone on getting to Earth—and wasn't quite clear on where he was going to sleep. Or what he was going to eat. In his excited daze, he hadn't even thought to ask the Legionnaires, and none of them had volunteered any advice.

A hand touched his shoulder.

'I know how you must feel ...'

Brek turned to see a tall, striking, raven-haired woman.

'How can you know how I feel?' he blurted out. 'Nobody can ...'

'But I do! I'm Night Girl and I, too, came to Earth to join the Legion, but I was rejected even though—'

'I wasn't rejected!'

Night Girl appeared taken aback.

'You weren't?'

'No! I was accepted! I have been in the clubhouse all day!'

'Oh ... Gosh.'

The beautiful young woman looked momentarily sad, and Brek had a sudden flash of how it must feel to have failed. He felt that he ought to say something to make her feel better.

'What's your unique power? Maybe I can put in a good word for you!'

'That's very kind,' she said, 'But I think they were right to reject me. My power is super-strength, look.'

Brek gasped as she effortlessly lifted the nearby statue of Cosmic Boy.

'But with such strength, how could they reject you?'

'My strength only functions when there is no sunlight,' she said, looking crestfallen. Brek could see that this was a severe limitation. For fifty percent of the day, she would have no powers at all. No wonder the Legion had rejected her. He tried to think of something conciliatory to say.

'Perhaps you could tell me about what it's like in the clubhouse?' asked Night Girl. 'Was Cosmic Boy there? Or ... any other Legionnaires?'

Brek smiled. 'No, Cosmic Boy and several of the others were away on a mission, but let me tell you about it, it was amazing!'

Brek and Night Girl—or Lydda, as he discovered her name to be—spent all night talking, and found they had much in common. He felt that this was somebody he could become close friends with. But that wasn't to be. In the morning, she would return to the dark planet of Kathoon, her hopes and dreams dashed, while he would follow his dreams back to the Legion clubhouse and begin his new life. It was a realisation that made him feel uncomfortable, especially as it became time for them to part, but she brushed away his attempted apologies.

'Don't apologise for succeeding, Brek. You'll make a fine Legionnaire. You have a great power, you're smart, and you have a good heart. Don't worry about me, go and live your dream.'

She hugged him ('Gosh, she is tall,' thought Brek, smothered) and they went their separate ways.

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Dear Lydda,

I hope you made it safely back to Kathoon and this spacegram finds you there.

As you may guess, life is exciting in the Legion of Super-Heroes. Oh, it wasn't at first. There was so much to learn, and most of it is very tedious. You have to memorise their constitution, and to know all the emergency procedures, and to understand how the Monitor-Alarm system works. Then you spend a lot of time in front of the Monitor-Alarm system waiting for an emergency call to come in.

But yesterday a call came in while I was on duty, and I got my first mission! It was the Ocean Research Facility here on Earth. They artificially evolve giant sea creatures. No, don't ask me why they do that, I have no idea. Anyway, several of their giant creatures had broken free. Some of them are pretty dangerous, and they needed to be rounded up before they ran amok.

I was sent on the team, along with Bouncing Boy, Saturn Girl, and, you'll be glad to hear, Cosmic Boy was there too. (Don't think I couldn't tell! I have attached a private vid of him in action to this spacegram.)

Well, it was very exciting. I've been putting in a lot of practice with the anti-gravity flying belt (do you use yours much on Kathoon?) and it was great to use it for real.

Saturn Girl took charge at once. She's very competent and efficient, you know. She knew that despite their great size, the creatures are very timid, so she had Bouncing Boy bounce around them on the ocean surface. The bouncing terrified them, and herded them back towards their pen, where Cosmic Boy's power could pull the broken fence back together (see vid!). So clever! I think it's great that the powers you would think were less useful, like Bouncing Boy's, still have an important role to play. (It makes me think they were wrong to reject you because your power was limited!)

But here's the most exciting bit—one of the creatures slipped past Bouncing Boy, and I stopped it! Yes, really! On my first mission! It was easy, I just really cut loose with my power and froze the water around it so it couldn't move, then we pushed the "iceberg" back into the pen with the creature trapped inside. Don't worry, the warm ocean water melted the ice pretty quickly and the creature was unharmed. You have to think about that sort of thing in the Legion.

Oh, there was one bad thing. When we got back to the clubhouse, Saturn Girl berated Colossal Boy for not answering her telepathic summons. It's true that his power would have been useful to stop giant creatures, so she was right really. Colossal Boy sure looked glum, though. I don't know him very well, but he always seems dependable. But Saturn Girl is in charge (ha, it's funny, sometimes Sun Boy acts like he thinks he's in charge—remember I told you how he tried to reject me at my try out? Sun Boy is a brave hero but he's a bit of a blow-hard sometimes.)

I'm still learning what the other Heroes are like. I get on well with Phantom Girl and Triplicate Girl, both (all four? Ha ha!) are very sensible and down to

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Earth. Ultra Boy isn't great company, in fact he's a bit dull. Brainiac 5 spends most of his time telling us he's more clever than we are. And mumbling something about his ancestor, I don't know, I'm afraid I tune out a bit. I haven't met Superboy or Supergirl yet, it seems they don't come to the 30th century as often as they used to. I met Mon-El, but he's a bit of a loner and spends a lot of time on missions off Earth.

Well, sorry for writing so much, but you did ask me to give you my news. I hope I haven't bored you.

Love

Brek looked at the message for a second and then carefully deleted the last word.

Best wishes,
Brek

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Dear Brek,

I so enjoyed reading your spacegram. You were awfully quick-thinking with that giant monster!

I have also seen vids of your second mission. The one where you forced the atomic-powered "crime city" to land and then captured the criminal scientists inside it. It was so exciting. The vid-commentator said Sun Boy was creating that huge light, but I watched closely and I could see you had created a giant ice crystal to focus and amplify his power. I don't think his ruse would have worked without that, as it would have been too obvious to the criminals. Sun Boy took the credit in his interview afterwards, but really you saved the day, didn't you? Well, you and Cosmic Boy on the ground, of course!

But I noticed you were looked uncomfortable in your victory parade afterwards. Aww, were you shy? That's so cute.

No, I'm kidding. I know you're not a glory hound like some. I bet you'll just die of embarrassment when they put up your giant statue in the Avenue of Super-Heroes. But you'll deserve it. You're a true hero.

I don't have much news to write about here. Kathoon seems very dull after the lights of Metropolis. I help my father in his lab, and I do some public works (the other day I smashed a giant meteor that was heading towards our capital city—so yes, the flight belt did come in useful!) but really I don't have many friends here. I mean, nobody with powers that I can talk to, the way I could with you.

Please write as much as you like. I hope I hear from you again soon.

Love,
Lydda

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Brek smiled as he read the spacegram again. Sometimes, in his daydreams, he imagined he and Lydda had formed a super-hero team of their own ... but that was crazy! How could he want anything other than to be right where he was, a valued member of the Legion of Super-Heroes?

An alarm sounded from the Monitor-Alarm system, and suddenly all the on-duty Legionnaires were running for the cruisers. Brek caught up with Brainiac 5.

‘What’s happening?’

‘A fleet of Robot-Ships is heading toward Earth, blasting everything in their path! Earth’s fleet can’t stand against them, so we Legionnaires are being called in.’

The two were the last Legionnaires to board the cruiser, and no sooner had the airlock closed behind them than the mighty ship blasted off and streaked up through the atmosphere. Brek looked around at the small group. Superboy and Supergirl were in other time periods and Mon-El was visiting a distant part of the galaxy. How could this small band of weaker Legionnaires prevail when even Earth’s space fleet was helpless?

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On distant Kathoon, Lydda lay on her bed, her eyes glued to the vid set. A news channel was broadcasting live pictures from space near Earth. There were so many Robot-Ships, and only one brave Legion cruiser to face them. She felt both proud and anxious as she recognised the form of her friend leaving the cruiser with a group of Legionnaires.

‘Keep safe, Brek.’

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The Legion had quickly decided on their attack plan, *en route* to intercepting the fleet. Because Saturn Girl’s telepathic powers would be useless against the machine-controlled Robot-Ships, she would remain on the cruiser and mentally direct the others to their targets. Brainiac 5 would stay with her and study the ships for weaknesses. Saturn Girl could then relay his findings to the attack teams.

Brek flew towards his assigned target, looking for an exhaust port that matched the mental picture Saturn Girl was sending him. Seeing it, he filled it with ice. Seconds later, the build up of exhaust gasses produced an explosion deep within the engine.

‘I did it!’

No time for gloating, Polar Boy! There are still hundreds of ships to stop. Your next target is to your right.

‘Sorry, Saturn Girl.’

Brek spotted the target and zoomed off.

*

In Metropolis, a young man called Staq Mavlen lingered by a vid-store window, watching the battle unfold on a bank of screens.

I could have been there, he thought to himself.

Realising the pizza he was supposed to be delivering had grown cold, he glanced furtively round and breathed a small burst of fire at it to warm it up.

Stupid power, he thought. No wonder the Legion rejected me.

Dragging himself away from the screens, he went about his mundane business.

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A Robot-Ship loomed in front of Brek. He raised his arms to summon his power one more time. He was so weary ...

Not that one! Saturn Girl mentally screamed in his head.

Like a ghost, Phantom Girl drifted out through the hull of the ship. He had almost exploded the ship with her in it!

‘Oh, gosh, I-I’m sorry—’

She squeezed his shoulder.

‘Don’t worry Brek.’ They watched the ship spin off course. ‘I ripped the central flight controller out’ she explained. ‘Now come on, let’s smash some more.’

*

On the planet Zwen, the population were using their powers of super-suspended animation in preparation for the planet’s six-month-long night period. As Dag Wentim turned his body to stone, he thought of his recent trip to distant Earth. His failure to win a place in the Legion of Super-Heroes would haunt his dreams for the next six months. If only there was some way he could regain his self respect ...

*

Brek had lost count of how many hours he had been fighting. His power was almost exhausted, and many of his team-mates were in the same shape. Several of them had minor injuries.

He floated in an eerie, silent graveyard of ships. Pieces of wreckage filled the sector as far as he could see. Surely there was nothing left to fight? Saturn Girl had fallen silent some time ago, and he hoped that didn’t signify anything awful had happened to her.

A movement caught his eye. A wreck that he thought was inert had blinked to life and was spinning a ray-gun turret in his direction. He watched it in a daze, his tired and numbed brain unable to process what he was seeing. The turret opened fire.

In a flash, Ultra Boy interposed his invulnerable body, saving Brek from certain death.

‘Watch yourself, Frosty!’ Ultra Boy turned a grin on him. Of all of them, he had done the most damage to the enemy, and yet he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of energy—and optimism.

‘Come on, Brek. There aren’t many left. You’re not going to let Sun Boy scrag more than you have, are you?’

Brek shook himself. It didn’t matter how tired he was, there was still a job to do.

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In the rocky wilderness outside Metropolis, Ral Benem was hiking alone. He had been happily exploring Earth since his rejection by the Legion of Super-Heroes, not sure what to do with his life. He had always had a curious streak—even as a baby!—and for now he was happy just to enjoy the new sights Earth could offer him.

Such as these new seeds!

Ral studied the dry, dead-looking seeds as they drifted slowly around him. They were most peculiar, unlike anything he had seen before.

He couldn't resist using his power of accelerating plant growth on one of them, just to see.

Before his astonished eyes, the seed grew into a plant unlike any he had ever heard of, let alone seen. It sprouted branches and roots that looked almost like living arms and legs ...

With a yelp of fear, Ral realised that they *were* arms and legs, and the 'plant' was actually a giant humanoid plant-alien. Ral turned and ran as it reached for him, but he was too late. Dry, wooden fingers closed around him, choking the life out of him. His last thought was of just how *many* seeds were falling to Earth ...

*

It was a subdued Legion who flew back to Earth after the battle. Miraculously, none of them had been seriously hurt. But all of them had suffered minor injuries, and all were physically and mentally exhausted. Each one privately knew that they couldn't have lifted another finger if the threat to the Earth hadn't ended.

But it had ended. Every Robot-Ship in the mighty fleet had been destroyed, and Brainiac 5 had confirmed that not one had slipped past the Legion.

'Let's look on the bright side—We'll probably get another parade!' joked Sun Boy.

Brek's exhaustion, as well as his lack of confidence, prevented him from saying exactly what he thought of parades.

'Something strange,' announced Brainiac 5. 'I am not able to raise Earth traffic control on the radio.'

'Strange,' agreed Saturn Girl. 'Let me see if I can contact them telepathically ...' Her already pale face went white as a sheet. 'Oh, no.'

'What?'

'No ... it's too horrible ... turn on the vid news.'

The Legionnaires clustered around the screen. It showed the Metropolis skyline.

In flames.

Small groups of human survivors fled before a limitless army of giant plant men. Somehow, unthinkable, while the Legion had been distracted, Earth had been invaded—and conquered.

Brek blinked back tears. It wasn't fair! After they had fought so hard. This wasn't supposed to happen. What had gone wrong? What...?

The End.