

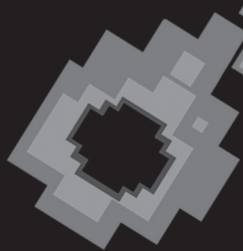


QUEST

LIVE STREAM

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CHAPTER 1

The blades of swords locked, sending sparks flying. Tai pushed back against Maxi, waiting for an opening. But Maxi wasn't letting his guard down—he blocked Tai's every attack.



“Spinning attack!” shouted Tai. They spun their frost sword around quickly like a tornado.

“Too slow!” said Maxi, dodging Tai’s sword. He smirked as Tai spun past him and into some nearby bushes. Tai jumped back out, swaying with dizziness, but steadied themselves and ran back toward Maxi.

To Tai, this battle felt like life or death . . . But this was Otherworld, Tai’s favorite video game in the Game Quest universe. Tai’s hit points dropped with every slash from Maxi.

“You can do it, Tai!” Kat cheered from the sidelines, where her avatar waved along with Alex’s. But Kat’s encouragement was drowned out by the cheering of Maxi’s fans.

Maxi was using Otherworld’s new streaming feature, and his chat window kept chiming with messages from his fans from across the world.

Maximus is gonna win!

Go, Maxi!

Each ping seemed louder than the last.

PING!

Tai's eyes darted across to the chat window. They spotted a comment that read *This Tai kid's got no chance! They're not as good as Maxi!*

Tai felt their heart sink.

THWACK! With Tai distracted, Maxi lunged and went for the final blow. Tai's hit points reached zero. They staggered back and fell onto the ground. "Oof!" The giant GAME OVER text appeared on-screen.

When Tai respawned, Maxi stuck out his hand. "You remember the bet, right? I get that frost sword of yours."

Tai looked down at the sword. "R-right." Tai slowly handed over their beloved frost sword.

Maxi snatched the sword and held it above his head, its blade sparkling in the light. "Nice, I'll add this to my collection!"

Tai's eyebrows furrowed. Collection? This was

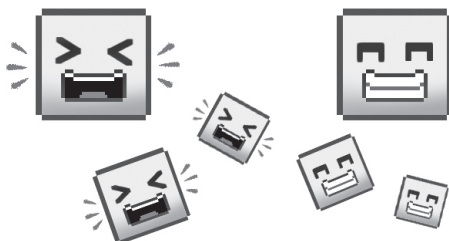
Tai's *only* sword. They had made it themselves thanks to a starstone, the rarest item in the game. Tai had only agreed to hand it over because they were so sure they would win. But now Tai had no idea when they could ever get their hands on anything like it again.

Kat and Alex walked over. "Good job, both of you! Maxi, you were amazing!" said Kat.

"Yeah, I've never seen someone fight like that before. Your skill is on another level," Alex added.

"I always love to entertain my fans!" Maxi said, striking a pose. "Even if that means kicking a friend's butt in the process." He laughed.

Maxi's chat filled with laughing emojis.



Tai's face turned red. Maxi and his chat, which was basically the whole world, were laughing at them. Tai's dream of battling their idol had turned into a nightmare!



Back in the real world, Tai sat with their laptop on the table, staring at the screen in disbelief.

Down the table from Tai, Maxi was still streaming. He wiped his brow and grinned. "Well, that was over quickly!" he said, addressing his stream's audience.

“All right, chat, I’m going to take a ten-minute break to grab a drink. This heat wave is making me so thirsty!”

Maxi closed his laptop and stood up. “Well, Tai, thanks for helping me entertain my audience for a minute or so. Your fighting moves were . . . unique!” Maxi laughed and walked out of the room.

Tai frowned, unsure whether *unique* was a compliment or not.

Kat and Alex sat beside Tai. “Wow, Tai, it’s so cool that you got to face off against MAXIMUS!” said Kat.

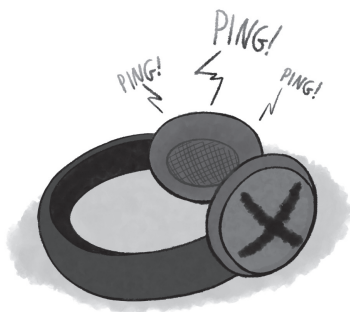
Across from them, Maxi’s cousin Margot had been watching the stream on her phone.

“I’m surprised Maxi agreed to your challenge. He doesn’t usually let anybody else share his stream with him!” Margot sighed. “Believe me, I’ve asked.”

“You have the coolest cousin in the world, Margot,”

said Kat. “Like, he might just be the *best* Otherworld fighter ever. Maybe even in the whole Game Quest universe!”

Tai took a drink of their soda, eyes narrowed. Maxi had left his headphones on the desk. The volume was so loud that you could hear the chat message sound pinging repeatedly.



“Yeah, I wish he was my cousin,” sighed Alex. “I would never be afraid of fighting zombies with him by my side!”

“Right?” agreed Kat. “Maxi *never* loses!”

With every chat message ping and every compliment

of Maxi, Tai was growing more and more annoyed. Tai groaned and snapped, “Now I get why I lost. It’s because everybody else was distracting me!”

Kat and Alex looked at Tai in shock.

Tai cringed. “Oops, I didn’t mean to say that aloud.”

Alex frowned. “What, are you blaming us?”

Margot looked around awkwardly then suddenly announced, “I’m going to go check on my hamster!” and dashed out of the room.

“Well, it’s just your shouting and all those chat messages were so loud, I couldn’t focus!” Tai said with crossed arms.

Kat pouted. “But we were cheering you on!”

“Yeah, should we have been cheering Maxi instead?” asked Alex. “Besides, I think you would have had more of a chance if you weren’t yelling your moves out before you attacked.”

Tai stammered, “No—it’s just—it wasn’t a fair match because I couldn’t concentrate!”

“Wow,” said Maxi, who had stepped back into the room with drinks and a snack. “Sounds like somebody”—he smirked at Tai—“is a sore loser.”

Kat and Alex couldn’t help but giggle.

Tai scowled at them. They took off their headphones and threw them on the table, knocking soda onto their laptop.

“Oh no!” gasped Tai.

The liquid began to fizz. Sparks were flying out of Tai’s laptop.



“What did you do?!” asked Kat.

“This doesn’t look good,” Alex said, backing away.

Maxi shifted forward in his chair. “Huh, never seen a laptop do that before!”

The soda fizzed louder and louder, and the sparks grew larger and more intense.

There was a loud final **POP** from the laptop . . .

And everything went white.