

# Thirty More Years

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Translated by Owen F. Witesman.

**I**gghatikat-eet doesn't knock on the door, instead flowing under it as a flat mass. He has spent a lot of time with humans and considerably makes a soft chirping noise as he enters the room. When I turn to look, he forms the pattern I've become accustomed to on his front side. I've only been on the planet Gpatimais-Karra for two years and still can't tell one Kahandti from another without their help. Each one of them is made up of thousands of distinct individuals and can change its shape more or less at will. Some say that with enough practice the human eye can tell one Kahandti from another. My eye isn't practiced enough, and Igghatikat-eet knows it.

He flows across the floor and gathers himself together on the wall behind my writing desk, at eye level. This is also a courtesy: he knows that I prefer to converse with something my own height. During my time here, Igghatikat-eet has done his best to make me feel at home—or as much at home as a human can feel surrounded exclusively by Kahandti. I'll probably miss him after I return home.

Just like I miss the company of humans now.

Igghatikat-eet waits patiently until I'm ready to listen to what he has to say. I nod, and he begins. It takes a moment before I understand what he's saying.

“A human has been found. You should see him.”

“Found? Here?”

“In Nnnght-K'kou.”

“I don't know that place.”

“In the North. It is an island near the equator. Two thousand six hundred and thirty-two kilometers to the north-east.”

“How so ‘found’?”

“Excuse me; I do not understand the question.”

“This human must have come to the planet in some way. I would suppose that a space ship would have been detected long before it landed.”

“A space ship would have been detected, yes.”

“I doubt he sprang out of the earth fully formed.”

“I do not understand.”

“Just an expression. He has to have come to the island from somewhere.”

“Perhaps he has been there a long time.”

I think for a moment. “Since the war?”

“Perhaps. During the war the humans did use devices that could perhaps have allowed a small ship to make it to the surface of the planet without being noticed.”

I have heard old stories from the war about stealth technology, but I’ve never seen anything like that in operation.

“And you want—you all want—that I go and meet him?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I had assumed that you did not want groupings of multiple humans on your home planet.”

“Perhaps he needs help.”

I hear more on the trip to Nnnght-K’kou upon setting off after Gpatimais-Karra’s five-hour night. The location in question is a tiny tropical island located a long way from everything. The Kahandti are not particularly fond of heat, so the place has remained uninhabited on this sparsely populated, outlying planet. Now and then sea worm fishers camped there. From time to time they had supposedly

been shot at from somewhere in the interior of the island. Apparently no one had investigated the reports of gunfire. I found this astonishing. Like most intelligent communal organisms, the Kahandti are very long-lived, so the war, which was fought around the time I was born, feels like yesterday to them.

The sea worm fishers had been involved this time as well. Near the edge of their temporary encampment they found a man collapsed on the ground. Although most Kahandti are afraid of humans—the war taught them to fear us—these two did their best to help the intruder. They had even built him a sort of bed, protected from the sun and the wind by a tent canopy.

I stooped down next to the man. He looks old and emaciated. He has on a worn uniform which has been carefully mended many times. He was once fair-skinned, but has now turned lemon-yellow. There is something strange in the stench of urine and sweat hanging in the air. I don't know anything about medicine, but even my amateur's eye can tell he doesn't look good. He mutters and mumbles, but I can't make out the words. He may be saying something about the Kahandti—I can almost make out similar sounds in the same order—but I can't be sure. I look at Igghatikat-eet, the sea worm fishers, and the two other Kahandti who came with us, their equivalent of government officials.

It takes me a moment to form what I want to say in anything like fluent spoken Kahandti. I notice that only Igghatikat-eet understands and interprets for me.

“This human is seriously ill. He needs expert help. He needs a doctor who knows human diseases. Otherwise he will die. I do not know enough to be able to help.”

I see that the Kahandti are conferring in that soundless way that only a select few humans understand. I can pick

out a few reactions, or I imagine that I can. One of the sea worm fishers and Igghatikat-eet seem surprised for a moment. The discussion continues for some time, so in the mean time I attempt to elevate the patient's upper body. His eyes open a crack and he mutters quietly. He has no teeth, and the horrible condition of his gums adds its own tang to the reek of excrement and sickness emanating from him.

A moment later Igghatikat-eet approaches me.

"In the capitol city there is a human doctor," he says in simplified spoken Kahandti. "The human doctor will be notified. He will come to assist you."

I chew on this bit of information for a moment. "A human doctor? A human?"

"Yes."

"I had supposed that I was the only Friendship Exchange Initiative participant on the whole planet."

"Yes. This human is not a citizen of the Earth."

"How did he come to be here then?"

"He has been here for a long time."

Then things start to fall into place.

"Is he a refugee from the war? A conscientious objector?"

"Yes."

Contrary to what is claimed in school history courses, by no means did all humanity band together thirty-five years ago to defend the interests of the (large corporations of the) Earth, human superiority, or the mother planet from the so-called aggression of foreign powers. Millions of conscientious objectors spent the war in prison camps. The lucky ones died in the hands of the security police before ending up in the camps, and the luckiest of all managed to slip out of the part of space controlled by Earth. However, I had always thought that all of the refugees had returned home decades ago, by now having gotten to hear their fill of invented or exaggerated tales of heroism. Apparently I was

wrong.

I had also been wrong in imagining that the Kahandti still don't dare to allow more than one human in the same place on their planet at a time. No one demands that I leave Nnnght-K'kou before the doctor arrives. The journey here from the capitol city lasts more than a day even in the Kahandti's fastest hovercraft—assuming that the doctor is able to extricate himself from his own work immediately after receiving word—so I have plenty of time to explore the area and care for the patient as best I can. I greatly fear that he won't be able to tell me what happened, so I have to try to find some traces of his activities on the island. I'd like to know how he ended up here and when. And whether he has any companions. One of them might also be in need of aid.

Or...

I try to get the patient to drink some stream water with crushed nutritional supplement tablets mixed in. Even though I hold his head up as high as I dare, the majority of it dribbles down the corner of his mouth onto the bed. I glance at the Kahandti now and then. They stay close to the camp, which has been built below a small bank, almost on the edge of the water. The Kahandti can get along even in the coastal water, but that isn't what this is about. The bank protects them from what they believe to be in the interior of the island. That's where the gunfire reported by previous visitors came from.

The patient, dressed in a war-era uniform, might have friends who might have weapons to protect them.

The very thought is bewildering. I'm of the generation born after the war, from a time when humanity has been forbidden from using any weapon more technologically advanced than a stone axe. Of course I've *seen* weapons in museums, in documentaries and in fiction, but I've never been threatened with such a thing and have never been

forced to experience the consequences of their use. The Kahandti are older than me, and they know from their own experience what guns do. I detect from their manner of movement—or perhaps more accurately I sense—that they would like me to investigate what lies in the interior.

We respect tradition where I come from, on Earth. One of the most important ones is that children always have to waste their lives clearing up the messes caused by their parents' and grandparents' generations. Fate appears to have followed me all the way here to Gpatimais-Karra. Because our patient has again lost consciousness and no longer needs immediate attention, and because there are still a couple of hours of light left in this planet's short day, I inform the Kahandti that I am leaving to investigate the area. They give me permission. One of the officials gives me a transmitter camera, which I tape to my shoulder as best I can.

Perhaps it will tell them later what killed me.

I search about for some time on the other side of the embankment, until I find a hint of a trail leading through the tangled thicket into the interior. With a little effort I can imagine seeing the marks of a person trudging towards the beach. I notice that Igghatikat-eet is following me, discretely, twenty meters or so behind. He has spread out his individuals to move as several ribbons in amongst the undergrowth. In a configuration like that, he would be unable to speak to me in a way that I could understand. But it still feels good that I'm not being forced to wander around the labyrinthine brush forest of this strange island alone.

The thick vegetation forces me to meander somewhat, but I try to head in the direction of the highest point on the island. I imagine in my tiny never-fought-in-a-war mind that this is exactly where military-type persons would prefer to take up residence: a place from which you can see as far as

possible and to which any attacker must ascend uphill.

It isn't until I hear a metallic click that I realize I've been walking lost in my own thoughts for a long time. It takes a moment to make out the direction the sound is coming from, and as I turn in place I realize that Igghatikat-eet is nowhere to be seen. I'm standing in an area of forest that was cleared away years ago, but which is now growing back the same sort of thicket as covers the rest of the island's interior. The clicking is coming from the other side of the clearing.

From behind a low berm I can see a camouflaged roof. On the berm there's some sort of device, which makes a clicking sound as it follows my movements. I stare at it for some time, thinking about what I should do. The clicking stops with an unpleasant crack. As I move, the device continues to follow me, but silently now.

Between the berm and the camouflaged roof is a trench. The thicket has not made it this far—no, upon closer inspection I notice that once all the vegetation had been pulled up or trampled, but now nature has begun recapturing the place. I think for a moment about circling the building along the trench, but there may be other devices along the berm interested in my presence. Instead, I open the only visible door and step inside.

Silence. The building is of sufficiently robust construction that it muffles the sounds of nature coming from without. This looks like one of the portable bases they would drop through the atmosphere from cloaked spacecraft that I've seen in documentaries.

The musty smell of stagnant air mingles with the odors of our patient's body. There's something else in the air... something familiar, from somewhere far off. After sniffing for a moment, I realize that it's the smell of mold. More Terrestrial organisms than just humans have made

it here. They've apparently found appropriate nutrition for themselves around the building.

Funny. I never would have imagined that the nauseating odor of mold could feel so homey.

The stench of the building's toilet is not homey in any way, shape, or fashion. The same smell extends into one of the small rooms. Apparently our patient was bunking there. He kept the other rooms tidy as long as he was able and then ceased to use them. A man of discipline. Military discipline.

The windows of the building are very small, so the inside is rather dark. But I notice that a small kitchen garden has been kept between the berm and the wall. On the other side of the building is a grave. No...many graves. I crane my neck and rotate my head, counting nineteen simple mounds all together.

One of the empty rooms was used for storage. There are weapons resting within easy reach, but a good amount of dust has gathered on them. I don't even want to touch them, so I edge my way past them farther back into the room. I find piles of what appear to be personal items. Sketch pads, even a painting or two. Notebooks. Printouts. Moisture and time have ruined most of them, but from what I can tell they look like a backup copy of the station log.

I move the pile of papers aside to take them with me and glance at the paintings. Landscapes of the island. A gifted artist. The artist has not even attempted to record every detail in the pictures, rather trying to capture something essential with just a few strokes. The superficially peaceful pictures radiate an underlying fear of foreignness. The artist seems to have found this to be a very frightening place. Of course it's no wonder: this person was living on a foreign planet during a war, on the world of an enemy race.

There are also human figures in the sketch books.

Apparently the artist's comrades in arms. Men and women in military dress. In some of the pictures one of the women appears to be pregnant. I'm not sure. I'm not very good at interpreting this type of art.

It begins to grow dark. Gpatimais-Karra's fourteen-hour day doesn't make for many hours of light. Here inside there is working lighting—I tried it—but I'm not sure if I can make it back to the camp in the dark through the thicket without tripping. I take the printouts under my arm and am in the process of leaving when I notice some sort of computer system in the last room. I try to start it, but the machine requests a genetic sample and won't accept anything else.

In the morning the patient seems to be in even worse shape, but I don't know how to help. He mutters now and then, but can't get anything comprehensible out of his mouth. In addition to nutritional supplements, I crush some strong anti-inflammatory painkiller tablets into the water; more than that I am unable to do. He still can't swallow properly. Hopefully the doctor will come soon.

On the preceding evening I tried to read some of the pages I brought back with me in the artificial light, but most of them are so smeared and waterlogged that I can't really make anything out. Most of the text just seems like routine observations: the weather, the speed of the wind, notes about Kahandti activities (which appear to have been extremely limited). As I understand it, Gpatimais-Karra was far from the action for the entire war. I don't know what Earth military command might have thought they would accomplish on this planet, but the results appear extremely weak.

The complement of soldiers at the base totaled some twenty persons. Our patient is apparently the last of them left alive. And he probably won't live much longer.

I dress the patient in clean garments and try to get some food and water into him, after which I return through the thicket to the base. Igghatikat-eet follows me again, but remains farther off. This time I hazard a walk around the building. The device still follows my movements, but without clicking; there are two similar devices on other sides of the base, but they don't move or react in any way. It probably would have been perfectly safe for the Kahandti to enter the fortification. Besides those three automatic devices, now inoperative, there don't appear to be any weapons here but the odd handgun. Although I can't be entirely sure—I am only a civilian after all. Maybe the whole place is mined and will explode instantly if some hidden sensors detect a Kahandti.

I make a show of investigating the building, but there isn't much to see here. The computer system still demands a genetic sample and won't talk to me about any other topic. I wander from room to room and try to look useful in case the Kahandti happen to look in on what I'm doing. I admit to myself, very quietly, that I'm mostly avoiding returning to the patient. I don't know how to do anything for him, even though I know that just holding his hand would probably help. But I can't stand to be near him. So I try to make myself look useful here.

I find more grubby, moldy, tattered printouts. Most of them are completely illegible, but here and there I can find fragments of sentences that don't seem completely routine: *...after which Medical Sergeant Lang Surjeeta demanded that the Commander submit to a genetic test. ...informed that the gene map recorded in the service records of the commander, Senior Lieutenant Liu Wen is a forgery and that he is not genetically qualified for his rank. Thus, second lieutenant Vasquez Joaquin, as the senior competent officer, was obliged to take temporary command of the base until an officer with*

*rights to the relevant rank arrives at the monitoring station in conjunction with the arrival of crew reinforcements to take over the duties of permanent commander. The former commander...*

The following pages are just a damp mass of mold. When I separate them, they fall apart completely. ... *nnikova informed Acting Commander Vasquez that the former commander, former Senior Lieutenant Liu Wen had attempted to commit an act of sexual violence against her, at which time the acting commander ordered Liu to be confined for the time being... and again illegible. ...refused to surrender his weapon, so the watch officer carrying out the arrest was forced to open...*

“Ahem.”

I jump, startled, and turn around. There’s a person standing in the door.

The first—no, the second—person I have seen in over a year and a half is a woman in her fifties. She has black, braided hair, which shows steel-grey streaks here and there, and skin the color of milk chocolate. Her human-style clothing is made of Kahandti fibers. Her dark brown eyes conceal whatever might be behind them. At first she looks just like an ancient Lakota from a children’s story, but there may be more Chinese or Indian in her features.

“Kareena Bhatt,” she says finally, after tiring of my staring. “I hear that nowadays it’s the fashion to say the first name before the surname.”

“Are you the... doctor?”

“Almost. I didn’t receive my degree before I left to escape the war. But I’m the best that’s to be had on this planet.”

“Have you already...?”

“Seen the patient? Yes. And there’s nothing to be done anymore with these resources. He’s actually managed to stay alive an amazingly long time.”

“Pancreas?”

“Pancreas, kidneys, and liver, among other things. As you know, the flora and fauna of this planet are excellent sources of food for humans, but only as long as they’re complemented by nutritional supplements. I noticed that you had tried to give them to him. A perfectly good idea, but far too late.”

“We can’t get him to a hospital.”

“Hardly. The closest place with expertise in human physiology is several light years away. The trip would take weeks, and I don’t believe he’ll live more than two days. He’s lucky if he lives until tomorrow.”

Bhatt looks around as she steps through the door into the room. “I just wonder,” she continues, “why on earth he came back here.”

“Back?”

“After being a POW. I would have thought that he would have wanted to get home to his friends and family. Assuming that anyone was still alive after the war ended. Maybe they were all dead.”

She laughs dryly, almost completely devoid of mirth.

“It seems to me,” I say, “that here at this base they thought the war was still going on and that they still had to stay at their stations...”

“In the middle of a Kahandti area? On a planet populated by Kahandti? I doubt it. I doubt they would have left a piddling little monitoring station like this in their rear.”

I shrug my shoulders, not willing to argue. The whole situation still baffles me.

“A gifted artist,” she mumbles as she flips through the sketch books. “She would have had a good career ahead of her. She could have become one of humanity’s greatest artists if she hadn’t have been dragged into the war and sent

out here... much has been taken from us and little...”

The woman fall silent midsentence and closes the book, rising and stepping to the window. She stares out the small window for some time at the narrow strip between the berm and the wall.

“Others came here too,” she mutters more to herself than to me.

I remember that the graves I saw are in front of that window.

“Well, no matter,” she declares as she turns around briskly. “I should get back to the patient. Did you get the computer working?”

“No, it asks for...”

“A genetic ID, I know.”

Apparently I look surprised, because she continues: “That was standard operating procedure before the war. At that time there was a firm belief that military and administrative talent were hereditary traits. So the proper place of the individual in society and in the military hierarchy could be determined by examining what variants they carried of certain genes. If you have the right genes, then you’re sufficiently high-ranking to get the computer to open up. Otherwise you can’t.”

Again the same dry, mirthless laugh.

“Old superstitions in a new form. Six and a half thousand years of aristocratic buffoonery demonstrate without a shadow of a doubt that military and administrative talent are not in any way, shape, or form hereditary traits. But no matter. We’ll look at the computer tomorrow. I’m going back to the beach.”

I’m left standing, dumbfounded, watching her leave.

My first human contact in almost two years has left me even more directionless. I wander from room to room, collecting all of the printouts I can find, and as evening

begins to fall once more, I also set off towards the beach.

The sounds the patient is making penetrate deep in the thicket. He's made plenty of noise before, but never so loud. I can almost pick out words too—but only almost. A long drawn out, agonized “LLLLL–NNnnG!” seems to be repeated often.

“Lllll-nnng.” It could almost be a Kahandti name.

Bhatt doesn't seem to want my company as she cares for the patient. The Kahandti are all about their own business. Next to our hovercraft a second has appeared, which in addition to Bhatt brought two new Kahandti. They keep a distance from me. Apparently they've already been told everything they feel they need to know about me. I eat dinner alone, remembering to swallow my nutritional supplements, and lie down under the canopy.

Bhatt spreads out her sleeping bag on the other side of the partition, only a couple of meters away, without saying a word. She's so close that I can hear her breathing in the silence of the night. I can hear as she sleepily scratches some itchy spot on her skin. The patient's vocalizing has gradually tapered off, becoming feebler, and finally amounting to only the shadow of a voice.

“Lllll-nnng.” Wasn't there someone in the station's crew whose name was Lang?

I figure that any light shining through the Kahandti fabric of the partition won't bother Bhatt's sleep, so in the dark I set my flashlight to minimum power and try to focus my sleep-deprived eyes enough to make something out from the printouts I brought back from the base. At least it gives me something else to think about.

*... geant Donnikova Ursula's status has deteriorated; without Medical Sergeant Lang Surjeeta, our ability to provide her with appropriate care is weak. Since the disappearance of the encrypted transmitter we cannot even*

*enquire about what actions to take. The suggestion has been made to Acting Commander Vasquez Joaquin that in this situation we must perhaps resort to using the unencrypted emergency link, which would reveal the location of the base to the enemy. It is impossible to say whether remote medical advice would even help in saving the lives of Sergeant Donnikova Ursula or her unborn child. We have used our available resources to attempt to find any traces of Lang on the island, but...*

Again many sheets of completely illegible, moldy pages. The dates and times are recorded using the old military calendar, which I don't know particularly well. ...*no signs of enemy activity. The acting commander, Staff Sergeant Koité Kante decided that we should...*

*... neral, Corporal Ljungman Karl took over the duties of acting commander and mov...*

If I've counted correctly, at the time of that entry some six years had already passed since the end of the war. Their manpower was down to only two souls. There appear to be very few later entries, other than repetitions of *no signs of enemy activity*. It would seem that Acting Commander Corporal Ljungman Karl has had only himself to command for nearly eight Earth years. Apparently none of the monitoring station's soldiers ever dared resort to using the unencrypted emergency link.

I stay up for quite some time poring over the sheets of paper in the light of my flashlight and then sleep poorly, waking up late. Our small camp is very quiet; the only sound is the muted rustling of the Kahandti. No human sounds. Bhatt is nowhere to be seen, and acting commander Corporal Ljungman Karl is no longer among us.

Igghatikat-eet informs me that Bhatt has walked to the base where she intends to turn off the last remnants of the defense system. I can't come up with anything else to do so I

follow after her.

For a moment I see a different kind of Bhatt. She's sitting at the computer, slumped over, hands over her face, powerless. Then she notices me, straightens her back, wipes her cheeks, and blinks her red eyes a few times. The impenetrable wall has returned to her eyes.

"Good morning," she says with almost a sneer.

I try to come up with some sort of greeting and doubtless seem like a complete idiot. But she surprises me by meeting me half way, "I'm sorry that I'm so...upset today. I... I haven't practiced medicine much in the past years. So I haven't lost a patient for a long time."

"Something like that probably takes... some getting used to?"

"Yes."

Awkward silence.

"But no matter," she continues. "Not any more. I was able to get into the computer system and turn off the defensive hardware. Or at least what was left of it. Perhaps you noticed."

I hadn't. But now when I think about it, I realize that I hadn't seen the device on the berm turning to follow me.

"My genes are apparently of sufficiently high quality according to this computer system," she says, laughing again mirthlessly.

"Unfortunately," she continues with emphasis and then repeating to be on the safe side: "Un-fort-unately the system was protected with some sort of backup check that I didn't know how to deactivate. After working for a little while it wiped itself clean because I wasn't able to type the secret key code it demanded fast enough. Look."

I lean over to inspect the displays, which really does just show a curt *not found* message. Bhatt glances at me quickly and turns back to the empty screens. "But... well... I mean,

I was able to see some of the information before it was destroyed. I must ask you forgiveness.”

I don't know if the sympathy in her face is just for show, but at least it's more pleasant see than her previous frigid hauteur.

“That is, it turns out that your theory was right,” she declares. “This observation station was not captured, but rather continued its operations unmolested for the entire war and from that time until now. Up until Lj... its last living soldier's health collapsed, and he finally decided to give himself up. Apparently the observation station was of so little trouble to the Kahandti that they thought it was easier to just leave the whole mess well enough alone. They just prevented it from communicating with the rest of humanity.”

Now there seems to be some genuine emotion in her voice: “Here they sat for thirty years without any contact with the outside world. But they still remembered their duty, wrote reports day after day, and shot the unfortunate Kahandti who happened to find their way within range. And all of this just because some genius military commanders thought wouldn't it be a laugh if we had a secret observation post behind the Kahandti lines.”

She rises from the computer and walks to the window. She scans the flourishing thicket through the window. “For thirty years they had nothing more to do than fulfill the requirements of their irrational sense of duty. Week after week, month after month, year after year, until...”

She doesn't know how to continue, nor does she want to show me her face, to reveal her scorn, her pity, her sorrow, her anger, or whatever it is she's feeling. We're both silent for a moment. She stares out the window intensely. With nothing better to do, I look at the empty screen of the computer.

“Well, no matter,” she says finally, adding, “Anymore. The war has finally ended for them too.”

I don't have anything to add to that, so I nod.

“And I'm no longer needed here either,” she says, turning and striding past me before stopping at the door. “So I'm returning to the capitol. The Kahandti have promised to convey all of...the deceased to Earth and their families. If any of them are still alive and if they care anymore about what happened to these people.”

Again a dry laugh. “Assuming I really understood humans in my day, I wouldn't be completely sure. It was nice to meet you.”

And then she's gone. I wander from room to room for a while, thinking about what to do. I collect the late artist's work together in a bundle, noticing that one of the sketchbooks has disappeared. When I return to the camp one of the hovercrafts has disappeared with its Kahandti and Bhatt. Igghatikat-eet and the others are breaking down the camp. It's time for us to leave as well and take along with us the earthly remains of Acting Commander Corporal Ljungman Karl. Igghatikat-eet reports that the other bodies will be retrieved later.

**A** few days later Igghatikat-eet streams under the door into my room again and climbs up onto the wall behind my desk. I nod in order to show that I'm ready to listen to him.

“The humans who died at Nnnght-K'kou have been dug out of the topsoil and taken to the capitol. They will be sent to Earth at the first opportunity.”

“As the representative of Earth I present my thanks to the Kahandti community for this action.”

“We wish to improve the relations between our peoples, which became needlessly tense due to the war,” he continues

in a similarly formal manner, then falling silent.

I notice from his posture that at this point in the comment comes an unspoken “but”. So I wait for him to continue.

“One of the dead humans is very small. Only thirty-six point two centimeters from head to feet.”

“Igghatikat-eet, he was a newborn. Or if anything a premature birth. In the papers I showed you there was a reference that one of the soldiers was perhaps about to give birth to a child.”

“I did not know that soldiers could give birth.”

“We humans are not able to reconfigure ourselves when we go to war. Not like you Kahandti. We always carry our reproductive organs with us, as impractical as it may be. There are methods and medicines that may prevent reproduction either temporarily or permanently, but perhaps they ran out of these at the observation station.”

“You also reported that according to the notes one of the soldiers had disappeared. It seems that she disappeared permanently, because one body is missing.”

“Perhaps.”

“I see that you think otherwise.”

“Yes.”

I think for a moment about how to phrase my question.

“I know that in the Kahandti opinion a Kahandti who has been at war is not able to function reasonably during peacetime, so he is broken up and his individuals are incorporated into other individuals.”

“Yes. It has been a very effective system.”

“So I understand. Is it possible... do you happen to know of any Kahandti who would have had merged into them individuals—perhaps the individuals of an officer—who had served in military or intelligence operations on Gpatimais-Karra and who might perhaps still have this

officer's memories?"

"I do not know the word 'officer'."

"It indicates a soldier who has more authority or knowledge about the overall situation in a war than others."

Igghatikat-eet is silent for a moment. I don't know if it can be called thinking. I'm still unsure to what degree terminology related to human thought can ultimately be applied to the Kahandti.

"If you wish to learn the memories of a Kahandti of that type," he says finally, "you must know that a Kahandti carrying memories related to killing humans or humans that kill cannot be allowed into contact with a living human, in order to avoid complications."

"I understand that perfectly well. I would not need to meet him, but..."

I think about how I might present my theory so that Igghatikat-eet will understand it.

"You wish to attempt to clarify whether you have interpreted correctly what happened," Igghatikat-eet suggests helpfully.

"Exactly, thank you! That is precisely what I meant."

"I must first hear your interpretation."

"I believe that when the Kahandti who were responsible for the military defense of Gpatimais-Karra were merged with other individuals, they failed to inform the civilian authorities about a certain operation."

"Do you mean memories of a decision to leave the human observation station on Nnnght-K'kou uncaptured because it was causing neither danger nor harm?"

"Exactly. But not only that. I suspect... I think that our missing soldier may not have drowned or died, but rather managed to get to the Kahandti and surrender."

"Why?"

"She did not want to fight. Perhaps she wished to be

a healer rather than a destroyer. Perhaps she thought humanity was not justified in fighting the war. If anyone ever is... And apparently at the Nnnght-K'kou observation station life was very contentious. There was some sort of struggle for power in which at least one person had already died at another's hand. So she left her companions and went to the Kahandti. She took along with her the device with which the human soldiers would have kept in contact with their other companions."

"And with which the Kahandti would perhaps have been able to intercept and decode the messages of the human forces."

"And perhaps also send counterfeit messages in order to disrupt military operations. Thus she made the observation station completely harmless for the Kahandti, so there was no reason to take any action against it."

"Do you suppose that this human individual still exists?"

"She may. I sincerely doubt she has returned to Earth, because during a time of war an act like that would have led to her destruction. I don't know about after the war...in any case it would have been very difficult for her to live on Earth if her actions had become public."

"So you think that she remains living among the Kahandti?"

"Yes. Possibly she slipped in among the refugees who left Earth territory before the war. Perhaps with an assumed name. The Kahandti would surely have helped her in this if they had been benefited by the device she brought."

"Perhaps."

Igghatikat-eet is silent for a moment. "So you wish for me to find out if an event like this was possible?"

"Yes. The name of this person was apparently Surjeeta Lang. Or Lang Surjeeta. Medical Sergeant Lang Surjeeta. Yes, and..."

I think for a moment again about how to frame this.

“Perhaps it would also be worthwhile to ask that doctor who met us on Nnnght-K’kou about this. Kareena Bhatt. I got the feeling that she would rather converse with a Kahandti than with a human.”

“Unfortunately that will be difficult.”

“How so? Nothing has happened to her, has it?”

“She has departed the planet of Gpatimais-Karra.”

“Where did she go?”

“I do not have any information on that subject.”

I turn the matter over in my mind for a long time after Igghatikat-eet’s departure. My first real human contact in two years had felt like a being even more strange and frightening than the Kahandti. Perhaps she had her reasons.

I don’t know what it would be like to live among the Kahandti for thirty years. Presumably most of the war refugees who ended up here returned to Earth territory soon after humanity surrendered. She may have been the only human on this planet for decades. Or at least so she has always assumed. Perhaps she really believed that her former comrades had ended up in the relative comfort of the Kahandti POW camps soon after she deserted them. And that they had returned home to their loved ones after the war to build a new Earth. It’s difficult for me even to imagine how it would feel to realize you had condemned—even unwittingly—a group of people you knew to living out the rest of their lives on a deserted island, living out a war which had ended everywhere else for thirty more years.

*Translated by Owen F. Witesman*