

Shared Identity
Chapter 1: Experiment
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“Maybe the *tenth* try will be the charm,” Keagan grumbled as he re-examined his creation yet again. The costume’s furry exterior was clean, the circuits were undamaged, and the runes he had drawn upon its sleek interior seemed correct. There were no signs of magical residues that could interfere this time.

To the casual observer, the costume looked like a realistic anthropomorphic fox with auburn fur, a fluffy white underbelly, and black ‘socks’ on its hands and feet. Three tails and black rune-like markings on its auburn fur betrayed that it was meant to represent a kitsune rather than a simple fox. However, what made the costume special was hidden beneath the fur. Intricate runes, circuits, and crystalline structures lined its insides, and Keagan just need to hope that he could actually get them to work properly with the magic he was trying to imbue the costume with.

The rediscovery of magic had changed a lot of things, for both good and bad. Problems like cancer and world hunger had been solved, but its unpredictability had also led to dangerous accidents. However, magic also slowly found its way into more mundane fields such as costuming and cosplay. Although still somewhat uncommon, people had been coming up with all sorts of ways to use minor magics to enhance their costumes. A few had even dabbled in actual, physical transformation. So far no one had managed to do more than minor cosmetic changes, and even those were hard to undo without side effects.

As far as Keagan knew, he was trying something that no one else had attempted yet. His last job had taught him a lot about magitek prosthetics, and after learning about golems he began dreaming up ideas for giving a little bit of life to a costume. In theory, it would make it easier to wear for long periods of time and make it possible to create realistic cosplays based on non-human creatures.

Unfortunately, this project had been far more difficult than Keagan expected. Making a suit that was meant to interface directly with an entire human body turned out to be quite complicated! In addition, a lot of precautions needed to be taken to make sure the costume didn't rip itself apart or harm the person within it. He had spent over a year preparing for this by making individual parts such as ears and tails which linked to their wearer's nerves, and now he was trying to bring together everything he had learned to create a full costume. However, at the rate he was going he wasn't sure his money reserves were going to last.

After finally being satisfied that everything seemed ready, Keagan picked up a magical crystal and slid it into the costume's padded interior. With a satisfying click, the crystal slid into the costume's 'heart' chamber within the center of its chest, and it generated an audible hum as it began to charge the various magical runes within the suit. Keagan hoped that using a stronger crystal would resolve some of the power issues he had run into during his last test.

While the suit charged up, Keagan stripped down to the jumpsuit he had created to help him interface with and control the costume. The idea was that the "neural interface jumpsuit" would tell the costume what movements he wanted to make and that it would then assist him with the movement. In theory, the suit would work like a series of powered prosthetics that were placed over his body. Without even a conscious thought, it would help him stand digitigrade, move its tails, and even its ears. In theory at least.

As Keagan picked up the costume he found himself reminded again of the fantasies he used to have about becoming a creature like this. He liked foxes well enough, but as a child he used to wish to become a magical creature like a kitsune or a dragon. He was not nearly as into that stuff as he used to be, but they still held a special place in his heart. Now that he was experimenting with cosplay, he figured why not indulge a bit?

Refocusing on the task at hand, Keagan slid his legs into the costume. It was a little bit difficult to fit into the suit's padded interior, but eventually he got his feet into the fox's paws and got ready to pull the rest of it up.

A sudden tightening sensation around his legs was the first sign that something was different this time, and Keagan gasped in surprise when the costume "stood up" seemingly by itself, forcing him to stand on his toes. The rest of the suit, which had been hanging limply in his hands before, began to fill out into its full vulpine shape. Even the suit's three tails had begun twitching back and forth behind him with life.

This was not quite what Keagan had been expecting, but even so he was overjoyed that something was finally *working!* He had meant for the suit to only become 'active' when fully worn, but he could work with this. The way the suit's upper body was flailing around his waist did worry him a bit, however.

After watching what was happening with the suit for a few moments, Keagan decided that the most likely explanation was that the part of the suit that he hadn't donned yet was just having spasms like a headless animal. After all, the thing was essentially filled with magical feximalies of nerves and muscles within all that fabric and padding. It would probably stop when he put it on. Keagan quickly stuffed his arms into the costume and tried to get his hands into its gloves. Trying to don something that was moving on its own was strange to say the least, but once he got his hands into place the costume tightened around his arms and seemed to settle down.

Next came the mask. With a little effort Keagan got a hold of the mask and slid his head into it. Somehow it felt like the suit was helping him with this step. He easily lined his eyes up with the suit's vulpine eyes and found that he had no difficulty breathing at all. Finally, he reached behind himself and pulled the zipper closed.

To Keagan's surprise, the suit hugged him even tighter after he was sealed. It wasn't uncomfortable, but it was definitely fitting him like a glove now. Thankfully, this didn't seem to restrict his movements since it was already matching his movements. After hesitating for a few moments, Keagan decided that he should test the thing out. He turned and walked over to his mirror, and observed his work.

The results were impressive to say the least. The suit fit him perfectly and moved quite naturally with him. It was even doing a convincing job of making it look like standing digitigrade was natural, just like he had designed it to. When Keagan tried opening his mouth, the costume's jaw opened with his.

The tails were still twitching back and forth freely, but with some concentration he found that he could control them to some degree. Controlling more than one at a time was difficult, and every time he got one to do what he wanted the others seemed to gain a mind of their own.

Keagan wasn't quite sure of what was causing the movements, but it certainly added to the costume's realism. The more he tried to control the tails the more he could swear that he could *feel* them. Despite the fact that magical prosthetics were meant to transmit a sense of touch to their users, Keagan had not expected this function to work, since his human body didn't have a tail of its own. Now he regretted not experimenting with this feature more in his earlier experiments.

Not everything was working quite as it should however. One thing that didn't seem to be working quite right with the costume was its eyes. The eyes functioned in a manner similar to cameras which were supposed to look in the directions Keagan intended and transmit images back to him. For some reason, the eyes seemed to occasionally focus to wander across the room and focus on random objects whenever Keagan wasn't specifically directing them. On top of that, Keagan was feeling strange itches and tingles across his skin as he controlled the suit. Both of these were things that were going to have to be checked.

After testing out his range of motion a few more times, Keagan considered taking the thing off so that he could inspect it and take notes. Instead, on a whim he decided to have a little fun. Posing in the mirror, he tried to imagine what a kitsune from the legends would act like. They were creatures that were born as foxes, but when they grew old enough became intelligent and powerful. They were animals... but also proud and human-like as well.

First he posed a few times, and he was pleasantly surprised that the costume's tails fanned out as if they were showing themselves off. Perhaps he was moving them unconsciously? After that, Keagan got down on all fours and mimicked a feral fox. Despite the costume's anthropomorphic form, he found that the suit adjusted itself to support his new pose quite well. "Weird, I don't remember programming it to do that," he said to himself, but he was pleased with the results regardless. He experimentally bared his fangs at his reflection, and lifted up one of his clawed gloves as if to attack.

After a few moments, Keagan started to feel silly and decided that it was time to stop. However, when he tried to stand upright so he could take the costume off, he found that he couldn't. For some reason the suit was forcing him to stay on all fours. Again he tried to stand up, but found that he couldn't raise his back. When he tried to raise an arm up to reach the zipper along his back, he found that he couldn't reach it.

Keagan became even more worried when he realized that the strange sensations he was feeling were becoming worse. Much worse. It felt like his nerves were being zapped now, and occasionally he could swear that he could *feel* the costume itself. He needed to get the thing off, and quickly.

As he tried to crawl towards his tools to find a way to get the suit off, a wave of vertigo hit him. It was as if all of his senses were going haywire. Even more disorientating was a sudden

sense of his mind being filled with unfamiliar thoughts and instincts. He tried to call out for help to his housemate, but barely managed to groan as he fell over.

Slowly, the sense of vertigo faded, but everything still felt wrong. The first hint of what happened was that Keagan found himself no longer looking through a mask. Instead, he was using the kitsune costume's eyes. After that, he quickly noticed that he no longer felt the suit around his skin, instead he felt the carpet beneath his body.

After a few moments Keagan managed to unsteadily push himself onto all fours again. Strangely, he found that standing this way felt incredibly natural to him now. So natural that he had to look in the mirror to make sure he hadn't actually been turned into a fox, but thankfully he quickly saw that this wasn't the case. His form was still anthropomorphic. However, while the costume had looked good before, now it looked eerily life-like. The costume *felt* like it was his body now, and his movements in the mirror looked incredibly perfect. He could even feel his ears and all three tails!

Still on all fours, Keagan came closer to the mirror. A quick inspection of his body confirmed that he had not been transformed. He could still see the costume's seams and imperfections. He was still breathing, and that implied that he still had living organs beneath the fake fur. In fact, when he poked at himself he could **feel** his human body underneath. Somehow, the idea that he was supposed to be human seemed alien to him.

With everything that had happened, Keagan wasn't sure if he should feel excited or terrified. Either the costume was malfunctioning and had driven him insane, or he had stumbled upon something amazing. Possibly both.

With great effort, Keagan tried again to stand upright. The costume didn't seem to be fighting him physically, rather it was as if something in his head was telling him that a fox should be on all fours. After fighting the urges for a few moments he said to himself, "I'm not a fox, I'm a kitsun... a human." The fact that he had to correct himself in mid sentence was more than a bit worrying.

Suddenly, the urges that he was fighting seemed to lessen, as if in response to his statement. As he unsteadily stood up on his hind legs, Keagan couldn't help but wonder if the suit had somehow understood him. While he had already made some guesses about how the suit's senses had replaced his own, he couldn't even begin to imagine how the thing could have its own awareness.

Now that he was on his own two feet, Keagan looked at himself in the mirror again and saw a kitsune looking back. Now that the suit had completely synced up with him, it looked uncannily real, thanks to how naturally it was moving. His ears and eyes moved naturally, and his tails were twitching to match his mood. The suit's chest was even moving perfectly with his breathing. He should have been terrified that he was wearing a malfunctioning magical device,

but instead Keagan found that he was overjoyed. The sensation of being a kitsune... it was just as wonderful as he had imagined. For a moment he couldn't help but pose in the mirror and admire his new form.

After a few moments, that sense of wonder was replaced with worry. Something didn't feel right, like his thoughts were clouded somehow. Was the suit affecting how he was thinking? After taking one last look at himself in the mirror, Keagan reached behind his back to open up the suit's zipper.

A sudden wave of fear and anxiety hit Keagan as he found the zipper. After a moment, he realized that these emotions were not his, but rather seemed to be coming from something else. As hard as it was for him to believe, the only explanation that he could come up with was that these feelings were coming from the costume! It really was alive somehow, and it was afraid of being removed. Feeling its fear made Keagan hesitate, but he gritted his (or rather the costume's) teeth and decided to ignore it.

The sense of fear changed into outright panic as Keagan got ready to pull the zipper open, and he began to feel conflicted. On one hand he wanted to get this thing that he didn't understand off of him before it did anything else to him. On the other paw, if it was his creation then wasn't he responsible for it? The real problem was that he had no way of knowing whether or not these thoughts were his. There had already been far too many signs that his mind was being affected by this thing somehow.

After hesitating for what seemed like an eternity, Keagan sighed and took his paw off of the zipper. "Alright, tell you what," Keagan finally said out loud, hoping that the suit would understand him. "I'll leave you on for a bit longer, as long as you don't do anything else weird to me, got it?" A feeling of happiness hit him in response, confirming that the thing really did understand him.

Hoping that he wasn't going crazy or making a mistake, Keagan decided that if he couldn't take the suit off he would just have to look over his notes to figure out what had happened. At least a kitsune such as himself should have an easy time solving a problem that involved magic...

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