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KNOW THY ENEMY

The prelude to The Apocalypse Trigger

by

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a Luc Fortesque eBook short

For Shonna, who suggested I write this story.

An artefact from the Baghdad National Museum could justify the coalition invasion of Iraq. But the artefact is among items looted from the Museum just before the invasion. CIA Analyst, Emma Burrows enlists the help of Captain William Bradford and a small Joint Task Force 2 team to retrieve the artefact. Unknown to them, a mercenary unit led by Luc Fortesque is also after the stolen artefacts intending to sell them on the black market.

Know Thy Enemy is an eBook prelude to the full-length thriller novel, The Apocalypse Trigger.

CHAPTER 1

BAGHDAD NATIONAL MUSEUM, JUST BEFORE THE COALITION INVASION OF IRAQ, 12 MARCH 2003

Yusuf Zaid eased his foot off the accelerator as his car left Ahrah Bridge over the Tigris, and joined the traffic circling King Faisal turnabout. It was an unusually hot day and the air-conditioning in his old Hyundai was acting up. Perspiration glistened on his furrowed brow; sweat trickled down his back. He braked and eased behind a truck; his eyes darting to the rear-view mirror. Nothing out of the ordinary; nobody appeared to be following him.

Ahead, he could see the Baghdad National Museum. The ruling party had declared it open today – a rarity. Banners adorned with the likeness of the Iraqi president, and felicitating his rule, streamed over the walls facing Nasir Street. Every pockmark and blemish in the man's face was magnified a hundred times and clearly visible from the road.

Zaid parked and climbed out into the afternoon heat. He put on his sun glasses and looked around. A few people were walking away from him; nobody approaching. His handlers had cryptically told him he would recognize his contact when contact was made. Nothing further was disclosed; the less he knew the better. Plausible deniability: his answers would be more convincing if the Iraqi Intelligence Service arrested him. Convincing enough, he had quietly concluded, for any torture to end quicker.

A swarthy man was suddenly in his face, with a tourist map open wide, pointing in the middle of the crackling paper. Before Zaid could react,

the man said, "Go into the museum. Now!" To any passerby the man was a tourist asking directions. Then, in a louder voice, "Thank you. Have a good day." And as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone, head buried in the map.

Zaid cast a glance at the departing figure, saw him angling toward two men. Something about the pair struck Zaid as odd as he made his way toward the museum entrance. He was about to turn away, when the 'tourist' – seemingly blinded by the open map – walked right into one of the men. Zaid was inside the museum compound when a loud altercation broke out among the three men outside. Then one of the men looked directly at Zaid and in that instant Zaid realized they were IIS. Zaid worked with Directorate 8 – the bureau of the IIS responsible for developing offensive weapons – and had seen enough of the kind to be able to pick them out.

Too late, though.

The 'tourist' had deliberately bumped into them to buy Zaid time to get into the museum. Spurred on, Zaid quickly made his way to the ticket counter. He chanced a look over his shoulder and saw the IIS men break away from the altercation and come after him.

Zaid grabbed his ticket, didn't bother about change, picked up the pace and went deeper into the museum.

The 'tourist' bellowed after the IIS men, shook his head for effect, and retrieved his fallen map. As he did so, he spoke into a concealed

microphone. "I couldn't take it off Zaid," he explained, frustrated, "I've sent him to you."

There was a crackle in his ear piece. "I see him," said the female voice of his partner, who had been stationed inside the museum for such a contingency. There was background noise from the crowd inside museum. "He's walking away from me."

"You have minutes before they nab him!"

CHAPTER 2

The Baghdad National Museum houses thousands of priceless relics from the Mesopotamian civilizations that flourished in the region. Yet, since the Iraq-Iran conflict it is almost never opened to the public. That day was one of the rare occasions when the museum opened its doors in a move by the Ba'athist party to restore a sense of unity and pride in the increasing probability of a coalition invasion.

Zaid was in the Assyrian Gallery on the ground floor. No one paid attention to him or noticed how panicked he was. He craned his neck, searching for his pursuers over the heads of the visitors. He reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and felt for the tightly bundled sheaf of papers.

They must not find it on me.

He looked at the gigantic 10-foot high Lamassu sculptures. The human-headed-winged-bull and lion looked down at him, as if daring him to make a brave move. He spotted one of his pursuers at the far entrance to the gallery. And about mid-way, he saw a woman pushing purposefully through the crowd to him. Her eyes told him that she was his contact.

The IIS officer's keen eyes spotted Zaid just as he ducked into the adjoining gallery. He caught the attention of a nearby museum guard,

tersely explained what was required, and together they gave chase, ordering the crowd to make way for them.

Zaid's contact heard the shouts, and realized what was happening. As the two men stormed past, she was roughly pushed aside. If she made a move to stop them, they would arrest her, too. Plus, the museum guard was twice her size. She couldn't do it on her own. As the other visitors strained to see what the commotion was about, she spoke into her mic, "Where are you, Ibarra?"

Ibarra's voice cut in. "Just got inside the museum"

"Zaid is in the Islamic gallery."

"Okay, I'll head him off."

"The museum guards have been alerted," she warned.

Ibarra, the 'tourist', was determined, "We need that information."

They arrested Yusuf Zaid within three minutes. Strong hands pushed him to the floor as onlookers formed a gathering circle, pointing, speculating excitedly. He was frisked thoroughly but they only recovered his wallet, a pen, and the ticket stub. The IIS officer gruffly asked him, "What are you doing here?" His hands were twisted behind his back and handcuffs were clapped around his wrists.

"I am here for the museum," he replied. "Unhand me. I am innocent."

"We shall see."

Meanwhile, the other IIS officer arrived and they marched Zaid out of the museum.

Ibarra watched unhappily from a corner as the IIS officers and their prisoner passed five feet from him. Then he caught sight of the woman and saw defeat written on her face. She shook her head slightly.

Yusuf Zaid simply disappeared off the face of the planet. His family lodged a complaint with the police when he did not return home that night, but they were stonewalled and a phony investigation was opened.

Though she kept up hope and a brave face, his wife could not shake the feeling that her husband had fallen afoul of the IIS and had been taken to one of the many secret prison facilities they maintained. If that was true, she might never see him again. She looked at their nine-year old daughter asleep on the bed in their humble apartment, and for the first time, Fahima Zaid began praying for the end of the Ba'athist regime.

US-led coalition forces invaded Iraq on the 20th of March 2003. As the war progressed, pressure mounted to find evidence of WMDs in Iraq's arsenal. The most obvious sources of information were the numerous prisons where the Ba'ath party kept, tortured and executed state enemies. The coalition forces began a structured operation to locate these prisons, register each inmate and question them. Teams were flown to Iraq from the various intelligence organizations to pool resources and get answers quickly.

Under this operation, it was in April of 2004 that Yusuf Zaid was freed from his prison of nearly three years. His name was registered and it triggered an alert in the CIA systems. The officer in charge of the field operations immediately sent for Zaid to be brought to Camp Victory.

CHAPTER 3

CAMP VICTORY, US MILITARY BASE, AL FAW PALACE, 7
APRIL 2004

The Blackhawk helicopter descended into the prison compound, raising a cloud of sand. Yusuf Zaid shielded his unprotected face from the swirling grit. His features were gaunt, his hair disheveled and he was reed-thin. The visible parts of his back showed raised welts and scars where he had been whipped. He walked as if in a trance, unable to believe he was finally a free man.

A US marine climbed out of the Blackhawk. "Sir, are you Yusuf Zaid?" he asked unnecessarily.

Zaid nodded.

"Come with me, sir," the marine said, taking him firmly by the elbow and helping him into the bay of the helicopter.

As if I have a choice, Zaid thought.

They were hardly aboard when the whine of the rotors increased and the Blackhawk lifted into the sky. They landed at a Forward Operating Base and Zaid was ushered into a waiting Humvee. After bouncing along the road for a while, the marine held out a hood for him to wear. The coalition forces did this regularly, he explained, when they brought non-military people in.

"I want to speak with my family," Zaid said. The Humvee swerved around a bomb crater in the road.

"I'm sure someone will arrange for that. Please wear the hood, sir"

As if it is apparel. Zaid sighed and put it on. The last thing he saw before the mask enshrouded him in darkness was the brightly lit façade of Saddam Hussein's residence – Al Faw Palace, or as the coalition forces called it, Camp Victory.

He had showered, shaved and his hair was combed neatly into place. They had given him a fresh set of clothes too. And then he had been escorted to one of the rooms in the Palace where a hearty meal had been laid out on an ornate table. He inhaled the aroma, before grabbing the silverware and wolfing down the food. There was orange juice too and it disappeared in one swallow.

Then he waited. There was a wall clock and he saw it was 0500 hours, in the morning. He heard footsteps outside, the door opened and a woman stepped in. He recognized her immediately as his contact at the museum. Her hair had grown out and she looked older. Under strain, he thought.

She pulled up a chair, sat down and smiled at him.

"Mr. Zaid. Finally. You may call me Jane."

"Is that your real name?"

"Does it matter?"

He thought it over and decided it didn't.

"Did you eat well?"

"Yes. Thank you. And thank you for getting me out. I want to speak with my family to tell them I am safe."

"Your family is here."

"Here? In the palace?" His eyes lit up. "Can I –"

"We have an urgent matter to get out of the way before that happens, Mr. Zaid."

"You have waited for a year; I'm certain another half hour will not matter." There was irritation in his voice.

She looked at him earnestly. "Not by choice. We were overruled. Now, we have a small window of opportunity and we must act."

The years in prison had not dimmed Zaid's mind. He had heard the IIS and prison guards talking: The coalition had invaded Iraq, claiming Saddam had WMDs, but none had been discovered. "You need a reason for the invasion," he said.

Jane looked at him and nodded slightly. "If you can give us the evidence of the bio-weapons and illegal human testing Directorate 8 was involved with, you and your family will be in the US within sixteen hours."

Zaid sat back, placed his hands on his thighs. "They interrogated me for days, you know?" He paused reliving the horrible experience. "And tortured me. I don't know how I resisted, but they didn't get a thing from me."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you really, *Jane*?"

"I'm here to do a job, Mr. Zaid. Believe me we tried to get you out that very day. And then as the days passed, we lost the trail."

"You mean you were reassigned."

She ignored the barb. "Tell me what we need to know."

"I hid the evidence in the Baghdad National Museum that day. One of the figurines was hollow. I pushed it into the mouth."

Jane felt foolish. It never occurred to them that Zaid would have hidden the evidence in the museum. They had assumed he had it on his person when he was arrested. But there was something else, and she could only hope her fear was unfounded. "Do you have the exhibit ID?"

"I memorized it." He gave it to her.

"Excuse me one moment." She went to the door, cracked it open, spoke to somebody in the corridor in low tones. She waited by the door for a minute or so. Then the person returned, they conversed again and Jane came and sat opposite him.

"The museum was looted after the invasion, Yusuf. I feared that the exhibit may have been among those pilfered. I asked my colleague to check it out and it turns out I was right."

"It isn't my fault the museum was looted." He wanted to ensure his rehabilitation in the US was unaffected.

"No, it isn't." She formed a steeple with her hands. "After the looting, there was a lot of public outrage. The Baghdad Museum Project was formed to ensure all artefacts were retrieved. There has been tremendous success, and working with Iraqi experts, we have recovered most of the stolen artefacts." She smiled for the first time. "This exhibit is among those we have recovered. It is lying in a temporary storage depot about six hours drive from here."

Relief flooded over Zaid. "Can I meet my family now?"

"Yes. I'll arrange for it." Jane stood. "Thank you for your cooperation."

"He has confirmed it?"

CIA Agent Emma Burrows –Jane – nodded. "Yes. I can go there and return before nightfall." She looked expectantly at her commanding officer.

While there was a high probability that the information Zaid had to offer would be dated, the coalition was desperate to make a case before the international community. Zaid's information was the closest anyone had come to unearthing tangible evidence of WMD research sponsored by the Ba'ath regime. In short: anything would do at this juncture.

"You're not going in there alone."

Burrow sighed. She had been expecting this. In a low voice, so that the other people in the operations room would not overhear, she said, "Dad, I'm not a little girl anymore."

Her father went on as if she hadn't spoken. "There are a lot of people who are watching this closely, *Agent* Burrows, and we have a lot of dangerous competition to find *something* to justify this *crazy* war. We've been burnt before; damned if it's going to happen again. We need someone outside our regular forces." He pushed a dossier toward her. "That's our guy. I've made it my job to keep an eye out for talent I can use on such missions. He's over at Camp Slayer. I'll sign out the orders."

She opened the dossier and looked at the black-and-white photo. The name on file was Bradford, William Henry. Canadian Joint Task Force 2. She looked at her father, arched an eyebrow. The Canadian government would never admit to the presence of their special forces team in Iraq.

"You better get started." her father replied. Burrows nodded and started to get up. "And Agent Burrows?" She looked at him questioningly. "Be careful."

CHAPTER 4

He would have been lecturing students on art, or the history of art, or excavating archaeological sites... had it not been for his jealous love of a fellow student, and his violent reaction to her lover. Luc Fortesque had nearly killed the boy with his bare hands. The outcome of that assault had been expulsion from college. Further, the victim's father had made good on his threat that Fortesque would never see the inside of any college or any institution that dealt with art. In short, Fortesque's future was destroyed before it took off.

Indignant at his treatment, Fortesque retaliated by working the black market as an antiques broker. He grew successful at it, operating a fool proof business. His clientele ranged from private art collectors and even museums, to thieves, smugglers and rebel factions operating in conflict regions the world over.

Life was looking good, until a certain crackpot military commander in South East Asia was convinced that Fortesque was holding out on him. He 'invited' Fortesque to his home in the jungle, and no amount of dialog, could sway his mind. Fortesque would have died had it not been for the timely intervention of a rebel faction, supplemented by mercenaries. With Fortesque in their midst, the mercenary unit doubled and tripled their income, by dealing in antiques pillaged from sites, private art galleries and museums, in the countries they were deployed in. But dealing with warlords, smugglers, tribes, police, and the military all at once meant at some point it would get too dangerous for a group of white-skinned. Whenever they drew nearer to rankling the indigenous population, Fortesque and the mercenaries fled. Among his

new 'friends', Fortesque traded skills: he taught them about art; they taught him the skills needed to survive, away from civilization. Fortesque was a natural, an exceptional learner, surpassing his teachers' expectations, to their point where he rivaled the mercenary leader. Bound by a tenacious friendship and respect for each other, the two men parted ways, promising never to cross paths, each taking with him their loyalists.

Now, Iraq was a land to be plundered: Fortesque had been following the stories of looting of Iraqi artefacts closely and had already brokered deals that netted his team close to a million dollars on the black market. All this while employed as contractors for the coalition.

In your face, he thought, with a sneer.

He ducked beneath the bomb-netting and entered the mess tent. His team was in a raucous mood after a successful extraction of an Iraqi defector just a day earlier.

The only woman on the team, Evangeline Rojas – call sign, Hotstuff – had Dash in a chokehold.

Dash could operate and maintain any kind of land, sea or air vehicle but he lacked finesse when talking to women. Other women ignored Dash; Hotstuff was making him pay. The others were laughing as Dash turned purple in the face.

"Alright, let him go," Fortesque said, "before he suffocates." In the distance, a mortar shell went off in Baghdad. "I need him alive for this." Fortesque kicked an upturned crate to the center of the tent and

unfolded a map over it. Hotstuff released her chokehold and Dash scrambled away, coughing.

“What’s up, Nap?” Dragon, a beefy mercenary asked. They called Fortesque, Nap – for Napoleon – a nod to his French roots.

The others gathered around. Smoothing the folded paper. Fortesque pointed. “This is where they’re keeping the artefacts.”

Sharp’s eyes widened. He was the youngest of the lot. “We’re seriously considering this? Do you know how much heat is on these treasures after our last heists?”

Fortesque ignored him, pulled out a notebook from his breast-pocket. “In this book, I have the exhibit numbers that we need. We take six, one for each. I’ve got buyers lined up.”

Hotstuff looked at Fortesque. “You’re sure this is safe?”

“Yes. This is a remote storage depot. Ninety percent of the security is in its obscurity. Two guards. In, out. Half-an-hour, tops. Think about it: we have a twenty-four hour window of opportunity before they move these artefacts to the museum.” He looked at Dash who had just joined them at the make-shift table. “Anyone who wants in, we leave at first light. After this, we pull out.”

CHAPTER 5

Agent Burrows hitched a ride to Camp Slayer and asked around for Captain William Bradford. She was told where he could be found: in the motor pool – lying on a mechanic’s mat beneath an Abrams tank. There was so much machinery noise that she had to shout to be heard.

“Captain Bradford! May I have a word?”

He couldn’t hear her. She bent at the waist and saw he had headphones on. A couple of marines whistled at her and she flipped them the bird – all in good nature. *You did what you could in the war.* She got down on her haunches and tapped his leg.

Bradford turned away from whatever held his interest under the Abrams and aimed his torchlight at her face. She put a hand up against the light. “A word with you, Captain,” she shouted.

He flicked the light off, pushed his body out, pulled aside one earphone, “What can I do for you?”

“Agent Emma Burrows, CIA.” She pointed outside the motor pool. “Let’s talk outside, where it’s quieter.”

He nodded, dusted himself off and told the marine who was working at the turret that he’d be back.

“Now why’d you want to come back to this, when there’s her,” the marine said, only half-joking. Standing tall in a pressed cotton blouse and knee-length skirt, Agent Burrows cut a striking figure.

"You won't be going back in a hurry," she told Bradford as they walked out into the sunshine.

"What's this about?"

"I've got orders for you, Captain, effective immediately."

He shook his head. "Not making sense, Agent Burrows."

"There's a collection of historic artefacts that need to be transported to Camp Victory ASAP." She held up a file-folder. "I have the location of the depot where the artefacts are being stored. And we all know where Camp Victory is."

"I'm sure you'll find another driver in this war that can do that just as well."

"Captain, if I wanted any driver, I'd have asked any driver. Read between the lines."

"Why me?"

"You always question orders, Captain?" Burrows handed him the file. The first page clearly stated that he was to do whatever she asked unless it risked the lives of his team.

"It says here, I am only to take two soldiers along."

"Take two of your best. I'm coming along as the fourth member."

"We could get way-laid. Lot of that going around: lone vehicle...IED...boom." He made an explosive gesture with his hands.

"I can use a gun, Captain," Burrows retorted. "I don't think we will run into anything that needs more than fourteen bullets."

"You hope."

"How soon can we leave?"

He thought. "One hour."

"Make it thirty minutes!"

Forty-five minutes later, a Humvee with a mounted M240 machine gun raced out of Camp Slayer with Bradford, Burrows and two other soldiers, both JTF2 from Bradford's unit. He didn't want to risk any lives of JTF2 personnel on a mission he knew nothing about; at the same time, but there were no other soldiers he'd rather have alongside on a mission that reeked of black ops. Matthew Keller and Tobias Andrews were the best in his unit.

Agent Burrows rode shotgun, a map spread on her knees; Keller was in the backseat. Andrews was manning the gun turret, more because he enjoyed the breeze on the open road than as a precaution against any threat. His colorful scarf, wrapped loosely around his neck billowed in the airstream. Bradford and Keller had gone over the intel; the road they were taking was considered safe.

But almost always, intel was inaccurate.

CHAPTER 6

Half an hour into the journey, Andrews called out. "Roadblock ahead."

Bradford saw it too. Thick pillars of black smoke curled into the air from burning tires in the road ahead. He squinted and behind the smokescreen he could just discern a derelict car parked across the road.

"Eyes peeled, everyone," Bradford ordered. In the gun turret, Andrews racked the bolt on the M240. The Humvee raced toward the roadblock.

"Captain, there's a narrow stretch of road we can squeeze past."

A sudden gust of wind had dispersed the smoke momentarily and Bradford saw what Andrews meant. The car wasn't long enough to block the entire width of the road. He could go around the boot. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark figure emerge from concealment in the sand by the side of the road and begin to run after the Humvee.

"Andrews, to your right," he intoned calmly, "They're buried in the sand."

Andrews swiveled the gun at the running figure. "He's a boy, Captain."

"With a rifle!" Bradford retorted. "Track him. If he tries anything funny, *warn* him away."

"Got another one on the left," Keller called.

Burrows saw another figure emerge from the sand on her side of the Humvee. As she watched, the figure brandished something at them.

“Incoming!” Andrews yelled as he let rip with his M240. The assailant ducked away, or was hit and blasted to molecules with the machine gun; nobody in the Humvee could tell.

The IED exploded in the air in front of the Humvee, expelling a storm of shrapnel – ball bearings, nails, metal – which could fatally lacerate human flesh. Bradford heard Andrews ducking into the truck as the deadly hail rained down on the truck. “Into the smoke!” Bradford warned.

The truck ploughed into the smoke barrier. Blindly, Bradford angled toward the edge of the road, the left tires spilled off the edge, tilting the truck. The right front fender nudged the roadblock aside. Bradford brought the Humvee back onto the road and floored the pedal.

Another figure materialized right in front. Burrows yelled a warning, but Bradford had no time to react. His jaw clenched as the truck rammed into the man, knocking the body aside. Then they were through the smoke. Andrews clambered up into the turret, swung the gun, pointing it back, covering their rear, but nobody came out of the smoke after them.

“All clear!” he called.

Burrows said, “We just ran over a human.”

“That human was part of a team who tried to kill us,” Keller explained matter-of-factly. “Did you get that guy who tossed the IED?”

“Don’t know,” Andrews said.

“Radio it back to base,” Bradford said evenly. “Update the intel, others may not be as lucky.”

CHAPTER 7

It was around four in the evening when Bradford's Humvee passed through the small village near the storage depot. A smattering of villagers, stood by the side of the only through-road, watching them mournfully as they drove by. A few of the children threw stones at the truck. Andrews tried to shoo them away to no avail.

"Doesn't it get to you?" Burrows asked, "to be hated, always."

"I'm not here to be liked," Burrows said curtly. "The depot should be on the other side of that rise."

Andrews who had a higher field of view was the first to spot the other Humvee parked outside the depot. Then the others saw it as their truck crested the rise and came to a halt. A soldier was standing casually by the Humvee smoking, his assault rifle pointing at the ground.

"Anyone else expected here?" Bradford asked Burrows.

"Not that I know of," she replied.

"Find out." He put the Humvee in gear and rolled down toward the depot. Bradford turned in a wide arc so that their Humvee was angled away from the other truck.

Fortesque and the others were in the midst of their theft when they were warned by Dash, who was outside with their Humvee.

Hotstuff looked at him, "I thought you said it was clear today."

"Must be something my contact didn't know about," Fortesque replied indignantly.

"We can't put these back in time," Dragon said looking at the figurines they had unpacked.

"We can bluff our way out of this."

"And if they get wise to us?"

Fortesque put up a hand silencing her, thought quickly. "Dragon, go to light switch and wait. Let's see what they want. If you sense any trouble, throw the lights and we'll subdue them."

"I'm not going home in handcuffs," Hotstuff said, hefting her rifle. "We told you this was getting too hot to handle!"

Bradford and the others saw another soldier coming out of the depot. Like them, he had a headscarf wrapped around the lower half of his face; his *boonie* was pulled low over his eyes. He stood in the doorway with his feet apart, cradling his rifle.

"Let's go," Burrows said and climbed out.

"Keller, Andrews, stay with the truck. We'll be back." Bradford got out, tucking his headscarf into his collar.

Burrows introduced herself to the soldier standing outside the depot, "Agent Burrows with the CIA. I'm here to retrieve an artefact." She flashed her creds and the order papers.

The soldier took the papers, glanced at them. "Just the one artefact?"

"Yeah, you know where it's kept?"

Fortesque nodded. "The artefacts are in the back."

"Lead on. I understand the crates are marked; this shouldn't take much time."

"I'm stepping out," Keller said. "It's cramped in here."

Andrews nodded. He saw Bradford and Burrows disappear into the depot. He turned his attention to the soldier standing by the Humvee. Then he noticed something that could be nothing... and the fact that the other Humvee's tire threads in the sand were recent, not blown over. He left the turret, came down into the main cabin of the Humvee and said, "Hey, Keller."

The soldier walked beside them, which was odd, Bradford thought. He should be *leading* them to the crate. Burrows was looking at all the war gear stocked in the depot.

"This is ridiculous," she said suddenly. "You've got inflammable material here!"

Bradford noticed barrels stacked three high and stenciled with the flammable logo. Yeah, it was ridiculous, but with so many units in the invasion, such a combination of gear, material and supplies being stocked in one place wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Each unit had no idea what others were keeping and where. Yet, the guys manning the depot should be in the know.

They walked deeper into the depot. It was dark; some of the overhead bulbs were out.

"The Iraqi Museum artefacts are here."

There was an open space in the depot. Beyond, were wooden crates, four-foot-cubes, stacked three high and ten long. There was woman standing besides the stacking and she appeared to be fussing over one of the crates which had been unpacked. She looked up when she heard them. There was an assault rifle with an attached grenade launcher on the floor near the crate.

Bradford frowned. "What happened there?"

"Nothing," the soldier shrugged. "Just got curious about what artefacts we were storing here."

So, you pull the crate in the middle of the stacking? Bradford thought to himself.

He shared a suspicious look with Burrows. Then his ear-piece crackled. "Captain." It was Andrews.

"Go ahead."

"This could be nothing but the guy by the Humvee..."

"Yeah?"

"The safety's off. Just thought you should know."

"Thanks."

The soldier was looking keenly at Bradford. Bradford noticed his rifle was no longer pointed at the ground... and the safety was off.

Bradford gave Burrows a cautionary glance. Her hand was inching toward her shoulder holster. He said to the soldier who had met them outside the depot. "Which unit are you guys with?"

The next instant, all four guns were leveled, two at two, and Burrows and Bradford had their safeties off. The female soldier by the crate, side-stepped toward them, keeping them covered with her rifle.

"What's going on here?" Bradford asked cheek to his rifle-stock.

"Easy now, no one has to get hurt here. Just walk away and forget this happened okay?" the woman replied.

Bradford heard a groan from somewhere nearby.

"You're stealing the artefacts," Burrows realized aloud.

All the lights in the depot went out with a *whump*.

And four guns went off deafeningly.

CHAPTER 8

Outside, the three soldiers manning the Humvees heard the gunfire. Dash raised his M16 and fired. Keller took a round and went down, scrambled behind the wheel as bullets smacked into the truck in a shower of sparks.

Andrews ducked beneath the dash, poked his rifle through the open door and fired blindly. Dash ducked behind the far side of the Humvee's hood and returned fire.

"Captain! What's going on!" Andrews shouted over the din.

Burrows was lying face down, clutching her side, blood pooling beneath her. Bradford had taken a hit to his thigh – the bullet had lodged in; a dark stain was spreading on his fatigues. But both had gone down firing: Burrows had nailed the woman in the arm and Bradford's rounds had taken Fortesque in the side of his face leaving it a pulpy mess.

"Burrows... can you hear me?"

She groaned in reply.

He spoke into his throat mic: "Andrews, need you here, Burrows is down. Get the med kit."

He heard gunfire outside.

Keller crawled in the sand, his rifle aimed under the Humvees, until he had a clear shot at the enemy's boots. He squeezed of a burst and there was a cry of pain. "Andrews, go!"

He heard the door opening and saw Andrew's feet plop into the sand. A few seconds later, Andrews had disarmed the wounded soldier and flex-cuffed him. "Captain! I'm coming!"

"Cap, where are you?"

"In the back! Watch out, there's another shooter in the depot."

Bradford felt under Burrows and found her wound above the navel. His fingers came away slick with blood. With all kinds of organs crammed into that abdominal cavity, she needed medical attention quickly. He heard running feet and then Andrews was beside him.

"I'm gonna turn her over, staunch the bleeding."

Andrews nodded and tore a coagulant pack with his teeth. Bradford flipped Burrows over, tore open her shirt at the waist, and Andrews applied the coagulant liberally on the wound. She moaned, gritted her teeth against the sting, while they slapped on gauze and a quick bandage. Bradford palmed his knife and cut open his fatigue pants, took another coagulant pack and worked on his wound, his face impassive. He looked at Andrews. "Ready?"

Andrews nodded. They hefted Burrows across Andrews' shoulders and they retreated for the door, with Bradford covering the rear.

Hotstuff grimaced with pain as she groped for her rifle, fingers closed around its stock. Her right hand was limp. She stumbled into the central aisle of the depot and saw the trio silhouetted in the rectangle of the door. Muzzle flashes drove her to her knees... and she fired the grenade launcher.

The grenade *shoomed* out at an angle, missed Bradford and Andrews but landed among the barrels marked 'Flammable'.

And detonated.

The primary grenade blast was dwarfed by the successive explosions. Shrapnel and debris and whole equipment were tossed in every direction and fires sprouted inside the depot, quickly spreading and kindling the wooden crates.

Unable to shout a warning in time, Bradford had shoved Andrews in the back, throwing all three of them to the floor just before the grenade went off. His action saved their lives as a large razor-sharp piece of metal was sent spinning over their prone forms by the explosion. Had they been running, it would have decapitated at least one of them. Debris rained all around them. Bradford looked back and saw the fires catching. Covering their heads, the Joint Task Force operatives and Burrows made for the door.

CHAPTER 9

"I have to go back!"

"What?" They had reached the Humvee. Keller came forward to help. Bradford reached for their water flasks in the truck and soaked his scarf in it.

"The two soldiers guarding the depot," Bradford explained, "They're in there! I heard a groan before the shooting started!"

"I'm coming with you," Andrews said, ripping off his scarf and soaking it. He shoved the water flask down the front of his shirt and handed another to Bradford.

Keller nodded. "I'll take care of her." He gasped as he took Burrows; the front of his fatigues was stained darkly.

"How bad?" Bradford asked.

"I'll live. Go, get them out."

"Keep sharp. Those imposters are only wounded; they will make for their truck."

Without another word, the two soldiers headed back into the burning depot.

The heat was searing and intense. Bradford's wound was beginning to send stabs of pain to his brain. The roar of the flames was everywhere. He stayed near the ground, blinking away tears from his eyes. The

central section of the depot was burning furiously so they made their way to the wall on the right. Keeping a hand out to guide them, they began crouch-walking toward the back, breathing carefully, not wanting to inhale too much smoke.

Something crashed to the floor, knocking other gear aside. Another explosion rocked the structure and they paused until they felt it was safe to proceed.

Andrews who was ahead turned around as if to say, 'How much further?'

Bradford gestured they should keep moving. Through the smoke he could make out they had reached where the artefacts were stacked. He pushed past Andrews and reached the corner of the depot. There, lying prone on the ground were two marines, their eyes wide with terror, struggling against their bonds. Bradford and Andrews produced knives and deftly cut them free.

"Here, put these on," Andrews said urgently and handed them the wet scarves. "Come on, quick." He took the lead. The two marines stumbled as circulation returned to their limbs. Bradford brought up the rear, favoring his wounded leg.

They retraced their steps. As they passed the place where the artefacts had been stacked, Bradford started. Through the thick smoke he discerned a shadowy hulking figure helping the woman, whom Agent Burrows had shot, to her feet. Bradford made out the shape of an automatic rifle slung across the figure's back. A sixth sense made the big figure look in Bradford's direction and the rifle was brought to bear. Just then, a weakened section of the beam in the roof of the depot

came swinging down in an arc and smacked against the crates holding the artefacts. Boxes and artefacts tumbled to the floor, some bursting open, spilling out their precious contents. When it was over, seconds later, the crates and smoke formed an in-traversable barrier between Bradford and the figure.

"Come on!" Keller shouted urging him on. "Let's get out of here!"

Andrews saw the four men exit the depot gasping for breath, tearing away their scarves, breathing the fresh air in deeply. Keller was supporting Bradford, whose leg was trailing limply along. The two marines whom they had freed were coughing uncontrollably, helping each other.

"Anyone come out?" Keller inquired. He hadn't been privy to what Bradford had seen in the depot.

"No," Andrews replied.

"I saw them; they're still inside," Bradford appraised them. He pointed at their prisoner. "Secure this one in their Humvee." He looked at the two marines they had rescued. "We've got to get Burrows to a hospital, get our wounds treated!"

The marines nodded. "We'll stay back and make sure these guys are arrested."

"Are you sure you can handle it this time around?"

The marines flushed in embarrassment. "Yes, sure. They told us they had orders to inspect the artefacts before they were shipped to Baghdad."

Bradford reined-in a sarcastic reply; the guys had had enough. "Keller, give them two rifles and some spare ammo."

"Thank you," one of the marines said. "For coming back."

Bradford shrugged it off. "About the only reasonable thing I've done in this war."

CHAPTER 10

2 DAYS LATER

Luc Fortesque awoke to a throbbing headache and pain in the side of his face. He opened his eyes but his vision was obstructed. There was a howling sound of wind everywhere. He flexed his fingers and gingerly reached for his face – and felt bandages.

He groaned loudly and was aware of a scuffling of feet. He groped about in the darkness, felt cloth, clenched his fist grabbing the thick material – he was in a tent of some kind. The walls of the tent were billowing, buffeted by a storm outside. Someone was kneeling near him, talking softly in Arabic.

“Where am I? What happened?”

He felt firm hands on his shoulders and was gently eased into a sitting position. His head swam and he breathed deeply waiting for the dizzy spell to pass. He felt hands around his head and then the pressure on his forehead began to ease as the bandages were unwound. He blinked his eyes, focusing in the darkness, and became aware of an elderly woman beside him. In her hands, she proffered an earthen bowl of steaming soup, gesturing that he should drink. Fortesque took the bowl in both hands and put it to his lips. As the hot liquid flowing down his throat awakened him, he struggled to remember what had happened to him. The last thing he remembered was the warning from Dash signaling the approach of another vehicle outside the storage depot.

After that, his mind was a blank.

"I hear you're coming along pretty fine," Bradford said with a smile. He was leaning on his crutch by Burrows' bed in the hospital.

She nodded at his crutch. "You're up and about, too." She patted the bed. "Sit."

He did.

"So, any news?"

He shook his head. "We didn't recover the artefact, Agent Burrows. The depot was gutted by the time rescue teams arrived. That's an embarrassment in itself – that we lost Iraqi treasures on our watch. There's a guy outside who accompanied me here. It's his job to ensure I don't spread the word outside the four of us."

Burrows was indignant. "I hope they arrested those imposters!"

"No luck there, too, I'm afraid." Bradford clicked his tongue. "When the rescue teams arrived, the two marines were found shot dead. You noticed the guy who led us into the depot had his face hidden all the time."

"Yes."

"I gave a description of the woman, though, and the lookout who was with the Humvee."

"And?"

"I was asked to leave the matter alone."

"What?" She sat upright in bed.

"Right from the top. Apparently, they were military contractors... working on our side!" He shrugged. "I was told the matter would be handled and we should forget about it."

They were silent for a few moments then Burrows rubbed her eyes and yawned. "The painkillers make me drowsy."

"I should leave then." He made to get up.

"I never did thank you."

Bradford smiled at her. "Oh, you were right about one thing: we didn't need more than fourteen rounds."

CHAPTER 11

As he left the hospital, Bradford fished awkwardly in his jacket pocket and withdrew folded sheets of paper. They were his final orders among other papers. Inexplicably, he, Andrews and Keller were to return home the next day. He stopped and looked at one line, a smile forming on his face. He had been nominated for a Canadian Cross of Valor upon his return home. He had been reading that one line at various intervals just to be sure he wasn't imaging it. Typically, he couldn't tell anybody on what mission he'd earned it. He took a deep breath and limped to the waiting Jeep.

Little did he know that he had not seen the last the mysterious imposter, and that one day their paths would cross... fatefully.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The Baghdad National Museum was really looted in the months leading up to the coalition invasion of Iraq. The Baghdad Museum Project is real and was very successful in recovering priceless pieces of civilization's history. More artefacts are being recovered and returned to Iraq even today. Unfortunately, and sadly, archaeological sites in Iraq continue to be plundered to fund nefarious organizations and activities.

The deployment of Canada's Joint Task Force 2 in Iraq is shrouded in secrecy.

"Blood antiquities" is an emerging problem – the sale of artefacts finances drug operations or rebellions. Similarly, artefacts are plundered by belligerents in conflict zones, and sold on the international market.