

Rules of Engagement

Ruby Gloom

“If everybody minded their own business, the world would go around a great deal faster than it does.”

—*Lewis Carroll*

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Chapter 1

Little Star

“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.”

It was around one in the morning by Lillian’s guess. The chill of the night air pricked at her. Her nylon jacket, even if it hadn’t been as torn up as it was, did little to protect her. Shoving her hands deeper into the pockets of her jeans, she walked a little faster as the suspension bridge came into view. She glanced absentmindedly at the blurry reflections of the stars in the water.

Lynn was a quieter coastal city. Although brimming with activity during daytime, fairly few places would stay lit up late after night fell. The lack of light pollution meant a fair amount of starlight reached the citizens, for those willing to stay up every now and then. On the other hand, the low number of witnesses also often invited trouble, which kept many from actually doing so.

As Lillian approached the mouth of the bridge, expecting an empty scene like the last couple of times she’d passed it at this hour, she noticed a hooded figure near the center of it. She stared blankly before registering that today might not be her day. Her heart fell. She really didn’t want to spend another day at home.

The figure hadn’t moved an inch yet, seemingly staring at something in the horizon. She exhaled gently and began walking down the bridge. She was tired. She was far too tired. She didn’t particularly care whether this was some stargazer or an escaped convict. Maybe she would chat with the stranger, spew out some half-hearted small talk from what little she could squeeze out of her soul. Maybe she could convince them to leave, or just wait until they chose to. They wouldn’t stand there until morning, but she herself didn’t have anywhere to be.

But as Lillian got closer to the person in the dark blue hoodie, she realized this stranger was not standing at all; they were sitting rather precariously on the metal railing of the massive bridge. It was at this point that the figure turned to her. Lillian stared back at the face of a girl who was no older than she was. The girl on the railing kicked her legs forward off the edge of the

bridge and leaned back at the same time to maintain her balance. She tilted her head as Lillian half-expected her shoes to drop off into the water below.

"Here to jump?" she questioned. Lillian stared back silently, wondering what this girl was trying to do. She shook her head in response and continued walking. She took up a position about a meter from the other girl, noticing her return to sitting normally out of the corner of her eye. Lillian leaned forward on the railing.

"Just stargazing," she replied softly. The other girl didn't respond. Lillian sighed quietly. The fact that this girl could easily fall off the railing at a moment's notice made her feel as if they were both here for the same reason, but she didn't feel like risking the off-chance the girl was here to play hero instead.

"Did you know how far away stars really are?" the girl asked. Lillian continued to stare at the night sky. The pinpoints twinkled weakly. "Even if they all disappeared, right now," she mused, "we wouldn't even notice for hundreds of years." Lillian stayed silent, not really processing the girl's words. She wanted her to leave, but didn't have the energy to think of anything.

"You should get down from there, you might fall off." And so she settled on humoring the girl until she got tired and went home.

"I hope not." Lillian noticed a sudden motion in her peripheral and turned. Her heart skipped a beat as she watched the girl abruptly slide off the railing entirely. She rushed over to where the questionably insane teen had been, almost tripping in her shock. The girl's fingers still hung onto the railing, and Lillian looked over the edge with wide eyes.

"It's a really long way down, I hear it hurts a lot even if it's just water." The girl recalled thoughtfully, apparently gauging the distance to the lake. She promptly glanced back up, meeting Lillian's somewhat horrified gaze. "What? See a ghost?"

Lillian quietly backed away as the girl, with some effort, pulled herself back up and sat back down onto the railing, this time facing away from the water. She swung her legs. The wind had blown her hood back, revealing shoulder-length blonde hair. Her zipper was only halfway up her stomach, and a black cross with silver trim hung around her neck.

"...Are *you* here to jump?" Lillian finally asked, wondering why she was shaken up by something she came here for herself.

"Hm? Not really." Lillian raised her eyebrows at the strange answer. "Oh, I get it, sorry if that surprised you." The girl ran a hand through her hair sheepishly. "Sometimes I do things most people wouldn't think of doing." She poked at the cross around her neck. "See, I have an angel watching over me. So I kinda sorta stopped caring about what *dangerous* means a while ago."

Lillian blinked twice, and then rubbed her eyes in exasperation. She walked up to the railing beside the girl, crossed her arms on it, and buried her face in her worn jacket's sleeves. She almost would have preferred the escaped convict

over this lunatic. A few moments of silence passed.

“Do you believe in God?” the girl eventually asked. Lillian thought of the time she’d spent shivering next to an alley dumpster, the time she’d spent fruitlessly trying to defend herself from the other orphans in foster homes, and the time she’d spent as nothing more than a slave for her new parents to order around and beat into submission.

She thought of how desperation drove her to pray to the mystical man in the sky. She’d begged and pleaded, with every new foster home, every new officer or social worker that promised her safety and delivered lies, for something divine to come take her away. And in the end, she had to do it herself.

“Not at all,” she choked out in a broken voice. She steadied her breathing. There was no real need to break down in front of the lunatic church girl. And at this point Lillian was fairly sure the girl was in fact here to play hero.

“Good. Then you don’t believe in an afterlife either, right? Heaven and all that?” It was a decidedly strange thing to hear, coming from a church girl possessed by an angel.

“Careful what you say,” Lillian began bitterly, “your priests might kick you out.” She heard the girl giggle.

“I don’t do church. This necklace was just a present from my father.” The girl gave the chain a twirl. “I just listen to what Ai tells me, never read any bible or anything—oh, Ai’s what she told me to call her, my angel friend.”

“The voice in your head, right.”

“Not really a voice, Ai doesn’t actually *talk*—well, you’re just making fun of me anyway, but it’s okay.” At that, Lillian turned to glance at the girl, who simply smiled back. “I don’t mind if you think I’m crazy, but I still wanna tell you, if Ai is right—and I think she is—there’s nothing waiting for us out there anymore.” The girl swung her legs over the side again and faced the water. “We just stop being. Nothingness. So all the people who try super hard to *impress God* or whatever, instead of making the best of their time—”

“And when there’s nothingness here either, nothing to make the best of, and you’re *sick and tired* of trying and hoping?” Lillian interrupted angrily. The other girl was silent. Lillian coughed to clear her throat. “Look, I know what you’re trying to do, but I’m not here to jump. You can just go home now.” The girl swung her legs again.

“Can I ask who gave you those bruises?”

“No.” Another minute of silence passed.

“I met lots of people on this bridge in the past month.” Lillian rolled her eyes. “People older than me with cuts on their wrists. People younger than me with black eyes. People with burns and bruises like you.” The girl paused. “A few actual stargazers.”

“Look, you.”

“Aside from the ones who brought telescopes, nobody’s ever waited this long for me to be the one to leave first.” Lillian turned to her with a weak glare.

“So how many did you save?”

“I’m not here to save people, just to talk.” The girl stretched her arms and fully stepped down from the railing. “I was bored. No clue what happens to them after, aside from the few that jumped off in front of me.” She yawned. “Hope they don’t regret whatever they chose, though.” Lillian stared into the water.

“I...”

“I want cake. There’s like one cafe open this late, you wanna come? My treat.”

“Wh—” The girl gestured and Lillian’s rejection hung in her throat as she heard tires roll up behind her. The flickering lights of the police car cast writhing shadows over the concrete.

“You girls alright? Shouldn’t be out and about this late!” the officer shouted, leaning on his car door.

“Yes sir, just watching the stars!” Lillian watched the girl pass her as she felt her heart sink. She wondered how it had turned out like this. Exhaustion and pain spread from her chest. “C’mon sis! Mom’s waiting at the cafe!” the girl called back.

Chapter 2

Nursery Rhyme

“My colour is black to the blind, but the blue and gold are seen of the seeing.”

Lillian stared at the colorful shortcake before her, vaguely listening in on the blonde’s phone conversation. She’d somehow managed to convince the officer to drive them to the café without asking too many questions. Lillian herself had stayed quiet for the entire trip; some part of her didn’t want to ruin the blonde’s convoluted lie. In any case, it almost certainly would’ve been even more trouble to act out in front of the cop.

“Well I can’t tell from just that alone, I’m not psychic.” The blonde poked at her own pastry with her fork, a thicker model of smartphone against her ear. “That’s fine, just...” She glanced up at Lillian, who met her gaze and quickly dropped it. “Keep an eye on the others and don’t spread too thin. I’ll be back in a month at most.”

Lillian glanced off to the side. The café was empty aside from themselves, and the waitress had been reluctant to serve them considering they were closing in twenty minutes. The few businesses that stayed open late were rarely positive to customers that actually came in at those hours. Lillian had gotten fairly used to the attitudes of overworked employees during her frequent nightly errands.

“Mhm. I’ll look around when I can.” Lillian still hadn’t touched her own plate. She still didn’t know what the blonde’s angle even was. Surely, she didn’t make it a habit of visiting a rarely-used bridge nightly just to hear stories of misery and hopelessness. Lillian didn’t understand. She wondered if the girl was just sadistic, or if she was actually trying to kidnap her.

“That, you can just do what you normally do or whatever.” The blonde scooped up some frosting and popped it into her mouth. “Sure, sure.” Lillian supposed she was a good target, considering nobody would come looking for her. The blonde didn’t know that, but Lillian was fairly certain her foster parents, despite being furious and desperate to teach her a lesson for daring to run away, wouldn’t put in the effort to plaster her name and face on local

media or draw attention from the police. And maybe getting kidnapped could be less unpleasant than being moved to more orphan homes. She was doubtful about that, though.

"If you don't finish that, we're leaving it here," the blonde spoke up, apparently done with her phone, 'the fridge in my hotel is messed up.' Lillian wanted to go back to the bridge. "Helloooo?"

"Why did you bring me here?" Lillian asked quietly. The blonde shrugged.

"Got rid of the cop for you, also wanted sweets." She shoved some more cake into her mouth. "Two birds." Lillian slumped forward and leaned on the table. "I'm Allison, by the way. Age sixteen. Friends call me Allie." Lillian raised an eyebrow, glancing up to Allison's blank stare, her fork still in her mouth.

"Nice to meet you..." Lillian mumbled into her sleeves.

"What's your name?"

"...Lillian."

"Can I call you Lily?"

"I don't care." Lillian continued to stare at the shortcake while Allison ate quietly. "Can I go now?" Allison pointed with her fork.

"At least try it?" Lillian sighed and slowly sat up straight. She picked up the fork and hesitated. "I don't think they poisoned it." Lillian wished they'd poisoned it.

It was moments like these that reminded her it was all borrowed time. Someone might try to be nice her, or something not horrible might happen to her, but in the end any moment she wasn't screaming into the void in her mind was another moment she was dreading the next time she would be.

She'd long since learned to not fall victim to that type of bait. Bumps in the road were just that, but Lillian had been rolling downhill for so long. Whether it was being kicked and thrown into walls or having her head slammed by the toilet seat, or just being sneered at and called names, she'd always been hanging on that chain over that pit of lava, waiting for it to drop her in once more.

"Do you like this city, Lily?" Lillian cut off some frosting.

"I like that bridge," she replied bitterly. The sweetness in her mouth did little to calm her. Allison sighed deeply. It reminded Lillian of the ones who berated her for being such a downer all the time, the ones who complained about her negativity. She'd tried being positive, a long time ago, and it hadn't ever helped. These days, she saved her energy for errands and beatings.

"Excuse me." Lillian hadn't noticed the waitress come up to their table. Allison turned to her. "I'm sorry but we're closing now, would you like a box for that?" She gestured to Lillian's plate.

"Yes, please," Allison responded quickly.

* * *

The sidewalk was empty as the two headed back towards the bridge at the edge of the city. A few of the streetlights were broken. Every once in a while,

a lone car would pass them by.

"You can stop following me," Lillian muttered, "watching me go off won't be any more interesting than the others."

"My hotel's this way too. You can come in for a while, if you want," Allison replied, her expression betraying nothing.

"And you're not trying to *save me*?" Lillian mocked. "Maybe you're kidnapping me?"

"If I was, would you care?"

"Nobody else would, so I guess not—" Her voice broke. "This is why you like it, isn't it? Talking to people who have nothing left. It's so easy to mess with them."

"When you hit the water, it'll really hurt," Allison explained calmly, ignoring the accusation, "and sometimes people survive. And I hear that's the worst thing ever." Lillian laughed.

"I'd love that. The biggest middle finger from God, when you can't even off yourself right."

"I've got a gun in my room." Lillian froze and turned to the blonde with narrowed eyes. Allison met her gaze with a smile. "Some people who can't aim properly survive that too, but I can show you how...and if you mess up I promise I'll finish it for you." Lillian stared at the girl incredulously.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Allison giggled.

"You're not the first person to ask that." The blonde yawned and played with her cross. "I told the others too, that there are less painful, less scary ways. They told me to go away." She started walking again. "I just think it'd be nice, for it to not hurt you anymore than you already are." Lillian stood in place, watching the girl's back. "It's up to you, though."

After a minute passed and it became apparent that Allison wasn't going to turn around again, Lillian started moving. Her chest hurt now more than ever and a hundred thoughts clouded her mind. At the very least, it'd be nice, if she weren't alone when it was finally over.

* * *

The hotel lobby was empty. Lillian nervously glanced at the cameras in the corners as she quietly followed Allison into the elevator. The blonde keyed in for the top floor and the doors closed. Neither spoke during the ride up.

Once the doors opened, Allison walked out and made a sharp left. Lillian followed closely, staring at the hood of the girl in front of her. They reached the end of the dimly lit hallway and Allison swiped a card on the door's lock. Lillian heard a click and Allison swung the door open. The room was fairly spacious, sporting two queen-size beds and a private bathroom. Scarlet curtains hung over the massive windows and the blankets were covered in lace designs.

Lillian hadn't paid attention to the hotel's name as they'd walked in, but it seemed to be very high-end. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been

in a place like this. She walked in cautiously as Allison closed the door behind her, suddenly feeling like she didn't belong.

"Sit wherever," Allison said, moving to place the small box of barely touched cake on one of the nightstands, "I was planning on leaving in three days or something but I guess I'll leave tomorrow morning instead." She turned back and went to retrieve a backpack on a shelf. "So they don't come looking for me to ask questions." She placed the bag on the floor and unzipped it. "Anyway, just pretend the room's yours." Lillian watched the girl dig through her bag as she sat down on one of the beds. "I can ping the police afterwards if you don't want your body to lie around for too long, so you look decent for a funeral or whatever they do."

"Funerals are for the living," Lillian mumbled, examining the intricate patterns on the bed. It was strange to think someone like her would spend her last moments in a place like this. She suddenly looked back up, wanting to ask about the hotel, about who this girl even was to have what she did.

Allison pulled out a modern-looking handgun and a long black tube. Lillian suppressed her shock. It wasn't as if she hadn't seen a gun before, but in that moment she held her tongue, promptly realizing she didn't actually want the answers anymore. She decided she wouldn't question how expertly this teenager two years younger than her handled a firearm, or any of the other strange things about her.

"I'm gonna silence this for obvious reasons. Um, you should go to the bathroom first, just, y'know." Lillian furrowed her eyebrows at the suggestion and sighed. It was so unnerving to her, that Allison carried these conversations so naturally. She stood up and headed for the bathroom.

She stayed inside for longer than she'd intended, simply staring into the mirror, at the burns and scars on her neck, and the bruises around her cheeks. Dull, sleepless, brown eyes traced the lines in her messy black hair. By the time she shook herself back to reality, she was somewhat surprised that Allison hadn't come knocking.

Stepping back out, she found the blonde passed out rather inelegantly on the far bed. The small box on the nightstand was now opened, only a few crumbs barely visible inside. Lillian stood in silence for a moment. In the past few hours, she'd found there was something very off about Allison. It was only now that she wondered, if the blonde cared less about everything than she herself did.

Lillian's eyes drifted to the pistol on the bed beside Allison, now set up with the silencer she'd been configuring earlier. She looked back over to the girl's backpack, which was still wide open. A few bottles of white pills were arranged neatly outside it. Inside, Lillian could make out wrappers of some sort, a few notebooks, and an empty bottle without a label. She immediately dropped the idea of digging through the bag and headed to Allison's bed.

She could simply leave now, she realized, but she supposed there wasn't much

of a point to that. After all that had happened, and after every chance she had to leave, she simply wanted to rest. She briefly wondered why Allison hadn't been the one to get sick of her. It wasn't as if she'd told her any stories, like she supposedly wanted. Lillian sighed and poked the blonde in her cheek. Her eyes flickered open and she blinked drowsily.

"A-ah, sorry...dozed off." She stretched and sat back up. "Mmm, gun's ready," Allison began, eyes drifting around the room as if searching for something, before settling on her bag. "Oh, right, I also have some cyanide..." Lillian immediately lied down onto the bed. Of course she had cyanide. "And some sleeping stuff. They'd probably be even better but I figured I couldn't prove what they were to you, that's why I suggested the gun first."

"I honestly don't understand you at all," Lillian stated, closing her eyes. "So this entire time, you were doing the opposite of saving people?"

"Like I told you, I'm not gonna be the one to decide what *saving* even means." Allison replied, lying down beside her. "Don't you think I'd just bring those with me if I was doing what you think I'm doing?"

"Then why do you have—" Lillian froze, suddenly recalling their meeting on the bridge. "You said you weren't there to jump..." Allison didn't respond. "...Are those pills for *you*?" Allison giggled loudly, burying her face in a pillow.

"Weird conclusion to jump to," she said, muffled, as Lillian looked on in confusion. "They used to be." The blonde got up and pulled the gun to her lap. "This, too." Lillian sat up as well.

"So you...used to be like the ones from the bridge?" she asked cautiously, "what...made you decide not to?" Allison suddenly leaned in with a smirk, making Lillian lean backwards.

"Wouldn't chat with me and now you're asking about *my* story?" She clicked her tongue. "Hypocrite," she accused playfully. Lillian looked away.

"You don't have to tell me either," she muttered, slightly nervous. Allison sat up straight.

"Well they don't work on me. Period." She poked at her necklace again. "I mean stuff like the gun still hurts, but, next thing I know I'm fine again. Ai won't let me die." Lillian stared at the cross in her hands.

"The angel again?" Allison shrugged.

"These days, I keep the gun for mercy. I don't know what Ai does to the people who try to hurt me, but it seems like a bullet to the head is a lot nicer." Lillian wasn't sure how to respond. Allison was clearly unwell. "Just forget I said anything if you want," Allison muttered, "do you still wanna go through with this?" She raised the weapon slightly. Lillian nodded silently, shifting uncomfortably on the bed.

For the next half hour, Allison explained in detail about angles of entry, targets in the brain and what to avoid, along with common mistakes and consequences of having faulty aim or a shaky hand. As Lillian listened, she

felt like the expertise came from someone who'd tried it themselves. As the makeshift tutorial ended, the room descended into silence. It was nearly five in the morning, according to the digital clock on the nightstand.

"Whenever you're ready."

"...Can I ask you something?" Lillian stared into her lap. Allison nodded, although unsure of whether the other girl could see her. "Why me?" Allison stared at the pistol for a moment, before flipping the safety off. She shoved the weapon into Lillian's hands.

"If that's your last wish, I may as well show you. Or try to." Allison stood up off the bed and walked to an open wall. Lillian watched in confusion. "I can't convince Ai to show herself to anyone, I don't even know if she can." The blonde leaned against the wall and planted her feet firmly on the ground. "But I *know* that the people who try to hurt me see *something*. Shoot me in the leg, and you have to *mean it*. Then I'll explain." Lillian dropped the gun to her lap.

"What? No!"

"You're gonna keep thinking I'm crazy until you do this. Please. Just aim for my leg," Allison tried to assure her, "we'll both be fine."

"I didn't come here to *shoot you!* What is *wrong* with you?" Lillian nearly shouted.

"You came here to *shoot yourself*, what difference does it make? You don't care about anything anyway, right? I'm just a psycho brat who interrupted some weakling's last day on Earth!"

"*Shut up!*" Lillian raised the pistol violently, arms trembling. Her mind raced. Her finger pulled against the trigger as she mentally screamed at herself. She felt all the night's pent-up frustration bubble up to the top. This arrogant lunatic of a girl showed up out of nowhere to make a simple night so obnoxiously complicated.

And then she threw the gun to the ground.

It landed with a loud clatter and she buried her face in a pillow behind her, trying to hide her crying. A few minutes passed before she felt weight on the bed again.

"Guessing you didn't see anything, then." She didn't respond, and the blonde sighed. "I *can't* die. So I run around in circles, looking for good reasons *not* to die." Allison paused. "They say a decent number of people use that bridge. So I started stopping by, wondering if I'd find someone who might wanna look with me." Lillian felt the blonde lie down beside her.

"Why you? I listened to so many stories, but I felt like you were the first that might listen to me, too."