

broken

TRACI L. SLATTON



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To paraphrase André Malraux:

A book is a museum without boundaries.

1

THE FIRE LICKS along the ground, creeping toward distant spires, intent on consuming villages and forests, towns and steppes. The sound of moaning swirls up off the ground, sibilant like crimson and yellow fallen leaves. I am walking along the edge of a muddy field.

A fixed point on the horizon beckons. I approach, and it is a boy, a Romany boy, dark eyed, ragged, unabated. He waves me to stand back.

I pause and a candle rises up between us, growing out of the ground with the tenderness of a seedling. Another emerges beside it. The twin candles take light at the same moment, their flames puffing upward. For a moment they are resonant. Then slowly the two flames curl around each other, a spiral of sparks. Then they merge into one flame.

All around me, people fall. The boy drops to his knees, a bullet hole in his head.

His spirit arcs upward as if flung by a slingshot—the mirror image of what happens when an angel, tempted beyond innate grace, falls.

I shudder and sit upright in bed, choked by the dream as if by a noose.

There are those who wonder if God's grace can still be

seen in the world, overrun as it is by stormtroopers, with bullets ringing out, tanks rolling, bombs destroying town squares and temples, and innocents dying on every street corner in Europe.

I am one of those who wonder. How can a good God permit such atrocities? And the worst is yet to come. I know that, because I am one of the damned, and I see flashes of the horrors on the horizon.

IS IT ARROGANCE that prompts a soul to take on material form? That's what some of the ancient scriptures say.

All the ancient scriptures speak of us, the celebrated ones who were created to serve and carry out the will of God. It is said that we are beings who have consumed, with the fire of the love of God, all human traits and limitations, and that we have clothed ourselves with the attributes of the spiritual; it is said that we have been released from the chains of self, and so we reveal God's grace; it is claimed that we are emanations of the Uncreated Wise Spirit; it is even asserted that we are symbolic references, without actual physical or spiritual being. We are spoken of but never defined. The truth is other than all the half-right, half-wrong claims. The intermediaries between Heaven and Earth are tainted, and redeemed, by both.

So does my story truly start with arrogance and lust?

I think it starts in loneliness. Even beings of light can feel alone when they suffer a loss as I lost Ariel.

When I knew isolation, I took on a body. Awareness broke over me, and I succumbed to its allure, to its succulent

poison. I clothed myself with a soft, supple, beautiful body, one that many men want to caress. Women, too. I encourage their touch, all touch. I reciprocate.

It's the fabric of sensuality that feeds me, and that I nourish. Putting my hands on a breast or a thigh or a penis and feeling the hungry pulse of flesh, feeling the inner resonance—that thrills me. Sucking in the sensual essence of a soul through my fingertips and palms, that's bliss. That's Heaven. The only Heaven I will ever again know.

Summer 1939. I am in Paris for almost a year. I walk into La Closerie des Lilas and stand at the check-in desk. I don't make eye contact with the maître d'. I could soak him in through my eyes, devouring him and expanding him and altering him, but I don't need his essence. I leave it for him, unvarnished, unhealed. It's something he doesn't appreciate.

He wants the answering glow in a woman's face when he shines his attention on her. He's good-looking and used to the reflection. I feel a thrum of sympathy for him; he wonders why the curvy, dark-haired, pale-eyed woman is cold. He wonders if it's him. Is he off his game, has he lost his charm? He rejects that, because humans easily flow into blaming others.

As the current runs, seeking an outlet, the good-looking maître d' designates some epithet for me. It expiates his sense of rejection. He mutters to himself, both hoping I hear and hoping I don't, "Stuck-up bitch."

If only he knew.

And then, as happens without my consent, the future flashes in. For the briefest millisecond, faster than the

human eye can register, white light irradiates the man. His future self appears.

Two or three years hence. He drags on a cigarette with a pair of Wehrmacht soldiers outside this very restaurant. They wear gray-green uniforms with shoulder straps and tight black belts. He has provided them with information, and they have rewarded him with a smoke. He wants his neighbor's bicycle, and so has told the Gestapo about the neighbor's stack of *papillons*, leaflets distributed by the Resistance under the very noses of the occupying army.

Monsieur le maître d' comes by a very nice Belgian bicycle.

The flash fades; no one has seen the future but me, who does not care about such niceties as disappeared neighbors and wheeled vehicles. Let Monsieur do as he wishes. His devices, his neighbor, are not my concern. I am here for the satiation of flesh, which is all that matters now.

I scan the interior for the man I am meeting. He's the friend of a friend, Spanish, black haired, green eyed, broad shouldered, delicious. I held him once, feeling his ripeness against my hips, his damp breath on my neck. I fended him off then, reluctant to feed off his light.

But he persists, like a moth to a flame, issuing an ultimatum to the fire to consume him.

Finally I need to take from him that thing that I crave. Only in appeasing the craving can I find any redemption.

"Beautiful," a voice calls. It's Pedro, swiveling around on a bar stool to face me.

I meet and hold his eyes.

Pedro is tall and husky, with lavish muscles and beautifully modeled forms. He's half Spanish and half German Jew; his father had taken respite from the Great War to father a child on the daughter of a bureaucrat in Spanish Guinea. His ancestors line up behind him in two neat rows, generations of fair-haired Jews on one side, swarthy Spaniards, many of them Saracens, on the other. They merge in the young man to create a bullfighter whose way with a red flag entrances everyone, not just the animals he slaughters.

He kisses with ferocity. He kills with sweetness.

He walks across the room, and the eyes of every woman in the place follow him. He is the handsomest creature I've ever seen. My palms itch to slide over his flesh.

For all his lush beauty, he's a sweet boy. He never speaks ill of anyone. He has suffered; his family has been tortured, fragmented, by Primo de Rivera, the inept dictator of Spain for a brief but crucial seven years. Pedro's father returned to Germany, leaving the pregnant wife to fend for herself. Young Pedro endured an early, bitter loss. It left him determined and yet tender, like the juicy rib of a lamb, young meat on pliable bone.

It's that combination of sweetness and fierceness that attracts me.

Pedro is looking at me.

I don't break the gaze. I intensify it. I breathe more deeply, feeling him, there, and me, here. I feel his body, the warmth in his flesh and the strength of his will, the current of spirit inhabiting the muscles. I feel my own flesh respond-

ing: the little pricking of my nipples, the slow burn beneath my navel, the wetness between my thighs.

Pedro opens his mouth slightly.

I part my lips, mirroring him. Then I inhale, and in so doing I collapse the space between us. I set his heart against mine, beat for beat.

Pedro comes at a run to gather me into his arms. “Beautiful Alia,” he murmurs, crushing me against him.

I don’t speak, and he drags me out of the restaurant, kissing me. The murmur of dinner patrons follows us, then recedes.

We are somewhere in an alley, somewhere out of sight, sheltered in a nook off the street. Are we on the boulevard Saint-Michel or boulevard du Montparnasse? I don’t know. I don’t care.

Pedro’s tongue probes my mouth. He has been drinking wine and eating a baguette with olive oil and salt. His hands roam over my shoulders and neck. He glows with desire.

The body is bathed in light. Humans think that the body radiates light, as if light is a by-product of the physical being. In fact, it’s the other way around: light congeals the body; light precedes form. Vaporous light is the structure on which all things are formed. It inhabits many realms. And it is delicious . . . delectable, for those of us who know it. Who know how to sip of it. The legends of manna from Heaven and of the nectar of the gods all trace back to this sweet, sweet light.

I come from a world of light, to which I will never return, so I am desperate to drink it in. To gorge myself. All I have to

do is open and the light naturally runs off into me, saturating me. It fills me, sates me, raptures me.

Because I am what I am, my lover shares my ecstasy. Light, alone of all phenomena, increases when it is shared. The consequences to the bed mate of a fallen angel are profound.

Yet when a human's light is metabolized by a fallen angel, the human is never the same. Never. Nor can the human understand what has been done to him or her. That's why the play of light during sexual congress is forbidden between angels and humans, and why we are sometimes called "Watchers"; angels can see what humans cannot. We can usurp them of their free will. It is a violation of the most sacred law decreed on high, free will.

Pedro lifts my skirts to my waist. He moans to discover I wear only sheer silk stockings held up by garters.

"You are blonde here, like a sun at your center," he whispers, curving his hand around my perineum. His fingers come away damp. Pedro growls, pressing his lips into my throat and décolletage.

I unbuckle his belt and then unbutton the fly to his trousers. I undo his shirt and press my hands into his stomach, which is taut with excitement. But the skin and muscles, buttery as they are, are just a thin membrane over the sea of light within. My fingers, pressing into him, taste his light-essence. All my receptors open to soak him in.

He presses back into me. His erection pushes against my stomach. He's much taller than this body I took on. He stoops to fit up into me. Roughly he jerks my left leg high,

crooking my knee around his forearm, easing the entrance for him.

There is a stretch in my hip flexor, and the deep inner muscle band of my psoas, that alchemical meeting ground of pain and ecstasy, melts. This body ripples and stretches.

Pedro presses inside me, gasping.

Then he is pounding rhythmically and my hips answer his, and I am winding tendrils of radiance deep inside him. His essence flows into me, but at the same time, he receives a collateral benefit. The light-template on which his body forms itself is evened, straightened, strengthened. He will crave this sensation forever, seeking to recreate it, not knowing why.

Pedro is taut and close to release. He is grimacing. His thighs slam into mine.

I dig my fingers into the warm, round flesh of his buttocks and he shakes, forcefully expelling his semen. “Beautiful, I am sorry,” he apologizes in a hoarse voice. “May I please you?” As he withdraws from me, his hand creeps down to stroke me.

“You already have.”

“For real. Let me, Alia.”

“No, *chéri*, not now.” Another time, I would accept his gallant offer. But soft white effulgence glimmers behind him, falling on the street like rain or abandoned time. I know what those gleaming droplets mean. I wipe away his spend with my hand and then scrape off my hand on the limestone wall. I drop my skirts and reach to help him collect his clothes.

“This is not right,” he objects. “It is selfish of me.”

“Go inside, quickly, so no one knows what we have done,” I say, though I don’t care who knows. “Go back and I will join you in a few minutes.”

“I will give you pleasure. It is only right.” He is a stubborn one.

“There will be many occasions for that.” I smile. My voice coaxes him, but it also commands. “Go in and we’ll have a *coupe de champagne*.”

He squints at me and shakes his head once, but relents. “If that’s what you wish, of course.” He marches away, his broad shoulders squared off, his step harsh with discord.

I close my eyes briefly, savoring the warmth of what I’d shared with Pedro. Then I calm my stomach, which clenches, in the way that human bodies register feeling. I open my eyes and look into the air in the center of the alley, where platinum ripples iridesce. A body solidifies out of the ripples.

“Alia, really? Fornicating on the street?” asks a male voice, often too high, and often untuned, like a stringed instrument in disarray. Archangel Michael stands before me in all his glory.

“Bonjour, *mon ange*.”

Michael shakes his head and flexes his shoulders backward, folding his powerful silver-white wings. He has taken his usual form on the Earth—that of a tall, slim man with graying hair and deep-set eyes full of compassion. His eyes hold more than compassion; they brim with thought and fire and life and honesty—with presence. A quiet, upright elegance characterizes the way he moves, and it is in full force as he walks toward me. “Alia, my daughter.”

“I am not your daughter, Michael.” I smooth my skirts down around me. Not that it matters; Michael witnessed the whole episode, including my forbidden luminescent play with Pedro’s aura. To take without informing the donor is a violation of the law of free will.

“A term of endearment.” He smiles indulgently. “You know among angels those distinctions are irrelevant; light is light is light.”

“There are other names I would have you call me.” I move down the alley into the boulevard Saint-Michel. I sidle close to Michael and lay my palms on his chest. “Look, we’re on your street,” I quip.

“Every street is my street, because every street is God’s, and all is God’s, including me,” he answers. Gently, he removes my hands. But he is smiling, and his eyes dance. It’s one of the things I love about Michael: he says the right thing, the holy thing, but somehow offsets it with a suggestion of impish humor. And the humor draws me close even as his righteousness rejects me.

He pulls me to him and then pushes me away. It torments me. I look at the white limestone. “Why are you here, Michael? I didn’t call you. So why did you come?”

“I would ask you the same thing, Alia.” His voice holds a note of reproach. “Paris, summer, 1939? What are you doing here in this place that will see so much, with these people who will endure so much? You know what is coming. Why, of all times and places, did you choose here and now?”

“Why indeed?”

“Alia.”

“To make it interesting for myself?” I smile. “They don’t know what is coming. They should, but they don’t want to see. Business is booming. Nightclubs are opening. Theaters are full. There’s a masked ball every night. Wonderful new books have come out. I have just read *La Nausée* by an ugly, froggish little philosopher named Jean-Paul. Did you realize, Michael, consciousness is completely independent, and life is meaningless?”

“Leave it to a French philosopher.” Michael shakes his head.

“He wasn’t very good in bed,” I confess. “I had to pretend I was a virgin, because that’s what he likes. I think it’s because his technique is so poor that he couldn’t please a woman who knows real lovemaking. Probably also why he formulated all those beliefs around meaninglessness—to compensate for his poor performance as a lover. If it’s all meaningless anyway, it doesn’t matter if he’s bad in bed. It’s all of one whole cloth.”

“I didn’t notice much finesse from your young Spaniard,” Michael comments with a grin that is also a grimace. He turns away, but he is observing my face out of the corner of his eye.

Michael’s observation pleases me. Is he the tiniest bit jealous? I can imagine so, for the joy it gives me to think he cares that way. “Yes, but his enthusiasm is marvelous!”

“All enthusiasm is marvelous. And when you are *entheos*, meaninglessness falls away like the adolescent drivel it is.”

“So that’s why you came, to discuss philosophy with me? Don’t you have prayers to attend to, wrongs to right, down-

trodden to advocate for? Why waste your time with an angel who threw herself away?”

“You would never be a waste of my time, Alia,” he responds swiftly. “You didn’t throw yourself away. You lost your way. You endured a deep loss and responded in a way that missed the mark.”

My breath, my heart, catches in my throat. Why must he remind me? It takes me a few beats to regain control of myself. I have been shattered, the shattering is still within me. I am only shards now. There is no core.

But his core is undiminished. He is the archangel. *The* archangel. There must be a reason for his visit. “Ah, you’re here to redeem me?” Laughter erupts from me. “That is a waste of time. What you’ve just seen, that’s the least of it. You can’t imagine what I’ve done. I call them to me, Michael. When I was an angel, one among the host, I did what angels do: I came when called. But now I have free will. Now I summon people with my power. Power! Can you imagine how delightful it is to feel it, to wield it? I bring them to their knees with longing and lust. I use them. I take away their will. Then I feed off them, I suck in their light to nourish myself. This is evil, isn’t it? Unredeemable?”

Michael lifts his eyebrows and meets my eyes.

I say, “‘Through that valley also rivers of fire were flowing, to which those angels shall be condemned, who seduced the inhabitants of the earth.’ If we seduce them, they are left with heightened desire that cannot be sated through ordinary means. They lose a vital piece of their own prerogative.”

Then, because it always does, Michael’s steady gaze dis-

concerts me. He sees to my depths. He gets inside me so easily. I shift about on my feet.

“No one is unredeemable,” he says, after a few beats.

“Unless they freely will themselves to be. Isn’t free will God’s law? Doesn’t even the Book of Life defer to it, rewriting its pages as necessary?”

“You haven’t answered my question, Alia. Why here, now?”

“I don’t have an answer.” I lean back against the wall so that the stone grazes my shoulders.

“I know you better than that.”

“You have known me.”

Finally his armor of calm is pierced, and Michael gives me a stony look, then turns his face away. “It is my loss, too. I love Ariel.”

For a moment, unmasked, we are silent with each other. “I am looking for clarity,” I mutter. “I’ve seen it on human faces, as you have. In extremis, when they call us to them, they have clarity. We are never in extremis, so how can we know what they know, then?” I take a deep, shuddering breath. “Why have you come, Michael? I did not call you.”

“I came to remind you that you have at your disposal an act of grace. One act. One miracle, one something. Whatever you want it for. Not everything is lost.”

“What do you know of loss? You deny that loss exists.”

His breath makes a harsh sound in his throat. “You are not evil, Alia, beloved.”

“This world is getting a lesson in evil now. But not from me, from the mad Führer. I leave these people better than I

find them. My feeding is a blessing for them. *What I do heals them.* ‘He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am: I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him.’”

“Such mockery, beloved Alia.”

“The only mockery is in your term of endearment for me. I would be your beloved, but I am not. So instead I have this power—”

“Well, that’s the dilemma,” he cuts in. “You have to decide if you want to heal them with power or with love.”

Anger erupts, burning, in my chest. I do not want this dilemma. I left this kind of question far behind. I take a quick, deep in-breath. Paris rises up in front of me, chattering people on bicycles and on foot, limestone buildings and elaborate wrought-iron railings, all of it glowing yellow from the soft lucence of the lamplights. In some few of the cut rectangular stones are preserved fossils of a long-vanished world. I must look carefully to find the *coquillages*, the tiny shellfish traces. Those stones are not valued, the builders don’t like to use them. I think they are more precious for containing the vestiges of a lost past.

I think the past makes anything priceless—when the past contains what the present and future do not. That’s why I left the company of those who see all time as one: I have grasped the discreteness, the separateness, of it all. Such comprehension has its roots in loss and loneliness.

“A storm is coming,” Michael says in a somber tone. “I wish you had taken a body in some other time and place.

You could have pursued Ariel and tried to redeem her. Ariel is your twin.”

“She is not my twin, and I respect her too much for that.”

Michael clenches his fists and then, with his will, opens his hands into a gesture of blessing. It costs him to do so. “I do not understand why you who have lost so much would choose here, now. For clarity, you say. But you will suffer needlessly. I would not have that for you.”

“What is my suffering to you or to anyone?” I take pleasure in the price he is paying for this conversation.

Michael continues as if he doesn’t hear me. “In the storm will be opportunities. For you and for ordinary humans. Opportunities for courage and grace and salvation, while the storm rages and so many millions die in pain.” He extends his beautiful wings in a burst of silver-white light. The street scene freezes, pedestrians and cyclists and motor cars all stilled, as if a single frame from a moving picture. Michael’s wings stretch out their full span. It is beautiful.

He will never wrap me with those beautiful wings.

Pain tears through me. “I am here now because they understand what God does not,” I say, and it is an indictment. “That loss hurts. God has lost sight of that.”

“God sees everything,” Michael says. His wings flap, as if he is some exquisite giant raptor, and he ascends, slowly at first. Then, with an inaudible boom, he is a pale streak against the indigo night, and the street bursts into animation, resuming itself.