

THE HALLOWEEN SANCTUM

If anyone had asked Kai what his favorite holiday was, Halloween probably wouldn't have numbered in even his top five. He enjoyed Christmas for its colors and smells and general feelings of good will and friendliness, even if some of it felt forced. Thanksgiving, if mostly forgotten in an era where shopping was deemed more important than family, at least had plenty of good food, and Kai was guilty of taking part in at least two Black Fridays. His third favorite had to be April Fool's Day, because even if it wasn't technically a holiday, it was still a great excuse to prank people (and by *people*, he meant Lindsay). Halloween's novelty, however, had worn off when he was a child. It seemed like most people his age were moving from trick-or-treating to partying, which wasn't how he preferred to spend his time. Without the costumes and nighttime excursions, Halloween just wasn't exciting anymore.

That was before he had discovered the Sanctum, of course.

One blustery October afternoon, Kai left his home and stepped into a sleek black car that was parked near the curb just

outside. As he put his seatbelt on, he noticed Lindsay and Kwin already inside. Lindsay was already trembling slightly from either fear or anticipation, and Kwin looked paler than usual, but they both greeted him with smiles.

"I'm guessing one of you already told Fred there's no need to hurry, right?" Kai asked, vainly hoping that this trip might somehow be different than all the others.

"I did tell him, and Lindsay practically begged him, but the man's ears... let's just say they operate very *selectively*," Kwin replied icily. "Are you well?"

"For now," Kai said, making doubly sure that his seat belt was fastened tight. *Whatever that will do for me*, he thought.

The car lurched away from the curb as the driver, Frederick, pressed down on the gas pedal as hard as he could. Kai sometimes wondered if the man knew that there was a vast realm of possibilities between "stop" and "go," but had never thought to ask him due to his genuine concern that he might throw up if he were to open his mouth.

They arrived an alarmingly short amount of time later given the distance, and as soon as Frederick stopped the car in front of the sweeping white marble stairs leading up to the double wooden doors of Alastor's mansion, Kai, Lindsay, and Kwin got out as quickly as they could, as though afraid Frederick might change his mind and decide to drive some more.

"I lived. I lived again, somehow," Lindsay panted as Kwin rubbed her back.

"Hey kids! Long time no see!" came a voice from the top of the stairs. Kai looked up to see Alastor jogging down to greet them.

"You couldn't have told Fred it'd be okay if we didn't see you within ten minutes of picking us up, could you?" Kai asked, glowering in the driver's direction.

“If I thought it would have done any good, I would have,” Alastor said.

“Aren’t you his boss?” Lindsay whimpered.

“Sure, but I’d like to think of what I’m doing as an act of charity. If he wasn’t driving for me, he’d be driving for someone else! I’m saving them, really,” Alastor laughed. “Anyway, if you can stand, I’ve got food waiting for us inside.”

“What toppings this time?” Kwin asked mildly.

“It’s not *always* pizza with me,” Alastor retorted. “Cheese and pepperoni, though.”

They spent the next several hours catching up, swimming in Alastor’s enormous indoor pool, and eventually taking a break to eat dinner. Kai, Lindsay, and Kwin had put their things in their respective guest rooms, and while everything was calm, an air of excitement filled the house. Kai always enjoyed the time he spent with his friends in the real world, but what he was looking forward to the most was when it came time for them all to go to sleep. That’s when the fun really began.

As Lindsay and Alastor took their places in front of one of his large TVs to play some games, Kwin sat next to Kai on the sofa to watch. This was their usual arrangement, and it gave Kai and Kwin time to talk while the others were distracted.

“I haven’t been in for a few nights. Has the event started?” Kai asked.

“Yes. I resisted the temptation to remain inside to watch the sun set so I could go in at the same time as all of you. What exactly will happen this year, though, is anyone’s guess,” Kwin answered.

“As long as they don’t run with a nightmare theme. Literally anything else would be great.”

“I doubt the world would be so callous as to give us all a reminder of *that* particular trauma. At least, not so soon after it

occurred. No, I feel like we'll be revisiting some more traditional stories and themes this year. How is Lindsay feeling about this?"

"She really looking forward to it, actually," Kai said. Lindsay had been the only one of their group to have been taken by the Nightmares when they invaded the Sanctum, something that had caused her a great deal of anxiety even after they were defeated. "If anything, she's been more impatient than me."

"Good. I've been concerned, but I haven't wanted to broach the subject myself. I wasn't sure that was my place."

"She'd tell you anything, you know that. You've been helping her deal with all that stuff from the Nightmares more than I have."

"Yes, but that assistance is more specialized. It comes without the years of close friendship you both have. All the same, I'm glad to hear it." Kwin paused for a moment to take a sip from her glass, then continued, "What about you? Is there anything in particular you're hoping for?"

"I don't know. Anything has to be better than our options in the real world," Kai replied thoughtfully.

"Is there anything within the horror or thriller genre that frightens you? Anything that might be particularly effective if you were to live it?"

"Well, I suppose I wouldn't want to be chased down and murdered," Kai chuckled. "I always thought it was kind of scary when you had the villain that just wouldn't die. Because what do you do then, you know?"

"I understand. An unstoppable force with no immovable object; just several college kids who make questionable decisions," Kwin agreed.

"Would you do better?" Kai asked with a grin.

"Almost certainly. The ones that can't die are the most fun

to toy with. Being unable to die doesn't mean they're unable to escape any situation; they're still limited to what their body can do, and the human body can do very little when, say, its feet are stuck in cement and dropped into the ocean."

Kai snorted. He didn't encounter many people who would speak so bluntly, and it was still particularly amusing coming from the mouth of a ten-year-old girl—even if that girl was a nationally renowned prodigy who could intimidate most adults with a look.

"What about you? Is there anything that scares you? Besides the dark, I mean."

"Darkness is a perfectly valid thing to fear," Kwin grumbled. "Beyond that, I don't actually know. Nothing I've read or watched so far has scared me, but I expect if I were to live certain experiences they would be frightening."

"Like what?"

"Like getting chased down and murdered."

"Fair."

The four friends stayed awake until nearly midnight, when Lindsay finally announced that she was probably tired enough to fall asleep within the hour. The others, who had been yawning and nodding off for the past two hours already, gratefully took this chance to head immediately to bed.

"We're meeting up at the Coliseum field, right?" Lindsay asked as they walked down the hall toward their bedrooms.

"Correct. I'll likely be there first, so I'll stand near the entrance until all of us arrive," Kwin explained. "Are we all ready?"

The other three nodded excitedly.

"Wonderful. In that case... see you soon," Kwin said, the slightest hint of a smile on her lips.

Kai didn't wait. He immediately turned and continued

walking until he opened a door a few rooms away. It wasn't particularly spacious, but Kai didn't need anything other than the bed.

As he lay down, he hoped his excitement wouldn't prevent him from falling asleep too quickly. He hadn't yet been in the Sanctum long enough that he didn't sometimes still get a little too enthusiastic about falling asleep.

Only a few minutes later, however, he found himself standing in the middle of a brightly lit city bustling with activity. He smiled. This was what they were here for.

Kai had first discovered the Sanctum several months ago when he opened a golden door that had mysteriously appeared in one of his lucid dreams. Once he stepped through it, he was thrown into this world, a massive dream that people from around the world could enter whenever they fell asleep. During his first visit he had been met by none other than Kwin, who had offered to show him around. Kai hadn't believed her at first, but once he received a clue in the real world that he had experienced more than just a strange dream, he spent several nights trying as hard as he could to get back in. Shortly thereafter he had helped Lindsay get in, and they had met Alastor, a mutual friend of Kwin's, and the rest was history.

It was usually daytime in the Sanctum whenever Kai arrived, but now it was dark, the first sign of the weekend to come. There were some events like this, the Festival of Lights being another, where the sun set and did not return for days. It had taken some getting used to, especially when the last time the Sanctum skies had gone dark, Kai and the others had been involved in a fierce fight against the Nightmares. Ironically, he thought, this time was likely to be less frightening than before.

Kai took a moment to look around before heading out to the Coliseum, and immediately felt glad he did. Golden Capital,

the Sanctum's largest and grandest city, had been decorated from top to bottom. Strings of orange lights hung from nearly every building, jack-o-lanterns were lit on every corner, and groups of bats periodically flew swiftly overhead. Kai took a moment to investigate a large spiderweb between two buildings nearby, only to find out that it was a very real web being built by a very real spider. He smiled, thinking he'd have to show Lindsay later. Patches of hay were visible between buildings, on window sills and roofs, and several scarecrows dotted the streets. As a group of girls walked past one, it sprang to life and leapt at them, causing them all to scream and one of them to wake up; she disappeared instantly as she awoke to the real world, and her friends laughed. Finally, Kai noticed a light fog hovering at ground level all over the city, swirling around his ankles as he walked.

Finally, deciding he'd seen enough, he kicked off from the ground, taking to the sky and turning toward the direction of the Coliseum. Being able to fly was still one of the more exciting parts of being in a dream. And as much as he wanted to see what else the world had in store for them, he didn't want to be the last one to arrive; Kwin very much valued punctuality.

With the Golden Capital behind him, Kai saw forests and fields and small towns ahead of him. The fog was here as well, and more than once he had to suddenly change course to avoid more bats. His eyes widened as he noticed that a large area of trees at least a mile in diameter was completely covered in spider webs. He flew a little higher just in case.

The rest of the journey was swift, and before he knew it, he was touching down on the grass fields of the Sanctum's Coliseum. The Coliseum was identical to the one found in Rome, but noticeably larger; Kwin had once told Kai that, rather than the design for the Sanctum's building being taken from the

outside world, it was in fact the other way around, and that many famous architects had “borrowed” the ideas for their designs from the Sanctum.

The whole building was brightly lit both inside and out, and decorated much like the buildings in Golden Capital. Kai saw small crowds of people walking in and out of the massive structure, and he wondered if there was anything going on inside that was worth their attention. Then he spotted Kwin and Alastor nearby and jogged over to meet them, grateful he had at least managed to beat Lindsay.

Kwin had switched to the form she usually took during battles; her blonde hair had turned black, her blue eyes now deep red, and a pair of bat-like wings emerged from her back. Her normal attire had been replaced with tattered robes, and she held a scythe in one hand that had a handle as long as she was tall. She might have painted a frightening picture, as she usually did, if not for the slightly oversized witch’s hat on her head that looked very much out of place. Alastor, for his part, was dressed in his typical earth-colored kimono-styled garments, changing as much of his physical appearance as he always did.

“Don’t say anything about the hat,” Kwin said as Kai walked up, already sounding tired. “Where were you flying from?”

“Golden,” Kai answered, and though he desperately wanted to ask, he thought it wise to heed the girl’s warning. “I think Lindsay was in Aqua. Oh, you’re looking good by the way, Elvia.”

Alastor turned to his left to look approvingly at the girl standing next to him. She was slightly shorter than Alastor and offset his cheerful demeanor with an expression that was mildly interested at most; she either wore this expression, or more commonly one of irritation, generally in response to

Alastor's antics. Her garments were also a stark contrast to Alastor's, with rich reds and golds mixing together in patterns that sparkled in the light of small fires and candles nearby. Part of her otherwise black hair was dyed red and purple, and tonight it was cut short so that it fell just above her shoulders.

This was Elvia, and she didn't exist. Because everyone was inside a dream, this meant that all sorts of things were possible within the Sanctum that weren't possible on Earth, such as flying, changing one's physical appearance, or even using almost magical abilities. The only limits outside of the Sanctum's few rules were the imagination, and Alastor had proven himself quite adept at making use of his own. Alastor was a frequent participant in the Tournament of Blades, the ultimate exercise in control and imaginative abilities, and one of Alastor's techniques early on had been to create a fictional character who would fight for him, and at worst, team up with him. The control it took to manage not just his own body but also a second was incredible, but Alastor had proven himself to be an incredible individual. As the Tournament of Blades' reigning world champion for several consecutive years, he and Elvia created a deadly and incredibly talented pair.

The most unique thing about Elvia was her complexity. Most fictional creations were one dimensional and existed only when their creator could dedicate all available mind power to them, as they were often created for very specific tasks, and even small breaks in concentration could cause the entire creation to disappear. Elvia, however, was always there, sometimes holding separate conversations of her own when Alastor was otherwise preoccupied, and sometimes even traveling the world on her own. This had led to some speculation and rumor that Elvia was a real person, and Kai honestly wasn't sure he could deny them all.

“Thank you. I am comforted by the fact that someone else is the subject of Alastor’s fashion experiments,” Elvia answered in a quiet, smooth voice.

“It’s only been a few minutes and I’m all the more in awe of what must be your unlimited patience,” Kwin said dryly, pushing the witch’s hat out of her eyes for the second time already. Kai chuckled. He should have known something like that wouldn’t have been Kwin’s idea.

“I was *going* to experiment on her, but then she gave me this look that made me feel like she was going to kill me, and I can’t imagine why,” Alastor said thoughtfully.

“If only such a thing were possible,” Elvia said under her breath.

“Yes, well, if Kwin hadn’t already tried I’m sure you would have,” Alastor replied, patting Elvia on the head. “Now then, how long should we give our little insomniac before we go on without her?”

“We wait until *everyone* is here,” Kwin said flatly. “If she gets too scared she’ll wake us all up and we’ll lose our place, and I’m not losing because of your inability to stop tormenting the poor girl for an entire night.”

“Our place?” Kai inquired.

“Ah, yes. Since I was the first one here, I decided to look around and see if I could figure out what the weekend’s activities were going to be,” Kwin explained. “It seems as though we’re to play a game that will take us across the entire world, and we’ll need to collect a stamp of some sort in every location we visit. The first to get all the badges and return to the Coliseum wins... well, bragging rights, I suppose.”

“We just need to travel? Wouldn’t that mean the fastest traveler wins?”

“Nah. There’s going to be a different task in each area, so

even if you get there first, that's no guarantee you'll finish first," Alastor chimed in.

"I wasn't able to figure out what each individual task will be. I assume we'll learn more about that when the event begins," Kwin continued. "That said, the obstacles we'll face aren't limited to just those specific areas."

"What else is there?" Kai asked.

Just then, Kai heard screams from the edge of the forest some distance away. He turned quickly to see several people running away from the trees. Some of them were running with their arms outstretched toward the people in front of them, a comical sight despite whatever had frightened them. A second later, however, Kai realized the ones running with their arms raised before them were not other dreamers—they were zombies, dozens of them.

"As I was going to say, we'll probably run into creatures here and there that will attack us," Kwin said calmly, hardly paying the approaching zombies any mind. "They can't hurt us, but we will wake up if we're attacked, so we should be cautious."

"Wha—! Can we get rid of them or do we have to run?" Kai asked in alarm.

"We can kill them if necessary. That would probably be fun for some dreamers, but I doubt there's any creature in the world that would provide me any entertainment," Kwin sighed.

"We should help the others at least, don't you think?" Kai said, eyeing the zombies nervously. Several of them were gaining on the hapless dreamers in front of them, and two victims had already disappeared, returning however briefly to the real world.

Now that he could see them clearly, he nearly took a step back; whoever had created them had paid plenty of attention to detail. Their skin hung loosely on their wiry frames, bones

were exposed here and there on their limbs, and their faces were contorted in expressions of agony and rage. Unlike the slow and silent zombies of TV, these zombies were practically sprinting, and they emitted loud shrieks and wails that quickly caught the attention of everyone on the grounds.

“Oh, I suppose. I’m not a fan of cleaning up anyone else’s mess, but it’s better than standing here,” Kwin agreed.

She lifted her scythe, and then disappeared in a cloud of black smoke. Kai barely had time to turn his attention back to the zombies before he saw several bright bursts of deep red light. Kwin swung her scythe viciously at the zombies, appearing in one place only long enough time to let her blade slice cleanly through the neck of every zombie in the area before vanishing again. Her blade glowed an ominous red and billowing dark clouds followed in its wake, and Kai had to appreciate the fact that if he didn’t already know her, he might have thought her far more frightening than the zombies.

It was over in only a few seconds, and before the last zombie’s twitching body had even hit the ground, Kwin reappeared next to Kai and the others in another cloud of black smoke that slowly faded away.

“I’ll admit that was more fun than I anticipated,” Kwin said simply, sounding like she had just gotten off a rather mild amusement park ride rather than decapitating dozens of the reanimated dead.

Now that the zombies had been taken care of, their bodies were slowly fading too, until the only sign that they had ever been was the frightened expressions of everyone else nearby. There was a brief silence, and then everyone nearby began to clap and whistle in approval—and, Kai suspected, relief.

Kwin, as usual, ignored them all completely, and was just about to speak again when someone else ran up to them.

“There you are! Sorry I’m late. Are you guys okay? I just heard someone mention there were zombies here!”

“Hey Lindsay!” Alastor welcomed her. “Don’t worry, they’re mistaken. A few people saw Kwin and thought she was dead, that’s all. She’s so pale! I’ve been telling her she really ought to get more sun.”

Kai laughed as Kwin smacked his arm without looking at him.

“Don’t be mean. And that’s vampires, anyway,” Lindsay scolded him before turning her attention back to Kwin. “Oh, I love your hat!”

Elvia greeted Lindsay with a hug, which luckily kept Lindsay from seeing the cross look on Kwin’s face.

With the whole group now together, Kwin led the way toward the Coliseum entrance. A long line of tables had been set up in one of the halls just inside; several stacks of paper rested on each, and roughly two dozen people wearing identical uniforms stood behind the tables, handing papers and maps from the stacks to everyone standing in line. At the sight of Alastor, Elvia, and Kwin, some people in line seemed more than willing to give up their spots to let them pass. A few even looked at Kai and Lindsay with expressions of awe and admiration, something Kai was still getting used to. Still, they reached one of the tables in less than a minute, and the woman behind it wasted no time handing them each a map.

The other paper she handed them was a long checklist of items that looked like names of events or rides in an amusement park, like “Tower of Terror” or “Survive the Dead Zone.” Some of them made it pretty obvious what they would be expected to do in each place, but others were more mysterious. Kai felt a thrill of excitement as he looked up and down the list. He had never been in the Sanctum for an event like this, and he

was already looking forward to it more than anything he had ever done in the real world.

“Do you understand everything, dearies? Know what you need to do and all?” the woman asked them kindly.

“Do we come back here to turn these in when we’re finished?” Alastor asked, holding up the sheet of paper with the list and nearly dropping it in the process.

“Yes! First ones back get a gift basket with some very rare and delicious items,” the woman answered encouragingly. “The event starts in a few hours so more people get a fair shot. Some poor souls have insomnia! Can you imagine trying to do an event like this when it takes you an hour or two to fall asleep?”

“Oh, I have insomnia! That’s why I always deprive myself of sleep so I know I’ll fall asleep fast when I need to come in here!” Lindsay exclaimed, sounding just a little too happy about this.

“I... see,” the woman replied, her smile faltering for only a split second. “Now, I see you’re in a group, so I think it’s only fair I let you know that only some of the activities can be completed together, so as to be fair to our solo adventurers. You can all claim the reward if you’re all the first ones back, but only if all of you have completed everything. Does that make sense?”

The others nodded in unison, and Kai realized he was feeling apprehensive. He had never felt this way about anything Halloween related in the real world. Sure, scary movies were sometimes pretty scary, but there hadn’t been anything that got him itching to start. A worldwide competition inside a lucid dream with a history of spectacular events, however, seemed like the right way to start.

“Excellent. You can stick around here if you’d like, but you can be anywhere when the event starts, and you can do the

events in any order. Good luck out there! Oh, and feel free to take some candy before you go.”

Kwin looked grateful to be getting out of the long line, where by now most of the people in it were staring at her and Alastor with excitement. She pulled the brim of her large witch’s hat slightly lower over her eyes, and Kai had to fight to suppress a laugh.

On their way out, Kai, Lindsay, and Alastor took a small handful of candy out of an enormous pumpkin bowl before heading for a spot near the Coliseum wall that kept them mostly out of the way of the crowds. Kai unwrapped one of the candies, a chocolate and peanut butter treat molded in the shape of a skull, and took a bite. His eyes widened in surprise as the rich, smooth flavor filled his mouth. He hadn’t been sure what to expect, uncertain if he could taste any food inside a dream, but he reasoned that since just about every other sense worked too, this wasn’t completely unexpected.

Lindsay seemed to be having the same revelation, and she hopped excitedly, holding the wrapper of the candy she just ate far out in front of her as though she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

“This is amazing! Elvia, here, you need to try one of these,” she exclaimed. Elvia looked like she wanted to object, but Lindsay pushed a candy into her hand without waiting for a response. Then Lindsay turned to Kwin, and her expression turned to one of surprise. “You didn’t take any candy? Don’t tell me you don’t like it!”

“I’m just not interested yet. Besides, do you really think the best treat on a night like this is to be found inside a communal pumpkin sitting in a doorway of a stadium?” Kwin remarked.

Lindsay paused, looked down at her candy again, and then after a moment of serious contemplation, continued eating.

“Whatever. I have room for plenty.”

The next two hours passed quickly as Kai and the others admired the imaginative costumes of other dreamers, played games, and fended off the occasional zombie attack. Elvia, who had looked all but entirely uninterested before, leapt to their defense as soon as she noticed Lindsay’s terror, and cut down dozens of zombies with ease. Elvia was typically very reserved and serious, but her one single exception was Lindsay, and the two had developed a strong friendship that puzzled even Alastor. Kai had even tried his hand at fighting a few times, though he was slightly nervous at doing anything in front of such a large crowd, which now numbered in the thousands. Further, the idea of taking part in any battle on the Coliseum field still made him uncomfortable; it had only been a few months since they had fought the Nightmares in this very same spot in a desperate last-ditch effort to save the world, and almost lost Kwin in the process.

When she wasn’t busy fighting to protect Lindsay—and showing off a little to bystanders in the process—Elvia made quick trips inside the Coliseum to check the time. As the time grew nearer and nearer, Kai found himself glancing at his list more and more, trying to decide where they should start. Maybe it would be more efficient to get all of the difficult items out of the way first, or perhaps to start as far away as possible where there were less likely to be any lines.

Kai was so focused on his list that he didn’t notice Kwin make her way over to him, and only looked up when she placed her hand over the paper in his hands.

“Don’t worry. No matter where we go, we’ll be the best,” Kwin said matter-of-factly. “Don’t think on it too hard; you’ll miss the fun.”

“Aren’t you the competitive one?” Kai asked with a small smile.

“I am, but I’m also better than everyone else. There isn’t much for me to worry about,” Kwin answered simply.

“Showoff.”

“I was born with this brain; I might as well put it to good use. Speaking of, there’s only five minutes to start. I suppose we should at least pick which place we’ll be going to first. As soon as this event starts, there will be thousands of people trying to get everywhere at once, and it will be chaos.”

Kai shuddered. He wasn’t opposed to crowds, but being in the middle of that many people frantically trying to push their way ahead of everyone else did not sound appealing to him whatsoever.

“Do you think we can wait somewhere less crowded or fly above everyone else or something?”

“If you’d like. I was thinking we could simply wait for most of the crowd to dissipate before going on our way. That’s much less stressful,” Kwin suggested.

“But don’t we want to hurry just in case we—?”

“Kai,” Kwin interrupted patiently, “we will be fine. We’ve got all weekend. Rest assured I’ll be giving this my all; I’m at a significant disadvantage compared to a few months ago.”

“Huh? How?”

“If I were still in my coma, I’d never have to leave for the real world. I could spend all weekend here and get it done without a break. Not that I wish to return to that state by any means, but it did have its advantages.”

“You’re very calm about all that,” Kai chuckled.

“I had eleven months to think about it and absolve myself of any emotional attachment. Besides, I’d like to think a sense of humor helps with my recovery.”

“Uh huh. Where do you think we should start, anyway?”

“I thought we might start easy by going to one of the mazes. Something classic like that is a good way to ease us into the competition. There are several throughout the world, but the one we need to visit isn’t far from Anathor and Portal, so I suspect most people will be leaving that alone for now,” Kwin said.

“That seems pretty tame for you, but I guess that would be pretty nice. If it’s not too scary then maybe it’ll help Lindsay feel more confident, too.” Kai looked back down at the list. There were fifty items on it, which meant that they would have to do at least seventeen events per night if they wanted to finish all of them by the end of the event. The first and last nights were bound to be shorter due to starting and ending at a specific hour, so their best hope was to do the bulk of the events on the first and second nights. Beyond that, however, he hadn’t managed to plot anything out further than five or six events, and with only a few minutes to go, he felt a little nervous. “What do you think we should do after that?”

“If you’re worried about time wasted on planning, it may comfort you to know that I’ve memorized all list items and locations and come up with six optimal routes. If you really want to do such a thing, that is,” Kwin said knowingly.

“You memor... all of them? Already?” Kai replied, stunned.

Kwin responded with one of her vampiric smiles that Kai knew so well by now.

“Really, it’s a wonder you’re still surprised. The point I’m trying to make is that you should try to relax. We’re going to play this by ear, not some algorithm.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Kai said, shaking his head as through clearing his head of a daydream.

Kwin peered up at him, then opened her mouth to speak,

but just then, a booming voice echoed from nearby, causing several people to jump in surprise. Kai craned his neck to see if he could find whoever was speaking, but the voice seemed to come from every direction.

“Dreamers! May I have your attention please! Welcome, one and all, to this year’s Halloween event. We’re sixty seconds to start, so I just want to say a few quick words. Please remember that all the Sanctum’s normal rules apply, so no, you cannot set your opponents on fire to gain an advantage. Second, you’ll note the addition of horrifying creatures around the world! They are not friendly and they will absolutely try to kill you, so be cautious. Finally, if you need help, you can ask for help in any town. Some towns are haunted, but you can’t win them all, I suppose. Now! Are we ready to begin!”

A thunderous roar came from the thousands of dreamers on the field, and a few more creative dreamers set off a flurry of colorful fireworks just as another cloud of bats flew overhead. The crowd was getting antsy now, and Kai could feel the tension in the air. Where before people had been talking and laughing amongst themselves, there was now near total silence everyone waited for the sign to begin.

“Excellent! Now, let’s get ready to... hold on, I’ve started a bit early, bear with me... and... there we are. THREE! TWO! ONE! GO!”

At these words, a great mass of dreamers lifted off from the ground or began to run in every direction, and Kai was all the more glad for their position near the wall that kept them safe. He could practically feel the ground shaking with their footsteps, and shuddered at the thought of being in the midst of everyone pushing and shoving. Lindsay had pressed her back against the wall, looking more afraid of the crowds than she had of the zombies.

Within a few minutes, there were only several dozen people left on the field. Some of them were groups of older people who seemed content with taking their time, and the others looked shocked into speechlessness and quite frazzled.

“All right kiddos, now it’s our turn,” Alastor announced, rubbing his hands together happily. “Have you got any ideas where to start? Because there’s this haunted underground mine they’ve got set up near Golden, it’s supposed to be the scariest—”

“Kwin suggested a maze,” Kai said hurriedly. He didn’t feel like starting out with the most terrifying event in the entire world, and he was absolutely certain he didn’t want to subject Lindsay to it either.

“Oh yeah? Do tell,” Alastor said, sounding only slightly disappointed.

“It’s a hay maze near Anathor and Portal. I thought it might be a good way for us to ease ourselves into the event, and I assume most of the crowds won’t be itching to go there first.”

“A hay maze, huh? That’ll do! I don’t suppose any of you have a petrifying phobia of getting lost, do you? Lindsay?”

“Don’t single me out!” Lindsay protested hotly.

“Sounds like a yes to me. Sounds good! Can’t wait to get my first star sticker of the night on my list here. You think they’ll make Elvy go through by herself? Oh, can I cheat with her? That’d be kind of unfair.”

“You would hold her back and we both know it,” Lindsay teased.

“That’s absolutely true. What say we get going? While the night is young and all that!”

“Can we make him promise not to talk the entire way there?” Lindsay pleaded, glancing at Kwin.

“If I thought it would do any good,” Kwin replied dryly, and Elvia let out a sharp laugh.

With nothing else left to do on the field, the five friends kicked off from the ground and flew swiftly in the direction of Anathor.

EVENT 1: HAY MAZE

Kai could see the maze from a mile away as they approached. It looked very much like most other hay mazes he had seen in the real world, except the walls of this maze were nearly fifty feet tall. From above he could see that different areas of the maze seemed to have particular themes; the northeast corner was covered in spider webs, and the walls to the west of the maze entrance had tombstones on top of them. Kai sincerely hoped that these were just decorations and that they didn't offer some hint as to what lay within.

It was also larger than any maze he'd ever seen, and he could tell already that simply getting through the entire thing, never mind all the other dangers he might find inside, would be a challenge.

There were only about a dozen people waiting outside the entrance when they arrived. It looked dark inside, though the walls were lit with strings of orange lights and dark gothic-style sconces. Every so often a bright flash emitted from inside, followed by the sound of horrified screams and inhuman roars

and shrieking sounds. A few of the people waiting to go in looked like they were seriously doubting their decision to enter.

The attendant at the entrance did a quick head count as Kai and his friends arrived, then clapped his hands to get everyone's attention.

"Great, we've got a big enough group now. Here's the deal: It's a maze, so your goal is to find your way through it and get out the other side alive, all right?" the attendant said monotonously. "You can go by yourself or in pairs, but no more. The maze will know when you're cheating and the walls *will* eat you and spit you out back at the front if you try to party up. Most of the maze will just scare you, but a few things in there may try to kill you, so just be careful. And don't forget to look up. Once you reach the end, the attendant there will stamp your event sheet. Any questions?"

A young boy near the front timidly raised his hand.

"Sorry, did you say kill—?"

"Okay good, let's get started then. Everyone gather round!" the attendant continued.

"If this is what we're doing to do just to warm up to the event, I think this might be too much for me," Lindsay said nervously as they approached. In response, Kwin immediately stepped closer and put a hand on her upper arm.

"We'll go together," Kwin said simply.

Kai smiled. Ever since the incident with the Nightmares, Kwin had been spending more time with Lindsay and had taken on a role that Kai could only describe as protective older sister, despite the fact that Kwin was seven years younger than Lindsay. Lindsay was powerful and skilled in her own right, and had been the one to defeat the enormous sea monster they had encountered when traveling over the edge of the world, but

being taken by the Nightmares had caused her fear and anxiety she still felt today.

Elvia tapped Kai lightly on the shoulder, looking genuinely remorseful.

“I mean no offense, because I would very much like to partner with you for this maze, but I’m afraid that if I leave my creator unattended for even a few moments he’ll find a way to get himself killed.”

“Oh, that’s all right. I think I’ll be fine on my own,” Kai replied encouragingly, though he felt a shadow of doubt himself as he saw the inside of the maze from close up. This was definitely not going to be anything like anything he’d done in the real world.

“Maybe I’ll be fine on my own, too! You don’t know!” Alastor protested to Elvia, who was completely ignoring him.

“Okay folks, in you go. Good luck and have fun,” the attendant said in the same monotonous tone, just as a loud rolling *boom* that sounded like thunder came from inside.

Kwin started forward immediately and Lindsay rushed to stay by her side. Within moments, they had disappeared into the maze. A few of the strangers near the front went next, followed by Alastor and Elvia. Almost immediately the two almost split up from each other when Alastor went his own way, leaving Elvia scrambling to catch up with him.

Determined not to be last, Kai headed straight inside.

Kai was swallowed by the darkness. It was as though he had stepped into another world; he felt like he was standing in the middle of a forest where the trees grew thick and where the shadows in the distance could be anything from dangerous creatures to bushes or branches. He walked forward purposefully, thinking that he might run into someone else considering he had been only a few seconds behind the others, but even

with several long passages in front of him, he saw and heard no one else.

Kai tried to remember what he had seen of the maze from above. It hadn't looked too complex at a glance; from what he remembered, it didn't seem like he would find himself running into dead ends or getting completely turned around too often. The true problem was its size. While he might not end up walking in circles, if he wasn't careful, he might end up walking most of the entire maze before finally making his way out—and Kai knew from past experience that getting tired inside a dream was absolutely possible.

As he made a turn down another fog-filled passage, he felt a thrill of fear run down his spine. He remembered the tombstones and spider webs and wondered if perhaps getting lost was not what anyone in the maze really had to worry about.

Kai quickly created the sword with which he was so familiar by now, a blade that pulsed orange like it was made of a star and all its fire. As a figment of his imagination, the blade took concentration to keep in one piece, but it had served him well against the Nightmares and other foes, and he had become very fond of it.

It didn't take long for him to run into his first opponent. Halfway down a dimly lit passage, he heard a horrifying scream from behind him. He whirled around to see the dark silhouette of a tall humanoid creature standing far behind him, partially obscured by the fog. As soon as Kai made eye contact, the creature began to sprint toward him with the same loping gait he had seen from the zombies at the Coliseum. Kai stumbled backward, and then, remembering he had his sword in hand, held it up in front of him. The light didn't seem to deter the zombie, and it screamed again.

Half the zombie's face was missing, tattered skin hanging

around it as though it had all been scraped away. Kai had never known zombies to express emotions, but this one seemed almost enraged, and Kai wondered if he was trespassing in its domain. He steadied himself and held his sword more firmly, ready to drive it through the zombie's chest as soon as it got close enough.

Then, just as the zombie reached the intersection between the path they were on and the one perpendicular to it, a *huge* dark shape flashed by with a loud roar. Kai barely got a chance to see it before it disappeared again, but he could tell it was at least fifteen feet tall. It leapt over the path Kai stood on for only a moment, taking the zombie with it. Kai heard the zombie give a screech of protest that was suddenly cut off, replaced by the sounds of tearing flesh.

Kai stood still in shock for a moment, then decided it was absolutely not in his best interests to stick around to find out what could possibly prey on zombies.

After another ten minutes in the maze without incident, Kai was starting to feel nervous. While he hadn't encountered any more enemies, and was mostly sure he hadn't been walking in circles, he still hadn't encountered a single other person who had gone into the maze with them. The maze was large, but not *that* large—unless, of course, it was a different size on the inside, which he realized belatedly was entirely possible. The entire design could be completely different from what he had seen from outside, which was a remarkable anti-cheating mechanism, but suddenly left him feeling very worried. The only thing he took comfort from was the fact that Kwin had picked this event first and had called it easy, and considering she had been in the Sanctum for five years already, he was inclined to trust her experience.

Just when he thought the maze might be playing mind

games with him, he heard voices nearby. He paused to listen, then ran toward a nearby intersection of paths. When he turned the corner, he felt a swell of relief as he saw two of the other dreamers, two boys who had been waiting to enter with them. They turned to him as he approached, looking just as happy to see him.

“Hey! You hang out with Kwin, don’t you?” one of the boys said almost enviously.

“Yeah. Have you seen anyone else?” Kai replied.

The boys shook their heads.

“This place is nuts. I haven’t seen anyone! Just zombies and snakes and even a scarecrow that came to life and tried to cut us with knives. Who makes stuff like this?!” the other boy growled.

“We just barely got away. I don’t know how we’re going to make it through the rest of the maze. Oh! What if you joined us?” the first boy suggested excitedly. “You must be pretty good, right?”

“You’ve already got two,” Kai said.

“Well yeah, but who’s going to know? The guy from the front isn’t here, and we can split up once we find the entrance and walk out separately!”

“Yeah, he’s right! And look at that sword, too. We’d get out without any problems if you came with us,” the other said.

Kai opened his mouth to reply, to say something along the lines of how he didn’t think cheating in the Sanctum was a good idea, when the entire wall to his right began to move. Kai’s eyes widened and he stepped back in shock as the wall undulated and rippled as though made of liquid. The boys shouted in alarm and tried to run, but then several thick vines shot out from within the wall. The vines grabbed them around the ankles and tugged them back, kicking and screaming,

before pulling them both inside the wall. Their voices cut off as they disappeared, leaving not even an echo behind.

Kai raised his sword and tensed, certain that the vines would come for him next. The last few vines seemed to look at him, and Kai swore there was a warning in whatever stare a plant could give, but then they pulled back inside the wall, and all was still and silent.

He uttered a curse under his breath, thankful that he hadn't given in to temptation. He wondered if the reason he hadn't seen anyone else in the maze was because others had decided to cheat, too. He knew his friends would be fine, even if he had slightly less faith in Alastor. If anything, they were already done and waiting on him.

With this thought in mind, he took a breath, steeled himself, and pressed on.

Right, left, right, left, left, right. He kept a steady pace, holding his sword slightly above eye level to let its blade provide extra light. He wasn't sure how much time had passed; it seemed like an hour had gone by already. He didn't think he had gone down any of the same paths twice, so he knew he had covered plenty of ground, but the maze hadn't seemed *that* big from above.

And then he heard the growl. It was low and guttural, so deep that the very ground seemed to shake. If that didn't, its footsteps certainly did. And whatever was making the sound was coming closer.

Kai looked quickly back and forth, looking for an escape or somewhere to hide. He was only a few feet from several intersecting passages, and he ducked behind a wall just as he saw a huge shape pass into the path he had only just been in.

It looked almost like a boar, but more terrifying than Kai had ever thought of one before. Its fur was brown and black,

and furls of dark smoke followed in the wake of each footstep that shook the hay walls of the maze. Its most prominent feature, apart from its glowing red eyes, were its two long tusks that were longer than Kai was tall. The beast was almost too large to fit between the walls, but Kai imagined the Creators had probably thought of that. There was probably no running from this creature.

Kai let his sword vanish, afraid its light might attract the boar. He watched it carefully as it plodded slowly along, its nose drifting from side to side. He could hear it snuffling. *Is it trying to smell me out...?*

Then, without warning, the boar turned completely around and charged directly toward where Kai was standing. The ground trembled at its footsteps, and it let out a squealing roar, its eyes glowing bright. Kai leapt back in alarm, recreating his sword in an instant in case he had to fight... but the boar charged past the intersection of paths and out of sight.

Kai waited a few moments to verify the boar was actually gone, and then fell to his knees, letting out a long, slow breath.

Too close.

After another moment of hesitation, Kai stepped out into the path the boar had been on and jogged down it in the opposite direction. The farther away he was from it, the better.

He went down several more paths with no issue at all, and he started to feel that, apart from a few wayward zombies and a monstrous boar, there wasn't actually much to be afraid of in the maze. It certainly fit the mood, and was better designed than any maze Kai had ever been in before, but he realized he was hoping for a little more danger. Just... not death.

Soon he came to three intersecting paths including the one he was coming from. He looked left and right, trying to decide what might be a better option. One of the paths looked like

the others, simple and safe enough, but it would take him almost back the way he had come. The other path was dark; all the candles had been extinguished, and Kai swore he could feel a chilly breeze coming from within. Kai knew from past experience that the world occasionally had a flair for the dramatic, and that there was absolutely something scary down there, which meant it was also probably the way he needed to go.

Before Kai could think on it too much, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked down the lighter path where he had seen it just in time to see the boar charging directly at him.

Kai yelled in alarm and turned right down the darker path. He knew if he turned back the way he had come, the boar would easily run him down. At least here the boar would have to take a tight turn.

He heard the creature hot on his heels, and one of its tusks sliced through several feet of a hay wall like it was a knife through a sheet of paper. Kai sprinted as fast as he could, taking a left, then a right. All the while the paths grew darker, and Kai's sword burned brighter as he tried to see what was ahead of him.

Then Kai noticed something. The boar's footsteps had stopped.

He turned quickly and looked behind him. The boar stood not twenty feet away, glaring at Kai with its fiery eyes. Kai took an instinctive step back, but the boar didn't follow. The creature snorted, gave one last look at him, then turned around and left.

Kai waited until it had disappeared completely around a corner, then turned back to continue on. He wasn't sure why the creature had stopped chasing him, but he wasn't going to

argue. Maybe he was close to the end and it wasn't able to follow him that far.

The paths grew darker and darker still. Dead leaves littered the path, crunching beneath his feet as he walked. He kept his sword held high, looking and listening carefully for anything that might try to sneak up on him. Luckily, everything he had encountered so far had been loud or large, making it easy to see or hear them coming. But as he walked on and on, he encountered nothing still.

Soon he came to another fork, and when he squinted, trying to see down each path, he noticed the walls looked a little different. They were still definitely hay, but looked a little paler than the ones he'd seen before. He reached out his hand to touch the wall nearest him... and felt the unmistakable stickiness of webs.

Kai whirled around. The walls in every direction were completely covered with webs. He saw tiny spiders skittering here and there, ones he hadn't noticed before due to his focus on the path before him. As a wave of horror washed over him, he remembered what the attendant had said before letting them all in.

And don't forget to look up.

Kai gulped as he looked slowly up toward the sky, and he realized quickly why this part of the maze was so dark. Thick webs almost completely obscured the sky from view, and he shivered as he saw dark shapes—some of them *very* large—moving among them.

And then, as though they had been waiting for Kai to notice them, they started to descend slowly toward him.

“NOPE.”

Kai began to sprint, taking paths at random just to keep up his momentum. He heard skittering and shrieking behind him,

the sound of far too many legs rushing over dead leaves. He saw movement on the wall next to him, and to his horror, saw a hairy spider as large as his head rushing to keep up with him. He slashed at it with his sword and heard a muffled *thump* as it fell to the ground behind him. He heard angry shrieks in response, and ran even faster.

More than once, a massive dark shape descended right in front of him, and he had to duck to avoid it. He felt a few of the spiders' legs brush against his hair or shoulder. He waved his sword aimlessly behind him, trying to frighten them off, but he could tell based on what he heard behind him that not only were they coming on faster, but in greater numbers.

He felt another leg brush against his own leg, another at his waist. And then he felt the unmistakable sensation of webbing. It pulled at his back, then his left arm. He tugged free, but then felt another at his ankle. He looked down to make sure he wasn't stepping in any webs, and in the process saw that the spiders were *spitting* their webbing at him. His desperation grew into a panic as he realized he was slowing down.

Kai twisted and turned, desperately trying to escape the webs, but he knew he was caught. He tried one more time to cut at the spiders with his sword, but his arm was already too restrained to do much good.

Even as the spiders crawled toward him and surrounded him, he couldn't help but think that this might be the first time in his life he'd ever been afraid of spiders. Then again, he'd never encountered a mob of spiders the size of small horses trying to hunt him down and kill him. This probably explained why the boar hadn't chased him. It had known what lay claim to this part of the maze. Maybe Kai ought to have taken the hint. This was turning out to be a terrible dream.

Oh, right. A dream.

Kai's world instantly turned white and orange as a wall of fire instantly engulfed the entire path and everything in it. The fire didn't harm him, but he heard the spiders screech in rage and pain, and watched as their burning bodies twitched and kicked. The webs burned away, and after only a few moments, the fire disappeared. The path was somewhat brighter now; the webs above had been burned away, letting in a hint of starlight. Apart from a few large and charred spider corpses, there was no sign of the nightmare that had been.

"I should have thought of that earlier," Kai muttered to himself, and then pressed on quickly in case any spiders he had missed decided to get some revenge.

He turned the next corner, and to his utter surprise, found himself walking out of the maze. He was greeted with a light smattering of polite applause by people who were clearly waiting for their friends to exit and were slightly disappointed.

"Kai! Over here," came a familiar voice.

Kai looked up to see Kwin waving at him. She was standing with Lindsay nearby, and while he couldn't see Elvia or Alastor anywhere, something about Kwin's patient expression told him he had in fact been the last to exit the maze. As he got closer, he realized that while Kwin looked completely unfazed, Lindsay was visibly trembling.

"Everything okay?" he asked concernedly.

"Just fine. We made it through easily and ended up the first ones out. We only ran into a few small problems," Kwin said.

"Problems?" Kai asked suspiciously.

"*Centipedes*," Lindsay whimpered. "They were so big. One of them picked me up and tried to wrap its body around me. I can still feel its legs..."

"It was only for a moment. I kept her perfectly safe," Kwin

said defensively, though she moved slightly closer to Lindsay all the same. “Did you encounter anything interesting in there?”

“Spiders. Zombies. A giant murderous boar,” Kai exhaled. “Not exactly what I was expecting. How did you get out so fast, anyway?”

“I memorized the layout of the maze as we were flying over it,” Kwin said simply, as though this was something everyone could do. “Alastor went off to get some snacks and Elvia went with him to make sure he doesn’t take too long. He already knows where we’re heading next, so we can get moving without him. Shall we?”

“Wait, what’s next? Nothing like this, I hope?” Kai said hurriedly.

“Not like this. Not for a while, anyway,” Kwin explained. “I appreciate that some of us might need a break after this maze; it was admittedly more intense than I expected. We’ll be doing some very simple things for now. Are you ready to fly?” Kwin asked in a gentler tone as she looked up at Lindsay.

“If it’s away from here? I’m so ready,” Lindsay agreed.

EVENT 8: MURDER MYSTERY SHIP

Two hours later, Kai and the other touched down on the beach just north of the Golden Capital. Kai was familiar with the area; they had met a man named Carpenter here not long ago, and he and his sentient tools had built them the ship they needed to sail over the edge of the world. Beyond the small hut in which Carpenter kept his tools to prevent them from escaping, there was little else on the beach that was worth paying attention to. At least, that was usually the case.

Even from a distance Kai could see the massive ship that now floated just offshore, connected to a large dock and boarding platform that hadn't existed before. It looked like a luxury liner, save for the fact that it was decrepit and rusted and glowing an ominous green from within.

"There's our ride!" Alastor said excitedly.

"So is this a haunted ship or a murder mystery game?" Kai asked, confused.

"Both. I suppose the Creators saw no reason the genres

couldn't overlap," Kwin said. "It looks like it's filling up quickly, so we should hurry."

The five friends hurried into line, and soon found themselves boarding the ship. The halls were narrow, and lights flickered overhead. The crowd was quiet as they walked along, and Kai could feel the tension in the air. Beyond knowing the ship was supposedly haunted and that there was a murder mystery *something* going on, he had no idea what to expect.

He stole a quick glance over at Lindsay; she looked nervous, as most of the people around them did, but no longer showed signs of any residual fear from the maze. Kwin had led them to a small town near Sky Capital where they had gone bobbing for apples, a completely normal event except for the fact that there were squid at the bottom of each barrel that reached up and touched their faces when attempting to grab their apples. Then there had been a strength contest where they swung a hammer against a lever as hard as they could to send the puck high up the tower. They had all done decently well, and had almost gotten out without incident until Kwin finished with the lowest score, at which point she had set the entire tower on fire.

Still, after a few mild events like that, Lindsay was looking noticeably better. As Kai looked around the ship, he hoped it would stay that way.

"GOOD EEEEEVENING," a voice rasped from just ahead of them. Kai jumped, and several people screamed. A ghostly man dressed in the outfit of a ship's crewman stood before them. The ghost tipped his hat, briefly showing his exposed brain before replacing it. Kai shivered. "I'll be your guide this evening. If you would please split into groups of ten apiece, we can get on with the show."

Kai and his friends immediately took each other's hands, and were soon joined by a burly man Kai recognized from

months before as Walt, an adventurous dreamer with a lumberjack aesthetic and mustache to match. After that came two girls who looked like twins, an elderly man who was dressed like a circus ringmaster, and a tall, twitchy young man who wouldn't make eye contact with anyone.

"That will do, I suppose. I know the halls are small. Follow me, if you please!" the ghost announced.

The small crowd followed warily as the ghost led the way, whistling a merry tune as he went.

"I hope all the ghosts are nice in this one," Lindsay whispered.

"I don't see why not. There's no reason a haunting has to be a bad thing," Kwin commented.

As they walked down the long hall, every so often a door would open, and a ghost would invite one group of ten inside. They seemed friendly enough, and Kai was starting to wonder if they were going to play a role in the scary events of the night at all or if they were just staff. Soon the hall only had thirty people left, and when the next door opened, the ghost of a middle-aged man opened the door and beckoned to them.

"In here, please! Let's get you all set up," he said in a friendly tone.

Kai and the others walked into what looked like a small ballroom. Dozens of small chairs lined the room, cream-colored panels made the ceiling from which a massive chandelier hung, and the carpet was a soothing maroon flecked with gold. A raised platform on one side of the room was clearly the spot where bands played, and a large black piano, weathered and dulled with age, sat upon it. Beyond that, the room was mostly empty, leaving plenty of room to stand, and perhaps in a different situation, dance. Kai noticed Kwin's eyes flicking this way and that as they walked, taking in every detail of the

room as quickly as she could. He wondered what she was thinking.

“Now then! We’ll get going with the show in a few minutes, but may I suggest you take a seat?” the ghost called from the front of the room. “We’re about to get moving and I don’t want anyone to fall and get hurt.”

“I’m shaking in my shoes already. I’m not sure how much more courtesy and politeness I can take,” Alastor said dramatically as they headed for some chairs near the door. Rather than stick together, most of the group sat with the people they were familiar with—or, as was the case with the old man dressed like a ringmaster and the twitchy teenager, they sat alone.

“It’s a good thing to see you lot again! Glad I’ve been grouped with you,” Walt greeted them cheerfully as he pulled up a seat next to Kai. “Not sure what this is about, but if I’m with you, we’ll win for sure. Doing all right, Alastor?”

“Wonderful! And yourself?”

“Couldn’t be better. I don’t suppose you’ve seen the headless horseman? I was told if we find him and bring back his head, there will be untold rewards!” Walt exclaimed in a hushed voice.

“I haven’t, but I’m already intrigued,” Alastor said enthusiastically. “Is he roaming the world tonight, then? Or do you think he’s—?”

“Alastor, you have prior obligations,” Kwin interrupted icily.

“But... headless horseman! Untold rewards!” Alastor protested.

“There’s a reason the rewards are *untold*. Let’s focus on winning this contest and we’ll get a prize that actually exists.” Kwin’s tone warmed slightly as she turned to Walt. “We’ll gladly assist you whenever we’re in a group together, but I’m afraid we’ve got a schedule of our own this weekend.”

“Not a problem! I hope I provide you some competition!” Walt said, thumping his fist to his chest.

“How many events have you finished, Walt?” Lindsay asked.

“Only two! I’ve been trying to get the longest ones out of the way first. That way I can breeze through all the easy ones as the event comes to a close. That and I’m also not working with anyone, so I’m afraid I might be moving slower than you.”

“Have you done the haunted maze yet? By Portal?” Lindsay continued, unable to suppress a shiver.

“Ah, not yet, not yet. I’m not worried about it! I may have few strengths, but one of them is my sense of direction,” Walt said confidently.

“Are you afraid of centipedes?”

“I can’t say I am, but I’ve never seen one here before. Something about your face tells me not to expect the ones I find in the bathroom at home.”

In response, Lindsay only shook her head.

Just then, Kai heard a clapping sound from the front of the room.

“Attention please! No, no need to stand up, but I thank you.” The ghost chuckled as the old man in their group sat back down with an embarrassed wave. “It’s probably best you stay seated, actually. I was just going to inform you that we’re about to get... *under way*.”

“What a strange inflection. Hey Kwin, do you think he’s ill?” Alastor asked, frowning his brow.

Kwin sighed.

“Do I think the *dead man* is ill, Alastor?”

“You never know! Actually, if you die sick, do you think your ghost will be sick forev—whoah!”

All at once, the ship began to tilt. The empty chairs began to slide across the room, and several people gasped. Kwin, Alastor,

and Elvia were the picture of calm, and Kai was reminded of the first time he had taken the Sanctum's enormous airship. Kwin had been calm then, too, even as she neglected to inform Kai that the massive ship would soon be traveling at roughly five hundred knots. This time, however, he wasn't sure what was going to happen.

Luckily, it seemed Lindsay soon figured out, as she let out a cry of understanding alarm.

"Oh! Under!"

Kai understood at the same moment he saw the surface of the ocean rising up to meet the ship from the windows facing the outside. Several people screamed as waves crashed onto the deck, but remarkably, the water seemed to do the ship no harm at all. Even as water flooded into the halls outside, not a drop entered the room they were in, and soon all was silent as the ship descended into the deep.

"A small change of scenery, if you will," the ghost announced once everyone had quieted down. "It also makes the next stage of the event more interesting. But before we begin, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Boris, and I will be overseeing some of your murders tonight."

"Huh. That's honestly not what I was expecting," Alastor whispered.

"Um, Kwin? Can you fight ghosts?" Lindsay murmured nervously.

"I've never had occasion to. I suspect they're unkillable for obvious reasons, but I doubt we'll need to try."

"But he just said—"

"I know. He said *some* of us will be murdered. Our job is not to fight him, it's to not be among those who get killed."

"Oh, of course, obviously," Kai added darkly.

"Everyone please stand up and come to the center of the

room!" Boris called. "Just stand in a line facing me, that's it, all you need—oh dear, what now?"

Everyone looked up as the lights begin to flicker... and then went out.

The ship rumbled, and in the confusion, Kai heard screaming, followed by what he was almost certain was the sound of splashing. Something knocked against his shoulder, causing him to stumble. He raised his hand, intent on creating some source of light, when the lights above flickered and came on again.

"Apologies, apologies!" Boris shouted, waving his transparent hands to get everyone's attention. "Sorry about that. The ship does that sometimes. It's not meant to be miles underwater."

"Miles?!" one of the twins shrieked.

"Yes, but everything's waterproof anyway. The point is, we're all safe. Well... most of us."

"What do you...? Ali? Where's Ali?!" the girl cried, turning frantically this way and that.

The others looked around. Sure enough, the girl's twin was missing. Kai felt a wave of dread as he guessed what might have happened. How it happened was a better question; he couldn't see any sign of a struggle.

"Oh, she's dead. That's all right! She'll come back as soon as she falls asleep again!" Boris said. Kai wasn't sure if that was supposed to be comforting. "Rotten luck, that, but there has to be one in every group."

"What did you do to her?!" the girl shouted angrily.

"That's the brilliant thing! I didn't do anything at all. You see... one of you did." He paused for a moment as all nine remaining people in the group turned to look at each other warily. "Yes, this is our main event. One of you is the killer. But

who could it possibly be?"

"I'll kill whoever it was!" the girl seethed.

"Now now, let me explain the rules first," Boris said delightfully. "You can work together or separately to identify the killer. So long as a majority agrees on the decision, your choice will be final. But this is where it gets ever-so-slightly tricky. If you guess correctly, you win the game. If you don't, however, the person who made the incorrect suggestion will die instead. You should refrain from making wild guesses... just in case."

The girl shut her mouth tight and stepped back, staring nervously at the floor.

"Question: what if an even number of us agree on someone but the rest are opposed? What's the tiebreaker?" Alastor asked.

"When there needs to be a tiebreaker, I will offer the winning vote," Boris answered.

"So if exactly half of us decide on something, that's automatically enough," Alastor said thoughtfully.

"Correct! Now... talk amongst yourselves and see if you can't figure out who the killer is without putting too many innocent lives at risk. Oh, but don't take too long. You have half an hour, and I'm afraid the killer may strike again periodically."

Immediately, Kai and his friends turned to talk to each other.

"Ideas?" Kai said.

"I've barely talked to anyone; I have no idea who it could be," Alastor admitted. "I just know it's not Elvia, because... well."

"That narrows it down a little I guess. Not enough to make any solid guesses. But I'm confused. He said one of us did it? How?" Kai persisted, frowning.

"Logically, we're left with one possibility: one of the real dreamers in this room was taken away and replaced with a double," Kwin said. "A normal dreamer can't harm another in

any way, and if we're to believe they're doing the killing, then it's not that someone we know is also a killer. It's that they are not the person we know to begin with."

"Which is probably why they had us group up with strangers. Gotta make things more difficult on that front," Alastor added. "I suppose we can come up with some sort of test to see if a person is real or not, but we'd have to do it quick."

"What about that girl, the twin? She seemed ready to start killing pretty fast," Lindsay suggested.

"Having one of her loved ones as the target would also be a useful tactic if she wanted to start by drawing attention away from her," Elvia said.

"What if it's Boris and he's having us argue about ourselves instead of thinking it's him? Isn't he the one who said he'd be overseeing our murders?" Kai said suddenly.

"A good idea, but I believe he was referring to how he will kill any of us who pick the wrong person. What's more, while it would be a nice trick, having him be the murderer would ruin the mechanics of the rest of the game. No, unfortunately it is most likely someone else in this room," Kwin replied.

"Look over there, that boy who came in alone. He hasn't said much, has he?" Lindsay said in a hushed tone. The others turned to look. The teenager was standing slightly apart from the others who had huddled up without him, watching them closely. "I don't like the way he's staring at them..."

"We should talk to the others before we start looking suspicious," Kai suggested, and the others quickly followed.

"You're all friends, are you?" the old man said suspiciously as they approached. "Close to a majority right there. You're going to kill us all, huh?"

"Unless one of us is the killer. And our majority vote

wouldn't matter unless we got it correct anyway, so let's just put a stop to the conspiracy before it gets out of hand," Kwin replied shortly. "Have you all come up with anything?"

In response, the others shared nervous looks.

"Seems like a yes, just one that's hard to verbalize," Alastor chuckled.

"It's just... well, some of us thought it might be you," the twin said to Kwin, looked mortified.

"Why? Do I really seem the most likely of anyone in this room to kill someone?" Kwin asked.

"Yes," Kai and at least five others said simultaneously.

"Understandable. I'm flattered, but it wasn't me, though I suppose that's what the real killer would say. You're free to make me your choice if you wish, but do you have anything beyond that?"

In response, the girl made an almost imperceptible nod at the teenage boy behind her.

"Have you ladies and gents talked to him about this?" Walt asked. The others shook their heads in unison. "Well! What effort to put into talkin' to someone you're about to condemn! Here lad, what's your name?" Walt continued, gesturing over at the boy.

"Uh... T-Thomas," the boy said, shuffling over to them and keeping his eyes averted.

"Good to meet you, good to meet you," Walt said, clapping the boy hard on the shoulder. Kai had been on the receiving end of Walt's affection before, and didn't envy Thomas. "Are you a murderer? Boy that sounds like a strange thing to ask, doesn't it?"

"I'm not. I don't want to hurt anyone," Thomas replied meekly.

“Why aren’t you talking to any of us? Why have you just been watching us?” the girl asked suspiciously.

In response, the boy muttered something Kai couldn’t quite hear.

“The lad’s just shy, that’s all it is,” Walt chuckled. “Don’t you mind him! He’s—”

“Just a few more minutes until the killer takes another victim! At least, that’s my educated guess,” Boris announced jovially.

“Shoot. Who do we pick? Who could it be?” the twin asked anxiously.

“I think it’s the *shy* boy,” the old man said confidently. “Doesn’t want to talk to us, been leering at us ever since we walked in this damn room, and was sat the closest to the girl who’s now dead as I recall.”

“That’s... not totally true,” Lindsay spoke, looking afraid to broach the subject. “There was someone sitting closer.”

The twin rounded on her.

“If you think I would EVER—”

“All options are worth exploring, and Lindsay is correct,” Kwin interrupted sharply, and the twin backed off immediately. “Defend your ego when we aren’t under a time constraint. Now... are you sure of your choice in Thomas?” Kwin continued, turning to the old man.

“That I am. It’s him, I guarantee it. Look, he’s not even denying it.”

Thomas looked like he wanted to say something, but then thought better of it and turned his gaze to the floor with a grimace.

“All right then. All those in favor?” Kwin said.

The twin immediately raised her hand, and Lindsay soon

followed. Walt crossed his arms, and Alastor looked equally unwilling to cast a vote against him.

Kai bit his lip. If they didn't get a majority, Thomas wouldn't be blamed, but that also meant a random person would die at the killer's hands. He didn't want their control taken away like that. At least if they were casting votes, they were making the decisions and not a random killer.

Elvia hesitantly raised her hand.

"Oh, interesting! You just need one more," Boris said from behind them as he walked around them, hands clasped behind his back. "I understand your hesitation, but you might want to hurry; I think the lights are flickering."

Kwin raised her hand. Kai looked at her in surprise, but her expression was impassive.

"Good, good! You've saved yourselves another terrible death. If you don't mind me asking, sir, what's your name?" Boris asked the old man.

"Ernie," the old man replied gruffly.

"Ernie! I have a cousin named Ernie. Wonderful fellow. Anyway, I just want to thank you for being so bold and so confident. It usually takes people more time to make a hard choice like this. Thank you also for playing, and I hope you have better luck during your next attempt."

Ernie barely had enough time to open his mouth in confusion before the lights went out again. When they came back on, the old man was gone, and Boris was wiping his hands on his pants.

"Always gruesome work, murder. If you haven't guessed by now, you were incorrect; Thomas is not the killer. But there are still many potential killers left... my oh my. Who could it be? Time for another round!"

"It's fewer than he thinks, but he doesn't have to know that,"

Alastor said quietly with a devious smile.

“And if Elvia is still here, it probably follows that you must be real. Still, that doesn’t give us high enough odds for guesswork,” Kwin replied.

“We should probably start choosing again... before the killer decides to choose for us,” Lindsay suggested shakily.

“Do you have any ideas?” Kai asked.

“I don’t know. I guess it wasn’t the old man or Thomas, but we still haven’t ruled out that girl’s sister. And we haven’t ruled any of *us* out, either. This is so stressful. I’d rather fight the Nightmares again.”

Alastor chuckled.

“Luckily that doesn’t seem to be on the docket tonight. But Kwin, I was curious... why would you vote for Thomas? You didn’t honestly think he did it, did you?” Alastor asked, turning to the girl.

“I didn’t, but there’s no penalty for casting an incorrect vote for those who don’t initiate it,” Kwin replied.

“Do *you* have any ideas, Kwin?” Lindsay pressed.

“Only a hypothesis. Let’s talk with the others so Boris won’t have to kill anyone else.”

“Good idea. I really don’t want to die tonight.”

Once again the groups converged, more noticeably nervous than before. Kai racked his brain, trying to piece together what he knew of the others, but if he had to be honest, it wasn’t much. His own friends weren’t offering much in the way of suspicious behavior, either. Kwin seemed unaffected by the stakes, Lindsay was clearly frightened, and Alastor was having a good time. If any of them were fakes, they were all doing a pretty good job.

He tried to make a choice based on the others. The twin did had a perfect cover, and her attitude and willingness to kill

whoever had taken her sister made her seem more capable than most of the others. They had just established it wasn't Thomas, and that left Walt. Walt had a decent story, too; by sticking up for Thomas, an innocent, he established himself as a voice of reason and someone who could be trusted.

"What if it's her?" the twin asked, jabbing a finger at Elvia. "She hasn't said a word this whole time. She's acting pretty suspicious if you ask me."

"Oh, no, she's with me," Alastor said quickly.

"You meant that as a defense, I'm sure," Kwin snorted.

"Guys, maybe we should be trying to ask some questions of each other rather than just pointing fingers," Kai attempted.

"Remember you've only got a few minutes," Boris said idly as he examined his fingernails.

"If you wanted to know if I was real or not, what would you ask me?" Kai continued hurriedly.

"An effective question would entail knowledge of something outside the Sanctum, so we are limited, but it would be better than nothing," Kwin said. "What caused you to come back to the Sanctum a second time?"

"Your dad," Kai answered with a small smile. "I thought you and the Sanctum were fake until he wrote that comment on my paper about it." He faced Alastor. "We found a picture in your main room before we decided to go over the edge. Who was in it?"

"My parents and my older sister, who Elvia is based on," Alastor responded, patting Elvia on the head. She responded by glaring at him wordlessly. "My turn! Lindsay, what's your least favorite part of coming to my house?"

"The drive," Lindsay said instantly. "Okay, Kwin. Name a memory you have of us that would sound crazy to anyone who wasn't there to see it."

“Probably when we were in the mirror world and the two of us had been imprisoned together before Alastor and Elvia broke us out,” Kwin said, a hint of amusement in her tone. “You weren’t made for prison, that’s for certain.”

“This is ridiculous! We aren’t getting anywhere with this,” the twin said angrily. “I’m glad you guys are all reaffirming how real you are to each other but there’s more than just you!”

“We can only go so quickly, and so far we’ve all verified our own identities. That cuts it down to two people: you and Walt,” Kwin said calmly. “If you’d like to use our remaining time trying to tell us all why we should choose Walt over you, by all means, go ahead. I’m biased in his favor, however, so you have your work cut out for you.”

“Teasing her is awfully mean at a time like this, don’t you think?” Alastor chuckled.

“This isn’t fair and you know it,” the girl seethed. “Someone like me can never make a suggestion and get the majority vote when half our group is all friends like this! It is you, isn’t it, Kwin? Or whoever you are.”

“Again, that is irrelevant, because the vote has to be correct either way. If anything, our stubbornness would work to your advantage... if you aren’t the killer, that is,” Kwin said, raising an eyebrow. “Walt, do you have any input?”

“Ah, well, this one’s tough, you know? I’ve never been great shakes at mysteries, and most of you are my friends, so...” Walt said uncertainly. “Thomas? What do you think?”

Thomas said nothing, but looked over at the twin with a grimace. The girl opened her mouth, a furious response moments from reaching their ears, but Boris clapped his hands.

“Time’s up! Do we have a decision made and majority support?”

The others stared around helplessly, and Kai felt a nervous

swell start to build in his stomach. If they could make a decision quickly...

“Your silence says no. That’s all right! The killer will only take one of you, so start thinking about who you want to choose next!”

Just as Boris was raising his hand and the lights began to flicker, Kwin suddenly lifted her scythe and swung it hard—and sent the blade slicing right through Lindsay’s chest.

The room erupted into chaos. Kai and Alastor leapt back in surprise as Lindsay disappeared, Walt shouted in alarm, Thomas clapped a hand to his mouth, and the twin screamed. Elvia looked stunned, her hand halfway to the hilt of her sword, and even Boris looked surprise. The ghost was the first to recover, however, and with some effort he managed to calm the others.

“I knew it was her! I knew it!” the twin shrieked. “No one but the killer could do that to one of us!”

“I’ll be damned. You made a convincing Kwin,” Alastor said almost approvingly, but fell silent as Kwin raised her hand.

“Other way around. Lindsay was your killer.”

“Uh, but you kinda just—”

“We’d run out of time and were nowhere near a consensus. If I hadn’t acted, another innocent would have been killed. It might have been one of our group. I didn’t want to see any of us fall behind, not when we have so many items left on our list.”

“Is... is she right?” Kai asked Boris.

The ghost scratched his head.

“She’s right. The girl she just killed was the murderer. This wasn’t exactly in the rules, but...”

“I assume if I’d got it wrong you’d simply kill me and let the mystery continue?” Kwin said.

“I would, yep,” the ghost agreed. “Still, I think we’ll need to

modify this event just a little bit, this is kind of a loophole...”

“How? What made you think it was her?” Kai asked Kwin in astonishment.

“Several things that built up,” Kwin answered simply. “For one, she mentioned preferring the Nightmares to this game, and considering the real Lindsay has genuine PTSD from her experiences with them, that seemed uncharacteristic of her. It was just as uncharacteristic of her to suggest random people as targets with the intent of self-preservation; she’s far too compassionate for that. There were a few other things, too, but nothing was concrete until I lied about our experiences in the mirror world and she let it go unchallenged. Her question itself was different; everyone else asked for specifics, but she asked something that required me fill in the blanks for her. I just called that bluff.”

“I... see...”

“So where’s the real Lindsay?” Alastor asked.

“Safe back on the dock!” Boris exclaimed. “She was a good sport. She’ll be happy to see you all come back alive. We’ve still got about fifteen minutes left until all the other rooms finish their events, and then we’ll head back. Until then... enjoy the view!”

With that, Boris wandered off and passed straight through a wall, leaving the others by themselves.

“Kai, you still look a bit pale. Are you all right?” Kwin asked, a flicker of a smile passing over her face.

“Yeah. Just... not used to seeing my best friend get cut in half, I think,” Kai said slowly.

“I’d remind you it wasn’t actually her if I thought it might help. Since it won’t, come with me; let’s watch the deep sea together.”

“Hey, Kwin?”

Kai and Kwin turned to see the girl just behind them, twisting her hands nervously.

“Yes?” Kwin replied expectantly.

“I uh... sorry. About before. I kind of flew off the handle near the end. I think you’re pretty cool actually.”

“It’s all right. Threats of death and time limits will do that to you. At the very least I can appreciate your competitive spirit. No hard feelings.”

The girl looked like she wanted to say something else, but then seemed to think better of it and turned away. Alastor and Walt had teamed up to talk to Thomas, who looked surprised at the positive attention, but not uncomfortably so. Elvia, ever the face of calm, seemed almost anxious to get back to the surface. Kai assumed she was worried about Lindsay, and he couldn’t blame her; he felt the same way.

With nothing else to do until their return, he stared out the window at the dark waters of the Sanctum’s oceans. Kai had never been beneath the surface, but ever since their trip over the edge of the world, he’d wondered just how far the creativity of the Creator’s world stretched. So far it had been seemingly endless; no matter where he had traveled, from the bottom of a lake to islands in the sky above the clouds, there had always been something to show that the Creators had given the area a personal touch. Even here in the pitch black, this seemed no different. Every so often Kai would catch a glimpse of some creature’s bioluminescence, the dark and crooked remains of a shipwreck, or the outlines of strange and frightening plants that were close enough to be caught in the ship’s lights.

He didn’t say a word, and neither did Kwin. He’d found they were both comfortable with silence, and he still enjoyed every second he spent with her. There was something special, albeit very strange, about staring out at the ocean floor of a dream

world from a haunted ship with one of his best friends. Even months later he still felt like one of the luckiest people in both the worlds he frequented.

It soon came time for the ship to return, and Kai watched as the surface came into view. The ship soon broke out of the depths and cruised into the docking area. No sooner had Kai and the others stepped out than Lindsay ran into him, nearly knocking him over as she hugged him.

“I’m sorry!” she gasped. “I wasn’t allowed to say anything, and I couldn’t go after you, I had to stay here the whole time, and I was hoping you would figure out it was me before the thing that replaced me killed too many people. Is everyone okay? Did you all make it?”

“We’re fine, don’t forget we’ve got the genius with us,” Kai laughed. “Kwin figured it out pretty quick. And she solved the puzzle in a way that made the ghosts have to rethink the way they run the whole event.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course she did.” As soon as she let Kai go, Elvia was there, and Lindsay gratefully wrapped her arms around the young woman. “I’m so glad you guys are back. So... what do we do now? Do you guys want to take a break?”

“No way!” Alastor said immediately. “This one had a lot of downtime, so we should get back to it. You got this one as a freebie, so I think we should do something extra scary and difficult next.”

“I didn’t ask for this!” Lindsay complained.

“We’ll do some of the quicker ones. It’s been several hours and we’re making good progress, and we’ll have to wake up soon, so we’ll check off at least a few more,” Kwin stated.

Alastor didn’t seem willing to contradict her, and so they quickly took off and headed in the direction of a small nearby town where several more events were being held.

EVENT 17: SURVIVE THE DEADLANDS

Kai woke up feeling refreshed, yet still somehow exhausted. He hadn't felt this tired from falling asleep since he'd had his training sessions with Alastor before they fought the Nightmares; those sessions had always tired him out, making him realize that it was wholly possible to have dreams so intense that he would wake up feeling more exhausted than he had when he'd fallen asleep the night before.

After the murder mystery ship, the five friends spent the remainder of their time close by, checking off several simple events from their list. The events were all different enough to ensure that every one of them had a difficult time completing at least a few things. Kwin had casually set a world record during a matching game, but had then taken several tries to complete the cooking challenge. Her pumpkin pies had come out either with the consistency of watery pudding or an old brick; finally, the attendant had given her a pass almost out of pity as he pulled one from the oven that had managed not to be set aflame. Lindsay excelled at the water gun target challenge and

several other carnival style games, beating out Alastor in a thrilling showdown at the ring toss. Finally, Kai had shown his quick thinking skills in an interesting game where each contestant had to quickly create objects in succession that had only one feature in common with the object before it, and had earned a round of applause for more than doubling the runner up's score.

After that, they had all woken up and gone to spend their day trying to keep themselves amused until they could all return the coming night. By just after ten in the evening, Lindsay had grown so impatient that they decided to sleep early, despite the fact that Lindsay's insomnia—never mind her excitement—usually meant she was last to join them.

Still, within half an hour, they had all met up in the dream world once again, and set about immediately planning their next move.

"We could do the Ferris wheel in Golden Capital!" Lindsay suggested eagerly.

"Aren't you afraid of heights?" Kai joked.

"Yes, but heights don't jump out and attack me."

"That you know of," Alastor jumped in, earning a light smack on the shoulder courtesy of Kwin.

"Why don't we wind down with something like that? There are several difficult events we have yet to complete that we should probably get out of the way while we still have a comfortable amount of time left," Kwin suggested.

"Like what?" Kai asked.

"This one here called 'Survive the Deadlands,'" Kwin explained, pointing down at her own event sheet. "The Deadlands are an unpleasant enough place on a normal day. I can only imagine what it's going to be like during Halloween."

Kai had never been to the Deadlands himself. He only knew

them to be located behind the massive mountains the Golden Capital had been built into. Even on Sanctum maps, the area was illustrated with dark soil and dead trees. He had never felt the urge to go, and still felt the same way now.

“I would say ‘survive’ makes it sound scary, except half the trials during this event are trying to kill us anyway,” Lindsay sighed. “Let’s get this over with.”

With nothing left to discuss for now, Kai and the others leapt into the air and quickly soared high above Golden Capital, flying higher and higher until the grand city was little more than a few glittering lights below. Lindsay’s fear of heights had visibly kicked in, and Elvia flew next to her the entire way, gripping her hand tightly in her own.

They soon reached the top of the mountains, a set of jagged snow-covered crests and cliffs. They were an awe-inspiring sight, and Kai might have stopped to look if they weren’t so intent on getting to their destination. Even with as swiftly as they were flying, the mountains were enormous and somehow intimidating.

Conveniently, the mountains were dotted with torches that lit the way down to the other side, and they quickly made their descent, guided by the light. The rush of the wind against his face was thrilling, and Kai was almost disappointed to touch down minutes later. Lindsay, however, seemed grateful.

“Can we go back by going *around* the mountains?” Lindsay asked meekly, her voice trembling slightly.

“It would add considerable time to our traveling, but if you insist I would not be opposed,” Kwin said.

“So... what are we supposed to do here?” Kai asked slowly as he peered around through the dark.

As far as Kai could see, there was only a forest of dead trees. The ground was crumbly and dry, and a faint eerie red glow

that seemed to come from the earth itself illuminated the skeletal branches of the trees. There was little else around save for the ever-present fog that seemed to blanket most of the world, preventing him from seeing too far. There were no signs, no lights, and no others.

“Elvia, scout around and see if you can’t find us some directions, yeah?” Alastor said quietly, and with a nod, Elvia vanished into thin air. “Not that the Deadlands are big or anything, but I figured there might be someone here to tell us what to do.”

“Unless all we’re supposed to do is survive, and that’s it,” Kai said warily.

“But for how long? And who stamps our list? I suppose we’re supposed to explore, but there’s still a logistical—” He broke off as Elvia reappeared next to him. She didn’t say a word, but he nodded. “Ah, she found something. There’s a bonfire with a few dreamers a quarter mile thataway.”

It didn’t take them long to find a source of light in the darkness. A large bonfire burned not too far away, and as they got closer, Kai could see a half dozen other people around it, peering into the forest but keeping as close to the light as possible. At least one of them had created an artificial light source, but the darkness seemed to swallow it up, as if not even light could survive here. Overhead, the full moon was bright, but seemed so far away.

As they approached, they were greeted with a few friendly waves.

“Hey friends. Do you know what this event is all about?” Alastor asked jovially as they reached the fire.

“From what I hear, we’ll be swarmed with enemies for a set amount of time, and everyone who’s alive at the end wins,” a broad-shouldered man who looked to be in his early thirties

said, nervousness clear in his voice. "I've got a few friends who say this is the hardest one on the list. They tried five times in a row before giving up."

"That's what I like to hear," Kwin said approvingly.

Kai saw three of the others staring at them, and one pointed. Then they jogged over, bright smiles on their faces.

"It's Alastor! And Kwin! And that kid who beat the Nightmares!" one exclaimed.

"Kai," Kai informed them, but they seemed to take no notice.

"Ha! We're going to win for sure with these guys on our team!" another said. "My friend and I are seeing who can finish our list first; no way will she have this kind of luck with this event."

"Just make sure you don't slack off. I *will* notice," Kwin deadpanned.

"Oh! O-of course not, we would never."

In the distance, a wolf howled. Kai saw Lindsay shudder.

"You going to be all right?" he asked her quietly.

"I think so. At least all of you are here now. Not like... last time," Lindsay murmured. "Just stay close, please? And if you see any wolves—"

"I'll take care of them, sure," Kai replied with a smile.

"If it helps, think of this like a game," Alastor jumped in, stepping away from the others. "We've got a bunch of enemies coming in waves and we need to survive them all. You've got a really cool team, and the only scary part is that this is just very, very realistic first-person shooter. Sort of. You'll be getting a head start for whenever VR really takes off."

"You really are a nerd," Kai chuckled.

"Hey, it's cool to be a nerd now. Besides, you should be telling Lindsay that, considering she can kick my butt at any game she—"

Alastor was interrupted by the deep sound of a bell ringing in the distance. As it faded, Kai could just hear the sound of snapping branches and shifting soil.

“Uh... are there buildings out here I didn’t know about?” one of the other dreamers asked nervously.

“I don’t think so. I believe that marks the start of round one!” Alastor said. “All right, friends. Stick close to the fire and keep an eye out in all directions. Stay in the same general position and hold there; a few of us will shift around as backup for whoever needs it. Give a shout if you’re getting overwhelmed. With all eyes out and equal firepower in all directions, we should knock this out easy peasy.”

“I’ll clear what I can in the back line to make things a little easier for you and keep an eye out for more powerful monsters. Stick to area damage when fighting swarms so we have fewer distractions when tougher creatures show up,” Kwin added.

“Listen to this nerd,” Alastor laughed, earning another playful smack to the shoulder.

And then Kai saw them. Creatures of all shapes and sizes, zombies and spiders and bears seemingly made of shadow, all with eyes glowing dark red. They came slowly, but unmistakably toward them from all directions—and there were hundreds of them.

“Ohhh no,” another one of the dreamers moaned.

“Don’t lose your nerve. We’re starting slow and easy. Let’s take advantage of that to warm up,” Kwin said confidently, twirling her massive scythe. “Remember your positions. Let’s get to it!”

Kai’s glowing sword materialized in his hand just as the first wave of zombies descended upon the camp.

The battle began in earnest as the confidence the dreamers had yet to find took the form of shouts and cheers. Despite the

initial chaos, they held their positions for the most part, and not a single creature made it past the line. When one person began to get overwhelmed by the sheer number of creatures bearing down on them, Elvia would appear out of nowhere and cut several down in the blink of an eye.

Kai was unnerved by the number of creatures heading toward them in a seemingly unending wave. The few zombies he had seen on the Coliseum field had seemed like plenty, but now the entire forest was teeming with them, all of them now sprinting toward the only source of light for miles around. Beyond the zombies, there were now skeletons of hyena-like animals with massive jaws, centipedes that were so large Kai could hear their footsteps, and eerie wraiths that looked like floating cloaks and shadows. It took a little time for him to find his footing, but when he did, he sent waves of fire into the forest, burning up dozens of monsters at a time.

Lindsay hadn't received any formal training like Kai had, but she was quickly starting to hold her own all the same. With no weapon in hand, she had evidently remembered what she was most comfortable working with; standing slightly behind the front lines, she sent powerful torrents of water at her enemies, trapping dozens in massive water spouts before sending blinding bursts of electric energy into them, incinerating them all in an instant.

Kai didn't see Kwin half the time. He only saw flashes of crimson fire at different spots in the forest that told him she was moving around swiftly and cutting down anything unfortunate enough to be in her path. Wherever she was, her efforts were noticeable, resulting in a brief break in the enemy waves.

The bell rang again and again, and each time the waves got more difficult. Soon, huge monsters the size of elephants rushed their way toward the fire. Some had claws, some had

tusks, and all had sharp teeth and fearsome red eyes. These required more focus to take down, causing some of the lesser creatures to build up in the confusion, and the camp was nearly overwhelmed several times.

Thunder rolled and lightning flashed, and during a break in the fighting, Kai's heart skipped a beat as he saw the distant silhouette of a horrifying man-like creature in the distance, standing half a mile high with spindly limbs and long talons for fingers. He only saw it for an instant before the lightning faded, but it was enough—for the first time he began to feel like this was a fight they could not win, and he sincerely hoped they wouldn't have to fight anything like that.

"You guys holding out all right?" Alastor called over his shoulder as he froze one of the large monsters in front of him before shattering it into tiny shards.

"Barely!" someone called back.

"Look! They're thinning out!" someone else shouted.

Sure enough, the enemy's numbers were beginning to wane. What had once been a flood was now random pockets of stragglers that sprinted toward the light and were cut down easily before they even got close. Even the last of the giant monsters gave them little trouble without the distraction the smaller creatures provided.

And then, finally, the last zombie was cut down, its body turning to dust.

Kai turned to the others, panting slightly, and flashed them a thumbs up.

"I think we did it."

"Whoever told you this was a challenge was right. This was more difficult than I thought it would be, and that's saying something," Alastor said as he and Elvia sheathed their swords

in identical motions. “We all still in one piece? Everyone make it?”

As the others gave their affirmations and began to relax, Kai walked over to Lindsay, who had fallen to her knees in relief. At least, Kai hoped that’s all it was.

“You okay?” he asked quietly as he approached.

“Yeah!” Lindsay replied not altogether convincingly. “This was just... it was... a little too much. I don’t think I can do something like this again. It just reminded me of what happened before.”

“They wouldn’t have another one like this I’m sure. This was so hard it has to be the only one. We’ll be back to normal fun stuff right after this,” Kai said consolingly. “Do you want to stop now? We can tell the others and I’m sure they’d—”

“No, no, that’s okay,” Lindsay interrupted hastily. “I don’t want to bother them. As long as we move on to casual things after this I’ll be fine. But I don’t think I like the Deadlands very much.”

“No kidding. I’m not sure exactly what the Creators were going for here. Maybe they were just in a bad mood or something,” Kai laughed. “I’ll tell Alastor we want to get out of—”

Before he could finish, Kwin suddenly appeared in front of the group in a cloud of smoke.

“We have problems. Move back to your positions and prepare to defend the fire,” she instructed quickly.

“Huh? Defend it against what?” Kai asked.

“The fight’s not over. There’s a horde of enemies coming from all sides not a quarter mile away—a *lot* more than before,” Kwin explained, keeping her gaze focused in the darkness beyond. “I’d guess that every enemy we defeated in every wave prior to this is coming all at once.”

“Did you say—?” started one of the other dreamers, but Kwin cut him off.

“Yes, so take the thirty seconds we have left to get over your incredulity, then prepare for a fight.”

At these words, Kai saw movement behind her. The distant dark seemed to be moving and shifting. The harder Kai looked, the more he realized that it was everywhere. No matter where he looked, he saw the same thing, with so much movement barely visible outside the light he might have thought the fog itself was swirling about.

And then he saw the first of the creatures, nearly a solid wall of them, running straight for them.

“Oh hells. What do we do? There are so many!” one of the young men cried in alarm, taking a step back.

“I think we’ll need a new strategy for this part,” Alastor said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. “Anyone want to go all out? Lindsay?”

Lindsay shook her head quickly.

“I-I can’t do this. I don’t want to do this anymore. I want to wake up.”

Kwin’s expression softened for a moment, and then she turned to Alastor and Kai.

“I’ll do my best to handle this myself. Make sure the others stay safe in case I don’t get back in time. Either way, this won’t take long.”

“Wait, get back? From whe—?”

Before Kai had even finished his question, Kwin had unfurled her wings and launched herself skyward with enough force to kick up a wave of dust and leaves. Kai chanced looking away from the oncoming mob to follow her progress. The girl soared higher and higher, heading straight up until she was barely visible against the stars. All the while, Kai heard the

thunderous footsteps of the approaching monsters getting louder and louder.

“Where is she going?” Lindsay asked nervously, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the screeching cries of the monsters.

“Up! And then, I assume, down,” Alastor answered.

Kai looked up again just in time to see Kwin’s silhouette pass in front of the moon. Her wings spread wide, she was momentarily frozen in midair, her shadow cast down upon the earth. And then she began her descent.

Faster and faster she flew, and soon she was diving so quickly Kai could hardly keep track of her. She was seconds away from hitting the ground, and the monsters were only seconds away from them. They were packed so tightly together Kai thought they would surely trip over one another, but somehow they kept running. He saw the dark shapes of several dozen far larger creatures in the back, all the giants leading up the charge.

Elvia raised her sword, and Kai raised his. The monsters were so close now Kai could almost reach out and touch the zombies at the lead, but he was not going to let them through.

And then the world turned to flame. A wall of fire burst from the ground with a deafening explosion. Kai barely had enough time to look up for the source of the noise before the fire passed over him. He yelled in alarm and raised his hands as though that would do anything, but even as the creatures before him all turned to ash in an instant, he felt no pain. Still, he was nearly knocked off his feet by the sudden wind.

The shock wave passed, and with it must of the wind, but Kai still had to shield his eyes to protect himself from the dirt that had been flung into the air. As he watched the wave pass swiftly away from him in all directions, he saw that even trees

had been uprooted by the force of the blast, and that, for the first time, he could see most of the land around him. Several fires had started across the field, the fog was all but gone, and the glow from the wave was still strong enough to light everything within a mile. The field was vast and mostly flat, covered with dead trees as far as the eye could see.

The roar of the shock wave soon faded enough for Kai to hear what came next.

“What the *hell* was that?”

One of the dreamers had made his way to his feet, staring at the still-moving wall of fire in the distance.

“My best,” came Kwin’s voice from nearby. Kai whirled around to see the girl walking toward them slowly, looking satisfied but exhausted. “I’ve never been able to try something like that; it was a lot of fun.”

“Holy moly, Kwin,” Kai breathed, a relieved smile playing across his lips. “That was... *is*, amazing.”

“It’s still going!” Lindsay exclaimed. “How...?”

“I’m impressed. Usually you go for something a lot more efficient; you always yell at me for my theatrics,” Alastor said approvingly. “Got the point across, though. And everything is definitely dead. That must have been, what... a few thousand creatures you just killed in one go?”

“I didn’t get a chance to count.”

“Uh, how long are you going to let the wave go?” Kai asked concernedly.

“A little while yet. I want to make sure everything is dead. Just in case,” Kwin replied, and for once he could see the strain of the concentration on her. He couldn’t imagine what it must be taking. The wave was expanding outward in all directions, which means that it was getting exponentially larger every second—and taking additional concentration to match. And

while he knew Kwin was skilled beyond anyone else he'd ever met, he knew even she must struggle to maintain a wall of destructive force several miles in diameter.

Finally, she let out a breath and visibly relaxed. The shock wave, which by now looked like only a thin strip of orange in the distance like the last light of sunset, disappeared.

Just as it did, a man wearing the same uniform as the other attendants appeared out of thin air with a quiet *pop*.

“Excellent! And somewhat unorthodox, if I may say, but a win’s a win. Congratulations. May I have your stamp sheets?”

EVENT 39: CLOUD SKIPPING

After the challenge of the Deadlands, which had left all of them too tired to continue with anything intense, they spent the rest of the night and early morning clearing many of the simpler events. It was a good decision regardless, Kai thought; with only one night remaining, the lines only seemed to get longer as the night progressed. As they did their menial tasks, Kai felt the refreshing effect of sleep slowly coming back, and by the time it was time to wake up and they only had twelve events left for the final night, even Kwin looked refreshed.

Sunday evening started with some trepidation, however, as there were still a few challenges left—and from the sounds of it, Kai and the others were not the only dreamers who close to finishing their goal. What's more, upon re-entering the world, they realized that their list now had an additional item at the bottom of their list that hadn't been there before.

Bonus: This quest will be revealed once the previous 50 quests are complete!

“Damn. One more thing to keep us from the headless horseman,” Alastor complained as he stuffed his list back into his pocket.

“The horseman is as likely to exist as that magical tree Walt was after months ago,” Kwin said. “We’re going to focus on things that are real.”

“He said *untold rewards*, Kwin!”

“And we already went over why that is. Don’t look so miserable; we’re headed to the Sky Capital next,” Kwin continued. “Are any of you afraid of heights?”

“If I reminded you, again, that I am, would I still have to go?” Lindsay attempted weakly.

“Yes.”

“Then no.”

True to its name, Sky Capital was a city in the clouds that was usually found in the eastern half of the Sanctum. Most of the buildings, like those of the inner city, were clustered together on large clouds, but the city as a whole was comprised of hundreds of clouds, many of which were known to occasionally disconnect from the rest of the city and float around the world.

From a distance, the city was like a beacon of light against the dark sky, and at first Kai wasn’t able to see anything different about it. As they got closer, however, he saw what had changed.

Beyond the Halloween decorations that covered the rest of the world, Kai saw several dozen new clouds in the sky that loosely formed a path, with a “Start” and “Finish” line at the path’s ends. Every cloud seemed to have something different going on; heavy rain poured over one cloud, while another was lined with nails, and still another periodically burst into flames.

It took Kai a few moments to realize what he was looking at: an obstacle course.

“Next race in five minutes! Contenders to the starting line, please!” a slightly harassed voice shouted over a loudspeaker. “Maximum of twenty people!”

Kai and the others touched down just as a small group of dreamers made their way to the line. It looked like a simple enough task, especially as the goal was likely just to make it to the end and not to beat everyone else. Besides, he thought, they had all of the power their imaginations could muster; how hard could it really be?

“I’m really glad we can all fly. Everything looks so... far down from up here,” Lindsay said nervously.

“We *are* four miles above ground,” Kwin said absently. “We’ll be fine.”

“Do you think we’re allowed to shove other people off the sides?” Alastor asked hopefully, causing Lindsay to take a very obvious step away from him.

“I doubt it. But if you push her off, you’re next,” Kwin warned.

“I wouldn’t do it to *her*. I just think it would be funny!”

“If it helps, sometimes you make me want to throw *myself* off a cloud,” Elvia added.

“Everyone’s a bully.”

“Attention dreamers! Our next race is about to start, and I’ll only say this once, so pay attention,” the voice over the loudspeaker called, causing everyone nearby to quiet down. “There are only a few guidelines. If you make it to the end, you win. If you don’t, you lose. You are not allowed to fly. You must also touch every cloud along the path, so no skipping. I know it’s in the name, I didn’t make it up, so *please* stop bothering me about it. If you can’t fly and are worried about falling, don’t. You’ll fall

into the net below the course and will be returned in short order to try again in the next one. That's all! Good luck."

Above the start line, a timer began to count down. Kai frowned and peered over the edge; he hadn't seen any nets below the course when they had flown up. He felt a cold chill down his spine as he saw several large spiders spinning webs below the clouds, occasionally looking up almost hopefully at the dreamers at the starting line. *Of course.*

Then, it was time. As soon as the countdown hit zero, he started running as fast as he could, only to almost immediately be hit with a powerful gust of wind that nearly knocked him off course. He would have fallen straight into the webs below—as two others did—had Elvia not caught him at the last moment.

"Be quick, but keep your center of gravity low as you move from cloud to cloud. Our obstacles are not all visible," she suggested before dashing off to join Alastor, who was already far ahead of the crowd.

Kai quickly realized that without the ability to fly, the course was much harder than he had originally thought. The rain made one cloud incredibly slippery, and another dreamer fell off right in front of him; he was immediately swarmed by the spiders. Another dreamer accidentally caught fire by jumping on the flaming cloud at the wrong moment, and flung herself backward onto the raining cloud to put out the fire.

"You've got to be kidding me," Kai muttered as he saw a cloud up ahead with several large axe blades swinging back and forth above it. He paused, timed his jump, then ran ahead as quickly as he could. He was almost struck twice, but made it safely through to the other side, only to immediately duck as a pair of flying crocodiles with two heads each swooped down at him. "Really!"

During a lull in the danger, he looked up to see that Kwin

and Alastor were already at the finish line, and that Lindsay and Elvia were just ahead of him. Elvia was helping Lindsay over a cloud that changed its position every few seconds, causing quite a few dreamers to miss their landing and fall through at the last second.

And then, somehow, they were finished. Kai pumped his fist as he landed on the cloud below the finish line.

“Hey, you made it! Well done. I was afraid you might fall at the last second; that shifting cloud was pretty tricky,” Alastor said approvingly.

“That was faster than I thought. Have we really only got quick ones left? This almost seems too easy,” Kai observed, staring down at his list.

“Well, we did try to get a lot of the really challenging or long events out of the way first, so yep! Apart from this mystery event, whatever that is, we’re done,” Alastor said. “I’m almost worried it’s going to be really difficult, but I think only a few groups have made it past the Deadlands.”

“And if they’re good enough to get through that, they’re good enough to give us steady competition for the rest of the event. We should still move quickly,” Kwin reminded them.

“I heard some people are taking medication to try to keep themselves asleep all weekend!” Lindsay said.

“It’s funny; people will stay up as long as they can for events in the real world and sleep as long as they can for events here. I’m not sure my old body could take it,” Alastor chuckled. “Ah well. Dedication isn’t necessarily a guarantee of skill.”

“Oh! We can take the Ferris wheel now, finally!” Lindsay said excitedly. “I don’t know about you guys, but that’s where I’m going next.”

“Looks like we know what our next event is,” Kai laughed.

For the next hour, the five friends were as diligent as

possible about finishing as many of the remaining events as possible, though not without time for some good fun. Between events or while waiting in lines, they took some time to sample some of the Sanctum's fall cuisine, which included everything from pumpkin pies and muffins to deviled eggs, candy apples, and butternut squash soup. It was all delicious, and Kai could almost feel his stomach growling even as he slept.

And then, finally, as they got off a roller coaster that came off the tracks and flew about as its riders were chased by witches on broomsticks, they got their final event stamped.

"Yes! Fifty out of fifty!" Lindsay cried, jumping into the air in celebration and waving her list about. Several onlookers stared at her enviously. "We actually finished everything!"

"Thank goodness. I don't know if I can do this again next year," Kai said tiredly.

"It's something you need to try at least once, for sure," Alastor added. "Let's find a place to sit down away from the crowds."

They found a few empty benches near a burning brazier and sat down to rest, if only for a moment. Now that they were clear of the bustling crowds still trying to get their events in, they had space to breathe and talk amongst themselves without having to shout to be heard.

"I'm curious: to win the event, do we need to finish the bonus quest too? Or is that optional and we just get extra credit or something?" Kai asked.

"That's a good question, actually. I would guess the bonus isn't necessary, otherwise it would be unfair; people plan their entire weekends around the list as it is," Kwin mused.

"Sure, but the Sanctum isn't always fair. I wouldn't be surprised if the Creators decided to throw us for a loop at the last minute," Alastor said.

“It’d have to be easy then, right? Otherwise, what if you finish your last quest at the last minute only to find out there’s actually one more?” Lindsay jumped in.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” Alastor continued. “I could argue that they should have just finished faster. We’ve known about it for a few hours now, so we all know it’s there, just not what it is. Speaking of which...”

“You don’t think it appears for everyone at the same time to make it fair, do you?” Kai asked, but then did a double take as he looked down at his own list. Now that their last list item had been checked off, the text for the bonus quest had changed. “No way. This has to be a joke.”

“What? Did yours...? Oh. Oh, no,” Lindsay groaned. Beside him, Alastor was beside himself with laughter as Kwin placed her face in her palms.

Bonus: Find the head of the headless horseman and bring it to the Coliseum to complete your quest.

Three hours later, however, Alastor was not feeling as gleeful as he had been before. They had searched the world tirelessly for any sign of the horseman, and at first they had felt some confidence at the fact that he must surely exist if the list itself said he did, but despite their best efforts, they had no luck at all. What’s more, everyone they’d talked to hadn’t seen him, either. After three hours, Kai was starting to wonder if perhaps the list was lying to them. The Sanctum was a big place, but surely *someone* must have seen at least a glimpse of the infamous Halloween figure.

For the moment, Kai waited by himself on a bench in a small town. They had agreed to split up and search, then return to this spot in an hour. They had chosen this spot in particular

because there was a statue of the headless horseman himself here. He had seen dozens like it in cities across the Sanctum. With only a few minutes until the hour was up, Kai, who had been close to town, decided to call it early if only so he could take a short break. The town was quiet, but decorated much like the others with carved pumpkins, spider webs, hay, and candles.

He stared up at the statue as he waited for the others. A man's body was on the back of a midnight-black horse, which was rearing on its hind legs. In one arm, the man waved a cutlass aloft, and in the crook of his other arm he held a jack-o'-lantern carved in a scowl. A candle burned inside the pumpkin, and the horse's eyes glowed a faint eerie green.

Kai sighed and rubbed his face in his hands. He had felt so good about their progress, but now that they were spending hours on a single task with absolutely no luck, he was starting to feel disheartened and nervous. What if someone else managed to find the horseman before them? Even if they hadn't finished all their quests until right before then, they would still be able to win if they got lucky. Kai felt his mood turn sour at the thought.

Before he could dwell on it too much, Elvia landed nearby, followed closely by Alastor.

"No luck, huh?" Alastor asked. When Kai simply shook his head, Alastor nodded and sat down next to him while Elvia kept watch for the others. "Same here. I'm so disappointed. I honestly didn't think we'd spend our last few hours chasing myths around the world in our sleep."

Kwin soon appeared nearby, and Lindsay landed only a few seconds later. Kwin looked tired and dejected, while Lindsay seemed either bored or thoughtful. Kai thought he could guess which it was.

“I can tell by your expressions you didn’t have any success,” Kwin said as she walked over, leaving Lindsay by the statue. “Did you at least hear anything from anyone? Any hopeful news?”

“None whatsoever. The few people who didn’t give me strange looks said they were starting to think he wasn’t real, either,” Alastor answered with a sigh.

“I wish we’d looked out for him more during the past two days,” Kai said dejectedly. “I wonder if he’s hiding in a cave somewhere.”

“I checked, and he’s not. At least not in the ones I visited,” Kwin said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “It wouldn’t seem like the Creators to have such a popular figure stay hidden away where most people wouldn’t even see him.”

“If we did find him and take his head, wouldn’t that mean everyone else wouldn’t be able to?” Kai asked.

“Nah. I figure he’s a respawning character,” Alastor said easily. “Not that it matters when no one can find him to begin with.”

Kai looked over at Lindsay while the others talked. She was staring at the list in her hand, occasionally glancing up at the statue and around the town circle before looking back at the list. She looked like she was ready to be done, and Kai couldn’t blame her.

“At this point I’d like to find him just so I could beat the stuffing out of him for causing us so much trouble, and I’d take his head myself as a trophy to commemorate one of the most frustrating events in Sanctum history,” Alastor continued.

“Gross, but agreed,” Kai said.

“We shouldn’t stay here long; we should start our search again soon. We can spend another hour before meeting here

again; I've already come up with an efficient search strategy," Kwin suggested.

"Oi, Lindsay, we're going to head out again," Alastor called over to her. Lindsay looked up at him suddenly as though he had woken her from a daydream, then made her way slowly over.

"What's the plan?" Kai asked slowly. The last thing he wanted to do was go out on another search, especially by himself.

"We'll take cities and towns equidistant from one another and make our way clockwise around the continent," Kwin explained. "Then we'll head slowly inland while still moving in a clockwise pattern. This will ensure optimal coverage while also ensuring some overlap in our patterns so many locations are seen twice. I'll start at Golden Capital; I can get there the fastest. I'll end at the Shallow Well. Alastor, start there and end at the Glowing Caverns. Elvia, start at the caverns and finish up at the Deepfalls River outlet. Lindsay—"

"I have a question," Lindsay interrupted softly.

Everyone looked at her.

"What is it?" Alastor asked.

"It's just a thought, but... do you think we need to actually find the horseman?" Lindsay asked almost pleadingly.

"What do you mean? If we want to finish then we definitely need—"

"That's not what I meant, sorry. I still want to finish. It's just... do we need to find *him* to find his head?" she continued.

"Who else would have it?" Kwin asked, tilting her head slightly.

"I mean, he is *headless*, so maybe he doesn't have it either," Kai returned. "But... that still doesn't tell us who would."

"I don't think anyone does. I think it's a riddle," Lindsay said,

and as she spoke, she sounded more and more confident. “The quest tells us to find his head. When it says ‘find,’ it doesn’t sound like it’s asking us to steal it or fight him and take it. It also doesn’t give us any hint as to where it would be, and since no one else in the world has seen him, I think he doesn’t exist after all. But I think the Creators *want* us to think he’s real so we’ll do exactly what we’re doing now.”

“Then where do we find this head?” Kwin asked patiently.

“We don’t even know what it looks like,” Alastor added.

“I don’t think there are many severed heads to choose from,” Kai said with a grin.

“It’s everywhere!” Lindsay said firmly, reclaiming their attention. “Or... I think it is.”

“Oookay, how do you mean?” Alastor pressed.

“Look.” Lindsay turned and pointed at the statue, and then pointed around the town circle.

Kai looked again. The statue hadn’t changed, and the man on the horse was still definitely headless. He looked closer, trying to see what Lindsay could be referring to, especially now that she had explained her context of *everywhere*.

His eyes traveled over the man to the horse and back to the man again, from the sword in one hand to the jack-o’-lantern in the other.

And his eyes widened as the realization dawned on him.

The man was carrying his head in his arm. A jack-o’-lantern. And the world was *filled* with jack-o’-lanterns.

“You don’t think it’d be that simple, do you?” Alastor asked in surprise.

“I... I very much think it would,” Kwin said, a rare smiling growing on her face. “I would have never thought of that. Well done, Lindsay.”

“W-well, we don’t know if I’m right just yet,” Lindsay said, clearly flustered by Kwin’s praise.

“I think you are. What say we finally end this event?” Kwin continued, visibly more excited than before.

“YES,” the other four said enthusiastically, and somewhat desperately.

“All right then. Lindsay, if you’ll do the honors?”

“Way ahead of you,” Lindsay replied, already returning with a jack-o’-lantern in hand.

With an hour to go until it was time to wake up, Kai and the others sat in a circle in a private room of Golden Capital. After returning with their full lists and the jack-o’-lantern, the attendant had greeted them excitedly, informing them that they had won the contest, beating out every other dreamer in the world. While many had by that point finished the original fifty quests, no others had also figured out the riddle, and Kai was all the more grateful for Lindsay’s participation. As a reward for winning, each of them got a large basket full of candies and baked treats available nowhere else in the world, and a shiny orange and black pumpkin-shaped pin that appeared on their clothes as a sign of their victory. The pin glowed like there was an actual candle burning inside the tiny pumpkin.

“No one else in the world will be able to replicate this, not even with their imagination,” the attendant exclaimed. “The Creators considered that potential oversight.”

The room they sat in now was small, but elegantly furnished. They had found it in one of Golden Capital’s many high towers, and had taken it so they could watch the view of the city below over the balcony as they snacked on their winnings. For the most part, they were silent, enjoying the peace and calm that came with not having any responsibilities

for the first time in three days. Kai watched the city down below, relishing in its beauty and energy. He saw scarecrows chasing people through the streets, the massive Ferris wheel in the distance, and clouds of bats flying here and there.

“It’ll be a shame to see all this go. It really needs to stay for more than just a weekend,” Alastor commented, and the others nodded.

“Especially since we spent so much time doing those quests we didn’t get to actually wander around and enjoy it,” Lindsay said mildly.

“There’s always next year,” Kwin said. “Though this event changes every year, so if we want to try again—”

“No,” the other four said unanimously, and Kwin smiled.

“I thought not. But let me ask you, Alastor, how do you like your pin? Is it as untold a reward as you were hoping for?” she asked, the slightest hint of venom in her tone.

“Not anymore. I mean, we’ve been told about it, haven’t we?” Alastor replied seriously, then laughed as Kwin started attacking him with a cushion.

“What do you think? This all go all right?” Kai asked, turning to Lindsay as the others fought.

“I think so. But if it’s okay with you, I want to spend Halloween in the real world indoors. *Maybe* we can watch a scary movie, but I want to do a whole lot of nothing,” she replied determinedly.

“No arguments here,” Kai agreed.

“I don’t even want to give candy to trick-or-treaters!” Lindsay continued hotly.

“We’ll eat it all ourselves.”

As they turned back to watching the city and eating their treats, Kai had to admit that despite the tedious event they had just wrapped up, he had quite enjoyed the Halloween celebra-

tion in the dream world. Every so often he glanced down at his glowing pin and couldn't help but smile, knowing that he was one of only five people in the entire world to own one. Maybe that was the secret, he thought; real-life events just needed to do more to pull out his competitive spirit. Or maybe they just needed to involve his favorite people in the world.