

Queen of the Board

by Anahera Gildea



My sister Tiana won the school chess championship, and ever since, it's like she thinks she's Genesis Potini or something.

“What are you doing here?” she said as I walked into chess club. “Chess is only for masterminds.” Mr Porter is the teacher in charge, but Tiana was the one barking commands. Anyone would think she was running it. In my mind, I call Tiana “Tianiwha” because she's a total dragon. She doesn't breathe fire or anything, but I bet she could if she wanted to.

The junior chess competition was coming up at school, and I'd put my name down to play. All I knew was the basics: use my pieces to protect my king and, at the same time, try to get the other person's king. I didn't know much more than that. I'd been secretly hoping that someone other than Tiana would teach me. But the minute I sat down in front of the chessboard, she raced over and sat down in the chair opposite.

“It's all about strategy,” she said. “All the pieces move differently. This one goes two up and one across. See?” She moved her knight and took my castle, waving it back and forth in front of my face before putting it to one side.

I slid my bishop diagonally across the board.

“You can't move there. I'll take you.”

“Eh?” I frowned. “What about my prawn then?”

Tiana snorted. “Prawn? You said prawn!” Her scornful laughter drew Mr Porter over.

“When someone doesn't know something, Tiana, it's your job as one of the tuakana of this room to help them and teach them,” he reminded her.

“But Miri doesn't count, Mr P. She's my sister.”

Mr Porter's eyebrows crinkled. “Then it's doubly important, Tiana. You're not just her tuakana in this classroom – you're her tuakana for life.”

Tianiwha made a face like a fish.

“If we have a gift, it's our job to share it,” Mr Porter added.



Gift? Chess wasn't Tiana's gift. Bossing people around was what she was good at. She placed her fingertip on top of each piece in turn while she decided her next move.

"Why don't you move your castle? Or your horse?" I said. "Make a quick getaway!"

"It's not called a castle – it's a *rook*." Tiana looked at me like I was crazy. "And it's not called a horse – it's a *knight*." Boss, boss, bossy. My sister had rules for everything. But in the back of my mind, I thought she might actually be a chess genius for real, so I tried to concentrate. Tiana moved her rook one step forward.

"Hah!" I said. "My knight is going to jump over your prawns and take your ugly queen to the dungeon."

"Ugh," Tiana sighed. "Dungeon? There's no dungeon. You can't just make up stories, Miri. Chess is about thinking ahead." She tapped the side of her head.

"I am thinking ahead," I said. "I'm imagining your queen in my dungeon after I capture her."



Tiana rolled her eyes. "If you're going to win any of your games, you have to think sensibly."

"But it helps me to work out the best moves if I can make them into a story." I imagined that Tiana's queen had long brown hair, just like her. And a dress made of spikes. And pointy shoes.

"Well, this is a game of thinking, not imagining. All you need to do is relax, breathe, think, and then make the best decision you can."

I tried to focus on the board like Tiana said, but it was no good. I was worried – and I had one more question. "What if I can't decide? What if I just don't know what's the best move?"

Tiana shrugged. "It's never happened to me. I guess you'd have to take a risk."





The day of the tournament arrived. Tiana was set to play a match against Jean Watson, the second best player in the school. I was against Huia Fisher. Tiana looked at me across the room as the buzzer went and tapped the side of her head. She was reminding me to concentrate.

Huia and I battled it out, piece by piece, until she had me cornered. My castle was the only thing stopping her from taking my king. I imagined it as a real castle, with battlements for shooting arrows between, but it was no help. Two moves later, she'd taken my castle and won the match.

“Good game.” I held out my hand, and Huia smiled and shook it. “You played well,” she said. “Really well. You must take after your sister.”

“Thanks,” I said, suddenly pleased – and a bit shy.

Tiana was waiting. She'd finished her game, too. “How'd it go?”

“Lost.” I shrugged. “I just couldn't make the right decisions the way you can. How about you?”

“Won, of course,” she said. “But only at the last minute.”

Tiana paused as if she was wondering whether to tell me more. “I had every possible move worked out, but for once in my life, I had no idea which one was the best.” She had a sly look on her face. “So, I took a risk.”

She paused again.

“What? What did you do?”

A huge smile broke across her face. “I used my imagination, of course. I got the knight to protect the king while my rook circled the entire kingdom and doubled back. I cornered her. And won. It's a new strategy I just learned.”

I couldn't believe it. “But I thought you said it was all about thinking ahead and making the best decision you can?”

“I did. The best decision was to use my imagination. Just like you do. All the rest was me, though,” she said, cracking up. “All me.”



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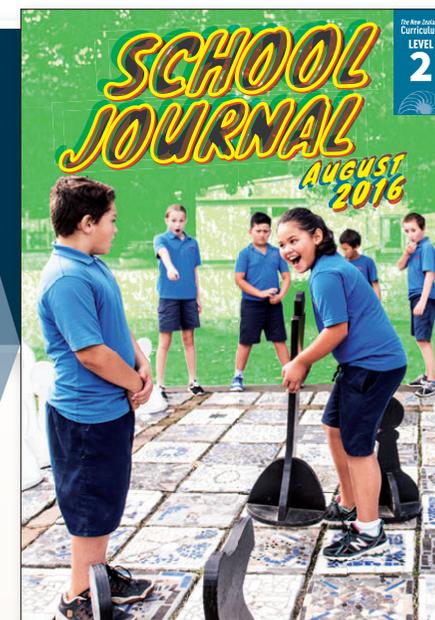
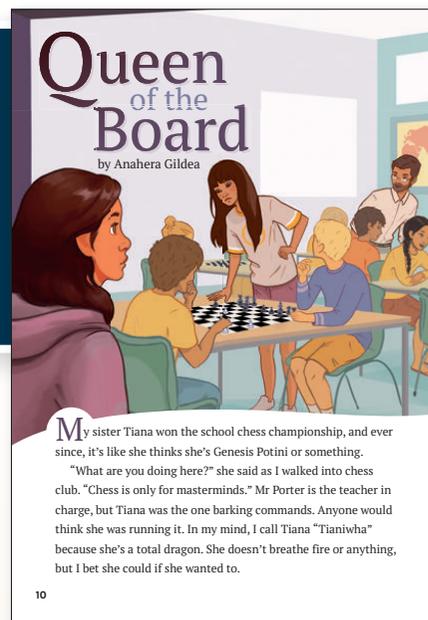
Published 2016 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 16650 7 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: David Chadwick
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 2 AUGUST 2016

Curriculum learning area	English
Reading year level	Year 4
Keywords	board games, challenge, chess, competition, imagination, mentoring, sibling rivalry, sisters, strategy, tuakana-teina relationship