

Book I: Serial Dilution

Chapter XI: The Storm Worsens

The great, spiraling path of the Corona Mountains was painted a glistening blue and white. However, those traveling up the sloping roadway had neither time nor inclination to revel in the beauty of the scenery. The snow fell heavier than ever here, wind whipping and whistling around Max's head. The great white steed whickered as he kept his head low, squinting his eyes as his trot slowed to a march; it was more important to move safely, he felt, than swiftly. The path was narrow, and as they were more than halfway up the main peak, a fall could be disastrous. Maximus glanced to the left and right in a cautious, alert manner; if anybody wished to do the King and Queen harm, these conditions could potentially prove ideal...but of course, the conditions themselves were plenty treacherous enough. The stallion's hooves sank into the snow at his feet past his ankles, and the royal carriage squeaked and rattled behind him. Each one of the guard horse's breaths came out in silver puffs of warm mist as he bravely continued on his way.

Inside the carriage, the Queen and the King glanced out the right window, looking over the snowy terrain beyond.

"I can't remember the last time it snowed this much," mused Arianna.

"Hmm...seems like there's more to come," muttered Frederic.

Arianna looked to her husband with mild concern.

"Is something the matter, dear?"

"I don't know, Arianna...maybe we SHOULD return to the castle."

She smiled gently.

"You're still worried?"

"Not for the same reasons," Frederic insisted.

Arianna gently placed a hand on her husband's own.

"We'll be alright, dear. And Rapunzel will handle well. She has Eugene, not to mention those old friends of hers."

"Yes. My entire kingdom and my daughter's life is in the hands of a teenaged boy, a talking dog,

a bad-tempered waterfowl, and a former highwayman. I feel SO much more relieved.”

Arianna frowned sternly.

“If you had such concern, truthfully, you should have voiced it MUCH sooner,” she said, crisply.

Frederic sighed.

“I’m sorry. I...I know I’m being cynical, I’ve never had a reason to distrust the boy and his friends, at the very least,” Frederic said with an apologetic expression. “And Rapunzel believes in Eugene; I’ve come to terms with that, and he’s not really a bad fellow. But...with everything that’s been going on, Rapunzel’s safety matters more to me than ever. More than...more than even you may realize.”

Arianna’s smile returned, and she scooted closer to Frederic.

“You don’t think it matters to me?” she said softly, reasonably. “My daughter was scarcely in her cradle, and then I never got to see her again for eighteen years. Believe me, Frederic, I understand how you feel. But you mustn’t get so nervous.”

The King had a haunted look in his eyes; a look that indicated there was something he wasn’t sure if he should tell his wife or not.

He opted not to.

“At any rate, my real concern – at present – is this weather,” he instead, instead. “I’m not sure continuing in these conditions would be-”

His statement was proven correct before it was even finished.

Fate can be most impressive, that way.

As Maximus moved along, an icicle the size of a chandelier suddenly snapped from one of the rocky outcroppings above him, and came crashing towards him. Max was a valiant steed, but like any horse, something very large and very sharp smashing down inches away from him was...well...startling to say the least.

The guard horse reared up and backed away. The carriage shook and rocked violently, causing the King and Queen inside to cry out sharply and grip their seats tightly.

They had every reason to worry; for one of the carriage’s wheels suddenly slipped off the path, and the weight of the coach began to pull them further and further away, towards the precarious edge. Max gasped and whinnied loudly, as he desperately dug his hooves into the snow and tried

to pull them away as hard as he could, and tow the coach to safety.

This was perhaps a tragic mistake; the combination of the horse's rough pulling, and the shift of gravity on the carriage caused the ropes to fray, snap, and break apart...and Max let out a shrill cry of horror as the royal coach went tumbling roof-over-wheels over the side of the peak...

CRASH!

Maximus stared over the side of the peak; through the blinding blizzard, he spotted the coach lying on its side on a small plateau amidst the rocky ridges. He cried out loudly into the screeching wind; the sound echoed everywhere, and he heard the distant cracking of ice from the peaks around him. He quickly went quiet; he didn't want to make things worse with an avalanche.

Max waited for precisely ten seconds, to see if the King and Queen would give any sign back; there was no response. That didn't mean they couldn't hear him, or even that they were done for. The horse's heart pumped rapidly, and without any further hesitation, he whipped around and galloped as fast as he could back down the spiraling main peak. He had to get back to the island. He had to get back to the castle.

He had to get back to the Princess...and hope he wasn't already too late.

The sky was growing darker and darker in Corona as the snow continued to fall. Rapunzel grinned as she patted down the last bit of snow on a snowman she'd made near some rose bushes in the court yard. She stepped back, sticking her tongue out and putting up a thumb as she examined her work.

"Seems okay," she murmured, and turned to Pascal, who was seated near her feet. "Do you have the finishing touches?"

Pascal nodded and pointed with his tail toward a small bag. Rapunzel grinned and reached into the bag, pulling out some sticks, a few lumps of coal, a carrot, and a pair of button eyes...and a few other "ingredients" to top it all off...

Sora, Donald, and Goofy approached her from behind, along with Flynn Rider.

"Whatcha makin' there, Sunshine?" Flynn asked, with interest.

"Ahhh, you're just in time!" the Princess smiled, and stepped aside, revealing a smiling snowman with a pair of stick arms, two brown button eyes, a carrot nose...and a wig that resembled Eugene's hairstyle.

"Behold! Eugene Fitz-snow-bert!"

Flynn's smile fell and one of his eyes twitched.

"...I am nowhere near that round," he responded, and looked down at himself. "Am...Am I?"

Sora and Company snickered while Rapunzel giggled.

"But seriously, not bad for a first attempt, Blondie," Flynn added.

"Thank you, I'm-WHOA!"

Rapunzel cried out as a sudden gust of fierce wind nearly knocked her off her feet. Sora hurriedly jumped forward and caught her.

"Careful, Princess!" he chuckled.

"Thanks," she sighed with relief as she regained balance. "I'm still trying to get used to this weather...has it ever snowed this much before?"

She addressed the question to Flynn. He shrugged.

"Not that I know of," he admitted. "But snow is only part of the problem. The wind is the real-"

"WH-WHO-WHOA!" Goofy suddenly cried out as another gust of wind blew and knocked the clumsy knight on his back...and Donald squawked loudly as he landed on top of him.

"Hey! Get off me!" Donald quacked, looking quite red in the face.

"Gawrsh...sorry!" Goofy apologized with a giggle, and uneasily got to his feet.

The three humans chuckled at the three...but they looked worried as they glanced about. It suddenly occurred to them that the torches in the courtyard were steadily being blown out, one by one, and that the people in the courtyard were beginning to do more shivering than frolicking. The wind was beginning to grow louder and fiercer.

"This is starting to get bad," murmured Sora, and turned to the pair. "I think this 'snow day' needs to draw to a close."

"He's right, Blondie," nodded Flynn. "It's getting late, and it's getting cold."

"I don't want to make these people have to return home in this weather...it seems like the wind could cause a lot of problems..."

“Like what?” Donald spoke up as he and Goofy got back to their feet.

“When I was in my tower,” Rapunzel said, grimly, “The wind would get so bad it would make the whole place shake, and ‘Mother’ would have me replace the shingles on the roof whenever they got knocked out of place.”

She shivered and huddled in on herself, hugging her own arms about her, as Pascal nuzzled into her neck, trying to bury himself in her own body heat.

“...This wind is just as bad, and doesn’t seem like it’s going to stop or die down.”

“Why not invite the people here into the palace?” suggested Goofy.

“Yeah!” Sora nodded. “Give them hot cocoa; maybe give them a large room to hunker down in till the storm passes.”

“Good plan,” Rapunzel agreed, then stepped forward and called out. “Everyone! For your own safety, please head inside the castle! We’re going to take care of things here till the storm passes, but it’s time to make sure to get out of the snow!”

A few groans of people clearly still having fun were heard, but the vast majority seemed in favor. After telling Stan and Pete and the other guards to help usher people into the Grand Ballroom, Rapunzel turned to Flynn.

“Head into town and spread the word; try to get as many people here as possible before this gets any worse,” she said, softly.

“I’ll do my best,” Flynn promised.

“We can help, too!” Sora put in.

“Four is better than one,” Goofy nodded in agreement.

“Thanks, sidekicks,” grinned Eugene. “Let’s get-”

A loud, screeching, braying sound caught their ears. Startled, Sora instinctively summoned the keyblade and turned...

...As through the palace gates, a familiar white horse wearily marched into view.

“Max?” Donald and Goofy exclaimed in unison.

Rapunzel and Sora glanced at each other and hurried towards the tired horse, who panted as he

came to a stop, his knees visibly shaking slightly; whether from exhaustion or the cold, they could not tell.

“Max, are you okay?” Sora asked.

“Maximus, where are my parents?” Rapunzel nearly gulped.

Max looked at both of them with huge, sad, sorry eyes...then whickered sadly and looked down again.

Flynn, brow furrowed in concern came striding up beside them. He bent down at Max’s side...

...And lifted the remains of the broken carriage ropes.

All three of them felt their blood run cold.

They didn’t say a word.

There are no words when you come to an obvious conclusion.

Less than a mile beyond the bridge that separated the capital of Corona from the wooded mainland, a lone figure in goggles – his blue-striped hair whipping about his face – came over the crest of a snowy hill. He gulped and panted slightly, clutching his cape about him to try and keep warm. His heart still hammered a staccato rhythm behind his little ribcage.

His baby blue eyes brightened with a look of hope as he gazed at the silhouette of the King’s Castle in the distance.

“I’m almost there, Dad,” he puffed into the whistling wind. “I’m almost there...just hold on...”