

# Part One

## Being and Becoming

‘The golden light of a candle flame sits upon the throne  
of its dark light that clings to the wick.’

— *Sefer ha-zohar*

1 May 2000

# 1

**V**oid. Hum.  
Three hundred and sixty degrees' expansion, pervading  
known and unknown matter.  
Breath.  
Existence.  
Him.

The first time he was struck by a spontaneous nambula, Markriss Denny was eight years old. Feet pushing hard on pedals, body leaning against handlebars, the wheels of the bike ahead glistening with sunlight. His attention was seized and for a moment he saw the heavens in that shimmering rotation. He couldn't take his eyes away. There was pain in the centre of his forehead. He was falling from his bike before he knew it.

He must have blacked out, because the next thing he was lying on the pavement, elbows and knees raw, the bike a resting animal a yard or so from where he'd fallen. His friends stood over him. T'shari, Karis, Nesta. Markriss let them wrench him to his feet, limping back to his fallen metal steed, waving away their concern, their insistence he looked pale. Soon they rode in unison again, creaking gears and turning wheels a random symphony beneath them.

They stopped outside rusting gates propped open with fallen masonry. Flakes of orange made the once grand entrance look diseased. Grass and weeds stood as high as their waists. A slight breeze made the strands rustle like a whisper of ghosts. They sat on their bikes, staring at the blighted metal. Silent.

Nesta edged forwards, thin bicycle tyre nudging the gate. He rolled over crumbled stone, standing and stamping on the pedals to gain more power until he was over the obstruction, inside. They followed, one after another. Markriss, Karis, and T'shari, the skinniest child, always last, lifting his chin towards graffitied walls, brow arched, fearful.

The building was huge. Not compared to the Ark of course, though it towered above their heads, four storeys high. They rode through warped frames of wooden doors into the main entrance hall, craning their necks to look at the roof. Fallen glass left the dusty brown sky exposed. Their school picture books showed chandeliers and birds wheeling overhead, but the boys saw neither. They got used to being alone, speeding up and down once polished marble floors, performing wheelies and long skids, creating miniature desert storms. When they grew bored, they explored alone.

Markriss rode past closed ticket booths and parades of empty shops, to the platforms where sleek grand trains once stood. He left his bike against a marble bench and jumped onto the tracks, amongst long grass. Some of the weeds were long green strands that looked like wheat. He lay against cool steel, trying to imagine what it must have been like. The olden days. He closed his eyes.

The mute disc of sun hadn't moved by much when he woke. Markriss guessed he hadn't been sleeping long. He climbed back onto the platform, studying the multicoloured lines of the Dinium route map, wheeling his bike into the entrance hall. There was no one. He thought they might have left, panicked for a moment, and then heard voices. Relief made him sag against handlebars. He smiled and hummed a soft tune, wheeling his bike in that direction.

An open corridor, doors long ripped away or kicked down. Black-edged shadows. He paused, biting his lip. The rectangle of light at the opposite

end was small, and far. Gloom seeped. Markriss called into the expanse. No answer. Partly, he was glad.

The far-away voices of his friends reached beyond dark. Spun-cotton wisps, distant. He made up his mind, rolling over broken glass and wood, careful, into the solid length of night. Daylight seemed consumed by that murky length of corridor. He saw nothing, his own physicality mythical; the only knowledge he existed came from the warmth of his handlebars beneath his fingers, his own harsh breath. The beat inside his chest, hot blood. The corridor smelt musty, damp and old. Markriss could taste the odour. He covered his mouth, pushing with one hand, which made the going even tougher; the floor beneath him, thick with dust. He repeatedly bumped his tyre against what felt like heavy blocks of concrete.

His bike wheel stuck. He pushed again. Still nothing. Again. No luck. He climbed aboard the pedals, resolving to do what Nesta had, stand up and push down hard.

There was a moment before he did this when Markriss had an inkling of what was to come. An image of himself and his friends, sprinting on bikes, screaming faces static. Metallic banging from a place he could not find, like a football smashing against a chain-link fence. A chuckling peal of laughter somewhere beyond his peripheral vision. He felt the sound in his stomach, an ache.

He snapped back into the moment, back in the dark corridor, sniffing. Urine. His nose wrinkled. Gotta get out of there. He rose to his feet, smashing down with both feet.

The roar came from everywhere, echoing, bouncing from unseen walls. He was pushed violently, hitting something sodden yet hard, recovering to wrench the bike around and back the way he'd come, pedalling fast. He heard shuffling behind him, running footsteps and mused words like a foreign language, obvious curses. He sprinted towards the light, shooting into the entrance hall and screaming for his friends at the top of his lungs, surprised to see them rapid-pedalling away, until he saw the vagrants behind him. Grimy faces of shining tar, they stumbled and wheezed, trying to run even though their lungs wouldn't serve them, their clothes in tattered strips, clawing empty air

like old viewscreen monsters. They chased the boys for yards before they gave up, legs faltering, hands on knees, shaking from rasping explosions of lengthy coughs. Markriss caught one last sight over his shoulder—the vagrants lying in dust, spotlit by shards of light from the broken ceiling, shuddering as though undergoing a group fit.

He turned away, sprinting harder.

They directed their bikes towards the gates, T'shari, Karis, Markriss, cheeks and foreheads damp with effort, tendons thick in their arms.

Far from the Ark Station, almost two blocks away, they realised.

'I thought he was with you!' Markriss screamed over the handlebars. Karis trembled, sweat gluing baby corn-hair to his forehead.

'Don't shout at him, we all went off on our own!' T'shari's neck stretched taut, tendons protruding, a late entry to any argument, as was his way.

No one dared go back. They waited a heart-wrenching fifteen minutes before Nesta returned, shoulders hunched, riding slow.

'Ra . . .' Smiling when he saw their surprise, their worry. It angered Markriss, though he said nothing. 'You lot was scared, right? You shoulda hid. They got sickness. They can't hurt you.'

An ice cream truck a few blocks from the Ark Station, the young vendor leaning on his counter, tattooed and bored. A dig for change, excitement from Karis and T'shari, echoed in miniature by Markriss and Nesta. The joyful-bought whipped-cream cones, slow-melting vanilla; the sombre orange and lemon ice poles that bled sweet juice. They rolled their bikes towards a grass verge behind the truck, to a bench where they could sit.

'You lot never seen a sickie before, yeah?' Nesta licked at his ice pole, watching faces. 'My uncle had it. He died. Only took three months. I was there.'

T'shari, the only boy still mounted, rocked his bike back and forth, eyes cast at the pavement.

'My cousin had it. He died. I wasn't there. My parents wouldn't let me see him. He was old anyway.'

‘My dad doesn’t believe in sickness,’ Karis piped up.

‘So what d’you think killed them?’ Nesta, leaping to his feet, waving the pole. Orange spatters flew. The youths backed off.

‘Dunno . . .’

‘Dunno . . .’

‘Dunno . . .’

‘Maybe cancer . . .’ T’shari’s offering, limp, useless.

‘You don’t catch cancer, so it can’t be . . .’

Markriss, sitting higher on the verge, lost interest. He stared across the street at a broken building wedged between the One Tic store and a shop called Mama’s Day that sold maternity wear. A sliver of storefront lit by red fluorescent lights placed above the awning to form letters, the letters creating words: TEMPLE OF SEBEK THE MEASURER. Twin symbols—three circles placed inside each other housing a small triangle—bookended the name. Men and women clothed in long white robes drifted in and out, holding thin black books to their chests. A sign was placed on the pavement, green chalk on blackboard, imploring passers-by to ‘*Find the Neter Within. Join us in worship: 11–3 / 6–10. All welcome.*’

His mother, Willow, called them Kushites, or Nubians like herself. Some noticed the ice cream truck and crossed the quiet road. Markriss didn’t want to stare, though he was fascinated. A man, broad in his cheap suit, smiled as he bought a cone for his pebble-headed son. Markriss’s lips twitched. He looked away, caught.

Willow didn’t go to temple, though she had a shrine in her podroom. She believed in Neter, not religion. He wasn’t quite sure how his mother separated the two, and never had the courage to ask. Markriss considered himself lucky that she didn’t force him to pray twice daily, like his friends whose parents were Ila, Nandi, Yoruba, Abaluyia.

He lifted his head, searching beyond the ice cream truck, the temple and its followers. Above, the skyline undulated in a frosted brown haze, a broad smudge that stained the horizon.

That evening he played World Cup outside with his brother while the filthy sun descended, casting dusk like a curse. As Ninka was five he

couldn't play to the best of his ability, though Markriss still enjoyed the game. Their street was a discreet row of red brick houses, backed against one another like continuous Siamese twins. His brother was born on the living-room floor, his mother's moans climbing the stairs to his podroom, where he'd been banished with a neighbour to await Ninka's arrival. Markriss himself had been born in the local hospital after his mother's waters broke and he didn't arrive. When he was ventoused into the world, some eighteen hours later, his parents had lived in the house for less than a year.

Chasing the ball, running, he had an abrupt vision of a sleeping face lit by restless candlelight, eyes cast heavenwards, blind; more flickering lights, larger than the candles, the ancient stutter of a cinema reel projected onto the blank screen of their eyes. He saw himself, his mother and father standing to attention beneath the wailing screech of gears, the everlasting blast of a train horn. Unknowing, Markriss was granted his second premonition.

His brother began to splutter and cough, overheard by Willow, who called the boys inside. Markriss trailed behind. He wanted to dismiss the pictures in his mind, alarmed after what he'd seen that afternoon, those lurching, failing bodies. He couldn't tell his mother he'd been playing in the derelict station; he'd be grounded, possibly beaten, and he wasn't even sure his assumptions were correct. Ninka always coughed, fell over, bumped his head. Most infants did. It wasn't worth the risk of a beating to tell his mother what he'd seen over what was probably just grit in his brother's throat.

The boys ran straight into the kitchen, believing dinner was about to be served, only for Willow to hurry them through the tiny space and push them into the garden. Unlike the confines of the house, the garden was their mother's refuge. Three times the size of her kitchen, twice the size of their living room, it was where she grew spinach and mint, parsley and oregano, which often ended up on the family plate. A fruit-bearing apple tree stood on the far left. A fence at the furthest end was wrapped with a blackcurrant bush, plants that sighed with the wind. Willow never stopped reminding the children of their luck. Many nights saw their

mother on her deck-chair, long slim legs straight as pool cues, smoking a cigarette constructed, in part, from one of the plants grown in her airing cupboard.

Long accustomed to Willow encouraging use of the garden, the boys followed her wishes with little protest. At the bottom of their mother's haven, just past the berry-laden fence, in a man-made valley 200 metres from where the boys stood, lay a rusting, dirt-brown train track. The majority of the city's poor were found in regions much like the town where Markriss, Ninka and Willow lived, while the rich lived nearer Dinium's centre, a bare desert of dark earth leading to high walls surrounding Inner City—the Ark. Karis told Markriss that beyond those walls were streams of honey, all the computer games a boy could play, even nudie magazines given by generous men on street corners. Markriss argued white-heat dismissal, never knowing whether to believe him. At night, in his sleeper, he dreamt it was true.

His mother called them to this spot once every six months. For once every six months the train transporting the lucky to Inner City ran along the track at the end of their garden. Being 'lucky' seemed to mean you had to make an exceptional amount of money, be a renowned artist of any kind, or a teacher, or a great fighter, or adept at any skill that could benefit the world within those walls. Though many complained it was slave labour in disguise, few of the poor found courage enough to decline the opportunity, if or when it came.

Willow agreed with the optimists, for on those nights she walked them down the garden until they were immersed in the smell of mint and the buzz of insects. Pollution soaked the clouds like mud-stained cotton wool. In all the picture books he'd read the sky was blue. He'd often wondered why book characters never wore the ugly black masks that covered the faces of people on the streets of his town. When he'd asked his mother why, she said he thought too much and told him to go outside and play.

He watched the bullet-shaped train ease past government houses, so old its former grey metallic exterior had turned copper in places. The Excellence Award logo, an E slashed above an A, was long faded. A

stubborn layer of dust coated the windows. Smoke seemed to emerge from every crack in the metal, every loose panel, though it didn't bother the occupants, who were delirious with joy, screaming with laughter, hanging from open windows, yelling how they'd made it, how happy they were, of the new lives they would lead. Families in various gardens waved and wished further luck. Try as he might, Markriss couldn't contain his envy.

Willow eased herself between her sons, taking their hands, a strange look on her face. She seemed tall enough to tear a handful of rotten cloud from the sky. Feeling his eyes, she managed a smile.

'Remember what you've seen,' she said as always. 'That's your ticket out and don't ever forget it.'

Ninka was too young to grasp her words, of course, though Willow seemed relieved when Markriss nodded. As his brother grew bored and found a neighbourhood cat to play with, she knelt beside her elder son until her face was level with his. Her thin, pretty features were elegant, her eyes like the tawny orbs of a lioness. Her skin reflected red sunlight, giving Willow a warm tint that made him love her more than he thought possible.

'It's up to you.' Her whisper scratched at her throat. 'Understand? You're too young, though when you're older you'll ride that train. You can be anything you want, Markriss, you're the only one. I'm too old, and your brother . . . Well, he isn't quite strong enough. So it's you.'

He watched Ninka grasp for the tabby's tail and felt hollow, cold. His brother could never ride that train by his own power no matter what changes he was destined for. His natural IQ was low since birth, and recent schooling seemed to indicate little would change. Markriss was a child, and yet he already knew the results would mean Ninka growing up to become a burden, maybe someone that he, as his older brother, would be forced to carry. It didn't make him love him less, yet the fact remained. It was something known without words.

'Yes, Mum.'

'Good. Now go and get your dinner.'

He ran inside, clipping Ninka on the ear to make him wail, a success, then collecting his steaming plate of spaghetti bolognese from the oven

top. Markriss remembered the meal as one of the best he'd tasted. Full, he kissed his brother on the forehead to apologise. Willow smiled, pleased with them both.

In full night, after wiring him into his sleeper, she closed the lid and loaded a Nocturna program, telling Markriss how proud she was. He could have wested and gone straight to Aaru.

Markriss fell asleep to a baritone vibration of comfort, until sometime during the night he was wrenched from his familiar projection of playgrounds and climbing frames to find when he opened his eyes he couldn't see. There was pressure on his chest. He couldn't breathe. He tried to fight, yet the more he struggled, the worse the pressure seemed and he knew his eyes were open because he could feel himself blinking; still, he *couldn't see*. He tried to open his mouth and scream. Nothing came, so he fought to kick and punch, only it was useless and his breath was leaving so fast that soon he wouldn't have any left. A voice rasped in his ear, deep, creaking with age—an old man's rattle—whispering words he didn't understand. He fought harder, pushing and tearing at the pressure, lashing out—though not with his limbs, which seemed paralysed, with his mind. He couldn't quite work out how he managed this, fighting until he woke up.

Everything remained as it was when he had gone to bed. His toys were where he'd dropped them, his clothes were where he'd folded them and his brother lay in his deep, humming sleeper on the opposite side of the room, face up, arms flat by his sides. Markriss lay back on his pillow, curled into a ball, shuddering from the remnants of his sleep cycle. It would take another few hours for him to realise that Ninka's breathing had ceased, to leap from the bed and shake his brother, first gently, then more frantically, for Markriss to scream for his mother and Willow to burst into the room moments after, breath caught in her throat, tight fist clutching her dressing gown, pushing her elder son aside in haste. Shoulders colliding, unaware of the other, they pushed and pulled at Ninka until Willow lifted his limp body from the pod, knowing he would never be warm again.