

CROSS UPS



ANYONE'S GAME

SYLV CHIANG

Art by **CONNIE CHOI**



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© 2018 Sylv Chiang (text)
© 2018 Connie Choi (cover and interior illustrations)

Designed by Kong Njo

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For my mother,
who taught me to stand up for myself,
and
for my fierce daughters.

—S.C.



CHAPTER 1

On screen, my dragon-cross, Kaigo, is locked in battle with Saki, the yeti-cross.

Kaigo breathes fire, but before he can melt the ice off Saki's beard, Saki thrusts a snowstorm my way. The fire extinguishes, and Saki comes in to punish me.

I'm playing my favorite game, *Cross Ups IV*. Kaigo's my main. I play him so much it's like he's a part of me. Not the real me, of course. I'm just a skinny twelve-year-old who's never been in a real fight. Kaigo's the guy I am inside my head.

Kaigo wears kung fu gear and he's totally buff. He's super confident, probably because he can turn into a dragon and blow his opponents' heads off with fireballs.

Most of the time.

Right now, he's being shut down by Saki, who just unleashed a blizzard of punches. The yeti-cross is being played by my friend, Cali. It's the second week of summer holidays and we're playing online.

Cali's gotten good at *Cross Ups* since she moved to live with her dad in Montreal a few months ago. I mean, she was always good, but now she's actually coming close to beating me. I'd better power up.

I go to throw my Dragon Fire Super but she's faster. Her character transforms into a huge yeti and stomps across the screen. Ice flies everywhere. My Health Meter is down to a thin beat of red.

Not cool.

I jump in the air to breathe fire down her neck—a move she never blocks fast enough. But today she does. Before I compute what just happened, a yeti headbutt takes me down.

K.O.

She beat me?

That's not supposed to happen.

Hermione

YES! FINALLY! GTG

Tuesday, 4:08 pm



We've been playing for six hours, but I totally don't want to stop. Not on a loss.



JStar
1 MORE

Tuesday , 4:09 pm

Hermione
CAN'T

Tuesday , 4:09 pm



JStar
Y NOT?

Tuesday , 4:09 pm

Hermione
TRBL TALK SOON

Tuesday , 4:10 pm



JStar
WHAT KIND OF TRBL?

Tuesday , 4:10 pm

She logs off before I hit Send.

It's not like Cali to run off just because she finally got a win. Is her dad mad at her for playing so long? Or is it something more serious?

Sometimes Cali's like the yeti. She freezes me out.

CHAPTER 2

I search to see who else is online and find Chung-Key. He's a top-ranked local player for *Cross Ups*. I just found out he's sponsored by ArcadeStix, the same team that sponsors me. That's pretty cool! I mean, he's not as good as my idol Yuudai Sato, the best *Cross Ups* player in the world, but Chung-Key's still pretty up there.

I type an invitation to play, then hesitate. Maybe he won't even know who I am. I see him online all the time but he's never asked me to play. Maybe he thinks I'm some one-hit wonder. I mean, I've only ever gone to one tournament and here I am on his team. He probably doesn't respect me.

Well, the only way to earn respect from gamers is in the game. I hit Send.

WANNA PLAY?

He pings back right away.

OK

I hear my mom coming in the front door with my sister, Melanie. My instincts kick in and I press the off button on my controller.

Ugh, why'd I do that? Now Chung-Key thinks I wussed out.

"*Er zi.*" My mom always speaks to me in Mandarin and calls me that. It means son. "Why are you sitting in the dark? It's a beautiful day."

We've been getting along better lately, and I think part of it is because I've started to speak Mandarin to her. I agree with her. "I was just going to go out."

Melanie smirks, then asks loudly, "What did you do all day? Sit around playing *Cross Ups*?" She can be such a witch.

I ignore her and put on my shoes.

Melanie's working shifts at a golf camp this summer. Mom loves that she's getting fresh air and showing responsibility. But I remember that in past summers she sat around the house doing nothing too.

"Wait," Mom says, putting down a box from the diner where she works. "I brought pie."

The smell of baked apples and cinnamon makes my mouth water. I realize I haven't eaten anything

since breakfast. I slip off my shoes and make a detour into the kitchen. “*Xie xie*.” I thank her while I push a quarter of the still-warm apple pie onto a plate and turn to go.

“Sit down and eat properly.” Now she’s got me. “And answer your sister’s question. Did you play video games all day?” I’ve only been allowed to play *Cross Ups* for about two months now. I used to have to keep it a big secret. Mom’s super strict about violent stuff. I guess she thought playing violent games would bring out the gangster in me.

Turns out I don’t have any gangster genes. I follow rules (well, most of them) and I’m scared to go out by myself at night. I’m not even close to cool. Mom can stop worrying about gangs recruiting me.

Still, I know she doesn’t want me gaming all day, so I cover. “I talked to Cali.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Fine,” I say between bites.

“How’s the baby? Does she like being a big sister?”

“Um . . . we didn’t exactly get into that.”

“Were you too busy telling Cali how much you *love* her?” Melanie calls from the living room.

Mom ignores her. “Is she getting along with her dad and his girlfriend?”

"Yeah, everything's fine." That's probably true. I mean, she didn't mention any problems. Unless that's what *TRBL* meant.

"And you played lots of *Cross Ups* too, I bet." *Shut up, Melanie.*

I'm not sure this pie was worth the interrogation. To shut it down, I shove the rest of the slice into my mouth in one huge bite—Mom doesn't like me to talk with my mouth full.

I'm getting up from the table when the doorbell rings. It's my friend Hugh. Even though he's almost thirteen, his dad makes him go to day camp. He comes to my place every day after camp ends. Today he's got our buddy Devesh with him.

From the hall, Hugh can see into the kitchen. "Hi, Mrs. Stiles." He turns to me. "Dude, what kind?" He's pointing to the pie on the table. As if the flavor matters to him.

"Later," I say and push them toward the porch. I really don't want Hugh talking to my mom. The last thing I need is for her to find out about camp.

"Hi, Hugh. Hi, Devesh." Mom switches to English but pronounces their names *Hoo* and *Dee-vesh*. "You want pie?"

I shake my head at them and mouth *please*.

They pretend to misunderstand. “Yes, please.” They take off their sneakers and push past me into the kitchen.

Mom plates two slices. “What you boys do all day?”

The less they say, the better, so I answer. “Devesh just sleeps all day.” I’m only partly joking. Since summer holidays started, he’s been sleeping in and showing up here later and later. Today, it’s after four.

Devesh wrinkles his forehead so his monobrow turns into a squiggle. “Not true. I got up at noon. Would’ve been here sooner, but I dropped by STEM Camp to see Hugh’s catapult in action.”

Crap!



“What camp?”

Hugh knows where this is going. Having an over-protective parent is a bond we share. “Oh, it’s really boring, Mrs. Stiles. I wish I never signed up.”

Devesh’s family is different. He’s the youngest, with three older sisters, and he’s mega-spoiled. His parents would never sign him up for anything he didn’t want to do. He doesn’t see the warning signs. It only takes one sentence for him to totally ruin my summer. “At least Mr. E’s teaching it.”

It’s a good thing I don’t actually have Kaigo’s powers, because I’d totally breathe fire on Devesh now.

“The math teacher?” Mom loves Mr. Efram and thinks he’s the best teacher ever because he helped me deal with some bullies last year. I admit he’s kind of cool. But not cool enough to give up my freedom.

Hugh tries to save me. “I think it’s full already.” That’s a lie. He told me there are only six other kids there.

“I will call and see.”

CHAPTER 3

“JStar!” Mr. Efram smiles as I walk into the classroom the next morning. A cool thing about Mr. E is that he’s a gamer. A not-so-cool thing is that he calls me by my gamertag now. “Glad you decided to join us. I guess Hugh’s told you all about STEM Camp.”

STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. Besides Hugh there are a bunch of younger kids. The website says the camp is for ages eight to twelve. I’m pretty sure the other kids are all eight.

“Hey, Mr. Efram,” I say, and slump into the chair next to Hugh. The camp doesn’t run out of Mr. Efram’s usual math classroom. This is the special education room, which has round tables instead of desks and an air conditioner in the window that sounds like a monster truck.

"Today we're going to solve another science problem together. Who remembers the five steps to 'Get AHEAD' with the scientific method?"

OMG, this is almost exactly the way he started every math class. Except instead of the superhero poster with math problem-solving steps, this poster has Einstein thinking about the scientific method. I put my head on the table while a little kid with a Ninja Turtles shirt says, "AHEAD: Ask, Hypothesize, Experiment, Analyze, Decide."

I close my eyes and think about lucky Devesh, at home, asleep.



"How many weeks did your mom sign you up for?" Hugh asks me at lunch.

"The whole month." Fortunately, STEM Camp only goes till the end of July.

"Sorry, dude," Hugh says. "At least I've got someone to hang out with now."

The morning sucked. After working out a boring question about the forces acting on a rocket at the moment of launch, things momentarily looked up when we went outside and launched actual

water-bottle rockets. Ours flew up really high, but came straight back down. On my head.

"It'll be nice not being the only unsporty guy from our grade in the gym this afternoon."

"Gym?"

"Yeah, after lunch we join up with the Sports Leadership Camp."

"Tell me you're joking."



Twenty minutes later we're helping Mr. Efram set up badminton nets. My head's still throbbing.

"Tell me again why we're here," I say to Hugh when Mr. Efram goes into the equipment cupboard.

"Every day Mr. E teaches about the science of a different sport."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Basically, whatever science thing we do in the morning, we apply it to sports in the afternoon. Yesterday we did angles and then used it to improve our basketball shots."

"Did it work?" I ask.

"I get the theory, but my shot still sucks."

"This whole camp sucks."

Mr. Efram comes back with a bucket full of

rackets. Hugh pushes his glasses up his nose and whispers, "Dude, I haven't even told you the worst part yet."

The gym doors open and the Sports Leadership Camp kids spill in, laughing and jumping on each other. I recognize two pretty girls from school: Hailey and Tanaka. Is that what Hugh meant? We're going to embarrass ourselves in front of the popular girls. That's nothing new.

But I see the worst part when the last two boys strut through the door.

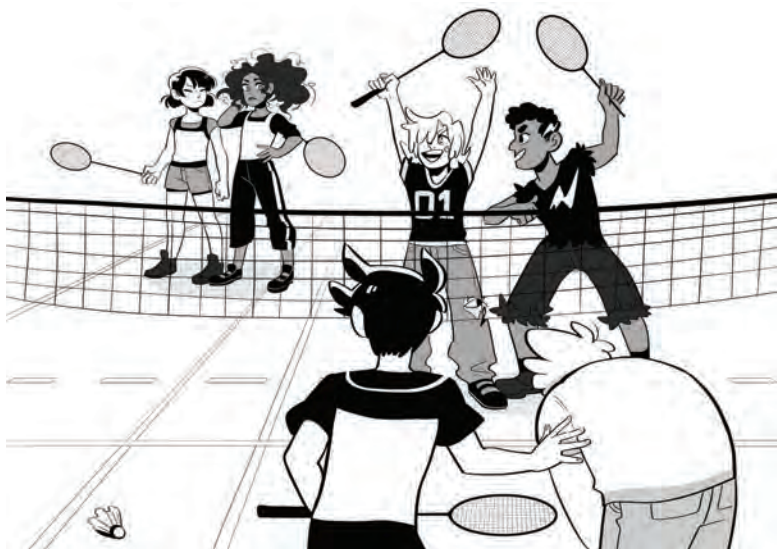
You've got to be kidding me. These guys are in a leadership camp? They're never going to lead anything, except maybe the local motorcycle gang.

"Look, *Huge* got Jaden to join Loser Camp," Ty says.

"Not on my team," Flash says, fast as the lightning streak shaved into his hair.



Ty and Flash—who probably don't understand any of the lesson about force Mr. Efram does with the group—have no problem using all their *force* to smash birdies at Hugh and me all afternoon. It's more like a game of dodgeball than badminton.



And they make sure Hailey and Tanaka notice every hit by laughing like stupid apes. They're practically pounding their chests.

When we get to my place after camp, Devesh is already there. He's sitting on the swing in front of Cali's front door. Her house is attached to mine and we share a front porch. Of course, she's not home—no one is these days.

I remember the day her mom broke her leg and the paramedics carried her down our shared front steps to the ambulance. Mrs. Chen is still at the rehab center. It's not just the broken leg that's the problem. She has this disease called multiple-

something that makes it hard for her to walk. Plus it makes her really tired. Cali had to take care of her a lot last year. Now she's living with her dad until her mom can make it up the stairs and move back home. I know she's worried she might never get to move back here if her mom can't handle it.

Their place has been empty for more than two months, but you can't tell. My mom planted flowers in the Chens' garden, and my dad makes my brother, Josh, cut their grass when he cuts ours. I slump down next to Devesh.

"How long till Cali gets back from Montreal?" Hugh asks, squishing himself between Devesh and me.

"She's supposed to come visit us so she can be closer to her mom," I say, "but I don't know when."

"Probably August," Devesh answers.

"How do *you* know?" Hugh asks.

"I played online with her all afternoon."

Guess she didn't miss me today.

"She's lit," he continues. "The way she plays, I'd never guess she's a girl. I mean, she's even better than that time we played with her in the spring."

I hope she didn't tell Devesh she beat me yesterday.

"Isn't it boring for her to play you?" Hugh says.

"I did okay," Devesh says.

"You beat her?" Hugh asks.

"Once."

"Respect." Hugh gives Devesh a high five.

I interrupt their celebration. "Let me guess—she was playing Cantu?"

"How'd you know?"

"Lately she's been trying new characters. Cantu's the one she's worst at. She was using you to practice."

"I don't mind," Devesh says.

"Yeah, Devesh will do *anything* for Cali." Hugh rolls his eyes.

Devesh shrugs. "So, I think she's pretty."

I never told Hugh and Devesh that Cali kissed me before she left for Montreal. I mean, it was only on the cheek, and it probably didn't mean anything. I don't need these guys bugging me about Cali any more than they already do. It's not like that. She's just a friend.

So why am I mad that Devesh is crushing on her?