

Shadow Walker

by Ricardo Federico

On the trail tonight the wind stirred and the trees whispered. A raven swooped low, the beat of its sable wings hard upon me as I limped through another league, the ragged scar on my ankle ablaze with fever. All else faded and the fell voice of the wind spun a sparse tale. Alone I was, forgotten and forsaken — loosed upon this world as surely as a plague. That same wind sundered the clouds to reveal a swollen, pocked moon, and a shaft of nacreous moonglow doused the ground before my feet. Night became day and back again in the span of a heartbeat, the familiar strangeness of the sudden change stinging like dust in the eye. I looked and the trail marched off before me to the horizon, tunneled between thick stands of alder, hackberry and ash; I looked again and the trail was swallowed in a blackness so deep it chilled the soul. Another heartbeat, another span of eternity, and the milky light of that bloated moon coated all before me, like ice older than stone.

This is the walk I must make. Tonight, tomorrow, the night after, and as long as it takes for the Rending to come. For only then will the elements call me, take me — sing into me the only life there is beyond the toil of this empty road. And yet — even as anticipation waxes and yearning burns within me — the wind calms, the moon's swollen girth shrinks, and the stones settle beneath my feet. Not tonight. Alas, not tonight.

So it goes, as it always has. The voices echo, the clouds roil, the raven swoops low. I am walking, ever walking — unable and unwilling to stand still lest the dirt floor and stone walls of my haunted memory close me in once more. And always I am watching the sky, sniffing the air like a beast, waiting for the moment when the damnable, fragile shell of this world will crack and I can slip through. When the husk of the man falls away to reveal the real thing beneath.

