

# 1

The sun was already sinking into the deep green of the hills to the west of the valley, the red and gray-pink of its shadows touching the corners of the land, when Flick Ohmsford began his descent. The trail stretched out unevenly down the northern slope, winding through the huge boulders which studded the rugged terrain in massive clumps, disappearing into the thick forests of the lowlands to reappear in brief glimpses in small clearings and thinning spaces of woodland. Flick followed the familiar trail with his eyes as he trudged wearily along, his light pack slung loosely over one shoulder. His broad, windburned face bore a set, placid look, and only the wide gray eyes revealed the restless energy that burned beneath the calm exterior. He was a young man, though his stocky build and the grizzled brown hair and shaggy eyebrows made him look much older. He wore the loose-fitting work clothes of the Vale people and in the pack he carried were several metal implements that rolled and clanked loosely against one another.

There was a slight chill in the evening air, and Flick clutched the collar of his open wool shirt closer to his neck. His journey ahead lay through forests and rolling flatlands, the latter not yet visible to him as he passed into the forests, and the darkness of the tall oaks and somber hickories reached upward to overlap and blot out the cloudless night sky. The

sun had set, leaving only the deep blue of the heavens pinpointed by thousands of friendly stars. The huge trees shut out even these, and Flick was left alone in the silent darkness as he moved slowly along the beaten path. Because he had traveled this same route a hundred times, the young man noticed immediately the unusual stillness that seemed to have captivated the entire valley this evening. The familiar buzzing and chirping of insects normally present in the quiet of the night, the cries of the birds that awoke with the setting of the sun to fly in search of food – all were missing. Flick listened intently for some sound of life, but his keen ears could detect nothing. He shook his head uneasily. The deep silence was unsettling, particularly in view of the rumors of a frightening black-winged creature sighted in the night skies north of the valley only days earlier.

He forced himself to whistle and turned his thoughts back to his day's work in the country just to the north of the Vale, where outlying families farmed and tended domestic livestock. He traveled to their homes every week, supplying various items that they required and bringing bits of news on the happenings of the Vale and occasionally the distant cities of the deep Southland. Few people knew the surrounding countryside as well as he did, and fewer still cared to travel beyond the comparative safety of their homes in the valley. Men were more inclined to remain in isolated communities these days and let the rest of the world get along as best it could. But Flick liked to travel outside the valley from time to time, and the outlying homesteads were in need of his services and were willing to pay him for the trouble. Flick's father was not one to let an opportunity pass him by where there was money to be made, and the arrangement seemed to work out well for all concerned.

A low-hanging branch brushing against his head caused Flick to start suddenly and leap to one side. In chagrin, he straightened himself and glared back at the leafy obstacle before continuing his journey at a slightly quicker pace. He

was deep in the lowland forests now and only slivers of moonlight were able to find their way through the thick boughs overhead to light the winding path dimly. It was so dark that Flick was having trouble finding the trail, and as he studied the lay of the land ahead, he again found himself conscious of the heavy silence. It was as if all life had been suddenly extinguished, and he alone remained to find his way out of this forest tomb. Again he recalled the strange rumors. He felt a bit anxious in spite of himself and glanced worriedly around. But nothing stirred on the trail ahead nor moved in the trees about him, and he felt embarrassingly relieved.

Pausing momentarily in a moonlit clearing, he gazed at the fullness of the night sky before passing abruptly into the trees beyond. He walked slowly, picking his way along the winding path that had narrowed beyond the clearing and now seemed to disappear into a wall of trees and bushes ahead. He knew that it was merely an illusion, but found himself glancing about uneasily all the same. A few moments later, he was again on a wider trail and could discern bits of sky peeking through the heavy trees. He was almost to the bottom of the valley and about two miles from his home. He smiled and began whistling an old tavern song as he hurried on. He was so intent on the trail ahead and the open land beyond the forest that he failed to notice the huge black shadow that seemed to rise up suddenly, detaching itself from a great oak tree on his left and moving swiftly toward the path to intercept him. The dark figure was almost on top of the Valeman before Flick sensed its presence looming up before him like a great, black stone which threatened to crush his smaller being. With a startled cry of fear he leaped aside, his pack falling to the path with a crash of metal, and his left hand whipped out the long thin dagger at his waist. Even as he crouched to defend himself, he was stayed by a commanding arm raised above the figure before him and a strong, yet reassuring voice that spoke out quickly.

‘Wait a moment, friend. I’m no enemy and have no wish to

harm you. I merely seek directions and would be grateful if you could show me the proper path.'

Flick relaxed his guard a bit and tried to peer into the blackness of the figure before him in an effort to discover some semblance of a human being. He could see nothing, however, and he moved to the left with cautious steps in an attempt to catch the features of the dark figure in the tree-shadowed moonlight.

'I assure you, I mean no harm,' the voice continued, as if reading the Valeman's mind. 'I did not mean to frighten you, but I didn't see you until you were almost upon me, and I was afraid you might pass me by without realizing I was there.'

The voice stopped and the huge black figure stood silently, though Flick could feel the eyes following him as he edged about the path to put his own back to the light. Slowly the pale moonlight began to etch out the stranger's features in vague lines and blue shadows. For a long moment the two faced one another in silence, each studying the other, Flick in an effort to decide what it was he faced, the stranger in quiet anticipation.

Then suddenly the huge figure lunged with terrible swiftness, his powerful hands seizing the Valeman's wrists, and Flick was lifted abruptly off the solid earth and held high, his knife dropping from nerveless fingers as the deep voice laughed mockingly up at him.

'Well, well, my young friend! What are you going to do now, I wonder? I could cut your heart out on the spot and leave you for the wolves if I chose, couldn't I?'

Flick struggled violently to free himself, terror numbing his mind to any thought but that of escape. He had no idea what manner of creature had subdued him, but it was far more powerful than any normal man and apparently prepared to dispatch Flick quickly. Then abruptly, his captor held him out at arm's length, and the mocking voice became icy cold with displeasure.

'Enough of this, boy! We have played our little game and still you know nothing of me. I'm tired and hungry and have

no wish to be delayed on the forest trail in the chill of the evening while you decide if I am man or beast. I will set you down that you may show me the path. I warn you – do not try to run from me or it will be the worse for you.’

The strong voice trailed off and the tone of displeasure disappeared as the former hint of mockery returned with a short laugh.

‘Besides,’ the figure rumbled as the fingers released their iron grip and Flick slipped to the path, ‘I may be a better friend than you realize.’

The figure moved back a step as Flick straightened himself, rubbing his wrists carefully to restore the circulation to his numbed hands. He wanted to run, but was certain that the stranger would catch him again and this time finish him without further thought. He leaned over cautiously and picked up the fallen dagger, returning it to his belt.

Flick could see the fellow more clearly now, and a quick scrutiny of him revealed that he was definitely human, though much larger than any man Flick had ever seen. He was at least seven feet tall, but exceptionally lean, though it was difficult to be certain about this, since his tall frame was wrapped in a flowing black cloak with a loose cowl pulled close about his head. The darkened face was long and deeply lined, giving it a craggy appearance. The eyes were deep-set and almost completely hidden from view by shaggy eyebrows that knotted fiercely over a long flat nose. A short, black beard outlined a wide mouth that was just a line on the face – a line that never seemed to move. The overall appearance was frightening, all blackness and size, and Flick had to fight down the urge building within him to make a break for the forest’s edge. He looked straight into the deep, hard eyes of the stranger, though not without some difficulty, and managed a weak smile.

‘I thought you were a thief,’ he mumbled hesitantly.

‘You were mistaken,’ was the quiet retort. Then the voice softened a bit. ‘You must learn to know a friend from an

enemy. Sometime your life may depend upon it. Now then, let's have your name.'

'Flick Ohmsford.'

Flick hesitated and then continued in a slightly braver tone of voice.

'My father is Curzad Ohmsford. He manages an inn in Shady Vale a mile or two from here. You could find lodging and food there.'

'Ah, Shady Vale,' the stranger exclaimed suddenly. 'Yes, that is where I am going.' He paused as if reflecting on his own words. Flick watched him cautiously as he rubbed his craggy face with crooked fingers and looked beyond the forest's edge to the rolling grasslands of the valley. He was still looking away when he spoke again.

'You . . . have a brother.'

It was not a question; it was a simple statement of fact. It was spoken so distantly and calmly, as if the tall stranger were not at all interested in any sort of a reply, that Flick almost missed hearing it. Then suddenly realizing the significance of the remark, he started and looked quickly at the other.

'How did . . . ?'

'Oh, well,' the man said, 'doesn't every young Valeman like yourself have a brother somewhere?'

Flick nodded dumbly, unable to comprehend what it was that the other was trying to say and wondering vaguely how much he knew about Shady Vale. The stranger was looking questioningly at him, evidently waiting to be guided to the promised food and lodging. Flick quickly turned away to find his hastily discarded pack, picked it up and slung it over his shoulder, looking back at the figure towering over him.

'The path is this way.' He pointed, and the two began walking.

They passed out of the deep forest and entered rolling, gentle hills which they would follow to the hamlet of Shady Vale at the far end of the valley. Out of the woods, it was a bright night; the moon was a full white globe overhead, its

glow clearly illuminating the landscape of the valley and the path which the two travelers were following. The path itself was a vague line winding over the grassy hills and distinguishable only by occasional rain-washed ruts and flat, hard patches of earth breaking through the heavy grass. The wind had gathered strength and rushed at the two men with quick gusts that whipped at their clothing as they walked, forcing them to bow their heads slightly to shield their eyes. Neither spoke a word as they proceeded, each concentrating on the lay of the land beyond, as new hills and small depressions appeared with the passing of each traveled knoll. Except for the rushing of the wind, the night remained silent. Flick listened intently, and once he thought he heard a sharp cry far to the north, but an instant later it was gone, and he did not hear it again. The stranger appeared to be unconcerned with the silence. His attention seemed to be focused on a constantly changing point on the ground some six feet in front of them. He did not look up and he did not look at his young guide for directions as they went. Instead, he seemed to know exactly where the other was going and walked confidently beside him.

After a while, Flick began to have trouble keeping pace with the tall man, who traveled the path with long, swinging strides that dwarfed Flick's shorter ones. At times, the Valeman almost had to run to keep up. Once or twice the other man glanced down at his smaller companion and, seeing the difficulty he was having in trying to match strides, slowed to an easier pace. Finally, as the southern slopes of the valley drew near, the hills began to level off into shrub-covered grasslands that hinted at the appearance of new forests. The terrain began to dip downward at a gentle slope, and Flick located several familiar landmarks that bounded the outskirts of Shady Vale. He felt a surge of relief in spite of himself. The hamlet and his own warm home were just ahead.

The stranger did not speak a single word during the brief journey, and Flick was reluctant to attempt any conversation. Instead, he tried to study the giant in quick glimpses as they

walked, without permitting the other to observe what he was doing. He was understandably awed. The long, craggy face, shaded by the sharp black beard, recalled the fearful Warlocks described to him by stern elders before the glowing embers of a late evening fire when he was only a child. Most frightening were the stranger's eyes – or rather the deep, dark caverns beneath the shaggy brows where his eyes should be. Flick could not penetrate the heavy shadows that continued to mask that entire area of his face. The deeply lined countenance seemed carved from stone, fixed and bowed slightly to the path before it. As Flick pondered the inscrutable visage, he suddenly realized that the stranger had never even mentioned his name.

The two were on the outer lip of the Vale, where the now clearly distinguishable path wound through large, crowded bushes that almost choked off human passage. The tall stranger stopped suddenly and stood perfectly still, head bowed, listening intently. Flick halted beside him and waited quietly, also listening, but unable to detect anything. They remained motionless for seemingly endless minutes, and then the big man turned hurriedly to his smaller companion.

‘Quickly! Hide in the bushes ahead. Go now, run!’

He half pushed, half threw Flick in front of him as he raced swiftly toward the tall brush. Flick scurried fearfully for the sanctuary of the shrubbery, his pack slapping wildly against his back and the metal implements clanging. The stranger turned on him and snatched the pack away, tucking it beneath the long robe.

‘Silence!’ he hissed. ‘Run now. Not a sound.’

They ran quickly to the dark wall of foliage some fifty feet ahead, and the tall man hurriedly pushed Flick through the leafy branches that whipped against their faces, pulling him roughly into the middle of a large clump of brush, where they stood breathing heavily. Flick glanced at his companion and saw that he was not looking through the brush at the country around them, but instead was peering upward where the night



sky was visible in small, irregular patches through the foliage. The sky seemed clear to the Valeman as he followed the other's intense gaze, and only the changeless stars winked back at him as he watched and waited. Minutes passed; once he attempted to speak, but was quickly silenced by the strong hands of the stranger, gripping his shoulders in warning. Flick remained standing, looking at the night and straining his ears for some sound of the apparent danger. But he heard nothing save their own heavy breathing and a quiet rush of wind through the weaving branches of their cover.

Then, just as Flick prepared to ease his tired limbs by sitting, the sky was suddenly blotted out by something huge and black that floated overhead and then passed from sight. A moment later it passed again, circling slowly without seeming to move, its shadow hanging ominously above the two hidden travelers as if preparing to fall upon them. A sudden feeling of terror raced through Flick's mind, trapping it in an iron web as it strained to flee the fearful madness penetrating inward. Something seemed to be reaching downward into his chest, slowly squeezing the air from his lungs, and he found himself gasping for breath. A vision passed sharply before him of a black image laced with red, of clawed hands and giant wings, of a thing so evil that its very existence threatened his frail life. For an instant the young man thought he would scream, but the hand of the stranger gripped his shoulder tightly, pulling him back from the precipice. Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the giant shadow was gone and the peaceful sky of the patched night was all that remained.

The hand on Flick's shoulder slowly relaxed its grip, and the Valeman slid heavily to the ground, his body limp as he broke out in a cold sweat. The tall stranger seated himself quietly next to his companion and a small smile crossed his face. He laid one long hand on Flick's and patted it as he would a child's.

'Come now, my young friend,' he whispered, 'you're alive and well, and the Vale lies just ahead.'

Flick looked up at the other's calm face, his own eyes wide with fear as he shook his head slowly.

'That thing! What was that terrible thing?'

'Just a shadow,' the man replied easily. 'But this is neither the place nor the time to concern ourselves with such matters. We will speak of it later. Right now, I would like some food and a warm fire before I lose all patience.'

He helped the Valeman to his feet and returned his pack to him. Then with a sweep of his robed arm, he indicated that he was ready to follow if the other was ready to lead. They left the cover of the brush, Flick not without misgivings as he glanced apprehensively at the night sky. It almost seemed as if the whole business had been the result of an overactive imagination. Flick pondered the matter solemnly and quickly decided that whatever the case, he had had enough for one evening: first this nameless giant and then that frightening shadow. He silently vowed that he would think twice before traveling again at night so far from the safety of the Vale.

Several minutes later, the trees and brush began to thin out and the flickering of yellow light was visible through the darkness. As they drew closer, the vague forms of buildings began to take shape as square and rectangular bulks in the gloom. The path widened into a smoother dirt road that led straight into the hamlet, and Flick smiled gratefully at the lights that shone in friendly greeting through the windows of the silent buildings. No one moved on the road ahead; if it had not been for the lights, one might well have wondered if anyone at all lived in the Vale. As it was, Flick's thoughts were far from such questions. Already he was considering how much he ought to tell his father and Shea, not wishing to worry them about strange shadows that could easily have been the product of his imagination and the gloomy night. The stranger at his side might shed some light on the subject at a later time, but so far he had not proved to be much of a conversationalist. Flick glanced involuntarily at the tall figure walking silently beside him. Again he was chilled by the blackness of the man.

It seemed to reflect from his cloak and hood over his bowed head and lean hands, to shroud the entire figure in hazy gloom. Whoever he was, Flick felt certain that he would be a dangerous enemy.

They passed slowly between the buildings of the hamlet, and Flick could see torches burning through the wooden frames of the wide windows. The houses themselves were long, low structures, each containing only a ground floor beneath a slightly sloping roof, which in most instances tapered off on one side to shelter a small veranda, supported by heavy poles affixed to a long porch. The buildings were constructed of wood, with stone foundations and stone frontings on a few. Flick glanced through the curtained windows, catching glimpses of the inhabitants, the sight of familiar faces reassuring to him in the darkness outside. It had been a frightening night, and he was relieved to be home among people he knew.

The stranger remained oblivious to everything. He did not bother with more than a casual glance at the hamlet and had not spoken once since they had entered the Vale. Flick remained incredulous at the way in which the other followed him. He wasn't following Flick at all, but seemed to know exactly where the Valeman was going. When the road branched off in opposite directions amid identical rows of houses, the tall man had no difficulty in determining the correct route, though he never once looked at Flick nor even raised his head to study the road. Flick found himself trailing along while the other guided.

The two quickly reached the inn. It was a large structure consisting of a main building and lounging porch, with two long wings that extended out and back on either side. It was constructed of huge logs, cut and laced on a high stone foundation and covered with the familiar wood shingle roof, this particular roof much higher than those of the family dwellings. The central building was well lighted, and muffled voices could be heard from within, interspersed with

occasional laughter and shouts. The wings of the inn were in darkness; it was there that the sleeping quarters of the guests were located. The smell of roasting meat permeated the night air, and Flick quickly led the way up the wooden steps of the long porch to the wide double doors at the center of the inn. The tall stranger followed without a word.

Flick slid back the heavy metal door latch and pulled on the handles. The big door on the right swung open to admit them into a large lounging room, filled with benches, high-backed chairs, and several long, heavy wooden tables set against the wall to the left and rear. The room was brightly lit by the tall candles on the tables and wall racks and by the huge fireplace built into the center of the wall on the left; Flick was momentarily blinded as his eyes adjusted to this new light. he squinted sharply, glancing past the fireplace and lounging furniture to the closed double doors at the back of the room and over to the long serving bar running down the length of the wall to his right. The men gathered about the bar looked up idly as the pair entered the room, their faces registering undisguised amazement at the appearance of the tall stranger. But Flick's silent companion did not seem to see them, and they quickly returned to their conversation and evening drinks, glancing back at the newcomers once or twice to see what they were going to do. The pair remained standing at the door for a few moments more as Flick looked around a second time at the faces of the small crowd to see if his father were present. The stranger motioned to the lounging chairs on the left.

‘I will have a seat while you find your father. Perhaps we can have dinner together when you return.’

Without further comment, he moved quietly away to a small table at the rear of the room and seated himself with his back to the men at the bar, his face slightly bowed and turned away from Flick. The Valeman watched him for a moment, then moved quickly to the double doors at the rear of the room and pushed through them to the hallway beyond. His father was

probably in the kitchen, having dinner with Shea. Flick hurried down the hall past several closed doors before reaching the one that opened into the inn kitchen. As he entered, the two cooks who were working at the rear of the room greeted the young man with a cheerful good evening. His father was seated at the end of a long counter at the left. As Flick had anticipated, he was in the process of finishing his dinner. He waved a brawny hand in greeting.

‘You’re a bit later than usual, son,’ he growled pleasantly. ‘Come over here and have dinner while there’s still something to eat.’

Flick walked over wearily, lowered the traveling pack to the floor with a slight clatter, and perched himself on one of the high counter stools. His father’s large frame straightened itself as he shoved back the empty plate and looked quizzically at the other, his wide forehead wrinkling.

‘I met a traveler on the road coming into the valley,’ Flick explained hesitantly. ‘He wants a room and dinner. Asked us to join him.’

‘Well, he came to the right place for a room,’ the elder Ohmsford declared. ‘I don’t see why we shouldn’t join him for a bite to eat – I could easily do with another helping.’

He raised his massive frame from the stool and signaled the cooks for three dinners. Flick looked about for Shea, but he was nowhere in sight. His father lumbered over to the cooks to give some special instructions on preparing the meal for the small party, and Flick turned to the basin next to the sink to wash off the dirt and grime from the road. When his father came over to him, Flick asked where his brother had gone.

‘Shea has gone out on an errand for me and should return on the moment,’ his father replied. ‘By the way, what’s the name of this man you brought back with you?’

‘I don’t know. He didn’t say.’ Flick shrugged.

His father frowned and mumbled something about close-mouthed strangers, rounding off his muffled comment with a vow to have no more mysterious types at his inn. Then

motioning to his son, he led the way through the kitchen doors, his wide shoulders brushing the wall beyond as he swung to his left toward the lounging area. Flick followed quickly, his broad face wrinkled in doubt.

The stranger was still sitting quietly, his back to the men gathered at the serving bar. When he heard the rear doors swing open, he shifted about slightly to catch a glimpse of the two who entered. The stranger studied the close resemblance between father and son. Both were of medium height and heavy build, with the same broad, placid faces and grizzled brown hair. They hesitated in the doorway and Flick pointed toward the dark figure. He could see the surprise in Curzad Ohmsford's eyes as the innkeeper regarded him for a minute before approaching. The stranger stood up courteously, towering over the other two as they came up to him.

'Welcome to my inn, stranger,' the elder Ohmsford greeted him, trying vainly to peer beneath the cloak hood that shadowed the other's dark face. 'My name, as my boy has probably told you, is Curzad Ohmsford.'

The stranger shook the extended hand with a grip that caused the stocky man to grimace and then nodded to Flick.

'Your son was kind enough to show me to this pleasant inn.' He smiled with what Flick could have sworn was a mocking grin. 'I hope you will join me for dinner and a glass of beer.'

'Certainly,' answered the innkeeper, lumbering past the other to a vacant chair where he seated himself heavily. Flick also pulled up a chair and sat down, his eyes still on the stranger, who was in the process of complimenting his father on having such a fine inn. The elder Ohmsford beamed with pleasure and nodded in satisfaction to Flick as he signaled one of the men at the serving bar for three glasses. The tall man still did not pull back the hood of the cloak shading his face. Flick wanted to peer beneath the shadows, but was afraid the stranger would notice, and one such attempt had already earned him sore wrists and a healthy respect for the big man's strength and temper. It was safer to remain in doubt.

He sat in silence as the conversation between his father and the stranger lengthened from polite comments on the mildness of the weather to a more intimate discussion of the people and happenings of the Vale. Flick noticed that his father, who never needed much encouragement anyway, was carrying the entire conversation with only casual questions interjected by the other man. It probably did not matter, but the Ohmsfords knew nothing about the stranger. He had not even told them his name. Now he was quite subtly drawing out information on the Vale from the unsuspecting innkeeper. The whole situation bothered Flick, but he was uncertain what he should do. He began to wish that Shea would appear and see what was happening. But his brother remained absent, and the long-awaited dinner was served and entirely consumed before one of the wide double doors at the front of the lobby swung open, and Shea appeared from out of the darkness.

For the first time, Flick saw the hooded stranger take more than a passing interest in someone. Strong hands gripped the table as the black figure rose silently, towering over the Ohmsfords. He seemed to have forgotten they were there, as the lined brow furrowed more deeply and the craggy features radiated an intense concentration. For one frightening second, Flick believed that the stranger was somehow about to destroy Shea, but then the idea disappeared and was replaced with another. The man was searching his brother's mind.

He stared intently at Shea, his deep, shaded eyes running quickly over the young man's slim countenance and slight build. He noted the telltale Elven features immediately – the hint of slightly pointed ears beneath the tousled blond hair, the pencil-like eyebrows that ran straight up at a sharp angle from the bridge of the nose rather than across the brow, and the slimness of the nose and jaw. He saw intelligence and honesty in that face, and now as he faced Shea across the room, he saw determination in the penetrating blue eyes – determination that spread in a flush over the youthful features as the two men locked their gazes on one another. For a moment Shea

hesitated in awe of the huge, dark apparition across the room. He felt unexplainably trapped but, bracing himself with sudden resolve, he walked toward the forbidding figure.

Flick and his father watched Shea approach them, his eyes still on the tall stranger and then, as if suddenly realizing who he was, the two rose from the table. There was a moment of awkward silence as they faced one another, and then all the Ohmsfords began greeting each other at once in a sudden jumble of words that relieved the initial tension. Shea smiled at Flick, but could not take his eyes off the imposing figure before him. Shea was slightly shorter than his brother and was therefore even more in the shadow of the stranger than Flick had been, though he was less nervous about it as he faced the man. Curzad Ohmsford was talking to him about his errand, and his attention was momentarily diverted while he replied to his father's insistent questions. After a few preliminary remarks, Shea turned back to the newcomer to the Vale.

'I don't believe we have met; yet you seem to know me from somewhere, and I have the strangest feeling that I should know you.'

The dark face above him nodded as the familiar mocking smile crossed it fleetingly.

'Perhaps you should know me, though it is not surprising that you do not remember. But I know who you are; indeed, I know you well.'

Shea was dumbfounded at this reply and, unable to respond, stood staring at the stranger. The other raised a lean hand to his chin to stroke the small dark beard, glancing slowly around at the three men who waited for him to continue. Flick's open mouth was framing the question on the minds of all the Ohmsfords, when the stranger reached up and pulled back the cowl of his cloak to reveal clearly the dark face, now framed by long black hair, cut nearly shoulder length and shading the deep-set eyes, which still showed only as black slits in the shadows beneath the heavy brows.

'My name is Allanon,' he announced quietly.



There was a long moment of stunned silence as the three listeners stared in speechless amazement. Allanon – the mysterious wanderer of the four lands, historian of the races, philosopher and teacher, and, some said, practitioner of the mystic arts. Allanon – the man who had been everywhere from the darkest havens of the Anar to the forbidden heights of the Charnal Mountains. His was a name familiar to the people of even the most isolated Southland communities. Now he stood unexpectedly before the Ohmsfords, none of whom had ventured outside their valley home more than a handful of times in their lives.

Allanon smiled warmly for the first time, but inwardly he felt pity for them. The quiet existence they had known for so many years was finished, and, in a way, it was his responsibility.

‘What brings you here?’ Shea asked at last.

The tall man looked sharply at him and uttered a deep, low chuckle that caught them all by surprise.

‘You, Shea,’ he murmured. ‘I came looking for you.’