

STAR
STRIKER

GAME ON!



MARY AMATO

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HOLIDAY HOUSE



NEW YORK

To my beautiful-game teachers—to Lucy Neher who first kicked it off for me (it’s true, Lucy!), to Ivan who kept the ball rolling by stepping up to coach, to Simon and Max and all their friends and teammates over the years, to Howard Kohn, especially for the summer camps that have delighted and employed so many kids and teens, and to Karen Giacomuzzi and Bob Antonisse and all the dedicated coaches out there who teach kids to love both the game and the community with just the right spirit. Goal!

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Printed and bound in July 2021 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Amato, Mary, author.

Title: Game on! / Mary Amato.

Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2021]

Series: Star Striker ; #1 | Audience: Ages 8–12. | Audience: Grades 4–6.

Summary: “Albert, a 7th grader, is abducted by aliens who recruit him to play Star Striker for their interplanetary soccer team, but it isn’t until after he agrees that he discovers that someone or something is trying to kill him”—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021010213 | ISBN 9780823449118 (hardcover)

ISBN 9780823450329 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Human-alien encounters—Fiction.

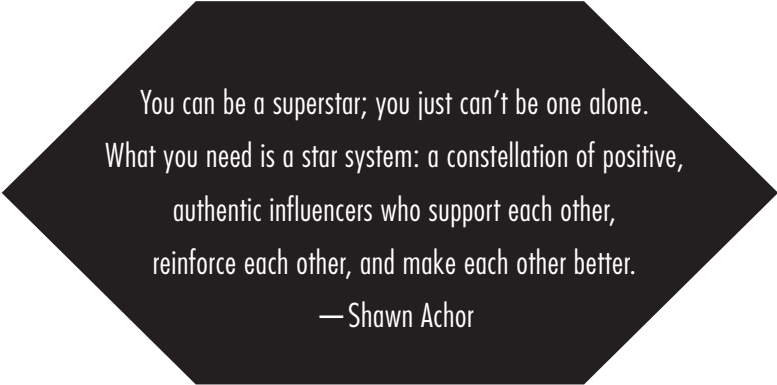
Soccer—Fiction. | Science fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.A49165 Gam 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021010213>

ISBN: 978-0-8234-4911-8 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0-8234-xxxx-x (paperback)



You can be a superstar; you just can't be one alone.
What you need is a star system: a constellation of positive,
authentic influencers who support each other,
reinforce each other, and make each other better.

—Shawn Achor

Albert felt first an icy prickle at the crown of his head and then a ripple of prickles across every inch of his skin, as if an invisible net made of tiny icicles had been dropped over him.

Run, he said to himself, but the ground snapped away from under his feet. His body grew warm, the prickles melting instantly, and then he began to slide upward, as if it were possible to fall up instead of down. He marveled at the sensation for a split second, and then he was yanked up violently. Everything turned black.

1.3

For twenty seconds Albert lost consciousness as he was teleported through the threshold. Silence. And then he blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the light.

He was sitting inside a small...aircraft? Rocket? Whatever it was, it was rumbling. Dim, with a sloped ceiling, the chamber was about seven feet high and maybe twelve feet across, with a control panel in the front that he couldn't comprehend. Above the various levers and buttons and wheels was a rectangle that Albert presumed was a window, although it was pitch-black.

A smell that oddly reminded him of pine trees seemed to emanate from the walls or the air or the floor. And then from the shadows and into the orangish-violet light of the center of the small vehicle, an object emerged at eye level. A yellowish drone, about

the size of a loaf of bread, with four snakelike arms, hovered for a split second and then flew toward Albert.

As adrenaline flooded Albert's body, he tried to move but found that two shoulder belts had been activated to keep him in place. The drone zoomed in, hovering in front of his face, emitting a hum as well as a metallic odor, and then one of the arms reached toward Albert's mouth with a spoon-sized tool, a metallic stick with a coin-sized swatch of fiber on the end of it.

Albert's heart pounded. He tried to turn his head, but the chair's viselike headrest held it in place. In the next moment, one of the drone's other arms leaped forward, suction-cupped Albert's chin, and pulled it down. Before he knew it, the spoon-sized tool was in his mouth.

A strange woolly taste. He gagged, the tool withdrew, and he clenched his jaw tight. The drone turned abruptly, zoomed to a panel on the opposite wall, and slipped the tool into a port.

A screen appeared and a number of incomprehensible words began to scroll.

Albert was barely breathing. He wanted to try bargaining for his life, arguing to whoever or whatever might be present that there must be some mistake, but he had clenched his jaw so tightly after the probe, he was having trouble opening it. A strange image floated into his mind—his mother and sister and grandmother at his funeral. Trey was there, too, trying to look sad. And then Trey turned to Albert's mother and offered to help with the chores around the house, and everyone was amazed by how perfect he was. Albert tried to shake the scene out of his mind, realizing how ridiculous it was for him to be thinking about Trey Patterson at a time like this.

A sound emerged from the control panel, and one phrase blinked into place on a large screen:

Although he was still strapped into the chair, the vise holding his head released. From behind him came a disconcertingly familiar voice.

“Welcome, Albert Kinney. You can call me Jessica.” A figure stepped into the light.

Albert stared. Here was his classmate since fourth grade, Jessica Atwater. She was slightly taller than him, dressed in her usual T-shirt, skirt, leggings, and boots. She was a girl you couldn’t help noticing because of her upbeat energy, a girl who had nothing to do with him, a girl who, this year, was in his Spanish class and friends with both Trey and Raul. Here she was standing in front of him, with one hand on her hip, smiling at him.

And yet she wasn’t Jessica Atwater. She was... a robotic version of Jessica Atwater.

“An apology for your discomfort, Albert.”

Instinctively Albert began looking around—for an exit or a weapon, he wasn’t sure. At the same time, he was kicking himself for having left behind his backpack, which contained his phone, assuming, incorrectly, that it would be of use.

But then the robotic Jessica slapped her hip, and he was startled to watch what happened next. With a ratcheting sound, her knees bent and she lowered into a sitting position of perfect posture—without a chair in sight. “You look pale, Albert. Not a good choice for my appearance?” the thing asked. “Based on my research, this body-form was determined to be one that you’d enjoy.”

Albert flushed, speechless.

The thing continued. “I observe that you are, as they say,

freaked out. Perhaps you desire to see the body-form menu.” She opened her forearm to reveal a panel.

Albert stared at the mechanics. “Are you . . . are you a robot?”

“Yes. I am an intelligent robot with smart-skin body-form technology that can be made to resemble any life-form. Assuming you would prefer human, I have been constructed with one head, two arms, and two legs, so I am limited in appearance. However, I can transform to generic female, male, or gender-neutral. Which would you enjoy?”

The black-eyed stare was intense.

After several seconds of stunned silence from Albert, she said, “No decision is, in fact, a decision, Albert. Remember that. Generic female it is.” She pushed a button on the panel embedded in her arm and then snapped the panel shut. As the orangish light around her seemed to wrinkle, the human clothing, skin, and facial features of Jessica Atwater evaporated, revealing a somewhat old-looking female-form robot of scratched and dented metal.

“In the saving of time, I won’t ask you for a name preference. You may call me Unit B33QX920J63434. Or abbreviate to Unit B, if you must.” The robot abruptly spun around and began tapping a large control panel with slender metal fingers. “Connecting to Zeeno.”

Before Albert could even process what had happened so far, a large video image appeared on the screen. Albert found himself staring at a dozen aliens who were all crowded together, staring back at him. They appeared somewhat human, each with two legs and two arms that looked muscular yet flexible; but, instead of the ranges of skin tones that Albert was accustomed to, the color of the aliens’ skin was a luminous swirl of multiple tones of browns and greens. As for their faces, they had no noses that he could see, but they had recognizable mouths for speaking and breathing

and—Albert noticed with immediate relief—for smiling. Their eyes were slightly larger than human eyes and either forest green or pale violet in color, remarkably clear, glittering with excitement.

“Team Zeeno, please meet Albert Kinney,” Unit B said.

First, the tall one in the center bowed. “I am Kayko Tusq, team tactician,” she said, “and on behalf of the team and planet, I extend our greetings.” The other Zeenods stood and straightened and bowed, not quite in unison, although they had intended to be.

Unsure, Albert froze.

“Bow in return,” the robot whispered, reaching over to release Albert’s shoulder belt.

Shakily, Albert stood and bowed, and then they all resumed sitting. The look on their faces astounded Albert. It wasn’t the shock and fear that he knew was radiating from his own eyes. It was the excitement of seeing a celebrity.

1.4

Although the desire to stay with Albert would be understandable, it’s essential to pause for a moment, peer into a new window, and meet another important player in this drama: a botmaker.

He was a Zeenod nicknamed Mehk, which meant “overtime” in the Zeenod language. In his early twenties by Earth standards, he was painfully thin, not by choice or by genes, but rather because he frequently forgot to eat.

At this moment in time, he was at the creature-fabrication facility where he worked, staring intently through his smartgoggles at the next project on his desk—a new line of robotic ahda-bird pets. But he was only pretending to be interested. Secretly, he was watching the video footage of his squirrelbot’s demise and Albert’s abduction, via an encrypted channel in his goggles. He had rigged them so that when he lowered them down to the tip of his nose, the footage would project onto the interior of the lens, where he could view it while appearing to be working.

After replaying the scene three times, he tapped the side of his goggles to stop. A part of him was relieved that, even though his squirrelbot was mangled, the surveillance camera embedded within it continued to operate. Another part of him hated having to watch the video. With trembling hands, he opened his log and began to type his thoughts, translated here for convenience.

Distressing news. Kinney has been teleported and this phase of my mission was thwarted by a dog! What a failure! You idiot! Why didn’t you—

He paused. Self-loathing. Not helpful. An idea popped into his head. Excited, he resumed typing.

I could create a microbot to detect self-loathing that delivers a small neural shock to disrupt it. This is brilliant! I wonder—

Stop. Do not become distracted!

He hit himself sharply on the side of his head.

Return to the subject.

Yes, you have experienced a setback. But remember, Kinney is an Earthling. Weak. Insecure. Even without the insertion of the negative thought-loop, Kinney will probably say no to the team. If Kinney does accept, you can get him to change his mind before the Opening.

Remember that your masterpiece is in place! Focus.

1. Initiate remote diagnostic and self-repair of squirrelbot.
2. Determine if the microbots housed within the squirrel are operational.
3. Continue with plan to deploy negative thought-loop microbot when Kinney returns.

He paused to think about the dog. Did the canine interfere deliberately? Could the canine sense the szoŭ?

Canines are not intelligent. You underestimated the animal's drive to hunt, that's all. The dog thought the squirrel was real. Ha! And you didn't even program it to have a mammal aroma or to perform bodily functions. Ha!

He paused and touched the ticklike bump on the back of his neck, the positive thought-loop microbot he had devised that sent a code to his mind... not an audible voice, but a silent yet comprehensible thought that repeated over and over:

Believe in your brilliance. You will succeed.