

Object of DOOM!

A tale of the Legion of Super-Heroes

by David Meadows

The massive hall of the venerable Himalayan temple was still and silent, showing no sign of the cataclysmic forces unleashed there just minutes previously. Beams of sunlight slanting through windows in high stone walls showed the hall to be empty.

If anybody had been there to observe, however, they might have been aware of a slight scraping noise, followed by a slight tremor in the black stones of the floor. Finally, our hypothetical observers might have heard muffled voices.

‘One more effort, Ben. We’re almost there.’

‘Easy fer you to say, Stretch!’

‘Now, Ben, now!’

The floor bucked and a massive section heaved upwards, splintering into huge, irregular slabs of solid basalt. Four figures staggered up and into the dim sunlight, coughing in the cloud of dust that settled onto their bright blue jumpsuits.

‘You did it, Ben!’ exclaimed Reed Richards, also known as Mr Fantastic, their leader. ‘Only you could have held that massive slab long enough for me to disarm Doctor Doom’s trap!’

‘Yeah, yeah, bake me a cake,’ growled his rocky-skinned companion Ben Grimm, the Thing. ‘That’s after we figure out where Doom went with that doohickey he stole.’

The youngest member of the quartet, Johnny Storm, the Human Torch, suddenly pointed to a rainbow pattern shimmering in the air at the far end of the hall. ‘More trouble incoming!’

‘Another of Doom’s traps?’ asked Susan Storm-Richards, the Invisible Girl.

Before Reed could answer his wife, the rainbow solidified into the shape of a translucent sphere some 15 feet in diameter.

‘I ain’t waiting to see what this one does!’ Ben declared. With that, he picked up one of the huge basalt fragments, as easily as if it were mere painted polystyrene, and hurled it at the mysterious sphere.

None of them could have been prepared for what happened next. Even as the deadly missile hurtled through the air a hatchway was opening in the sphere, and, almost faster than the eye could follow, a red and green garbed man flashed out, interposing his body between the missile and its target. The rock shattered into fragments against his muscular chest.

Switching his powers from invulnerability to speed and then to strength, Jo Nah, Ultra Boy of the Legion of Super-Heroes, wasted no time in taking the fight to the rocky assailant.

‘What,’ said Ben, as the orange blur crashed into him, ‘a revoltin’,’ he continued as the pair of them smashed into the far wall with bone-jarring force, ‘development,’ as the roof of the temple crashed down on top of them both, ‘this is!’

Before any of the Fantastic Four could come to their team-mate’s aid, their attention was occupied by the other three members of the Legion of Super-Heroes who were emerging from their time bubble, and the battle was well and truly joined.

1. Ultra Boy vs. The Thing!

After a second of stillness, both men lurched to their feet, shaking off debris. Ben seized the initiative and rained blows that would fell an elephant upon his opponent. Ultra Boy stood there under the onslaught and simply grinned.

‘You’re strong, orange man, but you’re not in my league!’

Jo switched his power from invulnerability to strength and swatted the Thing with a fraction of his strength. Ben went flying across the hall.

‘Aw cripes,’ Ben muttered disgustedly as he picked himself up, ‘Even the Hulk ain’t never hit me as hard as that.’

Ultra Boy was on him in a second, seemingly as fast as he was strong, and swung another punch. But Ben, to his own surprise, dodged the blow with ease. Within his rocky head, his deceptively sharp brain was turning over furiously. This stranger was as fast as lighting one second and slow as a poke the next. What gives? Ben swung his best Sunday punch at his opponent, with no apparent effect. For a third time, he went down under the punishing force of Ultra Boy’s fists, the impact of his fall pulverising several chunks of the rubble that was by now scattered over most of the floor. One of the flying fragments struck Ultra Boy on the cheek, drawing blood. The final piece of the puzzle clicked into place, and Ben launched himself at the still-smiling stranger, taking the two of them down in a tangle of limbs. After a brief scuffle, Ultra Boy found himself wrapped in a bear hug.

‘Now, two things ya don’t know about me,’ explained Ben. ‘First, before I was aunt Petunia’s favourite blue-eyed Thing, I was the meanest scrapper on Yancy Street, and I know how to take care of guys stronger’n me. Second thing is, I ain’t as dumb as I look an’ I figured yer shtick. You can only use one power at a time, right? So ya got two choices now. One is, you stay invulnerable but ya won’t be strong enough to bust free. The other is, ya get strong and hope ya can break free before I cave in yer ribs. What’s it gonna be, grinning boy? Ya want ta call “uncle”?’

Ultra boy fumed, but the Thing was one hundred per cent right. His overconfidence had led to his defeat at the hands of this much weaker man.

Fantastic Four one, Legion nil!

2. Invisible Kid vs Invisible Girl!

When Lyle Norg, Invisible Kid, left the Legion’s time bubble, the Thing and Ultra Boy were already going at it hammer and tongs. Unlike his headstrong team-mate, Lyle preferred to stand back and analyse a situation before wading in. With battle already joined, that was a forlorn hope. But still, he turned invisible to buy himself some seconds of thought.

To Sue Storm-Richards, the invisible Lyle stood out like a sore thumb. One aspect of her power was to perceive other invisible objects, but as she turned invisible herself and stealthily approached the youth it became apparent that the invisible stranger had no such advantage, as he was concentrating on another part of the melee that was by now filling the hall. The echoes of Ben’s titanic struggle masked her footsteps and she was able to get within striking distance of the young man.

A split second before she could render him unconscious, Lyle pivoted and lashed out with a kick that stunned her and knocked her to the floor.

‘Maybe I can’t see you,’ he said, ‘but I’d have to be an idiot not to see your footprints in the dust that’s coating the floor!’

Cursing her schoolgirl error in language that Reed certainly wouldn't approve of, could he hear it, Sue tried to clear her head enough to focus on a protective force field. But, again guided by her movements in the dust, Lyle was on her in a second. A Venusian Aikido hold, taught to him by Karate Kid, was sufficient to immobilize her. The hold was designed to cause just enough pain to break her concentration and drop her invisibility—and, although Lyle didn't know it, to stop her raising a force field that would have swiftly taken him out of the fight.

Fantastic Four one, Legion one!

3. Sun Boy vs Human Torch!

Dirk Morgna, Sun Boy, burst out of the time bubble in a blaze of heat and light, flying high and throwing sharp illumination to the far corners of the ancient hall. Instantly he realized who his opponent must be as the blond-haired man, apparently a teenager like Dirk himself, shouted 'Flame On!' and rose into the air to meet him.

Johnny Storm had no fear as his blazing body arrowed towards his opponent. The flying youth obviously had some kind of heat and light power, but no-one was as hot as the Human Torch! His opening gambit was to throw a few fireballs—actually globs of blazing plasma—to see how much heat the stranger could take.

The answer was, quite a lot, as Dirk shrugged off the flame and retaliated with heat blasts of his own.

But Johnny also proved immune to Dirk's heat. The two young men circled each other warily for some seconds, each looking for, and failing to find, an opening in the other's defences. Johnny was stumped. They appeared to be stalemated.

Dirk came to the same conclusion at roughly the same time. And at the same time as Johnny, he realized how this battle would be decided. Eschewing their powers, the young men simply flew at each other and began trading punches high above the floor.

They were of roughly similar age and build, and neither was a highly-trained martial artist. Thus their fight had all the characteristics of a schoolyard brawl, with plenty of enthusiasm but neither youth landing a decisive punch.

Stalemate!

4. Chameleon Boy vs Mister Fantastic!

Reed noted with some irritation that his team-mates had initiated the fight without waiting for him to call the play. He wasn't especially surprised at Ben and Johnny, but Sue too? Still, with Doom involved, he could understand that they didn't want to give the enemy an inch. But that just made a solid plan imperative!

With battle already joined, however, he would have to plan on the fly. And the first order of business was to tie up their opponents while they sounded out their abilities. Luckily there seemed to be only four of the strangers; three were fighting his team-mates, leaving the orange-skinned, antennae-bearing man to him. Fascinating ... what the origin of this particular super-human mutation might be, Reed couldn't guess. Some nefarious experiment of Doom's, no doubt.

Reep Daggel, Chameleon Boy, saw the human male—he assumed it was a human male—stretching two inhumanly flexible arms towards him, the hands expanding into giant, grasping fists. Well, two can play at that game, he thought, shifting into a malleable shape and deforming

his body away from his assailant. But Reed reacted to this counter without missing a beat, instantly assessing Reep's powers and adapting his attack. Elongating his entire body, he swiftly wrapped it around the twisting form of his opponent.

'If it's knots you want to engage in, I must warn you I am fully conversant with Gordian theory,' he said, unable to resist a chance to show off his knowledge even when fighting for his life, 'Plus, the work of Vandermonde, Guthrie Tait, and Gauss too, naturally.'

Reep found himself hopelessly tangled and all-but immobilized in seconds, but there was more than one aspect to his shape-shifting power, while this human seemed only to stretch much like the Legion's ally Elasti-Lad. Reep shifted his shape into that of a Jovian gorilloid, a beast of massive upper body strength. Flexing his shoulders, he strained against the elastic form holding him, causing Reed's implacable hold to slowly loosen.

'Sorry, it takes more than one trick to hold a Durlan,' he smiled.

Quick as a flash, Reed re-evaluated this new power and devised a new method of attack. Bracing his limbs against the walls of the hall, he allowed his opponent to break free, at the same time flexing his elastic form in the manner of a catapult and flinging the shape-changer at the roof with explosive power. But even as he acted, another part of his brain registered that something else was amiss.

'You're not speaking English!' he said in some surprise.

Reep switched to the form of a giant eagle and a beat of his wings, aided by his flight ring, spared him from a bone-crushing impact with the stone ceiling.

'No, I'm speaking Interlac. My telepathic earplug translates it into English for you,' he said, wondering, as he often did, why humans were always so obsessed with talking while fighting. He switched form to a razor-clawed Rigellian pouncer and leaped at the human. That elastic body was probably resistant to kinetic blows, but the pouncer's claws could cut anything short of a Kryptonian!

Reed saw the attack coming, but his body was still reforming after his last manoeuvre, and such was the blinding speed of the pouncer that he knew he wouldn't be able to evade in time. He was doomed!

At the last instant, Reep twisted aside, letting his deadly claws gouge the rock floor. These aggressive humans may have started the fight, but Reep wouldn't—couldn't!—use a lethal attack to end it. Legionnaires didn't kill!

Reed pulled himself together—literally as well as figuratively—and rolled to his feet. Something was decidedly amiss. Since when did any minion of Doom show mercy? The only explanation was—

'You're not working for Doctor Doom!' he said, a statement rather than a question.

The Durlan stood warily, waiting for a trick or another attack. 'Who's Doctor Doom?'

Reed didn't answer him. Instead he took a second to glance around the hall and see that the fights stood fairly evenly between the Fantastic Four and the strangers.

'Ben, Johnny, Sue! Stop fighting, there's been a terrible mistake!'

Four Plus Four

With hostilities over, introductions were swiftly made and Lyle explained where the Legionnaires had come from.

‘... So we received very precise instructions for programming our time bubble. But I’m not an expert in temporal mechanics and the programming was very unconventional, so I’m not entirely sure where—or when—we are now. This is 1969, isn’t it?’

‘Indeed it is,’ Reed confirmed.

Lyle breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Good. Then you must know Superboy!’

Blank looks from the Fantastic Four.

‘Or perhaps he’s already calling himself Superman now?’ he added helpfully.

‘We have worked with most of the world’s superheroes and I’m afraid that name is unknown to us.’

Lyle was perplexed.

‘Then something has gone terribly wrong. And if we are in the wrong time or place, then maybe the crucible isn’t here either...’

‘Would this crucible be a bowl of simple iron, approximately eighteen inches across?’

‘That’s how it was described. It’s supposedly an object of vast magical power. Do you know it?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Reed, ‘And now things fall into place. Doctor Doom—this era’s greatest evil mastermind—stole such an item from a museum in New York.’

‘Yeah, and we followed him across half the blamed world to this place, only ta have him drop a gazillion tons of rock on our heads!’

‘Not quite half the world, Thing, more like 45.7% of the world’s circumference as a Great Circle is described ... but that’s not important right now,’ Reed amended hastily as he met his old friend’s baleful glare. ‘When we were alerted to the theft, I could not fathom Doom’s interest in an obscure archaeological find. I should have known there was more to the item than met the eye!’

‘Is this Doctor Doom still here?’ asked Lyle eagerly.

‘We can only assume he is. He must have had a reason for bringing the crucible to this specific place. This temple appears to be the construct of an advanced ancient civilization, most probably the same civilization that created the crucible. I can only speculate what—’

‘You can speculate, Stretch, or you can quit flappin’ yer gums and let’s find Doom before he does something we’re all gonna regret.’

‘Direct and to the point as always, old friend. Legion, are you with us?’

‘Just try leaving us behind!’

The doors at the far end of the great hall led into another chamber that was, if anything, even grander in scale than the previous. This in turn led to a third massive room. Jo, chafing at the slow progress of the group, was about to suggest that he fly ahead to scout out the complex at super speed, when Reed suddenly called a halt.

‘Wait! See those field emitters built into either wall? If I am not very much mistaken, they set up a stasis barrier across the centre of this chamber. Anything that passes this line will become immediately frozen in time. Another trap, that we nearly rushed headlong into!’

‘“Rushed”?’ said Jo ironically.

‘How in Sam Hill did Doom have the time to set up all these traps?’ Ben wanted to know.

‘Clearly he hasn’t, these must have been set by the ancient and forgotten original builders of this temple. It would be fascinating to study the technology they used in—’

Lyle, with long experience of dealing with a certain other scientist's over-analytical musings, quickly interrupted Reed's abstract digression. 'Whoever set them, we still need to deal with them, and quickly.'

'Or simply bypass them,' Reep suggested. 'Jo could tunnel through the walls.'

Jo scanned the walls to either side. 'Not easily,' he said. 'My penetra-vision shows we're deep within a mountain. I would be tunnelling through solid rock, and it's riddled with power conduits and other things I can't indentify. It would be slow going to navigate a safe path.'

'Penetra-vision,' Ben muttered disgustedly.

'And time is against us,' Reed said. 'But there is another option. If Chameleon Boy and I slowly stretch into the field, him to the left there and I here to the right, we can create a tunnel that the rest of you can pass through, shielded from the time stasis by our frozen bodies.'

'But Reed—you'll be trapped' cried Sue.

'Trapped, but unharmed. It's the only way!'

'I'm willing to try it if you are, Mister Fantastic, but it's going to take absolute synchronization in our movements.'

'And we dare not fail!'

Indeed, they did not fail. With precise control over their powers, the two heroes 'rippled' into the field, pushing a little more of their bodies through as each successive segment froze into immobility. In a remarkably short time, they had fully penetrated the field and created a living tunnel through which their team-mates could pass.

'Come on,' said Lyle, 'We can't afford to waste this chance they've given us!'

The remaining sextet moved deeper into the gargantuan temple. At the next set of massive doors, Jo called a halt.

'There are robots on the other side of this. Dozens of them—'

'Well, robots I know how ta deal with,' said Ben. He flung the doors open and found himself facing an array of lethal weaponry.

'—And heavily armed,' Jo finished, even as he flashed in front of Ben and switched to invulnerability, saving the Thing from a barrage of blaster fire.

'Doombots! A whole army of them!' said Johnny. 'Doom must be close now.'

'We don't have time for a fight,' said Lyle.

'Me and Ultra Boy can handle this bunch, the rest of ya get moving!' said Ben. And with that he charged into the midst of the small army of Doctor Doom's robotic soldiers. Jo was at his side, and the two of them gleefully tore into the enemy.

'Think ya can handle this?' Ben asked.

'I'll tell you a secret, Thing. I was holding back when we fought.'

'Sure, whatever you say. But now it's robots, we can both cut loose. And that means IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIME!'

'Move!' Lyle ordered the remaining quartet. He grabbed Sue around the waist. 'Excuse me, Mrs Richards, but we'll do better in the air.' In formation with Sun Boy and the Torch, he flew over the heads of the battling Doombots and moved ever deeper into the bewildering complex of rooms.

The reprieve was a short one, as the next obstacle soon made itself known. Panels in the walls slid open and disgorged a flotilla of flying attack drones. The bat-winged constructs circled the heroes, crackling with lethal energy as they drew ever closer.

'I think this one must be ours, right Sun Boy?'

‘Right, Torch. Go invisible, Lyle, we’ll cover you.’

Hovering back-to-back, the youths blasted heat and fire in all directions, breaking the drones’ attack formation and opening a gap for Lyle and Sue to slip invisibly through.

Presently, their destination came into view. The innermost hall of the temple, and the largest by far. Colonnades of massive stone pillars, each one easily twenty feet thick, towered out of sight, supporting the weight of a ceiling far above. And at the far side of the hall, the cloaked figure of Victor Von Doom stood facing a stone pedestal upon which the iron crucible rested.

Lyle landed, and the two of them invisibly and stealthily approached Doom.

From the shadowy height of the ceiling, a blinding white beam of energy was descending and filling the crucible, bathing Doom’s armour in eerie light. Lyle was a skilled scientist, but the forces at play here were beyond his ability to explain.

‘See those black dots surrounding the crucible?’ whispered Sue. ‘Reed calls those “Kirby Dots”. They always appear when cosmic energies are at work.’

‘Interesting. We call them “Kirby Crackles”, though in our universe they are still a purely theoretical concept. Brainy would have loved to see this.’

Without warning, Doom turned and the cold eyes behind his expressionless face mask bored into the Invisible Girl.

‘Susan,’ he said disdainfully, as if barely interested in her presence. ‘The weakest member of the Fantastic Four is all that remains to face me? Don’t look so surprised. I long since equipped my armour with sensors that would penetrate your feeble invisibility power.’

Out of the corner of her eye, Sue saw Lyle move away from her. But Doom’s attention remained fixated on her. Evidently Doom’s sensors couldn’t penetrate Lyle’s particular form of invisibility! She resisted the impulse to look directly at the Invisible Kid and instead dropped her own invisibility and stepped directly towards Doom. She had to keep his attention on her!

‘As long as one of us remains, we’ll fight you to the end!’

‘Such bravado ... such foolish, futile bravado. But, perhaps it is fitting that you are here to provide witness to Doom’s moment of ultimate triumph!’

‘Triumph, Victor? I don’t understand,’ said Sue, playing for time while she studiously ignored Lyle’s stealthy progress towards the crucible. One thing that being married to a scientist had taught her was that they could resist no opportunity to explain their genius to lesser mortals. True to form, Doom took the bait.

‘Indeed! I stand on the cusp of ultimate control over the very fabric of the cosmos itself! And only I could have done it, for only I have the required mastery of both science and magic to unlock the secret of this crucible! In a few short seconds, the device will be charged to its maximum cosmic potential, and Doom shall be supreme!’

It was now or never. Lyle was on the steps leading up to the crucible, an arm’s length away from seizing it. But even the fringe of the massive cosmic forces pouring down upon it was battering him like a physical force. How could he reach it without vaporising himself?

As soon as she realized Lyle’s difficulty, Sue abandoned all attempts at subterfuge and formed a force field above him and the crucible, a dome from which the cosmic beam splashed harmlessly. But the strain was terrific! She fell to her knees as the irresistible energies threatened to turn her brain inside-out. A handful of seconds was all she could hold the force field for against that inconceivable power.

But it was enough. Lyle darted forward and picked up the crucible, which was now merely cold, inert iron despite the vast energy that had been poured into it. He clutched it to his chest and staggered back just as Sue's force field dropped.

With a howl of anger, Doom turned to see the crucible gone. Before he could act, the cosmic beam crashed down once more ... but with no crucible to contain it, the energy raged free. Doom was engulfed in an annihilating wave of power and vanished from Sue's sight. Lyle was picked up by the edge of the wave and flung a dozen yards across the floor. Battered and stunned, he barely held onto consciousness—but he did hold on to the crucible.

Safe behind a force field, Sue ran to Lyle's limp figure. Hauling him to his feet, she half-dragged him away from the mounting cosmic storm. Not fast enough, she thought, as waves of energy beat against her rapidly-weakening force field.

'Wake up, Lyle! You need to fly us out of here!'

Lyle could barely think, but he registered her words.

'Flight ring ...' he mumbled. 'Controlled by ... willpower ...'

Sue had naturally noticed the matching rings worn by each Legionnaire, and had assumed they were simply a form of identification, like a class ring. But ...

She took a firmer hold on Lyle, closed her hand around his, and mentally concentrated on flying.

Like a bullet, the strongest-willed member of the Fantastic Four flew herself and Lyle out of the great chamber, leaving the last enraged screams of Doctor Doom fading behind her.

Epilogue

Johnny and Dirk, their own fight won, met the fleeing Invisible Girl and helped her assist the rapidly-recovering Lyle to where Ben and Jo sat triumphant on a small hill of Doombot scrap. Then, with plenty of time to study the stasis trap, their combined powers and ingenuity freed their last two friends. Soon, the two teams were gathered outside the time bubble. Lyle stubbornly held onto the crucible.

'Thank you for the save back there, Mrs Richards.'

'Please, Lyle, call me Sue. And I couldn't have saved either of us without your marvellous ring ... I wonder why Reed has never thought of creating them?'

Reed looked slightly embarrassed and cleared his throat. 'Now, Sue, I only have so many hours in the day ...'

'He means he don't know how ta do it!'

'Ben! I'm sure the construction is quite trivial and ...' Reed stopped and frowned. 'Well, no matter. Doom has been stopped and the world saved.'

'Your world, Doctor Richards, but now we must take the cauldron and save ours.'

'Yes, about that.' Reed looked worried. 'It's not that I don't trust you, son, but ...'

The truth was that Reed dearly wanted to trust the likeable young Legionnaire, but Sue had fully related Doom's activities and he now knew that the cauldron possessed power beyond anything encountered before. His analytical mind couldn't help dwelling on the possible outcomes if it fell once more into the wrong hands. And how much did he really know about the Legion? Enemies had clothed themselves in friends' guises before. In this case, could he take such a risk?

The two teams tensed. None of them wanted to resume fighting, but all sensed that Reed's next words could lead to exactly that. Reed's mind span, looking for some empirical fact that would show him what choice to make.

Sue stepped forward.

'What my slightly dense husband is trying to say, Lyle, is that we are grateful for your help, and we trust you to use the cauldron safely.'

Reed let out a breath. He trusted his wife's empathy more than any fact in any text book he had ever read.

'Quite so. Indeed. Farewell, Legionnaires.'

The Legion boarded their time bubble. As the hatch closed, Lyle turned for one last wave.

'Thank you, Fantastic Four. Your universe is lucky to have you. Oh, and Dr Richards? You might want to look into element 152.'

With the familiar rainbow shimmer, the time bubble vanished.

'Back to the Fantasti-Car?'

'Back to the Fantasti-Car, Johnny.'

They turned and walked out of the temple.

'Of course, I had already deduced the flight rings used element 152. And actually I can think of several obvious improvements...'

'Oh, Reed, don't ever change!'

'Ha ha ha ha ha!'

