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Purpose

The bugle call sounds at 4 a.m. and madness ensues. This morning marks my third day at the Cadet Leadership Course. Except for minor degrading, the Citadel has been a nice, safe place so far. My mother wouldn't have forced me to come otherwise. Before I had to give up my phone on day one, she had told me that I could be weak only after trying my best.

I quickly make my way down the stairs, my heart racing with anticipation. We're up an hour early, what will we do today? My feet finally meet the red and white checkered quad, I make a beeline for my flight with a slight limp as multiple cadre yell, "Walk with a purpose!", and reach my spot in formation. I take a seat and listen in to the hushed conversations around me, only getting bits and pieces. Some of the cadre are mumbling about the girl's bathroom. Remaining silent, I search around for the physical training instructor: Major Farese.

As if on cue, a bald, veiny head struts through the entrance. Anyone who had the gall to speak during his absence immediately fall silent as he carefully scans his surroundings. His face was stoic; eerily so. Even my breath has stilled, but after minutes of suffocating intimidation from Major, it still dared to escape; albeit nervously. Major seems to sense the extra molecules in the air that come from me and whips his head in my direction, though he can't pinpoint who the breath had come from. I feel his strong aura press against me and begin to shrink into myself, but my fear suddenly turns into anger. *Sorry for breathing, Your Excellency*, I think to myself as we continue to sit on the cold floor. After a few minutes, I realize Major seems off this morning.

He barks a command:

“Parade field, NOW!”

Our flight commanders don't have us march off of the quad like we normally do. Instead, everyone walks with a purpose across the checkered area (no running allowed on the quad) and once we reach the sidewalk, we haul ass to the large field. Major Farese stalks out and paces in front of us with a predatorial nature.

Eventually he says, “Does the girl who left the bloody tampon in the shower want to come forward? If not, everyone will have to go through a punishment.”

Nobody moves or speaks.

Major then starts to pick his prey — two guys and one girl. Even though everyone has their nametag pinned on their hat, Major still tells the three cadets to state their names.

“Chadwick, sir!”

“Thomas, sir!”

“Conyers, sir!”

Then Major instructs Chadwick to get into push-up position and for the girl, Thomas, to sit on his back. Conyers is instructed to go into a squat. I feel a twinge of pain. Conyers has a pretty serious knee injury from falling during the Marine Obstacle Course. Everyone knew that. What is Major doing?

The twinge I felt turns into a wave of dread as Major issues his next instructions:

“Chadwick is going to do push-ups with Thomas on his back and Conyers is going to hold a squat. The amount of time that these three must keep their positions up depends on the rest of you; run to the other side of the field and then back. Do this a total of three times, one time for Chadwick, Thomas, and Conyers. Neither Chadwick nor Conyers can stop until every single one of you make it back after the third time. Thomas, you must also remain on

Chadwick's back the entire time, of course. Lastly, I have a whistle here. If Chadwick stops doing push-ups, or Thomas so much as falls off his back, or if Conyers is tired of squatting, then I'll blow the whistle and you will all come back and we will start over. For the sake of these three, or rather two, doing exercises, don't stop running and come back quickly. For the sake of all the cadets running, you three keep up your positions. Go!"

I sprint out onto the field filled with determination, ignoring the small amount of pain coming from my ankle, and land smack dab into a hole. Recovering as quickly as possible, I continue down the expanse of the field, willing the burning sensation intensifying with each step to go away. However, the parade field apparently has a vendetta against me. I slip into a dozen of the little holes littering the ground and curse. As I start to pump through my final lap, Major blows the whistle.

Rinse and repeat.

As the whistle shrieks for the fourth time, I catch the other cadets glaring at Chadwick. I turn my attention to Conyers and watch him for a moment. Even as he waited for over a hundred cadets to cross the field — about 350 yards — he still held his position. How could an injured kid hold out for so long?

I hear Major spout his common tongue, "Pain is just weakness leaving the body." Making eye contact with Conyers, I mouth to him that weakness is fine. Then I take off running again. A sickening snap rings loud in my ears and I turn around just in time to see Conyers fall. A few other cadets hear the sound as well but Major yells at us to keep running.

Halfway across the field, the pain in my ankle comes back with a vengeance. I glance in Conyers' direction again and think about the meaning behind my words.

Weakness has always been subjective in my opinion. A lot of people see quitting as a weakness. However, if you tried your best and pushed yourself to your limits, then quitting is no longer a weakness; it's a strength. Conyers pushed himself a bit too hard. I wanted him to know that even though Major would think he was being weak, everyone else would acknowledge his strength and perseverance.

With that in mind, I brought my focus back to my throbbing ankle. I could feel it swelling against my shoe. I've been running for too long now. I contemplate stopping, but Major's face looms in my head. He will definitely start yelling some obscenities at me. Stealing one last look at Conyers, I see him being placed on a stretcher. Thinking that Major Farese is occupied with him, I stop running. Looks like Conyers can go home now.

I start to hobble back towards the quad, still walking with a purpose. This is partly because it's already drilled into my entire being and also because I hope it will make me look stronger; more dignified. I make it to the road when I hear Major start yelling at me.

"Cadet! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm walking with a purpose to the infirmary, sir!"

"Get back here and run!"

Stepping onto the smooth surface of the quad, I turn to face Major and say, "Sorry, no running on the quad, sir!"

I spot the nurse and make my way over to her. She eyes me up and down for a moment before handing me a bag of weights. Seeing my confused look, she simply says, "Just because your foot is injured doesn't mean you can't use your upper body. Now get down and do 20 sit-ups."

What did I expect? Begrudgingly, I get down and do as she says. On my sixth sit-up, I notice the nurse walking towards the stairs with a small box in her hand. I stop for a moment to get a better look at what she's holding. Letting out a curse, I plop down on my back. It's not likely that she is the only person with those, but if she is the culprit then I'm going to go to jail for murder. I push the thoughts of murder out of my head and think back to the box of tampons in the nurse's hand.