

THE STORMWATCH DIARIES #1



LEGEND OF THE STORM SNEEZER



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MONSTER IVY
PUBLISHING

The publisher's logo, featuring the text 'MONSTER IVY PUBLISHING' in a stylized font, surrounded by decorative floral and vine-like elements.

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*To anyone who's waited for the perfect storm—
Here you go.*

ENTRY 0

AUTHOR(S) INTERLUDE PART 1



Dear Reader Name Here _____,

May I call you Reader Name Here _____? Truth is, I don't know your name—though I'd like to! You don't know mine, either, but we can fix that. I'm Rose. Rosy. Rosebud. Thunder Rose. Bunch of other names I probably shouldn't put in print. I've been told my parents had no business giving me a one-syllable name 'cause it's misleading, like I'll be easy to manage or something. I like to think they gave it to me 'cause it's short and sweet. Like me!

Maybe you're wondering why a book called The Stormwatch Diaries: Legend of the Storm Sneezer isn't starting with the words "Dear Diary." First off, that's a blah way to start a story ("Dear Blah" would've been better), and second, this isn't your typical diary. You, dear Reader Name Here _____, have stum-

bled upon a time traveler's diary! Do you know what that means? It means there's only one author of this story—me—but while there's only ONE author, there's MORE than one of me. ~ Rose Skylar, 1526 A.S.

There's two! ~Rose Skylar, 1527 A.S.

Three. ~Rose Skylar, 1529 A.S.

Four! ~Rose Skylar, 1530 A.S.

And five. ~Rose Skylar, 1532 A.S.

It's not as complicated as it sounds. Promise! See, every time traveler needs a diary to keep track of their time traveling so that events happen in the right order, timelines don't tangle, worlds don't collide, and life as we know it doesn't become completely unwritten. That's why keeping a diary is so important—and why YOU'RE so important, Reader Name Here ____! Because the best way to remember a story is to tell it to someone who's never heard it before. And today, that's you! ~1526 A.S.

(Unless you're rereading this book. And we don't blame you if you are. It's a good book.) ~1527 A.S.

Ever wonder what it would be like if your future selves could comment on your diary while you're writing it? That's our job.

We're here to teach our youngest Little Me how to write her first traveler's diary and thus keep the fabric of Time from unraveling before our eyes. (No pressure, right?) Are you paying attention, Little Me, 1526? Good. **How to Write a Time Traveler's Diary, Lesson One: Side notes.** Make 'em ALL CAPS and put them in parentheses.

(LIKE THIS.)

Use them whenever you need to clarify something or make a clever observation. You'll be doing a lot of both. ~1529 A.S.

Should I be writing this down? ~1526 A.S.

What do you think we're doing, silly? ~1527 A.S.

How to Write a Time Traveler's Diary, Lesson Two: Asterisks. When time passes between scenes, pop an asterisk. ~1530 A.S.

What are those, for headaches? ~1526 A.S.

If only. ~1529 A.S.

It's the little * symbol. They indicate a time lapse. Or, when you come across something in the story that Reader Name Here _____ might not know about, pop three asterisks (***) to break up the page and do a little explaining. We call those info-asterisks. ~1532 A.S.

* = Time lapse-asterisk. *** = Info-asterisks. Got it. Anything else? ~1526 A.S.

How to Write a Time Traveler's Diary, Lesson Three: Sometimes you have to look at the past to make sense of the present and prepare for the future. And this is where our story begins—in the past, when a girl of storms meets a boy of shadows and the friendship of legends is born ... ~1532 A.S.

... Is that my cue? That's my cue, isn't it? Sorry, I'm new at this "narrator" thing. Ahem. Flip the page, Reader Name Here _____, and get ready for a story that'll knock your socks off!
~1526 A.S.

Assuming you're wearing socks. It could be warm where you're reading. ~1529 A.S.

Or you could be wearing socks and shoes. ~1530 A.S.

Or you could be one of those weirdoes who wears shoes without socks, in which case we could just blow the whole foot off.
~1526 A.S.

How to Write a Time Traveler's Diary, Lesson Four: We do not DISMEMBER READER NAME HERE _____!!! ~1529 A.S.

Oops. ~1526 A.S.

Just—do what 1532 was doing. That was a very intriguing start. ~1530 A.S.

Fine, fine, fine. How'd it go again? Our story begins in the past, when a girl of storms meets a boy of shadows and the friendship of legends is born ... ~1526 A.S. (previously 1532 A.S. because that's time travel for you)

ENTRY 1

HELLO DARKNESS MY NEW FRIEND



Oh, the joys of being your own babysitter! Self-employment had never tasted so sweet. Yes, lack of pay was a slight disadvantage, but why would a girl be counting coins when she could be counting the steps from her house to the heart of a forbidden forest?

Of course, just because she was her own babysitter didn't mean she was alone strolling the backwoods of her family's estate. Rose was never alone, not with the little gray storm cloud following her wherever she went. Inside, outside, in the bathtub or in bed, there it was dripping raindrops like a runny nose. Lightning combed her curls till every strand was a live wire and the *thunder* ... well, like most uncomfortable noises, thunder picked the absolute worst times to crack. Her storm cloud was, without any competition, the biggest nuisance in the domain of Chunter Woods.

Gosh, she loved that thing.

“I’m a good babysitter, aren’t I?” Rose asked her storm cloud. Stormy considered this, fluttering in thought, and patted her head affirmatively. Her hair poofed like a kernel of popcorn. “Thought so.” She nodded in satisfaction.

She really *was* a good babysitter. Qualified in all babysitting necessities such as storytelling, how to open child safety locks, and—“Can we do that thing where you sock someone in the stomach when they’re choking?”

Stormy swooped, ramming between her ribs with the force of a fist. Rose belly-flopped on the ground, supplies spilling out of her rucksack. “Good,” she wheezed. “Good to know.”

When her lungs filled with air again, Rose got up and recovered her fallen equipment. The best babysitters always come well-prepared! She’d packed chocolate bars and strawberries for sustenance, a wooden sword for protection—

(OH, DON’T LAUGH, WOODEN SWORDS CAN BE VERY THREATENING. WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU PULLED A HALF-INCH SPLINTER FROM YOUR SKIN?)

—and her scarlet umbrella, which served no purpose whatsoever except to twirl over her shoulder and bring out the color of her red and gray wings. Umbrellas were for indoor use where mothers preferred

wet floors to soggy bread and rain-soaked tablecloths at dinner.

Given the choice, Momma would prefer her house bone-dry at all times, but particularly when she had company over, which was why she shooed Rose outside every Tuesday afternoon while she hosted her ladies' knitting club.

Rose shook out her feathers and reached for the final object from her rucksack. It was *Blackout's Tales*, the famous, eight-hundred-page anthology of Old World legends and the reason she was traipsing through the woods today, same as every Tuesday the past year. Do you know how many Tuesdays there are on a calendar? A lot. A *lotta* lot. And she and Stormy had spent every one of them following the example left behind by the greatest legend seeker to ever live.

Blackout was a man who devoted years to chasing down ancient scholars—

(OKAY, MAYBE NOT CHASING—THEY WERE PRETTY ANCIENT—
BUT, LIKE, POWER-WALKING)

—to collect their stories of the Old World in the book that would earn him his name. And once *Blackout's Tales* was complete, Blackout dedicated the rest of his days to storytelling, traveling from realm to realm, regaling the masses with his life's work.

What Rose wouldn't have given to hear him speak and experience his trademark move firsthand.

See, the book earned him his name, but the feat at the end of recitals earned him his fame. When Blackout finished his stories, he would close the cover of *Blackout's Tales*, stand up from his storyteller's chair, and *sing*.

It was a lullaby laced with magic, one that swept his listeners into oblivion. And as they blacked out, Blackout himself would disappear from the crowd, exiting the town the way he did everything else: without a trace.

Agnes had passed since Blackout's death, but his legends remained, and Rose was going to seal his legacy forever.

She was gonna prove that the legends of *Blackout's Tales* were true.

Sounds impressive, doesn't it? So dramatic. So purposeful! So utterly *impossible* for a nine-year-old angel without proper transportation. Wings only got you so far, and that was without her mother calling her home for dinner! But. Yes, *but*. There *was* a legend that could be found within an hour radius of her mother's voice: the will-o'-the-wisp—or *wispies*, she called them. Forest-dwelling tricksters appearing as little blue balls of light that lead hikers off their trails and sometimes over cliffs. Their playful giggles and beguiling light will enthrall just about anyone who crosses their path, but legend has it they have a particular fondness for lumberjacks.

Which was convenient since Rose had a back yard full of ‘em.

In the middle of the forest at the end of her family’s property lay the border between Pandrum, realm of artisan bread and bakery goods, and their neighbor Faberland, realm of carpentry and wooden novelties. They had more lumberjacks and janes than trees! She’d spy them frequently at the border, sawing away with occasional shouts of “timber!”

But the lumberjacks weren’t there today. And if *they* weren’t there, chances were the *wispies* wouldn’t be, either.

“Gah!” she groaned and slumped to the ground. This was going nowhere! Think, think, *think*. What else did she know about wispies? According to legend, they aren’t just interested in tricking lumberjacks or leading travelers to their dooms. If they like you enough, they’ll lead you to their home, a place known as the Wishing Mist. Step into the Mist, and it’ll taste you. If it likes the flavor, it’ll swallow you whole. And when it spits you out, you’ll have any wish your heart desires.

Eaten alive by a mist. Now *that* was the opposite of boring. Rose would gladly take being digested by a legend from *Blackout’s Tales* over slowly dissolving in a stew of her own boredom. Stirred with her own bored stiff spoon. Dying a slow, painful, boring death of—

A deluge of water doused her curls. She shook her head, flinging raindrops right and left. “Thanks. I needed that.”

She tilted her face, and Stormy twisted itself like a wet rag, wringing out a mini downpour. Rain washed the sweat from her forehead and filled her mouth with water. It tasted good and quenched her thirst, but sweet *magic*, what she wouldn't give for a glass of chocolate milk right now. Rich, creamy chocolate milk. In a world brimming with magic, why wasn't there such a thing as a chocolate dairy cow? Imagine: a whole herd of cows that only give chocolate milk! And when you first milk 'em and the milk's all warm, instant hot chocolate! Amazing. How had no one thought of this? She wished—

A bolt of lightning struck her tongue, and Rose swallowed compulsively. A pleasant buzz rippled through her body. She blinked the rain from her eyes and looked around.

There, peeking around a tree trunk, was a little blue ball of light.

Aha! When all else fails, wishful thinking does the trick!

(IN RETROSPECT, I WISH I'D THOUGHT OF THAT SOONER.)

Months of waiting were about to pay off, so long as no one made any sudden moves or—

Above her, Stormy exploded with lightning, followed by a burst of bone-rattling thunder. “Shhh!” Rose hissed. “I know we're excited. Behave.” She turned to the wispy. “Hi. I'm—”

“Follow me,” it whispered, high-pitched and giggling, and raced off at light speed.

“—right behind you.” If it was a chase the wispy wanted, then a chase it would get! Rose flexed her wings in pursuit, preparing for unexpected flight. No sneaky will-o'-the-wisp was gonna lead *her* over a cliff unawares! They spun through the woods, twisting and turning around shrubs, leapfrogging over fallen trees, and splashing through streams. She and her storm cloud were gaining. A few more feet and she could poke the wispy with her umbrella. Two feet now. One foot!

The blue ball of light took a sudden turn to the left, and Rose smacked headfirst into a tree trunk. She dropped to the ground in a heap of—what was the word? *Discomba*. *Discombaba*. *Discombobulation*.

(YOU DON'T NEED A DICTIONARY FOR THAT ONE, READER NAME HERE _____. JUST BOBBLE YOUR HEAD A BIT, AND YOU'LL KNOW EXACTLY WHAT IT MEANS.)

The wispy circled overhead, tittering. “Not this time, not this time! Next time, next time!” it promised and winked out of existence before her very eyes.

“Ugh!” Rose slammed her fist against the ground and glared up at the big, skull-crushing maple tree. “A real tree would come down here and apologize, you know.” To be fair, the tree did *try* to make a noise, but it sounded less like an apology and more like ... snoring?

Rose squinted up. Up, up, up to where a blue flannel shirtsleeve dangled from the higher branches.

Cradled in the maple's ancient arms, someone was taking a nap.

She got to her feet, swaying from dizziness and indecision. Option 1) She could leave, go looking for the wispy again with 0.00001% chance of success.

The sleeper gave a loud, snuffling snore.

Or Option 2) If someone could see logs like that in their sleep, they *had* to be a lumberjack. The flannel confirmed it. And if she woke up a lumberjack, the will-o'-the-wisp's favorite victim, maybe—just maybe—the wispy would come back!

Looking at Stormy from the corner of her eye, Rose smiled. A wink of lightning, and the storm cloud lifted from her head, growing bigger and bigger and bigger. In no time at all, her baby thunderhead was the size of a small house.

(*SNIFF; THEY GROW UP SO FAST.*)

Stormy rose to the level of the sleeping lumberjack, blocking the sky completely. How could Dad not love this? He *hated* when she let her storm cloud off its leash, but how could you hate something so breathtaking?

It gave the signal. Three lightning bolts, two lightning bolts, one lightning bolt ...

BOOM!

Thunder roared like a cannon blast, scaring birds from branches and generally upsetting the wildlife, and Rose couldn't help but laugh along with it as a large lump came tumbling out of the maple tree. She dashed behind a tree trunk, still giggling. Stormy reverted to the size of a pillow and zoomed to muffle the noise. It covered her face like an enormous gray moustache, plugging her mouth and nose. Was this what she'd looked like as a baby when her first cry spat the storm cloud from her lungs in a great, gusty sneeze?

Behind them, the lump on the ground groaned deeply. Lumberjacks were *used* to falling out of trees, right? They wouldn't ... hold a grudge or anything?

She tightened her grip on her wooden sword and readied her umbrella. Something long and stretchy moved at her feet, winding around the tree trunk like a length of ribbon that had lost its spool. It spiraled up her legs, stealing around her waist. What *was* it? Black, velvety, softer than anything she'd ever felt. No name came to mind, but never fear! When all else fails—

(INCLUDING WISHFUL THINKING)

—the scientific method is an infallible fallback.

She would have to lick it.

The black matter rejected this idea the instant her tongue emerged. It went taut, yanking her off of her feet and turning her upside down. Chocolate bars, strawber-

ries, and *Blackout's Tales* all tumbled out of her rucksack, bonking her head on their way to the ground.

“Let me go, let me go!” Wings beating frantically, Rose popped her umbrella like a shield and sliced her sword. “Let me g ... oh.”

Her captor was most definitely a lumberjack, decked in flannel and towering over her with the height of a cliff and the width of a boulder. He was really old, too. Thirteen, maybe fourteen. Broad face, squat nose, eyebrows akin to fuzzy caterpillars—there was something wonderfully frightening about him. His hair was a mop, and blue eyes twinkled against dark skin like moons at nightfall.

She gaped at him from her upside-down vantage point, enthralled by her find and enthralled by those twinkling eyes. Moonstones, they were. Gems of frozen moonlight. She'd half a mind to scoop 'em out of their sockets and add them to her gem, button, and assorted shiny objects collection.

(FINEST COLLECTION THIS SIDE OF THE MULTIVERSE.)

As if reading her thoughts, the lumberjack's eyebrows rose, and his wings snapped open forcefully. Like he *needed* to look any bigger. His feathers were black and oddly blurry, shifting like shadows. From their tips flowed a braided strand of darkness that made up the lasso around her waist. With a flick of his wing, the lasso spun

her upright, and she touched it with renewed fascination. That's what it was. A shadow!

It retracted suddenly, joining the darkness seeping from Shadow Boy's wings. His feathers became runaway inkblots, doubling, tripling, quadrupling in length, and he took to the air, blocking the sky as effectively as her storm cloud. The beat of his enormous shadow-wings whipped her curls like a wind tunnel, and Stormy struggled to maintain its molecules. The *size* of that wingspan! Just think of how fast he could fly. Faster than she could. Four times the speed would mean four times the distance. *Holy haloed hellhounds!* Are you thinking what she was thinking?

Shadow Boy hovered there, a harbinger of the flannel apocalypse and the solution to all her problems. She stared up at him with a look of sheer wonder.

"This is a withering glare," he informed her.

Rose nodded, blank and mesmerized. A moment or two floated by.

"You're supposed to wither."

"Oh! Oops. Should I—do you want me to get on my knees? Is that what I'm s'posta do? Or is it more of a droopy thing, like I hang my head and sorta—" She slumped forward, flopping her arms.

Shadow Boy sighed, and his shadow-wings receded. He landed on the ground with a resounding *thump*. "You don't find me threatening at all, do you?"

He was a Faberfrom for sure. His accent had all the

refinement of Auralis mixed with the ruggedness of the realms on the Shell, and it was rich and sweet as maple butter.

“I’m not afraid of a lotta things I should be ‘cause my head’s not screwed on right.” She wrinkled her nose. “Or that’s what everyone’s always telling me.”

Shadow Boy plucked a twig idly from his shirt. “That’s a lovely storm cloud you have. Is this the one that woke me? You have a mighty voice.”

Stormy blushed a darker shade of gray, and Rose rocked bashfully on her heels. “Thanks. I like your shadows, too.”

“Shadows and storms. Quite a pair, aren’t they?”

She couldn’t contain herself any longer. “Say, are you any good at stopping things from running into trees?”

“Hmm.” He crossed his massive arms. “Can’t say I have much experience as I’m usually running them through with an axe. But I bet I could learn.”

“Good.” She mimicked the tone her dad used when conducting knightly business, all brisk and stuffy like they’d run out of tissues. “I’ve got a proposition for you, Shadow Boy. See, I’m a legend seeker. I’ve been one for some time, actually, but today I suffered my first severe injury.”

“By running into a tree, I’m guessing?”

“Yes.”

“Hard?”

“Can’t you see the bruise on my forehead?”

“Okay. That explains the signs of concussion.”

“This is how I normally am!”

“Normal has nothing to do with it. Please, continue.”

“What I’m *saying* is, I could use a guardian angel.” She looked him up and down. An inch more in any direction, and he’d have a mountain range named in his honor. “You’d do.”

“Guardian angel.” Shadow Boy scratched his chin. “I suppose the hours are awful?”

“Just once a week! Around this time, but I can come later so you can finish your nap.”

“Considerate. And we would meet here?”

“Yup.” Say yes, say yes, *please*, say yes!

He gave a profound humph. “And what would I be paid with?”

Yeesh. She hadn’t thought of that. There were five bronze kudos jingling in her piggybank back home. Five hours’ worth of sermons on the importance of money management had borne her those coins. If she used them up, she’d have to go through another five hours of play-time persecution to gain them back! The very idea challenged the child endangerment laws of her realm.

Rose scooped up a strawberry and a square of chocolate from her spilled rucksack and dropped them in his hand. “These. You’ll get paid in these.”

Shadow Boy inspected the unusual currency and tested its legitimacy by tossing the pair into his mouth.

“Wait!” she cried, and he abruptly stopped chewing.

“That’s not how you eat it! It isn’t melted yet. Open your mouth. Wider. Wider. *Wider*. Perfect!”

A lightning bolt struck the square of chocolate on his tongue, melting it instantly.

“Okay, you can chew now. Go on, chew.”

His mouth stayed open. So did his eyes.

“Chew.” She grabbed his jaw and worked it up and down. His taste buds caught up with his brain, and Shadow Boy chewed vigorously. Swallowed. Licked his lips. He was quiet for a long time. “What’s your name?”

“Rose,” she said.

“Well, Thunder Rose”—he stooped, dusting off another strawberry and chocolate square from the ground—“you have yourself a guardian angel. Marek Knoxwind, at your service.” Marek bowed, and shadows whisked from his wings, picking up her fallen *Blackout’s Tales*. “Now, about this legend-seeking business,” he said, flipping through the pages, “where would you like us to start?”

Rose grinned. Wishing Mist or no Wishing Mist, that wispy had given her something even better than a chocolate dairy cow. She’d like very much to thank it. “How’s tracking down will-o’-the-wisps sound?”

Marek tossed the chocolate and strawberry into his mouth and opened wide.

ENTRY 2

THE GOOD OL' DAYS



“Am I your only friend in the worlds?”
They were trudging through the sludge of a
swamp—

*(WELL, MAREK TRUDGED—I TRUDGED IN SPIRIT WHILST
PIGGYBACKING.)*

—in search of the central figure from the *Blackout's
Tales'* classic, “Legend of the Man-Eating Sponge.”

“Four months we’ve known each other, and already
you’re the center of my universe?” he laughed.

It hadn’t been an overly eventful four months, it’s true.
There was the instance with the three-footed jackalope
and the burrow full of stolen carrot gold—

(NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH KARAT GOLD. CARROT GOLD IS A

TYPE OF MAGICAL YELLOW CARROT THAT, WHEN EATEN, MAY BRING ABOUT A SLEW OF FINANCIAL SUCCESS.

HOW'S THAT FOR EATING YOUR VEGGIES?)



—which was worthy of a legend itself, but finding an *actual* legend from *Blackout's Tales*? No such luck.

“You don’t talk about anybody else,” Rose pointed out. Somewhere above, Stormy rumbled in agreement, its shape indiscernible in the fog.

“I live in Nomad’s Doormat, where every traveler wipes their feet. Angels come and go as they please, and no one stays around for long.”

“What about the orphanage? Do you have any friends there?”

Marek stepped in a hidden, swampy puddle and grimaced. “Yes. The janitor. He says he’ll cut off my head and use my hair as a mop if I don’t stop tracking mud on the floors. I’m friends with my lumber crew as well.”

“I still can’t *believe* they let you work as a lumberjack at fourteen,” she huffed, admiring her muck-free boots from her elevated position between his wings. If this was what having a big brother was like, she could get used to it. “I don’t care how big you are, those men are ten times your age in angel years! You could hurt yourself.”

“Says the girl who has me hunting down a giant, man-eating sponge.”

Rose squinted through the fog, scouring the scenery for the stony alcove the sponge is said to reside in. If they brushed against the wrong rock formation, the legendary sponge would suck them in, dissolve them, and wring out the bony bits. “What about hobbies? Do you have any hobbies?”

“Outside of you, you mean? I like to carve wood.” The puddles on the ground rippled with the impact of heavy footsteps. Parting the mist ahead was a lumbering mass of mossy roots and seaweed. Shadow Boy’s hand went to his belt. “That man-eating sponge may not be on today’s itinerary, but what are your feelings on bog monsters?”

Apparently carving wasn’t the only thing his knife was good for.

(DEPLOYING TIME LAPSE-ASTERISK IN THREE ... TWO ... ONE ...

BUCKLE UP, READER NAME HERE _____. WE’VE GOT A LOTTA TIME TO COVER.)

*

Rose gaped at her guardian angel. “You fell out of a tree.”

Marek stood, brushing dirt and leaves from the seat of his pants. “Yes.”

“It wasn’t even my fault this time.”

“True.”

“You’re afraid of squirrels?”

“Deathly.”

*

“I brought something for you!” Rose plopped the gift-wrapped box proudly at Marek’s feet.

He sat up from where he’d been snoozing against their maple tree’s trunk. “For me?” Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he took off the box’s lid. His look of dismay showed clear as day before clouding over with polite interest. “It’s ... lovely.” He held up the shapeless, holey, seasick green sweater with garish yellow polka dots.

Rose giggled, and Stormy slapped her a lightning-laced high five. “No, it’s not—it’s the ugliest sweater in the history of the worlds! It makes *knitting needles* wanna impale themselves! It’s so absolutely, all-consumingly *hideous*, it can only be one thing.” She leaned forward and yanked the knitted nightmare down to meet Marek’s eyes. “It’s the sweater from ‘Legend of the Ugly Sweater Slayer.’”

“The one that’s made from the mane of a murdered unicorn?” he said.

“Yes.”

“The one that appears randomly as a gift in the homes of unsuspecting angels?”

“Uh-huh.”

“The one that judges the purity of the wearer’s thankfulness for the gift and, if it detects even a *hint* of ingratitude, will then proceed to strangle them to death?”

Rose nodded gleefully. “That’s the one!”

Marek stared at the killer cardigan. “What do you want me to do with it?”

“Put it on, of course!” Duh. How else were they gonna know if it was truly the sweater from “Legend of the Ugly Sweater Slayer”?

He shrugged and slipped it on over his wide shoulders. Fiddled with the buttons. Went still.

Then he clutched at his throat.

Excitement and dread tightened in a chokehold around her own throat as Shadow Boy tore at the material around his neck. Rose rushed forward to help. She gripped the sweater by one of its holes and pulled the woolen weapon over his head. “Die, die, die!” she cried, stomping it into the ground. When it was suitably subdued, she turned to Marek with a grin that threatened to split her face in half. “It’s real. Marek, it’s real! We found a legend from *Blackout’s Tales!*”

“Thunder, I ...” Marek massaged his throat. “I’m sorry. I don’t like turtlenecks. Pulling them off—it’s a reflex.”

Her grin faded. “So, it wasn’t trying to kill you?”

“Well, don’t sound so happy about it. Where did you find the sweater, anyway?”

Rose sank dejectedly to the dirt. “Under some floorboards in my sister’s room. I think it’s one of her failed knitting projects, honestly. She’s been going to Momma’s knitting club every Tuesday for years, but I don’t think it does her much good. Maybe I could help her if they’d let me join them—not that I wouldn’t rather spend Tuesdays with you!” She bit her lip. “I just wish ... I wish they wanted me there.”

Stormy dripped a raindrop on her nose, and she rubbed it away.

“Come on, Thunder.” Marek fluffed his feathers, and his shadows pulled her bracingly to her feet. “We may not be a knitting club, but we *are* a legend-seeking club. And you are very much wanted here. We have work to do! I’m sure there’s more murderous clothing just waiting to be sought out.”

*

“I can’t help but notice you’re wearing a tutu,” Marek observed.

“Yep! Got it on clearance at the market yesterday. The tailor said they couldn’t get rid of it.” Rose struggled to belt her wooden sword over the delightful poofs of her new skirt. “Can you believe it?”

“Hardly. But I thought we were going ghost hunting today?”

“We are!”

“Aren’t you concerned that your present apparel may put you in peril?”

“You’d be amazed what a girl in a tutu can accomplish.”

“You amaze me most days.”

*

Marek was waiting for her by their maple tree, grinning like a court jester. “I do believe yesterday was someone’s tenth anniversary of life.” He produced a cupcake from behind his back, stuck with a pink candle. “Happy birthday, Thunder!”

Rose stared at the cupcake. Red velvet. Her favorite.

She burst into tears, hiding her face in her wings. Stormy slunk away to the highest branches of the tree, drizzling miserably.

Dropping to his knees, Marek immediately drew her in for a bear hug. “Shh, Thunder Rose, what’s the matter? Did I get the wrong flavor?”

“He *hates* it!” she sobbed. “Why does he hate it so much?”

“I’m not sure.” Shadow Boy patted her back comfortingly. “But if you give me a few less pronouns, I might be able to help.”

“My dad hates Stormy.” She pulled back, sniffing. “It rained all over my birthday party. I just got excited, but all the knights and dames from the Order were there, and Dad says I ruined it. He says Stormy’s ugly and horrible and ruins *everything*.”

“Oh, Thunder Rose.” Shadows cupped her cheek, the soft velvet wiping her tears. “Listen to me, both of you.” Marek gestured for Stormy, and it drifted shamefully from its perch. “You wouldn’t believe it, but I pity your father. He hasn’t a clue what he’s missing out on, and if he did, I promise you he would never look at your storm cloud the

same. It isn't ugly and horrible. It's beautiful and powerful and full of mischief. It's you, Rose. And the only thing you ruin is a bad day." He presented her with the cupcake. "Someday we're going to find you a place where everyone knows how to dance in the rain. Just you wait."

Rose smiled wetly, and lightning glinted off her teeth, setting her birthday candle aflame. One puff, and she wished Marek would be her best friend forever and ever.

*

Rose sat next to Marek beneath their maple tree and took a deep breath. "I know about your drinking problem."

He whipped his head around. "Excuse me?"

"I found the empty bottles in your rucksack. I'm staging an intervention."

"Rose, I'm a lumberjack. It can't be helped."

"Drinking maple syrup straight from the bottle is gonna kill you."

"Then I will die a happy death."

"At least lemme make you some pancakes to go with it!"

"Well, now you're just enabling."

*

"We're not friends anymore!" Rose hollered, stamping

her foot. She picked up her duffle bag, sat down on the other side of the tree, and sulked. Stormy blew a thunderous raspberry and joined her.

Marek, with wisdom beyond his fifteen years, gave her a few minutes before sitting down next to her. “Well, we had some good times, didn’t we? A few laughs? A few near-death experiences? It was a good run.”

“Go away.” She shoved him as hard as she could.

(*TRY SHOVING A BOULDER AND SEE HOW FAR IT MOVES.*)

“You’re s’posta be on *my* side!” she said.

“I *am* on your side. Which is why I’m telling you that running away from home isn’t the answer.”

“I heard them talking. They said if I can’t find a way to control Stormy, they’re gonna send me to an asylum for unstable magic. I can’t go there, Shadow Boy, I just *can’t!*”

“You won’t,” Marek said firmly. “You’re eleven, not thirteen—you aren’t old enough to be committed. We have a few more years to figure out what to do, and when we do figure it out, you won’t be running *from* something. You’ll be running *towards* something.”

Rose looked at him reproachfully and held up a solemn pinky. “Promise?”

He wrapped his finger around hers. “Pinky promise.”

*

Rose twirled a curl mischievously around her finger.
“Hey, Shadow Boy?”

Marek glanced at her suspiciously. “Ye-e-s?”

“Why did the tree tell the lumberjack to stop telling
him jokes?”

“I don’t know.”

“ ‘Cause they were splitting his sides!”

“Why do I even bother?”

*

Rose sat with her back against the maple tree, *Black-out’s Tales* in her lap. She bit into a chocolate-covered strawberry and almost spat it back out.

The fruit was sour, the chocolate bitter, without Marek there.

Three times. *Three times* he hadn’t shown up at their meeting spot. In the years they’d known each other, he’d never missed more than a week. Was he sick? Break a leg? Did a tree fall on him, and he couldn’t walk anymore?

Was he bored with being her guardian angel and decided to quit when she needed him most?

On cue, a burst of panicked lightning shot from her fingertips, singeing the forest floor. Stormy wasn’t hanging above her anymore. It was ... well, it was ...

Rose breathed deeply, and thunder rattled in her chest. She and Stormy had done something—something too terrible for words—and as punishment, Dad had

found a way to trap her storm cloud inside her body, and it was *killing* her.

(METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING. THOUGH HAVING A STORM CLOUD TRAPPED INSIDE OF YOU PROBABLY ISN'T ON YOUR PHYSICIAN'S TOP 10 TIPS FOR HEALTHY LIVING.)

But right now, Marek's absence hurt worse than the storm roiling beneath her skin, trapped and fighting to get out.

Had she lost both of her best friends at once? She knew where Stormy was—but where had Shadow Boy gone?

Being an eleven-year-old gumshoe has its challenges, but if there were two things Rose never said no to, it was a challenge and a mystery to solve. And nothing mattered more than solving the mystery of Marek's disappearance.

She began by sneaking out of bed one night and taking a trip to his orphanage. The matron answered the door, wearing a tired dressing gown and an even more tired scowl. When Rose asked to see Marek, she was told in no uncertain terms that there were no Marek Knoxwinds on the premises and to leave said premises immediately unless she wished to become an orphan herself, in which case she would never leave the premises *ever again*.

(MATRONS AREN'T THE BEST CONVERSATIONALISTS AT THREE IN THE MORNING.)

Rose was halfway to the road when the matron called after her, “What was it you wanted, had he been here? The boy.”

Chin high, she turned around. “To adopt him.”

The lumberjacks and janes weren't any better. “Marek Knoxwind?” Rose called up and down their favorite logging grounds on the border between Pandrum and Faberland. “Shadow-wings, drinks maple syrup straight from the bottle, poster boy of Chunker Munkers United? You *have* to remember him.”

Most of them ignored her, drowning out her voice with their sawing, but one lumberjane slung her axe over her shoulder and sauntered over. “Listen, girl. We don't know any Marek Knoxwinds. And if we did”—she looked sternly down her nose—“we *forgot* him. I suggest you do the same.”

Like heck she would.

But who else could she turn to for help? Enlisting family was out of the question. Suppose they *could* find Marek—hooray! However, they'd just as soon forbid her from seeing him, or press charges or something stupid.

(FRIENDSHIPS DON'T COME EASY WHEN YOU'RE THE DAUGHTER OF A KNIGHT COMMANDER, ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL

KNIGHTS IN PANDRUM. DOUBLY NOT EASY WHEN YOU'RE HIS
FIRSTBORN HEIR, DESTINED TO ONE DAY TAKE HIS PLACE.)

Rose refused to introduce them for that very reason.
Actually, she hadn't introduced Marek to *anyone*.

Doubts grew like vines, itching like poison ivy. No one had ever seen him; no one had ever heard him speak. He laughed like he was real, he hugged like he was real, and yet ... "What if I made you up inside my head?" she whispered to the empty space beside her and held her head that wasn't screwed on right in her hands. Lightning from her trapped storm cloud crackled between her fingers.

Marek had asked her once what she wanted to be when she grew up, if she didn't have to follow in her father's footsteps. Her answer? *Professional legend seeker*—

(DUH.)

— *and part-time ghost hunter.*

(PART-TIME WAS A MUST. YOU JUST CAN'T MAKE A LIVING OFF
THE DEAD.)

Now she had another occupation to add. *Time traveler*. That way, she could change everything back to the way it was supposed to be: chasing down legends from *Blackout's Tales* with her best friends at her side and above her head.

She belonged with them in a way she'd never belonged anywhere else. Not with Dad and his ironclad plans for her future, nor in Chunter Woods, a town that would gladly dispose of her and the problems she caused and cry "Good riddance!" Marek and Stormy were her safe place in a world that didn't understand the beauty of thunderstorms or the faith to believe that legends can be true.

Would she ever find a place like that again?

... And how long would it take to get there?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kristiana Sfirlea knows what it means to get in character. She spent five years as a historical reenactor trying her best not to catch her skirts on fire as a colonial girl from the 1700s. Working at a haunted house attraction, she played a jumping werewolf statue, a goblin in a two-way mirror, and a wall-scratcher—so if she’s standing very still, growling, checking her reflection, or filing her nails on your wall, be alarmed. Those are hard habits to break.

Kristiana's speculative flash fiction has been published by Havok, and her debut novel is a spooky MG fantasy. She dreams of the day she can run her own mobile bookstore.

Or haunted house attraction. Or both. Look out, world—here comes a haunted bookmobile! (And this is precisely why writers should never become Uber drivers.) She loves Jesus, her family, and imaginary life with her characters.

