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Opening extract from

The Traveller

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This book is for Thom Mac Beatha

Chapter 1

Outside the inn, the wind was driving snow in from the north.

"It's on nights like this," the old man said, "that a stranger can lose his way."

"Easy for that to happen," the inn-keeper agreed, "when the night is so dark and snow covers all tracks."

"And sound too," the old man added. "Anything can stalk a man in the dark in the snow and wind. He doesn't hear the soft foot-fall behind him, or the breath of the hunter. Not until it's too late ..." He sighed.

"Do you think that was the way of it, then? All those years ago?" The question came from another man in the room.

"Who is to say?" the old man answered. He drank from his wine cup before he began again. "When the Traveller came here he was tall and proud and brave and ready to fight. At the time I thought that no one could defeat him. Not in fair combat, nor by cunning ..." He looked around at the listeners. "You would say that too if you had met him. But it was only I who saw him. It was only I who spoke to him that night. And it was I who let him go ..." He sighed again. "And he went to his death. I'm sure of it." He



paused as the wind shook the latches on the window shutters.

"Yes," he said. "It was on such a night as this. Heavy snow cloud was building in the Northlands, and the wind driving sleet before it, when my Traveller arrived."

The old man stopped speaking, then he tilted his wine cup and drained the last drops. He set it down with a thump. One of those beside him at the long table bent a finger at the inn-keeper. The inn-keeper rushed over with the wine jug.

The old man watched as his cup filled with the dark local wine. "Many times I've told this tale ..." he said. His voiced trailed away.

"It can bear another telling," came the reply.