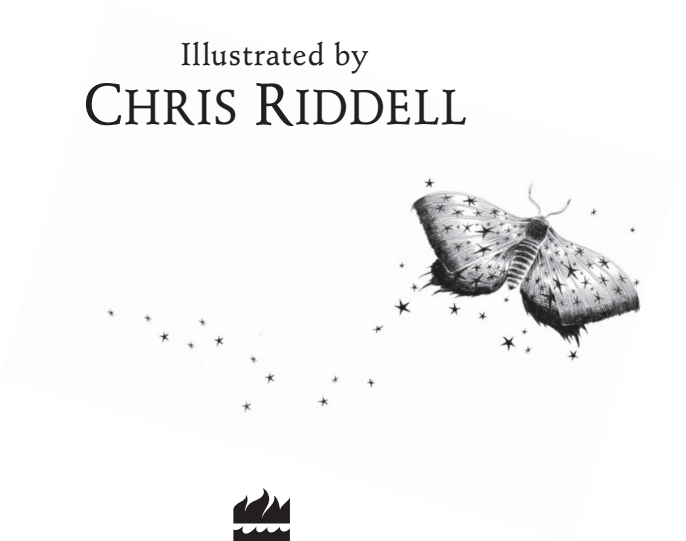
A Clock of Stars

The Shadow Moth

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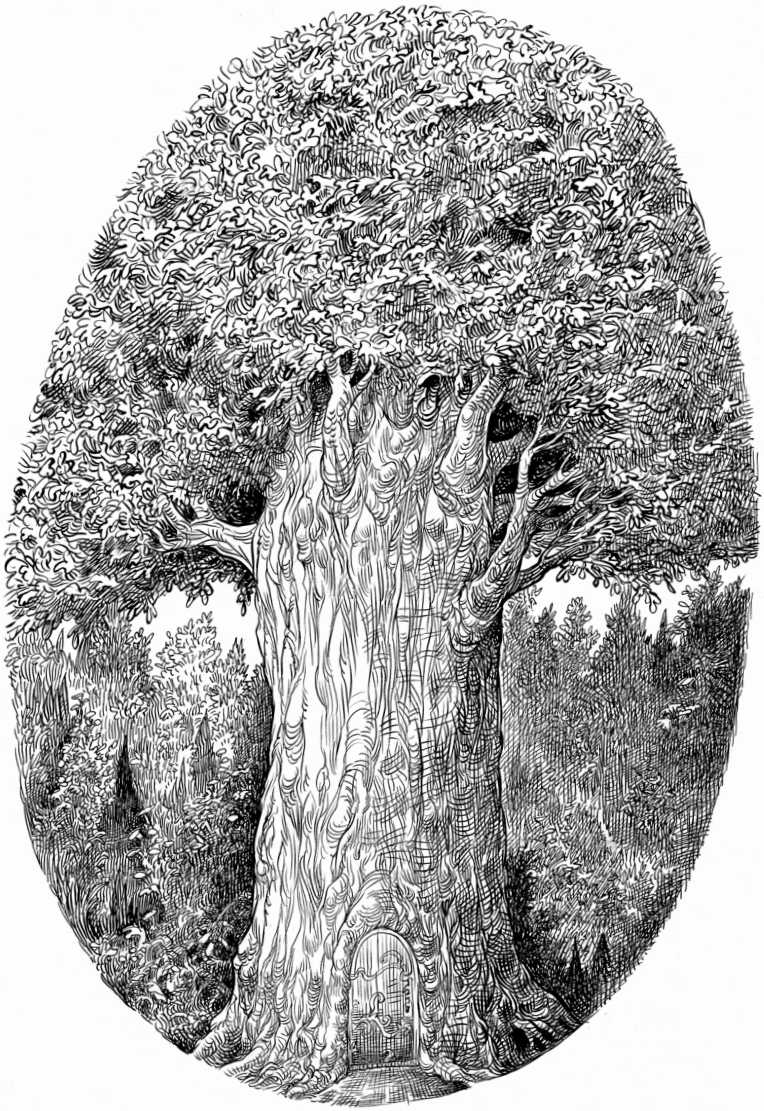


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For Mini and Bonnie, who will always be little to me



A Cast of Characters





ZUBY



KING DRAKOMOR



MIRO


ANNESHKA MAZANAR


LOFKINYE LOLO


YEEDARSH LOKAI



BLAZEN BILBETZ


ANDEL



OCHI

PROLOGUE

The monster stood alone on the side of the mountain. He held out his hands.

'Fly with courage and speed and the will of the stars. If you just do one thing, help return what is ours.'

He parted his claws so there was enough space for the moth to escape. It crawled over the back of his hand and circled his wrist. It had a silver-grey, fluffy body.

'Fly with courage and speed and the will of the stars. If you just do one thing, help return what is ours.'

The moth opened and closed its wings to show it was thinking. Then it travelled up the monster's arm. 'I'd forgotten how strange you creatures are,' said the monster, scratching his bald head. 'All the other moths just flew away.'

The moth's tiny legs tickled the monster's collarbone. He closed his eyes and repeated the words for a third time.

'Fly with courage and speed and the will of the stars. If you just do one thing, help return what is ours.'

The monster opened his eyes. The moth was crawling across his face, past his teeth, which stuck out like tusks,

over his squished-in nose and on to the top of his head.

'That's it,' he said. 'You've reached the end of Zuby. There's no more of me.'

There was a faint flutter and he looked up. The moth was flying away, but it wasn't travelling across the forests, like the moths he'd released before. It was heading up the face of the mountain.

Zuby soon lost track of its shape in the darkness, even with his sensitive eyes.

'Where are you going?' he called. 'You won't find it among the stars!'





PART 1

Chapter 1

'Now, you slithering monster of the deep, prepare to die!'

The knight charged. The giant sea slug bared its teeth and growled, moving to protect the treasure. But the knight was quick. Her sword plunged into the soft, slimy flesh of the monster.

'This is the bit where you die,' said the knight.

'I don't want to die,' said the sea slug.

'But you have to. You're the baddy.'

'Why do I always play the baddy?'

'Marie! You said you would.'

'How about – this time – the knight dies and gets dragged away by the sea slug to—'

'No. That's not the story. That's not how I wrote it. The knight kills the monster and reclaims the treasure and they all live happily ever after.'

'All except the sea slug . . .'

'It's just a bit part.'

The sea slug began to peel off her costume.

'What are you doing?' said the knight. 'We haven't finished yet.'

'I have.'

'But what about the dress rehearsal?'

The monster opened the treasure chest and ran her feelers over the gems. 'Well, if I'm just a bit part, then you'll be fine without me.'

'Hands off – that's my rock collection,' said the knight. She dropped her sword and reached for the treasure chest. The lid moved more easily than she'd expected and it came down hard, squashing a few of the sea slug's tentacles. The monster yowled.

This time they really fought. Underneath her outfit, the sea slug was a little girl with pinkish skin and wild red hair. Her name was Marie.

Marie stuffed the stolen rocks into her pockets. 'You said I could keep one stone!' she yelled.

The knight had short brown hair that she'd cut herself and smudges of freckles that ran across her pale cheeks like warpaint. Her armour was constructed from tinfoil and cereal boxes, and her name was Imogen. She was older than Marie, so she knew better – about pretty much everything.

'I said you could keep one stone if you acted in my play,' said Imogen, 'and you haven't.' She grabbed Marie and emptied the stones from her pockets.

'Mum!' cried Marie. 'Imogen's picking on me again!'

'No, I'm not!' yelled Imogen, releasing Marie's arm.

Marie ran into the house with one hand in her pocket. Imogen wondered if she still had a stone. She'd extract it later.

Imogen picked up her rock collection as rain began to fall. If only she could act every character in the play herself, then she wouldn't need Marie. It was hard work making her sister a star.

She followed Marie inside and dumped her cargo by the back door. Mum was standing in the hallway, wearing a long red dress that Imogen hadn't seen before. Marie was hiding behind her, with just one eye and a few curls visible.

Imogen knew how this would go. She was about to get told off. Imogen hated being told off. After all, she hadn't meant to squish Marie's fingers in the treasure chest.

Imogen eyeballed her mum. 'Why are you so dressed up?' she said.

'Never mind that,' snapped Mum. '*You* are in trouble. I'm not putting up with this behaviour any more – the fighting with your sister, the mess you've made in the garden—'

'It's a sea-slug cave!'

'Imogen! You're too old for this nonsense! And you're certainly too old to be making Marie cry.'

'She started it.'

'Well, I'm finishing it,' said Mum. 'Grandma's looking after you for the rest of the day and she'll take you to the tea rooms if you're good. Are you going to be good?'

'Where are you going?' asked Imogen.

'It doesn't matter where I'm going. I've left you home-made pizza for tonight. You'll have a great time. Now promise me you'll be nice to your sister.'

Marie's face had turned blotchy from fake crying. She looked like a half-ripened raspberry. Imogen did *not* want to be nice to her sister.

'Come on, Imogen,' said Mum in a softer voice. 'I'm counting on you.'

The doorbell rang and Mum turned in a circle. 'He's early!' she cried.

'Who's early?' asked Marie.

'You'll see,' said Mum.