

Night Lights

by Stephen Mark Golden

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"You spend too much time listening to the yarns of old men! I expect you to pay more attention to sharpening your skills of hunting and survival. There are too many in the tribe who waste their time pining for the days of the Ancients. Our existence is now, not in the past, whether real or imagined! You must be faithful to Pessim!"

Kanek was being reprimanded. His father was displeased with him. He had only wanted to hear more tales of the way it used to be -- the kind of things that were hinted at during the story tellings at the feasts and celebrations. It was all right to hear them then -- why not now?

"They're myths!" his father would say. "Imagination! During feasts, and celebrations, such foolishness must be overlooked. But now is not a feast! Now is not a celebration! Even if the days of the Ancients were truth, they were lost long ago! No one has ever left our world on a night-light! The Ancients went nowhere! They died, just like everyone else! Probably because they filled their heads with the foolishness of dreams and impossible visions of reality, and failed to preserve their own standard of existence. We are the people of Pessim! We must be practical at all times. We must not allow our dreams to go beyond what is reality!"

Kanek had never seen his father so enraged. He could imagine mists, like those at the hot pools, rising from his fathers head and pouring out of his ears. His eyes seemed to flash like lightning, and his voice rolled like the thunder of the sky. His face was as red as the hot magma he had seen flowing out of the ground at the base of Mount Pessim.

But the Ancients! Such wonderful tales of magic and mystery!

Kanek couldn't get the images out of his mind. In spite of his father's rebuke of his behavior, and denial of the possible truth of the stories, Kanek

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believed them! They must be true! Nothing else could explain the great artifacts and manifestations of disaster on the scored ground.

Oh, to be living in the time of the Ancients!

Desh, the old one with whom he had been spending time listening to the stories, was held in reverence in spite of his ravings. He had known many things which helped the tribe survive numerous disasters and hardships. The kind of things which were not obvious to the rest of them. Ideas that were passed down from those older than any of them -- generation to generation -- the ideas of the Ancients. Or what remnants were still able to be salvaged. But though Desh was held in reverence, his spoutings of the lights which once moved in the night sky, and the tale of the Ancients' return were not! These tales were forbidden!

Kanek's mind reeled. Lights that moved in the sky! Oh, not the regular movements of the stars. All were familiar with those. All knew how to tell direction and season from the stars. These were lights that were under the control of the Ancients.

"Did the Night-Lights really move?" Kanek had asked of Desh. "Could you really see them come down from the sky and return back into the dark void of the night?"

"Oh, yes, young Kanek. Wonderful visage it was, and many great things were accomplished by these lights! The passing of many days was rendered as nought. All of the people of the great and various continents were able to function as one, and with other miracles of light, they shared great knowledge which is now lost, or at least withheld from us until the Ancients' return."

Desh went on for many lengths of time, until the thunder of Kanek's father's voice could be heard outside. Then Desh simply went silent and smiled. He seemed at peace. He was patient to keep his secrets until another time.

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Kanek was internally furious at the interruption, but there was nothing he could do about it. He also knew that his father would be aware of why he had come to see the old man, and that his father would disapprove. But there were things that were more important than just continuing to live the way they always had! Certainly survival was important, but with the knowledge of the Ancients -- even a small portion of it -- all of their lives could be made better!

Kanek had resolved some day to investigate the areas of the Ancients. They were many days journey from the dwellings of his tribe. One of the places in particular -- the Port, as it was known to him -- was the place of the greatest interest to Kanek. It was the place to which the Ancients were said to return. A place guarded by mystery and evil spirits. A place where only the pure and undefiled could enter. Kanek wanted to test his purity, or at least test whether he could indeed enter, pure or not.

Until then, he would have to learn as much as he could from Desh.

"Desh, how do you know so much about the lights? Did your father see them?"

"No, not my father, nor my father's father, nor his father before him! I have seen . . ." and at this point he became very quiet, and whispered, ". . . books!" Kanek gasped for air! Books? The great curse upon mankind! The source of the evil ideas! Desh continued, "I have seen pictures of the great machines which were the lights. My father learned from his father, who learned from his father before that, about the lights. The lights were so great and numerous, they would dwarf the stars of the night. The Ancients used to ride in the great lights! Their plan was to travel great distances to another place in the sky in the conveyance of the lights."

Desh's expression became distant as he continued, "They left this world to find a better place, but the people of Pessim remained here. Those who left

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said they would return after they had found a new world. The people of Pessim did not believe them."

Then Desh, looking squarely at Kanek and opening his eyes wildly, uttered with conviction, "The other men of the tribe say I blaspheme against Pessim, our God, when I say they will return. But I believe! They will return, just as they said many generations ago, in the lights! And here is something that stretches even my ability to believe -- understand me -- the Ancients were men like you and me!"

"The Ancients -- 'men, like you and me,'" Kanek marveled. "If the Ancients were like me," he thought, "then I must be like them! If I am like them, then I can have all that they had if I can only discover their secrets!"

Soon, the time had come for Kanek to slip away from his tribe and investigate the "Port" of the Ancients. He packed his provisions, wished for his father's blessing (though he knew that wish to be an unreasonable one), and departed.

He was missed. He was lamented. He was regarded as one of the mysterious lost ones. He was counted for dead. Thus was the way of Pessim.

Kanek travelled for three cycles of the moon into the direction of the setting sun on the trail that had been marked as forbidden. He encountered blistering hot desert sand, abrasive wind, and inhospitable rock terrain, but he was prepared. He had learned his survival techniques well, and knew how to stay alive. Finally his efforts were rewarded.

He came upon great flat patches of conglomerate and aggregate stones, massive columns, and incredible remnants of stone and metal mountains. In the distance, he could see evidence of even greater conglomerate mountains, and

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beyond that, he saw what he knew to be the land's own monument unto itself, The Great Mountains to the Sky. These were amazing sights to Kanek, and he could scarcely comprehend the magnificence of it all, but his goal lay nearer to him than any of these. He sought the Port. He knew, from Desh's description, he was near to it now. He must look for the flat patches that would be higher than the trail, and climb the rocky hill. He should still be able to see the green crystal tower of the Port.

His excitement mounted as the tower came into view, so much so that he was careless when he clambered up the debris of the rocky hill. He caused some large boulders to break loose and graze his leg. Being quite determined, limping somewhat, he continued on toward his resolve. Finally, as night drew near, he reached the Port!

Beneath the green crystal tower, was a large structure which debris of the rocky hill, he caused some large boulders to break loose and graze his leg. For a moment, he was in agony! Finally, after determining it wasn't broken, he bound it with cloth from his pack and continued, limping somewhat, toward his resolve. There remained much distance, but as night drew near, he reached the Port!

Beneath the green crystal tower, was a large structure which stood intact; constructed of stone, metal, and sheets of clear crystal. It was truly a place of awe. "If there weren't spirits protecting this temple, there should be," he thought.

Cautiously, he entered the massive walls and came to an enclosure of pure, clear crystal all around. It was as if he were outside though he was inside. Clear stones, or cloth, or -- he couldn't describe it, it was incomprehensible to him. He set up camp in the crystal enclosure and marveled to himself. He was amazed to be in a shelter and still be able see the stars and the land about him.

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He remained there many days and explored much of the wonders of the site. He found hundreds of different instruments and devices -- the purposes of which he would probably never comprehend.

Then, one night while he was preparing for sleep, they came. He saw a myriad of new stars moving closer to the ground -- swirling in unison. A magnificent sight even for the initiated. To Kanek, it was a miracle.

The great machines of light landed on the wide flat surface of the Port. Hundreds of the Night-Lights were now before him! The tremendous machines that only moments before were barely distinguishable from being his own imagination were now resting on the massive grounds of the Port. Their lights were cooling rapidly, and even now, there was only a faint red glow in the areas from where the lights had promulgated.

Everything had become quiet.

He heard a noise, a whisper of air, and looked at the nearest of the machines. Kanek saw the side of the machine begin to crack open, causing an aura of light to pour out from around a square panel. He quickly scanned some of the other machines; each was cracking open in the same wonderful manner! The doors were being revealed! Each of them in unison was welcoming Kanek to come inside. He was being invited to join them!

Kanek ran to the nearest machine and approached the opening with caution and humility. Walking slowly up the ramp that led inside, he was bathed in the soft blue-white light of the interior. He was filled with the splendor of it all. Such an honor he had never imagined would be given to him! Kanek began to explore the passageways and chambers of the great machine, but as he did so, he realized he had seen no sign of the Ancients! He suddenly had a thought,

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"What if they aren't men like me? What if I cannot see them? What if they do not see me?"

In a very short time, his questions were answered. The Ancients were truly like him.

Upon entering the control chamber, he found the evidence. A lone skeleton suspended in the pilot's harness. Because the Ancients were like him, they were bound by the same frailties and weaknesses as he; they were shackled by the same needs for food and drink, air and warmth; they were vulnerable to the same problems and misfortunes.

The Ancients were dead.

The Ancients had indeed left the earth to find a better world, but it turned out, there was no better world. There was no habitable world within the reach of man. The Ancients travelled as far as they could go, and then decided to turn back.

None of them survived the flight home.

The great spaceships had returned and landed under auto-pilot control. The last of the Ancients had died perhaps a year before reaching home.

Ages ago, the people of Pessim had said the travellers were on a futile journey, that there was no place for them to go, that they would all die. Yes, it would seem in this instance the people of Pessim -- the Pessimists -- were right.