

Kundo Wakes Up

Chapter 1

Waking Up

Kundo woke as he did most mornings, gasping like a fish stranded on a river bank as the last vestiges of some repeating dream faded, leaving him only with its disturbing physical manifestations: clawed fingers, a light patina of sweat, rapid heartbeat, and oftentimes, a painful erection.

This cannot be healthy.

Invariably he failed to remember the dream, although he assumed it was recurring. After all, how many variations of an erotic nightmare could his brain throw out? That his brain was malfunctioning was clear. Either his meat brain or his implant: the ubiquitous Echo, part phone, part filter, part processor, the ultimate guide in life, his very own customized Virgil, leading every gobbet around their personal hell with a running commentary and useless bits of information.

Oh yes, it's pretty hot here, 102 degrees Fahrenheit. That aroma is burning flesh with a hint of thyme. . . This is how it ends for humanity, a slow imbecilic death with full coverage

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and commentary, everyone a star, no one a fan.

His Echo hadn't received software updates in a while. Was it a year? Six months?

Kundo blinked twice for messages, still his first instinct of the day. Nothing. Nothing personal, nothing from another live human. Nothing even from Karma, the AI running the city, who had been gradually going silent. At first her updates had been round the clock, but over the past few years they had reduced in number, until today, for the first time, there were none at all, no greeting, no report on the weather or hostile-nanotech count in the air. Could an AI stop caring?

He went through the categories of mail—he still thought of them as boxes—and found only spam, archaic advertisements promising space travel to a distant heaven or some extinct multiplayer game. Had he somehow dropped out of citizenship altogether? Was he so utterly irrelevant that even the machines were ignoring him?

Kundo sighed. Already the day was gray. He got to his feet slowly, not sure if he was about to be felled by a massive heart attack, half expecting it. That's the way his father had gone, after all. A cracking sound, like a tree falling; he remembered it vividly because it had startled him awake, the impact of a huge man hitting the deck, blood splattering from his father's broken nose, and he

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remembered thinking, *Ufff, that's got to hurt, except not really because he's already dead. . . . Could a broken nose hurt a guy whose heart had stopped?* This was a question he had struggled with growing up.

The blinds on his window slid open automatically, filling the room with sunlight. He was very high up, the entire Bay of Bengal stretched out in front of him, pristine-looking, deadly. Of course, this hadn't always been beachfront property, but the water had risen over the past decades, the price for burning fossils for all those centuries, and now he had a great ocean view in a city gently falling to ruin.

He said hello to the bamboo plant by the window, rubbing a leaf gently in greeting, making sure the drip feed was green. He trundled over to the kitchen unit, ordered tea, watched his mug fill with an amber liquid wafting the delicate sandalwood smell of Darjeeling. The kitchen unit was terrible at food. It could barely cook rice and dal, but it made a superb cup of tea, superior even to the priceless real Darjeeling tea leaf that Kundo had once been in the habit of drinking, in his heyday.

He sat in his rocking chair in front of the window, under the dappled shade of the fledgling bamboo, and looked out. The fumes from the mug swamped his face, creating a fragrant **minisauna**. There were no ships in the bay—the port had closed long ago—and now only er-

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rant seagulls graced the shore, a rare sight. Karma had ceded anything beyond the seawall long ago.

Still, he liked looking out, far into the ocean, and then down to the oceanfront promenade, the great walkway atop the seawall, which in years past would have been crowded with vendors and people. The numbers had dwindled, of course, as more and more people left the city—left or died, Kundo had no idea—but this morning he saw only a few stalwart little dots moving around.

Left or died, that was the question on his mind these days. His wife, for example, had left for sure, because there had been a note, one that clearly stated, “I’m leaving.” One year, 236 days ago. Or one year and 237 days if you counted the day she had written the note, which was presumably the night before, since he had woken up to find her gone. If she had made up her mind some time before, if it had not been a spur-of-the-moment leaving, then, of course, the count would have to be revised upward. It was impossible for him to determine the exact moment she might have decided to leave, even though he routinely scoured his memory for signs of disaffection or some seminal instance of revolt.

Like a prisoner, he constantly fretted about the count of days, even though his effort altered nothing.

Of course, he had looked for her, bewildered, wanting first her return, then an explanation, then just a conver-

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sation, or failing that at least some kind of instruction as to how he was supposed to proceed. For example, their collection of books, so valuable, printed on real dead-tree paper, how were they to divide them? Which classics did she want to keep? Surely that Jane Austen gilt-edged one? It was an anniversary present from him and she had treasured it. She had appeared to treasure it. By one year and day 237, he was no longer certain of anything. He wanted her to keep it, but perhaps that was tactless? Evidently she wanted a clean state. Was his presence so terrible that it would pollute even their most beautiful treasures? How could someone abandon a favorite book, or the bamboo plant, for example?

She had disappeared, and he had not been able to find her, despite his resources, so the question always was: left or died? Had the note been a metaphor for suicide? Or perhaps she had actually left with the intention to make a life somewhere, with someone, and subsequently been murdered? Or simply died in the wilderness, at the edges of the city where there weren't enough people to throw up a proper microclimate? She wasn't outdoorsy like him, did not have the skills to go foraging.

He couldn't imagine that she would feel the need to deliberately hide from him. He had never been a violent man, something she knew well. In fact, most of the violence had come from her, albeit not physically. Still, what

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threat had he represented, what possible reaction could she have feared to disappear so thoroughly? These were the grooves his thoughts inevitably ran in, grooves deepening in his mind until they were proper train tracks, inexorable, repeating lines that resisted change.

He skipped breakfast for another cup of tea, settled back into the armchair again, and lost track of time watching the waves breaking. At high tide, the thin strip of beach disappeared completely and the waves hit the wall, sending up a white froth. Street children no longer played on the wall. They had learned the hard way that the froth could kill.

He could empty his mind like this for hours, just sit and breathe. It was meditation, but one without purpose, unless total abnegation of thought counted as a purpose.

The lack of messages disturbed him. Nothing from his wife, nor any of his friends, of course, all of them drifted away, and now not even the city was bothering to acknowledge him. Had he died in his sleep? Was he, in fact, the one who had left? He glanced at his mental calendar. He had last checked it three days ago. Three days gone without record. Had he slept the whole time? No wonder he was woozy, confused. Had he eaten at all? Suddenly he felt a ravenous craving for the beef curry sold near the foot of his building, the illegally parked cart that served food that had certainly never come out of a stan-

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lard kitchen unit.

It was raining outside, a slight drizzle, and the air quality was fine, but he decided to put on his expedition outfit, for he knew from experience that once outside his feet might take him further afield. The city appeared to be in its death throes, but that was misleading. It was only sloughing off its old skin, the cardboard-box citizens with their boring lives, hamsters bereft of their wheels, rat racers who could not accept that the track was gone. What the city would become next was the real question. This had interested Kundo once, this evolution in front of his eyes of a mammoth organism that did not even know it was alive. It had been his passion even, documenting it.

Perhaps she had left because of it, perhaps he had lost track of time and, by extension, of her, once too often. But she'd had her own life, hadn't she? Her own secrets and hobbies and friends. The game she played incessantly. Had she been fucking them, the gamers in her crew? Secret gamer orgies, her lithe body pawed over by horny adolescent boys? He had never seen them in real life, but he always assumed gamers were pimply faced teenagers, although he knew logically this must not be true; statistics showed that almost 80 percent of the people living in Chittagong gamed casually, and fully 38 percent were considered hard-core.

He had hired a hacker to find **them**, an old acquaint-

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tance he could trust. No trace, all three of them were gone, guys aged seventeen, thirty-two, and forty-five, unconnected by anything other than the game they played. Hassem the cyber-eye had at least turned up their names and pictures, their meat identities, although no addresses. Hassem the genius was the last resort, after the police had glanced at his note and scoffed, after all his friends and neighbors had disavowed any further insight as to her whereabouts.

So, of course, the faces of those gamers haunted him, and thoughts rose unbidden of them banging his wife, their cocks in her simultaneously, slaves to her will.

Over the past year, however, the raw immediacy of the sting had faded. He could bear to look at a game screen without feeling that roiling nausea, the acid wash of chagrin. In his more zen moments, when his well of self-hate was exhausted, he even wished them bon voyage, hoped they were all together somewhere better, some place full of laughter and companionship and blue skies. When his mind was sharp, he would stop to consider why *all four of them* had disappeared, (different days in the same month). Was he so fearsome an adversary? She could have just eloped with them in some polyandrous menagerie, just told him and moved out, and, worst case, he would have whined at her, stacked up her message boxes, perhaps waited outside her new crib with pathetic

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flowers and a song.

Plenty of people went off in groups for sexual escapades. What the hell else was there to do nowadays, anyway? It was just sex. He could have lived with it. Whatever her plan was, the one unavoidable truth was that he had not been asked to join, not even considered for it. His inadequacy, either physical or psychological, was clear.

Predictable thoughts, running the same tracks a hundred times a day.

Hunger intruded, and for a moment he focused on dressing himself for the great outdoors. Black slick pants, double-layered synthetic, self-healing for punctures. Full-sleeved T-shirt with membrane seals at the neck and wrists. A gray set of gloves with gecko grip, which could be activated with a double tap. Same with the soles of his boots. Useful for climbing over ruins or not getting blown away in a freak hurricane. Coastal weather was unpredictable, despite the best efforts of microclimate tech. He took one of her scarves and wrapped it around his face and neck, a tasteful gray one made of the wool of some extinct mountain sheep. It smelled of her perfume, or so he imagined. In fact, that was a lie; it only smelled of illicit cigarettes now. Goggles, helmet, and coat, all of them made for frontier work, away from the city where the air itself was deadly and invisible nanotech could

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sneak into your body and kill you.

He felt a rush of optimism. It had been weeks since he had gone out properly. The coat had his brushes and paint in long pockets down the right side, and tightly rolled canvas down the other. It had been almost three years since he had painted, but there was always hope.

Chapter 2

Free Beers

He took the elevator down. Thank god it still worked. Many of the apartments in his building were abandoned. He supposed Karma would close it down one day, and make the last few holdouts move to something more compact. Everything still worked though, and soon he was outside, in front of the curry cart.

“Beef bhuna and white rice,” he said.

“Kundo Shaheb, how are you? It’s been days. I was worried.” A middle-aged lady ran the cart. She knew absolutely everyone in the executive quarter.

“I’m fine,” Kundo said. “Just lost track of time.”

“All alone up there, you should be more careful.”

“Yeah.” He started wolfing down the curry. He’d often eat at the cart counter, if there wasn’t a crowd. “It’s extra good today.” His wife had hated the curry. Something about the smell of turmeric. What kind of Bengali didn’t like turmeric? She used to watch him eat at the cart through binoculars and make acid jokes about how one

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day he'd run away with the curry lady. *That was love, wasn't it? You wouldn't watch someone eat through binoculars otherwise, would you?*

"Kundo Shaheb, when are you going to paint? Remember you promised?"

He had once offered to paint a mural on her cart, in return for lifetime free curry. He had offered it as a joke, but she seemed to think it was a great deal, and reminded him almost every time now.

"I will, I promise."

"I even have a design ready," she said.

Kundo sighed. He hated commissions.

She brought out a picture of a bizarre eagle-headed man, torso festooned with a zebra pattern of burns, some kind of folklore creature that escaped him. There was a stylized eye on top of his head. *The Eye of Horus? An Egyptian god in Chittagong? Who knew what mythology these provincials followed nowadays? The great calamities of the past century had churned out all sorts of black magic and peculiar superstitions, the veneer of rationality only surface deep and so easily rubbed off. It made him despair sometimes.*

"What the hell is that? He's got weird legs."

"It's Horus," she said, with a deep breath laden with secrecy. "Our savior is coming, Kundo Shaheb."

Great. I'm taking religious advice from a curry lady now.

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“He’s got funny legs, this savior. It looks like he’s cut his own off at the knees and attached someone else’s full legs to the stumps. It makes no sense. Are you sure you’re going to sell more curries with this kind of picture on your cart?”

“If you open your eyes, you will see more than Karma,” she said.

“I have not painted in a long time,” Kundo said. “Not since she—”

“Such a shame,” she said. “Such a famous artist like you, I can’t believe she left you like that.”

Tactful as ever. And hardly that famous. I doubt anyone even remembers me anymore. Certainly my agent doesn’t. If the curry wasn’t this good I don’t think I’d ever come down this way. Bloody woman can’t stop talking.

Then, to make him feel bad, she gave him a free beer, and had one herself in companionable silence. *Bloody mind reader.* Of course, no one ever stopped at one beer. He bought the next round, and they took turns getting rounds, and by the fifth he was tipsy and they had already started blasting their favorite songs from the 1980s, which seemed to be the world’s repository for cheesy music, as if everything cringy but compulsively singable had been compressed into a single decade.

They were halfway through “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go” by Wham! when a gaggle of lunchtime execu-

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tives suddenly turned up, talking loudly. The cart lady flipped off her sound box and straightened up into chef mode. Kundo slunk away amidst hard, derisive looks. Everyone else was more or less dressed in fashionable suits and had some kind of executive job, it seemed. This neighborhood had once been expensive and it still retained that cachet. They probably thought he was a drunken hobo, with his scavenging gear. No doubt some security drone would turn up soon to gently usher him away.

Yeah, your suits wouldn't last three minutes in an orange-alert zone, boyos.

The curry had settled his hunger and the drinking had made him crave society. He let his feet take him around the city, the ground level not crowded, at least in this area. Many pedestrians preferred the basement tunnels below the streets, with their conveyor-belt efficiency and protection. In many ways the wealthy had gone underground and left the surface to the freaks and outcasts of the city. Of course, there were the mansions on the hill, that little slice of paradise where the truly wealthy lived, behind their multiple layers of protection, but that was a different world.

Here in a forgotten commercial district, there were tall buildings around him, semiabandoned, semisentient. He felt like an ant walking between giant glass pillars, ig-

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nored by everything but liable to be pulped any minute by some absentminded mechanism. His feet took him away from the seawall, toward the more dilapidated parts of town. Men dressed like him began to appear, heads encased in helmets or cowls, heavy goggles around the eyes, every seam and joint coated with auto adhesives. What were they doing out here? Scavenging, black-marketeering, god knows what. A lot of the buildings here had been stripped down, useful things pried out, and a certain amount of urban foraging was tolerated. Why not, since so many people had left or died? There were real problems, after all. Storms. Waves of mutant nanotech from the bay. Superbugs that hit meat as well as electronics. Karma had neither the inclination nor the wherewithal to send her drones out for petty crimes.

He reached his first stop, a squat, small-windowed Disera* building, resembling a bunker, revealing much about the architects of that time; no one had time for airy frontage when the sky itself was trying to kill you. The building actually sloped downward, with many of

* Disera: Disintegration Era, approximately fifty years or so in the past, when global systems collapsed under the weight of errant nanotech, climate change, severe disruption to trade, and complete abandonment of labor, fossil fuels, and rare metals in the face of molecular fabrication and other techs.

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the apartments below ground level, the upper floors left for communal living spaces. He knew the code for the front gate, his Echo reaching out a tendril automatically with the password.

Walking through the circular hive-like corridor, he found it more dilapidated than usual. Only the zeros were left in this building, he could tell. It would not be long before it was abandoned. It had been a respectable address only a few years ago. Now it seemed only the desperate or the criminal lived here. Hassem was wealthy, but he preferred anonymity, like most of his ilk.

He stopped at the unmarked door of the hacker, and pounded for a few minutes to no avail. The screen on the door was disconnected. Nothing stirred behind the door.

Nonplussed, Kundo went to the neighbors, a family with a small baby. He had met them several times. The lady opened on the first bell.

“You!” A curly haired head peeped out.

“Hi, Mrs. Bandar. I was looking for Hassem.”

“You’re about three months too late,” she snorted. “Wait here. He left a note for you.” She closed the door and he could hear her rummaging.

Three months? Has it been that long really? Kundo waited awkwardly in the hallway. Eventually she re-opened the door, thrust out a handwritten letter. Hassem had a deep distrust for electric communications, almost