

Rules of Engagement

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Nina Barry was whistling as she wandered into the women's locker room at the end of her shift. She loved Moonbase, almost thought of it as home, but her occasional tours of duty Earthside gave her the chance to socialise with people she otherwise rarely saw. She was off down the pub tonight and Alec Freeman had promised to take her out for a drink before she went back. Alec was always fun, even if they did know each other too well to get serious.

The new girl was in the locker room. Helen, she thought her name was. She was better looking than most of the starlets on the lot upstairs but at the moment her pretty face was downcast and her shoulders slumped. This would not do.

"What the matter?" Nina asked. "First day not live up to expectations?"

The girl glanced nervously in her direction. A mouse, this one. A very shapely mouse but definitely a mouse.

Nina smiled encouragingly at her. "If there's a problem, it's best to get it fixed. Come on, you can tell me. I've been here so long I'm practically part of the furniture."

That raised a slight smile. She sat down on the bench and the girl, after a moment, sat next to her.

"There is something. I suppose you could call it a question of protocol. It's about... relationships."

"As in boy meets girl relationships?"

She nodded.

Nina thought for moment. "They're not exactly encouraged or discouraged. Really, as long as it doesn't interfere with your work or anyone else's, it's OK."

The look on the girl's face suggested that this was not what she wanted to hear but Nina still could not work out what the problem was. She paused for a long moment before saying: "You're going to have to elaborate."

Almost inaudibly Helen asked: "What about relationships with senior officers?"

Nina could not stop herself chuckling. "Please don't tell me you've set your cap at Commander Straker because he just doesn't. Believe me, everybody's tried but he just takes no notice."

She looked up. "What if a senior officer did take notice?"

Something clicked in Nina's brain. "Someone's already asked you out?"

She nodded and Nina grinned broadly. "Don't tell me, it's either Colonel Freeman or Colonel Foster."

Helen screwed up her face as if she was going to cry. "Both."

"And you've... You didn't think you could say no?"

The girl stifled a sob and Nina put her arm around her. "Oh love, you couldn't be more wrong. You can tell them to go chase an asteroid if you want to. It's only in work you have to do what they say." She shook her head. "Alec would be horrified if he thought..." She took a deep breath and continued. "Paul and Alec are both really nice guys - even if their idea of commitment lasts about three weeks. I could even get you references if you were interested." That raised a smile so she went on. "Paul's more up-to-date but Alec's got more style."

She continued chatting as they got changed. Helen even agreed to come down to the pub and see who was there.

Alec Freeman was coming down the corridor in the opposite direction. Nina pounced.

"I've got a bone to pick with you."

Alec pulled an innocent face. "Who, me?"

"Yes, you. Seriously."

So he was serious and Nina explained. And Alec was horrified.

"I... You thought..." He reached out to touch her then snatched his hand back as he realised how it might be misinterpreted. "I'm sorry. I'm so used to being slapped down I never imagined... Ed's not going to like this."

Nina was surprised but Helen asked the question first. "You're going to tell the Commander?"

"Of course. I'm head of personnel, I write the codes of practice. If I can mess up like this... I'd better go."

He looked so downcast that Nina hugged him. "Come to the pub later. And don't worry, you're not the only one. If you see Paul, tell him I'm looking for him."

That raised half a smile. That seemed to be her job today, raising reluctant smiles. He hurried off.

Helen looked at her. "He's not so bad, is he?"

"You'll only find one better and, like I said, he doesn't date. Now, you want to go after Paul Foster? I'd never be mean to Alec but Paul..."

They headed off to the pub.