all that i have met

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by throwawayaccount

Summary

Twenty-four-year-old Johanna Geiszler expects a life of clean linen, careful instruments, and respectable work behind Wall Sina. She has earned it, after all. First in her class at the Royal Medical Institute, with a future in the Interior all but assured.

Notes

This fic is imagined in a world similar to that of 1880s Germany and Europe, which is reflected in its prose, social norms, expectations, clothing, dialogue, and courtesies. While canon characters retain their personalities, ages, and backstories, along with canon events still occurring, much of it has been adjusted to accommodate the world I have been building in this story.

This story is quiet possibly much more of an extreme slow burn than some people may prefer (but not me), so fair warning.

Thank you to my real life doctor friends that helped me with this fic. I know they are exasperated with me and probably wondering why I simply didn't just choose another occupation for Johanna that I knew more about. Thank you to all my friends who helped me with worldbuilding, as well. We had a fun time learning about 1880s medicine and infrastructure.

This fic has been years in the making. I hope it reflects the care and attention I've given it.

Chapter 1

Mitras, 844

The courtyard of the Royal Institute had been built in the fashion of the old cloisters, enclosed on four sides by galleries of pale limestone, their vaulted ceilings borne upon pillars that had stood through more than a century of rain and winter frost, and which, despite the considerable expense devoted to their upkeep, have begun to show the indignities of age in the slow crumbling of their capitals and the dark veins of damp that follow the mortar between the stones.

Ivy has made the determined conquest of the eastern wall, climbing from the flowerbeds to the upper windows in such thick and tangled abundance that the gardeners have long since abandoned any ambition of removing it altogether, contenting themselves with cutting it away from the glass each spring and preserving the appearance of order wherever the professors were likely to look. Johanna has always liked the ivy, though she suspects Matron Ute would consider this another instance of her unfortunate inclination to admire things that do not know their proper place.

At the center of the square lies a reflecting pool, long and shallow, with a rim of weathered stone upon which generations of students have worn smooth hollows with their hands and heels. The water is fed by a narrow channel beneath the northern gallery and is ordinarily clear enough to reveal the pale gravel at its bottom, although the sycamores have lately begun shedding their earliest leaves, and several now float upon the surface like little boats abandoned by careless children.

Two of the trees stand within the courtyard itself, their branches reaching almost to the galleries, and beneath their generous canopies the grass grows thin and soft from the perpetual shade. In spring the place belongs chiefly to the gardeners and the few scholars willing to endure the morning chill for an hour of solitude, but summer has brought the students out in such numbers that there is scarcely a bench unoccupied, nor a stretch of lawn upon which someone has not spread a cloak, opened a book, or settled with a basket of bread and fruit to enjoy the warmth.

Johanna had come to the Institute six years ago with very little understanding of what a fine building ought to look like, having been raised in a modest house in Ehrmich where the ceilings were low, the floors uneven, and her mother considered an open window preferable to any number of decorative improvements. She had thought the courtyard splendid then, and still does, though familiarity has taught her to recognize where the plaster conceals old water damage and which of the pillars has been repaired with stone of a slightly different color.

There is something reassuring about the place all the same, with its broad arches and its great square of open sky, its old trees and its pool that faithfully returns the passing clouds, for it seems to her that so long as the Institute endures, there must remain some order to the world, some place in which learning and diligence might be rewarded without consideration for the petty grievances that occupy so much of ordinary life.

It is a foolish comfort, perhaps, and she knows better than most how readily the Institute can accommodate pettiness within its ancient walls, but she has never considered foolishness sufficient reason to deny herself something pleasant.

Today, however, the courtyard affords her considerably less pleasure than it ought.

She sits upon the stone rim of the pool with an open book across her knees, a parcel of bread and cheese beside her, and the remains of her morning's temper troubling her so persistently that she has been obliged to read the same passage several times without retaining any of its meaning. A warm breeze stirs the branches overhead and sends their shadows wandering across the page, making the printed letters appear to shift beneath her eyes, although she suspects she could have accomplished no more in a room lit by a hundred candles. Her thoughts have been elsewhere since leaving the anatomy hall, and no amount of attention paid to the pulmonary circulation seems likely to restore them.

There had been nothing wrong with her work this morning which might justify such a disturbance. The scalpel had slipped, certainly, though only a little, and the incision had been corrected before any appreciable damage was done to the specimen; a careless moment, perhaps, but hardly an extraordinary one, particularly when she had spent the greater part of the preceding night preparing for examinations and had arrived at the lecture without so much as a mouthful of breakfast.

Had the same error been made by one of the gentlemen, the instructor might have corrected it and forgotten the matter before the hour was through, but Otto Reinhardt had seen fit to remark that her mother's judgment must have been as uncertain as her daughter's, else she would never have remained married to a man so thoroughly broken by his service beyond the Walls.

He had spoken loudly enough for the adjoining tables to hear, and when one of his companions laughed, Reinhardt had gone on to wonder whether Annaliese Geiszler might still be living had she not been obliged to endure the company of a cripple.

Johanna presses her thumb against the margin of her book until the paper bends beneath it.

It had been a vulgar observation, and an ignorant one besides, though neither quality has ever prevented Reinhardt from giving voice to his opinions. He has inherited his father's narrow forehead and his mother's unfortunate habit of speaking as though everyone present has gathered expressly to receive the benefit of his thoughts, and while Johanna does not ordinarily concern herself with the deficiencies of other students, there are occasions when a person's stupidity becomes so determinedly public that it can scarcely be ignored.

She had informed him of this, among other things, and had perhaps been less measured in her choice of language than Matron Ute would have preferred.

The young man had laughed at her. That is the part she finds most difficult to forgive, though there is little to recommend the rest of his conduct. She can tolerate ignorance when it is accompanied by some willingness to learn, and even cruelty may occasionally be attributed to a momentary failure of judgment, but Reinhardt had looked upon her anger with such obvious satisfaction that she can only conclude he had intended the insult from the beginning.

One of the girls at his table had lowered her eyes, while another had laughed behind her hand, and Johanna, who has never discovered much virtue in allowing an insult to pass unanswered, had raised her voice sufficiently that the instructor himself had been obliged to intervene.

She will be summoned before the day is through. There is no avoiding that, for the Institute has a remarkable talent for discovering breaches of propriety, particularly when committed by students whose continued attendance depends upon the generosity of others, and Matron Ute has always warned her twice this term that academic distinction affords no license to behave like a fishwife. Johanna had assured her on both occasions that she understood perfectly, which she did, although she cannot help thinking now that the matron might devote some portion of her concern to those who make such conduct necessary in the first place.

Surely there ought to be some punishment for speaking ill of the dead.

Her mother had been a physician of uncommon ability, a woman who had spent more hours among the sick than any of the Institute's fashionable benefactors would care to imagine, and her father's service had been spoken of with admiration long before Otto Reinhardt had learned to fasten his own boots. That their names should be passed between idle students as material for amusement seems an offense against something greater than Johanna's personal dignity, though she knows very well that the Institute does not see it so. The dead have little influence in Mitras, unless they leave behind sufficiently wealthy relations to defend their reputations.

A peal of laughter rises from the benches near the southern gallery, where several young women have gathered beneath the sycamores with a basket of cherries. One has removed her shoes and tucked her feet beneath her skirts, while another leans back upon her elbows with her face turned toward the sunlight, apparently untroubled by the possibility of a reprimand. They look very pleased with themselves, and Johanna supposes they have every reason to be, for their examinations are finished, their families prosperous, and their futures arranged with a certainty that requires very little effort on their part.

She wonders whether any of them have ever been obliged to explain why she deserves to remain at the Institute. The thought is uncharitable, and she knows it, but she is not presently inclined toward charity.

She lowers her eyes to the book again, resolving to finish the passage before permitting herself another distraction, when a shadow falls across the page, broader and more substantial than those cast by the branches overhead. It remains there even when the wind moves, and she looks up with an impatience she has not troubled to conceal, expecting to find some classmate come to inquire after the morning's disturbance.

Instead she finds Commander Nile Dok standing beside the pool.

For a moment she can only look at him, disconcerted by the sight of his dark uniform against the sun-warmed stone, for he seems to carry something of the Military Police headquarters with him wherever he goes, an air of starch and leather and uncomfortable formality that does not sit easily among the young scholars lounging in the grass. His coat is buttoned high despite the warmth, the brass fastenings polished until they catch the light, and beneath the

brim of his cap his long face bears the familiar expression of a man who has come upon something displeasing and intends to endure it without complaint.

Johanna has known Nile for years, and knows that his countenance is not always a reliable indication of his humor, although she has never succeeded in persuading him that an occasional smile might do much to improve the impression he makes upon strangers.

“Johanna,” he greets her, inclining his head. “I hope I have no disturbed your studies.”

She closes the book upon her finger, preserving the page despite knowing she has made very little progress. “Not at all, Commander.”

His expression alters very slightly at the title, though whether in amusement or displeasure she cannot immediately determine. He glances toward the empty portion of the bench, and Johanna gathers her papers into a neat pile before he has occasion to ask.

“May I?”

“Of course.”

Nile settles beside her with the care of a man unaccustomed to sitting upon stone, placing his cap across one knee and drawing his coat smooth beneath him. For a little while he says nothing, allowing his gaze to wander over the courtyard, where the students have already begun taking notice of his presence. Johanna sees two young men exchange a glance beneath the opposite gallery, and farther along the pool one of the nursing students leans toward her companion with the unmistakable eagerness of someone who has been given fresh material for speculation.

It had begun with the letters. At first there had been nothing remarkable about receiving correspondence from a military commander, for the Institute has long since been accustomed to dealing with the families and benefactors of its students, and Nile’s seal is sufficiently familiar to the administrative clerks that his letters have always been delivered without difficulty.

But their arrival had grown more frequent during the spring, and when Johanna had ceased to answer them, Nile had taken to visiting in person, an arrangement which had naturally attracted the attention of every idle person within the building.

The explanations devised for their acquaintance are numerous and, in Johanna’s opinion, remarkably lacking in imagination. Some maintain that she has purchased her education through an intimacy which Nile’s wife would scarcely have approved, though Marie has never seen fit to acknowledge such rumors when the truth is much more difficult to explain to a city full of women who would find the arrangement scandalous regardless.

She had once considered telling them precisely what had brought Nile into her life, how he had known her father during the last seven years in the military and had taken an interest in her education after Annaliese’s death, but the prospect of recounting her family’s misfortune to a collection of strangers proves more distasteful than allowing them to believe what they please. There is pity to be had in the truth, and she has received quite enough of that already.

Besides, she doubts they would believe her. It is apparently easier to suppose that a woman has obtained her qualifications through a man's favor than to accept that she might possess some aptitude for the profession.

Nile turns his attention toward the book upon her knees. "They have published the placement lists, I understand."

"Yesterday," Johanna answers, wondering whether he has come all the way from his offices to discuss a matter which might just as easily have been settled by correspondence.

"I received a copy this morning. Your name stood first among the candidates for Interior placement."

She inclines her head, pleased despite herself that he has learned of it so quickly. "It did."

"Above several young men whose families have been making inquiries about their prospects for months, from what I am told."

She cannot help looking at him then, for there is something in his voice which suggests that he finds this circumstance rather gratifying. Nile has never been particularly forthcoming about his dealings with the Institute, and though she knows he has exercised considerable influence in securing her admission, she has sometimes wondered whether he has grown weary of the complaints and insinuations which have followed her progress through its halls.

"I suppose their families will be disappointed," she replies.

"Some of them have been disappointed before. I expect they shall endure it."

It is said so mildly that Johanna almost smiles, though she remembers herself before the expression can properly form.

"I am very glad for you," he continues, looking toward the water again. "You have worked hard, and it pleased me to see that your efforts have been recognized."

There is nothing in the words to which she might reasonably object, and yet she feels, as she so often does when Nile speaks of her education, the familiar discomfort of being reminded how much of her future rests upon another person's generosity. She has earned her marks honestly, has submitted to every examination required of her and several which have been devised, she suspects, for no better purpose than to discover whether her abilities could withstand unusual scrutiny, but she cannot deny that without Nile there would have been no place at the Institute for her to defend.

"I hope," she answers carefully, "that I have justified the expense."

Nile regards her for a moment, his brows drawing together. "Johanna, I did not pay your fees in the expectation of receiving a return."

"No, of course not. I only meant that it must be gratifying to see the money well spent."

"It is gratifying to see you happy."

She looks away, finding the surface of the pool suddenly worthy of considerable attention, for there is something intolerable about being spoken to with such simple affection when she has spent the morning defending herself against people who had seemed incapable of imagining that anyone might possess it.

Nile allows the silence, as he generally does, although she has lately begun to suspect that his patience is not inexhaustible. “Marie sends her love,” he says at length. “She asked after you yesterday.”

Johanna turns toward him more readily. “How is she? Has the swelling improved?”

“Somewhat, I believe, though she has been complaining of her back, and the physicians are of the opinion that the child may arrive earlier than we expected.”

“How much earlier?”

“They have not committed themselves to a date, which Marie regards as a considerable failure on their part.”

That is like Marie, whose patience with physicians has never extended quite so far as her kindness toward them, and Johanna feels a little of the morning’s resentment ease at the thought of her moving about the Dok household with one hand pressed against her aching back, issuing instructions to the servants while Nile follows in anxious attendance. He would undoubtedly make himself a nuisance, though he would consider every inquiry into his wife’s comfort an act of necessary vigilance.

“She wishes you to visit. She claims you have been gone too long for her liking,” Nile goes on, “and asked whether you might attend her when the child comes, if your duties permit it. Your mother was with her for the first, as you know, and Marie thought it fitting that you should be there this time.”

The mention of Annaliese catches Johanna unprepared, though she has heard her mother’s name often enough this morning and ought by now to have grown accustomed to it. She remembers Clara’s birth only dimly, a red-faced little creature wrapped in linen, and her mother returning home afterward with blood beneath her nails and a weary satisfaction that had remained with her through supper. Annaliese had spoken fondly of Marie’s courage, though Johanna suspects she had said as much of every woman she attended, being unusually generous in her opinions of other people.

“I should be pleased to come,” she answers, after a moment. “Provided the Institute can spare me.”

“I thought you might.”

He looks at her then with such unmistakable tenderness that Johanna feels an unreasonable desire to ask him what has become of the stern military commander who had once frightened her half to death simply by speaking her name across a dinner table. He has grown softer with age, or perhaps she has only learned to recognize the gentleness which has always been there, concealed beneath his habitual severity.

For a little while they speak of the children, of Marie's preparations and the inconvenience of finding a suitable nurse, and Johanna allows herself to believe that the visit might concern nothing more distressing than domestic arrangements. Nile has always been fond of discussing his family, and she is sufficiently acquainted with the household to offer her opinions without the formality ordinarily expected of a young woman addressing a man of his position.

Yet when the conversation falters, and he sets his cap beside him rather than returning it to his head, she understands that he has not finished.

There is no reason to ask what remains to be said. She had known from the moment she saw him standing beside the pool, just as she had known every time his seal appeared among her correspondence and she had carried the unopened letter back to her room, where the fire was usually burning low by evening.

The first she had burned had concerned a particularly troublesome episode at the barracks, during which her father had been found wandering the corridors in the middle of the night, speaking of enemies concealed within the ranks. She had read that account several times before committing it to the flames, unable to bear the thought that anyone else might discover the particulars of his humiliation. The next letter had remained unopened upon her desk for three days, its seal unbroken, until she could no longer endure the sight of it and had thrown it into the hearth as well.

After that, it became rather easy.

It is not that she wishes to remain ignorant of her father's condition, for such a thing would be unworthy of her training, and she understands perfectly the importance of observing changes in a patient's behavior. But Nile's letters are never written as a physician would write them, with sufficient attention to symptoms and their progression; they are full of concern and uncertainty, of things the men have reported and things Leopold himself has supposedly said, and she has found them increasingly difficult to read without imagining her father subjected to the pity of every officer in the barracks.

There is little to be gained from such accounts when she can do nothing to alter them, and if something truly dreadful had occurred, Nile would surely come to tell her himself.

He is here now.

Johanna looks down at her hands, where a faint stain of ink remains along the side of her forefinger despite the care she had taken in washing it this morning.

"Your father has been unwell," Nile says quietly.

She had expected the words, and nevertheless feels her stomach tighten. "He has been unwell for some time."

"Yes, he has. But the episodes are becoming more frequent, and I am afraid there was another last night which cannot be overlooked."

She makes herself look at him. “What happened?”

Nile’s expression grows graver, though his voice remains carefully measured, and Johanna wonders whether he has rehearsed the account before coming, as she herself has so often rehearsed conversations she hoped never to have.

“He was found after midnight, beyond the usual patrol, attempting to break away a portion of the Wall with a chisel. When the men approached him, he became agitated and insisted that they had been sent to prevent him from exposing something concealed within the stone.”

Johanna can scarcely imagine her father engaged in such a thing, though the image comes to her readily enough: Leopold standing beneath the immense pale face of the Wall with his injured leg braced against the ground, his uniform damp with the night mist, striking uselessly at stone which has endured for generations. She wonders whether he had been properly dressed for the chill, whether anyone had thought to bring him a cloak before escorting him back to his quarters, and is ashamed almost at once that these are the particulars upon which her mind has chosen to settle.

“Was he hurt?”

“No. One of the men took the chisel from him before he could do himself any injury, though he resisted them rather fiercely.”

“That does not surprise me.”

“No,” Nile admits. “It did not surprise me either.”

She stares toward the opposite gallery, where a group of students have begun gathering their books for the afternoon lectures. Their conversation carries across the pool in little bursts of laughter, and Johanna finds herself envying them with such bitterness that she looks away.

“These disturbances cannot continue,” he continues. “There have been complaints from his superiors, and several of the younger men have grown frightened of him. I have done what I can to protect his position within my regiment, but I cannot persuade the whole regiment to disregard behavior of this nature.”

“He has served faithfully for decades. He was a Scout for nearly thirty years.”

He inclines his head. “I know.”

“Longer than most of the men complaining about him have been alive.”

“Johanna, I know that as well.”

Heat rises beneath her collar and she resents it, for she has not intended to quarrel with Nile, who has been her father’s friend for seven years now and has done more than anyone to preserve what remains of his dignity. Yet there is something unbearable about hearing Leopold discussed as a difficult to be managed, a failing officer whose condition has become inconvenient to those around him, when she can still remember him returning from

expeditions with his cloak torn and his boots worn through, too weary to stand but never too weary to lift her into his arms.

“He should be permitted to retire,” Nile informs her gently, “with all the honors due to his service. There will be a pension, and arrangements can be made for suitable quarters. I have already begun looking into the matter.”

“He will not agree. He would sooner die than leave his post.”

Nile regards her sadly. “That is precisely what concerns me.”

Johanna wishes he had not said it. Death belongs to illnesses and injuries, to the unfortunate patients whose names she has learned to record without sentiment in the Institute’s registers. It belongs to the anatomy hall, where the dead are laid upon tables and reduced, through careful study, to the structures which had once sustained them.

It does not belong to her father, who has endured things far worse than a few troubled nights and who had always returned to her despite the certainty with which others had predicted he would not. A man does not survive so many expeditions only to be defeated by his own thoughts. Surely there must be some explanation.

“Leopold has refused every suggestion of retirement,” Nile says with a weary sigh, lifting a hand to flatten his hair, “and I have reached the limit of what I can accomplish by persuasion alone. I would have you speak with him, Johanna, and convince him to submit to a proper examination.”

She shakes her head before he has finished. “He refuses physicians.”

“Then perhaps he will listen to his daughter.”

“You know very well that he will not. He considers the matter an insult, and he has become so suspicious of anyone who questions his health that I doubt he would receive even Mother kindly were she living.”

She stops, disliking the way Annaliese has slipped into the conversation, as though her mother might simply be absent upon some errand and expected home before supper.

Nile watches her for a long moment. “And you fear what one might confirm.”

The words settle somewhere beneath her ribs, heavy and cold, and for an instant she is so angry with him that she can scarcely summon a reply. It is cruel of him to say such a thing, particularly here, in a courtyard full of students who would be delighted to witness another display of her temper, and she wonders whether he has given any thought to how difficult it has been for her to continue her studies while the affairs of her family remain in such disorder.

Yet she knows he is right, which is the worst of it. She has seen enough patients to recognize the signs of deterioration, has studied the disturbances of memory and perception which follow injury, fever, and prolonged distress, and could describe her father’s condition in terms

sufficiently precise to satisfy any examiner at the Institute. But she has not been able to bring herself to do so, for giving the symptoms a name would not make them less terrible, and she fears that once she begins looking upon Leopold as a patient, she will lose the ability to see him as her father.

She wants him to remain the man who carried her upon his shoulders and called her his little bird, who had written long letters from Scout Headquarters and promised that one day he would take her beyond the Walls to see the world he loved so dearly.

She wants him to be well, which is a childish desire and one she despises herself for, yet no amount of medical knowledge has furnished her with another.

Nile does not press her to answer. When he speaks again, his voice is gentler. “I have an acquaintance in palace service, a physician of considerable reputation, who has agreed to examine Leopold if we can persuade him to consent. He is a discreet man, and I would attend the consultation myself if that would ease your mind.”

Johanna looks toward him, uncertain whether the offer should comfort her. “And afterward?”

“That will depend upon his findings.”

“And if Father refuses?”

“Then we must consider what can be done without his cooperation.”

She lowers her eyes, tracing the worn edge of the stone with one finger. There had been a time when Leopold would have listened to her in almost anything, when she might have persuaded him to abandon a troublesome task simply by taking his hand and asking him to come inside. She had been small then, and her father had been young enough to lift her without difficulty; it is strange to think how little authority she possesses over him now, when she has grown old enough to understand what might be required for his safety.

“There is another matter,” Nile says, lowering his voice. “Your application for Interior appointment has passed the preliminary review, and the selection committee has recommended you without reservation. I have every reason to expect that you will receive a suitable post following your graduation.”

She looks up sharply, disconcerted by the change of subject. “I thought that was already settled.”

“The placement is settled. The particular assignment is not.” He pauses, studying her face with an expression she cannot quite interpret, as if choosing his words as carefully as he might do before a troublesome council of officers. “There is some discretion available to me. If you can persuade your father to accept examination, I should be prepared to recommend a position which would allow you to remain near him.”

The offer is so precisely calculated to appeal to her that she feels, for one unreasonable instant, that he has been unfair in making it.

She has imagined such an arrangement often enough during the preceding months, though never with any expectation that it might truly be possible. A respectable medical position close enough to the barracks that she might visit her father without arranging leave or neglecting her duties, had seemed the best future she could reasonably hope for. There would be no need to rely upon letters, no need to wonder what the officers mean by their vague accounts of his condition, and perhaps with her nearby he would become less troubled, less inclined to wander, more willing to accept the limitations imposed by his injury.

She might even be able to persuade him to leave the barracks and live somewhere quieter, where the windows look upon a garden rather than a parade ground. It is a pleasant vision, and she clings to it with an eagerness which ought to embarrass her, but first she must bring him before a physician.

First there must be an examination, and questions, and the possibility of hearing something she can never afterward persuade herself to forget.

“I cannot promise that he will agree,” she says at last.

“I ask only that you try.”

She looks at the pool, where the reflection of the sycamores has broken into a thousand wandering fragments beneath the wind. Across the courtyard a bell begins to ring, calling the students to their afternoon lectures, and those who have been lounging upon the grass rise reluctantly to gather their books and brush the dust from their skirts. She ought to go with them. She ought to collect her things, attend her lecture, and concern herself with the ordinary business of finishing her education.

Instead she remains beside Nile, feeling as though something she has carefully held at a distance has at last come close enough to touch her.

“Very well,” she answers, so quietly that she is not certain he has heard. “I will speak with him.”

Nile releases a breath and inclined his head, his expression softening with relief. “Thank you, Johanna. I shall make the arrangements and send word as soon as I have a time.”

She nods, though the thought of another letter arriving at her rooms fills her with a shame she cannot quite bear to examine.

For a little while longer they sit together beneath the sycamores, neither of them seeming eager to disturb the silence, and Johanna is conscious of his presence beside her in a way she seldom is when they visit one another at the Dok household. There he belongs among the familiar comforts of his wife and daughter, in rooms where she has eaten innumerable suppers and received more kindness than she knows how to repay, but here his uniform sets him apart from everything around them, reminding her that the man who has paid for her education is also the commander responsible for her father’s remaining years of service.

She wonders whether he finds those obligations difficult to reconcile. Perhaps he does, though he has never been much inclined to speak of such things.

At length Nile rises, replacing his cap and smoothing the front of his coat, and Johanna stands with him because it would be discourteous to remain seated. He looks down at her for a moment, his grave expression giving way to something almost fond, and reaches out to straighten the corner of her collar where it has folded beneath the weight of her hair.

“Do remember to eat something,” he tells her. “Marie will be displeased with me if I return having neglected to inquire.”

Johanna glances toward the parcel beside her books, the bread now somewhat hardened in the warmth, and her throat tightens curiously. “I shall.”

He rests a hand briefly upon her shoulder, then turns toward the northern gallery, passing beneath the arches with the measured stride of a man accustomed to having others make way before him. Several students step aside as he approaches, offering the little bows and murmured greetings which his uniform invariably inspires, and Johanna watches him go until he disappears into the shaded corridor beyond.

Only then does she sit again, her book lying open when she had left it, the page lifting and settling beneath the breeze as the courtyard returns almost entirely to its former pleasures. Someone has begun laughing near the far end of the pool, a pair of students are quarreling amiable over a borrowed text, and sunlight continues to fall upon the old limestone as though nothing of consequence has occurred.

Johanna gathers her papers slowly, taking care to align their edges before placing them in her satchel. There is still time to attend the afternoon lecture if she hurries, though she doubts she would be capable of giving it the attention it deserves, and Matron Ute will still undoubtedly have something to say about her conduct in the anatomy hall before the day is finished.

She has been looking forward to graduation for so long that she can scarcely remember a time when it had not stood before her as the natural conclusion of everything she has worked to accomplish. The prospect of leaving the Institute, of having her own patients and her own rooms, of earning a living by the knowledge she has spent so many years acquiring, has sustained her through examinations and humiliations alike.

Now she finds herself wondering whether her father will be well enough to attend. It is a foolish question, perhaps, when Nile has just described the severity of his condition, but the thought comes to her all the same, and she holds to it as she rises from the pool and begins making her way toward the galleries.

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