

DAYBREAK

by

Zachary S. Walters

When they discovered what would happen to their world, was there anything they could do?



“It’s my father,” Lijani told Meq’t as they looked down from the hilltop over their township. “I’m at my wit’s end with him.”

Mistmoon was at its highpoint, a milky sphere blotting out the neighbouring

stars. The dome of the Sanctuary and the glass roofs of the township glowed silver in the noon-light.

“First he kept disappearing,” Lijani continued, still breathless from the climb. “Going off for days on end and coming back with strange artifacts. You can’t move in his study for them! But now he’s excelled himself. He’s spent the past six days lining our house with

clods of earth!”

Meq’t was not sure he had heard her correctly. “He’s lined the floor with clods?”

“No, not inside. All the walls *and* the roof. They’re completely covered. Without

candles, it's like a grave inside."

Meq't tried to imagine it. He saw a robed figure leaving the Sanctory and hobbling across Communion Square. By his limp he knew that it was his childhood friend, Kan'ja, off, no doubt, to soothe some troubled soul. He thought of how mischievous Kan'ja had been when they were children and how serene his manner since he had taken the robes of a Counsellor.

"That must have been a great labour," Meq't said to Lij'ani.

"He worked day and night until it was done. You don't know how stubborn he is once his mind is fixed."

"Do you know why?"

She just shook her head, her eyes suddenly filling up. "He won't talk to me. He says he'll explain when the time is ripe. So I gave him an ultimatum - either remove the clods or I would move out. He simply ignored me. I've decided to stand firm. I'm going to the hospice tonight."

"You're abandoning him?"

He hadn't meant to be so blunt, but she didn't take offence. "It's nearby. How else am I supposed to make him see reason?"

Meq't, a glass worker, had been away the past month investigating the new lime deposits in the southern foothills. Since his return he had heard gossip that Lij'em had been behaving eccentrically. Until now he hadn't appreciated the extent of it and the effect it was having on Lij'ani.

Was it just his advancing age? Meq't knew that he had grown more cantankerous since the death of Lij'ani's mother, but this was a blatantly strange act. Lij'em had done much good work for the township in the past, curing sickness with herbal potions, discovering earths that improved the clarity of their glass, banishing the vermin that once infested their homes with a concoction based on marsh-hogs' droppings. His had been a productive and useful life.

Then Meq't had an unwelcome thought. Lij'em's

actions, though strange, had not as far as he knew actually caused anyone direct harm and might have better been moderated by negotiation rather than confrontation. What if Lijani was leaving her father more out of shame than desperation?

He looked into her face again but he could find no answer there; he saw only beauty. Aye, he loved her, and had intended to propose marriage. But this was not the right time.

Someone exited from the confessional and hurriedly departed. Meq't pressed a few coins into the offertory slot and heard them roll down the chute into the box.

"Twenty," said the voice on the other side of the screen as he entered. "Is that correct?"

Kan'ja was obviously well practised at counting both the number and the weight of coin. Meq't made a non-committal noise.

"You are poor?" Kan'ja prompted.

"Twenty's more than enough for you," Meq't said with hearty irreverence.

"Meq't?"

"Aye, it's me. My mind is troubled and I've come to seek wisdom."

Kan'ja chuckled. "A rare honour," he said. "How might a humble Counsellor help soothe your turmoil?"

"I seek advice on a practical matter," Meq't said bluntly.

"Ah."

Meq't heard the swish of fabric, as if Kan'ja was getting himself comfortable on his perch.

"You know, of course, that Lijani and I are close," Meq't said.

"Indeed. She is a woman of considerable spirit and beauty. Is a marriage proposal imminent?"

Meq't smiled at his friend's acumen. "Alas, more pressing matters have intruded. It concerns her father."

This time Kan'ja was silent.

"She tells me he's been behaving very oddly and has

now clad their dwelling with turf. I've seen it myself."

He had made a brief detour on his way to the Sanctory and found exposed earth surrounding the house to a considerable distance where Lij'em had removed the grass. "It was a great undertaking for a man of his age. Is there anything you can tell me that might explain it?"

Meq't knew that Kan'ja would be bound by the Counsellors' discretionary vows had Lij'em confided in him. But the old man was not known to be a Sanctory visitor.

"I can give you only rumours," Kan'ja said. "And you must make of them what you will. I accept no responsibility for their truth, or lack of it."

"Understood," Meq't said. "I am asking you as a friend. I wish to help him and Lij'ani."

Another silence. He could almost hear Kan'ja gathering his thoughts.

"As far as I understand it," Kan'ja said slowly, "he

believes that the Great Blindness is soon to return."

"What?"

"It's possible that his actions are explicable in terms of this."

Kan'ja began a convoluted explanation of how he had come about this knowledge. It appeared to derive from indiscreet talk among other Counsellors regarding the statement of Vrimeris, a neighbour of Lij'em's who had helped him clad the house. Meq't recalled that Lij'em had successfully nursed the man's daughter through a shaking fever when she was an infant.

Meq't could see why the Counsellors might bend their vows and discuss the avowal statement openly. If Lij'em truly did believe in the return of the Blindness, he risked controversy and shame. Even the smallest child knew that the Firstfolk had had their sight stolen after they crossed the starry wastes to settle this world many generations before. Little was known of that time save that chaos had reigned and many had died. The blinded survivors had managed to raise a new

generation free of their affliction, but most of their heritage and civilisation had been lost.

The order of the Counsellors had arisen in the aftermath, a band of stout-hearted folk who, though blinded, had gathered the survivors and instilled them with fresh hope and purpose. Peace and sanity had been restored, and the Counsellors had promised that the Blindness would never again be visited on the people as long as they regularly purged their souls of evil. Meq't, who did not consider himself very pious, nevertheless understood the potency of such a threat.

"Because it is only hearsay," Kan'ja was telling him, "we have so far managed to keep it out of earshot of the elders. But it is merely a matter of time. They are likely to take a dim view of it."

The Sanctory elders were rigorous in insisting that good order could only be maintained through the proper observance of their credo. They were zealous in

taking action against transgressors.

Meq't rose. "Thank you for the warning," he said to his friend, and hurried out.

Lijem's house now looked like a small artificial hill. It was a modest-sized dwelling, with inward sloping walls that must have facilitated the positioning of the clods. Even so, for a man of his advancing years there must have been a very pressing reason for undertaking such an arduous task. Or a quite unhinged one.

He knocked hard on the recessed wooden door and waited. Mistmoon was setting behind a stand of floss trees and the zenith stars were brilliant again.

No one came to answer. Perhaps Lijani had already departed for the hospice; perhaps her father was off on one of his mysterious excursions.

He tried the door. It opened. The main room was dark as midnight and heavy with the smell of raw earth; but

candlelight framed the study door.

"Ah, Meq't," Lij'em said without surprise when he knocked and entered.

On his forehead he was wearing a leather and metal contraption with tubular eye-pieces that were used as magnifiers for his diminished sight. He pushed them back and set aside the large sheet of paper he had been inspecting. It was covered with complex designs.



"How are you, Lij'em?" Meq't asked.

"As well as can be expected," the old man said without conviction. "If you've come to see Lijani, she's not here."

Meq't looked around the cluttered study. There was nowhere to sit and little space to stand. Chairs, tables and shelves were piled high with papers, gadgets and larger

assemblages of corroded metal and old plastech whose purpose Meq't could not even guess at.

Meq't considered a suitable choice of words.

"Do your investigations go well?" he finally asked.

"They go profitably but they do not go well," Lij'em replied, now probing the intricate innards of a box-like machine with a slender tool. "The conclusion they present is a grim one indeed. Did Lijani send you here?"

"No," Meq't replied. "But my purpose is as you suspect."

"Then you know that she has left this house?"

"I knew she intended it," he replied. And then, deciding on boldness: "It is scarcely comfortable here for either of you now that you have entombed it."

Lijem's laugh was mirthless. "And you have come to persuade me to see reason, eh?"

"I would like to understand your own reasoning."

Lijem scrutinized him but did not volunteer anything.

"At the Sanctory they are already saying you have prophesized the return of the Blindness."

Lijem cast down the tool with annoyance. But it was not Meq't he was annoyed with.

"I had hoped to spare everyone premature alarm," he said. "But now it seems the demon has escaped the box." He fumed briefly about the loose-tongued Vri'neris, to whom he had explained the purpose of the task. But his anger swiftly subsided. "Perhaps it's just as well. My latest calculations suggest the Blindness will return sooner than I originally estimated. Not a prophecy but a prediction based on evidence."

Meq't, who despite himself was finding this intriguing, had evolved his own notion to

account for the old man's periodic disappearances.

"You obtained your evidence from the place of the Firstfolk?"

Lijem was silent for a moment.

"That would be forbidden," he said with undisguised irony.

The old settlement, a day's walk from the township, was proscribed territory because the origin of the affliction was believed to reside there. The Sanctory elders had made it a central tenet of good citizenship.

"Indulge me," Meq't said. "Show me some proof. After all, you must know that I love your daughter. If disaster is coming, we need to prepare ourselves for it."

Lijem gave him another long look. From a cupboard he withdrew a silvery box with a row of protrusions along its upper surface. He set it down among the clutter on a bench, uttered a warning about not being alarmed, and put his thumb to one of the protrusions.

The box began to talk.

Mistmoon had long set by the time Meq't left Lij'em, and every star shone with full splendour in the sky. Meq't knew it was dangerous to leave the environs of the township after dusk, but what was one man's peril when everyone's future was threatened?

Lij'em's talking box had convinced him utterly that a catastrophe was imminent, and he now carried it pocketed in his cloak. It had taken him half a candle to persuade Lij'em to part with the box, but he had finally accepted that Meq't's plan was better than no plan at all.

He would demonstrate the box to Kan'ja. Even if his friend was not convinced by it, Meq't was confident that he would keep its existence secret. If, on the other hand, Kan'ja did accept its message, he would need little persuading to put their case to the elders. Far better to approach them through Kan'ja than for Lij'em to confront them alone. They

would surely reject outright the heretical evidence of the box if presented by a known sceptic of the Order.

Meq't crossed the stone footbridge and followed the pathway across scrubland. He knew why his friend had chosen such an isolated spot following his marriage and his initiation as a Counsellor. It was because it lay on the edge of the forest and the fierce animals that lurked there. As a child, Kan'ja had been attacked by a tree-crawler while he and Meq't were gathering firewood. Meq't had saved his friend's life by pouring his water bottle over the beast's head. Crawlers hated to get wet, and the beast had fled. But Kan'ja had been seriously injured and never walked properly again. He had built his house as close as possible to the place of the attack. Face your fears. It was a dictum of the Order.

As he neared the house, Meq't became aware of a movement nearby. He froze. Straining his eyes, he saw a dark shape moving on the edge of the scrub. It was not a

crawler but a slouch, a harmless lumbering beast that fed off vegetable matter. A spray of soil erupted from its hind legs. It was digging a burrow.

A slouch preparing to hibernate at the start of spring? This was unheard of. Then it occurred to him that the creature's odd behaviour was perfectly in keeping with what he had learned from the talking box. He hurried on and rapped on Kan'ja's door.

Rim'lu, Kan'ja's wife, greeted him warmly, ushering him inside. The sight of her rounded belly, which was a sign that she was soon to give birth to their first child, was an added spur to his mission. Kan'ja himself was sitting at the fireside, nursing a bowl of tea. Meq't joined him, warming his hands.

"What is so urgent that you would risk visiting at this hour?" Kan'ja asked.

Meq't indicated that Rim'lu should join them. When she was seated, he took the box from the pouch in his cloak and laid it on his knees.

Remembering Lijem's warning, he said, "Do not be alarmed."

When Meq't woke the following morning, he found that Kan'ja had already left for the Sanctuary. He had taken the speech box and intended to confront the elders with the evidence it contained. He would plead with them to mobilize the townsfolk to prepare safe places for themselves. There was little time. Exactly how little Meq't could not specify, but urgent action was needed.

Returning to Lijem's, he found the old man outside, testing another pair of looking glasses, these with lenses as dark as obsidian. It was impossible to see anything through them.

"Impossible now," Lijem said. "We always think only of now."

He did not elaborate. He was restless, plainly agitated.

"Have you refined your estimates?" Meq't asked.

"Twenty candles at most."

It was less than a day. Far less than he had hoped.

“How long will it last? This great burning light?”

“I cannot be certain, but probably no more than a few days. Yet we are too late. Too late to persuade everyone. Too late to save them. Will you bring Lijani?”

Meq't nodded. “By force, if necessary.”

He went directly to the hospice. Lijani had just finished doling out soup to the wretched. She looked happy to have been of use.

“Pack your belongings,” Meq't said bluntly. “We have to leave.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Very wrong. We must go now.”

“Has something happened to father?”

Meq't hesitated. “Yes.”

“That's a lie, Meq't. I can tell.”

Meq't shrugged. “Very well. No, nothing has happened to him. But you must come with me now.”

Her gaze was searching. “Has father had a change of heart?”

“This goes beyond his behaviour. We're all in imminent danger.”

Ostentatiously, she began to rinse out the soup urn. “What has he told you?”

“We're in danger,” he repeated.

“How?” she demanded to know. “Tell me.”

So he briefly explained about her father's visits to the old settlement and the speech box. Lijani, more orthodox in her beliefs than her father, looked both appalled and concerned. Appalled because the idea was monstrous. Concerned that it was not only her father who might be losing his wits.

So Meq't was forced to spell it out.

The speaking box was a device that captured voices. It had been used by the Firstfolk in the immediate aftermath of the Blindness to explain what had happened and to post a warning for future generations. However, the box

had been lost in the flight from the settlement, lost and forgotten until Lijem unearthed it. Although the speaker used many ancient words that were unknown in the present day, the essential message was readily decipherable. It was also devastating.

Mistmoon was not really a moon. It was a star, just like all those innumerable points of light that speckled the sky, only much closer. It was a blazing bright star whose heat and light were veiled by obscuring gas. The Firstfolk had known this when they had settled the world, but what they had not suspected was that it would suddenly increase in brightness and heat, showering the whole planet with its undimmed radiance. One day it had done so, taking everyone by surprise. It was this, this sudden blaze of light, that had caused the Blindness.

The message on the speech box also warned that it was likely to be cyclical, that in years to come it would happen again. And according to

Lijem's calculations, that time was nigh.

"And you believe this?" Lijani said to Meq't when he was finished.

"I do. If your father proves to be wrong, then we are nothing more than foolish. If he is right, we must take whatever urgent action we can. If you love me, come with me now."

For long moments she did not make the slightest move. Then she thrust the upturned urn onto the draining board.

The hospice lay on the margins of Communion Square. When he and Lijani emerged, they saw Kan'ja approaching from the direction of the Sanctory. He was no longer wearing his Counsellor's robe.

"They wouldn't listen," he told Meq't. "They wouldn't even let me make the box speak. As soon as I explained its function, they denounced it as infernal and confiscated it. I have been suspended from the Order for heresy."

Meq't offered his commiserations, but if

anything, Kan'ja seemed relieved to have been released from the burden of his office.

"You also believe in this story?" Lijani asked, still not wholly convinced.

"Rim'lu is carrying our child," Kan'ja replied. "I won't risk my family's future if there is any uncertainty on the matter. I have to go and get her. Can we lodge with your father?"

"Of course you can," Lijani said, sounding more persuaded by his passion than all of Meq't's reasoning.

"We must warn everyone else," Meq't said. "Anyone who will heed us."

To Meq't's surprise, both Lijem and Lijani agreed to join him in the square that evening. They stood defiantly outside the Sanctuary and loudly addressed any passerby who would listen about the imminent danger that faced them. As the night wore on they were joined by Kan'ja and Rim'lu, whose pregnancy was a useful deterrent to the

more aggressive members of the Order who were guarding the Sanctuary entrance with torches and threatening extreme measures unless they ceased their provocations.

"We speak the truth!" Lijem shouted, now full of the fervour of his revelation. "The light will come soon! It will blind us again unless we hide from it."

"Heresy!" countered the Counsellors. "Join us in worshipful observance of what has always preserved us!"

The Order's message was one of comfort and continuity, and it did not surprise Meq't that their own warnings bore little fruit. Most people, even those who knew them well, went by with embarrassment and without pause. Many welcomed being ushered into the Sanctuary by the Counsellors. No doubt they would be assembled in the Great Hall with its great dome of faceted glass. Meq't himself had not long ago replaced a damaged segment, etching his initials inconspicuously into one corner of a flawless

replacement that had taken him several days to polish. The dome had been designed to refract Mistmoon's light directly down upon those gathered there so that they would be bathed in its uplifting radiance.

But still they continued to make their case. Every so often, someone would reject the blandishments of the Order and approach them. Of those, perhaps only one in ten were prepared to acknowledge the urgency of doing everything they could to protect themselves. Among them was none other than Vri'neris, who was now full of apologies for betraying Lijem's confidences.

"There is a mob at your home," he told Lijem. "They have ransacked it."

All four of them left immediately and hurried to Lijem's house. The door had been broken down and the contents of Lijem's study scattered on the naked earth outside. It was a rabble of ordinary townsfolk, but Meq't was certain that the Sanctory elders had orchestrated it. A

few of the looters had adorned themselves with the devices Lijem had gathered from Landfall, such as strange windowed helmets, ornate bracelets, belts and bulky gloves. They were cavorting around a fire built of broken furniture from the house. Already half gone in drunkenness, some were starting to drift away and none of them appeared to notice as Meq't and the others crept by and slipped into the house.

Inside, huddling in the dank darkness, were the families who had taken heed of their warnings. Among them were children of all ages, the very future of their world. Only a few were sleeping, even though the night was now well advanced. They had brought with them food supplies and bedding but were fearful in the extreme. It was Lijem who stood before them and explained everything he understood about what they were likely to face.

"Fear is understandable," he concluded. "It is necessary. But

on no account should you panic. This is a time when the steadfast will endure."

When the last of the revellers had departed or fallen into an intoxicated slumber, Meq't, Kan'ja and Lij'em first went outside to re-set any of the clods that had been dislodged during the ransacking of the house. Vri'meris and others brought more candles and water jars from their homes, whereupon Lij'ani and Rim'lu marshalled others to fill them from the river. When they had returned, the door was re-set in its frame as well as they were able and then packed with spare clods of earth, leaving only a single small slit.

Long before Mistmoon rose, the sky began to lighten.

They took turns to look through the earthen slit. Not only was the blackness of the sky fading as never before, but so were the stars. Even the brightest of them disappeared as the sky took on colours far richer than any seen by

candle or moonlight, shades of depthless blues and purples and a greenish-gold spreading up from the horizon. The radiance had drowned the stars.

"It's already happened," Lij'em murmured to him. "Our world is turning into the fire."

A nearby stand of floss trees glowed like shining mist. Soon the colours were so bright and vivid that it dazzled their eyes. In turns, they began to use Lij'em's black lenses, which he had prudently kept with him since their devising.

But the light was now so bright it had even begun to illuminate their hiding place. The huddled families began to marvel at it. Mistmoon was still below the horizon but already its light made it brighter than any day inside.

Meq't felt a hand close around his. It was Lij'ani. She looked calm, with no trace of the fear he knew she must be feeling. The fear possessed them all, but they could have done no more to ready themselves. Meq't smiled and drew her to him. There were

no words for what they must face.

Outside, a thickset man stumbled into view close to the house. Most likely a newly woken reveller, on his shaven head he wore Lijem's reading eye lenses. He pushed back the viewing tubes as he teetered around, either through continued drunkenness or because of the sudden spectacular surge in the light.

The floss trees looked as if they had caught fire, and the man's rage-like screams broke the silence within. Gradually they faded as he reeled away, and a deep silence fell. Meq't felt the heat as well as the glare and he hurriedly plugged their portal with a square of cut grass.

Beyond their darkened world, the sun was rising.

Coming next issue:

Exciting new story by Leo Parrish -

THE COSMIC CONTROLLERS

Only he could see the sinister creatures who really ruled the world.

Tools and Hardware

WHOLESALE!

Start Your Own Business

Sell nationally advertised tools to your friends and neighbors. Also for your own industrial and institutional use. New giant wholesale catalog has room for only your name on it. You get all the orders and re-orders. A MILLION DOLLAR INVENTORY AT YOUR FINGERTIPS. NO STOCK TO CARRY. ORDER AS YOU NEED IT! . . . Stanley, Clemson, Disston, K. & E. Lufkin, Miller Falls, Wiss, S&K, Thor and many other name brand tools, appliances, electric tools, power tools and others, too numerous to mention. WHOLESALE DISCOUNTS UP TO 50% off . . . Send \$1 deposit and get the new giant wholesale catalog. Your \$1 is credited to your first purchase or refunded if not 100% satisfied. Write NOW!

HUGE PROFITS!
MORE MONEY!

Get up to
50%
off

U. S. SUPPLY CORP., DEPT. 211

403 Market St., Newark, New Jersey



The skilled hand of the German gunsmith is responsible for this .22 calibre, 6-shot repeater automatic with self-ejecting clip. Just 4" long, fits easily into pocket or purse. Ideal for sporting events, stage use. (not available to Calif. residents). Comes for \$6.95 ppd. from Best Values, Dept. G-160, 403 Market, Newark, New Jersey.