

SCREAM OF THE BUTTERFLY - PART 4

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8: Deployment

The first bullet caught Pam low, on the left side just above the pelvis. It ploughed through a layer of subcutaneous fat that all women share, clipped the outer quarter-inch of muscles beneath it and exited cleanly. It also saved her life.

The force of the impact threw her into the corner of the storeroom vault, to the right of the vault door. The rest of the burst ricocheted off the vault door, their second one, and into the nearby wall. The third ricochet that each bullet made sucked up any remaining excess energy and did little damage to anything in the vault.

Half a dozen bright stars had appeared on the back wall of the vault, in two clusters connected by three equally spaced, fresh stars of metal.

The second burst erupted into the vault, but by now, Pam and covered up and hunched into the smallest space possible. The penultimate round creased her across the upper back, but failed to cause any significant injury. It served only to enrage an already extremely angry person toting a gun of her own and possessed of damn good reflexes. The sounds had barely died away before Pam unrolled, looked through the crack between vault door and frame and sent two rounds into the skull of the second gunman.

Then she saw the scraithinth.

It was nearly six feet tall and built oblong. Muscles didn't exactly show except that it looked powerful in an angular way that sent shivers down her back. It was a dark mottled brown, coated with a grayish slime that moved on its own. There was a head of sorts and it bore a nose, also of sorts, and two eyes that glowed a hellish orange with a tiny center of intense yellow. There was a mouth as well but not like anything Pam had ever seen before, human or animal. It was round with filled with rows of tiny crystalline teeth, serrated, sharp and numerous. Pam thought that they might rotate around the mouth itself though how that could physically be managed by a living creature escaped her.

It radiated power.

It radiated hate.

It began a slow walk across the lunchroom, destroying the table that sat in its way with the merest flick of an arm.

Ohmigod, she thought. What the hell is that? How can I warn Kevin and I'd better, because it's headed right for him? Maybe even drawn toward him. Damn it, what do I do?

She caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of her eye and saw a fourth figure, a man this time, dressed in loose black clothing wearing a heavy amulet of silver around his neck. He started to chant something in a low voice and Pam took aim. At least she could take this creep out before she tried something stupid with that damn critter.

There was a flash of intense light and the fourth figure screamed once, thinly; he almost got his hands to his head before collapsing like a rag doll. His entire head was wreathed in smoke and Pam smiled grimly.

Kevin apparently had been alert; scratch one magician. Now what to do with the other thing?

Pam froze, all too aware that she didn't have enough knowledge to do *anything*. This was Kevin's area of expertise. His sphere. She had to fill some of his gaps but this was one of *hers*. She'd have to trust him to do it and that left only one thing for her.

They'd all come out of the same door so Pam decided to find out how many more there might be. And keep them, at least, off Kevin's back. She got up, took a couple of deep breaths and then darted from the vault to the doorway sporting two crumpled bodies. She leapt over them and through the door.

Pam landed in a world far away.

9: Counter

Kevin felt himself lifted up into the air and the face of the scraithinth appeared before him — the flickering of the yellow sparks impenetrably alien and unreadable. The mouth worked slowly, as if the creature chewed a lip, a nervous gesture, an unconscious trait that meant something? Kevin could only guess.

He rather hoped it wasn't a sign of hunger.

Kev gathered what strength he could, though he doubted that any strength he'd ever possess would have done him much good. To his horror, he suddenly realized that the gray slime covering scraithinth's body was in deliberate motion, slowly working its way toward the thick arms that held him.

Down those same arms.

Some of it oozed from the fists that held him upright by the shirt and jacket, flowing into the material of his clothing. A horrible decaying, acrid odor vapor began to thicken in sooty plumes around him. In another moment, he felt a burning begin on his shoulders. Slowly the pain increased but before he could scream, he found his breath choked off. His lungs took over, refusing to inhale any more of the fumes surrounding him. Kev felt a quite rational, visceral fear that he would suffocate before he could draw another breath.

Suddenly, he felt himself falling free, his shirt and jacket shredding away as the grayish slime weakened and dissolved the cloth itself.

His feet hit the ground and with desperate adrenaline strength, Kevin sprawled backwards, his lungs still burning. He managed to sprawl into a roll, only to come up against the wall of the hallway.

He gasped, his need for oxygen finally overriding the instinctive refusal of his lungs to take in air that burned, and scabbled with his feet frantically, distancing himself from the earth elemental. He couldn't get his feet underneath himself but that didn't matter. The pedaling, scabbling staccato of his heels against the floor gave him some movement; he concentrated on that.

The gray slime seemed to hunch on the still extended arms and fists of the creature and Kevin had no doubt that if it got much closer, the corrosive ooze would find a way to get to him, digest him alive so that horrible mouth could suck him up like a malt shop soda. He kicked out, dropped his left shoulder and back rolled again, only this time he hit nothing and managed to gain

his feet as he came around.

He backpedaled several more yards before he turned and *ran*.

Without thinking, he dodged and it was well that he did. A fuming mass of gray sped by him to his right, to land on the floor of the hallway a dozen feet in front of him. He leapt it and then threw himself into Paige's office, slammed the door, locked it and then looked for something with which to block the door. Adrenaline fueled muscles jerked a heavy filing cabinet sideways, across the door and he paused just long enough to take stock. His lungs hurt, but still seemed to work. His shoulders burned but they, too, still seemed to be functional. He felt terribly weak, sick even to the point of retching; his mouth and throat were burned and parched and filled with the dust of fear and death.

Pam! He had to keep that thing occupied and away from her. She'd have no chance against it.

But maybe she did — she'd been able to keep a demon at bay by herself once, but would she be wise enough to keep far enough away from that monstrosity in the hallway? He'd have to hope she would. He didn't have a lot of choices right now and everything depended upon him to come up with a way to counter the scraithinth.

He heard a slow tread, accompanied by creaking of the strained wooden floor of the old house and cast around quickly for materials. He had to find something with which to work and he didn't have much time.

He spotted a small refrigerator set on a counter in the corner and crossed to it, jerked open the door and scanned inside. Cola, soft drinks, bottled water — ice? Yes, there was a freezer shelf and a tray of ice cubes. Not many but it might be enough. Kevin glanced around further but didn't see much else. Paige didn't appear to be a muncher of any sort.

He snapped his head back to the refrigerator and grabbed the bottled water. Yes! It was carbonated. He quickly grabbed the ice tray and a paper plate holding yeast rolls, dumped the rolls and took everything back to Paige's desk. Now, if there was any... he went through the desk quickly, throwing stuff left and right just as the first of a series of heavy, resounding thuds came from the door. The wood began to splinter and smoke; an acrid stench began to seep into the room.

Kevin's knowledge of the different elementals wasn't profound — no human being could have ever claimed detailed knowledge. In fact, most humans had never encountered anything other than the prime species of each element — the one that was most prevalent and intelligent, capable of limited human understanding and communication. Sylphs for air, gnomes and dwarves for earth, undines for sea or water and salamanders for fire, though most of the contacts with salamanders had been with the quixotic, lower forms rather than the intelligent species that existed.

Scraithinth had had no contacts with humans, as far as Kevin knew. It was only because he'd encountered sylphs in a friendly and communicative mood one afternoon, several years before, that he even had heard of that powerful, hated, earth elemental species.

But it *was* an elemental — with exploitable weaknesses. Air eroded earth as did water and water could also weaken earth, disastrously so if applied correctly. Fire appeared to be much less effective than he would have hoped, but that made sense when one considered that this elemental species was a deep one, one that inhabited deep places of the earth. That implied heat, a lot of it.

So perhaps *cold* could be effective. Stiffening it, causing the elemental to slow down, become brittle or rigid.

Breakable? He'd see.

He finally found what he wanted and pulled forth a small box of mints.

10: Landing

It was a jungle. A damn, bloody hot, steaming jungle. Pam went to the ground, hoping to avoid any quick encounter with some watchful sentry and the ground squished underneath her. She didn't see signs of a guard but she doubted she'd be so fortunate.

She was right. She heard a crackle and felt a wash of heat above her and every hair on her body tried to stand up straight and alone. Pam rolled to one side and tracked with her Berretta, coming up with a target almost immediately. She fired twice and continued to roll.

A second crackle and a searing wash of heat accompanied the electric discharge she sensed. This time she had her target before she even finished her roll and twice more she shot. She reversed direction immediately, but it wasn't necessary. She'd caught both guards by surprise and killed both before they knew they were in a fight.

That didn't mean she was safe. Pam scrambled to her feet and did her best to fade into the brush around her. Once concealed, she took a couple of deep, shuddering breaths and took stock of the situation, while she took ejected her nearly spent magazine and slapped in her backup. This had better end soon; she was running low on bullets. She pocketed the nearly spent magazine.

She had absolutely no idea where the hell she was and on top of it all, she wasn't sure she was even in the right place. She couldn't believe that their burglars had calmly stepped out of a jungle into a Boston house. Why she'd landed where she had mystified her but perhaps it was a case of the portal being close by — she hoped that was the case, otherwise she had no clue how she'd return.

Kevin didn't have anybody protecting his back.

Pam felt like screaming in frustration but put herself mentally into martial arts mode. Her breathing slowed. She mentally cast around and discovered that she retained some of the perceptions she acquired during the Wired case. She became aware, dimly at first, of a presence nearby, a heavy, ponderous block of anger and bitter hatred. An onlooker would have seen her face grow pale as she located the presence.

It primarily dwelled *below* her. She also noticed small fireflies of energy that she decided corresponded to nearby humans. They were converging upon the spot where the two bodies lay.

Pam asked herself if she trusted her scanning of the situation and mentally shrugged. She had little choice. With a great deal of care she formed the mental pattern that she'd learned from a shadow dancer named Morgan and stepped into it, effectively blocking anything or anyone from detecting her presence. It took far more energy than she had remembered but it still worked. She was in some sort of nether region, a place between realities, invisible to human and most magical senses.

In a few moments, the soft sounds of speech came from two different positions about five yards away. They were separated by a good ten feet but she detected a slight movement of the dark green bushes between them. There was an open spot about the size of a car between the bushes and herself and she recognized the dark pooling near the closest bush to be blood. She saw neither body of the two men she'd shot but knew they were there.

A minute passed. Then she again heard soft words, this time in a language she thought must be Chinese, and then a figure detached itself from the bushes and entered the small clearing. Like the last two men she'd shot, the figure was simply dressed in dark gray with a mottled pattern of lighter gray-green mixed in. A second figure emerged. Then a third.

The third figure was dressed in lighter colored clothes and wasn't armed. He was of Oriental

extraction but she knew nothing further. He looked grim and gestured to the first two figures, his voice pitched so low that she couldn't make out individual syllables. With a reluctant look, the two men holstered very oddly shaped hand guns of some kind and began dragging the bodies of the two men she'd killed out into the clearing.

What in hell was going on here?

How did gunmen, elementals and a bloody Asian jungle all fit together? In spite of her concern for Kevin, the desperate need to get back to help him, she found herself concentrating on the whys and hows which presented themselves.

Industrial espionage? That fit rather well. International industrial espionage as it happened. Silicon wafers. Doping?

Don't be absurd, Pam, she thought. The doping Kevin spoke of had nothing to do with narcotics of any kind. That sort of doping dealt with putting microscopic amounts of other elements into a silicon crystal.

The two men examined the two bodies and reported to the third figure, apparently noting the rather mundane, ordinary, 9mm bullet wounds they found. The third figure, obviously in command, snarled and looked around, trying to figure out just what had happened and where the intruder might be. For an odd moment, Pam felt a bit of kinship with the bastard. Military, police, private investigator — any of the three found themselves at a loss when they encounter wild magic and elemental forces. Fingerprints and laser sights weren't effective when coming to grips with chaos.

11: Rebound

Kevin's full kit had been spread out in the hallway where he had been trying to trace the movement patterns from the break-in. His resources were limited to what he could find quickly, but that didn't mean he had nothing to work with.

He cleaned out his pockets, dumping the mini-emergency kit he always kept with him. More than once it had saved his neck and it might do so once again. He glanced around, spotted a stapler and dumped five of the breath mints onto the table and pulverized them with the stapler. He also grabbed the crushed staple and put it to one side before punching the stapler twelve more times. He put the staples together and then unfolded the foil pouch.

He kept various herbs in the foil and this time he only needed one of them, so he put all but the anise seeds into a pile, wrapped them in a sheet of computer paper and stuffed them in a back pocket. He crushed the remaining anise seeds using the stapler and put the used, bent staples to one side as well.

The metal didn't matter in this case, but the sympathetic magic they represented and the residual dimensionally augmented and amplified force of his pounding would either break or make his defense. A loud thud from the door distracted him for a moment and he glanced over at it, to see a puff of vapor erupt from between the door and the overturned filing cabinet.

The scraithinth looked to be having more trouble than it had counted on. The door was a solid core metal door and while metal may come from the earth, the alloy used in the door appeared to be giving it problems. *About time something went my way.*

Kevin looked at the crushed mints and added five more to the tabletop, crushed them and put them with the rest.

Quickly now, he fashioned a bowl with half of the foil, placed the crushed anise seeds and mints in it and then lit one of the little birthday cake candles from the emergency pack. He dripped

the wax over the powdered anise seeds and mints, and then formed a molten pool of hot wax about the thickness and diameter of a pair of nickels, mixing the powders together with the wax. That damn near took the rest of the candle so he extinguished it before setting it in the wax. He held it in place long enough for the wax to cool and then set the whole thing aside.

Now he needed something to hold the aluminum foil bowl in the air above the table about three inches.

He jerked the wide flat drawer open and rummaged around, found several rubber bands and a number of pencils and pens. He bent the clips of the pens and used them to help attach the rubber bands around the pens. One of the clips he bent to help form a joint for a tripod arrangement. He balanced the bowl on top, only to have it almost teeter over.

Once again he dug through the drawer and this time pulled out some rubber cement. He coated the bottom of the foil with a thick layer and plopped it down once again on the makeshift tripod, held it in place with one hand and with the other made several fluid gestures over the bowl. He muttered a phrase from an ancient Greek tragedy that perhaps five people in the world realized were words of power and after a moment, let the bowl go. The rubber cement was now literally frozen in position and he grinned to himself.

All right! Even better. I want frozen. I want lots and lots of frozen.

Sometimes serendipity was amazing.

The thuds behind him grew louder.

He didn't have much more time.

Kevin quickly took the staples he's set aside and with the rubber cement, glued them to a



piece of paper in the shape of two runes, Mannaz and Fehu, for individual power and protection respectively. With a pencil, he scrawled ancient Greek, this from a funereal incantation dating back to second century BC and set the paper in the middle of the table. He placed the tripod and aluminum foil bowl atop the paper, grabbed the carbonated water and shook it before pushing the desk over to directly in front of the doorway, but about five feet from it. He lit the candle, and with a gesture and phrase in Medieval Latin, froze the flame of candle in space and time. It wouldn't hold long but he had a feeling it didn't have to. The door was finally giving way.

Kevin shook the bottled water again and cast a holding spell upon it, twisted the top off and set it aside. He was going to have just one chance. He readied the ice cubes, putting them on the table beside the tripod and the bottle before he took a deep breath. *Okay, buddy. Let's get this over with. Let's see if I can send you home for good.* He waited.

While he waited, he idly shook the bottled water, thumb corking the carbonated water.

An earth elemental against all three other elements. Perhaps it would work after all.