

CHAPTER SIX

mags13: wait, didn't I just mute you? WTF?

tyz7513: no, that wasn't me. That person had "7412" at the end of their name.

mags13: that's . . . pretty weird though. That you would have such a similar ID.

tyz7513: Coincidences happen.

mags13: do they tho?

tyz7513: Let's go back to the beginning. Do you really think you'd be able to survive one of those dystopic games like in all of those books?

mags13: Sure. I'm a mom. I can do anything 😊

tyz7513: All right then. Prove it.

SANYA'S MOUTH DROPPED. "WAIT, you're *actually* a bad guy and Maggie isn't just having a paranoid hunger hallucination?"

Beth smirked. "I can't believe how easily you all fell for the 'poor little me' routine. Especially you, Maggie. You just can't stop yourself from helping people."

"I don't consider it a character flaw," Maggie said tightly. "Although in retrospect, I do wish that scythe had swung as you were exiting the crawl tunnel."

"So mean, Magdalena," Beth said, using Maggie's full name instead of her nickname. That, more than anything else, convinced Maggie that she was right, that Beth was part of the group that kidnapped women and threw them into some sick gladiator game. "What happened to your compassion for humanity?"

"I find it's lacking at the moment. Maybe I'll get it back. After I kick your ass into the stratosphere."

"What happened to 'I'm not going to fight anyone unless I have to'?" Beth said, her voice high and mocking.

"Oh, I have to," Maggie said. "I definitely have to."

Sanya looked like she was struggling to keep up. She glanced at Maggie. "Does she know you? Like, personally? Seems like there's a lot of hostility all of a sudden."

"Nope," Maggie said. "She's probably cattle-prod guy's handmaiden or something. His little side piece."

"I'm nobody's accessory," Beth said, snarling. "And Clark knows I wouldn't fuck him if he were the last man on earth."

"Clark," Maggie said thoughtfully. "He didn't really seem like a Clark to me. More like a Chad. A petulant little frat boy trying to prove he doesn't have a micro-penis."

"Chad, Clark—I mean, they're all rich white boy names," Sanya said.

"Yeah, but when I think of Clark, I think of Superman," Maggie said. "Morality, nobility, self-sacrifice. It doesn't seem like the kind of name you give to a little shit."

"I guess his parents couldn't have known when he was born that he would end up being a little shit," Sanya said. "That's not really predictable."

"There's probably at least one Brandon in that group," Maggie said.

"Ooh, and a Landon, too."

"I bet your name is not really Beth," Maggie said. "Is it McKayla? You look like a McKayla."

"Total sorority girl name," Sanya agreed. "Was Chad your college boyfriend? Did you meet at the kegs-and-eggs breakfast?"

"It's Beth," she said, her face mottled with fury. "And you're not going to be joking soon enough. Just as soon as we clear the ring of those useless cunts, you're going to be in there with me, and you're not going to like what you discover."

"You know," Maggie said, "if you want to trick somebody into thinking you're weaker than you actually are, then maybe you shouldn't give away the game before we even start. I revise my opinion of you. I thought you were pretty good at deception at first, but when it comes down to it, you are a crap hustler."

Maggie didn't want to fight Beth. It would be emotionally satisfying, sure, but she didn't want to risk injury or death at the hands of this woman. Maggie had already concluded that despite her slight appearance, Beth probably knew five separate martial arts disciplines or something, otherwise the group wouldn't have sent her into the maze. Maggie hoped that if she ran her mouth long enough, Beth would get angry and charge, and Maggie would be able to take advantage of her mistake.

Maggie wasn't a fighter. The only time she'd fought anyone was when Noah broke into her house after she'd moved out of his, and it wasn't some Queensberry boxing rules match. She'd tried to run, grabbed vases and wine bottles and anything else she could reach to slam into his head, had kicked him in the balls and slammed a door into his nose. She'd fought dirty because he'd been high as a kite and intent on killing her for taking Paige away.

Maggie didn't like her chances in an open ring, with no heavy objects to throw.

But I'll fight dirty. I'll do whatever I have to do to take her down and get to that exit.

Maggie's eyes went to the bright red sign, glowing in the artificial light of the maze.

"It's open, you know," Beth said, giving Maggie a sly smile. "Because I'm supposed to be the only one left after this obstacle."

"You won't be," Maggie said.

Her heart thrummed wildly. The door was open, unlocked. If she could just get there, then she might be able to find Paige.

"I will be," Beth said. "Because none of you are supposed to survive. That's my job."

"And what do you get out of it?" Maggie said. "They're a bunch of misogynists, anyone can see that. And they're probably the types that like to cosplay as military and pretend that it means something. But you? Why would you want to do this to other women?"

Beth sneered. "I don't believe in all of that sisterhood shit. I like manipulating people. I like hurting people."

Maggie knew there were those who enjoyed seeing others in pain, knew there were those who got a sadistic thrill out of that. But she'd never heard it stated so baldly, so honestly. Beth wanted to see the women around her suffer. Maggie couldn't grasp it. It was fundamentally not in her nature to be cruel.

"This group gave me the chance to do it on a large scale. Of course, I hardly had to do anything because you were all so *earnest* and *helpful*. Now, clear them out of the ring."

Beth flicked her fingers at #2 and #10. Maggie noticed that while she argued with Beth, #10 had stopped moving. Her eyes were closed, and Maggie couldn't tell if #10 was breathing anymore.

"No," Maggie said.

"I said, clear them out," Beth said. "You have to do every obstacle, and this obstacle is a fight to see who's still standing."

"Why should I do every obstacle?" Maggie said. "You've made it clear that we were going to be killed anyway. They never intended to keep their promise to let us go at all."

She said this with a fair amount of bravado, but inside, her heart was crumbling into pieces. *Paige, Paige, Paige.* Maybe they wouldn't really kill the hostages. Maybe Paige would be all right even if Maggie wasn't.

"Well, who knows?" Beth said, her look so smug that Maggie had a hard time resisting the urge to punch her in the face right there. "Maybe they'll change their minds if you're good enough."

Good enough. It was always like this, always a quest to prove herself to some man, to work three times as hard for half the recognition. She didn't want to play by their rules anymore. She was tired of feeling like she'd been shoved inside a box and permitted to bounce off the walls but never allowed to open the top and climb out.

But they're making you follow their rules because they're holding Paige over your head. They can make you dance because it's not just about you.

"There's nothing that says we have to go into the ring to fight," Maggie said.

"I just explained, dumbass, that you have to complete *every obstacle*," Beth said.

"And what I am saying, dumbass, is that I don't have to be inside that ring to fight *you*."

Maggie ran at Beth, tackled her before Beth realized what was happening. She slammed Beth into the ground with all the force she had in her body. Then she grabbed Beth's hair, close and tight to the scalp, and slammed Beth's head into the ground. Repeatedly.

Maggie knew her strengths. Her arms and legs were strong from climbing, but she didn't know the first thing about punching and didn't think she'd have the wherewithal to put a sufficient amount of force behind any blow. So she'd use what was available to assist her—the ground, the walls, whatever.

Beth bucked, tried to throw Maggie off her. Maggie was flat on top of Beth and she tried to move, to dig in her knees on either side of the smaller woman. As she'd suspected, Beth was much stronger than she looked. Despite the disorientation she must have felt, Beth managed to dig in her heels and heave Maggie off to the side. Maggie kept her grip on Beth's hair, though, and Beth screamed as some of her hair and scalp tore away.

Maggie spread her fingers and shook her hand, repulsed by what she'd just done. The moment of disgust was all Beth needed. She leapt on top of Maggie and did what Maggie should have done in the first place—sat on Maggie's hips and pounded her fists into Maggie's face.

Beth's hands were bony, her knuckles sharp, and she punched like someone who'd been trained to punch as hard as possible. After a few seconds, Maggie wondered if Beth would hit her until there was nothing left of her face, until she looked like she'd been shredded in a meat grinder. She felt something shift in her cheek, heard a crack, and there seemed to be a lot of salt in her mouth, salt and liquid and copper, and Maggie knew she'd lost at least one tooth. Agonizing pain coursed through her, and it dawned that her cheekbone was probably broken.

Then suddenly the pain stopped, the weight on Beth's body was gone, and Beth screamed out in fury. Maggie took a breath, discovered that breathing hurt. She turned to one side and spit out all the liquid in her mouth. The cracked pieces of tooth came out with the blood and saliva, and she thought, strangely, despairingly, of the dentist's bill. Her dental insurance was not so great.

The dentist is the least of your problems. Get out of this mess first.

Maggie pushed herself up to a crouch, saw Sanya had managed to get Beth on her back on the ground. Sanya was kicking Beth hard in the ribs, the face, whatever she could hit. Beth tried to roll away but Sanya stomped on her hand.

I should have done that, Maggie thought dazedly. I should have used my legs and kept my face away from Beth's hands.

She stood, wobbled, righted herself. She wanted so badly to lie back down and have a rest, but Sanya needed help. Maggie went to the other side of Beth and added her own kicks.

Soon Sanya and Maggie fell into a rhythm, a rhythm that meant that Beth was continuously receiving blows. It didn't take long before Beth's eyes closed, before she stopped trying to roll away, before she lay still and silent.

Maggie stopped, stepped back, peered down at Beth from a few feet away, half-convinced that Beth would pop back up like the killer in a slasher film.

Sanya said, "She's still breathing. Don't worry."

Maggie and Sanya looked at each other, both of them sucking air like they'd just run a hard race.

"I'm not fighting you," Maggie said.

"Same," Sanya said. "I've had enough of this shit. And by the way, your face does not look okay."

Maggie laughed, or tried to, because it hurt to smile. Her laugh came out like a strange little puffed grunt. It hurt to talk and stand and do anything, really.

"My face does not feel okay," Maggie said, and gave in to the driving need to sit down, just for a minute. She leaned her head forward between her knees and gagged, dry heaved, spit out some more saliva.

"Got nothing in there to throw up," Sanya said. "I would kill someone for a sandwich right now."

"God, I love sandwiches," Maggie said, gasping and holding her hand over her stomach, willing the dry heaves to stop. "That's my favorite food."

"What kind?" Sanya said, giving Maggie a hand up.

They walked toward the ring, because the ring was set up so that it covered the maze from wall to wall. There was no way around it; you could only go over it.

"Any kind," Maggie said. "I like all the sandwiches. I like cold-cut sandwiches and hot sandwiches. I like banh mi and Italian subs and short rib torta and Cubanos. I'll take a turkey and Swiss over a slice of pizza any day of the week. I even like—*gasp!*—tuna sandwiches."

"I like tuna," Sanya said. "I don't see why liking a tuna melt is such a controversial opinion."

"Right?" Maggie said as they pulled themselves through the ropes surrounding the ring. "A tuna melt and a cup of soup is just comfort food." *Sandwich*

"I could go for a tuna melt right now. Hell, I could go for a goddamned Nutri-Grain bar right now," Sanya said. "I can't remember ever being so hungry, not even when I was a broke undergrad. At least I could afford cornflakes and ramen."

They paused in the middle of the ring. Maggie knelt down beside #2, and Sanya beside #10. Maggie reached a shaky hand to check #2's pulse, and Sanya did the same for #10. Maggie jerked her hand back from #2 right away.

"She's already cold," Maggie said. "Does it really happen that fast?"

"It's been longer than it seems, I guess. I wasn't really watching the clock, what with the shocking revelations and all," Sanya said, holding her fingers to #10's neck.

After a minute, Sanya said, "Nothing."

"So it's just the two of us," Maggie said.

"Just the two of us and a bunch of guys with guns and cattle prods," Sanya said. "And Lord knows what else."

"Seems totally safe and straightforward," Maggie said, standing and looking toward the door built into the wall of the maze.

Alice went through a door, after she grew and then shrank, after she ate and drank things that maybe she shouldn't have. On the other side of the door, she had an adventure with flowers and grinning cats and very unhinged tea parties, an adventure that was sometimes wondrous and sometimes dangerous. Despite all of this, she made it home, wondering if it was all just a dream.

Lucy went through a door, one that was built into a wardrobe, and she came out by a lamppost and had tea with a faun. Later, her adventure got more wondrous and also much more dangerous, but she and her siblings all made it home safely.

Beauty went through a door in a castle, and had tea with a beast, but only after he shouted and pretended to be angry. Later, her adventure became more wondrous but somehow less dangerous, for that beast was all bark and no bite.

Maggie always thought this was irresponsible storytelling, because beasts don't stop being dangerous as long as they have teeth.

She didn't think she was going to find a cup of tea on the other side of the door, nor any adventure strange and wondrous. Maybe she would find her daughter. That was her hope.

Maybe she would find death, and that seemed more likely.

"What's going on in your head?" Sanya asked, standing beside Maggie and staring at the same door Maggie was staring at.

"The same thing that's going on in yours," Maggie said. "Is it a trick? Is it a trap? Will we just get shot on the other side? Will I be able to find my daughter?"

Sanya looked up at the running clock. "There's only one way to find out."

Maggie climbed over the other side of the ring, half-expecting a voice to boom out over a loudspeaker, telling them that they had to fight one another. But nothing happened. There was only the sound of her own breath, and Sanya's, and the thump of their sneakers on the ground outside the ring.

"Okay," Maggie said, and they started walking toward the door.

Maggie again expected something, some exhale of breath—an announcement, an outpouring of tin soldiers through the door. But there was nothing, and no one, and she wondered why. It seemed wrong, like the story wasn't following the preordained plot.

It can't be this easy, Maggie thought. After all of this, it can't be this easy.

Her feet began to move faster of their own volition, and the bright red exit sign bobbed up and down in her vision.

Let it be open. Please let it be open. Paige, I'm coming.

Maggie ran, ran, ran for the exit.

She slammed into the door, and pushed it open.