

It wasn't hard to figure out where Isra and her father lived. You could see the house from every corner of the city. Or better: you could see the hill it stands on. You just had to know that its top was actually the dome of an observatory.

I grabbed one of my family's rau-vehicles and drove towards the hill in good spirits... Until I got to the driveway of Isra's home. Doubt took over, and I stopped the car. How would Isra respond if the guy she had clearly rejected suddenly showed up on her doorstep? What was I supposed to say? I could have written a letter instead. It was a cowardly thing to do, I'm aware of that, but wasn't it the better option?

Apparently, I stood there for so long that I started to draw attention. A short, middle-aged man came my way. He wore his plain qumash in a way that was characteristic for servants. It was a simple wrap, but each pleat was so folded so perfectly that I raised my eyebrows.

"Can I help you?" he asked with a friendly smile. "You seem lost."

"This is the home of Isra Nagas, right?"

"That's correct. I'm her chamberlain. Would you like to speak to her?"

"If I only knew how. The last time I spoke to her, I said something stupid, but I have no idea what that was."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that. When did you see her?"

"At her father's promotion party. I'm not an astrologer, so I didn't understand what Lady Nagas' research was about, but she informed me. At first, she was friendly, but —"

The chamberlain raised his hand. "Did you say 'astrologer' to her as well?"

"Um, I think so?"

The man shook his head. "Then I know why Lady Isra felt so offended."

Dear future me, please bear this in mind, as far as your memory allows. Never, ever call an astronomer an astrologer. Yes, the words sound pretty much the same, but what both professions entail couldn't have been more different. I had called Isra a charlatan. Years and years of doing hard scientific research, and this was her reward... No wonder she had cut off our conversation.

I didn't enter Isra's house. My new destination was the library of the University of Anarad. I searched for "Nagas" with the aim of reading every article, every reference, even every napkin with a scribble that had anything to do with that name.

I wanted to learn.

I didn't understand a thing.

I started with the publications of Isra and her father full of confidence, but that reading material was too difficult for me. Then I switched to the textbooks used in Astronomy courses. Again, too difficult. Only the bare basics would work for me. The students in the library looked at me with a funny look that grew worse with every minute I spent in that place. Studying was, after all, an activity mostly reserved for the female sex according to Alnustan culture. I began to understand where that dichotomy came from.

One of the few things I did learn was that Isra, like her father, was also pursuing a title: doctor. Which is apparently different from a medical doctor. I certainly wouldn't make the mistake of mixing that up. Her mother had held that title too, apparently, but she had died at an age too young to have written many scientific publications. Isra must have been a child when her mother passed away. I wanted to know more about Isra, read more about the things she had written, even though I understood so little of it. After all, the passion I saw in her eyes was also visible in her words.

Sadly, I didn't have the time. My leave was over and I would be on a mission for Goddess-knows-how-long. I would leave tomorrow. I visited Isra again, this time armed with a thick pile of reading material that I had borrowed from the library. Now I did dare to knock on the front door.

The chamberlain greeted me. "Good morning. Are you here again for Lady Isra?"

I showed the stack of books and articles I had clutched under my arm. "This time, I come prepared."

"Did you read all of that?" He whistled in awe. "Impressive. I'm just afraid you'll have to come back at another time. Lady Isra and her father are attending a conference. They'll be back in two weeks."

The paperwork almost slipped from my hands. "Oh..."

Well, that was it. I gave up. I sent her a letter with my apologies for my blunt remark at her father's party, but nothing more same day I left for the barracks of Anarad, spent the night there, and got out of bed at an inhumanly early hour to leave for our deployment. It was terrible: combing mountains in the south for three full months to search and cripple rebellious tribes. I'll keep the details of that to myself. Only the day we returned matters.

We arrived in the morning, on a weekday. I was tired beyond words. We had driven in trucks through the night, and summer had arrived in full strength. Even at night, you would sweat like a pig. Add bumpy roads — though "road" is an euphemism—and the trucks' merciless wooden benches, and you could say goodbye to your night's sleep. I'm used to it, though, but that didn't stop me from leaving the military compound with a stumble and a brain full of fog.

Normally, cars and carriages would be parked on the side of the road when we returned from deployment. Civilians were not welcome on the military grounds, except for a small reception hall, but that did not stop family and friends from picking up their loved ones. This time, it was different. The mission had been unpredictable, and no one knew when we would return. The soldiers had no idea, and their families certainly didn't know either. So there was no welcoming party beyond the ramparts that surrounded the military complex. There was only one car. A woman got out of the vehicle at the same time I stepped through the gate of the compound.

It was Isra. That made little sense, so I was sure I was mistaken. My sleepy head must have seen Isra in someone who only looked like her, that's all. But the woman really came towards me, and with each step she looked more and more familiar. Her hair sat in a bun from which several locks had escaped, her qumash was worn in a simple manner, her back was straight, and her eyes twinkled. Yes, this was one hundred per cent Isra.

Suddenly, I was wide awake. "Miss Nagas? What are you doing here?"

"Catching you. Latif—our chamberlain—told me you had come by before you went abroad. Have you seriously read all of my father's articles?"

"Well, I tried to focus on yours."

She blushed. "It is fortunate, then, that I don't have as many publications to my name as my father."

"I'm sure you'll overtake him one day, if you manage to write a scientific article at parties. Your father's party is also the reason I wanted to read your work. I've said something stupid and I want to apologise for that."

"You want to apologise? It was I who behaved like an uneducated savage."

"I called you an astrologer!"

"But you didn't know the difference, while I was well aware that most guests had no idea what kind of work I do. I shouldn't have been so rude." Her straight posture slackened. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, as if she didn't trust standing on her own legs. "It's just so tiring to stay friendly. People like those young men at the party want to marry for status. They aren't interested in *me*, they only pretend that they are. It's impossible to stay kind to them. I've told my dad a thousand times that I'm not interested in those kinds of characters, but he keeps inviting them. I thought you were one of them."

"Wait, your father had all these young men come to his party so one would start courting you?"

"Sad, isn't it? He whines that a woman my age shouldn't be alone, that I should spend more time looking around instead of looking through a telescope." She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, I want to apologise. I have completely misjudged you."

"I'm glad we can talk. How did you even know you had to be here today?"

"Simple. I calculated it based on the position of your platoon."

I doubted for a moment if I had heard that correctly. "That information is top secret."

She shrugged. "People in the army also rely on arithmeticians. They stay in touch with the university's calculators, or they even work for both institutes. I pulled some strings."

I pressed my lips into a thin line. Isra had pulled those ropes a little too easily.

She didn't seem to notice my resentment. "Speaking of university... I hope your reading material wasn't too dry."

"To be honest, I didn't understand everything. I got more questions than answers."

She laughed. "Welcome to the world of science. Maybe we can meet and talk about it? I have some questions for you too, but I understand you want to go home first."

Home? To sit there at the dining table with a father who doesn't take me seriously? Or with those cousins of mine, who must have already filled my agenda with parties for the next ten years? I don't think so. "What questions do you have?"

"For example..." She stood on tiptoe and peered through the open entrance gate of the barracks. "Is that a VH720, half hidden behind that building?"

"Actually, it's the 860, the more modern brother... How can you tell?"

The corner of her mouth curled up slightly. "Learnt it at the same place where you found my research: the library. I thought, if someone is going to put so much effort into getting to know my work, then I should return the favour. Just don't expect too much from me though. The latest military developments are kept a close secret."

"And with good reason. Those mountain tribes make it difficult enough without them knowing everything about us." I looked at the howitzer that Isra had pointed at. Only a piece of the barrel and the immense wheels were visible from here. She had done well recognising it, and not simply calling it a cannon. That was like lumping astronomy and astrology together.

"Shall we deal with your other questions in a nicer place? I'll welcome a change of scenery. There are several excellent restaurants nearby."

As if on command, my stomach rumbled to reinforce my words. I hadn't eaten yet. Sure, the compound had a canteen, but I was in the mood for something a little more refined after months of soldiers' slop.

Isra beckoned me to her vehicle. "Just tell me where to go."

It would be the first of many dinners together. We mainly discussed our work during the first two dates. We talked about ourselves during the three that followed. At our sixth meeting, we kissed. I thought I had reached the peak of happiness, but every extra day spent with Isra made my life even more beautiful. Even my father stopped sneering about my rank when he found out who had forced the butterflies in my stomach to break out of their cocoons.

I wish I could go back to those years. The problems we had back then are mere trifles compared to the obstacles that stand in our way now. I'll consider myself lucky if my memories of that time remain intact. Cherish them, future me, especially when tomorrow seems as uncertain as yesterday. The memories offer you more strength than you can imagine.