

THE ALMOST EPIC SQUAD

**MUCUS
MAYHEM**

Kevin Sylvester

Illustrations by Britt Wilson

Uncorrected proofs. Not for sale.

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To my kid Baz, who has helped me research this book for years! Achoo!
And their sibster, Erin, who has helped us pick the most equitable tissues.
— K.S.

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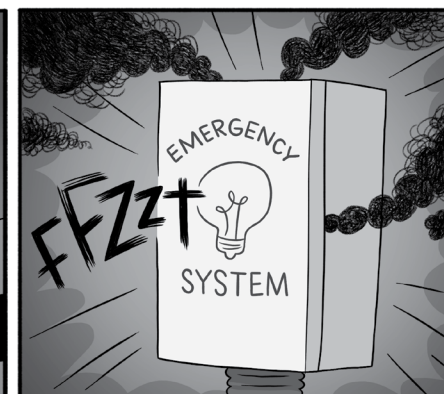
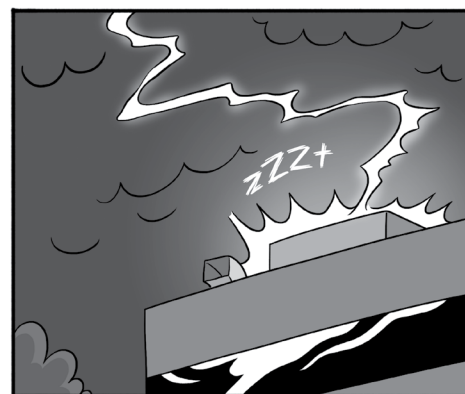
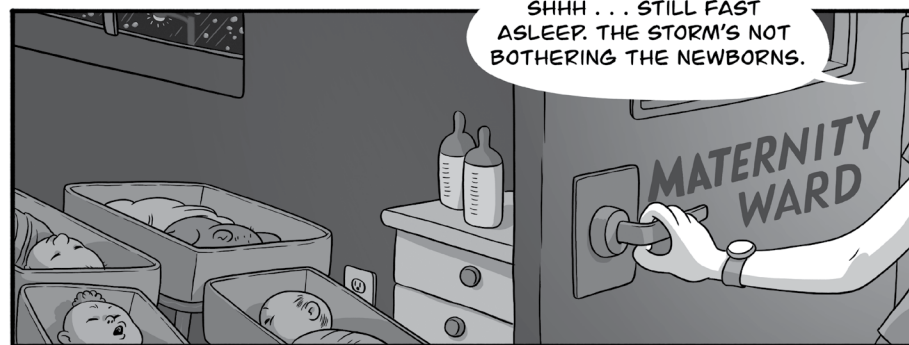
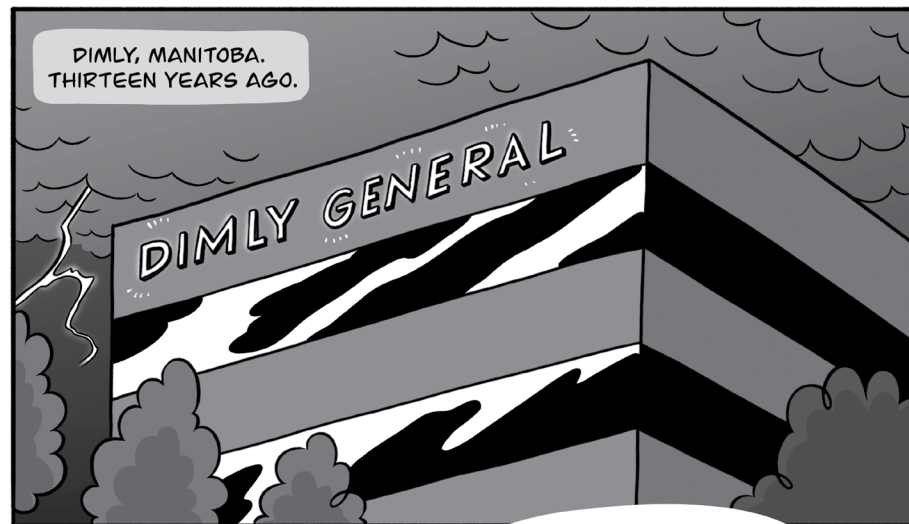
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THE EMERGENCY LIGHTING SYSTEM OVERLOADS!



A CLOUD OF DUST (?) RAINS DOWN ONTO THE SLEEPING BABIES.

BEEP BEEP BEEP



BABY FLEM GETS A NOSEFUL.



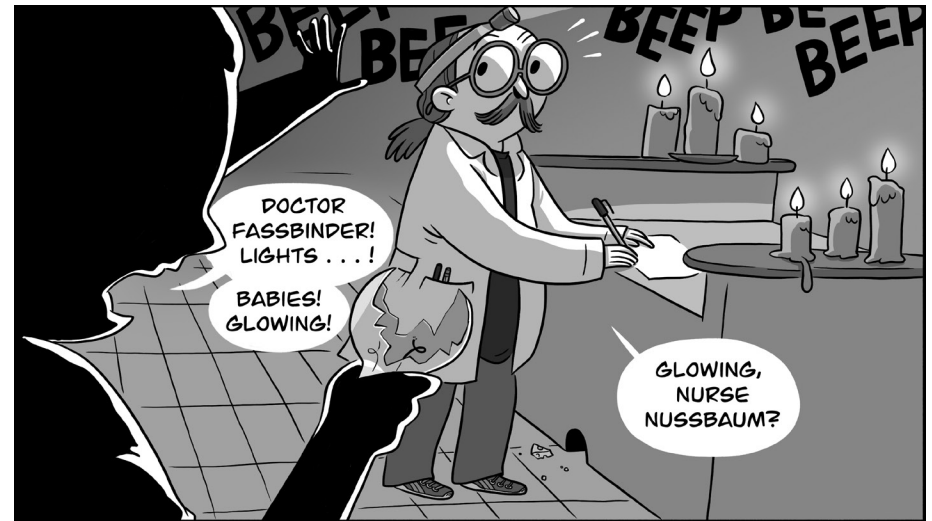
BABY LUNDBORG IS SPRINKLED DOWN THE SPINE.



THE RIGHT SIDE OF BABY KILDARE'S CRANIUM IS DUSTED.



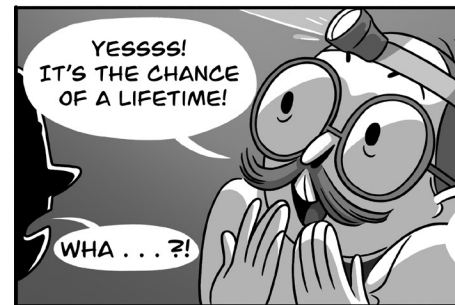
BABY O'KAYE SWALLOWS A MOUTHFUL.



DOCTOR FASSBINDER! LIGHTS ...!

BABIES! GLOWING!

GLOWING, NURSE NUSSBAUM?

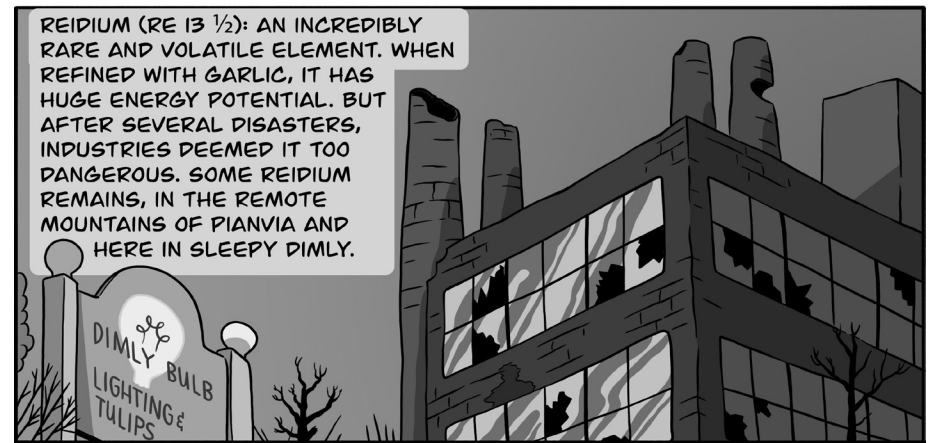


YESSSS! IT'S THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME!

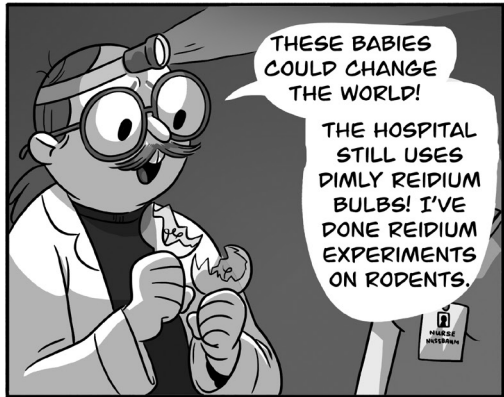
WHA ... ?!



THEY'VE BEEN IRREIDIATED!



REIDIUM (RE 13 1/2): AN INCREDIBLY RARE AND VOLATILE ELEMENT. WHEN REFINED WITH GARLIC, IT HAS HUGE ENERGY POTENTIAL. BUT AFTER SEVERAL DISASTERS, INDUSTRIES DEEMED IT TOO DANGEROUS. SOME REIDIUM REMAINS, IN THE REMOTE MOUNTAINS OF PIANVIA AND HERE IN SLEEPY DIMLY.



THESE BABIES COULD CHANGE THE WORLD!

THE HOSPITAL STILL USES DIMLY REIDIUM BULBS! I'VE DONE REIDIUM EXPERIMENTS ON RODENTS.



MEET MY LAB ASSISTANTS.



THIS IS STAN. AND THERE'S DAPHNE, CLAUDE, ELAINE, AL... AND GERALD.

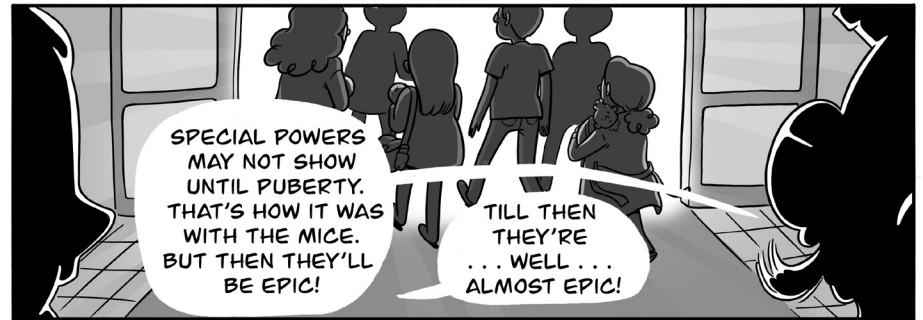
UH. HELLO?



TIME FOR THE BABIES TO GO HOME.

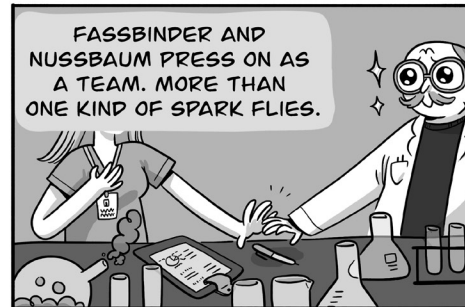
WE'LL BE IN TOUCH ABOUT BRINGING JESSICA BACK FOR "GIFTED TESTING."

I HOPE THE SETTLEMENT WE AGREED ON IS TO YOUR LIKING. ALL THE DETAILS AND PAPERWORK ARE IN THIS DOSSIER.



SPECIAL POWERS MAY NOT SHOW UNTIL PUBERTY. THAT'S HOW IT WAS WITH THE MICE. BUT THEN THEY'LL BE EPIC!

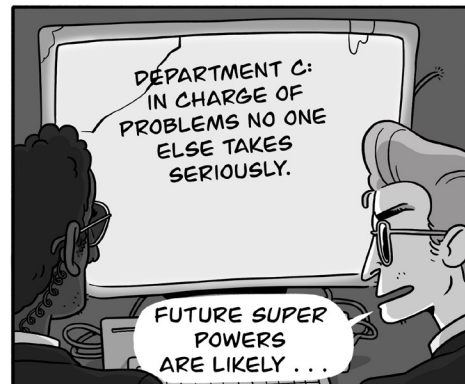
TILL THEN THEY'RE... WELL... ALMOST EPIC!



FASSBINDER AND NUSSBAUM PRESS ON AS A TEAM. MORE THAN ONE KIND OF SPARK FLIES.

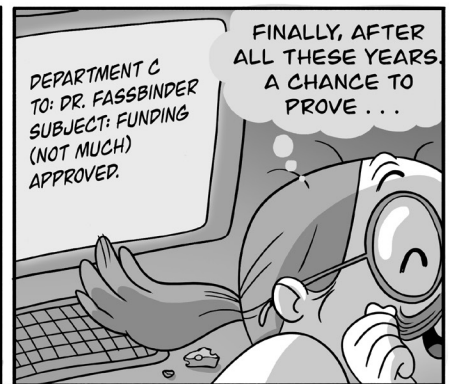


BUT LOVE DOESN'T KEEP YOU IN GARLIC. DESPERATE FOR FUNDING, FASSBINDER CONTACTS SECRET GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT C.



DEPARTMENT C: IN CHARGE OF PROBLEMS NO ONE ELSE TAKES SERIOUSLY.

FUTURE SUPER POWERS ARE LIKELY...



DEPARTMENT C TO: DR. FASSBINDER SUBJECT: FUNDING (NOT MUCH) APPROVED.

FINALLY, AFTER ALL THESE YEARS A CHANCE TO PROVE...



I MUST GO. THE WORK IS IMPORTANT.

THERE'S ONLY FUNDING FOR ONE.

BUT WHAT ABOUT US?



ENRAGED, NURSE NUSSBAUM GOES ROGUE AND SEEKS POWER FOR HERSELF.

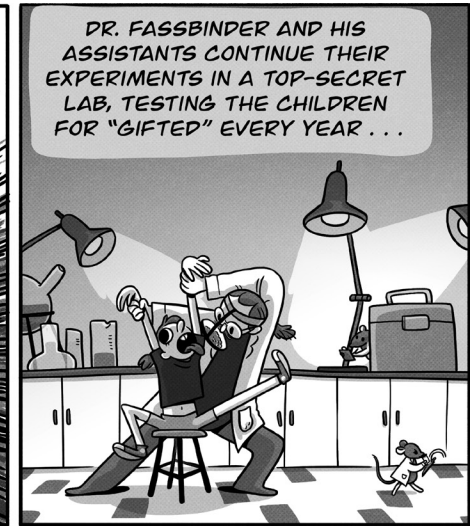
TEN POUNDS OF GARLIC.

A HALF OUNCE OF REIDIUM...



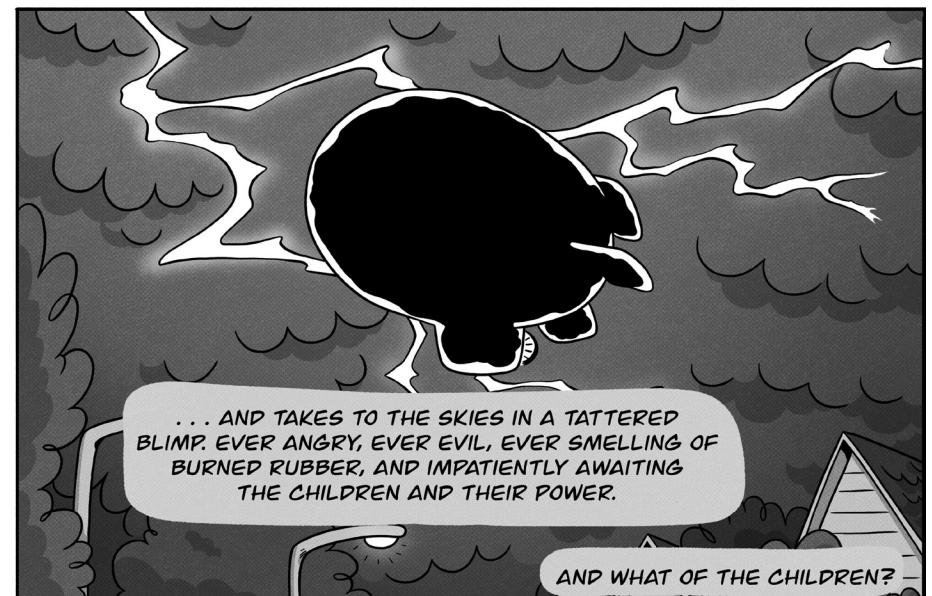
NOTHING REMAINS BUT THE SMELL OF SCORCHED RUBBER-SOLED NURSING SHOES.

OR DOES IT?



DR. FASSBINDER AND HIS ASSISTANTS CONTINUE THEIR EXPERIMENTS IN A TOP-SECRET LAB, TESTING THE CHILDREN FOR "GIFTED" EVERY YEAR...

MEANWHILE, SOMEONE KNOWN ONLY AS THE BOSS, QUIETLY RECRUITS A TEAM OF NEFARIOUS MINIONS TO SHADOW THE ALMOST EPIC KIDS...



... AND TAKES TO THE SKIES IN A TATTERED BLIMP. EVER ANGRY, EVER EVIL, EVER SMELLING OF BURNED RUBBER, AND IMPATIENTLY AWAITING THE CHILDREN AND THEIR POWER.

AND WHAT OF THE CHILDREN?



THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

The Gorg threw its flaming axe. I ducked, the twirling inferno singeing the ends of my long amber braids. I fell to one knee, head snapping back up, ready, watching.

The lips of my mortal enemy curled into an evil smile, his slime-covered fangs grinding horribly. “This ends now, Fairfax the Elfling.” He reached for a sword from his pack, igniting it with a snort from his nostrils.

I moved my right hand behind my back, concealing it. *Time to wipe that grin off your ugly mug*, I thought. Then I yelled, “Come get me, butt for brains!”

The Gorg charged. I mouthed the words to the armour charm and watched as a titanium glove cloaked my right hand. With a horrible shriek, the

Gorg threw the sword. I leaped and snatched it out of midair, the metal making a loud *THUNK* as it smacked against my hand.

“Ha!” I said, closing my fist and crumbling the sword like a pop can. My body glowed an eerie green as its energy flowed through me. I raised my eyes to the Gorg and smiled. His grin evaporated, replaced by a look of utter horror. He turned to run.

“Why the hurry? Got a date?” I curled into a ball and rolled forward, picking up speed. In one smooth motion I landed at the Gorg’s feet, unfurled, unsheathed my own sabre, and cut through the muscular back of the beast. It howled in rage and pain and exploded in a gush of blue flame. Gobs of slime flew into the air then rained down on the ground.

Where the Gorg had stood was now a smouldering hole. Out of the ashes rose the words I had been hoping for, emblazoned on two gold coins: *1,000 points, 1 Life*. I grabbed the coins, the air chiming with music. Not just music — the electronic sound of VICTORY!

There was a beep and a message appeared at my feet from beancounter3000x: “Nice one, Fartface. Next time it’s my turn.”

“You wish,” I typed. “And the name is Fairfax.”

But beancounter3000x had logged off, real identity still a mystery. He or she kept showing up to attack

me whenever I got close to a castle or stash of weapons or power bars. Of course, I always won. But he or she was a pain.

I sheathed my sabre and looked for the floating arrows that would tell me where I needed to go next. I was already a Seventh Level Warrior. Two more Life Tokens and I'd be a Grand Master, just like my mom before me. "May the Council of Greats allow her an eternity in the heavens," I said, bowing my head in her memory. But before I could move another muscle, a loud voice boomed in my ears.

"Jess! Dinner time! Pause that silly game and get up here." It was my mom, my real mom, very much alive, calling down the basement stairs.

Dinner time? I looked at the wall clock. Breakfast was a distant memory. Lunch? Apparently never happened. I shook my head. I'd been playing for eight hours? I let my controller hover over the "Quit Game and Save?" icon, a tremor of regret momentarily fighting with my need for food. I clicked.

My avatar gave a short wave and the screen went dark. I could see my reflection. The real me. No long, elegant braids or awesomely ripped muscles. Just messy dark hair, a face that was starting to break out and a nose that glowed like Rudolph's. Ugh.

"Jessica *Flem!*" Uh oh. Full name and angry-mom

voice. "Dinner is getting cold and I cooked your favourite, rigatoni!"

"You cooked OUR CAT?" I yelled.

Yes, I named our cat RigaTony. He replaced our old cat, RigaMortis, who, sadly, lived up to her name after a run-in with a snowplough. I cocked my ear, waiting to see how Mom would take the joke.

"Ha, ha," she said, her voice softer. "Now, c'mon."

"Whew," I breathed a sigh of relief. Still. Time to move, which wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. My butt was seriously asleep and I knew from experience that the more it woke up, the more it would feel like my undies were filled with stinging ants. I got up, slowly.

Suddenly, a shadow flew at me from the computer. Something landed on my head. Sharp talons dug into my scalp. "AHHHHHHHHHHH," I shrieked. The shadow answered with a howl and a hiss. My controller flew through the air, breaking a nearby lamp. The shadow jumped in alarm, its paws flailing in the air.

"RigaTony!" I yelled. And then it started: full-blown booger barrage, running nose, jammed lungs.

"Puffer, where's my puffer?" I croaked, hyperventilating. See, I'm allergic to cats, among about a million other things, and the basement is supposed to be a cat-free zone.

ILLUSTRATION T/K

RigaTony must have snuck down when Mom opened the door to call me for dinner. I reached around on the floor in a panic, gasping for air. He licked his paws and stared at me. Was he smiling?

“You demented dust bunny,” I croaked. He coughed up a fur ball, right in my face! My nose began to jam up like a blocked toilet. Puffer not found; tissues now the priority. I lunged for the nearest box — there were always ten or so close by — and blew. A tiny bit of relief as oxygen, for one split second, was able to pass through my nose.

I threw the tissue at RigaTony, who hightailed it back up the stairs like he’d been shot. That was weird. Why was a cat so afraid of a snotty tissue?

I looked around at the mess. In *Gang of Greats*, messes magically disappeared. The lamp did not appear ready to cooperate. It was a lamp my dad had

made from an old bottle of some disgusting drink called Splotnik. “*Splotnik*. Proudly bottled in Dimly” was written in a kind of neon orange paint on the glass. Well, now it was more like *Splo*, *Pro*, *Dim*, and *ik* on a bunch of glass fragments.

“I wish I had someone to clean this up,” I said out loud. Maybe Mom would hear me and decide this was a good birthday present. Fairfax was 125, pretty young for an elf. I was about to turn thirteen.

No response from Mom, other than the tapping of her foot on the kitchen floor, clearly waiting for me to emerge from my *crypt*, as she calls it. I turned to follow the cat up to the kitchen. But as the stairway light went out, I caught a glimpse of something moving on the floor behind me. Rats? Mice? I turned the light back on and stared. Had a tissue moved? I glared at it. It glared back. As motionless as, well, a tissue.

“Dinner! Now or never!” Mom yelled, her voice back to 8.5 on the grumpy setting.

I shook my head and turned off the light.