

Book I: Serial Dilution

Chapter VI: Demolition

Sora, Donald, and Goofy dashed out of the battered castle in Old Corona as fast as they could. Quirin had run ahead of the visiting trio, and they soon spotted him as they hurried down the steps into the yard. Their faces fell in expressions nearing horror at what they found.

Heartless. At least three dozen of them, all Soldier-types, all scurrying around the village like rats raiding a larder. People were running, fleeing their houses as the Heartless smashed through the doors and clawed at their windows. They found little safety in the street, however, for the dark beasts chased them, swiping their crimson talons at their backs. Their clumsy, armored forms leaped into the gardens and small crops of the farmers, their klutzy gaits leading to them smashing and ripping up plants left and right.

Directly ahead of the party, Quirin had grabbed a scythe from his toolshed, and was swinging it about, as three Heartless all tried to take a slash at him. They jumped back, dodging each strike, while Quirin desperately blocked and parried each swipe and swing.

“Get back, you cretins!” the retired knight barked, as the Heartless swiped at him again...then gasped as their claws cleaved through the scythe’s handle, slashing it into four pieces. The Soldiers now had a good, clean shot at the man, but Quirin lunged forward and whipped out the blade, then followed it up by hurling the remaining piece of the handle in his hands. The shadows leapt back, distracted...

...At which point, Sora, Donald, and Goofy flew into action. Goofy flung his shield, sending it spinning through the air, while Donald and Sora each pointed their weapons at the creature and launched two fireballs in their direction.

The three soldiers had no time to react, as each strike met its mark, and they disappeared in a cloud of dark mist.

“Thanks, boys!” Quirin called to them.

“We’ll take care of these creeps!” Sora called back. “Get the people to safety! Hurry!”

Quirin saluted, and rushed out onto the street.

“Everyone!” he yelled, calling to the people who were panicking all around him. “This way! Follow me! Everybody, get to safety! Quickly now!”

The farmer ushered his friends and neighbors towards a large, old barn on his property; it would

do as a temporary solution. Men, women, and children all hurried to follow his instructions...but the Soldier Heartless were persistent, and lunged after their intended victims.

Sora, Donald Duck, and Goofy leapt in front of several of them, barring their path.

“I don’t think so!” Sora jeered, and whirled the keyblade about his head, striking down two Soldiers at once. The other Heartless nearby all stepped back, twitching erratically as their claws flickered, vacant golden eyes peering at their opponents with hungry, hollow glares.

“I think we should split up,” Goofy suggested.

“We’ll take care of more faster that way,” Donald agreed.

“Right!” Sora nodded. “I’ll run dead ahead. Goofy, you go the right, and Donald, you go to the left. Don’t let them ruin anything else.”

“On it!” his friends chorused, and all three charged in their respective directions. Thus the battle truly began.

Donald flapped towards a group of seven Soldiers who were plunging their claws into the window of one house. He could hear the sound of a baby crying somewhere inside, as the ravenous black beasts tried hard to get at their intended prey. The duck growled and lifted his staff high above his head.

“THUNDER!” he quacked, as the end of his Mage’s Staff glowed bright yellow. Then, from out of the sky, seven lightning bolts flashed down from the gray clouds puffing overhead, and struck each of the Heartless. They convulsed briefly and fell back from the window...but melted into dark pools before they hit the ground. The pools almost instantly evaporated.

Meanwhile, Goofy spotted six Heartless that had cornered a young mother, standing protectively in front of her three children. The vicious brutes seemed to be trying to decide which of them would take which victim first. The dog-like Captain of the Disney Guards threw his shield, and it rebounded off the alley, flying at the Soldiers...

CHING-CHANG-CHING-CHANG-CHING-CHANG!

With a sound that amusingly enough resembled a pinball machine, the spinning shield crashed into each of the armored creatures, felling them as it bounced off each one and then carved through another near them...till his circular Knight’s Shield returned to his gloved hand, and all six of the monsters vanished into the dark void from whence they came.

Sora had no time to check on the progress of his friends, meanwhile. He charged headlong down the main street of the village in Old Corona. The Soldiers pounced and slashed at him with every

bound. The Kingdom Key was swift and keen and readily performed its service, for not a single one of the dark creatures so much as laid fingertip upon the teenaged swordmaster. He hammered it down to the right, and chopped one Heartless into two separate, goreless pools; he swung upwards to the left, and sent one flying into a wall...but it evaporated before it even reached said wall. He lunged dead ahead and then whirled about, sending one Heartless colliding into another...then twirled his weapon about and hacked at another one's neck. All three of the Soldiers disappeared at the same time.

But no matter how often he stabbed and cut down his foes, more seemed to keep coming. Sora scowled and gritted his teeth as he kept up the charge: this wasn't right. A horde of Heartless like this needed to have a source. But where and what could that source be?

He was so distracted by his thoughts, he never noticed two Soldiers creeping up behind him. He had just struck down another two with a single thrust of his weapon...when, before he could pull back and straighten his posture, the two Soldiers jumped at him. The keyblade master cried out sharply as he was thrown off balance, and thudded to the ground.

Sora was not one to be taken down so easily, and elbowed one of the monsters. As it leapt back, he managed to roll over, throwing off the second Heartless...but the Shadows were relentless, and plunged towards him again before he could try and sit up, let alone stand...

BANG!

Suddenly, a pair of vials, tied together by thin wire, came flying at the Heartless. A blinding flash of light burst from the broken glass capsules, causing them to claw at their own yellow eyes...and, in their distracted state, Sora felled them with a quick slice of his keyblade.

"You okay?" a familiar voice called. Sora looked up...and was startled to see Varian standing only a few feet away. He was dressed in his alchemist gear once more, and had a leather satchel slung about his shoulders.

"Yeah!" Sora called back, and then grinned. "Hey, thanks!"

"Not a problem!" Varian grinned...then paused, and frowned. "Hey, w-watch your back!"

So saying, he flung another pair of vials, tied together, at a third Soldier that was trying to once again sneak up on the keybearer. Sora whipped about and swung his blade in a wide arc, slashing across the crimson insignia on the armored fiend's chest. It stumbled back in a most ungainly manner and then faded from view.

Sora stood up as Varian ran over and joined him at his side. Eight more Heartless surrounded them in a circle, the Soldiers twitching, their heads jerking about like a bunch of rabid hummingbirds, while their claws flicked at the air, eager to rip and tear into the chests of their

prey.

“There’s so many of them,” Varian shuddered.

“There has to be some sort of Summoner; a place they’re spawning from,” murmured Sora, holding his weapon at the ready as he and Varian stood back to back.

“Any idea what it could be?” Varian asked, as he pulled four vials – two “packs” in each gloved hand – from his satchel.

Sora was about to answer...when suddenly, the ground began to shake.

THOOM. THOOM. THOOM.

Footsteps. Huge, powerful footsteps. Approaching the area.

The massive footsteps were accompanied by another sound: a faint, tinkling, cheery sort of sound. Sora suddenly realized it was a music box melody.

Slowly, the keybearer looked up. The scrawny alchemist did, too...

...Then squeaked like a mouse and ducked behind Sora in fright. He then peered out over Sora’s shoulder as both teens blinked their blue eyes up at the giant beast that had come towards them.

Looming before them was a massive machine, covered in flecks of rust around its joints. It was built like a gorilla, with stumpy lower limbs and burly, overly long arms. It had a dome-like head, with a brass crest, and five glowing green “eyes” set in its iron cranium. Its arms ended in huge, round, black appendages, carved from metal to resemble a pair of closed fists, but clearly made from items more akin to a couple of wrecking balls.

From the creature’s body came wisps of dark purple mist, and it was surrounded by a similarly-colored aura.

Varian gasped, and grinned despite himself.

“Fascinating!” he exclaimed, and stepped closer to the creation, from which the music box like tune jingled forth merrily. “I believe this is an Automaton! A-A marvel of ancient technology, really! I-I’ve heard about them, but j-j-just to see one in person is-GACK!”

Varian’s words were cut short, as Sora, grabbed hold of him and jerked him back, at the same time the massive machine lifted up one burly limb and then SLAMMED it into the ground. The ground quaked and both teens were nearly knocked clear off their feet.

“Maybe wait on the geeking out till AFTER the big bad robo-destroyer is taken care of?” Sora sighed, with some mild agitation.

Varian blushed and nodded.

“Oh. R-Right, heh, ah...sorry...”

Sora rolled his eyes...which then widened, as the Automaton let out a mechanical groan...and two more Soldiers suddenly appeared to rise up from the ground itself, and joined the circle of eight around them, making ten in total.

“It’s the Summoner!” Sora cried out, and narrowed his eyes at the aura and mist rising from the mechanized menace. “It must be possessed by one of the Heartless! We’ll have to flush it out to stop this!”

“Don’t worry, Sora! I’ve got this!” Varian announced, and lobbed both of the packs of explosive formula at the creature like a couple of grenades. The machine stumbled back and swung its arms upwards to try and balance itself as the explosions blasted against its side.

Two of the Soldiers lunged at Varian, who plunged forward. They flew clear over his head, and Sora smacked them down and sent them back into the darkness with a thrust of the Kingdom Key. The young alchemist’s teal-striped hair whipped about his face as he hurled another pair of vials exploded in a flash of fiery light and bashed against the robotic behemoth, which let out another ironclad groan before crashing to the ground.

Varian smirked proudly and glanced back at Sora.

“See?” he sang out. “I’ve got this! I’ve-”

WHAM!

Varian grunted and wheezed as the Automaton swung out one limb and bashed it into his side and sternum. The alchemist pinwheeled through the air and then smacked spine-first into the side of a nearby building. As he flopped to the ground, three more Heartless went plunging towards him, claws outspread.

Sora was quick to react; his keyblade swung fast about his shoulders in one, two, three downward slashes, each one eliminating one of the three Soldiers before they could reach Varian. He rushed to his friend’s side and helped him up.

“Are you all right?” he asked, carefully.

Varian whimpered and shakily propped himself up against Sora as he stumbled to his feet. He

looked rather cross-eyed.

“Ohhhh...despite the...EXCRUCIATING pain and the...f-feeling that I’m about to, ungh, pass out...”

He sighed dreamily and looked towards the possessed Automaton, practically having stars in his blue eyes.

“...The SCIENCE and INGENUITY at work here...it’s SPELLBINDING!”

Sora smirked and held back a biting laugh.

Now was not the time for jokes.

The pair looked towards the Automaton as the remaining five dark creatures slunk about and between its limbs. It groaned a third time, and the aura around it flared up, as two more Soldier Heartless rose from the ground between its ape-like forelimbs.

“We’ll need to take out the big guy as our first priority,” Sora said.

“Right, we need a plan!” Varian nodded back. “It’s...i-it’s gotta have a weakness to exploit...something that-”

He froze. The sound of the ringing, cheery tune of the mysterious music box somewhere nearby filtered into Varian’s ears. A lightbulb seemed to go off over the genius youth’s head.

“Sora! Th-That music! The music box!” Varian exclaimed.

“That tune that’s come from the thing?”

“Right! I-I have an idea! You deal with the Heartless! I need to get behind it!”

Sora nodded back, and the plan went into action. Varian dove to one side, running to flank the Automaton. The seven Soldiers darted towards him...but Sora was quick to respond, and thrust his Kingdom Key outwards as a blue-white light formed around its tip...

...Then – ZANG, ZANG, ZANG! – the keybearer jerked slightly, as if firing a large gun, as he blasted swarms of ice crystals towards the Heartless. Each time the crystals struck, they burst into a flurry of snowflakes, and the Heartless froze solid...before collapsing, shattering, and promptly melting away.

Varian ducked to avoid the swinging arm of the Possessed Automaton...and smiled with a sense of impending victory as he spotted a golden cylinder on the back of the creature. It turned

slowly, a quiet, saccharine sound coming from it as it moved...

“It’s got a timing cylinder!” Varian called to Sora. “If we can jam that, we can shut it down, and it won’t be of any use to the Heartless!”

So saying, he pulled another explosive pack from his satchel, and hurled it towards the cylinder...but the Automaton was faster, and swung around before it ever met its mark. The droid-like behemoth batted the explosive away with one arm. This, however, caused it to stumble back from the bright light that accompanied the blast.

“I’ve got it!” Sora yelled, and jumped into the air, flourishing his blade as he lifted it high over his head...

...Then, as he came back towards the ground, slashed the Kingdom Key clean through the cylinder, slicing it in half.

The green “eyes” of the Automaton flickered into dull, dark spots, and with a final groan and a low, slow whirring sound – the sound of some sort of engine dying – it crumpled to the ground with a resounding, earth-rattling BOOM.

For precisely four seconds, nothing happened...then, the aura and mist that had surrounded the creature abruptly faded...and out of its chest area drifted a small, round, black sphere. It appeared to have a jagged, red mouth – like that drawn upon a mask – and the same telltale yellow eyes all Heartless wore. From its body jutted four purple spikes, and it was surrounded by a dark cloud of mist.

The Possessor shook itself, as if dizzy, then jetted off in a streak of darkness, flying clear over Sora’s head. The keyblade master lunged upwards, but missed.

“I-It’s getting away!” Varian wailed.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” quacked a familiar voice. “GRAVITY!”

Just then, a large, purple-and-white sphere surrounded the Possessor mid-flight. It banged itself against the walls three times...then let out a shrill, sudden, snake-like sound as the Gravity Orb contracted in on itself...until the Possessor, with a final, alien scream, crumbled into ash and smoke. As the Gravity spell wore off, it faded away into nothingness.

From behind a nearby building stepped the victorious Donald Duck, followed closely by Goofy, who was brushing off his own shield somewhat absent-mindedly.

“Great timing, Donald!” Sora congratulated.

“Aw, it was nothing!” Donald smiled with a shrug.

“Gawrsh, are you two okay?” Goofy called out.

“Oh, we are BETTER than okay!” laughed Varian, and threw his hands up in celebration. “We are AWESOME!”

“Well,” said a new voice, “I wish I could say the same for everyone.”

All eyes turned as Quirin approached.

“Dad!” Varian cried out, and trotted forward. Quirin knelt down and the two hugged. “Dad...are you alright? Did...d-did everybody...?”

“Yes, thankfully,” Quirin sighed, then stood up and looked to Sora with a smile. “Thank you, Sora. You and your friends really helped us here...”

He frowned, then looked around the village, and all of the ruined houses.

“...But I don’t think we can stay here any longer, after this attack...”

“You’re right, Quirin!” called an angry, snappish voice. “We can’t! And we won’t!”

The group turned...and saw Peter, the green-dressed old farmer, approaching. A few other townsfolk were following close behind.

“All of you back to the sanctuary!” Quirin ordered.

“What for?” spat Peter. “The attack is over! Do you expect us to live in your barn?”

“The winter is coming, we can’t stay here now!” a woman cried out.

“What are these attacks for, Quirin? When is it going to end?” an angry man shouted.

“And what is that thing?!” Peter demanded, and pointed towards the fallen Automaton.

“Oh!” Varian piped up, and stepped forward. “Th-That’s an-”

“Another creation of yours, boy?” snarled Peter, interrupting the youth sharply. “I might have known, if it was!”

“I’ll bet those Dark Creatures are all HIS doing!” yelled another.

Sora felt something his chest snap. He looked to Varian. The younger teen froze in place. His mouth opened and closed a few times and he backed away. Quirin glared at the villagers...but made no move to protect Varian. He didn't even so much as place a hand on his shoulder.

Sora was sure that was not an intended cruelty...but he could virtually hear Varian's little heart breaking, and he frowned as he stepped forward and addressed the crowd.

"These things that are bothering you have nothing to do with him!" he called out, courageously. "My friends and I are trying to stop them!"

"We saw your heroics, boy," Peter nodded. "We are in your debt, undeniably, but--"

"-Then you should also know that I couldn't have defeated so many without Varian's help."

Peter shut his mouth tightly.

Varian looked to Sora with what seemed like genuine surprise. Now, his jaw simply went slack. His eyes bugged out as, shortly thereafter, Donald and Goofy stood at Sora's side, and all three crossed their arms over their chests as they glared at the villagers, as if daring them to say anything more.

None of them did.

It was Quirin who broke the silence.

"I cannot speak for that...THING, whatever it is," he said, jabbing a thumb towards the broken robot. "But as far as the attacks, and this particularly vicious strike, are concerned: I will be visiting the King tomorrow, with my son and our new allies. I promise you, we will find a solution to our danger, and make sure everyone is safe."

Peter and the villagers shuffled slightly, shamefaced.

"...Thank you, Quirin," one said, very quietly. "We're truly sorry for offending you."

Quirin smiled kindly.

"Your anger is justified. Now, I will see to it you all have a place to sleep tonight on my property. All will be sorted out in good time."

The villagers all mumbled their thanks and apologies, and quietly marched back towards the old barn.

Quirin looked down to Varian. The alchemist had hung his head, and was standing very quietly

at his father's side. The retired warrior bit his lip...and placed one hand on Varian's shoulder. The teen blinked, then looked up expectantly.

"I'm going to help them all get settled in," Quirin said, softly. "Please stay out of trouble while I'm at it?"

Something painful flickered in Varian's eyes...but before Quirin could even think of rewording his plea, Varian gulped and nodded, turning away.

"Right, Dad. Right."

Quirin patted Varian's shoulder softly...then trotted off to take care of business.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy watched Quirin go, then turned to look to Varian. It took a moment before the alchemist met their gaze.

He smiled thinly.

"Th-thanks. Heh. Y'know, for...um...uh...s-stickin' up for me, I guess, ha ha. It was...ah...y-yeah, it was...nice of you."

"Anytime, Varian," Sora smiled back.

"Can we help you at all?" Goofy added.

"Just don't make us help with too much," Donald yawned. "I'm TIRED."

"I think we all are," Sora agreed with a yawn of his own.

"Well," Varian murmured, and glanced back towards the broken droid. "Do you guys think you could help me drag that thing into my lab."

"We could try," Donald nodded, "But why?"

"I'm thinking I can use it for spare parts, or maybe work on some other projects," Varian shrugged, then smirked towards the trio. "I've been trying to build special farming machines that run on their own. The clockworks in that thing could help me figure out a way to make them function autonomously."

"We'll do our best," Sora said, and both Donald and Goofy saluted playfully.

Varian chuckled, and smiled gratefully. He paused and swiped with one gloved hand at his blue eyes.

“Th-thanks,” he barely breathed, then cleared his throat before adjusting his satchel. He waved for the three to follow him as he approached the busted Automaton.

“Come on, guys, let’s get this done and get to bed. We’ve got a long day tomorrow...”

Up above the heads of the four friends, the gray clouds remained half-coiled around the silvery moon. They neither thickened nor thinned.

The trio didn’t know it, but they were still in the eye of the hurricane, even now.

The true storm would bide its time.