



FED

MIRA GRANT

THIS IS ANOTHER WAY THE END OF *FEED* COULD
HAVE GONE: IT PICKS UP WITH THE EVENTS OF
WHAT WOULD ORIGINALLY HAVE BEEN CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE. IT IS NOT WHAT HAPPENED.

BUT IT COULD HAVE.

WE CAME VERY CLOSE.

RISE UP WHILE YOU CAN.

No one gets to ask us for anything more. Not now, not ever. When history looks our way—stupid, blind history, that judges everything and never gives a shit what we paid to get it—it better remember that no one had a right to ask us for this. No one.

**—From Hail to the King, the blog of Shaun Mason,
June 19th, 2040.**

I wanted to tell the truth. I wanted to be the grand crusader who walked into the darkness and hauled the answers, kicking and screaming, into the light. I wanted to be a savior.

All I succeeded in becoming was a fool.

I have paid enough; I have paid too much; I'm done
And I'm sorry.

**—From Images May Disturb You, the blog of
Georgia Mason, June 19th, 2040.**

One: Shaun

George walked out of the hall with her shoulders stiff and her face so composed that I knew inside she had to be screaming. The skin around her sunglasses was tight, a sure sign that she was transferring all the tension to her eyes, where no one would be able to see it.

Rick spoke first: "Georgia, what just happened?"

If she lashed out, I wanted to be the one who drew her fire. I stepped minutely forward, adding my own patently idiotic, "George? You okay?"

She grabbed a flute of champagne from a passing server and drained it in one convulsive gulp before she snapped, "We have to go. Now."

I frowned. "How pissed is he?"

A small, utterly humorless smile creased her lips. "He's pulling our press passes in fifteen minutes."

I whistled. "Nice. Even for you, that's impressive. What'd you do, suggest that his wife was having an affair with the librarian?"

"It was the tutor, that was the Mayor of Oakland's wife, and I was right," she said, with typical haughtiness. She started toward the exit. I followed, motioning for Rick to do the same. "I didn't say anything about Emily."

"Excuse me, but does one of you mind telling me what's going on?" interjected Rick, putting on a burst of speed to get in front of her. "Georgia just got us kicked out of a major political event,

Senator Ryman's clearly pissed, and Tate's glaring. I'm missing something. I don't like that."

That got through. George flinched a little as she asked, "Tate's glaring at us?"

"If looks could kill..."

"We'd be joining Rebecca Ryman," said George said grimly. "I'll fill you in once we're in the car."

Rick hesitated, licking his lower lip. "Georgia?"

"I'm serious," she said, and sped up.

She was clearly freaking out, and the heels she was wearing weren't helping her move as fast as she wanted to. I linked an arm through hers and matched her pace, letting my stride help to lengthen hers. Rick followed, holding his questions for the moment. Maybe he was smarter than he looked.

It only took one blood test to get out. Since everyone on the banquet level was assumed clean after the checks they'd endured to get there, the elevator came at the press of a button, no needles involved until we wanted to exit. Like a roach motel—the infected could check in, but they couldn't check out. My earlier curiosity about what would happen if more than one person took the elevator at the same time was answered as the interior sensors refused to let the doors open until the system detected three different, non-infected blood samples. Someone who unwittingly boarded the elevator with a person undergoing viral amplification would just die in there. Nice.

George had commandeered one of the campaign vehicles, and one of the campaign drivers, to

boot: Steve was leaning against a big black car with his arms folded across his chest. He straightened when he saw us coming, but didn't speak until we reached the car. Then he asked, "Well?"

"Threatened to yank our press passes," said George.

"Nice," said Steve, raising his eyebrows. "He pressing charges?"

"No, that'll probably come after tonight's episode of 'meet the press.'" She climbed into the back seat.

I circled around to the opposite side of the car, opening the door. "She means 'beat the press,' don'cha, George?"

"Possibly," she said, voice muffled by the car roof. I got in.

"Now will you tell me what's going on?" asked Rick, getting into the front passenger seat and twisting to face us.

"It's simple, really," said George. She sounded exhausted. I put my arm behind her just before she sagged into her seat. She braced herself against me, giving me a brief, relieved nod as she kept talking. "Dave and Alaric followed the money and proved that Governor Tate was behind the attacks on Eakly and the ranch. Also, PS, the CDC is potentially involved, which isn't going to make me sleep any easier tonight, thanks. The Senator wasn't thrilled by the idea that his running mate might be the goddamn devil, so he's asked us to go back to the Center to prepare our notes while he decides whether or not to fire our asses."

A long pause followed her announcement. I

stared at her, unable to think of a single thing to say. Steve spoke first, asking, “Are you sure?” in a low, dangerous tone that made me glad as hell that he was on our side.

“We have proof.” George leaned harder into my arm. “People have been funneling him money, and he’s been funneling it on to the sort of folks who think weaponizing Kellis-Amberlee is a good thing. Some of that money’s been coming from Atlanta. Some of it’s been coming from the big tobacco companies. And a lot of people have died, presumably so that nice ol’ Governor Tate can be Vice-President of the United States of America. At least, until the President-elect has some sort of tragic accident, and he has to step into the position.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Georgia...” Rick sounded almost awed. “If we know this for sure—Georgia, this is a really big deal. This is...are we allowed to know this and not just report it to the FBI, or the CDC, or somebody? This is terrorism.”

“I don’t know, Rick; you’re the one who worked in print media,” said George bitterly. “Why don’t you try telling me for a change?”

“Even in cases of suspected terrorism, a journalist can protect his or her sources as long as they aren’t actually sheltering the suspect.” Rick hesitated. “We’re not, are we? Sheltering him?”

“Pardon me for breaking in, Mr. Cousins, but if Miss Mason’s proof is as good as she seems to think, it doesn’t matter whether she plans on sheltering him or not. My partner died in Eakly.” Steve sounded perfectly calm. That scared the shit out of

me. “Tyrone was a good man. He deserved better. Man who started that outbreak, well. That man doesn’t deserve better.”

“Don’t worry about it; I have no intention of sheltering him,” said George. “I’ll talk it over with the Senator, and if he wants to throw us off the campaign, he’s welcome to. I’ll mail our files to every open-source blog, newspaper, and politician in the country while we’re on the road for home.”

“This is crap.” I pulled my arm from behind her head, leaning into my own corner and glaring.

“Right,” George agreed.

“Absolute fucking crap.”

“No argument.”

“I want to punch somebody right about now.”

“Not it,” said Rick.

“I punch back,” said Steve. He sounded a little amused.

“Just have patience,” said George. “This is all going to be over soon. One way or another, I guess we’re finishing things tonight.”

I gave her a sidelong look. “Let’s pick one way, okay? I don’t like another.”

“That’s okay.” George smiled a little, trying to be reassuring. “Neither do I.”

She was fidgeting in the way that meant she didn’t want to say anything else. I put a hand on her knee, and we drove the rest of the way in silence. We were greeted at the Center gates by a barrage of blood tests, all of which checked out clean before Steve drove on to the motor pool and parked the car.

I was the first one out, and started walking

briskly away. I heard George get out behind me. "Don't say anything, please," she said, to Steve. "I'm meeting with the senator tonight, when he gets back from his dinner. After that—"

"After that, I guess what needs doing is going to be clear one way or the other," said Steve. "Don't worry. I wouldn't have gone into security if I didn't know how to keep my mouth shut."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

I was already a good four or five yards from the car. I turned, walking backward as I called, "George, c'mon! I want to get out of this damn monkey suit!"

"Coming!" she shouted, and muttered something I was probably better off not hearing before she turned to follow me. Steve waved. I waved back.

Rick walked with us until we reached the van. Then he turned left, heading for his trailer. We turned right, heading for ours. The silence was getting to be too much for me—I'm not George, I can't do quiet for long periods of time. "He's a good guy," I said, as I pressed my thumb against the lock. It clicked open. "A little old-fashioned, but still a good guy. I'm glad we got the chance to work with him."

"You think he'll stay on after we all get home?" George squeezed past me to start rummaging through the clothes covering the beds and floor.

"He can write his own ticket after this campaign, but yeah, I think he may stick around." I was already halfway out of my formal wear. She pulled

her shirt off over her head. I smiled a little. "He knows he can work with us."

"Good."

We were back in street clothes when we heard the shouting. We exchanged a wide-eyed look before we went running for the door. George was two steps ahead of me as we left the trailer, and saw a stunned-looking Rick come staggering up the path. Lois was cradled against his chest.

I've seen a lot of road kill in my day. I know a dead cat when I see one. So did George; she sucked in a sharp breath, calling, "Rick...?"

He stopped where he was, staring at us. George ran the last fifteen feet, and I ran close behind her. Fifteen feet. That's all it took to change everything.

Those fifteen stupid little feet saved our lives.

"What happened?" George reached toward the cat, like there was a chance she could do something. I managed not to grab her arm and pull her away. Stupid as it may sound, I suddenly didn't want her playing with dead things.

"She was just...I got back to the trailer, and I almost tripped on her." Rick was still wearing his formal clothes. He hadn't even had the time to change. "She was just inside the doorway. I think... even after they hurt her, I think she tried to get away." He started to cry. "I think she was trying to come and find me. She was just a little cat, Georgia. Why would anyone do this to such a little cat?"

Then his words hit me. I stiffened. "She was inside? Are you sure this wasn't natural causes?"

“Since when do natural causes break your neck?” asked Rick.

“We should go to the van.” The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end, and I suddenly felt very exposed.

George frowned at me. “Shaun—?”

“I’m serious. We can talk about this in the van, but we should go there. Right now.”

“Just let me get my gun.” George turned toward the trailer.

I didn’t think: I just knew I didn’t want her near that trailer. I grabbed her elbow, yanking her back. She stumbled into me, and a split second later, the trailer exploded with the characteristic concussive bang of packed C4. A second, larger bang followed the first as the rest of the explosives went off, and there was a third explosion in the distance as another trailer—probably Rick’s—went up.

Fuck this, I thought, and took off running, dragging George with me. I didn’t know whether Rick was following us, and I didn’t care. I was getting her to safety. Fuck everybody else.

My first impulse was to run ahead and make sure the ground was clear. George knew where we were going, and she knew enough to keep running without me hauling her. I forced the thought away. I was staying with her, and we were going to get out of this. Together.

We were still running when something hit me in the arm, hard enough to break the skin. It was a lucky shot; they should have hit the Kevlar, and the fact that they hadn’t meant that someone had damn good aim. I glanced to the side, just long enough to

see the hollow plastic dart sticking out of me. My throat went dry. I forced my eyes back to the front, and kept on running.

“Shaun?” George must have felt my steps falter.

That wasn’t important. All that mattered was getting her safely inside. “Get the doors!” I shouted, and pushed her away from me, toward the van. She stumbled as she ran, then evened out, and sprinted the last twenty feet. She grabbed the handles on the van’s rear doors, pressing her forefingers against the reader pads. There was a click as the onboard testing system ran her blood and prints, confirming that she was both uninfected and an authorized driver before the locks released.

“Rick! Shaun! Come on!” She pulled the doors open and climbed up into the back of the van, turning to offer us her hands.

Rick ran toward her. He finally seemed to realize that he was carrying Lois, because he dropped the cat’s body in order to take George’s hand and let her pull him up to safety.

I kept running until I was about ten feet away. Then I slowed, stopping just out of reach. I wasn’t in a hurry anymore. I didn’t need to be.

George blinked, a line appearing between her eyebrows as she frowned in confusion. “Shaun? Stop fucking around. Get in the van.”

“No can do, George. I’m sorry.” I turned to show her the dart protruding from my arm. A patch of red had appeared around it, like a warning. I was bleeding. And I wasn’t stupid, no matter what

I tried to make people believe; I'd seen those darts before. I knew what they meant.

George paled. "No. It's...it's not that. It's a tranquilizer. It's harmless. Get in the van. At least let us run tests. At least..."

"You know better." I smiled at her, despite the growing ache in my chest. She was safe. She was in the van. She'd be able to drive away, and get the hell out of this whole situation. "Don't play dumb, George. You're no good at it. You'll just make us both look bad."

Rick's face appeared next to hers as he leaned back out of the van. His eyes widened when he saw my arm. "Oh, hell."

"My thoughts exactly." My smile faded as I straightened up. "Get me a shotgun, and some ammo. Don't hand them to me—toss them out the back. We're about to be in a bad situation, and I'll hold it off for as long as I can."

"Shaun." George's voice was barely a whisper. "Please. This isn't funny."

"You're the one who says the truth is all that matters, Georgia," I said, as gently as I could, under the circumstances. "Here's the truth: I'm finished. Now give me some guns. Let me buy you a little more time. Let me do something. Please."

The raw need in my voice, heavy with all the things I didn't have a way of saying, must have finally gotten through to her. George sniffled as she nodded, once. Then she disappeared into the van, reappearing a few seconds later with a shotgun and a box of ammunition. She tossed them to me. I

caught the gun, and allowed the box to land on the pavement at my feet.

“Shaun—”

“I love you, Georgia Mason. Now shut that door.”

She looked at me. Rick was still there, but he didn't matter anymore; all that mattered was Georgia, and me, and the distance between us, which we would never be able to close again. Those bastards had taken her away from me with a single needle, and nothing was ever going to give her back. I smiled at her, trying to keep my chin up. If anyone needed me to be brave, it was Georgia.

Then I turned my back on her.

The sound of moaning was starting in the distance, as the people who'd been caught in the blast from our exploding trailers got up and discovered that they were no longer among the living. I'd be with them, soon enough. For now, I had a line to hold, and George had work to do.

“I love you, too.” Her words were barely loud enough to hear over the rest of the surrounding noise. Maybe I imagined them. If I did, I didn't care; they were all I needed to take with me into the dark.

The van doors slammed shut. I racked the slide on my shotgun, and waited for the dead to come to me.

If you want an easy job—if you want the sort of job where you never have to bury somebody that you care about—I recommend you pursue a career in whatever strikes your fancy...just so long as it isn't the news.

—From Another Point of True, the blog of Richard Cousins, June 20th, 2040.

Two: Georgia

Rick was the one who actually closed the van doors. I couldn't do it. I couldn't move. Shaun's back was to me, and for the first time in my life, I wanted to leave a story untold—I wanted to jump down and run to him, like one of those brainless heroines in Buffy's stories, and go with him into the dark.

If she were still alive, I'd have to apologize to her for calling those characters unrealistic, I thought distantly. I didn't move as Rick flipped the deadbolts on the rear doors, and then pushed past me to do the same on the movable wall that shut the driver's cabin off from the rest of the vehicle. With those latches thrown, we were effectively cut off from the rest of the world. Nothing could get in, and unless we opened the locks, nothing could get out. Barring heavy explosives, we were as safe as it was possible to be.

We were safe, and Shaun was outside with the dead, guaranteeing himself a place on the Wall. That was what he'd always claimed to want. I looked at the closed doors, and wondered whether he'd finally changed his mind.

"Georgia?" Rick's voice intruded on my thoughts. I turned to face him, blinking as I realized that he was still there. Somehow, I'd already been starting to think of myself as alone. "When was the last security sweep?"

"I...I don't know." I took a seat at the main console, glad to be doing something as I brought up

the security recordings for the last day. The scanner came up clean, showing no attempted break-ins or unauthorized contact with the van's exterior during that time. "It looks like Shaun ran one while you were at the event. I don't know whether it was successful or not."

"He didn't start swearing."

"So we're probably clean." My fingers itched to turn on the exterior cameras. I wanted to see Shaun one more time.

I couldn't bear the thought of seeing him convert. I wanted to remember him as Shaun, not as one more member of a mob of shambling undead. I put my hands in my lap, folding them tightly.

I sat there in silence for several minutes, waiting for something to change. It was Rick who forced my hand, asking the one question I most needed to hear:

"What do we do now?"

We. Me and Rick; we were what was left. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the seat, suddenly tired. "I don't know what you do next, Rick. I wish I did. Maybe you should write something, or call Steve for an evac, or...I don't know. But I need to post. I need to..."

I needed to write down what happened. I needed to make sure people understood what this cost us, what we paid, what we thought we would be paying. This wasn't what we signed up for, but it was what we died for. It was what we felt we had to do.

We never asked to be heroes. I certainly didn't. No one ever gave me the opportunity to

say I didn't want this, that I was sorry, but they had the wrong girl; I just wanted to take Shaun and go home. No. Wait. That wasn't quite true.

I opened my eyes, sitting up, and pulled the keyboard toward me as Rick looked on.

I wanted to tell the truth, and let people draw their own conclusions from there. I wanted people to think, and to know, and to understand. I just wanted to tell the truth. In the van that had carried us across a country, and through the last months of my brother's life, with all hell ready to break loose outside, my hands came down, and I wrote.

Was it worth it?

God, I hope so.

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**CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE ALERT LEVEL ALPHA SPREAD
TO ALL NEWS SITES IMMEDIATELY**

REPOST FREELY REPOST FREELY REPOST FREELY

FEED IS LIVE

My name is Georgia Mason. For the past several years, I've been providing one of the world's many windows onto the news, chronicling current events and attempting, in my own small way, to offer context and perspective. I have always pursued the truth above all other things, even when the truth came at the cost of my own comfort and well-being. It seems, now, that I pursued the truth even when it would mean the loss of everything I held dear, although I was unaware of it at the time.

My name is Georgia Mason. I was adopted as an infant to be raised as part of a set, alongside Shaun Mason, a fellow orphan of the Rising. He was my best friend. He was my brother. He was quite possibly the only person I have ever loved in any meaningful way.

No: that's wishy-washy and dishonest. He was the only person I have ever loved in any meaningful way. He was my family. He was my home. And right now, he is standing outside the van where I am writing this,

waiting for the virus that is in the process of taking over his cells to finish its work. I tell you this so you'll understand that this isn't a hoax, this isn't some sophomoric attempt to increase ratings or site traffic. This is real. Everything I am about to tell you is the truth. Believe me, understand, and act, before it is too late.

If you're viewing this from the main page of After the End Times, you'll see a download link labeled "Campaign_Notes.zip" on the left-hand side of your screen. Possession of the documents behind that link may be considered treason by the government of the United States of America. Please. Click. Download. Read. Repost to any forum you can, any message board or photo sharing site or blog that you can reach. The data contained in those files is as essential to our freedom and survival as the report of Dr. Matras proved to be during the Rising. I am not overstating their importance. There isn't enough time for that. I have a conspiracy to stop, and a brother to avenge.

Neither is there enough time for me to repeat the facts which are already codified and ready for you to download. Let this suffice for all the things I do not have the time to say: they are lying to us. They are willfully channeling research away from the pursuit of a cure for this disease, and they are doing it under the auspices of our own government. I don't know who "they" are. I didn't live long enough to find out. Governor Tate served their interests. So, I regret to say, did Georgette Meissonier, previously a part of this reporting site.

They want us to stay afraid.

They want us to stay controlled.

They want us to stay sick.

Please, don't let them do this to our world. I am begging you, for Shaun's sake, for my sake, for everyone's sake, don't let them keep us frightened and hiding in our homes. Let us be what we were intended to be: human and free and able to make our own choices. Read what I have written, understand what they intend for us, for all of us, and decide to live.

They made a mistake in killing my brother, because alive or dead, the truth won't rest. My name is Georgia Mason, and I am begging you. Rise up while you can.

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...it is the sad duty of the management of After the End Times to announce the deaths of Shaun Phillip Mason, the head of our Action News Division, and Georgia Carolyn Mason, the head of our Factual News Division. Between the two of them, they created this site, they pursued the truth, and they changed my life forever.

I've been trying to find the words for this announcement since I was asked to make it, some three hours ago. The request came with a promotion to which I never aspired, and a position made bitter by the knowledge of what it cost. I would sooner have my friends than all the promotions in the world. But that option is not open to me, or to any of those who will mourn for them.

Georgia Mason was my friend, and I will always regret that we never met in the flesh. She once told me she lived each day hoping and praying she would find the truth; that she was able to keep going through all life's petty disappointments because she knew that someday, the truth would set her free.

Shaun Mason was the reason she kept looking for as long as she did before she finally gave up her search. For this, we all owe him a debt of gratitude.

Goodbye, Georgia. May the truth be enough to bring you peace. Goodbye, Shaun. May you find a better world than the one you left behind.

—From Fish and Clips, the blog of Mahir Gowda, June 20th, 2040.

Three: Georgia

The sound of gunfire began outside the van almost as soon as I finished my post. I folded my arms over the keyboard and put my head down, refusing to allow myself to look up. The security monitors would have let me see what was happening, and that was the one thing I knew I couldn't survive doing. If I saw Shaun...if I saw him fall, I'd follow him, and that wouldn't help anyone. We both had our jobs to do. Mine, unfortunately, required me to survive for at least a little while longer.

Rick put his hand on my shoulder. I didn't shrug him off. The gunfire continued.

Eventually, Rick took his hand away. I heard his footsteps on the van floor, followed by the sound of him sitting down at one of the other terminals and beginning to type. He gasped, a single short, sharp intake of breath.

"Georgia?"

I didn't want to respond to him. I didn't want to respond to anything, ever again. "What?" I asked, without lifting my head.

"Your post..."

"What about it?"

"It's live. We're getting so many hits that it's swamped two of the servers."

"What?" This time I did lift my head, turning in my chair to face him. The gunfire from outside continued, but it seemed less important now.

"I'm serious. Everyone is downloading this, everyone is propagating it. Alaric's reporting

that when some folks started the usual ‘it’s a hoax’ rumors, the CDC put out a press statement. The CDC.” He sounded awed. I understood how he felt. The CDC never puts out a statement with less than a week to prepare. “They confirmed the outbreak, and provided satellite footage to corroborate your report. This story doesn’t just have legs—it has wings, and it’s flying around the world.”

“Was the name on the press release Dr. Joseph Wynne?”

“It was.”

“Good man.”

“Georgia...he didn’t die for nothing. The story still got out.”

The urge to slap him was hot and sudden. A wave of exhaustion followed it, keeping me in the chair. “That’s where you’re wrong, Rick. No one should have died for this. Not Buffy, not Steve’s partner, and certainly not Shaun. This wasn’t supposed to be that kind of story.”

He turned to blink at me, looking faintly abashed. Then he ducked his head. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Just don’t start thinking their deaths are somehow justified because we got the word out. They were worth so much more than this story.” So damn much more.

Rick’s shoulders sagged. “I’m going to get back to work.”

“You do that.” I turned back to my own terminal, and put my head back down on my arms.

Minutes ticked by as Rick worked and I sat in silence, trying to change the world with the power of my denial. One of the monitors started to beep in

the frequency that meant we had an incoming call. "Answer," I said, not lifting my head.

"Georgia?"

Mahir sounded like he was on the verge of a total meltdown. I looked up to see his face on the monitor mounted above my terminal. His eyes were wide and terrified, whites showing all the way around, and his hair was disheveled, like he'd just gotten out of bed.

"Oh," I said. "Hello, Mahir. How are you keeping up with the forums?" My voice came out calm and reasonable, like I was just a normal person having a normal conversation about normal things. It was remarkable how lifelike I sounded.

"Hey," said Rick, from behind me.

Mahir glanced toward him before returning his attention to me. "I'm so sorry, Georgia. I—"

"Please don't." My voice was very small. I cleared my throat and said, more forcefully, "If you do that, I won't be able to keep going. And I have to keep going. I don't see any other way."

"What can I do?"

If apologies were the exact wrong thing, this was the exact right thing. I sat up a bit straighter, squaring my shoulders, and said, "I need a favor."

"Anything." He said it like he meant it; like it was the most important thing in the world. Good. He wasn't far wrong.

"I am not currently fit to run this news site." The words hurt less than I expected them to. I guess I'd already used up most of my capacity for pain. "I need you to take my place, until such time as I am

capable of doing my job without personal concerns clouding my understanding of the truth.”

“Georgia—”

“We need a new head for the Irwins. I can’t. I can’t. Do you understand me? I will die before I hire Shaun’s replacement. I am too scrambled, and too close to this story. Please, Mahir. Take over.”

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes. Say you’ll do it. I can have a contract to you in seconds. We can always put things back to normal when this is over.” But it was never going to be over. I was lying—I was lying—when I implied that “over” was even a possibility anymore. Normal had left the building, and it wasn’t coming back.

Mahir looked at me gravely. He knew me well enough to hear the quaver in my voice, and to know what I was really asking. I was asking him to take care of the site forever, because however this turned out, I wasn’t going to be coming back.

Finally, he said, “All right, Georgia. But only because it’s you.”

“I appreciate that. I’ll send you a contract and the master passwords as soon as we end this call. I’ll turn your login back on at the same time. It should take about ten minutes for everything to start working again. Once it does, I need you to be on every inch of the site. Grab every warm body you can find. Control it, maintain it, and ride this story as far as it will take you.”

“What’s the goal here, Georgia?”

I glanced over my shoulder to Rick. He nodded, understanding me. I looked back to Mahir.

“Shaun is dead.” The words hurt more than I could have imagined. “This story isn’t. We’re not letting them kill it the way they killed him.”

For a moment, it looked as if he might protest, but only for a moment. It passed as quickly as it had come, and he nodded. “I’ll get on that. Are you about to do something foolish?”

“I think so,” I said. “Goodnight, Mahir.”

“Goodbye, Georgia Mason,” he said, and the screen went black.

“I’ve got Steve on line two,” said Rick.

“Put him on speaker,” I said. I got up from my chair, moving like I was in a dream as I walked toward the weapons locker. I needed to get armed. Something bigger than a .45 was practically required.

“Georgia?” Steve sounded tentative, even broadcast through the van speakers. “Are you all right?”

“That’s a question for my therapist—if I had a therapist—but I think the answer is ‘no,’” I said, opening the locker door and pulling out two Kevlar vests. I tossed one to Rick before slipping my own on. “What’s the situation outside?”

“Ah...all infected have been cleared from the area outside your van.”

Meaning that Shaun was no longer outside, either protecting me or waiting to eat me. I expected that realization to hurt. It didn’t. It just left a numb patch at the center of my chest, one that spread as I slipped on my Kevlar. “Is it safe for us to come out? I have Rick in here with me. Neither of us was exposed.”

There was a pause before Steve said, "This area is still not secure."

"If you can clear a path to my motorcycle, we can get around anything that might be in our way." When he didn't answer immediately, I sighed, and said, "Please. They killed my brother. They killed Shaun. Please help us get out of here."

The pause was longer this time—almost long enough to make me think that Steve was going to walk away and leave us locked in the van, with no clear route to the exit. It wouldn't matter if he did. We'd find a way out of here regardless. It would just go faster if he helped us.

Finally, voice low, Steve said, "I haven't read your latest entry all the way. I read enough. Stand back from the door, and keep your hands where I can see them until you've tested out clean."

"On it," I said. I stepped back, motioning for Rick to do the same.

Air rushed in when the van door opened, accompanied by the heavy smells of blood and gunpowder. I stayed where I was, waiting.

"Georgia. Rick." Steve stepped forward, placing two blood testing kits on the ground just in front of the open door. They were good-quality units, not top of the line, but good enough that their accuracy ratings had never been contested.

I picked up the first unit and passed it to Rick before picking up my own. I looked toward Steve as I broke the seal. "If this comes up positive...he doesn't get to get away with this, Steve. He doesn't get to do this."

"I promise," said Steve.

That would have to be enough. I slid my hand into the unit and pressed it flat against the needles, not wincing as they broke my skin. The lights began their inevitable cycle of red-yellow-green, flashing through all the available permutations before settling on a steady green. Next to me, Rick did the same, with the same results. We were both clean.

I held up my testing unit. "Clear."

"Clear," echoed Rick.

"Thank you." Steve tossed us each a biohazard bag. "What happened?"

What happened? Shaun died. How could anything else matter? I took a deep breath, forcing myself to set that thought aside, and said, as calmly as I could, "Someone killed Lois—Rick's cat—which caused him to come back for us before we could enter our trailer. As a consequence, none of us were inside when the explosives went off. We ran for cover, Shaun was infected."

"Infected how?" asked Steve.

"A hypodermic needle, like the one we found at the Ryman farm." I shook my head. "We were set up. None of us are supposed to be standing."

"But we are," said Rick.

"Yes. We are," I said, finally dropping my testing unit into a biohazard bag.

Steve watched this before asking, "You got a plan from here?"

"Yes," I said flatly. "I'm going back to the rally. I'm going to have a chat with Governor Tate. And when that's over, I'm going to blow the fucking roof off this entire conspiracy."

“You can’t take your bike. You’d never make it out before the quarantine came down.”

I shrugged, somehow managing to smile a little. It almost hurt. “Well, then. Can we get a ride?”

Steve nodded gravely. “I thought you’d never ask.”

The best thing about my life is George. I don't think she really understands that, but that's okay, because I don't need her to understand it; it doesn't matter for anyone but me. As long as I know the truth, everything can keep on going the way it's going, and that'll be just fine.

I hate our parents. I want out of their house. I want to live my own life, with the friends that I choose, and with her. Always with her. But as long as this is what she wants, I'm here.

I'm here all the way to the end.

—From Postcards From the Wall, the unpublished files of Shaun Mason, June 19th, 2040.

Four: Georgia

The outbreak was still going strong as we fought our way toward the motor pool. The infected weren't actually everywhere. It just seemed that way. The three of us moved in a back-to-back wedge formation, Steve taking point, while Rick and I took the sides. We had sufficient ammo to keep pressing forward, even with zombies charging us from all sides.

I knew some of them; I knew too many of them. And the only comfort I could find was that Shaun was not among them.

"Georgia? How are you for bullets?"

"Good for now," I said, and fired again. "Rick?"

"I'm good. Steve?"

"I'll live," he said darkly.

That didn't sound good. "Is there anyone who can come and provide backup?"

Steve's lips tightened as he shook his head. "Our last call from Andres came while I was on my way to get you. He was backed against a wall with half a dozen of the aides. I don't think we'll be seeing him again. Carlos and Heidi are at the motor pool; that zone's relatively clear. Mike...I haven't heard from Mike. Not Susan or Paolo, either. Everyone else is either on their way to meet with us or holding fast in a safe zone."

Andres was Steve's latest partner, replacing Tyrone, who had died in Eakly. I winced. "I'm so sorry."

Steve shook his head. "I never was very good at partners." He turned and fired into the shadows at the side of a portable office. The zombie that had been lurking there gurgled and fell.

We kept walking, our formation allowing us to stop the infected before they could get too close. Thankfully, Carlos and Heidi knew we were coming, and they had access to all the ammunition that had been stockpiled at the motor pool. Thanks to their efforts, the infected tapered off as we got closer. We crossed the rest of the distance between us and the fence without incident. The gate was closed, the electric locks engaged. Steve reached for the keypad, and a shot rang out over our heads, clearly aimed to warn, not wound. Small favors.

"Stop where you are!" shouted Carlos. He and Heidi stepped out from behind the shed, both of them carrying too many weapons. Shaun would have yelled at them for that.

"Stand down," barked Steve. "It's me and the journalists. They tested clean when I picked them up."

"Beg your pardon, sir, but how do we know you test clean now?" Heidi asked.

"If you'll let us through the fence, you can keep us backed against it while you run blood tests," I offered, hoping that the fact that I was still capable of coherent speech would be a point in my favor. "If any of us comes up infected, you'll be able to shoot us before we amplify."

She and Carlos exchanged a look. Carlos nodded. "All right," he said. "Step back from the gate."

We did as we were told, Steve giving me a thoughtful look as the gate slid open. “You’re good at this.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” I said. Rick and I followed him into the motor pool.

Carlos chucked us blood testing units while Heidi reported on the status of the other units, still remaining at a safe distance. Susan was confirmed as infected; she’d been tagged by a political analyst as she was helping Mike evacuate a group of survivors to a rooftop. She stayed on the ground after she was bitten, shooting everything in sight before taking out the ladder and shooting herself. About the best ending you could hope for if you got infected in a combat zone. Mike was fine. So, surprisingly, was Paolo. There was still no word from Andres, and three more groups of security agents and survivors were expected to reach the motor pool at any time. Steve absorbed the news without changing his expression; he didn’t even flinch when the needles on his testing unit bit into his hand. I flinched. After the number of blood tests I’d had recently, I was tired of being punctured.

Heidi and Carlos relaxed when our tests flashed clean. “Sorry, sir,” said Carlos, walking over with the biohazard bags. “We needed to be sure.”

“Standard outbreak protocol,” Steve said, dismissing the apology with a wave of his hand. “Keep holding this ground.”

“Sir?” said Heidi. “Won’t you be holding it with us?”

“We have somewhere we need to be,” I said quietly.

Maybe it was the look on my face, or the obvious anguish in my voice. Whatever it was, they didn't argue.

"One of the armored SUVs should do," said Steve. "Find the fastest one that's still on the grounds." Carlos and Heidi blinked at him. "Move!" he barked, and they moved, scattering for the guard station where the keys to the parked vehicles were stored. Steve ignored their burst of activity, leading me to the weapons locker and keying open the lock. "Candy store is open."

"You're a real people person, aren't you?" asked Rick. "Prom King in school?"

"Four times," Steve said.

I ignored them, focusing on grabbing boxes of bullets and shoving them into my pockets with a single-minded determination that was frightening, even to me. It felt like I was running on a countdown. As to what it was counting down to...

Carlos emerged from the guard station and tossed a set of keys to Steve. "We can unlock the rear gate, but once the central computer realizes the seal's been broken—"

"How long can we have?"

"Thirty seconds."

"That's long enough. You two hold your ground. Keep anyone who makes it here safe. Mason, Cousins, you're with me."

"All the way," I said, and followed him to the car.

Once we were all inside, belts fastened and weapons secured, Steve started the engine and drove us to the gate. Carlos was already waiting, ready

to hit the manual override. The manual exits exist in case of accidental or ineffective lockdown, to give the uninfected a chance to escape. They require a blood test and a retinal scan, and breaking quarantine without a damn good reason is a quick way to get yourself sent to prison for a long time. Carlos was risking a lot on Steve's order.

"You have good men," I said.

"I know," said Steve, and hit the gas.

The roads outside the Center were clear. That's standard during a confirmed outbreak in a non-congested area. The people inside the quarantine zone will survive or not without interference; it's up to them the minute the fences come down. So the big health orgs and military intervention teams wait until the worst of it's had time to burn itself out before they head in. Let the infection peak. Ironically, that makes it safer, because it's trying to save the survivors that gets people killed. Once you know everyone around you is already dead, it gets easier to shoot without asking questions.

"How long since quarantine was declared?" asked Rick.

"Twenty-seven minutes."

Standard CDC response time says you leave a quarantine to cook for forty-five minutes before you go in. Given our proximity to the city, they wouldn't just be responding by air; they'd be sending in ground support, to make sure nobody broke quarantine before they declared it safe. "Can we make it?"

"We'll have to," said Steve, and sped up.

We were just crossing the Sacramento city

limits when the first CDC copters passed overhead, zooming toward the Center. Three more followed close behind, in closed arrow formation. I leaned over and clicked on the radio, tuning it to the emergency band. “—repeat, this is not a drill. Remain in your homes. If you are on the road, remain in your vehicle until you have reached a safe location. If you have seen or had direct contact with infected individuals, contact local authorities immediately. Repeat, this is not a drill. Remain in—”

Steve turned the radio off. “You know that breaking quarantine is a federal offense, don’t you?”

“I don’t care right now.” I leaned back in my seat, closing my eyes. Rick’s hand settled on my shoulder, trying to offer comfort. If I didn’t think about it too hard, I could almost pretend that he was Shaun.

“All right, then.” He hit the gas again. The SUV rolled faster, hitting the end of the trestle and blazing onward toward the city. He glanced at me as we drove, adding, “I’m sorry about your brother. He was a good man. He’ll be missed.”

“Thank you.” The idea of looking at his face—it would be so earnest, if his words were anything to judge by, so anxious for understanding—made me tired all over again. There was nothing I could do now, nothing I could do until we got to the hall and to the man who killed Shaun. So I didn’t open my eyes, and I didn’t say anything, and we drove on.

...but they were us, our children, our selves,
These shades who walk the cloistered dark,
With empty eyes and clasping hands,
And wander, isolate, alone, the space between
Forgiveness and the penitent's grave.

—From **Eakly, Oklahoma**, originally published in **By the Sounding Sea**, the blog of **Buffy Meissonier**, February 11th, 2040.

Five: Georgia

If the guard at the reception hall thought there was something odd about us arriving in a dusty, dented SUV over an hour after the Center went into lockdown, he didn't say anything. Our blood tests came back clean; that was what his job required him to give a damn about, and so he just waved us inside. He didn't ask any questions. I was relieved and angry at the same time. Maybe if people asked more questions, we wouldn't be in this mess.

We parked next to an empty press bus, the three of us pausing only long enough to check the readiness of our weapons before we walked to the elevator. We all got in together, even Steve.

I glanced at him and frowned. "You don't have a press pass."

"Don't need one," he said. "The Center's under quarantine. By contract, I'm actually obligated to circumnavigate any security barricade between myself and the Senator."

"Good," I said. I looked to Rick. "When we get inside, you let me talk to Tate. I want you staying out of the way." I wanted him to survive this little adventure. I wanted one of us—just one—to make it out alive.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded. And then it was too late for conversation, as the elevator doors opened on what looked for all the world like a perfectly normal party. Servers circulated with trays of drinks and canapés. Politicians, their spouses, reporters, and members of

the California elite milled around, talking like there was nothing wrong. The only signs of tension were in their eyes. They knew about the quarantine—half of these people were staying at the Center, or worked there, or had a stake in its continued success—and they were terrified. But appearances have to be maintained, especially when you're looking at millions of dollars in lost city revenue because of an outbreak. So the party continued.

"I hate this," I muttered. The man with the blood tests was waiting for us to check in. I slid my increasingly sore hand into the unit he held, watching lights run their cycle from red to yellow and finally to green. Next to me, Steve and Rick did the same.

As soon as the lights stabilized I yanked my hand free and ducked into the crowd, not waiting for my companions as I made a beeline for the room where I'd last seen Senator Ryman. They wouldn't allow him to leave after the Center went into lockdown, and if he couldn't leave, he would have stayed in the room with his surviving staff. He was that kind of a guy.

"Georgia? What are you doing here?"

Senator Ryman sounded astonished. I turned toward his voice and found him half-standing. Emily was beside him, eyes wide, hands clapped over her mouth. Tate was on his other side. Unlike the Rymans, the Governor looked anything but relieved to see me. I could read the hatred in his eyes.

"Senator Ryman," I said, and finished my turn, walking to the table. "Mrs. Ryman." I smiled narrowly. "Governor."

“Oh, God, Georgia.” Emily Ryman stood so fast she sent her chair toppling over as she threw her arms around me. “We heard the news. I’m so sorry.”

“I left him outside,” I said, looking past Emily’s shoulder to Senator Ryman and Governor Tate. “He was infected, and he wouldn’t let me die with him, so I left him outside the van. I locked the doors. He held off the zombies until Steve could get to us.” Belatedly, I realized that I hadn’t explained who “us” was. “Rick’s here, too. We both lived. Shaun didn’t.”

“Georgia?” Emily pulled away, looking uncertain. She glanced over her shoulder at Governor Tate before looking back to me. “What’s going on here?”

“How did you get out of the quarantine zone?” asked Tate. His voice was flat, verging on emotionless. He knew the score. He’d known it since I walked through the door. Lies only last as long as no one’s questioning them.

“I’m good at my job.” Emily Ryman let me go entirely, taking a step backward, toward her husband. I kept my eyes on Tate. “Shaun was a good friend of most of the security staff. They were happy to help me. I guess sometimes you really do reap what you sow.”

“Georgia, what are you talking about?”

The confusion in Senator Ryman’s voice was enough to distract me from Tate. I turned to the man responsible for us being here in the first place, asking, “Haven’t you seen my last report?”

“No, I haven’t.” His expression was drawn

tight with concern. “Things have been a bit hectic. I haven’t had a site feed since the outbreak bell rang.”

“Then how did you—”

“When the CDC puts out a statement, it tends to go around in a hurry.” Senator Ryman closed his eyes, looking pained. “He was so damn young.”

“Shaun was assassinated, Senator. Someone shot a plastic dart of live-state Kellis-Amberlee straight into his arm. He never had a prayer.” I swung my attention back to Tate, and asked, more quietly, “Why Eakly, Governor? Why the ranch? And why Buffy? I can actually understand trying to kill us, after everything else, but why?”

“Dave?” said Senator Ryman.

“This country needed someone to take real action for a change. Someone who was willing to do what needed to be done. Not just another politician preaching changes and keeping up the status quo.” Tate met my eyes without flinching. He’d been waiting for this moment. Maybe he was even, on some level, relieved that it was finally here. Everyone wants the chance to tell the truth. “We took some good steps toward God and safety after the Rising, but they’ve slowed in recent years. People are afraid to do the right thing. That’s the key. Real fear’s what motivates them to get past the fears that aren’t important enough to matter. They needed to be reminded. They needed to remember what America stands for.”

“How could you even...how could anyone ever believe that was the right way?” I drew my .40,

aiming it at Tate. The crowd went still, honed political instincts reacting to what had to look like an assassination attempt in the making. “Secure channel voice activation, Georgia Carolyn Mason, ABF-175893, password ‘Krypton.’ Mahir, are you there?”

My ear cuff beeped once. “Here, Georgia,” said Mahir’s voice, distorted by the encryption algorithms protecting the transmission. Secure channels are only good once, but oh, how good they are. “What’s the situation?”

“I’m with Tate now. Please start uploading everything you’ve received, and download my last post directly to Senator Ryman.” Governor Tate was glaring at me. I glared back. “I’ve been recording this whole time. But you knew that, didn’t you? You’re a smart guy. You know how this game works. Even if you didn’t know at first, I’m sure that working with Buffy taught you.”

“Miss Meissonier was a realist and a patriot who understood the trials facing this country,” said Tate, tone as stiff as his shoulders. “She was proud to have the opportunity to serve.”

“Miss Meissonier was a twenty-four year old journalist who wrote poetry for a living,” I snapped. “Miss Meissonier was our partner, and you had her killed because she wasn’t useful anymore.”

“David, is this true?” asked Emily, horror leeching the inflection from her voice. Senator Ryman had taken out his PDA and seemed to be growing older by the second as he stared at its screen. “Did you...Eakly? The ranch?” Fury twisted her features, and before either I or her husband could react, she was out of her chair, launching herself at

Governor Tate. "My daughter! That was my daughter, you bastard! Those were my parents! Burn in hell, you—"

Tate grabbed her wrists, twisting her to the side and locking his arm around her neck. His left hand, which had been under the table since I arrived, came into view, holding another of those plastic syringes. Unaware, Emily Ryman continued to struggle.

The Senator went pale. "Now, David, let's not do anything rash here—"

"I tried to send them home, Peter," said Tate. "I tried to get them off the campaign, out of harm's way, out of my way. Now look where they've brought us. Me, holding your pretty little wife, with just one outbreak left between us and a happy ending. I would have given you the election. I would have made you the greatest American President of the past hundred years, because together, we would have remade this nation."

"No election is worth this," Ryman said. "Emily, be still now, baby." Looking confused and betrayed, Emily stopped struggling. Ryman lifted his hands into view, palms upward. "What'll it take for you to release her? My wife's not a part of this."

"I'm afraid you're all a part of this now," Tate said, with a small shake of his head. "No one's walking away. It's gone too far for that. Maybe if you'd disposed of the journalists," the word was almost spat, "it could have gone differently. But there's no use crying over spilled milk, now, is there?"

"Put down the syringe, Governor," I said, keeping the gun level. "Let her go."

“Georgia, the CDC is piggybacking our feed,” said Mahir. “They’re not stopping the transmission, but they’re definitely listening in. Dave and Alaric are maintaining the integrity, but I don’t know that we can stop it if they want to cut us off.”

“Oh, they won’t cut us off, will you, Dr. Wynne?” I asked. If I was right and he was listening in, the CDC was with us. If it was anybody else...

There was a crackle as the CDC broke into our channel. “Here, Georgia,” said the familiar Southern drawl of Dr. Joseph Wynne. Mahir was swearing in the background. “Are you in any danger?”

“I’m not, but Emily Ryman is,” I said. “Governor Tate has her, and he’s holding a syringe full of what I assume is Kellis-Amberlee.”

“We’re on our way. Can you stall him?”

“I’m trying.” I forced my attention back to Governor Tate, who was watching me impassively. “The CDC is on their way. You know this is over.”

Governor Tate hesitated, looking from me to the Senator and finally to the horrified, receding crowd. Suddenly weary, he shook his head, and said, “You’re fools, all of you. You could have saved this country. You could have brought moral fiber back to America.” His grip on Emily slackened. She pulled herself free, diving into her husband’s embrace. Senator Ryman closed his arms around her, backing away. Governor Tate ignored them. “You and your brother will be forgotten in a week, when your fickle little audience of bottom-feeders moves on to something more recent. But they’re going to remember me, Mason. They always remember the martyrs.”

“We’ll see,” I said.

“No,” he said. “We won’t.” In one fluid motion, he drove the syringe into his thigh and pressed the plunger home.

Emily Ryman screamed. Senator Ryman was shouting at the top of his lungs, ordering people to get back, to get to the elevators, behind secure doors, anything that would get them away from the man who’d just turned himself into a living outbreak. Still looking at me, Governor Tate started to laugh.

The sound of my gun going off was almost drowned out by the screams of the crowd. Governor Tate stopped laughing, and looked, for an instant, almost comically surprised before he slumped onto the table. I kept the gun trained on him, waiting for signs of further movement. After several moments had passed without any, I shot him three more times anyway, just to be sure. It never hurts to be sure.

Steve and Rick stepped up beside me as people pushed past us, rushing for the doors. Mahir and Dr. Wynne were trying to shout over each other on our open channel, both demanding status reports, demanding to know whether I was all right, whether the outbreak had been contained. They were giving me a headache. I reached up and removed my ear cuff, putting it on the table. Let them shout. I was done listening. I didn’t need to listen anymore.

“I’m sorry, Georgia,” said Rick softly.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. I wiped my eyes with the back of the hand that held my gun, wishing that there was some mercy in the world. That getting the bad guys meant you got your loved ones back; that there had been another way.

That I could cry.

“What now?” asked Steve.

I shook my head. I honestly didn't know. I didn't know anything anymore.

Should we have seen it coming? I suppose. If we'd been less blinded by our own grief; if any of us had truly understood how shattered she was. But we were all of us shattered in those moments, and no one thought to take the gun from out her hand.

Rest well, Georgia Mason.

God, I miss you.

—From Fish and Clips, the blog of Mahir Gowda, June 21st, 2040.

Six: Rick

It took five and a half months for the CDC to release their ashes. Shaun's would normally have taken longer, and Georgia's would normally have been released almost immediately, but there are protocols for suicides, and they kept her body for a lot longer than any of us were expecting. When we finally got the notice that she was going to be released, Dr. Wynne petitioned his superiors to release Shaun's ashes at the same time, so that we could bury them together.

Georgia kept her word. She'd always said that she didn't want to live in a world without Shaun, and she didn't. A week after we broke the story of Tate's actions, she returned to the house she shared with her family, locked herself in the bathroom, and slit her wrists in the bathtub. No one was hurt when she reanimated, and the house security system kept her from ever leaving the room. The Masons have threatened to sue the site three times for the cost of cleaning up the mess she made. We're ignoring them.

Mahir is in charge now, of everything. I do what he tells me, I try to keep the Newsies in line, and I drink more than is strictly good for me—but there's no one to tell me not to, so why does it matter? We all died on that campaign trail. One way or another, we all died there.

Shaun's ashes arrived the day before the funeral. I wouldn't have scheduled the funeral at all, but once Georgia was released, we had to make plans

for interment, and this was the only day Senator Ryman could make it. He'd asked us to hold the service when he could attend, if possible. I might still have put it off, except for the part where our team couldn't come out of the field if the Senator—who was fighting, and apparently winning, an increasingly vicious battle for his political position—was still out there. Magdalene, Becks, and Alaric deserved their chance to say goodbye to the Masons.

Mahir's flight from London landed at eleven the day of the funeral. I drove to the passenger collection zone at the edge of the airport's quarantine border, hoping I'd be able to pick him out of the crowd. I didn't really need to worry. His plane had been almost empty, and I would've known him anywhere. He looked as lost as I did.

"Rick," he said, and took my hand. "I'm so glad to finally meet you. I just wish it could have been under better circumstances."

"So do I," I said, and led him to the car.

"What news?" Mahir asked, as we pulled onto the freeway. "I've been incommunicado for hours. Blasted flight."

"Senator Ryman's plane touched down about the same time yours did. They'll be meeting us at the funeral home. Emily couldn't make it, but she sends her regrets."

"And how are you?"

He meant "Are you sober?", and since I was driving, I couldn't fault him for asking the question. "I'm getting by," I said.

"Fair enough," he said, and we drove the rest

of the way without saying anything else. There was nothing else to say.

The parking lot of the funeral home was choked with cars. Packing the staff of multiple blog sites and a Presidential campaign, as well as friends and family, into a single building will do that sort of thing. I pulled into the last parking slot reserved in the “family” section of the lot. Today, we were family. We were the only family they had left in the world—the only family that mattered.

“Here we are,” I said, unlocking the door. I paused, then, looking to Mahir, and asked the one question I needed answered more than anything else: “Was it worth it?”

“No,” said Mahir quietly. “And yet...what is?”

The Masons did what they knew and loved best, and they died for it. Not before Shaun saved her one last time; not before Georgia found her truth. Maybe that was enough. Maybe this was all over. And maybe it didn't matter, because our story ended with a razorblade and a bathtub full of water, and a girl who never knew how to cry weeping in the only way she knew how. Even if this wasn't over, someone else was going to have to save the world next time.

We were done.

Rise up while you can.

END.

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