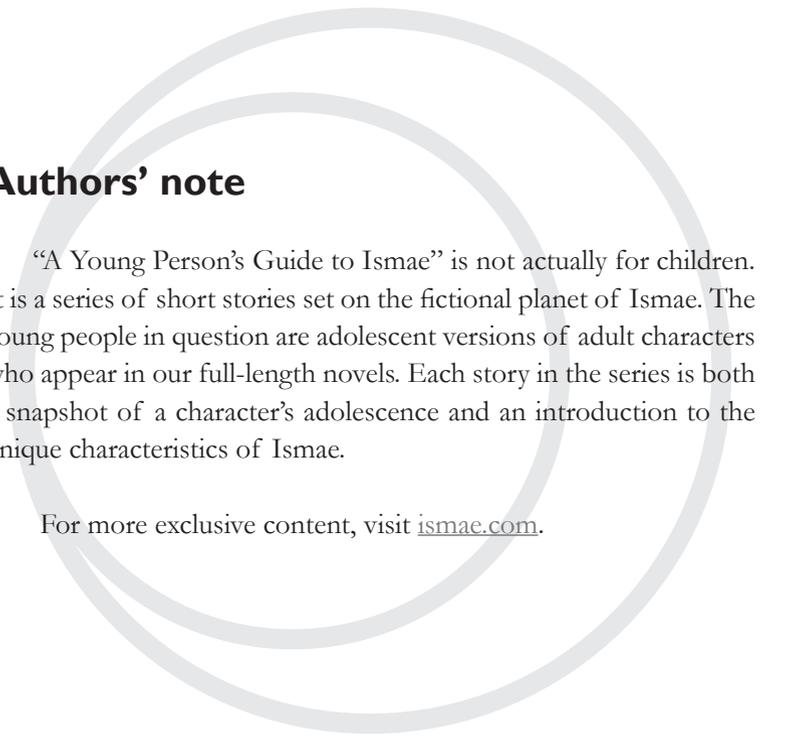


A YOUNG PERSONS' GUIDE TO THE VICTALYASSA

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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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SYLANDAIR



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“Don’t force the coin, let it slide back into your palm.” Reye demonstrated as he spoke. His fingers, still deft despite his age, easily danced the copper into hiding.

Sylandair blinked. It looked so easy.

Though the old groundskeeper had been instructed to educate Syl on the properties of the various herbs growing in the estate’s garden, Reye had spent the morning instead demonstrating what he called a ‘simple sleight.’

Thus far, Syl’s young hands found it anything but simple. The maneuver was awkward and almost purposely pointless. Syl slid his thumb back as he grabbed the copper, instead of dropping into his palm, it bounced off of a large black rock with a dull clink and fell into the fresh mulch.

Syl looked up into Reye’s face, blinking against the aftermid sun. Reye shook his head and smiled, as brilliant against skin as dark brown as the treats Papa Orono doled out when Syl was particularly well-behaved. It was warm and inviting, not like his own. When Syl practiced smiling in the mirror, it was dull; his teeth seemed to vanish against pale-grey skin.

“You’ll get it,” Reye said. “Keep practicing while I trim the fraal.”

Syl fiddled with the copper, nearly succeeding, while Reye squatted in the garden, shears busily clipping feathery clumps.

“The fraal’s a tasty herb,” he said, “Flibuul uses it in your food all the time, but did you know it also has medicinal purposes?”

Syl didn’t have a chance to answer. Both their heads snapped around as the screen door banged open. Nushgha tromped from the kitchen entry into the hazy sunshine and scented the air. Syl turned back to Reye, whose green eyes scrutinized the brutish guardian of the grounds as he strode across the courtyard, whistling off-tone like a bent tin fife.

“Off to find a trull, no doubt,” Reye muttered.

Eyes narrowed, Syl followed Nushgha’s path toward the main gate. His hate for the ragged-haired thug was without bound. “Yesterday he slapped Aliara so hard it split her lip,” Syl said quietly. “Because I didn’t want to practice the wheelharp.”

As though he heard Syl tattling, Nushgha looked their way with his remaining gold eye. Syl froze, expecting the big karju to change course and head directly for them.

Reye squeezed his shoulder gently. “Perhaps we’ll be lucky today, young master, and Erylkin’ll call to him while he’s out.”

Syl considered the statement as Nushgha passed into the street, and after a moment, decided it was as confusing as it initially seemed. “Erylkin?” he asked.

“You know, one of the Victalyassa.”

Syl stared blankly, waiting for the old man to continue.

Reye sighed, shook his head. “He leaves gaping holes in your education, our Master Orono. You’ve not heard of the Victalyassa?”

Syl ran through his lessons mentally and could not recall a mention of the strange word. He shook his head. “Is it one of the Duin?” Syl asked, ears perked in anticipation of one of the groundskeeper’s stories.

“Close, but never so far, Sylandair.” Reye sighed and dumped a handful of fraal into his harvest basket. “The Victalyassa are of the Duar. You *do* know them, right?”

“Yes.” Syl assumed an expression of dark seriousness and

quieted his voice. “Ny’evoo and the Triune.”

Reye shuddered a bit despite the aftermid heat. He nodded. “There are others born of them just like the scion of the Duin—Spriggan, Nys, Swesque, and such.”

Syl sat straighter and grinned. “Yes, I know them. ‘Spriggan slips and slinks and steals. Nys inspires, but repeals. Of Piru and Tokimer, do not trust beyond their fur. Estoas’ heart beats bravery...’”

Reye cut off the oft-repeated rhyme before Syl was even a quarter done.

“Good. He hasn’t completely neglected your foundational studies.”

“I know the rest.”

The old man cut him off with an easy wave of his hand. “We all do, young master.

Syl frowned, dissatisfied, and let the remaining recitation run through his mind.

“The only thing darker than the Victalyassa is the Triune themselves,” Reye said.

Syl nodded slowly. He’d not been able to sleep for nearly a quarter after Papa introduced him to the images and stories about the Triune. The three Duar: Nugeafu, Ruru Yhezzeho, and Sepmat, were attached to one another by their spines, able to communicate only through one another. The horror of the drawings—their twisted bodies merged, a bedlam of limbs, all covered in pale waxy flesh had gnawed at Syl’s mind each time he lay down to sleep. At least twice, he’d slunk downstairs and crawled into bed with Aliara, curling around her, images of Ruru’s faceless skull and perked ears, Nugeafu’s searching eyes and Sepmat’s blind, screaming visage dancing in his head.

Syl wasn’t entirely sure he was ready to hear a story about anything nearly as bad as that. He hoped Reye didn’t have any illustrations.

“They serve the Triune. Nugeafu, specifically,” Reye continued, oblivious to Syl’s anxiety. He rose, basket in hand, and dusted the

dirt from his knees. “But then can anyone really serve one without the other two?”

Syl considered the question only to realize it was rhetorical when the groundskeeper continued without pause.

“Let me see if I can remember my Granpap’s story ... used to know it like that.” He snapped his fingers. For a moment there, the old man stood, staring into the sky, lower lip tucked under his teeth. Finally, he raised an age-knobbed finger. “At the end of the War of Whispers, while Saxelyt nursed her empty socket, while the Duin buried their dead, while the world drown, Nugeafu plotted in his prison deep beneath the new-formed seas. He did not wish to wait for the souls of the damned to come to him, so he would send horrors to collect those that walked the land. He birthed the five Victalyassa to harry mortals and speed them to him before their appointed time.

“With a handful of blood-soaked earth he had taken as a trophy from the last battlefield, Nugeafu formed the most fearsome of his Victalyassa, Dullahan. Never dead, never truly alive and eternally enraged, Dullahan carries his head strapped to his chest with two leather thongs. His eyes, over-large and alight with cruelty, dart about incessantly while his mouth bears a preternatural grin. The rotting, putrid skin drips always from his form.”

Syl gulped and shifted.

“Scary, eh?” Reye asked.

Syl nodded.

“There’s more. Come on, let’s get comfortable.”

Reye ambled over to the old orange tree behind the house and slumped down against its trunk. Syl sat cross-legged beside him and picked at a squishy orange that had dropped to the ground.

“Dullahan rides his horse Lalat, a black and white dapple, the skulls of dead warriors hanging and clacking from its reins and saddle. With his whip forged of a mortal’s spine, he lashes those who will die in battle, marking their inexorable end. Beware him,

young master, as his arrival always heralds the beginning of a bloody war.” Reye waved a warning finger. “And there is naught to be done to stop him. On his approach, all locks, doors, and gates burst open to welcome the vile Duar.”

Syl dropped the punky orange and wiped his sticky grey fingers on the grass.

“Next came Erylkin,” Reye said.

“That’s the one you said should talk to Nushgha.”

The old man chuckled. “I did. I did. She is the mistress of accidents. Her visage is not nearly so terrible as Dullahan’s. She appears as a beautiful, shapely woman. And naked.” Reye winked at Syl as he formed the shape of an hourglass in the air with his hands. “She bled from a wound Nugeafu suffered during the War of Whispers. Ghostly transparent with a glow like lumia algae, Erylkin lures the unsuspecting into danger with her beauty and her call. Sometimes she appears in dangerous locations, inviting her victims to join her—the edge of a cliff, far out to sea, or too near a piece of machinery. Other times, she shows up suddenly or whispers in an ear to distract a victim. Their concentration breaks and...” He clapped his hands together, making Syl jump. “The fiend’s methods are many, young master, but the result is always misfortune. If she does her work properly, it will be lethal. You see why I wish her call upon our guardian?”

Syl nodded. “I hope she lures Nushgha off of Cuckold’s Leap.”

“We all do.” Reye rose, grabbed an orange from the tree and peeled it, alternately eating segments and passing them to Syl.

“Let me see ...” the old man said, eyes fixed on a puffy cloud, as he settled back into position. “I suppose next would be Fext.” His face puckered. “You don’t find many in the civilized world who call the Duar their patron, but Fext ... He is the patron of murderers and assassins. Those Thung Toh, some of the Abog scugs, they call him master. If they call anyone master, I suppose. They say he rides along with them when they do their work.”

Syl had heard of the Abog Union, sometimes one or two showed up to help guard things when Papa had parties. He didn't know the other group, but he didn't want Reye to stop his story. He filed away the name Thung Toh to ask about another time.

Reye spat an orange seed into the dirt. "Did Master Orono teach you about the War of Whispers? How Ny'evoo, drove a blade into the brain of Sywidian?"

Syl nodded enthusiastically. "Sywidian was protecting her daughters. Um ... Omatha and Saxelyt."

"Yes, very good." He pulled a red-striped hankie from his vest pocket, wiped his hands of the juice then blew his nose, taking far too long to clear both nostrils and snoot.

Syl eyed another orange, but waited, more interested in the story than the treat.

"Well, Ny'evoo made off with the knife she used, long and silver with an emerald-inlaid hilt—or so the stories say. Nugeafu begged it from her and, with Sywidian's blood still sticky on the blade, he formed Fext. That he is an enormous snake is repellent enough, but most disturbing is that he has the face of a person. Imagine that the next time I catch a snake in the garden!"

Syl shuddered but couldn't keep from giggling at the idea.

"Fext doesn't kill with his own body," Reye continued. "Instead, when the bloodlust is upon him, he abandons the corporeal form and slips into the mind of a mortal, bidding them to do his will. I can't tell you how many have tried to escape punishment for their crimes by claiming to have been overcome by Fext at the time they committed murder."

"Is that why Iruund says 'by Fext' when he's mad at the horses?"

"Just right, boy." He held up an empty hand, smiled, and rotated his wrist in a funny way. Another orange appeared in his palm.

Syl clapped.

Reye peeled the fruit and resumed sharing. "Hmm ... then there's Gorta, a Duar whose curse you would know nothing about,

young master. Nugeafu pulled her from the belly of a pregnant ox. So thin her ribs can be counted a mile away, Gorta's always hungry." Reye held his hands to his face, fingers circled around his eyes. "She has big, glassy eyes, stringy hair, and waxy grey skin, not healthy and plump like yours, but drawn and tough. Her hunger is never satisfied. No matter how much she consumes, she always wants to eat. When she arrives anywhere, she consumes all the crops and foodstuffs, leaving the region in famine." He nodded sagely. "Centuries ago in Prenja, she appeared. The city's an empty ruin now."

Syl looked at him skeptically. Papa had given him a book that said Prenja was abandoned after the War of Whispers. Opoli exploded, the terminus there stopped working, and no one wanted to visit a remote city that offered no easy escape. Before Syl could object, however, Reye went on.

"Farming communities leave offerings at Gorta's shrines during planting and harvesting. They don't speak her name, but they are reverent."

He sighed. "Last comes Amazaze. She is the most active of the group, I think. She grew inside Nugeafu and was vomited out through Sepmat's mouth."

"Yuck!" Syl said. Vomiting was bad enough but vomiting a whole person who had been in someone else's body seemed beyond repulsive.

"Yes indeed. She is an old hag—born that way, she was—with mouth full of razor-sharp fangs and a long, hooked nose." His hands traced the contours of the creature's face in the air. "She looks harmless, bent over her walking stick, feet wrapped in rags, but she bears the foulest of diseases. She wanders Ismae ceaselessly, seeking only to infect. Those who encounter her fall ill within a day unless they offer her food and drink and shelter." He chuckled and patted Syl's leg. "That, my boy, is why there are so few poorly cared-for hags out there in the world."

Syl giggled.

“Those are the Victalyassa. They work together to bring misery and death, speeding us into the arms of the Triune.” Reye stood and offered Syl a hand. “Now, we best do a little study of herbs. If Master Orono quizzes you this evening and finds you know nothing new he’ll sic Nushgha on us both.”

Syl got to his feet and followed Reye back toward the herb bed. He was certain that he would spend tonight in Aliara’s bed again, but only after the two of them made their prayers to Erylkin.

Thank you for reading

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