

Chapter 1

There's Something in the Water

How do you choose to look at the world?

How do you construct meaning in your everyday?

You do it the way everyone else does. You do it through your window to the mainstream – you know it all through all of places you've been, every tactile pleasure you've had, every wound you've grazed, every frustrated thought that has coursed through your cerebrum, up to and including all of the various plasma screens you've been acclimated to in your daily ventures.

You start doing it the second you're born.

Here we have a man, who has no means of exploring his universe because he was never given the right. He was born in the 20th century, and silently perished in the 21st. Though he was granted the will to survive, he was born in a system that was unwilling to grant him the means to thrive.

As he grew older, he had no way of distinguishing between the real and what it is he had simply imagined was real. Every day, he looked down at his own hands, the hands he used to eat, and to work, and to interact with objects and people, but really, he wasn't seeing himself at all. He only saw the

His mind became his cage, and he slowly broke down from the inside. He dreamed of going far, far away for most of his life, but all of the opportunities he needed were meant for someone else. He had lost a lottery, and he was being punished for it. There were many like him.

[this monologue goes on further]

From the ones who waded through the Earth's oceans a few centuries ago because they felt that their tombs had been made there ahead of time, by those who came before them, way before they had even been born into the world,

To the ones who were welded from the lead that forms our beaches and the liquid that flows freely through our canals of ketamine, the primordial soup

from which nature brandished its life energy for many of the citizens who have dwelled here,

To those whose theatrics shook the human population through the advent of modernity and all of its trappings, keeping them alleviated and energized as the jaws of its rapid death machine created struggle and competition that threatened to tear them apart,

To they, who sung from the heart of the links between their love and the zeitgeist in which they were operating in, wielding the charisma and sophistication of superhumans as they roamed the Earth, tour by tour, brandishing an allure so irresistible that it sometimes led people to their deaths,

To us, the generation with a responsibility to always understand, and to always think, lest the world returns to a state of pernicious illusion like it was for so many people, for so long.

Today is an important day, because you are all entering a new phase of your lives.

~~~

After that, the one person who was sitting in the back row stood up and gave her applause. The clapping was faint, almost inaudible from that distance, but loud enough to be appreciated nonetheless.

“Wow”, she said.

“You must’ve used every single word in the thesaurus for this one.”

That was her way of saying she liked it.

Franco gave their one-woman audience a smile, followed by a long, spirited bow.

In a way, that’s the most important part of the whole thing; the bow. It’s got to be nice, slow, and expressive. Do it too quickly, or too casually, and the illusion is broken. At that point, your sincerity as a performer fails to shine through, no matter how good the rest of the show was...

~~~

It was a clear day on Ketamaia. A rarity, if anyone had ever seen one. Most days of the month, you would expect to see the gutter system working overtime to funnel the rain-liquid into all of the right enclaves so it would make room for where the humans had built their modest communities. Overtime compared to most planets, as most off-Earth cities hadn't yet needed an aqueduct every square kilometer in order to avoid regular floods.

The biggest culture shock for an earthling was realizing what the rain liquid looked like when you viewed it in a still body, like a lake or a puddle. The liquid was opaque, and a marble texture streaked across it. It looked like a strange mix of white oil paint and laundry detergent, and because of that it felt odd to watch as the Ketamaian fauna drank very readily from it.

The perpetual dampness was hard to get used to for someone who was used to rain in the rural streets of the north of Italy. Franco didn't have the reflex of bringing a raincoat with them on off-planet trips and that proved to be a big mistake on this one.

"So what was that you said about always being ready for the unexpected?", Anja asked.

Yup, here we go. Franco dared to criticize her for waiting until the morning of their flight to finish packing and now she's never going to let them hear the end of this.

Honestly though, it's not so bad. The trip to get here was so long that if she weren't there to make it interesting, they would have been very bored otherwise.

This was a week ago. The duo had made it to the Education Centre, dripping wet. They were two peas in the same idiot pod, standing awkwardly on the welcome mat in front of the humanoid entrance.

That was their first impression. Completely wet, formally introducing themselves to the entire Ketamaian branch of the School Board. Trying to impress them seemed like it was a bust after that. But when they later learned about what the group thought of the encounter, they were told that everyone in the room found it to be pretty funny. Franco didn't really know if that was good or bad.

“There are worse ways to break the ice”, said Anja, as the two ran back to the visitor’s lodge after the meeting. Franco couldn’t wait to shake off the rain and to borrow an umbrella for the rest of their time here.

~~~

So on the day where it didn’t rain, Franco decided to spend the whole thing inside where they didn’t even notice that there was a clear sky going on.

At this point, Franco’s audition was only two days away. The two stepped back into their room at the lodge after finishing the dress rehearsal. Franco then immediately, before even taking off their shoes, fell face-first into the soft duvet of the bed.

“You want something to drink?”, said Anja, in an attempt to soothe her friend.

“Mmmh.”

“Well, okay, let me know when you’re done with that.”

[the two have a dumb argument over who gets to pick the movie for them to watch together on the one evening that Franco wasn’t busy rehearsing or doing other work]

“Perhaps one day you will stop that disrespectful prodding and recognize my superior intellectual prowess.”, they said, dramatically tilting their chin upward and away from her before starting to walk in the direction of the lodge room’s mostly-vacant, freshly cleaned desk table.

“Oh shit! Franky’s busting out the thesaurus again!”

“Okay shut up for a second. I need to call the theatre people.”

“How come?”

Franco grabbed the pen and notepad from the corner of the desk.

“Good evening, um- Is there a studio available all day tomorrow?”, they said to the person over the phone. “...Yeah that’s perfect, thanks.”

After the call’s end, they turned back towards the bed and

“I’m not satisfied with the act yet. I need to do some re-writes and practice the whole thing again.”

“Oh. Really? You seemed like you had it, though.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“”

They could hear Anja moving along the bed. She sat down next to them

“You know I’m just hardcore messing with you, right?”

Franco opened one eye just to stare at her blankly for a moment.

She just smiled back.

“You remembered to send out your order for an umbrella?”

Franco’s eye went back to being closed.

“Not yet. I’ll do it in a bit.”

“You need to do it before morning. They only come for the mail once a day around here.”

“I know.”

“It takes thirty minutes to get there by foot.”

“What’s your point?”

“Hey Mr. Intellectual. Night lasts two hours on Ketamaia.”

Franco sat up.

“...really?”

“You didn’t notice?”

“ ...”

“You didn’t notice the sunset and sunrise.”

“ .....

“Really? How long were you stuck in the theater?”

“uh, well- I spent a while practicing because I really wanted to get it right.”

“When did you go to sleep.”

“I think it was... eleven? Eleven o’ clock our time. I’m still really tired though.”

She stared at him for a second.

“Eleven o’clock last night, or the night before?”, she asked.

“...Eleven.”

“Did you stay up all night?”

[she chews them out for staying up two nights in a row all because they wanted to obsess over the details of their act for their audition. She also grills them further because they were planning on working even more right before the deadline instead of resting. Franco ends up apologizing, and promises to rest before the big day. They also promise to go visit around the planet with her after it’s over.]

They missed the chance to do it when they were sixteen, when they picked the Philippines over Ketamaia for their annual trip.

~~~

A person’s first voyage usually makes for an especially good story.

Franco was born with a couple of health issues, so they had theirs a bit later than most kids.

At age 6 they were a year behind on all of the other kids in their town. At school, everyone was talking about how Sadaf from just down the street, during her first trip off-planet, had gotten bitten so hard by a penthesilhean caterpillar that it left a big mark on her arm. Little Franco got scared,

because one of the kids at school told them that all bugs were poisonous. They had never even seen what these caterpillars looked like, and they already knew they hated them. Franco had to be dragged across the floor kicking and screaming by their mother because they refused to leave the house and get on the shuttle. It took the combined strength of her and her sister to un-pry them from the doorway.

When they got there though, their tune changed completely.

Not right away, of course. They were grumpy for a bit, as kids tend to be. Even though they got a say in what planet they were going to visit, they were annoyed that the one they were most excited to live on for a month was the one with... *the caterpillars*. But it was eye-opening to see what the planet had to offer, and for that matter, what their own planet had to offer.

Doubly so once they got older and they were more and more allowed to choose their destinations and the communal roles that they would take part in while they were staying there. One day, it all just clicked as to why they didn't like their name and why it felt much better to use a different one.

Because as they later figured out, humans owe certain things to one another, and to the non-humans that surround them as well. And it's only because of these trips that they had a chance to know what that really meant. You can only understand something so well by learning about it from a distance. The history lessons they received along their schooling revealed that this wasn't always the case, and that peoples' views of the world and themselves throughout history were often times extremely skewed and damaging.

It was a bit of a weird time for humans in the 21st century, and compared to how things were now, that was saying something.

And to ameliorate things, most governments on Earth needed to take actions to reverse this mass alienation. But this only began to work when they figured out that the majority of people on the planet needed to be freed from the stranglehold of financial insecurity and of intergenerational abuse cycles to do so.

Eventually, those who became bored with the insincere artificiality of advertising and consumerism for its own sake stopped partaking in it

altogether when they stopped being forced to partake in it just to survive, or to aspire to gain a semblance of self-esteem that they wouldn't have been able to find otherwise.

A new educational tradition was born on Earth, and most places had their own version of it: History Plays.

The idea was to teach each generation about what performance meant to the culture, and to explain why theatrics, in their best form, can inform people in their schooling.

Learning about turbulent, alienated populations in history made Franco horrified. The pain of not knowing who you are, and not having the means to learn about yourself filled them with an intense sadness. They couldn't imagine what it would've been like to never have had the chance to choose their life path. Especially as they grew older and learned more about themselves from experiences they could only have had because they were able to leave their rural hometown and not be confined to anything but their own dreams and ambitions.

If they had the ability to help people make that process of self-discovery even better, then Franco would gladly put their health through the grinder for it.

Not that they would be able to, really, since not sleeping for over 24 hours is illegal in most places.

And also because Anja would kill them if they tried to do it again.

~~~

Practice had paid off.

The School Board had given Franco an enthusiastic round of applause. All that was left now was to wait for them to make their decisions. They walked away, content that they had done what they could to

It could take weeks, even months for them to decide, so in the meantime, they had plenty of free time to visit the Ketamaian locales. Maybe they could even watch a sunset or two.



[proper paragraph that starts Anja's arc, by showing that her body, like many humans like her, is mutating. She's on board with it because she's one of the people questioning the value of maintaining a completely "human" appearance. Franco is aware that this is slowly happening and is worried that she's going to lose who she is. The chapter ends on this, implying that this will be a central concern of later chapters.]