

# Game Night

By Jonny Nexus

Chapter One Preview

"A laugh riot... the writing is top-notch, the story is hilarious and the book is very reasonably priced."

- Teflon Billy, ENWorld Staff Reviewer ☆☆☆☆☆ (5 stars)

"Game Night, the debut novel by Jonny Nexus, is a work of absolute genius, and is definitely ranked as one of the most fun and enjoyable books I've read in a long time, and in my opinion is at least as witty as the likes of Terry Pratchett. "

- Amazon.co.uk ☆☆☆☆☆ (5 stars)

"It's clear that Mr Nexus is a talented writer and hopefully there will be more to come, I await it eagerly."

- Amazon.co.uk ☆☆☆☆☆ (5 stars)

"One of the funniest reads this year."

- Amazon.com ☆☆☆☆☆ (5 stars)

"Game Night had me cackling from first page to last at the inept adventurers and the all-too-familiar players controlling them. Spare a thought for the GM too, potions and magic rings will never be viewed the same way again."

- Gregor Hutton, author of Best Friends

"I issued more laughs from reading Game Night than I do from an average Pratchett novel... Clash of The Titans meets Discworld, neatly blended with a little Red Dwarfism."

"Have to say, just finished reading it and enjoyed it immensely - shades of far too many games I've GM'd waving from the background..."

"I loved the book. As usual, your sense of humor was spot on."

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# Chapter One

The Riddle was old, for it was as old as the Gate, and the Gate had guarded the head of the Valley since men first walked upon the World. The words of the Riddle were an ancient secret, passed down from father to son, from grandfather to grandson, from uncle to nephew, and – in at least one case – from the most distrusted old man in the village to his worryingly young “friend”.

For more than five hundred generations a succession of Gatekeepers had kept their lonely vigil, climbing the steep winding valley each day to arrive at the Gate before sunrise, returning home to the village below only once the sun had set. Seasons came, and seasons went and still the Gatekeepers sat, and waited, through scorching sun and biting hail.

Waiting.

Eridu had been guarding the Riddle for fifty-two years now, ever since it had been entrusted to him by his father, as the old man lay dying from the cancer in his bones.

“The Visitors will come,” his father had told him. “As it says in the Prophesies, so shall they come.”

For fifty-two years Eridu had sat by the Gate, and in that time there had been no Visitors. Visitors, yes: curious children from the village; lost travellers; roving tax collectors convinced he was running some kind of scam. But none who greeted him as the Prophesies foretold.

Soon his vigil would end. He would pass on the secret of the Riddle to his great-nephew Pannon, and the five hundred and seventh Gatekeeper would be replaced by the five hundred and eighth.

Not today though. Not today.

Eridu waited.

The ride up the Valley had been long and tiresome, and the party's spirits had been further dampened by an unfortunate dispute over the bill at the inn in which they'd spent the night. But now they were within sight of that which they'd spent many moons travelling towards.

The Gate.

Yann leaned forward and whispered into Running Water's ear. The old mare, sensing the blessed rest of a pause in the journey, responded, as she always had since he'd nursed her back to health after finding her lying near to death beside the River.

The Gate grew nearer.

A group approached. Eridu watched them creep ever upward along the narrow winding path. Could they be the Visitors? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But patience was a virtue that a lifetime at the Gate taught, and so Eridu sat and waited, as the specks became dots, and the dots became riders, and the riders became men.

Or three men, a woman, and a halfling to be exact.

Their leader, or at least the one who led, wore the garb and body paint of a Northland barbarian, and rode a wild mare with a practised ease that came from a life lived in the saddle.

Behind him was an armoured knight, whose black armour was emblazoned with a cryptic symbol, and whose steed was a horse's skeleton, animated, that spoke of evil with every movement.

Next came a halfling with a crooked grin who rode the ugliest riding dog Eridu had ever seen, closely followed by a woman of cold beauty who rode a sleek white stallion.

Finally, some way behind, repeatedly catching up with the leading group only to fall behind once more, rode a fifth figure, clad in plain and rusted armour, and riding a tired looking mule.

The riders approached one by one, and drew up in front of Eridu. Were these the Visitors? These four, five now that the straggler had caught up? Quite frankly, Eridu hoped not; but the question was not his to judge. He was merely the Gatekeeper, nothing more than a player in a play whose performance had begun more than twelve thousand years before.

He stepped forward, and spoke the words that the Prophecies prescribed.

“Who are you, that approach the Gate?”

The one who'd led the way up the valley stepped forward, and replied with words that Eridu had not heard spoken aloud for fifty-two years.

“We are the Visitors. We come seeking the Riddle.”

Eridu's heart, tranquil until now, began to thump. It was told that others had unsuccessfully sought the mantle of the Visitors in the past, but none during his time at the Gate. Could these be the ones who finally succeeded?

Could they?

Eridu took a step forward, and began to recite the words he'd waited a lifetime to speak.

“I have many births,  
too many to count,  
but deaths—”

That single word, “deaths”, was the last word Eridu ever spoke – though not the last syllable, that distinction going to the gasped “Ugh” that emerged from his lungs when the sword's sharp blade thrust through his diaphragm. For a moment there was pain.

And then there was nothing.

The OverRealm. Home of the Gods, and several thousand assorted minions. Time has no meaning here, but if it did, it would be a little after tea-time. Six robed figures sit around a marble table.

The figure at the head of the table clears his throat, and wearily asks, "You're actually going to kill him?"

"I have killed him!" the figure sitting at the table's opposite end declares. He waves a hand to indicate the set of seven knucklebones that lay before him. "Five successes." He smiles a cold smile. "Read 'em and weep, old man."

The old man is the AllFather. From his once young and vigorous loins sprang all of creation. But now he is tired and weary. He looks again at the figure sitting opposite him.

"You really want to kill him?"

Yann watched in horror as Draag calmly pulled his sword from the Gatekeeper's crumpled and dying body, wiped its blood-covered blade on the old man's tunic, and returned it to the black scabbard that hung from his belt.

"What?" Yann stuttered, metaphorically – if not actually – speechless. He continued in that vein with a "But?" and a "Why?" before finally managing to assemble a set of words into an order that approached sentence-hood. "In the name of the Gods, why?"

Draag smiled a smile so smug and superior that it achieved the status of a smile on various technicalities only. "If you're asking why kill him, then I'd ask you why not? Why waste time trying to solve his riddle when we can just kill him and take the key?"

"What key?" asked an intruder to the conversation.

The voice was Hill's, the tone his usual mocking style. The halfling – a "scout" to strangers, a "freelance finance redistributor" to friends, the "defendant" to judges, Hilby Bigfella to his disapproving mother, and plain, damn "thief" to pretty much everyone else – leaned back in his saddle and waited for a response.

Yann finally broke the resulting three-way glare off with a querying nod, at which point the halfling continued. "You see, keys tend to be associated with keyholes. So if he's got a key," he declared, pointing at the Gatekeeper's corpse, "then shouldn't that there door have a keyhole? I've opened plenty of locked doors when I didn't have the key but I always had a keyhole to poke my picks in."

Yann looked at the ten yard high expanse of the Gate and saw only a sheer metallic surface, with no cracks, no markings, no features, and definitely no keyhole. He looked north, and saw the Wall marching across the mountains

to the infinite ice-sheets beyond. He looked south, and saw the wall marching south into the endless desert.

No way round.

No way through.

"So there is nothing on the body whatsoever, nothing that might somehow open the Gate?"

"No."

"I'll try forcing the Gate open again."

"Nothing happens."

"But I got seven successes!" shouts the Warrior, the Lord of Man's Ambition.

The AllFather says nothing. The woman sitting to his left sighs. "Perhaps you should have thought of that before you killed him."

"I don't recall hearing you object, Mistress Lady!" says the Warrior, angrily.

The Lady, the Mistress of Man's Despair, pauses for a moment before delivering a calm reply. "I don't recall being asked."

The Warrior considers that for barely an instant, then turns his attention back to the AllFather. "Anyway, I didn't actually say I was killing him, did I? And you hadn't asked me to cast the knuckle-bones, had you? So my cast would not have counted, would it?"

Eridu took a step forward, and began to recite the words he'd waited a lifetime to speak.

"I have many births,  
too many to count,  
but deaths I have one,  
no chance of miscount.  
I know where I'm going,  
no mistakes I shall make,  
but of thoughts and decisions,  
I do not partake.  
Much movement I have,  
yet I seldom alter,  
I may twist and turn,  
but I'll never falter.  
What am I?"

The attack when it came was swift and violent. For Eridu there was only the mocking laugh of the black-clad knight followed by a silence that lasted forever.

To the right of the AllFather sits the Jester, the Lord of Man's Uncertainty. He is the first to speak.

"Lord Warrior, a question, if you please? When we solve the riddle,

who shall we give the answer to? Who will tell us if we are right, or we are wrong?"

"Ah."

Eridu took a step forward, and began to recite the words he'd waited a lifetime to speak.

"I have many births,  
too many to count,  
but deaths I have one,  
no chance of miscount.  
I know where I'm going,  
no mistakes I shall make,  
but of thoughts and decisions,  
I do not partake.  
Much movement—  
"Aren't you dead?"

"No!" chant five voices in unison. The figure to the left of the Warrior – the Sleeper, the Lord of Man's Inactivity – blinks in confusion. "But didn't Lord Warrior kill him?"

The AllFather sighs. "Yes. But then he decided that he hadn't actually done it, so we rewound things back to the start."

"Yes, I know. But then he killed him again, didn't he?"

"Yes, and then he decided that he hadn't done that either and we rewound it back again."

"Oh, right."

"Please try to keep up."

Eridu stopped, angry, and glared at the source of the interruption: the rusty armoured warrior with the knackered looking mule.

"Do I look dead?"

"No, sorry. My mistake."

Eridu gave him a final glare, shot a confused glance at the Northland barbarian and got an apologetic shrug in return, and then began once more to recite the words he'd waited a lifetime to speak.

"I have many births,  
too many to count,  
but deaths I have one,  
no chance of miscount.  
I know where I'm going,  
no mistakes I shall make,  
but of thoughts and decisions,  
I do not partake.

Much movement I have,  
yet I seldom alter,  
I may twist and turn,  
but I'll never falter.  
What am I?"

"I hate riddles!" exclaims the Warrior. "The game should be about what our mortals can do, not what we are capable of."

The figure who sits to the Warrior's right nods in reluctant agreement. He is the Dealer, the Lord of Man's Contentment. "Much as it pains me to admit it," he says, "I think Lord Warrior has a point."

"Look, I'm just trying to put a bit of intelligent thought into the game," snaps the AllFather.

"What did the Gatekeeper say again?" asks the Jester. "Something about births and deaths. Did anyone write it down?"

Eridu took a step forward, and began to recite the words he'd waited a lifetime to speak.

"I have many births,  
too many to count,  
but deaths I have one,  
no chance of miscount.  
I know where I'm going,  
no mistakes I shall make,  
but of thoughts and decisions,  
I do not partake.  
Much movement I have,  
yet I seldom alter,  
I may twist and turn,  
but I'll never falter.  
What am I?"

He looked around and saw only five confused and puzzled faces. Perhaps these were not the Visitors.

"What in the bowels of he who rules our basement is that supposed to mean?" snaps the Warrior.

"It's a riddle," smirks the Jester. "It's supposed to be hard."

"Perhaps you should let those with a brain consider it," says the Lady, icily.

"Are you talking to him or me?" asks the Warrior.

"Why would you think I'm only speaking to one of you?"

Yann twirled a stalk of wild high grass between his fingers and considered

the meaning of the riddle. Many births, but a single death. Moving, yet not moving. Knowing and yet not knowing.

His thoughts swirled, and danced, and coalesced, only to break away to dance again. The Answer was elusive and slippery, like a dying ice salmon swimming for home. It's there, you can feel it; but when you try to grasp it you find only its trail.

He focussed on nothingness, as his Shaman-Father had taught him, turning inward, letting go of the world around him, feeling his thoughts merging as one.

And then the screaming began.

"I sometimes think you belong downstairs," shouts the Dealer.

"No need to get personal," says the Warrior.

"Hard not to," suggests the Jester. The Lady nods in agreement.

"The Gatekeepers have kept this secret for more than twelve thousand of their years," says the Dealer slowly, fighting for calm. "Do you really think you could get hold of it by just slapping the latest incumbent around for a bit?"

"It was worth a try," says the Warrior with a shrug.

Silence descends around the table.

"The Riddle?" suggests the AllFather, finally breaking the silence, only for it to resume, resiliently, after he has finished speaking.

The silence continues, accompanied, but not interrupted, by the occasional questioning glance.

Beneath the table the Dog, the Lord of Man's Loyalty, stirs, half-heartedly licks his balls, and then settles back down to sleep.

Eventually, the Warrior ventures to speak. "I was only joking when I said I was hitting him."

"Right."

"I didn't actually hit him."

"Of course."

The sun fell to the horizon, flared briefly, and then departed, taking day with it and leaving only night. Through it all, Yann let the words of the riddle flow over him, trying to ignore the hunched figure of the Gatekeeper huddling terrified beside the Gate, or the noise of Hill's riding dog Shovel apparently attempting to dig its way under the wall.

"I swear that dog's got some terrier in it," remarked Draag to no-one in particular.

The night continued.

"Can you give us a clue?" asks the Jester, a hopeful smile upon his face.

"What's the point of setting you an intellectual problem if I then just tell you the answer?" replies a depressed AllFather.

The Lady lays a hand upon the AllFather's arm. "No-one's asking

you to tell us the answer," she says.

"Just to give us a little clue," adds the Jester.

The AllFather sighs. "Well what's got many starting points and only one end point?"

"Dunno. And what's all that stuff about knowing where to go mean?"

"Well it knows where to go, because its path, its course, is predictable."

"Right. How?"

The AllFather looks around the table. "Anyone?" he asks, a tone of slight desperation in his voice. He gets no response, and continues, haltingly. "See although it twists and turns when looked at from above, when looked at from the side, it's always going in the same direction."

"Which is?" asks the Jester.

"Downwards."

"Downwards?"

"Oh for pity's sake, yes downward! It always flows downward!"

"It flows downward," muses the Lady. "What? Like a river?"

"Yes," mutters a defeated AllFather.

"That would make sense," concedes the Jester. "So the answer's a river, right?"

"Yes" says the AllFather, his head in his hands.

The Jester thinks for a moment. "What about deltas?"

"What about them?" asks the AllFather warily.

"Well in a delta a river splits into many channels, each of which makes its own way to the sea. That would make many deaths. So the answer to the riddle can't be a river because we're looking for something that has a single death."

"The answer," hisses the AllFather through gritted teeth, "is a river, okay?"

It is the Warrior who eventually breaks the resulting silence. "Shall we just give the answer to the Gatekeeper then, and get this farce over with?"

"I'm not sure he's in any real state to receive the answer," says the Dealer, with a hint of bitter sarcasm.

The Lady touches the AllFather on the arm again, and smiles. "Perhaps we should just start over from the top?"

Eridu took a step forward, and began to recite the words he'd waited a lifetime to speak.

"I have many births, too many—"

"River," said the black-clad knight, interrupting.

Eridu fell to his knees, stunned. "You know the answer without hearing the question!" he sobbed. "Truly, you are the Visitors!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. You've got the answer, now just open the sodding door."

Eridu stood, and walked on shaking legs to the Gate. He raised his hands

to the skies, spoke the sacred words that invoked the power of the Gods, and laid his fingers upon the smooth unmarked metal of the door.

Somewhere inside the mighty structure a thing that was designed to click, clicked, and the door swung smoothly open to reveal the fabled Far Lands that lay beyond the Wall.

Eridu had dreamed of this moment, but had never dared hope for it. He gazed at the view, seconds slowing as though stretched to minutes as he tried to absorb its magnificent beauty, scarcely aware of the Visitors walking past him. A grasp of the arm from the Northlander. Nods from the woman and the halfling. Blank incomprehension from the rusty-armoured fighter. And a mocking sneer from the black-clad knight who'd known the Riddle's answer.

None of it mattered. He'd done his duty. He, the five hundred and seventh Gatekeeper had completed the task so dutifully passed on by the five hundred and six that came before him. Of them all, he alone would enjoy the privilege of a retirement lived with the knowledge that the job was done.

He had just one more task to perform.

"The Gate has opened for you," he said. "And you have passed."

The black-clad knight, hearing his words, turned back to face Eridu. "Oh sorry, yes, almost forgot," he said.

The last thing Eridu ever felt was the sword slicing through his chest and into his heart.

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Thanks!