

Chapter 53 - Bloodied

Stepping outside into the expansive training hall again, I was once again struck by how utterly gigantic it was, considering the likely real-estate prices for a floor this high up in the megabuilding.

'Ether Labs is probably footing the bill for most of it,' I realised after thinking about it for a second. Every single person inside had to have some kind of connection to Ether Labs to be here, considering it was on a restricted floor, so it made sense that the dojo had deep ties with the corporation as well. *'In return, Miss K is training their people to be "monsters", as she said. Not a bad deal for either party, as far as I can tell...'*

We quickly assembled by the blue-coloured section, just a stone's throw from the office we'd just exited, under Miss K's direction.

"Now, before we dive in, let's cover the ground rules of the dojo," Selene's voice took on an official cadence, slightly accelerating as if she was reciting a well-memorised speech. "Rule number one—and this is beyond critical—do *not* go past your assigned colour zone on the floor. You all begin at blue. Advancements will come with time, granting you more access. But until I specifically clear you to move on to higher ranks, crossing into an unauthorised colour zone is absolutely and without exception, off-limits for your own safety and that of others. Is that clear?"

A unanimous "Yes, Sensei" echoed through the group, but it was the boy with cybernetic arms whose reaction caught my eye—his complexion had turned ghostly, hinting at the grave seriousness of Miss K's rule. His alarmed look served as a potent reminder to myself: Avoid stepping on unassigned coloured tiles at all costs.

The consequences, it seemed, stretched far beyond a mere scolding.

"Next up, absolutely *no* kill shots. While Ether Labs has graciously provided some protective measures, they're merely last resorts, not invincibility shields. They can't prevent the consequences of a truly lethal blow aimed to kill," Selene emphasised sternly, her voice turning icy as she did so and fixing us with a sharp, intense gaze. "Should I sense *any* of you aiming to inflict even a whiff of fatal harm on a fellow student, I'll personally ensure you regret it—permanently expelled, after I've broken every bone in your body myself. *Do you understand me?*"

The room fell into a heavy silence at her words, thanks to the gravity and intensity of her warning. We scrambled to hastily affirm with another "Yes, Sensei," the grim potential outcomes making her earlier admonition all the more terrifying.

Selene's mood lightened, her voice shifting back to its regular, softer tone, laced with an undercurrent of excitement. "Wonderful!" she exclaimed, a stark contrast to the severity of her previous warnings.

"Understandably, injuries are part and parcel of our training here—broken bones, bruises, and maybe some mild to severe internal bleeding are just part of the course. But let's make

one thing crystal clear: Taking another student's life is *absolutely* out of bounds; be it “accidental” or not. We're all under the Ether Labs umbrella here. Remember, you're being trained to be valuable assets, not liabilities.”

She began to stroll in front of our line, eyeing each of us closely as if assessing our potential or perhaps our understanding of her words.

Then, with a serious tone in her voice she stated plainly, “Last rule before we dive in: No sex.”

The sudden introduction of the no-intimacy rule completely took me by surprise, sending me into a coughing fit as I struggled to process the information.

I wasn't alone in my shock; the girl with fox ears let out a surprised, albeit very subdued, yelp, while the guy with bionic enhancements was also caught off guard, coughing just as I was.

Even the kid decked out in cybernetics, who up until now seemed to have an insider's grasp of dojo protocols, turned a deep shade of red, his eyes fixed on the floor.

Selene, unfazed by our collective reactions, quickly cleared up any confusion. “Let me be clear: I'm not imposing a complete ban on your sex lives. Honestly, what you do in your personal time is your business, and I'm not here to police that whatsoever,” she clarified, effortlessly rising above the commotion we'd caused. “But given that you're going to be some of the most fit and best-conditioned individuals in the city once I'm done with you, and considering your connections to Ether Labs, it falls on me to prevent any potential issues.

“The quickest way for things to spiral out of control is through unchecked emotions. Love, jealousy, envy—nothing leads faster to 'accidental' conflicts and injuries than those, which I will *not* tolerate here. If you wanna fuck someone from your training group, just let me know. I'll reassign one of you to a different group, clearing the way for any and all personal explorations, without disrupting the dojo's harmony.

“I'm not one to stand in the way of young love, after all,” she added with a teasing wink in our direction. “I can also offer some guidance and tips, if you want!”

The embarrassment caught me severely off guard, *'Seriously, I'm practically hitting thirty, why am I getting fucking flustered over this shit?'*

My romantic experiences, or the lack thereof, notwithstanding, you'd think my more mature mind would offer some immunity against such adolescent reactions. Alas, my body begged to differ, leaving me to recuperate from my coughing ordeal only to find my cheeks aflame with a deep blush.

Miss K's delight in our discomfort was unmistakable, her grin wide as she allowed the awkwardness to stew a bit longer, then graciously moved on.

“Alright, let's kick off with seeing what you've got,” she pivoted back to the blue section of the room, effortlessly summoning two red markers onto the floor with a flick of her hand.

"You'll start off three metres apart, going head-to-head, aiming to disable your opponent as effectively as possible—minus the serious injuries. It doesn't matter if it's a kick, a punch, a grapple, or a choke, show me your go-to moves. I'm keen on understanding your strengths and instinctive strategies."

Turning to us, she distributed small, slate-blue discs, "Use these as your safety nets. Attach them to your outfits like so." Demonstrating on her own attire, she snapped the disc onto her chest, twisting it until her robe transitioned to a vivid blue, seamlessly blending as if it had been that colour from the very start.

"Pretty straightforward, right? Make sure your robe's colour is correctly set before any spar. Nobody spars in a grey robe, *ever*. Got it?"

After we all secured the buttons to our robes, it dawned on me that these were some sophisticated pieces of tech from Ether Labs, tailored for training. The specifics of their operation were still shrouded in mystery to me, though.

"These devices, once activated, make your robes into a kind of force buffer, absorbing impacts to shield your vital organs from any damage that exceeds a certain threshold. But let's be crystal clear about this again: Severe injuries, or worse, are still on the table if you ignore your physical limits, or somebody actively tries to inflict them. While I'll be keeping a watchful eye during your sessions to prevent catastrophes, I can't be there at all times, watching over your every move. If you're at your breaking point, it's crucial to acknowledge it. Bravado won't earn you any extra points here."

Selene, tapping her temple for emphasis, added, "Just remember, your noggin doesn't get the luxury of that fancy robe protection. So, keep those hands up and avoid taking a nap on the floor, got it?"

As she wrapped up the intro to our session, a wave of nerves hit me.

Fighting had never been my forte back in my previous life, and it's not like I had any System perks to bail me out here either. I wasn't exactly what you'd call a fan of pain, yet it looked like these initial training rounds were going to be quite the ordeal.

'But that's exactly why I signed up for this, right...?' I reasoned with myself, scavenging for a drop of bravery. 'To beef up my self-defence game and ensure I can hold my own in this cutthroat world. A little pain now beats meeting my maker before I've had a chance to really live in this world...'

"Alright, gents, you're up first since we've got a neat split by gender for our opening round," Miss K announced, guiding the two boys toward the designated spots on the floor. "Just toss out the names you wanna go by. No need for formalities here; we're all about what you can do, not who you claim to be."

With a mix of youthful caution and bravado, the boys moved up to their marks—a scene as old as time, yet always fresh with anticipation.

The cyber-armed boy stepped up first, a trace of pride in his voice as he introduced himself, "I'm Jin. Pleasure to meet all of you. Let's give it our all, yeah?"

Jin's confidence and evident familiarity with the dojo's dynamics had me bracing for a touch of arrogance, probably born from his connections that paved his way here. Yet, his greeting was anything but, being more subdued and polite.

I couldn't help but be a bit taken aback. *'Well, he's more courteous than I expected,'* I mused internally, sizing him up, eager to pick up any tactics or fighting styles I might be able to use when my turn came around.

Then came the boy marked by the bionic veins pulsing rhythmically beneath his skin, a sight made all the more stark against his blue robe. He introduced himself with a hesitant voice that barely carried across the room, "I... Yes... Hi. My name is Tom... umm... Thompson. But Tom works just fine."

I couldn't help but feel a pang of empathy. *'Been there, done that,'* I mused internally. I'd never been a fan of the spotlight during introductions, and Tom's faltering made me think back to my own share of awkward moments that I'd much rather forget in their entirety.

Miss K, her enthusiasm palpable, reclaimed our attention. "Alright then! You two set?"

Her gaze swept over them, ensuring she caught a nod or a verbal 'yes' from each before she initiated the countdown.

"Three... Two... One... Begin!" Her hands came together in a clap that echoed far louder than expected, making us all jump. And just like that, she kicked off the inaugural round of what she called our 'initial capability assessment'.

The initial standoff between Jin and Tom was like watching a high-stakes dance, each sizing the other up with deliberate circling, their footwork mirroring each other's almost perfectly.

Jin, with his cybernetically enhanced arms, exuded an air of cautious confidence, each movement deliberate and powered with a mechanical precision that seemed almost too robust for mere training. His probing attacks were forthright, punches slicing through the air with a weight that hinted at the metallic sinews beneath his skin, the sound of his movements slicing through the air a clear indicator of his aggressive strategy.

Tom, in contrast, was a lot more fluid and graceful, his bionic enhancements imbuing him with an agility that belied his slightly more bulky build, allowed him to dance around Jin's powerful strikes more easily.

The blue hues pulsing through his body seemed to give him an enhanced awareness of his own space and that of his opponent's; so fast and fluid were his responses.

His counterattacks were swift, a series of dodges and weaves that leveraged his enhanced speed to land quick jabs that, while not as forcefully powered as Jin's, were precise and tactically placed.

Their combat, while lacking the polish of seasoned fighters, was a fascinating display of raw potential, and frankly, quite terrifying to witness.

‘There is no way I’d stand a chance against either of them! I hope that fox-ear girl over here isn’t as much of a monster as they are, or I’ll get my ass beat all day...’

Neither was a master, but their respective augmentations did a lot to bridge the gap between young novice and more experienced adept, granting their movements an extra layer of threat and power that one wouldn’t expect from boys their age.

Jin's assaults were like hammer blows, each one meant to overwhelm and overpower, while Tom's strategy was evasion and quick, stinging counters, aiming to exploit openings rather than bulldoze through defences.

As the fight progressed, Jin's confidence surged with each exchange, his blows gaining a sharper edge as he sought to dominate the spar. Despite Tom's nimble efforts to dodge and weave, Jin's relentless advance began to tip the scales.

It wasn't until Tom started integrating kicks into his repertoire that the tide showed signs of shifting. His well-placed kicks, leveraging the bionic enhancements threaded through his legs to accelerate his reactions, began to stall Jin's forward momentum, forcing the cybernetically armed teenager to reassess his approach.

With a mix of swift roundhouses and strategic sidekicks, Tom created the necessary distance between them, momentarily halting Jin's bullish attacks.

With a clear preference for boxing to maximise the use of his cybernetic arms, Jin found himself at a slight disadvantage, unable to close the gap without receiving a well-timed kick for his troubles. The dynamic of their battle shifted with this addition, the rhythm punctuated by the thud of kicks against arms and the occasional connection with flesh.

As their breathing grew more ragged and their groans of pain more vocal, the pace of the combat escalated as frustration began to etch itself into Jin's strategy.

No longer content with the standoffish exchange, Jin finally decided to breach the distance with a leap of sheer determination, tackling Tom to the ground in a move that was more brawl than anything resembling martial arts.

The ground immediately turned into their new battlefield, with Jin attempting to assert his dominance through a flurry of punches aimed downwards, each strike growing more and more desperate to end the fight on his terms, before he ran out of steam.

Tom, caught off guard by the sudden shift in tactics, struggled beneath Jin's weight, trying to squirm away from or deflect the punishing blows that rained on him again and again.

The area around them became coloured in a different hue bit by bit, stained with the blood from both fighters as they grappled for supremacy. Tom's face ended up bearing the brunt of Jin's aggression, blood smearing his features as he fought valiantly to escape the unfavourable position, while Jin's own face ended up with a couple of nasty cuts as well.

“Enough! Break it up!”

Selene's command resonated through the room, bringing the heated clash to an abrupt halt.

Jin and Tom, their bodies still buzzing with the fight's leftover energy, separated, throwing each other wary glances that betrayed the rush of battle still lingering in their systems.

Despite their readiness to continue, obedience to Selene's directive was immediate, showcasing their respect for her authority. It was immediately apparent, however, that Tom's metabolism was a lot faster than Jin's as his breathing returned to a more normal rhythm very quickly.

"Jin takes this round, though it was a close call," Selene announced, effectively putting an end to the speculation of who had the upper hand. Her assessment was stark, highlighting the crucial moments of the duel. "Tom, had this been a genuine confrontation, Jin's relentless focus on your head would have been undoubtedly fatal. The moment you both hit the ground and you failed to get out quickly, it was his game. Remember, awareness and evasion are just as critical as landing a hit. You need to be more aware of what your enemy's mental state is looking like. If you had paid more attention, you could have seen his frustration early and avoided getting grappled."

Her words, firm yet instructive, underscored the lesson to be learned from the encounter.

In the world they were training for, the line between victory and defeat was thin, defined by quick decisions and even quicker reflexes. Selene's feedback was not just a judgement but a roadmap for improvement.

To Jin, she offered, "Smart move taking him down to counter his kicks. However, your dependence on those cybernetic arms is far too high. They're meant to *enhance* your capabilities, not be your sole entire focus. Don't forget the rest of your body; ignoring your potential to kick only makes you an easier target."

She then shifted her attention to Tom, noting, "Your kicks were effective, but they should have been your opening move. There's no merit in playing into your opponent's hands. Initiating with your kicks could have kept Jin at bay, allowing you to leverage your quicker recovery to wear him down. We'll work on ground escape techniques, ensuring you won't find yourself trapped again as easily in the future."

Finally, addressing them collectively with a nod towards the supply area near the door that led to her office, she advised, "Both of you, head over and apply some spray bandages from the bench. Patch up. I'm setting up the next round with the girls. Great effort from you both; it was an enlightening start to our assessments."

Her feedback, while direct, carried a tone of genuine guidance, aiming not just to critique but to elevate their skills. Much to my elation and surprise, I also received a double-notification from the System as she finished up her rundown.

[System]: *[Martial Arts] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *100xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.*

I had to admit that the balance between acknowledging their strengths and highlighting areas for growth set a constructive path forward, all while maintaining an atmosphere of rigorous training and mutual respect.

'This is the perfect way to deal with teenagers, I'd imagine... She really is a professional at this.'

I didn't have much time to mull over Miss K's teaching prowess, nor my newly gained [Skill] however, as no sooner had Jin and Tom limped off than it was our turn in the spotlight.

The dojo floor had already cleared away the evidence of their bout, reverting back to its pristine state, waiting for the next set of contenders. Miss K beckoned me and the girl with fox ears to the now-spotless arena.

"Your turn now. Same deal as before: Let's get introductions out of the way, then hold for my signal. You start off," Miss K directed, her finger pointing squarely at me.

With a small gulp of anticipation, I managed to announce myself with a modicum of composure, "I'm Sera. Nice to meet you all. Let's give it our all," I added, accompanying my words with a bow reminiscent of those I had seen in countless animes and martial arts demonstrations.

It was a simple gesture, one that I hoped conveyed respect without drawing too much attention my way.

Following my introduction, the fox-eared girl stepped forward with a mix of eagerness and discernible nerves rattling through her voice. "I... I'm Kenzie! I'll beat you up!" she blurted out, her enthusiasm bubbling over despite a stumble in her words. She flashed a quick, albeit nervous, smile that seemed to momentarily brighten the atmosphere around us.

A smile split my face at her words. I was definitely taken aback by the introduction for sure, but her nervous smile made it seem more like a quirky style of bravado than in any real, rude or threatening way.

Taking the opportunity to fully appraise her, trying to discern if there was anything I could learn about her before our match, I noticed details I hadn't picked up on before.

Kenzie's hair, a rich copper that matched her uniquely fluffy fox ears, shimmered subtly under the dojo's bright lights. Her eyes, too, held a deep copper hue and the expected, characteristic vertical slit pupils that one would expect from a fox, giving her a coherent vulpine appearance that was both intriguing and, admittedly, quite captivating; I hadn't exactly seen any real fox-girls in my life before, after all.

She stood slightly shorter than me, her stature at about 152cm—a detail I logged mentally, considering my own height of 157cm, which I had recently reclaimed after my period of recuperation.

Despite her relatively small frame, it was clear where her strengths could lie.

Her arms, though slender, didn't command much attention, but her legs told a different story.

They appeared robust and well-muscled, indicative of considerable power and agility. This observation alone marked her as potentially formidable, especially in a skirmish where agility and leg strength could turn the tide.

Kenzie's hair was meticulously gathered into a tight knot atop her head, a practical choice for minimising distractions and hazards during combat. It mirrored my own decision to confine my hair into a bun, a silent acknowledgment between us of the practicalities of fighting.

Taking a deep breath, I locked my focus onto Kenzie, her copper eyes a clear indicator of where her attention was directed—me.

'Keep an eye on those powerful legs, anticipate a swift move, and if possible, close the distance,' I strategized, reminding myself to potentially mirror Jin's tactic of initiating a ground tussle. My advantage might lie in the raw strength afforded by my enhanced Body Attribute, a fact I was banking on in the face of my opponent's apparent agility.

Miss K's voice sliced through my whirlwind of thoughts.

"Three... Two... One... Start!" Her hands clapped together, a sound I was now braced for, allowing me to maintain my focus without the flinch that had caught me off guard before.

Instinctively, I raised my arms, adopting what I hoped was a decent defensive posture reminiscent of the boxers I'd watched in countless videos from my previous life. My stance was an attempt at readiness, though I was acutely aware of the vast gap between mere imitation and true skill.

'Protect your head, whatever the cost,' was my mantra that I paid the most attention to.

The moment I settled into a defensive stance, however, I felt an almost instinctual shift in my posture, subtly altering my position to offer a more stable base for quick counter-moves. My feet, too, seemed to know exactly where to place themselves, mimicking the cautious dance of circling that prefaced our confrontation, as if choreographed by unseen forces.

This unexpected assistance sparked a realisation; the System was subtly at play here, guiding me through the foundational manoeuvres derived from my accumulated attributes in Reflex and Body.

Even more, I could sense an undercurrent of additional finesse as well, likely borrowed from my [Knives] Skill, weaving its way into my movements. The muscle memory I was tapping into felt like a blend of all of these, providing me with a frankenstein-like composite foundation I hadn't anticipated.

The System, it turns out, was quite adaptive and clever, making the most of what it could offer me, even if the applications weren't always perfectly aligned.

While [Knives] didn't directly apply since I was unarmed, the foundational footwork and stances it taught were apparently not confined to fighting with knives exclusively. My body instinctively adopted the optimal postures, adapting those movements to this unarmed context in a surprisingly useful way.

Moreover, my enhanced Reflex and Body attributes subtly included a basic primer on hand-to-hand combat, or at least, on the fundamentals of self-defence without weapons.

This was an aspect I hadn't explicitly noticed during the attributes' enhancement process, as there was no distinct memory of acquiring such knowledge directly from the upgrades. Yet, as I found myself relying on these instincts in the heat of the moment, it became clear that these improvements were not all just physical in nature.

They had somehow enriched my innate understanding of combat, drawing from the very essence of the Attributes rather than any specific [Skill] or prior knowledge I possessed.

Equipped with a newfound confidence in my own stance and movement, courtesy of the System, I felt significantly more prepared to face Kenzie.

Her stance was rather unconventional, resembling more of a predator poised to leap than a traditional fighter's pose. Her fox ears, sharply angled to track my every motion, added an unnerving precision to her appearance.

As we circled each other, the tension built, stretching the seconds into what felt like an eternity.

Kenzie's speed and agility was undeniable, however, her movements a blur as she abruptly aimed a series of swift kicks in my direction after a quick dash forward to get in range.

Each one felt like it could easily knock the wind out of me if it connected, forcing me to rely heavily on the dodging techniques instilled by my newly discovered muscle memory.

She followed up by trying to close the gap between us, but I threw a series of amateurish kicks her way that were altered just enough by the System's muscle memory to look halfway proficient.

They worked, as they managed to keep Kenzie at bay.

Our exchange continued as a dynamic dance of push and pull.

Each time Kenzie tried to close the gap, aiming to exploit what she might've perceived as a weakness in my defence, I countered with a strategic retreat, creating space to launch my own offensive—mainly a series of controlled kicks aimed at halting her advance.

It baffled me why she insisted on narrowing the distance between us; her legwork was formidable and could easily dominate from afar. Yet, her persistent attempts to engage at close quarters only fueled my resolve to keep her at bay, following Miss K's advice to Tom, not to play into my opponent's game plan.

Every once in a while, she would manage to get just close enough for me to take a swing at her, immediately attempting to make her back off, whenever she managed to break past my kicks.

This allowed me to leverage some of the strength I hadn't fully realised I possessed until now.

My punches and kicks, though fewer than her rapid ones, carried a surprising weight, a direct benefit from the System's enhancements to my Body Attribute, giving each strike a potential to shift the balance in my favour.

The fight progressed with a series of traded blows that tested both our limits.

A particularly close call came when Kenzie managed a feint that nearly allowed her to breach my guard, her agility shining through as she darted to one side and aimed a swift kick at my midsection. I managed to barely sidestep it, feeling the air shift with the force of her kick, only to be greeted face-to-face with her, as she had taken the opportunity to dash into direct contact with me.

Scrambling backward, determined not to let Kenzie close the distance, I launched a desperate punch, hoping to create some breathing room. It was a wild swing, fueled more by instinct than technique, aiming to make her reconsider her approach.

As my fist sailed through the air, I saw Kenzie's hands darting towards my face, a motion that sent alarm bells ringing in my head.

In a split-second decision, I jerked my head back, narrowly avoiding her strike, but not without consequence. I felt the sting of her nails, sharp as claws, grazing my neck and chest, leaving behind lines of pain and the start of what would soon be a heavy bleed.

My hastily thrown punch found its mark at the same time, however, landing with a thud that was both satisfying and horrifying, as I felt something beneath my fist compress with an unsettling ease.

We both stumbled back, Kenzie landing on the floor, clutching her face, and I, retreating to assess the damage she had inflicted.

Blood was already starting to mat my skin, dripping from slashes that were thankfully superficial; she hadn't hit anything vital. The realisation did little to comfort me, though, as I grappled with the immediate pain and the shock of how quickly things had escalated.

"Damn, that really fucking hurts," I muttered under my breath, teeth gritted against the sharp ache. The adrenaline pumping through my veins did little to dull the sensation, serving as a harsh reminder of the realities of physical, close-up confrontation.

As Kenzie sprung back to her feet, rage contorting her features, I found myself fixated on the wound over her eye, where my clumsy counter strike had left its mark.

The sight of her, fueled by anger and pain, was a stark contrast to the timid introduction we had exchanged just moments ago. Inside, I was screaming for intervention, hoping Miss K would deem our escalating injuries severe enough to call a halt to this madness, as they already far outdid anything I considered "reasonable" for simple martial arts training, but no such relief came.

Instead, Kenzie charged once more, her body coiled like a spring, targeting my abdomen with a dive that mirrored Jin's previous tactic.

I had barely enough time to process her approach before instinct took over. Recalling Jin's match, I attempted to replicate his defensive move, my legs carrying me backward in a desperate bid for distance. For a moment, I revelled in the anticipation of successfully evading her attack, my foot cocked back for a counter.

That fleeting sense of accomplishment evaporated almost immediately, however, as dread filled me, realising the imminent collision of our strategies.

Horror gripped me as I watched Kenzie's head hurtle toward the force of my boot.

My efforts to lessen the kick's impact were futile; the sickening sound of contact echoed in my ears, blood erupting from her as she was flung back, lifeless upon the ground. The dread of seeing a [Murder] Skill notification flashed through my mind, sending me into a panic.

"Oh shit! Oh fuck...! Kenzie?! I'm so, so sorry!" I exclaimed, my voice laced with terror as I rushed to her side to check on her. "Kenzie are—"

But, in a twist that defied my worst fears, Kenzie sprang up abruptly, her visage a mask of blood from her injuries, fury animating her every move. Caught off-guard, I had no time to dodge as she launched herself at me, her fingers, sharp as talons, slashing across my neck.

I cried out in pain, struggling to escape her relentless assault, feeling the sting of her razor-sharp nails drawing more and more blood as she utterly tore up both my face and neck, the fear of causing irreversible harm clashing with the need to defend myself.

Instinctively, my left arm shot up, shielding my face while my other fist, fueled by desperation, rocketed towards her midsection.

'I just need to get her to back off again,' I frantically thought, wary of aiming for her head again, fearing the consequences. The impact was immediate and forceful; her relentless attack ceased as she collapsed, coughing and desperately gasping for air.

I realised then I must've struck a critical spot.

"Enough!" The command from Miss K pierced the chaos, a welcome reprieve as pain seared through my cuts.

"Good grief, you two..." she exhaled, approaching us. "I appreciate the effort, but this was way overkill. Really, there's no need to mangle each other like that to prove a point..."

Her under-breath comment, *"girls are always so fierce at this age, huh?"* barely reached me before she raised her voice again, addressing the room.

"I'm calling this one a draw," Miss K announced, capturing our full attention. "Sera, that kick could've immediately won it for you, but rushing in to check on Kenzie, driven by sympathy, then hesitating to follow through afterwards? That hesitation could be fatal in a real confrontation. Kenzie would've murdered you if this were for real."

Addressing Kenzie, she advised, "You've got an interesting fight style, but don't let those claws be your only trick. You're neglecting your greatest asset—those scarily powerful legs.

We're gonna refine those kicks, blend them into your overall strategy. It's fine to have a preference for what makes you unique, much like Jin with his arms, but don't lose sight of your other strong points, Kenzie."

Then, her gaze shifted to me. "Sera, your fighting technique is... peculiar. There's a strangely refined amount of finesse there, shadowed by a severe lack of experience. It's hard to pin down, but it's clear we have plenty to work on. You're versatile, yet without a defining strength. We'll uncover your niche. And whatever workout regime you're on, keep at it. For someone without enhancements, you're very impressive."

With a reassuring thumbs-up, she underscored her point, as if to encourage me further to keep at it, while contrasting me with my genetically, cybernetically, and bionically enhanced peers.

"Yes, Sensei," I managed, my voice slightly strained as I performed a respectful bow, all the while trying to mentally distance myself from the stinging pain that marked my face and neck. The thought of enduring a prolonged recovery briefly daunted me until the realisation hit—my access to the Rest Function meant I didn't have to fret over long-term scarring whatsoever.

"Now, both of you, go patch yourselves up. Kenzie, there's a paste on the bench for you; apply it carefully on your nose and around your eye, but don't overdo it—that stuff costs a ton of creds. Sera, the green ointment's for you; it's great for preventing scars," Miss K directed, waving us off the combat area.

Sidestepping past Jin and Tom, I caught their attempts to look anywhere but at us, their expressions a mix of shock and perhaps a new-found respect.

'Perhaps they've never seen a fight get this gritty, this real,' I pondered, allowing a small, pained grin to surface despite the discomfort. *'Or maybe they just didn't expect us girls to go all out, huh?'*

"Good match, Sera," Kenzie's voice suddenly perked up beside me, her tone brimming with both respect and a hint of admonition. "But next time, don't pull your punches! We're here to learn, to push our limits. Trust me, I can handle it!"

Grinning through the pain, the odd mix of anger and gratitude in Kenzie's tone added an unexpected layer to our interaction.

"Yeah, you too, Kenzie," I managed, attempting a smile that only reminded me of the cuts stinging on my face. "Yikes, those claws of yours are no joke, huh?"

Kenzie's response, her face a blend of injuries and a playful pout, was dripping with sarcasm, "Oops, my bad! Wasn't exactly aiming to decorate your face after that delightful kick of yours. I'll remember to be gentler next time, especially after getting a punch that almost took out an eye."

The sarcasm, thick and tangible, sparked an involuntary laugh from me. It was the kind of banter I lived for; plus, the adrenaline drop from the fight was making everything oddly hilarious.

Joining in the laughter, Kenzie and I found some comfort in our shared amusement amidst applying our respective treatments. The banter, coated in a layer of pain and sarcasm, somehow made the ordeal of patching ourselves up feel less daunting, creating an unexpected moment of bonding over shared battle scars.

Mulling over the unexpected boon of some free [First-Aid] experience, I couldn't help but secretly smirk to myself.

'Snagging some of those supplies could come in handy,' I mused, pondering where I might procure them for personal use. 'Must be an Ether Labs shop around here. But, can I even make purchases there? Do they require some sort of permit given the exclusivity of this floor...?'

As we tidied up and ambled back to the blue zone, we noticed Tom and Jin already in position within the "ring", ready at their starting marks.

"Okay, gear up for four more rounds, let's see what you've picked up. Hope you all came packed with enough stamina, because we're not wrapping up until each of you has faced off in all five bouts! We'll keep the same matchups for today, but next time around, we'll switch it up, so pay attention to everyone's fights!" Miss K declared, her enthusiasm mirrored by a collective sigh from both Kenzie and me.

Had we realised the sheer marathon ahead, perhaps the two of us wouldn't have thrown everything into the initial fight...