



The Queen She Won't Take

Ages 9-12



Chapter 1: The Open Square

Chani's queen is right there.

Across the chessboard, Malky can take it with her knight. She checks the square twice. There isn't a hidden trap. Her older sister leaves a powerful piece in reach.

Malky takes it.

"Oh dear," Chani says.

She doesn't sound very surprised.

Malky is ten. Chani is fourteen. For years, Malky has wanted to be good enough to play without her sister telling her every move.

Today, she wins her third game in a row.

She should feel magnificent.

Instead, she looks at the place where the queen stood.

Chani reaches for the box.

"Another?"

"Why don't you move the queen?"

"I didn't notice."

Malky knows her sister. Chani notices when a pawn moves one square. She notices when Mama moves the sugar bowl.

Something is wrong with all three victories.



Chapter 2: The Conversation in the Hall

On her way to get water, Malky hears Chani talking to Mama.

Mama wears her cream tichel, with all her hair covered. She is checking a shopping list beside the pantry.

"She won again?" Mama asks.

"Yes. I'm keeping it cheerful."

Malky stops where both can see her.

"What does that mean?"

Chani turns.

"Nothing."

"It doesn't sound like nothing."

Mama puts down the list.

Chani looks at the floor.

"I made a few easier moves. So you wouldn't get upset."

Malky grips her glass.

She remembers being upset after losing. She remembers arguing for one more game, then another. She doesn't remember asking for a pretend opponent.

"So I didn't win."



"You did win the games we played."

"The games you let me win."

Nobody corrects that sentence.

Chapter 3: Three Victories in the Box

Malky puts the chessboard away.

Not carefully. The pieces rattle in the box.

"Don't throw them," Mama says.

Malky sets it down.

"Everybody thinks I can't do anything."

"That's a bigger sentence than what happened here," Mama says. "Chani changed her moves. That doesn't tell us everything about you."

"It tells me she thinks I'm a baby."

Chani sits beside the closed box.

"I think you get very upset when you lose. I don't want every game to end in a quarrel."

Malky wants to say she never quarrels. Last week is too close for that to work.

"You could tell me you don't want another game."

"I tried."



Malky looks away.

Malky wants the game to be real. She also wants Chani to forget how much noise she made after last week's loss. Chani is clearly not forgetting.

Chapter 4: The Plan Before the Pieces

The next afternoon, Chani asks whether Malky wants to talk about chess.

"Not play yet," she adds. "Talk."

Malky agrees.

They sit at the kitchen table with Mama nearby.

Malky wants a real game. Chani wants the right to stop after one game without an argument.

"We can agree to both," Mama says.

Chani offers another choice. Sometimes they can play a practice position instead of a full game, with the help named before they begin. Nobody pretends that practice is a competition.

"I'd rather have the full game today," Malky says.

"Then I'll play to win."

Malky's stomach flips. That is what she asked for. It sounds less comfortable when Chani says it.

"All right."



"One game."

"One."

They set up the pieces.

The queens stand in their proper places. Neither promises to stay there.

Chapter 5: The Queen Moves

Malky takes her time.

On her fourth move, she sees a possible attack. She almost asks Chani if it is good. Instead, she checks it herself. They agree no advice during this game.

Chani moves a bishop.

Malky carries out the first part of her plan. It works. She gains a pawn.

Then Chani moves the queen out of danger.

Of course she does.

Malky studies the board. Her knight isn't where it needs to be. She has no next part.

For several moves, the game gets difficult. Malky loses the extra pawn and another beside it.

She feels angry. She also feels something she doesn't expect.

Interested.



This board asks her a question she can't answer merely by waiting for Chani to make an enormous mistake.

She finds a move that protects her rook.

Chani pauses.

Malky likes that pause more than the three victories.

Chapter 6: One Game Ends

Chani wins.

Malky sees the finish two moves before it comes. She wants to knock a piece sideways and start an argument about whether the board shifts.

The board doesn't shift.

She rests her hands in her lap.

"That knight got stuck," she says.

"Yes. Do you want to look at that part later?"

"Later."

Her voice is tight. Chani doesn't demand a cheerful thank-you.

Malky helps put away the pieces. Then she goes to her room and reads until the hot feeling in her face eases.

It doesn't make losing wonderful. It stops the whole kitchen from becoming part of the loss.



When she comes back, Chani is making herself a sandwich.

"I want to see the knight part tomorrow," Malky says.

"Tomorrow afternoon works."

No rematch begins.

The promise of one game survives the result.

Chapter 7: A Victory with a Name

The next day, they put only the pieces from the difficult position on the board.

Chani tells Malky what she is practicing: move the knight without leaving the rook unprotected.

Malky finds two possibilities. One doesn't work. Chani shows her why. The other holds.

"That's a good one," Chani says.

Malky believes her because the mistake gets named too.

A week later, they play another agreed game. Malky loses again, more narrowly. She is disappointed. She still asks about one move afterward.

When their cousin visits, he notices the chess box.

"Still beating Chani?"

Malky considers the old three victories.



"We're playing differently now," she says. "I want to get better at the real game."

Chani brings the board over.

"Practice or a full game?"

Malky looks at the clock. They have twenty minutes before supper.

"Practice. That knight position."

Chani sets it up.

The queen isn't a present this time. She's part of the problem, and Malky is ready to work on it.