

## **Book I: Serial Dilution**

### **Chapter IV: Friends For Dinner**

“I don’t quite know what to feel about this.”

“Huh? H-How come, Dad?”

“Well...on the one hand, I’m glad my son has friends over for dinner...and I’m glad to have guests, in fact; it’s a fine change of pace.”

“...But...?”

“Simply put: I wasn’t expecting two of my guests to have fur and feathers.”

Everyone at the table laughed. Quirin smiled as he took another spoonful of hearty vegetable stew, looking at the figures assembled at the table. Donald and Goofy sat across from one another at the far end of the table; closer to the man, Varian and Sora sat across from each other, too; the boy with the teal-striped hair sat beside Goofy, while the oddly-dressed teen with spiky hair sat beside Donald Duck.

The anthropomorphic canine took a spoonful and licked his lips as he swallowed the rich, hearty soup down.

“Gawrsh...that’s purty good!” he commented.

“It’s nothing too extravagant,” shrugged the old knight as he took a spoonful of his own.

“It’sh delishush!” Sora mumbled out, chewing on some of the vegetables in the soup...then grunted as he was elbowed by Donald, who gave him a scathing look for his bad manners. With some effort, he gulped down his mouthful, and burped softly. “Oof...heh heh...ah, s-sorry ‘bout that.”

“Don’t worry,” chuckled Quirin. “At least I know you like it.”

“What’s in it?” Donald quacked.

“Eh, chopped potatoes, tomato paste, diced onion, chopped celery, a handful or two of mushrooms...”

“And not a scrap of meat anywhere!” chirruped Varian, and slurped noisily from his own bowl...then froze up as Quirin gave him a disapproving look.

“Son,” he said, gently but firmly, “Manners.”

Varian blushed, his freckles turning crimson, and swallowed his helping before letting out a nervous chuckle.

“Heh heh heh...thanks for the reminder, Dad,” he peeped, and gave the others a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

“Aw, forget about it,” scoffed Donald, and thumbed towards Sora, who noisily slurped up some soup of his own. “We have to put up with him, anyway.”

“Hey!” Sora frowned petulantly through stuffed cheeks, “I haff mannersh!”

“Yeah, bad ones,” Donald retorted blandly.

Goofy let out a fittingly goofy-sounding chortle while Sora pouted and continued eating. Quirin just rolled his eyes.

“Teenagers will be teenagers, I guess,” he muttered to himself.

“So, how come you don’t put meat in this stuff?” Sora asked, after gulping down another helping of stew.

“Well, I can go for a steak or some bacon now and again,” Quirin shrugged, then jabbed his spoon and tilted his head towards his son. “But Varian here-”

“Not a fan of meat,” the alchemist stated. “I mean, I’ll eat it – I love ham sandwiches, and some fish or chicken is nice, but generally speaking, not a big guy for steak or bacon or anything like that.”

“Oh, how come?” Sora wondered, tilting his head.

Varian paused to politely take a spoonful, and held up a finger, as if to say “one moment,” before answering.

“Mph,” he grunted, and patted his mouth with a napkin. “See...the human body needs approximately 50 grams of protein daily. Most people get their protein from meat, but I have a theory that you can get by without anything...unless you count eggs, heh.”

“So...it’s a diet for an experiment?” Goofy checked, scratching his cheek in confusion.

“Kinda,” shrugged Varian. “See, you can get protein a lot of ways: cheese, milk, specific green

vegetables...”

“It’s funny,” interjected Quirin with a chuckle. “Once upon a time, when he was a baby, I couldn’t get him to TOUCH his veggies. Now he eats almost nothing but.”

“Dad!” Varian exclaimed with an exasperated blush.

“But why are you experimenting with your diet, then?” Sora asked with a light laugh.

Varian paused, and opened his mouth to answer...then stopped, as he felt something tugging on his pant leg. He looked down and smirked, as Ruddiger had scampered over, and was pointing into his open mouth with one paw while giving the boy begging eyes. The alchemist reached across the table and plucked an apple from a bowl of fruit in the center, then dropped it down. The raccoon caught it in his mouth and scurried into a corner, where he began to chew on it, quickly and greedily.

“Animals,” Varian explained, gesturing to Ruddiger in explanation, “Have thoughts and feelings just like we do. And again, I don’t mind SOME meat on occasion; I’m not a pure vegetarian, or anything. Like everyone else, I need it. But...I also don’t like the thought of somebody hurting a cow or a pig to give me some dinner.”

“I keep telling him it’s part of the natural world,” Quirin broke in. “After all, wolves and big cats eat other animals all the time.”

“Ahhh, but they don’t have a choice!” Varian argued with a grin and a twinkle in his baby blue eyes. “They can’t survive without meat! But if human beings COULD...!”

“Alright, alright, I won’t argue over it!” chuckled Quirin as he fished some more from his bowl of stew. “Just don’t blame me for being so skinny.”

Varian blushed, and looked with some embarrassment to the rest of the table.

“I, ah...s-still haven’t figured out the proper way to GET all the necessary proteins to stay...y’know...f-fully fit, ha ha...”

“You’ll work it out someday,” chuckled Sora, and took another spoonful.

“I hope so,” murmured Varian to himself.

“At least I know you won’t be wanting roast duck soon,” mumbled Donald to himself.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Quirin smirked. “I did mention I could enjoy meat from time to time.”

“WWWWAAAAAAAK!” Donald squawked indignantly, to everyone’s amusement.

“So!” Quirin said, looking to Sora, “My son said you were the ones who helped the Princess and Flynn Rider a year ago.”

“Yep!” Sora said, puffing out his chest with pride. “The Trusty Sidekicks and Conquering Heroes! That’s us!”

“Always so humble,” grumbled Donald, while Goofy just blushed at the description.

“I have to say, you’re an unlikely group of fighters,” Quirin observed.

“Oh, they are AWESOME!” Varian cheered. “You should have seen them against those Dark Creatures, Dad! Sora was like...!”

The lad began gesturing with his spoon, as if trying to act out the swordfight.

“...And the other two were like...!”

He then made zapping sounds and clanging noises, imitating the shield and the staff.

“...And I was like-*eep*.”

Varian froze up as Quirin placed a hand atop his son’s head. The teenager blinked up innocently at his father’s amused, bemused face.

“I think I get the picture, Varian,” Quirin said, dryly.

Varian blushed and smiled bashfully.

“Sorry, sir,” he squeaked out.

Quirin smirked and ruffled Varian’s hair; the bucktoothed alchemist yelped and swatted half-heartedly, shouting “I’m not six anymore!” in response.

“Still, sounds like quite a showdown,” the retired knight remarked, and tilted his head as he looked to Sora in particular. “But...I don’t see a weapon on you.”

“Oh, I keep it in a special place,” Sora said with a cryptic smile...which then became an exuberant grin. “Would you like to see it? It’s really, REALLY cool, even if I do say so myself!”

“You DO say so yourself,” Goofy and Donald snorted.

Sora stuck his tongue out at them childishly.

Quirin laughed; he had to admit, for someone apparently so gifted in battle, the spiky-haired youth was about as zany as his own son.

He was glad they were getting along so well.

“Well, if you don’t mind, certainly,” he permitted.

Sora smiled wider, and stood up from the table. He stepped back and snapped his fingers – just for show – and in a flash of light, the Kingdom Key appeared in his grip.

“It’s called a keyblade,” he elaborated, twirling it and then resting it on his shoulder with a wink. “Awesome, right?”

Varian clapped his knuckles together with an absolutely giddy smile at seeing the weapon again, while Donald and Goofy just rolled their eyes at their friend’s antics...

...But Quirin’s own eyes grew wide, and his expression suddenly lost its humor. He was barely aware of the moment when he dropped his spoon into the bowl with a clatter. All eyes turned to him as he gaped at the weapon in Sora’s hands. Sora frowned in confusion, glancing from his treasured battle-tool to the middle-aged knight a few times.

“Um...is something wrong?” he asked, slowly.

Quirin shook his head, just as slowly.

“No,” he said, softly. “No, I just...I’ve never seen something like that in Corona before.”

“Well, it’s not exactly something you can find in Corona,” chuckled Sora, and glanced towards Donald and Goofy to make sure he hadn’t broken the rules.

Donald glared and gave him an “I’m watching you” gesture, while Goofy just smiled blithely as he ate some more veggie stew.

As for Sir Quirin, he nodded thoughtfully, never taking his eyes off of the Kingdom Key.

“Yes, I can imagine so,” Quirin said softly...then, rather awkwardly, he stood up and dabbed at his mouth.

“Dad?” Varian checked, tenderly. “You okay?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Quirin insisted, a bit hurriedly. “Just, ah...please excuse me for a few moments,

I'll be back shortly."

Without another word, the knight bustled out of the dining room. The rest all looked to each other in confusion.

"Gawrsh," Goofy grunted, floppy ears "swipping" about his head as he glanced from Sora to the direction Quirin had gone. "I wonder what's eatin' him?"

"Heh. 'Eating him.' At dinnertime. Good one," Varian muttered.

"He seemed bothered by something," Donald added.

"You think it was the keyblade?" Sora murmured, holding it in both hands and looking at it with a furrowed brow.

"Seemed that way," Varian put in, and glanced in the direction his dad had gone, "Though I can't imagine why."

"I hope it's nothing too serious," Sora said, lowering his weapon to his side.

Varian paused for a moment; he bit his lip thoughtfully, something deep and less than chipper swirling in his blue eyes...but after a moment, he just scoffed and waved it off.

"Nah, it's...i-it's probably nothing, heh..."

Then, he shot up in his chair and stood up fast.

"OH! Ah, th-th-that just made me remember! I wanna show something to you guys, i-it's something I forgot to share earlier! Do you mind if I, uh...y'know...run to the lab and pick it up?"

"Your house," Donald and Goofy shrugged in unison.

"We'll be okay waiting," Sora said with a smile.

Varian smiled wider, and without another word, trotted out of the dining room, heading for his laboratory.

Thus, the three warriors of light were left alone in the room.

"Well," sighed Sora, "He may be a kook, but I like him! His dad seems nice, too."

"He sort of reminds me of you," Goofy piped up.

Sora blinked and tilted his head.

“...His Dad?” he said, with a slight grimace.

Goofy and Donald both laughed.

“A-Hyuck!” Goofy chortled. “No, silly! Varian! You two’ve sure got a lot in common!”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Sora frowned. “I’m not a science guy!”

“No,” Donald broke in, and began counting on his feathered fingers. “But you do like cool things, you’re highly excitable, you like to show off your skills, and you can be a total dork.”

“I am NOT a total dork!” Sora snapped, stomping one yellow-booted foot.

“Yes you are,” teased Donald with a smile.

“You’re adorable, too,” Goofy added.

“I AM NOT!” Sora yelled.

“Kairi sure thinks so,” the canine knight winked.

“Th-That’s...she’s...THAT IS SO UNFAIR!”

“Hey! Look!” Donald cheered. “He’s blushing!”

“Sh-Shut up, you’re just-!”

“TA-DA!”

Sora jumped clear out of his skin as he turned around...and found a pair of sharp, steel prongs pointed at his face, surrounded by glowing green coils that buzzed and hummed faintly.

The weapon was held by Varian, who had seemingly popped back up out of nowhere, holding the object in his hands with a wild sort of look in his eyes, smiling so wide one could almost see his gums. It appeared to be a makeshift sword, with a handle made of bolts and custom-pressed metal.

“BEHOLD!” Varian declared dramatically, and twirled the glowing weapon around his head. “My Secret Weapon Of Radical Demolition! Or, if you want the acronym...My SWORD!”

Sora blinked a few times.

“That...that is...”

Then he grinned.

“...SO COOL! Wh-what did you make it out of, how’s it work?!” he cheered with a laugh.

“Oh! G-Glad you asked!” Varian said, bouncing on his heels a bit, and swung the weapon around his head playfully. “See, I-I took some phosphorous and some assorted acids and a bunch of spare tubing, combined with a cattle prod, a-and some pieces of old, broken equipment my dad was gonna toss out, and...well...here we are!”

“That’s really neat!” Sora exclaimed...then smirked and pointed the keyblade at Varian.

“Hey...would you like to spar?”

Varian jerked back.

“Huh? M-Me?”

“Well, duh!”

Varian blinked...then smirked smugly.

“Well, heh...I should warn you, I...HAVE practiced with this baby a lot – based it on a weapon from the Flynnigan Rider stories, y’see, and I’ve had a looot of spare time to-”

CLANG!

“-WHOA!”

Ruddiger jumped in his corner and fled from the room as the keyblade clanged against the weapon in Varian’s hands.

“He-Hey! I d-didn’t mean right-”

CLANG!

“-NOW! Okay, ha ha, I-I guess we’re doin’ this, but-”

CLANG!

“-WAIT! H-Hey, you’re fast!”



“Come one,” Sora grinned mischievously, “Loosen up and watch my movements. If you’ve had so much practice, it should be easy, right?” he added, with a wink.

Varian blinked...then gave him a determined glare.

“Okay, Key-Boy. It. Is. ON.”

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

Donald gulped nervously as the pair of hyperactive teens clumsily “fenced” around the table. He cleared his throat and looked towards Goofy.

“...Should we...um...stop them?”

Goofy just looked up at the duck with a dopey grin and lifted his empty bowl.

“Think Quirin’d mind if I got seconds?”

Donald stared at Goofy for a solid three seconds...then sighed and facepalmed.

“Children,” he grumbled. “I work with children...”

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Meanwhile, elsewhere in the old castle, Quirin had entered his own private chambers. He pulled a match from a pocket on his person, struck it on the wall, and lit a lone candle that was on the stand near his bed.

Beside the window, across from Quirin’s bed, was a large, battered wooden chest, shut with a rusting padlock. As the Sun sank in the sky, its stray, slacking beams filtered through the gray clouds beyond, and fell upon the chest with an almost eerie glow. The aging warrior and experienced farmer glided towards the spot, and knelt before the chest...then looked up towards the wall above.

His eyes took on a sad look, as he stared at the portrait that was hung upon the wall: the image of himself, over a decade younger, posed with his smiling wife – a peachy-cheeked young woman with bright red hair, tied up in a bun, and sparkling blue eyes.

Blue eyes that were currently turned down to give a loving look to the smiling, bucktoothed infant – who was just showing signs of a dark head of shaggy hair – that lay happily in her arms.

Quirin sighed softly and shook his head, then looked to the chest. He frowned at the image of a circle, with three parallel lines slashed through it, on the front. Cautiously, he opened the chest...

Inside was a rusted suit of old armor. Quirin paused to look at his helmet...then pushed it aside, as he pulled out a scroll. Or rather, the fraction of a scroll; it was shredded along one side, clearly torn off of a larger document. On it was a series of ancient runes...

...And the image of a familiar golden flower.

Quirin glanced out the window again, towards the houses of Old Corona, which had holes in their roofs and windows; towards the ruined crops his neighbors worried about constantly.

He sighed and shook his head a second time, as he rolled up the scroll, replaced it inside the chest, and then shut the padlock.

“What am I going to do?” he murmured to himself as he pocketed the key.

Just then, a shrill chattering noise caught his ear. He glanced back just in time to see Ruddiger dart into the room. The raccoon tugged on his pant leg with one arm, and pointed towards the door urgently with the other.

Quirin frowned, and was about to ask what was the matter, when...

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

He jumped as he heard the sound of metal banging clumsily against metal somewhere downstairs.

“What in the world...?”

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“Loosen up, loosen up!” laughed Sora. “Weave a little...now you’re getting it!”

“I don’t feel like I’m getting anything but sore wrist!” Varian laughed weakly, then squeaked as the keyblade crashed against his weapon again as he blocked instinctively.

“Back up, back up, don’t get so close!” Sora instructed good-naturedly. “That’s it! That’s the way!”

Varian dodged as the keyblade swung at him, and then lunged forward fast. Sora laughed louder as he blocked the untrained strike.

“Not too bad, really, not too bad!” he encouraged.

“W-Wow, really?” Varian smiled.

“Yep, but don’t let it go to your head!” Sora said, and swiped his own weapon. Varian let out a

cartoonish “Yipe!” and ducked fast, then swung his own weapon around as hard as he could...

“WHOA!” Sora yelled, and ducked as well, then rose up to parry the strike as the alchemist swung back again.

Donald and Goofy were hiding under the table, watching the two teens go back and forth like it was a tennis match.

“Gawrsh...who do ya think’s gonna win?” Goofy whispered.

“I don’t think anyone wins this one,” Donald sighed. “In fact, I think everyone loses: loses some dignity, loses some brain cells, loses permission to ever be in the dining room alone...”

Goofy just rolled his eyes.

The alchemist and keybearer were still at it, but that didn’t last long. Suddenly, Sora flicked his keyblade in a practiced way, nearly knocking Varian’s “SWORD” out of his hands. The alchemist squeaked like a mouse and tried to catch it...and, unfortunately, grabbed it by its glowing “blade.”

“HOT-HOT-HOT!” yelled Varian, and impulsively tossed the weapon aside. It spun across the room...

...Then stabbed into the wall, three inches away from the entrance...

...Just as Quirin entered the room.

The knight stopped dead in his tracks and blinked at the weapon embedded in his wall. Ruddiger, who had been perched on his shoulder, looked at the SWORD so close to them...and promptly fainted dead way, flopping to the floor with a moan.

Quirin slowly turned to look at his son and Sora with a deadpan, disapproving look.

The keybearer gulped nervously...and made his weapon vanish before waving timidly.

“Uh...w-welcome back?” he peeped.

“Hi, Dad,” Varian nearly whimpered out, looking like he wanted to sink into the floor as he kicked at an imaginary pebble.

Quirin glanced towards the table boredly. Donald and Goofy both held up their hands, indicating they wanted no part in anything.

The middle-aged knight looked back at the two teens. His eye twitched once...and he sighed, pinching his brow.

“...I think I just remembered why we don’t have guests over often,” he muttered.

Varian and Sora ducked their heads blushed guiltily...but they couldn’t help but smile at one another.