

CROSS UPS



**TOURNAMENT
TROUBLE**

SYLV CHIANG

Art by **CONNIE CHOI**



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© 2018 Sylv Chiang (text)

© 2018 Connie Choi (cover and interior illustrations)

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For my 3 *E*s

—S.C.



CHAPTER 1

I hammer the buttons on my controller.

Fireball.

Miss.

Double fireball.

Miss again.

Holy crap, this guy is fast! I can't land anything.

"C'mon, Kaigo . . ."

"I know you always play Kaigo, Jaden, but the dragon-cross is only cool if his fireballs actually hit the opponent."

"Thanks, Dev. You want to try?"

I'm in my living room with my friends, Devesh and Hugh. Like most of our gaming sessions, this one started out with us playing each other but ended up with them watching me battle random people online. On screen, two guys in karate gear are beating the crap out of each other.

Fortunately, I've never been in a real-life fight. I wouldn't have a chance. But playing my favorite game, *Cross Ups IV*, I haven't lost a battle in four months. Then again, I've never played against `KnIght_Rage` before.

I whiff another fireball combo when `KnIght_Rage` jumps out of range—again.

“Aw, dude, you almost had him,” Hugh says.

“Not even close.” As usual, Devesh is keeping it real. “No offense, J, but you're getting owned. Who is this `KnIght_Rage` guy, anyway?”

“I see him online all the time,” Hugh says.

Devesh turns to Hugh. “Oh yeah? You ever play him?”

“Once . . . kinda. I left the match before it ended.”

“You mean you rage quit.” Devesh punches Hugh in the arm.

“No . . .”

“Would you guys shut up? I'm trying to concentrate here.”

WHAM! The screen flashes a burst of gold and `KnIght_Rage`'s avatar, Blaze, transforms into a phoenix, flapping huge golden wings that send shock waves into me. “How'd he hit me with that Solar Burst? I was blocking!”



“Use your Dragon Breath,” Hugh says.

“I will—as soon as I can move again—stupid hit stun! What the . . .?” I drop my move when Knight_Rage disappears for a second and then reappears, attacking me from behind. “Ugh! I forgot Blaze can teleport. Take that!” I yell as I activate Dragon Breath. Kaigo transforms into a dragon and breathes fire, but my opponent jumps away just in time. “Aaah! I can’t get any moves in.”

I slam the back button to block the shock waves from the next Solar Burst, but for some reason I still take the punishment. “Why isn’t my block working?”

“Look at your Health Meter. You’re going to die from chip damage at this rate.”

“Shut up, Dev.”

“But hey, your Super Meter’s full again,” Hugh says.

“Yeah, go for it,” Devesh says. “But you’d better do some serious damage or it’s over.”

There’s only one move that can get me the win. Kaigo’s biggest Super: Dragon Fire.

I hear car doors slamming outside. If that’s my mom, I’m so dead. I should turn off the game, but I can’t let my streak end like this. Panic makes me go nuts on the controller—a total button mash.

“C’mon . . .”

Miraculously, Kaigo transforms into his dragon side and whirls into a tornado of gray smoke that cuts right through Blaze. Blaze crumples and his Health Meter dives. Now we’re both one hit from defeat.

I glance at the clock—6:22 p.m. I don’t hear any more noise outside. Maybe it was the neighbors’ car? I use my bread-and-butter combo: two crouching light punches back to back, followed by Dragon Claw.

K.O.

“Whaaaaaaat!?!” My friends scream and jump from the couch.

Devesh points to the TV. “The streak continues!”

Hugh throws his hefty form onto the carpet at my feet, bowing and chanting, “You are the master.”

“Am I dreaming?” I let the controller drop to the floor. “No, seriously. Am I asleep? Someone hit me.”

Devesh and Hugh pile on top of me and pummel me with jabs.

“I’ve never seen that Super.” Hugh settles his glasses back in place.

“That’s because I’ve only ever hit it one time. The timing is crazy hard.”

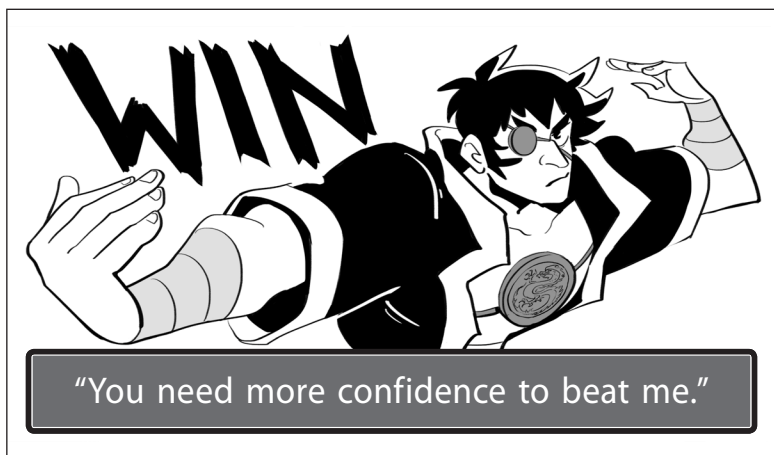
Devesh helps me up off the carpet. “We’ve got to start streaming your battles. That was godlike!” His phone bings and he pulls it out of his pocket. “I gotta go. I was supposed to meet my dad ten minutes ago. He just texted me from the car in all caps.” He grabs his bag and walks backward out of the living room.

“Hold up. I gotta go too, dude. Think your dad will give me a ride?” Hugh grabs his things and runs after Devesh, breathing hard by the time he gets to the end of the hall.

“You live on the other side of town. Why you always asking me for a ride? Train your dad better.”

Their voices trail off until the door slams shut behind them.

I'm still staring in disbelief at the TV. My arm muscles twitch like I'm the one who physically battled. Of course, those muscles are scrawny compared to Kaigo's, rippling through his black kung fu uniform. His win quote at the bottom of the screen reads:



If I looked like that, I'd be confident too.

Just as my thumb descends on the power button, a message pops up on the screen.

Kn1ght_Rage
GG JSTAR

Tuesday, 6:25 pm



Players don't usually message after a fight, unless they're friends. I hesitate but don't want to be rude after the guy complimented me on a good game. I write back:



JStar
THNX

Tuesday, 6:27 pm

Within seconds, another message:

Kn1ght_Rage
CAN U R3P3AT?

Tuesday, 6:27 pm



Can I? I have no idea how I pulled off the Dragon Fire Super. But there's no way I'm going to admit that. I type:



JStar
ANY TIME

Tuesday, 6:28 pm

Kn1ght_Rage
BATTL3 @ T3?

Tuesday, 6:28 pm



My thumbs tap the controller. The Top Tiers Tournament, or T3, is the biggest fighting game tournament in the city. Imagine, competing like Yuudai Sato? That guy is godlike. But there's no way I can compete. With my mom, it's not an option.

I write back:



JStar
NO THNX

Tuesday, 6:30 pm

Kn1ght_Rage

Tuesday, 6:30 pm

Y NOT? W1LL WA1V3 UR F33



My curiosity battles with the ticking clock—6:31 p.m. More car doors slam outside. That has to be Mom. Quickly I type:



JStar
WHO R U?

Tuesday, 6:31 pm

The answer takes forever. When it finally comes, it just raises more questions.

Kn1ght_Rage

Tuesday, 6:32 pm

R3G1ST3R—SAY KN1GHT_RAGE S3NT U



A key turns in the lock and I automatically go into shutdown mode, powering off the TV and game console and sliding the controller under the cushion next to me. Then I flip open my math book and try to act bored, hoping my mom won't notice my shaking hands.

CHAPTER 2

Y NOT?

Kn1ght_Rage's question pulses in my mind as I listen to my mom starting dinner in the kitchen. I need to think, so I head out the front door. The warm spring air puts me in the mood for ice cream.

Someone's sitting on the swing on the other side of the porch. Cali's wearing a navy T-shirt and jeans. Her long, black hair fluttering in the breeze is the only sign that she's a girl. Her family's house is attached to ours, and we share a huge porch. All the other semi-detached houses on our street have a railing to separate the front porch into two sides. But since Cali and I spent so much time running back and forth to each other's houses when we were little, my dad took down the railing so we wouldn't hurt ourselves climbing over it.

Cali's just sitting there, staring straight ahead like there's a movie screen across the street.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Crappy day," she answers.

"Sunshine's?"

She nods, and we head down our shared front steps and up the street to the local ice cream shop. It's been a while since me and Cali hung out. We're almost the same age, but my December birthday puts me a year ahead of her in school. Now that I'm in grade seven, we don't go to the same school anymore.

Along the way, I tell Cali about Kn1ght_Rage and T3.

"So, what are you gonna do?" she asks.

"Not sure. I really want to go. Man, I wish my mom was normal."

"Your mom *is* normal. She's just a bit over-protective."

"Normal? Don't you remember when she turned off *The Fox and the Hound* because the hunter had a gun? I mean, seriously! It's a Disney movie!"

"She was probably just worried we would be scared."

"We were eleven! It's so stupid. She bans anything

violent for no reason. It's not like watching that stuff actually makes kids fight. I haven't changed since I started playing *Cross Ups*, have I?"

"Well, I haven't seen you much lately . . . how do I know you haven't been beating up little kids for ice cream money?"

"Ha, ha. Anyway, I can't exactly use that as an argument. 'Hey Mom, I've been playing fighting games for years now and there haven't been any negative effects on me.'"

"Yeah, that's not going to work because then there *will* be a negative effect on you." Cali laughs.

"Like my mom beating me!" I take a fake swing at my own face and Cali laughs harder.

"You know, my mom always says your mom's a real tough woman," Cali says. "She says it in this mysterious way—like there's a secret she can't tell me. Maybe your mom used to be a street fighter in the old days."

I try to imagine a young version of Mom, throwing jabs in a back alley in Taipei, but in my mind she's still wearing the black pants and white button-down shirt she wears to work at the diner every day.

The jingling bells on the door let Mrs. Sunshine know we've arrived. I don't know her real name,

but that's what we've always called the lady behind the counter. Goosebumps form on our arms when we hit the cold air of the shop. We place our usual orders: strawberry cheesecake for Cali and vanilla for me, and Mrs. Sunshine piles the cones full.

The bells jingle again and my sister, Melanie, comes in with her boyfriend, Roy. She sees Cali at the register paying and her eyes light up. "What's this? You're not even going to pay for Cali's cone? Come on, J, you'll never win her over that way."

"What? So you think I'm going to pay for your cone now?" Roy pulls Melanie to him.

"You always do, babe." Melanie gives him a quick kiss.

My cheeks feel like Kaigo just breathed fire on them. I look over at Cali on the way out of the shop, but there's no reaction on her face.

"Sorry," I say. "You know Melanie."

"No worries." She takes a lick of her ice cream and smiles. "Remember when we were in kindergarten and our moms dressed us up like a bride and groom for Halloween?"

"Yeah. And the next year we were Cinderella and Prince Charming. I only agreed so I could have a sword."

“And you kept poking me with it.” She licks her cone thoughtfully. “Wait, were you already playing those video games back then?”

“No, not in grade one. Hey, so playing video games has actually made me *less* violent.”

Back in front of our houses, Cali points up. The cherry tree in our shared front yard is full of pink blossoms and the light from the setting sun is making it glow like a Photoshopped picture.

“Hey, you never told me why your day was crappy.” I shove the last bit of my cone into my mouth.

“Another time.” She dashes up the steps and into her house before I can push for details.