

Josh Stead-Dorval  
The Calling

“Gather around! It is time for The Calling!”

With great mummering, the people of the village gathered in the downtrodden square, a grotto surrounded on all sides by overgrown buildings. The evidence of life was contradictory here: the village had been overtaken by plants, no effort was given to upkeep the old buildings, birds and pests ran rampant; and yet, the people here lived each day of their lives in these places, worked to protect them in this decrepit state, and thrived. The need for the material was in the Old Way, which had died many years ago.

Five figures stood at one edge of the square on a small dais. These were the Elders of the village. No one knew of their true identities. They hid their faces behind long wooden masks, and each wore bright and beautiful robes of different colors: red, orange, yellow, blue, and purple. Next to them was a humble wooden table, on which rested another mask and vibrant, beautiful green robes.

All in the village, adults and children, looked at the table with fierce envy and desire. The children knew they were to compete for that mask and that robe, the adults knew what was truly at stake.

In the middle of crowd, a thin boy with curly, brown hair, no older than eleven or twelve, eyed each of the five Elders and studied their masks. Each one was identical, carved with images of the Gods - the Hawk, the Dog, the Fly, the Deer, the Owl, and the Cat – surrounded in runic symbols and delicate swirls. The mask on the table was exactly the same, down to each carving, rune, and pattern. The boy leaned forward, focusing on the masks’ details, and accidentally

stepped on the baker's foot, who yelped in pain. The baker's wife turned and admonished the boy,

"David! It's a bad omen to be so careless on a day like today. Apologize to my husband."

Before David could offer his apologies, his father – one of the local lumberjacks, a broad-shouldered, pious man – stepped towards the baker's wife and spoke for him,

"Amelia, please forgive my son, but your husband must also be wary of his feet today."

Amelia bristled but found no malice in his tone.

"I suppose you are right, Tomas. The Deer be with you," she replied, frowning at David before turning to face the dais once again. David bowed his head in shame, and Tomas placed finger under his chin to lift his head up.

"A final lesson. Don't let your focus drift, my son, not today. Steady on and calm yourself, you know what to do."

"Father, do you think each of the Elders represents a different one of the Gods? Like the Elder in Blue could be the Cat, or the Elder in Yellow could–"

"The Elders are the Elders. The Gods are the Gods." David rolled his eyes as Tomas quoted the New Way, but he hugged his father anyway.

Tomas eyed the dais with apprehension. He and Emma had trained their son for this day since he could walk. They knew the Calling would happen, but for it to be announced so suddenly was unexpected. Tomas closed his eyes and thought of his wife. He wished she was here to see this day.