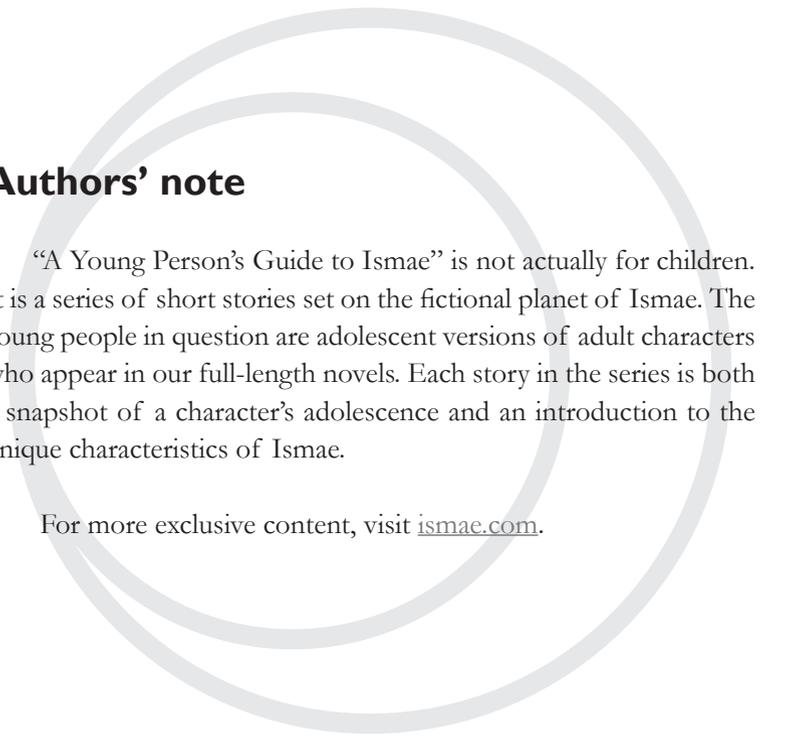


**A YOUNG PERSONS' GUIDE TO
OPOLI**

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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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ALIARA



2055 MEDIBAR 37

Aliara hoisted herself onto the outer sill of Flibuul's window, grabbed the head casing, and scrambled up, free climbing from sill to sill. She'd landed hard on the flagstone patio more than once, but it had been months since her last slip. After the last time she nearly cracked a rib, she'd pilfered one of Orono's precious silver forks. It had taken her hours dangling here, excavating the mortar between bricks until the fork had no tines, but now she had perfect little notches that fit her hands and feet.

She pulled herself onto the sill of the guest room at the back corner of the house, unoccupied at present, and licked dirty crumbs of mortar from her fingertips, spitting them in a glob on the patio below. The balcony loomed overhead. The long supports that spanned its underside made outstanding hand-holds, like sky-skimming versions of the park equipment she'd seen other children playing on.

She adjusted the rucksack strapped to her back. The straps were set a little wide for her young shoulders and wearing it made maneuvering a little more difficult, but the pack was an improvement on carrying things in her pants. Orono hadn't seen fit to give Aliara her own pack, so she scaled one from his long-abandoned hunting gear stowed in the library. Inside, the textbook Syl had loaned her rode along. The accompanying sandwich was courtesy of Flibuul, a

secret treat she looked forward to.

Aliara crouched and leapt from the sill to the first truss beneath the balcony. The giddy rush of risk raced through her chest, her limbs, her head. She grinned at the winding streets of Dockhaven beyond the estate wall, thoroughly unaware of the talented girl climbing her way toward the sky.

When she reached the balcony's edge, she pulled herself up. Feet tucked between stiles, she dangled from the edge of the railing, careful to avoid the study's broad glass doors. Orono probably wasn't inside, but that was always a risk. When she was sure she was alone, Aliara hauled herself onto the top rail—traversing it with an ease of balance circus performers would have envied—grabbed the lip of the roof, and dragged herself up. She belly-crawled over the clay shingles to the peak then rose and danced nimbly along the ridge toward the taunting height of the tower.

Its smooth, tiled walls had been a challenge on her first attempts at climbing it. She'd spent many days sitting on the dormers contemplating the problem. Only after seeing one of the larger seabirds run headlong into the structure, knocking free one of the colorful tiles, had Aliara devised a plan. Using the same battered fork—mostly handle now—she prised off tiles and dug into the coquina beneath. After months of work and the destruction of two other forks, she'd carved out a little path straight up the back of the tall column.

She climbed the tiled tower quickly, heaved herself over the gutter and edged her way to the right groove in the roof. Aliara pulled herself up, settling into the concavity at the base of the purple stripe, and leaned back into the depression created by the roof's swirl shape. Below her, Iruund and Reye worked the grounds, people outside the walls went about their business, and beyond that, the sea did its slow ballet. Above birds dove and squawked in the growing dusk.

It was the only spot where she could be alone and do those

things forbidden by Orono without worry of being caught, things like read and learn. Even Syl couldn't reach her here. The secret privacy had been worth every injury, every condemnation.

She took out the book, *Mechanical Science of the Mucha: A Brief Introduction for the Layman*, described by Syl as being "dry as the Lohaataa Desert." The Mucha lived next door, or rather the association's local headquarters was located there. Orono wasn't one of them, but you wouldn't know that from the way all the Mucha treated him. If they knew how he achieved all his "brilliant zoetic inventions," Aliara wondered if they'd treat him any differently. She doubted it.

"No one cares about one little chivori girl when what I invent makes their lives so much easier," Orono always told her when she protested his experiments or put up any resistance when he ordered her onto the operating table. He was probably right.

She flipped to the chapter she wanted: *Opoli and It's Uses* by Right Sovereign Master Bildvald Rillaag. It sounded like slag reading, but Orono told her she would be scaling some opoli when they visited Elnor next quartern, and she wanted to know more about the substance.

Syl had explained the basics to her one night, pointing out the faint pinkish ring in the sky, the last vestiges of the moon once known as Opoli. The name referred to more than just the moon, he'd told her. After it exploded and the seas rose, fragments of the moon had fallen to Ismae. They called that opoli, too, but with a little "o." The purportedly genius Mucha who'd built the estate next door had figured out how to turn those bits of the moon into power. Now everybody wanted it, but it was so rare that it cost more silver Callas than Aliara had ever seen. It sounded more complicated to filch than that giant copper bowl from Monicene.

"More efficient than chemical batteries," the text read, "less labor-intensive than capacitance power and requiring less maintenance than zoetics, opoli has been a boon to all citizens of Ismae. The ore's

scarcity and volatility, however, have made it a luxury, affordable to only the most privileged among us.”

Aliara already knew all that. She wanted to know if it was safe to touch or if it would burn through a bag. Or through her hand.

She skimmed past the history everyone knew—even as isolated as she was, it was hard not to know, given the constant reminder circling the planet—to the section titled “The Refinement Process and Its Dangers.”

“Sadly, no one was able to successfully harness opoli’s potential energy in a stable form for nearly two millennia. Though some inventors were able to implement the substance as a power source, their work was apt to fail at odd times and, more importantly, was highly unstable, sometimes explosive. In 1928, the Mucha Jodidar Grifmuel developed a refining process, making opoli more broadly accessible. The process, however, is still relatively volatile due to the frequent amalgamation of instable minerals in the opoli ore. Many who do this work, this author included, have lost fingers or hands to the substance. Fortunately, Jodidar’s process minimized the explosive potential, resulting in a far fewer deaths.”

Jodidar—Aliara was pretty sure that was the name of the guy who’d build the estate next door. She looked down at the glass dome that topped the building, a handful of little people skittering around inside, their clothes as bright and garish as the minaret cap she sat on.

“Inventors took to the new substance instantly, finding profligate uses for the power source. The most well-known and visible example of opoli’s power is the Dvedova Express, the rail line constructed by Empress Drenla Vaznau’Merza in the mid-1900s. The line, which spans the Dominion of Chiva’vastezz from the Ritora Doublet in the north to Port Melan in the south, has run for more than one hundred fifty years, stopped only one quarter annually for cleaning and repairs. While that is an achievement in itself, more impressive is that the opoli core powering it has not once been replaced.”

A gull landed in front of Aliara, balanced on the ridge where the roof's green and purple stripes met, and bobbed the hook of its bright-green beak questioningly toward her pack. Aliara pulled the bag closer. She would share her sandwich with no one, especially not some manky gull. It dropped a bit of lime, cursed at her, and flapped off toward the setting sun. More would follow so long as she had food. She unwrapped the sandwich, sniffed it. Fresh-caught scorillion, tomatoes from Reye's garden, a green herb she didn't know the name of, and bread Flibuul made that morning. Orono would be furious if he knew such food was being wasted on her. She nibbled it slowly as she read, savoring every bite.

"Shielding naturally became of great importance as opoli equipment was placed in close proximity to living tissue," the text continued. "While brief bursts of exposure to the substance are harmless, extended exposure can lead to illness and sometimes even death.

"To develop this shielding, the world once again turned to the brilliant minds of the Mucha. The simple answer: lead. Fumber United developed a method of producing small, portable containers in which refined opoli could be stored, even carried close to the body without risk of injury. Storage of unrefined opoli, requires larger containers, which, depending on the sample size, can make it less portable. Fumber produces wheeled cases for that purpose."

Aliara couldn't carry a heavy box when she went to pinch the opoli for Orono, wheeled or otherwise. She hoped she was stealing the refined version.

The author veered into a lengthy discussion of the company and its products. Aliara flipped ahead to the section titled "Applications."

"The most common use of the power source," she read, "is the general operation of Ismae's major cities and manufacturing facilities. Prior to its implementation, the machinery in many factories ran solely on capacitance—colloquially referred to as cap-power. While the introduction of opoli essentially annihilated the

job of ‘power-cog,’ it freed up many employees to perform more practical functions requiring sentient intervention.

“Weapons, naturally, are among the most sought-after items employing opoli. This author has made his career designing and manufacturing a line of pistols powered by the substance. Electromagnetic slide guns, or mag-weapons, had long been powered by simple chemical batteries, requiring frequent replacement. The introduction of opoli created a new breed of firearm, one that requires far less maintenance.”

Aliara studied the photographs and drawings of pistols, rifles, and needlers, their maker’s names and model numbers listed beneath. She’d seen Orono’s guardian of the grounds, Nushgha, with one once, but it hadn’t been as nice as any of these.

She finished the sandwich and tucked its wrapper in the bag, lest the gull return and abscond with it.

A sudden cacophony of voices erupted from the adjacent estate, the Mucha Hall. Bunches of people were fiddling with tents and tables and colorful decorations. They were setting up for another of their fetes. Later tonight, she and Syl could spy on the party from his bedroom window. The Mucha members wore the funniest stuff, still behaving with almost embarrassing dignity. Last time they’d seen a chivori woman with hair colored and styled to look like a wave and a dress that looked like a sweet shop had exploded.

When the tents were up and Aliara could no longer see much from her angle, she returned to the book.

“It is unknown how much opoli hides beneath our seas. What is known is that the highest concentrations, and most potent (and most dangerous) quality, have been found on the island of Cloviist. An astronomical joke on us all given the wild island’s numerous dangers and many previous unsuccessful colonization attempts.”

Aliara closed her eyes and pictured the maps from Syl’s geography textbooks. Cloviist was near the top. It looked like a big ladle. The world history book she’d read a few quarters back said a

lot of important things had happened there. She rolled back through the pages in her mind. The War of Dawn and Twilight ended there. That was the big one. Nobody lived there, though. Supposedly, every time someone tried, they vanished.

The door below slammed. Orono waddled out, leaning heavily on his cane. Nushgha escorted him down the lane, flagged a pedicab, and packed his master inside. They spoke briefly, and the driver pedaled the cab slowly away. Nushgha went back to his room in the servant's cottage.

In a few moments, the estate's front door opened again, and Syl appeared in the courtyard. He scanned the area before looking up, hands cupped around his eyes, squinting against the dying sun. He waved, inviting her to come down and join him.

She glanced at the book's last section, which went on at length about bringing opoli to the masses. Aliara slammed the book shut and returned it to the filched rucksack. She'd learned what she needed to know. The rest didn't matter.

Thank you for reading

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