

**The
First Man**

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Cover illustration by Ryohei Hase

Mom and Dad
It's not much, but this book is for you.

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ONE

My name is Adam, and I am the First Man.

I was formed from dirt and mud and shit and have walked the Earth ever since. You might've heard my story. Of course, like most good stories, it is a lie. Eden, Eve, the Serpent and everything that came after; fiction stitched from rags of fact. A story designed to hide the truth: that I am this world's greatest mistake. And by inference, so are you.

I apologize if this is different from what you have been told. Kaliyah says people don't like the truth. He says it is better to lie and make someone happy than it is to tell the truth and make them sad. By his own admission, Kaliyah is both a liar and a cheat. But that doesn't mean he's wrong.

The truth is a weapon of subtraction. It takes from you. Often in fractions so slight you barely notice them. Children know this better than most: Santa Claus does not exist. You are not special. Your parents are not the people you grow up thinking them to be. Tiny truths that forever rob you of the fulsome happiness only ignorance can provide. Each new piece of knowledge ages you, abrades the very girders of your soul. And so you bury yourselves in lies, shoring up your days with as many empty promises and false hopes as it takes to make them bearable.

This is all my fault. Hubris perhaps, but the truth nonetheless.

• • •

I do not like your cities. They are too big and filled with too many people. And yet, paradoxically, they are too small to contain the hopes and dreams squeezed into them.

I stand at a corner. Around me people huddle together. Desperation and denial and apathy jammed into suits and blouses, fear and confusion in glossy heels and casual flats. All of them bound and held together by nothing more than the gossamer promise of "tomorrow".

They get as close as they must without having to acknowledge one another. Lives hidden behind distant stares and averted gazes. They might be together, but they are always alone, nothing more than background noise, as much a part of the city as its buildings and cars and pollution. Across the street, amongst the tangle of people—shuffling problems gathered at the corner—a father and son hold hands and wait for the light to cross.

The child is happy. He does not know why he was pulled out of school early or why his father has taken the day off work to spend with him. Nor does he care. What he knows is that it's been a day filled with pizza and ice cream and rollercoaster rides. It has been one of the best days of his short, young life.

He does not know that earlier in the morning, while he was learning how to add and subtract, his mother was thinking of him as blood filled her lungs and the weight of her mangled BMW pressed down on top of her, or that his father has spent the day trying to decide how to tell him that his mother is dead. He doesn't see the sadness in his father's eyes or the pain in his smile.

I know this as you know the winter is cold and the night is dark. The truth is an easy thing to see, but a hard thing to accept. And so you choose not to. You pretend not to see just like you pretend the person standing next to you does not exist.

The light turns green and people flood into the street. The boy smiles at me as we pass and in that moment I want to hold him. To snatch him up and protect him from a universe that is random and cruel. Instead, I look away. It was not supposed to be this way. In another time I might've tried to help. In another time I did. A mistake I do not intend to repeat.

• • •

It is the middle of the afternoon, the perfect time to be in a bar. Later, it will be crowded and noisy. It will reek of tobacco and sweat and desperate need. Now, though, it is quiet. It is a place you can sit and think and be alone with other people. The fewer the better.

Today there is just the one.

He is young by your standards, not yet thirty. His clothes are clean and unassuming, his hair neat and short. Polite and attentive to the needs of others, he has lived a good life. It is a rare thing to see and my glance lingers longer than it should.

I regret it immediately.

I cannot read your minds. But it is a simple thing to know what you are thinking. I have watched mankind for thousands of centuries and you have changed very little in that time. The lies you tell shade your existence. Just as one might tell the time of day by the direction of a person's shadow, I can tell what you've done and what you still intend to do.

He sees me staring and smiles reflexively. It is a warm, hopeful smile. He is a good person and I wish I had looked away sooner. But it is too late. I already know that he is going to rape his next-door neighbor.

I know it without trying to.

I cannot see the future. The vagaries of human lives—your fears and doubts and indecision—make the minutiae of your days impossible to predict. But just as the position and angle of the sun determines the length of a shadow, the trajectory of your lives is readily apparent in the truths you tell and those you do not.

She is friendly. She talks to him when they see each other in the hall. She doesn't own a cat, but her cupboards are filled with packets of pet food that she gives to the strays loitering around her building. She is kind. But she has terrible taste in men.

He doesn't approve of her boyfriends. They're the wrong kind of men for her. He doesn't understand why she doesn't see that. When they're done with her and she is left broken and crying, he is always the one who helps her pick up the pieces. He is the one who holds her and tells her everything will be all right. He is the one who fixes her.

But this time, when she is curled in his arms and her tears again stain his shirt, he will heal her. He will make her see. He will kiss her. And she will kiss him back and in him she will find the comfort and love she has yearned for and he is able to give.

He doesn't want to believe that she will reject him. But she will. And in his surprise and pain he will force himself onto her, pinning her arms with his hands and muffling her screams with his tongue. He will think of all the rejection and torment he has suffered. And for what? For being a good person? For being caring and respectful and kind to people who don't deserve it, for whom virtue is a thing to ridicule, a source of amusement? He will hurt her.

And when his rage is spilled he will stand and leave without saying a word. The guilt will consume him. He will walk past his apartment and up the stairwell that has stunk of piss and garbage since the day he moved in. He will emerge on the roof of the apartment

building and there in the darkness, alone and afraid, he will commit himself to the streets below.

It's possible the universe will intervene in some way. One of her suitors might propose to her. He might take a job in a different city. Blind luck might spare one or both of them. But I doubt it. Tragedy is a train wreck, relentless and inevitable.

There is no stopping it.

I should tell him that it's not worth it. Make him understand that God has a plan. Explain to him that life is precious and should not be wasted. Any of the fragile fallacies you gather around yourselves for comfort would do. But I cannot lie.

I finish my drink and leave.

• • •

I do not ride in elevators. I stay away from the subway. I avoid hospitals; waiting rooms of any kind, really. I stand in line only when necessary. Your secrets are petty and shallow and I do not care to see them.

I like to walk. Outside, people are on the move. They have places to be and are intent on getting there quickly. They barely notice me as they hurry past and my eyes slide over them as they go by. As long as I do not linger I can avoid their ugly truths. Their lives are still there, always there, but they are faint and inconsequential, like the hummed words of a distant song.

It's cold on the street. The darkening sun glints off the taller buildings above, but the light doesn't reach down here. *Sometimes it feels like it never has.* It's getting late. In a few hours people will pour out of offices and jostle their way to bars and restaurants and homes where they will seek distractions in alcohol and TV and one another's arms—fleeting respite from the slow grinding monotony of their days. I want to be indoors by the time that happens.

I walk faster. My eyes turned downward, away from the billboards and the promises—Love! Wealth! Beauty!—they scream to the people below. A melting pot, you call it, and I suppose it is. The prejudice and phobias of polite society baked into every corner of the city even as it fades from the faces of those within. Insincerity alloyed with guilt or greed to produce facades of untarnished brilliance. Fool's-gold smiles. It would be infuriating if it weren't so heartbreaking.

"Spare some change!" barks a homeless woman as people move past. It is more a command than a question. They hurry along, doing their best to ignore her. One or two slow down long enough to toss coins into a tin cup as though it were a wishing fountain and each soft clink an unspoken wish: *Please don't let me end up like her.*

She smiles when she sees me. A true smile. In my shaggy beard and dirty clothes she sees a kindred spirit. Someone who will look at her without pity in his eyes, who will *see* her. A brief reminder that she is not alone. But like them, I avoid eye contact. Her problems are hollow echoes of an endless chorus of pleas and I have long since grown deaf to them. I drop a crumpled hundred-dollar bill into the cup and keep walking. I do not need to look back to see the astonishment pull her eyes and mouth into wide circles.

The money will not help her, but it will blunt the edges. A new pair of shoes, a warm meal, cannabis or heroin or whatever else she needs to keep the uncertainty and fear at bay. The pain of life, its promise unfulfilled, will kill a person just as readily as the cold or an empty belly.

My stomach growls just then and I realize that I'm hungry. I don't often eat, so it's an easy thing to forget. I can go for weeks without food, but when the hunger comes I need to eat or the pain will quickly become unbearable.

Up ahead, under a sign pointing toward a nearby subway stop, is a hot dog cart that has seen better days. JERRY'S RED HOTS! YOUR #1 CHOICE! screams the sun-faded lettering. The yellowing umbrella and rusting metal undermine the bold printed proclamation but there is no queue so the decision is an easy one. I place my order without looking at the man behind the cart. Scooping up the loose change, he gets to work, trying to make small talk. I ignore him and he quickly gives up.

On more than one occasion Kaliyah has called me rude. He thinks I should make more of an effort to engage with people. He seems to believe it would be good for me, that in doing so I might come to accept your failures and understand my own. He might have a point but then he's never had to deal with the knowledge that the man making his hot dog urinates in a bottle he keeps next to the containers of toppings he uses.

I would wager that this is one of the least disgusting facts about this man, but that is a bet I do not care to win. And so I stare at my feet while he prepares my food. There is nothing particularly interesting about my shoes—Italian leather, hand worked, worn and frayed through years of good use—but given the choice between them and the hygiene habits of Jerry, the shoes win every time.

There are few things mankind can claim to have improved over the centuries. Advancements have been made certainly, but that is not the same as making something better. I will say this, though. Shoes are one of those things. I have walked the length of this world, have worn everything from clogs to kamiks, and can promise you that there are few things as valuable as a good pair of shoes.

I am pondering this when I feel the cold skitter-scratch of insects swarm past me. A dead tongue revulsion on the back of my neck that is there one instant and gone the next. The sensation sets my pulse racing. My eyes dart over the people flooding the street. The familiar drone of soft, boring lies washes over me as I skip over people lost in worlds of their own creation. They talk on phones and listen to music. They read email and play colorful, derivative games, anything to avoid engaging with the people around them. *You are mistaken* says the voice in my head. The notion is warm and pleasant and one that I find all too easy to accept. Their greedy, adulterous lives tug at the edges of my vision, begging to be seen. I start to turn from them, eager to return to my life of just a moment ago, secure in the knowledge that I was wrong. *Yes, just a trick of the mind.*

No.

One of them is doing none of those things. One of them is weaving purposefully through the crowd. One of them is covered head-to-toe in lies. I do not wish to know your secrets. But then, *your* secrets are harmless; selfish little deceptions that ripple through the lives around you and vanish, never felt by the world at large.

This woman is different. She swarms with untruths. They crawl and buzz and slither around her, an armor of deceit. It is a simple thing to see your lives, but hers is a dark void. An emptiness, cold and hollow and starker than the lives around it.

I shut my eyes against the path forming before me. I focus on the smell of mustard and pickles and let the knowledge drift away. *I don't have to do anything.* I can eat my hot dog and leave. Another minute and she will be gone, lost to the city and its endless well of problems. "Not my problem," I chant quietly to myself, a mantra that has served me well in years past. I say it over and over but it's no use. The decision has already been made.

I grit my teeth and step into the bustling solitude of the crowd. Jerry shouts something, and my stomach rumbles in response, but I am already being swept along with the flow of people, dragged down the street by the swirling currents of their lives.

Around me, people jostle for space. Voices swirl and churn in the stale air, a frothing pain in my skull. My head is spinning, my stomach a pit of lava. Gnawing distractions that I shove aside. I focus on her.

She is neither tall nor fat and has a pleasant, forgettable face. She wears jeans and sneakers, the uniform of the non-descript. But these are inconsequential details. Trivialities anyone can see.

I tug and scrape at the edges of her life, searching for a loose thread. Some strand to pull at to unravel the cocoon of lies she has spun around herself. But there is nothing to see. *What are you doing here?* is what I want to say. Or, *where are you going?* But I draw no closer.

Instead, I follow and observe. Watching her first as a reflection in a passing window and then as a vague blur in the polished chrome of a trashcan and, later still, as a dim flicker in the light of a glaring LCD panel. I see her a hundred ways in a hundred places, mirrored again and again in the faceted surfaces of the city.

And as I watch her features seem to grow sharper, her eyes more severe, and in those moments a peculiar familiarity scratches at the edge of awareness. *Could it be?* But an ill-timed blink or a momentary distraction later and her face is once again that of a soft and unremarkable stranger.

She makes her way through the city, from Faris Heights to Marston to Gurney, and I follow. The streets grow narrower and as they do the crowd starts to thin, swallowed by the many mouths of the city. People disappear through doorways and into waiting cars and buses. They disperse down side streets and lose themselves in the concrete folds of buildings.

Before long we are alone. She doesn't stop. Doesn't look back. But as she rounds a corner our eyes meet and I catch the faintest hint of a smile. A dreadful thought rises amongst the clamoring quiet. *She knows I'm here.* Has probably known since I first saw her. She turns off the street then, disappearing through an old, rusting metal door.

Let her go, I tell myself. I should keep walking. Past the door and the abandoned building it's attached to, back to my life. *But I need to know.* Like the craven addict desperate for the hot sting of a needle, I let the creeping need consume me. By the time I have made up my mind I am not surprised to find myself already stepping through the door and into the darkness beyond.

• • •

Lilith.

With her shoulder-length hair and cocoa skin she looks different than the last time we met, different than even just a moment ago, but I recognize her all the same. Her eyes, ancient and knowing, are the color of malachite, severe green gems that shine in the black curls framing her face. Standing before her, it's hard to believe I could've thought this woman to be anything but the self-proclaimed Mother of All Things. In my defense, she was supposed to be dead.

I force myself to hold her gaze, anything to avoid looking at the man next to her. He is old. *Fifty-nine.* An errant fact gleaned as my eyes swept over the room, and him, when I first entered. His shirt is covered in sweat and his breathing heavy behind the rag stuffed into his mouth. The chains that wrap his wrists creak softly as he dangles off the floor like a fat, scared pendulum.

I ignore him and address her. "What are you doing here, Lilith?"

Something shifts behind her eyes, an animal gleam. "My name is Eve."

"Let the man go."

"This?" She pokes him with a slender finger causing him to sway gently. "This is no man."

Her face darkens as she presses the nail of her forefinger into his side, harder this time. "This is excrement."

I hear him sobbing. But I don't look. I keep my eyes fixed on hers. I don't want to see this man. I don't care to know his life. Lilith watches me with those glittering eyes that see everything and smiles.

"Come now, child. Don't be modest." She walks behind him and I drop my eyes to the floor.

"You should be proud!" she purrs. "You have accomplished so much."

His chains clink and I guess she is dragging those long fingers of hers across his shoulders. "Is he not a marvel?"

Her voice is low and wistful, "Each one of them fragile and unique..." and then grows hard, "...like shit snowflakes."

"Stop this!" I say.

"Look at him and I'll let him live."

I make no effort to raise my eyes. "No you won't."

On hearing this, he starts to scream and struggle against his bonds. The chains clank in protest as he writhes, a wriggling worm on a hook.

"Do you really want to be responsible for his death?" asks Lilith.

His screams are cut short by a coughing fit. *How long has he been held here?* I wonder.

"You are responsible for what happens to this man. Not me."

"But don't you want to save his life? You could, you know. All you have to do is look."

She is lying. *But what if she isn't?* I cannot read her, never could, but I know this woman. She will not let him leave. *You don't know that for certain* argues the voice in my head. He has begun to whimper.

Fine. I look up.

He will turn sixty next month. His wife is planning a boat cruise in the Caribbean. A surprise, she thinks. She doesn't know that he knows. She's never been very good at keeping secrets. Not like him.

I look away. I don't want to know.

"Oh, you can do better than that," says Lilith. "Look upon your legacy, child. See what you have given this world."

"Please, Lilith. Don't do this."

"Eve!" she screams. "My name is Eve!"

She curls her fingers around his throat tight enough to prick a thin rose of blood from his neck. Her nails are sharper than before, curved into short claws. "Do you really want one more death on your conscience?"

I do not.

To be human is to wear a mask. Masks for your parents, for your friends and colleagues and lovers. Each of them gets to see a part of you, but only the rare few ever see it all; that knot of truths, raw and tender, at the core of your being. I look into the man's eyes and I see beneath the mask that he has constructed. I see past the birthdays and the cool summer evenings barbecuing in the backyard, past the colleagues he has drinks with every Thursday and the woman he has loved for forty years. I see beyond it all to the lives he has ruined, the children and the cameras and the heartbreak.

I pull away from the rest.

Eve watches intently. Her eyes shine, her lips part and she laughs, a demented wail that slams itself around the cavernous space, swallowed by its own cackling echo. She is still laughing as she digs a claw into his neck and, like a zipper on a costume, drags it open. His muffled scream turns to a muted gurgle as the blood stains his shirt crimson.

"I looked!" I scream. "I did as you asked. You didn't have to kill him!"

She points a bloody finger at me. "That's where you're wrong. Where you've always been wrong. He's a broken thing. And broken things need to be fixed."

“This isn’t the way,” I say, but she isn’t listening.

“I tried,” she says, staring at her hands. “I really tried. But there’s too many of them. I can’t fix them all.” She lifts her head to face mine. The anger is gone. There is nothing left in her eyes but shimmering sadness.

If I hadn’t just watched her slice a man’s throat open with her bare hands, the sight of her then would almost make me pity her.

“I want to go back. Take me back, Adam, please.”

“You know I can’t do that. I don’t know how to get back to Eden,” I say.

“I thought you might say that,” she says softly, the words almost a whisper. Then she reaches into her pocket and underarms a small gnarled stone toward me. I reach for it instinctively, and regret doing so the instant it touches my hand.

The stone cuts into the skin of my palm. I let go but instead of falling to the ground it buries itself deeper into my flesh. I dig the fingers of my right hand under the edges of the stone but it’s sunken deep into the flesh and I can’t grip it.

“What is this?” I yell, dropping to my knees as a wave of sharp agony courses up my arm.

“Incentive,” says Lilith, her lips curled in a predatory grin. The confused girl of a moment ago is gone. In her place is the animal that has stalked me through the centuries. She comes closer, kneels down beside me and whispers in my ear, “A word of advice: run.”

She stands to leave and I reach out to stop her, but a fresh wave of pain shudders through my arm and the world drops out of focus. She brushes me off and I collapse to the floor.

Lying on my back, the room twists into a spiral of too bright light. I can do nothing but watch as the long shape at the center of it steps out into the night.

I push myself to my knees. With my right hand I pry the fingers of my left hand open. Whatever this is, it’s now completely buried itself under the skin of my palm. There is no blood. The only evidence of its existence is a swollen red lump in the center of my hand and the blinding shards of pain in my arm.

I struggle to my feet and, clutching my arm to my chest, stumble toward the door. I don’t look at the body. *Jeremy Poole. His name was Jeremy.* I think of his wife excitedly planning the birthday surprise he already knew about and how the news of his murder will devastate her. And later still, when the truth of his life comes out, how utterly it will destroy her and ruin her family. Eve killed more than just this man today. I push the knowledge away, letting it drift loose in the back of my mind, amongst the millions of fragments just like it—Jeremy and the rest of this world’s problems.

I make my way out into the street. The pain has subsided to a steady thrum but I am no longer paying attention to it or my arm. My eyes are fixed on the building across the street and the face emerging from it.

• • •

I was there in the beginning. I traveled through those yawning years and witnessed the restless aches of a waking world. A time when shadows spoke and mountains heaved their weight across the land. I named its beasts, its birds and all living things. I cared for its sick and counseled its kings. I lived a thousand lifetimes in service of this world. And in all that time I have seen a sentinel only once.

Until now.

It drags itself free of the building, arms and legs taking shape from the stone. It is an agent of will. A creature born of singular purpose whose existence ends when it has

completed whatever task is required of it. When you push the universe, a sentinel is what pushes back.

This one is large, a golem of rock and bone. It watches me with blazing eyes notched into a featureless face and crushes a parked car with a single limb as it knuckle-walks towards me. Not a threat, but a simple statement of truth. It can destroy me. All it need do is lift a finger. No one on the street notices it or the flattened vehicle. Their minds are closed to its existence.

What they do see is a man, apparently crazed, step off the pavement and sprint down the middle of the street straight into oncoming traffic. On the pavement people would get in my way. They would stand and stroll and gawk and do what people do best: absolutely nothing. I would never be able to outrun it. The drivers of the cars, however, are staring straight at me. They swerve and slam the brakes. They honk their horns and curse through rolled down windows as I streak by, my tattered coat billowing behind me. I do not slow down. I run as fast as the limits of my form allow.

I do not look back. I can feel its eyes on me. Orange orbs that sparkle like collapsing galaxies. The ground shakes with every stride it takes, the weight and power of a universe channeled into its massive limbs. I know I cannot outrun it. But I don't need to. Sentinels are powerful, but they are children. Infants by most measure, whereas I have been alive since the dawn of time. Unlike them, I have learnt the difference between a red and green traffic light.

I cross the intersection a second before the dump truck comes through. The sentinel makes it half way across before the truck collides with it. The truck does not stop. The driver does not see the sentinel crack. Doesn't flinch as four hundred tons of force is applied across the length of the sentinel's body, shattering its granite skin and snapping its spine, pieces of which shred its internal organs. The driver jerks at the wheel to keep the vehicle going straight. To him it probably feels like a sudden, strong gust of wind.

I watch as chunks of rock and viscera rain down into the street—

I don't see what happens next.

Later, I will remember the face of the woman as she looks up from the cellphone in her hand. I will recall with excruciating clarity the sudden hard stop and the explosion of pain that detonates in my spine and sends a shockwave of hurt rippling through my toes and fingers. I will flinch at the muscle memory of that awful sound, hard and wet, as bone and glass shatter.

But right now all I am aware of is the impact, first of metal then glass then concrete, and the warmth of the darkness as it presses down over my eyes.

TWO

Eden is little like the garden depicted in your stories. It is the nexus of creation, a wild place filled with impossibilities. Here, oceans of rock and tree wash upon a beach of stars and grotesquely beautiful creatures cavort and kill. Where day is stitched to night and existence hangs at the seams. It is a land named for everything it is not.

My earliest memory in Eden is of being eaten alive. Of waking to the sound of bones snapping and the sight of my torso being separated from my legs, which, bitten and bloody, disappeared down the throat of a “gwar”. Kaliyah’s name for it. He says it is a name with texture. But a name is unnecessary. It would not do the creature justice.

Its skin was the color of glass; muscles and nerves wrapped in a thick, translucent hide. I watched as my flesh wound its way through a spiral of intestine, felt the sting as short, triangular teeth tore another chunk of meat from me, and marveled—quite possibly because of the shock—at the terrible efficiency of it all.

With each exertion, streaks along its flank glowed a chemical red. When it was done with me, nothing remained but a few strands of gore strung across its broad jaw.

I bore the ignominy of uncomfortable hours in the belly of that beast before I passed through its bowels and returned once more to the world. I endured, I think, because at that point the concept of death was still unknown to me. Having started life as excrement I assumed it would only get better from there.

I was wrong.

• • •

It was beneath the bone sky that awareness returned to me. I opened my eyes and saw its broad scales shifting high above. Sinuous shapes that moved in slow, undulating motions like the flank of some great beast dragging itself across all of existence.

I felt the beating of my heart and the slow slush of blood carving a path towards nascent muscles and organs. Presently, I became aware of my arms, then my fingers. A thought floated up out of the darkness of my mind. *Something important.* But it drifted away before I could grab hold of it. I glanced down at my feet. Ten toes, far too pink and erect, stood at the ends of narrow, arched flesh and above them a row of teeth glistened dully. *Teeth?*

It was then that I noticed the partially transparent shape of the gwar. Its thick tongue dropped out of its mouth and gave one foot a long, curious lick. A not-unpleasant numbness spread where its saliva coated my skin.

I suppose I should’ve been flattered that the animal had once again sought me out, but I had no intention of being an agreeable meal. I screamed—a low-pitched howl that startled both of us. The gwar looked at me. I looked back. For a moment we simply stared at one another in dumb shock. But when the sound faded and nothing more seemed likely to happen, the gwar moved again to wrap its jaws around the foot it had just tasted. Kicking out, I scrambled backward in the dirt. It lunged after me and then froze in mid-stride as I pushed myself upright.

Rising above the gwar, I stood straight on long, powerful legs. I was taller than before but that did not make me a match for the creature's bulk. Fortunately, it didn't seem to know that. The gwar hesitated. It lowered its head and eyed me uncertainly.

It took a tentative step forward and as it did I raised my arms above my head and screamed again. The sound rose up out of my belly and my throat shuddered with the force of it. I don't know what it sounded like to the gwar, but in my ears it thundered like a roar. I yelled and waved my arms wildly, but when the sound of my voice faded the gwar stood, unmoved. My heart sank. A long moment passed before it let out a low rumbling snort and, sufficiently convinced that its meal had become too much of a nuisance to bother with, slowly turned and sauntered off.

I watched it go, its pale outline blurring the air as it walked. Just before it reached a copse of thirsty looking trees, it stopped and turned back to stare at me. There was a hopeful look in its small, high-set eyes. It seemed to be searching for some sign that I'd had a change of heart and would allow it to snack on my innards after all.

I shoed it away with a wave of my hands and it turned and faded into the tall, dry grass. I stood there until I was convinced that the animal was not hiding just out of sight, waiting for the moment I turned my back before setting upon me once again.

Once I was satisfied that it had in fact given up, I turned and promptly fell flat on my face. Standing and walking, I discovered in the short trip to the ground, were sufficiently different that knowing how to do one did not necessarily translate into an understanding of the other.

I lay in the dirt and pondered this. *What else had my death taken from me?* I got to my feet, dusted myself off and tried again. My arms dangled at my sides. I flopped one of them up and down. It was shorter than before. *Far too short to be of any real use*, I thought.

I took a step forward and wobbled, correcting slightly as I brought my left leg forward. I overbalanced, first forwards then backwards, but managed to stay upright. A third step and this time I was sure I would fall, but I flailed with my arms and managed, once again, to regain just enough balance to stop from going over. *Perhaps this won't be so difficult after all*, I thought to myself.

I made it another four feet before falling into a thicket of dried shrubs, my head narrowly missing a hard, rock-shaped plant. Or maybe it was a rock. I realized then that something was wrong with my eyes. Colors I had never seen bled out of everything around me. Black rocks, red dirt, orange sky. The world shone with vibrant detail. So much of it that shapes I had grown accustomed to seemed almost unrecognizable.

I shut my eyes and everything faded to blissful darkness. Sounds, at least, were much as I remembered them, though there seemed to be a great deal more of them now. I listened as a gentle breeze stirred the branches of the short trees and flung fine grains of sand against their dry trunks. A carrion bird called out and its mate responded with a sharp caw. There was a rustle of grass to my right and then a sibilant hiss that snapped my eyes open.

The world was no less vivid than it appeared a moment ago, yet I realized with some relief that nothing was wrong with my eyes. If anything, they had actually improved. The colors I saw gave a depth and clarity to everything around me and the focus made it possible to pick out minor details even at a distance. With my new eyes I watched as the serpent slithered towards me, and for the first time noticed how his scales were ridged and curled at the edge, like tiny spear tips.

I lay still, and marveled not just at how he barely disturbed the short grass as he moved, but at my own ability to distinguish his rust brown shade from the colors that surrounded him. I followed his path until he emerged from the grass, lifted his broad and flat head above mine, and hissed, "Shesha! What kind of name is Ssshesssha?"

“You don’t like it?” I asked, brushing him aside as I sat up and inspected my injuries. The hairs on my arms and legs were so fine as to offer little protection. I stared at the red patches on my palms and knees where the skin had been scraped away in the fall. The raw flesh stung where I touched it. Apparently, not every part of my new form had improved over the old.

“No, I don’t,” said the serpent indignantly.

I looked at him. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Well—I...” he stammered, then continued in a whining, plaintive voice, “I just don’t feel like a ‘Shesha’. Besides. I don’t see why I can’t just choose my own name.”

“Neither do I,” I said, and got to my feet. I was naked, and felt even more so for the lack of hair on my body. I shivered as a light breeze cut right through me.

The serpent blinked. “What are you saying?”

“If that is your wish, I think you should choose your name. So go ahead.”

“Just like that?”

“Sure.”

His head tilted back and forth as though physically wrestling with the idea. “I’m supposed to just pick a name out of thin air?”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s my name! You can’t decide something like that on the spot! A name is how the world knows you. It’s got to be just right.”

“It’s just a name,” I suggested.

“Jusst a name!” he spat. “Just a name!” He looked as incredulous as a snake could. “A name is everything you are and everything you ever will be. A name has power.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I conceded. “But surely any name is better than none at all? I mean, what would I call you in the meantime?” I asked as I took a wobbly step forward.

He considered this for a moment. “What about ‘dhghem’? Sounds strong and dependable. Earthy.”

I said nothing, my focus squarely on my feet.

“Yeah, maybe not,” he replied, slithering alongside me.

With my arms held out for balance, I took another step. I wobbled a little less this time, but the serpent had to quickly slither out of the way to avoid getting stepped on.

“Watch it!” he yelled, then, “Are you alright?” as he looked me up and down.

“Fine,” I replied, and concentrated on coordinating the movement of my arms and legs. “Walking upright just isn’t as easy as you might think.”

He took a long look at me then. “Oh yes-s-s,” he said, nodding. “I thought there was something different about you.”

• • •

“Roger,” the serpent said.

We had traveled a not inconsiderable distance, had long since left the bone sky behind and now passed through a grove of hanging trees. And through it all, the serpent had not relented in his search for a name. I ignored him and scanned the wood to my right. The trees here coiled around themselves like a noose, cords of vine and bark that tightened around each other and any creature unlucky enough to be caught within their grip.

Undeterred, he continued. “Perhaps Amit? Or Ian? I could be an Ian,” he said.

There were others too, but I was no longer listening. My attention was focused over my shoulder at the path that had grown steadily narrower so that the trees, like tight twists of rope, now crowded its edge. Nothing stirred. But for our passing, the path remained as still as a dew-filled dawn. And yet, the unease that had grown in my belly persisted.

I ignored it as best I could, but every step stirred the anxiety in my veins until the quiet of the grove was matched only by the sluicing of blood in my ears.

When I could no longer bear it, I slowed to a stop and watched the trees for signs of movement, listened for the soft scuffle of disturbed leaves.

Nothing.

I stood and watched and listened for a sign. Any sign at all. Slowly, doubt crept in at the corners of my mind. *A trick of the senses, perhaps?* After all, they were new and not entirely familiar to me.

From somewhere far away, the serpent's voice, "What do you think of Marik?" It was little more than an echo now, as though distanced by the growing awareness in me. He continued to talk but the words were dark butterflies that flitted just beyond my perception and were lost to me.

I saw nothing, heard nothing, and still I did not move. The more my senses tried to reassure, the more my mind said otherwise, the more I became convinced that something *was* watching us. My veins flushed with the cold certainty of it and the hairs on my neck stood as if commanded by an arctic whisper. Whatever it was, I felt its gaze, the full weight of its scrutiny, on me.

"Adam!" the serpent called from a few yards ahead. "Are you even listening to me?" he hissed loudly. The sound of his voice snapped the distance closed, like a book being slammed shut in my face, and brought me back.

The presence receded. The grove stood silent. Empty.

I blinked and shook my head. "Sorry, what?"

He hung his head. "I'm never going to find my name at this rate," he sighed and slithered further down the path.

• • •

Eden is a place of infectious whimsy, a land of capricious moods. And my new body felt like a conduit to the heart of it. I reveled in the smell of an afternoon rainbow and swayed to the subtle melody of grass beneath my feet. I basked in all the tastes and sounds that bled through and tangled into one another, richer than anything I had known before.

The sky seasons passed and as they did I forgot all about that encounter in the grove, the memory of those ageless eyes buried beneath newer joys and experiences.

Slowly—in the timeless cycle of life in Eden, nothing happened quickly—a new sensation emerged amongst my tapestry of senses, an aching curiosity that shook and rattled through me even as I slept. Spurred by that insistent thrum, like the steady beat of a drum, I journeyed across Eden.

The serpent accompanied me on my travels, though I do not recall ever inviting him to do so. He spent his days in my company reciting long lists of names, being sure to ask my opinion of each and every one of them.

"What about Susie?" he asked from my shoulders as I pulled us up onto a long, flat ridge. Already, the white sky had begun to darken at the edges. The black days were not long off, though by my estimate they would not arrive until after we had reached the mountain's peak.

"You don't think it sounds a tad feminine?" I grunted, eyeing the rock in front of me for a handhold.

"Does that matter?" he asked earnestly.

I shrugged, curled my fingers into a small cleft of rock above my head, and pushed up off the narrow ridge.

Our conversations had developed a familiar pattern. The serpent would propose a name, I would offer an opinion, and, good or bad, after a moment's consideration he would move onto the next name he could think of. The predictability of the banter had become a pleasant distraction from the physical exertion of the climb.

"Well, I like it," he said with some finality.

"S-s-s-s-s-zeeeeee," he repeated to himself, reveling in its sibilance. "Has a nice ring to it."

"It won't stick," I said and pressed my toes into a wedge for support.

"Will too," he countered.

It did not stick. Before the sky vanished into darkness he had sworn off the name and was a further dozen into that ceaseless list in his head, explanations and ruminations following each.

And so it went. I climbed and crawled and walked and the serpent talked.

Time passed, though not in any way you would be accustomed to. The sky aged and died and was reborn and still we wandered. Its colors waxed and waned over each lifetime, from whitest just before it vanished, to an unfathomable blue as it faded slowly back to life. Now, as we came to a large lake, it was a bruise of soft yellow.

"Island," the serpent said. He was leaning forward off my shoulder, his head bobbing side-to-side, smelling the air with his tongue.

We had taken to naming the places we passed through. Before this there had been The Empty Mountain and The Place Of The Withering Light and before that The Broken Meadow and at least a dozen other caves and rivers and valleys. We spent some of the sky's red days in The Upside Down Swamp and, most recently, foraged among the unique formations of Forty Rocks. By my count there were only thirty-eight of the white sponge-like spheres, but the serpent had argued that using the actual number made for a poor name.

We did this, in part, because the serpent felt that the practice would be good for him (though his own name still eluded him), but mostly we named them because doing so made them real somehow. Once these places had passed out of sight, and long after they had faded from our personal existences, we could conjure them back into our minds merely by uttering the names we had given them.

Perhaps someday soon we would think of the Island and its name would remind us of that mound of black rock, its smattering of mossy grass and a few lonely looking trees surrounded by the dark water of the lake.

"Just 'Island?'" I asked, and slipped down into the water. There was never a question of whether or not we would explore the oddly shaped mound.

But the serpent, preoccupied with coiling as much of himself onto my head and away from the water as he could, simply said, "Then 'Just Island' it is."

The water was warm, yet as it rose over my body I felt a shiver trace its way up my spine, the cold corpse of a memory clawing its way out from where I had buried it. The same presence that first appeared as the serpent and I made our way through that grove of twisted shapes.

With each stroke, I felt the weight of its scrutiny. Eyes that did more than just watch; eyes that studied and evaluated. Under its gaze I was stripped bare. Not just naked, but exposed. My thoughts, my fears, my needs and wants, my very being, picked apart and laid open like a cadaver's organs on an autopsy table.

I swam as fast as I could.

That was how we came to Just Island. Had I known what we would find there, how it would alter us and what it would mean for all of Eden I would never have set foot upon its shore.