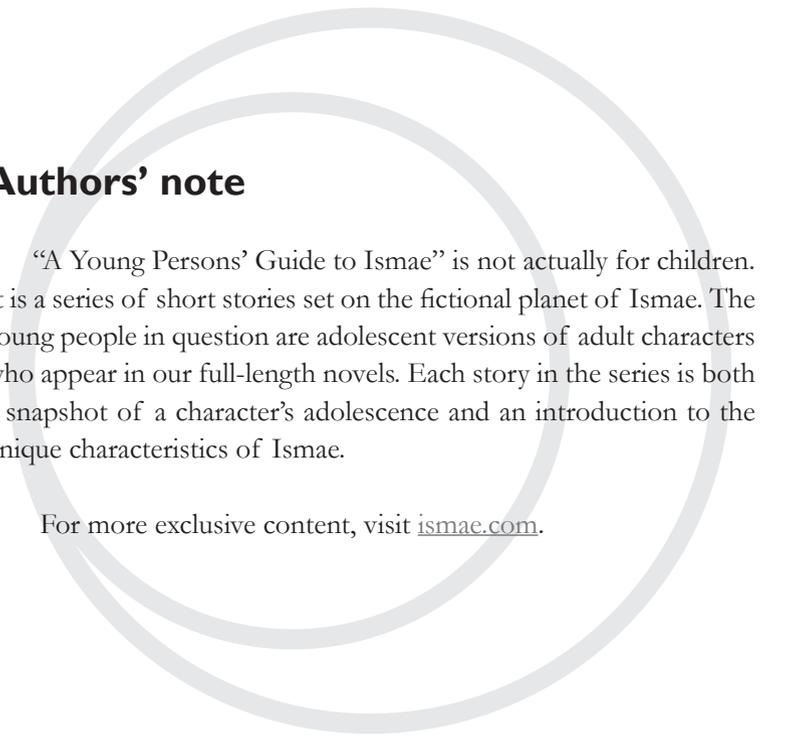


**A YOUNG PERSONS' GUIDE TO
SUBTERFUGE**

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Authors' note

“A Young Persons’ 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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SVIROOSA



2081 FALAK 28

“...seven...eight...nine...” The street mendast counted aloud as a girl laid cards in his moss-colored palm. “Ten!”

The girl put the final card in the mendast’s hand and grinned at a pair of adults at the front of the audience. They waved and beamed as though she were about to perform the illusion all by herself. The two looked awfully like Sviroosa’s parents had when she’d sang the old songs during the manor house’s Acknowledgement Day celebration play back home.

Someone bumped into Sviroosa and she glanced away from the mendast’s show. A group of chittering little girls hurried down the street, dodging the taller festival attendees, karju and chivori who may not have had anything to celebrate but enjoyed a party no matter the reason. The girls ducked into the passing parade and disappeared just as the band—hidden somewhere along its length—launched into a slightly off-key rendition of *It’s a Good Day for a Zootie with You*. The parade seemed to be a constant element in the celebration, a marginally organized trail of bodies perpetually dancing its way through the streets of Pukatown spouting music, hoots, and little blankets. She’d already nearly been engulfed by it twice today.

Sviroosa hadn’t been sure what to expect at the Acknowledgement Day festival here in the city. It was her first in Dockhaven since the Duke had asked her to be his *personal* domestic, and she was

still settling into running the household. Back in Chiva'vastezz, Acknowledgement Day was a quiet affair. It was celebrated as a family at home, where the Vazztain upper castes didn't have to witness it. Here, frolicking pukas ran through the streets wearing brightly colored blankets and shouting about sentience. Seeing something she'd long considered private turned to public spectacle made Sviroosa uncomfortable.

When Sviroosa had asked after local customs, her friend Skizzle had warned the celebration would be big and loud. Sviroosa had found the description so unappealing that she wouldn't have attended at all if the Duke hadn't suggested it in that way that told her he specifically wanted her to go. "You should see your people as they are here," he'd said.

She returned her attention to the mendast, who tapped the small stack of cards against his palm and turned to a different girl in a dress matching the first, offering her a short stack of them. "Do you have a pocket, young miss?"

The second girl nodded.

"Good, good. Now put those in that pocket." The mendast picked the remains of the lyntyyl deck from the sad little table referred to as his stage. He fanned the remnants of the deck, ran a thumb across the top to separate each card, and showed the fan to the crowd before moving close to where the girls' parents stood. "Pick one, Moocha."

The woman's cheeks hazed as she drew the card.

Another someone in the passing stream of revelers bumped Sviroosa, this one hard enough to send her into the man standing beside her. Already smelling of brew, he stumbled and tipped the mug he held toward the woman beside him, pouring his drink over her kartah-on-a-stick and down the front of her blouse. They argued briefly before the man started laughing. The woman joined in and the man turned to share their amusement with Sviroosa.

"Apologies, but someone ran into me—" Sviroosa began, but

the man waved it off with still more laughter.

“You didn’t mean nothing by it,” he slurred between giggles. He slapped her on the shoulder hard enough to send her stumbling. “I’m gonna’ go watch the pole’n svoggers. They wouldn’t care if I was dripping with brew,” he declared and ambled away.

“...will transfer three of your cards to your sister.” The mendast had continued despite the hubbub. “Are you ready?”

He crouched and waved his arms, blathering a nonsense incantation in a show of mystical abilities. The onlookers giggled.

Sviroosa watched his hands but saw no sleight. She crossed her arms. It could have come earlier, maybe when he tapped the girl’s shoulder or when Sviroosa had looked away. Or the mother’s card selection wasn’t random. Duke Sylandair had attempted to teach her what he called “the art of prestidigitation” since she’d moved to Dockhaven, deeming it necessary knowledge for one working in his household. Sviroosa had appreciated his efforts but hadn’t taken to it as well as she’d hoped. Though she had learned enough to spot most blinds.

The mendast left off with his antics and asked the girl to produce her cards. As they were counting out the pack from her pocket, another body bumped her, this one lower. Feeling the telltale brush against her hip, Sviroosa whirled around, jerking her satchel away from the thief’s hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Sviroosa barked at the young puka, who clutched the rebuffed hand to his chest.

She reached for the boy, intending to take him to one of the City Corps in the area. The child ducked and rolled, darting into a portion of the parade featuring animals dressed like people. Sviroosa considered chasing him, saw the copious scat being left behind by the parade, and let the little thief go.

“You!” a voice was struggling to be heard over the constant buzz of the crowd. “You in the brown sweater.”

Sviroosa looked down. She’d chosen her light brown sweater

this frosty morning, but she couldn't imagine who would be looking for her in this crowd.

"Sweet Mother Jajal, will you look back here, girl?" the voice continued.

She scanned the faces. No one seemed to be looking at her until she spied a round-faced and overly made-up woman with her eyes turned Sviroosa's direction. She was on the other side of the street, standing on something obscured by the passing procession.

"Finally!" the woman shouted.

Sviroosa crinkled her brow. She didn't recognize the face.

"Yes you," the woman waved a hand heavy with rings. "You're the Duke's girl, aren't you?"

She was the only duke's girl she knew in the Rabble. Sviroosa frowned.

"Oh, Sywidian's ghost!" the woman yelled. She hopped off her pedestal and vanished from sight. In a moment, a nearly round puka woman stumbled out of the crowd and flopped against Sviroosa. "You don't hear too well, do you, girl?"

The woman wiped sweat from her brow, bobbling the artificial daisy precariously adhered to her scalp with sweat-greased cosmetic tack. Her skin was the pale green of kisso nut meat, her eyes the beige of the shell, and she wore period clothing Sviroosa identified as a gaudy costume of Frangipani, matron of the first family of pukas to join the Billidoc Coalition. The gown wrapped around the woman's almost-spherical torso like an after-bath towel, then over one shoulder to be dress and drape in one. The whole thing was covered in short, bright-pink feathers, the jeweled accessories copious. Though Sviroosa didn't recognize the woman, she understood the costume meant she was someone of note locally. In Dockhaven, Skizzle had told her, only the community's most influential members were assigned the historical dress roles on Acknowledgement Day.

"I've been calling to you forever," the woman said, "but you wouldn't turn around. Every other windless douse in the street

answered me, but not you. You are the Duke's girl, right?"

"Yes..."

From behind them, the mendast shouted "Thirteen!" and the crowd applauded.

"Tokimer's favor! I would have been furious if I'd spent all that time yelling just to find out you weren't you." The woman wiped her scalp clear of sweat with an open palm. "Oh goodness, my daisy's falling off." She fumbled with it for a few moments to no avail.

"Here." Sviroosa removed the artificial flower, rolled the tack until it was sticky again, wiped a clean spot with her shirt cuff, and returned the flower to its place.

"Grat, dear. I'd hate to lose my namesake. She's been with me my whole life." The round woman winked and patted her adornment. "Of course, that might make more sense if you knew my name was Daisy. I'm Flark's wife. If you really are the Duke's girl, I'm sure you've met him."

"Yes, I know him," Sviroosa said in her most neutral tone. Flark had lurked around the penthouse, trying to play off his visits as a concerned neighbor checking in on a new tenant. After more than half a year, the pretext barely held water. "He visits Duke Imythedralin frequently."

"Playing games, no doubt. Or trying to swindle the Duke out of his coin. My Flark does love doing business with the chivori. He has some whole rigamarole about how chivori are the only ones you can trust because you know they can't be trusted. That's just the wind leaking out his front end."

Sviroosa smiled, waiting to learn what this woman wanted with her.

"I saw you out here on my way back from the concert. Tibit-daa music all day down by Kinkle Square! Can you believe that? I love it, but I'd hate to live near there today!" Daisy put a hand on Sviroosa's arm and tugged her into the parade.

The celebrants' momentum nearly knocked Sviroosa off her

feet, but she righted herself and struggled against the oncoming tide, bumping into someone's pet miniature horse before being tangled in the leashes from a trio of cats wearing brightly colored capes. When Sviroosa emerged on the other side, Daisy was buying something doughy and fried from a chivori street vendor.

"Ah, there you are." Daisy took a bite and made a sound a pleasure that was enough to make a trull blush. She swallowed and pointed at Sviroosa. "Flark and I are having a party today. Naturally. We do every year. We're known for it. Our penthouse is big enough to hold half of Pukatown, but we only invite the best and brightest. The Duke of the Rabble's housegirl is definitely one of those."

"Domestic," Sviroosa said. She dodged an arguing pair of pubescent boys and followed Daisy into the lobby of the big charcoal-grey building the locals called "the Bung Building" because Flark was owner and landlord to most of Pukatown. Duke Sylandair had warned her not to use the less-than-complimentary term around Flark.

"Domestic. Fancy! You see, that's exactly what I mean. Everyone else around here's a maid or a housegirl, but you're a *domestic*." Daisy clicked her tongue. "You don't belong out there on the street with the rest."

"I can't be gone long," Sviroosa said. "Duke Imythedralin and Lady Rift are expecting me to be back in time to fix the evening meal."

"And you will be, of course." Daisy looped an arm around Sviroosa and guided her toward the cube of ornate ironwork encircling the lobby elevator. "I wouldn't think of keeping you. I simply want to show you around our penthouse, introduce you to important pukas. We'll be done in plenty of time to cook dinner."

Sviroosa didn't particularly want to spend her holiday with Flark or his wife, but he did a lot of business with the Duke, and she'd hate to do anything to queer that. Conceiving of no further excuse, she followed, silently wishing to be anywhere else. She'd be polite,

Sviroosa told herself, but no more.

Though he'd never directly bothered her during his visits to the Duke's, Flark made Sviroosa uncomfortable. When she came in the room, he would smile at her like the two of them shared a secret. She'd heard stories about him around the market—he was unscrupulous, arrogant, and believed everyone to be in debt to him. Skizzle said her sister had been his domestic for a few months. Intending to clean his game room one day, she's walked in on Flark and a pair of chivori doing something that had caused the sister to resign on the spot. Skizzle had refused to clarify further.

After one of Flark's visits in Sviroosa's first days in Dockhaven, the Duke had visited her in the kitchen, requesting that she join him on one of the tall stools situated around the center island. He sat on the other and smiled gently at her.

"You are more than adept with Vazztain social customs, Sviroosa. It is one of the reasons I selected you. However, you should be aware that Dockhaven has its own mores."

She'd nodded soberly, unsure where the conversation was going.

"Being so close to me, you may be approached one day with an impressive offer—coin, power, romance—whose only price would be to surveil the home in which you live."

"Spy on you?" Sviroosa had shaken her head, hands fluttering on the countertop like clipped birds. "Never, Duke Imythedralin. I would never do such a thing to you or Lady Rift."

The Duke had put a calming hand on her wrist and smiled. "If I were not certain of your loyalty, you would still be in Faisa."

"We're hosting a professional storyteller soon. You'll enjoy it." Daisy whisked Sviroosa into the lift, open to front and back and guarded by two muscular pukas. "You'll never guess who Flark managed to recruit to play Jidryy."

Skizzle had warned Sviroosa about this performance. Back home in Chiva'vastezz, most families read the play instead of performing it. Grandfather Fastuul always had that honor in their

house—he'd probably be doing so later today, but only after tying on a good tippie. His readings were often followed by long rants about rowdy grandchildren and lazy bound-sons or about the Duke's liberal foolishness and the haughtiness of all chivori.

In Dockhaven, Skizzle had told her, the Acknowledgement Day story had been turned into a play with the Jidryy role going to a chivori who'd been an ally to the puka community over the past year. As Sviroosa had no idea who in Dockhaven might have done something for their community, she merely shrugged at Daisy.

“Mayor Carsuure!” Daisy threw her arms into the air.

“Oh..!” Sviroosa mimicked enthusiasm. She'd heard the woman's name bandied by the Duke's guests, but she'd not yet met the Mayor.

Daisy prattled on about the party and its many luminaries as they slowly rose in the iron carriage. They passed no exits, just unbroken wall, large numbers painted at intervals to indicate their location. Sviroosa checked the back wall in case the exits were arranged differently than the entry but found only the two escorts. The bigger one winked at her suggestively. Sviroosa returned to the bland wall in time to see the number eleven pass by.

Doors greeted them at the thirteenth level, exiting onto a large living space with ceilings high enough to accommodate nearly any species of guest, uncommon in an all-puka building. A few people lounged on angular furniture upholstered in browns, blues, and pinks that looked like they'd been in the sun too long.

Sviroosa smiled at Daisy. “You have a lovely home.”

“Pish,” Daisy said. “Flark decorated it. The only taste that man has is in his mouth, and even that's questionable. Now, follow me.” She took Sviroosa's arm, fingers pinching hard enough to make bruises. “There are plenty of unmarried and *very* well-to-do young men here today, including my son Ghulf, who's just perfect for you. I'll introduce you. You'll be a good match. We'll have you married, pregnant, and having parties or your own this time next year.”

Sviroosa fought the urge to run. Daisy sounded like her mother.

Just because she'd come of age two years past didn't mean she was ready to be married and popping out babies like her sisters. She liked the freedom of her new life, the chance to be out from under her family's expectations. She might miss them, but not their constant badgering.

"Here we are..." Daisy led Sviroosa outdoors to the patio, filled with mingling pukas, a large portion wearing period attire.

Sviroosa spotted one man dressed as the first puka to free himself from the Dominion of Chiva'vastezz, a woman dressed as an early maker of puka-sized furniture, and a little cluster that had to represent the council that codified the rules of farspeech. In lieu of cloaks, those not in costume wore beaded and embroidered blankets, symbolic of the first words spoken by a puka.

Sviroosa suddenly felt very small and out of place.

"He's already arguing," Daisy stage-whispered to Sviroosa. "I can't leave that whinging douse alone for a heartbeat."

She half-dragged Sviroosa to a broad, circular table covered in white-fringed blue cloth. Flark sat at the far side, overlooking the street below, silver-headed walking stick dangling from the table beside him. He was dressed to match Daisy: a long tunic covered in Norian embroidery and Vazztain wok-silk trousers tucked into Estoan kartah-hide boots. He was Stroin, the patriarch of the first Billidoc pukas and husband to Frangipani. Like his mate, Flark was covered in jewelry fashioned across the isles, Oras to Chiva'vastezz. He was the picture of a puka trader—one in his old age, at least. He was shouting at a well-dressed, though not costumed, puka woman who leaned on one side of the table, glaring at him.

Daisy pushed Sviroosa into a chair at the table. "Wait here," she said and trundled off into the mingling wealthy.

"Take your eye, you buffoon!" Flark barked at the woman across the table. Nostrils flared on either side of his impressive nose. "We all know the story, Burkork, I'm not arguing that—by Saxelyt's dry socket, it's about to be performed in my home as it is every year

during the sentience carnival. What I'm arguing is what came *after*. Without Froniker..."

"Go spit down Ruru's throat, you old razeel!" the woman snapped. She drew a deep breath and pinched the silver bridge-cuff clipped between her round brown eyes. Her voice was calmer when she spoke again. "You know that's not what I mean. I mean that Froniker was just the first anyone *knew* of. We'd been sentient for ages."

"Then why didn't we speak to the other species before then? Before one chilly puka decided to ask for a blanket?"

"I don't know," Burkork straightened, hands on her hips. "Maybe because we didn't want to go from doted-on pets to pissed-on servants."

Flark blew air through lips that seemed weighted at the corners.

"Or maybe," Burkork said, "because we were learning their language and Froniker was just the first to manage it."

"Bosh!"

"Fine, then maybe because we just didn't *want* them to know." Arm's crossed, Burkork smirked at Flark.

"It wasn't gradual or some great mass-decision. It just happened." Flark slammed the table with his palm. "Bam! We all knew it at once! Sit down, you douse!"

"I prefer to stand," Burkork said.

Flark picked up his cane and waved it overhead. "Vesven!"

A tall karju man, bright-red hair and toffee-brown freckled skin, materialized from the cluster of plants in the nearby corner. As with all his species, Vesven was enormous. Sviroosa had often seen the bodyguard waiting patiently in the foyer at home while Flark and the Duke gambled or negotiated. He gave Sviroosa the dithers almost as intensely as Flark did.

Burkork sat.

"You listen," Flark pointed his cane at the shaken woman. "It was instant. In that moment it happened to Fronier, it spread across

us all. Latent farspeech did it, jumped that knowledge from one to the other and the other. We weren't hiding out or enjoying being pets. We just *changed*." His face puckered, ubiquitous frown dipping lower. He spat on the ground. "Pets."

"Then why..." Burkork began. She glanced at Vesven and lowered her voice. "Then why do only...what is it...three percent of us have the ability?"

"One percent," Flark said, "have the ability in the extremes you mean, conversing over distance—*really* long distances, given a bump of themot—but the rest of us have it too." He tapped his forehead with the cane's handle. "Just not as much."

Daisy materialized beside Sviroosa, a lackadaisical man on her arm. He was tippled in that strange dignified way of the rich. The resemblance to Flark and Daisy was unmistakable. He had his father's dark green skin and drowsy eyes, his mother's small ears and a soft nasal swoop. He might have been attractive were he not so drunk. Sviroosa had no doubt this was Ghulf.

Daisy cleared her throat, but no one at the table noticed. Ghulf took another drink.

Burkork looked at Flark dubiously. "Vazztain records indicate pukas had been showing inclination toward complex behavior, emotional responses, and taking protective actions for years."

"My giches do that." Flark gestured across the patio to where two large birds sat watching the party go by. One lifted a pink-tinted wing and scratched with a viciously hooked beak.

Sviroosa had never seen a gich outside of a schoolbook, hadn't realized just how large they were. She'd always thought Grandfather Fastuul's story about her great-uncle Olt and a gich was fabrication. "Swallowed whole while he was picking berries," Grandfather used to say. Seeing these two, she was no longer certain he'd made up the tale.

"Enough of this," Daisy said with a clap that rang in Sviroosa's ears. "Never mind the giches, Burkork. They're for show... Just like

everything else around here.”

“To the depths with you, woman,” Flark snarled. “What do you want?”

“I wanted to introduce Ghulf to Sviroosa.” Daisy shoved the young man forward.

“Why did you need me for that?” Flark asked.

“I just needed you to shut your yap so someone else could talk,” Daisy snapped. She stared hard at Flark for a heartbeat before returning to matchmaking. “Isn’t she lovely, Ghulf? I just know you two will get along.”

“Yeah, pretty enough.” Ghulf gulped his drink and shrugged. “She’d do.”

Sviroosa fought the urge to leap up and slap the douse.

Apparently finished with his assessment, Ghulf turned and pointed his drink at Flark. “I’m telling you, Tappa, you and Burkork are both wrong. We pukas were a collective mind. Froniker’s little question that you all seem so fond of, split us all apart.”

“You tit, why would a global collective choose to be subservient to any other species?” Flark spat at Ghulf. “Go get another drink, you dunderpate, and keep your mouth busy. It’s no good for talking.”

With an indifferent shrug, Ghulf wandered away from the table.

Daisy’s made to go after him, but Flark stopped her. “Pricklefoot!” he barked and waved his cane toward Sviroosa, “who *is* this person?”

“Don’t you recognize the Duke’s girl?” Daisy patted Sviroosa’s shoulder.

Sviroosa waved. “Vrasaj.”

Flark’s big eyes rolled down to her. He squinted. “Who?”

“I should go,” Sviroosa said, half-rising.

“No, no, dear.” Daisy’s voice was as tight as her grip on Sviroosa’s shoulder. “Flark, this is *Duke Imythedralin’s* domestic.”

“I see.” Flark squinted at Sviroosa and flicked fingers at his debating partner. “Get out of here Burkork, before I prove to my quim of a wife that those giches aren’t just for show.”

Sviroosa envied Burkork her swift departure.

“The Duke’s girl, eh?” Flark rubbed the rounded top of his ear, studying her as she’d seen him study the Duke during a game.

“She is,” Daisy said. “What was your name again, dear?”

“Sviroosa.”

“Sviroosa,” Daisy echoed.

“Yes, I think I’ve seen you around. Yes.” Flark clicked his tongue.

“What brings you to my event?”

Before Sviroosa could concoct a complimentary answer, Daisy squealed.

“Oh!” she said, her angry tone happy again. Her hand unclenched from Sviroosa’s shoulder. “Shush, Flark. They’re starting!”

“Imt’s eyes, woman, you bring the Duke’s housegirl to me then you won’t let me talk. What in the depths is wrong with you?”

“Hush. The reading’s about to start.”

Flark closed his eyes and snorted.

“Vrasaj, everyone!” a woman barked through a loudhailer. She was standing on a little stage in the middle of Flark’s patio, holding a comically large leather book. Beside her was a tall stool and lectern.

The party quieted. One of the giches whined.

“Grat everyone,” said the woman on stage. “I’m Tansy, Flark and Daisy’s eldest, and I’m a professional skald.”

“Professional money drain,” Flark mumbled.

“Today I’m going to read my version of the classic tale of Fronkier and Jidryy.”

The curtains parted behind her to reveal a pretty but annoyed looking chivori woman sitting in an antique Vazztain rocker. A young puka boy sat on her lap, head resting against her shoulder as he feigned sleep.

Tansy gestured to them. “As an added treat, my son Kluun will be playing the role of Froniker while our mayor, Idra Carsuure, will stand in for Jidryy.”

The audience clapped. On stage, the Mayor waved, and the little

boy opened one eye and tittered.

“As every little puka girl and boy knows,” Tansy began, “Acknowledgement Day marks the first time pukas were recognized as sentient. Before that cold Falak day, we either lived in the wild or we lived at the sufferance of other species as their pets.”

From somewhere above, a light shone on the Mayor and little Kluun. Both now appeared to be asleep.

“Jidryy, a chivori noblewoman, had fallen asleep on her veranda one aftermid, her pet puka Froniker curled up on her lap. It was late Falak, and the weather was turning cold. When the sun had set, the puka woke before his mistress.”

Kluun mimed yawning and stretched. The Mayor continued her feigned doze.

“Frost collected on the windows,” Tansy continued. “The puka could see his breath.”

The boy wrapped his arms around himself and mimed shivering. The crowd awwed and chuckled.

“Froniker saw that his mistress was already going pale with the evening’s chill.”

Kluun patted the Mayor’s cheek, his brow pinched with concern.

“He rose, went inside and retrieved a blanket for her,” Tansy continued, “but was unable to find his own.”

He scampered behind one of the curtains, disappearing from view, made a few sounds to mime a vigorous search then reappeared, gold-and-orange beaded blanket in hand.

“He covered his mistress and climbed back onto her lap, curling as close to her warm body as possible.”

Kluun mimed the story as she read. In her faux sleep, the Mayor frowned.

“The motion woke Jidryy,” Tansy said as the Mayor’s eyes popped open. “She was surprised to find the blanket over her. ‘How did this get here?’ she asked aloud.”

The Mayor feigned astonishment, her acting comically

exaggerated.

“Her mate was away, and Fronkier had never done such a thing before.” Tansy dragged out her pause. The whole crowd seemed to be holding its breath. “Then it happened: Froniker spoke. His words, perfect Vazztain.” Tansy looked out at the crowd and raised both hands, inviting them to join in this bit. Many did, even Sviroosa. “I couldn’t find mine, Moocha...and I’m cold.”

Everyone clapped. Tansy closed the book, the spotlight clicked off, and the performers left the stage to circulate through the crowd.

Flark snatched his cane from the table and pushed himself to his feet. “I’ll be inside.” He raised his cane and pointed to Sviroosa. “Housegirl, with me. Vesven, follow.”

Sviroosa looked to Daisy for salvation, but the woman was watching her grandchild bask in the audience’s adulation. Wishing she’d stashed a cleaver in her bag before leaving this aftermid, Sviroosa slid off her chair and followed Flark.

“He a good one, my Kluun,” Flark said as he led her across the patio. Guests parted for him as he strolled through. “Not like the rest of the brood. That one got a good dose of *my* spark.”

Sviroosa followed him into the parlor where guest lingered, chatting and drinking. Flark led her upstairs to his office and settled into an overstuffed chair behind the desk, gesturing her into the one in front.

“Have you ever seen anything like that?” he asked when she’d settled, skirt tucked firmly under her thighs.

Sviroosa hesitated. “Like what?”

“Have you ever known another puka who had the Mayor perform in his home?”

Sviroosa had met many important people from all species while in the Duke’s employ. She set her jaw and nodded. “We don’t have mayors in Chiva’vastezz, but the Duke has—”

“Bosh!” Flark’s brow went up, his mouth turned down. “You’re missing the point, housegirl.”

Sviroosa glanced at the door, blocked by the big ginger guard, and adjusted in her seat.

“Only *I* could have the Mayor of Dockhaven playing Jidryy on my patio,” Flark said. “Difficult woman, but then couldn’t the same be said of all chivori?” He cast his bark-brown eyes over to Sviroosa and smiled.

Her mouth pinched. She might have to listen to him, but she didn’t have to agree with his bosh. “I have found Duke Sylandair and Lady Aliara to be quite pleasant as employers, not at all difficult.”

“I find that unlikely. I bet they’re a pip to clean up after—the upholstery stains alone must keep you busy.”

Though she knew what he meant, Sviroosa would go to the depths before she’d admit it to this puddle. “They’re quite tidy.”

Flark chuckled and ran a finger down the arcing bridge of his nose, tapping the tip as he watched her. His chin rested on his chest. “Wouldn’t you prefer to be your own employer? Run your own business? A pretty girl like you could do quite well here in Pukatown.”

“Not particularly. I wouldn’t know what to do with my own business at this age, Mister Flark.”

“Wise for one so young. I could help you get that nest egg so you can do whatever strikes your fancy in the future.” Flark’s tongue ran from one drooping corner of his mouth to the other. “If you help me.”

Sviroosa knew what was coming. Plenty of others had tried it. She’d had no trouble rebuffing them, but she’d have to be cautious with Flark. She started picking her words before the proposition had left his lips.

“There is a simple something you can do for me...Sviroosa, was it? Yes. Your Duke Imythedralin is quite fortunate,” Flark folded his hands on the mound of his belly.

Sviroosa frowned. The Duke didn’t generally come into the sort of suggestion she’d expected. Flark, it seemed wanted something besides sex. She remembered the Duke’s warning: “...you may be

approached one day with an impressive offer...”

“He has connections that would make an emperor envious.” Flark smiled at her, more hungry than friendly. “He has collected bits of information, scraps of knowledge that could be very handy to me.”

“I won’t steal.”

“Of course not.” Flark leaned in a little closer. “All you’d have to do is take a peek at whatever’s on the Duke’s desk and pass that information to me. It’s not stealing.”

Sviroosa crossed her arms.

He leaned back and rubbed his gut like a pregnant woman encouraging her child to kick. “Do you have any idea how difficult it’s been to climb to my level? A puka in the greatest trade city in all the isles?” He didn’t pause to allow response. “Everything I do must be quicker, more shrewd, and more daring than my chivori and karju competitors. Only the rhochrot could come close to understanding our plight, and their size alone gives them advantage over us. Certainly you, a fellow puka, could understand.”

“So, you want to use me to cheat?”

Flark groaned as he rose, leaning heavily on the cane, and turned to the tall window behind him. Vesven appeared from the shadows, but Flark waved him off. “Come over here, housegirl.”

“I’m fine here.”

“Come over here and look at these buffoons below.” He clicked the butt of his cane against the window.

She joined him, staying out of arms reach, and looked out over the city, its towering buildings half-blocking the growing dusk and darkening sea. Some were smooth and tall, like they’d gone up as planned and stayed that way. Others were awkward—damaged, altered, or simply added to. They looked like they shouldn’t be able to stand. Back home, the Duke’s three-story manor house was easily the tallest building in Faisa and even it was collapsing in on itself. Land in the duchy was dotted with buildings, not the reverse.

All around the Bung Building, people leaned from windows, tossing cheap blankets onto the crowd. Only about twice the size of Duke Sylandair's wok-silk hankies, the tokens were good for little more than lap blankets or shawls, but they were tradition.

Flark smacked his tongue as though trying to re-wet his mouth. "I know the chivori who makes those little blankets they're throwing. She makes a very nice living off of our holiday. Oh yes, you see heirlooms, custom blankets, and small-batch homemade ones here and there, but for these idiots who just want to run around tossing trinkets at one another, she makes the cheapest ones around. I don't know how she does it. I suspect she has a warehouse full of rou tucked somewhere in the Dominion, all of them weaving until their fingers bleed. It doesn't matter how she does it. She does. She crushes anyone who comes close to competing." He tapped his cane against the glass twice. "And I own the building she lives in, the building she works from, and her warehouse. I can close her down in a day." He paused, waiting for Sviroosa to speak.

The man made her skin crawl.

"To succeed, you must be as cunning as them, as wicked as them—more—or you will spend your life washing up after their endless reeving." He pushed the window open, spat out onto the crowd, and returned to his seat, scratching his belly. "I own your Duke's building. The Heap, such a fitting name."

Sviroosa watched him silently. That wasn't entirely true; he only owned many of the units on the lower floors.

"I can help you, Sviroosa." Flark repeated the tongue-smacking procedure. It turned her stomach. His nostrils flared. "You don't want to tell me your Duke's business, that's fine. Just do this one simple thing: Keep alert for anyone looking to sell a unit in that building."

"I thought you owned the building."

Flark's eyes narrowed for a moment. He reinforced the fake smile. "Majority owner. I'm considered the landlord. I'd like to own

even more, and you can help me with that.” He leaned forward on the desk. “All you need do is stay alert for any tenants thinking of selling their units, pass their names to me. Or maybe your Duke might find himself a bit skint one day, so you stop by here and tell me it’s a good time to make him an offer on the place. Can you do that for me, Sviroosa?”

“The Duke trusts me.”

“Of course he does. I wouldn’t come to you otherwise.”

Sviroosa bit her lip, making a show of considering the offer.

The Duke had prepared her for this proposition. “If I were not certain of your loyalty, you would still be in Faisa,” he’d told Sviroosa months ago when she’d protested that she’d never spy on him. When he’d removed his hand from her wrist, though, he’d added, “I want you to say yes.”

When she’d merely stared dumbfoundedly at him, the Duke chuckled.

“You will be my surveillance on those who wish to pry into my affairs.” He had stood, straightened his jacket, and added, “Be certain they compensate you well and often.”

Out on the patio, a cittern player began strumming and Flark’s guests joined them in a sing along of *It’s a Good Day for a Zootie with You*.

Sviroosa grinned at Flark. “What will you pay me?”



Author’s note: Grat to the Amazing Barry (amazingbarry.com) for assistance on our mendast’s trick.

Grat for reading

If you enjoyed “A Young Persons’ Guide to Ismae,” be sure to check out *They Eat Their Own*, the first full-length novel of Ismae, available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Your support does so much to help indie authors and keep us writing.

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