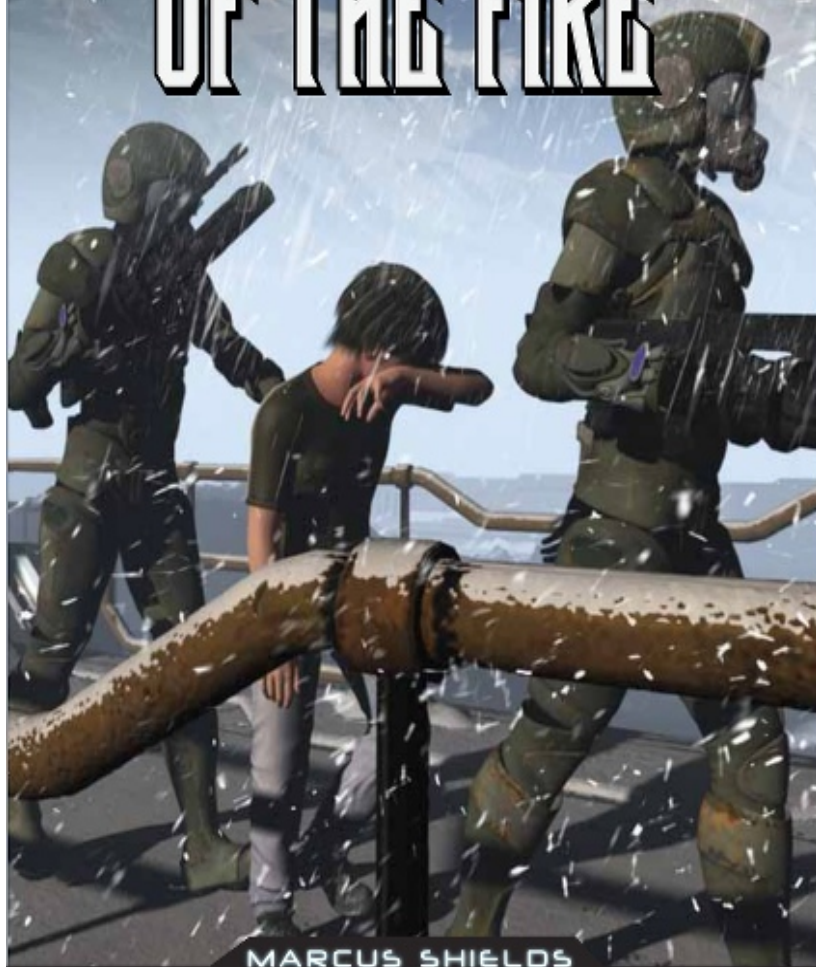


THE ANGEL BRINGS FIRE BOOK IV

CHILDREN OF THE FIRE



Sample Chapter

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The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

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The Recruits

Daughter Tornado-Diamond-Curtain

"It'll be pitch-dark in another few minutes," advised Chu, in the direction of the Storied Watcher. "How much longer are you going to need?"

"Hopefully... not too much longer," replied the alien-girl, her gaze never leaving Kaysten's somnolent face as she crouched next to the incapacitated man, his backside still resting in the inner surface of the little shield.

"He is coming slowly out of the dream-world," she noted. "*Vîrya I'èà'b'* confirms that. It is interesting, you know – she has become quite close to Jerr-ee, in the time in which she has been protecting him."

"Karéin," inquired Abruzzio, who, along with Ramirez, had also come to rest next to the Chief of Staff, "Do you mind me asking you about that?"

"Not at all, Sylvia," said Karéin-Mayréij. "Just as long as you understand that there may be things that would be, ah, 'unwise' for me to reveal, in the presence of these eff-bee-ai people – who, though they be friends right now, could revert to being my enemies."

"Yeah... can't blame you there," agreed the scientist. "Well, what I wanted to know is... you've been referring to some of these items that we've seen on you, as if they were, uhh, 'people'... like the shield there, for example. What exactly do you *mean* by that?"

"Just what it sounds like, Professor," matter-of-factly stated the Storied Watcher. "That is what they *are*."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not getting you," said Abruzzio.

"There we go again, with this Eng-lish thing about 'getting' this and 'getting' that," grumbled the alien-girl. "I will speak plainly: my war-children – including *Vîrya I'èà'b'*, for example, as well as *Vîrya Quü'j* – though in her case, she is venerable and could not be considered as a 'child', are *alive*. They think, dream, quarrel, hope, fear and speak... they are aware of their state of being, not exactly like as do you or I, but in a manner very similar. Perhaps most importantly, they desire love and give love back; they wish to grow in knowledge and wisdom. In this, my war-children are no different from any other sentient being."

"That's... *amazing*," commented the female scientist.

"It certainly is," added Ramirez, "But... where did they come from? I don't remember seeing anything about a bunch of armor, from the recordings on-board the *Eagle* and *Infinity*. Did you hide them away on board, when you left Mars?"

"Ha... no, Hector," answered the Storied Watcher. "Though there *are* others, who sleep secure now, in the deep reaches of *Mailànhk*..."

Her eyes took on a far-away stare, for a few seconds, then she continued, "To answer your question, though... I gave birth to all of them, except for *Vîrya Quü'j*, that is. You could consider me their 'mother' – they are my children."

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“If you don't mind me sayin', Karéin,” joked Wolf, “Considerin' the size and shape of some of them things, that must have been kinda... *painful*, you know?”

“Boy, he shore likes to *push* it, don't he?” muttered Boatman.

“Ah, that is just my big friend's sense of humor,” nonchalantly replied the alien-girl. “But if you are asking if they came out of my woman-hole, as would a human-child... the answer is, 'no'. Just as there are many, many types of intelligent beings in this universe who look, think and act nothing like you or I, there are also many ways of giving life, and some of these are not, uhh, 'biological'. As for my war-children, I used knowledge and powers from places long ago and far away, to breathe the spark of life into *Virya I'èà'b* and her sisters and brothers. Behold, therefore, where, before, they were only inanimate items – a sword, a shield, *et cetera* – now, they live as separate entities, as a human-child lives apart from his or her mother. And their mother loves them very much, by the way.”

“Wait a minute,” interjected Hendricks. “Did you just say that you took stuff that was just lying around, and made it, uhh, 'alive'?”

“I would not say that they were just 'lying around',” stated Karéin-Mayréij, “There is a story behind *that*, too. However, if I understand what you mean, Will Hen-dricks, I would have to say that the answer is, 'yes'.”

“So's that mean you could, like, take my cell-phone or my key-chain, and make it come to life?” incredulously pressed the third agent.

The Storied Watcher allowed herself a low chuckle of amusement. “Breathing the life of the *Makailkh* into a mobile com-mun-ee-kator, now *there* is a fine idea,” she quipped. “What weirding-powers would you have me infuse in it, Will – perhaps 'immunity to tell-ee-phone network money costs', or some-such, mighty ability? I am afraid that it does not work that way, though. An item to which one wishes to gift life... it must be a treasured companion, one who will accompany you through all of life's trials and battles... it must have some *spirit* in it, from the start. I hate to disappoint you, but that is how things have been, ere the dawn of time.”

“Aww, damn,” complained Hendricks. “And there's all those 1-900 things I could have –”

“Just as good,” chimed in Boatman. “You make that-there thing magic, all it's gonna do is get you into ball games without buyin' a ticket.”

Now, the alien-girl, her eyes dimly aglow, her body outlined with a godly aura in the half-light, sent the third agent a very strange look.

“But in *your* case...” she started.

“Come over here,” ordered Karéin-Mayréij.

“Yeah... okay... I guess,” complied Hendricks, very unsure of himself.

Haltingly, he came over to where she was seated, next to the still-sleeping Chief of Staff.

“Bend over so that I can see your face and upper body more clearly,” she demanded.

Reluctantly, the third agent stooped as low as he could.

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

His face was very close to her own, and the man could instantly tell how far out of his depth he was, in dealing with this being; her fresh-faced, teenager-like attractiveness, evident at any range, was simply *overpowering*, like every schoolboy's secret, unrealized dream of 'having' the perfect supermodel.

The Storied Watcher reached up and ran her fingers over the gold chain that Hendricks usually kept semi-hidden, behind his tie.

Though she did not come in direct contact with his flesh, each finger-stroke sent electric thrills up and down his spine.

God, I can hardly keep it in my pants, warned his alarmed mind.

"You know, Will," she counseled, "If you would give life to something, I would start with *this*. It is something dear to you... is it not?"

"Yeah... I guess it is," he stammered. "It's... uhh... it's like a religious thingie, from my Dad... he was in the Army in Pakistan about twenty years ago, when they first went in... gave it to me just before he passed away... Dad told me it kept him safe while he was over there, told me to wear it all the time... kind of a souvenir, you know?"

"No it is not," she contradicted, with a light shake of the head.

The alien-girl's voice was gentle, warm and considerate, but her stare was deadly-serious.

"Just a sou-vee-neer, that is, Will Hen-dricks," she stated.

The crickets stopped chirping, all of a sudden, and the air became heavy. The humans' attention was drawn inexorably to the alien's portentous words. Dignified, electric-hymnal music sounded dimly in the distance.

"This little chain binds you to your father, and your ancestors, as well," patiently explained the Storied Watcher, as if delivering a high-school science lesson. "You want the secret of breathing the living-power, young agent of the eff-bee-ai? I will tell you. Take hold of your neck-chain every night as you can, sing to it, play good music by your own hands as well; tell it that you cherish and respect it, think back to the memory of your father, remember the good times with him... his strength, what was noble about him, why you *loved* him."

As she intoned these words, a frightened, awed, but simultaneously thrilled Hendricks thought, *J.H.C., no wonder those two warned me about the "whole different level" thing... what a rush... if I live through all of this, that is...*

With the choral music raging through human bloodstreams, Karéin-Mayréij continued, "Honor all those in your line, who came before you, and dream of those who will come after you; tell each link of this thing, that it is special, that it will bind your successors to your clan as surely as it holds fast with the next of its kind. Above all else, give thanks that your parents gave *you* life, and pray to your God that your chain should be blessed with the spark of awareness, also such abilities as were meant for it, as judged by the spirit-world."

What could he do, but nod?

"Thus," she instructed, "If you be worthy and your God favor you, perhaps your prayer should be answered; but this may take much time, many years, possibly, and you must persevere with *faith*, as you pour your own spirit and life

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

into what you would in turn give the blessing of being... for nothing with a consequence such as this, comes without the greatest of effort. You are a mortal and you do not have my arts to help you along – but hear my words, man, the doing of this is within your grasp, if you will *believe*.”

Is this how an angel sounds when she's talking? reflected a shocked Abruzzio, absentmindedly wiping a tear.

Listening to her is like hearing all those beautiful church-hymns, but this is real, right here, right now... five minutes ago I was talking with her like one scientist to another... now I want to get down on my knees and worship her..

“And the knowing of it will come to you in a vision,” concluded the Storied Watcher. “You will hear a voice that is not a voice, speaking when you slumber; it will be different from the sounds in any other dream. When you wake and concentrate on your chain, you will hear that voice again – at first, like a whisper in the back of your mind, but later, as loud and clear as you hear me, right now. Afterward, you must teach your new companion in the ways of the world, just as you would teach a newborn babe; but *this* child will live on, long after you are gone, and it will sing the story of your life to your own human children, and theirs, and the ones after those, even unto the end of the marking of space and time. *That*, is how it works, Will Hen-dricks.”

“And the government wants to *kill* her,” muttered Ramirez. “If what she's sayin' is *true* – *Dios Mio*, the *implications* –”

Abruzzio's wide-eyed, awed astonishment required no word from her lips.

“Can't be *true*,” stammered Chu. “*Can't* be. Every rule of science says that this kind of thing is just superstition –”

“It is true, my friend,” argued Misha. “All one need do, is see these 'war-children' of hers, in action... that will dispel all doubt. Knowledge available nowhere else, my friend. *Nowhere* else.”

He stopped for a second, as if pondering something, then added, “And I have such a locket, as well – a memento from the Patriarch. These are said to protect one, when danger is all around.”

“Indeed,” affirmed the alien-girl, with a knowing look. “And you should do as I counseled this young man, forthwith. The *Fire* is within you... a, ah, 'head-start', as it were.”

The third agent, utterly at a loss about what to say, remained stooped over the Storied Watcher for a few seconds. Then, without a word, he stumbled backward, staring at the chain.

The Storied Watcher turned to Ramirez.

“Here,” she said. “Help me lay Jerr-ee down on the ground, for I have something to show you about what manner of being comes to life, by these blessed arts.”

The air slowly went back to normal, as the music tailed off.

Abruzzio and Ramirez complied, and they were only slightly surprised when they saw the buckler float unaided upward, to take a place on her left arm.

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

Then she mumbled something in her incomprehensible language in the direction of the shield. It left the alien's arm and hovered within easy reach of the two scientists.

"Touch her," commanded Karéin-Mayréij. "She will not harm you... nor is this a brain-control trick. If your bodies had been, ahh, 'made more compatible' with my war-children and I, by the gift of my kiss, that is, *Vîrya I'èà'b'* could speak directly to your minds; but as matters are now, you must be in contact with her."

Abruzzio looked at her compatriot. "I don't know, Hector... do you think we should...?"

"Ain't that the shield that sliced the arms off them CIA boys back at the hotel?" demanded a suspicious Boatman.

"Yes, she is," admitted the Storied Watcher, speaking to the black FBI agent. "And her powers are *much* greater now, than they were on that unhappy day. With so much as a thought on my part, her edge could slice yonder big stone," – she pointed to a rock at least two meters thick – "Clean in half, and keep going after that. Or she could simply fly fast at it, and knock it back by a handsome distance. *Vîrya I'èà'b'* has many other powers that I care not to discuss; after all, she *is* a living child-being, and I should safeguard her privacy. Now, with all that said... Hector, Sylvia, why not run your fingers across her side-edge... you know, the one that can dismember you, in a tenth-of-a-second?"

"That doesn't sound like, uhh, too good an idea, Karéin," evaded Ramirez. "I mean, that's gotta be *sharp*... right?"

"See for yourself," replied the alien-girl.

She pointed to the shield with an open palm.

"What's the *matter*?" cracked Wolf. "Ain't none of you boys ever patted somebody's pet Rottweiler? If it don't like you, there goes your hand... same thing, more or less."

"Yes, but guard-dogs can't fly, or cut you in half... at least with one bite," argued Boatman. "I bet with yours truly, they'd take two or three."

"That's why we love you, Otis," wryly noted Chu.

"Well, look, Sylvia," proposed the Mexican-American scientist, "I guess *one* of us *should* try it... and the other one takes notes, just in case the, uhh, 'guinea pig' ends up not survivin' the experiment, you know?"

"I'm not going to stop you, if that's what you mean," answered Abruzzio.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," said Ramirez.

Warily, he extended a hand and gingerly touched his index finger to the bottom-part of the shield, immediately withdrawing it, as one does when touching a potentially hot surface.

"I guess I still can point at things," he joked. "So here goes nothing."

Now, with all the humans – except Wolf, who feigned disinterest – staring intently, Ramirez touched his index finger to *Vîrya I'èà'b'*, this time maintaining continuous contact with the shield.

He looked stunned, staring blankly ahead.

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“Hector? *Hector!*” exclaimed a worried Abruzzio.

“It’s... it’s okay, Sylvia,” slowly spoke Ramirez, while the others wondered if he realized that he was now grasping the buckler on either side of its lethal edge.

“This is... it’s *incredible*, man,” he gasped. “I can *hear* it – hear *her*, sorry there, *chica* – talkin’ in my head... I’m communicating with her... can’t tell if the words are in Spanish or English, but somehow, I’m sendin’ them back and forth.”

He paused for a second, then said, “Hey there, Little Miss Shield – I gotta go for a bit, but I’ll be back.”

He let go of the thing.

“Sylvia, you *gotta* try this,” he demanded, with a look of utter amazement. “It’s like, I don’t know, like havin’ your brain plugged right into Neo... no, I take that back, it’s *better* than that. You can hear the thing *thinking* – it sounds like a kid... a girl, but I don’t know how I know that... there’s really no words to describe it.”

“*Vîrya I’èà’b*’ actually *does* know a few words of Spanish, and a few other Earth-languages as well,” explained the Storied Watcher. “Remember – she, and all her brothers and sisters, also *Vîrya Quü’j*, are connected to my own intellect, when we journey together. I teach them what I know... and already, they are starting to teach *me*.”

“What could they possibly teach *you* about?” inquired Abruzzio. “From our conversations while you were in space, my understanding is that you’re, ahem, a little older than anyone here... including these living creations of yours.”

“Well, let us just say that some of my war-children are better-attuned to the techno-stuff of this world, than I am,” mentioned Karéin-Mayréij, with a saturnine smile. “Oh, and by the way, while we were talking – before I, ah, ‘put most of them to bed’ – my war-children have been, ah, ‘learning’ about how your little talking-box, works. They told me that it is very intricate and sophisticated... they are most impressed with the craftsmanship that has made it. But they will figure it out, very soon, now.”

“*She-it*,” chuckled Boatman, who had taken a seat on the nearest large rock. “You know, Minnie, that explains a lot of things, I guess. Like why the bugs didn’t hear nothin’.”

“We’re not supposed to talk about that, you know,” cautioned Chu. “But this is, uhh... very interesting, to say the least. These weapons that we saw on you... they look like *medieval* stuff, swords and shields, I mean. We never considered the possibility that –”

“Did you think that I would just sit around and fall as a helpless victim of your techno-weapons?” remarked the alien-girl, with an air of smug satisfaction. “For the record, Ms. Minn-ee-Choo, your friend is not telling me anything that I did not already know. On *my* side, I reveal this information, weighing off the risk of allowing you to know too much, against hoping that your government will be deterred by what you learn while you are with me. I may not get this balance right, but it is a chance that I believe that I must take.”

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“How, exactly, are these 'war-children' of yours, learning about technology, Karéin?” pressed Abruzzio. “I mean, Hector and I tracked your progress since the Jacobson team first encountered you, in that cave on Mars. We all thought it was remarkable, how quickly you adapted to what must have been very unfamiliar circumstances, what with the appearance of the astronauts... however, it's *one* thing to teach a living, breathing, intelligent being how to use a telephone or a dishwasher, but how would you teach that to a shield? What would be its sphere of reference?”

“Why not just ask *Virya I'èà'b'* for herself, Sylvia?” teasingly replied Karéin-Mayréij.

“I... I don't think I should...” stammered the scientist. “I mean...”

“There's nothing to worry about, Sylvia,” assured Ramirez. “But if you don't wanna do it, that's okay... I can just ask her – the shield – on your behalf.”

Abruzzio bit her lip, torn by the conflicting desires of insatiable curiosity and fear of the unknown.

“Oh, the *hell* with it,” she muttered. “Go ahead, read my mind, take it over, if you will – you've probably got better ones to play with, anyway.”

Quickly, she extended her hand to grasp the shield from above and below near its edge, and instantly, her visage took on the same astonished look that the group had seen from Ramirez, a few minutes previously.

Except that there was an incredulous, overjoyed smile, this time.

“Oh... *wow*,” breathed the scientist. “Hector... this is just *amazing*, I can hear her talking... yes... hello to you, too... I'm sorry, little one, I don't know how to pronounce your name... I'm Sylvia, I know your mother... why thank you, I'd love to be your 'auntie'! I did my best to help your mom, and that was before you were born... So what was I going to ask? Oh, yeah... I wanted to know, about the computers, how do you... *what*?”

Abruzzio started laughing, then regained her composure.

“Well I don't think you can do *that*, even if it worked with the 'dumb-ass techno-critters' – did your mother say that was what they are?” she spoke, as if to nobody. “A human being is *different*, you see... don't be sad, I'm sure that he will come to love you too, but it takes *time*, you see, you have to get to know him better... there, there... oh, we have *so* much to talk about... I want to be your friend, and so does Hector... what? Yes, he's the 'hoo-man' who just spoke with you, that's right... okay. I'll tell him, I promise. Got to go, but I will be back... bye-bye...”

Abruzzio slumped backwards, her head hanging from the fatigue of utter bewilderment.

“This is all... too... *much*,” she managed. “I could... I could feel her mind running all over my own, trying to learn as much about me as quickly as she could – it didn't hurt and I could tell that it was innocent, but it's a *scary* experience... I felt naked, helpless –”

“So it *is* some kind of mental domination thing, isn't it?” suspiciously demanded Chu.

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“Minn-ee,” explained the Storied Watcher, “If I wanted to control your mind, you would be *groveling* at my feet right now. What Sylvia refers to is that *Vîrya I'èà'b* is still young, and like a human child, sometimes her curiosity overcomes her, uhh, 'judgment'. Have you never had a little one who pries into places of your house, where he or she should not go? You humans must all remember that the only way my war-children can truly perceive the world – although this is slowly changing, and their senses are good enough to let them function on their own – is through my own eyes. They hunger to know, to grow and to progress. And I would ask Hector and Sylvia, as the friends that I know they are, to help them in this journey. Will you?”

“What scientist could turn down such an opportunity?” quickly concurred Abruzzio. “Is there any chance that we could get one or more of them, into an... uhh... laboratory?”

“Sylvia...” cautioned Ramirez.

“I can ask them, when this is all over,” replied the alien-girl, “But do not forget, *Vîrya I'èà'b*, her brothers and sisters too, they are all independent beings, with minds of their own. Just like it is with Jerr-ee, the decision will be up to them. You may want to ask 'Daughter Tornado Diamond-Curtain' yourself, next time you parley with her.”

“That's the shield... right?” asked Chu.

“It is one translation of the words that you hear in her name,” answered Karéin-Mayréij. “There are others.”

Abruzzio was about to continue with her line of questioning, but she was interrupted by a low moan coming from Kaysten's direction.

They heard a cough.

“Looks like he's coming to,” remarked the FBI team-leader. “Is there anything we can do to, uhh, help bring him around?”

“If 'bring him around' is what I think it is,” replied the alien-girl, “The answer is, 'no'... he will be light-headed and disoriented for a few minutes, but he will be, oh-kay.”

“Ohhhhh...” moaned the man.

All of a sudden, to the obvious consternation of the Storied Watcher, the little shield flew over to Kaysten and landed on his chest.

“*Vîrya I'èà'b*,” cautioned Karéin-Mayréij, in a parental tone.

But the shield just rocked back and forth, as if resisting being pulled off.

With his eyes still closed, he muttered, “So... now... what... happens...”

“Take your time, Jerr-ee,” counseled the Storied Watcher. “You are with me, that is, Karéin-Mayréij. “I have stolen you away from the 'White House' palace... you are safe, but we are far away, in the big southern canyon, along with some friends of mine, and some, ahh, 'acquaintances', who I have made.”

Unexpectedly, he winced and laughed a bit.

“Oh, *stop* it, that *tickles*,” protested Kaysten.

His hands reached out to grab the shield, and the minute that he touched it, he stopped fidgeting.

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“Yes, I like you too...” he muttered.

Then his eyes opened.

With a startled look, the Chief of Staff exclaimed, “What the – where –”

“Ain't you never been to the Grand Canyon, there, pardner?” sarcastically questioned Wolf. “Oh, wait a minute, I know – you all couldn't get your limo, down here... right?”

By now, the Chief of Staff had more or less come to. He propped up his upper-body with arms behind and surveyed the scene.

“Who the *hell*?” he complained.

A second later, his gaze fell upon the Storied Watcher, and he added, “Oh... it's *you*, there... funny, you don't look nearly so... *impressive*, without that suit of armor...”

“Well, what did you *expect*, Jerry – my only, ahh, 'change of clothes', is from that 'Salvationary Army' place, and it is challenging just keeping it intact, when it is hidden within the folds of *Virya Ahn'jè* – go and see what *your* clothes look like, after storing them inside an oven for a few hours,” she answered. “And for the record, after our little trip, your own suit needs a good pressing, too.”

Now Chu crouched down close to Kaysten.

“Mr. Chief of Staff,” she said, “I'm Minnie Chu of the FBI – I don't know if you remember me, but I was with the Bureau liaison team down at the Hotel Tucson, just before the incident that occurred there... I'm here with Agents Otis Boatman and Will Hendricks –”

“Yo,” called the big black man, while the third agent smiled and waved.

“Oh... so you're here to get me out? *Fantastic*,” remarked Kaysten. “When do we leave?”

A second later, he winced.

“Owww,” he protested, looking at *Virya I'èà'b*, who had nestled herself into his chest around the belt. “What's *that* – oh, no, never mind, I guess I... know... but look, *you*,” – he pointed at the shield – “No more tickles and bites, you *hear* me?”

“Looks like you picked yourself up an alien stray puppy there, Mister Kaysten,” joked Boatman. “But I'd advise you all to give it lots of positive reinforcement, if you know what's good for you. In the 'keepin' my body in one piece' category, that is.”

“Nonsense,” contradicted the alien-girl. “*Virya I'èà'b* would *never* hurt Jerr-ee... *would* you, dear child?”

The shield gave off a weird, barely-perceptible squeaking noise, and wiggled a bit more.

The Storied Watcher sighed and shook her head.

“Why don't you tell it that you'll put it to bed without supper?” maliciously suggested Wolf. “That always worked for my gf's kids.”

“First off, *Virya I'èà'b* and her brothers and sisters do not 'eat', at least not in the way that you may think,” countered Karéin-Mayréij. “And second, if *your*

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

child flies off in a pout, *you* will not have to pursue it through the skies or the very earth-rock, at several thousand kil-o-meters per hour.”

Another odd sound, halfway between a chirp and a giggle, issued from the shield.

“Too fuckin' *much*,” commented a laughing Hendricks.

“I was going to say, 'I could write *books* about this',” interjected Abruzzio. “In fact, I could write *encyclopedias*.”

“Look, Mr. Chief of Staff,” continued Chu, “We realize that you've had sort of a rough ride in getting all the way out here, and you may still be suffering some of the after-effects of it, so please stop me if I'm going too fast... but I need to bring you up to speed on what has happened in between the incident at the White House and now. May I begin?”

“I'm not sure I want to know,” muttered the man, “But go ahead.”

“Well, briefly, sir,” said the FBI team-leader, “After she invaded the White House and took yourself and the 'stand-in' for the President hostage, the Storied Watcher rendered you unconscious with what she described to us as her 'kiss', which is in fact a bite, that injected some kind of alien substance into your bloodstream, the effects of which we are still not sure about –”

“Yes, you *are*,” admonished the alien-girl. “I *told* you. All it did was let Jerry fly safely at close-quarters with me. And it gave him good health and long life, as well.”

“That's what *she* says,” commented Chu, neutrally. “She has also told us that this, uhh, 'kiss' of hers, should not affect your judgment or ability to reason, particularly about the Storied Watcher herself. Is that true, sir?”

“Is *what* true?” he asked.

“Do you feel yourself to be under her mental control, sir?” demanded the team-leader.

“What?” he replied. “Oh... no, not at all.”

Kaysten pointed a finger at the Storied Watcher.

“Listen, *you*,” he complained, “You've got a lot to answer for, young lady.”

The alien did a mock curtsy, and said, “I am not so 'young', actually. Ah, maybe my best years are behind me... do you think?”

“You're not so cute, without all that weirdo gear all over you, either,” he quipped.

While its mother shrugged nonchalantly, the little shield fidgeted and rocked back and forth, causing another pained expression on the face of the Chief of Staff.

“Not *you*,” he apologized, in the direction of *Vîrya I'èà'b'*. “*Her*.”

The shield let out another strange, edge-of-hearing sound and quieted down.

“Riiight,” spoke Chu. “So anyway, she – *Karéin-Mayréij*, that is – spirited you away to here... she claims so that she can 'educate' you – we're not so sure about that, but there's little that we can do about it. Furthermore, as of a few minutes ago, the Storied Watcher concluded a tentative working agreement with the Director for her to temporarily call off her, uhh, 'campaign' against the

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

United States, in exchange for the Bureau's cooperation in tracking down whomever within the Government is responsible for the abduction and torture of the Billings party –”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Kaysten. “Did you say, 'within the Government?’”

“Yes,” confirmed the FBI team-leader. “Sir, I can relate the full story behind this to you when we have more time, but basically, the Director, as well as many other agents of the Bureau – including, incidentally, myself, Agent Boatman and Agent Hendricks – have for some time been of the opinion that our internal investigations under Project Red Rover have been systematically blocked and subverted, by someone on the 'inside', for reasons as yet unknown. Up to now, the Director has kept this point of view under tight wraps, for reasons that I shouldn't need to explain to you; but given the urgency of the situation with *her*, we felt that the Bureau had to undertake a private initiative to make contact with the Storied Watcher and see if we could work something out. Which, I'm happy to say, we seem to have been able to do.”

“Your government is, how would Bob say, 'on probation',” mentioned Karéin-Mayréj. “It would be *most* unwise of your President to spoil his reprieve.”

“*Surely*, Agent Chu,” warily stated the Chief of Staff, “The Director must be aware of the implications of doing something like *this*, behind the President's back? And that I would have to tell him, the instant that I can?”

“He is, and we are,” confirmed Chu, professionally. “But the Director is of the opinion that to have alerted the President to the plan, would almost certainly warn whomever is behind the abduction of the Storied Watcher's 'family', as she calls them. The Bureau is unanimous that our approach is in the best interests of the country. We're hoping, frankly, that you'll come around to seeing things our way.”

“I... uhh... won't answer that, right now,” evaded Kaysten.

He looked up at the Storied Watcher.

“Is it okay for me to get up with... uhh... *her*, on top of me?” he asked.

“I would assume so,” remarked the alien-girl. “*Vîrya I'èà'b* has told me that she likes you. Therefore she will refrain from, ahh, slicing you in half.”

“Of course, women are known to be fickle... *human* women, I mean,” unhelpfully added the Russian.

Shaking his head, the Chief of Staff slowly stumbled to his feet, with the shield still tightly adhered to his chest.

“This is bloody *awkward*,” complained Kaysten. “But every time I try to shake it off, I get this really annoying, itching feeling.”

“You sure it isn't 'the heartbreak of psoriasis', dude?” joked Hendricks.

“The *what*?” asked a perplexed Storied Watcher.

“Nah... probably diaper rash,” chimed in Wolf.

“What?” said a confused Karéin-Mayréj. “He is a grown man – but Jerr-ee, if you need to clean yourself, you can use yonder pool, by the water-fall –”

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

Kaysten glowered.

"I'm fine," he protested. "Your friend there in the cowboy boots, has a big mouth."

"You noticed?" sarcastically muttered Misha.

"Behave yourselves," remonstrated the Storied Watcher, to her two understudies. "You have free-will – use it responsibly, and chastise not each other, neither still our friends, brothers. I do far too much boasting and threatening talk myself, and I expect to be told when I am, ahh, 'crossing the line'. Let us antagonize and war on the big issues... not on trivial insults."

"You too, Will," ordered Chu, wagging a finger at the third agent.

Hendricks, the Russian and the bounty-hunter wisely fell temporarily silent.

"Sorry," continued Karéin-Mayréij, addressing Kaysten. "I misunderstood, with this Eng-lish... one never knows if words really mean what they seem to say. But anyway, *Vîrya I'ëà'b'* has told me that she has considerable affection for you, Jerr-ee. And in fact, were it not for her skills, you would still have died while flying with me, across the country. If I were you, I would try to be nice to her."

"Look at the *bright* side of it," added Wolf. "If it was that suit of *armor* that she wears, and it took a likin' to you, you'd be roast toasties by now."

Speak told up thee not to, came the little voice of *Vîrya I'ëà'b'*.

Thee why defy I can cannot?

Because I am thy mother, little one... and they are not my sons, silently replied the Storied Watcher.

All freedom shall come to thee in time, beloved daughter Tornado-Diamond-Curtain; but thou must learn much about this world, before that day.

A barely-audible whining sound issued from the shield.

"Or the two daggers," commented Misha. "Wolf and I have both had them rather close by us... the experience was not pleasant, but for *you*, it would have been much worse than that."

"Yeah, kinda like what's left after a frozen steak gets thrown into a curin' kiln," confirmed the bounty-hunter.

"Neither *Væran Ksé'l'ch'* nor *Væran Ss'éth'ch'* would want to harm any of my friends, nor even anyone with whom I do not have a known quarrel," indifferently offered the alien-girl. "Then again, they *are* but children... they *do*, ahh, 'rough-house' every so often, unfortunately."

"Most kids don't 'rough-house' at 500 below, or 5000 above," observed Wolf, with a wicked smile.

"Absolute zero is approximately minus 273 degrees Celsius," corrected Misha. "There is no such *thing* as 'five hundred below'."

"There is, if you never took all that science stuff in high-school, pardner," retorted the bounty-hunter.

Abruzzio sighed and rolled her eyes, while Hendricks whispered to Boatman, "Yeah, and my guitar amp goes up to '11', too."

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“It shore is good seein' you in one piece, Mr. Chief of Staff,” stated the black agent, trying to get back on topic. “Because after what we saw goin' down at the White House, on TV I mean, we all thought you was a goner, if you know what I mean.”

“They put *that* on TV, the thing where the other guy was filming us, that is?” asked Kaysten. “What about the one that she had us do, with the 'stand-in' for the President, where he's telling everybody to 'lay down your guns' and all that?”

“That one went first, followed up by the one where she, uhh, laid the bite on you,” recounted Chu. “There seems to be a bit of a PR war going on, over the airwaves, right now. As of when my team and I headed off here, the Government was in the midst of a frantic campaign to regain control of the debate and assure the public that the real President, *is*, in fact, in charge of the country. There was talk within the Government of martial law being declared, but the problem was, 'who are the Armed Forces supposed to believe'. Basically there's a lot of confusion out there.”

Kaysten turned to address the Storied Watcher.

“Was all of this really necessary?” he demanded. “Not to mention the crap at Rushmore, and dropping the top half of the Washington Monument into the South Lawn. Oh, and let's add to that, flying me off to here... wherever 'here', happens to be.”

“Grand Canyon, remember?” snorted Wolf. “I'd have voted for puttin' you on top of Old Faithful in Yellowstone... but that's just 'me', I guess.”

“In answer to your question,” explained the Storied Watcher, with a half-shrug, “I arrived at that hotel, fully ready to, ahh, 'talk things over'... and I was rewarded by being first shot in the back, then by being attacked from all directions by people dressed very much like my eff-bee-ai friends over there, and then by having a number of huge bombs, dropped on my head, all presumably the 'gifts' of your nice little American government. I have already made penance to Sylvia and Hector, for having endangered them, by showing up there, in the first place. If you knew what I was – and am – capable of doing to this empire of yours, you would say that my actions so far, have been quite... *restrained*.”

“She was going to wreck your entire *country*, you know,” warned Misha, in Kaysten's direction. “We – that is Wolf and I – dissuaded her... I hope.”

Karéin-Mayréij sent the Russian an affectionate glance.

“You owe my friends Misha and Wolf a great deal,” she remarked. “Let us hope their counsel is not in vain.”

The alien-girl slowly walked over to be closer to Kaysten, then continued, “And that is an interesting subject, do you not think? You see, it was not just out of friendship, or wanting to have a hostage, that I brought you to this place.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well,” she coolly mentioned, “I hoped that if I could remove you – a senior courtier of your President-Emperor, that is – away from the entrapments

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

of the American state, you might be able to, ahh, 'fill me in on' what has *really* been going on, within the deliberations of your government. I am sure that Minn-ee Choo and her team, also her 'Director', would want to know, too."

Kaysten tried to remain silent.

"Let us be frank, here, Jerr-ee," cajoled the Storied Watcher, "We both know that what your President has said to me, equally to the peasants of your country, about the whereabouts and captivity of Bob, Tommy, Whitney, Curtis and Melissa, is a parcel of lies. Now that you have no spies or army-men looking over your shoulder, do you have any additional information to reveal?"

"What happens if I don't tell the truth, or if you think I'm not telling the truth?" nervously asked the Chief of Staff.

"Nothing," answered the alien-girl. "Except that I will be very disappointed in you; and, I will think less of you."

"The Storied Watcher has given the Director her personal assurance that you won't be harmed," interjected Chu. "My team will hold her to that."

"As if you *could*," retorted Wolf.

"There is no need to goad them, good companion," cautioned Karéin-Mayréij, in the bounty-hunter's direction. "What you say is true – I *could* kill everyone here, with only a thought – but Minn-ee and her team are pledged to defend their leaders, Jerry among them, even at the cost of their own lives. There is honor in such bravery, and shame when one much greater, crushes the weak, without risk to self. So you have nothing to fear from me, Jerr-ee; but you *do* have something that would be terrible to lose."

"Uhh... *what?*" he demanded. "I don't follow you."

"I would hope that someday you would, and *that* is what you have to lose," she replied, with a hint of the godliness leaking out, again. "But for the time being, all I request, is a little *information*."

"Well, as our friends from the FBI here can probably attest, it would be *treason* – that's a death-penalty offense, by the way – for me to divulge the internal discussions of the National Security Council, or the equivalent in the White House," offered Kaysten. "But what I *can* tell you is, the President's just about at his wits' end about you, Ms. Mayréij. Originally, he just wanted the Government to be the first to get in touch with you, sit down and make some arrangements, you know? So we set up the thing in Tucson – as Ms. Abruzzio and Mr. Ramirez are no doubt aware, I had a direct hand in all that – and we were hoping that by staging *that* event, we'd get another chance to set the record straight, but something, uhh, went wrong... you gotta *believe* me, that was the *opposite* of what the President intended."

"You withhold the whole truth, Jerr-ee," pressed the alien-girl. "I have ways of knowing when a mortal is doing that."

"How would you know?" evaded the Chief of Staff.

Because you are starting to know, too, she sent to his surprised mind.

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

Close your eyes and reflect, man. Think deep-down – my power – the Fire – lies upon you, it grows within you... ask my beloved daughter, who cleaves now to your chest, for guidance.

Soon, you, too, will know instinctively, when someone tells a lie.

A second later, came another message.

You will also know when someone like you, is living a lie, and is thereby denying who he really is, Jerr-ee. I do not judge humans because of stupid prejudice. I will not judge you, if you will accept my love... even if you desire me not, as man desires woman.

An air of concern circulated between the others, as, for a few seconds, Kaysten did not say anything, instead staring vacantly into space with an astonished, half-panicked look.

Eventually, he managed, “Okay... I hear you... I get it.”

“You get *what*?” asked Boatman. “She ain't said *nothin'* to you.”

“She does not *have* to,” commented Misha. “There are ways of communicating that do not involve speaking with one's lips.”

“Ms. Abruzzio,” asked Chu, “Is this what you were referring to, when you told us about the 'message' that she –”

Yes, *it is*, came the mental response, from she knew not where.

And the fact that you now so clearly perceive my thought, means that you are changing, too.

Chu gulped.

“I... see,” she nervously offered. “What if I don't *want* to?”

“Easy,” remarked the Storied Watcher, out loud. “Then move yourself away from me. But you had better do so quickly, and make it nice and far... say, ahh, the top of yonder canyon-wall, would do.”

“You *know* I can't do that... neither can Will or Otis,” protested the FBI team-leader. “We're under *orders*.”

The alien-girl shrugged, nonchalantly. “Oh well, then,” she purred.

“Can't you turn it *off*?” demanded Chu, with desperation. “*Please!*”

“Not as far as I know,” explained Karéin-Mayréj. “And I would not, even if I could. The blessing that my presence bestows is as much part of *me*, as your ancestry or the sound of your voice is part of *you*. I will not deny who I am, nor who I will become... nor should you.”

The music was playing again, and out of the corners of eyes, the mortals again could see the awesome countenance of the Storied Watcher.

“But you're trying to *change* who I am,” argued Chu.

“I am not 'trying' to do anything, Minn-ee Choo,” countered Karéin-Mayréj. “It happens naturally, without any effort on my part, for those who I favor. With each passing second, you – and everyone here – are becoming more, so *much* more, than 'just a mortal'. Why not accept my trust, my gift and my love, in gratitude, woman? Do perfect health and another hundred years added to your lifespan, mean *nothing* to you? It is your *destiny*. Do you think that you were brought here by happenstance? There is a purpose, to all things.”

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“Uh-oh,” muttered Hendricks. “Any chance we can call that helicopter, after all, Minnie?”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Boatman, addressing the Storied Watcher. “I thought you said that you had to *bite* us, or some such nonsense, before—”

“That makes it better, and makes it happen faster,” stated the alien-girl. “But if you are in my presence, and my arts tell me that you are a follower of the Holy Light... it will happen, anyway.”

She arose and walked over to the big black man, and, to his obvious discomfort, embraced him, laying her head on his massive chest.

“Be my friend,” she quietly inveighed. “And thus, be... *strengthened*.”

“Look, it ain't that I don't *like* you,” stuttered Boatman. “But you goin' too *fast* here, you know?”

“Who knows how much time remains to us, before the hour is urgent,” replied the Storied Watcher, regarding the black man from a perspective way under his much taller face.

“Hey, congratulations on joinin' the club,” cracked Wolf, a cynical smirk on his face. “But hey, Karéin, don't the Russkie and I get brownie points fer campin' on first? After all, I had to *shoot* someone to get to run with you.”

“A friendship forged in the fires of war, is like a well-tempered sword – stronger than one that has never been so hardened,” replied Karéin-Mayréij, with a friendly nod toward the bounty-hunter as she slowly let go of Boatman. “But my love and blessing fall upon *all* who now hear my voice. I only ask that they accept it. *Be* with me... be *part* of me – with all my heart, this I pray.”

Somehow, the desert stars shone brighter, and previously-hidden colors started to show themselves to the eyes of the humans in this place.

“Otis, Will, I'd like you two to get as far away from here as you can, as long as you can keep us all within eyesight,” commanded the FBI team-leader.

“But Minnie, it's just about dark out there,” argued Boatman. “Director told us all that we had to—”

Damn, silently reflected the big FBI agent, his mind racing with excitement and real fear, for the first time in decades.

I knows I should get my ass the hell out of here – but I can't – feet don't wanna go... should pray to the Lord... but... what if she's on His... side... somethin' keeps tellin' me...

“It would not be far enough, anyway,” commented the Storied Watcher. “Your fellow eff-bee-ai agents would have to be much further away. And some roads, are not for turning back upon.”

“Funny,” mentioned Hendricks, “Is it just my imagination, or is the last bit of the sun reflecting off something up there? No moon, but I can see all sorts of stuff now—”

“Karéin,” protested Abruzzio, “As a scientist, I find this fascinating... I feel... *funny*, in a nice way, but... Ms. Chu has a valid point. It's unfair of you to impose this, uhh, 'gift', as you call it, upon the rest of us, without our informed consent. I'm asking you to stop the process. *Please*.”

The Angel Brings Fire Book 4 : Children of The Fire (Teaser)

“Yeah, I mean, leaving aside all the other issues, we're supposed to be doing an, uhh, 'objective' analysis of yourself,” added Ramirez. “How can we do that, if you're, uhh, changing us into something other than a 'real' human being?”

“I *cannot* stop it, not without denying who I am, or without making myself defenseless, which I will in no way do, and besides, you have a choice,” countered the alien-girl. “You can walk about a mile, or more, in any direction. But, Hector – does it *feel* 'bad'? Do you feel any the less able to think, to reason, to make your own decisions? If you must walk... walk with *me*, man. And bring your friends on our journey, that I might teach them... thereby showing my special love, to all who hear these words.”

She bowed her head, her hands reverently folded.

Uh-oh, realized more than one of the soon-to-be-ex-humans.

Here it comes.

But they could do nothing; and, subconsciously, each one knew it.

Dumbfounded, Ramirez hesitated, involuntarily biting his lip.

“I would have to say that it feels... *wonderful*,” he admitted. “The opposite of 'bad', in fact.”

As the ethereal music played gently in the nether regions of human psyches, the Mexican-American scientist looked up to the heavens.

“*Dios mio*, it sure *is* pretty, isn't it?” he quietly observed. “Look at the little ones... I've spent my whole life looking at the sky, you know... but I never saw them before... not like *this*...”

Ramirez' voice tailed off.

“What's *happening* to us,” whimpered Chu, as she struggled to maintain her famously-professional presence. “Not what I wanted... not what I wanted... not... what I wanted... what I want... I *want*...”

“I never did drugs,” absent-mindedly remarked Abruzzio. “But I see things... *new* things... how can it be *real*, how can it have all been just round the corner, just past our finger-tips... this is *terra incognita*... Karéin, I'm asking you, please...”

“Your beautiful world, how it *really* is, Sylvia,” quietly answered Karéin-Mayréij, like a tutoring parent. “How the Immortal Light meant her children to see it, thus to love it, treasure it... preserve it. Let thy favored eyes be opened, woman... friend.”

Hymnal music played faintly, from everywhere and nowhere.

A shooting star passed by. Its tail was iridescent, sparkling, so much *better* than in even the best childhood memories.

Was it a dream?

Mutely and reluctantly, six now more-than-human glances passed uneasily from one to the other, then back again, all around.

– End of Sample Chapter –