

# SCREAM OF THE BUTTERFLY - PART 5

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## 12: Data

Pam watched while the three men talked for a short while longer, the leader apparently giving instructions of some kind and the other two ultimately nodded their understanding. They melted into the brush on either side of their leader and Pam sensed them moving cautiously, carefully into positions that would give a better angle of view for not only the small clearing but the surrounding thicket of plants. She doubted anybody could approach them closer than twenty-five feet without being detected. They had redrawn their weapons and Pam concentrated on them, trying to determine just what they were. She hadn't ever seen anything like them before.

From the two shots taken at her, Pam had figured the weapons emitted some sort of electrical discharge, but it was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. A taser didn't act that way at all. It merely fired small darts that were connected to wire that ran back to the unit, allowing a high voltage discharge to be administered. What she'd seen looked much more like a lightning strike than anything else.

But they had seemed to aim them, which didn't fit with any electrical theory she heard of. She discarded that line of thought after a moment more, realizing that speculation would get her nowhere at this point.

The third man turned and without any display of concern, merely walked back the way they'd come, vanishing into the bushes. Pam elected to follow and permitted herself a smug grin, knowing that the two guards had no way of sensing her interest or movement. Within a few moments, she'd caught up behind the man and from that point on, simply kept several paces back. She contented herself with observation and completely suppressed speculation. It was pointless at this time.

After several minutes of walking, the third man came into a much larger clearing which sported a pair of tents and what appeared to be a cache of some kind. There were crates and what looked like a mess tent/cooking arrangement, as well as weapons.

Lots of weapons.

*This is getting deeply weird, Pam thought. What in blue blazes is going on here?*

She suddenly realized that she felt exposed, for no reason that she could understand and then moved her position from the middle of the open area to the shade of a large tree that seemed connected by vines to every other tree in sight. After a moment, she realized that it was a kind of banyan tree.

The feeling of being exposed, of hostile gazes upon her disappeared the moment she entered the shadows. The feeling of relief was so intense she almost felt giddy. *Got to be something to do with Morgan's shadow dancing. Maybe that's part of what he was talking about — melting into shadows.*

She turned her attention to the tent that her inadvertent guide had entered and in a moment, he reemerged, joined now by two others, a woman of about fifty, tall with frizzy light brown hair and a surly expression, and a man of about sixty, going on two hundred. His hair, what there was left of it, was salt and pepper, his moustache pure white. His skin was heavily tanned on top of being quite dark naturally. His face was a wasteland of wrinkles surrounding black eyes that gave Pam the creeps. They appeared to harbor all of the soul one would expect to find behind an Aztec sacrificial mask. If any man was a killer and an evil man to boot, Pam decided that this one was. Her revulsion was so visceral she felt like shooting him then and there.

She stopped herself.

A talk ensued and this one was in English. “Chua, I want that person, now. Dead or alive, I want to know exactly what happened and I can’t until you at least bring me a body to question.” Pam stiffened. *Judas Priest. A freaking necromancer. That’s all I need right now.*

The man who had led Pam to the encampment looked mildly apologetic. “No trace whatsoever. When I say trace, I *mean* trace. The person, a woman I think, burst out of the gate, hit the ground and began shooting. She killed both guards. And then got *out* of there by some method I don’t understand at all.” He glared at the two in front of him. “I’m no neophyte — I can detect quite a few things that most people can’t. But I lost her trail within three or four steps. I have *no* idea what she did.”

The woman spoke. “That has to be that Whitby woman. She’s McKinley’s partner but she doesn’t know any of the arts.” The woman sound both musing and dubious.

“And McKinley is occupied right now.” This was from the old man. His eyes seem to bore into the man he’d called Chua.

“Maybe she got some sort of device or amulet from him. I don’t know. But she’s gone and I have no way of tracking her. *You* don’t either, so get off my back.”

For a moment, Pam thought the old man would explode but he eventually took a deep breath. He said, in an almost mild tone, “True. I suggest you refrain from pointing that out any more or I’ll be somewhat offended. You really don’t want to offend me, Chua. You are no more than an infant in the arts and I won’t waste my time being gentle. Do you understand?”

“Jon, shut up. Quit threatening the help and do something constructive. What about pulling in some favors from the elementals? They have abilities we lack. You yourself admit that.”

The man regarded the woman for long seconds and then with a totally impassive face, replied. “You do it, Sarah. I’m occupied right now with keeping our pair of scraithinths from laying waste to the surrounding countryside. That’s a bit more important, don’t you think?”

Grimly, the woman nodded agreement. She glared at Chou. “I can’t do it alone, I don’t have the power. You’ll have to help me.” Chou looked between the two and after locking eyes with the old man for several long, tense seconds, nodded.

“Right. Let’s see what they have to say.”

Pam watched as the two of them went back into the tent and the old man, Jon, stood silently, gazing really at nothing as he concentrated on something unseen and far away.

The scraithinths. He had to be checking up, exerting whatever control or influence he might have with them. Pam thought for a moment, trying to piece things together. She at least had managed to identify the source of the break in — that was clear. Jon and Sarah appeared to be the leaders and certainly had the powers required and the cunning to plan the robbery. How and why they’d gotten aid from a weird, alien type of elemental remained to be seen but Pam had a feeling that there was some sort of exchange behind that cooperation, rather than any overt force on the part of Jon. The little she’d seen of that earth elemental had convinced her it was not one that could be controlled — dealt with, possibly destroyed but not controlled by any human.

The motive for the robbery had to be to steal secrets and why they’d bungled that the first time around wasn’t clear. Perhaps they’d had problems with the scraithinths — that was the most likely. Something had required them to get in and get out before they had had a chance to get to stripping the computers of their information. That would explain why they had returned. And why they had been prepared for both Kevin and Pam, expecting them. They had noticed Kevin’s bugs and magical traps and nullified them easily enough. It wouldn’t have taken them long to trace back who had been hired and what they were capable of, *if they hadn’t already known.*

Pam felt that perilous presence stir below her and she narrowed her eyes intently, watching Jon at work. Some communication seemed to be going on though this was the first time Pam had ever witnessed what amounted to telepathy. Every dealing she’d seen Kevin have with elementals had been

face-to-face, often very vocal, though in weird languages and tones. Pam figured it was prudent caution

on the part of the old man that limited the contact.

Pam suddenly grinned to herself. From the expression on Jon's face, he wasn't terribly pleased with the response he was getting. She didn't get to enjoy it very long because about then, she found herself surrounded by the flickering light of dancing salamanders. They danced and circled and spun in delight as if they found a long lost friend. Perhaps one of them had — but it betrayed her presence.

She backpedaled into deeper shadow and cleared her mind, concentrating entirely on stepping into the void she envisioned. She did her best to become nothing more than a wisp of darkness without form or thought.

It must have worked. The salamanders didn't follow her and she found herself presented with a rather large problem. She could garner information, spy, but only by revealing herself. Worse, the scraithinth below her seemed to have become aware of her presence and she felt it begin to approach through the ground below. She felt the faintest of tremors, as if a mild earthquake had begun and as she watched, the ground around Jon surged upward.

Jon rolled. His concentration totally disrupted; the scraithinth came forth and Pam got a much better look than she had before. Much too good a look.

### 13: Ambush

The filing cabinet surged backwards suddenly, as if it had been kicked by a horse. It crashed into the desk between Kevin and the door, upset the tripod and nearly knocked Kevin down. He felt a stab of pain as he reflexively grabbed for support from the desk, caught his balance and then pulled himself back into position, further straining his back in the process. He ignored it, righted the tripod checked to make sure the candle was still lit and frozen in stasis and then picked up the ice cubes and bottled water.

The door shattered. Shards of wooden veneer and chunks of metal flew away from the frame and Kevin could see the scraithinth standing in the wreckage of the doorway. The eyes glowed yellow and red with a hellish intensity and it kicked the remainder of the wooden wreckage out of the way before stepping into Paige's office. Kevin began to chant in ancient Greek and then paused, and dumped the ice cubes into the candle flame.

Under the stasis spell Kevin had invoked, the candle flame *absorbed* the ice and he snatched up the bottled water, shook it once more keeping it corked with his thumb. He directed the spurting water into the stasis bound flame aimed at the scraithinths. He spoke two Persian words of command, enjoining the three elements to fuse.

Beneath the tripod, the runic letters exploded into white light as all of the components obeyed his will. The runes carried the power and meaning of Kevin's intent, the candle flame, frozen in stasis above them, intimately connected by wax to the mint and anise powder which amplified Kevin's intent, channeled that power into a tight, laser-like beam, striking the elemental squarely on its chest. For a split second, the beam had no effect, but then Kevin — still chanting and directing the application of energy — could see the beam begin to erode the earth elemental.

It howled, a weird piping sound that carried a guttural undertone. It froze in place, the arms reaching toward the blankness that slowly expanded on its chest and after a few seconds more, all movement ceased as frozen fire, air and water began to overpower the magic which gave form to the elemental. Kevin gritted his teeth as he threw his own life force into the beam, gambling everything on this one attack.

The creature's weird cry began to falter.

Kevin's legs began to shake and sweat poured down his face. His arms shook and he had to steel

himself to keep the beam focused and centered. It seemed to go on forever and Kevin was wracked with searing pain. It *hurt*.

Kevin had nearly collapsed when the scraithinth's piping, undulating cry suddenly ceased. The light of the eyes disappeared and then the creature disintegrated into dusty sand and ash. That was the last Kevin saw before a gray fog took his vision and he blacked out.

#### 14: Counterstrike

The scraithinth scooped up the necromancer in its arms and Jon *screamed*. Pam saw the gray slime begin to coat the man, his flesh beginning to liquefy and smoke as the elemental issued a thunderous series of indescribable sounds. For a moment, Pam wondered what had happened, but suddenly, her mouth dropped open as she realized that the creature was enraged, *because Kevin had killed the other one!* Pam might not know the words but the emotion of rage and grief combined were unmistakable. It was going to take apart everything it could find and Pam had better get some distance, now, or she might just be another bowl of protein soup.

She moved like a shot, circling the scraithinth by a wide margin but making for the tent where Chou and Sarah had disappeared. The way that thing was killing the old necromancer was as ugly a method as Pam could imagine and she elected to give the other two some warning of their danger. After that, they were on their own.

Pam sped into the tent only to find both of them sitting at a folding table, recovering from what had to have been a shock when the salamanders had bolted and run. They had apparently tried to stop them and been consequently dazed. Pam stepped out of concealment, reached over and slapped the woman across the face, bringing her around quickly.

"Your buddy Jon is getting eaten about now. I'd make for the hills if I were you." Pam spat out before giving Chua a slap as well. "Keep the hell out of Boston, or I'll blow the two of you away faster than you can blink, got me?"

As if to punctuate her remark, the scraithinth emitted another bellowing roar and both Chua and the woman paled. Before they could make another move, Pam stepped into concealment once again, vanishing before their eyes. They didn't spend any time coming to a decision, but exited the tent at a run, only to find themselves face to face with the scraithinth and what was left of Jon.

There wasn't much, actually, but they got the stinking, now mushy remains in their faces as the elemental closed with them. Their screaming started almost immediately.

Pam was already far away. She had been sprinting, if you could call what she was doing running, and now slowed to an easy pace. With concentration, she found she could increase her actual ground speed quite a bit without any more effort than she was currently putting out; she settled for that.

Underbrush, trees, thickets of any kind, offered no resistance to her as she found herself automatically shifting and flowing — dancing — along the path of least resistance, melting into the deep shadows of the jungle and briefly becoming visible as a flashing darkness in that twilight world.

She presently came to a river and found herself balked. That feeling of being visible flared terribly and she realized that she had to have some sort of shadow to cross — that she actually was inside the shadows while she moved and that her ability to move freely had a limitation.

Pam paused, not sure what to do at that point. Putting more distance between her and the scraithinth was probably unnecessary. She had to have crossed a dozen miles by now. But where was she? Which direction should she be taking?

From the sun, she gathered that it was early afternoon. If she were in the Far East, it should be between ten and fourteen hours difference in time. She marked what would be west and then regarded the river. It appeared to be flowing to the southwest.

*Okay, better get moving. I'm not going to be able to use their portal so I'm going to have to find my own*

*way out. Following a river is usually damn difficult but not the way I've been traveling. Better get to it.*

She set off as what felt much like a normal walking pace, though the ground flowed much, much faster — almost at a dead run. Pam figured she could keep this up for hours and settled down to explore her new found ability, varying the speed, noting the way things appeared while in this nether region, mentally biding time until she would be faced with something concrete to concern her.

About nightfall, she came to a bridge and a highway and after a while, managed to catch a ride on a lorry filled with noisy, unconcerned people who regarded her with little curiosity and her questions with frank unconcern. By midnight, she was in Bangkok, Thailand, looking for the American embassy with a lame story about being kidnapped on tap. Oddly enough, the consulate seemed to find her story at least amusing and she had no trouble getting a quick loan, a hotel room and a long distance call placed to Kevin's cell phone.

He answered on the second ring.