

*Ahh, vacation.*

I stretched my arms above my head, letting the movement and airflow cool some of the clammy sweat from my body.

Know what my favorite part of vacation was? Besides the little capuchin monkeys chattering in the trees above me?

There were no disasters.

No evil villains trying to take over the world.

No ridiculously impossible odds to face, and no world-saving missions to complete.

It was only me, my family, and the huge orchid balanced above my ear. Relaxing in the teeming jungle with

chirping birds and insects all around us. Though to be honest, the fact that the orchid wouldn't stay in place was already getting on my nerves. I was ready to throw it into the ocean.

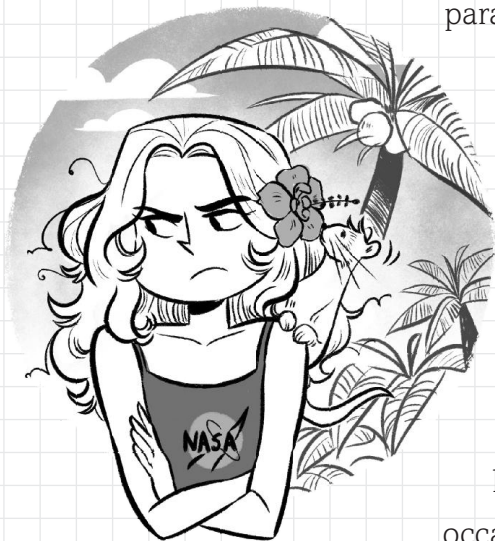
"Can't I hold *onto* the flowers instead of being decorated in them? I'm not a flowerpot," I whined. Pickles, my ferret, seemed to agree, swiping the wispy tendril of flower as she shifted from her perch on my shoulder.

"No way, kiddo." Mom's mouth turned up into a satisfied smirk.

If you'd ever seen my mom before today, you probably wouldn't have recognized her. She usually had what I like to call Momface—a combination of weary and paranoid, probably because

she spent most of her time worried about whether or not one of my latest inventions was going to blow up the house.

Understandable, considering it was known to happen on occasion.



But ever since my dad had come out of hiding from the police (and us!) after being framed for attempted murder seven years ago? Mom was a breezy, smiling, walking ray of sunshine.

“We only get to do this once, so everything’s going to be special. And if you insist on Pickles riding on your shoulder during the ceremony, she’s going to have to get used to the flowers . . .” She handed me a cluster of messy wildflowers as a placeholder bouquet. “Both in your hands *and* your hair!”

I rolled my eyes. “Technically you’re not doing this *once*,” I reminded her. “This is your second time walking down the aisle. To the same guy, even. What’s the point of getting married *again*? You never got divorced or anything. He just disappeared.”

“The point, my dear child,” she said, “is a new start. We’ve gone seven years without your dad, and we want to make his return special. Plus, this time, you’ll be there with us. It’s the start of a new chapter in the book of our lives!” She lifted her hands dramatically.

“The book of our lives needs another lemonade, not a wedding!” I licked my parched lips, trying to remember where I’d left my water bottle.

I should probably explain the past few months, in case you haven’t been keeping track in my official

government records. Actually, you know what? Explaining would take too long. Let me sum it up:

I'm a genius. I got shipped off to a boarding school that turned out to be a secret government-run place called Genius Academy helmed by a tough, no-nonsense lady called Martha. The students' job, to put it bluntly, is to save the world. We use quick thinking, prodigious expertise, and a good dose of luck to protect Earth and its inhabitants from threats. I'll admit it: It's totally fun.

But don't let the fact that we're geniuses make you think we're all the same.

Nope, Genius Academy is an equal-opportunity agency, representing different kinds of brilliant minds. Some of us excel at inventing and building dangerous weapons (that's me!), while others are experts at stuff like music, physics, chemistry, leadership, or reading people. Or, if you're like my friend-and-possibly-boyfriend, Leo da Vinci, you're good at everything. (Which is completely unfair, if you ask me.)

Anyway. So, before I joined the Academy—seven years ago, as I already mentioned—my dad was all over the news for blowing up his lab. The police found plans for a bomb that he was developing to use to hurt a bunch of people. But guess what? He was framed! By an evil

dude who wanted to sell one of Dad's cool inventions for boatloads of cash.

I know! How rude, right?

To make this long story short, he disappeared to keep me and my mom safe, but my friends from Genius Academy helped me clear his name, so he's back in the picture now.

That's great because it means I finally have my family together again, and we can let go of some pretty awful stuff from the past.

But it's not so great because it means I've had to endure my parents basically making out all the time, "reconnecting" after so many years apart. Barf!

Don't ask me why they couldn't reconnect by going out to a fancy, candlelit dinner like regular long-lost soul mates. Nope, they wanted to get away from it all. And I guess "it all" means air-conditioning and flat-screen televisions. As you can probably tell from the vines and monkeys surrounding me, I'm not at the Academy anymore.

Welcome to the Monteverde Cloud Forest! Home to over four hundred species of birds, one hundred species of mammals, and one nerdy genius with a sunburn. Oh, and my parents, who are now rehearsing for their upcoming (second) wedding, where they're going to

renew their vows and profess their love in holy matrimony.

My job today was to practice walking down the aisle alongside my mom at the right tempo. You'd think that being a genius would mean I'd be good at this, but the truth is, I could hardly balance on the tiny heels Mom had bought me to go with my bridesmaid dress. I've seen some people wear heels that are three inches tall without breaking their necks—how do they do it?!

I mean that literally: I've done the calculations, and the physics of walking on heels doesn't add up.

“So when you hear the second bar of the music, that's when we go.” Mom gripped my elbow tightly, but her face was all smiling sunshine. Seeing Mom so happy after so many years of sadness was pretty great . . . even if it was hard on my feet.

Just then, Pickles chattered sharply in my ear and scurried down my arm, using her sharp claws to push off me as she catapulted to the ground. A flash of chocolate-brown and white, she bolted off in the direction of our hotel.

“Ouch!” I yelped, stumbling on my heels.

Mom held me steady and stared after Pickles. “What's up with her?”

I chewed my lip. “I'm not sure.” I squinted against

the dappled sun streaming through the jungle leaves as a last flick of her tail disappeared around the curving trail. A low buzz of anxiety started to quiver inside my stomach.

“Mind if I go see what’s up?” I asked Mom, trying to keep the edge of nervousness from my voice. “She’s not usually like this. Not unless . . .”

The chatter of the jungle got louder in my ears. Pickles didn’t race off like that unless she was motivated by something—or *someone*.

Mom took the bouquet from my hands. “Maybe the hotel staff has been sneaking her treats! Go ahead, sweetie. We’ve got a week until the wedding. Tons of time to practice.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Be right back!”

Kicking off my uncomfortable shoes, I darted after Pickles, my bare feet skidding on the path as I arrived at the cute little hotel my family was staying at for the next week.

“Pickles!” I yelled through the vivid green trees. “Where’d you go?” I clicked my tongue and clapped my hands, trying to get her attention. Usually, if I made noises like this, she’d think I had food and race back to me.

But this time . . . *nothing*.



Continuing through the hotel doors, I hoped someone at the front desk had seen her. Would they kick us out of here if she caused trouble? I plastered on a fake smile in hopes of endearing myself to the staff.

“Excuse me,” I said, ducking under the ornamental tree by the door to reach the receptionist. “I’m looking for— *Oh!*”

The receptionist wasn’t there. Instead, Pickles sat perched atop the shoulder of someone else.

Someone who should have been thousands of miles away . . .

“Hi, Nikki!” Charlie Darwin lifted her arms and danced in place. Then five other faces popped up from behind the counter, like they were celebrating a surprise birthday party.

Only it *definitely* wasn’t my birthday.

