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Set

Takes place in the archive room of the family Hohenzollern auf Schwabia. It's an elegant room, well appointed. A curving bookcase sits on a carved dias, taking up a quadrant of the back wall, with a curved walkway across the front, all in glossy red-grained wood, many thick tomes, folios, manuscripts, scrolls, photographs, many curios, bricabrac, boxes, ornate coffers, a comfortable couch at floor level in front of the dias, flanked by display cases, lighted.

A double door glass-front cabinet flanks the entrance SL with a basilisk tapestry opposite on the bookcase endwall. Funerary jars fill about half of the cabinet. At SR a similar solid front armoire as a clothes closet. A ladder bolted to the wall between the bookcase and the armoire allows access to the tops of both of them. A rolltop tambour desk hides computer equipment.

The cabinet is a convenient roost for Flux, an oval window above the bookcase allows him exit and entrance. From there he has a de facto platform set of steps down to the floor. He is an adept hopper and climber. Centre front stage hangs a rotating pendulum. It spirals in over a rug woven with descending rainbow patterns, from UV to IF to black at the center. Flux draws his life force from the pendulum. When it spirals to a stop, he enters his sculpture, his aura imprisons him, he can longer leave his form. A glass bowl of water in the left display case; a candelabrum in the other. Massive roof beams above.

Flux leaves via the roof. The pendulum rig is gimmicked to run off a motor; it can start and stop at will. Flux is of diminutive stature, about four feet tall, with a short bony beak, cockscomb, prehensile forked tongue that can spit vemon. He moves in a hoppity slide, hoppity slide fashion, deploys his rudimentary wings with chitinous crackle, when he deploys his wings, a formidable beast.

Beneficent. A loyal courtier. A royal retainer nearly half an eon. Keeper of the truth. Record scribe, translator eidetic memory, it best be that you befriend him since he can fry a bat on the wing at fifty feet, gaze into his eyes, he will show you the real thing. Benediccio, Flux is approaching the end of his tenure, circling the drain. He's waiting for the apostolic succession of the knowledge he's amassed. Friends for life, that's how it works.

How Flux moves round the stage is visually disturbing; each lunge forward seems like an attack. Which it could be. Friends for life. Flux speaks in a crockish lisp-hiss. Imagine an owl's cronecrackacraka with a guttural hiss, that's the basilisk when it speaks. An excellent mimic. The cooing of a dove or a well-satisfied turkey hen, Flux has many dialects, including old ostrich and ophidian. Friends for life. Remember that.

He's been waiting, for more than a century, for Meral Bernouli to enter this place. Several generations ago great-great-grandpa Bernouli hatched into a Hohenzollern. So that's the connection. Some admixture of Attila the Hun, some Cossack, way back to Poseidon, an impeccable lineage of note. Much attenuated now. Meral has recently become an orphan but she doesn't know it yet. She's been obsessively searching for her mother. Meral is fifteen and a half. She's climbing up the stairs now. Flux climbs the ladder to his perch on the armoire, freezes into place. She's about to traverse a major change in her life, she's right outside the door, ecce vox veritas!

Scene I

[Meral's voice off-stage far away echoing up stone stairs.]

M: Mama! [Her voice draws near, at the balcony outside] Mama? [Meral enters from the SL doorway, stands in the entrance, she wears a light grey sweatsuit, no shoes, hair in braids]

M: Mom? [takes a good look all around, fingers the basilisk tapestry]

M: Can you help me? [She examines the glass front cabinet just to her right.]

M: (with resignation) Uh huh. [M opens door, takes out last jar, reads inscription, reads others, nods, removes lid, speaks into jar]

M: Hi Gramma (visibly upbeat).

M: Warmer ... warmer ... [replaces lid, jar on shelf, lines up the inscription, closes door]

M: [to audience] I'm looking for my mom. Have you seen my mother? No? [She approaches the pendulum]

M: And what manner of marvelous device is this? Indigo spilling down from black nothing. [opens tambour desk]

M: Ha! A scanner. [looks at bookcases] Probably for you all, huh? [stands before armoire, notices Flux crouched above on his roost]

M: Oh, hello there. I wish you were real. I've heard about you. I wish you could talk.

F: (cocks his head) Lady Meral, I *am* real and I do talk. [he hops to the desk, onto the chair, stands on it facing her as on the dock before the bar in a court of law, speaks sooth in a guttural lisp, formal bow] [she recognizes this, replies with a curt little bob]

F: I am Flux. These last five hundred years, your family's personal and private secretary, accumulator of the hoard, your librarian of the collection. If I may [she nods assent]

F: The Bernouli family holdings are rich in science, we keep Daniel Bernouli's notebooks circa 1730 in folio. We have your great-umpteenth-great-grandpa Johan's violin. We administer basic patents in fluid dynamics and we have several Euripides. Late when he wandered Macedonia. Lady Meral, your lineage goes back to when Poseidon was a highland horse god. The collection is unique. Priceless. It's yours. Tell me what you want to do.

M: (blinks) Can you find my mom? And tell me ...

F: (nods) I can. I will. When did you last see her?

M: A week ago.

F: Where?

M: At the garden gate.

F: She was going out?

M: To the market. For food.

F: What have you been eating?

M: Figs. Weeds. Water from the flowerpots.

F: I will bring food in a basket. And news, I will bring you news. Stay here and wait. It's not safe to wander the city. Marauders ply their trade. I fear the worst.

F: Allow me leave. Let me taste your wrist and your feet. [He looks at each in succession, she extends her right arm, his tongue briefly encircles her wrist, beneficent bondage. Then he jumps from the chair, touches his tongue to her feet, goes to rummage in the armoire, surfaces with a shoe, sticks his snout in it, with appreciation. Fifteen years old, still definitive. Good. I have her now. F carefully replaces the shoe, leaves the door slightly ajar, with precision, a subtle invitation. Then he swarms up the ladder onto the bookcase.]

F: Be patient. I must be furtive. [he opens the rose window, slips out. She tends to the scanner, powers up, plugs in some wires, scans her own outplayed hands, prints the image, signs it.]

M: Signed and dated. [to audience] We'll frame and hang it so all of you can see what I did here. [she examines the closet, takes a large fur coat, drapes it about her, sits on the couch, stares at the pendulum and the invisible forces beyond it.]

[Scrim down]

Scene II

[morning light streams in through the door and rosewindow. Meral is asleep on the couch, under the greatcoat, feet tucked under the other pillow, face to the audience, head to SR. Flux enters by the window. He lets down a basket on a cord. Follows it down via the ladder. Flux removes a mortuary jar from the basket, cradles it, takes it around the dias, hiphop onto the display case, onto the floor, to the glass front case with yes all the other jars. There. He opens the door, sets the jar into its niche, lines up the inscriptions, bows deep, then closes the glass door. M has been watching him. He joins her at the couch, she makes room for him, he pulls the basket down between them.]

F: Eat first. Here, bakclava, and pomegranate wine. [he opens the packages]

F: Olives, parmasiano.

M: Food in the face of trauma?

F: Exactly so. Eat. [He breaks bread, offers a dish of salt. She accepts. They eat in silence. He uncorks a bottle, hands it over. They drink from the bottle, they eat dates, grapes, mandarin oranges. Then they eat the marscapone.]

M: Tell me now.

F: (sits up straight) Mistress Meral, Lady Bernouli, I am oath-bound to tell you the truth. A little ouzo. [he pours from a flask. She drinks, he drinks from the same little cup]

F: (evenly) Your mother is dead. I had no problem differentiating your spoors at the garden gate, yours returned, hers went out. I followed hers. It must have happened right away, about halfway to the market in one of those little back alleys. Sniper. She still had her purse. I've brought it, and her ring. I cremated her body, administered last rites as per her wishes, have placed the urn, have hereby discharged my obligation to her in full forthwith.

M: (long stony-faced silence, deep sigh) What now?

F: You are the last of your line. Without you the museum ends. I cannot do it alone. My time is short here. I've already overstayed my tenure.

M: (resignation) You said you feared the worst. Did you have an inkling?

F: Your mother didn't visit much up here. Busy with her family. Then the bad times started. Your father didn't come home. Your brothers all at once. Then your sister by slavers. Your mom got angry, took unnecessary chances. We argued about this. She said, "No, it's my city, my market, getoutta my way." After that, I plied my trade and brushed up on my Greek. There was nothing I could do. Crazy guys with long guns and telescopes. Turned it into no-man's land. So. Yes. I knew. Statistically optimistic. [F starts poking inside the basket]

M: Don't push food at me. I've had enough.

F: (undeterred) Yes'm. [turns open end of basket to her. She delves in immediately.]

M: A tomato! My mom left to get some of these while they were in season in the south. [she considers the scene at the garden gate with a little salt and crackers. Then she clams up. F retrieves comestibles, removes basket to desk]

M: Was she suicidal?

F: Driven. Face to the pavement. Obsessive. Those last two years she didn't care any more about herself. You some, me very little, willing it to be over by raging willpower, I have seen this, wild-eyed. [they sit centered staring out to the audience through the pendulum]

F: Light depends from, is centered out of darkness. Light is an energy, all energies require conductors, very likely darkness is the conductor by which light descends. We can visualize this [he indicates the pendulum] as an optical transformer. A metaphor. For the influx of light. At lightspeed everything is possible, everything can be decrypted.

M: I can see a glittering spiral crawl down the cable.

F: It's a powerful device. It taps into plasmatic consonants. Potential is infinite. Mere matter rips out in just a few places. Most of the universe is dark. Dark is the conductor to seriously twisted energy. Lightning bolts. Sunbursts. Flux lives in all of this. There are other ways of life than aliphatic hydrocarbons.

M: A useful device for mental gymnastics. Very nice rainbows.

F: It spirals inward very gradually, imperceptibly, sometimes a lot if I expend a lot of juice.

M: Are you dying?

F: Oh no, hardly that. Quite on the contrary. When the plumbob enters null, I get to recharge, take a vacation.

M: It's hypnotic.

F: I have told you this. We are eager for transcendence.

M: What am I to do, Flux, what?

F: Stay here. Hide from the thugs. Help me copy this, it is your life collection, what your great-aunt Puella thought important, her silver hair pins, and your seashell box with the scallops on it, incunabula, one-of-a-kind that define you and incidentally represent some of the finest scientific thinking of its day, worthy, I say worthy of showtime, I say showtime showtime awrk.

M: Haven't I already agreed to help you with this? If not me then who else? Allow me.

F: Agreed. Forthwith.

M: What happens when the plumbob points to the center of the medallion and no longer moves?

F: I withdraw into my form. This can be anything. I thought Culpepper's *Bestiary* was amusing. I freeze. I hear and see, watch but do not move except at really huge expenditures of energy. I recharge in glorious overtones. Scintillant. Imperative.

[Drop scrim].

Scene III

[Late afternoon, orange light streams through the door. Meral is at the desk scanning the last pages of a large book taken from a stack on the right display cabinet. Flux enters by the door, unusual for him. He sets the basket on the left display case, immediately returns to the door, stands to test the outside air, head to and fro, tongue extended, dissatisfied, he shrugs, returns to the basket, removes a framed copy of Meral's hands, shows it to her, she smiles, nods, he takes adhesive peel-away hook from the desk, sticks the hook to the side of the desk facing the audience, hangs the image]

F: It's official. You're the archivist. [to audience] Let it be known that I pass the baton to Meral Bernouli.

M: [closes the book, shuts down scanner] Done. Phew. I figured I might as well start while you were out. [Flux takes the book, sets it on the stack, picks up the entire stack and moves it to the dias, then climbs the ladder and replaces them into the bookcase. While she hands them up, they discuss what they are.]

F: Antoine Court de Gebelin's *Monde Primitif*. In nine volumes.

M: Rare?

F: Valuable. You'll find other sets in the Wewelsburg collection and at the Sorbonne. A major opus. For its time. He devotes a chapter to the Tarot in Volume 8. Heh, wrong on almost every count. But still impressive. Kind of like Piazzzi Smythe on the Great Pyramid. Great lithographs but light on truth.

M: Amazing how well we lie in print. [She hands up the last one, then approaches the basket with glad anticipation. It's become their family ritual together.]

M: Sausage, bread, cheese, what's in these little jars?

F: Prawns in aspic. I also found a canned food stash not too far away and a pharmacy with vitamins and antibiotics. [She prepares to settle in. Suddenly his head comes up, he takes a flying leap off the dais, wings extended. At the door.]

F: Maledictae! [He whirls, palms up, herding her before him, urgently]

F: Mistress, I've made a terrible mistake. I've been lax with my chameleon camouflage. They've seen me and followed me here. Evil approaches. I must confront it quickly now, do exactly as I say. I swear I'll defend you with my life. Into the armoire, hide. Not a sound. These men kill for pleasure. Hideous. Silence. Sssilence. [She disappears into the closet, he closes the doors, scrambles up the ladder and hunkers down behind the low parapet that runs along the top. Boots on the stairs, scraping sounds, heaving stuff coming up, dragged along the balcony.] [We won't dignify them with names. They're just numbers in non-descript fatigues. M1 carries the gun; M2 is the servile drudge/decoy; they are a prurient co-dependency.]

M1: OK. Go!

M2: I hate this part.

M1: Get in there. [M2 flits past the doorway, then peeks around the corner, reluctantly steps through, fingers the tapestry, looks at the cabinet, beckons to M1. M1 enters, gun at the ready. It's a long rifle. He herds M2 before him.]

M2: This wall hanging might be worth something. Easy to transport. And maybe those jars.

M1: The jars are no good. Names and numbers don't sell.

M2: How about all those books.

M1: Burn 'em on the balcony. Set up a grill. Roast something.

M2: Little boxes of something. Could be valuable.

M1: Check the clothes closet. [He hangs back while M2 opens the doors, discovers Meral.] [M1 is at the basket, cramming sausage down his gullet.]

M2: Look here! Nice. Save some of that for me. [M2 drags Meral out, roughs her up. M1 sets the gun against the wall between the armoire and desk. It's their fatal mistake.]

M1: Don't fight it, honey. [she goes limp while they pull off her sweatsuit, then push her to the couch. Meral falls prone, face out, feet to the door.][As M1 grabs her by the throat, M2 hangs back, Flux extends his wings. That sound attracts M2's attention. He turns to the armoire. Flux hits him square in the chest with a sort of venomous spit. M1, still intent on Meral, misinterprets the splatter.]

- M1: You can piss on her later. [M2 inhales, gasps, splutters, grabs his own throat, starts shrieking, whirls to the audience, tries for the bowl of water in the left cabinet. Meral languidly raises her leg, points her foot at M2, who mistakes her rotating foot for the beast that just attacked him, lurches blubbering to SL, collapses in the doorway, occasionally moans, makes escape motions with his feet, then goes quiescent. M1 releases Meral, turns to face Flux.]
- F: (conversationally) Meral, cover your eyes with your hands. [she does so] [bright red strobe flash from the armoire hidden by F's body. M1 freezes.]
- F: (continues in the same laconic tone) All done. You can look now. I've fried the red blood cells in his retinae, so he's blind. And I've coagulated the blood in his heart so it can't pump any more. It will take him several minutes to die, so he's still potentially dangerous. Not as quick as organo-phosphate spit. Maybe this one would like to do something right with the last two minutes of his life. Useful. Perhaps atone (directly to M1)... time's running out. [Meral takes him by the hand, leads him to the door, he follows her willingly.]
- M: Drag your friend to the balcony. [She stands naked in the doorway, issues further commands.] That's good. Right to the railing. [Sounds of dragging.]
- M: Lift him up. Now tip him over. [Sound of a sack of potatoes hitting the ground]
- M: Now yourself. Just lean forward. Go ahead. Dive, it won't hurt. [second body hits the ground]
- M: Good boy. [cue pendulum ritard. By the end of this scene, it should circumscribe half the medallion. [M turns, stands in doorway, hands on the jambs. F slides down, stands on the chair facing her.]
- F: You lied.
- M: Open wide. (Quite pleased with herself) This won't hurt a bit.
- F: Agreed. Sometimes a lie is necessary to propagate progress. [M takes two steps forward. F regards her carefully. Flicks his tongue to taste her presence.]
- F: You've changed. This is the moment of transition. [M takes two more steps to CS. She undoes her braids, shakes out her hair. F steps down, opens a drawer in the armoire, takes the gun and lays it in there, slams it shut.]

F: We collect our enemies' weapons. [Feral grin from M. F gathers up the sweatsuit, folds it, she moves as if to take it.]

F: No, you're done with this. You present a formidable presence. You should look the part. [he takes a pair of black suede boots from the armoire.]

F: Here, I got these for you ten years ago, knowing that you'd come to this passage. New, never worn. Yours yours. Now. [he sets them before her, she steps into them.]

M: Exactly right. Soft, supple. [he turns to peruse the clothing.] Vibram soles. Electrical insulators. How's about this one? [he fingers a black dress trimmed with silvery blue wolf fur]

M: I've been admiring that one.

F: So be it. If you allow me. [He hops onto the chair. She brings him the dress.]

F: Face the outside. Henceforth I shall be at your back. [He shakes the dress out. She slips into it, right arm first, then left. She turns to face him.]

F: There's hooks and eyelets here and here at the collar bones [he demonstrates]. This one first, so now it hangs straight, and then there's this one for a balanced bodice. It's a little loose right now but you'll grow into it. Further closures at the waist and thigh. Notice the sewn-in holster? [he taps her crotch] Reach in with your right hand. It accommodates your mother's Beretta. Think carefully. Do you want it? [She nods, mute. He retrieves it from the desk, demonstrates how it works]

F: She had it in her purse. It wouldn't have done her any good. Not out there. [He removes the clip, rolls the bolt, drops a bullet on the desk.]

F: Seven in the clip, one in the chamber. Semi-automatic as fast as you can squeeze the trigger. Laser-dot sight, accurate to several hundred feet, depending on the type of cartridge. There is no safety. The gun runs on a battery. When it's in the holster it cannot fire. It switches on as soon as it comes out. I can supply shorts for target practice, soft nose lugs that splatter, and steel tips that explode on contact. I recommend that you wear it unloaded until you're comfortable with it. I adjure

you to shoot in anger only in extremis. I hereby endow you with your birthright. Be thou well with it. [He hands it over, she slips it into its hiding place. He motions her backwards, pushing her away, regards her critically, comes to a decision.]

F: So. [she stands, poised on the cusp of past and future, eternally now, turns in place, nostrils flared, eyes tight, lips stretched thin, teeth bared]

F: Behold. (to the audience) All right. Regal. Self-assured. Potentially lethal. [to Meral] My mistress, I've served your mother, her mother and several of your lineage before you. Yours is the completion, the omega, the chariot, the way forward. You are no longer a girl. You are a woman. I have been and will be with you. [he bows deep from the chair, hands in supplication. She steps forward, lays her right hand on his crest. Likewise inclines her head towards him. His tongue caresses her face.]

M: I'm in your debt, Flux. I don't know how I can possibly repay you. We must examine the future at hand.

F: Well said. Agreed. Stand back, straighten your shoulders slightly back. Tighten your neck muscles. Keep your eye slightly above the horizon. Lead with your libido. Never, I say never, doubt your ability. I have spoken. [They relax from the ceremonial to the ordinary. He jumps down.]

F: Are you hungry?

M: Not a chance. I'm completely wired.

F: Is the basket tainted?

M: Perhaps.

F: Best then to be cautious. I'll dispose of it and the other offal. So. [The pendulum has reached its new equilibrium.] [He slumps, hunches his shoulders.]

F: Wired. Understandable. I feel ... not for a long time ... I feel ... this must be ... tired. Gravity encumbers me. [He crawl up on the couch, rests his head on a

pillow. She practices some moves with the Beretta. Presently he falls asleep. She takes the great-coat from the closet, covers him, regards the pendulum, pulls the chair close to it, meditates on it, palms outstretched as if to warm her hands. Croons a tuneless melody. Then silence.]

[Scrim down]

Scene IV

[Noon sun pours through the door and window. Several boxes and baskets arrayed along the bookcase top. M comes dancing through the door, bobbing and weaving.]

M: [to audience] It's a glorious time to be alive. [Once round the pendulum, facing it, thence to the desk where she turns on the scanner, then a sudden whirl, draws the Beretta in one practised motion, shines the laser dot on the books seemingly at random, goes retrieve that book, and proceeds to scan it. While humming a more recognizable tune.] [F enters by the window, pushes a box through into line with the others, sets a glass jar on the case, treats it very carefully, locks the window with finality, crawls to the ladder with the jar, collapses on the bookcase. He speaks slowly.]

F: I ... think ... that's my last time ... out. We'll leave the roof ... to the pigeons ... and gargoyles. Here. Take this. [She receives the jar, sets it on the right-hand display case.]

M: ?

[He lays his snout over the edge.]

F: Leave me here ... continue. Let's ... talk. [She continues scanning. She flips a page.]

M: What does "quare" mean?

F: Spell it.

M: Q.U.A.R.E.

F: Is that "Brendan ... Behan?"

M: Yes.

F: The quare ... fellow ... is to be ... executed. Near death ... allows .. facili .. facili ... facilitates ... clairvoyance ... farsight ... farsight ... truth speak.

M: When I covered my own eyes, I saw myself leading a dead man. And then it happened. Like that?

F: Yes. Death empowers. You have it ... practise it.

M: Are you dying?

F: No one ... ever ... truly dies. I just need ... to plug in.

M: What happens if you don't? [She keeps scanning during the discourse.]

F: Thinking does not ... stop. Only the husk ... is abandoned.

M: Because the universe thinks herself into existence?

F: More like ... sings ... celebrates.

M: So we can learn. We are alive for the experience?

F: So. Otherwise there would be ... no purpose ... to it.

M: For the knowledge freely extended. That's why this is here. [She points at the archive.]

F: There is no ... no ... door. All are welcome.

M: Knowledge benefits all.

F: So is it ... ordained.

M: We are curious. Maria Montessori thought that we teach ourselves. Just make the wherewithal available.

F: Just ... so.

M: How can thinking be after we die?

F: Self-knowledge is .. our birthright. The universe ... affords ... infinite ... interconnectivity. It must ... think.

M: Everything thinks? Even the trees are self-aware?

F: Each ... according to ... its kind. To teach ... is divine. Some take many ... tries ... attempts ... to get it right. All expression ... is valid.

M: Did I do wrong?

F: They will learn. Even them.

M: If we don't defend ourselves there'd be no chance for evolution.

F: True.

M: It felt good. Was I wrong to do it?

F: Triumph ... feels good. Vengeance is ... is ... wrong. It lends to indiscriminate ... to ... everyone loses ... to ...horrendous ...to useless ... don't.

M: Noted. I won't. I can still feel it and I won't go there again. This is true?

F: True. [cue final pendulum ritard]

M: What will happen to me?

F: Oh. You'll continue ...

M. Kids?

F: One daughter. You'll name her ... Ordinale. She will start ... a new ... lineage. Tangential ... to your sphere.

M: (musing) A daughter. When?

F: You Bernouli women ... mature ... late ... physically. Wait 10 years ... for ... your pelvic foramen ... to get big enough ... to birth ... a child.

M: How?

F: You will go it ... alone. In the fountain. On a warm summer ... day. I have ... stolen ... a surgical kit. But ... you won't ... need it.

M: With whom shall I mate?

F: I have ... not ... seen him. Just wait. He will come ... or go ... to find him. You will need to know ... when. I bless thee. Now.

M: Must you?

F: It is meet ... for a parent ... to allow ... a child ... full ... recognizance.

M: Food? Supplies?

F: Some. Antiseptics ... antibiotics ... first aid ... stuff ... I thought ... you'll need. Water filters. Fire makers ... maps to various ... food stashes ... out there. Lists ... of places ... kinds of moneys ... I ... I ... leave this ... all ... to ... you. I know you well.

M: How can I possibly repay you?

F: Help me ... acccrosss ... the abyssss. [She climbs the ladder, he rests on her shoulder while bridging the gap to his perch, she descends to SC, faces him.]

M: Advice.

F: Keep your eyes slightly above the horizon. Get where you're going. [The pendulum spirals to rest. A lilac light flashes down the cable] [M lets out a lout ullulation, right hand clapping over her mouth, then a deep bow. His eyes flash lilac, then he freezes.] [She moves the chair to CS before the couch, places the

bowl of water on it and gazes deep into the well of forever.] [Dips her forefinger in the water, observes the concentric ripples.] [Cue dripping water on a PA] [Then she opens the jar on the right display case, pours out packets of flower seeds.]

M: Ok. (with a quaver) I will. The best I can. (a shudder, a subliminal tear) Farewell, Flux. [She bends low over the bowl.] [His eyes glint blue.]

[Scrim down.]

Scene V

[26 years later. Meral has personified the set with her own handiwork. The Bernoulli coat of arms hangs over the mortuary cabinet (just the shield); a collection of extinct species graces the top of the bookcase, some real, some mounted 3-D printouts; a conch, chambered nautilus, scallop shell, spiny urchin, abalone, king crab, lobster, etc., vase of wildflowers on the L display cabinet, stack of large coffee table books on the R; afghan draped over the couch, new embroidered pillows. Bowback chair before the ladder; office swivel chair at the desk; all-voice prompt electronics. Headphones on a globe of Earth above, wall hanging with two intersecting circles 2 feet in diameter, embroidered yellow thread on forest green backing, draped with tassels, second framed handprints on the side of the desk facing the audience SR. Pendulum motionless. Summer, later afternoon. Meral in a princess Leia Organa dress, supine on the couch, head to the door, leafing through a limnology book. She's about 44, looks good. Ordinale in jeans and a denim T-shirt enters, lapis lazuli necklace in hand, crosses to the desk and fires it up. Lays the jewellery next to the globe.] [O is all business with an obvious agenda. She's 16 and looks really good. Her father must have been of African persuasion.]

O: [spreads hands apart before the screen] Boot up [it lights up and responds to further commands] Open surveillance. Track me yesterday. 9:00 am. 10 a.m. Fast forward. Freeze. [touches screen] Tag him. Name him. [She spells it.] E.N.K.I. Track him. [Meral sits up, puts the book down on the stack, and pays attention.]

O: Noon. 1 p.m., 2:00 p.m., 3:00 p.m. 3:15. 3:30. Fast forward. Slower, freeze. [She takes a long hard look]

O: Hmm. Backtrack him. 9:00 a.m. 8:30. Fast back. Slower. Freeze. Run security check. Access university mainframe. Oh oh. Delve deeper. Enough. Close surveillance. Check messages. [She scrolls down the list, touches several.] File these. Dump all the rest. [Then she slumps, gives off a long sigh.]

M: Okay, out with it. What happened? [O swivels to face her mom. Mother and daughter communicate very well about the most personal of circumstances.]

O: (shakes head in disbelief) So I met this guy.

M: (Smile) Finally.

O: (rising inflection) Well, yeah, and I thought it was all decided.

M: But it's not so?

O: Now I don't know where it's at.

M: Okay. Back up.

O: Right. So I went wandering through the harbor market, thinking to score some saffron for paella later this week.

M: Mussels. We have rock lobster in the freezer.

O: When I noticed him, Enki, at the same time that he first saw me. Unmistakable connection.

M: Good sign. Hair on end over here right now.

O: Me too. Again. So he's been taking photographs. Nice camera. Long lens. He asks me if he can photoshoot me.

M: Nothing awkward?

O: Nope. Straightforward. We get introduced and then casually walk around till he sees something interesting. Buildings. Boats. A flower stall. Architectural stuff. Balustrades. That carved pilaster on the auction house. The two sphinxes. He had me lean on one of them. Sat on the retaining wall at the hanging garden. Lunch at the Polo.

M: Not a pinchpenny.

O: Seems to be well-heeled. Very well-heeled from what I just found out. We talked.

M: Mostly about ...

O: ... nothing. Inconsequential stuff full of non-sequiturs.

M: Very pleasant.

O: Mom, absolutely. Friggin' perfect. Azure sky, lap-lap waves. The best dreamscape in full smellavision.

M: (closes her eyes to picture it) Remember such moments. They're all too rare. I envy you.

O: Got it. (nods definitively) Got it good. I thought at that moment that we're on.

M: Continue.

O: Lunch is on him. We spend the next few hours at the basilica, around the back with the fountain. Little faun statuary. Nymphettes. Charming stuff.

M: Then?

O: On to the Olmec globe. The one at that Mayan plaza place.

M: I'm getting a pattern here.

O: Yep. Enki. Water on earth. He's well named. Soft-spoken.

M: Soft-spoken draws the girl closer. Old trick. Works.

O: It does. I'm good with that. Hand in hand. Electric first touch.

M: Long or short?

O: Short immediate longer. Firmly entwined fingers. Oh Mom, I was so sure this is it. This is what it feels like please god.

M: And then?

O: The afternoon wends away. Time makes no difference. We're sitting on a curbstone. He calls for a cab. Has a lab session he can't afford to miss. University.

O: While we wait we walk through carnelian commons. I admire this (she hands over the lapis necklace) man, look at this.

M: [She fingers the beads, tests the heft] This is really, I mean really nice. Expensive?

O: Crap. I don't know. It was one of those stalls where nothing is priced. He paid with a card. Bows formally. Says he wants me to wear it at dinner. Then. Poof! He's gone. Private military-type car. Uniformed driver. I did get a pix of the licence plate. The last pix he took was a close-up of me. The rest you know from just now. No messages. What am I to think? Did I screw up?

M: It's only been 16 hours.

O: Reasonable. Reason doesn't fly right now. Could I have done something to make me more alluring?

M: If you build it, they will come. (affects a southern drawl) Ah honey, you is built.

O: (accepts that) What should I do?

M: You tracked him.

O: He lives in the citadel. Second-year university. Honours all the way. Some sort of empowerment that I don't exactly twig.

M: But it all checks out?

O: Completely.

M: (considers) Excellent. Did he ask you for *anything*? Anything at all.

O: (thinks that over) Just poses. Set there. Stand here. Look at that. Professional, competent, unassuming, relaxed. If there's an agenda there I didn't get it.

M: Oh, he's got an agenda all rightie. Girl in denim. Lapis lazuli. Close-up. Fear not, he's hooked.

O: Do you really think so, Mom?

M: I've got a good buzz off all this. My advice is don't push. Just wait.

O: You've said that waiting for anyone is a poor tactic in life.

M: It's only been 16 hours. You're 16. It fits. Wait a while. There's always Plan B, C, and D.

O: I want plan A. Fucking A.

M: Then so be it. Sixteen is tough.

O: Yeah, yeah. Raging hormones. I get it. You really think so?

M: I do. Besides, self-doubt...

O: Gets you nowhere. I'm gonna go look in the mirror.

M: Sure. Like what you see. Get where you're going.

[O does a 360 degree on the chair, faces the door, sets her course. As she's heading out, M has a thought.]

M: Ordie?

O: [turns back]: Yes, Mom?

M: How did you sleep last night?

O: A little flighty, but I settled in.

M: No strange dreams?

O: Not so's I can remember. You doubt my ability to make informed decisions?

M: Exactly so.

O: I'm okay. Nine hours. All cleared out and flying right side up.

M: Well and good. (waves her off) [As O is leaving, an alarm rings at the desk. She returns, flips on the security system.]

O: Awrk! Eek! Eek! Mom! He's here. He's right downstairs. Awrk!

M: Okay, okay. Calm down. Deep breath. Told you so. All's as it should be. Go put on your pretties. And give me some time to sound him out. Easy. Snoop if you wanna (big smile) [O runs out completely distraught. M settles in on the couch, facing the door, pretends to be absorbed in a book. Enki appears in the entrance, book in hand, curious, careful, congenial, yes he could be a proper son-in-law.]

E: [knocks on the door jamb]

M: (she puts on a good act, languidly) Yes? (examines him from two angles, arches her eyebrows, waves him forward.)

E: Lady Meral?

M: Indeed.

E: (formally) Of the Bernouli?

M: That's my lineage. Coat of arms to prove it. [Points at the shield]

E: (He persists) And you are Ordie's mother?

M: That I am. [She sits up, replaces the book. He steps forward, extends the book he's brought.]

M: A boxed set. [He steps back, waits courteously.]

M: Ha! Thea van Harbou's *Metropolis*. With the digital remaster of the movie. Bios of her and Fritz Lang. Annotated. Appendices. Bibliography. Is this the Pink Floyd soundtrack?

E: Yes, ma'am. Both the original and their concert versions.

M: Very nice. Accepted on condition. [She stands, confronts him.] Where did you get this?

E: (Completely forthcoming) We don't know for sure but it's probably stolen or looted. We get this sort of stuff everyday. People bring it to us, we examine it, ask questions. Mostly we buy it and they go away satisfied. Then we document and add it to the libarium or to the university museum. We practise the best curate. All get access ... as do you.

M: True. Acknowledged. We take you at your word. Honest counts. Thank you. We are agreed. [She sets the box on the R display case.] But that's not why you're here. Nice gambit.

E: (nods) Yes ma'am.

M: Who are you? [O stands quietly in the doorway, listening, wears a ruffled white blouse, the lapis, same jeans, soft shearling moccasins. The inquest proceeds.]

E: I am Enki Chaleel. My family occupies the citadel across the river. We've been there 10 years. Since the war's end, we keep the peace. We're still military and no one gives us grief. Apparently we're well liked. Kids play in the streets. We provide daycare for working mothers. No one goes hungry. We prosper and spread it around.

M: Admirable. (She softens a bit.) Enki, why are you here? Out with it.

E: Am I that transparent?

M: Mothers know. Speak now.

E: (deep breath) Lady Meral, I ... I really admire your daughter.

M: (She ups the ante) Many do.

E: No doubt, and with good reason. I'm here to get my foot in the door. It can be no other way. [O relaxes, nods to her mom, big grin from ear to ear]

M: It is well.

E: You allow this?

M: Ordi's decision.

E: Of course. [He waits her out.] [O mimes vigorously, yes, yes, oh please yes]

M: You will treat her right. [It's not a question.]

E: I do swear here and now. [She lets him off the hook.]

M: Enki, my dear, I'll let you in on a secret.

E: (breathless, agape) Yessss?

M: Ordie likes you. In fact she likes you a lot. Hasn't talked about anything else. Me too. You're on.

E: (he melts) (whispers) Oh thank you god. [M plants a brief kiss on his cheek, turns him around.]

M: Welcome. Forward. Moment of Truth. The real thing. Hoy! [M backs away to watch. E and O stalk each other briefly, bobbing and weaving, grapple hungry, kiss ecstatic. M mouths a silent ooh. When they come up for air, she turns to the audience.]

M: I've only seen that once in my life. [to O and E] Thank you for letting me in on how it's done. [O and E are still fairly oblivious to external stimuli but then they recognize the enormity of the moment.]

O: [to no one in particular] Yeah, that'll do it. [to E] Keep on with that. [to M] Hi Mom, we're together. [E can only nod agreement, he's still dumbfounded. Then he rallies.]

E: [to M] Private moments are hard to share ... I'm back. [They reunite CS]

O: Now what?

E: There are protocols. [M stands expectantly.]

E: I did come prepared. If you'll allow me? [M nods assent. E whips out his phone.]

E: Billy, bring it up? [tinny squawk on the phone, "yeah boss, right away"]

E: [to Meral] The traditional method for kids getting to know you is to get as faraway as possible from parental interference. We don't believe in that. There's been too much separation lately, among ethnic communities, we're not doing that no more. We mean to include you. We're not going away. It's coming to you.

O: We talked about this, Mom. You're in. I'm pretty sure you'll get an invite from the Charleels. They'll send a limo. Wear your wolf dress. [While M digests that, two men in spiffy uniforms and creased trousers roll in a dim sum cart, set up a round bistro table, CS, two folding chairs. They're wary of M. They're the same actors from scene 3; karma does get round. E picks up on this. M gets the candelabrum from the R display case, sets it on the table. E dismisses his men, then retrieves the bowback chair, sets it for M, seats her formally.]

E: Thank you guys, you're off the hook. Go on home. [unctuous bows to M, and they retreat through the door.] [E passes around a lighter wand. Each lights a candle.]

E: The first of many. [They examine the dishes.]

E: Um, shrimp toast, Swedish meatballs, chicken something, potato salad, devilled eggs, mooshoo park, maybe. Baklava, bread pudding, orange goop. Name your pleasure.

M: [to O] Pass it over.

E: Ha! My dad brews beer. Here's some starfish probably. Yes? [He pours and they yack.]

E: [to O] Better?

O: You put me through serious changes this morning. Didn't know what the hell.

E: Hey, I was getting the third degree from my folks. [M leans back and mostly listens, spears a meatball, sips, delights]

O: Seems we're pretty transparent.

E: Your family and the Hohenwhitzs, sure, and mama san [points at M].

O: Didn't go well, huh?

E: They're suspicious of royalty.

O: Understandable. Poor track record. Crusades. Trench warfare.

E: Then I pointed at the archive [points at bookcase], so even though you're not well-known on the Net, you really should get out more, I could honestly say that you were instrumental in making all this love happen.

O: That was the crucial bit?

E: Clinched it. My dad is a firm believer in education for all.

M: *Konx om pax.*

E: (surprised) Just so. Light in extension. We should talk about that. Later.

O: Am I being left out? (uncomfortable silence)

M: Sorta masonic. I'll speak for you.

E: As will I. One shoe fits all.

O: As you see fit. More goop?

M +

E: Sure.

O: [to E] So what do you do at the university?

E: Mostly we document architectural features. From everywhere, both original and culled from public sources. We've got several million in the database. Postcards. Maps. Anything photographic. And we can duplicate them, print 'em out in 3-D.

O: Do you like it?

E: Oh yeah. Documenting our heritage for future reference is necessary if we want to reconstruct it. Rebuilding means jobs, everyone who wants to work gets a paycheck. It's really satisfying knowing I've made a difference.

M: Nice work, walking around with a camera.

E: There's perks (meaningful look and a nod to O).

O: You were saying...

E: ... Last year was a different project. Actually closer to my preference. I'm more of an audio guy than visual.

O: More on that.

E: [spears a tidbit] Well, each building presents unique acoustics.

O: It's well to know what it looks like ...

E: ... but what it sounds like offers profound subliminal cues to its intent. [to M] Are you interested in this?

M: Where you've been and where you're going.

E: So, for example, I set up a bigass amplifier in the crypt under Meshi square. Hook that to a signal generator, sweep the entire sonic spectrum, record all the nuanced reflections and reverberations. Then we can calculate algorithms and apply that to, say, a chanter in the studio. We can make one soloist sound like a choir in that exact space. From that we can infer if it's a sepulchre or church.

M: Didn't know there was anything under there.

E: The entire city is riddled with tunnels and holes. I'm so fortunate working in my element.

O: And next year?

E: This is the last quarter to go through my lens. Still lots to do. Write it up. Make it accessible.

M: Publish or perish.

E: You're right. Flinders Petrie said that. We owe the high altar at Naukratis to him. I sometimes dream about finding a major site like that.

O: Or a treasure hunt ...

E: ... and a rescue mission. [They contemplate the cart, dabble with the debris.]

O: Sounds a lot like wild beasts, lions and tigers and bears oh my in the forest, swim in the river, rescue the Indian princess, and she's ever so grateful.

E: I grew up playing that game, pushes all the male fantasy buttons. (broad smiles all around)

M: It's an old one, tried and true. Rapunzel ...

O: ... Harry and Hermione ...

E: Odysseus and Penelope. Helen. It's a long list. Some of it really dark. Not so now, not here, not with you. [to O] I'll meet you halfway. [more contemplation]

O: Whatcha thinking, Mom?

M: Ordie, my child, Enki, my son, this can work. Go for it. [They clink glasses, drink deep of a future waft]

O: [to E] What's next?

E: Introductions, show and tell. Urgencies. Agreed?

O: Agreed. [They push back their chairs.]

M: I'll get this into the fridge. I won't wait up. That way. [As they head out the door hand in hand] Fuck all you like. [to audience] Betcha you're wishing your parents were as laid back with it. [E comes rushing back in, grabs something from the cart, heads out mouthing a silent "Thank you!"] [M dims the lights with a remote, puts on the headphones, takes off her shoes, reclines on the couch, head to the door.] [Presently the candles flicker, Flux enters from a secret door behind the basilisk tapestry, circles the pendulum, it starts up. Then he tweaks M's shoes.] [M removes the headphones, lays them on the L cabinet, goes to her knees, hugs F long and silent, he lays his head on her shoulder, flicks his tongue across her face, wipes away a tear, and then as one]

M +

F: (whispered) I missed you. [He's a bit taller, a slight blue sheen to his carapace, has lost the lisp but still retains that soft burr.]

[She exhales into his snout, he licks it up greedily, she thinks fast.]

M: How was your trip?

F: The traverse requires massive expenditure of energy, but I'm near equilibrium. I should eat. [While she clears away the plates, sets dishes before him, they sit on the two folding chairs.]

F: How's your daughter?

M: Ordie is with her brand new boyfriend getting introduced to his family right now. Sixteen. Big deal. [F steps, hops to the doorway, tastes the air, returns]

F: Right now they are cavorting in the fountain. Heavy pheromones. [M doesn't miss a beat.]

M: Like I said, priorities. Can you, will you stay?

F: How long have I been gone?

M: Twenty-six years, three months, eight days.

F: Five hundred some with your family was ... interesting. I'd like another chance at it. If you'll allow it, mistress. I will serve thee to the best of my ability. Accompany thee. Make conversant with thee. That it please thee. You.

M: Deal. Done. So. [They clink glasses.]

F: We've done this before.

M: Many more times.

F: Tell me how it went.

M: The next day I raked over the old gardens and scattered flower seeds. That, more than anything else back then, that kept me sane. I was so lonely, on my own. I kept the scanner hot all that winter. When your form disappeared so I couldn't touch it, I was just plain devastated. Didn't dare go out. All the food that you gathered lasted maybe six months. There'd been no shootings all winter so I ventured out. Gotta eat. Those maps and directions made it possible for years. Years. Spring. Spring, the seed packets arrived. Someone threw them over the garden gate. Did you... ?

F: I did. Paid handsomely for it.

M: I planted vegetables. Tomatoes. Carrots, broccoli. It took me three years to become a competent gardener. After that it went easier. The harbour bazaar opened. I dared it once a month. Wore camouflage. Installed security cameras. Phone links. Grew up.

F: Have you fired your Beretta in anger?

M: Never had to. But I was ready. Still am.

F: My mistress, I am proud of you. Many would have retaliated.

M: There was no one and by the time they were, it was over. Rebuilding had begun.

F: And your daughter?

M: I chose one of the masons at random. They adopted me and let me in. They provided a marvelous security blanket. My social life improved. I went there. Very few came here. I think after Ordi arrived I waxed protective. They knew. That year they did the food runs. And then she went with me. Everywhere.

F: You've done well, my mistress. Grandchildren. Much progeny. Your line is secure.

M: Almost lost it.

F: In evolution that's normal. Lines die out, or get swamped out. There was a time when your species contracted to less than a hundred thousand worldwide. Great hawsers start with thin filaments. The Bernouli persist. [Wolf howls from E and O from far in the depths.]

M: That's my kid. I think they just got there.

F: Ah, youth, joyful and triumphant.

M: Mmm. [Nods] Sixteen years just passed in parade. It wasn't so long ago that I laid her on the tiles by the fountain. It seems we cut the cord twice. Once at birth and again when they leave home, off and running. Just a flash in time.

- F: There's a great truth in this. History repeats, the universe echoes itself, from a chambered nautilus to a spiral galaxy. [M and F sit crosslegged, facing each other, briefly play patty cake, then face the audience. F is on the right, he lays a wing across her back.]
- F: You first. Tell them what you've learned. It's why we're here, it's who we are. [M meditates, bows her head, then looks up, eyes ablaze.]
- M: Listen. Remember. See what we see. [F's eyes glint blue, M speaks slowly, carefully, decisively.]
- M: There is only one absolute truth, with a capital "T". And that is the universe itself. It speaks the truth. Always. Truth resides in every facet of its being. In the rock, the nuclear fire, in the water, the trees, all manner of life. In ways that we've not yet imagined.
- F: I have seen this; certainly not all of it; truth is vast. More.
- M: All of us, you out there, and us down here, we may partake of this. Winnow it forth. Separate what works from what does not. That's what the truth is good for. To behold, grasp, and extend. Trees don't lie, they cannot. Neither do the animals that share spaces. But we, self-aware intelligence, we have choice. We can twist the truth.
- F: With letters, words, numbers, graphs, images. We call this mundane truth. Ordinary. Opinion. Advertising. Posturing. At worst, self-aggrandizement at another's expense.
- M: That's the truth of governments, corporations, churches. It's up to you to decide which is worthy. And which is crap. Some of it is evil. Evil thrives on truth. Speaks the truth brazenly inverted. *Arbeit macht frei*.
- F: Make the lie big enough and fools will accept it as the truth. Demagogues love you. Take care that this not be done to you. [Short pause to let that sink in.]

M: What I've learned is that knowledge is a group work. Succeeding generations build on the accumulated lore of their forebears. That's our job, to provide the basis for continuing evolution. We guard knowledge. We extend it free without stint.

F: *Konx om pax.* Light in extension.

M: We consider the archive a sacred trust. We can advise, we can point; we shall never tell you what to think. That's yours. Your most precious possessions are your thoughts. Hence your beliefs. Further, your purpose. That's why we're here. Learning is fun. Knowledge feels good. Wisdom may be approached. We all contribute. We celebrate multiplicity. Knowledge does no good unless we play with it. All points of view are useful. The frame of reference is vast. Look around you. Embrace diversity. Flux, you have the last word.

F: In my travels, I've seen many worlds. If the dominant species is all of one kind, one color, one hairstyle, one monolithic mindset, my people don't go there. We. Shun. (very deliberately) You.

[Spot off]

[Curtain]

HF

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Post Scriptum

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