

# Meerkat Mischief

by Moritz Matthies

Sample translation by Jennifer Busch and Isabel Hagedorn



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## **Chapters one to two (pp. 7 to 24)**

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Rights information contact: Elisa Diallo

[elisa.diallo@fischerverlage.de](mailto:elisa.diallo@fischerverlage.de)

## Chapter one

'It's love', I say.

'Elsa?' Rufus starts hyperventilating. 'Biologically speaking, that is a futile endeavour.'

'Rufus. Can't you talk like all the other meerkats?'

'Ok, it'll never work, you muppet!'

'Whatever', I reply without batting an eyelid. 'It's true love.'

'Our paterfamilias would be less than enthused if he found out.'

'It's love, Rufus. There's no 'if'.'

'Have you ever stopped to consider that your chosen one is about twice your age – to begin with the lesser complications.'

'So what?' I reply.

'Besides, your interests are completely different.'

'How would you know? You've never even met her.'

Rufus sighs. 'She's a chinchilla, Ray, and you're a meerkat, and...'

'Meerlion. When it comes to Elsa, I'm a meerlion.'

Rufus sighs again. He's nobody's fool. If he could choose a job, it would be that mad Italian guy's, the one who was tilting at windmills. Or was he French? 'A meerlion, for all I care,' he says. 'Anyway, she likes the mountains, you live underground. She doesn't eat meat, you feed on nothing else. And she's nocturnal. That means you'd practically never see each other.'

Finally, something I can argue against. 'That can be very beneficial for a relationship,' I say. 'Do you think Kunze and Gerda would still be together if he weren't napping twenty-three hours a day? And don't tell me that's just a lion thing.'

Rufus wants to retaliate but ends up wincing. 'What was that?' he whispers, stretching and sniffing nervously in all directions. 'Did you hear it, too?'

It's like this every damn time we're on guard duty. Every two minutes, my terrified brother becomes convinced we're in mortal peril.

'Oh god,' I say tonelessly. 'A savanna eagle, right behind you. Run for your life!'

Rufus gives me a long look, then wrinkles his nose. 'Save your stupid jokes, Ray. Just because we live in a zoo doesn't mean we're safe.'

'Rufus,' I try to calm the waters, 'we were both born here. Think about it: have you ever, in your whole entire life, seen a single eagle attack?'

'Not here,' Rufus replies, 'but I've read that the San Diego Zoo has...'

'You shouldn't read so much. And you should definitely stay away from scary stories.'

'That was in the paper,' huffs Rufus. 'Besides, it's essential for at least one of the mob to keep up to date with what's going on in the rest of the world.'

Well, I could listen to Rufus's lecture on the importance of a general education for meerkats. But I don't want to. Rufus taught himself to read with the help of an internet-

enabled mobile phone and the newspapers that end up in the bin by our enclosure. And now he's convinced that he has to spread this knowledge. Too bad no-one's interested.

'We're not in San Diego', I try to distract him.

'But there's been an eagle here, too. Pa remembers it well...'

'Romantic Africa nonsense', I interrupt my brother. 'Pa was born in the zoo just like all the rest of us. He's got all those Africa stories from his father, who got them from his father... And at the end there's the legendary Chester, who supposedly strangled puff adders with his arthritic claws.'

'Stop making fun of our founding father. Pa witnessed an eagle attack here in the zoo when he was a young meerkat', insists Rufus.

'Codswallop!' I retort. 'And you know it. Ask who you like. Everyone says this so-called eagle was a decrepit pigeon that happened to crash into our enclosure. It was only afterwards that Pa talked himself into believing there was an eagle involved, who ended up getting the pigeon instead of one of us meerkats.'

Rufus isn't listening. He's pricked his ears again and is stretching and sniffing in all directions. 'D'you hear that? There it is again!'

Dead still, he's staring at the flamingo enclosure. I drag myself up and follow his gaze. It's pitch-black over there. Annoyed, I sink back to my post.

'Rufus, your constant panic attacks are really getting on my meertits.'

'At least I'm not putting the whole mob in danger just because I need to be supercool', he counters.

'What do you think: Would the mob prefer a supercool meerkat like me to be boss or a twitchy little meerkitten like you?'

'I trust that Pa will base his decision on reason. A mob boss doesn't have to be strong, he has to be clever and act with foresight and...'

'Still dreaming about being boss, you tossers?' Behind us, a gravelly voice booms out of the burrow. It's our brother, Rocky Jr. He ambles up to us, grinning broadly as usual.

'Ah, the firstborn', I scoff, 'Our paragon of virtue. What's up, Rocky? Afraid of the dark? If you can't sleep, Rufus'll read you a bedtime story.'

Rocky flexes his impressive muscles and snorts disdainfully. 'Once I'm boss, you'll be laughing on the other side of your face, Ray.'

'If you become boss', Rufus interjects boldly.

Slowly and deliberately, Rocky turns round. 'Want to say that to my face, bookworm?'

Rufus gets a lump in his throat. But caving in would wound his pride. His problem. 'Firstly, don't call me "worm"', he splutters. 'Secondly, all three of us have the same right to apply for the position of 'mob boss'. And thirdly, I have...'

There's a dull thud followed by a short, sudden gasp. Then Rufus falls to the floor like a sack of potatoes.

'Doesn't it ever get boring?' I ask Rocky.

He shakes his head. 'Why would it. Now shut it, you bellends.'

'What do you care about noise? We thought you were copping off with our sister, anyway.' I retort.

'Watch it, Ray', threatens Rocky, sauntering back to the burrow.

He could smack me but seems to think better of it. In our last punch-up I dug my teeth into his neck so hard he couldn't move his head for days. Looked funny. Since then, Rocky keeps his distance.

Rufus comes back to his senses. 'What happened?'

'The usual', I reply. 'Our brother clocked you one. How much longer are you going to put up with that?'

'Until he realises violence isn't the answer', Rufus preaches.

'For him, violence apparently is the answer', I point out.

'Only in the short term', Rufus explains. 'No advanced civilisation so far has...'

He stops mid-sentence and stretches, sniffing. What a surprise.

This time, it's my turn to sigh. 'Not again, Rufus.'

'There definitely was something', he says. 'I'm sure I heard it.'

He peers intently at the flamingo enclosure. Bored, I follow his gaze. In that precise moment, a flash of lightning pierces the night, and at the same time there's a sudden blast. I leap up in fright. Then both of us stare in the direction of the flamingo enclosure. Only a few animals have woken up. Given that we're in the middle of town, most don't let anything jolt them out of sleep any more.

Rufus and I wait, feeling extremely tense.

There! Another flash followed by another blast.

'Keep it down!', grumbles a sleepy gnu.

Then there's silence. For a while, we just stand there and wait. Apart from Rufus's teeth chattering, everything seems to be quiet.

'We should report back', he says as if in a trance.

I nod. 'No problem. I'll let them know.'

I turn to the burrow. After a few steps, I meet Rocky, accompanied by our sister Roxane and several youngsters.

I raise my arms. 'Okay, guys! Everyone back! Hurry up! Back to the burrow! We've got a two-five.'

I'm met with confused looks.

'What's a two-five?' lisps little Marcia from the fifth litter.

'A two-five is an unexplained event that might suggest an attack', I tell her kindly. 'In this case, Alarm Stage One applies. Which is why you have to go back to the burrow as fast as you can, Marcia.'

'Oh!' replies Marcia, eyes wide.

'Aren't you laying it on a bit thick?' asks Rocky.

‘In the case of a two-five, the guard’s instructions are to be followed immediately’, I answer, unfazed. ‘Which means that the same applies to you: back to the burrow! You can wake up Pa. We’ll make our report in a moment.’

Rocky looks at me contemptuously. ‘Like I said, little bro: you’ll be laughing on the other side of your face’.

‘Sure’, I grin, ‘and now, back to your basket.’

Roxane has to giggle. Rocky gives me the evils, and I smile ingratiatingly.

When everyone has disappeared into the burrow, I run back to Rufus. ‘Has anything else happened?’ I want to know.

Rufus shakes his head.

‘Okay. How long shall we wait?’

Rufus shrugs. ‘Maybe a few more minutes. I just peed on my feet in fright. I’d prefer if no-one noticed.’

‘No problem’, I reply. ‘We can wait.’

I stand next to Rufus and look towards the flamingo enclosure. Everything’s quiet there. Dead quiet.

The next day, our mob treats itself to a late breakfast. That’s our term for leaving the muck that keeper Silvio throws into our enclosure every morning until midday. The night was long as well as exciting. The flashes and blasts reminded Pa of events in Africa. So he says. As he’s never been there, his adventures with cold-hearted poachers, dangerous beasts and unbridled natural forces are nothing more than figments of his imagination, but the younger mob members are really into scary stories. Rufus and I were promoted to principal sentries thanks to our brave – and at the same time cautious – behaviour. Rocky was so jealous he almost exploded. Rufus jibed him about it with such a dirty grin that Rocky clocked him on the nose again, right after our nightly powwow.

In any case, the school children passing by had to make do with an empty meerkat enclosure this morning. Silvio did try to coax us out of the burrow with encouraging words, to no avail. We’re one of the more stubborn species. Apart from that, we don’t set out to please humans – except for Roxi, who just can’t get enough attention. People looking for a better price-entertainment ratio will just have to go to the monkey enclosure.

I head towards the main tunnel, still half asleep. Passing the eastern entrance, I hear a deep voice: ‘If I understand you correctly, there is no way of finding out whether he was actually here on that specific day.’

I peer out of the eastern entrance and see two men standing at the railing of our enclosure. One of them has a five-o’clock shadow and generally seems a bit scruffy. In any case, I’ve definitely seen people who wash their hair more often. He’s wearing sunglasses and a sand-coloured linen jacket that looks as if it’s been run over by a bus. Maybe even while the guy was still wearing it. He’s holding a photo in his hand.

Squinting, I recognise the portrait of an elderly man. A silver-grey gent in an expensive suit; a grand seigneur who looks a little arrogant, but all in all has a pleasant appearance. And, somehow, he seems familiar.

The guy in the linen jacket is talking to our zoo director – the only one who has even more say here than Pa. Even more than Kong, the gorilla boss. The zoo director is something like a mob boss for the humans.

‘You’re welcome to take a look at the digital pictures our visitors take’, the zoo director replies. ‘We wait a week before deleting them in case someone asks about a photo. That might take a while, though. On a good day, up to ten thousand people come here.’

The crumpled linen jacket seems far from enthusiastic. He pulls a business card from his wallet and presents it to the zoo director together with the photo of the old man. ‘I’ll think about it. If you happen to remember anything else, you know how to reach me.’

The zoo director briefly glances at the business card, pockets it along with the photo and holds out his hand to the scruffy guy. ‘Of course. Good luck with your search. And if you have any more questions – just give me a call. After all, it’s in my interest for the issue to be resolved. If someone goes missing after visiting the zoo, it’s not exactly good publicity.’

‘It’s only an assumption that the missing person was here last’, the guy interjects. ‘An assumption I hope won’t be confirmed’, replies the zoo director, turning and heading towards the cafeteria.

‘Where on earth have you been?’ complains Rufus. ‘I’ve been running around, giving out detailed explanations, and it was only when I got to the western entrance that I noticed you weren’t at my side any more.’

I don’t answer. Instead, I watch the guy with the linen jacket. He’s just noted something down in a small black book, and now he’s packing both book and biro away.

Rufus follows my gaze. ‘What’s up?’

‘I’m not sure yet’, I respond. ‘But I’ve got something of a hunch.’

The guy pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

‘Can’t you read?’ Rufus barks at him. ‘No smoking!’

Insulting visitors is one of our favourite games when we get bored. We hurl the worst swearwords at them, and they smile in thanks and say ‘Listen, how cute, that one’s squeaking!’ No surprises there, Meerkattish is a significantly more complex language than, say, English.

As expected, scruffy ignores Rufus’s remark. Instead, he opens the pack of cigarettes, sticks his nose in and inhales the tobacco smell with relish.

‘Didn’t you hear my brother?’ I call out. ‘Do I have to come over there? You that desperate for a kick in the teeth?’

‘Look, he’s not really smoking’, Rufus tries to calm me down.

‘So what?’ I retort.

In actual fact, the guy pockets the cigarettes and pulls a flat, gleaming, silver bottle from inside his jacket.

We stretch. Looks like the fun's about to begin. Mirko, the gnu keeper, also has a bottle like that. When he drinks from it, you never know what'll happen next. Sometimes he starts crying, and then he talks about a woman he used to know. Or he sings Russian songs. Then again, he'll spend hours stroking the gnu Mathilda and say things like: 'You're the best. You'd never disappoint me. You're the only one who understands me.'

Mathilda, however, can't stand Mirko. 'If that schmuck touches me one more time, I'll bite his finger off', she threatened recently.

The linen jacket takes a long swig from his bottle, and Rufus taps me on the shoulder. 'Your hunch, what was it?'

'That guy gave the zoo director a photo of an old man who seems to be missing', I explain. 'I thought it might have something to do with the events of last night'.

The guy puts down his silver bottle and looks around, confused. Must be devilish stuff, if Mathilda is to be believed. Mirko once gave her a sip. After that, she felt awesome for a moment, only to suffer a three-day headache that reached the tips of her horns.

The guy takes another big swig. Takes another look around. Finally, his gaze lingers on Rufus and me.

'What's up with him?' I wonder.

Rufus shrugs. 'Why don't you ask him?'

'Hey, tosser! Whatcha gawpin' at?'

Scruffy doesn't move. Puzzled, he examines the bottle in his hand, then looks back to us and takes another gulp.

'What's up, birdbrain?' I up the ante. 'Stop staring at us or I'll come over there and pull the creases out of your jacket!'

Rufus smirks. I, however, am beginning to get bored. I thought the guy would be more interesting.

'Let's have breakfast', I say to Rufus and am about to turn away, when the guy leans against the railings, takes off his sunglasses and says: 'And what exactly happened here last night?'

## Chapter two

Phil. That's the name of the guy with the linen jacket and the sunglasses. And, after a few swigs of single malt, apparently he understands Meerkattish. A rather curious affair, finds Rufus. Weird shit, if you ask me. After all, there's never been anything like this before, at least not since great-great-grandpa Chester's time, when our mob was dragged from the Savannah and resettled here in the zoo. Incidentally, I find it incredible that Phil's a private detective. And that he's working on a case right now.

Okay, the following information is confidential. Strike that: strictly confidential! The rest of the mob has no idea, not even Rufus. The thing is, I've always dreamed of being a private detective. In fact, I've wanted to be a private detective ever since I was a tiny little meerkitten. And actually, as everyone surely must see, there's no-one better for the job than a meerkat. Observations and stakeouts are pretty much part of our genetic makeup. And the same goes for following trails, detecting clues and general sleuthing. I'm a born sleuth. It's just that, here in the zoo, my talents are completely unrecognised. Or rather: were. Until today, when Phil appeared. And, judging by appearances, he needs our help.

It's Hanno von Sieversdorf. Phil says the name as if the guy's been munching through a bag of worms with Pa once a week for decades. Hanno von Sieversdorf is actually the sole managing partner of Sieversdorf GmbH, whose logo adorns practically every other pack of painkillers in the country. Meaning the guy has more euros down the back of his sofa than we've got grains of sand in our enclosure. Rufus said he'd come across the name in the paper at some point, but my little brother would rather rip his claws out than admit to not knowing something. At any rate, this Hanno von Sieversdorf has disappeared. Yesterday afternoon his daughter dropped him off at the zoo, and no-one has seen or heard from him since. He didn't turn up for dinner with his daughter and, according to his housekeeper, he hasn't been home either. His mobile is off and clearly no-one's checking his voicemails. It's as if on setting foot in the zoo he was swallowed up by a parallel world.

That's where I come in. Alright, my brother Rufus too. After Phil explained his case to us earlier, I offered him a deal: we find out what was behind those flashes last night and Phil gets live food for the whole mob. I've finally got a chance to show everyone what I'm made of. Pa will be so impressed. If I really can figure out what happened here yesterday, and Phil does bring us all live food, then Pa will have to think twice about whether he really wants to name Rocky Jr as his successor. Rocky Jr might well have 500 volts in his front legs, but, sad to say, he's missing the converter between his ears.

We wait until it's all calmed down, then Rufus and I sneak out through the secret passage that leads under the footpath to the flamingos. The exit is right behind the flamingo house. I've placed a paving stone on top as camouflage.

Rufus is jittery before we've even got outside. The very idea of moving around freely in the zoo – beyond the limits of our enclosure – gives him such an adrenalin kick that he starts



clipping himself round the ear every few minutes. I have to admit that, when it comes down to it, we're quite a degenerate bunch. Pa's a prime example: he's got gout and black lung disease but nevertheless insists on being back in the burrow by sundown. He still talks about the Savanna as 'our spiritual home' and the 'hallowed land', but, in reality, these days all the puff adders in the world couldn't chase him from our enclosure.

'You okay, mate?' I ask my brother as I heave the paving stone to one side.

"Always!", pants Rufus, clipping himself round the ear.

We begin our interrogation of the flamingos. Firstly, the flashes came from this direction, secondly, we're standing in the middle of their enclosure anyway, and thirdly, flamingos are active both in the day and at night. So if anybody saw what went on here yesterday, it's most likely to have been one of them. The problem, though: flamingos are sensationally forgetful and rank second to last in the animal kingdom when it comes to putting one and one together. So I need to choose my questions very carefully.

I climb on top of a boundary stone and straighten myself up: "Everyone who's awake, listen up!"

The chattering stops abruptly. About half of the flamingos turn to look at me.

'Hi', I say.

'Evenin', Ray', a dozen or so voices greet me from every possible direction.

'Okay', I begin, 'concentrate: this here is my brother, Rufus, and we...'

'Evenin', Rufus', I hear, jumbled with, 'hi, Rufus, 'ey up, Rufus.'

Once everyone's finally finished greeting my brother, I try again. 'We're conducting an interrogation...'

'Really?'

'Cool!'

'An interrogation?'

'Ohhh...'

I raise my front paws: 'Quiet please, guys. It's about yesterday evening – quiet please! Yesterday evening: Did any of you notice anything out of the ordinary?'

I'm met with a cacophony of voices: 'Yesterday evening?'

'Uhh, dunno...'

'What day of the week was that?' pipes a voice from the back.

'I can't remember, I think... Hang on, maybe I do remember?' says a flamingo who's standing directly in front of me.

'You can never remember anything', says his neighbour.

'How would you know?'

'Both of you are rubbish at remembering stuff – I think', comes from further back.

'I didn't notice anything', decides a flamingo who's sitting on the floor. 'At least, not as far as I know.'

'Me neither, I think.'

'Okay', I shout, 'stop! I'll be more precise. Listen up! The question is: Did any of you hear gunshots last night?'

'Gunshots?'

'Here?'

'In the zoo?'

'Uh, why exactly are you asking about gunshots, Ray?'

'Because', I explain, 'last night my brother and I think we saw and heard some.'

'Really?'

'What kind of gunshots?'

'That', I respond, 'is what I'd love to know from you.'

Silence. Then: whispering. The flamingos put their heads together in little groups.

'Well, I heard gunshots too', is the revised opinion of the sitting one.

'Didn't you just tell me that you didn't notice anything unusual?' I ask.

'Oh well, that's before I knew you were talking about gunshots.'

'We heard gunshots as well', reports a group of flamingos standing in the water.

I forgot to mention: flamingos love telling you what you want to hear. Among humans, says Rufus, people who do that are called opportunists, or, if they used to be in the Stasi, turncoats. Shame they weren't called turnnecks, that'd fit the flamingos perfectly. At any rate, they're all suddenly convinced that they heard gunshots.

'Can anyone tell me how many shots there were?' I want to know.

They put their heads together again.

Finally, one chief clever clogs reports back: 'Well, how many would you say there were, Ray?'

'My brother and I counted six', I reply, unfazed. And because I can feel Rufus looking at me, I hiss at him: 'Not a word!'

The flamingos whisper and chatter for a while, then the two who'd just been squabbling announce: 'Six is right.'

'Could have been five!' comes from the back.

'Maybe even seven', calls a newly awakened voice from the house, 'but six is probably right.'

'Yeah, six.'

'Exactly. That's what I counted.'

'Thanks guys!' I climb back down from the paving slab. 'You've been a great help.'

'No problem.'

'Any time.'


'Always here for you, Ray.'

'If you have any more questions...'

I wait until Rufus has written down all of the answers in his notebook, then I push him through the hedge and over to the elephants.

## Translator information

Jennifer Busch


 0049 176 457 366 82

 [jen@jennifer-busch.com](mailto:jen@jennifer-busch.com)

 [www.linkedin.com/in/jenniferbusch](http://www.linkedin.com/in/jenniferbusch)

 [www.jennifer-busch.com](http://www.jennifer-busch.com)

Isabel Hagedorn

 0049 176 620 346 90

 [info@british-korrekt.de](mailto:info@british-korrekt.de)

 [www.linkedin.com/in/isabel-hagedorn](http://www.linkedin.com/in/isabel-hagedorn)

 [www.british-korrekt.de](http://www.british-korrekt.de)

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