

Quantum Leaping

A tale of the Legion of Super-Heroes

featuring GAZELLE and KID QUANTUM

by David Meadows

Gizelle Smith sat in the cockpit of the tiny United Planets cruiser and unwrapped another candy bar.

“Florg,” she said to nobody in particular. The ship’s autopilot took a microsecond to analyse the instruction and decide it wasn’t a valid course declaration.

“State course and speed,” it asked patiently.

“Florgin’ nowhere fast,” muttered Gizelle. She hadn’t signed up to the U.P.’s Young Heroes programme to sit a bazillion clicks from civilization looking for space phantoms. She still wasn’t sure how it was her and not one of the other foobs who had managed to volunteer. She was pissed. To make matters worse, when she was pissed she always ate more. And with nowhere to exercise on this pathetic excuse for a cruiser, the stored calories were making her jittery.

Some deep spacers had reported sightings of an unidentified ship out here beyond the limits of civilization and Gizelle was stuck here on picket duty until she found it. Which was impossible, obviously. There was nothing out here and the spacers who reported it were obviously high on—

“Bloody nass!”

If there had been room in the cockpit, Gizelle would have leaped to her feet in excitement. One second she was looking at a blank starfield, the next she was looking at a ship. A big ship. No, a florging big ship! Gizelle glanced at the cockpit displays to confirm what her eyes were telling her. The ship was clicks long. Bigger than any ship she had ever seen. Bigger than any ship she had ever heard of.

The ship cruised sedately through space. It showed no markings, no lights, and no source of power other than the glow of its massive fusion drives. Gizelle’s instruments could pick up no life signs and nobody answered hails on any frequency. After running all the standard contact protocols (well, ok, *some* of the protocols; she was far too excited to go down the U.P.’s ridiculously long checklist), Gizelle clambered into her environment suit. Her metabolic control would actually keep her alive in space unaided for a brief period, but there was no point taking stupid risks. She directed the autopilot to within a hundred metres of the alien ship, cycled the airlock, and kicked off towards the alien ship.

Clambering over the hull with the magnetic clamps built into her suit, she soon found something that appeared to be an airlock. From her tool pouch, she pulled a lock decoder and slapped it over the control panel. The decoder took a few seconds to sync with the controls and then the hatch slid smoothly open. Within a minute, the lock had cycled and she was stripping off her environment suit inside her first alien ship.

Gizelle found herself in a gently curving metal corridor. The air was breathable—luckily, as she had completely forgotten to check—and the gravity was close to Triton normal. The temperature was below what the U.P. called “room temperature”, but comfortably warm for a native of Triton. Indirect strip lighting gave her plenty of light to see by.

Of course, now she had little idea of what to do. Probably find a control room of some kind. She peered through the airlock's view port to reassure herself that her cruiser's autopilot was keeping pace.

That's when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Reacting on pure instinct, she spun and kicked out at whoever was behind her. Her kick connected with the chest of a young humanoid, hard enough to lift him clean off the deck and slam him into a wall. Breath whooshed out of him with a loud huffing sound, and he lay slumped and dazed against the bulkhead.

Gizelle stood poised for another attack but the fight was obviously taken out of the dark-skinned stranger.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" she demanded. The stranger held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. She noticed that he had recently been through some hard action; his red-and-black uniform was torn in several places, and he had cuts on his torso and a bruise on his face that definitely wasn't caused by her kick.

"I was going to ask you the same," he said. "They call me Kid Quantum."

"Sounds like a florgin' Legion name," she said. The youth grimaced with obvious disdain.

"No way!" he said. "I'm the Champion of Xanthu!"

"Xanthu? Never heard of it."

"You've never heard of *Xanthu*?"

"What do I look like, a florgin' encyclopaedia?" Still, the boy's reaction to her mention of the Legion of Super-Heroes had perversely softened Gizelle's attitude towards him. She sank to the floor across the corridor from him and sat against the wall.

"I'm Gi—Gazelle," she said, using her Young Heroes codename. "Do you have any idea where we are and what this ship is?"

"No to both. But I'll tell you what I do know. The ship entered Xanthu's detection net a couple of days ago. It seemed to be some kind of unmanned derelict and wasn't answering hails. Problem was, it was on a collision course straight towards Xanthu and it's way too big for the planet's defence grid to deal with. They sent me to board it to see if I could change its course."

"Well you succeeded because it's nowhere near Xanthu now."

Kid Quantum leaped excitedly to his feet and looked out of the viewport. His face fell.

"It is. I would recognise those stars anywhere."

"No way!" Gizelle was on her feet herself. "I was patrolling light years from any civilized world, nowhere near this Xanthu—"

Gizelle stopped in mid sentence. The stars had changed. They were nothing like those she had been staring out of the cockpit at for the last few hours. With rising panic she realised that her ship had also vanished. The autopilot should have been keeping station but it was nowhere to be seen.

"That's not possible."

"Oh."

"Oh? Oh what?" she rounded on the Kid.

"Oh, I know what's happened. The ship isn't just powering towards Xanthu, it's also leaping in and out of our universe."

"Say what?"

"Xanthu's scientists say it's a quantum instability in its main drive. At regular intervals it's flipping between our universe and another. It's done that twice since I've been aboard. The other universe is completely different. The stars are all changed around."

"Was there a big nebula over there?" Gizelle asked with rising panic.

"Yes..."

“And a blue giant in a globular cluster over there?”

“I think so...”

“Florg!”

It didn't take long for them to agree on what had happened. They had each joined the derelict alien ship in a different universe.

“I've been on the ship for hours,” Kid Quantum explained. “I went to the bridge—fought my way through robots that seem to be the ship's automated defences—but I couldn't do anything to change the course from there. When the ship is in my universe, it's still on course to smash Xanthu. I'm trying to get to the engine room to shut the drive down before I run out of time.”

Without any warning or sense of movement, the stars outside the viewport shifted, once more showing the patterns Gizelle was familiar with.

“Woohoo! This is my stop, Kid. I'm getting off this tub before I'm stuck forever.” She reached for her environment suit. “Good luck with—”

She stopped. “Good luck with saving your planet,” she was going to say, before the reality of that sank in. The Kid was battered from his first fight with the ship's killer robots, and it didn't look like he was that tough to start with. She dropped the suit again.

“Which way to the engine room?” she asked.

She had to turn away, embarrassed by the tears of gratitude in the Kid's eyes. *Is that how people look at Legionnaires?* She wondered.

“This way,” he said simply, and they fell into step beside one another.

They walked at a brisk pace but still Gizelle was itching to move faster. Her metabolism was still amped far higher than normal and she was desperate to burn some energy. She would have welcomed a killer robot attack.

As they travelled, they compared notes on their own universes. They quickly established that they had several planets in common, but neither of them knew enough about other worlds to be sure what the differences were. One thing they could compare the differences of were the Legions of each universe. Gizelle wouldn't admit it to anyone else, but she had spent a lot of time reading up on “her” Legionnaires—well, one of them anyway. Kid Quantum had also studied “his” Legion, but for a different reason. It seemed that his government was going to send him to represent his planet as a Legionnaire and appoint a different Champion of Xanthu.

“Champion of Xanthu is a prestigious position,” he said. “The Legion is a pretty new idea and nobody knows if it's going to work out. I'm not sure it's a good move for me...”

“You know what? Florg 'em. Let me tell you about the Legion—they're a bunch of over-inflated egos who think they own the universe. I'll bet that's true in any universe. They're not going to care that you're a big shot on Xanthu. Give 'em a micron and they'll walk all over you.”

“You think?”

“Yeah,” she said, warming to the subject. “So you've got to assert yourself from the start, see? Let them know you're not taking any nass from them. You're the florgin' Champion of Xanthu, you're better than any Legion dimclod.”

“Well, I'm not *exactly* the Ch—”

Gizelle never found out what the Kid wasn't exactly, because the ship's automated defences chose that moment to attack. Several large sections of bulkhead detached ahead of them and formed themselves into humanoid shapes bristling with spikes and cutting edges. With a whoop, Gizelle launched herself at them. A flying kick crushed the chest of the first robot and she grabbed the swinging arm of a second, ripping the arm clean off. She used the arm to beat a third into scrap while cart-wheeling between the scything blades of more robots.

But the robots were *tough*. Ripping steel was right at the edge of her strength limits, and she was tiring fast under the endless wave of robots. Inevitably, her sleek ballet of strikes and dodges faltered. She mistimed a block and a robot caught her ankle in a vice-like grip. A whirling chainsaw appendage darted towards her...

...and froze, for no apparent reason. Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Gizelle wrenched her ankle free and kicked the head off the last moving robot. She stood, breathing heavily, among a mountain of scrap metal.

And for the first time, realised what Kid Quantum had been doing in the fight. For as many robots as she had trashed ahead of them, an equal number had formed in the corridor behind them and now were standing... frozen.

"How?" she panted.

"It's my power. I freeze things in quanta of time."

"Cool power. Got any food?"

"Huh?" The Kid was thrown by the change of subject.

"My power... enhanced metabolism... but I need to replenish..."

The Kid dug in a pouch at his side and found two small ration blocks.

"It's all I've got."

"Thanks." Gizelle devoured them and started to feel able to walk again. Maybe not fight, but definitely walk.

At that moment, the frozen robots vanished.

"How do you do that?" she asked.

"It's not me! It happened at the bridge, too. I think the ship has just jumped universes, and anything in my quantum field gets left behind in the other universe."

"Huh, that even kinda makes sense. Anyway, how far to the engine room?"

"The robots only seem to be guarding key areas, so I'm guessing..."

They rounded a corner and the Kid didn't need to complete his sentence. They faced a massive chamber, as big as the biggest dome on Triton, with hulking machinery that could only be the drive. At the hub of the machinery was the glow of the naked singularity that provided power to the massive plant. Gizelle struggled to remember the few physics classes she hadn't cut.

"Singularity, right? We need to... uh..."

"Destabilize it," explained the Kid. "It should be easy, as it's already in a semi-stable flux."

Gizelle made whooshing noises and gestures to indicate that the explanation had gone right over her head. "Just tell me what I need to break."

"Not you, me. This is my part of the mission. I'm going to create a microquantum field right in the heart of the singularity."

"Isn't that dangerous?" she asked.

"Well. Two possible things may happen. One, the drive may explode. Two, the ship might be catapulted into an entirely new universe, permanently. Either way, Xanthu will be safe."

"Uh..."

"Yeah, I know."

They were silent for a moment. Gizelle looked at the youth who had quietly and calmly proposed blowing them both into eternity. *That's what a hero looks like*, she found herself thinking. *The Kid would've made a forging great Legionnaire.*

On impulse she hugged him, then pushed him away when, after a startled moment, he hugged her back.

"Ok, Kid, let's blow this thing."

“Wait! If I’ve got the timing right, we’re still in your universe and we’ve got a couple of minutes before it jumps to mine and hits Xanthu,” he said, suddenly excited about something.

“So? It doesn’t matter which universe you blow it in, and there’s no point in cutting it any finer.”

“Yes, it matters. Goodbye, Gazelle, and good l—”

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With no sense of missing time, Gizelle found herself alone in empty space. All traces of the gigantic ship had vanished and the familiar star patterns of her own universe surrounded her. Kid Quantum had encased her in a quantum time stasis and waited for the ship to jump universes, leaving her behind. Somewhere in the vastness of the multiverse, he was alone in that alien ship, saving his planet from destruction the way its Champion should. *I hope he finds a way to survive it*, she thought.

Then, as the reality of her own situation dawned on her, she set about locating her cruiser before her breath and her stored metabolic energy ran out.