



FROM THE CO-AUTHOR OF
IN THE COMPANY OF SHADOWS

DELIVERANCE

BY AIS

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Author note

This was written for The Slash Pile May Anthology, 2012, Wanderlust. We were given a theme of travel and random tags that we had to fit into the plot somehow. These characters appear only in this and are unrelated to any other story. I plan to continue this story in the future.

tags I received: student/teacher, agents, friendship, religion, and originally polyamory.

Thank you to Ashley for the lovely cover!

Luke waited at the front of the store, idly examining a can of colored hairspray that seemed to have some sort of knock-off Japanese cartoon character on the label. It was already fifteen minutes past their meeting time but given that everyone ran on Fiji Time, including his confidential informant, it wasn't unusual.

Two Indo-Fijian teenage girls walked into the store, hardly glancing at him as they headed toward the back. Their hijabs hid their hair but not their smiles when they saw the new stock of embroidered denim skirts on display.

Most of the businesses in this area of Suva were owned by Gujarati, which was likely why his native Fijian CI had chosen it. English was spoken everywhere but in these stores, Hindi was understood more often than Fijian. That, and it was large enough for him to hide in a corner.

A native woman appeared at his side, dark freckles dotting her face with her curves hidden beneath the old t-shirt and sulu she wore. Her hair was cut in a short afro and she grinned when she drew up beside him.

"Ni sa bula vinaka. E rawa ni'u vukei kemuni?"

Luke glanced down at her in assessment. She didn't work here, that much he knew, but her ploy worked at a glance. It wasn't unusual for the employees of businesses to hound the white visitors who stepped into their stores, primarily because they were oftentimes tourists and they would spend a whole lot of money if they got the help they needed.

She must be the new go-between. The secretary, Luke often referred to them, even though Jone didn't think that was as funny as he did.

"Io," he answered, setting the hairspray down. He leaned idly against the corner of a wall near him and didn't need to look around to know no one would overhear them. "Au via raici Jolame."

She was definitely the secretary, since she recognized the code name he used for Jone. She grimaced faintly and shook her head in the manner of someone who had to inform a customer that the item they were looking for was not in stock. "Vosota e sega ni mai cakacaka 'o koya."

Luke sighed and nodded, pushing himself to a stand as if it was a mild inconvenience. Their eyes meeting for a moment told another story entirely. 'Jone didn't come to work' meant in their world something a whole lot more alarming than the man felt like staying home sick.

"E rawa ni 'o ni qai vakadewataka vua e dua na i tukutuku?" he asked. Normally he wouldn't ask to leave a message but he was starting to get antsy; they were running low on time.

She nodded. "Io."

"Me qai qiri mai vei Luse e na naba 311354."

"Sa vinaka," she said with another nod and stepped back. There was a brief pause in which a tricky little smile crossed her lips. She spread her arms to encompass the merchandise in the store. "Na cava o via volia?"

Luke nearly snorted but instead only shook his head regretfully, keeping up appearances in case anyone nearby understood Fijian. They both knew he wasn't going to buy anything and even if he wanted to, she couldn't sell it. Her pretending to be an employee was simply a cover to allow them to converse without others giving them a second glance.

"E sega. Vinaka."

She arched an eyebrow and crossed her arms, one hip cocking upward. Apparently she was really getting into pretending to be an employee if a simple 'no' wouldn't suffice. He made a mental note to tease Jone about his lackeys watching too many Bond movies.

"Au a volivoli enanoa."

"Sa vinaka..."

Her dubiousness clearly showed how unimpressed she was with the excuse he had thrown out. He couldn't blame her. 'I shopped yesterday'? Really? What was he, an old man who got out once a week?

She smiled. "Moce mada."

"Sa moce."

Even though the store wasn't air-conditioned and the door stayed propped open, leaving the building was like walking into a wall of heat. Luke adjusted the light t-shirt he wore and wished, as he strode down the street, that he'd worn a sulu as well. He could get away with wearing a swath of fabric around his legs in Fiji, even if he couldn't have gotten away with that back home.

Then again, Montana had never made him want to kill himself with the thought that surely Hell would be cooler than here.

As he passed down Renwick Road, he wondered what he was going to do about Jone. He couldn't have been in too much trouble if he was able to send his new secretary out to the meet-- but this was the first time he'd failed to show. And when the topic was so important, too...

Fingers clenching in his pockets, he absently swept his dark blue gaze past the open storefronts and the people milling about.

Something was happening. Something big.

It was the only explanation.

His phone suddenly vibrated, buzzing against his fingers and startling him. He pulled it out and checked the caller ID, feeling his blood run cold at the name. He didn't pause nor allow a flicker across his bland expression as he answered.

"Yo," he said idly into the phone. He tossed some money in a beggar woman's cup as he passed and glanced around at the storefronts. "I told you I wouldn't buy you anything if you didn't call me before I left."

There was a significant pause on the other end of the line before the rumble of a familiar voice murmured into his ear. "This is a secure line."

"I know, I know," Luke said in a cheerfully long-suffering tone. He swung closer to a storefront with groceries inside, eyeing a cold drink before making a face and continuing on his way without breaking his stride. "But complaining won't change a thing. You have to learn to make up your mind before I leave."

"Tell me when you can talk."

"Yeah, yeah." Luke twisted to avoid running into a man striding past him. "Maybe next time."

It took him nearly five minutes to wind his way through the streets until he could finally locate a place out of the way from prying eyes or ears. He strode up a small hill and ducked into the back area of an abandoned building. He had used this space occasionally for CRI meets and it had proven to be one of the most secure areas in Suva for delicate conversations. Even so, he flicked on the debugger clipped to his belt and only spoke when he saw he was clear from any surveillance.

"Reese, what the fuck?" Luke hissed quietly. He hovered near the wall to aid in further privacy. "I told you not to use this line. Are you trying to get me killed?"

"It couldn't be helped."

"What's so important?"

There was a short pause and then: "Give me your update first."

Luke raised his eyebrows and turned, his upper back pressing against the rough wall. "I have six possibles identified, depending on the message. Did you hear back from intel yet?"

"They say it's likely to be concentrations."

"What sides are we thinking?"

"The big two, most likely."

Luke grimaced and dropped his head back against the wall. "Great," he said sarcastically. "Any update on the timeline?"

"A week," Reese said reluctantly. "Maybe more."

"A week?" Luke repeatedly dangerously, straightening abruptly. "What the hell-- how did that slip through the cracks? Last I heard was a month, maybe two."

"They pushed it up. No one knew." Reese paused and added, "You know we would have told you if we did."

Luke glared into empty air. If his time was that short after all, he was going to have to lean on his CRIs even more. At least he understood the reason for Reese's call.

"I'll get on it. Copy you on anything new." He was about to hang up when Reese said suddenly:

"There's something else."

"Okay." Luke drew the word out slightly. The silence stretched and Luke rolled his eyes. "What, are we playing guessing games now?"

There was another, longer pause. Luke's senses went on heightened alert as a stirring of worry moved through him. Reese wasn't usually this reluctant.

"You aren't going to like it."

"What? It can't be that bad."

Another long pause and then:

"Someone's name came up in recent intel. An old alias." Reese fell silent a moment while Luke went completely still. "It's him."

Mal.

The world stopped moving around Luke. The susurrations of voices in the background and the oppressive heat of the day fell away in the face of the buzzing that overtook his mind.

"What?" he asked breathlessly, clenching the phone.

Reese sighed. "It's him. I don't know why or how or even whether he's involved. The alias is old-- twelve years. It could be a coincidence, but..."

"Probability of truth from intel?"

He could almost see Reese's sculpted features grimacing. "They place it in the 60% range."

An explosive breath left Luke and he started moving again without realizing it; a restless pace that kept him circling in the corner like a piece of debris caught in the wind. He shoved his fingers back through his thick brown hair, leaving locks to fall forward into his eyes when he dropped his hand at his side.

"Probability of a trap?"

"Too hard to say."

"What do *you* think?" Luke pressed.

Reese's silence was answer enough.

Luke growled, at once infuriated and frustrated. He wanted to shut off his phone and start on a manhunt immediately but Reese's voice stopped him.

"I know what you're thinking and you can't do it."

"I can fucking well do what I want," Luke snapped before he could stop himself.

"Don't be an idiot. It's an *old* alias. It was probably leaked to draw us out--"

"And what if it wasn't, Reese?" Luke demanded, rounding on the corner as if the man were standing in front of him. "What the fuck then? This could be a distress signal--"

"He taught us better than to use shoddy work like a fucking old alias--"

"Stop being so goddamned hooked on the alias! You just don't want to believe it's him so you're coming up with excuses ahead of time."

"And you *do* want to believe it's him," Reese snapped back. "If you'd get his dick out of your head for one minute you could think clearly about all this."

"*Ha*," Luke said harshly. "If you'd get *mine* out of your head you wouldn't be so fucking biased."

The ringing silence that met that statement caused even Luke to stop and realize what he'd just said. Before he could say anything else, the phone abruptly went dead. Luke looked down at the blank screen and swore aloud.

So much for never bringing that up.

* * *

A brush of a strong hand against his thigh, moving upward at a distracting pace.

"What are you doing, Mal?"

"Teaching you."

His eyes finally opened to the white of the ceiling above him. The warmth of the sheets against his back. His palm scraped lightly across Mal's upper arm, his lips lifting in a lazy smile.

"Is that really what you're supposed to be teaching me?"

A low rumbling chuckle and a brush of a stubbled cheek against his own. "I don't see you complaining."

His own voice turned huskier as that hand neared the junction of his legs. "You know I like to suffer in silence."

A whisper of hot breath in his ear:

"Then this is me teaching you endurance."

"Emori!"

Luke jerked awake, for a moment too disoriented by the white ceiling and hot, sweaty sheets to understand where he was.

"Emori!" the voice came louder and a dark face suddenly came into focus above Luke's eyes.

"What?"

"Saleem," Akhil said. "He is ready for you."

"Oh," Luke said in confusion, and then pushed himself up to a sitting position. The sheets fell down his bare chest to pool in his lap. The Fijian cover name he used slowly filtered through his brain and told him where he was.

This wasn't that day in Ixtapa. This was so many years and assignments after that.

"Oh," he said, more significantly this time. He grimaced and dragged a hand back through his sweaty hair. "Can you give me a minute?"

"Of course."

Akhil was gone before Luke had even swung his feet over the edge of the bed. He stood, stretching as he did so and feeling a pop of reconnecting bones and strained muscles. Sudden movement caught his attention followed by a chattering squeak. He glanced through a fall of overgrown brown hair to see the resident gecko silhouetted against the wall in an awkward pose.

"Hey Spartacus," he greeted it as he swiped some clothes off the floor. The gecko merely shot up the wall, and then stopped to stare near the ceiling.

When he was suitably clothed in loose bermuda shorts and a tank top that was already starting to stick to him in the heat, he padded out of his room into the main space. Saleem, for all his wealth, lived relatively frugally.

In Suva, at least. His house in Savusavu was another matter entirely.

Voivoi mats were already spread across the floor in the main room, covering the rug beneath it that was starting to wear through in areas. He heard voices murmuring behind a closed door. It was what he thought of as the Muallaf room; the place of converts.

The door opened as he settled on his knees on the edge of one of the voivoi mats. He looked over to see Saleem walking out of the room, his angular face serene as always while his body blocked the others Luke could just see behind him. A man's voice droned in the background even as the door swung quietly closed.

"La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasoolu Allah..."

Luke had always found the Shahada to sound beautiful and fluid, like much of Arabic did to the untrained ear.

"Emori," Saleem greeted him as he drew closer. The pale shalwar kameez he wore stood out against his dark skin. His beard sheltered the white flash of his smile. "You have woken."

"Thank you for your hospitality," Luke responded, bowing his head slightly and keeping his hands folded in his lap.

"It is a pleasure of mine." Saleem gestured for him to stand. Luke trailed after him as they headed toward the small, open kitchen located just off the living room. "Your sleep was good?"

"Yes, thank you."

Saleem nodded and poured Luke some water from the tap. He slid the glass across the small counter top with a faint scratching noise and then straightened, his dark eyebrows rising. "I trust there is a reason for this visit?"

Luke smiled. "Oh, just passing through, really. I do have some questions to put in my next article, though, if you have time? I was hoping for some clarification on the Five Pillars."

Saleem stilled, his dark brown eyes flicking from Luke's benign expression to the empty room surrounding them. Akhil could be heard through an open door down the hallway, rapidly conversing in a garbled mixture of Hindi and English to someone on the phone.

"Yes." Saleem smiled after a moment in return, although Luke didn't miss his tensed shoulders any more than Saleem had seemed to miss Luke's idle tapping of his fingers against the glass. "There is time now, yes."

Luke left the glass of water on the counter and followed Saleem deeper into the flat where they took a set of steps to the second level. The upstairs was hardly used at the moment while it was being converted to a larger space for prayer. Saleem planned to allow women to pray in the space alongside the men; a practice not as uncommon in Fiji as it was elsewhere in the world, but still considered unacceptable by some of the most traditional countries, particularly in the heart of the Middle East.

"I must pray soon," Saleem said the moment they were alone with no chance of being overheard.

"I know." Luke crossed his arms and paced the length of the wall before he turned and regarded Saleem seriously. "You've thought about what I told you before?"

"Yes, of course." Saleem waved a hand dismissively and began to turn away. "But I do not believe it is a worry. You come to me only with rumors and assumptions--"

"Saleem." Luke's grave tone caused the older man to stop and turn to face him. "It's going to happen even earlier than we thought. Next week."

Saleem's pleasant features fell at the words. In that moment, he looked decades older. "The timing..."

"Yes." Luke's eyes narrowed and he turned to begin pacing again. "Can you ask them not to celebrate or somehow find a new place to do it?"

"On Eid-al-Fitr?" Saleem asked incredulously, then let out a harsh laugh with a shake of his head. "You must joke. It is impossible."

"Surely you can convince them to make an exception this time," Luke insisted.

"The entire community looks forward to such a day," Saleem said unequivocally. He frowned, his arms crossing. "After Ramadan? No, it is not to be done."

"Goddamn it, Saleem, people are going to die!" Luke snapped, rounding on the Imam and pulling himself up short at the man's sharp stare and stiff back.

"It is not appropriate to curse," Saleem said coolly.

Luke opened his mouth and then shut it. He grimaced and jerked a hand through his hair. "Sorry, I..." His eyes narrowed and slid away. He frowned and let out a quietly harsh breath. "Sorry."

Saleem was silent for a spell. Just as Luke was ready to make a new argument, he heard the quiet footfall approaching him and turned to see the older man pause near him. He braced one arm on the other and tapped his bearded chin with one long finger.

"You seem most upset. More even than when you spoke of this first."

Luke frowned, wishing not for the first time that the man wasn't so damn observant. "This new timetable means the casualties will be even higher."

"Hmm." Saleem stayed there, dark eyes burning into the side of Luke's face at length. "Yes. It is true."

There was nothing to say to that and Luke sighed heavily. He strode across the room, wishing they hadn't covered the windows during the conversion to a quasi-mosque. He settled for leaning against the wall and crossing his arms, his brow hooding his features.

"Saleem, this is serious. You know we have solid intel on this."

Saleem sighed, his shoulders weighing down. "We do not know the specific city though, yes?"

"We have a very good idea it will be in the Suva area."

"Why Fiji?" Saleem pressed. His lips turned down on the edges. "Surely there are better locations for such an attack..."

"It's not only about Muslims, although that's a large part of it." Luke sighed and shoved himself away from the wall, walking over to stop in front of Saleem. "Look, Islam may not be the largest percentage of population here but there's a significant mixture of that and Christianity. And you know as well as I that a bombing may cause another coup on top of it. Not to mention it's a good way to warn against other religions; Hinduism, Sikh..."

"And the target?"

Luke frowned. "I can't say for certain, but I think there will be two primaries with a number of secondaries. My best guess so far is near the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Suva-- don't look at me like that; you know they just built that new mosque off Hercules and depending on their range they could hit the police station and city council as well." Saleem's expression darkened but he didn't interrupt. "And the Nakasi Mosque-- that will also hit the police station and Catholic church nearby. The airport isn't far from there so they could use it to escape."

"And the schools!" Saleem protested, his cheeks flushing. "There are schools near both! It is madness to harm the children..."

Luke stared at him and then shook his head. "Saleem. The schools are probably one of the reasons they would choose those locations. Especially Nakasi."

Saleem threw his hands up angrily and turned away. "I can speak of this no longer. Such horror to think of during this time..."

He started to stride toward the stairs but Luke stopped him with a hand on the hard lines of his shoulder.

"Saleem." He squeezed and stepped closer. "I'm telling you this so we can stop it."

Saleem said something almost too quietly for Luke to hear.

"What?"

"I said, 'how?'" Saleem said more strongly, turning to glare at Luke. His shoulder jerked in a sharp motion, dislodging Luke's hand. "We are only so few. Even if we tell the military, even if we tell the police, how does it end? If not this Eid-al-Fitr, another. If not these targets, others. If not them, their colleagues."

His dark eyes blazed as he stepped into Luke's personal space. "They wish to start a war, Emori. Within and without. For such extremists, they stop at nothing. It is a perversion of their *jihad-bil-saif*. How do you stop this?"

Luke's mouth opened and for a moment he was taken off guard; words from another life hissing through his mind:

They wish to end it all. How do you stop it when they have nothing to lose and you have everything? Or is it possible, Lucas, you think you have nothing after all?

"We'll find a way," he heard himself telling Saleem confidently. "We have to."

Saleem scrutinized him; dark gaze drilling into Luke's and scouring every centimeter of his face for any sign of a lie. At length he frowned and stepped back.

"I hope you are right, Emori," he said gravely. "I do not wish to live in a world where I must pick my steps around dead children and believers."

"None of us do, Saleem."

Saleem eyed him for another long, tense moment before he turned abruptly and strode, stiff-backed, toward the steps. "I will do what I can. You must do what you can. I will speak to the chief and contact you later in this week. For now, I must pray."

His tone was dark and Luke wished he had the luxury of feeling guilt for making a pious man consider such grim realities during his holy month. But he didn't, so he simply followed behind and split off when Saleem headed to one of the private rooms. He grabbed his few belongings from the guest room and threw them into his worn bag.

Spartacus came skittering down the wall and paused near the door when Luke went to leave. He stopped and eyed the little creature, feeling for a moment as though the gecko was the only one on the island who understood the isolation of his position.

Ridiculous, he thought scathingly.

When he left he could hear Spartacus' chittering laughter trailing him down the hall.

* * *

"Jone."

The man paused as he walked to the Republic of Cappuccino. He stilled, staring straight ahead even as Luke shifted in the corner and jerked his chin subtly toward the entrance of the coffee shop. Jone hesitated and then followed Luke inside.

They didn't speak as they each ordered a drink. Luke left Jone to pick up the drinks while he secured them space on the comfortable chairs in the far back. The light croon of American Jazz would hide their conversation.

Jone returned shortly and carefully handed over the mug of coffee. Luke held the warm mug of coffee in his hands, leaning forward on the edge of the overstuffed red chair with his forearms resting on his knees. His dark gaze burned into the side of Jone's round face.

"I got your call and yet you don't seem happy to see me," Luke observed.

Jone tracked some people walking past the store through the windows in front and sipped his americano silently. Tension built between them but it was a kind Luke recognized. He shrugged easily and settled back in the chair. Another cover conversation it was, then.

"Fine-- whatever, man. You don't want me involved in your sister's business, I get it." Luke narrowed his eyes and paused with the mug near his mouth. "But she's the one that invited me to the wedding, okay? It's not like I pushed it."

Jone met Luke's eyes for the first time; a quick jerk of a movement that hovered once caught. Once, they had been able to read each other well enough to not need words. Now, Luke wasn't certain how clearly he could read his informant's face.

Jone's bloodshot eyes, the dark bags, the failure to show at the previous appointment-- he was being followed or threatened. Probably both, judging by how Jone's eyes kept shifting toward the window then stopping before the movement became anything more than a subtle tic.

"You say this but you were the one who contacted her first." The still in Jone's voice may not have been feigned entirely but the disdainful glance he sent Luke's way was. Or at least, Luke hoped so.

"I was asking her about Maria," Luke protested indignantly. He scowled and leaned forward, shoving a finger in Jone's chest. "*You* were the one who told me to get on that."

So close, their eyes met. *Are you okay?* Luke asked silently, and thought his informant must have understood when he pulled away and shook his head vigorously.

"No, I told you Maria was ready and single. I didn't tell you to lean on my sister who *you* dumped."

"That was ages ago, man." Luke waved a dismissive hand, tilting his head down but not looking away from beneath dusty eyelashes. Watching Jone for the tell. "You need to get over it already."

"She cried for three weeks!" Jone yelled, slamming his mug down on the table suddenly. "There was nothing I could do! I wanted to help but I couldn't-- you know that. You *know* that!"

His dark features flushed, his lips pulling back from his teeth in a seemingly genuine grimace. When the other customers all looked over except two people who kept their eyes steadfastly on their newspapers, and when Jone's gaze flicked seemingly unconsciously between the coffee and Luke's mouth, Luke knew.

Ice flooded his veins.

Jone's near-black eyes didn't shift from Luke's face. If anything, they seemed to grow heavier. Chin trembling faintly, he kept his back to the other customers.

Luke shifted his feet subtly; tensing his thigh muscles even as he raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. A simple gesture of a movement; setting the untouched mug of coffee down as if his heartbeat wasn't pounding with adrenaline and he didn't realize he was two seconds away from potential enemy capture. Alone, without backup.

"Jesus, man, I'm sorry," Luke said mildly. "I didn't know she leaned on you that hard."

Jone's shoulders were a sloping line; his steady hands that had once caught Luke before he could fall too far were now flexing restlessly.

"It wasn't only her." Now Jone wouldn't meet Luke's eyes-- drawn, instead, to the empty air over the agent's shoulder. "It was my mother, too. My father."

Dark eyes dragged back to Luke's with effort, as if pushing against the weight of the world. "You understand? They needed me to help her. They needed me..." His gaze dropped to his americano, his voice turning quiet. "I couldn't tell her no."

Luke knew Jone wanted forgiveness but there was none he could give. Not right now. "How many times did they ask you?"

"Three times at first. Then two, at the end. There was no way around it. You know that, right?" Jone's eyebrows drew together, trembling just so slightly like his lips. "But they said if I helped her I could make a difference. I had to help."

Luke translated in his mind: *Three enemies in the front; two in the back. Surrounded. No way out.*

"Maybe it feels that way, Jone," Luke said, fixing Jone with a heavy stare. "But there's always a choice."

Thick black eyelashes shuttered Jone's glistening eyes as his expression fell in on itself. He slumped forward even as Luke saw the two customers up front fold their newspapers.

"I'm sorry," Jone whispered thickly. "Ni vosota sara, Luse, forgive me."

Luke calmly stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Give Maria my regards."

He walked into the bathroom, locking the flimsy door behind himself and pausing to look in the mirror. *You'd better be paying attention*, he thought darkly.

Flipping the toilet seat up, he relieved himself even as he worked at his back molar with his tongue. When he felt it shift in just the right way, he bit down and was rewarded with a quiet crunching noise overrun by the sound of him urinating. He spit the thin pieces of enamel that had been hiding the GPS activation unit in his tooth into the toilet and flushed the evidence.

As he washed his hands he peered into the mirror, mouth wide open and eyes narrowed as he searched for any evidence that would show what he'd done. It worked as well as he'd always been told it would; all he saw was another silver cavity amidst others.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, he saw two men and a woman waiting for him with guns aimed at him and hugged up against their bodies to hide the weapons from view. He didn't bother resisting. The number of civilian casualties that would result from it wasn't worth it.

Instead, he casually followed them out to the street and into a waiting taxi. The diesel-burning engine was loud and uneven-sounding, and the driver watched the surroundings of the vehicle a little too closely. Luke wondered whether the legitimate owner of the taxi was still alive.

He was pushed into the back seat between two of the enemy with the third going in front. They'd meant to drug him with his coffee but since he hadn't had a sip they had to take other actions.

He wasn't surprised by the stabbing pain in his neck, nor the subsequent darkness that overcame him.

* * *

"How do you spot a terrorist?"

Luke blinked, distracted from eyeing the way Mal's fitted shirt hugged his body. He arched an eyebrow, dragging his gaze up to Mal's impassive one. "Is this a trick question?"

"No," Mal said patiently.

Reese tapped his pen against the side of his book, looking sidelong at Luke. After a moment he straightened his back. "There is no one way to spot a terrorist but you can look for suspicious activity around suspects or potential targets."

"Good," Mal said with a curt nod. He held his hands behind his back and sedately paced the front of the room. "What are some examples of targets?"

"Anything with critical infrastructure or a high likelihood of casualties," Luke intoned. He slouched forward, resting his cheek on the heel of his hand. "Really, do we have to do this now? It's so effing hot..."

"What are some key characteristics of terroristic attacks?"

"Inflicting mass casualties or interfering with critical infrastructure--" Reese started to dutifully reply and Luke straightened.

"Hey, I just said that--"

"--secondary devices, often intended to injure or kill emergency responders, the possibility of multiple incidents, and the possibility of rapid escalation of the hazards."

Mal nodded again and although his lips didn't shift from the serious frown dominating his strong features, his blue eyes did regard Reese approvingly. "Good, Reese. Sarah has taught

you well." He paused and raised one wan eyebrow. "I'm beginning to wish you were my rookie instead."

Luke rolled his eyes and said, dripping with sarcasm, "Nice. I love you too, Mal."

Reese resumed tapping his pen. His gaze burned into the side of Luke's face.

"What are immediate actions to take at the scene of a WMD incident?" Mal continued, unperturbed.

"RAIN," Luke responded, sitting up straight with his hands folded in front of him. The way he raised his eyebrows and the more polite tone of his voice made it obvious he was mocking what it meant to be a good student. "Recognize the hazard or threat, Avoid the hazard, injury or contamination, Isolate the hazard area, and Notify the appropriate support."

"Good. And types of WMDs?"

"Chemical agents, biological agents, radiological materials and nuclear weapons, and explosive devices," Luke ticked off and then continued impatiently: "And before you ask-- among others, vapor density, odor, mortality, bacteria, viruses, toxins, alpha, beta, gamma, neutron radiation, exposure and contamination, pyrotechnics, propellants, explosives, and be careful of the stimuli like heat, ESD, friction, impact, shock or RFE so you don't set it off. Can we be done now? I want to hit the beach before the sun sets."

Mal's eyebrows shifted upward and even Reese's pen stilled. Luke looked between the two.

"Yes? Good? Okay." He pushed himself to a stand and threw his books in his bag. "I'll see you both back at the hotel. I'm going to change."

When he left he didn't look back but he could feel both their stares burning into him.

* * *

He awoke suddenly but years of training kept him dead still. He resisted the urge to fly his eyes open and instead looked through the dusky screen of his eyelashes. His head pounded violently and it felt like his entire body was moving in a slow undulation.

"I know you're awake," came a man's calm observation. "Feel free to stand any time, Lucas Wainwright."

Well, that solved the question of who they thought they had in their custody. They knew who he was but at least they didn't truly know who he was. Which meant they hadn't gotten to Mal yet or, if they had, he hadn't told them anything.

A knot of anxiety that had been burning in his gut unwound slightly at that knowledge.

Mal may still be safe.

Still, the mystery remained: who exactly was his enemy?

Luke grimaced faintly and rolled onto his back. The room still seemed to be spinning and the pounding in his head only increased. When he opened his eyes fully he simultaneously noted that the light was blindingly bright and that it hadn't been the screen of his eyelashes that had made the room unfocused; it was his eyes themselves.

It was a laborious task but he shoved himself up to a seated position, his knees drawn in and falling to the sides. If his vision had seemed blurry before it was now whited out by a snowstorm. He squeezed his eyes shut against the light, with one hand at his forehead and the other braced on the floor to keep himself from falling over again. Even then he could feel the muscles in his arm twitching; accounting for every subtle shift in his body weight even while his mind was unconscious of the way he wavered.

"What did you give me?"

His voice came out as scratchy as the stubble that perpetually lined his jaw.

"Merely a sedative. It will wear off."

Luke had grown accustomed to hearing many accents over the years and being able to place the origin of their speaker. This time, there was no need to even rack his brain. He knew a hometown accent when he heard one.

American, just like him.

He tried to concentrate on the meaning of that simple piece of knowledge but the rolling of the room was a nauseating distraction.

"Why are we on a boat?"

"We are not. As I said, you were sedated."

Luke pressed his fingers to his temple, as if the pressure would still the migraine. "Well. You sure know how to treat a guy. Will there be a comment card before I leave? I have some suggestions."

The man didn't bother to respond. When the silence stretched between them, Luke squinted his eyes open to peer between his parted fingers. Details began to solidify in his surroundings: the hard texture of the concrete; the bare, flickering light bulb on the ceiling.

He focused on the man himself. He looked to be in his late thirties or early forties and was tall, powerfully built, with a scar that arched down his temple and curled along his cheekbone like a lover's touch. He wore a simple cotton shirt, as brilliant a white as his eyes were blue, with loose linen pants and worn sandals. His dark blond hair looked purposefully tousled. It was difficult to tell his height but Luke guessed he would be close to his own 6'2".

Overall, the man appeared to be at once manicured and comfortable.

He was sitting backwards on a chair, his strong forearms resting on the back of the chair while he studied Luke. Nothing could be read in that even stare.

Luke dropped his hand at his side, trying to ignore the massive pounding of his head. What the hell had they given him, horse tranquilizers?

He shoved the fall of hair out of his eyes, wondering if he looked as artfully tousled as his captor did. He didn't need a mirror to know the answer to that question: he didn't.

"So," Luke said conversationally when it became apparent the man wouldn't speak. "Kidnap federal agents just to stare at them often or am I special?"

"Do you know the meaning of your name?" the man rumbled.

Luke's eyebrows drew together. "What?"

"But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry," the man intoned, his expression shifting slowly from impassivity as he spoke, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness," his voice strengthened, his fingers clenching into fists, "which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

The man straightened, his voice growing as powerful as the apparent strength in his arms. "Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me."

There was a pointed pause. Brilliant blue eyes burned into Luke's face, accompanied by an enigmatic shift of his lips. "But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion."

When the man stood, his powerful form seemed to loom larger than six feet, larger than eight, as he peered down at Luke still seated on the floor. His voice echoed around them, filling every empty centimeter with the passion of a true believer.

"And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Ringling silence followed the last word while Luke stared.

"Wow," he said blankly after a pause. "Good story, man."

The man's features had settled back into impassivity as easily as he settled back onto the chair. "You do not believe."

Luke studied the man thoughtfully. He could go the route of 'no really, I'm a believer just like you' but it would be pointless. This man was too astute and if he knew Luke's profession then he likely knew why he was here. Besides, it was a good way to draw out more information and verify which group this was.

"I don't believe or disbelieve anything," he answered finally. He shifted and leaned back against the wall, his aching head slowly starting to clear. "But if there is divinity out there, it's possible it's all the same thing seen through different eyes and given the name of different religions."

The man's lips thinned.

One of Luke's dark eyebrows rose. "That's the wrong answer to you."

"The Lord is not a diamond with facets. He is absolute and those who believe otherwise have fallen to the devil's influence."

The rhetoric certainly sounded in line with a few groups but the best way to tell was to test a theory.

"Just because you believe something doesn't mean everyone else has to." Luke pushed back the fringe hair that was starting to fall into his eyes. "What harm is there in seeing the world through others' eyes?"

"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers," the man replied, his voice charged. "For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?"

"Can you answer anything without using someone else's words?" Luke asked mildly.

"My own words are unnecessary when even greater words have been given to us through the Holy Bible."

Luke nodded and tipped his head back against the wall. "So what's your goal?"

"Goal?" the man asked, his inflection as unchanging as his stone face.

"Yes." Luke gestured around him. "What are we doing here now?"

"We are having a discussion."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I make no plans; it is the Lord who has plans for me. I follow the footsteps He has placed before me and I fulfill the work He has asked of me." The man's blue eyes seemed to burn into Luke. "What are *your* plans?"

"Well right now you're kind of the one holding the cards, buddy," Luke said blandly. "If you're asking what I'd've liked to be doing right now, maybe a shot of whiskey and a game of pool." He paused and a small smirk played along the edges of his lips. "Maybe a hot young thing at my side while I'm at it. I'm sure I could find someone for you as well." His eyebrows raised. "So what's your preference? Male, female, or other?"

The man's eyes narrowed dangerously. His muscles flexed. "You mock the sanctity of life."

"I'm not mocking anything, man. I'm just asking who or what you like to screw."

When the man rose to his feet, it was with the power and grace of a lion; muscles that shifted visibly beneath his skin and the aura of a killer barely held in check. His voice was a rumbling growl. "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination. Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion."

"You could've just said you're straight but that works too." Luke leaned back against the wall. "You know, if you want me to hook you up with someone I know a person. My sister just became available. She had a long time boyfriend who got her knocked up but you don't need to worry about a kid running around, she had an abortion. She's looking for someone to have some fun with now." He looked the man up and down. "And damn if you aren't her type."

The man's lips curled as disgust clearly shifted across his face. "Now you attempt to anger me. For what reason?"

Luke watched him idly and shrugged. "Just passing the time."

Even so, this was strange. The general assumption from intel had been that Corazón were the ones who would be responsible for any terrorist attack. But this man wasn't like any of the Corazón operatives Luke had ever seen. Their biggest issue was abortion, and there wasn't a one of them who wouldn't respond violently at the topic.

But this man remained cool and calm no matter what Luke said.

Luke rolled his shoulders to remove some kinks. Might as well keep the man talking. "So there's something I've been wondering for awhile and maybe you can clear it up for me. If your god is so powerful, why doesn't he smite people every time we say 'goddamnit'--"

The man was in Luke's space with no warning, one powerful hand snapping around Luke's throat and throwing him against the wall. The man punched him, snapping his head back against the concrete with a crack that stunned Luke and echoed sharply in the room.

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," the man intoned as he violently punched Luke in the stomach; once, twice, as he started to fall. "For the Lord will not hold him guiltless, who takes His name in vain."

When the man stepped back as abruptly as he had approached, Luke couldn't stop himself from dropping to his knees with a racking cough. Through blurry eyes, Luke saw flecks of blood splatter across the dull grey floor.

Great. Just as his headache had started to leave, the friendly room service saw fit to bring him another.

At least the outburst had told him one thing: his growing theory about who this man represented was probably not far off the mark. But if that was the case, the ghost tale of an extremist group actually existed.

And the man had gone into this not planning to leave Luke alive.

The man's measured footsteps moved across the room, followed by the harsh grating noise of a metal chair scraping across concrete.

"There is no need for us to be at odds with one another," the man continued calmly as if he had not just beaten Luke to the floor. "Although the only true law is God's Law, I will respect our country's designation of you as a federal agent. I will give you a chance to make amends."

He paused behind the chair, his hands curling over the back. For the first time Luke noticed a heavy silver ring adorning one of his fingers and wondered if that was what had made his head, rather appropriately, ring. Luke dropped back to a sitting position as he'd been in before. This time, his body creaked unpleasantly.

"I ask that you cease your actions immediately. This world is corrupted with the evil of wicked men and the devil's ways. We will cleanse it of the unbelievers-- cleanse it of the heretics-- and we will open the eyes of our brethren who have been blinded, pushed back from True Faith even as the endtimes draw near. Our Lord God has seen fit to put us here to do His deeds, to spread His word to the fallen, and we will be there to rain fiery Hell down on those who would stop us."

As seemed to be the case, the man's voice transitioned from simple statements to declarations that vibrated with power by the end. His blue eyes seemed to burn unnaturally, his fingers a white-knuckled hold on the simple metal chair.

Luke rested against the wall and rolled his head to consider the man more fully. The rhetoric had a familiar ring to it but at the moment with pain running delirious circles around his body he couldn't exactly place it.

"What's your name?" The man studied Luke but didn't respond immediately so Luke added, "You know mine but I don't know yours. It only seems polite..."

"You may call me Simon," the man said at length.

"Well, Simon." Luke's dark blue eyes stayed, unwavering, on his captor's face. "I can't say I buy what you're selling. So if you get me that comment card I'd be happy to be on my way..."

Simon shut his eyes slowly, a resigned motion of one who had to give up a loosely held belief, and shook his head. "I had thought to reason with you but I can see now you are too far gone."

"Seems so," Luke agreed blithely. "'Infidel'-- it's written all over me."

The chair made a faint scraping noise as Simon pushed it aside in his trek across the room. He paused in front of Luke who merely stared up at him. It was better for his plan to stay compliant.

Simon seemed unworried about his prisoner running away, although the strength of his conviction was immediately made evident. He turned and calmly strode across the room. As Simon reached the door and stepped outside of the room, Luke heard a hissing noise. He glanced around him, searching for the source without immediate luck, and returned his attention to his captor just as the man paused with the door open.

Simon's piercing blue eyes seemed to glow from the shadowed hallway. The hissing sound was becoming more pronounced, bringing with it the beginnings of a medicine-head feeling. Luke didn't have to search the room to know the meaning. They planned to gas him. Whether it was meant to kill or sedate him, he didn't know.

The intent seemed crystal clear a moment later. He caught Simon's parting words before the door fell shut with finality:

"Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul."

=====

"I didn't know you were such a good student," Reese said as he sat at Luke's side. He drew his legs in and rested his forearms on his knees, hazel gaze running along Luke's face to dip, briefly, to his bare chest and down to where wet swim shorts still clung to his skin.

Luke snorted and flopped onto his back, resting his head on his hands. "Not you too." Reese was silent a moment and then said, "I only meant that Sarah..."

When he didn't continue Luke couldn't help a bark of a laugh. "Sarah said I sucked didn't she? I don't take the trainings seriously, I skipped out on important lessons, yadda yadda?"

"Well. Yes..."

"Well, Sarah's a prissy bitch if you hadn't noticed," Luke drawled. He closed his eyes, his lips lifting faintly on the edges. "She's always been that way."

There was silence for a period of time before Luke heard the rustle and whump of Reese dropping down to lie at his side. He felt the brush of Reese's skin against his when their elbows knocked together. "You've known each other awhile, I heard."

"Yep. We lived near each other in high school," Luke said idly. "She was a few years older but we hung out. She's why I got into all this in the first place. I didn't know what to do with my life and she ended up pushing me in this direction."

Reese made a thoughtful noise under his breath. "Guess that's why she's a trainer. She knows how to beat people into doing what they don't want and making them think they do."

Luke laughed and opened his eyes, tilting his head just enough to see the contours of Reese's face in the shadows. Their eyes met, mere glints in the night, but Luke could see Reese was smiling back. Luke knocked his elbow lightly against Reese, making him rock faintly.

"You know, Reese, you're alright," Luke said with a grin.

Reese's smile grew, his gaze sliding down Luke and dropping away. "You're not so bad yourself."

* * *

"Luke." The voice traveled from far away. "Luke! Lucas! Come on, you motherfucking idiot, breathe--"

"--I swear to fucking--"

* * *

"--God, Mal--" Luke gasped, arching his back and throwing his head back into the pillow. His feet dug into the bedding. "Jesus-- fuck-- Mal..."

Mal's hand sped up on Luke's erection, making the younger man groan unabashedly and tangle his hands in the sheets. Luke's body rolled with Mal's movements, trying to increase the friction.

The second that thought became evident, the older man abruptly stilled.

"What--" Luke hissed, dark blue eyes peering in accusation down his body. "What the fuck?"

"We're doing this at my speed," Mal reminded him with quirked dark blond eyebrows.

"For fuck's sake, you are so fucking full of yourself--" Luke started angrily, starting to reach for his arousal to just jerk one off on his own. He'd been so close before Mal decided to cockblock him. Mal's fingers snapped around Luke's wrist out of nowhere: a hard, unspoken warning. Luke looked over at him, mildly startled, while Mal's brown eyes burned into him dangerously.

"My speed."

"I should've known a geezer's speed would be glacial," Luke muttered but grudgingly settled back against the bed nonetheless.

"You know," Mal mused as he abruptly crawled up Luke's body to hover above him. His dark blond hair framed the hard lines of his jaw; the strong, slightly crooked nose from one too many fights. "Keep acting like a spoiled brat and I might give up on you entirely."

Luke glowered up at him. "Would that be such a bad thing, with a cocktease like you?"

Mal's lips pulled into a rakish smirk and Luke was reminded once again about exactly how devilishly handsome his mentor could be. "I see. If it's so bad for you now, it seems I've neglected your training. And here we are," he sat up, hand hovering centimeters from the straining heat of Luke's arousal. His dark brown eyes bore into Luke's face while his fingers shifted, a brush of air like torture along the electrified nerves of Luke's cock. "Back to endurance testing."

Luke growled, throwing his head back against the pillow for an entirely different reason now. When he squeezed his eyes shut it was with a grimace and a harsh reminder to himself to stop challenging Mal in bed.

Because if there was one thing he'd learned about Malcolm Carr, he said what he meant and, even more worrisome, he meant what he said.

"God--"

* * *

"--damn it!"

Luke's mouth fell open with a great, wrenching gasp. His eyes snapped open suddenly, gaze darting around hectically as he tried to understand the situation--

The intense green hazel of Reese's eyes came sharply into focus.

A hard punch on Luke's shoulder solidified the room's detail at the adrenaline shot of pain.

"Lucas *fucking* Wainwright, try that shit again and I will fucking kill you--" Reese was growling heatedly as his hands ran along Luke checking for wounds.

Luke coughed, hearing the sickness even in his own lungs. "What the hell are you punching me for?"

"Because you're a motherfucking moron! What the hell are you doing, getting caught without backup? If I hadn't already been on my way when I got the GPS distress it would have been too late. The ready team's already busy in India--"

Luke stopped listening to Reese's rant and rolled onto his side. He felt along his teeth with his tongue and then smirked sidelong at Reese. He was still too out of it to remember how their last conversation had ended and that he probably shouldn't tease. "Naughty boy. Did you slip me some tongue when you were giving me CPR?"

Reese's expression turned murderous and this time when he punched Luke it was full force. Luke let out a genuinely pained groan.

"What the fuck happened."

Luke grimaced. His head throbbed and he put pressure on his forehead. He was looking forward to the day when he didn't wake up with a raging fucking headache. Maybe the next generation of homegrown terrorists would take to drugging their captives with morphine instead.

"It was Left Hand of God."

"What?" This time, Reese's tone was sharp for an entirely different reason. "What proof do you have?"

"None, really. But he displayed all the characteristics that--" Luke cut himself off just in time but Reese looked at him knowingly nonetheless.

"That Mal compiled," Reese finished.

His broad shoulders were hard lines beneath his fitted white tank top as he looked away. Even dirty, the tank top looked crisp against his caramel-toned skin. What had been dark curls the last time Luke saw him was now replaced with short, nearly buzzed brown hair that disappeared into the shadows. Luke couldn't help feeling disappointed by this turn of events. For years, he had entertained a fantasy of grabbing the man by those curls and throwing him to his knees. Followed by much more interesting interactions.

"You need to give up on Mal for the moment," Reese said flatly and Luke was reminded once again of why that fantasy never quite made its way to reality.

Luke started to push himself up but was stopped by a strong hand gripping his shoulder. He looked up to find Reese's light eyes drilling into him. "For now," he emphasized. "If you don't, you'll be too distracted to finish this."

A scowl darkened Luke's features but he didn't say anything.

"I didn't miss anything in intel."

"I know you didn't."

"So what are they doing showing their faces now? They've been ghosts for years."

"Guess they had their fill of sitting on the sidelines while amateurs fucked up their goals," Luke said with a shrug. "They decided it was time to start a holy war."

The muscles in Reese's jaw flexed. "This is a good place to start a test run."

"Their thoughts exactly." With heroic effort, Luke tried to push himself to a stand but found that his muscles didn't quite want to cooperate yet. He dropped down and decided sitting was a nice pastime too. Way underrated.

"What were they like?"

"Couldn't say, just saw one. But he was a zealot. Calm as can be until you disrespect his ideals, then he snaps in a flash."

Reese made a noise in the back of his throat, looking around them. "Smart."

"Being a zealot?" Luke asked with mass incredulity. Probably more than was warranted but his head was killing him.

With a sidelong glance that was a scoff of its own, Reese said shortly, "Letting him think you're dead. A man like that doesn't give up on his enemies lightly."

Luke smirked. "Feel bad for wailing on me now?"

"Only that I left you conscious."

Luke had nearly forgotten how damn attractive the man was, with his high cheekbones, piercing eyes, and the lips that seemed perpetually chapped and, because of that, begging to be licked. The beard he sported mimicked his hair; short, shaped, and clean-cut.

"That's not what I want to hear from my handler," Luke commented as he started to push himself to a stand.

"Anyone assigned you should say far worse. You're impossible to keep out of trouble, you know that?"

When Luke was initially unsteady, Reese reached over and helped him up wordlessly. As Luke hovered somewhat gingerly between upright and slouched, Reese eyed him.

"Oh, relax," Luke said dismissively. "There was never any worry-- I knew you'd save me." He smirked. "My hero."

"You need one, when you keep ending up in distress."

Luke rolled his eyes. "What, twice in all the years we've known each other?"

"Two times too many, by my count."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but we're even. More than, if I count how embarrassing yours were. Remember that time in Rio--"

"We don't have all day," Reese cut him off shortly and stormed ahead. Luke smirked to himself. "I met with Saleem already-- he's aware of the status. "

"I probably scared the shit out of him by not showing at our meeting," Luke mused as he followed Reese out of the room. His limbs felt creaky and rusted.

"That's the short of it."

As they strode into the hallway, Reese's unruffled demeanor rolled over him again like a wave. His light eyes swept the area closely. Luke peered around them. They seemed to be in some sort of old building, heavily rundown and in need of repair.

"What happened anyway?"

"They had a bomb set to detonate if the gas hadn't killed you first." Reese's confident stride echoed around them. Pale eyes shone faintly in the light when he glanced over his shoulder. "You may feel some aftereffects."

Luke raised his hand idly and made a face. "Already on it." He kept waiting for the walls to stop throbbing in time with his head.

Reese pulled a phone out of his back pocket, and in his semi-addled state Luke couldn't quite pull his eyes away. The man's ass was impressive. Reese's thumb passed across the screen fluidly as he navigated the two of them through the building. He paused at a main door, his hand curling around the doorknob and stilling as he glanced over his shoulder.

"Intel wonders if the church is involved. They've backed multiple coups in the past; it's possible this is another case. Especially if it *is* Left Hand. You remember Ame. 'If God does get angry with the heathens, Christians will be punished because they allowed the worship of idols and other lesser gods in Fiji...'"

Luke was already shaking his head. "Anything's possible but Jone was pushed into giving me up. So whether or not the leaders are in on it, not all the followers are. Besides, if this were only about Fiji they'd aim for the Hindu temples."

"Like the fires in '08," Reese mused and Luke nodded.

"Exactly." Luke's eyes narrowed, his fingers flexing into fists and loosening again. He could feel his extremities tingling faintly. "I think this is something bigger."

"You didn't alert the churches yet, did you?" Reese's eyes were on his phone as he typed something quickly.

"No. It gets too political when you pull them in." Luke frowned. "I had considered it, though. It's what I was going to talk to Jone about, before..." He waved his hand. "Everything."

Reese nodded curtly. "Good. Let's go. We're running out of time."

"We have a timeline?" Luke asked interestedly.

They stepped out of the building. The sun hadn't yet risen but it was already hot and humid.

"The bomb was set for two hours from now." Reese finished typing and returned the phone to his pocket, leveling Luke with a pointed stare. "It follows that the others are set in a similar time period. So we need to find the other locations and defuse them. Here." He handed over a comm unit.

Luke looked around to get his bearings. He recognized Brewster Street, and turned toward the northwest. "We're right by the hospital," he noted flatly.

Reese peered in the direction of the buildings with a frown. "Probably to keep the injured from being saved."

Luke glared at the hospital. "Do we have clearance to contact the locals?"

"We have to go internal," Reese said shortly with a shake of his head. He crossed his powerful arms in front of him, looking as unhappy as Luke felt. "We can't tell the level of corruption in this case. We can't risk tipping them off."

"Then where's backup?"

"Five minutes out." Reese met Luke's eyes evenly. "They need to know where to go."

A dark scowl creased Luke's features. "I know where they're targeting."

* * *

While the backup team sped straight to Nasinu to search by the Nakasi Mosque, Reese and Luke split up to search the surrounding area for more bombs. Reese continued a more thorough search in and around the hospital while Luke took Reese's rental car to speed the eight blocks to Hercules. He left the car parked on the side of the street and ran past the mosque.

Given the plan to attack all the heretics according to Left Hand of God, placing a suitably powerful bomb directly between the nearby cathedral and the mosque could level both at once, along with the congregations. If there was only one bomb, it could be placed there.

The two religious institutions were separated by less than a block but the heavy trees and darkness before the dawn made it difficult to search the street. Trees and plants rustled as he darted through yards and rummaged through the undergrowth. He didn't find anything. His heartbeat ratcheted higher as he went, knowing all the while he could be missing it or he could simply be looking in the wrong place.

After another thorough sweep of the area he stood, sweating, his head snapping between the cathedral and mosque. Would they target first the people they saw to be heretics, turning from their god's word, or would they target the Muslims for not sharing their beliefs in the first place?

He ran to the mosque.

Reese's voice came across the comm. "Status?"

"Negative so far." Luke paused and swore loudly. "Where's a motherfucking Wheelbarrow when we need it?"

"Likely destroyed or detained, if the local LE had any. I wouldn't put it past Left Hand to have a dirty cop or two on the payroll."

We're going to be fucking killed, Luke nearly snapped, but he stopped himself just in time. He drew in a deep breath and let it out. The door to the side of the mosque crashed open at his push, and he was soon inside the building.

"I'm checking the mosque. They damn well better not have put it in the cathedral."

"I'll clear it."

"You're done already?"

"I found one earlier with enough C4 to level the surrounding blocks. Nakasi group reported disabling three so far."

Luke's breath was growing labored as he darted through the mosque. His head was finally starting to clear but the nausea hadn't left even with the adrenaline crashing through his system.

"Assuming I find one in the mosque, that's five so far. How much you want to bet we find two more?"

"Given the Seven Days of Genesis, I'd bet my house."

Luke snorted. "I've seen your place. That's not much to bet."

"You have something better?"

"My virginity."

It was Reese's turn to scoff. "I'm not sure you were even *born* with that."

"Ouch," Luke said as he darted down the stairs. "You maim me with your hurtful words."

There was a pause and then, "Luke?" He didn't wait before he continued: "We'll find them."

Luke didn't respond other than a quiet, tense: "Yeah."

They fell into mutual radio silence after that.

He searched as quickly but efficiently as he could, running in and out of rooms after they had been cleared. Once again, he wished they'd had time to deploy a whole bomb squad unit, complete with the robots that could take over the most dangerous positions. But with limited resources and a pushed up deadline, they had to make due with what they had.

He kept checking his watch, sometimes seeing only a few seconds had lapsed since the last time and others seeing a stretch of minutes. His heartbeat was louder than the echoes of his footfalls, and he could feel the blood pounding through his veins. In the back of his mind he knew if he messed up, if he missed this, not only would innocent people be killed but he would as well.

His entire life and any hope to a future, gone in less than a second.

He hadn't found anything yet when he heard the rustling of clothing and many quiet footsteps. Alarm peaked his heartbeat as he ran up the stairs and peered out a partially open door. There were far more people than he was expecting. They were still congregating slowly but when he darted out the back door and came around the side he saw a large mass of people siphoning into the mosque.

His sense of time had been completely confused. Ever since Reese had mentioned the two hour timeline, in the back of his mind he had been wondering why the bombs would hit early.

Now he saw they would be right at the worst time.

"Shawwal," he hissed under his breath, darting a glance around the sky.

He moved amongst the crowd, cutting over to a better vantage point to see the sun's progress at the horizon. It was only just beginning to rise but that meant it wouldn't be long until it had reached the distance above the horizon that the Eid prayer would start.

It was already Eid al-fitr. The entire Muslim population was going to be out in large congregations.

"This area's clear. I'm heading over," Reese's voice came across the comm unit.

"You won't make it in time."

"Do you have a better plan?"

"Yes." Luke moved into the basement beneath the large congregation hall. "Start evacuation."

"What's your status?"

"If you didn't find anything in the cathedral, I think they're going for one large explosion here."

"Have you found it?"

"Not yet."

"Keep looking."

He was running out of rooms to check and, more importantly, running out of time. His watch diligently counted down the minutes, bringing him to less than fifteen minutes.

He had just passed the twelve minute mark when he finally found the bomb, hidden in a dark corner of a janitorial closet.

Without the proper equipment, he couldn't analyze it the way he needed. If only it were as easy as in the movies. Cut the red wire and he could save the day.

Except in reality, the good guys detonated the bomb in a safe place or had high tech instruments to defuse it, and the bad guys couldn't be relied on for consistently colored wires or not putting in misdirects that would blow when tripped.

He looked around quickly, running through the options in his mind. Reese should be well into evacuating people by now so if he failed, hopefully the casualties would be minimal.

That was when he noticed the huge bucket, and the water faucet. He looked back at the size of the bomb. It could easily submerge.

It was risky, but he might have a slightly better chance than randomly pulling out pieces of the bomb or cutting wires at will.

He dragged the bucket over to the faucet, slamming the water on as high as possible.

Here goes nothing.

* * *

The sun was a glowing white brand against the azure sky, pressing heat deep into his skin. He squinted and shaded his eyes with his hand.

The mosque was still intact. The damage had remained largely on the lower level. No casualties. They would be able to cover this up as a burst water heater.

He was so relieved by the turn of events that when Reese came jogging around the corner, Luke broke out into a huge grin and ran over. He caught his former partner around the shoulders and swung around, thumping him on the back.

"We did it! We stopped those fuckers!"

Reese's smooth features were broken by an answering smile. "I knew we could." He reached over, one arm across Luke's shoulders in a short squeeze. His hand lingered a little longer than necessary. "I knew you would make it."

Before Luke could respond, Reese's phone rang. He pulled back and answered the phone, his light gaze sweeping the area as he spoke quietly. Luke looked around them, watching the nearby people continue about their days, many unknowing of the fate that had lain in store for them.

When Reese hung up, Luke glanced over.

"Backup is heading to Indonesia. Something came up. No issues in Nakasi otherwise. You were right-- seven bombs in all."

Luke nodded but before he could respond, Reese's phone rang again.

"I never knew you were so popular," Luke said with a smirk that grew at Reese's annoyed glance. Luke walked away to survey their surroundings.

A smile hovered on his lips. There were days his job was a huge pain in the ass but it was times like this he remembered why he did it. The sun was shining, people were oblivious to the darker side of the world, and they had stopped some assholes from senseless killing. His stress levels were finally starting to fall after a week of paranoia.

He heard Reese approach behind him and started to say as he turned, "So, ready for a dri--"

The question died on his lips the second he saw Reese's expression.

"What?" Luke asked warily.

"They hit Nadi," Reese said quietly. "Over 200 known casualties so far." He paused, then continued, "There were children."

"What?" Luke asked again, his voice rising harshly. "Where?"

"Andrews Primary School."

"But that's-- those are mostly schools! The only institution anywhere nearby is the Hindu temple."

"And the hospital and the Nadi Muslim College," Reese said darkly.

Luke shook his head sharply. His voice rose heatedly. "I didn't miss anything-- all my sources pointed toward a Suva attack. There was nothing about Nadi..."

Reese's hand rested heavily on Luke's shoulder, ending with a short shake. "Luke. No one blames you."

Luke drew in a short breath, unable to stop the anger and pain from brewing deep within him regardless, and let it out. He jerked out of Reese's grip and started striding toward one of the larger streets. "We have to get over there."

"Then we're going this way." Reese jerked his thumb back the way they'd come. "The car."

The drive to Nadi was spent in tense silence, and with the way Reese sped it took less than the two and a half hours it normally would. When they arrived on site, volunteers and emergency personnel were still searching for survivors buried beneath the rubble.

As Luke and Reese approached, Luke accidentally kicked something. He looked down, and saw the charred remains of a child's dismembered hand, curled inwardly as if trying to clutch at a parent's hand. Disgust welled up in his throat.

Reese glanced over his shoulder, saw the hand, and met Luke's eyes gravely.

They spent the next several hours helping and trying to make sense of this all. They learned there had been five more bombs in the area, and the knowledge that it had risen to twelve bombs in total filled Luke with anger with Left Hand that was only equaled by fury with himself.

All he could think as he dug through the rubble and body parts was: *I should have seen this. I should have stopped this.*

I could have saved them.

Reese called in their status and, after a short conversation, stepped away for some privacy as he discussed the next steps. Luke continued working without his handler, switching effortlessly between English, Fijian and Hindi based on who was talking to him.

But the smell of burned meat combined with unearthing the fourth dismembered torso of a child's body made him need a break. Luke walked away, clenching and unclenching his fists. He stopped down the street and dropped onto the edge of the curb, dropping his head into his hands.

He felt the distant vibrations of part of a building collapsing onto the concrete.

It took him a moment to realize his phone was buzzing in his back pocket. He pulled it out, eyebrows drawing together at the caller ID. Blocked number.

He accepted the call but didn't speak. There was a beat of silence before a voice that was digitized beyond any identifiers came into his ear:

"Hello, Mr. S."

The world fell away as the words hit Luke like a punch in the chest. His hand was a white-knuckled grip on the phone. That name-- no one should know it; no one but Sarah and Mal...

"My employers have a message for you. It isn't over yet."

The call disconnected before he could speak. He looked down at the phone, his mind racing on how to track the number even as he knew it would be futile. Whoever knew the truth would be intelligent enough to hide their tracks.

"Something wrong?"

Reese's voice at his side made Luke jump. He looked up, seeing Reese peering down at him. The tank top he wore was now stained with spots of black, grey and rusty red, the same as his face. His hazel eyes tinged with green were focused solely on Luke and in that moment Luke knew his former partner would listen to anything he had to say.

But Mal had listened once, too. And now he didn't know where he was or if he was safe.

Now, he didn't even know if Mal had betrayed him.

Luke pushed himself to a stand and slid his phone back in his pocket. "Nah. Just needed a break. Ready?"

A skeptical stare sharpened Reese's features, his strong jaw shifting before he abruptly turned. "Let's go."

Luke's stare swept their surroundings for anyone watching; anyone listening.

He didn't see anyone but that knowledge didn't make him feel any safer.