

Bleeders

Part two of the
Cardinal sequence

A novel by Stu Jackson

Prolegemon

mI awoke as if emerging from milk, the transition seamless and white, and opened my eyes to find the Doctor standing over me, smiling.

"Good morning Egan," she said brightly. "How are you feeling this morning?" mI saw the radial glimmer in her right eye as a corneal screen snicked into place and began presenting her with data. She cocked her head and began to hum tunelessly, a gesture mI had come to despise. "Oh." She sounded surprised and pleased. "Progress!" She smiled down at me. "Nchoo56-KL metabolite concentrations are down Egan. Hmm. 79-JF too. Good. *Good.*"

"Fuck your progress, Doctor" mI opined, articulating the words carefully, taking a sip of water, the words and gestures long rehearsed. "And fuck you, too." *Today. This was it. mI knew mI was ready.*

Am I *really* going to get away with this?

The probability of condensate resurrection is not high, as you know.

I know.

You *were* responsible for recommending this option as a viable component of SECR training if I recall.

Precisely why I'm suspicious.

I don't follow.

I know.

"Egan," she admonished and focused outwards away from her internal presentation of data. "Are you feeling a little negative again this morning?"

"No more than usual," mI replied, and immediately felt myself begin to Bleed, a usual morning occurrence from the Doctor's point of view. That was important: mI knew that everything must appear as normal. "I still hate this fucking place – and I still hate the sight of your fucking ugly face every morning." mI saw her Membrane ripple and cloud in response to my Bleed, and watched her face for the impact of my words, realising – as her face crumpled with bovine-like distress – that what mI said actually mattered to her. Actually *upset* her. mI liked to picture the Doctor as a Bitch, as a quasi-Nazi Torturer, but the truth was she was little more than a glorified nurse, and a slightly backwards one at that.

"Oh Egan. Sometimes ... I wish that ... "

mI could see her gaze focus inwards onto the virtual light of her corneal screen, checking to see if mmy Bleed had compromised her Membrane: she wasn't totally naïve, then. *Everything must appear as normal*: today of all days that *had* to remain the case, mI knew.

"I don't give a shit what you wish for," mI offered, as offensively as mI could.

The Doctor pursed her lips with disappointed distress. "Well." She moved to the foot of the bed. "As you wish." She moved to the door. "I'll be back in an hour."

"Yeah, can't fucking wait."

mI is pretty good isn't he?

Indeed. For an analogical.

Hah. Progress?

The protocol is being tapped.

That's what you said last time.

Ah. Yes. You wish to hear something inaccurate but more immediately emotionally palliative?

And in truth, mI couldn't wait. Because today, if all went to plan, mI would walk out of here – even if, as mI suspected, mI was going to have to kill a lot of people in order to do it. The thought that mmy actions would have such consequences appalled mme. *Disgusted* mme. But Mary had taught mme well – taught us all well – and mmy resolve was absolute. The rightness of mmy path was so clear to mme. Like the purest mountain air, my purpose was both rarified and exhilarating.

If mI could get out.

The Doctor left the room, and mI saw the seeming-fragile figures of Coagulant twins watching mme intently through the door, stupidly large Resource weapons trained and ready. *Fucking ghouls*. And entirely unnecessary, given the glutinous air of the room in which Coagulant had installed me, thick with hostile nchoi. SERC training was the best there was, but there was no way mI could do or say *anything* without every nuance of it being inspected, recorded and more than likely, prevented in any one of several nasty ways.

mI knew that Coagulant agents were already at work throughout mmy somatic body. mI suspected that Coagulant nchoi was even attempting to interface portions of mmy neural machinery. mMy Bleeder defences would keep the hostile machinery out of course, but their defence was guaranteed to be neither wholly effective nor without the risk of severe collateral damage. mI could be in a Coercive already and not even realise

it – everything immediately tactile, olfactory and visual nothing more than the dribble of false information through a meat-butcherer Coagulant UI. So mI knew mI could trust nothing, could rely on nothing.

If they got in though ... mI shivered. MI would not even have private thoughts. But mI didn't want to contemplate that prospect too closely. If true, mI was effectively dead.

This is incredible you know. The subjective experience is not exactly what I expected but still ... incredible.

You ran experience workshops during SERC training. You must be familiar with the phenomenology.

Yeah. But. You know. Reality bites.

There is no reality.

Don't patronise me, you fucker.

mI lay back, willing the Bleeder trance upon mmyself. Not that mI would be able to do anything constructive, of course. But the rehearsal techniques felt good, felt comforting. And right now, mI needed that. mMy may have been a monster in Coagulant eyes, a murderer of the worst kind, a Bleeder, guilty of some of the worst "atrocities" of the "war" ... but mI knew differently. Mary knew differently.

MI thoughts drifted. *Mary*. Every Bleeder remembered the first time they had met Mary, understood the tactile-seeming wash of information-rich pheromones brushing across their sensorial palettes. *Beautiful Mary*, one of the very first Bleeders to openly rebel, daughter of Elizabeth, one of the founders of the Hypersymbolics, and of Unbound too – the effects of her schism with the other leaders of that radical faction was almost as famous as her death.

MI stopped. *Curious*. Something was nagging at mme, triggered by thoughts of Mary. mI tried to force associate. *Mary. Unbound. Hypersymbolics*. Hmm, it was almost as if ... mMy thoughts, like dry ice dropped in hot oil, exploded into a roiling volume of phenomenological steam that quickly dispersed and cooled, leaving ...

Computational stockade holding.

Yes. Last thing we need is for Coagulant to fully appreciate just what they're up against. Fuckers'd probably tear the planet apart looking for us if they did.

Agreed.

How's the transfer proceeding?

Well.

How long?

Impossible to estimate. Extra-existential data protocols do not lend themselves ...

Yes, yes.

... nothing but myself. I shook my head, and saw again the two Coagulants appear in the doorway. I watched them take up position by the side of my bed, appearing to wobble oddly due to the depth and viscosity of their Membrane. They said nothing for a moment, giving me time to study them.

Children, with stupid, oversized Resource weapons trained down at me. That's what they looked like to my eyes standing there next to each other: thin, malicious, twisted children, bent into emotional and intellectual absurdity by ... what? I had never understood Coagulant.

"We know what you are trying to do, Bleeder. You will not succeed."

I turned to look at the one on the left of me. "You people are not worth talking to."

The face of one Coagulant twisted. "Vermin." A thin hand snaked out, pointing