

# STRANGER THAN FICTION



Scott Colby

DEVIANT MAGIC BOOK FOUR: STRANGER THAN FICTION

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## THE DEVIANT MAGIC STORY SO FAR...

*A Date with Death* introduced Council of Intelligence Driff, an elven agent on the take dispatched to investigate a small town in rural Illinois where no one can die. Driff discovered that the local reaper, having spiraled down into a deep depression due to a recent breakup, had been shirking his deathly duties. When our hero's attempt to solve this problem with the aid of a group of local losers blew up in all their faces, Driff learned that the strange events in Harksburg were just part of the devious Witch's plot to temporarily dispatch an elven hero and rob him of the Ether, a powerful magic he can only lose upon dying.

That magic became important in *Shotgun*, when failed family man Roger Brooks discovered it in his silverware drawer and it bonded to his old ten gauge. The elves returned him to their capital, Evitankari, and declared him their Pintiri—a warrior and figurehead with a position in their legislative body, the Combined Council. Roger eventually teamed up with Driff and the reunited Brooks family to fend off the Witch and put an end to a newly restored demon warlord long thought dead. The story you're about to enjoy begins mere hours after that final battle.

*Diary of a Fairy Princess* doesn't have much to do with any of this (yet), but it's a fun tale of revolution in a strange magic city as told by the titular heroine in a style all her own. Notably, it implies that the Witch may not be quite as malicious as she's seemed.

Which brings me to the matter at hand: *Stranger than Fiction*. With most of Evitankari's leadership dead or scattered, Driff and Roger prepare to circle the wagons around the resources remaining to them. There's blood in the water, however, and a shapeshifting shark's zeroing in for the kill—but he's not interested in hunting alone...

Also, you know those epilogues at the end of young adult fiction that depict the heroes all grown up and happy with smiling children who are sure to turn out just as awesome as their parents? Yeah, those are bullshit.

## — PROLOGUE —

*Excerpt from Chapter 47 of Lazarus Jones  
and the Lightning Club: Final Showdown*

**Y**ou are done for.” Headmaster Aldern—smoking, bloody, his body still spasming with the aftershocks of magical lightning—collapsed to the dirty stone floor and didn’t get back up. A ragged gasp squeaked out through his chapped lips.

Kron the Withered leered down at his fallen opponent and cackled. His twisted, emaciated body quivered evilly beneath uncounted layers of tattered gray and black robes.

“Well,” Lazy said to the Lightning Club, “that’s not good.”

Dash leaned past his friend to peer around the corner of the tunnel leading into Kron’s cavernous lair. “Yeah. This is definitely not part of the plan.”

Keighlan grabbed them both by the high collars of their school uniforms and yanked them back into hiding. “We have to retreat,” she said sternly. Beside her, Gearix adjusted her thick glasses and nodded in meek agreement.

Dash stuck his head back out as soon as Keighlan released her grip. “What’s he taking from the headmaster?”

Kron reached into Aldern's robes and tore an amulet from the headmaster's neck. The wrinkled sorcerer stared at his prize with hungry eyes. "Thank you for delivering this to me, brother. With its power I can finally free the archdemon!"

"No way!" Dash hissed. "Kron's the headmaster's brother!"

Lazzy, peering around the corner with his friend once more, shook his head sadly. "That amulet..."

Keighlan pulled them back again. "Seriously guys, it's time to go!" Gearix repeated her previous nod.

But Lazzy wasn't listening. Resolve burning hot in his chest, he stood up straight and buttoned his jacket.

"I know that look," Dash said with a cocky smile.

"We're not going anywhere!" Lazzy declared. His bright blue eyes turned to steel. "We solved the troll's riddle. We tracked down the warlock's diary. We escaped Balacath's trap and killed the hellhound. We put all the clues together and found Kron the Withered's lair behind the blackboard of our Advanced Hex Removal classroom, defeated Balacath once and for all, and tricked Headmaster Aldern into coming here to face Kron for us. We can't run." He surveyed his friends, all of whom stared up at him in awe. "This is our responsibility. We will face Kron the Withered—and we will win!"

Gearix leapt to her feet and pumped her tiny fist. "Yeah!"

Dash stood. "Let's get 'em, Laz."

Keighlan remained seated. "How, exactly, are we going to do that?"

Lazzy smiled. "With a power Kron has never possessed and will never understand." He offered Keighlan his hand. "Help me, K."

She frowned. "I don't know about this..."

"Enough!" Kron's terrible voice boomed through the tight space. "Come out here and let me get a look at you."

The Lightning Club froze. Gearix's lower lip began to quiver. Dash peed a little.

Lazzy was the first to regain his composure. "Come on. If he wants us, he's got us."

One by one they rounded the corner and stepped into Kron's cavernous lair. Lazzy, the handsome young hero with the heart of gold. Gearix, freckled and lanky and nervous. Dash, Lazzy's cocksure best friend. And Keighlan, the beauty and the brains of the Lightning Club's whole operation. This was it: their moment, their big showdown, the confrontation they'd been working toward since they first deciphered the weird runes that kept appearing on their homeroom's blackboard.

They weren't ready. Three of them knew it. The fourth, well...

"You're not getting away with this, Kron!" Lazzy shouted.

The twisted old man cackled. He clutched the amulet in his bony fingers like it was the only thing in the world that mattered. At his feet, Aldern gasped for breath. "Kids. Run."

Lazzy snatched Keighlan's hand in his own and took a defiant step forward. "No. We're not leaving. Kron, return the medallion and turn yourself in!"

"Or what?" Kron asked, his voice tinged with genuine curiosity.

"Or you're the one who's done for!"

The ancient sorcerer rolled his rheumy eyes. "And how exactly are you going to make that come to pass?"

Lazzy tried to take another step toward Kron but Keighlan held him back. "I did a service for the fairy queen," Lazzy replied, undeterred, "and in return she granted me this blessing: as long as she who loves me most is by my side, evil shall do me no harm!"

Kron's malicious yellow smile made them all flinch. "Is that so?"

"Yes!" Lazzy shouted. "Keighlan and I love each other! You have no power over us, you evil bastard!"

Kron laughed again. "Looks to me like the girl might have a little something to say about that."

Beside Lazy, Keighlan was shaking. The others had never seen her look so small and vulnerable. It sunk their spirits. She closed her eyes and bowed her head.

"K," Lazy said softly, "what's wrong?"

Keighlan's face flushed and tears streamed down her cheeks. "Damn it, Lazarus!" she snapped. "I don't love you!"

Those four simple words, stated so bluntly and so angrily, tore a ragged hole deep in Lazy's chest. "That's nonsense!" He blinked at her in disbelief. "What about that night we shared my sleeping bag in the Foreboding Woods?"

"Gnomes stole my pack and it was cold out."

"Or when we got drunk on azacea at the fairy queen's reception and I carried you back to your room?"

She shrugged. "Thanks?"

"Or when I broke Balacath's spell over you at the spring formal, and we slow danced until the chaperones made us go home?"

She cringed away from him. "I'm sorry. I was so relieved to be free of Balacath, and I knew Dash would never ask me to dance, so..."

Lazy let his grip on Keighlan's hand go slack. For a moment she stared down at the space where his fingers had been, then she darted over to Dash and buried her head in his chest. He hesitantly wrapped an arm around her shoulders and shot his best friend a look of utter shock.

"That's it, then," Lazarus Jones croaked. The confident boy seemed to deflate, his heart well and truly broken—and their one chance to stand up to Kron shattered along with it. Lazy's obsession with Keighlan and his inability to interpret their friendship as just that had doomed them all. He felt like such a fool.

Pyres of purple energy burst to life in Kron the Withered's hands. "That's enough teenage angst for one day. You did well to make it this far, Lazarus Jones, but your story goes no further."



The Lightning Club steeled themselves for the end. If this was truly it, at least they'd get to go out together. Lazy and Dash exchanged a brotherly nod, the girl who'd briefly but spectacularly come between them forgotten. Keighlan clutched Dash as tight as she could. Gearix, desperate to reach Lazy, tripped over her own big feet. He caught her—barely—and pulled her up straight.

"Lazy," Gearix whispered, her green eyes glistening and twice their normal size, "I love you."

Kron clapped his hands together and sent a blast of violet death spiraling toward the Lightning Club. It struck Lazy and Gearix first...

...and bounced right back, reflected like a sunbeam off a mirror. Kron the Withered barely had time to register what was happening before his own spell enveloped him. The evil warlock vanished in a puff of smoke, leaving nothing behind but a pile of ash and Headmaster Aldern's amulet.

The sudden silence in the cavern was deafening.

"We're alive," Dash muttered. Keighlan turned her head and surveyed the scene with one open eye.

Lazy didn't care. He pulled Gearix close and pressed his lips to hers. She didn't hesitate to shove her tongue right into his mouth. He lurched back in shock and surprise and then went with it. Gearix felt good.

"Kids?" Aldern mumbled. "A little help here?"

## — CHAPTER ONE —

**G**oody's, the most popular dive bar in the ancient neighborhood of Evitankari known as Old Ev, was packed to bursting with elves celebrating Roger Brooks's victory against Axzar and the Witch just a few hours prior. It was a tiny, claustrophobic space to begin with, which meant any single movement in any direction resulted in a chain of additional movements spreading outward in all directions like a ripple in a pond. Conversation wasn't so much a dull roar as a collection of several dozen screaming competitions struggling mightily to outdo each other. None of those in attendance cared about the AM hour, which in polite society is typically considered far too early to get that intoxicated. Elves and polite society, it turns out, go together not so much like oil and water but more like a tomato and a sledgehammer. It's not pretty.

Also not pretty: the expression on Lazy's face. Dash couldn't decide if Lazy looked constipated, utterly depressed, or just disgusted. He settled on "constipressgusted," took a long swig from his giant glass stein of cheap swill, and leaned back against their booth's hard wooden bench to watch the pants-suited businesswoman doing a keg stand in the corner. Yes, Goody's

allows keg stands—but only on special occasions, like the Pintiri’s birthday, Secretary’s Day, or, to be honest, most Wednesdays.

“It’s like we’re not even here,” Keighlan, Dash’s wife, muttered from beside him. The remains of four extra dirty martinis—strategically ordered all at once for efficiency’s sake and subsequently slammed back with the same competence and economy—surrounded her like a tiny glass honor guard. She’d been tracing increasingly malformed figure eights on the skin of Dash’s muscular right forearm for the last twenty minutes, a nervous habit that meant she had a problem that required her husband’s undivided attention. Dash had decided to ignore her in the hopes that she’d get angry and cause a scene so they could go home already.

“My glass has been empty for ten minutes,” Lazy moaned, his babyface somehow pinching itself left and right and up and down all at the same time. Short and thin as a rail, Lazy had always made up for his lack of stature with a powerful personality and the sort of can-do attitude that’s mostly gone extinct outside of home renovation shows. “We haven’t had to buy our own drinks in this town...ever,” Lazy continued.

“Had to happen eventually,” Dash said, trying to keep the strain out of his voice. He was glad no one in Goody’s was paying them any mind. Adoring fans and would-be hangers-on had been all up in his business for far too long. “We had a good run.”

“Doesn’t mean we have to like it,” Gearix, Lazy’s wife, mused from her spot slumped in the corner. Strands of her wispy red hair stuck oddly in the nooks and crannies of the wall. The splash of freckles that had been a mark of shame in her youth now made Dash’s heart flutter. She’d had a single small beer and called it a morning. She’d always been the quiet, introspective one of the group, content to let the other three take the lead and garner all the attention while she worked things out in the background. Dash

could tell from the tightness in her lips and the set of her jaw that she was busy at work doing just that.

"We shouldn't have to like it," Lazy declared with a slight slur. "Eighteen years ago, we—just a precocious quartet of teenagers barely into our third year in the academy—single-handedly thwarted Kron the Withered's attempt to destroy Evitankari. We're heroes! None of these people would even be here without us!"

"We had a good run," Dash repeated. Lazy could ramble on for hours if no one derailed him, and Dash had an upcoming and urgent appointment with his recliner, his home brew, and a Spurs/Bulls game later that afternoon. "Maybe give it a few days, Laz. That human and his wife and Council of Intelligence Driff are probably just the flavor of the month."

"Or they're next year's model," Gearix said wistfully, "and we're the old junkers on the back lot, ruined by time and depreciation to the point that even the dealership's most desperate salesmen won't bring anyone out to see us."

"I get to be a Mazda Miata," Keighlan replied sleepily. "Remember when we rented one of those in Florida, D?"

This was Dash's chance. "I'm pretty sure that was some sort of Chevy, K." It absolutely wasn't and he knew it.

She blinked at him in surprise. "No, it was a yellow Miata. With leather seats."

Lazy grabbed the shirt of the nearest patron walking past. "Hey. You know who I am?" The guy looked down at him, scowled, and slid deeper into the crowd.

Dash took another drink from his beer to steel his nerves. "It was a Chevy Camaro," he said bluntly. "Blue."

Keighlan recoiled from him in sloppy drunken horror. "It was not!"

In the corner, Gearix idly traced her finger along a ragged heart carved into the wall.

"It was definitely a Chevy," Dash said.

Lazzy leaned out of the booth and yanked a woman's skirt to get her attention. "Miss, do you know who I am?"

She spun around and slapped him in the face. "Quit it, perv!" She melted away into the masses behind a wall of angry male companions.

"D, I can't believe you! That was definitely a Miata!"

"Chevy."

"And why are you so intent on correcting me in front of our friends?"

"Because you're wrong."

A broad shadow darkened the booth. Dash looked up to find an obese, red-faced elf in an ill-fitting gray business suit had squeezed himself into the narrow space between their table and the three dudes still glowering at Lazzy.

"Do you know who I am?" Lazzy asked.

The newcomer nodded. A few drops of sweat from his broad forehead splattered the table. "I'm familiar with each of you. Lazzy, the headstrong hero with a heart of gold. Gearix, the former ugly duckling who loves Lazzy with all her heart. Keighlan, the energetic overachiever with a solution for every problem." He paused. "And Dash, the sidekick."

Too stunned for words, Dash stared up at the wide elf in dumb shock. Sure, everyone in Evitankari knew their story backward and forward, but few would ever describe his role in such dismissive terms—even if they agreed with that assessment in private.

"And you're Council of Economics Granger," Gearix said coolly. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I'm here on business, of course," Granger replied with a Cheshire Cat grin. "And today's business is that human Pintiri you're all so jealous of."

"We're not jealous!" Lazzy protested. "We just don't want to be forgotten."

"Fuck that," Keighlan slurred. "I'm jealous."

Granger shrugged. "Either way, I believe I can be of assistance."  
"How?" Gearix asked, clearly skeptical.

Granger's grin expanded into a double-wide, complete with attached deck. "I have reason to believe the Pintiri's 'defeat' of the demon lord Axzar didn't go exactly as the official story would have us believe."

"I knew it!" Lazy shouted as if he'd just discovered the secret of cold fusion.

"Dirty humans," Keighlan muttered.

Dash ignored the excited glances bouncing around the table and drained the remainder of his beer as he turned Granger's words over in his mind. *Gee, he thought angrily, doesn't all that sound familiar.*