



## FOUR OF A KIND

BY STEPH MATUKU

Whaea Melanie carefully parked the school's new van. They were there. Caesar wiped the foggy window so he could see outside. Across the street, the courts gleamed after the morning rain. He'd imagined their first game on a sunny day – and with no spectators. But the place was packed.

Caesar peered closer. Something was wrong. "Miss," he said suspiciously. "Why are there no boys?"

"Wait! What?" said Dayton, making his own peephole. "What do you mean no boys?"

"There are no boys," Caesar repeated.

"Over there – is that one?" Kaya asked.

"That's a man." Bethany spoke with exaggerated patience. "With a beard!"

"He's really short," Kaya said. "Maybe it's a fake beard."

Caesar gave his team-mate one of his withering looks. "Why would a boy wear a fake beard to a netball game?"

"Dunno." Kaya shrugged. "Why do you take baths in your dad's aftershave?"

Kaya fanned his hand in front of his nose.

Caesar's look intensified. "That's my aftershave, actually."

"Yeah," said Kaya. "For your fake beard."

"Out you get," said Whaea Melanie.

"You're wasting time. We need to warm up. It's a new season – let's be at our best. Stand out."

"We'll be doing that all right," Dayton muttered, "seeing as we're the only boys within a 50-mile radius."

"Why didn't you tell us netball's for girls, Miss?" Caesar asked.

"It's not," said Whaea Melanie. "You're here, aren't you?"

"Not for long," said Dayton. He slumped down and pulled his beanie over his eyes.

"It'll be fine," said Bethany. "Chill."

"Easy for a girl to say."

Whaea Melanie slid open the door.

Bethany and the rest of the girls climbed out – Anah and Kelsey and Hannah – but the boys didn't move.

"Come on," said Whaea Melanie cheerfully. "Don't let all that practice go to waste."

"Shame!" moaned Dayton.

"I'm surprised you didn't make us wear skirts," Caesar added.

Whaea Melanie rattled her keys. "Out. I need to lock up."

Grumbling, the boys struggled out of the van. They huddled together, their breath misty in the early morning air, and sullenly waited for the next instruction.

"Right, follow me," said Whaea Melanie. Together, they trooped across the road, through the gates, and onto the courts.

Spectators crowded the sidelines, bundled in warm jackets, yelling encouragement. Little kids clung to their parents' legs; slightly bigger kids rode their scooters erratically in the narrow gaps between the courts. On the far side, by the sausage sizzle, a team in red was warming up. The air smelt of rain and fried onions. If they didn't have to play, Caesar thought, this might've been fun.

They followed Whaea Melanie to the office, where a woman in a blue puffer jacket sat behind a counter. Caesar noticed her checking them out – she seemed surprised.

"Court five," the woman said. "And you need to confirm player names. Gosh, you do have a lot of boys," she added.

"Couldn't find a rugby coach this year," said Whaea Melanie briskly. "Netball was the only option. So here we are."

"Great," said the office woman. "That's really great."

Was she whakamā? Caesar wondered – because she wasn't the only one.

The woman smiled brightly and passed Whaea Melanie a clipboard. "Enjoy your game, boys."

"Oh, we *won't*," said Dayton under his breath.

"What about us?" Bethany whispered crossly. "What about the girls!"

Whaea Melanie hustled them over to a quiet area by court five. Her mood had changed. She seemed annoyed. "It's not the dark ages," she grumbled.

"Dark ages?" said Kaya.

Vance grinned. "She means the olden days when girls played netball and boys played rugby and everyone was happy."

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Dayton.

"But look how good our women's rugby team is," said Whaea Melanie. "The Black Ferns are world champs."

"Yeah, come on! Anyone can do anything these days," said Vance. "My cousin Shane wears make-up. He does vlogs."

Caesar rolled his eyes. They'd all heard about Vance's cousin the make-up vlogger.

"Well, there's a difference between knowing boys can play netball and being the only boys actually playing netball," grumbled Dayton.

"Look at it this way," said Whaea Melanie. "We might have a tiny advantage."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bethany.

"She means," said Vance with a smirk, "that boys are better at netball than girls."

"That is so sexist!" Bethany folded her arms, waiting for an explanation.

“That is not what I mean,” said Whaea Melanie. “If the other teams aren’t used to playing against boys, it might rattle them a bit. It’s a psychological thing.”

Dayton didn’t look convinced. “Well I don’t want to play,” he said flatly. “I’m the one who’s rattled.”

“Here,” said Whaea Melanie, taking a ball from the gear bag. “Might as well warm up seeing as you’re here. You’ll freeze if you stand around.”

Dayton threw the ball sulkily to Vance, who threw it to Kaya, who threw it to Caesar. “Fine,” said Bethany, taking a second ball. “Whatever.”

It wasn’t long before their muscles had loosened up. Caesar was actually feeling good, and that’s when he remembered: he *liked* netball. He didn’t miss rugby at all.

The hooter sounded, ending the round. There were cheers and handshakes, then players began filing off the courts.

“Everyone’s staring,” hissed Dayton. He nodded towards a group of girls looking their way. “Look. They’re laughing.”

“There’s a good reason for that, try-hard,” said Vance. “Your shirt’s on backwards.”

“Oh,” said Dayton. He quickly pulled it off and turned it round the right way. “That hasn’t fixed anything, by the way. This still sucks.”

“I don’t know,” said Caesar cautiously. “Maybe it’s OK.”

Strangely ... Caesar couldn’t say why exactly ... but he was starting to have fun.

To prove his point, he pulled out his phone and took a quick selfie. “What shall I put for a caption?” he asked. “One of a kind?”

“One of a kind?” said Kaya indignantly. “There’s four of us!”

“I’m thinking three,” said Dayton. “This is still too weird for me.”

Whaea Melanie held out her hand for Caesar’s phone and dropped it in her bag. Then she turned to Dayton.

“How do you think the first women’s rugby team felt? Or the first female astronaut? Or the first female prime minister? Or the first anyone? They didn’t stop because *they* felt weird. And besides,” she added, “you only have to feel weird for an hour or so, then we can go home.”

Dayton kicked at the ground. He wasn’t persuaded. Not yet. But Caesar could see that Whaea Melanie was getting somewhere. He decided it was time to help.

“OK, so we’re not all the same,” he said. “Some of us are girls, some of us are boys, some of us are try-hards – but we’re still a team. We’re dressed like a team –”

“We play together as a team,” said Vance. “Yeah,” said Bethany. “And if you don’t step up, Dayton, you’ll be letting us down – the team.”

“She’s right,” Whaea Melanie said. “And you’d better make up your mind. Looks like we’re about to start.”

The opposition had appeared on the court. Girls in green. They had high ponytails and new trainers and bounced on their toes. They looked smart, Caesar thought, and confident. They were used to winning.

“Come on, Saint Pats,” a dad yelled. “All the way!” He looked confident, too, and they hadn’t even started. Dayton was looking at the man. Clearly, he was having the same thoughts as Caesar.

“Well?” said Whaea Melanie.

“Oh, all right,” Dayton said.

They jogged onto the court. Caesar stood in the centre circle and studied the other players. He smiled.

They won the toss.

The whistle blew.



illustrations by Daron Parton

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by Steph Matuku

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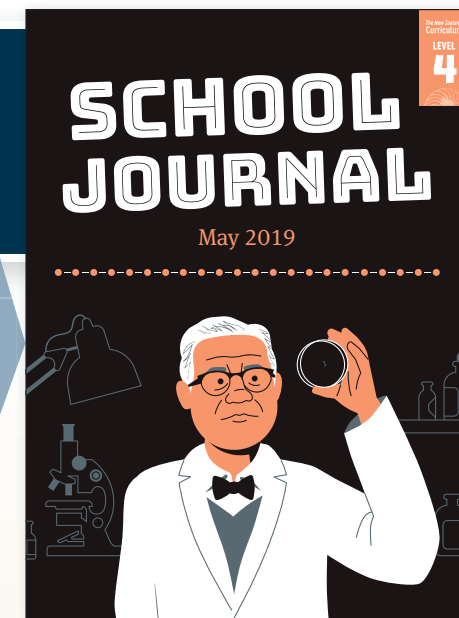
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