PRAISE FOR GEEKHOOD

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For Mum for just being her, Dad for his boundless enthusiasm, and for my mate Jim for teaching me the meaning of friendship. And always for my son, Hugh.

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ANDY ROBB

GEEKHOOD

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE GIRL KIND

"Who am I? Are you sure you want to know?
If someone told you I was just your average ordinary
guy without a care in the world, somebody lied."

Peter Parker, *Spider-Man 2*

"Rosie Cotton dancing. She had ribbons in her hair.
If ever I were to marry someone, it would have been her.
It would have been her."

Sam Gamgee, *The Lord of the Rings:*
The Return of the King

ONE

There are better ways to wake up. One would be to be nudged into consciousness after a night of Abandoned Passion with Kirsty Ford. (But, short of selling my virginity on eBay, any form of Abandoned Passion will have to remain a solo flight.) Another would be to have my mum and dad gently call my name, and tell me that they're back together and that everything's going to be all right. But they don't and it won't, so there's no point even thinking about it.

There are countless ways that are better than the one that I have to go through this particular morning. First it starts with a noxious smell that drifts up my nose, threatening to close my throat and make my stomach rebel against whatever I had for tea last night. Then there's the bark of a voice that shatters my slumber and catapults me into the morning sunlight that is suddenly streaming through my curtains. Basically, I'm shaking off the bad dream that I was having last night and walking straight into another one.

"Arch! Wake up, mate! It's nearly lunchtime."

It's my stepfather, Tony. Well, he's not technically my stepfather as he and Mum aren't married, but it's easier

than saying "my mum's boyfriend". He's standing at the window and might as well be beaming the sun's rays into my eyes with a magnifying glass. There's already a fag clamped between his lips, sporting a cylinder of ash that threatens to drop with every word he speaks. Needless to say, the room now stinks of cigarette smoke. As my brain tries to quickly relearn everything it's picked up in the last fourteen years – speech and basic motor functions, like sitting up – I get this weird feeling that I don't know where I am. It's only a split second before I remember that we moved into our new house yesterday. That would account for the pile of boxes at the end of my bed.

Tony stands, looking out of the window, a cup of tea for me notably absent from his hands. He's a big bloke in every sense of the word: tall, big gut, big voice, big pain in the backside. Only his glasses indicate that he might be human at all, hinting at a frailty that seems otherwise missing from the whole deal. He goes over to my painting desk and picks up one of my miniatures; it's a goblin warrior I've been working on, trying to paint in some detail on the shield. I unpacked them last night, to check for any damage that might've happened in the move. Tony looks at it closely and chuckles to himself.

"Nice one," he says.

Just in case you haven't worked it out, Tony drives me nuts. But he's my mum's partner, and I've got to live with him for at least the next four years, until I go to uni or he works out that he serves no other purpose on this earth than to wind me up, and then spectacularly explodes in a cloud of guilt. Or something like that. So, I tolerate him; I have to for Mum's sake. She'd hate it if I kicked up a fuss and, for some reason that I just can't get a handle on, he seems to make her happy. To cover this conflict of emotions, I've developed a VERY LOUD interior monologue that works completely independently from what my face and body are doing. For example, at the moment, while Tony is examining my prized goblin warrior, my face has crinkled into the approximation of a sleepy smile, while my hand scratches at my head in a pantomime of tiredness. Even my voice, although a bit croaky, has a friendly lift in it.

"Cool, isn't it? Just wanted to check they'd made the journey OK."

However, at exactly the same time that my exterior is sending all these signals of muzzy cheeriness, my Interior Monologue (IM) is saying something along the lines of:

Put that bloody thing down, you Tosser! It's not there for you to laugh at; it's there as an expression of my need to escape this world and embrace a realm where anything

is possible! And put that bloody fag out before you come in next time! And stop calling me "Arch"! It's "Archie"! Nobody else but Mum gets to call me "Arch" – it doesn't make us any more related or anything! AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN HERE ANYWAY?!

Does this make me two-faced? I don't think so. I see it more as a silent pressure release. If I didn't rant to myself, I'd say something stupid and upset someone. I'll concede that maybe my IM does get a bit carried away sometimes and perhaps loses a little perspective, but no one's perfect.

"We're unpacking the lounge," Tony declares, as though he's actually going to be involved. "D'you want to give us a hand?"

IM: *What kind of stupid question is that? Of course I don't want to come and unpack the lounge but, in the interests of a quiet life, I will.*

"Yeah, sure. Give us a minute and I'll come down."

And Tony leaves the room. Doesn't even say thanks. I sink back into the pillow and let out a loud sigh.

Welcome to my world.

I roll out of bed and stumble into the bathroom. Unfortunately, the new bathroom mirror is broadcasting

the same picture as the old one: a mess of blond hair that looks like it would be more at home on the end of a mop frames the face of an adult trying to form, somewhat unsuccessfully, on the head of a child. Compared to some of the other guys in my class, I look young for my age, but I still get a thrill seeing the glitter of a scraggy nest of hairs sprouting out of my chin. There's even the threat of a few on my chest. We'll stop there.

Teeth brushed and clothes thrown on, I lumber down the stairs, running my hand along the unfamiliar wood of the banister. It's a fairly big house – much bigger than the one me 'n' Mum moved into when she split from Dad. There's no doubting that our lives have taken a financial turn-for-the-better since Mum met Tony (he runs his own business – something about a marketing data service), but it doesn't make him any less of a Tosser. I do, occasionally, try to step back and look at him with objective eyes, but the same answer keeps returning: Tosser.

IM: *Ah, yes. Extensive research has finally allowed us to confirm the existence of the Tosser gene…*

Mum greets me at the bottom of the stairs with a cup of tea. She's always been a big tea-drinker, but during The Split-Up, she seemed to drink even more and I sort of joined in. It was the only way I knew of offering

some form of support at the time. In films, you see guys drowning their sorrows with beer or whisky. Me and my mum did it with Typhoo.

"Sleep well in your new room?"

"Yeah, not bad."

I can tell she's scanning me for any worries I might have, but I've learned not to give too much away. I know she only has my best interests at heart, but if I say something's up, she'll tell Tony and, in a clumsy moment of attempted bonding, I'll be subjected to some sort of chat that neither he nor I want to have.

We go into the lounge, which is big enough to pass for the entire ground floor of our last house. Tony's sitting cross-legged on the floor, a Buddha with a fag, reading a book from one of the boxes he's just opened. Mum's already buzzing around in the background, like a well-meaning bumblebee.

"I think these are yours, Arch. D'you want me to take them up for you?" She's standing by the two boxes I couldn't find last night.

"Yep. They're mine. Don't worry, I'll do it."

They contain my game-playing gear. OK, here's where I have to clarify something else. Because of this *one* quirk, this *one* fascination, this *one* harmless little interest, I am, according to the Rules of Society, hereby branded a "Geek".

IM: *Let's not forget your ability to quote* Star Wars, *your obsession with fantasy novels, your inability to pass a comic book shop without buying something and your general hopelessness with girls. Oh – and you don't like football. Just sayin'.*

Like most people my age, I have a computer and a PlayStation, but a couple of years ago I came across the cover of a Sunday magazine – one of those that comes with the papers. On it was a photograph of a dragon – quite obviously a model, but painted in a way that made giving it a go seem like The Most Important Thing in the World. It wasn't that the model looked alive, it was that it looked like a Work of Art. The dragon in question was a Fire Dragon, and I can still remember how each of the red scales was christened with a yellow highlight that melted seamlessly into the base colour. My world was rocked.

IM: *Nothing geeky about that.*

So, I read the article, just to see what it was about, and it turned out that there was this world of gamers who painted miniatures to accompany their RPGs, or Role-playing Games. It was like I had discovered something that no one else knew about, some ancient and mysterious secret. At least that's what I thought until Dad said it was pretty big when he was growing up. And Mum told a story about some religious-types

handing out leaflets at her school, saying that these games were one step away from Satan worship. And Dad admitted he knew a guy who knew a guy who might've played it while he was at college. It seems that even in the Dark Ages, RPGs had a bit of a Geek rep going: no one likes to admit that they ever sat round a table fighting pretend monsters with dice.

IM: *No kidding? Why could that be?*

Yes, we're talking Dungeons & Dragons, the great-grandaddy of all RPGs. And the best. Something in me just seemed to bite. Mum and Dad's rows had reached biblical proportions by then, and it was a cheaper escape route than the ticket to Greece I occasionally fantasized about. Even better, the article had a list of shops where you could buy this sort of stuff and – guess what? – there was one in my town! Boringsville suddenly had an adventure playground and it went by the name of "The Goblin's Hovel".

That was it: any money I came by – be it my allowance or odd-job money or birthday cash – I was straight down the Hovel. It was like an Aladdin's cave: models of every colour and description stood proudly in display cabinets; others fought battles on gaming boards mocked-up to look like forests or wasteland. Dragons stood side by side with trolls and ogres, while barbarian warriors valiantly tried to hold them off. There was a part

of the showroom dedicated to the tricks of the trade: modelling knives, glues, brushes and paints with names that practically begged you to stick a paintbrush in and get cracking – who could resist "Goblin Green" or "Vampire Vermilion"? And the models themselves: sculpted heroes and villains striking poses that made you want to believe that magic is real.

IM: *"Geek Grey", anyone…?*

I s'pose the other thing the Hovel gave me was a place to hide; somewhere I didn't have to listen to raised voices or conversations cracking under the strain of civility. Even if it did mean listening to the sound of Big Marv, the owner's, 80s metal collection blaring over the in-store sound system.

And then there were the games: games in which you could adopt the persona of a character a million miles away from who you really were – heroic fighters, wily thieves, insane magicians. It called to me like a whisper from a dream.

IM: **Whispers* Geeeeeeek…*

It became my Saturday regime: pop down to the Hovel and spend hours deciding which miniature would receive the loving caresses of my paintbrush. Or, if I didn't have any money, just flipping through the rule books of various games to marvel at the mechanics of imaginary worlds that could be brought to life. I'm not

even going to *begin* to talk about all the dice you can get for the rules systems. Needless to say, I hung out at the Hovel A LOT.

I guess I was a bit embarrassed at first and kept myself to myself, but slowly I started to recognize the odd face from school and a few surreptitious nods were exchanged. Some of the nods evolved into conversations and mates were made: Matt, Beggsy and Ravi – all of us united in leaving the Real World behind. Every few weeks, we'd meet at someone's house and embark on a journey together, hunting monsters, slaying the undead or double-crossing each other for a jewel with special powers. Unsurprisingly, there were never any girls there.

IM: *Just can't … figure … out … why…*

In fact, the next game is due to be staged at my new house, but I've got to find the right time: I need Mum and Tony to be out, so that we can really get involved without the fear of half-time sandwiches being delivered to the door by my mum and bringing us all crashing back to earth. It's all about atmosphere, you understand.

So there you have it: my name's Archie and I'm a Geek. But only in this world…

I'm halfway up the stairs with the second cardboard box when the landline rings; I won't be getting a new mobile until I've raised the cash to pay for half of it. According to Mum, spilling paint on the last two doesn't qualify as "looking after your possessions". Mum calls up after me, masking the mouthpiece with her hand.

"Archie! It's for you."

I dump the box on the landing and thunder back down, trying not to appear too eager.

"Hey, Archie." It's Beggsy. His voice still hasn't fully broken yet and he swings from sounding like Mickey Mouse to James Earl Jones in a matter of seconds. I'm pretty lucky: mine broke gradually, without me really noticing it.

"Hey."

"How's the new pad?"

"Cool. What's up?"

"Dude – have you forgotten what day it is?"

"Remind me."

"*Dude!* June the 9th! It's Battle-Fest! Down at the Hovel!"

Beggsy's right! It's the day when the Hovel comes into its own. I can't believe I'd forgotten! This is the day when they open up the doors for gamers to bring their prize models down to the shop and game like there's no tomorrow. There are painting workshops with visiting

artists, awards for the best models and winner-stays-on war games! It's Geek heaven.

"What time?"

"Two. You coming?"

The "Yeah!" I give him is one that asks, "Are you completely nuts?" at the same time.

"Great!"

"Hang on," I groan. "I've promised to unpack."

"*Du-ude!*"

"Hang on!"

I smother the mouthpiece and call back after Mum. "Mum! Is it OK if I go down the Hovel? There's a games day on."

She comes into the hallway, holding a pewter-coloured kettle half out of its newspaper wrap.

"What about all the unpacking?"

"I'll unpack my stuff later – I promise. It's the last Saturday of half term…"

I know the answer before she says it; she does this frown thing that's supposed to suggest that she's thinking about it, but I've seen better acting in pantomimes. Without waiting to hear the "yes" that's rattling around her head, I'm straight back on the phone to Beggsy.

"See you there."

"Cool. Bye."

"Bye."

A hand on my shoulder makes me spin round: Tony's grinning at me like he knows something I don't.

"Trying to get out of the unpacking, eh, Arch?" He throws in a knowing chuckle, just to make sure that the urge to punch him becomes really unbearable.

IM: *You TOSSER! As if YOU'RE going to be doing ANYTHING other than sneaking off to read the paper somewhere!*

For some reason, I throw my appeal out to Mum.

"I've already said I'll do it later, haven't I, Mum?"

She just smiles and goes back to the unpacking, and Tony chuckles off as if he's won some kind of victory. I silently mouth "Tosser" after him, then shoot upstairs to have a root through my miniatures. What should I take? Should I take anything? You've got to understand that this is like gun slinging for Geeks; every hotshot who thinks he can use a paintbrush will be there, waving around his best offering and weighing it up against the others. To take nothing would be like admitting defeat, like the Mexican peasants in spaghetti westerns. But if I take the wrong thing…

IM: *It just doesn't bear thinking about…*

I eventually settle on a wizard I painted a couple of months ago. It's not a showboating piece, by any means, but I'm quite pleased with the flesh tones, and the detail

I've put in on his cape was researched from ancient Celtic writings. It also boasts the best varnish job I've ever done: four layers of gloss that give it the look of china. It's good enough to show that I've got a steady hand and I'm not frightened to use it. I lay it gently in a carry case and pack it with cotton wool.

Two o'clock is just round the corner. If I get my act together, I should make it with time to spare.

It's time to ride into battle.

I wonder if Mum'll give me a lift?

TWO

To be honest, I could have walked it; the new house is only about twenty minutes from town. But you don't turn up late for a games day. It's Geek Law. And even though I'm at least ten minutes early, the Hovel is already overflowing with Geeks. This means that on the pavement outside there are loads of little groups of guys my age and men in their forties, all wearing clothes that are meant to act as camouflage. In reality, their clothes are so drab that they might as well be wearing neon signs with "I'm a Geek – And So is He" flashing on and off above them. It's a weird one, but in an effort to fly under the radar, they make themselves impossible to miss. I s'pose this is where me and my mates break from the herd; we dress pretty normally. But, then again, I'm a Geek, so what do I know?

IM: *You said it, not me.*

I eventually locate Beggsy standing with Ravi and Matt beside a lamp post.

"Hey."

"Dude!" Beggsy's always the first to respond. He's got this hyped-up enthusiasm about pretty much anything you'd care to mention. If he wasn't such a nerd, he'd be