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GARTH NIX

WE DO NOT  
WELCOME OUR  
TEN- YEAR-  
OLD  
OVERLORD



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*To the memory of my brother*

*Jonathan Nix*

*1966–2023*

*A creative genius in many fields, and one of the best and kindest people I have ever known.*

This book is set in an alternate version of Canberra, Australia, in a 1975 that did not exist. I have taken liberties with everything, particularly geography, history, the natural environment, and the release date of Dungeons & Dragons supplements.

While this story is not set in the actual Canberra, it is inspired by the real place, and I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of that land and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Though none of the characters are based on real people and the family situations and everything else are all completely invented for a better story, this book is dedicated to the players of the D&D campaign I ran from roughly 1976–1981: Grant Flitton (Altmoor) and Peter Howe (Flàdrif), who both sadly left this plane of existence far too early; John Ciempka (Borkum Scandinavian); and Phil Greaves (Philip Des Cheveaux).

# CHAPTER ONE

Without warning, the sun went out. Only for a fraction of a second, but it was definitely gone. Or so claimed the one scientist who had been paying attention. It was 1975, and the computers monitoring the few solar telescopes that were watching were not very advanced, so it was presumed to be a programming glitch or something like that. All the other scientists said she was wrong.

But the scientist wasn't wrong. In that split second the sun *had* disappeared and come back again, and the world had changed, even if no one knew it. Reality had rippled and bent, and there was suddenly something new on Earth that had not been there before.

A small globe, golden and shining, appeared in the shallows of an artificial lake. For a few moments it lit up the water – until it rolled around and coated itself in mud, and the light was dimmed. It continued to roll on, into a patch of weed that wrapped around it, fronds trailing up like hair from a severed head.

It was a twelve-minute ride down to that lake from Kim Basalt's home, an easy coast even on his heavy old bicycle and a breeze on Bennie Chance's new ten-speed. Their younger siblings, Eila and Madir, took longer, always following but never catching up.

Kim, whose full name was Chimera Xanthoparmelia Basalt, was twelve years old, as was his best friend Bennie, whose full name was Benjamina Ramella Chance. Their younger sisters were only ten years old, Eileithyia Indigofera Basalt and Madir Sofitela Chance. They had known each other all their lives, but each pair became friends in preschool because, for that time, they had unusual names.

The quartet rode down to the lake almost every evening, after dinner for Kim and Eila because their parents insisted on eating together early, and before dinner for Bennie and Madir, whose meals were generally late and unpredictable. First Kim would ride

down from the experimental farm on the mountain (a hill really) where his family lived to Bennie's house, which was on the highest street of the suburb below the mountain, with Eila trailing behind. Bennie would be ready and ride out straight away, with Madir yelling out to Eila to wait for her as she put on her shoes or looked for her hair band or whatever.

The night the globe appeared was like any other night for the kids, at first. Once they got to the lake, Kim and Bennie put their bikes down by the boat ramp and sat on the park bench by the pebble-strewn foreshore to chat and skip stones, while Eila and Madir lounged on the merry-go-round in the playground behind, idly pushing it with their feet while they talked. The two groups were far enough apart that neither could hear what the other duo was talking about, which was the way they all liked it.

For Kim, it was a break from having Eila always know more about almost everything than he did, and telling him about it. His sister never held back, no matter how many times he tried to tell her that people often didn't like being corrected. And by 'people', he meant himself.

Eila liked hanging out with Madir, because Mad worshipped Eila and was always happy to listen to her

talk about anything. Also, it was a break for Madir from her own older sibling, Bennie being an ever-watchful presence. But as long as she could keep an eye on her sister, Bennie didn't need to listen to her. So the separation suited everyone.

'Dan Lovell's family got a colour TV,' said Bennie. Colour television had only been introduced eighteen months before, years later than in most other countries. She picked up a stone and idly threw it across the water lapping near their feet. It skipped four times and sank. This was a poor result for her, as she was a champion stone-skipper and generally fantastic at throwing anything, bowling in cricket, or pitching in softball.

'Remember that American girl whose family visited last year?' continued Bennie.

'Yeah. Rose.'

'She couldn't believe no one had a colour TV yet,' said Bennie. She laughed and threw another stone. It skipped six times. 'She must have looked in everyone's house, everyone in fifth grade anyway. Demented.'

'She didn't come to visit us,' said Kim.

'Yeah, well obviously,' said Bennie.

Kim nodded, acknowledging the point. His family

didn't have even a black-and-white television, and were never going to get one. His parents were dedicated to what they called an 'alternative lifestyle', which was why they took the job looking after the experimental farm. It had six long greenhouses, and besides the actual scientific crops, Kim reckoned a bit too much of the space was taken up with the family's vegetables. He was always worried his parents would get fired, but the scientists from the university down the hill and the government research centre farther west along the ridge didn't seem to mind. Possibly because they were regularly given baskets of tomatoes and beans and zucchinis and out-of-season flowers.

Eila, on the other hand, did not share his anxiety. Sometimes Kim felt like his parents and sister lived in a different world to the one he inhabited. They were all so certain about everything, in their different ways. He wished he had their single-mindedness sometimes, but try as he might, he couldn't stop worrying about things that might happen, or could happen, or were definitely going to happen.

'Wish I had a bow,' said Bennie, skipping another stone. She mimed shooting an arrow up at the sky, which was beginning to darken, the sun already out

of sight behind the mountain, though its reddish light still lingered. ‘Like Flàdrif.’

Flàdrif was the name of Bennie’s character in a new game called Dungeons & Dragons. Kim had found it browsing in the city’s one tiny games store, which mostly sold jigsaw puzzles and chess sets. He was immediately drawn to the small white box with the picture of a wizard blowing up a bunch of little monsters (orcs or goblins, he figured out later, and not blowing them up but casting a fireball). He stood for an hour carefully but swiftly reading through the three booklets the box contained, with the patient shop owner, Mrs Griffith, only reminding him to not bend the pages.

After that first read, Kim wasn’t really sure how you played the game, and Mrs Griffith didn’t know either, because it had only been released the year before and none of her customers had ever played it. But Kim desperately wanted to try the game. He loved fantasy books, and had already read *The Lord of the Rings* twice.

This game seemed to promise you could make up your own stories of monsters and magic and kind of act them out. Kim and Bennie already did, pretending to be Egyptians in a wholly imaginary pyramid on the school oval, fighting mummies, or Vikings in a longboat

sailing out to combat frost giants, when they got a turn in one of the school canoes, going up and down the river just before it entered the lake.

The Dungeons & Dragons box was \$20.00, which was \$19.80 more than Kim had in the whole world, and he was lucky to have twenty cents in the first place, since his parents didn't believe in pocket money. Or money in general, for that matter. Fortunately Bennie had a lot more than twenty dollars saved, and when she heard about the game, she came with him to the shop, they read through the books together, and she bought the box.

'Are we going to play again this Sunday?' asked Bennie.

'Sure,' said Kim. They'd played three times so far, on Sunday afternoons, but they were getting the hang of it, or thought they were. Bennie played the elf fighter Flàdrif, and their fellow sixth-grade friends Theo and Tamara were respectively Altmoor the human magic user and Hargrim the dwarf cleric.

Kim was the Dungeon Master, which meant that he was the one who made up the basic outline of the story and described what was happening according to the players' decisions, the rules and the roll of the dice.

He liked running the game, but he also wanted to play himself, and hoped he would one day. But they didn't know anyone else who played or had even heard of Dungeons & Dragons, and no one in the rest of the group wanted to run a game; they all liked playing too much.

Eila and Madir had expressed interest in playing when Kim was first talking about the game, but he told them it would only work for three players and a Dungeon Master. This was a straight-out lie. The real reason was because Kim thought his sister would argue with him all the time if she played. He wanted to do something Eila didn't know about. He even hid the rules so Eila couldn't read them.

'Can we play at your place again?' asked Kim. His parents didn't approve of any kind of war games, which is what they would think Dungeons & Dragons was, so he'd been careful not to tell them about it. They wouldn't even let Kim play Risk, which had been his and Bennie's favourite game before they discovered D&D.

Bennie shrugged, which meant it was no problem. Her parents were so busy with their own lives they seemed to Kim to barely notice their children, beyond attending to the bare necessities. They had never even

attended a single parent-teacher night at school, which made all the other kids envious.

Not that Bennie saw it that way. She had tried to explain that the lack of parental attention was part of an actual problem, but Kim didn't understand. He could see only the advantages. Like being able to play D&D there and have sugar in his tea and not have parents giving him jobs to do all the time. Bennie's parents had big important jobs, and neither of them spent much time at home. They even had a cleaner come in, and a gardener, which no one else's parents did.

Bennie was just about to skip another stone, but she stopped as Eila suddenly walked in front of them and swiftly waded into the water. For a second both older kids gaped at her, before Kim sprang up and splashed in after his sister, with Bennie jumping across to restrain Madir as she tried to follow Eila into the lake. She always followed Eila in everything.

'Eila! What are you doing? Stop!' Kim called out. But Eila didn't stop.

She never listened to her older brother, because Eila knew she was always right.

## CHAPTER TWO

Eila stopped, but it wasn't because Kim was shouting at her. She suddenly knelt down in the water to look at something below the surface. Her brother grabbed her shoulder to pull her up, but she resisted.

He looked down as well and recoiled.

'What is that?' he asked. 'Is that . . . a head?'

'Looks like it,' whispered Bennie, coming up close. She had a tight grip on Madir, who was still trying to move up to Eila. 'A cut-off head. Someone with long hair. A murderer must have thrown it in—'

'It isn't a cut-off head,' snapped Eila. As so often, she used her 'I told you so' voice, which Kim was always trying to get her to drop. Eila was super, super smart

and nearly always right about facts, but telling people they were wrong often got her into trouble, particularly with older children. Kim and Bennie sometimes had to step in to protect her from bullies who didn't like being corrected by a know-it-all girl. Kim peered into the murky water. 'Yeah, the hair is lake weed. It's an old cannonball or something like that. Or maybe just a stone?'

'*She* isn't a stone,' corrected Eila. She shrugged Kim's hand off and leaned into the water to reach for the muddy ball, weed and all.

'Don't!' shouted Kim, but he was too late. Eila got both hands on whatever it was and lifted it out of the water, drawing it close to her chest. It was perfectly round, roughly the size of the globe in the school library, and pinpoints of light began to shine through where the mud was rubbing off.

Kim reached out to wrestle the globe away, and Bennie let go of Madir to help him. But as soon as they touched the muddy ball, they froze. Brilliant light shone *through* their fingers, showing their bones like shadows beneath the skin. They could not let go, nor move any other muscle.

Kim felt a sudden, sharp pain behind both ears, as if someone had stuck needles in either side of his head.

But he couldn't even flinch, and a terror rose up inside him, accompanied by a horrible sensation that *something* was entering his brain: incredibly thin fingers or tendrils squirming into his mind, feeling their way inside. At the same time he heard a voice, a voice he knew was not transmitted via sound through the air, but coming down those tendrils, straight into his head.

*Let me in, said the voice. Let me in. I am a friend. I can help you.*

*No no beck no!* thought Kim.

He exerted all his willpower, focusing his entire mind on getting free. His hands came off the globe as if wrenched away from some super sticky glue. Bennie was still holding on, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth where she had bit her lip, her eyes bulging as if she was trying to resist some incredible weight that was about to pull her underwater.

Kim grabbed his friend's wrists and pulled. For a moment he felt those needles again, trying to get into his brain, and then he and Bennie fell away together, into the lake, crashing below the surface. The cold, muddy water was a relief, the shock of it purging the sensation of those terrible tendrils probing inside their brains.

They came up spluttering, holding on to each other,

to see Eila had walked back to shore, clutching the globe. Madir was holding Eila's elbow but not touching the globe itself. With a growing horror, Kim realised he'd managed to save his best friend . . . but not his sister.

Kim tried to talk but could only cough up water. He and Bennie waded ashore and shook themselves like dogs, sending droplets flying everywhere. Kim coughed a few more times and tried to talk again.

'Eila! Throw it away! It tried to get inside my head!'

For a split second he thought she might listen to him, possibly for the first time in her life.

But instead of dropping the globe onto the ground, Eila held it tighter.

'That is simply a more effective mode of communication,' said Eila. She did not look at Kim. She was concentrating on smearing the mud more evenly across the globe, hiding those points of internal light. 'It was rude of you to refuse.'

'I don't think so,' urged Kim. 'Please, Eila! Throw it back!'

'*She* is a person,' pronounced Eila.

'I'll tell Dad,' said Kim. 'And Mum!'

'No, you won't,' said Eila, unperturbed. 'Or I'll tell them about your Dungeons and Dragons game. And

the war game you play with the Airfix soldiers. And your secret books.'

Kim's secret books were simply novels. His parents only allowed non-fiction in the house, and only certain kinds at that. He kept his small personal store of books and those he'd borrowed from the school and city libraries inside the huge hollowed-out gum tree on the north-west corner of the experimental farm, which had been lazily used to anchor the perimeter fence, like a giant post.

'I'll tell *my* parents,' snapped Bennie. 'Madir, get away from it!'

'Eila says it's perfectly safe,' Madir replied worshipfully, gripping Eila's elbow more tightly than ever. 'It's our secret.'

'You won't tell anyone either, Bennie,' said Eila.

'Oh, won't I—'

'No, you won't, because your parents are too busy for you. They always are, aren't they?'

'That's not true,' protested Bennie, but her voice was weak.

'Go on then,' said Eila. 'Tell them. I guess you'll have to make an appointment—'

She didn't have to say any more. Bennie made a

sound that was half a sob and half a growl, but didn't speak.

'I don't care if our parents stop my games or take my books,' Kim said. 'I am going to tell them.'

Eila finally looked up from the globe and stared at him. 'Why?' she asked, exasperated. 'There's no need. It will only cause trouble, mainly for you. It isn't rational. She's a friend!'

'I'm telling,' said Kim. He remembered the touch of the globe reaching inside his head, how it hadn't backed off, how he'd had to use every particle of willpower he had to make it go. That wasn't the action of a friend.

Kim wanted to grab the globe from Eila and throw it out as far as he could, out into the deep, deep water. He was bigger and stronger, and Bennie would help. But he was afraid. He'd only just managed to escape those cold tendrils reaching into his brain. He might not be able to escape again. And who knew what else the globe could do?

Eila suddenly swivelled to look at the western sky. There was still a tiny sliver of sun visible, but it dipped beneath the horizon as she watched. An afterglow remained.

A flake of mud fell off the globe, and its light shone through. But it was no longer bright and golden; it was a dark, subdued red.

‘Oh,’ said Eila, but she was not speaking to Kim, Bennie, or Madir. ‘You can do that? Yes, that’s a good idea.’

She looked back at Kim, meeting her brother’s troubled gaze with her own obstinate, certain eyes.

‘What are you going to tell Mum and Dad, anyway?’

Kim pointed at the globe. But only for a moment, before he let his hand fall. He heard Bennie gasp beside him, and Madir let out a little cry of triumph. ‘Are you going to tell them I found a basketball in the lake?’

Eila drew her fingers across the globe, scraping off mud. The light faded under her hand to reveal orange stippled rubber decorated with thin black lines.

The globe had transformed itself into a basketball, like the old ones they had at school, worn and well-used.

Harmless and ordinary.

OUT NOW

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