



KINGS of the COURT

ALISON HUGHES

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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*For Chris, who painted the basketball
key on the backyard patio, and for everyone
who played backyard basketball at the
Burnham Avenue Court.*

ONE

Game Face

The noise in the gym was so loud, Sameer could feel it rumbling up through his chair and thrumming in his chest. It shook the scorers' table where he was sitting and jittered the pen beside the score sheet. The few adults in the gym had their hands over their ears, shaking their heads in alarm and giving each other pained smiles. Some kids in the crowd were doing the wave, and the non-waving sections were drumming their feet in a deafening frenzy on the bleachers as the seconds ticked down on the halftime break. Even during this pause in the basketball game, the Gladys Spinoza Junior High gym was a riot of cheering chaos.

Sameer smiled and pushed up his glasses. The atmosphere in the gym was exactly how he liked it. He swung his short legs happily, turned to Gracie and yelled, "Great crowd, eh?"

She shrugged. "The usual," she shouted back, smiling and shaking her head.

Sameer jumped as the buzzer sounded, scrambled off his chair and stood to high-five the team members as they ran back from their half-time shooting. Every guy on the team swung by the scorers' table to slap Sameer's hand.

"Great job, guys...Keep it up...Shots, shots, *shots*, Rochon...Nikho, they're playing close on D—burn around them and go to the hoop...You can take that number 3, *easy*...*Boards*, man, *boards*...You are getting *up* there, Nate! Whatcha been eating?...Hey, great support from the bench..." Sameer had a quick word of encouragement for every one of them.

"Sameer!" Gracie tugged at his arm and pointed at the refs, who were at the center circle, looking impatient to start the half. Sameer and Gracie switched places at the table, and Gracie snatched up the pen and smoothed the score sheet. The scoring wasn't anywhere near as much fun as

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the announcing, so he and Gracie had agreed to call one half, score the next. Sameer adjusted the microphone and pulled a paper with cryptic stats on it from his pocket. Then he settled his elbows on the table, put his chin on his fists, closed his eyes and savored the moment.

Gracie had done a great job calling the first half. She had a knack for description, a quick, lively delivery and great give-and-take with the crowd. It was a tough act to follow. Sameer took a deep breath, reminded himself how much he loved basketball and this team, opened his eyes and flicked on the mic.

“We’re *back*, you pounding maniacs!” he thundered. The crowd roared its approval. “You guys are *amazing*! No school has spirit like Gladys Spinoza school spirit! We are most definitely in *GLADIATOR COUNTRY*!” Sameer’s friend Vijay, the Gladiators’ mascot, brandished a silver garbage-can-lid “shield” and dollar-store sword in a menacing and bloodthirsty manner, racing back and forth and baying at the appreciative crowd.

Gracie elbowed Sameer and pointed to the players on the court, her eyebrows raised.

“Whoops,” Sameer said into the mic, “you guys are such a great crowd that I almost forgot I’m supposed to call this thing! Thanks, Gracie. Okay, well, the Bobcats blew that shot, so we haven’t missed any scoring. It’s 42–39 at the half, and the Gladiators are close, so *close*, to their first win of the whole season, after losing—well, after losing a *lot*!”

From the sidelines on his left, Coach Bosetti threw Sameer a dirty look. Coach Boss had his game face on, and it wasn’t pretty. He was packed tightly into a gray Gladiators sweatshirt, and he looked, as usual, red-faced and angry. He paced the sidelines, swinging his clipboard and bellowing at his team.

“Boards! *Boards*! Do you understand? BOARDS! REBOUND! Speak English? You guys are PATHETIC!”

Sameer ignored him. “Bobcats sit at second-to-last place in the league, so Gladiators, this may be our game!”

“Block out! BLOCK. OUT. NATE! WHAT ARE YOU *DOING*?” Coach Boss’s scream ripped through the gym, louder than Sameer with

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the mic. Nate, a sensitive, awkward redhead, glanced nervously over at Coach Boss, then flushed and skittered into the key like a young giraffe, one of his long legs accidentally tripping a player from the other team who was driving in for a layup. The ref blew a short blast on the whistle. Nate had the misfortune of already being six foot five and not entirely in control of his arms and legs.

“Foul on number 12, Nathan Schneider,” Sameer said quietly into the mic. He glanced down at the score sheet and added quickly, “*But* that’s only Big Nate’s second foul, folks, which is really excellent for a big man in a tight game. He’s been putting up monster rebounds this game too.”

“Sub! SUB!” roared Coach Boss.

As Nate came back to the bench, his face white and anxious, Sameer gave him a thumbs-up and a quick, closed-eyes headshake that meant “Shake it off, buddy—don’t let him get you down.”

“Substitution. Number 16, Kenneth Otombo, coming in for Nate. He may be their spark off the bench,” Sameer reported to the crowd. “This is Kenneth’s first appearance this game, so let’s give him a big Gladiator salute!”

The people in the crowd jumped to their feet, raised their fists above their heads and roared, "Charge!"

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about!" Sameer grinned and stood, raising his fists along with the crowd.

Play continued, and the Gladiators' best shooter, Rochon, started to get hot.

"Rochon, the Rockin' Roch-Man, *raining* down threes! Burying them! Shooting the lights out!" Sameer whipped the crowd into a frenzy, "Shooting three for seven from downtown! Better outside shooting percentage than *Kobe Bryant* last night! We'll take it! Oh yes, we'll take that three, thank you very much! Oh, wait, what's this? The Bobcats' coach has just wisely called a time-out. Yes, sir, smart plan." Sameer nodded at the other coach, who ignored him. "He's gotta stop the bleeding! Because these Gladiators, *your* Gladiators, are on *fire*!" The crowd cheered as both teams jogged in to their benches.

"Great job, guys!" he called after flicking off the mic. Blaring music filled the gym, and the cheer team ran in to execute a complicated routine.

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Vijay ran over to Sameer and Gracie. His helmet wobbled perilously as he ran. “Hi, guys,” he said, looking only at Gracie.

“Your helmet’s crooked there, tough guy.” Gracie laughed and turned away to talk to a friend.

Vijay dumped his sword and shield on the ground and pulled off his gladiator helmet. Sameer and Vijay had spent a whole evening making it, covering an old bike helmet in duct tape and tinfoil and glue-gunning a yellow sponge-mop head along the top. Vijay reached behind Sameer and grabbed Sameer’s hoodie to wipe his sweaty face.

“Okay, that’s *disgusting*,” protested Sameer, looking up from studying the score sheet. He snatched his hoodie back.

Vijay grinned, showing gums and a line of big front teeth. “Hot in this thing. Like, *hot* hot.” He gestured down at the peeling silver tunic someone had donated from an old Halloween knight’s costume. He was wearing it over his regular gym clothes.

“Speaking of your gladiator costume, Vijay,” Sameer said, “couldn’t you maybe wear black

shorts and a black shirt? Or red? I mean, team colors are black and red. Those green shorts, that yellow shirt..." He shook his head dismissively. "Unprofessional. Plus, they stink. Just saying."

"Yeah yeah, whatever." Vijay wasn't listening. "So, Sameer," he said, his eyes snaking sideways to look at Gracie, "has she mentioned me? Like, at all? In any way?"

"Oh yeah, Vijay. You're all we've been talking about," said Sameer sarcastically. "It's just been 'Vijay' this and 'Vijay' that! Look, we're in the middle of a basketball game, if you haven't noticed. I'm *working*, okay?"

"I'm working too," said Vijay, leaning in annoyingly close and breathing in Sameer's ear. "Working on loooove."

"Go," said Sameer, batting him away.

Vijay grinned, then jumped as Coach Boss's clipboard hit the wall behind him.

"*Man*, he's throwing things now?" Vijay looked over his shoulder with alarm at the huddled Gladiators and the huge, ranting man. "I mean, not just screaming like usual? Wait, aren't we winning?" Vijay checked the scoreboard, even though Sameer

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was nodding. “Yeah, we’re winning. Rochon was raining them in there.”

Sameer shook his head. “He’s a terrible coach. No clue how to motivate players, how to use their strengths. Just rant and rave, shame and blame. Only ever plays five, maybe six guys, even if they’re dog-tired, like *now*. And look at the talent we have on the bench—” Sameer was interrupted by the whistle ending the time-out.

“Go, Vijay. Shoo.”

Vijay had already turned to Gracie.

“Guess I gotta get back to my fans,” he said, grinning at Gracie and her friend Simone. He put his hand to his ear. “Hear that? The crowd’s calling me. Calling their number one Gladiator. Got to... gladiate.” He picked up his sword and shield, shoved on his helmet, gave a corny salute and ran off to lead the crowd in the GLAD-I-A-TORS cheer. Each of the four sections of the bleachers had a syllable, and Vijay conducted them like a maniac, running up and down, first slowly, then with increasing speed, until it all broke loose into laughter and applause and foot stomping.

“Such a goof,” said Simone.

“Sort of cute though,” said Gracie. “In a way.”

Sameer pushed up his glasses and looked over at Gracie. *Seriously? Vijay?*

“If you like skinny little brown guys,” blurted Sameer, looking down and pretending to study his notes. Where did that come from? he thought. Vijay is my friend...

“*You’re* a little brown guy.” Gracie laughed, swatting Sameer on the shoulder with the back of her hand.

“An even *littler* brown guy,” Simone pointed out. “Not so skinny though...”

“Okay, okay, Simone. You can stop right there.” Sameer’s ears felt hot.

Simone looked at him, her head tilted and her eyes narrowed.

“Hmmm. Maybe Vijay’s not the only one who likes—”

“Oh, look,” Sameer interrupted in desperation, pointing urgently at the court, “here’s a *basketball game* that’s happening in this gym. And here’s a *mic*! Maybe I better call this thing.”

“Yep, back to work. Go, Simone.” Gracie shooed her friend away.

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“Aaand we’re back, Gladiator Nation!” said Sameer into the mic. “Anybody else find that the longest time-out *ever*? Let’s play some ball!”