

Chapter 3 The Collector of Names

The *Ardeld Raarchlan* had appeared so quietly and quickly it might have blinked – teleported – right to the spot.

The figure tasted the air with a red, red tongue.

“Mmmm,” he said. “An Ellouarch in the Madlands. So rare, and thus so easy to sense. I smelled you twenty miles from here. And your taste...different, slightly. You taste like an elf that has spent *too much* time near the Madlands. I sense *Ghost* on you.” The words were in the Ellouarch language, but they puffed out of the creature’s mouth like the breath from a hole cradling something dead.

Kelvy’s legs buckled. “I just want to leave.”

The boy managed to break the creature’s mesmerizing gaze. He glanced around for something he might use to defend himself. He spotted Flyndyng, overstuffed from Ghost food, fearfully lumbering and then diving into a box of fat, multi-colored cords that might offer a little protection.

Weapons, Kelvy thought.

The cave was full of Ghost weapons, but Kelvy didn’t understand how to use Ghost powers. His own magical abilities were famously bad. The previous year, Kelvy had so utterly failed the Ellouarch Magical Aptitude Test that the test-giving Grovestone had collapsed like an empty egg. Kelvy’s spells always fizzled, except for minor magical exercises like the Chant of the Dancing Spheres and Langree’s Loquacious Lozenge Lesson, spells that at the moment helped him not in the least.

Kelvy seized from a nearby barrel a long staff with an oddly bent end and aimed it towards the Ardeld Raarchlan. However, the figure standing in the entrance did not enter the cave. He seemed reluctant or even unable to do so. Kelvy recalled something his old village teacher, Mimerick Clomm, had once tried to explain to him. This was when Mimerick Clomm wasn't scolding Kelvy or ridiculing him or insultingly referring to the boy as, "a big imp." Mimerick Clomm had told his students that many demonic creatures could not enter a home unless they were invited to do so by the owner. So although the horrible Ardeld Raarchlan could not reach Kelvy in the cave, neither could Kelvy get past *it*. He was trapped.

"Let me leave," Kelvy repeated.

"I'm afraid not. I must collect some things from you." The creature flicked his fingers, and a ridiculously large and battered leather book appeared in his hand. Kelvy did not want to guess what the book's crimson cover had been made from.

"You are...are the *Collector of Names*?"

"Ah, yes. You Ellouarch call me that, the *Ardeld Raarchlan*. Of course, the humans call me all sorts of things, and have all kinds of interesting stories about me. They don't often dare refer to me by *any* name. Right now, however, *your* name is the important thing."

Despite the horror slowly squeezing his body, Kelvy noticed how ragged the Collector appeared. The creature's suit was rumpled and ill-fitting. One sleeve was longer than the other. The shirt was stained. A great hairy toe protruded from a thumb-sized hole in one shoe. However monstrous and powerful he might be, the

Ardeld Raarchlan had seen better days. The thought gave Kelvy the slightest flicker of hope.

“You don’t really want *me*,” Kelvy offered nervously. “I’m small compared to most Ghosts. Ellouarch Elders say I’m ill-tempered, so I probably would taste sour. I’m sure the big Ghost that lives in this house would taste *much better*.”

The Collector considered this and attempted to smooth the wrinkles out of his scarf.

“It is true that you Ellouarch are too consumed by past glories and have lost your delicious *sweetness*. Now you simply taste *old*. But the humans’ gizmos have made their souls as thin and weak as soup. Bleah. And, in any event, I have, as the humans would say, *diversified*. I presently work for another whose interests are limited to Ellouarch. Thus, you must give me your blood and your soul.” The creature peered past Kelvy to the box from which Flyndyng’s pointy ears, heavy brow, and grotesquely distended stomach protruded. “When I’ve finished with this boy, gargoyle, you can then give me *your* bit of blood and your tiny little soul.”

The miniature gargoyle squeaked and rustled more deeply into the box.

“Now, young Ellouarch, your name, please.” The Collector creaked open his monumental book and prepared to write with a long and jagged fingertip that looked like it had been sharpened by a hundred tiny teeth. He squinted irritably at the pages and then humphed, apparently unable to properly read the names in front of him. With a twitch of a finger, a pair of bulbous gold spectacles appeared on the Collector’s face, causing the bottomless fire in his eyes to seemingly leap out towards Kelvy.

“After I have your name,” the Collector told the boy, “we can finalize the transfer of your soul.”

“My name is Jakeshade Dusktongue, Son of Malthezar,” Kelvy lied. He hadn’t learned nearly what he should have in his classes, but he knew better than to give his name to the *Ardeld Raarchlan*.

The Collector frowned, shook his head, and boomed shut the book. It rather impossibly disappeared within the Collector’s tattered coat. The Collector looked tired and a little sad. The creature sighed, much like Kelvy’s teachers did when they dealt with him. Kelvy found this reassuring; he had always been very good at getting into and out of trouble with his teachers.

“We’re going to be difficult about this, are we?” the Collector said. “You think I don’t know a false name when I hear one? Fine, we’ll do the other part first.”

An extravagantly etched crystal jar appeared in the Collector’s hand. It glittered in the unnatural Ghost light. The jar wasn’t very big, but Kelvy sensed it could hold much more than its size suggested, much like an Archmuse’s bottomless bag or Flyndyng’s stomach.

“Your blood, please,” the Collector said, raising the crystal jar. “Come on, now, it won’t hurt a bit. A little pinch, and an easy, comfortable draining away. It will be like going to sleep.” His smile was like an old black scar across his white face.

The Collector’s very presence spread fear through the air like some ghastly dust. It was stealing Kelvy’s breath and the warmth from his muscles. Fortunately for Kelvy, Ellouarch children are raised to contend with dark forces of the world. Further, he was beyond the Collector’s reach, at least for the moment. Finally, the

fact that the Collector could not enter the cave meant that he was of a powerful order of demons that nonetheless was bound by specific rules. If only Kelvy knew what those were.

“I’m not giving you *anything*,” Kelvy stammered.

The Collector stared at Kelvy, then at the empty crystal jar. To Kelvy’s surprise and horror, the creature’s smile only widened. It seemed to split his head in two, and was full of dirty silver teeth and the darkness called *necroghast*. The crystal jar disappeared into the creature’s coat.

“This is good,” the Collector said. “Fantastic, even. You’re obviously too smart to just *give* something away. You’re a *challenge*. I haven’t had a good challenge in quite a while. Far more interesting than just plucking the spirit from some idiotic sprite. And the greater the challenge, the more valuable the soul.”

“*All* souls are valuable. That’s why I’m not giving you *mine*.”

The Collector seemed more intrigued than angry that Kelvy would not easily surrender his soul. The creature tipped his head one way and then the other. He inhaled deeply through his nose, drinking in the smells of the Cave and of Kelvy. The Collector’s very long tongue snaked out into the air and tickled it. He closed his eyes.

“Ahhh,” the Collector breathed. “I *know you*. I know *all* about you. Your Ellouarch Lords think you stole the *Rosul*. That’s why you’re *here*.”

“Not at all,” Kelvy lied. “I’m a relic hunter. I’m here to reclaim the, uh, Ring of Balbrind the Reborn.”

“Don’t bother lying, boy.” The Collector’s tongue flitted about, but the creature’s speech nonetheless was as bright and tempting as diamonds. “I can taste

a lie before the words leave your lips. You are no relic hunter. No, you are something quite different. The trees of your Gloraiden Grove spoke to you, didn't they? They asked you to prevent the theft of the Rosul. But the fools of Emerlyr didn't believe you."

"No, no."

Kelvy tried to shut out the Collector's words, but they crept into his mind, much as cold winter drafts used to pierce his mother's hovel.

The trees of your Gloraiden Grove spoke to you....

A voice had spoken to him, but it could not be that of the Glorious Trees. There were many voices in the world, good and bad. The Glorious Trees would never have spoken to an outcast like him, let alone a boy. The Collector had to be lying to him, Kelvy thought. The fiend was trying to confuse and weaken him.

And Kelvy *was* confused and utterly terrified. He was floundering in a stormy sea. He needed something to cling to, anything to keep from being swept right into the Collector's deadly whirlpool. He had to keep talking; only that could keep him afloat.

Kelvy could feel the creature's words circling him like hideous sea creatures. Sweet, sweet monsters that he increasingly wanted to invite into his arms. Kelvy fought the urge to step over to the Collector and surrender himself. He told himself the Collector was just like his old teachers, just like Mimerick Clomm and Old Smeechling Nimbernul, who Kelvy had so often bamboozled. He had to keep talking. More importantly, he had to keep fibbing.

“You’re mistaking me for my twin brother,” Kelvy insisted. “He smells just like me. He’s the one the Lords of Emerlyr want. I don’t know anything about any voice.”

But Kelvy *did* know about the Voice. It had begun mere months ago, during the long and empty hours of his apprenticeship as a stable cleaner in Llobrahaar, the imperial city of Emerlyr.

Arvor sul, the Voice had told him. *Arvor sul*. Save the seed. And Kelvy had tried and failed.

“My twin brother is still in *Llobrahaar*,” Kelvy persisted. “If you let me go, I’ll tell you where he’s hiding.”

“More lies. They will not save you.” The Collector’s tongue twitched excitedly.

Kelvy felt his courage beginning to fail. It was only a short step from this point to a walking death. All Kelvy had to do was nod.

“Give me your soul, boy.” The words were like honeyed milk.

Kelvy wanted to nod. How delicious it would be to agree.

But then the Collector’s earlier words fully registered in Kelvy’s mind.

The trees of your Gloraiden Grove spoke to you....

Who else but beings as powerful as the Glorious Trees would have asked him to save the Rosul Seed? Maybe the Collector hadn’t been lying about that. Maybe the Glorious Trees *had* spoken to him. Nobody in Llobrahaar had seemed to believe Kelvy when he’d told about the voice, but the Once-Great Archmuse Mutterpearl *had* helped the boy escape. Could the Glorious Trees have truly spoken to Kelvy?

Kelvy remembered what else the Voice had said, and the words were so clear in his mind that it was as though the Voice were speaking to him again, at that very moment.

You are a listener of leaves. You bear the spirit of the trees...

And the words felt like a boat gathering him up from the churning sea.

"I'm not giving you *anything*," Kelvy told the *Ardeld Raarchlan*.

And still the Collector of Names grinned, all granite and grave. Was it because the creature knew he ultimately would claim Kelvy's soul, or was it because the fiend was so truly old or so enfeebled from feasting on Ghost souls that he had become more than a little bit addled?

"You won't agree," the Collector said, nodding and beaming as though he barely understood his own words. "Then why don't we make a *deal*? I *love* deals. I love seeing my, um, *clients* satisfied. I'll offer you something of *incredible* value, something you can't get anywhere else, something you really, really want. In exchange, you give me your soul and your blood. How about a pot full of jewels? Imagine plunging your hands elbow-deep into diamonds! Imagine the cold, hard feel of gems! Shiny, shiny, shiny! Or I could fill your shoes full of gold every night for ten years. Or maybe a magic violin? I can tell you're a musical sort. I can give you anything you want. *Anything*."

For a moment, Kelvy thought about things he might want. The Collector's words kept coming and coming in seductive waves. *Anything you want*. Kelvy could make his mother happy. She could quit slaving away in a silver forge and do nothing but sing all the time. Kelvy could learn who his father was and what happened to

him, a secret not even his mother would – or could – reveal. Kelvy might even become a proper Ellouarch, rather than continuing to be a too-big, too-wild, and too-fast misfit who seemed to belong nowhere.

The Collector's tongue twitched towards the elf boy. His red eyes flared like happy embers.

"Ahhhh." The Collector's red eyes narrowed. "Acceptance. You want *acceptance*. I can arrange even that. No more taunting. No more rejection. Give me your soul and your blood, and you can be just like the others of your race. Just like...Ellouarch?" The Collector frowned, apparently puzzled by what Kelvy should be.

You are a Listener of Leaves. You bear the spirit of the trees.

"If I give you my blood," Kelvy told the Collector, "then I'll be *dead*. I won't be able to use any of the things you're promising me or be whatever you could make me."

"I believe you'll find that the benefits of life are quite exaggerated. I can offer you an incredible range of after-life options. Many of my clients find an existence free from the demands of blood and soul to be positively delightful."

"Why do you need my *blood*, anyway?" Kelvy asked, trying both to stall and to distract himself from the prospect he might become a zombie. "I thought you collected *souls*."

The creature rolled his red eyes. "It's this plot of my new patron's. I guess he didn't have enough of his *own* blood." The Collector grimaced. "I shouldn't have told you that."

“I won’t tell anyone else,” Kelvy lied.

“You *are* trapped, of course. Sooner or later you’ll give me what I want. But I *like* you, I really do. You remind me of myself when I was a young flame, barely a candle flicker. So bright and troubled. I’ll make you an even better offer than I should. How about I give you acceptance within your race *and* a shoeful of gold?”

Kelvy knew he couldn’t trust the Collector, but the creature was right about being trapped. In just a few hours, the sun would rise. Regardless of what happened to the Collector, if the Madland sun directly shone on Kelvy, he would, according to the Ellouarch Ancient Lore, be burnt to a crisp. Additionally, come dawn the Ghosts in the house would awaken, and *then* what would happen to him? Kelvy had to try *something*, something other than accepting the Collector’s offer. The creature certainly would cheat Kelvy and probably couldn’t truly gain him acceptance among the Ellouarch. However, the Collector clearly was not as strong or as mentally quick as he undoubtedly once had been. Maybe Kelvy could take advantage of this, much as he’d tricked Old Smeechling Nebernul into not punishing him after last year’s most unfortunate moonberry juice bath incident.

“How about a contest?” Kelvy was getting desperate.

“Of course! I love contests almost as much as I love deals! How about a music contest?”

Kelvy considered this. Thanks to his mother, herself a musician of incomparable ability, he played the flute beautifully, but he doubted he could outplay a creature like the Collector, who the Ancient Lore described as a supernaturally brilliant musician.

“How about a test of knowledge?” Kelvy proposed. “If *I* win, you allow me and my companion to leave freely and don’t try to collect my or my family’s souls. If *you* win, I’ll give you my soul.”

The Collector wagged a long, long finger at the elf boy. “*And* your blood.”

“If you get my name and my blood, I should get more than just free passage. If I win, you also owe me a *favor*.”

“A favor is no small thing. Especially for an Ellouarch who is trapped and is attempting to retain his soul.”

“Well, then, instead of a favor, you can owe me something else.” Kelvy thought about his mysterious father, about all the things his mother wouldn’t tell him, about all the unanswered questions in his life. “If I win, you can also owe me a *secret*.”

“You are a shrewd bargainer, my young Ellouarch, but a secret is nearly as valuable as a favor, perhaps more so.”

“Well, if we can’t agree, we can instead wait here and see what happens in the morning when the Ghosts come out.”

The Collector’s tongue slid over his lips, greedily and confidently anticipating the taste of Kelvy’s spirit.

“A secret. Fine. So we’ll have our contest, then?”

“You are bound by our agreement, yes?” Kelvy asked nervously.

“Certainly. It’s part of my nature. So, the first one of us to answer a question wrong or not know the answer loses.”

“Sounds fair.” Kelvy pressed his lips together and thought hard. “But I want to be sure I understand the rules. Will this be a contest like the one between Flormorex the Four-Earred and the Gleedemon or like the one Stradtax won with Lorpormal of Dreveldek?”

The Collector frowned, bunching the flesh of his forehead into a billion wrinkles. “I don’t know.”

“Ah, ha! You couldn’t answer the question. You lose!”

“No! No! The contest hasn’t *started* yet! And further, you *made up* those contests between Flormorex and whomever!”

“*Certainly not,*” Kelvy fibbed. “Why would I *make up* such stories when the Ancient Lore is full of them?”

“I have no earthly idea!”

“You lose again!”

The Collector sputtered with rage. His eyes swelled until they looked like burning cacklebird’s eggs.

“*Cursed* Ellouarch!”

“You are bound by the terms of our agreement to allow me safe passage, so I’ll be leaving now...” Keeping an eye on the Collector, Kelvy carefully edged towards the opening of the Ghost cave.

“You Ellouarch are almost as loathsome as the Fangeyes!” The Collector’s bones jittered angrily, threatening the seams of his tattered suit. “Why couldn’t the fiend have just needed *human* blood!”

“*What* fiend?” Kelvy asked.

“No one! No one at all!” The Collector grabbed his bald head with one big hand and shook it. Kelvy half-expected to hear some sort of rattling noise. The creature bit his lips so madly he looked like he was trying to swallow his face.

The Collector’s slip of the tongue made Kelvy remember that the fiend now owed him a secret. He had been thinking the Collector could tell him who his father was or what happened to him. But to ask for the secret, Kelvy realized he would have to reveal to the *Ardeld Raarchlan* even more information about himself, and *that* wouldn’t be smart. However, there was *another* secret here, information that might be precious and that might even help the Lords of Emerlyr defend the elven realm. Kelvy imagined being awarded silver medals and privileges, even *accepted*, if he heroically brought back secrets from the *Ardeld Raarchlan*. He paused at the cave opening.

“Since you owe me a secret,” he told the fuming Collector of Names, “please tell me for whom you’re collecting Ellouarch blood and why he wants it.”

The Collector’s face was now almost as red as his tie. But a moment after Kelvy made his request, the Collector’s eyes widened and brightened. His mouth slit into a nasty little smile. “Of course. Here is your *secret*. I work for a creature called Thomas Blane, who, by obtaining Ellouarch blood, reaches everywhere and nowhere. When Emerlyr falls, he will become Lord of Slevros, the Empire of Noise.”

“Who is this Thomas Blane? That’s a Ghost name, isn’t it? And Slevros? The Empire of Noise? What are those?”

“I was obligated to tell you a secret. I am not obligated to tell you what it *means*.”

“But who is this creature? Did he steal the Rosul Seed?”

The Collector smugly shook his head. “Those are two more secrets. I might tell you, but *only* if we have another contest and you happen to win. Care to try?”

Kelvy began to accuse the *Ardeld Raarchlan* of breaking the terms of their agreement. Suddenly, the deadwood door at the back of the cave shook and flew open with a crash. Lights brighter than the sun lit the cave in blinding white. Kelvy squinted at the big figure in the open doorway. The previously snoozing, groggy and obviously irritated Ghost wore baggy pants and a belly-sagging shirt that proclaimed, “I Believe in Beer.” The Ghost knuckled his eyes and stared. He scanned the cave, and his gaze finally came to rest unmistakably on Kelvy.

“What the hell’s going on out here?” the Ghost thundered. “Who are you and what are you doing in my garage?”

For one long instant, Kelvy’s body refused to move. The Ghost could *see* him! How could this be? Had the Ellouarch’s protective magic *failed*? Had *his own* magic somehow failed? Almost as horribly, Kelvy *understood the Ghost’s words*. Even though he’d discovered a little while ago the truth about the language his mother had taught him, it was quite a different thing to hear it spoken by an actual Ghost. Kelvy felt as though he were falling.

But when in doubt or in trouble, Kelvy thought numbly, *run*. He saw the welcoming and thoroughly known darkness, the *twimyr*, outside the cave. The comforting, earthy smell of the nearby trees tugged at him. He could hear the *vergleam* of the woods encouraging him. He bolted. Flyndyng immediately flapped out of his box and fluttered after the boy.

“What the hell is *that?*” the Ghost bellowed with horror. “Some kind of damn *bat?*”

As Kelvy darted by the Collector, the demon hissed at him powerlessly. The Ardeld Raarchlan’s tongue shot out so far it nearly brushed Kelvy’s shoulder. The Collector’s eyes slitted intensely, the red within welling like blood.

“I’ll remember your taste!” the Collector snarled at the boy bounding towards the woods. “I’ll find you! I’ll remember! I will see you again, in the Empire of Noise!”

The Collector made a grim gash of a smile. The empty crystal jar shattered within the creature’s furious grip.

“What’s *your* story, pal?” the Ghost challenged the Collector. “Or should I just call the cops?”

The Collector stared for a moment into the night and sighed. He turned to the Ghost. “If you’ll invite me *in* for just a moment,” the Collector suggested, “I can explain all of it to you....”