

The Meaning of the Word  
by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

Then I saw something odd, fuzzed with the sand glimmering in the coral sunlight, and I began to slog my way toward it.

"Jhirinki, get back here!" Wolton ordered from the skiff. He was sounding angrier by the minute.

"There's something out—" I tried to tell him but Almrid cut me off.

"Let him alone, Wolton. Your jurisdiction goes no farther than the skiff." Then, with scarcely a change in tone, he said to me, "You stay here until camp is set up. I want to know where everyone is."

Wolton gave him a sour smile and motioned me away. But it was important that they know about that irregularity. I tried again. "I saw something out there. It doesn't look—"

"Wait until the camp is set up. We need to get some more definitive readings before we go exploring. And"—Almrid added to Wolton—"we can't get those without the prowler."

Wolton jerked the hatch of the skiff open. "All right. Here's the prowler. You know that it can't get any better data from the surface than the monitors can."

"Look, Almrid—" I began.

"Not now, Peter. We'll talk later. When we have more accurate material to work from." This last was, of course, for Wolton.

It was useless. I stepped back as Wolton reluctantly put the prowler in action, letting it scuttle out over the hazy sand, scanners clicking contentedly to itself.

Sumiko Hyasu had barricaded herself behind her equipment, preparing to run soil tests. She and Langly, the biochemist, worked in silence, the remote sounds of their breathing murmuring in my earphones.

On the other side of the skiff I knew Parnini and Goetz were furling the sails of the weather unit. I could hear them swearing occasionally. They were busy. Wolton and Almrid were still arguing. My eyes were dragged back again to that irregular spot in the sand that might be what I wanted. That might be digs.

"I'm calling Captain Tamoshoe," Wolton declared to anyone who would listen. "I'm going to give him a status report."

"That is your responsibility," murmured Almrid as he watched the prowler set zig-zagging in a widening spiral. His heavy head was even larger in the Class Eleven uniform. His hands hung like paws, wholly unlike what one expected in a virologist. It was hard to think of him doing the minute manipulations that were the mark of his work—it was like trying to imagine Caliban or Quasimodo making watches or microcircuitry.

A yawning breeze wound a bit of dust on its finger and then sank back, too tired to hold it. That was the feel of the whole place—drowsiness. The wind barely breathed. The plain was heavy with dreaming, the sky unmarred by clouds where the greater of two suns hung about fifteen degrees above the horizon, a

platter of polished copper. Our presence intruded on this somnambulistic landscape where even the rocks were softened and sometimes crumbling and in place of dirt there was sand that was not sand flickering in the monochrome stillness.

Yet I wondered and hoped. There had been indications of structures from the monitors on the Nordenskjold. I knew my digs were here to be found, if only I knew where to look.

"Jhirinki's been wandering around," Wolton was reporting and the sound of my name brought me back to the camp. He added in response to the captain's garbled question, "It was Almrid's idea to bring along an archeologist. Not mine. Ask him."

In the slow heat of the opalescent afternoon work was sluggish. There was nothing for me to do but stare at the one odd spot in the distance—and wish.

Goetz swore in my earphone as his equipment toppled for the second time, victim to the treacherous shifting of the sand. "Need help?" I asked him, not reluctantly.

"What I need is a foundation," came his answer, the words bitten out in frustration.

"According to the monitors," Almrid said icily, directing the insult at Wolton, "there's all kinds of rock around here. Or, maybe not rock. Maybe it once was buildings."

"Look, Almrid—" Wolton began.

Then, unexpectedly, Sumiko Hyasu cut in. "Leave him alone, Franz," she said softly to Almrid. "We have work to do."

"It looks like you've wasted your trip, Peter," Almrid said to me, a certain morose satisfaction in this statement. "Why don't you ride up tonight and forget it? There are other planets."

I wondered if my disappointment showed so much.

"I think I'll stick around for a while," I said.

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"I don't know, Sumiko," I was saying as we watched the second skiff settle onto the sand. "I can't give up the thought that there's something here." Absently she made some answer.

"Don't you feel that?"

"I suppose so." She was only half-listening. This world was too unknown, too compelling for us to pay much attention to each other. Every one of us saw it through his/her eyes only. "Is any of this real, Peter?" she asked. "Or is the planet hiding from us?"

I had felt that from the first. Something was hidden here right under our noses and we hadn't the sense to find it. But all I could do was shrug. I

didn't know then what she wanted to find, what it was she had been searching for with that terrible, fragile intensity that marked her more than her beauty.

"What do you want to find?" she asked me.

"Oh, I don't know." It was a lie and, like a lot of lies, it felt ugly. But I couldn't admit to her that I had longed for the chance to find a lost civilization here, to be the first to decipher its language. People could be known and understood by the way they used words, and to be the first to understand in that way had been an obsession with me since before I trained on the Probe Ship Magalhaes.

"You're going to do some exploring later?" It wasn't really a question, it was a dismissal.

"Whenever Almrid and Wolton get tired of fighting and give a general release, then, yes, I'll go exploring." Neither of them was willing to stop feuding long enough to let the expedition get moving and I was becoming riled at the delay. But Commander Markham would be in the next skiff and, knowing Josh, he would put an end to the sparring that had taken up too much time already.

"Good luck," she murmured and went back to her equipment. Then, as she started adjusting the sample breakdowns, her voice sounded again in my earphones. "Why wait? Why not do what you want to do?"

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By the time the base camp had been set up and the full complement of expedition staff had been ferried down the surface shelters were waiting. I had spent the long afternoon struggling with ring supports, emplacing the doughnut-shaped foundations for the inflatable buildings, but now it was night.

I walked away from the camp, watching the unfamiliar sky. There were more and brighter stars above me and some eleven dissimilar moons coursed overhead in a bewildering tangle.

In a while I found the irregular stone, although I had not consciously been looking for it—I had been drawn to it as surely as fur draws static. I knew that it would tell me what I wanted to know, if only I could puzzle it out before Captain Tamoshoe ordered us all back to the Nordenskjold. Yet, as I stood over it, not knowing where to look or what I was looking for, I could still mock myself for being so obsessed with wanting to find a language and a culture that obviously had failed in all this desolation.

So I paced the thing off nonchalantly. It was not too large, this oblong section of rock, rather like one of the old headstones in the landmark cemeteries.

I kneeled in the sand and rubbed at the side of the block—and touched what I thought at first was a flaw or chip in the surface. Curious, I bent closer, gently blowing the clinging dirt from the slab with my sweat valve, brushing the stone clear as I worked.

And then, there it was. Without any doubt, without any ambiguity, the glyphs appeared under my hands. I drew back to get a proper look at them.

For several minutes I sat and looked at them. The stillness of the night was suddenly alien. Eight low relief marks on a rock—and I felt for the first time that all I am was justified.

I rose, wiping more of the block free of the sand, but I could find nothing more. The inexorable movement of the sand might have worn other markings away, or perhaps the stone reached deeper into the ground than I had thought at first, with more glyphs farther down. Almrid and Wolton had said something about erosion. Perhaps this had been high above the sand, once.

It seemed like a long way back to the camp just to get a shovel and some help. I stood, rubbing my hands together to free them of the dust that was clinging insidiously to them and to film of my surface suit. Was it worth it, going all the way back? I could do more here tonight even without tools. And if I went back, Almrid or Wolton would be sure to try to stop me from coming back. In the morning I could bring some of the expedition with me, but then this find would no longer be mine. I finally accepted the rationalization that left me alone with my particular dream for a little longer.

Setting to work, I scooped armloads of the soil away from the block, hoping to discover more glyphs. I felt that I had found the key to a larger discovery.

It was on the fifth armload that I fell through into the room.

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Dust spread out around me like a reverse halo against the shiny surface of the floor. I tasted grit—the suit must have ruptured somewhere. As I lay on the floor I took stock. No bones broken, but some dandy bruises. I gathered my knees beneath me and carefully stood up. It was dark down here except for the shine from the moons through the hole. There was no other light. With uncertain fingers I grabbed for my litepak and found it undamaged. Thumbing it, I found that it could hardly reach beyond that sand on the floor. After a moment of thought I turned it off and began walking slowly in an outward spiral.

On the third round I bumped into a thing, apparently of stone, about the size of a half-chair with a shoe-shaped projection. It felt smooth and solid.

"Curiouser and curiouser," I said aloud to the unechoing blackness.

Slowly I wandered back to the sand haze on the floor, the site of my fall. I looked up at the rent in the roof. The realization rushed in on me then that I was truly cut off from the expedition. I had left my commkit at the camp and my litepak's trickle of beam could not have been seen by anyone at that distance. The sand filtered down through the hole, whispering.

And the light was failing. Two of the moons had set since I had fallen into my

find and I could not get out without light.

Let's leave that alone for the moment, Jhirinki, I told myself for comfort.

Then, as I watched, the great heavy stone I had loosened by my fall gave a kind of sigh and, with deceptive languor, tumbled end over end to crash and shatter on the floor. If it had fallen straight down, that would have been the end of Peter Jhirinki.

Badly shaken, I went back to the object I had walked into earlier. My hands shook when I reached out to steady myself, and I drew them back.

Perhaps I should touch nothing here until I knew what had made that great stone fall. Were other stones still in the ceiling above me?

Anxiously I pulled out my litepak again and played its feeble beam over the ceiling. But the fact that I saw no other blocks of stone was actually small comfort. This room was an important find and I was without means to see it—and now too isolated to get the help I needed. I also remembered there was a tear in my suit, which might or might not mean anything on this planet.

Again I wandered back to the place beneath the hole, taking care not to get near the gently falling sands.

"Peter!"

For a moment, I didn't believe the sound in my suit phone. Then, as my name was called again, I realized that I had been missed and that a party was searching for me.

"Yeo!" I yelled, full of relief.

The stream of dust into the hole increased.

"Peter Jhirinki—" Now that the voices were closer I was able to pick out Markham's among the others—a large resonant sound that no commsystem could properly handle.

"Down here—" More rivulets of the soft dust were pouring down now and I wondered how strong the roof was. "Be careful—I don't know how long the roof here will hold."

"Thanks." Markham's voice. "We'll get you out of there. Dominguez went back for the rig." After a moment's silence Josh Markham asked, "And did you find anything down there, Pete?"

It took me a little time to answer him. "I hope so," I said finally. Then, as I looked around the dark, I didn't want to leave. "Drop me a litepak, will you?"

"Right." And in a moment Markham's litepak in its crashcase thudded to the floor. "Dominguez will be back any time, Pete. Make it short."

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But I knew that. I wrenched the litepak from its case and pressed the switch.

The beam stabbed into the darkness, showing me the room for the first time. It was large, low-ceilinged and shiny save for the place where I had brought in the sand. Two of the walls were a patchwork of designs, intricate embossed patterns on tilelike bricks. The other two walls ...

The other two walls were covered with glyphs.

"Get ready, Pete." Markham cut into my discovery like razor into flesh. "I can't get this very steady. You'll have to guide it coming out."

There was a clank of the rig as the saddle hit the floor, then the purposeful clicking of the pulleys set in motion.

Quickly I straddled the saddle, grabbing the upper sling so that I could help control the lift.

"We're under way," Markham called as the rig hoisted me into the air.

I turned the beam of the litepak on the walls as I rose, letting the light linger on the marks for as long as I could.

I got my back scraped coming out of the hole, but I was too preoccupied to notice it until Josh Markham said, "Holy Mama, where did you get that?"

I looked at my arm, saw nothing and shrugged.

"Your back, man, your back."

As soon as he said it, the pain hit like a hammer. "Oh. That." For a moment I concentrated on the damage and decided that it wasn't that much. "Coming out of the hole, I think. Is it bad?"

Relieved, Josh said, "It's messy. Have Sanderson look at it back at the base. He'll want to check you for foreign bugs anyway. What the devil did you find down there?"

"Words," I said quietly. "A whole world of words."

"There are ruins down there?" He asked it incredulously, his big body slewing about in the sand. "A city?"

"I don't know about the city, but there sure as hell are words. Maybe a complete language. I'm going back down tomorrow and find out."

Markham eyed me suspiciously. "What if Wolton says otherwise? What if I say otherwise?"

"It wouldn't matter." As I said it, I knew it could make no difference what they said. Nothing anyone could say or do would keep me out of that hole now that I had seen the wall.

"All right, Pete. But don't push your luck. This place is still terra incognita as far as we're concerned."

I nodded. "That's just it. It won't be unknown if I can get a chance at that wall. There's the whole puzzle, right down there. Complete with solution."

"Hey, won't machines do as well?" Dominguez put in, having listened to us as he stowed the gear in the crawler. "We got machines for that."

"No." I spoke harshly, but there was no way for me to say it kindly. "No machine wrote that, no machine is going to read it. That is what I'm trained for. That's why I'm part of the crew. And it's what I've wanted to do all my life."

"Sure. Sure. I don't care whether you get yourself ruined. I just want to know. Academics!" He sat down in the driving cockpit. "You two can ride in the back if you want." He didn't wait for an answer, preferring his machines to our company.

Josh Markham and I scrambled aboard as the crawler began its lurching way off through the sand. Only it wasn't sand.

"Josh," I said uncertainly as we clung to the rear platform of the crawler. "I think I know what this stuff is."

"The dirt? Damned persistent, isn't it?"

"It isn't dirt," I told him slowly, avoiding his eyes. "I think it's ash."

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"So this is where you disappeared to," Franz Almrid said, wiping his hands in a futile gesture to rid them of the ash.

"Yes." I was beaming with pride. In the morning light the hole was even better than I had thought.

"What is it?" Almrid's voice held open sarcasm as he looked at the figures on the wall. "Looks like spermatozoa in formation with math symbols."

"It does at that," I admitted, determined not to fight with Almrid. The very fact that there had been something worth discovering on this planet had made him furious.

"You really think you're going to get sense out of that?" He gave a derisive laugh. "You're kidding yourself, Jhirinki."

I was spared the problem of answering him by Josh Markham, who was lowered into the hole on the new cable rig.

"Looks good, Pete," Josh said, craning his corded neck, trying to see it all without turning around. "What's next?"

"Well, that wall," I told him, pointing to the farthest one, "is probably not worth much. It's too scarred and faded. But this"—I looked at the longer wall with its bright surface and clear markings—"is a treasure."

It was as if I had finally lured a much-sought mistress into my bed. That wall, with its thousands of glyphs in neatly horizontal lines was more than I had ever hoped to have for myself.

"You're a damned romantic, that's what you are," Josh said with a chuckle. "Well, while you're busy down here, we'll just go along and dig up a few square miles of ash, in case there might be a city down there."

I'd told him that there might be, late late last night after I had reported

the find. In the morning I wondered if I'd been right, but let it go. The chance was worth a look.

"If you're sure this is a building, where is the door? Or did they all tumble in the way you did?" Almrid's icy tone stopped both Josh and me.

I hated to admit it, but Almrid had a point. If this had been a building there had to be a way in and out of it. And no matter what size or shape the inhabitants a door is a door is a door.

"Maybe in the floor?" Josh suggested. "This is pretty high up, judging from the few readings we can get around here. Maybe this was an attic or sun room." He looked at me hopefully, his big hands rubbing at the ash.

"It's possible." Looking around the room I knew there was an answer. I just had to be left alone to find it with my instincts and my pores.

"There's nothing for us peasants to do but dig," Almrid said acidly. "All right, Professor. We'll do it your way." He went to the sling and was hauled out of the hole.

"Don't let him bother you, Pete," Josh said with all the reassurance he could muster. "He doesn't like the place and can't figure out why."

"I know."

A short silence fell.

"Well, I'll leave you to your work. Call if you need help."

"I will," I promised him as he rose through the hole.

When he was gone I circled the room again, looking at the wall with the glyphs. There was a key somewhere. There had to be. I could find it if I thought about it. Again I came to the bench-like affair. Again I studied the surface of the shoe end. It was smooth and faintly luminous. For a moment it seemed to be the reflection of one of the suns—and then I realized that neither was shining down directly. This made me wonder.

I sat on the half-chair (which was a bit too low and too small for comfort). This might be the clue I wanted. In my annoyance I tapped the cool, faintly glowing sheet of—was it stone? The echo sounded unused. I went on tapping absent-mindedly as I tried to take stock of the wall and the room.

Blink.

I was so startled that I raised my hand. The light, if there had been a light, stopped.

But now I had a hope. Gently I tapped the surface again. Then firmly.

BLINK.

Then I put my hands full and solidly onto the surface of the table, pressing it, willing the light to continue. "Come on, light," I pleaded with it. "Blink."

Almost ridiculously, it did. First there was a flicker, then a wavering opacity and finally a bright glow.

"What the bloody hell is this?" I asked of the air joyously. Since there was no one but me to answer, I shook my head in ignorance.

The light in the table was increasing, growing brilliant. Symbols formed on it:

"I think—" I said to the machine. Then I realized that I would have to stop thinking and be willing to learn. "Machine, you and I have a little mutual understanding to do."

The symbols faded but the light stayed on, full and strong. I hesitated—then, taking my stylus, I made a small circle on the table and put nine dots leading out from it, adding little points for the moons. When this was done, I drew a box around Terra and waited.

The machine buzzed.

On a guess I wiped the marks away.

In a moment the machine showed two circles and a series of dots, putting a box around the fourth one. This was the fourth planet, but the machine showed only three moons. This bothered me, but there was no way to question the machine about it. I would have to wait.

But we were on the right track.

I duplicated the Sol system diagram and boxed Terra and labeled it.

The machine made the planets again, with the puzzling moons.

"All right. Now that we're introduced, let's get down to languages."

The machine began to hum, making periodic squeaks. I couldn't have it malfunction now. I fumbled over the sides, looking for knobs or dials that might help. The hum and the squeaks merged into a rising wail.

"Wait a bit," I told it.

I moved my hands again, rubbing the sides firmly until a single dot appeared on the screen in front of me and I heard, very clearly the single word: "Gei."

My hands began to shake. I sensed that this was a machine intended to teach, to inform. The concept was not unfamiliar to human archeologists—men of many eras had left time capsules or other record of their passing for future centuries to find. Whoever had left this artifact had known what he was about. The implications took a little time to sink in.

The machine formed another dot directly above the first and called it: "Shy."

It was giving me the elements of language. Those two symbols were part of the name of the planet.

A vertical line connected the two dots and the dots faded out. "Sti," said the machine in its parody of a voice.

I took out my scanner and trained it on the table top. The scanner would give the Nordenskjold a record of all this in case something went wrong down here.

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Then I set to work, the machine reciting its language to me, showing it to me, bringing it to life.

"Pete! Pete! Answer me!" The commkit beside me sounded put out. The voice was Sumiko's, high and overcontrolled. I wondered if she had been calling for long. I had been absorbed.

I stood up stiffly from the bench, muscles protesting, and reached for the kit.

"Pete—" it went in my ear.

"Yeo. I'm here. What is it?"

"This is Sumiko. I've finished the tests on the silt from your digs. You're right. It is ash."

"I know. Look," I said, rushing on, "I may be way off, but I think you might find some evidence of volcanic or—I don't know, earthquakes, maybe, a long time ago. There'd be a lot of them, occurring all at once or with little warning. The diagram I've found down here shows only three moons. Either we've got the wrong planet or things have changed upstairs—"

"What diagram?" she interrupted.

"There's a device down here that teaches the language," I admitted reluctantly. "It seems to be programmed to communicate with strangers—I mean beings possibly alien to whoever or whatever made it, which suggests that the culture of which it was a part anticipated being wiped out. The device and I have just begun to come together on basics—I should get the rest in a few days."

"You'll let me know?" This was said too quickly.

"Sure, Sumiko." Right then, I wanted her to find what she was seeking, too. There had to be something here to compensate for the terrible hunger at the back of her eyes.

"You'll need tools," she said decisively.

"Maybe some digging tools. Brushes for the walls. Levers and a couple of files. There's a pack in my shelter."

"Is that all? I'll bring them along."

"Thank you." There was jealousy in me as I spoke. I was not yet ready to share my hole, my wall. Not with anyone. Not even Sumiko, the one person who might understand what I felt.

"I'll be there as soon as the captain is ready to come over."

In some surprise I asked her, "Is he down on the surface? I didn't think he was planning to come."

"He and Wolton have been going over the whole camp for about the last hour. He's had Almrid and Dominguez in. I gave them my report earlier."

A prickle ran along my spine, a feeling that gravity had shifted, immeasurably, under my feet. The captain had gone to the soil chemist and a biophysicist before the archeologist on a planet with digs. Something wasn't right.

"Pete?"

"What?"

"I'll see you later?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's going to be interesting." And with that I signed off.

Standing there in my hole, with the language of Shy-gei-ath waiting for me, I frowned, wondering what had gone wrong. No one had come in with a negative report. There had been no warnings about the virology level or the functional radiation ratings that usually got the captain on the ground long enough to get everyone back to the ship.

I remembered my scraped back from the evening before, but that couldn't figure in anything. The injury itched unpleasantly under the thin surface suit and there had been some trouble getting it to scab over. But that was hardly enough to worry about. What was Captain Tamoshoe doing down here, anyway? Why had he come?

The machine was reciting "co-rel-sti-gei" , "sa-che-sti-gei" , "co-sa-che-sti-gei" when I finally heard the noise above me. I tapped the machine on what I'd come to think of as the HOLD button and waited for visitors.

They took their time. Once I heard Franz Almrid swear, use cold words with venom I had never heard from him before.

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At last the sling came down, bearing Captain Nemeu Tamoshoe, black on black. "Jhirinki," he said, turning his trademark grin on me, a display of large white teeth in a face only slightly lighter than his black captain's uniform. And in that face, which dictated eyes of obsidian, Captain Tamoshoe's smouldered the impossible blue of Aegean waters.

"What's wrong, Captain?"

But he didn't answer me, not right away. He got off the sling and began to walk around the hole. "Have you been able to decipher this?" he asked me, pointing at my wall.

I knew that there was something very wrong then. "That section you're pointing

to reads from right to left: 'Thir de-lom-st-gei jhae emh bis lom-de-sti-gei.'  
Second line: 'Thu shy-ens emh thu lom-qua-fer-de-sti-gei sir-ath-gei.' "

"Which means?"

"That is what the wall says, sir. In fact, right now I can read out loud every word up there and make the symbol for it if I hear it spoken. But I don't know what it means, because this machine does not have a way to tell me until it has explained to me all the elements of its language. But the communications center on the ship will have records of this so I can work from them, if necessary."

Captain Tamoshoe looked at me evenly for about a minute, an eternity. "I am sorry, Jhirinki. The commcenter didn't pick up the relay. Almrid and Wolton were too busy wrangling to center the channel."

"I don't understand—" and as I said it I did understand.

"Radiology reported a variance last night. This place was hot. That little machine of yours has been running along on plutonium and the room was sealed. You fell into a vat of radon gas—" He stopped. Then: "There's isn't much danger on the surface of course, but we don't know how many of these things there are. I am sorry, Jhirinki."

"Wait—" Josh Markham appeared in the hole, hanging onto the sling too tightly, his large face drawn and his eyes heavy. "Captain?"

"I have told him what I could. You can explain it more thoroughly if necessary. Are we ready to ferry up?"

"Almost."

Again Captain Tamoshoe: "It is a pity. This is surely the find of a lifetime." He turned back to me, blue eyes hooded. "Well, perhaps you will be able to reconstruct much of this from memory, do you think? There's isn't much time and it would be a shame to lose all of it."

"How do you mean, lose it?" I was frightened then, not of the radiation that had slid in through my respirator into my bones, but of leaving Shy-gei-ath. I had come so far. I did not want to leave.

"Looks like this one was more trouble than it was worth, Pete," Markham said, trying to keep his tone light and failing.

"No."

"Pete—"

"No," I told them again, stepping back to the teaching machine. "I've almost got it all. I'm so close to the meaning of it. It won't take too much longer. I'll be out of here in no time."

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Josh shook his head. "Can't do it, Pete. You've been exposed. We should have brought you out before now, but I knew this was damned important to you."

"Wait—" I said, licking my lips. "What is the treatment for radon? Can't I take decontamination and then come back? It's gone now—and I'd be safe."

"I am sorry, but we'll have to put the place in quarantine until we know how much potential danger remains," Captain Tamoshoe said apologetically. "You understand the necessity, don't you? When all investigations have been made we can come back."

"But what about that?" I pointed to the wall, already hazing from the dust filtering down. "How much longer will that be here once the ash goes in? The other wall is almost useless. This one will be ruined."

"There may be others."

"And maybe there aren't." I knew I was starting to sweat. "And the machine will be ruined."

Captain Tamoshoe shook his head. "I can recommend speed and claim emergency status on the artifacts. The Navy is aware of the value of this sort of find. We might be able to have full Class Nine suits authorized."

"You've got to leave, Pete." Markham had taken a step toward me. I stepped back.

"Commander Markham," the captain said quietly.

"Take a look at your hands, Pete." Josh shot an angry look at Captain Tamoshoe as he spoke.

"What about my hands?" But as I looked down and saw what looked like varicose veins in my palms I closed the marks inside my fists.

"The skiff is waiting, Pete."

"Let it wait." And as Josh started toward me I raised the commkit over my head. "Don't try it, Josh—I will use this."

It wasn't much of a weapon, but it made Josh stop. "You stupid kid," he said dispassionately. "You're going to die."

"Am I?" I asked Captain Tamoshoe.

"Almost certainly," he answered me.

Without moving from the place I stood I said, "Get out of here, Josh. I want to talk to the captain."

Josh looked at me with an expression I had once seen in my father's eyes. Then, with a nod to the captain, he let himself be hoisted out of the hole.

"He wants you to live, Jhirinki. And you were not assigned to my ship to die."

In the stillness that followed his words I realized that he and I were the only people left here, that the others were back at the ferry, waiting to leave Shy-gei-ath. I felt an enormous loneliness fall over me, dark and heavy.

"Why not come back?"

I shook my head. "No. This is what I'm all about. I've spent my life learning to do what has to be done here. I can't leave when I'm this close."

"Have you a choice?"

For just a moment I knew panic. Then: "Will I last all that much longer if I leave?"

"No. Not that much longer."

"Then I'll stay."

"But what will you do, Jhirinki?"

The strange part was that I knew the answer. "As long as I can, I'll describe the forms to you, the way the machine did for me. You can leave me a skiff relay, can't you?" Not waiting for an answer I hurried on. "I'll try to translate what I've found and you can record it for the Margien Language Institute."

Captain Tamoshoe considered this. "I've always thought," he remarked absently, "that a man's death should be as much in his hands as his life. You'll get the relay."

"And food?"

He didn't answer me, so I knew. "Thank you, Captain."

"Goodbye, Peter Jhirinki," he said as he left.

. . . . .

" 'Lom-de-sti-gei ath dev lim-gei,' " I dictated from the wall to the commkit. I listened for the relay sound that would tell me they had recorded the line on board the Nordenskjold. A half-dozen lines were left. Lines that wavered in front of me, milky with haze.

"Pete!"

But that wasn't my machine. It was someone I used to know. Why would Josh call me? What did he want?

"Pete, for God's sake!"

"What?"

That must have been what he wanted to hear. But I couldn't hold my commkit steady. My hands had gone funny. Purple. The tendons were soft, spongy.

"... translations?"

That mattered to me. That was important. More important than my strange hands. I had to tell them.

"A few words—"

"What words?"

"Shy-gei-ath." Like Terra and Terrans.

The twin suns were hot above me, but it was dark. I burned and burned and it was dark. If I looked at the floor I could see my face. But I didn't do that.

"The wall, Pete. The wall."

From here on the floor I could watch my wall as I told them about it. I knew what it meant at last.

"Shy, infinitive verb. To be. Active sense. Gei, infinitive verb. To be. Passive sense. Shy-sti-gei, to be alive. Sti-gei, to exist. Shy-sti, to conceive. They build from there." Was that sound me?

"But the wall, Pete."

It was an effort, but I began to read. But breathing hurt and I got slower and slower. " 'In the time of the Fourth Moon, I sought out a high place and made it safe against the end of Shy-gei-ath.' "

"Go on."

" 'Against the end ... it happened I found this place and required a stronghold to be built. The time was short for we could see in the night in the Fourth Moon. Waters would soon rise, the mountains change and Rel-ath-gei would consume all.' " That would quiet them, the noisy ones above me. I looked at the wall through darkening eyes, turning on the floor to read the end of the story.

"Peter! Answer me!"

I kicked the commkit, laughing.

"What about the place name. What does that mean? We've got most of what we need to crack it, Peter. What does the name mean?"

Reluctantly I pulled myself across the floor, feeling like a slug, not a man. Just a bit more and they'd leave me alone with my wall. I'd earned that.

"The word?" I asked the commkit.

"Shy-gei-ath," the tinny voice prompted.

"Shy-gei-ath. This place. Here." But that wasn't quite right, I thought as I watched the ash sifting through the hole. "Shy-gei-ath. To be ... to ..."

"Go on; tell us. What does it mean?"

So I told them. "To be home."

The End

About "The Meaning of the Word"

Language has always interested me. How people say things influences how they think. The obsessive desire to know has also interested me. It was not my conscious intention to combine those particular interests in a story, but they seem to be there.

Somewhere in a large box of background material in my office closet there are two legal-sized foolscap notebooks crammed full of shy-gei-an language, with grammar and forms and usage as well as a very large vocabulary. One of these years I may dig it out and do something more with it.

When the story appeared in If magazine, there were a few "minor" changes: the first word had been dropped and three short paragraphs had been added. Here the story is returned to its original form.

I don't usually write in the first person—my characters are very definite, very separate individuals in my mind and, for the most part, I give them the same third-person integrity that I give my friends. But Peter was an exception, and the story is, I think, stronger for the reader sharing Peter's head.