

Shared Identity

Chapter 2: Answers

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“Hey, are you in there?”

Slowly, Keagan stirred. For some reason his head hurt, and it felt as if he was wearing something heavy and warm. It sounded like his housemate, James, was calling him; had he slept in? A slight smell of burnt fabric made Keagan wonder if there was a fire.

Muffled curse words seemed to be coming from the other side of his door. “You’ve been quiet for hours. If you killed yourself with your crazy magic in there, I’m going to kill you.”

“Wait I...” Keagan said as he tried to get up, but found he couldn’t. His head was spinning and his limbs weren’t responding the way he wanted them to. After a few moments he realized that he wasn’t just wearing something heavy, he was wearing a mask and gloves as well. On top of that, Keagan realized that he was on the floor, and he couldn’t remember how he got there.

"I'm coming in!" There was the sound of a door opening. Keagan managed to look up to see his housemate rushing over.

"Shit, what happened?" James asked as he tried to help Keagan up. James seemed to try and suppress a snicker, but couldn't help himself. "Hah, I guess your transformation into a furry didn't go as planned?"

As Keagan tried to come up with an angry retort, he finally realized he was wearing his experimental kitsune costume: the one with all the magitek enhancements. He vaguely recalled trying the costume on for yet another test, and it working for once. No... it had worked too well!

Now the memories were rushing back to him. Not only did the suit make him feel like he had been transformed into a kitsune, it made him think he was one as well. On top of that, the suit seemed to have a mind of its own! It didn't speak, but Keagan was able to feel its emotions, and as he wore it he could swear that thoughts were beginning to form as well.

Though Keagan couldn't quite remember how long the costume had him thinking that he was a kitsune, he did remember that it eventually began to truly malfunction. Parts of it 'detached' from his nerves, putting him in a state where he felt half human and half kitsune both mentally and physically. Once this happened, it didn't take long for him to feel nauseous, and he eventually collapsed on the floor.

"Seriously, what happened? Are you alright?" James asked again with a worried tone in his voice.

"I... can you help me get this off?" Keagan asked instead of answering the questions. He was embarrassed that his housemate was seeing him like this, and wasn't even sure how to explain that he had accidentally created some sort of living suit. "I think it malfunctioned."

"I assumed that much. Zipper's in the back, right?" James replied and started trying to find the zipper under the suit's fur. After it started taking uncomfortably long for James to find it, Keagan began to worry that the zipper might actually be gone.

It turned out that his housemate had been distracted by a different discovery. "Keagan, there are burn marks on your suit," James stated, before finally finding the zipper and pulling it open.

The thought that his creation had caught fire, or at least came close to it, quickly sent Keagan into a near panic. Though still weak, a burst of adrenaline helped him begin pulling the rest of the costume off.

When Keagan finally got enough of the suit off to take a look at it, he found that there was indeed significant damage. Both the kitsune costume and Keagan's interface suit had scorch marks on them, and some of the energy distribution pathways were discolored. Some of the fur on the outside of the costume had even burnt off. Disturbingly, the burn marks seemed to be located at several spots where the two suits were meant to interface; specifically at the spots where Keagan recalled that the suit had 'disconnected' from him right before he blacked out.

Half a day had passed since Keagan tested the costume out, and now it was late in the evening. His time being unconscious and trapped in the costume had caused him to almost miss two meals, and at this point Keagan felt like he was starving. Once he had recovered enough strength, he and James decided to go out to grab some burritos for dinner. As they ate, Keagan gave his housemate a rough explanation of what had happened with the suit while being careful to leave out any mention that it may have developed a mind of its own. For some reason, Keagan found himself worried about what his friend would think of that little detail.

"So wait," James began, but paused to finish swallowing a mouthful of food before continuing. "You're saying that you felt like you had been turned into a fox while wearing that fursuit? I thought that it was just supposed to be like, an exosuit that moved with you."

"Please don't call it that," Keagan said, and couldn't help but glance around to make sure no one had heard his housemate use the word 'fursuit'.

James smiled at the reaction that he had managed to get out of Keagan, but didn't push the subject further, "Whatever you say. Look, I don't know as much about this 'Magitek' stuff as you, but it doesn't sound like the suit simply malfunctioned on you. That sounds like it somehow worked way better than you thought it would. You didn't break the law did you?"

"No, I assure you that I didn't use a black market magicite crystal," Keagan said quickly. "I know what can happen if you use too much magic without the proper precautions."

"Right," James replied, and then took a bite of his burrito and began talking as he chewed. "But this sounds an awful lot like you took a shortcut by using a bunch of magic and letting it do the work for you."

"The entire point of using magic is as a shortcut!" Keagan replied somewhat more loudly than he had intended. After taking a deep breath, he continued, "The crystal I used definitely came from an official Magitek store. It was the biggest one they're selling, but it shouldn't have been dangerous. I suppose I may have just made a mistake by not adjusting my calculations for a larger stone." Keagan felt it was safe to assume that the crystals and tools that he had gotten from the Magitek company weren't at fault. Sure, the company had changed a lot since it initially

reintroduced magic to the world, but he had seen no signs of the quality of its products dropping.

A glare from his housemate told Keagan that he needed to keep explaining, and he continued after letting out a sigh. "So, I did take a shortcut, but this was supposed to be a relatively well tested one. You know those 'miracle' prosthetics arms that work and feel as good as the real thing? And the gloves and socks that help limbs with damaged nerves move properly?"

"Right, you told me the suit was based on those," James replied as he seemed to think on the implications. "They feel just as real as the limbs they replace supposedly. I remember you saying that the prosthetics needed to be surgically or magically fused to a person to grant sensation, as well as control. Since you are not still trapped in the thing, I guess the magic did something unexpected then?"

Keagan nodded, "It seems so. The spell used here works by basically adapting the prosthetic, or in this case the suit, to sync it with the host's nervous system. I guess all the modifications I made must have caused something weird to happen."

After making that statement, Keagan went back to eating his food to try and hide his expression from his housemate. Everything that he had just said was technically true, but it came nowhere close to explaining how the suit had come to life, and even less about how it had made him begin thinking he was a kitsune. While he had researched the issue as a kitsune, he had formed a theory that the faux nerves within the suit had somehow formed a sentient mind within its neural network. However, he wasn't sure that he could trust any judgements he made while under the suit's influence.

"So, what are you going to do now?" James said, bringing Keagan out of his musings. "The thing seems dangerous, so maybe you should throw it away."

"I...don't know," he replied, surprised by how conflicted he suddenly felt. On one hand the experiment might have nearly killed him. On the other hand, if the suit was still alive, then Keagan felt that discarding or destroying it was wrong. Though, yet another issue was that if the suit was alive, Keagan wasn't sure it was moral to keep using the thing. He wasn't even sure what he was supposed to do with it if it was sentient, and he couldn't help but wonder if there were laws about this kind of stuff.

As he kept thinking on the suit, Keagan realized there was another reason why he was hesitating. As strange as it was, despite everything that had gone wrong, he wanted to try wearing the costume again. Becoming a kitsune, or at least feeling like becoming one, had actually been an enjoyable experience despite all the weirdness.

After pondering a bit more about how to justify his decision, Keagan finally replied, "I think I need to see if I can figure out what happened before deciding. I... don't want all that work to go to waste. The thing may be damaged, but I have a few tools and tricks that should help me repair it."

James gave Keagan a skeptical look, and then shrugged, "Well, don't die. I'll have to find another person to split the rent with if you do."

"Oh, thank you for your concern!" Keagan replied with a weak laugh. He couldn't summon much energy because he was feeling bad about misleading James about the suit. However, Keagan couldn't help but feel terrified at the thought of what his friend would think if he found out the truth. After all, Keagan wasn't quite sure himself why he was even entertaining the idea of wearing a living costume again.

Unfortunately, another reason for Keagan's lack of enthusiasm was that James was probably uncomfortably close to the mark about just how dangerous the thing that Keagan created might be.