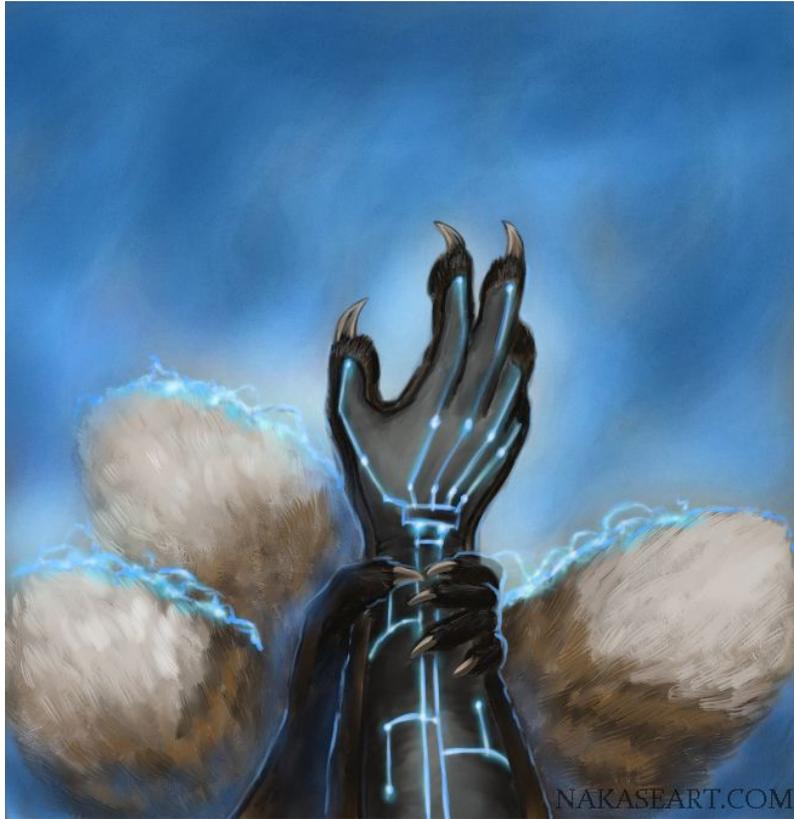


Shared Identity Chapter 10: Freedom

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After exiting the house into the evening sunlight, the kitsune took a deep breath of the sweet fresh air. It smelled so much better out here that he couldn't believe that he had wanted to stay cooped up inside. After taking a quick look around to make sure there were no signs of people peeking in his backyard, he made a dash for the forest. He felt so much faster and more agile than he had as a human, and once he was hidden among the trees he would be able to test the limits of his new form.

Once he was past the initial wall of undergrowth, the kitsune couldn't help but let out an animalistic squeal of joy. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so free. Even though he was there because of Kazu's requests, this felt like something he had wanted all along as well. They quickly lost track of time as they darted through the trees, but neither the kitsune nor Kazu cared. They were finally free of that stuffy house, and able to play like a fox should.

For what felt like hours, the kitsune darted between trees and climbing over rocks. When he found other animals, he stalked them as stealthily as he could. Soon, finding creatures and trying to surprise them turned into a game. Unfortunately his large body made it difficult to be as

quiet as an actual fox however, and most creatures ran away long before he got anywhere near them. Even so he got quite close several times, which made him feel sure that he could do even better with more practice.

Some time later, he found himself completely exhausted and quite far from home. The quick onset of weakness reminded him that under that fur, he was still very much a frail human who barely ever exercised. It felt so unfair that he was being held back now by his other self's laziness!

Maybe we can rest under that big tree, Kazu said, speaking for the first time in a while.

The kitsune looked in the direction that Kazu was indicating, and the tree's thick canopy did indeed look welcoming. After walking under it, he laid down on a nice thick patch of dirt to rest his aching muscles.

"I never even knew this place existed," the kitsune murmured as he settled in.

You've really never been out here before? Kazu asked. *Do you really just stay cooped up in that house?*

Keagan frowned, since he didn't want to go back to thinking about his human life so soon, but decided to answer Kazu's questions anyway, "I've lived at that house for three years, and honestly I've barely explored the areas around it. There's just been so many things that I want to do during the day, and none of them have involved the forest."

You were so excited to be out here though, Kazu insisted. *Are you sure that you didn't want to come out here?*

"You're probably right," Keagan agreed, before letting out a sigh and closing their eyes to help him relax as he talked. "Maybe I had an unconscious desire, now that I'm thinking about it."

Unconscious desire? What is that?

"A desire that I didn't consciously know that I had," Keagan explained.

You humans are so weird, Kazu said as he tried to grapple with the idea.

"You probably have some as well!" Keagan said with a fox-like laugh. "For example, even early on you wanted me to wear you all the time, but you didn't quite know why."

Huh, Kazu murmured before going silent for a while it pondered Keagan's point.

As a magitech engineer, Keagan couldn't help but feel thrilled that he may have just nudged Kazu towards being more introspective. That meant that his friend could develop even further even without the aid of wild magic related shortcuts. However, he forced himself to not think about that right now. At this moment, he was just a kitsune. He could be an engineer again when they got home. Letting his mind calm down for the first time in what felt like months, he simply laid there and let himself listen to the sound of the forest around them.

Keagan, desires can change right? Kazu asked suddenly.

"Huh?" He had dozed a bit, so it took Keagan a moment to process Kazu's question. "Yea, I suppose they can."

What if you stopped wanting to be a kitsune? Kazu asked with a fearful tone in his voice. What would happen to me?

The seriousness of the question took Keagan off guard, causing their ears and tails to snap up in alarm. "Kazu, no matter what happens, I'll find some way to take care of you" he said quickly as he tried to think of some way to reassure his friend.

Can it happen then? Kazu pressed, not seeming reassured by Keagan's answer. Being worn by someone who didn't want to become me... it would feel so wrong! Plus, what if you lost interest and didn't wear me often enough for me to stay alive?

The unexpected amount of worry behind Kazu's questions took Keagan off guard, but he managed to make himself take a moment to carefully think over the best way to answer. He didn't want to say anything that would give Kazu the wrong impression. "Well, desires can change, but I doubt that I would stop wanting to be a Kitsune any time soon. In fact, I doubt it would ever change."

How can that be true when you keep wanting to go back to being human after wearing me for a few hours?

"Well, it is a bit complicated," Keagan said as he once again struggled to come up with an answer. "It would be hard to explain."

We aren't in a rush, so could you please tell me? Kazu pleaded. I don't worry about things like you, but this has been bothering me.

"I don't know how well I'll be able to reassure you," Keagan said before hesitating for another moment. If he was going to give a proper explanation, then he was going to have to delve into some of his past that he hated remembering. However, there didn't seem to be any alternative, so Keagan decided to not hold back. "Alright, I do owe you an explanation since this is sort of a life or death thing for you."

Thank you! Kazu said before briefly wagging their tails in excitement.

“Don’t worry about it. I guess I should start at the beginning,” Keagan said as he laid back and closed his eyes in an effort to help himself remember. “Well, I’ve liked foxes ever since I was just a child. However, it wasn’t until I found out about kitsune and other magical and legendary versions of the creatures that I started wanting to become one. I think I was a little over ten years old at the time.”

Ten years! Kazu exclaimed. *I’m only a little over a month old, aren’t I? Ten years is practically forever!*

“Heh, and I’m over thirty now,” Keagan said with a smile.

Wow, I didn’t realize you were so old!

“Hey, thirty years isn’t that old!” Keagan stated indignantly. “Anyway, that means that I’ve wanted to be a kitsune for the last twenty years of my life. While I’m not as obsessed with them as I used to be when I was younger, I doubt that I’ll ever stop wanting to be one.”

Obsessed? Kazu repeated, seemingly surprised that Keagan used the word.

“Yea, if anything I wanted to be a fox too badly,” Keagan explained with a frown. “Sure, right now I would love to stay like this for as long as I can, but back then I would have gone along with your idea to use wild magic to merge us without any regard for the risks. I would have done it just because there was a slight chance of success.”

I can see why you would say it was an ‘unhealthy’ obsession then, Kazu said with a disappointed, but understanding tone. Just out of curiosity, if I found a way to turn you into a kitsune with no risks at all, would you be willing to try it?

“I... I don’t know,” Keagan stuttered as familiar internal conflicts welled up inside him.

Kazu seemed to notice the effect the question had on his wearer, and hesitate before finally replying, *I’m sorry, I didn’t realize these questions would be painful for you.*

“It is fine,” Keagan said before standing up and stretching. “I don’t talk about these things with anyone, so maybe I just need to get it off my chest instead of keeping it all bottled up. How about I keep explaining things on our way home?”

We’re going home already? Kazu whined. *But we’ve barely done anything!*

“Oh, right, it is your turn,” Keagan said, feeling ashamed that he had forgotten. “Ummm, what would you like to do?”

Let's explore the forest more! Kazu said excitedly. *Plus, maybe you can tell me more about why you're so afraid of being transformed, and why you got so interested in kitsune in the first place.*

"Well, transforming myself into something else just feels... irresponsible," Keagan said as he began walking. Normally he wouldn't have felt comfortable at all discussing these things with anyone, but Kazu had become an exception. "Soon after magic became publicly available about fifteen years ago, some people started trying to use it to transform themselves. They had all sorts of reasons for it, whether they wanted a healthier body or were some flavor of furry, but most of their attempts ended badly."

I think you mentioned this before, Kazu said. Did they use wild magic?

"Well, most of them tried to control it, so it wasn't technically wild magic," Keagan explained. "But they didn't know what they were doing, so the results weren't much better. I think I've mentioned it before, most of those who got the magic to work at all got turned into mutant-like hybrids or monsters. A whole bunch of people even went crazy, and a few died."

So, you don't try to transform yourself because of the risk? Kazu asked, seemingly becoming more intrigued as Keagan went on.

"Right, it just doesn't feel right to risk my body just for some fantasy," Keagan explained, though his voice became quiet as he spoke. "Even if I had a way to transform that was guaranteed to work, I'd be hesitant to take it because it would be permanent. Reversing that sort of change is very difficult."

Kazu was quiet for a few moments before finally asking, *Aren't kitsune supposed to be able to disguise themselves as humans? Wouldn't that solve part of the problem?*

"Well, it would actually," Keagan said before chuckling. "Unfortunately, the best illusion magic that I know of wouldn't do a great job of hiding those tails, and only some kind of genius would be able to even attempt at will transformations. That's why I made you. A hyper realistic neural link costume that I can simply take off to become human again was the best idea I could come up with."

I didn't think of it that way, Kazu replied while seeming surprised by the comparison. In a way, being able to use me to switch between kitsune and human form is close to the real thing. Though it probably would be even better if you could run on all fours while wearing me!

"That would be a lot of fun, but you weren't made for that kind of motion," Keagan said, unable to help but grin as he imagined the idea. "And honestly, I'm not sure how I would even go about building a costume like that. I haven't looked into quadsuits, and having a costume switch between two and four legged modes would be an interesting project to say the least."

Before you get sidetracked by that, you didn't answer my other question, Kazu interjected. What is it that you like about kitsune so much that it makes you want to be one? It must be something unique to you, since I don't think James was interested in wearing me.

Keagan unconsciously brought one of their clawed hands up to scratch his chin as he considered the question. "I don't know. I doubt my reasons are unique, because there are a lot of people who like foxes in general. Though, aside from the cool look, I suppose something about their free spirit appealed to me."

Free spirit?

"Yea, they're tricksters who simply do whatever they want without caring about what people think of them," Keagan explained. "Well, I suppose that's a generalization, but that impression has always stood out for me."

Interesting! Kazu said excitedly, as if he thought Keagan had said something insightful. *I suppose you want that freedom for yourself?*

"I'm not sure what you mean," Keagan said, finding feeling a bit confused by Kazu's conclusion. "I'm an adult, I have all the freedom that I could wish for right now."

But... you're constantly hiding in your house, Kazu pointed out.

Though his first instinct was to argue with Kazu, Keagan found himself slowing to a halt as he began to realize that Kazu had a point. He was constantly hiding. There were so many things that he was anxious about that he was almost continually trapped in his house as he tried to keep his anxieties under control.

Somehow, Keagan felt as if he had just found a missing puzzle piece. Now that he had it, so many things about his life suddenly made sense. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that every aspect of his life had been affected by his anxiety, including his deep desire to become a kitsune.

Are you alright? Kazu asked. *It feels like you're... shivering.*

It took a few moments before Keagan regained enough of his composure to speak. "I'm... I'm fine, Kazu. I guess I'm getting chills down my spine because you just made me realize a few things about myself."

The kitsune golem's concern could be clearly felt through their link. *I hope they're good things?*

"I'm not sure, they're good per say," Keagan stated. "But I'm glad that I've realized them. You see, I've had these anxiety issues for most of my life. I had a bad time in school when I was

younger, because I simply couldn't figure out how to interact with everyone else my age. Honestly, much of my school life was a living hell because of it."

"When I found out about kitsune, I must have realized they had everything that I didn't," Keagan continued, his voice becoming quieter as he spoke. "Maybe I started wishing I could have that freedom, power and charisma for myself."

And now you still want to be one, because you unconsciously think one wouldn't be anxious, Kazu added. I just need to ask this then. If you became less anxious, would you still want to wear me?

Keagan only needed to think on that question for a moment before he smiled and shook his head. "My love of kitsune is a lot deeper than that, even though I may have originally just wanted to use them as an escape. More importantly, I'm certainly not going to abandon you like that. Even if something happened that kept me from wearing you, I'd at least try to find someone else for you."

I hope it never comes to that, Kazu replied. Still, thank you, it means a lot to me.

"No, thank you," Keagan said. "Since we're sharing this kitsune identity, we need to watch out for each other."

Definitely! Kazu added. Speaking of which, since you're getting tired, *how about we head home and watch a movie?*

After eagerly agreeing, Keagan adjusted their path back towards home. Since it was getting late, he fully expected to miss their house by hundreds of meters, and the idea of popping up in someone else's backyard worried him. However, even though his chaotic thoughts were making it impossible for him to assume his kitsune persona again, wearing Kazu made him feel braver than usual. Not for the first time, he was glad that the costume hid his identity so completely. After all, how would anyone identify him if even his voice was different?

Much to Keagan's surprise however, they arrived right back at the exact spot they had entered the forest. "I can't believe we didn't miss the house," Keagan said, before pulling his keys off his belt to unlock the door, and using an incantation to open a magical seal he had placed on all of the house's doors and windows. Now that he was more aware of himself, he couldn't help but think about how all these protections were just another product of his anxiety. "Between that and not running into anyone else, we were pretty lucky."

Foxes have a strong magnetic sense, so of course you were able to find your way back! Kazu explained haughtily.

"Wait, what?" Keagan said, surprised by the unexpected claim. "I didn't install any sort of compass in the costume."

You didn't? Kazu sounded confused by Keagan's statement. *But it felt as if you knew what direction to go in. And before you ask, I certainly didn't use any wild magic that time! Not on purpose at least.*

"For now, I'm going to hope it was just luck," Keagan said while desperately hoping that he wasn't going to have another complication to deal with. It was true that he had gone in the direction that he felt would lead them home, but the idea that he had been imbued with an animal-like ability to sense the earth's magnetic field was worrying. "I'm going to give both of us a scan just to make sure."

They encountered James, who had seemingly just gotten home from work on their way to Keagan's workshop. "Well now, is that dirt and leaves I see in your fur?" James said with a teasing grin. "Am I going to have to worry about you two going feral or something?"

"Kitsune aren't 'feral'," Keagan responded with distaste, but couldn't help but grin.

"Hi James!" Kazu said out loud without moving the suit's jaws. "We had a lot of fun, you should come with us next time!" Keagan immediately grimaced at the thought of James seeing him running wild like that.

"Hah, maybe I will," James replied with a laugh while giving the suit an odd look. "By the way, I heard your phone beeping a few minutes ago. I think someone was sending you messages."

"Huh, alright," Keagan said as he wondered who could be.

The first thing he did when he got back to the workshop, aside from sitting down to give his aching legs a rest, was checking Kazu's mana levels. His paranoia also led him to also dig out his bio scanner, so he could verify that his body hadn't been affected by Kazu either.

Is everything alright? Kazu asked as he tried to make sense of the readings.

"I think everything's fine," Keagan said while fumbling with the devices with their clawed hands. "You do have some wild magic buildup, but it isn't at a dangerous level. I don't see any problems with my body either. I think we have enough time to watch a quick movie."

I wish we didn't have a time limit, Kazu said with a mental sigh.

"Same," Keagan agreed. "As much fun as we've been having lately, I need to figure out a solution to the mana bleed. It'll have to be included in your final design if I'm to make any suits for other people."

Other suits? Kazu immediately perked up. *You're planning to make more of me?*

“Hopefully, they wouldn’t just be clones of you,” Keagan said, remembering that he had been hesitant to discuss his plan with Kazu. “Ideally, each one would be unique, and I’m not sure if they would become sapient like you. Though, I’m honestly not sure if I should be selling things that could turn into intelligent beings to people. It sounds like selling slaves or something.”

But I’m not a slave! Kazu added indignantly.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it that way!” Keagan said while immediately regretting his choice of words. “But you understand what I mean, right? You’re a costume that’s meant to be worn, and I’m not sure it is right to create intelligent beings that are meant for that purpose.”

Kazu was quiet for a long moment before replying. *For a while, I wasn’t sure that I liked being this way either,* Kazu said. *But, being in that four legged golem didn’t feel right, and I’m finding that I don’t mind that my purpose is to be a part of someone else. I think other costumes that you create will be happy this way too.*

“That’s a strong possibility,” Keagan agreed. “Though I really need to run some more experiments to figure out what is causing this before I end up creating another intelligent species on this planet.”

You’re worrying too much! Kazu said teasingly. *Personally, I’d love to be able to have some brothers and sisters. Now, how about you hurry up and check that message so we can go watch that movie. It is still my turn after all!*

“Alright alright!” Keagan said while feigning exasperation. He picked up his phone and was surprised to find who the most recent message had come from. “Huh, I wonder what Nira wants. Oh wait, I bet she wants to know how well the fox golem worked out. I’m not sure how I’m going to explain all that to her...”

When he played the message, a hologram of Nira’s wolf avatar appeared and began to speak. “Hey Keagan!” Her image began saying. “You mentioned that you were looking for a room for Anthro United, right? Well, the person I was splitting my room with just canceled on me, and I’m looking for someone else who might be interested. I think it would be cool if you came and showed off your golem! Just let me know if you’re interested, alright?”

Ohhh, you should say yes! Kazu said as soon as the message was over. *It is still my turn to tell you what to do, so I get to choose!*

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Keagan replied with a laugh, before refocusing on the message and letting out a sigh. “I guess I should stop running from this shouldn’t I? I need to make money, and getting the attention of furies would be the best way to do it for better or worse.”

I know their costumes often look silly and unrealistic compared to me, but why don't you like them? Kazu asked. They don't seem that different from you.

Hearing Kazu say that made Keagan cringe. "They have some similar interests, but let's just say they have their own... culture. A lot of them are into weird stuff from what I've seen, and they are far too obsessed with transformation magic for my tastes."

Does that make them bad people? Kazu asked hesitantly.

"No... they aren't bad people," Keagan conceded. "Plus, if there was anyone that would be fine with me hanging out with them as a kitsune, it would be them I suppose."

Well, what are you waiting for? Kazu said excitedly. *It seems to me that you're just worrying too much again, and I want to meet people!*

"Alright, alright..." Keagan said in defeat as he prepared to send Nira a response. "At least I wouldn't be going alone."

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