

Jack's Harvest

Nidann whistled nervously as he walked home along the forest path. The sun had descended past the mountain peaks a short time ago so now he walked home on borrowed, but fading, light. The growing darkness gave his fear new life in his mind. Nervously he checked his watch. It was near six o'clock, less than an hour before full darkness.

Trees surrounded him, their branches looming overhead ominously. Here they weren't as thick as they were in other parts of the woods, but still, they obscured anything further than two trees in. The wind picked up and he flinched. His heart raced as he stopped dead in his tracks and listened intently to his surroundings; beyond the rustling of the wind in the trees, silence reigned. After a moment of stillness, he hesitantly continued on his way.

Legends surrounded this night; tales of daemons and witchcraft all centred around this coming darkness. This night was seen as unlucky. All who could stay inside for the duration of the dark because it was said that nightmares could cross over and stalk this realm so long as night reigned. For this night was when the barrier between the world and the darkness was the thinnest. Only inside did it remain safe.

Normally he would have been inside with his family, like just about every person in the valley. But tonight work had kept him out late and he hadn't complained because, of course, those stories were made up. They were only told to frighten small children, or so he continued to tell himself.

It was almost black out when Nidann first noticed the orange glow coming from the forest to his right. At first, he ignored it but the light was persistent and didn't fade away. Instead, it grew larger. A thought crossed his mind and he stopped dead to peer into the woods. Although he couldn't see the light's source the reflected glow flickered and danced across the trees. The light flickered like that from a fire. That worried him; an uncontrolled fire in these woods could burn for ages and take the entire town with it. After taking a deep breath to settle his fears he stepped off the path and strode into the forest. The source of the light wasn't far from the path; within minutes he was within sight.

A bonfire raged in the middle of an old pumpkin patch, this was the source of the light he had sought. Nidann stopped in the shadow of an outlying tree so that he could observe unseen. Before him, old fence posts stuck out of the ground marking the entrance to the patch. Beyond that open gate sat rows upon rows of pumpkins. In the centre of those rows, the fire burned.

A monstrous figure towered over the bonfire; under its dour gaze, the flames leapt higher and higher. A fae light gleamed from the eyes of the jack-o-lantern head atop its narrow shoulders. Tattered cloth

hung loosely from its long narrow arms. Strips of fabric, that Nidann assumed once belonged to a coat, encased the creature's torso; they freely drifted around its arms as it gestured to the shadowed forms surrounding it.

Small figures danced around the fire and creature. Hand in hand they spun chanting around the flames. At first, he thought they were cloaked children but then he caught a glimpse of one of their faces. Glassy eyes stared out from beneath those hoods and light reflected off of pale, too shiny skin. Their features were still enough to have been carved from wood. Indeed their motions appeared wrong as well; their limbs moved stiffly but precisely and without the normal vigour of life.

His curiosity won out over his fear and he crept closer; his eyes intent on the scene before him. What was going on? What was this foul ritual he witnessed?

As the dance continued the trees surrounding the pumpkin patch withered as though the life were being drained from them. Fires began to spring up around the edges of the clearing. All the while the light from the creature's eyes grew in intensity and the figure's dance increased in speed.

"What have we here?" Growled something behind him. The sound of the voice drove shivers down his spine.

He didn't even have time to spin around before a gnarled hand grasped his shoulder and shoved him through the bushes and out into the light. Terrified he froze as the pumpkin's flaming eyes turned towards him.

"You shouldn't have seen this little human," it said harshly as one of its long wooden arms gestured outwards. The small figures turned as one and began picking their way through the pumpkins towards him. Their expressionless faces gleamed madly in the light from the fires in the clearing. Nidann attempted to back away, but the hand returned to his shoulder and held him in place.

"You've just joined us," whispered the voice, "Why would you leave us so soon?"

The small figures were close now. They were close enough now for him to see the texture of their faces. He could see the wood grain slanting across their faces through the thick coat of varnish. They were wooden dolls. As one the dolls raised knives as they approached. Nidann stiffened as he stared at the dolls. Unblinkingly they stared back. Self-preservation kicked in and he broke free of his paralysis; he fought against the hands holding him.

His struggle was short lived.

The creature at his back smashed a fist into the back of his head and the force of the blow knocked him to his knees. Winded, he dropped heavily to the forest floor and the dolls closed in around him.

His screams shattered the air as the dolls got to work.