

Chapter 1 The Madlands

Kelvarlor Evenuin Lumeron Parlamonsul perched on the boundary between the forest and the grass as though he were balancing on top of a fence. Behind the boy lay *Emerlyr*, the hidden forest realm of the Ellouarch elves. It was both his home and the place from which he was fleeing. The night woods were full of *vergleam* and *twimyr* and many other of the thousand shades of darkness that the boy knew so well, but the same woods concealed hunters who were quickly closing in upon him.

Before Kelvarlor lay the Madlands, the forbidden domain of humans. The Madlands were a vast and terrifying landscape of open spaces, unnatural light, and rickety, smoking machines. Only the most powerful, desperate or foolish Ellouarch ventured into the Madlands. As much as any Ellouarch, Kelvarlor feared the Madlands. However, now that he stood upon the border, he felt a very odd and strangely familiar pull, as though a length of glimmerstring tied around his heart tugged him towards the frenzied dominion of humans. Was this pull an enchantment? Was it his ever-present urge to do what was wrong? He did not know, but now that he might be forced to flee into the Madlands, Kelvarlor was horrified to realize he actually *wanted* to go.

The Ellouarch's Ancient Lore described a hundred horrible fates suffered by elven children who strayed into the Madlands. Although the great magic of the Gloraiden Grove made elves virtually invisible in much of the world, the Madlands were full of terrible creatures that might find you, nonetheless.

There were the humans, of course, who the Ellouarch called, “Ghosts.” If you were an Ellouarch in the Madlands, white-coated human “Bounty Scientists” might capture you, conclude you were a creature from the stars, and stick you in a white cell to be endlessly, “examined.” Or you might wind up a slave of the evil Red Toy Baron of the snowy north. Other Ghosts might determine you were, indeed, a creature of myth and try to put you on display before human mobs, who would proclaim that you were a fake and try to pull off your ears.

If you were an Ellouarch in the Madlands, a roaming Grobgrut might gobble you up and spit out your eyes, which would then be sold as charms by enterprising Ghosts who mistook them for bits of a shooting star. The devilish *Ardeld Raarchlan*, also known as the Collector of Names, might trick you out of your soul and leave your dead and hollow body to wander the world. Other monsters of myth roamed the Madlands. A Slibberfitch might lick you with a tender tongue that sliced like a sword. There were Cacophants – powerful spirits summoned during the Great Magical Race Wars whose Ellouarch Archmuse masters had died, leaving them to haunt the world and prey upon the weak. The Madlands were even home to the last of the Fangeyes, the shape-shifting demon dogs who fought neverending wars with the Ellouarch.

Kelvarlor suspected that most of the Ancient Lore stories were intended simply to scare Ellouarch children away from the Madlands. Nevertheless, the front of the boy’s head throbbed with fear at the thought of leaving the *twimyr*-bright and protective forest of Emerlyr. However, he was even more afraid of what hunted him – the renowned Ellouarch trackers called *Tslir Traas*. If he didn’t brave the

Madlands, he would be caught by the Tslir Traas and then accused and appallingly punished for an awful crime against Emerlyr, a deed that he not only had not committed, but which he had tried to *prevent*. Someone had stolen the *Rosul* – the legendary seed of the Gloraiden Grove that renewed the magic concealing the Ellouarch from their many enemies. If the *Rosul* was not recovered by the next full moon, doom would descend upon Emerlyr. And then it would not matter whether Kelvarlor was guilty or not.

The boy reached out and touched the bare grass, expecting...what? He stood up from his crouch to his full height, which was tall for an Ellouarch, almost as tall as a human boy of a comparable age. His hair was the color of copper and curled over his teardrop-shaped ears like vines. His eyes were black when he looked straight at you, and golden when he did not. He was still a boy, and so Ellouarch called him, “Kelvy,” but in a few years they would only call him by his proper name, “Kelvarlor.” Assuming, the boy thought, he and the Ellouarch even survived that long.

“The Tslir Traas will catch up to us soon,” Kelvy’s companion whispered from somewhere above and behind the boy. “And when they do, will my curse be dissolved? Will I still be bound to help you? The bane ‘Master’ Mutterpearl put upon me seems awfully imprecise, as did the terms of my release from it.”

Kelvy glanced back at the foot-tall gargoyle settled on a shadowed branch. One of the few Ellouarch who believed in Kelvy’s innocence was the Once-Great Archmuse Mutterpearl Flarebud Thuinswort, who most considered mad. The Archmuse Mutterpearl had helped the boy escape the dungeons of the Ellouarch imperial city and had aided him even to the point of forcing the thieving gargoyle

named Flyndyng to accompany Kelvy in his flight. But Flyndyng seemed far more interested in pilfering trinkets and getting out of his curse than in helping Kelvy escape.

“You can believe that, if the *Tslir Traas* catch us, you’ll be worse off than me,” Kelvy told Flyndyng. “*Me*, they want to capture alive. *You*, they’ll just shoot full of arrows.”

The little gargoyle thoughtfully picked at his chin with a claw. His voice was high and leathery. “I unfortunately believe you are right. What a horrible fate for a master practitioner of the Acquisitional Arts. Then again, I have survived far worse situations, both in Emerlyr and in the Madlands.”

Kelvy cut him off before Flyndyng could begin yet another of his endless tales of thievery. What kind of thief was unable to keep quiet? A failed one. One that had been caught and captured by an Ellouarch Archmuse.

“How long do you think we have?” Kelvy asked the little gargoyle.

Flyndyng pretended to keenly sniff the night air. He twitched his ears as though he might sense far-off sounds. “One hour?”

“You don’t really know.”

“My specialty is *not* getting caught and therefore *not* getting chased. Although the Lords of Emerlyr are beyond stupid for thinking that *you* might be capable of stealing the Rosul. I’m surprised they didn’t accuse *me*.”

“I’m sure they think you *did* help steal it, by now. You’re with *me*, remember?”

Flyndyng's beady black eyes stared at the boy. He sputtered a wet and unintelligible sequence of noises that could only be gargoyle cusses. Kelvy ignored him and carefully searched the darkneses behind him. Nothing, yet. Squirrels, and he sensed, a few *haarlor* – wood spirits – timidly hovering among the trees.

In front of him, the grasses had sprung teary little dewdrops. The frighteningly bare and ice-blue moon poured *lusollum* onto the almost-empty Madlands. In the near distance, several Ghost Houses loomed. They were monstrous, angled structures hammered together from deadwood. Lanterns clung like fat burning beetles to the sides of the Ghost Houses and to tall poles alongside the black stone roads. Smaller lights winked within almost every house. Humans feared the dark, even when they slept. They also feared *every kind* of darkness and not only the more menacing ones, like the *durmurk* and *sloedroom* and *darbane*. Then again, Kelvy thought, there were many strange and unnamed darkneses within the Madlands. Darkneses he desperately wanted to see. The Madlands felt to Kelvy like one huge irresistible trap.

“One hour before the trackers find us,” Kelvy repeated. “*Maybe* one hour.”

The little gargoyle's stomach gurgled. “We'll *starve* to death before then. We haven't eaten anything since we escaped Llobrahaar, and that was over a day ago. I promise you, we'll find unimaginably delicious food in the Ghost Houses.”

“The Ancient Lore says Ghost food is poison.”

Flyndyng snorted. “Your Ancient Lore knows *dringle*. Ghost Houses are full of wondrous delicacies. Cream-filled chocolate chips. Double-fried potato twists. Caramel peanut crunch ice cream. No Ellouarch spells, not even the Hymn of

Quivering Happiness, can make one feel better than a chocolate mousse fudge donut.” The little gargoyle panted with hunger. Kelvy already had observed that Flyndyng was capable of devouring at least three times his body weight in food, rather like the magical bottomless bags used by many Ellouarch Archmuses.

“Every Ghost House is a treasure trove, trust me.” Flyndyng added.

Trust me.

Kelvy *did not* trust the little gargoyle, but it was clear Flyndyng knew a lot about the Madlands. And filching things.

Flyndyng fluttered down from his perch and landed with a soft thump next to Kelvy.

“I’ll share with you some rules I’ve learned about venturing into a Ghost House.”

“Into? Who said anything about going into one?”

“First, don’t go near a Ghost House where a canine lives. The Ghost canines usually aren’t Fangeyes, but they hate Ellouarch and will try to bite you into bits. Second, *don’t eat the garbage*. Ghosts use magicless power to make their food look and smell better than it is. Their garbage looks better than real food, so you have to be sure you eat the right thing. Third, don’t watch the Ghosts’ magical Black Boxes. They will put you under some kind of spell. Next thing you know, you wake up hours later surrounded by nasty little Ghost children who are screaming because they think you are a monster that came to life out of their Black Box. Fourth, don’t take any of the Ghost gadgets, the ones covered in buttons. Somehow, the Ghosts can use these to track you down.”

Flyndyng had many more rules, but Kelvy had stopped listening. He *was* listening to the sound of the White Wind murmuring through the trees. He was listening to a booming drumbeat within him that he realized was his own heart. The rhythm summoned a familiar feeling, a mad music that pulsed through his body and urged him to make trouble and do things proper Ellouarch did not do, like venture into the Madlands. The mad music made him feel differently and act differently than other Ellouarch. Like a *spindler*, as an angry village teacher had once told Kelvy. Like a *freak*.

Whenever he felt the mad music, Kelvy tried to stuff it down into a dark place within him where it wouldn't create a crisis, but at the moment Kelvy was glad to have any feeling that would help him overcome his throbbing fear of leaving the once-safe forests of Emerlyr.

The mad music urged him to brave the domain of open sky, of humans and dogs, of discovery and adventure. Kelvy was terribly afraid, but the Madlands pulled at him as though they had cast upon him the Charm of Inexhaustible Splendor. Mixed in with these other feelings was a misty sort of sadness. Once he crossed the boundary, would he be leaving behind for good not simply Emerlyr, but also his mother, Evenor? For his entire life, she had protected and taught him, not just the things proper Ellouarch were supposed to know but other things, wondrous and strange. Odd languages that Ellouarch mouths didn't seem shaped to speak. Weird tunes using notes and harmonies that weren't found in powerfully magical Ellouarch music. Unlike most Ellouarch, Kelvy and Evenor had always moved from village to village within the thousand separate forests that constituted Emerlyr. But

then the Rosul had been stolen and Kelvy had been accused and imprisoned, and now he wondered if he would ever see his mother again.

Known darkneses swam in the trees behind Kelvy. Before him lay the hideous Madlands, which the Ellouarch's Supreme Code of Perpetual Border Preservation prohibited him from entering.

He was terrified. He was exhilarated.

He dashed into the open. His wicked grin seemed to linger behind him like a sliver of moon.