

Nomadin

Chapter I

The Pointed Pencil

He was dead for sure.

Twice before he had foiled their attacks, once by hiding in a thicket of brambles at daybreak whose prickles left claw marks down his face, next through sheer luck, overhearing their whispers of revenge as he hid behind a tree at dusk. Then he was able to avoid their trouble. But now, this third time . . . three times was a charm, but not always a lucky one. He braced himself as his enemies approached.

The two figures moved from behind the stand of trees and stopped a dozen paces away. The leader, small and thin for a boy his age, shoved his larger companion ahead of him. "Get it," he commanded.

The other boy lumbered forward, his wide face creased in delight. There was nothing to fear here, that much he knew. After all, he was the biggest twelve-year-old in town, and taller than most thirteen-year-olds as well. Heck, he'd even made a few high schoolers cry. This little one would go down easy.

"Give it to me or else," he said, advancing and raising a meaty fist.

Ilien looked hopefully up the dirt road. Farmer Parson sometimes passed this way with a load of hay from his outer fields, bound for his tall grey barn, but it was only mid-April. A lone hawk circled above, a black spot in the sky above. Ilien was on his own, as usual.

"I said, give it to me or else," the boy growled, opening and closing his fist, knuckles cracking like shots.

"Or else what?" piped a voice that sounded, oddly enough, just like Ilien's.

Ilien groaned. He knew he should've left his enchanted pencil at home. An "A" in math was little consolation for a beating.

The boy left the fist in the air and turned to look back at his impish leader. "Did you hear that, Peaty? Now I'll hafta hurt him."

Peaty laughed him on, his lips drawn back in a sneer. "Do it, Stanley. Do it."

Ilien held the pencil at his side as Stanley approached, his feet frozen to the ground. He might still escape unharmed. There was still a chance. If only . . .

The pencil made a sound as if clearing its throat.

"Shut up!" Ilien shouted. "Why don't you ever shut up?"

Stanley's fist streaked forward and Ilien's head flew back with an audible snap. He stumbled back and tumbled to the ground, clutching the stinging wound beneath his eye, tears blurring his vision.

"Don't tell me to shut up!" said Stanley. "Now give me that pencil!" He leaned menacingly over Ilien, sweat beading upon his meaty brow. "Give it to me, or I swear, I'll break your arm."

"Why?" piped the pencil, mimicking Ilien again. "I bet you don't even know how to use it. Besides, I'd be afraid you'd poke yourself and pop. Someone in your condition should be careful around sharp objects."

With a bellow, Stanley charged, leaping on top of Ilien as he lay cowering on the ground, hammer fists raining blows. Ilien threw his arms across his face. Pinned beneath

the sweating Stanley he could do little more than shield his wounded eye and gasp for breath, but his thoughts were racing.

Peaty's face twisted with spite, reddened with sudden blood-lust. "Kill him, Stanley! Kill him!"

The barrage of strikes was short-lived as the fat boy quickly tired. Stanley climbed off him and struggled to his feet, and Ilien scrambled backwards as his attacker stood swaying before him. Both eyes stung now, and a tear of blood trickled from his nose.

"Is little Ilien afraid to lose his pencil?" Peaty mocked, his eyes cruel slits in his feverish face. "Are you gonna cry, little baby? Is that pencil your only friend?" Spittle flew from between his thin lips as he continued in angrier tones. "I bet your deadbeat daddy gave it to you right before he ran out on you."

Ilien squeezed the pencil in fury. It didn't matter that he never knew his father. No one talked about his dad like that. A few choice words of his own came to mind as anger swept through him, words that would do more than just sting.

"Ilien Woodhill! Don't you dare!" cried a voice behind him.

Ilien winced. It wasn't Farmer Parson come to the rescue, that was for sure.

The two boys backed away, fear clouding their faces.

"It's that crazy old man. Let's get out of here!" Peaty yelled. Ilien watched from the ground as the two boys ran off, casting back menacing looks. "Look! It's freak and geek!" they called, laughing. Then they were gone.

Ilien climbed to his feet and wiped at the blood running from his nose. "Don't worry, I'm fine," he said. The old man leaned on a thin, wooden cane, his cheeks bright red as he

smoothed his short silver hair with a lean hand. "I said I'm fine!" Ilien shouted in answer to the sudden withering stare.

Gallund merely squinted and scratched at the stubble on his chin. "It wasn't you I was worried about," he said, his eyes following after the fleeing boys. "Was it?"

Ilien summoned tears and hid the talking pencil by his side, praying it would keep silent. He had learned to summon tears on cue since Gallund had come to stay at the house. A most useful skill.

"Don't give me that," said Gallund. "You know what I mean." He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a handful of peanuts. "It's a good thing I got here when I did, wouldn't you say?" He popped a peanut into his mouth and chewed methodically.

What luck! It seemed he was safe after all. Gallund hadn't noticed the pencil. "Why yes, you're right," said Ilien, smiling and relaxing his guard.

"They obviously didn't know who they were dealing with," continued Gallund, popping in another peanut. He grinned and raised a knowing eyebrow.

"They had no idea," said Ilien, suddenly emboldened, his wound forgotten. "They're lucky you came. I was just about to cast—"

Ilien marveled for a moment at his own stupidity.

"Ah ha!" Gallund exclaimed. "So I was right!" Dust swirled around him, the product of an angry foot upon the road. His hands were at his hips, but he still held his fistful of peanuts. "And to think I trusted you." His eyebrows furrowed into a single silver line. "What is rule number one?"

Ilien's shoulders resumed their usual droop. "No spells whatsoever outside the house," he muttered, "unless confronted by dark magic of the worse sort."

"And it seems I can't stress that enough, can I?"

Ilien's hands balled into fists. "But you didn't hear what they said!"

"I hear more than you think," Gallund said. "And if you're talking about what mister Peaty Wilson said concerning your father, he should be as lucky. His father's a lying, cheating drunk. He beats the boy, I know. Better to have no father at all than one like his."

Ilien doubted that, but he kept his arguments to himself as he looked up the dirt road where Peaty had fled. He was in enough trouble already. Besides, he suddenly didn't feel like talking about it.

Gallund tapped his cane on the road to garner Ilien's attention. "Now back to the point at hand. You know better than to use magic outside the house."

Ilien stared at his shoes. "I wasn't really going to electrocute them."

Gallund straightened. "Electrocute them?" he shouted. "Electrocute them!" he cried to the sky. "You can't be serious!" He drove a long finger into Ilien's deflated chest as he yelled, and peanuts flew everywhere. "Not only have I been careful not to teach you offensive spells, but I am quite sure I have never taught you anything as low-down as electrocution. Surely you know that I myself would never consider using such a crass, and frankly, low class spell when Flaming Fingers would do a much better, and might I add, more impressive job. And let me remind you that Lightning spells are about as predictable as the weather. For all you know you might have electrocuted yourself."

Ilien kicked at the ground in front of him, scattering dropped nuts. "Well, I think Lightning spells jam," he mumbled.

"Jam? Jam?" Gallund looked around as if addressing an unseen jury. "What is that language he's speaking? Where in the world did you ever think that one up? Jam indeed. I never will understand you kids. Jam. Jelly. Marmalade. Really!"

Gallund turned and walked up the dusty road, carrying his cane like a sword and ranting under his breath about everything, from what kids say to what kids smell like. "And how your mother ever gets your britches clean after god knows what you've been rolling in. If she wasn't away visiting your uncle—. How I ever let you convince me to teach you magic behind her back, I'll never know!"

He spun and pinned his pupil with a look that could have tacked paper to the wall. "And don't you think I didn't see that pencil in your hand," he said, dropping more peanuts as he pointed in accusation. "I didn't give you an enchanted pencil so you could cheat on your geometry test. It's for spellwork, not schoolwork. Once more, just once more, and you'll lose it for good. Now let's go. If you can't play nice then you won't play at all. Study. That's what you'll do. Study!"

As Gallund turned to go he looked into his hand. "Nuts!" he cried, and threw the ruined pieces to the ground.

To Ilien, the short walk back to the house felt as long as a forced march to certain death. He trailed behind his teacher, kicking along a small rock that had been unfortunate enough to get in his way. The land surrounding his small town of Southford stretched out around him like a taut, green blanket with an occasional wrinkle where a sudden hill dropped down to a flooded gully or trickling stream. Luckily, he had to pass only one house along the winding road, Farmer Parson's, and no one there was home to witness his

humiliation. Study! On a Friday, no less! He shoved his hands to the bottom of his pockets in disgust.

Chapter II

The Map in the Hall

So it was that Ilien found himself imprisoned on a sunny, green April day while the rest of the world fished and climbed trees and chased dogs. Even his house, a small, two story farmhouse with no trees nearby to speak of, got to bask lazily in the warm afternoon sun, and Ilien desperately wished he could join it, lying half-asleep in the backyard out by the small, meandering stream that snaked away into the surrounding fields. Instead, he sat in a small, hard chair poring over a textbook big enough to choke a dragon. It wouldn't have been so bad, after all he was studying magic, if it hadn't been for the eyes he accidentally conjured up.

All seventeen of them. The size of dinner plates.

Fortunately, they weren't sword-wielding arms, or fang-filled jaws. They were just eyes, a mob of them, huddled together in the far corner of the study, their lids flapping up and down in unison like tiny window shades. They hovered above the floor, squinting in the sunlight as if woken from a nap, thankfully taking no notice of the boy who sat frozen ten feet away.

Ilien eased his chair back and inched from his seat, keeping his two small eyes on the seventeen big ones across the room. He hoped to make it to the door before they saw him. No small feat considering their number. Perhaps they would float out the open window before Gallund discovered them and sail off into the sunset, never to be seen again. If not, big trouble was sure to follow. Ilien had been forbidden to Conjure ever since the killer-bee incident the week before, and the fang-filled jaw charade the week before that, and the . . .

With memories of the sword-wielding arm melee burning in his mind, Ilien turned and crept toward the door. Then something caught his eye and he looked back in disbelief. He had forgotten his pencil and it was rolling across the table! He knew he shouldn't have choked the blasted thing. Now it was going pay him back. Magical pencils were so vindictive.

He held his breath as it neared the edge. If it fell he would be caught for sure. Magical pencils could make quite a racket when they wanted. Once, he accidentally broke its tip and it screamed so loud it woke his mother out of bed. He had to do some quick thinking to explain that one.

The pencil continued its vengeful march. Ilien pleaded silently for it to stop. It teetered on the brink.

"Over here! Over here!" it screeched as it sailed over the edge.

Seventeen black pupils narrowed to angry slits, and Ilien ran for the door. The eyes flew after him, lids flapping violently. Ilien's feet barely touched the floor, but the eyes were too quick. They reached the door before him and turned with an angry leer. Ilien was about to do the only thing he could think of, apologize profusely then run the other

way, when the eyes sprang open wide. They retreated. They backed into the door, wincing in fear. One eye opened wide, peering at him through a pool of shimmering tears.

"Forgive uss," it hissed, its pupil forming the words like a mouth with no tongue.

"Forgive uss, Masster. We had no idea it wass you. Pleasee forgive uss."

Ilien forced a smile and shuffled back toward the table, and the open window beyond. "I forgive you," he said, secretly wondering how much his fall from the second story window would hurt.

At that the other eyes joined the first in blinking away their tears. The whole sopping cluster moved toward him, laying a watery trail behind. They seemed relieved, almost grateful—

—until Gallund stepped through the door.

In the blink of sixteen eyes (one remained shut in fear) they spun on the new intruder.

"Ilustus bregun, ilustus bregar!" the wizard cried as the eyes volleyed toward him. No sooner was 'bregar!' out of Gallund's mouth when the eyes burst and disappeared, soaking him nose to knees in a deluge of warm tears.

"Ilien Voracious Woodhill!" Gallund's cheeks glowed a torrid red, and his hands at his hips framed a thoroughly wet mid-section. "If I've said it a thousand times I've said it once, just because you can read a spell doesn't mean you're ready to cast it!" He rapped his cane on the floor just as he said 'cast it!' and his clothes dried in an instant. "It's a good thing your mother's not here, that's all I can say. I don't know how I would have explained that one."

Ilien tugged at his shirt and looked nervously around the small room. The bookcases that lined the far wall seemed to lean forward disapprovingly. He was a small boy for his age, and shrank even smaller before the angry wizard.

"I really didn't think I could conjure them," he said.

"You most certainly didn't conjure them. Do you honestly think that after what you put me through that I would ever permit you to conjure again?" Gallund shook his head, his mouth a thin line of exasperation. "Your conjuring days are over. I've placed anti-conjuring wards in every room of this house. Yes, even in the bathroom!"

"But—"

"What you managed to cast," snapped the wizard, "was an Illusion, and how you managed that is beyond me. Eyes? Really, Ilien? Eyes that call you master? Frankly, I preferred the fang-filled jaws. They might have been real but at least they couldn't talk!" Gallund studied him silently for a moment, gaging the effect of his rebuke, then shook his head. "Just sit and open your spellbook and show me what else you've learned today. And it better not be trouble!"

Ilien snatched up the magical pencil and jammed it into his pocket. With a nervous glance at the wizard, he sat back down, turning his attention to the massive spellbook in front of him. A curving, black symbol emblazoned its faded cover, like two cast iron horseshoes stuck belly to belly. He set it open to its very first page. *The Kindle Candle spell. An easy spell to impress the old codger with!* thought Ilien.

In the center of the table sat a tall, unlit candle in a holder of tarnished brass. Ilien silently read the spell, took a deep breath and pulled the candle close. At a glance, a thin wisp of smoke curled upwards from the wick and a small flame grew visible. Ilien

squinted in concentration and the pale flame grew steady. It danced atop the candle and Ilien turned to Gallund with a toothy smile.

With a blinding flash, the tiny flame blazed upward in a guttering rage and burned the candle furiously down to its end, leaving behind a pile of hot drippings, the smell of scorched wax and a gout of choking smoke. Ilien sat dumbfounded before the wizard.

Gallund's cane beat a steady tap tap tap on the floor. "Control," he said, waving a hand through the thick, white cloud that enveloped him. "Control. Always say the spell aloud. It's easier to tame your voice than it is to master your thoughts. And remember, the language of magic is no different than your own. Don't massacre it. Watch your tenses, avoid incomplete sentences, no unnecessary adverbs and please, oh please, use the proper words! Slang in a Flaming Fingers spell will get you just that."

Ilien looked at him in confusion.

Gallund's cane increased its beat. "Flaming fingers! It will get you flaming fingers!"

Ilien nodded and tried to ignore the cane's impatient tapping as he studied the next passage.

"Kinul—" he began.

"Tut tut! Tenses! Watch your tenses!"

Ilien eyed Gallund's cane with wishes for a saw. "Kinil ubid, illubid kinar," he said aloud.

He held up his hand and a small globe of light, like a tiny full moon, appeared in his palm. It grew to the size of an apple, glowing pale gold. He removed his hand and the spot of light hovered where he left it. Upon his command, he sent it flying about the room. Finally it came to rest like a halo above the wizard's head.

"Better," said Gallund, his eyes now tempered with good humor. "Keep reading, but remember, no more jumping ahead. Read as far as Moving Marbles, no farther. I'll be downstairs. When you're through you can come down and eat. We wouldn't want you wasting away to nothing while your mother's in Dell, now would we?"

Ilien went back to studying the Kindle Candle spell as Gallund closed the door behind him. But as soon as he heard the wizard's footsteps descending the stairs he flipped the page - twice.

Two pages isn't really jumping ahead, he thought. *It's really more like creeping than jumping.* Creeping sounded more cautious, and thus more responsible. He had just begun reading about the dangers of lightning bolts—"Caution! Be sure to avoid the future tense of the verb Involt for risk of being struck next Monday"—when . . .

"Ilien!" The wizard stood in the doorway, his eyes flashing with annoyance.

Caught!

Ilien slammed the giant book shut—on the fingertips of his left hand! He bit back a startled cry and looked up at Gallund, forcing a smile across his grimace of pain.

The wizard merely pointed to the space above his head where the tiny globe of light still hovered. "Would you mind?"

Ilien stifled a laugh and called the light back to his side where it floated lazily above the table.

As the late afternoon faded into early evening and the sun sank below the fields outside, Ilien was forced to abandon his studies. Even after he had brightened the magical light so he could see, he just couldn't keep it from wandering away. Whenever he tried to concentrate on the lightning bolt passage, he lost control and the light drifted off, making

it impossible to read. He thought of lighting a lamp, but he was tired and hungry and decided to quit for the night. Besides, he had only managed to shock himself twice while trying to learn the blasted spell, and hoped the beginning of the week didn't bring any unexpected storms.

"Control," he mumbled, lamenting his lack of it. He spoke a few words to the magical light and it dimmed, but didn't go out. A few more words spoken sternly and it reluctantly faded to darkness, leaving the room steeped in shadows.

Ilien sat in the darkness and wondered what he would do tomorrow. Tomorrow was Saturday, a day usually relegated to chores and homework, but his mother was in Dell visiting an uncle he had never met, and Gallund wasn't one for enforcing his mother's rules. The old wizard usually spent the morning reading the paper, and the afternoon napping. Ilien guessed he could go fishing. He loved to fish, even if he often fished alone. He could hike up to Parson's Hill and climb the big pine tree there, but he'd done that a hundred times before, and though he still marveled at how far he could see—all the way to the Three Lakes, he was convinced—it was a long walk back, and Stan and Peaty were sure to be on the lookout for him. He'd heard there would be a pick up game of Cracksticks at the town common around noon, but he wasn't much good at Cracksticks. He looked glumly at his spellbook, a gaint slab of shadow in the blackness, and suddenly didn't feel much good at anything.

The sudden clatter of hooves outside jarred Ilien from his gloomy thoughts and sent him rushing to the window, tripping over his chair on the way. The western horizon glimmered purple and grey, and a few bright stars shone in the black sky to the east. Down below a single rider sat astride a black horse. Bright light spilled into the yard as

Gallund went out to greet him, and from the way the pair acted it was apparent to Ilien that they knew each other. The rider dismounted and hitched his horse to the fence surrounding the front yard. The two talked briefly on the front stoop, then Gallund motioned toward the door and they walked inside.

Who in the world would come to visit Gallund? Ilien wondered. Surely the crusty old wizard didn't actually have friends. Well, he'd just have to find out. Besides, it was time for supper anyhow.

"Wouldn't want you wasting away to nothing while your mother's in Dell," he said in his best wizard's voice. At that, the tiny globe of light flickered to life behind him and Ilien nearly fell back over his chair.

"Go away. Didn't I tell you to fade? Now fade!"

Again the little light dimmed but didn't go out. Instead, it flew under the table and hid, casting up thick, black shadows upon the ceiling. Ilien sighed and shut the door behind him, locking the magical globe of light in the study.

Ilien tiptoed his way along the darkened hallway. The picture frames on the wall looked like square, black patches in the gloom. As he neared the stairs he heard Gallund down below invite the rider to sit, then the wizard must have lit a lamp for the bottom of the stairs grew brighter. Ilien crept quietly down, avoiding the creaky fifth step, and hid in the shadows to hear their conversation and see who it was.

The rider sat in one of the high-backed chairs by the hearth. Ilien saw then that Gallund hadn't lit a lamp, but rather had stoked the fire, and was throwing more wood into the flames even then. Soon a large blaze hissed and crackled in the fireplace, casting its orange light upon the stranger.

Week-old whiskers stained a weather-beaten face. Bright green eyes canvassed the room. That was all Ilien saw before the man looked away and stretched his muddy boots out toward the fire. As he did so the glint of chain mail flashed beneath his cloak, and Ilien's heart suddenly jumped with thoughts of adventure and knights and swords. But what Ilien found most curious was not the armor. What stuck with him were the piercing eyes that had searched the room, and though they never fell his way, Ilien felt somehow certain that the man knew he was there, crouching like a cat upon the stairs. As Gallund left to fetch some hot ale, Ilien shrank back further into the shadows.

Just then the magical globe of light appeared beside him, trying its best to be as dim as an ember. The stranger flew to his feet. The tiny light disappeared, but it was too late for Ilien. The man seized him quickly by the collar.

"And what do I have here, lurking in the dark like an overgrown rat?" He looked Ilien up and down. "Or should I say mouse?"

Ilien struggled to free himself. "Let go of me!"

At that moment, Gallund returned from the kitchen with two steaming mugs. When he saw Ilien suspended off the floor in the other's rude grasp, he burst into laughter, nearly spilling the piping hot ale he'd brought for him and the rider.

"Put him down, Thessien. That's no way to treat my new apprentice."

The rider looked at Ilien in surprise, then set him down, bowing low in apology. "My pardons, young master. It has been a long time since I've been in a respectable place where people can be trusted." He bowed again.

Ilien stood dumbfounded. The magical globe of light reappeared, hovering above his head, but he didn't notice. He was transfixed by the tall stranger before him.

"Were you spying on us?" the wizard asked.

Ilien swallowed hard and looked at his teacher. "I just wanted to—" but he stopped. The magical globe dimmed as if suddenly ashamed as well.

Gallund handed Thessien his mug and scrutinized his pupil. "Well, are you just going to stand there all night and tire your legs? Please, sit down."

Globe tried to follow, but Gallund pointed a long finger in its direction. "Not you! It's back upstairs for you." When Globe refused to move, Gallund reached for his cane. The tiny light hissed then disappeared.

Gallund and Thessien talked long into the night, many times sending Ilien to stoke the fire and fetch more hot ale. Ilien was beginning to wish he had stayed upstairs with his nose in his spell book; the man's thirst had no end! But in between trips to the kitchen he listened to their conversation and soon changed his mind.

"Tensions rage anew," Thessien said, gesturing with his mug and spilling ale in the process. "Berkhelven has raised an army, if you can call it that, and Evendolen has been training its archers and footmen."

"I do hope this story has an ending," interrupted Gallund. "Preferably one that will tell me why you are here. It seems unlikely that you would travel so far from the Eastland simply to request help with some ridiculous land spat. Surely this mountain they're fighting over can't hold that much gold." He reached into his pocket. "Nut?"

Thessien smiled and took a long pull of his ale. "I see you're still as impatient as ever." He wiped his mouth with a grimy hand. "Yes, my story does have an ending, even one worthy of a Nomadin's ear, though I'm not sure it's one you'd choose to hear."

"A Nomadin? What's a Nomadin?" Ilien asked as he threw yet another log onto the fire.

Gallund settled back in his chair with a handful of peanuts. "I am Nomadin." He stretched out his long legs and tapped his shoes together as he ate, his cane on his lap.

"But I thought you were a wizard."

"I'm called a great many things, Ilien. Whatever the name, rest assured, I'm still the same."

Thessien leaned forward in his chair, his grizzled face a mask of annoyance. "May I finish?"

"Please do," said Gallund.

"Both sides in the dispute claim their miners have been disappearing. Each blames the other. Each denies the accusation." Thessien turned silent.

"And?" Gallund prodded, looking up.

"We believe a NiDemon has crossed."

"What are NiDemons?" asked Ilien.

Gallund gazed at the hissing fire and sighed. He stroked the handle of his cane, his eyes soft and polished in the flame light.

"What's your proof?" he asked.

"This." Thessien reached beneath his cloak and withdrew a small leather pouch tied fast with heavy string. He opened it carefully, producing a small, smooth stone. *A perfect skipping stone*, thought Ilien. It fit easily in Thessien's palm. He held it out for Gallund to see. As he did the room filled with a foul stench. The fire in the hearth sputtered and crackled. Ilien grabbed his nose. He hadn't smelled anything so awful since coming

across the remains of one of Farmer Parson's calves after the wolves had taken their fill last July.

"Put it away," bade the wizard, as if pained by more than just the sickening odor.

Thessien placed it back in the leather pouch, cinching it tight. "It was found deep in the mountain where the mining tunnels end and the natural ones begin. There were others."

"What is it?" Ilien asked, still holding his nose.

Gallund sat slumped in his chair, and Ilien thought his face looked suddenly pale. "It's spanstone," the wizard replied, quietly. "It's proof of a Crossing."

"A crossing?"

The room fell silent save for the hiss of the fire. Ilien had no idea what it all meant but he knew he'd get no further explanation.

Gallund stood up and waved his cane through the air. The putrid smell of the spanstone disappeared. The color returned to his face, and he turned to Thessien.

"We leave in the morning." He tossed the remainder of his peanuts into the fire, where they sputtered and smoked.

"Leave?" Ilien asked as he tended the logs in the fire. "Leave where?"

"Why, to Berkhelven," said the wizard. "Where else?"

Thessien fingered the chain mail near his collar. "We had better not take the road."

Ilien froze, a log poised over the flames. "Why is that?"

Thessien's eyes danced with reflected flames. "I stole across a dozen men camped near the East Road. Amber-eyed, every one of them."

Gallund's eyebrows lifted. "Wierwulvs? This far south? Ilien, fetch me the map in the hall."

The log Ilien held began to smoke. "Amber-eyed men? Wierwulvs?"

"Move, boy!" cried the wizard. "We don't have all night."

The map that hung in the hall revealed in detail the hilly land south to Clearwater River, north to the outskirt kingdom of Evernden, and east to the Midland Mountains. The western edge of the map lay blank. It was said that Giants roamed the west, so it was no mystery to Ilien why that side of the map remained unfinished. The map had been drawn by Ilien's father, who had been quite an adventurer in his youth, rumored to have even crossed the Midland Mountains, or so Ilien had been told.

Ilien returned with the map and handed the parchment to Gallund, who spread it open on his lap.

"Camped by the East Road." Gallund's cane tap danced on the floor. "Then we'll ride due north, over the hills behind us and through the outlying forests to Evernden, avoiding the road completely." He traced the route on the map with his finger. "Then from there, hmm, this map fails us there. No matter. I know the land north of Evernden well enough, and a relatively safe path through the Far Plains."

Ilien looked on with excitement. Often he had studied the map as it hung on the wall, imagining the land beyond the hills he hunted. More often still, he wondered about the world outside the edges of the map, beyond the Clearwater, past Evernden or especially over the mountains to the east, the mountains his father had once crossed. Perhaps soon he would know.

"What about the boy?" Thessien asked. "Surely we can't take him with us."

Ilien's face must have wilted to the floor for Gallund looked at him queerly. "This is not a game, boy."

"I know," said Ilien.

"You'll have to carry your own weight."

"I will."

"And keep up."

"Yes, of course!"

"And keep quiet!"

Ilien nodded.

Gallund shrugged and looked at Thessien. "I can't leave him here alone, that's for sure. And leaving him with the neighbors will only raise questions best left unasked."

Thessien stared into his mug.

Ilien stood as rigid as a sign post.

"Okay then," said the wizard. "You'll come as far as Evernden. I have a friend there who can watch over you until your mother returns from Dell. In fact, I believe he has a daughter to keep you company. When you do return home, tell your mother I was called away on important family business."

Ilien bit back his disappointment. As far as he knew, Evernden was only slightly farther away than Dell, and he had been to Dell before. And a girl? That was the last thing he wanted to keep company with. So much for his plans to see the world. He sighed and glanced at the map in Gallund's lap. Evernden. Humph! *Probably doesn't even have a castle*, he thought.

Gallund waved a hand at the boy. "Up to bed now. And wash your face. You look like a raccoon."

Ilien touched his right eye. It still smarted from his scrabble with the bullies, but he did as he was told. He learned long ago, there was no sense in arguing with a wizard.

"So that's him," Thessien said after Ilien had gone upstairs. His speech was thick from too much ale, and he picked up his mug for more. "Doesn't look like much to me, even for an apprentice, let alone what you claim he is."

Gallund snatched the empty mug from Thessien's hand. "Looks are deceiving," he said, and rose to go into the kitchen. "Not all appearances are what they seem, oh Brat of Ashevery. You, of all people, should know that."

"You haven't even tried to kill him yet, have you?" Thessien called after him.

Gallund spun around. "Shut up, you fool!" His eyes strayed to the staircase. He continued in a hushed voice. "We all deserve a life of our own choosing. Should it be any different for him?"

Thessien smiled. "Some would say yes, my friend. Some would say yes."

Upstairs, Ilien lay awake under his covers thinking about the mysterious visitor and the adventure he'd brought with him—the adventure he would miss. He imagined amber-eyed men laying wait for them upon the road, fearsome NiDemon haunting darkened caverns. And in the darkness of his room he thought of his father, too. When at last he fell asleep, he dreamed of mountains.