

THE
ALMOST
EPIC
SQUAD

WHAT BLOWS UP

Ted Staunton

Illustrations by Britt Wilson

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To an awesome Epic Squad:
Richard, Lesley, Kevin, Britt, Anne and Erin
— T.S.

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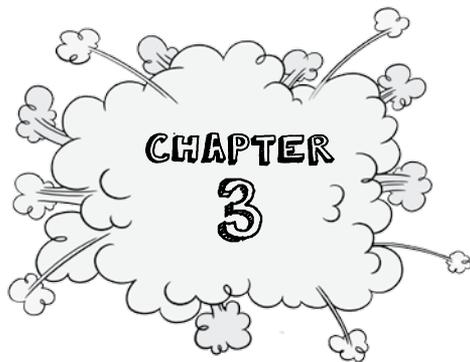
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CHAPTER 3

LABBERGASTED

It was past 2:00 a.m. when Gary nodded off in the testing room. The movie he'd seen earlier had featured a lot of swooping starfighter craft. Maybe that was why he dreamed the fireplace tongs from the afternoon's testing were sailing around the light fixtures, battling flying tissue boxes.

Noises jerked him awake: shouting, crashes, a thud, then a cascade of *something* falling around him. Gary blinked. Bits of plaster and pebbled plastic were scattered at his feet. Drops of water pattered on his head. Gary looked up. One of the light fixtures dangled in front of him, swaying by a wire. The tongs were rammed into the ceiling, a tissue box impaled on each arm. Tissues wafted like spring snowflakes in Dimly.



The sprinkler system had kicked in as well. Amid it all, Dr. Fassbinder was shouting orders to mice in tiny lab coats.

Huh?

Dr. F. pushed past the light fixture and pumped Gary's hand. His moustache danced wildly. "You did it, Gary! Congratulations!" A tissue settled on the doctor's head. He didn't seem to notice.

"Huh?"

Behind Dr. F., mice were swivelling a video camera

recording the destruction. “*You did this!*” cried Dr. F.

“Geez, sorry. I don’t—”

“No, it’s wonderful! Gary, your powers have kicked in. You must have—” Dr. F. took a deep breath. “Gary, try this. See that chair? Move it.” Gary rose. Dr. F. stopped him. “No, with your mind. *Will* it to move.”

“You mean, like, um, tele-whatsit?”

“Telekinesis. Exactly. Imagine moving it.”

Dr. F. didn’t seem to be kidding. Gary eyed the chair. It looked heavy. He pushed up his glasses, sucked in a breath, and summoned a big mental push. *Now*. The chair rocketed across the room and bashed into the wall. Mice squeaked and leaped to safety, lab coats billowing like superhero capes.

Gary’s mouth opened. At first nothing came out. “Wow,” he finally breathed. “Sorry, I forgot the . . . roller thingies . . .”

“Never mind.” Dr. F. reverently patted the dented wall. “My friends, success!”

The mice broke into applause. A tiny voice cried, “Bravo!” This was followed by an angry squeak. Dr. Fassbinder lifted his sneaker from a mouse tail.

“Sorry, Elaine. C’mon, everybody. To the lab.”

The mice hustled through the door flap. Gary and Dr. Fassbinder followed in the regular way. Behind another door was a room Gary had never seen before: a

laboratory, bustling with mice scampering on computer keyboards, lugging test tubes, and wiring connections.

“They’re nocturnal,” said the doctor, as if that was all that needed explaining.

Other than that, it wasn’t much of a lab. The computers were old, the work tables cluttered. There was a microwave, refrigerators labelled *cheese* and *brain samples* and a lounge area with dollhouse furniture. There, two mice were putting marbles on a *mini* minigolf course, another stood over a sudoku chewing a pencil, and one bench-pressed a wrench. In a far corner sat cardboard boxes marked *DIMLY BULB: The Light of Your Life*.

“Do you know what reidium is, Gary?”

Gary thought. “Um, is it when you’re bored with reading?”

Dr. F.’s eyebrows bunched and his moustache drooped. Gary imagined it sweeping up again. The hairs shot skyward.

“OW!”

“Sorry.”

“Not to worry.” The doctor paused for a moment, gingerly patting his moustache. “No, Gary, reidium is a rare element, a hyperconductor.” He nodded at the boxes. “It was used in light filaments and systems made in your hometown, until it was declared too

volatile. But it's special for another reason too. When my assistants here were babies, I exposed them to reidium. Look at them now. You were accidentally exposed to reidium, Gary, in the Dimly hospital just after you were born. And now you have special power too." He took something from his pocket. "Cheese?"

Gary blinked. *What was going on?* All he'd wanted was a little coordination, maybe some math smarts. "No, thank you. Could I have a glass of water?"

"Sure, there are beakers by the sink. Use your power. On second thought, let me get it."

The mice took a cheese break, then patched Gary with sensors. Machines beeped and hummed as he guided balloons (tricky), printed on a whiteboard (very tricky), and threw darts (don't ask) using mind power. Then came a couple of accidental don't-asks involving a tennis racquet and a Bunsen burner. Gary quickly thought the fire extinguisher into action. Unfortunately his glasses had come off. He aimed at the wrong place and destroyed some computers.

"Not to worry," said Dr. F. "They were old ones."

"Everything in this dump is old," squeaked a voice.

It was all so strange that it was hard to concentrate. After a while Gary's power began fading. By 6:00 a.m. it was gone. He slumped sootily in a tangle of wires. Thirteen years of waiting for three hours of mental

Clumsborging. It hardly seemed fair. At least his feeling had been right.

“Don’t worry,” said Dr. F., nibbling now-smoked cheese. “It’s probably a cycle; your power should return. We’ll test again tomorrow night. Now you need some rest. Tell no one. I’ll talk to your mom.”

“We’ll get a budget increase!” cheered a mouse peeling off Gary’s sensor stickers.

“Budget, schmudget,” groused the voice Gary had heard complaining earlier. The mouse was coated in foam from the fire extinguisher. “We should be a reality series. That’s where the money is. We’d be stars! Millionaires!”

“Claude, this is pure science! Research is its own reward,” sighed Dr. Fassbinder.

The argument was raging when Gary left. In the cab he messaged Jess back in Dimly: “Weirdest visit with dr F evr! We should talkl.” Then he fell asleep.

The second night Gary’s power came and went again. There were more don’t-asks, this time with barbells, a TV remote and the microwave.

“Your cycle is 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.,” panted a mouse as it hopped on laptop keys, entering the data.

“And you have to clearly see what you are doing,” chimed another, scrubbing red stains on a counter. There were a lot of red stains around the lab.

“And eating garlic boosts your power during the cycle,” said a third, plugging in a vacuum cleaner.

Gary burped. There had been a lot of Caesar salad.

“And you could try *concentrating*,” complained Claude, the mouse who wanted to be on reality TV. He was raking up broken glass with a fork.

Gary had peeled off his own sensors this time. “Sorry about the mess. Let me help.” He switched on the vacuum. It sucked up two mice standing in front of the nozzle. Gary hit the *off* button and yanked out the bag. Dirt flew. The mice plopped out, coughing and spluttering. “SORRY!” Gary yelped.

Dr. F. flapped a hand, partly to avoid the dust cloud and partly to wave away Gary’s garlic breath. “Forget it. You meant well. Marvin and Denise, you two okay? Just an accident.” The mice coughed and waved.

“Yeah, but I mean about the other stuff, like the—”

“Gary, how would you know we had tomato sauce in the microwave?”

“I thought it was just garlic bread.”

“You’re a telekinetic wrecking crew.” Claude waved his fork.

“Enough,” said Dr. F. “Gary is trying.”

“What happens now?” Gary asked, stepping over Claude and the glass.

“First you get some breath mints,” said Dr. F. “Then you go back to Dimly. You are officially Top Secret, even from your parents. I’ll explain to them. You’ll get a call from Department C, a man named Cheeper. He’ll use a password.” The doctor leaned in and whispered, “*Tapioca.*” He straightened. “Got that?” Gary nodded. “Excellent. You’ll have training this summer. More garlic before you go? Cheese?”

“No thanks.”

“Don’t worry, Gary. This is new and strange, but your coordination will catch up to your growth and your power. In the meantime, practise, if you can stay awake. Eat lots of garlic. And try to concentrate, huh?”

They skirted the smoking ruin of a TV set. A barbell stuck out of the screen. At the door, Dr. F. shook Gary’s hand. Gary felt a piece of paper being slipped to him.

Out in the hall he looked at it: *Watch for blimps* it read. Gary burped again. Overhead, the light began to flicker.