

## THE WORD UNSPOKEN

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Shanzi paused and looked toward the haunted city. From out here, just a short distance from the wall, it even looked haunted. Of course, all Lanky cities were haunted so this one was no different. She took a deep breath. *Come on, girl. This is no time to turn chicken.*

After adjusting her backpack, she took a sip from the canteen at her side, preparing to walk the final steps to the circular wall and its thousands of doors. She looked to the ground at her feet. The signs of time were everywhere. Weeds pushed up through cracks in the old road leading inside. Trees grew thick and branches hung low.

The humans who had first settled on this planet called the previous inhabitants Lankies because these people had all been very tall and very thin. The Lankies had long ago disappeared without a trace, but their ghosts could be felt in every Lanky city. For that reason, few humans ventured close. Trying to work with the feeling that someone was always looking over your shoulder was more than most people could take for any length of time. Ghosts were everywhere, but no one had ever found a Lanky, dead or otherwise. It was one of the great mysteries on a planet full of mysteries. Nearly one hundred years after humans first settled Lank, little was known about the Lankies themselves. Humans knew them to be intelligent, scientifically advanced, and had managed a few words in their language. That was about it.

Leaves brushed Shanzi's head as she ducked to avoid a particularly low set of branches.

Crack!

Upon hearing the sound, Shanzi felt as if her heart had stopped. She could almost hear her mother now. "If you had listened to me and forgotten this nonsense, you wouldn't be lying here dead, killed by some horrible creature."

Except it wasn't nonsense. She was an archaeologist. In truth, she was a 14-year-old who had just started high school and was a long way from graduation, but she was still an archaeologist, she reminded herself. Or would be, someday. As Shanzi raised her

head proudly, ready to continue with her mission, she stopped again. Had she felt something?

*Calm down*, she told herself. *You're imagining things*. Unfortunately, telling yourself that you're only imagining things, doesn't help you with things that are real. The tiny legs creeping across her neck were that kind of real. Shanzi tried not to scream, held her breath, and quickly reached for the thing at her neck, tossing it to the ground.

The scalpel spider had fallen on its back and was desperately trying to right itself, its legs waving madly. Each of those eight legs ended in razor-sharp barbs. If any had pierced her skin, so far from home, Shanzi knew she was as good as dead. Her hand shaking, she reached around and felt her neck where the spider had landed and pulled her hand back. There was no blood. She was okay.

Meanwhile, the spider continued its fight to roll over. Shanzi grabbed a nearby branch, inched over to the spider, and with a single swing of the branch, crushed it.

As she paused, shuddering, she heard a voice.

"Ooh, gross!"

"Mixa! What are you doing here?"

Shanzi's seven-year-old sister bent down to look at the crushed spider. She grimaced. "Depends," she said.

"Depends on what?"

"It's ugly," Mixa said as though she had already forgotten the conversation.

Shanzi sighed with frustration. "Depends on what?"

"Depends on what you're doing here," Mixa said, her attention to the spider now evaporated. "Have you got any food in that backpack?"

"Of course I have food. You don't think I'd go exploring without supplies, do you?" Shanzi looked at Mixa who carried nothing. "Unlike you. You're not even dressed for it."

Before leaving, Shanzi had done her best to outfit herself for a hike. Her backpack had a phone in case of emergency but currently off, a first-aid kit, and some food. Her canteen was heavy with water. Her clothes were loose fitting and completely covered her arms and legs. Her pants were tucked into her socks so nothing could crawl in. Mixa, on the other hand, wore a yellow sundress and had a bright red ribbon in her hair.

Mixa ignored the comment. "Well, I'm exploring too." With that, she walked past Shanzi and up to the Lanky city wall. She looked to the right and left, sizing up the many doors built into the circular wall. Lanky cities were all like this, circular structures with back doors into individual Lanky homes. The 'front door,' the one that actually led into the city center, could only be accessed by walking through the house. Mixa started to head for one, stopped, picked another, and then, unable to decide on one, she picked a handful in front of her and began reciting "Eenee, meenee, minee, mo."

"Mixa!" Shanzi caught up with her sister. "Stop it and go home right now. I don't need you to trail along behind me like some demented shadow. Besides, there are ghosts in there." Shanzi crossed her arms and smiled, sure that her last statement had won the argument.

"Of course there are ghosts," Mixa said. "That's what 'haunted' means." Shrugging at Shanzi, Mixa pointed to the door directly in front of her, and yelled, "Mo!" She then walked up to the door and said, "Dra-a-ak," the Lanky word for 'open.'

Dra-a-ak, indeed, Shanzi thought. She clenched her teeth and followed Mixa. Someone had to keep the little troublemaker safe. Refusing to give in quite so quickly, Shanzi added, "Okay, but next time you come exploring with me, make sure you wear proper clothes!"

'Open' had been the first recorded word of the Lanky dictionary. It was discovered, according to legend, after early explorers had given up trying to enter one of the walled cities. The chief explorer had expressed his disappointment, stretching out the word in Lanky fashion, and the doors had opened. Harmless words in one language sometimes meant entirely different and even funny things in another. Kids who wanted to curse in front of their parents would claim to be speaking Lanky.

The door was tall and narrow, built for the original inhabitants who, in pictures, were all tall, spindly creatures. Like humans, they had two arms and two legs, but they stood one and a half times as tall. Adult humans entered the doors sideways. Mixa and Shanzi simply walked through.

"Just don't touch anything!" But Mixa was already gone. Sighing, Shanzi followed.

Lankies, like humans, loved to take pictures. There were plenty of them on the walls of this house. Shanzi walked up to one, and using her sleeve, wiped away the dust of years. It was a picture of a Lanky mother, father, and one child, which was kind of

the usual Lanky family. Their faces were all without expression which Shanzi always found strange. Didn't these people ever smile? The strangest things though, were their eyes, which were large, flattened, oval things. Instead of a single black pupil, each eye had five vertical slits, and each slit could be a different color. The majority of Lanky eyes, it appeared, were red, like in this picture. Obviously, red was the dominant eye color. Shanzi studied them admiringly.

Like looking into a Lanky mirror, she thought.

Shanzi pictured the mainstays of every country fair, long curved mirrors with a sign above that announced, "Look like a Lanky!" Her grandmother, who had actually come from Earth when she was a kid, had told her once that they had mirrors like that on Earth, and that no one had ever heard of Lankies back then. Shanzi remembered thinking how incredible that was.

Then she heard Mixa scream.

When Shanzi rounded the corner, she found Mixa huddled along a hallway, looking up at nothing. Shanzi knew better. She ran to Mixa's side, feeling the touch of the invisible Lanky ghost as she reached her sister. Taking Mixa's hand, she took her to the front of the house away from the presence in the hallway.

"I ran right into it," Mixa cried.

Shanzi cradled her sister. On one hand, she wanted to comfort her, but on the other hand... "I told you not to follow me. Now, will you go home?"

Mixa wiped her eyes. "Why? Will you?"

"No. I'm staying here until I make an important discovery."

But why?"

"Because..." Shanzi stopped herself before continuing. She didn't want Mixa to know. Heck, she didn't want anyone to know. With no one else around and against her better judgment, Shanzi told her. "I just got my career evaluation last week. I haven't even shown it to Mom and Dad yet. The school says I won't be able to study archaeology, that I'm not cut out for it. Me!? Can you believe it? Well, I'm going to show them by coming up with the most important Lanky discovery ever."

"We're all supposed to do what we're good at," Mixa said. "There aren't enough people yet for us to choose our own careers."

"Yeah, that's what they teach you in school. Back on Earth, people learned to do what they wanted. Even here on Lank, some people get to choose anyway. I'm going to be one of those people. Besides, there are two million people on Lank now. That's a huge number."

Mixa reached up and wiped away a tear from Shanzi's face. Shanzi hadn't realized that she too, had been crying.

"Come on, Mixa. Let's discover something together."

"What if they don't want us in the house. Maybe they want to kill us all," Mixa offered.

Shanzi groaned. "Then we'll leave the house and wander in the city. I just want to have another look around in here first. Besides, the Lankies are all dead, and the dead can't hurt the living."

"Is that true?"

"Yes, Mixa. It's true."

"That's good." Mixa followed Shanzi who wandered around picking things up, looking at them only to put them down again. Her sister seemed more interested in what was around. Mixa was more worried about ghosts. "I wish we could turn on some lights," she said. "It's dark in here."

"The lights don't work," Shanzi replied. She was turning a small glass globe over in her hands.

"Why not? The door worked."

Shanzi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Because the door is voice-activated. The right sound, 'Dra-a-ak,' opens it. Either the lights are all broken, or we just haven't figured out what word turns lights on. Now, do you mind? I'm working." Shanzi whispered 'sheesh,' put down the globe and picked up a Lanky book.

The book had a few recognizable words in the Lanky language. Every three or four words were followed by colored dots. No one had yet figured out why Lankies decorated their books like this. Color dot decorations were everywhere. Lankies loved to decorate things with them. Circular cities. Colored dots. What did it mean?

"Shanzi, what do you think happened to them?"

"Who?" Shanzi snapped as she put the book down.

"The La-an-kies." Mixa stretched the word out in Lanky style.

Before Shanzi could snap her reply, a presence stroked past her, or she past it. She felt a cold shiver run up her back and she grabbed Mixa's hand. "Come on kiddo, there's nothing more to see here." She almost ran to the front door, yelling "Dra-a-ak" as she neared the door, and jumped through it and into the street with Mixa in tow.

"Wow!" It was Mixa. She had not felt what Shanzi had and was instead focusing on the city before them. "Awesome! That's a huge big city! Bigger than anything people have ever built."

"The Lankies were people, Mixa. And it's not that big. Besides, I've been to Bezore and there are over 50,000 people there. I'll bet you can't even imagine that many people."

Mixa, unimpressed, continued to survey the streets and other houses with awe. "What did they die of?" she asked.

"Nobody knows," Shanzi said, warming to her favorite topic. "Lankies didn't preserve or bury their dead, so there are no bodies to study. No one has ever found any evidence of holocaust or plague or anything. No sign. If it wasn't for the fact that everything is haunted, people would think they had just gotten up one day, and left."

"Why do they stay around? Why don't they go to heaven?"

Shanzi shrugged her shoulders. What was heaven for a Lanky? she wondered. Nobody knew for sure whether they even had a religion. Maybe that's what the colored balls were for. If that was true, then the link to understanding these people would be found in a church.

Grabbing Mixa's hand, Shanzi headed purposefully down the street. "Come on, Mixa." If she was right, then she only had a few hours before dark and, as Mixa had pointed out, nobody knew how to turn on Lanky lights. She had a small flashlight in her backpack, but it was a long way to travel back home with so little light.

As they moved through the streets, the girls zigzagged to and fro to avoid the ghostly presences they could feel but not see. They kept so close to each other that at times, they had trouble walking. Silent Lanky vehicles were everywhere. They looked new, although years had passed since the people who made them vanished. They no longer worked; at least, no one had ever been able to make one work.

Up ahead, squat spires rose in grotesque silhouettes against the sky. Mixa, who was trailing a few feet behind, called out, "What an ugly place! What do you think it is?" Shanzi turned briefly and caught Mixa's expression, her face twisted in revulsion.

"The books say that these were probably churches, but nobody knows for sure."

The structure was grotesque, but inviting. A semicircular panel above the door was decorated with hundreds of colored dots, looking a lot like the cards opticians used to test for color blindness.

Shanzi felt Mixa squeeze her hand tight. Her sister was more worried than she would admit. What could happen to you if you disturbed a Lanky Holy Place? They had walked a fair distance to get here and had felt many ghosts around them. After a while, thought Shanzi, it doesn't feel as bad.

"Come on, Mixa."

The two ran toward the old church, then slowed almost to a stop as they neared the front steps which they climbed carefully. The door swung smoothly open at Shanzi's voice command and closed behind them seconds later, leaving them both in twilight.

Mixa's hand tightened even more as they continued to walk. There was a massive entrance that looked up toward a high, partially translucent ceiling. She had seen some old horror movies from Earth that featured places like this. Gothic. Even the word was spooky. Shanzi started to shiver. Had she thought that it wasn't so bad? This was certainly starting to feel like a bad idea.

"I'm scared," Mixa finally admitted.

"You're the one who wanted to come with me."

"And you weren't supposed to come here. Nobody is."

"Enough, Mixa! Just stay close. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Mixa stopped and tugged hard at Shanzi's hand. "Why do we have to keep going?"

"MIXA, YOU ARE SO ANNOYING! We don't have to go anywhere! I never asked you to follow me and you don't have to follow me now. I'm going to have a look around." Shanzi was shaking. "You stay here, and keep quiet!"

She shook free of Mixa's hand and started to walk away. Behind her, she could hear Mixa starting to cry but she continued to walk. It won't hurt her to cry a little, she thought.

"Sha-a-an-zi!" Mixa cried out through her tears.

Shanzi stopped and hung her head down, feelings of anger and shame mixed in equal proportion. The voice of her conscience was giving her what for. Mixa is just a little girl. How can you do this to her? Well, why did she follow me, then? You have no right to be here, either. The instant of thought asked a lot of questions, but then something else happened. Some of the lights came on.

Mixa did not seem to notice, but cried out once more. "Sha-a-an-zi!" She dragged out the name in a near shriek.

Still more lights came on and as the room grew bright, Mixa abruptly stopped her crying, and Shanzi looked up in astonishment. The 'church' began to take on a different look in the light, a functional look. There were three floors above her and rooms circled the large central area. An atrium, she thought. This isn't a church.

There were benches circling a structure in the center of the large room. It had a large circular stone top with a depression in the center. To Shanzi, it looked less like an altar and more like some kind of centerpiece. But what kind? There weren't enough benches for those to be pews.

First things first. She ran to Mixa and held her sister's head against her stomach. "I'm really sorry, Mixa. I'm sorry I left you like that." She pulled back and held Mixa's face in her hands. "Do you know what you've done? You've just made an important discovery!"

Mixa wiped her eyes and smiled at that. "I did?"

Behind Shanzi, in the center of the atrium, a fountain, silent for centuries, came to life. Water rose and fell over the stone 'altar,' adding a welcome sound to an otherwise silent place.

Shanzi grabbed Mixa's hand. "Come on," she said and ran with her to the nearest room. She pushed the door open and barreled in.

"Sha-a-an-zi," she cried into the darkened room. Instantly the lights came on. "This is wonderful!" she said to Mixa. "My name stretched out in Lanky fashion means 'turn on the lights' or something. This qualifies as a discovery, and you discovered it. Do you realize, Mixa, that people have been trying to get the Lanky machinery to turn on, do something, anything, for years and no one has figured it out, until now?"

Mixa beamed. "But it was your name that did it," she graciously offered. "You're the archaeologist."



Shanzi looked at her sister, feeling a strange mix of guilt and joy. She wondered what important discovery she would have made on her own. Mixa might have been a pain, but it was Mixa who had shouted out her name and turned on the lights—the same Mixa she had threatened to abandon. Bending down, she kissed Mixa's forehead. "Thanks."

They rushed from room to room, skipping or running, watching everything fill with light. Finally, they ran back to the center atrium fountain and started to splash water at each other. Within the mix of giggles and horseplay, neither noticed that there were now more than just ghosts watching.

"Chi-i-a ze-o-o da-i?"

Shanzi spun around to face the voice, instinctively putting herself between Mixa and the intruder. She swallowed hard. A Lanky! A real, living, breathing, talking Lanky! A Lanky who was right now examining them, his head bobbing up and down and sideways. The water from the fountain ran down her back and onto Mixa's head, but Mixa held her place under the cascade.

"Chi-i-a ze-o-o da-i?" the figure repeated. He was a full two meters tall, and wore a form-fitting gray suit that made him look official. Business-like, Shanzi thought.

When no answer came, the Lanky official simply stared at them, the vertical slits in his large, oval eyes flashing in alternating colored bars; on the right, three reds, a green, and a yellow, while the left slits stayed a deep blue. He tilted his head and waited.

"That's how you communicate, isn't it?" Shanzi asked, though the Lanky just looked at them. While he waited, he spoke his original phrase of greeting, "Chi-i-a ze-o-o da-i?," then repeated the color sequence, three reds, a green, a yellow, and five blues.

"What does he want?" Mixa said quietly behind her.

"He's trying to talk to us, only he doesn't just use sounds for words. See how his eyes change color? I'll bet those are words, too."

"The colored dots in the books?" Mixa offered. "Those are words?"

"Yes," Shanzi replied. "It's a language made up of both light and sound." Then, she had an idea. "Mixa, give me the ribbon from your hair."

Mixa pulled the red fabric away and handed it to Shanzi, who took out her flashlight and pushed the lens firmly against the ribbon. Then, she turned the flashlight

on and off, ten times. Each flash was a bright red dot. After the tenth, she stopped and waited for the Lanky to respond.

All of the Lanky's eye slits flashed to red, just like in the Lanky family pictures.

"And that, Mixa, is a smile."

"Ne-e-ta me-e-rallo," the Lanky added, repeating the red-eyed smile.

Hours later, several representatives of the human population of Lank, as well as officials from the government city and language experts from the university, had arrived. Shanzi and Mixa's parents had been informed but had been asked to stay outside during these first meetings with the Lankies.

There were also several more Lankies present. Shanzi stood with the group, offering the odd word. The Lanky they had met earlier was eager for her to stay close. He kept looking at Shanzi and smiling his red-eyed smile.

"Shanzi?" Mixa called.

Shanzi turned around to look at Mixa, who sat in front of the fountain on one of the semicircular benches. She excused herself from the Lanky official, pointing to her sister for explanation. The Lanky smiled again. "Tee-ah-sah, Mi-ix-aa."

Shanzi laughed. "Yes, Mixa." She waved and walked over to sit with her sister.

"What is it?" Shanzi said.

Mixa asked, almost whispering, "What's happening?"

"Quite a bit," Shanzi answered. "As I understand it, the Lankies didn't die at all and they didn't really leave either. Something happened to the planet a long time ago, something that was poison to them. Whatever this thing is, it happens on a regular basis, and will happen again. If they stay, they die. They don't know about space travel so they don't have spaceships."

"Then where did they go?"

Shanzi shrugged. "Nowhere. Not really. They have some kind of space-displacement machine. They could all go into a sort of suspended animation, like the sleepers on spaceships, like in your picture books, only they didn't really go anywhere. The machine they have opens a kind of door into another place and they all walk through it. They've been frozen there for centuries waiting for the machines to decide that it was safe for them to come out again. The problem is, something went wrong and

the machines never woke them up even when it was time." She reached out her hand and grabbed Mixa's chin. "That is, until you got the machines going again. When the lights came on, all the other systems fell in behind them and the Lankies woke up." Shanzi leaned in close. "You know what? Everybody's talking like you and I are heroes. Isn't that wild?"

"So, Mom and Dad aren't going to be mad?"

"No," Shanzi said with a wide-eyed smile. "I don't think so."

Mixa looked around. There were Lankies walking around everywhere, talking, doing things. "So what happens now?" she asked.

Shanzi followed her eyes. Having grown up with picture-book Lankies, they didn't look or seem all that strange. She smiled. "I'm not sure. In fact, there's only one thing I know for sure."

"What's that?" Mixa asked.

"We're going to have new neighbors," Shanzi told her sister.