A Clock of Stars

Beyond the Mountains

Francesca Gibbons

Illustrated by
Chris Riddell



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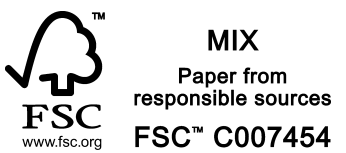
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Chapter 1

The trees leaned out of Ochi's way, creating a path through the darkness.

Ochi walked without hesitation. She knew her way through these woods – she was the forest witch, after all.

A pony followed at a respectful distance. There was a pillowcase tied to its saddle with a very strange clock inside.

Anneshka Mazanar followed the pony. There was nothing respectful about the way that she walked. She muttered as she stumbled through the forest. Andel's mechanical dragon had scorched her hands and face. She'd lost a slipper and her wedding dress was in tatters. Brambles trailed from her petticoats, swishing like a long barbed tail.

Although Anneshka's burns were painful, the thought of what she'd lost hurt more. She'd been *this close* to being crowned queen. *This close* to fulfilling her destiny.

Now Drakomor was dead. And it wouldn't be long before all of Yaroslav heard about the things she had done; the people she'd had killed and the prince who'd got away . . .

Anneshka imagined her mother's reaction. *You could have*

married the king, but oh no! You had to have a dragon, had to set fire to the castle. Stupid girl. What will the neighbours say?

No. Anneshka would not return to Yaroslav. The witch was her only hope.

Ochi strode ahead, lantern swinging. She was tall and slender with pale skin and black hair. She'd offered Anneshka shelter. Perhaps she had answers too.

The witch knows where I'm destined to rule, thought Anneshka. She gritted her teeth and limped on. *I can still have a kingdom and a castle. I'll show mother. I'll show everyone.*

Ochi's cottage appeared without warning. One moment, there was nothing but trees, the next Anneshka was standing by an old house. Ochi was busy unsaddling the pony so Anneshka let herself in.

There was a fireplace and higgledy-piggledy furniture. There were lots of clay pots, and a chicken was roosting in a drawer.

So this is what I'm reduced to, thought Anneshka as she collapsed into a chair.

A pot on the mantelpiece rattled. Anneshka looked up. The pot was still.

'This place is driving me mad,' she murmured and she pulled up a stool for her feet. One foot was bloody and bare. The other wore a grubby silk slipper.

'That's right, child, make yourself at home,' said a rasping voice from behind. Anneshka jumped to her feet. The voice

belonged to a very old woman. Her skin was wrinkly and her muscles had wasted away. Anneshka scanned the room for a sharp object.

'Don't be afraid,' wheezed the hag. 'It's only me that changes. I'm sure you're as beautiful inside as out.'

Anneshka recoiled. Was that . . . 'Ochi?'

'What did you expect?' said the woman. 'No one stays young for ever.'

Anneshka did not like the way that she smiled, but she knew she was speaking the truth. The young witch and the old woman were the very same person. Anneshka recognised the eyes.

'We'd better see to your burns,' said Ochi-the-ancient. She opened a drawer and removed two snails.

'What are you doing?' cried Anneshka. 'Get those things away from me!'

'You won't be queen of anything if you die of an infection,' said Ochi, hobbling closer. 'Those injuries need treating.'

The snails remained hidden in their shells. Anneshka looked down at her hands where the skin had blistered, caught by the dragon's fire. 'Oh, all right,' she sneered. 'Do what you must.'

Ochi placed the snails on Anneshka's wrists and stroked the shells with her twisty old fingers until their inhabitants emerged.

Anneshka fought the urge to throw the snails across the room. She hated the way they had eyes out on stalks; she

hated the way that they moved. Everything about them was disgusting.

'There are burns on your face,' said the witch.

Anneshka wrinkled her nose, but her hands did feel better . . . She let Ochi place a snail on her chin. The creature's cold foot slithered up her cheek and across the bridge of her nose.

By the time Ochi was done, Anneshka's burns were covered in an iridescent layer of slime.

'This had better work,' she grumbled.

The old woman put the snails on the floor and they started the long journey back to their drawer.

'What a queen you will be,' sighed the witch, sitting down.

'Queen of what? Queen of where?' snapped Anneshka. She was growing tired of the way Ochi talked.

'I can ask the stars . . . if you're willing to pay.'

A pot by Ochi's chair started shaking. The witch pushed it back with her heel.

'You're hiding something,' said Anneshka. 'What's in all these pots?'

'I'm not hiding anything, child. Why would I hide things from you?'

Anneshka scowled at the witch. She looked frail; a bundle of bones with an eggshell for a head. *It would be easy to crack her skull open*, thought Anneshka; *see if the secrets fall out*.



The pots by the window were sealed with plugs. Anneshka snatched one and read the label.

W. Lokai

The label meant nothing to her. She grabbed another pot, leaving slime fingerprints.

Ş. Zārda

She'd never heard of a potion called that.

One of the pots had no stopper. Anneshka peered inside, half expecting a frog to leap out. It was empty so she looked at the label.

V. Mazanar

'That's my mother,' cried Anneshka. 'That's her name!' She took a moment to steady herself. 'Why is there a pot named after my mother?'

'Come,' said the witch. 'It's time to rest.'

'Tell me now!' Anneshka marched over to the snails and raised her single slippered foot above one of them.

'It's too late. I'll tell you in the morning.'

Anneshka lowered her slipper, relishing the crunch.

'My snail!' cried Ochi. Her face twisted in pain.

'Talk,' demanded Anneshka. Her bare foot hovered above the second snail.

'Your mother purchased a prophecy on the day you were born,' said Ochi. 'I told her you'd grow up to be queen.'

Anneshka's toe pressed the snail's shell. 'I already know that.'

'Please! Not Boris!' begged the witch. She talked faster. 'When your mother dies, she'll pay for the prophecy with her soul. I'll keep it in that pot.' The witch paused. She looked ashamed. 'Each soul, freely given, grants me more time in this body.'

Anneshka raised an eyebrow and stepped away from the snail. 'You collect souls to extend your miserable life?'

There were pots on the shelves and stacked up in corners, pots on the table and under the chair. Anneshka turned a full circle. She looked down at the witch. 'Just how old are you?'

Ochi stared at Boris as he inched under a cupboard. 'I'm twenty-three,' she whispered. 'Seven hundred and twenty-three.'

Chapter 2

Someone had stolen the keys for the windows in room 32C. Outside, it was one of the last hot days of the year. Inside, a class of Year Sevens were being baked alive.

Mr Morris was being baked too. 'Turn to page eight,' he said, and he plodded across the room, slow as a lizard in a tank.

Imogen flicked through the textbook, enjoying the mini-breeze the pages made as they turned. She paused at a photo of an astronaut gazing out of a bubble-shaped window.

That's Earth, said the text. *That's home. That's where we make our stand.*

Imogen wondered if the astronaut felt homesick or excited when he looked at the Earth from this strange new perspective. *Perhaps*, she thought, *he feels a bit of both.*

She glanced up at her teacher. He wasn't talking about astronauts. He was talking about the differences between liquids and solids.

Sweat is a liquid, thought Imogen, as a drop ran down Mr Morris's face. *Time is a solid*, she continued in her head. *Nothing can make it move faster.*

There were five minutes until the end of the school day. Five minutes until Imogen finished her first week at secondary school.

It hadn't been a bad start. She'd made friends, and she liked her form tutor, but everyone already knew her as 'that girl who disappeared'. At least they didn't know she was seeing a therapist.

Other students kept asking if she'd run away or been kidnapped. Imogen decided against telling the truth. They'd never believe she'd found a door in a tree, made friends with a prince and flown on the backs of giant birds . . .

Three minutes until home time. Imogen tried to focus on the textbook.

Space travel comes at a cost. The astronauts on this mission won't see their families for five years. And when they return, it'll take many more years to adjust to normal life.

Two minutes until home time.

Mum would be waiting at the school gate. Imogen wished she wouldn't. None of the other parents did that, but Mum had been different since Imogen went missing.

It had been her idea to get a therapist. She said Imogen needed 'special support'. Apparently, that was code for hours of talking . . . As if you could be talked into forgetting about a magical world.

One minute until home time.

'At room temperature, water is a liquid,' said Mr Morris. He sounded exhausted. 'But when it's heated, water starts to –' the school bell rang and the children grabbed their books and poured out of the room – 'evaporate,' finished the teacher, flopping back in his chair.

The door banged shut and the classroom went quiet. Mr Morris closed his eyes. Imogen waited to be noticed. The teacher took a deep breath, letting the air in through his nose and out through his mouth. He held a water bottle to his cheek. He was sitting very still.

'Sir?'

Mr Morris jumped. 'Imogen! You're still here!'

'You know astronauts have been to the moon. Have they been to other places?'

Mr Morris lowered the water bottle from his face. 'Well . . . yes. NASA sent probes to Mars.'

'But there are no people on Mars.'

'No, Imogen. Not yet.'

Imogen narrowed her eyes. 'Do you think there might be another planet that the astronauts haven't discovered yet? Like our planet, with people and animals . . . but different?'

'I don't know,' said the teacher. 'But if something like that *does* exist, it's very far away. Even if you had a ship that travelled at the speed of light, it'd take many years to get there. You might be an old woman by the time you touched down.'

Imogen found it hard to imagine that she'd ever be an old woman.

'Why do you ask?' said Mr Morris.

Imogen stood up to leave. Enough time had passed. There'd be no one around to see her meet Mum at the gates.

'Oh, never mind,' she said. 'I was just curious.'