

\aleph_0 in the Sleepy City

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 wasn’t 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 view of the 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.