

lemonzsaucce

... Author's Notes ...

Dear reader,

I go by the pen name j.j. scriptease and I've been writing fan fiction on and off for almost a decade and a half now, predominantly of a lemon/erotica variety. None of the places I've posted my stories on however quite felt like home, whether it be due to the design or structure of the website, the restrictions imposed on saucy content, or anything in between. And thus, I thought it would be neat to have a personalised hub for my fan fiction works.

I teamed up with a developer buddy to create a site called lemonzsaucce.com where you can find ALL my literature along with extra goodies – like downloads in PDF format, seeing the artwork that inspired the fics, and subscribing for new story and chapter updates!

The site does cost money to keep up and running. If you enjoy my work and would like to help with maintenance (or would simply like to support me), please feel free to visit lemonzsaucce.com/donate to make an offering - no pressure, and it's not necessary at all :) - any amount from a dollar up will be very much appreciated.

Thank you for reading! I hope this piece of writing lives up to your expectations.

- j.j. scriptease

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WARNING

This work of fiction is Rated MA and only suitable for mature audiences. It may contain explicit and offensive language, adult themes and graphic descriptions of a violent and/or sexual nature.

J. J. SCRIPTease

**DEVILS, MONSTERS AND
THE LITTLE OLD BOX**

(A Tekken Fanfic)

CHAPTER 4



Synopsis

Hwoarang and Steve, a couple of no-good, thug mercenaries, have their pitiful lives turn even more pitiful after getting mixed up with a pair of seemingly frivolous schoolgirls.

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Devils, Monsters and the Little Old Box

A Tekken fanfic by j.j. scriptease

Chapter 4 – Devils and Monsters

Jin didn't know if he hated tennis or hated Xiaoyu for dragging him out of isolation and forcing him to appreciate the sun. It was too risky, being out in the open like this, even in his own spacious backyard. No cure meant no predicting when the devil may rear its blood-stained horns from the pits of his soul. Every moment he lounged in the presence of others teetered on a knife's edge, a façade simmering on the surface of a potential bloodbath. Outbreaks seldom gave him a heads-up before hijacking his faculties and driving him past rage, and so Jin preferred to steer clear of people, limiting the damage he might inflict on anything or anyone around him.

Xiaoyu though...

In spite of all her annoying, persistent and pesky behaviours, she didn't deserve the wrath of his bloodthirsty demon. Jin kept his sporadic, murderous inclinations to himself, though he'd come close to burdening her with his secret a couple of times. She pestered him to be more open and often mocked his brooding, mimicking his serious face and deadpan tone of voice, anything to try to get him to lighten up. He didn't crack a smile. Though, much later in the confines of his dark bedroom, an occasional tinge of amusement would sneak upon his lips when he thought back to her antics.

How fun it must've been to skip through life worrying about nothing but what to feed your pet panda every day of the week. Jin couldn't begin to wrap his head around the extent of her carefree nature, both intrigued and envious of it. In a world teeming with conflict and darkness, she lived every day like a cartoon character on a joy ride. How? Perhaps she had a secret of her own.

Jin had graduated from high school over a year ago, leaving Xiaoyu no one to stalk between classes anymore, though that didn't stop her dropping by his place after the final bell rung. She decided her extracurricular activity for today involved challenging him to an impromptu tennis match after pointing out she'd never once seen his court being utilised. Jin forgot it was there despite walking past it every day, his head bowed in deep contemplation, thoughts wrestling with the dark voices clawing for release. When he frowned at the idea of a frivolous tennis match, her pigtails drooped sadly and she pouted until he reconsidered.

"So how much am I winning by?" she jibed, bouncing the ball with her racket.

He hadn't the mental room or energy to keep score, but it was safe to assume she was ahead by quite a margin. A fighter, like him, Xiaoyu posed plenty of athleticism to go with her jaunty nature. If she loved this Mishima estate so much, perhaps she should've inherited it instead of him. He wouldn't have minded, one to prefer a secluded cabin and the comforts of nature over extravagant wealth. If Xiaoyu wanted this match, she could have it too.

"I don't know," he said. "How much *are* you winning by?"

"Hmmm, something like..." She spread the distance between her hands, steadily increasing it to reflect the supposed gap in the score line. Finally she stopped when her outstretched arms could stretch no more. "This much!"

"Hn." Had he really been that bad? Even so, his former schoolmate needed to reel in her celebratory tone. "You know, winning means nothing until you've actually won."

She tapped a finger on her chin in deep thought. "So, you mean if I do win then it wouldn't matter because winning doesn't mean anything, except until you actually do, in which case it would mean something if I won, meaning it always meant something to begin with?" She scratched the side of her head. "Jin-sama, you're being confusing again!"

"Never mind," he sighed. How did people do this whole 'casual conversation' stuff? Apparently, he'd been good at it once upon a time; a time the Devil Gene hadn't carved its mark in its life. Thankfully, the tennis match helped paper over the cracks of a disjointed conversation. "Just serve."

"Well okay," Xiaoyu said in a warning tone. "You asked for it!" She swiped her fingers across her visor, a juvenile gesture translating to: I mean serious business. She tossed the tennis ball in the air and swung her racket through it. The spin caught him flatfooted. He

could only watch as the green blur swerved in an unreachable direction and bounced on the service line. “Ace!” she cheered. “Woot, woot!” She shook her bottom left to right in a celebratory dance.

“Right...”

That might’ve been even more embarrassing than the score line. Maybe he should’ve started taking the match seriously, if only to avoid seeing Xiaoyu do anything unfortunate like that again.

When he bent over to pick up the ball, a lurid pain exploded in his skull. The throbbing agony knocked him down to one knee. *Not this again.* Not now. His vision quaked, doubling the ball and the ground beneath him. Xiaoyu’s voice sounded twice as far from where she stood but her distress resounded loud and clear. Her hurried feet rushed towards him.

“No!” Jin threw his hand back holding up a stop gesture. “Don’t... don’t get any closer.” She didn’t realise how much danger she was in.

Her eyebrows bunched together with worry. “Jin, are you okay?” The sound of her voice bounced around in his ears; one second she was standing atop a mountain and the next he could hear her gulp. “What’s happening? Jin-sama!”

He dug his nails into his scalp, gnawing his teeth as his heart pounded in his skull. “Go home,” he said, voice darker than intended. She couldn’t be here to witness what this migraine would morph into. It always ended the same way once the voices crawled out of hell. What was she doing still standing there?! He whipped around and she flinched before he’d opened his mouth.

“I said go home!” Rage and spit flew from his lips.

She looked into his watery, bloodshot eyes and trembled, dropping her racket on the ground, petrified.

Jin covered his face with both hands and growled. If she wasn’t going to leave, he’d have to while he still had his cognisance.

He staggered back to the manor. His double vision doubled as he stumbled through the halls, clearing plants and ornaments off their shelves. Dark voices raided his mind all at

once. They spoke no language or reason. Just gasps, harrowing screams, dark mantras and twisted chortles. His nails grew longer and sharper.

No, please!

He thrashed his head left and right, desperate to shake the voices loose. Horns climbed out of his temples. He screwed his eyes shut as black and red flashed across his sights. It was a losing battle. His protective chamber upstairs felt like a mile away. But he had to put distance between him and Xiaoyu. Fire flooded his veins. He roared in agony with all the fight he had left.

Jin blacked out.

Well, he should've.

His eyes peeled open and he raised his hands in shock. No claws. He rummaged through his hair. No horns. Everything was... normal.

That's new.

The grumble of an old car pulling up drew him to the window. Jin didn't recognise the battered sedan. As he squinted at the foreign arrival, keen to trigger some memory of it, the head-splitting pain returned with scorching zest. He leaned an arm against the wall for support, suddenly under siege again. What in the devil's name was going on?

The car lumbered into the driveway. It stopped, and so too did his hellish fever. Asuka stepped out from behind the steering wheel, looking in worse shape than the battered chunk of metal she'd arrived in, her hair a hot mess, her school uniform untucked and dishevelled.

He glanced at the living room clock as she rushed inside. "School ended hours ago," he said. "What took you so long to get back?" She ignored him and hid behind the curtains, peering out the window as if she feared someone had been following her. "Why are your clothes all ruffled? You've been fighting again?" Jin suspected he already knew the answer. "And whose car is that? Since when do you drive? Do you even have a license?" She continued to peer through the curtains whilst ignoring him. He lost his patience and swung her about the shoulder. "Hey, I'm talking to you."

"And I heard you!" she shouted back, shrugging him off her shoulder.

“Hn.” She would’ve done well to remember whose roof she was living under. In the space of a few years, Jin went from not knowing his cousin existed to offering her a room in the Mishima Estate; it was closer to her school and more convenient than her father’s cabin on the outskirts of the city. Jin didn’t mind, provided she stayed out of his way, stayed out of trouble and stayed focused on her studies, which for the most part she did. Still, he didn’t appreciate her temper, hormonal teenager or not.

“Do you want to try that again?” he asked. “Where were you?”

“Out.”

“Why are your clothes all messed up?”

“Gee, Mr Fashionista, you don’t look so hot yourself right now.”

“Whose car is that?”

“I borrowed it.”

“You can drive?”

“Apparently.”

“You have a license?”

“Does a license to thrill apply?”

Jin groaned. *Never having kids.*

“Look,” Asuka said, “I’m just trying to figure stuff out, cuz. You don’t need to get involved in any of it.”

Good. He didn’t want to. Silencing a devil constantly trying to take hold of his body was drama enough for his life. She mumbled something about a shower then took off upstairs. He turned his attention back to the car. Just locking his eyes on it stoked his migraine into high gear.

It couldn’t be a coincidence? Something about that heap of garbage could manipulate the Devil Gene. How come? Asuka hadn’t divulged where she’d ‘borrowed’ it from either. Jin stared at the rage-inducing junk on wheels and couldn’t find any answers. Maybe a closer look was in order?

It was a long shot but if the car really was affecting the Devil Gene, there might've been a way to reverse engineer the technology. Maybe, just maybe, he could craft something out of it that could help him conquer his demon...

Help him reclaim his life.

From a crack in the curtains, Jin stared at the potential gift dumped on his driveway, pondering and daring to hope.

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Hwoarang felt hot, itchy blackness against his face, his vision smothered, his oxygen sparse. The bastards left just enough space at the bottom of the bag to keep him alive. Rope squeezed his wrists and ankles together, limiting his mobility to wriggles as the stuffy air taxed his breathing. Motion sickness added to his plight. He groaned at every speed bump and pothole. Had to be some shitty gravel road. The driver seemed to have made a game out of hitting the brakes hard, probably laughing his ass off as the suddenness threw him around the back of the van. Dickwad. He'd be the first to go, Hwoarang decided. Not much of a threat coming from someone who couldn't scratch his own ass, granted. The itch burned fiercer too as the ride trudged on. It drove him crazy. He was rubbing the side of his ass on the van's floor when it bumped into Fox.

"Watch where you're swinging that thing," said the ill-tempered Brit. "Could do without catching your crabs, mate."

"*You're* a fucking crab," Hwoarang retorted. "Bad shit always happens when I'm fucking around you. I'm probably gonna die all itchy and shit. Fuck!"

"Excuse me, remind me whose bright idea it was to hook up with those birds, why don't you?"

"Mine, Fox. All the bright ideas are fucking mine. I do all the thinking around here."

"With your fucking knob. That's why we're in this bloody mess in the first place, you genital wart."

“Hey, don’t get all pissy with me coz you didn’t get the job done, alright? I can lead your dick to the pussy but I can’t make it fuck.”

Steve scoffed. “Well aren’t you the poet? Fucking wanker. Instead of being a smartarse, how about you help think of a way to get us out of your shit, eh? Who are these maggots anyway?”

“How the hell should I know?” Hwoarang grunted and growled as he struggled to wrestle his wrists loose. His thoughts returned to the men who had them tied, bagged and dumped in the back of a van like garbage. All dressed in black, head to toe, masks and all. Fucking ninjas. Cowards afraid to show their mugs. At least when he committed crimes, he owned them. Hwoarang’s musing stalled when he felt something round rub against his side. Something that felt suspiciously like an ass. “Dude, what the fuck?”

Steve continued to grind his butt until something beeped. “Got it.”

“The fuck? You need to get your ass checked, man. That shit just beeped.”

“Pager,” Steve said.

“I don’t appreciate all that bumping and grinding action.”

“You’re one to talk. I heard you did quite a bit of bumping and grinding in the pen.”

He heard the smile in Steve’s voice and it pissed him off. “The fuck you just say to me, cocksucker?”

“Tsk, tsk. What a filthy mouth you’ve got there. Oughtta be washed out with soap. Oh... I’m sorry, is *soap* a sore topic, mate?”

“You motherfuck-” Hwoarang’s anger mangled his words. “Gonna fuck you up right now!”

Hwoarang did all he could in his constraints to inflict harm. Steve sought to do the same. The two scooted towards the centre of the van in a snail-like collision. Tackle attempts proved no fiercer than wriggles. Head-butts turned into harmless nuzzles. They hurled profanity at each other through the bags, but for all the violence in their tongues, their bodies brushed and rolled about together achieving little harm.

So consumed by their frustrations, they failed to realise the van had stopped moving. When the door slid open, sunlight burst through the darkness, and a silence stilled the air. As Hwoarang lay frozen on top of Steve, he got the distinct impression they were being watched.

“Jesus Christ,” said a gruff voice. “You two need a moment?”

Another man laughed. “Can’t tell if they’re trying to fight or trying to fuck.”

“Heh, first one I hope. We should untie them and let them take each other out. Save us the trouble.”

The first man chuckled. “Don’t get ahead yourself. He still has plans for these losers.”

“He? Who’s ‘he’? And what plans?” Hwoarang asked, his voice muffled by the bag. “What fucking plans?”

“Well, wouldn’t you like to know?” said the man with the gruff voice. “Let’s find out, shall we? Get your asses up.”

They hauled their prisoners out of the van.

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Hwoarang stumbled as one of the masked brutes shoved him in the back.

“Walk faster!”

Maybe he would if he could actually see where the fuck he was going. Nothing about this felt right.

Not knowing the kidnappers’ identities troubled him, burned in his mind, an itch he could neither reach nor ignore. Who were these ‘maggots’ as Fox so delicately put it? Not cops. Wasn’t their style. He might’ve thought they were Miguel’s henchmen had they not taken the man by surprise too. Maybe they were ghosts of his past risen to haunt him. Even then, names and faces fell short of his memory. Bastards were best forgotten. Whoever ordered his capture however didn’t strike him as the type to forget, or forgive whatever sin Hwoarang might’ve committed.

The thugs shoved their blinded prisoners into walls and cackled nastily. Steve's accented retorts were hushed by thumping blows. These pricks appeared to hate him and Fox in equal measure. Could it have been a joint mission gone wrong? If so, Hwoarang couldn't remember it for the life of him. A life he might not have for much longer.

After all the people he'd taken out in the name of money, he couldn't cry foul play, but he could still ask to go out like a man, couldn't he? To look into the eyes of the coward who'd carry out his execution? Was the least they could do. If this was payback, the most frightening part was he and Fox were still breathing. At this point, the thought of a quick and painless death was pure fantasy.

Fuck. If only he'd had one more cigarette.

Hwoarang and Steve's footsteps, and what sounded like an army marching behind them, echoed through long and winding corridors, the final stretch down death row. His breath hung hot and heavy in the bag, darkness suffocating him. The more he wriggled his bound arms, the hotter the rope ate into his wrists. His ankle constraints had been loosened to allow only half a step at a time, his captors wary of what his feet could do. And they were right to be.

He wondered if he could run given half the chance. Lumbering in blindness, he stumbled left and right in a disguised attempt to gauge the space around him. Some sort of corridor, he imagined, and the air pervading his bag smelt dusty and stale, as though the place hadn't seen working ventilation for years. An abandoned building would've been his guess. It provided enough time and privacy to end a couple of nobodies and figure out what you wanted to do with their bodies. He knew, having used similar facilities himself for similar reasons.

Hwoarang got shoved through a half-open door and felt Steve bundled in right after him. His thighs crashed into the back of a wooden chair, then unsympathetic mitts clutched his shoulders and piled on weight. "Si' down," the handler groaned. Hwoarang was happy to, his itchy ass sighing against the rub of the seat.

He didn't appreciate how banged up his body was until then. The war against Miguel's army left his bones aching, and the bumpy van ride soon after hadn't done him any favours. He was grateful to be sitting in what felt like a completely ordinary armchair. But his relief would be short lived. A rough hand yanked the bag off his face.

After hours of breathing his own recycled air, the dingy atmosphere smelt fresher than daises. With squinty eyes readjusting to light, he glanced to his right where Steve was relieved of his bag too, blond hair puffy and dishevelled from the pull. They had but a moment to catch each other's eyes before the presence on the opposite side of the table commanded their attention.

The dimness of the room added to the man's menace, a face sliced diagonally into light and shadows, his visible eye cold and measuring. What could be made of his expression was calm, and yet layered with hard judgement, the lines on his face deep, troubled, aging an otherwise strapping visage. He leaned forward moving into the light, agitation fixed across his creased brow. "Gentlemen, I don't suppose you know why you're here?"

"Holy shit," Steve said, out of the blue. "I know you."

Hwoarang squinted at the shadowy man but his face remained unfamiliar. "How?" he asked his partner in crime.

"From reading the fucking papers, dipshit."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Saying I can't read?"

"Porn magazines don't count, wanker."

"Fuck off. I don't read that filth," Hwoarang said, before stopping to clarify. "I only look at the pictures."

A burly henchman slammed his fist on the table, forcing the captives to jump. "Enough! You'll not disrespect The Boss with your juvenile drivel."

"The B-B-B..." Hwoarang's voice failed him. "The B-Boss? As in, *The Boss*?" He studied the man's features in greater detail.

"Better known as Mr Rochefort in more conventional circles, isn't that right?" Steve said. "Multi-millionaire, renowned philanthropist, one of the biggest fat cats in the oil game. And a monster to boot. Heh, should've fucking guessed. Who else could have so much power?"

Rochefort? Hwoarang mused. Why did that sound so familiar?

“I’m a man of many names and many faces,” said The Boss. For a man who spent his entire existence hiding his involvement with The MIZU Zaibatsu, Mr. Rochefort seemed awfully undeterred by his identity being openly discussed. It only meant one thing: he had no intention of letting them walk out alive.

“There are only two reasons you aren’t dead already,” he continued. “One, is because I wanted to watch as it happened. And two,” he said, rising from his throne. The whiteness of his suit shone through the darkness; a crisp look lathered in wealth and prestige, the same glimmer refining his shoulder-length hair and long, thin goatee. “I need to ask you one question.”

He moved round the table with an air of authority, owning a slow gait you’d expected to see on a man three times as tall and broad as he actually was. His hawking presence was enough to keep Hwoarang and Steve silent and obedient.

He skulked behind their chairs exuding a strong fragrance stinging Hwoarang’s nostrils like sweet poison. The stink of filthy rich. Hwoarang would’ve rather smelt dried-up piss than the shit these pretentious scumbags dabbed on themselves.

Mr Rochefort slapped his hands on either one of their shoulders. The shiny bling on his fingers nearly blinded them with its excessive sparkle. “Now,” he said, voice low, cool as ice. “Which one of you gentlemen touched my daughter?”

Hwoarang and Steve exchanged dumbfounded expressions. The redhead thought back to his latest conquests. He sucked at remembering names, especially when it came to women, even more so if he’d slept with them already. But Asuka, this Asuka Kazama, had a friend, and he just knew, as was typical of his life, this friend had the last surname you wanted a girl to have under the circumstances.

Lili. He remembered. Emilie Rochefort.

He bowed his head and muttered, “Fuck my life.”

“I’m only going to repeat this once.” Mr. Rochefort’s clench tightened on their shoulders, knuckles growing white with intensity. He said it slower. “Which one of you gentlemen touched my teenage daughter?”

Hwoarang looked at Steve out the corner of his eye, annoyed at his suicidal silence. “Look,” he said, voice shaky. “S-sir, Mr Boss, sir, your highness. W-we didn’t know she was... she was your –”

Hwoarang’s plea met an abrupt end when his face got smashed into the table.

Fingers intertwined in his red hair, Mr Rochefort hauled Hwoarang’s head up by the scalp. “Was it fun?”

“I didn’t –”

He thrust Hwoarang’s face into the table again.

“Sir, I swear I –”

SMASH!

“I didn’t –”

SMASH!

“I didn’t fucking touch her!” he bawled.

“No?” The Boss said, calmly. “Then it was this one?” He slammed Steve’s face into the table with his other hand. “I’ll teach you sick perverts to prey on schoolgirls.” He slammed him again. “Not my daughter.” Again. “Not my fucking daughter!” Hwoarang’s face next. “You don’t get to live with that!” Again. “She’s just a kid,” Mr Rochefort cried out, emotion spilling into his fury. “She’s just a fucking kid!”

The Boss took turns bouncing their faces off the table, a rabid outpour of hatred, spitting callousness and rage unbecoming of his polished image. He demanded to know their intentions, who hired them and why his daughter was a target, questions he gave them no chance to answer before smashing their teeth into the wood. No explanation could cool his rampant rage anyway.

The table zoomed in and out of Hwoarang’s face repeatedly, the whiplash driving him sick and dizzy. Blood oozed from his smashed nose and busted lip as the taste of metal filled his mouth. The Boss used his forehead to punch a growing crater into the table, relentless in his method of punishment, raw emotion spilling out in furious growls. Thump after thump,

Mr Rochefort would've continued until Hwoarang drowned in his own blood, if not for the fatigue in his arms slowing him to a halt.

As their enraged employer heaved over Hwoarang's bowed over body, Steve attempted to intervene. "Sir, Boss..." He stifled a gulp. "We get why you'd be pissed but we really did no harm to your daughter. If anything, we saved her life." The claim silenced Mr Rochefort's heavy breathing. He swivelled his flustered face towards Steve, doubt in his expression. "I swear on my life," Steve insisted. "You saw the carnage back there, the house you picked us up from. She was caught in the crosshairs of a gun battle. You really believe she survived all that by luck?"

Hwoarang made a muffled chuckling sound with his face still buried in wood. "A precious little snob like her? No fucking chance." He spat a knot of blood and saliva.

The offended father lifted the back of his red locks and slammed his busted face into the furniture with a spiteful thud. "You are no man to speak ill of my daughter."

"Yeah, would you just shut the fuck up for once?" Steve said.

"I'll say whatever the fuck I want whenever the fuck I want," spat Hwoarang.

"And you wonder why no one fucking likes you."

"Your mom liked me pretty good, dickwad."

A few of the surrounding henchman chuckled. "We really should let them fight to the death."

"My money's on the redhead!" another shouted. "Crazy mother fucker!"

Laughter broke out.

But The Boss was not amused. "Jesus Christ." He bashed their skulls together. "Insolent children. Is this really the standard of henchmen worthy of my purse?" He shouted at the bodyguards around him as if they'd personally hired the captives. They all stopped laughing.

"I cannot listen to any more of this malarkey. These lies!" Mr Rochefort rolled a sleeve up to his elbow. "I've never been a man of violence despite what you may think. This, however, is not violence." He rolled up the other sleeve. "This is a service to the public, a

cleaning up of our foul streets. No one will notice you're gone, and those that do, will not miss you." He snapped his fingers and had a knife instantly placed in his hand. "Safe be our schools from filth like you two."

Mr Rochefort yanked Hwoarang by the back of his head, exposing his unprotected throat. Fear trudged down his Adam's apple as the icy blade feathered across it. The sharp tip poked one side of his throat. A bright red bead seeped from the puncture. Mr Rochefort tightened his grip on the handle, ready to deepen the wound and stretch it right across the breadth of his prisoner's throat.

The door burst open.

He swivelled round, the knife stopping in its shallow tracks. Hwoarang gulped with quiet relief as hurried footsteps entered the room. Whoever had barged in murmured something to Mr Rochefort which made him ask, "Are you certain?"

More murmurs between him and the messenger.

The cold blade on his throat didn't move while its wielder assessed the news. Seconds moved like hours. Hwoarang couldn't make out any words but the tone and pacing of the mutterings indicated something urgent. Urgent enough to delay his imminent slaughter. What the fuck was going on?

Without explanation, Mr Rochefort pulled the knife away and returned to the opposite side of the table. He placed one hand on his hip while scratching his head with the other, as if he'd just been dealt the most impossible conundrum of his life. After some silent deliberation, he pressed his fists on the table and leaned forward, breathing down on his apprehensive prisoners.

"Where's Pandora?"

Hwoarang and Steve exchanged puzzled glances. "Where's who now?"

The Boss didn't buy their confusion. He waved the bloodied tip of the knife between them. "No more games. Where is it? Where's the box?"

Silence. Confusion.

The Boss lurched forward. They scuttled back as far as their seats would allow. His abrupt lunge was only a threat, stopping short of thrusting his knife into one of their faces. “So, you refuse to talk, is that it? Very well.” As gentle as his sudden shift in tone, he placed the knife down on the table. “Take them to the dungeons. I cannot be trusted to restrain myself.” He shot Hwoarang and Steve one last look of disgust before turning his back on them and issuing a definitive order to his men.

“Do whatever it takes.”

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Steve dangled by his bound wrists chained above his head, his shirt torn open, tattered left sleeve hanging by a thread. Cuts and bruises blotched his exposed torso, and yet another punch added colour to the muscular canvas. Steve winced with every strike, his interrogators throwing jabs at him like a hanging chunk of cold meat. He didn't have the answers they tried so desperately to beat out of him.

With one eye swollen shut and the other blinking blood, he could barely see past the large shadow pummelling his ribcage. Behind his bald head stood putrid, grimy walls and a boarded-up window, trapping the stench of death within the dimly-lit room. Steve could smell the victims that had succumbed in here before him, and his captors appeared hell-bent on making him next. The only thing keeping him alive was Mr Rochefort's insistence he and Hwoarang knew where his precious box had been whisked off to. But even that could only delay the inevitable for so long.

Steve tensed his abs before every blow, his groans of anguish masked by the loud thumps of fist on flesh. Every part of him ached. Former world champion or not, he was but a man rapidly reaching his threshold. He hated the fucking shit Hwoarang got him into. If that redheaded maggot wasn't on the brink of being beaten to death too, Steve would've done it himself, more than happy to land the finishing blow.

Pain numbed the side of Steve's face and his arms felt ready to drop off – they would've if not for the chains forcing them upright. His burly integrator threw all his weight behind a ham-sized fist, knocking the wind out of Steve in a pained cry that echoed across the dingy walls, chains rustling as he swayed from the impact. That last one might've hurt the

aggressor as much as it hurt him; the big man shook the sting from his hand after having slammed it into Steve's steely abdomen.

"Still not gonna give it up?" he puffed, almost in a pleading tone, fatigued from carrying out The Boss's orders. Steve droned, then coughed up blood. There was nothing more he could say he hadn't already. The enforcer sighed before balling his fists once more. "Okay then."

Steve braced himself for more punishment when the door creaked open.

"Bring him down," said a silky voice. It belonged to a slim man hidden behind a mask. Judging by the immediate obedience to his cold demeanor, this slim man held some authority over the brawny interrogator tasked to getting his hands dirty. He undid Steve's chains on command, probably relieved himself.

Steve didn't think for one second it was over though. More likely he'd be thrust into a game of *good thug, bad thug*. After failing to break him physically, perhaps they'd target his psyche.

As soon as the chains released his wrists, the blond prisoner sprawled to a heap on the floor. The large bodyguard hauled him back to his feet, bringing him face to mask with his slim supervisor.

"So, your lips are sealed, huh?" he spoke with a thick French accent.

Panting, Steve dripped sweat and blood. "I told you," he said dryly. "I don't know where the bloody box is." What would it take to get that through these thick idiots?

"Yes, of course, of course," said the slim man, all but yawning. "Come with me." He turned and walked.

Steve was pushed forward, his sluggish legs forced to work.

"You know what I like about you?" said the masked man while leading the way down a dark corridor with dying fluorescent lamps. "You seem more reasonable than your ill-tempered bosom buddy."

Hwoarang's screams echoed from further down the corridor. Screams of torturous pain, or so Steve thought, till they'd approached close enough for him to hear laughter amid

Hwoarang's dramatic outbursts. Was he being beaten or tickled to death? The bloody tosser had finally lost his marbles. Whatever little he had had.

Steve scoffed. "A schizo patient would sound reasonable next to that guy."

"My point exactly." The masked man pushed the door open to the torture chamber and gestured for Steve to enter. "After you."

"Don't mind if I do." Steve limped in and grimaced at the sight of the banged-up redhead. He was chained up the same way Steve had been while two henchmen took turns swinging blows at his battered carcass. Double the punishment for double the douchebag. Made sense, Steve thought. A third bodyguard stood by monitoring the interrogation and firing off questions in between every punch. It appeared Hwoarang had won himself the complete VIP treatment.

Steve recognised his pager on a table that had been pushed to the far side of the room to make space for Hwoarang's dangling body. Bloody useless thing must've stopped working. He couldn't recall when it had been taken off of him, evidently some time before his torture began. Hwoarang's possessions had been stripped too; a box of mints, his lighter and his gun lay next to Steve's pager and wallet.

"As you can see," said the masked man, reclaiming Steve's attention. "Your friend's got a death wish."

Refusing to cooperate was one thing, but Hwoarang went far and beyond being a nuisance, laughing and mocking the burly men punching him black and blue. "You mean that's all you got?" He took a fist to the jaw, spat blood then continued to mouth off. "I've been hit on harder in gay clubs, motherfucker!" He laughed like a maniac.

Steve quirked an eyebrow. "Gay clubs?" he muttered under his breath.

Hwoarang swallowed another punch to the gut. "That one actually tickled," he wheezed.

"Hey," said one of the torturers, running out of breath. "Can't we just kill these fools already? We're wasting our time here. They don't know jackshit."

The masked man turned to Steve. "I'm afraid I agree with my colleague's sentiments here. Either your friend here really doesn't know anything or he doesn't give a damn about saving his own skin. But, I thought, perhaps you might."

"Huh? Me?"

The masked man grabbed Hwoarang's gun off the table, fired one shot through the ceiling then pointed the pistol between the redhead's eyes. "So," he said. "Here's the deal. Since he's too unreasonable to talk, if you don't talk for him, we'll blow his brains out. Then we'll blow yours out next. You really think you're indispensable? You think The Boss can't find more dollar-a-day punks to do his bidding? Please."

He lifted the bottom of his mask to launch a ball of spit into Hwoarang's face, and then turned back to Steve. "There's only one way out for you two here. And that's by redeeming yourselves in The Boss's eyes. Trust me, he'll find Pandora with or without your input. But, spare him the hassle of starting all over again, and he might just have enough mercy left in to let you walk." He squeezed Steve's shoulder in an encouraging way. "Come on. Show some sense. Don't make me splatter your friend's brains right in front of you."

Steve looked from one henchman to the next, silent in his appraisal, weighing up everything he'd heard. The room became tense, the torturers daring to dream he might finally provide them what they'd wanted to hear. Hwoarang's laboured breathing was the only sound for several long seconds.

Then Steve broke out in laughter.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" His belly laugh turned into a groan as his ribs reminded him of their bruising. "You think I give a flying fuck about this cunt?" He limped right next to the man pointing Hwoarang's own gun at him and jabbed a finger at the redhead's chest. "He's the fucking reason we're here in the first place. Fucking piecing of shit – I'll off his stupid ass myself."

With all the strength that hadn't been beaten out of his arms already, Steve delivered a stomach-turning gut punch to his partner in crime. Hwoarang opened his bloodied mouth to spit some childish retort but Steve snapped his jaw shut with an uppercut before he could get it out. To the amazement and glee of Mr Rochefort's henchmen, Steve unloaded his own

frustrations towards Hwoarang in rib-crushing body shots, cheered on by the chuckles and 'oohs' of the bloodthirsty men who'd been dying to see their partnership crumble from the moment they'd picked them up. Steve's rage finally boiled over; he grabbed Hwoarang's gun from the masked man and pressed the barrel against the redhead's temple.

"This was your fault," he snarled through gritted teeth. "See you in hell, bitch."

Steve pulled the trigger.

It clicked.

Nothing. He roared, outraged, then pulled the trigger again, and again, and again. Click, click, click. "Fuck!" He threw the empty gun across the room and asked one of the bodyguards to lend him one of theirs. The nearest man happily handed over his pistol. Steve cocked the gun and returned the favour. By shooting *him* square between the eyes.

The thud of his body reverberated in the deathly silence. Faces went from joyous to stunned and confused in a matter of seconds. Slow to catch on, the men reached for their guns all at once, but Steve was one trigger ahead of all them. He blasted the masked man above his ear, then dropped all his cronies before any of them could say 'fuck'.

"Morons." Steve kicked the biggest man in his dead stomach. That was for fucking up his ribs. He retrieved a batch of keys from the masked man's pocket and began sticking each one into Hwoarang's shackles.

"Fuck." Hwoarang spat bitterly. "What the fuck was that?"

"Oy, it worked didn't it? Had to make it look believable."

"You almost fucking blew my brains out."

"I knew you were out of rounds," Steve said, finally slotting in the right key. "You wouldn't stop whining about it about the house."

"Fuck that. What if they loaded more bullets in it after they took it off me?"

Steve shrugged. "A risk I was willing to take."

"Fuck you."

"You're welcome."

Hwoarang exaggerated a sigh of relief, rubbing his free wrists. “Son of a Panda, you didn’t need to be so brutal,” he said, re-adjusting his jaw. “On the plus side, I can’t feel the itch on my ass anymore.”

“Hate to break it to you but your ass isn’t safe just yet,” Steve said, kneeling over a wasted bodyguard. “Let’s get the gats off these tossers. Have a feeling we’re gonna need them real soon.”

“Copy that, fuckface.”

It was only a matter of time until the patter of those gunshots reached the attention of the higher ups. They’d have a whole army of cunts swarming in on them if they didn’t get out of here pronto. Shot up with adrenaline, they scavenged all the firearms and ammo they could carry. The instant they left the room however, a horde of black-clad men charged from around the corner, a dozen guns aimed at the escapees.

“Shit!”

They raised their guns, determined to take out as many as they could before succumbing to the impending hail of bullets.

Shots went off.

Not the shots anyone expected.

The crony leading the stampeding pack was blown off his feet and sent flying into the corridor’s wall, gun clattering harmlessly on the floor. A couple of the men right behind him tripped over his fallen body, then several more shots peppered whoever was still standing, bullets searing into their sides from an open door in the corridor. Dumbfounded, Hwoarang and Steve hadn’t even fired a single shot.

From the open door, a big, bald-headed, dopey-looking motherfucker emerged. His head was about a fingertip shy of touching the ceiling, his shoulders as broad as the corridor, and everything beneath his neck was pure grit and muscle. He wore leopard pants and a sleeveless, fur coat over his bulletproof vest. Heavy boots shook the ground with every step as he walked out tapping a shotgun over his shoulder; it looked like a measly fishing rod in his possession.

Hwoarang and Steve lowered their guns.

“Ya called?” Marduk said.

“About time,” Steve replied, annoyed. “I hit the fucking distress signal a century ago.”

“Distress signal?” Hwoarang looked surprised Steve could have such foresight. “Why the hell didn’t you hit it fucking sooner?”

“Just be glad I hit it at all, you busted dickwad.”

Marduk chuckled. “Watch who you calling busted, Blondie. You don’t look so pretty no more neither.” He failed to hide a crooked smile.

“Sorry, honey, didn’t have time to put on my make-up for you. What took you so long? Your big ass stalled the elevator again?”

“Ha. Ha. Funny guy.” Marduk grunted. “No. Decided to stop by the salon to get my hair done,” said the big, bad baldy.

“Had time to take a course in comedy too by the sounds of it,” Hwoarang said.

“They owe you a refund, mate,” Steve said, unimpressed.

Loud and sudden gunfire rattled their eardrums, cutting the banter short. The trio ducked out of instinct. Hwoarang and Steve waited a few seconds after the final shot and then turned around to discover a quartet of enemy corpses laid out with fresh bullet holes.

A lone woman stood further down the corridor, an Uzi in her grasp, barrel smoking from her surprise fire. She wore tight pants hugging her athletic legs and a small protective vest leaving her hourglass waist exposed. Handguns sat strapped to her thighs, a dagger slotted into the side of her boot, and a utility belt housing several pouches. Her ponytail swung in tandem with her hips when she walked.

“Boss,” Christie greeted, tossing Hwoarang a spare Uzi.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” He kissed the submachine gun.

“You’ve looked better, boss,” Christie said in as polite a tone as she could muster. Seeing Steve’s condition worried her just as much, if not more. She acknowledged him with a blasé nod. “Steve.”

“Christie.” He responded in kind.

“Monty,” Hwoarang said. “Brought my baby with you?”

“How could I forget?” Christie handed him a set of keys.

“Where is she?”

“Eastern exit, seven o’clock.”

“Sweet.” Hwoarang pocketed the keys. “Oh yeah, and –”

“Got you covered, boss.” She slipped a cigarette between his lips and sparked it with her lighter.

As the cancer stick burned, they heard a stampede marching above their heads, and hurried footsteps approaching from either ends of the corridor. They slid into a back-to-back-to-back-to-back formation, covering all possible points of entry.

Hwoarang puffed smoke out the side of his mouth and cocked his gun. “Bring it, bitches.”

... TO BE CONTINUED ...

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Sincerely yours, j.j. scriptease.