

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT THE EARTH CONTAINS

With a roar and a thundering crash, a large chunk of jagged bedrock dropped heavily into the truck grumbling impatiently on Watchward Lane. Jack Shield, brown-eyed, brown-haired, and possessing legs that seemed to be mostly shin, glanced up from the makeshift goal he was defending and, too late, covered his ears.

A soccer ball caught him in the stomach, throwing him heavily onto his back.

“Hey!” Jack cried out.

“Sorry.” Jack’s sister, Jaide, was instantly by his side, helping him up. “It was meant to go past you, but I got distracted. It’s so noisy!”

Jack nodded, dusting himself off. He didn’t have the heart to argue, although the ball *had* seemed to move much faster than a normal kick would allow. Perhaps it had received a helping boost from Jaide’s Gift. . . .

“I wonder when Grandma will come out to tell them off again,” he said.

They both looked to the front door of the big, rosy-bricked house they lived in, half expecting it to burst open that very instant. Three seconds passed and there was no sign of their grandmother, but they knew it wouldn’t be long. Her temper was on a short fuse when it came to civic disturbances of any kind. Jaide possessed a similar temper,

leading Jack to frequently wonder if Grandma X's hair had been red, too, before it had turned white.

Jack and Jaide looked completely different, but they were, in fact, twins. They and their mother were living in the small town of Portland because of Gifts the twins possessed — Gifts they hadn't known anything about until they'd accidentally destroyed their house in the city. Even worse, it was dangerous for their father to come near them, lest his own Gifts further disrupt theirs. Hector Shield was a Warden, like their grandmother, and the twins were troubletwisters, doomed to whip up mayhem until their Gifts were firmly under control.

Jaide's Gift gave her power of the air, and she had indeed used a careful puff of wind to give the soccer ball a secret push toward the goal.

Now she looked back over the fence, to where the yellow, toothy head of the front-end loader was turning with a snarl to find another chunk of stone. Perhaps if she could deliberately time the next kick with another crash, Jack would be distracted again and she would have better luck.

"What are they doing in there, anyway?" her brother asked. "I thought they were supposed to be fixing the old place up, not tearing it down."

"Tara told me they're building an underground garage big enough for three cars." Tara was Jaide's best friend, and the daughter of the developer who had bought the property next to their grandmother's home. The two buildings were identical — three stories high, with wide windows and a widow's walk circling the roof. The only difference was that one had been left to go to ruin.

Jack retrieved the soccer ball and moodily bounced it on the ground in front of him. "Did Tara say why it has to be so noisy?"

Jaide shrugged. “Garages don’t dig themselves.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

Jaide wondered if he was thinking of the time a bulldozer had attacked them when they had first moved to Portland. It had been driven by a hideous creature made of rats and other animals taken over by an evil intelligence known only as The Evil — a nameless, amorphous power from another dimension that was always trying to insinuate itself into anything and everything on earth, starting with small things like bugs and moving its way up to people and inanimate objects like bulldozers. The Evil was the ancient enemy of the Wardens, which was why being a troubletwister was so important. One day Jack and Jaide would graduate to become Wardens, and join the great fight.

“Just ignore it,” Jaide said, snatching the ball from her brother’s hands and running away to the other side of the yard. “I’m up five goals to two. You’re never going to catch up!”

Jack narrowed his eyes and crouched between the posts, ready to defend his goal.

“Do your worst!” he cried back to her.

“What does that even mean?”

Jack didn’t know, exactly. He’d read it in one of his father’s old novels. It was a challenge of some kind, and he needed to do something to turn back his sister’s powerful kicks. Perhaps a flicker of shadow across her face would distract her, at just the right time . . .

With a cough, the front-end loader fell silent. The absence of sound seemed to ring in the air.

Jack breathed a huge sigh of relief, then lunged too late for the soccer ball, which zoomed past him so quickly he practically heard it sizzle. It ricocheted off a tree twenty

feet behind him and startled a large ginger cat who had been sleeping with one eye half-open, waiting for careless birds.

“Yowl!”

“Sorry, Ari!” Jaide was contrite, but not very. Aristotle was one of Grandma X’s Warden Companions, and he was supposed to be umpiring. “That’ll teach you to pay attention.”

He sniffed the ball and poked it with one of his claws. His whiskers wiggled. “It’s hot. Is that allowed?”

“Yes,” said Jaide.

“No,” said Jack.

“This is why cats don’t play sports,” said Ari with a yawn. “Fighting is much more interesting when there aren’t so many rules.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said an elegant gray-blue cat coming around the side of the house. Kleopatra was the second of Grandma X’s Warden Companions. “Without rules, we’d be nothing but wild animals. Humans and cats alike.”

Ari rolled his eyes and moved back into his favorite sleeping position. “Shush. You’re scaring off the birds.”

“If there are any left after that racket . . .” Kleo ran up to join the twins, her tail swaying high above her rump. “I came to see why the noise has stopped.”

“We don’t know,” said Jack, reaching down to rub her chin. “Maybe it’s their lunch hour.”

“I can hear people shouting,” said Jaide, whose hearing was particularly good during daytime, when her Gift was strongest. “I can’t make out what they’re saying, though . . . sounds like they’re under the house.”

All four of them looked up at the sound of footsteps running along Watchward Lane toward them. Ari opened

both eyes and watched with interest as the owner of the footsteps appeared in the arched entrance to the garden.

It was Tara, looking dusty under a hard hat decorated with decal flowers.

“We need you next door,” she said, slightly out of breath.

“How long have you been there?” Jaide asked. “I didn’t know —”

“I wanted to call you, but Dad said we were just dropping in for *one minute* on the way home and, anyway, my phone was out of charge.” Tara shook her head. “That doesn’t matter. You have to come.”

Jaide glanced at Jack, wishing they’d never lied about being interested in architecture. Tara’s dad probably just wanted to show them an interesting piece of drywall. Besides, she was winning at soccer.

“You go on ahead,” said Jack. “My ears still hurt. I don’t want to go any closer in case they start up again.”

“They won’t,” said Tara. “That’s why I’m here. They’ve stopped for a reason. I couldn’t call over the fence because they’d hear me. You know I can’t . . . you know . . . because . . . you know.”

She mimed a zipper across her mouth and waggled her eyebrows in frustration.

That awoke the twins’ interest. Tara, along with another boy from school named Kyle, knew all about Wardens and The Evil, but had been bound by their grandmother never to speak of it in public. They literally *couldn’t* speak, write, or even draw anything that might reveal the troubletwisters’ secrets.

If she was having trouble talking now, that meant something connected to The Evil had happened next door.

“What is it?” asked Jack urgently.

“They’ve found something,” she said, coming closer and leaning in to whisper.

“What kind of something?” asked Jaide.

“That’s why I want you to come and look.” Now she was tugging both their arms. “I don’t remember what it’s called, but I’ve seen one of them before.”

Reluctance turned to intense curiosity, and the three of them hurried out of the garden and up the lane, soccer ball forgotten, followed closely by the two cats.

Parked diagonally across the entrance to the house next door was a white van emblazoned with the name MMM HOLDINGS. That was Tara’s father’s, but he was nowhere to be seen. They ran past the massive truck into which the rock from under the house was being loaded, past the inert front-end loader, past all manner of construction equipment, all lying idle. There was no sign of anyone on the ground level of the construction site.

An earthy ramp led down into the house’s foundation under the living room, right next door to the location of Grandma X’s secret blue room, where she maintained the wards that protected Portland from The Evil and taught the troubletwisters their magical lessons. It was a repository of old things, many of them imbued with magical properties through their long proximity with Wardens. It was also a kind of armory or quartermaster’s store, though the twins suspected even Grandma X didn’t know half of what was in there, particularly as their father and other Wardens delivered new old things there all the time, to be investigated and redistributed to other Wardens who might need whatever powers had ended up in the antiques.

The house next door seemed to have no such space.

“Dad?” called Tara.

“Down here, darling,” floated back a familiar voice. “I wondered where you’d gotten to.”

Tara waved for the twins to follow her as she descended the ramp. It looked dark down there to Jaide’s eyes, but Jack’s soon adjusted. There were four men standing at the far side of the roughly hewn space, where the wall wasn’t yet fully dug. They all had on hard hats, and one of the men was holding a flashlight. The beam of light danced across something Jack couldn’t quite make out until he was closer.

It was a long, brass tube, not unlike a cannon in size and proportions. One end poked out of the wall. The other was still buried. It was covered in dirt, apart from one spot where one of the men had rubbed at it, exposing the metal. When the light hit that patch, it shone.

“Hello, kids,” said Martin McAndrew, Tara’s father. He was a short man with a personality as broad as his too-white smile. “This is a construction site. You really shouldn’t be down here without proper headgear.”

“We won’t be long,” said Jaide, peering past him to get a better look at the object in the earth. Tara was right: It did indeed look like something they had seen before. But what? “We just wanted to check out what you found.”

“Well, sure, I guess.” He blinked in surprise at the cats coming down the ramp, sniffing the dusty air. “Everyone’s curious, eh? Not surprising. We think it might be something left behind after an old battle. Or part of a broken machine. It might even be valuable. Does Portland have a museum?”

As Martin and the workers discussed this, Tara and the twins jostled closer. Jaide’s Gift was tingling, so she knew the object had *something* to do with the Wardens. Perhaps

it was an artifact they had read about in the Register of Lost and/or Forgotten Things. There might even be a reward!

Jack's mind was off on a similar tangent. Their father was an expert at finding lost objects once important to the Wardens. He really should be here, looking at this thing. Perhaps they should give him a call . . . ?

"It looks just like one of those things . . . you know . . . that your friend the professor built . . ." Tara managed to force out.

"Of course," said Jaide, kicking herself for not seeing it sooner. It was still mostly buried, and there was a dent in it that might have been caused by one of the digging machines, but it did look very much like a cross-continuum conduit constructor. She hadn't recognized it straightaway because it had a slightly more modern look, like their grandmother's new car. It wasn't brand-new, but it wasn't three hundred years old, either.

"I didn't know there was another one," breathed Jack.

Jaide wasn't worried about that. "How did it get down here?"

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Tara.

"I'm getting your grandmother," said Kleo.

By then the three kids were ear to ear, just inches from the long, brass tube. Jack leaned in for a closer look at the end of the tube, and a coil of bright white light whipped between him and the exposed metal. A stinging shock went through him, into Tara, who felt nothing, and jolted Jaide in turn. She gasped in surprise.

Suddenly her Gift was amplified. A spiraling gust of wind kicked up around her feet, raising a thick cloud of dust. Jack staggered back, coughing and struggling to

contain his own Gift. The flashlight went out, and the light coming down the ramp dimmed as though a cloud had passed across the sun.

“A cave-in!” Tara’s dad tried to pull all three of them away from the wall. But the twins resisted. They knew that this was no ordinary event, and the dust was just dust. Their Gifts had been woken by something — or was it the other way around?

There was a whooshing noise. Flickering golden light danced through the shadows and clouds of dust. Something papery fluttered in Jack’s face, and he brushed it away with one hand, only to find that it stuck to him and wouldn’t let go. He shook his hand, and it wriggled up his sleeve to his elbow, where it clung on tight. Trying to dislodge it with his other hand only repeated the process up that arm.

Jaide, meanwhile, felt a thud as though something had dropped to the ground right in front of her. There was a chittering noise that sounded like insects. *Lots* of insects, all rustling and clicking at once. The hair on the back of her neck stood up as dozens of tiny white dots winked into life through the gloom.

She knew what they were. They were eyes. But not ordinary eyes.

++We have found you, troubletwisters,++ said a terrible voice directly into her mind. **++We have found you!++**

Jaide raised a fist above her head and swung it about in a tight circle. Her Gift responded to her sudden urgency, sweeping the dust away in a tight circle around them and revealing the creature that crouched before her. It was as big as a medium-size dog, but made entirely out of insects. The legs and antennae of each bug gripped each of its neighbor’s, creating a rippling, ever-changing mass that,

even as she watched, raised up in front of her and unfolded four spindly tendrils to clutch at her face.

Ari flashed past her, a ginger cat enraged, fur on end and claws unsheathed. The Evil scattered and fell back as Jaide gathered her Gift around her before it could regroup.

Jack wasn't oblivious to his sister's predicament, even as he wrestled with the clinging, living parchment that had worked its way up to his shoulder and was threatening to envelop his face. Keeping it at bay with one hand, he took all the shadows around him and wove a protective cloak around the workers and Tara's father so that they couldn't see The Evil and it couldn't see them, either. He looked for Tara, and found her tugging a length of timber from an exposed beam and testing its weight as a club.

The Evil raised itself up and confronted two trouble-twisters, one girl, and a cat united against it. Hundreds of tiny white eyes glared with unflinching malevolence.

++Join us,++ The Evil said. **++It is your destiny!++**

"You don't frighten us," said Jaide, telling herself to believe it. The Evil couldn't have been at full strength, or she would have felt its terrible presence battering at her mind.

"Four against one," added Jack, who had the living parchment caught tight in his hand now. It wriggled and squirmed but couldn't get free.

++We are one,++ said The Evil, **++and we are many.++**

With a terrible ripping noise, The Evil split into quarters and leaped in four directions at once.

Jaide whipped up the wind to blow her quarter away, but it broke down even further into individual insects, and each unfurled two pairs of tiny gossamer wings. Humming loudly, the swarm was buffeted by the wind but not greatly slowed. Jaide covered her face as hundreds of buzzing, stinging bugs converged on her at once.

Tara swung the plank of wood like a baseball bat. It sailed right through her bug creature, squashing maybe a dozen or two but having no effect on the rest. She nearly tripped backward over Ari, who was doing his best to swipe at his portion of The Evil, and finding it difficult to do more than punch holes that quickly healed over.

Jack tried something he had never attempted before, which was to send shadows into the white eyes of The Evil insects. If he could put out that awful glow, maybe that would kill The Evil, too. But the light was unquenchable. No matter how many shadows he threw at the bug creature lunging at him, its eyes still glowed white. His frantic gesturing only set free the parchment, which renewed its quest to smother him. With two rippling leaps it reached his neck, and with a third it clapped tightly over his eyes, blinding him.

The bugs saw their chance and took it. Feathery wings and prickly legs tickled his face and neck, buzzing and biting.

++Yes, yes,++ gloated The Evil. **++Come closer and together we will open the way for good.++**

“Blow the man down!”

The cry came from behind Jaide. She ducked as a pair of royal blue wings flapped overhead, scattering the insects that were attacking her. A curved black beak snapped at the clumps bothering Tara and Ari. With a snap of her wings, Cornelia the macaw swooped to help Jack, who had staggered backward into the earthen wall, struggling against two attacks at once.

Before Jaide could rally her Gift, a beam of silver light shone down the ramp, issuing from the moonstone ring of a stiff-backed, white-haired woman dressed in jeans, a white linen shirt, and cowboy boots, with Kleo, her Warden

Companion, trotting at her feet. The light scattered the insects crawling over Jack, and sent them swirling in a panic.

“Grandma!” Jaide ran to her side and hastened to explain. “It wasn’t our fault. The Evil came out of nowhere. I don’t know how —”

Grandma X shook her head. “Let’s deal with it first. We’ll talk after.”

++You will never defeat us,++ The Evil intoned. The swarm had taken on the shape in which it had first appeared, and it rose up on three spindly legs and spread its arms wide to face this new challenge.

“It’s not our job to defeat you,” said a soft voice. “Just to contain you.”

Jack felt a firm, wooden hand come down on his shoulder. “Rennie?” he said.

“I’m here,” she said, and some of Jack’s panic evaporated, even though he still couldn’t see. The living parchment absolutely refused to come away from his face. When he tugged at it, it stretched like rubber, then snapped back exactly as it had been.

Jaide watched the Living Ward of Portland, one of four wards charged with keeping The Evil at bay, do something with her one human hand. A translucent bubble formed around The Evil, turning the whiteness of its eyes to myriad tiny rainbows. The Evil reached out to pop the bubble with one bug-claw but it only bulged slightly, spreading circular ripples out in waves.

Rennie’s hand moved again, and the bubble began to contract.

++We will return,++ The Evil vowed. **++We have found a way. We are coming.++**

The bubble shrank and the bug-thing crouched to avoid

touching it. Eyes blinked and rolled as The Evil folded in on itself, becoming a shapeless swarm confined to the size of a basketball, a football, a tennis ball. . . .

++We are coming!++

Soundlessly, the bubble collapsed to nothing, and the eyes went out. Instantly, the swarm was released, unharmed, and the air was full of buzzing insects.

Jaide grinned in relief and Tara clapped her hands.

“What’s going on?” asked Tara’s father. He and the workers, released from the gloom Jack had cast over them, swatted at insects and looked at the sudden crowd on the work site with suspicion. “It wasn’t a cave-in, was it?”

“Termites,” said Grandma X, raising her moonstone ring a second time. “You called Rennie here for a second opinion.”

Rennie, in her former life, had been the town’s handyperson.

“Looks bad,” she said. “You’d better go call an exterminator.”

Martin McAndrew blinked three times and nodded.

“You’re right,” he said. “That’s a good idea.”

He reached in his pocket for his mobile phone.

“You’ll want to do that somewhere else,” said Grandma X, with an unbending gleam in her eye. “Reception is bad down here.”

Tara’s father and the workers headed obediently up the ramp.

“A little help here?” said Jack, his voice muffled by the parchment.

Jaide hurried to him, horrified that she hadn’t noticed that he was still under attack. She had simply assumed that all of The Evil had been expelled by Rennie and Grandma X.

“What is it?” asked Tara, as together Grandma X and Rennie helped Jack peel the living parchment from his face. Cornelia circled above, offering encouraging squawks.

“I think . . . yes.” Grandma X held up the parchment by its top corners while Jack and Rennie held the bottom two. “Okay, easy,” she told it in a reassuring voice. “We have you now.”

The paper became still.

“It’s a message,” she said, “of a kind that Wardens send one another sometimes. Living mail, if you like, only I’ve never seen one as determined as this. It must have been sent a very long time ago, and held up somehow, desperately trying to get through.”

“What does it say?” asked Jack, eyeing the paper resentfully. It had better be something really important, given it had almost smothered him in its quest to make sure it was noticed.

The paper seemed blank at first. Then ink swirled around the edges and sent fine filaments across the page. Letters formed, then words, written in an unsteady hand.

We’re here and we are trapped. Please help us!

It wasn’t signed.

“What does it mean?” asked Jaide. “Who’s it from?”

“Where are they?” asked Tara.

“How do we help them?” asked Jack. Cornelia landed on his shoulder and cocked her yellow head.

Grandma X’s face had gone very pale. She folded the parchment into four and clutched it tightly in her hand.

“Tell me how you came by this,” she said.

They explained about the brassy tube buried in the

bedrock under the house and the mysterious way their Gifts had woken as they came near it.

“It’s a cross-continuum conduit constructor, isn’t it?” said Jaide.

Grandma X nodded.

“And these aren’t really termites,” said Tara, pulling one of the wriggling bugs from her hair. It had four wings, five body segments, and no less than ten legs.

“Did they come from the same place as the message?” asked Jack.

Grandma X nodded.

“How?” asked Tara.

“The cross-continuum conduit constructor opened a small hole inside the wards,” said Rennie. “That’s how it got into Portland. The Evil followed the message through.”

“So it was our fault,” said Jaide, feeling a pang of guilt.

There were many places in the world where The Evil tried to break in, places where the fabric of reality was weak. Each was protected by four wards, and each ward had a different nature, as depicted in a simple rhyme that every troubletwister learned by rote:

SOMETHING GROWING

SOMETHING READ

SOMETHING LIVING

SOMEONE DEAD

The Something Read Ward was a piece of romantic graffiti scribbled on the town lighthouse by Jack and Jaide’s parents. Rennie was Something Living. What the other two wards were, the troubletwisters didn’t know. The Evil was always trying to get around the wards and the Wardens

who maintained them. Jaide hated the fact she had helped it find a new way in.

Grandma X stirred from her deep thoughts.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she told Jaide in a firm voice. “Don’t ever believe what The Evil tells you. It only means to frighten you or put doubts in your head. It saw an opportunity, that’s all . . . an opportunity the message provided.”

“Does that mean the message came from the same place as The Evil?” asked Jack.

“From the Evil Dimension?” asked Jaide.

Instead of answering, Grandma X crossed the room to study the cross-continuum conduit constructor. The parchment went into her pocket, but she kept one hand pressed against the pocket as though keeping its contents safe.

“Tara,” she said, turning away from her examination, “thank you for bringing this to our attention. Please tell your father that I would like to buy it from him for a price we’ll settle later. I would also like his expertise in freeing it from the earth. I need to get this home as soon as possible, so I can examine it.”

Tara nodded and headed up the ramp.

Grandma X turned to the twins.

“Whatever you have planned for the rest of the day,” she said, “I’m afraid it’s canceled.”

“Why?” asked Jack, exchanging a worried glance with his sister.

“What does this mean?” asked Jaide. She had never heard their grandmother sound so serious.

“I don’t know what it means. That’s why I’m going to do something that’s only happened once before in my lifetime. I’m going to call a Grand Gathering and ask them the question that for the life of me I cannot answer on my own: Why do I recognize the handwriting on that note?”