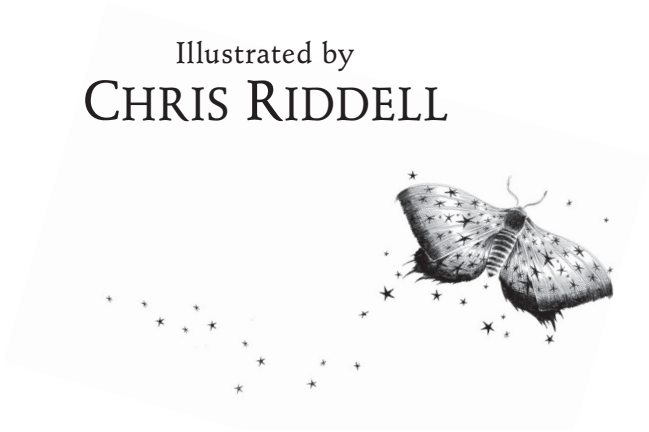


A
CLOCK
OF
STARS

THE GREATEST KINGDOM

FRANCESCA GIBBONS

Illustrated by
CHRIS RIDDELL



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PROLOGUE

High up in a tree house, Andel squeezed a spring between his fingers. He was making a wind-up toy, and he wanted it to be perfect.

The room where he worked was something between a carpenter's yard and a magician's workshop – full of wood and weights and all manner of tools, bubbling liquids and gems.

The forest canopy swished around him, squirrels gossiped in the trees, and Andel leaned closer to his work. He had to get the settings just right if the toy frog was to hop like the real thing.

There was a creak on the steps and Andel glanced up. He wasn't expecting any visitors . . . If the woman from the tree house by the lake had come to ask for more singing boxes, he would have to find somewhere to hide.

But the footsteps were swift. Perhaps it was his daughter, Daneetsa, come to summon him home. She was always teasing him, saying that he only went to his workshop to nap.

Well, Andel would tease her right back. He hurried to his

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sheepskin armchair and sat, struggling to keep the grin off his face.

The creaking on the steps grew louder. Daneetsa was near the top.

Andel closed his eye and pretended to snore. He couldn't wait to see his daughter's reaction.

The thrush that had been singing went quiet. There were footsteps on the balcony, approaching the entrance. They were heavier than Andel had been expecting.

He opened his eye just a sliver. A figure stood at his doorway – not Daneetsa, but a man. Andel's eye snapped open.

'Erm . . . hello?' he said.

The man stepped into the workshop. He wasn't especially tall, but he was strong. Andel could sense it from the way that he moved. His head was shaven and his beard was cut to a point. He turned his cool gaze upon Andel . . . and Andel felt himself shrink.

But there was no reason to be frightened. Just because the man had come at the end of the day, it didn't mean he intended any harm. Just because he carried a sword and two daggers . . .

Andel tried to remember where he'd put his small knife.

'I'm Andel,' he said, getting to his feet. 'They call me The Clockmaker, although I make other trinkets. Is there something in particular that you're after?'

The man cleared wood shavings off Andel's worktop with

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a single sweep of his hand. Then he placed a package on the space that he'd made.

There was something in his face that Andel did not like – a mocking expression that reminded Andel of the men who had taken his eye.

Anger and fear rose inside him.

He thought he'd made his peace with that, he thought—
'What do you want?' he blurted.

Finally, the man spoke, as if he'd been waiting for Andel to look afraid. 'Commission,' he grunted.

Ah . . . so he was just a customer, after all. Andel let out his breath. 'Well, there's a bit of a waiting list,' he said. 'But if you don't mind leaving your details, I'll send word when I've got a slot.'

The man unfolded the package on the worktop, revealing a shiny black book. The cover was scorched, as if it had been pulled from a fire, but the title was still visible: *The Book of Winged Things*.

The man opened the book and Andel saw that it was full of moths. They were drawn in exquisite detail. He leaned in, in spite of himself. The man kept turning the pages.

But wait. Those moths were not drawings – they were the real things, killed and flattened, like flowers in a press. Andel suppressed a shiver.

The man stopped on a page with a silver-grey moth. He cracked the book's spine and pushed it closer. *Mezi Múra*, the scrawled words said. The name was familiar, though Andel

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had never seen an insect like it. It had huge antennae and a velvety body.

‘Very nice,’ he said, straightening, and he looked the stranger in the face. ‘What exactly is your commission?’

‘A moth,’ said the man. ‘Like that.’ He jabbed the page with one finger.

Andel considered the request. He liked working on a small scale and the silver-grey moth *was* beautiful. To make something that could fly would be an excellent challenge . . .

But why would such a man want a moth? Surely, it wasn’t a toy?

‘Must be exactly the same,’ said the stranger and he reached into his pocket and pulled out a purse. He slapped it on to the worktop.

Andel heard footsteps in the forest below. Light feet, fast feet. *Daneetsa*. And, for a reason that he couldn’t quite name, he didn’t want this man to meet his daughter.

‘I’ll do it,’ he cried, ignoring his misgivings. What the man wanted with such a contraption was not his concern. Surely, it could do no harm.

‘One month,’ said the stranger as he stalked out of the tree house. ‘You have one month to make the moth.’

CHAPTER 1

Imogen walked barefoot across the kitchen. Feet slapping cold tiles, she reached for the biscuit tin and took a fistful of Bourbons. One in her mouth. Two in her pyjama pockets.

Munch, munch, munch. They were good.

She loved Sunday mornings. Mum slept in and, until Marie was awake, Imogen got the computer to herself. It was just her, *Cosmic Defenders*, and the biscuits.

A man's jumper lay by the sink. It had been thrown there casually, as if it belonged here . . . and it did. Mark had moved in last month and his things were scattered throughout the house.

Imogen had decided she didn't mind the extra coat, extra keys or the big squeaky shoes. It was good to be reminded that Mark was a permanent fixture – like a sofa, or a rug, or a dad.

She picked up his jumper and slipped it over her head. The sleeves finished down by her knees and the wool smelled of coffee. There was another scent too, a smoky aroma, as if Mark had been sitting by a bonfire.

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Imogen wondered if her real dad smelled similar, before pushing the thought aside.

She glanced at Marie's drawings, which were stuck on the fridge next to Mum's lists. The mundane was mixed with the magical: river sprites, bread and bleach. Imogen picked up a pencil and added 'biscuits' to the shopping list.

Then she took a Bourbon from her pocket and ate it, slower this time, savouring the chocolatey middle. It was several months since she'd returned from the world beyond the door in the tree, but the novelty of being home hadn't worn off.

She enjoyed the comforting sounds of the house – the faint hiss of water in pipes, the gentle hum of the fridge. Soon Mog the cat would appear, miaowing until he got food. Better make the most of the peace.

Pulling up a seat at the kitchen table, Imogen reached for Mum's laptop. She was allowed to play *Cosmic Defenders* as long as she kept the volume off. She ran her finger over the mousepad and the screen flashed awake. Imogen felt a little thrill at the thought of playing her favourite game.

But Mum must have been reading the news before bed because a browser had been left open. Imogen was about to close it when a picture at the top caught her eye.

It was a photo of the prime minister, stepping out of his house. He looked defeated, sagging inwards like a Hoover bag. Imogen cocked her head. Perhaps this wasn't how he thought being prime minister would be.

The photo was a swirl of movement; jostling microphones,

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blurry police uniforms. Only the woman at the top of the steps was still. She looked straight at the camera, as if she'd known this moment was coming, as if she'd been *born ready*.

Imogen recognised her in an instant.

The blonde hair.

The violet-blue eyes.

Imogen blinked in the laptop's light. Then she slammed the screen shut and backed away. The kitchen cabinet pressed into her spine. She could hear the throb of her heart. *It's her, it's her . . .*

Anneshka.

But Anneshka couldn't be in this world! It wasn't possible!

Surely, this was a look-a-like . . . or some kind of Photoshop prank.

Imogen tried to gather herself. She reached for the laptop, prised it open, waited for the screen to flicker back to life.

The news article was still there. Imogen scanned the headline:

New Scheme Given the Go-Ahead

She studied the photo more closely. The woman's body was hidden behind the prime minister, who was hurrying away from the cameras as quickly as his suit-bound legs would allow.

The woman was in no such rush. Her long hair was swept back from her face. Even her make-up was of this world – flicky little lines at the sides of her eyes.

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A smile ghosted her lips. It felt like her gaze was cutting through the screen, piercing her way into the kitchen.

That was Annesska Mazanar, as sure as chocolate's sweet. What was she doing with the prime minister? What was all this talk of a 'scheme'?

Imogen pulled the biscuit tin on to the kitchen table and stuck another Bourbon in her mouth. Crumbs fell on the laptop, but Imogen didn't even notice. She was transfixed by the article.

Annabelle Clifford-Marbles spent several years rescuing orphans abroad, before launching her new business in England. She already enjoys the backing of—

'Imogen?' Mum was standing at the kitchen doorway. 'Is everything okay?'

Imogen looked from the laptop to her mother, who was tying her dressing gown round her waist. Mum raised her eyebrows, waiting for Imogen to speak.

'I know that woman from the news,' whispered Imogen. Her voice was as dry as crumbs. 'She's the woman who kidnapped Marie.'