

e x u r b l a

SUBLIMIA SYNDROME

THE FIRST TECHNOLOGY WAS LANGUAGE

There, it's done. The baby is well and the mother rejoices. It was not the easiest birth I have attended, nor the hardest either.

The mother's name is Duma. She is a middling-size world, more land than ocean. Her harvests are many, her disasters are few. An unremarkable planet populated by a species of human you would recognise as human.

But their world-language, Duman – it is known as the most specific in all the galaxy.

Sotieti: the electric field that hangs over your morning when someone you like will be visiting later.

Fasimit: the fear that one's joyful days are all behind now.

And *svobodnoto*: the freedom that comes with learning to let go; of people, of oneself, of the future.

It is my turn to let go.

I have been on this world five standard years. Even now the day-night cycle feels unnaturally long. I am used to twenty-two-hour spins, not thirty-five, and usually wake at dawn. So have I woken this morning, my last morning,

I suppose it is sad in some sense that Duma will never be a star-faring world, will never join the Symposium of Humankind because of my actions here. But think of what is gained for that. They will remain forever safe on the edge of human space, forever protected in obscurity; a hermit pottering about his garden, perfectly content for not knowing of the horrors beyond his gate.

Up into the middle passes of the mountain now – those flowers and scents native to most worlds given planetary intermingling and colonisation thousands of years ago: dogwood, linden, jasmine and oh, truth. Let it be truth that lingers as the final perfume of this world. For in my own small way I have come to spread truth here, and while the Dumans won't remember me, though no one here shall ever know my name, their world is a child I have delivered, or a tree-trapped cat I have saved from a fatal fall, or a flower, mottled and near death that I, in my brilliant and ingenious way, have—

But the airship isn't moving. I see it there, still sleeping at the Scholar's Guild, no sign of departing for the House of Parliament. I wait a little longer. Nothing.

Why.

Why?

Why—



—was that the day my life changed? So it happened upon graduation that us generalists, twenty and twenty-one years old, were allowed to specialise and choose our majisters to study under. And this was how I found myself in the Theoretics Tower of the Sociographer's College, one hundred floors up. I had visited several majisters already

(it was a student's privilege to choose their teacher, not the other way around) and was on my way to meet another when I passed through a courtyard of rosebushes.

I came upon two caretakers, a young man and woman, hurling insults at each other. The dialect was impossible to understand, but clearly all was not well. I thought of intervening, then remembered I was nobody here.

I hurried on through the cloisters and hallways in search of a destiny. Turning a corner, I spied a woman throwing what looked to be fruit off a balcony and into the courtyard below.

“May I ask what you're doing?” I said.

“Day drinking,” the woman replied. Students and majisters were staring up at her display, perplexed.

“I'm sorry?”

“Melon smash, specifically. Three parts gin, two parts orange juice.” She raised her finger to me as though it were a jewel to be regarded or a bomb to be defused, added, “And one part melon.”

“Why are you *dropping* the melons?”

“The recipe specifies they must be opened by gravity, and I'm a stickler for details, but then I wrote the recipe after all.”

“Right,” I said and made to leave.

“You're going the wrong way,” she said, nodding to a chamber where, behind a half-closed door, I spied a sandpit filled with scribbled glyphs.

“I have no interest in word games,” I said as politely as I could.

“But what if they're interested in you?” She threw another melon to its inertial death below. I went to bid the mad woman goodbye once more. She said, “A year's tuition to find out if we like each other.”

“What should you like to do with it, sceptical little gosling?”

I glanced about. In the courtyard below, still among the rosebushes, were the same bickering caretakers as before.

“Solve that,” I said.

She only shrugged and returned to launching fruit off the balcony.

I spent the day in dusty halls learning of distant worlds and their troubles, of the great Symposium of Humankind and its civilising reach across the stars. I met with pragmatists and narrativists, all promising that their methods were the most powerful in maintaining galactic unity. I pretended my hardest at being an adult, kept my robe uncreased and waited for my turn to speak, until I pretended so hard that it simply became my nature, which I suppose is how adulthood happens anyway.

In the end I settled on enrolling with the pragmatists, arranged to study under a pleasant enough majister there, and saw myself growing comfortably old and sagely in those ornate chambers, well-rested and well-fed.

It was evening when I passed back through the rosebush courtyard bound for the student dormitories. Two figures were engaged in a passionate kiss beneath an orb light. I tried to ignore their garish display until I noticed their shawls. It was the screaming caretakers from the morning.

I raced up the stairwell again to the mad woman's chamber. She was standing above the sandpit now, a stick in her hand, a scribble of glyphs before her.

“The shouting couple, how did you fix that?” I asked.