

Book I: Serial Dilution

Chapter XII: Broken Words

A tall, able-bodied man – garbed in the armored uniform of the palace guards, with special, draped shoulderpads that indicated his higher rank – marched into the audience chamber of Corona Castle. He was a grizzled fellow with a thick, curly moustache, and sharp eyes like an eagle’s.

The man eyed the group that stood awaiting his presence in the throne room: the Princess, her beau, and the strange trio of the boy, the dog, and the duck. They were all pacing to and fro and chattering quietly among themselves. As he entered the room, all eyes turned to him in a flash.

“Captain!” Rapunzel gasped, clasping her hands as she saw him arrive. “Has everyone been brought to shelter in the ballroom?”

“Everyone from Old Lady Crowley to Ulf the Mime is accounted for,” the Captain nodded stiffly. “I have Pete & Stan watching the gates, and the rest of the guard is helping to make sure the people are kept comfortable.”

“Thanks, Cap,” Flynn said with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

The Captain nodded respectfully back, then turned to Rapunzel.

“Was there more you needed, Princess?”

Rapunzel nodded, a light of determination in her emerald-colored eyes.

“Captain,” she said, “I need to go find my parents.”

“With all due respect and sympathy, Your Highness...as of now, you are the Acting Queen,” the Captain said, the sternness leaving his expression and posture. “You can’t just leave the kingdom, especially not in a storm like this.”

“But I can’t just leave them to freeze!”

The Captain shook his head.

“Rapunzel, going out in this weather is a virtual death sentence; you cannot go!”

“He’s right.”

The pair turned as Flynn spoke up.

“You can’t, Rapunzel,” he said faintly. “But we...”

He gestured to Sora and his friends.

“...We can.”

“But...but the Captain just said...”

“Please,” Sora chuckled, “We’ve faced worse than some bad weather before!”

“Rapunzel, the mountains made for a great hideout back in the day,” Flynn persisted. “I know those roads better than anyone in Corona. With their help, and with Max’s help, we can do this.”

“Your Highness,” the Captain spoke up, “No disrespect to these fellows, but shouldn’t the guards be the ones to go?”

Rapunzel opened her mouth to answer, but looked unsure. She turned to look back at Flynn.

He smiled kindly, shook his head, then looked to the Captain.

“If this storm keeps getting worse, or something happens to us out there, this kingdom will need its guards.”

The Captain’s moustache bristled; he seemed at a loss for words.

“Rapunzel,” Sora urged softly, moving closer to his friend, the princess, “It’s your call.”

Rapunzel bit her lip, eyes darting about for a moment as she stepped away from the group, clearly trying to make up her mind...

...Then, a distant voice came ringing out down the hall.

“Rapunzel! Sora! SORA! RAPUNZEL!”

The keyblade master and the princess jerked with a start as the throne room doors opened...

...And in sprinted Varian, his shoulders still covered with fine powdered snow, his eyes wide and desperate looking.

Stan and Pete followed close behind him; the two clumsy guards finally caught up with him and grabbed his arms. Varian yelped sharply.

“Hey! HEY! L-Lemme go...!”

“Sorry, Princess,” Stan grunted.

“He slipped right through our fingers!” Pete exclaimed.

The Captain scowled and moved towards Varian and the two guards...but Rapunzel stopped him with a wave of her hand. She and Sora both moved forward.

“It’s okay,” Rapunzel told the guards. “Let him go.”

Stan and Pete obliged, and Varian promptly scrambled over to the pair, nearly tripping on his own feet.

“Oh, thank goodness! Thank goodness!” Varian panted out.

“What’s the matter?” Sora asked.

“Varian, are you hurt?” Rapunzel prodded.

“No! Not me! My Dad! He’s in danger!” Varian said in-between heaving, wheezing breaths. “Y-You’re the only ones who can help me, please! You have to come to Old Corona! Now!”

Rapunzel and Sora glanced to each other, then to the group around them. The Captain and the Guards looked confused. Flynn and Goofy looked concerned. Donald looked impatient.

“Uh...c-can you guys all, just, excuse us for a minute?” Sora piped up, and he and Rapunzel led Varian just outside the doors of the throne room, back into the hall.

“What is wrong?” Rapunzel urged, gently.

“It’s...it’s the Dark Creatures – the Heartless!” Varian jabbered out, speaking very fast and gesticulating wildly. “They...I-I tried to stop them, but...the crystals, they’re encasing – ENCASING my dad!”

“Encasing?” the two heroes responded in unison.

“Come! Come see for yourself!” Varian cried out, in a mixture of urgent desperation and hope. “You can help! One of you, both of you! Th-The creatures have a connection to you, Rapunzel! A-And Sora, you’ve dealt with them before, you have that...the keyblade, you can...!”

“Varian, it’s a state of emergency here,” Rapunzel tried to explain, cutting him off quickly. “I...I

can't help you! Not right now."

Varian gasped, closing and opening his mouth a few times; he seemed utterly stunned. He looked to Sora, eyes flickering.

Sora flinched at the pleading, potent stare the younger teen flashed his way. It felt familiar, somehow...and not in a good way...

"Varian...I have a mission, a-and the King and Queen here are in danger. I...I can't help..."

"But...but you said you'd...you'd be there if I needed it..."

He turned to Rapunzel, so fast that she nearly jumped.

"And you! Y-You said...said everything would be okay, s-said we were in this together...!"

"We are, Varian, and it will be!" she insisted.

"We just need time to get things fixed," Sora put in. "We want to help you, just...we're not able to here."

"Just let me get things sorted here," Rapunzel nodded. "I'm not-"

"No! Nononono!" Varian squeaked out, in a wild sort of way. "My dad can't have much time! You're the only ones who can help! You know how to deal with darkness! Rapunzel, Sora, please!"

"Princess!"

The Captain's barking cry suddenly caught them all off guard as he stomped forward. He glared at Varian, then looked to the other two.

"Princess, whatever this boy's problem is, it has to wait. You and your friend here have more important matters to attend to; the whole kingdom-"

"NO, PLEASE!"

The Captain gaped as Varian suddenly threw himself forward, and grabbed Rapunzel's arms. The teenaged eccentric began to shake her, strands of hair stuck to his face from the moisture of the snow and his own sweat. The Captain's glare grew stronger, and he waved a beckoning hand towards Stan and Pete, who began to hurry over...

"Please, Princess! Rapunzel! Please!" Varian all but cried. "Y-You have to help me! You HAVE

to! You must! You promised you would! You promised-AH!”

“Varian, stop! Please, listen to us! That’s enough, Varian!” Sora hissed as he tried to pry the younger teen away. He had noticed the guards approaching, and, afraid for the alchemist’s safety, tried to stop him before things got any worse. His attempts fell on deaf ears, however, as the other boy thrashed and kicked like a wild thing.

“Let go! Y-You can’t do this to me! You CAN’T! Please, if she can’t, you have to...Sora, please! Don’t...!”

Stan and Pete suddenly snatched Varian away. He tried to break away again...but this time, they caught him fast.

“Take him away!” the Captain of the Guards thundered.

“Careful!” Sora exclaimed.

The two guards were already dragging Varian away; the heels of his boots skidded on the ground as he squirmed and tried to flee, but their grip only got tighter.

“Princess! Keybearer! My dad needs help!” he tried again.

“Don’t hurt him!” Rapunzel begged.

The pair watched as the guards carried Varian – still kicking and screaming – down the hallway. He shot them a final, almost unhinged, pleading stare, and screamed at the top of his lungs...

“RAPUNZEL! SORA! *YOU PROMISED! YOU BOTH PROMISED!*”

And then he was gone.

Silence.

Dead Silence.

“...Rapunzel...”

“...Sora...”

The two turned to the sounds of Flynn and Goofy’s voices.

“We’re still waiting on a decision, Princess,” the Captain of the Guards said, quietly.

“What do you want us to do?” Donald quacked mournfully.

Rapunzel looked to Sora. He bit his lip, and stepped back, clenching his fists and bowing his head.

She looked away...then buried her head in her hands. She shook her head once...then mumbled out her orders.

“We’re following Eugene’s plan.”

“HELP! PLEASE, HELP!”

Varian continued to yell and cry out as he was dragged through the Grand Ballroom. All around him, he saw the Citizens of Corona, drinking hot cocoa as they rode out the storm. He tried to break away, to see if there was anybody – ANYBODY – who might be willing to help him in some way. Someone to talk to Rapunzel, someone to talk to Sora...someone he’d never realized held an answer, just...just SOMEONE, anyone!

But every shout and every yowl was ignored. Some of the citizens turned their backs deliberately toward him, either looking sorry for him but helpless, or even looking annoyed by his yammering. Others didn’t even seem to notice him at all, too caught up in their own little worlds.

Varian felt the world spinning out of control as they exited the palace. The wind squealed like a thousand plague rats in his ears, and prickled his cheeks like a thousand needles. His pleas became mindless, wordless bawling, wailing in the wind’s airy handling. He kicked and struggled harder than ever; he felt the grip of the two guards loosening...

Too little, too late.

“STAY OUT!” Stan thundered.

“AND BEHAVE!” snapped Pete.

The pair kicked open the castle gates and tossed Varian onto the snow-covered streets beyond. Then, before he could get back to his feet, they slammed it shut...and locked it tight.

Varian all but roared as he slammed his fists into the gate...but to no avail.

Finally, reason and sanity began to swirl back into his mind, at least to some extent. He gulped back several sobs; his heart felt like a knife was slowly being driven into it...

“...I’ll do it alone,” he nearly whimpered to himself. “If that’s the way you want it...I’ll do it on my own.”

And without another word, the Alchemist turned tail and began to run back towards the bridge. Back towards the mainland. Back into the woods.

Varian never looked back...and because he never looked back...he never noticed the dark pools that formed just a few feet before the gates seconds after he took his flight...