

## **The Lunantishee**

In an old trunk in the dim, dusty attic, or dank basement of your aging mother's home, she has kept the long forgotten treasures of your childhood. On a whim, you decide to sort through them, and relive some of those long ago carefree days.

You sort through old toys and games, torn costumes, dolls, stuffed animals, wooden blocks, and tin soldiers. You leaf through favourite childhood books with half forgotten pictures of literary adventures. At the very bottom of the trunk you find a dark, old, well worn stick, its varnish scratched with use. You pick it up and examine the stick closely, bringing your flashlight to bear on it, half remembering that it was once your chief treasure, prized above all else, even those most extravagant toys, then lost in the fading memories of childhood. Holding the stick in your hands, you close your eyes and the old familiar feelings come back and wash over you – a feeling of curiosity, excitement and wonder, an adventure about to begin.

Opening your eyes again you are astonished to find that you are no longer in your mother's home, but deep in the familiar woods that used to surround your family's home. You can hear the sound of crows cackling in the trees, laughing at you as they did many years ago. Stepping on a twig, you look down toward the ground, and are suddenly disoriented, the ground is closer than it should be. Then you realize that you are smaller, in fact, as you look at your hands in amazement you realize they are a child's hands. You have stepped into your own past.

The afternoon sun sparkles through the late autumn branches, as you follow the ancient pathway through the woods. You remember the rickety bridge over the slow rocky creek, and notice a fork in the path that rises to a low hill. You don't remember the hill, and are hesitant to leave the familiar path, when once again, you hear the rasping voices of the crows taunting you, daring you to climb the mysterious mound.

With the exhilarating energy of a child, you bound up the twisting path toward the apex of the hill, then stop short as you peer out between two boulders at the crown. Three twisting trees are swaying together, although there is no breeze. The teasing ravens fly low above the trees, and a branch reaches out to capture the bird, misses, and a shrill laughter is heard. The crow cackles in response and the dance between birds and trees continue, as you watch, crouched behind the rocks, in utter fascination.

Three eerie voices weave together, with the crows calling above, forming a strange cacophonous song:

*We are the Sacred Three*

*From the Tribe of Lunantishee  
Guardians of the Blackthorn Tree  
The Mother of the Wood!*

*Cross not our spiked hedge, we warn,  
We can slay by the prick of thorn  
Death comes with the flesh we've torn,  
The Warden of the Wood!*

*The tree of Druid, Witch, and Mages  
Offers wisdom through the ages  
Ancient lore of Faerie Sages  
The Crone of the Wood!*

Abruptly the song stops, and all three creatures lift their arboreal heads, and seem to sniff the air. The crows cackle ominously, and you feel a thrill of fear, remembering their threat, "*We can slay by prick of thorn . . .*"

You begin to back down the hill, but it is too late. Before you can take another step backwards, with a rush of crackling and clacking, you find yourself pinioned between three pairs of long, sinewy dark arms. You blink and look at the amazing creatures that have captured you.

At first glance, they look like oddly twisted bushes, but a closer look reveals their almost human shape under the foliage. Their skin is dark and leathery, their eyes a strange dark colour somewhere between midnight blue and deep purple, their expression sinister. Their rough heads are covered in small dark green leaves, with an occasional delicate five-fold white flower.

"Look!" The taller one says, pointing to your hands, "He holds a key!" The old wand is still grasped in your small trembling hand.

"I remember you." Rasps the taller tree spirit, leaning closer, peering into your face, the strange smell of leaf and loam heavy in your nostrils. And suddenly you remember a time long ago, when you first travelled in these woods, that a strange twisted twiggy creature had given you a gift, a key, to keep you safe, and bring you back to their secret realm. You had thought it a strange dream, until the next morning you discovered that you still had the mysterious wand. Many an hour had been spent in the wood searching for the strange creature, occasionally capturing a glimpse, a sound, an odour, feeling a gentle touch on the shoulder. When youth had faded, the memories of those magical moments faded too.

"You've returned to us!" the creature laughs, and the three dance around you gleefully once again singing their peculiar song, the crows clattering and swooping above. The strange dark fairies offer you a bittersweet drink made

from the sloe berries, served in a dark wooden cup carved from the bole of an ancient blackthorn. The drink, though bitter, is bracing and energizing. You enter into their dance with vigour, grasping their hard, dry, twig-like hands.

The afternoon begins to darken into dusk, and at last the three *Lunantishee* cease their revelry. "Dark is coming, and these parts can be dangerous." The smallest fairy warns. The middle fairy cautions, "The Night Hag prowls the moonless night, and she is hungry." And the tallest one declares, "We must see you home, and quickly!"

Once again, three pairs of sinewy hands grab you, and you are propelled swiftly down the path, racing the deepening dusk for home. At the edge of the wood dark has fallen, and you hear a harsh, shrill cry from within the wood. The tree spirits give you a hard shove and you stumble out of the wood into your mother's back yard. Looking back you see three still, dark blackthorn bushes standing sentinel along the path on the edge of the forest. A harsh cold wind emanates from the woods, accompanied by a sinister moan, and you turn and flee toward the house.

Your mother is still sitting at the kitchen table, "Like some coffee, dear?" Surprised you look toward your feet and realize that the ground has receded, and you are a grown man once again. "Love some," you tell her.

"Where did you find those?" Your mother inquires, looking at your hands. And you realize that you are grasping the blackthorn wand in one hand, and the strange wooden cup in the other. "In the woods . . ." you answer her.