

Extract from:

Dieter Dath, *Die Abschaffung der Arten* ('The Abolition of the Species')

551 pages, clothbound, 2008

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VII.

The Other Love

'Old Fur-Face sent you, I suppose,' a tinkling, feminine voice laughed.

The wolf gave a start.

'No, do carry on drinking. You've got to protect your throat – however hot it is where you're from in the Old World, our weather is something else, isn't it?'

A female figure floated in the water in front of him; she was part human, part swan. Dmitri was reminded of the Valkyries in that first film he'd seen with Clea Dorn: they had peeled off their feathers before bathing. The apparition threw back her beautiful human head and laughed which the wolf found unnerving. He felt ashamed in the presence of such confidence and looked on in wonder as the thick layer of little white feathers on her head and shoulders puffed up, like tousled short white hair. Downy plumage hugged her body, in train-like folds between her arms and hips where beaded drops glinted. Her wing-span must be more than the entire length of his body, Dmitri guessed as she rose from the water and waded over to him gleaming like a still-wet Venus.

'I sense who you are looking for and who sent you. It has been a long time since I heard from him.'

The bird, thought Dmitri? This is the bird? This peculiar beauty?

He spoke his contradictory thoughts out loud. ‘No, it’s...it’s someone male, some guy, I’m after.’ What was this, what was happening between them? *Déjà vu*, a gift, or a trap perhaps.

‘I used to be, once,’ she said in her softly singing voice which, Dmitiri realised, he was having trouble following. Was some kind of hypnosis at play?

In a shot she was out of the water next to him. ‘I,’ she gave the semblance of a bow, ‘am Alexandra Élodie Paula Mirameí, and I am the one you’re looking for. As for helping you – or him – no can do unfortunately. Be my guest, if you will. You might even enjoy it.’

Crouching down in front of him, she caressed the nape of his neck and ran her fingers through his hair as though she had often done so before.

A moment earlier he couldn’t wait to get away from the place, now it felt like he belonged.

‘He’s a king now, I hear,’ she said, cradling Dimtri’s muzzle briefly in her slender hand, ‘which, I suppose, makes me a countess.’

The wolf didn’t understand her words, but as she held him and kissed him lightly he knew he would stay.

As long as I am here, his heart told him, I am where I should be.

Each to the other divine

Sometimes the lovers made brief forays into the grassland or to the sea where they would gaze out at the expanse; and sometimes they made their way to the carp pools beneath the highest cliffs.

Her mouth would be a beak for a time, then her beak become a mouth with a bottom lip he was particularly partial to. When the sun rose, her eyes were more swiftly blue than the skies, and she’d gaze at him as though astonished he existed.

He was proud then for her wonderment was in mysterious contrast to the fact that she knew so much more than he.

He followed her one night when she thought he was asleep, through thyme and wild mint, deep into the foliage until they came to a clearing. It lay so far into the forest that the neon lights of the laboratory could no longer be seen. There in the cool, blue stillness the countess prepared to perform a duty that she loved. Between the blue stones she stepped out of herself in the starlight, a second physical entity composed entirely of light. The loving wolf, suddenly dizzy and in a turmoil, caught his breath and crouched low in the underwood, the wind against him.

The first of the two beauties, who were one and the same, said to the other, 'O Romeo, doff thy name; and for thy name, which is no part of thee, Take all myself!' The reply came: 'Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized; Henceforth I never will be Romeo.' 'What man art thou,' the first took up her role, 'thus bescreened in night, So stumblest on my council?' 'By a name I know not how to tell thee who I am. My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, Because it is an enemy to thee. Had I it written, I would tear the word.'

The wolf lay his snout on the damp earth, breathing in the scent of pepper, and closed his eyes. It was like this that he heard the whispered, 'My niess!' and the other respond, 'I shall say goodnight.' And he understood what only he, and the mushrooms growing there, had heard: that it was the reason why the lion would receive no help from these quarters, for this was all the countess wanted, to be Romeo and to love Juliet, or to be Juliet and to love Romeo.

To reconcile history, to forget the time of mutual liberation which nonetheless brought loss. The needles of rosemary nodded like ghosts in the gentle breeze, a sensitive public.

I am not Juliet, thought Dmitri, nor am I Romeo, I am just someone who stumbled into this by capricious chance and longed to view it as a homecoming.

She is so much older than me, yet so much more naïve.

Will she bury me if I die here or will she teach me what I need to know to get away? Will the time to leave be the very moment that I've properly arrived?

'Hence will I to my ghostly sire's close cell, His help to crave, and my dear hap to tell.'

In the morning after his discovery, he woke up in the old parking lot in the shadow cast by a dilapidated observation dome. Maple leaves lay scattered around him like shed feathers. They had tossed and turned until the first light of dawn. He stretched, his humming like a hive of bees, and looked up. The cats were flying in wedge-shaped formations, then in clusters. Upon closer inspection it looked like other swarms were joining the movement.

'Hey!' The Countess had come stealthily from the right, the heavy scent of the leaves disguising her own. She smelled of smoke. 'Do you see what those arrows are, and those wedges?' Alexandria asked.

He hesitated, then saw it, too, and understood that the angler fish had spoken the truth: pelican eels, hatchet fish and a cloud of hundreds of grenadier fish. 'They really have...conquered the skies, the fish!' the wolf marvelled. The swan kissed the hollow of his throat and whispered, 'Just wait. The Atlantic Ones are ambitious. The skies, oh, that's just for starters. The universe. That's what they want, and it's theirs for the taking if you regard it as ocean.' He nuzzled her ear, took a light sideways step away from her and said, 'The universe? We've been there already.'

'Now you sound like the lion,' the swan opened her wings and folded them around her again, a chaste robe. 'Humans weren't cut out for it, that's true. They abandoned their plans before liberation. Two things would have had to be different: their fragile genetic makeup was too susceptible to the harsh radiation and the constant particle showers in oblivion; and their limited life-span made those longer, more interesting voyages out there unthinkable.'

The wolf looked up again: fiery swords; flaming symbols; a mass of colour.

‘And the Gente have got it sorted?’ he said pensively.

‘Ah, the Gente. What’s happening up there is something altogether new. The fourth generation since liberation. You are only second generation.’

‘Only. Doesn’t sound nice.’

She stroked him and his mood lifted.

‘Isn’t imagination our salvation?’ she asked. He was surprised and full of tender concern that someone whose actions and knowledge were driven by a clear sense of rectitude had succumbed to this pious and faintly repelling lie.

She felt his silence, so spoke to him of something else. ‘I’ve been building and building since the age of sixteen. I collect anything connected to it.’