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opening extract from

Sebastian Darke: Prince of Pirates

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Philip Caveney

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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

THE FOREST OF GELTANE

The ancient wooden caravan had been crossing the wide stretch of plain for several days. Pulled by a single buffalope, it was making decidedly slow progress. Now the caravan creaked to a halt a short distance from the edge of a mighty forest.

The owner of the caravan sat perched on the wooden seat, clutching the reins and staring thoughtfully into the trees. He was what many plain-spoken people referred to as a 'breed' – the offspring of a human father and an elvish mother. He was not yet out of his teens and his tall lanky frame was loosely draped in the colourful uniform of a jester, one that had clearly been designed to fit a much bigger man. A garish three-pronged hat was perched on his head.

On the sides of his caravan were painted the words, SEBASTIAN DARKE, PRINCE OF FOOLS. The word 'Sebastian' looked somehow different to the rest. It had been added in a wobbly, amateurish hand, clearly over painting another name that had been there before.

Alexander, his father, had been a very successful jester. After his untimely death Sebastian had tried to take up where his father left off, but his recent visit to the city of Keladon had taught him one valuable lesson: that whatever skills he possessed, he was not cut out to be a jester. His future lay in a different direction, and this journey, more than anything else, was his attempt to discover what that future might hold for him.

'This looks depressingly familiar,' said the buffalope in a slow, gloomy voice. He too was gazing straight ahead into the thick green ranks of the forest, his apprehension fuelled by a journey through those self-same woods in the not-toodistant past. 'I can't believe we're going through there again.'

'What's the problem?' asked a voice to their left, and they both turned to look as a little warrior on a tiny pony came riding abreast of them. Though his voice was deep and sonorous, the face that stared out from under his bronze helmet was smooth and baby-like, completely devoid of hair. His large blue eyes showed not a trace of concern. 'Surely, Max, if you've passed through the forest of Geltane once before—'

'It was no picnic,' interrupted the buffalope. 'There are *things* in there . . .'

'Things?' The little warrior shrugged dismissively. His name was Cornelius; he was a Golmiran and, like most of his proud northern race, he didn't know the meaning of fear. He looked up at Sebastian. 'What's he talking about?' he muttered. 'What *things*?'

The elfling considered for a moment. 'Things that slither,' he said at length. 'You couldn't see them and yet you knew they were there. You could hear them moving in the trees high above you.' He frowned, remembering. 'And then there were the lupers, of course. We never encountered any in the woods, but we heard them howling every night.'

‘We’ve seen off lupers before now,’ said Cornelius dismissively. He reached down to rest his hand on the intricately crafted handle of his sword. ‘Like all creatures, they have a healthy respect for a length of sharpened steel. And they’re not so fearsome. Why, even Max managed to fight off two of them.’

Max fixed Cornelius with an indignant stare. ‘What do you mean, *even* Max? I’ll have you know, among my own kind I’m considered quite a warrior.’

‘Quite a worrier, you mean! You haven’t stopped complaining. It’s one thing after another. Your hooves ache, your shoulders hurt, your snout itches—’

‘It’s all right for you – you don’t have the task of pulling this blooming caravan. I said before we ever left the city that the two of you had packed more equipment than we needed. I understand that we have to bring provisions, but you brought enough to supply an army!’

Sebastian sighed. Cornelius and Max had been bickering like this all the way from the city. It was unbearable, particularly when he was in such low spirits. In leaving Keladon, he had also left Queen Kerin, the woman he loved with all his heart. But she had told him that they simply could not be together. She had said it with tears in her eyes, but she had meant it just the same. And any day now she would be marrying some slope-headed dummy of a prince from the neighbouring kingdom, even though she had freely admitted that she did not love him. It would be a marriage of convenience, undertaken for her people, to bring peace and harmony between the kingdoms of Keladon and Bodengen. It made Sebastian’s blood boil because he was convinced that, deep down, Queen Kerin loved him back. But he knew that there was nothing he could do. He would simply have to try and forget her.

Meanwhile Max and Cornelius went right on bickering.

‘Perhaps if you put more effort into pulling the caravan and less into moaning all the time, we’d be making better progress. We should have reached the forest of Geltane yesterday afternoon!’

‘That’s easy for you to say, being carried everywhere by Phantom. I don’t see you offering to walk occasionally to give her a rest.’

‘Perhaps you’d like me to strap the saddle on my back and let her ride me from time to time?’

‘Oh, well, now you’re just being—’

‘Enough!’ snapped Sebastian, with such force that both Cornelius and Max turned to look at him. He glared from one to the other, making no attempt to mask his irritation. ‘Do you think we could journey in silence for a while? Your constant arguing is giving me a headache!’

There was a long pause while his two companions studied him warily. But Max could never stay silent for long.

‘Still feeling glum, are we?’ he said.

‘*Glum* is not the word I would use,’ said Sebastian ruefully. ‘*Broken-hearted* is closer to it.’

‘Plenty more fish in the sea,’ muttered Cornelius.

‘Yes, great, if you wish to have a relationship with a *fish*. I, on the other hand, fell in love with a woman – and not just any woman. The most beautiful in all the kingdom.’

Max wrinkled his nose. ‘Hmmph! I didn’t think she was that much of a catch,’ he said.

‘Not much of a catch?’ Sebastian could scarcely believe his pointed ears. ‘She was the Princess of Keladon! With our help, she deposed her wicked uncle and became queen. Of *course* she was a catch. If I’d married her, I’d be minted now. I’d never have to lift a finger ever again.’

Cornelius edged Phantom closer and reached up to pat Sebastian's hip. 'It was never on the cards, my friend,' he said, with what sounded like genuine regret. 'I *did* try to warn you. Besides, think about what you're saying. You're not the sort who's happy to sit around in the lap of luxury. You're a man for adventure! Just think, if you'd married *her*, there's no way you'd be out here with us on the trail of pirate treasure.'

'No,' agreed Sebastian wistfully. 'I suppose not.'

'Imagine,' said Cornelius, warming to his theme. 'The treasure of Captain Callinestra, lost for centuries . . . and *we* have the map.' He patted his breastplate, beneath which, Sebastian knew, he had a hidden pocket where he kept his most precious belongings. 'So come on, I vote we crack on and put some more distance behind us before the sun goes down.' He pointed across the plains to where the great golden ball of heat was already beginning its slow climb down to the horizon. 'We'll want to find a suitable place to put up for the night, won't we?'

Sebastian nodded and slapped the reins against the buffalope's flanks.

'Was that really necessary?' complained Max. 'You could just ask!' But he moved obediently towards the trees.

Sebastian looked left and right, searching for a suitable path into the forest, and after a few moments he spied one, a dark opening beneath low-hanging branches. The earth there was lined and rutted with the imprints of many wheels and countless hooves, so it seemed a likely spot.

Max sniffed at the opening suspiciously. 'This is not the path we took last time,' he observed.

'I'm sure it doesn't matter,' said Sebastian. 'It's clearly much used.'

Max snorted. 'I'd forgotten how dark it is in there,' he muttered. 'Dark and creepy-looking.' But he kept going, and soon the caravan and its occupants were moving into the forest. The sun seemed to go out like a snuffed candle.

It was pretty much as Sebastian remembered it, an eternally twilight world, where countless gnarled limbs rose up sheer on either side of them, to lose themselves in a swaying green canopy far overhead. But something was different. This time he was struck by how silent it was in here. Not a single bird sang, not a pair of wings whirred, and even though the foliage stirred restlessly in the wind, not a rustle did it make. It was as though this part of the forest was quite dead. He remembered how, on their previous journey, it had been rich with the sounds of countless birds; and that when darkness fell, there were other sounds, sinister noises and stirrings aplenty.

'I don't like taking a different path,' said Max nervously. 'How do we know it will get us to the far side of the forest?'

'They say all routes do that eventually,' Sebastian told him.

'Yes, well, I've got a bad feeling about this. Couldn't we just go round it?'

'We'd lose too much time,' Cornelius assured him. 'Geltane forest is the biggest in the Mid Lands. Only the jungles of Mendip to the south are bigger, and they are reputed to go on for ever.'

'Nothing goes on for ever,' said Sebastian. And then he added with the ghost of a smile, 'Except possibly Max.'

'Oh, don't you worry, young master,' said Max, missing the dig completely. 'We buffalopes are known for our longevity. I've a good few summers in me yet.'

Sebastian and Cornelius exchanged amused glances.

'And a good few complaints, no doubt,' murmured Sebastian.

Cornelius chuckled. 'Perhaps you are already beginning to heal,' he observed.

Sebastian shrugged. ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Sometimes I forget about her for a while and everything seems fine . . . then, all of a sudden, I see her in my mind’s eye and I think how it *could* have been.’

Cornelius sighed. ‘Sebastian, it was never on the cards. A commoner and somebody of royal blood – it just wasn’t meant to be. You need to set your sights a bit lower, my friend. There are plenty of girls out there. Ordinary girls, who won’t look down their noses at you.’

‘You say that, and yet Princess Kerin never— Shush! Listen!’

There was the sound Sebastian remembered with such dread. A dry rustling noise, as if dead leaves were being dragged slowly across tree bark. He looked this way and that, peering into the gloom, but he could detect no trace of movement anywhere around him. He glanced down at Cornelius.

‘You hear it?’ he whispered.

Cornelius nodded and listened. He looked decidedly unconcerned. ‘Tree serpents, I suppose,’ he said at last.

Max jerked his head round to look at the Golmiran. ‘Tree serpents?’ he echoed. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Not positive, but I’ve heard of such things. Big snakes. They coil themselves in the branches overhead, waiting to drop down on their prey.’

Max swallowed loudly. ‘And . . . what do they eat, these . . . serpents?’

Cornelius considered for a moment. ‘Oh . . . pretty much anything that’s slow-moving,’ he said. He rode on for a few moments before elaborating. ‘You see, they hang there, some distance up, and they fix their gaze on whatever’s passing below. But if it’s moving too quickly, by the time they’ve fallen from the heights, their prey has passed. Then they have the irksome task of slithering all the way up the tree again on an empty belly. So you see, if you move briskly enough, you have nothing to fear.’

‘I see . . .’ Max actually picked up his pace dramatically for several steps before something dawned on him.

‘Just a moment! This is another of your stories, isn’t it?’ he cried. ‘Like that yarn you spun me about the grundersnat on the road to Keladon. Just a callous trick to make me hurry!’

Cornelius’s baby face split into a huge grin. ‘You should have seen your face!’ he cried. ‘I’ve never seen anything so funny in all my life.’ He threw back his head and laughed heartily.

‘Cornelius,’ said Sebastian, puzzled, ‘you shouldn’t make jokes about things like—’

A sharp cracking sound from under the front wheels of the caravan startled him. He glanced over the side and saw that they had just passed over a scattering of dry white sticks. He looked closer. No, not sticks . . . bones . . .

Cornelius suddenly stopped laughing. Sebastian turned back to look at his friend. The little warrior seemed frozen in his saddle, staring up into the trees in apparent astonishment.

‘Cornelius?’ said Sebastian. ‘What’s wrong?’

And then, with heart-stopping suddenness, a huge snake came hurtling down from the forest canopy, striking Cornelius and knocking him clean out of his saddle.