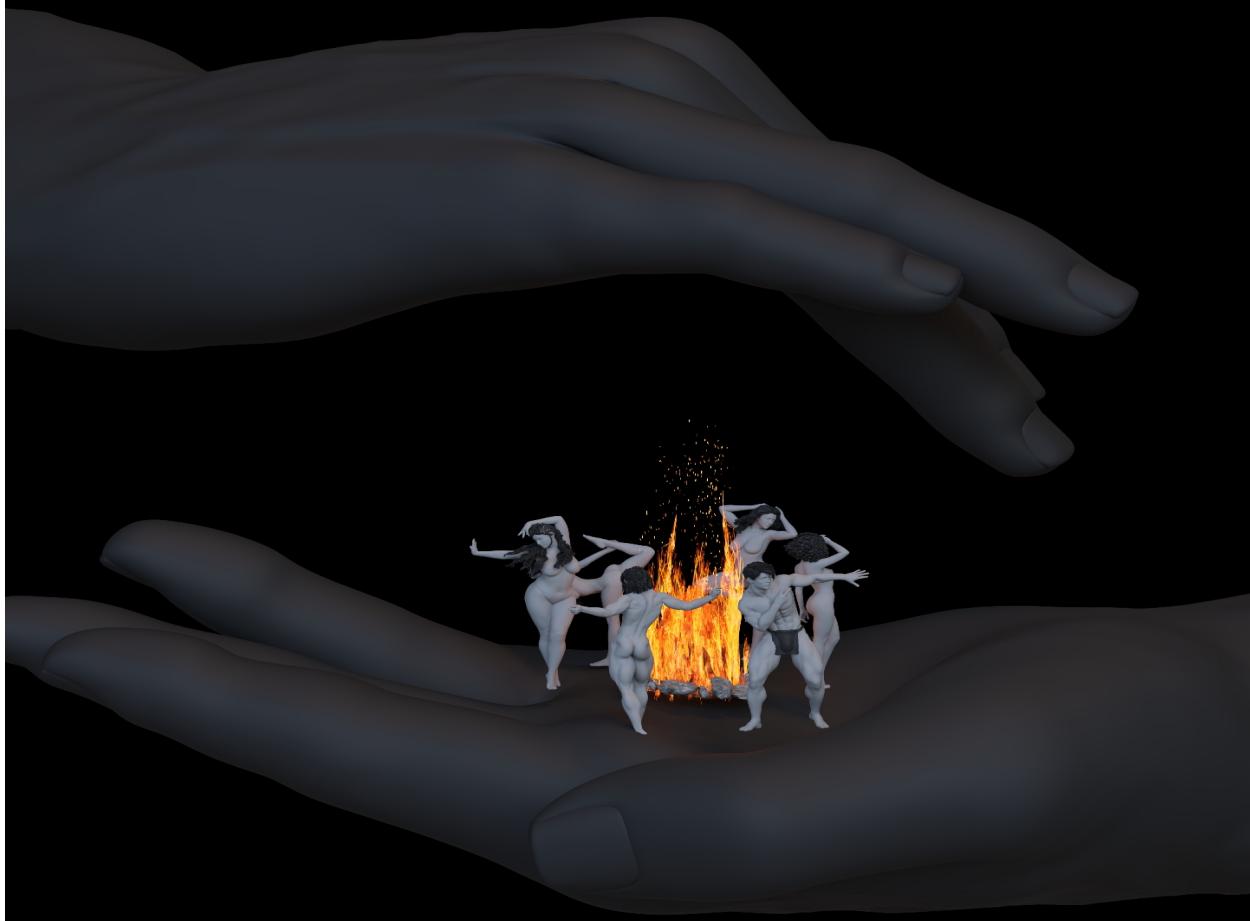


The Tracks in the Woods

by Njord



This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover art by Trent Harlow, <https://www.deviantart.com/trentharlow>

WARNING: This story contains scary situations.

The jack-o'-lanterns on every doorstep watched the caravan pass by, carven faces leering emptily for want of flames to illumine their eyes. Wind hissed through pumpkin teeth, cold as ghosts grasping to drag October into the grave. The roll of tires too quickly through quiet suburban streets sent in their wake little vortices of foliage, the color of fire and dry enough to invite it, even as you could feel the dying season slouching toward winter's embrace. The jack-o'-lanterns left to sit watch after Halloween would be wilted into frost-tipped frowns before long.

Perfect night for a sick kegger!

Each SUV, minivan, pickup, and sports car in the caravan speeding away from the university through the quieter periphery of the college town was full (many to the point of unsafety) of students at varying levels of pregaming inebriation, and the sun hadn't even set. Each had a course set for a clearing in the deep woods, removed even from the usual campgrounds, where the wood for an inferno of a bonfire was already being piled high. This Halloween social was set to eclipse even the previous year's bacchanal as a night of debauchery for the annals of campus history.

And it would.

"It's sooooo nice out here!" Kellyanne twirled through a leaf storm that blew across the clearing. They had all had to walk there from where they parked all the vehicles. She pulled her jacket tighter. "I feel like I'll be able to see my breath tonight."

"Not once we light *this* bitch up," said Ryan, jogging past her to join the guys who had spent much of the day stacking the fuel for the bonfire into a pyramid that cast its shadow over them like a forgotten druidic shrine.

"That looks dangerous," Corrine said, pouting at the sight of the massive structure.

"Speaking of danger," said Janine, tapping her shorter sorority sister on the shoulder, "weren't you the one giving Brynn a ride?"

"Oh. Right, uh, Buh-ryyyyyyn!" Corinne called over the heads of people trickling in from the path through the woods.

“Maybe she went off with one of the guys,” Janine whispered into Corinne’s ear, grinning.

“Un-likely. Ugh, *there* she is.”

Brynn’s unkempt mop came bouncing along, the pale girl hidden under it kicking up piles of leaves in those scuffed flats Corinne had called “unfortunate,” a word she had applied to the rest of Brynn’s outfit, and everyone else had agreed, this having been said in public before they climbed into the back of Corinne’s SUV. Then, unlike most of the time they’d spent in close proximity since grade school, Corinne thought Brynn had been less of an overreacting weirdo bitch than usual, actually accepting some constructive criticism for once, and even now she was smiling when she caught up to Corinne. Not that anyone was keeping track, but it may well have been the first time she hadn’t forced a smile toward the blonde woman since they had met 12 years ago.

“This is such a perfect place,” Brynn said, brushing black bangs out of her gray eyes and gazing with satisfaction at where 90 minutes cramped in the back of Corinne’s SUV had brought her. The claustrophobia and noise of the ride was seemingly forgotten. “Thank you, again, for the ride, Corinne.”

“She was happy to,” Janine said, before Corinne could respond less congenially. The tall brunette flashed perfect teeth down at Brynn. “She knows you’re already thinking of how her essay is going to turn out for Medieval Lit.”

“Small price to pay for admission,” Brynn said.

“Right, because old and weird shit is your specialty, huh?”

“You know it, Jan.”

Janine cocked her head as the little mousy thing went by, ignoring the taller, more attractive people pushing past her. Maybe the certified nerd and freak could be OK to be around for once? She shook the thought out of her head before breaking off to find Dylan (who she still couldn’t believe had chosen to ride there with his friends rather than with her). Freakiness was not only a choice, but a social contagion, and you had to be careful who you let close to you.

The sun was falling fast as a candy into a bucket, the pale unblinking eye of Halloween night’s full moon peering through the cerulean dusk. Tables were unfolded and coolers stationed near them throughout the clearing, maybe an entire college’s supply of alcohol ready to be swigged in one night. People were pitching tents around the edges of the clearing, because by the time it was dark, they would already want the privacy to be available.

Music was playing. Ryan noticed Brynn standing near him—all wrapped in unflattering black and gray, nothing like what girls ought to wear to parties, especially not a hot bonfire—staring at the towering woodpile like she was making up her mind about something.

“I thought Reen was joking,” he said.

Brynn turned to face him, holding a red Solo cup with a drink that Ryan guessed was probably 80% juice.

“About bringing me? Nope, no joke,” she said, “I’ll just owe Corinne for it later.” She looked up at Ryan with a wan smile. “You look nice, Ryan.”

“Yeah, thanks. You look like usual.”

“Oh, but I’m already in costume. I didn’t want to wait for everyone else to get their outfits from the cars before I put mine on.”

Ryan’s eyebrows rose, his arms folded. “You always look like you got dressed in the dark, that’s not a costume.”

“It’ll help me stick out from the crowd once I change out of it later,” Brynn said, finishing her drink in one gulp, and her face made Ryan wonder if it had been even 20% juice. “I’ll see you around, big boy.”

“What the fuck?”

The last shades of pink were draining from the clouds, and it was time. The fire had to be lit.

A match flew from a hand into the dry pyramid and found new life, rising from the earth in a festival of leaping golden-orange-red with a muffled roar almost as loud as the cheer that erupted around it.

“Let’s get this shit started!”

“Turn uuuuup!”

“*It’s Halloween, bitches!*”

Maybe “Love Lockdown” wasn’t the first song most people would put on a Halloween party playlist, but it was the song Corinne and Janine saw everyone dancing to in silhouette before the great fire when they returned from the back of Janine’s car in their complementary angel and demon costumes (Janine clad with infernal red and black, Corinne with heavenly white, but neither clad in all that much). They danced with each other first.

“This is so much better than last year’s,” Janine said, rising from a wiggle that had her ass near to touching the ground. “You’re so lucky this gets to be your first Halloween here, Reen!”

“I’m so happy I got to come!” Reen said, hugging her bestie. “I thought being a freshman might suck.”

“Not with the right friends ahead of you. When I—”

Janine squealed, tugged away by what she thought was Dylan’s strong hands around her waist, only to turn and see Brynn, smiling like she found the cure for being creepy, with one of her scarves slung around the taller woman’s waist.

“You are not at *all* what a demon looks like,” Brynn giggled.

“*What* are you doing?” Janine said, bending over at the waist to talk to the unwanted interruption like a teacher scolding a kindergartener.

“Is this not the *best*?” Brynn said, finishing what the other two girls couldn’t have known was her seventh drink of the night. “I’ve never had so much fun! Even though I ran into Patricia Dorner from middle school and she asked if I was hiding a muffin top under my outfit.”

Corinne snorted and adjusted her halo on its wire. “Well aren’t you?”

“Hah! You wanna see?”

Brynn gyrated toward her in a way that made Corinne hop hastily back; the weird little nobody had never moved like that at any of the school dances growing up, usually clinging to a corner and offering unacknowledged looks to anyone who passed by without a partner. Brynn wriggled out of her gray sweater and tossed it on the grass, shuffling back and forth to the music in a sports bra, sweat shining in the firelight.

“I haven’t changed much since we met,” she said, bouncing against Corinne in a way the blonde had been hoping a football player might. “Though you made me want to a lot.”

Corinne pushed her away and brushed her hands off on a skirt barely there to begin with. “So why don’t you?” she said, her lip curling with disgust.

“I will!” Brynn cried, throwing her hands up to the end of the song and laughing. She started toward the nearest group of dancers nearer to the fire. “Tonight is my night!”

“Freaky,” Corinne muttered to Janine. “If she gets too drunk and embarrasses me, her ass is gonna owe me another paper after this.”

“No wonder she was never adopted,” Janine said. She finally saw Dylan and skipped in his direction, dragging him away from his frat brothers in the middle of finishing a Jagerbomb.

“You owe me a dance,” she said, playfully butting into his chest with her foam horns.

“Do I get something in return?” asked the tall werewolf, pulling his demoness against him so she could feel his rising with the moon.

“Maybe if you’re a good little doggie.”

The moonlight was almost as bright as the bonfire when Patricia and Corinne were distracted from grinding on a Greek god and a pumpkin-headed lumberjack, respectively, by the sight of a dance circle forming around, no bullshit, Brynn Morgan.

The little freak was sure dancing like one. Patricia had a vision of what a spider would look like dancing and shuddered, but no denying it was impressive how fast her stocky legs could move. Her rhythm was a distant cousin to the music, but her serene face and low singing—whatever it was, certainly not the words to “Disturbia,” which was thumping through the clearing—made her seem the guest at a dance party in a neighboring dimension. Brynn threw back her head and addressed the chuckling, pointing onlookers, some of them pulling phones out.

“I know a bunch of you going waaaaay back,” she sang. “I can’t believe so many of you got into college without me doing all your homework, is that not amazing? You all should have thanked me for all the help, but you never did.”

She twisted in midair like a cat and landed with startling ease, muttering more of those weird, barely heard words to herself, then kept shouting to her audience over the din of the music and the voice of the fire, because the whole time she had been moving closer to it, getting closer to the center of the clearing than most of the partygoers.

“I used to hate myself!” she laughed. “I used to hate all of you!”

“Fuck me,” Patricia groaned. “Why’d you bring this gross bitch here, Reen?”

Corinne wanted to sink into the ground.

“But I actually made some friends, and they taught me—Don’t get mad! Get even, and why not have fun doing it?” Brynn took off her sports bra and flung it at the nearest dancer, eliciting whoops from the gawkers. She slithered out of her pants easier than the serpent from its skin, and maybe a few people began to think she should stop getting so near the fire, and maybe some of the girls nudged some of the guys to go drag her back.

None of the guys would admit it, but they were afraid to touch her. The near-naked woman was moving like she was possessed.

Corinne began to start toward her, but the fire was so *hot*, even with the night’s chill, and her eyes caught Brynn’s... it was like she could see straight through them to the fire. But she was close enough to be the only one who heard Brynn when she turned to face the towering blaze and shout:

“Friends, keep your promise! Belial, bless me!”

And Brynn Morgan launched herself, turning, through the air, graceful as any of the costumed cheerleaders, straight into the fire.

Everyone who saw screamed. Brynn did not. Her mouth was open, but if she could have been heard over the logs that burst around her, she would have been heard laughing.

Everyone who didn’t see—most of the few hundred people at the social, including Janine, who had dragged her wolfish boyfriend to the tree line to see what use a demon could make of him under the full moon—kept swigging drinks and dancing, though some were now looking with concern toward what sounded like... screaming? Near the fire?

It was everyone’s turn to scream when the ground rippled and the bonfire collapsed like a Jenga pile.

The fire turned the color of cold moonlight, and before the ghostly light flickered out, all the stunned revelers who weren’t suddenly finding their phones dead saw a smoldering shape rise up and up and up from the ashes.

Who among them didn't think they were insane when they saw the shape was an arm, glowing with heat, its hand reaching toward the black sky as if to scatter the stars? Or when it planted itself on the ground with a boom and began to push, bringing the weight of a cyclopean body out of the smoking, splitting earth as slowly, liquidly, as a shipwreck being winched from a stygian sea?

A head pulled free from the earth and swung back and forth, hair tossing like a willow's moss in a high wind. A deep sucking noise: sniffing. And then...

Mmmmmmm.

Everyone ran.

The giant, dark thing was faster. It stepped over them and strode through the woods with the tallest trees brushing its knees with their topmost branches. It did not stop until one of its immense feet landed on a car and left it a souvenir coin in the dirt. The shape turned about, destroying the rest of the parked vehicles, stooping once to pluck a minivan from the ground and crunch it experimentally between its teeth. The remains of the other vehicles followed

It swallowed, and there was no driving away from the woods.

As slowly as it had risen from the fire, the gigantic shape lowered itself to its hand and knees and started toward the smoking clearing.

Run.

"What the fuck is happening, Dylan?" Janine asked, deeper into the woods than everyone else, with her boyfriend pantsless and chagrined beside her. "We should go back."

"Everyone's fucking screaming and you want to go *towards* that?"

"Something happened, that was like an earthquake. When the fuck do we have earthquakes here?"

The earthquake continued, and no one was fast enough to escape its sweeping hands. None could run fast enough to escape their long, long reach. Those who ran did not look back, so there was no telling why screams would stop as if the screamers simply disappeared.

Corrine ran so fast she could have been flying on her store-bought wings.

They couldn't carry her over the wall of the giant's hand closing around her.

"*Nooooooooo, please, no, please please please, stooooop!*" Corinne screamed herself hoarse.

Shhhhhhhhh.

Corinne's bladder betrayed her at the sound of that voice. She recognized it.

It sounded like something—or many things—pretending to be Brynn Morgan.

Corinne was one of half a dozen terrified bodies writhing in the immense palm as they were brought closer to a face larger than nightmares were supposed to be.

No, she realized before she was gone, that's not what the voice sounded like. It sounded like Brynn Morgan pretending to still be human.

Patricia, as she was carried to the bosom of this dark god of the clearing, felt a memory shove itself unwanted into the trembling center of her mind, felt her new God putting it there Herself: Cornering Brynn Morgan in the girls' locker room after PE in 10th grade, making her show the other girls how much she *hadn't* grown since turning 13, pulling Brynn Morgan's shirt up over her head when she hesitated.

Patricia was laughing. She didn't need to apologize. Her new God would take what She wanted, and all would be forgiven. Patricia was pressed between hot, earthy flesh, and felt utterly un-endowed by comparison. Fair was fair.

Ryan cried soundlessly as he was lifted between legs taller than houses. The smell inverted his stomach. This, too, was fair, but he didn't want to admit it. He didn't want this.

Neither, once upon a time, had Brynn Morgan.

Under the colossal shadow of vengeance, the moonlight could reveal little, but Ryan didn't need much light to make out the sight, unexpected there, of teeth.

"Oh God," Janine breathed. Her throat was as tight as if squeezed by invisible hands. She crouched behind the oak tree at the edge of the clearing and watched them all go. "Oh *God*." She could manage no more, incapacitated by sobs. Dylan thought he would run, but found himself clinging to Janine as if she could keep them both anchored in this world, invisible and inviolable.

The New Shape of Brynn crawled around like an excited child combing a carpet for stray pieces of candy.

Two tasty pieces had rolled toward the woods, and they did not make it much farther in before something's idea of a human shape rose to its feet and charged, one hand reducing to splinters an oak tree they had hidden behind mere seconds before.

Stay.

Janine kept her eyes squeezed shut as she rose through the cold air, so fast she was queasy. Bile in her mouth, a smell like ancient decay wriggling in her nostrils, she opened her eyes and met the ones staring down at her like red twin moons.

"Brynn," Janine barely managed. She wanted to beg, but for what? This dark thing owned her life now. "B-Brynn, please."

Here.

The other giant hand rolled Dylan onto Janine.

Go on. Finish.

The two mortals looked at each other and touched, but with trembling hands.

“I love you,” Dylan whispered.

Good. Lie.

Janine choked on a scream as she pressed her lips to Dylan’s and rolled onto him. The hand holding them was utterly still, unswaying even as the rest of the immense body shifted, as the face loomed even closer and split in a satisfied smile, wider and wider, as much like a shark surging up from the deeps as like the face of Brynn Morgan.

Brynn had been right, Janine realized before she pulled Dylan against her for the last time. Even with horns and a tail, Janine looked nothing like the things that had given Brynn Morgan her new body.

So many students disappeared without a sign that night that any explanation could have passed for convincing. Aliens, terrorists, cultists. But none of those explained what was left behind amid the smoldering grass and smashed bottles of liquor: the footprints.

Deeply impressed in the earth, in a line from the center of the clearing to where cars had been parked and back, were huge footprints, wide enough for three people to stand side-by-side in them. Fewer, and less distinct, were the handprints, as if they had carried less weight.

Doubtless a hoax. A revival of crop circle hysteria. What, had the Jolly Green Giant spirited away hundreds of the state’s youth?

No. Observers pointed and whispered: Count the fingers, the toes.

The tracks had an unplaceable, acrid, burning smell.

It lingers to this day. That clearing is seldom visited by man or beast since that night, and certainly not on Halloween. A few have, and who knows where they are now? Do you? Better to stay away.

But more daring souls (or liars) have said they hid in the woods on Halloween night, out of sight of the barren expanse where bonfires were once an annual tradition, and felt the ground shake, and heard the sound of pleading screams, and a voice like the earth speaking.

I know you’re there, my new friends. Come closer.