

The Governor

Excerpts from Chapters 1, 3, 9, 13, and 22.

Matthew Lane



Chapter I

I CLOSED my eyes for a fraction of a heart beat and assimilated.

My Social Standing Index number this morning is SSI#0800881.

My name is Luca Gray.

It is 6:17am, Tuesday 18th November, 2373. It is unlikely that external temperatures will exceed 289K in Merdon State.

I am 23 years old, son of Paula and Michael Gray.

I am fully vaccinated and have a Tier 3c surgical implant, so am highly unlikely to become unwell. I have a rare form of anaemia. It does not affect my ability to function normally so is largely irrelevant. My next B12 vitamin supplement is in 2 hours and 12 minutes.

My mental wellbeing is regular, consistent with expectation. I am a safe citizen. My use of Emotional Restraint is at thirty-five percent, sixteen percent above Municipa average.

I have a degree in Recombination Science and Quantum Computing from the Finer Sciences University. I am applying for a PhD.

There is nothing in my schedule for today.

Information.

It is the bedrock of society. It defines us: our ability or inability to form a cohesive picture of the world determines how we respond to everything that happens. Humanity's greatest flaw has always been its inability to allow information to shape this picture. Instead we have let our biases impose restrictions and limitations on our lives.

But things are better now. Better than they have ever been.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

The increase in visible detail was noticeable. Much of the depth of colour that I could see now had been hidden from me the day before; the soft hairs that decorated my skin, the faint flush of blood just beneath the surface, the smallest of creases at the corners of my mouth. The Governor update – some small modification to the implant hardware in my tongue – was supplementing my natural vision to ensure that I did not overlook any details.

My pupils dilated as I assimilated.

I reached up and gingerly touched the side of my face, running a finger along the line of my jaw. There was no pain, which was good, not that I had expected any. I opened my mouth to inspect my tongue, but yesterday's incision was hardly even visible. It would be gone by tomorrow.

I washed, put on a pair of dark slim jeans and a white shirt and rolled up the sleeves to reveal pale blue threading that ran along the length. Attention to detail was key, in all things. I glanced in the mirror one last time to check my reflection, smoothed my eyebrows flat and ran my fingers through my hair. My English and Dutch complexion stood out against most of my South American and Central Asian neighbours, an interracial mixing pot in which I was the minority. I looked controlled, pale, intentional. Which was fine with me.

Once satisfied, I went downstairs.

Ma was sitting in the kitchen. There was jazz playing in the background. I liked jazz.

“Good morning,” I said as I walked in on her. She glanced up from her tablet, no doubt reading the news.

“Good morning, Luca. Did you sleep well? Any pain?”

I shook my head. “No pain at all, and there’s already no sign of the surgery.”

“That’s good,” she said, returning to the paper. “How does the update feel?”

“Superb. Faster than before. I’m hardly noticing it. I could sense where you were downstairs without having to look. The background processing is superb.”

She nodded, smiling. Her update was due tomorrow.

There was a jug of orange juice on the table and a pot of coffee, four glasses and two mugs. One of the mugs had been used, waiting to be washed up.

“Your father just left,” Ma said, seeing me look at the used mug. I poured myself a glass of juice and sat down next to her to look at the tablet. The headlines were much like they had been for weeks: GDP was still rising, and was expected to continue; Municipa’s population was steady at ninety million people and would soon be allowed to grow; the kid with the great voice had won one of the talent shows; the southern States’ student unrest had been tied to a neglectful Local Education Council; Highground Rugby club had beaten North Shields, both regions within Merdon state, retaining their championship status for another year.

“He said to remind you to leave him a message when you hear from Finer Sciences. It can’t be long now.” She patted my hand. “Now, what would you like for breakfast? I can do eggs if you like?”

“Yes, thank you. That would be lovely.”

Ma opened one of the fridges and brought down some eggs and milk and cracked them into a bowl. I reflected on my Finer Sciences application and for a moment felt a small flicker of excitement and worry. I frowned, but decided against increasing my Emotional Restraint any further. A small amount of anxiety was natural and my Mood Control was set at recommended levels.

“Would you call up to your sister for me?” Ma said smoothly. “She should be down by now.” I nodded and went to the door with my juice.

“Em,” I called up the stairs. “Breakfast.” There was a clatter, followed by some sort of acknowledgement.

“She’ll be down soon,” I said, returning to the kitchen.

“She’ll miss the bus if she doesn’t hurry. I don’t want her to be late to college.”

The time is 6:56am,

the Governor whispered automatically into my subconscious. I couldn’t remember what time her bus drove by our stop, but I thought that it was around 7:20am.

I nodded and returned to the tablet, sipping my juice. “What do you make of the riots?” I asked. I hadn’t had time to ask Father. He had been too busy at work and I hadn’t seen him.

“They’re not really riots, Luca, just strikes. Some people are never happy with what the State provides and will always want less. Silly really, but at least it’s just civilians and not The Silence.”

“It says the Education Council is to blame.” I pointed at the headline.

Ma nodded and took the eggs off the heat. “And it probably is,” she said, spooning them onto some thick cut toast. “Your father spoke to the Minister for Education only last week. He said there was one school in one of the States, I’m not sure which one, where the teachers had told their students to disable their

Emotional Restraint and Mood Control completely. Can you imagine?” Ma shook her head, tutting. “Here you go.” She put the plate down in front of me and left the room. I heard her go upstairs, probably to hurry Emma along.

I couldn’t imagine.

Emotional Restraint at thirty-five percent, sixteen percent above Municipa average, equal to Merdon State average.

I couldn’t imagine why anyone would disable their ER, or their Mood Control. It must make it that much harder to think. No wonder the students in the south were behaving irrationally, impulses and emotions determining their actions.

And with no Mood Control, they couldn’t be content.

Frankly, I was surprised that there hadn’t been riots, only strikes. It was irresponsible of the teachers. But like Ma had said, at least it wasn’t The Silence.

I ate my eggs and sat back, enjoying the jazz. They were very creamy. I remembered reading somewhere that a new type of eggs had passed clinical trials and had been introduced into the mainstream. They were good.

It was going to be a good day, I thought.

Ma came back down and bustled into the kitchen, putting some more bread in the toaster. A moment later and she was followed by Em. There was a slight flush high up on her cheeks from where she had been rushing. I wondered why it always took her so long to get ready. Her ginger hair was perfectly straight and shiny, and her lashes were long and dark. I supposed that was why.

“Do up your blouse,” Ma said. “Nobody wants to see that.” Em rolled her eyes. I hid a smile behind the tablet. “And hurry up and pack your bag or you will be late.”

“Ma, I’m not going to be late,” said Em, sitting next to me and slurping my juice.

“Do up your blouse.”

She did as she was told this time.

“What are you going to do today, Luca, with all your free time?” asked Em playfully with an undercurrent of jealousy. I could understand it. She was studying for her Highers and still had exams, whereas I was just waiting to hear from FSU. Still, I supposed that I deserved a break, not that I particularly wanted one. I missed my work.

I put the tablet down and reclaimed my orange juice. “I think I might go for a walk in a bit, sit in the piazza and read,” I said. “It would be nice to visit Uncle Phil again. I haven’t seen him for a couple of days. How is he doing?”

“Aunt May is over at Merdon Teaching Hospital right now,” replied Ma. “Your father gave her a lift in on his way to work. I think he’s going in earlier now to make sure that he isn’t late, what with the new driver.”

“Why hasn’t Uncle Phil been moved from the Teaching Hospital yet?” asked Em. I had been wondering the same thing. Uncle Phil had been in a car accident on the way to work a little over two weeks ago and had broken both of his legs. Ma came over and put the toast in front of Emma before sitting opposite us and clasping her hands neatly on the table.

“Merdon General is the better hospital, isn’t it?” Em asked.

“Merdon General is bigger, but the standard of care is the same. If your father thought Uncle Phil would be better in Merdon General than the teaching hospital, he would have had him transferred. Now eat your breakfast, Emma. You haven’t even packed your bag and I don’t want you to be late.” Em rolled her eyes and picked up her toast, going into the other room to pack her bag. Ma smiled at me. “Give Phil our love when you see him.” The phone rang in the middle of the table

and Ma clipped the magnetic earpiece to her ear, getting up and walking out of the kitchen. It was one of her friends, so I didn't try to listen.

I sat and enjoyed the jazz.

"Did you get all of the integration done?" I called out to Em. A maths assignment. She appeared around the archway and her eyes widened for a moment, assimilating from her Governor, then she shook her head.

"I couldn't do the last part."

"When is it due?"

"Tomorrow."

She dipped her head demurely and looked up at me, lashes fluttering. I felt the ghost of a smile play across my lips.

"I'll look at it tonight," I said. She grinned. "Now, you do need to finish packing your bag."

It is 7:14am.

"It's coming up to 7:15."

"Crap," she muttered, before darting back behind the archway again. I laughed and sipped my juice.

Chapter III

[...]

“Professor, I can’t thank you enough, really, that is-”

“Be quiet, Luca,” he snapped. “It hasn’t happened.” Then he softened, in the gruff sort of way that I had come to recognise as respect mixed with gravel. “At least not yet.” He turned away from the display panel. “Return to background,” he ordered, and the panel faded to black, the Governess dissolving in a shower of cold blue. “Your father was hoping you would get Dr Dawei as a supervisor, and I expect that she will put her name forward for you as well, but I would strongly advise you to choose me over her.” He chuckled. “But then, I’m biased.”

“I promise I will consider it, Professor Cohen.”

“Aharon, please,” he insisted.

I left FSU feeling pleased, and somewhat reluctant to reduce my ER. But I had given my word to my uncle and was determined to set a reduction target on my

account that evening. The prospect was not one that I felt even remotely optimistic about, with an inevitable increase in my anxiety over my application as I scaled back the ER's hormone therapy and blood filtration. At least I could counter the stress with more Mood Control.

Once back down in the foyer, I paused for a moment to admire the whale, again struck by the sense that this was where I belonged. I hardly noticed the three members of university staff that walked past me, automatically moving out of their way. *SSI# beginning 082, 082, 083.* Nor did I notice the small group of students who passed me by, giving me space to stand and stare. *SSI# beginning 07, 068, 069, 07.* *Second Year students, going into Third Year.*

I wasn't consciously aware of any of it, the Governor processing my surroundings on my behalf. Instead, I watched the whale. The dusty blue code was more complex than anything I had ever written, but I wasn't even really seeing that. My mind's eye was blind to everything except the newly christened Gray's algorithms, individual simulated trajectories diffusing across my vision. They were like heavy threads, all of them connected, and every line distinct from every other line.

ER increased by one percent to accommodate rise in cognition.

The change wasn't made consciously. Rather, my subconscious had interacted with the Governor automatically to improve my ability to recall information. I was vaguely aware of being impressed by the new Governor's integration with my mind, but even that was on the periphery. As a wave of glucose was released into my blood, my brain prepared itself to do work.

I could almost hear my own mind humming as I summoned vast strings of information from memory and held them ready for use. At some point after I had recalled the entirety of my algorithm to the forefront of my mind, I started walking,

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allowing the Governor to continue processing sensory information about my surroundings so that I didn't consciously have to. I had decided to buy myself a jacket, something to celebrate my success. Somewhere, I recognised that I was happy.

But that was not interesting. My code, however, was interesting. I placed markers in the mental picture of the algorithm where I know my programming had been sloppy.

Three men, mid-thirties, SSI# all less than mine. They split without faltering to let me through. Like me, they were unaware of their surroundings. They were caught in conversation with each other, their Governors recognising me and my Governor recognising them. We walked around each other without ever realising that our paths had crossed, engrossed in the fine details of our own private lives.

I left spaces for Playground programs that I would need to learn from Aharon to make checking the results easier. Like a childhood trail, I lay links to later pockets of code, jumping and skipping over components that didn't need to be repeated and writing new lines where necessary. I could now see just what the Governess had meant. The whole thing was long and would run on too many processors; it was embarrassingly parallel, just as she had said. If only I had paid more attention when first writing it.

One woman, older. Executive position. SSI# beginning 081. My body stepped to the side to let her pass. I didn't see her. I was hardly using my eyes at all, even less than was normal.

To be useful I needed to speed the whole thing up. Currently, the simulation was repeating great long swathes of calculations that were redundant. If I could find a way to cut them down, then I could free up server space for other processes and it

would run faster. Aharon wouldn't allow me to take up unnecessary space on his servers. That was just bad practice.

Students. Lower social standing. They let me pass; I recognised one of them as being from my department, the year below me. He smiled, and I acknowledged him, neither of which would I remember later. My brain was no longer receiving any of the information from my eyes, solely focussed on my algorithm. All my visual stimuli were now being processed by the Governor. God, it was a good update. Better than it ever had been before.

By Jehovah.

I split my mind in two: one half to focus on the programming and the other to reflect on the physical system I was trying to model. What did it tell me about the structures involved? Perhaps I could find some deep insight there. I had always worked like this, and Aharon had always told me not to. There was no reason why my system of interest would contain any information that would help me simulate it, I knew that. But somehow it had always felt right to me to approach problems in this dualist fashion. That being said, I knew not to hold on to my intuitions too tightly. While often correct, I would not be blind-sighted. And if the Governess said my approach was inefficient, then it was.

ER increased by a second increment.

My muscles relaxed as my body's automatic response to excitement receded. The adrenaline had been clouding my ability to think, but I could feel it clearing as the hormone was filtered from my blood.

Core body temperature regulated.

Yet the intuition remained, even with the increased clarity. Analytically, there were benefits to treating this as a Physics problem rather than a numerical problem. It meant that I wasn't tempted by convenient approximations. Though-

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Family of five. Lower social standing. They let me pass.

-focusing on simulating the physical quantities rather than seeking numerical approaches from which I could extract those quantities was where the redundancies came. If only I could find a way of maintaining my strong sense of physical intuition while still utilising all of the clever mathematics and programming tricks that people far cleverer than I had developed, then I would be happy. Perhaps if I went back to the very beginning and looked for a way of recasting the problem in the language of computers rather than Physics... Perhaps what? I wasn't sure what that would achieve, but it was worth a try.

Suddenly the sky moved.

I blinked, confused, struggling to make sense of what I saw.

The street was busy, I had reached the shopping centre, but my perspective was wrong.

I was on the ground.

Somewhere in the distance I registered a dull pain in my backside. I had grazed my hand, my right palm stinging hotly.

But there was no one there.

I must have tripped.

“Sorry.”

I blinked again and looked to my left, confused.

ER reduced by two percent, back to thirty-five percent, sixteen percent above the state average.

My concentration had been shattered.

The broken fragments of code fell backwards from the plane of my mind's eye, trajectories fading like delicate spider's silk torn in a breeze.

Looking to my left, I still couldn't see anyone, my Governor remaining silent as I searched for the cause of my untimely distraction. But I was alone. So, I must have tripped.

“Let me help you up.”

I blinked again. But there was still no one there.

I struggled to look with my eyes, feeling as though I was coming up from deep underwater. I forced myself to stop assimilating, and after a strained moment of conscious effort I managed it, breaking the water's surface to see the world once more.

“Here, take my hand.”

There was a young man, his face worried and his hand extended down to help me up.

...

I waited, but my Governor was silent.

I couldn't see him.

I could see him – he was holding his hand out to me – but to my Governor he was invisible.

I took his hand and he pulled me up, making me wince as he gripped the raw skin on my palm. I was frowning and had developed a headache. I realised I had no idea what to say.

“Sorry,” he said again. He looked like he had been running, his European skin slightly flushed and out of breath. I guessed he must have been about my age, maybe a year or two older. He had brown eyes, and wavy brown hair. Not that long, just wavy.

“I-” I stuttered. I blinked again. He went to brush me off, but I recoiled. He was taller than me. He sighed and took a step back.

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“Sorry,” he said again, shrugging. “It was an accident.”

And then he jogged away.

I watched him as he darted between passers-by, disappearing down the pedestrianised street. The shoppers, like I had been, were completely unaware of him. I could hardly believe it.

A Ghost.

I had walked into a Ghost.

Or rather, he had run into me.

Chapter IX

[...]

Most of what I found from my Governness search were things that I already knew: that the Government had made it a legal requirement for citizens of Municipa to have a Governor implant. The move had the overwhelming support of the population and experts had been universally pushing for a change to the constitution for years.

It had been a gradual process. There were Human Rights Councils, and public consultations, and committees and three years of planning and legislating. There were campaign groups on both sides, and both sides were listened to, but the evidence was clear. After the collapse of the old world and its many nations, it seemed logical that the Resettlement Program would have to do things differently.

But that was ancient history.

Trials were run, votes were cast, decisions made, and laws passed.

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That was in 2289.

Anyone who chose not to have the surgery was denied citizenship. At first, this meant very little and the minority who made that decision could carry on as a valued part of society. But as more and more services, treatments and data became automated, simulated and dispensed via the Governor and its uplink to the Governess, it became harder and harder for those who opted out of citizenship.

Five years later there was a second set of public consultations and the NCIC - or Non-Citizen Integration Committee - was created, simply to deal with the growing socio-economic gulf between citizens and non-citizens. For a little over a decade the situation was managed. But it was clear that things could not go on as they were for the long term. The widening gulf between was not sustainable.

And so, in 2296, opting out of citizenship became illegal

Those who did not comply within a two-month period were arrested and given a choice of permanent arrest, though not technical incarceration, or Governor surgery. If they opted for the latter, they immediately regained citizenship and were pardoned for their transgressions. Those that opted for permanent arrest were comfortably looked after and had a public representative who could speak on their behalf, but were not allowed to leave the detention facility.

It was unclear what would happen if they had children.

Somewhat surprisingly, everyone opted for citizenship, even those who had been most vocally opposed to the Governor.

“Dim display,” I said, and the panel darkened.

[...]

A couple of Governess searches later and I came across something interesting.

“Classified content,” I muttered, frowning at the display. All content was visible to all users, but sensitive information was only available to those with clearance. Then the display flickered and the words ‘Classified content’ were replaced by ‘archived footage’. I gestured using the command mat and accessed the link. A holding screen opened.

I felt my Governor shift as its uplink to the Governess opened and data started to stream. It was a wonderful feeling, being aware of my connectedness to my community.

But I wondered why I was suddenly streaming so much.

Attempting to access classified content.

Please hold while the Governess is consulted.

This was strange. It had said it was classified, and then it wasn’t, and now it was.

Social Standing Index number is currently SSI#0801057.

Social Standing Index number is inadequate. Please continue to hold for further verification.

Primary workplace privileges are inadequate. Please continue to hold for further verification.

Additional workplace privileges are inadequate. Please continue to hold for further verification.

Personal exemptions are inadequate. Please continue to hold for further verification.

This had never happened before.

Checking for external exemption request. No external exemption request found.

Please hold for further verification.

...

No further verification found.

I went to close the Terminal. Maybe it was some sort of error, but I obviously didn’t have the clearance.

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Consulting Governess servers.

Permissions granted.

I blinked, surprised.

I felt the uplink close, and the holding screen was replaced by a video file.

Loading

.

..

...

The file was called *thesilence_initialprovocation01_15102297.vidf*.

It started to play.

Half of the screen was taken up by steady drone footage from above, the other half by an unsteady hand-held camera on the ground. There was muffled noise, a crowd. I nudged the volume up with my Governor.

It looked like the steps outside The Union Building in the centre of Centrale, where Father, Dr Stone, Secretary Winter and Madame Lefebvre had been on the news only a few days ago.

On the steps were fifty, maybe even a hundred, people all standing in a line a few bodies deep. And around them, held back by state officers in deep blue, was a crowd. It took me a moment to work out what the difference was between those on the steps and those in the crowd.

Those on the steps were all wearing grey. They were all adults. They were all slightly dishevelled, with bags under their eyes.

“What’s going on?” asked a voice next to the hand-held camera. “What are they doing now?”

“Pan around and zoom in,” came another voice, this time from the drone. Probably the pilot, wherever they were. The two sets of footage were playing at the

same time, the conversation from within the crowd and the instructions to the drone pilot playing simultaneously.

“Yes, sir, panning around.” The aerial footage angle changed.

“I don’t know, Dad,” replied the cameraman on the ground. “It looks like another protest.”

“Why though? They were given a fair choice, I thought.”

“Hold that angle,” came the voice of the pilot. “Zoom in there. What is that?”

The image from the drone enlarged.

“Wait!” cried the son with the camera. “Look! Look at that!” He held the camera up over the heads of the onlookers.

There was a scream and the field of view shook as the crowd moved, people turning around, walking away, covering their children’s eyes.

“Get the Defence Secretary in here right now! And the Minister for Health! Quick!” The pilot didn’t sound so calm now.

I squinted, trying to work out what was happening. There was another scream, and then another, and another. And weeping. And a sound like choking.

“Good God,” said the voice of the father. His face appeared on the display, horrified and disbelieving.

“Dad, they’re-”

“I know, I can see it.”

Then the state officers pushed the crowd further back, not that they needed to. The crowd was rapidly dispersing.

“Please vacate the square,” shouted an officer. Then that half of the display, the shaking hand-held half, went black.

“Hold that angle, and zoom in again,” came a new voice over the drone’s communication feed.

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I gasped.

“Get emergency services over there right now. Alert the local hospitals, and get state officers ready.”

“Yes Minister.”

There was a moment of tense silence. I could see state officers in blue running up the steps towards the people wearing grey.

“I hope we can stop the bleeding.”

All fifty, sixty, seventy people - however many there were - had held up metal pliers to the crowd, glinting in the clear sunlight, and then before anyone realised what was about to happen, pulled out their tongues. The screams, the weeping, they had done that to themselves.

The video stopped.

There was a woman with frizzy brown hair that was turning grey, probably around fifty years old, with a kind face, holding the hand of an old man next to her. They might have been married. Perhaps that was their son just in front of them. She must have just glanced up at the drone as it stopped filming, her eyes streaming tears; pained, determined, accusing.

Subconsciously, I raised a shaking hand to my mouth.

There was blood, a violent shade of red, spilling from her lips and down her chin, staining her grey jacket and leaving it sticking to her skin. The same was true of her husband, and her son. And everyone else that had been standing on the steps of The Union Building.

Glowing, flaming, crimson.

Silenced.

Chapter XIII

[...]

I let the door shut behind me into my room, soft lights fading up automatically. The curtains across the panoramic window were still open, revealing the post-evening beauty of Parkland Meadow, of an entirely different character to that of the day time. It was dark, yes, but the orange and pink flowers in the trees were glowing, only faintly, and green and blue lights murmured in the distance, lost somewhere among the roots, at the feet of white towers and winking yellow sparkles that reached up into the sky, catching clouds.

I sniffed.

Was that... coffee? Could I smell coffee?

I pulled my eyes away from the windows, following the scent of coffee with an inquisitive sniff.

It was definitely coffee. Real coffee.

There on the low wooden table in front of my three-piece suite was a gilded cafetiere, all glass and silver, encasing a deep mahogany-brown fluid. There was steam drifting slowly from the spout, delicate tendrils thin and vanishing.

I walked over in something of a trance, enraptured by the glorious aroma of freshly ground real coffee beans, and sat down on the sofa with my knees touching. I inhaled.

“By Jehovah,” I murmured in pleasant surprise, then chuckled, then hiccupped. My Governor went to assimilate, but I suppressed it, wanting to be fully present in the experience of the cafetiere.

Slowly - carefully - I pushed down on the plunger, savouring the warmth of the metal against my hand and the gentle hiss as the filter came to rest at the bottom of the vessel. It was comforting, homely. And then I noticed the china cup with a single golden rim and a similarly minimalist saucer, and a small jug of whole milk beside a bowl of sparkling brown sugar crystals. With a small silver spoon, I transferred some of the sugar to the cup, and went to pour the coffee.

Were the lights too bright? Maybe a little. Everything seemed more brilliant than normal.

And what was that? A small plate of dark squares, dark as a polished chestnut but with a sheen like copper. Chocolate; real chocolate, with real cocoa.

I stopped, my hand paused in mid-air and quivering against the weight of the filled cafetiere, resplendent amber ready to be poured.

Quivering.

My mind quivered. And my pupils dilated.

I had said to Phinn that I would get chocolate for him the next time we had coffee together. And the cafetiere was big enough for two. That, and I hadn't

ordered anything. Though I suppose Father could have ordered it for me, but why would he do such a thing before bed? Real coffee was full of caffeine.

Phinn had been going to decide which one he preferred: coffee or chocolate?

We had argued last time, but I couldn't remember what about. Something, and he had left, just after I got the email from Aharon.

I felt a touch at my shoulder, but I didn't jump. Perhaps my reactions were dulled, or perhaps I sensed something change in the air.

Perhaps.

"Luca," said Phinn. And he stepped around the side of the sofa and sat down next to me, smiling.

"Phinn."

I smiled back.

The colours were definitely bright.

He took my hand in his, still suspended holding the cafetiere, and poured the coffee with me. His palms were rough but not calloused, and his nails were neat. When he was done pouring, we put the cafetiere down. His fingertips lingered for a moment as he pulled away, brushing over my skin. And then he added the milk.

Was there something in his eyes?

My heart was beating strangely, and there was a quiet burning somewhere in my brain that drowned out the noise of my Governor with warm silence. I could feel my breath as it passed over my lips, and every fibre of my shirt as it relaxed against my skin with each exhalation.

Phinn clasped the cup gently and sipped, the immersion in the moment spread across his face like a perfect cloud in the sky, eyes closed and tilted upwards. He put the cup back down on the saucer and his eyelashes fluttered open.

“Beautiful,” he said. “So rich. Even better than I remembered. And you put sugar in it this time too. I like it.” He nudged the saucer towards me and I took it, then he picked up a square of chocolate and held it up to the light between his thumb and forefinger. “But now the true test,” he said, eyes sparkling. And he bit the tiniest of corners.

I could feel the chocolate melting on my own tongue, just watching him; soft and warm, delicate yet commanding. He took a short breath.

“Luca, you must have some,” he whispered. “You must.” His eyes were wide, disbelieving, pupils dark and endless. He looked at me, little more than a glance in slow motion.

What was that in his eyes?

He broke off a piece of the square and leant forward towards me. He held it out, his gaze holding mine.

“Open,” he breathed. I did, and he placed it on my tongue, this time for real.

It was dark, but not bitter; perhaps cinnamon, perhaps ginger, the very taste of sweet nurtured earth.

“Close your eyes.”

I did.

Something changed in the air. There was a small sound of movement.

And then his lips brushed mine, delicate, hesitant.

The silence in my mind was deafening, throwing me forwards into those seconds which lasted forever. And then his fingers were on my face, caressing the line of my cheek, and winding through my hair. My eyes fluttered open in surprise before relaxing closed, leaving me alone with him in the privacy of our shared darkness. He made me breathe faster. The rhythm of my heartbeat rose and fell. The intimacy of the moment eternal.

In that kiss I forgot my name.

I knew only the shape of his face against my skin, the warmth of his hands on my neck, and the pressure of his mouth over mine.

And then he was gone, and I gasped. Slowly, my eyes opened, and there he was, real and in front of me. Not assimilating into my conscious experience, but there, right there. With me.

What was that in his eyes? How had I not seen it before? How had I been so blind?

And reflected in his eyes? Were they really my own, wide with the same emotion?

Love.

It was a wonderful emotion, maddening and full of secrets. It wasn't something I had ever experienced, ever thought to experience, ever realised I was missing. But now I knew what it was to love, and be loved. To share a moment, and share a feeling.

ER reduced by two percent. Higher function suspended.

It left me in pieces, whole, and wanting more, but not wanting to move on and leave this place. This place with Phinn, who I hardly knew but knew so well, who was from another world, but more alive in this world, more than anyone else I had ever met. And had I felt like this all along? Hidden, somewhere, but still feeling this way?

I didn't know.

I thought perhaps.

He sat there, looking at me, his expression lost somewhere between tenderness and concern. His face was so open I felt like I could fall into it.

He licked his lips.

“You’ve been drinking.”

I nodded. “Wine,” I said. “With Father and Aharon and some other people.”

“Are you drunk?”

“Tipsy.”

“I thought you didn’t get tipsy?” I must have looked confused, because he explained. “I thought the Governor stopped you from getting drunk, or something like that?”

“It does,” I replied. “My function is pretty low though.”

He reached out and took my hand in his. “You’ve been reducing the ER?” He smiled, and I nodded. I smiled back at him. I couldn’t help myself.

“I wanted to feel,” I said. I hadn’t even thought this to myself, but I realised suddenly that it was true. “And I kept on thinking about things you had said. I kept on thinking about you.” A flush of delight crept up into his face and lingered for a moment, sparkling in his eyes. He tilted his head to one side.

“You were thinking about me?”

“Yes.” It was true. “Often.”

“What were you thinking?” He was whispering now, and he pulled gently on my hand.

“That I missed you,” I said, and he pulled a little harder. “That you seem so alive.” He pulled again, and I shifted towards him on the sofa. “That you saw things differently, that I wanted to see them with you.” He pulled, I leant forwards. “That you cared so much.” I was whispering now too. No, I was breathing rather than whispering, each breath an honest admission. “That I wanted to see you.” He moved his hand up my arm. “To talk to you.” He stroked my neck. “To touch you.” I leant a little further forward and realised that I could see my own reflection in his eyes again. My pupils were wide, but the Governor was silent. I took in a small

breath, and realised that I could smell him, and the thought sent shivers up my spine, and then across every pore of my skin. And his face was so smooth, and so close; I could hear each shallow breath as his lungs took in oxygen. “That, every time I was with you, you made me see things differently.”

His eyes flickered between my own, wide and glassy. “Then be with me,” he said.

I raised my hand to Phinn’s cheek, and I kissed him.

Chapter XXII

[...]

Phinn was in the adjacent room, separate from his bedroom, lounging on a sofa with his feet propped up on a soft reclining chair. But I was drawn towards an ancient looking armchair next to a set of shelves with an uplighter in the corner.

“It’s called a wing-back chair,” said Phinn, watching me tend towards it from across the room. He was reading his tablet. For some reason I still couldn’t get used to seeing him with a tablet. But then, what had I expected? What else was he going to read?

“A wing-back chair? Why?”

“The wings up the side, they were put there to protect the user from getting caught in a draft.” He got up and joined me, winding his arms around my waist from behind and looking fondly at the chair. “It’s around four hundred years old,

probably a little bit older,” he said. “It’s fully upholstered, and that deep blue fabric is original as far as I know, and the legs are real wood. The cushion took me two years to track down.” He seemed proud of the cushion.

“To track down?”

“I collect things,” he replied. “I save them, give them life and purpose again. Things from long ago.”

Somehow I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the chair was just a chair. It never would be, and had never been, alive.

“I mean, just look at the fabric,” he continued, moving around to guide my hand, stroking the cloth. “It’s soft, isn’t it?” I nodded. “I like to wonder why it is soft. I like to think about all the different people who have sat on it, leant on it, walked past and left flurries of dust to settle on it. I wonder how many families it has known, how many old ladies it has comforted, how many men have rested their heads back against it. It’s been a part of their lives, Luca.”

“Or this,” he said, pulling a stuffed bear from the shelving next to the wing-back chair. “I wonder how many boys and girls have buried their faces in his fur to help them sleep.” He hid his face in the bear and peered up at me with sparkling eyes, the eyes of a child. He removed the bear from his face and looked down at it with fondness. “I found him six years ago when I was out hunting at a reclamer’s shop for old things. Cost me a small fortune. And do you know why?” I shook my head in bewilderment. It was nothing more than a dishevelled play thing.

“It was owned by the last Prince of England before the dissolution of the Monarchy, would you believe it? And after him it was owned by the daughter of a pilot, presented to the pilot by the prince, who gave it to her nephew. He went into the civil service and left it in his will to his granddaughter whose husband was a doctor that worked for the Resettlement Program. They couldn’t have children of

their own, so they adopted twins and one of them died when the diseases came, but the other one looked after it and brought it with him, brought it with him to Municipa. It got lost after that until the reclaimers found it with this-” He held up multiple sheets of paper, faded and fragile. “-which says everything I just told you. Seven different handwritings, seven different inks, and who knows how many different lives. All of them here, in this stuffed bear.”

Carefully, he placed the sheets and the bear back on the shelf. I had never seen paper up close before and tried to study the mottled leaves covered in hesitant scrawls, but Phinn carried on.

“Or this, one of the first ever mobile phones, or this, the last ever iPhone. You know about those?” he asked. I nodded. I had seen them in The Repository, back in Merdon. “Think of all the conversations they have heard. I have tapes and videos and CDs and DVDs and memory drives and loops and some of the first material cues to be used in augmentation. I have maps and paintings, look at how small this is, and someone painted it, Luca! Someone painted it!” He was pointing to a tiny portrait of a family, all worn and discoloured. “I wonder who they were, where they lived, what the painting was for. I wonder what it meant to them.”

He came back around to stand behind me, and put his arms around my waist again, resting his head on my shoulder and regarding his collection proudly.

“All that life, Luca, here on a shelf. Not forgotten, not lost.” He frowned. “Well, maybe lost. But still remembered. Surely that means something?” Then he nudged me forward and pushed me down onto the wing-back chair. “And now you join the long list of people who have sat there, Luca Gray. Different times, different places, different people. But all joined together by this old blue wing-back chair.” There was something sad in his voice, something despondent, but I didn’t dwell on it. I didn’t need to. Because all of a sudden, I understood.

The wing-back chair had creaked when I sat down on it, the cushion sighing almost with pleasure as my weight came to rest. It moved beneath me to get comfortable, ancient wood and cloth shifting and groaning awake after centuries of slumber. I could feel the threadbare age of it against my hands and watched as a single white thread drifted in the air at my disturbance, shivering with delight at being useful again.

There was a smell like old leaves, of damp and quiet waiting, of passing seasons and a forever of sunsets, of old food spices and herbs and a whisper of bread and the tiniest spillage of wine, and of heavy smoke from a venerable pipe.

The winged chair was a fossil, layers of sediment deposited by each owner, and each passing age.

And I understood.

Because I felt it too: that despondent ache in my chest at the thought of all the people who had sat there before me and had now passed away beyond memory. Their concerns, their fears and joys and delights. Their highest moments as they soared through the wonders of human life, and the crushing lows spent crying in defeat here, against the wings of this chair, protected from the draft.

This old blue wing-back chair.

I jumped up like I had been burned.

Phinn took a step back, startled. "What's the matter?" he asked.

I stood there for a moment, panting, the scent of tobacco little more than a fading memory. Perhaps that was all it had ever really been.

"Nothing," I said eventually. "Nothing is the matter."

Before Phinn could pry any further, someone knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Maria," replied Maria.

MATTHEW LANE

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

“It can’t wait a minute.”

Phinn sighed. “Really? It can’t wait a minute?”

“No.”

Phinn winked at me. “I’m naked.”

There was a pause. And then: “I don’t care. I’m coming in.” And the door creaked.

“I really am very naked!”

There was a second pause.

And then she came in.

She looked Phinn up and down, and then glared at him. I didn’t even get a second glance.

“Liar,” she said.

“Stubborn,” replied Phinn with a smirk.

Maria shrugged. “I wouldn’t have cared anyway,” she said. “I’ve seen it all before.”

I may have shuffled uncomfortably then, because she looked at me. “Oh yes, little robot, I’ve seen it all. Your Phinn and I, we have no secrets.”

“Alright, Maria,” said Phinn chuckling. “What was so important it couldn’t wait?”

She looked at him, confused, before grinning wickedly. “Oh, nothing,” she said. “Just that the others are up and waiting to see you and your city boy.”

Phinn rolled his eyes. “Honestly, Maria, you are hopeless.”

“Whatever you say.” She turned and went to leave, lingering on her way out. “No, wait, there was something. It’s Sunday. Thought you might want to know.”

Phinn’s face fell. “What time is it?”

The time is 9:41am.

“It’s twenty to ten,” I said, before Maria could answer. She glared at me.

“So we didn’t miss it,” sighed Phinn, clearly relieved. “That’s good.”

“Miss what?” I asked.

“An address from our glorious leader,” said Maria with a mock bow. “The others are waiting.” And then she actually did leave.

“What is it really?”

Phinn laughed. “It really is what Maria said. Our President, Ipsus Mardin, gives a weekly address on a Sunday. Maria and I missed last week’s, but with everything that’s been going on I had completely forgotten about today’s. We’ll watch from the balcony with the others. If you want to?”

I nodded. It seemed like a good thing to do. “The others?”

“Other Ghosts of the Township, Republicans who do what I do,” Phinn explained. “Come on, you can meet them for yourself.”

[...]

Suddenly, the rolling shock of a gong rang out and reverberated across the balcony. As the echoes bounced between the stalactites, and off the far-opposing wall, I was quickly reminded of the sheer size of the cavernous space that was the Bastion.

The time is 10:00am.

“Time for the address,” said Phinn once he could be heard again. And we all made our way to the edge of the balcony to peer down into the market below us.

In its very centre, between two low burning massive bonfires that I hadn’t noticed before, was a stage. Whether it had always been there, or had been erected

especially for the address, I didn't know, though by the sheer size of the gong I assumed it must have been a permanent feature of the market. It was at least three people tall in height.

There were around fifty chairs set up on the stage and over half of the seat were already taken, with six chairs noticeably vacant at the centre. I could just about discern that there were armed guards on the platform, and in front of it, and on every side, and spread throughout the crowd that had amassed.

There must have been thousands of people gathered down there, and more watching from the balconies up the sides just like we were.

All of them Republicans.

"The President's Address will begin shortly," came a booming announcement, which was immediately followed by what I assumed was the same announcement in three different languages. I was amazed. I could hardly believe that they still used dialects other than English. I certainly didn't recognise any of them. There was a scattering of cheers and hollering from the crowd gathered below, but then an expectant hush fell.

I ate some of the bread that Phinn had brought over and tried the chic. It wasn't the same as coffee, but it was still rich and dark and somewhat bitter, a fair substitute.

The time is 10:03am.

"I'm sorry about Maria," said Phinn thoughtfully. "I don't know why she's being like this." She was standing as far away from me as possible. "But it looked like you were getting on okay with the others?" He sounded nervous. And I realised that he probably was. He wanted me to like these people, and for them to like me.

"They seem great," I said, smiling. And I meant it, too.

“I know they’re not the same as people in Merdon, or Centrale, not like people that you’re used to. But they are clever in their own ways. Not as clever as you of course, but-”

“Phinn, it’s fine,” I said. “I like them.”

He grinned and leant forwards to place a kiss on my cheek. But before he could, I found myself jerking forwards over the side of the balcony and staring down at the ground below, some two hundred metres away.

“Saved your life!” came a cry as the hands that had pushed me forward pulled me back. I turned, with my heart beating in my mouth, to find Jacob, or Moggs as they called him, standing there laughing hysterically. For a moment I hardly knew what to say. He must have experienced some sort of manic episode and tried to save me from falling as part of his delusion.

Then Phinn pushed him - hard - and he tripped over, still laughing.

“Damn you, Moggs!” exclaimed Phinn. Moggs just bounded back onto his feet and adopted the stance of a boxer, bouncing on his heels. Phinn laughed and did the same, and they started to fight.

I was astounded. And entirely confused.

“We are sorry for the delay,” came a second booming announcement. “The President’s Address will commence as soon as possible. Thank you for your patience,” which was followed by the equivalent translations.

The time is 10:07am.

Grant came and stood next to me, watching Phinn and Moggs fight. “Don’t bother,” he said, giving me a knowing look, made somewhat more intense by the eyeliner.

“Bother with what?”

“Moggs,” he said, gesturing at the two of them. “Don’t bother trying to understand him. If we can’t, and we’ve known him for years, then you really don’t stand a chance. Just be ready for anything.” I conceded, chuckled, and stopped trying to work out what had just happened.

“Is the President’s Address always at ten on a Sunday?” I asked. Grant nodded, his curls bouncing. “Every week?”

“Yes. But it hasn’t been delayed before. At least not as far as I can remember.”

I watched Phinn and Moggs weave and dart around each other, ducking and diving with joyful abandon. This was clearly a regular occurrence because no one else seemed taken aback. Quite to the contrary, the others were laughing and clapping. I found myself noticing things that I didn’t ordinarily notice. Not just that Phinn was attractive, but that I found him attractive. The shape of his face, the smoothness of his skin, the faint flush of blood just beneath the surface, the shine of his eyes, his lips and smile, white teeth, glossy waves of hair, the tensing of his muscles, the intentionality of his movements, his concentration.

I steadied myself. Perhaps my heart was still beating from Moggs’ joke. Perhaps it was something else.

I didn’t know.

The time is 10:12am.

We carried on waiting for the address.

The time is 10:18am.

The time is 10:30am.

The time is 10:45am.

People were beginning to grow restless. Then there was motion on the stage as six people came up the stairs and sat down in the previously vacant seats. No one else seemed to notice; their short attention spans had wandered.

“The President of the Council of Ministers, Muhtar Ipsus Mardin!” came the announcement. The translations were lost beneath layers of applause and cheering.

“About time,” said Phinn, back at my side having forced Moggs to yield.

A single man, clothed in maroon and beige but otherwise identical to all of the others at this distance, stepped up to a white podium. Mirrors grated above me and three sunbeams fell into place around him as he stood still. I leant forward and squinted in an attempt to resolve his face, but he was too far away. He raised his hands and the applause intensified. Then after a moment, he lowered them.

“Good morning!” he boomed. “Gunaydin, good morning!” He raised a hand again as if to quieten the masses. “Thank you.” And the hush returned, this time as close to silence as was possible in such an echo chamber as this. “I am sorry for the delay in starting. I assure you it was not down to simple tardiness. But on to business.

“I hope you have had a positive week, and if you didn’t then I hope that things soon improve. I hope you are well, and if you aren’t then I wish you better health in the days to come. There are a couple of celebrations that I want to notify you of. First: there have been eighteen births in the Bastion this week!” There was a round of applause. President Mardin then proceeded to name all eighteen of the newborns. I could see no sign of a prompter, or notes, so he must have learnt the names by heart. “I would like to thank all of the nurses and healthcare staff involved in the births and wish the babies and their families all the best in the coming months.”

“The place of your birth is less important than how you live,” said everyone in a single collective voice, startling me.

“And may you live very well indeed!” cried President Mardin. “Second: I want to celebrate the lives of twelve fellow Republicans who passed away within these walls this week.” He proceeded to name all twelve of them, again from memory, and each name received a tremendous cheer from everyone who was gathered. It was a small wonder that the stalactites didn’t shatter at the noise. “To the family and friends of those who have passed, we pledge ourselves as your family and your friends in this difficult time. But it is important that we remember those who have died, that they may live alongside us, with us, and through us, rather than be lost too early to the endless march of time.”

“For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” responded everyone in unison.

“But dust is earth, and earth gives rise to new things,” continued President Mardin, “and we must not forget this good truth. For it is a very good truth indeed.

“Now then, since we were so late in starting, I am going to go through this quickly so that no one is kept later than was intended. First then, there are some things that I want to clarify. There have been reports that universal income is going to be increasing this week. I want to put this to rest now so that no one gets disappointed later: this is not true.” There was an audible sigh, and not a happy one, from those gathered. “The reasons are complicated, so I am not going to explain them here, but Minister Abigbe and the Welfare Senate will be holding an open forum at some point early next week where you can raise any concerns that haven’t already been addressed in the meantime.

“I also want to confirm reports that Republicans in Stanton and Wellham have requested further aid, as well as those in Grebes and Holloway. Again, further details will be passed down through the Senate.

“There have been complaints that a handful of personal processors have been taken offline for many hours at a time this week. This was intentional. Municipal authorities have been running increasingly effective sweeps, knocking us out of their network. It is likely that the SSMD are responsible for the heightened effectiveness of these sweeps, but I can assure you that the Ghost Council is making this a priority, and the Township Assembly has already made some progress.” Kris and Devyn high fived and Moggs whooped, making everyone laugh. “While I would like to promise you that we won’t be taking any more servers offline, I, and the rest of the Council of Ministers, think it is more likely that this will become a persistent problem as The Silence solidifies its hold in Holloway and Grebes, and increases its activity in the Township. If anything, the SSMD is only going to intensify the sweeps. Which brings me on to why I was so delayed in greeting you this morning.” Ipsus Mardin leant forward onto the white pedestal.

“I received a report late last night that Municipal authorities in the state of Jester conducted a raid on the homes of more than thirty suspected Republican sympathisers, none of whom were in fact Republicans. While the details remain unclear, and the SSMD has made sure that there is no leakage onto public servers, I can tell you that eighteen people, eighteen supposed citizens, were killed by the government.” There was a gasp from the audience that quickly grew into angry muttering. I didn’t gasp, but every muscle in my body grew tense as what he said settled into my bones. I felt Phinn half turn to look at me. It couldn’t be true.

“As of half an hour ago, we successfully hacked into central communications in The Union Building,” continued President Mardin. “We believe that this attack was conducted as part of the government’s pre-emptive directive, which has so brutally torn communities in Wellham, Holloway and Grebes apart.” He raised his voice over the growing sound of discontent. “This is the first time such an attack has

occurred as far north as Jester. We do not know what triggered it, or what the Municipal government hoped to achieve by it. But let me just say this.” And something in the way he spoke drove everyone back into silence.

“Such wanton acts of aggression, both unprovoked and illegitimate, will not go unchallenged by The Silence.” There was a wave of nodding heads that swept the surface of the crowd below. “We will respond. We will show solidarity, not only with those fellow Republicans living in the southern states of Municipa, but with those who are let down and even repressed by a system that is supposed to protect them. Republican or citizen, The Silence will stand in the way of this government and its unceasing ideological warfare!”

Many thousands of people raised their voices in cries of agreement. It was a terrifying sound.

“Over the course of the day, and into tomorrow, the Council of Ministers and I will be meeting with the Ghost Council, our Security Forces, and the Abacus Project to determine exactly what action we should take. But I promise you that we will take action! You have my word. Until next week, my friends. Goodbye, hoscakall!” And he stepped back from the podium. Immediately, the mirrors grated above me and the pillars of sunlight diffused.

Phinn turned to look at me, many questions in his eyes, and perhaps fear.

“That was the President’s Address,” he said, having to talk over the noise as everyone dispersed back about their business, discussing what had been said.

“Maybe we could get some space? We should probably talk.”

I nodded and tried to relax.

It couldn’t be true. I didn’t believe it.

Which meant it was a lie.