
Диана Рейн
16+
ПРИВЫКАЯ НАРУШАТЬ ПРАВИЛА

Getting Used to Breaking the Rules

Standalone

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Привыкая нарушать правила

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

Getting Used to Breaking the Rules

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Falling in Love

One of the chief rules of the Center read: “Do not fall in love with your patients.”

Korney had a kind heart, and he never returned from an expedition to another planet without saving someone. His latest find, Dang, was still hanging about the Center, trailing after his rescuer like a shadow and forever underfoot among the staff. The mentor was angry with him: in her view, his eyes strayed toward Kira far too often, distracting her from her work. But Kira was not so foolish as to forget the rules; she treated Dang neither better nor worse than any other patient. After all, he would be leaving the Center soon enough. If he did not return to his home world, he would be shipped off to some institute for an exchange of experience. None of those Korney saved ever stayed with him forever — and that was precisely why the rules mattered.

Nor was Kira about to lose her post over some Kitten.

When Korney came back from Giganda yet again, he brought with him someone’s charred body. Whether it had been a man or a woman, how old it had been, what it had even been... once — there was no telling.

“Can he be saved?” Korney asked calmly, laying the remains out on the gleaming metal table. “I stumbled upon him quite by chance, just as we were already making our way back to the starship. I gave him an injection of serum to keep him going, but he had been shot as well — honestly, I don’t know whether even you can manage it...”

The mentor spared the table barely a glance.

“Of course.” And with that she went off to prepare the equipment, as though no task could have been simpler, or more routine, for her.

The restoration took five days. Earth’s latest technology mended damaged cells and tissues with unfailing precision, rebuilding a

person’s appearance anew. Every day Kira and the other lab assistants came to the procedure room, watched the process, recorded the patient’s biometric data, and left.

On the fifth day Korney appeared, and the Mentor ordered Kira to stay behind. The patient was already clinically healthy; it was time to bring him out of suspended animation. The Mentor whipped the sheet from the body and pointed to the sensor fixed to the patient’s head. Only now did Kira see, for the first time, what the victim from Giganda looked like — saw it once the machine had restored him in full.

The young man was no older than she was, perhaps even younger. Every one of his features was sharp, and that only made them seem oddly fragile, as though fashioned of glass. His neck was too thin, his collarbones jutted, his ears stuck out. Only his nose seemed too large for his face, and his eyes were sunk deep into his skull. Something elusive bound him to clumsy Dang. Perhaps they both came from the same place. What were they called — Alaites?..

“Readings,” clucked the Mentor, and Kira snapped out of her daze and rushed to the display.

Korney threw her a brief glance, and she bustled about even more than usual, so that he might never suppose she had no idea what she was meant to be doing, that she had utterly forgotten every rule.

Silvery lines traced their way across the transparent screen, following the patient’s heart rhythm, breathing rate, and blood pressure, and Kira copied them down diligently and checked them against yesterday’s records — and for a while that made it possible to forget that all these numbers and graphs belonged to a living, real person.

After this Alaian — the Fighting Cat — came out of suspended animation, Kira never saw him again. Nor, truth be told, did she wish to; their first encounter had been more than enough.

By the Mentor’s calculations, the patient would not wake until closer to evening — some two hours off yet. And so Kira, already absorbed in her routine tasks, settled onto the edge of his cot, slipped the recuptoner bracelet onto his forearm, and bent over her notes. Then, quite without warning, the patient stirred.

Kira gave such a start that she knocked over the metal tray with all its instruments. At the terrible clatter the fellow shot upright and very nearly leapt onto the screen beside the cot. Yet the Mentor and Korney only turned toward them with lazy indifference, as though nothing of the sort had happened.

Afterwards Kira hurried out of sight of all three and spent the rest of the day braced for a scolding from the Mentor. But it never came.

News of how Korney was handling the new patient reached her only thirdhand, through the other lab technicians and Center workers: he treated him just as he had everyone who came before. He showed him Earth, told him of the latest technologies — but the savage from Giganda stubbornly insisted that he had been brought to some kind of testing ground and was still on his home planet. The technicians joked that Korney was simply wasting his time; it would be easier to ship the dimwit straight back home.

But for some reason Kira still felt sorry for him.

A week later she finally did run into the man — what was his name again? Something coarse and primitive, like Dang’s, but try as she might, it simply refused to come back to her.

The lab assistants came scurrying after Korney in a chattering flock, trading everything new they had learned about the Blue Dragons — the corps of armored walkers in the army of the Duke of Alai from Giganda. Korney had taken it into his head to rescue a local scientist, a decent man, and to manage that they would have to punch through an

armored unit. Their agent had been drilling for the operation for almost a month.

Kira walked with the rest but, as usual, lagged behind. By the time the whole company, Korney at its head, had already filed into the lecture hall, she had only just reached the end of the corridor and turned the corner. The next instant she ran straight into someone.

That “someone” sprang back and instantly whirled to face her, fists raised in self-defense. And in the tall, gawky young man Kira recognized one of the patients they had rescued — the Cat from Giganda.

Gag. That was it. His name was Gag.

He was dressed like all the patients — a white shirt and short trousers — yet even in such plain, almost homely clothes he somehow contrived to look dangerous.

True, his eyes widened when he saw that the one who had barged into him was merely a girl. He hastily lowered his hands, scowled, and no longer looked quite so ready for a fight.

“Sorry,” Kira whispered, and tried to smile.

She hurried around Gag nearly at a run, only to find that the group, its talk with Korney finished, had dispersed about its business, and the professor himself had long since gone.

Only she and the man from Alai were left in the lecture hall.

Kira turned to him again, hoping her face betrayed none of her frustration at having failed to keep up, at having missed everything — though no one had so much as noticed.

“What are you doing here?” she asked artlessly.

The Cat’s eyes darted about, and his hands hid behind his back all on their own.

“It’s nothing. Just, nothing.”

He tried to speak in a loud, low voice, but his voice was boyish and rang more than it rumbled and growled.

Kira couldn’t find anything to say to that, so she asked again:

“Have you had lunch yet?”

She didn’t mean anything by it, and she certainly wasn’t trying to offend their guest. But Gag twisted his lips, baring his fangs, and snorted:

“What, did Korney put you on my watch too, like that mechanical dolodon?”

He was speaking Russian, not Alaic — like with the other patients, the Mentor had implanted knowledge of their language into his memory while he was unconscious. But even so, Kira could hardly make out what he meant.

“The dolodon?..”

“You know, that cast-iron tub thing,” he waved his arms and puffed out his chest, trying to portray someone bigger than himself. — Is this so that everyone here can show and tell me everything, huh? So that I’d fall for your Earth and want to stay here. Right?

And once again, Kira couldn’t find anything to say to that. Korney never forced anyone out of the Center, and he certainly never tied anyone up or sent them back to their home planet against their will. But she didn’t know his plans for this Alaic, and so she didn’t know what answer would be truthful. And she simply didn’t know how to lie.

“I don’t know,” she replied, because the guy kept standing there, waiting for something from her. — I would tell you, but I don’t know. I’m sorry.

She buried her hands in the deep pockets of her lab coat and felt an apple in one of them — a leftover from breakfast. Without a second thought, she held it out to Gag.

He cast a silent glance at the fruit, but at once lifted his head and met her eyes. A jolt shot through Kira, as though she were the one about to deceive him, to do him some harm—and it seemed to her that if he refused that wretched apple now, it would mean he did not trust her, that he despised her, though she had never once lied to him about anything.

Gag's fingers crept slowly toward her hand, and the apple dropped softly into his palm.

Kira broke into a wide smile and hurried away. She remembered that she never did learn how the children's confrontation with Korney had ended, but the thought no longer troubled her.

With a heavy heart, Kira packed away the field first-aid kit. Dang soon returned to his old self—his broken nose and knocked-out tooth were mended with such effortless speed, as though a burr were being eased out of tangled hair. His swollen eye could see once more, and his bruised side ached no longer. But even Earth's newest technologies proved powerless to wipe the terrible memory from the victim's mind. Poor Dang, who had been preparing at last to break free of the Center and begin a new, peaceful life on Earth, was once again trembling with terror, his teeth chattering, at the mere mention of the Fighting Cats.

Kira still could not believe what had happened. She could not fathom why Gag had attacked and beaten his own countryman. She asked the Mentress about it a hundred times, but the woman only snapped, "Because he is a Fighting Cat!"—as though that could pass for an explanation.

Before the incident, she had crossed paths with Gag at the Center a couple of times. Never once had he raised his voice to her or tried to threaten her. On the contrary, he had always struck her as more lost than anything, somehow clumsy—but by no means dangerous.

And then the beaten Dang was brought in to her, all but weeping with terror.

What utter nonsense.

Numbly, Kira ticked off the necessary medications and instruments against her list. Their comrade, the agent Oleg, was heading for Giganda, posing as an armor master. He was taking an enormous risk, but everyone understood how vital this mission was to the progressors. The people of Giganda themselves, however, would scarcely appreciate it — the people of a wild, terrifying, doomed world.

She had been a little late in seeing Oleg off, and so she came racing down the empty dark corridor, her medical kit thumping clumsily against her knees. Somewhere along the way she had already firmly made up her mind to ask Korney to let her speak with Gag once everything was over. Perhaps she would manage to learn why — for what reason — he had attacked Dang. Might Dang have said something to him that the Alaian could not forgive? Or perhaps Dang had simply been frightened, and that was why he had insulted the Cat? There had to be at least some reason.

Without breaking stride, Kira touched the sensor lock and burst out onto the street — and she could not have picked a worse moment.

To her left, Oleg and Korney stood frozen like a pair of statues. Both stared at her in horror the instant she appeared, and Kira very nearly launched into a flood of apologies for her lateness. But out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of someone else, and turned…

Gag was staring at her, eyes wide. His short, soft hair stuck up like the fur at the scruff of a real cat’s neck, his mouth slightly parted, as though utterly astonished. His whole bearing was so bewildered that Kira might even have smiled.

If he hadn’t been clutching an assault rifle in his hands. With its muzzle trained straight on her.

Korney had never once forced the patients he had rescued to return to their homelands.

But if someone no longer wished to “be a guest” and ached for home, was it right to hold him back?

Even if that home lay ravaged by war, wrapped in the stench of plague, and infested with cutthroats and traitors like lice?

Would it truly be mercy to keep a rescued guest here rather than let him return to that wild yet native planet?

Korney could no longer object to Gag — let alone stand against so drastic a plea to be let go. He did not want the fellow to perish this time, once and for all, with no progressor left to save him.

But what…

But what if…

But what if a doctor stood at his side?

Even if not quite a doctor. Just a lab technician who had never set foot outside the Center. But a lab technician armed with Earth’s most advanced knowledge. Did that count? Could it stave off the desperate Cat’s death? Could it save at least one life on doomed Giganda?..

Kira had had no time to say goodbye to her Mentor or to the children of her group. And she would never forget the sorrow with which Korney had looked at her — how he said, “Be careful,” yet his eyes told her plainly that he was bidding her farewell forever, that he did not believe she would last a single day there.

But she would not be alone there.

The elusive, lightning-swift starship Phantom raced toward Giganda, drawing farther from Earth with every passing second. In the captain’s seat sat the grim Oleg, who had yet to utter a single word.

Behind him, two teenagers had settled into the passenger cabin. Kira clutched a field medical kit to her chest — packed for their agent, though now, it seemed, she would have to carry it along herself. Across

from her sat Gag, who hadn't once let go of his rifle. And Kira still had no idea how furious he was with her for joining him.

Perhaps he would shoot her the moment Oleg left them alone.

Perhaps he would abandon her to her fate and flee.

Perhaps…

The cat raised his head and looked straight at her. Kira held her breath, staring almost in horror into his sunken, somber eyes.

"Killer's eyes." That was how Korney's wife had once described them.

He hadn't said a single word to her about her coming along. No thanks, no objections. Most likely he was so dazed by his victory — by the knowledge that he would soon be home — that whatever conditions had been attached no longer mattered.

Unable to hold her gaze for long, he let his eyes fall to the rifle in his hands. Then, abruptly, almost fearfully, he knocked it to the floor and kicked it under the bench.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he forced out through clenched teeth, stealing a guilty glance at Kira. "I'm sorry."

One of the Center's cardinal rules was "never fall in love with your patients." Yet surely not even the Mentor herself had suspected where breaking that rule would lead.

Denial of Feelings

Falling in love with a girl from another planet — you couldn't invent anything more idiotic.

The whole affair, from the very start — his rescue (which he had never asked for), the attempts to tame him, the hope of reforming him (as though he wanted any such thing?) — had been stupid and unfunny. And then a nurse had to go and get tangled up in it as well, a woman who at first did nothing but get underfoot, materializing out of nowhere at the most inopportune moments. Yet the most inopportune moment of all came when he chose to negotiate pleasantly with the progressors (that is, Fighting Cats style) about sending him home — and that silly girl stepped straight into the sights of his assault rifle.

He could easily have forgotten the whole incident and never spared it another thought. If she hadn't taken it into her head to follow him to Giganda.

In Gag's opinion, this was stupidity of the highest order. The girl had plainly taken leave of her senses out of sheer terror, and the sensible course would have been to deliver her to a hospital — and perhaps keep her there under lock for a while. But Korney, the chief progressor, the creator of the Center, had listened to her! And had cheerfully packed her off alongside Gag (without, naturally, troubling to ask him).

And that was not funny at all.

Returning to his native Giganda, Gag felt at first a giddy rush of joy — until reality delivered a swift punch to the gut, showing him what his home had become. The war was over, yet everything, it seemed, had only grown worse.

He could scarcely recognize the place where he had been dropped — even though it was the very same Porcupine Village from which Korney had taken him. A few months before.

Along the dusty road stretched an endless line of refugees—people fleeing the contaminated city. There was not a fighting man among them, only women, children, and the old. Bony oxen hauled the clumsy wooden carts, but many people simply walked, dragging their loads behind them. Not a single motor vehicle was in sight, and every one of them was unarmed.

This pitiful sight was the first thing to meet the eyes of Kira, the foolish nurse from Earth. Gag would have understood completely if, after seeing it, she had rushed back to their agent—the one posing as a master armorer. She would have begged him to send her home to the calm and beautiful Earth. Or she would have stayed right where she stood, waiting for the starship to come back for her.

He had steeled himself for anything, for even to him what was happening offered nothing to lift his spirits. But the nurse merely adjusted the strap of her first-aid bag and asked, serene as ever:

“We’re going into the city? The place all those people are fleeing?”

“Yes,” he answered, almost gleeful, eager to see her panic and rue her foolish choice. “Exactly there. Some of our own people may still be in there—someone who could explain what happened. But there is the plague,” he went on, studying her face. “Korney said so. Gangs of cutthroats. And the army…”

He could not finish. He swallowed hard, still—even now—unable to believe that the army was no more. That he was no longer a soldier.

“All right,” said Kira, as calm as the robot Dramba. “Then let’s go.”

She had clearly taken leave of her senses! She wasn’t thinking straight at all. Gag was so exasperated by this that he couldn’t summon a single retort; he simply trudged along behind her in silence. Oh well

— in a little while she would realize what sort of place she had landed in, and then her true colors would show soon enough.

The fact was, Gag had meant to abandon the girl to her fate, just like that.

The moment he learned this lunatic intended to follow him to Giganda, he decided then and there that he would not play nursemaid. He had never agreed to take her along, which meant that looking after her was no concern of his. Not a chance — the instant the spy left them, he would slip away from the silly girl and forget all about her.

But for the time being, abandoning her simply wasn't working out — even now, in the dead of night.

With the coming of darkness the ground cooled quickly, and the wind died down. They stopped to one side of the road, away from the crowd of refugees, built a small smoky fire that gave off no warmth, and sat down facing one another.

The lab assistant, it turned out, was capable of a moment's weakness after all: along the way she had rushed over to some old man sitting on the ground and tried to help him. Gag had very nearly walked right past without noticing them, but then he did turn around and bark at her to move along. Kira left the old man and quickly caught up with him, though her round eyes had grown wider still, and she kept scanning the crowd for the wounded and the forsaken. Gag noticed her nose turning pink and her eyes shining — yet she no longer strayed from him; she only kept glancing back, again and again, her gaze trailing after those unfortunates.

If her mission was to save the people of Giganda, she ought to have gone off with the refugees — they were the ones who needed help, not him. And he kept wanting to tell her so, even to order her, as if to say: since you're so kind and righteous, stay here — I'll manage perfectly well without you. He should have said it before it was too late, but the

words wouldn’t come. Or perhaps he simply didn’t know how to phrase it in Russian so that she would understand. Who could say — maybe, after his return to Giganda, everything he’d ever known of their language had been blasted clean out of his head?

Though of course not — of course it hadn’t.

Their pitiful little campfire had scarcely begun to burn brighter when the rain came pouring down.

Wherever the eye turned — not a tree, not a single hovel, only posts bearing hanged men. Fresh moans and curses rose from the crowd, but the rain fell harder still and drowned them out.

Gag merely scowled, staring at the puddle their campfire had become. He was home, and that was what mattered. Everything else was just mouse guts.

“Gag?…”

Kira sat across from him, shivering with cold, clutching her bag foolishly to her chest. Her tight bun had come undone, and dark chestnut strands slid down over her shoulders. Within the very first seconds her lab assistant’s uniform had been soaked through.

There it was — now she was bound to start complaining and begging to go home. But it was too late! He had to tell her that she had tagged along after him for nothing, that she had vainly fancied herself some kind of saint who would bring light and love to their wretched world. For nothing, for nothing, for nothing! Nobody here was glad to see her! Nobody here needed her!

Gag swallowed, then sprang up off the ground. In a single stride he was at the girl’s side; he sat down beside her and quickly shrugged off his jacket. It was, of course, drenched through as well, but thicker and sturdier than the nurse’s flimsy little smock.

The Cat’s camouflage jacket, all signature emblem and shoulder spikes, looked utterly absurd on little Kira. She seemed to drown in it, though her snub little nose soon poked out.

“What about you? You’ll get soaked...”

“Already am.”

Gag tilted his head back, glaring up at the heavens with pure loathing. He wanted to die of shame on the spot — to hurl himself headfirst into the ground, to howl aloud. After all, he was a Fighting Cat, whom nothing was ever meant to catch off guard (fine, Earth doesn’t count), a cat alien to weakness and sentiment. A cat who couldn’t — who mustn’t — fall in love with a silly girl, least of all one from another planet. He had no right to so much as entertain the thought!

But Kira had no notion of what was churning through his head just then. She mumbled something more about the cold, the rain and the damp, then folded back the edge of the jacket and flung it over his shoulder. Her small body pressed tight against Gag’s firm side, yet she crossed her arms shyly over her chest and murmured:

“It’s just better this way. More rational. Right?”

Gag never told her that the jacket was soaked through to its last thread and could no longer warm or protect either of them. But then what was warming him now? What lent him confidence, what sent fresh strength surging through him? Perhaps his native land, the memory of his days in battle? Perhaps thoughts of tomorrow, and the hope of seeing his comrades again?

Anything at all — but certainly not a silly girl from another planet.