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Shards of Glass. Part 1.

Before the Fall, the name of the “GLasS SAMurai” had been one that commanded respect from hackers around the world, despite his personal career choices.

In hacker culture, there were Black Hat hackers (who caused mischief and mayhem with their skills), White Hat Hackers (who broke into places just to prove it could be done, but without causing harm), and then there were the samurai. The samurai (or “cowboys”, as they were sometimes known due to Gibson's *Neuromancer*) actually used their skills to work for a living. They would hire themselves out to a corporation (or, occasionally, a government), and either help make their employers “bullet-proof” against Black hats or engage in corporate espionage against competitors. The former use was legal, while the latter was not. However, any corporation that could afford a samurai also kept enough lawyers on retainer that any espionage allegations were quashed or paid off before any government agencies ever caught wind. Of course, the fact that this samurai was largely considered a “ghost” because no one could ever catch him in a hack didn't hurt. As such, he had had the respect of hacker society that saw most cowboys as corporate sell-outs.

He had chosen the adjective “Glass” because, in hacker parlance, it was synonymous with silicon, the substance most microchips were built on. Even though the random alphabetization changed on a nearly daily basis, the legend, the mystery, had endured. (Even though his birth name was William, once he'd become part of the hacker world, he had ceased to use it for good.) Only one man had ever caught him in mid-hack, a mysterious data smuggler and money launderer named Norman that was nearly as enigmatic as Glass himself.

Of course, hacker society didn't mean much these days, since most of them were dead, either in the riots of the Fall or in the bloody anti-Tech crusades from the order of Neo-Palidins. Glass hated the Palidins with a passion. Their illiterate crusades had all the dogma of a religion, full of brutal killings of all infidels who held on to technology, but he knew that their Seekers employed tech to find the technophiles they hunted. Hypocrites, all of them!

Glass wasn't allowed out much these days. Like the samurai of feudal Japan who had lost their masters, he'd become a “ronin.” The corporation he had worked for, a Tokiwan Conglomerate LLC, had been a shell corporation hidden in so many other shells that even he hadn't ever figured out who was calling the shots. Still, it had been a legitimate employer in a world where there were networks to hack and other samurai to fight past.

Now he was just one of a group of personalities kept locked away until needed. A remnant of the past.



Today, however, he was needed. Bob had explained that the cards were here and that he would have to engage in the most secretive hacks of his life...the hacks against Maganimus. If he succeeded, a new regime might be able to reboot the internet and seize the most powerful collection of knowledge available. However, if he failed, they were all dead.

Magnanimus kept a powerful network here in Barcelona, so Glass would be able to put his skills to service once more. Each card was stored in a different location. There would be a total of five hacks, all under complete silence. Tom was the best of them at getting in, so he would break in and then Glass would take over. Every move Tom made to get them into the house was agony. This was the house of one of Mag's advisers, which is why it had the network access they coveted. Of course, if anything went wrong, if Tom slipped up when it came to subduing the man, they would be dead. That's why Frank wanted to do it, not Tom, but Frank was a killer. Tom was a cat burglar with amazing reflexes and knew how to use knock out darts, rather than poisons. As such, he was the right choice. Still, they both made sure Frank was waiting to rush in if anything went seriously south.

Glass stood on guard, watching Tom's every move, and, thankfully, things went smoothly. The official's bedroom was right where it was supposed to be and Tom's silent movements allowed him to sneak in to tranq the man without him waking. Glass became momentarily distracted by the snarl of colorful tattoos that wrapped down the official's left arm, like the markings of some Maori chieftain. Once Tom was sure the tranquilizer had been fully absorbed into the man's system, the thief removed the dart so there would be nothing to raise the alert in the morning to the official.

On padded feet, Tom sought out the terminal which was in the official's separate study. After that, Glass stepped in, leaving Tom to go make his report.

Glass glanced again at his watch. 10:24 PM. He'd tried every encryption he could think of, but was finding his skills rustier than he had anticipated. He hated that there were so few places his skills were needed because it made him look incompetent. He could practically feel Frank's eyes on the back of his neck as he monitored him from the guard house. Glass shook off the prickling sensation this notion gave him and got back to work.

Despite his shakiness, he felt certain that it was only a matter of time before he succeeded.

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They called it the "Guard House" but it was really more like a guard room where whoever was on watch could keep an eye on things. During jobs, it was crucial that the watch person be someone who could get in fast if something went wrong and knew how to defend himself. And, to Tom's continued disgust, that was why they had to rely on the likes of Frank.

Tom eyed the man as he entered their meeting place, and passing the guardhouse at the entrance. Frank glared balefully in return, the killer's coal-fired eyes sending chills down Tom's back. Frank's crew cut and black fatigues might make him look military, but those eyes revealed that he was more mercenary than soldier. To Tom's mind, he rationalized that every group needed an angel of death to watch their back. Frank was their reaper, for good or for ill.

"Paws," Frank hissed. "Get back here."

Tom winced at the nickname. Being a cat burglar, "walking on cat's paws" was technically the goal, but Frank somehow made the term seem disparaging. Nonetheless, he turned on his wrapped feet and returned to the killer.

"What do you want, Frank?" Tom asked, wishing that there was some disparaging nickname he could use. But people tended to not make up nicknames for reapers. Granted, many of them created their own names, like hackers did. Still, for those who wished to be known as "Frank," the wise man didn't quibble.



“Send Jill back here.” Frank leered.

“You know she isn't into boys, Frank,” Tom frowned.

“Please!” Frank mocked. “Having sex with her would be like jacking off.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tom's eyes narrowed dismissively. “So why do you need her?”

“I need to stay awake if I'm going to keep our glass pansy alive,” Frank smirked. “She tells the best sex stories ever! Doesn't even need a strap on!”

“Of course, how classy!” With that Tom turned to walk away.

“Hey, I never get to go to any of the sex parties!” Frank protested, as though that justified his vulgarity.

Tom ignored him while he walked through the doorway of the meeting room. Reapers might be necessary, but it was hard to believe he had to be in a team with one like Frank.

As he walked into the main room of the meeting place, he glanced at the nine folding chairs that were arranged in a circle under dim lighting, across the polished hardwood floor. As Tom glanced at the six other specialized personalities currently seated in the ring, he was again reminded of how much it looked like a support group.

“Hello, I'm Tom. And I'm a crazy,” Tom smirked as he slumped down in one of the free chairs.

“Hi, Tom!” Jill parodied, licking her full lips rather provocatively.

Despite himself, Tom laughed at the blonde in the green sequined dress and black stilettos. Her outfit could've looked nice, but it was beaten to hell. Tattered clothes and smeared makeup was the way Jill expressed her individuality. Nonetheless, she was always up for helping him with his tired jokes, which meant something to Tom..

“So it's started, at least,” Tom shrugged, now back into his actual role. “I got in, tranqed the official, found the computer in the study, and then got out so Glass could hack it.”

“Frank's standing guard and keeping an eye on things?” The balding, 40-something Bob confirmed with an arched brow. Bob was their unofficial leader, as he had the most overall life experience, both before and after the Fall. With eight specialists, he was the closest thing to a generalist in the group. As such, he commanded their respect in a way that no one else did.

“Yeah, but he says he's getting tired, so he wanted Jill to keep him company!” Tom shrugged.

“He just wants to hear more of my conquests,” Jill grinned, standing up rather provocatively to bring her impressive figure to full effect. Her skills with seduction were legend and her body was enough to tempt any of them, no matter what their rules were or her own proclivities might be.

“Yeah, that's the G-rated version of what he said,” he nodded to her.

“Well, he's just jealous because I know how to make use of it better than he does,” she grinned playfully and then walked out of the room toward the guard station. Tom couldn't help watching the bounce of her posterior as she walked—or, more correctly, “stalked.”

Bob sighed and shook his head at her behavior before returning to the discussion at hand.

“Did you watch how William was progressing before you left?” Bob asked. He was the only one who called Glass that. “Did he seem to be making headway? Did Frank say anything about it?”



“Seemed to be doing okay when I left and Frank didn't say anything, but that's not really surprising is it?” Tom returned with another shrug. Frank's skill set was great for what it was, but it didn't bother itself with extra updates.

“No, not really.” Bob agreed with a worried look on his face. He didn't have to say what was on all of their minds: 'now, we wait.'

After a moment, Tom glanced again at the remaining misfits who'd kept quiet during the conversation.

Their buzz-headed demolitions expert wore crocodile pants, a lady's fur coat, and bug-eyed sunglasses. He went by the rather bizarre moniker of 'Re-Lit' Rudyn. (Due to his penchant for weed and other narcotics, the rest of the team tended to convert the name to 'Refried' Rudy.) His frenetic energy and encyclopedic knowledge of home-based explosives made him good at what he did, but his personality grated on their nerves. Fortunately, he seemed to be high currently, so he wasn't bothering them with much useless trivia. Bob didn't approve of such behavior but was practical enough to realize whatever Rudy needed to keep him tranquil when they didn't need him to blow things up was a good thing.

Then there was Stephen, the brown haired, blue eyed Irish con artist. He was so full of blarney and so talented at finding and exploiting marks, that the rest of them had long since suspected that he was born out of the mold of the secretive Traveler society. The few times anyone had asked about his origins, he just grinned and said, “I might have a bit o' their blood in me veins, boy-o!”

Traci (“with an ‘i’”) was the only other woman in their team. She was, without a doubt, the most artistic of any of them. She could forge everything from money to credentials to paintings. However, to go along with her flaring red hair and luminescent green eyes, she was also the most emotional of any of them. She could ignite into anger at the most inopportune times, become crushingly depressed at random intervals, and burst into tears for no apparent reason. Although she could be a handful, Tom had a soft spot for the girl.

Clarence was the last member of the team: a rather bookish engineer who could create some of the most amazing inventions you could imagine. The black scientist chose to wear a cracked pocket protector, figure out complex equations with a slide rule, and sported horn-rimmed glasses that had gone out of style in the 1950's. Like Jill, his quirky fashion choices were part of his persona. His intellect was staggering and he tended to hang out with Glass an awful lot. Neither were permitted out into the dangerous world of the post-Fall world very often, so they had plenty of time to chat with one another.

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Glass typed faster, his muscle memory lining up with his personal memory in a way that reassured him. Due to their specialized origin, their team was, in some ways, more strong and stealthy than any other, but, it could be argued, more fragile than any other, as well. As so often happened, a Pre-Fall song called “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” flashed through his brain as he hacked feverishly. It always seemed appropriate.

As the song echoed in his brain, he remembered again how much he missed radio. Almost as much as he missed the computers. There was something liberating about all the music you would care to listen to being available to course through your ears, no matter how long the hack took.

Oh, there were still radio stations. That tech was too hard to squash. However, most didn't play music these days. You either had the rhetoric that was spewed by the stations owned by the kings, governors, and emperors of the kingdoms and communes of the Post-Fall world, or you had the vitriol that was poured out by the pirate DJ's who had access to a shortwave, as well as a generator and moonshine or a solar panel and rechargeable battery.

Momentarily distracted, he just managed to catch himself before he actually started singing along with his mental radio. As he clamped his mouth shut to keep quiet, he failed to notice the cold shivers that had started moving up his back.



“...So then she says, 'Okay, what's the strangest place you've ever done it?'" Jill waxed on with relish, her eyes sparkling through the raccoon-like smear of eyeshadow and mascara. “So I tell her, it's--”

“Shut the hell up!” Frank said suddenly, holding up his hand.

“What the hell, Frank--” Jill started, then noticed the change in body language and the fact that his eyes were now riveted to the monitor. He might be a jackass, but he had no desire for them to be caught and killed, so he was very good at his job. Of course, they said reapers loved their jobs enough to do it for free anyway.

“Damnit, tell Bob that I'm catching a reflection... Chip's oblivious!” Frank barked, using his nickname for Glass, based on. “Tell him I'm going in.”

She didn't even have to ask about what reflection he was referring to. Only one thing could get this sort of reaction from Frank.

With that she hurried out one way, while Frank did the same in the other.

He was so close. Glass typed faster. Just a few more command lines and he would have the code. He could download it into the card emulator drive he'd made sure no one forgot. The tunnel vision of the hard hack came over his eyes as his hands typed like they were possessed. As he entered the zone, everything else had the volume turned down and his typing accuracy suddenly dialed up to 100%.

As such, he didn't hear the man barking in Spanish behind him until the third time. When he did, he whirled in terror to see a swarthy Spaniard with a gun. If Frank had been here, he probably could've told exactly what type of gun it was, but Glass didn't even have a clue. It just looked huge. The barrel seemed to expand in his vision until his entire world seemed to be eclipsed by the maw of death.

Suddenly, he started to pass out from the strain, but, before he did, he felt himself being jerked down out of harm's way.

“Stay out of it, you idiot!” Frank's snarl echoed in his ears, letting him know that he'd been able to get there in time. “I'll take care of this!”

Glass curled into the fetal position on the floor. He felt the press of the hard wood against his face and listened to the sound of struggle in the distance. As he passed out, he blamed himself for his uselessness in a fight.

Frank's sudden movement startled the guard, who didn't know what to make of the change in the situation.

As Frank didn't get to be out on assignment as much as he liked, he could tell that he was a bit rustier than he wanted to be. Still, his battle honed senses were dialing everything into a crisp slow motion with his eyes dilating to take in more light as he did. He'd heard that they called it the “athlete effect,” where time slowed down when every second counted. He thought that was a stupid name for it, because it was most common with warriors whose lives were literally on the line as opposed to stupid athletes..

As he moved through space, he sized up the guard. 5'10” with husky build and a partial goatee. Eyes slightly glazed showed that he'd been drinking, clearly the reason he hadn't known how to respond. Obviously a loyal Mag-man, the guard's ornate tats marked his face and even extended onto the top of his left hand. The



maniacal part of Frank's mind couldn't help cackling in glee with subconscious delight that, 'he's got upper management written all over him.' Frank stifled the voices aggressively.

The guard's right hand wielded a 1911 pistol that looked as though it had seen better days. Only seven shots in the magazine, although, if you got tagged with one of the .45 caliber rounds, it wouldn't go well for you. Frank had no interest in being tagged by anything and was already drawing the Kabar battle knife from his thigh sheathe as he moved in a circular movement to the right.

Targeting the exact spot on the man's wrist with his eyes first, Frank's blade tip whipped up with surgical precision and stabbed into a cluster of nerves, severing them. In shock, the hand spasmed open, dropping the gun, as Frank pulled back his hand. The multiple safeties on the 1911 would make sure it didn't go off when it hit the ground. That, combined with the fact that the carpeted floor would muffle the thud, meant there was no need to grab for the piece. As such, the next motion Frank made was to rotate the Kabar vertical and jam blade straight up under the man's chin and into his brain, killing him before he could scream.

As the man collapsed in Frank's arms, he whipped out the nylon body bag he kept in a back pocket for just such occasions. With a practiced hand that had been honed first in Black Bag operations for the Marine Corps and then as a mercenary for hire, Frank kept the man's head tilted forward so that the blood loss was soaked into his shirt as he leveraged him into the bag. Waterproofed on the inside, no blood would get out of this special bag. After he tied a knot into it, he checked the floor to make sure that no blood had dripped on it in the scuffle. To his satisfaction, it was a clean kill.

He retrieved the 1911 pistol and checked the magazine. When he saw that it was nearly empty, Frank smirked to think that even the men who worked for Mag had only one bullet in their mags. It was a stupid pun, but nobody had ever accused Frank of having a high intellect. Still, they couldn't argue with how well he did his job.

Knowing that Glass would be safe where he was, Frank stowed the body in a closet and decided to prowl through the house. Count on someone like Paws to not have taken out the guards properly.

The building was three stories tall, so an in-depth search of the premises took time. Fortunately, it looked as though Bob's intel about the guards going out to get whores at the local brothel was correct. Clearly the one that had returned had somehow struck out and decided to return here to lick his wounds. Frank smirked again. How bad did you have to be in bed to strike out with a whore? *(With finances being what they were these days, most of whorehouses had adopted a buffet mentality that was leeringly referred to as "AYCL"--All You Can Lay. As such, men on leave rarely left before they'd spent the entire night.)*

As Bob had insisted on no more kills than necessary, Frank didn't kill the official in his bed once he verified that he was still soundly asleep from the thief's dart.

With that, he returned to the study, found the bag with the body and made his way out a back door into the street. Before he ran into any people, he pulled out a detailed foam mask that bore tats that would identify him to anyone who scanned him as a low level servant. Finding good mask makers was difficult these days, but, fortunately, their artist was good at her job. What was her name again? Amber, Sammy, Keri? One day he would learn her name, he supposed. However, the truth was, he didn't much see the point because she wasn't full of fascinating sexual tales the way Jill was. Still, her work had gotten them into places even Glass couldn't.

He glanced at the watch on his wrist. 12:16 AM. The imperial city might claim to be "crime free," but that was a lie. As such, Bob had made sure that everyone knew where the criminals were located before the job went down. Criminals were the only things you could trust these days, in Frank's opinion. Of course, the fact that it was a bunch of Travelers was all the more ironic. Word was that the only ones the government hated more than these modern Gyps was the Jews. Some things never changed.

He knew he had to hurry if he was going to get back in time to get Glass up so he could finish the hack. With that, he repositioned the bag on his back and picked up his pace.



Jill scurried into the meeting room, her heels clattering on the polished wooden floor, looking a bit more disheveled than normal. She and Tom had been watching from the guard room while Frank dispatched the guard and now that it was clear where he was going, she was sent to pass on the information.

“Fortunately, it was only one guy,” Jill breathed as she slumped down into the chair facing Bob. She tried to get a rise out of him by exposing more cleavage than usual, but no luck. He might as well have been a deacon or something. Yet again she wondered why on earth a man like him would be in the mix with the rest of them? Maybe everyone had to have a decent part of them. Maybe that was what Bob was for them. “Frank took him out, no fuss.”

“Alive?” Bob’s lips pursed.

“Are you stupid?” Rudy decided to interject. His comments were unpredictable, almost as though they were meant to remind them that there was a reason he was still here — that he had as much sense of self preservation as they did.

“The boy-o’s right, Bob,” Stephen decided to add his two cents to the group. “It’s like that African tale about that alligator and that thar monkey. You knew what I was before you got on me back!”

“Shut up, Stephen,” Jill glared acidly at the con artist. He was one reason she was glad she wasn’t into men. Still, it didn’t stop him from trying to hit on her every chance he got. At least Frank just wanted her to regale him with tales of conquests. It was strange that the leering reaper somehow made her feel safer and more respected than the flattering con. “Bob’s not like the rest of us delinquents. He wants to believe that this can be done without people dying.”

Finished chastising the two loudmouths, she quickly glanced at Traci and Clarence, who were listening while amusing themselves with drawing pictures—the artist’s were elaborate and colorful while the engineer’s were detailed and streamlined.

“Anyway, as our tactless Traveler pointed out, Frank is a killer and sometimes people have to die so that we don’t get our head chopped off,” Jill shrugged, but tried to show him that she empathized with him. As she did, she shifted her shoulders to cover up her cleavage, feeling strangely sheepish for her earlier behavior. Bob didn’t deserve it. “However, it was as painless as possible and the guy he killed was a Mag-man, full tats.”

“Well, that’s something, at least,” Bob sighed. “What’s he doing with the body?”

“Tats like that make him valuable to Skinners,” Jill shrugged. “So he’s taking them down to the Travelers.”

“Damn,” Bob grimaced.

“Hey-o, what’s wrong with the Travelers, mate?” Stephen bristled.

“Nothing,” Bob’s eyes narrowed. “It’s the right move, I’m just nervous about the delay. Who knows when the others might come back from their carousing. We’ve already had one straggler. I’m just concerned.”

“I know, I know.” Jill nodded, looking down at her battered shoes. “It’s not like Glass deals the best with danger. I mean, he’s always been one we’ve had to watch out for. Even Clarence isn’t as useless in danger.”

“Hey, now...” Clarence looked up from his drawing, his dark brows furrowing behind his glasses.

“Sorry, Clare.” Jill smiled softly. “You know what I mean.”

“I know,” he nodded, mollified. “I battle with my brain, not my brawn. Glass and I are the ones to take on the



mental giants.”

She smiled again. Jill was the only one Clarence let call him 'Clare' and she knew he had a bit of a crush on her. It was too bad that he didn't feel similarly for Traci, because the redhead clearly liked him a lot.

“How is William doing?” Bob asked.

“He's still out of it and it's been over an hour. I hope Frank can get him up and back to work,” Jill sighed.

“Indeed, I do, too.” Bob nodded. “I wish we knew how close he was.”

“Yeah,” Jill nodded, feeling like she was 8 all over again. That was one of the few years she could remember clearly, unfortunately. To prevent the wash of unpleasant memories, she decided to ask a question she kept forgetting. “What all do you think the Travelers managed to loot in the Fall? I mean, they managed to stay ahead of the destruction like they had a sixth sense or something.”

“You know about the prophecies, about the visions and dreams?” Bob shrugged. “The rumors I've heard are that more of their people had them, but, unlike Gavin's Dark Dreamers, they kept it to themselves. Only for other Travelers.”

“Bastards,” Jill scowled. “We're just 'countryfolk' in their estimation, so it's okay to screw us.”

“Hey, you make good use of me, don'tcha?” Stephen protested.

“Only because you're stuck with us,” Jill retorted. “If you weren't, you'd steal everything we owned and be on the next Traveler caravan tomorrow.”

“Now, lass, you know we're not all bad!” Stephen attempted to be charming once more, his blue eyes flashing across the circle at her. “After all, we're the ones that came up with the Code of the Traveler.”

“Allegedly,” Bob interjected with a soft smile. “No one knows who came up with it for sure. It seems a bit universally fair for the Travelers, in my opinion.”

With that, they sank into silence to wait, knowing Tom would come to get them if someone was needed.

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Frank walked into the meeting room with his clothes drenched in sweat. He probably stank but, in his mind, it was a good stink. It was the stink of a doing a good night's work, earning an honest dollar, and bailing out an associate. As much as he might speak with contempt of his team, he had to admit that he regarded them with a certain fondness, even the more useless ones like Chip and Clarice. *(Neither nickname went over well, which only caused Frank to use them more.)*

“You look like the cat that swallowed the canary,” Jill's eyes narrowed, but he could see that she was relieved that he was back safely.

“You want to play with my canary, pussycat?” Frank arched a brow suggestively, unable to resist the innuendo.

“I'm a venus flytrap,” Jill smiled with mock-coyness, licking her.

“So what do you have to report,” Bob interjected before Frank could say anything about his “fly.”

Somehow Bob could manage to interrupt Frank without making Frank want to slit his throat. A pretty impressive trick, Frank had to admit.



"Chip's back in the office and working on the hack," Frank shrugged and sat down next to Jill. "It took forever to get him to snap out of it and get back into the game."

"It's not a game," Traci—yes, *that was her name*, he realized—suddenly interjected, staring at him with her piercing green eyes. He was momentarily struck by the intensity of the girl. They always assumed that she'd survived fewer atrocities than the rest of them, but maybe she was just better at hiding them away. "It's life...our life and death."

He rolled his eyes, not finding a good retort in his memory banks.

"And how is he?" Bob asked with arched brows.

"Fine," Frank shrugged again. "He said he was close to getting the hack done."

"Did he give a time?" Bob pushed.

"Twenty minutes," Frank returned, then looked down at his watch. "It's 3:40 AM now, so he should be ready for extraction at 4:00 AM."

"So much closer than I wanted," Bob worried, shaking his head.

"Well, I do have some other news," Frank smiled. "Turns out the magnet I killed had some pretty useful codes in his tatted hide. The skimmers were willing to give us half a pound of gold..."

"Half a pound of gold, now that's not bad, mate..." Stephen whistled in appreciation. That was two month's wages in the empire.

"..And some information," Frank smiled tersely.

"What information?" Bob leaned forward in anticipation.

"Only three of the cards are actually viable," Frank explained.

"Only three??" Jill's eyes went wide.

"But I heard they had all five," Bob's eyes narrowed.

"Nope, they only have three," Frank's eyebrows arched. "But they just acquired the cracker that ghosted the other two before the Fall."

Frank might not have been the smartest man, but even he knew what that look in Bob's eyes meant.

"Gavin's protege," Bob breathed. "She IS alive, after all. Now that changes things."

To Be Continued...

