Chapter 0005

"Time for the ranking," the Captain growls, looking around at us with distaste. "You're dressed in your grey candidate fatigues because you have not yet earned your Academy black. The bottom twenty percent of candidates will be cut at the end of the second week of candidacy. I suggest you take this seriously."

The Captain surveys us, his eyes cold. "Today's test," he barks out, "measures what you won't survive without at the Academy: physical prowess. Rafe Sinclair! Kenny Dextrin! You're up – first blood wins!"

The Academy is famous for teaching its students the most cutting-edge methods and technologies - but first ranking is determined by a fist fight!?

The match is over shockingly fast. Rafe knocks Kenny down and bloodies his nose within thirty seconds.

When Luca Grant is called, I smirk a little. Luca dances around his opponent and taunts him for a while before whipping out a swift uppercut that knocks the other boy clean over. I bite my lip a little, admiring his technique – and the spread of his muscled shoulders - when to my horror I hear my own name.

Or at least, my pretend name.

"Ari Clark! Robert Brown!"

My jaw just drops open because – god, I'm such an idiot – but as long as I've been standing here watching, I've never thought about how I was going to have to do this!

I groan as I realize that I slipped into my Princess identity – I'm used to standing on the sidelines, watching Rafe and Jesse fight –

"Let's go, Clark!" The Sergeant snaps when he sees that I haven't stepped forward.

Rafe, next to me, sighs and puts a hand on my back, shoving me forward. I look back at him in shock but he just shrugs, his eyes clearly saying you wanted to join the Academy, kid.

Frantic, I turn to Robert, who is already stepping into a fighting stance. As he puts his fists up and I finally realize that I'm actually supposed to punch him, the candidates all around us

start to shout and whistle.

"Come on!" Robert shouts, urging me forward. "Let's do it!"

But I just stand there, shocked.

Someone starts to laugh uproariously and then bellows, "The shrimp's scared!"

Others start to laugh too, and then they pick up a call: "Shrimp! Shrimp! Shrimp!"

This, somehow, spurs me on – and finally gets my wolf to pay attention to something besides that insane thing that happened this afternoon – two boys – two scents –

Kill him, she growls, stalking forward within me. Show 'em all...

And so I start to step forward, my lips curling back, raising my own fists the way Rafe and Jesse taught me to, moving fast towards the other boy –

Everything goes black.

When I open my eyes I see Jesse staring right at me, peering again over the edge of my bunk. "Hey there, Shrimp," he says, smirking at me, but not without sympathy. "How you feeling? He got you good."

I open my mouth to say something but pain instantly flares over my entire face.

"Ith it..." I say, my voice all stuffy from my poor injured nose, which I raise a hand to gingerly touch, "Ith it broken?"

Jesse takes a moment to press my nose between his thumbs, pushing at it experimentally, which hurts like hell. I gasp and wince, but he shakes his head. "Nah, cousin, you'll be all right in a few days. You'll have one hell of a black eye, though."

Well, also, I can't smell anything with my nose all messed up, can I?

So, I have no idea which of these boys are...

God, I can't even think the word to myself.

Mate! My wolf gleefully supplies, dancing around inside of me, ignoring my pain. Your mates! Both of them! Get up now, shift into me! I can smell them! I can do it! I would love to do it!

I scowl, ignoring her and closing my eyes again, wishing I was still knocked out.

A few minutes later, though, my rest is interrupted by something landing on my pillow that makes me jump. I gasp, opening my eyes, and then I scowl when I see a cellophane-wrapped sandwich and a water bottle next to me, along with a packet of pain killers.

"You okay, kid?" Rafe asks quietly, and I jump a little to see him standing where Jesse was before, peering at me closely.

"No, I'm dying," I sigh dramatically, collapsing back onto my pillow.

"That breaks the pact," he says, shoving me lightly on the shoulder. "You die, mom kills me – then dad's only got Markie and Juniper left, their two worst kids. You know we can't do that to them."

I smirk, laughing a little, but then I flinch when laughing hurts. "Hey," I say, suddenly remembering that I missed the big event. "Did you win?"

Rafe just gives a casual shrug but Jesse pops up behind him. "Of course he won!" Jesse says, looping a proud arm around Rafe's shoulders. "You should have seen the brute he had to take out though, Ari," he continues, his eyes wide and thrilled.

"You're being dramatic," Rafe murmurs, shrugging Jesse off even though he can't keep the corners of his lips from turning up.

"No seriously," Jesse says, leaning in to me. "He was like, bigger than Rafe, maybe – or at least as big – and totally brutal. You could tell he had never been formally trained, but he just went into his fights like a damn madman –"

"Really?" I ask, curious, sitting up a little. "Which one was it?"

"That big boulder over there," Jesse murmurs, pointing across the room. I see him instantly – who couldn't? He's seriously gigantic – rivaling even my dad in size. He hunches over in his bunk, looking down at his mattress with his arms resting lightly on top of his knees, totally stoic but clearly disappointed to have come in second. His dark hair falls in his face like he can't be bothered to push it away.

"You beat him?" I ask, turning shocked eyes on my brother.

"Don't act so surprised," Rafe snaps, frowning at me, offended.

I laugh a little and lean over to give him a shove on the shoulder. "You're right," I say in an overly-girly voice, like a deranged cheerleader, teasing him. "No one can beat Rafe Sinclair!"

Jesse laughs with me, turning to watch Rafe turn red as he scowls.

"Eat up," Rafe mutters as he hops down from the bed, "and take the painkillers." Then he hesitates, looking over his shoulder, and leans in to whisper. "There are some closed shower stalls, but...I don't think you should go in there anytime soon. All right?"

"I'll do it in the morning," I say with a yawn, reaching out to grab the cold water bottle and press it to my face, moaning a little at the instant relief. "I'll get up at 3, before anyone else."

"Okay. Wake me up too. I'll come with you."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "You need sleep. It'll be okay."

"Just wake me," my brother growls.

I nod to appease him and lean back against my pillow with a groan.

Fine, my wolf growls as I drift of, displeased. But tomorrow, we're finding them!

Unfortunately, as fate would have it, tomorrow is too long of a wait.