

# LES FLEURS DU MAL

Brian Stableford

Prologue: 14 April, 2550

Oscar stood before the full-length mirror, carefully inspecting every detail of his face. He caressed the flawless flesh with sensitive fingertips, rejoicing in its gloss. "Ivory and rose-leaves," he murmured.

Oscar always addressed his own reflection in the most admiring terms while it remained full of youth. When it grew old, as it had three times before, it lost its capacity to inspire admiration, and became a mocking reminder of the hazards that he and all men of his era still faced: decay, senescence, decomposition.

His revitalized hair was a glossy chestnut brown. To describe his complexion in terms of ivory and rose-leaves was a trifle hyperbolic, but the skin was pale and even. Authentically young men never had skin as perfect as that, because they could not help accumulating petty flaws while growing to maturity; only the rejuvenated could attain perfection, thanks to the artistry of their cosmetic engineers.

It was a nice paradox, Oscar thought, that only those who had been old could look *truly* young. He had flown in the face of professional advice by attempting a third

rejuvenation so soon, at the age of 133. Many older men than he had not yet undergone their second rejuvenation, refusing to risk deep somatic engineering while their bodies had not quite descended to the depths of decrepitude. Oscar was far less brave than they; his fear of personal dilapidation was pathological.

"It is only shallow people," he informed his reflection, confident in the knowledge that he had an appreciative audience, "who do not judge by appearances." He bathed in the luxury of his own narcissism, admiring his grey eyes, his soft lips, his pearly white teeth.

He reached out to pluck a green carnation from the wall beside the mirror. He twirled it between his delicate fingers, admiring it with as much satisfaction as he admired his own image. The flower was his own creation. It was a joke, of course, but a serious joke. The games which Oscar played in consequence of his name — which had been given to him in all innocence by parents whose knowledge of the earlier Oscar Wilde was limited to a vague awareness that he had been a writer of note — were no mere matter of public relations. His identification with the ideas and ideals of his *alter ego* had long ago become a kind of fetish. He was not afraid to acknowledge that fact, nor to take pride in it. Life, if it were to be lived to the full in modern conditions, required a definite style and aesthetic shape: a constant flow of delicate ironies, tensions, and innovations. He placed the flower in the buttonhole of his neatly tailored

suit. Furnishing hotel interiors was vulgar hackwork unbecoming a real artist, but a real artist had to make a living, and the commonplaceness of such commissions was offset by such flourishes of unorthodoxy as having it written into every contract that one suite of rooms should be fitted with green carnations instead of the more fashionable roses and amaranths. His clients did not mind his making such demands; they were, after all, paying for his fashionability as well as his technical dexterity, and he could not have been nearly so fashionable were it not for his extravagantly extrovert eccentricity.

He turned one way and then the other, shrugging his shoulders to make sure that his jacket hung perfectly upon his remodeled body.

Oscar did not doubt for a moment, as his greedy eyes devoured the glory of his reflection, that he would be equal to the challenge of his third youth. He was no crass businessman, apt to fall back into the same old routines at the first opportunity, wearing a new face as if it were merely a mask laid over the old. Nor was he the kind of man who would go to the opposite extreme, reverting to the habits and follies of first youthfulness, playing the sportsman or the rake. He was an *artist*. Artists had always been the pioneers who led mankind into the psychological unknown, and the current technology of rejuvenation was, after all, little more than a century old. No one knew for sure how many times a man might be successfully restored to youth, although it was tragically obvious that many failed at the second or third attempt.

Oscar was firmly resolved that if the only thing required to secure eternal life was the correct attitude of mind, then he would be the first man to live forever.

He closed his eyes for a moment while he savored the pleasures of anticipation, but his delicious reverie was shattered by the comcon bell. He sighed, and crossed the room to the nearest telescreen, pausing only to make sure that his cravat was in order before exposing himself to the unit's camera-eye. His precautions were unnecessary; no face appeared on the screen. There was only a teletext message, cold and impersonal. It was a request that he should call on a man he knew only slightly, and did not like at all. It seemed an unromantic and unpromising beginning to the new phase of his life. He reached out to send a message refusing the invitation, but paused before his fingers could descend upon the keys. The fax light was blinking. He pressed the RECEIVE button. He expected a copy of the message displayed on the screen, but what emerged from the humming printer was a seat reservation for the midnight maglev to San Francisco. Oscar had no intention of going to San Francisco; no such thought had crossed his mind. He could not imagine why anyone, least of all Gabriel King, should send him such a gift, with or without an explanation.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he murmured.

He decided to obey the summons after all. He had never been able to resist temptation, and there was nothing in the world quite as tempting as a mystery.

While she waited for the forensic experts to conclude their examination of Gabriel King's apartment, Charlotte Holmes tried to collect her thoughts. This was by far the biggest case of her fledgling career. Routine police work was incredibly dull, at least for site-investigation officers, and there had been nothing in her training or experience to prepare her for anything half as bizarre as *this*. Murder was nowadays the rarest of crimes, and such murders as *did* happen usually occurred when rage or spite smashed through the barriers erected by years of biofeedback training. Premeditated murders had fallen out of fashion as soon as it became impossible for the perpetrators to avoid apprehension.

She went to the window at the end of the corridor and looked out over the city. She was on the thirty-ninth floor, and there was quite a view. Central Park looked much as it must have looked in the days before the Devastation, but the rotting skyline was a product of the moment, whose like would probably never be seen again. Charlotte assumed that Gabriel King must have taken up residence in New York so that he might bid for a lion's share of the work involved in the deconstruction of the city. He had always been bigger in demolition than in construction, because he controlled a number of key patents in decay biotechnology. The Decivilization

Movement had been a great boon to his business, although its prophets detested Gabriel King as much as they detested all old-style entrepreneurs, especially wealthy multiple rejuvenates. King could easily have made enemies among the people whose crusade he was furthering, and among the business rivals who had competed with him for the contracts—but who among them could have thought up the murder weapon she had just been studying through a camera-eye?

Her waistphone buzzed, and she took the handscreen from its holster. No image appeared. Hal Watson rarely allowed his face to be seen; he was a dealer in data, and preferred to remain invisible within the webs of information that he spun. "Two names," he said. As he spoke, the names appeared on the screen in capital letters: WALTER CZASTKA; OSCAR WILDE. "They're the top people involved in the engineering of flowering plants," the voice continued. "We'll need one of them as a consultant, to double-check the forensic investigation. Czastka's in Micronesia, on an island he's leased in order to build an artificial ecosystem. Wilde's here in New York, but he's just gone through his third rejuvenation and may be incommunicado. Try Czastka first."

"I'll call him," said Charlotte. "What about the girl?"

"Nothing yet. Camscan's under way. Might be able to pick her up somewhere, figure out where she came from or where she went. Has the team come out of the apartment yet?"

"No," said Charlotte, glumly. "I'll stay until they do."

"Don't worry," Hal said. "It'll open up once we have the forensics. With luck, we might crack the case before the story leaks out."

Charlotte sighed, and began punching the buttons on the handset. She tried Czastka first, as instructed. The fact that he was on the other side of the world wasn't of any real consequence, because he'd have to use a camera to inspect the murder-weapon anyhow, and probably wouldn't be able to do much more until the lab had turned up a geneprint. The image which came onto the screen was a grade A sim.

"Charlotte Holmes," she said. "UN Police. Sending authority." The privacy-breaking codes cut no ice. The sim told her that Czastka was temporarily unreachable. That probably meant that he was messing about somewhere on his island, without a beeper. It wasn't worth the hassle of getting Czastka's house-system to send out a summoner while there was an obvious alternative.

This time, she got a low-grade AI receptionist, which informed her that Oscar Wilde was not in his hotel room at present. She sent her authorization code. The pretty face flickered as the new subroutine was engaged. "Mr. Wilde is in a cab," said the higher-grade receptionist, her simulated voice still honey-sweet. "Sending contact code; destination Trebizond Tower."

Charlotte was just about to retransmit the contact code when she realized that Trebizond Tower was the building on whose thirty-ninth floor she was standing.

"What a coincidence," she murmured, reflectively. Before she had finished wondering what the coincidence might possibly signify, another voice-call came through. This one was from the uniformed officer she had posted at the bottom of the elevator shaft to keep the public at bay.

"There's an Oscar Wilde here," said the officer, laconically. "He says he got a message half an hour ago to come up to King's apartment."

Charlotte frowned. Gabriel King had been dead for quite some time, and no call could possibly have been made from his apartment. "Send him up," she said, tersely. She had an uncomfortable feeling of being out of her depth. She was only a legman, after all; Hal was the real investigator. She hesitated over calling Hal to tell him what had happened, but decided against it. Instead, she went to the elevator to meet the new arrival.

When the man emerged, she felt a curious jolt of astonishment. Hal had mentioned that Wilde was a recent rejuvenate, but she hadn't adapted her expectations to take account of it. Expert witnesses and other consultants usually looked fairly old, but Oscar Wilde looked ten years younger than *she* did; in fact, he was quite the most beautiful man she had ever seen. He bowed gracefully, and then looked up, briefly, at the discreet plastic eye set in the wall, whose security camera recorded every face



which passed by.

Public eyes and private bubblebugs were everywhere in a city like New York, and native New Yorkers were entirely used to living under observation; those who had grown up with the situation took it completely for granted. In some unintegrated nations, it still wasn't common for all walls to have eyes and ears, but within the borders of the six superpowers, citizens had long since been required to learn to tolerate the ever-presence of the benevolent mechanical observers which guaranteed their safety. Wilde was neither a native New Yorker nor a genuinely young man, but he didn't give the impression that he resented the presence of the eye at all. If anything, his self-consciousness suggested that he *liked* to be watched.

"Mr. Wilde?" she said, tentatively. "I'm Charlotte Holmes, UN Police Department."

"Please call me Oscar," said the beautiful man.  
"What exactly has happened to poor Gabriel?"

"He's dead," Charlotte replied, shortly. "I understand that you received a call from him, or his simulacrum?"

"The message came as text only, with a supplementary fax. It was an invitation—or perhaps a *command*. It was sufficiently impolite to warrant disobedience, but sufficiently intriguing to be tempting."

"That message wasn't sent from this apartment," she told him, bluntly.

"Then you must trace it," he replied, affably, "and discover where it did come from. It would be interesting to know, would it not, who sent it and why?"

They were interrupted by the emergence of the forensic team from the apartment. Charlotte waited patiently while they removed their sterile suits. Oscar looked curiously at all the protective gear, undoubtedly wondering why it had been necessary to use it.

"It's sealed," said the team-leader. "We set up a camera on remote control, and we stripped all the bubbled data there was. We connected his personal machines to the Net so that Hal can trawl the data."

Oscar wore a quizzical expression. Charlotte didn't want to enlighten him yet as to what had happened; she was anxious to see what his reaction would be when she showed him what was in the apartment. She led the way to the screen mounted in the wall outside the apartment door, and punched in the instruction codes.

The camera was still at the scene, but it had been left pointing tastefully away from the *corpus delicti*. The room was furnished in an unusually utilitarian manner; there was no decorative plant life integrated into the walls, nor any kind of inert decoration. There were mural screens on the blank walls, but they displayed plain shades of pastel blue. Apart from the food delivery point, the room's main feature was a particularly elaborate array of special-function telescreens. Charlotte juggled the camera while Oscar peered over her shoulder, raptly. On one of three sofas lay all that remained of the late Gabriel

King. The "corpse" was no more than a skeleton, whose white bones were intricately entwined with gorgeous flowers. Charlotte zoomed in, and moved aside to let her companion look closely at the strange garlands and the reclining skeleton.

The stems and leaves of the marvelous plant were green, but the petals of each bloom were black. The waxy stigma at the center of each bell was dark red, and had the form of a *crux ansata*. Oscar Wilde took over the controls, moving them delicately so that he could inspect the structure and texture of the flowers at the minutest level. He followed the rim of a corolla, then passed along a stem which bore huge thorns, paler in color than the flesh from which they sprouted. Each thorn was tipped with red, as though it had drawn blood. The stems wound around and around the long bones of the corpse, holding the skeleton together even though every vestige of flesh had been consumed. The plant had supportive structures like holdfasts which maintained the shape of the whole organism and the coherence of the skeleton. The skull was very strikingly embellished, with a single stem emerging from each of the empty eye-sockets.

"Can you be certain that it's Gabriel?" asked Oscar, finally.

"Pretty certain," Charlotte said. "In the absence of retinas the analysts checked the skull-shape and the dental profile. A DNA scan on the bone-marrow will confirm it. It seems that the flowers are composed of what used to be his flesh. You might say that their seeds

devoured him as they grew."

"Fascinating," he said, in a tone which had more admiration in it than horror.

"Fascinating!" she echoed, in exasperation. "Can you imagine what an organism like that might *do* if it ever got loose? We're looking at something that could wipe out the entire human race!"

"I think not," said Oscar, calmly. "These are single-sexed flowers from a dioecious species, incapable of producing fertile seed. How long ago did Gabriel die?"

"Between two and three days," she told him, grimly. "He seems to have felt the first symptoms about seventy hours ago; he was incapacitated soon afterward, and died a few hours later."

Oscar licked his lips, as though savoring his own astonishment. "Those delightful flowers must have a voracious appetite," he said.

Charlotte eyed him carefully, wondering exactly what his reaction might signify. "You're something of a flower-designer yourself, I believe." Her gaze flickered momentarily to the green carnation in his lapel. "Could you make plants like those?"

Oscar met her eyes frankly. She was as tall as he, and their stares were perfectly level. He frowned as he considered the matter, then said: "Until I saw this marvel, I would have opined that *no* man could. Clearly, I have underrated one of my peers." He seemed genuinely

perplexed, although the level of his concern for the victim and for the fact that a crime had been committed left something to be desired.

Charlotte stared hard at the beautiful man, wondering whether anyone in the world were capable of committing an act like this and then turning up in person to confront and mock the officers investigating the crime. She decided that if he could be guilty of the *first* madness, the second might not be too hard to believe. "I can't help feeling that your appearance here is a very strange coincidence, Mr. Wilde," she said.

"It is indeed," said Oscar, blithely. "Given that it seems to be impossible that I was summoned by the victim, I can only conclude that I was summoned by the murderer."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It *is* hard to believe. But when we have eliminated the impossible, are we not committed to believing the improbable? Unless, of course, you think that *I* did this to poor Gabriel, and have come to gloat over his fate? I disliked the man, but I did not dislike him as much as *that*—and if I had decided to murder him, I certainly would not have revisited the scene of my crime in this reckless fashion. A showman I might be, a madman never." He turned back to the screen, and looked again at the deadly flowers, which were still displayed there in intimate close-up.

Charlotte did not want to be put off. "As it

happens," she said, "we would have shown all this material to you anyway. We need an expert report on the nature and potential of the organism, and I was given two possible names. I couldn't get through to Walter Czastka. I was trying to call you at your hotel while you were on the way over here."

"I'm offended by the fact that you tried Walter first," Oscar murmured, "but I forgive you."

"Mr. Wilde. . . ." she began, feeling that her patience was being tested too far.

"Yes, of course," he said, "This is a serious matter—a murder investigation. I think I can hazard a guess as to why the summons was sent. I suspect that I was brought here to identify the murderer."

"How?" she demanded.

"By his style," he replied.

"That's ridiculous!" she said, petulantly. "If the murderer had wanted to identify himself, all he had to do was call us. How would he know that you could recognize his work—and why, if he knew it, would he want you to *do* it?"

"Those are interesting questions," admitted Oscar. "Nevertheless, I can only suppose that I was sent an invitation to this mysterious event in order that I might play a part in its unraveling." He paused, and looked at her reproachfully, radiating injured innocence. "You really do suspect that I'm responsible for this, don't you?"

he said.

"If *not you*," she countered, "then who?"

He opened his arms wide in a gesture of exaggerated helplessness. "I cannot claim to be absolutely certain," he said, "but if appearances and my expert judgment *are* to be trusted, these flowers are the work of the man who has always been known to me as Rappaccini!"

2

Charlotte called Hal Watson. "Oscar Wilde's here," she said, making an effort to be businesslike. "Can you trace the call that was made to his hotel room asking him to come? He says the flowers might have been made by a man named Rappaccini."

"Of course," Oscar added, with annoying casualness, "Rappaccini is not his real name. Some long-standing members of the Institute of Genetic Art still prefer to exhibit their work pseudonymously—a hangover from the days of prejudice."

"Are you one of them?" she asked.

Oscar shook his head. "I am fortunate enough to have a real name that *sounds* like a pseudonym—my identity thus becomes a kind of double bluff."

"Perhaps," she said, "your identification of

Rappaccini as the man who made the flowers is also a double bluff."

Oscar shook his head. "I fear that I have an ironclad alibi. Three days ago I was in the hospital, and the flesh of my outer tissues was unbecomingly fluid. I had been there for some time."

"That doesn't prove anything," Charlotte pointed out. "You might have made the seeds months ago, and made sure that they were delivered—or began to take effect—while you were in the hospital."

"I suppose I might have," said Oscar, wearily, "but I assure you that your investigation will proceed more smoothly if you forget about me and concentrate on Rappaccini."

"Why should a man take the trouble to summon someone capable of identifying him to the scene of the crime?" she asked, with a trace of asperity. "Why didn't he simply leave his calling card?"

"Why didn't he simply shoot Gabriel King with a revolver?" countered the geneticist. "Why go to the effort of designing and making this fabulous plant? There is something very strange going on here, dear Charlotte."

*There certainly is*, she thought, staring at him, as if by effort she could penetrate the lovely mask to see the secret self within. Oscar, seemingly unalarmed by her scrutiny, began to play with the keys that controlled the camera in the apartment. He zoomed in on something which lay on the glass-topped table. It was a small



cardboard rectangle. It had been lacquered over as a safety-measure, but it was still possible to read what was written on it. The words were in French, but Oscar effortlessly read out what Charlotte took to be a translation.

" 'Stupidity, error, sin and poverty of spirit,' " he said, " 'possess our hearts and work within our bodies, and we nourish our fond remorse as beggars suckle their own parasites.' Perhaps the murderer *did* leave his calling card, Inspector Holmes. A man like Gabriel King would hardly have a note of such lines as those."

"Do you recognize them?" asked Charlotte.

"A poem by Baudelaire. *Au lecteur*—that is, 'To the Reader.' From *Les Fleurs du Mal*. A play on words, I think."

Charlotte's audio-link to Hal Watson was still open. "Did you catch that, Hal?" she asked.

"I checked the words already," Hal replied. "He's right."

Charlotte wondered how many men there were in the world who could recognize seven-hundred-year-old poems written in French. Surely, she thought, Oscar Wilde *must* be the person behind all this. But if so, what monstrous game was he playing?

"What significance do you attach to the card?" she asked him, sharply.

"If my earlier reasoning was correct, it must be a

message directed to me," replied Oscar. "All this is communication—not merely the card, and the message which summoned me, but the flowers, and the crime itself. The whole affair is to be *read*, and hence understood. I am here because Rappaccini expects me to be able to interpret and comprehend what he is doing."

Charlotte tried to remain impassive, but she knew that her amazement was showing. She was grateful when the phone in her hand crackled.

"I'm blocked on Rappaccini for the moment," said Hal. "His real name is recorded as Jafri Biasiolo, but there's hardly any official data on Biasiolo at all beyond his birth-date, way back in 2420. It's old data, of course, and may be just a sketchy construction of disinformation."

Old data tended to be incomplete, often corrupted by all kinds of errors— although she noticed that Hal had said "disinformation," which meant lies, rather than "misinformation." In Hal's view, old data was senile data, too decrepit to be of much use in a slick modern police inquiry. But Gabriel King had been nearly a hundred and fifty years old, and Oscar Wilde—in spite of appearances—must be well over a hundred. If Rappaccini really had been born in 2420, the motive for this affair might go all the way back to the final years of the Aftermath. The Net had been of holes in those days.

"What about the call which summoned Wilde here?" she asked.

"Placed three days ago from a blind unit, time-triggered to arrive when it did. I've got nowhere with the woman yet. No picture-match, no route to or from the apartment-house. This is going to take longer than I had hoped."

Charlotte digested this information. She was not unduly surprised by the news that the real person behind "Rappaccini" might be difficult to identify. It was easy enough nowadays to establish electronic identities whose telescreen appearances could be maintained and controlled by AI simulacra. Virtual individuals could play so full a role in modern society that their real puppet-masters could easily remain hidden—until they came under the scrutiny of a highly skilled investigator. Hal could get through any conventional information-wall, and work his way through any data-maze, but it would take time. She had a gut feeling that told her that the creator of "Rappaccini" was right in front of her, taunting her with his presence, but she didn't dare say so to Hal. He was no respecter of gut feelings.

"Can you patch the security tape through to the wallscreen here?" she said. "I'd like Mr. Wilde to see it. He seems to know everything else—perhaps he can tell us who the woman is."

"Ah," said Oscar, softly. "*Cherchez la femme!* Without a woman the crime could not be deemed complete!"

"Hal Watson's a top cracksman," Charlotte told him, trying to shake his casual composure. "He can get into all

the little electronic backwaters all the locked-up mines of information. It's impossible to hide anything from him. It's only a matter of time before we get to the bottom of this."

Wilde did not seem in the least intimidated. "I'm delighted to find the two of you working in partnership," he said. "It demonstrates that even the higher echelons of the International Bureau of Investigation are home to a sense of humor and a sense of tradition."

He was trying to be clever again, but this time she knew what he meant. Everyone made jokes about it.

On the biggest of the display screens on the far wall there appeared an image of the corridor outside the apartment. The tape had already been edited; no sooner had it started than a young woman came into view, reaching out to activate the doorchime. Her lustrous brown hair was worn unfashionably long. She had clear blue eyes and finely-chiseled features. Even in this day and age, when cosmetic engineers could so easily remold superficial flesh, her beauty was striking. It was not merely the shape of her face, but the undefinable presence which she brought to it. Charlotte could not quite make up her mind whether she was authentically young, or whether she was a successful product of rejuvenative engineering, whose perfection of manner arose from long and careful practice. The woman stepped forward as the door opened, and passed beneath the eye.

The viewpoint abruptly shifted to the second security camera in the hall. King was visible now, with

his back to the camera, and Charlotte watched carefully as the girl moved forward, her eyes gazing into his, and raised her head slightly so that he could kiss her on the lips. King did not seem surprised, and he responded to the unspoken invitation. The kiss did not seem particularly passionate; it might, Charlotte thought have been a polite greeting between people who had some history of intimacy, but were meeting as friends, or it might have been a friendly kiss exchanged in hopeful anticipation of future intimacy. There was no sound-track on the tape, but few words were spoken before King stood aside to let his visitor precede him into the sitting room. The tape cut again, and they saw the woman re-emerge from the doorway. She was alone, and seemed quite composed as she walked to the main door of the apartment, opened it, and went out.

"She was inside for about half an hour," said Charlotte, drily. "King was still perfectly healthy when she left, and it wasn't until some twelve or thirteen hours later that he called up a diagnostic program. He never had a chance to hit his panic button—the progress of the plant was too swift. We'll know more when we've decanted his bubblebugs, but we won't know what went on in the bedroom. The girl might have nothing at all to do with it, but she *was* the last person to see him alive. We don't know how she fed him the seeds, if indeed she did feed them to him. Do you recognize her?"

"I'm afraid not," said Oscar. "I can only offer the obvious suggestion."

"Which is?"

"Rappaccini's daughter."

Charlotte said nothing, but simply waited for clarification.

"It's another echo of the nineteenth century," said Oscar, with a slight sigh.

"Rappaccini borrowed his pseudonym from a story by Nathaniel Hawthorne entitled 'Rappaccini's Daughter.' You don't know the period, I take it?"

"Not very well," she said awkwardly. "Hardly at all" would have been nearer the truth.

"Then it's as well that I'm here. Otherwise, this exotic performance would be entirely wasted."

"You think that the man you know as Rappaccini is acting the part of his namesake—just as you make a show of acting the part of yours?"

Oscar shrugged. "In the story, Rappaccini committed no murder—but he did cultivate fatal flowers: *fleurs du mal*. Our Rappaccini has signed his work, for those who have the wit to read the signature. I have a strong suspicion that we have probably seen the murder committed, by means of that gentle kiss which our mysterious visitor delivered. She, of course, would have to be immune to them."

"This is too much," Charlotte explained.

"I quite agree. As lushly extravagant as a poem in

prose by Baudelaire himself. But we have been instructed to expect a Baudelairean dimension. I can hardly wait for the next installment of the story."

"You think this is going to happen again?"

"I'm almost sure of it," said Oscar, with infuriating calm. "If Rappaccini intends to present us with a real psychodrama, he will hardly stop when he has only just begun."

"The next murder, by the way, might well be committed in San Francisco."

"Why San Francisco?"

"Because the item which was faxed through to me when I was summoned here was a reservation for the midnight maglev to San Francisco." So saying, he took a sheet of paper from his pocket, and held it out for her inspection.

She took it from him, and stared at it dumbly.

"Why didn't you show me this immediately?" she said.

"My mind was occupied with other things. Anyhow, your colleague Dr. Watson must have obtained a copy of the message when he tried to trace it. Perhaps he has already begun to investigate. I do hope that you will not try to prevent my using the ticket—and that you will allow me to assist you throughout the investigation."

"Why should I?" she replied. She was uncomfortably

aware of the fact that she could not prevent his going anywhere in the world he pleased.

"Because the person who committed this murder has gone to extraordinary lengths to make me party to the investigation. If I am supposed to go to San Francisco, there must be a reason. This is only the beginning, dear Charlotte, and if you wish to get to the end with all possible speed, you must stay with me. You can, of course, count on my complete cooperation and my absolute discretion."

*And you, Charlotte said, silently, while she stared into his lovely eyes, can count on being instantly arrested, the moment Hal digs up anything that proves your involvement in this unholy mess.*

IBI headquarters in New York were in the "new" UN complex built in 2431. There had once been talk of the UN taking over the whole of Manhattan Island, but that had gone the way of most dream-schemes during the troubled years of the Aftermath. Now, an even more grandiose plan to move the core of the UN bureaucracy to Antarctica was well-advanced. The same sentence of death had been passed on the IBI complex that had been passed on the whole of New York City, but Gabriel King's brand of controlled rot had not yet been allowed



to set in.

"How well did you know Gabriel King?" Charlotte asked Oscar, while they were *en route* in the police car. He had suggested that he come with her until the time appointed for his departure, and she had been quick to agree although she knew that Hal would not approve.

"I supply his company with decorative materials for various building projects. I haven't *met* him for more than twenty years. He and I are by no means kindred spirits."

"And how well do you know Rappaccini?"

"I know the work far better than the man, but there was a period before and after the Great Exhibition when we met regularly. We were often bracketed together by critics who observed a kinship in our ideas, methods, and personalities but I was never convinced of the similarity. Our conversations were never intimate; we discussed art and genetics, never ourselves. It was a long time ago."

She would have pursued the line of questioning further, but the distance between the Trebizond Tower and the UN complex was short, and they arrived before she had a chance to do any serious probing. She asked Oscar to wait in her office while she consulted her colleague in private. "I brought Wilde with me," she told Hal, brusquely.

Even in the dim light, she was easily able to see the expression of distaste which flitted across Hal's face, but all he said was: "Why?"

"Because he knows too much about this business," she said, wishing that it didn't sound so feeble, so *intuitive*. "I know it sounds crazy, but I think he set this whole thing *up*, then turned up in person to watch us wrestle with it!"

"So you think his introduction of the 'Rappaccini' name is a red herring?"

"Yes, I do. It's all far too convenient. Is it possible that Rappaccini is entirely his invention?"

"I'll check it out," Hal said. "But we don't need him *here*."

"He wants to go to San Francisco on the midnight maglev."

"Let him. What difference does it make? We can find him, if need be, in San Francisco or on the moon."

"Suppose he were to murder someone *else*," said Charlotte, desperately. It was pointless. Modern detective work was sifting data, carefully sorting the relevant from the irrelevant, and the real information from misinformation and disinformation. Talking to people, being a real-time activity, was generally considered to be an inordinately wasteful use of IBI time, to be kept to an absolute minimum even by lowly scene-of-crime officers. "Can I bring him down here?" Charlotte asked, defensively. "I'd like you to see for yourself what he's like—then perhaps you'll understand what I mean."

Hal shrugged in world-weary fashion.

Charlotte collected Oscar from her office, and brought him down into Hal's Underworld. The room was crowded with screens and comcons, but there were enough workstations for them to sit reasonably comfortably.

"Oscar Wilde—Hal Watson," she said, with awkward formality. "Mr. Wilde thinks that his unique insight may be of some help in the investigation."

"I hope so," said Oscar, smoothly. "There are times when instant recognition and artistic sensitivity facilitate more rapid deduction than the most powerful analytical engines. I am an invader in your realm, of course—and I confess that I feel like one of those mortals of old who fell asleep on a burial mound and woke to find himself in the gloomy land of the fairy folk—but I really do feel that I can help you. I have some hours in hand before the midnight maglev leaves."

"I'm always grateful for any help I can get," said Hal, not bothering to feign sincerity. Charlotte saw that her colleague was unimpressed by Oscar Wilde's recently renewed handsomeness. Hal, whose machine-assisted perceptions ground up all the richness and complexity of the social world into mere atoms of data, had not the same idea of beauty as common men. The cataract of encoded data which poured through his screens was *his* reality, and, for him, beauty was to be found in patterns woven out of information or enigmas smoothed into comprehension, not in the hard and soft sculptures of stone and flesh. Unfortunately, the unshadowy world of

hard and superabundant data had yet to be persuaded to explain how it had produced the eccentric masterpiece of mere appearances which was the murder of Gabriel King.

"Rappaccini is proving evasive," Hal told Charlotte, while his eyes continued to scan his screens. "His business dealings are fairly elaborate, but he holds a flag-of-convenience citizenship in the Kalahari Republic, and has no recorded residence. His telephonic addresses are black boxes, and he conducts all his affairs through the medium of AIs. The Rappaccini name first became manifest in 2480, when he registered with the Institute of the Genetic Arts in Sydney. He participated in a number of public exhibitions, including the Great Exhibition of 2505, sometimes putting in personal appearances. Unlike other genetic engineers specializing in flowering plants, he never got involved in designing gardens or in the kind of interior decoration that provides you with a living, Mr. Wilde. He seems to have specialized in the design of funeral wreaths."

"Funeral wreaths?" echoed Charlotte, incredulously. The manufacture of funeral wreaths seemed an absurd profession for anyone to follow, even in the guise of a part-time persona. Now that serial rejuvenation supposedly guaranteed everyone an extended lifespan, funerals were not the everyday occurrences they once had been. On the other hand, their very rarity meant that the ceremony devoted to the commemoration of revered public figures was usually very lavish.

"Rappaccini's flowers have always been grown under

contract by middlemen in various parts of Australia." Hal went on, while his fingers roamed in desultory fashion over his keyboards. "I'm checking the routes by which seeds used to be delivered, trying to backtrack them to the laboratories of origin, but he hasn't put out anything new in thirty years. His agents are still making up wreaths and crediting him with royalties, but they've had no personal contact since 2520. He still has a considerable credit balance, and he probably has more in accounts I haven't identified yet. His last manifestation as an active electronic *persona* was in 2527. Incoming telephone calls have been handled since then by a simulacrum which doesn't seem to have referred enquiries elsewhere. Our best hope of discovering the real person behind the network of sims is a thorough interrogation of the financial records. The real person has to have *some* means of recovering or redirecting credit accumulated by the dummy. I also have AIs trawling out the data relating to every recorded public appearance Rappaccini has ever made. We'll pin him down, even if it takes a week. I have all the data in the world to work with—I just need time to find, extract, and combine the relevant items. If your artistic intuition throws up any other helpful suggestions, just let me know, and I'll let loose another pack of data-hounds."

"Mr. Wilde hasn't been able to guess why Rappaccini should want to murder Gabriel King," said Charlotte. "Do we have anything on a possible motive?"

"I'm investigating King's background," said Hal. "If

there's a motive there, I'll find it. For the time being, I'm more interested in the method. We know that the murderer has to be a first-class genetic engineer, so I've got AIs looking at the people who have the necessary expertise, trying to eliminate them one by one. It's not easy, of course—there are too many commercial engineers whose work involves the relevant technical skills. Even a structural engineer like Gabriel King might be able to adapt what he knew."

"I don't think so," Oscar said, dubiously.

"Maybe not," said Hal. "Naturally, we'll start with the people whose expertise is most relevant. Walter Czastka—and yourself, of course, Dr. Wilde."

"My life," said Oscar, airily, "is an open book. I fear that the sheer profusion of data will test the stamina of your programs—but that may make it all the easier for them to eliminate me from consideration. The idea that Walter Czastka might be Rappaccini is too absurd to contemplate."

"Why?" asked Charlotte.

"A matter of style," said Oscar. "Walter never had any."

"According to the database, he's the top man in the field—or was."

"I presume you mean that he has made more money than anyone else out of engineered flowers. Walter is a mass-producer, not an artist. I fear that if Rappaccini is

leading a double life, you will not find his secret identity among the ranks of flower-designers. You'll have to cast your net further afield. He might be an animal engineer, perhaps a human engineer . . . but there are thousands of experts in each category."

"My AIs are indefatigable," Hal assured him. He was interrupted by a quiet beep from one of his comcons. His fingers raced back and forth across the relevant keyboard for a few seconds while he stared thoughtfully at a screen half-hidden from Charlotte's view. After half a minute or so, he said: "You might be interested to see this, Dr. Wilde." He pointed to the biggest of his display screens, mounted high on the wall directly in front of them.

A picture appeared on the left of the screen. It showed a tall man with silver hair, a dark beard trimmed into a goatee, and a prominent nose. "Rappaccini in 2481," Hal said. "Taken at the offices of his growers during an early meeting." He pressed more keys and another image appeared in the center of the screen, showing two men side by side. One of them was clearly the same man whose image was already on the screen.

"Isn't that . . . ?" Charlotte began.

"I fear that it is," said Oscar, regretfully. "I looked a lot older then, of course. Taken in 2505, I believe, at the Sydney Exhibition."

*It proves nothing that they've been photographed together, Charlotte thought. That may only be an actor, hired to lend flesh to the illusion.* Somehow, though, she

couldn't quite believe it.

"It was 2505," agreed Hal. A third picture appeared, again showing Rappaccini alone. "2520," Hal said. "His last public appearance."

Charlotte compared the three pictures. There was hardly any difference between them. The man had not undergone a full rejuvenation between 2481 and 2520, although he had probably employed light cosmetic reconstruction to maintain the appearance of dignified middle-age.

"If he really was born in 2420, he seems to have delayed rejuvenation far longer than usual," said Hal, pensively. "He must have had a full rejuve very soon after the last picture was taken—I'll get a program to trawl the records. A picture-search program might be able to connect up the face, but that kind of data's very messy. It's proving difficult to track the woman who visited Gabriel King's apartment—there are plenty of cameras in the streets, but a bit of everyday make-up and a wig can cause a good deal of confusion. Faces aren't as widely different as they used to be, now that so many people use light cosmetic engineering to follow fashion-trends. We'll trace her eventually, but . . . again, it's a matter of time."

As he spoke, three signals began beeping and blinking within the space of a second's hesitation, and his attention was instantly diverted. Charlotte and Oscar left the computer-man to the company of his assiduous AIs.

"It's good to know," observed Oscar, as the elevator



carried them up, "that there are so many patient recording angels sorting religiously through the multitudinous sins of mankind. Alas, I fear that the capacity of our fellow men for *committing* sins may still outstrip their best endeavors."

"On the contrary," Charlotte retorted. "The crime rate keeps going down and down as the number of spy-eyes and bubblebugs scattered around the world goes up and up."

"I spoke of *sins*, not crimes," said Oscar. "What your electronic eyes do *not* see the law may not grieve about, but the capacity for sin will lurk in the hearts of men long after its expression has been banished from their actions."

"People can do what they like in the privacy of their virtual realities," she said. "There's no sin in that."

"If there were no sin in our adventures in imagination," Oscar replied, evidently determined to have the last word, "there would be no enjoyment in them. It is mainly our sense of sin which sustains our appetite for virtual experience. No matter how perfect an image we present to the world, in our appearances and our actions, we are as vicious at heart as we have ever been. If you cannot understand that, my dear, I fear that you will never be a real detective."

While he still had time to spare, Charlotte took Oscar to dinner in the IBI's restaurant, where he decided that what his appetite demanded was Tournedos Bearnaise and a bottle of St. Emilion. IBI food technology was easily adequate to the task of meeting these requirements. Its beef was grown from a celebrated local tissue-culture which had long rejoiced in the pet name of Baltimore Bess: a veritable mountain of muscle, "rejuvenated" a hundred times or more by means of the techniques whose gradual perfection in the last two centuries had paved the way for the rejuvenation of human beings. The St. Emilion was authentic, although the whole Bordeaux region had been replanted as recently as 2430, when connoisseurs had decided that the native root-stocks had suffered too much deterioration due to the environmental degradations of the Third Biotech War.

"This crime," said Charlotte, as soon as she felt the time was ripe for talk of business, "is the work of a very remarkable mind."

"Very," Oscar agreed. "I have, of course, a very remarkable mind myself, but genius is always unique. I wear my genius openly, and can barely understand the temperament that would hide away an entire life behind a series of electronic masks, but the man who has invented Rappaccini is clearly a dissimulator. I suspect that this crime has been planned for a very long time. The

fictitious Rappaccini might have been *invented* with this murder in mind, and every detail of him has been tailored to its requirements. Absurd as it may seem, I cannot help but wonder whether my involvement as a witness was planned along with the crime."

Charlotte studied his face soberly. She wondered whether he had designed his own features. It was rare to see such flamboyant femininity in the lines of a male's face, but she had to admit that it suited him.

"What was your impression of the man who posed as Rappaccini?" she asked.

"I liked him. He had an admirable hauteur—as if he considered himself a more profound person by far than the other exhibitors at the Great Exhibition. He was a man of civilized taste and conversation. He appeared to like me, and we shared a taste for all things antiquarian—particularly relics of the nineteenth century, to which we were both linked by our names."

"Do you remember anything *useful*?" asked Charlotte, with some slight impatience. "Anything which might help us to identify the man behind the name."

"I fear not. We never became *friends*. We were both solitary workers, deeply interested in the purely aesthetic aspects of our work. One could not say that of all the exhibitors at Sydney, or even of the majority. Walter Czastka is more typical—he has always worked with an army of apprentices, far more interested in industry than art."

"You don't seem to like Walter Czastka," she observed.

Oscar hesitated briefly before replying. "I don't *dislike* Walter," he said, "although I find him rather dull. He's an able man, in his way, but a hack. Whereas I aspire to perfection in my work, he aims to be prolific. He certainly has Creationist ambitions—he has taken out a lease on a small island in the Pacific, just as I have—but I can't imagine what he is doing with it."

"Walter Czastka knew Gabriel King very well," Charlotte observed, having scanned several pages of data copied to her by Hal Watson while they ate. "They were both born in 2401, and they attended the same university. Czastka has done a great deal of work for King's companies—far more than you. Most murders, you know, involve people who know one another well."

"Walter has not sufficient imagination to have committed this crime," said Oscar, firmly, "even if he had a motive. I doubt that he did; he and Gabriel are—or were—cats of a similar stripe."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that they were both hacks. A modern architect, working with thousands of subspecies of gantzing bacteria, can raise buildings out of almost any materials, shaped to almost any design. The integration of pseudo-living systems to provide water and other amenities adds a further dimension of creative opportunity. A true artist could make buildings that

would stand forever as monuments to contemporary creativity, but Gabriel King's main interest was always in *productivity*—razing whole towns to the ground and re-erecting them with the least possible effort. His business was the mass-production of third-rate homes for second-rate people."

"I thought the whole point of bacterial cementation processes is that they facilitate the provision of decent homes for the very poor," said Charlotte.

"That is the utilitarian view," agreed Oscar. "But it is two hundred years out of date. Future generations will look back at ours with pity for the recklessness with which we have wasted our aesthetic opportunities. One day, the building of a home will be part of a person's cultivation of his own personality. Making a home will be one of the things every man is expected to do for himself, and there will be no more Gabriel King houses with Walter Czastka sub-systems."

"We can't *all* be Creationists," objected Charlotte.

"Oh, but we *can*," retorted Oscar. "We can all be everything we *want* to be, or we should at least make every effort to do so. Even men like me, who were born when rejuvenation technology was still in its infancy, should do their utmost to believe that the specter of death is impotent to set a limit upon our achievements. The children of tomorrow will surely live for centuries if only they have the will to do so. You and I, Charlotte, must be prepared to set them a good example. The men of the past had an excuse for all their failures—that man born of

woman had but a short time to live, and full of misery—but only cowardice inhibits us now. There is no excuse for any man who fails to be a true artist, and declines to take full responsibility for both his mind and his environment. Too many of us still aim for mediocrity, and are content with its achievement. You don't intend to be a policewoman *all* your life, I hope?"

Charlotte was slightly discomfited by this question. "I'm continuing my education," she said. "My options are still open." Her waistphone began to buzz. She plucked it from its holster and accepted the call. She held it close to her ear so that Oscar would not be able to eavesdrop, assuming that Hal had ferreted out some further morsel of information about Rappaccini. What he actually had to say was rather more disturbing. When she had replaced the phone, she looked at her companion, trying to control the bleakness of her expression.

"Do you know a man named Michi Urashima?" she asked, as blandly as she could.

"Of course I do," said Oscar. "I hope you aren't going to tell me that he's dead. He was a better man by far than Gabriel King."

"Not everyone would agree with you," she said, shortly. Urashima was an expert in computer graphics and image-simulation, famed for the contributions to synthetic cinema he had made before becoming involved in outlawed brainfeed research—which had led to a much-publicized fall from grace.

"How was he killed?" Oscar asked, sadly. "The same method?"

"Yes," she said, tersely. "In San Francisco. There's no need for you to take the maglev now."

"On the contrary," he said. "There is every reason. This affair is still in its early stages, and if we want to witness the further stages of its unfolding, we must follow the script laid down for us. You will come with me, I hope?"

"Scene-of-crime officers don't operate nationwide," she said. "Police work isn't done that way in this day and age." She knew even as she said it, though, that she still wanted—and still intended—to cling to her suspect.

"Police work may not be," he replied, with an infuriating wave of his hand, "but psychodrama is. The mystery in this, my dear Charlotte, is not *who* has done it, but *why*. I am the man appointed by the murderer himself to the task of following the thread of explanation to the heart of the maze. If you want to *understand* the crime as well as solving it, you must come with me."

"All right," she said, hypocritically. "You've convinced me. I'll stick with you till the bitter end."

Charlotte rose earlier than was her habit; the maglev *courette* was not the kind of bed which encouraged one to sleep in. She called Hal to get an update on the investigation, then wandered along to the dining car to dial up some croissants, coffee, and pills. It was a pity, she thought, that there was no quicker way than the maglev to travel between New York and San Francisco. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she might end up chasing a daisy-chain of murders all around the globe, always twenty-four hours behind the breaking news. But the maglev was the fastest form of transportation within the bounds of United America since the last supersonic jet had flown four centuries before. The power-crises of the Aftermath were ancient history now, but the inland airways were so cluttered with private flitterbugs and helicopters, and the green zealots so avid in their crusades against large areas of concrete, that commercial aviation had never really gotten going again. Even intercontinental travelers tended to prefer the plush comfort of airships to the hectic pace of supersonics. Electronic communication had so completely taken over the lifestyles and folkways of modern man that most business was conducted via comcon.

By the time Charlotte had finished her breakfast, the train was only four hours out of San Francisco. Oscar joined her then, looking neat and trim although the green carnation in his buttonhole was now rather bedraggled. "Such has been the mercy of our timetable," he observed, "that we have slept through Missouri and Kansas."



She knew what he meant. Missouri and Kansas were distinctly lacking in interesting scenery since the re-stabilization of the climate had made their great plains prime sites for the establishment of vast tracts of artificial photosynthetics. Nowadays, the greater part of the Midwest looked rather like sections of an infinite undulating sheet of a dull near-black violet which offended unpracticed eyes. The SAP-fields of Kansas always gave Charlotte the impression of looking at a gigantic piece of frilly corrugated cardboard. Houses and factories alike had retreated beneath the dark canopy, and parts of the landscape were almost featureless. By now, though, the maglev passengers had the more elevating scenery of Colorado to look out upon. Most of the state had been returned to wilderness, and its centers of population had taken advantage of the versatility of modern building techniques to blend in with their surroundings. Chlorophyll green was infinitely easier on the human eye than SAP-violet, presumably because millions of years of adaptive natural selection had helped to make it so.

While Oscar ordered eggs duchesse for breakfast, Charlotte activated the wallscreen beside their table and called up the latest news. The fact of Gabriel King's death was recorded, but there was nothing as yet about the exotic circumstances. The IBI never liked to advertise crimes until they were solved, but the exotic circumstances of King's death would make it a hot topic of gossip, and she knew that it was only a matter of time before bootleg copies of the security tapes leaked out.

"My dear Charlotte," said Oscar, "you have the unmistakable look of one who woke too early and has been working too hard."

"I couldn't sleep," she told him. "I took a couple of boosters with breakfast. They'll clear my head soon enough."

Oscar shook his head. "No one who looks twenty when he is really a hundred and thirty-three can possibly be less than worshipful of the wonders of medical science," he said, "but, in my experience, the use of it to maintain one's sense of equilibrium is a false economy. We must have sleep in order to dream, and we must dream in order to discharge the chaos from our thoughts, so that we may reason effectively while we are awake. Now, what about the second murder? Any progress?"

She frowned. She was supposed to be the one asking the questions. "Did you know Urashima personally, or just by reputation?" she countered, determined not to let him get the upper hand.

"We met on several occasions," said Oscar, equably. "He was an artist, like myself. I respected his work. Although I didn't know him well, I would have been glad to count him a friend."

"He'd been inactive of late," she said, watching her suspect closely. "He hadn't worked commercially since his conviction for illegal experimentation thirteen years ago. He served four years house arrest and control of communication. He was probably still experimenting,

though, and he may well have been engaged in illegal activities."

"His imprisonment was an absurd sentence for an absurd crime," Oscar opined. "He placed no one in danger but himself."

"He was playing about with brainfeed equipment," she said. "Not just memory boxes or neural stimulators, but mental cyborgization. And he didn't just endanger, himself; he was pooling information with others."

"Of course he was," said Oscar. "What on earth is the point of hazardous exploration unless one makes every effort to pass on the legacy of one's discoveries?"

"Have *you* ever experimented with that sort of stuff?" Charlotte asked, vaguely. Like everyone else, she bandied about phrases like "psychedelic synthesizer" and "memory box," but she had little or no idea of the way such legendary devices were supposed to work. Ever since the first development of artificial synapses capable of linking up human nervous systems to silicon-based electronic systems, numerous schemes for hooking up the brain to computers had been devised, but almost all the experiments had gone disastrously wrong, often ending up with badly brain-damaged subjects. The brain was the most complex and sensitive of all organs, and disruption of brain-function was the one kind of disorder that twenty-sixth century medical science was impotent to correct. The UN had forced a world-wide ban on devices for connecting brains directly to electronic apparatus, for whatever purpose, but the main effect of the ban had

been to drive research underground. Even an expert fisherman like Hal Watson would not have found it easy to figure out what sort of work might be going on, where, and why.

"You've just heard me express my dislike of everyday chemical boosters," Oscar pointed out. "There is nothing I value more than my genius, and I would never knowingly risk my clarity and agility of mind. That does not mean that I disapprove of what Michi Urashima did. He was not an infant, in need of protection from himself. His perennial fascination was the simulation of experience, and for him, the building of better visual images was only a beginning. He wanted to allow his audience to *live* in his illusions, not merely to stand outside and watch. If we are ever to make a proper interface between natural and artificial intelligence, we will need the genius of men like Michi. Now, have you anything to tell me about his death which may help to unravel the puzzle which confronts us?"

"Perhaps," she said, grudgingly. "Did you know that Michi Urashima was at college with Gabriel King—and, for that matter, with Walter Czastka?" She permitted herself a slight smile of satisfaction when Oscar raised an interested eyebrow.

"I did not," he said. "Was Rappaccini, perhaps, also at this particular institution of learning? Has he been harboring some secret grudge for a hundred and thirty years? Where was this remarkable college, where so many of our great men first met?"

"Wollongong, in Australia."

"Wollongong!" he exclaimed, in mock horror. "If only it were Oxford, or the Sorbonne, or even Sapporo . . . but it *is* an interesting coincidence."

Charlotte regarded him speculatively. "Hal transmitted a copy of the scene-of-crime tape," she said. "Urashima's last visitor was a woman. She'd changed her appearance quite considerably, but we're pretty sure that she's the same one who visited Gabriel King."

Oscar nodded. "Rappaccini's daughter," he said. "I expected it."

"The main thrust of Hal's investigation is to identify and track the woman," Charlotte went on. "He's set up programs to monitor every security camera in San Francisco. If she's already gone, we might still be able to pick up her trail. The problem is that she left Urashima's house more than three days ago; if she moved fast, she may have delivered more packages in the interim."

"We must certainly assume that she did," Oscar agreed. "Did she leave another calling card, by any chance?"

"Not this time. But she kissed Michi Urashima, exactly as she kissed Gabriel King." She had decanted the tape on to a disc, so she only had to slot it in. Like the tape she had displayed for Oscar outside Gabriel King's apartment, it had been carefully edited from the various spy-eyes and bubblebugs that had been witness to Michi Urashima's murder.

The similarity between the two records was almost eerie. The woman's hair was silvery blonde now, but still abundant. It was arranged in a precipitate cataract of curls. The eyes were the same electric blue but the cast of the features had been altered subtly, making her face thinner and apparently deeper. The changes were sufficient to deceive a standard picture-search program, but because Charlotte *knew* that it was the same woman, she could *see* that it as the same woman. There was something in the way her eyes looked steadily forward, something in her calm poise that made her seem remote, not quite in contact with the world through which she moved. She was wearing a dark blue costume now, which hung loose about her seemingly fragile frame. It was the kind of outfit which would not attract much attention in the street. As before, the woman said nothing, but moved naturally into a friendly kiss of greeting before preceding her victim into an inner room beyond the reach of conventional security cameras. Her departure was similarly recorded by the spy-eye. She seemed perfectly composed and serene.

There were more pictures to follow, showing the state of Urashima's corpse as it had eventually been discovered. There were long, lingering close-ups of the fatal flowers. The camera's eye moved into a black corolla as if it was venturing into the interior of a great greedy mouth, hovering around the *crux ansata* tip of the blood-red style like a moth fascinated by a flame. There was, of course, a sterile film covering the organism, but it was quite transparent; its presence merely served to give

the black petals a weird sheen, adding to their supernatural quality.

Charlotte let the tape run through without comment, then flipped the switch. "The flowers aren't genetically identical to the ones used to kill King. Our lab people think that the germination of the seeds may have been keyed to some trigger unique to the victim's genotype—that each species was designed to kill a specific victim, while being harmless to everyone else. That would explain how the girl can carry the seeds around. She traveled to San Francisco on a scheduled maglev. The card she used to buy the ticket connects to a credit account held in the name of Jeanne Duval. It's a dummy account, of course. She didn't use the Duval account to reach New York, and she'll presumably use another to leave San Francisco."

"You might set the search programs you're using to find her to pick up the names Daubrun and Sabatier," Oscar advised. "Jeanne Duval was one of Baudelaire's mistresses, and it's possible she has the others on her list of *noms de guerre*."

Charlotte transmitted this information to Hal. The maglev was taking them down the western side of the Sierra Nevada now, and she had to swallow air to counter the pressure on her eardrums.

"By the time we get to San Francisco," she said, "there won't be anything to do there except to wait for the next phone call."

"Perhaps not," said Oscar. "But even if she's long gone, we'll be in the right place to follow in her footsteps."

The buzzer on Charlotte's waistphone sounded, and she snatched it up.

"One of Rappaccini's bank accounts became active," Hal told her. "A debit went through ten minutes ago. The credit was drawn from another account, which had a guarantee arrangement with the Rappaccini account."

"Never mind the technical details," she said. "What did the credit buy? Have the police at the contact point managed to get the user?"

"I'm afraid not. The debit was put through by a courier service. They don't collect until they've actually made delivery. We've got a picture of the woman from their spy-eye, looking just the same as she did when she went to Urashima's apartment, but it's three days old. It must have been taken before the murder, immediately after she arrived in San Francisco."

Charlotte groaned softly. "What did she send, and where to?"

"A package she brought in. We don't know what's in it. It was addressed to Oscar Wilde, Green Carnation Suite, Majestic Hotel, San Francisco. It's there now, waiting."

"We don't have the authority to open that package without your permission," Charlotte told Oscar. "Can I



send an instruction to the San Francisco police, telling them to inspect it immediately?"

"Certainly not," Oscar said, without hesitation. "It would spoil the surprise. We'll be there in less than an hour."

Charlotte frowned. "You're inhibiting the investigation," she said. "I want to know what's in that package. It *could* be a packet of seeds."

"I think not," said Oscar, airily. "If Rappaccini wished to murder me, he surely wouldn't treat me less generously than his other victims. If they're entitled to a fatal kiss, it would be unjust and unaesthetic to send *my fleurs du mal* by mail."

"In that case," she said, "it's probably another ticket. If we open it now, we might be able to find out where her next destination is in time to stop her making her delivery."

"I fear not," said Oscar. "The delayed debit was timed to show up *after* the event. The third victim is probably dead already. The package is addressed to me and I shall open it. That's what Rappaccini intended. I'm sure he has his reasons."

"Mr. Wilde," she said, in utter exasperation, "you seem to be incapable of taking this matter seriously."

"On the contrary," he replied, with a sigh. "I believe that I am the only one who is taking it seriously *enough*. You seem to be unable to look beyond the mere fact that

people are being killed. If we are to come to terms with this strange performance, we must take *all* its features as seriously as they are intended to be taken. I am as deeply involved in this as the victims, though I cannot as yet understand why Rappaccini has chosen to involve me."

"You'd better make sure that nothing you do fouls up our investigation," said Charlotte, ominously, "because we won't hesitate to throw the book at you if we find a reason."

"I fear," said Oscar, sadly, "that Rappaccini has already thrown more than enough books into this affair himself."

6

The promised package lay on a table in the reception room of the Green Carnation Suite. It was round, about a hundred centimeters in diameter and twenty deep. Charlotte had taken the precaution of arming herself with a spraygun loaded with a polymer which, on discharge, formed itself into a bimolecular membrane and clung to anything it touched.

Oscar reached out to take hold of the knot in the black ribbon which secured the emerald green box. It yielded easily to his nimble fingers, and he drew the ribbon away. He lifted the lid and laid it to one side. As

Charlotte had half-expected since seeing the shape of the container, it contained a Rappaccini wreath: an intricate tangle of dark green stalks and leaves. The stalks were thorny, the leaves slender and curly. There was an envelope in the middle of the display, and around the perimeter were thirteen black flowers like none that she had ever seen before. They looked like black daisies.

Oscar Wilde extended an inquisitive forefinger, and was just about to touch one of the flowers, when it moved.

"Look out!" said Charlotte.

As though the first movement was a kind of signal, *all* the "flowers" began to move. It was a most alarming effect, and Oscar reflexively snatched back his hand as Charlotte pressed the trigger of the spraygun and let fly. When the polymer hit them, the flowers' movements became suddenly jerky. They thrashed and squirmed in obvious distress. The limbs which had mimicked sepals struggled vainly for purchase upon the thorny green ring on which they had been mounted. Now that Charlotte could count them she was able to see that each of the creatures had eight hairy legs. What had seemed to be a cluster of florets was a much-embellished thorax.

"Poor things," said Oscar, as he watched them writhe. "They'll asphyxiate, you know, with that awful stuff all over them."

"I may have just saved your life," observed Charlotte, drily. "Those things are probably poisonous."

Oscar shook his head. "This was no attempted murder. It's a work of art — probably an exercise in symbolism."

"According to you," she said, "the two are not incompatible."

"Not even the most reckless of dramatists," said Oscar, affectedly, "would destroy his audience at the end of act one. We are perfectly safe, my dear, until the final curtain falls. Even then Rappaccini will want us alive and well. He surely will not risk interrupting a standing ovation and cutting short the cries of *encore!*"

Charlotte reached out to pick up the sticky envelope at the center of the ruined display, and contrived to open it. She took out a piece of paper. It was a rental car receipt, over stamped in garish red ink: ANY ATTEMPT TO INTERROGATE THE PROGRAMMING OF THIS VEHICLE WILL ACTIVATE A VIRUS THAT WILL DESTROY ALL THE DATA IN ITS MEMORY. It was probably a bluff, but she didn't suppose that Oscar Wilde would let her call it — and she still didn't have any legal reason to overturn his decisions.

As soon as she had updated Hal, she got through to the rental car company and demanded all the information they had. They told her that they had delivered the car to the hotel three days earlier, and that they had no knowledge of any route or destination which might have been programmed into its systems after dispatch. Hal quickly ascertained that the account which had been used to pay for the car had enough credit to cover three days'

storage and a journey of two thousand kilometers.

"That could take you as far north as Juneau or as far south as Guadalajara," Hal pointed out, unhelpfully. "I can't tell how many more accounts there might be on which Rappaccini and the woman might draw, but I've traced several that are held under other names; it's possible that one of them is his real name.

"What are they?" Oscar asked.

"Samuel Cramer, Gustave Moreau, and Thomas Griffiths Wainwright."

Oscar sighed heavily. "Samuel Cramer is the protagonist of a novella by Baudelaire," he said. "Moreau was a French painter. Wainwright was the subject of a famous essay by my namesake called 'Pen, Pencil and Poison.' It's just a series of jokes, presumably intended to amuse me."

The car which awaited them was roomy and powerful. Once it was free of the city's traffic control computers it would be able to zip along the transcontinental at two hundred kph. If they *were* headed for Alaska, Charlotte thought, they'd be there some time around midnight.

As soon as they were both settled into the back seat, Oscar activated the car's program. It slid smoothly up the ramp and into the street. Then he called up a lunch menu from the car's synthesizer, and looked it over critically.

"I fear," he said, "that we are in for a somewhat

Spartan trip."

Charlotte took out her handscreen and began scrolling through some pages of data that one of Hal's AIs had compiled from various dossiers. It had found many links between Gabriel King and Michi Urashima — more links than anyone could reasonably have expected. It seemed that the construction engineer and the graphic artist had remained in close touch throughout their long lives. Many of Urashima's experiments had been funded by King, and the two of them had embarked upon several ventures in partnership. Charlotte could see that the AI searches had only just begun to get down into the real dirt. No one whose career was as long as King's was likely to be completely clean, but a man in his position could keep secrets even in today's world, just as long as no one with state-of-the-art equipment actually had a reason to probe. It was only to be expected that this murder would expose a certain amount of dirty linen, but this particular collection seemed overabundant. It seemed entirely probable that Gabriel King had been a major stockholder in the clandestine brainfeed business, and that he had not only funded Urashima but had established all kinds of shields to hide his work and its spinoff. Was there a motive for multiple murder in there? But if there was, where did Rappaccini and Oscar Wilde fit in? Why all the bizarre frills? And who was the mystery woman?

When Charlotte had digested the dossier's contents, she plugged her waistphone into the car's transmitter and phoned Hal. "Anything new on the woman?" Charlotte

inquired.

"No identification yet," said Hal. "We haven't picked up a visual trace since she left Urashima's apartment. I've loosened up the match criteria, but she must have done a first-rate job of disguising herself. Where are you?"

Charlotte realized, guiltily, that she had not even bothered to take note of the direction in which they were headed. She squinted out of the window, but there was nothing to be seen now except the eight lanes of the superhighway. "We're headed south," said Oscar, helpfully.

"She may have gone south," Charlotte said to Hal. "Better check all plausible destinations between here and Mexico City." She signed off.

"It might be as well," Oscar said, ruminatively, "if I were to have a word with Walter Czastka."

"No, you don't!" Charlotte said, suddenly remembering that she should have called Czastka herself, several hours ago. "That's *my* job. Walter Czastka may be a suspect."

"I know Walter," said Oscar. "He was a difficult man even in his prime, and he's not in his prime now. It really would be better if I did it. You can listen in."

She weighed up the pros and cons. It might, she thought, be interesting to see what Oscar Wilde and Walter Czastka had to say to one another. "You're a free man," she said, in the end. "Go ahead." She moved to the

edge of her seat, out of range of the tiny eye mounted above the car's wallscreen. She watched Oscar punch out the codes on the keyboard. He didn't need to call a directory to get the number.

She could see the image on the screen even though she was out of camera-range. She knew immediately that the face that appeared was that of Walter Czastka himself. No one would ever have programmed so much ostentatious world-weariness into a simulacrum. "Hello, Walter," said Oscar.

Czastka peered at the caller without the least flicker of recognition. He looked unwell. Charlotte could not imagine that he had ever been handsome, and he obviously thought it unnecessary to compromise with the expectations of others by having his face touched up by tissue-control specialists. In a world where almost everyone was beautiful, or at least distinguished, Walter Czastka was an anomaly—but there was nothing monstrous about him. His sad eyes were faded blue, and his stare had a rather disconcerting quality. Charlotte knew that Czastka was exactly the same age as Gabriel King and Michi Urashima, but he looked far worse than either of them. Perhaps rejuvenation hadn't taken properly.

"Yes?" he said.

"Don't you know me?" asked Oscar, in genuine surprise.

For a moment, Czastka simply looked exasperated,



but then his stare changed as enlightenment dawned. "Oscar Wilde!" he said, his tone redolent with awe. "My God, you look ... I didn't look like that after *my* last rejuvenation! But that must be your third—how could you need . . .?"

Oddly enough, Oscar did not swell with pride in reaction to this display of naked envy. "Need," he murmured, "is a relative thing. I'm sorry, Walter; I didn't mean to startle you."

"You'll have to be brief, Oscar," said Czastka, curtly. "I'm expecting the UN police to call—they tried to get past my AI yesterday, but didn't bother to leave a message to say what they wanted. They're taking their time about getting back to me. Damn nuisance."

"The police can break in on us if they really want to," said Oscar, gently. "Have you heard the news about Gabriel King?"

"No. Is it something I should be interested in?"

"He's dead, Walter. Murdered by illegal biotechnics—a very strange kind of flowering plant."

Charlotte couldn't read Czastka's expression. "Murdered by a plant?" he repeated, disbelievingly.

"I've seen the pictures," said Oscar. "The police might want you to take a look at the forensic reports. They have a suspicion that you or I might have designed the murder-weapon, but I'm morally certain that it's Rappaccini's work. Do you remember Rappaccini?"

Charlotte began to regret having given Oscar Wilde permission to make this call. Perhaps it would have been better to ask Czastka to make a separate judgment. If both of them, without collusion, identified Rappaccini as the designer ... but how could she be sure that they weren't in collusion already?

"Of course I remember Rappaccini," snapped Czastka. "I'm not senile, you know. Specializes in funeral wreaths—a silly affectation, I always thought. I dare say you know him better than I do, you and he being birds of a feather. Are you saying that he murdered Gabriel King?"

"Michi Urashima is dead too," Oscar said. "He and Gabriel were killed by seeds which grew inside them and consumed their flesh. This is important, Walter. Genetic art may have come a long way since the protests at the Great Exhibition, but the green zealots wouldn't need much encouragement to put us back on their hate list. Neither of us wants to go back to the days when we had petty officials looking over our shoulders while we worked. When the police release the full details of this case, there's going to be a lot of adverse publicity. I'm trying to help the police find Rappaccini. I wondered whether you might remember anything that might provide a clue to his real identity."

Czastka's face had a curious ochreous pallor as he stared at his interlocutor. "King and Urashima—both dead?" He didn't seem to be keeping up with Oscar's train of thought.

"Both dead," Oscar confirmed. "I think there might be others. You knew Gabriel and Michi from way back, didn't you?"

"So what?" said Czastka, grimly. "I didn't know Urashima as well as you did, and all my dealings with King were strictly business. We were never friends—or enemies." Charlotte noted that Czastka's eyes had narrowed, but she couldn't tell whether he was alarmed, suspicious, or merely impatient.

"No one's accusing you of anything," said Oscar, carefully. "I've told the police that you couldn't possibly be the man behind Rappaccini—and I think they're more inclined at present to suspect that *I* might be. We all need to find out who he really is. Can you help?"

"No," said Czastka, without hesitation. "I never knew him. I've had some dealings with his company, but I haven't set eyes on him since the Great Exhibition."

"What about his daughter?" said Oscar, abruptly.

If he intended to surprise the other man, it didn't work. Czastka's stare was as stony as it was melancholy. "What daughter?" he said. "I never met a daughter—not that I remember. It was all a long time ago. I can't remember anything at all. It's nothing to do with me. Leave me alone, Oscar—and tell the police to leave me alone!"

Charlotte could see that Oscar Wilde was both puzzled and disappointed by the other man's reaction. As Czastka closed the connection, Oscar's face wrinkled into

a frown.

"That wasn't much help, was it?" she said, unable to resist the temptation to take him down a peg. "He doesn't even *like* you."

"As soon as I told him about the murders, he froze," Oscar said, thoughtfully. "He's hiding something, but I can't imagine *what*—or why. I would never have thought it of him. There's something very strange about this. Perhaps your clever associate and his indefatigable assistants should start attacking the problem from the other end."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"The Wollongong connection. We ought to find out how many other people there are in the world who were at Wollongong at the relevant time. Walter and the two victims are uncommonly old men, even in a world where serial rejuvenation is commonplace. It's possible that such a list might contain the names of other potential victims—and the university records might offer a clue as to a possible motive."

Charlotte called Hal to relay the suggestion, but he scornfully informed her that he had already put two AIs to work on it. "One more thing," he added. "Rappaccini's pseudonymous bank accounts have been used over the years to purchase materials that were delivered for collection to the island of Kauai, in Hawaii. They were collected by boat. There are fifty or sixty islets west and south of Kauai, natural and artificial. Some are leased to

Creationists for experiments in the construction of artificial ecosystems." Charlotte had already turned to look at Oscar, and was on the point of forming a predatory grin when Hal continued: "Oscar Wilde's island is half an ocean away in Micronesia—but Walter Czastka's is nearby. All the supplies that Czastka purchases in his own name are picked up from Kauai, by boat."

Charlotte winced as the car lurched slightly, throwing her sideways. They had left the superhighway and were climbing into the hills along roads which did not seem to have been properly maintained. This had been a densely populated region in the distant past, but California had suffered several plague attacks in the Second Biotech War, and rural areas like this one had been so badly hit as to cause a mass exodus of refugees. Most of those who had survived had never returned, preferring to relocate to more promising land. Three quarters of the original ghost towns of the Sierra Nevada were ghost towns still, even after three hundred years. The car had not been designed for climbing mountains and it had slowed considerably when it first began to follow the winding road up into the foothills of the mountain range. It was picking up speed again now. Charlotte called up a map of the region on to the car's

wallscreen, but it was stubbornly unhelpful in the matter of providing clues as to where they might be going or why.

"The region up ahead is real wasteland," she told Oscar. "Nobody lives there. Nothing grows except lichens and the odd stalk of grass. The names on the map are just distant memories."

"*Something* must be up there," Oscar said, shifting uncomfortably as the car took another corner.

"Rappaccini wouldn't bring us up here if there were nothing to see."

Charlotte wiped the map from the screen, and replaced it with a list which Hal had beamed through to her. There were twenty-seven names on it: the names of all the surviving men and women who had attended the University of Wollongong while Gabriel King, Michi Urashima, and Walter Czastka had been students there. The names, that is, of all the *supposed* survivors; Hal's patient AIs had so far only managed to obtain positive confirmation of the continued existence of twenty-three. The business of trying to contact them all was proving uncommonly difficult; they all had high-grade sims to answer their phones, and most of the sims had been programmed for maximum unhelpfulness. IBI priority codes were empowered to demand maximum co-operation from every AI in the world, but no AI could do more than its programming permitted.

"These people are crazy!" she complained.

"They're all *old*," Oscar pointed out. "Every single one of them is a double rejuvenate. They were born during the Aftermath, when the climate was still disturbed, the detritus of the plague wars hadn't yet finished claiming casualties, the Net was still highly vulnerable to software sabotage, and cool fusion and artificial photosynthesis were brand new. All of them were conceived by living mothers, and I doubt if one in five was carried to term in an artificial womb. They're strangers in today's world, and many of them don't have any sense of belonging any more. Half of them have nothing left to desire except to die in peace, and more than half—as your associates must have found out in trying to cross-examine them—have no memory at all of the long-gone years they spent at the University of Wollongong."

She looked at him curiously. "But you're not much younger than they are," she said, "and you're a *triple* rejuvenate. *You* obviously don't feel like that."

"The fact that *I* do not," he said, drily, "is the greatest proof of my genius. I am a very unusual individual—as unusual, in my way, as Rappaccini."

Charlotte's waistphone buzzed, and she lifted it from its holster reflexively. "You can take Paul Kwiatek off your list," Hal's voice said, dully. "They just found him dead. Same method, same visitor."

Oscar leaned over to speak into the mouthpiece. "Who's dead?" he asked Hal.

"Paul Kwiatek. Another Wollongong graduate, born 2401." Charlotte snatched up the phone again. Determined to be businesslike, she said: "Where?"

"Bologna, Italy." "Bologna! But . . . when?"

"Some time last week. It looks as though he was killed before King. The woman probably flew to New York on an intercontinental flight from Rome. I'll try to figure out where she was before that—there might be other bodies we haven't found yet. We're stepping up our attempts to contact and question the others on the list, but I don't know how to work out which of them are potential victims, let alone potential murderers."

"Czastka knows *something*," said Charlotte. "He might be the key."

"We've just talked to him," Hal said, in his infuriating fashion. "He denies knowing anything at all that would connect him with King, Urashima and Kwiatek, and he denies having received the equipment and supplies paid for by the Rappaccini accounts. So far, there's no proof that he's lying. We're worried about another name on the Wollongong list—Magnus Teidemann. He's supposed to be out in the wilderness somewhere in mid-Africa, but he's been ominously silent for some time. If he's dead, it could take us a week to find the body. I've ordered a search. That's all for now." He broke the connection, without waiting for Charlotte to respond.

Charlotte had already recalled the list, and had begun tracing a path through the back-up information.



"Paul Kwiatek," she said to Oscar. "Software engineer. Should I call up a more detailed bio, or do you know him?"

"No," said Oscar, "but I know Teidemann by repute. He was a major force in the UN a hundred years ago, one of the inner circle of world-planners. Gabriel King probably knew him personally. The unfolding network of cross-connections is going to deluge your friend's AIs with data. There's too much of it to sort out and unravel, unless we can somehow cut the Gordian knot at a stroke."

"It doesn't work like that," she told him, although she wasn't entirely convinced. "The machines are so fast that a profusion of data doesn't trouble them. The real problem is the *age* of the data. If the motive for the murders really does go back a hundred and fifty years ... but if it does, why wait until *now* to carry them out? Why murder men who are already on the threshold of extinction?"

"Why indeed?" echoed Oscar Wilde.

"It's insane," Charlotte opined, being unable to see any other explanation. "It's some weird obsession." Such things were not unheard of, even in these days of chemical retuning and biofeedback training. The brain was no longer the great mystery it once had been, but it kept stubborn and jealous guard over many of its secrets.

"Obsession might sustain memories which would otherwise fade away," Oscar admitted. "If there were no

obsession involved, no murderer could nurse a plan as elaborate as this for as long as Rappaccini must have nursed it."

Charlotte returned to her contemplation of the list displayed on the screen. Apart from Teidemann's, none of the names meant anything at all to her. Only a handful were listed as genetic engineers of any kind, and none seemed to have the right kind of background to be Rappaccini—except, of course, for Walter Czastka. As she scanned the subsidiary list of addresses, her eye was caught by the word "Kauai." She stopped scrolling. One Stuart McCandless, ex-Chancellor of the University of Oceania, had retired to Kauai. She was tempted to call Hal and trumpet her discovery, but she knew what his response would be. His AIs would have turned up the coincidence; investigation of the data-trail would be in hand. She wished, briefly, that she were back in New York. There, at least, she would be involved in the routine pursuit of inquiries, making calls. What was she accomplishing out here, in the middle of nowhere?

She glanced out of the side-window as the car swung slowly and carefully around a bend into one of the ghost-towns whose names were still recorded on the map in spite of the fact that no one had lived in them for centuries. The ancient stone buildings had been weathered by dust-storms, but they still retained the sharp angles which proudly proclaimed their status as human artifacts. The land around them was quite dead, incapable of growing so much as a blade of grass, and

every bit as desolate as an unspoiled lunar landscape, but the shadowy scars of human habitation still lay upon it.

In the long-gone days when the earth had lain temporarily unprotected by an ozone layer, this would have been a naked place. Even then, it would probably have been almost empty; this part of the state, within a couple of hundred kilometers of Los Angeles, had been very hard hit even by the first and least of the three plague wars—whose victims, not knowing that there was far worse to come, had innocently called it the Great Plague War.

8

The wallscreen blanked out. While Charlotte was still wondering what the interruption signified, the car's AI relayed a message in large, flamboyant letters:

WELCOME, OSCAR: THE PLAY WILL COMMENCE IN TEN MINUTES. THE PLAYHOUSE IS BENEATH THE BUILDING TO YOUR RIGHT.

"Play?" said Charlotte, bitterly. "Have we come all this way just to watch *a play*?"

"It appears so," said Oscar, as he opened the door and climbed out into the sultry heat of the deepening evening. "Do you carry transmitter-eyes and bubblebugs in that belt you're wearing?"

"Of course," she said.

"I suggest that you place a few about your person," said Oscar. "I have only the one bubblebug of my own, which I shall mount on my forehead."

Charlotte turned to stare at the building to their right. It did not look in the least like a theater. It might once have been a general store. It was roofless now, nothing more than a gutted shell.

"Why bring us out here to the middle of nowhere?" she demanded, angrily. "Why didn't he just record it on tape for transmission in a theater in San Francisco or New York?" As she spoke, she planted two electronic eyes above her own eyebrows.

Oscar quickly located a downward-leading flight of stone steps inside the derelict building. Charlotte planted head-high nanolights every six or seven steps to illuminate their passage, which had been hollowed out using bacterial deconstructors far more modern than the building itself. By the time they reached the bottom of the stair, there were several meters of solid rock separating her from the car; she knew that her transmitter-eye would only function as a recording-device. At the bottom, there was a door made from some kind of synthetic organic material; it had no handle, but when Oscar touched it with his fingertips, it swung inward. "All doors in the world of theater are open to Oscar Wilde," he muttered sarcastically.

Beyond the doorway was a well of impenetrable

shadow. Charlotte automatically reached up to the wall inside the doorway, placing another nanolight there, but the darkness seemed to soak up its luminance effortlessly, and it showed her nothing but a few square centimeters of matte-black wall. The moment Oscar took a tentative step forward, however, a small spotlight winked on, picking out a two-seater sofa upholstered in black.

"Very considerate," said Oscar, drily. He invited her to move ahead of him, and she did. Five seconds after they were seated, the spotlight winked out. Charlotte could not suppress a small gasp of alarm. The nanolight she had set beside the door shone like a single distant star in an infinite void.

When light returned, it was cleverly directed away from them; Charlotte could not see Oscar, nor her own body. It was as if she had become a disembodied viewpoint, like a bubblebug, looking out upon a world from which her physical presence had been erased. She seemed to be ten or twelve meters away from the event which unfolded before her eyes, but the distance was illusory. Cinematic holograms of the kind to which Michi Urashima had devoted his skills before turning to more dangerous toys were adept in the seductive art of sensory deception.

The "event" was a solo dance. The performer was a young woman, whose face was made up to duplicate the appearance that the image's living model had presented to Michi Urashima's spy-eyes. Only her hair and costume were different; the hair was now long, straight and

jet-black, and she was dressed in sleek, translucent chiffons which were gathered in multicolored profusion about her lissome form, secured at strategic points by gem-faced catches. The music to which she danced, lithely and lasciviously, was raw and primitive. Charlotte knew by now that the original Oscar Wilde had written a play called *Salome*. Forearmed by that knowledge, she quickly guessed what she was to watch.

As the virtual Salome began the dance of the seven veils, the first impression Charlotte formed was that the dance was utterly artless. Modern dance, with all the artifice of contemporary biotechnology as a resource, was infinitely smoother and more complicated than *this*—but she judged that its primitive quality was deliberate. In the nineteenth century, Charlotte knew, there had been something called "pornography." Nowadays, in a world where most sexual intercourse took place in virtual reality, with the aid of clever machinery, the idea of pornography was redundant; everyone now accepted that in the realm of mechanized fantasy, nothing was perverse and nothing was taboo. Charlotte thought she understood, dimly, the historical implications of Salome's silly prancing, but she found it neither stimulating nor instructive. The gradual removal of the veils was simply a laborious way of counting down to a climax she was already expecting. She waited for Salome to acquire a mute partner for her mesmerized capering.

The dancer *did* look as if she were mesmerized. She looked as if she were lost in some kind of dream, not

really aware of who she was or what she was doing. Charlotte remembered that the young woman had given a similar impression during the brief glimpse of her that Gabriel King's cameras had caught. The dance slowed, and finally stopped. Salome stood with bowed head for a few moments, and then reached out into the shadows that crowded around her, and brought out of the darkness a silver platter, on which sat the decapitated head of a man. Charlotte was not surprised, but she still flinched. The virtual head looked more startlingly real than a real head would probably have done, by virtue of the artistry which had gone into the design of its horror-stricken expression and the bloodiness of the crudely severed neck. She recognized the face which the virtual head wore: it was Gabriel King's.

The dancer plucked the head from its resting-place, entwining her delicate fingers in its hair. The silver disappeared, dissolved into the shadow. The dance began again.

How differently, Charlotte wondered, was Oscar Wilde seeing this ridiculous scene? Could he see it as something daring, monstrous and clever? Would he be able to sigh with satisfaction, in that irritating way of his, when the performance was over, and claim that Rappaccini was indeed a genius?

The macabre dance now seemed mechanical. The woman appeared to be unaware of the fact that she was supposedly brandishing a severed head. She moved its face close to her own, and then extended her arms again,

maintaining the same distant and dreamy expression. Then the features of the severed head changed. It acquired an Oriental cast. Charlotte recognized Michi Urashima, and suddenly became interested again, eager for any hint of further change. She fixed her gaze steadfastly upon the horrid head. She had seen no picture of Paul Kwiatek, so she could only infer that the third appearance presented by the severed head was his, and she became even more intent when the third set of features blurred and shifted. The number and nature of the metamorphoses might well be crucial to the development of the investigation. She felt a surge of triumph as she realized that this revelation might vindicate her determination to stay with Oscar Wilde. She did not recognize the fourth face, but she was confident that the bubblebug set above her right eye would record it well enough for computer-aided recognition. How many more would there be?

The fifth face was darker than the fourth—naturally dark, she thought, not cosmetically melanized. She did not recognize this face, either, but she knew the sixth. She had seen it within the last few hours, looking considerably older and more ragged than its manifestation here, but unmistakably the same. It was Walter Czastka.

There was no seventh face. Salome slowed in her paces, faced the sofa where Oscar and Charlotte sat watching, and took her bow. Then the lights came on. Charlotte had assumed that the performance was over, and its object attained, but she was wrong. What she had



so far witnessed was merely a prelude. The lights that came on brought a new illusion, infinitely more spectacular than the last.

Charlotte had attended numerous theatrical displays employing clever holographic techniques, and knew well enough how a black-walled space which comprised no more than a few hundred cubic meters could be made to seem far greater, but she had never seen a virtual space as vast and as ornate as this. Here was the palace in which Salome had danced, painted by a phantasmagoric imagination: a crazily vaulted ceiling higher than that in any reconstructed medieval cathedral, with elaborate stained-glass windows in mad profusion, offering all manner of fantastic scenes. Here was a polished floor three times the size of a sports-field, with a crowd of onlookers that must have numbered tens of thousands. But there was no sense of this being an actual *place*: it was an edifice born of nightmarish dreams, whose awesome and impossible dimensions weighed down upon a mere observer, reducing Charlotte in her own mind's eye to horrific insignificance.

Salome, having bowed to the two watchers who had watched her dance at closer range than any of the fictitious multitude, turned to bow to another watcher: Herod, seated upon his throne. There had never been a throne like it in the entire history of empires and kingdoms; none but the most vainglorious of emperors could even have *imagined* it. It was huge and golden, hideously overburdened with silks and jewels, an

appalling monstrosity of avaricious self-indulgence. It was, Charlotte knew, *intended* to appall. *All* of this was a calculated insult to the delicacy of effective illusion: a parody of grandiosity; an exercise in profusion for profusion's sake.

The king on the throne had drawn himself three times life-size, as a bloated, overdressed grotesque. The body was like nothing any longer to be seen in a world which had banished obesity four hundred years before, but the face, had it only been leaner, would have been the face which Rappaccini wore in the photographs that Hal Watson had shown her the day before. Oscar took her wrist in his hand and squeezed it. "Tread carefully," he whispered, his invisible lips no more than a centimeter from her ear. "This simulation may be programmed to tell us everything, if only we can question it cunningly enough."

Herod/Rappaccini burst into mocking laughter, his tumultuous flesh heaving. "Do you think that I have merely human ears, Oscar? You can hardly see yourselves, I know, but you are not hidden from *me*. Your friend is charming, Oscar, but she is not one of us. She is of an age that has forgotten and erased its past."

*Mad*, thought Charlotte. *Absolutely and irredeemably mad*. She wondered whether she might be in mortal danger, if the man beside her really was the secret designer of all of this.

"Moreau might have approved," Oscar said, off-handedly, "but his vision always outpaced his

capacity for detail. Michi Urashima would not have been satisfied so easily, although I detect his handiwork in some of the effects. Did Gabriel King supply the organisms which hollowed out this Aladdin's cave, perchance?"

"He did," answered Rappaccini, squirming in his huge uncomfortable seat like a huge slug. "I have made art with his sadly utilitarian instruments. I have taken some trouble to weave the work of all my victims into the tapestry of their destruction."

"It's overdone," said Oscar, bluntly. "As a show of apparent madness, it is too excessive to be anything but pretense. Can we not talk as civilized men, since that is what we are?"

Rappaccini smiled. "That is why I wanted you here, dear Oscar," he said. "Only you could suspect me of cold rationality in the midst of all this. But you understand civilization far too well to wear its gifts unthinkingly. You may well be the only man alive who understands the world's decadence. Have the patient bureaucrats of the United Nations Police Force discovered my true name yet?"

"No," said Oscar.

"We soon will," Charlotte interposed, defiantly. The sim turned its bloodshot eye upon her, and she flinched from the baleful stare.

"The final act has yet to be played," Rappaccini told her. "You may already know my true names, but you will

have difficulty in identifying the one which I presently use as my own." The sardonic gaze moved again, to meet Oscar's invisible stare. "You will thank me for this, Oscar. You would never forgive me if I were not just a little *too* clever for you."

"If you wanted to kill six men," said Oscar, "why did you wait until they were almost dead? At any time in the last seventy years, fate might have cheated you. Had you waited another month, you might not have found Walter Czastka alive."

"You underestimate the tenacity of men like these," Rappaccini replied. "You think they are ready for death because they have ceased to live, but longevity has ingrained its habits deeply in the flesh. Without me to help them, they might have protracted their misery for many years yet. But I am nothing if not loyal to those deserving of my tenderness. I bring them not merely death, but glorious transfiguration! The fact of death is not the point at issue here. Did you think me capable of pursuing mere revenge? It is the *manner* of a man's death that is all-important in our day and age, is it not? We have rediscovered the ancient joys of mourning, and the awesome propriety of solemn ceremony and dark symbol. Wreaths are not enough—not even wreaths which are spiders in disguise. The end of death *itself* is upon us, and how shall we celebrate it, save by making a new compact with the Grim Reaper? Murder is almost extinct, and it should *not* be. Murder must be rehabilitated, made romantic, flamboyant, gorgeous, and glamorous! What

have my six victims left to do but set an example to their younger brethren? And who but *I* should appoint himself their deliverer, their ennobler, the proclaimer of their fame?"

"I fear," said Oscar, coldly, "that this performance might not make the impact that you intend. It reeks of falsity."

Rappaccini smiled again. "You know better than that, Oscar," he said. "You know in your heart that this marvelous appearance is real, and the hidden actuality a mere nothing. This is no cocoon of hollowed rock; it is my palace. You will see a finer rock before the end."

"Your representations are deceptive, Dr. Rappaccini," Charlotte put in. "Your daughter showed us Gabriel King's head first and foremost, but Kwiatek died before him, and Teidemann was probably dead even before Kwiatek. It was optimistic, too—we've already warned Walter Czastka, and if the other one can still be saved, we'll save him too."

Rappaccini's sim turned back to her. She had not been able to deduce, so far, how high a grade of artificial intelligence it had. She did not expect any explicit confirmation of her guess that Magnus Teidemann was a victim, or that the woman really was Rappaccini's daughter, but she felt obliged to try.

"All six will go to their appointed doom," the sim told her.

She wanted to get out now, to transmit a tape of this

encounter to Hal Watson, so that he could identify the fifth face, but she hesitated.

"What can these men possibly have done to you?" she asked, trying to sound contemptuous although there was no point. "What unites them in your hatred?"

"I do not hate them at all," replied the sim, "and the link between them is not recorded in that silly Net which was built to trap the essence of human experience. I have done what I have done because it was absurd and unthinkable and comical. Great lies have been banished from the world for far too long, and the time has come for us not merely to tell them, but to *live* them also. It is by no means easy to work against the grain of synthetic wood, but we must try."

And with that, darkness fell, lit only by the tiny star which marked the door through which they had entered the Underworld.

Night had fallen by the time Charlotte and Oscar emerged into the open, but there was a three-quarter moon and the stars shone very brightly through the clear, clean air. The car had gone. Charlotte's hand tightened around the bubblebugs which she had carefully removed from their stations above her eyebrows. She had been

holding them at the ready, anxious to plug them into the car's systems so that their data could be decanted and relayed back to Hal Watson. She murmured a curse.

"Don't worry," said Oscar, who had come out behind her. "Rappaccini will not abandon us. A vehicle of some kind will be along very shortly to carry us on our way."

"Where to?" she asked, unable to keep the asperity out of her voice.

"Westward. We may have one more port of call *en route*, but our final destination will surely be the island where Walter Czastka is. His death is intended to form the climatic scene of this little drama."

"Let's hope it's not too late to prevent that," said Charlotte bitterly. "And let's hope the fifth man is still alive when we get a chance to find out who he is. He may be dead already, of course—your ghoulish friend displayed his victims in the order in which their bodies were discovered, not the order in which they were killed."

"He was never my friend," Oscar objected, "and I am not sure that I like his determination to involve me in this. There is an element of mockery in it."

"Mockery," she said, tersely, "isn't a crime. Murder *is*." She took out her waistphone and tried to send a signal. There was a chance that the power-cell had enough muscle to reach a relay-station. Nothing happened. She turned back to her enigmatic companion.

"Did you understand all that stuff?" she asked him, point-blank.

"I think so," Oscar admitted. "My ancient namesake's *Salome* provided the format, but the set owed more to Gustave Moreau's paintings than Oscar Wilde's humble play. . . ." He broke off. His words had gradually been overlaid by another sound, whose monotonous drone now threatened to drown him out entirely.

"There!" said Charlotte, pointing at a shadow eclipsing the stars. It was descending rapidly toward them, growing hugely as it did so. It was a VTOL airplane, whose engines were even now switching to the vertical mode so that it could land helicopter-fashion. Charlotte and Oscar hurried into the shelter of the building from which they had come, to give it space to land.

The plane had only an AI pilot. While Oscar climbed in behind her Charlotte plugged her waistphone into the comcon and deposited her bubblebugs in the decoder. "Hal," she said, as soon as the connection was made. "Data coming in: crazy message from Rappaccini, delivered by sim. Conclusive proof of Rappaccini's involvement. Pick out the face of the fifth victim and identify it. Send an urgent warning to Walter Czastka. And tell us what course this damn plane is following, when you can track it." The plane had already taken off again.

Hal acknowledged, but paused only briefly before saying: "I'm sure all this is very interesting, but I've closed



the file on Rappaccini. We're concentrating all our efforts on the woman."

"What?" said Charlotte, dumbfounded. "What do you mean, *closed the file*? The tape is proof of Rappaccini's involvement. Have you found out his real name?" Hal was too busy decanting the data and setting up programs to deal with it; there was a frustrating pause. Charlotte looked around. The airplane was a small one, built to carry a maximum of four passengers; there was a frustrating pause. Charlotte looked around. The airplane was a small one, built to carry a maximum, of four passengers; there was a second comcon and a second pair of seats behind the one into which she and Oscar had climbed. Behind the second row of seats there was a curtained section containing four bunks. Oscar was busy inspecting the menu on the food-dispenser, frowning.

"It all depends what you mean by a *real name*," said Hal, finally. "He really was born Jafri Biasiolo. The dearth of information about Biasiolo is the result of poor data-gathering toward the end of the Aftermath. After his first rejuvenation—which changed his appearance to the one that we saw earlier—he began to use the name Rappaccini for all purposes. Later, as he approached his second rejuve, he established half a dozen fake identities under various pseudonyms, including Gustave Moreau. After the rejuve, when he had his appearance considerably modified again, he began using the Moreau name as a primary, and Rappaccini became exclusively virtual. Moreau leased an islet west of Kauai, where he's

spent most of the last twenty-five years, never leaving for more than four or five weeks at a time. There's no evident connection between Moreau and the victims, except that Walter Czastka's his nearest neighbor. So far as we know, Biasiolo never had any connection with the university at Wollongong."

"I don't understand," said Charlotte. "Surely we have enough to arrest Moreau, with all the stuff I've just sent through. Why close the file?"

"Because he's *dead*," Hal replied, smugly. "Ten weeks ago in Honolulu. Details of his birth might be lost in the mists of obscurity, but every detail of his death was scrupulously recorded. There's no doubt that it was him. The common links to his island were closed down before that—he's been shipping equipment and material back to Kauai for over a year. There's nothing there now except the ecosystem which he built. The island's off-limits until the UN can get an inspection team in."

"But he's still *responsible* for all this," Charlotte protested. "He must have set it all up before he died. He and the girl—his daughter."

"Moreau never had a daughter in any of his incarnations. He was sterilized before his first rejuve—even though it wasn't actually a legal requirement back then, it was a point of political principle. He made the customary deposits in a reputable sperm bank, but they've never been touched."

"Oh, come *on*, Hal! He's a top-class genetic

engineer—his sterilization doesn't mean a thing. Look at the tape. She's playing Salome to his Herod!"

"That's not *evidence*," said Hal, sharply. "Anyhow, the exact relationship of the girl to Moreau is neither here nor there. The point is that *she's* the active mover in all this. She's the only one we can put on trial, and she's the one we need to find before the newscasters start billing this mess as the Crime of the Century. If there's any *real* help you can give me, I'd be grateful, but all this theatrical stuff is just more news-fodder, which we can do without. Okay?"

Charlotte could understand why Hal was edgy. News of how Gabriel King and the others had died must have leaked out, and he was very sensitive about cases being publicized before arrests had been made. It wasn't his image or his reputation within the department that he was worried about; it was a point of principle, a private obsession.

"We *are* helping, aren't we?" she whispered, after the inset had disappeared. The question, by necessity, was addressed to Oscar Wilde.

"He won't find her before we do," Oscar said softly. "We've been given the fast track to the climax of the psychodrama. And she *is* his daughter—if not a literal daughter, then a figurative one. I see now why the simulacrum said that we'd have difficulty identifying his true name. Moreau was his *true* name, by then, but he knew that the coincidence would make me assume that it was a mere pseudonym. I must talk to Walter again."

Before he could touch the keyboard, however, another call came in.

"The fifth face is Stuart McCandless," said Hal's voice. "We've spoken to him once but we're trying to get through to him again; his house AI's sent out a summoner. Your plane's heading west, on course for Kauai. You might be able to speak to him in person soon."

Charlotte placed her fingers on the rim of the keyboard, but Oscar put his hand on top of hers, gently insistent. "I have to call Walter," he said. "Dr. Watson will have priority on the call to McCandless."

She let him go ahead, although she knew that she shouldn't let her authority slip away so easily. She, after all, was the investigator. She no longer thought that Oscar was a murderer, but that didn't affect the fact that *he* was the one who was only along for the ride.

Oscar's call was fielded by a sim, which looked considerably healthier than the real Walter had. "Oscar Wilde," he said, curtly. "I need to talk to Walter urgently."

"I'm not taking any calls at present," said the simulacrum, flatly.

"Don't be ridiculous, Walter," said Oscar, impatiently. "This is no time to go into a sulk."

The sim flickered, and its image was replaced by Czastka's actual face. "What do you want?" he said, his voice taut with aggravation.

"You're a player in this game whether you like it or not, Walter," Oscar said, soothingly. "We really do have to try to figure it out."

"I'm not in any danger," said Walter, tiredly. "There's no one else on the island, and no one can land without the house systems knowing about it. I'm perfectly safe. I never heard of anyone called Biasiolo, I've never met Moreau, and I know of no connection between myself and the other names the police gave me that could possibly constitute a motive for murder."

"I don't think the motive is conventional," said Oscar. "This whole business is a publicity stunt, a weird artistic statement, but there must be *some* kind of connection—something that happened at Wollongong."

Czastka looked ominously pale. "I told your friends, Oscar—*I don't remember*. Nobody remembers what they were doing a hundred and thirty years ago. *Nobody*."

"I don't believe that, Walter," said Oscar, softly. "We forget almost everything, but we can always remember the things which matter most, if we try hard enough. This is something which *matters*, Walter. It matters now, and it mattered then. If you try, you can remember."

"I *can't*." The word was delivered with such bitterness and anguish that Charlotte flinched.

"What about you and Gustave Moreau, Walter?" Oscar asked. "Didn't you know he was your neighbor?"

"I've never even *seen* the man," said Czastka. "All I

know about him is the joke the wise guys on Kauai keep repeating. The island of Dr. Moreau, get it? You must—you've probably even *read* the damn thing. You must know, too, that we keep ourselves to ourselves out here. All I want is to keep to myself. *I just want to be left alone.*"

Oscar paused for thought. "Do you *want* to die, Walter?" he asked, finally. His inflection suggested that it was not a rhetorical question.

"No," said Czastka, sourly. "I want to live forever, just like you. I want to be young again, just like you. But when I do die, I don't want flowers by Rappaccini at my funeral, and I don't want anything of yours. When I die, I want all the flowers to be mine. Is that clear?"

"I think we're on our way to see you," said Oscar, placidly. "We can talk then."

"Damn you, Wilde," said the old man, vehemently. "I don't want you on my island. You stay away, you hear? *Stay away!*" He broke the connection without waiting for any response.

Oscar turned sideways to look at Charlotte. His face looked slightly sinister in the dim light of the helicopter's cabin. "Your turn," he said. His smile was very faint.

It didn't take as long to get through as Charlotte had expected. Evidently, whoever had called on Hal's behalf had been brisk and business-like. Stuart McCandless wasn't answering his phone in person, but when Charlotte fed his sim her authority codes it summoned him without

delay.

"Yes?" he said, his dark and well-worn face peering at her with slightly peevisish surprise. "I've hardly begun on the data you people dumped into my system. It's going to take some time to look at it all."

"I'm Charlotte Holmes, Dr. McCandless," she said. "I'm in an airplane that has apparently been programmed by Gustave Moreau, *alias* Rappaccini. He seems intent on providing my companion—Oscar Wilde—with a good seat from which to observe this unfolding melodrama. We're heading out into the ocean from the American coast. We're heading your way and I thought we ought to talk. Have you ever met Moreau?"

McCandless shook his head vigorously. "I've already answered these questions," he said, irritably.

"Have you looked at the tapes of the girl who visited Gabriel King and Michi Urashima? Do you recognize her?"

"I'd be able to study your tapes more closely if you'd allow me time to do it, Ms. Holmes. I'm looking at them now, but in these days of changing appearances it's almost impossible to recognize *anyone*. I don't know whether the person in those pictures is twenty years old or a hundred. I've had dozens of students who were similar enough to be able to duplicate her appearance with a little effort. There's a visitor here now who could only need a little elementary remodeling."

Charlotte felt Oscar Wilde's hand fall upon hers, but

she didn't need the hint. She was already trying to work out how to phrase the next question. "Who is your visitor, Dr. McCandless?" she asked, in the end.

"Oh, there's not the slightest need to worry," McCandless replied. "I've known her for some time. Her name is Julia Herold. I told your colleague in New York all about her."

"Could you ask her to come to the phone?" asked Charlotte. She glanced sideways, very briefly, at Oscar.

"Oh, very well," McCandless said. He turned away, saying, "Julia?"

Moments later he moved aside, surrendering his place in front of the camera to a young woman, apparently in her early twenties. The woman stared into the camera. Her abundant hair was golden red, and very carefully sculptured, and her eyes were a vivid green. *A wig and a bimolecular overlay*, Charlotte thought. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Herold," she said, slowly. "We're investigating a series of murders, and it's difficult to determine what information may be relevant."

"I understand," said the woman, calmly.

Charlotte felt a strange pricking sensation at the back of her neck. *It's her*, she thought. *It has to be her*. Hal Watson was undoubtedly checking the woman out at this very moment, with all possible speed, and if he found anything to justify action, he would act swiftly—but until he did, there was nothing she could do. *She's playing with us*, Charlotte thought. *She has McCandless in the*



*palm of her hand and there's no way we can save him. But she'll never get away. She can't make another move without our knowing about it.*

"May I talk to Dr. McCandless again?" she asked, dully.

They switched places again. Charlotte wanted to say *Whatever you do, don't kiss her!* but she knew how stupid it would sound. "Dr. McCandless," she said, uncomfortably, "we think that something might have happened when you were a student yourself. Something that links you, however tenuously, with Gabriel King, Michi Urashima, Paul Kwiatek, Magnus Teidemann, and Walter Czastka. We desperately need to know what it was. We understand how difficult it is to remember, but ..."

McCandless controlled his irritation. "I'm checking back through my records, trying to turn something up," he said. "I hardly know Czastka, although he lives close by. The others I know only by repute. I didn't even know that I was contemporary with Urashima or Teidemann. There were thousands of students at the university. We didn't all graduate in the same year. We were never in the same place at one time, unless. ..."

"Unless what, Dr. McCandless?" said Charlotte, quickly.

The dark brow was furrowed and the eyes were glazed, as the man reached for some fleeting, fugitive memory. "The beach party . . . ?" he muttered. Then, the

face became hard and stern again. "No," he said, firmly. "I really can't remember."

Charlotte saw a slender hand descend reassuringly upon Stuart McCandless's shoulder, and she saw him take it in his own, thankfully. She knew that there was no point in asking what he had half-remembered. He was shutting her out.

*It's happening now, she thought, before our very eyes. She's going to kill him within the next few minutes, and we can't do a thing to stop it. But we can surely stop her before she gets to Walter Czastka.*

"Dr. McCandless," she said, desperately. "I have reason to believe that you're in mortal danger. I advise you to isolate yourself completely—and I mean *completely*, Dr. McCandless."

"I know what you mean," he retorted testily. "I know how the mind of a policeman works. But I can give you my absolute assurance that I'm in no danger whatsoever. Now, may I get on with the work that your colleague asked me to do?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm sorry." She let him break the connection; she didn't feel that she could do it herself.

When the screen blanked, she turned and said: "He's as good as dead, isn't he?"

"The seeds may already be taking root in his flesh," said Oscar, gently. "It might have been too late, no matter what anyone could have said or done."

"What was it that he started to say?" she asked. "And why did he stop?"

"Something that came to mind in spite of his resistance. Something, perhaps, that Walter might half-remember too, if only he wanted to. . . ."

Charlotte shook her head, tiredly. She called Hal. "Julia Herold," she said, shortly. "Have you tied her in with Moreau yet?"

"No," said Hal, simply. "She's a student. Her career seems quite ordinary, all in order. According to the Net, she wasn't in New York when Gabriel King received his visitor, nor in San Francisco when Urashima was infected. I'm double-checking—if it's disinformation, I'll get through it in a matter of hours."

"She was there," said Charlotte. "Whatever the superficial data-flow says, she was there. It's all in place, Hal—everything except the reason. You've got to stop her leaving the island. Whatever else happens, you mustn't let her get to Czastka."

"Who's her father?" Oscar put in. "Whose child is she?"

"Egg and sperm were taken from the banks," said Hal. "Both donors long-dead. Six co-parents filed the application—no traceable link to anyone involved in this. The sperm was logged in the name of Lothar Kjeldsen, born 2355, died 2417. The ovum was Maria Inacio's, born 2402, died 2423. No duplicate pairing registered, no other posthumous offspring registered to either parent. I'm

checking for disinformation input, in case the entire Herold identity is virtual."

"The mother was born at the same time as the men on the victim list. Could she have known them?"

"It's possible. She was an Australian resident at the appropriate time. There's no trace of her in the University records, but she might have been living next door. What would it prove if she was? She's been dead for a hundred and thirty years. She drowned in Honolulu—presumed accidental, possibly a suicide. This isn't getting us anywhere, Dr. Wilde, and I have a whole panel lighting up on me—I'm cutting off."

The screen went blank yet again.

"She's Rappaccini's daughter," said Oscar, softly. "I don't know which bit of the record's been faked, or how, but she's Rappaccini's daughter. And she'll get to Walter, even if she has to swim."

Charlotte stared out of the viewport beside her. Behind them, in the east, the dawn was breaking. Ahead of them, in the west, the sky was still dark and ominous. Beneath them, the sea was only just becoming visible as fugitive rays of silvery light caught the tops of lazy waves. In these latitudes, the sea was almost unpolluted by the

vast amount of synthetic photosynthetic substances which were daily pumped out from the artificial islands of the Timor Sea; even by day it did not display the defiant greenness of Liquid Artificial Photosynthesis. Even so, this region of the ocean could not be reckoned a marine wilderness. The so-called seven seas were a single vast system, now half-gentled by the hand of man. The Continental Engineers, despite the implications of their name, had better control of evolution's womb than extinction's rack. Even the wrathful volcanoes which had created the Hawaiian islands were now sufficiently manipu-lable that they could be forced to yield upon demand the little virgin territories which the likes of Walter Czastka and Oscar Wilde had rented for their experiments in Creation.

"In my namesake's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Oscar said, ruminatively, "the eponymous anti-hero made a diabolical bargain, exchanging fates with a portrait of himself, with the consequence that his picture was marred by all the afflictions of age and dissolution while the real Dorian remained perpetually young. He cast aside all conventional ideas of morality, determined to savor the entire gamut of pleasurable sensation."

"I'm sure it's great fun," said Charlotte, ironically.

Oscar ignored the remark. "At that time, of course," he said, "the story of Dorian Gray was the purest of fantasies, but we live in a different era now. It is perhaps too early to declare that yours is the last generation

which will be subject to the curse of aging, but I am living proof of the fact that even *my* generation has set aside much of the burden with which ugliness, disease, and the aging process afflicted us in days of old. We are corruptible, but we also have the means to set aside corruption, to reassert, in spite of all the ravages of time and malady, the image which we would like to have of ourselves. Nowadays, everyone who has the means may have beauty, and even those of limited means have a right of access to the elementary technologies of rejuvenation. I am young now for the fourth time, and no matter how often doctors and doubters tell me that my flesh is too weak to weather a fourth rejuvenation, I will not be prevented from attempting it. Nothing will induce me to become like Walter Czastka when I might instead gamble my mortality against the chance of yet another draught from the fountain of youth."

"So what?" said Charlotte. "Why tell me?"

"Because," he said, tolerantly, "that's why Rappaccini expects me to understand what sort of artwork he is designing. That's why he expects me to become its interpreter and champion, explaining to the world what it is that he has done. Because I'm Oscar Wilde—and because I'm Dorian Gray. Men like the first Oscar Wilde and the first Gustave Moreau were fond of likening their own era to the days of the declining Roman Empire, when its aristocracy had grown effete and self-indulgent, so utterly enervated by luxury that its members could find stimulation only in orgiastic excess.

They argued that the ruling class of the nineteenth century had been similarly corrupted by comfort, to the extent that anyone among them who had any sensitivity at all lived under the yoke of a terrible *ennui*, which could only be opposed by sensual and imaginative excess. All that remained for men of genius to do was mock the meaningless of conformity and enjoy the self-destructive exultation of moral and artistic defiance.

"They were right, of course. Theirs *was* a decadent culture, absurdly distracted by its luxuries and vanities, unwittingly lurching toward its historical terminus. The 'comforts' of the nineteenth century—hygiene, medicine, electricity—were the direct progenitors of what we now call the Devastation. Few men had the vision to understand what was happening, and even fewer had the capacity to care. Addicted to their luxuries as they were, even terror could not give them foresight. Blindly and stupidly, they laid the world to waste, and used all the good intentions of their marvelous technology to pave themselves a road to Hell. In the Aftermath, of course, the work of renewal began. Collective control of fertility was achieved, and the old world of hateful tribes was replaced by the world of the Net, which bound the entire human race into a single community. And we were able once again to cultivate our comforts ... to the extent that Rappaccini seemingly believes that the revolution is complete, and that the wheel has come full circle."

"But that's nonsense!" said Charlotte. "There's no way that there could be another Devastation. There

couldn't possibly be another population explosion, or another plague war."

"That's not what Rappaccini fears," said Oscar. "What he's trying to make us see, I think, is the horror of a world inhabited entirely by the *old*: a world made stagnant by the dominion of minds that have lost their grip on memory and imagination alike, becoming slaves to habit, imprisoned by their own narrow horizons. He's telling us that, in one way or another, we must kill our old men. The argument of his artwork is that if we can't liberate our renewable bodies from the frailty of our mortal minds, then the technological conquest of death will be a tragedy and not a triumph. He has undertaken to murder six men who are nearing a hundred and fifty years of age, not one of whom has dared to risk a third rejuvenation, even though it would seem that they have little or nothing to lose—and he has chosen for his audience a man who *has* taken that gamble, hopefully soon enough to avoid the kind of mental sclerosis which has claimed his victims. Can you begin to see what he's about?"

"I can see that he's stark, staring mad," said Charlotte.

Oscar smiled wryly. "Perhaps he is," he said. "His fear is real enough—but perhaps the threat isn't as overwhelming as he seems to think. Perhaps the *old* men will never take over the world, no matter how many they are or how old they grow. Old age is, after all, self-defeating. Those who lose the ability to live also lose



the will to live. But the creative spark can be maintained, if it's properly nurtured. The victory of *ennui* isn't inevitable. If and when we really can transform every human egg-cell to equip it for eternal physical youth, those children will discover ways to adapt themselves to that condition by cultivating eternal *mental* youth. My way of trying to do that is, I admit, primitive— but I am here to help prepare the way for those who come after me. They will be the true children of our race: the first truly *human* beings."

Charlotte felt her eyes growing heavy; she felt drained. If only she had been more alert, she thought, she might have obtained a firmer grasp on Oscar Wilde's arguments. After all, she too retained an echo of the 1890s in her name. Could the small phonetic step which separated "Charlotte" from "Sherlock" really signify such a vast abyss of incomprehension? She knew that she needed sleep, and she felt in need of a soporific. Unfortunately, she was four thousand kilometers away from the ingenious resources of her intimate technology. She looked uncertainly at Oscar Wilde. He was watching her, with a serious expression in his liquid, luminous eyes.

"We ought to get some sleep," Charlotte said. "It'll be late tomorrow before we get to Hawaii." She hesitated, wondering how to proceed, her gaze drifting to the curtain which screened the cabin's bunkspace.

"How my namesake's heart would have warmed to our Virtual Realities and the wonders of our intimate

technology!" Oscar said, as though continuing his reverie. "I fear, though, that we have not yet learned to use our intimate technologies as fully or as consciencelessly as we might. Even in a world of artificial wombs and long-dead parents, we cling to the notion that sexual intercourse is essentially a form of communication, or even communion, rather than an entirely personal matter, whose true milieu is the arena of fantasy, where all idiosyncrasies may be safely unfettered."

Charlotte couldn't help blushing, although she presumed that he had preempted her proposition mainly in order to spare her blushes.

"Thanks for telling me," she said, sharply. "I suppose that if Rappaccini had you on his list of victims, you'd be in no danger."

"Not so," he said. "A kiss is, after all, just a kiss—and I can appreciate a lovely face as well as any man. It is only in matters of *true* passion that I am an exclusive and unrepentant Narcissus."

When Charlotte awoke, the sun was high, but Oscar had darkened the viewports in order to conserve a soft crepuscular light within the cabin of the speeding plane. She sat up and drew the curtain aside to look over the

backs of the seats. Her waistphone was still plugged in to the comcon; data was parading across the main screen at the command of Oscar's deft fingertips.

"Good morning," he said, instantly aware of her movement although he had not turned. "It *is* still morning, thanks to the time-harvesting effects of westward travel. We're less than half an hour from Kauai, but I fear that we'll be unable to do much there except bear witness to the completion of the fifth phase of Rappaccini's grand plan."

Because she was slightly befuddled by sleep, it took her a second or two to work out what he meant. "McCandless is dead!" she said, finally.

"Quite dead," he confirmed. "The local police had him removed to an intensive-care unit as soon as he showed signs of illness, but there was absolutely nothing to be done for him. The progress of his devourers will be tracked with infinite patience by a multitude of observers—the doctors have sent a fleet of nanocameras into his tissues—but to no avail. What remains of Teidemann's body has been found too."

Charlotte donned the tunic of her police uniform. "What about Julia Herold? Have they got her in custody?"

"Alas, no."

Charlotte knew that she ought to have been astonished and outraged, but all that she really felt was a sense of bitter resignation.

"How could they possibly fail to intercept her?"

"She had already left when McCandless began to show signs of distress," said Oscar, who did not seem overly disappointed. "She went for a moonlight swim, and never surfaced again. The eyes set to follow her were mounted on flutterbugs, and by the time suitable submarine eyes entered the water she was beyond reach. Flying eyes are, of course, watching avidly for her to surface, but she must have had breathing apparatus secreted off-shore, and some kind of mechanized transport."

"A submarine?" said Charlotte, incredulously.

"More likely a towing device of some kind. The officer in charge of the failed operation pointed out that there was little more he could have done without a warrant for her arrest. One has now been issued. The Kauai police have sent helicopters to lie in wait for her, but Walter has forbidden them permission to land, and they're not empowered to override his wishes unless and until they actually see her. There's one more police helicopter awaiting our arrival on Kauai."

"Have you talked to Czastka?"

"No. He's refusing all calls. He presumably still thinks that all he needs to do is keep his house sealed. 'Julia Herold,' by the way, is a fiction of disinformation. Your Dr. Watson has proved that the person in McCandless' house was indeed the same one who visited Gabriel King in New York and Michi Urashima in San

Francisco. He is confident that he will be able to prove that she delivered the fatal flowers to Teidemann and Kwiatek too. He assures me that it is only a matter of time before he discloses an authentic personal history."

"Is that everything?"

"By no means. It required all my skills as an organizer to present these edited highlights so economically."

Charlotte looked resentfully at the bright and beautiful young man, who seemed unafflicted by the least sign of weariness. She switched the nearest viewport to reflector mode so that she could straighten her hair, and studied the faint wrinkles that were becoming apparent in the corners of her eyes. They could be removed easily enough by the most elementary tissue-manipulation, but they still served as a reminder of the biological clock that was ticking away inside her. *Thirty years to rejuvenate number one*, she thought, *and counting*. It was not a kind of paranoia to which she was usually prone, but she could not help comparing her flawed features with Oscar's fully-restored perfection.

As soon as they had set down at the Kauai heliport, Charlotte opened the door, and leapt down to the blue plastic apron. The promised helicopter was waiting less than a hundred meters away. Its police markings were a delight to her eyes, holding the promise of *control*. From now on she would no longer be a passenger but an active participant; a pursuer, an active instrument of justice. Oscar kept pace with her in spite of the fact that his gait

seemed much lazier.

"I should leave you here," she said, while climbing aboard. "I can, you know—this isn't public transport."

"You wouldn't be so cruel," he said. He was right.

The helicopter lifted as soon as they were strapped in. Charlotte reached into the equipment-locker under the seat, and brought forth a handgun. She checked the mechanism before clipping it to her belt.

"You're not thinking of using that, I hope?" said Oscar.

"Now the proof's in place," Charlotte answered, tautly, "I can employ any practical measure which may be necessary to apprehend her. The bullets are non-lethal. We're the *police*, remember."

They were traveling at a slower speed than they had previously, but flew so low that their progress seemed more rapid. The downdraft of their blades carved the roiling waves into all manner of curious shapes. High in the sky above them, a silver airship was making its stately progress from Honolulu to Yokohama. Oscar tuned in a broadcast news report. There were pictures of Gabriel King's skeleton, neatly entwined with winding stems bearing black flowers in horrid profusion. This was only the beginning; the AI voice-over promised that details of several more murders would soon be revealed. Charlotte knew that an operation of the size that was now being mounted would attract the attention of half the newshawks in United America and a good few in

not-very-united Eastasia. Flocks of flying eyes would be migrating this way from every direction. The privacy which Walter Czastka so passionately desired to conserve was about to be rudely shattered.

Oscar blanked the newscast as soon as it moved on to more mundane matters, and his fingers punched out Walter Czastka's telephone code. The AI sim which answered had clearly been reprogrammed since Charlotte had last seen it.

"Damn you, Oscar Wilde," it said, without bothering with any conventional identification or polite preliminary. "Damn you and Rappaccini to the darkest oblivion imaginable."

Charlotte turned the camera-eye so that her own image filled the viewfield. "Dr. Czastka," she said, "this is Charlotte Holmes of the UN Police. I need to speak to you, urgently."

"Damn you, Oscar Wilde," replied the sim, stubbornly. "Damn you and Rappaccini to the darkest oblivion imaginable."

Charlotte looked at Oscar, whose face had creased into an anxious frown. "I have a horrible suspicion," he said, "that we might be too late." Charlotte looked at her wristwatch. They were still twenty minutes away from the island. She punched in another code, connecting herself to the commander of the task-force that had surrounded it.

"What's happening?" she demanded.

"No sign of her yet," the answer came back. "If anything happens, Inspector, you'll be the first to know." There was nothing to do but wait, so she sat back in her seat and stared down at the agitated waves. They were still a few minutes away when the voice came back on line. "We have camera-contact," it said. "Relaying pictures."

The screen showed a female figure in a humpbacked wetsuit walking out of the sea, looking for all the world as if she were enjoying a leisurely stroll. She paused at the high tide line to remove the suit and its built-in paralung, then knelt beside the discarded wetsuit and removed something from an inner pocket. Over the voice-link they could hear the officer who had spoken to them instructing her to desist.

Suddenly, the air around the girl was filled by a dense smoke, which swirled in the breeze as it dispersed.

"Alate spores," Oscar guessed. "Millions of them."

Julia Herold stood, with her arms upraised in a gesture of seeming surrender. She had apparently done what she'd come to do.

"Stay in the copters," Charlotte instructed. "The stuff she's released is probably harmless to anyone but Czastka, but there's no need for everyone to take the risk. I'll pick her up myself."

"As you wish," said the other officer, sourly. He evidently thought that Charlotte was intent on appropriating what little glory there might be in making



the arrest.

"I think we may have mistaken the exact form that the final murder was intended to take," said Oscar, quietly. "It's not Walter those spores are after—it's his ecosystem. She came here to destroy his private Creation."

As the helicopter swept in to land Charlotte scanned the trees which fringed the beach. Lush undergrowth nestled about the boles of palmlike trees. She half-expected to see the green leaves already flecked with darker colors, but nothing was happening yet.

"Nothing can stop it," said Oscar, softly, his voice reduced now almost to a whisper. "Each murder is one hundred percent specific to its victim. Walter's own body is safe inside the house, but that's not what he cares about . . . it's not what he *is*. Rappaccini's instruments are going to devour his entire eco-sphere—every last molecule."

For the first time, Charlotte realized, Oscar Wilde was genuinely horrified. The equanimity that had hardly been rippled by the sight of Gabriel King's hideously embellished skeleton was ruffled now. For the first time, Oscar was identifying with one of Rappaccini's victims, seeing Rappaccini as a criminal as well as an artist. But even as Charlotte observed his outrage, Oscar's expression was changing.

"Look!" he said. "Look what kind of demi-Eden Walter Czastka has been endeavoring to build here." The helicopter had set down some thirty meters from the

woman, who still stood there, with her arms upraised. She was taking no notice of them or the other hovering machines; her green eyes were quite blank. Charlotte climbed down, keeping one eye on the woman while she obeyed Oscar's instruction to look inland. She could not see anything surprising or alarming.

"Poor Walter!" said Oscar, sadly. "What a petty Arcadia this is! Immature and incomplete though it undoubtedly is, its limitations already show. Here is the work of a hack trying desperately to exceed his own potential—but here is the work of a man who has not even the imagination of blind and stupid nature. I can see now why Walter tried to keep me away. The mysterious Julia does not have to kiss poor Walter, because Walter is already dead, and he knows it. Even if his heart still beats within his withered frame, he is dead. Rappaccini's worms are feeding on his carcass."

"It looks perfectly ordinary to me," said Charlotte, staring up at the uneven line made by the crowns of Walter Czastka's palmlike trees, as they extended their ample canopies to bask in the life-giving light of the sun.

"Precisely," said Oscar Wilde, with a heavy sigh.

Charlotte moved to confront the woman, who stood statue-still, looking up into the brilliant blue sky.

"Julia Herold," she began, "I arrest you for . . ."

She heard a strange squawking sound behind her, and guessed that someone was trying to attract her attention by shouting over the voice-link to the

helicopter's comcon. She picked up her waistphone impatiently. "It's okay," she said. "I've got her. It's all over."

"Look behind you!" said the voice from the other end, trying to shout at her although the volume control on her waistphone compensated automatically. "

*Corrosion and corruption, woman, look behind you!"*

Uncomprehendingly, Charlotte looked behind her.

Falling toward her from the vivid brightness of the early afternoon sun was a black shadow. At first she could judge neither its size nor its shape, but as it swooped down, the truth became abundantly and monstrously clear. She could not believe the evidence of her eyes. She knew full well that what she was seeing was flatly impossible, and her mind stubbornly refused to accept the truth of what she saw.

It was a bird, but it was a bird like none that had ever taken to the skies of earth in the entire evolutionary history of flight, bigger by far than the helicopters whose automatic pilots were taking evasive action to avoid it. The pinion-feathers of its black wings were the size of samurai swords, and its horrible head was naked, like a vulture's. Its beak was agape, and it cried out as it swooped down upon her. Its cry was a terrible inhuman shriek, which made her think of the wailing of the damned in some Dantean Hell.

Wise panic took hold of her and threw her aside like a rag doll, lest she be struck by the diving impossibility.

She had no time to fire her gun, nor even to think about firing it. Her reflexes rudely cast her down, tumbling her ignomini-ously onto the silvery sand.

Julia Herold didn't move a muscle. Charlotte understood, belatedly, that the raising of her arms was not a gesture of surrender at all. With confident ease, the girl interlaced her fingers with the reaching talons of the huge bird, and was lifted instantly from her feet.

According to all the best authorities, Charlotte knew, no bird could lift an adult human being from the ground—but *this* bird could. It was climbing again now, beating its fabulous night-black wings with extravagant majesty, circling back into the dazzling halo of brilliance that surrounded the tropical sun.

Charlotte reached up her own hand to take the one that Oscar Wilde was extending to her. "Do you remember when Rappaccini's simulacrum said to us, 'This is no cocoon of hollowed rock; it is my palace. You will see a finer rock before the end'?" he asked, resignedly. "The second 'rock' was actually 'roc.' A cheap shot, in *my* judgment."

"Get back in the helicopter," she said, grimly. "I don't know how far or how fast that thing can fly, but she is *not* going to get away."

"I don't think she's even trying," said Oscar, with a sigh. "She's merely escorting us to the much-joked-about island of Dr. Moreau, so that we may cast a critical eye over her father's Creation."

Moreau's island was more or less identical in size and shape to Walter Czastka's. By the time it was in view, Charlotte had Hal Watson on the line, watching the drunken flight of the giant bird through the helicopter's camera-eyes. Huge though it was, the woman's weight was burden enough to make flight very difficult, and Charlotte wondered whether the creature had sufficient strength left to make landfall.

"It is clear," said Oscar, "that the murders were committed partly in order to lay a trail. We shall be the first to reach its end, but by no means the last. Every news service in the world must have dispatched spy-eyes by now. We are about to attend an exhibition, dear Charlotte—one which will put the so-called Great Exhibition of 2505 to shame."

"We picked up enough body-cells at McCandless's house to produce a DNA-spectrum," Hal put in. "The lab people didn't expect any kind of correlation with the people who were registered as Julia Herold's parents, but they found one. According to her genes, Herold is Maria Inacio, saving some slight somatic modifications compatible with cosmetic transformation. Inacio's alleged death in 2423 must be disinformation."

"No," said Oscar, softly. "Maria Inacio was born in

2402; there's no way that she could be Rappaccini's daughter. You won't find Julia Herold's birth recorded anywhere, Dr. Watson. She was born from an artificial womb on the island, not more than twenty years ago."

"A clone!" said Charlotte. "An unregistered clone! But she's not his daughter. You were wrong about that."

"In the literal sense, yes," admitted Oscar, as the bird summoned the last vestiges of its strength for one last surge toward the silver strand where the waves were breaking over Dr. Moreau's island, "but he's raised her from infancy within the confines of his own Garden of Eden, and I'll wager that he has exactly the same degree of genetic relatedness to her as he would have to a daughter: fifty percent."

"You mean," said Charlotte, "that she's his *sister*!"

"No," said Oscar, clenching his fist in a tiny gesture of sympathetic triumph as the bird dropped the girl into the sand and lurched exhaustedly to a sprawling landing twenty meters further on. "I mean that Maria Inacio was Rappaccini's *mother*."

"I suppose you've worked out who his father was, as well?" said Charlotte, as the helicopter zoomed in to land. The helicopter's safety-minded AIs gave the beached roc a wide berth, putting them down sixty meters away from the point where the woman had been dropped; she had already picked herself up and disappeared into the trees fringing the beach. Charlotte unplugged her waistphone from the comcon. She didn't bother

unshipping any transmitter-eyes. Hal would soon have plenty of eyes with which to see. The whole world was coming to *this* party.

"We can narrow it down to one of six," said Oscar, as he opened the door and climbed out of the slightly tilted helicopter. "Perhaps that's as far as Rappaccini cared to narrow it down. It's possible, if McCandless's half-recollection of a beach-party at which all six of the victims might or might not have been present means anything at all, that Maria Inacio was uncertain which of them was the father of her child. I strongly suspect, though, that a genetic engineer of Rappaccini's skill and dedication could not have been content with any such uncertainty."

Charlotte looked uneasily along the strand at the chimerical creature that was peering at them dolefully from an unnaturally large and bloodily crimson eye. "It was Walter Czastka," she said, knowing that she could claim no credit simply for filling in the blank.

"It was Walter Czastka," he echoed. "Poor Walter! To harbor such genius in his genes, and such mediocrity in his poor mortal body."

Charlotte wasn't about to waste time feeling sorry for Walter Czastka—not, at any rate, for *that* reason—but she couldn't help feeling a pang of sympathy for poor Maria Inacio, dead before her life had really begun, leaving nothing behind but a child of uncertain parentage. Such things couldn't happen nowadays, when all children were sterilized as a matter of course—and only a tiny

minority ever applied for desterilization in order to exercise their right of reproduction while they were still alive—but Maria Inacio had been a child of the Aftermath. Hers had been the last generation of women victimized by their own fertility.

Charlotte and Oscar walked side by side to the place where Rappaccini's mother/daughter had disappeared. They kept a wary eye on the roc, but the bird made no move toward them. It seemed to be in considerable distress. As they paused before moving into the trees, Charlotte saw the bloodshot eyes close. They walked into the forest, following a grassy pathway that had all the appearance of an accident of nature, but which had in fact been designed with the utmost care, as had every blade of grass.

The trunk of every tree had grown into the shape of something else, as finely wrought in bronze-barked wood as any sculpture. No two were exactly alike: here was the image of a dragon rampant, here a mermaid, here a trilobite, and here a shaggy faun. Many were the images of beasts that natural selection had designed to walk on four legs, but all of those stood upright here, rearing back to extend their forelimbs, separately or entwined, high into the air. These upraised forelimbs provided bases for spreading crowns of many different colors. Some few of the crowns extended from an entire host of limbs rather than a single pair, originating from the maws of krakens or the stalks of hydras.

The animals whose shapes were reproduced by the



trunks of the trees all had open eyes, which seemed always to be looking at Charlotte no matter where she was in relation to them, and although she knew that they were all quite blind, she could not help feeling discomfited by their seeming curiosity. Her own curiosity, however, was more than equal to theirs. Every tree of the forest was in flower, and every flower was as bizarre as the plant which bore it. There was a noticeable preponderance of reds and blacks. Butterflies and birds moved ceaselessly through the branches, each one wearing its own coat of many colors, and the tips of the branches moved as though stirred by a breeze, reaching out towards these visitors as though to touch their faces. There was no wind: the branches moved by their own volition, according to their own mute purpose.

Charlotte knew that almost all of what she saw was illicit. Creationists were banned from engineering insects and birds, lest their inventions stray to pollute the artwork of other engineers, or to disrupt the domestic ecosystems of the recently renewed world-at-large. When the final accounting was complete, and all of Rappaccini's felonies and misdemeanors had been tabulated by careful AIs, he would probably turn out to have been the most prolific criminal who had ever lived upon the surface of the earth. Rappaccini had given birth to an extraordinary fantasy, fully aware that it would be destroyed almost as soon as others found out what he had done—but he had found a way to show it off first, and to command that attention be paid to it by every man, woman, and child in the world. Had he, perhaps, hoped

that his contemporaries might be so overawed as to reckon him a *god*, far above the petty laws of humankind? Had he dared to believe that they might *condone* what he had done, once they saw it in all its glory?

Rappaccini's creative fecundity had not been content with birds and insects. There were monkeys in the trees, which did not hide or flee from the visitors of their demi-paradise, but came instead to stare with patient curiosity. The monkeys had the slender bodies of gibbons and lorises, but they had the wizened faces of old men. Nor was this simply the generic resemblance that had once been manifest in the faces of long-extinct New World monkeys; *these* faces were actual human faces, writ small. Charlotte recognized a family of Czastkas and an assortment of Kings and Urashimas, but there were dozens she did not know. She felt that her senses were quite overloaded. The moist atmosphere was a riot of perfumes, and the murmurous humming of insect wings composed a subtle symphony.

*Is it beautiful?* Charlotte asked herself, as she studied the sculpted trees staring at her with their illusory eyes, marveling at their hectic crowns and their luminous flowers. *Or is it mad?*

It *was* beautiful: more beautiful than anything she had ever seen or ever hoped to see. It was much more beautiful than the ghostly echoes of Ancient Nature that modern men called wilderness, doubtless more beautiful than Ancient Nature itself—even in all its

pre-Devastation glory—could ever have been. Charlotte could see, even with her unschooled eyes, that it was the work of a *young* man. However many years Rappaccini had lived, however many he had spent in glorious isolation in the midst of all this strange fecundity, he had never grown old. This was not the work of a man grown mournful in forgetfulness; this was the work of a man whose only thought was of the future that he would not live to see: its novelty, its ambition, its progress. This was Moreau's island, by which its creator meant *morrow's* island.

It was mad, too, but its madness was essentially divine.

In the heart of the island, she expected to find a house, but there was none. There was only a mausoleum. She knew that Moreau's body could not be inside it, because he had died in Honolulu, but it was nevertheless his tomb. It was hewn from a white marble whose austerity stood in imperious contrast to the fabulous forest around it. It bore neither cross, nor carven angel, nor any inscription.

"Like you and I, dear Charlotte," Oscar said, "Jafri Biasiolo was delivered by history to the very threshold of true immortality, and yet was fated not to live in the Promised Land. How he must have resented the fading of the faculties which had produced *all this!* How wrathful he must have become, to see his fate mirrored in the faces and careers of all those who might—had the whim of chance dictated it—have been his father. When the true

immortals emerge from the womb of biotechnical artifice, they will no longer care about who their fathers were or might have been, for they will indeed be *designed*, by men like gods, from common chromosomal clay. He, alas, was not."

Charlotte looked around curiously as she spoke, wondering where the woman might be. "*He* may be dead," she reminded Oscar, grimly, "but his accomplice and executioner will have to stand trial."

"Yes, of course," he murmured. "She must settle her own account with the recording angels of the Celestial Net." So saying, he walked around the massive mausoleum. Charlotte followed him.

The woman was sitting on the pediment on the further side of the tomb, facing a crowd of leaping lions and prancing unicorns, vaulting hippogriffs and rearing cobras, all hewn in living wood beneath a roof of rainbows. Hundreds of man-faced monkeys were solemnly observing the scene. Her vivid green eyes were staring vacuously into space. It was as though she could not see the fantastic host which paraded itself before her. She was quite bald, and the dome of her skull was starred with a thousand tiny contact-points, glistening in the sunlight. The golden red wig that she had worn lay like stranded sea-weed between her feet. In her left hand, she held a flower: a gorgeously gilded rose. In her right hand was a curious skull-cap, made of exceedingly fine metal mesh.

Oscar Wilde picked up the gilded rose, and placed it

carefully in his buttonhole, where he was accustomed to wearing a green carnation. Charlotte picked up the skull-cap, and turned it over in her hands, marveling at its thinness, its lightness, and its awesome complexity.

"What is it?" she asked, as her eyes dutifully compared its shape to the contours of the girl's strangely decorated skull.

"I imagine," said Oscar, "that it is your murderer's accomplice and executioner: Rappaccini's daughter. The Virtual Individual which has moved this Innocent Eve through the world, fascinating her appointed victims and luring them to the acceptance of her fatal kisses, is the vengeful ghost of Rappaccini himself, left behind to settle *all* his accounts on earth. When your Court of Judgment sits, *that* will be the only guilty party that can be summoned to appear before it. No part of this project originated within the mind and purpose of the girl herself. You may add trafficking in illegal brainfeed equipment to the seemingly endless list of Dr. Moreau's crimes."

Charlotte let out her breath in a long, deep sigh that sounded exactly like one of Oscar Wilde's. She looked up into the little tent of blue sky above the mausoleum, which marked the clearing in which they were standing. Already, the sky was full of flying eyes.

*This is Rappaccini's funeral, she thought, and all of this was his last gift to himself: his last and finest wreath. It's a great symbolic circle woven out of life and death, laying claim to the only kind of immortality he could design for himself. Everybody in the world has*

*been invited, to mock or mourn or marvel as they please*

.

The eyes, she knew, had ears as well. The words that she and Oscar spoke could be heard by thousands of people all over the world, and would in time be relayed to billions. Oscar was looking upward too, with a curious smile on his face.

"It was, after all," he said, wryly, "a perfect murder."