

The MIRRORS SHATTERED

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A. J. HARTLEY

The **MIRRORS**
SHATTERED

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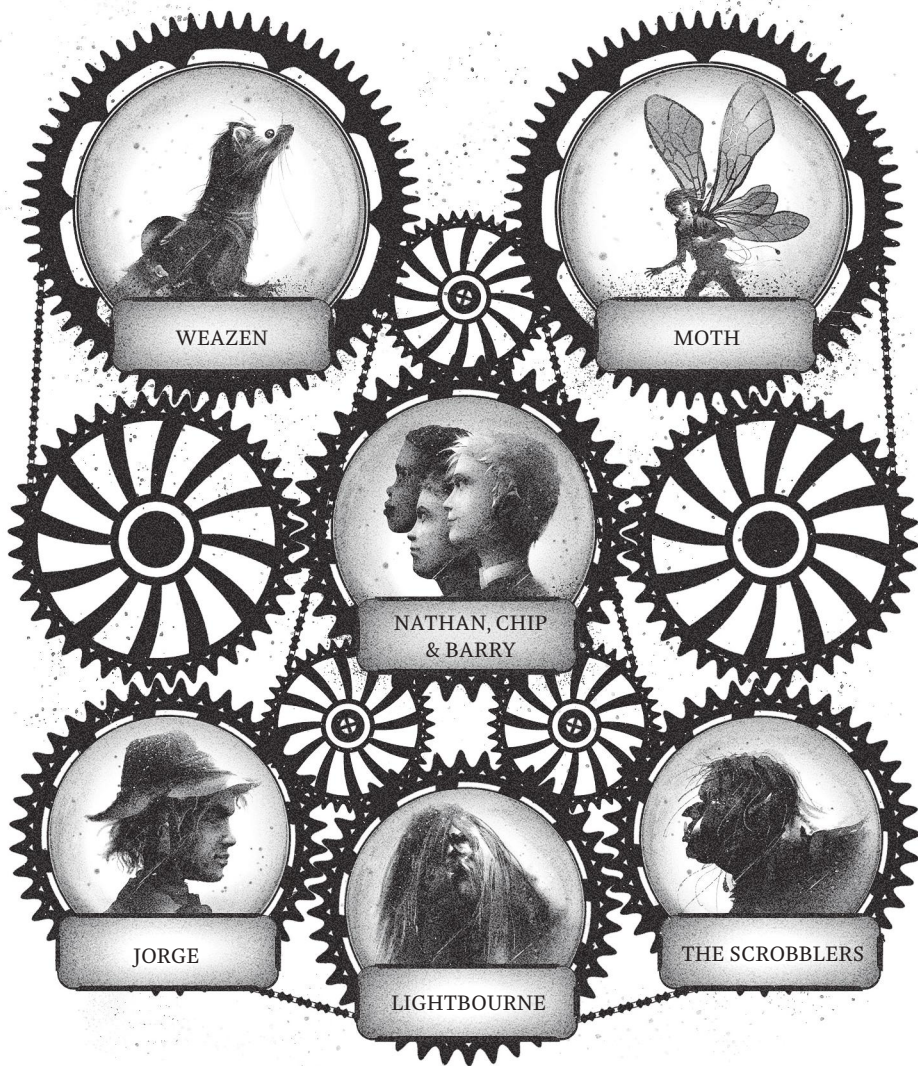
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*To Finie and Sebastian, to my parents,
and to all those other parents, teachers, librarians,
and booksellers who enact the conviction that
good books make for good people.*



Cast of Characters







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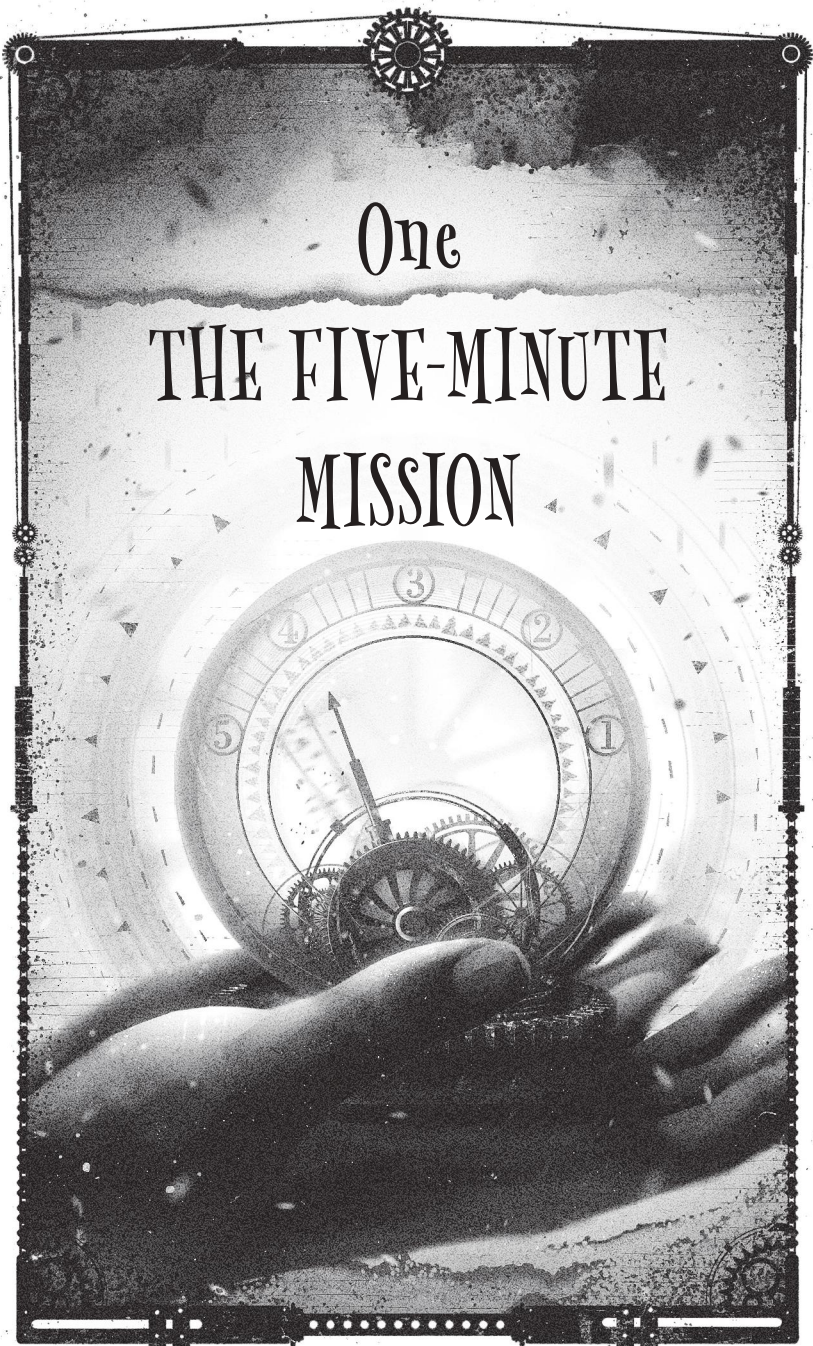


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The MIRRORS SHATTERED



One
THE FIVE-MINUTE
MISSION

Darwen Arkwright stood in front of the shimmering portal on the floor of the chamber known as the Great Apparatus, Alex O'Connor on his left and Rik Haggerty on his right. The flickering doorway before them was one of a hundred, arranged in a great circle around an outlandish contraption whose brass and copper surfaces were studded with elegant, if antiquated, controls. Darwen and his friends had crossed over into Silbrica many times before, but rarely had they done so with such a sense of dread at what would be waiting for them on the other side.

“Ready?” asked Darwen.

Alex – slim, black, her hair pulled away from her face with a spangled headband – scowled.

“Never,” she said, “but we always go through anyway. How about you go through first and make sure it’s safe? I can bring Rik through myself.”

It was Rik’s turn to scowl. He hadn’t got over the fact that of the three of them, he was the only one who couldn’t open the portals into Silbrica by himself. Darwen had been the first – the true Mirroculist – but somehow, no one knew why, Alex had picked up the gift during Hillside Academy’s trip to Costa Rica. Rik didn’t say much about it, but Darwen knew it rankled.

“No,” said Darwen. “We go through as we always do: together. Rik,” he added, “take this.” From his pocket Darwen drew what looked like a toy gun, fashioned from wood, copper and brass, and placed it in Rik’s large pink hand. “Weazen lent it to me,” Darwen explained. “You have about ten shots before it will need recharging, so make them count.”



“Why don’t I get a cool blasty thing?” Alex demanded.

“Because you get this,” said Darwen, handing her a glass globe containing a watch mechanism.

“Ooh,” she said. “Nice. What is it?”

“We’re not supposed to be here,” Darwen explained, staring at the shimmering rectangle of light in front of them, “and the portals will seal once Greyling detects us. We have five minutes from the moment we step through the first gate. That,” he said, glancing at the device in Alex’s hand, “will keep track of time.”

“So it’s a clock,” said Alex, disgruntled. “Rik gets a blasty thing and I get a clock. Awesome.”

“If it’s any consolation,” said Darwen, unfolding a square of grease-stained cardboard, “I’ve got nowt but this dodgy-looking map Weazen drew on a pizza box.”

“*Nowt* means nothing,” said Alex sagely to Rik. “One of his primitive Lancashire dialect words.”

Darwen opened his mouth to protest but changed his mind. Alex didn’t have the kind of filter that stopped most people from speaking their minds, but she never intended to be mean. “This is for Mr Peregrine,” he said. “So let’s get it right.”

Rik and Alex nodded seriously. It was Mr Peregrine who had first shown Darwen the way into Silbrica, and since then he had been a mentor and friend to the three students. But some time before Christmas, Mr Peregrine had been replaced with a terrible insect-like creature disguised in a suit made of flesh. The real Mr Peregrine – it turned out – had been abducted by Greyling, once a member of the Silbrican Council of Guardians but now a powerful



and ruthless villain whose armies of scrobbles and gnashers were bent on taking over the world beyond the mirrors. Darwen and his friends had been trying to locate Mr Peregrine for months without success, but at last they had a solid lead.

“One more thing,” Darwen said. “The loci we have to pass through will all be dangerous. Greyling has deliberately connected places to make it as difficult as possible for us to reach our destination.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Rik. “What?”

“On three,” said Darwen, not looking at them. “One. Two. Three.”

Alex clicked the timer device and they stepped through the first portal.

There was a bright light and a buzz of power as they crossed over. They had to shield their eyes against the glare on the other side, so it took a moment for them to realise that they were standing next to a battered and ancient-looking boat on a beach unlike any they had ever seen. The sand was a brilliant blue and shifted beneath their feet, rippling like water. The water, by contrast, was a milky amber colour and quite still.

“OK,” said Alex. “Fairly weird.”

“It’s Silbrica.” Rik shrugged, stirring the air in front of his face with a broad, sweaty hand. “Of course it’s weird. Weird is OK, though. I’ll take weird over terrifying and deadly. Where to next?”

Darwen studied the pizza box lid. He could feel the sweat breaking out on the back of his neck. “That way,” he said, pointing at an unlikely-looking grove of palm trees. He took a step, releasing their hands, but the ground seemed to collapse beneath him and he sank into the sapphire-coloured crystals up to his waist.



“Whoa!” exclaimed Alex, reaching out and grasping Darwen’s flailing right hand. Holding his ground carefully, Rik did the same, bracing himself against the ancient boat.

“Still just weird, or are we getting close to terrifying and deadly?” said Alex.

“Just weird,” said Rik.

“It’s fine,” said Darwen, trying to sound upbeat. “I’m nearly out.”

“Let’s make it completely out, shall we?” said Rik, his voice suddenly urgent.

“We’ve got loads of time,” said Alex, checking the mechanism in the crystal sphere.

“No,” said Rik, his eyes fixed on the blue sand about a hundred metres away, “we really don’t.”

There, between the palm tree grove and the edge of the unnaturally still water, something was stirring in the blue sand. Most of it was invisible, but poking through the water was what appeared to be a large, triangular fin.

“Shark!” shouted Alex. “Worse, Silbrican shark! Terrifying and deadly, right on schedule!”

“Just get Darwen out,” Rik retorted, leaning back and dragging him till the joint in his shoulder sang with pain.

Darwen glanced back. The shark – or whatever it was – had been tracing a slow semicircle through the blue crystals, but now it had locked on to them and was closing fast, leaving a long furrow behind it in the sand. Darwen tried to clamber out, but he seemed to sink deeper.

“Keep still,” said Rik.



Darwen tore his eyes from the shark thing, which was getting faster, and fastened on to Rik's. The bigger boy met his gaze levelly and, almost under his breath, said, "OK, Alex, now!"

Darwen stayed quite still as they tugged, feeling himself sliding up and out.

"Into the boat!" said Rik.

They half-clambered, half-vaulted over the wooden side and in.

The shark thing almost broke the surface of the sand, showing a slick grey body speckled with leopard-like spots, and then it was diving, rubbing the hull of the boat so the whole thing rolled and threatened to capsize. A moment later, the creature – whatever it was – was gone.

"Chuffin' 'eck," Darwen muttered.

"What is it with this place?" Alex demanded. "I swear it's designed to make you think everything is nice and happy, then WHAM! Where would you most like to go? The beach? Sure. But, of course, this is a beach that can kill you, because it's Silbrica and that's just how we roll here."

"Those palms are a portal," said Darwen, wiping the sweat from his face. The heat was becoming unbearable. "We've got to get over there."

"Check this out," said Rik, taking a long pole of dark, lacquered wood from the floor of the boat.

"What's that; an oar?" asked Alex.

"More like a punt," said Rik, standing up. "Here goes nothing."

He pushed one end of the pole into the blue sand and shoved. The boat shot forward at an impossible speed, like a waxed



sledge on snow.

Darwen found himself laughing with delighted relief as Rik fought to steady himself on the plank seats.

“This thing has some serious horsepower,” Rik observed as he recovered his balance.

He punted twice more, trailing the pole in the sand to steer, and in moments they were gliding into the grove, the unnaturally regular spacing of the trees leaving no doubt that what lay before them was actually a series of portals. Darwen checked the pizza box. “That one,” he said.

Rik plunged the pole deeper into the sand and the punt glided slowly to a halt. He was about to clamber out, his broad pink face split by a contented grin, when Alex grabbed him.

“Wait!” she shouted. “Didn’t your daddy tell you to look both ways before crossing the street?”

Rik gave her an incredulous stare, but Alex just nodded significantly at the undulating blue sand. As they looked, one of the ripples broke and another triangular, spotted dorsal fin crested above the surface for a moment, then sliced lazily down again.

“You can take your chances wading around among whatever they are,” she said, “but I’d suggest getting the boat up against the portal and hightailing it through before they can take a chunk out of us.”

“Agreed,” said Darwen.

“Let’s just hope they can’t jump,” Alex added darkly.

Rik nodded hastily, then used the pole to bump the punt right up against the palm trees framing the portal Weazen’s map had indicated. Like other Silbrican gateways Darwen had seen over the



last few months, the doorway looked like it had grown out of the very earth – but it was also studded with dials and controls, valves and levers, all made of finely wrought glass, copper and brass. He reached over, pushed a button, then pulled the lever next to it and waited as the portal hissed out a blast of steam and shimmered into golden life.

“How about I try this time?” said Rik hopefully.

“And have it fire you back yonder to be lunch for those sand-sharky things because you’re not a Mirroculist?” said Alex.

“Good point,” said Rik. “Darwen?”

Darwen took their hands, and together they leapt out of the boat and through the glittering doorway.

They were standing in a muddy clearing surrounded by towering scarlet grasses whose feathery stalks reached six metres into the still, silent air. A damp path of beaten earth stretched ahead between the walls of vegetation. Somewhere in the distance something called, a ragged *kraaak* sound that Darwen thought was vaguely familiar.

“Ohhh-kay,” Alex ventured. “Doesn’t seem so bad so far. And at least we know where to go.”

Straight down the path, no more than a couple of hundred metres away, they could make out another ring of portals, these fashioned into the braided hoops of the gargantuan grass.

“Let’s do it,” said Rik. He took a few steps along the trail and grunted as his foot splashed in the soft ground. “Marsh,” he said, peering off into the red grasses. “There’s probably all kinds of stuff living out there. Better stick to the path.”



Darwen was gazing to the other side, his eyes locked sightlessly on a patch of particularly tall grass as his brain teased at the sound he had just heard. It reminded him of something. Not something in Silbrica but something from home, from England, and his associations with it were good, even excited. He tried to summon the sound once more, and as he was trying to mentally recreate it, it came again.

Kraak!

This time he knew it. It was almost the same as the call of a great grey heron, a bird he'd heard when he'd visited the waterfowl sanctuary at Martin Mere with his parents. He remembered being in one of the hides, watching a flock of pink-footed geese, a pair of miniature binoculars grasped tightly in his fingers . . .

Suddenly, the gigantic red stalks he had been staring at shifted, interrupting his reverie, and he saw not blades of grass, but carefully camouflaged feathers of russet and crimson, a pair of bright, hard eyes, and a needle-sharp beak as long as a car.

He cried out, leaping forward just as the colossal bird-like creature lunged. Its bill stabbed into the sandy dirt only centimetres from where he had been standing. It was so big it plunged the whole path into shadow, and for a second Alex and Rik could only gaze up in rapt horror.

"Run!" shouted Darwen.

They didn't need telling twice. Alex was off like a shot, and Rik followed, his lumbering, pounding footsteps much noisier than the light, mincing steps of the bird on its telegraph pole legs. It lunged at Darwen's back, missing only by millimetres. Undeterred, it



stepped over him with one immense stride, blocking him from the portal that was his goal. It turned its narrow head and unblinking eyes to face him. Behind it, Alex and Rik were off and running, but the heron thing had lost interest in them. Its focus was all on Darwen. Out here in the open Darwen had no chance, so he did the only thing he could. He leapt sideways into the grass forest.

He landed in water up to his ankles, took three messy steps and then stopped, eyes turned upwards, waiting. For a moment nothing happened. Then, without making any sound at all, the great heron-like thing stalked slowly into view. It moved with almost-impossible care and was absolutely motionless between steps.

Darwen thought of Alex's little "clock." He was wasting time and the longer he tried to inch towards the portal from here, the more likely the heron-thing would get him. For a brief moment he wondered what that would be like, the spear-like beak stabbing at him from on high, but he pushed the thought from his mind, remembering something his father had told him:

Hérons are stealth hunters. They aren't built for pursuit.

As the thought struck him, something moved in the grass a few metres from him. It was long and black, and reached through the stalks beside him to land carefully in the wet ground. It was one of the heron-thing's feet. Darwen looked up again and saw the great bird, its head perfectly level and its bright, unblinking eyes fixed, gliding past like some lethal, animated crane on a building site.

It was now or never. He took three silent steps back towards the path, then pushed through the last of the grass stalks, turned



up towards the portal where Rik and Alex were waiting for him, and broke into a flat run. He didn't need their cries of panic to know the bird was coming after him. He felt its shadow on him – felt the wind of its first lunging stab as it darted its beak into the silty ground – but he did not look back.

A couple of seconds later, he knew it had given up the chase. Darwen thought gratefully of his dad. Without that memory of the two of them at Martin Mere, Darwen would never have tried to outrun the heron.

“Quite the safari we're on, huh?” said Alex, as Darwen reached the portals. “Like being in Costa Rica all over again. Only instead of jaguars and snakes, it's giant, freak-show birds that are trying to kill us.”

They both looked badly shaken.

“Well,” said Rik, as they prepared to step through the gate, “the next locus can't be as bad as this.”

“I really wish you wouldn't say things like that,” Darwen muttered. Then he led them through the shimmering rectangle.

They landed hard on cold, wet rock in a howling gale that blew rain in great horizontal sheets. They were high on a mountainside, which was treeless except for the twisted and misshapen trunks that formed the portal ring they had just come through. All three of them bent their heads and turned their backs to the wind.

“It's looking a bit black o'er Bill's mother's,” Darwen remarked dryly.

“Huh?” said Alex. “Black or Bill's mother's what?”

“It's looking black *over* Bill's mother's *house*,” Darwen



explained. "Like you're looking out over the town and there are clouds overhead."

"What?" said Alex.

"It's an expression," said Darwen. "Means the weather is going to be grim."

"The weather *is* grim," said Alex.

"I know," said Darwen. "It's a kind of joke."

"Who's Bill?" asked Rik.

"No one," said Darwen. "It's just something my dad used to say."

"I don't get it," said Alex.

Darwen had to shout to be heard. "Never mind," he yelled, checking the pizza box. "It's not important." Then, pointing right into the mouth of the gale, he called, "That way!"

"Of course," Alex retorted.

"How long?" Darwen called back as he trudged through the driving rain, already soaked to the skin.

Alex consulted the glass device, wiping the water away as best she could. "Three minutes," she said. "Greyling *really* doesn't want anyone finding a way through, does he?"

Darwen started walking faster.

They covered about fifty metres, but the rain was so heavy they could barely see ten.

"You sure this is right?" shouted Rik.

Darwen wasn't, but he said nothing and pressed on; eyes scouring the blasted windswept slopes for signs of another portal.

"Two minutes, twenty seconds!" called Alex.



Darwen gritted his teeth. There was nothing up here. They had taken a wrong turn.

“What’s that?” demanded Rik. “There in the mountainside.”

“It’s nothing,” said Darwen.

“No,” Rik insisted. “There, see? Looks like a cave.” “I don’t see it,” said Darwen.

“Two minutes,” said Alex.

“Follow me,” said Rik. He pushed ahead, veering to the right and up a slope of ragged scree and scattered boulders. The wind seemed fiercer here, and Darwen was actually blown back a step. He stooped till he was almost bent double, and managed a few faltering steps. When he looked up, he could see that Rik was right.

It was a cave, Darwen supposed, but as soon as they were inside the opening, they could see that the walls pulsed with an eerie blue light as if the very stone was breathing. There were alcoves set into the wall, though whether they had formed naturally or been carved was hard to say. What was clear was the system of brass numbers set above them, and the ornate switch mechanisms that brought them online. Darwen rubbed the rain from his eyes, shuddered at the chill of the cave, and with one hurried look at his sodden cardboard map chose the third alcove. He pushed a button, grabbed Alex and Rik by their damp, cold hands, and stepped in.

As Darwen gaped, stricken with dread and fear, Alex leant in and whispered, “It’s looking black o’er Bill’s mother’s.”

Darwen nodded seriously. It was.