
A Perfect Romance

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2859.06.01

"Who is it *this* time, flutterbrain?"

Zherra stopped humming and looked up at Cassidorina. She hadn't even realized she was humming. She was still so giddy from the Gather last night that she'd brought the feeling with her to the morning's goldrider meeting -- which hadn't started yet, since Weyrwoman Lybelle and Dunia both had yet to arrive. "Um," she said... and inwardly groaned, "You've got to do better than that!"

Cassidorina just smirked at her. "Nice gather last night?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "Ugh, that wasn't intelligent at all!" she internally berated herself.

"So who *is* it this time?" Luka said, cracking a huge yawn. She said it neutrally, but Zherra detected enough of a hint of not-quite-teasing behind it that she felt a spike of anger towards Luka and had to force herself to calm down. It wouldn't do for Velcroth to start bickering with Savukath, who was touchy enough as it was.

When she could speak without sounding angry (she was doing so much better at that; her mother would be proud!), she said, "No one of consequence." Only a Lord Holder's son. But she mustn't let anyone know; Esthevan had been *most* insistent. Zherra supposed he was right.

"Was he handsome?" Cassidorina asked, her voice a teasing wheedle.

Zherra could be honest enough about that. "He was magnificent." She sighed dramatically, and was gratified to see the curiosity on the faces of her fellow goldriders. She ached to tell them everything. But she mustn't! What could she tell them? "Oh, nothing happened! I just danced with him. But that was enough." She couldn't help a sigh, and she clutched her hands together in front of her on the table.

The whole evening had been *so* romantic! Esthevan was a marvelous dancer, and even though they couldn't dance the evening away without making someone suspicious of his partiality, Zherra had spent the rest of the evening *imagining* what spending the night with him might be like. It had been bliss.



2859.06.20

Zherra was in the pits of despair.

It had been three sevendays since the Gather -- THREE! -- and no word from Esthevan. No messages, nothing. Men

were so fickle! So... MEN! She burst into tears *again*. At least she was in the privacy of her cot this time, so no one could see. She was supposed to be dressing for the Hatching, but still sat on her dressing chair in her shift, too despondent yet to do anything more. She'd had similar random outbursts all week. Not being able to talk to anyone was *the worst*.

You can talk about it with me, Velcroth gently reminded her.

You don't really understand, Zherra snapped back. Velcroth's bewildered hurt made her feel guilty, though. *I'm sorry, love, she said. I just... need to talk to someone human.*

You can talk to many people, Velcroth said. **We have many visitors today; Ihyanith's eggs will hatch very soon. You should be ready.**

Zherra brightened a little at that, though it didn't help her anxiety much. And she wouldn't be able to talk to any Hatching guests about her plight; she still had to keep it secret. But maybe -- just *maybe* -- Esthevan would come today. Lord Morgav had a standing invitation whenever any candidate from Cibola was presented, and she was sure there was at least one. That hope spurred her to dress more quickly, and she gave special attention to her hair as she put it up, and to her face. Somehow she had to hide that she had been crying. She examined her puffy eyes. It was going to be some trick.

After a good deal of work with her powders, she was finally ready, and she practiced her hip-swaying walk as she left her cot.

All the males will admire you, Velcroth told her, thrusting her nose under Zherra's hand. **They should admire you, for you are mine.** Zherra hugged her dragon's face as best she could without mussing her dress.

A flurry of wings disturbed their reverie, and Zherra looked up. A green was descending -- not one she recognized immediately. Velcroth provided the dragon's name: Pephth.

'Of course!' Zherra thought. Kuroi, Esthevan's sister. Zherra's heart leapt into her throat. Kuroi was a watchrider now, at Windsong; Zherra didn't see her much. But if it was Kuroi, surely she had some news...? She wouldn't be seeing Zherra on a social call. She wasn't someone Zherra had ever been friendly with, or had even known well. She'd Impressed before Zherra had even started standing as a Candidate.

Velcroth stood aside to give Pephth room to land, and after the dust died down, Zherra approached. Kuroi didn't bother to dismount, but she smiled cheerfully.

"I just delivered my passengers," she said, "and have to be back at the Hatching Grounds soon, but my brother asked me to tell you he would like to see you at the Weyrhall door before the Feast." She smiled.

"Th-thank you," Zherra stammered.

"Well, I will see you at the Hatching," Kuroi said, and Pephth took off again.

'I wonder if she *knows*,' Zherra thought. But clearly Esthevan had trusted her to be a messenger. She decided not to let it worry her -- though she was having such trouble calming the flutterbys swirling in her stomach that the thought was pushed out of her mind in favor of more

immediate concerns: Esthevan's message. He wanted to meet her. He hadn't forgotten her.

Suddenly, Zherra's day was a whole lot brighter.



This Hatching was better attended than most, being the product of a Weyrleadership Flight. Zherra liked L'ars well enough, and was glad he would be Weyrleader for another Turn. The hatchlings themselves were strong, and were finding their partners quickly... but those were all just passing thoughts to Zherra. Her attention was preoccupied by the distinctive bald head of Lord Morgav -- the landmark she used to mark where his tall, beautiful, dark-haired son sat.

Zherra realized her leg was bouncing up and down, making the skirt of her dress flutter. She tried to hold still. She didn't think anyone was watching her closely, but all the same... She kept glancing over her shoulder towards Esthevan, and once or twice caught him looking her way. He always looked away as soon as she made eye contact. For some reason, that made Zherra both excited and nervous.

As soon as all the hatchlings were safely Impressed and taken care of, Zherra hurried herself out of the Stands as quickly as was polite for her status. This was her first Hatching as an official goldrider with knots -- her responsibilities were few. And standing at the Weyrhall entrance to welcome attendees was certainly something like official duties.

She reached it well before the majority of the guests, and turned and smoothed her skirt a little. She managed her best, most cheerful smile, and tried to remember not to touch her carefully-arranged hair, and started putting on the charm. Guests flowed past her into the Weyrhall and she cheerfully welcomed each that came within range -- all the while surreptitiously looking over their heads for Esthevan.

"Ah, Goldrider Zherra."

Zherra turned towards the deep, authoritative voice to see the imposing figure of Lord Morgav himself, and behind him... She tried to muffle the catch in her breath. He was just as handsome as ever. She wrenched her eyes away from him with difficulty, and offered her hand to Lord Morgav.

"We're always glad to welcome you to the Weyr, Lord Morgav," she said.

"You are quite the grown-up young lady," Morgav said, taking her hand and drawing it to his lips. "It's always a pleasure to engage in conversation with the shining jewels of the Weyr. I hope," and he clasped his other hand over the top of hers, "that you would honor me with more conversation over the course of the evening." Morgav smirked at her in a way she did not entirely like, but Zherra had a hard time thinking about it when she was too excited about being able to talk to Esthevan. She was impatient to have her hand back, but reminded herself to smile and nod, and to make her face appear cordial. When the Lord Holder finally released her, he turned towards the Weyrhall, and she was at last able to turn her attention to the one she most wanted to see.

Then she was drowning in Esthevan's eyes. He took her hand as well. "Always a pleasure," was all he said, then he drew her hand to his lips. She sighed when his lips lingered

on her hand longer than was necessary for cordiality. Then he let her hand go, and drew away from her, following his father.

In her hand, he had left a small slip of parchment.

She allowed herself a small gasp, then quickly tucked it into her waistband. She was anxious to read it, but there were formalities to attend to; it would have to wait until she could read it unobserved. Still, she watched Esthevan walk away and sighed, until she was reminded of her duties by a clearing of someone's throat, and she turned to greet the next guests.

When the crowd entering the hall had ebbed, she was finally able to make an excuse to find the privy -- and on the way, she pulled the note from her waistband to read it.

I cannot speak with you directly today, with so many eyes watching. Only know that you have captured my heart. We must meet again soon. I will send messages as I can. You are in my thoughts always.

— E

Zherra clutched the note to her bosom. It was true! Esthevan *did* remember her, and... could it be that he *loved* her? It was like something out of a dream, and her ecstasy knew no bounds. But still... secrecy was a must. She couldn't let on to anyone.



2860.04.07

It was a Restday, but Zherra almost wished it was a normal work day for her. Playing her gitar was not enough to keep her mind off the fact that she had heard nothing from Esthevan for two sevendays.

He had contrived to send messages to her perhaps once a month since Ihyanith's Hatching last Turn, but it was never enough... and Zherra always found herself impatient before the next message would arrive. Like now. Glimpses at Hatchings and stolen dances at gathers couldn't satisfy her desire to be with him.

She was convinced he was in love, and she was SO much in love in return. Esthevan was so romantic! Every word he wrote confirmed his feelings for her, and every moment she felt herself more and more in love with him. She knew it wasn't quite the best thing for her, as a goldrider, to involve herself with a holder... but she felt she and Esthevan were destined for each other. There was no other explanation for the violence of his feelings, or of hers.

She hadn't stooped to falling for anyone else at the Weyr. She wasn't like her brother Bh'ruk, and she wouldn't lift her skirts to anyone for the taking, despite all the eager bronzeriders (and more) who seemed willing enough. They just weren't enough to tempt her, when she had something far better in mind.

Though, Velcroth's maiden flight last month had been... memorable. She'd been caught by a *very* good-looking Ista wingsecond. O'wyn had been most eager. But so had she. Zherra felt her face flush, just thinking about it -- and about him. She wanted to think that she would have preferred to have been with Esthevan... but the experience had been so intense, the desire so overwhelming... and so much Velcroth's... that she honestly couldn't say that she had even thought of Esthevan. But she would have liked to have hoped that she had thought of him. Somewhere in all of that.

She tried not to remember that she had mooned over O'wyn's return to Ista for a seven-day -- until Esthevan's next message had arrived, and she had returned her affections to their proper place.

The hardest thing was making it seem to everyone that nothing was going on. She thought she'd been successful. She had tried to conceal her highs and lows -- especially since she couldn't talk about them! That was the hardest. Esthevan had given her advice on keeping the secret, but she didn't like pretending she was in love with someone else. All the same, she was afraid that Esthevan would scold her if she let on about their love, and she certainly would never be allowed to see him again. Cassidora had finally congratulated her on calming down, and settling better into her new role as a goldrider.

She distracted herself from that train of thought by plucking a few notes on her gitar. The Harper Hall had refused her, but she was sure they didn't realize what she was capable of. Now that she was a goldrider, she would never know.

She was disrupted from her reverie by a chirp from the window. A slim gold firelizard had lighted there, and was stretching her head toward Zherra.

"Oh! Do you like my singing?" she said. Maybe she really was another Menolly! Well, she was a dragonrider now, and that door was closed to her. Too bad for the Harper Hall. "I'll sing some more if you like. What?"

She finally noticed that the gold firelizard was holding out a leg to her, with a message tube.

"Oh!"

She quickly took the tube, and properly thanked the firelizard, who gave another chirp and then took off.

Zherra's heart was in her throat already as she pulled open the small parchment roll.

I can bear it no longer... I must see you. I am traveling to my secret refuge, a day's travel on horseback to the south of Cibola Hold, near the foothills, just west of the Gold Stream. A small secret cot, where I go sometimes when I need to be alone. Come to me there in two days. Overfly it; if you see my grey stallion Valiant tethered outside, you will know I am there. I will be waiting.

— **Ǝ**

Zherra was nearly beside herself. He wanted to see her! A private rendezvous! This was oh so much more than a stolen kiss. She blushed at the thought of what might come. But how to do it? She couldn't just go traipsing about the countryside, especially in Cibola territory. Anyone who saw her would recognize that Velcroth was gold, and not just another sweeprider. But she had to figure it out. She had to... She couldn't disappoint Esthevan!

Her gitar forgotten on her bed, Zherra paced back and forth, trying to determine how she would make it work.



2860.04.09

Zherra could scarcely contain herself for two days. She had several close calls... especially when Luka asked her why she was acting so strangely. Zherra had mumbled some excuse or other (she couldn't remember what she'd said), but she wasn't sure Luka had bought it. After that, she'd tried her best to lay low, avoiding everyone's company so as to dodge any more embarrassing (and unanswerable) questions.

When the day finally arrived, Zherra fulfilled her duties as best she could, considering her distraction. She attended the Dragon Infirmary during a very early-morning Threadfall with only the barest of inattention (she thought), though thankfully there were few scores to attend to, and none of them serious. Velcroth's running commentary during 'Fall helped.

Afterward, she quickly cleaned up and ran to the Weyrhall for a bite to eat. After most Threadfalls this early, she would have tried to get a mid-morning nap, as well... but she was too nervous for that.

Shortly before midday, she finally decided it was time to put her plan in motion. On the pretext of Velcroth wanting to hunt wild wherries, she readied her gold for flight, and set off.

They emerged from *between* over the low Cibola foothills, and she made several passes before she found the stream, the clearing, and the low structure in the middle of it... and there, tethered outside...

Land! Land quickly, Velcroth!

But why here?

Esthevan is here; he's waiting for me! But you mustn't be seen here. You can go into the mountains to hunt, if you like.

Very well. But I do not like leaving you alone with this holder.

I will be fine. Esthevan would never do anything to hurt me.

Why do you want to mate with him? There are plenty of males at the Weyr who would be willing. The tone of Velcroth's mindvoice made it clear that she thought the Weyr's males were far more worthy than any holder, even a Lord Holder's son.

Zherra blushed furiously. Of course she couldn't hide that thought from her own dragon. Finally she reined in her flustered thoughts, and convinced Velcroth to land. She had her dragon land just far enough away not to spook the stallion (though it still rolled its eyes at them and

sidestepped nervously; it was very well-trained). As soon as Zherra was safely on the ground, the gold launched herself again.

Giddy with joy and the excitement of a secret meeting with a lover -- *'My first rendezvous!'* -- Zherra savored every step. She admired the well-bred stallion -- from Cibola's finest breeding stock, she was sure -- and the picturesque location Esthevan had chosen. When she drew closer, Esthevan himself opened the cot door.

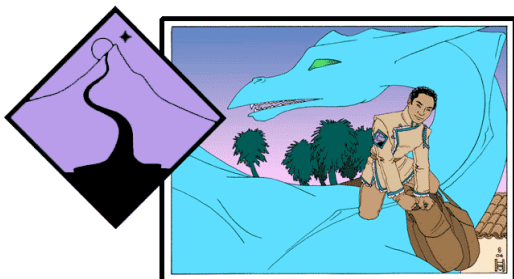
She stopped and gasped in wonder at his beauty. He was breathtaking, his linen shirt tucked into his breeches but left open at the neck just so... and the breeze stirred the linen just enough for her to see his well-formed chest underneath.

Then she remembered to walk again, and closed the distance between them quickly. Esthevan held his arms wide, and drew her into an embrace. He pulled away and looked at her face. There was something in his expression -- a fleeting hint of something unpleasant -- but it quickly gave way to what Zherra could only think of as pure passion.

"I'm so glad you came," Esthevan breathed, and kissed her forehead. Then he kissed her cheek. Then... and Zherra's heart fluttered... he kissed her mouth. And kissed her, and kissed her more, and wound his fingers into her hair. Then he drew her with him into the cot.

Outside, the stallion stamped a foot, and snorted.

To be continued...



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