

## Chapter 2 The Cave in the Ghost House

Kelvy ran towards a promising-looking Ghost House, feeling vulnerable and utterly thrilled. It was like leaping into a dark mountain lake without knowing what dwelled within. The Ellouarch magic would conceal him in the Madlands, but abandoning trees for grass was nonetheless crossing a threshold. The deep and dancing shadow magic of Emerlyr grew weaker, replaced by a humming sensation that shivered Kelvy's skin. Was the feeling fear or magic?

Kelvy's elf-shaped shadow flitted around the side of the Ghost House and peeped in a window. The little gargoyle Flyndyng flapped softly nearby. Through the window, Kelvy saw a fat Ghost sprawled, asleep, in front of a huge Black Box busily blazing light across the room. Kelvy was surprised that the Ghost's body looked so solid. According to the Ancient Lore, Kelvy should be able to see right through the human. Ghosts, Kelvy had been taught, were no more solid than sunbeams. This Ghost seemed as firm as a tree.

"Do not linger here," Flyndyng warned from his perch on the windowsill. "If you watch the ill-magic light for too long, you will be bewitched every bit as much as the Ghosts."

"Where in the Ghost House can we find food? And maps?"

"Ghost Houses always have several doors. Often they are unlocked. And if they are not..." Flyndyng wagged his deft little lock-picking fingers.

The front of the Ghost House gaped open in a large cave. A single, fat white light hung just over the opening and illuminated the cave interior. Kelvy knew no name for the kind of light it created. The cave was crammed with treasures, not gold or silver or jewels but rather vast stacks and piles of Ghost objects in all imaginable shapes and colors. There were bizarrely-bladed staffs and freakishly curved tools, rainbow-colored balls, and silent two-wheeled contraptions. Shelves sagged beneath boxes overflowing with what appeared to be talismans, components and charms. The items radiated power and uniqueness. The cave's contents confirmed in Kelvy's mind the Ancient Lore's judgment of Ghosts: they were relentlessly inventive and greedy; they possessed a magicless power that destroyed as much as it created; and they tried to transform every substance in the world into something else. They also were incredibly good at breaking things.

How wealthy and powerful Ghosts must be, Kelvy thought, to leave such a valuable hoard seemingly unguarded. Kelvy's stomach quivered at the prospect of pilfering from such a treasure trove. Ellouarch might fear the Madlands and despise Ghosts, but not even the most highly trained scout could resist filching human objects, especially keys, spectacles, pens and gadgets. The Cave of Ghostly Wonders that lay before Kelvy was irresistible.

Flyndyng, on the other hand, had a far less appreciative assessment of the Cave's contents.

"Junk!" he sniffed. "This is where the Ghosts that live here pile all the things they don't want or know what to do with."

“But all these things are so bright, so...strange and beautiful. How can they be junk?”

“Welcome to the human world. Much in the Madlands is magically bewitched. If you see it, then you want it, even if it’s worth nothing. As a Master Practitioner of the Acquisitional Arts, I have often risked great danger to enter a forbidden Ghost building only to wind up with goblets that look like gold but weren’t, or with marvelous-seeming tools that don’t work, or even with some many-buttoned contraption called an ‘Instasleep Ambience Generator.’”

The little gargoyle made a bitter little face. “I once penetrated a huge Ghost house and came away with a useless widget called, ‘The Vibratomower Grass and Garden Regulator Guaranteed to Produce Enviably Lush and Even Lawns.’ It *looked* so valuable, but I pressed every single button, and *absolutely nothing* happened. Disappointing, to say the least. Ghosts fill the Madlands with an endless assortment of junk. No, to get the *good stuff*, you have to visit special Ghost buildings called, ‘museums.’”

Kelvy peered into the Cave of Ghostly Wonders. “Can we at least get maps and food in there?”

Flyndyng pointed at an enormous, ice-white trunk humming in a back corner of the Cave. “We might find something in that box.”

Kelvy inspected the cave’s entrance and found neither hidden defenders nor spell traps like the infamous Sour Snare of Shrieking Snivers. Flyndyng produced some little tools from a little bag around his waist and, after several minutes of dramatic probing, confirmed the elf boy’s conclusion.

“It’s clean,” he pronounced.

Kelvy softly stepped inside the Cave. For a moment, Kelvy listened for sounds of a trap being sprung. Silence, except for the gentle creaking of the deadwood from which the house had been built. Deadwood sounded mournful, unlike the high singing of live trees and of the living glimmerwood from which Ellouarch homes were molded (except for Kelvy’s and his mother’s hovel, which had been as much bark and bush as glimmerwood, the whole mess patched together by the Hymn of Home Adhesion). Kelvy’s nose was stung by the cave’s bitter smells; of mold and dust and, most powerfully, of chemicals. The world of humans felt more than ever like a dirty dreamland.

Hearing nothing, Kelvy rummaged through boxes on a shelf. One was full of rusty metal screws. A second contained nails. He switched to a different shelf, only to find a bin of dirty, colored balls, moldy oversized leather gloves, and round tins of foul-smelling paint. Perhaps Flyndyng’s assessment of the Cave’s contents was correct.

Kelvy opened a big musty box to discover over a dozen brightly-colored masks made of a thin shiny substance. Beneath the masks were shimmering, gaudy, and tattered clothes wadded into balls. They looked like something Ghosts might wear to a festival or ceremony. Kelvy pulled out a couple of the colorful outfits, and then leapt back in horror. He’d unearthed a bunch of jet black feathers that, for an instant, appeared to move on their own, as though part of a living creature. A creature that looked much like the thing that had stolen the *Rosul*, the legendary tree seed that renewed the Ellouarch’s concealing magic.

The memory flashed through Kelvy's mind like lightning. Three days ago, he had been in *Lloubrahaar*, the imperial city of Emerlyr. Three days ago, he and thousands of other Ellouarch had been witnessing the great renewing magical ritual called the *Haardar*, when the Rosul was replanted within the Gloraiden Grove. A voice spoke to him, then, a voice like that of the White Wind whispering through the deep forests, a voice young and high and bright. *Arlor sul*, the voice told him. *Arlor sul*. Save the seed. And Kelvy tried. He warned the Silver Guard, anybody, *everybody*. Instead, Silver Guards seized him.

And then, as a Fellow of the Gloraiden Grove raised the ceremonial silver bowl containing the *Rosul*, a shred of shadow dropped from some crook of darkness, some *durmurk*, high within some neighboring trees. The thing plunged, seeming part wing and part claw and part oily darkness. It snatched the *Rosul*. Arrows and spells and bolts could not stop the blackwinged creature before it darted back into the shadows.

Even before the shock of the theft had diminished, even before the full horror of the consequences became clear, Ellouarch asked how such a creature could have penetrated the heart of Emerlyr. Only creatures of Ellouarch blood could pass so deeply into Emerlyr, so close to the Gloraiden Grove. The thieving creature, which the Lords of Emerlyr identified as a *Shrade*, was an unnatural being spawned through sorcery. It must have been created by a powerful dark wizard, but also aided by an Ellouarch. And who else could have helped the *Shrade* and its creator but the boy who had known the crime would occur?

The black feathers in the mildewed box within the Ghost Cave were, Kelvy realized, only feathers from a dead bird stuck to some kind of hat. But beneath them, beneath the shiny colorful outfits, there was a little pool of *durmurk*. Kelvy tipped the box towards the unnatural Ghost light and chased the *durmurk* away. Who knew what might be hiding anywhere, certainly in the Madlands, and now even in Emerlyr?

Kelvy kept searching. In another moldy box, he found maps, many of them, all printed on deadwood paper. He studied the writing on them and gasped. This was a language his mother had taught him for many years. She had claimed it was a variation of Southern Ellouarch, where distant cousins of theirs lived, but Kelvy realized the writing was truly the language of Ghosts. Why had his mother taught him this? Had she somehow known Kelvy would enter the Madlands? And *how* had *she* known a language that not only was understood by a very few Archmuses and Songbinders but that ordinary Ellouarch were prohibited from speaking?

What did this mean? Kelvy felt as though his shadow had come alive and had begun talking to him. The normal world was twisting and turning inside-out. No wonder Ellouarch called the human domain, "The Madlands." He wanted to return to Emerlyr and stay there. But he couldn't. Not any more.

Kelvy looked at the maps, trying not to read the writing, and confirmed that they were Ghostly representations of the great western land within which both Emerlyr and the Madlands lay, and thus at least usable. He stuffed a dozen of them into his bag. He didn't want to look at them, but he had to have them. The drumbeat of the Mad Music within him quickened crazily.

He noticed Flyndyng examining the tall white trunk murmuring in the corner.

“It’s safe,” Flyndyng said. “Ghosts never guard their food, which is astounding, since so much of it is *sooooo* good.”

Kelvy pulled and pulled on a handle. The thick door of the trunk wooshed open, blasting the boy with frigid air. He darted away, sure that he’d just sprung a trap and would be immediately turned into stone. But, no, it was just winter air, a little stale bit of the White Wind.

There was a lot of Stuff within the cold white trunk, much of it consisting of brightly painted metal containers the shape of Kelvy’s closed fist, only larger. They made a tinging sound when Kelvy flicked them with his finger. Flyndyng hopped about and told Kelvy what to take.

“Those and those and that, and a couple of those.”

They found more Ghost food in a big hard box next to the cold white trunk. Soon, Kelvy’s bag bulged with items, including many crinkling bags of cooked, thinly sliced potato pieces, small, clear containers of something red and jiggly, a thing labeled, “Bob-O’s Beef Log,” and a metal container of “Pork Rind Whip.”

“Trust me,” Flyndyng told him, “after you taste Ghost food, you’ll never want to even *see* mashed whiteroot or brinberries again. Then again, you may not be able to *see anything* – some of this stuff can blind you.” He grinned a gray grin and shoved into his mouth a gnarled, pollen-colored twist of something called, “Grandma Stark’s Cheese Jerky.”

While Flyndyng feasted, Kelvy poked around a little bit more, dazzled by the sheer variety of objects. He was contemplating how many rusty tools to pilfer and

cram into his already overloaded bag, when he sensed a horrible presence. It was a sharp sensation that made him feel slightly nauseous, like a breath of bad smoke.

Kelvy slowly turned to find a figure standing just outside the wide entrance to the Cave of Ghostly Wonders. The figure was bone-thin and taller than either an Ellouarch or even most humans. Its face glowed like a wedge of moon, but seemed to drain the light from the night. The darkness surrounding him was as airless and hushed as a tomb. The figure looked like he was wrapped in a sweeping cape of *evenghast*. The creature looked and smelled and sounded old, old, old, as though one of the ruined stone pillars on Maergard Hill had danced alive and into the Madlands. It – he? – wore a black, human-style suit with a black shirt and a flame-red scarf that matched the color of its eyes. However, unlike the rather wrinkled scarf, the eyes had an endless depth. Looking into them was like peering into a vast and never-dying fire.

It was a creature about which Village Elders and teachers and the Ancient Lore had tried and failed to warn Kelvy. After years of desiring the forbidden, Kelvy had finally found it and now knew that he absolutely, certainly, unquestionably, didn't want it.

Twenty feet away from him stood the *Ardeld Raarchlan*, the Collector of Names.