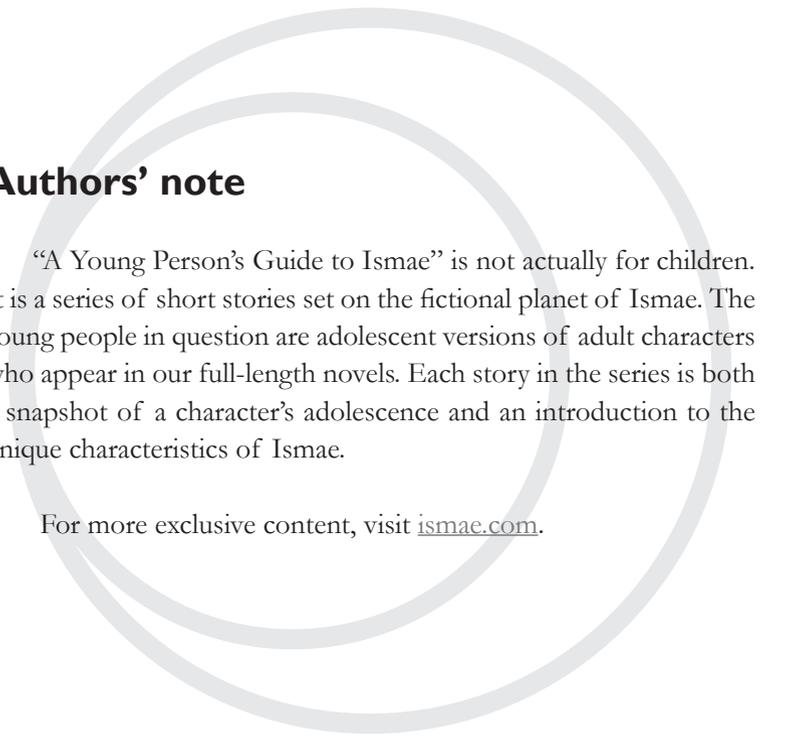


# **A YOUNG PERSONS' GUIDE TO COIN**

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## **Authors' note**

“A Young Person’s Guide to Ismae” is not actually for children. It is a series of short stories set on the fictional planet of Ismae. The young people in question are adolescent versions of adult characters who appear in our full-length novels. Each story in the series is both a snapshot of a character’s adolescence and an introduction to the unique characteristics of Ismae.

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# SCHMALCH



## 2081 MEDIBAR 18

“You see how she looks amused on this side?” The old karju man leaned closer to the little boy he’d been sitting with all aftermid. A single silver Calla lay smiles-up in his palm.

Schmalch had barely missed which pocket the coin had come from. He thought it was the one patched to the front of the old man’s jacket, but it might have been the pants. He kept both eyes on the man; he wouldn’t miss which pocket it went into when the old man reversed his trick.

The little boy nodded, reddish karju curls bouncing like somebody’d topped him with rusty, broken bedsprings.

With one knobby finger, the old man flipped the coin to scowls. The engraved face of Calla Billidoc glowered up at them from its tarnished surface.

The little boy made an “ooo” face.

“And here she’s stern.” The old man pushed the wire-rimmed cheaters up his nose. “Do you know why?”

The little boy shook his head. He had to be about Schmalch’s age in years, but he was karju. They didn’t develop as quickly. Didn’t die as quickly either. And they got to stay in the orphanage so much longer just because they took longer to grow up. They didn’t “burn like the Duin’s torch” the way Elder Sriree had said pukas like Schmalch did.

Schmalch shifted on the puka steps behind the bar and took a sip of his brew. Garl had done a better job with this batch. It tasted less like feet than the previous ones.

“After the Cataclysm, Moid and Calla Billidoc were the first to set out in search of trade,” the old man said.

The melody engine switched from soft, sweet tune to a pounding one. On the stage across the room, the dancer went from slow sway to a bounce-and-spin rhythm.

The old man raised his voice. “Moid was the adventurous type, already a sailor, you catch, young sir?”

The boy blinked.

“He didn’t want to stay on land...” The old man swept an arm over the room. “Not with all that water between him and the unexplored. Calla Billidoc was a patient, understanding wife, but she was also smart.” He tapped his temple with a callused fingertip. “She knew they’d be gone a long, long time, so she packed everything she could find, every morsel she could buy and crammed it into the hold of their ship.”

“Bloody douse,” mumbled Garl. He stood beside Schmalch, tall and broad and smelling more than a little like cooked meat, drying glass after glass behind the bar.

He’d been watching the pair at the little table by the bar with growing intensity for a while. In their hours at the Bitter Barnacle, they’d bought only one round while the old man sat there telling story after story. Taking up Garl’s table. Schmalch didn’t mind it so much. History hadn’t exactly been the focus of the education given to him at the Spriggan temple. Still, he knew some of the stories, others were new and kind of interesting.

Occasionally, someone stopped by the old man’s table, spoke for a moment, and dropped a copper or two on the lyntyyl card that lay between them, the two of forest, or what Garl called “the badgers.” The old man gave them his gratitude, scooped up the coins, and the stranger moved on. Garl didn’t like it. With each new story, he

grumbled more. And with each new story, Schmalch grew more anxious.

“So Moid and Calla left out from the island we call Locnor and headed west,” the old man said. “Before the Cataclysm, those were mountains. Then pow! The water came and a little crooked row of their tips was all that’s left. First thing Moid and Calla came to—almost right away—was the Cay Nors, one little dot of land after another. Can you imagine that?” He bopped the little boy’s nose with his finger and wiggled his droopy white-blond mustache.

The little boy giggled.

Schmalch had seen this kind of situation before in his brief time at the Bitter Barnacle. He’d seen it get ugly, too. Usually it was the customer who walked out cradling his broken fingers or dislocated shoulder, though once it had been Garl. It had been really cold that night, but Schmalch and Dibbit and Flerf had dragged Garl’s, big body down to the Prick and rowed him out to Helik’s ship. The local physic kept Garl overnight for an ossein treatment then shipped him back to the Barnacle. He’d been a real fid twister for quarterns after that. Only when he broke that lady’s nose did his mood return to normal.

“Spouting all that bosh?” Garl snarled. “Talking ‘bout how the twitching Billidoc brought trade to the islands. Saviors and geniuses and pioneers and all that. What’d you think was gonna happen after the moon went poof and everyone found themselves tits-deep in the sea?” The big karju swished his broad hand back and forth in the air, making the towel he held dance. “Vazztain, they need pimee fruits, Norian’s got ‘em, but they don’t got the wok spiders and they need that silk. A douse could figure it out.”

Schmalch nodded, though he was pretty sure Garl neither noticed nor cared.

“The Vazztain, they’re up to *their* tits in wok spiders, right?”

The old man was talking, but Schmalch couldn’t hear him over Garl’s deep rumble.

“And Orasians, they need twitching everything, eh?” Garl chuckled.

Schmalch relaxed just a whit.

Garl put down one glass, picked up another. “Nah, all the Billidoc do for us ordinary lot is drive up prices with their tetchy little Billidoc Coalition standard. They sail into port on fancy bumboats, bragging how ‘our home is everywhere’ and tell us we have to trade by their rules.” He made a rude sound with his mouth, an equally rude gesture with his rag hand then lapsed back into his usual grim silence.

Unsure if response was required, Schmalch grunted. When it was clear no more would be said, he returned his attention to the old man, straining to zero in on the old man’s voice over the others buzzing through the Barnacle tonight. He hoped he hadn’t missed any important parts of the story.

“So they came with them,” the old man was saying. “They were alone for more than a quartern when they arrived at the little isle at the southern tip of Ukur. They traded food and clothing, tools and teakettles. When they left, though, some of the pilgrims from the Cay Nors stayed, but guess what?”

Schmalch caught himself before asking, “What?”

“What Granpap?” the little boy said.

“Some of the people from Ukur came along instead.”

The little boy clapped.

A big-bubbed karju woman who’d been headed for the bar veered off and stopped at their table, one hand fishing in her pocket for coins.

“Oh, lash that down!” Garl pulled the secrikosh bat from under the bar. “This feck is gonna end.”

The melody engine switched again, this time something lilting and happy. The dancer’s pace shifted to something close to skipping.

“They stayed only as long as necessary before leaving Ukur and the Middle Sea,” the old man smiled and nodded at the woman. “Do

you know what island they came to ne—”

Garl stomped up to them, fingers wrapping and unwrapping around the narrow bat. “What can I get for you?” he asked in his best fake-nice voice.

The woman left two coppers on the badgers card, waggled fingers at the little boy and hurried back to her seat.

“Nothing, young fellow,” the old man replied, “we are *still* fine with our drinks.” He tapped his half-empty glass of water then the little boy’s completely empty myylantyl fizz. Schmalch was pretty sure Garl hadn’t put any liquor in it.

“Allow me to be more clear,” Garl’s voice was less pleasant. “What *else* can I get for you?”

The old man’s eyes rolled up, his wrinkles arranged in annoyance. “Nothing for the moment. Gratitude.”

Garl leaned hard on the table, knuckles first, and stuck his flushed face in the old man’s wrinkled one. His mostly bald scalp was shiny in the light that dangled above. Schmalch had learned the hard way not to compare his own completely hairless, olive pate to Garl’s slightly fuzzy agate-pink one. At least not out loud.

“Listen you old pink boy, you and your precious little gup here...” Garl slammed the secrikosk bat into the wood in front of the child.

The little boy winced and slowly wound himself up toward a good cry. The old man remained perfectly still.

“...have been taking up a whole twitching table for too twitching long. You need to order something now—and I recommend something *very* expensive—or you need to vacate before I throw you out into the sea to find out what really happened to your blessed Moid and Calla.”

The old man stood up, straightened his jacket, and reached for the two of forest card laying on the table. Garl grabbed his wrist.

“It’s my badgers now,” Garl said.

The old man nodded and tapped the tip of his walking stick

against the brown-tiled floor. At his signal, the little boy hopped up. He jerked his arm from Garl's grasp, took the boy's hand, and walked out.

A buzzing cluster of chivori ladies settled into the newly vacated steel chairs and ordered a round of Garl's "thirsty luscas," one of the most expensive drinks on the menu.

Schmalch relaxed. That much coin coming in would put Garl in a better mood. He might let Schmalch skip some of the more unpleasant tasks tonight.

"You see that, puka?" Garl asked Schmalch as he settled back into place behind the Barnacle's bar. "That is how you rid yourself of undesirables."

Schmalch scanned the room. Pretty much all of Garl's customers looked undesirable to him in one way or another.

He slapped the two of forest onto the table. "Here, puka, have your first badgers. I'm sure it won't be your last."

Schmalch slid the card across the bar and set his mug on the edge so it wouldn't blow away. It was from a more comical deck than he'd seen previously. Usually, the middle picture just looked like regular woodland badgers, but in a few like this deck, the artist had dressed them up and pictured them like the two Duin, Piru and Tokimer.

"Put it out when you want to beg," Garl grabbed a wet glass and his rag. "No doubt you'll be Piru's gudgeon someday."

Elder Tamerlynn had taught them about the badgers, mostly to beware them. On the card, two little badgers looked up at Schmalch in a way that might have been grinning. One wore spectacles; that was Tokimer, if he remembered the Elder's lessons right. She'd said the really desperate among Spriggans sometimes turned to Tokimer, challenging him to a battle of wits. They always lost and were cursed to a lifetime of bad luck.

Schmalch tapped the drawing of the other badger, Piru, who was dressed fancier than his twin brother. He was the one everyone

at the orphanage always blamed their bad behavior on. It was Piru, not one of the Spriggan kids, who stole that bauble or told that lie.

“That old man didn’t have the Billidoc insignia anywhere on him,” Garl’s eyes jumped for customer to customer as he spoke. It was like watching a shark study its options from a full school. “Just begging away money meant for my kitty.”

Schmalch slid the card into his pocket and nodded. Tonight had been the most Garl had spoken to him about anything other than work since he’d taken the job here right out of the Spriggan Temple. The Bitter Barnacle’s barkeeper and owner only hired the best, Headmistress Reinert had told him. That was right before she sent Schmalch out into the city with five Callas, a toolkit, a bedroll, two changes of clothes, and a new pair of shoes. The shoes gave him blisters.

Dibbet had corrected the Headmistress’ lie. Another puka had died working for Garl. Schmalch was being released as an adult. The only reason he’d been hired was convenience. He was fine with that. It put a roof over his head for at least half the day, plus reduced cost on food and drink. He had it better than some of his old mates.

The melody engine went silent for a moment as a new dancer took the stage.

“You want another one, puka?” Garl asked.

Schmalch looked at his empty brew mug.

“If you’re not drinking, you better get out there a mingle. I don’t keep you around for company.”

Schmalch had scaled three of Garl’s customers so far this evening. No one’d noticed yet. He’d had his eye on this real pretty chivori lady with a chrysoprase on her ring big enough to plug Schmalch’s left nostril. He watched her move and talk. She still had her legs under her. After a few more thirsty lusca, he might be able to slip it right off her finger.

He looked up at Garl. “Yeah, one more.”

Garl filled the mug and plopped it down in front of Schmalch,

foam spilling over the edge. “That’s two more coppers off your take tonight.”

Schmalch nodded. Garl got the shark’s share of the take for letting Schmalch work here. Discounting that and his drinks for the evening, he should still have thirty, maybe thirty six coppers, depending on how Garl appraised things. If the Barnacle had a really good evening, he might go to forty and give Schmalch a whole Calla. A couple more nights like this and he could rent a room for a quartern instead of unpacking his bedroll under the docks outside.

“That old man was beached,” Garl said. “Left the Billidoc years ago, but he still comes in here every few quarterns with that gup, talking ‘bout what his precious scion did for the world. If you have to listen to that drek from one’a the Billidoc Coalition, pick one that’s not beached. They have coin and aren’t afraid to show it.” He put down one glass, touched his snoot with his finger with a knowing nod, and picked up another. “You listen to me.”

Schmalch nodded, it made sense to him.

“You know how else to spot a customer with coin?” Garl asked, face pointed out toward the room, eyes still wandering.

Schmalch wasn’t certain he was the one being asked, but he answered anyway. “No.”

“Raiders. Look for the raider clan patches. You know what they are, right?”

Schmalch nodded. You didn’t steal from bigger, meaner thieves. That was one of the lessons they taught at the orphanage.

Garl snorted. “Glad to see the Spriggans aren’t getting lazy in their training.” He pointed to a karju man halfway across the room. “We got a group of Yenderot here tonight. See that fella’s tattoo?”

A mixed group sat around one of the longer tables near the stage. Somewhere on each of them was green ship on a yellow field, a black blade sticking through the sail.

“Barnacle sees a lot of their kind what with them prowling the Middle Sea. Always good for four rounds at minimum. Then there’s

the Suul with their red kris and the Bankal, who just fly black, but they haunt the Twilight and the Dawn, so we don't see them so much in the Haven." He put down the glass and picked another. "None of 'em come into town unless they've made a haul. That means they want drink and a good joggle and they got the coin to pay for it. Yeah, puka, the raider clans make for good coin at the bar. Do not go picking them, though, unless you want to pay the price of Sax." He tapped beside one eye.

That was something every Spriggan knew: Raiders put out one eye on anyone caught stealing, the way their patron Saxelyt got her eye shot out.

"Knew a man once who was dumb enough to lose 'em both. What in the depths would make you go back for more?" Garl fell silent, shaking his head.

The buzz of the crowd and squeak of Garl's cloth lulled Schmalch. He leaned against the bar, gaze drifting over the main room to the stage where the current dancer gyrated. She was missing teeth and her skin looked like the leather of Garl's vest, but a small circle of loyal customers still lurked around the stage. When she teased a gawker's nose with the tip of her zoet-grown tail, Schmalch went back to his mark. The chivori lady he'd been watching seemed a little more tipsy than the last time he'd looked. She took longer to blink and leaned slightly to one side. Or he might just be imagining it.

Schmalch took another sip of his brew. Bubbles flew up his long nose and he sneezed. Brew foam sprayed.

Garl laughed so hard he had to put down his glass and rag. A few customers looked over to see what was so funny. They joined in.

Schmalch wiped the foam off his face with the back of his sleeve. His cheeks burned pine with embarrassment.

The melody engine kicked back on, the new dancer began his own series of convulsions and attention shifted away from the foolish puka.

Garl choked off his laughter and wiped his eyes with the drying rag. “With a nose like that, it’s a wonder you didn’t empty the whole glass, puka. Best laugh I’ve had all day.” He handed Schmalch the rag. “I gotta empty the bilge. Dry a few for me while I’m gone. I’ll give you a finger of zhuuve if you do ten while I’m in the lav.”

Schmalch grabbed the rag, scooted his puka steps closer to the sink, and started drying.

“Don’t you steal any brew,” Garl called back as he crossed the room.

Schmalch made it through four glasses before the storytelling old man returned.

“Pardon, young man, I don’t mean to be a bother,” his smooth voice said.

Schmalch flinched and looked up from his work. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“I know, but it seems I left one of my playing cards before I went.”

“Really, Garl’ll break your hands if he catches you here.” Schmalch put down the fifth glass and grabbed the sixth. “He loves that bat.”

“I just want my playing card back, Mister...?”

“Schmalch.”

“Do you know where he put my playing card, Mister Schmalch? It’s the two of forest. The badgers, some of the more superstitious call it.”

Schmalch bit his lip. The badgers was the first thing anyone had ever given Schmalch since the Spriggan Elders—and they *had* to give him stuff. He put down glass six and moved to seven.

Garl said he would need the card someday, too. Schmalch shifted on the steps.

“Young man?” the old man asked. His eyes looked concerned behind his spectacles.

On the far side of the room, Garl swung open the door to the

lav.

“He’s coming,” Schmalch said. “You better go. Hurry.”

“I can’t leave without that card.” The old man was calm, weirdly comfortable with imminent hand breaking. “I can’t afford a new deck and my grandson needs to eat.”

Garl was halfway across the room. Schmalch switched glass seven for eight.

“We don’t all have paying jobs like you, Mister Schmalch.”

Schmalch dropped the rag and fished the card from his pocket. He gazed at it for one long heartbeat before sliding it across the bar. “Now go before he breaks both our hands.”

The old man took the card. “Gratitude, young man, the Duin surely will take you too to B’hintal Dadeyah.”

“Get out of here,” Schmalch hissed.

The old man hobbled away, walking stick ticking on the tile with each hurried step.

Schmalch switched glass eight for nine than nine for ten.

“Only nine glasses, puka?” Garl said. With one foot, he scooted the puka steps out of his way.

Schmalch grabbed the counter with his rag hand to steady himself on the little stool.

Garl snatched glass number ten from Schmalch’s hand and clicked his tongue. “Looks like no zhuvve for you tonight.” He put down number ten and fished a new one from the sink. “Unless you buy it.”

## Thank you for reading

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