Chapter 10: A New Thread to Follow

It was overwhelming. All of it. I felt like life was changing too fast. When I received that call from Lucien they seemed so excited, so filled with energy. It wasn't what I expected from someone who just got turned down. Lucien wasn't exactly known for taking rejection well.

Still, they said they had a "surprise" for me and that all I had to do was wait and see. So we waited. And waited. And waited…

The fated phone call came late in the evening, just as Laura and I were settling in for the night. My phone buzzed on the coffee table, and when I saw Lucien's name flash across the screen, my stomach dropped. I wasn't sure I was ready to face… whatever this was. Some sort of prank? Lucien was rich enough to buy my house, buy the house of everyone I ever knew. If worse came to worse I just didn't know if I could face their disappointment—or worse, their anger.

"Do you have to answer it?" Laura asked, her voice tinged with concern. She was curled up on the couch, her taur body taking up most of the space, her multiple legs tucked neatly beneath her. Her upper torso leaned back against the cushions, her arms crossed in a way that made her look both relaxed and guarded. She had that look in her eyes, the one that said she was already bracing for the worst. Sometimes I think she worried more than I did.

"I think I should," my right head said, hesitating before picking up the phone."I think I have to," my left head said. My right head tilted toward the screen, my left glancing at Laura for reassurance. "If I ignore them, they'll just keep calling. You know how Lucien is."

Laura sighed but nodded. "Alright. But if they start yelling, just hang up. You don't owe them anything."

I shook my right head. "Lucien doesn't yell… but I'm worried about what they might do instead." I took a deep breath and answered the call. "Hello?"

"Annamaria, darling!" Lucien's voice boomed through the phone, their usual exuberance undiminished. "How are you, my dear? How's life treating you?"

"Uh, fine," I said, caught off guard by their cheerful tone. My left head spoke this time, my voice a little higher-pitched, while my right head stayed silent, my lips pressed together in a nervous line. "Everything's… fine."

"Splendid, splendid!" Lucien said, their many voices overlapping in a cacophony of enthusiasm. "Now, we know we had a bit of a… disagreement, shall we say, about the Port Solei project. But we've been thinking, and we believe we've found a solution that will work for everyone." It was like a chorus of rich pompous business speak, all coming through the phone at once. For Lucien to speak with all their heads, they were riled up about… something.

I paused, unsure how to respond. My right head finally chimed in, my voice lower and more hesitant. “A solution? I mean, I already said I don’t think the position will work I-”

“Yes, yes, a solution!” Lucien said, their excitement palpable. “You see, we have a sister. Twee. Twee Dubois. She runs a little store in one of the mainland’s mutant districts. It’s a small operation, but she’s quite talented. And we think you’d be perfect for it. You were looking to stay on the mainland, were you not?”

“A store?” I repeated, my mind racing. My left head tilted to the side, my brow furrowing as I tried to process what Lucien was saying. “What kind of store?”

“A mutant fashion boutique, of course!” Lucien said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “What else do you think we here at the DuBois family would do? Twee specializes in custom-made clothing for mutants. Bespoke. Made to order. She’s the down to earth, get your hands dirty side of the job. We prefer the more high-concept design focused skills ourselves.”

Lucien then launched into a long tangent about the different sides of the fashion industry, a talk I’ve heard plenty of times before, a rant they tend to go on when they get a little too into their own brand. My eyes glazed over for a bit until Lucien finally got back to the matter at hand. “Anyway, she’s been doing it for years, and she’s quite good at it. But she could use some help. She’s a bit… how do you say… stubborn. Prefers her little holes in the wall rather than an industrial factory. But she’s overworked and is dealing with a bit of a family issue. We think you’d be just the person to provide some relief and an extra few pairs of hands.”

I hesitated, unsure how to respond. My right head glanced at Laura, who was watching me with a raised eyebrow. “What do you think?” I mouthed.

She shrugged only having heard about half of the conversation through Lucien’s booming voices echoing through the tiny phone speakers. “It’s your call.”

I took a deep breath and turned my attention back to the phone. “Alright, Lucien. I’ll check it out. But no promises.” I couldn’t believe I was telling Lucien Dubois “no promises.” What was I crazy?

“Wonderful, wonderful!” Lucien said, their voices rising in a crescendo of delight. “We’ll send you the address. Just… be prepared. Twee is a bit of an odd one. But then again, so am I, and you seem to tolerate me just fine.”

That was a bit of unexpected self awareness from the biggest personality in mutant fashion. Then again, if Lucien thinks Twee is weird, what on earth could she be? I quite literally struggled to think of either a mutation or personality more outlandish than Luciens. The sheer extreme possibility of it all made me nervously laugh, my left head chuckling while my right head stayed tense, my lips pressed into a thin line. “Alright, Lucien. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Excellent! We’ll let Twee know to expect you. Ta-ta for now, darling!”

The call ended as abruptly as it had begun, leaving me staring at my phone in stunned silence.

“Well?” Laura asked, her tone cautious.

“They want me to check out a store run by their sister,” I said, still processing the conversation. My right head spoke this time, my voice low and thoughtful. “A mutant fashion boutique. They think it might be a good fit for me.”

Laura raised an eyebrow. “And what do you think?” She said, specifically forcing me to grapple with this, as if it was my decision. I hated that. It would have been so much easier if I just treated this like something I had to do. I LIKED going with the flow. I didn’t like the prospect of possibly having to choose between my career and my girlfriend AGAIN.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, my left head chiming in now, my voice tinged with uncertainty and exhaustion. “But I guess it’s worth a look. Right?”

Laura nodded, though her expression was skeptical. “Alright. But I don’t want them running you ragged. You already do so much for this company, and staying on the mainland won’t matter much if I never get to see you because you are always working on some exotic project.”

I laughed. I always laugh when I'm nervous. It was the best I could do to deal. Lucien’s phone call had left me on edge. They’d been unusually cryptic, even for them. “We think we can work something out,” they’d said. “Give this a chance.” I wasn’t sure what “this” was. How bizarre was this store they talked about? Or was it just because Lucien looked at anything normal as if it was bizarre?

Communicating with Lucien was the hardest part of this job… and it wasn’t because of their mutation.

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The next day Laura and I set out for the address that Lucien gave us, and to be honest we couldn’t believe our eyes. We expected a spectacle, some sort of dazzling boutique with flashing lights welcoming in the highest breed of clientele. Instead we were staring at a store that looked more like a closet than a business.

The name of the shop was painted in delicate, curling letters on the window: *Threaded Oddities.* It sounded like the title of a weird indie movie, not a fashion boutique. But then again, Lucien had warned me that their sister was… eccentric. And considering Lucien’s entire existence was a walking, talking spectacle of eccentricity, I wasn’t sure what to expect.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Laura asked, her voice tinged with doubt.

“Lucien gave me the address,” I said, double-checking my phone. My right head spoke this time, my voice steady, while my left head glanced around. “This is it. Threaded Oddities. Owned and operated by Twee DuBois, Lucien’s sister.”

Laura sighed. “Alright. Let’s go in.”:

The bell above the door jingled as we stepped inside. The store was even smaller on the inside than it looked on the outside… if that was even possible. There were boxes of fabric strewn about and it was hard for us to get our feet on the floor without knocking something over.

“Well,” Laura said, her multiple legs shifting nervously in her heels. “This certainly is… cozy.” ‘Cozy’ was one word for it. The store was a tiny square, barely wider than Laura’s taur body. It wasn’t even certain that we could both fit in. She found herself pressed up against the front window uncomfortably.

But oh, what a front window it was! From the outside it looked like it was just filled with junk but from the inside you could see it was crammed with mannequins wearing outfits that defied any conventional understanding of fashion. One mannequin had six arms, each sleeve a different pattern. Another was shaped like a centaur, with a flowing dress that draped elegantly over its equine half. A third looked like it belonged to a snake mutant, with a sleek, form-fitting bodysuit that split at the bottom. It was like a mutant fashion fever dream. The craftsmanship was undeniable, but the display, well it looked a bit more like storage than anything meant to attract customers.

The store had a single desk acting as a counter, piled high with fabric swatches and sketchbooks. The walls were lined with racks of clothing, each piece more bizarre and beautiful than the last. There were dresses with asymmetrical hemlines, suits with extra sleeves, and tops with strategically placed cutouts for wings, tails, and other mutant features. It was like walking into a mutant fashion wonderland compressed into a single room.

“Hello?” I called out, my voice a dry echo in the cramped space.

There was a rustling sound from the back of the store, followed by a series of rapid, clicking footsteps. A moment later, a figure emerged from behind a curtain. Or rather, two figures. One was a woman with a raptor-like body—digitigrade legs ending in sharp claws, two arms with three-fingered hands, a single large eye, one singular large breast that took up her entire chest, and a tail that swished nervously behind her. The other was a teenage girl, conjoined to the woman’s back. She had a sullen expression, her arms crossed over her chest, and her eyes glued to a phone.

“Ah, oh yes oh yes excuse me, you must be Annamaria, yes, Annamaria” the woman said, her voice high-pitched and twitchy. “Lucien told me you’d be coming. Didn’t expect you so soon.

Good to have you. Yes. Good. I'm Twee. And this is my daughter, Skylar. Say hello Skylar. Yes. Say hello." Twee motioned to the teenager attached to the tip of her tail.

Skylar didn't look up from her phone. "Hey," she muttered, her tone dripping with teenage angst.

"Hi," I said, unsure how to respond. My left head spoke this time, my voice soft and hesitant, while my right head stayed silent, my eyes darting around the store. "Uhm, th-this is my girlfriend, Laura."

Laura gave a small and meek wave. "Nice to meet you."

Twee's large eye blinked rapidly, her gaze darting between me and Laura. "Yes, yes, lovely to meet you both," she said, knocking over a mountain of boxes as she tromped through the cramped space of the store. "Lucien said you might be interested in working here. Yes. A job, a remote job. Is that right? Someone to help? Yes?"

"Uh, maybe," I said, still trying to process everything. My right head chimed in now, my voice low and thoughtful. "Lucien mentioned you could use some… uh… assistance?"

"Oh, yes, definitely," Twee said, her hands fluttering nervously. "We're a small operation, very small, but we've been getting more orders lately. Lucien can manufacture great and giant lined of fashion but clothing needs the personal touch. Yes. Personal, for each mutant. Customized. Mutant fashion is becoming quite popular, you know. Very popular. Mutants everywhere, not just in Port Solei. New mutants every day, popping up with more extreme mutations that we have to make clothes for! It's hard to keep up with demand when it's just me and Skylar."

Skylar groaned and crossed her arms tighter over the front of her graphic T-shirt emblazoned with the phrase *Not Interested*. "Mom, I told you, I don't want to work here. I have school."

"Yes, yes, I know," Twee said, craning her neck backward and patting her daughter's arm. "But you're kind of stuck with me dear, what with your mutation conjoining us and all. You could at least try to be helpful."

Skylar rolled her eyes and went back to her phone.

Twee turned back to me, her eye wide and pleading. "So, what do you think? Would you like to see the back? We have more samples there."

"Sure," I said, curious despite myself.

Twee led me to the back of the store, while Laura stayed in the front. The back room was even more cramped, filled with sewing machines, bolts of fabric, and half-finished garments. It was clear that the DuBois family's funding went into the store's supplies and equipment, not the facility itself. But despite the lack of space, the room was bursting with creativity. Everywhere I

looked, there were pieces of mutant fashion in progress—dresses with built-in harnesses for wings, suits with adjustable hems for tails, and tops with hidden zippers for extra limbs.

“This is… amazing,” I said, running my hand over a bolt of shimmering fabric. I really did not expect to see so much creativity crammed into such a dingy little space. My left head spoke this time, my voice filled with awe, while my right head stayed silent, my eyes scanning the room. “You make all of this yourself?”

“Mostly,” Twee said, her voice tinged with pride and excitement. “Skylar helps when she’s not too busy with school. Not much else she can do you know. She’s had to be homeschooled since the mutation, so the store doubles as a bit of a learning facility. Yes. She takes all her lessons here, and then reports them all online to her school, and as she does she usually helps me out with an article of clothing or two. We are good at splitting focus. Yes.”

Twee suddenly blushed red realizing she was practically confessing to child labor, though it was a bit understandable as a family business. “A-and we have a few part-time seamstresses who come in occasionally, of course. Everything in this business is totally legitimate. But it’s mostly just me. Yes. Working the day away on everyone’s personalized fit.”

I picked up a half-finished dress, admiring the intricate stitching. It was made out of a sort of elastic with a peculiar stitch that opened up as it stretched and closed tight afterward. You could fit an extra pair of arms through this, or tuck them inside like a turtle retracting its limbs and no one would be the wiser that there was a hole in the garment. “This is incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Twee beamed. “Thank you. I try to make something for everyone because everyone has something they need. Mutant fashion is about more than just clothes. Yes. It’s about expressing who you are. Embracing your uniqueness. You are a mutant. The clothes should be mutant too. Why limit ourselves to human standards of fashion and beauty. Push the envelope! Make something new! That’s what I say, yes.”

I nodded, feeling a spark of excitement. This was exactly the kind of work I’d always dreamed of doing—creating fashion that celebrated mutants, that made us feel seen and valued. It’s like Twee went into my dreams and plucked out designs that I could only imagine, and then somehow *improved* on them! I felt like I could do great things here. I felt like Twee could teach me so much.

But…

But at the same time, I couldn’t ignore the reality of the situation. The store was tiny, almost unbearably so.

“So, uh, what uhm… what would we be talking about… in terms of money.”

I winced as Twee responded with a number that was low, lower than even I expected. The salary would be a fraction of what I currently make at DuBois Fashion, I wasn't sure if I was ready to give up the stability of my current job. But… It was convenient. It was close to Laura, smack dab in the middle of a mutant district filled with culture. It was a place we could both feel at home, moreso than we could in Port Solei.

"I'll think about it," I said finally. My right head spoke while my left head glanced at Twee, my expression thoughtful. "This is… really tempting. But I need some time to decide."

Twee nodded, her eye blinking rapidly. "Of course, of course. Take all the time you need. Just let me know. Yes."

I thanked her and made my way back to the front of the store, where Laura was waiting. She was buried in her phone, as we made our way through the maze of boxes out into the sunshine.

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"What's that?" I asked as we began our walk back, my left head tilting to get a better look at her phone screen, while my right head stayed focused on Laura's expression. She was holding her phone out, showing me an ad for an apartment. The building in the picture looked sleek and modern, with floor-to-ceiling windows and a rooftop garden that seemed to stretch forever. The caption read: Designed for mutant bodies. Spacious, stylish, and inclusive.

"An apartment," Laura replied, her voice tinged with excitement. "It's in a mutant-friendly building. Three bedrooms, big kitchen, lots of amenities. I figured I might as well start looking around if this job might be an actual reality."

I scanned the ad, my heart buzzing with excitement… but then sinking as I saw the price. "It's also way out of our budget."

Laura sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "But it's nice to dream, right?"

I nodded, but the reality of our situation was starting to weigh on me. Between the reduced salary at Twee's store and the cost of a new apartment, I wasn't sure how we were going to make it work. But at the same time, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was the right path—that working at *Threaded Oddities* and living in a mutant-friendly community was exactly what we needed.

As we left the store and walked back through the mutant district, I couldn't help but feel a sense of hope. The streets were alive with mutants of all shapes and sizes. A woman with four legs and a taur body trotted past us, her hooves clicking against the pavement. She was pulling a small cart filled with groceries, her long tail swishing behind her. Nearby, a snake woman with three separate tails slithered gracefully down the sidewalk, her scales shimmering in the sunlight. She was chatting with a woman whose head was at the end of eight tentacles, each one moving independently as she gestured animatedly.

Further down the street, a group of conjoined triplets laughed as they skipped down the road. They were dressed in one outfit that had three separate fashions for each of them, their three heads bobbing in unison as they shared a joke. Across from them, a giant cow woman—easily ten feet tall—stood outside a café, sipping from a comically large cup of coffee. Her hooves which looked more like biologhical high heels than animal hooves clacked against the ground as she shifted her weight, and her udder swayed slightly with the movement. She was chatting with a woman who had wings folded neatly against her back, her feathers a vibrant shade of blue. The district was a vibrant, thriving community, and for the first time since my visit to Port Solei I felt like I belonged.

As we turned the corner, Laura suddenly stopped, her eyes lighting up. “Wait a second,” she said, scrolling through her phone. “The apartment building is only a few blocks from here. Why don’t we go take a look? Even if we can’t afford it, it might be fun to see what’s out there.”

As we reached the end of the block, the reality of our financial situation came crashing back. I hesitated, my right head glancing at her skeptically while my left head tilted in curiosity. “I don’t know… you know it’s out of our price range. Isn’t this just kind of torturing ourselves?”

Laura shrugged, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. “Maybe. But it’s also motivating. Come on, let’s just peek.”

Before I could protest further, she was tugging me down the street, her multiple legs practically galloping with purpose. Nearby, a family of mutants was having a picnic in a park—one mother with butterfly wings, the other mother with a lizard tail, and their two children, each with tiny scaly tails and fluttering wings.

The apartment building came into view a few minutes later. Crap. It was even more impressive in person. The sleek, modern design stood out against the older buildings around it, its large windows reflecting the sunlight. A sign out front read: *The Haven—Living Designed for You.*

“Wow,” I murmured, my left head craning to take in the height of the building while my right head focused on the details—the polished metal accents, the lush greenery surrounding the entrance, the wide, accessible ramp leading up to the doors.

Laura grinned, clearly pleased with my reaction. “Told you it was nice. I have an eye for real estate”

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We stepped inside, and the lobby was just as stunning. The floors were made of polished stone, and the walls were adorned with artwork celebrating mutant diversity. A receptionist sat behind a sleek desk, her head a cluster of crystals that refracted the light in dazzling patterns. She looked up as we entered, her voice warm and welcoming.

“Hello! Are you here for a tour?”

Laura nodded, her excitement palpable. “Yes, we’d love to see the available units.”

The receptionist smiled and handed us a brochure. “Of course. Let me call someone to show you around.”

A few minutes later, a tall woman with antlers and hooves approached us, her stride confident and graceful. “Hi, I’m Marissa. I’ll be showing you around today. Let’s start with the amenities.”

She led us through the lobby to a set of double doors that opened into a sprawling common area. There was a gym with equipment designed for all kinds of bodies—treadmills with extra-wide belts for taurs, weight machines with adjustable grips for multi-limbed mutants, and even a pool with varying depths to accommodate aquatic mutants.

Next, we saw the rooftop garden, which was even more breathtaking in person. The space was filled with lush plants, winding paths, and seating areas designed for all kinds of bodies. There were benches with extra-wide seats for taurs, hammocks for winged mutants, and even a small pond for aquatic residents to relax in.

“This is incredible,” I said, my left head turning to take in the view while my right head glanced at Laura, who looked equally awestruck.

Marissa smiled. “We pride ourselves on being inclusive. Now, let’s take a look at one of the available units.”

The apartment itself was just as impressive. The living room was spacious, with large windows that let in plenty of natural light. The kitchen was modern and well-equipped, with countertops at varying heights to accommodate different body types. The bedrooms were generously sized, and the master bathroom had a tub large enough for even the biggest mutants.

“This is… amazing,” Laura said, her voice filled with wonder. “I could totally see us living here.”

I nodded, but the reality of the situation was still weighing on me. “It’s perfect,” I admitted, my right head speaking this time, my voice tinged with regret. “But it’s also way out of our budget.”

Laura sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. “I know. But maybe, for something this perfect… we can make it work?”

I nodded, but the question lingered in my mind as we left the building. Was this possible? Or were we setting ourselves up for failure? I did some quick calculations in my mind. If we took some side gigs and squeezed by with the savings I had, maybe… maybe it would be enough.

And I found myself left again, paralyzed with choice.

Do I take the job at Twee's store, and if I do, do we spend all this money on this incredible apartment… or just continue living where we are.

It would be so nice to start a new life with Laura in the apartment of our dreams… but dreams cost money.