

MONSTERS
in the
MIRROR

ALSO BY A. J. HARTLEY:

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A. J. HARTLEY

MONSTERS
in the
MIRROR

The title 'MONSTERS in the MIRROR' is rendered in a highly decorative, blackletter-style font. The word 'MONSTERS' is at the top, with a gear-like shape above the 'M' and a circular pattern inside the 'O'. Below it, 'in the' is written in a smaller, simpler font, connected to the main title by a dotted line with small stars. The word 'MIRROR' is at the bottom, with a gear-like shape below the 'R' and a circular pattern inside the 'O'. The entire title is surrounded by small decorative dots and stars.

Illustrated by Manuel Šumberac

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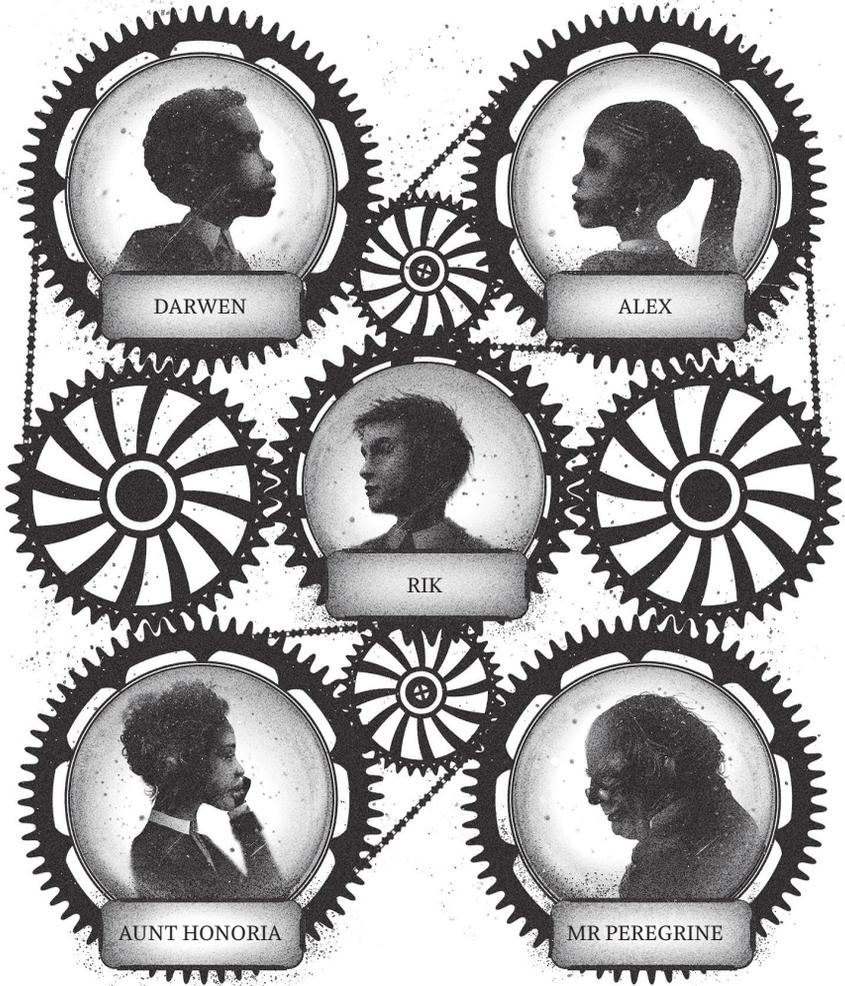
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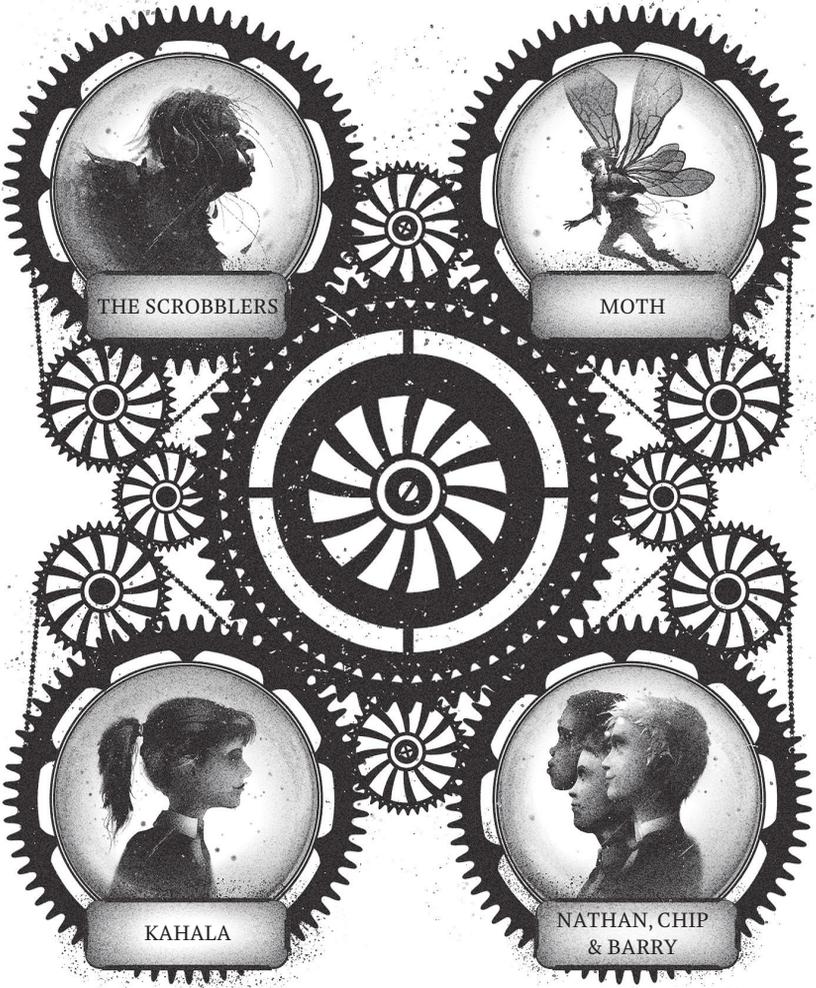
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*To Finie and Sebastian,
with whom I discover wonders*



Cast of Characters





THE SCROBLERS

MOTH

KAHALA

NATHAN, CHIP
& BARRY

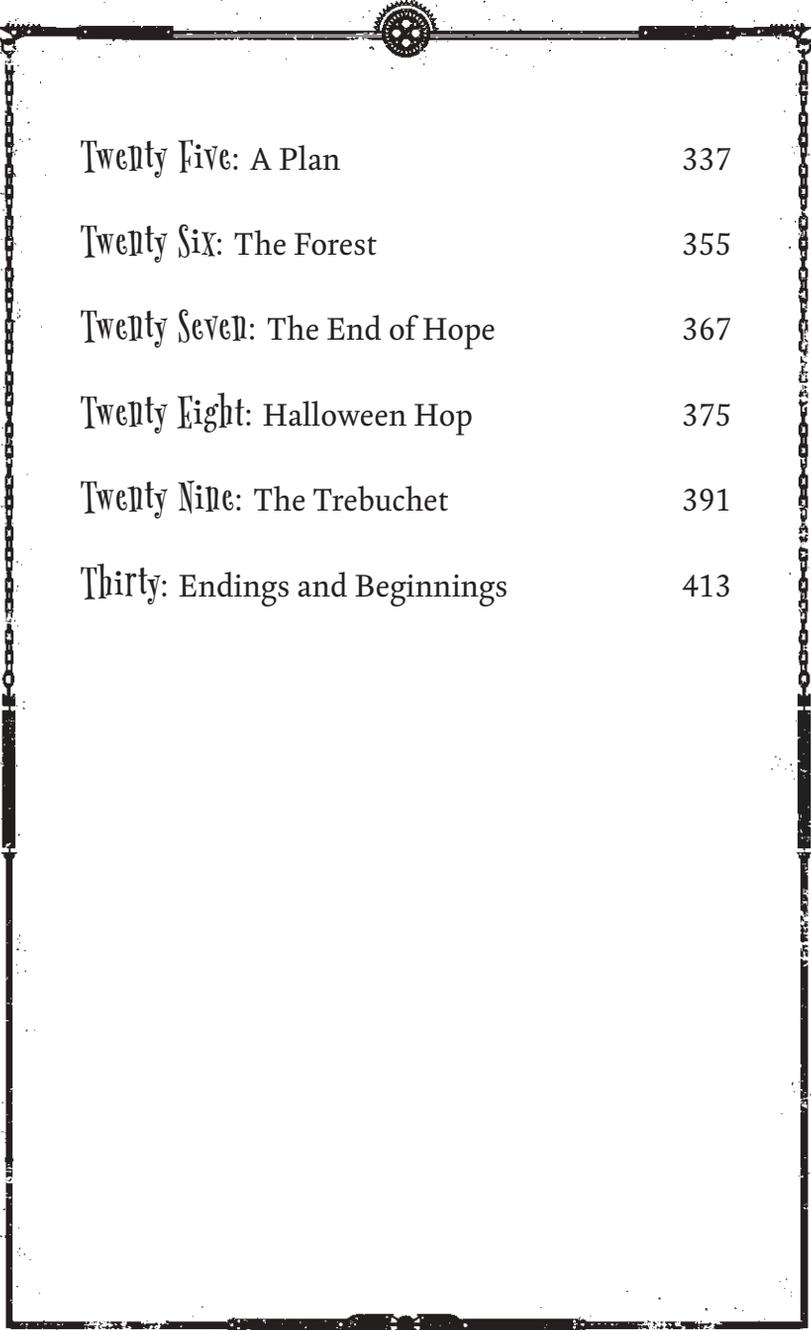


Contents

One: The Flittercrake	1
Two: Mr Octavius Peregrine	9
Three: An Unexpected Gift	23
Four: The Mirror	33
Five: Moth	43
Six: Hillside Academy	55
Seven: Students	67
Eight: Gates	87
Nine: Scrobblers	97
Ten: Deep Weirdness	105
Eleven: Trouble	115



Twelve: The Reflectory Emporium	131
Thirteen: An Unintended Alliance	155
Fourteen: Digging	165
Fifteen: Outmanoeuvred	175
Sixteen: The Journey	189
Seventeen: The Jenkinses	203
Eighteen: Raven's Watch	219
Nineteen: Mr Peregrine's Lie	233
Twenty: Construction	253
Twenty One: The Attack	269
Twenty Two: Stolen Goods	281
Twenty Three: Portals and Batteries	303
Twenty Four: The Guardian Council Chambers	319



Twenty Five: A Plan	337
Twenty Six: The Forest	355
Twenty Seven: The End of Hope	367
Twenty Eight: Halloween Hop	375
Twenty Nine: The Trebuchet	391
Thirty: Endings and Beginnings	413

MONSTERS
in the
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One
THE FLITTERCRAKE



At first Darwen Arkwright thought the twittering he heard was part of a cheesy soundtrack piped through speakers – *Woodland Sounds* or something similar – designed to make the shopping centre feel less like a concrete box in the middle of a city. But when he looked up through the plastic branches above him, he glimpsed a tiny bird fluttering between boughs of fake foliage. A sparrow or some kind of finch, he thought, as it disappeared from view. Darwen stood up and tried to follow its call.

“There you are,” he muttered. The bird was perched right on top of a potted palm tree and was tweeting so madly that it was amazing nobody else was paying it any attention. Darwen had seen birds trapped in shopping centres before, and he supposed they survived pretty well – lots of scraps to eat from the food court, no cars to hit them, no hawks or owls to pick them off – so long as they didn’t try to fly through a window. They didn’t belong inside, he thought. They were outsiders – like him – but still, they did okay.

The bird’s song went up an octave and grew louder and shriller. Something big and dark shot across the shopping centre’s glass domed roof, silhouetted against the sky. The bigger bird – if that’s what it was – slammed into the smaller one in a puff of feathers, and the sparrow fell completely silent. Darwen stared as the survivor adjusted its grip on the branch and began to eat.

Darwen had always been fascinated by birds of prey, so a part of him thought it was pretty cool that he had seen the attack, even though he felt sorry for the sparrow. He moved to get a better look at the bigger bird and saw that its head was quite bald.

No way!



It shifted, gulping down more of its dinner, and turned to scan the scene below, spreading its wings as it did so. It looked right into Darwen's face. Instantly he knew that this bird belonged here even less than he did – even less than the sparrow – knew, in fact, that it wasn't a bird at all. Its wings were leathery, like a bat's, and there were what looked like arms underneath: arms with hands that ended in tiny little claws. At least part of the body was furry but the face belonged to neither bird nor bat.

It was a man's face, or very nearly: a man's face with a long, cruel-looking beak to which sparrow feathers now stuck. Darwen stared with his mouth open and in that instant, the creature – he couldn't call it a bird anymore – took flight. It leapt out of the tree with a beat of its leathery wings, swooping across the dome and off down one of the shopping centre's many corridors of stores. Darwen ran after it.

He made it about twenty yards before he slammed into a woman loaded with shopping bags.

"Watch where you're going!" said the woman.

"Sorry," muttered Darwen, still looking up to the ceiling where the winged creature was soaring unnoticed by the people below.

"You know," said a girl emerging from behind the shopping bags, "it's polite to look at people when you are talking to them."

Darwen looked down and blushed.

"Right," he said. "Sorry."

"You really shouldn't go tearing around in here," said the woman. "You'll break something."

"Right," said Darwen again, looking up to where the bird-bat-thing had been. "Sorry. I have to . . ."



THE FLITTERCRAKE

He pushed past them, face up to the ceiling, and the girl exclaimed, “How rude!” loudly as he went.

It was a fancy shopping centre. No dollar stores or book shops – the only ones Darwen ever found interesting – nothing but high-end clothing and jewellery. He ran on, desperately scanning the roof beams, window ledges and potted foliage for signs of the flying creature.

Nothing. He had lost it.

He paused for breath, turned all the way around and . . . there it was, high up on the sign of a store which sold handmade chocolates. The creature wasn’t so much perching now as lounging, sucking what Darwen assumed to be sparrow blood off its long fingers. For a second Darwen just stared, and then the creature turned to look at him, grinned maliciously, and stuck its long pink tongue out.

Darwen gasped.

What *was* this thing?

Then it was moving once more, flapping in long even strokes over the heads of the crowd who – astonishingly – were too taken with themselves and the shop windows to notice the strange whatever-it-was flashing over their heads. Darwen began to run again, determined not to lose it this time.

He had got halfway down the next grand corridor of stores – this one filled with brand-name handbags and electronic gadgets – when he collided with a fat man in uniform who sent him sprawling.

“Sorry,” said Darwen, still running.

“Get back here,” said the man, getting to his feet.

He was a policeman.



Darwen had never been a troublemaker, and if he had been back in England, there was no way he would have run from a copper. But the winged creature had a hold of his imagination and he wanted – *needed* – to see where it went. Darwen shouted “Sorry!” again and kept running, his eyes never leaving the flying beast, which had done a little loop in the air so that it could make a rude face at him. Then it was off again, diving and soaring, feinting right and left, then zooming down a different walkway. Darwen didn’t risk a glance back to see if the policeman was following.

This end of the shopping centre was quieter than the rest. Darwen ran past a large department store smelling strongly of perfume, then a furniture shop with a sign advertising massive discounts, and then there was nothing, just a broad open walkway flanked by empty store fronts.

Well, almost nothing. There was one more shop, right at the end of the corridor beside the exit sign, a tiny ramshackle place that looked like it had been lifted out of an entirely different location and dropped in. Even at this unfashionable and largely ignored end of the shopping centre, it was out of place. The exterior was made of chipped brick and ancient wood – the varnish stained and peeling – and little windows crisscrossed with lead. It looked like a shop from another age. Above its door, suspended from two chains, was a faded wooden sign with gold lettering:

MR OCTAVIUS PEREGRINE’S
REFLECTORY EMPORIUM:
MIRRORS PRICELESS AND PERILOUS



THE FLITTERCRAKE

Clinging bat-like to the sign, its head cocked in Darwen's direction, was the little winged beast. It blew a raspberry at him, then hopped onto the wall and disappeared into the shop through a half-broken diamond of leaded window glass.

Darwen ran to the door but hesitated as he put his hand on the tarnished brass handle. There was something odd about this place. He could feel it. The window displays were dusty, full of antique mirrors in ornate frames, many of them faded, speckled and scratched, some with obvious cracks.

And how, he wondered, could mirrors be 'priceless and perilous'?

He peered at the hand-lettered price tags and his mouth dropped open. The store might not look like it belonged in the shopping centre, but its merchandise was not cheap. There was nothing in the window selling for less than a thousand dollars, and that would only buy you a tiny, old-fashioned hand mirror, not much bigger than the compact his aunt carried in her handbag. The larger one next to it had a corner missing, but the spidery writing on the yellowing paper tag said that it sold for \$4,600.

They have to be kidding, thought Darwen. It was no wonder the place looked deserted.

But he had to know what that bird-thing was. He just didn't have a choice. So he pressed the worn brass latch and, as a little bell tinkled, pushed the door open.

