

The Door of the Druids

It is the sixth day after the first new moon following the Midwinter Solstice. A sacred time, when the Druids of old would climb into the majestic oak trees to gather their most sacred plant – the mistletoe.

You have been looking forward to this night for many years. Fascinated with Druids since childhood, you have attended every available class, workshop, and festival on the subject, read every book, and even joined a marvelous order that offered a correspondence course. Tonight was the night of Druidic self initiation, and you have chosen a difficult task, to obtain a cluster of mistletoe from an ancient oak tree, deep inside the woodland estate, performing the act as close to the ceremony of old as possible. (After much thought you have decided to leave out the sacrifice of the twin white bulls.)

You don a ceremonial white tunic with Celtic knotwork embroidery to represent the ancient white robes of the Druids. You grab your knapsack and take off from your cottage, leaving the village in which you live behind and making for the surrounding forest. Snow crisps the ground, and you crunch through the drifts, allowing your intuition to guide you to the rare Scottish oak tree you had already discovered in the deep Caledonian wood. A raven flutters before you with a wild caw of warning. You spy the great shape of the wintry oaks, silhouetted against the snow. As you draw closer, you can see the mistleberries glistening above you in the dim moonlight.

You throw up a stout knotted rope over a lower branch of the massive tree. You manage to shinny up the rope, bracing your feet against the knots and pulling yourself up knot by knot until you reach the first bough. You climb into the center of the tree, then pull yourself up bough by bough until you are within reach of the lowest cluster of the “holy wood”, its berries shining bright as stars amongst the dark green leaves.

From within your backpack you produce a small sickle shaped knife, which has been gold plated, and a large white linen scarf. You tie the four corners of the scarf around the mistletoe, tying it off below the stem connecting it to the wood of the oak. Then, with the sharp sickle, you begin to saw at the stem, uttering the sacred chant honoring the holy plant in the ancient tongue of the Gauls:

Uil-ioc! Draoidh-lus!
Sùgh an Daraich!

With a final saw, the stem snaps free, and you quickly grasp the linen bag before it falls to the ground below. Carefully, you place the linen bag inside your knapsack and begin your careful descent to the ground.

As you lower yourself, knot by knot, you hear something – the deep metallic

chiming of a bell. You look around for the source, but see nothing but a forest of winter bare trees and evergreens. The chime sounds again, and the oak shudders with the sound. With a jump, you land on the ground and crouch on all fours staring warily around you. And again, the bell sounds its deep call. Finally you look behind you, and realize the sound is coming from the oak itself!

Looking closely at the oak, you note something you hadn't seen before. A portal shaped outline of light glowing in the deeply grooved bark at the base of the trunk, with an oddly shaped hole in the middle. A door in the oak? Then you remember that the word *Door* is linked to the old Gaelic word for oak – *Duir*. Tentatively, you approach the door and put your hands on the rough bark and push. It is solid, and does not budge. You put your ear up to the trunk, and you can hear noises, as if there was an assembly on the other side of the door. You look inside the bright spot in the middle of the door – something like a keyhole, and your eye is dazzled by the light. You withdraw, frustrated. What you need is a key. A key that will open the oaken door.

Sùgh an Daraich!

Then you remember the translation: “The sap of the oak”, “the darling of the oak”- Mistletoe. You reach inside your knapsack, and untie a corner of the white linen bag. Your hand finds a loose twig of mistletoe and you pull it out. The white berries gleam against the dark green leaves perched on a crooked golden brown stem. Taking your “key” to the doorway, you insert the stem in the oddly shaped hole, and it suddenly swallows the sprig whole, and with another chime of the bell, the light outline around the portal widens and the door opens.

Looking inside the door of the oak you see a vast hall. But glancing around the tree, your mind boggles, for it is no bigger than any other oak. Between the threshold of the tree and the forest, space itself seems to have warped, and you are looking in on another world. Gingerly, you step through and move forward. Glancing back for reassurance, you note that the door is still open, and you can still see the familiar forest outside.

It is a hall unlike any you have ever seen before. The walls are a dark aged oak, and a wooden staircase spirals upward around the walls and disappears into the darkness above. The stairs continues spiraling downwards as well, it's railing taking its shape from the knotted root of the oak, and a burnished oaken floor is a circle suspended between the vast upper chamber and the mysterious underground. You note glowing lights from niches in the walls, giving the interior a sparkling, star-like quality.

Finally, you pull your eyes away from the strange twisting stairs, and look towards the center. There resides a large, thick, glistening oaken table on stout legs. Simple wooden stools are pulled under the table. The table is full of light, at first looking like brilliant lanterns placed around the table. You realize that is the

light which nearly blinded your eye as you looked in the keyhole. You creep closer and note that the table is inlaid with strange and marvelous designs – Celtic knots, mystical creatures, bizarre flowers, sun, moon, and star-like designs, and more. But looking at the brilliant lanterns, you realize that they are not lanterns at all – but shaped glass. As you gaze at the largest one of these brilliant orbs, your eyes adjust to the light and finally you are able to discern its true shape – it is a finely crafted skull, made from quartz crystal. In astonishment, you observe that there is a circle of twelve crystal skulls on the table.

Again you hear the bell, its deep tones seeming to come from both above and below, reverberating against the walls, as if the tree itself were the bell.

And then you hear the sound of voices, talking in low tones. Male and female voices, coming from all around, yet you could see no human beings, or even forest spirits.

“*Cò tha seo?*” You hear a voice whisper, and another answers, “*Chan aithne dhomh.*” Then there is silence once again.

“Who’s there?” you ask timorously. “I can’t see you!”

“We are all around you.” Comes a voice nearby. Looking down at the table, you find yourself staring into the crystalline orbs of the largest of the quartz skulls, and realize that the sound is coming from the stone.

“You can talk!” You exclaim in astonishment.

“Of course we can talk. It is all we do.” The voice responds evenly. Though no part of the stone jaws move, the sound is unmistakably coming from within its recesses. A buzzing of voices commences, and you realize the voices are coming from all the stones. Looking up at the walls, you realize the shining lights are yet more crystal skulls, their lights gleaming far above your head like stars until they disappear into the darkness above.

“But, who are you? Where am I? What is happening?” You blurt out in avid curiosity.

You hear the merry sound of laughter swelling around you, and with it, your apprehension lightens. These creatures cannot hurt you, they are stationary, whereas you have two legs, that can still carry you through the open door back to your own world. You look back and note with relief that the door is, in fact, still open. But you are still too curious to retreat.

“You have found the key to *Talla Drùidhean*, the Hall of the Druids.” The nearest skull tells you. “The key, of course, is *Draoidh-lus*, the Druid’s herb – mistletoe.”

Another glistening skull adds, "This is our mid-winter assembly."

"Assembly of who?" You insist.

"We've already told you." A citrine colored skull exclaims rather peevishly.
"Druidhean. We are the spirits of the Druids of Old. As Celts, we have always venerated skulls. What better form for our spirits to reside in?"

Stunned, you look around you at the skulls, the lights disappearing above you, the glow coming from the stairs leading underground. "You're all trapped here?"

Again, the laughter. "Trapped, no." patiently the largest skull explained, "The old tale that Nimüe trapped me inside a tree isn't exactly true."

"You're Merlin?" You whisper, flabbergasted.

The crystal flashes in the affirmative, "I am called *Meirneal* in this part of the world."

A delicate rose quartz skull next to him answered, "The truth is, we retired here. By the way, I'm Nimüe, but the Druids once called me Nemetona. And you?"

You hesitate in confusion, your head spinning, then remembering your manners you stammer your name.

"And all these others?" You indicate the glistening orbs in the niches above you.

"All the Druids of Albion," Meirneal tells you, "have come to rest here. Every region has it's own assembly."

"But you have come to be initiated, haven't you." Nemetona states. "There is a seat for you at our table tonight."

You note that one of the stools has been drawn out, and there is an empty place at the table. You look down at the ornately carved wood and notice your own totem inlaid in the wood. The highly polished surface reflects your image back to you, and for an instant, you see can see through the skin, not to bone, but to a crystal matrix within.

The ceremony is short, but profound, witnessed by the sparkling orbs of colored light – the skulls of Druids past. Before the end, you have been given a new name, known only to yourself and the crystal skulls.

"What gift have you brought us?" Meirneal asks.

You hesitate, then remember to look inside your knapsack, and draw out the

white linen bag. You unfasten the ends and pull out the bough mistletoe, laying it carefully on the outspread linen cloth.

“You couldn’t have chosen a more appropriate gift.” Nemetona’s pink surface gleams at you in approval.

“You can always come back to us when in need. We are your guides in this life, and your companions in the next.” Merneal advises you, “*Where Mistletoe meets oak, there you will find a portal.*”

“But for now, you must go back to your own world. We have left you a gift at the door.” The light in the skulls have begun to dim and you realize that you must withdraw. You bid your farewells and make your way back to the oaken portal, which has remained open. Outside, the stars still sparkle in the night sky, the six day old moon is still high overhead. It seems that no time had passed at all.

You step outside and look back at the tree. No light outlines the portal, it is once again a winter bare oak tree. But hanging from a low bough is a small bag. A gift for you. Even in the dim light, you can see what they bestowed upon you as you emptied the contents of the green silk bag into your palm – a sprig of mistletoe, an acorn, and a tiny delicate clear quartz skull.

