

I.

Névaria is out of breath. She's running full speed. Her heart is pounding so hard she can hear it over the sound of her own footsteps. It feels like it might tear free from her chest. For a split second, everything drifts, and she forgets she isn't safe.

VOICE 1

— There she is!

VOICE 2

— We're going to tear her apart!

Névaria is breathing so heavily that her riot helmet fogs up. She always forgets how heavy the gear is like wearing a suit of metal armor. Everything blurs. Shadows flicker around her, black and yellow shapes rushing past on all sides. Firecrackers, stun grenades, sirens, shouting, each sound cranks her anxiety higher. She trips over a trash can. Before she can even get back up, the blows start raining down on her. Five men. Black and yellow. A strike to her chest knocks the air out of her. She gasps, unable to breathe. The blows keep coming. She's at the end of her strength. Her body begins to give in. *If this is how I go...*, she thinks.

She jolts awake with a sharp inhale. Her breath comes in ragged bursts, sweat running down her body. She's safe now, lying in her bed. Just another nightmare. The third this week. The Yellow Vest protests are starting to take a real toll on her mind. She forces herself to slow down, drawing in deep breaths, steadying herself. She's drenched so much that it feels like her dark skin catches the faint light, glistening with beads of sweat in the dark. She turns her head toward Marine, sleeping peacefully beside her. Thankfully, the nightmare didn't wake her. Névaria wants to keep it that way. Being a cop's partner is already complicated enough without adding the weight of her nightmares to it. Marine's calm presence soothes her. She looks like Snow White, with her pale skin and jet-black, shoulder-length hair, lying there as if she's dreaming of something gentle, untouched. Névaria places a hand over her chest, making sure her heartbeat has finally slowed. Then she lies back down, hoping this time sleep will come without visions of horror.

*Monday, November 26, 2018,*

The alarm goes off. A harsh, crackling buzz shatters the silence. Névaria reaches out instinctively, slamming her hand onto the clock to silence it. She gets up, her body heavy, as if the blows from her nightmare still linger across her back. Like a programmed machine, she takes a shower, then slips into her civilian clothes before heading into the kitchen to join Marine. Marine stands by the window, lost in thought, a steaming cup of coffee in her hands.

MARINE

— Morning.

NÉVARIA

— Morning.

MARINE

— Did you sleep well?

Névaria sighs as she pours herself a cup of coffee.

NÉVARIA

— Not really. I had trouble falling asleep.

She glances briefly at her watch, then sets her cup down.

MARINE

— Because of the upcoming protests?

Névaria chooses not to answer. She knows Marine worries constantly whenever she's out on protest duty, and she doesn't want to add to that weight. Instead, she simply leans in and kisses her, then heads out of the apartment.

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Under a bright, sunlit sky, a police car crosses the Pont de la Concorde through light traffic. Seated in the front, Névaria and her partner Alexis face the Assemblée Nationale. Alexis, tall and lean, in his thirties, with short, military-cut blond hair turns up the radio while Névaria gazes out the window, lost in thought. A wave of nostalgia washes over her. The first time she crossed this bridge, she was barely in her twenties, ready to take the leap and move to Paris. Convinced the police was her calling, despite everything her family and friends had said. Their disapproval still echoes in her mind. "You're a Black woman! What the hell are you doing going into that?", "They'll chew you up alive." "You won't last five minutes..." And yet, it's been over ten years. More than just holding on, for Névaria the police is a family "for better or worse, till the end." A flawed family. She's not naive. "There are bad apples among us... some lose control, and it sets off a whole media storm about police violence."

When the media storm grows too intense, Névaria reminds herself why she chose this path in the first place a reason many would call simple. "Protect and serve." A "simple" reason she shares with Alexis *my little brother in the field*, she thinks. They've worked side by side for over five years, their bond unchanged. They've been through everything... terrorist attacks, protests spiraling out of control, waves of social unrest. Névaria has seen her share of movements, and yet something in her gut tells her this one the Yellow Vests is different. The beginning of something new. A new era that, in her eyes, could tip into chaos at any moment. She gives a slight shake of her head, forcing herself to push away the darker possibilities. The voice on the radio cuts in, pulling her back to a reality that feels both brutal and uncertain.

