

BADGE OF HONOUR

BY SARAH PENWARDEN



Isaac's knee won't stop jiggling. He's sitting in assembly, waiting for Miss Latu to announce the new school captains. What if he's one of them?

"It's my great pleasure," Miss Latu says, "to announce that Fai Tuima and Jess Hutton will represent the girls."

There are a few cheers.

"And the boys are ... Tomasi Tesi and Isaac Lauofo!"

Isaac feels a bubble of pride swell inside him. Everyone's clapping. He looks around and sees Tomasi get to his feet. They walk up together, along with Fai and Jess. Miss Latu pins a badge to each of their shirts. He looks over at Tomasi, and they grin at each other. They're going to make an awesome team.

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"So," Isaac asks as they head home, "are you pleased?"

"What?" Tomasi says. He seems to be a long way off.

"About being school captain ... remember?"

"Miss Latu's so strict," Tomasi grumbles. "Didn't you hear her going on?"

They'd met with Miss Latu after assembly – all four of them lined up on the couch in her office.

"Being a school captain is an honour," Miss Latu said, "and I expect good things. It's not just a job. You're role models now – leaders. People will respect you – and you need to respect this." Miss Latu pointed to the new badges and peered at each of them in turn. Isaac noticed that her eyes rested on Tomasi for a moment longer than anyone else before she looked away.

"It's just ... all those jobs she wants us to do," Tomasi says. "I've got touch practice and other stuff. When am I meant to hang out with my friends?"

Isaac says nothing. He'd heard rumours about Tomasi and his new friends. That they get into trouble in the weekends. That they're in a gang. Isaac can guess what you have to do to be in one. He'd been asked once but said no. He doesn't want to fight, and he doesn't want to steal stuff. But as for Tomasi ... Isaac knew Tomasi wouldn't do anything really bad, but who knew exactly what he got up to? It was best not to know.

A boy from Saint Benedict's stands by the dairy across the road. The boy waves at them. "Wait here," Tomasi says – and before Isaac can reply, he runs across the road. He returns a few minutes later, and they keep walking.

"What was that about?" Isaac asks.

"Oh," Tomasi says, too casually. He shrugs. "Nothing."

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The next day, when Isaac's walking to PE, someone grabs his backpack from behind. He turns around. It's Fai Tuima. Isaac likes Fai. She's full of ideas and opinions and isn't afraid to share them. But she's sensible too. Her shirt's so full of badges, there's hardly enough space for the school captain one.

"Hey," Fai says. "We need to talk." She looks around, checking no one's watching, and leads him to a bench.

"What's up?" Isaac asks.

"It's Tomasi," Fai says in a low voice. "I know things about him ... like he fights ... on the weekend and sometimes after school, down at the park. His friends all go to watch. They film it on their phones."

Isaac doesn't know what to say, so he says nothing.

"I don't know why Miss Latu picked him," says Fai.

"Are you sure about the fights?" Isaac asks.

"Yup," Fai says. "Totally."

Isaac shakes his head. Maybe Tomasi did fight once, but things are different now. They're school captains. So it doesn't really matter what Fai has to say.

"I have to go," he says, getting up. "PE."

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Walking home together, they're just about at Isaac's place when Tomasi's phone rings. He talks quietly, but Isaac can figure out what's going on. He catches the words "fight" and "Highfield Park" and "Saint Benedict's". Isaac's pulse starts to race. He stares at Tomasi, who finishes his call, slips the phone into his pocket, and starts walking – fast.

"Hey, what's going on?" Isaac says.

"Gotta go. The park." Tomasi pauses and looks at his friend carefully, as if he's weighing something up. Then he decides. "There's this fight," Tomasi explains. "With some kid called Richmond from Saint Benedict's. They're all waiting for me."

"But you can't! You're a school captain!"

Tomasi's top lip curls up. "That doesn't matter right now. I have to do this. The other kids expect me to. Don't worry – I'm a much better fighter than Richmond. I'll beat him no sweat."

Isaac's not sure he cares who wins. "But what about Miss Latu?" he asks.

"What! You're such a loser. I can't believe you're still going on about that. She won't find out. Anyway, it's after school. It's nothing to do with her." Tomasi softens his tone – meets Isaac's gaze. "It's about respect."

Isaac nods despite himself. His friend always has to prove himself. He was like that even when they were little kids. Isaac watches Tomasi walk off. What else can he do?

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The next morning, during English, Isaac's got his head down, working on his blog – but he can feel someone's eyes on him. It's Fai, trying to get his attention. He blanks her, but as soon as the bell goes, she rushes over.

"Tomasi was in a fight," she says. "Yesterday, after school. I told you," she adds accusingly.

"Talk quietly!" Isaac says.

"Kelisha was there."

Isaac's stomach turns over. "Are you going to tell anyone?" he asks.

"I don't know," Fai says. "We probably should tell Miss Latu – but Kelisha doesn't want to get Tomasi into trouble. I don't really care about that. He's a school captain – and he shouldn't be."

"Yeah, but no one's perfect," Isaac says. "Not even you, Fai," he adds, trying for a joke. He needs to buy some time. Fai had said "we".

"Whatever," Fai says. "He's your friend, Isaac."

"So?"

Fai shrugs. She leaves the word hanging there and walks off.

* * *

At lunchtime, Isaac knows what he has to do – find Tomasi. They're all sitting around the back of the school, on the bench, laughing and talking. Tomasi raises his eyebrows at him. "What up?" Isaac can see a bruise under Tomasi's right eye.

"So you did it," he says in a low voice, looking pointedly at Tomasi's face.

"Oh, this," Tomasi says, touching the bruise gently. "Fell off my skateboard." He grins – then sees the look on Isaac's face. "Look, don't worry," Tomasi adds. "Miss Latu won't find out – and if she does, I'll deny it."

Isaac feels sick. He's about to tell Tomasi about Fai and Kelisha, when out of the corner of his eye, he sees movement. It's Fai, coming towards them, a serious look on her face. Beside her is Miss Latu.

"Tomasi," Isaac says, pointing. "She knows."

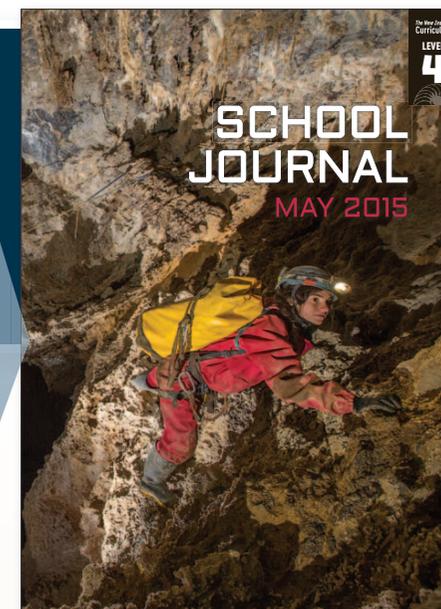
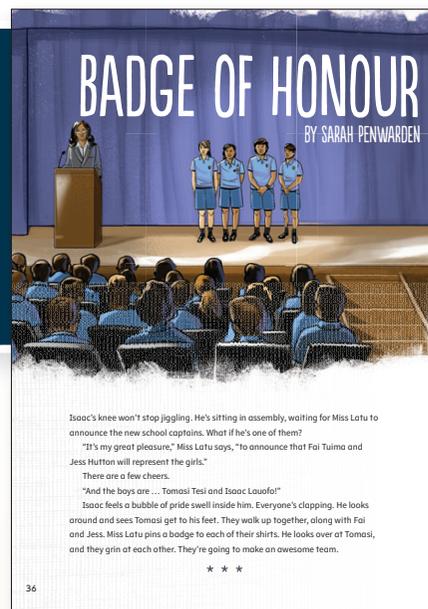
For a split second, Tomasi looks afraid. Then a smooth, confident look settles back across his face. "Hey, Isaac," he says quickly, "back me up. You need to say I was at your place after school yesterday. Miss Latu will have to believe us. We're school captains, right?"



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