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Ubik

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Extract

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1

Friends, this is clean-up time and we're discounting all our silent, electric Ubiks by this much money. Yes, we're throwing away the bluebook. And remember: every Ubik on our lot has been used only as directed.

At three-thirty A.M. on the night of 5 June 1992, the top telepath in the Sol System fell off the map in the offices of Runciter Associates in New York City. That started vidphones ringing. The Runciter organization had lost track of too many of Hollis' Psis during the last two months; this added disappearance wouldn't do.

'Mr Runciter? Sorry to bother you.' The technician in charge of the night shift at the map room coughed nervously as the massive, sloppy head of Glen Runciter swam up to fill the vidscreen. 'We got this news from one of our inertials. Let me look.' He fiddled with a disarranged stack of tapes from the recorder which monitored incoming messages. 'Our Miss Dorn reported it; as you may recall, she had followed him to Green River, Utah, where—'

Sleepily, Runciter grated, 'Who? I can't keep in mind at all times which inertials are following what teep or precog.' With his hand he smoothed down his ruffled gray mass of wirelike hair. 'Skip the rest and tell me which of Hollis' people is missing now.'

'S. Dole Melipone,' the technician said.

'What? Melipone's gone? You kid me.'

'I not kid you,' the technician assured him. 'Edie Dorn and two other inertials followed him to a motel named the Bonds of

Erotic Polymorphic Experience, a sixty-unit subsurface structure catering to businessmen and their hookers who don't want to be entertained. Edie and her colleagues didn't think he was active, but just to be on the safe side we had one of our own telepaths, Mr G. G. Ashwood, go in and read him. Ashwood found a scramble pattern surrounding Melipone's mind, so he couldn't do anything; he therefore went back to Topeka, Kansas, where he's currently scouting a new possibility.'

Runciter, more awake now, had lit a cigarette; chin in hand, he sat propped up somberly, smoke drifting across the scanner of his end of the bichannel circuit. 'You're sure the teep was Melipone? Nobody seems to know what he looks like; he must use a different physiognomic template every month. What about his field?'

'We asked Joe Chip to go in there and run tests on the magnitude and minitude of the field being generated there at the Bonds of Erotic Polymorphic Experience Motel. Chip says it registered, at its height, 68.2 blr units of telepathic aura, which only Melipone, among all the known telepaths, can produce.' The technician finished, 'So that's where we stuck Melipone's ident-flag on the map. And now he – it – is gone.'

'Did you look on the floor? Behind the map?'

'It's gone electronically. The man it represents is no longer on Earth or, as far as we can make out, on a colony world either.'

Runciter said, 'I'll consult my dead wife.'

'It's the middle of the night. The moratoriums are closed now.'

'Not in Switzerland,' Runciter said, with a grimacing smile, as if some repellent midnight fluid had crept up into his aged throat. 'Goodeve.' Runciter hung up.

As owner of the Beloved Brethren Moratorium, Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang, of course, perpetually came to work before his employees. At this moment, with the chilly, echoing building just beginning to stir, a worried-looking clerical individual with nearly opaque glasses and wearing a tabby-fur

blazer and pointed yellow shoes waited at the reception counter, a claim-check stub in his hand. Obviously, he had shown up to holiday-greet a relative. Resurrection Day – the holiday on which the half-lifers were publicly honored – lay just around the corner; the rush would soon be beginning.

'Yes, sir,' Herbert said to him with an affable smile. 'I'll take your stub personally.'

'It's an elderly lady,' the customer said. 'About eighty, very small and wizened. My grandmother.'

'Twill only be a moment.' Herbert made his way back to the cold-pac bins to search out number 3054039-B.

When he located the correct party he scrutinized the lading report attached. It gave only fifteen days of half-life remaining. Not very much, he reflected; automatically he pressed a portable protophason amplifier into the transparent plastic hull of the casket, tuned it, listened at the proper frequency for indication of cephalic activity.

Faintly from the speaker a voice said, '. . . and then Tillie sprained her ankle and we never thought it'd heal; she was so foolish about it, wanting to start walking immediately . . .'

Satisfied, he unplugged the amplifier and located a union man to perform the actual task of carting 3054039-B to the consultation lounge, where the customer would be put in touch with the old lady.

'You checked her out, did you?' the customer asked as he paid the poscreds due.

'Personally,' Herbert answered. 'Functioning perfectly.' He flicked a series of switches, then stepped back. 'Happy Resurrection Day, sir.'

'Thank you.' The customer seated himself facing the casket, which steamed in its envelope of cold-pac; he pressed an earphone against the side of his head and spoke firmly into the microphone. 'Flora, dear, can you hear me? I think I can hear you already. Flora?'

When I pass, Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang said to

himself, I think I'll will my heirs to revive me one day a century. That way I can observe the fate of all mankind. But that meant a rather high maintenance cost to the heirs – and he knew what that meant. Sooner or later they would rebel, have his body taken out of cold-pac and – God forbid – buried.

'Burial is barbaric,' Herbert muttered aloud. 'Remnant of the primitive origins of our culture.'

'Yes, sir,' his secretary agreed, at her typewriter.

In the consultation lounge several customers now communed with their half-lifer relations, in rapt quiet, distributed at intervals each with his separate casket. It was a tranquil sight, these faithfuls, coming as they did so regularly to pay homage. They brought messages, news of what took place in the outside world; they cheered the gloomy half-lifers in these intervals of cerebral activity. And – they paid Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang. It was a profitable business, operating a moratorium.

'My dad seems a little frail,' a young man said, catching Herbert's attention. 'I wonder if you could take a moment of your time to check him over. I'd really appreciate it.'

'Certainly,' Herbert said, accompanying the customer across the lounge to his deceased relative. The lading for this one showed only a few days remaining; that explained the vitiated quality of cerebration. But still . . . he turned up the gain of the protophason amplifier, and the voice from the half-lifer became a trifle stronger in the earphone. He's almost at an end, Herbert thought. It seemed obvious to him that the son did not want to see the lading, did not actually care to know that contact with his dad was diminishing, finally. So Herbert said nothing; he merely walked off, leaving the son to commune. Why tell him that this was probably the last time he would come here? He would find out soon enough in any case.

A truck had now appeared at the loading platform at the rear of the moratorium; two men hopped down from it, wearing familiar pale-blue uniforms. Atlas Interplan Van and Storage, Herbert perceived. Delivering another half-lifer who had just

now passed, or here to pick up one which had expired. Leisurely, he started in that direction, to supervise; at that moment, however, his secretary called to him. 'Herr Schoenheit von Vogelsang; sorry to break into your meditation, but a customer wishes you to assist in revving up his relative.' Her voice took on special coloration as she said, 'The customer is Mr Glen Runciter, all the way here from the North American Confederation.'

A tall, elderly man, with large hands and a quick, sprightly stride, came toward him. He wore a varicolored Dacron wash-and-wear suit, knit cummerbund and dipdyed cheesecloth cravat. His head, massive like a tomcat's, thrust forward as he peered through slightly protruding, round and warm and highly alert eyes. Runciter kept, on his face, a professional expression of greeting, a fast attentiveness which fixed on Herbert, then almost at once strayed past him, as if Runciter had already fastened onto future matters. 'How is Ella?' Runciter boomed, sounding as if he possessed a voice electronically augmented. 'Ready to be cranked up for a talk? She's only twenty; she ought to be in better shape than you or me.' He chuckled, but it had an abstract quality; he always smiled and he always chuckled, his voice always boomed, but inside he did not notice anyone, did not care; it was his body which smiled, nodded and shook hands. Nothing touched his mind, which remained remote; aloof, but amiable, he propelled Herbert along with him, sweeping his way in great strides back into the chilled bins where the half-lifers, including his wife, lay.

'You have not been here for some time, Mr Runciter,' Herbert pointed out; he could not recall the data on Mrs Runciter's lading sheet, how much half-life she retained.

Runciter, his wide, flat hand pressing against Herbert's back to urge him along, said, 'This is a moment of importance, von Vogelsang. We, my associates and myself, are in a line of business that surpasses all rational understanding. I'm not at liberty to make disclosures at this time, but we consider matters at present to be ominous but not however hopeless. Despair is not

indicated – not by any means. Where's Ella?' He halted, glanced rapidly about.

'I'll bring her from the bin to the consultation lounge for you,' Herbert said; customers should not be here in the bins. 'Do you have your numbered claim-check, Mr Runciter?'

'God, no,' Runciter said. 'I lost it months ago. But you know who my wife is; you can find her. Ella Runciter, about twenty. Brown hair and eyes.' He looked around him impatiently. 'Where did you put the lounge? It used to be located where I could find it.'

'Show Mr Runciter to the consultation lounge,' Herbert said to one of his employees, who had come meandering by, curious to see what the world-renowned owner of an anti-psi organization looked like.

Peering into the lounge, Runciter said with aversion, 'It's full. I can't talk to Ella in there.' He strode after Herbert, who had made for the moratorium's files. 'Mr von Vogelsang,' he said, overtaking him and once more dropping his big paw onto the man's shoulder; Herbert felt the weight of the hand, its persuading vigor. 'Isn't there a more private sanctum sanctorum for confidential communications? What I have to discuss with Ella my wife is not a matter which we at Runciter Associates are ready at this time to reveal to the world.'

Caught up in the urgency of Runciter's voice and presence, Herbert found himself readily mumbling, 'I can make Mrs Runciter available to you in one of our offices, sir.' He wondered what had happened, what pressure had forced Runciter out of his bailiwick to make this belated pilgrimage to the Beloved Brethren Moratorium to crank up – as Runciter crudely phrased it – his half-lifer wife. A business crisis of some sort, he theorized. Ads over TV and in the homeopapes by the various anti-psi prudence establishments had shrilly squawked their harangues of late. Defend your privacy, the ads yammered on the hour, from all media. Is a stranger tuning in on you? Are you *really* alone? That for the telepaths . . . and then the queasy worry

about precogs. Are your actions being predicted by someone you never met? Someone you would not want to meet or invite into your home? Terminate anxiety; contacting your nearest prudence organization will first tell you if in fact you are the victim of unauthorized intrusions, and then, on your instructions, nullify these intrusions – at moderate cost to you.

'Prudence organizations.' He liked the term; it had dignity and it was accurate. He knew this from personal experience; two years ago a telepath had infiltrated his moratorium staff, for reasons which he had never discovered. To monitor confidences between half-lifers and their visitors, probably; perhaps those of one specific half-lifer – anyhow, a scout from one of the anti-psi organizations had picked up the telepathic field, and he had been notified. Upon his signing of a work contract an anti-telepath had been dispatched, had installed himself on the moratorium premises. The telepath had not been located but it had been nullified, exactly as the TV ads promised. And so, eventually, the defeated telepath had gone away. The moratorium was now psi-free, and, to be sure it stayed so, the anti-psi prudence organization surveyed his establishment routinely once a month.

'Thanks very much, Mr Vogelsang,' Runciter said, following Herbert through an outer office in which clerks worked to an empty inner room that smelled of drab and unnecessary micro-documents.

Of course, Herbert thought musingly to himself, I took their word for it that a telepath got in here; they showed me a graph they had obtained, citing it as proof. Maybe they faked it, made up the graph in their own labs. And I took their word for it that the telepath left; he came, he left – and I paid two thousand poscreds. Could the prudence organizations be, in fact, rackets? Claiming a need for their services when sometimes no need actually exists?

Pondering this he set off in the direction of the files once more. This time Runciter did not follow him; instead, he thrashed about noisily, making his big frame comfortable in

terms of a meager chair. Runciter sighed, and it seemed to Herbert, suddenly, that the massively built old man was tired, despite his customary show of energy.

I guess when you get up into that bracket, Herbert decided, you have to act in a certain way; you have to appear more than a human with merely ordinary failings. Probably Runciter's body contained a dozen artiforgs, artificial organs grafted into place in his physiological apparatus as the genuine, original ones failed. Medical science, he conjectured, supplies the material groundwork, and out of the authority of his mind Runciter supplies the remainder. I wonder how old he is, he wondered. Impossible any more to tell by looks, especially after ninety.

'Miss Beason,' he instructed his secretary, 'have Mrs Ella Runciter located and bring me the ident number. She's to be taken to office 2-A.' He seated himself across from her, busied himself with a pinch or two of Fribourg & Treyer *Princes* snuff as Miss Beason began the relatively simple job of tracking down Glen Runciter's wife.

2

The best way to ask for beer is to sing out Ubik. Made from select hops, choice water, slow-aged for perfect flavor, Ubik is the nation's number-one choice in beer. Made only in Cleveland.

Upright in her transparent casket, encased in an effluvium of icy mist, Ella Runciter lay with her eyes shut, her hands lifted permanently toward her impassive face. It had been three years since he had seen Ella, and of course she had not changed. She never would, now, at least not in the outward physical way. But with each resuscitation into active half-life, into a return of cerebral activity, however short, Ella died somewhat. The remaining time left to her pulse-phased out and ebbed.

Knowledge of this underwrote his failure to rev her up more often. He rationalized this way: that it doomed her, that to activate her constituted a sin against her. As to her own stated wishes, before her death and in early half-life encounters – this had become handily nebulous in his mind. Anyway, he would know better, being four times as old as she. What had she wished? To continue to function with him as co-owner of Runciter Associates; something vague on that order. Well, he had granted this wish. Now, for example. And six or seven times in the past. He did consult her at each crisis of the organization. He was doing so at this moment.

Damn this earphone arrangement, he grumbled as he fitted the plastic disk against the side of his head. And this microphone; all impediments to *natural* communication. He felt impatient and uncomfortable as he shifted about on the inadequate chair which Vogelsang or whatever his name was had provided him;

he watched her rev back into sentience and wished she would hurry. And then in panic he thought, Maybe she isn't going to make it; maybe she's worn out and they didn't tell me. Or they didn't know. Maybe, he thought, I ought to get that Vogelsang creature in here to explain. Maybe something terrible is wrong.

Ella, pretty and light-skinned; her eyes, in the days when they had been open, had been bright and luminous blue. That would not again occur; he could talk to her and hear her answer; he could communicate with her . . . but he would never again see her with her eyes opened; nor would her mouth move. She would not smile at his arrival. When he departed she would not cry. Is this worth it? he asked himself. Is this better than the old way, the direct road from full-life to the grave? I still do have her with me, in a sense, he decided. The alternative is nothing.

In the earphone words, slow and uncertain, formed: circular thoughts of no importance, fragments of the mysterious dream which she now dwelt in. How did it feel, he wondered, to be in half-life? He could never fathom it from what Ella told him; the basis of it, the experience of it, couldn't really be transmitted. Gravity, she had told him, once; it begins not to affect you and you float, more and more. When half-life is over, she had said, I think you float out of the System, out into the stars. But she did not know either; she only wondered and conjectured. She did not, however, seem afraid. Or unhappy. He felt glad of that.

'Hi, Ella,' he said clumsily into the microphone.

'Oh,' her answer came, in his ear; she seemed startled. And yet of course her face remained stable. Nothing showed; he looked away. 'Hello, Glen,' she said, with a sort of childish wonder, surprised, taken aback, to find him here. 'What—' She hesitated. 'How much time has passed?'

'Couple years,' he said.

'Tell me what's going on.'

'Aw, Christ,' he said, 'everything's going to pieces, the whole organization. That's why I'm here; you wanted to be brought into major policy-planning decisions, and God knows we need

that now, a new policy, or anyhow a revamping of our scout structure.'

'I was dreaming,' Ella said. 'I saw a smoky red light, a horrible light. And yet I kept moving toward it. I couldn't stop.'

'Yeah,' Runciter said, nodding. 'The *Bardo Thödol*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, tells about that. You remember reading that; the doctors made you read it when you were—' He hesitated. 'Dying,' he said then.

'The smoky red light is bad, isn't it?' Ella said.

'Yeah, you want to avoid it.' He cleared his throat. 'Listen, Ella, we've got problems. You feel up to hearing about it? I mean, I don't want to overtax you or anything; just say if you're too tired or if there's something else you want to hear about or discuss.'

'It's so weird. I think I've been dreaming all this time, since you last talked to me. Is it really two years? Do you know, Glen, what I think? I think that other people who are around me – we seem to be progressively growing together. A lot of my dreams aren't about me at all. Sometimes I'm a man and sometimes a little boy; sometimes I'm an old fat woman with varicose veins . . . and I'm in places I've never seen, doing things that make no sense.'

'Well, like they say, you're heading for a new womb to be born out of. And that smoky red light – that's a bad womb; you don't want to go that way. That's a humiliating, low sort of womb. You're probably anticipating your next life, or whatever it is.' He felt foolish, talking like this; normally he had no theological convictions. But the half-life experience was real and it had made theologians out of all of them. 'Hey,' he said, changing the subject. 'Let me tell you what's happened, what made me come here and bother you. S. Dole Melipone has dropped out of sight.'

A moment of silence, and then Ella laughed. 'Who or what is an S. Dole Melipone? There can't be any such thing.' The laugh, the unique and familiar warmth of it, made his spine tremble; he

remembered that about her, even after so many years. He had not heard Ella's laugh in over a decade.

'Maybe you've forgotten,' he said.

Ella said, 'I haven't forgotten; I wouldn't forget an S. Dole Melipone. Is it like a hobbit?'

'It's Raymond Hollis' top telepath. We've had at least one inertial sticking close to him ever since G. G. Ashwood first scouted him, a year and a half ago. We *never* lose Melipone; we can't afford to. Melipone can when necessary generate twice the psi field of any other Hollis employee. And Melipone is only one of a whole string of Hollis people who've disappeared – anyhow, disappeared as far as we're concerned. As far as all prudence organizations in the Society can make out. So I thought, Hell, I'll go ask Ella what's up and what we should do. Like you specified in your will – remember?'

'I remember.' But she sounded remote. 'Step up your ads on TV. Warn people. Tell them . . .' Her voice trailed off into silence then.

'This bores you,' Runciter said gloomily.

'No. I—' She hesitated and he felt her once more drift away. 'Are they all telepaths?' she asked after an interval.

'Telepaths and precogs mostly. They're nowhere on Earth; I know that. We've got a dozen inactive inertials with nothing to do because the Psis they've been nullifying aren't around, and what worries me even more, a lot more, is that requests for anti-psis have dropped – which you would expect, given the fact that so many Psis are missing. But I know they're on one single project; I mean, I believe. Anyhow I'm sure of it; somebody's hired the bunch of them, but only Hollis knows who it is or where it is. Or what it's all about.' He lapsed into brooding silence then. How would Ella be able to help him figure it out? he asked himself. Stuck here in this casket, frozen out of the world – she knew only what he told her. Yet, he had always relied on her sagacity, that particular female form of it, a wisdom not based on knowledge or experience but on something innate.

He had not, during the period she had lived, been able to fathom it; he certainly could not do so now that she lay in chilled immobility. Other women he had known since her death – there had been several – had a little of it, trace amounts perhaps. Intimations of a greater potentiality which, in them, never emerged as it had in Ella.

'Tell me,' Ella said, 'what this Melipone person is like.'

'A screwball.'

'Working for money? Or out of conviction? I always feel wary about that, when they have that psi mystique, that sense of purpose and cosmic identity. Like that awful Sarapis had; remember him?'

'Sarapis isn't around any more. Hollis allegedly bumped him off because he connived to set up his own outfit in competition with Hollis. One of his precogs tipped Hollis off.' He added, 'Melipone is much tougher on us than Sarapis was. When he's hot it takes three inertials to balance his field, and there's no profit in that; we collect – or *did* collect – the same fee we get with one inertial. Because the Society has a rate schedule now which we're bound by.' He liked the Society less each year; it had become a chronic obsession with him, its uselessness, its cost. Its vainglory. 'As near as we can tell, Melipone is a money-Psi. Does that make you feel better? Is that less bad?' He waited, but heard no response from her. 'Ella,' he said. Silence. Nervously he said, 'Hey, hello there, Ella; can you hear me? Is something wrong?' Oh, God, he thought. She's gone.

A pause, and then thoughts materialized in his right ear. 'My name is Jory.' Not Ella's thoughts; a different *élan*, more vital and yet clumsier. Without her deft subtlety.

'Get off the line,' Runciter said in panic. 'I was talking to my wife Ella; where'd you come from?'

'I am Jory,' the thoughts came, 'and no one talks to me. I'd like to visit with you awhile, mister, if that's okay with you. What's your name?'

Stammering, Runciter said, 'I want my wife, Mrs Ella

Runciter; I paid to talk to her, and that's who I want to talk to, not you.'

'I know Mrs Runciter,' the thoughts clanged in his ear, much stronger now. 'She talks to me, but it isn't the same as somebody like you talking to me, somebody in the world. Mrs Runciter is here where we are; it doesn't count because she doesn't know any more than we do. What year is it, mister? Did they send that big ship to Proxima? I'm very interested in that; maybe you can tell me. And if you want, I can tell Mrs Runciter later on. Okay?'

Runciter popped the plug from his ear, hurriedly set down the earphone and the rest of the gadgetry; he left the stale, dust-saturated office and roamed about among the chilling caskets, row after row, all of them neatly arranged by number. Moratorium employees swam up before him and then vanished as he churned on, searching for the owner.

'Is something the matter, Mr Runciter?' the von Vogelsang person said, observing him as he floundered about. 'Can I assist you?'

'I've got some *thing* coming in over the wire,' Runciter panted, halting. 'Instead of Ella. Damn you guys and your shoddy business practices; this shouldn't happen, and what does it mean?' He followed after the moratorium owner, who had already started in the direction of office 2-A. 'If I ran my business this way—'

'Did the individual identify himself?'

'Yeah, he called himself Jory.'

Frowning with obvious worry, von Vogelsang said, 'That would be Jory Miller. I believe he's located next to your wife. In the bin.'

'But I can see it's Ella!'

'After prolonged proximity,' von Vogelsang explained, 'there is occasionally a mutual osmosis, a suffusion between the mentalities of half-lifers. Jory Miller's cephalic activity is particularly good; your wife's is not. That makes for an unfortunately one-way passage of protophasons.'

'Can you correct it?' Runciter asked hoarsely; he found himself still spent, still panting and shaking. 'Get that thing out of my wife's mind and get her back – that's your job!'

Von Vogelsang said, in a stilted voice, 'If this condition persists your money will be returned to you.'

'Who cares about the money? Snirt the money.' They had reached office 2-A now; Runciter unsteadily reseated himself, his heart laboring so that he could hardly speak. 'If you don't get this Jory person off the line,' he half gasped, half snarled, 'I'll sue you; I'll close down this place!'

Facing the casket, von Vogelsang pressed the audio outlet into his ear and spoke briskly into the microphone. 'Phase out, Jory; that's a good boy.' Glancing at Runciter he said, 'Jory passed at fifteen; that's why he has so much vitality. Actually, this has happened before; Jory has shown up several times where he shouldn't be.' Once more into the microphone he said, 'This is very unfair of you, Jory; Mr Runciter has come a long way to talk to his wife. Don't dim her signal, Jory; that's not nice.' A pause as he listened to the earphone. 'I know her signal is weak.' Again he listened, solemn and froglike, then removed the earphone and rose to his feet.

'What'd he say?' Runciter demanded. 'Will he get out of there and let me talk to Ella?'

Von Vogelsang said, 'There's nothing Jory can do. Think of two AM radio transmitters, one close by but limited to only five-hundred watts of operating power. Then another, far off, but on the same or nearly the same frequency, and utilizing five-thousand watts. When night comes—'

'And night,' Runciter said, '*has* come.' At least for Ella. And maybe himself as well, if Hollis' missing teeps, para-kineticists, precogs, resurrectors and animators couldn't be found. He had not only lost Ella; he had also lost her advice, Jory having supplanted her before she could give it.

'When we return her to the bin,' von Vogelsang was blabbing, 'we won't install her near Jory again. In fact, if you're agreeable

as to paying the somewhat larger monthly fee, we can place her in a high-grade isolated chamber with walls coated and reinforced with Teflon-26 so as to inhibit any hetero-psychic infusion – from Jory or anybody else.'

'Isn't it too late?' Runciter said, surfacing momentarily from the depression into which this happening had dropped him.

'She may return. Once Jory phases out. Plus anyone else who may have gotten into her because of her weakened state. She's accessible to almost anyone.' Von Vogelsang chewed his lip, palpably pondering. 'She may not like being isolated, Mr Runciter. We keep the containers – the caskets, as they're called by the lay public – close together for a reason. Wandering through one another's mind gives those in half-life the only—'

'Put her in solitary right now,' Runciter broke in. 'Better she be isolated than not exist at all.'

'She exists,' von Vogelsang corrected. 'She merely can't contact you. There's a difference.'

Runciter said, 'A metaphysical difference which means nothing to me.'

'I will put her in isolation,' von Vogelsang said, 'but I think you're right; it's too late. Jory has permeated her permanently, to some extent at least. I'm sorry.'

Runciter said harshly, 'So am I.'