

‘The Haunted Maze. Free entry, no exits!’ The sign declared, festooned with paper cutouts of bats, skulls and pumpkins. The last part was obviously a lie given how the occasional figure emerged via the clearly marked exit, most looking like they’d had a good, thrilling time.

Bales of hay had been placed to build a solid wall around the rural house, using its wide former farmland to stage the maze. A passage led into a thicket of trees, the path even led through the house itself, with many twists and turns allowing participants to delight and frighten any who braved the maze.

The brown fox Kodi was alone, a text showing that the friend he’d planned to enter with had been held up and might need to cancel. While it was a damper on his plans, Kodi wasn’t going to let it stop him. If the maze was as expansive as it appeared then he would be hard pressed to see all there was before closing time. If it was actually what he assumed, a multiple path labyrinth with several ‘correct’ ways through, tailored to the spooks one sought, he could see one path and then delve into another later when his friend arrived.

It seemed his guess was on the money, after a brief foray of dead ends with one correct path, he came across a widened square with three thematic splits. One directed him to the thicket, labelled as The Forest of Fright, another to the Manor of Murder with the final path, the one he took, sending him to the Grave Garden.

True enough things grew more thematic, painted wooden boards hid anything like the mundane hay, depicting vines and crops stretching to the distance, wrapped around headstones against a dark starry sky.

The prop work didn’t stop there, with some of the dead ends having a foam mockery of a stone set up, painted in grey with the standard smattering of joke names or humorous final words.

Kodi wasn’t alone, either, having to brush past several others before he reached another signposted split in the road. ‘For the easily scared.’ Said one path. ‘For the danger seeking soul. Warning, beware of monsters.’ Claimed the other.

He wasn’t here for a casual stroll. Taking the path which promised spookiness he set off. The decorative wall-boards were raised too high for him to see at that point. Not only was it more atmospheric, but it was far more difficult. Not least because the maze featured ramps that you had to climb down from, forming one way paths. All that was a prelude before he heard a shuffling nearby, an exaggerated sniffing of the air.

The walls were too high for him to see the source yet it sounded like the creature that made the noise was right next to him. The hairs on his neck stood on end as it grunted and then suddenly ran, legs striking the ground rapidly. Kodi explored at a faster pace, trying to keep one side in mind to ensure he eventually conquered the maze yet when he rounded a corner and started down a path, suddenly one of the boards was pushed over, a figure, wide enough to fill

the maze burst through the wall, a snarling toothy expression twisted his way as it let out another bellow and ran for him.

With a yelp the fox fled in the opposite direction, his thoughts broken as instinctive panic took over. Whoever was in the monstrous costume was fast, able to keep pace despite the bulk of their outfit, making disconcerting slathering noises and even closing the distance between itself and Kodi.

His heart was thudding in his chest, panting with the effort as he turned a corner at speed, a short distance away was another corner, if he could make it he might lose sight of the creature. As he neared it a shrouded figure leapt to block the way, letting out a piercing shriek that sent Kodi's heart into his throat! "Gaaah! What th- whaaaah!"

He was forced down the longer path, sighted by the monster and chased once again. The path split to the right and left, one way showing one of the ramps, another a lengthy corridor with more branches. He took a run up the ramp and on seeing a soft mat prepared below, leapt from it. It caught his weight easily but it cost him time. When he stood, the pursuing beast had reached the junction, turning and running to the top of the ramp. It saw him and then stopped, letting out a defeated howl before turning and walking away.

His chest rose and fell, thrilled and spooked by the chase. Though now, quite lost from being herded into an unfamiliar segment of the maze. It would take a lot of thought to figure out quite where he was relative to when the chase began.

With a sigh, he calmed himself and started to explore anew, quickly getting back into the spirit of things. More frights awaited, a few jump scares from walls or if he tried to go down certain pathways, with the most memorable being a hole in the ground, six feet deep... There was no surprise needed to make that eerie. Instead, to pass it he had to climb down a rope on the near side, with a wider rope ladder to get out on the far side. While at the bottom, several reaching skeletal hands grasped at the air.

He didn't know if they were props or actors, but either way it impressed him. With a gulp, he set down, careful not to bump them. They moved on fixed, obvious patterns, props then... one brushed his leg, and continued its regular patrol, proving that.

Only two feet later his assumption was turned on its head; something grabbed his leg! Sudden and unexpected, a real grip. He was quick to step out before he winded in any peril but the shocking surprise of an actual arm sent him scurrying to the ladder, only to have another pair of hands burst out of the walls and make swiping motions at him. With another surprised squeak he clambered upwards, avoiding them by what felt like chance and scurrying onward on hands and knees.

He ran past further signage, more warnings of monsters. To heed their words or be punished. Accompanied by warnings of dangerous dead ends ahead he presumed he must have been in the thickest part of the maze. He'd not seen another explorer for a while, either, come to

think of it. Though he still heard the occasional distant ‘Wahahaha!’ from a jump-scaring performer and the accompanying squeak of shock from visitors.

The scenery had changed gradually, with less plants depicted on the boards and more graves, even open coffins and scarecrows that looked slightly too well defined to be sticks and straw.

He turned a corner, seeing what seemed to be a dead end up ahead with a prop waiting at the end. Rigid sticks with loose ropes, a dismembered straw and cloth arm left behind. He gulped and turned back, not wanting another chase so soon, imagining that there could well be some one-armed scarecrow up ahead.

He backtracked, finding an alternate route and questing down it. Another shuffling filled the air, far heavier, accompanied by a thud of wood every two steps.

Burying his fear he pressed on, this one didn’t sound all that mobile and also seemed to be moving away from him. Still, he moved slowly and carefully, checking corners, slinking through them. A further several minutes of exploration found him reaching a solid corner with no further passageway. A sign hung up, emblazoned with paper skulls declaring it a ‘Dead end.’

Well phooey, he turned back, only to see the way blocked by an imposing sight. A towering robed figure, cowl hiding its head, with two glowing blue eyes shining from the depths. Belts held a pair of tools at its back, a shovel and a crowbar. A lantern hung at its hip with a heavy aged looking book on the other side.

The figure stared straight on and reached behind it, pulling something out. The heavy wooden thud he’d heard revealed as it dropped a six foot open wooden coffin in front of it. “You.... lose.” It said in a deep echoing voice.

“Wh-what do you mean?” Kodi asked, a bit flustered as he stared at it.

“Dead end. You must get in.” It said.

“Hold on now, that... I mean, that’s not a real coffin right?” Kodi asked, looking between the ‘gravekeeper’ and his burden.

“It is in the rules. You must obey. You chose this path. You must suffer the forfeit...”

A forfeit? Well that sounded more ominous than spooky. With a gulp Kodi tried to convince himself it was fair enough. This was obviously a public spectacle of a place so it wouldn’t be too untoward though he wished he’d read the rules a bit closer beforehand.

The coffin seemed deeper than needed, too, which was something of a comfort. It wouldn’t be all that cramped. “Let me guess.” He tried, “You place this somewhere in the park and I have to knock or scratch when people walk past?”

The gravekeeper said nothing, instead waving his hand to the box.

“Alright, that’s what I’ll do.” Kodi asserted, moving to stand inside it. The keeper moved to grab another piece of wood, with Kodi relaxing, thinking it would be the lid, showing him his purpose. Instead the keeper suddenly thrust a shorter piece in place, across Kodi’s arms and belly. A wooden slat which stuck into a groove that he’d not noticed before.

“Huh, what’s this?!” He asked.

The keeper ignored him, taking a small mallet and tapping two wooden blocks to trap the slat in place before another wooden plank was shoved over Kodi’s chest. Tap tap, shove, tap tap shove. The fox squirmed against the solid construction but it was more than sturdy enough to hold him. His hips, his thighs and his shins were all pinned by the wood, revealing why it was so deep. He was stuck!

“Wait, wait, I c-can’t move!”

“I am a fair keeper...” The monster said as it hammered the last blocks home. “You may keep your voice. You have... until closing time.” It said, pausing before adding. “To be rescued...” Pulling the shovel off its back. Dirt caked the dull blade, making it suddenly look very real, concerningly so.

It thrust the blade into the ground beside the walls, before pushing Kodi’s casket into the corner where the sign had been. It dropped the crowbar alongside him before finally retrieving the casket lid.

“And then what happens?!” Kodi asked, feeling more than slightly scared now. He couldn’t even reach into his pocket with how the slats pushed on him.

The figure said nothing, slotting the lid in place. “Then what happens?!” Kodi asked again. Answered only by a thud, thud, thud as a hammer struck the corners of the coffin, jamming the lid, trapping the slats, and ensuring Kodi would not be escaping on his own.

A crack in the lid allowed him to see out just a little, enough for the gravekeeper to put one glowing eye in place and give him a final glance and scrawling something in the book at his hip before he turned and plodded back the way he came.

“Hello? Helllooo?!” Kodi called out, hoping to stop the keeper or be heard by another guest.

He tried to kick, tried to struggle, but he was too soundly confined, dressed in a casket that set his thoughts spinning in fearful directions... he had no idea how much of it was a fantasy. He hoped he’d not made a very grave mistake...