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Extract from

Geekhood 2: Mission Improbable

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For the rest of the lesson, I find myself glancing at the door every ten seconds. But Sarah doesn't come back. Whatever girls talk about in these situations is obviously a threat to the fabric of time and space and demands their full attention.

IM: *Periods, then.*

Finally, the bell goes and everyone around me starts to collect their stuff together. But I just sit there, staring at Sarah's empty chair out of the corner of my eye, feeling that some Golden Opportunity is about to pass me by. Luckily, Caitlyn's on hand to let me know what it is: she comes over to my desk and gestures at Sarah's coat and bag.

"D'you want to take them to her?" she asks from behind her glasses.

IM: *Bingo! The perfect opportunity to restore balance and harmony to the universe!*

And there it is – the chance to rebuild the bridges with Sarah that I've been so determinedly torching. But the fact that Caitlyn's made this gesture lets me know that she knows about what happened. This realization only serves to increase my level of humiliation and causes a major argument between my brain and my mouth, who mutually agree to part company at the Vital Moment.

"Yeah… That's not a good idea, is it?"

IM: *Way to go, Archie. Why didn't you just squirt a tube of paint in her face? Patronizing Purple perhaps?*

I honestly didn't mean it to sound the way it did, but now that I've committed, I can't take it back. It's like the hyperdrive's locked me into a panic-powered collision course with the Planet of Sarcasm. To complete the picture, my face joins in, doing one of those dry, world-weary smiles like the Emperor did whenever he was being threatened by Luke. But without the humour.

It's not the answer Caitlyn was expecting, judging by the look of disdain that scrapes the concern off her face.

"Well, you don't have to be so immature about it!" she snaps, before turning on her heel, gathering up Sarah's belongings and strutting out of the room.

IM: *BOOM! Right between the eyes! Game over!*

There's a distinct feeling of salt being rubbed into a wound – but the offending sodium chloride seems to be in my own hand. Although I'm not going to admit it, Caitlyn's right, there's not an ounce of maturity in the way I'm dealing with any of this. A wiser man would just go up to Sarah, do the apology thing and get on with the job of being her friend. But I don't seem to have levelled up that far just yet.

My head feels heavy as I get dragged along by the growing swarm of students as they burst out of classrooms and head towards the various exits. The

hive-mood is always brighter at the end of the day, and there are playful jostles and shoves thrown into the mix as the school rules loosen their grip for another few hours. But we Geeks enjoy that particular straightjacket; we like the security of rules and regulations. It's when we're left to our own devices that the world gets that bit more scary.

IM: *Red Alert: threat detected!*

My Grunt Detectors™ pick up something ahead. On a conscious level, I don't know what it is; it might be a change in the collective body language of the crowd or a new rhythm to the apparently chaotic chatter around me. It's like Spider-Man's spider-sense – you just know something's wrong.

IM: *Oh, crap.*

Crap, indeed. A school-bully-sized pile of it. Every time I see Jason Humphries, I'm astonished that we're in the same year. OK, I'm a bit young-looking for my age, but you'd at least guess I was in my teens. Humphries could be way older; he's built like the Hulk and has a face with more scars than skin. Acne pits and battle wounds seem to have eradicated any evidence of youth from his face. Those and the dark, dead eyes that burn out from under a brow that has more muscles in it than my right arm.

IM: *And that's well-exercised.*

Luckily, he's got his back to me. Unluckily, he's with

his mates and Fellow Grunts, Lewis Mills and Paul Green. Weirdly for three guys who seem to spend most of their time trying to get out of school, as soon as the final bell goes, their walking speed slows down to an absolute minimum. At some point, the crowds are going to force me past them and I'll be spotted: a Lone Geek in a Sea of Normality. Like being a hobbit at an orcs-only party.

IM: *Commence evasive manoeuvres!*

There aren't many, but I do have options. I can assume the standard Geek Stance: stooped shoulders, eyes down and just try not to get noticed. Trouble is, this often seems to have the same effect as when Frodo put on the Ring: while you're invisible to everyone else, you somehow light up like a beacon to the Great Eye of Humphries. I could opt for doubling back and finding another exit, but I don't want to be late to hear what Beggsy's LAAAAARRRP thing is all about. On top of that, struggling against the flow of hungry students might attract unwanted attention. But the crowd's moving me closer, so I've got to do something soon.

IM: *You could just wet yourself.*

As I'm dithering between options, something else grabs the attention of the lumbering Pack of Grunts™. As one, their heads swing left, as though they've picked up a scent or can hear something that the rest of us can't.

IM: *It's a mating call – pheromones or something.*

Ambling equally slowly, clacking out their dissent with their too-high heels, are three girls. They're sporting recently applied lipstick that would put the Joker to shame and more 'chood than sense. Humphries and his mates lope over and the two groups fall into a grinning, barking imitation of conversation.

IM: *No doubt they'll be grooming each other for fleas shortly.*

I take my chance and speed up – not into a run, more of a determined walk. But a fast one. I throw a quick glance over my shoulder to check that I'm out of range, and trudge towards the school gates.

By the time I get there, Beggsy is in a state of near-spontaneous combustion, pacing, hopping and slapping his hands against his thighs in frustration.

"Dude!" he squeaks. "Where've you *been*?"

My EM powers up a smile and goes into Everything's Cool Mode. "Hey. What's happening?"

Ravi, whose voice has broken far more than it ought to, rolls his eyes and sighs, like a benevolent earthquake. "Thank God you're here! He's been bugging us all day about his 'Big News'!"

"Yeah? Well, you'll be chowing down on humble pie in a minute!" Beggsy replies. He watches too much American TV.

"Well, what is it, then?" I can't help but notice that there is a darkening shadow on Ravi's upper lip and, in my current mood, it only serves to remind me of my worthless glands.

Taking the mobile stage, Beggsy moves in front of us, walking backwards as we join the exodus from the school gates.

"Gentlemen," he begins, "I give you: Live. Action. Role. Play." There's a dramatic pause, before he adds "LARP" in a much deeper voice. It's like he's occasionally inhabited by the spirit of someone with testicles.

IM: *Big ones.*

Unfortunately, he doesn't quite get the reaction he's looking for: me, Matt and Ravi exchange a quick succession of confused shrugs.

"'K. So what does that mean?" I like the word "role play", but I don't quite get the rest.

"Dude," Beggsy begins in his Serious Voice. "I took some vampire lords into the Hovel last night and Big Marv told me to put them out the back. There was a flyer on his painting desk for something called 'QuestFest'." There's another pause, while he tries to calm the storm of hyperactivity that's obviously raging in his head. "Turns out there's this bunch of people who play Dungeons & Dragons but, like, for real! They meet up in a field, dressed as their characters, and there's a

Games Master and a team of bad guys, all dressed up as monsters, and they do an adventure – but *for real*! Big Marv says it's like 'total immersion', like you're living your favourite fantasy film!"

Our confusion vanishes in a puff of smoke. This is Big News for a number of reasons. First off, it's a ridiculously imaginative take on our Games Nights. Usually, we're sitting round a table, rolling multi-sided dice and arguing about the finer points of the rules, but this would be taking it to another level. My mind is suddenly awash with images of shining armour, clashing swords and living, breathing monsters – we can do this for real! Secondly, it means we're not alone. By their very nature, Geeks are hard to sniff out; we like to keep our profiles as low as possible, in case it attracts unwanted attention. But they are out there. And we might get to hang out with people for whom debating *Star Trek* versus *Star Wars* is something to be taken seriously. Thirdly, it means I've got something else to think about instead of Sarah.

Matt and Ravi look at me expectantly, as though they're seeking some sort of approval.

"Sounds awesome!" I declare and see three Geeks visibly relax.

"There's one next weekend and," Beggsy continues, back in *Alvin and the Chipmunks* territory, "Big Marv

says we can go with him! He says if we're interested, to come to the Hovel today and he'll talk us through it!"

"Cool," I reply. "Let's do it. To the Hovel!"



Big Marv isn't ashamed of his Geekhood; he wears it like a big, shiny, unconventional medal. From his tousled brown hair and scruffy beard to the waxed tips of his moustache, Big Marv, like most Geeks, appears to have been born in the wrong time. If it wasn't for his penchant for bright yellow T-shirts (usually referencing *Doctor Who*), his glasses and the cut-off jeans he likes to wear, he'd remind me of Volstagg out of the *Thor* comics. And we won't even talk about the sandals.

"Ha-haa!"

And Big Marv is always laughing in a Friar Tuck kind of way for no apparent reason. Because of this and the extra weight he's packing, it's hard to put an age on him, but I'd guess late thirties.

"Ha-haa!" he chimes again. "So, my bold adventurers, you want to know more about the fabled world of LARP!" I love the way he speaks.

The cool thing about Big Marv's apparent madness is that because he doesn't seem to care about how other people see him, in his company, we don't, either.

The shields we all keep in place for our parents and other grown-ups are silently dropped and we just behave like we do with each other.

IM: *But without the willy jokes.*

"Can you explain it, Marv?" Beggsy rasps.

"Be seated, good fellows!" Big Marv booms, pulling up a painting stool round a wargaming table that depicts the Battle of Weathertop. We all follow his lead and soon have something that looks like a council of war – five generals seated round a three-dimensional map.

IM: *Or five Geeks sat round some tin soldiers. Pick one.*

With Big Marv kicking off in his weird patter, this feels *really* Geeky; like, *über* Geeky.

"Well met, fellows!" he begins, before lowering his voice to a Serious Level. "LARP is the gaming experience taken to the next level: Total Immersion! For two days, you live and breathe the character of your choice! There is a quest to be undertaken and there are foes to be slain!"

IM: *If he broke into a few "fol-de-rols" here, you'd be sitting with Tom Bombadil.*

"And what are you?" I ask. "In the LARP thing."

"Ha-ha! I, Archie, am a necromancer! I can raise the dead, create poisons and wield magic, according to the Dark Arts!"

"How does it work?" I ask. "What about the rules?"

IM: *Ah, the comfort-blanket of parameters…*

"Slowly, slowly, young Quester – there is much to learn!"

For the next half-hour, Big Marv gives us the lowdown on LARPing. And the more he tells us, the more awesome it sounds. It's one thing to sit round a table and use miniatures and D20s to work out how a fight resolves itself, but to actually wield a sword and smite the forces of evil in man-to-man combat is a Geek dream come true. Especially as you can't get hurt.

IM: *Bravely spoken, Sir Runalot!*

Even Big Marv telling us that all the weapons are made from foam doesn't dampen our enthusiasm. In fact, when he shows us some pictures of past QuestFests on his laptop, it only stokes us all the more: the weapons look real, the armour is ornate and the costumes are brilliant.

IM: *Doesn't sound Geeky at all. No, really.*

And the rules aren't that far off Dungeons & Dragons; all the usual Hit Points and Magic Points and stuff. As Big Marv explains the rules a bit more, I take a quick glance around Weathertop; although the guys are listening, I can see that their minds are doing the same as mine – conjuring pictures of bloody battles, encounters with warlocks and, most importantly of all, a world in which WE CAN BE HEROES.

IM: *Gonna take a lot of imagination.*

Big Marv suddenly produces a rule book and slams it down on the table, knocking over a Ringwraith in his excitement.

"All you need to know, you will find in here!" he declaims, like he's Gandalf or something. "But the question is: is LARP for you?"

"Dude!" Beggsy affirms, conveying *Most definitely!* with a single syllable.

"I'm in," Ravi agrees. "Sounds awesome."

Matt waits for my response; he always likes to go with the majority. The responsibility of making an individual decision is way too much for him. But I'm in. There's no way I'd miss this.

"Let's do it," I nod. "Matt?"

"You shall have my sword," he replies, and, for a moment, he's not my nerdy, ginger-haired friend; he's a noble warrior, bristling for battle.

IM: *In his school uniform.*

Big Marv hands round some consent forms for our parents, and then we take our leave and wander through town, checking out the Book of Rules as we go. We're all excited and there's a feeling that Something Good is happening; it's like we're no longer part of the real world, but are already set apart from the mortals that scurry around us. Today, we are gods.