

## Bullied By The Badboy By Maramartha Chapter 5

Fucking hell

There's one thing Maria and my parents don't know about me. I fight illegally in an underground ring. Mum and Dad will have a mini heart attack if they learn their daughter is somewhat of a champion at underground martial art, thanks to Hayden. And there's no way to tell Maria without her diving into a series of questions, wanting to know why I haven't beaten half the school's population for giving me shit.

The song—an original from Maria's unnamed album—playing from the tiny speaker on the table filters into the room, the tension in my joints melts and I shuffle to stand in front of the mirror to start my stretches. I hear the faint cheering from outside and my heart skips a beat. Ten more minutes until my turn. Swiping my brown hair out of my face as I bend to touch my toes, I focus on keeping my raging heart under control and regulating my ragged breathing. In. In. In. Out. I exhale and repeat the process.

Today's match is super important, the biggest since I started. I am fighting another champion. My palms grow clammy at the thought of losing, I've lost a few matches but I can count the losses on one hand.

"Tee." A knock on the door follows, I recognise the voice as Coach Greyson's. "Can I come in?"

A glance at my half-naked self in the mirror and I shake my head. "No." I snatch the bandage on the table holding the rest of my belongings and adjust my tube lying flat on my chest. "Not yet. Just a second."

Wrapping the bandage around my chest to make it flatter, I throw on a black tank top matching the colour of my tube, making sure to avoid

looking at the discolouration on my stomach and upper thighs. The doctor called it segmental vitiligo, a patchy loss of skin pigmentation and there's no known cure for it.

I hate it.

I hate the fact it might spread to all parts of my body; my face. I should take Maria's advice—rock crop tops, bodycon and spaghetti straps while I still can but I hate seeing the difference between me and my family. I hate looking at my body, to be reminded I am this way. Hayden doesn't have it, neither do my parents. One day, I am a normal teenager, the next day, I have spots on my stomach, my back, legs as if being skinny and unfashionable isn't enough of a curse to live with. Mum says I'm not that skinny and I can work on my fashion sense but I'll rather do nothing and sulk. No point since I can't show off my body.

Another knock on the door forces me out of those pitiful memories, I pull the leggings over my waist and dab my eyes with the heel of my hand. I can't change my body. This is not the time to feel bad about that, it is the time to fight like I was born to. To beat my opponent in the ring like he's the cause of my vitiligo.

“You can come in now,” I scream to the person behind the door at the same time my phone pings with a message. Only one person texts me this much, she hates calls as much as I do. I giggle at the picture of Maria standing in front of a blinking banner in her headband with big, fluffy ears. She is at the concert.

Maria's weekends consist of concerts, music festivals, street shows and whatnot. If it involves music, you can bet your life Maria will be there. Music is everything to her, she loves singing. She's a hustler and the only way her parents will truly agree with her decision of skipping college is if she finds a label to push her career forward. I dare not think of skipping

college, my parents will send me to a counsellor. Besides, I want to go to an acting school to hone my amateur skills. I send Maria a short text with lots of kissy faces and slide my phone into my bag. Staring at the door with a frown, I cross my hands on my chest.

Coach should be here. I can't go out there without him. Why isn't he here ?

A jerk at the door, the violent twitching of the knob and the answer comes to me. I locked the door.

"Sorry," I say to him once I open up. He takes a seat on the couch opposite the vanity, I pull out a chair and lower myself into it, folding my hands under my jaw propped on the headrest. "How's it out there ?"

He shrugs. "You ready ?"

Coach Greyson was Hayden's coach before he went off to college. He knows my real age and is fine with me coming here alone as long as I keep up my grades and win him a few thousand dollars monthly.

"Nope," I say, popping the p. He laughs and pats the spot beside him. I am nervous, I am always nervous before every fight but tonight, I'm skittish. Hiding my face behind my palms, I say, "I can't do it, Coach."

"You can do it," Coach says, throwing a bulky arm covered in tattoos over my shoulders when I join him on the couch. Don't let his Viking appearance fool you. The man has got a heart of gold beneath all that thick, bushy beards, big body and tattooed sleeves. I nod and he ruffles my hair. "Remember to throw your punches this way, not that." He balls his hand into a fist and punches the air to demonstrate his point. I lost my last match because I was trying to pull a punching stunt I saw on YuuTube, he wasn't so pleased. "And your right hook, never forget to use it." He stands with a foot behind. "Show me your right hook."

The right hook has always been my winning hit, I mimic his stance and jab the air from under. Coach whistles. “Attagirl.” He raises his hands for a high five. “That’s how you knock an opponent out.”

Taking a sip from the water bottle Coach passes me, I put my hair into a tight knot and bounce on my toes, shaking my limbs to get the stiffness and nervousness out of them. The wall clock above the mirror shows I have two more hours until my curfew, I pop my knuckles and twist my neck. I need to win the ten grand even if I don’t need it. Each round takes about forty minutes. If I stick to what I know and have always done, the fight should be over in thirty minutes. A knockout signifies the end of the match and if I want to get home early enough, I need to put the motherfucker on the ground in less than thirty minutes.

No pressure.

Dumping the water bottle on the table, I wipe the sweat decorating my forehead with the towel hanging from my neck and head for the door. I stop at the sound of Coach’s voice, a bit hesitant to face him, he doesn’t need to know I am still nervous after his pep talk. He’s a good coach, I can’t lose this match.

“Tessa.” I close my eyes. I can do this, I have done it before, I can do it again. A strange feeling creeps up on me as I repeat the words and I gulp. “Your mask.” Oh. My eyes lower to the black mask he stretches to me, I accept it with gratitude, taking one last look at my room before putting it on. “Calm down. Breathe.”

I follow his breathing pattern, we go at it two more times and I relax. He gives my shoulders a squeeze in his usual fatherly manner, drawing me in for a side hug and I stay in his embrace longer than I should have.

Kissing my pendant for good luck, I step into the auditorium to my theme

song which is almost drowned by the screams and shouts of my name from the audience waving flags with my caricature.

Out here, I am Tee. The guy behind the mask. No one can tell my identity and I love it, it adds a bit of mystery to this whole persona. My opponent is already bouncing in the ring and that odd feeling returns with intensity. I assess him from a corner of my eyes, walking slowly to the ring with a calm I don't feel. Dude is a brick of muscles and I am a stick of flexibility, speed and skills. I hope those can save me like they have always done in the past. With a bigger opponent, I have to move faster, work twice as hard.

The music fades once I step inside the ring, I wave to the crowd as expected and they erupt into another round of cheers. I smile through my mask, this win will be for them too. I touch my chest one last time to confirm the presence of the necklace, a familiar calm surrounds me and I nod. I can do this, I will win.

For Hayden, for Coach. That unmasked guy behind me is going down.

Adrenaline pumps through my vein, I turn, ready to rumble and my breath ceases.

Shit.

Fucking hell.

Ben is my opponent.