

# Cages

*Ian Watson*

“Miss ADAMSON, I’M Svelte,” says the tall, skinny forty-something woman who enters my office.

Svelte by name, and likewise in body, which is long and slim. Elasticized black leggings and a black T-shirt under a crimson shirt that sports sev-eral zipped pockets. Not quite the usual ladies’ attire for Combined Intelligence. In my own more chunky forties, I’m in a cream blouse and gray jacket. A long gray skirt conceals my knee-cage.

Svelte’s hair cascades blackly and the collar of her crimson shirt gapes wide to accommodate a hexagonal neck-curse of brass, which holds her chin high. Her impediment looks the height of funky fashion, something chosen deliberately rather than inflicted upon her.

I indicate the brown leather chair facing my desk, and she lounges in it.

“So what exactly is Kore?” I ask her.

According to the file still on screen, Svelte is half-Serbian, half-Romanian. Her birth name was Svetlana but she uses the name Svelte from her time as a... turbo-folk singer. Her job description at Combi-Intel is Analysis Eastern Europe—she graduated in Politics and Economics from the Uni-versity of Belgrade. Most economies in Eastern Europe are in a mess because of the hoops coming so soon after the upheavals of uniting with the West.

Outside my tinted window, the Thames is as gray as my clothing. At rooftop level above Kens-ington and Chelsea, hoops hang leadenly in their dozens. If the sun were shining on this June morn-ing, how the hoops would glitter, like huge bangles from boutiques.

“Kore is tekky that samples and remixes the sounds of love-making,” says Svelte.

“Hang on. Tekky. Samples. Remixes.” This Ser-bian-Romanian seems to have a bigger English vocabulary than I do.

“Tekky is neo-techno music,” she explains. “You sample other bits of

music or noise, using a syn-thesizer to distort. Take a source sound and make it something it never was. Kore uses fucking and coming as the source sounds.” Helpfully she spells source. Not sauce, no.

From a crimson breast pocket emerges a memo-ry stick, which I plug into the computer. An album cover comes on screen, depicting a dancing woman surrounded by flames. A fox mask hides the woman’s face. Groping, caressing hands of a multitude of hues, detached from their owners, cover most of the woman’s body. A patch of pubic hair and a nipple are exposed.

“Oh, I see,” say I. “Kore as in hard-core.”

“Isn’t digitized—hands are all painted on her.”

“So it’s art. Patient woman. Must have taken ages.”

The title of the album is *Sighs and Cries*. From Quantum Entanglement, the very group! Svelte is extremely well organized, and at only a half-hour’s notice. Her slimness, her extra height, her dark hair, just as Miriam was, till she left my life. Not that Miriam died, merely our relationship.

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THE MUSIC IS slick and smooth as sweaty skin but with a pulsing bass line, climax a long time com-ing, wailings looping around and around, wave after wave, sighs like choirs of angels in ecstasy:

*Ev-ery-thing you  
Ev-ery-thing you do  
You do, you do, you do  
Everything you say  
To me, to me, to me  
Everything you do to me  
Say to me do to me  
Is perfect perfect perfect  
Do to me say to me  
Perfect perfect perfect...*

“Sounds like a steal from Marlene Dietrich,” is my opinion. “You Do Something To Me.”

“No, someone really said those words while making love. The voice is like filtered, disguised, high-pitched. Sometimes gets overdone. Voice winds up six octaves like breathing pure helium, like almost ultrasonic, like something to get bats off on.”

Could I even dream of phrasing anything of the sort in Serbo-Croatian or Romanian? Not even in English!

Minimize the album cover away, resume CV. In her youth, Svelte was a favorite of the Milo-sevic regime. Turbo-folk was mystical nationalist music originally supportive of Milo-sevic and his gangsters, a primitivist blend of pop and folk and oriental sounds. Strong allegations of crime and drug trafficking—Svelte must have been obliged to get out of Serbia. She tidied up her act and dusted off her university degree and became one of our experts on East-ern European. Not to mention our expert on the music scene.

“Do you know why I’m asking about Kore?”

“Web chat says Quantum Entanglement gonna do a big Exprisonment gig. They’ll sample the noise the alien bees make, fuck about with the big bees’ hum and blast the mix at hoops or at the bees. Like, the Varroa fucked with us, so let’s fuck ‘em with music. That’s the idea.”

Succinctly put. Pretty much what I was alerted to, fresh out of a meeting about the nuke the Chi-nese had set off. So far as satellite imaging can tell, the solitary alien hoop, which the Chinese nuked in the Gobi, was merely hurled several kilometers upward. Maybe some blast got through to the other side of the hoop.

First shot in an interstellar war? Considering the size of a hoop, about a thousandth of a megaton may have got through, if any blast at all. No repercussions from the aliens, at least not as yet. We needed to do more than nuke a hoop? Damn the Chinese—they might have provoked anything.

Svelte shrugs. “Only just found out. Can’t follow everything.”

“You’re fast.”

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WHEN WE SPEAK of the aliens, precisely what do we mean? Precision is vital in intelligence. It’s important to regularly re-analyze what we think we know in case of some new interpretation. It can be fatal to make

assumptions then stick to them.

First of all, from nowhere, came the hoops. They appeared worldwide during a single day, tens of millions of them. Next came the Varroa, who—or which—used the hoops to arrive and exit. Is any-one—or anything—else involved about whom we know sod all?

It only took a week for the myriads of hoops to bestow impediments upon the world's population. A hoop would swoop. Of a sudden the targeted person found a cage around some part of their body. I need to keep my own left leg stretched out beneath my desk on account of my knee-cage.

A transfixing bar holds an impeded in place. In itself this doesn't hurt, but woe betide anyone who has an impeded removed by surgery or by DIY saw-ing. They'll experience agony until a hoop gets round to renewing the affliction, maybe next day, maybe a week later.

Hoops don't swoop upon someone who's up a ladder, say—they wait for a more suitable moment. Smart hoops. If you shut yourself up tight in your home, a hoop will appear as if by magic. Hoops are about a meter in diameter.

Nothing we do affects them. Exotic substance, say scientists. Might be made of strings.

Ah, I have just cottoned on: Exprisonment, the title of Quantum Entanglement's proposed gig, is the opposite of imprisonment. We're all confined by our impeds, all constrained, but at the same time we're free to walk about. We're exprisoned.

"So," I say to Svelte, "do we butt in on Quantum Entanglement and take charge of this hum-mix event? All sorts of measuring equipment on site? Or do we limit ourselves to observing? In which case," as I appraise her clothing, "just how do we dress?"

"Or undress."

"You mean literally?"

"Some kids'll go nude or scanty. Not most."

"Glad to hear it. Is this only for young people?"

She shakes her head. “You get worked up by Kore with a friend of any age, or even on your own. It’s non-discriminatory, like sex for the dis-abled. Impeds looked like fucking the club and dance scene, like how do you dance with a box on your foot? Kore says fuck off to impeds.”

“You mean there’ll be some sort of orgy?”

“Some micro-orgies maybe, not mass writhing. There’s like a spiritual dimension, like an orgasm reaching heaven. Transcending the body, flying free.”

“And *Sighs and Cries* was a response to impeds?”

“No, *Sighs and Cries* came out a few months before the hoops. What QE are planning right now is their response to the hoops. They must’ve been sampling and mixing for months.”

“High time to stick our noses in.”

“Party time? Dude!”

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So THE VARROA come through the hoops. They look like giant bees, size of an electric toaster. *Varr-oh-aah, varrr-oh-aah*—that’s the sound they make. A bit loud for wing beats. The noise suggests some kind of protective energy field, whatever that might be. Bee-ing as how we can’t catch a Varroa nor harm them in any way.

There’s a terrestrial parasite named Varroa, which sucks the blood of our terrestrial bees. This enfeebles the bees. So they collect less pollen. So less honey gets made. After a few months, bye-bye hive. The Varroa and their hoops certainly impair human beings, so the name sticks.

The Varroa could be robots made by aliens (hith-erto unseen), sent through the hoops to impair us and assess the effects.

Those hypothetical aliens might be:

softening us up for the real invasion—however, some ethics committee of alien races disapproves of brutal methods and awards Brownie points for ingenuity;

making sex difficult so we’ll slowly go extinct; the birth rate is scarily

down, vacant planet in another couple of centuries at the present rate (see invasion scenario, above);

hampering us so that we don't get above our-selves by suddenly making some scientific breakthrough such as developing interstellar travel and causing mayhem;

practicing an art form;

fill in your own guess.

Many countries have sent smart little spy-flyers through hoops, though here in London we know of none that ever returned or transmitted any data back. SETI specialists—Searchers for Extraterrestrial Intelligence—try in vain to analyze the Varroa noise and communicate. Everything's guesswork. Now here's a different tack—the Kore people are going to carry out an innovative and maybe confrontational musical experiment. If they strike gold, wow. Let's not spoil the spontaneity of the experiment. Sometimes there can be too much consultation. We'll simply observe it, me and my Serbian who intrigues me—and of course we'll need someone to video unobtrusively so we have audiovisual for the record. This'll be on my own initiative. Hell, it's only a music group. Nothing might come of this, then I'd be wasting resources, right?

Before the hoops came and my left knee was caged, I was mainly liaising with the French security service about the Islamic terrorist threat. That's how I met Miriam Claudel, six years ago now. That ended, and for the past two years there's been no one else. I much prefer relationships to arise in the natural course of events rather than to go hunting.

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"THE STUDIO" IS the name for a nineteenth-century vicarage in Lambeth, converted and extended into a nursing home, which subsequently went bankrupt. With mucho money from American and Euro tours and a zillion sales, Benny Wallace and Trev Tate bought the place before the aliens arrived.

It's going to be club night there tonight—anything to keep our spirits up.

A mild sunny evening, this fifth anniversary (in days) of my first meeting Svelte. I drive with the window down. My long denim skirt, its big pockets embroidered with swirls of daisies, laps pixie boots. White blouse,

sleeveless denim bolero jack-et. A bit Country Dance, but it takes all sorts. Alongside me, Svelte is in scarlet and black. In the back, Tony Cullen from Surveillance sports a box on his left hand—that's his digicam disguised as an imped. His real imped is some sort of complicated groin truss. Consequently he doesn't much like sitting, even on a commode chair at home, he told me. Usually, quote unquote, he sprawls on a sofa like a feasting Roman. Looks rather like a Roman, Tony does, with those crimped blond curls and eagle nose. He mustn't see much gay action these days, what with his truss. He wears loose baggy fawn pants and an oversize cream sweater.

There's so much less traffic on the roads these days that the air almost smells sweet. Easy-peasy to park my disabled-adapted Volvo turbo-diesel on a street of shops; try finding a parking space in this part of London before the impeds. Walking half a mile with a knee-cage won't be much fun but we're being discreet.

Out clamber Tony and I awkwardly. Svelte slides out and is instantly, gracefully upright. I admire her.

The theory that we might all be atoning for something in our past by the type of impeds we wear is probably ridiculous. Must my leg be immobilized because I was captain of the hockey team at Oxford? Because Svelte was a singer, does she need an imped up near her vocal chords?

Our pace along the street is determined by my need to swing my stiffened left leg in an arc. A hoop drifts overhead, ignored by most people. It's easy to tell who's heading for the party. Girl in a one-piece Spiderman bathing costume and short frilly skirt, her friend in black bra and panties, boots and cowboy hat. Girl wearing hot-shorts and an off-the-shoulder top, her knee-imped just like mine except it's bright red. She must have painted or enameled the cage herself, which shows spirit. Various others.

Svelte told me that Benny and Trev aimed to centralize studios for a half-dozen tekky groups, the idea being a synergistic commune all rubbing off each other while doing their own unique things. Wisdom was that you oughtn't to live where your studio is because that way you'd become entrapped and not have a life, but as it turned out in the wake of hoops and impeds, The Studio provided a sort of sanctuary, an oasis. Some of the music made there is really demented, Svelte said with approval—such as the stuff by Psalms of Madness.

We're only interested in the original Quantum Entanglement band,

which consists of Daniel and Sean and Alanjune—as those last two members call themselves, as though they don't have separate identities. Maybe an impeded locks Alan and June together nowadays—we'll see.

Passing a fish and chip shop, funky jazz drifts out along with the smells. A beautiful Chinese girl with long black hair is scooping chips out of a fryer. Personally I would put the hair up in a net in those circumstances. But oh, the hair partly hides her impeded. A small red box—like a radio—is bonded to the side of her head. And that's the source of the jazz! Does that box play all the time? How does she ever get to sleep? How isn't she half insane? Yet she looks serene. Maybe she went deaf.

“Sally, cop a look,” says Svelte. I'd told her to call me Sally—Miss Adamson would sound absurd at a gig.

Generally one avoids gawping at abnormally impeded individuals, since basically we're all in the same boat. However, the middle-aged woman crossing the street toward us is something else. Living impeded are rather rare, and that woman's right forearm is a tortoiseshell cat.

To be accurate, it's most of a cat. Fused to the elbow-stump of the woman's right arm, the animal lacks hind legs. She's cradling the moggy against her chest, its front paws clinging to her shoulder, its tail flicking to and fro.

“Imagine feeding it!” Tony is holding his boxed hand very steady—I think he's filming the woman. At home, does he have a private video library of weird impeded? Heigh-ho, anything to keep sexual-ity alive and kicking.

Imagine that poor woman kneeling patiently by Kitty's food bowl, purring encouragingly. Imagine when the cat wants a crap.

“What did she do to deserve that, eh?” says Tony. “Love her pet excessively?”

“What did the cat do?” counters Svelte.

We hush as the woman passes by.

A lot of impeded seem arbitrary, while some do seem poignantly appropriate. So there's the “snap-shot” theory that the impeded reflects what a person was thinking about at the exact moment of caging. People thinking banal thoughts received any old impeded from stock; but obsessives tended to be thinking about their obsessions.



“They’re practical jokers,” says Tony. “Some-where in Varroa land, audiences are laughing their heads off and rolling in the aisles.”

As if on cue, the noise intrudes: *vrrrr-oh-aah, vrrrr-oh-aah-oh-aah*, a wild wind rushing through trees, the sound of a giant bee flying. One of the Varroa comes cruising overhead, dangling scaly jointed legs, its glassy-looking wings beating fast. Yellow fur streaked with orange, black bulbous eyes, antennae like miniature antlers.

“Sod off sod off!” a bloke shouts at it. He shakes his impeded vengefully—a right-hand box. Most people look the other way.

Rather higher in the sky, a passenger jet is descending across London toward distant Heathrow. That isn’t such a frequent sight as for-merly. Tourism’s almost dead.

A skinny black chap equipped with a full head-cage emerges from a newsagent. Cradling a toddler in his arms, he looks like a parody of an American football player. Of a sudden the black man legs it at quite a pace. Cottoned onto a Varroa in the neighborhood, did he? Whatever a daddy does, his child will receive an impeded when it’s nearing a meter tall. Head-Cage is probably a bit nuts and is trying to stop his offspring from learning to walk, so that the child never appears tall. Well, that won’t work, is the long and the tall of it. Long equals tall.

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A HIGH STONE WALL tipped by rusty spikes sur-rounds the grounds of the ex-rectory, ex-nursing home. Cedars, cypresses, and Scots pines rear up. At the gateway a couple of blokes stuff entrance money into the pockets of long, open leather coats. On account of his waist-cage, one of these collec-tors looks pregnant with some robot child, its curving spine and ribs and other metal bones wrapped around his bare midriff. The other fellow has a solid box on one foot—after a year, how the inside must stink.

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So NOW WE ’RE heading up a long driveway through shrubbery—in company with teens and twenties mainly, a bass beat somewhere ahead of us. I’m wondering what homeowners in the area think about the noise, whenever there’s club night. Prior to the hoops, when people could get to gigs further afield, I guess no club nights happened here. Priorities have changed as to what annoys us. Tony covertly films a gorgeous black girl

ahead of us wearing pinstripe pants cut into thin thongs exposing her ass and legs. Hand-cage resembling a medieval weapon. Maybe Tony isn't gay. I don't care a toss. I'd rather it was just Svelte and me here this evening, but there are proper ways to do things, as Tony's presence reminds me.

The black girl's blonde friend sports a frilly skirt and a bulging grille of a metal bra, to the back of which is fixed butterfly wings of yellow muslin. I tell a lie—that bra is a breast-cage, which she has dolled up. Quite a crowd is heading for club night.

A big marquee comes into view.

"They're brave, these kids," says Svelte. "I admire them."

"Whistling while Rome burns," says Tony.

"You're excited. Enjoy the view."

Grinning, Svelte says something that sounds like, "S'avem che bea shi fute!"

"What's that?"

"A Romanian toast. It means: here's to a drink and a fuck."

"Look," says Tony, "it's inconvenient for me to get excited—not to mention unprofessional."

Svelte doesn't know about Tony's groin truss. She's so exotic, Svelte is, though doubtless not to herself. Probably she's hetero. Not necessarily, though. Time will tell. Or will it? I really must keep my head clear.

Let's take a look in the vast marquee first, where things are warming up—as in hot bodies and hot lights fanning through aroma-mists. However, the music playing from big speakers right now is like cool liquid, kind of distanced rather than intimate. What's playing at the moment are recordings. On stage a quartet of machines wait, for later on. Digi-keyboard, drum machine, hypersynth, and a whatnot—I've no idea which is which, or what, though Svelte does.

"Nice backward reverb setting off the vocal line," she comments loudly, and I think I understand. "Just don't overdo it! Aw shit, there we go. That'll excite the bats," sneers Svelte.

Now a different remix rivets me. Sighs and cries over a pulsing bass line—kosher kore, the piece I heard in the office:

*Ev-ery-thing you  
Ev-ery-thing you do  
You do, you do, you do, you do...*

Youngsters waggle their arms overhead and shuffle and shimmy, frantic to enjoy. Lip-rings, nose-studs, belly-button trinkets make the impeded seem like huge exotic piercings. The white girl in black bra and panties, boots, and cowboy hat smooches with a black girl in white bra, et cetera. I approve. A huge Hawaiian garland of bright plastic flowers hangs upon another girl's brief blue cocktail dress. A bloke's T-shirt reads KISS MY ARSE, SEXY, although the bum-cage bulking under his oversize jeans makes this unlikely. Why doesn't he wear a kilt? Similarly impeded chaps favor kilts. Older people are in the crowd too, so I don't feel far out of place. We have two or three hours before QE perform live, plenty of time to nose around independently.

I spy a midget, a very little man indeed with a large head, a bit more than knee-high to me. He's wearing a string vest and very brief yellow shorts, showing off his bandy, hairy, muscular legs—no, showing off the absolute absence of any imped! He's immune because of his extreme shortness. In the land of the impeded the diminutive midget is king, and he does show off, struttingly. He must think he's sexy these days; maybe he knows it for a fact.

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A FRECKLY GINGER-HAIRED man of forty-odd, brown leather bomber jacket hung on his shoulders—a cage enclosing his right hand—is nattering fairly urgently to a thin tall guy in baggy shorts and a T-shirt showing a cunt, a cage upon his right foot. Cunt T-shirt's cadaverous face and wild shoulder-length hair fit the website picture I saw of Sean of QE.

I scoop the snoop from my pocket to my ear. Looks like a tiny flesh-tone hearing-aid, if anyone even notices. The directional mic in my pocket is radio-linked.

“... could easily be a real word, exprosonment.”

“Like Bjork thinking ‘homogenic’ was a real word? Until someone told her it was bullshit. But she stuck with it.”

The thin fellow intones, “The way you stick with me, though I’ll never be free... Needs pulling apart. The way you, the way you, stick with me, stick with me...”

“Don’t take the piss, Sean! Is Caz going to show?”

“Dancing’s the candle, she’s the moth.” Just at this moment, a gorgeous blonde teeny-girl wearing green hot-shorts and a gauzy off-the-shoulder top comes by, her left foot caged, the other in a green fetish boot. Sean pivots toward her and jiggles his impeded. “Hi jewel, we’re a pair, you and I. I live in The Studio—want to see inside?”

She eyes him then says, “Foosh off.”

Ginger says appeasingly, “Kids can be Puritans. They just don’t look or act it.”

“So why come to a fucking Kore gig? Are you a Puritan yourself these days, Pete, if you can’t shag Benny’s treasure?”

“I don’t like the word ‘shag’.”

“I need some Heineken Ice. Want to come in The Studio?”

“I’ll hang around here for a bit.”

“Hell, Benny can’t go anywhere.” Benny, the co-owner. “And he’s getting fatter every day. No exercise, and overeating.”

Let me get this straight—Pete has screwed Caz, who is co-owner Benny’s girlfriend or wife or whatever. Pete is hoping to see Caz tonight, so Pete isn’t resident in The Studio—or not anymore? Benny may have found out about Caz and Pete and had him expelled from the community. Pre-sumably Pete can’t be entirely *non grata* with the other co-owner, Trev, otherwise those guys on the gate wouldn’t have let Pete in at all. I already noticed a couple of bouncers in jeans and bright orange T-shirts—security, first aid, whatever. Both have head-cages as impedes. Like visored helmets convenient for head-butting if the need arises. If Pete’s blacklisted, doubtless they’d know about it. I keep Pete in sight as he wanders alone through the huge, ever more crowded marquee.

Benny can’t go anywhere; Benny gets no exercise. Does that mean he’s severely impeded, more so than most people? That might explain

opportu-nity and motive for infidelity by Caz.

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AHA. A TALL, slim dark-haired woman dressed in a long green skirt and lace blouse has arrived—and Pete is heading her way. Maybe she's forty or more, and she has a black patch over her left eye. Assuming that she's Caz, has Benny got angry and punched her in the eye? Presumably not if he's immobilized.

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PETE AND CAZ talk for a good five minutes, while I eavesdrop on them. Pete wants her to come away with him, but she can't. Not won't—how she yearns for that—but she can't. Not yet.

—Caz, can't you abscond with Contessa? And anyway, it's all just bullying bluster. And how could he manage to torture...

I expected Pete to say—a child. But he says:

—a cat?

Contessa must be the name of a cat, Caz's cat. Like a child to her. Benny has threatened Caz's cat, if she misbehaves.

—I don't have a cat basket.

—Hell, I'll buy you one!

—How would I explain it?

—He's all hot air.

—Can I risk that?

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ON THE ONE hand, Benny's threat seems real to Caz, and horrible. Yet from the way Caz talks about Benny, she seems to care for the man and feel sorry for him. She's unwilling to abandon him.

—Pete, I need to show him soon...

Show him what?

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AT LAST I cotton on. As if in compensation for immobilizing Benny, the hoops swapped one of Benny's eyes for one of Caz's. If and when Caz raises her eye-patch, Benny can see what she's see-ing. And vice versa? I've no idea. Caz must need to close her own eye whenever she raises the patch, otherwise there would be a hopeless jumble of double vision, two different scenes eyed simultane-ously.

Benny's eye is Caz's impediment. Yet Benny can't hear or feel or smell, only see—otherwise how could Pete and Caz have succeeded in making love? I imagine Caz's patch coming loose one time as she tossed her head to and fro upon a pillow, her noise of pleasure suddenly changing to a cry of fright.

—You still jerking him off, Caz?

—It seems only fair—how can I refuse?

Does this wound Pete?

—I do love you, Pete. I think about you every night—

is the last thing I hear her say to him.

Reluctantly Pete moves away from her, disappearing into the crowd. Caz dances on her own, not straying from the same spot—for now she shuts her right eye and raises the patch to her brow. Her right eye was green, but her left eye is brown. Hoops can join part of a living cat to a person's arm in direct proximity. Hoops can also connect an eye remotely to a brain. This needs reporting. Investigators will descend upon Benny and Caz.

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I WATCH CAZ as she dances, keeping Benny's eye masked, or stands still with it exposed. She's relaxed, yet wary. Periodically she and Pete coin-cide again for two or three minutes at a time. It's noisy and several times Pete has to ask Caz to repeat herself. Quite often she's looking away as she talks to him.

Most of their chat is about trivialities, or acquaintances. After that first

encounter Pete doesn't implore or beg. No matter how frustrated he is, he mustn't want to spend their precious stolen time whining or cajoling, but companion-ably. Caz seems well able to hide her feelings, but she must love Pete otherwise she wouldn't take risks at all.

I'm fascinated with what seems to be the situation between them, and with the idea of the Eye of Another in one's head.

By itself that threat to torture the cat seems absurd and histrionic—yet at the same time ingenious, I suppose. Benny knows how to press Caz's buttons and scare her. Maybe there are other threats too. Personally I don't think she'll ever run off with Pete, no matter how much she may wish to, at least in her dreams. Pete almost realizes this. Before the coming of the Varroa I read a statistic that only about twenty percent—or was it less?—of wives actually leave their husbands as the result of an affair. I wonder if Pete and Caz manage to meet away from The Studio, and for how long? That spying eye, it's worse than a photophone.

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AFTER A GOOD hour and a half Svelte returns to me. In the interval I've hobnobbed with Tony Cullen a few times. The first thing I ask Svelte is, "Have you been inside The Studio?" I'm remembering Sean's invitation to that blonde girl—my God, I'm having a jealous thought about Svelte.

"Sure," she says.

"How?"

"Got chatted up."

"Did anything happen?"

She grins. "Just led her on a bit. Can't do much surveillance if you're in bed."

Did Svelte go with a *her* by coincidence, or by design?

I tell Svelte about Benny and Pete and Caz.

"Wow, that's heavy surveillance, jealous guy's eye looking out of your own face. Needs a lot of composure to take that in your stride! I got a glimpse of Alan and June. They aren't fused or chained together, though I guess you couldn't perform too well like that. Fancy dancing a bit?"

Me, with my knee cage? Svelte's invitation excites me. Is she playing with me, being innocent-ly friendly, thinking protective coloration, or what? Her eyes sparkle. I wonder if she did a line of coke in The Studio with *her*, on duty too. I mustn't seem nothing-venture, especially not here, so I give dancing a go.

All the while, other bodies are dancing in a slow demented euphoric way to the thump and pulse of tekky. A girl in long boots with a crimson crop-top and golden bangle piercing her belly button has what I can only call a cunt-cage. How on earth does she get her panties on? The penny drops—she painted them onto already de-haired flesh, unat-tainable now except by the touch of a brush. Two young fellows clash hand-cages together, triumph-ing over affliction.

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AT LONG LAST the head-caged bouncers and some helpers lower one wall of the marquee, exposing the event to the night, and the night to the event. And now the four members of QE come to their music machines, facing across the crowd toward the canvas wall-that-was, now a big darkness plus silhouettes of trees.

Sean, I've already seen. Daniel is a big black man with a shaved head, his impeded a huge shoulder-cage adorned with an equally huge red epaulet. The cage cramps his upper arm but he can use his lower arm well enough. June dresses Goth-like, white face, lurid red lips, purple hairpieces entwined with her own jet hair. A dark gown swells at her belly—that'll be her cage. Beak-nosed, coal-eyed Alan has long white hair, presumably bleached, spilling from a head cage, and he wears a white robe with a scarlet pentacle on his chest. He's like a Wicca priest with his head in a birdcage.

Most of the lights go out, apart from spots illu-minating the music machines.

It's Alan who addresses the crowd. He gestures beyond them at the night.

“Oh ye aliens who exprison us! We've decon-structed your humming and now we'll hum a new tune for you big bees! We're gonna pipe you back to oblivion like the Piper of Hamelin did, only he never had a hypersynth. You feeling caged, people? Hum along, come along! Welcome to Exprisonment.”



June lifts a mic, and to begin with starts to hum.

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A BEE-HUM can become a banshee-howl, almost drowning what June is singing with abandoned, sweating passion—Fuckyou Varroa forfucking-withus... cometo theVarroafuck...comecomecome... comefuckcome... fuckingcome fuckinggo...

Double-beats from the drum machine are loudening and lessening like a disordered heart. Heterodyning, is that the word?

Is that the Varroa hum played backward now?

\* \* \* \*

A LIGHT GLOWS silver, a hoop in the night. Sweet Christ, has this noise actually brought a hoop here? The players are gesturing, dancers are all turning to face the darkness and the ring of silver light which poises upright upon the lawn. Tony is pointing his phony impeded, the digicam. "Oh dude," cries Svelte. I have to get a full team here— I shout into my mobile but I can't damn well make out the replies. Svelte bellows into my ear the words, resonant frequency.

The hoop is expanding. We've never known a hoop behave this way before. The base of it is below ground invisibly, so what I'm seeing is a kind of archway rather than a circle.

In place of the nighttime that was beyond, now a shimmer of blues and greens and rose fills the area inside the hoop. It's like the membrane of some huge soap bubble about to be blown. I'm wondering if a sudden wind from beyond might in a moment propel a floating sphere out into our world—when of a sudden the space inside the hoop becomes a view. Yes, an opening into a land-scape—of bushes and trees that are white ostrich plumes and tails of peacocks and adornments of birds of paradise and sulfur crests of cockatoos growing upward from ground that sparkles kaleidoscopically, ground resembling a mosaic of tiny crystals. The source of light is somewhere in a pale blue sky, unseen.

Otherworldly, strange, beautiful—we're seeing into another world. Never before have we seen elsewhere through a hoop.

Already us club-nighters are heading toward that magical scene—a

surge of audience.

“Dude!” cries Svelte, and Tony Cullen knows that he needs to get closer too, and so do I, yam-mering into my mobile at Combi-Intel to come immediately, and so do priestly Alan and big black Daniel elbowing past us. In the forefront of flesh and glad rags of all kinds for a moment I glimpse Pete hustling Caz along with him toward that archway to elsewhere—he’s seizing his chance to kidnap Caz no matter to where, and they’re through, a half-dozen kids capering alongside them, and they aren’t stifling or choking in some toxic alien atmosphere, or at least not yet. They’re amongst the lovely alien vegetation. More and more of the audience follow.

I think the noise from the speakers has gone into a loop. QE were recording their live performance; the recording’s replaying now. The stretched hoop seems to wobble. Before, it was precise.

“Hurry up!” from Svelte. She grabs me strongly from my good side so that I shan’t risk falling over on account of my knee-cage, propelling me with her, for of course I must go through to see. This is like an assault by some motley children’s crusade on some city with a breached wall, as people stream through. As when the Pied Piper reached the mountain that opened up for all the enchanted boys and girls...

“Tony, stay to brief the team that gets here—”

“Bollocks, I’m not missing this. Enough impedes’ll be left behind to tell—”

What I’m about to do may be madness, but I shall be adventuring with Svelte—oh, what am I thinking? It’s my duty to investigate as fully as I can. What will we eat and drink, how will we ever get back again?

Just as we pass through, that midget chap push-es past. Almost immediately he stumbles, sprawling upon the sparkly soil. More like a beach of multi-hued mica, which his impact grooves. He doesn’t roll or scramble up. Air smells faintly of burnt toast and vanilla.

“Wait, Svelte!” Stoop and press the pulse in the midget’s neck. None there. Check his wrist. “He’s dead.”

“Too much excitement.”

“No, why is he dead?”

An almighty pop, and there's no hoop any-more. Nor loudspeaker noise from any marquee, nor oval of nighttime, nor marquee, nor nothing of where we came from. The bright yellow-white sun dazzling high above the feathertrees looks smaller than... well, it's a different sun.

How many people are wandering about, with bugger all in the way of supplies or equipment? Two hundred of us? All impeded, too.

Why did the midget drop dead?

A couple of hundred of us, and no means of get-ting back. I know why we rushed through the archway—after the utter frustration that everyone has felt ever since the hoops arrived, an almost orgasmic release of tension, a sense of exaltation. The prettiness of this—um, paradise?—con-tributed. People desired to cavort.

Orange T-shirt with head-cage kneels by the midget, turns him over, tries some first aid.

“Svelte, the midget didn't have any cage. And he died as soon as he came through.”

“You mean having cages lets us into here? Why? No, he had a heart attack or a stroke.”

“Maybe he had one of those because he didn't have a cage.”

“Like, as a ticket? Or to protect him? Lot of excitement tonight. Small chap, he overdid him-self.”

“Jacko's definitely dead,” announces the head-cage, and he stares at me hard.

“Look,” I say to him, “you're security, right?” When he nods, “We have to organize all these peo-ple.”

“What's it to you?” Behind the visor, blue eyes, chaotic sandy hair—quite hard to comb!

Deep breath. “My name's Sally Adamson. I'm from Combined Intelligence. We were keeping an eye on your musical experiment tonight.”

Tony Cullen is by my side to back me up, as is Svelte.

“I’m Bryce. There are more of you back at The Studio?”

Alas, no, at least not yet. I’m hoping that my yammering into the mobile raised the alarm. Nobody ever could have reasonably expected this result from tonight’s techno caper.

Why, pray, did I stage what amounts to a private surveillance, all on my own say-so? I ought to be for the high jump. Exactly how far have we jumped away from Earth?

“You have a radio with you?” Bryce demands. “Or a phone?”

“Do you seriously expect—?”

“Have you tried?”

He’s right, so I pull out my phone.

“No signal.”

“Dial anyway, see what happens.”

*Dee-du-doo-doo-du-do...* followed by silence.

“Now you know for sure, don’t you?”

“Why did you come through, Bryce?”

“Somebody in charge had to.” Looked at from that point of view, I suppose he’s more in charge than me. “Seeing as they already know me, the kids might pay some attention. You’d best stick to advising, hmm?” He eyes Tony and Svelte. “Got guns?”

No, and no.

He laughs shortly. “All you got is combined intelligence. Pretty disconnected right now.”

People have spread out among the featherbushes, feathertrees. Partly concealed by ostrich plumes, two kids seem to be fucking. Getting to the kore of the problem, eh? That’s unfair—they’re true pioneers, the first human beings to have sex on an alien world. That’s one defiant one for the record book.

Svelte exclaims, “Look, how do we know this place is actual? Why not a virtual reality, and cages admit you into it? That’s why Jacko couldn’t take part, not his mind anyhow. Maybe the Varroa belong to some super-evolved combi-intelligence that hangs out in mind-space.”

“Yeah,” sarcastically from Bryce, “like this thing dumps millions of tons of solid fucking cages onto Earth? And it’s virtual?”

“Okay, just a thought. No birds or insects any-where in sight, you’ll notice. No ecology.” Svelte’s right, at least regarding the area nearby. “You mightn’t expect birds as such, but there oughta be something besides a bunch of fancy feathers.” Svelte really is very acrobatic in her thinking.

\* \* \* \*

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE. COMMUNICATE with the club-nighters, to get ourselves organized. Mustn’t wander off chaotically. Food, drink, explore, communicate. Communicating with home is impossible. Or is it... ? I’m looking at Caz and Pete standing hand in hand, that black patch over her left eye, while Bryce and Svelte rally people...

If Benny can see through her eye back home— and Caz through his?—when they’re apart from each other... How does it happen, what’s the link? Advanced alien science, some sort of instant linked vision-at-a-distance, quantum stuff, a shortcut through spacetime? How distant does distant have to be before it’s too far?

My phone can display four lines of memo or text on its screen the size of my thumb.

\* \* \* \*

“YOU’RE CAZ. I’M Sally, from Combined Intelli-gence—you understand?” Caz does. “And you’re Pete. Caz, I know you and Benny can see what the other sees.”

“How do you know that?”

“I was snooping. That’s my job. We appear to be marooned here, wherever here is. You may be a way to communicate with home...”

\* \* \* \*

PETE DOESN’T WANT her to co-operate. Small won-der. They’ve

escaped together, and almost at once here's me asking her to let Benny see everything, supposing it's possible.

"Realistically," I say, "with no food or water we're probably going to die here, unless something different kills us first."

Pete hugs his Caz, as if he can preserve the two of them by pure wish and willpower. Wishes don't rule the real world.

I'm going to die too. Me and Svelte. I'll think about that later. The important thing is that Caz understands this. I know she heeds duties and obligations even if those frustrate her dreams. Only fair, isn't it? Wasn't that what she said?

"Caz, this is the first ever information we have about anything regarding where our invaders come from. Back home nobody will know any-thing unless..."

She nods miserably. Or bravely. There are different sorts of bravery. Women understand much more about self-sacrifice than men do.

Pete sits down with his back to us. Doesn't want to watch this. Or doesn't want to be noticed by Caz's Benny-eye? If Caz looks round, Pete's ginger hair will be very visible.

\* \* \* \*

WELL, IT WORKS. It works. We're connected. Phone screen and Benny's displaced eye reading it at this end, Caz's eye in Benny's head at the other end perceiving a notepad he writes on. Hallelujah. But... I couldn't believe any man would exploit this situation for blackmail. Benny uses it. Oh he uses it. Benny won't tell anyone else a fucking thing unless Caz promises, promises, swears on the memory of her mother, to return to him. Obviously forget about torturing the cat—seems that wasn't sufficient to hold her. Oh and forget the extreme unlikelihood of her being able to return—unless, I suppose, when Combi-Intel gets its act together, they manage to control a hoop by the same method as CE used. My god, I must grill those two, the priest and the big black guy. Alan and June on their own may be able to give Combi-Intel enough guidance to re-open the hoop. Hey, there's hope, a possibility—why am I so blind and slow? Too much to think about, that's why. The same hope didn't enter into Bryce's head, or Svelte's. Or if so, they didn't say. That's because we aren't desperate yet. Only just got here. Novelty value still prevails.

Caz opens her right eye, and tears jerk from it. Tiny discs of water fly as if she's expelling contact lenses one after another. I've never seen anyone cry quite like that, projectile tears, tears so pent up that they don't trickle but fly for a few seconds at least. Then she shuts her own eye tight.

"I can't see the phone now," she reminds me. "Write: I promise." And I peck at the keys with my fingernail.

Pete tells her fiercely, "You can break any promise extorted by a threat."

"I'm sorry. It's a personal thing. A promise is a promise."

"A shitty vicious threat to keep knowledge from the whole world unless he can hang onto you like a dog in the manger!"

"You can't really blame him. We have so much personal baggage, him and me. What would become of him?"

Is Caz a coward, or is she very brave, able to sacrifice the hope of personal happiness for the sake of many other people who will never even realize?

"Shit." Pete doesn't try to interfere as I hold the phone screen up to Benny's brown eye.

"Varroa—!"

A hum coming closer. Soon we're being inspected.

\* \* \* \*

BEFORE LONG A second Varroa comes. As us club-nighters stare up, many chattering to each other, the mutual hum of the Varroas modulates, seeming to search through a spectrum of sound. Soon I think I'm hearing thrumming echoes of human words, words that evade meaning as if played backward, half-words.

"Fucking hell," says big black Daniel, "they're sampling us. I'll swear it." Indeed he has already sworn.

"Or like they're tuning in," says Svelte.

A comprehensible sentence emerges:

*Why you bring child must die without zzzwzz without without cage?* This is the only time a Var-roa has ever communicated anything. But no child is here...

"It thinks Jacko's a child. The dead body isn't a child!" I shout out at the Varroa. "The dead body is a very short adult, too short to receive a cage!"

*How you open zzzwzz open open hoop?*

Daniel prods one finger upward defiantly at the Varroa. "With our music, that's how! You want to buy a memory stick?"

Unready.

"Yeah, don't have no memory sticks here, do I?"

*Unready.*

I have a sense that the Varroa are lower-level intelligences compared with whatever may have created them. Bred them. Assembled them. I think sheepdogs—times ten as regards capabilities.

Above us, the two Varroa begin to circle. No, that circle is spiraling outward.

Very soon they're racing around, dodging the tall feathertrees, looping around all of us. Their hum is loud, *MUM-UM-MUM-UM*. A curving line of bright light begins to follow each now like con-trails, two lengthening arcs of light, which soon join up. Those Varroa are guiding the huge horizontal hoop encompassing all of us—suddenly intensifying as it flashes toward the ground, which is of rough short moonlit grass, and I do keep my footing while a fair few around me are tumbling because of impedes or disorientation. As the after-image of the ring of light fades, an expanse of flat concrete stretches into the distance where I'm making out large low buildings and silhouettes of big parked planes, passenger jets. And a half-full Moon's in the sky amidst clouds and stars. Already people are struggling up or being helped. We've been dumped unceremoniously at a huge airport near an unlit runway, though further off are a fair number of lights. We conserve power nowadays where possible. Someone's whimpering about their ankle, twisted or broken.



“It’s Heathrow!” shrills a girl.

Airports are anonymous, yet that could easily be Western Avenue over there on the perimeter, where any hotels remaining open won’t have many guests these days. This may well be London’s Heathrow, nowhere near so busy as used to be.

Of a sudden the runway lights come on—on account of us arriving? Shall we pretend to be a planeload of passengers, newly descended from Sirius or some other star? Please proceed to pass-port control—what, no baggage? People begin heading toward the illuminated runway but Bryce bellows, “Stay here, everyone! The runway’s dan-gerous. A plane’ll be landing.”

“There’s no plane—”

“Idiot, they don’t switch the lights on at the very last moment. Plane’ll be ten minutes’ away.” Of course he’s right.

Svelte’s shining a slim torch, here, there.

“Lost something?” Tony asks her.

“Looking for feathers.”

I see none in the beam from Svelte’s torch. The Varroa or the big hoop must have retained any alien vegetation in the process of returning us—to a big empty flat space where we wouldn’t collide with anything.

“Everybody stay right here,” I call out. “I’ll have us collected, bussed back to The Studio.”

Now there’s a signal for my phone. *Dee-du-doo-doo-du-do... ring ring.*

\* \* \* \*

“THAT PLACE WAS artificial,” Svelte insists to me as our crowded coach, the foremost of three, finally nears Lambeth. Combi-Intel persons on each coach are busy doing preliminary interviews of the club-nighters. There’ll be a lot more interrogation by and by, especially of Daniel and Sean and Alan and June, although I suspect that neither QE nor anyone else will be able to control a hoop again by that same method. For we are unready.

“Made. Grown. The way you grow pretty crystals in a jar of some liquid. Maybe the feathers were all like sensors on the outside of some machine the size of a world. Or not as big—gravity could have been artificial. Maybe the place was a pleasure park for aliens, or like a sculpture garden. But artificial, yes.”

“So what does that imply?”

“I don’t know.” Svelte stares out of the window at houses, streets.

\* \* \* \*

WHAT DOES UNREADY mean? Can the impeds be some sort of benevolent teaching aid? A focus for mental growth? A way of being able to attain the stars and join in, if only we can discover how? Something we might learn to use after ten years or after fifty years? The Varroa didn’t mean that it wasn’t in the market for a memory stick.

“We’ll talk more later about this artificial idea of yours, eh, Svelte?” Oh, I am tempted by her, and I still don’t know if it’s possible. If only. Just let me not be too impulsive, as I surely was, going to club-night with her, only the two of us and Tony Cullen. In retrospect I was rather foolish. I don’t like to be foolish.

One person is unaccounted for, the dead Jacko. Is that because his body was lying beyond the ring of light when it descended? Or because a dead body is more akin to a featherbush than to a living person?

\* \* \* \*

Now THAT WE ’VE debussed, Pete is talking urgent-ly to Caz, and I’m a snooper again.

“...meaningless, because Benny helped bugger all! He made a phone call; so what? What else does the co-owner of a place do, that loses a couple of hundred people? Pay no attention? It was the Varroa brought us back, no thanks to him!”

“Even so,” she says, so sad-sounding, “I did promise.” Caz tosses her hair, perhaps to hide tears or dispel them, and wanders toward The Studio.

We all have our cages. But will we ever learn from them?

\* \* \* \*