

## **Book I: Serial Dilution**

### **Chapter XXVIII: A New Storm Brews**

In the vast, blue-black reaches of the space between Worlds, the brightly colored Gummi Ship quietly cruised on its way to its next destination. Inside the ship, Donald and Goofy had retired to sleep in the bunks they claimed in the small craft's quarters.

Another member of the crew, however, was not asleep. He was a tiny little fellow – roughly three inches in height – and many forgot his presence aboard the ship anyway. He had not partaken in the adventures in Corona...but his fellow crewmates had told him everything.

And now, he was staying up late to sketch and write in his Journal, to catalogue everything they had told him...or, at least, the most salient points.

Jiminy Cricket yawned, his antennae twitching; the anthropomorphic insect adjusted his gloves, as he was still dressed in his tuxedo and spats, his little top hat and umbrella hung up next to him in the sweet little nest up in the ship's rafters, which he called home. He picked his pencil back up and checked what he had written in his book.

"Varian," he murmured, as he looked at the short biography he had provided, reading it aloud to himself: "Corona's resident alchemist. A friend of Princess Rapunzel who became a friend of Sora. Unfortunately, his anger got the best of him after his father was trapped in an accident; he has fallen to Darkness-"

A morose sigh caught Jiminy's nonexistent ear. The cricket blinked, and then glanced down from his perch. He tilted his head as he saw Sora, quietly seated in the cockpit, staring out the window into the vast void beyond the ship. The spiky-haired teen had a forlorn kind of look in his big, blue eyes.

Jiminy frowned empathetically; he had worked for years as a conscience for a truly innocent puppet. He couldn't help but worry when he saw someone who was bothered, and perhaps needed advice. Quietly, the old cricket slapped his blue top hat onto his head – one had to keep up appearances, even among friends – and picked up his umbrella before tucking his journal and pencil into the lining of smart black jacket. Then, after giving a quick adjustment to his yellow ascot, he popped open the red umbrella, and used it like a parachute, drifting down towards the young keybearer.

Sora was silent, staring out the window with a pensive, contemplative look. He blinked as something brushed against his shoulder, and he looked around. A tiny flicker of a smile passed over the boy's lips as the friendly cricket settled there.

“Hi, Jiminy,” he smiled.

“Howdy, Sora,” Jiminy smiled, and tilted his head. “You look glum.”

Sora frowned again, and turned away.

“Just...a little...thoughtful,” he answered slowly.

“Mmm,” Jiminy hummed with a nod, and turned away, looking out the window alongside the boy. For a few moments, neither said a word.

“...Well?”

“Hm?”

“Aren’t you going to...you know...ask me what’s wrong?”

Jiminy looked to Sora calmly.

“I think I already know,” he said, simply. “And I think if you want to talk about it, you will.”

Sora bit his lip...then took a deep breath.

“I just...I only knew him for a few days...but he seemed like such a good guy. I...I really did feel like I was his friend, Jiminy. I wish I could have done more for him. Maybe...maybe if I had tried to help him more...”

“Varian didn’t change because of anything you did or did not do,” Jiminy consoled the boy, and his smile turned sadder when he saw Sora wince at the name. “I think he had a lot of problems. You said that the village he lived in didn’t seem to like him very much, and while I’m sure Quirin tried to do what was best...”

“He only wanted to make him proud,” Sora nodded. “I don’t think he ever felt he did.”

Jiminy nodded back. Sora looked to him with wide, sad eyes.

“I just...I’ve seen so much Darkness,” Sora said, very quietly, his voice becoming shaky. “I’ve seen so many monsters, so many people who fell into that place...after Tron, I thought that I’d never see another friend fall like this. But Tron didn’t fall by choice; he was forced into it. I never thought...I never thought I’d see someone GOOD decide to become the villain.”

Jiminy furrowed his olive-colored brow, and looked away thoughtfully, clasping his hands in

front of him.

“There are a lot of people who live in the dark,” he said, softly. “Like Maleficent, or Xemnas...they are the sorts of villains who are easy to spot. They embraced the darkness long ago, and they make no secret of who and what they really are. But sometimes...sometimes a person isn’t even aware of the darkness within their own soul. They can be a problem.”

Jiminy looked back to Sora.

“Everyone,” he said, somewhat warningly, “Has the ability to be led by Temptation. Trust me, I would know. It’s harder to avoid than you might think. And when all the chips are down, and a person feels they have no other choice, Temptation becomes harder to refuse. People forget their conscience, they lose their way, and they go to the darkness not because they want to, nor even because it’s all they have...it’s simply because they honestly believe they have no choice.”

“But he did have a choice!” Sora protested. “Couldn’t he see that?!”

“In another time, maybe,” Jiminy said with a soothing smile. “It’s not always that easy. When a person decides to embrace the dark for any reason, they don’t always realize how destructive the choice is. It shatters them: their minds, their hearts...everything they are.”

Sora hung his head softly. Jiminy paused...then placed a hand on Sora’s shoulder. The brush of the insect’s gloved palm caused Sora to look up again.

“But you know...just because something is broken...that doesn’t mean it can’t be fixed,” Jiminy said, in a fatherly sort of voice. “You never gave up on Riku, remember? He, too, was tempted, but he found his way back. And Kairi wouldn’t give up on you, even when you became a Heartless yourself; that’s as far into the darkness as you can go, but she never let go. If anyone can fix Varian, I think you and Rapunzel are the ones to do it.”

Sora blinked...then smiled gently.

“Thank you, Jiminy,” he said, softly. “Maybe when I return to Corona...things can be different.”

“I hope so, Sora; I really do,” Jiminy said.

Sora chuckled, and grinned.

“You know...Pinnocchio was lucky to have a Conscience like you,” he teased. “You’re good at this.”

“Well,” Jiminy Cricket chortled, “They don’t call me Lord High Keeper of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong for nothing.”

So saying, the nimble cricket hopped down, first onto the arm rest of the seat, then onto Sora's knee, then finally down to the floor.

"I think it's time I get some shut-eye," he said. "You should get back to bed yourself, Sora. Lots of adventuring to get through, y'know."

"I'll sleep soon," Sora assured the cricket. "Thanks again."

Jiminy smiled and tipped his hat in response, then strolled away to find his way back up to his little nest.

As he walked, he pulled his journal back out of his pocket and looked over the short biography on Varian again.

"He has fallen to Darkness...but with a little bit of luck, maybe someday, at last, he'll see the Light again."

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Meanwhile, back in the Kingdom of Corona...

King Frederic marched boldly through the dimly-lit, dank halls of the castle dungeons. He shivered slightly as he walked through the cold, claustrophobic prison area. In point of fact, the dungeons of Corona were relatively empty; crime was scarce, and while Frederic was the first to say he'd done some questionable things as a King from time to time – he was so grateful for Rapunzel's forgiveness – he and Arianna, on the whole, were beneficent rulers.

On the upside, that meant – in the current block he entered – all was quiet. There were no scoundrels sneering and spitting at him or whining rats begging for release and claiming they had been framed. All was very, very still and silent.

That, however, was the downside at the same time: there was a lonely, frigid atmosphere to the deepest depths of the dungeons that left one feeling greatly uneasy. They felt haunted, and sometimes Frederic wondered if they truly were. The silence was unending, only the sound of his own feet breaking the monotony as he slowed his pace and approached one particular cell, far from prying eyes.

In the shabby torchlight of the dungeons, the cell was only half-lit. As Frederic peered inside it, even the mighty king felt something inside him seize up slightly.

The one he came to speak too was resting on their cot in the shadowy part of the room, leaving only a vague, dull look at them. In the shadows, the King could see that the figure sat upright, legs crossed...stroking their pet raccoon as the furry little animal curled up in their lap. But what arrested the King most were the two eyes – so bright and blue they looked like white-hot flames

– which unblinkingly stared at him. The moment he had turned the corner, he'd found them already looking at him, as if the boy had been waiting for his arrival.

Largely shrouded in shadow, Varian said nothing; he breathed steadily, the blue eyes filled with such a look of utter loathing it made Frederic's skin crawl with a curious blend of guilt and indignation...but not fear. He was not going to be intimidated by this child.

Not even a little bit.

Nope.

Not at all.

"Good morning, Varian," he whispered, and the sound echoed everywhere as if he had spoken at his full voice. "Are you...feeling well?"

Varian just stared back, and said nothing. Ruddiger opened one eye and looked to Frederic; the raccoon curled up tighter against Varian. The King wasn't sure if he was scared of Frederic...or perhaps worried the King would hurt his boy...or both.

The King frowned slightly. The coon had helped them escape, yet he still seemed to take the youth's side in all this. Perhaps that was simply the depths of the pet's loyalty...Frederic had to admit, faithfulness like that was hard to come by.

"Your pet is...very stubborn," he said, speaking on the subject. "I had to convince the Captain to let him stay with you. It wasn't very difficult, as apparently he nearly bit the man."

Ruddiger smirked, showing no sign of apology.

Varian remained as silent, still, and unblinking as before.

Frederic's frown deepened.

"Are you not going to speak to me?" he urged, somewhat brusquely.

Varian blinked once...then spoke in a dead, icy voice.

"I have the right to remain silent. I choose to exercise that right."

There was a pause.

"...Is that all?" the King urged.

Varian said nothing. He did not even move. He simply kept eye contact with the King, and did not break it for a moment.

Frederic sighed. Cautiously he placed a hand on one of the bars. Varian did not react.

“I want you to know...you may not believe me, but I truly regret this,” Frederic said. “I have never once imprisoned someone of your age. There has never been a need; barbaric practices like that were a thing of the past...till now.”

Still no response from the alchemist, who simply stroked Ruddiger slowly, not once watching his own movements.

“Rapunzel and Eugene have left. They...wanted me to tell you they wished you goodbye.”

Frederic paused, then stiffened his posture, straightening his back.

“I promised my daughter,” he said, calmly, “That I would see to it I helped you in any way I can. I have called for a doctor from a neighboring kingdom; he has...special talents that may prove useful in your case. If you behave yourself, and work with him, you may be out of here in...”

He paused again, and smiled wincingly.

“...Well...let’s just say it would be wise of you to do those things. Yes?”

Varian remained still and unblinking.

Frederic’s smile fell.

“...I am sorry about what happened to your father. And I am sorry my own negligence, and his complicity, led to all this. If I could turn back the clocks and help, I would. While I cannot say I feel you were in the right, and I cannot say I do not feel a twinge of anger at you for your actions, Varian...I do forgive you. And I hope you can forgive me. My daughter. Sora. Everyone.”

Varian narrowed his eyes.

He uttered a single, snarling word.

*“Never.”*

Frederic blinked...then sighed again and hung his head, shaking it wearily.

“I will leave you to your thoughts,” he said, in a tone of surrender. “But...please think on what I have said...and know that if I thought there was any other way to help those I cared for most, I

would have gladly taken it.”

“Funny,” Varian said, in a silky sort of way. “That’s exactly what I felt before you tossed me in here.”

He gestured to the shackles on his wrist, and the ball and chain around his ankle.

“I suppose we have more in common than you think, Your Majesty.”

Frederic frowned and said nothing. He waited for precisely ten seconds to see if Varian would say anything else...then, without another word...turned and walked away.

Varian waited till the King’s footsteps were out of hearing range...

...Then, in an instant...the hard, icy, burning look of smoldering vengeance fled his face...and Varian’s shoulders shook, his eyes shutting tight as he sobbed bitterly. Ruddiger, hearing his owner’s crying, let out a crooning sound and nuzzled against him. The young, gangly teen hugged his beloved pet close, crying into his fur the way a small child would into their pillow.

“I’m s-sorry...sorry, Dad,” he blubbered out. “I’m...I’m so...s-so sorry...”

He sniffled and wiped his face, and looked towards the ceiling, letting the coon ease into his lap once more.

“I’ll...I’ll find my way out,” he said quietly. “They can’t keep me in here forever. They still underestimate me...”

He growled and glared, the hate returning to his eyes.

“...I’ll show them. I’ll show them all who they are really dealing with.”

“Really?” came a smooth, elegant, feminine voice. “And just who, exactly, are we dealing with?”

“GYAH!” exclaimed Varian, none too eloquently, nearly jumping a foot out of his skin and falling off the cot in the process. Ruddiger, startled by both the voice and the tumble, dove under the cot and blinked out nervously.

“Owww,” groaned Varian, clutching his skull, then froze up as he heard the voice let out a soft, sinister sort of chuckle.

“An amusing little fellow, aren’t you?” the voice cooed, then went on: “Poor child. Neglected. Rejected. Shunned by the world that did him wrong. No chance to save the one he cares for

most. Betrayed by those he considered his friends. Such a tragic situation..."

Varian gulped, and sat upright. He looked around, but saw nothing.

"Oookay...ahh...y-you don't...sound like my usual hallucinations," he said with a nervous laugh. "So, uh...um...m-mind telling me who you are, Mrs. Voice?"

"That will come in a moment," the voice said. "First, I have a question for you, Young Varian: would you like to free your father?"

Varian's eyes widened, and he nodded, moving onto one knee.

"More than anything in the world!" he exclaimed, and glanced about, still seeking the source of the voice that came from nowhere and yet everywhere the same time. "B-But, uh...it's, ha ha...k-kinda hard to do that from...y'know...this place."

"I can fix that easily," the voice said, calmly, and took on a note of pride and powerful command. "Join me, my boy. I am seeking new blood to help me in my cause. You are the perfect candidate."

"New blood? Me? Wh-why me?"

"You are a genius. You are gifted with a superior intellect beyond your years. You are passionate, driven, and will stop at nothing to achieve your goals."

The voice suddenly seemed to be in his ear.

"You are even willing to kill."

Varian squeaked and swiped at thin air, backing away from where the voice had been. The laughter came again; louder, and with a hint more malice.

"I...well...um...okay, but...wh-why should I help you?" he frowned, and his voice began to harden. "How do I know I can trust you? I don't even know who or wh-what you are!"

"If you assist me in my schemes, I shall give you two great boons," the voice answered, sibilantly. "First, I shall give you power to seek revenge on those who wronged you; the wretched fools who spurned your genius, shunned your friendship, and betrayed your trust. You could take over this whole kingdom for your own, do with it as you will."

Varian's fingers slowly clenched into fists. His teeth gritted as familiar, hateful faces flashed in his mind. Ruddiger, under the cot, whimpered; that was the same look he'd seen on his boy's face when he'd been using that scary machine that used the princess' hair...



“Tempting,” he said, curtly. “But what does this have to do with my father?”

“Simple: I have the power to bring your father back. And if you help me – for a time – that will be the second boon.”

The fury left Varian’s face. One could practically see stars in his eyes.

“...You...y-you...you mean it?” he peeped, barely daring to hope. “You...you can really do that?”

“Do you dare to question my abilities?” the voice responded, with such cold displeasure it formed goosebumps on the alchemists’ thin arms. “I do not offer gifts I cannot give.”

Varian bit his lip, furrowing his brow in thought.

“...Show yourself first,” he said, at last. “Show yourself, a-and tell me who you are.”

The laugh came a third and final time...then, Varian gasped again, as a swirl of dark, black-and-purple mist appeared on the opposite wall from him. The portal opened wider and wider...and then, out of the portal stepped the source of the voice.

The figure was that of a tall and most exceedingly elegant lady; one who carried herself with dignity not even Queen Arianna possessed. She was garbed in dark, flowing robes of obsidian, lined with purple and magenta. Her collar was high and scalloped, almost resembling bat-wings, and a black headdress with horns was tightly bound upon her head. The blackness of her garments matched the feathers of the yellow-beaked, baggy-eyed raven that was perched upon one of her shoulders. One long, slender hand stroked the bird’s feathers, while the other – which wore a golden ring with a black gemstone inlaid in it – gripped the handle of a long, golden staff, topped with an emerald orb.

Just as the colors of her robes matched the plumage of her avian companion, the staff’s emerald topper matched the woman’s curious green skin. Her jade-colored face had high cheekbones and a pointed chin, but was somehow youthful and glamorous; wretched, yet oddly beautiful, all at the same time. Her dark, crimson lips curled into a hungry sort of smile, as glowing yellow eyes peered down at Varian with more than mild interest.

“I,” the woman greeted him, with no small amount of pride in her voice, “Am Maleficent. I am arranging quite a glittering assemblage; to ignore one with talents such as yours would be a most egregious oversight. If you come with me...”

She bent low at the hip...and extended one hand to Varian invitingly.

“...I shall give you everything you desire.”

Varian looked up to Maleficent’s face, then to her hand, then back to her face again.

He gulped nervously. Maleficent caught the flicker of hesitation, and raised one thin, magnificent eyebrow.

“Do you have many other current options?” she pressed, smoothly. “I could always leave you here.”

Varian bit his lip...then looked to one side and behind him.

Ruddiger whimpered, and glanced between Varian and the Dark Fairy.

Varian seemed to study the frightened raccoon for a moment...then, he moved onto his hands and knees and extended one hand.

“Buddy,” he whispered, “Come here.”

Ruddiger whimpered, ears folding back, and moved back a bit.

Varian looked about ready to cry again.

“Please,” he pleaded, speaking an octave louder. “Ruddiger...I-I...you’re all I have left. Please...just...come with me. I can’t...”

He gulped, choking back a sob, and looked beseechingly at the raccoon.

“...I can’t do this w-without you.”

Ruddiger hesitated...then, very timidly, he approached Varian.

The youth smiled gratefully, and draped his pet around his shoulders before scratching him softly behind the ears. Maleficent and her raven, Diablo, shared a quick, subtle look, before focusing on Varian once more.

The alchemist took a deep breath, straightened his back...and nodded up to Maleficent.

“I...I-I accept,” he said, with no small amount of fear...but also no large amount of certainty.

Maleficent smiled wider, revealing perfect white teeth. With a wave of her hand, she undid the shackles that bound Varian. Having done this, she said nothing, but simply offered her hand once more. Varian paused, massaging his wrists for a moment or two...

...Then, he took the hand of the Mistress of All Evil, and held it tight.

And without another moment's hesitation, Maleficent led him – as a mother leads their child – towards the dark portal. They both stepped through it and disappeared. The portal closed behind them...

And the cold, damp air of the dungeons somehow seemed more chilling than ever...as all they left behind them was the empty, quiet cell.