

CROSS UPS



RISING STAR

SYLV CHIANG

Art by **CONNIE CHOI**



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© 2019 Sylv Chiang (text)
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Designed by Kong Njo

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For my dad, who would totally drive
me to Comic Con if I asked him to,
and for my husband, who would
do the same for our girls.

—S.C.



CHAPTER 1

“Finally!” From the sidewalk I see a small cardboard box sitting at my front door. I turn to high-five Cali, but she’s already taking off.

I scramble up our steep porch steps behind her and use my house key to tear open the tape on the box. “Yes!” I hold up the advance copy of *Cross Ups V* in victory.

“C’mon, Jaden!” She grabs the key from my hand and opens my door. Even though her own front door is only a few feet away, we want to play together. And anyway, Cali’s ArcadeStix controller is still at my place.

We drop our backpacks, jump out of our shoes, and run to the living room. Lights are all off, so I know I’m home first. I rip the plastic off and open the case. Instruction papers fall to the floor. Who needs those? I grab the disk and slide it in.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. We’re staring at the picture on the cover as we wait for the start-up screen to appear on my TV. It shows all the characters around a giant roman numeral V because this is the fifth version of *Cross Ups*.

“Look at Kaigo!” I say. My main—a big muscly guy—has a new punk hairstyle and more badges on his kung-fu uniform. I wish I looked like him. I’m the scrawniest guy in grade eight. The only thing we kind of had in common was his old, messy hairstyle.

“Who’s that?” Cali points to a girl with a long black ponytail that starts right above her forehead.

“Who cares? Let’s go.” I click through all kinds of pop-up screens, ignoring all the messages, until I can finally select the new Kaigo and start a match. “This is amazing.” My thumbs tap the controller buttons excitedly. Ever since the announcement that *Cross Ups* was releasing a new game, it’s been all I can think about. And the graphics totally live up to the hype. The new Kaigo looks so crisp.

We’re battling in some kind of rainforest. That’s new. And the colors are amazing. It’s like one of those nature programs they show at Best Buy to make the TV look good. Everything looks so high def.

Cali's playing Ylva, the dire wolf-cross. She fits right in with this backdrop. Her cavewoman outfit is different too—shorter and striped.

In *Cross Ups*, the characters fight as people doing crazy hand-to-hand combat. They each have a bunch of Super moves they can use when they transform into the mythical creature they are crossed with. To transform your character, you have to wait for your Super Meter to be full, like mine is now. Kaigo is the dragon-cross, and I go for his Dragon Fire Super. It's his hardest Super, and I want to see what the new graphics look like. But Kaigo doesn't do anything. I'm so excited that I must have messed up.

Cali uses my mistake to grab me and spin me over her head.

The home phone rings. Yes, we still have a landline. My mom is stuck in the last century. She won't even let me have a cellphone.

"You gonna get that?" Cali asks, her onscreen-self pouncing on me as soon as I recover.

"Nah, it's just Devesh or Hugh calling to see if *Five* came. They've been calling every day since I told them about the advance copies." Cali and I are sponsored by ArcadeStix to play *Cross Ups*. Our rep, Kyle, sent us this advance copy of the new version

so we can get our skills upped fast. He told us to keep it on the down-low because the game doesn't actually come out for two more weeks, but of course I told my friends.

"You should get that. Could be Hailey."

"And let you say you won the first match on *Five*? Nu-uh."

"So *Cross Ups Five* is more important than true love?" I know Cali's just going for the win, because she never teases me about Hailey.

"Shut up." I input Dragon Fire Super again, but Kaigo still doesn't transform into his dragon side and spin across the screen like he's supposed to. Okay, that's weird. I never miss that move anymore.

Cali's not having any problem with her Supers. She howls to transform into a canine beast and shoots shimmering moonbeams at me from her eyes. I crumple to the forest floor.

As soon as I'm out of hit-stun I go for my Dragon Tail Super. I burst out of my kung-fu uniform, mutating into my dragon-self and slashing my tail across the screen. Cali goes flying. That's better.

The phone stops ringing and the answering

machine—yes, we seriously still have one of those—picks up. After a few seconds, when the outgoing message must be playing, we hear: “Hi, Jaden. It’s Kyle. Listen, a great opportunity has come up. Give me a call . . .”

I jump off the couch, sending my huge controller thumping to the carpet. My feet get tangled in the cord and I land on my knees. I lunge at the phone, knocking it to the ground. When I finally get it to my ear, I hear my screechy voice through the machine, “Kyle. I’m here.”

Dead air on the other end.

“What do you think that was about?” I ask.

“Dunno. But I just kicked your butt.”

I glance at the screen. A big *K.O.* announces my defeat.

This isn’t the first time Cali’s beaten me. But it still burns. On screen, Ylva celebrates, shaking her hands wildly above her head. Her win quote runs along the bottom:

STAND UP AND DEFEND YOURSELF!

Way to rub it in. I lay on the floor, wrapped in the controller cord, scrolling through the saved numbers on the phone, trying to find Kyle’s.



Cali's phone buzzes on the table. "Hello?" She looks at me and mouths *Kyle*. After a few seconds she says, "Seriously?"

I bug my eyes out at her. "What's he saying?" I whisper.

She waves her hand to shake me off. After a long pause, she says, "Sounds amazing. I'll ask my mom and let you know." She hangs up and grabs her controller to start a match.

"So?" I practically scream.

"Oh, ArcadeStix wants to send me to Comic Con in New York." She tosses her long black hair over her shoulder, all casual.

"For real?"

"Yup. The makers of *Cross Ups* are launching *Five* there and they want me to demo it for the crowds. You know, get young gamers interested."

"Oh . . . But, he called me first."

"Yeah. Too bad you didn't get to the phone." She selects *Ylva* and waits for me to start the match.

"That's totally unfair. I was trying to call him. I've been on the team longer, I should get to—"

"Whoa, chill! I'm just messing with you. We're both invited."

"You serious?"

She nods. “They’ll even pay for our flights.”

“Awesome!” Flying to New York for Comic Con with my best friend? That’s living the dream! I fall backward onto the couch and realize my thumbs are tapping like they always do when I’m stressed out. “That wasn’t funny!”

“But they won’t pay for chaperones. We’d go with Kyle.”

I crash-land back in reality. Fly to another country with a guy we hardly know? There’s no chance in hell my parents will go for that.