

THE MAGICAL REALITY OF NADIA

MIDDLE SCHOOL MISCHIEF

By BASSEM YOUSSEF and
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To Nadia and Adam, the sources of
my pride, happiness, and joy.

-B.Y.

To Katie Woehr, editor extraordinaire.

-C.D.

For Kristen and everyone
at Squishy Minnie.

-D.H.

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Chapter One

Yay!” cheered Nadia as a ball swished through the basket. She raised her fist into the air. “Nothing but net, amirite?”

Adam elbowed her in the ribs. “You’re cheering for the wrong team,” he informed her.

“Oh,” said Nadia, slightly embarrassed. It was the day before school started after the holiday break and she and her friends were sitting in the stands at their very first middle school basketball game, Bridget Mason Middle versus Tenth Street. Though they were more inclined to attend a debate tournament than a sporting event, they were there to support their newish friend Jason, who played on the team.

Nadia looked over at her freckled, redheaded best friend, who was watching the game intently. It was only a couple of months ago that Adam didn’t know a goal from a

touchdown. (They had goals in basketball, right?) And now, thanks to his desire to bond with his new stepdad, he was a veritable sports fanatic.

“Don’t worry, Nadia,” said Vikram. “You know I’m just here for the snacks.” He held up a box of nachos. “Mmmmm. The cheese just melts in your mouth.”

Vikram was also one of Nadia’s friends. The group called themselves the Nerd Patrol, and was originally made up of Nadia, Adam, Chloe, Sarah, and Vikram. They were a diverse group. Nadia was born in Egypt; Adam had recently discovered he had roots in Austria; Vikram’s parents were from India; Sarah was Korean American; and Chloe was half Jamaican American, half Barbadian American. But they had a lot in common. They were smart and funny. They took school seriously, but not necessarily themselves. They considered themselves well-rounded geeks. Even so, everyone had been surprised when Nadia suggested they go to the basketball game.

“Well, Jason is part of the Nerd Patrol now,” Nadia had said. “He plays sports. We should support him!”

Nobody could argue with that.

“So this is what the jocks do on Saturday afternoons,” marveled Chloe, looking around as she smoothed her velvet skirt. Nadia, unsure about what to wear to a sporting event, had gone with the safe jeans-and-T-shirt combo. But Chloe looked like she always did—a middle school fashionista.

Nadia looked around. Chloe was right. The Bridget Mason students scattered throughout the bleachers were

almost all from the school's different sports teams. Not a Dungeons & Dragons Club member or a mathlete in sight. Nadia didn't see any other nerds, or artsy kids, or goth kids, or even pastel-goth kids. Just sporty kids as far as the eye could see.

As if on cue, two eighth graders wearing volleyball sweatshirts pushed their way into their row, practically stepping on Vikram's nachos.

"Um, do you mind?" Nadia said.

"Yeah, I do mind," one of the girls said. She was tall, with long, straight jet-black hair that Nadia would have admired if she wasn't so annoyed. "You're in our seats."

Sarah jumped up. "We'll move!" She scooted down the row, pulling the rest of the Nerd Patrol along with her.

"Well, that was rude," Nadia said. "There's plenty of room."

"Eh," Sarah said. "I kinda get it. I'd be annoyed if a random kid sat in my favorite seat at a debate tournament." She shrugged. "We are sort of in their territory."

"But this is the gym," Nadia said. "The sports kids don't own it."

Adam shifted in his seat. "Whatever. I didn't mind the excuse to stand up. I never realized how uncomfortable these bleachers are. My ttub hurts."

Nadia frowned. "Are you talking backward again?"

About a month ago, Adam, who loved all things tech related, had discovered how to play audio backward and now peppered his commentary with backward words that

Fun Fact: A terrapin is a type of turtle. The name means "little turtle" in the Algonquin Indian language.

everyone had to decipher. It was both endearing and slightly annoying.

"Sey," he said with a grin. Then he pointed to the court, narrating the action like a sports announcer. "Jason gets the pass and immediately goes into a triple threat position. He sizes up his opponent . . . does a pump fake . . . and pulls up for the jump shot. SWISH!" He turned to Nadia, a teasing grin on his face. "That was us. You can clap now."

Nadia applauded politely. She was amused to discover that even on the basketball court, Jason paused for a moment to toss his shaggy sandy-blond hair out of his blue eyes. The Nerd Patrol's newest member brought his own brand of nerdery to the group—endless knowledge of plays, stats, and strategies. His sports brain was a new—and welcome—point of view. Nadia looked over at Sarah, who tried to push her new cat-eye glasses up on her face, forgetting that she was wearing a huge GO, BRIDGET MASON! foam hand. She ended up poking herself in the nose. Nadia giggled.

Yes, the Nerd Patrol were definitely expanding their horizons, thanks to Jason.

The ref blew a whistle and the teams went back to their benches.

"What are they doing now?" Nadia asked Adam.

"Tenth Street Middle is taking a time-out," he explained.

Their mascot, a huge green shell on its back, began moving around the court super slowly. The Tenth Street fans seemed to think this was hysterical.

"Tenth Street's mascot is a terrapin?" Nadia asked.

Adam gave her a look. “It is,” he said. “But how did you know that? Most people assume it’s just a turtle.”

Nadia felt an excited buzz start up in her brain, like she always did when she sensed an opportunity to share interesting facts. “Well, its shell has a pattern,” she said. “Also, it has red stripes on each side of its head, which leads me to believe that it’s a red-eared slider terrapin.” She laughed. “I just didn’t think mascots were that . . . specific.”

Nadia was distracted from the terrapin when the Bridget Mason cheerleaders started a cheer:

*“Hey, hey you, get out of our way
Today is the day we will blow you away!”*

Sarah looked over at Nadia. “Eh,” they said in unison. It was pretty uninspiring, as far as cheers went.

As the time-out clock buzzed, the teams ran back out on the court.

“Let’s go, Bridget Mason!” Adam shouted. Then he turned to Nadia and said, “We really could win this.”

The Tenth Street cheerleaders started a routine:

*“Extra, extra, read all about it:
Your mascot is boring and there’s no doubt about it!
When you’re up, you’re up! When you’re down, you’re down!
When you’re Bridget Mason Middle, you’re going down!”*

The cheerleaders ended their cheer pointing to the far corner of the gym. Nadia followed their gaze.

“Is that—” She nudged Vikram. “The Bridget Mason Petunia?”



“What else could it be?” Vikram said, shaking his head.

Nadia sighed, staring at the kid in costume. He was dressed in a green spandex onesie, a large headpiece surrounding his face with pink petals. He was just kind of standing there sticking his leafy arms out, acting like, well, a flower.

Nadia wasn’t surprised she hadn’t noticed the mascot until now. She was halfway through fifth grade before she realized that Bridget Mason even *had* a mascot.

The terrapin pointed to the petunia and laughed. Then it

fell onto its back and pretended it was stuck. It waved its arms and legs helplessly. The Tenth Street fans roared with laughter.

“I heard that poor kid didn’t even want to be the petunia,” Vikram said. “He tried out for the basketball team and didn’t make it. Coach Zuckerman hadn’t had any applicants for the mascot, so he said the kid could come to basketball practices if he agreed to be the mascot at games.”

Nadia watched as the petunia sighed and walked closer to the Bridget Mason cheerleaders. There, he struck a slightly more enthusiastic flower pose.

“Way to photosynthesize!” a boy wearing a Tenth Street sweatshirt shouted mockingly.

For the rest of the game, Nadia watched the mascots instead of the players. The terrapin was way more entertaining than the petunia. Where the turtle danced and shook its shell to the music, the petunia swayed back and forth like a blossom in the breeze. Yawn.

As the game went on, the cheerleaders’ insults continued.

“Your mascot is so boring! We’ll just keep on scoring!”

And Tenth Street did. They won 55 to 22.

“Well, that was lufwa,” said Adam after the game as the friends waited for Jason by the fountain at the Bridget Mason school entrance.

It took a minute for the rest of the Nerd Patrol to decipher the word.

“Yeah,” Chloe finally said. “Super awful.”

“I think all the mascot mocking had a lot to do with us losing,” Nadia said “A petunia is so . . . wilty. A terrapin

is a little strange, but at least there's potential for it to be entertaining. Doesn't it bother you all? They were mocking us the whole game."

"Eh, that's part of sports," said Adam. "Fans make fun of each other."

Sarah shrugged.

Nadia shook her head. "But we're handing it to them on a silver platter. Shouldn't we do something about it?"

"My big brother tried to get it changed a bunch of years ago," said Chloe. "But Principal Taylor refused. They say he actually used to be the petunia and that he still keeps his old costume somewhere in his office."

Now that did not surprise Nadia one bit. Their principal loved Bridget Mason Middle School—and its students—like nobody's business. And he wasn't afraid to show it. Like last semester, when he started DJing at school events. He himself had graduated from Bridget Mason Middle way back in the stone ages—the 1980s. If you looked at his yearbook (and she had) you could see Zachary Taylor in all his mulleted glory, his extremely long list of extracurriculars taking up two columns underneath his photo.

The door of the gym pushed open and Jason appeared. He looked pretty disappointed.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "Sorry we lost so bad."

"Are you kidding me?" said Nadia. "It was awesome! And you made four goals, too!"

Jason laughed. "Oh, Nadia, you crack me up," he said. "But geez, that was a tough game."