Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Inkdeath

Written by

Cornelia Funke

Published by

Chicken House

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your

To Rolf, always – it was the best of things to be married to Dustfinger.

To Ileen, who knows all about loss and was always there to understand and ease the pain.

To Andrew, Angie, Antonia, Cam and James, Caroline, Elinor, and last but for sure not least, Lionel and Oliver, who all brought so much light, warmth and true friendship to dark days.

And to the city of angels, which fed me with beauty and wilderness and with the feeling that I had found my Inkworld.

Published in Germany by Cecilie Dressler Verlag 2007
Original text copyright © Dressler Verlag 2007
English translation copyright © Anthea Bell 2008

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by
The Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.doublecluck.com

Cornelia Funke has asserted her rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Ian Butterworth
Cover illustration, map and chapterhead by Carol Lawson
Inside illustrations by Cornelia Funke
Designed and typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978 1 905294 71 8



A note from the author:

INKDEATH came to life in my new home in Los Angeles. For the first time, I had enough room to put up all the photographs and paintings that inspired me to write. Hundreds of notes with ideas and plot points covered my booshelves (yes, I also had room for my books!), and in front of the windows my son played.

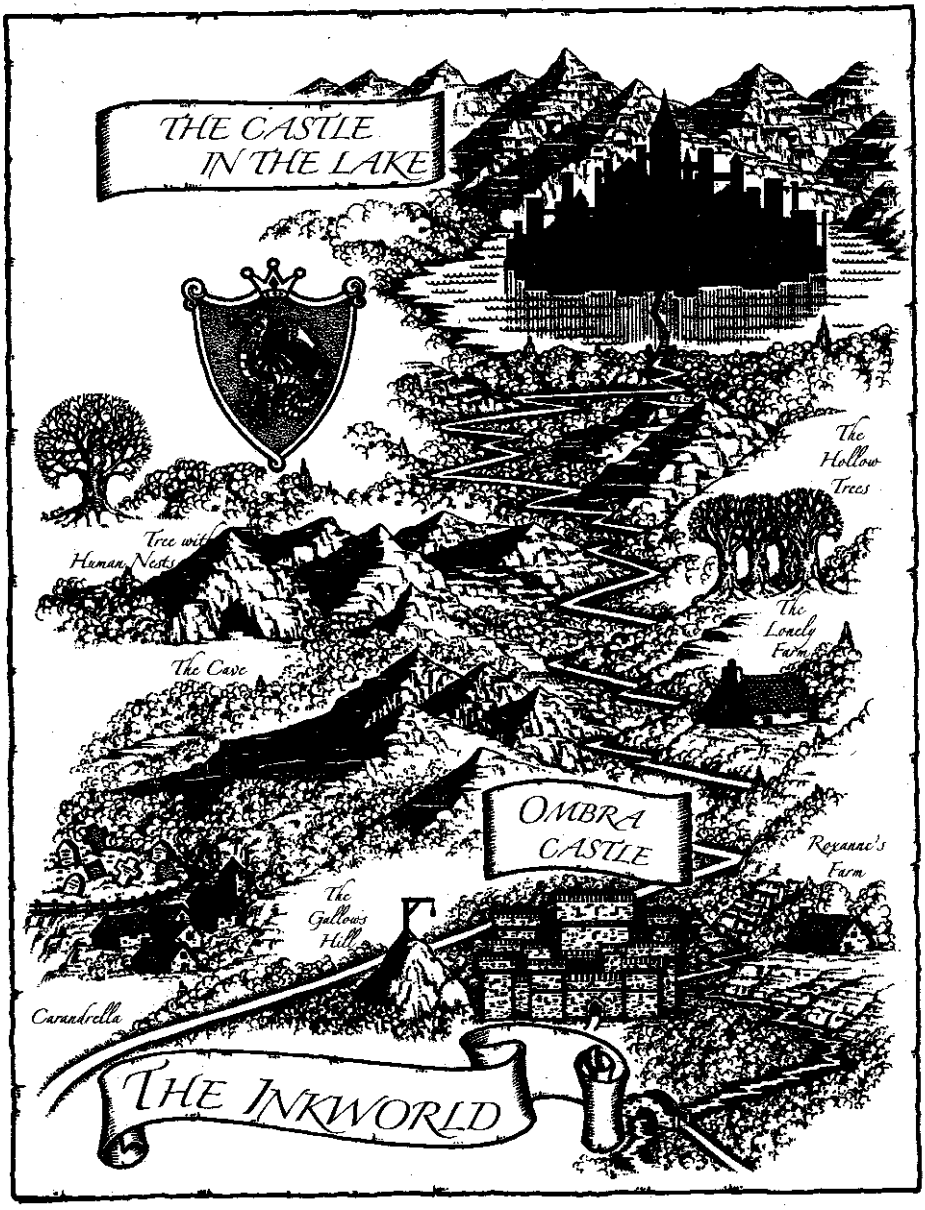
When I sat down to write the first chapter, it felt like meeting up with very old friends. In the story, only two months have passed since Dustfinger's death and so it felt for me. But once again, I was surprised. Mo had become the Bluejay, much more than I had expected, and INKDEATH soon became as great a writing adventure as INKHEART and INKSPELL. As an author, I especially enjoyed the Fenoglio chapters (and I hope you'll like that he has two more glassmen to help him).

Some of you may know that Rolf, my husband of twenty-six years, became sick and died shortly before I finished this book. You may wonder if the loss and the grief my children and I felt made me write a story that deals so much with death. But it's not true. The story was told already, and only a few lines felt wrong and had to be rewritten.

I am the song that sings the bird.
I am the leaf that grows the land.
I am the tide that moves the moon.
I am the stream that halts the sand.
I am the cloud that drives the storm.
I am the earth that lights the sun.
I am the fire that strikes the stone.
I am the clay that shapes the hand.
I am the word that speaks the man.

Charles Causley, *I am the song*




THE CASTLE IN THE LAKE
The Hollow Trees
Tree with Human Nests
The Lonely Farm
The Cave
OMBRA CASTLE
Roxanne's Farm
The Gallows Hill
Carandrella
THE INKWORLD

Inkheart

Mortimer Folchart (Mo), a bookbinder, has such a beautiful voice that it can bring characters out of books when he reads aloud. He discovered his dangerous gift by accident when he was reading a story called Inkheart to his wife Resa and daughter Meggie. Several characters, including the evil Capricorn and some of his followers, came out of it into our world – and Resa vanished into the world of the book. Meggie, only three at the time, can't even remember her mother.

Nine years later the fire-eater Dustfinger, one of the Inkheart characters and desperately homesick for his own world, visits Mo and Meggie (now twelve years old) to warn them that Capricorn is looking for all copies of the book to destroy them, so that no one can ever move between the two worlds again by reading from it. He is after the copy that Mo still has, and he also wants to force Mo to read treasure out of books for him.

Capricorn and his criminal gang have made an Italian village their headquarters, and when Dustfinger treacherously tells them where to find Mo, he is kidnapped and taken there. Meggie, her great-aunt Elinor (a book collector with a fine library) and the repentant Dustfinger join forces to rescue him. But they no longer have the book that might help Dustfinger to get home and Mo to find his wife at last. With a new friend – Farid, a boy read accidentally out of the Arabian Nights by Mo – they track down the author of Inkheart, old Fenoglio, but his own copies have also

been stolen. Although a single copy is left, it is in the hands of Capricorn and his witch-like mother Mortola. After many more perilous adventures, Fenoglio and Meggie end up as captives back in Capricorn's village. Meggie, who has inherited her father's unusual talent, is to be made to read Capricorn's ally, a terrible creature known as the Shadow, out of the remaining copy of Inkheart. But with the help of Fenoglio, who writes new words to add to the story, she and Mo turn the tables and Capricorn falls dead. Fenoglio himself disappears into the Inkworld in exchange for the Shadow. With Dustfinger's help Resa, who spent years in the Inkworld serving Capricorn and Mortola and lost her voice in passing between the two worlds, is found again. Reunited, the Folcharts all go home to Elinor's house.

Inkspell

At the end of Inkheart, Dustfinger went away with the only existing copy of Fenoglio's story – and with Farid, who wants to learn to be a fire-eater. Now, in Inkspell, Dustfinger has finally found someone to read him back to his own world: a petty criminal calling himself Orpheus who has a wonder-working voice like Mo's. Orpheus wants the book for himself, and reads Dustfinger into the Inkworld, but not his devoted apprentice Farid, who is left holding the book. Farid takes refuge with the Folcharts in Elinor's house.

Meggie, longing to see the Inkworld too, discovers that she can read herself and Farid there. It is a place of marvels – fairies, water-nymphs, brownies – and when they meet a band of strolling players whose leader is known as the Black Prince, they are taken to the city of Ombra, capital of Lombrica, and find Fenoglio there. Ombra is in mourning for its ruling prince's son, Cosimo the Fair, killed by a gang of fire-raisers led by Firefox, one of Capricorn's men. And it is threatened by the ruler of the country of Argenta, known as the Adderhead, whose daughter Violante is Cosimo's widow. Near Ombra Dustfinger has been reunited with his wife Roxane, once a minstrel woman and now wise in herbal healing lore. But his daughter Brianna, Violante's maid, is hostile to him.

Back in our own world Orpheus has allies: Capricorn's mother Mortola and his henchman Basta, who turn up at Elinor's house. Orpheus is to read them – and Mo – into the Inkworld, where Mortola believes her son will still be alive. In her fury at finding that he is dead there too, she shoots and wounds Mo, to the horror of Resa, who grabbed his hand at the last moment and came into the Inkworld too. Resa nurses her husband devotedly, keeping away the White Women who visit those close to death. They meet the strolling players, who take Mo for a famous robber known as the Bluejay. Left behind in our world, Elinor and her friend Darius, formerly reader to Capricorn, are still imprisoned in Elinor's house, while Orpheus lords it in her library.

Once again, Fenoglio and Meggie combine their talents for writing and reading aloud, this time in order to bring Cosimo the Fair back to life. But Cosimo's campaign against the Adderhead's forces ends in a disastrous defeat and many deaths. Fenoglio has lost control of his story, which now seems to be telling itself. Full of remorse, he vows never to write again. Mo and Resa have been captured and taken to the Castle of Night in Argenta, where Mo, with Meggie's help, is forced to bind a magic book to keep the Adderhead alive for ever. In return the Adderhead releases them, as agreed, but he sends soldiers after them and their friends: Dustfinger, the Black Prince and his men. Basta kills Farid in the fighting, and is killed himself by Mo. Dustfinger bargains with the White Women, daughters of Death, to take Farid's place and dies instead. Farid, alive again but distraught, persuades Fenoglio to write words for Meggie to read aloud that will bring Orpheus to the Inkworld, hoping that if he read Dustfinger home he can also read him back to life. And Orpheus arrives, clutching the single remaining copy of Inkheart. But was it safe to bring him here? And will Orpheus do what Farid wants . . . ?

Inkspell ends on this note of suspense. Now you can find out what happens to all the characters next in Inkdeath.

An A-Z of characters is at the back of the book.



1

Nothing But a Dog and a Sheet of Paper

Hark, the footsteps of the night
Fade in silence long.
Quiet chirps my reading light
Like a cricket's song.

Books inviting us to read
On the bookshelves stand.
Piers for bridges that will lead
Into fairyland.

Rilke, *Sacrifice to the Lares, from Vigils III*

Moonlight fell on Elinor's dressing gown, her nightdress, her bare feet, and the dog lying in front of them. Orpheus's dog. Oh, the way he looked at her with his eternally sad eyes! As if asking himself why, in the name of all the exciting smells in the world, she was sitting in her library in the middle of the night, surrounded by silent books, just staring into space.

'Why?' said Elinor in the silence. 'Because I can't sleep, you stupid animal.' But she patted his head all the same. This is what you've come to, Elinor, she thought as she hauled herself out of her armchair. Spending your nights talking to a dog. You don't even like dogs, least of all this one, with his heavy breathing that always reminds you of his appalling master!

Still, she had kept the dog in spite of the painful memories he brought back. She'd kept the chair too, even though the Magpie had sat in it. Mortola . . . how often Elinor thought she heard the old woman's voice when she went into the quiet library, how often she seemed to see Mortimer and Resa standing among the bookshelves, or Meggie sitting by the window with a book on her lap, face hidden behind her smooth, bright hair . . .

Memories. They were all she had left. No more tangible than the pictures conjured up by books. But what would be left if she lost those memories too? Then she'd be alone again for ever – with the silence and the emptiness in her heart. And an ugly dog.

Her feet looked so old in the pale moonlight. Moonlight! she thought, wiggling her toes in it. In many stories moonlight had magical powers. All lies. Her whole head was full of printed lies. She couldn't even look at the moon with eyes unclouded by veils of letters. Couldn't she wipe all those words out of her head and heart, and see the world through her own eyes again, at least once?

Heavens, Elinor, what a fabulous mood you're in, she thought as she made her way over to the glass case where she kept everything that Orpheus had left behind, apart from his dog. Wallowing in self-pity, like that stupid dog rolling over in every puddle.

The sheet of paper that lay behind the glass looked nothing

special, just an ordinary piece of lined paper densely written in pale-blue ink. Not to be compared with the magnificently illuminated books in the other display cases – even though the tracing of every letter showed how very impressed Orpheus was with himself. I hope the fire-elves have burnt that self-satisfied smile off his lips, thought Elinor as she opened the glass case. I hope the men-at-arms have skewered him – or, even better, I hope he's starved to death in the Wayless Wood, miserably and very, very slowly. It wasn't the first time she had pictured Orpheus's wretched end in the Inkworld to herself. These images gave her lonely heart more pleasure than almost anything.

The sheet of paper was already yellowing. To add insult to injury, it was cheap stuff. And the words on it really didn't look as though they could have spirited their writer away to another world right before Elinor's eyes. Three photographs lay beside the sheet of paper – one of Meggie and two of Resa – a photo of her as a child and another taken only a few months ago, with Mortimer beside her, both of them smiling so happily! Hardly a night went by when Elinor didn't look at those photographs. By now, at least, the tears had stopped running down her cheeks when she did so, but they were still there in her heart. Bitter tears. Her heart was full to the brim with them, a horrible feeling.

Lost.

Meggie.

Resa.

Mortimer.

Almost three months had passed since their disappearance. In fact, Meggie had even been gone a few days longer than her parents . . .

The dog stretched and came trotting drowsily over to her. He pushed his nose into her dressing-gown pocket, knowing there were always a few dog biscuits in it for him.

'Yes, all right, all right,' she murmured, shoving one of the smelly little things into his broad muzzle. 'Where's your master, then?' She held the sheet of paper in front of his nose, and the stupid creature sniffed it as if he really could catch Orpheus's scent behind the words on the page.

Elinor stared at the words, shaping them with her lips. *In the streets of Ombra* . . . She'd stood here so often over the last few weeks, surrounded by books that meant nothing to her, now she was once again alone with them. They didn't speak to her, just as if they knew that she'd have exchanged them all on the spot for the three people she had lost. Lost in a book.

'I *will* learn how, damn it!' Her voice sounded defiant, like a child's. 'I'll learn how to read them so that they'll swallow me up too, I will, I will!'

The dog was looking at her as if he believed every word of it, but Elinor didn't, not a single one. No, she was no Silvertongue. Even if she tried for a dozen years or more, the words wouldn't make music when she spoke them. She'd loved words so much all her life. Although they didn't sing for her the way they sang for Meggie or Mortimer – or Orpheus, damn him three times over.

The piece of paper shook in her fingers as she started to cry. Here came the tears again. She'd held them back for so long, all the tears in her heart, until it was simply overflowing with them. Elinor's sobs were so loud that the dog cowered in alarm. How ridiculous that water ran out of your eyes when your heart hurt. Tragic heroines in books tended to be amazingly beautiful. Not a word about swollen eyes or a red nose.

Crying always gives me a red nose, thought Elinor. I expect that's why I'll never be in any book.

'Elinor?'

She spun round, hastily wiping her tears away.

Darius stood in the open doorway, wearing the dressing gown that she had given him for his last birthday. It was much too large for him.

'What is it?' she snapped. Where had that handkerchief gone this time? Sniffing, she pulled it from her sleeve and blew her nose. 'Three months, they've been gone three months now, Darius! Isn't that a good reason to cry? Yes, it is. Don't look at me so pityingly with your owlish eyes. Never mind how many books we buy,' she said, with a wide sweep of her arm towards her well-filled shelves, 'never mind how many we get at auctions, swap or steal – not one of them tells me what I want to know! Thousands of pages, and not a word on any of them with news of the only people I want to know about. Why would I be interested in anything else? Theirs is the only story I want to hear! How is Meggie now, do you think? How are Resa and Mortimer? Are they happy, Darius? Are they still alive? Will I ever see them again?'

Darius looked along the books, as if the answer might after all be found in one of them. But then, like all those printed pages, he gave her no answer.

'I'll make you some hot milk and honey,' he said at last, disappearing into the kitchen.

And Elinor was alone again with the books, the moonlight and Orpheus's ugly dog.



2

Only a Village

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding –
Riding – riding,
The highwayman came riding up to the old inn door.

Alfred Noyes, *The Highwayman*

The fairies were already beginning to dance among the trees, swarms of tiny blue bodies. Their wings caught the starlight, and Mo saw the Black Prince glancing anxiously at the sky. It was still as dark as the hills all around, but the fairies were never wrong. On a cold night like this, only the coming of dawn could lure them from their nests, and the village whose harvest the robbers were trying to save this time lay dangerously close to Ombra. As soon as daybreak came they must be gone.

A village like many others: only a dozen poor huts, a few barren, stony fields, and a wall that would hardly keep out a

child, let alone a soldier. Thirty women without their menfolk, three dozen fatherless children. Two days ago the new governor's men had carried off almost the entire harvest of the neighbouring village. The robbers had reached the place too late, but something could still be salvaged here. They'd spent hours digging, showing the women how to hide livestock and provisions underground . . .

The Strong Man was carrying the last hastily-dug sackful of potatoes, his rough-hewn face red with effort. It went the same colour when he was fighting or drunk. Between them all, they lowered the sack into the hiding place hey had made just beyond the fields, and Mo covered the entrance with a network of twigs to hide the storage pit from soldiers and tax gatherers. By now, toads were croaking in the surrounding hills, as if to entice the day out, and the men on watch among the huts were getting restless. They'd seen the fairies too. High time to get away, back into the forest where a hiding place could always be found, even though the new governor was sending more and more patrols out to the hills. The Milksop, the widows of Ombra called him. A good nickname for the Adderhead's puny brother-in-law. But the Milksop's greed for what few possessions his new subjects had was insatiable.

Mo rubbed his eyes. Heavens, he was tired. He'd hardly slept for days. There were just too many villages that they might yet be able to reach ahead of the soldiers.

'You look worn out,' Resa had said only yesterday when she woke up beside him, unaware that he hadn't come to bed beside her until the first light of dawn. He had said something about bad dreams, told her he'd been passing the sleepless hours by working on the book he was binding, a collection of

her drawings of fairies and glass men. He hoped Resa and Meggie would be asleep again now when he came back to the lonely farmhouse that the Black Prince had found for them. It was east of Ombra, an hour's journey from the city on foot, and far from the land where the Adderhead still ruled, made immortal by a book that Mo had bound with his own hands.

Soon, thought Mo. Soon the book won't protect him any more. But how often had he told himself that before? And the Adderhead was still immortal.

A girl hesitantly approached Mo. How old would she be? Six? Seven? Her hair was as blonde as Meggie's, but it was a long time since Meggie had been so small. Shyly, she stopped a pace away from him.

Snapper emerged from the darkness and went over to the child. 'Yes, go on, take a good look!' he whispered to the little girl. 'That's really him – the Bluejay! He eats children like you for supper.'

Snapper loved such jokes. Mo bit back the words on the tip of his tongue. 'Don't believe a word he says!' he said, in a low voice. 'Why aren't you asleep like everyone else?'

The child looked at him. Then she pushed up his sleeve with her small hands until the scar showed. The scar of which the songs told tales . . .

She looked at him, wide-eyed, with the same mixture of awe and fear he had now seen in so many faces. The Bluejay. The girl ran back to her mother, and Mo straightened up. Whenever his chest hurt where Mortola had wounded him, it felt as if he had slipped in there to join him – the robber to whom Fenoglio had given Mo's face and voice. Or had the Bluejay always been a part of him, merely sleeping until Fenoglio's world brought him to life?

Sometimes when they were taking meat to one of the starving villages, or a few sacks of grain stolen from the Milksop's bailiffs women would come up to him and kiss his hand. 'Go and thank the Black Prince, not me,' he always told them, but the Prince just laughed. 'Get yourself a bear,' he said. 'Then they'll leave you alone.'

A child began crying in one of the huts. A tinge of red was showing in the night sky, and Mo thought he heard hoof beats. Horsemen, at least a dozen of them, maybe more. How fast the ears learned to tell what sounds meant, much faster than it took the eyes to decipher written words.

The fairies scattered. Women cried out, and ran to the huts where their children slept. Mo's hand drew his sword as if of its own accord. As if it had never done anything else. It was the sword he had taken from the Castle of Night, the sword that once belonged to Firefox.

The first light of dawn.

Wasn't it said that they always came at first light because they loved the red of the sky? With any luck they'd be drunk after one of their master's endless banquets.

The Prince signalled to the robbers to take up their positions surrounding the village. It was only a couple of courses of flat stones, and the huts wouldn't offer much protection either. The bear was snorting and grunting, and here they came now out of the darkness: horsemen, more than a dozen of them with the new crest of Ombra on their breasts, a basilisk on a red background.They had not, of course, been expecting to find men here. Weeping women, crying children, yes, but not men, and armed men at that. Taken aback, they reined in their horses. They were drunk. Good – that would slow them down.

They didn't hesitate for long, seeing at once that they were far better armed than the ragged robbers. And they had horses.

Fools. They'd die before they realized that weapons and horses weren't all that counted.

'Every last one of them!' Snapper whispered hoarsely to Mo. 'We have to kill them all, Bluejay. I hope your soft heart understands that. If a single man gets back to Ombra, this village will burn tomorrow.'

Mo merely nodded. As if he didn't know.

The horses neighed shrilly as their riders urged them towards the robbers, and Mo felt it again, just as he had on Mount Adder when he had killed Basta – that coldness of the blood. Cold as the hoarfrost at his feet. The only fear he felt was fear of himself.

But then came the screams. The groans. The blood. His own heartbeat, loud and much too fast. Striking and thrusting, pulling his sword out of the bodies of strangers, the blood of strangers wet on his clothes, faces distorted by hatred – or was it fear? Fortunately you couldn't see much under their helmets. They were so young! Smashed limbs, smashed human beings. Careful, watch out behind you. Kill. Fast. Not one of them must get away.

'Bluejay.'

One of the soldiers whispered the name before Mo struck him down. Perhaps he had been thinking, with his last breath, of all the silver he'd get for bringing the Bluejay's body back to Ombra Castle – more silver than he could ever take as loot in a whole lifetime as a soldier. Mo pulled his sword out of the man's chest. They had come without their body armour. Who needed armour against women and children? How cold

killing made you, very cold, although your own skin was burning and your blood was flowing fever-hot.

They did indeed kill them all. It was quiet in the huts as they threw the bodies over the precipice. Two were their own men, whose bones would now mingle with those of their enemies. There was no time to bury them.

The Black Prince had a nasty cut on his shoulder. Mo bandaged it as best he could. The bear sat beside them, looking anxious. The child came out of one of the huts, the little girl who had pushed his sleeve up. From a distance she really did look like Meggie. Meggie, Resa . . . he hoped they'd still be asleep when he got back. How was he going to explain all the blood if they weren't? So much blood . . .

Sometime, Mortimer, he thought, the nights will overshadow the days. Nights of blood. Peaceful days – days when Meggie showed him everything she had only been able to tell him about in the tower of the Castle of Night. Nymphs with scaly skins dwelling in blossom-covered pools, footprints of giants long gone, flowers that whispered when you touched them, trees growing right up to the sky, moss-women who appeared between their roots as if they had peeled away from the bark . . . Peaceful days. Nights of blood.

They did what they could to cover up the traces of the fight and left, taking the horses with them. There was a note of fear in the stammered thanks of the village women as they left. They'd seen with their own eyes that their allies knew as much about killing as their enemies did.

Snapper rode back to the robbers' camp with the horses and most of the men. The camp was moved almost daily. At present it was in a dark ravine that became hardly any lighter even by day. They would send for Roxane to tend the

wounded, while Mo went back to where Resa and Meggie were sleeping at the deserted farm. The Prince had found it for them, because Resa didn't want to stay in the robbers' camp and Meggie too longed for a house to live in after all those homeless weeks.

The Black Prince accompanied Mo, as he so often did. 'Of course. The Bluejay never travels without a retinue,' mocked Snapper before they parted company. Mo, whose heart was still racing from all the killing, could have dragged him off his horse for that, but the Prince restrained him.

They travelled on foot. It meant a painfully long walk for their tired limbs, but their footprints were harder to follow than a trail left by horses' hooves . And the farm must be kept safe, for everything Mo loved was waiting there.

The house, and the dilapidated farm buildings, always appeared among the trees as unexpectedly as if someone had dropped and lost them there. There was no trace now of the fields where food for the farm had once been grown, and the path that used to lead to the nearest village had disappeared long ago. The forest had swallowed everything up. Here it was no longer called the Wayless Wood, the name it bore south of Ombra. Here the forest had as many names as there were local villages: the Fairy Forest, the Dark Wood, the Moss-Women's Wood. If the Strong Man was to be believed, the place where the Bluejay's hide-out lay was called Larkwood. 'Larkwood? Nonsense,' was Meggie's response to that. 'The Strong Man calls everything after birds! He even gives birds' names to the fairies, although they can't stand the birds. Battista says it's called the Wood of Lights, which suits it much better. Did you ever see so many glow-worms and fire-elves in a wood? And all those fireflies that sit in the

treetops at night . . .'

Whatever the name of the wood, Mo was always captivated afresh by the peace and quiet under it's trees. It reminded him that this, too, was a part of the Inkworld, as much a part of it as the Milksop's soldiers. The first of the morning sun was filtering through the branches, dappling the trees with pale gold, and the fairies were dancing as if intoxicated in the cold autumn sunlight. They fluttered into the bear's furry face until he hit out at them, and Battista held one of the little creatures to his ear, smiling as if he could understand what its cross, shrill little voice was saying.

Had the other world been like this? Why could he hardly remember? Had life there been the same beguiling mixture of darkness and light, cruelty and beauty . . . so much beauty that it sometimes almost made you drunk?

The Black Prince had the farm guarded by his men day and night.

Gecko was one of the guards today. As Mo and the Prince came through the trees he emerged from the ruined pigsty, a morose expression on his face. Gecko was always on the move. He was a small man whose slightly protuberant eyes has earned him his name. One of his tame crows was perched on his shoulder. The Prince used the crows as messengers, but most of the time they stole for Gecko from the markets; the amount they could carry away in their beaks always amazed Mo.

When he saw the blood on their clothes Gecko turned pale. But the shadows of the Inkworld had obviously left the isolated farm untouched again last night.

Mo almost fell over his own feet with weariness as he walked towards the well. The Prince reached for his arm,

although he too was swaying with exhaustion.

'It was a close shave this time,' he said quietly, as if the peace were an illusion that could be shattered by his voice. 'If we're not more careful the soldiers will be waiting for us in the next village. The price the Adderhead has set on your head is high enough to buy all of Ombra. I can hardly trust my own men any more, and by this time even the children recognize you in the villages. Perhaps you ought to lie low here for a while.'

Mo shooed away the fairies whirring in the air above the well, then let the wooden bucket down. 'Nonsense. They recognize you too.'

The water in the depths below shone as if the moon were hiding from morning there. Like the well outside Merlin's cottage, thought Mo, as he cooled his face with the clear water and cleaned the cut that a soldier had given him on his forearm. All we need now is for Archimedes to fly up on my shoulder, while Wart comes stumbling out of the wood . . .

'What are you smiling at?' The Black Prince leaned on the edge of the well beside Mo, while his bear lumbered around, snuffling, on ground that was wet with dew.

'A story I once read.' Mo put the bucket of water down for the bear. 'I'll tell it to you sometime. It's a good story, even though it has a sad ending.'

But the Prince shook his head, and passed his hand over his tired face. 'If it ends sadly I don't want to hear it.'

Gecko wasn't the only man who had been guarding the sleeping farm. Mo smiled when Battista stepped out of the tumbledown barn. Battista had no great opinion of fighting, but Mo liked him and the Strong Man best of all the robbers, and he found it easier to go out at night if one of them was

watching over Resa and Meggie. Battista still did his clown act at fairs, even when his audience had hardly a penny to spare. 'We don't want them forgetting how to laugh altogether!' he said when Snapper mocked him for it. He liked to hide his pockmarked face behind the masks he made for himself: laughing masks, weeping masks, whatever he felt like at the time. But when he joined Mo at the well he handed him not a mask, but a bundle of black clothes.

'A very good morning to you, Bluejay,' he said, with the same deep bow that he made to his audience. 'Sorry I took rather a long time with your order, but I ran out of thread. Like everything else, it's hard to get in Ombra. But luckily Gecko here,' he added, bowing in the man's direction, 'sent one of his black-feathered friends off to steal me a few reels from one of the market traders. Thanks to our new governor, they're still rich.'

'Black clothes?' The Prince looked enquiringly at Mo. 'What for?'

'A bookbinder's garments. Binding books is still my trade, or have you forgotten? What's more, black is good camouflage by night. As for this,' said Mo, stripping off his bloodstained shirt, 'I'd better dye it black too, or I can't very well wear it again.'

The Prince looked at him thoughtfully. 'I'll say it again, even though you don't want to listen. Lie low here for a few days. Forget the outside world, just as the world has forgotten this farm.'

The anxiety in his dark face touched Mo, and for a moment he was almost tempted to give the bundle back to Battista. But only almost.

When the Prince had gone, Mo hid the shirt and his

bloodstained trousers in the former bakehouse, now converted into his workshop, and put on the black clothes. They fitted perfectly, and he was wearing them as he slipped back into the house just as the morning made its way in through the unglazed windows.

Meggie and Resa were still asleep. A fairy had lost her way in the gloom of Meggie's room. Mo lured her to his hand with a few quiet words. 'Will you look at that?' Snapper always used to say. 'Even the damn fairies love his voice. Looks like I'm the only person not to fall under its spell.'

Mo carried the fairy over to the window and let her flutter out. He pulled Meggie's blanket up over her shoulders, the way he used to on all those nights when he and she had only each other, and he glanced at her face. How young she still looked when she was asleep. Awake, she seemed so much more grown-up. She whispered a name in her sleep. Farid. Was it when you fell in love for the first time that you grew up?

'Where have you been?'

Mo spun round. Resa was standing in the open doorway, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

'Watching the fairies' morning dance. The nights are getting colder now. Soon they'll hardly leave their nests at all.'

It wasn't exactly a lie. And the sleeves of the black tunic were long enough to hide the cut on his forearm. 'Come with me, or we'll wake this big daughter of ours.'

He drew her with him into the bedroom where they slept.

'What kind of clothes are those?'

'A bookbinder's outfit. Battista made them for me. Black as ink. Suitable, don't you think? I've asked him to make you and Meggie something too. You'll be needing another dress soon.'

He put his hand on her belly. You couldn't see it yet. A new child brought with them from the old world, although they had found out only in this one. It was barely a week since Resa had told him. 'Which would you like,' she'd asked, 'a daughter or a son?' 'Can I choose?' he had replied, trying to imagine what it would be like to hold tiny fingers in his hand again, so tiny that they could scarcely grasp his thumb. It was just the right time – before Meggie was so grown-up that he could hardly call her a child at all.

'The sickness is getting worse. I'll ride over to see Roxane tomorrow. She's sure to know what to do for it.'

'Yes, she's sure to know.' Mo took her in his arms.

Peaceful days. Nights of blood.

