

SCREAM OF THE BUTTERFLY - PART 6

By: T.G. Browning

15: Realization

Kevin came to suddenly, as if someone had flipped a switch and all of the lights had come on.

He was lying on the floor of Paige's office and for a moment, he wasn't sure exactly what he had been doing. Then he saw the splintered remains of the doorframe and the door itself, part of the crumpled filing cabinet and he remembered *exactly* what he'd been doing.

From his vantage point on the floor, he looked across, under the desk and spotted a large pile of ashes and sand that marked the place where the scraithin had been. He hadn't been sure that he'd managed to kill it; apparently, he had. Kev was reasonably certain he wouldn't have regained consciousness had the thing lived.

He sat bolt upright. *Pam! Where the hell is she? I've got to —*

The searing pain in his lower back took his breath away. For a moment, all he could feel was pain and then he gritted his teeth and very gingerly got to his feet. He had to turn over onto his knees and pull himself upright using the desk, but he managed it. It took a bit of time.

God, he hoped like hell that Pam hadn't been shot. She was hard to kill, she'd proven that but all it took was one damned bullet. He staggered into the hallway and made his way down it, helping himself along with one hand on the wall as he went. He paused at the storeroom, took note of the two bodies and felt a bit more hope. Pam had taken two of them out — perhaps she hadn't been shot.

The door to the bathroom was still closed while the door to the vault was partway open, so Kevin headed that way. He got there, rested a moment and then stepped inside and looked around. He looked behind the door and sucked in his breath when he saw splatter smears of blood. She had been wounded!

He chewed a lip and dropped to his knees, touched one of the blood smears and looked carefully. She'd been hit, but there wasn't enough blood for it to have been a major wound. Nowhere near enough blood for a major wound. The smear appeared to be where she'd put one hand on the floor to push herself upright. He glanced around further and spotted a fainter, now completely dry blood smear that showed the imprint of a tennis shoe. She'd left under her own power, at any rate. And there was no sign of anyone else having been inside the vault.

Kevin was sure that she hadn't gone out the front — she would have looked for him if she had. That meant she'd probably gone into the general storeroom, where the two bodies were located. That was the most probable place for the portal to have been.

Kevin made his way to the storeroom, still hobbling but now hopeful. Pam must have hit them by surprise and with surprise on her side, he rather doubted that she'd left anybody alive. She didn't mess around with half-measures when things like this went down. If anything, she was twice as hard and tough-minded as he was. He stopped, frozen for a moment while he realized just what he'd been thinking. The implication of it.

Pam was more of a force to be reckoned with than he was.

She acted more quickly, without hesitation, almost always picking the best course without having to stop and think things through. And she had her own code of ethics, a damn strong one, though Kevin doubted that authorities would sanction half of what she did.

She always took the path that she felt was right.

Just as he did.

With a sigh, he realized fully, totally, that his reasoning had been correct. If he lived, he'd end up preventing Pam from understanding her true potential as a force. A force that he could always support, had always supported, would always and forever be bound to. He hadn't fully believed it, not deep inside, until now.

Kevin straightened up, even though it hurt. He glanced into the storeroom, and saw the third body, that of the magician he'd taken out himself. He entered, glanced around and sighed. As he thought. The trail ended here. Pam had gone through the portal and ended up wherever that had led. After such a long time he doubted that he'd be able to trace it at all and a few minutes work convinced him it was pointless. Whatever happened now was up to Pam and all Kevin could do was wait.

Wait, and maybe piece together what exactly was going on. That still needed to be answered, no matter what else happened. Carnage such as this had to have an explanation and from Kevin's experience, it needed to be wrapped up or the results could get messy indeed.

Kevin checked his wristwatch, saw it was already morning and decided he had to get something to eat before he proceed further.

He did.

16: Evaluation

Late that morning, groggy with lack of sleep but no longer hungry, Kevin returned to Dawson Dynamics, called Sam Dawson and arranged for him to return to the office by six that evening. That gave him enough time to clean up the mess and dispose of the bodies, as well as do some detective work. He wanted to know exactly why the break-in had been committed; he didn't propose to let the trail get any colder.

Once he'd cleaned the place up, he set to work.

Four hours of methodical labor revealed a great deal. He might not be as good an investigator as Pam — wasn't, in point of fact. She had a gift for it that eluded most people, giving her insights and guesses accuracy that often was uncanny. Even so, Kevin was no neophyte and he possessed a much more disciplined attack than Pam could ever hope to muster. His search of the bodies had revealed a few clues as to their origin. His examination of their weapons and clothing revealed far more.

All three were Chinese, though none of them were Chinese nationals. A quick check of the names via the Internet using a rather powerful and highly illegal search engine Kevin had discovered several years before, cost Kev over \$5000, but turned up that all three were last known to have been residents of Bangkok or Hong Kong. The two gunman were just that, hired professional bodyguards and covert-op specialists. They had a reputation for both efficiency and ruthlessness that made their cost seem relatively minor. The third was a relative unknown through any digital source Kevin could use, though he was able to get a short and incomplete bio of the man. He'd been born in Taiwan thirty years before, attended school there until his father, a businessman, had relocated to Hong Kong. While there, the man had finished the normal schooling rich children of prominent businessmen normally acquired and then disappeared entirely for almost two years, only to resume living in Hong Kong again nineteen months later. No reference to that missing time was available but Kevin had an inkling of what had happened. It all hinged on a first class plane ticket to Bangkok.

Kevin had learned his magic alone, without the aid of a teacher. Many Westerners did. But that wasn't the way most magicians of the Far East learned their craft. There were three centers of activity that Kevin knew of: Djakarta, Bangkok and Calcutta. One couldn't exactly call them schools but training did go on and the knowledge gained there was reputedly quite deep. Kevin had only met one magician who'd gone that route, a rather indifferent one in Vancouver, British Columbia who was much more interested in the good life than esoteric study. What information Kevin had, came from him.

Djakarta specialized in some of the blackest arts. The making of zombies had been imported nearly

century before and that had been added to some deep knowledge of lycanthropy, various demon sects, and necromancy. Bangkok dealt more with the twisting of minds and persons, influence rather than coercion as a means of operation as well as catering to every decadent art ever devised by man. If power could be gotten from raw sex and bestial appetite, it had either originated in Bangkok or been subtly improved there. Calcutta was the most religious of the three cities and the darkest of arts coexisted with the whitest, side by side in frozen conflict. Kevin had found the philosophic stances of both to be a bit too self-absorbed to be taken too seriously but had to admit, many could and did derive power from those sources.

A complication and a puzzle had been the result of Kevin's first searches on the internet following the magician he'd killed. The name he had for the man was legally his — January Secundus but sounded like a joke. It had made any backtracking of the man extremely difficult and Kevin would have been stymied at that point if he hadn't known of the other two men and the Hong Kong connection. Kevin had also known that January 2 was the date of the Cleansing, which had occurred in 1884 in Hong Kong. There the British had crushed a small cult in some of the bloodiest and most hushed up of British Imperial history. A group of fifty or sixty adherents to what the British authorities deemed to be a devil cult had been butchered in the back alleys of Hong Kong on the night of January 1st/January 2nd. Kevin wasn't sure exactly how that might have related but he at least knew where Secundus had learned his craft and what that craft might have consisted of. The attempt to take possession of him fitted in snugly.

But Kevin knew he was missing some crucial pieces and broke off any further research until Dawson showed up. He had to know more of Sam's work before he could start making any guesses.

Throughout it all, worry about Pam remained, burning in the back of his mind even though he could do nothing. He had to count on her own resourcefulness to get her free. He hated that.

Sam showed up promptly at six o'clock, took one look around and started to swear. He kept it up as he walked through the rooms, checking and noting broken furniture and blood stains here and there. Kevin was a little in awe. The curses were varied, in several languages and never repeated. At least, not that Kevin could tell.

Sam turned on him suddenly as he stood looking into the storeroom where three men had died. "What in hell happened? Have the cops been here yet?"

"No, they haven't and I'd suggest you not call them quite yet. Things are still in flux, though I'm starting to get an idea of what exactly is going on. But I need to know more about what you were working on, exactly."

Dawson looked at him impassively for a moment and then asked, "Why?"

"Because the break-in was not just about industrial secrets and the theft of technology, though that's part of it. There was some other aspect to it and that don't square with anything that straightforward."

"Such as what?"

Kevin regarded Dawson carefully and then slowly and very distinctly said, "Magic."

Sam regarded him narrowly for perhaps ten seconds before he reacted. "Magic? As in, what? Industrial Light and..."

"Sam, please. Credit me with some sense. You hired me as a security consultant. I'm paid to dig into things. Lots of things and what I've dug up seems to indicate you know exactly what sort of magic I'm talking about. Do I have to demonstrate? Doesn't the fact that you hired me for all of my abilities and skills, make a difference?"

Dawson took a deep breath and then sighed, "Yes, of course it does. And I won't con you any further. But what the hell is going on?"

"That doping process you're using. How did you come up with it?"

Dawson rubbed his face before answering. "Well, I developed it myself and it doesn't use magic, believe me."

“Okay, but *how* did you develop it? Where did you get the ideas?”

“There you’ve got me. I stumbled across some old organic chemistry journals from Germany, written in the 1880’s. They referred to some old alchemical texts that had come to light a couple of decades before in Prague. I’ll assume you don’t know much about the history of either inorganic or organic chemistry —”

“Safe assumption.”

“ — so I’ll explain why I bothered. Quite a few interesting materials were developed by alchemists over the centuries, though not for the reasons they would have expected. Most people don’t know it but Alfred Nobel might not have invented TNT. I’ve seen some old text that, if properly followed, would have yielded TNT, and that’s hardly the only case.”

“Reader’s Digest version?”

Dawson grinned ruefully. “Anyway, it got me thinking about alchemy and so I did some research, finally coming up with a really weird process involving fused silica and some organic materials. With a modern understanding of chemistry, I could see that the results indicated a type of doping was going on when the material went into the beta —”

“Beta?”

“Sorry, quartz, silica, ceramics. The materials have two different structures depending upon temperature. The beta form exists only at higher temperatures. Clay pots become pottery after going through that phase shift twice. But I could see that with a little tinkering, I might be able to adapt the process to other materials and did so.”

“You knew magic works, though, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, by then I’d discovered it wasn’t all smoke and mirrors. I don’t know any myself but I figured out pretty quick that I might need to get some defenses in place, once I started working with the process. I had a lot of really weird stuff happen and finally pinned it down to some sort of elemental activity. Now, I don’t know a damn thing about elementals — they make no sense in our modern world and I have a damn hard time believing in them. But too much weirdness kept popping up. So, I asked around through some of my contacts and eventually, discovered that you were very well thought of and not just because of your integrity. The hints were that you were a powerful magician. Now, I don’t really buy it, not completely, but I’ve learned not to scoff so quickly.”

Kevin nodded to himself. He looked around once more and then went back down the hall.

“Well, let’s get some coffee or tea and we’ll try to piece together what’s going on.” Sam didn’t follow immediately but stood for a moment, looking at the aftermath and then took a deep breath and followed Kevin.