

The Society of Misfit Stories Presents...

Blood and Sand: A Cult Love Story

By

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Bards and Sages Publishing
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A young couple on the run from dangerous cultists tries to reach Mexico before agents of the man known only as The Black Star find them to take their unborn child.

Blood and Sand: A Cult Love Story

Ever since Arianna and Jebediah had left Florida in a hurry, he had been warning her of a man dressed in black, who he called the Enforcer, and who he said was going to pursue them relentlessly. Jebediah was not usually one given to emotions, being a stoic man most of the time, but when he told her of the Enforcer, he looked scared, wide-eyed, and worried.

The desert sun in Arizona, where they were sleeping in a fleabag motel on the side of the highway this morning, was warm and inviting. It felt to Arianna like she had stepped out onto a tropical island, albeit a particularly dry one. She took a moment and breathed in the desert air. It smelled like heat and tumbleweed and diesel fuel.

So far, Arianna hadn't seen a thing, not a single threat, much less a mysterious man in black hunting them.

She looked out at the desert road; pavement colored yellow in the desert. It was 7 a.m. and the air was as cool as it was going to get. The road was empty and the desert hills seemed to sparkle under the morning sun. She vaguely remembered from school that there were minerals all around and other things hidden in the desert's impenetrable folds – animals and plants and all sorts of things. If there was a man coming for them, Arianna wondered if he would be like the hidden desert-life; coming without a warning, buried in the sand, invisible to the naked eye if one were to look only from the road.

She felt her belly. It was still flat. She wouldn't show for another few months most likely. Twenty and pregnant. She'd missed a period back in Florida and that was that, it was the incendiary moment and they were gone soon after. Things had been a whirlwind.

She wanted a cup of coffee; remembered the cashier at the motel had told them the coffee at the diner was good. But she couldn't drink coffee. She went to the diner, a classic-styled 1950s getup with pastel-colored checkered tile walls and chrome borders and red leather seats. A girl with olive-colored skin and dark hair served her, and Arianna asked for a cup of orange juice. While the waitress was getting her order, Arianna texted Jebediah, told him if he woke up in time, he could come join her.

She looked out the window at the gas pumps. There was a grizzled looking man, not looking at her, fueling up a pickup truck. He wore a flannel shirt and khakis and hunting boots. His skin was the color of light coffee and his face was coated in stubble the color of fresh snow. She couldn't see his eyes from where she was sitting. She knew this man wasn't the one hunting them, but seeing him just reminded her of the mystery of everything they were doing. He even admitted he didn't know much about the man chasing them – he had never seen him.

Jebediah told her they were going to Mexico. He knew people there. A resistance against the Black Star Society, the cult they had fled from in Florida. The only ones he knew who could hide them, led by a figure he called The Mother. Down south of the border, with The Mother, they would be safe, he told her over and over again. He'd given her the phone number to call. If they got separated, he said.

Arianna was excited to see Mexico despite the danger present. She envisioned a sandy beach full of exotic beautiful-looking people, close to naked as they could be, and little umbrellas in drinks with fruity flavors and unpronounceable names, and hotel rooms with strange and wonderful colors and paintings on the wall. She knew the reality was different. Jebediah had told her that just a day prior. He'd pulled up his phone and showed her an article about drug cartel murders in the inner-city, said that was closer to where they were going. She'd told him to shut up and let her have her fantasy.

Of course, she knew the danger. But she couldn't help but be optimistic. There was a child in her, and once it was born, she would have a family. The three of them; her and Jeb and the baby. It didn't matter what had happened in the past, nor where they came from. It was where they were going – that was what mattered, she thought.

It didn't matter that they'd come from the Black Star Society, one of the most prestigious and connected cults in American history, which no history books mentioned and no one would admit to knowing of. The Black Star wanted the baby. He had made his choice, and broke away from the cult he'd been a part of since birth for her. She had never felt the same way about any other guy. He was The One, she had no doubt about it – he was the kind of romance she'd been told about in stories as a young girl. Their circumstances were extreme. It would be difficult, but everyone had to do difficult things. You sacrificed for what you wanted. Nothing was ever easy.

It didn't matter that her own childhood was unremarkable, a bland American stew of suburban lower-middle-class life; teenage years spent in black hoodies, sitting in the back of the class with Killswitch Engage and Rise Against on low in her speakers, doodling graffiti in notebooks in place of doing her work. She had been an unimpressive student and she was headed toward a similarly unimpressive life.

All of it was behind her now.

The door opened. Light flooded in, nubile and yellow morning light, and then Jebediah was sitting across from her. His feather-light brown hair was tousled and unkempt and he wore an oversized T-shirt and jeans and converse. His eyes were still puffy from sleep. He smelled like tobacco, a habit he'd taken up more often since they were on the road.

"Morning," he said.

She smiled at him. The waitress dropped off a cup of herbal tea. Jebediah asked if he could get a plate of waffles.

"Hungry, eh?" She asked.

"Starving," he said. He was never very talkative in the mornings.

He asked her how she'd slept. She said fine, and said the baby was doing well, too. She could feel the smile on her face creeping on.

"He'll be born in Mexico, with a sombrero on," she said.

"Oh, he's a he now?"

"I feel like he is. It's one of those things, you know."

"One of those things, like mother things?"

"Exactly," she said.

"I'll take your word for it," Jebediah said. "If it's a boy, we'll get him a sombrero for sure."

"And if it's a girl?"

Jebediah shrugged. "We'll buy her a different-color sombrero," he said. She laughed.

The waitress put a steaming hot cup of coffee down in front of Jebediah, and told him his waffles were on the way. He said thanks and gave her a smile.

"I want to name him Alfredo," she said. "Or maybe Scott. I've always liked Scott. It's a good name."

Jebediah snorted. "Alfredo or Scott," he said, grinning at her, boyish and mischievous. "Those are real different names, babe."

She swatted at him with an open hand. "Oh? And what kinds of brilliant names do *you* have, then?"

The smile left his face and he looked more pensive now. "Maybe Tomas. If it's a girl, Celeste."

She smiled. "Those *are* good."

"Told you."

"Shut up."

She drank her orange juice and felt a warmth in her. Her *family*, she thought. God, it would be so great.

Arianna asked him if he wanted a boy or a girl. He looked at her, and then away for a second, mulling over the question. Then he said he didn't know which one he wanted.

She shrugged. "I always wanted a little boy. I don't know why."

He nodded and drank his coffee.

Concerned with the silence, she asked, "Are you worried about the Enforcer?"

"What?"

"The guy," she said, "the guy you told me about, with the cowboy hat. The Enforcer."

"Oh," he said. "No, just tired. Though I'm always worried about him. I will be so long as we're still out here alone."

"I've never heard you say you're worried about anything," she said. He looked up and gave her a hollow smile. He picked up his coffee and sipped it.

"Never had a reason to be before," he said.

He didn't have to say she was the reason anymore. She thought the way he talked, without overt or cheesy declarations of love but she knew he loved her anyway, was more romantic than anything else she'd known.

The waitress came back and dropped his pancakes off. He took a bite and asked if she wanted some. She said sure, and helped herself to a small piece.

* * *

She had met Jebediah in her last year of high school. He had walked up to the lunch table she was sitting at and he told her she looked beautiful with the necklace she had on, a silver beaded necklace with a pendant shaped like a four-leafed clover. He said it brought out her eyes, and he said that with a genuine friendliness, rather than the implication she owed him something for it, which lingered in the voices of other guys their age. She took one look at him, in his dark clothes and with his curly brown hair and wide, easy smile, and liked him right then and there.

They ended up having a lot in common. They liked the same music – the Beatles, Lou Reed, the Clash, the Sex Pistols, Judas Priest and other old rock, along with At the Drive In, Sublime, Hatebreed. He would take her to movies and whisper jokes in her ear and she'd have to stifle her laughter and hope she wasn't distracting the other moviegoers. They would sit at indie coffee shops and mall food courts, a couple amidst other couples. They came up with a vocabulary of inside jokes. He made brash, arrogant jokes about kids they both knew, and she had finally felt included in something.

They dated all through the final semester of their senior year of high school. He took her out to little cafes and restaurants on weekends and evenings. They made their way back to her house most of the time and made out in his car or in her room. Only a few times she went to his house. It was more of a mansion – a gigantic old Victorian with three floors and pillars like out of a Greek castle, pointed spires like a 1960s-horror film. She always thought of *The Haunting* when she saw it, the old 60s movie, and she told him that. She asked him why he never brought her here, and he blushed and looked away – she never saw him do that. He told her because he didn't like girls who wanted him just for his family's money. She told him she wasn't like that and she meant it.

She felt like she was drunk with him – face flushed, everything blurred and in fast motion, but also oddly slowed. Time moved differently with him. They were together seven months before she knew what the Black Star Society was and two years before she got pregnant.

He told her on graduation night about Black Star. They had dinner at the best restaurant in town, ate filet mignons and drank sparkling champagne on account of Jebediah being friends with the owner. They had sex in his bed at home at the mansion, and after, naked and glowing, he told her about the Black Star. It was a secret society, he said, that his family had been part of for generations. He hadn't wanted to tell her before because he was afraid it would freak her out.

She was rapt with attention then. She asked him what it was they did, and he said they were in positions of power all over the country, who believed, in some way, that the Black Star was the right way, same as church for other people. Jebediah said they were something like Satanists, worshiping horned deities who looked to come from the woods, deities who spoke to strength and self-preservation.

She asked him if they ever sacrificed any virgins.

He was caught off guard by that. He said, “Uh, I don't think so.”

She laughed and straddled him, put her arms over his bare shoulders. They sat there like that. She said “Well, I guess I'm safe from *that* then, either way.”

“I guess so”, he said, and he was so beautiful, with the warm glow around him, his skin all pink and gold and his eyes so goddamned vulnerable, not the way they were in everyday life. She bent down and kissed him on the lips and felt his hands on her back and it was like heaven, his touch on her back, the sweat on his palms, the A/C on their bare skin, the moon outside shining like some lighthouse beacon through the window – all eyes on them, she thought, as it should be. They were the center of the world at that point in time.

She sat through the barbecue parties, attended by politicians and lobbyists who Arianna had only identified by name through newspapers and NPR. She felt woefully out of place. Everyone flocked to Jebediah's family home for the Black Star, to speak with his father. His father was a tall man with a strong chin and skin that always looked too dry and papery. His eyes, Arianna thought, were the most chilling; they were little blocks of black coal.

But he loved Jebediah. And he was grooming him to take over. At the barbecue parties, his father would call him over and she would watch him from afar, feeling like a hired hand, invisible to everyone else until Jebediah would come back to her. She saw him mingle with the big dogs and the movers and shakers who made the country run, and she knew he didn't really want to be there. Even through his smiles and his chummy attitude, she knew he was faking it all.

Because she knew him.

She knew his rebellion streak, knew the way he disdained the world. He wouldn't ever sell out to the corporate whores.

* * *

A year and a half after he told her what the Black Star was, she was set up in a ritzy condo in Florida, going to art school and working on a degree she never would have had the chance to go for otherwise. And then she missed a period, and that was that, wasn't it? Everything that had happened since hinged on it. The pregnancy test came back positive, and she remembered looking at it and feeling something she never could have described.

The Black Star wanted the baby. That was perhaps where things had gone wrong, but really, as with most things

in life, there were an infinite number of things that happened to get people where they eventually ended up. There were no formulas and no cheat sheets to calculate it. She looked at her life now and thought there was never a way to predict how any of it was going to go, and you were along for the ride and you had to take control.

But she thought she didn't have any control. She felt like her life had been a sequence of being shuffled between these mammoth institutions – her parents and the schools and then the Black Star. She felt like with Jebediah, she had a chance to break free of it all. Mexico was her freedom, embodied. If she could make it there, she could be happy. She would have *made it*, man. All the lyrics of her favorite punk and hardcore songs would be true for her. The rebellion and the breaking free and the fuck-the-man.

But they had to make it there first.

Jebediah, who had always been one to keep his problems and emotions firmly bottled, had been even quieter on the road for the two days they had driven so far. He had told her in the past that it was just the way he was raised; to be self-reliant and strong. But out here, he was different. Instead of the confidence and ease he'd always had, he seemed distracted and distant. There were long stretches where he'd look ahead at the road and not move or say a damned word for hours. On his face she would see such a drawn, terse look, with age lines more befitting someone twice his age, someone who had seen so much more horror. When she asked him what was wrong, he seemed to retreat further into himself and he dodged the questions, and later on he'd act more like his old self and pretend he'd never acted any other way.

* * *

They were driving on a two-lane desert road, dust kicked up behind them in billowing clouds. Jebediah talked in a subdued voice about the way Mexico was, from what he had read online. He was saying he wanted them to be as safe as possible and they shouldn't stop until they reached the city. They were going to get an apartment in the nice area of a big city, he had told her. They had stayed up nights and learned Spanish. Arianna wished she had done that as a younger girl. Her mother was born in Cuba, but she'd been raised only in English, told it was better for her here in the Land of the Free.

The dust clouds kept kicking up behind them, and then all around them as they got far enough away. He was still talking about the dangers of Mexico. The fucking cartels, he was saying. The drug wars. Those fucking barbarians down there.

She said, "Yeah, I hope we'll be all right."

But she was fading. She felt the sleep coming, and then it was here, and she drifted out of consciousness.

She woke up sometime later, with the sun shining at an angle through the window – it was close to the evening and the breeze was kicking up. Even in the desert it got cold. She should've *known* that, she thought. The first sound she heard was his swearing. He wasn't in the car. For a moment, she panicked, but as she woke up she realized there were no signs of violence, no sounds of a scuffle.

They were stopped. Jebediah was outside the car, the hood open. She unbuckled her seatbelt and got out of the car.

"What's wrong?"

"Fucking thing's overheated," he said, looking at her and waving a dismissive hand in the direction of the engine. His brow was coated in a sheen of glistening sweat and he wiped at it with the back of one hand. His body seemed weighed down by the humidity, the rolling waves of heat.

"I'll call Triple A."

"Good idea."

He went around to the car and picked up a bottle of water. He drank from it sloppy and fast, like a man dying of thirst. She called Triple A and told them they were out on the desert and had just passed the gas station near Salvadore. She was about 90 percent sure that was the last town they'd seen. The guy on the other end of the phone said okay, he knew the general area. She thanked her lucky stars that he did. He said it would be about thirty or forty minutes to get out there.

She told Jebediah and he nodded, told her to get back in the car.

Before she did, she looked out at the horizon. From where they'd come, a storm was rolling in. The clouds were the color of a fresh bruise. They looked to Arianna like a rolling wave, coming toward them in slow-motion.

After a ten-minute wait, the two of them were picked up by a tow truck and taken to the next town. It was barely a town; just a bar and a body shop and two motels with faded colors and cracked plaster. There were houses off in the distance on a side road or two, little things lost in the desert's great mass.

The car's engine had overheated and the parts needed to fix it wouldn't be there until the next afternoon. The mechanic, with sympathetic eyes, asked them if they had anywhere to stay. They said no, and he told them they could get a discount at the local motel, the Sandy Dunes. He asked his assistant, a tall man built like a beanstalk, to drive the two of them over to the Sandy Dunes. He bade them farewell, told them he hoped they had a pleasant journey. Jebediah shook his hand and thanked him, and Arianna thanked him, too.

They checked into the Sandy Dunes, a homely little place where a tan-skinned Mexican behind the desk, with strong, hairy arms and a hard-set, stout face, confirmed that yes, they did get a discount if Marv from the auto shop said so. Jebediah handed him the credit card. The man scanned it and gave them a room key.

The room was small and smelled like mothballs, but otherwise was clean. Outside they had a good view of the desert, with those ominous clouds still rolling in. The thunderclaps came more and more frequently all afternoon and evening. Arianna was reminded of her father. He would hold her in his lap when she was a young girl afraid of the thunder, and when she was in his arms, the thunder didn't seem so bad. He would point to the skies and say look, honey, it's far away, it can't hurt you in here.

She hadn't spoken to her father in weeks. Neither of her parents knew where she was, or that she wouldn't be coming back.

Jebediah was pulling the curtain away from the window and peering as far down the road in both directions as he could. He seemed restless. His whole body seemed to be in constant motion, she thought, but his face was still as stone.

"At least the man with the hat won't be able to get to us," she said. "You know, if it rains."

"What?" He looked up at her, utterly confused for a moment.

"There's a big storm coming," she said. "We might not be able to go anywhere, but...you know, I doubt the guy chasing us can, either."

He shook his head.

"You don't know him," he said. "He'll find a way. We have to be prepared."

"We'll be okay," she said. She touched his shoulder. He looked up at her and then pulled her closer and kissed her on the mouth. She was surprised – he hadn't been intimate lately even in the way of normal physical contact. He had been acting like her touch was poison. He pulled back almost immediately, with a slight wince she pretended not to notice.

"I'll protect you," he said. But immediately after, he was distant again with that hurt look in his eyes.

* * *

She went outside in the early evening. Outside the wind was blowing and the skies were a dark grey. The night would fall soon, but it didn't matter, as the sun would not shine again today. The rain fell hard, but the thunder seemed to be letting up. She took a dollar out of her purse and put it in the machine and got a pack of trail mix. She ripped the bag open and started munching on peanuts and raisins. It was peaceful out here. She felt the queasiness of calling her parents weighing in her like a sickness. But she took out her phone and dialed.

Her father picked up on the fourth ring, and the butterflies in her stomach, God, they were powerful. Her father said "Hello? Honey?"

"Hey, Daddy," she said. She hadn't called him Daddy in years. Since she was a girl, since he was telling her the ghost stories he loved so much, which she'd had an endless appetite for. Now, the ghost stories were real. All she wanted was to tell him everything: the ghosts are real and I'm in trouble and there's nothing you can do, and I just need to tell another living soul.

But really she just said, "How've you been?"

Sounding cautious, he said, "We're fine, honey. We haven't heard from you in over a month. You haven't returned our calls."

"Yeah," she said. "This is a new number. I'm real sorry, Daddy."

"You don't have to be. We just want to know where you *are*."

She felt a sob welling up but suppressed it. "I'm just... Jebediah and I are on a trip. We're seeing a band in another city. I'm sorry. I'll come by and have dinner when I get back, okay?"

"Yes, honey, that would be wonderful. Would you like to speak to your mother?"

She didn't respond at first, because Jebediah had come outside. He was looking at her out of the corner of his eye, trying to catch her, and she nodded at him. He walked off in the direction of the diner across the street. According to their tow truck driver from earlier in the day, it turned into a bar at night, with rowdy country rock and

frothing beer and stamping feet.

She watched him walk across the black road and he became a lonely dot in the distance.

Her mother was on the phone then. "Arianna?" she said, her voice with a slight hopeful tinge to it, like she'd been worried about her daughter. Arianna felt a new wave of ugliness all over about the whole situation and, as she'd done all week now, pushed it back down and put on a smile.

"Hi, Mom," she said.

Her mother spoke to her for a few moments about the weather and about what she had been up to. She told her mother she was doing fine and repeated all of the same lies she'd just told her father.

She'd tell them the truth later, she hoped. When they were safe in Mexico.

* * *

Arianna joined Jebediah in the diner. The tables had been pushed to the sides to make way for a dance floor, and middle aged folks in cowboy boots were dancing to the live band – loud, twanging, nostalgic country music blared throughout the place, amplified by the hollow wood and the clapping hands and stomping feet to a kind of horrific echoing blend of white noise. The bar was a straight line of hairy old men with walrus mustaches and Jebediah at the end, chugging down a Corona. He stank of beer. It smelled like piss and gasoline, she thought. Arianna sat with him and he did not speak to her, didn't even really look at her. He was watching the band, who seemed to have a boundless energy, like they were running on batteries. Arianna suddenly felt very old and very tired. She told Jebediah she was going back to take a nap, and he didn't respond. The music and the riotous chorus of human noise followed her out and almost all the way back across the street.

* * *

She woke when Jebediah kicked the door open. She heard his footprints, sloppy and drunk, as he made his way to the light and turned it on. She still had her eyes closed, and light flooded through her eyelids. She could hear him wrestling his shoes off. He was sitting on the other bed. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and sat up, legs crossed. He was facing the wall, taking off his socks. She said, how was the bar? He just grunted.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm okay," he said. "Don't worry."

She felt tears welling up and gulped them down, feeling like a nagging wife, an old cliché. She didn't say anything. He was taking off his shirt, unbuttoning it. He threw it on the chair across from him, where it sat in a crumpled heap.

"Did you have a good evening?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "It was okay. I just needed to sleep."

He muttered something incomprehensible. She propped herself up on one elbow.

He cleared his throat and said, "cause that's what matters, isn't it?"

"Huh?"

"That's what matters," he said. "That *you're* doing okay."

She said, "What are you talking about?"

She got up off the bed and sat on the other one with him. She touched his arm. He felt cold.

"I spent my life groomed for the Black Star," he said. "But now, it's all for shit. Ruined. You even give a shit?"

"I didn't make you do anything," she said. "But I love you for doing it."

"You ruined my life," he said, abruptly turning around and facing her, jabbing an index finger at her. "Took everything I cared about and turned it right upside down."

"You're drunk," she said. "You need to go to bed."

She was backing up, off the bed, standing now. He stood up, too, and there was a real rage in his eyes, a primordial thing, burning. His face was reddening and he was grinding his teeth. He stepped toward her and she felt like the room was closing in on her, the walls getting smaller.

"I killed for you," he said, lucid even in his drunkenness. "There's blood on my hands and it won't wash out. When I sleep, I only see that guy in the office dying."

The tears came slow and in rivulets down his red cheeks. She could see that what she'd thought was rage was actually a lot of pain.

"We should go to bed," she said. She felt every part of her body shaking. She wanted to get him to sleep and

then go to sleep herself. She wanted to sink deep in the ocean of dreams and not know a thing anymore.

She got him to sleep, in the opposite bed from her. She put the covers over him like a mother would, and then she went to bed too. She fell asleep very quickly and had dreams of a looming figure rising up over the desert, a black shape with wings, and the dread was enough to wake her up in a cold sweat in the dark.

She went to the mini-fridge and pulled out a bottle of water she'd stored there. She pulled her nightgown close to her and opened the curtains. Bright moonlight shone in and lit up the back half of the room, but the desert as far as she could see was empty.

* * *

At first the pregnancy was a joy, but that was short-lived. The trouble back in Florida came when the Black Star got word of the baby. It was bound to happen eventually, as they were Jebediah's family, and he told them intending to celebrate. Arianna's life had taken on a new glow, and she went through her days feeling a new kind of purpose that had never been there, and with it came a sudden frantic urgency to clean up her life and get responsible, fast. She made mental resolutions to work out more and eat right and go to the doctor and learn how to manage money.

She was going to be a *mother*. It didn't seem real.

But the trouble came, as trouble does, albeit in a way she didn't expect. Jebediah arrived home one day and told her that the Black Star wanted the baby. It was a price, he said, for all the spoils they had reaped. The Black Star wanted their loyalty.

She hadn't known what to say. The plan to leave was not something they came up with instantly. At first, he'd just said, we'll figure it out, we'll do something about it. He told her he'd talk to his father, but he never seemed to have made any progress. Every day he would come home and have the same stoic, stunned look and say he was still working on it. This was new to him, too, she realized. She was angry at first, spiteful and short with him, thinking *come on, just do it, you wimp*, but she tried to hold her emotions in check. They were in it together.

She mostly just wanted that glowing feeling back. Now it was all dread and paranoia.

One day after class, she'd been approached by a black car, tinted windows, and the window rolled down and there was a man telling her to get in. He was perfectly benevolent about it, and there was no threat of danger, and she knew if she didn't get in, she would have to face it later.

The leather seats were cold against her arms and legs. The A/C was blasting. The man next to her didn't speak. There were two guys in front; bald, tan-skinned men, who didn't say a word either. Arianna thought she should make conversation, lighten the mood – it was the instinct instilled in her by her mother, who had always told her to be polite, but nothing was coming to her. So she shut up, too. She couldn't stop her knees shaking. Like little miniature tremors, she thought. Like there was some sort of miniature earthquake.

They took her to a nondescript looking, empty office building in a one-story strip mall highly typical of Florida. The walls were bare and the smell was some sort of suffocating cleaning fluid. She felt her gut churning. The men flanked her and walked her down a hall and into a room where a tall bald man in a forest-green suit sat. This man was skeletal and bony, and his face was so nondescript she couldn't have picked him from a crowd. He looked at Arianna with all the caring of a scientist about to dissect a specimen.

Then he was pulling a piece of paper out of a drawer in front of him, the drawer making a creaking wooden sound, the paper swishing as it slid across the desk. She read it but could barely comprehend the words. It was a contract that said the baby would go to the Black Star, would be in their custody, and there was a blank line just waiting for her to sign her name. Oh God that line, she thought; it would be her death if she signed that. She sat there and her whole body shook.

"Sign the paper," the bald man said. "This will be painless if you do."

She shook her head no. She wanted to say something, but it felt like her tongue was covered in fuzz.

The bald man sighed as if he were dealing with an impatient child. He said, "Are you going to make this difficult?"

Arianna became conscious of the two bodyguards outside, silent sentinels. The man before her clearly had no mercy. She was surrounded on all sides. What was to stop them from forcing her here? She felt as alone and helpless as she'd ever been, maybe more so. And there was that awful cleaning-solution smell, sterile grape smell like a sickbed, filling her nose. She felt lightheaded.

"Am I going to have to make you sign it?" the bald man asked, his tone curt and short with her. "I don't want to do that."

With hands shaking so badly she could barely hold the pen, she leaned forward and bent over the paper. The

pen touched the paper. She felt the bald man's black eyes on her, smelled the grape cleaning solution like some awful drug. The first black mark was on the paper...

And that was when the door crashed open behind her, hitting the wall behind it with a bang. Jebediah stood there with a gun and he fired it before she or the bald man could say a word. The gunshot rang in Arianna's ears. The bald man had a round bloody hole right in the center of his white skull. The expression on his face was one of shock. Jebediah stood there with the gun billowing smoke, floating past Arianna's head like a ghost.

Then he was holding out his hand.

"Come with me," he said. "It's time to go."

So she took his hand. And they ran.

* * *

They got the car back that afternoon and it seemed to be fixed for now. He put on a fake smile – the first one Arianna had seen from him in days now – and thanked the mechanic, shook his hand. They drove to the motel and collected their scant bags in silence. In the car, Jebediah was back to his sullen look and didn't speak to her, only grunting when she spoke to him. He'd apologized that morning for his outburst the previous night. She had said it was fine. It was more important now, she thought, to keep moving.

The road was empty and the air was humid. Jebediah had the A/C cranked up high. There were stormclouds brewing, but they had heard no thunder.

Then there was a truck behind them, old and rust-colored like every other vehicle frequently driving through the desert. It clunked and crashed and made noises so loud they could hear it even over the A/C. The windows were tinted, so Arianna couldn't see who was behind the wheel as the truck got uncomfortably close to them. Then it was bumper to bumper.

He groaned and rolled down the window and leaned out. "Get off my ass," he shouted. His voice was dwarfed by the rattling metal of the truck.

Then they felt the first hit. *Bam*. Arianna felt her whole body jerk forward. The seatbelt cut into her stomach and her shoulders. She felt her heart skip a beat. Her head was spinning.

"Fuck," Jebediah said. They were swerving now, kicking up sand, the wind spitting in their ears through the open window. The truck hadn't budged, was steady like a storm, Arianna thought, with a sideways glance to the rumbling black clouds unfurling towards them from all sides.

In the early stages of their relationship, they played a game where he'd tell her to make up a scenario in which he'd have to survive, and she would say okay, you're trapped in a sinking ship out at sea, or some such thing, and he would tell her some crazy way he would get out. He always had an answer at the tip of his tongue. But now he was speechless. Stranded in the desert with a pregnant wife, it turned out, was his limit. He looked at her now with crazed eyes and a naked, savage desperation.

Arianna gripped the door handle until she couldn't feel her hand anymore. Jebediah said this is him, this is the Enforcer. Arianna felt everything collapsing in. She looked at the truck behind them – unwavering as the tide – and knew he was right.

The truck rammed them again. This time, harder, and Jebediah's hands left the wheel. The truck went spinning out into the desert sands. Arianna felt her eardrums ringing as Jebediah cried out. He turned the wheel sharp to the right, and when they hit the pavement again she felt her heart drop as if it were a penny thrown into a well, sinking into the deep with everything in slow motion. She opened her mouth to take a breath and it came out a sob, harsh and wet.

He put his foot on the gas pedal and slammed it all the way down. They sped forward and the road screamed beneath the wheels and everything was a blur.

"We have to find a place to stop, some place to call the cops," he was saying.

"What about the murder back in Florida?" she asked. He had told her he'd be in trouble if the police caught them, said this with his jaw tightened and his eyes averted from hers on that first day they had driven away in a hurry with the sunshine state behind them like a scorned love.

Now he looked at her and said it didn't matter. Now, all that mattered was the baby.

"If I don't make it out of this, there's a knife in the glove compartment," he told her.

She popped open the glove compartment and there it was, a gleaming sharp instrument of death. She hoped she wouldn't have to use it. She swallowed and said nothing. She felt it wasn't time to be weak, to express doubts.

The truck behind them was gaining on them, spitting sand and gravel and dust up off the road, that awful

mechanical metal roar deafening now as the wind picked up, and the black clouds of the storm were hanging pregnant overhead, a swelling balloon about to burst. The sands around them were red and dark and there was nothing else. There was no one around to help them now.

Arianna squinted and thought she could perhaps see a figure through the tinted windows of the truck, a slender scarecrow-like outline, wearing a wide-brimmed hat...

Then there was a bang, a loud crash, and the world seemed to turn over on itself.

She felt a weightless flying sensation, like she was on a roller coaster. The sky outside, black and brimming with rain, spun like a top. Then after what seemed like a long time, they crashed. The landing was rough and hard and loud, and everything was sideways. She felt an acute pain in her arm, sharp and there was something wet flowing. Jebediah wasn't moving. He was bleeding from a cut on his head. She craned her neck. The truck that had been following them was pulling to a stop.

She suddenly became painfully conscious of her own breathing, deafeningly loud in the tiny enclosed space. She heard the door of the truck slam.

She undid her seatbelt, feeling all the while the sharp pain in her arm. It might be broken, she thought. She managed to wrestle herself free. She crawled out into the light, the musty, desert air, which whipped at her with humid, sweaty tendrils. Jebediah was stirring. She leaned back in and helped him undo his seatbelt, and he crawled out, too.

The man before them was over six feet tall. His skin was pale and he was very thin, though he wore a long brown trench coat and a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. His face was nondescript and his hair beneath the hat looked to be thin and light brown. It was his stature that made him intimidating. He stood tall like a giant out here in the desert. It was starting to rain. Tiny drops of water pockmarked the sand, dark enough to be blood out here.

The man before them, the Enforcer, said come with me, this is the end of the road. You can't run anymore.

Jebediah spat on the sand and there was blood running down the left side of his face. He was shaky on his feet. Arianna held him and he had an arm around her shoulders. He said not a chance, you won't take us.

"Stop playing your games," the Enforcer said. "This is over now."

"I love you," Jebediah gasped through his ragged breaths, voice hoarse and dry. "You remember that, okay?"

Arianna began to cry. She couldn't help it. Through her tears she told him she loved him, too. The rain fell down on their bodies and on the sand, and the wind was picking up and there was nothing out here but the dark. The Enforcer was walking toward them and pulling out a gun, and Arianna couldn't breathe, like there was a vice grip around her lungs.

Jebediah stepped forward and pulled out his own gun. Swaying, with his head bleeding, he took a step forward, gun outstretched. Arianna called his name, told him to stop and come back to her.

"We can work this out," she said, this time addressing the Enforcer. "We don't have to use violence. I can come back with you, voluntarily. I won't run away."

Shaking his head, the Enforcer said, "There's no more talking to do. And this one" – he gestured here to Jebediah – "this one won't go quietly ever."

"Damn straight," Jebediah said.

The Enforcer raised his gun and – as if it were a crack of lightning through the black sky and the rain – he pulled the trigger and shot Jebediah in the shoulder.

Jebediah's whole body snapped back as if he'd been electrocuted, and he let out a cry up to the heavens – a ragged, desperate, pained sound that hurt Arianna to hear. Blood spurted from the wound like a small fountain. He went down, clutching his hand to the wound. Arianna clasped her hands over her mouth and then got down and started trying to stop the bleeding. The blood kept coming. Her hands were covered in blood within seconds. Jebediah's breathing was fast and shallow. He looked up at the dark sky with hollow eyes, not seeming to see her.

Standing to the side, the Enforcer was on a cell phone. He was saying something about sending help.

Arianna whispered, "It'll be all right, we'll be fine, I won't leave you."

He sucked in a big gulp of air. His voice barely above a whisper, and he said, "I don't think you have a choice."

The Enforcer pocketed the phone. He walked to Arianna and grabbed her by the forearm, jerking her off the ground and forcing her to her feet. She struggled and cried out. His hand on her arm was like a vice grip. He started to drag her away from Jebediah, who was still writhing on the ground. She planted her feet firmly in the ground, but the sand was ever shifting, and she was unable to keep her footing.

He dragged her to his truck, the mud-colored beast that had chased them down the highway. He opened the door and picked her up and hoisted her in, and she heard the door lock click. She felt like an animal in a cage. He got in next to her in the driver's seat and turned on the ignition.

* * *

The rain was falling harder now and splattered the windshield with water. The Enforcer turned on his windshield wipers, which were old and rusty and moved across the windshield with a scraping metal sound that reminded her of sounds that would be heard in a tomb, cold and dead and unnerving.

On the road, the truck was as loud as a hurricane, a whirlwind of metal clashing and screaming engines. The Enforcer told her he'd called some people about Jebediah.

"Some people," Arianna said.

"He's family to the Black Star," the Enforcer said. "We weren't going to let him die."

She nodded. She looked out the window at the grey sky, clouds shifting so it looked like the whole horizon was melting, and the rolling sands, just anything to look away from her new captor. She needed to think about how to escape.

"I'm telling you this because I know you would be restless if you thought we just let him die," he said.

"How considerate," she said.

The knife was in her pocket. She'd never been a violent person. The idea of stabbing this man, or anyone else, made her queasy. Her stomach was churning, and she thought of asking him to pull over so she could throw up, but he would never go for that, wouldn't fall for it. He was not here to coddle her. She was on her own and the knife was in her pocket.

The rain hit the windshield like pelting missiles through the dark sky. Another car hurtled toward them with bright headlights. She realized if she was going to do this, it couldn't be when there was any other cars around – she couldn't endanger anyone else's life.

The car passed and the rain turned to sleet. The windshield wipers creaked monstrosly, slamming against the glass. The Enforcer looked bored, if anything, and that was what perhaps enraged her beyond the fear that had settled inside her. He was not fighting for anything, so much as collecting a paycheck. He wouldn't feel any change in his life from this, but her life by contrast would be changed forever. She thought it was unfair. He was going to forget about her after this. He was bigger and stronger than her, and he worked for the establishment. She would be fed back into the machine. Like always, she thought – like before when she was so tired of school, when all she wanted was out.

She just had so little real power.

It was this thought that lodged in her head, and it was there when she drew the knife and plunged it into the Enforcer's neck. She heard the wet sound of the blood spurting and looked away but the blood splattered on her anyway. The Enforcer let out a cry of surprise and shock and pain. The vehicle immediately began to swerve drunkenly. The road was wet, which made the jerking, swerving movements worse. Arianna clutched onto the handle of the door until her knuckle turned white. Outside it was all turning around like they were in a top. Thunder cracked in the far distance. The car went off the road and into the sand, and they teetered as they came to a stop.

Then the truck turned over. Arianna let out a surprised cry. Then, for the second time that day, she was sitting in an overturned vehicle, feeling the blood rushing to her head. The rain came down. The Enforcer was gasping for air, gagging and bleeding, and the blood dripped down and hit Arianna. She wrestled herself free of her seatbelt and climbed gingerly over the body of the Enforcer and pushed the door open. As she was going, she felt a hand brush her ankle. When she looked down he was staring at her, with wide, pleading, dying eyes.

She shook him off. Then she was standing on top of the overturned truck. The rain came down and as far as the eyes could see it stretched over the horizon like a film. It looked like a grey veil, hanging down from the sky in ribbons. She felt the aching pounding in her head and all her limbs ached. She felt Jebediah's absence like a knife in the gut. Or, she thought with an odd gallows humor, a knife in the neck. She wanted to laugh and cry. Things were welling up inside her and she stood there on top of the truck in the rain. She let out a cry – just a wordless sound of primal rage, which carried across the desert, because she didn't know what else to do.

She walked with the storm. The rain washed the blood from her body, and the sand, colored crimson and brown, blew around her in a blistering hurricane. The clouds were dark like night, fat and pregnant, and the sounds of the storm were loud, as if she were trapped in a small space and the sounds were echoing around her. The road lay flat like an enormous black serpent, and it seemed like it stretched to infinity with no end.

She could feel the Enforcer with her, and with him all the power of the Black Star. He was the storm. He was behind her, a gust of tyrannical wind in the dark, and if they were going to take her now, she thought they might as well. He was in every grain of sand and every drop of water and every bit of blood on her hands. She looked at

them numbly. Her face was cold and her body all numb but she still felt it – she had taken a life. Now, she would die, too – she knew this as certain as the rain would keep coming at her.

She reached the road, and her feet touched the pavement. In either direction there seemed to be nothing; it was as if she had become the last person in the world. She didn't feel connected to anyone else now. It was the feel of that knife entering the Enforcer's flesh. She had done that, with her own hands, and there was no way to take it back.

And the devils were closing in. She felt them knocking at the doors of her mind. She couldn't stand the screaming in her ear, the pounding like the gavel in a courtroom – she'd *taken a life*. She felt the weight of it. In her mind, the Enforcer's eyes had more emotion than they'd had in real life. She wondered if he had a family or had ever had a family. She wondered what he had loved and hated and feared and desired. She told herself to knock it off, but that voice was small compared to the whirlwind of thoughts – compared to the devils at her door.

There was a pair of headlights now, shining through the rain. A car coming toward her, a little Sedan by the looks of it. She felt her heart stop for a moment, because she knew that when the car pulled up, it would be the Enforcer, back from the grave. He would look at her with dead eyes and cracked skin and then he would extend his cold, mottled dead hands and wrap them around her throat. Then she would let out the scream that had been welling up inside her like a volcanic eruption, and she would die out there in the desert as he had, because that was what happened out here; things died.

But the man who pulled up was fleshy and concerned. He looked like a soccer dad; the kind of guy who takes his kids to their games and cheers in the stands. He had a strong chin and a brown crew cut; maybe ex-military. He was asking her if she was okay. She nodded her head in a dazed way. He asked what had happened, with the blood.

"It's not my blood," she said. She heard the words come out of her mouth but felt as if it were someone else saying them.

"Shit," he said. "Shit."

"I'm fine now," she said. "I was attacked."

"Fuck," he said. "Get in the car. Let's get you to a hospital. Or the police or something. There's a town just a few miles back there."

He was pointing the direction from which they'd come. She nodded. Sure, she said. They drove until they reached the town. He made nervous, jittery conversation the whole way as if that were the only way he could cope with the oddity of the situation, relating to her that he was from Utah and he was driving for work down to New Mexico. He worked as a salesman, he said, and he was meeting a company in Albuquerque to talk about new products. She tuned him out after a while. Instead, she looked at the desert in the rain, all the cascading water falling from the sky amidst grey ghostlike ribbons of sunlight. It was breaking now. The storm was turning to day.

The town they found was sleepy and small, every building colored like sand. There was a post office with the USPS logo sandblasted from the wind. There were little motels with the curtains all drawn, family owned. There was a grocery store with fruits and vegetables, all greens and reds and yellows shining in the receding darkness, out in the front, ready for shoppers when the weather would allow. There was a hospital, too, looming in the distance – the tallest building around, a tan modern looking behemoth with all flat walls and sharp corners and perfectly square windows.

"I need to go there," she said. "I think I need to get looked at."

The man said okay, yes, and he took her there.

She sucked in her breath when they arrived and hoped this would work.

"I need to do this alone," she said. "Thank you for your help, but I need to go from here on my own."

She had always been told the eyes were the mirror of the soul. She could see why people said that as she looked at the man who'd saved her from the desert. She saw that he was a man who didn't want trouble, an essentially good man who'd been caught off guard and stepped into her story unwillingly. She imagined that he saw in her a dangerous mystery, a story to be told later over drinks with work buddies, the girl in the desert covered in blood in the storm. He didn't want that life. As alluring as it may have been, and as pure as his intentions likely were, she could see he didn't want this.

So, the man nodded his head..

"Thank you for everything," she said.

She watched him drive off, smoke out of the back of his car, the exterior of the car glistening with fresh rain drops. The rain had slowed now to almost nothing, just a drizzle. The hospital doors slid open on their own. A cool blast of air hit her body and she felt like she'd been dipped in an oasis, couldn't breathe for a moment, it felt so damned good.

She stepped in. She knew Jebediah was here. She could feel it like she heard twins who'd been connected in the

womb could feel it. They hadn't been legally married, but she figured this was as good as being legally married. She told the woman at the desk that her husband Jebediah Black was there. She looked it up and said yes, go back to Room 107.

As Arianna walked away, she wondered when the woman would question her bloodied, dirty appearance. Again, as with the man in the car, she had taken her bizarre and outlandish story and shoved it, with all the finesse of a nuclear bomb blast, into everyone else's cozy realities. She did not regret this.

* * *

The room was dark and Jebediah laid there dormant, eyes closed, bedsheets wrinkled but up to his chest. There were wires hooked up to him. She felt like she hadn't seen him in an age. He looked so young, she thought. With his tousled brown hair, featherlight in the afternoon sun after the storm, and his pale cheeks, he looked to be a lot younger than her, years even. She sat with him in silence.

In the darkness, she let all that had transpired wash over her. She sucked her breath in deep thinking of the feeling of the knife blade sliding into the Enforcer's neck, of the blood that had come after that. She couldn't get that feeling out of her. It felt like a parasite that had crawled somewhere deep in her and, try as she might, she couldn't wrench it out. The violence would live in her now. She put her fist in her mouth to stifle the cry that was trying to escape.

God, she felt the pain now. She felt filthy, but a shower would never wash off what was ailing her.

The nurse who came in was young, male, and Hispanic with cropped hair and a thin, solemn face that probably helped him in his job when he had to be serious. Arianna asked him when Jebediah would be able to go home. The nurse answered soon, said he was recovering from his surgery.

"Thank you," Arianna said.

Jebediah woke up at five p.m. He broke into a smile when he saw her. He reached up and touched her face. His hands were so soft and her skin had become so hard and cracked from the sand and blood and rain, but he caressed her face anyway as he had done a thousand times in bed. There was a warmth in his face that had been absent since they'd run from Florida.

"Did you escape him?" Jebediah asked.

"It's taken care of," she said, but as she said it, looking at him and remembering everything about his family and the Black Star, she knew it wasn't over yet. They would send more. The Enforcer wasn't all they had up their sleeves.

He looked at her and he understood what she'd done – if not the specifics, then the general gist of it. He stroked her cheek more.

She moved away from his hand, feeling a brief pang of guilt – why should anyone touch her when she had done such horrible things?

"When can you run?" she asked.

He wasn't smiling now. He said, "Just let me wake up."

He made the call from his bed. He spoke to The Mother, the leader of the rebellion against the Black Star. She could only hear what he was saying. He said yes, they were ready to come in. He said they were mostly fine, though they'd been roughed up. He was quiet for a few beats, listening. Then he motioned for her to hand him the pen and pad on the table. She watched as he scribbled down something. When he took his hand away, she saw it was coordinates, like for a map.

Then he was thanking the person on the other end. He hung up the phone.

"It's done," he said, showing her the paper. "These are the coordinates where The Mother is."

* * *

He ate dinner and she sat with him. Then he pushed himself up and started unhooking himself from the wires and machines.

"Are you sure you're good?" She asked.

"It's just a shoulder wound," he said.

"Still. I don't want you falling over dead halfway there." She put a hand out and touched his good shoulder, squeezed lightly, as they'd always done to comfort one another.

"I'll be fine," he said with a wry smile. "I have to be."

He was getting dressed. He pulled on his jeans and then a black T-shirt she'd bought him at the hospital's gift

shop. He put on his shoes and socks. She felt overcome with something. She leaned forward and threw her arms around him and kissed him, lips pressed against his. He was startled but returned the kiss. Their bodies together again seemed to erase, for now, the spectre of the violence in her. If it would return later, to haunt her in dreams or when she was alone, so be it, she thought. But she could worry about that in Mexico.

Then they separated and it was a moment lost in time. Jebediah stepped toward the door.

"Come on," he said, "We'll run fast and far enough to leave a trail in the sky. Like comets."

She felt the smile come across her face like it used to so easily when they first met. She took his hand and they went toward the doors. They broke into the outside, fresh new night air cool against their skin. It felt like they'd been reborn now, fresh and nubile, babes bathed in a spring. Their bodies seemed to glow.

It was dangerous to do what they were going to do. They would be outcasts and runaways from the Black Star. But they had a purpose now, and their futures lay ahead hanging like stars from a child's ceiling. But now in the night

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