YESTERDAY CRUMB AND THE STORM IN A TEACUP

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Title Artwork TK

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Prologue

Upon a snowy winter's night, in an old Northern town called Sorrow-by-the-Moor, a door appeared where it had not been before.

Most doors have the courtesy to attach themselves to a house, or a school, or a museum, but this door was not nearly so well-mannered. It floated a few inches above the cobblestones, as if held there by strings, its wood coloured the warm brown of very strong tea.

The door slowly creaked open. A lady stepped out, wreathed in the aromas of cinnamon and gingerbread. She wore a dress like woven candyfloss. Her butterscotch-blonde hair tumbled from beneath a pointed hat around her rosy-pink cheeks. Her eyes were the colour of lavender. Upon her shoulder was a raven with sugar-white feathers.

‘Over to you,’ said the lady, hands on hips as she cast her gaze around the town square. The raven flapped on to a streetlamp. ‘The shop needs me like a kitchen needs a kettle, and I’ve been away for long enough as it is.’

‘This is all stuff and nonsense, Miss Dumpling,’ said the raven, anxiously preening his feathers. ‘Are you quite sure about this . . . *project* of yours?’

Miss Dumpling plucked a pink teacup from thin air, plumes of steam drifting from the amber liquid inside. ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged that a witch in possession of great magic *must* be in want of an apprentice.’

While the raven muttered something under his breath, Miss Dumpling knelt upon a snow-covered flowerbed. She plunged her hand into the earth below, bringing up a pinch of soil. After sprinkling the soil into her tea, she drank it down in one go. For a moment, she blinked very rapidly. Then she smiled, feeling the magic at work. Her tongue had turned honey-gold in colour.

First, Miss Dumpling spoke to a sycamore tree (she was usually only fluent in oak and willow). Sadly, it was very old, and it no longer paid attention to the business of humans.

Second, she addressed the wind, but it was far too excitable and did not give her a straight answer.

Third, she consulted with a statue outside the church. It raised its stone top hat to her, and then pointed towards some circus tents on the edge of town.

Miss Dumpling beamed and thanked the statue. 'You're all set up with directions,' she said to the bird. 'Now, shall you do as I have asked, or must I find a new familiar who *will*?'

After a pause, the raven let out a prim sigh. 'I've never failed you before, and I don't plan to start today.'

With a wink, Miss Dumpling disappeared through the tea-coloured door, and left the raven grumbling and groaning as he set off towards the circus tents.

Meanwhile, curious little creatures were watching from the shadows. They nervously peered out from alleys and sewers, behind dustbins and under motorcars, all fur and feathers and horns and claws. They were whispering breathlessly amongst themselves.

'By Oberon, don't you know who that was?'

'Of course I do! Does it mean what I think it means?'

'Oh, yes! It means Dwimmerly End is on its way. Dwimmerly End is coming to town!'

Chapter One

Yesterday's Dreams

There was once a girl named Yesterday Crumb, and that was not even the most peculiar thing about her. For one, she lived and worked in a travelling circus, even though she was only twelve years old. For another, her hair was the colour of pumpkins, fiercer than any shade of ginger you have ever seen before, while her skin was so pale it was almost silver.

Oddest of all, instead of ordinary human ears, she had the pointed ears of a fox, reddish-brown and tipped at the end with the black of burnt toast. They poked out from her tangle of hair, and even though they were fairly small, any vixen worth her claws would tell you they promised to be marvellous in the future.

She spent her days curled in the corner of her iron cage, gawked at by circus patrons who paid good money to see the girl with the fox ears. She slept there, on a bed of straw; she ate there; she lived and played and dreamed there, with no friends save for the donkey who pulled her cage whenever the circus travelled to a new town.

'Would you look at those ears!' said a young lady in the crowd, tapping on her husband's shoulder.

Yesterday was bathed in the yellow light of a sign which read, *Yesterday Crumb, the Amazing Fox Girl!* Snow was starting to fall, but she was clad in a simple white dress. And, although it was against the rules, she had wrapped herself in a tattered brown blanket.

'You don't suppose they're real, do you?' the lady continued. 'Surely they're glued on or some such.'

The gentleman leaned in and studied her ears, as if Yesterday were a specimen in a museum gallery and not a girl with thoughts and feelings and a heart that could ache. 'Hm. Look pretty real to me.'

'What an odd little thing she is,' said the lady, barely suppressing a shudder.

I can hear you, you know! thought Yesterday. *I'm not called the Amazing Fox Girl for nothing, even if these ears do ruin just about everything else.*

She held her tongue, the constellation of bruises on her arm a reminder of what had happened the last time she had insulted a circus patron.

Instead, she tried to ignore the voices, and disappear into her one and only book. It was only small, no bigger than her palm, and was practically falling apart these days. The title on the front cover read *The Pocket Book of Faeries* and there was a picture of a man with dragonfly wings underneath.

It was a kind of storybook, written like a birdwatcher's guide, only for made-up creatures rather than real ones. Even so, every time Yesterday read it, she pretended that such creatures really existed. That there were river trolls who lived under bridges and feasted on moss and syrup for their supper. That there were pixies the size of toadstools who were born every time someone fell in love. That there were goblins who travelled the world with their markets, trading their wares in exchange for your earliest memories or the last years of your life.

Yesterday flipped open the cover, lingering briefly on the torn fragment of paper that should have been the book's first page. All that was left of it was a little scrap in the corner, on which her name, *Yesterday,* was written, and nothing more.

The book had been found by Yesterday's side, her only possession, when the ringmaster had discovered her as a baby outside his tent twelve years earlier. Yesterday often wondered who had left her the book and had written her name in it, and if it was the same person who had left her all alone at the circus, but finding out the answers to such questions was not a luxury afforded to the Amazing Fox Girl.

Yesterday sat and read all evening until finally a grumpy-looking man in a top hat and dirty crimson jacket came over and slotted his key into the cage's lock.

'Grubs up, Crumb,' grunted Ringmaster Skelm, who was not well-known for his friendly manner.

Crumb was the surname he had given to Yesterday since, in Skelm's opinion, she was so small and obviously unwanted by whoever had left her behind.

'I'm not hungry,' said Yesterday, refusing to look up from her book.

'You'll do as you're told, girl,' the ringmaster said, baring his teeth. 'Or you'll have no dinner for three nights. Do you understand? Are you listening to me?'

Yesterday was not, in fact, listening in the slightest. She was completely lost in her book, as ever. Besides,

she was sick of the same boring old turnip soup he fed them every day. It was hardly worth standing up for.

'Will you get your nose out of that thing for once!' Skelm bellowed.

'It's called a book, Ringmaster Skelm.' Yesterday sighed, turning a page. 'You might try reading one someday.'

Skelm's expression twisted into a sneer. 'You and that *book*. Forget your dreams and stories,' he said to her. 'Girls like you don't go on adventures. You don't end up with happily-ever-afters. You're no elegant princess, winning the heart of a prince . . .'

Yesterday tapped her chin thoughtfully. 'Fine by me. What would I do with the heart of a prince, anyway? Wear it on a necklace? If that's your idea of a happily-ever-after, you can keep it. Besides, this isn't that kind of book.'

Skelm gritted his teeth. 'I don't care what kind of book it is. You belong to this circus, and a circus attraction is all you'll ever be.'

Yesterday fixed him with one of her fiercest glares. 'And the ringmaster of a tacky circus, who picks on little girls just to feel important, is all *you*'ll ever be. Now, would you mind disappearing?' she said airily,

eyes returning to her book. 'You're eating into my reading time.'

There was a moment of agonising silence as Skelm's face contorted into a snarl. 'See what your attitude gets you, you little horror,' he growled at last. 'Nothing, that's what.'

And with that, he locked the door again and put the key in his pocket before storming off.

Yesterday gave another sigh, a prisoner once more. She looked out at the world beyond her cage. Paper lanterns twinkled among the circus tents, lanterns which she liked to imagine were jewels in a dragon's hoard. She watched as the remaining circus patrons lingered around the closing tents, snapping up their last toffee apples, marvelling at the acrobats' final performance, begging for their fortunes to be told by a yawning Madame Zufarru.

Soon they would return to their normal lives in the town of Sorrow-by-the-Moor. They'd go back to their normal homes and families, their hot dinners and warm, comfortable beds.

The light illuminating her cage was extinguished, making it difficult to read comfortably. Yesterday slumped back against the cage's bars. She glanced at *The Pocket Book of Faeries*. 'Maybe I would have had

a normal life too,' she said to no one in particular, 'if I hadn't been born with these ridiculous ears.'

'Why do young people always think being *normal* would solve all their problems?' said a voice.

Yesterday sat bolt upright in her cage. She looked all around her, trying to work out where the voice was coming from.

'Then, the next minute, they're desperate to be *special*!' the voice went on. 'Being contradictory is a pitiful way to live one's life, if you ask me.'

Yesterday looked up. Perched on the top of her cage was a raven, his white feathers shimmering in the moonlight.

'Don't you know it's polite to reply when one is spoken to?' the raven chided. 'Standards are slipping these days. They really are!'

Yesterday stared at the bird. *I must have fallen asleep at some point*, she thought. *I must be dreaming*. 'I beg your pardon,' she said, playing along with the dream, 'but I think you just *talked*.'

'What incredible powers of observation you command!' the raven squawked. 'I wonder what great discovery you'll make next. Perhaps you shall tell me that rain is wet, or that sphinxes riddle? Stand up straight, now, and remember your manners.'

Yesterday grudgingly got to her feet. 'Make out that I'm stupid all you like. But it's not exactly every day you meet a talking raven!'

'A raven, indeed!' the bird snapped. 'I may have been born a raven – we all have a past – but I am so much more than that now. I am a *familiar* and I must insist that you respect my title. I had to achieve all sorts of qualifications from the Royal College to get it. And I have a name, you know – a very fine one at that. It is Madrigal.'

'Oh, right. Well, I'm sorry, but there really was no way of me knowing,' Yesterday pointed out. She added, 'My name is Yesterday Crumb.'

Madrigal looked her up and down. 'Yesterday?' he echoed. 'How preposterous. A foolish name, if you want my opinion. A foolish name for a fool girl.'

Yesterday folded her arms. She was rapidly abandoning any desire to be civil. 'If you want *my* opinion—' She stopped abruptly. Her heart skittered as a thought came to her. 'Wait a minute, did you say you were a . . . *familiar*?'

She fumbled for *The Pocket Book of Faeries*. She had definitely seen that word before.

As she flipped frantically through the pages, Madrigal went on. 'Why of course I am a familiar! Anyone with

a slightest bit of sense could have told you that. I am so very different from any ordinary raven that you might as well call me a *not*-raven, much as a "cat" familiar is a not-cat, and a "toad" familiar is a not-toad. There are conventions to these things, you see.'

Yesterday reached the right page of *The Pocket Book of Faeries*. '*Entry Sixty-Three: Familiar*,' she read out loud, squinting to read in the darkness. '*Animals who spend a great deal of time in the company of faeries often develop magical powers of their own, including speech and low-level bewitchments, making them excellent companions for witches . . .*'

She looked up at Madrigal, wide-eyed. 'You're a familiar,' she said. 'You're talking to me . . .' She glanced down at her book again, then back up at Madrigal. 'That's impossible. *This* is impossible. Completely and totally impossible!'

She truly hoped that he would prove her wrong.

'What a small mind you have,' squawked the not-raven, 'throwing around words like *impossible* as if they mean anything at all. Look at me, fool-girl, and listen. I am talking. I am a familiar. I am, you will agree, not simply possible – I am real.'

'If you *were* a familiar,' Yesterday argued, feeling as though her whole world was being turned inside out,

'that would make you a faerie, wouldn't it? Which would mean faeries exist. But faeries can't exist! Everyone knows that! This has to be a dream. It *has* to be.'

Madrigal tutted at her. 'This certainly isn't a dream, and faeries certainly exist. Who do you think ensures the seasons change when they should? Who do you think put the moon in the sky? Queen Victoria?'

The familiar chortled to himself, though Yesterday wasn't sure she got the joke. She wanted to tell him how peculiar he sounded. Then again, she was holding a conversation with a talking bird, so it was a little late to start calling things peculiar now.

Madrigal glanced around the circus and cawed disapprovingly. 'What a dismal place the world would be if it belonged only to humans. You know, it was *humans* who hunted down their most magical people and drove them into the realms of faeries all those years ago.'

'Our most magical?' Yesterday flicked through her book again, landing on a page with a picture of a man with horns sprouting from his head and a broomstick in his hand. 'You mean . . . *witches*?'

Madrigal peered at her book. 'Of course I mean witches! After they ran away from your ugly human

cities and into the faerie kingdoms, witches soon became more faerie than human. Lucky them. Quite the improvement, I'd say. But why am I telling *you* all this? You should know it by heart. Every young witch learns this story in their crib . . .'

Yesterday blinked. 'What did you say?'

'I said, all young witches learn this in . . . wait. Surely you know you're a witch at least, don't you?'

Yesterday said nothing. She just stared. Madrigal groaned. 'For Oberon's sake,' he said. 'You have ears like that, and you couldn't figure it out? You even have *The Pocket Book of Faeries*! What does that volume say about witches, fool-girl?'

With trembling hands, Yesterday glanced down at the page. Her voice was shaking as she read out loud. '*After witches were forced out of human society, they reconnected with the magic of the wild. This soon evolved into a physical manifestation of certain animal features, like hooves, horns, pointed ears, snouts . . .*'

Madrigal cocked his head at her. 'You read that and never linked it to your own ears? A fool-girl, and how!'

Yesterday reached for her fox ears, touching their furry tips tentatively. 'I always thought my ears were

only good for getting me the wrong sort of attention,' she muttered. 'If faeries are real, how come I've never seen one before? And how come I can't do magic? If I were a witch with magical powers, I would have broken out of this cage, for a start.'

'Everyone knows what happens if you spend too long in the human world, away from magic,' Madrigal said. 'Well, everyone except you, it seems. You *lose* it. You become a strangeling.'

'A . . . a what?' Yesterday asked. *That* word certainly wasn't in her book.

'I am not a librarian whom you can pester for answers to every little question,' said Madrigal. 'You want to know more? Ask Miss Dumpling yourself. We must hurry now.'

'Who's Miss Dumpling?' asked Yesterday.

Madrigal ignored the question. Instead, he swooped down and waved a weary wing over the padlock on Yesterday's cage. A second later, it melted. The metal trickled down the bars and on to the ground. It had been turned into golden honey, as one might drizzle into tea.

'Impossibler and impossibler,' said Yesterday, so startled that she forgot proper grammar.

Madrigal was already spreading his wings. 'Follow

closely, little fool-girl. Madrigal the familiar waits for no one!'

With a flourish of his white feathers, the not-raven flapped up into the air, and soared off towards the forest that grew beyond the circus's boundaries.

Carefully, Yesterday pushed open the cage door. Her heart was thundering against her ribs. She fetched her satchel from the corner and stowed her book inside. Then, slinging it over her shoulder and pulling her blanket more tightly around her like a cape, she took a deep, deep breath.

And she stepped out of her cage.

Yesterday felt electric as her first taste of freedom coursed through her veins. Quite without meaning to, she began to laugh.

But it was too early to celebrate her escape. She darted away from the cage, creeping between the tents as she headed towards the forest, keeping an eye out for Ringmaster Skelm.

At the edge of the circus grounds was a wrought-iron fence separating her from the forest beyond. As she placed a foot on to the first rung, she heard shouting. She peered back over her shoulder.

'Yesterday!' Skelm roared, charging after her, his voice bellowing through the whole circus. 'Yesterday

Crumb, come back here now, you wandering good-for-nothing!'

'Goodbye, Ringmaster Skelm,' said Yesterday defiantly. And without a second thought, she climbed over the fence and disappeared into the forest.