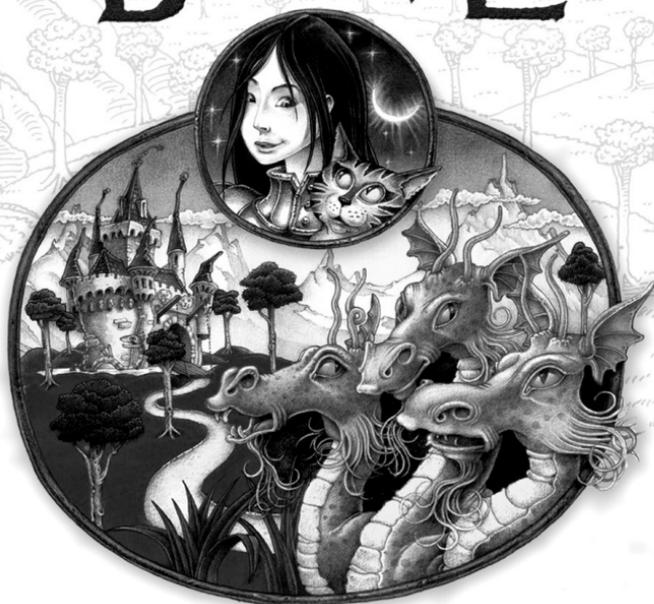


IGRAINE THE BRAVE



CORNELIA FUNKE

with illustrations by the author

Translated from the German by ANTHEA BELL

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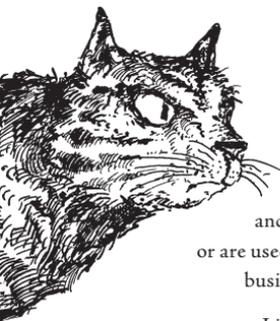
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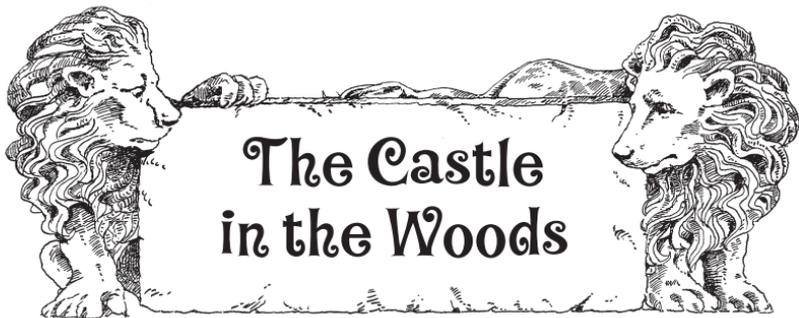
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The Castle in the Woods

Igraine woke up because something was crawling over her face. Something with a lot of legs. She opened her eyes and there it was, sitting right on the end of her nose, a fat black spider. Igraine was scared stiff of spiders.

“Sisyphus!” she whispered in a trembling voice. “Wake up, Sisyphus. Shoo that spider away!”

The cat raised his furry gray face from Igraine’s stomach, blinked, stretched—and snapped up the spider from the end of her nose. One gulp, and it was gone.

“Did I say anything about eating it?” Igraine wiped cat spit off her cheek and pushed Sisyphus off her bed. “A spider on my nose,” she muttered, throwing back the covers. “The day before my birthday, too. That’s not a good omen.”

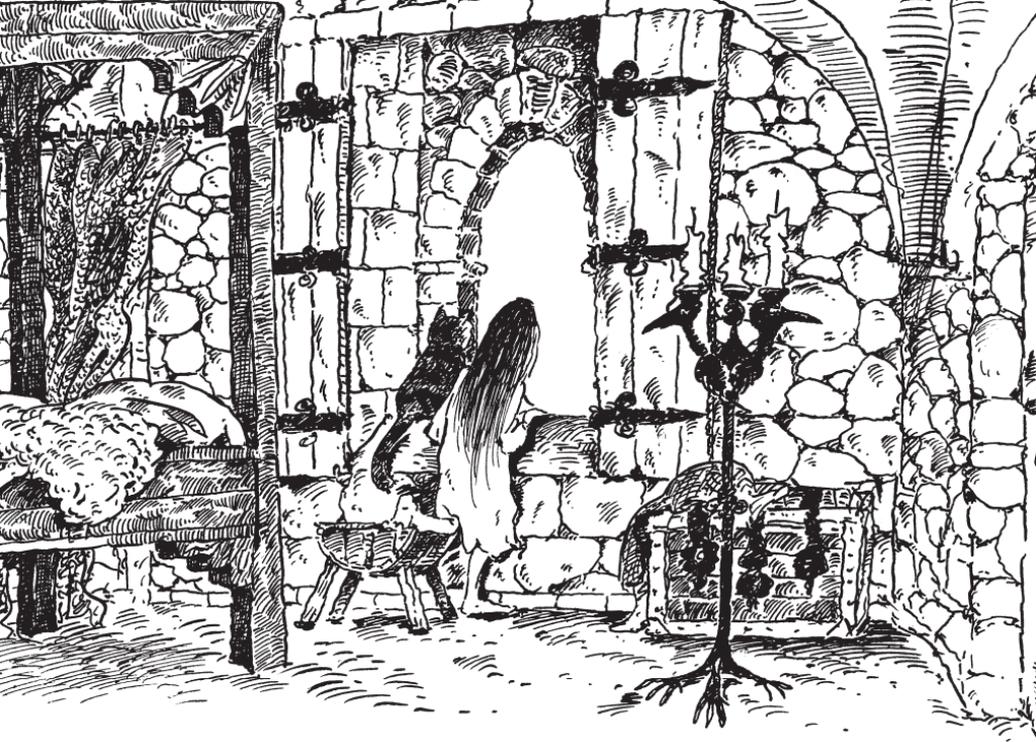
Barefoot, she went over to the window and looked out. The sun was already high in the sky above Pimpernel Castle. The tower cast its shadow over the courtyard, doves were preening on the battlements, and a horse snorted down in the stables.

Pimpernel Castle had belonged to Igraine's family for more than three hundred years. Her mother's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather had built it. (There may have been a few more "greats" in that; Igraine wasn't sure.) The castle was not large; it had only a single tower, which leaned over sideways, and the walls weren't much more than two feet thick, but Igraine thought it was the most beautiful castle in the world.

Wildflowers grew between the paving stones in the courtyard. Swallows nested under the roof of the tower in spring, and water snakes lived under the blue water lilies in the great castle moat. Two stone lions, high on a ledge above the gateway, guarded the castle. When Igraine scraped the moss off their manes they purred like cats, but if a stranger came near they bared their stony teeth and roared. They sounded so terrifying that even the wolves in the nearby forest hid.

The lions, though, were not the only guardians of Pimpernel. Stone gargoyles looked down from the walls and made terrible faces at any stranger. If you tickled their noses with a dove's feather they laughed so loud that the bird droppings crumbled off the castle battlements, but their wide mouths could swallow cannonballs, and they crunched up burning arrows as if there were nothing tastier in the world.

Luckily, however, the gargoyles hadn't had any arrows or cannonballs to eat for a long time. It was many years since



Pimpernel Castle had been attacked. Once upon a time, life hadn't been so peaceful. For Igraine's family owned the famous Singing Books of Magic, and many powerful men had wished to own them. Robber knights, dukes, barons, even two kings had attacked Pimpernel to steal the books. But they had all gone away empty-handed, and since Igraine's birth, life had been quiet at Pimpernel.

"Mmm, just smell that!" Igraine put Sisyphus down on the windowsill beside her and took a deep breath of the cool morning air. A delicious smell of wood ash, honey, and vervain met her nostrils, and a shimmering pink glow rose

into the sky from the top window of the tower. The magic workshop where Igraine's parents cast their spells lay behind that window, for noble Sir Lamorak and the Fair Melisande were the greatest magicians between the Whispering Woods and the Giant's Hills.

"Why are they working magic so early in the morning?" Igraine whispered anxiously into Sisyphus's pointy ear. "I don't suppose they've even had breakfast yet. Do you think they're worried my present won't be ready in time?"

She quickly brushed a few moths off her woolly pants, climbed into them, and put her great-grandfather's chain-mail shirt over her head. Igraine had worn it ever since she found it in the armory, although it came down to her knees and she had to admit that it wasn't very comfortable. Her big brother, Albert, wanted to be a magician like their parents, but Igraine thought magic was dreadfully boring. Incantations, spells, lists of ingredients for magical powders and potions — learning all that by heart gave her a headache. No, she'd rather be like her great-grandfather Pelleas of Pimpernel. He was a knight who fought in tournaments and had adventures from morning till night — if the family stories were to be believed. Albert laughed at her ambition, but that's big brothers for you. Now and then Igraine took her revenge by putting wood lice in his magic coat.

"Laugh all you like!" she said when Albert teased her. "You wait and see. I bet you ten of your tame mice

I'll win one of the King's tournaments someday."

Albert loved his mice, but he accepted Igraine's bet all the same. As for Sir Lamorak and the Fair Melisande, they always exchanged worried glances when their daughter came down to breakfast in her mail shirt. Her family definitely didn't think much of her plans for the future.

"Come on, Sisyphus." Igraine buckled up her belt and put the yawning tomcat under her arm. "Let's go and do a bit of spying." She ran downstairs to the Great Hall, passing the portraits of her ancestors (who all looked very glum), and pushed open the big gate leading into the courtyard. It was a lovely warm day. The scent of flowers filled the air within the high castle walls, mingling with the smell of mouse droppings.

"Oh, Sisyphus, Sisyphus!" said Igraine reproachfully as she carried the cat downstairs with her. "If you lay off of Albert's mice for much longer, we'll be treading on them when we cross the courtyard! Couldn't you at least scare them away now and then?"

"Too dangerous," growled the cat, sleepily closing his eyes. Ever since Igraine had sprinkled him with Albert's red magic powder he'd been able to talk, though he didn't often feel like it.

"You're just a scaredy-cat," said Igraine. "Albert may keep threatening to turn you into a dog, but he'd never really do it. He doesn't know how. And even if he did — well, my parents would never let him."



Sisyphus yawned in answer, and pretended to be asleep as she carried him over to the Enchanted Tower. The single tower of Pimpernel stood right in the middle of the castle courtyard, surrounded by a moat of its own, not as wide as the outer moat, but very deep. Igraine's ancestors had survived many a siege in this tower, because you could barricade yourself inside even if the rest of the castle had been captured. The only way across the moat was over a very narrow bridge that could be raised in times of war. A dragon had once lived underneath (he hadn't been very big, but in the family chronicles he was known as the Knight Eater). Igraine often wished he were still there, because now the underside of the bridge was infested with spiders. They made her knees shake when she went to visit her parents in their workshop. And because Albert knew that, he sometimes drew the bridge up just a bit so that she had to jump the gap. He'd done that today. Igraine cursed him, but she jumped, with Sisyphus under her arm.

"Quiet now!" she whispered as she crept over the bridge, her knees still all spidery-weak. "No mewling, no hissing, no purring, nothing. You know Albert has ears like a bat."

The cat just gave her a scornful look as she put him down outside the tower door. Of course. He could prowl around much more quietly than she could, but Igraine did her best. A few startled bats fluttered to meet them when she climbed the endless staircase on tiptoe — there were hundreds up

in the rafters — and Albert's tame mice sat on almost every step, but Sisyphus acted as if he didn't even see them.

The heavy oak door of the workshop was painted with magical signs, and the door handle was a small brass serpent that liked to bite strangers' hands.

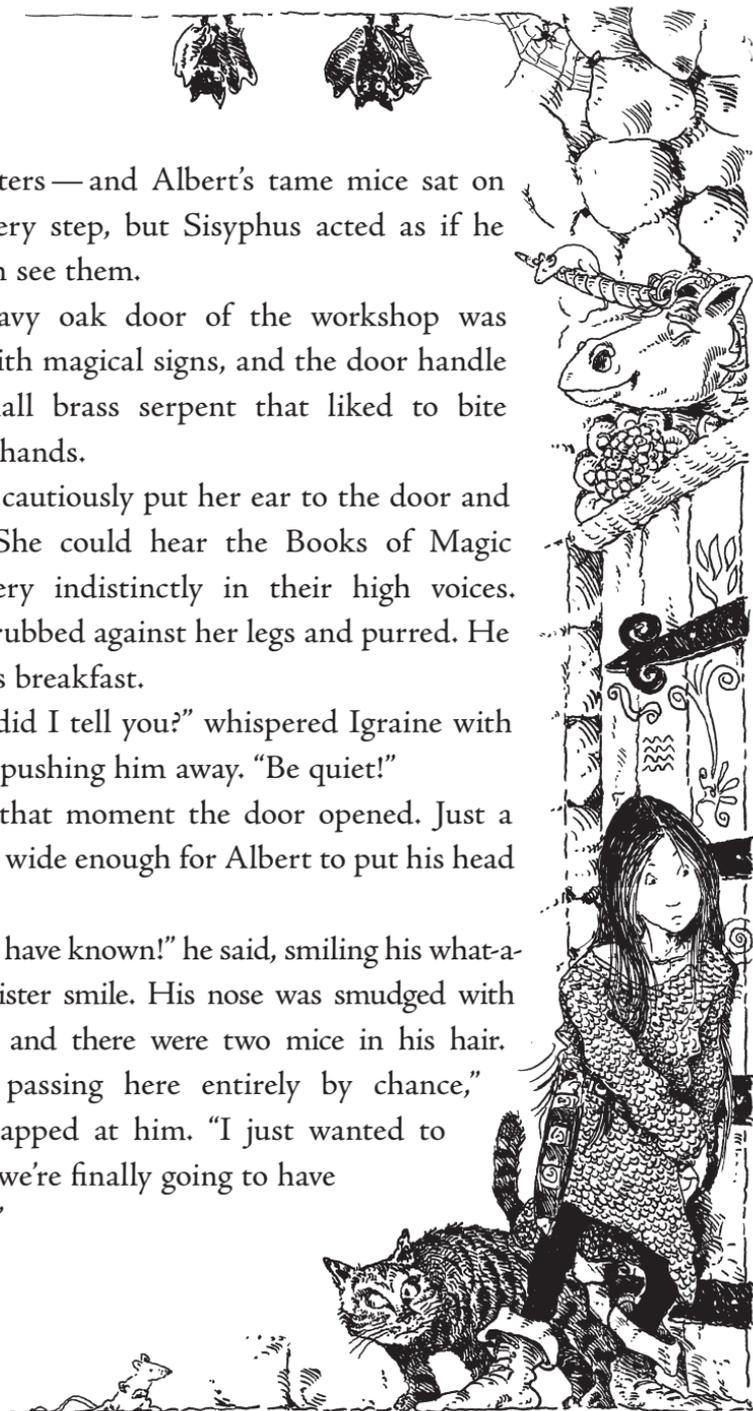
Igraine cautiously put her ear to the door and listened. She could hear the Books of Magic singing very indistinctly in their high voices. Sisyphus rubbed against her legs and purred. He wanted his breakfast.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Igraine with irritation, pushing him away. "Be quiet!"

But at that moment the door opened. Just a crack, just wide enough for Albert to put his head out.

"I might have known!" he said, smiling his what-a-silly-little-sister smile. His nose was smudged with wood ash, and there were two mice in his hair.

"I was passing here entirely by chance," Igraine snapped at him. "I just wanted to ask when we're finally going to have breakfast."



Albert's smile widened. "You won't find out what you really want to know!" he said. "Your birthday present has always been a surprise, and it's going to be a surprise this time, too. Go and feed the snakes."

Igraine stood on tiptoe so that she could at least steal a glance into the room over his shoulder, but Albert pushed her back.

"Go away and play knights in armor, little sister!" he said. "I'll ring the bell for breakfast when we're ready."

"Good morning, honey!" Igraine heard her mother call inside the magic workshop.

"Good morning!" called her father, Sir Lamorak.

Igraine didn't answer. She stuck her tongue out at Albert and climbed down all those stairs again with her head held high.

