They brought me to the basement nobody knew existed beneath Dicky’s Bar. Anybody aware of its dark presence either rightfully kept their traps shut or never walked out the same way again. Most of the time, any poor bastard who woke up down there never saw the light of day ever. Others, especially the Lakertown Police Department, questioned if it even existed beyond conspiracy theories surrounding the Mafia.

 Through the manager’s office (hidden behind a littered bookcase) and down a small wooden staircase, Caesar and one of the lion soldiers from before led me to an underground space no larger than a high school’s locker room. The smell alone could make an adult fur gag for fresh oxygen. It felt like some scents in the air dated as far back as the Outfit’s golden age, when they ruled with iron fists.

 Dark stains spoiled the tiled floor and trailed to a singular, overused drain, while an aging fluorescent lightbulb flickered randomly over the silhouette of a beaten figure tied in a chair. One of the basement’s many, many victims, or soon-to-be victims.

 A young, brown-furred rabbit in his twenties, wearing a bloodied white jacket and torn jeans no doubt done by his captors. A black tattoo could be found on his upper neck at just the right angle, haphazardly inked into his fur. It looked like either a gang tag or a label for whatever the Mafia employed him to do. When we approached him, the rabbit weakly raised his bruised head, breathing heavier and saying something through the duct tape wrapped tightly around his skull like a muzzle made of sticky rubber.

 “Who’s he?” I dared to ask Caesar.

 “He’s nobody,” the Italian wolf scoffed while pulling out his phone to stare down at a text. He intentionally angled it away from my peripheral view. “Some drug dealing prick who thought it’d be a fun idea to form some kinda…heh, get this: a ‘worker’s union’ of sorts for the other drug dealing pricks throughout Lakertown’s west side. Kinda funny when you imagine it. The big problem’s that it actually got some of the ones under my payroll into the fucking idea.”

 The rabbit tried speaking (or pleading) through the duct tape, only for him to be silenced when Caesar stepped forward and smacked him across the muzzle. Hard, to the point his chair nearly tumbled over on its rickety side.

 “Shut up, you motherfucking piece o’ shit!” the wolf seethed at the herbivore. “We’ve been losing money because of you! And all because you and your greedy pals can’t stand the idea of having protection from the police and giving a little tax, can ya?!”

Exhaling sharply, Caesar’s nostrils flared down at the limp figure still tied to the chair. I could feel his anger vibrate in the thick air. It certainly made the nameless rabbit piss his pants, if the scents in the air indicated anything. Caesar’s visible anger paled to the tranquil fury his family had expressed plenty of times in the past.

“My best men have been trying to get this guy to talk about who else is in on the scheme,” he explained in clear annoyance, the Italian wolf’s fur bristling further. “Seriously, I’m this close to going horror movie shit on him, but he won’t budge. And I wanna get this whole ‘drug dealer union’,” he air-quoted, “out of the question. Pull a ‘concrete shoe’ on it all.”

In other words, if I got the brown rabbit to talk, then he would deliver on the deal.

“So, Dark Wolf of Ireland,” Caesar smirked towards me, “Think you can make this birdie sing for me?”

The rabbit had to be no older than those two kids who tried to gun down Cherry. The way his blue, teary eyes dragged frantically between me, the Italian wolf and his stoic lion guard reminded me of a prey cornered by three ruthless predators. Ready for the kill.

“Bruises and cuts heal. So do broken bones and tails,” I said after a moment of contemplation. “Caesar, Sir, your ‘family’ has grown unimaginative in interrogation techniques over the years. Nowadays, the worst punishments you can inflict on someone are the kind that last forever. And you…”

I knelt to stare directly back at the scared, bound rabbit. My hardened stare did not break one single moment.

“I can think of so many punishments for you that will make death something you crave for…like your own drugs,” I lifted the rabbit’s chin when his head began to loll downward. “Stay focused, kid. I need you to pay attention.”

Glancing back to Caesar, I proposed, “Keep him down here for a couple weeks, feed him only cocaine or heroin or whatever it is he sold on the streets. Do it until he’s addicted to his own supply, then cut off every finger in each of his paws. The thumbs too, so he can’t get a fix on his own anytime soon if he’s let go…”

The rabbit’s eyes widened to comical proportions. Bingo.

“Have you ever visited Central America, rabbit?” I asked him in the most casual tone I could muster. “In my merc days, I once heard of this demented cartel leader…he once tortured a rival boss by dripping infected vials of blood down his mouth. Syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea, HPV, HIV, different types of hepatitis, then let him rot away in a cell, slowly dying of all these diseases. Of course, it was a rumor. Still, the idea alone makes you wonder how it’d feel.”

I coldly stared into the rabbit’s terrified soul, the one hiding within his irises.

“Or maybe, and this is completely hypothetical…we strap you down and give you a pre-frontal lobotomy? Take away all that you are and can remember? By the time we’re finished with you, we’ll dump you in front of the nearest mental hospital where you’ll spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair. Let nurses wipe your ass and spoon-feed you while you remain trapped in your own mind… I glared down at him, some of my teeth visible beneath my lips. His pleading eyes flickered opened and closed, frantically. “Could you handle living these kinds of punishments the rest of your life, kid?”

Minutes later, the rabbit confessed every single name like his life depended on it.

Whether or not Caesar would go through with the suggested threats didn’t matter to me, not as he led me upstairs back to the second-story apartment, patting my shoulder and laughing proudly as if he were my own father who saw me win a football match.

“You’re right. We didn’t know which cathouse Sylvester was hiding in until this morning,” Caesar explained to me when we sat down. “We couldn’t hit all of ‘em at once without getting the fuzz’s attention. It needed it to be in a single strike. It needed to count. Then we could take the tiger’s girls and contacts for ourselves…”

One of the Italian wolf’s soldiers handed him an electronic tablet, then turned it to my view, which displayed a stilled image from a surveillance camera. It showed the outside of Dicky’s Bar during the dead of night, and a short figure in dark clothing was onscreen. His mask and the lack of lighting hid his facial features well. The figure’s frame and posture made it a probable male. No other discernable elements indicated his species though.

“One of the opening bartenders found a note attached to the front door two mornings ago, telling us what his ‘super-secret schedule’ is each night. Security cameras couldn’t catch his face, but we do know he is canine based on the faint musk one of our tracker guys recognized on the note. We had to be sure he wasn’t some two-bit undercover cop or something, so I pulled some favors, and we managed to track him from street cams all the way to the edge of the Red-Light District. He spent a couple hours looking up at this apartment complex before disappearing onto the morning metro bus. We lost him from there.”

My ears shot up high at his words, then resisted the urge to growl at what I saw onscreen.

Fuck. There the mysterious Benefactor was, binoculars in paw, looking up to the balcony of my own penthouse apartment. The morning before me and the ocelot I harbored spoke on that same location, out in the opening for anyone to see.

*Oh, shit, shit, shit!* I nearly growled, *The motherfucker knows where we live!*

As angry and fearful as I was in that moment, I did not need Caesar or any of his lackeys knowing where I lived. For all the Outfit knew, I lived in some upscale high rise in the Loop.

“Is this what you are looking for, Dark Wolf?” Caesar asked me across the table.

With tense muscles, a restrained tail and firm nod, I replied, “It is.”

I thanked Caesar for the information, and promptly left Dicky’s Bar without giving the Italian wolf another chance to ‘ask a favor’ from me. Not then. Not ever. Not when the mysterious serial killer I’d been tracking from afar literally found my doorstep!

Rushing out into the twilit street and down a less-populated sidewalk, I yanked my smartphone out from my pocket to call Cherry. It rang for dozens of seconds.

“Hello, this is Charlie Rochford.”

I snarled, “Cherry! The—”

“I can’t answer ya right now. Please leave—”

I growled in frustration, waiting for the beep before explaining (almost) everything to the distracted feline when he finds the voicemail.

“The bastard found where I live. Soon as you hear this, close the blinds, lock the doors and don’t do anything until I get there! Whatever you do, *do not* give him any opportunity to see you, got it!? I’m on my way back!”

Angrily, I tossed my phone into my pants pocket and tried hailing a taxicab to no avail. The rush hour was in full effect. Everybody happened to be in their own hurry. Eventually, after the seventh cab refused to slow down, I decided to cut my losses and run back to the penthouse.

The creased business suit did not help. Desperately, I jogged past idle pedestrians, ignored an angry, well-dressed vixen when I bumped into her side and relentlessly stomped my shoes against the cracked concrete. I made each determined stride count. The sweat and accumulating grime started ruining the suit, but I didn’t even give a single shit.

Fuck, I was an idiot! I should have expected this breach of security long beforehand! Only an amateur like me wouldn’t notice the same goddamn target they’re tracking just so happened to be tracking him too! That sadistic little stain somehow found me—a cold-blooded contract killer with more experience, resources, and scars to count on two paws—before I found him. And now he knew where I lived!

I fucked up. I fucked up, royally.

*Whoever this canine is, he probably knows by now who owns the penthouse*, I thought grimly. *How long has he been watching us?*

No sooner than it crossed my mind did my smartphone buzz in my pants pocket. It had to be Cherry, I hoped. Slowing down to a semi-fast pace of walking, I blindly answered it.

“Cherry?” I rasped, panting into the device as I tried catching my breath. “Cherry, did you get my voice—”

“**I finally found you.**” Replied a distorted, deep voice.

I skidded to a halt in front of a crosswalk. My blood froze and the damp fur underneath the suit stood on end. When I glanced down to the caller ID, it read ‘unknown’ on screen.

“Who...the hell,” I slowly asked out loud, “…is this?”

“**Did you really think you could hide that boy from me?**”

“So, it is you then.” I grit my teeth in order not to add ‘you son of a bitch’ at the end, then carefully asked, “How did you find this number?”

“**You have your set of skills**,” he simply said, “**and I have mine. And I must say, you and that little whore are harder to track down than I thought.**”

Glancing around to make sure no nearby furs could hear (and possibly figure out if the bastard was calling me from somewhere nearby), I spoke in a seething whisper, “Are you talking about the same kind of skills that result in five murders?”

“**Two murders, not counting the tiger I let the Outfit remove for me,**” he answered back. “**Plus, the ones you committed after I hired those two dolts to take care of the whore, Gradee Cormic. That is your name, correct?”**

An annoyed growl confirmed it for him. “I’m not a fan of peeping toms, whoever you are. Since you know my name, why not tell me yours?”

A short, deep, electronic laugh resonated into my frozen ears. “**I don’t think so. You of know better than anyone else that names can hold significant kinds of power…Mr. Faoláin.**”

My breathing immediately hitched. My blood turned to arctic ice. My damp, drying fur stood further up and I was pretty sure I jerked my tail between my legs in that single instant.

What.

The.

Ever.

Lasting.

Fuck.

Did.

He.

Just.

Call me?

“**Markus Faoláin. Born August 12th, 1982, in what is now Toome, Northern Ireland. During your final year of high school in 1998, you were declared missing after a terrorist backpack bombing left eight students and two faculty members dead and dozens injured. Inspectors believed you were the perpetrator behind the attack at first, then thought you were among the victims until the body of the real perpetrator, Thomas Faoláin, was found eviscerated with a sharp instrument in his home. Interpol and Northern Ireland’s police probably didn’t suspect the long-missing teenaged wolf would grow up to be a wanted man.**

“Wanted, how?” I tried everything I could not to sound scared.

No, I wasn’t scared. I was fucking terrified. For the first time in years. Never before had I felt the need to crawl under the nearest hole, pretend it was a dream, deny reality in any sense of form. Not ever.

“**You go by many identities and nicknames. The mob calls you the Dark Wolf of Ireland—but you don’t even sound Irish anymore, do you? But one of the most common names I could scavenge on Dark Web forums was the ‘Iron Phantom’. I have got to give you credit, price listing is very detailed and thorough, as are your computer files.**”

How the fuck did he manage to hack my computer without me noticing? Did he accomplish it after I left? Was he in the apartment? Had he already gotten to Cherry first? The last thought nearly made my knees buckle, but fortunately, the light turned green, and I stumbled across the street.

“What…” I managed to articulate a question from my incoherent thoughts, then say it to the Benefactor on my phone, “What do you want?”

“**That whore you’ve been harboring needs to die,**” he replied like an inner demon whispering into my folded ears, “**and you do not want what I know to go to Interpol. I believe we can come to a consensus.**”

I nearly cracked my phone screen in my right paw. “And what…would that be?”

“**Kill the slut by tomorrow, and you can return to killing nobodies for other nobodies. I will even pay you double your normal rate if you can do this before the time reaches midnight. What do you say?**”

“I say go fuck yourself on a ten-foot pole and tell me where you are!” I suddenly growled, not caring if a few idle pedestrians heard my ‘offensive’ language. “What makes you think you can just blackmail me and walk away?”

“**Because I hold all the cards in one paw and the speed dial for every police agency in the other**,” he mentioned casually. “**Now, I want a reply. Do we have a deal?**”

As I delayed my response, something crept up from the frontal lobe and collided with the rest of my brain. Time slowed down as it finally dawned on me like the morning sun.

*This doesn’t make any sense.*

The Benefactor’s modus operandi revolved around getting other people to do his dirty work. However, part of the operandi revolved around making sure he stayed as far from the consequences’ crosshairs as possible. If this bastard had wanted to, he could’ve just sent the information about me to Interpol after confirming I resided in that same apartment with Cherry.

If he were this careless and bold, he would’ve been caught a long time ago.

The man did not like loose ends. He proved that by making sure neither Becky Mullin’s mother, the hospital’s bill that was paid in cryptocurrency or even the two would-be motel shooters knew where the money came from. The money that fueled the goals of silencing the victims. First Becky Mullin, then almost Cherry, and lastly Desmond Sylvester in order to make sure revenge would not come back to haunt him, the Benefactor. If this guy were as smart and tactical as I’d been inclined to believe, he would never make a deal with a loose end like me without…making sure…

“**Are you still there, Mr. Faoláin? I need your answer.**”

He was distracting me!

Without even looking, I tossed the phone into the sewer and bolted for the penthouse.

*Cherry, please be safe! For the love of Fucking God, be safe!*