



PHILIP ATHANS

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WHISPER OF WAVES

*The Watercourse Trilogy* BOOK I

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## PROLOGUE

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*10 Kythorn, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)*

**L**ightning played across the water-saturated ground, the only relief from the utter blackness of the moonless night. Each brilliant flash of blue-white showed another tableau of destruction.

There was nothing left but rubble. It was all gone. The supports lay shattered, once great stone blocks so much gravel, and all around was mud—everywhere black, all-consuming mud.

He didn't speak. Barely moving enough to breathe, he stood perfectly still. He'd never held his body so motionless. As the lightning crashed all around him and the thunder vibrated his chest, threatening to disrupt the very beat of his heart, he stood in perfect, uninterrupted silence.

There was nothing to say, after all. What was there to say? What eulogy could be appropriate for a man's dreams? His life, that was obvious—a list of family and friends, platitudes to assuage the grief of those left behind—but his dreams? His dreams left in a pile of mud and ruin, what could a man be expected to say?

Lightning arced a few paces from him, close enough to raise each hair on his head in a wave from the front of his hairline to his neck. The skin on his back shivered, and his knees twitched. Despite his desire to stand in place, he took one step backward to keep from

falling but still slipped on the muddy ground. He fell to one knee but stood quickly, even as the deafening boom of thunder echoed into the background hiss of the incessant rain.

He took no notice of the mud caked on his trousers. His linen and silk clothing stuck to his body, heavy with rain. If it was dirty as well, what could it matter? The rain was cold and the wind blew in from the Lake of Steam, cool enough to provide no relief but still rife with the stench of sulfur that was the lake's peculiar curse—one of its curses, anyway.

His body shivered, but he paid it no mind. A bolt from the heavens crashed to ground behind the pile of rubble that had been his life's work, outlining in silhouette the uneven mound. Ribbons of rain water blew from the edges of broken stones like the thin branches of willows whipping in the wind. The constant percussion of the rainfall grew loud enough to drown out all but the closest and most insistent of the thunderbolts. He couldn't have heard someone approach from behind him if he'd tried, and he didn't try.

A deep breath put as much rain water as air into his lungs, but he didn't give the storm the satisfaction of coughing. His eyes moved slowly from left to right, then back again, taking in the ruin, memorizing it, making it a part of himself. He cared only for the sight of what had become of his work, and he didn't know that something made its way across the ankle-deep mud behind him.

Had he bothered to turn he might have seen it, at least in silhouette, against the blinding lightning that illuminated the roiling, angry clouds. He might have seen it take its time, dragging its feet through the mud one tortured step every dozen heartbeats, secure in the fact that it didn't have to be fast. It had all the time in the world.

So intent was he on the rocks, mud, twisted metal, and splintered wood that he didn't see it coming. So deafened

was he by the crash of thunder and the hammering of rain that he didn't hear its footsteps or its groans. So devoured was he by the bitter reality of the mess his work had been reduced to that he didn't think to turn.

Behind him, something had come almost within reach—something that moved but didn't live, hated but didn't reason, killed but felt no remorse.