

Quantum of Sunlight

A tale of the Legion of Super-Heroes

by David Meadows

Superman sat in the Interplanetary Ice Cream Parlour and, for the first time in twenty years, tasted a spoonful of Martian ice cream. He closed his eyes and smiled in satisfaction. Some things hadn't changed.

Shutting out the excited whispers of the parlour's patrons—*Is it him?—He looks taller on Tri-V—Ask him for a videograph*—he focused his attention on the man sitting opposite him.

Cosmic Man grinned as sticky ice cream ran down Superman's fingers. 'You look like you're enjoying that.'

'I am. It's hard to find time to relax in the 20th century. But here in the 30th ... it's a place I can really be me. I missed it.'

'I'm sorry we had to call you in such dire circumstances. But we couldn't have solved the Nolan mystery without you.'

Superman shook his head dismissively. 'Of course you could. I didn't do anything any Legionnaire couldn't have done, except perhaps provide a fresh perspective on the problem.'

Cosmic Man smiled. Twenty years of being his century's greatest hero hadn't erased Superman's essential humility.

'But tell me,' Superman was asking, 'Now we have more time to talk, about the other Legionnaires. Brainiac 5 took me to meet a lot of ex-members, of course, but there are some that nobody has mentioned. Sun Boy, for example—or, I suppose it must be Sun Man now—what's he doing with himself?'

'He stuck with Sun Boy,' grinned Cosmic Man. 'Dirk couldn't bear to change his name and acknowledge he was growing older, the way the rest of us did.' Then his look grew more pensive. 'But ... he's not a Legionnaire now. Oh, it's a long story.'

'I've got time,' said Superman. 'The 20th has a lot of heroes now, it's not so urgent that I return.'

'All right. Let's see, it was two years ago, just after Quantum Queen joined ...'

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Sun Boy stepped onto the ballroom balcony of Mercury L-1 and blinked at the dazzling sight, not of the huge orange ball of the sun hanging overhead—that was pedestrian to him—but of

the throng of Earth's best and brightest young socialites strutting their million-credit gowns at this gala charity event.

He saw Quantum Queen at the balcony rail, looking down on the packed dance floor, and paused to admire her statuesque figure and the way she wore the few wisps of material that made up her costume. He appreciated it when female humanoids wore such scanty attire. Well, except that one time Saturn Girl tried it. That was just *wrong*. Bringing his mind back to Quantum Queen, he moved to join her.

'This must be pretty strange for you,' he said.

'Just because the Wanderers worked out on the fringes of the galaxy doesn't mean we were country yokels,' she said coolly. 'I've been to my share of society functions.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—look, I meant strange having me tag along as your minder for your first few missions, when you've already got more than enough experience already. It's just a standard Legion rule, ever since Chemical King ... well, you know.'

'I know, and I'm sorry I snapped, Sun Boy.'

'Call me Dirk.'

'I'll call you Dirk when we're on leave, Sun Boy when we're on a mission. Fair enough?'

'Fair enough. Though this isn't a real mission. We're only here for public relations, really. Baby-sitting a crowd of pretty young things while they dance the night away. Oh, I can barely contain my excitement!'

Sun Boy threw an arm theatrically across his forehead, eliciting a short laugh from his companion. *The ice queen is thawing*, he thought as he turned his best million-candlepower smile on her, the smile that had warmed the hearts of a billion young sentients on Tri-V screens—

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'Million-candlepower smile?' said Superman, laughing. 'Really?'

'I'm just getting into character,' grinned Cosmic Man. 'Now are you going to let me tell the story?'

'Ok, ok. Tell it your way!'

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Sun Boy smiled at Quantum Queen ['Better?' 'Better.']. and offered her his arm.

'As long as we're here, the mission is to mingle and be seen. And while we can be seen very well from up here, we need to go down there to mingle. Dance?'

After a moment's hesitation, Quantum Queen took his arm. Activating their flight rings in unison, they floated over the balcony rail and down into the throng. A clearing formed around them, and Sun Boy swept her into his arms and led her into a waltz—waltzes were back in vogue this season—in perfect time with the music. As they moved, he kept up a stream of inconsequential small-talk, seeming not to mind that her responses were monosyllabic at best. He talked mostly about himself, but his anecdotes were light and amusing, and for the first time in many months she found herself relaxing and enjoying the moment. Tilting her head back, she admired the splendour of the view. Like Sun Boy, she had seen more cosmic spectacle than the average citizen could imagine, but sometimes the setting—and the company, she had to admit, as she moved her body incrementally closer to her dance partner—made her appreciate the spectacle with fresh eyes.

Mercury L-1 was the hottest destination on the party circuit—literally, as well as figuratively. A free-floating space station gravitationally anchored at the Sun-Mercury Lagrange point, it was as close to the Sun as 30th-century technology could feasibly get. The massive station’s central, circular ballroom was topped by a dome of transparent inertron-alloy, designed to keep out harmful radiations and modulate the light to safe levels, while giving an unfiltered view of the Sun in all its glory, making it appear so close that Quantum Queen felt she could reach out and touch it.

Sun Boy squeezed her hand slightly, and brought her attention back to him.

‘Thinking about your old team?’ he asked.

‘For the first time in a long time—no. Maybe I’m getting over it.’

‘It must be the company,’ he smiled, and she sensed that he was full enough of himself to mean it seriously. But it didn’t matter. He *was* good company, not to mention a great dancer, and she had honestly forgotten about brooding over her loss for a few minutes. Despite his self-centred outlook, Sun Boy had instinctively known what she needed. She began to see why he was considered the most eligible date in Metropolis. Maybe this mission wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Sun Boy had been speaking in a low voice, designed to carry to her ears and no further over the loud music. He now continued in the same low tone but with slightly more urgency in his voice.

‘Nice as this dancing is, I need to bring your mind back to business. I’m going to do a half turn, and tell me if you see the Coluan over my shoulder.’

‘Yes, I see him. Strange to find a Coluan off-world.’

‘Strange to find one at a party, you mean!’ laughed Sun Boy. ‘But I know this one. Fraz Jox. A few years ago he was running with the Resource Raiders.’

‘A criminal?’

‘Of the worst kind,’ Sun Boy confirmed. ‘I put him in Takron-Galtos last time we had a run in, but he’s evidently got himself out somehow. No, don’t make any sudden moves. Watch him and see who he interacts with. There may be some kind of heist going on. There’s lot of money in this room.’

‘But he knows we’re here. He wouldn’t try anything with Legionnaires on duty.’

‘That depends on who he’s with and what his plan is. He’ll have factored us in, and if he thinks he’s still got a 95% chance of success, he’ll take that chance.’

‘I think he’ll want at least a 98.6% chance of success.’

‘Don’t give me any of that sprocking green-skinned logic!’ he laughed. A knowing look passed between them. Both were more than familiar with the ways of Coluans. He pulled her closer. ‘I hope he springs his plan quickly so we can get back to more pleasant things. My stateroom has a king-sized—’

A rumbling explosion rose above the music and the floor suddenly bucked, throwing several dancing couples off their feet, eliciting shrieks of surprise and panic.

The music suddenly ceased and a booming voice filled the air. Looking round, Sun Boy saw Fraz Jox talking into hand-held communicator which was clearly patched into the station’s public address system.

‘People of the United Planets, may I have your attention? I am not at all sorry to declare that you are now all my hostages. That explosion was my doing, to demonstrate that I am serious.’

The crew will soon confirm that I have destroyed several non-essential station functions. You may find your stateroom's sonic showers do not work, for example.'

Sun Boy started towards Jox, who fixed him with a calm gaze and continued talking in an unhurried manner.

'However, that is not my only explosive device. If Sun Boy does not stop in his tracks, the next one takes out the gravimetric generators. You do not wish that to happen.'

Sun Boy stopped in his tracks. He had a fair idea of what would happen if the gravimetric generators stopped working, and having the station plunge into the Sun was *not* how this mission was going to end. But Quantum Queen ...

'Furthermore, Quantum Queen I am well aware that you could convert your body to light and move faster than I can react. Which is why the bomb is on what you would colloquially call a 'dead man's trigger'. Touch me, and it explodes without my intervention.'

Sun Boy gripped his partner's wrist, hard enough that she drew a sharp breath. 'Sorry. But wait. Coluans don't bluff. There are 200 people on this station and we can't put their lives at risk. Let him make his play.'

'Thank you for seeing the logic of the situation, Sun Boy. Now, I have associates here that will be moving through the crowd with devices like this.' Jox brandished a small data terminal.' Each of you will be asked to input the codes of your personal bank accounts, whereupon 20% of your fortunes will be transferred untraceably to me. Only 20%. I am not a greedy man.'

At this, several of the liveried waiting staff produced the terminals and moved purposefully into the crowd. Sun Boy cursed silently. *Didn't they vet the waiters?*

While his underlings worked, Jox strolled almost casually over to the Legionnaires. Sun Boy noted that he carried no weapons, and neither did his men. He was that confident of his plan working, even with Legionnaires present.

'Go on, have your gloat,' said Sun Boy. 'I'll get you as soon as these people are safe.'

'Gloat? Sun Boy, where is the logic in that? I am merely letting you know that I am getting what I need—finances to continue the research my short-sighted, so-called 'peers' will not authorise—and you can do nothing to stop me getting it, nor escaping with it. Nobody will be hurt, these people will lose a trivial percentage of their fortunes, a percentage I have calculated will not materially affect them, and they will go home with an exciting story to re-tell at their ridiculous cocktail parties. Everybody wins. Except you and your reputation, of course.'

'Me and my ... you nass, you're doing to this get at me, aren't you? Because I beat you last time!'

'Revenge is illogical, Sun Boy. And yet ... oddly satisfying.' The Coluan smirked.

Sun Boy couldn't help himself. He swung at the smirking face and his fist connected hard with a green jaw, hard enough that he felt the impact jarring up through his arm. Jox barely had time to look surprised before crumpling to a heap on the floor.

'Sprock,' swore Sun Boy, rubbing his knuckles.

There was distant 'boom', and everything went haywire.

The floor lurched, throwing more people to the ground. Lights flickered and went out, leaving the room bathed in the lurid orange of the overhead Sun. Then the Sun began to slide ominously to the side, indicating that the Station was beginning to rotate. Or worse, move.

'Quantum Queen, scout outside,' ordered Sun Boy, 'We need to know how things look.' She shifted to x-ray form, her standard move for passing through solid objects, but found herself

confounded by the dome's radiation shielding. Shifting her energy quanta through various wavelengths, she found one that the dome allowed through, and flashed outside.

Sun Boy was heading towards where he had spotted the Station's captain in the crowd. 'Captain, what—'

The captain held up a hand for silence while he listened to somebody talking in his comms earpiece.

'It's bad, Sun Boy. Gravimetric generators are off-line and without them we can't maintain orbit.'

'But the station is in Mercury's L-1 point, right? That's a stable orbital position.'

The captain shook his head. 'That was the theory. But we moved out of L-1 for this gala. The owners thought it would provide a better spectacle if we were closer to the Sun.'

'How close?' asked Sun Boy in some alarm.

'Too close.'

Cursing, Sun Boy activated the communicator in his flight ring. A small holo of Brainiac 5, currently on mission monitor duty, sprang into view.

'Brainy, we have a problem.' In a few terse words, Sun Boy outlined the events of the last few minutes. 'I don't suppose Mon-El is anywhere close?'

'Negative, Sun Boy, he's on the other side of the galaxy and you don't have that long.' Brainiac 5 looked at something out of Sun Boy's field of view. 'Sensor data indicates a spiralling orbit with chaotic instability. I estimate the Sun's radiation will overwhelm the Station's shields in ... thirteen minutes. Cosmic Man is scrambling a team and will arrive in a Legion cruiser.'

'I think this station's a bit big for Cos's power to push, Brainy.'

'Immaterial. His E.T.A. is seventeen minutes anyway.'

'Grife. Ok, stay on the line, I might need a plan 'B'. Captain, you have lifeboats?'

'Not enough for all passengers.'

'What?'

'The station's systems were supposed to be ... fail ... safe ...'

'Brainy, take a note to recommend that space station design engineers study up on 20th-century history, specifically, 'Titanic'.'

'Not a time for joking, Sun Boy.'

'If I don't laugh I might cry.'

Quantum Queen materialised next to Sun Boy and the captain.

'I think the explosion was external. There's a big solar power array that's basically trashed, but I can't see any other sign of damage. And I heard what you said about lifeboats—there's a luxury liner docked over on the starboard side. I think it's big enough for everyone.'

Sun Boy levitated a couple of metres off the deck and radiated enough light to attract the crowd's attention.

'There is no need to panic, but the station is spiralling into the Sun—'

Predictably, panic broke out.

'Nice going, Sun Boy,' called Quantum Queen unhelpfully.

'Listen, people! I'm a Legionnaire! When I say there's no need to panic, there's no need to panic, ok? We have the situation under control.' The buzz of the crowd subsided and anxious faces looked up at him. 'Thank you. Now we need you all to move in a fast but orderly manner towards the starboard docking port ... an ORDERLY manner! The Station's crew will take charge and ensure everyone gets there safely. Thank you.'

Sun Boy noticed that the captain was desperately signalling him, and dropped back to the floor. He was gratified to see that the crowd was moving in a calm manner—mostly—in the direction he had indicated.

‘Sun Boy, that liner, its drive isn’t rated for work this close to the Sun. It will never pull free.’

‘O...k. Need that plan ‘B’ now, Brainy.’

‘Working on it ... the station’s gravimetric field could be used to push the liner clear, like a catapult.’

‘Yeah, no. The gravimetrics are toast.’

‘They’re not!’ insisted Quantum Queen. ‘I told you, the damage is to a solar power array, nowhere else.’

The captain was shaking his head. ‘The solar array provides direct power to the gravimetrics. Without it ... backup power isn’t enough.’

‘You use the Sun to keep you away from the Sun,’ said Sun Boy, mildly amused despite the seriousness of the situation.

‘If that’s the problem, all we need to do is provide solar energy directly into the gravimetric generator, bypassing the array,’ said Brainiac 5. And then stopped, closing his mouth abruptly.

Sun Boy was silent for a moment. It was obvious what Brainy couldn’t bring himself to say. ‘Can I put out enough power?’

The holo of his team-mate and life-long friend looked at him. They both knew what Brainy’s next words would mean.

‘Yes. You will need to give your full output for three point five minutes, enough to catapult the shuttle clear of the Sun. By that time, the station will be ... too deep in the gravity well for your flight ring to ...’

‘Don’t need to spell it out, Brainy. Captain, where do I need to go?’

Quantum Queen grabbed Sun Boy’s hand. ‘Dirk ... you’ll ...’

‘I know.’

‘Then ... I’m sorry for this.’ Without warning, she swung her fist at Sun Boy’s jaw with all the force she could muster. Taken by surprise, he went out like a light.

‘Sprock,’ she swore, rubbing her knuckles. ‘Captain, please see that this lunkhead gets to the liner. Don’t let him wake up and do anything stupid. Brainiac 5, I’m heading to engineering now. Tell me what I’ll need to do.’

‘Unlike Sun Boy, you can’t project energy, you turn into energy. You will need to actively enter the ... Quantum Queen, I cannot calculate any outcome where you survive this.’

‘I know. But that’s why we’re heroes, right? And who knows ... maybe I’ll see the Wanderers again in the next life.’

‘There is no scientific basis for a next—’

‘Brainiac 5, kindly shut up. And when you see Sun Boy, tell him ... tell him thanks for the dance.’

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Superman looked at Cosmic Man, appalled. ‘Did she—?’

‘You’ve seen her statue in the Hall of Fallen Heroes.’

‘And Dirk?’

‘It broke him. He blamed himself, of course. Quit the Legion soon after. Now, he’s a virtual recluse, won’t see anyone. Us, his family, old girlfriends, anyone. It’s months since I last spoke to him. He’s not in a good place, and I don’t think he ever will be again.’

Superman was silent for a long time, his melting ice cream completely forgotten. Finally, he stood up.

‘Well, duty calls.’

‘You’re going back to the 20th?’

‘No. I’m going to see Sun Boy.’

And in a blur of red and blue, he was gone.

Historical note: the framing sequence of this story takes place immediately after the end of Adventure Comics #354, ‘The Adult Legion!’. For dramatic purposes I have chosen to ignore the partly obscured inscription on the pedestal of Quantum Queen’s statue on the cover of Adventure Comics #354. You can’t see it inside the issue, and we all know covers often don’t represent what’s actually happening in the story!
I also decided Sun Boy would appreciate her later costume more than her original one ...

