

ARSOWUENT

BOOK OF THE INNOCENT



Introducing
Ahmenar Ishtam
and the Worlds of Atria

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with Andrew Wallis

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ARROWENT

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INTRODUCING AHMENAR ISHTAM
AND THE WORLDS OF ATRIA

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Welcome to Atria, a world whose ancient past could be our near-term future. Here begins the story of Ahmenar Ishtam, a well-intentioned, much-liked, but deeply troubled young man of disturbingly uncertain origins.

This cycle is dedicated to the human species:
that it might find the collective wisdom to survive;

To children everywhere:
that they receive the love they deserve;

And to all individuals:
that they recognize their wounds,

And by embracing them,
unveil their Paradise Found.

CAUSES

THE DEAD LANDS, T'ERNAN PENINSULA

The sun had overtaken Ahmenar as they both headed west, toward their respective destinies. The sun's was certain; Ahmenar's anything but. In the four hours since he'd escaped the cavern of the Ancients, the dirt encased object in the bottom of his knapsack pressed on his mind as much as it did against his spine. Head down, he glanced up; the old dirt highway shimmered in the heat. A fine dust had risen with his every footstep and now covered his shoes, his torn pants, and his ripped shirt. The sun was hot on his left arm where the sleeve was gone. The dry air was uncomfortable in his mouth where the dust comingled with his saliva, turning it to paste. He rubbed the throbbing back of his head; his hair was matted there but no longer was it bleeding.

His pace had slowed even though he was late getting home from his Arsowuent, a night of test and transformation. Walking head down, Ahmenar came upon a flattened lizard. He winced as he walked around it; the sun had baked it dry since he encountered it still alive earlier the prior day on his way out to the Dead Lands with his Guildsman guides. The memory of its flattening drove him to quicken his pace even though exhaustion bore on him, as did the sun and his thirst, and he pressed on with speed for more than a mile until the highway turned southward, toward Nerolli, his hometown, and the Caprinian sea. Ahmenar loved them both, especially the sea.

Half an hour further, Ahmenar came into the welcome reach of the sea's climactic effect. The lands to his left, southeast of the road and closer to the sea, had been filling ever more fully with plantlife. Ahmenar's eyes were steadily drawn to the green. As he went, the vibrant grass reached the side of the road. Reckoning he was less than an hour from Nerolli, and his thighs thick and his feet heavy, he stepped from the road to the soft ground and felt immediate relief.

As he lowered his long Arsoewent stick to the ground at his side, he focused on the narrow end of the carved and decorated stick. He'd drilled that end with a series of holes and had strung them with lengths of leather strips to the ends of which he'd attached courten nuts and thin rocks and bits of curved metal and worn shards of colored glass that he'd collected the preceding year through which that he'd painstakingly drilled holes so they wouldn't crack. These killiks more than decorated an Arsoewent stick—they were part of its utility, both in defending oneself during the night a boy wanting to become a Guildsman stands alone on a mound to face the Spirits of the Ancients, and for purposes Ahmenar didn't yet know, purposes he knew would be revealed when he became a Guildsman at the end of the week.

Ahmenar sighed; his stick was broken: the once honed point was splintered, and most of the killiks missing.

Ahmenar swung his knapsack from his shoulders and lowered it carefully to the ground; a sharp clink came from within. Hunched, he undid the flap and reached inside for the glass bottle. Holding it up, he measured by eye a ration of the small amount of water he had left; then he unscrewed the cap and filled his mouth with the allotted amount. Warm, almost hot, the water wasn't refreshing, but he held it for a few seconds to soften his his tongue and mouth. With a gulp, he swallowed. As that was all he'd permit himself, he screwed the cap back on. Water bottle in hand, his arm resting on a bent knee, he stared at the knapsack. He looked up the road in the direction from which he'd come, put the bottle on the ground beside him, and in a smooth motion tucked one leg beneath the other and sat while simultaneously pulling the knapsack onto his lap. Again, he stared at it. Then he plunged his hand in and withdrew the object. It fit in his palm and was as long as half his lower arm. The metallic object's shape was bewildering: a small

roundish knob connected by a short strut to a long spike. The wide end of the spike had already been brushed clean; that shiny exposed bit was what had caught his eyes in the cavern.

Ahmenar twisted his hands around it, breaking the dirt away, revealing a thin layer of gray-white material which flaked off easily. Fragile, they splintered; rubbing these turned them to dust. Ahmenar worked his hands around the object, clearing it of the dirt and its whitish covering. As he exposed more and more of the object to the light of the sun, it glittered ever more brightly. Ahmenar smiled as he polished it, pleased to have such a gift from a Spirit, especially because it was given on the first day of his manhood.

In that moment, sitting aside the road the morning after his just completed Arsowuent, Ahmenar found life grand, working perfectly, and he thought of the cavern, if not the world itself, as his pearl-bearing oyster.

Movement in the distance caught his attention and he looked back down the road, to the east. Squinting into the glare, he strained to see. Something was moving in the distance. Were the Guildsmen coming? Were they looking for him? He flinched to motion, his immediate instinct to run and hide. But the area all around was open. Besides, they had horses and running would be a sign of guilt. No, better that he continue as if nothing were out of the ordinary. How many of them were there? He stared, but the bright sunlight made it hard to see. A cloud of yellow dust rose behind them, hanging in the sky like the worries which hovered in his mind. What if they questioned him? He'd have no choice but to lie for no one could hear the story of his Arsowuent until he told it fully at his Presentment. *At the dig site? No sirs, not me.*

Through the gauze of dry air, the muted colors of motion undulated and shifted; it seemed there were three riders. Three amorphous riders on three brown horses shimmering behind curtains of heat rising from the road. They came closer. He saw red in their midst. If they wore red, that meant they were Seekers, not Guildsman. Had there been others at the dig site that he hadn't seen? Undulating up and down, the riders came toward him in slow motion. He watched, unsure what to do. As they emerged from the haze, what had appeared to him as three riders became one, a solitary rider. What if it were the one who was with the Guildsmen at the dig site?

Had the man seen him there? He'd soon enough find out. Gathering his wits, Ahmenar stowed the metal object and the water bottle back in his knapsack and tied the flap shut. He stood, strung his arms through the straps, pulled those tight, grabbed his Arsowuent stick, and resumed his walk home. It wasn't long before he heard the clopping of hooves.

Ahmenar moved to the side of the road as the rider came up by him. The horse's nostrils flared. Its scent was strong, but clean, not like the repugnant smell of those in the crowded stables in town; it reminded Ahmenar the well-tended ones out at his uncle's manor house.

"You okay?" the Seeker asked.

Still walking, he looked up to the Seeker. Beneath his red hood, the man's bushy eyebrows were slanted, separated by authoritative furrows. "Sure," Ahmenar answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Looks like you've been in a fight."

The man spoke with a foreign accent. His voice seemed oddly familiar, but Ahmenar didn't know any Seekers. "No, no fight."

The man pushed back his hood, exposing his tanned face. Draping down to his shoulders, his dark hair was thick with gray-white streaks. The man radiated a gentleness that reminded Ahmenar of his uncle Jerelli. "What are you doing out here?" the Seeker asked, eyes narrowed.

Ahmenar spoke proudly, "Going home. I did my Arsowuent last night."

The Seeker's eyes surveyed Ahmenar: the bloodied back of his head, the missing sleeve of his shirt, the rips elsewhere in it and his pants. "Dogs didn't get you, did they?"

No." Ahmenar shot back. "My stick's a good one," he said, holding his stick up proudly.

The Seeker's eyes went to its broken, jagged end. "Attacked by a spirit of the night, I see."

Ahmenar grinned and nodded; he couldn't give the true explanation for the stick's condition.

"I see it left you with your life," the Seeker said, smiling in a friendly way.

Ahmenar smiled back. "Yes, it did."

"Does that mean it accepted you?"

Ahmenar didn't know. He turned from the Seeker and looked up the road to the edge of the woods far ahead, and lost in perplexed reflection about his actual encounter, he didn't answer.

The Seeker said, "I'd offer you water or help, but it is your custom that you do this alone."

"Uh-huh," Ahmenar acknowledged, still lost in thought. Then, returning to his present circumstances and aching to know if the Seeker had been the one he'd seen with the Guildsmen, and, if so, whether the man had seen him, Ahmenar asked, "What are you doing out here?"

"Going to town."

"Are you coming from the Monastery?" Ahmenar asked, hoping it a leading question.

"Yes."

Ahmenar nodded, but was frustrated by the answers curtness. "I thought so. Have you come straight from there?"

"Where else would I be coming from?"

"I don't know. How, uh, how long have you been there, at the Monastery?"

"Sixteen years."

"That's how old I am."

"I know that," the Seeker said with a grin.

Ahmenar's eyes widened. "You do?" he asked, looking up with wonder.

The Seeker laughed. "Of course. You've just started Arsowuent. I may not be from around here, but I know more than a little about your rituals."

Ahmenar felt foolish for being surprised that the Seeker would know his age. "But I'm not going out to start Arsowuent. I'm heading back home; I've just completed my Arsowuent."

"Is that so. Well, seeing that you're okay, I must get on as I too am late getting to town."

Ahmenar's eyes widened. "I, uh, stayed for a while to keep my fire burning until long after the sun had risen over the Five Sisters."

"Is that so?"

"Did you get a late start also? Or is it a long ride from the Monastery?"

"I started early. The ride is long, but not excessively, by horse. I'm late because I spent a few hours helping SuSu men."

Ah! So, the Seeker was the one. Still, Ahmenar wondered if he'd been seen. Ahmenar also

didn't know what to make of the Seeker calling the Guildsmen 'SuSu men' and wondered if it was derogatory. "Susemhren," Ahmenar corrected.

The Seeker chuckled. "We each have our own names."

"What sort of help?"

"There was a collapse at a cavern."

Ahmenar feigned surprise. "Was there? Was anyone hurt?"

"Not yet," the Seeker answered.

"Not yet? Might someone get hurt?"

"Depends. Depends on why the spirits are angry."

"Are they angry?"

"Yes. And their artifacts are trouble."

Ahmenar avoided the man's gaze. "Trouble? How so?"

"Questions of a philosophical bent are best discussed over tall glasses of spirits."

Ahmenar turned to the Seeker with a puzzled look. The man winked at him. "Spirits from the fruit." Ahmenar smiled, understanding, but the man's expression flattened. "You were in the Dead Lands. You didn't come across any artifacts while out there, did you?"

"N-no," Ahmenar lied uncomfortably. "Why do you ask?"

"What do you know of the ancients?" the Seeker asked.

Ahmenar had a great respect for the ancients. "They were powerful and had many altechnikals." Ahmenar said with pride, "We have a TZ at my house."

"Is that good?"

Ahmenar blinked. He presumed so.

Before Ahmenar could think of a reply, the Seeker said coldly, "There are many more altechnikals than the Operators have figured out."

"Do you know much of the Ancients?"

The Seeker nodded. "Maintaining such knowledge is one of my causes."

"Causes?"

“Service to the Priestesses is another.”

Ahmenar nodded; of course, that’s what Seekers provided—service to the Priestesses. “But you helped the Guildsman, at the dig site.”

“And?”

“I thought you Seekers devote your lives to the Priestesses?”

“That is true. But one can devote one’s life to many causes, all at the same time.” The man smiled. “So long as they don’t conflict.”

Ahmenar frowned. “I take it then that the Susemhren aren’t in conflict with the Priestesses?” He’d concluded otherwise, though couldn’t speak of the matter to any Guildsman as he yet wasn’t a member.

“Nothing implies that. All that is implied is that *my* causes are not in conflict. What of yours?”

Ahmenar blinked. “My causes?”

“Surely you must have a cause or two of which you champion?”

There was the sport of fresbool for which Ahmenar pined to be a champion, but he didn’t think the Seeker would consider this ‘a cause.’ He shrugged.

“Perhaps you should take one up.”

Ahmenar nodded. “Like what? Are you suggesting I become a Seeker?”

“Perhaps protecting more than the Priestesses.”

“Who else needs protecting?”

“People.”

“What people.”

“Innocent people.”

“From what?”

“From forces they can’t see. From things that kill and maim, the things of the ancients that so poisoned the ground in some places as to make the land unsuitable to live upon, or even near; things that to this day still distort living creatures, like the stunted trees of the Dead Lands, and children born of unnatural shape and arrangement, some so severely they die exiting the womb.”

“What can I do?” Ahmenar asked uncomfortably.

“Do the Spirits of the Ancients truly guard us?”

Ahmenar stared blankly; he didn’t really know and had never thought of these things.

“Can they prevent the people of the modern Worlds from unleashing more of the horrible unnamed things of the past?”

Still Ahmenar stared; no one had ever mentioned such horrible things to him.

“Cursed and tainted are those things buried beneath those mounds—the very things exhumed by the SuSu men.”

Ahmenar shivered uncomfortably—he was to become a Susemhren himself later that week. A chill curdled Ahmenar to the bone, and filled with morbid but unquenchable need to know, he asked, “Are all artifacts dangerous?”

“Yes.”

“But the Susemhren mine them, and they seem okay.”

“The Susemhren have their methods. And their rituals. They cleanse the objects and make offerings to the ancients to appease the spirits for taking their property.”

“But I didn’t know how to do that,” Ahmenar said, now quite troubled, and unaware that by his statement he inculcated himself for violating this essential act.

“Such you will learn, if you become a Guildsman.”

“Do you know of these rituals?” Ahmenar asked hungrily.

“All things in their proper time.”

Before Ahmenar could inquire further of the Seeker, the man said, firmly and distinctly, “K’pani.” Then, tugging once sharply on the reigns, the horse’s legs pranced. Without looking back, the Seeker went on his way.

Kuh-pahn-ee? Ahmenar had never heard that and wondered if he’d heard right or if it was an expression from the lands from where the Seeker came. Ahmenar stared after him. He watched the Seeker steadily shrink into the distance ahead. Finally, Ahmenar too continued on his way. *Kuh-pahn-ee.* Ahmenar hoped his brother-in-law Mero might know what it meant; Mero had

travelled the Worlds before coming to Nerolli.

Walking beneath the hot sun, a bead of sweat broke free at his temple and crawled down his right cheek by the ear. Ahmenar didn't take notice, for he was troubled: not only had his Arsowuent stick become broken, which was a bad omen, but he carried an artifact of the ancients, something potentially dangerous, something for which he hadn't performed a ritual of protection as he knew the Susemhren always did.

The sun was strong in the clear sky as Ahmenar approached Nerolli. Feeling the presence of the sea, the crispness in the air, and the temperature drop, he felt renewed. Taking a deep breath, he moaned softly. He turned to his Arsowuent stick. "Sea air." He smiled. "We'll be home soon."

About two miles from town, Ahmenar came upon Nerolli's airfield. As he passed by, Ahmenar looked over it, northward, to his right. Cows grazed lazily. On the far side the trees were thick, the beginning of dense woodlands that ran northwest from Nerolli. An old ruin at the side of the airfield drew his attention. Its hulking skeleton rose high above the trees. Built by the ancients, it was a tower of concrete and metal. Strangely, it had no windows. Inside was a rectangular shaft that ran from top to bottom—for a lift, he'd once been told. A stairway wrapped around this. At the tower's top was a covered platform, much wider than the tower itself. As a boy, he'd played there with his friends imagining themselves ancients with the ability, like gods on earth, to move mountains. They'd fight using chunks of concrete plucked from the decaying building as proxies for weapons of immense power, pretending them the sort the ancients had. A few of these relics were on a shelf in his bedroom, but having fallen into desuetude, they gathered dust. Perhaps, he thought, he'd clear the shelf and return the old junk to the tower. What were they to an artifact from the cavern—just kids pretend playthings. But in that moment Ahmenar recalled the admonition of the Seeker: all artifacts are dangerous. "Why," he mused aloud to his Arsowuent stick, "do you think the Spirit wanted me to have it?"

ΕΝΔΣ

From the airfield into the city proper the road was paved. It was one of the few stretches of paved road outside of the town's boundary. Ahmenar's home was on the far west side, where canyons cut deep into the high bluffs rising from the sea, and so he had to cross all of Nerolli to get there. About a mile further on, Ahmenar came to a park-like arboretum. In spite of its beauty he walked quickly, pressed by the hour to get home.

Unlike on the road, here there were people. Some slowed as they approached Ahmenar and asked if he needed help. He smiled and replied that he was fine. To Ahmenar, his disheveled appearance was a badge of honor for it represented his night of Arsowuent and all that had happened. He'd not just made it through the night but had met a spirit of the ancients, one that spoke to him, that led him to a cavern with knowledge of a map so he could gain entrance. And there, he'd gotten the artifact.

Passing through the park with its luscious flowers and vibrant greenery, Ahmenar paused. He reached down plucked a blade of thick grass. Stretching it tight between the knuckles of his thumb, he brought it to his lips and blew firmly and steadily. The grass vibrated, making a sound like a reed, only much shriller. He blew in pulses, some hard, some soft, shifting the pitch and the volume. The fibers of the grass frayed, releasing the strong, bitter herbaceous scent. Ahmenar

closed his eyes, drawing in the smell. In his mind he heard laughter. Not for any reason; it was just an association, one that happened reliably. Ahmner had others like this, sounds that came to him if he listened within when he smelled certain things. He continued on his way.

Crossing an invisible line demarking the city's limits, Nerolli loomed up and swallowed him. All at once dense buildings were around him and the noise and activity and smells and colors of city life burst upon him. Children ran after one another in the street. Old couples sat on porch steps keeping an eye on them. Dogs barked. From somewhere unseen he heard a woman singing. Elsewhere, pots clanged. Down an alley, a woman beat a large rug with a broom, raising a cloud of gray dust. He'd had enough of dust.

Though the sun was still strong and bright, the air was crisp and cool. Ahmenar found it a most pleasant day. Composing a rhythm, his head bobbed to it as he walked, paying no mind to the people he passed and so didn't notice those who looked with curiosity at the dirt-covered lad who, in spite of his raggedy appearance, was so obviously and obliviously happy. He stopped suddenly when, down the street, he caught sight of the great stone wall of Ihabara.

Ihabara long intrigued Ahmenar, as it did most boys. Within the city of Nerolli yet isolated from it, Ihabara was a world unto itself, ends unto its own means. Most fascinating to Ahmenar was that fact that Ihabara had its own rules. More than once Ahmenar had heard it said from other boys that *anything* could be purchased in Ihabara—if one knew what they were doing. Though Ahmenar wasn't quite certain what those 'anythings' could be, he never allowed his naivete to show and spoke with the other boys as if he knew many such things.

Ahmenar had also heard that Ihabara wasn't a place for those who didn't know what they were doing, and was once told in an urgent way by a friend whose older brother traded there that even experienced and knowledgeable traders were sometimes bamboozled and hoodwinked by fast-talking merchants. All of these considerations swirled in Ahmenar's head as he neared the great walled city-within-a-city. He'd never before been there without adult accompaniment. But, he reminded himself, his present situation was different: having completed Arsoquent, he was now himself a man. The thought didn't match his feelings.

The massive stone wall of Ihabara seemed to rise higher as Ahmenar proceeded along the paved street that he'd been on since the airfield. Not far ahead, the road merged into Uru Boro's End, a broad circular street that ran around the walled marketplace. A main thoroughfare, it connected roads from different parts of Upper Nerolli. Sounds of the traffic and activity on Uru Boro's End grew steadily louder as Ahmenar approached: the clacking hooves of draft animals pulling carts, the putter of small engine-driven vehicles, the voices of men calling or yelling to one another, and the play of children who darted between the carts and the trucks. These were an envelope that wrapped Ihabara in sound just as Uru Boro's End did in pavement. After his time in the quiet of the Dead Lands, the city sounds were a welcome symphony, the energy and activity of city life a magnet.

Ahmenar slowed as he reached The End. Looking first to the left and then right, the stone wall of Ihabara curved smoothly away in both directions on either side of the very large entrance gateway that was before him. Great gray blocks made up Ihabara's thick wall. As far as Ahmenar understood, Ihabara wasn't the sort of structure that could any longer be built, not even with technology of the Operators; the blocks had been cut and fit together with irreproducible precision. It was yet another testament to the ancient's mastery of the physical world.

The buildings on the outer perimeter of Uru Boro's End, facing the walled marketplace, were also quite old. Most were commercial in nature: small warehouses, craftsahm's shops, retail stores, and light manufactories. The upper stories of many of these buildings were apartments. Ahmenar couldn't imagine living in such a place as Uru Boro's End was to him much too noisy and busy a wayfare for residential life.

Ahmenar observed two well-dressed men also crossing the street. Talking with severe faces, he presumed they were discussing business, perhaps a trade, and so decided that should he ever negotiate his own deal in Ihabara, theirs was the sort of don't-mess-with-me expression he'd adopt. With that image in his head he stepped into Uru Boro's End, and crossed the busy street moving steadily, navigating amongst the horse-drawn wagons and smaller carts pushed or pulled along by burly men. The motorized vehicles were a nuisance as their drivers drove more quickly

than the other traffic, around which they swerved hazardously.

Reaching the other side, the massive gated entry to the hidden inner world of Ihabara loomed before him. He looked up at the apex of the arch. Etched into the keystone were the letters C and H drawn with a short, vertical connecting line, the H above the C. There were six entrances to Ihabara, evenly spaced around the marketplace-city, and each had this mysterious marking. To Ahmenar, it contributed to the mystery of Ihabara, as did even the name of the road which wrapped it: why was it called an End when it made a closed loop? All Ahmenar ever concluded of this was that many of Nerolli's roads ended here, but that answer was less than fully satisfying. But then, very little about the ancients was ever answered in a convincing way.

While the outer wall of Ihabara was thick, it wasn't a full building's width, as was the central marketplace in lower Nerolli, a place Ahmenar frequented and its shops he was quite familiar. The central marketplace was also enclosed, but by a row of buildings on each of its four sides. To enter the central marketplace one had to pass through tunnel-like entryways that went through the heart of a building. The center of that marketplace was an open plaza with several fountains. Ahmenar liked it there because it always felt festive to him. Ihabara was anything but. It was foreboding because not only enclosed, it was also covered, though its high curving roof had many large rectangular openings that let in air and light. Set in the vast roof in a regular pattern, it was clear these openings were intentional, though Ahmenar couldn't imagine why the ancients would have built a covering over a marketplace that let in the rain. Ahmenar crossed beneath the arch. He was now in Ihabara.

Unlike the central plaza in lower Nerolli, Ihabara contained buildings within its walls. They lined the city-within-a-city's meandering narrow streets. As much as Ahmenar found it exciting to be in Ihabara the few times he'd been taken there, he also found it quite confusing. Which it was to him now, only more so that he was alone. This made him nervous, though he did his best to be a man and push that nervousness aside, reminding himself that he'd confronted a spirit of the ancients and had been in one of their caverns. What was Ihabara to that?

Rarely on the west side of upper Nerolli, Ahmenar had never entered Ihabara via the entrance

he just came in by. Three alley-like streets ran from where he stood: one straight ahead, one to the left, and one to the right. Even the one that went straight had a bend not far ahead which he couldn't see past. He presumed this road would take him quickest to the heart of Ihabara. From there he thought he could find his way to Errant Street where the TZ gamedealers were; he'd been taken there by Mero but had never been there on his own. From there, he was confident he could find his way to the gate that exited nearest Wenslow's Skelp, a windswept shelf of crumbly land near the top of the cliff that separated lower Nerolli from upper. It was a dangerous route his parents had forbade him to use after he once fell there and nearly killed himself. But that was a rule for a boy; he was a man now. And taking it would save him much time.

As Ahmenar stood considering the alternatives, three seafaring men walked passed him. One of them stopped and turned. By his tousled hair, long braided red beard, and squinting eye he reminded Ahmenar of a pirate. Sandwiched between his muscled right arm and broad chest he carried a large box. "Need help, matey?" the man asked. *Matey*—certainly they must be sea-ahm. The man's two compatriots stopped as well. Wary of sea-ahm because of the many disparaging comments his father made about them, Ahmenar eyes shot among the three men as he distilled his father's stories to their essence: all sea-ahm were brash, short-fused, and eager for confrontation. "No thank you sir," he answered wanting to be polite lest he incite the sea-ahms' tempers. But his voice was weak and the words came out hoarsely as he was parched from his long walk beneath the hot sun in the dry lands.

"Sir," one of the other sea-ahm laughed, a man with a long, gaunt face, a narrow nose, and a gray, weathered skullcap atop a head of straggly, greasy, lampblack hair. "Ain't nobody called him 'sir' in so long that he may not know yer talkin to im." Though this second man was much smaller, he slapped the big man who'd spoken first heartily on the back, saying "That be you, Jerrod, that the lads referring to by 'Sir.'"

"Don't mind him," Jerrod said to Ahmenar with a jovial smile. "His name is Ackel and being that he didn't introduce himself you can see he don't have quite the good manners I do. Besides which," he said, holding his hand up, thumb and forefinger apart by the size of a pea, "his brain's

real small.” The sea-ahm smiled. “Why I’m surprised Ackel even remembered my name as he don’t usually.” With a hearty laugh Jerrod jabbed Ackel in the side with his elbow, and said, “Nor the debts he owes me.”

Ignoring the jab, stroking his wispy black beard, Ackel bowed, crossing his purple-stockinged left leg behind his right. To Ahmenar he said, “Tis an honor and a delight to make your acquaint this fine day.”

Ahmenar nodded respectfully.

Leaning forward Jerrod reached past Ackel and poked the third sea-ahm in his side. “This here,” he said to Ahmenar, “is Hernden.”

Hernden nodded.

Jerrod looked back to Ahmenar. “Call ‘em both by their names. They wouldn’t respond to ‘Sir’ unless it danced all a jigglin on a table afore ‘em. Now me, you can call Sir because it fits me just fine, don’t ya think, lad?”

ROPE

Tired from his night of no sleep, disoriented by the choice of paths into Ihabara, and now made more than a bit anxious of these sea-ahm who confronted him, Ahmenar stood transfixed, wanting to end this encounter but not knowing how.

Before Ahmenar could reply Ackel turned his long face to Jerrod and said, “Why you’d think the lad’s jus’seen a ghost.” Turning his inky eyes back to Ahmenar, he said, “Don’t let us upset you, boy.”

“I’m not a boy!” Ahmenar shot back.

“Whoa,” Ackel said raising his hands up, fingers spread, palms forward. “Sorry mate. Didn’t mean to go insultin yer sensitivities.”

In spite of his quickness to apologize, Ahmenar didn’t trust nor like this Ackel fellow though he did think it funny that Ackel would refer to a ghost when in Ahmenar’s eyes it was Ackel who appeared ghostlike: gaunt like a skeleton or a mummy wrapped by pale and pasty skin. Ahmenar also found it funny that Ackel’s name rhymed with cackle as that’s how he sounded. As humourous as he found these notions he suppressed a smile. Unsure of what else to do or say Ahmenar stood there wanting nothing more than for the sailors to leave him and get on with their business. Thinking he should prompt them to do the same. Putting a hand to his hip he said

proudly, "I'm here on business. Don't you gentlemen have business of your own that requires your attention."

Again Ackel turned to Jerrod. "Well-spoken, ain't 'ee."

Jerrod ignored Ackel's comment, nor did he take his squinting right eye from Ahmenar. It was, Ahmenar realized, scarred into that shape. Jerrod answered him, "Yes, course we got business that requires our attention. And I did'n think you were here without business yerself. I did'n say that, did I? Course not. I just stopped to ask a fellow businessahm if 'ee needed help gettin' to 'is place of business. That's all. After all, these streets can be more'n a bit confusing." Then Jerrod chuckled. "Why, without me, these two mateys of mine wouldn't get to where we're needin to be before sundown. If even then at all."

Brushing his wavy, salt-n-pepper hair from his face the man furthest to the right, Hernden, who'd been quiet until now, said, "Remind me, Jerrod, where *is it* we need to be?" By his snappy answer Ahmenar decided that he wasn't as simple as Jerrod was making them out to be.

"What kind of business do you gentlemen have in Ihabara?" Ahmenar asked politely, not wanting to engage them in further conversation but also not wanting to come across as rude.

"Important business," Hernden replied flatly, seriously, neither bragging nor being playful.

Ackel elbowed Hernden in the side, "Shh, ya big dummy. We don't go telling strangers our business is important."

"Sorry Ack. I just figured his business was important too. Why else would a smart lad like 'im be here, homeless as he is."

"Homeless?" Ahmenar echoed, feeling both infuriated and insulted. "Why would you think I'm homeless?"

"Well, just look at ya," Hernden said. "Dirty as ya'are, clothes all ripped. And ya' look like ya' been in a fight a long while ago and still nobody's takin' care of that head of yers." Hernden narrowed his eyes on Ahmenar, "Smart a lad as ya are, you wouldn't go doing business looking like that; the shopkeeps here would eat you up. No sir, if you're here to do business its because you got no home to get all tidied up at. Am I wrong?"

Ahmenar could see the logic in Hernden's statements; he wasn't stupid. More so, his warning about the merchant's taking advantage of him loomed large. Hernden was right: given the way he looked coming from his incident in the cavern, no merchant would take him seriously, even if he were a man. "Your points are well taken, Mr. Hernden Sir." Hernden turned his head sideways and tilted his head slightly, keeping his eyes on Ahmenar, a dignified motion that further belied his simplicity. Ahmenar was beginning to like this man and felt kindness in his twinkling yellow-brown eyes. "But I do have a home. Quite a nice one. I just happen to be coming from the Dead Lands."

"The Dead Lands," Ackel echoed in a wavering voice filled with mock fright.

"By yerself?" Jerrod asked, raising the eyebrow over his good left eye.

"Yes," Ahmenar said, standing straighter and puffing his chest. "By myself. My Arsowuent was last night."

Ackel took his skullcap from his head and made a broad sweeping bow with it, again throwing one leg behind the other. He remained bent over for two or three seconds then stood, replacing the skullcap to his bald-topped head. "Me and my mateys are honored to be in the presence of a boy turned man this very day. But tell me my good sir who's name we don't yet know, how is that you come to be lookin as you do? "The dogs didn get ya, did they?"

"No, the dogs didn't get me. I had a good fire and a sharp Arsowuent stick." He held it up.

The three sea-ahm peered at Ahmenar's Arsowuent stick. Jerrod said, "So that's what that is, yer Arsowuent stick?"

"Yes," Ahmenar said defensively. "Can't you tell?"

"Looks like a busted walkin stick to me," Jerrod said.

"It got broken and I lost the killiks," Ahmenar said not wanting to explain how this happened.

"Got broke, did it?" Jerrod said eyeing Ahmenar, his permanently squinting eye more unnerving than it had been. Then, with a conspiratorial wink, he asked, "Didn't go diggin with yer stick, did ya?"

Ackel said. "Look at 'em. I'm sure he's got quite the rope to haul."

Ahmenar didn't like being doubted and had no idea what Ackel's comment meant. "I didn't dig for anything. And I don't have any rope."

Hernden smiled. Rubbing the fabric of his silky blue shirt, he explained, "Having rope to haul—that's an expression sea-ahm use. Ackel meant you must have quite a story to tell."

"Well, I do."

"Then out with it, mate." Then, bending his hulky frame, Jerrod put down the large box he was carrying. Straightening back up he placed a heavy leather boot on it and crossed his arms.

Ahmenar wasn't sure what to do. The more he tried to extricate himself from conversation with these sea-ahm, the more involved he became. He was stuck now; he had to tell them something. But what? He couldn't say anything about the cavern yet he couldn't say that nothing had happened. But he did have something to work with. "A spirit of the ancients came to my mound. Just before sunrise, at gheraiyo. It came through the crack between worlds in solid form." Then, remembering of his conversation with the Seeker he added, "I fought it. And that's why I look like I do."

"That's quite the rope your haulin'," Ackel laughed.

Ahmenar didn't know what to make of this. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Hernden smiled at Ahmenar. "That means: your tale is tall and impressive."

Ahmenar smiled, proud to the bone that he'd been visited by a spirit of the ancients.

"It means," Jerrod added immediately, "that Ackel thinks your spinnin the tale."

"Spinning?" Ahmenar echoed, frowning, unsure what the sea-ahm were implying.

"Making it up." Jerrod said.

"I am not!"

"I don't mean ya no disrespects," Ackel said, "seein how smart a lad, I mean, a man, y'are. But for all my years at sea and all the ports I put in at and from all the sea-ahm I've knocked wood with, I've heard a lot of rope hauled, and never 'ave I come across anyone who claimed 'ee actually was touched by one of them ancient spirits. Besides, as I hear it, a man would explode if a spirit touched 'im. And you don't look like a man exploded."

Ahmenar grinned. “Don’t I? Do I look like a boy who’s passed a peaceful night beside a warm fire atop a mound in the Dead Lands?” Then with his eyes burning as brightly as his fire had he launched into faced-paced storytelling that emerged without thought. “That spot on the back of my head—that’s where it touched me. The spirit went in to me there, into my head. But I fought it off in my mind. We wrestled in the dirt. I rolled through clumps of broom and bounced into the hardwood of skylosalos.” The faces of the sea-ahm became rapt as Ahmenar spoke. “But I wouldn’t let it take my soul. And when it left the way it came in I did feel like I’d exploded. But here I am. And I’m all in one piece.” The energy of his fabrication spent, he looked between them; their smiles deepened, even Hernden the quiet one.

Jerrod nodded. “Mighty fine rope yer haulin.”

A big grin grew on Ackel’s face. “The lad pulls mighty well.”

Though entirely fictional, Ahmenar felt slighted. “But it’s true.”

Taking on a serious expression Jerrod said, “Course it is.”

The smile drained from Ackel’s face as well. “Yup. Who’re we to doubt the words of a lad just done ‘is Arsowuent. Strange things happen out in them Dead Lands. Lots of valuable stuff there to be traded. Who goes out there in them lands—not many; just fools who end up as dead as the ground they trod upon uninvited and Guildsmen. That’s all. Why’s that? Because them spirits protect the lands. Ain’t that right, Jerrod.”

Jerrod nodded.

“Were you really out there?” Hernden asked.

“Yes.”

“Then tell us more.”

“More?”

“Can’t be all that happened, can it now? If you hook some fellahs, you need to play ‘em to draw ‘em in, like ya got yerself a prize ogee on yer line.”

Ahmenar had never fished for deep-sea ogee was, but knew their reputation as a long and difficult play, and so thought he understood what Hernden meant, and knew he needed to tell

more of the story. He started tentatively. “Before it could fly away I grabbed it.”

Hernden nodded approvingly.

Ahmenar continued. “I had become weak from the fight but tired as I was I dragged it back up the mound. It kicked and shrieked as we got closer to the fire. It knew then that it was true, that I could kill it, that I could make it shrivel up and blow away as smoke in the night, never to be seen again.”

Jerrod stamped his boot on the box. “Yes, yes, that’s it. Go on.”

Ahmenar grinned; the adulation was intoxicating. “It begged me not to kill it. I asked it why I should let it live. I asked it why it attacked me.” Noticing he had the undivided attention of the three sea-ahm, Ahmenar paused. Ackel lifted his hand and made a *c’mon, c’mon* motion with his fingers. Ahmenar took a deep breath then launched into full-scale rope pulling. “It had been trapped in the ground, it told me, for a thousand years; stuck in one of the caverns. It had just come out that night for the very first time. It didn’t mean to attack me, but my fire scared it. Again it begged that I let it go. It said it would join the other spirits and not bother people again. So I let it go.”

After a pause Jerrod said, “You just let it go?” Ackel looked at him cross-wise. Hernden frowned. So Ahmenar continued, “And when I let it go it stood before me. It said it was sorry for attacking me and to make it up to me it said it had a gift for me. And then it flew away.”

Ackel smiled, bowing slightly. “And here we are—the gift yer spirit promised.”

Jerrod added with a laugh, “Imagine that. An I thought *we* was here on *our* business.”

“You got some rope pullin talent, matey,” Ackel said.

Hernden turned his head askew. “I think there’s some earth in ‘is bucket.”

“Do ya?” Ackel said to Hernden.

Again Ahmenar was unsure of the exact meaning of the sea-ahm expression, but sensed it was a compliment.

Hernden’s face took on a serious look, and he said to Ackel, without the prior joviality, “I think the Arsowuent lad really got something. From the Spirit.” Then, turning to Ahmenar he

said, "Didn't you?"

Ahmenar felt cornered. He didn't mean to mention the artifact, and didn't want now to say anything about it. He smiled nervously. "It was just rope pulling. I guess I landed an ogee."

"Well, well," Jerrod said crossing his arms, "either your standin beside a tightly wrapped and well-coiled rope or your standin within a mess of one. Which is it?"

Ahmenar thought understood what Jerrod meant by the seafarers expression: it was a warning not to get caught up in his own tale. Ahmenar's chest felt like it would cave in. He wanted to run away but was frozen in place by the long-fingered hands of the three sea-ahms' narrow stares.

"Out in the Dead Lands, you were, right?" Hernden said, his expression now quite serious.

Ahmenar nodded.

"Got injured out there, right?"

Again he nodded.

"And now yer here?"

Ahmenar said smiling nervously. A line Mero often spoke came to him. "Where else can I be than here?"

Hernden chuckled. "A student of the philosepheric arts, are ya? Well, I didn't mean that in some useless thinkin-about-life-rather-than-livin-it way. I mean that here ya are, in Ihabara."

Ahmenar nodded. "Uh huh. I'm here in Ihabara." Puzzled by their interrogation, Ahmenar grew nervous. The sea-ahm stared at him quietly as he tried to stitch together the implication of Hernden's comments. "I'm just on my way home."

"By going through Ihabara?" Ackel asked.

"Aren't I allowed?"

"Course ya are," Jerrod said. "Every man's got a right to trade here."

"But I didn't come to trade."

"No?" Ackel said.

"No."

"Listen lad," Ackel said, bending toward Ahmenar. "An don't get huffy on me, I know yer

a man, but you're a young man. And like Hern said, you look like a homeless one. But you say you ain't. So, if you was truly out in the Dead Lands and yer lookin like ya do, you must've done some scratcin-about while out there." Ackel's eyes shifted away; Ahmenar followed his gaze to the broken end of his Arsowuent stick. "I says you found something."

"No," Ahmenar objected. But he flinched and knew by this that he'd betrayed himself.

"And now yer wantin to trade."

Ahmenar's mouth fell open, but he didn't know what to say.

Ackel added, "Listen Spirit-Warrior, we got more experience than you in trading artifacts."

"I told you, I'm just passing through, on my way home."

Jerrod spoke up. "Then why did yer Spirit lead ya here, an' right to us?"

Ahmenar squinted. "Did it do that?"

"Sure! So you could make a trade an' bring your Arsowuent to a proper and fitting end."

"But I already finished my Arsowuent. Out there," Ahmenar said, twisting around to point in the direction of the Dead Lands.

"Nonsense," Herded said.

Ahmenar turned back to the sea-ahm. "But I did."

"It ain't over til the fire's out."

"The fire? I extinguished the ashes before I left my mound."

Jerrod spoke, drawing Ahmenar's gaze to him. "Lookin to be a Guildsman, aren't ya?"

"Of course I am."

Jerrod leaned forward. and said sotly, "Proper Guildsman don't take for themselves. Not even a souvenir."

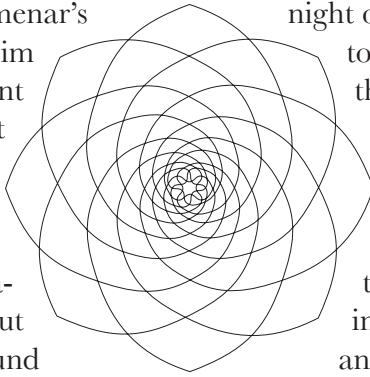
Sudden concern filling Ahmenar, his eyes shifted nervously from Jerrod to Ackel to Hernden, then back to Jerrod. "Are you Guildsman?"

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