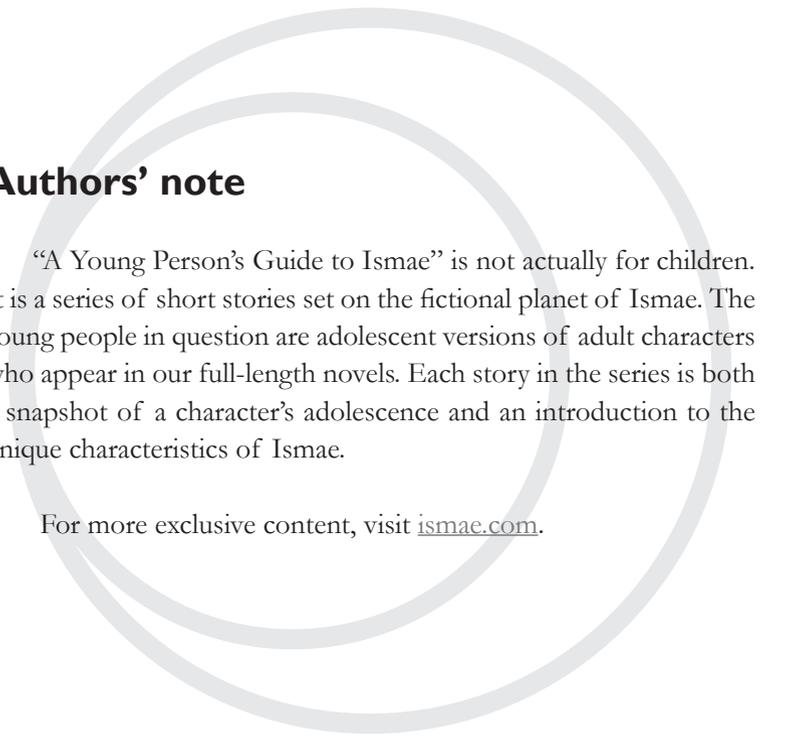


A YOUNG PERSONS' GUIDE TO ANTI-AGATHICS

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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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It was like sinking into his future.

As the wrought steel lift cage descended, the sounds and smells from below seemed to swell around him. A spritely ensemble was pushing through *The Aessorel's Flight* without nuance. Skeln's grunt of disapproval must have been noticed as his escort, Well Sovereign Master Enan Ranaran, turned her delicate grey face toward him and spoke.

"They've activated the orchestrion tonight," she said, her disappointed frown spoiling an otherwise well-structured face, "the Deiden Consort must not have been available."

Already Skeln could smell the perfumed bodies, exotic dishes, and fragrant liqueurs waiting for them. The gibbering sounds of half-tipped conversation rose as an undertone to the rote melody of the orchestrion. Their destination ascended into view, and the puka lift operator opened the cage eliciting a rattling crash of metal.

His peers and other yet-to-be-known personages of Dockhaven filled the auditorium, crowding around the circular tables at the perimeter or clapping and cawing from the plush-seated house floor as automata skittered around the stage in prearranged choreography he found both inelegant and crude.

The audience wore bright, intricate, expensive clothing, their hairstyles engineered and crafted in the city's most clever and costly

salons. His hairstyle—dyed green and clamped into an intricate web—had been a welcome gift from the Hall’s other members. His knee-length fitted coat, an import from the finest tailor in Ukur-Tilen, matched the new grey-and-green checked trousers, a gift from Enan. These were his people. He had rightly called himself a Mucha for years, a journeyman toiling away at the colleges. Tonight, Skeln Emat was truly a Master. The Mayor had hired him, the Dockhaven hall had inducted him, now he could celebrate knowing his path was open and his career launched.

Dockhaven was the commerce hub of Ismae, an isolated nation-city on a tiny chain of islets at the heart of the Middle Sea. Over the centuries, its architecture had been built and rebuilt then stacked upon and on and on. It was the most complicated city in all the isles for a man in his profession. Right out of the Colleges, *he* was not only invited to practice there, but commissioned to design the newest wing of the Rimadour Museum of Arts and Sciences, an institution nearly as old as the city itself.

“Come now,” Enan took his hand and tugged him through the theater-cum-nightclub inhumed beneath the Mucha Hall, the one his fellows had yammered about as soon as his induction ceremony was complete.

He’d been skeptical at their enthusiasm, but on seeing the magnificence laid out before him, Skeln could admit it was as impressive as touted. He trailed Enan, glad for her guidance as he took in the detail from hand-wound iron chandeliers and soft ceiling frescoes to plush seating and complex entertainment. Behind the elaborate décor, the architect in him observed the clever skill, the artistry of the club’s creator. It was no small feat to build below ground. He envied his predecessor’s talent.

“They’ll have a table waiting for us in the lounge.” Enan led him from the auditorium, past a red wok-silk curtain, and into a long corridor of a bar. Another automaton whizzed up and down the polished wood counter, taking orders and serving drinks. She

slid into one of the semi-circular booths facing the bar and patted the seat beside her. Skeln settled in, close enough that her scent was almost intoxicating.

“Vrasaj,” said a dark-skinned chivori woman who seemed to have materialized at the table. Her long white hair, woven into a complex plait, was wrapped around her neck like jewelry.

Skeln returned the greeting, trying not to stare at the lacing vines of tattoos that ran down the stranger’s arms, curious figures entwined intermittently. He was unaccustomed to those of her sect so freely displaying their markings, but this woman wore a sleeveless sheath, the symbols unabashedly exposed.

“Welcome to Club Perpetual, Most Illustrious Master Skeln Emat,” she said.

He straightened in the booth and nodded. The metal bands spangling his hair clattered.

“I am Seer Marishov Chimeaka, proprietor. Should you need *anything*,” she stressed the word with a shrewd smile, “the club would be delighted to furnish it. Klarin will serve you this evening. She can reach me should you require anything beyond her station.” The Seer snapped and a sweet-faced karju woman, thin and shapely, slipped into place beside her.

“Vrasaj, Master Emat.” Klarin’s young skin was the shade of well-tanned kartah leather, her eyes a twinkling green. She knew things, Skeln imagined, that he had only dreamt of. “What would you like to drink?”

The Seer offered a half-bow as she slipped back away, disappearing behind the red curtain.

Skeln frowned. He hadn’t had much time for carousing while at the Colleges of Ukur-Tilen. Other than zhuuve on ice, he wasn’t sure what someone might order at such a swish nightclub.

“The house special is a tyro’s tongue,” the server continued. “Made with zhuuve, a splash of piminee fruit juice and—”

“You yellow-gilled git!” yelled a green-haired woman seated at

the bar. She threw her drink at the grinning man who stood by her stool. He ducked, and the drink splattered, Skeln, Enan, even the server, who murmured apologies and darted behind the bar in search of a towel.

The man giggled and smoothed the lines of his bright-blue suitcoat. "You don't mean that, lovely Linicia."

Apparently she did. With a bark of "Treybow!" Linicia launched herself from the barstool onto her tormentor, clawing and slapping while he continued to laugh. Only when she ripped off his wig, a multi-tiered yellow augmentation styled like a pair of hands cupping his head, did the man's amusement end. The woman dropped to her feet and rushed out of the lounge, the cursing man chasing her.

Klarin returned with apologies and a handful of cloths. As she mopped up the spill, Enan slid out of the booth.

"I'll be in the washroom," she said. Nose wrinkled, mouth downturned, arms held away from her soggy cerise gown, she was a picture of disgust.

Skeln ran a hand over his dripping face. His carefully applied cosmetics were ruined. "Where would that be?" he asked.

Enan waved for him to follow. With a prurient glance at the backside of their busy server, he trailed his date through the theater, past the lift, and into a short door-lined passage. The men's lavatory was as elegantly appointed as the rest of the club and clean. An old man sat on the round plush golden couch in the middle of the room, bent over, grunting and fussing with something unseen. Aromatics repressed the smell of the dibucos at work within.

Skeln accepted a towel from the puka attendant, dabbed his clothing and face, and reapplied his cosmetics to the best of his ability given the facility's well-used offerings. When he turned around, the old man was sitting up, a soft brown bootie in one hand, his foot in the other, thumb busily rubbing some pained spot near the heel. From his angle, Skeln could see up the stranger's dress, a white pleated piece with embroidered squiggles around the hem that

gave the effect of creeping green fire. He wore nothing beneath; it was not a pleasant view. The man was tall and broad like any karju, but fat, the kind seen only in the very wealthy. He was also almost completely bald, a sight as rare at a gathering of Mucha as goat's gills. Skeln wondered if perhaps the man's wig had been mussed or his scalp had been itchy and the hair was hidden behind him on the couch.

"It is a terrible thing getting old. Not for the meek," the round stranger said without looking up from his foot. "I suggest you stay as you are, young fellow."

Skeln chuckled and idly tossed the used towel to the attendant. "Maybe someday a zoetics master will design a genome to do something about that."

The stranger lay his bootie to one side and switched his legs, offering a different view of his aversion to undergarments. "I have tried, young man. I have tried. If I cannot manage it, I very much doubt anyone can without the direct intervention of the Duin."

"You're a zoeticist?" Skeln asked.

The bathroom attendant concealed a guffaw with a cough.

"Indeed." The old man released a little groan as he rubbed the same spot on this foot.

"Have you originated any genomes of note?" Skeln tried to keep the derisive tone from his voice. Virtually every zoeticist or zoetics student he'd known produced very few original schemas. They either specialized in the alteration of an existing body or they did little more than map and modify schemas long-ago designed by others.

"Several, I am sure."

"Truly?" Skeln paused, the answer unexpected. "What ones?"

"Were it not for me you would be hard pressed to acquire a glass of water in this city, let alone bicker with your colleagues over cocktails in this establishment."

Skeln considered the implication. For centuries the isolated city of Dockhaven had relied on communal solar stills to convert

seawater into fresh. Just over a century ago, the desalinization plant and its constituent plumbing had changed that, the zoetic lusca housed within converting gallons in a fraction of the time required by the stills.

Everyone knew the name of the famously peculiar owner of Dockhaven's desalinization plant. He'd designed more genomes than most people could list. But this swollen, pasty, old man sitting here hardly resembled the hail and dignified statue of the man that stood along the High Road in front of the plant.

"You're Kluuta Orono?" Skeln felt his face flush hot. His earlier tone may have been a serious misstep at the beginning of his career. "Apologies, sir. I didn't recognize you."

"We have met before?"

"Well, no, though I have looked forward to doing so."

Orono looked up at him and nodded slightly. His face was round, excepting the jowly cheeks, with delicate skin that looked inflamed and sore. His few wrinkles were deep, more valleys than cracks. Skeln was fairly certain he'd never met a man this old, not even a chivori.

"Now that we have met, I hope our acquaintance is long and beneficial to us both," Skeln said, trying to fill the uncomfortable moment. "I am Most Illustrious Master Skeln Emat. I was inducted into Dockhaven's Hall this evening and am celebrating...it seems."

"Yes, they bring all the inductees here on their first night," Orono said with a bland tone. He reached down with a grunt to pull his other bootie off.

Skeln attempted to salvage the conversation before scarring himself socially. "I understand that many consider you a Mucha in spirit, despite your lack of formal education."

Orono began to chuckle, building quickly to a deep laughter that left him flush-faced and teary-eyed. It made Skeln wish someone would walk into the washroom and give him opportunity to escape. When the old inventor's mirth showed no hint of fading, Skeln

wondered if Orono might be quite mad, as elders often were.

The smiling bathroom attendant offered the man a cup of water.

Orono became suddenly sober and struck the cup from the puka's hand. "Off with you, douse!" he bellowed, and the attendant darted to mop up the mess with a towel.

"Come sit with me...Skeln was it? My neck is tired from watching mechanical dancers."

Skeln settled in beside the inventor and attempted to right the conversation. "Yes, the engineering is impressive, but the performance leaves one wishing for something a bit more elegant."

"They were designed many decades ago by a rather brilliant trio of masters, but they have all died or retired. Their scions have yet to devise programs worthy of the legacy."

"How old is the club?"

Orono paused in thought a moment, "A bit more than seventy years, if I recall correctly. We opened it the year before Master Jodidar went to the waters. Some of his work resides here as well. He was living in Ukur-Tilen then, but still leant his mind to our enterprise. The orchestrion is his as well as the power plant that keeps the systems going. You and all your Mucha cohorts will have gone back to the water long before its opoli is spent."

"You were involved in the construction?" Skeln finally had his feet under him now that the conversation had turned toward the structure they sat in.

"Only tangentially. The lumia used in the club's lighting is my design. A long-lived strain that can survive many years without feeding. Terribly expensive to cultivate, though. Not cost effective enough for broader distribution. Other than that, I contributed to the design a bit. Architecture has always been an interest of mine. And I do own a stake, though I'm considering selling that off to the current management. I do not find the entertainments here as amusing as I once did, and I need to devote myself to my current work."

“Will this work necessitate a structure as grand as your desalinization plant?” Skeln asked, hopeful of a future commission.

“Nothing so massive, but it will be a significant facility.” Orono turned his attention to his other foot, massaging the arch as he glared at the lavatory’s attendant. “I really should have a puka for this, but I detest their touch.”

“Please tell me about this future facility. My concentration is exclusively architecture.”

“I have more than one branch of research active currently and do not usually share my work before it is ready.” Orono gave Skeln a dubious look. “But you seem the trustworthy sort. My most pressing study goes back to the question of aging. I am working on an anti-agathic that is at least as efficient for karju as the Vazztain compounds are for the chivori. If successful, it would require a production facility.”

“When designing a building I prefer to have an understanding of its planned use. I do not believe it is enough to throw up a few walls and a roof and call it a laboratory, for example.” Skeln waited for Orono to approve of his methods, but the old inventor remained focused on his aching foot. “Anti-agathic is not a term I am familiar with. Perhaps you would enlighten me?”

Orono pursed his lips and grunted softly. “Anti-agathics are a class of drugs or therapies intended to retard, suspend, or possibly reverse the process of aging. The Vazztain have made advances in the last couple of centuries, however, their compounds have proved most successful for chivori and—disappointingly—puka physiologies.” He paused to deliver another withering scowl to the washroom attendant. “Our people have not been so fortunate. The current offerings have limited effect, slowing the aging process minutely to a ratio of six years for five. Even those successes were only recorded in subjects who had not yet entered middle age.”

“If I might ask, what then have you discovered that drives your research?”

Orono left off kneading his foot. Expression sober, he turned his hard, brown eyes on Skeln. “What do you know of the verderi?”

Skeln barely repressed a snort. “The Changed? Only from my ga’s stories. There is no conclusive evidence they exist. The Colleges have never cataloged a specimen.”

“There are many things in this world and in the skies above that the Mucha have yet to properly study. I have a botanist associate who has been embedded on Haasteboah for many years. Not a Mucha, but a researcher of some renown. She has been fortunate enough to have survived expeditions into the interior and has made contact with the folk of Phenatali Verderi. I do not know how—nor do I care— but she has formed a friendship with one of them. Some time back she sent me a sample for analysis that was beyond her ken. It was a microorganism secreted by the verderi, one capable of tissue repair on a cellular level.”

“Truly?” Skeln couldn’t stop himself from interjecting. “I know tales of verderi healing with a touch, but surely these are just the yarns of ignorant rustics. I fear you’ve been duped in some manner. An intricate ruse, I’m sure, but a ruse nonetheless.”

Orono scowled, a look that left Skeln feeling as though he was about to be punished. Or bitten. “I have witnessed the proof through my own scope. The results have been limited, but they *are* there. My own body has reaped the benefit. Since injecting what bit of the sample I could spare, my joint pain has receded significantly.” He waggled his nimble fingers uncomfortably close to Skeln’s face as evidence. “The challenge before me is a lack of material, as the organisms have a short lifespan once outside of the producing body. My associate has been able to secure a formula compounded by the verderi in which to suspend samples. It is an anti-agathic in itself, but only a bit more effective than I have found elsewhere. With its use, the viability of my samples has increased by quarterns, although still not long enough or in sufficient quantities for rapid progress.

“I have recently increased my funding to her work in Haasteboah

and hope she will be able to negotiate an agreement with the subject that will allow me to study the creature directly. If I had such access, I would be able to determine how the organism is produced. With that knowledge, a zoetic gland could be produced which, when grafted into a body, would be able to continuously repair cell damage.”

The washroom door swung open and Enan entered, the straight silver of her hair a beacon in the oppressively gold room. “Are you going to hide out in here all night, Master Emat, or do you intend to rejoin us?”

“Ah yes, I will be with you shortly.” Skeln rose and turned to Orono, “Apologies Mister Orono, but I should return to my date. Can we continue this conversation another time?”

He took a step toward the exit, but Orono snatched Skeln’s arm, his movements faster than they should have been given his age and weight. He drew Skeln down until their faces practically touched. Skeln could smell the earthy neha root and soured caba the man had enjoyed for dinner.

“I caution you, young Mucha, to keep what I have told you between us or you will see few commissions in this city. Or perhaps your peers will merely ridicule you. Either way, you are wiser to remain silent.” He released Skeln and smiled as though nothing but merriment had passed between them. With a nod to Enan and a shooping wave of his hand, Orono returned to massaging his foot. “Let us see how that new wing at the Rimadour Museum turns out, and I may be in touch. Go, celebrate your youth.”

Shaken and confused, Skeln looped an arm around Enan’s slender waist and led her back to the lounge. Only when he slid back into the plush booth did it occur to him that he’d never mentioned the museum. Orono had known who he was all along.

Thank you for reading

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