

CHAPTER ONE

Rise

The following transcriptions are memories of my past. The best point to start is six years ago, when I was nine. My doctor told me that I was an anomaly that was recorded in many research studies and books. Doctor Newman said that my birth was a case study, as no delivery had ever been replicated. He didn't know that two years prior to his mentioning this, I was able to sneak a look at my lab reports when the nurse had stepped out, leaving the file behind. The details of my birth were vivid. The hospital report included video surveillance of my "reformation," as they called it. I didn't understand the words, but I did understand the visuals. One doctor's note discussed my nascence in detail, describing "a very soft balloon being birthed only to congeal quickly into a human baby." In the video, the doctors and nurses stared in disbelief as the clear, gelatinous ball was received by a male nurse who nearly dropped the balloon. The camera centered on my mother's face. She looked confused. When the camera perspective rotated the angle around, it refocused onto me, pink and clean. A nurse had draped a cloth around my naked body and forced me to cry. That's where the footage stopped. The memory of the discussion has been presented several times since I've started this recording. It's been six years since that conversation, but its relevance has caused me to dream of the interaction.

Dr. Newman advised that every child born at the hospital is automatically tested for genetic abnormalities pre and post-birth. In my case, the test was inconclusive pre and unnecessary to do post. The labs could never determine my status in utero; despite clearly pulling samples from my embryo, the results were always confirmed as amniotic fluids. The doctors knew immediately that I was a carrier

based on my birth, and mutants were always retained at the hospital. In the file, my mother's D.N.A. was listed as a N.A.A.C.: Non-Abnormal Allele Carrier – meaning that her D.N.A. did not have the genes – or alleles - that caused different types of mutations. This could only mean that my father was the reason for my cursed life. Since they didn't have a sample of his D.N.A., they assumed that he was either an unknown male M.A.C. (Mutated Allele Carrier) or N.A.M.A.C. (Non-Active Mutated Allele Carrier). M.A.C.'s have a mutation in their genetic code that gives them an ability, while N.A.M.A.C.'s just carry the genetic code without any abnormal capabilities.

Per Dr. Newman, my mother disappeared a few months after my birth. She never gave the details of my father to the hospital. The memory from the video footage of her confused face at my birth was clear for days and weeks but eventually faded. Her features were the only memory I created, so similar to the image I saw in my bathroom's full-length mirror. Her eyes had more green flecks than mine, but we had the same almond shape.

The information about my history and family was never provided to me, even after leaving the hospital that held me captive for nine years. Books occupied most of my day in that prison, even before I was able to read, mostly because I had nothing else to do with my time. The only toy I remember having was a plastic truck that Dr. Newman had brought in. It disappeared the next day. In hindsight, it may have been another test—a simile to try to make me cry, which did not work. Television was allotted to one hour in the morning with the rest of the day appointed to spend reading. The t.v. was of moderate interest to me when I was under five. At that time, I was only interested in the pictures that the newsmen would show and would hover close to the screen, waiting for any visual to pop up so that I could study it. Trees and animals fascinated me, but most of the images of nature were scorched deserts with dilapidated homes. There was nothing presented on the projected news that was even remotely similar to the plain white hospital walls. As I got older, I liked the stories that reported natural disasters because I got more visuals of the outside world. In the tropics, hurricanes showed huge buildings jutting out of palm tree forests. In other areas, earthquakes showed buildings demolished, and wildfires showed burning homes. It was the colors and change of scenery that broke up the drab whiteness of the walls. The images were projected from my smartbot onto the wall – with only a few channels to choose from. The only programs that aired

on the old wavelengths were the news, a show on artifacts, and another where women sold jewelry. As I got older, I grew less interested in the reporters and the constant drama broadcast by the local neighborhood newsbots— a type of cambot that news sources used. The T.V. would activate automatically; I kept it on mute.

There was one memorable instance after my breakfast and shower ritual when I was tired of the news. I changed to the paid announcers right when they were excitedly discussing an upcoming auction of M.A.C.'s. My breath stopped. The term was familiar to me as I had just read my file. They listed me as a M.A.C. It was the first time I'd heard the moniker spoken. With my eyes as close to the wall as I could get, I waited unblinkingly, to confirm what a M.A.C. was. The time slot was strict. The television projection flashed black as the clock turned 9:00, leaving a void. My imagination created other eight-year-old boys stuck in a white room with no knowledge of why they were there.

Scheduling my days made me feel more in control and comforted.

- • 7 a.m.: Breakfast then shower
- • 8 a.m.: Television
- • 9 a.m. to noon was English and Latin
- • Lunch
- • 1 p.m. until dinner at 8 p.m. was math, physics, biology, and chemistry.

The routine was not given to me. I created it when I was five to gain structure to my day. It helped keep me from losing my mind. The only non-furniture in the room was my smartbot. He was my teacher and only friend—the humanoid-shaped robot would answer my questions and direct me throughout my learning. The interactions I had with people were distressing, making me apprehensive about any adults entering my room. I had a weekly physical exam and my monthly blood test, where I got to see humans. Dr. Newman was the only reliable person that I saw. On my sixth birthday, he told me he knew me from birth, and he discussed some details with me about my condition. Dr. Newman knelt to my level and bowed his head as if focusing on a stain on the floor. His bald head reflected my face in a distorted way. He spoke in his hushed, accented voice, distinguishing that I wasn't supposed to know about any of it. The information he gave was vague as neither of us knew the extent of my ability to manipulate water. He taught me about the Mutated Allele Carriers, aka M.A.C.'s that were an evolutionary subset of homo

sapiens. The abilities ranged from psychics to M.A.C.'s with the capability to manipulate things, including people. The government wanted to understand the spectrum of mutations better, so they had facilities to evaluate anyone with the genes present.

After the hospital life, Dr. Newman told me that many kids with special abilities didn't know their real parents. Parents with the inability to adequately feed themselves or the child would sell their offspring to the highest bidder. He explained that it wasn't a selfish act on the part of the mother or father. A M.A.C. needed to be raised in the proper environment with the right nutrition. If they didn't have the right balance, then the genes each M.A.C. had would proliferate inside their cells within the child and feed off them like a parasite. Children with powers needed more than the average amount of food to support their special ability. The mutation needed extra nutrients to fuel the body. If the nutrition were not provided through sustenance, it would find another source inside the person. I knew this too well from personal experience. There were countless times where I failed to get out of bed. My body and brain would not allow it. I had to force myself out. It was usually another source that coerced me to extricate myself, like the urge to use the bathroom or the bed becoming overwhelmingly hot.

There was an incident where nothing worked, my body, my brain, or my excuses to leave the bed. Doctors had to intervene. They wheeled in machines and fluids along with a large quantity of liquid food. After several meals and hours of treatment, I was able to free myself. It felt like chains had released me from the bed, and when I stood, I felt stronger than I had ever felt. Dr. Newman called this 'oppression,' when the mutation takes over so harshly that the person is unable to carry on, and if they survive, their abilities would be more prominent. They studied me for days afterward. Years of confinement at the hospital made the prodding a regular occurrence. I liked having the new nurses and doctors surrounding me; they were less likely to do tests. They asked me questions, some I didn't know the answers to. A new nurse that I had never seen before, at one point, got on her knee and talked to me in a gentle voice. She beckoned me forward until I was inches away from her face.

"How old are you?" She asked as she pushed a long strand of her dark red hair behind her ear.

She was aware of my age, I entertained her because she was entirely new to me. My eyes turned from the red hue of her hair to

the gray eyes framed with green makeup. I liked her immediately. Her colors alone made me want to stare at her. She was a reprieve from the stark whiteness of my room. All of the nurses wore gray uniforms, but hers was embroidered with letters K.C.B. in green letters.

"Six years, three months, and twelve days." I glanced at the clock to confirm the date.

"Very good, you're a smart boy," she said in her hushed tone, "My name is Nurse Beatty. You can call me Bee for short."

Matching her whisper, I replied, "Like a bumblebee? I've read about them."

She laughed. I hadn't heard this sound before from anyone else besides Dr. Newman and myself. I leaned forward to look at the lips. Her eyes had creases from her cheeks, pushing her lips into a smile. My nose hinted at a scent that I did not recognize. It was sweet, like the sugar that I would sometimes get with my meal. Her skin was the first that I remember feeling against my own without the barrier of a glove. Her fingers had grabbed my arm when she lost her balance. They felt soft like my cheeks after a shower. Nurse Beatty's smile fell as she looked into my face. She quickly disengaged and rose as if she had been caught doing something wrong. Her behavior was recognizable, as I had acted in the same manner often. I had begun to understand my place, and I tried to abide by the rules, but curiosity is in every young boy.

By age six, I had seen numerous nurses and doctors. None of them stayed longer than two visits except for Dr. Newman, so I didn't expect Nurse Beatty to come back; when she did, I was so excited I felt my lips turn into a smile. The doctor that was with her started making notes on his tablet, his pen swiping excitedly. Nurse Beatty smiled at me as she approached. I was sitting on my bed rubbing the white sheet between my thumb and primary and secondary digits—a habit I had when I was excited or nervous. She settled onto my bed, and her voice tenderly asked, "How are you doing, young man?"

I had to turn my head and focus on her lips. No person had ever spoken to me in such a tone. The doctor continued his quick-fingered notes on the device. For a moment, I thought I had imagined it. I didn't answer her, just in case, it was in my mind.

"Let's see you," She said, waving me to stand, "Come on," she encouraged me more.

I stood from my bed, leaving her alone, and raised my

arms out to my sides in the shape of a 't,' like I always did. The doctor approached and waved an instrument around me. "Getting my vitals" is how they described it. The doctor jabbed my ribs with another tool. I kept my eyes on Bee- hers narrowed as I flinched. The doctor moved to my knees, hitting them in rapid succession. I was used to this test. They said they were testing my reflexes, but I never had any. He moved to my elbows and then my shoulders, and finally my head. Each examination ended with a surprise- a sort of test done as though to catch me off my guard. This doctor's "surprise" was an electric shock from a stunner. Not very original as I'd been paralyzed this way before.

The electricity flowed through my body, arresting my control until I collapsed to the ground. When one of these doctor probes was done, I usually woke in my bed as if I had simply fallen asleep during the exam. This assessment was different. I awoke to Nurse Bee screaming at the doctor. She had him cornered against a wall as he tried to edge across the room towards the exit. I sat up, rubbed my arm where he had shocked me, and continued to watch. The doctor had a sharpening bruise around his eye. When he was able to escape the slaps from Bee, she turned and rushed to my side. Her grip was surprisingly gentle as she pulled me to my feet.

"Don't you worry, young man, that will never happen on my watch," Nurse Bee said with determination.

I smiled. I don't know what made me do it. Possibly the entertainment or maybe the promise Nurse Bee had made. She gave me her own smile, but it wasn't the same as the other times. Her face looked strained as she searched my face. When she exited after the doctor, I was confident that she would never return. But she did. From that visit forward, she was the only nurse to attend to me.

I didn't mind the examinations as much as I did before her. She ensured a sense of security and happiness that I never had before. Sometimes she would slip into my room with a game, and we would play for hours. It was usually at night when I was supposed to be asleep. She would remove the sensors around my head and disengage the machines. I knew that she wasn't supposed to be there, but I never told anyone, and she never had to advise me not to. We played games with cards and dice. She taught me new words with pictures from small books that she would bring in her uniform pocket. These days were the best I had at the hospital. I always pretended to fall asleep for the monitors. I learned to calm my breathing and heart rate while maintaining my consciousness. I never knew when Bee

would come. I hoped every night to play a game or learn something new. Sometimes I just wanted her there to console me.

It was usually the days when they would shower me—hose me down, rather. I took regular baths, always monitored in case my abilities presented, of course. But on occasion, a new doctor or researcher would insist on different methods of immersion. I was never told what the new test would be. I was sometimes surprised at the creativity and depths they would go to.

The worst one I remember occurred two months before Dr. Newman brought me to his home to live. *A doctor that I saw regularly, Dr. Clifton, showed me to the swimming center. He always wore black square glasses, this feature embedded in my mind as no one else wore spectacles. I enjoyed going to the pool. Despite the ice-cold water, I felt alive there. The smell of the clean water was like perfume to me. At first, I thought it was another test to see me swim. I can't remember when I started to swim, they said it was when I was an infant, but I could never picture myself utilizing my limbs at such a young age to do laps. Something was missing this time. It took me a moment to realize, the calming odor that I came to associate with the pool was gone.*

As I got closer to the pool, I noticed that there was already someone swimming. The figure was submerged on the far side, near the deeper end. Their movement was strange. I observed for many minutes, expecting the person to rise out of the water and show themselves. I stared intently, waiting for the cerulean surface to be broken. The researchers wrote their notes, all watching me intently instead of the guy I thought had to be running out of air. Then he moved towards the shallow end where I stood. As he came closer, a fin broke the surface. It was not a man; the pool was now an aquarium holding a shark. I knew this word. I had learned of this creature in many of my television shows. Despite the fish's approach, I was inquisitive. The men in the white coats, sometimes Bee would call them "coats," looked from me to the animal and back, expecting a reaction.

Instead of fear, I walked closer to the edge. How did the doctors get this giant fish into the pool? I splashed the water and smelled it. The pool cleaner smell was gone, replaced with foreign water that I knew must be saltwater. The shark did not appear interested in my splash; it turned lazily around and swam back to the deep end and circled it. I walked around the pool edge, wanting to get a better view. It was longer than I was tall. The animal was imprisoned. I felt a deep sadness for him and sat on the edge with my feet in the water as it swam under the blue crest. I wasn't worried. I knew that sharks did not prefer humans. The animal could sense me, but it did not show

any desire to come closer. I stared at him or her for a long time until I felt a prick on my forearm. I looked up to see Dr. Clifton holding a blood-tinged lance. The man straightened his posture and placed the needle into a container. I was used to samples being collected, but I looked at him with narrowed eyes. What a strange time to take my blood, I thought. The wound had gathered a pool of red that had already started to drip into the water. My eyes widened. He did not want a sample. The last thing I saw before being pushed in was the shark gathering momentum as the scent of food enticed it into a frenzy.