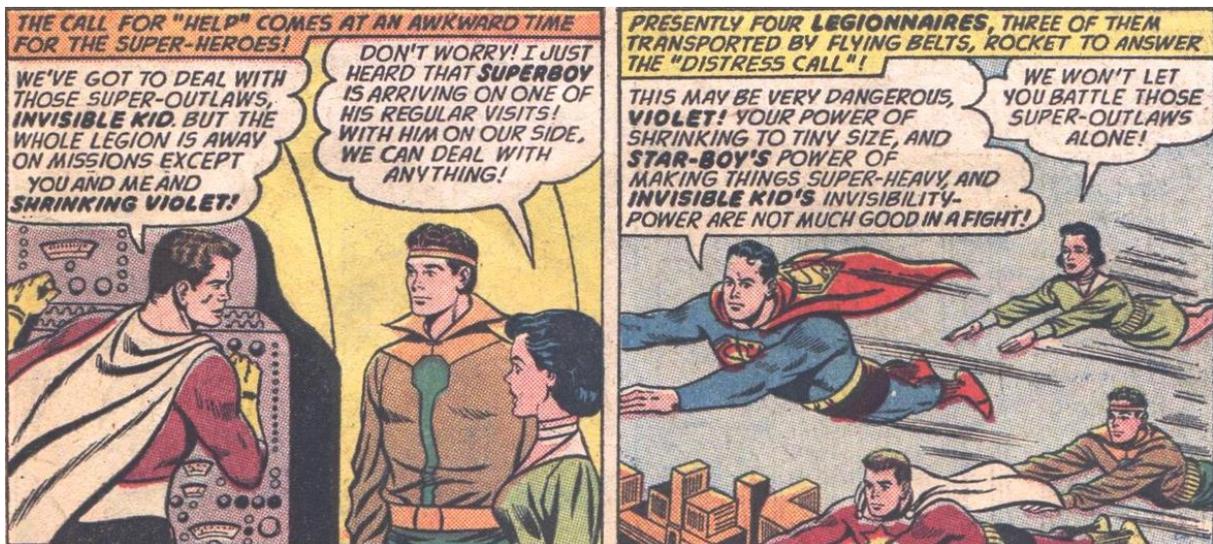


# No Way Out

*A Tale of the Legion of Super-Heroes*

*by David Meadows*

This Story Takes Place during the events of 'The Legion of Super-Outlaws'  
(Adventure Comics #324, 1964)



Beyond the edge of explored space Mon-El flew alone, faster than any human rocket ship, unaffected by the airless cold, his super-vision constantly searching light-years ahead of him. At the back of his mind was a slight unease that he was so far beyond the range of any communication devices that he would be unable to respond if an emergency arose on Earth. As the most powerful member of the Legion of Super-Heroes he felt a weight of responsibility to protect the weaker members, and with other Legion teams away on their own missions the members remaining on duty were very weak indeed—Star Boy, Invisible Kid, and Shrinking Violet, all brave and resourceful Legionnaires but with limited powers. Before leaving, Mon-El had secretly communicated with Superboy, asking his old 20th-century friend if he would look in on the Legion in his absence. Superboy should be able to deal with anything, Mon-El thought.

Meanwhile, Mon-El wasn't just cruising through space because he enjoyed the solitude and freedom it gave him, he was on an urgent mission himself. The Galactic Survey Corps had lost contact with one of their scouting ships exploring far beyond known space. It might mean nothing, or it might mean a brave pilot of the GSC was in some kind of danger, and Mon-El was the only one fast enough to reach this distant region of space and search for the scout.

Also, he enjoyed the solitude and freedom that cruising through space gave him.

As he passed through a small and evidently unoccupied planetary system, his searching vision picked out an anomaly in the belt of asteroids that surrounded the system's star. Metal glinted where there should only be dull rock. Focussing on the glint, he saw what was obviously a small space cruiser, drifting inertly among the rocks. At super-speed, Mon-El flashed over to the asteroid belt and threaded his way between the rocks.

As he had thought, it was the missing scout ship. GSC scouts travelled alone, usually far from civilised space ports, and so their small cruisers were designed to be extremely robust and reliable. This one was clearly in trouble, though. It showed no signs of power, and scarring on the hull suggested it had impacted several of these small asteroids as it had drifted through the belt. Fearing the worst, Mon-El examined the ship with his x-ray vision, and was relieved to see the occupant was still living. He flew around to the forward cockpit window and tapped on it gently.

The person dozing in the pilot's chair awoke with a start and a look of panic on her face. When she saw Mon-El, the panic changed to disbelief—he was, after all, floating in airless space without any protection—and then, relief as she recognised the famous face of a Legionnaire.

Mon-El pointed to the airlock on the side of her ship. The pilot understood his meaning, but shook her head and through gestures made him understand that it wasn't working. Of course, thought Mon-El, if the ship has lost power the airlock will not cycle correctly. And if he tried to enter the ship without the airlock working, the pilot's precious air would be vented into space, killing her. Struck with an idea, he pantomimed putting a helmet over his head. She shook her head again and made more signals. So, for some reason her space suit was unusable.

This was a dilemma. Mon-El had a fair understanding of engineering and could possibly repair her ship, but not while it was floating in deep space and he couldn't get inside it.

He scanned the worlds around him with his telescopic vision. The asteroids were useless, of course. Looking further, he saw a single rocky planet slightly further out from the star, and it had an atmosphere. Closer examination with microscopic vision showed that there was enough oxygen in the atmosphere, and nothing that would be obviously poisonous to a human. It would be cold, but the pilot would be able to survive while they repaired the ship.

Turning back to the window, Mon-El performed what he thought was a pretty good mime of carrying the ship to the planet. The pilot looked completely baffled. Shrugging, Mon-El flew to the back of the ship, took a firm grip of the engine housing, and flew towards the planet, taking care to keep his acceleration low enough that the pilot wouldn't be harmed. Keeping his speed low meant that it took over an hour to reach the planet—not a problem for the indefatigable Daxamite, of course. He then slowed even further to enter the atmosphere, not wanting the friction of re-entry to melt the ship. Finally, he was able to gently deposit the ship on the planet's surface. Not fussy about where he made planet fall, he had selected a flat, rocky plain, featureless but for a ridge of low hills some five kilometres to the east.

Mon-El moved to the airlock and opened it as gently as possible. The locking mechanism snapped—that was unavoidable—but he kept the damage to a minimum so he could repair it later.

The pilot stumbled out, and he caught her as her legs buckled under the sudden influence of gravity. She shrugged his hands off irritably and took a deep breath.

‘It’s freezing,’ were her first words.

‘We are one hundred and twenty million miles from the star, so it’s colder than Earth. I’m sorry I couldn’t find you a better world, but our options were limited and I had to keep you alive,’ said Mon-El. Then added, sarcastically, ‘You’re welcome.’

The pilot flushed, though Mon-El couldn’t tell if was due to shame at her attitude or anger at his. But when she spoke, her voice was contrite.

‘I’m sorry. Thank you for the rescue. I’m Zuna. And I recognise you, of course, everybody knows Mon-El of the Legion.’

‘It is an honour to meet you, Zuna. I admire you scouts and your dedication to duty, facing dangers as great as any we Legionnaires face in your efforts to map the galaxy.’

Now he was certain that her flush was from pleasure. She might be a hardened space pilot, but she was still a young woman by human standards, scarcely older than some of Mon-El’s comrades in the Legion, and she probably wasn’t used to being complimented by such a famous celebrity.

‘Let’s get you out of the cold as quickly as possible, then,’ he said. ‘If you can tell me what’s wrong with your ship, we can try to fix it and get off planet before the sun goes down.’

‘Well—’ she began, but that was as far as she got. As soon as Mon-El had mentioned the sun going down, they had both automatically glanced upwards to where the pale yellow ball glowed through the clouds. But while Zuna saw only the sun, Mon-El’s super-vision saw something else high above them. Moving at super-speed, he grabbed Zuna and flashed the five kilometres to the hills, aiming for what looked like a small cave. Even with his mind-boggling speed, he barely outran the ball of plasma which streaked down from the sky and annihilated the ground they had been standing on a microsecond before. Zuna’s scout ship was blasted to atoms, and an area of solid rock hundreds of metres across flashed into vapour, leaving a crater dozens of metres deep.

Mon-El reached the cave and halted inside, shielding Zuna with his body as a blast of super-heated air washed over them. For several seconds the air was full of thunder, then it stilled as quickly as it had started. Mon-El released Zuna, and immediately caught her again as she collapsed limply to the floor. He lowered her gently and scanned her anxiously with x-ray vision. He knew he had got her away from the blast area, and he was sure he had shielded her from the heat wave, so how was she injured?

The terrible truth became obvious when he saw her ruptured blood vessels and the friction abrasions on her skin. He had used his full speed in his desperate sprint to safety, and a human body simply couldn’t tolerate the stresses of super-speed flight that Mon-El took for granted. In his haste to protect her, he had caused her injuries himself!

Thankfully she was still breathing, and in a few seconds her eyes fluttered open. ‘What ... happened?’ she asked weakly.

Tersely, Mon-El explained what had happened. ‘I’m sorry,’ he finished, ‘I caused this by moving too quickly.’

She levered herself to her knees and gazed out of the cave entrance, to the plain where her scout ship had once stood and a smoking crater now dominated the landscape. ‘Don’t apologise for saving

my life,' she said. 'If you hadn't seen the attack being launched ... well, perhaps Legionnaires can survive plasma torpedoes but humans certainly can't.'

'Most Legionnaires can't,' confessed Mon-El. 'But that's beside the point. We have to worry about further attacks. That bolt was launched by a massive space battleship in orbit above us. If I hadn't looked up at that precise moment, I would never have seen it in time. And if they fire again, we know the weapon is powerful enough to burn right through the small amount of rock in this hill, and ...' He left the thought unfinished, and fell silent while he looked up towards the low ceiling of the cave. Zuna watched him, sensing that he was concentrating.'

'That's ... strange,' he said, finally.

'What?'

'I can see the battleship, it hasn't moved, but the picture is fuzzy, like looking through snow on a badly tuned television set.'

'Like what?'

'Never mind, a 20th-century technology. But what's causing ... oh!'

'What?' asked Zuna again.

Mon-El reached up to the ceiling and crumbled a bit of the rock in his fingers. 'Galena. I've brought us into a cave riddled with veins of lead ore.' He smiled humourlessly. 'It's interfering with my x-ray vision.'

'The good news is that it will also interfere with the Karrem targeting scanners,' said Zuna.

'The what?' It was Mon-El's turn to be confused. So they sat down and made themselves as comfortable as possible leaning against the cave wall while Zuna told her story.

On her long scouting mission, she had entered a region of space never before explored by humans, and had encountered a race of belligerent aliens who called themselves the Karrem. Their military science was very advanced, allowing them to build space battleships such as the one Mon-El had seen, armed with plasma weapons of incredible power, as they had both now witnessed. Zuna's tiny, unarmed scout ship had been captured, and her computers interrogated to learn where she had come from. Once the Karrem had learned of the location of Earth, they had assembled an armada to invade it. Simply because they liked invading places, as far as Zuna could tell. Zuna had been thrown into a gaol cell, but had managed to escape—she glossed over this part of her story, but still Mon-El's respect for her courage and resourcefulness increased considerably—and steal back her scout ship, flying back to Earth at top speed to alert them to their danger. Unfortunately, the Karrem must have sabotaged her ship, or damaged it while examining it, because she had only got as far as this remote system before losing all power. And Mon-El knew the rest of the story.

And now they were stranded here, with a Karrem battleship searching for them, and no way to alert the Earth.

'It's obvious,' she said. 'You will be faster than the battleship, you will have to fly to Earth and warn them. I can survive here a little while, long enough for you to return for me after saving the Earth.'

'Out of the question,' he said. 'Yes, I will be faster than the ship, but I'm not leaving you at their mercy.'

'Then, you can attack the ship. I'm sure the plasma weapon can't hurt you.'

'You're right, I don't think it will hurt me. But they don't know that, and as soon as I leave this shielded cave, they will fire. The torpedo will continue past me and vaporise this entire hill.'

They were both silent for a long time.

'You could move me away first,' Zuna said.

'No again. To move you far and fast enough that you wouldn't be caught in their attack, I would have to use speed that you couldn't survive, especially now you're already injured.'

Another silence. The next proposal came from Mon-El:

'Of course! I can tunnel clear through the planet at super-speed, approach them from the other side. They won't fire on this hill if they don't see me emerge from the cave.'

He leaped up to carry through his plan without delay, but Zuna also jumped up and hung on his arm.

'Stop! As soon as you start tunnelling, they will detect the seismic tremors and use them to pinpoint where you are digging. And then ... zap.'

Mon-El was crestfallen. She was entirely correct, and in his haste he had almost done something incredibly stupid.

They sat down again.

'Is it still there?' she asked.

Mon-El looked upwards. 'Yes. They must suspect we are still on the planet. We can only hope they get bored.'

'I was among them for a while, remember. They are very single-minded. Once they get an idea in their heads, they don't give up.'

They sat in silence.

'It's still cold,' she complained.

'Take my cape,' he said. 'I don't get cold.'

'Of course you don't,' she said, bitterly. She wrapped herself in the cape he offered. Then she sat down again, leaning against him. For warmth or comfort, he wasn't sure which. 'I suppose you don't get hungry, either,' she said.

'I'm sorry.'

'We're probably the first humans on this planet,' she said, changing the subject to take her mind off food.

'I'm a Daxamite, you're the first human,' he corrected her.

'You stepped on it first, you should name it.'

'I will call it ... Zuna's Planet.'

She smiled and hugged his arm.

'Tell me about the 20th century,' she asked.

Mon-El told her about his brief time in Smallville with his friend Clark Kent, posing as a travelling brush salesman (which concept took quite a bit of explaining in itself). This led to an explanation of his visit to Krypton before it exploded, and a more general discussion of the many worlds he had visited in his travels in both the 20th and 30th centuries. Obviously they had a common interest in the exploration of space, and they were soon trading anecdotes of their adventures and discoveries. They had more in common: Zuna was also alone, her family dead many years ago. Like Mon-El, she had found friends, hers in the Galactic Survey Corps which she had joined at a very young age, but like

him she had no-one 'special' waiting for her at home, and like him she had found she preferred the solitude and freedom of space. She didn't do what she did to win fame and glory, she did it because she loved it.

Her words grew slower, the pauses longer, and Mon-El eventually realised she was sleeping.

A long time passed. Mon-El's thoughts slipped into a trance. He was used to waiting. He had had a thousand years of it in the Phantom Zone.

Suddenly he found himself being shaken. Had he fallen asleep? He shouldn't have.

'Are you ok?' Zuna was asking.

'Yes, why?'

'You were breathing ... funny.'

'Oh.' He had known this would happen, but hadn't expected it to be quite so soon. This also explained why he had slept, and why his head felt so foggy now.

'I have an ... allergy,' he said. 'Lead hurts me, the same way kryptonite hurts Superboy. I have a serum that protects me, but I have to retake it periodically or ... and, well, there's a lot of lead around me right now.'

'Will you die?' she asked, alarmed.

'No! At least, not for a long time. The serum is still in my system, and I'm still pretty tough you know.' He managed a reassuring smile. 'But it's making me feel a little, well, in the 20th century they would have said "grotty". That's probably why my breathing was a little rough.'

'Oh.' And then after a minute: 'But you will keep getting weaker, won't you?'

'Yes,' he said reluctantly.

'Weak enough that you won't be able to fly back to Earth?'

'We won't be here that long,' he said.

But he didn't know how to back up that statement.

He stood and paced the cave.

'I'm the most powerful Legionnaire,' he said angrily. Not a boast, just a statement of fact. 'I'm probably stronger than Superboy. And yet, I'm helpless here!' He laughed suddenly, remembering his thoughts from before this situation had started. 'If you were here with any other Legionnaire, they would be able to save you. Invisible Kid could fly out undetected and disable the battleship from the inside. So could Shrinking Violet. Star Boy could make it literally too heavy to stay in orbit, without them knowing where he was. And I ... I'm useless!'

'Mon-El, no! You're not useless at all. You've already saved my life. And the only reason you're staying here now is to protect me again.'

She stood and walked to stand just inside the cave entrance, and looked out to where the sun was beginning to set.

'We've been here for several hours. If we wait much longer, the Karrem fleet will reach the Earth and billions more will die. You must warn them. You must!'

'There's no way,' he said.

'Try! Fly as fast as you can, and—'

'I saw how fast they locked on target, how fast their weapon travels. I can't stop it before it fires, and then you will die. I will not put you in that danger. We will find another way. There's always another way. We just need to think!'

'I understand,' she whispered.

But his head felt so foggy, the insidious lead poisoning making it hard to think.

That's what he would tell himself later. That's why he didn't realise what would happen next. That's why he couldn't react in time. That's what he would always tell himself.

But he would never believe himself.

Zuna turned, smiled at him, and took a step backwards, outside the cave.

Super-hearing detected the whistle of air as the bolt of plasma streaked down from orbit. Mon-El moved, threw himself towards her, willed himself to be faster.

The plasma bolt struck the hill, turning it into an inferno of molten rock and metal vapour. The awesome power drove even Mon-El to his knees.

Screaming, he hurled himself into the sky. The battleship fired again and again. He didn't even try to evade, flying through the bolts of plasma as if they were not even there. Then he was out of the atmosphere and the massive alien ship was directly ahead of him.

Even in this moment of rage, the need to preserve life was uppermost in his mind. X-ray vision confirmed that no sentient beings were in the engine compartment of the ship, then he smashed into it, fists and heat vision tearing and slicing, ripping the ship in half. Kicking the massive engines so that they spiralled away, to eventually burn up in the planet's atmosphere, he pushed the crewed portion of the ship away from the planet, out into deep space. They didn't deserve to step foot on Zuna's Planet. He tore a hole in the hull, boarding it and sealing the breach behind him, and flew to the bridge. It had all happened so fast that the ship's captain still hadn't comprehended what was happening. Crewmembers were shouting reports to him when Mon-El burst through the bridge doors and bodily lifted him out of his chair.

'I know you understand Interlac because you learned it from Zuna's computers. I am Mon-El of the Legion of Super-Heroes. On Earth are many of my team-mates, every one of them with the power to stop you. You will call your armada now, and you will tell it to turn around and run home. Or you will face the consequences. I swear this in the name of the bravest woman I have ever known.'

\*

This story never appeared in any of the Legion's chronicles. The Legion didn't have to fight the armada; Mon-El's threat on top of his display of power had been sufficient to avert the invasion. When pressed about what had happened out on the distant world he had entered in the GSC register as 'Zuna's Planet', Mon-El remained tight lipped.

And when future Legionnaires asked about the unknown woman whose statue Mon-El had erected on Shanghalla, they were told that she didn't want fame and glory, but had still lived and died a hero.

And that is enough.