

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

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EPISODE

Stardust - Part 3

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Stardust - Part 3: Ambition

An original story by Kaylee Rose

Now free from your old self, you vowed to reach into the blackest depths of the star sciences and be the first to grasp the secrets. The polarity between us reversed - I became your reluctant assistant in dozens of deplorable experiments, crushed in the grip of your ambition. A precise arrangement, the sacrifice of conscience, the abandonment of self you desired. Upon your furrowed brow, the mathematics of our existence, the geometry of the cosmos - an ephemeral equation wholly expressed in negative space.

The study kept a sick pulse. Wax ran down the ribs of tall candles. A quill scratched in a corner where no hand moved. On the table lay my old work. A glass eye. A jaw of wire. A book sewn in thread that once lived in a wrist. A mouth opened on the paper and shaped my name. Cold went through the room with soft feet. The door eased on its hinges and a scent of iron brushed the tongue.

She entered.

Her palm met my chest. The murmurs on the table fell silent. "Come" she said.

We stepped through the castle door and noon poured over us. Bells called from towers with a tender rhythm. A woman stood in a doorway with hands warm with a glob. Several faces turned to her and held.

We stopped at one of the places that offered food from the richest gardens. We browsed in the open air with bright steps and looked around. Piles of fruit waited on stone trays. The scent of fresh fruits filled the air, twined with a faint tang of brewed leaf. Pomegranate cracked with jewelled chambers, fig opened with a slow smile and bled honey onto its own skin. Persimmon sat with a lantern glow. Mango wore the sun in its flesh. Citrus peels beaded oil and misted the air.

"What's your favourite?", she asked me.

"All of them", I said.

"Greedy. Choose one and swear to it." I touched one. Her brow arched. She lifted a slice to my lips, then drew it away at the last breath. *"Say please,"* she whispered.

"Please," then she pressed it to my mouth. Juice ran over her knuckles. She bent over, caught a drip with her tongue and laughed once, low and satisfied. Her eyes held mine. *"I think we should move on."* I said looking around with a hint of worry.

"Then let's obey," she added.

A small and slightly bend creature watched from the shoulder of the crowd. Skin the color of old wax. Teeth close and neat. Silver ring on thumb. Seal at belt. His gaze fixed on her. The ring turned in slow circles and pressed a tender groove in the flesh beneath. He counted her steps under his breath. One. Two. Three. He set his feet to the rhythm of her heels and moved with patient water. Eventually I took Rose by the hand and pushed her deep into the crowd. Swallowed by it and disappearing into the woods. Something gave me an uneasy feeling.

Under the high sun we slowed and stood next to a shallow fountain. Water made a small sound against the rim and sent a fine mist into the air. Old trees ringed the slope. Beyond them the plain opened wide.

"Look at the rim of the sky," I said. *"Three worlds hang there. The first holds a pale fire. The second shows red scars that drift. The third carries a bright slow sea."*

"The sky looks different than mine. Why this purple?" She squeezed my hand.

"This world moves in four cycles," I said. *"First, violet grows, then it turns to green, then it settles into soft gold. Second, deep indigo rises and lays over rose. Third, copper comes in beside wine. Fourth, a sheet of pearl spreads with thin lines of emerald."*

To the west a dark cloud climbed. I laid a hand upon her palm and showed her.

"What's that?", she asked.

"When the rain drops the soil opens. Heat rises. And by the end of the next cycle the field feels fresh and new to grow new plants. But you have to be careful, that soil when it opens it draws you inside the ground. Eats you if you stay inside the rain"

"An end." Her voice softened.

"..that feeds a start" I added and made a soft pause looking at its dark beauty.

"Huh" she bursted, *"Darko, my God, I think is time."* I raised my eyebrow and gazed at her. *"In my last work I finally found a way to control the dust of stars. I want to become the One that you always desired."*

"No, that's impossible, I had a choice and I chose you already," I said. *"I broke a wall for one soul instead of doing more harm."*

She turned her face toward me. *"Why you hid me into your castle? Why you are afraid to show me to your world?"*

"The court forbids. Is forbidden for someone like you to come in this world. They would take your breath." I stopped shortly.

"So you caged me and called it love?" she asked.

"I need time, I cannot let it fall on your skin. I fear. I feared what I would be asked to do if..."

"I paid in blood and names and sleep to come here. I stand here by choice. I trust that choice." she said.

"I have done so. But this must not continue. I have watched already one of us judged. I saw gentle faces turned into knives. I have watched the price one must pay. I would rather bear all the pain in the world than carry you to that altar of doom." Her eyes held mine while I spoke out with worried voice.

"We can already use what we know about the Stardusts. My final experiment worked." She took my wrist and pressed my palm to her heart. Heat met heat. The dark cloud edged closer across the grass. She lifted her chin. *"My blood... isn't what you always wanted? You, to create out of my essence The One? To love you, to care about you and to be from your suffocating stillness of your castle? I will be what you always dreamed of. I will gladly give myself to you, to be what you wanted me to be."* Her words softly trembled.

"I don't want that anymore," I said in a blink of the moment. How could I forget the nights when I drew patterns carefully in chalk. Endless experiments that failed. But it was wrong, I could not stifle my repulsion. *"Rose, my obsession with the Dust blinded me to my blessings, and smothered me in a fever dream of dissatisfaction. Don't do this to you. I love how you are, I am happy with you."*

"You don't! You choose to keep me in your castle, living in a fantasy about what it could become, rather than making it happen. I have seen you ride the peaks of your frustrations many times. I have studied your past experiments and the dust of the stars long enough for you to shape me. Forget my body and make me your Queen. I will walk beside you without fear." She insisted.

"That's impossible. You are far more better than every of us. You are the perfection already!" I breathed out.

"Huh, my blood is not perfect..." she made a small pause and inhaled before she continued with tears into her eyes, *"Humanity is a weak hypothesis. An unbalanced equation, an imperfect angle. We sow the seeds of our ruin, and seek to deny its reckoning. We make mountains of our mistakes, monsters of our misdeeds. We slip and stumble, we fail and we falter. And yet, in each of us, a hopeful light, holding fast against the hellish shadows that gather between our good intentions. Is that what you call perfection?"* She confessed with certainty that filled the air.

"I... I can't do this to you," I confessed.

She turned and walked ahead of me, keeping a generous distance. The discussion left us feeling unsettled. As we walked under the trees, the light grew dimmer and the ground breathed cool air through its roots. Leaves brushed our shoulders. From the path behind us came a thin squeak. A reed in a throat. A shoe on wet bark. The squeak sounded again. Then stillness. I turned around. The small, bent creature from the market was standing in the shade. He lifted the seal with two fingers. His voice piped through a narrow opening in his chest.

"Oho. The God and the mortal. I think the council would be interested to hear about this. I shall speak only the truth and only that." The creature intoned.

I stepped toward him. *"Leave the path and forget everything you saw here."* My voice held.

He began to twirl in a tight circle. The seal thumped against his belt. The ring flashed. He hopped once and squeaked again. *"That is impossible. I will run to them before the next bell. I will draw a picture of your mouth on hers."* His zeal spilled into the air.

Rose jumped from behind me with quiet feet and a face of calm night. Gold lived in her hand. A dagger the color of ripe sun. As she swung the dagger, her world narrowed to the blade and the creature's chest. One thrust took the soft place under the ribs. Two found the lungs. Three slid through the hollow above the collar bone and rang the blade on bone. Four and five opened the lines that feed the heart. Six kissed the throat from below, Seven found the spine. Eight took the last hold of breath. Nine stilled the eyes and ten pierced the soul.

She wiped the blade on the fallen coat and turned to me. Blood marked her throat and her lips. Confidence walked through her shoulders and settled in her stance. A darker current moved under her skin. I rose on unsteady legs. The sight of her filled my head. Fear and need and awe wrestled in my ribs. I reached for her and stopped short. She held my gaze until my breath steadied.

I guess ambition's rewards are dwarfed by its consequences. It's all lost; we cannot stop the inevitable. There was no turning back from this. Death is not the end here, and they will come for us. I need to prepare.

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