



– World of Depleted Tales –
Shards of Glass, Pt. 2:
Reap the Whirlwind

by [Fred Koskin](#)

Those who don't know me, call me Benjamin Judah.

That's what it says on the identification card that's in my wallet.

The picture's so poorly taken that it could be me or any number of other people. Before the Fall, when many countries had a department of motor vehicles, there was a sick sort of pleasure that workers there prided themselves on taking the worst possible pictures for identifications. It was sort of the way iPhone users had taken a similarly perverse pleasure in bragging about how short their battery life was, or how Mag's prisoner's bragged on their similarly short life expectancy. In the Wild West, they would've called the latter Gallow's humor. Now, at least in Barcelona, such macabre levity had been re-christened Blade Jokes or Nail Jests, after Mag's favorite elimination options. Of course, I've heard rumors that he's bringing back the Games. Who knows what we'll come up with then. Maybe we'll just borrow a more universal term from the Reapers: 'scythes.'

The blade whipped through the night shrouded air like a sickle, whistling as it carved the wind toward the reaper's head.

Battle honed senses responded subconsciously to the sound and Frank's eyes dilated, the adrenaline hitting his system like a punch in the gut. For normal people, this was the onset of the flight or fight response. For Frank, it was simpler: it was the onset of the kill or murder response. The world slowed down in response, allowing him to sidestep the thrown knife as its wicked spin relaxed into a lazy cartwheel of forward motion. He used his momentum to redirect himself toward the alley from which the projectile had come. The lane was so narrow that it was hidden from the Barcelona street lights, but he could just make out the glint of another blade being pulled from the sheath, even though he couldn't make out the face of the man who was trying to kill him.

He momentarily contemplated returning the favor with his Kabar battle knife, but, considering there was some question about the assassin's distance in the dim light and he had only one knife, he decided to err on the side of safety. He reached for the .22 Luger with its silencer, his savant-like brain bringing up the stats on the diminutive gun as he did so. Most people thought bigger guns were better...more stopping power. But reapers knew their tools too well to be bogged down by such machismo. The reality was that every weapon had a special use and, when you needed stealth, a silenced .22 in the hands of a trained shooter was surgical in its precision and whisper quiet in its execution. The matte black gun make a quiet "ptt-ptt" sound as Frank fired six times, sending a horizontal line of bullets just above where the second knife was about to be hurled. Right or left handed, one of the bullets was going through his attacker's heart.

As the assailant fell, the knife dropping from suddenly limp fingers and clattering across the pavement, Frank was already re-sheathing the weapon and hurrying into the shadows, his eyes dilating even more as he scanned the area to make sure he wasn't walking into an ambush. Nothing stirred within the alley as he slid into the shadows and checked the body.

"*Damnation,*" he heard in his ear. *Bob's voice.* Clearly he had joined Tom in the guardhouse, watching Frank's performance remotely. Frank gritted under the distraction, but then noticed why it had occurred. A chain rosary had fallen from the dark-garbed assassin's left hand as he had died.

Frank's eyes narrowed with recognition. He knew the steel sigil that ended those rosaries. They were the identification badges of the Order of the Steel Rood. The glittering sword piercing the cross-beam made their sigil instantly memorable, especially since Frank was one of the few people who had managed to survive not just one, but two encounters with them. The fact that, before the Fall, they'd been monks, rather than serial killers and sociopaths, set them apart from the reapers, of course; as did the fact that they protected those they regarded as saints and innocents, rather than those who could pay them enough money.

In truth, most of their group were made up of warriors, but a few were trained as assassins. In Frank's opinion, he felt this latter group were likely former sociopaths like the reapers who had, for whatever reason, chosen a monastic order as penance. After the Fall, like the reapers, they were given a new lease on life.

These killers were trained to blend in like the ninjas of feudal Japan and were given high value targets. Because they claimed to be servants of God and that theirs were the just kills

needed to protect the innocents in the last days, those who whispered of their existence referred to them as the “Horsemen.” No one knew how many of them there were, although the rumors suggested that their numbers were growing.

“Why the hell's he dressed in a habit?” Tom's voice brought up. *“That's the opposite of stealthy.”*

Leave it to the cat burglar to point out something Frank had failed to notice. He bit down the urge snap at Tom to *“just take over if he was so smart.”* The truth was, he should have been paying more attention to anomalies like that.

Like the Japanese ninjas who would wear different outfits based on their environment, the Horsemen were the ultimate in chameleons. There was a time when dressing like a monk might be an excellent way to avoid detection, but, with Mag's state religion and death penalty for those who didn't conform, such a disguise would have the opposite effect these days.

“Good question,” Frank whispered to the team. “An even better question is why a horseman just tried to kill me? I mean, I know why they tried to kill me the last time, but this time I'm not working for Mag.”

“Check him,” Bob spoke tersely, the tension in his voice betraying what they all knew. Unless this was a renegade who'd gone templar, there was something very wrong here.

At first pass, Frank found nothing, but as he knew the Rood always made use of secret compartments, he did a more thorough investigation. As he did so, he noticed a peculiar bump in the man's flesh, beneath a mysterious tattoo of a fiery skull. As he played his fingers past the lump, he found a subtle seam in the dead man's flesh. As he began to pull at the seam, he knew at least one group they'd be chatting with.

The truth is, I don't know who Benjamin Judah was.

A boy ravaged before any of us got a chance to meet him. When I came upon him, he'd been torn into so many pieces you never could've put him back together.

As the oldest of us, it was my decision that we'd keep his card and use it for ourselves—one at a time—when we needed an official ID. It's far better to have an ID of someone who'd show up in the system than a fake id, especially since we left no evidence so there would be no record of Judah's death. Obviously, the girls had to disguise their femininity when they used it, but, overall, it worked well.

“Look, I told you, I'm not with mag's enforcers,” Traci explained to the hostile man in the threadbare suit, eyeing her across the painted table. Like a grisly flag, the dead horseman's piece of pseudo-flesh was spread out in front of them, its flaming skull leering evilly at the world in general. “I just want to talk to the man who made this! I've got meet him.”

Not for the first time she wondered why on earth she was the one who was here. Stephen was the one who should've been here, as far as she was concerned. After all, he claimed to be a traveller, so he should've had an in with them. However, Bob had over-ruled her. When she'd asked him why, he refused to answer her in front of the group; instead, when it was time for his shift in the guardhouse, he invited her along.

It wasn't unusual for folks on guard duty to take one of the other members with them to help stay awake or keep entertained. And since Bob was sort of the surrogate father of the crew, he rotated who he spent time with on his guardhouse shifts as fairly as possible. However, Traci felt like she had a greater bond with the man. Her creativity seemed more in keeping with his personality than the extremes of the other crewmembers. As such, she'd expected to hear more of his reasoning in private.

"Regardless of who Steve fancies himself to be," Bob had explained gently. "You and I both know that no investigation will reveal any connection to them."

"But the records all got destroyed in the Fall," Traci had protested. "How would they be able to know?"

"The Traveller's didn't rely on the old record keeping; they use more ancient techniques," Bob had smiled softly. "Lying about a past with the Travellers is a good way to end up on a skinner's table."

"But I thought they didn't kill outsiders," Traci had queried. "It was okay to rob them, but not kill?"

"Normally, that'd be true," Bob's eyebrows had arched gently at her. "But when it comes to people trying to counterfeit ties to them, they have a zero tolerance policy. After all, they protect some of the best forgers in the planet in the new economy. Wouldn't do to have their reputation sullied by bad fakers."

"I guess," Traci had sighed, knowing that the brash Stephen would certainly have over-played his role when dealing with trained con men like the travellers, even if he didn't say anything about his much-vaunted past.

"It's far better to simply go as what you are: an artist and old-tech forger who admires the work and wants to apprentice to a master skinner," Bob had gone on to explain.

"Apprenticeship is one of the only ways to become connected with the society, other than birth and marriage. After all, they need to build their artisan base to compensate for the losses Mag's inflicted."

"But won't that take too long?" Traci had almost wailed at that point. "I mean, we've got to pull down four more cards, right?"

"The micro-disc we pulled out of the horseman is mostly scrambled, but Glass has been able to crack some of it," Bob had explained. "He's confirmed that two of the cards are in flux. We

still don't know if Mag's got the right apprentice and, if he does, whether she has any access to the codes at this point. As to the other two, we'll be planning when you're there, and working on obtaining them when you're not needed."

"But won't it look suspicious that I leave at night?" Traci had asked plaintively.

"You just leave that to us," he had said.

And good as his word, he and Glass had come up with a story for her to pass along, complete with a secret hack that would put all of their information on a most wanted list with Mag. For the paranoid skimmers, the blood enemy of your enemy was far more palatable than a new face with no testable past.

Now she was re-explaining to the man across the table for the third time that she wasn't trying to cause any problems. She just wanted to meet "him"—the artist who had crafted the pseudo-flesh and tat on the table. As this was getting her nowhere, it was now time to resort to the truth—or the facsimile they had crafted, rather.

"Listen, the reality is, I'm an OT paperhanger, okay?" Traci blurted out, not having to do much acting to portray someone who was at the end of her rope. "The reason I gotta meet your boss is because I've got to phoenix myself."

The man looked at her impassively, but Traci thought she saw an ounce of intelligent curiosity sparking behind his eyes. Taking that as a positive sign, she continued:

"I got in trouble with Mag's people pulling a last scratch before the change over and, unless I get reborn as someone new, I'll get to decorate one of Mag's crucifixes."

"So why come to us? I'm sorry you have problems with the Imperium and all, but we're just a family of wanderers..." The grizzled man arched a scarred eye brow at her, allowing her to see the canny gleam in his eyes, betraying more open curiosity now.

"Cut the Mag rhet," Traci gritted out, her voice growing angrier as she continued. "An associate of mine sold a skin to another group of gyps—" Traci bit her tongue, as the term was considered highly offensive to the Traveller culture due to their origin,"—travellers a few nights ago. When we found a corpse with this skull on it, I knew it was pro skin. I've never seen anything that good, either the art or the flesh. We brought some plaster to your colleagues, and they said that a Skinner in this group was responsible. Now, why don't you go hack the planet and see if I don't check out?"

"What makes you think we'd have access to any of that information?" The canny traveller asked appraisingly, clearly measuring her with his hard-edged eyes.

With those words out of his mouth and gleam in his eyes, she realized that she was talking to the Skinner she had been looking for. Oldest trick in the book, she thought ruefully, as it allowed the decision maker to analyze risks personally, but play his involvement off as though he were someone bigger's assistant. Do that until he knew if he could trust you, or, at least,

deal with you. She just didn't have experience dealing with people as much as she did dealing with her art. Not for the first time did she wish Stephen was there. After all, it wasn't as though she was even the right gender for this gig!

Nonetheless, she was here and it was up to her to pull off her side of the mission. Fortunately, she'd read enough hard boiled detective novels that she felt like she could pull it off!

"Everyone knows you've collected nearly as many of Anon's hackers as you've collected tech in the Fall," Traci returned sharply. "There's a local network here in Barcelona. I'm sure you've managed to set up a very special system to verify information!"

"I'll see what I can find out about you," he stated non-committal, taking a few more moments to eye her. The gaze seemed to bore into her and she felt exposed, wondering how far he could see through her.

A moment later, he rose and left the motor home she'd been interviewed in.

There was nothing for Traci to do but wait.

I think it's the name that fascinates me.

In Jewish history, the tribe of Benjamin was almost destroyed due to its internal corruption. It was reborn only through pieces of other tribes being grafted into it. For the other name, the tribe of Judah is the only tribe of ancient Israel that survives to this day, the apparent origin of the name "jews." Since we all take turns becoming this man, one could say our fates are grafted into his and that we all help him survive, just as he helps us. So, it would seem that the "Benjamin Judah" name is appropriate and worth remembering.

Clarence didn't normally get angry, but, as the debate got more heated, he found that his adrenaline was rising. Left to his own devices, he'd always believed his own flight or fight response was more like the run or flee response, but, apparently, it was healthier than he'd imagined.

"This is a situation for brains...n-not brawn!" Clarence sputtered angrily at Frank, as Glass and Jill stood watching and Bob tried to mediate. He hated that he often stuttered a bit when he got angry, as it felt like such a cliché to go along with his glasses and high IQ. "The second code Glass decoded clearly shows a part of the network that's vulnerable to being exploited! If we're going to figure out whatever's hidden there and if it relates to the girl, we're going to need to build a network sensor system before Glass goes in. Otherwise, we could be walking into an elaborate trap that really could get us all killed."

"Now, Clarence," Bob interjected. "Tom's told me that Traci's interview is going well. Let's find out what information she's able to glean after she gets into the skinner's confidences.

We may be able to physically get access to whomever hired them from the Rood, without having to rely on tech to access something that really could be a trap.”

“Exactly where you need my skills,” Frank returned, his eyes bulging slightly. “It takes a Reaper to keep either of you alive. I won’t have you getting in the way while I’m trying to keep hack boy alive!”

Glass reddened at the diminutive comment and Clarence could tell it was taking all of the hacker’s will power to stay silent. That made Clarence even more angry.

“Reaper?! You don’t even wear the S&K!” Clarence returned, getting even more riled. “You’re one step a way from being a Raver!”

The words were barely out of his lips before Clarence regretted them. He’d always wondered whether he just had Aspergers...or whether it was actually Terretts! There were some things you didn’t say. You didn’t call a rape victim a whore, you didn’t call a Traveller a gyp, and you didn’t suggest that a Reaper was a Raver—at least, you didn’t if it was your own reaper.

But it was too late to take it back. The temperature of the room seemed to drop, with Jill’s sudden intake of breath the only sound in the stunned silence.

“Maybe I ought to split the difference,” Frank finally bit out, his eyes glass hard as his right hand slid down to his kabar knife, caressing the hilt. Even Clarence knew the midway point between the extremes were Reavers, definitely not a comforting thought.

“Okay, everyone.” Bob pushed the two men away. “We’re all just going a bit crazy from cabin fever since we don’t get to get out as much as we’d like these days! Let’s calm down.”

“I’m really sorry, Frank,” Clarence blurted out, sincerely chagrined. “I was just frustrated because I felt like I wasn’t needed and I hate always being the one in the think tank.”

It took a moment for Frank’s glare to soften. When it did, Clarence knew it wasn’t due to emotional impetus the way it would be for most normal, non-sociopathic people. Rather it was the logical realization that it would, indeed, be very stifling to be trapped in the think tank so few field trips. As reapers dealt less well with captivity than virtually anyone else, Frank was one of the most frequent scouts in the outside world, so he could grasp the futility Clarence was describing. That was as close to empathy as he could come, but Clarence would definitely accept it.

“It would suck to be stuck in here as much as you eggheads are,” Frank shrugged, pausing before leaving to add, “but just so you know: I may not have the Sickle & Kilij but it’s not because I don’t agree with the sentiment.”

With that, Frank turned on his heel and headed toward the guard house. Jill hurried after him.

“Glass, can you give us a minute?” Bob asked as he took Clarence by the shoulder and walked to the edge of the conference room to chat with him more privately.

As they walked he went on, “It wasn’t his decision.”

“What do you mean?” Clarence asked, trying to connect the dots.

“He wanted to take the S&K, but I wouldn’t permit it,” Bob shrugged.

Clarence looked with confusion at their leader, wondering why he would stop a public declaration like the S&K.

Finally Bob clarified it with a simple statement: “It would get us all killed if he did.”

For the second time, Clarence felt unbelievably shortsighted. For someone as smart as he was, he really did have a lot of times where he was amazingly stupid!

Before the Fall, I got it renewed every four years...like clockwork. Now it's useless—simply a worn and faded memento of an arguably simpler time.

After any sort of national or international government's perished in the riots of the Fall, the heyday of paperwork or physical identification passed less than 450 days after the Fall. Forgers like Jenna, Denver, their mentor, Gavin, and my own Traci had inadvertently forced the kingdoms to go to a different form of identification, one far more primitive. The ancient Maori and countless other tribes had long ago realized the advantage of tattoos as identification. They're hard to forge and, unless you chose to make a permanent copy, impossible to stand up to intense scrutiny.

Of course, when modern tribal kingdoms started using this technique once more, the more “advanced” ones had to make their work more elaborate and encompassing.

“So, it looks like you check out,” the skinner stated as he re-entered the trailer, hints of admiration warring with suspicion on his scar laced face. “Strange that I never heard of you before now, however.”

“I’ve worked with a team that keeps a low profile,” Traci confessed, truthfully.

“So why don’t you just get out of town?” the skinner asked her appraisingly, using a device for double checking stories that Steven had warned her about. Liars either couldn’t keep their story straight or they repeated it exactly. People telling the truth had subtle variations each time they told it as new elements came forth that still reinforced whatever facts were available. Fortunately, Traci knew the facts her story had to reinforce.

“You know that my brother’s in Mag’s dungeons,” Traci explained, thinking about tragedies from her own pass to make the sadness in her voice sincere.

“No one gets out of Mag's dungeons except to hold up the sky,” the skinner returned. “It's only a matter of time.”

“That may be,” Traci admitted, a mixture of resignation and defiance in her voice that Steven would've been proud of. “But you, of all people, know that blood is thicker than water.”

“Indeed,” the man grimaced reluctantly. The Traveller camps were defined by their families, such that a man cast out from his family was considered no better in this culture than a Ronin had been in feudal Japan.

“There's always the chance that he'll be released,” Traci continued. “Or that I'll hatch a way to free him.”

“The latter seems more like your aim,” the man discerned shrewdly.

Traci shrugged.

The old forger finally grimaced in resignation.

“Alright, I will apprentice you,” he gritted. “You'll have to pay your startup costs, because I'm not running a charity here.”

Traci had expected this and brought two pieces of gold to play: a battered doubloon and a misshapen lump of the metal. While the clay and iron pieces (which Steven swore look like poker chips) that Magnanimus had installed as money were official currency, traveller groups insisted on gold. She tossed them on the table.

“You'll be my new boy,” he tested the gold with his teeth and tongue, stuck them in the waistband of his pants, and then stood to his feet. “You can call me Aric.”

Tracy stared him coldly, disliking his tone.

“My name--” she began as she stood as well.

“Doesn't matter.” He arched his brow. “My apprentices are all my 'boys' until they've proven that they're worthy to have a name. Until then, you'll go by, 'boy.' Understood?”

“Understood,” Traci grimaced with distaste, rising to her feet.

As they walked from the mobile dwelling, Aric came near her elbow.

“I'm not gonna try to forbid you sneaking off to prowl about the prison at night,” Aric stated gruffly, cutting off any protest. “Yes, there were a few reports from guards I ran across that would tie in with your description, so there's no point in denying what you've been doing or that you will do it in the future. However, if you ever get caught, lead anyone back here, or try to trade what you know for your brother, you will die.”

Before she could respond, she felt a needle prick in the back of her neck, his hand having moved faster than she could anticipate. She instantly felt terror grip her heart, wondering if she had just been poisoned.

“You didn't think I became a master skinner without borrowing some of Mag's tricks,” Aric smiled darkly. “Why do you think we skin his magnets? We don't just need the ink for reference, we need whatever else went into their skin. That's a suicide implant you just felt. So long as you stay loyal and uncaptured, we won't have to trigger it.”

With that, Aric smacked her on the back of the neck with his now empty hand, as though to make the sting go away.

When Magnaimus' empire arose, he went a step farther to encode multiple forms of identification into tats, so people could be generally identified from a distance and uniquely verified up close. And, with a death penalty on all forgers in the empire, you don't see many people wishing to push the boundaries. (Especially since rumors continue to circulate that Mag's using special magnetic inks and Old World technology like subdermal implants.)

As such, the only people ballsy enough to do it are members of the secretive traveller society. Their forgers are known as “Skinners,” because of their penchant for skinning victims and corpses for their tats has become legend. They say it's the only way to make a perfect tat replica, but I privately suspect that some of the sick mothers who might've otherwise become reapers (or ravers, for that matter) have chosen this profession to slake their thirsts. (Of course, if Mag is using Old World tech, they may be able to extract it in the skinning process. That may be why they have a rep for never having their fakes spotted—at least for full changeovers.)

As he made his way toward his assignment through fog shrouded streets, Frank still felt his pride stinging. Bob had over-ruled him on the Clarence/Glass fiasco, permitting them to tag-team while Tom watched from the guardhouse. Of course, Frank had still been expected to be on call.

Sometimes that's all he felt his life was anymore...never getting the final say, but constantly being on call to pick up the pieces when things went wrong. It made him feel more like a wet nurse than a reaper, which was infuriating. He wished he could just walk away, but, unlike most reapers, he was bound to his clients until death did them part—like some sort of crazy Mormon marriage.

The thing that stung the most about all of it is that the two members of the team most likely to be killed by a bicycle had somehow managed to pull off their job without tripping any alarms and only minimal intervention on the part of Tom. It made him wonder if he was losing touch. If his perspective on things was more skewed than he knew. There were enough things skewed about him that the thought that his logic was amongst them was almost more than he could stand!

With that said, Clarence's probe had revealed no external traps that they could find and Glass had safely broken in and out of the portion of the network. The area that the information from the horsemen's disc had led them to was an isolated corner of the system that was cut off from the rest of Mag's network. While they were unable to get any information on the cards or which part of Gavin's crew was in play, they did come across a list of shatterbrains that owed their allegiance to the N.I.R. There had been rumors that Mag had rebooted Project Copperhead, but considering it was exclusively a U.S./Israeli covert project, most people had discounted it. Now it seemed that this disregard was premature. While hardly an army, if the men listed were part of a new Project Copperhead that Mag was leading, then it also explained why he so desperately wanted to get the 'Net back online. With access to the internet, shatterheads were to a world of science what mages were to a world of magic—deadly, powerful, and a total game changer.

Frank had had to listen to Glass go on about the Copperhead concept far too often when the project had originated some ten years ago. He desperately wanted to be part of the project but, like Frank, the good of the group was more important than Glass' personal desires. The fact that the chips would break down over time was just too great a risk.

With the Rood hunting for them and the Empire hoarding them in preparation for an eventual reboot of the internet, the list of shatterbrains was too great a potential asset to overlook. The Iron Empire ruled with fear, which meant that those who were the most talented would resent that negative reinforcement greatly. If you could find a way for them to defy Mag and his Empire without dying, then it stood to reason that many would be willing to do just that. (And, for those who weren't quite willing to defy their master, even if they could get away with it, revelation that the most feared assassins in Europe were gunning for them might just do the trick!)

Of course, even though they had tried to do their research, there was just no way to tell which of the men and women on the list were loyal to Mag, which were looking for an out like the one Frank's crew could provide, and which ones had been trampled by the horsemen. As such, they had chosen a name at random: a Thomas Fowler.

From there, it came down to three of them to select for the job: Steven, Tom, or Frank. Steven could smooze a mark, liquer him up, and get a decent amount of information from him, while Tom could break into his home and ransack his files. Both had their place, but with time being of the essence if they were to stay ahead of Mag's people and the horsemen, it had been decided that Frank would simply drop in on tonight's mark after Traci got back. The reaper's analytical, sociopathic mind was adept at spotting deception in people and, unlike anyone else on the team, would instantly reward such deception with the death it deserved without a twinge of regret.

Frank didn't read much, but he'd heard a phrase he rather liked from some old Italian philosopher: "An iron fist in a velvet glove." If Bob was the velvet glove, then Frank was definitely the iron fist. (Of course, maybe Tom was the velvet glove, since he was a cat burglar. Frank had always been torn about which interpretation was more correct.)

Frank was still contemplating it when he arrived at the target's home—a two story Spanish villa with rustic landscaping. The list Glass had found included access codes to people's homes and, even more mysteriously, suicide frequencies for their chips. Unfortunately, they still didn't have one of the transmitters that could send out these suicide frequencies, so there'd be no margin of error, at least not on this first one. Still, Frank wondered how much trouble a shatterbrain could be? After all, the target couldn't "hack" him to death with his mind, whereas Frank might not have an implant, but his version of hacking definitely did end in death.

The passcode provided immediate entry after Frank tapped it into the keypad by the man's door. With a quick shrug, he moved through the traditional door, thanking gods he didn't believe in that it wasn't one of the sliding doors, which made more noise and couldn't be controlled with human force.

His night trained eyes quickly adjusted to the dimness of the man's residence, finding that he was in a large living room area. In the rear of this, past a side set dining room and recessed kitchen, he saw a staircase leading up to the second level.

As he stealthily made his way up the stairs, he started to pick up chatter from the guardhouse.

"...went in totally unprepared," the voice was Glass'.

"How unprepared?" Tom's voice queried.

"Really unprepared," Glass returned. His voice was extremely nervous. *"As in, this isn't just a list of shatterbrains..."*

Frank cursed silently to himself as he arrived at the top of the stair, wishing to throttle Glass at this moment. He stopped moving, praying that Glass would go on so that he knew what he was walking into.

"...It's everyone from Mag's version of Project Copperhead, including thunder hawks and manowars..."

The warning came only half a second before the first bullet ripped through the door, but enough in advance for the reaper's adrenaline to kick in. As though to compensate for the FUBAR he was about to walk into, he noted that the syrupy slow-motion he was used to seeing at times like this seemed to be even slower than normal. He felt like he could almost see wind whipping around the bullet as it barreled towards him.

Fortunately, before he could become mesmerized, he snapped out of his reverie and threw his body viciously to the side, shrinking into a tight ball that would've made the acrobatic Tom impressed if he'd been paying more attention. As he rolled across the hall away from the stairs and the bedroom, the wooden paneling that lined the wall exploded like thunder as bullets languorously smashed it to bits.

As time slowed, his brain quickened. He was dimly aware that Tom and Glass were still

talking in the Guardhouse but their speech was so torpid and distorted that he couldn't understand any of it and simply ignored it. Why hadn't he remembered that Project Copperhead was for a number of types of enhanced soldiers besides shatterbrains? Since there had been no light from the room the bullets had come out of, the only thing he could be dealing with at this moment was one of the manowars. Some people just called them tanks or even battle mages, but, no matter what you called them, they could rain down hell on the unwary. For this reason, some people referred to them by the Mars' moniker: "godofwars."

"Frank, can you hear me?" Suddenly Glass' voice cut through the slowness around Frank.

"Yes," he barked in a whisper, unsure why he could understand the other man, considering that the world was still in slow motion as he continued to roll down the hall.

"I've increased my speech velocity so that you can understand me," Glass explained instinctively. *"I've been going over those codes. I think I've figured out how you can arm the suicide code."*

"How the hell do I do that?" Frank grimaced, as, despite his rolling, a lucky shot grazed his shoulder, cutting his flesh slightly.

"Pull out your walky talkie," Glass ordered.

Frank wanted to snarl that he had no time to pull out anything, but, as he retreated further down the hall, he saw a bathroom that should give him some protection. Fast as thought, he rolled to his feet and sprinted into the bathroom, diving through the door and into an old clawfoot tub at the rear of the room.

As he slid into position, he pulled out the tiny walkie they each had to keep with them.

"What now?" He panted as he looked at the piece.

"Now, you've got to let Clarence remote in," Glass said. They were the last words Frank ever wanted to hear.

"Hell no. I'm not letting that bastard in here," Frank snarled under his breath. His earlier relenting hadn't changed his overall contempt for the man who he regarded as virtually useless. The notion of entrusting his life to him was just too much.

"There's no other way," Clarence's voice echoed in Frank's ear. *"I don't like you and you don't like me, but, dammit, you need my brains in this. Let me remote in or we're all dead!"*

Frank hated that Clarence was right. Again.

Bullets were now smashing through the tiles of the bathroom. If they couldn't kill the bastard soon, it would be all over.

"Alright," Frank snarled. *"But not all the way."*

"I know!" Clarence returned. *"I'm not suicidal."*

With that, Frank watched as his hands began to adjust the walkie talkie in ways that he was completely unfamiliar with.

They say that none of us uses 100% of our brain's capacity—that the human brain is just too powerful for any one person to fully control all of it. In this, their half right. It's not that it's impossible for any one person to control 100% of their brain, it's that it's impossible for any one PERSONALITY to control 100% of the brain. But what if there were more than one personality? And what if, rather than assimilating into a single persona, these personalities chose to stay separate but work in unison rather than losing the skills each of them had acquired?

Most people couldn't have done what we did, but, then again, by definition, we're not like most people.

Frank staggered out of the front door of the house, trying his best to keep a low profile as the door auto locked behind him. It had been a tight call, but somehow that crazy engineer had gotten the walkie to work right and, as abruptly as it had begun, the gunfire had stopped. A quick glance in the man's bedroom had confirmed he was dead, but before Frank had been able to search his room thoroughly, he'd discovered the countdown clock was past 2:00 minutes. Countdown clocks were issued to all of Mag's people as a way to boost morale. Ostensibly, they showed people being attacked how soon they could expect reinforcements. Of course, it also worked to alert intruders that Mag's private army was on its way, so they could get away.

Frank had made one more glance around the room, momentarily considering taking the manowar's gun, but had thought better of it. Before he left, however, he did drop one of his high-test flame grenades on the bed. Set for a 1:00 minute delay, Magnus' people would find the house an inferno and checking his records would show no forced entry. (Although it would show that someone had used his passcode immediately before the fire. But there was no help for that.)

Frank had gotten about two blocks from the scene, taking all the stealthy ways he knew to lose people when he heard Traci chiming in.

I need to get back, her voice echoed in Frank's head as he stalked the streets.

Frank gritted his teeth. He always hated being pulled out of the field like this, especially with the authorities so close. But he knew that Traci did have to get back to her job today!

Give me a minute to get you safe, Frank muttered.

The truth was, on the best of days, he hated leaving the field. And, for Traci's shift, hanging out in the guardhouse was almost more painful, because the crap she dealt with was boring as hell. Tom was better suited to it, or even Glass! And, of course, after having his butt bailed out by one of the eggheads, Frank was even more loathe to go in and be in proximity to their silent gloating!

After a few more blocks, he finally overcame his reluctance, stopped walking, and faced a store front. They'd learned long ago that changing in mid motion was extremely disorienting and might lead to someone breaking something. Laying down was easiest, but, with a little trial and error, they'd gotten it refined where standing worked just fine. Of course, the remote issue earlier showed that they still had a lot to work on in regards to finesse!

As he waited, Frank glanced at the reflection in a store window, wondering once again who Benjamin Judah really was. He'd heard that some of them believed he was God, since they'd been created from him. But Reapers tended to have trouble with faith, what with their emotional retardation. Of course, Frank had heard that some had overcome this and taken the 'Redemptio Per Sanguis' – *Redemption Through Blood* – mantra under their S&Ks. With one of the few emotions he could express, he envied them their ability to believe.

As Traci took over, an outside observer might've noticed that the man's eyes changed, at least in their demeanor. However, no one was watching as the man who had once been Benjamin Judah turned on *her* heel and headed for the traveller camp.

To Be Continued