

SCREAM OF THE BUTTERFLY - PART 3

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5: Break-in (cont.)

Pam looked a little less annoyed and then grinned at Paige, who was now seated in one of the visitor chairs, regarding the two of them quizzically. “Once in a while I’ll come up with something worth while. In this case, a shielded cable link back to a Flash RAM drive. It appears they missed it.”

Pam turned as they heard voiced down the hallway and stepped back from the door to allow Sam and his other two researchers to enter. Molly Hatheway entered first, a fifty-five year old woman packing a bit of extra weight but still looking fairly fit. She ought to, since she routinely rode a mountain bike twelve miles a day for her commute, except for the winter of course. She wasn’t fool enough to take those chances. Calm brown eyes swept the room before she found herself a chair out of the way.

Carl Jacobs was the youngest of the group, having just celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday. He was also the most junior, having been hired by Dawson only the year before. He was a small man, just an inch or so taller than Pam and thin, one of those people who vibrate in place, rather than sit quietly. He nodded to both Pam and Kevin before taking up a station along the wall by Paige’s design desk.

Sam looked even more unhappy. “They took damn near all of the raw silicon as well as all of the finished substrate. We’re completely stopped until we can get replacement materials and that’s not going to be easy.”

Pam took a deep breath and raised an eyebrow when Kevin looked to her. “Have you checked the mag stuff yet?” In their own code, “mag” meant magical, rather than magnetic as most engineers would have assumed.

Kevin sighed himself, disgruntled now. “Yeah. Completely kaput. There’s no sign of it around at all. They cleaned it all out.” Pam looked worried and Sam noticed. But before he could ask anything, Kevin continued. “Got it. Hold on a minute and maybe we’ll see who it was that came to call.”

Kevin clicked his mouse a few times and then stood up and faced the laptop to the room in general. “Okay. Sam, see if you or anybody else can recognize these jokers.”

The laptop began playing a video file, complete with an audio track. But there wasn’t much to hear. Just a mildly hissing silence as ID numbers on the bottom of the video frame raced by.

The number stopped, only to begin again, this time much more slowly, the time rate apparently now one-to-one. As they watched, a portion of the hallway dimmed, as if an invisible screen had begun to darken, between the video cam and the outside door. After about ten seconds, the dimming began to abate and they could see three figures standing outside the door to Paige’s office. But even with the full field of view now normal, the three figures were somehow indistinct.

One of them didn't appear to be human. His shoulders were huge and surmounted a terribly short torso atop very short legs. He couldn't have stood more than four feet in height. His hands were overlarge and the massive head sported hair that was a dirty brown, unclipped and wild. He resembled a dwarf as much as anything, but that still didn't truly describe the figure.

Sam sucked in a breath, just about the same time that Paige, Carl and Molly stiffened in surprise. "What the..."

"Quiet." Pam's voice was soft and low but still carried a ring of authority.

As they watched, one of the figures touched the doorknob and then turned to the others. He at least appeared a bit more distinctly now and was a man of about forty, with dark brown hair cut short and a heavily tanned face. The man appeared to be examining the hallway, eyes following the natural lines of the ceiling wall juncture and then sweeping the wall and doorway at the end of the hall. He cocked his head after a moment and then muttered something to the other two.

The third figure pulled something from a pocket and pointed it down the hall and... the laptop screen froze, the video file finished.

Nobody said anything for a full ten seconds before Pam softly muttered, "Judas Priest..."

6: Noise Level

Pam came back to the jeep, exiting the hotel lobby briskly and climbing into the driver's seat. She shook her head when a doorman looked at her quizzically and inclined her head back toward the lobby. She was waiting for Kevin who should have been right behind her.

They'd hustled all four researchers into cars and taken them in to downtown Boston, putting them up for the night at one of the best hotels. It took some fast-talking on the part of the two of them to explain why they were so anxious to get them away from the office — the place had been burglarized and shouldn't have held much interest to whoever had performed the break-in. At least, that's the way Sam and company had viewed it.

However, Kevin and Pam were adamant and even though they refused to explain exactly what they themselves planned to do, had persuaded Dawson to check in. Kevin had offered to foot the bill which had been some of a shock to both Sam Dawson and Pam both, but been refused as Sam took charge of the situation. After that video and then the subsequent evidence that Pam had dug out of the passive systems — systems that merely monitored a variety of conditions such as temperature, magnetic field, humidity and so forth — he'd realized that something more dangerous than a case of industrial espionage had taken place. According to the strip charts, the temperature in the hallway, Paige's office, his office and the storeroom had plunged to fifty below zero in the space of about ten seconds, remained there for almost an hour and only then slowly began to warm up.

Pam wasn't sure which bothered Dawson more: The fact that it had happened or the fact that Kevin had something in place that could record it. Sam looked to be getting a bit skittish about both Kevin and Pam as well.

Kevin finally emerged and got in the jeep and Pam nodded to the doorman as she began to pull out. "Well, what's the plan?"

Kevin didn't answer immediately. He was lost in thought, not really seeing Pam or the route they were traveling while he tried to figure out just what they were up against. Pam gave him all of thirty seconds before she repeated her question and nudged him. "Wake up, Kev. I want to know what the plan is."

"Sorry. Just trying to figure things out."

“What’s to figure? That was a dwarf in the video, correct?”

“No, it wasn’t. I’m not sure what it was exactly. Some sort of earth elemental I’m not familiar with.”

“Looked like a dwarf to me.”

“No, it looked like what pop culture *thinks* a dwarf looks like. Actually, dwarves don’t look all that much different from human beings. Just chunky and heavy.”

“What about the strip recorder?”

Kevin sighed, braced himself as Pam shifted suddenly between two travel lanes and crossed the river. “That’s what’s got me worried. It’s not in any pattern I know. Why the temperature drop? Why so much? If it was to hide evidence of what happened, it was a failure and stupid to boot. Low temperatures act to make background signal noises less obtrusive. That can’t be the effect they were hoping for, can it?”

Pam frowned and then abruptly braked for a stop light. She turned to regard him. “No, but if they didn’t know jack about electronics, they wouldn’t know what to steal, would they? Contradiction.”

She was silent for a moment and then suddenly said, “Unless they didn’t get what they wanted.”

Kevin regarded her for a moment. “Explain — you lost me.”

“We’ve made the assumption that they were after proprietary information. Yet so far, the only actual evidence we’ve seen of theft has been the looting of the supplies. You had watchdog programs on board all of the computers. Maybe the computers weren’t touched because they ran out of time or something went wrong. Or perhaps they didn’t have the means to buck your stuff immediately available. That would explain not rapping the computers.”

Kevin frowned, thinking about it. She had a good point. There was no indication at all that the burglars had actually spent any time on the computers. And he could check that by running the keystroke log and checking the timestamps. He said as much and Pam nodded. She took another turn, this one to the right and then followed up with one final right hand turn that brought her to Dawson Dynamics. They both jumped out and headed inside to check.

It took Kevin all of five minutes to determine that Pam had been right. They hadn’t messed with any of the computers. While he was checking that, though, Pam made the discovery that all of the hard-copy files that related to patents, patent applications and Dawson’s proprietary methods of doping silicon wafers, had been either trashed or stolen. They took stock.

The break-in had been magical as well as physical, had involved an earth elemental of some kind and the target might had been the doped silicon wafers. And for some reason, the burglars had found it necessary to lower the temperature to fifty below zero — why?

Kevin sighed after a moment’s pause. “Energy. They were using the heat as an energy source for some reason. Likely to open a portal of some kind to leave.”

Pam nodded. That made sense to her from what little she knew of the *magicks*. The energy used in a lot of spells had to come from somewhere. “Can we trace them?”

Kevin nodded slowly. “I think so. But I’ll have to do a complete set up and it will take time. About an hour.”

“Then let’s get to it. The question remains: Is this just a robbery or is it something you have to take a stand in? One of those duties you’re always talking about.”

Kevin nodded. He had a gut feeling that this just might be one of those duties. “I don’t know yet, but you could be right. In either case, we still need to know more and getting the

information takes precedence now.” For several seconds the two of them regarded each other and then they got to work.

For Pam’s part, that meant a thorough check for any physical evidence; she started at the one place she’d found anything, so far — the doorway at the end of the hall where their electronics had been burned out.

After a puzzled five minutes, Pam gave up. The door had obviously been forced and the rapid freezing had left obvious signs — metal parts of the door had cooled at differing rates due to differences in materials and thickness, leaving screws broken or cracked and the hinges warped out of shape. On close inspection, she was amazed they’d been able to open and close the door at all. Parts of the hinges appeared to have crystallized unevenly and become extremely brittle.

Once beyond the hallway, she was presented with a large room used for conferences and lunch breaks, with three other doors leading off to a rest room, the main storage room and a heavily secured vault that was about five foot by five foot. That had been where the silicon wafers had been kept, as well as the patent applications and other sensitive hard copies. It had obviously been tossed looking for specific items and Pam took out her kit and began dusting for prints. She didn’t hold out much hope of finding anything she could match since the method of entry had been primarily magical.

She’d been at work for about twenty minutes and had straightened up, stretching her back and shoulders, when she heard a soft sound from the direction of the other storeroom. She pivoted quickly, drew her Berretta and jacked a shell into the chamber. She flicked the safety off and then listened from behind the vault door. After a moment, she leaned her head to see out between the vault door and the frame.

Two men stood in the doorway to the other storeroom and both were armed with either mini-Uzis or some surplus cold-war, eastern bloc, mini-assault weapons. Both wore stocking caps that concealed their faces, leaving only opening for their eyes and mouth. Pam sighed to herself. They looked like a pair of macho gun nuts on a training mission. They also looked like they’d shoot the first thing that moved.

Damn it to hell. I should have been prepared for this. We knew they might be back, but I didn’t think to set up a radio link to Kev. Now I have to figure out a way to warn him and not get killed in the bargain.

She maneuvered her Berretta to fire through the crack between the vault door and frame, sighted, decided that this was for real and snapped off five shots. She caught the lead figure at least three times, twice in the trunk and once in the head and missed with one of the other two bullets. The fifth shot took the second gunman in the chest and he was knocked back into the storeroom itself, out of sight.

Lousy grouping, Pam. You’re out of practice.

He didn’t look to be hurt that badly and Pam sucked in another breath. They had to be wearing body armor.

With no muzzle brake, the shots were thunderous in the vault and Pam was positive Kevin would hear them. Now, she had to shift position before return fire started up.

She never got a chance.

7: Elements

Kevin heard the shots and nearly leapt out of his skin. He’d been in the process of setting up

a scrying spell to trace the pattern of movements that the thieves had made the night before. His first thought was that Pam had been ambushed but then he realized that it had been her Berretta he'd heard. He ought to know the sound of it by now; she'd drilled him in weapons twice a week for the past seven years and he knew far more than most people would think.

Not that he was proficient with them. He wasn't. But he was an expert with a variety of rather lethal spells and that mattered a great deal more in the long run. He grabbed for the amulet under his shirt, extracted it, and concentrated on the pattern on the face of it. When he had it firmly blazed in his mind, he muttered three ritual words in Coptic and was rewarded with a vision of the common room. Both the doors to the storeroom and the vault were open and he could see that one figure was rather messily dead in the doorway of the storeroom. Behind it, a second figure was getting to his knees, picking up a weapon and signaling frantically to someone behind him. As he watched, the figure crawled to the doorway and cut loose with two separate bursts from his weapon, pumping ten or fifteen rounds into the vault. Kevin paled when he heard them ricochet.

He reminded himself that he wasn't actually in the room and jerked his awareness back to his body and made for the hallway. As he ran for the end of the hall, he pulled in his strength and concentrated on a spell that would do a great deal of damage to everything within a five foot radius of its impact and then came to an abrupt halt right outside the hallway door. His head rang from an impact with something unseen and stunned; he staggered back, slipped and landed on his back.

Lights played in his skull and for a moment, he was too stunned to realize that it was more than just the blow he was fighting. Someone was trying to take over his body.

Kevin laughed, though it sounded like a laugh only in his own mind. The sound he made was more of a croaking groan and as he managed to get his elbows underneath him, he struck back mentally, following the line of force to its source. They should never have tried to take him on that way.

As far as Kevin could tell, he had a natural talent for self-defense when it came to mental attacks. So far, he'd never found one that gave him more than a moment's pause to figure out a counter and react. There was something about his own person, his own personality and basic core that instinctively fought such attacks, with strength he normally could never hope to tap.

Some people can't be broken. They can't be forced. They can only be killed. The Soviets had found that to be the case in the seventy odd years of applied barbarism that had been the Gulag Archipelago and it was true. Some people were incapable of mentally submitting to mental coercion or brainwashing.

Kevin was one.

He streaked back along the force line and shattered a hastily erected mental shield into nothingness. The strength of his attack was awesome and totally out of his control. The magician who'd tried to bushwhack Kevin screamed a thin scream and collapsed, his brain totally fried as if by a lightning bolt had hit him. His head *smoked*.

Kevin found himself once again in his own body and totally drained of strength. It was all he could do to continue leaning on his elbows and hold his head up. Through blurry vision he could see the conference room beyond the doorway but he could make out no details.

With a start, he realized that Pam could be hurt, wounded by that murderous blast of bullets and he started to struggle up, only to collapse to the floor. The best he could do was to turn over and laboriously push himself into a crawling position. Slowly, he worked his way around and began to crawl toward the doorway, his breath coming in gasps. Six inches closer.

A foot.

Ten inches closer.

He found himself up against a force wall of some kind and wearily rested his head against it.

What the hell do I do, now? I can't seem to catch my breath.

He sensed as much as heard the tread of heavy feet coming toward him and when he opened his eyes, he found himself looking at a pair of unshod feet that seemed to be made of clay covered with a viscous slime that seemed to pulse with a life of its own. If the first creature he'd seen the night before had been a possible earth elemental, a type that he didn't know, this one had to be another one. Only thing, Kevin had a sick feeling he knew what type of earth elemental it was.

Sylphs, elementals of the air, had once alluded to a rare but incredibly dangerous earth elemental, one that's power was only second to it's hatred for all living things, for all other elementals. A *Scraithinth* they called it. A term of their own and not the name it called itself. No one knew what that actually was because no one had ever encountered one and survived. At least among the elementals of the air.

They were made of an incredibly dense clay, animated with the awareness of a molten spirit that partook of both lava and the deepest slimes found only in the darkest, deadliest trenches of the oceans. Where the earth fought the mighty seas. A creature that should have had some affinity for fire elementals but didn't, because to them, they were food and nothing more. Scraithinths were rare.

So what in hell was one doing here?