



## Cold Light

**T**he movement was two years old, and he was there from the start. There weren't any slogans, chants, or songs—only the Green Cat, eyes fixed and teeth bared, as both avatar and beacon. Most were civilians like him, and the few ex-cops and soldiers were well-connected. The police sniper uniform hadn't taken the artisans long to make; it matched the real thing with precision. Ditto the fake creds. These tools and symbols fused themselves to him, reflecting the talent and training that made him the cold, focused thing he was.

The sequence they had drilled into his head played out: He fled the scene, ditching his Remington 700. He burned his gloves in an alley. He trekked a few blocks and hitched a getaway van with the Green Cat logo. When he returned, he came to the disused skyscraper; those guarding the broken door let him inside. The basement led to a system of tunnels, whose art deco and gothic design had made it a tourist attraction back in the day. Earth's cool inner drafts accented every bottle raised in celebration of the blow that had been struck. Shadows danced and morphed in the glow of flashlights. His deed began to sink in as everyone mobbed and embraced him. Friends and allies spluttered his name, and \_\_\_\_\_ locked him in a vise grip, possessing him with eyes that bore things beyond the immediate impact. Eight hundred miles away, he had done as he promised. And eight hundred miles away, everything after the gloves disappeared into a ghost narrative that swam in a chamber gifted to him by some armed men on fire for their Leader and Teacher.

It was the sixty-third day—eighteen hours past his final daily serving of crackers, a small bowl of beans, and water. He lay on a table in a commandeered medical office, strapped and sedated but still fighting the effects of starvation and sleep deprivation. The cold light from the ceiling bore down, splashing off the subway-tiled walls, as if to ensure that he couldn't escape between his ears any longer. The doctor, artificially young-looking and straight out of a men's clinic ad, bent over the gaunt, sallow form in the yellow scrubs. "You know, I almost brought you pancakes and sausage this morning." His prisoner summoned a small reserve of strength and launched a surprisingly well-formed gob into his face.

The screams of the crowd didn't register as he bolted from his perch at the top of a concealed ramp across the square. He didn't see their initial shock and terror turn to delirium as they rushed the stage to smear themselves and their children in the blood of their new martyr. The smell of burning rubber led his pursuers to the alley, where a few of them surrounded him. A chop to the throat of one, a wrestling match with another—then the barrel of an AR-15, inches from his face as he rose. "Go ahead, do it," he said. "Get it the fuck over with, right now. You'll feel better, won't you?" The heat packer, his hardware protruding over an ample hill covered in a sleeveless red T-shirt, grinned. "Whaddya think we are, animals?" A high-pitched yawp came from the side. "Shut up, Lonnie." Lonnie obeyed. They hustled their catch into an SUV and peeled out toward an expressway on-ramp. They sped across a city that would soon, like others, fill itself with ripped and burning flesh, reverberating with random howls.

The next injection coursed through him. He gurgled, and his breathing began to collapse on itself as friends and allies ran through his head. He knew that he alone had made their burden real. He reasoned that many, including \_\_\_\_\_, wouldn't live to tell their stories after it was all over. For that matter, would it ever end? The guilt of the dying, after all, had replaced the guilt of survivors. He tried to laugh. The world inverted in darkness.

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