

Book I: Serial Dilution

Chapter II: Kingdom of the Sun

Winter had come to the Kingdom of Corona. At first glance, however, you might not know it. The leaves of autumn still covered the ground, and the realm was so full of evergreens, especially in the more mountainous and hilly regions, that it remained bright and plentiful virtually all year round. The glorious Sun from which the kingdom took its name was as bright and majestic as ever, and bathed all the world in a golden glow, even as it peeked between grayish clouds, which looked for all the world like silver cushions, upon which the sunlight rested its weary head. As it had to shine day in and day out, with only a few hours rest, one could hardly blame it.

Out of the clouds, like a falling star, came something very strange from the skies of Corona that day: a peculiar flying craft, which seemed to be made out of red and gold, rubbery-textured blocks, with a glassy blue-tinted dome in the cockpit. As it flew from the sky, the craft seemed to wobble and swerve the closer and closer it came to the ground...

...Then, in the forest beyond the kingdom's capital, one would see the craft suddenly take an abrupt nosedive...before abruptly crashing to the ground. It skidded several yards across the forest floor before banging into a sturdy tree, at which point one could hear the hum and whirr of an engine being shut down...

...Then, a few moments later, the familiar figures of Sora, Donald, and Goofy all but tumbled out of the Gummi Ship. All three groaned, rather dizzy, and grabbed onto the first solid object they saw; Sora leaned back against the ship, Donald clutched onto a low-hanging branch from another tree...and Goofy flopped over and wrapped his arms around a boulder.

"...Okay...so...what have we learned?" Sora gasped out. "Answer: Never. EVER. Let Goofy Drive."

Goofy let out a laugh – "A-Hyuck!" – and smiled loopily. Donald moaned, eyes spinning, and shook his head fast.

"Never. Again," he quacked in agreement.

By and by, the trio regained their faculties, and got to their feet, looking around the woods. Sora stepped away from the ship towards a clearing in the trees, and looked out in the distance. He smiled as he saw the familiar sight of the Castle of Corona far off in the distance: a glistening jewel on an island in the center of a clear blue sea. Donald and Goofy soon stepped to his side and looked out with him.

"Just as purty as I remember it," Goofy smiled.

“Nothing SEEMS to be wrong,” Donald muttered.

“Maybe Master Yen Sid was wrong?” Sora suggested.

Donald and Goofy looked at each other, then shook their heads.

“Gwarsh...he’s never been wrong before,” Goofy said.

“We should find Rapunzel,” Donald insisted. “Maybe she can help us.”

“Well, they’d be at the castle,” Sora murmured, crossing his arms and looking down thoughtfully. “It’s a long way from here, but I guess that is the best-”

“AAAAGH!”

The sudden cry of fear caused all three to jump. They heard a commotion from somewhere not so far ahead, and the sound of trees and bushes rustling.

“Come on!” Sora urged the others, and ran towards the source of the sound. His friends glanced at each other, shrugged, and followed as fast as they could.

The trio hopped over a log and pushed past bushes, till they came to what seemed to be a dirt road that ran in something of an S-Shape through a section of the forest. As they moved into the clear spot where the road began, they glanced around, pausing to check their direction...

And then, bounding up the road, came a raccoon. It had dark gray eyes that matched its thick, gray-and-black fur. The plump little critter panted and glanced about with fright, as if seeking a place to hide, its tail twitching frantically as its ears drooped back.

It soon noticed Sora, Donald, and Goofy, and its eyes widened. It chattered loudly, and ran over to them...ducking behind Sora’s legs and whimpering as it hid behind him.

“H-Huh?!” the Keyblade Wielder gasped out nearly tripping on the animal. “Hey...c-careful, little guy! What’s got you...?”

“Sora! Look!” quacked Donald, as Goofy suddenly lowered into a battle-ready stance and prepare his shield.

Sora glanced up in a flash...and found a dark and mysterious figure running towards them. It was shorter than Sora, though not by much, and completely clad in dark clothes, dressed in a heavy black coat and what looked like thick, rubber-lined gloves and boots. A mask not unlike that of a welder covered its face, and two green lights shone from where the eyes were, the rest

of the mask blank and emotionless as the figure charged toward them.

In a flash, Donald lifted his staff, as if ready to attack. Sora narrowed his eyes and swung out an arm. With a flick of his wrist, there was a flash of light...and the Keyblade materialized in his hand.

“STAY BACK!” he yelled.

As Sora dropped into a fighting stance, his weapon at the ready, the figure skidded to a stop...

...And then suddenly – and quite clumsily – tripped and fell onto its backside.

“GYAH!” the figure yowled in an unusually high-pitched, squeaky sort of voice behind the mask, and then held out a hand. “W-Wait! Don’t hurt me! I...ah...I’ve g-got nothing to give you! No gold, or...I dunno...jewelry – are you jewelry thieves? Doesn’t matter! Nothin’ on me! Nope! I mean...I got my alchemy belt, but...y-you wouldn’t want that right? R-Right?”

The voice became a whimper.

“Please...p-please don’t take my alchemy belt,” it pleaded, like a child afraid of having their favorite toy thrown away.

The trio gaped, and looked to each other, then back at the craven figure in black.

“Uhhhh...weren’t you just chasing the raccoon?” Sora asked slowly.

The figure tilted its head...and then lifted its mask, revealing the face beneath. The figure was nothing more than a teenaged boy – he seemed a couple years younger than Sora, if even that – with a freckled face and pinkish, upturned nose. He had a pronounced overbite and moppish black hair with bangs; a single streak of teal went through part of his hairdo.

His eyes were a bright baby blue, and wide as plates as he blinked at the three.

“Chasing the...? That’s my PET!” he protested, then looked to the raccoon with a concerned expression. “Buddy, y-you okay!”

The raccoon let out a chittering sound and nodded. Sora glanced to the little animal, then back at the boy, who was starting to stand up unsteadily.

“Were you the one screaming a little bit ago?” the teenaged warrior asked.

“Y-Yeah, there’s some-”

He paused...and blinked as he seemingly noticed Donald and Goofy for the first time.

“...Ummmm...wh-why are you dressed like a dog and a duck?” he asked, blandly, then suddenly seemed scared again. “Wait...y-you are thieves, aren’t you?! The masks, I-ohhh, as if my luck couldn’t get any-”

“We’re not in masks!” Donald snorted.

The boy’s jaw dropped.

“...You...you just talked. And your mouth moved. You just...ARE YOU A REAL DUCK?!”

“Of course he’s a real duck!” laughed Goofy. The boy abruptly squealed and flailed his arms, jumping up and slamming back-first into a nearby tree.

“Talking...talking dog...there’s a talking dog...walking on two legs...o-oh boy...”

“Trust me, don’t question it,” Sora suggested, waving a hand dismissively.

“I question everything!” the other teen rapped back.

The raccoon rolled its eyes and sighed, shaking its head at its apparent owner’s ridiculousness...

...Then it let out a frightened chatter and ducked back behind Sora again. The four others present all turned to see what had scared the coon...

...And that’s when they saw them: half a dozen dark figures, all about as tall as Donald, dressed in dark blue trousers, curly-toed shoes, and oversized silver helmets, which did nothing to hide their glowing, empty yellow eyes. As they came clumsily galloping up the road, one could see they bared huge red claws, the size of kitchen knives...and across their chest was emblazoned the image of a heart, with a scarlet X-shape through it.

“Heartless!” gasped Sora, and lifted his keyblade again.

The teenaged boy yelped, and dove behind a tree, whimpering and quivering.

“L-LEAVE ME ALONE!” he shouted at the Heartless. “I do NOT taste good, okay?!”

The Heartless evidently didn’t agree, as they began to lumber towards the freckle-faced youth...

...But Sora quickly barred their way.

“We’ve got this,” he called over his shoulder to the boy, and swung his keyblade around his

head. Two of the six Heartless jumped away from the strike, and a third pounced toward him like a feral cat.

Sora dodged to the side, the Soldier Heartless landing on all fours. It got to its feet and whirled around...but before it could try and take so much as a swipe at him, the Keyblade Master slashed the blade upwards slash. The Soldier let out a serpentine hiss, and vanished in a cloud of black mist.

Another Heartless charged at Sora from behind, its claws ready to slash at him...but Donald was quick to react. He thrust his staff into the air and gave it a twirl. Four fireworks suddenly appeared in mid-air. Donald pointed his staff at the Heartless, and the colorful rockets shot fourth.

“GET READY!” he called out, and his cry distracted the shadowy imp, which turned just in time to see the missiles blasting towards it...

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG!

That was the end of the second Heartless.

While Sora and Donald were busy, another Heartless rushed at Goofy. The clumsy but courageous knight yelped comically, bouncing back as it swiped at him with its talons once, twice, thrice...

Finally, Goofy put some distance between him and the Heartless. He narrowed his eyes, reeled back, and hurled his shield like a discus. The Soldier ducked the strike, and started to run at the knight again...

SWANG!

The shield swerved back like a boomerang, and struck the Heartless through its middle. It vanished into darkness before it could even so much as scratch the knight, who caught his shield deftly.

The boy behind the tree's expression changed from fear to interest as he peeked out a bit. His raccoon soon ran over to his side and bumped against his leg. The teen picked up the coon and held it to his chest, then bit his lip as he quietly watched his saviors take on the remaining Heartless.

Another Heartless charged towards Goofy, who held out his shield as it swiped at him, the crimson claws scraping against the steel surface with a sickening sound. The shield-bearer thrust out his weapon(?) of choice, pushing the Heartless back. The clumsy little monster stumbled back, trying to regain balance...at which point Goofy whirled about with surprising speed, shield

out in front of him, moving like a tornado towards the Shadow. Startled, it tried to turn and run...but it was just too slow. The shield's edge met its mark, and the fourth Soldier was no more.

Another Heartless tried to take a swipe at Donald. Donald managed to block the strike with his staff, and sighed with some relief; he wasn't used to direct combat. He narrowed his eyes and muttered something under his breath...and a moment later, a strange purple sphere formed around the Soldier. The Soldier's claws pulled away, and it thrashed for a moment, as if trying to break free from some unseen force that was pulling it back as it seemed to fall to the ground, as if kicked by an invisible opponent...

...Then, the Gravity Sphere compacted in on itself, and the Heartless let out a short, hissing screech, curling up tighter and tighter and tighter...before vanishing into dust and smoke like the rest as the sphere imploded and disappeared.

Donald smirked and twirled his staff, flashing a smug smile.

"Still got it!"

Only one of the Heartless now remained; it seemed uneasy as it eyed the three...then tried to turn tail and run.

"I got 'im!" Sora called to the others, and pointed his keyblade towards the fleeing shadow. A sphere of blue-white light formed at the tip of the Kingdom Key...then, a flurry of ice crystals shot from the sword's point and rushed towards the escaping Soldier.

CRRRRRACKLE!

The crystals hit their mark. In a split-second, the Heartless froze into a solid block of ice, mid-run...then THUNKed onto one side...before both the ice and the Heartless itself seemed to evaporate into nothing.

Sora smirked and nodded to himself as he rested the keyblade against his shoulder.

"Piece o' cake," he chuckled to himself, brushing the knuckles of his free hand against his jacket lapel.

"O. M. Goodness."

The three turned around as the boy and the raccoon stepped out from behind the tree. Both looked from one member of the trio to the other with wide eyes. The raccoon jumped down from his human companion's arms, and the teen's mouth opened and closed a few times as he removed his mask completely...revealing a pair of brass-rimmed goggles strapped to the top of

his head.

“That...was...”

...The boy dropped the mask...and promptly squealed with delight bouncing into the air and laughing excitedly.

“...ONE OF THE MOST AWESOME THINGS I’VE EVER SEEN! Oh-ho-ho-HO, boy, that was SO. COOL!”

Before the three could react, the teen bounded over and ran past them. He knelt down towards the dirt road, where the Heartless had been standing. He picked up some of the dirt in his fingertips and ground it between his forefinger and thumb. A bucktoothed smile painted his face as his baby blue eyes glittered with pure joy and energy.

“Fascinating...not a sign of them,” he murmured, then stood up again and clapped his hands together, all but dancing in place as he gushed. “I mean, WOW, the Princess told me you were super-good fighters, but MAN, she was understating it! Ha Ha! S-Seriously, Flynn Rider HIMSELF probably doesn’t have fighting moves like that! Just...”

He paused for a moment and began gesticulating wildly, making various noises to imitate the swiping of the Keyblade, the spinning of the shield, and the effects of the magic staff.

“...So. Freaking. EPIC,” he finished, and laughed breathlessly, wiping a tear from his eye. “S-So beautiful. Really.”

The three Warriors of Light – needless to say – didn’t really know how to react to all this. Donald lifted a finger as if to speak...but after opening and closing his own mouth a few times, found no words came to him. Goofy blushed and shuffled his feet, chuckling bashfully at all the praise. Sora, for his part, just...sort of stared, slack-jawed and bug-eyed.

“...I’m...uh...I-I’m sorry, back up,” he finally said, lifting the hand that no longer held the keyblade in a “stop” gesture. “Did...you said you knew the princess and Flynn Rider?”

“Ah, ha-ha, no, I KNOW them,” corrected the lad, waving a hand through the air. “Rapunzel an’ I are, like, total BFFs! Well...um...actually, no, that’s not true. And it...uh...sounds kinda lame, so, no. No, we’re not. BUT! B-But, I have been helping them with a lot of stuff ever since these strange Dark Creatures...what’d you call ‘em?”

“Ah...the Heartless?”

Before Donald and Goofy could scold Sora about “keeping the order,” the boy snapped his fingers.

“AH! Yes, the Heartless, THAT’S it! Huh...that definitely sounds cooler than ‘Dark Creatures,’ much more creative, ANYWAY!” he yammered on before Sora could try to butt in, “She told me she needed help dealing with these things, so I’ve been...”

He giggled rather nervously and swung his arm in a gung-ho sort of motion.

“...Just doin’ my part! Ha Ha!”

“Is that why they were chasing you?” Goofy thought to ask, slowly.

“Oh! Well, kinda,” shrugged the boy, then straightened up his coat and stood a little straighter. “See, I happen to be a man of science; an alchemist, specifically.”

“Man?” whispered Donald. Sora nudged him to be quiet.

“As such,” the teenaged alchemist went on, “I’ve been trying to study these creatures to figure out their behaviors, weaknesses, and so on...the, uh, heh...th-the only problem is they’re so...well...ah...hostile. It’s k-kinda hard to really focus on ‘em without them tryin’ to...y’know...”

He trailed off, scratching the back of his head...then suddenly froze, blinked...and smacked his own forehead.

“Ack! Oh, DUMB Varian, DUMB!” he shouted, and knelt down again towards the dirt, before pulling out a small vial from somewhere in the folds of his heavy black coat. “I should totally take some soil samples; maybe some residue here from when they ‘poofed.’ I wonder what kinda processes make that happen...?”

The trio once again looked at each other, their expressions rather blank. They glanced back to the alchemist and then huddled together quickly.

“Well, HE’S a kook,” Sora muttered.

“He’s no less of a dork than you,” teased Donald.

“I am not...!”

“Not now!” Goofy soothed with a slight chortle, before turning serious again. “The Heartless shouldn’t be here. Master Yen Sid was right, there’s something going on in this kingdom.”

“You’re right,” Sora nodded. “Now, more than ever, we have to see the Princess...”

“I can take you to her!”

All three jumped and yelped...and found the teenaged boy had suddenly popped his head in over Donald's shoulder, smiling innocently...then his eyes lit up again as he noticed Donald's staff. “Oooh...that's how you made those rockets and that...weird...purple...crushy-ball thing appear. AWESOME!”

One could practically see stars in the boy's eyes as he looked to Donald with an almost puppyish expression.

“C-Can I touch it?” he peeped.

Donald just clutched his staff tighter to his chest, protectively, and shook his head, letting out an uncomfortable squawk.

The boy immediately sobered up and stepped back a few paces.

“Oh...uh...yeah, s-sorry...I get a little, uh, overexcited.”

“We've noticed,” Donald grouched.

The teen winced slightly, his smile turning a little bit sad.

Sora, noticing the reaction, stepped forward and smiled more encouragingly.

“Hey...you said you could take us to the Castle?”

“Oh, sure, Sora!” The teenager smiled cheerily. “I'd be happy to!”

Silence.

“How do you know my name?”

“Uh, I DID say the Princess told me about you guys, didn't she? You're Sora...”

He pointed to Donald.

“...That's Donald, and the other one is Goofy,” he finished, pointing to the last of the trio.

“Gawrsh...if the Princess toldja about us, how come ya didn't recognize us?” Goofy thought to ask.

“Well, she told me about a dog, a duck, and a guy with spiky hair...but I thought she meant, like,

a NORMAL dog, and a NORMAL duck. Not..."

He gestured to their clothes.

"...You guys."

The trio had no idea how to react to that.

"I guess if she'd shown me her painting of you all or something, maybe I'd recognize you more easily," the boy said. "Anyway, like I was saying, I'd be happy to take you to the city! My dad and I are actually heading there tomorrow!"

"Sounds great!" cheered Sora. "But, uh, where is your dad?"

"Oh, back home," the teenager answered, thumbing over his shoulder. "It's not far. And our cart is a lot faster than walking there from Old Corona, trust me. You could...you know...spend the night, maybe...th-that is if you don't mind, heh heh..."

The boy rubbed one of his arms, shyly. Donald and Goofy opened their mouths, looking as if they were ready to refuse...

...But Sora took another step forward and pumped one fist with a wide, encouraging grin.

"That'd be great! Thanks!"

The quirky little scientist's eyes lit up and lifted his head a bit higher.

"R-Really?! Oh, FANTASTIC!" he nearly squealed, and giddily clapped his hands. "We never, NEVER get any visitors, n-not even from the village! SLUMBER PARTY, WOO-HOO! This is gonna be-!"

He abruptly paused...and glanced around with a frown.

"Hey...uh...where did my raccoon go?"

A chatter and a tug on the lad's pant-leg answered him. He looked down...then smirked and picked up the pudgy raccoon that smiled up at him, and carefully draped him around his shoulders. The raccoon let out a happy purring sound and nuzzled the teen's cheek.

"Aww-ha-ha, buddy," giggled the boy, and scratched the raccoon under the chin. "We've got company, don't get all 'cutesy' on me now."

Sora, Donald, and Goofy couldn't help but laugh. The young scientist smiled back at them, then

waved for them to follow as he turned away.

“C’mon, New Team Awesome! We got work to do! This way!”

“New Team Awesome?” Donald whispered.

This time it was Goofy who nudged him to be quiet.

“One minute!” Sora called out, as he hurried forward to catch up with their newfound ally. “We didn’t catch your names!”

The blue-eyed boy turned around...and smiled a bucktoothed smile, wider than ever.

“Oh! Y-Yeah, right! Ha! Well now: this,” he answered, gesturing to the raccoon on his shoulder, “Is my buddy Ruddiger. As for me?”

He winked and jabbed a thumb towards his own chest.

“My name is Varian. Think you’ll remember that?” he introduced himself, teasingly.

Goofy chuckled. Donald rolled his eyes. Sora just smirked slightly, a warm twinkle in one eye.

“Nice to meet you, Varian,” the keybearer said, sincerely. “Don’t worry: I’ll remember.”