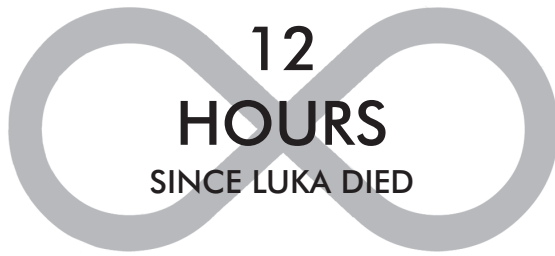


BEN OLIVER



2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS



12
HOURS
SINCE LUKA DIED

I do this thing sometimes where I sing the same song lyric over and over again in my head. I do it mostly when I don't want to focus on anything, or if I don't want to think too much.

I've been doing it a lot tonight. Ever since they killed that boy on the stage.

His name was Luka Kane, and he was a bad person. He was a *bad* person.

The song I keep singing is one of the last to chart before the world ended. It was a cover of a cover of a cover. A song that was first written hundreds of years ago, literally. The part that I keep singing goes like this:

*Any old port in a storm, lads,
Whatever that port may be,
And thanks be given our Father in Heaven
Who watches over you and me . . .*

Yeah, see, literally, those few lines, over and over again. Not like it's stuck in my head, more like I'm making myself repeat it over and over. It's weird how I do that. I'm

pretty weird, I think.

All songs were covers before the world ended. All the music artists got sued so often, lawyers saying that they used a chord progression that some band from fifty years ago used, as if a person can own a chord progression. But anyway, literally all the music artists were too scared to write new songs, so all we ever got was covers. Gods, I go off on tangents all the time.

Yeah, the boy on the stage. I'd never seen anyone killed before. I hadn't been there at the Battle of Midway Park, I was in the Data Room, you know, trying to bond guanine and adenine bases, or whatever. And I chose not to go to the executions of traitors, generally – but this one was compulsory. We sat there straight-backed in our uniforms in perfectly straight lines and I thought *Gods, it's so weird, they made me a soldier without even asking me.* It was like *Hey, Chester, your dad was rich, so you get to survive the end of the world, but literally you're a soldier now. Here's your gun, son.* But it was Happy's decision, and you don't question Happy.

It's the truth by the way, that I got to survive the end of the world because my dad was rich, I think.

Gods, I'm frantic right now. My brain is going at a million miles an hour and the only way I can slow it down is . . .

*Any old port in a storm, lads,
Whatever that port may be,
And thanks be given our Father in Heaven
Who watches over you and me . . .*

But it's not working as well as it did before.

That boy, Luka, he said a lot of things before he died. It was weird. And he didn't look the way I thought he'd look. I always thought that he would be this big, tall muscly guy with evil eyes and gang tattoos on his face or something, but he wasn't: he was just this boy, younger than me, literally.

They had talked about it, all the other Alts (Alts is what they call people like me, people who got cosmetic upgrades and mechanical hearts and stuff. People that could afford all that.) They had been whispering about how Galen Rye had captured the leader of the rebellion.

There were a lot of stories about Luka Kane, how he had burnt down a hospital with mothers and babies inside. How he tortured Alts for information and then, when they told him everything, he'd bury them alive. He was a bad guy.

*Any old port in a storm, lads,
Whatever that port may be,
And thanks be given our Father in Heaven
Who watches over you and me . . .
Who watches over you and me.
Who watches over you and me?*

No, no. Don't try to distract yourself. Actually think about what he said. How had it gone?

There had been a weird kind of electricity in the air. No, not electricity, it was . . . I don't know, almost a smell.

We were sitting together, all the soldiers, in the Arc, a custom-built structure that is designed to protect us from the end of the world. It's this crazy tall building that's like

a steep-sided dome, all built out of self-repairing black concrete and graphene.

‘Chilly. Hey, Chilly,’ a voice had come from my left. Chilly is not my name, my name is Chester Beckett, but when I was little, I always had cold hands, so my mum called me Chilly Paws, and it kind of stuck. I leant forward in my chair. We had been in the big hall; an auditorium of sorts. Why a 66-hundred storey end-of-the-world shelter needs an auditorium, I do not know. Anyway, the voice belonged to Tansy, and she was smiling like a mad person.

‘What?’ I’d asked.

‘Twenty Coin says it’s Luka Kane.’

Tansy was one of the first people I met in the Arc, and for that reason – and probably only that reason – we sort of became friends. We both have blue hair, so I guess we have that in common.

I didn’t reply to Tansy. I mean, we knew it was Luka Kane, all of us has stood outside the Arc when he was escorted in. It was the Overseer’s way of intimidating the rebel. And anyway, what would I do with twenty Coin at the end of the world? Not like there’s anything to spend it on.

I sat back in my seat and Galen Rye came on to the stage. We all cheered and hollered until he held up his hands. Then we were silent.

He had reminded us that Luka Kane had been captured, but he’d surprised us all when he’d said that Luka was not a prisoner. He was here to join our cause, to defect to the side of truth and virtue. He said something like that anyway.

Galen Rye is, like, a hero to me. Square-jawed and steely-eyed, and yet still kind and approachable. He stepped up and made the hardest decisions imaginable in order to save the human race. He's smart and considerate, but most of all he's brave. The thing is, I'm nothing like Galen Rye. I try to blend into the background, I try to stay away from danger, but for some reason, I can't help but think that Galen is a great man.

Anyway, then the doors opened, and that weird guy, Tyco Roth, marched Luka up on to the stage. Tyco is a Flare. That's what we call the Alts with the bright eyes. It's the latest upgrade, but I swear to the Final Gods that it makes the people who get it super stuck-up and . . . I don't know, weird! And more and more Alts are getting upgraded every day. It was the Flares that did the majority of the work building the remaining sixty-two floors of the Arc, and – get this – they built it all in just under four weeks, literally. The Flares live high up in the Arc, way above us normal Alts. I was sort of friends with some of the people who have had the upgrade, and I barely see them anymore, unless they're bossing me around, of course.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Galen said, all grand and showy. 'Today is a very special day. I'm sure all of you recognize the young man who stands before us. This is the great Luka Kane.'

At that, we were all booing and laughing and telling the rebel boy exactly what we thought of him. I hated him in that moment. I think I was sort of swept away by all the

rage that was in the auditorium, but I truly hated him. He was a ruthless killer, a torturer, and he wanted humanity to fail.

But then Galen got angry at *us*. He said something like *how dare you laugh?* And then he went on about how great Luka Kane was, and how much he had achieved. And I really thought then about how smart Galen Rye was. He could see through some of the rumours and the lies. Luka Kane wasn't a mythical guerrilla soldier; he was just a boy who *thought* he was doing the right thing. He had been confused about who were the good guys and the bad guys and now he was going to join our team.

Galen was yelling on the podium: 'This day is an historic one! This day will go down in Earth's new history! This day will be remembered for ever as the day the fighting came to an end!'

And then it was time for Luka to speak.

He stepped up to the microphone. Behind him there was a ten-metre live hologram of him, and I could see how nervous he was. We were expecting humility, apologies, declarations of fealty, but we didn't get any of that. He said this:

'I came here today after meeting with Galen Rye. He took the time to explain to me exactly what it is you are striving for. What you want is a new beginning, a future, a reset for humanity, a chance to start again and get it right. That is an opportunity that is hard to turn your back on, especially when your only other option is death. And yet some chose death. There were Alts, just like you, who

listened to the World Government's plan, their plan to eliminate most of humanity, to eliminate the poor, the infirm, the disadvantaged. And you sat here and watched them die for their empathy. One by one they were brought before you on this stage and they were erased, and you cheered. But you're the good guys, right? You're doing the right thing? You're the ones protected by the future authors of history. No one will remember your wrongdoings, so what does it matter?'

And I think we all started to realize that Luka Kane was not here to surrender and join our cause. I think we all, at the same time, literally, realized that he was standing up on that stage and telling us that we were wrong, and that we were bad, and that we just couldn't see it.

I felt the fury and the wrath of the crowd swelling up again, and I almost got carried away with it, but there was this part of me that thought, *Man, that boy is sort of heroic. He knows he's going to be killed for this, but he's doing it anyway.*

Next, he got this little companion drone to fly up into the electronics and take over the hologram projector. And then he showed us this footage of Galen Rye and this young Flare sitting behind a big wooden desk, and they were talking about Happy. About how Happy sees humanity as a virus.

But Happy is an artificial intelligence that has helped to save humanity from the brink of decimation on multiple occasions. It was created by Happy Incorporated after the Third World War. We needed it then, all the history texts

say so. Happy's logic formed the World Government, Happy's genius cured cancer and heart disease, Happy's counselling helped to form a healthcare system that worked for everyone, a justice system that cut crime rates in half. Happy is never wrong.

I think that's why no one believed what we were seeing.

The Flare's torchlight eyes fixed on the camera as he spoke. 'Humans beat dogs to teach them not to bite. Now it's time something greater than yourselves trained you how to behave.'

The scene cut again, and Galen was speaking. 'The stupidity of the masses, Luka, is not to be underestimated. I preyed on their fears, on their prejudices, on their idiocy. I told them I'd stop migrants taking a chunk out of their subsidy percentage, and they called me a hero. I told them I'd bring back conscription, and they called me a saviour. I promised to loosen USW weapons laws, and they chanted my name! Do you think I care about migration? About homelessness? About any of the arbitrary things I'd spout day after day? No! But I knew what the braindead hive mind of the people wanted to hear. I manipulated them until they were loyal, dedicated, steadfast. Phase One of Happy's plan involved poisoning ninety-eight per cent of the population of Earth – a thing like that cannot be achieved without people like me at the reins.'

Next, Luka's voice could be heard as the scene cut back to the Flare.

'I know all about your plan,' he yelled.

And the Flare looked at him with no emotion at all in his bright eyes and said: ‘Then you should be thanking us. We are repairing your broken species, destroying a diseased batch and starting anew.’

That’s when the projection cut out and the whole auditorium fell silent.

Guards grabbed Luka and held him in place. The rebel boy didn’t even fight, he just stood there.

And Galen Rye, he stepped back up to the podium and he had this big smile on his face, literally like the whole thing was this big joke, and he said: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, it appears today we will not be joined by the leader of the revolution. Instead, I ask you, the survivors of Earth, what should become of him?’

At that point I didn’t know what to expect. I mean, the boy had just shown us that Galen Rye thought we were fools. And he’d shown us that maybe even Happy was not as benevolent as we’d thought, maybe even Happy was evil!

But then somebody shouted, ‘Kill the rebel!’ from near the back of the room. And then Tansy shouted, ‘Kill the liar!’ and then everyone was shouting.

I felt, literally, like my head was going to explode, but then I was shouting too. I don’t remember exactly what I was saying, but I do remember feeling like this boy was trying to take apart everything I believed in, and I didn’t want his words to be true, so it was just easier to call him a liar. But the thing of it is, I saw the look in Galen Rye’s face when Luka started showing that footage; he was scared.

Next, they got Luka to say his final words, that's when I knew they were going to execute him.

The boy stood there, and he looked right into one of the drone cameras and he said: 'Never give up. History is not the words written on a page, history lives in hearts and minds and in the rocks and the oceans. It can't be erased by evil. You are fighting for what is right. They are clinging to power with frayed minds and fingertips. Remember, we don't do running away.'

And I knew he wasn't speaking to us Alts anymore, he was speaking to the other rebels, the ones who were still out there fighting.

Most of the Alts in the audience were jeering and booing, but the hairs on my arms were standing up and there was gooseflesh all over my body.

They killed him then.

It was strange, watching someone die.

They used a heart trigger.

Luka Kane was once an inmate in the Loop – a prison where they kept young offenders before they transferred them to the Block. In the Loop, an explosive device is sewn into prisoners' heart to stop them escaping.

Galen aimed the heart trigger at Luka, and then killed him.

There was no sound. He just went limp, and his body went pale. He looked heavy.

And then everyone was cheering and celebrating and hugging each other like something great had just happened.

Nobody talked about what Luka had said. Nobody questioned whether or not it was real. We all just carried on as though we hadn't seen it.

*Any old port in a storm, lads,
Whatever that port may be,
And thanks be given our Father in Heaven
Who watches over you and me?*