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A. J. HARTLEY

The Mirroculist Mission

Illustrated by Manuel Šumberac

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For Finie and Sebastian



One
TAKEN



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 scrobbler 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.

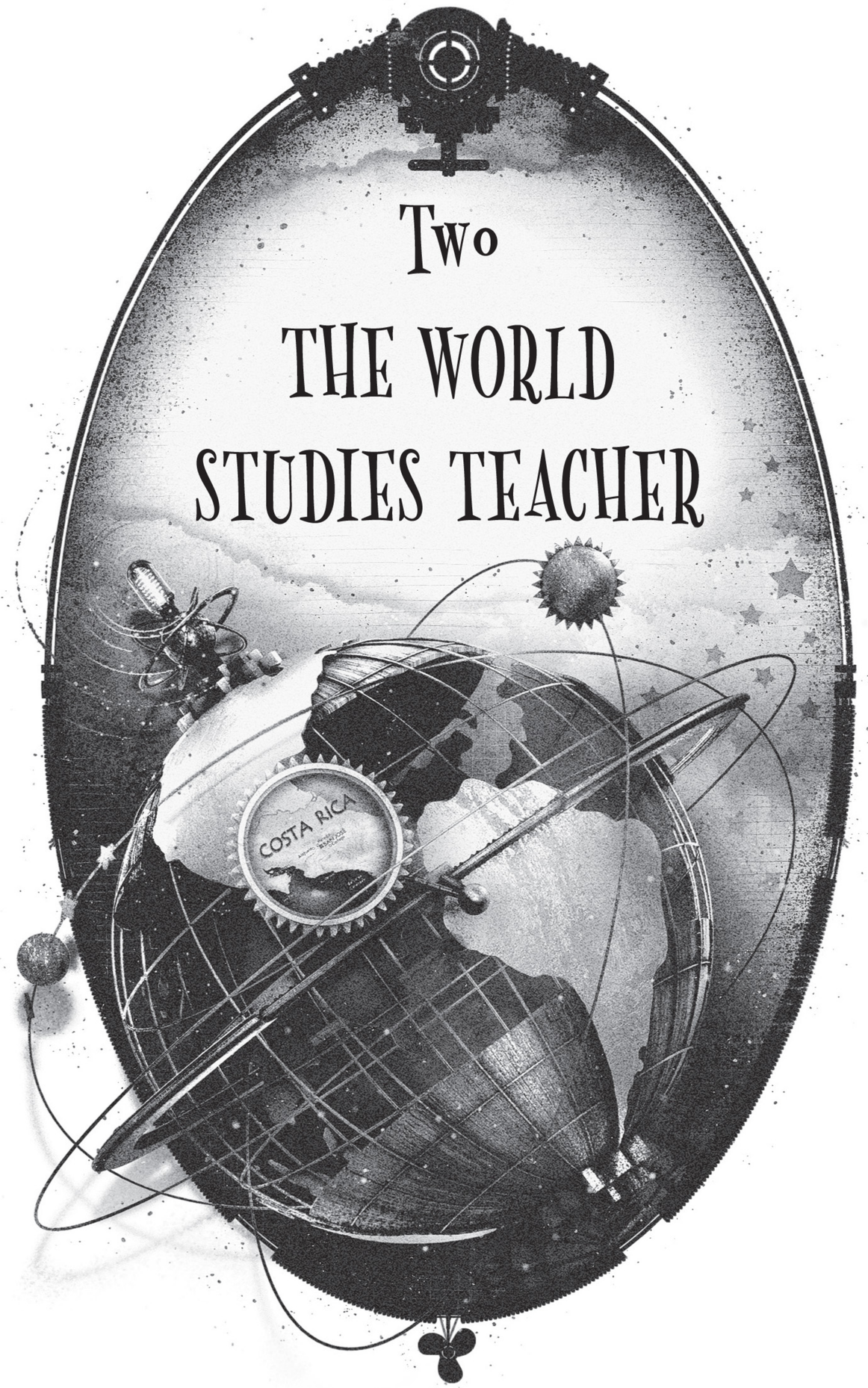
He turned back towards the amber portal he had come through,

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.

Two

THE WORLD STUDIES TEACHER



The following day marked the end of Darwen's first term at Hillside Academy in Atlanta and there was an air of excitement that even the school's strictness couldn't quite stifle. One more day and they would be free on holiday for two whole weeks. With a bit of luck, it might even snow.

But Darwen's mind was elsewhere. One thought burned bright and urgent in his mind as he stared at the stone sphere he had accidentally brought back from Silbrica: he had to find that boy. He had to save him.

Madhulika "Mad" Konkani – a wild-haired girl who once caused a power outage when the kitchens couldn't produce her vegetarian meal – asked him what he was going to do over the holidays and he didn't respond till she flicked him hard on his earlobe. The sixth graders filed into class where the science teacher, Mr. Iverson, stood owlish at his desk in his oversized glasses and patched lab coat.

"Our last day before the winter vacation," he said, smiling. "But that doesn't mean we don't work."

A tall white boy with blond hair and perfect teeth who was draped in his chair like he owned the entire room, and a slim black boy who was lounging like a bored cat, rolled their eyes at each other: Nathan Cloten and Chip Whittley, two of the popular kids who had never taken to Darwen. Nathan yawned.

"Today you have a special challenge," said Mr. Iverson, "at the request of our new world studies teacher. Class, I would like to introduce . . . Mr. Octavius Peregrine."

"Chuffing 'eck!" Darwen exclaimed, using one of his favourite phrases from his native Lancashire, in northern England.

"No way!" Darwen's friend, Alexandra O'Connor, exclaimed. "I mean . . . no way! Mr. P. is a teacher? Here?" Alex's mouth dropped open. She was washer thin and wore her hair in pigtails (jauntily fastened with with green glow-in-the-dark plastic skulls which in no way went with her Hillside uniform). Her eyes were wide with astonishment.

"Maybe it's a different Octavius Peregrine," said Darwen's other closest friend, Richard Haggerty, his face pink as usual. Rik seemed too big for every chair he sat in and looked slightly sweaty and uncomfortable indoors, as if he should be sitting astride a tractor somewhere chewing on a grass stalk. He had a rich southern accent and spoke slowly, but everyone knew that he was the smartest kid in the grade, particularly when it came to science.

"Because Octavius Peregrine is such a common name, you mean?" said Alex, deadpan.

And, as if on cue, the man they had known as a shopkeeper and one of the gate keepers of the world beyond the mirrors entered. Darwen was so dumbfounded that he barely heard a word of Mr. Iverson's speech about their new teacher's impressive independent research into the "archaeology and anthropology of ritual spaces and the ancient peoples who used them." Rik, meanwhile, was gazing at the old shopkeeper with new respect.

Darwen had last seen Mr. Peregrine three days ago, but their history went back far longer than that. It was Mr. Peregrine who, while masquerading as a shopkeeper, had given Darwen the portal-mirror that had led him to the magical world of Silbrica, the magical world on the other side. It was because of Mr. Peregrine

that Darwen had discovered that he was a Squint, properly called a Mirroculist, that rarest of people who alone can climb through certain darkling mirrors, and even bring along others who are touching them – humans and Silbrican creatures alike.

With his friends Rik and Alex – the Peregrine Pact – Darwen had discovered a threat to the school from a former member of Silbrica's Guardian Council. The council member, Greyling, had assembled an army of hulking, green-skinned monsters called scrobblers, creatures with huge tusk-like teeth and red eyes behind brass goggles, armed with terrible energy weapons. At Halloween, those monsters had broken into the human world to take children to fuel their awful power generators. Darwen and his friends had stopped them, but the mirror Mr. Peregrine had given him hadn't survived the battle. Without that mirror, Darwen couldn't travel to Silbrica – couldn't visit its enchanting creatures or see its magnificent machinery. And so Darwen was left stranded in Atlanta, an ordinary but unfamiliar mundane city that Darwen had only come to a few months ago after his parents' deaths.

But then three days ago, Mr. Peregrine had produced another mirror. It had been damaged, presumably during the Scrobblers' earlier attack on his shop, and the old man had warned Darwen that this one was "one use only." Once entered, it would give Darwen a few hours in Silbrica before shutting down forever. This was the mirror Darwen had used last night. And thank goodness he had or he would not have seen the boy and the monster which had taken him.