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Opening extract from

Sebastian Darke: Prince of Fools

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CHAPTER 1



A BOY AND HIS BEAST

The ancient wooden caravan creaked slowly out from the cover of the trees and stopped for a moment on the wide stretch of plain.

If there had been anyone to observe the scene they would have noticed the words, SEBASTIAN DARKE, PRINCE OF FOOLS, painted gaily on the sides of the caravan. Those with a keener eye might also have noticed that the word 'Sebastian' looked somehow different to the rest of the sentence. It had been added in a rather wobbly, amateurish hand, clearly over-painting another name that had already been there.

The sun was low on the horizon and Sebastian was obliged to shade his eyes with the flat of one hand as he gazed off into the shimmering, heat-rippled distance. The land ahead of him was flat, arid, featureless red earth, baked by the sun, with here and there the occasional bunch of scrubby grass

thrusting tenaciously through the soil. He had no real idea how far it was to the city of Keladon, but a merchant he had met the previous day had warned him to expect to travel for at least three days and nights.

'It's a good distance,' the merchant had told him. 'And those plains are infested with Brigands. You'd better sleep with one eye open, Elf-man.'

Sebastian was well used to this term, though he didn't much care for it. He was a 'breed' – the son of a human father and an elvish mother. His tall stature and handsome features clearly came from his father's side of the family, but his mother's lineage was there too, reflected in the large jet-black irises of his eyes and his long, slightly pointed ears. His gangly frame was accentuated by the striped black and white costume he was wearing, complete with a tall three-pronged hat topped by jingling bells. The costume had been his father's and hung rather loosely on Sebastian, but he had steadfastly refused his mother's offers to alter it, saying that in time he would grow to fit the clothing. Fitting comfortably into the role of a jester might take a little longer.

Sebastian clicked his tongue and slapped the reins against the shaggy haunches of Max, the single buffalope that pulled the caravan. Max snorted, shook his great horned head and set off again at his usual leisurely pace. He had been in the Darke family for as long as Sebastian could remember; indeed, one of his earliest memories was of his father lifting



him onto the buffalope's mighty back and leading him slowly around the paddock. Max was now of advanced years and had many grey hairs peppering the rich ginger of his shaggy hide. With each passing day he seemed to grow more cantankerous and he had never been slow in stating his dissatisfaction.

'I don't much like the look of this,' he muttered now, as he started off across the plain. 'We're going to need plenty of water.'

'We've *got* water,' Sebastian told him. 'Enough for at least two days. And besides, there are streams out there. That merchant said so.'

Max sniffed disdainfully. 'Why you'd take the word of a Berundian oil-seller is quite beyond me,' he said. 'A man like that would sell his grandmother for a few croats.'

'You suspect everybody,' Sebastian chided him. 'According to you, every person we meet is some kind of villain.'

'That's because they generally are. I noticed the Berundian managed to sell you some lamp oil.'

'So? We needed some!'

'Not at three croats a bottle we didn't. Daylight robbery! Back at the market in Jerabim you could get a bucket of the stuff for—'

'We're not in Jerabim now,' Sebastian reminded him.

They moved on in gloomy silence for a while and Sebastian found himself thinking wistfully about his hometown, the

place he'd lived for all of his seventeen years. He closed his eyes for a moment and saw the big bustling market in the town square, where prosperous merchants in their embroidered cloaks loudly advertised their wares as the townspeople moved past them. Suddenly a whole series of familiar images, smells and tastes assailed Sebastian's senses. He saw the richly decorated textiles and carpets that hung from wooden frames around the many stalls. He smelled the rich odours of the cattle pens, where people came to barter for buffalopes and equines. He tasted the delicious tang of the hot sherbet they served in the cafés, and savoured the warm aroma of elvish coffee emanating from the many restaurants that lined the square . . .

Then he had a vivid recollection of his mother's face on the day he'd finally left home – her red-rimmed eyes; her brave, forlorn attempt at a smile. Sitting up on the seat of the caravan, he'd called down to her that he'd be back just as soon as he'd made his fortune, that all her troubles would be over . . . but neither of them had really believed it.

'Take care of yourself, Sebastian,' she'd called to him. 'Remember, if things don't work out for you, I'll still be here!'

That had been three moons ago. He didn't like to think of her sitting alone at night in the shabby homestead, while the cold night winds sighed outside the window—

'This is tedious!' Max's whining voice broke rudely into his thoughts. 'I mean, look at it. There's nothing out there, not

even a hill or a tree. The least you could do is humour me with a little conversation.'

'I'm not in the mood,' said Sebastian. 'Besides, most buffalopes know their place. They don't jabber incessantly at their owners.'

'You're not my owner,' Max reminded him. 'That honour belonged to your father.'

'He's been dead over a year now. I inherited the house and I inherited you. Accept the fact and shut up!'

'Oh, that's charming, isn't it!' exclaimed Max in disgust. 'Downgraded to a mere possession. Well, at least I know where I stand.'

Sebastian immediately regretted his words. 'It's not like that. You're not a possession. It's more . . . you're more of a . . .'

'Servant? Chattel?'

'I was going to say . . . a partner.'

Max seemed rather pleased with this. He lifted his head a little and walked with fresh spring in his step. 'A partner,' he mused. 'Well, yes, let's face it, you wouldn't have got this far without my help. Who was it showed you the path through Geltane Woods? Eh? And it was my idea to take shelter in that pine grove last night.'

'I'm very grateful,' Sebastian assured him. 'Really.' The last thing he needed right now was a buffalope that didn't feel like walking any more.

They moved on in silence, save for the creaking of the ancient leather harness, the crunching of the wheels and the tinkling of Sebastian's bells. He sat there asking himself, not for the first time, if he was doing the right thing.

Sebastian's father, Alexander, had been a jester, a very successful one. As Court Jester to King Cletus the Magnificent, he had lived a rich and privileged existence and had been able to keep his wife and young son in relative luxury for many years. But Cletus was already an old man when Alexander first came into his employ. Cletus's son and heir, Daniel the Doleful, had none of his father's love of wit and good humour. So it was clear that Alexander's good fortune was not going to last for ever.

He had always harboured the wish that Sebastian would follow in his footsteps. From an early age the boy had done his level best to learn the jester's skills. But something wasn't quite right. He managed to memorize the jokes, quips and stories well enough, but somehow he didn't tell them convincingly. His timing was wrong, or he got some small detail mixed up. Where Alexander would be sure to get a hearty laugh, Sebastian could coax only a feeble chuckle; where Alexander would hold an audience spellbound with a story, Sebastian's listeners would quickly become restless and distracted. It was clear to Sebastian that he simply didn't have 'the gift', as his father liked to describe it. But Alexander refused to accept this, insisting that practice

would make perfect and that it was all just a matter of time.

Then King Cletus had finally died and Alexander had found himself without a patron. Attempts to ingratiate himself with other well-to-do nobles around the court were unsuccessful and with no money coming in, he was soon obliged to offer his services to local taverns and music halls for a few croats a night. The family found itself in trouble as their income slowed to a trickle. Alexander tried everything he knew to find work but it was to no avail. Then one night, in a tavern, a stranger told him about a powerful king in the city of Keladon, far away to the west.

'King Septimus is a fine and noble man,' he had told Alexander. 'It is said that his palace is the richest in all the world. He dines on gold plates and drinks from silver goblets encrusted with precious jewels.'

'Does he have a jester?' Alexander had asked.

To which the stranger had replied, 'Do you know, I don't believe he does!'

Alexander seized upon the notion as a drowning man clutches at a piece of driftwood. He became obsessed with making the long and arduous journey to Keladon, where he intended to offer his services to King Septimus. In preparation for the trip, he devised a completely new routine and practised long into the night, every night, going over and over it, trying to perfect every word, every nuance, every expression on his haggard face.

He had not recognized the toll that the recent months had taken on him. He was undernourished and exhausted. One morning Sebastian and his mother had woken to find Alexander slumped unconscious on the tiled floor, pale and shivering. They carried him to his bed and Sebastian rode Max into town to summon a doctor, but it was no use. Alexander had been taken by a terrible fever, and within a week he was dead.

For Sebastian and his mother it was a desperate situation. The house and land was theirs but they had no income to speak of and the only option was to go begging in the streets. Unless . . .

When Sebastian had first mentioned it, his mother had been dismissive.

He was a mere boy, she pointed out. He could hardly undertake the long and hazardous journey to Keladon by himself. Sebastian had argued that Max would be with him and he challenged his mother to come up with a better idea, but she couldn't think of anything.

And so it was decided. Sebastian would take his father's costume and caravan, he would take his father's jokes and stories and he would make the trip to Keladon in his father's place to seek employment at the court of King Septimus.

'What's the worst that can happen?' he'd asked his mother. 'If they don't think I'm good enough, they'll simply send me on my way and I'll come back home again.'

And his mother had nodded and forced another smile, but deep down in her heart she began to wonder if this was the beginning of the end; and she asked herself if she would ever see her beloved son again.

CHAPTER 2



DOUBLE ACT

'Oh, come on, for goodness' sake, this is terrible. Tell me a joke!'

'What?' Sebastian came back to the present with a bump. He stared around at the seemingly endless stretch of dry, dusty plain and had to work hard to fight down a rapidly rising sense of panic.

'You heard me. Let's hear something from your marvellous repertoire.'

'Er . . . not just now, if you don't mind. I'm thinking.'

Max wasn't satisfied with this reply. 'Is that what you're going to say when King Septimus asks you to perform? *Not right now, your majesty, I'm thinking!* That'll go down well, won't it? He'll probably have your head chopped off!'

'You have to understand,' Sebastian told him. 'I can't just

turn it on and off at will. I . . . need the right setting. An audience—'

'*I'll* be your audience,' Max assured him. 'And I'll make allowances for the setting. Let's face it, you won't have many other opportunities to practise, will you? The next time you perform it will probably be for the king and his court.'

Sebastian swallowed. It was not a particularly encouraging prospect. 'All right then,' he said. 'I'll try . . . but please don't interrupt until I've finished. And try to laugh in the right places.'

Max rolled his eyes but refrained from commenting further.

'Well then . . .' Sebastian thought for a moment, then launched into his opening routine with as much confidence as he could muster. 'Greetings, Lords and Ladies! I'm not saying it took me a long time to cross the plains, but I was wearing short pants when I set off!' He paused briefly, anticipating a laugh, but there wasn't one, so he continued.

'So . . . so this is the fine city of Keladon! I've heard so much about it. I heard that the merchants here are so prosperous, they've actually removed the padlocks from their dustbins! Of . . . of course, back where I come from, in Jerabim, things aren't quite as plush. I'm not saying it's squalid, but next week they're knocking it down so they can build a slum!'

No reaction from Max. Nothing.

'I . . . I had a very deprived childhood. Our family was so poor, we couldn't afford a fire in the winter. My father would

chew pepper-root and we'd all sit round his mouth! And food... we ... we could never afford to eat properly. Every so often my mother would send me to the slaughterhouse to buy a babarusa's head. And I had to ask them to leave the eyes in it – so it would see us through the week!'

Sebastian looked hopefully down at Max, who was plodding resolutely onwards, showing no signs of having heard anything. 'A little encouragement wouldn't hurt,' he growled.

'I'm sorry, I'm afraid the jokes so far are rather familiar ...'

'That wouldn't have stopped you laughing if Father was telling them.'

There was a brief silence.

'Your father had the gift of making the most unpromising material seem funny. Whereas you may have to work somewhat harder to achieve those results ... but please, continue.'

Sebastian gritted his teeth for a moment and then decided to weigh in with one of his own jokes.

'Did you hear the one about the two merchants who were walking to market? And the first one said—'

'Illogical,' interrupted Max.

Sebastian stared at him. 'What?' he snapped.

'Merchants never walk anywhere.'

'Oh ... all right then, they were riding to market. And one of them said—'

'I don't seem to recognize *this* joke.'

'No. That's because it's one of my own.'

'I see. And do you think it's a good idea to use your own material? Your father's jokes have at least been tried and tested.'

'If you'd just let me finish!'

'Sorry. Do go on, I'm all ears.'

'So . . . so one of them says, "How long have we been travelling?" And the other one says, "Three days. But to you, *two* days"!'

There was another achingly long silence, during which the creaking of the harness seemed unnaturally loud.

Then Max said: 'Of course, there's nothing to stop you pursuing *other* lines of work. I believe they're crying out for builders in Keladon.'

'It wasn't that bad!' protested Sebastian.

'No. No, it wasn't *bad*, as such. It's just that I failed to discern any actual humour in it. I mean, was it three days they'd been travelling or was it two?'

'That's . . . that's the point,' said Sebastian. 'You know these merchants, always trying to make you an offer? So, like, it's three croats, but to you—'

'Your father always used to say . . .'

'. . . never explain a joke! Yes, I know. But . . . but then he didn't have you deliberately failing to see what he was getting at, did he?'

'I can't help feeling you're being a little over-sensitive,' said

Max primly. 'It's hardly my fault that you can't write decent material. Still, it's perhaps unfair to judge from one example. Please, continue – at least it's passing the time.'

'Forget it,' said Sebastian bitterly. He could see that the clouds on the horizon were darkening from red to a deep shade of crimson. Night came quickly here, and packs of wild lupers crossed the length and breadth of these plains, so it made sense to keep a decent campfire. Furthermore, they were approaching what must have been one of the only clumps of bushes he had seen on these flatlands. They were stunted and withered but would at least offer a little shelter. 'We'll stop over there for the night,' he told Max.

'Good thinking. My hooves are killing me!' Max expertly manoeuvred the caravan in beside the bushes. Sebastian jumped down from the seat and unhitched the harness. Max made a big show of shrugging his shoulders and stretching his legs. 'Ah, that's a relief,' he said. 'It's no easy task pulling that caravan all day.' He glanced at Sebastian hopefully. 'And what delights have we for supper then?'

'Dried mulch for you,' said Sebastian, trying to sound positive. 'And elvish black bread for me.'

'No, no, too much – you'll spoil me,' said Max dolefully.

Sebastian ignored him. He went round to the back of the caravan and retrieved Max's nosebag, into which he threw a couple of handfuls of the dried food he had purchased in Jerabim. It smelled stale and unappetizing, but was probably

preferable to the rock-hard chunk of bread that *he* had to look forward to. He carried the mulch round to Max, who sniffed at it disdainfully.

'My compliments to the chef,' he said grimly.

Sebastian gestured to the nearby bushes. 'You could always supplement your diet with those,' he said. 'Provided you leave us a little bit of cover.'

Max looked downright offended by the very suggestion. 'Good idea,' he said. 'A bout of dysentery is just what we need right now.'

'You won't get dysentery,' Sebastian told him; but then thought that Max was awkward enough to go down with it just to spite him.

He slung the nosebag around Max's ears and went back to the caravan for some of the dry kindling he had collected on his way through the forest. He had accumulated quite a pile in the back – enough, he hoped, to see them through a couple of nights on the plain.

'Go easy with that stuff,' Max warned him, his voice muffled by the nosebag. 'We don't want to run out.'

'We can always resort to the bag of dried buffalope chips,' said Sebastian cheerfully, though he really hoped it wouldn't come to that. They were hard to light and gave off a dreadful stench when they finally got going.

'Burning dung,' said Max quietly. 'Oh goody. I can hardly wait.'

CHAPTER 3



DINNER IS SERVED

Sebastian had the fire burning by nightfall and was soon sitting on his bedroll, toasting a hunk of black bread over the flames in the vain hope of making it a bit more palatable. Max lay slumped nearby, staring gloomily into the fire, the reflection of the flames dancing like tiny devils in his large brown eyes. Every so often he arched his back slightly and let out a prodigious gust of wind.

'Excuse me,' he said, each time it happened. 'It's the mulch.'

'No, it's *you*,' Sebastian corrected him. 'Can't you try and exercise a bit of control?'

'Well, we'll see how you fare after you've downed that bread. Honestly, are you sure it's safe to eat?'

'No, I'm not, but the only alternative is to eat nothing, so if I can force it down without choking on it, I shall do so.'

Max sighed. 'Look at us,' he said. 'Reduced to this! Why, I

remember when your father would bring me out a bucket of Sargan grain drenched in wild bee's gold. And if I'd been working particularly hard, there'd be a couple of ripe pommers on the side . . . maybe even a yellow sweet fruit.'

'That's all history now,' said Sebastian.

'And what about you? Many's the time I've looked through the window of the house and seen you and your parents dining on succulent roast swamp fowl, with heaps of fried taties and thick, black mushrungers—'

'Could we talk about something else?' snapped Sebastian. 'You're making my stomach rumble.' He could wait no longer, so he lifted the steaming hunk of black bread to his mouth and took an exploratory bite. It was like eating hot sawdust. He forced his jaws to munch, having to work very hard to swallow down mouthfuls of the stuff. He was happy to wash it down with elvish coffee, one of the few luxuries they had brought with them, and by this method, he somehow managed to consume the rest of it. He found that the paltry meal had taken some of the dull ache out of his stomach but had done absolutely nothing to pacify his hunger. He gazed hopelessly around, but the moon was obscured by tumbled banks of rolling clouds and he couldn't see very far beyond the flickering light of the fire. Not that there was much to see anyway, just the endless plain rolling onwards to some unknown world. 'What I wouldn't give for a hunk of hot meat right now,' he said.

'Well, you needn't look at me,' Max chastised him. 'Actually, we buffalopes make very poor eating.'

'That's not what I've heard,' said Sebastian, casting a sly look at him. 'As I understand it, buffalope meat is one of the favourite ingredients on any Brigand's menu.'

'Really?' Max cast a nervous glance over his shoulder. 'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. From what I've heard, they're little more than animals. I've been told that when times are hard, they've even been known to resort to cannibalism.'

Now it was Sebastian's turn to be nervous. 'We . . . er . . . probably won't encounter any this far north,' he said. 'Still – just in case.' He stroked the scabbard of the big curved sword that lay beside him. That too had been his father's. Alexander had been a fine swordsman and had spent many an afternoon trying to pass on his skills to his son. Sebastian remembered the long hours spent sparring with him, until the sweat spilled from every pore. Alexander had been a stern teacher and thought nothing of making Sebastian go over every move again and again, until his hands were blistered.

Max looked down at the sword doubtfully. 'What do you suppose you'll do with that if some villain comes calling?'

'Well, I'll . . . brandish it and . . . I know how to use a sword!' he said. 'My father taught me well.'

'That I do not doubt. But knowing how to swing a sword and being ready to smite somebody's head from their

shoulders, without a moment's hesitation – that's a different matter.'

Sebastian flung a broken branch into the fire, sending up a great shower of sparks into the night sky. 'You're always getting at me,' he complained. 'If it's not my jokes, it's my complete inability to measure up to my father in anything I do. I wish you—'

Sebastian broke off abruptly as a distant sound rose and fell on the air – a long, drawn-out howl that seemed to echo eerily in the night.

'What was that?' asked Max fearfully.

'Oh, just a luper,' said Sebastian, trying to sound casual. 'They aren't a problem unless they're hunting in a pack.'

As if in answer to his statement, more howls sounded in response to the first. Sebastian counted at least six or seven different tones.

'Probably miles away,' he added, attempting to keep the note of desperation out of his voice. He tried to smile encouragingly at Max, but he could see a familiar expression in the buffalope's eyes. A look of apprehension.

'I've heard stories about lupers,' said Max uneasily. 'A pack of those things can strip a fully grown buffalope down to the bones in just a few moments.'

'You shouldn't believe everything you hear,' Sebastian chided him. 'It would take half the night to do that.'

'Oh, now I feel better,' said Max.

'And besides, you can tell by listening to them – they're not hungry.'

'Really?'

'Really. A hungry luper makes a particular sound. Sort of like a—'

Sebastian stopped talking. He had just heard something different. A rustling sound. His stomach seemed to fill suddenly with cold water.

'There's something behind us!' whispered Max. 'In the bushes!'

'I know!' Sebastian mouthed back at him. He reached out a hand to the hilt of his sword and began to slide it gently out of its scabbard. Now he could distinguish another sound mingled with the rustling: the dull, metallic clanking of armour.

'Oh, mercy!' whimpered Max. 'It's Brigands! They'll murder you and have me for dinner!' He thought for a moment. 'From what you've been saying, they might even have *you* for dinner!'

'Quiet!' hissed Sebastian. 'I'm trying to—'

'Who goes there?' bellowed a deep voice from the midst of the thicket.

Sebastian gave up all thoughts of delicacy and slid the curved sword clear of its scabbard. He got to his feet and stood crouched, ready to meet any attacker that came at him from out of the undergrowth.

'J-just a traveller,' answered Sebastian, settling both hands around the leather grip and noting with a hint of dismay how the blade seemed to be quivering uncontrollably.

'*Two* travellers,' Max corrected him.

'A traveller and his beast of burden,' ventured Sebastian.

'Oh, that's nice! A little while ago I was a partner; suddenly I'm downgraded to a beast of burden.'

'Will you shut up?' snarled Sebastian. He returned his attention to the bushes, trying to remember the advice his father had given him all those years ago. But nothing seemed to come to him. 'We mean no harm,' he said. 'We're just passing through.'

'Please don't eat us!' whimpered Max.

There was a long silence, during which Sebastian became aware of a rhythmic thudding sound in his ears. It was a few moments before he realized it was the sound of his own heart.

'Would you be willing to share your campfire with a fellow traveller?' boomed the deep voice.

'Er . . . possibly,' said Sebastian.

'It's some kind of trick,' whispered Max. 'He'll get you off guard and then stick a knife in your ribs!'

'Shush!' Sebastian took a deep breath and tried to gather his courage. 'Step forward and show yourself,' he demanded.

Another silence. He licked his dry lips and waited, for what seemed an age. He was abruptly aware of how small and

vulnerable he was, camped out here in the midst of this great, featureless plain. And how could he be sure that there was just one person out there? It could be a band of rogues, one of them trying to get him off guard, while his friends sneaked round behind him. He turned his head to take a quick peek over his shoulder, then snapped his gaze back as the bushes parted.

Somebody stepped out into the open – but at first Sebastian saw nothing. Then he realized that he needed to lower his gaze considerably.

A man was walking towards him out of the bushes, a thick-set fellow wearing a battered-looking breastplate over a chain-mail singlet. He also wore a crested iron helmet, with elaborate nose and cheek protectors that covered his face entirely. In one hand he held a vicious-looking straight sword, and slung across his left shoulder was what looked like the carcass of a javralat, the fleet-footed quadrupeds that inhabited this part of the country.

The newcomer was undoubtedly a fierce warrior and a force to be reckoned with. But unlike most warriors, he was no higher than Sebastian's hip.

CHAPTER 4



LITTLE BIG MAN

The stranger came to a halt a few steps from the fire, sheathed his sword and reached up a hand to remove his helmet. The hand seemed surprisingly big for one so small, and the action revealed a face that was strangely baby-like, with big blue eyes, jug ears and no sign of any hair whatsoever.

'Greetings, pilgrims,' said the manling, in that deep, resonant voice, which really didn't suit the face at all. 'I am Captain Cornelius Drummel, killer of Brigands, formally of the army of Queen Annisett.' He paused for a moment as though allowing this information to sink in; but getting no response, he continued, 'I see by the writing on your caravan that I am in the presence of Sebastian Darke, Prince of Fools.'

'Correct,' said Sebastian, making a formal bow.

'And Max,' added Max. 'His partner!'



Cornelius gave the buffalope a slightly perturbed look. 'You have a fine fire,' he observed. 'Visible at quite a distance. Not the most advisable thing in a remote spot like this, but a man must take his chances.' He reached back a hand and threw the plump body of the javralat to the ground at Sebastian's feet. 'I wonder if you'd allow me to cook my dinner over your fire? I've supped on raw meat these last few nights and I'm longing for something hot.'

Sebastian frowned. 'Well . . .'

'Of course, I'd be happy to share the food with you.'

Sebastian's eyes nearly popped out of his head. 'Then you . . . you would be most welcome!' he replied. 'And I would be more than willing to accept your generous offer.' He sheathed his sword and extended a hand to shake. The stranger took it in a powerful grip that made Sebastian wince and pumped it vigorously up and down.

'Watch him,' murmured Max under his breath. 'It's some kind of trick . . .'

Sebastian waved a dismissive hand at Max. 'Please, er . . . Captain Drummel. Make yourself comfortable.'

'Call me Cornelius. We're not on the parade ground now.'

'No, of course not. I – I've a metal spit in the caravan, it won't take but a moment to find it—'

'Don't turn your back on him!' hissed Max, then shut up as he noticed the newcomer glaring at him.

'He's a talkative one, your buffalope,' observed Cornelius

as he unbuckled his breastplate. 'Most of them can barely string a sentence together but this one is quite eloquent.'

'Umm . . . yes, he's been in our family for years. My father taught him to speak.' Sebastian shot Max a withering look. 'Unfortunately.' He hurried across to the caravan and rummaged amongst the piles of junk that were heaped in the back. 'I don't pay him much attention. He likes to prattle on, you know, but he's harmless enough.'

The manling didn't seem convinced by this and Max looked positively disgusted.

'Oh, please, do continue to talk about me as though I'm not here,' he said. He glared at Sebastian. 'And don't say I didn't warn you.' He lowered his huge head onto his front legs and looked away, as though absolving himself of any responsibility.

'Aha!' Sebastian had finally found what he was looking for – an iron frame that slotted together to make a sturdy revolving spit that would roast the meat evenly over the flames. He hauled it out of the caravan, brought it across to the fire and, crouching down, started assembling it. 'This should do the job,' he said. He was so excited at the thought of eating hot meat that his hands were shaking.

'Excellent,' said Cornelius. He set his breastplate aside and flexed his arms and shoulders with a sigh of relief. 'Ah, that's better. I've been walking since first light. Well, let's get down

to business.' He pulled a fearsome-looking knife from his belt and Sebastian froze in terror.

'What did I tell you?' hissed Max. 'I said he wasn't to be trusted!'

Cornelius gave the buffalope another strange look, then turned to the carcass of the javralat. 'I'll prepare this fellow for cooking, shall I?' he said.

Sebastian let out a sigh of relief. As he watched, Cornelius expertly skinned and gutted the javralat with a few flicks of the finely honed blade. He flung the entrails into the bushes, wiped the knife on his trousers, then handed the skinned carcass to Sebastian.

'These are the only things worth eating that I've found on these blasted flat lands,' he said. 'They're damned hard to catch, though. You have to sit stock-still by the entrance to one of their burrows, and when they finally stick their heads out . . .' He made a brief chopping gesture with the flat of one hand.

Max winced. 'What a world,' he said. 'One minute you're running happily across the plains, the next you're on somebody's dinner plate.'

'This is a lawless place,' growled Cornelius. 'It's kill or be killed out here – and there are plenty of creatures stalking the night that would think nothing of putting *us* on the menu.'

'Yes, we were just discussing lupers when you arrived,' said Sebastian.

'I'm not talking about *them*, although they can be bad enough.' He sat himself cross-legged beside the fire and held out his hands to warm them. 'No, I speak of the grundersnat.'

'The . . . what?'

'The grundersnat. Oh, a fearsome beast by all accounts. A huge leathery-winged creature with row upon row of razor-sharp teeth and vicious claws that can tear their way through just about anything.'

Max looked terrified. 'You . . . haven't *seen* one, have you?'

'No, but I've heard it in the night. A hellish bellowing sound that could turn the blood in your veins to ice. They say if the grundersnat sets eyes on you, it will not give up until it has you in its belly.'

Max's eyes got very big and round. 'Oh, that's marvellous!' he said. 'And to think we were nice and safe back there in our old homestead. But no, the young master said we were to go to Keladon and that was that. Nobody mentioned lupers and cannibals and flesh-eating monsters with razor-sharp teeth!'

Sebastian occupied himself with getting the javralat onto the spit. Within a few moments he had the creature impaled and was turning it around over the crackling flames. Almost instantly, an appetizing aroma began to fill the air. 'Smells good,' he observed brightly.

'It certainly does,' agreed Max. 'And as a lifelong vegetarian, I can hardly believe I'm saying that! But . . .

supposing the grundersnat smells it and comes looking for some supper?'

'We'll just have to take our chances,' said Cornelius; and he gave Sebastian a sly wink.

Sebastian resumed his seat by the fire, opposite Cornelius. 'You'll take a cup of elvish coffee?' he suggested.

'By Shadlog's beard, I will! My tongue is near cleaved to my mouth with thirst. They told me that I'd encounter streams out here but I haven't found one in three days of walking.'

'Is that so?' murmured Max. 'Well, well – no water, eh?'

Sebastian ignored him. 'We are without milk, I'm afraid. But I can offer you a little bee's gold to sweeten the cup.'

'You are most kind, sir. I am in your debt.' Cornelius clasped the proffered mug in his big hands and took a sip. He smacked his lips in appreciation.

'Well, this is a most welcome meeting,' he said. 'There was I, thinking that I would cross this plain without encountering a single person. Now here I sit, sipping coffee and enjoying good conversation. And I have no doubt that I am in for an evening of fine jest and merriment.'

Sebastian stared at him blankly. 'I'm sorry?'

'You *are* a jester, are you not? So I can surely anticipate some hilarity.'

'He's obviously never heard your jokes,' murmured Max.

'Or is it perhaps a double act I've found?' ventured Cornelius.