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Opening extract from

Troubletwisters

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Trouble Twisters

Book One

Garth Nix
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EGMONT



Prologue
A Bolt from the Blue

The year the twins turned twelve, everything changed.

It started with a small black cloud scudding over a perfectly ordinary suburban landscape. Neither Jack nor Jaide noticed it, even though they were standing sentry outside their house, eyes peeled for the first sign of their father's arrival. Their attention was fixed on the street and its occupants, not the sky above.

A taxi appeared in the distance, and the twins craned their heads hopefully, but it turned off before it got to their house. They sagged in disappointment.

'I wish Dad wasn't late *all* the time,' said Jaide.

'Here's hoping it's not genetic,' Jack gloomily replied. This time, their father was a full day late . . . and counting.

Jaide sent a hard look her brother's way. 'Speak for yourself, Jack. I'm not the one who takes after him.'

This was true. Jaide had her mother's green eyes, red hair and fair skin, though she never burned in the sun, whereas Jack had the brown eyes, black hair and brown skin of his father's side of the family. Or at least they assumed their

father's side looked like that; they had never actually met any of the other Shields. They all lived far away, the twins were told, and weren't very friendly. Even their mother had only met their father's relatives once. And clearly, it hadn't gone very well.

Jack vowed to himself that if the Shields *were* late all the time, he wasn't going to be like them. Genes weren't everything, their mother liked to say. Jack wanted to believe this.

Several hundred yards behind their house, the cloud turned right at a church spire and spun twice anticlockwise, as though lost.

Instead of their hoped-for father, the next person the twins saw was the postman. He smiled at them and put a letter in their postbox.

'Hey, maybe it's a card from Dad!' said Jaide. Hector Shield was a treasure-seeker, hunting lost masterpieces for auction houses and galleries. Sometimes cards from him took even longer to arrive than he did.

'He's probably just making long-distance excuses,' muttered Jack.

Jaide pushed past her brother, opened the postbox and took out the envelope.

'It's not from Dad,' she said, examining the cream-coloured envelope curiously. 'But it *is* for us.'

The envelope was made of a thick, flecked paper and addressed in ornate, formal handwriting that neither twin

recognised. It also referred to them by their real names, the ones their mother only used when they were in big trouble:

Jaidith Fennena Shield & Jackaran Kresimir Shield

'Who's it from then?' asked Jack, peering over Jaide's shoulder.

Jaide turned the envelope over. There was no return address anywhere and next to the stamp was a four-pointed star – like the compass symbol on a map – printed directly on the envelope.

Something about the star unsettled Jack. But he couldn't help asking his sister, 'Are you going to open it?' Jack would rather know something disturbing than have to wait in suspense.

'Of course,' Jaide told her brother, trying to sound as calm and cool as she usually did. It took a lot to bother Jaide. 'What's the hurry?'

She didn't tell him that there was something about the card that made her hesitate too. Something about it just felt . . . odd.

She ran her thumb along the flap and tore it with a satisfying rip. The smell of salt and sand hit her nostrils, as though a strong sea breeze had just rushed over her – even though they lived nowhere near the sea.

Jack wasn't hit by this strange sensation. As his sister hesitated, he pulled the envelope from her frozen fingers and

tugged out the card from within. It was white, with the same four-pointed star embossed in gold on the front.

The day darkened momentarily. Then the single black cloud moved on and the sky was immediately blue again.

'Maybe we should show it to Mum first,' Jack said.

'It does have our names on it,' Jaide pointed out. She flipped open the card.

Inside were a few lines written in the same old-person's handwriting.

My dear troubletwisters,
The cats have been very restless, so I expect I will see you soon.
With love,
Grandma X

'Grandma who?' asked Jack.

'That's not Mamma Jane's writing,' said Jaide, thinking of their mother's mother, who lived with their aunt in an apartment on the other side of town.

'Let me see that.'

Both Jack and Jaide jumped as their mother reached past them and snatched the card from Jack's fingers. Neither twin had heard her coming.

After reading the message, Susan Shield's lips tightened and she shut her eyes for a moment. The twins watched her, puzzled by her reaction.

'This isn't really for you,' she said finally. 'I want you to forget you ever saw it.'

'But it was addressed to us,' Jaide said.

'I know, but it shouldn't have been,' their mother replied firmly.

Jack couldn't help himself. 'What's a troubletwister?' he asked.

'We're not going to talk about it now. I want you to forget it,' Susan repeated in a warning voice. The twins knew that tone. They only ever heard it when they were caught doing something particularly bad, like climbing on the roof or blowing things up in the microwave.

'But we didn't do anything wrong,' Jaide protested.

'I know,' said Susan. She knelt down and pulled them both in for a quick hug, which typically Jaide resisted and Jack leaned into. 'But let's move right along, OK? Why don't you go and have a jump on the trampoline?'

'We've already done that,' said Jack.

'Who jumped the highest?' Susan asked.

'I did,' both twins declared. They glared at each other for a moment, then ran off through the house, since that was marginally faster than going around to the back garden.

Susan watched them run. As soon as they were out of sight, she read the card a second time, then realised that there was something else in the envelope. Susan pulled it out just far enough to see it was a map, with some instructions written on the side. Angrily, she stuffed it and the card back in the

envelope, which she then shoved into her back pocket.

'Where are you, Hector?' she said savagely as she closed the postbox flap with a loud rattle and went inside.

Half a mile away, the solitary black cloud stopped above a derelict building site and a single stroke of lightning flashed down. The muted clap of thunder that followed could have been a car backfiring.

The twins, busy on the trampoline, didn't notice it. Jaide, the eldest by four minutes, was shorter by half an inch, but even so she could nearly always jump far higher than Jack, much to his annoyance.

'Do you really think I take after Dad?' Jack asked while gathering his breath for another challenge.

'I don't know. I guess we both do, a little bit.'

'So you could be the late one, not me.'

'Maybe, but I'll always jump the highest.'

'Only because you hog the middle.'

'That's not true!'

'You know,' said a voice from the back fence, 'I reckon you both hog the middle, given the opportunity.'

The twins stopped jumping. For all their differences, the surprised looks on their faces were identical.

'Dad?!' they both asked.

The familiar, floppy-haired figure of Hector Shield smiled at them over the fence.

'Better late than never!'

The twins practically bounced over the trampoline net in their haste to get to him.

'You made it!' Jack said.

'What took you so long?' Jaide asked.

'It's good to see you too, kids.'

The twins opened the gate and Hector stepped into the garden. He was dressed in his usual rumpled dark-blue corduroy trousers and jacket, and was wheeling a large and battered black suitcase behind him. His long arms easily enfolded them both in a great big hug.

Neither twin noticed that there were scorch marks on his jacket. But Jack, burying his head in his father's shirt, withdrew after a moment, sniffing. Hector smelled like burned toast.

'Why did you come this way?' Jack asked.

'My, uh, taxi dropped me off on the wrong street.'

Jaide didn't care how their father had got there, just as long as he was home. 'Did you bring us any presents?' she asked.

Hector smiled at Jaide. He always brought back a little bit of treasure for each of them from his trips. His presents were invariably exciting and strange, like the antique wind-up horses he'd brought back from Spain the year before, or the Mayan goblets for drinking ceremonial hot chocolate he'd produced at Christmas.

'Of course,' he said. 'We'll have a present-giving ceremony after I've had a shower and a cup of coffee.'

They turned towards the back door and all three stopped as they saw Susan standing there with her arms folded and a tense expression on her face.

'Ah,' said Hector. 'You go on ahead, Jack and Jaide. I think your mother wants a word.'

The twins grabbed the handle of the battered Samsonite case. It was something of a ritual for Jack and Jaide to take it up to their parents' room and they were happy to get out of the way of the brewing parental argument. Since their mother worked shifts as a paramedic, any unexpected change of schedule (like their father being a day late) wreaked havoc with all the complicated juggling of school, after-school activities and work.

'It's heavy,' puffed Jack when they reached the stairs.

'Our presents must be huge!' Jaide let go of the handle and lifted the suitcase from its base. Together they negotiated the hairpin bend halfway up and lugged the suitcase into their parents' bedroom. The room was decorated with a series of nineteenth-century watercolours by an artist their father had discovered in Paris, depicting a series of small animals and birds all dressed in Victorian costume.

The twins started to hoist the suitcase up on to the bed, but Jack lost his grip at the last second and Jaide couldn't hold it alone. The case fell back on the floor. Jack leaped aside, and with an almighty crack, the solid outer shell of supposedly indestructible plastic split in the middle and all the contents cascaded out across the twins' feet.

For a second, Jaide and Jack were shocked into silence. Out in the garden, they could hear their mother cry, 'But Hector, you only just got back!'

The twins stared down at the shattered suitcase.

'Dad'll be mad,' said Jaide. 'What do we do?'

'I can't believe it broke,' said Jack. 'It must have fallen a million times before.'

Jaide picked up the two broken halves of the top of the suitcase and held them up to her brother.

'Look! It's *burned*. No wonder it broke.'

Jack came around and saw a jagged scorch mark running from one end to the other. He sniffed, and smelled the same odd smell that had been on their father when he had hugged them.

'Do you think – do you think he was in some kind of accident and that's why he's late?'

'I don't know.'

Jaide put down the broken lid and examined the pile of things at their feet. Most of it looked pretty ordinary, just shirts and socks, underwear and toiletries. But there was a pair of particularly old and tattered corduroy trousers that had something sticking out of the leg.

Jaide picked up the trousers and an iron rod fell out. Jack quickly reached down to pick it up.

'Ow!' he exclaimed as a bright blue spark jumped to his grasping fingers. He dropped the rod quickly on to the bed.

Both of the twins looked it over, eager to spot something special in it. But it was just a two-foot-long length of iron, pitted and scarred, utterly unmarked by rust.

'Not much of a present,' Jaide said, reaching for it. There was no spark, but a wave of dizziness rolled through her.

She shut her eyes and waited for it to pass, but instead the feeling got stronger.

'Are you all right?' Jack asked nervously. Jaide had suddenly gone very pale.

'No,' she said and swayed sideways. Jack steadied her and tried to snatch the rod away, to throw it back on the bed. But the moment he touched the cold iron again, a wave of dizziness hit him as well.

The floor sagged underneath them. The ceiling bowed. Every corner curved and twisted as though they were seeing the walls through buckled glass.

'What's going on?' Jack's voice boomed like a foghorn.

'It's the rod!' Jaide's voice squeaked like fingernails down a blackboard.

'Let it go!'

'I can't!' She shook her hand, but the rod was firmly attached to her palm. 'It won't let go of me!'

Jack tried to let go too, but he was stuck as well.

The angles and lines of the room bent even further, tangling their world in knots. Bile rose in their throats. Jack shook his head wildly and Jaide blinked and swallowed, hoping that this

would somehow make things look right again. But it didn't and they felt a sudden pain in their ears, a pain followed by a horrible, whispering voice that at first was so soft they could only feel it and not understand. But it grew louder and more strident, until it was the only thing they could hear, as if it emanated from inside their own heads.

++Come to us, troubletwisters. Join us . . . welcome, most welcome!++

The twins spun round and tried to head for the door, though now it was only a tiny rectangle at the end of a distorted tunnel of walls. Their feet still moved, but it was no use – the rod was fixed in place above the bed and they couldn't let go.

++We see you! We see you!++ crowed the voice triumphantly. **++So close, so close!++**

As the voice spoke, the watercolour animals on the walls twisted and writhed out of their frames, morphing into hideous, three-dimensional shapes with bulging eyes like those of a monstrous goldfish, eyes that rotated and shifted to peer intently at the twins.

Even worse than their attention was the fact that the eyes were entirely white, without iris or pupil, and the whiteness was buzzing and blurry, like the worst kind of fluorescent light.

++We see you! We see you!++

Jaide almost yanked her arm out of her shoulder socket as she tried to free herself from the rod. She kept her head down as she struggled, trying not to meet the gaze of those terrible

eyes, the eyes that she felt were drawing her in, sucking her into some other place, some other dimension.

Jack too averted his eyes, but the room warped and weirded around him even more. He sensed more than saw that there was something behind these impossible spaces, and desperately he tried to look at something that didn't hurt his brain, but there was nothing.

Both twins screamed at the same time.

Hector and Susan Shield heard the scream, and when they whirled around to the house, they were shocked to see its angles shifting. The roof, which normally met at a sharp point, was now as flat as the horizon, while the chimney had stretched up a dozen feet.

'Keep back!' Hector shouted to Susan, acting a second before she could. He leaped through a door that had become triangular and ten feet high, and ran up the stairs, becoming distorted himself in the process.

Then he was gone, engulfed by the bizarre geometry.

Upstairs, Jaide could feel a ghastly coldness creeping up her fingers and into her arms. It robbed her of her natural warmth and weakened her muscles, making it even harder to fight. She knew that if it spread much further, she wouldn't be able to resist at all and whatever lay behind the voice would get her.

To Jack it felt as though he was being skewered by the

multiplying eyes. Each new pair pinned him more tightly to the spot. If he met their gaze, he knew he would be lost. He kept moving his head, shifting his line of sight, blinking, but he knew there were just too many awful white eyes . . .

'Kids!'

A flash of purple-blue light cut through the mangled angles, dazzlingly bright and refreshingly straight. It struck the metal rod square in the middle. The twins were flung apart by a soundless explosion, even as another bright ribbon lashed out like a whip, gathering up Jaide and Jack and then looping back to the hands that had cast it. Through their shock, the twins recognised their father, but he looked like nothing they had ever seen before. Light rippled up and down his body like a gas flame, concentrating in his open hands. His hair waved like a nest of electric snakes.

Hector Shield grabbed the lightning as if it was a rope and hauled on it as hard as he could, pulling the twins to him. They reeled into his arms and he took the iron rod from their frozen hands without difficulty.

The white eyes flared brighter.

++No!++ the voice cried. **++They belong to us! They *want* to be with us!++**

'Never!' shouted Hector.

He raised the iron rod. Lightning burst from its tip, chain lighting that crackled across a dozen white eyes, bursting them like trodden-on grapes. But more and more eyes kept

appearing, and they grew closer and closer despite everything Hector did. The twins clung to him, not understanding what was going on, but in no doubt at all that they were in mortal danger.

'Get behind me!' Hector croaked to the children. He held up the rod again, but only a flickering spark jumped out. The eyes were everywhere, drawing nearer and nearer, as if a vast creature with ten thousand eyeballs was peering down at the small, helpless group of humans. The floor beneath their feet was tilting and rising at the sides, turning into a funnel, making them slide forward, and they all had the growing sensation that hidden behind or below the multitude of eyes there might also be a mouth.

'Get . . . get behind me!' the twin's father called out again. 'Then run for the stairs!'

++Come to us!++ countered the voice. It sounded very self-satisfied now, as if Hector's words were a concession of weakness.

The twins disobeyed both instructions. Jack stayed absolutely still, transfixed and paralysed. Jaide actually took a step forward.

'No!' she shouted back at the great cloud of eyes. 'Go away!'

'Jaide! Don't –' Hector yelled, dropping the iron rod and gathering the children in.

A tide of darkness swept over the room, snuffing out the glowing eyes. At the same time, the air became hot and gusted

furiously through the room. The wind pulled at Jaide, lifting her off her feet till Jack and Hector pulled her back down.

'I can't see!' Jaide screamed as the wind tore at her again. The darkness was almost worse than the staring eyes, and the wind kept getting stronger, accompanied by terrible crashing noises all around.

'Down!' shouted Hector. He pushed them flat on the floor as something – possibly the bed – flew over their heads and smashed into the wall. Clothes whipped from the wardrobe with a sound like giant birds flapping, and then the wardrobe itself blew into matchwood. Hector started to drag the twins back through the doorway.

The walls screamed as the roof came off and spun away. The twins screamed too, not knowing what was making the noise.

Then they felt their father's hands on them, pressing them to him, holding them down.

'Calm down, kids. We'll be all right. Take slow breaths. In for five seconds . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five – and now out for five seconds . . .'

As he counted, the darkness lifted. Jack found himself following his father's instructions even as his heart pounded in terror. Sunshine slowly filtered in from above, through the gaping absence where the roof had been. Jaide felt her brother grow calm and that helped her relax too. The wind slowed to a gentle breeze and then stopped altogether, to be replaced by an eerie silence, like being in the eye of a storm.

Behind the silence, as though behind a pane of glass that could shatter at any moment, the eyes were waiting.

'That's it,' said Hector. 'Nice, slow breaths . . .'

Jack's eyes shut for a moment. He twitched and raised his head. Suddenly he felt incredibly sleepy, as if he'd been woken in the middle of the night. He looked at Jaide, who was also nodding off.

Both of them slumped in Hector's arms and he walked them quickly down the stairs, looking anxiously behind him several times. Halfway down, he met Susan.

'Get them outside,' Hector said urgently. 'Away from the house.'

Susan grabbed them, the intense energy of her grasp keeping them just on the right side of awake. They were moving fast, running down the stairs, into the garden, out through the back gate into the lane and then several houses down, where Susan propped them against a fence and checked them over.

She had just taken their pulses when an incredibly loud thunderclap made them all flinch. Looking back, they saw a black column dotted with tiny bright lights rising up above the house. Lightning stabbed at the house out of a clear sky and then all that was left of the building was suddenly sucked up into the column, broken into pieces and spat back down again in a shower of debris.

'Hector . . .' whispered Susan.

The black column disappeared in a plume hundreds of feet

high. Dust rolled out in a cloud down the lane, making Susan and the twins cough and wipe their eyes.

But there, emerging from the dust, was the twins' father. He had blood streaming from a cut above his left eye and his corduroy jacket was ripped to shreds, but he was alive. In his right hand, he held the iron rod.

Jack and Jaide felt an incredible surge of relief. They smiled up at their father, but their eyes were dazed, and their exhausted minds stunned with shock and incomprehension.

'What have you done?' asked Susan.

'Susan, it's not . . .'

'Not your fault?' She pointed angrily at the metal rod in his hand. 'I knew you didn't go by plane. I looked up the arrivals, but I thought maybe – just maybe – I missed one and you had kept your promise.'

'I was going to say *it's not that simple*.' Hector knelt by the children and laid the rod down on the road.

Jack blinked up at his father, slowly regaining his senses. Next to him, he felt Jaide shift and Jack knew that he should say something, but he didn't have the strength to speak.

'Dad,' Jaide whispered. It took a great deal of effort to get the words out, so much so that she hardly knew if she was saying them right or getting them in order. 'We touched the . . . we saw the . . .'

'I know, sweetie,' said Hector. 'It'll be OK, I swear.'

'How will it be OK?' asked Susan. 'How will it be OK,

Hector? Our house has just been *destroyed*. You and the kids almost died.'

'We knew this might happen one day,' Hector said quietly. 'The potential is there, and one way or another, it will be realised.'

'*She* made it happen!' Susan tugged the letter out of her back pocket and flung it at him. '*She* did this.'

Hector scanned the four short lines and sagged back on his heels.

Jack didn't know what was stranger – what had happened or the fact that his parents didn't seem to be as surprised as he was. Jaide, meanwhile, wondered what on earth the card from the mysterious Grandma X had to do with it all.

'There must be a way to make it stop,' Susan said, clutching the twins tightly. 'There *has* to be.'

'She didn't make it happen,' said Hector. 'But the children have to go to her now.'

Go to her? Jaide thought. This was all happening too fast.

Susan could barely put her fears into words. 'No! She'll want to take them . . . she'll want to use them . . . I won't let them go!'

Jack had so many questions. But he was so tired and shocked he couldn't even begin to ask them. For now, he just listened. Questions would come later. Plenty of questions.

'She won't use them,' said Hector firmly. 'The choice will be their own. As it was for me, when I chose you.'

'But you didn't stick with that choice,' said Susan, her words as sharp as a knife. 'Did you?'

In the distance, they heard the sound of sirens cutting through the howling of dogs and the shrill repetition of car alarms.

Hector looked behind him and both Jaide and Jack followed his glance. Smoke was beginning to curl and twine out of the shattered walls and rooftops, and little flames were jumping in the shadows.

'They have to go,' said Hector. 'The twins . . . we might not be so lucky next time. I need you to take them to Mother before their Gifts fully awaken.'

'What gifts?' Jaide finally found the strength to speak up. 'What's happening?'

Hector looked at both of the twins. 'I can't tell you now. But you'll find out soon. All you need to know is that it's very important you go with your mother. Now.'

'You're not giving us any choice?' Jack asked.

'There is no choice.'

Jaide still didn't understand. 'What about you? Aren't you going to come with us?'

'Yes, Hector,' Susan said. 'Aren't you going to come with us?'

A flicker of intense pain passed across Hector's features. 'You know I can't go with you, Susan. Me being there would . . . interfere . . . as I interfered today.'

Susan looked away, back towards the burning house.

'You might as well go now then,' she said.

Hector nodded sadly. He bent down and kissed both the twins on the forehead, picked up the iron rod and stood, his glasses askew and misted over.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'One day, troubletwisters, I hope you'll understand.'

Hector turned to Susan, but she would not look at him, not even as his footsteps slowly receded down the lane. Jack couldn't watch him either – he felt like something inalterable was happening and their family was never going to be the same again. Only Jaide managed a small wave as their father left. She had no idea whether or not he saw it.

A minute later, a clap of thunder echoed across the ordinary suburb and a single black cloud slunk off towards the horizon, marking the end of the ordinary life of Jaide and Jack Shield.