

## **Book I: Serial Dilution**

### **Chapter V: Questions and Answers**

“I hope your friends don’t mind their room; this place may look big on the outside, but...”

“Don’t worry: if either of them complain, it will be Donald, and you get used to him after a while. And even he’s usually got the decency to be grateful.”

“Well, that’s a relief, I guess, heh...”

Sora smiled as he prepped the old, somewhat worn out sleeping bag Quirin had provided him on the floor. He was dressed in a plain white t-shirt and a pair of red plaid pajama pants: he and his friends always came prepared for nighttime stays when needed. Varian sat on the bed, dressed in light blue pajamas that had a few darker-colored patches; he obviously hadn’t been privy to a new suit of clothes in a while. The shade of the outfit matched his eyes. Sora couldn’t help but eye the young alchemist with curiosity once or twice; he had, naturally, removed his goggles and gloves, and without them, the gangly, chipmunk-faced teen somehow looked even younger than he really was – only about half his true age, although perhaps a bit too tall for the apparent range.

Varian tilted his head as he petted Ruddiger, the raccoon curled up in his lap as he wiggled his feet and watched the older teen get ready for slumber.

“Are you sure you’ll be comfortable with the floor?” Varian asked. “Because, really, I-I don’t mind givin’ up the bed. I mean...we could just sleep in it together, but that’d be...heh...awkward. Besides, we’d crowd Ruddiger.”

He patted the coon’s head in emphasis. Ruddiger let out a deep purring sound in response and nuzzled against Varian’s belly. The young scientist giggled: it tickled.

Sora smiled wider as he watched the interaction between the alchemist and his pet.

“It’s nice of you to offer, but it’s your house,” Sora said, courteously. “I’ll be okay, trust me.”

“Alright,” shrugged Varian, then grinned and tilted his head the other way. “So! Uh...before we get some shut-eye, I saved a little treat for you for after dinner. Would you like it?”

Sora blinked.

“I...guess that depends on what it is,” he said slowly.

Varian put Ruddiger to one side – the coon looked mildly affronted at being forced to leave the

lovely, warm lap of his favorite human, but didn't bug the lad about it – and then hopped off the bed. He moved to the nightstand behind his bed, opened the drawer...and revealed a small, rolled-up pouch.

“Here,” he said, and handed the pouch to Sora.

The keybearer frowned slightly in confused curiosity, and opened the pouch. His eyes then lit up as he beheld four small, round cookies, each covered in a curious purple frosting. Sora could smell the sweet, sugary goodness of the confections.

“They look good!” he grinned. “Where did you get them?”

“Nowhere. I made them,” Varian said with a chipper shrug.

Sora looked to the cookies, then to the teal-stripe-haired teen.

“They’re not gonna...you know...shrink me down, turn me to stone, anything like that?”

Varian looked Sora dead in the eye.

“Probably not,” he said, coolly.

Sora’s smile fell.

“...Probably?”

“Well. I don’t entirely remember what I used to make the frosting.”

There was a pause...then Varian laughed.

“HA HA HA! Oh! Ohhh, man, the look on your face!” he giggled and snorted with laughter, and waved a hand in a peaceful manner. “No, no, no, they won’t do anything like that, I promise! They’re safe, they’re safe!”

Sora sighed with relief and laughed weakly.

“You’ve gotta watch that sense of humor of yours,” he warned Varian with a chuckle. “Kind of evil at times...”

“Mean,” Varian grumbled, half-heartedly, in response. He then went silent as he watched Sora dropped all four of the cookies into his mouth at once; the older teen’s cheeks bulged as he began to chew noisily, chomping and crunching the cookies up before swallowing thickly, grunting as they all dropped into his stomach.

Varian smirked, an impish glimmer in his bright blue eyes.

“So...Sora,” Varian began, as the other boy sucked on his fingers to eliminate any remaining cookie crumbs, “How ‘bout we play a game before we, y’know, hit the sack?”

“Game?” Sora repeated, licking the last stray crumbs from his lips. “What kinda game?”

“Well...how ‘bout a round of ‘Truth or Dare?’” Varian suggested with a wink. “That’s always a classic.”

“Sure, as long as we don’t go too crazy,” Sora smiled and shrugged, and stood up to sit beside Varian on the bed. Ruddiger, who was eager to get a good look, chittered and bounded over to sit beside the two humans.

“You start; guests first, yeah?” Varian smiled.

“Sure,” Sora nodded, and then tilted his head thoughtfully. “Hmmm...let’s see now...Oh! Truth: why do have that funny teal stripe in your hair? Is it a dye job or something?”

Varian chuckled and ruffled his own hair, running his fingers around the bangs where the telltale stripe was found.

“Actually, no. I’ve always had it,” he shrugged. “Or, at least, I’ve had it since I was a little kid. It just...kind of grew in one day. I’ve actually, like, run tests on my own hair – right down to the follicle, which SMARTS, lemme tell ya, heh – but from what my research has been able to gather, it’s...y’know...all natural stripey-ness, ha!”

“Well, that’s kinda strange,” murmured Sora, then shrugged. “But I guess I’ve heard stranger. Your turn.”

“Okay, ah, I’ll go with a Truth, too!” Varian chirped, rubbing his hands together. “So: how did you learn to use that super-cool keyblade? Did you, like, go to school for it or something?”

Sora’s smile took on a nostalgic edge, and he shook his head.

“A keyblade,” he explained, “Chooses its user, not the other way around. I didn’t learn how to use the keyblade right away; if you mean in terms of my swordfighting, I used to practice with my friends back home all the time, and when the time came that I was chosen to use the keyblade, it was all just learning how to use its special powers.”

“Fascinating,” murmured Varian, and nodded. “Makes sense. Well, your turn again!”

“Right, so...Truth: I keep hearing stuff about explosions...?”

Varian flinched slightly and he blushed.

“I was trying to make machines that would give hot water to my village. They involved a formula I created called Flynnolium...”

He leaned in and whispered: “I named it after Flynn Rider! He even saw me demonstrate them!”

The alchemist clapped his knuckles giddily. Sora chuckled.

“Your dad mentioned that,” he said, then bit his lip before going on: “So, uh...what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Varian admitted with a sigh. “I’m not sure if the compound was still too unstable, or if the machines weren’t strong enough to withstand the reactions for an extended period of time, but...well...it didn’t go well.”

“I can imagine,” murmured Sora, then smiled widely. “Your turn again!”

“Simple Truth!” Varian grinned, rubbing his hands together...then gestured to Sora. “What are THOSE kinda clothes?”

Sora blinked.

“...Sorry?”

“Oh, they look AWESOME, make no mistake!” Varian exclaimed, with a nervous giggle and a placating gesture of his hands. “I’m just wondering where you get them, a-and why you dress like that, ha! I don’t know anyone in Corona with a sense of style like yours...”

He then suddenly reached forward and poked at the edge of Sora’s vest.

“...And the material...offhand, I’d say some sort of ethylene-based compound, but I’ve yet to find a way to replicate fabric of this kind of texture and design.”

“It’s...just what we wear where we come from,” chuckled Sora.

Varian looked disappointed for a moment, and even a little nervous; Sora wasn’t sure why...but he soon forgot it, as Varian shook his head as if to clear it, and chuckled.

“Well...ha ha...guess that’s a fair enough response! Heh...y-your turn again.”

“Okay,” Sora nodded, then paused and scratched the back of his head. “So, uh...this might be

personal, but...what happened to your mom?"

Varian's smile fell he paused and then sighed.

"Well...I was too young to really remember, but...apparently, she got...really, really sick. Like, super bad and terrible sick. And it just...finally got to her. My dad never told me the details, and I never asked him. Just..."

He rubbed his arm and let out a sad sort of laugh.

"...One morning...I woke up...and my Mom wasn't there anymore. My dad never cried so much in his life...in fact, I don't think I've ever seen him cry since, and I-I can't remember him ever, you know, crying before that..."

He paused, then looked upwards thoughtfully.

"I think...that's why I took an interest in alchemy. In science. I wanted to learn about how those things worked, a-and I wanted to know how to...how to make them stop. I wanted to help people who weren't happy, a-and make things better for...well...f-for everyone."

Varian dipped his head back down and then added: "Normally, I just...seem to make things worse."

Sora paused...then smiled comfortingly and placed a hand on Varian's shoulder.

"Hey, you can't be too hard on yourself," he whispered. "Sometimes people get scared by what they don't understand."

"Heh...well...they wouldn't have a reason to be scared, if I could make it work," Varian murmured, and something fiery flickered in his eyes as he clenched his fists. "One of these days...I'll make it right. I'll show them all, and...and I'll make my dad proud of me."

"I'm sure he's proud of you already," Sora said softly. "You're a great guy, Varian! You're smart, you're compassionate, you're...unique. I don't think there's anyone in Corona, or anyone else, who could do what you do."

Varian smiled up at Sora gratefully.

"Thanks," he said gently. "That...means a lot. Honestly."

There was a pause...and Varian coughed awkwardly.

"Ahem! Well, uh, I think it's, um...y'know, my turn."

“Right, right!” chuckled Sora, and scratched the back of his head, mussing his already unkempt hair. “Sorry, ah...shoot away.”

“Alright,” Varian said, and then tilted his head. “So, uh...I know you’re not from Corona – it’s pretty clear, really – but, um...where exactly are you from?”

Sora bit his lip.

“I’m...not sure I can tell you that,” he answered.

Varian raised one eyebrow...and smirked in a most devilish manner.

“Can’t you?” he purred.

Before Sora could insist that he couldn’t...he suddenly grunted and winced, clutching his chest. Something...seemed to be stirring inside him, making him feel woozy and unsteady, and there suddenly seemed to be something drumming in his head.

“Rrrrnh...it’s just...I’m not supposed to tell you that I come from another world called Destiny Islands because it’s against the rules of my job as a warrior of light and really it’s weird that I’m allowed to talk about the Heartless but I guess since they go everywhere that makes some sense though I don’t get why I couldn’t talk about other worlds I’d gone to in Halloween Town or the Pride Lands but anyway that’s why I’m not supposed to tell you the truth!”

All of this came out in one breath, and after briefly stopping for air...Sora’s eyes widened and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

Varian grinned widely, and his eyes gleamed.

“...What...h-how...why did I...?”

“Ha HA!” Varian exclaimed and pumped his fists. “Yes! YES! It works! I finally got it to work! YEAH-HAH!”

“What...what do you...?”

“I knew it! I KNEW you had to be from another world someplace; I mean, the animals around here are smart, but where else would you find a dog and a duck like that but another place entirely? And those clothes...TOTALLY not suiting the materials and styles of Corona or any of our other surrounding kingdoms, not even Saporita! And that POWER you have, I’ve never seen anything like it matched in alchemy! Ha Ha HA!”

Sora blinked slowly, trying to figure out what the excitable alchemist was cheering over...then, slowly, the pieces came together in his mind.

“The cookies,” he breathed, then glared. “Hey, was...you put something in those cookies, didn’t you?”

“HMMMM...is that your next Truth?”

“Wha...? Is that...?! Fine, yes, yes, it is, now did you?!”

“Yep!” Varian answered, bold as brass, a teasing smile on his face. “See, I’ve been developing a truth serum, but I couldn’t get it to work properly. When you guys came by, I thought this would be a great time to test it and learn some epic mad knowledge in the process! And I was right!”

“But...that’s...YOU TRICKED ME!”

“Hey, hey, it’s not going to ruin anything!” Varian soothed, putting up his hands. “Look, why is it so important you don’t tell people about that anyway, huh?”

Sora bit his lip.

“...Is...that...YOUR next Truth,” he shot back.

Varian chuckled.

“Good one, bravo. Yeah, we’ll say it is.”

“Well then,” Sora said, once again rattling out all the information as fast as his tongue would allow: “It’s because I travel to all sorts of different worlds and there are these bad guys and monsters who want to take them all over and destroy them. I’m not supposed to let other worlds know about...well...other worlds, because then their whole system gets thrown out of whack; that’s what creates a lot of the bad guys and the problems they cause in the first place, and-”

Varian held up his hands in a “time-out” gesture.

“So, basically,” he said, smoothly, “You’re not supposed to tell because bad things could happen if you tell a person.”

“...Basically, yes.”

“Well, the only one you’ve told is me!” Varian said brightly. “And trust me, I can keep a secret: I’ve been keeping them for a loooong time. I won’t tell Rapunzel, heck, not even my dad. I’m the only one who’ll ever know.”

Ruddiger let out an indignant noise. Varian smirked and stroke him behind his neck.

“Well...more like me and Ruddiger. Sorry, bud, didn’t mean to leave you out.”

Ruddiger smiled, and responded by rolling over onto his back. Varian giggled and scratched the coon’s tummy.

Sora wanted to protest, but...he had to admit...Varian made sense. And he found that, oddly enough, he DID trust the young alchemist – even if he had secretly slipped him a truth serum via cookie frosting.

Besides, it wasn’t like telling Varian, and Varian alone, would lead to Corona nearly being destroyed, or anything.

“Well...I guess that means it’s my turn again,” Sora muttered, and then glared. “But don’t go making me break anymore rules!”

“Hmmm...no promises!” grinned Varian. “I actually still have a few other questions for you.”

Sora looked the boy up and down...then sighed and threw his hands up.

“Fine, then why don’t you just ask them right now?”

Varian blinked, looking surprised.

“But...but it IS your turn.”

“Yeah, and I won’t be happy playing till I get whatever you want to get out of me...well...out of me,” Sora smirked. “So just go ahead and ask.”

Varian paused thoughtfully, and tilted his head.

“...Well...I do have one important one,” Varian said slowly. “Why did you come back to Corona? Why do you need to see the Princess?”

“It’s a mission for my Master,” Sora responded, quick as a whip. “He told us about this creepy weird vision he had and that the answers would be found in ‘The Kingdom of the Sun,’ meaning Corona, and so we came to try and figure out what’s going on. Rapunzel is a Princess of Heart – they’re, like, people who have superpowers they don’t even know about, tied to the very heart of their world – and our job is to protect her and see if whatever our Master saw has anything to do with her.”



Varian nodded slowly, processing all the information carefully.

“Then I have one last question, at least for now,” he responded, and narrowed his eyes, leaning in close. “Who do you think is behind...whatever you’re investigating? Who wants to hurt Rapunzel?”

Sora glared, and turned away from Varian, staring at the ground.

“She’s called...Maleficent,” Sora hissed the name with absolute hatred. “She’s one of the most evil and corrupt...THINGS I’ve ever met. Her crimes are without number, her villainy without end.”

“Ooooh...spooky talk,” Varian chuckled. “Sounds real dramatic.”

“Maybe it does, but it’s true. It has to be, thanks to your cookies.”

Varian smirked and winked in response. Sora didn’t crack even the tiniest smile.

“Over and over again, we keep thinking we’ve seen the last of her, but then she comes back with a new plan, or gets in our way again somehow,” he said. “Our Master found out she’s up to her old tricks; we think whatever is going on here in Corona, she’s got something to do with it.”

Varian nodded slowly again, a serious look on his face.

“I hope you get her,” he said softly, then blushed a bit and squirmed. “She sounds...um...kinda scary, heh...”

“She’d be scarier if she had a smarter thug working for her,” Sora muttered. “She’s got this guy called Pete. He’s from the same world as Donald & Goofy, and he’s basically this big, dumb, mean cat. He’s tough, but he can’t tie his own shoelaces without help from his own mooks. I think if she got rid of him...”

“Well, let’s hope she never does...and that she never gets someone smarter on her side,” Varian smiled, and nudged Sora’s shoulder. “Now, I think I’ve asked enough questions. You give me a Truth or Dare now.”

Sora nodded...then smiled.

“Well...to change things up...how about a Dare?”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. I dare you to learn some swordfighting of your own sometime.”

Varian blinked.

“...That...that’s not a dare I can fulfill right now.”

“Nope,” Sora responded with a shake of his head, crossing his arms over his chest. “But I’m also not done: after you learn how to fight with a sword better, maybe you and I can have another sparring match, and see who’s got the better moves. Sound fair?”

Varian smiled timidly.

“I...have a feeling you’ll win, anyway,” he chuckled. “But...yeah...yeah, that m-might be fun. But, BUT! Be warned! For I happen to know the greatest hero in Corona, Flynn Rider!”

Varian puffed out his chest and spoke with a deep, powerful voice as he added the last part. Sora chuckled.

“Oh, he’s not as great as you think. Trust me, if it hadn’t been for us,” Sora winked, “Eugene Fitzherbert wouldn’t have gone anywhere saving Rapunzel.”

“Oh, really? Well, what makes you think I’m talking about Eugene?” sniped Varian, and pointed to Sora. “Here’s MY Dare: before you leave Corona, I want you to pick up a book about Flynn Rider – the REAL Flynn Rider, NOT Eugene – and then tell me I couldn’t learn a thing or two from those books!”

Sora chuckled and responded by holding out a hand.

“You’re on, friend.”

Varian froze up.

“...F-Friend?” he peeped.

Sora’s hand dropped and he tilted his head, looking confused.

“Well...yeah.”

“...You consider me a friend?”

“What else would I consider you?”

“Would you like that answer in alphabetical order?”

Before Sora could react to that quip, Varian quickly added: “W-We’ve only known each other for a day!”

“That’s all it takes, sometimes,” Sora smiled, and thrust out his hand. “So let’s shake on it: you’ll learn how to use a sword properly, and I’ll give at least one of those books of yours a read. And someday, we’ll put both those dares to the test.”

Varian looked down at Sora’s outstretched hand...then smiled and gave it a shake.

“Thanks, heh...I think...I think that would be-!”

“HELP! HELP! SOMEBODY, HELP!”

Both jumped at the sound of sudden, shrill screams from outside the window.

“What the...?” Varian gasped...then yelped as the door was flung open. Quirin stood there in the doorway, holding a lantern, while Donald and Goofy – dressed in their usual attire, and with their weapons already at the ready – were at his side.

“What’s going on?” Sora asked, jumping down from the bed.

“The Dark Creatures,” Quirin answered grimly. “They’re back. And there’s more of them now than ever before.”

Sora sighed, and hurried towards the door, casting a spell to change back into his battle suit.

“Great,” he grumbled. “And we were having such a moment...a hero’s work is never done...”

Varian smiled as he watched Sora leave, followed by his dad, the dog, and the duck...

...Then, without a word, he jumped out of bed and hurried down the hall himself...heading straight towards his lab.

“I’ll show them all,” he muttered. “Someday, I really will...”