

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

PHILIP ATHANS  
SCREAM  
*The Watercourse  
Trilogy* OF STONE  
BOOK III



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# I

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*1 Hammer, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR)*

SECOND QUARTER, INNARLITH

A sound at his bedchamber door woke the master builder. Eyes still closed, head heavy with sleep, he rolled over and called out, “Yes . . . what is it?”

No answer, and he could feel himself starting to move from the confusion of interrupted sleep to the annoyance of being ignored by his own servants. It couldn’t have been anyone but the upstairs maid, but she would have answered. She would have opened the door and walked in. But she had never done that before. No one had ever thought to roust him from a dead sleep in the middle of the night.

He sighed and rubbed his face with sleep-weak hands and thought he must have been dreaming. He hadn’t heard—

*Tap.*

His breath caught in his throat. The sound was unmistakable. It still echoed in his ears. Then came the scraping, ragged nails dragged down the length of the heavy oak door.

Could it be one of the dogs? Inthelph thought, but no, it couldn’t be.

The scraping stopped, and again Inthelph thought he might have dreamed the sound, but it was less a thought and more a hope.

*Tap.*

*Scratch.*

Louder, but shorter, as though the claws sank deeper into the wood. He imagined the deep furrows that must have been cut into his door.

His hands shook, and he clutched at his bedclothes.

There were guards in his house, and the staff. No one who meant him any harm could have gotten as far as his bedroom door. It was why he'd never bothered to have a lock installed. Anyone who could get as far as his door was surely—

His door was not locked.

The tap came again, but louder, the tips of hard, heavy talons digging into the wood—then the scratching, louder, more insistent.

The master builder reached for the drawer in his bedside table. He had a dagger there, the blade enchanted so that even he would seem a formidable fighter with it in his hand. The drawer squeaked on its tracks and clunked open so loudly Inthelph winced. He fumbled for the knife, making even more noise, then there was the *tap* again, a knock, a thud, scratching.

“I have a knife,” Inthelph said, even though his probing fingers hadn't yet found the blade.

The scratching stopped. Inthelph's fingers closed on the dagger's handle and he drew it out of the drawer. He sat up in his high, soft feather bed, holding the dagger in front of him in a shaking hand. His mouth was dry, but he tried to swallow anyway. Pain and fear made him whimper, and the whimper made a cold sweat break out on his forehead and between his legs.

“For the love of . . . for goodness's sake, who is it? What do you—?”

“Inthel—” a voice from beyond the door interrupted.

The voice was familiar. At first he thought it was Willem Korvan, but it couldn't be. The voice was raspy and weak—an old man's voice.

The scratching noise came again, and Inthelph thought

he detected a trace of desperation in the sound of the claws on the door.

“Willem?” he said, but it couldn’t be.

“Inthelph. Help me.”

It was Willem. His voice was weak, barely above a whisper, but it was Willem Korvan.

Inthelph slipped out from under the covers and dropped to the floor. The chamber was cool and damp, the fire having long since burned to smoldering orange embers in the untended fireplace. Where was the maid?

“Willem?” the master builder called out, the dagger still in his hand, but largely forgotten. “Are you injured, my boy?”

No answer, but Inthelph thought he could hear a scuffling of feet in the corridor beyond. He sensed hesitation.

“Willem?”

The door handle turned. Well-oiled and polished, it made no sound, but caught the dim orange light from the spent fire.

The master builder rubbed his eyes and stood. He stepped away from the bed, closer to the door, but still held the dagger in front of him. He squinted in the darkness and cast about for a candle. He’d never had to light one himself—where was the upstairs maid?—and he wasn’t quite sure where they were kept. Anyway, he had no flint and steel.

He tried to swallow, but his throat hurt. He coughed. Spittle dripped onto his chin, but he didn’t have the strength to wipe it away. He shook in more than his hands, his whole body reacting to the cold and the fear.

“Help me,” Willem whispered from the darkness behind the door, which had come open a crack.

The fear began to diminish, and the master builder took a step closer to the door. Willem was injured, that much was plain in his voice, but Inthelph had nothing to fear from the young senator who had been his protégé.

“Willem, I—” Inthelph said, stopping short when the door opened and Willem Korvan stepped out of the darkness of the unlit corridor.

“Willem,” Inthelph whispered, “what’s happened?”

Willem stepped in, his knee almost giving out under his weight. What clothes he wore were dirty, tattered rags. Gore had soaked into most of them, and Inthelph was hit by the overwhelming stench of dried blood. Inthelph lifted one foot to step forward, but he couldn’t. He stood his ground, the dagger in front of his chest.

Willem took a step closer, then another. His head sat to one side on a neck that seemed incapable of supporting the weight. When he walked his knees didn’t bend. Inthelph’s eyes grew more accustomed to the dark, and he stepped closer to see Willem’s face.

Inthelph gasped in a breath and held it.

Willem’s lips had curled over his blackened gums, which in turn had receded off of teeth that were yellow and cracked. One of his eyes had rolled off to one side, the other locked on Inthelph and burned with a cold fire that made the master builder shiver. The smell washed over him. The cloying aroma of exotic spices mixed with the stench of rotting flesh. Willem reeked of the grave.

“What’s happened to you?” the master builder whispered.

Willem reached out and batted the dagger from the old man’s hand. The blade cartwheeled across the room and came to rest in a puff of orange sparks on the floor of the fireplace. Inthelph’s hand went numb, and when he tried to bend his fingers he heard a popping noise and a dull shot of pain arced up his arm. He hissed.

“Marek Rymüt,” Willem growled.

“Oh, no, Willem.”

Willem hit him in the chest so hard that purple and red lights flickered in Inthelph’s eyes. He felt the contents of his lungs pass his lips, and when he tried to inhale, it was as though the weight of the entire city had been laid on

his chest. Staggered, he tried stepping back but fell on his behind in an ungainly and embarrassing way.

Try as he might to speak, the master builder could only gasp for air that refused to enter his collapsed lungs. Willem stepped over him and crouched, his knees snapping like dried twigs.

“Marek Rymüt,” the thing that had once been his most promising protégé said again. His breath smelled of maggots and saffron. “Hate.”

Willem reached down and Inthelph tried to kick him. It was a feeble, comedic attempt to fight back, but Willem didn’t laugh. Hard, dry fingers closed around the master builder’s calf and squeezed so hard Inthelph felt cold talons puncture his skin.

Inthelph’s lips moved but he couldn’t speak. He wanted to ask what Marek Rymüt had done to Willem. He wanted to know why the Thayan wizard would want him dead, and why he would send Willem Korvan to do it.

Or was it Willem Korvan? If it was, the promising young senator the master builder knew was dead.

The thing pulled on his leg and the pain rumbled through the master builder’s body like a thunderstorm raging across a summer plain. When the shockwave reached his head he reeled and almost fainted.

He wished he had.

The sensation of his leg coming away at the knee, the stretching and tearing of tendons, the grind of bone on bone, the ruin of flesh made his chest convulse and his vision narrow until all he could see was Willem’s ruined face.

His own foot hit him in the mouth. Willem drew the leg up and smashed it down again. Inthelph’s jaw cracked and one of his eyes went blind. His head vibrated and he felt pressure build and build until he was certain his skull would burst from within.

“I’m . . .” Willem whispered from his dry, dead mouth, “so . . . so sorry.”

It was the last thing Inthelph heard. When his skull cracked in two he was already unconscious. When his own foot came down again and pulped his brain, he was dead.

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## 2

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*4 Hammer, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR)*

THE THAYAN ENCLAVE, INNARLITH

Pristoleph looked over Marek Rymüt's shoulder as they both sat. The thing that stood in the corner shifted its weight from foot to foot. It was a man, or at least it used to be. Marek turned his head ever so slightly to one side, following Pristoleph's gaze. Their eyes met and the Thayan smiled.

"Please don't mind him," Marek said. "He isn't listening and only understands what I tell him to understand."

"You feel you need a bodyguard to meet with me?" Pristoleph replied. "And I thought we were friends."

Marek twitched a little at the sarcasm, and Pristoleph smiled at him. The thing in the corner didn't respond in any way, and Pristoleph wondered if Marek was actually telling the truth. It didn't seem as though the thing was aware of their presence at all. It had a black leather hood over its head, tied tightly around the neck with a length of rope, so it couldn't see them. The fact that it was dead was obvious from its demeanor and its smell.

"You get used to it," Marek commented, and not for the first time Pristoleph wondered if the Thayan could read his mind.

"The dockworkers seem to have," Pristoleph said, drawing them to the matter at hand.

"It warms my heart to know that I have been of service to you, and that I have been of service to my adopted home."

Pristoleph spared the Thayan another smile, just to show that he didn't believe a word of it.