

Chapter 0012

"Oh god," I groan, sinking my face into my hands, my dreams of becoming an Academy cadet suddenly slipping through my fingers.

"Don't worry about it, Ari," Jesse murmurs, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and giving me a manly squeeze. "We'll train you up good. You just had one bad day, and they didn't measure any of the things you're actually good at."

"He's right," Rafe says, and I raise my head to see my brother looking at me seriously. I blink a little, emotion swelling in me because Rafe looks so much like dad when he looks at me like that, with a mix of stern expectation and love in his eyes. "We'll get your number up fast, Ari, you just need...a little more training."

"Not like you two have to worry," I sigh, leaning into Jesse for just a second before glancing up at the board again. "You two are..." and then I scoff a little in jealousy because their numbers are one and four. "Seriously, guys!?" I say, pouting at them. "You had to show me up that bad?"

"Someone had to uphold the Sinclair name," Rafe

murmurs, smirking a little as he finishes off his plate, shoveling the food into his mouth. "Seriously, Ari, eat up," he says, gesturing towards my plate with his fork. "You need the energy today!"

I sigh and eat the sausage in two bites, finishing up the orange as we bus our trays and head for the door. But as I swallow the last little bit of orange, I realize that I didn't even look –

I spin at the last minute, my eyes roving over the rankings for their names –

Luca Grant – that one's easy. Number five, right at the top, right under Jesse. Does that mean...did Jesse beat him in the bracket yesterday? Surely he would have mentioned –

But Rafe – if he beat my other mate in the final match that means...

Number two.

My eyes dart up the chart, fastening on his name.

Jackson McClintock.

That's him, I think, even as Rafe grabs my arm and hauls me out of the room.

Jackson. Luca and Jackson.



My mates.

And as we pass head towards the gym...I can't help but feel a little thrill of excitement twist in my stomach. Because I know who they are.

But they have noooo idea who I am.

At least, not yet.

I look up at my brother and my cousin on either side of me as we walk into the gym, moving towards the group of candidates who stand before what looks like a gigantic obstacle course. "Thanks, guys," I whisper, suddenly overwhelmed by a rush of gratitude. Because honestly, if anyone can get me raised up from number 120? It's them. "Thank you for believing in me."

"Don't thank us yet," Rafe says, shaking his head down at me. "Training is about to kick your ass. You ready for this?"

"Probably not," I sigh, and Jesse grins at me to let me know I'm right. But I square my shoulders and nod to them, ready to try.

By the end of the day, Rafe's prediction turns out to be correct: I have absolutely no urge to thank them.

Training today was brutal. I don't even know why

they call it training – it was just a lot of running through obstacle courses, throwing ourselves over barriers, and climbing chains – an activity at which I completely failed. None of it had anything to do with fighting anyone, as far as I could see. And it certainly was not an activity that played to my skill set.

Thankfully, nothing today counts towards rankings – we'll run the obstacle course again at the end of the two weeks, which is when it will actually affect our rank.

And I was seriously, pathetically bad at all of it. I gritted my teeth as I pulled myself through the final obstacle – a sand pit that I had to crawl through under a set of low ropes. As I hauled myself forward with my burning forearms, I was shocked to see Jackson passing me, barely giving me a glare as he went.

He was close enough that I got a good whiff of his scent as he pulled ahead, an experience that made me emit an embarrassing moan as my arms gave out so that I faceplanted in the sand, completely overwhelmed by exhaustion and lust. God damn it, having mates while running an obstacle course makes me look even more pathetic than I really am.

I spit out a mouthful of sand as I crawled out of the pit. "Dead last, Clark," a Lieutenant said as I got to my feet, raising an eyebrow at me.



“How can I be last!?” I panted, gesturing towards Jackson. “McClintock is ranked second, and he barely made it out before me!”

“Because,” the Lieutenant said, raising a snide brow in my direction. “McClintock went through twice, while you did it once.”

I groaned, tilting my head back, thinking longingly of the hot shower that I’d get to take next—



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