The Wonderling

Songcatcher

The Wonderling

Mira Bartók

WALKER BOOKS

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For Doug, for love and wonder;
for Jed, who helped to build my flying suit;
and for Jen, who gave me wings to fly

The World of The Wonderling

LUMENTOWN
The WILD WOOD
PINECONE'S HOUSE
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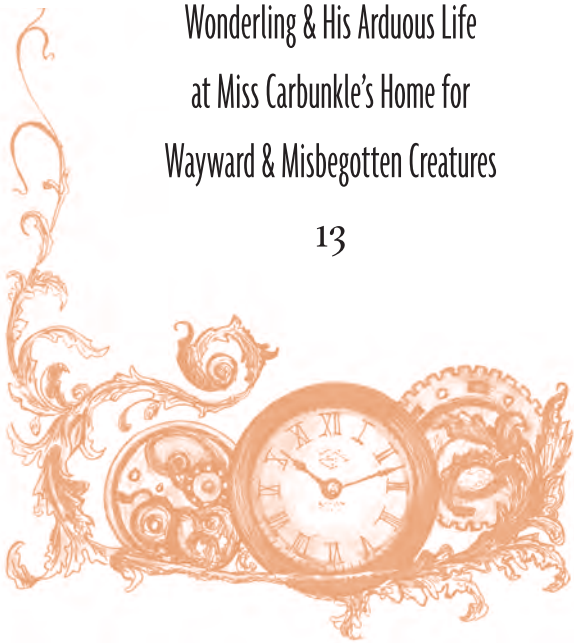

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We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams.

—Arthur O'Shaughnessy, "Ode"

Part The First

On the Mysterious Origins of the Wonderling & His Arduous Life at Miss Carbunkle's Home for Wayward & Misbegotten Creatures

CHAPTER 1

An Inauspicious Beginning

EFORE HE WAS CALLED THE WONDERLING, he had many names: Puddlehead, Plonker, Groundling and Spike, among others. He didn't mind these much, not even Groundling. The name he truly disliked was the first he ever remembered being called: Number Thirteen. It wasn't a name, really. Just a number, written in red, on a piece of paper, filed in a drawer, in a room full of hundreds of files and drawers. It was embossed on a small tin medallion attached to a piece of cord he wore around his neck at a home for unclaimed creatures. It was sewn inside his tattered grey shirt and shabby grey trousers. And it was painted on his hard, narrow bed in a room full of the beds of other unclaimed creatures who had at least been fortunate enough to have been given the gift of their own names at birth.

He looked like a young fox but stood upright like a child and had no tail to speak of. His eyes were a lovely chestnut brown and flecked with gold. But there was something about them that gave one the sense that, although he had not been in this world very long, he carried within him some inexplicable sorrow.

He was a creature with an innocent heart. What kind of creature, though, who could say? Despite his fox kit face, his snout was more dog than fox, and there was something rabbity about him too, in the way his nose twitched when he sensed danger, and how he trembled when he heard the loud clang of the orphanage bell. But the most singular thing about him was that he had only one ear.

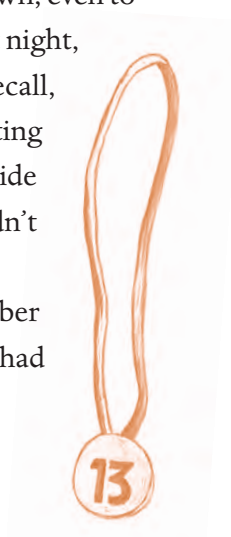
How he had lost his other ear (or whether he was born without it) he did not know. His right ear, the pointy ear of a fox, was velvety soft and covered in reddish-brown fur like the rest of him, but for a small white spot on his chest shaped like a leaf. Except for his missing ear, Number Thirteen had nothing out of the ordinary about him, at least not outwardly, for he lived in a world where the line between animals and humans was not so clearly defined. Nevertheless, people thought him strange. "Bad luck, that ear!" they whispered to one another. "Must be deaf as a doorknob, that one! And that name – Number Thirteen! Bad luck indeed!"

At night, he comforted himself, as frightened children

do all over the world. He'd reach beneath his pillow and pull out something soft and blue: a fragment of his baby blanket. Embroidered on one of the corners was what looked like the initial *M,* although he couldn't quite make it out, for some of the threads, which had once been brilliant gold, had faded or fallen out over time. Wrapped inside the scrap of blanket was a tiny gold key. He didn't know what it opened, or if it had ever opened anything important at all – just that the key and the blue scrap were the only things remaining from his very first home.

But Number Thirteen – one-eared, nameless and small of stature, for he never grew taller than three feet high – could not remember where he came from. Everyone comes from somewhere, and yet there he was, his origins unknown, even to himself. He could not remember being tucked in at night, or if he had ever been truly loved. What he did recall, however, was a sound from long ago: a beautiful, lilting song, floating through a sky full of stars, landing inside his fledgling of a heart. Other than that, he couldn't remember a thing.

When asked about his early years, Number Thirteen could recall only the terrible place he had been sent to.



CHAPTER 2

The Home

THE ORPHANAGE where Number Thirteen was abandoned shortly after his birth (by whom, he did not know) was called Miss Carbunkle's Home for Wayward and Misbegotten Creatures but referred to by its miserable occupants as, simply, "the Home." It was located in the country, far from city or town. The Home, which had been built centuries ago in the shape of a giant cross, had been many things – first a monastery, then a prison, then a workhouse for the poor and finally an asylum for unclaimed creatures.

On the front of the Home's brochure was a happy-go-lucky creature with the head of a rabbit and the body of a little girl, wearing a polka-dot dress and bow, clutching a bouquet

of daisies. Beneath the picture, the caption read: *Have you been unexpectedly burdened by a recently orphaned or unclaimed creature? Worry not! We have just the solution for you!*

The advertisement boasted of "a warm and welcoming place, nestled in an idyllic valley, surrounded by fields of buttercups, bluebells and heather." But none of the orphans ever saw a single flower or felt a blade of grass beneath their feet once they walked through the Home's ominous front gate. In fact, the only green they saw was the moss that grew on the massive stone wall surrounding the place.

And Miss Carbunkle's Home was anything but welcoming and warm.

The high black gate that rose to an arch in the middle stood a hundred feet from the entrance. Through it, any carriages came and went. Each of the gate's iron bars was topped by a spike that resembled the tip of a medieval spear, so sharp that birds never perched there. Hanging from its apex was a rusty metal sign with faded black letters announcing the name of the wretched place. So many of the letters had worn off over time, the sign now read:

M UNKLE'S H ME F R AYWARD AND M B TT N E T R S

On each side of the sign was the profile of a hawk. Someone or some force of nature had dislodged the sign long ago, and it dangled from a single nail, causing it to clank loudly

against the gate whenever the wind blew or whenever someone entered or left the grounds.

Let us just say that more entered than left, and leave it at that.

Two dim-witted mastiffs the size of calves stood chained together in front of the gate, barking incessantly and salivating so much that small puddles of drool gathered at their feet. At night, beneath the eerie glow of the gaslight, the guard dogs resembled a slobbery Cerberus, the three-headed guardian of hell – minus one head, of course. The dogs responded to one voice only, that of the headmistress, Miss Carbunkle, who ruled over her dominion with a cold, impenetrable heart.

To enter the orphanage itself, one had to pass through a heavy oak door, built into the wall and impossible to open without Miss Carbunkle's big brass key. Carved into the door was the figure of another hawk, clutching a tiny mouse in its

talons, a reminder lest anyone forget their place. The only way to pass from the Home to the outside world was through that door. There had been other doors built into the wall that surrounded the three-storey building and grounds – ancient arched doors with beautiful pictures carved and painted on them – but Miss Carbunkle had sealed them all off when she bought the place. Along the formidable wall, only the ghost image of each original door remained – a palimpsest of an exit to the outside world.

The wall, built centuries ago from thousands of rough-hewn stones, was three storeys high and six and a half feet thick. As with "the Home," the orphans called it simply "the Wall." Except for the top of a tall white birch, the orphans could not see a thing over the Wall – not the lush valley, nor the rolling hills that embraced it, nor the farmlands beyond the hills, the blue mountains beyond the horizon, nor, beyond that, the glowing spires of the Great White City of Lumentown.

And so the shy one-eared creature adapted to his surroundings and grew. Like so many others who have never known solace or love, Number Thirteen said little, kept his head down and did what he was told. He felt that he knew nothing at all about himself or about the mysterious world beyond the towering wall and gate. What he *did* know in his heart of hearts was that he hungered for something. But what that something was, he had yet to find out.