Desert

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The car windows are yellow, glinting opaque as the sunset filters through the dust coated glass. Outside, the world matches - long stretches of golden brown and red dirt flush the desert dusk, tinged by twilight. I put my palm flush against the smooth panel, soaking up the warmth. Twelve hours, one hundred degrees. It is pleasant now. At lunch, Sam scorched his hand by accidentally leaning against the hood.

Across from me slumped in the worn navy bucket seat, his eyes slide over the road ahead, unblinking. The band-aid on his first finger is peeling, stained with grit and sweat.

"You wanna swap?" I ask, voice husky from lack of use. Twelve hours, and the radio spluttered and died after four. We've listened to the desert music since; the reverb of the old Chevy engine and, as the cars around us drifted away, a deep falling silence.

"No, its fine."

"Your eyes are starting to look tired, that's all."

"They aren't." He turns his head, and raises his eyebrows to show me. The whites of his eyes are streaked so slightly with red veins - irritated by dust, I think. It gets into everything here. Dark fringe falls across his forehead and sticks from perspiration against his fair skin. I don't comment on the deepening circles under the dark blue eyes. He'll pull over when he's ready. It's routine.

With a sigh, I turn to look out the back. Our boxes are wedged pell-mell into the backseat; cardboard boxes and old mismatched Rubbermaid tubs overflow with three years of accumulated junk, the heavy black guitar case perched on top. The end of it sticks into the front seat by Sam's ear, and makes it impossible for us to move the seat backward. He has to drive at my settings, so his knees press uncomfortably against the dash. The plethora of stickers slapped so artistically onto the dimpled surface of the case are fading, the letters bleached from sun exposure and heat.

We aren't Irish.

The edges of the case are frayed and battered, but I think this gives it character. Besides, the treasure is what is inside: Sam's acoustic Les Paul Classic. Beauty in maple and mahogany, steel strings and topped with a gleaming finish. Money. I can't play a note.

"I'm glad it's cooling off a little," I say, setting back into my seat. "It was getting too hot for the guitar." Sam nods. Twelve hours. The desert nights are cool enough, but during the day the sun turns the little Chevy into our own mobile Easy Bake Oven. Death for a guitar. Even I know this.

In front of us, the road stretches on. Arizona goes on forever, I think. It is nothingness and everything; beauty and pain, heart, pleasure, torture. Something you can't bottle up and take home with you. And no matter how hard you try, the heat never stays. It soaks into your skin, but an embalming with Arizona sunshine will make you crazy. As soon as you leave the state, so does the warmth. California is dirty. Nevada is melancholy and empty, Utah desolate and chilled. Oregon is beauty with a cold shoulder, Washington drowned.

Pillars of red stone spot the horizon, rising into trademark arches and columns that make Arizona the gem of the southwest. I take a breath of the dry air and nearly choke; we can't roll down the windows because of the dust, and the car is stuffy. Sam smells faintly like Axe body spray and the cheeseburgers we ate for lunch. When I cough, it's not from the fine earth filaments that float through the vents but the sudden resurgent smell of French fries wafting behind me. The threadbare seats are soaking it up. We're going to reek of McDonalds forever. I just want to go run in the wild open spaces, to shed the shaken uneasy feeling of twelve hours.

"You look a little squirrely there, Araña." He calls me by my Spanish nickname. Spider. Always moving.

"Just restless."
“Let’s pull over then.” A wicked grin spreads across his face and I know what he’s thinking before the car even begins to slow, to drift. We’re stopped on the edge of the road, utterly alone. The sun setting rapidly in the West brings definition to the blanketed East, flecked with stars in a lavender sky.

Sex in the desert is like music: scorpions be damned. We hit the high notes together, and lay naked in the sand.