

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

ALEX LANE

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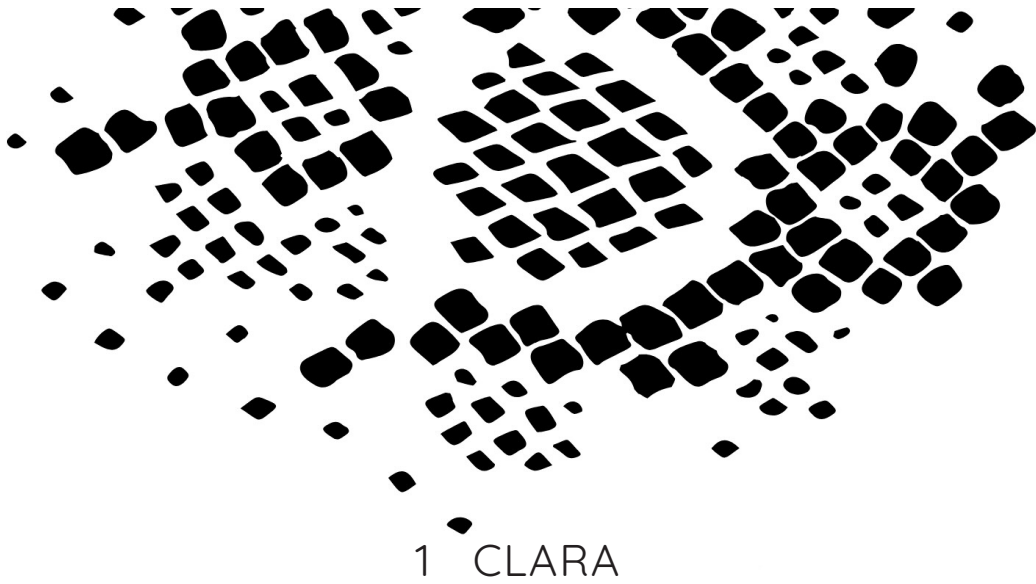
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To the boy who ignored me, thanks for the inspiration ;)



Every operative had the same fear and the same hope: to wake up one day and see the envelope sealed with the signet of Command slipped under their door. This envelope was the call that set an operative apart from the rest. It sent them into their own assignment, separate from those they trained with. It was evidence the operative had a special set of skills the other operatives didn't. It was an incredibly brilliant honor. It was also, more often than not, a death sentence. If not in the original assignment, then in a future one.

When Clara saw the envelope on her floor, adrenaline immediately coursed through her veins. This was not her first assignment like this, and if she survived it wasn't her last. She had gained her status as a high ranking operative over a year ago, and had received more summons than anyone else in her year, almost more than anyone in the division. It had been two months since her last assignment, the longest stint for her and she was completely restless.

Clara threw her clothes on quickly, meticulously lacing her

boots and concealing her favorite weapons. Her trainer had gifted them to her after her first summons. Obsidian blades. Absolutely lethal.

She didn't typically carry beyond those; her role was usually to blend in until it was too late for the person she was after. She had the mannerisms of a spy, but her honed agility and weapons training had given her a level of precision and deadliness few operatives could claim to possess. She smiled into the mirror, her eyes never softening, and she pulled her hair back.

She inhaled deeply. *Here I go.* She broke the seal.

"Clara Richards -

You have been summoned to Command. Join us in the war room at 0900 for your new assignment.

Command"

Clara couldn't keep the slight smile off her face as she walked through the dining line. "What's with you this morning?" Reese, the closest person Clara had to a friend, asked as Clara slid onto the bench next to her.

"Oh, just another one of those mornings."

"So cryptic." Reese stabbed a mini muffin on her plate, waving it on her fork as she added, "You got called into Command again, didn't you?"

Clara did not react immediately. She was trained not to react. But in the safety of the dining hall it was harder to slip into that perfectly crafted role. Reese kept the impaled muffin pointed at Clara. The lack of response was enough for Reese to assume she had correctly guessed. "Of course you did." She deadpanned. "Dude, it's been awhile since you've had an assignment! I'm sure

you're thrilled. I know I am. You've been driving me absolutely, positively, incredibly insane."

Clara smiled hesitantly, "So eager to get rid of me."

Reese rolled her eyes, "Get rid of you is a strong phrase. Far too strong since you'll be coming back. Obviously. No, more like I'm grateful you will have the chance to relax and work out some of your stress. Since that's what does it for you. It's weird to me. Really weird to me. But I'm sure you're excited." Reese took a deep breath when she finally finished her rambling train of thought.

Clara allowed a real smile to grace her face, "Yeah, okay. I'm excited. It just doesn't feel like the right thing to admit. I'm sure I'm being sent somewhere extremely dangerous. Again. It doesn't seem like the right thing to be excited about."

Reese didn't hold the same sentiment. "You're not excited because of the danger or because the war is getting worse." She exhaled deeply and popped the muffin into her mouth. Around bites she added, "You're excited because somehow this is where you find purpose. Don't ask me how or why. I'm not a psychic, or is it psychologist? Psychiatrist? Pretty sure it begins with psych. Anyways. You're gonna have to figure that one out on your own."

Clara nodded, shoving a bite of eggs into her mouth. These missions did bring a form of satisfaction to her. It was the knowledge she was furthering her kingdom. She was protecting people. She was standing in the gap in ways the normal population would never know. And the more selfish part, she was proving to herself and everyone else just how capable she was.

Ever since she and Carver were split between disciplines, and then split permanently, she had strived to become the best. She created an identity within her discipline—become the best assassin, until that's all anyone ever saw: a shadow.

As Reese continued to ramble, Clara tried to tune her out. Though she would never admit it, her nerves were becoming more

and more on edge from the idea of facing Command. Though she had been in that room many times since they graduated and received their classification, she couldn't walk those hallways without thinking of Carver. It was practically ritualistic. She threw herself into assignments to forget him, only to have his face come to mind every time she was given one.

Following basic training, each person was assigned to continue training as a special operative, or drafted into a military regiment where they became boots on the ground for emerging battles. For those chosen to train as operatives, they were assigned to Ravens, Spiders, or Vipers.

The Ravens were trained to blend into any scenario. Spies — intelligence. The Spiders were crafty and brilliant. Clara had seen some of the weapons they created throughout her own training, and it terrified her to consider what else Spiders might be capable of. She was grateful they were on the same team, and had resolved to never get close to, and never upset, a Spider.

Clara was assigned to Vipers. As lethal as the name suggests, Vipers were trained to be killers. Brutal, awful, terrible murderers.

Clara had been relieved that she and Carver were placed within operative disciplines. Now, she felt foolish for ever believing it was the easy way out. Operatives were pushed until they broke and what was left of their humanity was barely enough to stay sane. The line between brilliance and madness. A tightrope every operative learned to walk. Or didn't.

“So will you admit you're freaking thrilled? Or keep pretending this doesn't phase you?”

Clara rolled her eyes, though secretly she enjoyed the extra attention Reese was paying her.

“Yes, I'm excited. Something I shouldn't admit though,” Reese leaned in as Clara dropped her voice slightly. “Before every mission,

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I have the same anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach I had the first time.”

Reese burst out laughing, the noise shattering the concentration Clara’s brain had created. Every noise around her felt louder. Closer. More dangerous. As her anticipation grew, every sense heightened. Adrenaline doesn’t know the difference between anxiety and fear, and as Clara had trained, everything around her took on the hue of a threat.

“When did they tell you to go to them?”

“Right after breakfast.”

“I’m happy for you, Clara. In all seriousness, I know how hard you work for this.”

Clara gave her a tight smile before focusing her attention on finishing her food and keeping it down. Reese couldn’t know how hard she had worked for this. No one understood the full price she had paid to reach this level.

There were still operatives within the assassins who walked without the weight of blood on their hands. A feeling Clara couldn’t even vaguely remember. She couldn’t remember the number of lives she had claimed. All through direct orders. So many prisoners gone by her hand. Diplomats, advisors, generals, and those she knew nothing about except for their name in a list of instructions.

It was part of the training, after all. And Clara had been singled out from the beginning. What he saw in her, she still didn’t know. She had been fierce, but after things with Carver ended, she was simply angry. She had a fire that could burn the world down, and no clue how to direct it.

Ferris had singled her out immediately. He claimed she was weak, and that she’d never survive. And he told her from day one he would destroy her. After three months, Ferris realized she wasn’t easily destroyed and he flipped his actions. He made her his

star pupil, and he, knowing he wouldn't be allowed to stay an operative much longer, taught her his trade secrets he paid too much for to share in a class. He led her through every drill, every practice, coaching her to stay through lunch and dinner, adapting her body to training through weakness. She loved it. She loved the focus. She loved the pain that engulfed her every waking minute. She loved the feel of cool metal in her hands, and the destruction she realized she could wreak.

No one could tell her she was weak ever again.

No one could accuse her of needing a crutch.

Now, here she was. She carried the loss of her innocence as proof of her competence. And she would do it yet again.

"Thanks for the encouragement, Reese," she managed to say through her rushing thoughts. Clara picked up her tray and moved to the door as Reese wished her good luck and goodbye.

Another deep breath as she stepped out of the dining room into the narrow hallway. This is it. No weakness. She focused on the physical reactions she could control as she calmly walked to Command. Deep breaths. Consistent steps. Heart rate slowing.

That's more like it.

The walk to Command was shorter than she remembered. She blamed it on nerves. Command was at the center of the base, with each of the three disciplines sectored off in different directions. Operatives were encouraged, though not forced, to stay in their own sector. Each discipline was different, and what happened if too much cross pollination occurred?

Afraid to become pariahs, most people followed this rule.

Clara, in her path for perfection, of course followed this rule. And so, although she could have passed through and visited old friends from base training, explored a different section, or even come to present a request to Command, Clara only ever walked this way to have her fate sealed. Whatever words were spoken, what-

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ever assignment was given, that was her new destiny. She would execute it regardless of the cost.

She paused before the door, her feet almost stumbling as they broke from their previous pattern. *This is what I've been waiting for. I'm here.* Straightening her already perfect posture, Clara inhaled through her nose, exhaled through her mouth, and stepped through the door.



2 CARVER

Carver never understood the fascination with receiving a summons from Command. He loved exciting assignments for the change of scenery, but frankly he just didn't *care*. Yet somehow, he was the best. *Built for it*. So he was constantly told.

He'd been brought before Command for special assignments a handful of times now. Unheard of for the amount of time he'd been an operative, in fact, unheard of in general. He supposed he had proven himself. Command was comfortable with him carrying more information than anyone else in the sector because they knew he, at least, wouldn't break. After his slip up on his last assignment, he was surprised to be called in so soon.

Now he stood before them again, hands clasped behind his back and his eyes scanning the room. They sat in chairs arranged in a crescent shape, and from their stage, they were just high enough to look down on whoever stood before them. There were always five, never the exact same five, but they all had the same presence—icy, unfeeling, robotic. He had been scared the first time he was brought before them, their masks intimidating, their sleeves

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covering their hands. Now it almost felt routine and he resisted the urge to shift his weight from foot to foot. Couldn't seem too impertinent.

"You'll have a partner for this assignment." Was the first phrase that caught Carver's attention. His eyes snapped forward. This, this was different. He listened more intently as the woman continued.

Her voice was low, her eyes dark, but those were the only distinct features about her. With their masks and outfits, it was impossible to define anything about them. No one knew how many people were actually members of Command, and only those within the fold were capable of identifying other members.

"You've heard rumors of the 'Eclipse?'" His brain spun across the nickname. An assassin rumored to have killed more than any other operative. The rumors say he had never been caught, never failed an assignment. This assignment might end up being more interesting than he had expected. *Why are they assigning me to work with an assassin?*

His gut twisted, unsure about this change in normalcy but he nodded. "The two of you will be partnered for this assignment." The woman looked beyond him to the open doors behind him, "Ah, here she is now."

She. Carver's heart began to pound. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be. He turned slightly, looking over his shoulder. Praying he wouldn't confirm his suspicions. But he was right. He knew he would be. It was her. Her steps faltered for only a beat when her blue eyes met his. She was just as shocked as he was. Carver was glad he was standing so carefully. His lungs no longer wanted to expand, and he was pretty sure his vocal cords would betray him if he tried to speak.

His eyes tracked her as she recomposed herself, far quicker than he could, and walked until she was at his side. Feet away.

Far too close. And way too freaking far. Her posture was straight, and something about her expression sent a chill down his spine.

“Reporting for my assignment.” Her voice was careful, unwavering.

It snapped him from his reverie. It was her. How was she the Eclipse? His best friend, lover, then nothing. And now she was a feared assassin. *Of course she is.*

The woman who had spoken earlier looked between the two of them. She obviously knew their history. She was a member of Command, and their relationship, and then lack thereof, had never been a secret. Satisfied with what she saw now, she explained their assignment. “We’ve received a report that Noxvalis has successfully created an airborne biological weapon that can be used over a long distance.”

Carver couldn’t stop his eyebrows raising and the surprise that rushed through him. Noxvalis was a violent kingdom, hell bent on destroying all neighboring kingdoms. Their kingdom had been at the top of the list for a while. If Noxvalis had created a biological weapon that powerful, it would end their kingdoms’ feud. And cause the death of far too many people.

“We need you to infiltrate Noxvalis, gain access to their labs, and retrieve the weapon.”

“Retrieve? Not destroy?” Carver was surprised to hear Clara interject. When he knew her, she was shy, careful to never speak too loudly. And now she was questioning Command.

The woman’s eyes narrowed slightly behind the mask and Carver hoped for her own sake Clara wouldn’t continue questioning those who held full control over their lives. “We need to study it so we can understand their mechanics and begin developing antidotes. Anything else you wish to *question*, Operative Richards?”

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“No ma’am,” Clara replied, her tone belying how she honestly felt about the decision.

The woman ignored her and moved on. “Their yearly celebration will begin in five days. Many people from other kingdoms visit for the celebration, and the two of you will enter with them. Once inside, you will meet with our contact. Marsh Harris. She owns a bookstore named ‘The Midnight Quill’ on the edge of town square. She will give you the information she’s collected, and from there it is up to the two of you to get into the lab.

The train will take you within 20 miles of the gates, but you will have to walk the rest of the way, or find a caravan to join. There is no contingency. If you are captured, there will be no extraction.

Both of you have been here long enough to understand the cost of war. I don’t have to explain to you how dangerous this weapon will be if it stays in their hands. It must be retrieved at all costs.”

She finished, awaiting their response. Postures straight, they both saluted and replied, “Yes ma’am.”

“Excellent. You are dismissed to pack and ready yourselves for tomorrow.”

Carver turned towards the door, ignoring Clara at his heels.

“Operative Richards, please. Stay one more moment.”

Carver looked over his shoulder as Clara turned to face Command again. The woman did not speak again, clearly waiting until he exited. If they were to be partners, why wasn’t he receiving the same information she was?

He didn’t like it. He didn’t like any of this. Was this because of last time?

With no choice but to obey, he waited in the hallway until Clara was finished. He rolled his shoulders back and cracked his neck. The minutes ticked by like an eternity, but he knew it couldn’t have been more than five before she stepped into the hallway, a glare on her face before she even spotted him.

As much as he wanted to say something to her, he felt like Clara needed to be the one to break the silence. He was desperate to know what had been said, but he didn't need to ask to know she wouldn't share.

Eventually, after a moment of awkwardness, and with a deep sigh, she acknowledged him. "This is not what I expected from my summons today." The frustration in her voice was clear.

"I'm doing great, Clara. Nice to see you've survived too." Carver spit back with more venom than he intended or knew he had.

Her eyes widened, "Don't pretend this is a picnic for you either. I'm certainly not the one who landed us here."

"You're the one who climbed the ranks enough to be awarded the nickname 'Eclipse' so yeah, you kind of are."

Her face flushed, "I never asked for the name. And what was I supposed to do? I threw myself into training. They didn't think I'd make it, and I proved *everyone* wrong."

Carver's heart wrenched at the way she emphasized everyone. He knew without a doubt that he was included in that statement. He inhaled, exhaling slowly. They had to fulfill this assignment. And they had to do it together. Orders were orders. He couldn't change the past, but maybe he could make this situation a little less volatile. And save the world. And keep them both alive at the same time. That was a long list.

Though the way Clara looked at him, he could survive this assignment and still lose his life. She was an assassin.

"Listen," Carver attempted to slip into a different role, "I didn't pick this," he held his hands up quickly, "And clearly this wasn't your idea either. I guess we should be proud of the fact that we've risen to the top in both of our fields." *Maybe our breakup was worth it*, he wanted to add but wasn't sure she would appreciate that, "We're both here because we love our kingdom." Clara nodded, nervously

chewing her bottom lip. “And we both know the cost if we can’t accomplish this.”

Her face was calmer now, “We will accomplish this.” *Success.* Her first admission to a willingness to work with him.

“Yes,” he agreed quickly, “But we won’t be able to if we’re constantly at each other’s throats. We have to figure out how to work together and...” he paused, “dare I say trust each other?”

“I don’t trust you.” He knew the response was coming, still the cold tone felt like a knife plunged in his chest.

“I know,” he nodded, “And I share the same sentiments,” she looked ready to interject but he held up a hand continuing, “but we are partners for this assignment and must work as such or we—not just we, our kingdom—won’t survive.”

“So what do you suggest?” She crossed her arms over her chest, leaning back onto one foot. It was a more relaxed position for her, but her eyes still scanned him waiting for a reason to fight.

Carver had expected far more of an argument at his suggestion, but maybe she had matured more than he was giving her credit for. “I suggest we do what they said and go pack.” She shifted and looked ready to lunge at him, *maybe she hasn’t matured as much as I hoped,* “And then, meet back here after everyone is asleep. That will give us time to process on our own and prepare for the assignment so we can figure out how to work together.”

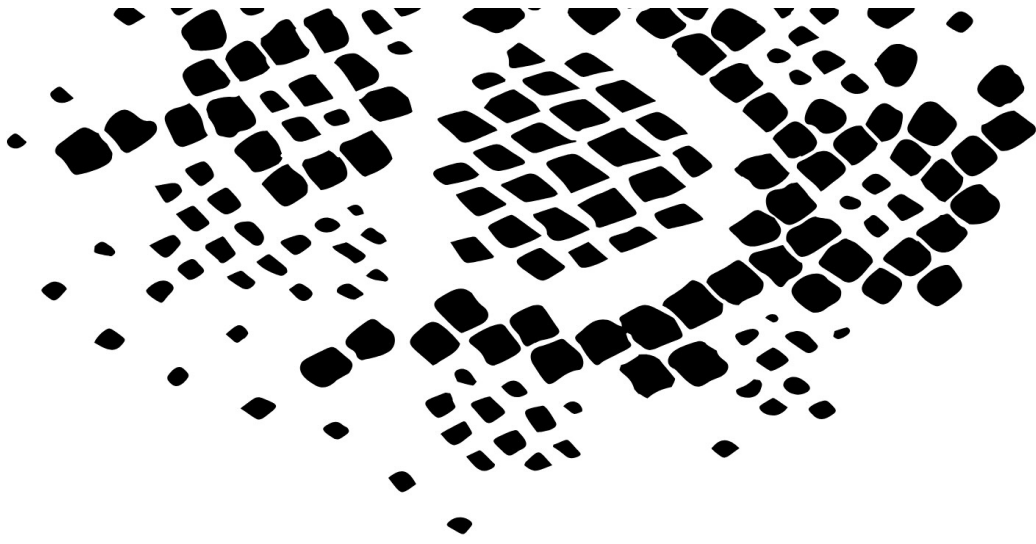
“Fine.” Her tone remained curt, though it was at least civil. Carver nodded in response. It took immense effort and self-control to turn and walk away from her again. This wasn’t exactly the reunion he had hoped for. Actually, he hadn’t dared to hope for a reunion. He always assumed it was a matter of time before one of them ended up dead. And she wasn’t supposed to still be here.

Their break-up was a matter of protection. Yes, he had done it under a leader’s suggestion. In order to protect Clara. But he wouldn’t pretend it wasn’t partially self-serving. He couldn’t bear

the thought of ever having to watch her die. Even now, fear slithered into his chest as he walked back to his room. What was he going to do with this?

“This isn’t good,” he groaned, slumping against a wall when he was far enough down the hall she couldn’t see him. Somehow, somehow he would protect Clara and fulfill this mission. He had to. Both were equally important in his mind, no matter how hard he tried to put his kingdom above her. She would always be a distraction. A perfect, smart, completely lovely distraction.

A distraction he couldn’t afford three years ago, and one he certainly couldn’t afford now.



3 CLARA

“You will assassinate the king.” She hadn’t known what to expect when Carver was called from the room. Her perfectionist tendencies screamed trouble. She had done something so atrociously wrong that even sentencing her to work with Carver wasn’t penance enough.

That wasn’t the case. It wasn’t penance. It was an honor. She was being given the most insane assignment. To assassinate the king of their warring nation. It was suicide. And maybe therein lay her punishment. Or her reward.

“Carver isn’t being told of this assignment.” Clara hadn’t needed the confirmation, the fact he was excused before the assignment said enough. “He will get you into the lab. His paperwork will detail a biological weapon he is to retrieve. It is everything we told you it is, powerful enough to destroy our kingdom. But the even greater threat is the king. Once you retrieve the biological weapon, Carver will return. You will remain and wait. Noxvalis will panic and increase safety precautions in the lab, leaving you a brief opportunity to access the king.”

She couldn't feel her face. Had the blood left her body? "Will that be too much Operative Richards?"

"No, ma'am." Her voice stayed strong.

Now, Clara wrapped her hands tightly, circling her shoulders to warm up her body. This wasn't what she signed up for. She already had a moment of panic, calmed down enough to pack, and when the lunch bell rang went to the empty training room.

She stayed light on her toes throwing punch after punch, twisting her hips into the motion and relishing the resulting sting on her knuckles. She added in a few kicks, relieved that while her mind was in chaos, at least her body stayed dependable, responding as it always did.

The bag rattled, echoing sound through the vacant room. It was usually pristine, but a few of the weights had been left out by those training before lunch. Clara ignored the small detail, focusing all of her attention on the bag in front of her. She wished she could take this anger out on Carver himself.

Sweat dripped down her spine as she tired. It would be okay. They could do this. It was just an assignment. Assignments always sucked on some level. Clara's personal enemy was now the person charged with watching her back. And she was given an impossible mission.

She snagged her water bottle, and sat against the wall, arms over her knees.

It had been three years. Three long years. She should be over him by now. But he was the reason she trained as hard as she did. He was the reason she was determined to rise through the ranks. He was always the ghost at the edge of her brain. Degrading her and telling her she wasn't capable, then softening and encouraging her to keep going. A pathetic example of intermittent conditioning. And yet, regardless of what form he took, his memory hurt far less than seeing him.

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She closed her eyes tightly. Could she be dreaming? Is this just a nightmare from which she will soon awake? No, she was, in fact, leaving on an assignment with Carver. *Carver.*

“You need to grow up! Stop being so weak. It’s pathetic. I can’t do this anymore.” The last anger-fused words he said to her before he turned and walked away. Three years ago. The day they received their operative groups. The day she lost him.

She had been stunned. What could she have said in response? The love of her life, her best friend, and he ended things with her with an insult.

She had stood there, her eyes fixed on where he had stood moments before. She didn’t react. It had hurt too much for her to do anything except stand there and wish the pieces would come back together.

In a lot of ways, he was right. She had been weak. Two years of basic training, but it was his constant presence that kept her moving forward. The last three years, it was his absence that kept her pushing herself harder and harder. The things she would never admit to him.

As her breathing slowed, she unwrapped her hands, re-rolling the fabric as was habit. Her knuckles were bright red, split across her pointer and middle finger. She flexed her fingers, watching the cuts release a little more blood.

She could do this. She was strong.

Carver expected her to be the same girl. But she wasn’t. She was brutal, cold, uncaring. She was the top assassin for a reason. She had to keep that in mind.

The day passed in a blur, both too quickly and too slowly for Clara’s liking. She ran through training exercises with her group, met with a former trainer, ate, listened to Reese’s banter and decided against telling her best friend about Carver having the same assignment, and finally, finally ended up pacing the floor of

her room as she waited for the time to meet Carver. He was smart in suggesting they meet after everyone was asleep. She didn't want anyone else to know how weak she still was when it came to him. She had, as Carver discovered, made a name for herself. She wouldn't sacrifice that on the altar of past affection.

Almost time. Clara looked around her bedroom. The thin mattress on a narrow frame. The blanket her mother sent her when she graduated, embroidered with a reminder, "Stay Alive." So far, she had. This next assignment could change that. Yeah, it would probably change that.

She felt a sliver of fear at the thought of abandoning her mother, but she shook it off. She could come back. She would.

Her wooden dresser was bare aside from the sketchbook Reese gifted her almost a year ago, and the three books her father left her when he went to war. The covers were worn, pages beginning to fall from the bindings. She could recite every page of all three books. She was tempted to pack one as a reminder of her long-gone father, a reminder that she had to stay alive for the sake of her mother, but she realized the sentimentality was more foolish than anything else. A memento wouldn't keep her safe. It would be one more thing she was afraid to lose. One more thing she felt desperate to protect.

Clara paused in front of the mirror on the back of the door. Vanity was frowned upon in all the sectors, but as Clara had proven herself a serious operative a mirror had been her one request, so an allowance had been given. She still couldn't say why she had wanted it so desperately. But the image the mirror showed reminded her of how far she had come, and how far she still had to go.

They would succeed.

Then she could go back to her life where Carver was nothing but a haunting memory. How lovely.

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With one last look, noting the harshness her features developed over the last three years, she began the walk to Command.

Carver was nowhere to be seen when she arrived, and Clara debated turning around. Would he use her decision to show up as proof that she was still weak? Would he again berate her? Remind her of what was at stake and the price they had paid to receive this responsibility that now weighed on their shoulders? She was well aware. She knew exactly what she had paid. She knew what was at stake, and she refused to let him yell at her again.

She slid down the wall at the entrance of the hallway to her sector, plopping down unceremoniously. She could see the opening where he would eventually appear, if he chose to appear.

She leaned her head back, debating between closing her eyes or continuing to stare. She decided it wouldn't hurt to relax a little. When she opened her eyes, only a few minutes later, he had materialized in front of her. She almost jolted, but caught herself just in time to avoid a reaction. He was a spy, this was as much his MO as hers, she reminded herself.

He held out a bottle like an apology, his eyes softer than she expected.

"What's that?" She practically barked out, inwardly cringing at the harshness of her own tone.

He shrugged, sheepish, "I thought a drink might take the edge off and make this conversation a little easier."

She grabbed the bottle from him, and quickly took a gulp, almost coughing at the burning sensation as it ran down her throat. The feeling after wasn't as unpleasant. "Thanks," she handed the bottle back awkwardly, attempting to move on from her original opening.

"You all packed?" Carver looked back and forth between her and the wall on the opposite side of the hallway, ultimately sitting across from her. His legs were long enough that in the narrow

hallway his feet reached as far as her knees. She resisted the urge to move away from him.

“Yeah. You?”

He nodded, gulping from the bottle. He grimaced as he swallowed. “Nothing like a strong drink.” She only stared in response. Her heart already pounding as they sat in the hallway. He handed her the bottle.

She resisted the urge to scan him. To commit every inch of him to memory, replacing the old version that haunted her. Did this Carver have the same easy-going smile? Did this Carver brush off the things that hurt him until the door was closed? Was he the life of the party? Everyone’s favorite? Her turn to take a drink. Since he grimaced, she didn’t.

More importantly, was this how the coming weeks were to go? Each of them pretending the person in front of them was a stranger instead of someone they knew intimately?

She didn’t think she could pretend that long.

“We have to come up with a plan or this won’t work.”

“What won’t work?” He asked with another drink, handing the bottle back to her.

She practically rolled her eyes as she took it. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Us. This. We won’t be able to work together if we’re constantly on egg shells.” Clara inhaled deeply, trying to ignore the way the shadows cut across his jawline, “We can’t pretend the past away.”

Her next drink of liquor went down smoother, and it had been long enough since she’d had a drink that she could feel the effects already. Carver nodded, contemplating her statement.

She took the moment to note all the changes the last three years had on him, allowing herself to view him the way she wouldn’t only moments before. He was leaner than she’d ever seen him. Every line of his body perfectly carved and toned. It looked like he hadn’t

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eaten enough recently, his cheeks slightly sunken. His jawline cut so precisely her heart fluttered. Because of the alcohol, of course. Only because of the alcohol. She hated him. No way in hell did she find him attractive.

She couldn't tell if the circles under his eyes were from lack of sleep or just the shadows playing tricks on her. For some reason she couldn't identify, she hoped it was the latter. Though she spent the last three years killing every positive emotion she had towards him, some emotions refused to die. It was those rebellious thoughts that wouldn't let her wish hell on him. She hoped he hadn't paid the same price she had. Foolish thinking.

He noticed her examination and met her eyes. Clara held his gaze, contemplating the phrase, "the tension could be cut with a knife." She certainly felt that way now.

"I have an idea," he said, keeping his voice low. Instinctively, she leaned forward from the wall to hear him better.



4 CARVER

“You’ve seen rules of engagement paperwork, right?”

Clara nodded, and Carver took a second to formulate his ideas. He motioned for Clara to hand him the drink, and she obliged. After downing another gulp he continued, “Rules of engagement define what degree of force is allowed within a specific mission. Basically, how the soldiers are allowed to handle combat.” He spoke the words carefully, as much for his benefit as hers.

“Again, well aware.” Sarcasm dripped from her tone, and he wondered why he was trying so hard to keep his own tone neutral, “What’s your point?”

“We need to create our own rules of engagement. If we have to work together, and spend all this time together, we need to have a set list of how we’ll cooperate. The past is in the past; like you said we can’t pretend it away, and the one thing we agree on is that we both want to succeed on this mission. Right?”

Clara bit her bottom lip, (and *dang* Carver needed to focus), hesitating before she responded, “Agreed.”

Carver grinned, surprised at the pride that welled in him with

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her agreement; he forced his eyes to focus though the alcohol was starting to make that difficult. He should stop drinking, and he should not have skipped dinner. “Excellent. Rule Number 1. No matter what the circumstances, you cannot undress in front of me.”

Clara almost choked, “Of all the requests, that's the one you're starting with??”

One shoulder went up in a half defensive shrug, “Hey, I'm male. I didn't make the rules on how my biology works.”

He received an eye roll in return. “Fine. Rule Number 2. No winking. Ever.”

“Really? That's what's a problem for you?” Clara leaned across the hall and swiped the bottle from him, “Rule 3. You can't look at me like I'm someone who's hurt you.”

“I don't look at you like that!”

Carver raised his hands, “I didn't say you have, I'm saying you can't moving forward. Who knows what the next couple weeks will bring out of us, and we both know we can't afford any distraction.”

It killed him to call her a distraction, and though she quickly masked it, he didn't miss the look of hurt that crossed her face. It's how he had explained being better off without her after they received their operatives assignments. He had told her she was a distraction he couldn't afford. Belittling their relationship to that of a mutual benefit. Not love. He couldn't admit how much he loved her. So he told her she was a distraction. A stupid distraction as he was crawling his way to the top.

“Rule 4,” her tone was colder again, her walls erecting in spite of the alcohol in her system, “No matter what the circumstances, you cannot go out of your way to defend or protect me beyond what you would do for a normal comrade.”

“That's a long rule. But I agree, though that one should go for both of us.” He leaned back pressing his head against the wall,

watching her carefully as he formulated the next rule. “Rule 5. We don’t discuss the past.”

“I agree with that one,” Clara said slowly. She paused and he waited for her to continue, “Honestly, I feel like we should summarize these rules a little more professionally. Most of the ones we’ve created wouldn’t work as actual rules.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Do you have paper? Let’s write it down.”

He didn’t, but he volunteered to retrieve some from his room, leaving the bottle with her as he jogged away. He wouldn’t have admitted it, but he needed a second to compose himself without her eyes on him. The years must have been brutal for her. She no longer had the sparkle in her eyes he loved. She didn’t smile. She had maintained an aspect of femininity throughout her basic training, now even that was gone. The bodycon outfits designed for movement no longer covered a curvaceous body.

His heart ached as he imagined what she had been through. He thought he was protecting her by pushing her away, forcing her to become her own person to survive, but in doing that it seemed he had indirectly destroyed who she was. He could never forgive himself for that, but he could at least keep her alive now.

He grabbed a notebook and pen from his room and rushed back. His head felt a little fuzzy, and if he didn’t wrap the conversation up soon, he would admit something that would only be harmful in the light of day. He had hurt her enough. He wouldn’t do that to her.

Better she believe the lies he spewed three years ago. Apologies would not make things better now, so best to just move forward.

He handed her the notebook without comment, ignoring the pinkish tint the alcohol had brought to her cheeks. She opened the journal, and a folded piece of paper fell into her lap. She started to open it, but Carver panicked and said, “That’s not for you!”

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He snatched it out of her hand, shoving it into his pocket. He didn't apologize for his outburst, though he knew he should.

Like she had earlier, she chewed her lower lip, waiting for him to sit on his side of the hallway before she said anything. The page was the journal entry he had written earlier. He tore it out to burn it, but got distracted and left it in the book. It was all of the thoughts he had about her. She could never see and never know.

"I think if we do this, they should legitimately be rules of engagement. The rules should have more to do with our ability to complete the mission than...us."

"Okay," Carver answered softly, feeling guilty for yelling at her.

"Rule 1, the mission comes first." She waited for him to respond, and when he nodded, she added the first rule to the book.

"Rule 2, no flirting."

"With each other," Clara added.

Carver shook his head, "No. No flirting with anyone. Each other or anyone else. The mission will go better if we agree that flirting won't be a part of the trip in any way."

She silently weighed the idea before nodding and writing the second rule.

"Rule 3, no physical contact."

"That's a given," Carver interjected.

"Still making it a rule."

He scoffed but didn't comment waiting for her to finish writing. Once she looked up he said, "Rule 4, no mention of our history—like we talked about earlier."

"Yeah." That rule was as much for him as her. If she asked him why he had ended things the way he had, the truth might come out. He had done too much to her already; he didn't want to add that to the list. "Rule 5," her eyes snapped up to his, daring him to challenge what she was about to say, "No defending the other person beyond what is necessary for the mission."

He felt his heart sink a little. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he would do whatever it took to keep her alive. But she was asking him not to. She held his gaze, her eyes hard, waiting for him to agree. He knew he had to, so he nodded yes. Relief washed across her face and she wrote the rule. She certainly was determined to fulfill this assignment.

“Rule 6, if there’s only one bed, I’ll take the floor.”

Clara rolled her eyes, clearly forgetting his earlier comment. “That’s not a rule. If there’s only one bed, *we’ll take turns* sleeping on the floor. Don’t try to be chivalrous.” She didn’t give him a chance to respond before writing the rule the way she had decided it should be.

When Clara was finished, she handed him the journal to approve. He nodded. “I feel like we should sign this in blood or something,” he quipped.

She shrugged. “Works for me.” She pulled a knife out of her boot—he hadn’t even known it was there—and sliced a small cut in the tip of her finger. She held her finger up, letting the blood pool and handed him the knife hilt first.

He took it gingerly. Though he had been trained with weapons, the part of being a spy he enjoyed the most was that he rarely ended up in combat. He forced himself not to flinch as he cut. He met her eyes, and they pressed their fingers to the page, careful not to brush against each other, sealing their agreement.

“Feel better?”

“Yeah,” Clara responded. “See ya tomorrow.” Just like that she was gone, leaving Carver still sitting in the hallway holding the blood sealed page in front of him. He read the rules again, sighing deeply as he realized just how hard he would have to work to abide by them.

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Rule 1: The mission comes first.

Rule 2: No flirting.

Rule 3: No physical contact.

Rule 4: No mention of our history.

Rule 5: No defending the other person beyond what is necessary for the mission.

Rule 6: If there's only one bed we take turns sleeping on the floor.