

Book I: Serial Dilution

Chapter VIII: A Promise

“Why do we have to wait out here?”

“Shhh! Sora, keep it down!”

“But it’s soooooooo BORING!”

“Trust me, kid, I know the feelin’.”

Sora groaned and slumped to the floor, crossing his arms in something like a pout as he sat against the wall in a spot just beyond the side entrance to the throne room. Donald and Goofy sat across from him, their backs against a pair of short columns, while Flynn Rider leaned up against the wall quietly, looking up at the ceiling. The group had been ushered out by the King himself; he had welcomed them all happily, but when it came to matters of royal duty, he was a stickler for certain rules.

“A King and His People,” he had explained, kindly, “Need to be on equal terms. If I allow strangers to be present for these matters, the people won’t understand it and might not know how to react. Some things need a bit of privacy. But whatever your mission is, I would be glad to discuss it later, if needed.”

He’d then looked pointedly at Sora with a slight smirk and added: “Besides, children have no place in court.”

Sora had decided at that point that Flynn Rider had a VERY annoying laugh.

Of course, Flynn had been asked to leave, too.

“This is for Rapunzel’s sake, son,” the King had said sternly. “You can’t be with her all the time, you know.”

As a result, the four had been dismissed...but Flynn had found them a spot outside the side door to “listen in, and kept the door slightly ajar without the Royal Family noticing.

“I get the feeling the King doesn’t trust you,” Goofy spoke up.

Flynn shrugged.

“I was a thief for over a decade; I don’t really blame ‘im,” Eugene responded. “Besides, he’s

probably afraid my devilishly handsome features will distract the good public!”

Donald snickered, while Sora just sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Ugh...we don’t have time for this,” he grumbled. “We have a quest to get on with!”

“Kid, I don’t know where you’re from, but I already know it ain’t from Corona,” snorted Eugene. “Trust me, I don’t like it any more than you do, but there are rules...and, sadly, now that I need to be Mr. Upstanding Law-Abiding Boyfriend, I kiiiinda need to follow ‘em.”

He smirked and thumbed towards the keyhole.

“But, hey...no one ever said eavesdropping was against the law, did they? Therein lies the Almighty Loophole!” he winked, tapping the side of his temple. “Can’t be with ‘em physically, but we can still listen in! Just can’t get *caught*.”

Sora nodded slowly, while Donald and Goofy groaned slightly. The teenager glanced at the door – or, more specifically, at the keyhole – then back to the goateed ex-crook.

“Think we can take a peek?” he whispered with an impish smile.

Flynn smirked wider and waved a hand as if to say, Be my guest.

“Don’t encourage him!” Donald hissed, jumping to his webbed feet...but by then, Sora had gotten up and tip-toed to the door. He moved so his large blue eye was almost flush against the keyhole, and peered into the throne room.

Rapunzel sat on a small throne to the King’s right, with Pascal on her shoulder. The poor lizard yawned and sighed, clearly bored out of his mind; Rapunzel tried to soothe him with a few gentle scratches along the back of his head. To the King’s left was the Queen, Arianna, who was dressed in dark purple robes and a golden tiara; Rapunzel clearly took after her mother, for aside from the fact the Queen was clearly older (though still quite vivacious) and had very slightly darker skin, the two were very nearly alike in appearance. King Frederic himself was a slightly heavysset man with wide, burly shoulders, dressed in blue and gold; he had short-cut hair and a thick beard and moustache of dark brown, along with steel-colored eyes. A golden crown of his own was set upon his thoughtful-looking brow.

“Next!” the King called, clapping his hands...and Sora’s eye flickered as he saw a tall, gangly figure with frizzled red hair and crooked teeth step up to the throne. He bowed most low – so low, in fact, his large, round nose nearly touched his toes – then looked up at the King with a nervous sort of smile.

“Feldspar!” the King greeted with a warm smile, speaking as if the clownish fellow was an old

friend (and perhaps he was), the expression matched by the oddball cobbler. “How can I help you?”

The shoemaker took a deep breath before speaking; his voice was flute-like and had a noticeable lisp.

“Your Majethy,” he began, and gestured to his own feet: “Ever thince you repaved the roadth, wear and tear on people’th shoeth have been at an all-time low! Why, no one hath come to my cobbler’th shop in over a week!”

The King smirked, seemingly amused, and shared a glance with the Queen, then stroked his beard thoughtfully.

“Well,” he said with a slight chuckle, “We can’t very well unpave the roads, can we, Feldspar?”

The cobbler hung his head and shook it.

“However,” the King went on, “I believe the Royal Guard is in need of some new boots. Do you think you could provide us with a full order of one new pair for each guardsman by next Tuesday?”

“Oh!” the cobbler exclaimed, looking surprised, then grinned and nodded eagerly. “It shall be done!”

“The Captain of the Guard and I will visit you before our departure tomorrow morning,” promised King Frederic. “Thank you.”

The shoemaker bowed again and practically skipped out of courtroom.

Sora looked to Flynn.

“Do the guards really need new shoes that badly?” he asked.

“Probably not,” answered Eugene. “But the King probably feels its worth the expense to help keep the shoe shop from losing too much. If Feldspar went out of business, who’d be there to fix shoes when the time was needed?”

Sora had nothing to say to that but a quick “Huh,” and looked back into the throne room.

The King had turned to Rapunzel and was speaking with her. Their voices were somewhat hushed, but Sora could still make out some of what was said.

“...You’ll have to be ready for every contingency while we’re away,” he warned his daughter.

“We’ll only be gone a day, Frederic,” Arianna soothed, placing a hand on his arm. “I’m sure she can handle it.”

“Oh, I know she can,” the King said with a smile to his wife, then turned back to his daughter with an only half-joking wink. “But a father can worry, can’t he?”

“I’ll do my very best,” Rapunzel promised. “I’ve already learned a lot here! And I’ll have Flynn and my friends to help me!”

Sora backed away from the door quietly.

“What’s wrong, Lockpick?”

Sora blinked and looked at him, crinkling his nose slightly.

“Lockpick?” he repeated, confused.

“I never gave you a nickname,” Flynn said with a wide, teasing smile. “You’ve got that weird key-sword-thingy that can unlock virtually anything, so...Lockpick.”

Donald and Goofy laughed softly, biting their knuckles to avoid being too loud while Sora blushed at the nickname.

“What’s on your mind, though? Seriously,” Eugene pressed.

“She...puts a lot of faith in us, don’t you think?” Sora replied slowly, gesturing toward the door.

Flynn raised an eyebrow.

“Again, key-sword-thingy that unlock anything. Not to mention you three took out Gothel after she...y’know...”

He proceeded to make a scary face and claw at the air while growling.

“...Went THAT direction. Tie it all up with me as the ultra-heroic guy leading the way, and I’d say she has a reason to have faith!”

He then glanced toward the door with a slightly affectionate smile, as if staring through it and towards Rapunzel beyond.

“Besides, when the chips are down, Rapunzel doesn’t need anybody. We’re just the insurance policy, I’d say.”

Sora felt that last part, at the very least, he couldn't deny...but there was something unsettling about knowing he'd essentially be working with not just a princess but essentially a queen for a day. He'd gone to many worlds and helped many people, and that was a tough enough responsibility...but knowing that the Heartless had somehow found their way to the Kingdom of Corona made such a burden a bit more strenuous. He kept these thoughts to himself, however.

Then, a pair of familiar voices drifted down the hall, nearing the area.

"Alright, SO! What's our strategy? I was thinkin' I could explain what I've learned from my study of these creatures, and, y'know, tell His Majesty-"

"Varian, you haven't got much to report there, have you?"

Sora got up, a curious look on his face, as did Donald and Goofy. The trio peeked around the columns down the dimly-lit hall just beyond. Sure enough, they saw Varian and Quirin marching down the main hall and the primary entrance to the throne room beyond.

"Oh, but 'not much' is better than 'nothing at all!'" Varian said, emphatically. "Know what I mean? I wish I could have tested that soil sample, maybe I could give some thoughts about their biological makeup from that, or-"

Quirin stopped mid-walk, pinched his brow with one hand, and sighed...then turned and got down on one knee, placing his hands on Varian's shoulders. The teenager looked confused.

"Son," he said, softly. "What I need you to do is stay out here and wait for me. I will speak to the King – my friend – alone."

Varian blinked slowly, and tilted his head, narrowing his eyes slightly.

"Uh...Dad, I...really think I should be there," he insisted, perhaps a bit frustratedly. "I can present the scientific-"

Quirin lifted a hand in a "stop" gesture, and Varian shut his mouth fast.

"Varian," Quirin said in a firm but also careful voice, "Children have no place in court."

When the trio heard that, Goofy tapped Donald's shoulder and whispered to him.

"Gawrsh...ain't that what the King said to Sora a little bit ago?"

"Hush!" Donald hissed back.

Sora paid them no heed; his eyes were fixed on Varian, whose eyes became wide and glassy as Quirin stood up again.

“But...but I’m not a...”

He trailed off as Quirin began to walk off. The young alchemist tentatively reached out a hand...then retracted it quietly, looking somewhat hurt and rather unsteady.

“Psst!” Sora called out. “Varian!”

The alchemist jerked about, spotted the keyblade wielder, and, after quickly glancing back in the direction his father had gone, jogged over to him.

“Sora?” he whispered. “What are you...?”

“I couldn’t help but overhear,” he said, and thumbed toward the door behind him. “Care to listen in?”

The young alchemist peered past the teenaged warrior...then smirked, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Well...d-don’t see a reason not to, ha,” he managed to stutter out slightly...and as he drew closer, suddenly seemed to realize the rest of the group. Donald and Goofy waved while Flynn smiled widely and gave the kid a mock-salute.

Varian blinked as he looked about.

“Heh...is this just, like, the First Official Meeting of Team Awesome, or something?” he giggled.

“We can call it that,” Flynn shrugged and gestured toward the door. “We wanted to keep an eye on Rapunzel, so we’re...you know...playing spies!”

He wagged his hands and fingers in the air dramatically.

“Ohhhhh,” Varian nodded slowly, then grinned. “Just like you did in the Legend of-”

“Wrong Flynn Rider,” Eugene interrupted, blandly. “Been over that before, Hairstripe.”

Varian blushed and gave a typically sheepish smile.

“Right. Ha ha...s-sorry.”

“Quirin, my old friend!”

The voice of the king rang out from inside the throne room. Varian’s eyes became locked on the side door.

“Dad? Already?” he murmured to himself, and then hustled over to the door. He peered quietly through the keyhole.

Inside the throne room, Quirin stepped up to the foot of the throne and dropped to one knee.

“Greetings, Your Majesty,” he intoned, deeply.

“You, of all people, need not bow to me, Quirin,” Frederic said with an almost brotherly expression.

Quirin smiled thinly, but respectfully remained on one knee, even as he lifted his head.

“How goes the time in Old Corona?” Arianna spoke up.

Quirin glanced to her, then back to Frederic. He cleared his throat.

“Ahem...Your Majesties...I’m afraid to say Old Corona is facing quite the dilemma.”

The King glanced to his wife and daughter, then looked back to Quirin, tilting his head slightly.

“Oh?” was all the King had to respond with, his voice quite cool.

Quirin nodded, and his smile widened, though it seemed somewhat forced.

“Yes, you see...our harvest this year has proven quite bountiful. Far more than any of us anticipated.”

Varian’s eyes widened, and his jaw dropped in disbelief.

Flynn eyed the boy’s reaction curiously, and frowned in confusion.

“Hairstripe?” he urged, carefully, “What’s the matter?”

Varian shook his head slowly, still looking through the keyhole, but said nothing.

“So bountiful, in fact,” Quirin went on, in the meantime, “That I fear I must request more land to help us manage it all. I know that it is a hard thing to ask of you, and that it comes to you very suddenly, but believe me, I have no other choice.”

“What?!” gasped Sora, Donald, and Goofy, who had heard everything.

“Would one of you tell me exactly WHAT is wrong?” Flynn hissed. “Because I know that-”

“SHHH!” all four hushed him, and Flynn lifted his hands in a placating gesture, stepping back in surprise as he shut his mouth.

Inside the throne room, Frederic narrowed his eyes, his bushy eyebrows furrowing. Rapunzel glanced between Quirin and the King patiently. Arianna tapped Frederic’s arm, and he leaned closer to her.

“Dear, we received no such reports before,” she whispered. “Don’t you think we’d have learned this sooner?”

Frederic hummed quietly, but said nothing. He leaned back in his throne for a moment, looking at the ceiling...then seemed to make up his mind about something as he rose imperiously.

“Quirin,” he said, in a lordly yet somehow calming voice, “I am pleased to hear this news, and even more pleased to grant your request.”

Quirin smiled with a sense of relief.

“Thank you...old friend,” he said, and then rose, bowed his head respectfully, and turned on his heel before marching towards the exit of the throne room.

“Next!” the King bellowed.

“No,” Varian whispered. “No, no, no...”

The group around the alchemist jumped and fell back with a sharp cry as the teenager suddenly dashed past them.

“GYAH!” they all yelped.

“Dad!” Varian called out. “DAD!”

Inside the throne room, Rapunzel’s ears pricked up, and she and Pascal glanced towards the side door. Her eyes narrowed.

“Dad?” she whispered. “May I be excused for a short while. I’ll be back soon.”

Her father nodded, and the Princess rose and strode across the throne room, while the next

person – the candymaker, Uncle Monty – stepped into the audience chamber.

Rapunzel strode towards the side door, and carefully stepped through it...then shut it behind her before looking down with narrowed, expectant eyes at the dog, duck, teenager, and ex-thief who were all steadily getting back to their feet.

“Well?” was all she had to say, while Pascal stood on his hind legs, tapping his foot against her shoulder impatiently.

All four smiled with embarrassment.

“H-Hi, Sunshine,” Flynn stammered. “Y-You, uh...you won’t believe who we ran into...or, ah, who ran into us, I should say...heh...”

Back in the main hall, Varian finally caught up with Quirin. The smile he had held in the throne room had faded into a stormy sort of look.

“Dad!” he gasped out, managing to get in front of his father. “None of that was true!”

“You heard?” Quirin scowled.

“Every word,” Varian nodded with a grim expression, and gestured back down the hall towards the chamber’s main entrance. “Old Corona’s being destroyed! Wh-why would you...?”

“Old Corona will endure,” Quirin responded, somewhat gruffly. “You’ll have to trust that I can handle this.”

So saying, the father began to push past his son...only for Varian to suddenly grab onto his arm.

“But how?!” Varian cried out. “H-How can I...trust anything when my own father lies to the King’s face-?!”

The teen’s words were cut off as Quirin’s fist clenched and he leaned close, an icy look in his eyes.

“That’s enough, Varian,” he almost growled.

Varian froze up and gulped nervously, trembling a little.

“...Y-Yes, sir,” he barely breathed.

Quirin grunted and pulled away, then continued down the hall.

“I’ll meet you back at the wagon,” he mumbled over his shoulder.

Varian watched his father go with wide glassy eyes...

...And the moment Quirin was out of sight...his fists clenched and his shoulders bunched as he ground his large teeth together.

“Varian?”

The alchemist turned to glance back over his shoulder briefly, and found Sora and Rapunzel striding toward him. He shut his eyes and turned away from them again.

The Princess and the Keybearer looked to one another. Rapunzel stepped forward.

“Varian,” she began to say, in a soothing, gentle voice, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Is everything okay?”

“NO!” the teenager blurted out, sounding on the verge of tears as he jerked his arm away. “No, it’s not okay!”

He took a deep, shaky breath, then wiped his arm on the back of his glove before turning back to look at the Princess.

“I told you something was wrong, didn’t I?” he said gravely.

“You indicated it,” Rapunzel answered slowly. “But your dad just told-”

“My dad lied,” Varian said, bluntly. “Rapunzel, the situation in Old Corona is getting worse. The Dark Creatures have been coming faster and faster.”

“How much worse?” Rapunzel urged, tenderly. “And...how much faster?”

Varian hung his head, his blue-striped bangs falling over his eyes as he looked to the floor.

“A lot worse,” he muttered. “And a lot faster.”

“I was there,” Sora spoke up, and Rapunzel glanced to him as he moved closer, a surprisingly serious look on his face. “Princess...I don’t know why Quirin said what he said, but...most of the houses were being ruined, and it sounded and looked like the people were scared. I haven’t seen the Heartless there myself, but they were in the forest just outside. They...well...they were attacking Varian while he was trying to study them.”

Rapunzel’s eyes widened and she looked to Varian with deep worry.

“I’m not hurt,” Varian peeped with a timid smile, but it was gone as quickly as it came.

Rapunzel paused...then placed both her hands on Varian’s shoulders as she smiled benevolently.

“Don’t worry, Varian,” she said. “I haven’t forgotten our agreement. We WILL figure out why these creatures have been popping up so often recently, and we WILL make sure no one gets hurt because of them. We’ll work it out together.”

She glanced to Sora.

“All of us,” she smiled wider, then looked back to Varian. “Things will be okay. I promise.”

Varian blinked up at her, not unlike a small child looking to its older sister for comfort...then turned his head with a jerk as a moment later as Rapunzel removed her hands, and one of Sora’s fell upon his shoulder from the side.

“Trust her,” Sora said, and placed his free hand to his chest. “And trust me. Because I’M going to promise that, if you ever need my help, I’ll be there. No questions asked.”

Varian glanced between the two...then smiled hopefully.

“Thank you,” he whispered...then took another breath and squared his shoulders, stiffening his posture. “Well, um...I b-better catch up with my dad and find Ruddiger. The sooner I get back home, the sooner I can get back to work on our...heh... ‘secret mission.’”

The pair nodded and allowed Varian to go. They watched him leave for a moment, then turned away and began to walk down the hall.

Varian paused, glanced back...and saw their backs retreating and disappearing around a corner.

He paused...then continued on his way without a word.

Outside, the gray clouds had turned a shade darker than before.