

The Symmetry of the Hunt

a story

Chapter One: The Vest and the Manifesto

The old sewing machine hummed with a rhythmic, metallic clicking, a sound Wratchet had come to associate with failure. It was the only noise in the basement until the thread snapped with a sharp pop, and he swore under his breath, the same three words he'd been muttering for the better part of three hours.

The basement itself was a monument to abandoned hobbies. A dead treadmill sat under a tarp in the corner, a relic of somebody's New Year's resolution from three tenants ago. A stack of milk crates held vinyl records nobody in the house owned a turntable for. And in the middle of it all, under a single caged bulb that buzzed faintly at a frequency just below conscious annoyance, sat Wratchet, hunched over a decades-old Singer sewing machine that had come with the house, wrestling a leather vest into something resembling menace.

He leaned back in the plastic patio chair — the only seat down here that wasn't currently supporting a cardboard box of someone's old textbooks — and stared at the vest draped across his lap. He had spent the last three hours trying to stitch a jagged, hand-drawn patch of a skull and crossed pistons onto the back, but his stitches were uneven, looping wide in some places and bunching tight in others, like a heart monitor reading for a man having a very bad night. The needle kept slipping on the thick hide, skating sideways instead of biting down, and twice now he'd nearly put it through his own thumb.

He wasn't particularly good at the domestic arts. His mother had tried, God love her, to teach him to hem his own jeans in high school, and he'd produced something that looked less like a hem and more like a wound that had healed badly. But if he wanted to look the part of a road warrior — if he wanted the vest to say something about him before he ever opened his mouth — he couldn't exactly afford a professional tailor on a student's budget. Not on the stipend he got for grading freshman comp papers, not after rent, not after the six dollars he'd spent on the patch fabric at the craft store where the cashier had looked at him like he was buying materials for a hostage situation.

"You're strangling the fabric, Wratchet. Just let it breathe," a voice called out from the doorway.

It was Julian, leaning against the frame with a smirk and a glass of something bright orange and bubbly, ice clinking gently as he shifted his weight. He looked far too polished for the basement workshop, dressed in a crisp linen shirt that seemed immune to the dust motes dancing in the dim light — the kind of shirt that always looked freshly pressed no matter what time of day or state of chaos surrounded it, a small ongoing mystery that Wratchet had decided not to investigate too closely, the way you don't ask a magician how the coin vanished. Julian had that effect on rooms. He could walk into the ugliest, most cluttered space in the house and somehow make it look like a photograph from a magazine about people who had their lives together.

"It's not about breathing," Wratchet said, tossing the needle onto the workbench with more force than strictly necessary. It bounced off a spool of thread and rolled under a stack of magazines. "It's about structural integrity. If this patch peels off during a sharp turn at sixty miles an hour, the whole aesthetic is compromised. I can't be the guy with the flapping skull. That's worse than no patch at all. That's a punchline."

Julian chuckled, stepping into the room and setting his drink down on a stack of textbooks that had been gathering dust since sophomore year — **Intro to Statistical Methods**, still shrink-wrapped, because Wratchet had switched sections the first week and never gotten around to returning it. "The only thing being compromised here is your sanity. Why are you stressing over a vest when you have that monstrosity of an essay due tomorrow for your Feminine Studies seminar? Professor Thorne isn't going to give you a passing grade for 'aesthetic integrity' in leatherwork."

Wratchet looked over at the laptop perched precariously on a cardboard box that used to hold a mini-fridge, the cursor blinking on the screen like a taunting heartbeat, patient and merciless. The document was titled **"Why My Titties: A Male's Perspective on Useless Nipples."** It was a bold, perhaps overly aggressive, start to a paper that attempted to dissect the evolutionary redundancy of the male chest while simultaneously arguing for the biological imperative of what he'd taken, in a fit of two a.m. inspiration, to calling the "Apex Alpha." He had spent the last hour spiraling into a theoretical frenzy about the sword-in-the-seed conqueror aspects of primal drive, trying to link caveman sexual dominance to the modern psyche of the masculine ego, occasionally standing up to pace when a sentence wouldn't behave, occasionally sitting back down when it finally did.

"It's a manifesto, Julian. Not just a paper," Wratchet said, his voice gaining a sudden, fervent intensity, the kind that always arrived around midnight whether or not the argument underneath it could support the weight. He gestured vaguely toward the screen, as if presenting it to an invisible jury. "Thorne wants us to 'deconstruct the gendered gaze,' but I'm giving him the raw,

unadulterated truth. The male nipple is a vestigial joke, a biological leftover from when we were just blueprints for women. But the drive? The conqueror aspect? That's the only thing that actually translates from the Pleistocene to the present. Everything else is costume."

Julian sighed, though his expression remained fond, the particular fondness of someone who had watched a friend talk himself into worse ideas before and lived to tell the story. He walked over to the laptop, squinting at the screen, reading a few lines with the exaggerated care of a man proofreading a ransom note. "I'm fairly certain that using the phrase 'sword in the seed' in a university-level sociology paper is a one-way ticket to a mandatory meeting with the Dean of Students. Also, 'titties' is a bold choice for a formal introduction. Very avant-garde. Very brave. Possibly actionable."

Wratchet ignored the critique, his mind already racing ahead to the conclusion of his argument, the part he hadn't written yet but could already hear in his head, delivered in the cadence of a man convinced he was about to say something important. He stood up, pacing the small, cramped space of the basement, his boots — thrifted, scuffed at the toe in a way he'd started to consider character rather than damage — clicking on the concrete. "That's exactly why it works! It shocks the system. It strips away the academic pretension and gets to the primal core. We're talking about the Apex Alpha, the biological imperative to claim space. That's why I need the vest, Julian. The essay is the theory; the leather is the practice. You can't argue for primal dominance while wearing a fleece hoodie from the campus bookstore. Nobody's ever felt like a conqueror in fleece. It's a scientific impossibility."

Julian laughed, a light, genuine sound that echoed off the cinderblock walls and briefly drowned out the hum of the water heater in the corner. "I admire the commitment to the bit, truly. But maybe, just maybe, you could tone down the 'conqueror' rhetoric before you submit it? You know Thorne — he loves a good debate, but he hates it when students try to relive the Stone Age in his lecture hall. He gave that guy last semester a C-minus for less. And that guy at least cited a source."

"Tone it down? Julian, you're asking me to castrate my own thesis," Wratchet replied, though he was smiling now, some of the manic energy leaking out of him the way it always did once someone else was in the room to absorb it. He stopped his pacing and looked at the laptop, the cursor still blinking with rhythmic insistence, indifferent to the drama unfolding around it. For a moment, the absurdity of the situation hung in the air: a young man in a basement, surrounded by heavy machinery and half-finished leatherwork, arguing the merits of "seed conquerors" to a friend who looked like he'd stepped out of a luxury catalogue for a brand that didn't believe in visible stitching.

"You know what your problem is," Julian said, settling onto an overturned crate like it was a chaise longue, "you think an essay is a battlefield. It's not. It's a conversation. You can say something bold without setting the building on fire."

"Setting the building on fire is a proven pedagogical technique," Wratchet said. "Ask any professor who's ever assigned **Lord of the Flies**."

"Ask any professor who's had to fail a kid for plagiarizing the Unabomber's turns of phrase."

"I'm not — that's not — " Wratchet stopped, considered, and sat back down. "Okay, that's fair. I'll cut the part about 'reclaiming territory.'"

"Progress," Julian said, lifting his glass in a small toast.

Wratchet didn't actually delete the word "titties," but he did consider adding a footnote about the sociological implications of colloquialisms in gender studies, which felt like a fair compromise between his convictions and his GPA. As he typed, the aggressive energy of the "Apex Alpha" began to mellow into something more reflective, the way a fire banks down into coals once you stop feeding it. He started writing about the vulnerability of the male form — the irony of seeking dominance while being biologically fragile in ways women weren't, the way a man's whole architecture seemed built for offense and none of it for defense. It was a strange pivot, moving from the "sword in the seed" to the reality that the drive to conquer was often just a mask for a desperate need to be seen, to matter to someone, to leave a mark on a world that would otherwise forget you'd been in the room.

"You know," Julian said, leaning over Wratchet's shoulder, close enough that Wratchet could smell the orange soda and the faint cologne Julian always wore, something with cedar in it, "if you're arguing that conquest is the primary driver of sexual attraction, you're ignoring the other half of the equation. Why is it always the man as the conqueror?"

Wratchet paused, his fingers hovering over the keys, the cursor blinking in the gap where his next sentence was supposed to go. "Because that's the primal architecture, Julian. The hunter, the provider, the guy with the leather vest."

"Right, but look at the modern landscape," Julian countered, gesturing toward the small basement window, half-covered by an overgrown hedge, through which the amber glow of a streetlamp was visible along with the distant murmur of the campus bustle even at this hour — someone's music, someone's laughter, the perpetual low tide of a college town after dark. "Women are playing the same game now. They've internalized the conquest. The 'lust thirst' isn't just a male trait; it's a currency. There are women out there treating dating like a strategic campaign, collecting

conquests with more precision than any caveman ever did. They aren't just the prizes; they're the generals."

Wratchet frowned, his mind attempting to reconcile the image of a prehistoric hunter with the reality of a modern dating app, the little grid of faces you swiped through like a general reviewing troops, except the troops were also reviewing you, and everyone was pretending not to notice how much math was involved in something that was supposed to feel like fate. "You're saying the 'hunt' is genderless now?"

"Exactly," Julian replied, his voice taking on a professorial tone that he clearly enjoyed a little too much, the tone of a man who had, at some point, decided that if he couldn't be a professor himself, he could at least sound like one at parties. "The lusting thirst isn't a male monopoly. There are women who treat the pursuit of a partner like a tactical operation. They don't just wait to be conquered; they curate themselves into the ultimate lure, calculating exactly how much skin or mystery to reveal to secure the high-value target. It's the same primal drive, just rebranded as 'feminine intuition' or 'social grace.' In reality, it's a conquest."

Wratchet looked down at his leather vest, then back at the screen, turning the idea over the way you'd turn over a rock to see what was living underneath it. The idea that the "Apex Alpha" was being outmaneuvered by a strategic use of aesthetics hit him with a strange mix of respect and existential dread. He imagined a world where the roles were entirely flipped — where the man was the ornamental prize and the woman was the one with the leather and the loud engine, and something about the image made him want to write for another three hours.

"Wait," Wratchet said, a sudden realization sparking in his eyes, the particular light that Julian had learned to recognize as either genius or catastrophe, with roughly even odds. "That's why those girls at the rally last month were wearing those... what do you call them? The leather bikinis? They weren't just dressing up for the heat. They were signaling. They were playing the same game I am, just with a different uniform."

Julian nodded, sipping his drink with the satisfaction of a man watching an argument arrive exactly where he'd steered it. "Precisely. A leather bikini can get you a Road King just as fast as a skull-patch vest can get a guy into a biker bar. It's all about the visual currency of desire. If you can project the image of the 'conqueror' or the 'ultimate prize,' the machinery of attraction does the rest. You're arguing for the sword in the seed, but they're playing the game with a scalpel."

Wratchet fell silent, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, the basement quiet except for the water heater's occasional groan and the distant, muffled thump of a bassline from somewhere down the block. The "manifesto" suddenly felt less like a declaration of war and more like a clumsy first

draft of something truer that he hadn't found the words for yet. He began to type, not with the aggressive fervor of before, but with a genuine curiosity, the kind that made the sentences come easier, less like he was building a fortress and more like he was digging a well. He started a new section, tentatively titled *The Symmetry of the Hunt*, where he explored the idea that the "Apex Alpha" wasn't a gendered role, but a psychological state of predatory attraction that anyone, regardless of the shape of their costume, could occupy or perform or hide behind.

For the next hour, the only sound in the basement was the rhythmic clack of keys and the distant hum of the street above, punctuated occasionally by Julian offering an unsolicited edit ("that comma is doing a lot of unpaid labor") or refilling his glass from a two-liter bottle he'd apparently smuggled down here at some point without Wratchet noticing. Wratchet stopped worrying about the structural integrity of his vest and started focusing on the integrity of his argument. He found himself laughing at his own earlier drafts, wondering how he had ever believed that nipples were the only thing making the male experience "useless." As he wrote, the gap between the road warrior and the sociology student narrowed, blending into a weird, hybrid identity that felt, for the first time, like it actually fit — not perfectly, not yet, but enough to walk around in without flinching.

By the time the clock on the microwave upstairs (visible through the open basement door, glowing a dutiful green) hit midnight, the essay was nearly finished. It was no longer a rant about biological redundancy; it was a meditation on the performance of power. He had kept the word "titties" in the opening paragraph — he decided the shock value was too good to waste, and some part of him suspected Thorne would respect the audacity more than he'd admit in front of the class — but he had tempered the "seed conqueror" rhetoric with a nuanced discussion on how modern desire is a strategic exchange of symbols, a negotiation conducted in fabric and posture and the studied casualness of a photo that had taken forty tries to look effortless. He felt a strange sense of warmth, a kinship with the very people he had spent the last three hours theorizing about, the leather-bikini generals and the fleece-hoodie foot soldiers alike.

"The theory is sound," Wratchet declared, slamming the laptop shut with more drama than the moment strictly required. "Now, we test the hypothesis."

He didn't just wear the vest; he inhabited it, shrugging it on over a plain black t-shirt and rolling his shoulders like he was settling into a new skin. With the skull and pistons patch finally secured — though slightly crooked, a fact he decided to reframe as intentional asymmetry, a design choice rather than a failure of craftsmanship — Wratchet felt the shift in his own gravity, the small but unmistakable recalibration that comes from putting on a costume that almost fits.

Julian looked him up and down, swirling the last of his orange soda. "You look like a substitute teacher who found a motorcycle in a ditch."

"I'll take it," Wratchet said, grabbing his keys off the workbench. "Rome wasn't built in a day. It was built by guys who also probably looked ridiculous at first."

"Was it, though? I feel like there's some survivorship bias in that statement."

"Get your coat, Julian. Field research doesn't do itself."

Chapter Two: Field Research at the Rusty Spoke

They didn't just wear the vest; he inhabited it, and he and Julian hit the road toward "The Rusty Spoke," a dive bar three exits down the interstate that Wratchet had chosen specifically because it was far enough from campus that nobody would recognize him if the field research went badly, and close enough that he could still make his eight a.m. seminar if it went well and he needed to write up his findings before the details went soft in his memory.

The drive itself was a small ceremony. Julian insisted on driving — "you're not operating machinery in that vest, it changes your center of gravity" — and Wratchet spent the twenty minutes with the window cracked, letting the night air needle at his face, trying to settle into the character he'd built for himself out of leather and theory. He practiced his posture in the side mirror, the particular slouch-that-wasn't-really-a-slouch that road warriors seemed to have mastered, equal parts relaxed and ready. He practiced not smiling too much, since Julian had pointed out, unhelpfully, that "conquerors don't grin like they just got a good grade," which was rich coming from a man who hadn't stopped smirking since they left the driveway.

"You're doing the thing again," Julian said, eyes on the road, "where you talk to yourself in the mirror like you're rehearsing a monologue."

"I'm not talking to myself. I'm calibrating."

"Calibrating what?"

"My affect."

"Your affect is going to get us both kicked out before we order a drink."

The Rusty Spoke announced itself before they saw it — a smell of stale lager and old regrets drifting out into the parking lot like a welcome mat nobody had asked for, mixed with the tang of motor oil from the row of actual motorcycles parked in a neat, gleaming line by the door, their owners' leather looking decades more lived-in than Wratchet's. The building itself was a low,

windowless rectangle with a single flickering neon sign — half the letters dead, so it read THE R STY S OKE, which Wratchet found weirdly poetic — and a bouncer out front who barely looked up from his phone as they approached, which felt like both a relief and a small insult, as though Wratchet's carefully assembled outlaw persona hadn't even registered as a threat worth clocking.

Inside, the lighting was dim enough to hide a bad haircut but bright enough to showcase a leather jacket, exactly the kind of chiaroscuro that flattered confidence and exposed uncertainty in equal measure. A jukebox in the corner cycled through classic rock nobody had requested in years, the bass turned up just enough to vibrate the change in your pocket. Pool balls clicked somewhere behind a half-wall. A row of taxidermied fish, presumably ironic, presumably not, watched the room from above the bar with glassy, unbothered eyes.

Wratchet played the part of the aspiring outlaw with a surprising naturalness once he got a beer in his hand and something to lean against. His newfound sociological insight — half-baked as it was, freshly minted an hour ago in a basement — allowed him to read the room like a map, or at least like a map he'd glanced at once and was now pretending to have memorized. He wasn't just a guy in a vest; he was a man projecting a curated image of rugged instability, and it turned out that projecting an image was ninety percent about not looking around too much to see if anyone had noticed you doing it.

Julian, for his part, looked exactly as out of place as he had in the basement, which was to say: entirely, serenely, and without a shred of self-consciousness. He ordered a drink with an umbrella in it — the bartender, a woman with forearm tattoos and an expression of profound patience, actually had to go dig one out from a box under the register — and settled onto a barstool like he was reviewing the establishment for a magazine. "This place has real texture," he said approvingly, running a finger along a groove worn into the bar top by decades of elbows. "I respect it."

"You respect everything," Wratchet said. "You respected the basement."

"I contain multitudes."

They talked for a while about nothing — Julian's ongoing feud with his advisor over a thesis committee assignment, Wratchet's plan (unrealistic, both of them knew) to actually finish the semester with a motorcycle license — and Wratchet let himself relax into the vest, into the room, into the low hum of other people's Friday nights happening around him. He watched a group of women near the pool table, tight jeans and looser laughter, one of them lining up a shot with the kind of exaggerated focus that suggested she was either very good or very drunk, possibly both. He watched a man near the door arm-wrestle a stranger for a round of drinks and lose, gracefully, the way men only lose gracefully when they've already decided the story of losing is worth more than

the round would have been. He watched, and cataloged, and felt something in his chest loosen that had been tight since he opened the laptop that afternoon.

That was when he saw her.

She wasn't at the bar and she wasn't at the pool table. She was on a small, makeshift stage in the back corner of the room — not a proper stage, just a raised platform with a single spotlight rigged from a clamp light and a length of orange extension cord, the kind of setup that suggested the bar hadn't planned on having a stage at all and had built one out of necessity and a Tuesday-night booking gone sideways. She moved with an economy of motion that made everyone else in the room look like they were still learning how their own bodies worked, a kind of stillness inside the movement, like the eye of something.

"Who is that," Wratchet said, not really a question.

Julian followed his gaze and let out a low whistle, more amused than impressed. "That, my friend, is either the best or worst thing that's going to happen to you tonight. Possibly both."

She wasn't just a dancer at the club's small stage; she was, in the specific and unglamorous ecology of the Rusty Spoke on a Friday night, the undisputed general of the room's erotic economy — a phrase Wratchet would later be embarrassed to have thought in exactly those words, but which was, at the time, the only language he had for what he was watching. She had spotted him from across the bar — the weirdly earnest student playing at being a biker, leather vest slightly too new, patch slightly crooked, posture that kept forgetting itself and slipping back into the careful slouch of a boy trying to look like a man — and she had seen right through the costume to the nervous energy underneath, the way you can always tell a rented tuxedo from across a room even if you can't say exactly how.

To Roxy, though he didn't know her name yet, Wratchet wasn't an "Apex Alpha"; he was a delightful, high-contrast novelty, the kind of anomaly that made a long shift interesting. She held his gaze for exactly as long as it took to communicate that she'd noticed him noticing her, and not one second longer, then went back to work, and Wratchet felt the specific vertigo of being both seen and dismissed in the same instant, filed away for later consideration.

"Close your mouth," Julian said. "You look like you're auditioning for a nature documentary."

"I am conducting field research."

"Sure you are. Buy her a drink, professor."

"That's not how it — I don't think that's how it works in here."

"There's exactly one way to find out."

Wratchet did not, in fact, buy her a drink in any conventional sense — the economics of the room didn't run that direction, a fact he would later find both humbling and clarifying, a small but real correction to an essay he hadn't finished writing yet. But over the course of the next hour, in the gaps between sets, in the loose orbit of a crowded bar where paths cross and re-cross without anyone quite planning it, he found himself near her, and then talking to her, and then — somehow, impossibly, given the version of the evening he'd rehearsed in his head — making her laugh.

It happened by accident, the way the good things usually did. He'd been explaining, with the specific, aggressive earnestness of a man three beers deep in his own thesis, some fragment of the "symmetry of the hunt" argument, the part about leather bikinis and skull patches being the same signal in different languages, and she had looked at him with an expression that was equal parts **is this guy for real** and **okay, but continue**, and said, "So you drove forty minutes to a biker bar to test a sociology paper."

"When you say it like that it sounds insane."

"It is insane."

"It's **field research**."

"Sure it is, professor." And she'd laughed — not politely, not the practiced laugh of someone managing a customer, but a real one, short and surprised out of her, like he'd gotten past a checkpoint she hadn't expected him to find. It was the first genuinely unguarded thing he'd seen from her all night, and it did more for his confidence than the vest ever had.

Julian, watching from a respectful distance with the studied nonchalance of a man who wanted full credit later for having engineered the whole thing, allowed himself a small, satisfied smile and went back to his drink with the umbrella in it.

Chapter Three: Roxy

Her name, it turned out, was Roxy — or at least that was the name she gave him, delivered with the flat, practiced ease of someone who had decided a long time ago that the name she used at work and the name she used for herself didn't have to be the same word, and that this wasn't a lie so much as a boundary with good manners. Wratchet didn't push for more. Some part of the sociology student in him understood, even half-drunk on beer and his own theorizing, that asking for more would have been its own kind of conquest, and he was trying, tonight of all nights, to be something other than that.

They ended up talking near the back hallway that led to the restrooms, a stretch of the bar too loud to be private and too dim to be public, which made it, paradoxically, one of the more honest spots in the building. She had changed out of her stage clothes into jeans and an oversized flannel that had clearly belonged to someone else at some point, and without the spotlight she looked less like a general and more like a woman finishing a long shift, tired in the specific way that comes from performing composure for eight hours straight.

"So what's the actual thesis," she asked, arms crossed, leaning against the wall with the particular skepticism of someone who had heard a lot of theses from a lot of men in this exact hallway. "Not the bit where you drove out here in a costume. The actual argument."

Wratchet found himself, for the first time all night, without a rehearsed answer. "I think — " he started, then stopped, then started again. "I think I wrote three thousand words tonight about how men perform dominance because they're afraid of being seen as soft, and I think I only figured out it was true about twenty minutes ago, talking to you."

"That's either the most honest thing a guy's said to me in this hallway, or the smoothest line I've heard all month."

"Could be both."

"Could be both," she agreed, and something in her posture shifted, some fractional easing that Wratchet felt rather than saw, the loosening of a person deciding, provisionally, that a stranger was worth a little more of their attention than strangers usually got. "You're not what I expected when I clocked you at the bar."

"What did you expect?"

"Somebody's kid brother trying to look dangerous for a bachelor party that hadn't shown up yet."

"That's — extremely accurate, actually."

She laughed again, that same short, surprised sound, and this time she didn't seem to be managing it at all.

They talked for a long time after that, longer than either of them probably intended, about things that had nothing to do with the essay or the vest or the Apex Alpha — about the town she'd grown up in two hours south, about the community college credits she was slowly, stubbornly accumulating toward a degree in something she hadn't decided on yet, about the way the stage lights gave her a headache by the third set every single night and nobody in management cared enough to fix the bulb. Wratchet talked about Thorne, about Julian, about the basement and the sewing machine and the specific indignity of trying to look like a road warrior on a grad-student stipend he technically hadn't earned yet. Somewhere in the conversation, the performance dropped away from both of them — his conqueror posture, her stage composure — and what was left underneath was just two tired people finding each other funny in a hallway that smelled like industrial cleaner and old beer.

At one point, a coworker of hers — a bigger man with a clipboard and the specific, weary authority of someone who managed inventory and disputes in equal measure — poked his head down the hallway to ask if she was "good," a question that seemed to carry a whole unspoken protocol behind it, a system of checks that existed for reasons Wratchet understood, suddenly and completely, without needing to ask. Roxy waved him off with an easy, practiced gesture, "I'm good, Marcus, this one's harmless," and the man nodded and disappeared, apparently satisfied, leaving Wratchet with the distinct, humbling awareness that he had just been evaluated and cleared by a system built to protect her from men who were considerably less harmless than he hoped he was.

"Do you have to do that a lot?" he asked. "The check-in thing."

"Every night. Sometimes twice." She shrugged, an economical, unbothered motion, though something in her eyes suggested the shrug cost more than it showed. "You get good at reading a room fast when reading it wrong has consequences. You, for what it's worth, read as exactly what you look like. A kid in a costume having an identity crisis in real time."

"That's oddly specific."

"I've had a lot of practice."

He wanted, in that moment, to say something that would prove her wrong, would demonstrate some hidden depth that undercut the assessment, but he couldn't think of anything that wouldn't have proven her exactly right, so instead he just laughed, and she laughed with him, and something in the exchange settled into an easier register after that, the two of them talking less like a customer and a performer and more like two people who happened to have stumbled into the same hallway at the same unglamorous hour.

By the time her shift ended, they'd migrated from the hallway to a booth near the back, away from the noise of the pool table, where she peeled off her name tag — the stage name, not the real one, a small piece of costume she set on the table between them like she was setting down a tool she was done using for the night — and ordered a water instead of anything stronger, explaining, when he raised an eyebrow, that she never drank on a night she was driving, or being driven, or making any decision more complicated than what to eat. "Rule number one of the erotic economy," she said, deadpan. "Stay sober enough to negotiate your own exit."

"I should probably put that in the essay."

"You should probably not put anything about tonight in the essay."

"Too late. I've already got a working title in my head."

"If it involves the word 'titties' again, I'm leaving."

"It does not. I've evolved."

"The stripper laid part of the evening," as Wratchet would later, privately, half-embarrassedly refer to it in his own head, happened with a surprising amount of mutual warmth, nothing like the transactional conquest his essay had spent three thousand words theorizing about. It wasn't a hunt and it wasn't a surrender; it was a collision of two people playing roles all evening who had both, separately and then together, gotten tired of playing them.

Julian drove them all — himself, Wratchet, and Roxy, who had clocked out for the night and declared with the weary authority of someone who'd made this call before that she wasn't driving herself home in this state of exhausted — to a motel just off the highway, the kind of place with a flickering vacancy sign and a bedspread pattern designed specifically to hide every stain that had ever happened on it. Julian took a separate room without comment, tossing Wratchet the extra key with a look that managed to be both smug and genuinely happy for him, then disappeared with a wave and an "I expect a full debrief in the morning, professor."

By the time they reached the motel, the conversation had shifted from the performance of power to the genuine exhaustion of maintaining an image, a subject on which they turned out to be unexpected experts, each in their own register. Roxy, stripped of her sequins and stage persona, found Wratchet's rambling explanation of "the symmetry of the hunt" genuinely endearing rather than absurd, in the specific way that a joke lands better once you understand it wasn't really a joke. He was, she told him, somewhere in the small hours, the first guy in three weeks who had tried to intellectualize their chemistry using an actual sociology paper, and she wasn't sure if that was the most pathetic or the most romantic thing that had happened to her all year, and hadn't decided by the time she fell asleep.

Wratchet lay awake for a moment afterward, staring at the popcorn ceiling of the budget motel, the leather vest crumpled in a heap on the floor where it had landed sometime in the last hour, no longer doing any work at all. The physical reality of the encounter felt far more authentic than any of the theories he had typed into his laptop that evening. He realized, in the specific clarity that sometimes arrives at three in the morning in an unfamiliar room, that the "conqueror" aspect he had been so obsessed with was actually a barrier — a wall of armor he had to build just to feel brave enough to be touched, a costume that had less to do with dominance than with the simple terror of being ordinary and unchosen.

Roxy's breathing had already evened out into sleep beside him, one arm thrown loosely across the space between them, and Wratchet found himself studying the line of her shoulder in the orange wash of the parking lot light leaking through the curtains, thinking that this — the unglamorous quiet of a motel room at three a.m., the hum of the ice machine down the hall, the faint chemical smell of the sheets — felt more like field research than anything that had happened at the bar. Not because it proved his thesis, but because it dismantled it, piece by piece, and left something truer in its place, something he didn't yet have the vocabulary for and would spend the rest of the night trying, uselessly, sleeplessly, to draft in his head.

Julian, meanwhile, was fast asleep in the adjacent room, likely dreaming of a world where "structural integrity" applied to more than just sewing patches onto leather.

Chapter Four: The Diner and the Submission

The next morning arrived with the harsh, unforgiving light of a roadside diner, the kind of light that made everyone in the room look like they'd aged a decade overnight and forgot to bring a coat. Wratchet sat across from a plate of greasy eggs that he was eating mostly out of obligation to the concept of breakfast, his mind looping back to the previous night in a slow, repetitive orbit, the way a tongue keeps finding a sore tooth. The transition from the theoretical "Apex Alpha" to the actual human experience had been jarringly simple, almost anticlimactic in how easily his three-thousand-word thesis had folded under the weight of one honest conversation in a hallway. He had spent so much time worrying about the "sword in the seed" and the primal drive that he had almost forgotten that the most primal thing of all was simply wanting someone to see through the costume.

Roxy had left before sunrise — a shift starting at a different job, something about a cousin's nail salon that needed help on Saturdays, delivered with the practiced brevity of someone used to leaving before things got complicated. She'd written her number on the motel notepad in loopy, confident handwriting and left it propped against the lamp, along with a single line that read: *Field research complete. Grade pending.* Wratchet had read it four times before folding it into his wallet, where it would live, increasingly soft at the creases, for longer than either of them could have predicted that morning.

Julian slid into the booth across from him a few minutes later, sunglasses on despite the diner's fluorescent lighting, sliding his own plate — pancakes, untouched by any vegetable, exactly as advertised — into position with the efficiency of a man who had done this exact walk of shame many times before and had it down to a science. He'd stopped, on the way in, to charm the entire wait staff with a compliment about the diner's neon sign that Wratchet suspected was completely sincere and entirely unnecessary, and had emerged from the exchange with a free refill of coffee that the waitress hadn't offered anyone else that morning. "You look like a man who's had a religious experience," Julian said, unwrapping his silverware from its paper napkin.

"Define religious."

"The kind where you come out the other side unable to shut up about it, but also somehow less annoying than you were going in. It's rare. I've only seen it a handful of times. Usually in people who've just gotten back from a silent retreat, or a breakup, or both."

"I had neither of those things last night."

"You had a third thing, apparently, and I'd like a full report, but I also respect a man's right to privacy, so I'll just wait here, patiently, radiating curiosity until you crack."

"I might have."

"Was it the eggs? Because those eggs look like a cry for help."

"It wasn't the eggs."

Julian studied him for a moment over the rim of his coffee cup, and something in his usual smirk softened into an expression that was, for Julian, unusually sincere. "For what it's worth — and I say this as someone who has watched you spiral about a sewing machine for three hours — you look lighter than I've seen you look all semester."

Wratchet didn't have a smart response to that, which was itself a kind of answer.

As he sipped a lukewarm coffee that the waitress had refilled twice without asking, he looked at his reflection in the diner's mirrored wall, the one running the length of the counter that every roadside diner in America seemed contractually obligated to install. He didn't look like a road warrior; he looked like a student who hadn't slept, wearing a leather vest that was slightly crooked, sitting across from a friend who somehow still looked like he belonged on a yacht despite having spent the night in a motel that charged by increments Wratchet didn't want to think too hard about. But for the first time, the crookedness didn't bother him. He realized that the "aesthetic integrity" he had been chasing all week was a kind of lie he'd been telling himself, a smaller and more manageable problem to solve than the actual, terrifying question underneath it. The real integrity, he thought, watching the waitress top off a trucker's coffee three stools down, lay in the gaps — the messy, unplanned moments where the persona slips and the actual person underneath is revealed, and somebody sticks around to see it anyway.

He pulled out his phone and opened the document. He didn't delete the "titties" intro, but he added a final, concluding paragraph, typing with his thumbs while Julian narrated an increasingly elaborate theory about the trucker's life story based entirely on his choice of hat. Wratchet wrote about the relief of being found out, the joy of being a "novelty," and the surprising warmth of a stranger's laughter in a hallway that smelled like industrial cleaner. He wrote about a note left on a motel notepad, though he didn't say what it said, because some things belonged to him now and not

to Professor Thorne. He hit "save" and felt a weight lift off his shoulders that he hadn't fully registered carrying. The manifesto was no longer a theory; it was closer, now, to a memoir.

"You're doing the thing where you type with your whole face," Julian said. "It's disturbing to watch."

"I'm finishing the essay."

"At a diner. With syrup on your sleeve."

Wratchet looked down. There was, in fact, syrup on his sleeve, from Julian's plate, transferred at some point during a gesture Wratchet didn't remember making. "This vest has survived worse."

"The vest has survived exactly one night. Everything is worse than that, statistically."

He closed the laptop and stepped out into the morning air with Julian a beat behind him, the leather of his vest smelling of old smoke and new beginnings, a combination he decided, somewhat pretentiously, that he liked. The diner's bell jingled behind them, cheerful and oblivious, as they crossed the gravel lot toward the car, the sun already starting to bake the asphalt in a way that promised a hot drive back to campus.

Julian was already at the car, leaning against the door with a look of amused curiosity by the time Wratchet caught up, having stopped to actually look at the note in his wallet one more time before deciding it was undignified to keep checking it in front of witnesses. "So," Julian said, his voice smooth and devoid of judgment, sliding his sunglasses down his nose to make eye contact properly. "How did the hypothesis hold up? Did the 'Apex Alpha' successfully navigate the erotic economy of the Rusty Spoke?"

Wratchet laughed, a genuine, chest-deep sound that felt entirely new, the kind of laugh that surprised its owner as much as its audience. "The hypothesis was flawed, Julian. It turns out the conqueror isn't the one with the most power, but the one who is most comfortable being vulnerable. Turns out, the 'sword in the seed' is a lot less effective than just being a weirdo with a sociology degree."

"I could have told you that for free."

"You did tell me that for free. Repeatedly. I just wasn't listening."

"Story of my life," Julian said, unlocking the car with a theatrical sigh. "Wise counsel, tragically ignored, vindicated only after the fact."

They began the drive back to campus, the landscape blurring into a smear of green and grey outside the windows, gas stations and cattle fields and the occasional billboard for a lawyer promising to fight for you. Wratchet watched the road, thinking about Professor Thorne's reaction to the paper, running through the possible outcomes with the specific dread of someone who had just gambled his GPA on a hunch about vulnerability. He suspected the professor would either give him an A for his boldness or a failing grade for his vocabulary. Either way, Wratchet didn't care, or at least cared less than he expected to. He felt a sense of stability that had nothing to do with the stitching on his vest, something that had settled into his chest sometime between the hallway and the motel and hadn't left since. He was no longer trying to fit into a mold of a biker gang wannabe; he was simply a man who happened to own a leather vest and a very controversial essay, and, folded into his wallet, a phone number he had every intention of using.

Chapter Five: Thorne's Verdict

As they pulled into the student parking lot, Wratchet saw a group of students gathered near the humanities building, debating the nuances of gender performance with the kind of intensity that only exists on a Sunday afternoon before a Monday deadline, papers clutched to chests, coffee cups gone cold in their hands. He felt a sudden, instinctive urge to walk over to them, not as a scholar, but as a practitioner. He didn't want to explain the theory to them; he wanted to tell them about the Rusty Spoke, about the leather bikinis and the strategic use of mystery, and how the most powerful thing you can wear is a costume that doesn't quite fit. He didn't, in the end — some instinct told him this was not information you handed out for free in a parking lot — but the urge stayed with him all the way up the stairs.

"You're thinking about the essay again, aren't you?" Julian asked, stepping out of the car and stretching, joints popping audibly enough that a passing freshman flinched. "You have that look on your face — the one where you're trying to decide if you're a philosopher or a delinquent."

"Maybe I'm both," Wratchet replied, gripping the strap of his bag. "Maybe that's the real Apex Alpha move. Being able to switch between a sociology seminar and a dive bar without losing your mind."

"That's not an Apex Alpha move. That's just called having a personality."

"Same thing, if you market it right."

They walked toward the building, the leather of Wratchet's vest creaking softly with every step, a sound he'd started to find comforting rather than embarrassing, evidence that the thing was real and not just an idea he'd talked himself into. He noticed a few other students glancing at him — some with confusion, some with a hint of admiration, one girl from his intro stats class doing a visible double-take that he decided, generously, to interpret as respect. He didn't feel the need to assert his dominance or project an image of rugged instability. Instead, he just smiled back, a quiet confidence settling in his chest that had nothing to do with the vest at all. He realized that the quest

for the "perfect" image was a race with no finish line, a treadmill you could run on forever without ever actually arriving anywhere. The real victory was the moment you stopped running and realized everyone else was just wearing a costume, too — some of them leather, some of them fleece, some of them a carefully maintained GPA and a LinkedIn profile, but costumes all the same.

As they entered the lecture hall, the smell of old chalk and burnt coffee greeted them, along with the low murmur of forty students pretending to have done the reading. Professor Thorne was already at the podium, his sharp eyes scanning the room with the particular scrutiny of a man who had graded three hundred essays over the weekend and found most of them wanting. Wratchet took his seat near the back — a strategic choice, he told himself, though it felt more like cowardice — opened his laptop, and looked at the title one more time: *"Why My Titties: A Male's Perspective on Useless Nipples."* He didn't change a word. He hit "submit" with a smirk he didn't entirely feel, leaned back in his chair, and waited for the fallout with an unexpected sense of peace, the kind that comes from having already decided you'll survive whatever happens next.

"You look far too relaxed," Julian whispered, leaning over from the next seat, having dropped into the chair beside him with the casual proprietary air of a man who considered front-row real estate beneath him on principle. "Most people would be shaking in their boots after submitting a paper that treats the male anatomy like a punchline."

"That's because most people are trying to fit in, Julian," Wratchet whispered back. "I'm just reporting from the field."

The lecture began, Thorne's voice droning on about the social construction of identity in a tone that suggested he'd delivered this exact lecture enough times to do it in his sleep, occasionally pausing to write a term on the whiteboard in handwriting that looked like it had personally suffered through decades of faculty meetings. Wratchet listened, mostly, but his mind drifted back to the neon lights of the Rusty Spoke and the genuine, unscripted laughter he had shared with Roxy in a hallway that smelled like industrial cleaner. He thought about the "symmetry of the hunt" and how, in the end, the hunt wasn't about capturing a prize, but about finding someone who spoke the same language of absurdity, who could hear a ridiculous three a.m. sociology tangent and laugh at the right parts instead of the wrong ones.

Halfway through the lecture, Thorne paused, closing the marker with a click that seemed to silence the entire room by reflex. "I've spent the last hour reviewing a particularly... **eclectic** submission from one of my students," the professor announced, his voice echoing through the silent room with the specific gravity of a man about to make an example, positive or otherwise, of somebody's Sunday-night decisions. He looked directly at Wratchet, and forty heads turned to

follow his gaze like a very slow, very public tennis match. "A paper that begins with a bold interrogation of the male chest and ends with a surprisingly poignant reflection on human vulnerability. It is, without a doubt, the most confused piece of writing I have ever encountered." Thorne paused, a small, rare smile appearing on his face, the kind of smile that made the whole room exhale at once. "And yet, it is also the most honest."

The class shifted, a dozen heads turning further toward Wratchet, someone in the front row actually turning all the way around in their seat. For the first time, the leather vest didn't feel like a costume or a shield. He didn't feel the need to lean back and project "Apex Alpha" confidence, didn't feel the old urge to perform certainty he didn't have. He just nodded, a simple acknowledgment of the truth, and felt, oddly, more like himself than he had in the entire three weeks of the semester leading up to that moment.

"Mr. Wratchet," Thorne continued, gathering his notes into a neat stack with the air of a man delivering a verdict he'd already made peace with, "your terminology regarding 'seed conquerors' is practically prehistoric and logically unsound. I would encourage you, in future work, to consult an actual source before inventing your own anthropology. However," and here he allowed himself a longer pause, clearly enjoying the suspense he was building, "your application of field research — specifically the evening you spent at a dive bar — provides a visceral context that most students lack. I suspect you didn't just read about the erotic economy; you actively traded in it. I'm giving you an A, provided you never use the word 'titties' in a formal setting ever again."

The room erupted into a mix of laughter and hushed whispers, someone in the back actually applauding before catching themselves. Julian leaned over, beaming with a sort of triumphant glee, as though he personally deserved a cut of the grade. "Told you the shock value would work. Though, I think you've officially transitioned from 'biker wannabe' to 'campus legend.' How does it feel to be the most intellectually honest man in the room?"

"It feels like I can finally take this vest off," Wratchet admitted, though he didn't actually move to remove it. He liked the way it felt now — not as a badge of rank, but as a reminder of a night when he stopped trying to be a conqueror and started being a person, crooked patch and all.

As the lecture ended and the sea of students flowed toward the exits, backpacks colliding, someone already asking Thorne a question about the next assignment before he'd even cleared the podium, Wratchet found himself thinking about the actual mechanics of that night, replaying it the way you replay a song you've just discovered you love. He remembered the moment the "Apex Alpha" facade had finally cracked, not because of a failure in his performance, but because of Roxy's laughter. She hadn't laughed *at* him, but rather *with* him, recognizing the clumsy effort he was putting into his persona and choosing, generously, to meet him there instead of walking

away. The transition from the loud, beer-soaked atmosphere of the Rusty Spoke to the quiet, sterile air of the motel room had been a journey of shedding layers, one at a time, without either of them quite noticing it happening until it already had.

He recalled the specific, surprising warmth of Roxy's hand on his shoulder as she told him that his "manifesto" sounded like something a very confused poet would write. There had been a genuine connection in that shared admission of artifice, a recognition passing between two people who had both spent the evening performing something they weren't entirely sure they believed in. For a few hours, they had both stepped out of their professional skins — she, the curated object of desire; he, the aspiring outlaw — and found a strange, middle ground of mutual vulnerability. It wasn't a "conquest" in the way his essay had initially argued; it was a temporary truce between two people tired of pretending, negotiated in a hallway that smelled like industrial cleaner and sealed, somehow, in the loopy handwriting on a motel notepad.

"Earth to Wratchet," Julian said, snapping his fingers in front of Wratchet's face as they stepped out into the bright afternoon sun, the quad already filling with the after-lecture exodus, frisbees and skateboards and someone's dog off its leash chasing all of the above. "You're doing that thing again. The 'deep thought' face. Come on, let's go get some food. I feel like celebrating your academic triumph with something that doesn't taste like a university cafeteria."

Wratchet laughed and followed him toward the parking lot, adjusting the strap of his bag over the crooked patch on his vest. He looked down at the skull and pistons, still slightly crooked, and felt a surge of affection for it that had nothing to do with how it looked and everything to do with what it had witnessed. The vest was no longer a requirement for a role he was trying to play; it was just a piece of clothing that happened to tell a story, one he was, for the first time, proud to be wearing.

As they walked, Wratchet found himself reflecting on the "erotic economy" Julian had described back in the basement, turning it over now with the benefit of having actually lived inside it for one night instead of just theorizing from a safe distance. He realized that the thrill of that night hadn't been the "win" or the biological imperative of the Alpha, but the moment of being seen. Roxy hadn't been a prize to be won, and he hadn't been a conqueror; they had just been two people in a dive bar, navigating the strange, neon-lit distance between who they were and who the world expected them to be, and finding, against the odds, that the distance wasn't as unbridgeable as it looked from the outside.

"You know," Wratchet said, glancing at Julian, "I think I'm going to keep the 'titties' intro in the final draft for the portfolio. Not for the grade, but for the record."

Julian grinned, shifting his bag over his shoulder as they crossed toward the parking lot, the afternoon sun catching the crooked patch on Wratchet's back like a small, defiant flag. "Bold. Completely absurd, and potentially damaging to your future as a serious sociologist, but bold. It's exactly what a 'seed conqueror' would do, isn't it?"

"Exactly," Wratchet replied. He felt a lightness in his chest that no amount of leather could provide. As they headed toward the car, he didn't feel the need to stride with a choreographed dominance. He just walked, a student with a strange essay and a slightly crooked patch, finally comfortable with the fact that he didn't quite fit the mold. He wasn't an Apex Alpha, and he wasn't just a student; he was something in between, and for the first time, that felt like enough.

His phone buzzed in his pocket as they reached the car. A text, from a number he'd saved that morning under a single letter: *R.*

Grade came back yet, professor?

He was smiling before he'd even finished reading it.

Chapter Six: The Weeks In Between

The weeks that followed Thorne's verdict passed in a strange, pleasant blur that Wratchet would later struggle to reconstruct in any real order, the way a good summer always resists being filed into a proper timeline. What he remembered instead were fragments: the specific creak of his apartment door at eleven p.m. on a Tuesday when Roxy showed up unannounced with a bag of gas-station snacks and a documentary she'd been dying to argue about; the smell of dry-erase marker in Thorne's office during an office hour that had started as a five-minute grade clarification and turned into a forty-minute conversation about the sociology of costume that left them both late for their next obligations; the particular quality of afternoon light in the library windows where he and Julian would sometimes sit, ostensibly studying, actually just talking, because it turned out that once you'd survived a night at the Rusty Spoke together, ordinary conversation felt like it had higher stakes and lower stakes at the same time.

He and Roxy fell into something that neither of them rushed to name, which suited them both. She had two jobs and an associate's degree in progress; he had a thesis committee to eventually assemble and a habit of overthinking every text message he sent her by at least four drafts before hitting send, a habit she found, when she found out about it — because of course she found out about it, because Julian had no filter and even less loyalty when it came to a good story — both flattering and mockable in roughly equal measure.

"You drafted a text about grabbing coffee," she said one evening, incredulous, scrolling through his phone with the casual proprietary air of someone who had decided, at some point without either of them formally agreeing to it, that his phone was now within her jurisdiction. "Four times. For coffee."

"The stakes were high."

"The stakes were coffee."

"Everything is coffee until it isn't," Wratchet said, which didn't make sense even to him as he said it, but which Roxy repeated back to him so often over the following weeks — usually at moments of maximum absurdity, usually accompanied by an arched eyebrow — that it became something like a private joke between them, a phrase that meant, roughly, *we're both taking this more seriously than we're willing to admit.*

He kept up his correspondence with Thorne throughout this stretch, an arrangement that had started as a joke and solidified, somewhere along the way, into something closer to genuine mentorship, if mentorship could be conducted almost entirely via a professor's grudging tolerance for text messages he insisted, at least twice, that he shouldn't be answering. Wratchet would send him fragments of an idea — a paragraph about the performance of masculinity he'd typed at two in the morning, a question about whether Foucault would have had anything useful to say about a leather bikini — and Thorne would reply, usually within a day, with something clipped and dry and, more often than not, exactly the correction Wratchet needed.

"You keep using the word 'primal' as though it excuses the behavior it describes," Thorne wrote once, in response to a particularly overwrought paragraph Wratchet had sent about the biological roots of jealousy. *"Primal is not the same as inevitable. A man can understand the roots of an impulse and still choose, on any given Tuesday, not to be governed by it. That choice is the actual subject of your paper, Wratchet, if you'd stop being so enamored with your own vocabulary long enough to see it."*

Wratchet read that text sitting on the floor of his apartment with his back against the couch, Roxy's feet in his lap while she scrolled through something on her own phone, and found himself laughing out loud at the specific, surgical precision of it.

"What," she said, not looking up.

"Thorne just roasted me in a text message."

"Good. Somebody should, professionally."

"You do it for free."

"I do it out of love. It's a completely different service tier."

It was during these weeks that Julian met Mia, at a gallery opening he'd only attended because a friend of a friend was showing photography and there was a promise of free wine that turned out, upon arrival, to be a single bottle of something aggressively mediocre split among forty people. Julian's account of the meeting, delivered to Wratchet over the phone the next morning with the breathless, slightly incredulous energy of a man who had genuinely not expected his Thursday

night to go this way, involved Mia critiquing his opinion on a piece of found-object sculpture so thoroughly and so correctly that he'd fallen for her somewhere in the middle of being told he was wrong.

"She used the phrase 'derivative but sincere' about a sculpture I said I liked," Julian reported. "And then she used the exact same phrase about me, thirty seconds later, completely unprompted, and I think I just stood there grinning like an idiot for a full minute."

"That's either the best or worst compliment you've ever received."

"I've decided it's the best. I'm choosing that. I have full authority to choose that."

"You have zero authority to choose that, but I respect the confidence."

Mia turned out to be exactly the kind of person Julian needed and had apparently been waiting for without knowing it — someone who matched his particular blend of polish and chaos with an equal and opposite blend of her own, someone who could out-argue him about aesthetics and then, twenty minutes later, propose something so gloriously impractical that even Julian, a man rarely at a loss for logistics, had to sit with it for a while before agreeing. It was Mia, in fact, who first floated the idea of Burning Man, at a dinner the four of them had together for the first time — an evening that started tentatively, all four of them a little unsure how their respective relationships were meant to intersect, and ended with Roxy and Mia deep in a conversation about desert survival gear while Wratchet and Julian exchanged a look across the table that neither of them needed to translate into words.

"You're going to say yes to this," Julian said later, once the women had disappeared into the kitchen, ostensibly for dessert, actually for a conversation the men weren't invited to overhear.

"I haven't even heard the pitch yet."

"You're going to say yes anyway. I can see it on your face. You've got the field research look."

"I do not have a look."

"You have a very specific look, Wratchet. It's the same look you had before the Rusty Spoke. I've started to think of it as an early warning system."

He wasn't wrong. By the time Roxy and Mia emerged from the kitchen with a half-eaten pint of ice cream and the specific, conspiratorial energy of two people who had just finished plotting something enormous, Wratchet had already, somewhere in the previous twenty minutes, decided he was going to the desert.

There was, in those weeks, also the small matter of the essay's aftermath rippling outward through his social world in ways he hadn't anticipated. Word had gotten around campus — Thorne's classes were popular enough, and the story absurd enough, that it traveled the way these things do, gaining small embellishments at every retelling until Wratchet occasionally heard versions of his own field research that bore only a passing resemblance to what had actually happened. A girl he'd never spoken to in the dining hall once asked him, with genuine curiosity and no apparent judgment, whether the vest was "the actual one from the essay," and seemed disproportionately delighted when he confirmed that it was, in fact, hanging on the back of his desk chair at that very moment, crooked patch and all.

He found, to his surprise, that he didn't mind the attention the way he expected to. There had been a time, not so long ago, when he would have leaned into the notoriety, would have worn it the way he'd once tried to wear the vest — as armor, as proof of something. Instead, he found himself shrugging it off with an ease that felt, in retrospect, like the most concrete evidence yet that Thorne's grading comment had actually landed somewhere real: **your application of field research provides a visceral context most students lack.** He hadn't done it for the notoriety. He'd done it, he understood now, because for one night in a dive bar, he'd needed to find out if the theory in his head could survive contact with an actual person, and it hadn't — not in the form he'd built it — but something truer had grown in its place, and that felt like a far better trophy than campus legend status ever could.

By the time the SUV was loaded and the binder finalized, the four of them had spent enough time together that the trip felt less like an adventure between strangers-of-convenience and more like the natural next chapter of something that had already been quietly building for weeks — in office hours and gallery openings, in gas-station snacks and four-draft text messages, in the small, unglamorous accumulation of trust that no essay, however honest, could have described half as well as simply living through it.

Chapter Seven: The Plan

"Burning Man is the only place where wearing a leather vest without a motorcycle is actually considered conservative," Roxy said, leaning over the passenger seat with a mischievous glint in her eye, three weeks and a dozen increasingly ridiculous late-night phone calls after the Rusty Spoke. She had reappeared in Wratchet's life gradually and then all at once, the way most good things do — a text here, a coffee there, an evening spent at his apartment watching a documentary about deep-sea creatures that had turned, somehow, into a two-hour argument about whether anglerfish had feelings, an argument neither of them won but both of them enjoyed enormously. By the time she brought up Burning Man, it felt less like a proposal and more like the next obvious sentence in a conversation they'd been having since the motel.

She had reappeared, in his words to Julian, as a whirlwind of sequins and spontaneous energy, transforming his academic victory into a practical adventure that neither of them had planned but both of them, apparently, had been waiting for. The plan, as she laid it out one night over gas-station burritos in his kitchen, was simple: a pilgrimage to the Black Rock Desert, a place where the "erotic economy" wasn't just a theory, but the primary currency, where the whole architecture of costume and signal and desire that he'd spent an all-nighter theorizing about got scaled up into an entire temporary city built on exactly those principles.

"You're describing my thesis," Wratchet had said, mouth full of burrito, "except with more dust."

"I'm describing an actual place, professor. Your thesis is describing my job."

"Fair."

Julian, ever the supportive wingman, had managed to secure a partner for the trip with the same effortless ease he brought to everything — a spirited art student named Mia who viewed the desert as a canvas for her own brand of curated chaos, and who had apparently agreed to the entire endeavor after a single conversation with Julian at a gallery opening that Wratchet still didn't have

the full story on and suspected he never would. Mia showed up to the planning meeting — held, appropriately, in the same basement where the whole saga had started, the sewing machine now retired to a corner and covered with a sheet like a piece of furniture nobody had the heart to throw away — with a binder. An actual binder, tabbed and color-coded, containing what she described as "logistics" but which Wratchet privately thought looked more like a heist plan.

"You've done this before," Wratchet said, flipping through a laminated packing checklist that included, under a heading titled MISCELLANEOUS, the entry *goggles (bring two pairs, you will lose one)*.

"I've done a lot of things before," Mia said, not looking up from where she was cross-referencing camp coordinates on a printed map with a highlighter clenched between her teeth. "This is the only one that actually required a binder."

Together, the two couples packed a beat-up SUV — Julian's, on loan from an uncle who had stopped asking questions about what Julian did with it years ago — with enough glitter, faux-fur, and hydration packs to survive a lunar colony. The packing itself took two full days and devolved, more than once, into arguments about priorities that felt, in retrospect, like a dress rehearsal for whatever the desert was about to demand of them. Roxy insisted on bringing an entire garment bag of costume pieces she'd been collecting for years, each one with its own small story she'd tell if you asked, and sometimes even if you didn't. Julian insisted on a portable speaker roughly the size and weight of a car battery, on the grounds that "the desert deserves good bass." Mia insisted on sunscreen in quantities that suggested she didn't trust the sun's intentions at all, and turned out, within the first six hours of the trip, to have been entirely correct.

"We are absolutely not bringing all of this," Wratchet said, standing over a pile of items that had, somehow, tripled in size since that morning.

"We are absolutely bringing all of this," Roxy corrected, folding a sequined jacket with the precision of someone packing for a much more formal occasion. "You don't understand the desert yet. You will."

"I feel like that's a threat."

"It's a promise."

As they roared away from the campus early on a Thursday morning, the sky still doing its slow gray-to-gold transition, the city skyline faded into a hazy memory in the rearview mirror, replaced gradually by strip malls, then gas stations, then nothing at all but the vast, shimmering expanse of highway stretching toward the Nevada wasteland. They rode hard, the music thumping against the

windows courtesy of Julian's car-battery speaker, their spirits buoyed by the prospect of absolute excess and the particular giddiness that comes from four people committing, together, to something none of them could fully picture yet.

Throughout the journey, Wratchet maintained a surprising, almost compulsive correspondence with Professor Thorne, a habit that had started as a joke — a single text sent from a gas station somewhere in the flat middle of the drive, *heading into the field again, professor, this time with worse WiFi* — and had morphed, over the following hours, into a strange, intellectual partnership neither of them had signed up for but both of them seemed to be enjoying. What had started as a student-teacher relationship had become something closer to a correspondence between two people who'd found, unexpectedly, that they spoke the same language about the theater of human behavior, even if one of them had tenure and the other had a crooked skull patch.

While Julian and Mia flirted over the map, bickering good-naturedly about the fastest route to a gas station that Mia swore existed and Julian was increasingly convinced was a mirage born of desperation, and Roxy plotted the strategic placement of their camp with the same tactical precision she'd once used to negotiate a shot of mezcal, Wratchet was texting Thorne, refining his theories on social performance in real-time from the passenger seat, phone propped against the dashboard vent.

"Current state: transitioning from 'Student' to 'Desert Nomad'," Wratchet had typed, staring at the horizon where the highway shimmered with heat that hadn't technically arrived yet but was clearly rehearsing.

Thorne's replies were clipped but intrigued, arriving in the particular tone of a man who enjoyed being asked interesting questions far more than he enjoyed grading papers about them. *"Ensure you document the collapse of the ego, Wratchet. Or at least the collapse of your social inhibitions. Adios to the tech world; the desert awaits."*

"Any advice for a first-timer?" Wratchet had typed back, somewhere around the two-hundred-mile mark, as the landscape outside began its slow transformation from green to a scoured, sun-bleached brown.

"Bring more water than you think you need," Thorne wrote, *"and less certainty about who you are than you think you can spare. Both will be tested. Only one of them can be replenished at a gas station."*

Wratchet read the text twice, then read it aloud to the car, and even Julian — who treated most received wisdom with the reflexive suspicion of a man who'd been burned by inspirational quotes before — went quiet for a moment before saying, "Your professor is annoyingly good at that."

"He's had a lot of practice being annoyingly good at things," Wratchet said. "It's kind of his whole deal."

Mia, from the back seat, had turned the phrase over with the particular delight of someone collecting material. "Less certainty about who you are than you can spare. I'm putting that on a shirt."

"You're putting everything on a shirt."

"That's the dream, Julian. That's always been the dream."

The "adios tech" moment, when it finally arrived, came with a sudden, collective snap that none of them were quite prepared for despite having discussed it, joked about it, and in Mia's case, planned an entire section of the binder around it. As the first shimmering spires of Black Rock City appeared on the horizon — impossible geometric shapes rising out of a landscape so flat and so white it looked, from a distance, like the surface of the moon had been repossessed and rezoned — the signal began to flicker and die on all four of their phones at once, as though the desert itself had reached out and simply turned a dial.

They watched their bars vanish one by one, a small, absurd ritual none of them had anticipated feeling anything about. Roxy held her phone up like a torch losing its flame, narrating the countdown with mock solemnity — "four bars, three bars, two bars, this is it, everyone, say your goodbyes" — until the screen simply read *No Service* and stayed that way, flat and final and strangely peaceful. The digital tether to the academic world — the grades, the emails, the constant curation of the self that had occupied so much of Wratchet's semester — was severed cleanly, all at once, with none of the drama he'd half-expected and all of the relief he hadn't.

There was a visceral, electric thrill in the silence that followed, a silence that wasn't really silence at all — the SUV's engine, the wind through the cracked windows, Julian's speaker still faithfully producing bass — but felt like it, in the specific way that the absence of a familiar hum can feel louder than the hum itself. For the first time in his life, Wratchet wasn't a student or a wannabe; he was just a body moving through a landscape of dust and light, unreachable, unsummoned, un-graded, at least for the next several days.

"Feels weird," Julian admitted, glancing at his own dead phone before tossing it into the glove compartment with a theatrical flourish, as though closing a coffin. "Like I forgot to bring a limb."

"You'll grow a new one out here," Roxy said. "Everybody does. It's just made of dust and bad decisions instead of bone."

"That's disgusting and also extremely accurate."

Mia had already pulled out an actual paper map — laminated, of course, tabbed, of course — and was tracing their route into the temporary city with a highlighter, humming something to herself that might have been a song or might have been the beginning of a plan neither Julian nor anyone else in the car was quite ready for. "Welcome to the desert," she said, without looking up. "Try to keep your ego somewhere I can find it later. We're going to need it on the drive home."

Chapter Eight: Black Rock City

As they navigated the chaotic geometry of the festival — a grid of streets named after concepts rather than presidents, a skyline built entirely out of temporary structures that would, in a matter of days, not exist at all — the air grew thick with the scent of cedarwood and expensive incense, underlaid with the more honest smells of dust, sunscreen, and generator exhaust. The playa stretched out in every direction, a vast alkaline flat so pale and so featureless that distances became impossible to judge, so that a sculpture that looked ten minutes away might take forty, and a stranger waving from what seemed like the next camp over might, once you reached them, turn out to have walked half a mile just to say hello.

They wandered through the crowd for their first full day with the specific, wide-eyed disorientation of newcomers, their dreams of desert adventure and hedonistic excess manifesting not as a single grand event but as a series of blurred, euphoric encounters, small and enormous by turns. A woman on stilts painted entirely gold offered them frozen grapes from a cooler she'd hauled across half the city for no reason anyone could explain except that she'd wanted to. A man playing a cello made from what appeared to be a repurposed oil drum performed, unbothered, to an audience of exactly nobody until Mia stopped to listen, at which point a small crowd materialized within minutes, as though her attention were a kind of magnet. Julian got into an extended, deeply serious debate with a stranger about the ethics of a communal kitchen's dish-washing rotation, and somehow emerged from it with both a new friend and an invitation to a pancake breakfast the following morning that none of them would end up making.

"The 'symmetry of the hunt' was no longer a paragraph in an essay," Wratchet found himself thinking, more than once, as the day wore on; it was the way Roxy looked in the flickering light of a nearby fire-sculpture, her face lit orange and moving, unselfconscious in a way he hadn't seen from her even in the hallway of the Rusty Spoke, and the way Mia laughed while throwing neon powder into the wind, catching most of it in her own hair and declaring it an improvement.

Wratchet felt the leather of his vest rubbing against his skin as the sun climbed, but it no longer felt like a costume. In the middle of the neon madness, surrounded by people wearing nothing but

strategically placed jewelry and sheer audacity, his crooked patch felt like a badge of authenticity rather than an embarrassment. He looked at Roxy, who was currently negotiating a trade of a handmade necklace for a shot of mezcal with a stranger who had, apparently, brought an entire suitcase of mezcal for exactly this purpose, and realized that this was the true "Apex Alpha" move, if such a thing existed at all: the ability to exist completely unmasked in a place where everyone else was pretending to be something else, or, more precisely, where everyone had agreed, collectively and without much discussion, to stop pretending and just be whatever they actually were, dust and glitter and all.

Julian and Mia were already deep in the rhythm of the desert by the second night, their laughter blending into the thumping bass of a distant sound system that none of them could see the source of but all of them could feel through the ground. They moved together as a single, fluid unit, the strategic campaign of dating — the calculated texts, the performed casualness — finally replaced by a raw, uncalculated attraction that neither of them seemed to feel any need to analyze or narrate, a rare thing for either of them. Wratchet watched them and thought of Thorne, wondering, not for the first time, if the professor ever dreamed of this kind of collapse — the moment where theory fails because the experience is too overwhelming to be written down, where the essay you'd write about it would always, necessarily, be a smaller and paler thing than the actual night.

They spent the middle days of the burn in the particular rhythm that the city seemed to teach everyone eventually: sleeping through the worst of the heat, emerging in the late afternoon as the light softened and the dust settled, wandering without destination until something — a sound, a smell, a stranger's invitation — redirected them somewhere new. Roxy taught Wratchet how to read the different flavors of the dust storms that would occasionally roll through without warning, turning the whole world the color of an old photograph for ten or twenty minutes before clearing as suddenly as they'd arrived. Mia sketched constantly, filling page after page of a battered notebook with faces and structures and, on one memorable evening, a fairly accurate caricature of Julian mid-argument about dish-washing ethics, which he insisted on having framed the moment they got home.

As the sun dipped below the horizon on their third night, painting the Nevada sky in bruised purples and burning oranges in a display that made even Julian, who had opinions about everything, go quiet for a full minute, the group drifted toward a massive, glowing dome near the edge of the city that promised a night of unrestrained liberation, the kind of open, adult gathering that existed at the edges of the festival's more public spaces, advertised by word of mouth and a soft, pulsing light visible from half a mile away. The promise of it — the grand, communal merging of bodies and spirits that the space was known for — felt, as they approached, less like a sexual goal and more like a spiritual requirement, a natural extension of everything the week had

already been teaching them about shedding the armor they'd all arrived wearing, whether that armor was leather, or sequins, or a carefully maintained air of ironic detachment.

Wratchet took a deep breath of the alkaline dust and smiled. He was no longer analyzing the erotic economy the way he had at the Rusty Spoke, cataloging and theorizing from a careful distance; he was finally, finally, a part of it, standing inside the theory instead of narrating it from the doorway.

The party shifted into a surreal blur of sensory overload once they were inside, the dome's interior lit in shifting colors that seemed to breathe in time with the music, a low, immersive pulse that felt less like a beat and more like a second heartbeat borrowed for the evening. He found himself dancing among a loose, shifting crowd of people whose names he never learned and didn't need to, their skin slick with sweat and glitter, moving to a rhythm that seemed to pulse from the earth itself rather than from any speaker he could locate. In the dim, flickering light, the boundaries between people softened in a way that felt less like chaos and more like a kind of collective exhale, a room-sized agreement to stop performing for one night. The "sword in the seed" rhetoric he'd built an entire essay around felt laughably small compared to the actual, expansive warmth of human connection when it's stripped of its social armor and simply allowed to exist in a room full of people who'd all made the same quiet decision to be honest for a few hours.

He saw Roxy across the space at one point, her eyes reflecting the shifting light, and felt a surge of affection that had nothing to do with conquest and everything to do with recognition — the specific, grounding feeling of seeing someone you know inside a room full of strangers and feeling, instantly, less alone. They found each other again before the night was through, and what passed between them there was less a scene to narrate than a continuation of the hallway conversation from weeks ago, carried out now in a different language, one made of proximity and trust rather than words, in a space where that kind of honesty was not just permitted but assumed.

Later, as they lay exhausted on a pile of faux-fur rugs under a canopy of a billion stars — more stars than any of them, city kids all, had ever actually seen at once, the Milky Way a visible smear across the whole black dome of the sky — the silence of the desert returned in full. The frantic energy of the festival continued somewhere in the distance, a humming hive of excess audible but no longer urgent, but in their small circle, there was a profound, quiet peace. Wratchet looked at his friends — his strange, eclectic tribe, assembled out of a basement and a dive bar and a road trip none of them had fully planned — and realized that the most successful "hunt," if you insisted on keeping the word, was the one that ended in a place where you no longer felt the need to hunt for anything at all. He closed his eyes, the smell of sage and old leather clinging to him, and finally fell asleep, more completely than he had in months.

Chapter Nine: The Ocean

He woke the next morning to the sound of Julian laughing, a full-bodied, undignified laugh that carried across the camp and pulled Wratchet up out of sleep before his body had fully agreed to the plan. They were surrounded by the wreckage of their camp — overturned coolers, stray sequins ground permanently into the dust, a singular, lonely boot that didn't belong to any of them and would remain, as far as any of them ever discovered, a permanent mystery of the desert. Mia was already up, painting a mural of a flaming heart on the side of their SUV's dusty flank with a level of intensity that only a desert-induced epiphany could provide, using, as far as Wratchet could tell, nothing but leftover face paint and sheer conviction.

"I think we've reached the peak," Julian said, tossing a piece of fruit to Wratchet, who caught it more by luck than reflex. "The ego is officially collapsed. We are now just four very tired people in a very large sandbox."

Wratchet laughed, feeling the grit of the desert in his hair and the lingering warmth of the previous night in his chest, a warmth that had nothing to do with the temperature, which was already climbing toward uncomfortable. He reached for his bag, intending to check his notes — an old habit, the reflex of a man who'd spent a semester turning every experience into potential material — but stopped himself halfway through unzipping it. He didn't need the laptop or the sociological framework to understand this moment. He looked at his leather vest, now stained with dust and neon paint in a pattern no craft store could have replicated, and decided it was the most beautiful thing he had ever owned. He wasn't a biker, a student, or an Alpha; he was just Wratchet, and for the first time in his life, that was more than enough.

As they began the slow, methodical process of packing up their lives — a process that took considerably longer than setting up had, everyone moving with the specific sluggishness of people whose bodies had spent a week negotiating a new relationship with sleep — Roxy approached him with a bandana tied over her hair and dust caked into the creases of her palms in a way that would take three showers to fully address. She was wearing a sheer robe over yesterday's clothes and a look of genuine curiosity that made her seem, for a moment, younger than she'd looked at any

point at the Rusty Spoke.

"So, the 'seed conqueror,'" she said, her voice a playful rasp, sun-scoured and a little hoarse from a week of shouting over music and wind alike. "Did he survive the desert, or did the desert swallow him whole?"

"He died somewhere between the sound system and the faux-fur rugs," Wratchet replied, smiling as he helped her pack a suitcase of shimmering fabrics that had multiplied, somehow, over the course of the week rather than diminished, despite nobody being able to account for where the new pieces had come from. "I think the new version is more sustainable. Less aggressive, more... confused."

"I like the confused version better," she whispered, leaning in to kiss his cheek, dust and all. "It's a lot easier to love a man who doesn't think he's the apex of a food chain."

The word **love**, dropped so casually into the middle of a sentence about a food chain, landed in Wratchet's chest with a weight that took him a moment to recognize, and he found himself smiling at the suitcase rather than at her, giving himself a second to arrange his face into something less transparent before he turned around.

The drive back to civilization was quieter than the trip out, the SUV's windows down, dust still sifting out of the upholstery for the first hundred miles no matter how many times they shook out the seats. The high of the festival had faded into a comfortable, shared exhaustion, the kind that doesn't need filling with conversation. They spoke in fragments, their conversation weaving through memories of the week — the fire-sculptures, the strange strangers, the way the stars seemed to dip low enough to touch, the lonely boot that had achieved, by unanimous vote somewhere around hour three of the drive, the status of camp mascot. Wratchet spent long stretches of the journey staring out the window, watching the grey asphalt reclaim the landscape from the gold of the desert, feeling something in himself reclaiming territory too, though he couldn't yet have said what.

The drive ended not at the campus dorms, but at the edge of the Pacific — Mia's suggestion, delivered without much explanation beyond "we're not ready to be indoors people yet" — where the salt air acted as a solvent for the last remnants of the desert's dust, a secluded cove where the tide was aggressively reclaiming the shore, gulls wheeling overhead with the specific indignation of birds who had not been consulted about the visitors. It was a silent agreement, arrived at without anyone quite proposing it out loud, a collective need to wash away the neon sequins and the simulated personas of the burn before any of them could face a lecture hall or a shift at the club or a gallery critique again. They stripped down to their skin on the empty beach, shedding the leather,

the sheer robes, and the intellectual armor of the past few weeks in one motion, standing naked and shivering in the bracing Atlantic breeze, four people who had, over the course of a week, run out of reasons to be embarrassed in front of each other.

One by one, they waded into the frigid turquoise water, hissing and swearing and laughing in roughly equal measure. It wasn't a casual dip; it was, from the first step, something closer to a baptism of the self, an unspoken ceremony none of them would have used that word for out loud but all of them seemed to understand instinctively. Wratchet felt the sudden, shocking bite of the ocean hit his chest, a cold so absolute it felt like a physical blow, driving the breath out of him in a single involuntary gasp. He dove deep anyway, pushing his body beneath the crashing surf until the roar of the world vanished entirely, replaced by the rhythmic thrum of the deep, a silence more total than even the desert had offered. When he broke the surface, gasping and exhilarated, salt stinging in his eyes, he saw Roxy and Julian and Mia floating in a loose circle a few yards off, their faces scrubbed clean by the brine, looking at each other with a raw, uncomplicated clarity that none of them had quite managed to achieve back at the desert's dome, where the light had been kind and the music had done some of the emotional work for them. Here, in cold water under a flat gray sky, there was nothing left to do the work but honesty.

They swam toward one another, not as a hunt, but as a homecoming. Wratchet reached Roxy first, their bodies colliding in the churning foam with none of the choreography either of them had once believed romance required. There was no "Apex Alpha" here, no strategic currency of desire, no leather bikini or skull patch doing the talking — just the desperate, warm grip of two people clinging to each other in a vast, indifferent sea that neither of them could pretend to have any power over. They held each other beneath the spray, baptizing themselves into a new partnership, one based not on the roles they played for the world, but on the quiet, shivering truth of who they were when everything else was stripped away, literally and otherwise.

As they dragged themselves back onto the sand, dripping and exhausted, wrapping themselves in the one dry towel Mia had had the foresight to keep sealed in a plastic bag, the silence was heavy and sweet, broken only by the ocean's own indifferent rhythm and the distant, echoing call of a gull that seemed, to Wratchet's salt-addled brain, to be laughing at all of them. They lay in a heap of tangled limbs and salt-crusted skin, the same way they had on the faux-fur rugs in Nevada, but this time it felt permanent in a way the desert night hadn't quite managed, as though the cold water had rinsed something loose in each of them that had been holding on too tight. The ocean had rinsed the costumes from their pores in a way the dust never fully could. Wratchet looked at his leather vest, lying like a dead animal on the dunes a few feet away, dust and salt spray both claiming it now, and realized he didn't need to put it back on to feel strong. The strength, he understood now, with a clarity that felt earned rather than theorized, was in the shivering; the

power was in the vulnerability.

"I think," Julian said, his voice raspy and small against the sound of the tide, sand sticking to one side of his face where he'd collapsed without checking first, "that we are officially ruined for normal society. How are we supposed to go back to seminars and spreadsheets after this?"

"We don't," Mia replied, staring up at the pale blue sky with a look of serene defiance, one hand absently tracing a shape in the wet sand beside her that might have been a heart or might have been nothing at all. "Or, we do, but we do it as spies. We pretend to be the versions of ourselves that the world expects, while secretly keeping this... whatever this is... in our pockets."

Wratchet smiled, closing his eyes against the thin gray light. He thought about the essay, the "titties" intro, and Professor Thorne's rare smile. He imagined the academic world as just another costume party, a series of roles and rubrics that could be navigated with a bit of wit and a lot of honesty, no more or less real than the leather he'd worn to a dive bar or the sequins Roxy wore on a stage. He felt a strange, humming connection to the people around him, a sense of kinship that transcended their social categories — the student, the dancer, the artist, the wingman. They weren't just students or dancers or artists anymore; they were a small, salt-stained tribe of survivors, bound together now by something neither the desert nor the ocean could take back from them.

He reached out and took Roxy's hand, her skin rough and warm against his despite the cold that still clung to both of them. The "symmetry of the hunt" had finally reached its conclusion, he thought: the chase was over, and the prize was simply the privilege of being known. As the sun began to dip, casting long, golden shadows across the beach, Wratchet didn't think about the seed, the sword, or the alpha. He just thought about the cold water and the warmth of the person beside him, and for the first time in his life, the silence was enough.

Chapter Ten: Vegas and the Question

The ocean had been a cleansing ritual, but the desert was where the gambling happened, and the gambling, it turned out, wasn't finished with them yet. As they piled back into the SUV — considerably more waterlogged and considerably lighter in spirit than when they'd arrived at the cove — the salt still itching in their hair, Wratchet didn't look back at the coast. He looked forward, toward the neon fever dream of Las Vegas, a destination that had emerged from the group's collective, half-serious speculation over the last hour of the drive and solidified, somewhere around a gas station with a slot machine bolted to the counter, into an actual plan. It wasn't about the casinos or the strip, though, not really; it was about the sheer, unapologetic audacity of a city built entirely on a bet, on the idea that if you dressed a thing up in enough lights, people would believe in it long enough to hand over their money and, occasionally, their hearts.

If they could survive the ego-death of the Black Rock Desert and the freezing shock of the Atlantic, they figured, with the specific overconfidence that follows any successful ordeal, they could navigate the gilded chaos of Nevada with a level of insight that most tourists lacked. Mia had already produced a fresh page in her notebook — the binder, apparently, had limits, but the notebook did not — and was sketching out a rough itinerary that involved considerably less structure than the Burning Man packing list and considerably more question marks.

They drove toward the city as a collective, a four-person pact signed in glitter and brine, windows down, the radio catching AM stations that faded in and out with the terrain. The plan was vague but visceral: they weren't looking for traditional success, but for a way to live that didn't involve pretending, a thread that had run through the whole trip and seemed, now, impossible to set back down. For Wratchet and Roxy, Vegas represented the ultimate "erotic economy" expanded to an urban scale — an entire city built on performance and desire and the careful management of illusion, except here the stakes were dollars instead of dust, and the costumes cost considerably more to maintain.

They talked about opening something — a lounge, a gallery, a sanctuary for the "confused" and the "unmasked," the phrase Mia coined somewhere around mile marker two hundred and

refused to let go of for the rest of the drive — where the currency was honesty and the dress code was whatever made you feel like a god, whether that was sequins or leather or, in Julian's stated preference, "something with better tailoring than anything currently in this car." They weren't heading for the riches of the high-rollers, they agreed, somewhere between a rest stop and a long stretch of nothing, but for the richness of a life shared on their own eccentric terms, a phrase that sounded, even to the people saying it, both wildly naive and completely worth trying anyway.

Julian and Mia were already sketching out the logistics of a communal living arrangement in the back seat, debating whether a loft in the Arts District or a converted warehouse would better suit their shared obsession with curated chaos, an argument that involved increasingly specific hypothetical square footage and, at one point, a genuine disagreement about whether a communal kitchen needed one dishwasher or two. The conversation in the car shifted from the theoretical to the practical, though the "practical" involved how many sequins they could realistically fit into a single suitcase and whether a warehouse could legally house both a gallery and Mia's collection of thrifted mannequins, a question nobody in the car could actually answer but everyone agreed was important. There was a warmth in the vehicle that had nothing to do with the heater, which was, if anything, working overtime against the desert heat pouring in through the open windows; it was the humming energy of four people who had stripped away their social armor, quite literally in one case, and discovered they actually liked what was underneath.

As the skyline of Vegas finally shimmered into view — a jagged, neon heartbeat against the dark desert floor, visible from an absurd distance the way all things in that flat landscape seemed to be, promising itself for forty-five minutes before it actually arrived — Wratchet felt a strange sense of closure. He thought of his essay, the "seed conqueror" and the "Apex Alpha," and realized those versions of himself were now just ghosts, characters in a paper he'd write about later rather than roles he needed to keep auditioning for. He didn't need to conquer a city; he just wanted to inhabit it with the people he loved. He looked at Roxy, who was already plotting their first strategic move into the city's underground with the same intent focus she'd once used to size up a room at the Rusty Spoke, and felt a surge of genuine, uncalculated joy.

They checked into a hotel just off the strip — not the flashiest one Mia's notebook had circled, but the one with the best view of the fountains, a compromise that satisfied nobody's specific fantasy but everyone's general mood — and spent their first evening doing exactly what four exhausted, sun-and-salt-cured travelers do in a city built for excess: eating an enormous, mediocre buffet with the reverence of pilgrims, watching the fountain show from a bench outside with the specific, wordless satisfaction of people who had recently remembered how to appreciate simple things, and falling asleep absurdly early for a city that never did.

"I want your babies," Roxy announced the following night, her voice cutting through the neon hum of the Vegas strip as they walked back from dinner, hand in hand, the lights turning her face alternately gold and blue and green in a way that felt, to Wratchet, less like a special effect and more like the city trying to say something it didn't have better words for. She hadn't said it with the tentativeness of a proposal or the desperation of a void to be filled; she said it with the same decisive, tactical precision she used to negotiate a shot of mezcal at a bar three states and a lifetime away. She was leaning against the velvet upholstery of their first real hotel room later that night, her eyes scanning Wratchet not as a project or a novelty, but as a biological possibility, the way you'd look at a house you'd only meant to tour and had, somewhere in the walkthrough, started furnishing in your head.

Wratchet froze, his mind instinctively leaping back to the "seed conqueror" rhetoric of his sociology paper, an old reflex firing before he could stop it. For a split second, the old ghost of the Apex Alpha whispered that this was the ultimate victory — the biological surrender of the female to the superior male, a line he could practically hear himself typing at two in the morning in a basement that felt, now, like it belonged to a different person entirely. But as he looked at Roxy, really looked at her, at the steadiness in her expression and the complete absence of anything like surrender in it, he realized that for her, this wasn't a surrender at all. It was a selection. She wasn't submitting to a conqueror; she was choosing a partner whose specific brand of intellectual absurdity matched her own, a partner she'd apparently decided, somewhere between a dive bar and a dome full of strangers and an ocean that had nearly taken his breath away, was worth building something permanent with.

The silence that followed wasn't awkward; it was heavy with the weight of a new, terrifyingly real trajectory, the kind of silence that a person only gets to sit inside a handful of times in a life. The theoretical "symmetry of the hunt" had finally collapsed into a very practical, very human desire. Wratchet felt a surge of panic, followed immediately by a profound sense of warmth that seemed to displace the panic almost entirely, the way a wave displaces the sand it moves through. The idea of a child — a tiny, chaotic blend of his academic neuroses and Roxy's glittering audacity — felt less like a biological imperative and more like the most daring adventure they had ever plotted, more ambitious than the desert, more permanent than the ocean, and considerably less likely to be washed off in a single cold swim.

Julian and Mia were already downstairs, likely debating the merits of a shared mortgage versus a nomadic lifestyle with the same binder-level intensity they'd brought to packing for the desert, but in the quiet of the room, Wratchet realized that his life had just shifted axes in a way that had nothing to do with a hallway or a hotel or a dome full of strangers. He wasn't playing a role anymore. He wasn't the student, the biker, or the philosopher. He was a man being asked to help

build a future, and the sheer honesty of the request stripped him of every remaining defense, the last few pieces of armor he hadn't even realized he was still wearing.

"You realize they'll probably be born with a sociology degree and a penchant for leather," Wratchet whispered, a small, genuine smile breaking across his face, the kind of smile that didn't require any performance at all.

Roxy laughed, a sound that felt like the only honest thing in the neon-soaked city of Las Vegas, echoing slightly off the hotel room's tasteful, forgettable art. "Exactly. They'll be the most intellectually honest toddlers in the nursery."

They spent the next hour not talking about the logistics of parenthood, which felt, for once, appropriately premature, but about the beauty of the unplanned — the way the whole summer had unfolded from a sewing machine and a bad essay title into a coastline and a desert and a hotel room with a view of a fountain neither of them had actually watched that night. They discussed the "erotic economy" of a family — the way love evolves from the heat of attraction into the steady, enduring warmth of shared survival, a phrase Wratchet knew, even as he said it, he'd eventually try to write down properly, though he suspected no essay would ever quite capture it the way this conversation had. For Wratchet, the transition was seamless in a way that surprised him more than anything else that summer had. The obsession with the "Apex Alpha" had been a search for a destination, a rank to be achieved and defended; he realized now that the destination wasn't a rank or a status at all, but a person who saw his flaws and decided they were assets, who'd looked at a crooked patch on a badly sewn vest and seen, somehow, exactly the man she wanted.

Later, as they walked through the corridors of the hotel toward the elevator, Wratchet felt a strange sense of lightness, the same lightness he'd first noticed in the diner after the Rusty Spoke, grown now into something sturdier. He looked at the leather vest draped over his arm — retired, mostly, from active duty since the ocean, but not yet ready to be thrown away — and for the first time, he didn't feel the need to wear it to feel like a man. The real strength wasn't in the projection of power, but in the courage to say *yes* to something as unpredictable and permanent as a child. He thought of Professor Thorne and the A he had received for his "honest" paper, and he realized that this moment — this terrifying, exhilarating *yes* — was the only piece of field research that actually mattered, the only finding worth building a life around.

As they rejoined Julian and Mia at a slot machine that Julian was feeding with the specific, doomed optimism of a man who understood the odds perfectly and had chosen to ignore them anyway, the group was buzzing with the electric energy of the city, but Wratchet and Roxy shared a secret, silent language that neither Julian's jokes nor Mia's questions could quite crack that night, though both of them clearly noticed something had shifted and clearly intended to interrogate it

over breakfast. They were no longer just drifting through a landscape of excess; they had found a center, a fixed point that the rest of the trip's chaos could orbit around instead of the other way around. The neon lights of Vegas continued to flicker and scream, promising a thousand different versions of a successful life, each one lit up and beckoning and, on inspection, hollow in exactly the way Wratchet had once accused fleece hoodies of being. But Wratchet didn't need the noise anymore. He had the symmetry of a partner, the loyalty of friends who'd waded into a freezing ocean beside him without asking why, and the sudden, shimmering possibility of a legacy that had nothing to do with conquest and everything to do with love.

Somewhere back on campus, in an office that smelled permanently of chalk and old coffee, Professor Thorne would eventually receive one more text from a number he'd started, against his better professional judgment, to actually look forward to hearing from. It would read, simply: *Field research update: findings suggest the hypothesis was backwards the whole time. Recommend full rewrite. Also, I might be a father soon. No rush on the grade for that one.*

Thorne, reading it at his desk between stacks of ungraded essays, would allow himself a small, private smile — the same rare one he'd shown the lecture hall weeks before — and would type back, eventually, four words that Wratchet would keep, like the motel notepad note before it, folded somewhere he could find them again: *Best field work yet.*

Epilogue: Field Notes

Six months later, Wratchet sat at the same basement workbench, though the sewing machine had finally been retired for good, donated to a costume shop downtown that had been thrilled to take it off his hands. In its place sat a laptop, considerably more organized than the one that had produced "Why My Titties: A Male's Perspective on Useless Nipples," open to a document titled, with far less bravado and far more confidence, *The Symmetry of the Hunt: A Field Study in Performed Masculinity.* It was, technically, his senior thesis. It was also, unofficially, the closest thing he'd ever written to a love letter, though he suspected Thorne — who had agreed, with an enthusiasm that still occasionally surprised Wratchet, to chair the committee — would strike that description from any formal defense.

The leather vest hung on a hook by the basement stairs now, retired from active duty but present, the way a uniform stays present in a closet long after the war it was worn for has ended. The crooked patch had faded slightly, sun-bleached from its week in the desert and its afternoon on the beach, and Wratchet had never once considered fixing it. Some asymmetries, he'd come to believe, were worth keeping exactly as they'd happened.

Roxy had moved into the apartment above the basement two months prior, a logistical decision disguised, both of them agreed, as a romantic one, since the building's other units had genuinely terrible water pressure and this one, mercifully, did not. She'd finished her associate's degree that spring and was three classes into a bachelor's in early childhood education, a pivot that had surprised exactly no one who had watched her handle a room full of drunk strangers at the Rusty Spoke with the patient, unshakeable authority of someone who had clearly been managing chaos professionally for years, in one form or another, long before either of them met.

Julian and Mia had, true to their word, found a warehouse in the Arts District — smaller than the one in their original fantasy, considerably more affordable, and already half-converted into the kind of space that made visitors immediately ask if they could move in too. Mia's mannequins, thrifted and reimagined into something between sculpture and furniture, occupied one whole corner. Julian had, against all logistical odds and his uncle's mild objection, kept the SUV, its

dented flank still bearing the faded outline of Mia's flaming heart mural underneath a fresh coat of paint neither of them had quite managed to fully cover it with.

Thorne, for his part, had become something between a mentor and a co-conspirator, the professional distance of their original relationship worn down over a semester of texts and office hours and, eventually, one uncomfortable but ultimately generous conversation about the limits of what a professor could and couldn't say to a student who'd started treating him like family. He still signed his texts with the same clipped, dry economy he brought to everything, but he had, on more than one occasion, allowed himself an exclamation point, which Wratchet privately regarded as one of the great honors of his undergraduate career.

The baby wasn't due for another four months, a fact that still arrived in Wratchet's chest some mornings with the same startled, electric weight it had carried in that Vegas hotel room, though it had settled, mostly, into something steadier — not smaller, exactly, but load-bearing now instead of overwhelming, the way a beam settles into a house once it's actually holding something up. Roxy had taken to leaving her hand on her stomach during long conversations without seeming to notice she was doing it, a gesture Wratchet had started cataloging the way he'd once cataloged bar-room body language, except this time he wasn't writing anything down. This time he was just watching, and being grateful, and trying, mostly successfully, not to overthink it.

He'd added a final section to the thesis just that week, one he suspected Thorne would want him to cut for being "too personal for a defense committee," though he intended to fight for it anyway, the same way he'd fought to keep the word "titties" in an essay that had, against every reasonable expectation, turned out fine.

The Apex Alpha does not exist, he'd written. *Not as a fixed biological state, not as a performance that can be perfected, not as a rank to be won and defended. What exists instead is the ongoing, unglamorous choice to be seen — in a hallway that smells like industrial cleaner, in a motel room at three a.m., in a freezing ocean, in a hotel room in a city built on the promise that the right costume can get you anything. The hunt was never the point. The costume was never the point. The point, it turns out, was always just this: finding someone who will watch you fumble your way out of the armor, laugh at the right parts, and stay anyway.*

He read it over once more, decided against a footnote, and hit save.

Upstairs, he could hear Roxy laughing at something on the television, and the sound of it — unguarded, unglamorous, entirely her own — pulled him up out of the basement two steps at a time, the vest and the essay and the whole long field study of that one strange, transformative year left behind him in the quiet dark, exactly where they belonged.