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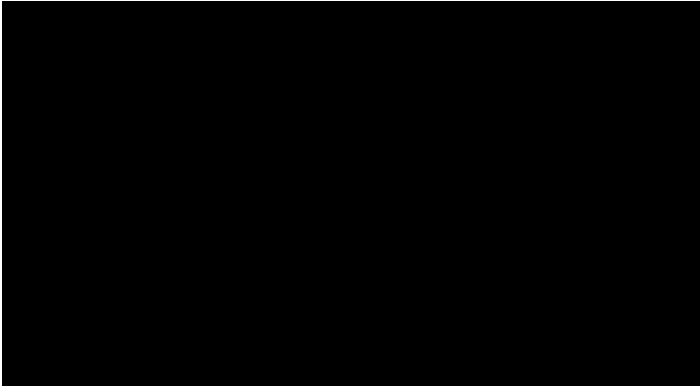
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Canada

For my 3^Es

S.C.



CHAPTER 1

I hammer the buttons on my controller.

Fireball.

Miss.

Double rebound.

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 rebounds actually hit the opponent."

"anks, Dev. You want to try?"

I'm in my living room with my friends, Devesh and Hugh. Like most of our gaming sessions, this

Fortunately, I've never been in a real-life fight. I wouldn't have a chance. But playing my favorite game *Cross Ups*, I haven't lost a battle in four months. Then again, I've never played against *Kn1ght_Rage* before.

I whip another reball combo when *Kn1ght_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 *Kn1ght_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 *Kn1ght_Rage's* avatar, *Blaze*, transforms into a phoenix, sprouting 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 Kn1ght_
Rage disappears for a second and then reappears
backslapping 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

“Whaaaaaaat!?!” My friends scream and jump

eir voices trail o 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 ba led. Of course, those muscles are scrawny com pared to Kaigo's, rippling through his black kung fu uniform. His win quote at the bo om of the screen reads:



If I looked like that, I'd be con dent too.

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

Kn1ght_Rage
GGJSTAR


Tuesday, 6:25 pm



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


 •• JStar Tuesday, 6:27 pm
THNX

Within seconds, another message:

Kn1ght_Rage Tuesday, 6:27 pm •• 
CANU R3P3AT?

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

 •• JStar Tuesday, 6:28 pm
ANYTIME

Kn1ght_Rage Tuesday, 6:28 pm •• 
BATT3@T3?

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

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 blowing 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

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 on 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 stu actually makes kids ght. I haven't changed since I started playing Gross Ups have I?"

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

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

"Yeah, that's not going to work because then therewill be a negative e ect 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 ghter in the old days."

I try to imagine a young version of Mom,-throw

“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.