

Book I: Serial Dilution

Chapter III: Old Corona

Gray skies covered the dominion of Old Corona, just as they did in the capital; the clouds seemed to be moving towards each other, preparing to meet in the middle. They seemed much more fitting to the atmosphere of the wooded mainland, which sat at the very edge of a huge stone wall, which marked the border between the Kingdom of Corona and the neighboring lands of its world.

Old Corona, not so very long ago, had been a prosperous farming community. Nestled in the woods and with a lovely river running through and around it, the land here was plentiful, and its people content and happy. It was a quiet, peaceful spot, where many were set in their old ways, and preferred to live their lives in serene and humble comfort. Orchards, cornstalks, and a great number of livestock once dotted the landscape. Aside from occasional “critter problems,” due to their literal neck of the woods, the people had never had much reason to complain.

That was not the Old Corona one would have found now as they entered the area. At first glance, it still seemed quite serene...but the closer you got, the more you realized it was perhaps TOO serene. Precious few people were found outdoors, and those that were around seemed to constantly glance over their shoulders. Several homes were in an obvious state of disrepair; at the start, you might believe this was simply due to age or lack of proper care, but the visible claw marks, burn patterns, and other things that dotted several homes indicated this was far from the case.

One such paranoid peasant was a little man in a green tunic and brown trousers; he appeared to be in his sixties, with brown hair streaked markedly with gray and even a few thin slivers of sheer white. His eyes were droopy and squinty, with dark brown irises. He was just putting away some tools, hobbling a little as he went about his business outside his hut. He glanced towards the small the pen that had once held all his chickens, and sighed dismally: nothing but feathers remained.

“Varian? Varian!”

The old man looked up as he heard a familiar voice coming down the main street. A moment later, the owner came in sight: a tall, burly man with a square jaw and straight nose. He, too, had matching eyes (currently colored with some worry), and had matching brown hair, well-combed...which unfortunately emphasized his receding hairline. He seemed a little younger than the green-garbed peasant, and his clothes seemed a bit more well-to-do, though not by much: he wore a burgundy tunic, over which was a fur-lined brown vest, and black leather workgloves on his huge, muscular hands. The gloves matched the black boots on his feet, which were nearly indistinguishable from the black trousers he wore, and in turn matched the black belt strapped

about his waist. He had a five-o'-clock shadow of stubble on his strong chin, and there was a strange, sleepy sort of quality to the eyes that made him seem older than he likely really was.

The middle-aged fellow spotted the short man and called out to him: "Peter! Have you seen Varian anywhere?"

The older man scowled deeply.

"If you mean that menace of a child, why should I have WANTED to see him anywhere?" the old man snapped back.

The middle-aged man's eyes narrowed.

"That's uncalled for, Peter," he responded, in a warning sort of tone.

"I'm entitled to my opinion, Quirin!" Peter snapped back. "That boy is dangerous! I wouldn't be surprised if these Dark Creatures were the result of one of his hairbrained schemes!"

Quirin glared darkly.

"My son," he said, icily, "Has nothing to do with our current misfortune."

"Well, what does?!" Peter asked, now taking on an almost pleading tone. "Quirin, those things could pop up at any time! What are we supposed to do? We can't-"

Quirin lifted a hand to silence the older man.

"We need to remain calm and rational," the old knight said, soothingly. "That's one place to start. Panic will get us nowhere."

Peter paused...then sighed and smiled wearily.

"I'm sorry, Quirin," he apologized, quietly. "I didn't mean to..."

"It's fine," Quirin answered, somewhat testily, but smiled back. "Be safe."

The two men thus parted ways, as Peter went back into his house, and Quirin continued to call out for his son.

"Varian! Where are you?"

"Dad!"

Quirin looked up...and sighed with relief as he spotted Varian – with Ruddiger perched upon his shoulders, dressed in his dark jacket – trotting towards him. The large man bent down on one knee as the boy ran over and gave him a hug.

“There you are!” he exclaimed. “What have you...?”

The strong man froze and slowly stood up, releasing his son, who turned with a bright-eyed smile towards the ones his father was now looking at: a strange boy with spiky hair...an oversized duck in a blue beret...and what looked like a bizarre cross between a bloodhound and a scarecrow.

“Um...Varian...who are these...people?” he finally decided on the words to use.

“Oh! Ah, Dad,” Varian chirruped, practically skipping back towards the three, as Ruddiger stood on his shoulders and swung out his paws dramatically to introduce them: “These are Sora, Donald, and Goofy. They’re, uh, friends of the princess.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Sora smiled, stepping forward and extending a hand.

Quirin moved closer, his face blank and emotionless. He glanced towards Sora’s extended hand and then his face. The teenaged keyblade master winced slightly, but kept his smile in place, trying to look welcoming before the imposing older man...

...Quirin finally smiled and took Sora’s hand firmly (but not crushingly so), and gave it a brisk shake.

“A friend of the princess is a friend of mine. I’m Sir Quirin, Vassal of Old Corona,” he grunted, then tilted his head. “Why are you all here?”

“Your son led us here,” Sora answered, stepping back. “We, uh...just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

“Lucky for him we were!” Donald sniggered. “Seemed like he was having some trouble!”

Varian’s eyes widened, and he gave Donald a “shushing” gesture, while Ruddiger made desperate throat-slicing motions...but it was naturally too late.

“Trouble?” Quirin repeated, then looked to Varian with a frown. “*Son...*?”

Varian gulped a bit nervously, then rubbed his arm sheepishly.

“I was...I was just out...researching-”

“Varian. Were you trying to...study those Dark Creatures again?” Quirin asked in a slow, dangerous voice.

Even Sora, Donald, and Goofy flinched slightly at the tone; if you, oh dearest reader, know anyone who can resist the intimidating power of the “dad voice,” I’d like for you to introduce them to me.

Varian, clearly, was not such a person; he winced, as if he’d been physically struck, and bit his lip before answering.

“...I just...I’m just trying to help...”

“The last time you tried to help, you nearly blew up the entire village,” Quirin answered blandly.

The eyes of the three Champions of Light widened and they glanced to each other with some alarm. They were even more alarmed when the conversation continued as if this was an everyday occurrence.

“I’m sorry! Just...I’ve been trying to figure out a weakness; I’m working on a chemical compound that I think could-”

“I’ve told you NOT to wander off; you should know better than to try and get anywhere NEAR those things!”

“I know, I know, I know!” Varian almost begged, “But...Dad, they’re not going away, and the attacks are coming faster now, SOMETHING has to be done!”

“Something will be done. Tomorrow.”

“Oh, I know that, too!” Varian exclaimed...then gestured towards the trio again, who took a slight step back as they were drawn back into the argument. “That’s, ah, why I thought they could go with you! Dad, maybe they can help us!”

Quirin looked back up at Sora and the group. He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

“Is that so?”

“We, ah...we need to see the Princess, ourselves,” Sora decided to say.

“Yer son said maybe you could give us a ride,” Goofy put in.

“And that we could spend the night,” Sora added.

“Ah, that is, if it’s not too much trouble!” Donald thought to qualify, hastily.

“No trouble at all,” Quirin said, rather kindly, then added: “But I think His Majesty and myself can manage here, at least.”

“If you’re sure,” Sora said carefully.

“Uh...dad?”

All eyes turned back to Varian.

“Yes, son?”

“I, ah...heh heh...I can come, too...”

His eyes became very wide and almost glassy as he looked up to his father.

“...Right?”

Quirin squirmed and mumbled something under his breath about (the only words Sora and company caught were “...your mother’s eyes...”), and smiled after a moment.

“Very well. You can travel with me.”

The trio glanced to one another again, eyebrows raised; the young alchemist had made it sound as if he was going to be traveling anyway. As if asking for permission wasn’t strange enough, why did Quirin seem so...hesitant?

Varian, however, took no notice. He blinked and looked quite surprised, as Ruddiger clambered down off his shoulders. The pair looked at each other, then back at Quirin.

“W-Wow...really?” Varian squeaked.

Quirin’s smile widened, and he nodded.

Varian beamed.

“Yes! YES!” he squealed, and began to dance happily, singing out his joy, while Ruddiger clapped his paws giddily. “ROAD TRIIIP! VARIAN AND DAD ARE GOIN’ TO SEE THE KIIING!”

Then, with the same exuberance, Varian gasped, and rubbed his hands together gleefully.

“I,” he proclaimed, with absolute seriousness, “Will pack *Ham Sandwiches*. BE RIGHT BACK!”

And without another word, the boy ran off, Ruddiger wagging his bushy tail behind him. Quirin chuckled softly and shook his head as he watched the lad dash off.

“Is he...always like this?” Donald thought to pipe up.

“Most always,” shrugged Quirin, then looked back at them. “There’s not much room on the wagon; you’ll need to sit in the back when we depart.”

“We’ve had worse,” Sora said with a shrug and a smile...which faded quickly. “Uh...Sir?”

“Quirin.”

“Quirin...you say the Heart-er, the Black Creatures have been attacking here a lot recently?”

Quirin’s face sobered, and he looked back over his shoulder towards the ruined houses beyond.

“No one has been hurt yet, or worse,” he said, but his grim tone indicated the unspoken words: *That can’t last forever.*

“We’ll be glad to help in any way we can,” Goofy offered.

“I appreciate that,” Quirin said, then tilted his head. “Well?”

The question had been directed at Sora. He blinked a few times...then tilted his own head. “Well what?”

Quirin rolled his eyes.

“I can tell there’s some questions in your head. You can ask, if you want.”

Sora paused, looking somewhat embarrassed...then finally spoke his mind.

“You said...something about...er...blowing up the village?”

“One of Varian’s experiments,” Quirin answered, then turned away again, looking pensive. “I care for my son deeply. You have to understand that. But he’s over-eager; he doesn’t always plan things out fully, or makes mistakes that lead to disaster. Some people even think he’s a threat. He never means harm, but...”

“You worry he might go too far.”

Quirin nodded, with a wry smile.

“It’s why I usually don’t have him travel with me. I’m actually glad you three will be coming with us. If you can help defend us from those Creatures on the way to the capital, it would mean a lot.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Sora promised.

“Well, for a start, could you help Varian prepare whatever he needs to?” Quirin asked, and then pointed off in the distance. The trio looked off in the direction he had pointed...

...And found themselves staring at an old brownstone castle – not as magnificent or opulent as the one in the main kingdom. It was aged and Gothic looking; in the gloomy gray light, it seemed almost sinister.

“That’s where you live?” blinked Donald.

“Yep,” Quirin said, shortly.

“Well, it’s...nice in a ‘I wish I’d said goodbye to Riku & Kairi before I came here’ way,” muttered Sora.

“We get that a lot,” Quirin shrugged, unaffected, then turned on his heel and began to march off. “I need to tend to my pumpkin patch. I’ll trust you all to make yourselves at home without causing trouble. Whatever you do, don’t touch the Flynnolium.”

The three watched Quirin go...then looked back to the castle...then to each other.

“Flynnolium?” they murmured in unison.

If the exterior of the Old Corona Castle was unnerving, then Varian’s laboratory was no less unsettling. As Sora, Donald, and Goofy stepped into the teenager’s workshop, they felt they had stepped into a scene straight out of *Frankenstein*. On one side of the room was a drafting table: papers and books were stacked or propped up, with a few select notes and drawings tacked to the wall. To the other side was a table apparently used for mechanical work; hammers, screwdrivers, and other such tools were all laid out. All around the place were shelves and bookcases, covered in glass containers; some were empty, others were not; fluids, powders, and crystal salts were all set out in every color of the rainbow, from aquamarine to chartreuse. The centerpiece of all this was a long table with a magnificent chemistry set on it, along with various other tools that almost looked like instruments of torture. The whole space was lit by gas lamps from the ceiling (which appeared to have been homemade – perhaps Varian had invented them?) and a small alcove with a large curtain was found in one corner.

The trio stepped through the door into the laboratory.

“Varian?” Sora called out.

“Varian!” Donald shouted, when there was no immediate response.

“Gawrsh,” muttered Goofy. “Maybe he’s not here after-”

FAH-PSH!

Out of nowhere, a cloud of pinkish-purple mist surrounded the trio. They coughed and fanned the stuff away from their faces – it smelled, oddly enough, like bubble gum – and then tried to move away from it...

...Only to find they couldn’t.

The trio looked down...and found that a strange, gummy, gooey substance had stuck up their feet, adhering them to the stone floor of the laboratory.

“WWWAAAAAAK!” Donald cried out, and frantically began bouncing around to try and get free. “HEY! LEMME OUTTA THIS STUFF!”

Goofy tried to pull himself free, then – “YOW-WO-WO-WOAH!” – flopped right onto his face and groaned.

Sora just sighed and facepalmed.

“Booby Traps. Of course. Of course he has booby traps.”

“Ahhh...actually, that’s a Raccoon Trap. Ruddiger’s not the only one around, after all.”

All three looked as Varian entered the workshop from a side door...removing a kitchen apron covered in pink polka dots.

“Sorry!” he chirped with a shy smile, slinging the apron onto the back of a chair. “Ha ha ha...I, uh...I DID say I’d be making ham sandwiches. Just now put them in the icebox for tomorrow.”

The young alchemist stepped fully into the lab and crossed the room to his mechanical workbench, placing the basket down next to a small handsaw. He had removed the dark coat the trio had met him in, and they could now see his more typical garb. Varian still had the goggles and the thick gloves and boots they’d seen him wearing before, but now they were accompanied by a dark maroon apron with multiple pockets that festooned his front. Underneath the apron, the youth wore a sky blue smock, with the collar turned up and the sleeves rolled up past his elbows.

His bottom half was clad in a pair of brown trousers, which seemed to have a few stains and even burn marks at the edges; clearly the apron didn't ALWAYS help...or perhaps, since the apron seemed relatively clean, he had only recently acquired it.

"You must have activated the trip wire when you came in," Varian grinned, looking quite proud of himself. "Makes for a good burglar-catcher, too, don'tcha think?"

"Yeah. Great," Donald grouched. "Now GET US OUTTA HERE!"

Varian giggled and patted down the pockets of his alchemy apron. Sora idly wondered what the point had been in wearing one apron over another...but ultimately decided, with Varian, perhaps it was best not to question.

"Okay, okay, keep your shirt on! Where is that neutralizing particle...? Aha!"

Varian pulled what looked like a salt shaker out of his apron and approached the group. He raised an eyebrow and waggled it in the air for a moment, as if to show off...then knelt down and shook what seemed like a bunch of small yellow crystals onto the gummy goop that held the group in place. There was a soft "fizzing" sound, and yellowish smoke with a lemon pepper smell drifted up...then, the goop seemed to evaporate away, as if it had never been there at all.

"I am SO sorry," Varian apologized with a light chuckle as he stood up.

"It's okay," Sora said, then smiled. "Actually, that's kind of a cool trick!"

"Says you," grumbled Donald, as Goofy just smiled and brushed himself off without a word.

"You...y-you really think so?" Varian asked, looking stunned.

"Well, yeah!" Sora chuckled. "I mean...it doesn't hurt anyone, and it's something that works well, and I can't think of anybody else who'd make something like that. I'd say it's pretty neat!"

"Oh! W-Well, if you think that's something cool, you should see something else I have cooking up!" Varian twittered, brushing his blue-striped hair out of his face...then paused and added in a hushed voice, lifting his hands in a subduing gesture. "But, uh, y-you have to keep it a secret. Okay? My dad would, like, totally flip out if he knew what I was making and why."

Sora's eyes lit up. Donald and Goofy rolled their own. If there was one thing Sora loved, it was a secret.

"Show me!" he exclaimed, with surprising excitement.

Varian grinned wider and clapped his hands, then all but pranced over to his chemistry set. He

picked up a large glass flask and showed it to the group. The three cocked their heads (Sora and Donald to the left, Goofy to the right) as they looked closely at what Varian had brought to their attention: it seemed to be a peculiar, viscous, honey-like liquid, which glowed slightly in the dim light.

“What is that?” Sora asked, tapping the flask.

“Ah, c-careful!” Varian chuckled, pulling it back and lifting it higher, as if in a great presentation. “It’s a chemical compound, of my own design... WHICH I SHALL HENCEFORTH NAME SORANIUM!”

Silence.

“...Um...awesome,” Sora chuckled, “But...why?”

“Oh, well, if you don’t want something named after you-”

“N-No, that’s...um...that’s...kind of awesome, actually,” Sora admitted with a slight blush. “But...I mean, why did you make it? What’s it do?”

Varian smiled wider; there was a twinkle in his eye – impish, almost unhinged.

The group wasn’t sure they liked it.

“It creates a series of amber-like crystals that grow for a certain time and then stop after a short while. I created it by mixing a few formulas of my own invention.”

He began to carry the flask back to the table, and continued speaking as he went.

“See...my dad thinks the best thing to do is just...let the problem blow over,” Varian said, his voice becoming tremulous and soft, “But Rapunzel...”

He smiled as he put the flask down and looked back towards the group.

“She believes in me,” he said, quietly. “She asked me to try and help stop the Heartless. They’ve been getting worse all over the kingdom...”

“How much worse?” Goofy asked.

Varian’s smile faded; he turned away, there was a haunted look in his eyes.

“A lot worse,” he whispered, hoarsely. “Nobody’s been killed, but...”

“Your dad said nobody was getting seriously hurt.”

Varian’s eyes hardened.

“Well. He’s half right.”

Varian left it at that.

“Rapunzel’s father doesn’t allow her to leave the capital anymore,” Varian admitted after a moment’s pause. “I try to go there whenever I can to...discuss things and such. She’s my friend. And I’m her ally. We will find a way to stop these creatures...”

He looked into the glowing honey-like liquid in the flask, a glint in his baby blue eyes.

“...I won’t rest till we do.”

“Then why don’t you use that stuff?” Donald asked.

“The Soranium?” Varian confirmed, as if he had been calling it that all his life. “Oh, well...it’s not finished. There’s a big problem with the formula...well, maybe two problems, hard to say.”

He gently tapped the flask with his knuckles as he explained.

“See, this particular batch was made using a bit of dark material I picked up from one of those creatures when it attacked our village last.”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy felt their hair stand on end.

“I thought it would help make it affect the ‘Heartless’ more,” Varian went on, “But the effects were...unexpected. It’s a little unstable. I haven’t had a chance to test it on the Dark Creatures yet, but it appears that the crystals are completely unbreakable. I tried everything: a drill, a buzzsaw, even one of my explosive formulas, and nothing worked. And I’m not sure how it might affect organic material...”

He trailed off, then looked up to the trio, a determined expression on his face.

“What else did my Dad tell you?” he asked, somewhat darkly.

“Um...he said that...well...he said some people...”

“Think I’m dangerous?”

“Yeah...”

A sad look came over the boy's face, and he hung his head.

"That's why I can't allow any mistakes this time. I need to make sure it works perfectly. The princess asked for this. I have to make it work."

"I think you should get rid of it," Donald piped up.

Varian stared at the duck as if he'd grown seven new heads.

"What?!"

"Tampering with the darkness is a dangerous thing," Donald explained.

"He's right, Varian," Goofy nodded. "That stuff has a piece of the Heartless in it; for all you know, it could do more harm than good."

Varian blinked...then suddenly, he snorted with laughter, all smiles and energy again.

"Nah, it's not THAT dangerous!" he chuckled. "Like I said, I haven't even tested it on organic matter, and it's not like I'd try it on a PERSON! So long as it stays in that flask, and nobody messes with it, it'll be fine. A few more tests, and I'll have it juuuust right!"

Before the trio could protest, the scampering sound of paws came from upstairs...and Ruddiger came bounding into the room. He twined himself around Varian's legs like a cat. Varian grinned and picked his pet up from under his forelimbs, the way one might a puppy or a plush toy.

"You done dusting things off, buddy?"

Ruddiger nodded with a bright smile. He flicked his ail, and a puff of dust came off it. Varian smiled back and draped him over his shoulders, then looked to his guests.

"Your rooms should be ready. Well, enough of this chatter!" he practically sang out. "Come on, New Team Awesome! Lemme show you around; it's been forever since we had people over for the night!"

So saying, the Alchemist hummed merrily as he swaggered out of his laboratory.

The trio glanced back towards the flask of "Soranium" on the table...then, without a word, followed.