

The MIRROCULIST MISSION

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A. J. HARTLEY

The
MIRROCULIST
MISSION

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For Finie and Sebastian



Cast of Characters







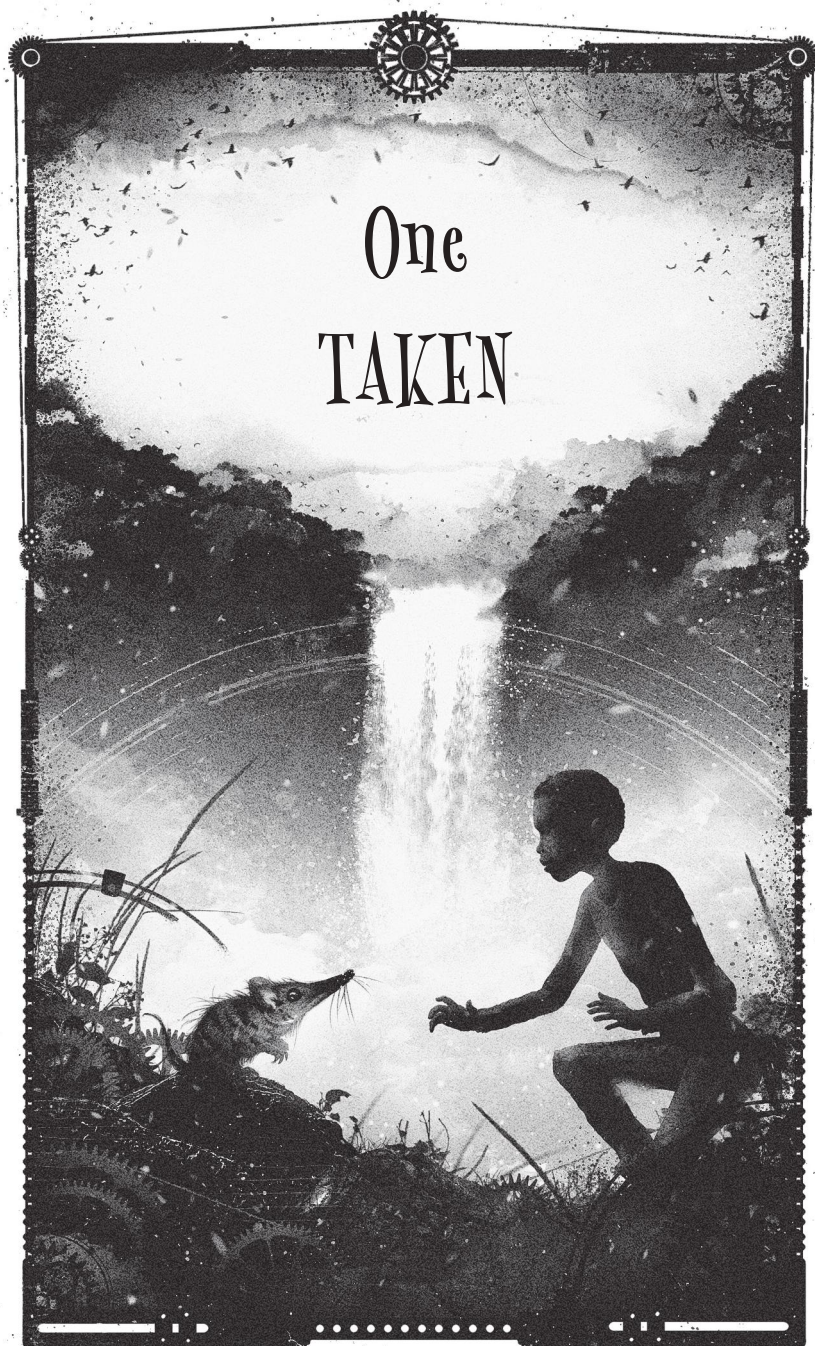
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Darwen Sebastian Arkwright looked around, delighted by his first glimpse of Silbrica in weeks. He walked away from the portal, past a rainbow-coloured waterfall – which strobed first turquoise, then emerald green, then a yellow bright as liquid gold – and onto the over-grown track. He forced himself to look for signs of gnashers and listen for the roar of distant scrobblers engines, but he doubted either would be found here. It felt safe.

As Darwen pressed further into the forest, strange lemon-coloured plants with stems like columns and slick, funnel-like tops grew up close around him. A startled animal, no larger than a field mouse but with a snout almost as long as its body and fur that was tiger-striped green and yellow like grass, looked up from drinking at the funnel flowers, then slid effortlessly down the stalk and off along the path. The track wound right, then left, then right again, so that even when he turned to look back the way he had come, Darwen could see nothing but a thicket of the bizarre vase-like plants shifting fractionally in the breeze. Above these towered trees with smooth black bark and blue, fringed leaves long as coffee tables which reduced the world below to twilight. Somewhere in the distance he heard a bird or animal call, a strange, wild sound unlike anything he had ever heard before.

I should go back, he thought, knowing he wouldn't, not after weeks without access to a mirror through which he could cross into Silbrica.

Following the greenish mouse-creature, he took another few steps, and just as it looked like the track would peter out entirely,



he saw something ahead. A gate, made of crystalline rock, but not built from pieces fastened together or even carved. It looked like it had somehow grown out of the forest floor, eroded out of the surrounding rock by centuries of wind or rushing water. It had to be a portal to another part of Silbrica, what they called a locus. The gate was hung with twining vines, one of which held a bright white flower like an open hand, palm uppermost. Darwen peered at it and saw, just beneath, a button set into the sparkling stone. His hand reached, then hesitated.

Probably doesn't work, he thought.

It looked disused and forgotten. The stone was beautiful, veined like marble but translucent as heavy, hand blown glass. He could see his hand through it when he reached behind – without really thinking about it, and pushed the button once.

Nothing happened.

Darwen waited, but there was no sound, no rush of steam.

I knew it, he thought. *Broken.*

His sense of imminent adventure faded and the forest felt strangely dark and brooding. He turned and began cautiously retracing his steps, suddenly keen to get back into the open, alarming the tiny striped animal so that it scampered into the undergrowth and vanished. And then the plants ahead of him seemed to flicker. A yellowish light was playing softly over the strange leaves and on his own coffee-coloured skin.

Darwen turned.

The portal had come to life. It wasn't the silvery light he had seen in other Silbrican portals, but a pale gold, amber at the centre.



Darwen ran an unsteady hand through the tight curl of his hair. The gate would only stay open for a moment . . .

He ran towards it, leaping in without so much as a pause.

Everything happened very fast.

He found himself sprawled in a darkness so complete that for a second he thought he had been swallowed up by the Shade monster which surrounded its victims in empty blackness. Then there was a bright, flickering light and Darwen could see. The ground was dirt and strewn with leaves but there was a massive contraption that looked like it had been frozen in the act of emerging from the ground. It appeared to be an armoured bulldozer covered with clumsy pipes and boilers. The light came from behind it, but the machine itself was black, silent and clearly inoperable. The air felt humid as the jungle he had just left, and the smells were similar. But it was night, and that wasn't the only difference.

There was also the screaming.

He got to his feet, looking wildly around, trying to make sense of the flickering light which streamed around the dead bulldozer, bright as lightning in the darkness. For an instant the world became a shifting pattern of silver leaves and coal-dark shadows, and then he saw the boy.

He was the source of the screaming. He was young, about Darwen's age, wearing a T-shirt and shorts with trainers. His dark eyes were wide with horror and his mouth was open. Words were coming out, and though Darwen couldn't understand them, he felt the boy's terror.



The boy's legs were still, but he seemed to be moving anyway, pulling back towards the source of the light. He reached desperately out to Darwen, still screaming, and Darwen took an urgent step towards him. And that was when he saw it.

The light came from a brilliant circle on the ground behind the boy: a portal from which the bulldozer had been unable to emerge. It was shifting because something was blocking it out, something long and heavy that writhed snakelike as it reached up and through from the other side. It pulled the boy towards the gate, and Darwen saw the thick and fibrous tentacle wound around the child's middle.

Darwen hesitated, catching the boy's terror, then he reached down to the forest floor, desperately searching for anything that could be used as a weapon. He found a ball-like stone and flung it hard as he could at the pulsing tentacle. The stone bounced off, but the undulating movement of the snake-like arm paused for a second. Darwen stooped for another stone, but by the time he had straightened up with three more, the boy was being sucked down into the portal again, only now there were two tentacles coming through, reaching hungrily for whatever had attacked them.

The boy shrieked again, and Darwen flung another stone, missing. In almost the same instant the boy was pulled down and into the pool of light. Another pair of tentacles came creeping out, each one studded with suckers and ending in a set of tooth-like claws. They whipped forward with horrible speed, and any thoughts of trying to rescue the boy went out of Darwen's head.

He turned back towards the amber portal he had come through,



TAKEN

praying it would stay open a moment longer. One of the tentacles reached for him, but brushed against a branch instead, seizing it for a moment, and tearing the limb free with impossible strength. Darwen surged forward, avoiding another tentacle which was snaking towards him. He risked one look back to the boy, but he was already gone and, blind with horror, Darwen leapt through the portal.

He didn't stop to look back, but he heard the tentacle follow him into the locus of the rainbow falls, heard the splintering of the crystalline rock as it tore the gateway apart from the inside. And still he kept running.

