

Book I: Serial Dilution

Chapter VII: Familiar Sunshine

The golden rays of the Sun filtered through the silvery clouds that curled what seemed like only inches away from the battlements of the Castle in Corona's Capital. There was a slight chill in the air, but the people who lived in the city didn't seem to mind. They bustled about, to and fro, with gay smiles upon their faces. As long as the Sun shone, there was never anything to fear.

Not far beyond the bridge that separated the island from the mainland, one might have noticed a sturdy wooden cart. It was drawn by an old dapple-grey pony, which chuffed as it shook its stringy mane out of its face. Seated in the driver's spot was Quirin, who gripped the reins firmly as he kept his eyes forward, the pony trotting along at a brisk but comfortable canter. In the back of the wagon – where normally apples and pumpkins may be stored – sat Sora, Donald, and Goofy, all on one side, while Varian sat on the opposite end.

Ruddiger was seated happily beside his human owner; he tugged at Varian's apron. The young alchemist looked to the raccoon and smirked, as the little critter opened his mouth and pointed into it with one paw.

"Fluffy little glutton," chuckled Varian, and pulled an apple out of the picnic basket on his opposite side. "This is the last one; you've already had five!"

He handed the fruit to Ruddiger, who greedily chomped it. His teeth nearly cleaved the apple in two with a single bite, juices spattering his whiskered face.

"Would you guys like anything?" Varian asked, graciously, patting the picnic basket as he looked at the trio.

"I'll have one of those sandwiches you made," Sora smiled.

"Same here!" Donald and Goofy chorused.

Varian happily handed them out, and also took one for himself, then looked to the driver's seat.

"Dad?" he called. "Would you like anything before we reach the capital?"

"I'm fine, son," Quirin answered, glancing over his shoulder for a moment with a quiet smile before turning back to face the road.

Varian shrugged and unwrapped his sandwich from the paper covering with a light hum. All four of those in the wagon took their first bites at almost the same time...and, also at almost the same

time, Ruddiger, began licking his whiskers and sucking his paw-digits as he finished up his apple, carlessly tossing the core over his shoulder and out of the cart.

“Sho, Vuriuhn,” Sora began to ask, cheeks stuffed as he spoke with his mouth full. “Ah wush jusht wunduhrin’...”

“Sora,” Donald interrupted, narrowing his eyes and smirking. “Mind your manners!”

Sora blinked...then smiled sheepishly as he chewed a few times and swallowed. Goofy just chortled at his side and continued eating his own sandwich without a word.

“Sorry,” Sora apologized.

Varian, whose own mouth was full, waved a hand dismissively, as if to assure his new friend it was okay.

“As I was saying,” Sora tried again, drumming his fingers around the sandwich he held. “I was just wondering how you got to know Rapunzel.”

Varian swallowed and chuckled, as he lifted his apron and dabbed at his mouth oh-so-properly.

“Ahhh...well, y’see, it was like this,” he said, putting his sandwich to one side as he spoke. “You see, a few months ago, she came to my workshop...”

He put on a high-pitched voice and clasped his hands in what could only be described as an overly girly way, clearly trying to imitate the Princess.

“...And she was all, ‘I’m looking for Varian!’ So I was, like...”

He thrust out his chest and put his hands on his hips.

“‘I AM VARIAN!’” he declared, in a deep, resonant tone...before letting out a snorting laugh and once again adopting his “Rapunzel” impression. “Then she said: ‘Hi! Sorry to bother you, sir, but I wanna ask you ‘bout my hair...’”

He froze and shook his head, holding out his hands.

“Oh! Hold on, sorry, lemme back up; I forgot to tell you about the raccoon trap. See, just like you-”

“Hold it, hold it!” Donald suddenly squawked. “Her hair?”

“Gawrsh...didn’t Eugene cut it when we last saw them?” Goofy spoke up.

“Ohhhh, that’s right, you haven’t been here for a while!” Varian exclaimed, snapping his fingers, and cleared his throat. “Ahem! See, for about a year, the princess’ hair was normal, but a few months ago it...grew back. Like...overnight, apparently. Blonde, long, the whole works.”

“Then...she has her healing powers, too?”

“Nope. Not anymore. But something else changed: her hair is completely unbreakable, kinda like the crystals Soranium makes. I should know; I studied it – did, like, EVERY test I could think of.”

He picked up his sandwich again and waved it about a bit as he went on.

“Now, most people say it’s magic, but...yeeeeaaaah, personally, don’t believe that.”

As Varian rolled his eyes and took another bite of his sandwich, the keyblade wielder and his compatriots looked to each other, then back at the alchemist.

“A girl suddenly grows her hair overnight – hair that’s unbreakable – and you...DON’T think it’s magic?” Sora said slowly.

“Nope!” Varian chirped after finishing his mouthful. “See, I believe in a simple rule: ‘Any sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic.’ Heck, there are some people who think alchemy is a form of magic; just a matter of chemicals and minerals and all that jazz.”

Varian shrugged and took another bite. The rest of his friends did as well.

“Varian,” Sora thought to ask after a few moments, “How long ago did the Dark Creatures start appearing?”

Varian’s smile faded; he glanced to one side.

“Literally weeks after she visited me,” he admitted...then glanced to Quirin, and waved a hand for the trio to move closer so he could whisper to them. The three travelers obeyed.

“We know there’s a connection,” Varian said in a low, hushed voice. “The Princess, Flynn Rider, Me...but we don’t know what it is yet. That’s why she asked me to try and figure out an answer. The ‘Heartless,’ or whatever they’re called, are moving closer and closer to the main city, and if all the attacks in Old Corona are a sign...”

He trailed off, ominously. Sora smiled gently and put a hand on the teen’s shoulder; Varian looked a little distressed, but his expression brightened again at the older teenager’s comforting expression.

“We’ll find a way to stop them,” he said, bravely.

“Yeah! We know the Princess, too, after all,” Goofy nodded. “We can probably lend a hand easily.”

“Especially against the Heartless!” Donald agreed.

Varian chuckled softly. Ruddiger, noticing his owner seemed worried, climbed into his lap. Varian petted him gently.

“I hope you’re right,” he murmured...then slowly looked up again. “I’m doing all I can to help, but-”

“We’re here, boys!” Quirin suddenly thundered, causing the quartet to jump slightly. “We’re crossing the bridge into Corona now!”

The cart pulled into the busy city square of Corona, directly across from Feldspar’s Footwear.

“There’s some goods I need to pick up before the King holds open audience,” Quirin said to the group, as they hopped out of the cart, Ruddiger once again draping himself across Varian’s shoulders. “Can I trust you all on your own?”

“Don’t worry, Sir Quirin!” Sora grinned, and clapped Varian on the back. “We’ll take care o’ him!”

Varian let out a shrill, squeaky sound, stumbled forward, and gave a slightly forced smile.

“Ha Ha...ouch,” he murmured, softly trying to rub at the sore spot on his shoulder.

Sora flinched and smiled back.

“Ahhh...s-sorry...”

The alchemist’s father rolled his eyes and shook his head, then jabbed a finger in his son’s direction.

“Stay out of trouble,” he warned, in a firm but not unkind voice.

“Psht! Since when have I EVER done otherwise?” Varian grinned innocently, his wide smile matched by the raccoon on his shoulders.

The former knight’s blank expression said it all.

“I’ll be careful,” Varian vowed, seriously, and Ruddiger nodded and gave a thumbs-up, as if to say, *Me too!*

Quirin’s lips quirked into a smile, and he flicked the reins, driving the pony towards a different shop – a bakery called “Attila the Bun” – while the other four waved farewell.

“See you at the castle, dad!” the boy with blue-striped hair called out, then smiled as he looked to Sora, Donald, and Goofy. “So! Let’s go see the Princess!”

“And Flynn!” Goofy chuckled, and the four headed off in the direction of the glittering palace of gold and turquoise in the center of the island...

The gates to Corona Castle were guarded by two men, garbed in red and white uniforms and golden armor. One was a broad-shouldered fellow with a bushy black moustache and tanned skin; the other was a pale-skinned man with freckles on his cheeks and a lean, trim build, a few inches shorter than his comrade. Each carried pole-axes, which they crossed as the four strange figures approached the castle.

“State your names and beeswax!” snapped the thin guard.

“Uh...Pete? The phrase is ‘names and business,’” the other guard hissed.

The thin guard blinked.

“...Is it, Stan?”

“Well, I THINK so,” the stronger man frowned, looking like he wasn’t sure.

Varian rolled his eyes, while Sora, Donald, and Goofy chuckled to themselves.

“I am Varian, Son of Quirin,” he began, “And-”

“Oh. The kid who nearly sucked the entire castle into a crazy vortex during the science expo,” glared Stan. “How...*nice* to see you.”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy’s jaws dropped; just how much trouble DID Varian’s experiments cause?!

Varian flinched and giggled in a nervous, guilty way.

“Uh...ha ha ha...y-yeah, um...and-AND! And these are Sora, Donald Duck, and Goofy!” he introduced the other three.

“The ones who helped Rider – I mean, Fitzherbert, save the Princess?” gasped Pete.

“Hey, Rapunzel can take care of herself,” shrugged Sora. “We just...leant a hand here and there.”

“We need to see her!” quacked Donald. “It’s really important!”

The guards looked to each other...shrugged...and uncrossed the poles.

“Fine, go on in,” smiled Pete.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy blinked, glanced at each other, then back at the guards.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. You’re friends of the princess, you helped the kingdom, King’s castle *es su* castle,” Stan chuckled.

Goofy frowned and scratched his head.

“Um...but, don’t you need-?”

“Come on!” Sora and Varian suddenly said at once, and all four hurried past the guards and through the castle gates.

The alchemist led Sora and Company into the palace. He smiled as he glanced around at the opulent rooms and halls around them as they marched through. The other three had their eyes open wide as they, too, took in the sights of the immense and beautifully decorated gilded halls.

“It seems bigger than I remember,” murmured Sora.

“It has that effect, I guess,” shrugged Varian.

“HEY! GET BACK HERE, FROG!”

The four stopped in their tracks as a voice bellowed through the Halls ahead. It was soon followed by another voice, and the sound of approaching footsteps.

“PASCAL! STOP! WAIT!”

Around the bend from one of the halls ahead of the trio, a small green chameleon skidded across the well-waxed tile floor of the palace. He smirked over his shoulder and hurried on...then

squeaked as Ruddiger jumped down off of Varian's shoulders and barred his way.

The chameleon stepped back, startled, and then looked up. His little eyes widened as he saw the four larger figures, which waved to him with matching, knowing smiles.

A moment later, another figure rounded the bend.

"There you are! Pascal, you know-!"

The young lady froze, and looked to the four with wide green eyes, which glittered like emeralds. Her lips were painted pinkish-red, and her cheeks were rosy as could be. She wore a fine-looking purple dress that reached nearly to her ankles, and visibly had no shoes on. But the most noticeable thing about her was her hair: braided tightly with multiple ribbons and beaded bands, it was a shade of blonde that seemed to glimmer and glisten in the light that streamed through the palace windows, shimmering like gold coins tossed into a wishing well. Even the light of the Sun seemed pale in comparison.

Pascal darted over to her; the young lady, who looked to be in her late teens or early twenties, bent at the hip and picked him up...then, still holding him in her hands, stood up fully again, her eyes never once leaving the group before her.

"Sora? Donald? Goofy?" she nearly breathed.

"Hello again, 'Your Highness,'" Sora smiled and gave a mock-salute in greeting, then whistled, as if impressed, as he eyed the long braid behind her. "Wow...your hair, it...even all wrapped up, it's even longer than I-"

He yelped, caught off guard, as Pascal hopped up onto his human friend's head...and Rapunzel dashed forward and suddenly embraced Sora in a tight, squeezing hug.

"I've missed you SO MUCH!" she nearly squealed, and then backed away with a wide, exuberant smile, glancing to Donald and Goofy and hugging them as well. Goofy laughed and nearly fell over as she all but tackled him, and Donald blushed and squawked as she actually lifted him into the air and cuddled him like an oversized teddy bear; Varian and Sora each giggled at the sight.

"It's been so long, I-I wasn't sure if you'd all really be coming back!" the Princess cheered, clapping giddily.

Then she turned to Varian...and her smile seemed to grow even brighter as she hugged him too. Varian froze up and let out another squeaking sound, blinking rapidly as his freckled face turned slightly pink.

“It’s good to see you, too, Varian,” Rapunzel greeted him, sweetly, and as he pulled back glanced down with a smirk at the raccoon by Varian’s feet...who was pouting at being overlooked. “And you, Ruddiger.”

Ruddiger perked up and smiled.

“Blondie!” the first voice called again. “Hey, Sunshine, did you-?”

The source of the voice halted quite suddenly as he rounded the bend. His eyes bugged and his jaw went slack as he saw the duck, the dog, and the boy with spiky hair standing in front of him. He was a tall, strapping fellow in his mid-twenties, garbed in a forest green vest and white collared shirt, the sleeves rolled up just under his elbows. He wore light brown trousers, and much darker brown leather boots, along with a matching belt. To one side he wore a leather pouch; the other bore a short sword and its scabbard. His eyes were the color of molten chocolate, and matched his well-combed hair, along with the sharp, short goatee that sprouted from his sharp chin. His whole appearance was bold and classically handsome; heroic, some might say.

It was a pity he looked more like a dying fish for about two seconds, eyes blinking and mouth struggling to form words...before a wide smile stretched across his face.

“Well, WELL!” he laughed, swaggering forward confidently. “My old fellow sidekicks! It’s been AGES!”

“Hi, Eugene!” grinned Sora, and the former thief gave all three of the heroes of light a high-five. Just like Rapunzel, he then turned to Varian.

“Well, well, Hairstripe,” he smirked. “Haven’t seen you since you nearly killed us with your last invention.”

“Yeah! Good times, right?” Varian sang out, not even noticing the tone of Flynn’s words.

“Right,” Flynn said dryly, but with slight amusement...then glanced about nervously. “You, uh...you don’t have another invention around, do ya?”

“Nope. Not today,” Varian said, almost sounding disappointed he couldn’t show anything new.

“No worries,” sighed Eugene, sounding immensely relieved.

Donald and Goofy rolled their eyes.

“What’s going on?” Sora put forth. “You two seemed in a hurry.”

“It was Pascal,” Rapunzel said, and pulled the little chameleon off the top of her head; the lizard squirmed somewhat guiltily. “He was...being rambunctious.”

Pascal smiled sheepishly, and his whole chameleon body turned a blushing shade of red.

“See, Blondie’s Dad is leaving tomorrow on a trip with the queen,” Flynn explained. “So she and I are gonna be in charge for a day.”

“Right,” Rapunzel nodded, and smiled as she stroked Pascal with one finger, the lizard purring as he sat in the palm of her hand. “So he wanted me to sit in on his little ‘open house’ for the day so I could get an idea of what to expect tomorrow. Pascal here didn’t wanna sit around bored, listening to people.”

“You know how frogs are,” Flynn winked. “Can’t sit still for ten seconds without hopping after a dumb fly-BWAH?!”

Flynn nearly stumbled over as Pascal’s long, sticky tongue flicked him in the ear, and the mischievous lizard giggled to himself.

“That’s actually why I’m here,” Varian piped up. “My Dad came for that audience today.”

“Oh, I see,” Rapunzel murmured, looking concerned. “Is something wrong?”

Varian bit his lip; all eyes were on him.

“...I’d...well...you’ll find out when my dad talks to you and your father,” he chuckled nervously.

“Well, that shouldn’t be too long from now,” Rapunzel nodded with a warm smile, then looked to her other friends and former rescuers. “Is that why you’re here too?”

“No,” Sora admitted, shaking his head. “We’re actually on mission; we think there’s something wrong here in Corona, and we wanted to talk to you about it.”

Rapunzel’s concerned expression grew deeper. She and Eugene glanced to each other, then back at the three.

“We’ll talk in private after Sunshine and her daddy dearest finish their business together,” Flynn said, in a firm sort of tone, placing a hand on Rapunzel’s shoulder. “We’ll have more time then.”

“Is there a place we can spend the next couple of nights, by the way?” Sora put in.

“We may be here a while,” Goofy admitted.

“I can set up a room for you right now, before the meeting starts,” Rapunzel smiled.

“I’ll go wait by the throne room for my dad,” Varian said, picking up Ruddiger and bowing his head respectfully to Rapunzel before beginning to walk off. “See you all later!”

“Later, Hairstripe!” Eugene called out.

“We have a lot to catch up on!” Donald quacked with a smile.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Rapunzel giggled with a twinkle in her eye, and tossed her head, a curl of loose hair flicking as she did. “Come on! We’ve got a lot to do, and not a lot of time...if there’s one thing 18 years in a tower taught me, it’s never waste a moment!”