

# Breakthrough

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Shawn was walking his rounds when the chime rang from Room 6, the Smoker ward. He was four days into his month-long rotation in the basement, what the prigs in administration called the Supernormal Event Care and Treatment Unit (SECTU), and what the attendants, nurses, and most of the doctors called Sig Central.

The Sigs were grouped behind the seven doors down here, kept together according to category, partially because it eased caring for them and partially because their particular miseries thrived in similar company. Weepers were in Room 1, Screamers in Room 2, Babblers in Room 3, Droolers down at the end in Room 4, Singers in Room 5, Smokers in Room 6, and Dancers in Room 7. These were broad categories, and if the hospital had the endless resources that every hospital craves, the Sigs could probably have been broken down further — maybe to the individual level. As it stood, these categories worked.

Shawn went to Room 6, buzzed the three-one pattern that identified him as an attendant, then pressed the keycode and let himself in.

"Hello? Hello?" came a scared voice from the end of the dark room, and Shawn had to run his hand up the wall to find the switch.

"It's okay. I'm right here," Shawn was saying as the light came on, and he saw the ward was full, most of the Smokers sitting up, turning their faces towards him, the black and cracked holes where their eyes used to be leaking streams of foggy smoke.

"Where am I?" the Smoker at the end said. He was a virgin, just got here an hour ago. "What happened? Why can't I see?" His voice was shuddery and clogged, like he was crying, or really wanted to.

The other Smokers were staying quiet, knowing the fear, remembering it. They had all awakened in this place after their personal breakthroughs, after they had *seen*, and they knew how terrifying it was. Where others might jeer or laugh or insult, these kept their silence and waited for Shawn to comfort.

Shawn stopped at the foot of the scared Smoker's bed. "Hello," he said softly, and the man jerked in surprise and drew backwards on the bed. "It says on your chart your name is Craig. Can I call you Craig?"

"What?" The Smoker was turning his head about, squinting the black, leaking holes with the muscles of his face. "Why can't I see? What happened to — what happened to me?" He was a mess, but all the virgins were. Some of the attendants liked to keep them socked out on meds, but that only passed the problem along to the next shift.

"What do you remember?"

The Smoker frowned, twitched his head with impotent irritability. The smoke traced a comma in the air before his face. "Nothing. Nothing. I just remember waking up here."

"Okay, it's all right. You saw yourself a UER, Unexplained Extraplanar Rupture. That's what the docs call it. You like that name?"

The Smoker twitched his head again and made another comma.

"Me neither. I call them breakthroughs. Say, Craig — hey, did you say I could call you Craig?"

The Smoker shrugged.

"Craig, we're gonna take care of you here. This is St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Fairfax, Virginia. This is what we do best, Craig. You got a room full of people here, all of them know what you're going through," and to the rest of the room, Shawn said, "Isn't that right?"

And the other Smokers spoke up, offering greetings and tiny comfort noises, like a blind AA meeting: "Hey Craig," "Hi Craig," "Welcome Craig," "It'll be okay, Craig," "We're here, Craig," "We love you, Craig," "We'll get through this, Craig," and on and on.

Shawn said, "Hey, Craig, I'm gonna touch your shoulder now, okay?"

Craig jerked, but then nodded. "Yeah."

Shawn reached out and laid a hand on Craig's shoulder, saying, "You're going to be fine. If you need anything, you can press that button. Food, music, you want to write a letter ... anything at all, you press that button and I'll come, or someone else will. We've been doing this work for a long time now, and it's all covered. Your family knows you're here, and they'll be by this weekend. And you know what? At some point, Craig, you're gonna be good enough to go on home again."

"Will I ever ... will I ever..." Craig couldn't finish the question.

"Hey, one thing at a time. For right now, just get used to this new place, and get to know some of these people. They're good people. Everything else, I don't want you to think about." Shawn didn't have to say it, because of course, Craig already knew. It was the first place curious fingers went when a person couldn't see, and Craig already knew that his eyes weren't just damaged ... they were missing.

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After tucking Craig in and saying goodnight to the room, Shawn stopped into Room 4, changing a few diapers and a few sheets, keeping an animated patter going even though the Droolers didn't respond. There wasn't a raised eyebrow, a turned head, a smile, a cough, a single sound. It might have been a room full of mannequins, propped upright against pillows, their heads canted, their eyes fixed, their mouths open, their skin waxy.

"Hi Rob, how are you tonight? Did your parents stop by this morning? I heard one of the nurses say something. Those are good people, your mom and dad. I only met them once, but I liked them."

"Steve, hey. New pajamas. Come on, man, where are the cammo ones? Who got you these yellow things? I'm surprised they don't have feeties. No, I'm just kidding you, you look good in them."

"Uh oh, Jessica, going with the braids tonight? You know I like you better in the pigtails. I think you look pretty. But don't you go asking me out again, you know I can't date the patients. I need to tell you that every time. But if I get them to change that rule, watch out!"

"Ken, big Ken. Yeah, yeah, I know, how'd my Dolphins do? Look, I gotta take care of a few things ... give me about an hour. Then I'll come back and read the whole paper to you, starting with sports. I promise."

At the door, Shawn again promised to be back to read the paper, then said, "I'm going to leave this light on, but I don't want any fooling around in here. I'll be on this floor for a while, so I'll be able to hear you."

He let himself out and pulled the door shut until it clicked. He had one room left, and it was the one room he would have skipped if he could. Shawn considered taking his fifteen minutes now, snagging his comic from the desk and disappearing upstairs for some pretzels and quiet time. Of course, if he did that, the room would still be waiting for him. Better to get it done now and not have it hanging.

Room 3. He stood outside for a while, thinking he might be able to hear them in there, *shplaržecrunelapengurdaquellomar*-ing away, filling every space with that guttural, alien noise. Of course he couldn't really hear them, not with these doors, and these walls.

He buzzed three-one, for all the good it would do, then keycoded the door and pushed it open. And the rushing, gushing nonsense chatter poured out of the room and filled up the hallway, and it filled up Shawn's head like a psychedelic venom, making it float and making it pound.

All of the Babblers were talking, but what they were saying was not in words, not comprehensible or intelligible. From each issued an ululating stream of consonants and vowels, hard and soft sounds, roiled together like a madman's stew. It might have been something like *sabedalentalfurrenshorgareenaplentzenekarunubleeparoo*, but really nothing like that at all. It wasn't English, of course, and it wasn't any Romance language. It wasn't Chinese or Japanese or sing-song Vietnamese, nothing anyone could recognize. It wasn't human.

But the stream snagged in the brain with a tantalizing, mesmerizing suggestion of meaning, with the faintest hint that it all might equal something, that if you just listened long enough...

Shawn had to work himself up to it, but finally he managed a tight, "Hey, everyone, how are we doing?" He had to ask the question again, louder, and then again, even louder, nearly shouting. "*HEY, HOW'S EVERYONE DOING?*"

The Babblers went on babbling, exchanging easy glances as though at a party, as though discussing politics and weather and clothes they were thinking about buying and spouses they were thinking about leaving. Their movements were not forced, their expressions were not strained; they acted as though unaware of this horrible cacophony, as though amused by all Shawn's shouting.

"*DOES ANYBODY NEED ANYTHING? ANYTHING AT ALL?*" Shawn bellowed, and received a few tolerant head shakes, a few dismissive waves. Most of them just ignored him.

"*OKAY, THEN, GOOD NIGHT!*"

Normally, Shawn spent up to twenty minutes in a ward, but even five with the Babblers made him want to run screaming. It was definitely time for a break.

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First Shawn's wrist counter went off, sporadic clicks building up into an insectile whirl. Then the space in front of the vending machines wavered and tore and gaped. From the ragged hole came a blazing wash of white light and a screaming tornado roar, this open-mouthed sound like *WAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH*. There was no heat, of course, and the air did not move.

At the first click, Shawn lowered his gaze to his lap, one hand covering his eyes, the other hand unsnapping the pouch at his belt and digging out his canvas cover mask. Eyes closed and breath held, he shook the mask open and pulled it over his head, then cinched the side cords. He only knew what the breakthrough looked like — the tattered edges, the blowtorch bright light — from training films. He had never actually seen one.

It was black inside the mask, stuffy like an attic and a little claustrophobic. The rushing roar was

deaden, faint and distant, not a *WAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH* but more of a *hmmmmmmmm*. This was what he focused on, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow. Shawn listened to the sound fade ... fade ... fade.... The breakthrough trailed off, ran out, whispered away. When it was gone, he counted thirty, took one deep breath, let it out, and slipped off his mask.

Shawn opened his gummy eyes, hidden again behind fingers. After a few blinks to clear his vision, he stole cautious peeks about the room. The breakthrough was over. He folded and stowed his cover mask, then transmitted the wrist counter data and reset it. He surveyed the break room. His *FreeLight* comic book, opened on the table before him, had a corner curled and browned slightly. One of the vending machines, the one he liked with the cheap pretzels, had a long crack running down its plate glass front.

He was dropping the comic into the sealbin when Matty ambled in, a dollar bill folded in his big hand, his wet mouth open and red. Matty nodded as he passed, then he saw the crack on the vending machine and stopped like he had bounced into an invisible wall. His chin kicked up, his arms dropped to his sides, and he dropped back a step.

"Aw, man, no." Matty turned toward Shawn. "You gotta be kidding me. When'd it happen?"

"Couple minutes ago, I don't know. I already sent the message."

"They're gonna take it," Matty said. "They're gonna take the one good machine left on this whole floor. You know that, right?"

Shawn tilted his head. "Maybe they won't this time. You don't know. Maybe they'll come here with a counter, it'll pass, and they'll just replace that glass." He didn't really believe that, since a fire team had always confiscated anything touched by a breakthrough in the past.

Shawn sat back down at his table, and Matty fell heavily in the chair opposite. Matty stared at the cracked glass, his fat fist bouncing on the sticky surface of the table, his tongue playing around his lips.

"Man," Matty said.

"Yeah, well..." Shawn couldn't really get a good sympathy going, since he didn't have a comic to read or enough money to buy something from the other machines.

"Hey, man, where they got you tonight?" Matty wasn't looking at Shawn, so he was probably just filling up the silence. Matty did that.

"Where do they always got me? Down in Sig Central. I only come up here because, well, usually it's quiet."

"Yeah, quiet." Matty unfolded his dollar, turned it a few times on the table. "You like working with the Sigs?"

"Do you?" Shawn asked.

Matty shrugged, his huge shoulders going up and down. "I don't know. I guess. Some are all right. Droolers, they're okay. The diapers are a pain, though. The Smokers, though ... no, you can have them. I can't stand looking into those holes." Matty shuddered a little, sending ripples down his whole big body.

"You know, I actually don't mind the Smokers, not that much. It's the Babblers I hate. You know, I saw this article, how scientists were trying to figure out the language. They said these experts say it's like a real language, only they can't figure it out. All the testing, the computers, all those smart

people, and they just can't figure it out. They said this one thing, about how a Babblor downstairs would be able to talk to a Babblor in China, like it's the same stuff coming out of their mouths. Can you believe it?"

"Who said?" Matty's face was all bunched up, as though he smelled something bad.

"I don't know," Shawn said. "Scientists. It was in this magazine."

They were quiet a while, and then Matty said, "You ever think about it?"

"What?" Shawn asked, but he already knew.

"Looking," Matty said. "Listening. Just taking the mask off."

"You mean full out? Just taking the cover mask off and looking in, get my eyes smoked? Just opening up my ears and getting all that noise up in my brain, maybe finally figure out what the Babblers been saying all this time?"

Matty nodded. "Yeah. You ever think about it?"

"Sure."

"You ever gonna?"

Shawn took a moment. "I ... well ... I don't know." He came close to saying something else.

"Yeah," Matty said, and then hiked himself up and ambled over to another vending machine. He ran a pudgy finger down the glass as he scanned the contents, and made an "Ah!" sound. He fed in his dollar and punched the letter-number combo. Something tumbled down and thumped at the machine's bottom. Matty knelt, felt around, and came out with a *Gearz* bar.

With some noisy effort, Matty rose. He twiddled the nasty combination of white chocolate and honey at Shawn. "Wanna share?"

"No thanks," Shawn said. "I should get back."

As Matty dropped back into his chair, Shawn got up and headed toward the break room door. Through a mouthful of *Gearz*, Matty said, "Watch where you look, man. What you listen to. I don't want it to be you I'm changing diapers for."

Shawn put his hand on the doorway, stood there for a few beats, and then shook his head. "You won't be. Don't worry about me." He looked back at Matty with a queer smile. "But if I ever do take the mask off, I'm not just looking. I'm going in."

Matty's mouth dropped open, revealing a churned slop of white and brown. "Y-y-y...", was all he managed.

"But don't worry," Shawn said. "I'm not gonna take the mask off." And Shawn went back to work. He had promised Ken he'd read the newspaper.