

Love at the Institute for Interspecies Sport

by Kirby Olson (October 2017)



Water Skimmer-Glider, Carol Carter, 2013

Deep beneath the medieval citadel, in a natatorium approachable only through secret tunnels, Elsa swam the butterfly. Elsa thought of the even larger castle her coach Enzo “Hips” had said they’d visit in the mist-enshrouded Transylvanian Mountains. Inside that castle, he’d said, were portraits of his distinguished family, an offshoot of a once-royal family, with big furry collars and fur hats. They were descended from lunar moths, derived from a blood transfusion between insects and Carpathian monks. Elsa was a B-cup Twiggy-esque beauty. For years she had fed on the endless grants available through the Institute for Interspecies Sport. What the transfusions would do to her reproductive capacity, or even whether her muscles would remain small but taut, was a question for the likes of Lamarck and Darwin. She only cared to excel for Enzo.

She was not a fish, not a fowl, but a kind of aquatic hydrangea. Her beauty was her only attribute, but it eclipsed all else. It was unique to her, and could not be set in comparison to anyone or anything, and yet it was everything.

Enzo loved her more than he loved all of his insect hybrids together. He looked out the leaded window as he saw the parson's hat bobbing as he exhorted his men to further acts of arson. Enzo's collection of hundreds of thousands of half-human spiders, centipedes, ants, bees, wasps and butterflies, mantises, dragonflies, grasshoppers, stinkbugs and squashbugs, ticks and beetles—living creatures—lay in their plastic cages with napalm sprayed on them.

"You bug me, Enzo!" The parson shouted.

Enzo skittered down secret tunnels, carefully locking every gate behind him on his way back to Elsa. Romania's tunnels reached back to the Roman Empire itself, as secrecy and underground life had been the central paradigm for survival. Enzo alone remained of those who understood the history of the Institute. The Romanian Olympic Committee under Ceausescu had established the secretive Institute for Interspecies Sport. The Institute had survived the return to democracy, because it had been kept so hidden that except for a few insiders, no one even knew of its existence, and so its funding had remained secure. It was based on the communist intuition to move toward the strength of the hive, and toward cold-bloodedness, in which the might of the state would smash the trifling ego of bourgeois man. Enzo took comfort in the thought that most of Eastern Europe had hives of the new sporting creatures hidden in their ancient recesses. No single parson, much less person, could ever damage the totality.

Enzo rejoined his most beautiful student. He and Elsa walked on water across the pool sideways with their hairy mandibles at the waterline, practicing water ballet, able to walk on the dimpled surface like pond

skaters due to his invention that spread their weight evenly across the surface skin of the pool, as they fluttered their gossamer wings. Together, he and Elsa hummed Bartok's *Diary of a Fly*, as the parson's hateful blaze attempted to immolate, but would only invigorate, their energetic innovations.

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