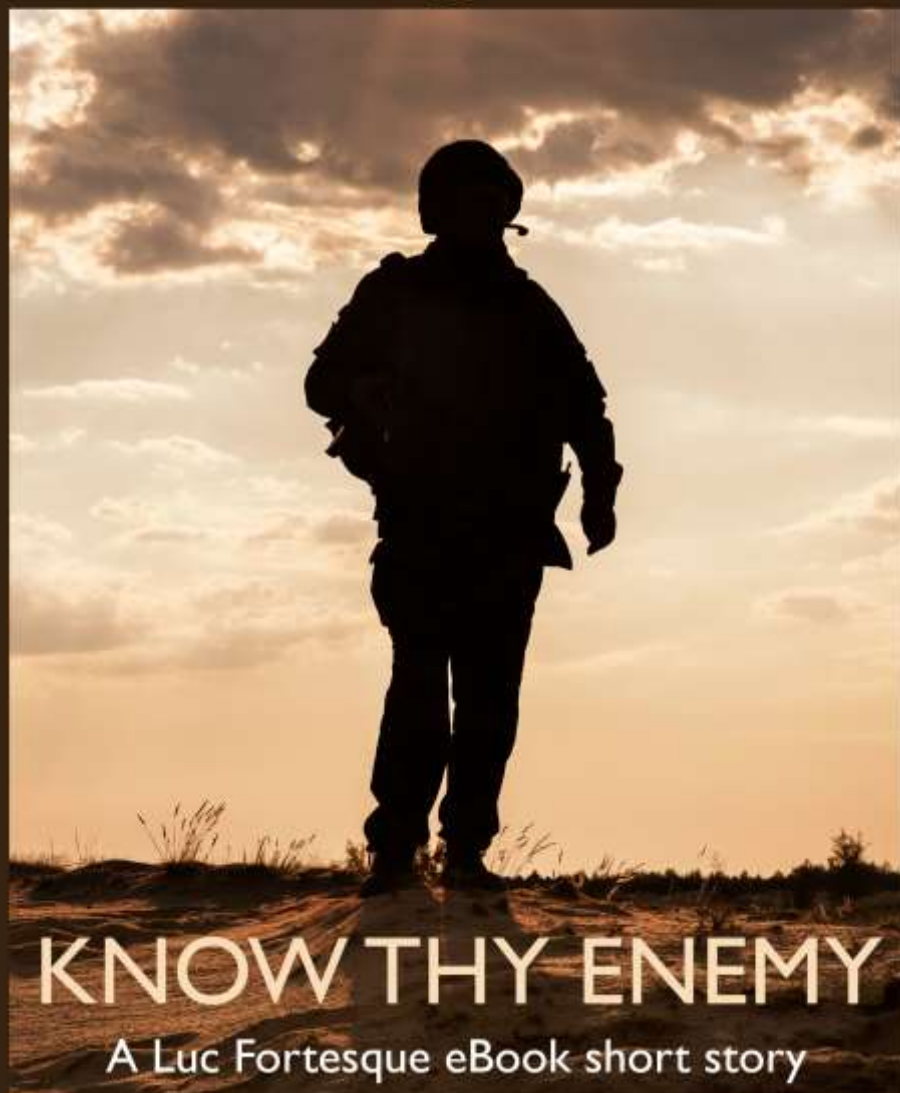


DOUGLAS MISQUITA



KNOW THY ENEMY

A Luc Fortesque eBook short story

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KNOW THY ENEMY

The prelude to The Apocalypse Trigger

by

Douglas Misquita

A Luc Fortesque eBook short

An artefact from the Baghdad National Museum holds a secret that might justify the coalition invasion of Iraq. But the artefact is looted from the Museum just before the invasion. CIA analyst, Emma Burrows enlists the help of Captain William Bradford and a discrete Joint Task Force 2 team to retrieve the artefact. Unknown to them, a mercenary unit led by Luc Fortesque is 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 Hyundai left Ahrah Bridge on the Tigris. He merged with traffic circling King Faisal turnabout. The perspiration beading his furrowed brow wasn't because of the Baghdadi heat. His eyes darted to the rear-view mirror. Nobody appeared to be following him. Ahead, was the Baghdad National Museum. The ruling party had declared it open today – a rarity since the Iran-Iraq conflict. Banners felicitating Saddam Hussein adorned the walls on Nasir Street. In the face of an imminent coalition invasion, the ruling party was trying to instil a sense of unity and pride.

Zaid parked, donned sun glasses, looked around. His handlers had cryptically informed him that he would recognize his contact. Nothing else was disclosed. He knew why: this way he could reveal nothing to the Iraqi Intelligence Service interrogators.

A swarthy man, with a tourist map, accosted him. He pointed to the crackling paper as if seeking directions. “Go into the museum. Now!” Then, “Thank you. Have a good day.” He departed; head buried in his map.

As Zaid neared the museum entrance, a commotion made him glance back. Seemingly blinded by his map, the 'tourist' had walked into a pair of men. An

altercation had broken out. One of the men looked around the 'tourist' and his gaze rested on Zaid.

Zaid worked with Directorate 8 – the Iraqi program for developing offensive weapons. He recognised the man as an IIS agent. Now he understood the 'tourist' had tried to buy him time.

Too late!

With a cry, the agents brushed the 'tourist' aside and came after Zaid. Zaid barged into the museum, ignoring the alarm from the ticket clerk.

The 'tourist' retrieved his fallen map. he spoke into his comms. "He was being followed; I couldn't take it off him. Zaid's coming to you. And two IIS agents!"

There was a crackle in his ear piece. A female voice assured him, "I see Zaid."

She had seconds to make the transaction. "Hurry!"

CHAPTER 2

Zaid was in the crowded Assyrian Gallery on the ground floor. Nobody noticed his panic. He craned his neck, searching for his pursuers over the visitors. He reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and felt for the bundled sheaf of papers.

They must not find it on me.

He regarded the gigantic 10-foot high Lamassu sculptures. The human-headed-winged-bull and lion looked down at him, daring him to make a brave move. He spied his pursuers at the far entrance to the gallery. And about mid-way, he saw a woman pushing purposefully to him. She was his contact.

The IIS agent's keen eyes spotted Zaid as he ducked into an adjoining gallery. He caught the attention of a museum guard, tersely explained what was required. They gave chase, ordering the crowd to make way for them.

Zaid's contact heard the shouts. She was helpless as the two men stormed past. The museum guard was twice her size and an opportunity to trip them up didn't materialise. She spoke into her mic, "Where are you, Ibarra?"

Ibarra's voice cut in. "Inside the museum"

"Zaid is in the Islamic gallery."

"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 gathered. He was frisked but only a wallet and pen were recovered. The IIS agent gruffly questioned him, "What are you doing here?" Zaid was handcuffed.

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

"We shall see."

They marched Zaid out of the museum.

Among the excited crowd, Ibarra watched in dismay. Then he caught sight of the woman and saw defeat on her face. She shook her head.

Yusuf Zaid disappeared off the face of the planet. His family lodged a complaint with the police when he did not return home. A phony investigation was opened. Zaid's wife suspected he had fallen afoul of the IIS. She looked at their nine-year old daughter, asleep in their humble apartment. For the first time, Fahima Zaid prayed 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 an operation to locate these prisons, register each inmate and question them. In April of 2004, Yusuf Zaid was found. When his name was registered, it triggered a red flag.

The CIA officer in charge of the field operations sent for Zaid to be brought to Camp Victory.

CHAPTER 3

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

A Blackhawk helicopter descended into the prison compound, raising a cloud of sand. Yusuf Zaid shielded his face from the swirling grit. His features were gaunt, he was reed-thin and had lost most of his hair. His shirt concealed welts and scars, reminders of his torture. He approached the Blackhawk in a trance, incredulous that he was a free man.

A US marine climbed out of the Blackhawk. “Yusuf Zaid?” he asked unnecessarily. Zaid nodded. “Come with me, sir.” The marine took Zaid firmly by the elbow. They were hardly aboard when the Blackhawk lifted into the sky. They landed at a Forward Operating Base (FOB) and Zaid was ushered into a waiting Humvee. After bouncing along the road for a while, the brightly-lit façade of Saddam Hussein’s residence – Al Faw Palace, came into view. The coalition called it, Camp Victory. The marine held out a hood for him to wear. It was routine, he explained, some things at the palace were not for civilian eyes.

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

“Please wear the hood, sir.”

Zaid showered, shaved and dressed in fresh clothes. Then he was escorted to a room where a hearty meal awaited him on an ornate table. He inhaled the aroma, before wolfing down the food. The orange juice disappeared in one swallow. Then he waited. The wall clock told him it was 0500 hours. He heard footsteps outside. The door opened to admit a woman. He recognized her 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 and smiled at him.

“Mr. Zaid, you may call me Jane.”

“Is that your real name?”

She ignored the question. “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 has been notified.”

His eyes lit up. “Can I –”

“We have an urgent matter before that happens, Mr. Zaid.”

“I’m certain, that after a year, a half hour will not matter.” There was irritation in his voice.

She looked at him earnestly. “Not by choice. I was overruled. 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.

"Evidence of Directorate 8's bioweapons program.

She nodded. "Give it to me and you and your family will be on the next flight to the United States."

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

"I'm sorry."

"Are you really, *Jane*?"

"Believe me, we tried to get you out that very day. 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. One of the figurines was hollow. I pushed it into the mouth."

The look on Jane's face was not one of relief.

"What is it?"

Jane 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 cracked open the door, 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 and Jane returned to Zaid. She looked relieved.

“The museum was looted after the invasion. I feared the exhibit was among those pilfered. It turns out I was right.” A pause. “However. The Baghdad Museum Project was formed to ensure all artefacts are retrieved. Working with Iraqi experts, we have recovered most of the stolen artefacts.” She smiled for the first time. “The exhibit is among those we have recovered. It is in a temporary storage depot about six hours drive from here.”

Zaid smiled broadly. “Can I meet my family now?”

“Yes.” Jane stood. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

CIA Agent Emma Burrows – Jane – said, “I can have it before nightfall, sir.”

She looked expectantly at her handler. He was unsure. They had never known what exactly Zaid was bringing them. The Iraqi had been frustratingly vague.

She persisted, “At this juncture, it’s worth the shot.”

The coalition was desperate to make a case before the international community. Zaid’s information might provide tangible evidence of WMD research sponsored by the Ba’ath regime.

“You’re not going alone.”

Burrow was expecting this. In a low voice that could not be overhead by the others, she hissed, "Dad, I'm not a little girl anymore."

Her father went on as if she hadn't spoken. "People 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 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 said. 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 history... had it not been for his jealous love of a fellow student, and his violent reaction to her lover. 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 antiquities broker. His clientele ranged from private art collectors and museums, to thieves, smugglers and rebel factions operating in conflict regions the world over.

Life was good, until a crackpot disgraced general in South East Asia was convinced Fortesque was cheating him. He 'invited' Fortesque to his home in the jungle. No amount of dialog could sway his mind. Fortesque was rescued by mercenaries of Global Security Services, a private security contracting behemoth with interests in conflict zone around the globe. The GSS contractors were there for British humanitarian workers who were held hostage by the general. The CEO of GSS realized Fortesque's value. With him in their midst, the GSS doubled and tripled its revenue by dealing in antiquities pillaged from countries they deployed to. In the company of the mercenaries, Fortesque learned to survive away from civilization. His aptitude for armed combat uncannily matched his aptitude for art and history. He was an exceptional student. By the time GSS was dealing heroin and artefacts in Afghanistan, rumours of the 'educated mercenary' were rife. After Afghanistan, Iraq was waiting to be plundered.

Fortesque had been following stories of looting of Iraqi artefacts. On his reports, GSS had already brokered deals. Now, he had to deliver.

He ducked beneath the bomb-netting. In the mess tent, his 'special unit' was in a raucous mood after the successful extraction of an Iraqi defector 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 vehicle but he lacked finesse with women. Other women ignored Dash's bumbling overtures; Hotstuff was making him pay. The others were laughing as Dash turned purple in the face.

"All right, release him," Fortesque said, "before he suffocates." In the distance, a mortar shell exploded in Baghdad. Fortesque nudged 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?"

"This is a remote depot. Ninety percent of the security is in its obscurity. A pair of guards. In, out. Half-an-hour, tops. 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. “I have the exhibit numbers that we need.”

CHAPTER 5

Agent Burrows hitched a ride to Camp Slayer and asked around for Captain William Bradford. She found him in the motor pool on a mechanic's mat beneath an Abrams tank. There was so much machinery noise she had to shout to be heard.

"Captain Bradford! 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. 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 raised a hand against the light. "A word with you, Captain," she shouted.

He flicked the light off, slid 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, told the marine 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 didn’t know much 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 in her lap; Keller was in the backseat. Andrews manned 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 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. A sudden gust of wind dispersed the smoke momentarily. Bradford saw the car didn't block the entire width of the road. The Humvee aimed for a narrow channel in the blockade.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bradford spied a figure emerge from concealment by the side of the road and 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, *warn* him away."

"Another on the left," Keller called.

Burrows watched the figure on the left brandish something at them.

"Incoming!" Andrews yelled as he let rip with his M240. The assailant ducked away, or was hit. Nobody in the Humvee could tell.

The IED exploded in front of the Humvee, expelling a storm of shrapnel. 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. Blindly, Bradford angled toward the edge of the road, the left tires spilled off the shoulder, tilting the truck. The right front fender nudged the roadblock aside. Bradford brought the Humvee onto the road and floored the pedal.

Another figure materialized right in the way. Burrows yelled a warning, but Bradford had no time to react. His jaw clenched as the truck knocked 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."

"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

At four in the evening 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. Mournful stares followed the Humvee. Some 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. 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 frowned.

"Find out." The Humvee rolled 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 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 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. The woman standing besides the stacking appeared to be fussing over a crate which was 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, 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,” 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. 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 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."

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 off 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 gritted her teeth against the sting, while they slapped on gauze and a 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 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. She fired the grenade launcher.

The grenade 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. Fires sprouted inside the depot, consuming 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 went spinning over their prone forms. Had they been running it would have decapitated at least one of them. Debris rained all around them. Bradford 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 them 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. The roar of the flames was everywhere. He crawled, 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 crouch-walked toward the back. Something

crashed to the floor. Another explosion rocked the structure and they paused until it was safe to proceed.

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

Bradford gestured to 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. A sixth sense made the big figure look in Bradford's direction and a 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, helping each other.

Bradford 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. "They told us they had orders to inspect the artefacts before they were shipped to Baghdad."

Bradford withheld a sarcastic reply; the guys had suffered enough. "Keller, arm them."

"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 became aware of a scuffling of feet. He groped about in the darkness, clenched his fist grabbing the thick material – he was in a tent of some kind. The walls of the tent were buffeted by a storm outside. Someone was kneeling beside him, talking softly in Arabic.

“Where am I? What happened?”

He felt firm hands on his shoulders and was 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 discerned an elderly woman beside him. In her hands, she proffered an earthen bowl of steaming soup. She gestured. *Drink*. Fortesque accepted and put it to his lips. As the warm liquid flowed down his throat, he struggled to remember. He recalled 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. "Any news?"

She shook his head. "We didn't recover the artefact. The depot was gutted by the time rescue teams arrived. That's an embarrassment – that we lost Iraqi treasures on our watch."

Bradford said, "I had hoped 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. Did you notice 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?"

"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. 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 sentence, a smile forming on his face. He had been awarded a Canadian Cross of Valor. 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.

The End

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 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.