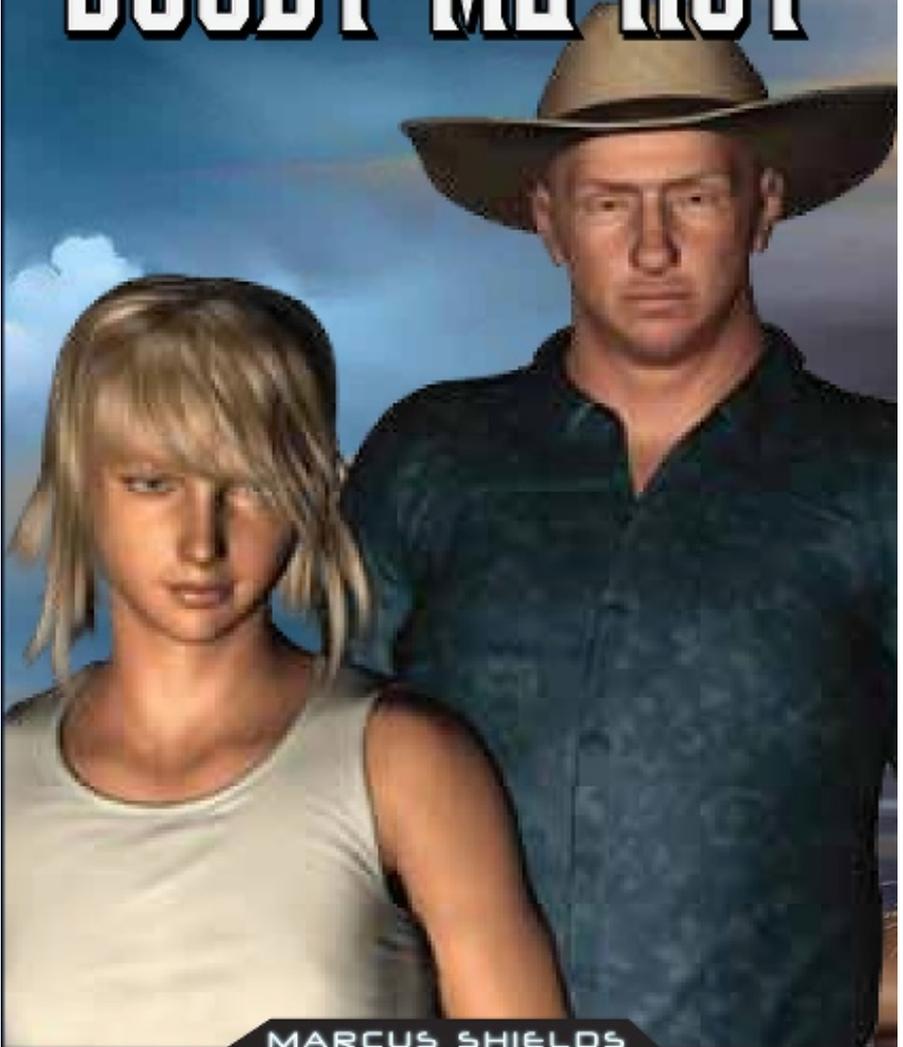


THE ANGEL BRINGS FIRE BOOK II

DOUBT ME NOT



MARCUS SHIELDS

Sample Chapter

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The Angel Brings Fire Book 2 : Doubt Me Not (Teaser)

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Aftermath

You Can Call Me, “Bob”

Wistfully, and with genuine affection, the fallen-girl waved good-bye to the trucker, as he closed the door of his cab. The truck's engine growled a low chord as its driver guided it around a lonely clump of trees, to a government roadblock astride the Idaho-Wyoming state line.

Walking quickly forward, she saw a man in a gray-green uniform, wearing a funny-looking, wide-brimmed hat, accost the truck driver, who opened the window of the cab, handed the uniformed man a bunch of papers and then sat waiting impassively.

After a minute or two, the soldier-or-whatever motioned for the trucker to get out, which he did, leading the uniformed man and a couple of his fellow soldiers to the back of the truck, which was opened and, evidently, carefully inspected. A bit later, Donny came back out, said something to the uniformed men and got back in his cab, restarting the engine. The rig started to head off to the east, disappearing in a cloud of dust.

“Bye-bye, Don-nee, bye-bye,” whispered the fallen-girl, suspecting but not caring that he could not hear.

Alone I am, again, she mused, silently wiping the traces of a tear. The stranger, the drifter from afar, whose only companions are sky, memory, the inner fire, and duty.

What duty?

None paid any special attention to this woebegone girl-thing, lost as she was at the edge of a large crowd of dirty, down-and-out people of all shapes and sizes, milling about the roadblock.

Their loss; as, if they had so done, they would have seen a creature outwardly human, but in fact something *far* more, much more, facing an unknown future in a strange land – no, a strange *world* – as, she somehow knew, had been her lot so many times before.

Her face wore the serene, saturnine half-smile that others had seen before in another place, as her eyes and other senses scanned the scene with cool, analytical precision, trying to make sense of the cacophony of images, smells, vibrations, sounds, radiation and unfamiliar thought-patterns; she sampled the latter and her smile broadened ever so slightly, as she felt another of the old skills – one with no outward sign, but a vital one, none the less – gradually returning.

So that is how they put the words together, thought the girl-in-rags, bemusedly. Catherine and Donny must be very tolerant, to have listened to my pidgin Eng-lish, without laughing.

Upon a seconds' more of reflection, she remembered, *But I knew how to put the words in the right order, all along. I knew how, once. Not long ago, either.*

What made me forget?

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A hundred or more men and women, mostly white but not a few blacks and Hispanics, and – though she did not yet know them as such – a number of native Indians, as well, families with and without children and countless others in a modern-day *Grapes of Wrath* scene, milled about this forlorn place, while the Prairie skies occasionally stung the eyes with gusts of wind-borne grit. By a range of measure that meant much to the inhabitants of this place, but which was far less significant in her own reckoning, it was considerably warmer here than it had been, back at the restaurant or in the truck.

The fallen-girl closed her eyes for a second, called upon a deep thought, and tried to adjust her metabolism accordingly.

This had once been simply a nondescript section of Interstate highway, back in the halcyon days prior to 'Lucifer'; nowadays, however, a collection of hastily-constructed tents, temporary buildings and even a Quonset hut – most, but not all, painted in the green-and-khaki of the military – had suddenly appeared astride the imaginary line separating Idaho from the next state.

The girl-thing's senses, sweeping from north to south in a wide arc, detected the life-signs of soldiers far off in either direction, undoubtedly there to stop anyone trying to end-run the Interstate barrier that she was now approaching. She also felt the presence of metal things buried in the ground, perhaps two hundred meters on either side of the highway, with a sign erected in the midst of these places.

“Warning, Mines!” it says, she mused. *I thought that was where these people retrieve elements from the earth... another one of these many words with more than one meaning, no doubt...*

A voice crackled out, all static and feedback, from a trumpet-shaped thing on top of a wooden pole, itself on top of what looked like a prefabricated hut or shack at the side of the road.

“Attention!” it barked out. “We need to remind all of you in the crowd that on the order of the Emergency Measures Authority, no-one without the correct documentation is to approach the border processing checkpoint! If you don't have your papers, there's *nothing* we can do to help you. Those with proof of citizenship or special authorization to travel, you may come forward. No exceptions!”

“I'm trying to get back home!” shouted a male voice from the midst of the crowd. “My papers are there. How the hell am I supposed to –”

“You *heard* 'em,” said another voice. “No exceptions. Goddamn country's like Roossia, or Irat, or whatever that damn place is, these days...”

Though she was more than a hundred meters from the checkpoint, the fallen-girl's eyes focused sharply, effortlessly on the faces and figures immediately in front of its gate. She heard arguing, shouting, clearly – although some of the words were still new to her – a dispute of some sort.

There was more shouting, then some shoving, then, cringing involuntarily, she saw a soldier take out a weapon and use its butt to club a man over the head, sending him to the ground in a shower of blood. A nearby woman – the victim's

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mate, probably – wailed pitifully and dragged the wounded man away, cursing the soldiers as she went.

The bystanders moved back, helped along, undoubtedly, by seeing the soldiers' guns lowered, pointing forward. One of them fired a shot into the air, and the half-panicked crowd surged to the girl-in-rags and then past her, but she just stood there impassively unafraid, her glance moving from fearful face to face as each trotted or ran past.

An average-looking, forty-something white guy with a slight paunch around the waist and a couple of days'-worth of stubble on his face, at least a full head taller than the fallen-girl, with thinning hair combed back in a futile effort, stopped suddenly. He was wearing a too-tight, badly-creased business suit that looked like 'three months since its last dry-clean'.

The man shouted out, “Hey, *you* there – you *stoopid* or something? They got *guns*! You better get your pretty little ass – ”

“They are your own soldiers?” she replied, faking innocence. “They would harm you? You have broken no law... nor have I...?”

The man looked quickly over his shoulder, visibly relieved as he saw the soldiers retreating gradually to the checkpoint.

“Oh, yeah... yeah, you're right, there, Miss,” he said. “Whew! Well, better safe than sorry, you know, especially these days with all the 'special' laws after the Big Bang...”

The rest of the crowd, seeing the same thing, gradually slowed down, milling aimlessly about, as the fallen-girl stood in front of the man, her glance sweeping over him, up and down.

I need someone who I can trust, she mused. And I need to know, if this art still works, with those with whom I hold not close. I shall not trouble you for long, so friend, I hope that you and the Gods can forgive me.

“Hi,” she offered, fetchingly. Her gaze caught him straight in the eye.

Be my friend, she sent. I am a nice person. Trust me. Love me.

“Hel-lo,” the man in the shabby business-suit, stammered. “Bob – Bob K. Billings, Junior, here, that's my name. Tucson, Arizona, but I can't get back to the damn place... can't even get across a state line, these days. How about you?”

“I am Sari Tanak,” she primly replied. “Why did you come here, Bob K. Billings Junior? What brings you to this place?”

“Sari... Tanak... sounds *foreign*,” he commented.

“It is,” she deadpanned.

“Well, you can call me, 'Bob'”, he explained. “Anyway, since you asked, I'm in sales, see, hardwood and ceramic floor tiling, that kinda thing. Part-owner of my store's franchise, we do business all over the Southwest, even some jobs as far as California, one or two in St. Louis, too, but I guess there won't be much more to do there... not for a while... what about you?”

“Use my first name, just 'Sari', Bob,” the smiling fallen-girl requested. “I am just a wanderer. I go from place to place. I do not have a home.”

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“Hmm... that’s too bad,” replied the salesman. “But what do you do for a living? Not to be nosy, but...”

“Well, I got some money from the last man who I was with,” the girl-in-rags stated, matter-of-factly.

“Ah, I see,” Billings knowingly answered. “Forgive me for being blunt about this, but, well, you’re a *working* girl, then?”

“Yes, I always do good work in exchange for money,” she affirmed, with an enigmatic, slight smile.

Sizing her up, he offered, “Yeah, I’ll bet you do. I’ll *bet* you do. But don’t take that the wrong way. I’m not the judgmental type, don’t you know.”

Can’t imagine why I didn’t see it at first, he reflected.

But God, she is cute – what is it, that little-girl haircut? Weird, that salt-and-pepper hair looks like she’s almost a grandma, but her face and figure says she can’t be more than 20, probably not even that... is it those turquoise eyes? That small-boobed, “never-been-you-know-what” teenager physique? Maybe not a ‘10’, but ‘9 and a half’ for damn sure, and that’s with her clothes on. Could stand to use a bath, for sure, but if those banking machines were just on-line...

He paused for a second, then continued, “Just for the record, I had a gf back in Tucson, and a kid, too, but he’s from my ex-wife, not the girlfriend, you know? They’re stuck down there, I’m stuck up here, and that’s about the long and short of it.”

“I am hungry,” she said. “Is there anywhere around here, like a, how do you... a ‘restaurant’, where we could buy some food and talk some more, Bob?”

“Fraid not,” answered the salesman. “Closest thing is that charity mess-tent that the Salvation Army – well, I *think* it’s the Sally Ann, maybe it’s one of them other religious nuts, I dunno – is running, you see it there?”

He pointed at a tarpaulin-covered structure, a few score meters off to the left, with a lineup of people trailing out the front door-flaps of the tent, with hymnal-sounding music echoing outwards.

“We could go there,” suggested the girl-in-rags, trying to sound helpful. “Would for-tee dollars of money be enough for dinner? Would it also buy us a warm place to sleep, tonight?”

“You sure don’t beat around the bush, do you, Sari there girl?” he retorted, half-nonplussed, half-aroused.

“Beat the – ” she started, but he interrupted, saying, “But, just so we don’t have any... *misunderstandings*, here, I’m afraid that I don’t have a lot of cash on me – you gotta appreciate, I live off my credit and debit cards, normally, but when the Big Bang came down, well, I kinda got stuck out here when the computer networks all went down, which is why I’m here telling you this, right now. Like, I can’t pay you what you’re probably worth, my dear, and – not that the girlfriend would mind that much, she’s not really the jealous type, anyway and we’ve kind of been on the ‘outs’ recently, but I don’t think the Bible-bangers running that place would cotton up to us sacking down on their turf, even if they

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had any place to put us up in, which I pretty much doubt, anyway. So I guess it's just chit-chat, for now. Is that alright by you?"

"I am not sure that I completely understand," replied the fallen-girl, "But I am alone and I would welcome company, even if it is just someone to talk with. If you want to lie with me, we can leave that until later. Oh-kay, Bob?"

"You *got* it," he agreed, mentally kicking himself for giving up so easily. "Let's go."

– End of Sample Chapter –