2460 On the Count of Three  
  
Some time later, the floor of the boxing gym was littered with groaning, weakly moving bodies. The air was heavy with the stench of blood.  
  
Sunny studied his bruised knuckles for a moment, then pushed a finger through a long cut on the side of his jacket and let out an irritated sigh.  
  
"Now I'm going to be wet from the damn rain. Great."  
  
He took off the jacket, revealing his arms — and the scales of the black serpent coiling around them.  
  
If Effie was surprised to see a gang tattoo on the skin of her partner — one much more grand and vast than the ones covering the groaning thugs, no less — she did not show it. Instead, she rummaged around the table where the Black Snakes had been playing cards with a focused expression. Ignoring the alcohol and the piles of money, she picked up a bag of potato chips and smiled in satisfaction.  
  
Sending one into her mouth, she asked with curiosity:  
  
"Not to be a stickler for the rules, but haven't we broken at least a dozen laws just now?"  
  
Sunny gave her a long look, then scoffed.  
  
"Who's going to report us? They?"  
  
The groaning thugs were a pitiful sight, and they were definitely not going to bring the attention of the cops to themselves — let alone let the news that a couple of cops wiped the floor with them spread.  
  
Shaking his head, Sunny walked over to the ring, leaned down, and dragged one of the Black Snakes from under it by the leg. This one was whom he had punched first — the leader of this sorry bunch.  
  
The lower part of his face was painted with blood, and his broken nose was swollen, sticking at a wrong angle.  
  
Nevertheless, he gave Sunny a hateful gaze.  
  
"What... kind of a damn demon are you... you're dead, rat! When the bosses find out, you're going to die…"  
  
Sunny gave him a cold look, then reached forward and unceremoniously set the man's broken nose. As soon as a sharp scream turned into a pained groan, he patted the thug on the shoulder.  
  
"There, there. I set it for you. We can't have you growing even uglier than you are now, can we?"  
  
The man shivered under his ruthless gaze, pressing himself into the side of the ring.  
  
Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then smiled dangerously.  
  
"And hey, buddy, I think you need to get your facts straight. I am not a rat… a rat would have gone behind the backs of the bosses to sell them out to the cops. I told them that I was leaving fair and square, looking them in the eye. It's not my fault they weren't inclined to agree, is it? By the way, that is why you have new bosses now. The old bosses didn't scare me, did you think these new losers would?"  
  
Leaning down, he whispered into the man's ear:  
  
"Tell them to come find me. Hell, tell them I am waiting. That'll make my day."  
  
He straightened and looked at the shivering thug with a complete lack of emotion in his black eyes.  
  
"But then again, you'll have to be alive to tell them anything. And whether you'll live through the next few minutes… is completely up to you."  
  
Effie, who had wandered close, gave him a reproachful look and sighed.  
  
"...I was supposed to be the bad cop, though!"  
  
Sunny ignored her. Instead, he produced his cracked phone and showed the thug a photo of the Nihilist's latest victim.  
  
"Recognize him?"  
  
The man tried to reel back, but he had nowhere to go.  
  
"Shit! What the… what the fuck is that?! Get that crap away from me, damn it!"  
  
Sunny blinked a few times.  
  
"What, have you not seen a corpse before?"  
  
He chuckled, then put the phone back into his pocket and told the thug the dead kid's name.  
  
"He's one of yours, isn't he? You see, my partner and I came here with sincere intentions, wanting to help you guys bring the murderer to justice. There was no need to be so inhospitable, really. But since things already turned out the way they did… I guess you'll just have to tell us everything we need to know anyway."  
  
The thug glared at Sunny and hissed through gritted teeth:  
  
"Do you think I'll tell you anything, rat?! Dream on!"  
  
Without saying a word, Sunny punched him in the face, dislodging the man's nose again.  
  
There was another desperate scream, and Effie winced, taking a step back to continue munching on her potato chips.  
  
"If I were you, I'd just tell him everything he wants to know. There's a limit to what plastic surgery can achieve, after all. There has to be something left of your nose for them to restore it…"  
  
Sunny took a deep breath.  
  
"Did I not tell you to stop calling me rat, bastard? Look what you made me do. Let's try it again, shall we? The kid — tell us everything there is to know about him. When was the last time you saw him? What was his job? Which part of the city did you have him working? Who were his friends? And so on."  
  
The thug had raised both hands to shield his face, looking at Sunny through the tears that had veiled his eyes because of the pain. He remained silent for a while, and then barked angrily:  
  
"I don't know! I don't know, you asshole! Okay?! He's not one of ours!"  
  
Sunny stared at him darkly.  
  
"Hey, friend. Do I look easy to you? Do you think I can't recognize a Black Snake mark when I see it?"  
  
The thug shook his head desperately.  
  
"No, wait! I mean it! He… he used to be a junior member, up until a couple of years ago. But we haven't seen him since!"  
  
Sunny frowned.  
  
"Huh? Since when is the Blacκ Snake gang in the habit of losing track of its junior members?"  
  
The thug lowered his hands and glared at Sunny, then grimaced and spat a mouthful of blood on the floor.  
  
"What the hell do you know, Devil? The gang… is not what it used to be. Times have changed, damn it! It used to be that there we could just scoop up useless kids from the streets — little shits like you fought for the right to join us. But now, recruiting them is hard, and keeping hold of them is even harder."  
  
He grimaced.  
  
"Especially after those bastards opened doors. A damn charitable organization… they house them, educate them, support them financially, and even give them proper jobs. We lost a bunch of junior members to those assholes — this guy was one of the kids who left the gang and became a squeaky clean member of society thanks to them."  
  
Sunny and Effie looked at each other.  
  
"A charitable organization? What charitable organization?"  
  
The thug cursed under his breath.  
  
"Mirage City Center for Troubled Youths… it's a private charity run by the Valor Group. You think we can compete with a damn conglomerate?!"  
  
Sunny stared at him for a while, and then smiled viciously.  
  
This… this was what he needed.  
  
This was the thread he would pull to unravel the case!  
  
"Valor Group, huh?"  
  
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Soon enough, they left the upturned boxing gym and returned to the car. Effie seemed thoughtful… or maybe she was just wondering where to get more food. At this point, Sunny could not be sure.  
  
He lingered in front of the car, soaking in the rain. She waited for a while, then gave him a confused look.  
  
"What, are you sad that we hit a dead end? This whole Black Snake lead turned out to be meaningless."  
  
Sunny shook his head.  
  
"No, I'm not sad. And it wasn't meaningless… in fact, it was quite a fruitful visit."  
  
Then, he turned to the tall beauty and looked at her somberly.  
  
"Listen… partner. Things are going to get interesting from here. So, I need you to tell me something honestly."  
  
She smiled innocently.  
  
"What's that?"  
  
Not sharing her laidback tone, Sunny asked bluntly:  
  
"Who the hell are you? Oh, and think carefully before answering. You might end up dying heroically on your first day as a detective if you don't. Killed by the vicious gang members… it will be a real tragedy."  
  
The threat in his tone was apparent. He was saying that he would kill her if she tried to lie.  
  
Sunny would have loved for his threat to be a joke, but it wasn't. The Nihilist case was far more dangerous than even those terrified of the elusive serial killer suspected — that was because it involved people whom a mere cop like him could not dare to touch.  
  
Those people would not hesitate to make a troublesome cop disappear… they could, for example, insert one of their operatives into the case and force the higher-ups of the Police Department to saddle Sunny with that operative as a partner — to keep an eye on him, and dispose of him if need be.  
  
He was not sure that Effie was a double agent, but he knew that she was not who she appeared to be.  
  
His supposed partner stared at him for a while, silent. There was a hint of a odd emotion in her eyes… unease? Uncertainty? Fear?  
  
But a split second later, it was gone.  
  
Effie laughed and reached to slap him on the shoulder with her usual easygoing smile.  
  
Her hand remained there, holding him lightly.  
  
"What are you on about, Sunny? Snap out of it."  
  
Sunny tensed, preparing to strike…  
  
And then, something odd happened.  
  
He snapped out of it.  
  
A shiver ran through his body, and he looked around with a startled expression.  
  
A strange city. Pouring rain. Air that smelled neither like the sterile cleanliness of NQSC nor the poisonous miasma of the outskirts. Unfamiliar buildings; a weird PTV of archaic design.  
  
Shifting his gaze to the boisterous huntress, Sunny blinked a couple of times.  
  
"Effie? What the hell?"