

Cloudland

A tale of the Legion of Super-Heroes

by David Meadows

Consciousness slowly returned to Dawnstar. Her first sensations were exploding lights and pain behind her eyes. She opened her eyes gingerly and found that she was lying in a cool darkness, with stone beneath her back and a putrid smell on the air.

Her last memory was of a giant hand closing around her. *Colossal Boy? No, leathery skin and three digits ... Validus?* No, although that was the obvious answer it didn't seem quite right ...

She shook her head to clear it and immediately regretted it. Raising her fingertips to her skull she felt for damage. There appeared to be none, but if she had been hit hard enough she might have a concussion; that would explain her inability to remember. Her body was more resilient than a human's, it had to be, due to the stresses of unaided space flight, but she was no Superboy.

Satisfied that her bones were all in one piece, she pushed herself to a sitting position and stretched her wings.

She was in a cell, she recognised. A cell constructed from immense blocks of stone and sealed by a door of stout metal bars.

'Good morning,' came a drawled greeting. Looking through the bars, as her eyes grew accustomed to the low light, she saw an identical cell facing hers across a wide corridor. A young man occupied the cell, leaning against the bars nonchalantly.

'Where am I?' was Dawnstar's first question.

'You don't know? You followed me here.' At Dawnstar's blank look, the man added, 'This is Cloudland.'

'You had better start from the beginning,' said Dawnstar. 'Starting with your name ...'

'Jak,' replied the man.

'Jak. I am Dawnstar of the—'

'Everybody knows who you are,' Jak smiled. 'That's why I'm not worried about getting out of here.'

Dawnstar privately disagreed with him. Trapped in a cell, her powers of flight and tracking were of no use. She didn't have the right kind of powers to smash or blast her way through steel bars. She was more at home in space than a small ... cramped ... suddenly, she began to feel a touch of claustrophobia. To distract her mind from it, she again said, 'Tell me everything, from the beginning.'

'From the beginning? Sure. I'm Jak Orlanz, a farmer on Winath. Well, I was a farmer, but ... well, anyway. I had a smallholding, there was just me and my mother, Pa is dead and my twin emigrated to Earth years ago, and the farm was enough for the two of us. But the big conglomerates, well, they keep getting bigger, don't they? And they make it hard for us independents to compete. We can't sell our surplus and ... well, long story short, we're in hock to the bank for ... a lot. The bank was going to foreclose if we didn't make an immediate payment, but we had nothing, zip, nada. I had an old land speeder,

the only thing we had that we could sell, and I was taking it to a dealer to see what he would give me for it. But on the way ... I swapped it for something better than money.'

Jak stopped talking and a wide grin was spreading over his face. And because he appeared to be waiting for Dawnstar to say something, she asked, 'What did you swap it for?'

Jak's grin got wider as he dropped his voice and whispered, 'Magic beans.'

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Brainiac 5 waved his scanner over the green trunk that grew out of the soil of Winath.

'Phaseolus coccineus,' he said. 'Bean.'

'Yes, Brainy, I could see that,' said Saturn Girl peevishly. 'But why is it so ...' She stepped back and craned her neck. 'Big?'

The top of the mammoth beanstalk disappeared into the clouds hundreds of metres above.

'That will require further analysis,' Brainiac 5 said unhelpfully.

'I haven't been able to make telepathic contact with Dawnstar since she disappeared into the clouds,' said Saturn Girl, gazing upwards. 'I fear the worst ...'

She saw Lightning Lad emerge from the clouds. He flew down to where they were standing.

'It goes into the cloud, but it doesn't come out above it,' he said puzzled.

'What happens to it inside the cloud?' asked Brainiac 5 eagerly.

'Nothing. I was flying straight up parallel to the stalk and one second it was there and the next second ... not. But not like I came to the top, more like it just ... stopped.'

'A-ha!' smiled Brainy, his smug look indicating he thought he knew something nobody else did.

Saturn Girl sensed her husband's frustration at not being able to understand what this giant beanstalk was doing.

'Let's fly up together,' she said soothingly, 'and take another look.'

'That won't help,' said Karate Kid as he stepped around the beanstalk. 'Flying won't take us where the beanstalk goes. We'll have to climb it.'

'Climb it?' Lightning Lad and Saturn Girl chorused incredulously.

'Yes,' came the Kid's cheerful reply. 'Because that's how ... ohhh ... you don't have that story on Winath or Titan?'

'Nor on Colu, though I am familiar with it,' interjected Brainiac 5, slightly peeved at the Kid spoiling his 'big explanation' moment. 'A folk tale, but such things often have—heh—*roots* in the truth. Karate Kid is right, the only way to reach the top of a beanstalk is to climb it.'

'Dawnstar flew straight up,' Lightning Lad argued.

'But she was using her tracking power to follow the missing man. That gave her an extrasensory link to the stalk's terminus dimension, a quantum-type entanglement with it, you could say, which substituted for the beanstalk's inherent trans-dimensional tunnel-like properties.'

'...,' said Lightning Lad, opening his mouth and closing it again.

'Typical Dawnstar,' said Saturn Girl, 'Flying off ahead and not doing anything useful!'

'You can't really say she didn't do anything useful,' said Karate Kid reasonably. 'She did show us that there's a way through at the top of this.' He took a hold of a bean

shoot as thick as his arm and gave it a tug. 'It shouldn't be too difficult to climb. And the sooner we start, the sooner we can ensure Dawnstar is still safe.'

Saturn Girl snorted.

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'A giant beanstalk?' asked Dawnstar incredulously.

'I swear,' said Jak. 'It grew overnight where my mother threw out the beans. I mean, Winath is famously fertile, but ...'

'So what did you do?'

'What anybody would do in that situation. I climbed it.'

*

Three Legionnaires climbed the beanstalk slowly and painfully, breathing heavily, each thinking dark thoughts about how annoying Karate Kid was.

A dozen metres ahead of them, Karate Kid climbed effortlessly, not at all out of breath despite keeping up a constant stream of childhood stories of giant beanstalks and other fantastical phenomena.

'I will *not* let him beat me to the top,' muttered Lightning Lad through gritted teeth.

'Don't be hard on yourself,' his wife said. 'Our powers require less physical conditioning than his, that's all.'

Brainiac 5 maintained a prudent, breath-saving silence.

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'So, this giant being attacked you unprovoked when you entered his kingdom?' Dawnstar was asking. Jak was quick to reassure her that he was entirely the injured party, but something didn't ring quite true to Dawnstar's ears.

'Very well, if this giant is hostile we may assume he will not release us voluntarily. And as my friends have not reached us yet, we must assume they may be unable to.'

Friends? She thought. *No, not really.* She admitted to herself that she hadn't really formed any close friendships since joining the Legion. But it wasn't her fault! The Legion was very cliquy, and as a new member it was difficult to be accepted into their circles. Well, getting herself and the missing man out of this mess would remind them how useful she was, anyway.

She tested the strength of the cell bars, but she knew before even trying that they were impossible for her to bend.

'Oh, these cells? Easy,' said Jak with a grin.

To Dawnstar's surprise, Jak pulled a small metal tool from within his belt. Reaching through the bars, he inserted it into the cell's lock and manipulated it for a few seconds. With a click, his cell door opened.

'Why is it that you just happen to be carrying a lock pick?' asked Dawnstar suspiciously as he got to work on her cell.

'Pa always taught us to be prepared. But I didn't have anything to get past the giant, until you turned up!'

Out in the corridor, Dawnstar began to appreciate the scale of the building they were in. The vaulted stone ceiling soared dozens of metres above their heads.

'Exactly how tall was this giant?'

‘Oh, ten metres. Twenty, maybe. But now you can fly us out. Right?’

Dawnstar took a moment to reach out with her extrasensory tracking power, seeking her fellow Legionnaires. Nothing. But that was impossible. She could follow a trace of a person across solar systems. The others must be closer than that! She tried again, seeking instead the top of the beanstalk. In a way she could never explain to anyone without her powers, an awareness of its location filled her mind, and she knew the path she must take to it. The flight would be short, but ...

‘We will walk,’ she said, setting off in the correct direction. She itched to fly, but didn’t want to take the chance of triggering traps or alarms on the way out. A slow and stealthy approach would work best. She smiled to herself. And they said she wasn’t Espionage Squad material! This would show them ...

Jak hurried to catch up with her.

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Karate Kid had to admit, he was impressed. One moment he was climbing the beanstalk through dense cloud, the next he appeared to pass unimpeded through a layer of rock, rock which he was now standing on and which was as solid as rock ever should be. A neat trick, he thought. But what really impressed him was the archaic stone castle in front of him. It was simply huge, bigger than any structure he could ever remember seeing.

In a minute, his companions were standing next to him, breathing heavily from the exertion of the climb.

‘Fascinating,’ was all Brainiac 5 said.

Saturn Girl raised her hand to her temple. (*Why does she always do that?* wondered Karate Kid). ‘I can sense Dawnstar’s thoughts ... she’s in trouble!’

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Dawnstar peeked through an archway that was big enough to fly a Legion cruiser through. A hall the size of a magnoball stadium lay between her and a gigantic wooden door. She spied a small, open window half way up the far wall. For a giant, probably a tiny ventilation hole. For her, a wide-open way out of the castle. The time for stealth was past: time for a final sprint. She turned to whisper to Jak that she would fly them across the hall.

Jak was not behind her.

She quickly spotted him trotting stealthily across the floor of the hall towards a wooden table with legs thicker than the thickest oak tree. From the floor, she couldn’t see clearly what was on the table, but something was glinting on the floor next to it, and this is what Jak was making for.

With a couple of beats of her wings, she caught him up as he reached his destination.

‘What are you doing?’ she hissed.

‘Look!’ On the floor was what appeared to be a solid gold coin. It was surely the smallest farthing to the giant who owned this castle, but it was the size of a large dinner plate to Jak. He bent down and, with an effort, picked it up, cradling it in both arms.

‘Ok, we can go now,’ he said.

‘You are nothing but a common thief!’ said Dawnstar disgustedly.

‘This will pay my debts and then some! I deserve it! I—’

'FEE!' thundered a voice like ... well ... thunder.

There was a powerful tremor through the floor.

'FIE!'

Dawnstar grabbed Jak, then realised it was too late.

'FOE!'

She pulled him behind the table leg as an enormous shadow fell across them.

'FUM!'

Dawnstar held her finger to her lips, warning Jak to silence. Another footstep shook the room, then the giant paused. They heard a loud sniffing noise.

'I SMELL THE BLOOD OF A WINATHIAN!'

The table was suddenly flung aside, gold coins scattering across the floor with a ringing sound like a thousand church bells. Dawnstar found herself staring up at the grotesque face of a giant humanoid at least twenty metres tall. A three-fingered hand reached down for her ...

Swiftly, she grabbed Jak and flew them both out of the giant's grasp. But barely ... with the weight of Jak and his stolen booty she was slow and manoeuvred sluggishly, every beat of her wings an effort.

'Drop it, Jak,' she commanded.

'Never!'

She suddenly folded her wings and dropped, causing Jak to yelp with fear but allowing her to avoid the giant's sweeping hand.

'Drop it ... or I drop you!'

'Bluff! You're a Legionnaire, and you can't kill me!'

Silently fuming, Dawnstar made a sharp turn and darted to the window she had identified earlier. But the giant was surprisingly fast for his size, and not as stupid as he looked. Seeing the direction of her flight, he darted forward and slapped a massive hand over the opening. Dawnstar barely pulled up in time to avoid a painful collision.

'We're trapped! Do something!' squeaked Jak.

On cue, the main doors burst open, shattered by a bolt of lightning.

'Dawnstar, this way!' came Saturn Girl's urgent thought. Dawnstar didn't need telling twice. Her team-mates were outside and she had never been so happy to see them in her life.

'Is this the missing man?' asked Karate Kid as she landed next to them.

'Yes, and this is stolen gold that he is going to return,' she said sternly.

'But it's ... I deserve ... I ...' Jak quailed under the stares of the Legionnaires.

The ground shook as the giant stepped out of his castle. The Legionnaires looked up.

'Run!' Jak shouted. But Legionnaires didn't run from danger.

'I don't sense any evil in his thoughts,' said Saturn Girl (*Why does she always raise her hand to her temple?* wondered Dawnstar), 'Just a feeling of being wronged.'

Dawnstar stepped towards the giant, her heart beating fast as she realised he could squash her with one swift stomp.

'Giant! I know you can understand me through our translator earplugs. I fear this has been a misunderstanding.'

The giant rumbled deep in his chest, but didn't make any hostile move.

'We came here inadvertently, we meant no trespass. And we are returning the coin.' She favoured Jak with a hard stare. He looked around at the other Legionnaires

but saw no sympathy in their faces. Sheepishly, he laid the heavy coin down in front of him.

‘And we both apologise for the trespass.’

She waited expectantly. Then she nudged Jak.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled.

‘And, uh, sorry for the door,’ added Lighting Lad.

‘We will leave the way we came, and ensure that nobody else can disturb you. Is this acceptable to you?’

The giant looked at her in silence for a moment. Then he bent slowly down and retrieved the coin. With a grunt that she took to be assent, he lumbered back into his castle.

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Back at the base of the beanstalk, Brainiac 5 was taking final readings. He gave a wistful sigh.

‘This is unprecedented. We could have learned so much from further analysis.’

‘A promise is a promise,’ said Dawnstar firmly. ‘Karate Kid, if you please?’

‘With pleasure,’ said the Kid. He had been studying the beanstalk carefully. Now he picked his spot and made a sudden chopping motion with the edge of his hand.

‘Hiiii-Ya!’

It seemed impossible that such a small blow could affect the mammoth stalk. But, incredibly, it quivered, swayed, and came crashing down, measuring a very long line in the Winathian soil.

‘That will mulch into hundreds of tonnes of compost,’ said Lighting Lad admiringly. ‘A nice present for the independent farmers in this region of Winath.’

‘Well, I guess that’s that,’ said Jak, sounding surprisingly cheerful. ‘A wasted opportunity, but, ah well, there will be others. So long, Legionnaires.’

‘Wait one moment,’ said Brainiac 5, consulting his Omnicom. ‘You are Jak Orlanz?’

‘Yes ...’

‘Wanted on Winath on five counts of robbery, three of extortion, and numerous traffic violations.’

‘Ah ... it’s a misunderstanding ...’ Jak backed slowly away, and bumped into Dawnstar, who had moved behind him.

‘There have been a lot of those today. Was anything you told me true?’

‘It’s true I was a farmer ... long ago ... but ... well, I guess I maybe didn’t trade for those beans, but stole them from an agricultural research lab ... but Dawnstar, you won’t let them arrest me, right? Look how we escaped the giant’s cells, you owe me!’

Dawnstar allowed herself a small smile.

‘Why don’t we see if you are as good at escaping a Science Police cell?’

Jak didn’t respond. He knew when he was beaten. But ...

He smiled.

What a story he would have to tell his cell mates!