

A Blackthorn Journey

In a small, dusty, disorderly antique store, hidden amongst the tangled alleyways of an ancient British town you are touring, you pick up a long dark walking stick from a bin, while meandering through the cluttered aisles of a fascinating assortment of items.

“It’s Blackthorn.” The proprietor informs you, “a fine old British walking stick.”

Intrigued, you purchase the staff, feeling it will be a useful item on your travels, and take it back to your room. Before long, the stick seems to call to you, inviting you to adventure. You pick up the stick and set out.

You are walking along an ancient country track, the path worn by centuries of use - foot, horse, cart, bicycle, much too narrow for an automobile. You’ve passed Hawthorn, Elder, Crab Apple, and now note that the track is hedged solid with Blackthorn trees. You peer at them with interest, noting their crooked branches, and wonder how difficult it is to obtain a straight branch for such a stick as yours.

It is a hot afternoon, and you are tired. You look for a place to rest and have a sip of water from your canteen, and you spy a hedge of Blackthorn, partially hollowed out in one spot, as if someone had sought a prized length of blackthorn branch for a walking stick there.

It offers the only shade in sight, and you nestle in, carefully avoiding the sharp thorns. The air is cooler, inside the hollow, and the very sounds of field and wood are silenced. The hollow casts a shadow of green and dark purplish blue, reflecting the ripening berries. The dark trunks and twisting branches arch in a chaotic pattern around you, and late afternoon turns to dusk, and dusk deepens into night. You drift into a deep sleep.

The sound of the wind awakens you. There is no moon, but the sky is bright with stars. They reflect on the sloe berries, creating tiny stars within the bush.

With the light of the stars reflecting on the star-like berries in the thicket, you continue on the old trackway. There are openings in the hedge now, leading to oblique alternate paths, still hedged by Blackthorn. Your path forward is blocked by an impenetrable thicket, and you choose another path, and then another, and come to realize that you are in the middle of an ominous Blackthorn hedge maze.

The roots of the thorn create rickety bridges over dark, fast moving streams, strange animals with glowing eyes rustle in the undergrowth; with a hoot, the white gleam of an owl flashes by in hunt of its dinner. A hooded raven gazes down at you from an overhead branch, the shape of the black bird melting into

the pattern of the sinister dark tree. You clutch your stick for protection, fearing what might be around the next bend.

Strange objects and shiny baubles occasionally hang from the branches of the murky tree. When you reach for one to examine it, the spiky thorns of the Blackthorn scratch your skin, and you withdraw and move on. The cold wind channels through the high hedges and chills you to the bone.

Ahead, you see a movement, and are paralyzed with fear. Watching warily, you note that it is the flapping of cloth in the wind. You move closer and realize that a dark hooded cloak hangs from the twisted branch of a tree. Gratefully, you pull it free, and wrap its warmth around you. Like the bushes around you, you note glints of shining light woven into the pattern of the dark wool. The subtle light of star, berry and glinting cloak illuminates your way forward.

Another parting in the hedge appears. You investigate and find that it leads to a meadow rather than another path. You seem to have stumbled on the center of the maze. You peer in with trepidation. The glade is surrounded by the baleful thorn trees, crooked limbs moving eerily in the wind. In the center is a low stone well, built with dark gray slabs. Behind you, the wind picks up, moaning through the trees, and a forceful gust pushes you through the opening into the Blackthorn Grove. You look behind you and already the dreadful branches are knitting a thorny thicket, blocking the exit from the glade. Clutching the staff for support, you move to the center, relieved to move away from the close proximity of the pressing trees. You lean down and gather the dark water into your hands. Thirstily, you drink. The water has a strong taste of tonic minerals.

You look up at the night sky, crowded with sparkling stars. Looking around, you note the familiar sparkle in the trees, and even on the ground around the well. You feel a sudden disorientation, as if you were floating in space, surrounded by whirling stars.

You find yourself lying on your back in the middle of the glade next to the well, your staff beside you. You sit up, grateful for the solid earth underneath you. Looking around, you notice that the meadow seems smaller, the trees closer, leaning in toward you. You can barely perceive their roots moving in the earth toward you, carrying the trees along slowly through the rippling ground. For the first time, you realize why the term “to sit upon thorns” is a pseudonym for fear. Terror straightens your spine, rooting you to the ground. There is no escape from these menacing trees.

The approaching trees halt, looming mere yards from you. They seem to lean toward you, in eager anticipation, their sinister branches crackling together. One of the trees detaches itself from the threatening hedge. Its sinewy limbs form a human shape. It approaches you, and by the starry light, you can barely

distinguish its features. As it comes closer, it takes on the form of a darkly robed, ageless, eldritch woman with midnight hair and deep purple-blue-black eyes.

“I am the Fairy Spirit of Blackthorn.” She pronounces majestically. Her voice is low, rasping, but strangely comforting, “The Mother of the Woods, the Crone of the Woods. In the old tongue, I am called *Draighionn*, *Draighean*, and *Draenen ddu* by the Druids. Why have you come to me?”

“I’m, I’m lost!” You stutter, quickly standing up.

“Strange that you should lose yourself in my sacred grove, hidden in the center of the maze . . .” she observes. “I see you’ve found my cloak.”

You slip it off immediately and hold it out to her, shivering in the wind.

“You keep it for now.” She offers kindly.

Gratefully, you pull its warmth around you again. *Draighionn* looks to the staff on the ground.

“I see what has led you here.” She says, reaching out for the staff, and it comes to her hand of its own accord. “Ah yes, a fine, intelligent wood, gathered nearby from one of my hedges.” She hands it back to you. “Keep this with you on your rambles. It will lead wisely and guard you from danger.”

“Why has it led me here?” You dare to ask the regal Blackthorn Fairy. A long, dark sinewy hand reaches out from within her robes and touches your face. The touch is gentle, with the familiar aroma of the flowering Blackthorn tree. She gazes straight into your eyes with her intense dark purple-blue orbs. “You seek *Eòlas Dubh*, the Dark Wisdom. “

Before you can answer, she takes your hand in hers, and leads you to the other side of the glade. An opening in the thicket has appeared, and the path leads uphill, closely hedged by more thorn trees. The roots themselves form a gnarly uneven staircase leading upward. Branches form handholds and rails to pull you along the steep hillside. Soon you are high on a hill, overlooking the vast forest. Beneath you is the tangled blackthorn maze, and beyond are other trees forming their own forests and glades. The dark root-staircase leads ever upward, until the ground itself falls away. The starry bushes are replaced by the stars themselves as the staircase ascends higher still. The earth falls far below you, and the stars appear between the twisting stairs. The dark face of the Hidden Moon glowers below you as you ascend higher still, hand captured in the strong grip of the Crone of the Woods.

At last you reach the apex of the long winding thorn stairs. You see before you a vast dark well, with points of light floating above, approaching the rim, and being pulled into the well, creating comets of light that disappear in the center.

“This is the *Màthair Dubh* – the Dark Mother of All. This is the Well of All Existence. It is through this well that we all pass into darkness, before we are reborn into light.” Draighionn explains. “This is the beginning of all wisdom.”

You peer into the vast well and see yourself falling into its depths. Rather than frightening, it seems familiar, an eerie déjà vu experience. You lean over the thorn banister compelled to come closer to that rim.

“It is not your time,” Draighionn admonishes gently, pulling you back, “But once having been here, you will never fear death in this lifetime.”

She takes your hand once again, and pulls you down the twisting stairway, past the glittering stars, past the sinister Dark Moon who reaches her shadowy hands out for you. Draighionn pulls you along until you reach the ground, and back along the path to her Blackthorn Grove. You both take your rest beside the small stone well, refreshing yourselves with its dark tonic waters.

“With this stick, or any piece of the Blackthorn Tree, you have the key to enter this grove again. There are many lessons waiting for you. Be not afraid of the Dark, for it is your mother.” She says sagely, as her form changes and soon you see that she is a stark wintry blackthorn standing guard over the well. Your mouth drops open in amazement as you witness the tree blossom, black branches covered with tiny shining white flowers, and you hear her voice once more, “Light is born of darkness.”

It is near dawn, and the stars begin to pale. You turn, and see the opening in the hedge you had traversed through what seems like ages ago. You leave the meadow, looking back to see the meadow fade with the stars, and the hedge closes its thorny branches. The old familiar trackway leads you back to town.