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1 - Arc 1: Class 13A

Warrior of Light strode through the large, towering gate as it suddenly sprung open just for his welcoming. His long, neat silver hair flowing in the breeze. He kept his chest held high and had a strong grip on his plain yet posh rucksack. He constantly checked his uniform to make sure that every part of his clothing and body had been neat and clean; his dark blue blazer was completely new and spotless, his long-sleeved shirt was as white as pearls with every button done up securely, his dark blue trousers was thoroughly washed and ironed just before he put them on, his dark blue tie was straight and had been neatly tied around the collar of his neck so that it wasn't too loose or too tight, even his smart, jet-black shoes were completely polished for the day just as they were every day since he bought them. Once the final checks were done, he lifted his head and gazed at the large, office-like building that stood out amongst all other buildings in the district. Along its wall held its name in huge capital letters: DISSIDIA ACADEMY.

Today was possibly the most important day for Warrior of Light in his life so far; A new year at the Academy was beginning and Warrior of Light had become – Crowned, in his mind - the President of the Academy's council. For this very occasion, he had arrived 1 hour early even though he was supposed to arrive only 30 minutes early.

He entered the building with a proud expression strapped across his face, and began to climb up the winding staircase towards the top floor. The Academy had 6 floors: the 1st was where the Entrance hall, the Dining hall, the Theatre room and the Reception area was situated; the next 3 was for each year group and most of the subjects; the 5th held the Laboratory rooms, the Art rooms and the Tech rooms; and the top floor held the teachers offices, the school council room and the Headmistress' office. For this certain occasion, Warrior of Light had to meet with the Headmistress about his new role of the academy. Something he was anxious about yet was too stubborn to show it.

Finally, he reached the top floor; he passed the variety of offices which each had the name of the teacher across the doors. He passed the council room and caught sight of the door for the Headmistress' office, eyes locked on target like a hawk.

He knocked.

"Come in." A sophisticated female voice answered on the other side, giving off a soft and welcoming aura.

Warrior of Light opened to door and entered through, his eyes lit up just as he caught sight of the office. The room he entered was large and spaced out; with a bookcase on the left holding a variety of subject folders; a file cabinet holding information related to the academy; a cream sofa on the right for visiting guests; and directly in front was a desk that was as clean as could be. Accompanied with the desks were 2 seats that had been situated on either end.

Headmistress Cosmos sat peering out towards an enlarged window situated behind her desk, watching the clear blue sky in a peaceful daze. Just a small glimpse of her appearance caused Warrior of Light to skip a heartbeat in admiration. She had been wearing from top to toe a bright silver suit, including blazer and heels; matching perfectly with her long, soft platinum hair and bright eyes. In addition to this, she had a figure of a goddess; healthy and decently postured, one could not fault her in any way. Altogether, she gave an atmosphere of warmth and inspiration.

She swivelled her seat back to the desk with elegance and glanced up towards Warrior of Light. He bowed to her the moment their eyes met, feeling to would be rude not to do so.

"You must be very keen to arrive at such an early time, Warrior of Light." Cosmos cheerfully commented

with amusement, noticing the digital clock that hung against the wall above the sofa. It read 7:13am. "My apologies Headmistress; I felt it would be better for me to arrive at this time." Warrior of Light admitted in response.

"There's no need for apologies, let's just not make a habit out of it." Cosmos grinned coolly, a light chuckle escaping her voice. "Take a seat."

Warrior of Light did as he was told without hesitation, placing himself on the seat opposite the Headmistress.

"So ... shall we begin?"

It was now 8:00am, hordes of students passed through the front gates, chatting amongst one another with cheerful expressions. There were around 1,300 students who attended Dissidia Academy, all with their own dreams and goals to accomplish. Warrior of Light stood beside the gates with crossed arms, watching the students pass with a wary mind-set, hoping none of them were to misbehave or act rebellious in any way upon entering the academy grounds.

Even though he kept to his duty, Warrior of Light had thoughts rushing through his head, the entirety in relation to his meeting with the Headmistress. Most of it was based on his role as the new President of the School Council, in which he had been expecting; however, there were also topics that struck him by surprise. For now, he decided to assure himself that this was not the time to worry about such problems and concentrate on the task at hand.

Suddenly, Warrior of Light caught a loud commotion originating from the academy car park. He decided to take action.

"I'm sorry, sir; but you cannot park your Chocobo in the car park." A Member of the Council explained in a strict manner, agitated with the situation. "It is against the policy of the academy."

"Huh!? B-but I'm a student here!" A student argued back, keeping himself close to his Chocobo in refusal to back down.

Upon entering the car park, Warrior of Light recognised the student immediately. The student was Bartz Klauser; considered to be one of the class clowns of Dissidia Academy based on his laid-back attitude and who he had a tendency to spend his free time hanging out with. Sporting medium-long, light brown hair and a slim figure; he was a guy who enjoyed anything Chocobo related and causing mischief.

"Rules are rules, Mr Klauser; you must have a permit from Reception in order for you to park any vehicle, air-ship or – in this case – Chocobo in this car park!" The Council Member continued on with a stern expression, beginning to fluster due to the nuisance. "The permit is also applicable for the academy stables, where your Chocobo is MEANT to be!"

"Well, Boko is staying right here and there's nothing you can do about it!" Bartz stated proudly, folding his arms and showing a grin. "Isn't that right, Boko?"

The Chocobo, Boko, hooted and nodded in agreement.

"The funny thing about that is ... we can." The Council Member then admitted, abruptly taking hold of Boko's reins. "You see, Members of the Council are allowed to confiscate or restrain any mode of transport – Chocobo, for this matter – if a permit had not been issued to the owner. This will, in turn, be escalated to the Head of the Council."

"Wha-!? And who would that be!?" Bartz stubbornly questioned, as though attempting to keep the upper hand of the situation.

"That ... would be me." A sudden, unimpressed voice answered from directly behind Bartz.

Bartz switched round abruptly, almost leaping out from his skin in fright. Warrior of Light had stood patiently behind him for a while, listening to the commotion in silence. His arms crossed and eyes glaring back with a serious tone, Bartz couldn't help but quiver. Warrior of Light's President Badge that was situated on the collar of his Blazer reflected the sun's bright rays with pride, proving to Bartz he was the

real deal.

"Escort the Chocobo to the stables, please." Warrior of Light commanded his fellow council member, pointing over towards the direction of the academy stables. "I'll deal with this fool."

"Right away, Council President." The Council Member nodded back, guiding Boko away.

"W-wait, I beg you!" Bartz hastily called out in desperation. "Please don't take Boko away!"

Boko glanced over to Bartz, calling back to him with a loud yet worried screech.

"BOKOOOO!" Bartz cried out with tears streaming like waterfalls, falling to his hands and knees in defeat.

Warrior of Light glanced down towards the broken Bartz, scratching his head and wondered what in the world had just happened. He noticed many of the students watching in curiosity, the atmosphere surrounding the two tensing up, causing him to feel ever the more awkward.

Ultimately, he gave out a frustrated sigh and decided to keep his cool, kneeling down beside Bartz in order to issue him instructions.

"Listen to me, Bartz; go to Reception and request for a permit, fill out the form and show it to me when complete. Mark my words; I'll give you your 'beloved' Boko back by the end of the day." Warrior of Light explained to him clearly, knowing he has to be reasonable to everyone ... including the idiots. "For now, though, he'll be well cared for in the stables."

He caught sight of a subtle nod from the sulking Bartz, accepting the Council President's words bitterly. Warrior of Light then assisted Bartz to his feet, brushing off the gathered dust on his uniform. With that, he straightened himself up and stepped away, feeling relieved that the situation was sorted out without too much hassle.

However, this had been short-lived. Warrior of Light halted abruptly due to an individual shooting passed him with alarming speeds, a gust of wind trailing from behind.

"There, there Bartz; don't worry about Boko." An upbeat voice began to comfort Bartz. "You know as well as I do that the new Council President keeps to his word."

Warrior of Light whipped round in an instant, noticing that the person who had sped past him was a fellow student. However, this was no ordinary student. He was the 'Partner in Crime' to Bartz and 'Mastermind' behind most – if not, all – of the tricks and pranks caused within Dissidia Academy grounds. He had light-blond hair tied into a long yet thin pony tail and clear-blue eyes. He was of short yet nimble build, able to beat any who oppose him in a race of speed. And most notable of all ... he had a golden monkey tail.

"Are you sure about that, Zidane?" Bartz wondered curiously, sniffing out and cuffing away his tear-filled eyes.

"I'm positive!" Zidane answered. "Would I ever lie to you? ... Actually, don't answer that."

Zidane rubbed Bartz on the back with cheerful spirit and began to walk away, tail freely swooping from behind. However, just as he was about take his leave with his friend, Zidane glanced back towards Warrior of Light's position, an evil grin showing as he began to pat his rear pocket. Warrior of Light watched him with confusion, cautious as to what he was indicating.

It was at that moment where he had realised, swiftly switching his sights down towards his blazer. His President Badge had been stolen! There was no wonder to Zidane's known title amongst the Academy, known to many as: Zidane the Thief.

Warrior of Light hastily switched back to Zidane and Bartz's position, only to find the two had disappeared in an instant. Warrior of Light took no time to hesitate, desperate to have his badge returned at once.

He began make his way around the Academy grounds in a swift run in hopes to find the thief; looking through every window, in every dustbin, past every door and in every room. No luck, there was no sign of Zidane.

Then, just as he had reached the fields of the Academy with the need to recover his energy, Warrior of Light heard a loud calling-whistle originating from high up the Academy building. He turned towards the direction of the building and glanced upwards, noticing Zidane in an instant. He was swinging from a 4th floor window ledge like a pendulum, using his tail as an anchor and could be seen juggling the badge from one hand to the other.

"Looking for this?" Zidane called out as he held out the badge, laughing away in a cheeky manner.

"Give that back, Zidane!" Warrior of Light bellowed back, his frustration rising due to this pointless chase.

"Hmm ... Nah, don't feel like it!" Zidane coolly refused with a shrug.

With that, Zidane shot away through the open window. Warrior of Light gritted his teeth furiously and charged back into the building of the academy. He leaped up the staircase towards the 4th floor, refusing to stop himself for any given reason. He reached the 4th Floor corridor in no time whatsoever and began to search the area, checking every room he passed along the way.

Not long into the search, Warrior of Light heard an echoing laugh coming from one of the far end corridors. Following the sound of Zidane's voice, he leapt into a sprint and flew through the corridors, something he would normally disapprove of to the other students.

All of a sudden, Warrior of Light skidded to a stop, noticing someone standing directly in his path. A student with brown hair, a large scar running across the crux of his nose and a moody expression showing in his face stood in Warrior of Light's way. At first, Warrior of Light was hesitant to approach the guy, feeling somewhat intimidated by his appearance. However, this approach was brushed aside as the student held up his right hand, showing off Warrior of Light's 'precious' badge in broad daylight.

"I believe this is yours?" The student spoke with an irritable tone, passing over the badge to its original owner.

"Err ... Ah! Yes it is! B-but how did you-?" The Warrior of Light tried to question back, having trouble to form words as he was handed the badge due to lack of breath.

"I have the most unbearable curse of having to cope with both him and Bartz every day." The student answered with a bothering sigh, keeping the same tone in his voice as though he was bored out of his mind. "Trust me; I know ALL of Zidane's tricks."

"I see ... well, thank you for your help." Warrior of Light appreciated gratefully, before curiously asking him. "May I ask ... Who are you?"

"Squall. Squall Leonhart." He answered with his monotone. "And I suggest you keep your distance from the other two, especially since you're in the same homeroom class as us three."

"Right, I'll try my- wait ... WHAT!?" Warrior of Light stuttered, unable to believe what he had just heard. Squall sighed out with a face-palmed, "(I haven't got time for this) ... I guess you haven't seen the- What the-? Where'd he go?"

Warrior of Light had suddenly disappeared out of sight within seconds of hearing this news.

Squall shrugged out, placing his hands in his pockets and walking away silently like a shadow.

"Meh, at the end of the day ... We're all screwed." He murmured quietly.

Warrior of Light was once again charging through the corridors in haste; some of his energy returning to him after the incident with Zidane. He reached the staircase and leapt down every few steps towards the 1st floor; he was cautious not to trip or lose his concentration during his descent. And yet, his mind was racing even faster than his legs were. He had not checked up on the homeroom group announcement board as he felt it had been inappropriate at the time. Yet now he was seen cursing himself for the decision.

Finally, he reached the bottom of the staircase. With no time to rest, he instantly ran towards the entrance of the building, noticing students crowding outside. Once he exited the building, huffing and

panting away, Warrior of Light turned swiftly to his left, the large board towering could be seen towering over the crowds of students that gathered around. All were gossiping either gleefully or in a moan as they found out where they were placed in the designated academic Class'.

Warrior of Light rushed towards the board, slipping his way through the vast crowd towards the front, gaining the clearest view possible. Upon reaching the front, he halted to a standstill and gazed up to the board. An immense list of names completely filled up the board, all in large enough writing for most to see. The top of the class board revealed the names in the Academy Council and who the head of each Club were. Underneath were the homerooms with the Class numbers and teachers' names beginning each list. Warrior of Light skimmed through the board until he finally caught his homeroom.

He read the list carefully:

Class 13A:

Teacher: Shantotto

Students:

Warrior of Light (Council and Class President)

Firion (Council Member)

Onion Knight (Council Member)

Cecil Harvey

Bartz Klauser

Terra Branford

Cloud Strife (Head of the Chocobo Racing Committee)

Squall Leonhart

Zidane Tribal

Tidus (Blitzball Captain)

After several checks, realisation finally began to set in. It was all there.

Warrior of Light gave out a loud, horrid moan; he was despising the fact that he had been put in the same class with both a troublemaker and a total idiot! How was this possible!?

"SWEET!" An excited voice exploded from behind. "This is great, Cloud! All of us have been put in the same class! We have to find Firion and Cecil and tell them!"

Warrior of Light span around upon hearing the ear-piercingly loud voice, feeling as though his eardrum had burst in impact. Two male students stood direction behind him: one with light-brown, medium-sized hair who was looking eager and over-excited; whilst the other had blond, spikey hair and seemed to have an exhausted expression on his face. Their names: The Blitzball Captain 'Tidus', and Chocobo Racing Committee Head 'Cloud Strife'.

"You can go and tell them yourself ... I'm getting a coffee." Cloud answered back in a tired, groaning voice, struggling to stay awake.

"Coffee!?" Tidus leapt back in a surprised manner, over-exaggerating his actions. "Why would you want coffee for!?"

"*Sigh...* Because, Tidus, you called me at 3am to hurry to the park for a game of Blitzball which went on non-stop for THREE HOURS!" Cloud explained to him in frustration, sounding as though he had constantly reminded Tidus previously of the dilemma. "Right now I'm shattered and I think I'm going to collapse."

"Yeah, but that's no reason to get a coffee!" Tidus ushered Cloud towards the Academy building, not realising that coffee would help to wake Cloud up. "Come on; let's go find Firion and Cecil!"

With that, Tidus grabbed the back of Cloud's collar and dragged him out of the large crowd; Cloud's feet

dragged against the concrete floor as he gave out a low, quiet groan. With that, two were out of sight, a trail of dust cloud forming from Cloud's feet marks. Warrior of Light turned away and shook his head. In summary; he had a feeling that his whole class were a lost cause.

He gave one last glance to the board with displeased eyes and then left the crowd.

It was now 8:45am; the students of Dissidia Academy were entering the Theatre room for the beginning of the academic year assembly. The students took their places along the rows of chairs and sat on whichever they desired with their friends. This was the ONLY time in the academic year this was allowed to happen, any other time they would have to sit in their Homeroom Class groups.

Warrior of Light was up on stage doing the last minute preparations including sorting out the Headmistress' microphone. He knew that Headmistress Cosmos was set to call out several announcements; some that may shock everyone in the entire hall of the Academy. It was the one thing that had caught him out during his meeting earlier. It was tough to handle, yet Warrior of Light had to press on.

After a few minutes with checks, he was able to finish with the microphone and slipped swiftly backstage, out of sight from the crowd. He noticed Headmistress Cosmos and approached her with the strong stance.

"Is everything ready?" She questioned him curiously, her kind smile as bright as ever.

"Yes, Headmistress." Warrior of Light answered formally, giving a nod.

"I told you many times, just call me Cosmos."

"Sorry Headmiss- I mean, Cosmos."

Cosmos sighed out, changing the subject, "I feel the news I have to give to the students is going to surprise them, and probably not in a good way."

"I have that feeling too; I know it isn't going to go down too well." Warrior of Light agreed; the sounds of the students gossiping and laughing from behind. "But they have the right to know; and they will endure it, just like I have."

Cosmos closed her eyes and gave out a small nod. She stepped out onto the stage in front of the crowd of seated students. Warrior of Light watched her step towards the microphone, her body tall and elegant. He and many other students of the academy admired Headmistress Cosmos for who she was and what she gave, said by many that she was the best they had at the Academy. Not to mention, she had been running the academy for a good 13 years from a staggering young age of 21.

Cosmos held up a hand and the whole room suddenly fell completely silent. She picked up the microphone and began her entrance speech.

"Welcome everyone to a new year of Dissidia Academy; I hope you all had a good holiday." She spoke out to the room, her tone completely confident and proud.

Many students silently answered the question, some nodded and others groaned.

"Well, it's time for all of you now to focus back once again to your work and commitment." She continued on, her eyes gradually watching the crowd, one section at a time. "Many of you will have a busy year ahead and you will need to use this time as preparation for the future. But of course, there will be a variety of activities, clubs, and events throughout the year. Many new, many changed but all that meet your interests and abilities, some may even help set the future that is ahead of you."

The students hissed "yessss" amongst each other in excitement as they had heard the 'variety of' section of her speech.

"There are a few announcements I will be sharing with you before you head on to your Class Homerooms. Firstly, many of you have been asking about what this year's trip will consist of and I can confirm to you that there will in fact be TWO trips this year; one in February where there will be a skiing and snowboarding trip and the other in June, a first for the Academy, a Water-sports based trip."

Suddenly, the hall had gone berserk as almost the entirety of students cheered upon hearing the announcement. Cosmos put up her hand again calmly, silencing the crowd. The entire hall calmed down once again in an instant.

"Yes, I guess you all would be excited to hear that. Next is, of course, the seasonal Academy events dates and times: the Halloween Festival will begin at 7pm on the 31st October and end at 9pm. The Christmas party will begin at 8pm on the last day before the Christmas Holidays; the date will be the 17th December and will end at Midnight. Following from this, the Spring festival will begin at 3pm on the 14th April and will end at 6pm. And the Summer Sports Festival will begin at 1pm on 10th July and will end at 4pm."

The students began to whisper amongst each other, struggling to control their excitement.

"And now, the last announcement of the assembly!" Cosmos called out over the whispers, her voice echoing around the hall.

But then there was a pause. Students watched her curiously, curious as to what she was about to reveal.

Cosmos took a deep breath.

"This may become a shock for all of you, however I do understand if it doesn't for some of you. On the last day before the Christmas holidays ..."

Warrior of Light closed his eyes, bracing for what was about to come. Students were anxious, curious and confused by why she was constantly pausing.

It was then she revealed.

"... I will be leaving Dissidia Academy."

What followed was a very uncomfortable silence, the students sat frozen in their seats. Cosmos gazed round cautiously, anxious about the reaction. Warrior of Light peeked out, glancing at the situation at hand.

And then, everyone abruptly leaped out of their seats in unison.

"WHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!?"

2 - Arc 1: The Need for Coffee

Warrior of Light climbed up the staircase towards the 4th floor of the Academy, keeping his usual elegant posture and a strong walking pace. In the hopes continuing in setting an example for the rest of the academy, he refused to allow his body to falter in whatever way. Although this was the case, his mind was miles away, wondering why Headmistress Cosmos would leave the Academy the moment when the Christmas holidays begin. The reasoning behind her leave was never brought up during the assembly or even during their meeting this morning. Whenever Warrior of Light would attempt to bring up the subject to her, Cosmos would always change the topic within that very second.

Warrior of Light gave out a frustrated sigh, feeling that the Headmistress was hiding many secrets from him and the whole Academy. Eventually reaching the 4th floor, he was given a sudden startle by one of the students bolting past like a speeding bullet. It was none other than Cloud Strife, flustered and sweating as fast as a waterfall. Warrior of Light watched him hastily skid round the corner of the corridor and out of sight, the startled expression frozen across Warrior of Light's face.

Due to curiosity, Warrior of Light decided to follow him. He trailed Cloud's direction and curiously glanced round the corner of the corridor. He instantly caught sight of Cloud running up towards the various vending machines near the end, hearing faint sounds of panting and gasping due to being out of breath. Cloud hastily reached into his blazer pocket, seemingly struggling to get money out from the pocket. His uniform became increasingly untidy as he searched and searched his various pockets. Finally, he had found a coin, glancing at it with wild eyes. Warrior of Light could hear him muttering to himself silently, although a hastily tone could be heard within his mutters.

"Come on ... come on ... just one cup of-"

"CLOUD!" A sudden, loud, familiarly energetic voice called out from nowhere.

Both Cloud and Warrior of Light jumped out of their skin simultaneously in fright. For what seemed like a mere second, Warrior of Light caught sight of Tidus flying past him towards the shaken up Cloud.

Noticing his friend's fast approach, Cloud threw the coin into the coffee machine without delay.

However, this was hopeless ... his hand was caught by Tidus just as the coin was about to enter the machine.

"What are you doing here, Cloud?" Tidus questioned him curiously, the high spirits glowing from his body. "Homeroom is about to start!"

"B-but I ..."

Before Cloud could even answer, Tidus locked his grasp on Cloud's shoulder and dragged him away from the vending machines. Cloud couldn't bring himself to retaliate; he could only watch hopelessly as the coffee machine gradually moved further and further away from his grasp.

Warrior of Light watched the two students pass by him; Tidus seemed to be in his own little world, and Cloud had been too dreary eyed to notice Warrior of Light's presence. Warrior of Light couldn't help but give a somewhat saddened expression, feeling rather sorry for Cloud's despair all due to his friend's over eagerness. He would hate to be in those shoes right now.

Warrior of Light then decided to turn and tread back towards his homeroom, realising the time. As he moved round the corner in his usual manner, he abruptly head-on collided into another student. The two fell backwards to the floor in sudden surprise, unable to grasp the unexpected encounter. Numerous sheets of paper flew above their heads, catching the air as it descended. Warrior of Light gradually rose back up to a seated position, soothing the back of his neck due to colliding against the solid floor relatively hard. Opening his eyes in pain, he noticed the other student standing tall above him, a hand

offering to help him back to the feet. Warrior of Light raised his head, realizing that the student was in fact a fellow Council member: Firion.

Firion was a silver-haired, strong looking lad who seemed to have some sort of unique passion for working in the Academy, however no one had found out the reason behind this as of yet. Both he and Warrior of Light had a strong, healthy friendship together, striving for similar desires and morals.

"I'm really sorry about that, Warrior of Light; I wasn't watching where I was heading." Firion apologised to him, showing off a sweet, innocent smile in the process.

"Oh, there's no need to apologise. I just didn't see you round the corner." Warrior of Light answered fairly, accepting Firion's assistance and rose back to his feet.

The two began to gather up the sheets of paper that had been spread out all over the floor, trying their best to keep the sheets as organised as possible. From the content of the papers, Warrior of Light could easily guess that they were all of Firion's lesson notes from the previous academic year.

"I'm assuming you've met my two friends back there; Cloud and Tidus?" Firion spoke out curiously, collecting up the last batch of sheets.

"Yes, I did." Warrior of Light nodded back, remembering the huge difference between Cloud's and Tidus' personality. "I find it interesting how those two have roles in the Academy community; Cloud being head of the Chocobo Racing Committee, and Tidus being the Blitzball Captain."

"Well as the saying goes, don't judge a book by its cover; those two are more reliable than you would first imagine." Firion cheerfully explained, a light chuckle escaping his breath as he spoke. "Tidus has this huge and unique passion for Blitzball, always seen practicing whenever the chance he arises. Many even say he is one of the best Captains they have had in the Academy team for a long time. I would say he gets it from his Father. Cloud, on the other hand, has participated in Chocobo racing for quite a number of years, finishing many of his recent races on top of the leader board."

"Really?" Warrior of Light wondered in surprise, chuckling away at this so called 'revelation'. "Well, let's hope that they put in as much commitment in their class work as they do on their hobbies."

"Heheh ... No need to worry, that's were my job comes in. I'll be sure to keep those two in line." Firion nodded back to him, holding onto his stash of papers. "Anyhow, I must save Cloud before his caffeine needs hits crisis level."

"He does seem rather shaken up." Warrior of Light pointed out whilst folding his arms, feeling that should be mentioned. "He was attempting to buy a coffee from the machine before Tidus dragged him away."

"I guessed that would happen, seeing as I passed those two just before we bumped heads." Firion answered back, fiddling through his trouser pockets for coins. "If I don't settle this, I guarantee that Cloud would collapse at any moment during homeroom, considering one could see his consciousness is hanging by a thread."

"I see ... Well, I best get to the room otherwise I'll be late." Warrior of Light concluded, time consciously on his mind. "I'll see you there, Firion."

Firion waved to him with a cheery expression and turned towards the coffee machine, counting up his coins. Warrior of Light took his leave and headed towards the room, smartening himself up as best as he could. A slight pain could still be felt throbbing in the back of his neck, however decided to ignore knowing it was only a fall.

8:45am; the Class 13A Homeroom was close to crowded with most of the students in the group, chatting away about their own affairs. The room was lively, the aftermath of the summer break still hanging high in the air. Warrior of Light entered the room, keeing up his appearance as he stepped. Upon noticing his placement, he stepped over towards his seat situated as the 3rd desk in the front row.

Sitting down, he began to gaze around; he could see the students scattered around different sections of

the room in small groups, continuously chatting about the eventful summer and the announcements in the assembly just a moment ago. He caught sight of Tidus continuously chatting to Cloud, who in turn struggled to keep his eyes open whilst another fellow student, Cecil Harvey, continued to nod and agree endlessly to the non-stop rant. Cecil was a student with long, silver-hair and a tall figure, similar to Warrior of Light's own appearance. However, the two differed very much so in personality, as Cecil was known to be very approachable and patient with others.

Moving on, currently standing as the only girl in Class 13A, Terra Branford, was happily speaking to the youngest student of the group based on appearance, Onion Knight. The two were close in companionship, with Onion Knight seemingly the only student in the class Terra was able to become friends with without hesitation or shying away.

That being said, Terra's presence within the group tended to light up the atmosphere in the room based on her pure appearance. With bright blonde hair and a timid expression, she was like an angel to the academy. Onion Knight, although being younger than the rest of the group by a few years, had the mind of a genius. He was able to conquer difficult puzzles and equations with ease as could challenge any person into a debate and win. This was something Warrior of Light was uncertain to believe, feeling as Onion Knight's personality just came off as cocky and self-righteous.

Warrior of Light then caught sight of Bartz and Zidane continuously pestering on Squall, who seemed to be looking as moody as ever. Warrior of Light understood his pain, knowing first-hand the mess those two were able to cause given the chance.

In the end, Warrior of Light switched his sights back towards the front of the room, deciding to begin taking out the equipment he required from his bag. As he took out his books and equipment, he attempted to mind his own business and ignore the conversations happening around the room. That was until; one specific conversation caught his attention.

"I hear Cid of the Lufaine is visiting the Academy soon." Onion Knight casually told Terra.

"Is that true!?" Terra gasped out in surprise, her hand lightly raised over her mouth. "Where'd you hear that from?"

Warrior of Light sat up, a sudden surge of exhilaration sparked through his body without warning. He always wanted to meet Cid of the Lufaine, an inspiration during his youth. However, the fact he was not told by Headmistress Cosmos meant he was unsure whether Onion Knight's words were true or not.

"There's a huge rumour going around the whole Academy; many the teachers were even discussing about it recently." Onion Knight explained to her, his eyes beginning to light up.

"And ... you believe these rumours?" Warrior of Light interrupted, switching round to their direction.

"Well ... why wouldn't I?" Onion Knight answered with a shrug, feeling caught off by Warrior of Light's sudden involvement in the conversation. "I mean, I would think the teachers would be telling the truth, otherwise what would be the point of bringing up the rumour in the first place?"

Terra didn't say a word, beginning to feel out of place within the conversation as the two locked eyes against one another.

"I personally wouldn't trust rumours, even if they were from teachers." Warrior of Light coolly argued, knowing from past experiences. "I'll consult the Headmistress about this during lunch to find out if this is true."

"Right ... you go do that, I'm certain she'll confirm the rumour to be true." Onion Knight confidently stated in an arrogant tone. "I'm always right with my intuition."

"Sure you are ..." Warrior of Light murmured under his breath irritably.

The two continued to glare each other down with dagger-like eyes, as though they were continuously attempting to stab each other until one dominates the other. Terra, watching the two from the side-lines, felt as though she was being intimidated by the atmosphere between the two of them.

Warrior of Light always found Onion Knight irritating with his big-headed intuitions and omniscient

complex, even if he was also a fellow member of the Council. Onion Knight, on the other hand, found Warrior of Light's continuous attempts to set examples for the Academy and domineering personality to be a nuisance. Their rivalry had clashed constantly since the beginning of last year's 1st Semester, with the two always trying to contradict each other with opposing opinions.

After a few moments, both of them broke away from the staring contest with annoyance, carrying on with their own businesses. Warrior of Light began to think through this so called 'rumour', taking in the possibilities and contradictions. The idea of Cid of the Lufaine visiting the Academy caused Warrior of Light to feel pleasant about the situation. Even so, the fact that this was currently a large, baseless rumour circling round the Academy caused Warrior of Light to feel somewhat doubtful.

At that very moment, the door swung open, silencing the room abruptly. The class began to hear footsteps but could not see anyone enter the room. Warrior of Light lifted his head curiously as high as he possibly could; only catching a glimpse of fair-blond hair tied up in two ponytails bobbling across the end of his desk.

"Now then class; you best listen to everything I say, or so help me, I will turn you all into strands of hay." A soft but strict voice commanded to the group, echoing around the classroom as though there were loud, surrounding speakers hidden within the walls.

Suddenly, a high stool appeared out from nowhere directly in front of the classroom, causing a few students to instantly jump out from their seats. A small, dwarf-like figure leapt up onto the stool in swift motion and faced the class with an elegant pose.

"I am your homeroom teacher: Professor Shantotto." She stated proudly to the class. "Oh-ho-ho!"

"YOU'RE our homeroom teacher!?" Bartz laughed out hysterically, swinging back on his chair in hysterics. "PHA-HA-HAA! ... You're so small!"

Shantotto glared back with absolute distaste as Bartz continued on, his laughing causing the rest of the class to gasp in horror. Warrior of Light awkwardly hid his face in the palms of his hands, refusing to believe this was happening.

After what felt like forever, Shantotto finally blinked.

"Well now, it seems we must go through some ground rules ..." She pointed out calmly, yet her tone of voice felt very intimidating. "Rule number 1!"

Unexpectedly, a sceptre instantly appeared in her right hand. She began to twirl it in her hand relaxingly, feeling the flow of the sceptre move around her tiny palm. And then, like a flash, she jabbed it in Bartz's direction. A large whirlwind instantly caught Bartz by total shock. He had been thrown completely off his seat and collided against the back wall due to the sheer force of the whirlwind, causing a enormous *CRASH!!!*

Once the whirlwind had disappeared; Bartz slumped to the floor, collapsing on his front with groans of agony.

"... One shall not insult another in this class; otherwise one may find their next breath to be their last." Shantotto stated cheerfully, her sceptre disappearing from her grasp. "Do you agree, Master Klauser?" Bartz struggled and groaned as he lifts his arm from the ground, just being able to give a thumb up in approval.

"Good. Rule Number 2: we must respect each other's ambitions and wishes, and help each other towards our successes ... Am I clear?"

"YES, PROFESSOR SHANTOTTO!" Everyone called out at the same time.

"And Rule Number 3: We are a family in this group, and this will continue in a loop."

"*Sigh...* what a pain." Squall moaned under his breath, glancing away in distaste of that 3rd rule.

Unexpectedly, a loud slam echoed horribly around the room. Everybody jumped up by the surprise, including Squall himself. Gradually and cautiously, they all turned round towards the direction of the sound. The loud slam had originated from Cloud, who had smacked his head against the desk. He had

fallen completely unconscious; his over-tiredness finally got the better of him. Everyone gazed towards him with their mouths hung open in confusion and shock.

Warrior of Light sighed sorrowfully as he noticed Cloud's slumped body lean against his desk, close to losing balance on the chair below. Following just after that moment, the door to the room had opened up. Firion entered the room, holding two cups of hot fresh coffee.

"Sorry I'm late, I was just buying a coffee for Cloud and ..." Firion jumped up as he noticed Cloud's motionless body. "... Ah! I'm too late!"

Cloud's lifeless body slipped off of the desk and collided against the floor, causing another slam to echo across the classroom. Cloud was now on the classroom floor, motionless and silent as he slept.

"Err ... Professor; I suggest we should bring Cloud to the Medical Room." Warrior of Light recommended to Shantotto awkwardly, breaking the tension.

She nodded in approval, but did not comment back.

Warrior of Light and Firion began to carry Cloud across the hallway with his feet dragging against the floor of the building. Warrior of Light knew that the Medical room was situated on the 1st floor near the Academy Reception. With both of them realising this, they took in a long, meaningful breath and began to hobble down the stairs. They could not take the elevator due to it being situated on the other side of the Academy and was currently out of use for maintenance.

"So, why were you so late?" Warrior of Light questioned Firion curiously, feeling the strain from the deadweight of Cloud's unconscious body hanging from his shoulders.

"I got ... caught up with something." Firion answered hesitantly, most of his concentration on Cloud.

"Caught up?" Warrior of Light wondered oddly. "What do you mean?"

"N-nothing! It's nothing." Firion smiled and laughed weakly, his voice roughened up by the continuous strain.

Warrior of Light gazed towards him with an odd expression, feeling as though he had been hiding something. However, he decided to keep quiet for the time being, knowing to keep out of the business of others.

They continued struggling down the staircase, gradually passing each floor as they made their descent. Finally, they reached the 1st floor of the Academy, almost collapsing the moment their feet touch the floor. Panting and wheezing in agony, Warrior of Light and Firion heaved Cloud over towards the Medical Room, desperate to be free from the burden. The two heard Cloud lightly groan, as though attempting to either awaken or talk in his sleep. This seemed most likely the latter, as he still had not gained consciousness.

They eventually reached the door leading into the Medical Room, almost dropping Cloud along the way. Both Warrior of Light and Firion glanced towards each other, simultaneously counting to three before opening the door. With that, they suddenly lurched forward, almost losing balance. Regain their postures, they examined the surrounding room. Warrior of Light and Firion had never visited the Medical Room before, having never gained any injuries or major illnesses during the previous year.

To their surprise, the Medical Room was large and spacious, with many beds situated around; some of them with closed up curtains whilst others were open and vacant. At that very moment, a young lady, seemingly around the same age as them based on appearance, emerged from one of the closed curtains.

"Ah! Hello, may I help you?" She asked them both curiously and politely, her soft voice echoing the large room.

"Err ... yes; Cloud here had fallen unconscious with over-tiredness during Homeroom." Warrior of Light explained in detail, dazzled by the beauty of this young lady.

"Oh, that's unfortunate! Well, the Head Nurse is away at the moment, I'm a Student Nurse here helping

out." She smiled calmly, before pointing to one of the vacant beds. "Here, we can use this bed."
"So, you should be fine with taking care of him?" Firion questioned her in turn, also mesmerized by her beauty.

"Yes, of course." She nodded cheerfully.

With that, she began assisting the two as they dragged Cloud over to the free bed directed by the student nurse. Carefully laying him down on the mattress of the bed, both Warrior of Light and Firion felt relieved as the burdening weight lift from their shoulders. Both of them began to stretch out, feeling the aches and strains slowly disappear from their bodies. Warrior of Light took another glance around the Medical Room out of mere interest, noticing a few students on a few beds with different injuries and illnesses.

"May I ask your name?" Firion politely asked the student nurse, feeling gratitude was in order.

"My name is Aerith." She answered back with a confident, bright beam. "Aerith Gainsborough."

"Well then, Aerith, thank you for the assistance." Warrior of Light told her politely, realising the time. "It was a pleasure to meet you; however we must get back to class."

She bowed back with her sweet smile, "I understand; I'll look after Cloud for the time being until he fully recovers."

And so, Warrior of Light and Firion bid their goodbyes to Aerith and made their way back out to the main area of the 1st Floor. Still stretching out the aches, the two began to work their way towards the homeroom. They began to ascend the staircase nearby, dragging their feet as they dreaded the effort of journeying back up to the 4th floor. However, Warrior of Light halted just as they began climbing; he caught a glimpse of a large, hulking figure outside the building in the distance, standing idly on the academy grounds. He froze, glaring towards the large, powerful figure in a combination of confusion and horror.

The moment he blinked, the figure instantly disappeared. Warrior of Light shook his head, thinking that the figure was just his imagination.

"Are you okay?" Firion wondered curiously, noticing Warrior of Light frozen on the spot.

He leapt up with surprise, returning to reality, before turning back to Firion.

"Err ... y-yes, I'm fine." He hesitantly commented as an excuse, glancing back towards where the bulk of a figure initially stood. "I ... just remembered, I need to go see Headmistress Cosmos."

Warrior of Light hastily leapt up the stairs towards the top floor, out of Firion's sight.

"Oh ... okay, see you then." Firion muttered as he watched Warrior of Light disappear, confused as one could be.

Sitting in her office, Headmistress Cosmos had been reorganising some old files on her desk, disposing of various out of date and unnecessary documents. During this moment, she got a sudden knock on her door.

"Come in." she commanded formally in her sweet voice.

The door opened up with Warrior of Light stumbling into the office, gasping for breath.

"Warrior of Light, You seem rushed. Is something the matter?" Cosmos asked him with surprise, unexpectedly halting her folder and document organisation.

Warrior of Light didn't wish to inform the Headmistress of the figure he caught sight of just yet, but there many questions in his mind he desired to bring up.

"I-I'm sorry for the intrusion, Headmistress. I had to take Cloud Strife to the Medical Room and needed to stop by." Warrior of Light began to explain to her, regain his posture. "I've come to ask about this rumour I heard-?"

"You wish to ask me if Cid of the Lufaine is visiting the Academy?" Cosmos finished his question for him,

reading him like a book.

"O-oh ... yes, that's correct." He nodded, caught off guard by the Headmistress' accurate guess.

"Well, to answer your question..." She began addressing, smirking away. "The answer is yes, he will be visiting the Academy by the end of this very week, in fact."

"So the rumours were true!?" Warrior of Light blurted out abruptly, unable to hold back. "Why was I not told about this, Headmistress!?"

"I didn't wish to spoil the surprise." Cosmos jokingly answered back in amusement, a sweet giggle escaped her mouth. However, as she continued to speak, she became slightly more serious towards Warrior of Light. "I'm having a wild guess here that Cid's visit is not the only reason why you came up to my office, especially since your first lesson of the semester will begin very shortly."

"That is true ... just a moment ago, I spotted-!" Warrior of Light began, deciding it was the right time to inform about the figure from earlier.

However, just as he was about to reveal the name, a loud knock was heard from the door behind.

Without delay or warning, the door opened casually.

"... Garland." Warrior of Light finished with a dazed expression, his eyes fixated on the hulking figure that entered the office.

3 - Arc 1: An Uncertain Alibi

"Did I interrupt something?" Garland questioned curiously, stepping into the Headmistress' office in a formal manner.

Warrior of Light glared towards Garland; stricken with horror as the man that he despised the most in this world entered the room so casually. Garland was shown to be a tall, buffed man who always towered over everyone before him. He wore a dark black suit in a similar form to all the staff members within the Academy. However, what caused him to stand out from the rest was the fact that he always wore a fully-facial, metal-plated helmet consisting of two large horns and a tense, eerie expression whenever he would be seen.

Garland stepped towards Cosmos' desk and handed over a sturdy binder consisting with several sheets of paper, the binder's cover titled: 'DISSIDIA ACADEMY: 1st Semester Itinerary'.

"I believe this is what you had called me over for, Headmistress?" Garland coolly wondered, allowing Cosmos to take the binder off of his grasps.

"Yes, this is perfect." Cosmos cheerfully nodded, placing the folder neatly on her desk.

Numerous questions shot across Warrior of Light's mind: Why was Garland here? Why was he being so well-mannered and casual towards both him and Headmistress Cosmos? Why was the Headmistress acting so calmly back towards him? Why was he suited up like the staff members within the Academy!? The Headmistress then switched her gaze towards Warrior of Light calmly, causing him to jump out of his skin in retaliation.

"Is there anything else you need, Warrior of Light?" Cosmos wondered curiously, "If you don't head off soon, you'll be late for your first lesson. As Student Council President, it would certainly damage your reputation if you were late."

Warrior of Light was completely speechless. He tried to speak out and ask so many questions that rushed through his mind, and yet none of them escaped his mouth. Instead, Warrior of Light's mouth just hung open as if to dry. Faint, stuttering grunts could be heard in an attempt to object. In the end, however, he gave up, lowering his head in frustration.

"No, there's nothing else." He spoke, shaking his head.

"Well then, if that is the case, I must continue with my own work." Cosmos concluded peacefully, switching back towards her desk. "Garland, would you be so kind as to escort Warrior of Light to his lesson?"

"Certainly, Headmistress." Garland accepted, giving out a subtle nod.

Warrior of Light gave out a small sigh and began to follow Garland out of the room. Garland held the door open for him as he passed, but Warrior of Light refused to thank or even look upon Garland. As the door for the Headmistress' office began to close shut, Warrior of Light took one last glance towards the Headmistress. He was just able to catch a glimpse of Cosmos raising her head; a small but somewhat sad smile appeared on her face. But just before Warrior of Light could get a clearer view, the door closed shut.

Warrior of Light and Garland headed down the staircase towards the 5th floor, both not speaking a word towards each other. Warrior of Light's first lesson of the academic year was Art, situated within the 1st main Art room on the 5th floor. Right now, Warrior of Light's mind was flying all over the place with numerous questions and uncertainties, having Garland escort him to his first lesson made this situation all the more worse. Warrior of Light's mind was close to exploding with fury.

Eventually, the two reached the 5th floor and began to head off towards the Art Corridor, the tense

silence looming in the air.

As the two passed the windows, Warrior of Light noticed students were now sitting in their first lessons, most eyes concentrating on the introduction of the subject at hand whilst others were either already dozing off into their daydreams or whispering amongst each other. Outside the classrooms, the halls were as vacant as it could ever be.

"I always find that the Academy has the best atmosphere when it's quiet." Garland suddenly stated, trying to break the silence. "It's rather peaceful, wouldn't you say?"

Warrior of Light halted to an abrupt stop, his head hid behind his long platinum silver hair. Garland noticed his halt and switched to his position curiously. Warrior of Light's hands drew into fists and began to shake violently by his side, as though struggling to keep control. Until now, he tried to brush away the fact that Garland was now a part of the Academy, but his presence and attitude continued to dig deep into his mind. Garland's innocent comment was too out of character for him in relation to the past, and Warrior of Light needed answers.

"Why ... are you here, Garland?" Warrior of Light began to question in a low, menacing tone, his head rising back up to face Garland.

"Hmm ... well, if you must know; Headmistress Cosmos generously offered a job for me within the Academy as an English teacher." Garland began to explain, his tone of voice was formal yet proud.

"Long story short, I accepted and here I am now."

This constant positive and upbeat tone coming from Garland continued to infuriate Warrior of light, feeling as though there had to be some sort of catch to all of this. Warrior of Light stepped closer to Garland and examined him carefully, checking for any sign of contradiction.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Garland wondered cautiously, noticing the fury within Warrior of Light's eyes.

"You have ruined so many people's lives; purposefully causing civilians to become unemployed, bankrupted, and even homeless! You've created chaos in so many towns and cities for your own personal gain! And from a personal standpoint ... you were the primary cause for my amnesia five years ago!" Warrior of Light spat in disgust, pointing the guilty finger towards Garland. He kept the volume of his voice as quiet as possible, bearing in mind about the lessons happening around them. "Right now ... you should be locked up in the Dungeon Cells!"

There was a moment of silence between him and Garland, eyes locked onto each other's. Warrior of Light's eyes was burning furiously like the sun whilst Garland's were blank, empty and unreadable. Warrior of Light caught sight of Garland shaking his head in a subtle manner, glaring down for some reason.

"The Dungeon Cells is a place no living being would want to be locked up in." Garland finally spoke out, confessing in a formal, acquitted tone. "During the 5 years trapped in that horrific place; I gave myself time to recollect the faults and sins I have created for myself and others. I knew that I did wrong, that it would have been close to impossible to request so many people to forgive me for my actions. But alas, I was rightfully paying for my own crimes. It was then that I desired to become a changed being, to wipe the slate completely clean from its unmovable stains. After trying so many times, it was Headmistress Cosmos who answered my call. She gave me the chance to enter society once again as a respectable civilian and even offered me a job within this Academy. I am very grateful for her and hope to repay her in the future."

Warrior of Light took a moment to gather in all this information, glaring at him with uncertainty. The idea of Garland becoming a changed man and especially him becoming an English teacher here did not sit well inside his mind whatsoever. To him, this whole situation was completely absurd to say the least.

"There has to be some sort of catch here." Warrior of Light responded cautiously, his arms crossed.

"Well, whatever you may think about me, we can only settle our differences and trust by working through

the rest of the academic year. Right now we both have places to go and tasks to complete." Garland began to conclude, realising the time. "I trust that you could reach your first lesson without my assistance?"

Warrior of Light gave out a small nod, his mind still full of obscurity.

"Then I shall take my leave." Garland finished, beginning to tread off in the opposite direction. His voice echoed throughout the halls as he left, waving back to the idle Warrior of Light, "I shall see you in your first English Lesson."

Warrior of Light just stood there in the middle of the 5th floor corridor, watching Garland walk off proudly. His mind felt like it just took a fatal beating from the events that had just occurred. Shaking his head vigorously, all he could do now had been to brush this all away to the back of his mind and rush to his first actual lesson of the Academic year: Art.

Warrior of Light finally reached the door to his lesson, the plaque that had been drilled into the door reading: Art Studio 1. He straightened himself up appropriately, checking his uniform and bag so that nothing was out of place or messed up. Warrior of Light knew that there would be some sort of punishment for his lateness, but he wasn't going to cower away because of it. Inhaling a deep, calming breath, he knocked on the door and turned the handle to head inside. The exact moment he began to enter, Warrior of Light caught sight of his fellow classmates from the Homeroom sitting in their assigned seats for the subject. All eyes switched to him the split second he had knocked on the door, causing Warrior of Light to feel somewhat intimidated. He tried to brush off that feeling as he stepped inside the room.

"Apologies for the lateness, sir." He began his apology, keeping a formal manner. "I had to ... huh?"

As Warrior of Light examined the Art Studio fully, he noticed that the teacher was nowhere to be found. The Art Studio itself was large and spacious, allowing students to move around with ease to different materials and apparatus to work on. Its walls were filled with various images and work varying in different types of Art techniques and movements. An understandable difference with this room from others in the Academy had been the desks or 'workspace'; they were considerably larger than the usual classroom desks so that there would be enough room for individuals to work on their numerous projects. Towards the front of the Art Studio was a large, towering white board filled with various descriptions about famous Artists, Artwork, and about Art in general.

Warrior of Light switched to his classmates, who were gazing towards him with surprised expressions, as though they were watching something extraordinary and completely out of this world. Warrior of Light wondered to himself why they were acting in such a way, however decided to ignore the stares and instead continued to wonder about the teacher's whereabouts.

"Do you guys know where the teacher-?" He began to question the class, but suddenly got interrupted by an echoing, menacing voice.

"So, the 'Council President' decides to show up after all!" The eerie, over-the-top voice taunted, "And here I was thinking that the Academy elected a lazy-@\$\$, skiving, failure for a Council President. Hehehehehe ... It seems I may have to reconsider that ... slightly."

Warrior of Light tried to spot where the echoing voice was originating from, but the only people he could see were his classmates. The students just continued to glare towards him, or to be exact 'above him', speechlessly.

"Where are you!?" Warrior of Light bellowed out, his head changing direction trying to find the person who had been taunting him.

"HERE I AM!" The menacing voice suddenly roared.

Just within that second, an upside-down, clown-like face appeared from above Warrior of Light. The

sudden and unexpected close appearance caused Warrior of Light to literally jump off of the ground in fright, his legs flying up in front and head flying back. He fell back uncontrollably due to the loss of his balance and collided against the floor of the corridor, knocking his head hard against the wooden floor and causing a loud crashing sound to echo throughout the corridor. With that, Warrior of Light began to hear a booming, insane-like laughter follow the crashing echo.

"WHOA-hohohohoho! That was just PERFECT!" The voice bellowed in a manic tone of voice, laughing non-stop that seemed to gradually grow louder. "Hohoo ... That's will certainly be a highlight of the year, and we're only on the FIRST DAY! I can't stop laughing!"

Warrior of Light began to sit himself up painfully, his head throbbing in agony. He instantly caught sight of the man who caused him to jump laughing manically, clutching his abdomen as he tried to breathe through the hysterics. What caught off Warrior of Light's guard even more at this moment in time had been that this man was floating at ease in mid-air!

Bobbing up and down on his back like it was nothing to him. As Warrior of Light recovered to his feet, his heart still beating at an aggressive speed, he began to notice the detail of this man 'floating' before him. The man had been wearing the usual formal suit like all the staff in the Academy, yet what had made caused him to stand out from the rest of the staff had been his face and skin. The man seemed to have had his whole appearance styled like a creepy jester or harlequin; his skin had been as white as a ghost, his purple lips smiling eerily, and his light brown hair had been tied back with a bunch of large, sky blue feathers and trinkets.

"Erm ... y-you must be Mr Palazzo?" Warrior of Light guessed with a hesitant stutter, unable to read this man's peculiar movements.

"Mr Palazzo? Ha! I'm not too fond of being addressed by such a name." The man spat with distaste, yet continuing to laugh hysterically, "A pathetic insect like you may call me MASTER Palazzo as I RULE in these lessons! Hohohoo ... or just Kefka, if you so desire."

"R-right ..." Warrior of Light nodded cautiously, taking in a deep breath as he straightened back into his usual strong posture.

With that, Warrior of Light stepped inside the classroom, passing Kefka with a safe distance, and headed towards his allocated seat. Kefka's eyes were locked onto the Warrior of Light like daggers, ready to strike as the student passed. Once Warrior of Light sat down, Kefka casually began to glide over towards the front of the whole class with ease, small chuckles escaping him as he flew over.

"Now then, let us ... begin." Kefka announced; his tone of voice ranged from lightly humorous to deep and terrifying within that one sentence.

As Kefka began to make a long and somewhat psychotic speech, Warrior of Light eyes averted and searched the room. He instantly realised Cloud Strife wasn't present for the lesson, meaning he was still situated in the Medical Room. But something else caught his sight; Terra Branford's present behaviour. Terra, who had been sitting across the room from Warrior of Light, was tensely fidgeting and seemed to be severely nervous. Warrior of Light kept an eye on her curiously, wondering why she was acting like so.

"... Now with the subject of art, the artist can express their own desires and emotions through various styles and movements. The ideas of Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism are just a few examples of the wide range of movements in art culture." Kefka ranted on, chuckling away as he spoke out to the class, his expressions and emotions were all over the place. "But, personally, I don't fancy the 'peaceful' and 'drastically dull' artwork in early generations. I enjoy the EXPLOSIONS, the FLARE, and the INSANITY of recent generations! Hehehahaa ... ooh, you can just feel the CHAOS burning within the brushstrokes!"

A small squeak was then heard from Terra, taken aback by Kefka's sudden outbursts on his views of art. Warrior of Light tried to read Terra like a book, noticing that there seemed to be some sort of history

between her and Kefka. By how she's been acting, Warrior of Light could tell she was traumatised by the teacher. He began to feel sorry for the girl, but knew he couldn't help her just in case he interferes with the lesson. He switched his sights back to the front and began to listen to the madman for a teacher rant on and on about the love for chaos and destruction.

Lunch Break finally began across the Whole Academy, the 12:30pm bell ringing out loudly across the buildings and grounds of the academy in high spirits. Most students rushed straight from their classrooms towards the Dining Hall, grasping their food money ready to chow down to the cafeteria's decent and well-presented dishes. Some students, however, had their own packed-lunches prepared for them beforehand, and so headed outside towards the surrounding academy grounds to enjoy the strong rays of the Sun and relaxing atmosphere.

Warrior of Light swerved and dodged the rushing crowds so he could reach the academy grounds, remembering from last year how much of a hassle it had been to move about during Lunch Break. Due to students' impatience for food, Warrior of Light was pushed about constantly as he attempted to pass by.

After a number of accidental punches, kicks, and elbows to the face, Warrior of Light finally made it out to the Academy grounds. He took a moment to gain his breath back after that onslaught of impatient, hungry students. Once regaining energy, he caught sight of a free bench under a faraway cherry-blossom tree, vacant and out of the way from the crowds of gathering students.

Warrior of Light stepped over to the vacant bench, cautiously checking for anymore rushing students. Once he reached the bench, he took no time to sit and acquire his packed-lunch from his backpack. His lunch consisted of the simple-yet-classic ham and cheese sandwich, a green and fresh apple, a small chocolate bar, and a bottle of natural spring water. Warrior of Light felt at peace being separate from all the inconvenience of both the students and teachers, especially after the whole drama from only the first day of the Academy's opening Semester. The falling cherry-blossom petals helped clear his mind, giving him a moment of tranquillity. Taking a deep breath, he grasped a sandwich and drew in ready to take a bite.

"Ah, Light-o, there you are!" A loud, enthusiastic voice called out abruptly.

Due to the sudden burst, Warrior of Light completely missed his sandwich and instead bit down on his own tongue. Not long after, a tremendous scream of agony roared across the whole of Dissidia Academy. Every student and teacher within the academy halted on what they had been doing, whether eating, working or chatting amongst each other, and gazed around wondering where the random roar had come from.

Warrior of Light pressed down on his tongue with his thumb and finger, preventing the blood from flowing out. Sitting beside him on the bench, Tidus was laughing hysterically for the past ten minutes, sounding as though he had been literally dying of laughter. Warrior of Light, on the other hand, wasn't amused in the slightest, seeing as it was Tidus who caused him to bite his tongue in the first place.

"I'm glad you thind dis thunny." Warrior of Light sarcastically commented whilst still holding his tongue. He found Tidus' over-the-top laughter starting to get on his nerves.

"Hahahaha ... b-but that was just t-too funny!" Tidus admitted as he tried to breathe again, and yet his laughter had no end. "How in the world could you bite your tongue s-so ... EASILY!?"

"It'sth not like I dthid it on purpsth!" Warrior of Light tried to argue, squeezing tightly and painfully on his tongue without even realising due to his rising frustration.

Ever since he bit his tongue, he was unable to eat any of his lunch whatsoever. He could feel his stomach growling in hunger, grumbling loudly as though shouting out in desperation that it wanted to be fed. Warrior of Light gradually lifted his finger and thumb off of his tongue, feeling that the cut on his tongue had finally stopped gushing out with blood.

Just then, he caught from the corner of his eye noticing Tidus glaring towards his lunch, as though he had been inspecting its quality.

"Your food seems kinda ... dull." Tidus lowly commented, his wondrous eyes locked onto the food. "Wait, you don't have this every day for lunch, do you?"

Warrior of Light felt something snap in his mind, feeling as though his temper has just been let loose.

"Argh...! Is there a reason why you're here or do you just want to bother me!?" Warrior of Light groaned out in anger, hastily moving his lunch out of Tidus' view.

"Woah, woah ... chill out, buddy!" Tidus waved innocently, feeling that the outburst from Warrior of Light was rather sudden. "I just wanted to hang out, that's all."

"Well, why me? What about Cloud, Cecil, and Firion? I thought you would always hang out with them."

Warrior of Light wondered curiously, finding it odd that Tidus wanted to hang out with him rather than his usual group.

"Cloud's still recovering in the Medical Room; Firion said to me that he had an errand to take care of; and Cecil's having a meeting with Professor Golbez, who happens to be his older brother and our astronomy teacher." Tidus lengthily answered, numbering them off with his fingers as he explained.

"... And what about you?" Warrior of Light continued to question, deciding to finally chew down on his sandwich without any more sudden interruptions. "Haven't you got Blitzball training or something?"

"Nope, I have training on Tuesdays and Thursdays." Tidus answered ecstatically, showing of a cheerful smile. "And besides, I always see you wondering about the Academy alone, not hanging out with friends or anything. You always seem to be working and have a serious attitude about you. You're kinda like Squall, just without the gloominess atmosphere hanging around you and the lack of care in the world. So I thought I should help you lighten up a little, get to know you and stuff ... seeing as I have nothing else to do."

"Is that so...?" Warrior of Light glanced towards him oddly, trying to understand the guy. He couldn't understand how Tidus could be so cheerful and always full of energy, let alone the process of his sudden and crazy decision making. However, he also felt somewhat grateful, talking with Tidus started to give him some of the fresh air he needed. Under the blissful cherry-blossom tree, Warrior of Light felt like he had been in a peaceful state as he enjoyed some company, something he never thought he would get from Tidus of all people.

"Well, thank you for the concern." Warrior of Light nodded with gratitude as he finished off his sandwich, a small smile lifted up on his face.

"Hey! Maybe we should practice some Blitzball drills and-" Tidus began to speak with his usual upbeat tone, but abruptly halted his words.

"Sorry, I was never that great with Blitzball, But I – huh, what's the matter?" Warrior of Light wondered curiously, switching round as he noticed Tidus' sudden change of tone.

Upon turning round, Warrior of Light instantly noticed Tidus glaring towards the distance of the Academy grounds, his face lit up with a wondrous yet abnormally cautious expression. He then suddenly leapt up on his feet to stand on the bench in order to gain a better view. This, in turn, caused Warrior of Light to hastily shuffle back from his sitting position due to the sudden movement.

"What in the world has gotten into you?" Warrior of Light questioned cautiously, gazing up towards him with an odd expression.

After a moment of glaring in the distance, Tidus abruptly leaped off from the bench.

"Err ... got to go, Light!" Tidus called out, taking one last glimpse around, horror showing in his face, before shooting off in the distance of the other direction. "I'll see you back in class!"

"What was that all about?" Warrior of Light murmured to himself with a completely stunned expression. He then shook his head, brushing away what had just happened and got ready to eat his fresh green apple. But the moment when he was just about to take a bite, he heard a fellow student roar out from

behind him.

He abruptly switched round to see where the voice had come from, not knowing what to expect. The moment he caught sight of what was approaching, his mouth instantly fell open in shock and terror. Who he caught sight of was none other than Squall Leonhart, sprinting for his life. He seemed to be gritting his teeth tightly and numerous drops of sweat flew off of his face. However, what had been chasing Squall from close behind was what both he and Warrior of Light began to fear for their own lives from. "That's ... a lot of girls." Warrior of Light ushered out from the back of his throat, eyes wide open with horror.

A large group of female students were chasing after Squall with love-struck expressions, showing no signs of stopping until they've caught their target. Warrior of Light hastily packed up his bag and slung it over his shoulder, knowing this was the moment to move. The second he straightened up though; sudden loud, deafening screams echoed through the whole of the Academy grounds.

Warrior of Light was now a target.

Squall, who had still been keeping up with a fast running pace, caught onto this straight away.

"Run, NOW!" He roared out, panting and wheezing as he continued to run for his own life.

Before Warrior of Light could react, Squall shot passed him at lightning speed, grasping a sudden hold onto Warrior of Light's collar as he passed. Warrior of Light's body jolted without warning and before he knew it, both he and Squall were now sprinting away from the crowd of 'fan girls' where were on their tail. Warrior of Light swiftly drew into a constant speed, running to the same pace as Squall.

"What is going on!?" Warrior of Light called out towards Squall in haste, his mind completely flying with various questions and confusion. "Why are these girls chasing us!?"

"You've become their new target!" Squall answered back, trying to find his words through all of the panting and gasping. "They will not stop until they've caught at least one of us!"

"And what will happen if they do!?" Warrior of Light continued to question, he could feel the sandwich he just ate up churn round in his stomach as he ran through the grounds.

"Who knows?!" Squall answered regretfully, wishing this nightmare would end. "Let's just say; no one has ever 'lived' to tell the tale!"

"... Oh." Warrior of Light realised under his breath, horror striking a nerve in his body.

Both Squall and Warrior of Light turned a corner hastily, trying to figure out a way to lose the unstoppable fan girls. The two kept an eye out for hidden gaps or spaces to hide through, hoping for a miracle. They began to parallel with the Academy's building, not dropping their pace for a second. Just then, Warrior of Light caught sight of a small, well-hidden side-door leading into the west side of the building. It was one of the Academy's Fire Exits, and it was the perfect place to hide.

"Quick. Through here." Warrior of Light hastily nudged Squall, trying to give away the idea to the girls behind them.

Squall nodded back, his expression tense. On the count of 3, the two of them launch themselves through the small door and out of the fan girls' sights.

"T-that ... was close." Warrior of Light forced out with a sigh of relief, kneeling on the carpet of the small corridor as he tried to gain his breath back.

Squall took a moment to do the same, and then struggled in an attempt to rise up to his feet. His whole body was shaking violently from the insane amount of running they had just been through.

"Those girls began to target you the moment they found out you were the Council President." Squall began to explain, taking in many deep recovery breaths as he spoke on. "Ever since this morning's assembly, they've been tracking you down non-stop."

"Are you serious!?" Warrior of Light blurted out in horror, wondering in his mind how all this happened.

"What about you, Squall? Why were they chasing you?"

Squall took a moment to answer; Warrior of Light could see he was having a lot of trouble answering.

"I ... all I did was pass by and say 'hi' to the group." He finally admitted, mumbling as silently as he could whilst he dropped his head; hide his face of embarrassment from view.

"Wait ... THAT'S IT!?" Warrior of Light bellowed in shock, then hastily covering up his mouth as he realised he had been too loud.

"Yeah ... Bartz and Zidane disappeared and left me behind the moment they realised what I had done." Squall murmured, his teeth gritting hard the moment he mentioned the two class clowns. "... Some friends they are."

"Tch! How typical of them." Warrior of Light tutted, knowing Zidane and Bartz well enough from his earlier encounter. "How is it looking outside?"

"Don't worry; I think they're gone now." Squall assumed, placing an ear against the Fire Exit door. He then gave the 'all clear' and cautiously opened the door. Warrior of Light gradually got back up to his feet, making sure he still looked respectable as he rose up. As they re-entered the Academy grounds, they continuously checked all sides to confirm that the place had been safely clear.

"My guess is that they'll be roaming the Front Entrance of the Academy, so be on the lookout." Squall hopefully yet lowly assumed, becoming slightly paranoid of whoever passes him from behind.

Warrior of Light nodded in response, trusting his instincts.

The two of them headed over to the Front Entrance, passing the bench under the cherry-blossom tree where Warrior of Light initially sat under to eat his lunch. Warrior of Light knew that he had no other choice but to eat the rest of his lunch later on in the afternoon, his stomach silently growling.

Suddenly, as they closed in on the Entrance, Squall halted his movement. He abruptly forced Warrior of Light to the side, both of them hidden away against the wall.

"What are you-?" Warrior of Light blurted out, but noticed Squall holding up a finger to silence him.

Warrior of Light poked his head around to find what the fuss had been all about. Instantly, he caught sight of Cloud Strife exiting the building, feeling slightly dazed and holding a coffee cup.

"Finally, some fresh air." Cloud sighed out in relief, rubbing the small bump on his forehead from where he had collided against his desk during Homeroom.

Just at the moment he drew in for another sip of his hot coffee, sudden echoes of feminine screams were heard from the distance. Cloud switched around, wondering where the screams had been coming from. The screams grew louder and louder, and both Warrior of Light and Squall could only watch in horror as the upcoming events began to unfold.

The same large group of female students began to appear from out of nowhere, approaching the unexpected Cloud from every direction. Cloud was unable to see this coming, and became completely shocked and confused as the group surrounded him mercilessly. At first, numerous loud and cheerful conversations spread across the surrounding group of girls, and then it turned into chaos. Cloud was grasped onto by many of the female students and dragged away into the distance.

"Wh-what's going on? Where are you taking me!? W-wait ... WAIT!" Cloud bellowed out, unable to break free from the fan girls' unbreakable clutches. "NOOOOooooooo...!!!"

Warrior of Light and Squall glared sorrowfully as Cloud disappeared into the distance trapped in the cage of the girls' giggly grasps.

"Cloud was a valiant ally." Squall stated in his usual dark, gloomy tone, however brought his hand up into an honourable salute. "His sacrifice will never be forgotten."

"You sound as though he's going to DIE!" Warrior of Light blurted out in sudden anger, finding this whole situation unbelievable.

The final bell of the day rang out at exactly 3:00pm; the various groups of students left the classrooms feeling free and alive. Various students grouped up and began to gossip away to each other about how their day had gone by and what their plans were for the rest of the day. Students took their time to leave

the Academy building, the remaining amount of students dwindling lessened over a small period of time. Class 13A exited from their final lesson of the day: Maths, and began to head off happily in their separate directions. Squall left in an instant so that he could get as far away as possible from Zidane and Bartz, who had been constantly nagging him. Tidus rounded up his usual group: him seemingly ecstatic as always, Firion and Cecil deep in conversation to some sort of debate, and Cloud trailing from behind. Cloud seemed to be in a somewhat traumatised state from the incident with the 'rabid' female students, and so Tidus kept on attempting to perk his spirit up so that he would be back to his normal self. Terra and Onion Knight headed off at their own pace, both who seemed to be rather relieved to have the day finally end. Warrior of Light packed up his equipment and slung on his backpack, ready to move. But, just as he was about to leave, Firion tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Warrior of Light; do you want to walk home with us?" Firion wondered curiously, a calm smile showing across his face. "We're thinking of hitting the arcades later on."

"Sorry, Firion; I have a meeting with the Headmistress about sorting out the Council meetings." Warrior of Light answered, shaking his head as he switched round. "Maybe we could some other time."

Firion shrugged cheerfully, "that's fine; just be sure you let me know about the Council plans tomorrow."

"Yes, I'll be sure to do that." Warrior of Light grinned in return, waving the group off.

Warrior of Light could just catch Tidus speaking and joking about with the other three, "Light seems to be visiting the Headmistress a lot today, sounds like they're all buddy-buddy, Ahahaa!" before the group disappeared from sight.

Warrior of Light swiftly reached the top floor of the Academy, having no problems during the way up. He stepped up to the Headmistress' Office and patiently knocked on the door. He heard the usual call from the Headmistress to head in and did so with no hesitation. As he entered, he caught sight of the same organised office the he entered during the beginning of the day, just slightly dimmer aura due to the light of the setting sun.

He instantly noticed Headmistress Cosmos standing up from her desk, overseeing the students leaving the Academy grounds from the window. She gave off the feeling that she was a Goddess to the Academy, managing both the academic and the wellbeing of Dissidia Academy and its highly valued students. Warrior of Light stepped up to the desk, checking once again to be sure he stood in a proud manner.

"It's nice to see that the Academy had a strong first day for its Semester, wouldn't you agree?" Cosmos cheerfully spoke out, twisting round with a cool, innocent smile across her face.

"Well, it certainly was an interesting start, that's for sure." Warrior of Light nodded with a chuckle, knowing from his odd experiences during the day.

"Now, seeing as the first Council meeting begins on Friday Lunch Break; I would like for you to investigate any issues concerning the Academy throughout the rest of the week, any suggestions for upcoming events, and so on." Cosmos began to brief, handing over a sheet of paper to Warrior of Light that concerned current upcoming events taking place throughout the next couple of months. "I'm sure that should be simple enough for you, Council President. Ah! Before I forget, you will be joined by Cid of the Lufaine in that meeting, so make sure there is a lot to discuss with him."

Warrior of Light gleefully agreed and accepted the sheet of paper, placing it into his backpack. However, just as he zipped up the bag, his expression turned to sudden uncertainty. There was something that stuck in his mind during the day, a question that he needed to bring up immediately.

"Cosmos, may I ask; why did you employ Garland into the Academy as an English teacher?" He finally asked out, hoping to gain the answer he needed. "It just doesn't seem right, especially with the harm he has caused in the past."

The Headmistress stood silent for a moment, dipping her head slightly in hesitance. She knew he would

ask such a question, but didn't want to set a misunderstanding.

"Garland appeared before me desiring to begin a new life, explaining to me that he realised he had done wrong throughout the past number of years." Cosmos finally began to explain, taking in a deep breath as she spoke. "At first, I did not accept his wishes, knowing he wasn't to be trusted. But I examined him and realised he had been telling the truth, and so I decided to help him regain a respectable reputation."

"But you know what he has done to the lives of so many people, including myself!" Warrior of Light began to argue, hoping that there had been some sense in the Headmistress' risky decision.

"Don't worry; I certainly placed that into consideration. Alas, when I heard him out, I could tell that he hoped dearly for a second chance." Cosmos continued on, giving out an understandable nod. "And my eyes have never told me wrong."

Warrior of Light drew back with hesitance, not knowing whether to accept this or not. Cosmos gazed at him with understanding eyes.

"All I can tell you now is that you'll just have to trust me and see for yourself as the academic year goes by." Cosmos assured him.

Warrior of Light took a moment to consider this; and then nodded with acceptance, knowing that he could place his trust on Headmistress Cosmos' words. He got ready to head out home, slinging the backpack over his shoulder once again.

"I will see you tomorrow, Warrior of Light." Cosmos stated out as she bid farewell, his kind smile illuminating towards him.

Warrior of Light waved her goodbye as he left, but did not say another word. Cosmos sat back down on her desk and began to write notes down on various reports. But not long after Warrior of Light left, another knock sounded from the door of her office.

"Come in." Cosmos formally called out, concentrating on her reports.

The door opened and the sound of large, booming footsteps echoed in the room.

"That boy certainly likes to nose in on the businesses of others." A deep, strong voice spoke out.

"Warrior of Light has very valid reasons to know about the changes going on within the Academy."

Cosmos stated truthfully, her eyes locked onto her reports. "He is a promising student, and will certainly lead a successful life. He just needs to manage the setback that he has kept inside of him for so long, that's all."

"If you say so, Cosmos." The deep voice accepted.

Cosmos halted her note-taking, hesitating for a moment. The man that stood before her was to be the new Headmaster of Dissidia Academy, no matter what arguments and excuses Cosmos tried to use to change the minds of the Governing body. In her head, Cosmos hated the fact the she would be replaced against he own will by such a man. She felt that the amount of care and attention she had put towards this Academy would be thrown out of the window and demolished the moment this man takes over. But in the end, the results were inevitable; Cosmos just had to accept that.

Cosmos placed down her black-inked pen and raised her head to meet eye-to-eye with the man. The man that stood before her was no ordinary man; everything other than his suit had been different than everyone else within the Academy. He towered twice the height of Garland and looked as though he could take down buildings with a simple punch. He had four brutal-looking arms with large claws at the end and two large, demonic wings. His facial appearance seemed to be particularly different; he had the face of a demon. With two bloods red horrifying horn and various smaller spikes covering the head. He also had razor-sharp, shark-like teeth that could cut through anything.

"Is there anything I can help you with, Deputy-headmaster Chaos?" Cosmos questioned politely, keeping up her sweet, peaceful appearance.

End of Arc 1.

4 - Arc 2: Wake Up Call

Cloud Strife's eyes flickered open ever so gradually; his senses coming back to him one by one whilst he regained his consciousness. The first thing that he caught a glimpse of was the plain yet heavenly ceiling directly above. Unique patterns continued to flourish throughout, as though trying to tell a story based on the viewers imagination. Cloud's eyes wondered around dazedly in their sockets with curiousness, trying to figure out where he was currently situated in. He could just about notice a series of large crystal-white curtains surrounding his body as though trying to keep him secured and safe from harm. Cloud then raised his head up slightly, feeling a puffed-up pillow rub gently against the back of his head. He gradually began to gaze above towards the window with curious eyes, finding several pure light rays breaking through the gaps of the window blinds.

"Ah, so you're finally awake." A sweet and innocent voice suddenly spoke out, causing Cloud to jump up suddenly in fright. "Welcome back to the living."

Cloud swiftly whipped his head round to where the voice originated from, not knowing what to expect. The moment he caught sight, his heart instantly felt as though it had skipped a beat. The person who he laid eyes upon gave the feeling that he was enlightened with a guardian angel to watch over him with care. Her face was smooth and delicate, showing of a sweet and innocent smile that would calm any troubled soul. Her chocolate brown hair had been tied back with a simple hairband, yet the way it swayed showed off how well-managed and the amount of effort that had been put into its quality. What she wore seemed to be a pure white uniform, giving off a heavenly feel.

Cloud hastily shook his head, snapping himself out of his engulfing trance. The moment he did this, a variety of questions began to pop into his mind. Shuffling through the pile, he decided to begin with the most simple of the bunch.

"Wh-where am I?" He dazedly requested, examining the area that he laid in once again. "Am I dead?"

"Wha-!?! No, no! Don't be ridiculous! You're in the Academy's Medical Room." The girl hastily answered, giggling by Cloud's question. "You're two classmates carried you down here saying you collapsed during homeroom."

Cloud instantly understood what had happened the moment the girl answered. It seemed that the lack of sleep had hit him the hard way, noticing the throbbing bump swelled up on his forehead. He began to sooth it, flinching as his fingers made contact.

"Well ... thank you for looking after me ... um ..." Cloud began to state in gratitude, showing appreciation to the girl that he realised he did not know the name of.

"Aerith Gainsborough." The girl answered to him sweetly. "I help out here as a student nurse."

"Th-thank you ... Aerith." Cloud echoed shyly, trying to hide his flustered face.

Aerith nodded cheerfully in return, accepting his gratitude wholeheartedly. She then placed her soft, smooth palm on Cloud's forehead, checking if the swelling was beginning to go down. This caused Cloud's current anxiousness to peak, his face burning bright red as his heart continued to race.

"Hmm ... it seems to be settling down now. Just to be on the safe side, you should probably sooth it with an ice-pack every so often." Aerith began to explain with her sweet smile, completely oblivious to Cloud's burning flustered expression. "And maybe you should have a cup of coffee to wake yourself up properly."

"Oh ... right!" Cloud nodded hastily, barely paying much attention.

Aerith moved her palm off from Cloud's forehead and stood up, deciding to drag the curtains that surrounded Cloud open. Cloud began to shuffle himself over to the edge of the bed, preparing to put his

shoes on and leave the Medical Room. He checked the time on the clock that hung on the wall to the left of him: 12:23pm. It then dawned on him that he had been unconscious for almost 4 hours now!

As he began to tie up his shoelaces, Cloud heard Aerith's sweet voice from a distance.

"Oh ... you ALL came to visit Cloud?" Aerith wondered curiously, sounding as though she had been talking to people on the other side of the curtains.

When the word 'all' was spoken, Cloud abruptly felt as though a brick had whacked him round the head. Frozen in place, his eyes grew wide with sudden horror and teeth clenched tight. He turned his head slowly and cautiously, expecting and bracing for the worst to occur.

The moment he caught sight of what awaited past the open curtains, he instantly gave out a small whimper in the similar vein of a small pup. Surrounding him were girls ... lots of girls. And not just any type of girls: they were Fan girls. They all stood over him, faces gleaming with excitement of finally getting close to him. Cloud forced a grin in fear, knowing what would happen the moment he moved an inch.

All of a sudden, in unison with each other, the fan girls screamed at the top of their voices ecstatically. The screams were loud enough that any unfortunate person within range of them would instantly go deaf. Cloud literally leaped out of his skin, not knowing what to do. The fan girls then began to draw in closer, surrounding him with no room to escape as their hands were out ready to grab hold of him.

"N-no, please don't!" Cloud cried out in panic, shuffling back on his bed as he braced himself for the worst. "NOOOooooooo...!!!"

And at that moment, everything suddenly turned pitch black.

Cloud tossed and turned in his sleep, grunting and moaning due to his current nightmare. As he continued to drift away, a knock began to sound from his door across the room.

"Oi, Cloud! It's time to wake up!" A voice called out loudly and energetically whilst the door opened up.

"Come on, man. It's only Thursday, you've got to head off to the Academy soon."

Upon entering the room, the man suddenly caught sight of Cloud tossing and turning on his bed, expressions full of fear and dread. The man could tell within an instant that Cloud was in the middle of having one of his recent nightmares. At first, the man could only show concern for Cloud, sorrowful for what he was going through.

"N-no ... don't ... take o-off ... my clothes ..." Cloud moaned in his sleep, his face steaming with sweat. The man's initial concerned expression then turned into a straight up scheming, evil grin, as an idea popped into his mind. He trod up closer to Cloud's bed, flexing his shoulders to ease the joints in his arms.

"Hehehee ... don't you worry, Cloud. I'll save you from your nightmare." The man assured the oblivious sleeping Cloud, chuckling with what he had prepared.

He loomed over Cloud's bed, clicking the joints in his body to ready himself for what he had up his sleeve. Just then, he grasped his right bicep and gripped it tightly, tensing up the bicep in the process. He raised his arm to show off a 90° angle, whilst his eyes were locked onto the oblivious Cloud. With legs spread out slightly and showing off some victory stance, the man drew in a deep, calm breath.

"Time for the good old ..." The man began calmly and peacefully. However, like a spark, the man's tone of voice abruptly changed from sweet and calm to loud and monstrous. "... ELBOW DROP!"

The man leapt high in the air, almost reaching the ceiling of the bedroom, and armed for a vital point on Cloud's body ... yet not too vital. With his elbow pointing out and eyes locked on target, the man struck his prey at full force ... colliding his elbow against Cloud's abdomen.

BAM!

Instantly, Cloud woke up from his nightmare in the most painful and abrupt way possible, feeling the man's elbow crush his abdomen without any prior warning. Due to the impact, the air from Cloud's lungs

was knocked out of him completely, his tearful eyes pointing up to the ceiling as though they were about to pop out of their sockets. Without delay, Cloud hastily wrapped his arms around his abdomen in agony, struggling to find his breath. He rolled across and off of his bed, colliding against the floor with a loud crash.

Cloud rolled around on the floor in the foetal position, continuing to gasp and wheeze in order for air to get back into his lungs. A shadow loomed over him, engulfing his body. Cloud hesitantly glared upwards, eyes red and streaming with agonizing tears as he caught sight of the culprit.

Suddenly, a hysterical, loud and menacing laughter echoed throughout the room as the man towering Cloud crossed his arms in triumph.

"HAHAHAHAA! Now THAT is the way people should be woken up by!" The man chuckled hysterically, unable to keep his calm.

Cloud raised his body up slightly, pain surging through his body, and had been able to call out underneath his gasps and wheezes.

"Why did you ... have to do that ... Zack!?"

"Ah, so you're still able to say my name after that?" Zack jokingly chuckled, still in his playful mood.

"Hahahaha, I feel so honoured!"

Zack Fair was Cloud's best friend and fellow housemate in their two-bedroomed rented apartment. He had long, spikey jet-black hair with his bangs/fringe parting both ways, and bright-blue Mako-filled eyes. He stood at a tall 6ft 3in, slightly towering over Cloud's 5ft 7in. Whilst Cloud had been a student of Dissidia Academy, Zack had already finished his time as a student a few years prior and now worked full-time as a SOLDIER 2nd Class as part of the Shina Electric Power Company in the city close to the Academy.

As demonstrated, Zack has a playful, energetic and easy-going personality, finding any opportunity that would satisfy his crave for enjoyment. However, when on SOLDIER missions, he instantly changes to a determined and serious tone in hopes of someday finally gaining his 1st Class rank; a goal that leads towards a certain dream he has kept with him since even before his days a student at the Academy.

Zack held out his hand towards Cloud to help him to his feet, in which Cloud accepts. Although able to breathe again, Cloud still felt the agony from his abdomen as he rose to his feet with the help from Zack.

"You didn't need to ... elbow me in the gut." Cloud wheezed painfully, soothing his abdomen and he stretched out.

"What are you talking about?" Zack cheerfully pointed out, chuckling away. "You should be thanking me. I did just save you from another one of your nightmares, after all."

As though the thought triggered from Zack's response, Cloud recollected back to how the nightmares began. Ever since the incident with the fan girls during the first day back at the Academy; they had begun to take over his dreams, tormenting and intimidating him to no end. His most recent dream, having been rudely yet also thankfully interrupted by Zack, had in fact been an earlier, sweeter flashback from that same day. That had been so, until the fan girls took over the dream.

Cloud began to wonder when these series of nightmares were going to finally end, desiring for a decent night sleep for a change. Zack noticed Cloud's worried face, understanding that he had been tormented by this recent situation. After a long, thoughtful silence; Zack gave out a relieving sigh, causing Cloud to gaze towards him with confusion.

"Standing around here isn't going to get us anywhere, you know?" Zack chuckled, lightly placing a hand on Cloud's shoulder. "We have places to go and stuff to do."

With that, Zack turned and headed towards the bedroom door, flexing out his elbow that he had used to wake Cloud up with. Although, just before he was about to exit the room, he halted himself and turned slightly towards Cloud's direction.

"Hurry up and get ready, dude." He called out cheerfully, giving out a positive atmosphere. "Breakfast is

ready downstairs."

Cloud's confused frown turned into a grateful smile, coolly nodding to Zack.

Cloud began to munch down on a slice of toast eagerly, only just realising how hungry he had been. He then took no time to consume his hash browns and strips of bacon. As Cloud continued to eat; Zack gazed towards him with staggered eyes, amazed by Cloud's sudden desire to consume ALL the food on the table.

"Since when did you become such a ... glutton?" Zack wondered oddly, wide eyes locked onto Cloud as he was unable to believe Cloud's ridiculous hunger.

Realising that he completely forgot about it; Zack began to sip his cooled-down morning coffee, waking himself up properly so he would be ready for his missions at SOLDIER. Cloud finally finished all of the food on the table, indicating he was full with a small burp.

"It's weird, I don't even know why I'm this hungry." Cloud innocently admitted, embarrassed by his sudden urge for food.

"Well, for now, I'm just thankful that I ate my breakfast before waking you up." Zack laughed awkwardly, placing down his cup of coffee.

Cloud began to sip his own coffee, feeling the refreshing taste revive his energy. Ever since he collapsed from over-tiredness during Homeroom, Cloud was always sure to drink a cup of coffee before heading to the Academy or when Tidus calls for him during ridiculous times in the middle of the night. He glanced over towards the clock on the kitchen wall; 7:15am. With plenty of time to spare, Cloud sat back Zack and Cloud's kitchen had been small and simple, consisting of the essential equipment for making and storing food they would need during their day. Cloud wasn't too fussed about how large his living space was; as long as it was comfortable, he was completely fine.

He took no time to drink his coffee and placed it back down on the table without a drop left, feeling reenergized. Abruptly, Zack snapped his fingers out of the blue as though a small light bulb clicked on in his mind, causing Cloud to switch towards his direction cautiously.

"Oh! I just remembered; you have Geography today, don't you?" Zack stated ecstatically, his face beaming with rising excitement.

"Yeah ... why do you ask?" Cloud answered with a very cautious mind-set, not knowing where this would be leading considering it was Zack.

"Well starting today ... Sephiroth will be tutoring your lessons!" Zack leapt up to his feet, a cheerful smile strapped across his face. "He announced a few days ago that he would be taking a break from his SOLDIER 1st Class job for indefinite."

Cloud gazed towards him with blank eyes for a small moment, as though the news Zack had told him was still in the process of registering in his mind. He then snapped with sudden surprise, not knowing whether to be excited about this news or confused by why this was happening in the first place.

As stated by Zack, Sephiroth was a top ranked SOLDIER 1st Class and considered to be a hero and role-model to Shina, the city and even Dissidia Academy itself. Ever since Zack joined SOLDIER, he had been constantly trying to catch up to Sephiroth's level so that he would gain his everlasting dream of becoming a hero. Cloud was all in favour for having Sephiroth as a teacher, however a part of his mind seemed to be cautious of the idea, maybe due to the unexpectedness of it. It was then when something came to his mind through his own curiosity.

"Why would Sephiroth wish to take a break from SOLDIER?" Cloud wondered curiously, finishing off another coffee in thought, "What does he hope to gain out of this?"

"To be fair, I don't know; he just stated that he desired to pursue other projects for the time being." Zack answered back with a shrug, scratching his head as he attempted to remember back to when this had been announced. Zack leant back as he searched through his mind for more possible answers. "He

never actually gave detail of what or why he was doing it."

Cloud nodded thoughtfully, eyes dipping and silently finishing off his second coffee. A small chuckle from Zack's direction caused Cloud to once again raise his eyes with curiousness whilst still sipping the drink. "Oh, and one more thing I forgot to mention ... I've got myself a date." Zack announced to him, showing off a cheesy and innocent smile.

Within a miniscule second, Cloud spat out in shock, spraying coffee all over the table. Zack swiftly braced himself so that he wouldn't be struck by the projectile coffee.

"You!? A date!?" Cloud blurted in shock, coffee dripping from his chin. "What 'poor' soul would accept a blockheaded fool like you?"

"Ouch, no need to be so harsh!" Zack drew back; feeling insulted by Cloud's statement, but then brushed it away with ease. "Well, all I'll say for now is that she's sweet and cute."

After swiftly cleaning himself up, Cloud squinted towards him, examining him intently as if he had been hiding something.

"... Is it Cissnei?" He then asked out tensely, eyes locked onto Zack like daggers across the table.

"Huh..? Cissnei!? Nooooo ... No no, it isn't her." Zack shook his head, looking somewhat disappointed for some reason. "You know how many times I got turned down by her, seeing as she prefers to concentrate with her Turk work."

Cloud silently grinned at the thought as he knew exactly how many times Cissnei turned down Zack: 17 times in the space of 4 years. The fact that Zack tried to pursue her after each time was beyond him entirely. But now the idea of Zack successfully dating a new girl interested Cloud greatly, although he needed more information about this girl in order to have an idea of how their relationship is going to unfold.

"Seriously though, I need more than just 'sweet' and 'cute'." Cloud stated in a stern tone, not letting this pass so easily. "It would be good to know about how you two met and more about her 'qualities'."

"Ah-hah ... all in good time, my friend." Zack teased cheekily, pressing a finger against the side of his nose to indicate that he had been keeping it a secret. "If I told you now, I'll just be ruining the surprise." Cloud shrugged his arms whilst his eyes rolled, feeling the whole idea was pointless. Zack showed off a cheesy grin, knowing that it was all fun and games for them in the end. With that said, he did want to make sure that the girl he had been dating would be a decent surprise for Cloud.

Just then, a 'Victory Fanfare' tune began to ring around the kitchen, causing both Cloud and Zack to jump up with fright. Zack hastily grasped his ringing phone and answered it straight away, rising up from his seat.

"Hello, Zack here." Zack responded openly and positively, listening carefully to the other end of the mobile phone. "Ah! Hey there, Director! ... Uh-huh, yep ... ok, I'll be right over."

Cloud heard him hang up the phone and began to collect his belonging and SOLDIER weapon; a simple bladed sword with the Shinra emblem on it.

"Are you heading out already?" Cloud wondered curiously, rising from his own seat.

"Yep, duty calls!" Zack cheerfully chanted out, placing his weapon against the metallic magnet on the back of his SOLDIER uniform.

The blade of his weapon instantly locked up against the magnet on his back, no loose movement whatsoever. The magnet would only unlock on Zack's command, a mechanism that allowed him access to his weapon whenever the appropriate situation arises.

"The Director wants me to lead a mission with Angeal to Wutai as soon as possible." He then added, recapping what he was told on the phone. "It has something to do with them holding mass anti-Shinra weaponry of some kind, although we have no idea what exactly these weapons are at this point."

Cloud nodded curiously; interested in this new upcoming mission Zack had to work with. Zack has always talked highly about his mentor SOLDIER 1st Class Angeal; although Cloud had never actually

met him in real life as of yet. In terms of the Wutai stronghold, Cloud knew from various articles in newspapers and online that they have recently threatened to attack Shinra and other opposing forces due to their strong hatred for the companies questionable practices.

"Be careful when your over there, ok?" Cloud warned him protectively, knowing Zack had the tendency to go overboard with his missions at times.

"I always am." Zack stated proudly, heading towards the front door.

BANG!

"Ack!" He yelled out unexpectedly, hastily rubbed his head as he began to feel a bump form on his temple.

As he had stepped over towards the door; he had not notice the archway above him, causing him to smack his forehead hard against it.

Cloud attempted to hold back the laughter, finding the situation ironic. Zack hastily switched to his direction, awkwardly smiling as his face burned up red with sudden embarrassment.

"L-like I said: I'm always careful!" He reminded hastily, trying his best not to act like a complete fool. Cloud nodded sarcastically; a large, sympathetic smirk strapped across his face as he continued to hold back his laughter. Zack hurried to the front door and began to twist it open, feeling the warm autumn breeze brush against him. Before he left, Zack gave one last shout out back towards Cloud, not switching to him directly but instead holding up a hand in acknowledgement.

"Hey Cloud; maybe if this mission succeeds, I'll finally be promoted to 1st Class." Zack called out in hope, clenching his raised fist positively.

"It wouldn't hurt to be hopeful." Cloud smiled back, keeping up with Zack's optimistic atmosphere. Zack fist-pumped upwards as he nodded with hopeful eyes, feeling that Cloud had his back for support. He drew in a deep, meaningful breath and stepped outside into the morning Sun. "Ok, see ya later, Dude!" Zack finally waved, running off into the distance. Cloud just heard a "Say 'hi' to Sephiroth for me!" before he disappeared completely.

Cloud began to prepare himself to head for the Academy, swiftly recollecting Zack's dream of becoming a hero. Even though Sephiroth had been a hero and inspiration for Shinra and the city, Cloud never really acknowledged him as an inspiration. The reason for this was due to the fact that he already had an inspiration to look up towards, Zack; finding him to be his best friend, older brother, and even his hero.

"... So, he's finally got himself a date!" Tidus loudly bellowed out in surprise; acting his usual loud, over-the-top self.

The time was 8:40am and Class 13A began to gather in the usual Homeroom, waking themselves up from their drowsy state and continuing to chat amongst each other about the usual gossip. Firion, Cecil, and Tidus sat around Cloud's desk, chilling out with Cloud before Professor Shantotto entered to begin Homeroom. Cloud had explained to them about Zack's new 'mystery' girl, knowing that they would kick up a fuss if he kept this a secret. Reactions were as follows: Firion had a very surprised expression on his face, although he accepted it wholeheartedly; Cecil had nodded to himself with a light glimmer shining in his eyes, liking the idea of a 'mystery' romance; Tidus had leapt up with complete shock, completely not expecting the fact that Zack had finally been able to 'bag' a girl.

"Do you know who the girl is?" Firion wondered curiously, leaning against the table in front casually.

"No. He didn't slip any detail of who she is or how they actually met; all he said was that she's 'sweet' and 'cute'." Cloud admitted with slight frustration, crossing his arms. "Talk about 'overkilling' the surprise."

"I think it's glorious; the idea of having a couple love each other in secret whilst those close to them unravel the mystery makes my heart burn with passion." Cecil proudly stated to the group, acting as

though his eyes burned brightly with that idea.

Firion, Tidus, and Cloud glanced towards Cecil awkwardly, all 3 of them knowing full well how much of a romanticist Cecil had the tendency to be.

"Yeah ... keep dreaming, love maniac." Tidus commented under his breath, glaring with bored-looking expression. He then swiftly whipped back to facing Cloud with the sudden shift back to his eager eyes, "I suggest we jump on him, force him to spill the beans!"

"There's a slight problem with that proposition: we're just Academy students with barely any experience of such physical activity whilst Zack is a full blown SOLDIER operative, he would turn the tables on us before we even make the move on him." Firion interrupted Tidus' idea, stating exactly what Cloud had been thinking except in more contexts and slightly exaggerated.

"How about we tail him whenever he is caught off-guard, learn what we can from the shadows." Cecil then suggested, considering more of a secretive approach.

"If he were to catch us though, he'll list us as stalkers and it'll be game over." Tidus debated back, not particularly enjoying the idea of being caught in the act.

"Guys, we're talking about my best-friend here. He not the serious 'I'll wipe your memory if you find out' type guy, there isn't any need to go so far." Cloud then decided to cut in, feeling the whole situation unnecessary. "Besides, I'm not going to stalk or force Zack into admitting something he wants to surprise us with. When he decides to spill it to us, I'll be there waiting patiently for who it is."

With that, Cloud rose from his own seat and decided to go grab a coffee from the machine, feeling that he had time to go grab a cup before Professor Shantotto would begin the Homeroom session. He passed Onion Knight and Terra on his right who were discussing away with each other as they usually do, and Warrior of Light who had been patiently sitting on his desk with a book in his hand. However, before Cloud could head out the door, a small phrase escaped from Tidus' mouth that placed him completely off-guard and froze his movement.

"You're boring as usual, Cloud." Tidus commented with a murmur; a subtle, scheming smirk appearing on his face.

Firion and Cecil followed the pattern with their own comments.

"How disappointing, it would have been quite fun." Firion admitted bluntly, trying to keep a straight face.

"So the 'mysterious' romance will forever stay a secret." Cecil stated lowly, dipping his head down to hide his face behind his long silver hair.

Veins began to pop up around Cloud's face as his anger and frustration began to rise. However, he took in a deep breath and turned back round to the other three, knowing this whole idea would be such a pain.

"Fine, I'll play your little 'game'. But, if we're going to tail him then we'll have to wait till he gets back from his mission in Wutai." Cloud stated in a serious tone, attempting to hide his frustration. "And we'll have to be extra careful; Zack tends to catch on to anything very quickly."

Tidus nodded cheerfully to Firion and Cecil, feeling rather victorious from convincing Cloud to change his mind.

"No need to worry about that, Cloud." Tidus smiled confidently, ideas forming in his mind. "We'll have that sorted out in no time."

Cloud nodded cautiously, knowing Tidus would state such a thing which in turn worried him more. He hastily left the Homeroom to grab his coffee realising that there wouldn't be much time left till Professor Shantotto would begin.

At 12:25pm, time moved swiftly towards Lunch-break, although some of the Academy students felt it was running too slowly. Cloud sat patiently in his seat as his Math lesson began to draw to a close. The teacher of the subject was a very stuck up yet intelligent man who referred himself as 'The Emperor',

stating to the whole of Class 13A that he ruled the whole of the subject 'Math' and desiring to dominate all academic subjects.

Firion murmured to Cloud underneath his breath before the lesson began that he personally despised The Emperor to no end, saying something about them having intellectual conflicts against each other countless times in the past. And now Cloud could see why; The Emperor had to be the most BORING teacher he had ever had to tolerate in lesson. His way of teaching the subject literally drove most of the class to sleep, only to be woken up abruptly by a ruler aimed directly to the head.

Cloud, to his and the rest of the Class' surprise, was able to keep himself awake throughout most of the lesson, only dropping his head slightly a few times. In fact, it was only Cloud, Warrior of Light, Onion Knight, and Terra who had kept themselves awake throughout the lesson: Warrior of Light and Onion Knight were mainly focused with competing against each other in a rivalling battle of wits, whilst Terra tried to keep herself awake in caution that she wouldn't be smacked by the ruler.

Currently, Cloud began to feel satisfied that the lesson was finally drawing to a close, yet he was also warily patient about Lunch-break and what he was afraid would follow. The reason for this being that he would have to try and hide in fear from the mass of fan girls that were hunting him down, which was a thought he would prefer to have washed away. In addition to this, right after Lunch-break he would be sitting in a Geography lesson taken by the SOLDIER hero Sephiroth.

Speaking of Sephiroth; Cloud had been unsuccessful so far in spotting him throughout the entire day, wondering if he'll actually turn up for the lesson that he is supposed to teach or not. And why teach Geography? What had been so special about that particular subject? Cloud's mind rattled around with those thoughts and questions throughout the whole of the lesson, trying to come up with theories and answers.

Just then, the bell that indicated Lunch-break finally rang abruptly throughout the corridors of Dissidia Academy, to everyone's pleasure and relief. The Emperor finished up on his dismal lecture and allowed everyone to leave for their Lunch. Cloud swiftly packed up his belongings and slung his backpack over his shoulders, refusing to spend a second longer in the hellhole of a classroom.

Before he left, however, he met up with Firion, who was most relieved that he could finally be released from the torture for a Maths Lesson; and Cecil, who drowsily shook his head to wake himself back up completely. Cloud then finally turned over towards Tidus' desk, where he had caught sight of him drifting away in his sleep, leaning back on his chair casually as he snoozed.

A sudden and cheeky thought idea crossed Cloud's mind during that point, feeling that it would be pay-back for his own lack of sleep from the first day of the Academy. He instantly knelt down to the legs of Tidus' leaning chair and pushed them upwards, tipping Tidus obliviously off his balance.

WHAM!

The moment Tidus collided against the classroom floor, he abruptly leapt to his feet with the most confused and frightened expression on his face.

"Who-!? Wha-!? I-I wasn't asleep, I swear!" Tidus bellowed out, his loud voice echoing through the classroom.

The whole of Class 13A gazed upon him awkwardly, eyes staring towards his direction as though Tidus had completely lost his sanity. Tidus blushed with embarrassment, feeling this whole situation was painful and awkward to say the least. He then began to hear uncontrollable laughter originating from Cloud's direction, where he caught sight of Cloud clutching his stomach in pain as he tried to calm himself down. He was crying with laughter, finding the whole situation hysterical and a perfect payback. After a moment where his mind processed the situation, Tidus decided to brush the embarrassment aside and laugh with Cloud.

Cloud cautiously peeked around the corner of Dissidia Academy's building, checking for any signs of the

dreaded female students that were hunting him down. The other three had to go their separate ways due to errands and jobs they needed to pursue: Tidus had Blitzball practice with his Father who was Class 13A's sports coach; Firion had errands with the Student Council with Warrior of Light and Onion Knight; and Cecil had been summoned to his Brother's office due to upcoming events of some kind. This had meant that Cloud had been left to fend for himself, something he hadn't been very keen on.

After several moments of examining the area, Cloud released a sigh of relief. Ever since the 'fan girl' incident, he had always needed to be constantly wary of wherever he headed to, hoping highly that he wouldn't have a repeat of the trauma. However, the moment Cloud began to make his move for lunch, he felt a tap on his shoulder from behind. Cloud completely leapt out of his skin in fright and doubled back with paranoia, bracing himself with eyes tightly shut for what he expected to happen next.

"Erm ... Is something the matter, Cloud?" a light, pure voice wondered curiously, drawn back by Cloud's unexpected reaction.

Cloud's eyes cautiously flickered open upon hearing the familiar voice, realising that the person wasn't anyone involved with the mass of fan girls. As he opened his eyes and his sight cleared, his heartbeat calmed to the point of relaxation. The student stood before him was the only female in his class: Terra Branford. She gazed towards Cloud oddly, wondering why he was acting so oddly. Cloud hastily brushed away his paranoia and casually grinned back in her direction, hiding away anything relating to his fear.

"It's nothing. I was just caught off-guard, that's all." Cloud admitted shyly, chuckling awkwardly.

"I see ... well, seeing as Onion Knight is on an errand, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind joining me for lunch." Terra wondered innocently, silently giggling due to Cloud's odd act.

"Yeah, sure. Why not." Cloud nodded towards her, although his eyes still carefully analysed his surroundings just in case any of the fan girls appeared.

Cloud and Terra walked around the Academy grounds in hopes of finding a place to have their lunch, making small talk with each other as they walked on. The Academy grounds were packed with numerous students socialising and eating their lunches together due to the strong climate and positive atmosphere. Because of this, both Cloud and Terra began to feel irritated after a while with the amount of Academy students taking up most of the available sitting space on the grounds.

After a while of searching, they finally found a free bench towards the other side of the building to perch themselves on. They began to cross the entrance of the Academy towards the bench, happy to be able to rest themselves in the pleasant heat of the Sun.

However as they closed in towards the bench, something caught the corner of Cloud's eye that caused him to halt his movement. Terra instantly noticed Cloud halt to a stop and stopped herself in wonder of what caught his attention. She followed his eyesight curiously to notice that his attention had been drawn towards the Entrance Gate of Dissidia Academy.

Standing there were two people deep in conversation: one was a female student whilst the other was a slightly older male who was a student to the Academy. The man had taken out some sort of present from a plastic bag he had been holding and showed it to the female student, giving out a meaningful smile. The female student cheerfully clapped her hands together excitedly, showing her appreciation towards the man. The present was a pink silk hair-ribbon, woven together with absolute care.

The man offered to tie the ribbon around the female student's long brown hair, in which she had accepted gratefully. The ribbon seemed to have suited the female student perfectly, holding her hair up gracefully and neatly. The female student then wrapped her arms around the man with affection, showing gratitude and love for him.

"Aww ... how sweet." Terra cheerfully spoke out, placing her hands together softly as she watched the couple embrace joyfully.

"Yeah ..." Cloud murmured in response, completely lost for words, "... sweet."

When he first caught sight of the couple, it took him a while to adjust his eyes as the sun was blinded him whilst it hovered directly over the two. Yet once they had adjusted, Cloud's heart leapt up in shock. He knew exactly who these two were.

The man stood at a tall height, a strong posture and broad body, he wore the distinctive SOLDIER 2nd Class uniform and had his jet-black hair spiked up with his bangs parting to the sides. It was his best friend, Zack Fair, who stood upon the Entrance Gate of Dissidia Academy. It seemed that he was able to finish off his mission in Wutai earlier than Cloud had initially expected, although it seemed as though he returned with a few injuries inflicted from the mission.

However, what made Cloud's heart jump out the most was the girl who embraced him, certainly being the girl Zack had currently been dating. With the hair-ribbon tied around; her long, chocolate-brown, well-maintained hair drew back elegantly into a braided pony-tail. She had smooth, natural skin and the appearance of an angel. She wore the same Dissidia Academy uniform as every other female student yet stood out gracefully amongst many of the students in the Academy. Cloud knew straight away who the girl was just by her elegance alone, she was the Assistant Nurse who had tended him when he woke up in the Medical Room: Aerith Gainsborough.

5 - Arc 2: Questioning Perfection

Zack Fair struck his blade into the chest of Wutai's 'Anti-Shinra weapon', his concentration set solely on taking the abomination down. The weapon was a towering bulk of immovable mass known as the Vajradhara Tu; Wutai's ultimate resort to overpowering Shinra and gaining the upper hand in the War. Without this, Wutai would be unable to counter Shinra's advances, in turn leaving them cornered and out of options.

Zack made sure that this 'monster' perished like its brother: Vajradhara Wu, who was currently lying motionless on the ground with open wounds and dead eyes. As Zack dug his blade deeper into the Vajradhara Tu's chest, he could feel it begin to stagger and moan lowly; the sign's indicating that he had successfully struck a vital area. The weapon attempted to flail its monstrous boulder-like arms in order to brush Zack away, however it was useless. It had lost focus entirely, life draining away from its body.

Finally, the weapon's legs gave way from underneath, all the strength in its hulking body disappearing altogether. As the weapon fell forward, Zack hastily drew his blade out from the beast and leapt out of the way, hoping not to get flattened by the weapon's crushing mass.

CRASH!!!

The weapon collided against the floor of Wutai's fort, causing the whole area to violently shake like an erupting earthquake. Zack froze in a knelt down position, bracing himself as the floor continued to shake. The reacting earthquake eventually died down, allowing Zack to steadily regain his footing. With his blade grasped securely in the palm of his hand, he stepped over to the Vajradhara Tu. Cautiously; he prodded the mass of muscle with the blade in order to confirm that the weapon was ultimately slain. The last thing Zack needed was a surprise attack.

The Vajradhara Tu showed no movement whatsoever, the pupils of its eyes completely whited out and saliva beginning to seep from the corner of its gaping mouth. It was then Zack instantly realised; he had completed his mission victoriously! Gazing towards his two fallen opponents with full amazement melded across his face, Zack couldn't hold in any longer.

"I-I did it ...? I did it!?" Zack bellowed out, an explosion of excitement escaping him all at once. "N-no way, this is unbelievable!"

With the amount of exhilaration running through the veins of his body, Zack proudly swung and spun his sword about in a single flow, ending it with a victory pose. As he placed the blade of his sword against the magnet on the back of his Shinra Uniform, Zack began to reflect back on the entirety of the mission. As stated on the mission briefing: Zack had to infiltrate Wutai's Fort without any supervision. The reason behind him having to complete the mission independently was due to Shinra preferring not to start an all-out conflict. With Sephiroth taking a break from SOLDIER, Zack's mentor Angeal had initially been assigned the mission as a replacement. However, the reason for Zack leading the mission instead was due to Angeal's personal request, having consulted to the SOLDIER's Director: Lazard Deusericus beforehand in order to prove Zack's ability.

Throughout the duration of the mission; Zack was able to infiltrate the Fort without triggering any alarms or alerting any Wutai forces, much to his own surprise. Upon entering the 'Anti-Shinra weapons' stronghold, Zack had fought valiantly against the two monstrous weapons whilst successfully withstanding many of their incoming deadly blows.

Suddenly, the sound of hands clapping slowly together echoed throughout the building, causing Zack to leap up in fright. He hastily switched round and drew his blade back out, ready to attack if need be.

However, as he focused his attention towards the source of the echo, he caught sight of his mentor, Angeal, stepping out from behind a corner.

Angeal was a tall, powerful man who had always carried with him a large, deadly Buster Sword and a constant tense expression to go with it. Although his primary weapon of choice as a 1st Class SOLDIER operative, he never actually uses the Buster Sword. The reason behind it had been due to his family's pride, a reason that Zack was never able to his head round with.

Upon noticing Angeal, Zack hastily re-sheathed his weapon, ensuring to Angeal that he wasn't a target. From what was seen, Angeal seemed to have been the one clapping, showing off a proud yet cool expression whilst examining the results of the battle.

"Well, it seems there wasn't any need for me to interfere in the mission after all." Angeal chuckled as he began to analyse Zack's overall performance throughout the duration of the mission, noticing Zack's hopeful expression gradually appearing instantly. "I must admit, there were times when I was on the edge of my seat, particularly when you almost let your guard down during the main battle. But the fact that you didn't draw attention to yourself and completed the mission at a staggeringly fast rate, I think I'll be able to let the little nit-picks slide. I must hand it to you, Zack, you've certainly impressed me."

Zack sighed with absolute relief; he knew that Angeal had been inspecting his performance from a distance, watching his every movement like a hawk. But the moment he entered the Fort, he instantly brushed aside the thought of being assessed and concentrated solely on the mission itself. Angeal's concluding statement allowed Zack to truly feel proud to be a member of SOLDIER.

"Now, concerning your status within SOLDIER ..." Angeal then began to state out, stepping closer towards Zack with a serious expression.

Zack's heart jumped the moment Angeal spoke out; this was the moment of truth. Will his recent success and progression in missions allow him to be finally promoted to 1st Class, or will he be stuck to serve Shinra as a measly 2nd Class for a while longer? (what would feel like forever in Zack's over-exaggerated and impatient mind.)

"... Will have to be addressed at a later time." Angeal abruptly stated.

Zack's mind suddenly felt as though it had blown a fuse.

"HUH!? YOU CAN'T JUST BUILD UP MY HOPES AND THEN LEAVE ME HANGING LIKE THAT!" Zack roared out in complete frustration, grasping the collar of Angeal's uniform tightly and let loose everything that erupted in his mind. His eyes raged with tears of anger and veins bulging from his forehead, Zack refused to let this whole situation go. "HOW AM I SUPPOSE TO SLEEP SOUNDLY TONIGHT WITHOUT A CLUE AS TO WHETHER OR NOT I'VE BEEN PROMOTED!?"

Angeal had instantly squinted his eyes upon receiving Zack's over-the-top outburst, keeping a calm mind in order to block it all out. It was expected, having braced himself for what had come for him. Once Zack finally finished his rant, Angeal coolly brushed him off, showing no expression whatsoever.

"If you gave at least a moment of thought about your own surroundings before freaking out, you would have realised that we're still in the Wutai Fort and have now possibly just alerted the entire Wutai squadron." Angeal explained to him in a calm tone, pulling off Zack's grasp coolly.

Within that moment, Zack began to hear sirens outside the Fort, along with rising commotions originating from the Wutai troops. Not long after, a stampede of footsteps swiftly drew in from the distance outside the walls around the two SOLDIER warriors. Zack's expression dropped with the realization that he screwed up thanks to his bellowing outburst.

"Err... Oops." He whimpered in a squeaky tone, beginning to sweat anxiously.

Angeal pressed a palm against his own forehead, sighing lowly in frustration, "What are you going to do now, 'Zack the Puppy'?" He questioned in a serious tone, a hint of amusement breaking almost breaking through.

"Wha-!? Angeal, you know how much I hate you calling me that!" Zack blurted out all of a sudden, before

catching a glimpse of Angeal curiously raising an eyebrow towards him.

He felt a cold shiver run down his spine, as though he was still being assessed. This caused him to feel even more anxious, several sweat droplets falling from his face at a fast pace.

He hastily turned and began to scout for an escape route, "A-anyway, the sooner we get out of here, the better."

Zack hastily scanned the area around him, showing minor signs of panic and distress as he attempted to find a suitable escape route. He swiftly stepped over towards the back door of the room, yet began to hear Angeal murmur from a distance as he tried to open it.

"I would guess that the Wutai troops would have the whole building surrounded by now." Angeal lightly hinted with a small smirk, acting as though he was finding this situation amusing to watch. "I wouldn't be surprised if all the plausible escape routes were blocked off."

Zack pulled himself back from the door and gulped, covered in sweat and body shaking with dread. He couldn't believe this was happening to him; after everything he put himself through in order to succeed in the most important mission of his career, he decides to go and screw himself over during the home run!

The thought of failing to reach 1st Class and losing the one opportunity to live his dream caused his mind to go into meltdown. Throwing both arms over his head, Zack began to pace around, eyes wild as he struggled to rationalise his thoughts.

It was then when he heard the footsteps closing in around him, it was only a matter of time before he and Angeal would be caught by Wutai forces. The whole room had been spinning around him as his anxiety continued to rise.

Then all of a sudden, a snapping sound echoed the room...

Zack instantly shifted his sight towards Angeal with wide yet confused eyes, knowing straight away that he was the one who snapped his fingers. Zack swiftly noticed him pointing his index finger skywards; however his eyes were still locked on Zack with a serious expression. Zack, curious to know what Angeal was implying, took this hint gratefully and followed the direction of his mentor's finger.

Then, as though a lightbulb clicked on in the depths of his mind, realisation kicked in: the Ventilation System! Considered to be the most clichéd way of escape, it was either this or facing an entire Wutai Army. With that said, a couple of questions appeared in his mind: Would he (and especially Angeal with his Buster Sword) be able to fit through the ventilation system? If so, where would it lead to?

"From what I was able to investigate earlier, I wouldn't be surprised if this lead to the roof of the Fort."

Angeal calmly deducted, acting as though he had thoroughly read Zack's mind.

Zack was just about to ask Angeal on how he knew what was going through his own head, but was suddenly interrupted by the closing uproar from the other side of the doors. Zack stepped back hesitantly, uncertain about what he should do. He then caught sight of Angeal leaping into the ventilation system, not even a second thought passed through his mind as he disappeared.

Zack hastily took one last look of the doors in front of him.

"... Well, I guess there's no time like the present!" Zack encouraged himself, keeping up his regulated, positive tone.

He swiftly leapt up towards the opening of the Ventilation system, completely out of sight just as the Wutai army broke through the door.

After some time passed crawling within the never ending maze of the Ventilation system, both Angeal and Zack finally reached the opening of the system. Angeal was correct; the system did reach the roof of the Fort. He was the first to appear out of the Ventilation system, inhaling the open air in desperate relief. He was able to spot the morning sun still beat down around the Wutai area, glaring proudly. Angeal stepped out of the system without making any sound whatsoever, praying not to alert the Wutai

troops of their whereabouts. Unfortunately this idea did not cross Zack's mind.

"PHWAH! Argh man, talk about cramped with a capital C!" Zack exclaimed loudly, bursting out of the vent with no consideration at all.

Angeal scowled towards him, attempting to hold back the large amount of frustration and anger that raged on through his body. And yet, Zack continued his loud speech, as though he had completely forgotten he was currently on a mission and instead acted as though he was in a conversation with a close friend.

"I mean, seriously! Drag a claustrophobic sufferer in there and in a matter of seconds he'll go absolutely Ape-shi – Mmph!?!!"

Zack's mouth was forcefully covered by Angeal's hand, refusing him to speak another word.

Zack glanced up towards his mentor's face, and gasped horrifically underneath the covering palm upon noticing Angeal's current expression. Angeal's eyes were raging like a rabid bull, his temper completely past the breaking point and lips sealed tight in desperation of holding back the roar of a lion.

As sanity slowly returned to him, Angeal whispered lowly in a warning tone, gritting his teeth in the process.

"If you say another word in that loud, obnoxious tone of yours ... your blood will be the first to stain the Buster Sword." He murmured grittily, eyes locked like daggers on Zack's terrified face. "Do I make myself clear?"

Zack instinctively nodded, hands slightly rose upwards in proof of his innocence as he gave off a slight whimper.

"... Good." Angeal instantly released his hand from covering Zack's mouth, turning away in order to scout the area.

Zack drew in a few deep yet quick breaths, calming himself down after such a terrifying encounter. He then stepped out of the vent and resealed its gate carefully without causing any disruptive sounds. He turned and treaded over to Angeal's position, who was preoccupied observing the outskirts of the Fort. Zack curiously followed Angeal's eyes, peering down towards the depths of the fort below. In that instant, Zack felt his heart sink in despair, noticing the sheer mass of the Wutai army surrounding the building.

"Oh man, those are a lot of troops. I feel dizzy just thinking about it." Zack commented gloomily, keeping a constant low voice. "How in the world are we going to get out of this mess?"

"Hm-hmm..." Angeal chuckled proudly, acting as though he was one step ahead of the game.

"... What's so funny?" Zack questioned in a low tone, caution entering his mind. "Why is it that I get the chills after I hear you laugh?"

"You don't need to worry your simple mind over our small mishap, that's all." He then shrugged, a dark smirk sealed as he shook his head. "I have this covered."

Zack curiously watched his mentor swivel round, making his way towards a large mound of leaves situated on the other side of the Fort's roof. Angeal swiftly reached into the pile and emerged with two large backpacks. Zack immediately knew what the bags held inside, however it wasn't to his liking.

"And ... why do you have parachutes?" Zack questioned as he nervously stiffened, his breath stuttering.

"Simple; this is the key to our escape." Angeal answered, treading over to pass a bag to Zack. He then noticed his abrupt cautious attitude, "What's the matter, wasn't parachuting one of the activities they offered back in Dissidia Academy?"

"Yeah, we had the option ... but I didn't find any interest at the time." Zack admitted, feeling rather embarrassed by not taking it up back when he had been a student at the Academy. "... I'm kinda regretting it right now."

Angeal closed his eyes and shook his head, crossing his arms to show off his disappointment in a teasing way.

"And here you are hoping to be a 1st Class operative after this mission ... how shameful." He spoke out, exaggerating his disappointment in hope of triggering Zack's mind.

Fortunately, this didn't take long at all; Zack's head instantly whipped round towards Angeal's direction with a scornful expression. Upon hearing Angeal's words, Zack's mind snapped, he refused to allow this statement to pass off so easily.

"Give me that parachute." Zack ordered in a low, menacing tone, sounding completely off from his usual personality.

Angeal passed over one of the parachute packs, smirking by how typical Zack is with his behaviour. He felt as though this was payback after his earlier vocal explosion. Zack swiftly strapped the pack onto him tightly and efficiently, making sure no straps were loose and that the fabric wasn't twisted or worn. With that in check, Zack then turned round to his mentor with a serious atmosphere looming over him, not allowing for anymore of his own screw ups to occur for the exit of this mission.

However, this tense and looming atmosphere did not last very long. The moment Zack dipped his head, the tension he once had turned into a combination of awkwardness and embarrassment.

"Err... what do I do now?" Zack clumsily questioned, knowing that he had failed to keep up the tense tone of the situation.

After a slight frustrated sigh, Angeal swiftly explained the instructions of the parachute. He was desperate to leave the facility, knowing the Wutai would have already realised the two had escaped to the roof of the complex.

"So ... count to 5 and pull the cord." Zack echoed, reiterating his mentor's explanation. "That's all?"

"Yeah, that's all there is to it." Angeal nodded, relieved to finally escape this place. "... Just don't forget to jump."

Upon grasping the concept, Zack swiftly leapt into position. Angeal indicated to him where there escape point was, pointing out towards the small forest in the distance west of the complex. Zack instantly tensed his muscles and locked eyes directly towards the bulk of the forest, building up his confidence yet again. At that moment, the both of them began to hear crowds of Wutai troops forming below around the complex, discussing their next options to capture the intruders. Zack assumed at that moment that the Wutai already knew that they were still in the Fort.

"No time like the present, Zack!" Angeal called out to him, swiftly observing the area below them.

"I'm way ahead of you!" Zack nodded confidently, already running towards the edge of the roof.

I can do this ... I can do this ... Zack repeatedly thought to himself as he charged towards the edge, keeping a positive outlook.

Angeal watched him pass at a ferocious speed, yet keeping a close eye down below them.

"I can do this ... I CAN DO THIS!" Zack then bellowed out with pride, closing in to the edge with eyes locked towards his escape.

However, as he finally leapt off of the edge, his words changed, "... I can't do this."

In that instant, he began to fall towards the crowding Wutai forces, unable to control his descent.

Angeal rapidly ran towards the edge where Zack leapt off from and swiftly called out to him, "PULL THE CORD!"

As Angeal roared, gunshots began to fire up towards the both of them. The Wutai spotted them. Angeal stepped back in order to dodge to incoming bullets. He then heard something inflate below, and a sudden roar of excitement.

"YEEEEAAHHH!" Zack roared at the top of his voice, his body lifting up sky high as the parachute drifted towards their escape zone. "This is AWESOME!"

Upon relief, Angeal chuckled, finding it a joy to hear his excitement let out. He then took a step back to prepare himself. Without a moment's thought, he leapt off of the edge, pulling the cord on his own backpack and began to feel the jolt of his body being carried away. Both Zack and Angeal swerved their

bodies gracefully in order to dodge the fired bullets. To their luck, none of the shots hit their targets, not even damaging the parachutes.

"Hah-hah-haa! I forgot Wutai were terrible shots!" Zack called out, unable to hold back the laughter. Finally, Zack and Angeal soared into the forest, successfully escaping the Wutai facility and completing the mission unscathed ... mostly.

The Director's office situated within Shinra HQ was always very organised and spacious, allowing people to move around freely whenever they need be. The logo of the company hung down on large plaques against the walls around the office, displaying its pride to the world. In the middle of the office was a large arched desk with a small number of computer screens, detailing various attributes and current affairs around the whole of SOLDIER and Shinra itself.

The director of SOLDIER himself sat behind the desk, filing papers and checking up on the system mainframe. Director Lazard had fairly slick back, blond hair and wore formal looking blue glasses. His attire was proof of how serious Lazard was when it came to his work, giving off a strong and formal atmosphere around him. This consisted of a striped blue blazer with white shirt, trousers, and gloves. He also wore a purple and blue tie to match the rest of his attire with elegance.

With all of this and a strong, healthy posture; Director Lazard Deusericus was perfectly suited for his role.

A small, polite knock from the office doors echoed the entire room, indicating the presence of visitors. Rising from his seat, Director Lazard was expecting a visit around the current time.

"Come in, gentlemen." The Director called out respectfully, knowing who stood on the other side of the large office doors.

The doors opened smoothly as two SOLDIER operatives entered the room in high spirits. SOLDIER 2nd Class Zack Fair and SOLDIER 1st Class Angeal Hewley stepped up towards the arched desk, both bowing gracefully towards their boss. The Director nodded back in response, greeting both Zack and Angeal as he stepped around his desk. Angeal, deciding the time was right, stepped forward. He positioned himself beside the Director, facing Zack. Zack straightened up his posture, his arms joint behind his back in an organised manner.

Upon returning to Shinra, all Zack could even think about was how he completely screwed up his mission during the escape. Without Angeal's assistance, he would have failed the mission altogether. Dread overcame him, only wishing for the mission debriefing to be over. In his mind, he knew he wasn't going to be promoted to 1st Class anytime soon.

"After observing the video footage containing your actions during the mission, there were certainly times I was struck by surprise." The Director began in a truthful tone, his face expressionless.

Whilst the Director recapped various scenes that stood out in the footage, Zack gave out a sharp and annoyed look towards Angeal.

You were recording me!? His mind roared, yet keeping a neutral expression.

His teeth grounded together, keeping his frustrations in check.

He then caught sight of Angeal nodding back towards him, indicating to pay attention to the Director.

Zack switched back towards the Director, his breath stuttering.

Upon finishing his recollection of the mission, the Director was ready to give his verdict.

"... Overall, I must say that this was a very interesting experience for you, Angeal, myself and even the whole of SOLDIER." The Director honestly admitted, pressing his finger against the centre of his glasses to realign them. "All in all, with a 'few' unfortunate slip ups to be considered..."

This is it ... the moment of truth. Zack dreaded in his mind, struggling to hide away his emotions.

"... The mission was a complete success." The Director proudly began to conclude, coolly smiling towards Zack. "The War against Wutai is now currently halted for the foreseeable future."

The corners of Angeal's mouth rose, feeling proud of the achievement.

"And so it is an honour for me ..." The Director announced, "... to promote Zack Fair to SOLDIER 1st Class."

Upon hearing those last key words, Zack froze in complete shock. His mouth fell open and eyes wide with complete disbelief, his mind struggling to process this outcome. He didn't know what to say or think at all; it just felt as though all thoughts and doubts rummaging through his mind instantly disappeared. He began to chuckle lightly, tears of pure happiness welling up in his eyes. The thoughts of achievement finally rushing through his mind like a speeding train.

"This ... this is insane!" Zack let out his roar of triumph, causing his voice to echo throughout the office for what seemed like forever. "I finally became FIRST CLASS!"

He switched towards Angeal, who was smirking upon seeing Zack's reaction with gaining this achievement.

In that instant, Zack leapt over towards Angeal, throwing his arms open, "I can't hold it back anymore, man! I gotta-!"

"If you hug me, your blood will be the first to stain my Buster Sword." Angeal coldly interrupted him, dropping his grin in an instant as though it wasn't even there in the first place.

Zack abruptly halted his lunge, skidding across the floor slightly as he took Angeal's words into consideration. Whenever Angeal included his Buster Sword in statements, he wasn't joking around.

"Eh-heh-heh ... sorry Angeal." Zack apologised lightly, raising both hands innocently.

Zack then heard the Director chuckle lightly beside him, causing him to shift his gaze with wonder and curiosity. He noticed Lazard examining his watch with a cool, formal smile appearing across his face.

"Well now, it seems that not only did you succeed this mission with flying colours, but you also seemed to have completed it in record time." The Director acknowledged, indicating the time on his watch.

"Seeing as it is now only lunch break, one must wonder what you would do for the rest of the day."

Zack didn't take long to realise what the Director had meant, examining his own watch to confirm the time; 12:15pm. Zack began to wonder about what he would do, his thoughts drawing a blank.

"Well, for now you can go for an extended break of an hour whilst we set up for your promotion." Lazard then suggested, showing that he was ahead of Zack in terms of plans and preparations. "When you arrive back, your new uniform will be ready and waiting for you and we'll brief you on future assignments."

Zack nodded cheerfully, excitement engulfing him as he relished the fact he was finally able to reach his lifetime goal. That was when it hit him; what was he to do for the hour-long lunch break?

Whilst he gave it some thought, Director Lazard dismissed them from the mission debriefing. Zack and Angeal left the office, bowing to their boss just as they passed through the doors.

Finally, an idea clicked into Zack's mind, something that felt so obvious to him. However, before he began to follow through with his newly-formed idea, there was still a question looming around in his mind that needed answering. As the two began stepping down the long hallway, Zack decided to speak his mind.

"How much footage did you record of me during the mission, Angeal?" Zack quietly queried Angeal, knowing something wasn't completely right when the Director spoke about the details of the mission footage.

"Only what mattered for the Director." Angeal answered back in an instant, his eyes keeping to the path ahead. "I stopped recording the moment you killed the 'weapon'."

Zack's expression brightened, showing absolute relief that there wasn't any footage of where he had completely screwed up the missions escape. However, as he continued to walk on through the passageways of Shinra HQ, Angeal placed a hand firmly on his shoulder and halted him in his tracks.

"There are two things that I want you to keep in mind when pursuing future assignments, Zack." Angeal

indicated in a serious tone, eyes now locked on Zack as they both stood firm. "First of all; I want you to work on controlling your emotions during missions. If it wasn't for your over-the-top outburst, our escape would have played out a lot more smoothly."

"Well, you could have held off on shooting down my hopes like you did back then." Zack countered, refusing to forget the reason behind the initial outburst.

"That's not the point." Angeal shook his head sternly, knowing Zack would bring that up, "As a newly promoted 1st Class operative, it is vital that emotion is restrained, especially in the heat of the moment." Zack was silent, taking in his mentor's words.

"Now, secondly, I want you to keep in mind that 'no mission goes according to plan'." Angeal continued on.

"What do you mean by that?" Zack wondered, finding the idea rather odd.

"What I mean is that there is no such thing as a 'perfect' mission." Angeal responded, keeping with the serious tone. "No matter how smoothly a mission is executed, there will always be something that could potentially disrupt the flow of the mission. Once this occurs, it is your duty to improvise and dynamically plan how to regain the mission flow. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yeah, I think I got it." Zack answered confidently, nodding to show that he thoroughly understood.

"If that is the case, then I'll leave you to your errands." Angeal concluded, knowing that Zack was in some sort of rush. "When you're done, come back and I'll debrief you further."

With that, Zack gave a small nod and began to make his way towards the end of the corridor, waving back just as he disappeared. As he left the building of Shinra HQ, he immediately took out his cell-phone and began to type out an email, hoping to meet someone outside Dissidia Academy's Entrance Gates.

Aerith Gainsborough stepped outside of Dissidia Academy's building, fresh-faced after hours of lessons and working in the Medical Room. She took in the fresh surrounding air and the strong rays of the Sun as she treaded across the Academy grounds, her empty stomach indicating that it was time for a bite to eat. But, before she was able to do so, she needed to meet someone in front of the Academy Entrance Gates, having gotten an email 15 minutes prior to the beginning of lunch break.

She began to head her way over towards the meeting place, slipping past the large groups of students crowding and moving in the various directions. Whilst a hassle to break through, it didn't take too long to finally reach the Entrance Gates. Once there, she took the opportunity to regain her energy, taking in a few deep breaths like it was nutritious water.

Aerith waited by the gates patiently, feeling the pleasant atmosphere cooling her down during in the meantime. She watched the crowds of students pass her gaze, humming peacefully to herself as time continued to pass.

It wasn't long until she noticed the person step up towards the gates from outside the school grounds. A kind and pleasant smile appeared across her face in that very instant, straightening up as the person drew closer. As the person closed in towards her, his details gradually began to show within the light of the Sun's rays. He stood at a fairly tall yet proud height, a 2nd Class SOLDIER Uniform covering the majority of his body. He had jet-black spikey hair and a constant positive expression on his face.

He was none other than Zack Fair.

Zack jogged over towards Aerith, coolly waving to her whilst seemingly hiding something behind his back in the other hand. Aerith politely waved back, although wondering curiously as to what he was hiding from her.

"Phew ... sorry for making you wait." Zack cheerfully apologised, stretching out as he finally reached her.

"I bet you're craving for some food right about now."

"Oh, there's no need to worry; I didn't have to wait long." Aerith responded cheerfully, lightly giggling as she appreciated the fact that he would go so far as to see her in the middle of work. "So, what did you

want to see me about?"

"Well, if you must know..." Zack began hesitantly, taking in a deep breath to show how important this was to him. With a proud stance, he began to announce with a powerful, accomplished grin. "I have finally been promoted to SOLDIER 1st Class!"

"Wha-!?! Really!?! That's amazing!" Aerith gasped with surprise, feeling astonished by Zack's recent achievement. "Congrats, Zack!"

"Heh-heh, thanks." Zack happily responded, feeling proud to be one step closer towards his lifelong dream. "It won't be long now till society recognises me as a hero."

Although saying this to her, Zack knew all too well that Aerith wasn't fond of Shinra and their practices. Normally he would keep details of his work separate during their time together, only adding it into conversation if required. Even so, something like this couldn't be held back. This was far too important for him.

"To commemorate this achievement, I decided for us to start celebrating with this small present I wanted to give you." Zack continued on, finally revealing what he was hiding behind his back.

Upon reveal, he was holding out a small, simple bag. Inside of this bag was a light object, carefully wrapped in styled packaging. Aerith took the object out from the bag appreciatively, yet seemed to be showing a confused expression upon holding it.

"For me...? But surely it would be the other way around?" Aerith wondered uncertainly, unable to figure out why he was doing this. "I mean, you were the one who got promoted."

"Yeah, that is how it's meant to go ... but I felt like breaking those rules for this one occasion." Zack cheekily answered, showing off a cheesy grin in the process.

Aerith giggled, always enjoying Zack's optimistic attitude. She began to unwrap the present with as much care and attention, just as how it was wrapped initially. Upon noticing what it was, Aerith suddenly gasped with delight, unable to get rid of the permanent beaming smile that struck across her face. The present was a pink hair-bow; delicately woven with the absolute care.

"Nice, isn't it? The moment I saw this in the shop on the way here, I thought it would suit you perfectly." Zack admitted sweetly, his eyes locked on her. "Here, let me put it on for you."

He offered to tie up the bow for her, feeling rather generous. As she turned, he carefully took out the simple hairband that had tied up her ponytail throughout the time she was a student of the Academy. Once off, her hair dropped down slightly and swayed with the slight breeze, giving off a fresh, sweet scent in the process. Zack then tied the bow around in the similar way as to how the hairband had done before.

Upon completion, Aerith whipped round gracefully, showing off the new bow.

"Well, how do I look?" Aerith wondered curiously, swaying her ponytail innocently.

"Just like an angel." Zack stated meaningfully, giving of a serious tone as he continued to grin.

Aerith giggled and swiftly embraced him, showing her caring gratitude towards him. In return, Zack wrapped his arms around her, feeling appreciative to have her by his side.

Cloud Strife gazed towards the couple as they continued to embrace in the distance, unable to break away. Even though various students passed his gaze, the image of the two embracing was clear as day. Cloud was glad to see Zack was finally with someone he could care about, plus he had only known Aerith for a few days ... and yet, he could not shake of this odd feeling deep inside him. His throat felt dry and heart began to beat at a faster and powerful rate.

He just couldn't understand it.

Part of him had the desire to go over and meet with them, but the rest refused. It was like mental chains restricting him from moving, holding him back with absolute force.

A voice then broke his inner tension, almost causing him to leap out of his skin.

"Are you ok, Cloud?" Terra Branford peered at him curiously, wondering why he continued to gaze out in the distance. "Is something wrong?"

"Ah, sorry ... I must have dazed out for a moment there." Cloud answered back, breaking out of his locked gaze. He switched his sights over towards the bench that they were both initially heading for, "Should we sit over there?"

Terra nodded cheerfully, "Yeah, before it gets taken like every other one."

They hastily rushed over towards the bench, both feeling the emptiness of their insides growling for food. Cloud still had Zack and Aerith in the corner of his eye, yet decided it was best to leave them be for the time being.

Finally, Cloud and Terra perched down on the bench in relief, feeling appreciative that they could rest themselves in the warm, pleasant environment. They both hastily took out their lunches from their bags and began to chow down on their lunch. As they ate, Cloud continued to reflect on what he just saw and attempted to understand this odd feeling growing inside of him. The image of the two embracing stuck in the depths of his mind and didn't seem to go away anytime soon.

Cloud abruptly shook his head, trying his best to push that thought aside and think about something else.

... But this didn't seem to work.

"So, do you know that couple?" Terra questioned politely, hoping to start some sort of conversation.

"Y-yeah..." Cloud nodded in response, although hesitating as he answered her, "In fact, the guy with the black, spikey hair is a close friend of mine."

"Oh, really!? Wow, that's convenient." Terra blurted out in surprise, giggling away quietly. She then lowered her eyes slightly and quietly added, "... He certainly seemed happy with her."

"That's Zack in a nutshell: he's always happy." Cloud chuckled as he pointed out to her, taking a sip of his drink. "Always having a positive demeanour when leaving for missions at SOLDIER and constantly headstrong about what to do ... I've never seen him as anything different."

"It must be nice for him ..." Terra began to silently murmur under her breath, closing her eyes in the process, "... to love and to feel."

"Huh?" Cloud glanced towards her oddly, feeling the atmosphere around them shift slightly.

"Ah ... sorry. Don't mind me." Terra apologised in haste, returning back to her normal expressions. "Why not tell me more about him and the girl he was with."

"...Right." Cloud nodded with a shrug, continuing to speak as they ate their lunch.

As time passed, they finished with their meal and began to pack their empty boxes away, still chatting away cheerfully. As Cloud leant down to grasp his bag from the floor, he abruptly began to hear a high pitch squeal in the far off distance. His whole body froze in an instant; eyes wide with absolute fear and muscles tensed in retaliation.

Terra seemed completely oblivious to the situation, gazing at him oddly. However, it was then when she began to feel the ground vibrate beneath her feet. It was like a quake, strengthening each passing second. Soon after, Cloud rose up with his bag around his shoulder and eyes hidden behind the bangs of his hair.

"W-what going on, Cloud?" Terra worriedly asked, struggling to understand the sudden change of events. "Why is the ground shaking!?"

"Sorry, Terra..." Cloud spoke lowly, a vacant grin appearing yet eyes still hidden behind his blond hair.

"But it looks like we'll have to part ways for the time being."

"Huh...? Why? Lunch break hasn't even ended yet." Terra responded in shock, feeling the vibrations below grow more ferocious. "We've got 15 minutes left till our next lesson."

"You'll see soon enough..." Cloud murmured, his fists tensing up.

"... See you in Geography!"

With that he bolted off into the distance, creating dust from the ground with his feet as he sped away. Terra stared in bewilderment, her mind completely drawing a blank. However, it seemed she didn't need to spend another thought on the reason, as her answer appeared in front of her without a second delay. A colossal stampede of female students flew past Terra at gargantuan speeds, causing her to stumble back in horror. Students leapt out of the way, noticing the crowd of fan-girls barging passed them. They followed Cloud's direction, sniffing him out like rabid dogs. What followed was his terrified voice, his bellows echoing throughout the entire Academy grounds.

"WILL YOU PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE!?"

Terra was frozen in place, wide-eyed with disbelief.

Lunch Break ended with the sound of the Academy's bell ringing. Students began to make their way for their next lessons, dispersing from the grounds and back into the building. Cloud began to make his way towards the 2nd Geography room, situated directly on the 3rd Floor of the Academy building. The corridors of the floor were fairly vacant of students, a sign that he was slightly early.

He was completely worn out, felling as though he could fall unconscious at any given moment. He was able to successfully outrun the mass of fan-girls, refusing to repeat the horrors of the previous encounter. During the chase, he was able to hide himself amongst a group of taller 3rd year students who were discussing the dreads of their next lesson. He lowered himself just as the stampede passed him, completely hidden from view.

With that out of his hair, he began to wonder about the upcoming lesson. He remembered Zack suggesting that the 'Hero from SOLDIER' Sephiroth would be taking on the lessons for Geography starting from today. Ever since the school day began, Cloud was having conflicting feelings about Sephiroth tutoring the subject; unable to grasp whether he was excited or dreaded about the idea. The only way he could find out was to sit through the lesson itself.

Not long after thinking about it, Cloud finally reached the door to Geography Room 2. He took a small moment to gather his thoughts, erasing any doubts in his mind. He drew in a few deep breaths and grasped the handle of the door. Finally, he turned the handle and stepped in the room.

It was then when he heard the voice, powerful and somewhat intimidating. There, rising from his seat, was the man himself.

"Ah! Master Strife." Sephiroth's smooth yet dark voice greeted him. "Come in and take a seat, the lesson will begin shortly."

6 - Arc 2: The Great Globe

Cloud Strife passed through the door into the Geography Room, expecting to walk into the usual bland, uninspiring classroom one. At first, his eyes were thoroughly locked onto Sephiroth with a cautious glare, still unable to grasp whether he was excited to meet the 'Hero' in person or dreaded the idea of meeting someone so deadly.

He, like anyone else, could tell straight away that this man was the one of legend: the iconic long, silver hair flowing down to the back of his legs; his sharp, green gaze that drove his opponents into fear; and the tall, powerful stance that many looked up to with inspiration. Just like most of the teachers in Dissidia Academy, Sephiroth wore a formal dark suit that seemed to fit with the type of aura that surrounded him. Before Cloud had entered, Sephiroth was sitting on his desk opposite the door, filing away what seemed to be various authorization forms.

It was then that Cloud finally noticed the classroom's unique design; never had he been so wrong about his own thoughts. The whole classroom was completely redesigned, with various areas that had completely caught Cloud off-guard. The first thing that caught his eye was the enormous, Golden Globe that calmly turned on its axis. The globe was situated in the middle of the classroom, towering over the surrounding desks that placed all around in order to fully observe its magnificence.

Shifting his sight towards the walls and ceiling of the classroom, Cloud instantly noticed several boards that showed off various holograms consisting of specific areas around the world. These holograms were so sharp and clear on the boards that it could be considered on the level of 4K visuals. These holograms were also completely 3-Dimensional; allowing students to grasp sight of any object that would be shown. Even so, these holograms additionally show off detailed information on whatever is shown, giving facts and figures on any events that had consisted around the world.

Cloud could not believe his eyes whatsoever, he couldn't think of any classroom he had entered in the past that showed off such imagination or creativity, not even an Art room. He couldn't even take his eyes away from the Globe, finding it otherworldly. It continued to slowly turn on what seemed to be a small mechanism underneath, gradually showing off the variety of countries that formed the world.

He then heard Sephiroth step up to his side, even though his eyes were still locked onto the Globe. He could hear Sephiroth chuckling coolly, finding Cloud's reaction amusing.

"Impressive. Isn't it?" Sephiroth coolly chuckled with a triumphant stance, showing off his pride in a formal manner. "This was something I've been working on for a while now; in fact I was able to finish it all yesterday."

"I-it's unbelievable ..." Cloud stuttered, gazing with awe at the sight of the Globe whilst he struggled to grasp reality. "How were you even able to get this into the room!?"

"I didn't." Sephiroth stated as he shook his head, amused by Cloud's question. "I built the Globe in here with parts that were delivered externally. Whilst they were being sent over, I programmed all the holograms so that they were accurate for being displayed on the Globe."

"I-I see ..." Cloud breathlessly muttered, finding this all impossible to grasp.

There was a moment of silence as Cloud continued to observe the Globe and the various boards surrounding the room, his mouth still gaping and eyes wide with shock. Sephiroth sighed with the amusement of Cloud's frozen reaction, crossing his arms and smirking. He then turned and sat back on the chair of his desk, typing up something on a laptop that sat on the right side of his desk.

"I suggest you take a seat, Master Strife. The Lesson should be commencing soon." Sephiroth then called out to Cloud, giving out a reminder that they were in a classroom and not a museum.

Cloud hastily snapped out of his vacant trance and nodded back, only just remembering about the Geography lesson. He stepped over and took a seat behind one of the desks that surrounded the towering golden Globe. Just as he sat on the chair, a question instantly formed into his mind as though it was somehow triggered.

He was hesitant at first; uncertain whether it was the right time to ask him. Yet, with a push of confidence, he spoke his mind.

"Sir, why did you take a break from SOLDIER?" Cloud questioned wondrously, hoping to get an answer or two out of the 'hero of SOLDIER' before the rest of Class 13A arrives from Lunch Break. "And why take up teaching Geography at the Academy?"

Sephiroth paused for a moment; giving some thought to the questions he had been asked. Cloud watched as he sat back against his seat, pondering away. He then finally gave out a slight chuckle, causing Cloud to raise a curious eyebrow.

A dark smirk broke through Sephiroth's expression as he answered, "Well, I felt it was necessary because-"

Abruptly, the classroom's door flew open with a loud *Crash!* It collided against the wall, possibly causing some minor damage in the process. Cloud leapt out of his skin in a fright, bewildered by the sudden interruption. Sephiroth, on the other hand, halted his words as his eyes widened with unexpected shock. "CLOOOUUUD!" A roaring, echoing voice roared as the figure sped through the door.

Cloud instantly realised who had bellowed out his name, however didn't have enough time to answer back.

The only thing Cloud could murmur out at this point was a dreading "Oh no..." as he braced for impact. Within that moment, an arm caught Cloud by his waist, throwing him completely off his chair and to the floor with a *Bang!* Due to the sudden impact, Cloud felt the air of his lungs leave him immediately. In addition to this, his head had collided against the floor hard, causing his sight to blur. Unable to focus on the room around him, Cloud struggled to regain the air back into his lungs.

To make matters worse, the figure that tackled him to the floor began to shake his body uncontrollably by the shoulders.

"What were you doing with Terra during Lunch Break!?" The figure's voice roared out with over-the-top fury, his hands tightening on Cloud's shoulders as he continued to shake him.

Just then, air returned to Cloud's lungs, relieving him and allowing him to answer back. Even so, being shaken about was not helping his situation whatsoever.

"I was. Only. Hanging. Out. With. Her!" Cloud answered back as best as he possibly could, having completely lost his bearings at this point. "Please. Stop. Shaking me. Tidus!"

As though reacting on command, Tidus stop shaking Cloud relentlessly, yet still had a tense grasp on his shoulders. Cloud then gradually began to regain his sight, his eyes just about able to focus on Tidus and the detailing around him finally becoming clear again.

"Only hanging out, huh!?" Tidus echoed back, gritting his teeth, "So you were trying to snag the cutest girl in our class – and possibly in the whole of the Academy – from behind our backs!?"

Woozily, Cloud hastily checked around the room, hoping that none of the other students in his class were watching. Much to his relief, the only ones in the room were him, Tidus, and a very bewilderedly confused Sephiroth.

"I wasn't trying to 'snag' her." He then assured his friend, hoping to clear up the misunderstanding as soon as possible before it got any worse. "You, Firion, and Cecil were all busy during Lunch break and it just so happened that Terra was free at the time."

And besides, she's the only girl in our Class at the moment ... although she is very cute. Cloud also answered in his head, yet decided it wasn't necessary to add into his excuse in fear of being hypocritical. Tidus shook his head in blind denial, believing none of what Cloud had just told him, "Yeah ... like you'll

get away with just that."

Cloud rolled his eyes in frustration, finding this whole situation to be a complete nuisance.

"Look, can we sort this out another time? We're not exactly the only ones in the room right now." He whispered, his eyes diverting towards the front of the classroom momentarily as he indicated.

Tidus gradually turned his head around, having only just realised that they were being watched the entire time. It was then when he abruptly leapt up in surprise, noticing Sephiroth glaring towards them with a baffled expression. Cloud felt Tidus' grip on his shoulders unconsciously loosen and took the opportunity to swiftly swipe them off of him. Feeling the strength return to his body, Cloud recovered to his feet.

"Ah ... sorry, Sir." Tidus awkwardly apologized, embarrassed by his usual melodramatic behaviour. Sephiroth silently nodded and slightly raised a hand in acknowledgement, deciding not to say a word about what just occurred.

"You do realize that he's 'Sephiroth', don't you?" Cloud whispered close to Tidus' ear, struggling to hide his smirk as he added to Tidus' embarrassment.

Tidus' body shivered the moment Cloud whispered Sephiroth's name, turning towards Cloud with waterfalls flowing from his eyes and mouth drooping in sadness.

"Please don't make this worse for me." Tidus whimpered with a soft plea, unable to bear any more of this torture.

Cloud then sighed, rubbing the back of his head where he had knocked it against the floor a moment ago. He decided to change the subject out of pity and pointed out towards the large Golden Globe, telling Tidus to gaze upon it. The moment the Globe caught his eye, Tidus' mouth fell open as complete shock and awe had set in. His whole expression changed completely as he laid eyes upon the towering Globe, struggling to comprehend such overwhelming magnitude.

Cloud silently chuckled due to his friend's expressive reaction, finding it amusing that Tidus had a similar reaction to his own. As Tidus continued to gaze wondrously towards the Globe, Cloud swiftly peaked towards Sephiroth's direction. He noticed that their geography teacher had returned to filing away the forms scattered on his desk.

Due to this, a slight surge of frustration sparked in the depths of his mind. Cloud almost had his questions answered before Tidus' interrupted with his usual over-the-top mannerism, resulting in a missed opportunity.

Just then, the bell's loud ringing echoed across the whole of the Academy, indicating that Lunch Break had officially ended and the next lessons began to start. As it occurred, the rest of Class 13A entered the room; fresh from their Break and prepared for the upcoming lesson. However, as the class stepped through into the classroom, almost every one of them gasped at the sight of the enormous Globe towering before them along the whole redesign of the Geography Room. They all began to comment amongst each other on the magnificence of it all and how stunned they were to witness it.

"It's magnificent..." Cecil Harvey gasped in amazement within the group, most likely talking to Firion.

"It's unbelievable that this could be made in such a short period of time." Warrior of Light spoke out formally, standing at the head of the pack as per norm.

"I'm intrigued by how the software for the holograms was created; I don't think I've ever seen anything so advanced or unique." Onion Knight admitted as he continued to analyse, sparks of enthusiasm in his eyes.

"I wonder how they were able to get this big Globe into the room in the first place ..." Terra Branford pondered, unconsciously wondering the exact same question Cloud had asked mere moments ago.

"Well, once you've all sat down, I'll answer any of your questions regarding the Globe and the upcoming lessons." Sephiroth lightly sighed from his desk, hoping to get his lesson started before it even ends.

The students noticed their new Geography teacher and leapt up in surprise, realizing who he was.

Without hesitation, they all decided to take their seats around the globe, whispering to each other about the fact that the 'Hero of SOLDIER' was soon to teach them Geography.

As Cloud watched the rest of Class 13A sit in their allocated desks surrounding the Globe, he caught an eye of Squall Leonhart still standing idly and glaring up towards the towering Globe. His usual non-existent expression was as clear as day; he couldn't care less about the globe and found his fellow classmates' reactions all the more bothersome.

"What's so special about it?" Squall coldly questioned; his dark, emotionless eyes glaring towards the Globe with not a care in the world. "... It's only a big, flashy ball."

With that, deciding there was no point in further expressing his opinions, he stepped over to his designated desk beside two empty seats and separate from the rest of the class. Leaning back on his seat, Squall glanced out towards the far-off window as further evidence of his disinterest.

Cloud silently shook his head, finding Squall's attitude towards the Globe rather typical of him. However, upon noticing the two empty seats either side of Squall, it was then when he realised that the class was short of the two class clowns: Bartz Klauser and Zidane Tribal.

Because of this, a growing feeling of caution appeared in Cloud's subconscious relating to the two. The feeling certainly wasn't unexpected, for whenever Bartz and Zidane turn up late for a lesson, it was normally due to them conjuring their pranks and tricks.

Thinking back, Cloud always found that out of the two troublemakers, Bartz was rather misunderstood. From what he usually gathered, Bartz doesn't tend to get fully involved with the mischief, preferring to assist him and watch the mischievous events unfold from afar. Even so, he always seems to get into the most trouble, playing as scapegoat whenever a prank goes awry.

Cloud shrugged lightly, brushing away his recent thoughts as though deciding there was no point in worrying about the matter for the time being. Shifting focus, he noticed Sephiroth rise up from his desk, stepping over towards the Globe and the students with a calm expression. As he drew closer, Cloud was able to notice that Sephiroth was holding his distinctive katana sword, appearing as if ready to strike down any enemy that would dare to oppose him.

In an instant of noticing the katana, the majority of the class froze with horrified stares, their eyes wide and the blush in their cheeks turning pale. There were some whose glances diverted towards the door of the room or even the window as they considered to options of escape.

However, they soon found out it was unnecessary.

"What's with all the nervous stares?" Sephiroth curiously wondered towards the class, noticing the students restlessly fidgeting in their seats. "I'm only using this to point out on the Globe and the holograms."

On that exact moment, every student in the classroom gave out a loud, relieving sigh. Heart-beats were racing along with the loss in colour in some of the students' faces. Cloud joined in with the relieving sighs, some of his worries disappearing from his mind. He then caught a glance of both Warrior of Light and Squall face-palming in frustration, seeming as though they were finding everyone's reaction rather unbearable. After giving off a silent chuckle; Cloud shifted his concentration back towards Sephiroth, who finally began teaching his lesson.

"So, to begin with, many of you would know me as SOLDIER 1st Class Sephiroth; or in other words: the 'Hero of SOLDIER'." Sephiroth began his introduction towards the students, guessing that they had heard of him in some form or another. "Recently I had decided to take a break from the Line of Duty to 'pursue other Projects' for the time being, or so the reports suggest. For now, I'll say that working as a teacher in this Academy is part of my so called 'project'."

Cloud listened in closely, hoping to gain new information on the reasoning behind Sephiroth taking a break from SOLDIER. To his disappointment, however, the information Sephiroth had revealed was only what already known to a certain degree.

"From today onwards, I shall be your Geography teacher." Sephiroth continued on, his eyes shifting from one student to another. He then began to point out towards the Globe with his sheathed katana, "What we'll be using in our lessons in terms of presentations and information is the Globe; a physical, technologically advanced system that I had created in order to assist us in upcoming lectures. I decided to have this in our lessons because I felt the Academy needed the extra 'flare' for you students to learn at the best of your abilities. I hope you all will use it well and securely."

Securely...? Cloud thoughts echoed out, finding the use of the word odd to him. *Why do we need to use it securely?*

After he concluded his introductory speech, Sephiroth immediately made full use of the grand Globe as he began his lecture on the current topic of the session: environments. Using his Katana as a pointer; he swivelled the Globe towards specific points on its axis, discussing about the environment varieties and how they had evolved and changed over time. The students listened in closely to wherever Sephiroth decided to indicate, their eyes gazing with awe and wonder.

What mainly caught the students eyes were the displaying holograms, showing images of the specific area Sephiroth pointed towards whilst also detailing precise information on the locations with various facts and figures. In addition to this, other holograms were showing a live feed of Sephiroth lecturing on, allowing students to see him speak out and move around.

Cloud couldn't help but grin in amazement due to how impressed he was with the presentation and how clear Sephiroth detailed each point during his lecture.

After a good 20 minutes passed by, Sephiroth was close to eventually ending his lecture and preparing to move on to the lesson's main activity. Before he did so, he stepped round to the opposite side of the Globe, to the point that Cloud would need to use one of the holograms to watch Sephiroth continue his speech.

Just at that moment, Cloud began to hear rushing footsteps from outside the classroom's door, the sound gradually drawing closer at a frantic rate. He began to listen closer towards the door in order to figure out what the noise was, causing him to be completely distracted from Sephiroth's lecture. Not long after, he began to hear faint panting and wheezing sounds amongst the rushing footsteps.

BANG!

All of a sudden, the classroom door abruptly burst open. During that moment, most of the class leapt in fright and whipped their heads round to find out what was going on. Sephiroth, on the other hand, continued to lecture on, completely oblivious of the sudden event.

As the door had flown open, Zidane hastily entered the room in a dash. Upon noticing the Globe right in front of him, he swiftly skidded to a halt; sliding to the point where he was close to touching to Globe itself. After a moment of gathering his thoughts, he took a small step back and gazed up towards the enormous Globe in front of him.

Cloud and the rest of the class – especially Squall – glared towards Zidane with a mixture of expressions, ranging from surprise to utter bewilderment. However, Sephiroth didn't even notice Zidane abrupt arrival whatsoever, seemingly concentrating on the current lecture and eyes locked on the Globe. Cloud noticed the frustrated Squall in his seat gesturing to the oblivious Zidane hastily, trying his hardest to grab his classmate's attention and get him to sit in one of the desks before the situation gets out of hand. Zidane, on the other hand, seemed to be fixated towards the Globe that everything around him was a complete blur.

"Wow ... that's a big ball." Zidane stated in a soft tone, amazed by the size. "Man, I'm glad I didn't run into that."

However, as he began to shift his sight towards Squall, Zidane abruptly felt his body shift forwards with considerable force. Before he knew it, his body was flying forwards at an uncontrollable momentum, colliding face first into the Globe. Following on from that, he dropped to the floor in a daze, groaning in

pain as his face continued to throb.

As he regained his stance, Zidane turned towards the one person who collided into him in the first place. That person, ironically, happened to be Bartz; who was following Zidane close behind in haste as they had rushed towards the classroom.

"Bartz, you idiot!" Zidane whispered with a frustrated sneer, "You nearly made me break the ball-thing!" Bartz gradually lifted his head up from the ground, wincing due to the pain from his collision. Suddenly, Bartz's expression instantly turned from a wincing daze to a horrified gasp, the colour in his skin turning pale the instant he noticed what had happened.

"Err... Zidane," Bartz began to answer back, his terrified gaze frozen upon the Globe behind Zidane. "I think we just did..."

Zidane hastily turned back to the globe, dread filling his expression.

Cloud and the rest of the class group were already gasping in fear as they watched the towering Globe lose its balance on the pedestal underneath. It began to tip off of its axis and fall towards the floor, numerous sounds of cracking and screeching echoing as it gradually toppled over.

Students who were sitting in the desks underneath the direction of the falling Globe – Warrior of Light, Onion knight, Terra, and Squall – hastily launched themselves from their seats, just able to gain enough distance from the Globe's impact zone. However, this did not stop the class from panicking, for the Globe was heading towards an oblivious Sephiroth.

Whilst the other students stood away from their seats, Cloud abruptly leapt to his feet.

"Sephiroth, Sir! Get out of the way!" He roared out to him.

Sephiroth, having heard Cloud's sudden bellow, turned towards his direction curiously.

However ... it was too late for him.

"What's with all the shouting?" Sephiroth questioned ignorantly.

It was then when he noticed the Globe closing in from above, his expression of realisation frozen in place.

"Oh ... that's why."

CRASH!

The Globe collided right on top of Sephiroth and shattered upon impact with the floor. Pieces of the crumbling Globe, varying from the small and sharp to the large and bulky, flew in various directions haphazardly. The students all braced upon the impact, protecting themselves from the incoming shards. As everything eventually calmed, the whole class gazed wide-eyed with complete shock towards the pile of shards that lay in front of them. Sephiroth was nowhere to be seen. He had taken the full impact of the Globe's fall.

As expected, Warrior of Light was the first to respond, followed by the rest of the student council in the class. Gradually other students joined in to assist with the movement; leaving only Cloud, Squall, Bartz and Zidane. Bartz and Zidane were still processing the incident in their minds, frozen in their sitting positions on the floor. Squall, as expected, watched without any evident emotion. And finally, Cloud frantically stood with both hands on his head, his mind going into complete meltdown.

Breaking to overwhelming tension, Zidane broke out of his frozen state as he felt the need to speak his mind.

"Err ... I think we just killed the teacher." Zidane murmured in a stutter, streams of sweat sliding down his face with rising anxiety.

"Yeah ... and he just so happened to be Sephiroth." Cloud revealed to the two of them, feeling the need to add to their looming conscience.

"Wait ... so we just killed a HERO!?" Zidane then blurted out, his horrified expression became so priceless that Cloud would have burst out laughing if it hadn't been for the current situation.

"So ... does this mean we have the rest of the lesson off?" Bartz then abruptly wondered with a curious

glance, evidently unable to grasp the situation whatsoever.

Cloud, Squall, and Zidane all stared at him with bewildered eyes, unable to confirm whether Bartz was joking or actually being serious. Either way, this certainly wasn't the time for Bartz to have that type of attitude.

Just as Cloud decided to assist in moving the various shards; a loud, abrupt noise echoed through the room. The class leapt out of their skins in fright, finding the sound completely unexpected. To everyone's complete shock, a hand had shot out of from the pile of shards, twitching and raised towards the ceiling. As the students watched in amazement, the hand tensely pressed down against the pile and began to push out the body underneath. Gradually, the head and torso appeared from the pile as an increasingly fearful dark aura engulfed the body. The being eventually stood up from the pile of shards, muscles tensed up and covered in the dark aura.

Much to his relief, Cloud was able to tell that Sephiroth was fine and well. Yet, what now began to worry him – and the rest of the students, for that matter – was that Sephiroth was in a foul mood. The atmosphere surrounding him was entirely filled with dread, draining the souls of any victim trapped in its shadow.

Cloud hastily whipped his head back towards Zidane and Bartz, noticing their sudden horrified yelps as they watched Sephiroth rise from the pile of shards.

"Well now ... I was wondering when you two were going to show up." Sephiroth chuckled as his sudden sinister voice echoed through the classroom, spooking the students completely even though he had his back towards them.

With that, Sephiroth gradually began to turn his head around, his eyes glowing with a bloodthirsty glare. Whist turning, his Katana-wielding arm rose up towards the ceiling of the classroom, grasping tightly onto his sheathed weapon with malice intent. His stance now set, he placed his free palm against the sheath itself as he locked his grip in place.

Zidane and Bartz were frozen in terror, unable to escape the hellish glare of their Geography tutor.

"Unfortunately, it seems that the Globe is currently out of order..." Sephiroth murmured on in his dark, sinister tone, his eyes locked on Zidane and Bartz as though ready to strike them down where they stood. "So, I suggest we postpone the rest of the lesson until it is ... restored."

He progressively unsheathed the blade, a flash of light reflecting from the blade the moment it revealed itself. The room was filled with the sound of the blade scraping against its sheath, echoing throughout the room with magnificence.

The students of Class 13A felt shivers crawl up their spines as they watched with awe at the graceful sight of the world-renowned SOLDIER weapon being unsheathed in front of his very eyes.

"Class 13A ..." Sephiroth announced clearly to the students around the room. "I would like to ask for all of you to stand outside the classroom as I have a 'word' with Master Klauser and Master Tribal."

Without any need of question, the class nodded to one another and began to leave the room without saying a word. Cloud hesitated for a moment as he glanced towards the two soon-to-be victims, feeling rather sorry for their predicament. The two of them were still completely frozen in place, looking as though they were cast under a spell of some sort.

Regretfully, Cloud eventually decided to walk away, feeling unable to prevent their demise. As he stepped out of the door, he could just see through the corner of his eye that Sephiroth was making his way towards the two with slow, deadly steps. The dark aura continued to engulf his body and the Katana blade held in the air, ready to strike down its prey.

The door then closed...

For the next few seconds, all the students could hear was silence, not even a mutter. Not a single student of the class dared speak a word, carefully listening in to what was occurring on the other side of the door concerning Sephiroth and the two 'class clowns'. Squall, on the other hand, decided to lean

up against a far-off wall and kept his distance from the others. His eyes closed as his mind escaped from reality, preferring not to involve oneself in the matter. Cloud glanced towards him curiously, finding his attitude as typical as ever.

In a normal circumstance, others would think Squall felt some sort of inner sympathy for his two troublemaking friends, yet everyone in his class knew he was unable to care no matter how hard he tried.

It was at that moment, Class 13A heard Sephiroth mutter the two words that every being imaginable feared.

"Heartless ... Angel."

What followed was the sound of a sharpened blade, echoing throughout the distant corridors. This was then followed immediately with two loud, terrorized screams.

"EEEEYYYYAAAAAAAAAAAAahhhhhhhhh.....!!!!!"

The students of Class 13A gave a moment of silence in respect of their fallen comrades, peacefully praying for their health as they transcend to the afterlife. Cloud suddenly showed off a confused expression, feeling as though this whole situation had become very over-exaggerated.

"Err ... Guys, I don't think they're actually dead." Cloud hesitantly reassured to the group, finding them acting out oddly but fairly amusing.

In the end, Zidane and Bartz miraculously survived Sephiroth's infamous attack, however exited the classroom with the expressions of soul-destroyed beings. The rest of the lesson consisted of the class working on the activity Sephiroth had set them, relocating the lesson to one of the spare rooms in the Academy for the time being. Acting as though the unexpected 'event' hadn't happened in the first place, the students of Class 13A were fully immersed in their activity, working in pairs as they fulfilled their set tasks.

However, during this time Sephiroth was nowhere in sight, most likely managing with the smashed Globe.

As the lesson came to an eventual conclusion, Cloud was unable to locate Sephiroth whatsoever, finding it frustrating that he wasn't able to get any more answers from the SOLDIER operative. Brushing the inconvenience aside, he decided to follow the rest of his class towards their homeroom, setting the looming questions towards the back of his mind for the time being.

Once the group entered the Homeroom, Cloud dropped down to his seat in a slump, a relieving sigh escaping him as he was finally able to settle.

... Unfortunately, this didn't last long.

"Duuuuuuuuuude, Geography was freakin' awesome!" Tidus shouted hysterically, leaping onto his seat having appeared out of nowhere.

SLAM!

Cloud instantly slammed his head on the surface of his desk the moment Tidus spoke out, unable to bear any more of the insanity that had happened throughout the day.

"What's the matter, Cloud?" Firion questioned curiously as he sat down in the seat in front of Cloud.

"You seem mentally exhausted."

"Urgh ... I'm fine." Cloud sighed out in a groan, rubbing his eyes in desperation of keeping awake. "It's just been a busy day."

"Well, at least you made out alive this time round." Cecil lightly chuckled as he sat next to Firion. "The 'class clowns', on the other hand ... may need some intense therapy after what they had been through."

As Cecil had stated, Cloud's eyes diverted towards Bartz and Zidane desks on the other side of the room. The two were still struggling to grasp reality after their 'near-death experience', their expressions lifeless and lacking the vibrant emotions that once thrived within them.

During this time, Cloud also caught sight of Squall, who was sitting behind them sporting an unusually dark grin. It was as though he enjoyed watching the two in their current state of mind, finding some kind of long-awaited relief in their torment.

Sighing away, Cloud returned his gaze to his group of friends, casually leaning back on his seat.

"Well, at least there's only one more lesson to go." Cloud lightly suggested, his mind wondering free as he assumed there was nothing else left to do for the day. "After that's over with, I'm heading home to bed."

However, the other three had all raised an eyebrow towards Cloud upon hearing his statement. Cloud noticed the sudden shift in tone, cautiously worrying about what they had in mind. This 'gut feeling' was made worse with Tidus' growing dark smirk, meaning there was some devious plan rattling around in his mind that Cloud was unaware of.

"Now hold up there, Cloud." Tidus spoke out with a low chuckle, showing off his cheeky grin. "You seemed to have forgotten our little 'heist' we decided to plan earlier today."

"W-what do you mean by a 'heist'?" Cloud wondered cautiously, unable to guess what Tidus was thinking.

"Wait, you 'really' forgot!?" Tidus then yelled out at full volume, the rest of Class 13A glancing over to his direction with curious stares.

Cloud, suddenly feeling exposed, hastily gestured Tidus to shut his mouth, indicating that he was drawing far too much attention to himself. Tidus, however, waved off the rest of the class, apologising for his outburst.

As the attention died out, Cloud drew in closer towards Tidus, continuing on with their conversation with low voices.

"What are you on about, Tidus?" Cloud questioned him in a low murmur, a groan escaping his voice as he spoke.

"You should know!" Tidus answered in a frustrated manner, struggling to keep his voice in a low tone.

"We were going to track down Zack and his 'cute' new girlfriend."

At that moment, Cloud's face expression instantly dropped as he realised what Tidus was referring to. The memories of their discussion from the beginning of the day along with the clear image of Zack with Aerith during Lunch Break were all flooding back. He sat up as it dawned upon him, feeling the sudden sense of anxiety rising within him.

"What's wrong, Cloud?" Cecil then asked him, a hint of worry in his voice.

Tidus watched Cloud with a confused gaze, wondering why he was acting oddly. Firion, on the other hand, showed off a curious expression, wondering whether something had happened since the morning homeroom registration.

Cloud began to think the entire situation through, wondering whether to admit the truth or let them find out for themselves. A part of his mind was desperate to reveal who Zack's date was, wanting nothing more than to end this nuisance once and for all. However, the other part of him wanted to keep the secret hidden so that Zack could surprise them later down the line.

Frustrated with all of this nonsense, Cloud sighed out and gave into temptation ... to an extent.

"Well, I can definitely say that she's 'cute!'" Cloud awkwardly murmured underneath his breath, diverting his gaze from the group.

"Hold on! YOU KNOW HER!?" Tidus abruptly bellowed out, leaping up to his feet as his voice reverted to its loud, boisterous tone.

Cloud hastily leapt up and blocked Tidus' mouth with his hands, forcing him back to his seat.

"Will you stop that!?" Cloud spat out in his whisper, his teeth gritting anxiously.

Tidus nodded back to him in response, his eyes wide and his hands held out to show his innocence.

"I was only able to catch a glimpse of her during Lunch Break." Cloud then admitted in his whisper,

slowly releasing his hands from Tidus. "She was at the entrance gate with Zack ... talking."

"But, didn't you say this morning that Zack was on a mission in Wutai?" Firion interrogated, crossing his arms as he looked at his friend with uncertain eyes.

"I don't know how he was able to finish so early, but I can guarantee you he was there with her at the time." Cloud confidently assured, turning to face Firion.

Noticing Cloud's firm expression, Firion decided not to pursue the questions.

Cloud then sat back on his chair as he continued to convince them, "Anyway, I suggest we wait until he officially introduces her, snooping on them behind their backs would be outright wrong ... let alone cause far too many issues in the long run."

"Dammit Cloud ... you're such a killjoy." Tidus pouted as he turned away in disappointment. "... And here we were so close to executing the perfect heist."

"For the last time, will you stop calling it a 'heist'!" Cloud gritted his teeth, holding himself back from shouting his head off. "Listen, we don't know where they are going or if they're even going out together after academy hours."

However, it was then when Cloud started to hear Tidus chuckle away in silence, causing him to feel even more edgy.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll track them down somehow." Tidus whimsically assured, showing off his upbeat smirk as he glanced back.

"How are you so confident?" Cloud murmured in annoyance, losing hope of control for the situation.

"We already know that Zack isn't on his mission right now, so he shouldn't be too hard to track down."

Tidus answered confidently, his cheesy grin gleaming at his friends. "Also, its more than likely that he'll be on a date with his girl today considering that he took the time out of his job to see her."

"Yeah ... I'd love to see you try." Cloud smirked back competitively, feeling amused by Tidus' declaration.

"So, does that mean you're going to get involved with this, Cloud?" Cecil smoothly diverted the conversation back to its original point.

Cloud's eyes instantly shifted towards Cecil, becoming slightly agitated due to the fact that he almost got away from the topic. Unable to escape the anticipation of his friends, Cloud decided to give in and answer them.

"I'm-

BANG!

The door to the Homeroom was abruptly thrown open, the sounds small footsteps following through. All of the students hastily turned towards the front of the room, knowing that their Homeroom teacher had made her entrance in the most 'vocal' way possible.

"Sorry I am late." Professor Shantotto announced to the class, a frustrated tone mixed in within her usual rhymes. "This bumbling fool got herself stuck at the gate."

Class 13A all turned to each other with confused looks, wondering what in the world she was talking about.

However, this was immediately resolved...

"Argh, hell!" A sudden, loud boisterous voice yelled out in a sulk, "Why do you always make me feel like the idiot in front of people!?"

A being of normal height had stepped into the room, carrying with her a stack of large, seemingly heavy boxes. The class couldn't see much detail of this new girl from their seats due to the boxes covering her appearance. That being said, the students were able to catch a glance of some of her aspects: Her long, smooth, lavender hair flowing down to her lower back; along with her skin seemingly well maintained and unscathed.

However, the class then caught a sight of the girl's pointed ears, breaking through the strands of her hair in clear, open view.

Class 13A commenced to gossip with low whispers amongst one another as they had laid eyes upon the girl, wondering as to 'who' and 'what' she was.

"Could that girl be an Elvaan?" Terra whispered in wonder to Onion Knight.

"What could someone of her species be doing so far across from the East?" Firion wondered as he commented to the group.

Admittedly, Cloud seemed to also feel taken aback by the sudden appearance of someone like her, but what caused him to become more curious was Warrior of Light's unexpected reaction. Although it was hard to see from his position due to Warrior of Light sitting at the front of the room, Cloud was able to catch his already upright posture suddenly lurch at the sight of the 'Elvaan' girl.

Clump!

Just then, the girl dropped the boxes amongst a free corner of the room nearby, stretching out as she felt the freedom from the sheer weight flow through her arms once again. She swiftly swivelled round and faced Professor Shantotto, giving off a light, hearty smile.

The class was finally able to see her in full view, struck with awe at her unique beauty: She had navy blue eyes, the bangs of her hair reaching down towards the centre between them; she sported a large, ecstatic grin that would be able to compete with Tidus; and wore mainly a lab coat similar to Professor Shantotto's own.

Underneath the lab coat, she seemed to wear fabric that originated to her culture, consisting of a black and purple top with frilly sleeves along with black shorts that covered the top half of her legs. She also wore what seemed to be durable, tanned boots, giving off the impression that they would be able to withstand any level of environment.

"Phew...! All the boxes are now in the room, Doc." The Elvaan girl called over to the Professor with a care-free expression, "What do you want me to do now?"

"First of all, stop calling me by such a name." Professor Shantotto moaned back, hopping up to her desk chair, "You know all too well that it is a complete bane."

"Ah! S-sorry, Professor Shantotto." The girl apologised back clumsily, scratching the back of her head with an awkward chuckle.

"Secondly, I request for you to introduce yourself to the class." The Professor then demanded, indicating to the students in the room.

Without further ado, the Elvaan girl immediately switched towards the class with a curious grin, acting as though she found the students a rather interesting group. She then abruptly threw a peace sign towards the class as she gave off an immense cheesy grin.

"Hey there! The name's Prishe!" The Elvaan girl began to introduce herself, giving off a tomboyish, rowdy tone. "I'm the Doc's – Err ... I mean Professor Shantotto's – Assistant in errands and experiments. I hope you all treat me well!"

As Homeroom was nearing its end, the students gradually began to pack up their bags and glance over the information for their next lesson. During this time, the Elvaan girl – Prishe – was pre-occupied with Professor Shantotto's continuous errands, preventing her from having any free space to cool off from the physical work and mingle with the students.

Warrior of Light, unexpectedly, seemed to look rather ill and oddly out-of-place, unable to keep his concentration ever since Prishe had entered the room. He was watching Prishe darting in and out of the room in a daze, as though struggling to comprehend her existence.

Shifting focus, Cloud was examining his timetable in assurance of the last lesson for the day, mentally preparing himself.

"Man, what a drag!" Tidus groaned out in frustration; abruptly catching Cloud, Firion and Cecil off-guard with the complete switch in emotion. "We've got P.E. with my Old Man!"

"Is that so ...?" Firion lightly murmured, wondering why he was making it such a big deal on the matter. "He's going to be nagging and pushing me about non-stop!" Tidus continued to complain, ignoring Firion. "The way you say it, he sounds a bit like a bully." Cecil suggested to him curiously, wondering what the relationship was between him and his Father.

"I wouldn't say that ... he just tries to act all cool in front of everybody because he thinks he's the essence of 'manliness'." Tidus grumbled as he turned his head away, hiding his pout. "He goes out of his way to embarrass me! Seriously, he's a total nightmare!"

"Sounds ... rough." Cloud commented with a small shrug, lacking any care in the world. "I bet he's completely strict as well."

"Hmm ... if he lets us have a game of Blitzball, then I should be fine with it." Tidus then admitted, flexing the muscles in his body as if to prove he was just about ready for the challenge.

The group stood from their seats and pack up their equipment, preparing to make a move to the changing rooms located on the Ground Floor of the Academy. However, the moment Cloud began to stand, Tidus decided to speak his mind.

"Well then, Cloud. We'll be meeting up after the lesson at the Entrance Gate of the Academy grounds." Tidus informed him, giving off his usual mischievous grin. "Once we've all grouped up, we'll be tracking down Zack and his girl. Our mission will be to acquire details on who this girl is and everything about her."

Cloud gave out a loud, irritated sigh, finding it impossible to sway Tidus no matter what he did.

"What's your answer, Cloud? Are you joining the 'Dissidia' Heist Team?" Tidus queried in his upbeat tone, giving a sudden name to the group. "It's your choice in the end, Dude."

Cloud glared towards his friend with frustrated and exhausted eyes, taking his time to answer. The two parts of his mind were still fighting against each other with no sign of stopping. One part was refusing to join in due to already knowing about who the girl was, whilst the other half was curious as to what the couple were up to.

However, much to his dismay, it seemed that his answer was already finalised since the moment Professor Shantotto and her assistant made their entrance into the Homeroom.

Cloud finally drew in a deep breath and answered the question, although his regret loomed over his mind.

"Fine ... I'm in."

7 - Arc 2: Unbreakable Bonds

"HAH-HAH-HAA...! Do you think you have what it takes to challenge me, boy!?" The tensed up, middle-aged man teased on one end of the sports field; giving off a dark, cocky smirk. "Then come at me! Give me your best shot!"

"You're not going to drag me through the mud anymore, Old Man!" The young, up-beat boy roared back, eyes burning with determination. "Mark my words: I'm going to defeat you with everything I have!" As the two raged against one other from a distance, the atmosphere surrounding them constantly expanding as it heated up to boiling point. In a small instant, the two leapt towards each other with both their right fists at the ready. The moment they drew close enough to each other, they began to swing, eyes refusing to lose focus on their target. However, what immediately followed were both their left hands hastily intercepting the attack, locking their grasps against the other's fists. The moment upon impact, the two were now at a stalemate, refusing to let go of the other no matter what happens. As though they were mimicking each other, they drew back their necks and tensed the muscles connecting to their spines. They then, abruptly, bashed their foreheads against the others with full force, gritting their teeth the moment their foreheads made contact.

Cloud Strife stood a few feet away, watching the two go at it with a bored glare, hopelessly trying not to nod off. With him, the rest of Class 13A were gazing with similar expressions, utterly confused by what was going on right in front of them. The group were currently standing within the large sports field outside the back of the Academy, wearing the Academy's mandatory sports uniform.

The sports uniform consisted of: a white polo t-shirt with the Academy's logo woven on the chest, showing the large amounts of delicacy placed into weaving the fabric; breathable jet-black tracksuit pants/trousers for male students and female students, allowing for free movement and comfortability during activity; and finally, white, gripping sports sneakers/trainers to assist with movability through various terrain.

Having just exited the hanging rooms, Group 13A had immediately come across the 'Boy' and 'Old man' wrestling each other.

"Err ... Do they always do this?" Squall questioned with a 'bored as ever' expression, stepping up beside Cloud in wonder of what was occurring. "Seeing as they've been doing this for the past 10 minutes now, it's starting to seriously drag on."

"Yeah ... well, considering that they've been given the title of 'The Most Competitive Father-Son Rivalry in the entire Region', it kind of proves that this is a regular thing for them." Cloud answered back whilst his eyes continued to watch on the conflict, showing a somewhat awkwardly forced smile.

Just then, the conflicting Father and Son finally broke away from each other, flexing their muscles in preparation for their next bout.

"Is your head hurting, Kid?" The Father teased, grinning with a dark, intense, cocky expression, "If you go for another bash, you'll end up taking a nap in the mud."

"Oh, don't you worry, Old Man!" The Son yelled back, reckless arrogance building up inside his mind, "I'll be sure that the imprint in the mud will be of YOUR FACE!"

The two then tensed up their muscles, gritted their teeth, and dug their feet into the ground as they were ready to charge at one another.

"Erm ... Instructor Jecht, Sir?" Warrior of Light called out from behind the group, finding this whole random ordeal frustrating, "Will we be having our P.E. Lesson today or are you just going to continue on beating up Tidus?"

Both the Father and Son halted their tense movement, expressions switching to surprise as though they had just snapped back into reality. Jecht, the Father and a P.E. instructor of Dissidia Academy, switched his sight towards the Class, giving them a cheesy, powerful grin as if to show innocence.

"Well now, if you're that pumped up; I think we're just about ready for-!"

"He wasn't beating me up, Light!" Tidus, the Son and fellow Class 13A Student, interrupted with an exaggerated roar, "I'm completely able to hold my own against this Old Fart!"

"L ... Light...?" Warrior of Light echoed in uncertain hesitation, somewhat appalled by this sudden nickname.

Just as Tidus finished his statement, Instructor Jecht abruptly grasped his son into a tight headlock, several veins popping out from his muscles as he refused to let go. Tidus struggled to break free, seeing this as a cheap trick to gain the upper hand.

However, under his breath, Instructor Jecht began to whisper coldly to his son, "How dare you interrupt me during lesson..."

Something else was also whispered following these words but Cloud and the rest of Class 13A could not make it out clearly. Suddenly, Tidus' face dropped completely into a horrified expression, his whole body beginning to go limp and shaking in fear as the colour in his skin faded into white. Noticing this, Cloud was completely caught off-guard by the sudden turn in Tidus' current personality, nervously wondering what in the world his Father had said to him.

"S-Sorry ... Sir." Tidus murmured in a monotoned voice, acting lifeless and robotic.

"Good boy ... now go join the rest of your Class." Instructor Jecht concluded his whisper, relaxing his muscles around Tidus' neck and allowed him to move freely again.

Tidus gradually nodded his head in reply and stepped away, his eyes completely blank with fear and body beginning to move like a zombie. The rest of the Class watched him as he limped over and stood back within the group, making no response whatsoever as he hid himself amongst them. Cloud couldn't believe what he had just witnessed, never had he seen Tidus unable to speak or show off his over-enthusiasm.

"Now then, little squirts, let us start the session with some intense warm ups!" Instructor Jecht then informed the group, once again giving off a cocky grin and bashing his rock-hard fists together. "4 laps around the Academy grounds, no stopping for breaks ... NOW!"

For the next 10 minutes, the group began their warm up jog around the grounds, some students slower than others. Cloud took up the middle of the group, his mind in its own world as he began to reflect on the odd day he was having. One of the topics the especially came up was the case of Zack and Aerith; wondering how they got to know each other, how long, and why Zack kept their relationship a secret. The other main topic that had appeared was regarding Sephiroth, mainly questions still relating to why he had taken a break from SOLDIER

Just then, out of nowhere, a small tap on his shoulder abruptly caused Cloud to leap out of his skin in fright. His mind instantly snapped back to the current reality and switched his head towards the person who tapped him.

"You really have gotten jumpy recently, haven't you Cloud?" Cecil stated with an awkward yet light-hearted grin, causing Cloud to glance away instantly and give out a frustrated, embarrassed expression.

Cecil had been jogging beside Cloud for quite some-time during the warm up laps, even though Cloud hadn't noticed him at all. He seemed to have caught on to Cloud's constant spacing out not long after they began running, but had decided to stay silent and wait until it was necessary to speak up.

"What's with all this spacing out you've had today?" Cecil then wondered curiously, "I mean, you do it a lot anyway ... but you've been doing it far more than usual, did something happen to you recently?"

"No ... it's nothing." Cloud murmured lowly, hoping to keep his own thoughts to himself, "I'm just having

some second thoughts on tracking down Zack and his girlfriend, that's all."

"Is that so?" Cecil curiously stated, finding Cloud's statement intriguing. However, he then gave out a light chuckle, "It's funny, we've already asked you twice today about if you wanted to go ahead with it and both times you've said 'yes', so technically you would be having 'third' thoughts."

"Ok, there's no need for you to rub it in!" Cloud spat back in annoyance, although knowing that it was just a light-hearted joke. "I'm just starting to feel that 'maybe' we should hold it off. I'm sure Zack has been anticipating this for a while now and it would hurt him if he found out we've known about it the entire time."

"Awh! But that would ruin the greatness of a 'secret romance!'" Cecil moaned in disappointment, albeit his eyes suddenly lighting up with emotion. "Don't tell me you're chickening out!"

"Err ... it wouldn't be a 'secret' if we stalk on the couple." Cloud murmured with a bored and awkward expression. "In fact, it would be considered an invasion of his privacy."

"You're hiding something, Cloud." Another sudden voice muttered from Cloud's other side.

Cloud's heart skipped a beat in fright the moment the voice spoke, stumbling slightly whilst he continued to jog. He then whipped his head round to the opposite side, although knew who it was from the get go.

"Firion!?" Cloud blurted out in surprise, his expression full of shock.

Firion had caught Cloud and Cecil up throughout the jog, listening to their small conversation.

"What do you mean by Cloud's 'hiding something'?" Cecil then asked out in curiosity, confused as to what Firion was indicating to.

"Whenever Zack's relationship is brought up along with our planning for the 'heist', Cloud has always been spacing out and backing off from the conversation." Firion began to explain, becoming very perceptive on the whole matter whilst giving a hint of suspicion in his voice. "Something tells me he saw something related to Zack's relationship that didn't agree with him."

Cloud felt his teeth suddenly bite the inside of his lip in reaction, cursing Firion's surprisingly observant nature. He then hesitated from speaking out, feeling both Firion and Cecil's eyes glaring down on him.

"I ... I already told you!" Cloud then finally spoke, stuttering as he jogged. "I spotted Zack at the Academy gate during Lunch Break with the girl he was dating, I just couldn't see who she was though." Cloud then noticed Firion raise an eyebrow, causing his nerves to heighten.

"I see ... however, I get this feeling you know who that girl was." Firion then assumed; his curiosity and suspicions heightening.

Urk! How did he catch on to that!? Cloud's mind wondered nervously; sweat beginning to run down his cheeks.

He then had the immediate urge to change conversation, "A-Anyway, why isn't Tidus with you two?" Both Firion and Cecil looked at each other with sudden sorrowful expressions, wondering if it was right to answer.

"Erm ... ever since Instructor Jecht whispered something to him; he wasn't his usual self." Cecil answered somewhat cautiously, his shifting eyes indicating to the back of the jogging group.

As Class 13A began to turn a corner around the Academy Grounds, Cloud took a peak towards the back. To his complete shock, he caught sight of a zombie-like Tidus jogging – or rather 'limping uncontrollably' – from far behind the rest of the group. Coincidentally, it seemed that his was in a small three-man jogging team with two other half-dead looking classmates: Zidane and Bartz. The two seemingly still haven't recovered from the wrath of Sephiroth during their previous lesson.

What's interesting about this development, however, was that Bartz, Zidane, and Tidus would normally be leading far ahead of the Class 13A, factoring to their immense speed and endurance as seasonal sportsman.

"What did the teacher say to Tidus!?" Cloud blurted out in a shocked state, eyes wide with horror of seeing Tidus' current appearance.

"I don't think it's wise for us to ask right now..." Firion answered with a feeling of dread in the pits of his stomach, "However, what I would like to know is ... why are the teachers in this Academy so terrifying!?"

The Class finished the 4-lap warm up, many already feeling as though they could pass out at any minute due to the intense exhaustion. However, throughout the rest of the P.E. lesson, they had worked on circuit training set up within the whole diameter the grounds. Cloud was taken aback by the change in session, as he had expected – from Tidus' own words earlier – that the group would be playing Blitzball for the whole session. He considered bringing up the topic to Instructor Jecht, but ultimately decided to brush it away and follow through with the circuit training.

After the session finally drew to a close, Cloud had begun to make his way over towards the changing rooms. His body was covered with sweat as his body muscles ached and throbbed throughout, his energy completely drained. It was the same with the rest of Class 13A, all of whom were dragging their feet to the changing rooms with unbearable exhaustion.

Suddenly, just before Cloud entered the male changing room, Firion had stepped out to head back to the grounds, still in his sportswear.

"Err ... aren't you getting changed, Firion?" Cloud questioned in an odd, wondering tone.

"Yes, I will do ... eventually." Firion politely nodded, but his eyes were locked towards the grounds with a serious expression. "Although, it does seem that I will be delayed."

Cloud stared at him with confusion, but then followed his line of sight towards the grounds, where realisation struck him completely. It seemed that Tidus had recovered from his daze and began to battle it out with Instructor Jecht ... again.

"Seriously! They're fighting ... AGAIN!?" Cloud bellowed in shock, mouth hanging open with absurdity. "I know they despise each other with a passion but ... do they HAVE to fight each other the moment their eyes meet!?"

"I know, it's problematic ... but we can look into fixing their relationship at a later date." Firion stated with a long-winded sigh, before his expression switched over to a determined look. "Right now, I have to split the two up."

"Do you want me to help you out?" Cloud volunteered, thinking it more than one person may be necessary considering Instructor Jecht's brooding stature.

"No, don't worry about that; I've got Cecil to back me up if the situation gets too out of hand." Firion assured him confidently, showing off his polite smile.

"Oh ... Ok." Cloud murmured in understanding, feeling rather useless.

"Well, in the meantime, you can head over to the entrance gate and wait for us there." Firion then suggested, although pausing slightly whilst glaring at Cloud with a cautious eye. "Unless you've change your mind about participating with the 'plan'..."

"*Sigh...* You don't need to give me that suspicious look, Firion; I'll be there." Cloud assured with a slightly frustrated expression, finding Firion's constant glare an annoyance.

Firion nodded as his expression turned back to the usual soothing grin, before finally running off towards the grounds in preparation to stop the Father-Son conflict. Cloud spared a few seconds and watched as Firion started to struggle with splitting up Tidus from his brawl with Instructor Jecht. He shook his head, letting out a quiet chuckle in the process, and headed inside to change back into his usual Academy Uniform.

After changing into his uniform, Cloud made his way towards the allocates meeting point, passing through the student-filled corridors on the Ground Floor of the Academy. As the time had hit 3:00pm; he had just heard the final bell ring for the day, causing the students to rush out from the rooms towards freedom. Swiftly, Cloud turned a corner to miss the aggressive rushing crowd in avoidance of being

engulfed in a claustrophobic battle for the Entrance Gate.

However, as he thought he had successfully escaped the crushing crowds of students, he accidentally collided into an oncoming figure. He tripped up, causing him to fall onto something oddly soft ... kind of like pillows. Thankfully, he didn't fully fall onto the floor, but instead felt his body accidentally lean up against the other figure. Cloud hastily recovered from his lack of balance and stood up awkwardly, blushing with embarrassment upon causing the accident.

"I-I-I'm sorry about that; I wasn't looking where I was going." Cloud swiftly apologised, eyes shut tight and stood as straight as possible.

"Hmph-hmm ... there's no need to worry about that, Cloud; it was just unfortunate timing." The soothing voice of the figure replied, giving off a light, pure and wise tone.

Cloud then gradually opened his eyes, finding the voice very familiar to him. Upon opening them fully, he instantly recognised Headmistress Cosmos standing opposite him with her usual pure smile.

"Oh, H-Headmistress Cosmos!" Cloud stuttered with surprise, trying his best not to act like a complete fool in front of her ... even though he had already failed to do so.

Wait ... the Headmistress!? Then the soft pillow-like objects I felt were her – ACK!!!

Cloud's whole body suddenly froze up like a statue upon the realization, his mouth fallen open completely along with beads of sweat dripping from him at a swift rate. Students continued to pass the two, heading out of the building and towards the Entrance Gate. As they did this, some had taken a small yet awkward glance towards the frozen Cloud, unable to grasp what was happening between him and the Headmistress. Noticing the abrupt reaction, Cosmos tilted her head with confusion, finding Cloud's sudden behaviour rather odd.

"Is something the matter, Cloud?" Cosmos asked him curiously, her gleaming smile as pure as the blue sky.

"I-I-I-I-I'M SO SORRY ABOUT BUMPING INTO YOU, HEADMISTRESS!" Cloud abruptly bellowed out in apology, hastily bowing down and face turned completely bright red.

"Like I said, don't worry about that." Cosmos reassured as she placed a hand up innocently, trying to hold back a giggle as she began to find Cloud's behaviour amusing. "And please ... just call me Cosmos."

"O-Ok..." Cloud finally nodded back, raised his body back to a straight posture, yet eyes still shying away with embarrassment no matter how hard he was trying to hide it.

"Anyway, I'm glad to have bumped into you." Cosmos then stated, wishing to speak to him about something. "I was in fact wondering about the Chocobo Racing Committee you'll be leading next Wednesday."

Cloud gave out a light gasp; his mind was preoccupied with so much that had occurred throughout the day that the Chocobo Racing Committee completely slipped his mind.

"Y-yes, what do you wish to know about?" Cloud then formally queried, curious as to what Cosmos wanted to ask about.

"Well, have you been able to gather a team for the upcoming races yet?" Cosmos began to question curiously.

"Sorry, not yet ..." Cloud admitted as shook his head sorrowfully, "I'm still currently a team member short."

For the past few days, Cloud had been advertising the Chocobo Racing Committee all around the Academy. He could be seen placing 'The Chocobo Racing Committee needs YOU!' posters all throughout the corridors and halls of the Academy, handing out flyers to students, and announcing to groups on signing up for membership.

In the end, he was able to gather a decent amount of team members who had replied through emailing and other social media. However, upon checking up on the number of members, he had gathered only 5 new members who wished to be in the Racing Team itself whilst 15 others wishing to assist as a

member of management for the committee.

"I see ... well, at least you still have some time to find your last member." Cosmos cheerfully assured; giving off a light, pure aura about her as she spoke. "Let's hope for a successful season of racing!" "Yeah, I'll be sure to make this season the best that the Academy has ever had." Cloud assured the Headmaster with complete determination, feeling as though his worries were suddenly lifted – even if it was temporary.

Cosmos nodded back peacefully, "I am glad you feel that way, Cloud. I shall be cheering for you and your team when the races season begins."

With that, she waved and began to step up the flight of stairs that was situated beside the two, keeping a strong, refined posture as she ascended. Cloud watched in awe, eyes filled with inspiration.

... *She must be a Goddess in human form!* Cloud thought to himself as he began to follow the Students towards the Entrance Gate.

Upon finally reaching the Entrance Gate, Cloud stood and waited patiently for his friends, observing the hordes of students who rushed out of the gate and towards the freedom of the outer world. He then turned his gaze towards the landscape that was situated outside the gate, watching the trees peacefully rustle against the light breeze and the afternoon sun glaring strongly over the nearby metropolis. He inhaled the fresh oxygen within the air around him and blew it out without a care in the world, allowing his question-filled mind to drop freely into a dormant slumber.

However, this was only short lived ...

"You seem very relaxed, Cloud." A soft, light voice suddenly spoke beside him.

Cloud whipped his head around, mind suddenly becoming active again whilst slightly getting caught out by the unexpected voice. The moment he noticed who had spoken to him, he leapt up in surprise, his heart skipping a beat and throat suddenly becoming dry.

"A-Aerith!?" Cloud stuttered in shock, unable to control his heart-beat, "Aha-haa ... what a lovely surprise!"

Aerith Gainsborough was standing idly next to him, showing a cheerful, light-hearted expression – as one would usually expect from her. Her hands sat freely behind her back and legs closely together, giving her an innocent aura. Her braided, chocolate brown hair blew lightly towards the direction of the breeze, held strongly together with her new pink Hair-bow that she had received earlier by Zack Fair. The sudden gut feeling Cloud gained not too long ago had returned to haunt him, causing him to feel gradually more edgy and unable to think straight.

"It's nice to see you looking well." Aerith stated back with a soft giggle, showing a wondrous expression upon meeting Cloud. "Are you waiting here for someone?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm meeting my friends here ... who should be arriving anytime now." Cloud answered truthfully, but feeling the need to change the subject. "Anyway, that hair-bow certainly suits you, although I don't think I've seen you wearing it before though."

"Ah, do you like it? It was given to me as a present earlier today." Aerith expressed enthusiastically upon hearing the compliment, moving her head side-to-side to show off her bow in all its purity. "I admit, it's already become my pride and joy."

Cloud nodded with a calm smirk, "Well, the person that gave it to you certainly had decent taste."

"Eh-heh-heh!" Aerith chuckled away, before noticing the time on her watch. "Oh! Sorry Cloud, I must head off; I've got to go meet with someone."

This is my chance! Cloud's mind leapt up instantly, making sure this opportunity wouldn't go to waste.

"Ah! No, don't worry about it." Cloud coolly expressed back, brushing the inconvenience aside. "Sorry if I sound random in asking this, but ... where is it you're heading off to?"

"I'm visiting Crescent Lake on the other-side of the City." Aerith answered excitedly without a care in the world, "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious, that's all." Cloud swiftly answered, hoping for her not to catch on to him.

"Ok then. Well, I best head off." Aerith then concluded, beginning to step towards the direction of the City, "I'll see you soon, Cloud!"

Cloud waved her off, gazing towards her as she left the scene, a small grin appearing across his face with accomplishment.

As Cloud continued to wait for the three, he continued to watch on as the last of the Students treaded through the Entrance Gate. Just then, one of the students had caught his attention, noticing a glint of reflected light from the corner of his eye. He then caught a glance of the female student who stood out gracefully amongst the small group she was gossiping with: she exhibited shoulder-length, dark-green hair and rather pale skin. Concentrating his gaze, he realized what had reflected the Sun's light was a red, crystallized ruby gem, sitting firmly within a decorated hair ornament the girl seemed to wear with pride. Cloud had known about her from Cecil, having spoken of her a few times in the past.

The Girl's name was Rydia, who lived in a nearby town called Mist.

As she passed him, Cloud abruptly heard a voice in the distance, narrowing it down to within the area of the Academy. Cloud instantly rolled his eyes the moment he realised that it was a voice that was ironically iconic with being loud and over exaggerating to no end. With a sigh, Cloud turned towards the direction of the growing voice, bracing for what was about to hit him.

"ClooouoooOOOOOUUUUUUDDDD!" The roaring voice rose to exaggerated heights, closing in on Cloud at tremendous speeds.

Cloud paused his breathing, placing full concentration on the timing of when the owner of the voice would soon encounter him. As he did this, he then took in a deep, meaningful breath whilst tensing up the muscles in his body. Cloud was ready to tackle what was heading for him.

And then ... He swiftly took a large step to the side.

WOOSH!!!

Just within that second, a blurred figure flew passed him at a ferocious speed, causing his clothing to abruptly flutter momentarily. It was then where Cloud heard the figure's voice abruptly bellow out in sudden realisation of what had occurred.

"WOAH!!!"

CRASH!!!

From what was heard, the figure had tripped up over his own feet and collided face-first against the gravel pavement, skidding across the track just outside of the Entrance Gate. Cloud felt his entire body cringe up as he witnessed the figure continue of his skidding journey, knowing all too well that this would leave a mark. Cloud then caught sight of Firion and Cecil appearing out from the corner of his eye, however he was still unable to cast his sights away from the event in front of him as it continued to unfold. He could only guess at this point that both Firion and Cecil had the same cringed up expression as he did upon seeing the situation.

Finally, after what felt like forever, the skidding across the gravel finally came to a halt. Cloud dropped his horrified expression, feeling somewhat sorrowful for allowing this event to occur in the first place. He then turned towards Firion and Cecil, who were – correcting with Cloud's prediction – staring in horror after having witnessed the figure grind face-first across the gravel pavement.

"Tidus hasn't had one of his greater days today, has he?" Cloud muttered towards the other two; his small amount of sorrow being almost completely eclipsed by the thought that it was rightly deserved for someone like him.

"Yea, I don't think those marks will disappear anytime soon, to be quite honest." Firion commented back, looking away in respect for his damaged friend.

"There goes the beautiful face of our fellow brethren." Cecil then stated highly, showing off crocodile tears towards the lying Tidus. "... He shall be missed."

Why do students in our Class always exaggerate these things ...? Cloud wondered to himself, reflecting previous situations where one or a few students within his Class would exaggerate to the point of permanent/fatal damage or even death.

Suddenly, the motionless Tidus raised his arms, slamming the palm of his hands against the ground. Within one heave, he silently dragged his body to his hands and knees, beginning to breathe eerily heavy upon bearing the agonising pain. Not long after, he turned his head round towards the three.

"*GASP...!* OOOOOHHH...!!!" All three of them hissed loudly with a cringing tone, noticing the extent of the damage.

From what they could see, Tidus' face seemed just as though it had been shredded to pieces; several grazes appearing throughout the entirety of his mug, some sections even had blood beginning to trickle down. The expression on his face was something akin to what Tidus would show when confronting his own Father: absolute anger and hatred.

"Cloud! Why did you move out of the way!?" Tidus roared out, struggling to bear the pain that spanned throughout his entire face.

"What do you expect!?" Cloud argued back, holding back the tears of laughter that began to creep up to him. "If I took the impact, I would be on the ground, gasping for air!"

"Well, if you DID take the impact, I wouldn't have had my 'handsome' face almost TORN off of me!?" Tidus then bellowed in agony, leaping up to his feet with a struggle.

"Admit it, Tidus. You deserved that after what you had done during Lunch Break." Cecil shrugged in a cocky tone, unable to hide the dark grin on his face.

"Don't you even dare bring 'that' up, Cecil!" Tidus hastily demanded, gritting his teeth intensely and pointing to Cecil in order to hush him up.

"Wait ... what did he do?" Cloud wondered as he turned to Cecil, ignoring Tidus' evident plea.

"The reason behind our P.E. Session changing its schedule all of a sudden was due to Tidus recklessly damaging a section of the Academy's Blitzball Stadium." Cecil stated out bluntly, a slight grin appearing whilst he crossed his arms.

"WHA-!? How is that possible!?" Cloud blurted out in shock, unable to gather the possibility.

"LA-LA-LAA...! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" Tidus echoed out at the top of his voice, desperately using whatever means he had to drown out the reveal.

"He accidentally struck a weak point in the barrier with his notorious Jecht Shot during practice." Cecil continued to explain, remembering what he was told earlier by Instructor Jecht whilst helping out to stop the Father-Son brawl. "Supposedly, the event within the stadium mechanics was 'quite' spectacular."

"It was an accident, in any case!" Tidus pouted arrogantly, turning his head away with frustration. "And besides, it was only a minor situation. The engineers said it'll be fully repaired by the end of next week."

"Yeah ... no wonder your Dad was angry at you." Cecil then stated, chuckling away.

Both Cloud and Firion began to let out a few chuckles with Cecil whilst Tidus glared with betrayed eyes.

"Anyway, we know why we're meeting here." Tidus then announced, hastily trying to change the subject whilst cuffing the blood from his face. "Right now, our 'task' is to track down Zack and find out everything about his new 'girlfriend'. So far, all we know is that she is supposedly 'cute' and 'sweet'. So, our first objective is to find out where they are, which ... is going to be rather difficult."

Cloud hesitated, wondering to himself whether this was still a good idea or not. Yet, he ultimately decided that it was now too late to turn back.

"They would most likely be heading towards Crescent Lake." Cloud admitted, trying to hide his nervous breath.

"What makes you say that, Cloud?" Firion wondered, curious as to how Cloud came to such a

conclusion.

"Well, I hear that Crescent Lake tends to be a hotspot for couples, mainly due to its immense scenery and atmosphere." Cloud elaborated, beginning to reflect upon what he had been told by his best-friend a while back, "Also, I do remember Zack telling me in the past that if he ever did get himself a girlfriend, the first place he would go would be to Crescent Lake."

"If that's what he said then that'll be the first place we'll look!" Tidus stated loudly with determination, stepping up closer towards the group so that he didn't feel so far away.

"It will be quite the trek though, seeing as it is on the other side of the City." Firion pointed out, "At our usual pace, we'll probably get there by the evening. By that time, we'll most likely miss them."

"That won't be a problem if we run." Tidus cheerfully suggested, hopping up and down in preparation for a speedy pace.

"Err ... As much as we would love to, Tidus; we're still worn out from the circuit training we had done during the last lesson." Cloud swiftly pointed out, hoping greatly that they wouldn't run for the rest of the day in fear of passing out before even reaching the Lake. "For now, we'll just have to bear with the long walk."

Firion and Cecil nodded in agreement, also feeling that running such a long distance would be unbearable. Cloud switched his sights over towards Tidus, who still seemed to have a fiery expression about him. After a moment of silence, Tidus gave out a frustrated sigh.

"*Sigh...* Fine, we'll walk." He nodded in acceptance, finding it completely pointless to argue for no given reason whatsoever.

They began to walk off towards the City, hoping to reach Crescent Lake before the Sun sets.

The Sun magnificently illuminated Crescent Lake, giving it a pure atmosphere. The numerous trees surrounding the grand Lake rustled with the light gusts, transforming the late summer leaves into the autumn season. The stony pathways were trodden up by varieties of tourists: families, couples, study groups, and various others.

As the day began to draw to a close, many of the visitors began to make their way towards the exit. However, Cloud, Tidus, Firion and Cecil rushed through the exiting crowd in the opposite direction, completely out of breath and aching from their muscles. Their eyes hastily examined the area around them, instantly realising that Zack and his girlfriend was nowhere to be found.

"W-were we too late?" Cecil wondered in a breathless pant, slowly recovering from the long journey.

"Argh, Man! What a pain!" Tidus groaned in frustration; his heightened anticipation shattering like cracked glass. "I was so looking forward to seeing his gal as well!"

Cloud took a glimpse towards his three friends, all looking both exhausted and disappointed.

"Maybe they haven't left yet." Cloud then suggested to them, feeling that the journey would have been a waste if they gave up now. "I mean, there are still visitors walking around the place."

Firion and Cecil glanced to each other with an uncertain expression, beginning to wonder whether it'll be worth it or a waste of time in of itself. Tidus, on the other hand, began to show an enthusiastic yet creepy grin, causing Cloud to shuffle back nervously. All of a sudden, Tidus launched his whole body towards Cloud, grasping his neck and holding him down with a strong but friendly headlock. With the free-hand, he instantly clenched it into a fist and began to rub his knuckles hard against the top of Cloud's head.

"Man, I knew your curiosity about this would get to you eventually!" Tidus cheerfully joked, chuckling away as he continued to rub his knuckles against Cloud's spiked blond hair.

"Ah – ow, ow, ow, OW! W-would you g-get off of me!" Cloud shouted out in pain, trying his hardest to release himself from Tidus' clutches.

Tidus instantly released Cloud and stood back and continued to laugh out loudly, "Hahahaha! Sorry dude!"

Cloud stretched out, feeling his whole body aching away. After recovering, he examined the area around him again, checking for any hints that Zack and Aerith had visited the Lake.

"If we walk around the whole entire Lake, we're bound to find them before dusk sets in." Cloud proposed to the group, soothing the top of his head from where Tidus had rubbed his knuckles against.

"Hmm ... sorry Cloud, I'm not going to join you." Cecil sorrowfully shook his head, "I feel as though Zack would have already left by now; and as much as I would love to see his relationship blossom with his girl, it'll be a pointless search."

Cloud silently nodded, feeling no need to persuade him even though it had felt ironic considering he was all for the 'heist' earlier in the day. Cloud then turned to Firion, wondering if he was up for it.

However, Firion silently shook his head as well, deciding to pull out due to similar reasons.

"Argh, you two are killjoys!" Tidus abruptly blurted out, highly annoyed about their decisions. "Come on, Cloud, let's go track down the lovebirds."

Tidus strode off towards the beginning of the path, hunching up his shoulders in disgust and refusing to look back. Cloud watched him walk off with an awkward expression, feeling that Tidus' frustration was slightly overblown. He then turned back to Firion and Cecil.

"If your choice is set then that's fine by me." Cloud admitted truthfully with a small grin, feeling fine about their decision. "We'll see you at the Academy tomorrow."

Cloud switched round and swiftly sped into jogged in hopes of catching up to Tidus, waving back to his two other friends in the process. Upon noticing them wave back and begin to make their separate ways for home, both Cloud and Tidus started their search.

For the next hour or so, Cloud and Tidus investigated along the walkway situated around the Lake, attempting to be as observant as possible. However, as they pressed on, the evening was seen pressing on, almost to the point where the setting Sun was about to drop behind the trees. With no sign of Zack or his girlfriend within view, Cloud and Tidus was beginning to doubt they would be able to find them at this point.

Finally, they had made an entire circle around Crescent Lake, much to their disappointment. They strode up towards the entrance and decided to ultimately call it a day.

"You know ... I'm starting to think it would've been best to head home with Firion and Cecil." Tidus sighed away, the feeling of failure digging deep into his chest.

"We tried ... at least." Cloud loosely shrugged, trying to hide the fact that his initial intuitions about the whole thing being a bad idea were correct.

"Anyway, I best head home. My Old Man is probably going to scold me for damaging the Blitzball Stadium and our brawl during his lesson." Tidus then groaned in despair, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. "I'll see you tomorrow, dude."

Cloud nodded back and waved Tidus off, who had his head down in gloom as he trod off into the distance. This was soon followed by Cloud sighing in frustration, giving a whimsical thought on what to do next. Oddly enough, the idea of watching the Sun set from the Lake appeared into his mind, feeling that he would rather end the day with a fulfilling send off. With his priority set, he took to trekking over the same path as he did earlier ago in hopes of finding a substantial seat.

As he pressed forward, however, two silhouettes suddenly caught his eye in the distance.

What followed ... was an all-too familiar voice.

"Heh-heh...! What do you think to the new uniform?" The larger, masculine-looking silhouette proudly showed himself off to the smaller, feminine-looking silhouette. "Do you think I look heroic yet?"

"Wow! It really suits you, Zack!" The feminine silhouette answered with a light giggle.

Zack! So you DID take her here! Cloud called out in his mind, his eyes lighting up in a buzz as he subtly treaded closer to the couple's position.

Although the area was beginning to darken, there was enough light to at least see the details of the two silhouettes. Cloud instantly caught notice of Aerith, who seemed to be wearing more casual clothes instead of the standard Academy Uniform he had seen her wear a while ago. This consisted of a long-sleeved, flower-patterned top; tight-worn jeans; and her new pink Hair-bow for added effect. This new look for Aerith was something that made Cloud's heart warm up pleasantly, adding to the already calming atmosphere that surrounded her constantly. As his sight switched over towards Zack, he was suddenly caught off-guard by his new attire. Covering over his whole body was the one thing Zack had always dreamed of wearing: The SOLDIER 1st Class Uniform.

"N-no way ... he finally made 1st Class ..." Cloud whispered in shock, unable to keep it inside his mind. Cloud stopped by a nearby tree and leant an arm against the bark, supporting his weight efficiently as he stood to watch the two interact with each other. His mind completely overturned by Zack's sudden success, growing desperate to reveal himself just so he could congratulate his long-time best friend. Aerith had sat down on a nearby bench, resting herself from what supposedly was a busy day for her. She watched as Zack gave out triumphant poses in front of her with his new uniform, overjoyed in seeing him so ecstatic.

Wow, what a show off...! Cloud thought in a murmur, finding Zack suddenly dragging down the excitement with his poses, but also feeling equally overjoyed by the turn of events.

Eventually, Zack decided to sit down next to Aerith, gazing out towards the illuminating Crescent Lake with a motivated grin.

"It's really peaceful..." Aerith spoke out quietly, taking in a deep, meaningful breath, "I'm glad we came here."

"Hm-hmm, yeah ... it certainly is." Zack agreed in a light tone, taking in the view of the lake.

Cloud caught sight of Zack and Aerith's closest hands silently joining together, proving to him just how close Zack and Aerith's bond was. Upon witnessing the two joining together, a chord struck with Cloud. With all of the odd behaviours he had been displaying throughout the day along with the increasing moments of spacing out, there was no doubt in his mind at this point that Cloud admired Aerith greatly. The feeling of tranquillity had always welcomed him whenever Aerith was close by, taking away all matter of worry and doubt in the process. Ever since he found out the truth, it was difficult for him to take in the fact that she was already with someone; more importantly, his own Best-friend.

However, as he observed the two become more intimately close to one another, he came to an understanding: Zack truly deserved her. After witnessing Zack get turned-down constantly by woman after woman, to see him finally break free from the shackles and sit together with someone he truly cared for was a sight to behold. With the addition of him having succeeded in his dream to become a Hero, Cloud respects for him broke through its peak, both as a Best-friend and as someone to look up towards for inspiration.

As the Sun finally began to set, Cloud turned away and stepped off towards the distance, feeling that he had seen all that he needed to see. A deep smile grew across his face, his heart renewed and assuring that he would support the two for eternity.

Meanwhile, back at Dissidia Academy...

The halls and corridors had silently begun to darken upon the Evening Sun casting the last of its light over the vast horizon. All the lights within the Academy were now off ... aside from one, single bulb. Situated within Geography Room 2, work was still in progress. Sephiroth was situated non-stop on rebuilding the Great Globe; many of the golden, shattered pieces were finally forged back together in their correct positions.

As Sephiroth continued his intense repair, the door suddenly began to open unexpectedly. Normally, one would cast an eye over to the door in wonder of whom had entered, but not Sephiroth ... he was fully

aware of the visitor's presence far before they had reached the door in the first place.

"Still hard or work, I see." The gruff voice spoke out, proudly echoing throughout the entire room. "No wonder people see you as a workaholic!"

"Hmph! What do you want, Jecht?" Sephiroth muttered back in a dark tone, knowing exactly whose voice had spoken.

Jecht gave out a deep chuckle, closing the door behind him as he stepped over to inspect the repair.

"Watching you repair such a huge piece of equipment – even after it got smashed, in fact – really fires me up!" Jecht expressed loudly, giving out a snarky grin. "Why go so far for something that's only there to be 'flashy' in front of the kids!?"

Sephiroth abruptly halted his repairing and glanced round; his long silver hair barely hiding his dark, horrifying glare.

"Just so you know ... it isn't 'just' for showing off and educating the students." Sephiroth murmured coldly, the whole atmosphere around him beginning to shudder.

"Oh, so I've heard." Jecht teased, unfazed by Sephiroth's deathly stare. "It must have been horrific to watch your masterpiece shatter right on top of you like it did, all due to some worthless brats messing around."

"Don't worry ... I was able to handle it." Sephiroth then admitted, turning to face Jecht entirely at this point. "I assume you've had one hell of a time in trying to repair that Stadium of yours."

"Heh-heh-heh ...! No need for the concern, I'll be sure in due time that my boy gets the punishment he rightfully deserves." Jecht grinned in a cocky tone, crossing his arms and tensing up his brutal muscles. "I'm curious though ... what IS this big plan of your?"

Sephiroth sat completely silent the moment Jecht had asked the question, slightly dipping his head.

Abruptly, what followed afterwards was a small yet deadly grin seeping across, showing how dark and menacing he had become throughout the years.

"I cannot tell you presently..." Sephiroth finally expressed, his dark voice echoing throughout the room. He turned and flipped a switch that was situated on the base of the Globe, suddenly turning on the large variety of crystal clear holograms. However, instead of the images that he uses for Classes, holograms of various specific people were showing on the walls throughout the room. These holograms included a wide range of live footage documenting the current whereabouts of these individuals, including a variety of Students from the Academy.

Jecht switched off the lights in the room and stepped forward to gain a full view of the holograms, observing the glorious footage with his own two eyes. His grin and expression turned from dark and brooding to truly menacing and even insanity, accompanied with a dark, terrifying chuckle that slowly escaped his voice. Ignoring Jecht's moment of insanity, Sephiroth glanced up to the central section of the ceiling: concentrating at one last hologram.

"... All I can say: it is a whole lot bigger than you could ever imagine." Sephiroth concluded his dreading statement, the pupils of his eyes abruptly beginning to intensify.

The hologram was both observing and documenting the central, most important person in Sephiroth's plan; the one and only person in Sephiroth's mind who could possibly be able to cause such a magnitude of chaos within the whole of Shinra ... and later down the line: the entire world.

His name ... SOLDIER 1st Class: Zack Fair.

End of Arc 2.

8 - Arc 3 (1): Bitter Rivalry

Friday Lunch Break in Dissidia Academy: the wide variety Students began to crowd towards the canteen and the surrounding Grounds to eat; basking in the fresh, open taste of freedom from the constant drag of Lessons. However, not all Students were free to run around and idle, there were those who had jobs to manage the Academy and the events that take place. They stood among the students as the most devoted and determined in the whole of the Academy: The Student Council.

Within this Council; there were a complete set of ten students who all excel in the academic subjects. The President of the Council, Warrior of Light, had been given the task of leading the team in creating a safe and enjoyable atmosphere within the Academy. He was personally chosen by Headmistress Cosmos due to his capability of keeping a strong and clear mind through intense situations whilst showing he has a completely fair and just heart. Assisting him are fellow students in his class and members of the Council: Firion and Onion Knight. Both are highly advanced in intelligence and decision making. However, a rivalry that would equal the Father-Son rivalry of Tidus and Instructor Jecht has spurred up that has the whole of the Academy in deep gossip. Council President: Warrior of Light and fellow council member: Onion Knight have very opposing mind, generally resulting in intense conflicts of wit and intellect.

Warrior of Light, Firion, Onion Knight and the rest of the Council had entered the well-managed Student Council Room; situated on the Top floor of the Academy close to the Headmistress' Office. The room was very open and wide; within the room was a large, ringed table that was completely spotless from dirt and ready to be used. Hanging on the walls were various notice boards filled with numerous papers; documenting a large number of upcoming events set throughout the current Academic year and important notices stating certain rules and guidelines that need to be followed. Situated on the right side of the room was a large, blank board; used mainly to write down important notes during meetings and placing images from the Overhead Projector above. On the far end of the room was a large, vast window overlooking the Grounds of the Academy, taking in the Sun's strong rays and brightening the area with a pleasant aura.

The Council sat in their designated seat around the ringed table and kept up a strong, constant posture towards the President. Firion and Onion Knight placed themselves either side of Warrior of Light's position, taking out sheets of paper to write notes on. The President himself, however, stayed standing as he placed a large Binder on the table; the Binder held various documents from past Council meetings, completely organised in order to easily access when need be. Warrior of Light then took out a sheet filled out with topics to discuss in the current meeting. He took a bulky black board-marker from the holdall beside the board on the wall and began to write down the titles of the topics on the board itself. After filling it all out, Warrior of Light cleared his throat, ready to speak to the Student Council.

"Welcome to the first Council meeting of the Semester." Warrior of Light announced to the group. "As you all thoroughly know; it is OUR duty to make sure this Academy is well managed and – Onion Knight! Why is you looking towards the window!?"

Onion Knight had his head leaning against the palm of his hand and had instantly begun to stare out towards the window with a bored tone of expression. The moment Warrior of Light snapped at him, he straightened up and turned back towards the direction of the President, but still showing signs of boredom.

"Sorry, President; but the moment you began to speak, my mind was instantly elsewhere." Onion Knight admitted, giving out a largely cocky mannerism.

“Is ... that ... right...?” Warrior of Light responded to his classmate with sudden frustration, gritting his teeth and veins popping from his forehead.

“Are you going to continue in drilling into our heads with pointless drivel, or will you ever get to the actual topics of the meeting?” Onion Knight then wondered in his cynical tone, a very small grin strapped across his face.

“Oh, don’t you worry ... I’ll get to it.” Warrior of Light stated through his gritting teeth, eyes full of rage towards Onion Knight.

The two’s eyes locked towards each other as the tension began to rise between them once again, creating another battle between intelligence before even getting to the first topic. Firion, on the other side of the two, rolled his eyes with a frustrated sigh, finding this tension completely infuriating. The other members, however, watched in amusement whilst the tension continued to rise. Finally, Firion slammed the palm of his hand against the surface of the table, causing Warrior of Light and Onion Knight to snap out of their locked glare.

“Can we PLEASE get through this meeting without the pointless staring contest!?” Firion bitterly blurted out, his face turning bright red with rising anger. “Maybe it would be efficient to start with information on the rumour that spread recently.”

There had been a moment of silence within the room; nobody was fearless enough to speak back to Firion. Eventually, Warrior of Light nodded, realising that now wasn’t the time for such matters.

“*Ahem... * Anyway, skipping the ‘unneeded’ filler; our first main topic is about Cid of the Lufaine’s upcoming visit.” Warrior of Light began to announce, annoyed that he couldn’t finish his introduction to the Council meeting that he had in fact rehearsed daily for this moment. “To further elaborate; his visit was meant to be today.”

Firion and Onion Knight looked at each other with confused expressions, wondering what the President meant behind the statement. Onion Knight had always trust his own instincts on anything he had come across; and in all cases, his intuitions had been correct. In terms of the current rumour about Cid of the Lufaine, he had trusted his own instincts that the rumours were correct. However, upon hearing the President’s statement, he began to have his worries.

“Well, I will now put those rumours to rest.” Warrior of Light continued on, his eyes swiftly scanning the room and the fellow members around him. “These rumours are in fact ... true.”

Onion Knight gave out a relieving sigh upon hearing this, thinking that the idea of his intuitions being wrong would break him apart. Warrior of Light, however, was glaring at him with scorn eyes, finding Onion Knight’s relieved reaction infuriating. Onion Knight then began to retaliate with a similar glare. But as his sight locked onto Warrior of Light, he began to notice that behind the scorn and formal expressions were growing hints of excitement. From what Onion Knight could tell, Warrior of Light look up to Cid of the Lufaine as a hero and an inspiration. Accidentally, Onion Knight slipped a small, sudden chuckle, causing Warrior of Light to whip his heads around towards Onion Knight’s direction. His eyes had abruptly lit up in flames, namely due to his sudden rise in anger. Onion Knight sunk back on his seat and kept silent, deciding to hold back on mocking the Council President. The other members of the Council had been discussing their delight on the fact that the rumours were true. Swiftly, Warrior of Light placed up a hand to show that he hadn’t finished what he needed to announce on the subject.

“Furthermore, Cid of the Lufaine is currently touring the Academy with the Headmistress and Deputy-Headmaster.” Warrior of Light continued on, keeping up his sophisticated, clear tone. “In fact, he will be taking part in this meeting later down the line.”

Onion Knight then noticed a hidden smile form around Warrior of Light, seeming as though he began to struggle holding back his own excitement. Onion Knight had also felt a surge of excitement course through his mind, feeling that anything Cid discusses about would certainly positively affect the Councils thoughts upon crucial topics.

“Will the Headmistress also be joining our meeting, President?” One of the female members of the council questioned, raising a hand formally as she spoke.

“I haven’t been told but I am certain she will.” Warrior of Light answered back, nodding with a hopeful attitude.

Onion Knight knew exactly who had asked the question, his eyes locked towards the direction of the female member. She had been about the same age as most of the members, a good 3-4 years older than he was; and had long, fair-blond hair that had been tied up gracefully with a dark-blue ribbon. Her attitude tends to be very confident and self-proud, hence her current held up posture. He knew her as a close friend to Terra Branford, although he didn’t know much of how far back their friendship was. What he certainly knew about her was her name being Celes Chere, and that she was Class 13F’s President. Warrior of Light then suddenly drew in a deep breath, readying himself to move on to the next topic.

“Now then, moving forward to our next topic of interest ...” He began his announcement, placing a finger towards the second topic on the board “Is to establish plans for the first event that the Academy would be holding: The Academy’s Annual Social Club Open Day.”

Onion Knight expected for this one to come up before the meeting even started. Normally a week after the Academic year begins, the Academy arranges an Open Day for all Sports and Social Clubs to set up stalls and campaign for new members.

“But haven’t some Clubs already started up?” Firion questioned curiously, knowing from Tidus who has already began his Blitzball training sessions.

“Yes, so it seems.” Warrior of Light nodded, expecting that someone from the Council would ask such a question. “However, most Clubs have vacant spaces for fresher students and others who wish to join up. Also, it’ll help Clubs gain popularity among the students.”

Abruptly, Onion Knight gave out a loud, obnoxious yawn, “That’s all well and good but ... what date will this Open Day run on?”

Warrior of Light’s eyebrow suddenly twitched, trying desperately to hold back an explosion of anger so that we wouldn’t act like a complete fool in front of the Council. He knew completely that Onion Knight was testing his patience, and made sure that he wouldn’t be beaten no matter what opposed him.

Gritting his teeth, Warrior of Light turned to the boy and answered his question.

“If you must know, it’ll be this coming Tuesday.” Warrior of Light murmured, giving a piercing glare towards Onion Knight. “If you’re ‘child-like’ mind was a little more patient then you would’ve had your answer eventually.”

Onion Knight bit the inside of his lip as he glared towards the Student Council President, unable to speak back. The President knew all too well about Onion Knight’s actual age and the reason behind him being a few years ahead academically. Any jab that insulted Onion Knight’s age, height and appearance would cause some trouble in the boy’s heart; and even if they were bitter rivals, Warrior of Light made sure not to step over that line unless truly necessary.

Abruptly, there had been a sudden knock on the door, causing most of the members in the room to leap out of their skin with shock. Warrior of Light turned towards the door and stepped over to open it for the people on the other-side. Onion Knight continued to glare in silence, his mind feeling troubled from Warrior of Light’s words. Hastily, he shook his head and snapped out of the daze, brushing away the troubles in his mind. He took in a deep breath and kept a decent, formal posture on his seat. Warrior of Light opened the door, straightening himself up and holding back the urge of excitement.

“Welcome to the Student Council Room, Cid of the ...” Warrior began to announce, only to halt mid-sentence, “Huh?”

He could only see Headmistress Cosmos, who stood cheerfully and sophisticatedly at the door.

“It is very nice to be here, Warrior of Light.” A sudden, formal voice spoke up from below both Warrior of Light and Cosmos.

Warrior of Light lowered his eyes towards the floor, completely put off by the direction of the voice. And then, as though he had just seen something vile, Warrior of Light's expression turned with disgust. The pupils of his eyes minimized severely and his eyebrow began to twitch, unable to comprehend what he had just witnessed. Below him and Cosmos stood a Moogle; a small, white-furred creature with small, reptilian wings and a large red bobble on its head. Warrior of Light's body shuddered; hoping that this was all a complete joke.

"Y-you're ... Cid of the Lufaine?" Warrior of Light stuttered, gazing down upon the Moogle.

Cosmos turned away, hiding her smirk and giggle.

"Yes, that is correct." The Moogle answered, bowing respectfully.

The whole room froze; every Council Member suddenly became completely dumbfounded. Everyone had heard the tales of the Legendary Cid of the Lufaine but had never seen an image of what he actually looked like. This included Warrior of Light, who stepped back motionlessly and with a frozen expression. Cid stepped through into the room, examining the area around him. Onion Knight slowly rose from the table in order to grasp a good look at the legend. But, instead of being as speechless and shocked as every other member in the room; an unexpected, surprised smile appeared across his face.

Ah-Hah! I'm not the smallest person in the room anymore! Onion Knight's mind cheered with joy, feeling that his small stature wasn't as much of a setback in this current time.

Warrior of Light, on the other hand, couldn't take his eyes off of Cid, finding it troublesome to grasp the appearance. As far back as he could remember, Warrior of Light always adored the stories of Cid of the Lufaine and became a true hero in his eyes; but the idea that during his whole life, he has been looking up towards ... a Moogle; it was completely ridiculous to him!

"Cid of the Lufaine ... my hero ... a Moogle?" Warrior of Light murmured breathlessly, sweating gawkily with a distant expression.

With that, Warrior of Light raised his head dreamily and fell backwards, colliding against the floor and instantly losing consciousness upon impact. All eyes in the room snapped towards the direction of where Warrior of Light fell, some leaping up in fright. Cid and Cosmos curiously gazed down towards the Council President, finding the sudden pass out unexpected.

"Erm ... Isn't it wise for him to be taken to the Medical Room?" Cid of the Lufaine questioned, looking towards the unconscious body worriedly. "The boy seems rather ill."

"No need to worry, Cid." Cosmos pleasantly assured, a pure atmospheric feel loomed around her as she smiled down. "Our Council President tends to overreact; once he snaps out of his little fuss and wakes up, he'll be absolutely fine."

Cid nodded awkwardly, understanding what she had meant but still felt concerned for Warrior of Light's wellbeing.

Onion Knight placed a closed hand over his mouth, trying ever-so hard not to laugh at Warrior of Light's sudden predicament. However, another thought had popped into his mind that caused him to become rather curious. He wondered as to how his friend Terra would react upon noticing Cid of the Lufaine's intriguing appearance. He already knew that Terra had a certain secret adoration for Moogles, and that she wouldn't be able to resist cuddling one that she would come across. But Onion Knight also began to dread this idea upon realising that he would have to be the one to hold her back from smothering Cid to death. The situation would not go down well on Onion Knight's conscience, that's for sure.

Cid hopped up from the floor and landed onto the table, being able to get a clear view of the Council Members. Cosmos took a spare seat next to Firion and elegantly sat down, ready to be involved with the meeting's discussion. Cid twirled round, giving out the familiar Moogle 'Kupo' noise as he spun, and then bowed towards the members.

"Now then, it is a pleasure to meet you all." Cid greeted formally and graciously. "As you all are already aware, I am Cid of the Lufaine, and it is an honour to join in with this meeting. If there are any questions

you wish to ask me, feel free to ask anytime.”

At that moment, one certain question came up in every member’s mind: **How is it that he is a Moogle?** However, they all felt that it would be dishonourable to mention it, and so kept silent for the time being. Except one ... Celes Chere, who raised her hand in pride. All the other members glared towards her cautiously, expecting the unexpected.

“Cid, sir; how were you able to accomplish such amazing feats with your ... small stature?” She questioned, her eyes gleaming with eagerness.

Cid glared over towards Celes, none of the members were able to read his thoughts and expressions. Then a small chuckle escaped his breath, sounding as though the expression he would show would be grinning.

“An interesting question; however, this is a question I cannot answer at this moment in time.” Cid answered, shaking his head. “All I can say for the time being is that ‘No matter how great an obstacle can be, the smallest being will always find a way to move forward.’”

Onion Knight’s eyebrow suddenly rose up with curiosity, finding Cid of the Lufaine’s words rather fascinating.

Abruptly, a random hand palm slammed against the top of the round table, scaring the living daylight’s out of every Council Member in the room. Only Cosmos, Cid, and Celes stood their ground. Every wide-eyed student glared over towards the hand, leaning back on their seats in terror. Just then, a low, tired groan echoed around the room. A shaking body rose from the floor, long white hair covered over the face and a zombie-like tone looming over. Finally, the figure raised his head and revealed the face from behind the hair. Dazed and confused, Warrior of Light examined the area, trying desperately to remember.

“Cid ... the Lufaine ... Moogle ...” He murmured under his breath, his distant eyes scanning about. The moment he caught sight of Cid of the Lufaine, the memories all flooded back into him. He straightened up his stance and sat down on his seat in silence, refusing to speak about how he had just acted.

“S-sorry about that, sir.” Warrior of Light bowed apologetically, fully conscious at this point. “I’ll be able to continue the meeting now.”

Cid nodded back, the expression he would be showing at this point would be an accepting smile. Throughout the next 15 minutes, Warrior of Light continued to go through the main topics of the meeting, eagerly allowing Cid and Cosmos to suggest options towards specific topics. Firion also contributed towards many of the topics, speaking out about his own opinions. Onion Knight, however, took a back seat in his mind and watched the meeting pass by. But as the meeting continued on, a curious question began to grow in his mind. He noticed that someone was missing within the room. He scanned the entirety of the table, but could spot every member of the Student Council. It then instantly caught on to him. He rose up a hand, the question sticking in his mind intensely. Warrior of Light turned to Onion Knight in a snap, instantly being cut off from one of his long-winded speeches.

“What is it now, Onion Knight?” Warrior of Light broodily asked, eyes glaring like daggers. “If it is another one of your ill-mannered comments then you’ll be heading straight out the door.”

“No, it’s a legitimate question.” Onion Knight shook his head back; however his eyes were locked back on the Council President with the thought of going for another round. “In fact, it is a question I would like to ask the Headmistress.”

Cosmos turned towards Onion Knight with curious eyes, her kind smile giving Onion Knight a sudden calmed sensation.

“What is it you wish to ask me, Onion Knight?” She questioned curiously.

“It’s just that Warrior of Light mentioned earlier that both yourself and the Deputy-Headmaster were giving Cid a tour of the Academy.” Onion Knight began, standing up as high as he could and keeping

the formal tone in his voice. "However, only you and Cid arrived to join in with our meeting. Why didn't the Deputy-Headmaster appear?"

Suddenly, a small giggle escaped Cosmos' breath, causing her to place a hand against her lips in order to prevent her laughter from fully escaping. The Council Members were all gazing towards the Headmistress with curiosity, wondering as to why she was laughing. Warrior of Light, Firion, and Onion Knight glanced towards each other in wonder, finding her reaction to the question peculiar. Finally, Cosmos had been able to control her laughter and took in a deep, calm breath to control her own emotions.

"Well, Deputy-Headmaster Chaos was unfortunately unable to join us for the meeting today." Cosmos began to answer, pausing every-so-often to keep herself in control. "The reason behind this was that he had been caught up with some ... ironic complications on the way here."

Elsewhere ...

Crowds of Students gathered round the rear entrance door of the Academy Building; a small, cramped Fire-exit door that leads towards the Academy Grounds. Tidus, Cecil, Cloud and Terra wondered over towards the crowd with curious expressions, questioning themselves as to why there was so much commotion. They slithered through the gaps in the crowd, making sure they were all together as they continued towards the front of the crowd. With Tidus leading the group, eager to find out the cause of commotion, they finally reached the front. However, the moment the four of them caught sight of the reason behind commotion, they entered a sudden state of shock. The Deputy-Headmaster Chaos had lodged himself in the door, completely unable to break free due to his large body mass and tough structure. Many of the Students had taken out the cell-phones and began to snap photos of the situation, non-stop crying with laughter as the cameras in their mobiles continuously flashed in the Chaos' direction. Tidus was the first to break out in laughter, hugging his abdomen in pain as he cried with uncontrollable laughter.

"T-this ... this is just too hilarious!" Tidus wheezed underneath all of his eruptive laughter.

Cloud was the next to lose the control over his emotions, struggling to breathe over his laughter. Cecil and Terra both followed; Cecil chuckling underneath his breath and Terra giggling away non-stop in her soft tone. She couldn't even hold back her tears of laughter due to the amount of irony this had been for the Deputy-Headmaster.

Suddenly, a small, deep grumbled was heard underneath the crowds' commotions.

"What a pain ..." Chaos murmured, feeling completely embarrassed by the situation.

Back at the meeting, both Warrior of Light and Onion Knight gave out an instant "Oooh ..." within sync of each other as they gazed towards Headmistress Cosmos.

The rest of the Council Members erupted in laughter, finding the whole situation hilarious. Celes stood her ground and kept completely quiet, however a small twitch of her tense lips shown that she had been holding back a giggle. Cosmos joined in with the rest of the Council Members and let out a light-hearted giggle; unable to hold her own emotions back any longer.

"S-so, in the end, we decided to ... I-leave him there after we called for emergency s-services." Cosmos finished her explanation, tears streaming from her eyes as she continued to giggle away.

"They should be arriving anytime now, I am sure he'll be wedged out from the door in no time." Cid stated, seemingly to be the only person in the room who did not break out in laughter.

Warrior of Light turned away swiftly from the rest of the Members and chuckled underneath his breath, hastily trying to gain back control over his emotions. Onion Knight cheekily laughed away, not needing to hold himself back.

After another 10 minutes, the Student Council meeting had finally drawn to a close. Warrior of Light stayed behind to eagerly speak with his hero, even though trying not to bring up the Moogles appearance whenever he spoke. Onion Knight swiftly packed his items up and strode out of the room with the other Council Members. The moment he had exited the room, he suddenly caught sight of Terra waiting for him, her pleasant, silent smile glowing towards his direction. He smiled back and began to walk with her towards the stairs, deciding to head towards their next lesson even though there was still 15 minutes of lunch left before the Academy Bell would ring. They began to discuss about the Council's meeting topics and also laughed away about Deputy-Headmaster Chaos' unfortunate predicament. Terra had told him that the emergency services had been able to break Chaos out from the door, although the door and frame would need to be replaced due to the whole framework being completely bent out of shape and unable to keep the door itself shut. As they reached the 5th Floor that lead towards Food Tech - one of the only subjects that Onion Knight seemed to dislike and struggle in - Onion Knight abruptly halted his movement. Terra then stopped and turned towards him with a confused expression, finding his sudden change in expression rather abnormal. Onion Knight closed his eyes and listened carefully to the atmosphere around them, feeling as though something wasn't right. Just then, there was a sudden crash originating from one of the rooms underneath them on the 4th Floor of the building. This was then instantly followed by a loud, feminine scream.

"Terra, quickly, something's happened on the 4th floor!" Onion Knight loudly commanded his companion, hastily rushing down the staircase towards the 4th floor.

Terra instantly followed him, worried as to what just happened.

They swiftly reached the 4th floor; hearts beating at a tremendous speed. Onion Knight hastily scanned the area, trying to find which room the incident had happened in. As he leapt round the corner of the empty hallway, he instantly caught sight of one of the doors leading into a classroom slightly opened. He hastily launched himself towards the door and caught the handle tightly. He pushed the door breathlessly and took a step into the room. Then, like a fuse, he gasped in shock. Terra finally caught up with him and glanced into the room, wondering as to what had been happening. The moment she realised, the whole area suddenly felt as though time had completely stopped.

"What the ...!?" Onion Knight murmured, unable to find the words to complete his sentence.

The room had been a complete mess: Sheets of paper all over the floor; a large, smashed window allowing in gusts of wind; various desks toppled; and most crucial of it all ... a fairly small blood stain marked on a cracked wall. As Onion Knight's eyes shifted lower towards the floor, he suddenly took a step back in horror. A female student with shoulder-length, dark green hair lay lifelessly on the floor; blood trickling from her head. She wasn't moving, yet faint signs of breath escaped her mouth. Standing between Onion Knight and the unconscious girl was another student. He was male and had dark, blond hair. He seemed to be breathless and had his back towards Onion Knight, a stance as though he was in shock.

"Wait, that's ... RYDIA!!!" Terra suddenly screamed out in horror, running over towards the unconscious girl to check her health.

Rydia had been picked up carefully by Terra as she tended to her wound, her body completely limp. Her hair ornament seemed to be missing from her head, meaning that it could have been stolen. Onion Knight froze whilst he glared over towards the male student, realizing who he was. On the boy's lower back was a long, blonde-furred tail. The boy then turned towards Onion Knight, his wide eyes full of abrupt confusion and shock. Onion Knight locked his eyes towards the boy, not knowing what to make of the situation. And then finally, Onion Knight spoke out to the male student in horror.

"Zidane ... what have you done?"

9 - Arc 3 (1): Investigation

Zidane took a step back, his body uncontrollably shaking in terror. Onion Knight, in retaliation, took a cautious step forward, his intense glare refusing to deviate from Zidane. Zidane glanced over toward Terra and the unconscious Rydia. A small gasp escaped his voice as he switched back towards Onion Knight.

"I-I ... I didn't do it!" Zidane blurted out, pleading that Onion Knight and Terra would believe him. "I swear to you ... this wasn't my doing!"

Onion Knight took in a deep breath, wishing he could believe his classmate. But he needed answer about what happened, how it happened, and why. He couldn't let Zidane walk away from this, not unless he had a believable alibi.

"I cannot let you go, Zidane." Onion Knight sorrowfully shook his head, glancing around the entirety of the room as he spoke. "I need to know everything in order for me to believe anything you say."

Zidane hesitated, sweat droplets seeping from his face whilst he inhaled anxiously.

"I got here just before you guys did." Zidane desperately explained to them, his hands violently shaking.

"I heard a crash and a scream and I-"

"What's going on here!?" A commanding voice interrupted, causing every conscious student in the room to jump up in fright.

Onion Knight swiftly sped his body round towards the direction of the voice; even though, to his displeasure, he knew exactly whose voice it had been. Upon the second his eyes caught sight of the person, his heart jolted anxiously. Warrior of Light stood at the open door; his eyes wide with horror and mouth dropped open in shock. His eyes were scanning around the room as he took in the extent of the incident in great detail. Onion Knight hastily glanced back towards Zidane, who had stood frozen in position with terror of seeing Warrior of Light; and then towards Terra, who continued to cradle the unconscious and injured Rydia in her arms whilst tending to her wounds. The atmosphere was cold and silent, the breeze from the smashed window creeping in and the feeling of a thousand eyes glaring into the room. Onion Knight couldn't think at all; the situation continued to tense up and with the inclusion of Warrior of Light's appearance ... everything for Zidane was about to become ever-so worse. Finally, however unpleasantly, Warrior of Light had been the first to break the silence.

"What have you done to that girl, Zidane!?" Warrior of Light bellowed out in disgust, eyes locked onto Zidane like daggers prepared to strike. "What were you trying to steal from her that made you commit such a heinous act!?"

"W-wait! You've got it all wrong!" Zidane pleaded back, stuttering and shaking violently as ever. "I would never-"

"She's missing a valuable hair ornament; something that she would always wear wherever she goes."

Onion Knight analysed, remembering the times in the past he had seen her around in the Academy.

"The only time I would suspect she wouldn't wear the ornament is during P.E. or at home. Even then, jewelry of such value would certainly be kept somewhere safe and away. To see her in such a condition and with the room in a damaged state; it is a strong possibility that there had been some resistance before the 'culprit' committed the final blow and stolen the ornament whilst the 'victim' fell unconscious due to the inflicted injury."

Warrior of Light nodded in silence, taking in what Onion Knight had stated whilst glaring towards Zidane with despire. Zidane, on the other hand, glanced towards Onion Knight with a terrified expression, not knowing how to defend himself from these allegations. Just then, another student appeared from behind

Warrior of Light, hearing the commotion from the distance. It was Firion. The moment he caught sight of the crime scene, he gasped with shock. Warrior of Light then swiftly turned towards Firion; keeping to his strong, confident posture and tone to show that he knew what to do in this situation.

"Firion, I need you to go get help from the Medical Room so that this girl – Rydia – can get treatment for her wounds." Warrior of Light demanded calmly, keeping a cool mind as he spoke. "And make sure it is as soon as possible."

Without hesitation, Firion nodded and rushed off towards the direction of the stairs, racing with haste in hopes to get to the Medical Room as soon as possible. As Firion disappeared down the staircase, Warrior of Light turned back round, this time directly towards Onion Knight.

"Onion Knight, once Firion returns with a Medical staff member; I need you to head towards the Headmistress' Office and get her to hurry back here and assess the incident." Warrior of Light commanded, having no desire for any conflicts between the two of them. "In the meantime, however, I want you to close off this room so that students wouldn't come across the crime scene. This room doesn't have an upcoming lesson so there shouldn't be any complications with timetables and groups."

"Wait, then ... what are you going to do?" Onion Knight questioned cautiously and in confusion. "Are you not the one who would normally head towards the Headmistress' Office?"

There was a moment of silence as Warrior of Light once again locked his eyes towards Zidane, who had cautiously shuffled back.

"Normally that would be the case. However, I'm going to do something that I should have done since the first day of the Semester..." Warrior of Light began to answer, eyes lighting up like flames. "... and detain the Thief."

"You're going to WHAT!?" Both Onion Knight and Zidane spat out in shock.

Just then, as though it had all been over in a flash, Warrior of Light launched his body towards Zidane and threw him to the floor. Warrior of Light had made sure that they were far away from the glass shards that had fallen on the floor from the smashed window. Warrior of Light hastily turned Zidane onto his abdomen and grasped hold of his arms like hand-cuffs. Zidane didn't resist whatsoever, still completely shocked of the situation and unable to think of what to do.

"You won't get away from me this time, you filth!" Warrior of Light spat whilst gritting his teeth, forcing himself and Zidane to stand back on their feet.

"Hold on, President! We're still not completely clear that Zidane is the culprit of this whole mess!" Onion Knight began to object, finding Warrior of Light actions entirely absurd. "We should at least hear what he has to say."

"He's called 'Zidane the Thief' for a reason." Warrior of Light argued back, beginning to move Zidane towards the door. "Stealing is his specialty, and I'm completely sure he would place the blame on Bartz when he had the chance, just like he had done many times before. But not this time ... this time he'll be locked up in the Detention Room and soon he'll be kicked out of the Academy."

The moment those last words were stated, Zidane's eyes lit up with worry and horror.

"No, Light! You have to understand!" Zidane suddenly resisted, refusing to let this happen to him. "I didn't-"

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH!" Warrior of Light abruptly roared, his eyes burning with fury. "You will NEVER call me by that nickname!"

As the two moved past the door, Onion Knight could only watch as Zidane was taken away by Warrior of Light's unbreakable force. Before they disappeared, Onion Knight caught a glimpse of Zidane's final expression: He was completely mortified.

Onion Knight gave out a loud groan, soothing his head as though he was trying to get rid of a headache. He turned towards Terra, who had been keeping strong pressure against Rydia's head injury. To his surprise, Terra's expression was something he had rarely seen from her: a combination of sadness and

regret.

"Do you really believe that Zidane is the culprit?" Terra hesitantly wondered, her eyes serious and pure.

"I mean ... seeing his reaction and everything, is it really true?"

"Zidane was the only person in the room when we discovered the crime scene; it's no surprise that he's a suspect." Onion Knight explained, however, he began to question this as well. "It doesn't help either with the records of his past mischievous antics."

"But would Zidane go so far and commit such a crime just to steal the hair ornament." Terra began to argue back, showing a personality that Onion Knight had never seen before, "I've seen Zidane do some mischievous acts in the past, but he has always been considerate towards everyone he's met."

Onion Knight raised an eyebrow with curiosity, falling silent as he gathered his mind. He considered Terra's argument, agreeing about the fact the Zidane wouldn't normally go as far as intentionally injuring someone for the sake of stealing. If injuries did occur, it would normally be accidental; such as with Sephiroth during the 'Great Globe Incident'. Onion Knight glanced around the room, examining for large clues that may help understand the situation any better. To his dismay, the only way he would be able to grasp the incident thoroughly would be to investigate the scene to the smallest detail. Right now, he did not have to time due to making sure Rydia is safe and secure and prevent other students of the Academy to stumble upon the crime scene. To add to that, the bell indicating the end of Lunch Break and the start of the next lessons would sound off anytime now. Onion Knight would have to do as Warrior of Light requested before assembling further investigations. He switched back round to Terra, and began to figure out a way to investigate the situation.

"If we're going to find out the truth behind this incident, we will have to form a structured plan." Onion Knight began to explain to her, feeling determined to find out if Zidane was truly the culprit. "First of all, we'll continue with Warrior of Light's orders and maintain the area securely. Once Rydia is safe in the Medical Room and the area is fully closed off, we'll join with the rest of our class in the upcoming lesson."

"But, wouldn't that mean abandoning the crime scene and the investigation?" Terra wondered worriedly, biting her lip in the process as she cradled the unconscious Rydia in her arms. "We can't just walk away!"

"Don't worry about that; it will only be a temporary setback." Onion Knight assured, understanding Terra's worry. "As soon as the lesson ends – or before if possible, depending if the teacher would allow for us to head out early – we'll return here and fully investigate the room. By that time however; the Headmistress, other members of the Student Council, and possibly the public services would also be investigating the scene. So it may be difficult for us to get anything that hasn't already been found." Terra nodded with a confident expression, taking in everything Onion Knight had told her. However, as she glanced down towards Rydia, a question formed in her mind.

"But ... how are we going to convince both the Headmistress and the Student Council about who the 'real' culprit is?" Terra cautiously questioned, thinking the situation through. "I mean ... if there is a strong possibility that Zidane is innocent."

Onion Knight drew in a deep sigh, raising his head and crossing his arms as he questioned that himself.

"Yes, I was wondering about that myself." Onion Knight spoke out, trying to solve the problems at hand.

"Consulting the Headmistress wouldn't be too much of a problem, but the rest of the Student Council will certainly be tough. Especially with Warrior of Light's intense grudge against Zidane, he'll be almost impossible to convince."

Dipping his head, Onion Knight glanced towards Terra in silence, desperately attempting to figure out how to pass the obstacle. But in the end, he gave out a small shrug.

"Well, for now, we'll continue as we were told." Onion Knight sighed, deciding that thinking about it any further would waste the precious time that they had. "I'll stand in front of the door and wait for the

Medical Staff to arrive and you can continue with managing Rydia's injury."

Terra gave a determined nod, accepting her current role. Onion Knight turned and stepped outside of the room, securing the scene of the incident and looking out for Firion and a member of the Medical Staff. Onion Knight closed the door most of the way, allowing a small open gap between the door and the frame so he and Terra can communicate. Only a minute after Onion Knight began standing guard, the Academy's bell rang throughout the building. Onion Knight drew in a deep breath, expecting for students to appear at any moment. Students began to appear from the staircase, gossiping cheerfully and freely. Many walked past Onion Knight, most of them ignoring him as he continued to stand in front of the room. However, some of the passing Students glanced towards him curiously, wondering why he was standing so tensely in front of the door.

Just then, Onion Knight noticed his fellow classmates appearing from the staircase. Cloud Strife, Squall Leonhart and Tidus appeared as a three-man group. Tidus had been leading the other two as he constantly ranted on, Cloud and Squall however both seemed as though they were bored out of their minds. Between the two, Squall had fallen into a very gloomy expression whilst Cloud seemed to be close to nodding off; something that was the norm for them. Abruptly, Tidus caught sight of Onion Knight and began to run over to him, much to Onion Knight's sudden displeasure. The one of two people Onion Knight truly did not wish to see at this moment in time, the other being Bartz Klauser due to having similar annoying character traits to Tidus. Cloud and Squall decided to follow Tidus, hoping to accompany Onion Knight with knowing and hoping completely that he was someone who had a sense of sanity. Onion Knight took a swift glance back and peeked through the gap of the room, checking of Terra and Rydia before he had to deal with Tidus and his curiosity-filled personality. As he confirmed to himself that they were safe, he switched his sight back towards the trio. To his sudden shock, Tidus had loomed over him with a cheesy smile, causing Onion Knight's whole body to suddenly shiver. Cloud and Squall stood either side of Tidus and enclosed Onion Knight in a minuscule, claustrophobic space. With Cloud's drained expression on the left, Squall's gloomy expression on the right, and Tidus' hyped expression in the middle; Onion Knight struggled to breathe through this enclosing space.

"Hey man, what's up?" Tidus innocently greeted him, his cheesy smile showing off completely.

Onion Knight began to shuffle his feet back, struggling to keep a strong mind.

"I-I'm fine ..." Onion Knight stuttered, feeling tense by the three crowding round him. "I-is it possible if y-you could take a step back?"

"Why's that?" Tidus curiously wondered, unable to grasp the reason behind Onion Knight's request.

"I-it is just that ..." Onion Knight struggled to answer, unable to form his words as he continued to feel the tension of the classmates looming over him. His mind, on the other hand, began to call out in frustration: ***Please don't make me say it...***

"It's just what?" Tidus echoed in a confused tone, his mind unable to click that he was causing Onion Knight to lose his stability.

"Well, I ..." Onion Knight murmured, feeling his legs beginning to shake whilst his mind yelled out in pain: ***Just get the hint already!***

Unlike Tidus, Cloud suddenly snapped into reality from his daze and realized Onion Knight's problem, taking a step back. Squall glanced over to Cloud in with a confused expression, but decided to follow his action and give Onion Knight some space. Tidus, however, did the exact opposite.

"And besides, why are you standing here when the classroom for our Food-Tech lesson is across the other side of the corridor?" Tidus added to his curious questions, abruptly shuffling forward towards Onion Knight and beginning to cheekily peer into the room behind Onion Knight. "Is there something happening in this room?"

I'M GOING TO SAY IT! Onion Knight's mind cried out in agony, biting his lip and whole body shaking.

"Please, just ..."

"Uh, Tidus ..." Cloud called to his friend with caution, noticing that Tidus wasn't noticing the situation he was causing.

"Huh, what's the matter?" Tidus wondered and he glanced back.

But it was too late, Onion Knight's mind had snapped completely.

"IS IT TOO MUCH TO ASK FOR YOU TO GIVE ME SOME SPACE TO BREATHE!?" Onion Knight abruptly roared out, unable to hold back his anger any longer. "I CAN'T KEEP CONSCIOUS WITH YOU TOWERING OVER ME LIKE THAT BECAUSE OF MY SMALL STATURE! DO YOU EVEN KNOW THE MEANING OF PERSONAL SPACE, YOU DENSE FOOL!?"

Tidus instantly leaped back with shock, allowing Onion Knight to regain his senses again. Other Students passing the corridor suddenly glanced over towards them with surprise and curiosity, wondering as to what was going on. Onion Knight began to take in deep recovery breaths with relief; however, his eyes were wide and pupil's dilated as though he still had terror in his mind.

DAMN! I SAID IT! Onion Knight's mind bellowed out, feeling foolish himself for admitting about the problem with his height.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Onion Knight." Tidus innocently apologized, giving a sorrowful expression. "I didn't mean to trip you out."

"N-no, don't worry about that, you didn't know." Onion Knight hastily answered back with a calm smile, hoping to brush away the problem that had occurred to him. However, his mind had been had a different thought altogether: **Yes, don't worry ... I'll kill you in your sleep ...**

"Is something wrong out there, Onion Knight?" Terra called out curiously, hearing his sudden outburst.

"Hey, is that Terra? What's she doing in there?" Tidus instantly began to wonder, trying to get another peek into the room.

"Don't concern yourself with what she's doing; she's just treating someone's wound at the moment."

Onion Knight hastily spoke back, still taking in air but blocking the door from Tidus' curious sight.

After a moment of recovery, Cloud felt it was necessary to bring up the question again that Tidus had asked a moment before.

"So, why are you standing here?" Cloud questioned, curious as to what was currently occurring. "You said something about Terra treating an injured person in the room behind you."

Onion Knight straightened up his posture and nodded to Cloud, accepting to speak about the incident but on a mild level. As quick and simple as he possibly could, Onion Knight addressed the situation to Cloud, Squall, and Tidus. He made sure that key points were left out such as who the victim and the actual culprit were.

"That's horrible ... I hope the girl is ok." Cloud sympathized, feeling sorrowful for the person even though he only knew that it was a female student.

"I'm sure she'll be fine, I bet you that she's a trooper!" Tidus cheerfully admitted, acting as optimistic as ever.

However, Squall shook his head with a bored expression, his statement caused Onion Knight to jump up in surprise.

"Whatever ... I'm sure the culprit will get what he deserves." He murmured, showing no sympathetic expression whatsoever. "... It'll save me from any further hassle in the future."

HUH!? He knew that Zidane could have been involved with the incident! Onion Knight's mind suddenly exploded with thoughts, causing him to begin raising suspicions. **But ... how did he know!?** Just then, four members of the Medical Staff had finally appeared with first aid equipment, including a wheelchair that would be used in order to move Rydia safely from the room of the incident to the Medical Room. Onion Knight stepped to the side as the team rushed through the door; Cloud, Squall, and Tidus also had moved out of the way to allow leeway for the Medical Team to move in and out of the area. Onion Knight then noticed Firion appear from behind the Medical team, stopping beside Onion Knight

the moment he reached the group. Onion Knight watched as Terra assisted with moving Rydia safely onto the wheelchair, Rydia seeming to still be completely unconscious.

"Aren't you guys supposed to be in lesson right now?" Firion suddenly questioned the other three fellow classmates, causing Onion Knight to realize the time. "I'm sure Food Tech has already started."

"Argh ... do we have to go!?" Tidus complained suddenly, as though hoping to get away from the lesson.

"This looks so much more fun though!"

"This isn't a silly fun event, you know ..." Squall commented to him, giving off an un-amused aura.

"I know, I know." Tidus sighed in but frustration and sorrow, looking down on himself. "I just felt like skipping the lesson. But ... what about you guys?"

Tidus had directed his attention towards Onion Knight and Firion, whilst also implying Terra. Onion Knight and Firion glanced towards each other, wondering to themselves about what they should do. In the end, however, they both felt it was necessary to assist with investigation the incident.

"We'll be in the lesson once we've finished our service with this." Onion Knight answered, keeping a determined mind. "Please inform the teacher about the reason for us being late."

"We will." Cloud accepted, smiling as he nodded. "We'll make sure she understands the situation."

With that, the three classmates began to make their way towards the Food Tech room, however Squall halted his movement. He glanced back towards Onion Knight, showing a sharp glare in his direction.

"Oh, by the way Onion Knight ..." Squall called out, feeling the need to speak. "Choose your friends wisely; you wouldn't want to end up with any odd-balls."

As Squall followed the other two, Onion Knight watched him disappear with a suspicious expression. Onion Knight struggled to understand why he spoke like that, similarly to the earlier comment he spoke of. However, Onion Knight's intuition began to spark up, suggesting that Squall maybe linked to Zidane and his 'supposed' crime. Unfortunately, he needed more information to go on in order to make full assumptions.

"Anyway, I'm going to inform the Headmistress." Onion Knight hastily stated, shaking his head and placed the intuitions towards the back of his mind due to having to deal with more important current issues.

"Go on ahead, I'll hold down the fort." Firion nodded, smiling coolly as he stood strong beside the door. Onion Knight thanked him and hurriedly rushed up the staircase, hoping that Headmistress Cosmos was either still in the Council Room of her Office. The moment he reached the 5th floor however, he noticed Headmistress Cosmos rushing towards him.

"S-sorry for the delay – (huff ... huff ...) – I heard about the incident." Cosmos apologized through her rushed and concerned voice, trying to regain her breath. "Is the Female Student safe?"

"Don't worry, she's being treated by the Medical Staff and is currently being moved to the Medical Room." Onion Knight explained with a serious nod, giving a confident expression.

Cosmos gave out a sigh of relief, feeling slightly more relaxed thanks to learning about her main concern.

The moment they got back to the 4th Floor of the Academy; Cosmos and Onion Knight had entered the room, both examining the scene with tense eyes as they stood between the scene and the door of the room. Firion had also entered the room; however, he seemed to be in deep thought with a full investigation of the area. He had been wearing clear rubber gloves and kneeling down on the floor to conduct his investigation, seeming as though he was a real Detective. Terra had decided to stand out of the way, taking time to recover herself from managing Rydia's injury and safety. Onion Knight took in the scene with great detail in his mind, trying to figure out the many holes to this whole ordeal. At first the room was almost completely silent, apart from the gust of wind echoing through the room from the smashed window. However, Headmistress Cosmos had been the first to break the silence.

"Has the culprit of this incident been detained?" Cosmos questioned tensely, her eyes locked on the

area of the crime scene.

Onion Knight first hesitated due to difficulty with finding the correct words, but did not take long to reply. "A suspect had been taken in by Warrior of Light; in fact he is a fellow classmate of ours: Zidane Tribal." Onion Knight admitted to her, although gaining mixed feeling about how to approach the topic. "Terra and Myself had found him here when the incident had occurred; it had only been him and the victim who was at the scene when we entered."

Cosmos nodded slowly as she took in everything Onion Knight, "Was there any crucial details about the victim: Rydia?" She then wondered, keeping a clear mind.

"She had a head injury from colliding against the wall in –what my guess was – some sort of conflict that occurred during the incident. She was also missing a Hair Ornament that she would regularly wear."

Onion Knight answered, remembering everything that he noticed when he and Terra first found Rydia.

Cosmos then drew in a deep breath, closing her eyes as she thought about the details of the information. Onion Knight glanced over towards Firion; who had been taking photos of sections of the area including the broken window and the small, cracked blood mark on the wall. Firion had also been taking notes about the crime scene with a small notepad he had taken out of his pocket, bullet-pointing important facts about the incident as he continued on. It was like he had been prepared for this type of event to occur!

"Firion, did you find anything during the examination?" Onion Knight called out to him with curiosity, wondering if he picked anything unexpected.

"Well, I found evidence that would certainly work against Zidane." Firion began to state, initially causing Onion Knight to feel cautious. "However, there's also evidence that doesn't seem to add up correctly with what we know about the incident entirely."

"What do you mean by that?" Onion Knight wondered as his mind began to open up more from hearing the statement.

"There are a few strands of long brown hair found in the area that does not belong to either Rydia or Zidane, who have green and blond hair respectively. And they certainly don't belong to either of us."

Firion explained to him, confusion lighting up in his expressions as he look out a small, clear plastic pouch containing the hair-strands. "Additionally, there were small pieces of fabric that hung on the shards of glass from the smashed window."

"Is that so?" Onion Knight commented, intrigued about the finding. "But, what's the fabric got to do with not adding correctly to the incident?"

"It may seem relatable at first but as I looked closely, the direction of the torn fabric indicates the possibility that the culprit had made an escape through that window." Firion continued on.

"Huh?" Both Onion Knight and Terra expressed with confusion, with Onion Knight carrying on with his thoughts and questions. "Wait, but Zidane was found inside the room! Could it just be possible that the clothing of either the culprit or Rydia's Academy Uniform got caught against the glass?"

"See, that was what I first thought as well. But as I watched Rydia get wheeled out of the room, her whole visible clothing seemed to be fully intact." Firion quickly added, shaking his head. "And the state of the fabric on the glass seemed that it was rather unlikely that it was a mere coincident."

Onion Knight raised an eyebrow to this statement, finding the evidence rather odd. But as the information seeped through his mind, more holes seemed to suddenly appear.

"I've just realized!" Onion Knight leaped up, noticing more flaws to the incident. "When we found Zidane here through to when he was taken away by Warrior of Light, the Hair Ornament wasn't anywhere in his possession. However, we found him immediately after the incident occurred. Surely, if he was truly the culprit, he couldn't have hidden the Ornament in time, could he?"

There was a small moment of silence in the room, all of them deep in thought with figuring out the answers to the rising number of questions. Abruptly, Headmistress Cosmos clapped her hands together,

causing the three students - Onion Knight, Firion, and Terra - to leap up in fright.

"Well then, it seems a difficult ordeal has been brought upon us." Cosmos suddenly announced cheerfully, as if she was planning to speak out in riddles. "But we won't be able to find our answers standing around idly like this; we'll have to move this investigation up to the 'next' level."

The unexpected statement made by Cosmos caused the three students to become speechless, unable to answer back. This sudden change of emotion had been completely out of the norm for the Headmistress. Onion Knight, however, was able to break this tension.

"What do you have in mind, Headmistress?" Onion Knight questioned, somehow curious about what she had been going on about.

But, to his shock, Headmistress Cosmos shot him an unexpectedly dark glare, as though he had pushed the wrong button.

"Oh, just call me Cosmos ..." The Headmistress murmured in a threatening tone, her eyes stabbing into Onion Knight's mind.

"Err ... um ... Sorry, Cosmos." Onion Knight hesitantly apologized, completely baffled by the Headmistress' sudden switch in personality.

"Anyway, I have an idea in mind that may help us solve the case." Cosmos continued on, switching back to her usual, caring personality like nothing had just happened. "But this will mean I'll have to prepare everything within the next hour. So, for now I'll have this room boarded off from the rest of the school and set up the plans ready for the Academy's Assembly."

"What do you mean by these plans?" Terra, who stepped up in view next to Onion Knight, questioned her with curiosity.

"Don't you worry about that for now, I'll tell you all after you have finished the current lessons." Cosmos assured the three of them, keeping her secrets to herself. "So for the time being, it's best we hold the investigation till when the lessons are finished."

Onion Knight, Firion, and Terra glanced towards each other with odd expressions, unable to grasp what the Headmistress was speaking about. But, in the end, they agreed to follow Cosmos' suggestion and began to make their way out of the room. But before Onion Knight stepped outside the door, a small glint caught the corner of his eye. As he turned towards the direction of the glimmer, he instantly caught sight on an object lying on the floor in the distance. He stepped up towards the object and knelt down, examining the details. To his surprise, it was a red, crystallized jewel. He carefully picked it up and analysed to jewel in its entirety. He then began to wonder if it belonged to Rydia's missing Hair Ornament. But for the time being he placed in a secure section of his Blazer pocket and swiftly caught up with Firion and Terra.

As the three entered the Food Tech Room, they could instantly smell the filling texture from the ovens. The noises of their fellow Class 13A students talking with each other as they were working together in order to make exquisite food. Firion and Terra took in the smell with great appreciation, unable to resist. Onion Knight, however, couldn't bring himself to appreciate the smell. He turned his head with frustration, refusing to make eye contact with the teacher of the lesson.

"Sorry we're late miss." Terra called out cheerfully, unable to notice Onion Knight's sudden scorn expression.

Onion Knight drew in a deep breath, wishing Terra didn't call out to her. Footsteps then approached the three of them from the distance.

"Don't worry; we've only just started with making scones." The Female teacher answered back, a smile showing on her face.

Onion Knight grunted, refusing to look eye to eye with the teacher whatsoever. The teacher then turned to Onion Knight's direction, looking down on him with sudden intimidation.

"Well now, Onion Knight, is something not to your liking?" the teacher questioned, giving a dark, low

chuckle.

"N-no ... it's nothing." Onion Knight regretfully answered back, biting the inside of his lip as he spoke. "Then look me in the eye when you're speaking, you ungrateful child." The teacher then abruptly spat, crossing her arms in a strict position.

Hesitantly, Onion Knight turned his head back and glared towards his Food Tech teacher. He could suddenly taste the blood from his lip due to his teeth digging in when he heard one of his most 'hated' words being called to him. The Teacher had been wearing a neat, white chef uniform and a smooth, black office miniskirt. Her long hair was dark silver and had been held back by netting. She had very strict expressions, especially when talking to Onion Knight. Her name: Cloud of Darkness.

"S-sorry ... Miss." Onion Knight stuttered, giving off his unusually hesitant expression.

"Apology accepted." Cloud of Darkness nodded, but her expression did not change. "Now then, you and Terra can pair off and begin making your scones whilst Firion can help Bartz seeing as he's on his own this time."

The three of them nodded and moved to their designated work place within the room. The Food Tech room was styled exactly like a large, open kitchen. Filled with various cooking equipment and several machines, the walls were covered in various posters and sheets of paper informing about the ideal diet and unique recipes. Air vents were situated around sections of the ceiling to allow for steam and smoke to be vented out efficiently, meaning that there wouldn't be any problems with fire alarms or lack of visibility.

For the next 30 minutes, Onion Knight and Terra had set up and begun helping each other to cook the scones. However, every attempt on the scones Onion Knight had done seemed to keep getting burnt or even crumble, much to his frustration.

"Onion Knight! Throw them away and try again!" Cloud of Darkness demanded the moment she spotted Onion Knight's failure, her voice raised over the noises in the room to a strong level. "You are wasting such valuable ingredients."

"Again!?! But it's my 5th attempt!" Onion Knight complained back, feeling ever so annoyed that every cooking attempt he had made so far had failed in various ways.

"Tch, Such irony! You call yourself the 'Onion Knight' and yet you cannot even cook something as simple as scones!" Cloud of Darkness cheekily mocked, giving out a low, dark giggle. "Maybe you should look at Squall's fantastic masterpiece! It may even give you a bit of inspiration!"

Onion Knight turned towards Squall's position, only for his mouth to abruptly drop to the floor and his eyes widen with complete shock. The rest of the group had gathered around Squall's work area with shock and awe, gazing at his tray of perfect scones with admiration. Squall showed off no expression whatsoever, finding the attention frustrating and an invasion of his personal space.

"Woah! How did you make them SO TASTY!?" Tidus wondered with awe, chomping down on one of the scones. "Are you a part-time chef or something!?"

"Er ... not really." Squall shook his head with his usual bored expression, finding this all irritating. "My pathetic Dad refuses to cook at home with using his usual 'leg cramp' excuses, so I just do it myself."

"Wow, this is amazing!" Bartz shouted out cheerfully, feeling the tastes excite his mouth.

Onion Knight dipped his head in depression, feeling completely useless with his terrible cooking skills. Terra placed a hand on his shoulder and quietly giggled, giving her usual sweet smile.

"Don't worry, Onion Knight." Terra comforted him, looking over towards Squall's work table in the process. "I'm sure you'll get the recipes correct one day."

"Yes, but it doesn't help with Miss 'Strict' over there constantly dragging me down to the ground whenever I slip up." Onion Knight pouted, glaring towards Cloud of Darkness with stabbing eyes. "She's been mocking me about my poor cooking skills since the start of last year."

"Well, look on the bright side, at least Warrior of Light isn't here." Terra sweetly pointed out, allowing

Onion Knight to notice that Warrior of Light isn't anywhere in sight. "I'm positive that he would have added his own comments to the fire in some way to another."

"That is true." Onion Knight raised his head back up, looking around. "Where is he anyway?"

Just then, however, the door to the Food Tech Room suddenly opened up. One of the Medical Staff entered in a rush and caught sight of Terra and Onion Knight. The whole of the Class turned and watched the Medical Staff with curiosity, wondering as to what was happening.

"Onion Knight and Terra Branford!" The Medical Staff Member hastily announced, trying to gain back his breath. "Rydia has just gained consciousness, and wishes to speak to you!"

Onion Knight jumped up, his eyes wide with sudden ambition as he knew this had been his chance to escape the lesson. He turned towards Cloud of Darkness, hoping she would approve him leaving the lesson.

"It's fine, they can leave." Cloud of Darkness accepted formally, nodding towards the Medical Staff Member.

Onion Knight felt his heart leap with joy, packing up his work surface as fast as possible and leaving the room with Terra in no time whatsoever. Cloud of Darkness glared as the two left, wondering as to why they were in such a rush.

Onion Knight and Terra reached the Medical Room in barely any wasted time. They entered the room with expressions of respect; taking in a deep, meaningful breath. As the door opened, they both noticed Rydia sitting up on the bed, looking rather distant to the world.

"How are you feeling, Rydia?" Onion Knight politely asked, stepping up beside the bed with Terra beside him.

"I'm feeling fine, thank you." Rydia nodded cheerfully, turning her head towards their direction. "I wanted to say 'thank you' to both of you for helping me when I was attacked earlier."

Onion Knight and Terra smiled with appreciation, feeling cheerful that Rydia was making a safe recovery. However, her eyes still seemed rather distant and unfocused, causing Onion Knight to begin to wonder. He sat down on the chair beside the bed and locked his sight towards her.

"Rydia, there is something important I'd like to discuss with you, and I'm sorry if I'm treading too far with this." Onion Knight began with a serious tone in his voice. "Do you remember anything about the incident? Who was the person that attacked you? Why did that person attack you? And, why were you in that room?"

Rydia hesitated, having trouble to form her words correctly.

"I..." She finally began, tears suddenly welling up from her eyes. "I don't remember ... I can't remember the incident at all!"

Just then, she abruptly placed the palms of her hands against her face, hiding it from the two as she broke down in tears. Terra instantly sat down next to her on the bed and comforted her, feeling saddened that Rydia was in such a state.

"M-my Hair Ornament ..." Rydia continued in a struggle, unable to stop sobbing. "It was a gift from my Mother, I must get it back!"

Onion Knight leaned back on his chair, gritting his teeth in frustration. Without Rydia remembering anything about what had happened in the incident. It was going to be ever so difficult for him to solve the case. He struggled to bring up any solution in his mind towards solving this incident. Just then, the door to the room opened suddenly with Headmistress Cosmos stepping in, showing an unexpected proud yet also excited expression about her.

"Don't you worry, Rydia. We'll solve this case and get you your Ornament back in no time." Cosmos assured her, smiling kindly as she stepped up to the bed.

Onion Knight and Terra glanced towards each other with odd expressions, wondering why she was acting like so.

"What do you mean, Cosmos?" Onion Knight questioned, looking up towards her curiously.

"Well, it's simple." Cosmos began to open up, giving a rare, excited smile. "During the Student Assembly, the Academy will have a Court Trial that will determine the Case of the incident."

Onion Knight's mind suddenly shattered with shock, unable to grasp what he had just heard.

"A Court Trial!?" He echoed as he leaped up from his seat. "But who will be the Lawyer and Prosecutor of the Case!? And, what about the Judge!?"

The Headmistress gave out a sudden small chuckle.

"I'll be bringing in an old friend of mine who is an official Court Judge." Cosmos answered with pride.

"However, I have decided that two 'Gifted' Students will take the roles of Lawyer and Prosecutor."

Onion Knight and Terra listened in, wondering what Students will take the role.

"Warrior of Light will take the role of Prosecutor. Whilst you, Onion Knight, will take the role of Lawyer and defend Zidane in the upcoming Trial." Cosmos announced, giving a sweet, cheesy smile.

10 - Arc 3 (1): Fueling the Fire

The Detention Room: A small, plain, boring room that is used to isolate trouble-making Students from the rest of the Academy for short periods of time. This room was situated on the top floor of the Academy, close to the Headmistress' Office and Student Council Room. The walls of this room had nothing in terms of Academy posters or notes, whilst only a small sized window is able to allow light within the entirety of the room. Within this room holds only a small, mahogany desk and two plastic chairs facing each other, seemingly used more for interrogation purposes rather than anything else. As stated within the rules of Dissidia Academy: Students can only be held within this room for the maximum of two hours, and must be situated with a qualified Staff or selected Student Council Member at all times.

Suddenly, the door to the room swung open and slammed against the wall, causing a small crack to appear. Warrior of Light shoved Zidane Tribal into the room with aggression, his eyes burning with intensity. From the time he detained Zidane to the moment they entered the Detention Room, Warrior of Light was completely silent. During the first half of the journey, Zidane had constantly repeated that he was 'innocent' and was not involved with the incident involving assaulting the female Student Rydia and stolen her precious Hair Ornament. But as much as he tried, Warrior of Light refused to believe anything he said. During the latter half of the journey, both had kept silent until they step into the Detention Room.

Warrior of Light closed the door behind him but kept his eyes locked onto Zidane as though he was some kind of roach. Zidane, however, had stumbled slightly due to Warrior of Light aggressive push. He swiftly recovered and twisted towards Warrior of Light, soothing his arms.

"There wasn't any need for that, Light." Zidane moaned painfully, attempting to keep a serious tone to the situation. "I mean, you could have just-"

"Sit down." Warrior of Light interrupted with a tense command, indicating towards the seat nearest to Zidane.

"Ah! Ok, ok! Geez, no need to be so pushy..." Zidane answered back with a startle.

Zidane raised his hands up to show his innocence, deciding to comply with Warrior of Light's command. He drew back the seat from under the table and perched himself in silence, eyes locked onto Warrior of Light with caution. Warrior of Light took the seat on the opposite side of the table, keeping up his elegant posture in the process. There was a moment of tense silence between the two; Warrior of Light glaring with spite towards Zidane as he began to think up what questions to ask, whilst Zidane sat uncomfortably on his chair as he tried to awkwardly avert Warrior of Light's death gaze. Warrior of Light then took out a pen and some lined paper, preparing himself so that he had evidence from this questioning. Finally, the interrogation began.

"Due to previous reputations, Zidane, you should understand why I detained you." Warrior of Light began, already jotting down notes on the paper.

"Yeah, it seems that I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time." Zidane jokingly answered, giving a cheeky smile.

Warrior of Light paused slightly, and then continued on.

"You seem very ... light-hearted about this, considering that fact that you are currently being accused of assault and theft." Warrior of Light glared with a somewhat curious expression.

Suddenly, Zidane's expression suddenly jumped from light-hearted to serious in a flash, "Light, I already told you many times; I didn't attack Rydia. And also, the only one who has actually accused me

so far is you!"

"And do you have proof that I'm wrong?" Warrior of Light hit back, ignoring the nickname he was given. Zidane hesitated, biting his lip with a cautious expression. But, he then decided to turn the tables around ... almost literally.

"No, I don't ... But do you have any proof that you're right?" Zidane somewhat confidently answered, trying to keep his serious tone.

Warrior of Light gave of a small, yet surprised gasp; another thing he hated about Zidane had been his self-confident mind.

"Don't get cocky with me." Warrior of Light raised his voice slightly, keeping control of the situation.

"I'd suggest you mind your mouth if you want to come out of this innocent."

"Face it though, Light. You're blinded by your own arrogance." Zidane assured him, keeping a cool head. "If you just listened more and considered the thoughts of others, things would go a lot smoother."

"Tch!" Warrior of Light gritted his teeth, finding this a complete nuisance. "How can I, or anyone else with a sense of logic, truly consider your opinions if you always pull such pranks and rebellious acts." Zidane leaned back on his chair, placing his hand behind his head as he answered, "It's true that my type of enjoyment is to pull tricks on people and steal things in their procession. But, whenever I do stuff like that, I'll always consider peoples safety and always give the items back to them ... eventually."

"Is that right ..." Warrior of Light cautiously glared, feeling unable to determine if Zidane's statement was a lie or not. "So, does that mean you considered Sephiroth's and the whole Class' safety when you and Bartz smashed the Great Globe yesterday?"

"Heheh ... that was a complete accident on both mine and Bartz's behalf, and thankfully no one was injured in the end." Zidane replied with embarrassment, biting the side of his lip as he wished that incident hadn't been brought up.

"Fine then, so what about during the first day of the Academic Year when you stole my President Badge?" Warrior of Light then questioned, crossing his arms tensely. "Were you planning on giving that back?"

"I was just playing about with you! All I wanted to do was to get to know you better." Zidane cheekily answered back, showing his innocence. "And besides, I would have given it back to you if Squall didn't interfere beforehand."

Warrior of Light sighed with frustration, he wasn't getting as far as he hoped for so far. The one thing he needed was to push for the truth, but nothing from Zidane's statements helped towards his belief of this thief being the sole culprit within the current incident. However, it had suddenly clicked in his mind that he needed to use a different approach, one that would cause Zidane to slip up unintentionally and give Warrior of Light the info he needed to claim that his intuitions were correct. He straightened up his back and cooled his breath, gripping the pen tightly and he continued.

"So then, if you claim that you were not the culprit of the assault, then why were you at the scene of the crime?" Warrior of Light questioned, his eyes locked onto Zidane and refusing to divert attention.

Zidane's tail suddenly twitched, causing his eyes to divert awkwardly from Warrior of Light's tense gaze. One of Warrior of Light's eyebrows rose curiously towards this sudden change in attitude.

"I-I ... was just, you know ... I-in the room next door w-when it happened." Zidane stuttered as he spoke, struggling to speak and began to sweat. "It was a coincidence that I was so near."

"Wait ... is that all!?" Warrior of Light began to complain, raising his arms up as he shrugged with frustration. "That's far too vague for me to get anything useful! ... What are you hiding from me?"

"N-nothing..." Zidane hastily shook his head, turning his head away.

Warrior of Light knew at that moment, he was hiding something crucial about the whole incident. He then kept hold of his intuitions, knowing he may have hit jackpot.

"I need a lot more than just 'I was in the room next door' for me to actually consider believing you."

Warrior of Light spat back, refusing to dwindle.

"I know that!" Zidane answered back, switching back to eye contact. "It's just ... I don't feel that it's right for me to explain my side of the story just yet."

"So when would be the right time?" Warrior of Light's voice began to grow louder, frustration rising. "All you've been doing so far is avoiding the main topic with your quirky remarks. And then when I finally corner you, you give me something so vague that it brings us straight back to square one!"

"You can talk! Your constant tense glares and arrogant attitude isn't helping this whatsoever!" Zidane argued back, although a slight twinge in his lip showed he enjoyed winding Warrior of Light up. "What happened to the 'fair' Light I met on the first day when you helped out Bartz!?"

"I told you to stop calling me that!" Warrior of Light blurted out, showing he was completely irritated.

"... But your name is such a mouthful." Zidane commented in a sudden laid back manner, leaning on his chair once again as he gave a moping expression. "If it bothers you so much, why don't you just tell everyone your 'actual' name?"

"My actual name ..." Warrior of Light echoed with hesitation, his head lowered with a somewhat shameful expression. "I was never given one."

"Wha – Wait, seriously!?" Zidane abruptly gaped, leaping up on his seat. "Man ... that must suck! I mean, that must REALLY suck for you!"

"L-look, you're the one being questioned here, not me." Warrior of Light swiftly changed back to the actual subject. "Why are you trying to avoid this? Considering as you're so 'desperate' in trying to show your innocence, you would be giving me compelling reasons by now."

"I feel that if I told you now, it would only lead to you changing it about to suit your own needs." Zidane admitted in an oddly dull tone, scratching the back of his head awkwardly.

Warrior of Light suddenly jerked back from his seat, his expression frozen tensely. Zidane saw right through him, even though he hadn't been doing much to keep his intentions secret. He then gave out a small, low groan; struggling to think up what to do next. However, he realised the inevitable had arrived, and all he could do now was leave this to the higher-ups (teachers).

"Fine then ... you can have it your way." Warrior of Light finally concluded with a sigh, rising up from his seat. "Just be aware that I will NOT stop until I extract the truth from you."

He began to make his way to the door, only to here Zidane call out to him with a frustrated tone of voice.

"Oi! What am I supposed to do now!?" Zidane rose from his chair, palms firmly pressing against the desk as he glared towards Warrior of Light. "Should I just sit here or do nothing or are you going to let me go?"

Warrior of Light turned his head glimpsing towards the frustrated and confused Zidane, "I'll have a member of staff head over and watch over you whilst I consult with the Headmistress. You'll sit in here until further notice."

With that, he opened the door and stepped out of the room, taking in the air around him as though he had been trapped in a stuffed, enclosed area. But as the door began to close, he heard Zidane murmur something that caught his mind.

"Light ... be sure that you outside the box with this."

Warrior of Light watched as the door to the Detention Room closed up, breaking his sight of Zidane. He then stood still in the middle of the corridor, considering his next options. He then sighed as he lifted his head up, glaring out of the window next to him.

"... I told him not to call me that silly nickname." Warrior of Light groaned, crossing his arms and keeping his usual elegant posture.

However ... he began to wonder as to why he had been refusing his fellow classmates from calling him by that name. He already knew that he would rather be called by his full title; however, he realised that there were parts of him that desired to find out his 'true' name, even though he only know one person

that could guide him to the truth.

As his mind snapped back to reality, he swiftly switched the thought to the back of his mind. In its place, he focused back on his interrogation with Zidane. He knew that it didn't go to his initial liking, considering that he couldn't gain any crucial information out of the suspect. But as he gathered his mind on the subject, some of Zidane's quotes began to haunt his memory.

What happened to the 'fair' Light I met on the first day when you helped out Bartz? The voice continued to echo through his mind.

At first, Warrior of Light shook his head to try and get rid of the thought, however, this wasn't possible. He began to question his own motives towards this case; whether he had been involved with this for the truth of the matter or to satisfy his own greed by exposing Zidane.

"You seem like a lost lamb, standing in the middle of this corridor. Is something on your mind?" A sudden, deep voice called out.

Warrior of Light felt as though he had literally leapt out of his own skin the moment the voice had abruptly spoken out. He switched to where the voice had originated from, only to then notice the one person he despised more than anything towering over him.

"Is there any need for you to stand this close to me, Garland?" Warrior of Light moodily spoke back, his whole body beginning to feel heavy under the towering figure.

Garland took a step back, giving Warrior of Light room to gasp for air after the sudden pressure being in a sudden enclosed space. Warrior of Light glared towards the masked man with cautious yet frustrated eyes.

"Well, now I know how it feels like to be Onion Knight ..." He then commented to himself, taking in cool breaths. He then targeted his voice towards Garland, ready for whatever comes back to him in return.

"So, why are you here?"

"Well, if you must know, I was taking a short stroll around the Academy, considering that I have no lesson to teach at this current time. During this stroll, I just happened to have noticed your presence nearby." Garland began to explain in a gracious and formal tone under his demonic-looking helmet, something Warrior of Light had never settled with. "From the Headmistress herself, I had heard about the incident that had occurred during the end of Lunch Break. She spoke about you dealing with the supposed 'suspect' of the case at hand, and I thought it would be wise to check up on your interrogation."

"I see ... unfortunately, I couldn't gain any important information from my interrogation on Zidane."

Warrior of Light admitted as he switched his sight towards the Detention Room door. "It seemed to have been a waste of time so far."

Garland silently nodded, showing a curious posture even though his expressions were hidden under his helmet.

"Do you wish for any assistance?" Garland suggested, acting rather generous all of a sudden.

Warrior of Light glared towards him with hesitation, cautious as to whether to take him up on his offer. But in the end, he realised that he needed to keep to the Detention Room rules of the Academy, even if it meant passing over the responsibility to Garland.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I would like some assistance." Warrior of Light nodded, although holding back his annoyance to the situation. "I need you to watch over Zidane whilst I locate the Headmistress. He has 1¼ hours until he has to leave the room and I need to consult with the Headmistress on current events."

Garland nodded as he understood the situation. Warrior of Light, however, found himself already regretting his decision, despising the fact that he had to give a request to Garland of all people. Unfortunately, he couldn't turn back on this now.

"The Headmistress is situated in the Medical Room currently, if you wish to speak to her." Garland

indicated to Warrior of Light, showing his unusual kind manner.

Warrior of Light began to step past Garland as he made his way towards Headmistress Cosmos' destination, refusing to speak another word to the teacher. As he passed the Student Council Room and reached the staircase, he heard Garland call out to him.

"Just on a side note, Warrior of Light, it would be rather pleasant if you began calling me as 'Professor' Garland."

Just then, Warrior of Light whole body jerked horrifically. He felt as though he would actually vomit by the idea. With eyes watering and mouth holding back his stomach, he glimpsed towards Garland one last time.

"Well ...?" Garland curiously asked.

"OVER MY DEAD BODY!" He then bellowed with anger, furious with the thought of calling Garland as a 'Professor'.

With haste, Warrior of Light disappeared down the staircase. Garland watched him leave, giving out a small chuckle. He then turned towards the door to the Detention Room, grasping the handle and passing through into the room where Zidane was held.

Back in the Medical Room, Onion Knight was seated on his chair with his mouth gaped open and eyes wide with shock. Momentarily, the room had been in complete silence, whilst Headmistress Cosmos stood with a gleaming smile across her face. Terra, who had been perched on the edge of Rydia's bed, had been taken by surprise of the announcement made by the Headmistress. Rydia, on the other hand, seemed to have been confused to the whole scenario. Finally, Onion Knight broke the silent tension.

"M-me, as Zidane's Lawyer?" Onion Knight muttered with disbelief. "Th-that's ridiculous! How could I be a Lawyer!? I don't have the training or knowledge for the profession, nor the experience of defending someone who has been accused."

"Ah, however, you do have the correct mind-set and determination for this task." Cosmos assured, her posture seemed to be strong and proud. "Besides, this isn't a 'true' Court Trial, but rather an experience for the students of this Academy. This Trial will help the Students towards an effective thought process. In addition, it should allow both you and Warrior of Light to conquer a psychological weakness that restricts your abilities."

"A psychological weakness...?" Onion Knight echoed curiously, wondering what she had meant by the phrase. But his mind clicked on about a certain 'weakness' automatically, "Wait ... Are you indicating about me being short!?"

"No, I would call that more of a 'physical' weakness. You'll understand what I mean soon enough."

Cosmos assured once again, giving out a small, light chuckle. "With that said, the reason behind my decision to cast you and Warrior of Light for the roles are due to the potential both of you have towards influencing the events of the Trial. That, and ... I do rather enjoy the tension with the rivalry between you two."

Onion Knight's eyes stared towards Cosmos with a blank yet irritated expression, finding her amusement about the rivalry between him and Warrior of Light a nuisance. But as the idea of having a Court Trial formed in his mind, Onion Knight felt the need to raise a question. However, it seemed Terra had beaten him to it.

"Cosmos, what would happen to Zidane if he was found Guilty of assault and theft by the end of this Trial?" Terra questioned, cautious about what would be the answer.

"He would face immediate Exclusion from the Academy." The Headmistress answered with a sudden serious tone.

Both Onion Knight and Terra felt their whole body tense up suddenly, realising how serious this could be for Zidane. They then glimpsed towards each other with worried expressions. Cosmos, however, gave

out a small cough to clear her throat as she wished to speak once again.

“Now then, I do have a question for you, Onion Knight.” She announced, giving off a confident aura.

“What do you believe about Zidane Tribal? Do you feel that he is Innocent or Guilty of the crimes he is accused of?”

Onion Knight hesitated upon hearing the question, lowering his head towards the floor as he recollected the events. He remembered that there were pieces of evidence set against Zidane; however other pieces seemed to act as a contradiction. He took a deep sigh as he finally answered.

“I believe that Zidane isn’t the culprit of the incident.” He admitted, hesitantly confident with his decision.

Cosmos nodded coolly, “Then it is settled.”

Suddenly, the door of the Medical Room opened up, allowing a figure through into the room.

“Cosmos, I’ve been interrogating Zidane but I have yet to – huh?” Warrior of Light spoke out as he entered, only to realise who else was situated in the room.

Upon entering, he caught sight of the Headmistress but also of Onion Knight, Terra, and Rydia. It had caught him by surprise that both Onion Knight and Terra had been in the room. Onion Knight, however, turned his head away with irritation the moment he caught sight of his so called ‘rival’.

“... And so the fool finally entered the field.” He teased mockingly under his breath, giving off a rather cynical smile.

Warrior of Light felt veins pop out from his skull the moment Onion Knight made his small quote. His eyes piercing the boy like daggers locked on its target.

“Oooh ... Is that a threat I smell.” Warrior of Light murmured in a dark, creepy voice, provoking the situation.

“Wait, you’ve lost your hearing over your own ego, is that why you have to smell now?” Onion Knight questioned mockingly. “I never would have thought that could happen to you so soon.”

Cosmos slowly clapped, deciding to break the tension. “Now then, I see you two are already in the right mind-set, but shall we-”

“I see, so the pint-sized ‘genius’ has developed a mouth to go with his cocky demeanour.” Warrior of Light cheekily taunted, crossing his arms as his glare towards Onion Knight intensified.

“WHO ARE YOU CALLING PINT-SIZED!?!” Onion Knight suddenly snapped, leaping out of his seat in rage.

Just then, both Warrior of Light and Onion Knight felt their ear get pulled unexpectedly. They felt their body get yanked from their place as they were pulled closer together against their own will. They slowly turned their heads as they noticed Headmistress Cosmos had prevented them from continuing their insults against each other. They both caught sight of her current expression and ... began to fear for their lives.

“I would prefer it that I wouldn’t be interrupted. Do not forget that we are in the Medical Room and excessive noise will NOT be tolerated.” Cosmos eerily spoke to the two, causing them the suddenly gain shivers down their spine as she tugged on their ears. “... Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” The two answered in unison, sweating with fear.

Cosmos nodded silently, somewhat pleased that she had gained control. Terra and Rydia watched as the two were released from the Headmistress’ grasp, feeling rather sorry for them.

“Now that’s been settled, you two can use that flare against each other during the Court Trial.” Cosmos assured the two as she reverted back to her usual personality.

“Court Trial?” Warrior of Light echoed in a confused tone, gazing towards the Headmistress as he soothed his ear.

“That’s correct...” Cosmos nodded, giving a sweet smile as she continued to detail Warrior of Light’s upcoming role.

As she continued to explain the situation, Warrior of Light began to show a variety of emotions, some rather unexpected. It began with curiosity, and then followed by shock, uneasiness, frustration, understanding, and then pride. As Cosmos concluded her explanation, Warrior of Light glimpsed towards Onion Knight with a blank face. Onion Knight had sat back on his seat as he watched Warrior of Light learn about what had been discussed before he arrived. Just then, Warrior of Light gave out a confident yet arrogant grin towards Onion Knight. Onion Knight instantly leapt back on his seat with sudden shock, glaring back as though their eyes were ready for another bout.

"Oh, this will certainly be interesting." Warrior of Light muttered with a small, dark chuckle, seemingly forgetting the true purpose of the Trial.

Onion Knight groaned under his breath, his eyes slightly squinting to show his unamused expression. However, his mind snapped suddenly as he remembered the Warrior of Light had been interrogating Zidane before he arrived.

"Enlighten me then, 'Prosecutor'; were you able to receive any crucial information from Zidane on the case?" Onion Knight questioned formally, wondering as to what Warrior of Light had found out.

Warrior of Light's reaction switched instantly from smug to disappointment upon hearing the question.

"Nothing, unfortunately." Warrior of Light answered, reverting back to his original serious and formal personality. "When I asked him any questions related to the incident, he would try and change subject or, at the most, answer back as vague as possible."

Onion Knight, Terra, Cosmos, and even Rydia took a moment to think about the situation. Warrior of Light looked towards each person as the room fell silent.

"Why would he try to hide his alibi?" Onion Knight murmured almost silently under his breath.

"Considering that before Warrior of Light escorted him from the room, he had been constantly blurting out that he wanted us to listen to his side of the situation."

Abruptly, the four of them instantly shot towards Warrior of Light without warning, causing him to jump back slightly with shock.

"H-hold on now ... why are you all glaring at me like that?" Warrior of Light stuttered as he braced himself.

"Did you provoking him too much for him to answer, by any chance?" Cosmos wondered, curious as to how the interrogation actually unfolded.

"N-no, I didn't ..."

"You could have pressured Zidane too much for him to answer back." Terra suggested, interrupting accidentally.

"I did as what was needed..."

"No wonder you never gained any important information." Onion Knight blurted out, interrupting intentional. "Zidane must have been frustrated enough to have locked his mind due to your constant nagging!"

Warrior of Light had completely lost his temper at this point, "WILL YOU ALL PLEASE STOP INTERRUPTING ME-!"

Drrring-Drrring...!

The Academy bell suddenly rang throughout the building, an indication that the current lesson had ended and the Afternoon Homeroom was about to begin. Just then, Cosmos clapped her hands together, realising that it was time to move from the Medical Room.

"Right then, you three ..." She began, indicating to Terra, Onion Knight and Warrior of Light, "Without further ado, we must leave Rydia to her recovery. As such, we are to move to the Theatre Hall to prepare for the Trial."

The Headmistress swiftly took lead and exited the Medical Room in an excited rush. Onion Knight glimpsed towards each other and shrugged, deciding to follow. The two waved back towards Rydia and

hoped for her recovery for following Cosmos towards the Theatre Hall. Warrior of Light, however, just gazed blankly towards the distance, unable to move his body momentarily and only able to give a lazy sigh.

“(sigh...) Perfect ... Just Perfect...” Warrior of Light muttered, eyes showing a lack of enthusiasm whatsoever. “Even the Academy Bell decided to interrupt me. What has the world come to...?” With that, he used all of the effort he had left in his legs to step out of the Medical Room and follow the rest from far behind.

As The Headmistress continued on ahead through the Ground Floor of Dissidia Academy, Onion Knight began to wonder as to what this Trial is going to reveal. However, he suddenly caught sight of Terra walking beside him, which caused him to become rather curious about her involvement.

“Terra, you don’t have to involve yourself in the Court Trial.” Onion Knight suggested to her, keeping his eyes forwards. “

“No, I have decided to involve myself with this Trial as your assistant.” Terra shook her head as she assured him, keeping a strong walking pace. “I am a witness to the incident and I feel I could help out to uncover the truth behind the assault.”

There was a pause in Onion Knight’s expression, taking this into account. However, a small smile began to break through on his face, pleased that there was someone by his side.

“Well then, couldn’t hope for any better company.” Onion Knight complemented, knowing that he would have an advantage over this cause with help from his close friend. “Besides, in this Trial ... I’ll need all the help I can get.”

Cosmos reached the large doors that help the entrance to the Theatre Hall of the Academy. With a small push, the doors began to open up on a grand scale, revealing the Room at its finest. As Onion Knight and Terra caught up with the Headmistress, both their mouths fell open and eyes lit up with amazement due to the sheer sight of the Hall’s sudden transformation. Apart from the seats for the students; the whole room had been completely redecorated to replicate a Court of Law. Various strong wooden stands had been set up to house the Judge, the Defence, the Prosecutor, and Witness’. Flags were positioned equally on various areas of the Hall, all designed elegantly with the logo of the Academy. Everything on the stage had been lit up appropriately just as though it was a scripted theatre production.

With this, the Headmistress stepped inside, taking in the glorious handiwork that had been done to create the scenario. Onion Knight and Terra followed her through, struggling to take in the unexpected redesign. And following from behind, Warrior of Light entered completely dumbfounded by the transformation, unaware that there had been any work taken place in the Theatre Hall.

“Welcome to the Court Room, where the battle for the truth will commence.” Cosmos announced proudly, gesturing towards the stage. “Now, the audience will arrive shortly and the Judge will soon make his appearance, so well shall move into the correct positions as soon as possible.”

“Wait; there’ll be an audience in this Trial?” Warrior of Light suddenly jumped up, not expecting that there would be an audience watching the Trial.

“That is correct.” Cosmos nodded back, showing her usual calm expression. “The whole of the Academy will be watching the entirety of the Trial. So, with this in mind ... no pressure.”

With that, Cosmos stepped over towards the Stage and stepped up to gain a closer inspection of the Court design. Warrior of Light stood frozen, finding this all completely sudden for him. Onion Knight glimpsed back towards him, giving a low mocking grin.

“Don’t Worry, Warrior of Light; I’m sure this Trial will end quickly ... with your loss.” He continued to mock, fuelling the fire ready for the upcoming battle of the wits.

“I can say the same to you, Onion Knight; this’ll be a battle that I’ll triumph over.” Warrior of Light

answered back in retaliation, ready for what was about to take place.

Onion Knight and Warrior of Light stepped up to the stage, following the indications from Cosmos as to where they'll be standing throughout the Trial. Onion Knight and Terra headed towards the Right side of the Court whilst Warrior of Light took the Left side. Warrior of Light kept with his elegant posture to show his authority as he took his position, showing that he seemed to be perfect for the role of Prosecutor. However, the moment Onion Knight stepped up to his own position; he instantly noticed a problem with where he was standing.

"T-this booth ... is too tall for me." Onion Knight murmured the moment he realised, his mind licking instantly.

Upon that moment, a sudden burst of laughter echoed throughout the Theatre Hall. This laughter had originated from Warrior of Light, who was the first to notice Onion Knight's predicament. From his point of view, Onion Knight's head could only be seen emerging from the booth, whilst Terra and Warrior of Light could be seen with the waist up.

"My God, t-that's perfect!" Warrior of Light wheezed in laughter, finding this completely ironic for Onion Knight.

"DO YOU DESIRE A STAB IN THE EYES!?!)" Onion Knight roared out from his Defence booth, unable to restrain his temper.

Suddenly he caught sight of Terra trying to desperately hold back her own laugh, placing the tips of her fingers on her lips.

"Don't you set yourself on his level, Terra ..." Onion Knight threatened her, eyes glaring like daggers in her direction.

"I-I'm sorry, I c-can't help it." Terra answered as she continued to hold herself back from losing control of her own laughter, eyes watering up in the process.

Cosmos silently chuckle for a short while herself, but then snapped her fingers to solve this problem.

"Prishe! I need a box!" She called out to the area behind the stage, still showing a cheerful smile in response.

"Prishe is here!?" Warrior of Light suddenly spat out, instantly dropping his laughter to a shocked expression.

"You're giving me a box!?" Onion Knight bellowed out, feeling evermore embarrassed about his predicament.

In that instant, the Elvaan girl Prishe appeared from behind the curtains of the stage. In her procession, she had been carrying a sizable, wooden crate; strong enough to hold Onion Knight's weight for a long period of time.

"Is this the one you needed, Headmistress?" She curiously wondered as she stepped up to Cosmos.

"That will do perfectly." Cosmos nodded cheerfully, although giving a twitch in her smile as she heard the word 'Headmistress'.

Prishe swiftly placed in Onion Knight's position, allowing him to rise to a suitable height on the booth. Prishe then turned towards Warrior of Light, suddenly giving him a cheerful and energetic wave.

"Hey, Light!" she called to him, giving a large and boisterous smile.

"Stop calling me by that nickname!" Warrior of Light yelled back towards her, unamused that people have been calling him by the name lately. "A-anyway, why are you here, Prishe? Were you not supposed to be assisting Professor Shantotto?"

"Headmistress Cosmos requested for me to help set up this Court Trial." Prishe answered back, showing a joyful expression. "So I thought 'to Hell with being the Doc's errand girl' and now I'm going to be the Bailiff of this Trial! Awesome, right?!"

Warrior of Light's eyes drooped upon hearing Prishe's answer, feeling oddly put off by the idea of Prishe being the Bailiff. This also somehow did not sit right for Onion Knight and even Terra the moment

they heard.

“Why do I have the feeling that there’ll be some ‘intentional’ injuries during the Trial?” Terra murmured to Onion Knight, feeling nervous all of a sudden.

“It seems The Headmistress wished for a bit of ‘muscle’ in case this Trial becomes hard to manage...” Onion Knight silently replied, suddenly losing colour in his skin due to the thought of Priske unleashing a rampage on the Court.

Suddenly, the Door of the Theatre Hall abruptly slammed open. Onion Knight, Terra, and even Warrior of Light felt their whole bodies leap up in fright. Terra even gave out a small ‘eep’ by complete accident. As they all peered over towards the door, they caught sight of a large figure sporting a clad of silver armour. The knocking of the armour parts echoed throughout the Theatre Hall. Onion Knight suddenly felt a chill down his spine as he watched the figure rise up to the stage, expression hidden from his face. The clad of armour had been shaped in a powerful and intimidating context, features including a cape that dropped to the figure’s feet and horns of the helmet that curved downwards.

“Ah, High Judge, it is an honour to finally meet you once again after so long.” The Headmistress greeted gracefully, bowing to the large figure.

The ‘High Judge’ had responded by silently shaking her hand and bowing. Onion Knight and Terra glimpsed towards each other with a curious yet cautious expression, wondering who the man in the armour was. However, it had seemed that Warrior of Light had beaten them to it and entered the lion’s den.

“Excuse me, High Judge, may I ask as to who you are?” Warrior of Light called out, showing confidence in his question.

The figure turned towards Warrior of Light, eyes glaring from behind the Helmet. In that instant, the figure decided to reveal his identity under his helmet. Ah he lifted his helmet, Onion Knight, Terra, Priske, and Warrior of Light finally caught sight of the man’s face. He had short blond hair and hazel eyes. The expression he had been showing was tense and completely intimidating, refusing anything in his path to would try and break through him.

“If you must insist, my full name is Noah fon Rosenberg; however, I commonly go by the name of Gabranth.” The man answered back, giving of a sudden intense aura around him as he spoke in a dark yet sophisticated voice. “As the High Judge of this land; those accused will stand under my rule and fall below my shadow.”

11 - Arc 3 (1): Battle for the Truth

Bartz Klauser followed within the group of Class 13A, completely curious as to why they were heading to the Theatre Hall. During Homeroom, Professor Shantotto had announced that all students had to move towards the Theatre Hall for a 'surprise event'. The Class had been wondering to each other as to why this was the case. Furthermore; Warrior of Light, Onion Knight, Terra Branford, and Zidane Tribal, were all unusually absent during the registration. More questions continued to rise with Shantotto asking in her usual rhyming tone to hold all questions until the event.

The group passed through the corridor towards the staircase, Bartz caught sight of Firion who seemed to be walking on his own towards the front of the group. He decided to catch up to him with the intention of finding out what this was all about. As Bartz caught up, he instantly noticed Firion had been completely focused with something he was holding in his hand.

"Hey Firion, do you have any idea what this is all about?" Bartz asked curiously, however showing his usual light-hearted expressions.

Suddenly Firion snapped from his concentration, noticing Bartz towards the corner of his eye. He turned towards him, giving out his pleasant smile.

"Sorry Bartz, I'm wondering that myself." He admitted, even though he seemed hesitant at first.

Bartz nodded, giving out an innocent smile. "Ok, thanks anyway."

However, he then noticed Firion give off a serious aura, as though he was about to go into a conflict of some sort. Bartz began to wonder about the possibility that Firion was actually hiding important information from the others in the group. With a sigh, Bartz decided to brush it aside and wait to see what this whole event would be about. He then heard a small conversation coming from behind him, relating to the upcoming event. He switched his sights towards the conversation, instantly spotting Tidus and Cloud. Tidus seemed to have a wondrous look about him whilst Cloud seemed to have the usual tired expression.

"Hmm ... what could this be all about?" Tidus began to wonder curiously, attempting with a struggle not to speak in his usual over-the-top tone for once. "Do you think it could be to do with 'that', Cloud?"

"I don't know, I don't care." Cloud instantly answered backed, his tiredness clearly showing as he yawned out. "I'll probably be snoozing through all of it anyway."

That...? Bartz's mind began to wonder, confused as to why Tidus would be so subtle.

He then decided that he needed to know what this was all about, he was never the person who enjoyed being in the dark about things. He slowed down his pace slightly in order to reach the same level as Tidus and Cloud, showing off his usual light demeanour.

"Tidus, do you have any guesses as to what this 'surprise event' is all about?" Bartz questioned curiously, hoping that he would gain at least a clue to what was happening.

Tidus' sight switched over towards Bartz, showing his own light-hearted smile. However, Bartz noticed hesitation in Tidus' expressions, as though he was unsure whether to answer or not.

"Well, Bartz ... I'm still up in the air about this myself." Tidus spoke out with an awkward laugh, contradicting his earlier statement to Cloud. "We might as well just wait and find out."

Bartz drew himself back with sudden confusion; why did Tidus just suddenly lie? Considering that he had hinted about it a moment before, it did not seem right to brush it off. In addition to this, Tidus would normally express his mind with such ease. He then looked towards the 5 present members of his class, noticing that Firion, Squall, Cloud, Cecil, and Tidus were showing rather distant expressions.

Just then, Bartz realised the class had reached the doors to the Theatre Hall. With this, the members of

Class 13A began to line up in an orderly fashion. Bartz swiftly stepped into position, standing behind Tidus and Cloud as the group waited patiently to be allowed into the room. Bartz began to fidget on the spot, he did not know what to expect. With his classmates unable to answer his questions, brushing them off with vague or contradicting answers that made him all the more confused.

Finally, the large doors of the Theatre Hall opened up majestically, slowly showing the contents that were held within the hall. The class had gasped upon the sudden transformation of the Hall. As they took in their surroundings, they had noticed that other allow classes from the 3 different years have already been seated. Bartz could not believe his eyes, instantly dumbfounded by every charge surrounding him. The wooden stands towards the stage of the Hall and the formal decorations were all new to him. Professor Shantotto guided Class 13A towards the designated seating ... situated within the front row seats of the Hall. The students of the class began to wonder curiously as to why they were being seated as the front, considering that their class would normally be seated further back. Without question, all 6 (including Bartz) of the present class sat in the seats, Bartz seemingly confused by what was happening.

In the distance of the seats, towards the back corner of the Theatre stage stood Terra Branford, who had been peering through the gap that led to the hidden backstage area. She seemed somewhat nervous, considering that the event she is involved with would be watched by the entirety of the Academy. She caught sight of her class instantly as they had sat down on the front row seating. With noticing the class and the rest of the students taking their seats, it would soon be time of the Court Trial to commence.

"This is it ..." A voice sighed out close to the right of Terra.

The voice had originated from Onion Knight, who stepped up beside Terra in order to take a glimpse of the crowd of seated students that began to form up. He also seemed rather nervous, although it seemed more like it was due to his determination of fighting this upcoming court battle.

Ever since the High Judge Gabranth had appeared before them a moment before, they had been informed by Headmistress Cosmos to head into the backstage area for their preparations. Onion Knight and Terra had paced around as they had recapped about the incident and what they had found during the investigation. They pointed out to each other the Key Evidence of the assault that took place and what may help them when they need to convince Zidane's innocence to the Court.

Speaking of whom, Onion Knight turned and caught sight of the defendant for this Trial stepping up to them. By appearance, Zidane seemed rather calm about the situation, although this could be due to the fact that he was used to getting into trouble in the past. However as Onion Knight glanced down, he instantly noticed that Zidane's blond-furred tail had been locked up with a metal cuff on chains. As Onion Knight followed the chain with his eyes, he could see Priske holding onto the chain tightly. She had been directly ordered by both Warrior of Light and Headmistress Cosmos to contain Zidane so that he wouldn't suddenly escape during the entirety of the trial.

"How are you feeling, Zidane?" Onion Knight questioned subtly, glancing towards him somewhat sorrowfully.

Zidane shrugged, "I'm chilled about it, there's nothing I can do now but sit and wait."

Onion Knight nodded as he listened, subtly examining the chain that latched on his tail. Terra also listened; feeling saddened about the predicament Zidane was in. However, something was on Onion Knight's mind, something that he needed to clarify.

"Zidane, I need you to clarify for me ..." Onion Knight began hesitantly, "Are you certain that you didn't assault Rydia?"

Zidane's eyes widened as Onion Knight asked the question, giving a surprised expression.

"I am innocent, that's a definite." Zidane then answered, showing a somewhat determined face. "I may be a thief, I may be rebellious, but I know the line that I must never cross ... And I refuse to cross that line."

Onion Knight gave a small grin as he took in Zidane's every word, "That is all I needed to hear." Terra smiled cheerfully upon hearing words from both Zidane and Onion Knight, thankful that they were on the same level of mind. However, this was short lived.

"Well then, Zidane, I hope you're prepared for the guilty verdict." A sudden gloating voice spoke out, an arrogant chuckle escaping. "Because this is going to end the moment it begins."

Zidane switched his sights towards the origin of the voice, followed by Onion Knight and Terra leaping up with surprise. They all knew exactly whose voice it had been, sending frustrated shivers down their spine. Warrior of Light stood among them, crossing his arms and giving off a smug grin; something that was normally rare for him. Onion Knight gritted his teeth together, finding Warrior of Light's attitude irritating.

"Don't get cocky, Warrior of Light." Onion Knight warned, deciding to speak. "This trial can go either way. I suggest that you should be wary about throwing assumptions and insults so soon, it'll just ruin your image when it bites you back in your behind."

Warrior of Light's smug expression suddenly dropped like a hat, his eyes locked on his 'rival' like daggers. The two continued to glare in silence, acting as though their eyes were crossing swords. Terra waved her hand in between the two, attempting to snap them back in reality. Zidane watched with a bored expression, feeling as though they weren't going to get far with these two constantly glaring at each other. That was, until Headmistress Cosmos approached the group.

"I told you two to save the dramatic glares until we begin the trial." The Headmistress spoke out in annoyance, crossing her arms.

Onion Knight and Warrior of Light snapped up in response and turned towards her, acting as though they were innocent.

"Sorry, Head – err, I mean Cosmos." Onion Knight hastily apologised, remembering that the Headmistress was not a fan of formalities.

"We were just discussing about the upcoming trial." Warrior of Light excused, giving of a forced formal expression and stance. "We were just giving our thoughts on the case."

The Headmistress nodded to the two, smiling calmly. "Well then, if that is the case, it's time for me to announce the event. So prepare yourselves for your designated roles. Oh, and Zidane...?"

Zidane, who had been looking away from Warrior of Light and the Headmistress, turned upon hearing his name.

"... Good Luck." Cosmos nodded cheerfully, showing her optimism.

Just as the Headmistress left to walk onto the Theatre Stage, shown by the sudden silence of the crowd; Warrior of Light leant over towards Onion Knight, becoming subtle on his approach.

"Just so you know, Onion Knight; I suggest that you are careful with your arguments during the trial ..."

Warrior of Light warned in a low tone, placing a hand on his shoulder lightly. "I assure you, I'm not going to hold back."

Onion Knight gave off a light chuckle, amused by Warrior of Light's ironic caution.

"Thank you for the concern, Warrior of Light." Onion Knight acknowledged with a small nod, showing a hint of sarcasm in his tone and expression. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind, so don't you worry yourself."

Warrior of Light showed off a cynical smile in return before stepping towards his side of the backstage, taking in a deep breath as he cleared his mind. Onion Knight watched as his opponent stepped away, his sarcastic expression dropping instantly as Warrior of Light broke sight. Onion Knight gave out a small sigh, clearing his own thoughts in the process. However, he then noticed another figure step into view, the sound of clad of armour scraping and clashing against each other as the figure took his stride. Gabranth was now prepared to take his role as court judge. To Onion Knight's surprise, Gabranth had not changed out of his armour since he arrived; he was even holding his helmet under his arm ready to

wear during the trial.

“He seems ... very intimidating.” Terra spoke out warily, unsure how he will act during the trial.

“Don’t worry; if we hold our ground, then we’ll be fine.” Onion Knight assured both Terra and Zidane, keeping his confidence intact.

Both Terra and Zidane nodded as they agreed in assurance; however, even though the three were showing the strong will, no one could see that Zidane’s tail was shaking violently.

Headmistress Cosmos stepped up to the mic situated on the centre of the stage in front of the set up court design. As she stood gracefully behind the mic, the whole of the Theatre Hall abruptly fell silent. Situated at the front seats was Class 13A and some of the teachers, whilst others sat along the side of the seating area. Sephiroth and Instructor Jecht, who were the last to enter the Hall, stood against the doors with arms crossed. Sephiroth seemed to have his eyes closed with a calm manner, whilst Jecht had been giving off a cocky smile.

The Headmistress then gave a light cough to clear her throat, ready to begin her introduction speech for the event.

“Welcome, students and staff of Dissidia Academy, to the end of week assembly.” Cosmos began to call out, her voice being echoed out by the speakers on each corner of the Hall’s ceiling. “As many of you may have known or speculated through various rumours, a special event is to be held throughout the rest of the day on this Theatre Hall. This does mean that the final lesson of the week will not be commencing.”

Within that moment, the seated students began to whisper with glee and surprise, not expecting to miss the final lesson of the day. Some were beginning to think that the Headmistress was being too generous, whilst others began to speculate whether this could be some sort of ploy. The Headmistress, as generous as she was, knew that this would be a hindrance to the teachers of the academy. She instantly caught sight of some of the teachers grumbling with frustration as they had to scrap their plans in their minds. Cosmos knew that she would need to pay them back on a later date for this.

“Prior the this assembly, many of you may of heard about an incident that occurred during the latter half of Lunch Break.” Cosmos continued on, her attitude and expression abruptly turned to a complete serious tone. “In this Academy, we take the safety of our students as a core priority, and so incidents such as this will not be tolerated lightly. Both students AND teachers are reminded that we must treat each other with respect and as equals. As such, I would like you all to consider this as an ‘example’ of how we treat those who disrespect and abuse to wellbeing of Dissidia Academy.”

There was complete silence in the Hall, no student dared to speak. They had never seen their Headmistress express her serious side before, feeling that they would be treading on uncharted waters if they were to oppose her. The teachers were even hesitating on the spot, finding her glare fairly intimidating. This showed how important this Academy and the students/staff are to Headmistress Cosmos, showing elements of her position as Head of Dissidia Academy.

The Headmistress took a moment to calm her mind once again, taking in a deep breath as she recollected her pleasant, sweet aura. The atmosphere also cooled, with the students showing signs of relief that they could see their Headmistress returning to her normal personality.

“Now then, without further ado, I shall now pass onto Priske who will begin the event.” Headmistress concluded her introductory speech, showing no signs of her previous serious expressions whatsoever.

“Please enjoy.”

With that, Cosmos stepped off the stage gracefully and sat on the empty corner seat of the bottom row, settling herself down. Just as this was done, the lights in the room abruptly switched off, the Theatre Hall becoming engulfed in complete darkness. The students were all gazing round, wondering what was happening. And then, a singular spotlight suddenly lit up, focusing on the centre of the stage in the

middle of the court setup. The abruptness of the light caused many of the students to jump in fright. Finally, a figure stepped into the spotlight, hands behind her back in a formal manner and a subtle smile showing on her face. Priske was ready to begin. Within the darkness surrounding the Elvaan girl, silhouettes were shuffling towards their designated stands. Priske closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath, and announced to the crowd of students and teachers.

“*Ahem* ... All rise for the Honourable High Judge Gabranth!” Priske announced loud and clear, keeping any urges for outbursts behind a wall in her mind.

The students were all completely confused, some began to slowly and anxiously rise from their seats however others were unsure. With an eye curiously opening up, Priske noticed that the students weren't complying with her 'order'. Just then, the wall in her mind instantly disintegrated.

“I said ... RISE, YOU ASSHATS!!!” Priske roared demonically, her voice booming around the Hall as she crossed her arms and shone her fangs to the crowd. “I SWEAR I'LL PUMMEL YOUR ASSES LIKE NO TOMORROW IF YOU DON'T DO AS I SAY!!!”

The students had all shot up from their seats in terror, not wanting to further irritate the Elvaan girl. Priske glared towards the crowd, satisfied that they all stood up after initially taking too long.

“That's Enough, Bailiff!” A sudden deep voice suddenly echoed out, causing Priske to glance back with curiosity. “You may stand aside.”

Another spotlight shone towards the top centre of the stage, where the Judges stand was situated. Perched on the judge's seat was the High Judge Gabranth, his sharp hazel eyes shot towards Priske like daggers. Priske, in retaliation, gave a cheeky grin whilst awkwardly placing a hand against the back of her head.

“Ehehehee ... sorry, Judge; I got carried away.” She apologised to him, seemingly somewhat embarrassed by her recent outburst.

She then stepped away towards the main stands, placing her back against it whilst showing off an honourable posture. However, as she did this, she caught sight of her boss, Professor Shantotto. She had been sitting with Class 13A, showing a sophisticated posture on her seat, her eyes seemingly closed. But as Priske adjusted her eyes, an abrupt chill crawled down her spine. Shantotto was in fact glaring towards her with furious eyes. Priske didn't know what was going through her mind ... and she didn't want to know.

Gabranth ushered for the crowd of students to sit back down, nodding in a subtle way. The students did as he asked, knowing not to disobey after Priske's outburst. With that, The Judge began his own speech, his eyes glaring towards the crowd of students as he spoke out.

“The court is now in session for the trial of Mr Zidane Tribal.” Gabranth announced with his booming voice, echoing around the Theatre Hall.

Just then, another spotlight flickered on to show the defendant's stand. There were small gasps from the rows of seats as they caught sight of the defendant, a few conversing whispers to each other whilst eyes locked onto the shamed Zidane. Zidane stood there, his tail chained to the floor and his body completely motionless. Bartz Klauser, upon the moment he caught of his best friend, became completely speechless. His eyes widened and a horrified expression, Bartz couldn't believe what was happening. He was beginning to pray that this was an act, thinking that this could be some stage play. However, a small thought in his mind grew, attempting to sway his speculation.

At that moment, the next spotlight appeared to illuminate the left side of the court stage (from the student's direction of eyesight). Appearing under this spotlight was Warrior of Light, showing his usual elegant posture whilst having his eyes closed and crossing his arms.

“The Prosecution is ready, Your Honour.” Warrior of Light announced proudly, his eyes opening up and showing his confidence.

Finally, the last spotlight clicked on towards the opposite side to Warrior of Light, illuminating the two

figures standing as the opposition. Onion Knight and Terra Branford stood side by side with strong stances, showing that they weren't going to hesitate.

"The Defence is ready, Your Honour!" Onion Knight announced with a loud voice, his mind clear and focused on the Trial.

With that, the lights of the Hall began to light up again, however dimly. As this was done, the spotlights began to disappear in its stead, evening out the lighting of the room. Every person's eyes were able to adjust quickly, without any need to squint.

Gabranth nodded with a stern gaze, "Very good." He commented, showing his approval of the introductions. "Now then, I first wish to clarify with both the Defence and the Prosecution: Do you both know the full extent of the roles you've been placed in?"

Both Onion Knight and Warrior of Light's minds clicked instantly with the information about their designated roles, with Warrior of Light being the first to answer back.

"I do, Your Honour." Warrior of Light called out with a confident nod, "The Prosecution's role is to investigate the incident and build the relevant case around using applicable evidence in order to find the truth. As the Prosecutor, I must present this case with the intention of bringing the offender to justice using lawful means."

"That was a very in-depth description." Gabranth complemented him, his eyes then shifting over to the opposing side. "And ... what about the Defence?"

Onion Knight drew in a deep breath, ready to show his intellect.

"Yes, I do, Your Honour." He began his response, his mind full of the suffice information. "The Defence's role is suggested by its name; to defend the accused and allow for a fair, unbiased trial. They must cross-examine the information bestowed upon the court and find irregularities within the witness testimonies using the case evidence. With this, the defence would be able to demonstrate the possibilities of innocence within their clients."

There was then a moment of silence within the Theatre Hall, Gabranth taking in everything that both Onion Knight and Warrior of Light had analysed about their roles. Onion Knight took this time to take in his surroundings fully. He glanced over to his assistant Terra, who seemed to be showing her nerves. Her body shaking and her expression tensed. Onion Knight found this quite intriguing, wondering as to why she was acting so nervous considering that all she would need to do is 'assist' him during the trial. However, it was then that he realised why ... Terra had stage-fright. She was never a fan of big crowds, and the thought of them all glaring towards her as she had been standing on the stage increased her fears.

Onion Knight swiftly retaliated, hoping to calm her down. He placed a palm on her shoulder and drew slightly closer to her.

"Terra, don't concern yourself about the crowd, they will not glance towards you during this whole trial." Onion Knight assured her in a small whisper. "Their concentration will be towards me and Warrior of Light, you'll be completely fine."

"I-I know, I-it's just t-that ..." Terra stuttered under her breath, her hands grasped against the flat surface of the Defence stand to hold herself still.

"Don't think about the crowd at all, Terra!" Onion Knight then gave a more stubborn whisper, refusing to let the stage-fright get the better of her. "I know it's hard, but you need to imagine that you're in an empty classroom. You are in control of this fear, not vice versa."

"R-right." Terra nodded with an uneasy smile, taking in stuttering breaths to try and calm her mind.

"Thank ... Onion Knight."

Onion Knight gave out a small grin, happy that she's trying to conquer the fear. However, as he examined his surrounding more, he knew that he couldn't allow for either him or Terra to falter. They needed to be at the top of their game for Zidane's sake.

It was then that he had caught sight of Warrior of Light, whose stubborn glare was locked on to him. Onion Knight knew he was going to cause problems during the trial, a part of him even wondering if Warrior of Light would be desperate enough to forge fake evidence just to get his way. Onion Knight then pushed that thought aside, knowing too well that Warrior of Light had too much pride to do something so devious.

Shifting his eyes towards the crowd, Onion Knight drew back with sudden shock as he caught sight of an unexpected figure. Cid of the Lufaine was perched on the front row seat close to the rest of his classmates. Onion Knight's first reaction upon noticing the Legendary Moogles was to tell Terra. However, he abruptly prevented himself, knowing that Terra may faint due to the shock from her stage fright.

"As the both of you know your roles well enough, we shall now have the Prosecutor give us the full detail of this case." Gabranth then announced to the court, his sharp eyes glaring around the Hall. Warrior of Light gave a proud nod, ready to disclose the case details to the court. Onion Knight gritted his teeth together. The battle was now about to commence.

"Approximately around 1:05pm on Friday the 14th September (today); an incident occurred on the 4th floor of the Academy building, specifically the 3rd Math's room. The victim of this incident was 2nd year student Rydia of Class 13D, who had seemingly been assaulted with blunt trauma to the head. In addition to this, a hair ornament had been stolen from the victim. More details of this and the approved evidence of the crime scene will be explained by the detective of this investigation, Student Council member Firion. With that said, a sole suspect had been arrested at the scene of the crime, our Defendant Zidane Tribal."

There was a moment of throughout the Theatre Hall, students taken aback by the shock of learning about the crime that had been committed. Some even began to converse silently with each other about speculations if whether Zidane was guilty or not. Judge Gabranth had taken this in thoroughly, nodding as Warrior of Light detailed the incident. Onion Knight had also been listening carefully, however not specifically about the details ... but analysing what he was detailing: what was fact and what was opinion. Warrior of Light continued on, "to summarise the incident, Rydia is currently in the Medical Room making a full recovery and authorities are now investigating the crime scene for any additional clues that our detective may have missed. However, I personally feel that this further investigation will not be needed for the case."

"And why is that?" Onion Knight instantly questioned, crossing his arms and a curious glare on his face. Warrior of Light shrugged his arms up and shook his head, giving off a cocky grin.

"Is it not simple?" Warrior of Light chuckled, causing Onion Knight to become wary. "As there was only a sole suspect, it would be understandable that our 'defendant' is certainly the culprit."

At that moment, Onion Knight instantly snapped in retaliation.

"OBJECTION!" He bellowed out, throwing out his arm and pointing his index finger towards his opponent.

"An 'objection' already?" Gabranth curiously wondered, cocking an eyebrow. "Fine, speak your mind ... child."

"I shall – ACK!?" Onion Knight bit his tongue the moment he spoke, the 'trigger word' striking a cord in his mind. "CHILD!?! How dare you call me such a thing ... I'LL BREAK YOUR LEGS AND STICK THEM ON YOUR HEAD!"

Within that moment, Onion Knight began to kick out and punch the air in the Judge's direction, almost leaping to ferociously attack. Abruptly, Terra threw her arms around Onion Knight's abdomen to prevent him from attacking the High Judge Gabranth.

"Onion Knight, don't attack the Judge!" Terra warned him as she struggled to keep him grounded.

"We'll look bad in front of everyone! We'll never get anywhere with you throwing tantrums every time

someone mentions one of your trigger words!”

In a small instant, Onion Knight halted his tantrum, flexing his body and mind as though he had just pressed the off switch.

“*Ahem* ... Fine, I’ll leave the leg breaking till later.” Onion Knight cleared his throat, his eyes closed as he gave off a sophisticated appearance. “Anyway, the reason for my objection was due to the fact that Warrior of Light had deviated into his own thoughts and assumptions, when he is meant to be detailing the facts of the case!”

“Tch! I’ll have you know I AM detailing the facts of this case!” Warrior of Light began to argue back, defending his statement. “I’m just stating how this trail will wrap up to be in the very near future, you could consider it ‘an insight into the future’.”

“O-Objection sustained!” Gabranth abruptly ruled out, stuttering as he had just recovered from an unexpected shock. “The Prosecutor will only state the facts when detailing the case!”

“WHAT!?” Warrior of Light spat out in retaliation, completely baffled by this sudden turnout. “How could you accept THAT!? It was foolish and juvenile objection!”

“WHO ARE YOU CALLING JUVENILE!?” Onion Knight roared out in the background, suddenly beginning another tantrum.

“I will not accept such ‘assumptions’ in the mix of facts, or as you would say it ‘a glimpse into the future’ ... unless you were a qualified fortune teller.” Judge Gabranth explained in his strict manner, ignoring Onion Knight’s outburst.

“Great ... now the Honourable Judge is siding with a child standing on a box.” Warrior of Light murmured with a pout.

“I HEARD THAT!” Onion Knight’s voice echoed out again in the distance, his bony being desperately held down by his assistant.

“Well then, we shall now move on.” Gabranth announced sternly, standing tall and proud as though he was towering over his subjects. “Prosecutor, you stated that you had a detective investigate the crime scene?”

“That is correct.” Warrior of Light nodded, his arms crossed and his eyes closed with a formal expression. “And so I would now like to ask him to rise to the stand, for he shall speak further detail of the crime and the evidence he has gathered.”

As Warrior of Light finished his statement, Firion rose from his seat. Showing an expressionless face, he took to the witness stand with a formal approach. He’s had a serious aura around him ever since he began the investigation; he refused to waver as he was ready to play his part in this case.

Warrior of Light cleared his throat, keeping his posture strong and formal. His eyes were locked on Firion, ready to ask him questions about what he found.

“Please state your name, role and Academy status.” Warrior of Light began.

“My name is Firion and I am the detective of this case.” Firion answered, showing a cool yet serious expression. “My status within Dissidia Academy is second year student in Class 13A and member of the Student Council.”

Warrior of Light nodded with a small grin, accepting Firion’s introduction.

“It is to my understanding, Firion, that you were able to find numerous pieces of evidence relating to this case?” Warrior of Light questioned him, his mind ready to gather information.

“That is correct.” Firion nodded firmly, giving a confident smile.

“The court would like you to further detail the crime scene, including specific information about the assault that had occurred and potential evidence that you had found.” Warrior of Light then explained, keeping to how a qualified Prosecutor would formally express statements during court cases.

Firion had accepted this, taking in deep breaths as he prepared his testimony.

“Before I begin my testimony, I would like to present to the court the Accident Report of the incident.”

Firion suggested to the court, pulling out a sheet of paper in an envelope from the bag he had carried over. "Within this report details head injury that the victim, Rydia, had sustained as well as the cause, a forced collision against the wall. In addition, the report states about the hair ornament that had been stolen from the victim and details about its appearance."

"The court accepts this into case evidence." Gabranth nodded back in reply, commanding Prishe to take the report off Firion's possession.

Prishe stepped over to the witness stand and had been given the report, transferring it directly to the Judge. Gabranth scanned the notes on the report, nodding at various points. With that, he placed the sheet to the side and gave another nod for confirmation.

"You may now begin your testimony, Detective." Gabranth spoke out, allowing Firion to detail about his investigation.

Witness Testimony: Detective Firion.

"I had entered the crime scene a moment after the victim had been transported to the Medical room; during this time, I was able to discover key evidence in relation to the crime." Firion began his testimony, his mind racing with the relevant information he needed to reveal. "The first and most important was the cracked wall where the victim struck her head against during possible conflict. I can additionally confirm the blood-stain on the cracked wall is indeed the victim's. Another crucial piece is the smashed window to the right of the cracked wall, particularly, the window itself. The placements of the broken glass shards prove that the window had been smashed from the outside; however the window shows minuscule tufts of blue fabric, the direction of this fabric leading outside the room. Other evidence includes tufts of blonde 'tail' fur, strands of long 'green' hair, and marks of footprints. I personally wished that I had more time to investigate, however this was all I could find based on the time I had at the crime scene."

Witness Testimony ... Complete.

High Judge Gabranth had been silent throughout the duration, jotting down notes and taking time to review the testimony. Onion Knight and Warrior of Light had also done the same, jotting quick notes from the testimony even though they had every word stuck in the mind like glue. Terra peered over Onion Knight's shoulder, curious about the notes he had been writing up. As it concluded, Gabranth gave out a low chuckle, causing some of the students to shiver for some reason.

"I must say, that was a long and 'informative' testimony." The Judge commented with a dark grin. "I shall accept these as evidence."

"Firion has top-of-the-range observation skills, meaning he can seek out the most hidden secrets within his surroundings." Warrior of Light complimented proudly, giving off a confident yet cocky grin. "I am proud to have him by my side during in the Student Council."

"Heh ... kiss-@\$\$. " Onion Knight murmured cheekily under his breath, turning his head away slightly to hide his comment.

Warrior of Light's glare locked onto his rival at that moment, attempting to strike Onion Knight down with his sight. Onion Knight ignored the scowl and noticed something was off with the testimony.

"Is something the matter, Onion Knight?" Terra asked him, noticing his sudden serious aura. "You seem like something is out of place."

"No ... it's nothing important at this time." Onion Knight answered back slowly, eyes scanning his notes. His mind however, differed; ***Firion had left out the 'brown' hair-strands in his testimony ... was this on purpose?***

Just then, Gabranth had interrupted Onion Knight's current thought process.

“Now then, the Defence may Cross-Examine the Detective.” The Judge announced loud and clear. Onion Knight snapped his mind back into reality, shaking his head to focus.

“I accept, Your Honour!” Onion Knight confirmed with complete confidence, placing the palms of his hands on the surface of the stand.

Cross-Examination: Detective Firion.

Onion Knight glanced over his notes and pinpointed the sections that stood out in his mind with curiosity, relating it consistently to the evidence he had been given. He then began his first query, picking out the first evidence as backup.

“I’m curious, Firion, as part of the ‘crucial’ first evidence, you stated that you could confirm that ‘the bloodstain on the cracked wall is indeed the victim’s’.” Onion Knight questioned, placing a thumb and finger around his chin and began to stroke. “How were you able to confirm this so fast?”

“Simple. I had asked our Homeroom teacher Professor Shantotto to analyse a sample of the blood.” Firion shrugged cheerfully, finding the question a walk in the park. “She was able to confirm that the DNA matched the victim’s exactly.”

“I see. That was unbelievably fast to say the least.” Onion Knight then commented. “How was she able to confirm that?”

“How should I know?” Firion shrugged once again, however this time with a clueless expression.

“Professor Shantotto refused to reveal how she knew this.”

Onion Knight shook his head, “Then this evidence cannot 100% reliable! It’s impossible to...”

“Objection.” Warrior of Light interrupted, pointing his index finger towards Onion Knight. “We shall never question our Homeroom teacher and her ‘science’. She has every Academy Student and Staff’s DNA on record; I can also confirm the evidence is completely legit.”

Onion Knight held back his upcoming argument, knowing it was pointless as he assumed this was true. He pressed on further down the notes of the testimony. And then something caught his eye ... even though it was not part of the actual testimony.

“Firion, were you able to find relevant data on the Security Camera System of the Academy?” Onion Knight queried, his eyes locked on target.

“S-Security Camera System!?” Firion stuttered suddenly, stepping back on his spot slightly with surprise.

“That is correct.” Onion Knight nodded with crossed arms and a serious tone. “Although Headmistress Cosmos had not concerned the students about this as of yet; the Academy, as with any other building in this modern-age we currently live in, has an installed Security Camera System. Surely, you must have seen them around the Academy at some point?”

“I – I haven’t.” Firion murmured out, his expression completely distraught.

“Objection!” Warrior of Light spat out, finding this subject out of place. “As Firion had limited amount of time to investigate the crime scene, he would not be able to check the system.”

“Objection!” Onion Knight countered hastily, not allowing for this to run away from his grasp. “Even though Firion had not the time to check, the fact that he was unable to even ‘acknowledge’ the security camera in the room of the crime scene is rather concerning. This is considering that at least ONE security camera had been installed in every single room of the Academy and it’s border! This could prove valuable for the case at hand!”

“Is that your argument? Interesting...” Warrior of Light chuckled as he shook his head in a teasing manner. “And did YOU ‘acknowledge’ the security camera in that room?”

“Why would I need to? All I needed to do was to think it was there and I knew the room had some ‘sense’ of security at the least!” Onion Knight threw out his excuse, giving a slightly cunning grin to his

statement.

“That is a shame ... considering that fact that the Security Camera of the room has been out of order for the past few days.” Warrior of Light spoke, deciding to drop the bombshell.

Onion Knight snapped back in an instant, completely feeling thrown off course.

“WHA-! How is this possible!?” Onion Knight slammed his palms against the stand surface, feeling suddenly ridiculed. “How did you know of this!?”

“Headmistress Cosmos sent an email about the broken camera some time ago to staff and members of the Student Council, including myself as President.” Warrior of Light admitted with a smirk, shrugging his arms. “How you did not know of this is beyond me.”

Hastily, Onion Knight slipped out his cell-phone and swiped to the indicated email. It was then that he caught sight of the words ‘IMPORTANT: Broken Security Camera!’ In retaliation, Onion Knight slammed the cell against his forehead in fury.

NO! BECAUSE OF MY IGNORANCE, I NEGLECTED TO READ MY E’MAIL! I’M AN IMBICILE!

However, it was then his mind clicked, his genius mind kicking into play.

“Hold it!” Onion Knight bellowed out, gritting his teeth. “Is it possible that this could be something other than a coincidence?”

“Your mind is fooling you, Onion Knight!” Warrior of Light struck back. “It IS a mere coincidence. The statement in the E’mail – in which YOU have not read – states clearly that ‘The wires within the camera were faulty since before the beginning of Semester’, meaning that the camera had packed up due to this fault!”

“I see ... and what of the ‘other’ cameras?” Onion Knight sneakily added, beginning the counterattack.

“... What do you mean by ‘other cameras?’” Warrior of Light muttered cautiously, noticing that his opponent was suddenly ahead of the game.

“The surrounding Security Cameras OUTSIDE the room!” Onion Knight shot out, slamming his palm on the stand’s surface once again.

“WHAAAAA-!?!” Warrior of Light suddenly leapt back from his stand, realising what his rival meant.

The crowd of students began to discuss against themselves in shock and awe, gasping at the sudden realisation.

“One camera may have been out-of-order; however, there are other cameras in situated positions in the halls and outside the building that would certainly had eyes on the room and its surrounding!” Onion Knight continued on, his mind on a train that had no brakes. “The fact that no one had known off this is a serious flaw in the case!”

“N-no, how could I have missed this!?” Warrior of Light growled, biting the inside of his cheek.

“I can’t believe it ...” Firion murmured under his breath, full of shock. “I completely overlooked the idea of Academy Security Cameras.”

Onion Knight bowed with pride, eyes locked on his opponent like arrows that had just pierced the target.

“Your Honour! I advise for the Detective to analyse the Security Cameras collected data ... immediately!”

Onion Knight called out, concluding his cross-examination.

“... I approve.” The Judge answered rather calmly, bringing up his gravel.

BANG!

Cross-Examination ... Complete!

“I hereby conclude this testimony with the Detective to fill the void of this flaw.” Gabranth announced, his booming voice echoing the Theatre Hall. “He shall return with evidence in the form of footage captured by Security Cameras surrounding the area of the crime scene, this must be in relevance to the case!”

Firion gave a silent nod, his competence completely broken. With that, he turned and exited the Theatre Hall with a depressed aura hanging around him. Onion Knight released a sigh of relief, glad that he held his ground. He had won the first battle ... paving way for many more. Terra placed a hand on his shoulder, showing a kind smile. Onion Knight nodded to her with a thankful mind, grateful for the encouragement.

"With this revelation, we shall take a small break." Gabranth began to conclude, his eyes closed coolly.

"We shall wait until--"

"OBJECTION!!" A voice roared out abruptly.

Gabranth, Onion Knight, Terra, and the crowd of students jumped up and gasped in sudden shock, turning to the owner of the voice.

Warrior of Light had his arm thrown out towards the High Judge, his index finger pointing sharply. He could be seen chuckling away, completely amused by all of this.

"Why must we break so soon?" He chuckled, a grin strapped on his face.

"We ... have no witnesses." Onion Knight cautiously answered back, unsure as to what was about to happen.

"Ohoho, on the contrary, Onion Knight." Warrior of Light echoed out, a grim smile showing as clear as day. "When in fact ... we do indeed have a CONFIRMED WITNESS!"

In that moment, the whole of the Theatre Hall roared out with complete astonishment.

"Wh - WHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!!!?!"

Warrior of Light closed his eyes and clenched his fists, building himself up for the reveal.

"I hereby call BARTZ KLAUSER to the Witness Stand!" Warrior of Light roared with pride as he threw his finger towards the direction of his seated classmate, his echoing voice booming across the entirety of the Hall.

Bartz Klauser drew back on his seat; eyes wide with horror, dripping of sweat, and mouth gaping in terror as he caught sight of Warrior of Light's finger pointing directly towards his position.

12 - Arc 3 (1): Partners in Crime

Firion made his way up the forever-climbing staircase, his consciousness in another world and climbing in a zombie-like state. His mind had repeating flashbacks of the trial and how Onion Knight had caught him off by such fault. Firion lost the ability to think straight, wondering as to how he could miss such an important detail during his investigation. He took on the role of Detective of the court case to prove his worth; to make an amateur mistake had cost him dearly. And interesting thought however, Firion wasn't at all infuriated over Onion Knight's tough approach during the Testimony. He knew Onion Knight was only fulfilling his role as the Defence, and understood that the situation was something no one could take lightly.

Shaking his head out of the daze, Firion snapped his mind back to reality. He needed to fulfil his own duty as Detective and not allow for any further mistakes. This was crucial for the court ... and possibly saving Zidane from his own predicament. He controlled his pace to a fast leap up the flight of steps, knowing that the Academy building should be empty. His target: the Security room on the top floor of the building, situated on the opposite end from the Headmistress' office.

Only a few minutes passed ... and most of his energy, Firion reached the top floor. He took a small moment in regaining his breath, leaning against the wall to his right and his breath took time to slow down. Ready to move forward, Firion's eyes locked on towards the door at the end of the corridor. It was then that his breath momentarily froze, a cautious mindset suddenly forming.

The Security room was not 'secured', with the door left slightly open and a small key situated within the lock. This could mean that either someone was recently in the room ... or was still in it. Normally one would safely assume that someone was currently using the room. With that said, why was Firion hoping for the possibility of the former idea?

Peeking through the gap of the door, Firion could only see the Security Camera System's control centre, included with a variety of desktop monitors and connecting wires.

Before stepping through, Firion warily checked the area around him, feeling the chill that he was being watched. As he made his way into the room, he took the key from the lock and closed the door slowly until he felt the click. Firion took a small glance at the key he had taken, checking for any indication as to who's it belong to. Comparing to the Security room key he had been given by the Headmistress before leaving the hall, this key seemed completely identical.

Firion then changed his sights and stepped over towards the Security Control System, leaning forward as he placed a hand on the mouse and began to click away. The Security room was what one would expect; aside from the system setup, there were several shelves scattered across the walls of the room, all with numerous tapes and DVDs of past camera records. However, none were recent.

Continuing through the program, Firion began to mutter key words almost silently as he went through the time of the incident and the surrounding area of where it happened. Searching through the records, Firion showed no hesitation.

"Today ... 1:00pm – 2:00pm ... 4th floor ... Math's room 3." Firion's voiced quietly whispered out, however his eyes suddenly began to squint. "Wait ... did I make a mistake?"

In instant retaliation, Firion checked through several of the surrounding security cameras. The more he searched, the more he began to realise the problem. He straightened up his posture, eyes widened with surprise.

The footage ... they're gone!? Firion's mind called out in despair.

Without even hesitating, Firion threw himself back onto the system and clicked away at immense

speeds. During the next few minutes, Firion slowly found out more on the missing footage. The missing footage was taken from every camera on the 4th floor, specifically around the time of 12:00pm to 2:00pm. Firion wondered about the possibility of backups; however hopes was dashed the moment it arose.

Firion went back and forth on the programs, hoping for any signs of possible footage or clues. And the moment he accepted it, he gave up trying. He slammed his fist hard against the system desk, frustrated that the search was entirely unsuccessful. Someone had tampered with the records, meaning that the truth of the incident was more of a mystery than ever before.

Firion sighed out, wiping away the sweat from his forehead. He needed to clear his mind, figure out what to do. He clicked the mouse to return to where he first checked the records, deciding that it was best to head back to the court. However, a small curiosity filled the back of his mind, feeling as though something had been overlooked during his frantic search. It was a long shot, but Firion decided to take the chance. Using various methods, some previously attempted and others not done before, Firion was on the border of losing what little faith he had left ... and then his heart skipped a beat.

Within the depths of the system's memory, a 7sec video file titled 'September 14th – Unknown' sat alone in a folder full of random numbers. Firion took this with a grain of salt; unable to figure out it's worth. Clicking on the file, Firion analysed the looping 7 second video.

He instantly recognised the hall of the 4th floor; however the camera seemed to be far away from the room of where the incident happened. Firion also spotted numbers along the bottom of the video, indicating the time as 13:05:56.

This is it! This could be what he needed!

As the video continued and looped, Firion caught on to various moments of interest ... but this wasn't in his favour. The video showed Zidane stepping out of the room next door in a rush. Although the camera was far away, Firion could tell instantly by the long blond tail and energetic pace. To Firion's disappointment, just as Zidane enters the room where the incident occurred, the video cuts out and loops back. Firion then paused the video, and wondered. Is this enough?

Unfortunately, Firion could only speculate. He had spent enough time on finding the video and the rest was nowhere to be found. He took out a blank memory stick from a draw below the desk, and swiftly transferred the data from the system. Once complete, Firion slipped the memory stick into his pocket and headed back out the door. Before making his way down, he halted himself outside the door of the Security room. Holding out the spare key that was found in the door lock, Firion considered placing it back. He ultimately decided against this, knowing this was linked to the missing footage and more importantly, the truth behind this case.

It was then that he felt a shadowy presence close behind him, causing his body to freeze up in abrupt horror.

The Court Trial...

Bartz was fidgeting on the spot. His mind was completely blank. His eyes were shifting from one side of the room to the other frantically. He had a stuttering breath, and sweat dripped from his brow. On the witness stand, Bartz was nervous; and the whole of the courtroom had their eyes targeted directly towards him.

Zidane, watching silently on the defendant stand, felt somewhat saddened about his best friend's current position. Out of all the mischief the two have cooked up in the Academy and the amount of times Bartz was used as a scapegoat, this was the one time that Zidane did not want Bartz involved.

Onion Knight stood in silence on the Defence side of the room, arms crossed and thinking non-stop. His eyes were locked in Warrior of Light's direction, wondering as to what move his rival was about to pull.

He knew that Bartz's name would be cast upon at some point during the case, considering the past scenarios related to the mischievous pair; however, he never expected it to appear so soon in the trial. Onion Knight had to be on his guard, as this could all fall apart by the smallest of slip ups.

Warrior of Light, on the other hand, had a confident smirk, close to chuckling away with his heightened confidence. He began to act as though he had the case in the bag, even if the witness hasn't been prepared beforehand. Onion Knight knew this 'confirmed witness' was a bluff, feeling as though this was just a cheap way of finding loopholes and gaining time. However, Onion Knight admitted to feeling curious about Bartz's possible involvement to the case, knowing well enough that Zidane and Bartz normally hang around together during Academy hours like partners in crime.

"Shall we begin?" High Judge Gabranth queried, his formal voice echoing the hall. "Time cannot be wasted."

"I agree your honour." Warrior of Light nodded subtly, keeping a formal tone even with his dark smirk still strapped across his face. "With that said; Witness, state your name and Academy status!"

Bartz suddenly drew back in hesitation, still struggling to adjust to the situation.

"Er... the Name's Bartz. Bartz Klauser." He finally began, taking his time with his answer. "A-and I'm a Student in Class 13A."

Warrior of Light went straight into the next question without a breath between the previous answer and the next question. Onion Knight watched both the Prosecutor and the Witness carefully, analysing not one the answers given but their expressions.

"It is to my, as with most others, understanding that you are close friends with the Defendant?" Warrior of Light asked, eyes locked tight onto Bartz as though he was ready to strike him down.

"Defendant...?" Bartz then questioned curiously, somewhat clueless of what the title meant.

"He means Zidane." Onion Knight whispered over in retaliation, knowing that Bartz wasn't paying attention.

"Ah right, yeah, we're great friends." Bartz acted proud in his answer, oblivious to his own actions.

"Then it must also be true that you both have a tendency to cause havoc when the opportunity arises."

Warrior of Light continued with a firm tone. "Am I right, Bartz?"

"Ah-hah, you know us too well, Light!" Bartz innocently teased, "In fact, there was this one time when-"

"Ok, that's enough Bartz!" Onion Knight hastily called out, not wanting the 'oblivious' Witness to make the situation worse than it should be. "Let's keep to the subject at hand."

"I don't see the problem, I'm curious to hear more about their 'tales of mischief'." Warrior of Light chuckled away, although hiding the annoyance of hearing the unwelcomed nickname once again. "You never know, it could be important."

"What matters in the court of law is the witness' relevance to the case." Gabranth interrupted with a small scowl, feeling a lack of patience in pointless quarrels. "And currently, I do not see such relevance."

"Don't worry, your honour, as Bartz is crucially important to this case." Warrior of Light announced clearly, showing control in the matter. "It is to my belief that our witness may be closely involved with the partaking of the crime."

A few gasps from the seated students began to echo the hall, although Onion Knight began to find it increasingly annoying. However, he couldn't let this go by without a backlash.

"Speculations are not effective in court without solid evidence, Warrior of Light." Onion Knight called out, slamming the palms of his hands against the stand surface. "Where's your proof to justify your claim?"

"Hmph ... there is none required." Warrior of Light shrugged carelessly.

There was a moment of silence; the whole of the Hall froze up as if time stopped momentarily.

"What...?" Onion Knight murmured in surprise.

There were small discussions elevating within the crowd of students, curious as to why Warrior of Light had made such a bold move. Onion Knight and Terra glanced towards each other with confused expressions, unable to determine whether such a move was wise. However, it was then that Onion Knight caught sight of Zidane's reaction to the statement. He suddenly seemed anxious.

"You see, that's the reason why I called Bartz to the stand." Warrior of Light continued on, his eyes switching between his rival and the judge. "Right now, our evidence is lacking and we don't have many leads. I know this is a bold move but it's a move I'm willing to take. The closest we have is him; when Zidane is involved in trickery, Bartz is normally close behind."

Onion Knight was silent, taking in what Warrior of Light stated. He didn't know what approach to take. No matter what way he look at this, Warrior of Light was right. If he went through with this, the risk on both sides would rise considerably. However, if they didn't, they'll be in a dead end unless Zidane confessed. That was the one thing Onion Knight could not allow.

Terra, standing close beside him, began to wonder about the situation. Was this the right direction to take? Where will it lead? All these questions were forming ... and they were about to be answered. "Whatever game we're playing here ... I'll play along." Bartz broke the silence, giving a calmer mind than earlier.

Everyone's eyes suddenly shifted towards Bartz. No one expected him to speak out, let alone accept his position.

Onion Knight breathed out heavily as he heard Bartz speak out. He knew that the moment Bartz spoke, he had to be ready. It was then that he caught sight of Zidane in the corner of his eye; he was bewildered that Bartz was going to testify, considering how oblivious he was to the situation.

Gabranth gave out a small nod, "Well then, if the Witness wishes to testify then by all means ... let him testify."

Witness Testimony 1: Bartz Klauser.

"Me and Zidane were in the 4th Maths room when it happened." Bartz began his testimony, taking his time to remember the scene. "There were two screams, we both heard the first one and Zidane rushed out of the room to check what was going on. The moment he left, that was when I heard the second scream and a sudden smash of glass. I didn't know what happened, so I panicked ... and ran out the room."

Witness Testimony ... Complete.

The Court was completely silent, every person taking in what they had just heard. Whilst this was going on, Onion Knight skimmed over the evidence he had: the Accident Report; Photos of the cracked glass and the victim's bloodstain on the wall; three separate plastic pouches that contained Zidane's hair-strands, Rydia's hair-strands, and strands of mysterious brown hair; pieces of fabric from the broken window; and last but not least ... the small red jewel he found.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary with Bartz's testimony in terms of contradiction with evidence. However, he noticed one contradiction with what he remembered of the situation.

"What are you thinking, Onion Knight?" Terra wondered quietly, curious about his thoughts.

"Well, I've already caught something." Onion Knight answered back in a whisper, indicating to 'two screams'. "However, I'm going look at the rest of the statement first. He's hiding a lot that we need to know."

Terra nodded in response, understanding the approach to this. She caught on to the 'two screams' instantly, however she was unsure the testimony as a whole.

“So, Onion Knight, what’s your move going to be?” Warrior of Light curiously queried, teasing him. “Don’t you worry about that, Warrior of Light, I have plenty.” Onion Knight chuckled in response. “Show some patience.” “If that is the case, Defence, then you can progress with the cross-examination.” Gabranth stated firmly, nodding over upon hearing his response.

Cross-Examination 1: Bartz Klauser.

“Bartz, from what you stated in your testimony, you were with Zidane before the incident happened.” Onion Knight instantly began, glancing at the notes he made. “Could you please elaborate for me as to what you two were doing in Maths room 4?”

Bartz hesitated, struggling to find his words. He then glanced over towards Zidane with a cautious expression. Onion Knight caught sight of his reaction and swiftly jotted down another note. Zidane was silent, however nodded back with an indication to admit as to why they were there in the first place. “We ... were setting up a prank against one of the Math teachers.” Bartz anxiously admitted, shuffling on the spot of where he stood.

Onion Knight glanced over towards Warrior of Light curiously, feeling as though there would be a reaction from him. Warrior of Light seemed to be biting the inside of his lip, as though he was holding something back.

“I-it was going to be harmless, though!” Bartz stuttered as he added, trying to keep the situation cool.

“I would like to know, Bartz.” Warrior of Light began, keeping a formal expression. “Who was the teacher you two were going to prank?”

“Professor Gabbaini.” Bartz answered lowly, acting as though he had a guilty conscience. “He was going to have a class in there when lunch break ended.”

Setzer Gabbaini ... the infamous gambling math tutor. Onion Knight thought out, a small chuckle escaped his breath. *That makes sense, considering the amount of times he placed the two in detention throughout last year.*

Warrior of Light nodded in response, keeping silent. Both he and Onion Knight knew the man was watching with the rest of the Academy teachers, and decided not to go into further detail.

Onion Knight knew what to ask next, however decided to tread carefully on this, not wanting to throw out the contradiction just yet. “Pressing on, you stated that there were two screams in the room of the incident ... are you sure that there were two?”

“I’m positive.” Bartz nodded with confidence. “... I think.”

“‘I think’?” Onion Knight echoed with curiosity, scribbling a point in his notes. “Do you mean that you’re not completely certain?”

“The Witness answered the question, Onion Knight.” Warrior of Light interrupted suddenly, his arms crossed and eyes shut. “There’s no point in beating the dead horse.”

Yeah ... that’s what you think. Onion Knight confidently thought, knowing the inevitable.

Onion Knight looked over his notes; he had recently added that Bartz was hesitant when asked the two questions. This gave him a stronger assumption that there was more to this, however only time will tell. Onion Knight’s eyes were burning with dedication to find the truth, he just needed more.

“You finally stated that when you heard the second scream, you ‘panicked and ran’.” Onion Knight moved towards the last of the testimony, curious as to why he had added this in. “Why did you run away from the scene?”

Bartz drew in a deep breath, he knew this would come up eventually, but he didn’t know what to answer.

“It makes sense, hearing a scream of pain would cause anyone to run away.” Warrior of Light answered

in his stead. "I'm sure it was instincts kicking in."

"OBJECTION!" Onion Knight slammed his hand against the stand. "What type of answer was that!? Being close friends with Zidane, I would assume Bartz would never want to leave him behind if they were in danger!"

"OBJECTION!" Warrior of Light struck back, pointing firmly towards his rival. "How could you just assume the possibility!? It obvious that Bartz ran away to protect his own hide! If someone were to find him in the room, he would have been exposed to being part of the crime!"

"That WASN'T the reason why I ran away!" Bartz interrupted the debate, showing signs of increased stress. "I would never leave Zidane behind!"

Normally, it would be the other way around... Onion Knight commented in his mind, thinking that it was ironic. "If that was the case, then you must have a valid reason for running away?"

"I went to get help." Bartz finally admitted, lowering his head in guilt. "When I saw what happened, I didn't care about being found out with the prank, I just knew I had to find help."

"Hold on ..." Onion Knight drew back with surprise of the sudden revelation, "so you DID see the incident!?"

There was a sudden burst of gasps from the surprise audience. The crowd of students began to discuss amongst each other about it. Onion Knight took a moment to gather his thoughts on this. If Bartz had seen the situation before he and Terra had arrived, what could he have seen? And in addition to this, why didn't they see him during the time they were heading towards the scene of the crime? Warrior of Light seemed calm about all of this, keeping eerily silent.

The High Judge Gabranth instantly slammed his gavel against his desk in the response of the sudden outburst of the students.

"Order! Order in the Court!" He roared out towards the students, causing them to freeze up in silence instantly. "Master Klauser, in you testimony, you stated very clearly that 'you did not know what happened' before running away. Does this mean that you lied?"

"N-no, that's not true at all!" Bartz objected to the judge in a sudden panic. "I saw the incident but I didn't know what to make of it! The room was dark and all I could see was Zidane enter it."

"So why was this not included in the testimony?" Gabranth pressed this directly; causing Onion Knight to feel somewhat left out, considering the cross-examination was part of his role. "You DO realise this is a very important inclusion to the case."

Bartz shook his head silently, struggling to speak out. Gabranth sighed in response, finding Bartz obliviousness to the situation rather frustrating.

"I must place the matter into consideration and ask the Witness to testify what he saw of the crime scene before leaving the area." He concluded, holding up his gavel.

However, before he could slam his gavel, there was an interruption.

"WAIT, YOUR HONOUR!" Onion Knight roared out hastily, refusing for this to continue.

Both Gabranth and Warrior of Light glared over towards Onion Knight's direction, curious as to why the trial was now held up. Everyone else look over towards the Defence's direction, causing both Onion Knight and Terra to feel pushed against a corner.

"There are crucial points I MUST clarify before we continue!" Onion Knight gritted his teeth, his fiery eyes glaring back at the Judge. "This may turn the

"Fine, do as you must." Gabranth growled, disgusted by the sudden interruption.

Warrior of Light watched curiously in silence, an eyebrow raised with interest.

"Bartz, I would like you to recite the second line in your testimony." Onion Knight demanded, although a hint of excitement rose in his voice.

"Erm ... Ok." Bartz answered back, unable to cool down from earlier. "There were two screams-"

"I OBJECT THIS STATEMENT!" Onion Knight abruptly bellowed out, interrupting Bartz completely

before he could even finish the request.

“And why is that?” Warrior of Light questioned his rival; feeling confused all of a sudden. “Did we not already go through this? Bartz clearly stated that there were ‘two screams’, end of story!”

Onion Knight began to chuckle away, finding this all rather amusing. “That is very true, and I can respect that ... until one realises that it’s a fatal contradiction!”

“H-HUH!?!?” Warrior of Light blurted out in shock, his eyes completely wide.

The crowd of students, and even teachers, began discussing amongst themselves with sudden excitement. Onion Knight was smiling stubbornly, feeling as though he was playing his cards right. He knew that he was on a role with this.

“You see, there was clearly one scream during the incident!” Onion Knight continued on his attack.

“Either the witness is confused, or he’s lying to the court!”

“OBJECTION!” Warrior of Light roared back in retaliation, pointing out in sudden anger. “Where is your proof!?!?”

“You ask a valid question, Warrior of Light.” Onion Knight commented cheekily, eager to continue. “The answer I must give you is ... We are the proof!”

There was sudden silence in the hall, every person froze up in confusion, and their mind’s unable to process Onion Knight’s statement.

“W-what are you talking about?” Warrior of Light gasped in confusion, almost speechless. “That’s not proof!”

“How can it not be? I and Terra are also witnesses to this crime scene; we heard one scream before we reached the scene of the crime.” Onion Knight argued with a confident expression, backing up his claim.

“Answer me, Bartz! The ‘two screams’ statement is false!”

“W-wait, Onion Knight!” A worried Terra called out; noticing Onion Knight had made a misstep.

“What the matter, Terra?” Onion Knight asked back, noticing Terra’s call out.

BANG!

“The initial objection has been overruled!” Gabranth suddenly slammed his gavel, a stern glare shot directly at Onion Knight. “A penalty will be placed against the Defence unless valid proof is shown to the court.”

“WHAT!? But that WAS solid proof!” Onion Knight argued back in sudden rage.

“You did not back up the claim with evidence, instead only using your own accusations that could have been altered for the purpose of gaining a false lead.” Gabranth sternly spat back, showing no signs of letting Onion Knight’s accusation pass.

Onion Knight instantly felt his excitement drain out of his body in a small second, and instead filled with the weight of despair by losing his perfect lead. Terra felt some sympathy for him, saddened that he couldn’t continue with what they knew was the truth.

“Give it up, Onion Knight.” Warrior of Light shrugged with a teasing grin, trying to hide his laughter.

“Giving such assumption only leads to downfall; you know that all too well.”

There was silence on the Defence side of the court, Onion Knight still struggling with his loss of the battle. Warrior of Light was satisfied by this turnaround, watching his rival fall for his own mistake.

“F-fine, however, I must ask one more question before we move on.” Onion Knight then spoke out, slowly recovering. “Bartz, why did we not pass you when we arrived to the crime scene?”

“Wha-!? I, err...” Bartz suddenly blurted out in sudden anxiety, drawing back.

Got him! Onion Knight’s mind clicked, straightening his posture and regaining his confidence.

“You’re certainly persistent!” Warrior of Light growled, finding this infuriating. “This will get you nowhere, Onion Knight! Is a penalty not enough for your ego!?”

“You may wish to rethink that, Warrior of Light!” Onion Knight warned with a smart grin. “For you see, Terra and I would have passed Bartz along the way towards the crime scene. And with only the ONE

scream heard, Bartz would not have reached the staircase before Terra and I reached the 4th floor.”
“But, that’s-!” Warrior of Light began to counter back, only to halt himself with Onion Knight’s next interruption.

“And don’t go suggesting this is wrong as you were at the crime scene not long after us to arrest Zidane!” Onion Knight then struck the definitive blow.

“ACK-! NOOOO!” Warrior of Light roared in realisation, remembering what happened at the crime scene.

“And furthermore: no one, teacher or student, had seen Bartz during the entirety of the Lunch break and so was only seen when Class 13A had entered the next lesson of the day.” Onion Knight continued on, gaining back his lead.

He caught an eye at his own Class sitting at the front row; all were nodding and agreeing to his statement.

“So, do you deny this, Master Klauser?” Gabranth questioned in response to the new claim, curious with where this could lead. “Would you answer the question?”

“N-no...” Bartz mumbled quietly, unable to back himself out of the corner.

However, it was then that the court heard the most unexpected response from the Witness, causing even the Judge to become speechless with shock.

“Heh-heh ... So you caught me, Onion Knight.” Bartz cheerily admitted, giving out a cheesy grin. “You were absolutely right; I was lying about the screams! There was only ONE after all! AH-HA-HA!”

Cross-Examination 1 ... Complete!

Onion Knight’s and Warrior of Light’s mouth dropped in utter disbelief, their minds exploded simultaneously as a reaction. It was then that the two both slammed down against their stands and roared out.

“IS THIS A JOOOKE!!!?”

The crowd of students and teachers followed on, completely confused by the sudden event. Onion Knight placed his hands against the sides of his head, trying to figure out what’s going on. He should have been overjoyed to the revelation, so why was this suddenly giving him a headache!?

Gabranth was the first to snap back into reality, slamming his gavel down in response to the rising commotion.

“ORDER! I WILL HAVE ORDER!” The Judge bellowed furiously, veins popping out of his forehead.

“Master Klauser! Have you been toying with us this whole time!?”

“Yep, sorry! Ha-Hah!” Bartz admitted truthfully, showing a laidback smile.

Zidane had face-palmed due to his best-friend’s foolishness, he could not believe what was happening. Bartz hadn’t at all been taking this seriously, finding it all as some type of cheesy act.

It was then that a towering shadow had been cast over Bartz, causing him to freeze suddenly. Slowly, he gazed up towards the direction of the shadow’s origin, suddenly finding a furious figure glaring down on him. Warrior of Light had moved off of his stand without anyone noticing, and prepared to unleash a storm of terror over Bartz.

“Er, L-Light...?” Bartz

squeaked in a cowardly tone, stepping back from the witness stand. “I-Is something wrong?”

“How dare you...” Warrior of Light murmured in a low, dark tone.

Suddenly, six fiery long blades appeared surrounding Bartz, all pointing at him as a target. It was then that Bartz knew what was about to happen ... and he knew he couldn’t run away.

“HOW DARE YOU TAKE THIS SO LIGHTLY!!!” Warrior of Light abruptly roared as his eyes were full of rage. He then commanded the blades, “RADIANT SWORD!!!”

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!!!” Bartz screamed out in terror.

Everyone watched in both horror and amazement as the blades struck down on the unfortunate target. Although Terra looked away, Onion Knight could not help but watch the whole event unfold. Even both the Headmistress and Cid of the Lufaine watched in wonder, the Headmistress even finding it amusing. As it all ended, the blinding light cleared and Warrior of Light stepped back on his stand, acting as though nothing had happened in the first place. What was left of Bartz was a crumpled body with various sword blades sticking out.

“...Worth ... it ...” a small, dying whisper echoed from the body.

Warrior of Light cleared his throat, his eyes closed and a calm composure shown. “I’m sorry, your honour, it seems that our Witness has ... passed on to the next life.”

“I see ...” Gabranth nodded in an understanding manner, his expression shown as calm and motionless. “Condolences shall be passed on to the family and friends of this poor soul.”

That was ... dramatic. Onion Knight murmured in his mind, squinting as he adjusted his eyes. *I don’t think he’s dead though.*

“I-I’m f-fine ...” Bartz slowly called out as his body, full of piercing blades, began to rise back up on the stand. “I c-can still do this.”

“Is that right, Master Klauser?” Gabranth curiously wondered, a dark smile appearing on his usually expressionless face. “We shall then summarise your previous testimony.”

Gabranth took a moment to prepare his speech, allowing for the Hall to settle before he began, “You have told us that there had in fact been one scream during the incident and that you HAD seen at least a glimpse of the crime scene before fleeing the area. For your next testimony, we must know if the scream happened before or after the defendant left the room, what you saw at the scene of the crime, and where you had escaped to. Is this understood?”

Bartz nodded painfully, “Y-yes, your honour.”

“And one more additional thing ... will you tell the truth to the court this time?” The Judge then asked with caution and warning.

“I’ve learned my lesson.” Bartz agreed as he gave a light smirk in response.

Onion Knight clenched his fists; he was ready for the 2nd round. He had barely any time to rest from the battle he had endured, he couldn’t allow himself to falter yet.

“Onion Knight, don’t get carried away with this.” Terra reminded her Defence partner. “Don’t forget why we’re here.”

Understanding the situation, Onion Knight nodded to his partner, aware that he could not allow for another minor flaw to happen.

On the opposing end, Warrior of Light had a stubborn scowl, his sight striking his rival like daggers.

“Come, Onion Knight, what’s your next move?” He murmured quietly, to a point that no one else could hear him.

Witness Testimony 2: Bartz Klauser.

“The scream came after Zidane had left the room; we had in fact heard noises within the room next door.” Bartz recollected to the court, “After the scream, I had run out of the 4th Math room in a panic. I saw mostly darkness in the room where the incident occurred, only seeing Zidane’s back from where I stood. I heard him shout, ‘hide!’ so I did as he told me to and rushed into the 2nd Math room alongside the 4th floor corridor.”

Witness Testimony ... Complete.

There was a moment of silence throughout the hall, the Judge silent as always and the two sides taking in the key points of the testimony. Finally, Gabranth broke the silence of the Hall, commenting on his own thoughts on the testimony.

"I believe this testimony was considerably stronger than the previous. I'm surprised giving the lack of preparation." Gabranth spoke, seemingly somewhat more accepting than before. "Any words to add, Prosecution?"

All eyes shifted towards the direction of the Prosecution stand, where Warrior of Light kept his silence. His eyes were closed, and it felt as though he mouth wasn't going to budge. The Judge switched his direction in response, eyes on to Onion Knight and Terra.

"Defence, you may Cross-Examine the witness." Gabranth granted, banging his gavel.

"Thank you, Your Honour." Onion Knight accepted, keeping a strong stance.

"Onion Knight, I can't see anything out of place with the testimony." Terra whispered nervously, skimming Onion Knight's recent notes.

"I know; we're just going to have to work our way through this one until something comes up." Onion Knight assured his partner, his mind analysing the testimony in its entirety.

Cross-Examination 2: Bartz Klauser.

"Bartz Klauser, within your testimony, you have admitted that there was one scream." Onion Knight began, his eyes locked onto the Witness. "With that said, are you certain that this was after Zidane left the room?"

"I sure this time." Bartz spoke out in reply, no pause in his speech whatsoever.

"In that case, can you give me more detail on what caused Zidane to check the room?" Onion Knight then followed through, wishing to know more.

"As I said; there were some loud noises coming from the room. There were some bangs against a hard surface, tables being toppled and I heard a window shatter around that point as well." Bartz described, thinking back to the time. "With what we were doing at the time, it made sense for Zidane to check on what was going on."

"OBJECTION!" Onion Knight shot out with his pointing finger, noticing it straight away. "That was an interesting description, Bartz; however you gave yourself a clear contradiction!"

At that moment, Onion Knight took out one of the photos in the evidence.

"If you were more consistent, Bartz; you would have remembered from the previous testimony you gave that you mentioned ..." He pressed on, taking out his notes to quote on. "And I quote, 'The moment he (Zidane) left, that was when I heard the (second) scream and a sudden smash of glass.'"

"OBJECTION!" Warrior of Light struck out to counter, refusing this to be left off lightly. "Bartz may have heard the broken glass both times! They could have been from two different objects like a lamp!"

"OBJECTION!" Onion Knight struck back instantly, pointing back at the counterclaim. "Nice try, Warrior of Light, but you're missing a crucial piece of information. Do you remember Firion's Testimony?"

"What about it?" Warrior of Light stubbornly snarled, not realising what his rival had meant.

"Have you gone daft? He had clearly stated in his testimony that he had found a broken window but nothing about any other glass-breakage of the sort." Onion Knight argued, insulting his rival's cluelessness.

"ACK-!" Warrior of Light suddenly jerked back, realising what Onion Knight had meant.

Gabranth chuckled deeply, finding this more amusing as the trial continued on. "Well played, Knight of the Onion, an interesting comeback."

Wh-what did you call me...?! Onion Knight asked out in his mind with irritation, before swiftly switching his mind back to the task at hand. It wasn't one of his 'trigger' words/phrases, but it was an

unexpected play of his name nonetheless.

“What do you say, Bartz?” Onion Knight curiously questioned the Witness, in complete control of the situation.

“Ah, that right! Sorry, I mixed it up in my testimony by accident.” Bartz innocently admitted, rubbing the back of his head with an apologetic expression.

“So that was an honest mistake?” Onion Knight asked in annoyance, disappointed to hear the response.

“Yeah, sorry man.” Bartz once again apologised. “I heard the smash after Zidane left the room.”

“Mistakes can happen.” The Judge commented, nodding away.

“Aaargh...” Onion Knight sighed out in frustration, his head placed in his hands as he moaned out. That got him barely anywhere, and now he was back to square one. He noticed a smirk on Warrior of Light’s face, causing more frustration to rise.

“Fine then, I’ll let that one be.” Onion Knight concluded, rubbing his forehead. “From what you said in your testimony, you had caught only a glimpse of the room. Are you sure you did not enter the room?”

“I was in too much of a panic.” Bartz assured him, “And besides, Zidane told me to hide before I even consider it.”

“I see ...” Onion Knight sighed in disappointment once again, losing any friction to the discussion.

That was until something clicked in his mind, *Wait ... what if I used ‘that’?*

Onion Knight instantly took out the pouch with the brown hair-strands, however kept it hidden from anyone else’s eyes. He wondered if he could use it against Bartz. However he then considered the possibility of losing its worth for the future Witness’, especially if he had to challenge another ‘brown-haired’ individual in his Class. Glancing over towards the seated students of Class 13A; he caught sight of Squall Leonhart, who seemed bored stiff with this entire court trial.

Onion Knight subtly shook his head in conclusion. He couldn’t rush this, and he knew Bartz would harm anyone like that. Placing the pouch away, he began to think of other possibilities. Nothing came to mind. He was completely stuck.

“Is that all from the Defence?” Gabranth queried curiously, hearing only silence from that side.

“I think our ‘genius’ has nothing left to go on.” Warrior of Light spoke out in response, teasing his rival.

“Let’s just finish this without getting too far ahead.”

“No, not yet!” Onion Knight hastily spat out, struggling to find something.

Terra watched him as he continued to stress out from thinking every possible lead. Not long after, she decided to add in her own thoughts.

“Onion Knight, why don’t you think outside of the box?” She added to her partner. “There’s likely something that hasn’t been mentioned throughout the testimonies.”

“How can I ‘think outside the box’? There are no leads or approaches I can use!” Onion Knight whispered back stressfully, his fingers tapping against the desk surface of the stand.

“But there’s still something! What about the broken window?” Terra pushed him, refusing to give up just yet.

“We’ve been through the window situation already!” Onion Knight dismissed the idea, rubbing his forehead as the stress continued to rise.

“... Not everything.” Terra murmured under her breath, her eyes shifting back towards Bartz.

Onion Knight’s head slowly rose up, as though Terra’s comment clicked life into the dormant brain of his. There ‘was’ one thing he had missed out, but it was something he could have never got without using the most unexpected approach.

“One last thing before we conclude this.” Onion Knight spoke out, placing all of his faith on this approach. “Bartz, I need you to think back to the moment when Zidane left the room and the glass window shattered.”

“Sure, although I’m not promising that anything else would come up.” Bartz warned, showing some eagerness.

“That’s fine.” Onion Knight nodded back. “Now, you did not leave the room until AFTER the window in the next room had shattered, is that correct?”

“Yep,”

“Perfect, and now for the defining question ... from the window in Math room 4, did you see a person escape from that shattered window?” Onion Knight carefully asked, his heart beating at a fast pace.

“How ridiculous...” Warrior of Light murmured, finding this pointless.

“Not ... that I know of.” Bartz slowly admitted, thinking back as hard as he could.

Onion Knight felt the disappointment beginning to fill his whole mind and heart; everything was banking on that approach. He knew it was a bold idea, but he also had hope.

... *He paused.* A sudden voice from the back of his mind called out to him, causing his whole body to jump back up abruptly. Hope beginning to surface suddenly

“Wait ... there was something there before I ran out.” Bartz commented, eyes squinting towards the ceiling as glimpses of memory formed up in his own mind. “A shadow, it was hard to make out. But I’m certain that a shadow had leaped out of the next door window.”

His eyes wide with anticipation, Onion Knight almost went insane with excitement. Clapping his hands loud together, causing various students within the seated crowd to jump up in shock. He threw out his index finger, and took his rival head on.

“THAT’S IT!” Onion Knight roared out with pride, “I’VE FOUND MY LEAD!”

Warrior of Light froze up, reacting from the completely unexpected response. “Wh-what do you mean.”

“I present to the court, a photograph of the shattered window!” Onion Knight pressed on, slipping the photo out from the desk of the stand and ready to hand over to the Judge.

Prishe, who had been completely restless due to the lengths of standing on the spot, almost stumbled when she realised she was needed. She hastily snatched the photo from Onion Knight’s grasp and passed it on to the High Judge Gabranth.

“What am I looking at here?” Gabranth wondered, not amused.

“Analyse the photo, Your Honour.” Onion Knight requested eagerly. “As you should be able to see within the photo, the broken window has small tufts of blue fabric stuck within the sharp corners.”

“I see ... what is your point?” Gabranth questioned further, squinting at the photo.

“A comment Detective Firion had given during his testimony was that the fabric directed towards the outside of the room. This assumes that someone had ‘exited’ the window!” Onion Knight continued on.

“OBJECTION!” Warrior of Light bellowed out in backlash, noticing an easy flaw. “Onion Knight, you must also remember from Firion’s testimony that he specifically stated that the ‘placement of the broken shards prove that the window had been broken from the outside’!”

“Yes, and that is ONE of the many factors that prove my revelation!” Onion Knight pointed out, completely throwing his rival off-guard and ignoring the ‘objection’ entirely. “So continuing on with this, not only does this indicate that the culprit had used the window for his own escape – although how it broke from the outside is still in question – but it is undeniable proof that Zidane could not have even ‘touched’ the window as he had entered through the classroom door!”

“No ... NO-NO-NOOOO!!!” Warrior of Light continuously smashed his fists against the surface of the desk on his stand, his teeth gritting considerably.

“That’s right!” Onion Knight pointed out in close triumph, “And the final kicker here is ... That someone else HAD to be in that room!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!” Warrior of Light roared out, completely defeated from this battle.

“Bravo, bravo, Knight of the Onion!” Gabranth clapped joyfully, enjoying every second of this battle.

“You are a fine warrior of mind! A brilliant battle of wit!”

BANG!

Cross-Examination 2 ... Complete!

Onion Knight almost lost his foot, completely breathless and tired from the stride. He could hear the crowd of students and teacher clapping away at his victorious battle. He caught sight of Terra smiling joyfully, pleased that he had figured it out. And then shifting his eyes, he caught sight of a glimmer of hope appearing in Zidane's expression.

"Don't be celebrating yet ... Onion Knight." A voice called out eerily, causing the applause to halt abruptly.

Warrior of Light had risen from his tantrum from the loss, and a dark smile escaping his mouth.

"This now begs the question ..." He spoke out darkly, small chuckles echoing across the Hall. "If Zidane didn't commit the assault ... who did?"

"That ... is what we need to find out." Onion Knight confidently replied, noticing the battle for the truth was not yet over.

"That is all too true." Gabranth concluded, nodding with a proud expression. "As such I must suspend this trial until a further date. In that time, I must request for further investigation until the more evidence and witnesses have been located and prepared for trial. I would also like to request the Prosecution to place Master Klauser and Master Tribal into further questioning. There are many secrets hidden in a 'prankster's' mind."

"I accept, Your Honour." Warrior of Light formally nodded, finally calmed himself.

"As such, court is adjourned." Gabranth announced loudly, raising his gavel.

BANG!

The Academy Bell rang not long after the court trial had finished, with numerous students feeling overjoyed to have missed the final lesson of the week. Many began to group up and wonder towards the entrance gates, chatting enthusiastically about what they had planned for the weekend. However, the big commotion had been the court trial; no one had expected such a battle, discussing who to back for the next trial. A majority were seemingly rooting for Onion Knight after watching his triumphant performance, whilst others felt that Warrior of Light could make a comeback for the next one. Ultimately though, no one knew what to expect for the future of the court case.

Warrior of Light stood leaning against the building's front wall, watching the students leave for home. Some had stopped and spoke to him eagerly, acting as though they were big fans of his. Although he didn't want to, he allowed himself to chat with his new 'fans' in order to keep his reputation. There had been a few occasions when he had to hastily hide away, due to noticing groups of the 'fan-girls' he didn't want to get himself involved with. He knew all too well from his past experiences how persistent these groups can be.

As he continued to watch, he felt a tug on his lower trouser leg. His eyes dropped down towards it curiously, only to suddenly jump up with surprise.

"You played a valiant battle back there." Cid of the Lufaine complimented highly.

"Cid of the Lufaine! Sorry, I didn't notice you there." Warrior of Light apologised hastily, feeling suddenly anxious by the Moogles' appearance. "Ah, yes, well ... I acted rather antagonistically during the trial, it seemed."

"I must disagree, personally, I saw a man motivated in finding the truth." Cid suggested, his sight switched towards the groups of students as he spoke out.

"I guess you could say that ..." Warrior of Light murmured back, unsure whether that was the approach.

"If I was more prepared, maybe I could have fared better against Onion Knight."

Cid paused, taking in Warrior of Light's comments into consideration.

"Granted, you used what you had to the best of your ability." Cid then assured looking at the situation in a positive light. "May I speak from my own personal experiences? All beings, no matter who or what they are, have a preferred outlook on life and will in most cases dedicate themselves towards keeping to their viewpoint. I like to call this the 'narrow road'. If two beings with opposite viewpoints meet in the confined area of this narrow road, their outlooks will more than likely clash in order to keep themselves on that road."

"Sound very reminiscent of Onion Knight and myself." Warrior of Light sighed out, relating himself to the descriptions.

"If that is how you see it." Cid commented back, continuing on. "These clashing viewpoints may battle on for an eternity, leading to various conflicts that could scale to both great and small. However, if one were to widen the road out, they allow for a more open outlook and more space to move around. I call this the 'open road'. In reality, this would allow for the two clashing viewpoints to have space; allowing for possible debates, but not causing immanent conflicts."

"And ... how could one widen this 'road'?" Warrior of Light wondered, picturing the description in his mind.

"That is a question you will have to find from your own experiences." Cid pointed out, "I will suggest this though. Those who can widen the road with success may become great 'leaders' in the future."

"Leaders...?" Warrior of Light echoed with confusion, "What do you mean?"

"Food for thought..." Cid nodded in conclusion, giving off a pleasant aura towards his fellow being. With that, Cid of the Lufaine began to waddle off in the direction of the entrance gate, disappearing into the crowds of exiting students.

"The 'Open Road' ..." Warrior of Light murmured quietly, thinking it through with care.

Meanwhile, in the Medical Room ...

"How are you feeling, Rydia?" Terra wondered with a calm smile, sitting on the chair beside the bed.

"I'm getting there." Rydia replied softly, slowly lifting up from the bed she had rested on. "I think I should be well enough to travel back home."

"I'm glad..." Terra felt relieved, cautiousness lifting from her spirit.

The two began to discuss about the trial, Terra describing to Rydia all the details about the clashes between Onion Knight and Warrior of Light. Rydia listened in with consideration, nodding back every so often.

"By the way, where is Onion Knight? I thought he would still be with you?" Rydia asked curiously, looking around the area.

"He headed off to find Firion." Terra answered, although equally as curious about both Onion Knight and Firion's whereabouts. "Firion never returned to the Hall after he left for the Security Room halfway through the Trial. Onion Knight got rather worried and left towards the Security Room."

"I see ..." Rydia murmured back, lowering her eyes as she fell silent. A sudden insecure feeling rose in the back of her mind, causing her to feel somewhat cautious.

On the Top Floor of the Academy Building...

"Firion?" Onion Knight called out, stepping out from the staircase.

He had searched every other hall, checking places that he could have gone to. He had strong intuitions that Firion hadn't left the building just yet, he would have at least told someone if that were the case.

Onion Knight began his search on the floor, peering into several windows of the offices for any signs. He

decided to continue through the corridor, curious as to whether Firion had left the Security Room at all. Switching to opposite the Headmistress' Office, that was when he found him ... leaning against the door unconscious.

"Firion!?" Onion Knight roared out as he rushed over in the instance.

He dropped to his knees and checked his condition, looking for signs of injuries. He noticed blood stained on the side of his head, meaning he was struck by something hard. In that moment, he heard a groan escaping Firion's mouth, and movement began to follow.

"Wh-what...?" Firion murmured out, wincing as he sat himself up.

"Don't rush yourself, Firion." Onion Knight warned, wary about Firion's movement.

"D-did I ... fall over?" Firion then questioned, seemingly unsure as to how he had fallen unconscious in the first place.

"I don't know; I had just found you like this." Onion Knight answered with caution, looking over for any more signs of injury. "It seems that you hit your head relatively hard though."

Slowly, Onion Knight assisted Firion to his feet, keeping his body balanced as he rose up.

"What can you last remember, Firion?" Onion Knight asked him, worried about his condition.

"I remember ... exiting the room after I found out someone had erased the video files." Firion answered as best as he could, soothing the injury on his head.

"Someone ERASED them!?" Onion Knight blurted out with disbelief. "How is that possible!?"

"I don't know." Firion shook his head, wincing once again. "I could only find – Wait...!"

Abruptly, Firion checked his pockets, trying to find the memory stick he had.

"No... No way, it's gone!?" Firion worriedly bellowed out, his hands rustling through his pockets.

Before Onion Knight could question what he meant, Firion had taken one of his hands out of his pocket.

He was holding a scrap of paper. He passed it over to Onion Knight, confused as to why it was there.

Onion Knight flattened the paper amongst his hands, noticing a note had been written down. The two of them read it; it was at that moment that both of their expressions changed from confusion to undeniable shock.

'This battle cannot be won so easily...'

13 - Arc 3 (2): No Stone Left Unturned

Onion Knight stood leant on the wall beside his bedroom window, gazing out towards the darkness of night. His mind was completely elsewhere, the whole of the court trial had completely drained his mental state. After going through a recap of the trial within his head, questions were arising from the depths that kept Onion Knight from getting sleep: *What are we still missing? Where do we go now in order to gain stronger leads? And to top it off ... Who else is involved in this?*

On the windowsill in front of Onion Knight was the flattened slip of paper he was given from Firion. The words played through his mind to the point of knowing it off by heart.

"This battle cannot be won so easily..." Onion Knight breathed out silently in echo, sighing out in annoyance. "So this is all just a petty game..? Tch! How repulsive!"

He picked up the piece of paper and moved it over to his desk that stood alongside the window, dropping it with the other pieces of evidence gathered from the case so far. All the evidence had been placed on the mahogany desk surface carefully, labelled up and included his detailed notes from the previous trial. Onion Knight slumped on his desk chair, showing his exhaustion with his body language. His head tilted back and another sigh escaped, trying his best to turn the imaginary cogs that worked his brain.

Holding up his wristwatch lazily, he checked out the time. It was 12:14am; past midnight. Onion Knight had spent around 4 hours connecting the dots and scrambling his mind in hopes of finding any hidden leads not already established ... however, this was to no avail. Onion Knight felt as though he had only wasted his time on the matter, leading to nowhere in the conclusion.

With some relief, however, Onion Knight remembered that it had just turned Saturday. The weekend arrived and the idea of free roaming for two days had begun to set in. One of the things that did come out of his 4 hours of head scratching was his upcoming plans, beginning the moment he would wake up the next morning.

I will begin the day with meeting up with Terra and Firion (of course, if he's up for it) and discuss about the case at hand. Onion Knight recapped in his mind, his eyes closed however still conscious.

Depending on the time, we'll head off into town to see if anyone else we know is about. I guarantee that we'll at least spot Warrior of Light near the Academy, considering how persistent he normally is.

Meeting any of the other students would be a bonus. Our main goal is to find potential witnesses, as that would be the only possible leads as of this moment. Considering what was confirmed during my meeting with Headmistress Cosmos, I cannot allow for any stones to be unturned...

Flashing back to The Headmistress' Office, 8 hours previous ...

"To think that another assault could happen in the Academy ... how awful." Cosmos murmured with sadness, feeling rather down about the recent incident. "Whatever 'game' is being played here, I refuse for it to continue."

She had been sitting behind her desk, books and files stacked on each side as per the norm. In the centre of the desk was the note Onion Knight had found, flat against the surface as the Headmistress crucially examined it. Onion Knight and Firion were placed on chairs opposite to Cosmos, one kept momentarily silent as he took in the situation and the other soothed his head injury with a medical ice pack respectfully.

Not long after Onion Knight and Firion had found the note in the latter's pocket, the Headmistress had

arrived at the top floor, initially oblivious to the situation that had just occurred beforehand. After tending to Firion's injury, Onion Knight had explained what had happened. Headmistress Cosmos reacted in an understandable yet previously unseen expression; she was horrified beyond belief. Reality had seemed to dawn on the Headmistress in an instant, any enjoyment from the precious court trial battle completely disappeared in a flash. Onion Knight had also shown the note to Cosmos, wondering if she could decipher the hand writing.

"I'm fine, Cosmos, this injury isn't something I'm majorly concerned with." Firion politely assured, showing a calm grin. "I like to consider it as a 'further means to find the truth'."

"Even so, the safety and wellbeing of my students comes before anything else." The Headmistress commented back firmly, although appreciative that someone finally acknowledged her preferences in terms of her title. "This is a statement I have carried with me and it is directly applied to both you and Rydia."

Silence engulfed the room at that moment, a somewhat depressing aura surrounding the three.

"What are your suggestions to the matter, Cosmos?" Onion Knight decided to speak his mind, curious about her approach to the matter.

"Well ... I've already got the authorities coming back to further investigations tomorrow. It pains me to say this but all we can do is to continue with our own investigations." The Headmistress glumly admitted, showing hints of irritation. "I will say this though ... this 'second assault' has given us a shed of light on the matter."

"You mean about the possible second 'suspect'?" Onion Knight murmured, having caught the realisation not long after he found Firion earlier.

"That's exactly correct, Onion Knight." Cosmos nodded with a firm expression, "It seems your conclusive assumption from the court trial is now closer to confirmation than we initially thought. Although it does not confirm Zidane's innocence as of yet, it would have been impossible for him to have committed the second assault during the given timeframe. He was either at the court trial or in questioning with Bartz in the instant after the trial concluded. I certainly know the latter considering I was the one questioning them at the time."

"I thought as much ..." Onion Knight's eyes lowered as he made his comment, unsure whether to feel more triumphant that he was correct on his accusation or frustrated that this 'suspect' had made another move. "What would be our next approach?"

Shuffling on her seat, Headmistress Cosmos reached out on her desk and held up the note before Firion and Onion Knight.

"This handwriting doesn't match any staff or student from this Academy. It may mean it could be purposely forged to throw us off but it may also mean that someone from 'outside' could be involved." Cosmos answered tensely, her grasp firm against the small note.

That was a fear that Onion Knight didn't want to come across during this investigation, however could only agree to what Cosmos had detailed. If the second 'suspect' was from outside the Academy, this would mean that the police would have to take full control of the investigation and Onion Knight give up his involvement even though he reached so far. Although this is only a small possibility, Onion Knight didn't want to head down the dead path.

I can't think like that now ... Onion Knight thought out as he tensed up, his eyes showing off the flame of his determination. ... *Not when I still have the lead on this case!*

"Right now, what we seemed to lack from the previous trial were solid witnesses." Cosmos decided to continue, placing the note back down on her desk. "Even if we had Bartz Klauser, that wasn't enough to warrant any decisive conclusions to this case. In actual fact, it had lead up to more questions and possibilities on the situation at hand. What we need is more witnesses, and one that are fully prepared."

"But that's a problem within itself!" Onion Knight hit back abruptly, noticing the flaw to this idea. "The

only ones on the 4th floor at the time were Zidane, Bartz, Rydia, and the mysterious second suspect. What, or who, else could there be?"

"That's ... true." Cosmos murmured hesitantly, disheartened slightly by that fact.

However, Onion Knight and Firion caught sight a small hidden grin, causing them to glance at each other curiously with a raised eyebrow.

"Thankfully ... this is where the court trial came in extra handy." She spoke up with a smile, a spark of confidence in her eyes. "There may be students who were too shy to admit or even unaware that they were witnesses of a crime scene. And so with the court trial's influence, these witnesses may decide to finally surface."

Onion Knight leaned back on his seat slightly and took the Headmistress' self-assured suggestions into consideration. The thought of the idea lifted his hopes up, however in a cautious manner.

"Would these hidden witnesses have a relevant testimony?" Firion decided to ask, seemingly speaking Onion Knight's mind. "And if so, is what they have seen worth testifying over?"

The Headmistress locked eyes on Firion as curiosity arose in her mind, "Speak your mind, Firion; you seem rather doubtful."

"Ah! Not in the slightest, Headmistress Cosmos." Firion denied hastily, taking the ice-pack off of his head momentarily as he explained himself. "I was just thinking that the majority of students were outside at the time of the crime; and so if any did perhaps see anything, what would the court be able to gain from it? All I could think of would be students catching a glimpse of the 'second' suspect."

Cosmos drew in a deep breath, closing her eyes in the process.

"Any witness testimony, both large and small in terms of importance, is still crucial to the court."

Cosmos breathed out in a sophisticated tone, her mind clear and assured. "Every single piece is important, whether it's a piece of evidence, a witness statement, or even an opinion. If one were to miss any of this, we cannot have complete progression. So to answer your question, Firion; yes, it would certainly be worth it."

Onion Knight glanced over to Firion at that moment, wondering about his reaction to Headmistress Cosmos' answer. Firion's mind was processing, his hands fiddling with the pack of ice. He then glanced back at Onion Knight, and gave a surprisingly determined smile in return.

"Then shall we get back to work, Onion Knight?" He asked with a grin. "Let's make sure no stones are left unturned!"

Present time ...

A small smile crept up of Onion Knight's face, amused by how the meeting had turned out back then. Every time he thought back to then, a rise of confidence sparked in both his mind and heart.

"I wonder how much closer to the truth we will be tomorrow." Onion Knight chuckled quietly, deciding to rise from his seat.

Before heading to bed, Onion Knight took a moment to idle in his room, clearing his mind ready for tomorrow ... and mainly so he could get a decent night's rest.

His room was simple; due to only moving into his student home 2 weeks before, Onion Knight hadn't had too much of a chance to fully unpack the boxes that scattered his room. Even so, he kept the place as tidy as he needed, with no mess on the floor, and clothes neatly folded and placed in the cupboards and draws that sat against the corner walls of the room. Items such as electronics and books were on the shelf above his single bed, ordered in terms of importance and efficiency. His walls were plain amber colour, giving a warm glow in the evenings however not much else.

After changing into his bed clothes, Onion Knight threw himself onto his bed, feeling as though time itself began to slow down. There was no sound whatsoever, the room completely silent, a perfect atmosphere

to drop off in. He coolly reached out to the desk next to him and grasped the slip of paper once again, deciding to hold it up high above in the light of the window from behind. He read the line one more time, and murmured sleepily as a response.

“Whoever you are ... I will track you down and bring justice to this case.”

The Next Morning, 9:30am ...

Drowsily eating his cereal, Onion Knight sat silently in front of the small dining table within the kitchen of his student home. The Kitchen was fairly cramped, however it had the basic essentials to cook and clean in.

Onion Knight's eyes were still drooping even though he had showered off and clothed up the moment he woke up half-an-hour ago. Sitting opposite him was a boy around his own age; with light brown hair, hazel eyes and freckles scattered on his face. He seemed to be fully engrossed in one of his books, with this one seemingly titled: ‘Secret of Mana’. To Onion Knight, the boy was a close long-time friend who entered Dissidia Academy during the same time. The boy was rather timid and soft spoken. Even though this was the case however, he closely matched Onion Knight in intelligence and often had friendly debates when discussing about various topics. The boy's name: Arc.

Onion Knight caught sight of Arc anxiously shuffle on his chair, looking as though something was on his mind.

“Is something troubling you, Arc?” Onion Knight queried curiously, munching away.

Arc lifted his head, acting as though he had just snapped back into reality.

“O-oh, no ... I'm fine, thanks.” Arc answered in a kind tone, a wavering smile to show how he felt. “It's just one of the chapters I'm reading, that's all.”

“I see ...” Onion Knight murmured coolly, brushing the response off as he continued to dig into his breakfast. However, he decided spark up a conversation. “I didn't realise they made a book of that game as well.”

“Yeah, it recently got adapted.” Arc nodded back, his eyes switching back and forth from the book to Onion Knight. “I never got round to playing the original, so I thought reading up on the story would be the next best thing.”

“Hmph ... well, that is always a viable alternative.” Onion Knight grinned, feeling rather reminiscent by the thought of the game. “Thinking about it, I don't think I've played it in years.”

Onion Knight and Arc continued to chatter for a moment longer, discussions ranging around decent fiction, whether it being from books and games. However, it soon dropped back to silence as Onion Knight finished of his cereal bowl and stretched out from his chair, beginning to feel more awake by that point. He decided to strike up one more conversation with his friend, thinking it was appropriate to bring up.

“By the way, how was your first week at the Academy?” Onion Knight questioned curiously, realising he had barely seen Arc during his time at Dissidia Academy.

That was when he noticed Arc giving out a sudden twitch in his body, acting as though the question put him off.

“About that, well ...” Arc stuttered, his eyes averting Onion Knight's.

However, Onion Knight could read his friend like a book, crossing his arms and giving off a serious expression. “... You're not enjoying it, are you? Are you being bullied again?”

“T-that's not the reason at all!” Arc raised his voice anxiously, causing Onion Knight to jump slightly in surprise. “I just feel ... like I don't fit in at all with my class.”

Onion Knight gazed towards his friend, giving out a slow quiet sigh, “That's typical of you ... All I'll say to that is just be patient, it's only been one week so you have plenty of time to build relationships with

your class.”

“Right ... says the guy who’s been getting all the attention as of recent.” Arc then pouted, turning his head away.

“Wha...!?” Onion Knight blurted out, feeling taken aback by the comment. “How is that related? You know as well as I do that building friendships and other types of relationships vary with time. And besides ... I didn’t exactly choose to take up the role of Defence Attorney in yesterday’s court trail.” There was a moment where time seemed to freeze, the two gazed at each other as they attempted to read the other’s mind. Eventually, Onion Knight decided to stand up and take his breakfast dish to the kitchen sink, wiping it off clean for later use. In the corner of his eye, Onion Knight caught sight of Arc slouching back on his chair.

“*Sigh* ... Maybe it’s best to change subjects.” Onion Knight decided, breaking the tension. “Actually ... Where in the world is Refia, I thought she would be down by now.”

Onion Knight glanced over towards the stairs through the open door, wondering where their other housemate/long-term friend was. He then switched his sights back to Arc, wondering why there was no answer. It was then that he gasped; Arc had frozen up completely, the colour of his skin turning white and sweat seeping down his face.

“U-um ... you might want to tread carefully around her right now.” Arc murmured in fear, his eyes wide with sudden terror.

“For what reason?” Onion Knight wondered in response, confused about Arc’s sudden reaction. “Did she wake up on the wrong side of the bed today? ... or is it ‘that’ time of the month?”

BANG!

Suddenly, the two felt a sudden impact from directly above, followed by a rumble. Onion Knight lifted his head, terror somewhat building in the back of his mind.

“I’m ... guessing it’s the latter option then.” Onion Knight blurted out, his eye twitching as he expected the unexpected.

“No ... you don’t understand.” Arc began to warn, leaning forward and placing his hands together on the table. “Refia is furious with you ... because you stayed locked up in you room for the entirety of last night.”

“THAT’S THE REASON!?” Onion Knight bellowed out in disbelief, finding it completely absurd.

“Oh ... the horror.” Arc then mumbled, beginning to trail off. “How she ranting on through the night, throwing off fits of rage ... I could barely sleep a wink.”

“Why couldn’t she have at least knocked on my door!?” Onion Knight complained, finding this somewhat pointless and irrelevant. “In addition to that, surely she knows of the situation I’m currently in! What, is she my mother now!?”

At that moment, quickening steps were heard from above.

“Whatever the case ... I suggest you cover your ears.” Arc concluded almost in a whisper, covering his ears with his hands.

Onion Knight stared at his friend with a blank expression, finding the dramatic performance rather outlandish. Taking in a deep breath, he then decided to turn and face what was about to appear. He stepped out through the open door towards the hall where the stair were, and waited. It was at that moment, she appeared ...

“WHAT’S WITH YOU!!!?” The young girl roared at Onion Knight as she made her appearance, bearing her teeth with fury. “You lock yourself up in your room the moment you got home from Dissidia yesterday like an antisocial bum, and NOW your complaining about me behind my back!? You have of sense of shame!!!”

Refia, Onion Knight’s other housemate and friend, was a light-ginger haired girl with a slim figure for her age. She mainly wore light based clothing such as a long-sleeve blouse and leggings. She was, what

Onion Knight considered, as the boss of the student household, keeping the two boys in check with managing the place and keeping themselves respectable. Anything out of line ... and she'll chew them out like a rabid dog.

"You seem slightly misinformed, Refia." Onion Knight pointed out, showing off an unimpressed expression. "First of all, I wasn't complaining behind your back, I knew from the noises you were making upstairs that you were listening and so I decided to express an honest opinion. Second, just because I stayed in my room for the majority of yesterday evening does not instantly class me as an antisocial bum."

"You could have AT LEAST come down for dinner, though!" Refia argued back, accepting no excuses. "Refia ... missing one meal in the day doesn't result to the end of the world, at least not that I know of." Onion Knight sighed out in annoyance, placing a hand on his forehead as he tried to clear out the frustration in his mind. "Anyhow, I have to fulfil a few objectives today so please don't hassle me."

"Dearly noted ..." Refia huffed, her eyes glaring towards her roommate. "Just be aware, if this happens again ... I'll place you on cleaning duty for a whole week!"

"HUUUHHH!?!?" Onion Knight's mouth dropped in despair, to be given a warning like that was almost unbearable for him.

"By the way..." Refia decided to add, sighing out after she finally let off steam. "Your performance yesterday during the Academy assembly's court trial ... was quite awesome."

With that, Refia brushed past him and entered the kitchen, leaving Onion Knight to stand in the hall in awkward silence. After his mind processed the whole ordeal, he looked over towards the clock that hung up high on the wall. It read close to 10am.

Ding-dong...

The doorbell rang out not long afterwards; Onion Knight had been sitting in the living room waiting for the bell to ring. He was now prepared to begin the day's main objective, hoping it will give him enough information for when they return for the next court trial. He rushed over to the hall without a moment of hesitation, his hand reaching out to the front door. Arc and Refia were busy in the kitchen and knew Onion Knight would have a visitor, hoping to join them later to hear about their plans. This meant that the visit wasn't to be unexpected ... or so Onion Knight thought.

"Ah, Terra! Good morning!" Onion Knight cheerfully greeted as he opened the door, showing his politeness to his friend.

Terra stood at the door with her usual well-mannered expression, greeting back with a kind smile. However, Onion Knight noticed the smallest of twitches in the corner of her mouth, causing him to become somewhat wary. He gestured to her, in which she accepted and entered the house. It was then that he realised the reason behind Terra's nervous twitch, as there had been a second visitor both did not expect to turn up at Onion Knight's door.

"Hey, Onion Knight! Do you mind if I-!"

SLAM!!!

Onion Knight automatically slammed the door in front of the surprise visitor, his mind unable to process for some reason. Terra squeaked due to the unexpected reaction. Onion Knight glanced over to his friend, his expression seemingly a balanced blend of confusion and annoyance. The surprise visitor was one of the last people he wished to see right now, and the fact that the visitor now knows where he lives infuriates him to no end.

Slowly, Onion Knight opened the door once again, wondering if the surprise visitor had left.

"Now that was rude-!"

SLAM!!!

He had not.

Onion Knight turned towards Terra, who had been standing beside him nervously. There was a moment

of awkward between the two; Terra trying to avert her eyes whilst Onion Knight glared with irritation. "Terra ... why is 'he' here?" Onion Knight eerily questioned, his eyes glaring like daggers. "H-he saw me walking down the street ... and decided to follow." Terra answered anxiously, unsure what to tell him.

"And ... you couldn't shake him off?" Onion Knight murmured in a monotone, crossing his arms in disappointment.

"Well ... what else could I do?" Terra complained back shrugging her shoulders.

Onion Knight face-palmed as he sighed out, his frustrations just seemed to keep building. However, he made the ultimate decision and opened the door once again.

"*Sigh* ... what do you want, Bartz?" Onion Knight queried to the visitor, his eyes rolling as he found this whole thing a nuisance.

Bartz Klauser, sporting casual clothing just like everyone else, was standing idly at the door. He certainly had his patience considering that he had to wait outside the door; however both Onion Knight and Terra noticed that his patience was beginning to run thin.

"Was there really the need to shut the door on me ... twice!?" Bartz began to complain, although giving a light-hearted expression in the process.

"I'll shut it again if you want ..." Onion Knight then murmured blankly, beginning to close his door a third.

"N-NO NO! There's no need for that! Hehee..." Bartz hastily muttered out, showing his desperation.

"Don't worry, I promise not to be a bother to you!"

Onion Knight and Terra glanced at each other, wondering how to proceed. Bartz fidgeted on the spot, curious as to what they were thinking.

"Bartz, you can come in ... however, just so you know, we need all the help we can get for this investigation." Onion Knight explained to him, becoming rather serious.

"That's the reason why I'm here!" Bartz instantly blurted out, feeling glad it was brought up. "I want to help out! Zidane is my best friend and so I want to do everything I can to help in proving his innocence!" Onion Knight nodded as he understood Bartz's reason. He ushered him inside and lead the two into the living room. The three sat on sofa chairs that circled around the room, shuffling on them as they made themselves comfortable. Onion Knight brought out two spare seats for his housemates when they join in for the conversation later on.

"I heard that Firion was injured yesterday, after he left the court trial." Bartz began the conversation, giving a somewhat worried expression. "Could you tell us what happened?"

Onion Knight sat on his own seat and glanced at both Bartz and Terra, knowing that one of them would ask about it a one point. Onion Knight had received a call from Firion when he woke up earlier. Firion had apologised that he wouldn't be able to meet up with him and Terra today due to developing a concussion from the recent incident. Saddened by this, Onion Knight wished him well and ultimately decided to carry out the plans without the case detective.

Onion Knight began to explain everything that happened during the aftermath of yesterday's trial; how he found the collapsed Firion on the top floor of the building, and what the note said. He continued on that he had spoken to Headmistress Cosmos about this issue and what it could possibly mean. Both Bartz and Terra listened in carefully, feeling rather sorry for Firion about becoming a victim in the mess. "But, if Firion was knocked out during the court trail ... then does that mean another person is behind this?" Terra wondered, noticing a contradiction between the second assault and Zidane position during that time. "It's not possible that Zidane could have attacked him at any point during the trial."

"That's more or less correct, during the time Firion had left the court room, Zidane was either present in the court or in further questioning." Onion Knight nodded it confirm, remembering the discussion he had with the Headmistress yesterday. "I'm sure Bartz would be able to clarify about the 'further questioning'."

Both Onion Knight glanced over to Bartz with intense glares, causing him to suddenly feel on the spot. “Y-yeah, we were both being questioned by Headmistress Cosmos.” Bartz admitted somewhat anxiously. “I told her everything I knew about the situation, and Zidane was almost silent throughout that time.”

“So he’s ‘still’ acting that way.” Onion Knight murmured, hoping Zidane would have become more open about the situation.

“Have you got any ideas about where we should start today?” Terra decided to ask, changing the topic slightly.

“Yes, I’m certainly not progressing with this blind, that is a given.” Onion Knight nodded back, giving a confident expression.

Suddenly, before Onion Knight could continue, there had been a knock on the living room door.

“Hey, Luneth! Is it possible for us to join in?” Refia had asked out densely, her and Arc stepping through to the room.

The room froze by the second Refia had spoken. Both Bartz and Terra reacted in shock within that instant. Refia gasped and covered her mouth, realising what she had just done. Arc also realised and hid back as he caught sight of Onion Knight’s own reaction. Onion Knight’s eyes widened as he could not believe his friend’s mistake. Eventually, he sighed out in anger and pitched the crux of his nose.

“Really ...? You just had to give ‘that’ away so carelessly?” He then murmured, finding Refia’s outburst completely careless.

The two sat down in their seats in silence, Refia turning bright red due to her embarrassment. Bartz and Terra’s eyes were locked on Onion Knight, finding this revelation unexpected. Onion Knight was prepared for more outbursts to come.

“W-wait a moment ... you’re true name is ‘Luneth!’?” Bartz blurted out in disbelief.

Great, here we go ... Onion Knight’s mind thought out in frustration, just before he decided to tell the truth. “Technically, ‘Luneth’ is my middle name, my first being ‘Ingus’. Onion Knight was a title I was bestowed upon by a family member of mine when I was younger, where I was told I had to use it as my official name for the majority of my life.”

“Really? Huh ... I always thought your first name was ‘Onion’.” Bartz commented innocently, chuckling away. “That makes a lot more sense!”

...Is this guy serious? Onion Knight felt as though he had lost a few brain cells due to Bartz idiocy.

“Whatever the case, I would prefer it if you would call me by my title. I don’t need people throwing my name about like it has little purpose.” Onion Knight quickly dispelled, wishing that he didn’t need to deal with this at such an important time.

“Aaargh ... but it sounds so much simpler to say!” Bartz then moaned out, “Could I at least call you ‘O-Knight’ or something?”

“Would you like me to show you the door, Bartz?” Onion Knight then threatened with a horrid grin, raising his arm towards the front door.

“...Sorry, I’ll stop now.” Bartz quietly sank into his seat, deciding to listen to Onion Knight.

“So then, before the RUDE INTERRUPTION...” Onion Knight directed his words towards Refia and Arc, before getting back to the topic. “The plan for today is to meet up with Warrior of Light for an update on the case and hopefully some insight on any new evidence or witnesses. Whatever our ‘stuck-up’ Prosecutor could reveal to us, we’ll be spending a large amount of today finding any of these potential witnesses or evidence. If possible, they should give us some details of the ‘second’ suspect that fled the scene during the incident.”

“How will we know who the witnesses are? It’s likely that Warrior of Light wouldn’t reveal anything to us due to the importance of his role.” Refia questioned in curiosity, placing her foolish mistake behind her and involving herself in the discussion. “At least ... that’s what I’ve heard.”

“All I can say for now is to ask any of the students you might come across when were in town.” Onion Knight shrugged, feeling the pain about the obvious gap in the plans. “During the incident, almost the entirety of the students had been outside of the building or on the ground floor. It’s highly probable that some could have seen our ‘suspect’.”

“That sounds like a drag.” Bartz argued back, straightening back up on his seat. “Are there any other ways we could try?”

“I know it sounds like a mediocre task.” Onion knight admitted back, understanding the complaint.

“However, during the day, we will also be checking up on the crime scene and both Zidane and Firion whenever possible. Firion would need to know about any updates on the case, and Zidane ... well; I would like to find out what he’s hiding.”

There was a moment of silence throughout the room as this topic was brought. Although Zidane has a stronger possibility of showing his innocence, the fact that he continues to refuse on giving an explanation on his side of the case is problematic.

“What do you think he’s hiding from us?” Terra cautiously asked him; unsure whether it’s right to ask. “Or rather, what could he hide from us? He has said numerous times he’s innocent so why would he refuse to explain his reason?”

“I don’t know ...” Onion Knight lowered his head; feeling dragged down by the fact there wasn’t a resolution to this.

“From what I could see, it’s possible that he might be ‘protecting’ someone.” Bartz murmured out unexpectedly, causing all the eyes in the room to dart towards Bartz in surprise.

“What ... do you mean by that, Bartz?” Onion Knight hesitantly questioned, finding this possibility rather sudden.

“What I mean is that I’ve known Zidane long enough to know about how he reacts towards various situations.” Bartz explained, standing up from his chair. “In most cases, he would either admit to his guilt if he gets caught during his pranks or try to prove his innocence. Of course, he normally uses me as his scapegoat in some situations, but that’s just because I assist him in his tricks. With that said ... I’ve never seen him act this way before. At first I thought he was acting like that because he knows he could be thrown out of the Academy, but...”

“... You then realised that his reasoning isn’t selfish.” Onion Knight finished Bartz’s sentence, his face lighting up with sudden realisation. “He doesn’t want to get the ‘second’ suspect into trouble!”

Bartz nodded in response, “The person behind the attack on Rydia is someone Zidane knows or even is a friend to! He’s keeping quiet because he doesn’t want to get the ‘culprit’ into trouble!”

“That’s troublesome for him AND for us!” Onion Knight gritted his teeth, noticing the difficulty of proving his innocence. “Damn it, Zidane! Does he not REALISE we’re helping him!?”

“That’s also a problem ...” Bartz then murmured lowly, lowering his eyes towards the floor. “If the true culprit is a friend of Zidane’s ... then that person might also be a friend to us!”

14 - Arc 3 (2): Unintentional Catastrophes

Zidane Tribal hung silently on the branch of a large sycamore tree with the use of his own tail, watching the world around him from the upside-down perspective. He was overlooking Crescent Lake in its full sun-lit glory, the rays glinting against the ripples of the water as if they were jewels. With not a single cloud in the sky, the atmosphere was perfect for clearing one's mind. Due to the decent conditions, Crescent Lake instantly became a popular area for visitors, both local and distant.

As time clicked on, many of the visitors passed Zidane, curious eyes wondering to the direction of his position. Zidane wasn't at all fazed by them; his mind was completely in a daze to care, acting as though he was minding his own business. During the whole time he had been hanging on the branch, he was munching down on a large bag of popcorn. At the rate he was gobbling them up; the crumbs of popcorn flew in many directions, with the majority falling to the ground below – or above from Zidane's perspective.

It was odd for Zidane to be acting so distant; on a usual weekend day, he would be using the opportunity to be causing mischief towards the people he knew. However, ever since the troubling situation at Dissidia Academy, Zidane had completely lost his motivation.

"H-Hey!" A voice suddenly called out in surprise, causing Zidane to snap his mind back into reality. He raised his head towards the ground below and noticed what had happened. Children had been playing around the tree he was hanging from and the popcorn crumbs had fallen onto one of the child's, a girl's, heads. As the young girl began to ruffle their hair as they tried to get rid of the crumbs, the others had gazed up to find the source. Their large, gleaming eyes were locked onto Zidane, causing him to feel suddenly guilty. In almost a flash, Zidane swung off of the branch he had hung from and somersaulted as he fell to the ground, the bag of popcorn held tight in his grasp. Using his momentum, Zidane had successfully landed with equal balance, instantly swivelling on the spot and approaching the kids. Whilst doing so, he placed the popcorn to the side, out of view.

"Ah! Sorry about that, I was miles away." Zidane excused himself, helping the girl pick off the crumbs that got stuck in her hair.

The other kids seemed to be too busy clapping and watching with awe to care about what had happened. Zidane then noticed more eyes from the Crescent Lake visitors lying upon him, curious about the commotion going on. Zidane hesitated slightly, unsure if they were glaring to him with scorn in their eyes or something completely different. Whatever the case may be, having more watching eyes from the public was the last thing Zidane needed right now.

Finally, the last popcorn crumb was removed from the girl's hair, allowing her hands to brush through without any stickiness.

"Again, sorry about that, I'll be more careful." Zidane apologised for a second time, stepping back and giving off a cheesy yet innocent grin.

"Can you do that again?" One of the male kids asked out with sudden excitement, his eyes still gazing with awe.

"Yeah, what you did was AWESOME!" Another kid shouted out, ecstatic.

"Err ... huh?" Zidane blurted out, completely lost about what they were on about.

"You know! That trick you did when you jump from the tree!" The first kid pointed out.

Zidane's mind clicked upon realisation, his sight switched towards when he had been hanging from. He then noticed the true reason why the visitors were staring at him; it wasn't that fact that he had been completely unaware with dropping crumbs below, but it was because they were curious about how he

was so seamlessly acrobatic. It seemed most of these visitors were still watching him, curious as to what he would do next. Zidane's eyes then shifted back to the kids, who were all gleaming with excitement and wonder.

It was at this moment when Zidane had a thought appear in his mind, a cheesy yet cunning grin formed from his mouth as he began to formulate an idea.

"Sure, I've got time to spare." He nodded to the children, his chest puffed up and hands on hips to show his pride and determination to give them a show. "A little word of warning; I am a trained professional, so don't try any of this at home."

The kids gasped with excitement, whispering to each other as they were ready to watch. Zidane ushered them to stand back and give some space, allowing his body to prepare for the performance. The lake visitors had overheard the conversation and approached to tree in equal wonder as the kids. Zidane nodded over to the growing crowd, his mind going through sections of this sudden routine as though they were puzzle pieces being placed together.

It was then that Zidane clapped his hands together with his eyes calmly closed up, his mind instantly at ease. The crowd fell into complete silence; they were ready and eager to watch him. The kids were shaken up with excitement, struggling to contain themselves as they waited.

The Question that seemed to appear in Zidane's mind was: Why all the attention and excitement? What was so great about him one simple somersault trick? He wasn't even aware he performed it, only noticing when the kids mentioned it. One thing that he did know had been that the kids had just wanted another somersault ... but the entire crowd wanted more.

Positioning his stance, Zidane glanced over to the kids. There was a moment pause, the children wondering why he was glancing over with a dead-serious glare. Suddenly, Zidane gave a large, witty grin and a small wink.

"You wanted me to show you a trick ...?" Zidane called out with complete confidence. "Hah! That's nothing to me! I'll give you a performance like no other!"

Without a second longer, Zidane launched himself up high into the air, his whole body curving back as he performed his first acrobat. During his backflip, he had twisted his body to aim for the tree, allowing the transition between the techniques feel seamless. Within a flash, Zidane span towards the ground, landing on the palms of his hands with even balance. With this, Zidane did not stop there. He used the momentum of his body to consecutively backward-somersault towards the tree, refusing to halt or even breathe.

The crowd gasped in amazement at the performance, eagerly whispering to themselves and recording with the cameras on their cell-phones. Upon reaching the tree, Zidane twisted himself to land facing it, his sight locked on. With no pause whatsoever, Zidane leapt into a sprint. With enough momentum gained, Zidane was able to lift off from the ground and sprint up the stem of the tree. The audience gasped in disbelief, to witness a gravity-defying skill like this pulled off with such ease was mind-bending.

Zidane heard the reactions load and clear, smirking with glee. He refused to stop, not until the climax. He knew he was showing off ... and he was enjoying every minute of it. As he reached the lower branches of the tree, he threw his entire body towards the first tough branch he caught sight of, allowing his body to flow. He grasped the branch with both hands and continued to use the momentum he gained to swing on the branch at intense speeds. After a few consecutive twists, Zidane tightened his grip on the branch and balanced his body in an upside-down position.

With eyes locked-on to him from below, Zidane needed his full concentration on the performance. More visitors were joining the audience as they wondered what the commotion was about.

Imagining as though he was on a tightrope, Zidane continued to balance his body. There was no fault in his position, his body was in complete perfection if one witch inspect from every direction. Placing one

hand against the other, Zidane moved towards the edge of the branch, acting rather casual in the process.

Upon reaching the edge of the branch, Zidane turned his balanced body towards facing the audience. With a confident grin, Zidane released his balance, falling with grace from his position. With his grasped still tightly locked in place, he began to swing once again. Speeding up his momentum, Zidane threw out with as much strength as needed. He span up in the air whilst crouched up like a beach ball. It was then that he performed his next move.

Reaching out with his tail, he was able to grasp the branch higher from him. As he was able to hold his momentum, Zidane began to naturally swing on the branch. His arms and legs were crossed as he continued to swing, acting as though he was using no effort whatsoever in the performance.

The crowd began to laugh out, finding Zidane's expressions amusing. The children were clapping out with joy, loving every trick and movement he made. Zidane chuckled, acting rather laid back. However, his mind clicked whilst his eyes turned serious.

"It's time ... for the FINALE!" Zidane roared out, leaping from the branch higher up into the air; acting as though he was reaching for the sky.

The audience's expression turned from amazement to shock in a matter of seconds as they watched the final part of Zidane's performance. The speeds of Zidane's next movements were insanely fast, causing some of the audience to struggle with keeping up on watching the movements in action. Some even felt out of breath just by watching him.

Zidane used the entire tree at his disposal, leaping towards various sections with no halts or mistakes. He had been spinning, swinging, twisting, flipping, and throwing his whole body around at a ridiculously fast pace, climbing higher up the sycamore tree. It was then that he had gained enough momentum for the final move.

Using every muscle in his body, he completely tensed up and launched his whole body up in the air. His body flew up high about the tallest point out the tree. The entire audience gasped out, squinting as Zidane reached the height of sun ... well, metaphorically speaking.

Time froze from a small moment, with Zidane peering towards the clear blue sky above. He couldn't help but smile. Ever since the incident yesterday, he had been feeling depressed and unable to act as his own mischievous self. However, with the crowds watching him and cheering, he felt free and able to forget about the problems he was facing, even if it was a only for a short amount of time. It was as though he was able to breathe again.

Zidanes body span in a consecutive, unstoppable somersault high in the air. This continued as he dropped down to the ground, adding in various twists in the process. Upon landing, the timing was impeccable. He was able to place his feet perfectly, no stumbles whatsoever. And to add to this, he instantly ended the performance with a strong bow, lowering himself slightly to one knee and placing an arm below his abdomen. He was only slightly worn out from the performance, feeling as though he could have continued if he had planned beforehand.

The audience roared out with an enthusiastic cheer, unable to contain the excitement. The children ran over to Zidane and circled around him instantly. Zidane rose back up and took a moment to regain his mind. He took in a large meaningful breath and watched to audience in front of him. He didn't know what to think at this point, he couldn't even believe the positive reception and reactions the crowd were giving him. It had been as though it was a completely different atmosphere than what he had before the performance.

"Th-thanks." Zidane responded to the audience, giving a rare nervous grin and throwing his hands behind his head.

... *Crack!*

Zidane's eyes widened in an instant, drops of sweat began appear from his brow. His grin completely

disappeared; the enjoyment of the attention washed away and replaced by ... horror. It wasn't just him whose expression changed; the crowd – including the children – fell silent instantly and switched their sight to towards what laid behind Zidane.

Zidane regretfully turned around, his mind worried about what was about to happen.

... *Crack! Crack-crackcrack!*

The large sycamore tree continuously twitched, becoming increasingly more violent in the process. Zidane gulped, sweat streaming down his body. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, not even once did the tree react during the performance, so why did it have to begin breaking apart NOW!?

... *Crack-crack! ... SNAP!*

Branched began to snap off from the tree, falling to the grass below whilst leaves fluttered everywhere. Large cracks in the wood severed through the tree, causing it to splinter and spat apart. It was then that the worst began to occur.

...*Crackcrack-SNAP! ... Creak ...*

"... Oh crap!" Zidane muttered as he watched in terror, suddenly turning back to the crowd. "Get back, everyone! NOW!"

The crowd scattered in an instant, most moving away from the area entirely whilst some gaining distance from the tree. Zidane grabbed hold of the children that stood around him and leaped out of the way. The cracks from the lower area of the tree had connected together and entirely broke off from the roots below. The entire tree began to fall under its weight and head towards the area where the audience and Zidane once was. Finally, with a powerful *CRASH*, The sycamore tree was no more. Zidane turned back and gazed with complete disbelief, unable to understand how this had happened. As he slowly approached the fallen tree, the colour in his cheeks went pale and the sweat continued to stream down him. The children with him watched as he approached it, completely silent.

"Well ... that was certainly a 'performance'." A familiar voice suddenly called out behind Zidane, causing him to jump up and shiver.

He turned and caught sight of the owner of the voice. Onion Knight had appeared from behind him, accompanied by Terra and Bartz, and seemed rather unfazed about the situation.

"H-How much did you see?" Zidane questioned anxiously, struggling to form his words.

"We've been here since the beginning." Terra answered in response, giving her usual sweet smile. "It was very entertaining."

"Yeah, it was AWESOME, man!" Bartz blurted out as an add-on, excited as usual. "I've got goose-bumps from watching."

Zidane dropped to the floor on his hands and knees with his head lowered and gave out a large sigh, finding this situation a continuous mess.

"...I give up."

Not long after, the 4 classmates had moved away from the area, just moments before the authorities arrived to deal with the aftermath. Onion Knight led the group to a large social area of the lake, far enough away from the area of the tree incident. Terra and Bartz followed in his footsteps, seemingly calm and cheerful. However, they couldn't help but look over their shoulders during various moments on their walk, checking up on Zidane who followed a fair distance behind. His shoulders were hunched over, his hands were sitting in his pockets, and his tail was dragging across the dirt ground below. He had even been staring towards the floor, his sight completely out of focus.

Finally, they had reached their destination, choosing a circular bench to sit on that was suitable for their needs. They perched themselves on one that had been overlooking Crescent Lake and away from any crowded visitor spots. Onion Knight gave out a mannered cough, placing his hand in front of his mouth as he cleared his throat.

“So then, now that we are away from the unfortunate ‘mess’ ...” Onion Knight began formally, however caught sight of his fellow classmate who was still hanging his head. “Zidane, staying depressed about what happened isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

“Mm...” Zidane groaned as he placed his head on the bench table.

There was a moment of silence between the 4 at the point, Terra and Onion Knight glanced towards each other with uncertainty. Due to this, Onion Knight couldn’t help but sigh out; this wasn’t exactly the type of mood they wanted to find Zidane in. Bartz gazed towards his friend with a somewhat sorrowful look, understanding the situation more than the other two.

“Thinking about, this is just like what happened during the time we broke Sir Sephiroth’s Globe-thingamajig.” Bartz commented in opinion, relating the fallen tree to back when the two had collided into and smashed the Great Globe during their first lesson of Geography.

Both he and Zidane’s bodies then shivered, remembering the consequences that came from the small fiasco.

“I ... didn’t need to be reminded of that, Bartz.” Zidane murmured out as he glared back to his friend in frustration, lifting his head up from the table slightly so he could move it.

“A-ha ... sorry.” Bartz nervously apologised.

“Anyway ... that’s not the main reason for why I feel like this.” Zidane sighed out, feeling that it was time to open up his thoughts. “It’s more of the fact that whenever I do something with good intention, all that seems to happen in return is everything gets screwed up and I’m the one that gets the blame ... unless it’s not serious then I just pass the blame over to Bartz.”

“Wha-!?! Hey!” Bartz blurted out to complain, becoming thrown off by the sudden jab.

Zidane gave a subtle smirk to show that he still had his cocky side, even if only for a short while.

“I see ... so first it was yesterday’s ‘assault’ incident, of which you had been wrongly accused of; and now this ‘fallen tree’ incident, where you had been entertaining the visitors without realising that the tree was actually fragile.” Onion Knight gathered up to summarise, crossing his arms in the process.

“Well, I can certainly see the dilemma you are having ... however the ‘Globe’ incident was entirely a consequence due to you two’s lateness to class.”

“Argh! Will you people stop bringing that up!?” Zidane groaned in annoyance, covering his ears to show he refused to hear anymore comments on the Great Globe. He then decided to change the subject, “Anyway ... I heard from Bartz that you guys were spending the day investigating the case. How’s that going?”

Suddenly, Onion Knight shot a leering glare towards Bartz in instant reaction. Bartz, in retaliation, nervously leaned back on his seat.

“W-what are you looking at me like that for?” Bartz stuttered, bracing himself for some reason.

Onion Knight then shook his head, deciding to go with the flow. “Well, I would say it was starting off well, but ...”

Flashback to Dissidia Academy Entrance Gate, 3 hours previous ...

“Now, why in the world would I tell you any details about my end of the case?” Warrior of Light sneered, showing off a disgusted expression. “The whole idea of it is absurd!”

Onion Knight, Terra, and Bartz had approached Warrior of Light at the Entrance Gate of the Academy. As part of Onion Knight’s plan, the first stop of the investigation had been to receive update of the case from Warrior of Light ... however, Onion Knight had a distinct feeling he wouldn’t be able to co-operate. It made complete sense that Warrior of Light wouldn’t co-operate; he was the opposition of the case and as part of his role, was not allowed disclose any recently surfaced information about the case until the court trial. In addition to this, the two were bitter rivals.

Even so, Onion Knight couldn't help but approach him.

"Just as I thought, you are as stubborn as ever." Onion Knight murmured with a disappointing sigh.

"Maybe I should reword your statement into 'nothing has surfaced whatsoever'."

Warrior of Light's eyebrow twitch in reaction to Onion Knight's comment, "Oh I see, so it seems you have nothing to do today so you decide to spend your time acting like a little brat and ticking me off in the process. Well, just to inform you, my short foolish classmate; that we both have important jobs to do and so ... you should be ON YOUR WAY."

"WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT MY SHORT STATURE!?" Onion Knight bellowed out in sudden fury, losing his composure in the instant he heard the 'trigger' word. "I DARE YOU TO SAY THAT AGAI-!"

"Onion Knight ... now is not the time." Terra swiftly intercepted, standing between the two. "Same goes for you, Warrior of Light."

Even though she spoke in her usual soft voice, Onion Knight could just about notice a hint of irritating breaking through from deep inside. Hastily, Onion Knight took a moment to breathe out and calm down, allowing for his mind and composure to return to normal. Warrior of Light, on the other hand, looked away in disdain, finding the whole encounter pointless.

"Listen, we're just as desperate as you to find the truth, so any piece of new info and clue would help all of us dearly." Onion Knight admitted in a serious tone, abiding to the atmosphere Terra had just giving them.

"Well, unfortunately for both you and myself, I have none to give." Warrior of Light spitefully answered back, cementing his earlier statement.

Onion Knight sighed out loudly in complete frustration, unable to find a way to come to terms with his rival. In the end, however, he gave up on pursuing this any further. Signalling Terra and Bartz, the 3 began to leave the area.

"... I couldn't even find a scrap of evidence or any witnesses." Warrior of Light lowly admitted, unable to hide it any longer just as his three classmates were leaving.

Onion Knight froze up, causing both Terra and Bartz to almost walk into him by accident. Onion Knight almost couldn't believe what he had heard; Warrior of Light, the Prosecutor of the case and the most stuck-up Class and Council President in the Academy, admitted to finding nothing more on the case! Onion Knight switched his sighted back towards his rival, stepping back to the place he previously stood.

"I'm surprised." Onion Knight jabbed, crossing his arms.

"What do you mean by that?" Warrior of Light awkwardly questioned, finding Onion Knight's sudden change of expression somewhat unexpected.

Onion Knight gave a small grin, "You're the Prosecutor, part of your role is to track down witnesses and evidence in order to seek the truth and back up your accusations. And yet, no one has approached you since the conclusion of yesterday's trial?"

"Where is this going?" Warrior of Light sharpened his sight, wary about where Onion Knight's statement is leading.

"... You must have scared them off due to your intimidating presence."

DONK!

"-OW!" Onion Knight clutched the top of his head in pain, moaning out as he soothed his cranium.

"THAT HURT, YOU EGOTISTICAL PRICK!"

Warrior of Light struck down with a tough fist against the top of Onion Knight's head in annoyance, his eyes squinting and muscles tensed up.

"Maybe you should keep your thoughts to yourself then." Warrior of Light answered back in a spiteful tone.

"Anyhow, what I should have stated was that we have until Monday to find evidence and witnesses for the case and yet you are already acting as though you have failed in the role Headmistress Cosmos had

bestowed upon you.” Onion Knight continued on after brushing of the pain, “Our roles are certainly not simple and easy; it takes time and an additional amount of preparation. Giving up so early would only mean that the Headmistress made a mistake in granting you the role of Prosecutor.”

Warrior of Light hesitated for a moment; he had taken in what he was being told by his rival, even if he refused to admit it.

“I-I knew that already! You don’t need to tell me about the importance of my role!” Warrior of Light spoke out, showing signs of weakness.

“The Headmistress has put an extensive amount of faith in us, we cannot let her down.” Onion Knight then warned, his eyes firing up with passion in his words.

Warrior of Light fell silent, unable to argue back. Onion Knight took a short breath as he finished his speech, feeling rather refreshed. He nodded over towards Terra and Bartz that they were leaving. Silent, Onion Knight took the lead of the trio and began to make his way towards the direction of the city. However, he had halted once more upon hearing Warrior of Light speak out directly to him.

“Onion Knight, there is one question I wish to ask you.” Warrior of Light began, showing a truthful expression to show he was completely serious in what he was about to ask. “Do you have any pieces of evidence that you haven’t told me about?”

There was a moment of silence in the area, Onion Knight glancing over his shoulder towards his rival. After this past, Onion Knight turned to face Warrior of Light from the distance, eyes locked onto his opponent. It was then that he answered, a hand placed against the pocket of where he held what could be the most important piece of evidence to the case.

“Unfortunately, I do not.” Onion Knight smiled, showing a pure and innocent expression. “It is just as you said: I have none to give.”

Warrior of Light nodded sincerely, not needing to speak further. With that, the trio of classmates left the area, leaving Warrior of Light to his lonesome.

For the next 2 hours, the trio had spent their time wondering around the city in hopes for finding fellow classmates or anyone currently associated with the Academy. During their travels, they had met up with Arc and Refia. The two had been asking around about any elevating rumours relating to the case, also researching for anything that could assist in the investigation. Unfortunately, there had not been any success. Onion Knight attempted to brush the negative thoughts and comments aside in order to stay positive and keep to the words he had given to Warrior of Light.

Onion Knight, Terra, and Bartz continued their investigation, leaving Arc and Refia to investigate on their own. They asked about the various areas of the city, questioning any noticeable students for possible witnesses or clues. However, as each moment passed, the trio’s optimism began to dampen. Aside from the small scraps of details that came up, the common phrase that came up was a resounding “No.”

Present Time ...

“I gave Warrior of Light all that optimistic speech, and right now all I seem to be doing is eating my own words freshly baked in disappointment and failure.” Onion Knight groaned at the end of his recap to Zidane, sulking with his own face pressed against the table this time instead of Zidane. “So, to answer your question ... our investigation is falling to pieces at this specific time.”

Terra sighed out, feeling somewhat the same as Onion Knight in this particular situation, although keeping her emotions hidden.

Zidane sighed, scratching the side of his head in order to think up anything that could be of use. Bartz had been switching his sight constantly, acting somewhat clueless to the atmosphere of the table.

“Well, all you can do right now is to follow your words to the end of the line.” Zidane shrugged in response to Onion Knight’s final statement. “If you keep following that line, I’m certain something will come up. Surely there are already a few leads that you have had set up.”

At that moment, Onion Knight’s body twitched, his head raised off of the table slightly. It was then that it occurred to him that Zidane was correct; Onion Knight had leads on the case ... and one of them was sitting on this very table. Onion Knight swiftly straightened his body up, showing off a formal posture. The other three caught sight of this sudden change of aura from Onion Knight, however unsure what to make of it. The sudden change was so abrupt that it threw the three completely off-guard. Onion Knight had something on his mind, and he was ready to share it.

“... That is the core reason as to why we’ve met up with you, Zidane.” Onion Knight then truthfully explained, his eyes glaring with sudden motivation. “Aside from checking up on your well-being, we wish to ask you a few questions related to the case.”

Both Terra and Bartz reacted with surprise; however, Terra understood that this would need to be addressed eventually, whilst Bartz began to fidget uncomfortably. Zidane raised an eyebrow in curiosity, finding Onion Knight’s sudden change of aura and request rather unexpected. He became cautious not to make any mistakes or miscommunication in his words during the upcoming conversation.

“Fire away, O-Knight!” Zidane coolly called, acting as though he had just accepted a challenge. “You already agreed that I’m innocent so what is there to ask?”

Onion Knight locked eyes against Zidane’s, no expression shown whatsoever. Any emotion that Zidane was showing had completely disappeared the moment this interrogation began. Terra sat silent on her seat, her mind clear as she was ready to take in what was about to happen. Bartz, on the other hand, couldn’t help but feel uneasy in this situation. The serious tone felt as though walls were slowly caving in around them, the world around the circular table disappeared completely from their minds. Bartz despised this feeling; the serious atmosphere was close to choking him. However, he decided to endure, knowing this was for Zidane’s sake.

Interrogation: Zidane Tribal

“Zidane, in order for us to fully succeed in this case, we cannot hide anymore information that could greatly concern the incident.” Onion Knight began, concentrating on the classmate/client in front of him and shutting out the rest of the world. “It is to my knowledge that you have been giving vague answers whilst being questioned, whether it was Warrior of Light or to your own close friends. So, why all this secrecy?”

“... I have my reasons.” Zidane shrugged, his eyes deviating slightly.

He’s already trying to dodge the question. Onion Knight bit the side of his lip, noticing the subtle clues in Zidane’s expressions. *He’s severely holding back. Something must be preventing him from allowing him to co-operate. What, or even who, did he see during the time of the incident? ... This may be more difficult than I first imagined.*

“Zidane, I cannot express enough that we’re trying to help you prove your innocence.” Onion Knight pressured the tone in his voice, showing that he cares for his classmate. “Hiding crucial information would only delay the inevitable, or may even cause this whole case to backfire against our favour. Please reveal to us, did you see the identities of either culprit who was there at the incident?”

“I ... might have.” Zidane slurred, showing hesitation.

Onion Knight took in a deep breath, keeping himself calm and refusing to allow his emotions to get the better of him. Terra switched her sights between Onion Knight and Zidane, analysing the confrontation thoroughly.

“Zidane, you may not be the culprit, but you are still an important witness to the case.” Onion Knight

continued to emphasise, his mind throwing about various different approaches to tackle this. "You may try to hide the information from us, but the moment you enter the stand in court on Monday, you will be torn apart by Warrior of Light or even the High Judge Gabranth!"

"That isn't a problem, Light already failed to take information from me during both of his questionings." Zidane brushed off without a fuss, giving his cocky smile. "All I need is to give them my side of the story with honesty and consistency. That is all it takes."

"But that will only-!" Onion Knight halted his argument at this point, suddenly freezing his body with an expression of realisation.

I must change the route of the discussion! His mind called out, noticing that this argument would only head to a dead-end.

"Fine, let's try something else for the time being." Onion Knight huffed, closing his eyes for a miniscule moment in order to reshuffle his approach. "During yesterday's trial, Bartz had explained during his 'second' Testimony that Rydia's scream was heard after you had left the 4th Math Room and entered the room that the incident had occurred in. Within part of the testimony, Bartz had expressed that you had told him to 'hide' and directed him to the 2nd Math Room. What was happening at that specific moment?"

"..." Zidane didn't respond to this question, droplets of sweat beginning to crawl down his skin and his eyes beginning to slightly quiver.

"Zidane ... What happened?" Onion Knight echoed his question, noticing Zidane's expression breaking apart slightly.

"H-he ... was about to ..." Zidane struggled to answer, feeling a heavy pain in his heart. "... Attack us."

"Wha-!?" Onion Knight gasped in shock, almost lifting from his own seat.

He glanced over to Terra, who was just as surprised as him. However, upon glancing towards Bartz, Onion Knight noticed a peculiar expression appearing from him ... he was glancing towards Zidane with uncertainty.

"Zidane, what happened after that?" Onion Knight questioned, snapping his sight back towards his classmate. "You didn't receive any injuries from how I see it."

"He ... he just ..." Zidane shook his head, showing signs of distress. "I-I can't ... he w-would NEVER ...!" Onion Knight's eyes widened, he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Not only was Zidane refusing to give information; he was close to having a panic attack!

Terra, having caught sight of this a moment before Onion Knight, swiftly took action. Moving around the bench, Terra placed a hand on Zidane's shoulder in order to try and comfort him.

"Zidane, stay calm. We're here for you." Terra spoke out to him, keeping a low comforting tone of voice.

Bartz had closed in to his best friends side, worried for his wellbeing. Onion Knight rose from his seat, his eyes directly locked on Zidane.

"Zidane ... what happened in that room? What did the culprit do!?" Zidane continued to question, unable to find any other approach.

Zidane's eyes began to flicker, his fists clutching the table tight whilst his body began to shake. He began to breathe heavily; sweat seeping down his skin at a fast rate.

"I-it wasn't him ... I REFUSE TO BELIEVE IT WAS HIM!" Zidane roared out, his mind breaking apart completely.

Suddenly, Zidane leapt out of his seat, pushing both Terra and Bartz aside.

"Zidane!" Terra called out in concern.

"Wait, Zidane!" Bartz shouted out, reaching out to his friend.

Within seconds, he had disappeared from sight.

Interrogation: Zidane Tribal ... UNSUCCESSFUL!

Onion Knight fell back to his seat, his eyes wide and blank with shock. Terra and Bartz both regained their footing, gazing towards the direction of where Zidane had ran off to. After a moment processing the situation, Onion Knight took in what he had witnessed. Terra turned towards Onion Knight, giving a rather angered glare to him. However, Bartz was unable to sit by whilst seeing his friend in pain.

"I can't see him like this." Bartz murmured under his breath, fidgeting on the spot. "I have to find him."

"Bartz! You can't-!" Terra hastily argued as her heart raced.

"Don't stop me!" Bartz shouted out with motivation, already leaping into action.

Before Onion Knight and Terra knew it, Bartz had already disappeared towards the direction of where Zidane ran off to.

"Don't follow him, if that's what he wants to do, so be it." Onion Knight persuaded her, shaking his head.

Terra twisted her body back towards him, showing an infuriated expression.

"I cannot believe you, Onion Knight!" Terra shouted at him, scowling. "You KNEW Zidane was becoming distressed with questions, yet you just HAD to press more onto him!"

"It was necessary." Onion Knight reasoned, his eyes showing no signs of wavering.

"What does that mean!?" Terra argued, unable to keep her own composure due to her increasing worry.

"Did you not see his face, or hear how he spoke during the questions?" Onion Knight then questioned out, his mind circling various theories behind Zidane's sudden panic attack. "He was completely out of character the moment we began questioning him. He barely even answered any of them."

Terra glared, she knew Onion Knight long to be open to him about her thoughts when necessary, to the point that she almost brought herself to slapping him for being so uncaring to Zidane's feelings. However, she was able to halt herself as she noticed what Onion Knight meant. Zidane had never shown such emotions for as long as they both have known him (or of him through his pranks); and even if he had shown them, his expressions and body language would be completely different to how it had been just now.

"I knew that something was preventing him from giving us the answers we need, but I never expected him to break like that ... and so soon." Onion Knight thought out loud, trying to find puzzle pieces of answers in his mind.

"What do you think happened to him?" Terra then wondered, sitting back down on the seat in front of her. "Do you have any ideas on who he saw during the incident?"

Onion Knight breathed out, concentrating all of his thought on the situation. There was a moment of silence between the two, Terra waiting for an answer whilst Onion Knight threw his mind about to find reasons. It was then that it clicked in, causing Onion Knight to almost jump out of his seat in realisation.

"There are some possibilities, I'm sure of it!" Onion Knight slammed a hand against the table as he spoke, eyes flaring up. "It may be the case that either the culprit – or culprits – that Zidane saw were so close to him that he couldn't bring himself to reveal their names or he had been forced to keep quiet against his own will ... or even both."

"But then ... who would the culprit be that is 'that' close enough to Zidane to the point where he would act out in such a way?" Terra asked out, seemingly confused. "And if it was the latter of what you said, was he told to keep quiet about the situation ... or was it a spell? I don't understand it."

"I don't understand it either. However, the person Zidane had been referring to during that whole scene was male." Onion Knight analysed, flashing back to the points where Zidane stated the word 'he'. "If it was someone very close, I could think of 'one' person of who that could be."

Onion Knight then placed a hand against his pocket, feeling the packet that held the evidence consisting

of the brown strands of hair.

“However, if it was ‘him’ ... then my previous suspicions were correct.” Onion Knight murmured underneath his breath, thinking hard about the possibilities. “... But could it truly be him? What would be his motivation to cause such the incident in the first place?”

“Who are you talking about?” Terra queried, looking lost with Onion Knight’s constant murmuring.

“You need to speak clearer when discussing this.”

“Ah, sorry.” Onion Knight apologised, showing some positive emotion through his smile. “I think it’s time we see Firion about the updated situation.”

“You’re leaving already?” A sudden, light voice spoke out over the two, causing them to jump out in fright. “How disappointing; after all the commotion that’s been going on recently, I was hoping to speak to you two.”

Terra and Onion Knight turned towards the direction of where the voice had been coming from. To their surprise, they caught sight on someone they would not expect to see. With a tough expression and powerful stance, the two knew who it had been in an instant. Onion Knight knew her from being a part of the Student Council, whilst Terra knew her as a very close friend.

“Celes?” The two blurted out in unison, thrown completely off-guard.

15 - Arc 3 (2): An Eventful Day

The Sun broke through the Horizon line, rising up above the grand city with a warm, golden, good morning glow. It was the perfect sunrise, allowing for the peaceful atmosphere to slowly dissipate. As a replacement, numerous tweeting and singing birds could be heard echoing in the vast distance. It was a brand new day, it was Sunday.

The fragrant scent of perfectly heated toast and grilled bacon was the first to greet the man who began to wake. Unlike other days where he would be in a huge rush to get to work, today was a day to take his time and act completely lazy. However, the toasty aroma was certainly inviting, pushing him the extra mile in order to exit the bed.

Still feeling like he was in a dreamlike state, the man was gleefully smiling as he stood up. Stretching out, he began to follow the aroma as though it was teasing him. His mind was in the clouds, imagining himself smothered in bread and bacon.

Suddenly, the moment he took one small step, his leg gave out. Before he knew it, he dropped to the floor with a massive thump. He laid on the floor still, unaware about what had just happened. His long, jet-black hair was somewhat tangled and covered his face almost entirely. He was clutching onto his leg, soothing what felt like a cramp.

“Squall! I’ve got another leg cramp!” The man called out in plea, hoping for a response. “Come help me up!”

However, after a small moment of silence, the response he got was not what had hoped to hear.

“Do it yourself, I’m busy!” Squall’s distinctive monotone voice echoed back, showing no mercy whatsoever.

“Aw, Squall, don’t be so harsh on your old man!” The man then decided to add, hoping to guilt trip him.

“I’m helpless down here!”

“Cooking breakfast takes priority!” Squall then shut his father’s attempt within that instant, his words were final.

The man groaned out, acting as though he was imitating a lazy seal. In his mind, he couldn’t help but feel betrayed that his own son refused to help him in his desperate time of need.

Man, where did I go wrong with him ... He sighed out whilst wondering the thought, chuckling slightly however keeping it subtle and in non-serious fashion.

In the end, he gave up on persuading Squall to help him any further, feeling it was completely futile.

Instead, he rolled to his front, his body flat against the carpet floor. With all the morning strength he could muster, the man used his arms to crawl towards the door, aiming for the kitchen with the use of the glorious smell of breakfast to guide him. His legs dragging from behind, the man refused to allow Squall’s stubbornness to bring him down.

... I am Laguna Loire, President of Esthar; and this heart of mine refuses to give in to such an obstacle!

Squall, having placed earphones in to drown out anymore of his father’s whines, finished up on both the toast and the bacon. The bacon was sizzled and crisped with perfection, allowing for the aroma to reach maximum without becoming overdone. The toast was also perfectly handled with care, reaching a golden-brown colouring.

Squall was satisfied, although this was impossible to notice due to the lack of emotion, he felt as though he was able to make an artistic masterpiece through such a simple concept known as breakfast. Adding a few final touches, Squall then split up the food into two dishes, one for himself and the other for his father. Balancing the dishes in his hands, Squall turned and began to make his way out of the kitchen

and towards the dining room, eyes locked onto the sturdy table that was situated in the centre of the room. Squall was in his zone, music playing loud in his ears and not a care in the world towards his current surroundings. Nothing could distract him.

“Ah-HAH!” A voice suddenly bellowed out, whilst a hand grasped Squall’s ankle without any prior warning. “Fork over the food!”

“WHAT THE-!?” Squall leaped back in a gasp, stumbling in the instant his ankle was grabbed.

Just then, like a domino effect, Squall’s stumble caused the plate of breakfast in his right hand to slip. As if the world’s time fell into slow-motion, Squall could only watch as the bacon and toast fell towards the floor. Underneath the falling plate, Laguna’s expression slowly turned from a cheeky grin to a horrified gasp, noticing a moment too late as to what he had done. Eyes wide and mouth gaping open, Laguna’s arms hastily shifted his arms and took on a bracing guard ... however his was a faction too slow.

SMASH!!!

Squall glared with a monotone combination of frustration and disgust, his earphones fallen from his ears and dangling from the V-neck of his t-shirt. Laguna, face completely covered up by food, groaned in emotional agony. Pushing the plate away from his face and wiping the large parts of toast and bacon, Laguna began to sulk.

“Karma ... why do you do this to me?” Laguna sniffled out, pulling off the most forced sad-face he could generate on his food-covered mug. “First the leg cramp, now THIS!? The Goddess is too cruel...”

Squall rolled his eyes, releasing a whispered growl to vent his undying frustration. Returning the focus of his sight back towards his embarrassing case of a father, Squall could not cope with any more of constant whining being displayed. The time and care he had spent on breakfast and the watching it all go to waste caused immeasurable pain in his sub-consciousness. Ultimately, Squall refused to allow it all to go to waste.

“You better eat every last scrap of food that was on that plate ...” Squall antagonistically warned, eyes burning like a raging fire whilst the rest of his expression remained emotionless. “... because I’m not making another.”

“Wha – HUUHH!?!?” Laguna blurted out in abrupt despair, his mouth gaping and eyes wide due to the unexpected horror. “Y-you’re kidding me, right!? I can’t eat this; I’ll be out of commission for the entirety of next week! Think about the 3 second rule! THE 3 SECOND RULE!”

“... So, you’re saying my cooking is now bad?” Squall growled in his monotone, eyes piercing the soul of his own father. “Is it not up to standard to what you expect?”

“N-no, that’s not what I ...” Laguna stuttered hesitantly, realising what he had just said. “I-I mean ... Y-you’re cooking is amazing, it’s just that ... eh-heh ... never mind.”

Attempting to scramble to his feet, Laguna gathered as much of the food from the floor as he possibly could. Wiping away the crumbs from his face, Laguna rose up and faced Squall with a guilt-ridden expression. Squall was completely uncaring; glaring back at his father like his was an annoying pest.

“Eat the food ... it’s getting cold.” Squall then demanded, pointing out as he refused to let any piece of the breakfast he made go to waste.

Laguna attempted to grovel once again, however could not bring himself to do so as the guilt struck back at him. In the end he just gazed down at his plate and accepted for what it was. As Laguna took a seat on the dining table, Squall gave a satisfied nod. Perching himself on the opposite side of the dining table, Squall took no time to dig into his plate. Laguna on the other hand, was picking his food about with a pout, hoping to find any unspoiled parts of his food.

As time went on, there was total silence, only the natural noises echoing from the outside world could be heard. Eventually, Squall stood up from his seat, plate completely empty, and shifted over to the dishwasher. Laguna, head placed against the table surface, sulked in despair. The plate beside his head

only half empty, Laguna could only resent on giving in to his son's spiteful threats. His stomach churning, Laguna couldn't even glance at his plate without feeling the need to throw up.

Squall, having returned from sorting out the dishwasher in the kitchen, glared down at his Father with his melancholic expression. Laguna could feel a sudden stab into his soul, having no choice but to lift his eyes to confront the inevitable.

"... You failed." Squall murmured bitterly, throwing his final verdict as if this was some sort of competition.

What followed was the sound of a heart shatter. Laguna was frozen on the spot, eyes whited out and acting as though his entire soul just left his body. His entire existence was reduced to nothing within the instant, the story of his life and achievements flashing before him. Squall sighed out; dropping his head and crossing his arms in the continuous frustration took over his mind. After a low sigh, he decided enough was enough.

"Screw this ... I'm heading out." Squall then concluded, knowing his role was finished for the morning.

... *What a pain.* His mind added in a murmur.

"Ooh, who are you going to see?" His Father suddenly jumped up in eagerness, reviving from the dead.

"You're mates from the academy ... or, maybe even a girl?"

Squall stumbled upon the question, just as he was about to walk through away. Glancing back, he had an exasperated expression, completely thrown off guard.

"Do you have to always ask about my personal affairs? If so, I'm not answering any questions you have." Squall assured hastily, eyes piercing into the regained soul of his Father.

Laguna hesitated slightly, finding the gaze of his son's as intimidating as ever. However, he then gave out a light chuckle.

"I'm just curious, Squall. Isn't that part of the Old man's role?" He questioned with a light-hearted grin.

"That has got nothing to do with anything." Squall growled back, finding his Father's priorities skewed.

"You may need to work on those 'father priorities' of yours, Dad."

"Is that so..." An idea then clicked in Laguna's mind, "Ah, I know! I'll go enrol myself into Dissidia, maybe a teacher or an undercover student, then I can be your all mighty wing-man."

"Urk- NO! No no no! Don't even joke about that, that idea is lethal." Squall warned hastily, the thought of his Father being a classmate at the academy threw him completely off balance ... even if he knew it was a joke.

"Aw, you don't have to always shut me down." Laguna continued to joke, beaming with amusement.

"You never know, this idea of mine could do you some good."

Squall swiftly placed his earphones in, drowning out any further unnecessary sound, including his Dad's own voice. With that, he left the room and out of sight, the sound of the front door closing followed.

Laguna watched him leave, unable to throw away his cheery smile. He found his son rather typical and predictable; the amusement of teasing him was never going to grow stale.

Picking up one last piece of breakfast that almost killed his spirit earlier, Laguna gave out another chuckle.

"Hah-haa, foreshadowing is such a delight ..." Laguna breathed out, grinning to no end.

He took a bite and chewed on the piece of bacon ... only to suddenly jerk forward with a sickly gulp.

A Moment Later ...

Squall stepped through one of the peaceful streets, music blasting loudly in his ears and his mind off into the far distance of his mind. The bright Sun beating down, hiding the fact that it was in fact late Summer/early Autumn. The street was close to empty, a few kids running about with a foam-made Blitzball, a few adults here and there working on the Sunday lawn, and not much else. Squall felt that he

was now in his comfort-zone, alone and free from unnecessary hassle.

It was then that he heard something attempting to break through his music, an irritating noise refusing to go away. What didn't help was that the kids had all stopped as they watched what had been happening, their ball rolling as they stood in the middle of the road staring away.

Slowly, Squall pinched one of the buds and drew it away for his ear, the noise becoming clearer by the distance. He drew it back just enough to hear that the noise was in fact an argument, slowing the pace of his walk to a slowing stop.

"You ALWAYS do this, Old Man! I swear, there's no end to your @\$\$-ery!" A familiar, yet in Squall's mind 'close-to-infuriating' voice, bellowed out.

"Ah-hah-haa! Don't be so sour, just because you couldn't take a small loss." Another familiar, this time more mature – in tone, not in mannerisms – voice, mocked in return.

Squall didn't even need to wonder who the voices belonged to, not even with the glance of Déjà vu. He was about to place his earbud back in, but hesitated at the thought.

"Screw you! Those dirty tricks of yours were too far from fair!" The Soon's voice argued, his voice echoing throughout the street. "I had barely any room to counterattack!"

"Any room!? Is that not the entire point!? Admit it! You were slaughtered!" The Father's voice provoked, laughing away like a mad man. "... And you call yourself my son, you have a long way to go before I can consider you at such a level."

What followed was a hard slam of a door, with someone storming out to the street. Squall crossed his arms, wondering what the origin behind this particular argument was. Then again, like previous arguments this pair has had, he couldn't give any less of a damn.

"GO TO HELL, Old Fart!" The Son roared back at the house in fury; face all red and popping veins.

"Thanks for the reminder; I pay the place a visit at some point! Ah-hah-haa!" The Father's voice, muffled by the walls of the house, joked about in a teasing manner, seemingly winning this round. "Oh, you better get back here on time this evening, Tidus! Any lateness and I'll be sure to give you payback in your next P.E. lesion!"

Kicking the pavement in a sulk, Tidus took a deep breath to vent his emotions. He looked up towards the clear sky above, spacing out momentarily. The street residences stared silently for a moment longer, and then went on back to their activities. The kids playing around with the Blitzball whilst the adults continuing with the Sunday chores. It was as though they completely ignored the entire scenario. Squall, however, knew this current situation would cause some nuisance for him.

If he sees me, I'm going to get an earful... Squall's thoughts began to warn, noticing he was in the open.

Swiftly spinning around and stepping off towards the opposite direction, Squall placed his earphones back in with haste. The one thing he did not need was Tidus' keeping him company today, especially after what just happened. Just imagining him trailing off about how much he despises his Father, or getting overexcited about any spontaneous ideas he has would send Squall into the deep depth of hell. Right now, he felt as though he was able to escape without Tidus noticing him. However, his music only drowned out the truth.

"SquaaaaAAAAAAAALLLLL!!!" A loud roar rose up all of a sudden, closing in on Squall without any warning.

Slam!

"GACK!?!!" Squall lurched forward, his whole body leaving the floor without his command.

He fell, his whole body rolling and scraping across the concrete ground. In addition to this, he felt a body latch onto him upon impact, causing a larger momentum. Screeching to a full stop, Squall was lying on his side, eyes wide with shock and gasping for air due to the oxygen knocked out of him. Just then, a figure stood over him, blocking the blinding Sun as this figure leant over with curiosity.

“Squall, my man, you’ve just sparked up my day!” Tidus spoke out to his classmate, gleefully smiling. “You’re like a guardian angel, I don’t think I’ll be able to thank you enough!”

“R-right ... happy to be ... of help.” Squall reluctantly responded as his earphones slipped out of his ears, struggling to breath and body full of scrape marks.

Squall knew, from previous encounters with Tidus inside and outside of Dissidia, he should have been a lot more prepared for this.

After Squall recovered, the two began to head through the streets towards the City centre. As expected, Tidus took the opportunity to rant on about his father, much to Squall’s displeasure.

“That Old @\$@ has no sympathy, all he cares about is himself and those who live up to his overbearing standards.” Tidus complained with a pout, allowing all of his thoughts known to the world – or Squall for that matter. “Also, the moment I screw up or do something that isn’t to his liking, I get schooled for it! Not only that, he never holds back when he gets competitive!”

“... Says the guy who not only damaged the Academy’s Blitzball Arena, but also refuses to take the blame by passing it off as a ‘minor accident’.” Squall commented as if to act as the straight man. “So ... yeah, you may want to rethink your argument.”

“Huh!? Who told you about that!?” Tidus leapt back in sudden surprise, looking abruptly anxious. “Cecil told me about it the other day.” Squall brushed off in return, shrugging as though he could not care any less.

“Tch! Damn you, Cecil ...” Tidus growled under his breath, feeling betrayed by his close comrade. “I swear; if he is spreading rumours, I’ll be sure to pay him back tenfold.”

Squall raised an eyebrow, curious as to what Tidus had up his sleeve. Throwing away the thought, Squall began to sum up Tidus’ situation.

“So, you lost the game against your Dad and now you’ve decided you’re going to spend the entire day moaning about how much you hate his guts.” He summarized, holding nothing back. “... Seems legit.”

“Oi, don’t you go guilt tripping me!” Tidus accused all of a sudden as he threw out a finger, finally realising Squall’s intentions. “Besides, surely you can relate to me here, Squall. I mean, haven’t you said before how much you dislike your dad?”

It was then that the entire aura surrounding the two had changed, engulfing their bodies and causing the world to become heavier. Squall slowed down to a halt, glaring at Tidus with his piercing eyes as he gave off a horrific warning vibe. Tidus hesitate, gulping as he felt the pressure dawn upon him.

“Err, heh-heh ... Did I push the wrong button?” Tidus awkwardly questioned, bracing himself for the possibility of losing his life. “C-come on, Squall! You know I didn’t mean anything by such a level!”

Momentarily, Squall continued to glare down Tidus, no response out of him. However, the heavy aura began to cool down, returning back to the calm and peaceful atmosphere of before. Squall’s glare also lightened, giving out a small sigh as he shifted his sight away.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I may find my Dad annoying, lazy, frustrating to deal with, and a complete pain in the neck ... but he is still my Dad.” Squall answered out, any emotion in his tone and expression completely dissipated. “Maybe it would be a good idea for you to take on different approaches to the matter ... especially with something as lame as losing in a stupid game.”

“R-right ... I’ll keep that in mind.” Tidus nodded back, his body shaken up slightly. “... It’s not just something as simple as that though.”

“Oh don’t worry; I know exactly where you are getting at.” Squall brushed off instantly, beginning to tread forward once again. “My Dad can be that level of infuriating, I just don’t consider it a reason to ‘hate’.”

With that, Squall needn’t continue to speak, feeling he had said enough for the time being. Tidus followed, falling quiet as he began to wonder about what Squall had told him. Part of him could see what

he meant, however he just didn't see it for him and the Old Man (Jecht).

As they continued walking, Squall had placed one earphone in his ear, leaving one hanging so he was prepared for any unexpected glomps from Tidus. However, he noticed that Tidus was busy on his phone, attempting to call up someone. After a moment of ringing, no one seemed to have answered. Tidus began to chuckle, something crept up on his mind that made him eerily amused. Squall turned back to Tidus curiously, wondering what was so funny.

"What's with the creepy laugh?" Squall questioned in an unamused tone, eyes squinting. "It doesn't suit you."

"Heh-hee, oh nothing much." Tidus chuckled back, shrugging in amusement. "... Do you mind if we take a detour?"

"Huh?" Squall murmured out in an odd tone.

With that, Tidus stepped on ahead, not saying another word. With a shrug, Squall decided to follow, wondering as to where Tidus was leading.

After a fairly short 'detour', the two reached their destination. What stood before them was a small, seemingly comfortable home. Squall had no idea whose place this was, yet felt that he would know the moment the door would be answered. Without a moment to lose, Tidus rang the doorbell with his usual eagerness, although behind his grin was an oddly creepy aura. A fanfare-like tune rang out upon the press of the button. For some reason, this felt familiar to Squall, making him feel as if he heard of it before.

Just then, the door opened up, revealing a tall man with black, spiky hair, sky blue eyes, and casual attire with the 'SOLDIER' logo on his belt. He was none other than Zack Fair.

"Ah! Hey guys!" Zack greeted energetically, a large cheerful smile strapped across his face. "Are you here to see Cloud?"

"Yep!" Tidus enthusiastically answered back, giving an equally energetic grin. "I'm guessing he's still in the middle of napping."

"You got that right! That kid will sleep the entire day away if he could." Zack commented cheekily, both joking and complaining all at once. "Do you mind assisting me in waking him up?"

"Hell Yeah! What have you got cooked up this time?" Tidus curiously wondered, eager to begin turmoil to his friend.

"Heh-heh-hee ... oh, it's going to be a good one." Zack began to explain, stroking his chin as though he had a small beard ... even though this was close to impossible. "It'll involve a bucket of water, a few trip hazards, and ..."

As the two discussed their plans, Squall stood watching silently. His mind blank, expression non-existent, eyes squinting slightly. The only thing he could think about was ...

... I see, so now I'm stuck with a pair of over-excited lunatics ...great, just great.

Squall sighed out, finding this all a royal pain. All he wanted to do today was to be on his own, away from the nuisances of other people. That now seems to be out the window.

"... So, everything is set up, now we just need someone to trigger the process." Zack suggested, wondering who would take up the critical task.

Both Tidus and Zack then glanced over towards Squall, dark, creepy grins strapped across their faces. Squall groaned under his breath, knowing all too well that he would be involved in this.

"Fine, whatever ... like I have much else going on today." Squall shrugged in acceptance, giving up on finding a way to get out of this.

Zack and Tidus looked back towards each other gleefully, their excitement reaching the boiling point.

Eventually, the three entered the house, Zack leading the two upstairs and towards the room that held a soundly sleeping Cloud. Squall was given a summary of what he needed to do. In a basic sense, he was

going to throw a bucket full of cold water onto the sleeping Cloud. Squall didn't know how to feel about this. If he was in Cloud's shoes, he would most likely have painted the house in their blood. But knowing Cloud, who was probably used to mayhem like this, would probably let things slide easily.

Finally, the three stood over Cloud's bed, where the sleeping Cloud lay, unaware of what was about to occur. He seemed to be mumbling in his sleep, as though he was having one of his 'Fan-girl' nightmares once again, something both Squall and Tidus reluctantly related to.

"Right, time to get into position, Squall, get the bucket ready." Zack pointed out in a whispering voice, nodding in confirmation. "Tidus, follow me ... this is going to be epic."

As the two left the room, Squall continued to stand over Cloud's bed, emotionless and uncaring as can be. A bucket of freezing cold water by his side, Squall couldn't help but wonder if he should purposely back fire this so called plan of theirs and wake Cloud up beforehand. However, another side of him had a sadistic motive of letting this plan run its course. It was mean ... but amusing.

Squall took up the bucket and held it over Cloud, who had tossed over on his beard without any clue. A moment of silence followed, with the sounds of whispering in the background. Just at that moment, Zack voice could be heard from down the hallway. It was the signal.

"NOW!" Zack called out, breaking the peaceful silence abruptly.

"Zzzz ... H-huh?" Cloud groggily snorted, clueless as he wondered why there was a sudden shout.

"... Sorry, Cloud." Squall murmured, although he didn't really care.

With a sudden haste, Squall threw the bucket over the unexpected Cloud. The freezing cold water fell freely towards the victim, soaking his entire body and clothing. As the bucket engulfed his entire head, Cloud leapt up in abrupt shock, stumbling off of the bed. Wrapped in his bed sheets and bucket over his head, Cloud's bearings were completely gone. He did not know where was up, down, left, right, forward, or backwards. In addition, he was shivering in both shock and the damp coldness of the water.

"Wha-!? What's going on - WHOA!?" Cloud yelped as he stumbled over, throwing his arms about.

Squall stepped out of the way, watching as Cloud scurried blindly past him. What happened next ... was of Tidus' doing. Standing on the other side of the door opening, Tidus casually held out his leg. Fated to occur, Cloud tripped and stumbled over the leg, causing him to lose balance. With the momentum of his body, Cloud flew across the hall. However, his feet continued to stumble across, stepping into what seems to be various shaped pots and pans from the kitchen downstairs. Loud, clanging noises could be heard echoing across the entirety of the house.

This was where the finale began ... and Zack's turn to cause havoc on Cloud. As Cloud stumbled towards the stairs that lead to the ground floor of the house, Zack leapt into action ... literally. He threw himself forward as he appeared from his own room, and shoved Cloud towards the direction of the stairs.

"Wah-!? Woahwoahwoah ... AAAAAHHHH!!!" Cloud screamed out as he fell, losing control of his body entirely.

Bang, bang, bang ... CRASH!!!

Squall, watching from the banister with Tidus and Zack, cringed as the three heard the sounds of the load collision. Cloud was spread out on the floor, motionless. The bucket on his head, bed sheets wrapped around his body, and body completely drenched in the freezing water. Swiftly, the three raced down the stairs, Tidus and Zack showing both concern and complete amusement whilst Squall showed nothing in terms of expression. As they surrounded him, Tidus took off the bucket from around Cloud's head. This revealed a completely dazed out and close to unconscious Cloud, the world spinning around him. Slowly, his bearings and sight began to recover.

At that point, both Tidus and Zack could not hold themselves back. The two burst out into fits of laughter, rolling on the floor. Cloud groaned out in pain, his entire body sore and aching. Squall gazed as he watched the two rolling about, unable to find anything in his stack of emotions related to this scene.

“HAHAHAA ... THAT WAS AWESOME!” Tidus roared out amongst the fits of his laughter, unable to control himself.

“W-We HAVE to do that again at some point!” Zack spoke out as he struggled to hold back his giggling.

“W-wait, no! We have to TOP IT!”

“I’ll ... kill you ... all.” Cloud wheezed out, eyes raging as he began to move about.

“... I think we’re done here.” Squall murmured with boredom, crossing his arms as the amusement completely passes him.

After everything settled down and Cloud had recovered enough, Squall, Cloud and Tidus strolled through the city centre. Tidus chatting away as usual whilst Cloud held an ice pack on his head, groaning in pain, everything seemed the usual once again. Squall had an earphone back in his ear so he could keep his attention away from Tidus’ yapping.

The centre was full with locals and visitors; understandable considering it was a Sunday. The shops and restaurants that were open during this time took the opportunity to advertise their ‘special deals’ and promotions. The customers were, in Squall’s eyes, ‘suckered in’ to these like dogs noticing a new treat. In addition, street performers were showing off their usual routines, amazing the audiences that surrounded them.

Tidus and Cloud went ahead of Squall, Tidus seemingly catching something in the corner of his eye whilst Cloud was dragged against his own will. Squall took this opportunity to hang back, finally getting time to himself. As he treaded along, swerving in and out of crowds, Squall took his time to look around. However, he abruptly stopped upon catching a glimpse of the T.V. through the glass panel, showing a face he didn’t need to see for the rest of the day. A Female narration was playing in the background, celebrating a special announcement.

“Today marks the 17 year anniversary of Sir Laguna Loire’s reign as the president of Esthar.

Yesterday, upon celebrating this occasion, Laguna had announced that a special play would be held in a year’s time.” The Anchor Lady described on the channel, her voice tone sounding completely professional ... and also bored. “Tickets for the set dates had already been sold out and more dates are to be announced due to popular demand. Laguna Loire had gone on to state that those who were not able to buy tickets are able to view the play via live broadcast.”

Damn it, Dad, you just had to give out your empty promises again. Squall groaned in his mind, finding a face-palm to be the most appropriate action.

During that very moment, a light, feminine scream echoed across the centre, causing Squall to glance towards the direction. He caught sight of the girl who screamed in an instant ... only to realise she was about to crash into him.

“AH! Watch out!”

... Too late.

CRASH!

The two collided into each other, falling to the ground with a large thump. Crowds had watched the situation unfold curiously, following the girl as she collided into Squall. And yet no one helped stop her. What followed on from that was a loud barking sound, causing children in the crowds to point out cheerfully. A large, brown, long furred dog was jumping and running around the two like a maniac, showing no signs of calming down. Squall eased himself up from the concrete floor, groaning out in pain. *Again!? Why did this have to happen to me AGAIN!?* Squall’s mind bellowed in frustration.

Shaking his head, Squall gave out a sigh as he regained his own bearings. He attempted to stand himself up; however, he was held down. Lying on top of him was the girl, a dog lead wrapped around an arm of hers and whilst another was wrapped around Squall.

Squall didn’t know what to do in this situation, finding this all completely absurd. Upon a closer notice,

the girl on top of him had jet black shoulder-length hair, areas seemingly highlighted with a fair caramel tone. She had soft, pale skin and – upon what Squall noticed before the collision – dark brown eyes. She seemed to be wearing some sort of blue dress with back, knee length tights.

“Nnn ... Angelo.” The girl moaned out, slowly raising herself from on top of Squall, completely oblivious. “... Would you calm down ... for once in your life.”

The dog barked in response to the name, assuming that was what the girl called it. It sat down as if to wait for further instructions by its master. As the girl sat up, she opened her eyes. In an instant, she gasped, moving herself away from Squall.

“I-I’m so sorry!” The girl apologised, grasping his hand instinctively. “Angelo gets excited a lot when she’s in a crowded place. Are you hurt?”

Squall felt a sudden relief, sitting up the moment she moved off of him. Squall sighed out, rubbing the areas of his torso that ached out.

“I’m fine ...” Squall murmured back, his eyes glancing away from her. “... Nothing you should be concerned about.”

He instantly slid his hand from her grasp, showing signs of his awkwardness. The girl hesitated, not knowing how to respond. Squall rose to his feet, giving out his other hand to help the girl up. The moment the two stood up, Squall watched the dog, Angelo, jump around them eagerly.

“He’s very ... jumpy.” Squall commented, not knowing what else to say.

“She.” The girl corrected somewhat sternly, as if to show some stubbornness towards Squall. “... And yes, she’s a very excitable dog.”

Just then, something clicked in her mind, pointing towards him as if to recognise him. Squall leant back cautiously, aware about her being too close towards his personal space.

“Wait a minute, aren’t you Squall Leonhart?” The girl asked him curiously, certain she was right.

“Yeah ... what about it?” Squall shrugged with his unamused tone.

“Oh, nothing much, I just see you about a lot at the Academy.” The girl cheerfully smiled, showing a kind expression. “I hear you’re one of the ‘Fangirls’ prime targets.”

“You ... you’re not one of them, are you?” Squall cautiously questioned, unsure whether it was wise to ask.

“Nope, I just hear rumours amongst my class a lot, that’s all.” The girl shrugged back, smiling towards him with amusement.

“I see ...” Squall awkwardly murmured, unsure whether to trust her with that statement. “... See you at Dissidia.”

Instantly, Squall darted out of sight through the large crowds, startling the girl. Within a flash, he was gone.

“Ah! Wait, I ... Ah, he’s gone.” The girl huffed in a disappointment, her hand grasping tightly on Angelo’s lead. “That guy needs to open up more. Isn’t that right, Angelo?”

The dog barked in agreement, as if in conversation with her. Just then another female voice could be heard calling out from the depths of the crowds.

“Rinoa, where have you gone?” The voice called out curiously, getting closer to the girl. “Rinoaaaaa!”

“I’m right here, Selphiel!” The girl called back, answering her call.

The girl glanced back towards where Squall ran off to, before giving a light sigh and leaving to meet up with her friend.

Finally back in the open, Squall took a moment to catch his breath back. Although he wasn’t running through the crowds, he wanted to keep his distance from that girl. Even though she was sweet and kind to him, he did not trust her. After cooling himself down, Squall took in the area surrounding him. He had left the city centre and was on one of the paths that lead towards Crescent Lake. The area was calm,

open, peaceful, and full of natural scenery, it was a perfect place for him just to chill out alone. He took a seat on a nearby bench, underneath a small yet sturdy tree. Placing his earphones back into his ears, Squall leaned back and watched the vast blue sky above. He was finally able to gain breathing space, and it was the most relieving feeling he has had all week.

Time passed on, the music in Squall's ears shuffling through the random tracks on his playlist. People passed him, yet gave no notice as to what he was doing, keeping to their own matters. It was all Squall wanted; and yet deep down in the back of his mind, this would never last.

"BOO!" A creepy clown-like face appeared close above him, meeting eye to eye in the instant.

"GAH!" Squall jumped in fright, slipping off of his seat.

"Hohoo-hehee-AHAHAHAHAA!" The Clown-faced trickster began to bellow out, over exaggerating the laughter to what felt like a new level. "My lord, I can't get enough of this! It's all ... exhilarating!"

Kefka Palazzo, Dissidia Academy's Art Teacher, was floating in mid-air clutching his sides, manically laughing non-stop. Any visitors of the area watched him in fear, children clutching onto their parents, balling as they heard his laugh and saw his appearance. Squall's heart was racing, unable to get used to Professor Palazzo's jump-scares no matter how many times it happens. The question that came to mind was: *Why was he here?*

"Pr-Professor Palazzo, why are you here?" Squall echoed his mind, shaking far too much to be able to stand.

"It's MASTER PALAZZO to dirt like you!" Kefka snarled abruptly with a menacing tone, scaring off everyone in sight. "... or Kefka, if you're so inclined."

"... Whatever." Squall sighed, struggling to his feet as he tried to stop the shaking.

"How rude ... I just so happen to be – umm – 'strolling' along, then along my travels, I just HAPPENED ... to see one of my 'prize' students taking a daydream on the bench." Kefka answered back as he circled around freely above Squall's head, the tone of his voice all over the place.

Squall didn't know how to respond, unable to predict Kefka's mood. Squall stood cautiously, knowing that running would be useless to this madman.

"Hohoo ... Giving me the silent treatment, I see?" Kefka giggled and he hung himself underneath the tree, crossing his arms. "Well, I guess there is ... another reason for me to meet you here..."

Squall raised an eyebrow, slightly curious yet immensely unsure as to what he meant by this.

"What pitiful Kefka is trying to say, my dear Squall ..." Another, seeming lustful voice, spoke up from directly behind Squall. "Is that you're going to be an important player come tomorrow's court trial."

Squall, frozen on the spot, felt a stroke of a soft hand caressing his cheek. He wished he could move, but the eerie voice from behind was preventing him from doing so.

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING 'PITIFUL', YOU LONESOME HAG!?" Kefka spat out in fury, his menacing insane mind momentarily breaking through his trickster persona. "Hee-ahahahaa ... I was just getting to the good part, my lovely Ultimecia."

Just then, Squall broke through his frozen state, causing him to automatically stumble forward to gain distance. He turned, eyes locked onto the figure that stood close behind him.

Ultimecia, the History Teacher of Dissidia Academy, stood tall and gracefully. With long, silk-like silver hair, golden serpent eyes, and strong red-toned lips, she was like a corrupted angel. Her attire consisting of a long, feathered blood-red robe, numerous uniquely shaped tattoos ... and not much else.

Her cleavage exposed and the complete lack of undergarments. Men – especially Squall's Father – would struggle to resist eying her up. To Squall, however, she gave off the aura of a possessive witch.

"You're being hunted down, Squall." Ultimecia warned him lightly, giving a subtle smile underneath her makeup and face-paint. "A fellow classmate thinks you may have had involvement with the recent incident... and he's not one to give up so easily."

"Hohohoo ... AHAHAHAHAA, it's enlightening us with so much CHAOTIC drama!" Kefka called out

energetically, dancing about in the air. "I can't wait a day for more!"

"... And why should I care about how he feels?" Squall questioned with a snarl, his mind knowing exactly who it was. "The incident has nothing to do with me."

"Hmhmhmm ... Are you sure, boy?" Ultimecia questioned back, gazing into his eyes as she drew closer. "To me, you may be the closest thing to the case than what is lead to believe, it's only a matter of time before they find out why."

Squall stepped back cautiously, wary about this 'witch's' approach.

"Why does it concern you?" He asked out, tensing himself up.

"We are merely SPECTATORS of the event ... Heyahhahaa – all we want is to add a bit more 'fun' into the case!" Kefka reasoned with him, appearing close in front of Squall as if to plead. "Will you be so kind as to ... create a bit more CHAOS for us, pretty pleeeeeeeaaase?"

"We don't mean 'help us', we mean 'get involved'." Ultimecia added on, giggling alongside Kefka.

Squall was silent for that moment, standing motionless. In his mind, his two closest friends were standing within the depths. Zidane, tied down to the chains of his fate, waiting for the verdict to fall upon him. Bartz, his emotions broken and full of despair as he watches his partner in crime, unable to cope with the questionings dawned upon him. As they disappeared into the darkness, Warrior of Light and Onion Knight stood in their place, glaring towards Squall with tense eyes; The Prosecutor offering a hand to strengthen the guilty verdict, whilst the Defence was ready to rip Squall apart to find the possible guilt lying within him.

Squall then shrugged, "Yeah, why not?"

16 - Arc 3 (2): One Time

Onion Knight and Terra Branford stood and watched in silence as their next objective stepped up to the table, eyes locked ready for battle.

Squall Leonhart, emotionless and set to challenge, refused to glance away. He knew the purpose of this meeting; he knew why he was there.

The three, as though they were in sync, sat on the designated table, continuing their silence. It was now a question of who would speak first, and where the conversation will go. They were in a café, surrounded by spectators of variety. Students, families, social groups, all locals and visitors who entered the café wondered as to what was happening in the centre table. Even the employees of the café were wary of the situation. News and rumours had spread fast across the city about Dissidia Academy's intense battle for the truth. The fact that they were about to watch the progression of the court case in action, excited them to rare heights.

"You could have picked a less crowded area..." Squall murmured with his typical unamused expression, conscious of the group surrounding them. "You know what they say about 'personal space', right?" Onion Knight shrugged, smirking somewhat confidently, "This is just a game to them, pay them no mind and I'm sure you feel more comfortable. Besides ... some freshly made tea and coffee during an interrogation does help tremendously."

Terra gave Onion Knight a sudden glare, finding him spouting out the name 'interrogation' rather crude and stubborn. However, she switched back to Squall, letting it slide for now.

"If this place is too crowded for you, Squall, we could always move to somewhere else." She kindly offered, hoping that the surrounding environment was suitable for this type of scenario.

"Its fine, I can live with a crowd for the time being." Squall shrugged with a sigh in return, uncaring about oneself as can be. "I'd rather get this thing over and done with."

Onion Knight and Terra gave a swift glance to each other, wondering how Squall will play this out. What would he reveal to them? What would he hide from them? These were questions that Onion Knight had wondered prior to this meeting. However, these two questions hid many others that Onion Knight wished immensely to pursue, considering his suspicions about Squall in relation to the case had yet to subside. Onion Knight and Squall then locked eyes against each other, as though ready to kill given the chance. The atmosphere grew intense, the surrounding spectators beginning to quiver by the abrupt change of tone. They are edged closer, eyes and ears open with anticipation. This was what they had all waited for, the battle was about to commence!

"So be it, Squall." Onion Knight grinned with confidence, accepting the challenge set before him.

"However, let me tell you, I will not be holding back."

"Hmph ... Whatever." Squall murmured in his monotone, his arms crossed. "But, I would like to ask ONE question before we begin."

Onion Knight cocked an eyebrow, curious yet cautious about what he was going to ask.

"And, what would that be?" he responded back warily.

"If I remember, Firion was the one who took up the detective role. So why am I being questioned by you two?" Squall asked, his eyes glaring intimidatingly.

Both Onion Knight and Terra tensed up upon hearing the question. To Terra, she realised that Squall was not aware of Firion's current situation, assumingly unaware of the fact that Firion had developed a concussion after a second assault. To Onion Knight, however, it was more to do with Squall's question contradicting Onion Knight's initial assumption on him being a possible culprit, supported by the fact

that there was nothing out of character with his attitude when he asked. With that said, Onion Knight knew there was a possibility of him lying to cover his alibi or that he still had involvement with the case in some form or another.

"Firion is recovering from a concussion after an accident late Friday at Dissidia Academy; so we are just standing in for him today." Onion Knight deciding to explain, avoiding details based on the cause of Firion's concussion as much as possible. "Warrior of Light is doing the same on his end, so it should be fair on both sides."

"I see." Squall nodded in acceptance, leaning back on his seat. "I had heard that something had happened to him, so I was only curious."

Wait, so he WASN'T oblivious to the incident with Firion? Onion Knight's mind suddenly alerted, causing him to re-evaluate. *Why does he have to be so mysterious about these things...? Fine then, we'll have it his way; all the more reason to interrogate him.*

Onion Knight then straightened up, his eyes fixated on his current opponent. Squall did the same, knowing he had to be on guard for what was about to come.

"If that is all you wished to ask, then we shall begin." Onion Knight commented in preparation, ending the relaxed tone of the pre-interrogation.

Interrogation: Squall Leo-

"Homemade Tea for Mr Onion Knight?" a young pink-haired female waitress abruptly approached the table, a large cup of brewed tea resting on the surface she had been holding.

In that instant, the high tension in the atmosphere was shattered entirely, almost every spectator groaned out as they felt the anticipation within the hearts break into pieces. Even the three on the table had broken their concentration upon this unexpected interruption.

The waitress glanced around the room carelessly, wondering why all the spectators/customers reacted in such an abnormal way.

"Y-yes, that's me." Onion Knight raised a hand shakily, his head planted against the surface of the table.

The waitress then placed the mug on their table and stepped away in silence, feeling somewhat awkward. Meanwhile, as Onion Knight recovered, he had noticed Squall frozen in a face palm position and Terra glancing away in an attempt to hide the smirk from the awkwardness of their situation.

"Well, that certainly killed the mood." Onion Knight sighed out in a murmur, picking up his mug and beginning to blow the scalding steam away.

"Tch! You're one to talk ... seeing as you were the one who ordered it in the first place." Squall groaned back bitterly, glaring towards him in irritation.

Taking a moment to recompose himself, Onion Knight took this time to recollect his thoughts, as though being given a second chance to prepare his mind and consider the situation in front of him. Terra and Squall did the same, sighing out and taking a moment to throw away the killjoy emotion sinking in their consciousness. The audience kept silent, cautiously aware for anything else that could break tension.

Without any further interruptions and the initial tension fully reinstated, Onion Knight took the first sip of his freshly brewed coffee and locked sight with Squall.

Game on.

Interrogation: Squall Leonhart

"Squall, I would like to question you about is your relationship with both Zidane and Bartz." Onion Knight commenced, deciding to get straight to the point.

“Oh, is that how we’re going to start this?” Squall replied with a cocked eyebrow, not expecting this interrogation to begin in such a direction. “Why do you need to know?”

“You see, in order for us to have the best possible chance on gaining Zidane the ‘Innocent’ verdict, we need insight on every aspect of this incident.” Onion Knight allowed himself to admit, feeling it was pointless to hide the purpose. “To you, it may sound random and obscure, however sometimes the most important answers lies within the most unexpected places.”

Squall shrugged carelessly, “Fine then. The three of us have been close friends for years – I would say, since we were around 10 years old ... The more I think about it, the more it gives me a headache.”

“Is that so...?” Onion Knight nodded back thoughtfully, as though considering the hardship Squall had to endure. “I must say, I do feel your pain somewhat.”

“You gain a tolerance for their mischief after a while.” He brushed off lightly, “And besides; it’s always a joy to watch as one of their pranks backfire on them from time to time.”

“Karma is a tough mistress.” Onion Knight chuckled in agreement, before his eyes sparked up abruptly. Terra caught a glance of the lit up glare in Onion Knight’s eyes, confident that she was on the same wavelength as him. The surrounding spectators watched on, most somewhat clueless, yet one or two began to fidget upon reaction of hearing Squall’s words.

No doubt about it now ... he has a hand to play in all this. The wheels began to turn in Onion Knight’s mind. *Question is: How is he going to play it out?*

“Squall, have you ever been involved in their pranks?” Terra then questioned curiously, a question that has been bugging her mind.

Squall switched to her, a distinctive silence engulfing him. Onion Knight glanced over to her as well, rather intrigued by the question. The sudden shift of eyes caused Terra to fluster, gradually sliding down her seat in an attempt to hide herself from the attention.

“Ah, s-sorry, I ... I was just curious...” Terra hastily added in defence, her cheeks glowing bright red in the thought that she did something wrong.

Onion Knight gave a subtle yet understanding grin; appreciating the amount of courage she mustered up in order to voice her thoughts. It was a question that was needed to be answered, and Onion Knight didn’t know if he himself would have asked during the questioning.

After a long pause, Squall answered the question with lowered eyes, “Bartz and Zidane would always try and get me involved with their shenanigans in some way or another. To begin with, they would ask me to join in constantly, never leaving me be until I finally accepted. During then, I would just observe by the side-lines waiting for one of them to screw up spectacularly ... which happened on a regular occasion at the time. Ultimately though, I never accepted to join in their so-called ‘games’. After a while though, they would revolve the pranks around me without me even knowing about it, probably in spite or just for kicks. Those plans never worked out though as, by that time, everyone already knew who would be to blame if they were pranked on, even when Zidane attempted to ‘expose’ me as the true mastermind. He and Bartz sure enjoyed those back-to-back detentions ... then again; I certainly enjoyed the much needed personal space.”

“You sound as though you were happy to get away from them whenever you had the chance.” Onion Knight casually commented.

Squall gave another pause, his eyes glaring like daggers ready to fight back if something was out of line. Onion Knight, glaring back, was aware of Squall’s avoidance, noticing a few hints of caution in his attitude. The surrounding crowd felt the tension begin to tighten, feeling the flowing adrenaline circling the air.

“You could say that ... Then again, I’m sure you would understand more if you had those two pestering you every single day starting from the crack of dawn.” Squall then sighed, as though reflecting on the days when he ‘suffered’ the most. “It was just nice to get some fresh air every once in a while. You

could say it was ... refreshing.”

Within that moment, Terra felt a shiver crawl down her spine unexpectedly, almost leaping up from her seat. She didn't know why she reacted all of a sudden; it was as though Squall's last comment set off alarm bells. Onion Knight was observant of Terra's reaction, considering it to be a sign of change in the atmosphere surrounding Squall.

However, he couldn't just end it here, he needed more from Squall.

“Was there ever a time when you accepted to help those two?” He pursued to question, the tone of his voice strengthening to show he was a force to be reckoned with. “Aside from the times you watched from the side-lines, of course.”

“As I said, I only watched their pranks from the side-lines.” Squall reiterated, his voice clear as day as he spoke. “Besides, would you see me get involved in something so petty and asinine?”

Onion Knight shook his head hesitantly, unsure if it was the right choice to answer back. His mind like clockwork, he began to prepare for the next string of questions within an instant. Yet, before he could press on, he was abruptly halted.

“... No, hold on ... there was that ‘one time’.” Squall lowly admitted, the thought just clicking in his mind.

“That ‘one time’?” Terra echoed his words curiously, her interest peaking similarly to Onion Knight.

“Whatever do you mean, Squall?”

“It was during the time at our old school, not long before we entered Dissidia Academy.” Squall answered, thinking hard to remember. “At least ... I think it was then.”

The audience eyed in closer, a few gasping in awe at this sudden revelation. Onion Knight groaned underneath his breath, beginning to feel irritated by the constant intimidation of the surrounding stares. Brushing it aside, he kept a strong posture and pressed on.

“It seems our ‘audience’ is showing interest, Squall.” Onion Knight decided to point out, a clue that was obvious to even the densest of people. “Could you give us more detail?”

Another long pause, as though Squall carefully considered whether to enlighten the two who sat before him – and the surrounding crowd. However, it was too late to back away at this point without setting off unnecessary rumours.

“It began during Lunch Break ...”

2 Years Ago, within the facilities of Balamb Elementary...

“But Squaaaaalllll ... You HAVE to help me with this!” Zidane begged Squall, gazing up at him with large, hopeful eyes. “It's our final day and I have the PERFECT send-off prank for the Headmaster! I can't do this without you, man!”

“For the millionth time, I'm not getting involved with whatever you're scheming.” Squall spat in frustration, trying his best to eat his lunch in peace.

The two were situated in the large and spacious dining hall of the school, lines of tables stationed in a parallel position with a considerable mass of students scattered among them. The typical echoes of the student's voices echoed like wildfire, conversations of excitement for the summer break and what was to come for them when they enter their new schools and academies. Squall, sporting a slightly more youthful appearance and a jet-black school uniform, was hunched over his food with an irritated expression engraved deep into his monotone face. Zidane, also sporting the same uniform and equally more youthful appearance, sat opposite leaning forward and fidgeting in hopes of his friend's acceptance.

“Come on, buddy, I'm desperate here!” Zidane continued to pry, refusing to give up. “Think about it, it's the last day! The teachers can't punish us even if we were to get caught, and everyone will walk away talking about it for weeks!”

“Not exactly ...” Squall rebutted Zidane instantly, noticing a flaw in his excuse, “The school can refute our entry into Dissidia Academy without even lifting a finger ... at least that’s what I’ve heard.” Zidane gave a blank stare in return, acting as though he was unable to process the thought. Squall’s own eyes narrowed as he sipped on his drink, irritated by Zidane’s ridiculously dense outlook. “... We’ll be fine!” Zidane then abruptly gave the thumbs up, his upbeat expression proving that he had completely discarded the possible consequence. “Besides, me and Bartz have already set up most of it. Just a little bit more tweaking and we’ll be good to go.” Squall gave a long groan, feeling the uncontrollable desire to run away. This thought was instantly negated though as he knew Zidane would overtake him and prevent his escape within mere seconds. He endured, knowing he wasn’t going to get out of this easily. “If you shup up and show me what you’ve done, then maybe I’ll help.” Squall murmured regretfully, instantly resenting the decision. “YES!!!” Zidane roared out ecstatically, throwing his arms up in the air as he leaped up from his seat. At that moment, the dining hall fell silent. Students turned curiously to see why there was a sudden shout for joy. Zidane was oblivious, his mind completely psyched up with anticipation. In contrast, Squall had his face completely in the palms of his hands, continuing to groan with regret.

Not long after, Squall and Zidane stood in the empty Theatre hall of the school, staring upon the complete set up for the prank. Zidane couldn’t stand still, his excitement reaching its absolute peak. Squall, on the other hand, glared with an expression of absurdity, completely dumbfounded by what was situated in front of him.

“So, what do you think?” Zidane cheerfully wondered, his hands on his hips and his chest pumped up with pride. “It’s awesome, right?”

“Y-you ... you must be joking.” Squall stuttered his words, his eyes wide as he processed what was placed in front of him.

Situated in the centre of the stage was an enormous blue bucket, filled to the brim with freezing cold water and a vast array of ice cubes. Beside it was a group of small rolling apparatus, commonly used for exercises and stretching. Based on what was seen here, Squall gathered instantly that Zidane had stolen these from the P.E. Equipment Store.

“Ha-ha-haa ...you need to lighten up, Squall. The school barely ever used these during lessons so I thought they would be of more suitable use for what I have planned.” Zidane chuckled, acting all care-free. “Now then, this is the plan: I will have the bucket balanced up in the rafters of the stage, directly above where the Headmaster will be standing. In the meantime, you’ll be hiding in the backstage, ready to bowl the rollers.”

“... And what will Bartz be doing?” Squall questioned.

“I’ve placed Bartz on filming duty.” Zidane quickly answered, a grin beaming from him. “He’ll be sitting in the crowds recording the whole prank and sending it to all the students afterwards. I guarantee you, it’ll trend like wildfire.”

Squall was silent, uncertain about this considering everything Zidane had told him. There were a few issues he wished to address.

“Why not place me on filming duty?” Squall decided to express. “Bartz has more experience in your pranks, whilst always I watch on the side-lines.”

“Well, I wanted to change things up and give Bartz a break from being on the forefront.” Zidane admitted truthfully, feeling compassion for his best friend.

Squall slowly nodded, as though understand his reasoning. Then again, considering Zidane’s tendency of using Bartz as a scapegoat all the time, there wasn’t any wonder why he came to such a decision. With that said, there was something else Squall needed to point out.

"I know you're agile and everything, but I don't think you'll be able to carry that bucket up to the rafters with all that water weighing it down."

Zidane froze upon hearing Squall's criticism, having just realised his mistake as his expression dropped from excitement to horror. Squall rolled his eyes, knowing all too well that this wasn't the first mistake he had made with his pranks.

"BARTZ!!!" Zidane abruptly bellowed out, causing Squall to jump up in fright.

Within seconds of Zidane's call, a youthful, innocent-eyed Bartz appeared from amongst the curtain folds of the Theatre stage.

"Aye, Sir!" He saluted, attempting to pull a forced straight face.

"We screwed up!" Zidane crossed his arms with a serious pout.

"How so!?" Bartz blurted in shock.

"We put the water and ice in the bucket BEFORE we set it up on the rafters!" Zidane explained to him. There was another pause, Bartz glancing over to the equipment as his mind slowly connected the dots. There was an odd ticking noise clicking as he tried to figure out the problem. Squall face-palmed, finding this all infuriating.

Ding...

"*Gasp* OH NO!" Bartz yelled out, placing his hands on his head. "The ice and water took me AGES to steal from the Kitchens without being caught! Whatever shall we do now!?"

So that's how they got the ice and water ... Squall's mind clicked, having answered another of his questions for him.

"Don't worry, we still have time!" Zidane assured him, approaching Bartz and placing his hands on his shoulders. "The prank will work no matter what is thrown against us!"

"... well great, now we're all screwed." Squall commented under his breath with a low sigh, speaking quietly enough so Bartz and Zidane wouldn't hear him.

Shifting to the end-of-year Balamb School Assembly, the Theatre Hall was filled to the brim with students and teachers, watching the Headmaster, a cheerful yet sophisticated man referred to many as Mr Kramer, stand on the stage to give his final speech in hopes to inspire the students for their future endeavours.

Squall was in position behind the stage curtains with the rollers, ready for either Bartz or Zidane to give the signal. Zidane, having been able to set the bucket up in the rafters, was also ready to go. Bartz, sitting amongst the crowd with their class, was setting up to film the Assembly with his cell-phone.

Now all they need was the perfect timing.

"... And so, students of Balamb Elementary..." Mr Kramer began to conclude in a clear and upbeat voice. Zidane nodded over to Squall as reassurance that it was almost time, in which Squall indicated back with a confirmed nod. Bartz zoomed the camera on his cell, getting the clearest picture possible for what was about to occur.

"... I thank you wholeheartedly for the great years spent at this school, and I have faith that you will follow your ambitions to a promising future!" The Headmaster bowed, ending his speech.

That was the signal.

Zidane tipped the bucket, allowing it to fall on target. Squall stepped forward, the stage on his right, and aimed the rollers. The bucket landed upside-down directly on top of its target, causing Mr Kramer to shriek as the freezing water and ice was soaked all over him. Squall followed up and released the rollers, timing it just as Mr Kramer lifted a leg. The moment the rollers made contact, Mr Kramer obliviously began to lose his footing. Ultimately, he slipped up on one of the rollers and collided against the stage floor on his back, the large bucket covering his torso entirely.

The room erupted in amazement and laughter, even cheering for Mr Kramer for a spectacular ending.

Bartz was able to grasp the money-shot on his cell, grinning non-stop. Zidane indicated with an ecstatic fist-pump towards Squall, who glanced away awkwardly. Admittedly, Squall felt bad for Mr Kramer, a man he had some respect for out of all the teachers at the school. However, he was rather amused by the result of the prank, trying his absolute hardest to hide his amusement from Zidane. However, this amusement was cut short as Squall caught a glimpse of his homeroom teacher glaring directly towards him from the far distance with fury in her eyes. They were caught.

Present Day ...

“... What we didn’t expect that day was that our Homeroom teacher had called out for the register at the beginning of the Assembly; meaning she was able to place the blame on me and Zidane to the Headmaster for the prank without a second thought.” Squall concluded his story, a sly smile hidden beneath his cold expression. “Mr Kramer took the whole situation as a positive so the both of us were let off lightly. If it wasn’t for him, myself and Zidane wouldn’t have been allowed in Dissidia Academy.” Onion Knight and Terra took in Squall’s story, having not initially expected to gain insight on both Squall and Zidane’s time before Dissidia Academy. The surrounding crowds began to discuss the story, enlightened and curious by what they had listened to. Throughout the time Squall spoke, Onion Knight was able to finish his mug of coffee, now playfully swirling the final drops as he figured out how to connect this to the current case.

“I’ve got to say, that was a nice little story you gave us, Squall.” He then chuckled, placing his mug back on the table as he spoke. “Considering the amount of detail, one would accuse you of actually enjoying the prank.”

“Tch! That’s just your imagination talking.” Squall hastily dismissed, glancing away.

“If that’s how you see it, then I’m not going to pry.” Onion Knight shrugged back, deciding it was time to further the interrogation by his favour. “Instead, shall we discuss about Zidane’s most recent ‘mess-up’?”

Within the instant of Onion Knight’s question, the surrounding environment of the café changed, feeling as though the climate heated up exponentially. Individuals in the surrounding audience quivered as this feeling struck them hard, excitement rushing through their veins. Squall glared hesitantly, as though ready to fight back if necessary.

“What ... would you like to know?” He cautiously asked, his fist beginning to clench against the table.

“Oh, just a few things ... for now.” Onion Knight confidently admitted, efficiently making his move.

“Firstly, were you aware of Zidane and Bartz’s plans to prank Professor Gabbaini during Friday Lunch Break?”

Squall shook his head in reply, “No, they didn’t mention any plans about that prank whenever I was with them.”

“Considering from what you had told us, do you ever wonder why they didn’t tell you about it?” Onion Knight then followed up, the story and earlier questions still fresh in his mind.

“The day I would care about such things, I would send myself to the nearest mental hospital.” Squall growled bitterly, “It’s Zidane’s fault for getting into this mess in the first place, I’ve rather avoid being any part of it.”

... *Harsh.* Onion Knight’s mind commented, knowing Terra had the same thought. “How did you feel when you heard that Zidane’s petty prank possibly lead to the recent ‘incident’ with Rydia?”

“I couldn’t care less.” Squall crossed his arms as he answered, eyes giving a piercing glare.

Onion Knight gave a small glance towards Terra, the two noticing a darker shift in tone with the way Squall spoke. He knew they were going into topics that would possibly surface during the next court trial,

but Onion Knight needed to find a plausible counter argument against Warrior of Light if he were to confirm his suspicions against Squall.

“If you wouldn’t mind me asking then; what were you doing during the time of the incident?” He questioned Squall, knowing the risk his was taking.

Squall’s eyes widened upon being asked the question, a reaction Onion Knight immediately tried to memorize. Squall’s eyes lowered and his teeth began to grit together hard, seemingly struggling to answer.

Onion Knight must have struck a chord.

“... That is a question I don’t need to answer right now.” Squall quietly murmured back in response.

“And why it that, Squall?” Onion Knight pressured him, eyes glaring to show he wasn’t going to let Squall run away so easily.

“That’s because right now ... I’m speaking to someone who believes me to be the suspect of this case.” He answered in an abrupt threatening tone, his eyes shooting daggers back at his opposition.

“And that question of yours just proved it.”

Onion Knight’s eyes widened, feeling as though his mind was just pried open. It hadn’t occurred to him that Squall was aware of his suspicions. How did he know? Was Onion Knight so transparent when he asked his questions? Right now, he couldn’t allow Squall to see any further cracks in his expression that would allude to the idea, whether or not Squall was pulling a bluff on him.

“That’s a rather antagonistic way of thinking, Squall.” Onion Knight struck back, wondering where this situation would lead. “We’re all classmates here, it would be deemed unwise if I were to accuse you of such things.”

Squall chuckled, seeing right through his opposition’s mental armour, “If that is the case; then I want you to show me proof – right here and now, in front of all these people – why I should or shouldn’t be deemed a suspect.”

Onion Knight felt as though Squall was intentionally pushing him into the nearest corner, attempting to find a weakness to exploit in front of their audience. He placed a hand against the pouch of his pocket, where the strands of brown hair were sitting ready to be revealed to the world. However, he knew now would be the worst time to reveal the evidence, as it was his main weapon for the court trial.

“Well, it looks like you’ll have to wait until court day.” Onion Knight returned with a small grin, refusing to give into this heightened tension surrounding them.

Squall slowly and silently nodded upon hearing Onion Knight’s answer, understanding his words fully. He rose up from his chair and began to move his joints, feeling the stiffness leave his body.

“So be it; I’ll see you when I take the witness stand tomorrow.” Squall concluded, turning away from Onion Knight and Terra. “We’re done here.”

Interrogation: Squall Leonhart ... SUCCESSFUL!

Squall left his seat and headed towards the door of the café without another word, his expression hidden from view. Onion Knight slumped on his seat just as Squall disappeared, giving out a large sigh of relief. Terra, on the other hand, sat silently, not knowing what to think. However, Onion Knight glanced over upon realising that they were still being watched by the surrounding crowd.

“Show is over, people!” He then raised his voice, a hint of irritation in his voice.

Instantly, the majority of the audience scattered from the café, going back to living their lives. Others hung about, either ordering from the various waiters and waitresses or finishing off their mugs of drink. Onion Knight turned to Terra as the feeling of eyes weighing him down finally left his mind.

“What do you reckon?” he asked her, noticing her silence.

“I don’t know ... there’s a large amount of history based on what Squall said but I don’t know whether

anything would clearly hint to him being a potential suspect.” Terra expressed with uncertainty, shaking her head lowly.

“I know what you mean, and it’s understandable considering there was a considerable amount to take in. However, I can assure you that this will all fall rightly into place.” Onion Knight nodded, a sign of confidence gleaming from the light of his eyes. “For starters, I saw you shiver when Squall spoke about Zidane and Bartz messing up. A reaction like that isn’t something that one could easily gloss over.” Terra’s eyes rose slightly, remembering the moment her reaction occurred. Although it was a concern, she couldn’t see that as a confirmation. Onion Knight then reached underneath the table, grasping onto an object that was locked against the underside of the table base. Unhooking it from its position, he revealed the device he had hidden prior to the confrontation with Squall and placed it on the table surface in front of them. The device was a Voice Recorder, the Record light blinking red to show that the entire conversation was saved securely in the device’s memory.

“With the new evidence and information Celes gave us yesterday and everything on this voice recorder; we have a strong chance to win this case.” Onion Knight grinned with motivation, refusing to allow Zidane to get the guilty verdict.

Terra anxiously smiled back, mixed emotions coursing through her mind ranging from uncertainty and worry to confident and trusting of her friend.

Just then, the door of the café sprung open, revealing two figures. They silently entered and directed themselves towards Onion Knight and Terra’s table. It wasn’t until the two stood over them when Onion Knight and Terra caught sight of them, both almost leaping up from their seats with fright.

“Wha – Firion!?” Onion Knight blurted in surprise, shocked to see him standing over them in healthy condition. “Are you feeling fine now?”

Firion, with no signs of injury or bandaging to be seen, nodded with a calm smile, “Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. By the way, look who I was able to come across during my travels.”

The second figure, casually hiding behind Firion, stepped to the side and revealed himself to the two. “Zidane!” Terra this time blurted out in surprise; both shocked and relieved to see him again and in safe condition after yesterday.

Zidane gave a small yet soulless grin in response, his eyes gazing to the floor below.

Later that day ...

Squall Leonhart stepped towards the sealed Dissidia Academy Entrance Gates, his hands in his pockets and his expression as dull as per norm. The sky was of a dusk setting, barely a cloud in the sky and the first signs of stars beginning to break through the red and orange. The trees were still, not a gust of wind in sight. Everything was quiet and motionless giving off a calm aura.

However it was then when three figures emerged before Squall, the first of whom being Warrior of Light. “How much were you able to discuss with him?” He questioned warily, hoping that Squall hadn’t revealed too much.

“Relax, I only told him what was necessary.” Squall reassured him; a long monotone sigh escaped his breath as he spoke.

“Good, there’s no need for unnecessary implications when the trial restarts tomorrow.” Warrior of Light accepted in relief, his tall posture easing ever so slightly.

“And what about you?” Squall then returned a question, curious to see his end. “Were you able to suitable evidence against Zidane?”

Warrior of Light nodded with a confident chuckle, “I have all the necessary ingredients to turn this trial on its head. Onion Knight’s chances of winning are diminishing.”

“What about them?” Squall followed up, noticing the two other figures stepping up closer into the light.

“Their testimonies are sufficient.” He answered firmly, showing no signs of wavering. “With you three as the key witnesses, there is no doubt in my mind that we’ll see Zidane receive the guilty verdict.”

The two now standing among both Squall and Warrior of Light glanced towards curiously, wondering what Warrior of Light’s plan would be.

One of them stood with a powerful yet elegant stance and held a tough unbreakable expression. A fellow and vocal member of the Student Council; Celes Chere was primed to testify.

The other stood rather tall and lean with a kind-hearted and trustful expression. A fellow classmate and friend within the group of Class 13A; Cecil Harvey was concerned for Zidane, yet was unable to hide the truth of what he saw that day any longer.

“Let the final battle for the truth commence.” Warrior of Light concluded, his pride shining brightly as the setting sun fell behind the horizon.

17 - Arc 3 (3): Curtains Up

Two days ago ...

“YOU'RE A WITNESS!?” Both Onion Knight and Terra Branford bellowed out in shock, almost leaping up from their seats.

Celes Chere had her fingers in her ears, having expected such a reaction from the two. The three were sitting on the circular bench situated around Crescent Lake; the surrounding atmosphere was close to quiet at this point in the day, only the natural sound of the local animal residence could be heard. The majority of visitors had either left for home or preoccupied themselves with where the sycamore tree had fallen over earlier in the day.

... At least this was the case before Celes announced to the two about her involvement in the court case.

“Could you two be any louder...?” Celes murmured with a sigh as she cautiously removed her fingers, relieved that her ears weren't ringing. “Yes ... I am officially a witness to Rydia's Assault case.”

The two both gazed in surprise, mouths gaped and eyes wide open. Celes felt a shiver run up her spine, feeling as though she committed some sort of offence based on the reactions given.

“H-how is that possible?” Onion Knight questioned hesitantly, struggling to comprehend this sudden turn of events. “You were at the council meeting when the incident occurred, it wouldn't have been possible for you to see it happen.”

Celes shook her head in dismissal, “I assure you, what I saw is eligible to the case.”

“And, what was it that you saw, Celes ...?” Terra asked somewhat cautiously, showing some rare aggression in her tone.

Celes paused, biting the inside of her lip as though she was beating herself up over the matter. It was like invisible metallic chains were wrapped around her body, holding her down and preventing her from speaking her mind. Onion Knight noticed her inner restraint, his gaze sharpening and his body tensing up. Terra's breath began to draw heavily, channelling Celes' frustrations.

“I ... I'm sorry. I-I can't say.” Celes shook her head as she grounded her teeth, disappointed in herself. “Warrior of Light found me before I could get to you, and so placed me under a contractual agreement. I cannot reveal my testimony to anyone until I stand in court, and any potential evidence I had in relation to the case is now under his custody.”

Just like that, Onion Knight's life drained away, his disheartened body slumping against the table like a lifeless corpse. Both Celes and Terra watched him lower in his grief, glancing towards one other with uncertain expression.

Clenching his fists, Onion Knight began to grumble, “I can't believe this ... so he's now a few step ahead of us ... this is EXACTLY what we need right now.”

There was a moment of silence during Onion Knight's grovelling, no one able to break through this unsightly tone set upon them. With Onion Knight's depressed aura, Terra was desperate to lighten the tone, yet struggled to find a satisfying solution. This was the case, until ...

“... What if I were to tell you there's a small loophole with Warrior of Light's 'agreement'?” Celes muttered with an abrupt yet cunning smirk, acting as though she was a bright light that swept away the looming darkness.

Onion Knight's head darted up from his initial gloom to an alerted attention, hope springing back inside him in an instant. Terra watched curiously, wondering what Celes had to say.

“You see, my agreement with Warrior of Light was to specifically not speak a word about the detail of

my testimony nor the evidence I submitted into Warrior of Light's custody." Celes reiterated to them, however worded it as though this was now some sort of riddle. "... However, the agreement never specified the evidence I 'have yet' to submit."

A light gasp escaped Onion Knight's breath in anticipation, the realisation of this 'loophole' clicking in. Terra was also swift to realise this 'loophole', however was unsure about this revelation.

"Celes ... does this mean you purposefully concealed evidence from Warrior of Light?" Terra cautiously questioned, her eyes sharpening as she spoke her mind.

Celes paused before answering, considering the approach to her answer. She knew how aware Terra could be based on the amount of time they have known each other, and so was careful not to hide anything from her.

"I wouldn't word it in such a way, but ... yes." Celes admitted, swaying her answer.

In that instant, before either Onion Knight or – especially – Terra could object to such a reckless decision, Celes placed a hand up to halt them in their tracks. She was fully aware of the legality and morality of temporarily withholding evidence from the prosecution and the court, and so didn't need the unnecessary lecture. Onion Knight and Terra stayed firm on their seats, holding back their urge to speak for the time being.

"Please understand my reasoning, you two." Celes requested, before continuing on. "I handed over some of the evidence in my possession to Warrior of Light, as he had requested under his agreement. They were small, but they were suitable enough. However, I couldn't allow Warrior of Light to see the remainder of the evidence as it would have swayed the case far too much in his favour. I'm not going to take sides ... but I'd prefer for a fair trial, as I'm sure we can all agree on."

Onion Knight fell silent as he took her words in for consideration, he understood her reasoning and was certainly grateful, yet part of him was uncertain due to the legality and morality of the situation. Terra seemed to sway more towards the morally correct answer; however he couldn't let such an opportunity pass him by.

"... and besides, I never said that I 'wouldn't' submit the remaining evidence to Warrior of Light." Celes then decided to add, just to round out any holes in her explanation.

"That's all fine; you've made your point clear." Onion Knight responded immediately, his eyes lit up with anticipation. "If possible, could you show us the evidence?"

Celes nodded without another word, reaching underneath the table. There, leant against one of the bench legs, was a designer pouch bag. What emerged after were several photographs, some were of identical images yet focused in on various angles. In addition was a singular silver earring, slightly marked and scratched.

Celes displayed the evidence across the circular table, laid clearly in front of both Onion Knight and Terra. The two glanced over the new evidence with gradual inspection, eyes wide as they scanned each image. Celes sat back and watched them unravel their minds, giving off the sense that new pathways were opening.

From what the two gathered, the photos consisted of 3 core areas: the first was an open window, seeming skewed and yanked apart; the second was a damaged blazer stuffed in one of the Academy cupboards, small holes and opening breaking through the fabric as if punctured or forcefully ripped; the third and final were spots of blood and small strands of brown and green hair scattered among the floor of the room. Moving onto the silver earring, as what was initially seen, the small markings and scratches were certainly evident. Onion Knight began to peer closer, analysing the bead-like jewellery from all angles. Nothing else could be seen standing out from this position, however there were indications that seemed to prove this earring was certainly worn recently.

"Where were these taken?" Terra was first to speak up, still concentrating on the photos.

"I took them in Laboratory Room 1, 5th floor of the Academy." Celes answered with honesty, her arms

crossed.

Onion Knight's focus shifted in an instant, his expression lighting up with sudden surprise.

"That's only along the hall from the Food Tech room and the Art Studios!" He exclaimed, the new information in his mind bouncing everywhere.

"That's right." Celes nodded, although that wasn't what she had in mind. "However, more importantly ... it's almost directly above the 4th floor's Math's Room 3."

"How were you able to find these, Celes?" Onion Knight questioned intensely, unable to grasp the possibility of just stumbling on these.

There was another pause, Celes calming her mind before she began her answer.

"After Friday's Court Trial, when everyone left for home, I decided to do some of my own digging." She admitted, somewhat hesitant of her answer. "I cannot say much, but I can admit that it was in relation to my testimony on how I was able to find these."

Onion Knight felt his teeth clench, frustrated on the whole 'agreement' ordeal Warrior of Light seemed to have implemented. However, brushing past such nuisance, he switched back to the evidence at hand. His fingers tapping against the bench table as he continued analysing. However, a question of concern formed just as he oversaw the photos.

"Are original evidence in the photos still in the room?" He wondered to Celes, glancing up at her curiously.

"I left them just the way they were when I took the photos." Celes answered instantly, giving a light shrug. "I didn't want to tamper with the evidence, so the original blazer and the strands of hair should still be in the room."

A combination of alarm and uncertainty suddenly crossed Onion Knight's mind at the moment. Terra noticed his uncertainty in an instant, glancing up from the photos.

"How likely do you reckon they would still be there now...?" Onion Knight lowly murmured, indicating that he already assumed the worst possible outcome. "In fact, why leave it there in the first place?"

"That would depend on the person – or people – that you're dealing with here." Celes answered for him. "You would assume they wouldn't be foolish enough to forget something so vital. That being said, they could have left it there on purpose as a means of a controlled or false trail."

"That wouldn't make much sense." Terra decided to speak her mind at that point, "Surely the culprit would want to hide such crucial evidence."

Onion Knight shook his head, "Not necessarily, there is a strong possibility that this culprit is toying with us; otherwise they would have disposed of the blazer by now and hidden those traces of evidence. To them, this is a simple crude game."

Terra and Celes kept silent at that point, thinking about this entire ordeal.

Onion Knight switched topic slightly, a thought appearing just as he spoke, "There are no signs of Rydia's Hair Ornament in the photos. Celes, were you able to spot anything regarding the missing ornament?"

Celes shook her head glumly, "No luck there, I'm afraid. I checked everywhere in that Lab thoroughly, but this was all I could gather."

Onion Knight sighed, figuring as much. However, Terra wasn't convinced. Something had caught her eye among the various photos yet she couldn't quite place her figure on it. She glanced back to the photos, her eyes focused as she drowned out the world around her. Onion Knight followed her gaze, wondering what caught her attention.

"These hairs ..." Terra murmured, pinpointing the specific photos that caught her attention. "Something seems off with them."

Onion Knight and Celes both peered over the photos of the hairs and spots of blood, analysing where Terra was indicating. The two couldn't see the issue, glancing both at the photos and at Terra with

confused expressions. However, it was then when a question came to Onion Knight's mind: *Why were these hairs on the 5th Floor of the Academy when the actual incident had occurred on the 4th floor?*

Just at that moment, Terra perked up in sudden alert, finally finding the abnormality of the photos.

"Zidane's hair and tail fur are missing in these photos." Terra confided with the two, tapping her finger. "We found his tail fur amongst the other hairs in the room where the incident occurred, yet it's missing here."

A sudden gasp escaped Onion Knight's breath, noticing what Terra was referring towards. Peering over the photos as to what felt like the thousandth time, Onion Knight was able to reflect upon what they had found during their investigation at the crime scene. This new revelation, along with his previous question on the positioning of the hairs, caused Onion Knight's mind to open with new questions and possibilities.

"This is the evidence we need." Onion Knight declared with revived confidence, "As long as we can distinguish that these photos were shot on the 5th Floor, it will be a compelling enough argument against Zidane's guilty verdict and is guaranteed to throw Warrior of Light off his game."

"How will we be able to do that?" Terra wondered somewhat warily, knowing the photos alone would be too vague to prove as legitimate evidence.

"All you would need is a source to link the photos with the scene, something that I can do fairly easily." Celes answered with pride, a grin forming as she spoke.

Terra couldn't help but smile back, knowing her long-time friend all too well. One of Celes' many charms was her resourcefulness and the pride that embodied her. If a certain situation was to arise, her first priority would always be to cover every related aspect possible before finding the solution. In the past, Terra had been saved by Celes' prideful initiative on various occurrences.

With that, Celes rose from her seat, feeling that their small meeting was reaching its climax. Onion Knight and Terra gathered up the new evidence, compiling the photos together in a bundle and placing the marked earring in a clear pouch.

"You two can keep the photos and the earring in preparation for the court trial." She then ushered to the two, "I'll print updated copies with marked citations for validation."

Terra was the first to respond, shifting from the table to embrace her friend with absolute gratitude,

"Thank you, Celes. Your help means so much to us; I don't think we'll be able to repay you enough."

"Well, I'm just happy to serve my part in this whole fiasco." Celes sighed with a light grin, returning the embrace.

She then turned to Onion Knight, who approached her with a confident expression that she could relate to.

"So, it seems that the next time we'll meet will be on the court stand, if not before." He coolly shrugged, making light of the situation.

Celes nodded back. However, just as she did, her expression dropped in an instant. It seemed as though a thought crossed her mind, one crucial enough to change the environment within a drop of a hat. Onion Knight caught this shift in atmosphere, his gaze sharpening to a cautious glare.

"Just a few words of warning before I take my leave ..." Celes began to caution him, deciding to speak her mind. "When you take the Defence stand, Warrior of Light will use every trick and strategy up his sleeve to overpower you. He's become even more ruthless than ever in order to prove Zidane's guilt."

Onion Knight tensed up, his teeth grounded and his hands clenched. He knew Warrior of Light's inhumane determination was sending the fool over the edge of his own ego, however to hear this from Celes made Onion Knight process the challenge that was set waiting to confront him.

However, what Celes was about to say next would haunt Onion Knight for the remaining days leading up towards the definitive court trial.

"In addition to that ... Squall Leonhart will be testifying against Zidane." She muttered, the serious aura

completely engulfing her. "Keep your wits about you, Onion Knight; Squall is hiding many truths under that lone wolf guise of his. Come court day, he'll be your most dangerous opponent."

Present day – Monday 17th September (8:10am) ...

Onion Knight stood amongst the crowd of chattering students at the centre of Dissidia Academy's grounds, gazing off into the far abyss. His mind in a complete trance, Onion Knight was completely oblivious of his surroundings. His thoughts were engulfed with recapping the progression of the court case and mentally preparing what he was soon to face.

Some of the students around him were occasionally glancing towards his direction, wondering why he was standing so idle. A few were even whispering to one another about his dazed appearance, wondering if the upcoming trial was triggering his nerves. In general, there were mixed emotions generating within the groups of students: some were exhilarated for the trial, raring to see how the intense drama would continue to unfold; others were more critical, either picking sides in relation to who would win between Onion Knight or Warrior of Light or finding this whole state of affairs ridiculous to say the least. Even the weather surrounding the Academy was mixed; dark, rain-bearing clouds passing overhead with small breakages of sunlight.

Just then, a whispering voice chanted Onion Knight's name from the depths of his mind, gradually growing louder as each second passed.

"... Onion Knight ... Onion Knight." The low voice whispered on, the origin of the voice somewhat familiar. Onion Knight stayed frozen in his vacant trance, sighing away.

"O-Knight ... O-Knight ...!" The voice called out in a louder tone, trying desperately to get his attention.

Yet there was still no answer, Onion Knight completely oblivious to the voice that called for him.

There was then a small pause, the world around Onion Knight falling into blissful silence.

... And yet, this moment of peace could never be realty.

"OI, LUNETH! WAKE UP ALREADY!" The voice bellowed out in frustration, finally losing patience.

Onion Knight snapped back to reality, his eyes wide and alert. With the surrounding world back in his sights, his eyes were met with the first image of this familiar world.

"Wha...? – WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!" Onion Knight screamed at the top of his lungs, his entire body leaping back in fright.

Due to the sheer momentum of his leap, Onion Knight stumbled and collided against the stubbly concrete ground below him. No pain was felt as he hit the ground, his eyes frozen in place as he stared at the cause of his abrupt horror. The surrounding academy students had turned and watched his melodramatic reaction with completely bewildered expressions, unable to grasp the reason behind the sudden outburst.

That was the case, until they too saw it ...

There, standing directly in front where Onion Knight once stood, was the face of absolute nightmares: A face widely stretched to its limits; the entirety of its teeth bare as one enormous grin; bloodshot eyes blank and completely dead inside; its body standing idle with arms and legs solidified like a statue; and finally, an engulfing aura that sucked the soul out of its victims. The fact that this was directly, almost nose-to-nose, in front of Onion Knight made the whole situation worse.

This grotesque 'thing' would have been completely unrecognisable ... if not for the swishing blonde-furred tail.

"W-What in the name of ... Z-Zidane!?" Onion Knight blurted out, struggling to speak with his heart racing at such a ferocious pace.

Zidane stood motionless, his forced back grotesque face evidently being held by a pair of hands either side of his head. Many of the surrounding students had jumped back in fright, almost in similar fashion to

Onion Knight's own reaction. Others, having noticed these reactions occur, held the terrified students in place so they would keep their balance and even consciousness.

However, it was then when Onion Knight caught sight of the 'true' culprit of this disturbing display, having realised that Zidane was only being used as a tragic object.

"Wow ... that wasn't the reaction I was expecting at all." Bartz admitted in honesty, appearing from behind Zidane with a somewhat concerned yet disappointed expression. "I thought you would get a kick out of Zidane's 'Happy-Face'."

The entire school grounds fell dead silent, even the sounds breezing winds and the chirping birds had disappeared ...

"... Bartz ..." Onion Knight murmured with an eerie tone, his head lowered and eyes out of view.

Bartz's expression dropped, his senses suddenly warning him of trouble brewing in the air. He stood frozen in place, droplets of sweat sliding down his skin as he continued to hold Zidane's face in position.

"Y-yes, Lune – Ah! I mean ... err ... Onion Knight?" Bartz stuttered in fear, finally realising the consequences of his actions.

Abruptly, Bartz felt his entire body get thrown off of his feet, his body crashing against the ground with a large *Thump!* He was able to release his hold on Zidane's face just before he was lifted from the ground, causing Zidane's warped appearance to reverse back to normal. Zidane was in a world of his own, just as Onion Knight had been not long previous, and was completely oblivious to what was occurring just behind him.

Onion Knight had rugby-tackled Bartz to the ground, towering over him with a solid grasp on his collar. His eyes were wild with uncontrollable fury; pupils lit up like a fiery flame as though a raging animal from within had escaped from its leash. Students began to surround them, watching this peculiar display unfold in the centre of the Academy Grounds.

"NOT ONLY DO YOU SPOUT MY REAL NAME IN PUPLIC WITHOUT MY PERMISSION, YOU ALSO DECIDE TO SCARE ME AND SEVERAL OTHERS HALF-TO-DEATH!" Onion Knight roared out, his grip around Bartz's collar tightening. "IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO PERISH, BARTZ KLAUSER!"

"Eek!" Bartz whimpered, closing his eyes shut and bracing for impact. "I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'M SORRY, ONION KNIGHT!"

However, just as Onion Knight was about to lay down his wrath upon the whimpering Bartz, a hand had grasped his wrist. He was pulled away against his will, distancing himself from Bartz.

"Onion Knight, stop!" Terra called to him, hoping to put some sense back into his mind, "You can't just go and start lashing out on Bartz! We don't need both you and him in trouble with the teachers, especially as we already have enough on our plates with the court case right now!"

Terra Branford had seen the commotion – and, on a side-note, heard Onion Knight's scream of horror – centring the grounds of the Academy. After struggling to break through the choking crowd, she caught Onion Knight kneeling over Bartz as he was about to land a blow. Without even needing to think, she intervened just before the situation grew worse.

Onion Knight brushed her grasp away from his wrist, glancing away in scorn as he fixed his uniform. After what seemed like a large number of inaudible mumbles, he decided to argue his reasoning in a prideful manner.

"I don't see the issue." Onion Knight grumbled back to her, giving a pouting shrug. "Was there not a new rule embedded by the Academy recently stating that: 'It is allowed for students and staff to punish Blartz Klauser whenever he was to commit to something moronic'?"

"I'VE NEVER HEARD OF THIS!" Bartz abruptly protested to the two, finding such a ruling ludicrous and contrived.

... He was ignored.

Terra sighed, finding this entire situation ridiculous. With crossed arms, she attempted to rationalise the

“Sleeping is such a waste of time! I mean, come on, how are you meant to get anything done if you sleep constantly the day away? Such an overrated concept, I say!”

Cloud groaned lowly, not even bothering to correct Tidus on his severely flawed statement. Another yawn escaping him, Cloud gazed off into the distance as he followed alongside his eccentric friend. Not far behind Cloud Strife and Tidus was Warrior of Light, keeping up his usual tough stride and posture as he stepped on towards the Class 13A’s destination. That being said, his mind seemed to be elsewhere, not speaking a word to anyone else as he seemed to be focused on the ‘crucial’ event that has yet to come. Directly behind were Firion and Cecil Harvey, discussing casually about the weekend passed and the drama revolving around the upcoming court trial. Onion Knight and Bartz Klauser followed on from behind, as also did the currently zoned-out Zidane Tribal and a hidden away Terra Branford. Finally, straggling at the very back of the group was Squall Leonhart, his hands deep in his pockets and his constant uncaring tone as clear as day.

“Actually, why DID you force Zidane to make that grotesque ‘happy-face’?” Onion Knight began to wonder, realising he had not found the reason behind Bartz’s odd idea.

Bartz hesitated, finding his words. Onion Knight raised an eyebrow in curiosity, noticing the hesitant pause.

“W-well, you see, with everyone in such a serious and dull mood because of the ‘assault incident’ – especially you and Zidane – I thought it would be nice to add some positive touches into the mix.” Bartz admitted to him, nervously biting the inside of his lip as he spoke. “With Zidane in such a daze this morning, I was rather desperate and wanted to see his crafty smile once again.”

“Really ... THAT is your reason?” Onion Knight murmured, eyeing Bartz with a critical glare.

“Come on, man, give me a break.” Bartz then lightly pleaded, tired of being given such scornful looks from people. “I didn’t mean to screw up like that; seriously, I did it with good intentions.”

“Is that so ... with ‘good intentions’ you say.” Onion Knight lowly teased back, a half-baked grin forming his lips. “Well, if it was part of your oh-so ‘good nature’ or not, the one you should apologise to right now is walking directly behind us.”

Bartz felt his heart melt with guilt, knowing exactly what Onion Knight was referring to. Ever since the earlier morning’s sudden ‘light explosion’, Terra had kept her distance far from the rest of Class 13A. The sheer amount of embarrassment caused her mind to cave in on itself and forced her into a timid shell of her usual self. Hiding behind her group of classmates, she was barely able to cope with the overwhelming humiliation that was drilled deep within her mind.

Onion Knight felt sorry for her predicament, knowing it would be a while until she would be able to return to her former self. Bartz, on the other hand, didn’t know what to do; he was constantly racking his brain in order to find a solution to Terra’s timid condition. Yet, no matter what came to mind, he felt far too aware of the negative implications any of his wild ideas could have to the rest of the class, let alone Terra herself. He was burnt out completely, hoping for a miracle.

However, as they fell silent approaching their classroom, Music Room 1, an unexpected voice suddenly perked up.

“Man, why are my cheeks throbbing so much?” Zidane wondered to himself, soothing his aching cheeks as he walked.

Bartz was the first to whip his head around, his eyes lighting up with sudden glee. Onion Knight turned not long behind, surprise hitting him. Zidane glanced back with confusion, wondering why they were giving him such odd expressions.

“Back from the world of dreams, I see.” Onion Knight chuckled out, amused by his abrupt return to reality

“Hmm, yeah, I guess you could say that.” Zidane pondered the thought, lightly scratching his chin. Beaming with an enthusiastic grin that could rival Tidus, Bartz strode beside his ‘partner in crime’ with

renewed confidence.

“Ah-hahaa! See, Onion Knight, I knew my plan would work!” Bartz chuckled away, becoming all sure of himself.

“What plan ...?” Zidane questioned his friend, struck completely confused.

Onion Knight gave a low, exhausted sigh, “If that was a part of your plan, Bartz, then it was certainly delayed.”

However, Onion Knight then switched to Zidane, deciding to shift topic.

“So, why were you in such a daze, Zidane?” Onion Knight queried his classmate, curious to see what was going on lately in that mind of his. “Was the upcoming court trial getting to you?”

Zidane tilted his head side to side as he answered back, “Sort of, it’s a bit of a combination between that and ...”

“And what?” Onion Knight echoed, wary of the pause.

Taking a deep breath, Zidane finished his answer, “... And what is just about to start.”

Onion Knight’s gaze sharpened cautiously as he heard Zidane’s answer, wondering what he would mean by such a phrase. As he turned his sights back towards the front, he realised the class had reached their destination.

In front of them was a singular door, just like any other door in the Academy. Situated at the centre was a nameplate, read as ‘Music Theatre 1’. It seemed to be modified version of the usual nameplates situated around the Academy, this change based on the shift from the simple ‘Room’ to a supposed ‘Theatre’. The Class was sceptical at first, thinking it was some sort of ruse to make the lesson sound ‘unique’.

Oh, how they were wrong.

Warrior of Light took lead, reaching out towards the handle of the room. However, just before he could make contact, the door clicked open on its own. The students glanced amongst one another with confusion, having no clue what to expect when they were to walk passed this door.

All except Zidane, his body tensed and ready.

“Guys ... cover your ears.” He warned the group.

His fellow classmates returned with a combined ‘Huh?’, yet they didn’t have to wait for a reason. Just then, as the door creaked fully open, an orchestrated sound of a church organ began to rise. What followed were more of the same instrument, in unison with the same note, only at different pitches. It was an odd sensation, feeling as though these combined instruments were ready for the class to make their next move

Warrior of Light stepped through, deciding not to hold off any longer. The rest followed in his footsteps, wary of this omniscient feeling that grew inside each of them. Zidane held back from the rest slightly, placing his fingers in the ears before taking the one step further.

The entire class was struck with sudden awe, observing their new surroundings with inspiration and wonder in their eyes. It truly looked like a music theatre! Directly in front were enclosed red and gold velvet curtains, surrounded by curving polished desks. The walls and ceiling were all decorated with a uniquely themed background, giving off the impression of the clear night sky with the hundreds of numerous glinting star shards and dark blue sky. In addition to this, there were surround sound speakers engulfing the top corners of the walls, linked up ready to deliver a world of sounds. And finally, situated behind the desks, was an enormous pipe organ, towering over the class with its rising rows of metallic pipes.

The class took their designated seats, eyes darting everywhere as they found name tags on their desks. Taking in the wondrous view, they all perched on their seats, placing bags down ready to set up for the lesson.

It was then when the shock of their lives struck them, as the organ began to play a more elevated,

fast-paced track. The engulfing sounds set the stage, as a singular being descended from the heavens above. The man, hovering without a single string attached, smoothly landed on the stage without a sound whatsoever from his rather distinct, buckled black boots. He had an effeminate, sleek appearance, his long silver hair flowing with such grace and attention to presentation. Unlike the usual yet simple styled suits of the other teachers in the Academy, this teacher took on a form of his own design, perfectly complete with a light robe and long sleeves lengthened over his arms like a pair of white, angelic wings.

As his head rose up, his pale complexion and light blue eyes glistened against the lights of the stars dangling from above. One could consider such care of appearance as overbearing, however the teacher preferred to use the term as 'dedication to the art of Music'.

The teacher chuckled out loud with a prideful tone, bowing to his subjects as though he was a conductor of an orchestra. Gazing towards his new students, the teacher began to clap his hands together in time with the organ. He held his arms outwards, showing off the full extent of his appearance and his adoration for music.

"Class 13A, I welcome thee to the beautiful World of Music." The teacher began his much-prepared introduction, small chuckles escaping as he spoke out. "I, your ever so invincible Conductor Kuja, shall direct you through the magnificent utopia of sounds, symphonies and melodies."

Just then, the velvet curtain rose from behind Kuja, revealing a wall of blinding light. He pointed towards his audience, a cunning grin displaying as he directed his next line.

"Now then ... It's time to begin our show!"

18 - Arc 3 (3): Breaking Point

Zidane's eyes were shut tight, his mind empty and heart beating at a gradual pace. His imagination began to flow through like a fluid stream, following the sounds of his surroundings. Within a mere instant, the blank canvas of his mind evolved into an entire world. In this realm, he was a peace, not a threat of interruption in sight. No faults, no accusations made against him, no chains that held him back from his freedom ... this world was the utopia that Zidane desired.

His imagination continued to progress and evolve as the tune continued to flow through his mind, never-ending scenes of various memories and dreams appearing clear as day. His various cunning pranks, both successful and failed, played out like a continuous sequence, his expression in every scene full of laughter and amusement as he continued his play of tricks and banter.

In the aftermath of each prank, his cheerful smirk could be seen next to his partner in crime, Bartz. The two stood tall and proud, taking in the onslaught of words cast upon them by the teachers; their light frustrations understandable yet an odd joy to see, as though expecting them to continue their typical nonsense no matter the cost. It was his life to enjoy, and he refused to let it slip by him.

This was the majesty of music, the sensation of tranquillity welcoming him with open arms. Zidane took this opportunity with a warm embrace, all his problems washing away into the flowing stream and wiping his slate clean.

Nothing could ruin this moment ...

"Tell me, Zidane, does the music 'trance' your mind? Are you 'bewitched' by its omnipotent power?" ... the moment was ruined.

The echoing voice, filled with circling chuckles, broke the immersion in an instant, like a fragile glass bubble shattering in millions of tiny pieces. To add salt to the wound, the pieces dissolved into the abyss, reverting Zidane's mind back to the initial, boring, blank canvass.

Before he knew it, he had returned to the detestable reality that judged him eternally, never allowing him a moment of peace and joy he longed for.

"It did ... until your voice broke the immersion." Zidane murmured in disappointment, avoiding eye contact with a disgusted pout.

"*Gasp...!* You've betrayed my fragile heart, Zidane!"

Standing before him, his stance as graceful and flamboyant as one could ever be, was his music tutor: Conductor Kuja. Having heard his student's blunt remark, he had abruptly staggered back in shock, his mouth gaping as he drew out a repulsive expression. He then turned away with haste, bitterly hiding his sulk from Zidane. He refused to let such disrespect slip by him so easily, thinking of a cunning retort.

Zidane stared at his tutor with an unimpressed gaze, feeling that the overreaction was rather unnecessary. With a sigh, he sat back on his seat as he tried to listen to the tune once again in peace, balancing himself on the back legs of his chair. However, he couldn't seem to regain the trance that engulfed his mind earlier, the thoughts of the situation he was currently in taking president over everything else.

Conductor Kuja floated away from Zidane's desk at this point, deciding it was pointless to hold the grudge. Instead he continued to oversee the other students of Class 13A, watching each of them as they enter their ideal inner paradise. It was intriguing for Kuja to imagine what worlds each student had fallen into thanks to the surrounding music entering their ears.

Zidane also casually glanced over towards a few of his fellow classmates, all of whom had their eyes shut. He first caught an eye of Warrior of Light, whose posture was as stoic as ever and expression

locked with his constant serious tone. He then shifted to Onion Knight, who seemed to have a more calculative expression, as though he was cracking codes and figuring out various puzzles. He continued to peer over to each classmate, curiously attempting to figure what they were imagining based on appearance. From Firion's peaceful smile, to Cecil's more romanticized aura, and then to Terra's more free-like wonder; Zidane couldn't help but feel just as fascinated as Kuja.

... And then there was Cloud and Bartz, both of whom had fallen asleep face down on their desks. It seemed that Cloud, being the tired soul that he always was, had once again given into his dream state after a valiant fight. Bartz, on the other hand, had noticed Cloud dozing off and decided it would be fun to copy him by placing his head on the desk as well, only to actually fall asleep immediately after. Shaking his head in a typical manner, Zidane's intrigue continued regardless ... until his gaze stopped at Squall.

Zidane didn't know what to think upon seeing his friend, feeling the intimidating aura that engulfed him as he just sat there. His arms crossed and giving a constant scowl, it was as though something was troubling him more so than ever. Zidane considered the various options causing this: maybe it was just the usual frustrations; it could be relating the recent news relating of his Father's proposed play; or possibly, and the most likely scenario, it was about the next upcoming trial.

His body gradually slid back on his seat, a sudden yet familiar weight beginning to overbear Zidane. He wanted nothing more than to stand up against the pressure, proving his innocence. And yet, every single time he tried, something was dragging him back, like metaphorical chains binding him and preventing his escape. His body tense and knuckles clenched up, Zidane continued to fight back even though he knew it was useless.

Then, out of nowhere, Class 13A heard an erupting *Clap!* echo the music theatre. The music halted, its entrancing allure dissipating in an instant. Each class member opened their eyes with a fright, reality hitting them like a ton of bricks. Cloud and Bartz woke in a terrified fright, leaping back on their seats ...

"No-no-no-NOOO!!!"

"AAAHH!!!"

... and falling to the floor with a humongous *CRASH!*

All eyes were now on Conductor Kuja, his cunning grin shining proud, as he rose up on stage.

"Now then, welcome back to reality, one and all." Kuja voice chuckling as it engulfed the room, his eyes assessing the class. "I hope the journey in the depths of your minds was enjoyable, I can certainly say mine was. However, each journey must come to an end and in turn, we shall reflect upon our experiences. But first, could anyone suggest to me as to what purpose this activity serves?"

Some of the classmates glanced towards one another with uncertain expressions, wondering how to answer their tutor's question. Warrior of Light, as expected, was the first to put his hand up, entirely certain about his answer. Kuja gracefully pointed to the Class President, awaiting his answer with anticipation.

"It's to show us how effective and influential music can be to our psyche and wellbeing." He answered confidently, a smug grin escaping him.

"Yes, that is a statement I wholeheartedly support." Kuja accepted passionately, "... However, there is another aspect to it than simply personal influence."

It was then Onion Knight's hand shot up, refusing to allow the arising opportunity to escape his grasp. Kuja indicated to him the moment the hand was up, curious to hear the opposing answer. Warrior of Light glared towards his rivalling classmate, finding his immediate contribution rather predictable.

"Music is a crucial form of art." Onion Knight began to explain, expanding his mind outside the box.

"Whilst it can influence one personally, it is a mandatory aspect to our culture as a whole. No one would be able to go anywhere without hearing music; no matter the occasion, music brings the necessary life into any scenario."

“Hm-hm-hmm ... Oh, right you are, Onion Knight!” Kuja then announced with joy, pleased to hear such a committed answer. “Music is literally everywhere! It is pinnacle for music to be implemented in our everyday media: our movies, games, on TV, along with many, many others. Not only that, but we have concerts, gigs, orchestra, and other dedicated forms that continue in revolutionizing the art of music. You could even suggest that the atmospheric sounds of nature or ‘lack of’ sound entirely is still considered Music. Yes, Music is ART! (... Regardless of one certain ‘Art’ teacher’s rather blunt disapproval.) And so, I believe we must embrace it as such.”

Onion Knight sat chilled on his seat, a cocky grinning on him as he bashed in his accomplishment. Warrior of Light’s eyes rolled in frustration, clicking his tongue at Onion Knight’s continuous arrogance in attempting to one-up him no matter the subject. Terra, who was sitting directly behind Onion Knight, couldn’t help but smirk at the rivalry; finding that it was refreshing to see the two compete in a more casual environment in comparison to the constantly serious court trial.

The class began to comment and chatter among each other, seemingly suggesting other particular sights where they felt music was a pinnacle aspect or helped liven up the atmosphere. However, Conductor Kuja held up a finger to his pursed lips, indicating to the class to be silent. The class stopped in an instant, gazing towards their tutor in wonder of what he was about to say next.

“That being said, it is important to recognize the ‘depths’ of music and how it affects us more personally, just as our dear Warrior of Light rightly suggested.” He exclaimed sincerely, acting more solemnly than what was initially perceived. “For you see, music can certainly influence us and allow our imaginations flow, just as what we were experiencing in the earlier activity. However, it is also there to help us in our time of need. There are times in our lives when we may feel down on ourselves ...”

Zidane’s expression perked up ...

“We may feel frustrated on reaching our goals or objectives ...”

Onion Knight and Warrior of Light watched with genuine eyes ...

“We may feel pain in watching our close friends or loved ones suffer ...”

Bartz’s shoulders slumped, his eyes drooping ...

“We may even feel the world around us is sometimes too much to bear.”

Terra and Squall froze in their seats, listening intently ...

“Those are the times were we must break away and escape from reality; allow music to cast us into our imaginative minds, and one we are ready ... we can finally return to the world renewed.”

Every single member of Class 13A sat in silence, unable to speak as their thoughts took in Kuja’s words momentarily. Time stopped, allowing those to process their feelings and come to their own conclusions. Zidane sat staring towards the blank surface of his desk, realising how refreshed he was when he exited his imagination after listening to the music being played.

The question dawned upon him at that moment: Would music be able to break the stigma that held him back?

End of Lesson – 10:00am ...

Zidane disappeared out of the music theatre, along with Bartz by his side and the majority of Class 13A. Onion Knight and Terra followed the group from behind, mentally preparing themselves for their next lesson: English. Conductor Kuja was casually perched cross-legged from the stage, watching the class leave. However, noticing Onion Knight and Terra about to pass through the door, he decided now was the best opportunity to speak to them.

“Oh! Onion Knight. Terra Branford. A word, if I may?” Kuja hastily called them out, leaping off from his seated position.

The two halted, switching to their Music tutor with curious glances. Kuja approached them, hovering

over like he was on a cloud.

“No need to worry, I only wish to speak to the both of you briefly.” Kuja assured them, getting the impression that the two were oblivious to the reason that they were called for. “It’s to do with Zidane’s current predicament.”

Onion Knight and Terra glanced at one another, wondering to each other on what Kuja wished to say. “There was a specific reason as to why I conducted this particular lesson today.” Kuja began, his arms crossed as he spoke. “You see, I have been watching your conquest on the Rydia case and it has occurred to me that the pressure is affecting not only yourselves and the rest of your class, but also the academy as a whole. It is a trying time, that’s for certain. Most notably, Zidane’s not acting like his usual self: always spacing out, looking down in the dumps, and ultimately there is just no fun in him like there normally would be. There is no doubt in my mind, based on his expression alone, that he is innocent.”

Terra nodded as he listened to the conductor, agreeing committedly to his comments. Onion Knight dittoed his classmate’s expression, yet wondered if there was a deeper connection than just a ‘teacher’s concern for their favourite pupil’.

“So, with that in mind, the lesson was to assess Zidane’s thought process whilst also giving him a much desired reprieve.” Kuja continued on, “It certainly was fascinating seeing his eyes lit up like it did, proving that there is certainly a way to crack whatever was holding him back. However, music can only do so much for the brain, and whatever Zidane is still hiding will take a lot more willpower than one alone could summon. So, I call upon the both of you, Onion Knight and Terra, to do everything you can and finally bring justice to this case. It would mean the world to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Terra agreed immediately, reassuring that the two of them will finish successfully.

Onion Knight was next to respond, “We shall, Conductor Kuja.” Yet, as he spoke his mind, something else crept up that he was unsure whether to address.

Kuja’s nodded with a small chuckle, yet his eyes sharpened on Onion Knight, reading him like a book.

“What seems to be on your mind?” He questioned curiously.

“Hm...? Oh, it’s nothing important.” Onion Knight shrugged off in reply. “It’s just ... what is your relation to Zidane; if you don’t mind me asking, sir?”

Kuja watched him silently, as though analysing him. Onion Knight felt a shiver run up his spine, feeling somewhat conscious of the Music tutor peering over him.

“Such details are classified.” He then answered; deciding now wasn’t the time to reveal. “All I am willing to say is that ... well, he is someone close to me.”

Onion Knight nodded in acceptance, followed by both he and Terra taking their leave from the music theatre. Kuja continued to watch them as they exited the room, his expression unreadable.

Onion Knight and Terra passed through the corridor of the Academy’s 2nd floor, following it around towards the staircase. As always, Onion Knight was deep within his thoughts, continuing to attempt piecing together the case revolving the incident. Terra walked in silence, also deep in her thoughts. However, Terra was reciting Conductor Kuja’s words both during his speech in the lesson and what he had told them later on, feeling as though his words had somewhat struck a chord with her.

Then, the moment the two reached the staircase, Terra returned to reality with one core question on her mind.

“So, what’s our next move?” She enquired to Onion Knight, hoping he had a plan of action before their inevitable showdown at the court trial later in the day.

Onion Knight paused, allowing his thoughts to settle, before answering. The two began climbing the steps towards the 3rd floor, where their English lesson with Garland awaits.

“Well, we need to further investigate both the room of the incident on the 4th floor and the lab room on the 5th.” Onion Knight deliberated, considering all aspects of the case so far. “However, I believe that

considering the lack of time we have left before the trial, we need to use our resources wisely and efficiently. So, my suggestion is that the moment we reach Lunch Break, the two of us split off and tackle the two rooms individually. I shall visit the 5th floor Lab room, whilst you return to the room of the incident. Hopefully, we can use that to maximise our efforts and return to the Defence stand with enough arsenal.”

“Hold on, we’ve already covered the room where the incident occurred.” Terra pointed out, unsure why Onion Knight wanted that area re-swept. “Plus, surely the room was already cleaned out by now; it would seem rather pointless to check it again now.”

Onion Knight loosely shrugged, “Well, it wouldn’t hurt if you checked for anything we missed. Also, you could have a gander in the other rooms of the 4th floor if you get the chance, especially in the room where Bartz and Zidane prepared for their prank.”

Terra pondered the possibility, knowing all too well that Onion Knight’s intuition was nothing to scoff at. Onion Knight gave off a cool and confident grin, thoroughly trusting in his own plans.

Finally, Terra sighed, “I see your point.”

The two, having climb up the staircase, had eventually reached the door to their English classroom, meeting up with the rest of the class in the process. It was then that the door opened, Garland appearing before Class 13A with his intimidating figure. Warrior of Light glanced away with immediate effect, refusing to make eye contact as he growled in disgust.

“Welcome to English, Class 13A.” He greeted them, his voice booming across the corridor. “Now, be seated and we shall begin the lesson promptly.”

Lunch Break – 12:30pm ...

Onion Knight approached the 5th floor of Dissidia Academy, passing through the gaps of various group of students as they desperately made their way towards the smell of food. It was certainly a struggle to break through the claustrophobic hoard, especially with his lack of height and without Terra – who would have given him the necessary barrier he needed to push through – by his side. The mere thought of it royally ticked him off, his cheeks flushed and eyes engulfed with fury.

Eventually, after a long hard battle through the woodland of taller people, Onion Knight was able to reach the Laboratory Room 1. After a moment to regain his strength and composure, he peered through the door window into the lab itself. To his relief, it was completely empty, having just finished being used. With no one in sight within the lab, he opened the door and slipped through with ease.

As the door closed, everything turned to absolute silence. There were no distracting noises from the students outside, no sounds of irritating contraptions, and no annoyances whatsoever: total bliss.

Onion Knight took a moment to examine the room as a whole, attempting to gain his bearings of the aesthetics within the lab. At the same time, he took out Celes’ photos of the lab from the depths of his blazer pocket in hopes that everything matches up. Upon noticing the position of where the photos were taken, he stepped towards the far corner of the lab room, nearest to the window.

There, to Onion Knight’s expectation, was the scene that matched Celes’ photos, untouched and secluded from the rest of the lab. Taped barriers were erected around the area, presumably to prevent any accidents from occurring. As his eyes switched back and forth from the photos to the area he was standing in, Onion Knight was able to point out the exact locations in an instant. The numerous strands of hair; the tampered open window; and, upon opening the cupboard in front of him, the damaged stuffed up blazer: all were accounted for.

Nodding to himself, Onion Knight began his investigation, slipping on a pair of latex gloves in order to prevent his fingerprints from mixing up with the evidence situated before him. He took up samples of the hairs dotted on the floor, separating the two hair colours and placing them into clear plastic pouches

labelled 'Lab Evidence' in black marker pen. Following on from that, Onion Knight carefully took the blazer out from the cupboard and displayed it on the nearby lab desk.

Upon splaying out the blazer, Onion Knight was able to gain the optimal vantage point, allowing him to fully examine the blazer in its entirety. The first aspect to the blazer he examined was the tag stitched within the inside, whimsically praying for a name or at least the initials of the owner. He flipped the tag, only to be left disappointed; there was no name, the tag was blank with only the 'L' letter displayed to indicate its large size. Moving on, he pulled out each pocket of the blazer, wondering if there was anything that would help him.

The first pocket, situated on the upper right of the blazer's torso: empty.

Onion Knight breathed out deeply, keeping his composure in check.

The second pocket, upper left of the blazer: empty.

Onion Knight nodded in acceptance, assuming the owner never used the top pockets of the blazer.

The third pocket, lower right of the blazer: scraps of paper.

This was where things began to perk up for Onion Knight, separating the papers and placing them to the side. He gazed upon them curiously, wondering if they were of any significance such as any specific writing or relatable images. However, as he further investigated them, he realised they were blank.

Feeling somewhat disappointed, he kept them out of the way for the time being.

And then, he turned to the fourth and final pocket, situated in the lower left of the blazer. Before Onion Knight reached in, he noticed a bulge, giving him an anticipated expression. He reached into the pocket, grasping something metallic, and held it up into the open.

It was a Lion's head keychain.

Onion Knight staggered back with a horrified gasp, recognising it in an instant. His back collided with the windowed wall. The keychain's shape was recognisable – iconic, in fact – to its owner, having constantly wearing a pendant in a similar form wherever he went.

That student ... was Squall Leonhart.

"So, 'this' was where you disappeared off to after class." A suspicious voice suddenly called to him, causing Onion Knight to jump up from his position.

Standing in front of the Lab room door, his arms tightly crossed and eyes locked on to Onion Knight like daggers, was Warrior of Light. Onion Knight, staring back with a challenging gaze, stood his ground, his arms to his side and body turning tense. In that moment, he swiftly placed the keychain within his own blazer pocket, out of sight.

Warrior of Light stepped forward, closing in on his adversary whilst examining the around him with his own eyes.

"Why are you here, Warrior of Light?" Onion Knight questioned intensely, his eyes refusing to divert attention from the Council and Class President.

Warrior of Light halted his movement, towering over Onion Knight as the two stood face to face.

"Tsk! Is it not obvious?" Warrior of Light tutted as he answered, finding such a question meaningless.

"The moment our recent lesson came to a close, I noticed both you and Terra Branford rushing out of the room. I thought to myself, 'it must be an urgent matter'. However, I chose to follow the two of you out of pure curiosity. I assumed it was related to our case as I saw Terra split off towards the 4th floor whilst you heading on to the 5th."

Without initially realising, Onion Knight felt his fists clench up tight and his teeth grinding together in frustration. He was bitter, giving off the impression that Warrior of Light was prying into him.

"I must say, you've found yourself some interesting evidence." Warrior of Light continued with a snarky remark, his gaze wandering along what was displayed on the desk beside the two. "It certainly fits with the case details so far."

Onion Knight shrugged whilst he continued to watch the Council President warily, "It's a new lead, at

the very least. Unfortunately, it doesn't have a name."

"I see." Warrior of Light grinned, expecting such a result. "I wouldn't be surprised if Zidane stashed that scruffy blazer away in a panic."

"Huh!? You must be joking!" Onion Knight erupted with a baffled yell, noticing the faults in Warrior of Light's statement. "The amount of inconsistencies in your statement just now is ridiculous to say the least! How could you assume its Zidane's from the get-go? First, the blazer is a size Large, it would simple be too big to fit Zidane. Second, you apprehended Zidane immediately after the incident took place. He couldn't have possibly had the chance to 'hide' the blazer, such an action would be impossible to execute in that time period. Third, we have already established that Zidane couldn't have broken the glass."

"Hmph! Fine then, if you insist." Warrior of Light grunted in retaliation, his eyes rolling. "However, let's not get ahead of ourselves. It is as you analysed during the conclusion of the previous court trial: 'someone else HAD to be in that room.' It is high possibility that the blazer belongs to an accomplice of our 'culprit'."

"Then it begs the question: 'Why break the glass window on the 4th floor in the first place?' whilst we must include that the window was broken from the outside, whilst the blazer was ripped during an escape from the room." Onion Knight then deliberated, refusing to let his rival take the high ground. "It is possible Zidane had more than one accomplice during the incident." Warrior of Light shrugged lightly, crossing off each likely scenario he could come up with.

"So, you now consider a new possibility that there were multiple culprits involved?" Onion Knight pushed on, finding the cracks in his opponent's reasoning. "That would completely contradict Bartz's testimony!"

"Well ... Bartz may have lied in his testimony to protect Zidane." Warrior of Light brushed aside, a subtle smirk forming within him. "Those two are, after all ... the closest of friends."

Onion Knight couldn't believe what he was hearing, his distraught eyes wide with shock. Warrior of Light refused to budge, each and every question he had tackled with a new probability or assumption.

"Why...?" He then murmured painfully, his head lowered as he attempted to control his pent up anger.

"Why are you so insistent in getting Zidane the 'guilty' verdict!? He is our classmate! Our friend! You know that just as much as I do!"

"... He is a thief." Warrior of Light retorted, his voice deepening to an antagonistic tone. "... A heartless, selfish thief who would stop at nothing to harass and humiliate his victims, just as long as it satisfies him. The moment he sees something he likes, he'll simply give in without any consideration of other. He's a pest, and a hindrance to the Academy."

Ba-doom...

Onion Knight abruptly reached up and took hold of Warrior of Light by the collar of his blazer, twisting him around and slamming him against the wall. Warrior of Light was bewildered by this sudden shift in Onion Knight's emotions, yet kept a commanding posture.

"THAT'S HOW YOU SEE IT!?!!" Onion Knight erupted furiously, his wrath overflowing. "Did you not even CONSIDER his own wellbeing on the matter!? How HE felt about any of this!? He may be the token prankster of the Academy and have a tendency to go overboard on occasions, but he is well aware of the limits. He considers others feelings, and would always give back anything he'd stolen from people immediately."

"Is that so?" Warrior of Light lightly chuckled out, finding this situation rather amusing. "Is he considerate of other people's feelings? Does he give back the things he stole? If I can recall, he never had the incentive of returning my Council President Badge when he stole it on the first day of the semester. It wasn't until Squall intervened when I was able to get it back."

Ba-doom, ba-doom...!

“...He stole your Council Badge?” Onion Knight echoed out breathlessly, his body in a state of mental shock. “That doesn’t give you the excuse to hunt him down like a rabid dog! Such a reason would be considered as pathetic, let alone selfish and arrogant! In fact, that also reminds me of another person who would usually consider other people feelings before their own ... hold on; it’s on the tip of my tongue ... OH! That’s right: THAT PERSON WAS YOU!!!”

“Oh, don’t worry, I certainly still consider the feelings of others ...” Warrior of Light smirked ruthlessly, finding no basis in Onion Knight’s argument. “However, I simply refuse to tolerate the behaviour Zidane displays.”

Ba-doom, ba-doom, ba-doom...!

“Y-you ... I saw you as my rival.” Onion Knight growled, his body shaking and fists continuing to tighten. “I didn’t tend to agree with you on debates or discussions, yet I always knew your heart was in the right place ... But this ...”

Warrior of Light’s raised an eyebrow cautiously, realising what Onion Knight was about to do.

Ba-doom – Ba-doom – Ba-doom...!!!

The pace of Onion Knight’s heart continued to rise uncontrollably.

“... This ...”

BADDOOM-BADDOOM-BADDOOM...!!!

“THIS, I REFUSE TO ACCEPT!!!” Onion Knight roared at the top of his lungs, his emotions at the breaking point.

Releasing one of his grasps on Warrior of Light’s collar, he hastily drew back and lashed out with an unbound strike. Warrior of Light mentally braced, fearing for what was about to occur.

However, just as Onion Knight’s fist was about to collide with Warrior of Light’s cheek ...

“This won’t do at all.” A calm, light-toned voice suddenly spoke from out of nowhere.

Following this, the two felt a powerful flick of the finger catch them via the centre of their foreheads.

“ACK!” Onion Knight reacted.

“GAH!” Warrior of Light blurted out.

The two stumbled back as they gained some distance from one another, turning away with agonizing tears in their eyes as the stinging sensation continued to surge from their foreheads. After some time, the two switched back as they questioned who flicked them.

They then gasped in astonishment.

“I cannot have two of Dissidia Academy’s brightest students fight it out like two uncivilised delinquents.” Headmistress Cosmos continued to comment, shaking her head in disapproval. “Such behaviour would be unethical, in addition to potentially hurting the Academy’s outstanding reputation.” Onion Knight and Warrior of Light stood in absolute silence, unable to think straight due to the sudden appearance of the Headmistress and the guilt that engulfed them. Cosmos cast a glare on the two of them, switching between one another with the rare expression of severe disappointment.

She then sighed sombrely, “I entrusted the both of you with these roles because I believed in your skills and abilities to find the truth of this unsightly incident. The promise you two hold is indescribable, and the performances you two demonstrated during the previous court trial proved to me that I had made the correct choice. Whilst it is evident that there are flaws in your convictions, it was always counteracted with the unstoppable passion for seeking the truth of the case.”

The two lowered their heads in shame, unable to meet eyes with Headmistress Cosmos.

“This is why it baffles me to see you two deteriorate to such a disgusting display of behaviour, especially with.” Cosmos’ tone darkened as she criticised, her voice rising to an intimidating level. “It sickens me to the core, and I will NOT tolerate it any longer. Do you two understand?”

“... Yes, Headmistress Cosmos ...” The two muttered in synchronization with the addition of nods.

“Good.” The Headmistress accepted in relief, sighing away as she returned the persona she ‘loathed’

back to the deepest depths of her sub-consciousness. "Now with that out of the way, I suggest the both of you to shake hands as friends and equal rivals."

Onion Knight did as Cosmos suggested, stepping towards Warrior of Light and holding out a hand ready for his fellow classmate to shake. Warrior of Light watched him intensely as he approached, hesitating whether he should take the gesture to heart or stand his ground. He gradually held out his own hand, pushing to accept the truce.

All of a sudden, however, he viciously casted Onion Knight's hand aside, the iris' of his eyes lighting up like a burning flame.

"I'll never shake your hand ... " He murmured with intimidation , his refusal absolute.

He turned away and stormed towards the lab door, yanking it open without due care. However, just before he stepped through to the corridor, his glanced back at his opponent.

"Mark my words, Onion Knight." Warrior of Light warned fiercely, "The moment this afternoon's court trial begins ... you are going to regret ever accepting to defend Zidane."

And with that, he disappeared from sight.

Onion Knight and Cosmos stood in silence as they watched the door of the lab room close up, their bodies frozen in place. Then, with the two alone in the room, Onion Knight stepped over to the nearest stooled seat and sat down. Resting his elbows on the table, he placed his head between his hands and hid the frustration that he struggled to suppress. Cosmos watched him, saddened by the current outcome between the two.

"... I don't understand him." Onion Knight remarked in a low murmur, breaking the silence. "He is completely hell-bent of punishing Zidane to the point that he's ignoring the true purpose of the case. Why is he so stubborn and close-minded?"

Cosmos stepped over beside Onion Knight, taking up a stooled seat and perched next to him. Onion Knight twisted his head slightly, glancing up at the headmistress with bloodshot, moist eyes.

"This is Warrior of Light's psychological weakness." Cosmos admitted to him, deciding it was the right time for the reveal. "Over the time that I've known him, Warrior of Light grew to become very stubborn and, dare I say it, arrogant on his roles as Class and Council President, and even as a student overall. Granted, he knows when to be sincere and compassionate towards his classmates, and it certainly is one of his strong suites. Yet, he believes in a high level of disciplinary order and justice, striving against any sorts of misbehaviour no matter the consequences. His heart is in the right place ... it's just so happens that he's stepped too far off the path."

"Do you know what caused him to act in such a manner?" Onion Knight then questioned, gradually raising his head back up.

Cosmos hesitantly nodded, "Whilst I don't know the true extent of the situation, I can say that an incident occurred to him 5 years ago, causing him to gain amnesia in the process. He is unaware of his past prior to the events and desires nothing greater than to return his memories and prevent another incident of similar proportions from occurring."

Onion Knight took in the Headmistress's word with consideration, grasping more of an understanding into Warrior of Light's mind-set. Whilst he was sceptical of the Council President and could never see eye-to-eye with him, he accepted the situation he was going through.

With that said ...

"... I cannot allow him to win this case." Onion Knight assured with determination, shaking his head. "If he wins, it'll go against everything he strives for. In addition to that, I've come too far to let it all go to waste; I'm close to solving this, and I'm certain on what I needed to do."

The Headmistress nodded to him with acceptance, a glowing smile forming deep within her. Onion Knight leapt off of his seat, his stance proud and tall – well ... as tall as he could be. He was ready to tackle the definitive court trial head on, no matter the obstacle that stood in his way.

Yet, before he could rush off and rendezvous with Terra, a question rattled his mind.

“Cosmos ... You suggested about Warrior of Light’s ‘psychological weakness’.” He began, his curiosity peaking, “What could my ‘weakness’ be?”

Headmistress Cosmos stood from her seat, her appearance shining like a beacon of pride as she rose up. Onion Knight watched as she stepped around him, directing herself towards the door of the lab room.

“You’ll find out in due time, Onion Knight.” She then answered with a tease, chuckling away.

Dissidia Academy’s Theatre Hall – 2:00pm ...

Onion Knight stepped towards his stand, eyes casting an intense glare as he caught a glance of the wooden box that awaited his arrival.

“So, we meet again ... Box!” He shook a fist in disgust, refusing to be intimidated by such an object. The surrounding atmosphere was thick with anticipation, the crowds lined up in their seats as they waited for the event to begin. There were high levels of gossip and cheering, supporting their side no matter what. Amongst them, Class 13A sat together with a nervous aura cast around them, oblivious to how the events of this trial would unfold. Opposite of the Defence Stand, Warrior of Light stood within the Prosecution Stand with crossed arms and a stern expression as he watched Onion Knight step forward.

To Onion Knight’s right was Terra Branford, her blonde-haired ponytail swaying as she stepped to the Defence stand. She was calm and determined, keeping her wits about even though she was in clear view of the entirety of Dissidia Academy’s students. She knew her objective, and was ready to support Onion Knight all the way.

To Onion Knight’s left was Zidane Tribal, his blonde-furred tail swishing relatively freely as he continued forward. His eyes and expression was blank, drowning out all sounds around him. In addition to this, he was wearing a pair of large, engulfing black headphones, music entering his mind as it freed him from his doubts and troubles. He had taken Conductor Kuja’s words to heart, allowing his imagination to flow like an expanding river.

The trio were met with a revived Rydia, who stood before them with a determined expression.

“Rydia, how are you feeling?” Onion Knight was the first to question, concerned for her being in the limelight. “Are you sure you should be here watching the trial?”

“I’m fine, thank you, Onion Knight.” Rydia smiled back, acting somewhat upbeat. “Don’t worry about me, I’ve mostly recovered. I’ll be rooting for you guys. So, be sure to win, ok?”

Both Onion Knight and Terra nodded in confirmation. Zidane, on the other hand, diverted his eyes away from Rydia, unsure how to respond. Rydia gazed over towards his with a curious glance, feeling hopeful for him to succeed in proving his innocence.

Whilst Rydia was still unable to recall the incident, she believed that within the depths of her heart, Zidane was innocent.

She then took a seat close by, allowing the three to press forward.

Standing beside the Judge’s Podium, her eyes beaming with anticipation of the trial, was the Elvaan girl Prishe. She could barely keep still, her body bouncing up and down on the spot as she hummed out to distract her short attention span. The High Judge Gabranth was yet to make an appearance, so she knew she had to keep engaged on the task at hand.

Onion Knight rose up on top of the box and stood before the Defence Stand, sighing out as he kept a positive spirit about him whilst paying no mind of what was underneath. Terra stood to his side, seemingly used to the novelty of Onion Knight standing on a box. And Zidane comfortably sat beside the two, keeping to his Zen mode yet deciding to take off his headphones out of respect for his

surroundings.

Then, the lights abruptly cut out, spotlight switching over towards the Judge's Podium. Gabranth, his an expected intimidating aura surrounding him as he stepped forward, appeared before the crowd of students. Prishe, with all of her overexcitement brushed aside, stood tall and formal. She took a deep breath, and announced the High Judge's presence.

"*Ahem*... All rise for the Honourable High Judge Gabranth!"

Gradually, students rose up from their seats, quietly finishing their conversations as they acted to the bailiff's request. However, the limitations in her mind washing away, Prishe had a few words to say.

"Oh, for the love of ... – GET YOUR DAMN ASSES OFF THOSE SEATS LIKE I ORDERED!!!" Prishe erupted, feeling somewhat identical to the previous court trial. "YOU CALL YOURSELVES DISSIDIA ACADEMY STUDENTS; I SAY YOU'RE ALL FAILURES!!! 'F's FOR EVERYONE HERE! IF I WAS THE HEADMISTRESS OF THIS PLACE, I WOULD-!"

DONK!

"Eep!" Prishe then squeaked as a spinning gavel flew towards her and smacked her squarely on the head, realising she had gotten carried away once again.

"Enough, Bailiff!" Gabranth groaned, finding her outburst irritating. "You may be seated."

The crowd of students sat back in their seats in silence, their hearts racing simultaneously as they tried to recover. Prishe stepped aside and took her seat next to Professor Shantotto, soothing her head in agony whilst also feeling an intimidating glare from her boss.

"The court is now in session for the continuation of the trial of Zidane Tribal." Gabranth announced loud and clear, his booming voice echoing the hall.

"The Prosecution is ready, Your Honour!" Warrior of Light formally announced in an instant, his mind ready for an all-out battle.

"The Defence is also ready, Your Honour!" Onion Knight followed on from his opponent, reminding himself not to fall behind.

Gabranth nodded to the two, "... Very Good."

The crowd glanced to one another, noticing that the aura surrounding both the Defence and the Prosecution was intense and almost suffocating. Both Terra and Zidane could also feel this, gulping as they cleared their increasingly dry throats. Terra noticed the sudden atmosphere change the moment she rendezvoused with Onion Knight, knowing something seemed off about him yet preferred not to pry for the time being.

"Now then, let us not stray any longer." Gabranth huffed patiently, neatening up his notes and papers as he spoke. "Prosecution! Your opening statement, please!"

"With pleasure, Your Honour!" Warrior of Light accepted gracefully with a bow, anticipating this moment. "During the previous Court Trial, we were enlightened that there was a likely 'accomplice' involved in the incident of Rydia's assault and the theft of her Hair Ornament. The questions that had arisen during that time were: 'Was Zidane Tribal the true culprit of the incident?' 'Who was this mysterious accomplice?' And, 'What was the purpose of the assault?' among many, many others. In addition to this, our Detective for this case, Firion, had also been assaulted during the search of the security footage data whilst the trial was still commencing. This confirmed the suspicions of an accomplice, or even an alternate culprit to the case. So, during the span of the weekend, both I and the Defence were able to gather a significant evidence that will further us towards the truth, and so will be revealed over the course of this court trial."

Onion Knight felt his body tense hesitantly, cautiously aware of his inclusion to Warrior of Light's statement. There was no doubt in his mind that Warrior of Light was calling him out from his safe zone and throwing the gauntlet to the ground, prepared to clash with him without remorse.

However, the Prosecution had yet to finish.

"I, personally, was also able to gather key witnesses to the case of whom I believe will be able to clear the mystery that envelopes this case. However, before we can call out our first witness ... I wish to enlighten the court on a significant discovery."

Onion Knight and Terra glanced to one another with confused expression, unsure as to what the Prosecution was about to reveal. The crowd collectively began to whisper to one another, excitement growing as they spoke.

"Order." Gabranth commanded in a casual tone, not feeling the need to raise his voice just yet. There was silence.

"I have with me an item crucial to this case ..." Warrior of Light began as he reached underneath the booth.

Onion Knight watched intensely; sweat beginning to seep over his temple as he stared. Terra also watched with careful eyes, her body shaken up by a feeling of uncertainty. However, what the two hadn't noticed was Zidane's reaction the moment Warrior of Light spoke his next line.

"One that I was able to find stashed away in the depths of Zidane Tribal's locker ..."

Onion Knight's eyes widened upon realising what his rival was indicating towards, dreading the reveal. Terra clasped her hands to her mouth in suspense, fearing what was about to come. Zidane, however, went completely pale.

Warrior of Light held the item out for the court to see, his eyes lit with certain confidence.

The entire Hall gasped in complete shock.

"Behold! ... The victim's stolen Hair Ornament!"

19 - Arc 3 (3): Neutral Ground

“HOLD IT!” Onion Knight hastily shouted out the moment he regained his senses, pointing towards Warrior of Light with a tense finger. “Your Honour, the Prosecution raided the Defendant’s locker without any known authority!”

“... Overruled.” The High Judge Gabranth denied in response, shaking his head sternly.

“Wha-!? On what grounds!?” Onion Knight blurted in shock at the High Judge, slamming his hands against the surface of the Defence Stand.

The crowd of students that watched the trial were all on the edge of their seats, desperate to find out more. The reveal of the Hair Ornament had taken the entire hall by complete surprise, wondering how this new, unexpected scenario would develop.

“Hm-hm-hmm ... Oh, dear Onion Knight, maybe you should use your eyes before calling out such nonsense.” Warrior of Light chuckled in answer, ushering his opponent to glance at his direction. Onion Knight switched direction and glared towards Warrior of Light with morbid curiosity, feeling as though his rival had metaphorically tripped him up somehow. It was at that moment, he realised he had spoken too soon. Whilst Warrior of Light was holding Rydia’s Hair Ornament in one hand, its reflection of the spotlight above glimpsing brightly and pure; his other hand was also holding out an item, a sheet of paper with lines of detailed text printed from top to bottom.

An Investigation Permit; signed clearly by Headmistress Cosmos herself.

In that instant, Onion Knight’s eyes darted towards the Headmistress’ allocated seat, of whom had perched herself at the corner of front row just like she had in the previous trial. Having noticed Onion Knight’s rather ‘betrayed’ glare, she straightened up on her seat and merely shrugged her shoulders with an expression of awkward guilt.

“Ah-ha-haa ...” She anxiously chuckled. “Oops?”

Is that all I get!? A shrug and an ‘OOPS’!? Onion Knight’s mind exploded in backlash, numerous veins bulging from his forehead in rage. *Is my respect for you THAT disposable, Headmistress!?*

Hastily, Onion Knight returned his attention to his opponent, painfully brushing aside the taste of resentment. He was hastily reminding himself that Headmistress Cosmos had to comply with Warrior of Light’s request regardless of her stance on the matter, keeping in accordance with her overall status as an unbiased role model of the Academy.

His eyes locked on his opponent, Onion Knight suddenly bit the inside of his lip in immense frustration. It was as though he had taken a considerable blow from the get go, being thrown aside without even realising what had occurred. Both Zidane and his own credibility had turned to jeopardy, the two now on a thin line.

This wasn’t helped with Warrior of Light’s smug grin growing more obnoxious by the second, knowing all too well that he had the upper hand thanks to the strong opening.

With only so much as a mere glance, Onion Knight caught Zidane’s current mental state in an instant: he was in a state of panic. The colouring of his skin had turned completely pale, and his body was drenched in a cold sweat. It wouldn’t be a surprise if he fainted at this point, considering his sudden ordeal.

He then switched focus to Rydia, who conveyed a vast array of mixed emotions. There was no denying that she was overjoyed that her treasure finally being found, yet there was a distinct aura that gave the impression that she was both undeniably disheartened and worried about the predicament that had befallen Zidane.

His mind was set. Onion Knight needed answers ... and he needed them NOW!

“Warrior of Light, do you have photographic evidence that proves the Hair Ornament was stowed away in Zidane’s locker?” Onion Knight warily questioned his opponent, his expression as tense as it could ever be.

Terra, fidgeting anxiously beside Onion Knight, gazed towards him with an uncertain glare, unsure if this approach was deemed wise.

“No need to worry, Onion Knight, I’ve come prepared.” Warrior of Light cheerfully sighed, placing down both the Hair Ornament and Investigation permit. “See for yourself.”

What followed were two distinct photographs being waved in the air, proving the evidence was as clear as day. Warrior of Light’s confident smirk refused to falter as he held the new pieces of evidence out to the court, showing to his audience that he was in complete control.

As bitter resentment filled his heart, Onion Knight watched as the photos were passed over to him by Prishe. Terra shifted closer to analyse the evidence alongside Onion Knight, although wanting nothing more than to avoid its very existence. Copies were also passed onto the High Judge Gabranth, curiously glancing over the evidence with his piercing eyes.

The two photographs depicted Zidane’s locker from two alternate viewpoints: the first portrayed the locker closed and locked up securely with Zidane’s name indicated above the lock, nothing seemingly out of the ordinary; whilst the second exposed the interior in all of its magnificent glory.

Upon closer examination of the second photo, Onion Knight was able to easily identify the Hair Ornament stashed in the far right corner amongst the heap of hastily crumpled P.E. clothing and various scattered class books. It was typical for someone like Zidane to have the contents of his locker in such a state, yet this was all the more catastrophic when realising that it gave the impression that the Hair Ornament was hidden away in such a rushed state.

Onion Knight felt his teeth grind and fists tension up to the point of shaking, losing his mind entirely over such a critical blow. It was as though his mind went into systematic shutdown, attempting to rationalize how he could ideally resolve the issue alongside thinking of questions that could throw off his opponent. Just then, he felt a light tap on the shoulder. This, in turn, caused Onion Knight to instantly leap up in surprise. He switched to Terra – the culprit of the abrupt poke – with a hopeful glance, his eye lit up at the thought that his dependable assistant would save the day.

... It was the opposite.

Terra was showing an expression of immense concern, her eyes locked in place on the two pictures – more so regarding the first image than the second. Her lips were quivering, her hands shaking; the atmosphere surrounding her was dense with apprehension.

“Terra?” Onion Knight called to her cautiously, his flash of optimism now thrown out the window. “Terra, what’s the matter?”

There was a pause, Terra was attempting to answer but her hesitation was overbearing.

However, she then shook her head, forcing herself through the anxiety.

“Th-these photos ... I don’t understand them.” She admitted in despair, pointing specifically to the first photo of the locker. “I can’t find any signs of tampering with the locks nor do I see any evidence of force on the locker’s door, it contradicts itself.”

Onion Knight gave the photos another glance, the line of his sight matching with the placement of Terra’s finger.

She was correct.

The door that enclosed the locker was in perfect condition, not a scratch or dent in sight. Onion Knight further analysed this, recollecting previous inform regarding the mechanics and regulations of the Academy lockers:

- Only the allocated student would be able to use their specific locker.

- Lockers are sealed using fingerprint scans, retinal scans, or overall facial recognition – this decision is based on the choice of the specific student when allocated their locker.
- If a specific locker were to ever be compromised, a security lockdown will activate and alert Headmistress Cosmos along with other members of staff in charge of security.
- The locker's security can only be overridden with guided permission of the Headmistress AND the allocated owner.

Then it clicked.

“Warrior of Light, how were you able to access Zidane’s locker?” Onion Knight hastily interrogated, refusing to let this slide. “Whist you may have had permission to access the locker by Headmistress Cosmos, you would still need have permission Zidane himself before being granted access. So, unless Zidane gave you permission – although I doubt the possibility given his situation – it would have been impossible for you to open-!”

“-The locker was already unlocked.” Warrior of Light admitted with a light shrug, his arms crossed.

“... Huh?” Onion Knight blurted in complete bafflement, his expression dropping its serious glare upon hearing the unexpected answer.

This same reaction was carried over to the majority of the hall, including – but, not limited to – Terra, Rydia, most of Class 13A (Squall was as uncaring as one would expect of him), and especially Zidane himself. Various teachers watched in intrigue, silently wondering how such an occurrence was possible. This could also be said about the High Judge Gabranth, who had leant back on his seat as he watched the case unfold before him.

“Would you care to elaborate, Prosecution?” Gabranth grumbled curiously, his imitating eyes fixed on Warrior of Light like a hawk.

“Certainly, Your Honour.” Warrior of Light nodded with a slight bow, yet his tone was still relaxed as he kept his gaze on his stumped opponent. “In all honesty, it’s a rather simple case of careless misplacement. When I initially approached the locker after receiving permission of investigation by Headmistress Cosmos, I too thought it was locked. However, upon closer inspection, I had found that the lock mechanism was wedge against a fold of fabric originating from Zidane’s ‘disgusting’ P.E uniform, resulting in the prevention of the lock mechanism from activating.”

And with that, all eyes switched towards an aware Zidane, casting the piercing gaze of disappointment upon him as if they were expecting a more satisfying reveal.

“Wha-? H-Hey! Why are you all looking at me like that!?” Zidane spat out consciously, feeling the pressure of the countless glares were psychologically crushing. “I can’t help it if my locker’s a mess! ... It just wouldn’t sit right with me if it was tidy, that’s all!”

The crowd of on-looking students all then glanced away with murmurs and grumbles, some individuals now cursing him to get the ‘guilt’ verdict. Zidane, in turn, dipped his head as the constant cynical mumbles enclosed around him.

Bang! Bang!

“Order in the court!” Gabranth raised his voice as he pummelled the gavel.

“So, there you have it.” Warrior of Light spoke out in pride, as if ready to conclude this entire farce.

“Our ‘oh-so-innocent’ Zidane made the valuable mistake of leaving the locker unlocked as he rushed to hide the-!”

“OBJECTION!” Onion Knight bellowed in haste, halting Warrior of Light’s triumphant monologue.

“Let’s not get carried away here, Warrior of Light!”

“Ooh? Is this the signs of desperation I see, Onion Knight?” Warrior of Light wondered with a condescending chuckle, thinking that was the only reason for the rude interruption.

“Hm-hmm ... If only that were the case.” Onion Knight returned with a witty comment, subtly shaking his head. “The nonsense you were about to gush out with would merely be a possibly. In fact, that

'possibility' would practically be miniscule if we were to remind ourselves of what we resolved in the previous trial, the most glaring examples being the fact that Zidane was still at the scene of the crime AND the likelihood of the second suspect!"

"Hmph! Zidane could have easily hidden the Hair Ornament in a temporary location during the times of the crime scene and when we found him." Warrior of Light shrugged carelessly, finding this irritating. "He could have returned at any point between then and now to transfer it to a more secure location." Onion Knight shook his head once again. "Wrong! Your argument is flawed, Warrior of Light! There was never a time Zidane could have possibly been able to hide the Hair Ornament, he was found merely seconds after the assault took place. Not only that, but someone was always watching over him during the follow-up and aftermath of the previous trial, including YOU."

Warrior of Light fell silent, deciding not to speak back.

"My theory – and one that would hold significant weight – is that Zidane's locker was accidentally unlocked 'before' the incident had occurred." Onion Knight continued on, refusing to falter for a second. "Because of this, our mysterious 'second' suspect was able to hide the Hair Ornament inside the locker not long after the incident, further solidifying Zidane as the sole possible suspect to this case. Face it, Zidane was framed!"

BOOM!

Warrior of Light slammed his palm against the surface of his stand, eyes sharpened with a powerful glare towards his opponent.

"You call my possibility 'flawed' and then you follow up with THAT!?" He growled intensely, "Such absurdity, Onion Knight! Your theory would suggest that it was a coincidence your 'second' suspect happened to find Zidane's locker open after escaping the crime scene. How would the suspect even know about the locker in the first place?"

"Simple. The second suspect may have already known about the locker before the event, deciding it was plausible to use it as a possible catalyst in further framing Zidane as the culprit." Onion Knight dispelled the question in an instant.

Warrior of Light gave a low sigh, "We'll see..."

However, Onion Knight then turned to the High Judge Gabranth, "Your Honour, I request for the Hair Ornament and the photographs to be placed as evidence for this trial."

Gabranth nodded firmly, "Hmm ... I'm surprised you didn't ask for this at the start."

Bang!

"No..." A trembling voice whimpered beside Onion Knight. "This is bad..."

Swivelling on the spot, a shocked Onion Knight caught a glance of Terra shaking violently and breathing at a rapid pace. She was chewing the edge of her thumb nail in desperation of keeping her thoughts in line.

"Terra, what's the matter now?" Onion Knight questioned in deep concern, showing positivity in his tone of voice. "There's no need to worry, we're still fighting this battle headstrong."

"I-it's not that, there's something else..." Terra slurred her words as she spoke, her terrified eyes lowered towards the surface of the Defence Stand. "B-but I ... I don't know what it is."

Onion Knight watched her curelessly, unable to grasp the issue that faced Terra. He wanted to find out the issue, but her words were far too vague to understand.

"Ah ... just another piece of detail I forgot to mention before we move on, Onion Knight." Warrior of Light then called to him as if in realisation, his previous intense aura dissipating.

Onion Knight turned to him with eyes focused, mentally bracing for what was about to occur.

Warrior of Light continued, "You see, I made a slight error ... I was not the one who initially found the Hair Ornament in Zidane's locker as I earlier claimed. In fact ... someone had beaten me to it."

Onion Knight felt his body freeze.

An error...? His thoughts wondered cautiously, No ... this was no accident. He set this up!

“Your Honour.” Warrior of Light announced to the court in a clear manner. “I would like to call up my first witness to the stand.”

Gabranth nodded without second thought, tapping his gavel in approval.

Bang! Bang!

What followed were the echoing tapping sounds of footsteps, drawing closer as the First Witness approached the Witness Stand. Onion Knight, Terra, Zidane, Rydia, and the entire hall of students and teachers watched in silence as the witness took to the stand, the atmosphere of the hall growing denser by the second.

Her long, luscious fair-blond hair, held firmly within a dark-blue ribbon, swayed as she stepped forward. She had the stance of a proud individual, confident in her well-kept appearance and high respect amongst both her peers and fellow students.

Standing tall at the witness stand, her confident blue eyes cast upon the court before her: Celes Chere was set to testify.

“Please state your name and Academy status to the court.” Warrior of Light confidently requested to her, straightening his tall posture as a sign of formality.

“My name is Celes Chere. I am the Class President of Class 13F and a member of the Academy’s Student Council.” Celes proudly announced in response, proving there was depth behind her confident appearance.

Celes ... so you were the one who found Rydia’s Hair Ornament? Onion Knight watched on in a calm mind, finally being able to connect the dots surround Celes’ mysterious ‘contractual agreement’ with Warrior of Light. *Damn ... No wonder.*

Just then...

“Celeeeeeeeesss...!” A single cry from Terra abruptly called to her, tears comically from her eyes as she noticed her long-time friend take the stand.

“Terraaaaaaaaaaaa...!” Celes cried back in response, completely losing her proud aura within the instant of noticing her friend in dire need.

Before anyone realised what had occurred, Terra leapt from her station on the Defence Stand and threw her arms around Celes, sobbing away as Celes embraced her like an older sister comforting a younger sibling.

Both Onion Knight and Warrior of Light watched the two close friends embrace in complete disarray, oblivious to how this occurred. The two had even glanced at one another wondering ‘what in the world was happening?’ ... only to shrug at one another with blank expressions.

“There, there ... no need to worry now.” Celes whispered to Terra in a motherly tone, patting her head in a consoling manner. “You’re standing strong, and that’ all that matters ... so, don’t falter so soon, Terra.”

Terra nodded, taking this time to recollect herself.

However, Celes then turned to face the court with a piercing glare, refusing to hold back from expressing a long awaited opinion as her gaze switched between Warrior of Light, Onion Knight, and the High Judge Gabranth himself.

“Mark my words, you three, if I see Terra cry or terrified during the remainder of this trial ... there will be dire consequences.” She warned them in a vicious yet passive tone, the light in her eyes disappearing as she spoke. “She is a delicate gem that must be protected with care, do you understand?”

“Y-YES, MA’AM!” The three hastily answered as they straightened up, their fearful stuttering voices echoed throughout the hall in sync.

It was a peculiar sight; witnessing such high figures of authority within the court case obeying a single female student’s command. And yet, the crowd of students watching the event came to a swift

understanding that this was the influence of such a being like Celes.

Celes gave a single nod in acceptance of the three's answer, before turning to her friend in a softer tone, "Now then, Terra, you can go back to your stand."

That was ... random. Both Onion Knight and Warrior of Light silently commented to themselves as if in sync with each other.

Stepping away from her close friend's welcoming embrace, Terra gave Celes and uplifted nod, showing renewed spirits in what was ahead of her. Onion Knight watched as his defence partner returned to his side, still unable to grasp what had just happened yet appreciative of Celes giving Terra that much needed reassurance and friendly comfort.

With everything now back in order, the trial continued on as if the abrupt random occurrence never happened in the first place.

Clearing his throat, Warrior of Light was the first to speak again, "*Ahem*... So then, Celes, if I may ask before we begin the testimony: have you swayed to a specific side at all in relation to the court case?"

Celes shook her head, showing her prideful aura once again.

"No. I deem myself neutral to this case and only strive to find out the truth."

"Hm-hmm ... A fair outlook." Warrior of Light nodded accordingly, satisfied with the answer given. "I have no need of further questions. Please, enlighten us with your testimony in regards to how you found the Hair Ornament in Zidane's Locker, Miss Chere."

Here we go ... Onion Knight sharpened his glare as he waited for what Celes was prepared to reveal. Terra, however, had a rather abnormal glint in her eye, as though inner confidence surfaced even if it was for a mere moment.

Gabranth sat up on his seat, prepared to hear out the Witness.

Witness Testimony 1: Celes Chere.

"Some time after the incident had occurred; I was standing before my own locker tending to my belongings for the upcoming lesson. Considering that the Student Council Meeting had not long concluded, I deemed it necessary to store my meeting folder away out of convenience. I was the only student in the locker area ... at least, as far as I was aware at the time. However, as I was about to leave, I heard a loud '*bang*' far off to the left of me. I turn and see a glimpse of a shadow swiftly disappearing off around a blind corner. I didn't know whether my mind was playing tricks on me or not, so I decided to investigate where the noise originated from out of curiosity. And, low and behold, I find Zidane's locker open and the Hair Ornament stashed beneath the bundles of clothing."

Witness Testimony ... Complete.

The High Judge Gabranth began to stroke the side of his faint stubble, his focus primarily on making sense of this new testimony. The entire court was silent, the majority of whom taking to opportunity to process the contents of Celes' words. The atmosphere was dense with anticipation, waiting for the testimony to be dissected.

Warrior of Light specifically was standing with arms crossed and a smug grin casted towards his opponent. Onion Knight, on the other hand, had jotted down notes regarding the testimony and began to highlight specific areas that he felt needed questioning or further elaboration. Considering that this was a precise and detailed testimony – as expected from someone like Celes – Onion Knight had a decent amount of new information to go on.

That being said ... there was nothing here that he would consider to be contradictory or would justify an 'objection'. Because of this, he was rather relieved, solidifying his trust in Celes' honesty.

“Before we begin with the Cross-Examination; Miss Chere, based upon your current testimony, is it safe to assume that you are the owner of the photographic evidence showcasing the locker?” Gabranth curiously wondered, linking up the probability.

“Yes, Your Honour.” Celes nodded. “I took those photos immediately after I found the locker. Warrior of Light”

“I see ... I shall update the records accordingly.” He then accepted, jotting down notes specifying that Celes was the initial owner of the photographs. “Although, this does raise an important issue...”

At that very moment, the High Judge Gabranth eerily twisted towards Warrior of Light, his eyes glowing red with unbound malice. Warrior of Light felt his entire body freeze up at the sight of the High Judge suddenly glaring down upon him, giving off an aura so thick that it could literally choke him if he were to make one false move.

“... You lied to the court, Prosecution.” Gabranth murmured in a horrifyingly dark tone, his piercing eyes sharp enough to strike the heart of the bravest of adversaries.

Onion Knight leaned forward as he was drawn into this peculiar development, an eyebrow raised as his morbid curiosity peaked. He was intrigued, and desired to see where this leads.

“I-I’m sorry, Your Honour!?” Warrior of Light blurted in bewilderment, almost toppling over upon hearing the absurd accusation.

“And you call yourself a Warrior of the Light ... for shame.” Gabranth continued eerily, his words stabbing Warrior of Light’s prideful self-esteem without hesitation. “KNIGHT OF THE ONION! Please educate our naïve fool of a Prosecutor on the specifics of his ‘grave’ mistake!”

A dark, twisted smile formed across Onion Knight’s expression as he straightened up to speak, “With pleasure, Your Honour. You see, whilst Warrior of Light admitted Celes had found Zidane’s locker before her did – as part of his ‘dramatic’ transitioning, no less – he neglected to inform the court that the photographic evidence was in fact taken by Celes and NOT by Warrior of Light. As a result, our Prosecution had taken the credit of the evidence without acknowledging the true owner!”

Warrior of Light leapt to defend himself, “T-That was a mere oversight on my account! Such accusation does not warrant-!”

“ENOUGH!” Gabranth bellowed furiously, her powerful voice shaking the entire hall like a quake. “I hereby issue you a penalty for ignorance of citing the owner of the photographic evidence to the court! Be sure not to make the same mistake ... otherwise, you will face the worst of consequences.”

With that, the High Judge pummelled his gavel hard against the surface before him.

BANG!

“*Gasp* N-NOOOOOOOOOOooooooooo.....!!!!!!” Warrior of Light yelled at the top of his lungs as he broke down on his stand, his inflated ego shattering like a plane of fragile glass as he took the hit on his reputation.

Witnessing his rival fall in despair, Onion Knight couldn’t help but break out a smirk of satisfaction, taking in this glorious moment as a memory that will never be forgotten.

However, he then caught a glance of Terra staring back at him somewhat passively, showing a rather disappointed expression.

“...You two are as bad as each other...” She muttered underneath her breath, shaking her head in dissatisfaction as she switched her focus back onto the case at hand.

“Wait ... what do you mean by that, Terra?” Onion Knight questioned in a sudden conscious manner, unable to figure out the depths of her words. “Terra...? Terra? Am I being ignored!?”

He was being ignored.

“Defence, you may now Cross-Examine the Witness!” Gabranth swiftly announced, breaking the existing atmosphere and turning it on its head.

Cross-Examination 1: Celes Chere.

Onion Knight cleared his throat, gathering the questions in his thoughts as he met eyes with the Witness.

“Celes, I must first commend you on giving the court an informative testimony.” He began with a positive tone, knowing he needed to keep her on his side.

“Thank you, Onion Knight, I’m relieved that I didn’t disappoint.” Celes acknowledged in gratitude, a small smirk having broking through as she nodded.

“If I may, I would like to ask a few questions so that I along with the rest of the court would grasp a more educated understanding on the matter involving your testimony.” He continued on, his mind consciously flicking through the various questions that needed answers to. “First of all, were you aware of the incident during the time it occurred?”

Celes shook her head immediately, honesty shining brightly within the blue irises of her eyes, “No, I wasn’t aware of it at the time.”

“Understandable.” He whimsically ushered, his attitude calm whilst his mind sped through the entire library of information filed under this case. “So, if you could think back for me, did you hear any peculiar banging or abnormal noises coming from the 4th Floor during that time?”

Celes shook her head once again, “No, I was already close to the Ground Floor of the Academy. It wouldn’t have been possible for me to have heard anything from the 4th Floor due to how far down I was. As I stated in my testimony, the ‘only’ abnormal noise was the *bang* when I was tending to my own locker.”

Onion Knight pressed on without hesitation, “In regards to the ‘mysterious’ perpetrator who used Zidane’s locker and caused that ‘*bang*’ noise in the process, you stated that you had caught ‘a glimpse of a shadow swiftly disappearing’: Were you able to spot any distinct detail of the person before they disappeared.”

Celes was about to shake her head once again, yet halted and pondered the question for a little longer, “I would say that I didn’t see anything significant ... but now that I think about it, I’m not too certain.”

“What do you mean by ‘not too certain’?” Onion Knight questioned as he noticed the slur in her words, almost forgetting that he was standing on a box the moment his feet shifted to its very edge.

Celes paused momentarily, considering her next words, “I *... sigh* As stated in my testimony, the person had left before I could catch any significant detail of what they were wearing at the time. I can, however, certainly the person was Male. He was average height and had a somewhat broad build to him.”

Her statement helps to further separate Zidane as the suspect based on the description ... but it’s far too vague for me to link it with anything else. Onion Knight analysed in deep thought, cupping his chin as his eyes lowered.

Terra was also in the midst of thought, however was uncertain if this would get them anywhere. Not only that, but she wondered about Celes’ personal wellbeing. She noticed her close friend’s uncertainty beginning to arise even before the last question was asked.

Could she be holding back...?

“Celes, I need you to think harder about who you saw back then.” Onion Knight stated in a pressuring manner, not letting this go until he found a possible lead. “Was there any specific detail you may have noticed? Was the person wearing jewellery? Was his style significant? Was the person wearing a school uniform or not-?”

“HOLD IT!” Warrior of Light abruptly interrupted as he threw his index finger towards Onion Knight’s direction. “Your Honour, the Defence is purposefully pressuring the Witness even though she clearly stated, both in testimony and now, that she wasn’t able to catch any detail of the person in question. I

request he stands down.”

Gabranth nodded sternly, “Yes. Onion Knight, please stop pressuring the Witness any further than what is required.”

Onion Knight felt his knuckles almost slam against the surface of his stand, frustration almost taking over him. His eyes were locked glaring towards Warrior of Light, knowing that his rival was watching him in return with a threateningly cunning gaze. As though able to read the mind of his opponent, Onion Knight grasped that Warrior of Light was warning him ‘not to overstep his boundaries’.

Silently, Onion Knight switched to his defence partner, wondering if she had any questions to ask Celes. However, Terra turned to his direction and shook her head in silence.

... Onion Knight was stuck.

“Defence, do you have any further questions to ask the Witness?” Gabranth called upon him, noticing the abnormally long pause. “If not, Miss Chere would be allowed to exit the stand.”

Onion Knight scrambled through the ocean of his mind, hastily think of effective questions to as Celes. He knew there was something he needed to ask, he just couldn’t grasp what it was.

“Celes, when you found the contents of Zidane’s locker, were they exactly as seen in the photos?” He then queried the Witness, having glanced over the testimony notes hastily.

Onion Knight had resulted to throwing any question that came to him, desperately hoping it would fall through.

Celes simply nodded, “I had not moved, or even touched, anything that was inside Zidane’s locker. The photos you see before you show the exact condition of the locker as of when I found it during the time I was there.”

Onion Knight bit the inside of his lip irritably, cursing his usually ‘vast’ intellect on failing him when he needed it the most.

“There is no point in getting worked up over this, Onion Knight.” Warrior of Light muttered with a chuckle, shrugging his shoulders in a nonchalant manner. “Accept it; you have no more questions left to ask.”

There was silence.

Onion Knight couldn’t deny it at this point; he had no more questions regarding this testimony. Without any valuable detail regarding the person who hid the Hair Ornament in Zidane’s locker, there was no way he could pursue this aspect of the case any further. In addition to this, he would lose Celes as an effective witness to this case, resulting in the information gained during their meeting two days ago practically worthless to this case.

Having lost the momentum of his forward-thinking, Onion Knight turned towards Celes hopelessly. She was glaring back at him with a stern expression.

Onion Knight felt his heart leap up in fright upon seeing Celes with such piercing eyes. He was dumbstruck, unable to grasp the reason behind this tense expression.

However, it then occurred to him: Celes was expecting him to question her on a specific aspect of her testimony. Whilst she had stated that she was neutral to the court case, there was a miniscule sway in her bias indicating that she wanted Onion Knight to succeed in proving Zidane’s innocence.

A silent chuckle escaped Onion Knight’s breath, finding Celes’ subtle indications rather peculiar. And yet, that expression she gave was what he needed to confirm that this Cross-Examination wasn’t over just yet.

From Celes’ stern expression alone, he knew: there was a flaw in the testimony.

Feeling as though a sudden spark jumped his mind back in gear, Onion Knight glanced over the Witness testimony notes once more. From an initial examination, the testimony was seen as flawless to him. It was well informed, detailed, and consistent. So then, what was missing?

He then thought back to his meeting with Celes two days ago, reflecting upon what they discussed about

the room directly below the scene of the incident.

It was then when it had occurred to him that he needed to link up this testimony to when Celes found out about the contents of Laboratory Room 1. That very room holds the very key that could throw this entire case on its head.

But the question still remains: How would he be able to link up this testimony to Laboratory Room 1? Terra watched Onion Knight as her own curiosity rose, wondering what was on his mind.

Flashbacks then occurred as Onion Knight continued his swift analysis of the testimony:

“After Friday’s Court Trial ... I decided to do my own digging.”

Celes’ voice from two days ago echoed throughout the vast reaches of Onion Knight’s mind.

“I cannot say much, but I can admit that it was in relation to my testimony on how I was able to find these.”

He found it.

“Well then, it seems you have no more questions to ask the Witness.” Gabranth concluded, his patience waning. “Miss Chere, you may exit-.”

“HOLD IT!” Onion Knight bellowed unexpectedly, intentionally cutting off the High Judge. “Your Honour, I have one more question to ask the Witness! Please don’t send her away just yet!”

“Tch! You dare interrupt the High Judge Gabranth!?” Warrior of Light yelled out in protest as a self-elected stand in for the High Judge, finding Onion Knight’s lack of respect intolerable. “He was just about to conclude the Cross-Examination before you opened your-!”

“So be it, one more question.” Gabranth unexpectedly accepted with a *huff*, completely ignoring Warrior of Light’s support. “However, just so we are clear, Knight of the Onion ... my patience is at its limit. Prove to me that I have made a valued decision.”

Warrior of Light crossed his arms and veered away in an angered mumble, “Oh, for the love of...!”

Onion Knight returned his focus to Celes immediately, his eyes lit up like a revived flame.

“Celes, in your testimony, you had stated to the court that the event regarding you finding Rydia’s Hair Ornament occurred not long after the incident itself took place.”

Celes nodded in confirmation.

Seeing this, Onion Knight crossed his arms and gave off a confident smirk as he let loose what was on his mind.

“So, my question is: Why was this not brought up during Friday’s court trial?”

Celes’ eyes widened, a gasp of shock escaping her. The crowds of students suddenly caught on to this with heightened intrigue, shuffling up on their seats as some began to whisper amongst one another.

Warrior of Light was even caught out by this, dropping his ignorant expression as he listened in. Terra, on the other hand, observed cautiously, realising where Onion Knight was going with this.

“... I didn’t have the chance.” Celes murmured hesitantly, her gaze shifting away awkwardly.

“And why is that?” Onion Knight pressed her, refusing to let her escape. “There was countless times where you could have brought up the subject; in my personal opinion, directly after Bartz Klauser’s testimony would have been perfect.”

“I...”

However, Onion Knight didn’t stop there.

“Warrior of Light!” He abruptly called to his rival.

Warrior of Light straightened up in surprise, completely oblivious to the possibility that he would be called upon by his opposition.

“From what I have been told, you had entered a ‘contractual agreement’ with Celes at some point before this trial, enforcing her that she was not allowed to speak directly about her testimony to anyone until she took the stand today.”

Warrior of Light kept silent, his expression firm as he listened to his court rival.

"I believe the court has the right to know, Warrior of Light; when did you find out Celes was a witness to this case?"

Having been forced into a psychological corner, Warrior of Light released a long bitter sigh. He was next to realise what Onion Knight was referring to.

"Friday ... soon after Academy hours." He muttered arrogantly, regretting his decision to speak almost immediately.

The entire hall gasped. The crowd of Academy students watched in shock and awe as they finally caught on to this revelation.

"And there we have it." Onion Knight concluded as he returned his focus onto the Witness. "Celes, I would like you to admit to the court the reason as to why you 'opted' to hide eligible evidence – namely, the location of Rydia's Hair Ornament – during Friday's trial."

Celes, feeling as though she was just taken through a high-speed rollercoaster ride, took in a deep, refreshing breath. She took this opportunity to regain her thoughts, deciding to ultimately comply with Onion Knight's request ... even though she knew it was going to happen eventually.

"Yes, I purposely neglected to tell the court about the location of Rydia's Hair Ornament during Friday's trial." She admitted truthfully, a faint grin breaking through as she spoke. "You see, I had originally planned to speak up in court that day about its whereabouts. However, I then stopped and thought to myself: 'Why not I just wait and further investigate the incident myself after the first trial finishes? If I followed through with this, I would have a stronger testimony during the next trial and help resolve the entire case in the process.' And so, after the previous trial concluded and Academy hours ended, I stayed behind and commenced with my own personal investigation."

Gabranth nodded as he listened to the Witness' explanation, his eyes closed and expression firm.

"It was a decision most noble and valiant, Miss Chere, yet I must condemn such actions as foolish." He stated, seemingly not approving of the idea whatsoever. "Your initial testimony had served its purpose, and ultimately resolved the location of the stolen Hair Ornament. However, I must now ask for you to testify to the court on your findings during your 'personal investigation'."

He banged the gavel, concluding the current testimony.

Cross-Examination 1 ... Complete!

Onion Knight felt his shoulders drop as mental exhaustion struck him hard. After a moment of refreshing his mind, he glanced curiously over to Celes, feeling somewhat apologetic for throwing her into the 'deep end' during the conclusion of the Cross-Examination.

However, what caught his eye was Celes' returning gaze and confident smile.

"... Well played." She coolly murmured in acknowledgement.

Onion Knight didn't know how to respond, finding it odd that she was congratulating him for calling her out. Grinning back, he straightened his posture once again, reminding himself that he needed to be in top form.

Shifting to the opposing side, Warrior of Light was glaring at his rival with antagonistic eyes, his arms crossed and body tensioned as his frustration rose up deep within. Observing Onion Knight overcoming each challenge irritated him beyond belief, reflecting upon the results of the previous trial that were still fresh in his mind. However, he was patient. The trial was far from over, and it was only a matter of time before this 'battle' turns in his favour.

For within the grasp of his right hand, currently hidden from view ... was a single USB Memory Stick.

20 - Arc 3 (3): Turning the Tide

“Ooh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh...!” Kefka Palazzo began to laugh manically, almost unable to hold himself back from jumping up and down on his allocated seat amongst the crowd of students. “I can SEE it, Ultimecia! I can SEE the rift between the students on the stage growing apart by the minute! Eh-hahahahaa! I can’t contain this excitement brewing inside of me! I feel like I’m going INSANE with anticipation!!!”

“Calm yourself, Kefka.” Ultimecia commanded in a low casual tone, having positioned herself sitting with one leg crossed over the other along with her posture displayed with perfection. “This is merely the warm up to the main event. Our boy Squall has yet to take the stand, remember?”

“Geh-heh-hee...! Why are we WAITING though!? Could you just fast-forward time and be DONE WITH IT!?” Kefka impatiently threw his arms up in complaint, squatting on his seat using the tips of his toes for balance.

However, Ultimecia shook her head in decline, “Events like this need the significant ‘build-up’ in order for the result to be more ... ‘climatic’, as it were. Imagine your ‘explosive’ art, for example: if we were to see an explosion without depth or build up behind it, we as spectators would find it simply meaningless and without purpose.”

“HMPH!” Kefka grunted in disgust, unable to argue with her words as he bounced back into a seated position. “... Explosions have meaning, I can assure you.”

“For now, let us enjoy the show.” Ultimecia concluded, showing off a seductive smile.

“... You two sound awfully suspicious.” A voice abruptly muttered to the two Academy Tutors. “What are you plotting?”

Sitting beside them was another fellow Academy Tutor, Kuja, who had overheard their conversation as clear as day. His arms were crossed, his posture tall and prideful, and his expression wary: Kuja flaunted the idea that he could see through any hidden guise ... especially Kefka’s.

“*GASP...!!!* Are you accusing us!?” Kefka melodramatically drew back in horror, struggling to hide his fakery due to his typical over-the-top manner. “And here I thought we were close Frie- No. Wait, what was it called again...? OH, I KNOW! – ‘Adversaries!’”

“Err ... Correction: Adversary means ‘Enemy’.” Kuja then pointed out mockingly, finding Kefka’s attempt of flattery ironic to say the least.

“... I stand by what I said.” Kefka defended himself with a satisfied smirk, only to close in on Kuja and lower his voice to a menacing level. “Ooh-hoh-hoo ... Are you perhaps STILL upset of the fact that I refuse to consider music as a form of ‘art’?”

“THAT’S NOT-!” Kuja bellowed out as his temper broke out, stopping himself abruptly just as he realised that he was about to stoop to the ‘clown’s’ level.

It didn’t help that nearby students had turned to face the two with curious stares.

Taking a moment to clear his throat, Kuja returned to his normal, flamboyant self, “As it so happens, I simply overheard your peculiar conversation about the trial. Your ... ‘narrow-minded’ opinion is a separate matter entirely.”

The two tutors, after heated tension engulfed their aura, glanced away in spite of one another. Ultimecia merely watched the two blundering fools by the side-lines, finding it pointless to include herself in their pathetic spat. Kefka began to scribble on a sheet of paper – seemingly a drawing depicting chaos – as a means of blowing off steam.

Kuja, on the other hand, returned his focus on the court trial, sitting back on his seat slightly as he eyed

the stage in its entirety. His gaze shifted from one person to another, analysing their various changes in expressions over the course of the trial. He then halted his gaze over Zidane, who had his back to him, and began to wonder.

What is he thinking right now...?

On the Court Stage...

“Your Honour, I would like to present evidence to the court that I believe is paramount to the Witness’ next testimony.” Onion Knight announced to Gabranth and the court, assuring that the time was right to reveal a portion of his hand.

With that, he withdrew from his pocket and held out a series of photos, all of which consisted of three major aspects: an open window, a damaged blazer, and the floor of the room with spots of blood and hairs. Prishe, relieved to finally be moving from her position after relentlessly fidgeting in one place for so long, passed along the new series photographs to the High Judge Gabranth.

“You all seem to like your photos...” Gabranth murmured as he scattered the photos across the surface of his desk, noticing a trend.

“These photos were taken by our Celes Chere during her personal investigation in Laboratory Room 1, Floor 5 of the Academy. It is situated directly above Math’s Room 3 – the room of the crime scene, for that matter – and holds significant items that may solidify our ‘second suspect’.”

Gabranth accepted the Defence’s insight, examining each photo with due care and attention.

“I can confirm this, Your Honour.” Celes casually added, a spark appearing in her eyes as she proudly explained the new evidence. “I have even taken to liberty of updating the photos with marked citations.”

Ah! That’s right! She promised us that she would reference the photos. Onion Knight suddenly remembered, grateful to see Celes come prepared. ...*It relieving to see she kept to her word.*

Prishe transferred the updated photos over to the High Judge, considerately placing each one next to their original counterpart in order to compare. Gabranth eyes widened with surprise at the informative yet easy to follow markings of the photographs. In fact, he was very appreciative of this.

“I ... I’m actually impressed.” The High Judge complimented in unexpected shock. “You have certainly taken the case to heart. However, how effective this may be to the case is an entirely separate matter.” Celes nodded in response, understanding the High Judge’s words. To be praised in such a manner by someone of Gabranth’s stature was undeniably gratifying, yet she knew these ‘additions’ and ‘gimmicks’ meant little to the overall progression of this trial. If she wanted to make a true impact to the case ... she needed to give her all during the next testimony.

“Prosecution, do you have anything you wish to say before we commence to the second witness testimony?” The High Judge questioned as he turned his attention to Warrior of Light, who he had noticed had not spoken since the end of the previous testimony.

However, Warrior of Light merely shook his head, dismissing the offer to speak his mind. He had an oddly calm composure, as though patiently waiting for the sufficient moment to make his next move.

Onion Knight, having noticed this strange change in atmosphere, warily glared towards him with a cautious expression, wondering as to what he was plotting.

“I see ... well, without further ado, Miss Chere: please testify to the court about your findings during your ‘personal investigation’.”

“Yes, Your Honour.” Celes nodded confidently, straightening herself up as she prepared for her new testimony.

Onion Knight set himself up for what was about to occur, knowing that it was crucial for him to maintain the upper-hand. And yet for some reason, he couldn’t help but keep Warrior of Light at the corner of his eye. The abnormal eerie tension that loomed over him was somewhat creepy, indicating that he had

something game-changing up his sleeve.

Witness Testimony 2: Celes Chere.

“To be honest, it was only out of sheer coincidence that I had investigated Lab Room 1 in the first place, seeing as my initial investigation of the scene of the crime had ended up in disappointment. Having found no new evidence in that room, I had almost decided to leave the Academy that day and planned to return on a later date. However, I was somewhat still curious about an aspect regarding the smashed window in the room, specifically I was wondering how the culprit had made their escape after the assault. So, I peered out of the window’s gap and examined the area outside. Whilst I initially couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary, I soon noticed one of the windows was open directly above where I was positioned.

“I didn’t think twice about checking the room above, I had rushed up to the 5th Floor and began my investigation in the Laboratory Room 1 – where the back-corner window there was left open. It wasn’t long before I found the items indicated in the photos you see before you: the yanked window, the damaged blazer, and the hair strands were all accounted for. I can assure you, none of these were tampered whatsoever during the time I took them.

“I believe this new lead may change the way we see this case entirely; in fact, I’m certain this would help considerably to find the truth we have been striving towards.”

Witness Testimony ... Complete.

Celes stood there on the Witness Stand, completely breathless after having poured her heart and soul in the testimony. She was undeniably relieved to finally reveal it to the court, having had to bottle up her full experience from anyone that questioned her – aside from Warrior of Light, who had implemented the contractual agreement in the first place. Due to this, she could only rely on giving away limited sections of her investigation to those deeply involved in the case – specifically Onion Knight and Terra.

It was a truly frustrating situation.

The High Judge Gabranth, having listened to the testimony with full concentration, sat silently for some time. With so much information being given to the court, he had to take time and process it all. This boded similarly to the crowd of the court, who were racking their brains as they tried to remember it all. Finally, he spoke out.

“Well, Miss Chere ... that was quite the testimony.” He expressed in surprise, almost having to exhale exhaustedly by the mental strain he had to endure. “Defence! ... Please tell me you wrote all that down.”
SLAM!

Several students amongst the crowd leapt in sudden fright, hearing the abrupt noise echo out of nowhere. They all cautiously turned to the source of the noise ... and their initial shock turned to a simultaneous realisation, acting as if it was expected.

Onion Knight had slammed his fist hard against the desk of the Defence stand, his face full of sweat and wheezing with exhaustion. His glaring gaze shot towards the High Judge, drooping almost to the point of collapse. In his grasps were both a pen and his notes written on a notepad, having frantically scribbled every detail of the testimony as he could without missing a single word.

“*Huff ... huff ... huff...* Y-Yes ... Your Honour.” Onion Knight answered breathlessly, stuttering and slurring his words as he spoke. “I-it was a challenge ... but I was able to gather every detail.”

... *This court is in dire need of a scribe, though.* His mind expressed, yet he regrettably decided to miss out that part, mainly for his own reputational benefit.

“A-are you ok, Onion Knight?” Terra then worriedly asked, concerned for his wellbeing after what

seemed to be a daunting task.

Onion Knight glanced back at her with a weak yet responding nod, “Y-yes, I’m fine. This ... this is nothing.”

He refused to admit that he had almost lost track of Celes’ testimony at certain parts; so, in turn, he had to rush double the speed in order to both catch up to her whilst also gain every necessary detail. It was difficult, but he had just about accomplished it.

However, after catching a curious glimpse of his notes, Terra couldn’t help but give him an odd stare, “You ... do realise a lot of this, we already know, right?”

“I know that!” Onion Knight bickered, defending his choice arrogantly, “You never truly know if there was some small, specific detail we may have missed.”

Deciding not to argue about the matter, Terra just nodded awkwardly, “That’s true ... I guess?”

Through all the commotion of the audience, the small bickering between Onion Knight and Terra, and Gabranth trying his best to grasp the entire thing; Warrior of Light kept his silence. Although everyone was oblivious to him, there was a subtle, condescending grin hidden underneath his stern expression. He was waiting ... as all the right pieces fell into place.

“*A-hem... * Well then, Knight of the Onion, if there is nothing else needing to be brought up, you may cross-examine the witness.” The High Judge Gabranth pressed on, hoping to move the trial forward without further delay.

Why does he keep calling me that...? Onion Knight mentally groaned, finding the nickname given to him by the High Judge rather bothersome.

Regardless of the thought and after giving off a much-required sigh, He turned to Gabranth with a revitalized – although somewhat forced – expression, “I’m ready, Your Honour.”

It was a tall order, yet if Onion Knight could successfully analyse Celes’ testimony and gain the necessary information, then there would be no doubt in his mind that he could ultimately convince the court of Zidane’s innocence. With so much possibilities displayed through the testimony and the accompanying evidence, the thought of succeeding this case had never been so close to his grasps. Onion Knight was undeniably psyched ... but also cautious. There was one aspect that still plagued his mind and set him back from a tranquil mind: Warrior of Light. This prolonged and unnerving silence from Warrior of Light played at him from the back of his mind, believing that his opponent was hiding something that could critically jeopardize whatever lead he may have. However, he pushed the thought away from his consciousness, feeling as though he was overthinking it. He turned a blind eye from his glaring opponent, acting oblivious as he observed his notes in preparation of the cross-examination. At that moment, what Onion Knight didn’t realise ... was that his looming concerns were truly warranted.

Cross-Examination 2: Celes Chere.

“I must apologise, Celes.” Onion Knight began, feeling the need to get this off his chest first. “With so much information, it will take me some time and plenty of questions to get through it all. I hope you don’t mind.”

Celes shook her head with an accepting smile, “Not to worry, I was expecting this. Take all the time you need, Onion Knight, all that matters right now is finding the truth to this entire mess.”

Onion Knight couldn’t help but give her an appreciative smile, finding her kind, support words uplifting. Feeling in high spirits, he skimmed through his own notes, highlighting every aspect of the testimony that caught his eye. Due to the testimony being so hefty, Onion Knight decided to most ideal option was to break it down by matter of significance to the case.

In other words, he had to get rid of the filler.

At first, this was incredibly difficult for Onion Knight, having been completely in the mindset throughout

the entirety of this case that every aspect of a testimony holds significant importance. He had to bite through his stubbornness, hating the fact that he had to go against what was second nature to him at this point. Regardless, he knew it would do him no good if he limited his options, he needed to break out of his comfort zone.

And then, as if by complete surprise, Onion Knight felt his entire world open up. He was shocked at how much of the testimony had been broken down and reorganised in his mind, his pen hand automatically circling and highlighting specific sections that were more important than others. It took time – as Onion Knight had predicted – yet Onion Knight had reworded the testimony into a more ‘bite-sized’ statement:

“During the initial investigation, I (Celes Chere) was unable to find any new evidence at the crime scene. Before leaving, I decided to check the smashed window out of curiosity for how the true culprit had escaped during time of incident. Although I was unable to find anything out of the ordinary at first glance, I noticed an open window situated directly above. I shifted my investigation to Laboratory Room 1 of the 5th Floor; there, I was able to find the back-corner window left open, along with various hair strands on the floor and the damaged blazer stuffed inside the Academy locker – as shown by the photographs.”

A cast of satisfaction was seen on Onion Knight’s mug, believing everything was now set in its correct place. Turning back to Celes with a prepared glance, he knew exactly where to go with this cross-examination.

“Celes, if you don’t mind me asking: What did you intend to find during your initial investigation of the crime-scene?” Onion Knight began to question, showing general curiosity on the matter. “Considering that Firion, Terra, and I had previously investigated Math’s Room 3, there would be no further need to check the room for evidence. Even our very own Headmistress Cosmos would be able to confirm this, seeing as she was the one who oversaw the investigation in the first place.”

“Well, aside from the connections regarding the Hair Ornament ... I honestly just did it on a whim.” Celes answered with a light shrug, acting somewhat disappointed of herself for not giving a more satisfactory answer. “Believe me, I wasn’t attempting to downplay your previous investigation – in fact, I felt that you, Firion and Terra did a wonderful job in gathering evidence – I just had this sneaking suspicion that there was more to it than meets the eye.”

Onion Knight nodded, finding Celes’ stance on the investigation matter rather understandable, “I see your point, if we think back to the first investigation, we ourselves had completely missed the surveillance footage, it was only because it was eventually brought up during Friday’s trial that we were able to check. So, it wouldn’t seem too out of place to have an extra pair of eyes monitor the crime scene.”

With both Onion Knight and Celes on a similar wavelength, the cross-examination was running as smoothly as one could imagine. It was as though there was no hesitancy or hidden motives behind Celes’ words nor his own, everything was theoretically out on the table for the court to see. And with Warrior of Light not interrupting, Onion Knight could get as much information as he required without unnecessary hassle.

“It was only by chance that I had checked the smashed window, and – whilst it wasn’t what I expected at the time – I was rather relieved that my own investigation wasn’t in vein.” Celes commented with pride, feeling satisfied by her findings.

The transitioning was perfect.

“Speaking of the ‘smashed window’, Celes: was the Lab Room’s opened window on the floor above the only clue you were able to find during that time?” Onion Knight immediately brought, not letting this opportunity go to waste.

“As I had stated in my testimony, I was unable to find anything else out of the ordinary – and I had checked that area very thoroughly.” Celes then answered, her serious expression further proving how

truthful she was in her words.

Onion Knight nodded, cupping his chin with his hand as he crossed his arms, "I see, I was just curious due to previous evidence showing the tufts of blue blazer fabric caught on the window's glass shards, so it was to my assumption that there could possibly be other clues and pieces of evidence caught on the outside wall of the building."

"It does make sense; the blazer was ripped more prominently than what was seen on the window shards." She added in agreement, yet showed a solemn expression. "Unfortunately, after thorough inspection of the outside area, I couldn't find any other indication of the culprits escape aside from the opened window directly above."

This was a slight snag, yet Onion Knight considered it as nothing close to major. He glanced once again over his notes, ready to move on to the next topic of discussion. Just then, he caught Terra from the corner of his eye closing in on him, presumably to express her thoughts on the matter at hand.

"Onion Knight, I'm finding Warrior of Light's constant silence very unsettling." Terra whispered anxiously, "What do you suppose he's planning?"

Onion Knight was silent momentarily, giving a swift yet cautious glance towards his oddly silent opposition, feeling his thoughts freeze up at the condescending glare he was giving.

"Just ignore him, he's probably acting all high and mighty just to intimidate us." He murmured back to her, switching his sights back to the notes in his hand. "Whatever he's scheming, I'm sure we'll be vigilant enough counter him."

"Right..." Terra hesitated in a murmur, uncertain by his words of encouragement. "I'm ... not so sure we should be taking this lightly; I mean, he seems set to hitting back with something big."

"Mm..." Onion Knight bit the inside of his lip, ultimately knowing there was truth to her words. "As much as I hate to say it, we can only wait and see what he has in store for us."

"Defence, do you have any further questions to ask our witness?" The High Judge abruptly pressured, growing tired of the delay.

"Ah! Of course! Sorry, Your Honour." Onion Knight hastily apologised, becoming suddenly alert.

As he rushed into his next question for Celes, Terra stood quietly beside him, her eyes wavering between Onion Knight's cross-examination on Celes and Warrior of Light's daunting aura. It was then – although difficult to get a clear visual – she caught sight of Warrior of Light fiddling with some sort of small object, hidden away within his hand as if purposefully waiting to reveal it.

She could only give a hesitant sigh at this point, knowing not to stall Onion Knight any longer.

"*A-hem...!* Moving on to Lab Room 1: Celes, you had told the court that these new pieces of evidence were not tampered at all during the time their photos were taken." Onion Knight reflected, holding up his notes as he paraphrased her words. "Tell me, though, did you inspect the evidence any further after you took the photos?"

Celes paused momentarily, as though hesitant for some reason. She warily glanced over to Warrior of Light, who, in turn, stared back at her with piercing eyes. Onion Knight caught this peculiar motion, yet didn't know what to make of it. From his stance, he considered the thought that Celes was still being held back by the contractual agreement she had made with Warrior of Light.

However, there was part of Onion Knight's mind that thought differently; thought there could be something more...

Finally, Celes worked up the courage to answer the question, "No ... no, I didn't tamper the evidence. The only piece of actual evidence I retrieved was..."

... *The silver ear-stud.* Onion Knight finished her sentence in his thoughts, seeing as she had tailed off. Her answer was consistent with the discussions he and Terra had with her a few days previous, with the only aspect not included was the ear-stud she had presented to them alongside the original set of photos. With Celes indicating towards its existence, Onion Knight had no choice but to bring it up to the

court. He currently had the ear-stud pouched up inside his pocket, hidden away alongside other pouched evidence yet to be revealed to the court – including the strands of brown hair he had kept with him since the very beginning.

“Witness, could you please finish your sentence?” Gabranth then pressured Celes, wondering what she was about to say.

“There’s no need for that, Your Honour.” Onion Knight immediately interrupted, causing every set of eyes to turn towards him in sync. “I have with me the sole piece of evidence Celes retrieved during her investigation in Lab Room 1.”

He placed the silver ear-stud on the surface of his Defence Stand, ultimately revealing it to the court. At that moment, the ever restless Priske stepped over to the Defence Stand in order to retrieve and transfer the stud to the High Judge Gabranth. As the pouch was given to Gabranth, Onion Knight couldn’t help but feel anxious in some way. This crucial piece of evidence was hidden from the court for a considerable amount of time, so there were some levels of uncertainty surrounding whether this could potentially result in him receiving a penalty or not.

“Defence, I would like you to clarify to the court on how you had this piece of evidence in your possession.” The High Judge ordered, holding up the pouched ear-stud as his piercing glare was fixated on Onion Knight.

“Certainly, Your Honour.” Onion Knight answered with a nod, although felt as though butterflies had entered his stomach after witnessing the intense glare in Gabranth’s eyes. “I was given this piece of evidence by Celes during the time I and Terra met with her 2 days ago. For those wondering, this was an unplanned meeting, we stumbled upon each other by mere chance. She handed this ear-stud to me alongside the previously un-cited photos of the Lab Room 1 evidence. Whist I apologise that this piece of evidence was hidden from the court for some time, I deemed the timing of its reveal necessary to the progression of this court trial.”

“Fret not, Knight of the Onion, there is no need for you to apologise.” Gabranth stated as he shook his head sternly, “Your explanation is adequate, although it does ponder the question of: Why? Why would you only reveal this piece of evidence to the court now? Why not reveal it alongside the photographs when they were handed over to the court?”

Onion Knight crossed his arms, showing a cautious expression as he was about to reveal the truth, “Because, Your Honour, Celes Chere is currently under contractual agreement with the Prosecution; where all known forms of evidence would have to be handed to him and information relating to her witness testimony must only be revealed and discussed with the Prosecution up until the time of court trial.”

There was sudden chatter amongst the crowds of students in the courtroom, taken by surprise by this surprising turn of events. The gossips grew louder, as Onion Knight, Terra, Celes, Warrior of Light, and Gabranth himself waited in silence. The atmosphere changed to an antagonistic vibe, various members of the crowd spouting out comments and taunts.

“Why would Warrior of Light do something so sketchy and back-handed!?”

“Yeah! Isn’t he meant to be the Student Council President!?”

“Why would Celes go along with it!? She’s a member of the Student Council herself!”

“Does this mean the Student Council is a corrupted entity in the Academy!?”

BANG! BANG! BANG!

“ORDER IN THE COURT!” High Judge Gabranth interrupted with a bellowing command, sending the courtroom into immediate silence the moment he banged his gavel. “I will not have baseless accusations and insults be thrown around by spectators in my courtroom!”

After the crowd cowered in the silence, Gabranth turned to Warrior of Light with a calmer tone to his voice.

“Is this true, Prosecution?” He asked, showing a sincere expression in the process.

Warrior of Light didn't say a word, deciding instead to only give a single nod in response. However, what was odd was his reaction to the reveal; he wasn't showing any form of guilt ... he was giving a dark grin. Shivers ran down the spines of Onion Knight, Terra, and even Celes. They didn't know what was going through his mind, instead only guess that it wasn't at all pleasant.

“I see...” Gabranth then murmured, sounding almost speechless by the answer. “(...how outrageous...) *Hmph...!* I do not care for what goes on behind the scenes regarding witnesses, all I care for is finding the truth! I hereby deem the Prosecution's use of contractual agreements VOID!”

BANG!

There was a sigh of relief given by Onion Knight, Terra, and especially Celes, grateful for the High Judge's verdict on the matter. Although Onion Knight could not help but wonder what the High Judge had muttered before coming to this conclusion. Regardless, he was happy for Celes, knowing that she wasn't held back by any contracts or limits made by Warrior of Light.

However, upon seeing that Warrior of Light was still giving off his dark, condescending grin, Onion Knight fell back into his cautious state. He was desperate to call out his opposition, wondering as to what he was hiding from the court. Yet, the questions remained: when would be the optimal time to call him out? And, what would happen if he did?

With this, the cross-examination pressed on...

“Defence, what do you suppose this new piece of evidence could mean to the case?” Gabranth questioned curiously, continuously inspecting the small beaded ear-piece in his possession. “Would it not be possible that this ear-stud could have been dropped by a student prior to the time of the incident?”

Onion Knight could only shake his head in uncertainty, “I'm not sure as of yet, Your Honour. It is likely the case that someone may have dropped prior or during the incident, depending on who it may belong to. However, I do wonder on why it would have been dropped in the Lab Room in the first place, seeing as it would make considerably more sense if the stud was left behind in a P.E. changing room.”

“Hmm ... that is a valid point, Defence.” Gabranth nodded in thought, before turning to Celes, “Witness, could you please add to your testimony on how you found this piece of evidence.”

“Yes, Your Honour.” Celes confirmed with a confident nod, “I found the ear-stud alongside the other pieces of evidence during my investigation in Lab Room 1. It was located on the floor nearby the cupboard of where the damaged blazer was found.”

Onion Knight, upon hearing this new addition to the testimony, included it within his notes, specifically where Celes had spoken about finding the other pieces of evidence. Although it wasn't anything significant as of yet, it did in fact pose a single question that he hoped to clarify.

“Celes, hearing about how you found the ear-stud does cause me to wonder: why did you only pick up the stud yet take photos of the other evidence found in the room?” He asked casually, seeing as he felt it wasn't a crucial question.

“I was simply worried that if anyone oblivious to the situation had entered the room between then and the trial today, it could possibly have been kicked away.” Celes answered back lightly, believing it was the right thing to do at the time.

“Understandable.” Onion Knight commented, seeing Celes' side to this case. “However, would it not make sense to require the damaged blazer as well? Surely, leaving it stuffed away in that cupboard would run the risk of someone finding it and throwing it away without due care and attention.”

As if her mind clicked to the thought, Celes gave out a light gasp in realisation, “AH! That's ... true.” She acted as though she was beginning to mentally beat herself up over such an oversight, wondering constantly as to why she would miss something so important. Onion Knight caught this, feeling rather sorrowful to her about bringing up the oversight. Yet, in truth, he was now able to set his mind on the

next important aspect for this case: the damaged blazer.

“Your Honour, I have no further questions for the Witness.” He announced to the High Judge, completely in control of the trial at this point – or so he reckoned. “I believe that our next course of action is to retrieve the damaged blazer that was found in Lab Room 1 and further inspect it.”

“Yes. I, too, believe this is the most ideal option we have to pursue.” The High Judge agreed with a solid nod, giving a confident smile as he held out his gavel. “Well then, if there are no further objections: Miss Chere, you may leave the-!”

“...Objection...” A sudden low voice echoed out in disruption, freezing the High Judge from finishing his announcement whilst sending Onion Knight, Terra, Celes and the rest of the court into a shocked state. With his eyes wide, Onion Knight warily switched sights to the origin of the echo. There, a hand placed firmly on the surface of his stand, was Warrior of Light. His intense glare was set, and there was no sign of weakness in his expression whatsoever. The only aspect of his expression that was breaking through the condescending aura was his small, certain grin. He was finally able to speak up against his opposition, and the feeling felt glorious.

Why now? Onion Knight warily questioned, his fists clenched at the thought of his opposition ruining his stride. *What’s he about to do?*

“Prosecution, would you care to explain the reasoning behind your last-minute objection?” The High Judge Gabranth pressed, rather irritated by this sudden disruption.

“I certainly shall, Your Honour.” Warrior of Light answered with an arrogant smirk, shifting away from his stand. “I must first applaud Onion Knight and Celes for their very informative ‘discussions’ on the case. You could say it was very ... ‘enlightening’.”

“Get to the point, Warrior of Light; you’re only making yourself sound like an arrogant prick right now.”

Onion Knight bickered back with crossed arms, now wishing his opposition just stayed quiet.

However, Warrior of Light ignored him and continued his long-awaited speech, “So, it brings me great displeasure to ruin such a phenomenal display of wit and deduction. For I have with me ... a certain piece of evidence that changes how we see this case – specifically, Miss Chere’s recent testimony.”

At that very moment, he held out his right hand, revealing to the court what had been in his hand the entire time of the trial. Onion Knight was the first to react, unable to believe his eyes upon witnessing the object that sat in the palm of his opponent’s hand. Terra was close behind him in terms of reaction, letting out a small gasp as she lightly clasped a hand over her mouth. Even the High Judge Gabranth had let out a reaction, rising up from his seat as his mouth fell open in shock.

Sitting within the palm of Warrior of Light’s hand ... was a USB Stick.

Is ... is that USB Stick the one stolen from Firion? Onion Knight wondered with a widened glare, leaning forward to gain a closer look. *How did he get that?*

“Now, I know what you’re thinking, Onion Knight.” Warrior of Light then chuckled, as though being able to read his mind. “You’re probably thinking: ‘Could that be the same USB stick that was previously stolen from Firion?’ Well, I can assure you this is a different USB – albeit it has a similar type of evidence in its memory.”

Onion Knight was taken aback by his words, “...What do you mean?”

“Hm-hmm...! Oh, there’s no need in me to explain to you or even the court.” Warrior of Light shook his head, holding onto his confident grin in the process. “...All you need to do is watch the footage.”

Onion Knight stood his ground, hoping Warrior of Light was bluffing about the importance of the footage. He could imagine his opponent was pulling off one of his egotistic schemes to sway the court in his favour. And yet, deep down in his mind, he knew ... Warrior of Light was being genuine.

The USB stick was passed on from Warrior of Light to the High Judge Gabranth, courtesy of an oddly silent Priske. Even she knew that what was held within the USB was not to her preference, preferring not to think about its contents.

Upon claiming the stick, Gabranth reached down underneath the Judge's Podium, pulling out what happened to be a laptop hooked in with a HDMI cable. Without a word spoken, he placed the USB into the matching socket on the side of the laptop. As this was happening, the rest of the court waited anxiously, noticing an enlarged, scrolling projector screen emerge from above the Academy stage. The moment the projector screen clicked into place, an image of what was shown on the High Judge's laptop was revealed. A pause icon was showing in the centre of what was the security camera footage, showing a specific room of the Academy through its HD lens. It didn't take long for Onion Knight and the rest of the court to grasp which room of the Academy it was documenting: Laboratory Room 1. Everything about the room seemed to be in check with what one would expect to be a science-based schoolroom: the prolonging tables fitted with tap, sockets and other contraptions; backless stools used for efficient movability when executing experiments and tests; various goggles and lab coats hanging up in the nearby corner; a row of cupboards holding numerous books, equipment and items; and, to top it off, windows spanning the entire length of the room.

Based on the bottom of the video, the video text read: Friday 14th September – 15:30:00. It was showing the time of when Celes had investigated the room.

However, the moment he caught an eye of the spanning windows, he noticed something peculiar: the corner window that meant to be yanked open ... was closed shut.

Onion Knight glanced over towards Celes for some reassurance, warily curious as to why it was showing this. However, to his complete surprise; he noticed that she was trembling on the spot. She had lost colouring in her skin, and a bead of sweat could be seen trickling down the side of her neck. This was a completely new side of her that Onion Knight and even Terra had ever seen.

"Celes, what's wrong?" Terra asked in worry.

Celes was silent, frozen in place.

"Now then, Your Honour ... would you like to do the honours?" Warrior of Light offered, slightly exaggerating his movements as if to show he was now in control.

Gabranth didn't say a word, only giving of an almost non-existent sigh. He then hovered the mouse cursor over the pause icon, and pressed 'Play'.

At first, there was no movement showing in the footage, the room seemingly vacant at the time.

However, after a sight fast-forward in the video, a figure could be seen stumbling into the room, scanning the place as if they were looking for something they had lost. Based on the figure's attire, body shape, and hair, it was easy to tell: the figure was Celes herself.

Onion Knight's eyes were fixed on the screen, analysing the video as much as he possibly could. As the video continued its run, the Celes that was standing in the footage was searching every part of the room. From assumption, she was searching hastily for any possible proof that the culprit(s) had situated themselves there at some point during the time of the incident. After a small while, she finally stalled, having opened the corner cupboard and inspected its contents.

"Observe closely, people of the court." Warrior then announced, as if commenting on the video whilst it was still playing. "This is the vital moment..."

On the screen, Celes nodded to herself as if to confirm something that was on her mind ... before turning towards the 'should-be opened' window.

With a strengthened yank, she forced it open.

""*GASP!!!!*"" Exclaimed the crowd in horrified shock.

"...no..." Onion Knight muttered blankly, unable to comprehend what was happening on the screen.

"No-no-NO!!!"

He had thrown his hands behind his head, close to pulling out his hair as he could only watch the screen in horror.

Then, the on-screen Celes turned and rushed out of the room. In that instant, the camera switched to a

different room entirely, having only skipped approximately 1-2 minutes of time. It was the crime scene, shown exactly how it was seen what Onion Knight, Terra, Firion and Headmistress Cosmos had investigated it.

Once again, Celes had rushed into the room, directing her momentum to the floor where the strands of various hairs were situated. She swiftly knelt down, and picked away at the floor.

“Yes, your eyes are not tricking you, ladies and gentlemen.” Warrior of Light commentated with a prideful tone, almost laughing away at how perfect this was. “Our own honourable Celes...”

The screen switched back to the Lab Room, skipping a few minutes of time once again. Celes could then be seen standing in the corner, holding what seemed to be a medium-sized clear pouch – similar to the pouches Onion Knight uses for gathering his smaller evidence.

The video then skipped forward a few more seconds ... and began to show her sprinkling the contents of the pouch across the floor.

“...had tampered with the evidence.”

Cross-Examination 2 ... Complete.

21 - Arc 3 (3): Broken Emotions

Friday 14th September – Dissidia Academy’s 5th Floor Corridor ... 16:00pm.

The halls of the Academy were completely silent, not even a sound of student voices or footsteps could be heard echoing in the distance. The atmosphere was full of ambience and tranquillity, as though resting from the chaos of a typical academic day. It was an undeniably odd sensation – rather eerie to imagine, in some respect – yet it was certainly warranted.

Far down the spacious 5th Floor corridor, one would eventually reach Laboratory Room 1, its door standing firm amongst its place in a row of various roomed doors. There were faint signs of rustling and movement that could be heard through its very slight opening, giving off the vibe that someone was rushing around on the other side of the door.

After some time, the door finally burst open.

Celes Chere exited the room with haste, immediately closing the door behind her as she was adamant to contain the important substances within. She stood there momentarily, hand grasped firm on the door handle as her hesitant eyes peering through the small window. She was beginning to contemplate if her recent actions were the right decision, aware of the consequences if the truth was ever found out.

“*Sigh...”

She shook her head, deciding there was no point in having second thoughts at this point. The deed was done, all that mattered now was how it would ultimately impact the court case. With a reassured glance, she nodded to herself and walked off down the corridor towards the staircase.

There was a sense of urgency rushing through her mind, wishing to leave the Academy as soon as possible. Yet, her patient steps down the spiralling staircase indicated otherwise, showing her awareness of raising suspicion to herself if she were to give in to her haste and insecurity. It was tough, however Celes knew she had to follow this through.

And then, just as she passed the entrance to the 4th Floor Corridor, she halted her steps in surprise. A figure stood in her way, seemingly heading up to the top floor. Her heart was racing, cursing herself as she had to re-evaluate her situation.

“Celes? Why are you still here?” The voice of the figure questioned curiously, equally surprised of her sudden appearance.

“I could ask you the same thing, Warrior of Light.” Celes expressed in return, firmly holding her ground. Warrior of Light, who had been on various small errands since the final ring of the bell for the day – both as the Council President and the Prosecutor for the current court case – was now on his way to the top floor in order to retrieve his belongings from the Council Room. The day had finally ended for him, so it was to his complete surprise that there was another student – a fellow Council Member, for that matter – still inside the building.

For as long as Celes could remember him, Warrior of Light was usually the last of the students to leave the Academy, always finding some sort of excuse or reason to stay behind. His inhumane devotion to the Academy was the one aspect to his character that no one would dare question or criticize, regardless of if it was truly a benefit to anyone.

In a way, Celes previously couldn’t help but feel inspired whenever he was around, even though there were plenty of occasions when she had an alternate clashing outlook to his own. However, right now was a different situation entirely. He was a formidable rival in this battle for the truth, and his recent actions and mindset throughout this case confirmed that he could be a potential threat to Celes if she

were to slip up this very moment.

Warrior of Light narrowed his brow, noticing Celes' expression waver as she had spoken, "You seem rather fidgety, Celes. Would you tell me what's on your mind?"

Celes felt her entire body abruptly clench up, wishing she had kept focus on her own body language. At first, she had the desire to reactively state: 'Nothing. I'm Fine.' Yet, she just couldn't bring herself to say it, knowing that there was a better solution to resolve this unexpected encounter. Warrior of Light continued to glare at her, increasingly suspicious of her odd behaviour.

Much to her bitter disdain, there was one solution she could think of.

With a sigh, she finally answered him, "I have something I need to show to you..."

As time shifted forward, Celes had directed Warrior of Light to Lab Room 1, feeling the sense of dread as each step brought her closer to the room she had left not long ago. Admittedly, Warrior of Light was the last person she wanted to stumble across, the thought of his unwavering strive to find Zidane Tribal the guilty verdict still embedded deep within her consciousness.

She would have much rather bumped into Onion Knight and Terra.

The two were now situated within the very room, Celes standing over Warrior of Light in observation as he lowered himself to thoroughly inspected the new pieces of evidence. He first analysed the forced open window, being the first thing out of place he could see as he entered the room. He then shifted over to the various hairs scattered across the floor, daring not to pick up or touch a single hair in fear of accidentally tampering with the scene.

Finally, as if saving the best for last, he moved onto the damaged blazer stuffed within the cupboard. As he opened up the cupboard, he stood silent for a brief moment, frozen in place as his piercing eyes stared over the crumpled heap of a blazer. It was at this moment that Celes felt the surrounding atmosphere tension, as if attempting to choke her out.

Is he getting suspicious? Her mind wondered cautiously, sweat beginning to appear from her forehead.

Will he want to question me?

And then, after what seemed like an eternity, Celes noticed Warrior of Light beginning to shake his head. She froze up, her sanity almost on edge at this point. She didn't know how long she could take this unbearable feeling of guilt, contemplating whether it was worth giving away her secret at this point.

"Disgusting!" Warrior of Light growled underneath his breath, "To think that someone would have the nerve of leaving their valuable blazer in such an unsightly state. It's barbaric, to say the least."

Oh... Celes then murmured in realisation, now feeling both rather disappointed and embarrassed of her inner emotions getting the better of her.

Warrior of Light turned back to her, having carefully closed up the cupboard as if in respect for the blazer's wellbeing. Celes could tell immediately that through his displeasure, Warrior of Light was certainly enlightened by this new revelation. However, a question had surfaced: how would he utilise this new information?

"Does any other soul know of this?" He then asked her in his serious tone, expressing the severity of the situation.

'Soul'...? Celes' mind echoed as she glanced at him oddly, wandering if this use of the term was one of Warrior of Light's typical phrasing.

In response, she shook her head truthfully, "No, not that I know of..."

Warrior of Light nodded back to her, accepting her answer before going deep into thought. This constant pausing and sense of uneasiness was beginning to truly take an effect on Celes, agitating her beyond belief. At this point, all she wanted to do was be done with this and leave.

At that very moment, to Celes' astonishment, she caught a glance of an image that would throw her off entirely. Warrior of Light gave off an analytic aura that was different than usual ... one that sent a shiver down her spine.

“Be honest with me, Celes.” Warrior of Light then muttered, his stern expression as unbreakable as can be. “What other evidence have you found?”

“*GASP!?” Celes let out in shock, her eyes widened in shock upon hearing his question.

She was speechless, wondering how in the world Warrior of Light would have assumed such a thing. In addition to this, the fact that he was correct in his assumption that she still had secrets yet to surface was, to her, both astounding ... and frightening at the same time.

Biting the inside of her lip, Celes had no choice but to answer him.

“I found ... Rydia’s Hair Ornament.”

Present Day...

Celes now stood frozen in place on the Witness Stand, completely silent as her expression was hidden within the depths of her lengthy blond hair.

The entire audience of the court were lost for words on what they had just witnessed, acting as though time itself had frozen over entirely. The footage seen was now on repeated playback, as if trying to clarify itself that this was reality and not just a nightmare. On the Court Stage, not a word could be spoken, for all eyes were set analysing every detail of the repeating footage.

Only two people in the entire hall seemed amused by the whole ordeal: Warrior of Light ... and Kefka.

“BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA-HAAAAAA...!!!” Kefka bellowed out in fits of manic laughter, unable to control himself as if he was sat watching the greatest comedy of all time. “*Wheeze ... Wheeze ...

*Wheeze!** OOH-HOO-HOO...! Hah ... Hah ... Ahah ... Ahaha...! ...AAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

Thud!

He had fallen of his chair entirely, his eyes streaming as he hugged his abdomen painfully.

And yet, despite this...

“*Snicker!* ...Ehehehehe...”

...He continued to laugh away.

Seated on either side of where Kefka was once perched, Ultimecia and Kuja glanced down towards the clown of a teacher with pitiful eyes. There were times when they both wondered why they would associate themselves with such a freak of nature ... and this moment was a key example. However, the two teachers then realised that all eyes of the surrounding students were bearing on them, curious as to why the infamous Art teacher was acting in hysteria.

Both Kuja and Ultimecia hastily avoided eye contact, their straight expressions struggling to hold as they felt unbearably cornered.

“Conductor Kuja ... w-who is this obnoxiously insane clown man, and why is he rolling around on the floor below us?” Ultimecia then anxiously questioned in forced ignorance, her eyes continuing to actively avoid any gaze set on them.

“O-oh, I ... err ... have no idea, Miss Ultemicia.” Kuja stuttered in response, sweat streaming from his brow.

Awkward silence then followed, mentally suffocating the two teachers as the eyes of students continued to stare at them blankly.

And then, they snapped.

““WE DON’T KNOW HIM! STOP STARING!!!”” They both roared in unison, bearing their agitated fans at the curious onlookers.

Without delay, every set of student eyes returned to focusing on the stage, fearing the mere thought of what could happen if they were to face such wrath head-on.

Returning to the stage, Warrior of Light stood his ground on the Prosecution Stand, bearing the cunning grin that sent shivers down the spines of those who were unfortunate to meet his gaze. Having drowned

out the odd commotion that echoed from the audience, his focus was set primarily on the guilt-ridden witness. Now fully consumed by control, he felt a sense of renewed pleasure in smoking out the guilty. Onion Knight stood in silence on the Defence Stand, struggling to justify what had occurred from the repeating footage. He was desperately analysing each frame for a sign of abnormality, hoping for some possibility of a miracle. Yet, to his despair, he found nothing.

And finally, Terra was staring directly at the anguished Celes, her expression almost on the verge of tears due to how distraught she became.

“Celes...?” She murmured anxiously, her voice almost soundless.

Just then, the frozen Celes tensed up in reaction, horrified at the sound of her distressed friend.

However, she refused to return a glance to Terra, unable to bear of emotional collapse if she were to so much lift her gaze. Instead, using the ounce of motivation left in her heart, she whispered:

“Terra ... I’m so sorry.”

Terra drew back in horror, disturbed by the uncharacteristic soulless tone of Celes’ apology. Her strong, unbreakable resolve had seemingly shattered, as if giving up entirely without a need to defend herself.

“Unfortunately, I have to admit, I am as heartbroken as everyone else – if not, more so – when I stumbled upon this footage.” Warrior of Light expressed bitterly as he emerged from his stand, stepping to the centre of the stage as he faced Celes and the audience directly. “Celes Chere is one of the most gifted Student Council members we’ve had in this Academy; she has always been open, honest, and insightful through her contributions during our meetings. Her commitment to her ideas have helped us tremendously during previous events, and there is no doubt in my mind that she has inspired many to strive for their ambitions without so much as waver.

“And so, it truly pains me to ask such a question ... Why, Celes? Why commit such a heinous act? I would think that you, of all people, would understand the consequences of ‘tampering with the evidence’. And yet here we stand, questioning your ‘honesty’. In fact, if I can recall, you told the court when you first took to the Witness Stand that you ‘deem yourself neutral to this case and only strive to find out the truth.’ Tell me, Celes, do you still stand by this declaration?”

Celes didn’t answer, her body clenched up entirely along with her hands now drawn to fists. Behind her, various students sitting in the audience began to whisper to one another, the aura of uncertainty growing. If Celes doesn’t answer Warrior of Light soon, the entire court would turn against her.

However, to the surprise of many ... she was not the one to speak out.

SLAM!

“HOLD IT!!!” Onion Knight abruptly roared out, his hands planted against the surface of the Witness Stand in fury. “Warrior of Light, the court has the right to know when, how, and why you have access to the security footage! I cannot allow such an important piece of information get ignored so carelessly!”

With an irritated sigh, Warrior of Light switched to his opponent with a bored glare, acting as though his flow of heightened anticipation was momentarily obstructed. He could tell Onion Knight was stalling the inevitable, using whatever desperate means necessary to prevent Warrior of Light’s pursuit. It was a laughable attempt, and solidified that Onion Knight was losing the battle.

“I, too, would like to know how the Prosecution obtained this footage.” High Judge Gabranth then concurred, his eyes still completely engrossed to the screen of his laptop.

Giving a careless tut in response, Warrior of Light shrugged in amusement, “I don’t see the need to enlighten the court with information so obvious; but if that is what’s required of me, then I have no choice but to comply.”

He then focused his haughty gaze on Onion Knight, who, in turn, drew back cautiously. He was clueless as to what was going through Warrior of Light’s mind, and the arrogant expression that had engulfed him only fuelled the concern that embedded Onion Knight’s thoughts.

“It surprises me that you’ve become so oblivious, Onion Knight ... considering you had consulted with

me not long before I discovered the footage.”

What is he...? Onion Knight wondered silently, becoming increasingly warier to what his opponent was implying.

And then, he gasped.

“Saturday morning!” He blurted in shock, almost losing balance on the box he had been standing on throughout the trial.

“Correct answer.” Warrior of Light nodded coolly. “Soon after we consulted one another, I decided to enter the academy and inspect the security footage. I would have spent hours of blindly searching for scraps of potential evidence if it wasn’t for a generous hint from the one and only Celes here.”

“Tsk...!”

Just then, the silent Celes reacted bitterly, knowing exactly what Warrior of Light was referring to when hearing her name. A flashback of when she stumbled upon Warrior of Light as she left the Laboratory Room sparked into her thoughts momentary, giving her more of a reason to regret ever showing him the evidence she had found. Regardless of this, she wouldn’t speak a word, fearing that she would further dig her own hole.

Warrior of Light then began to enlighten the audience regarding the context of his statement, “For all who may not know, Celes and I had bumped into one another on Friday after academy hours...”

His explanation continued on, detailing his surprise encounter with Celes on the 5th floor corridor and how he came to learn of Lab Room 1’s connection to the incident. During this time, Onion Knight and Terra listened intently, taking in the new information with absolute focus. Onion Knight had only known the basis that Warrior of Light had reached Celes before he and Terra got the chance, so to hear of the extent of their encounter had shed some light on the aspect.

“...and throughout the time that this had occurred, I found Celes’ behaviour rather uncharacteristic.”

Warrior of Light expressed upon finishing his explanation on the event, his gaze piercing the unresponsive Celes as he spoke. “I couldn’t help but be suspicious of Celes’ mysterious actions prior to our meeting, so it had become my goal to investigate on the matter ... even if it meant I was unsuccessful in retrieving other evidence and witnesses overall.”

The High Judge Gabranth nodded slowly, enlightened by this new information. His sights, however, were not set on the Prosecution whatsoever.

...They were set on the witness.

“Miss Chere, is the Prosecution’s story true?” He questioned in a dark, severe tone, indicating that dire consequences may be imminent.

Her body trembling and eyes fixed to the floor, Celes gave a single, hesitant nod in response.

Comotions built up at an increasing rate from behind, many reactions of surprise and intrigue were heard including a few gasps here and there. Gabranth had his gavel at the ready, on the verge of raining hell upon the students if their voices echoed any louder. And yet, he decided to ultimately hold back, saving his voice for a more appropriate occasion.

Instead, he shifted focus to the Defence Stand.

“Defence, are there any thoughts that you would like to express?” He wondered as he glanced to Onion Knight, curious as to what his stance was regarding the information.

Onion Knight paused with caution as anxious sweat began to seep from his skin, his gaze struggling to veer from Celes’ position. His mind thrived with mixed emotions, scaling from wishing he could help the witness escape the exposure to uncertainty on whether he could still trust her. Given the fact that she had yet to defend herself of the new accusation meant to him that she had a guilty conscience that crucially retained her.

Amongst it all, one thought had separated itself from the crowd.

“Y-yes ... Your Honour.” He answered eventually, pushing himself to turn his attention towards Warrior

of Light. "I do wonder, Warrior of Light: if you had access to the Security Room with the incentive of investigating Miss Chere's actions, would it not make sense to investigate the footage of the Lab Room during the time frame of when the assault had occurred?"

Hearing the question, Warrior of Light's prideful grin dropped in an instant. Onion Knight's brow raised a curiosity struck him, intrigued by the change of expression. A cast of hope sparked in the depths of his mind, anticipating a possible contradiction.

"Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain such footage." Warrior of Light sorrowfully answered, shaking his head as he expressed his disappointment to the crowd. "It seemed our *culprit* was smart enough to erase the footage during the time frame of the incident, and I do not mean just for Math's Room 3 and Lab Room 1 ... the footage for every single camera of the Academy had been wiped clean during the time of the assault!"

""GASP...!!!"

As the audience reacted in complete shock, Onion Knight's eyes widened drastically as the horror set in. His hope had shattered, feeling the weight of despair gradually devouring him subconsciously. Not only had he realised that he couldn't protect Celes, he regretfully realised that there was no chance of defending Zidane using any remaining footage that could possibly be looming in the system's data. Zidane, who had been perched on the edge of his seat with his tail flicking in anticipation throughout the entirety of the trial, was now slumped back against the chair in gloom. Fear had taken hold of his emotions as the sudden weight of surrounding accusations was mercilessly piled on top of him. He could feel Warrior of Light's resentful glare directed at him the moment the word 'culprit' was echoed; he was still adamant on striking Zidane with the guilty verdict, even when attention had shifted.

However, the worst to be affected was Celes herself, almost at the breaking point as her mental stability was forced to a corner. She was shaking violently, stream of sweat breaking through areas of her skin as her eyes became increasingly erratic. There was nothing she could do to escape the fate that awaited her, no matter what excuse she could possibly make.

"Anyway, enough stalling!" Warrior of Light called out sternly, silencing the entire hall before the High Judge had the opportunity to bang his gavel. "It's time for Miss Celes Chere to confess to her own guilt, and explain to the court as to why she tampered with the evidence!"

Deathly silence engulfed the Academy Hall, not one soul daring to speak a word as all eyes focused on the witness. Onion Knight and Terra stood helplessly as they watched their friend face the suffocating tension, cursing to themselves that they couldn't do anything to prevent such a devastating dilemma. Warrior of Light situated himself directly opposite Celes as he waited patiently for a response, acting as though he was the reaper of the guilty.

And then ... Celes broke.

"I tampered with the evidence, because..." She murmured in a low whisper, her words almost inaudible to those around her.

Warrior of Light gradually leaned closer to her, "Miss Chere, could you please speak up?"

SLAM!

"I TAMPERED WITH THE EVIDENCE BECAUSE I WANTED YOU TO OPEN YOUR DAMN MIND!!!"

Celes screamed furiously, a fist struck hard against the surface of the Witness Stand as the held back emotions finally flooded out of her. "Watching you during Friday's trial along with today's, I see you solely consumed on your obsession for control. You strive primarily to ensure that Zidane receives the 'Guilty' verdict ... and that's made you blind! What happened to you!?"

"You were NEVER like this before the incident occurred: you constantly expressed your devotion to the Academy, ensuring that everything was in order and accessible to students; you would always demonstrate commitment and resolve no matter the task or situation, proving to others that it was possible to pursue their ambitions just like you; and, most important of all, you were ALWAYS

considerate of others no matter who they were! You were the best of the Student Council: you are our Student Council President, Warrior of Light!!!”

Warrior of Light stepped back abruptly, shock eclipsing his once stern expression as Celes struck his cords with no remorse. Onion Knight couldn't believe his eyes, never had he thought he would witness someone as level-headed as Celes Clere lose her mind. Such a sight was terrifying to behold, causing him to be somewhat grateful that he was not at the receiving end of her verbal attacks.

“When I discovered the damaged blazer in the Lab's cupboard, I took it as an opportunity to prove to you that there were other – more likely – culprits to the case besides Zidane. I believed that deep down, you knew that there were more than meets the eye. But your mind was so forged with the certainty that the court case begins and ends with Zidane's guilt, all because of your personal grudges against him! Because of this, I took some of the strands of hairs from the scene of the crime and scattered them across the Lab floor nearby the corner cupboard in the hope that either you or Onion Knight would stumble upon it. I even forced open the nearby window in case the scene wasn't convincing enough to relate to the incident.

“I am fully aware that I committed a crime when I tampered with the evidence, however I hold on to my stance for finding the truth to the case no matter the cost ... even if it meant sacrificing my dignity in the process!

“I want this case to finally end! I want everything to return to what it once was! And ... I want our President back!!!”

Celes ended her onslaught of words, taking in a deep breath to calm her mind and take back the control of her emotions. She was undeniably exhausted at this point – both physically and emotionally. At this very moment, she wouldn't be surprised if her legs gave way and collapsed under the agony of her once restrained emotions being revealed all at once to the world. She had nothing else to give to the court, and she had nothing else to hide.

Her time as a witness had ended.

Having taken the onslaught of emotions head on, Warrior of Light was frozen to the core. He eyes were blank, devoid of emotion to the point that he would be considered a hollow shell of what he once was. His arms hung limply by his side, not an ounce of strength left in him. Any colour that once flourished on his skin had disappeared entirely, giving a very convincing impression that he had turned into a ghost. Eerie silence loomed over the entire hall, not one person able to speak after witnessing such an event.

“Your Honour ... I have nothing else to give.” Celes finally admitted in a raspy voice, her eyes dazed and shoulders dropped as her consciousness hung by a thread.

As though time began to move again, the High Judge Gabranth was the first to respond. He gave a single nod, accepting the witness' confession.

“Bailiff, you may escort the witness out from the courtroom.”

Having on just recovered herself, Prishe reacted with a leap of fright, giving out a light squeak upon hearing the command.

“Y-yeah ... got it.” She muttered with a hesitant nod, her body shaking tremendously due to the tension that engulfed the atmosphere of the hall.

She stepped forward awkwardly, her hairs standing on end and her pointed Elvaan ears risen due to being so alert of the situation. Upon reaching the witness, she took Celes lightly by the shoulder and directed her to the entrance of the hall. To her surprise, Celes complied, showing no signs of resistance or tension in her body as she stepped from the Witness Stand.

It didn't take long for them to exit the hall, passing the rows of seated students in the process. From the corner of her eye, Prishe noticed that the eyes of the students were actively avoiding her gaze, seemingly afraid of accidentally meeting eyes with her or Celes. It was as if Celes was being shunned by them, ignoring her existence entirely.

Although it painful to watch, Prishe ultimately that she could only drown out the negative tension, coming to the regretful conclusion that she could do nothing about it. Celes' reputation was reduced to a pile of ash, unlikely to rise from the devastation.

The two were now standing outside of the Theatre Hall, taking in the towering scenery of the empty Entrance Hall as the suffocating tension had finally lifted. Prishe let out an exaggerated, relieving sigh, placing her hand on her hips as she took in the refreshing air. She turned to Celes, a beaming smile across her face as she attempted to lighten the mood.

"I don't know about you, but I feel a hell of a lot better now that we're out of there." She admitted cheerfully, holding on her optimism as much as she possibly could. "I mean, I almost fainted from the amount of tension, it was like my soul was being-!"

Prishe abruptly halted her words, her gleaming smile disappearing the moment she noticed Celes' emotional state.

"..."

Heaps of tears were falling from her eyes, unable to contain the distress that had been taking over her the moment she left the Witness Stand. Her shoulders and cheeks flushed, it was undeniable that she had tried her best to hide the pain. However, the feeling of failure and worthlessness had overwhelmed her, causing her to lose the sense of composure she had left.

The strength in her legs buckled, causing her to lean against the nearby wall and fall to her knees. With hands covering her face and her body now crumpled into a foetal position, she bawled uncontrollably. She was a broken mess.

Even after Celes and Prishe left the Theatre Hall, silence still loomed the air. The audience waited for someone to break the deathly silence, wondering how the trial was going to play out considering the events that had just taken place. With the new information displayed, would Warrior of Light continue to hold the unpredicted lead, or will Onion Knight make a dramatic comeback?

Even Kefka was unexpectedly quiet from where he sat ... although if one were to look closely, Kuja and Ultemicia were the ones forcing him to stay quiet. Both had their hands forced over his mouth, refusing to let him break the tension with his bombastic, manic laughter. The challenge for the two teachers were difficult to say the least, yet they were adamant on keeping the insane clown restrained.

Shifting back to the stage, Warrior of Light still could be seen standing motionless at the centre of the stage, unwilling to break from his stasis. The High Judge Gabranth watched on, his stern piercing gaze waiting patiently for the trial to eventually proceed. On the other hand, Terra's eyes were directed to the entrance door of the hall, overcome with worry for her close friend. She was desperate to help Celes in her time of need, however she was afraid of leaving Onion Knight's side after realising that they were losing the battle.

It was during that very moment when she noticed Onion Knight move from the corner of her eye, stepping of his box without a word and leaving the Defence Stand entirely. Her focus completely set on Onion Knight, she watched him stride over towards Warrior of Light's position.

What is he doing? She wondered cautiously, although being too afraid to ask.

However, the answer she was given was not what she had expected to receive, and it shocked her to the core.

Without hesitation, Onion Knight forcibly latched onto Warrior of Light's collar, his teeth grinding as he glared at his opponent with unyielding rage.

"She was YOUR WITNESS!!!" He bellowed at the top of his lungs, refusing to release his grip as the anger took hold of his mind. "You betrayed her trust and sent her obliviously into a trap! Don't you

understand, Warrior of Light...? SHE WAS HELPING YOU! And yet, you're so engrossed in punishing Zidane that you didn't even consider what she was trying to do for you! I don't ... I don't think I've ever met anyone so heartless and selfish as you!"

As Onion Knight continued to force and shove his way into his head, Warrior of Light merely glanced back at him with blank eyes. He showed no resistance nor returning malice, he just took it just as he did with Celes. No one knew what he was thinking at this moment, he was truly unreadable at this point.

BANG! BANG!

"DEFENCE, I DEMAND YOU TO RELEASE THE PROSECUTION IMMEDIATELY!" High Judge Gabranth roared, his voice shaking the entire hall as he attempted to regain control of his court. Unfortunately, he was completely ignored.

"What are you thinking!?" Onion Knight spat in demand, prying some sort of answer from his opponent. "SPEAK!!!"

However, a pair of feminine hands held him back from lashing out any further, giving him no choice but to let go of Warrior of Light's collar. He switched his sights to the person behind him, wondering who would be so foolish enough to stop him.

It was Terra.

"Leave him be, Onion Knight!" She yelled in haste, hoping to snap some sense into her partner. "All you're doing is making this whole situation worse! Attack him with your wit, not your fists! You have more of a reason to prove Zidane's innocence to the court! So please ... please don't let Celes' contribution be in vein!"

Hearing her words, Onion Knight slowed his lashes to a halt, his arms falling limp to his sides as he was finally able to think clearly once again. He lowered his head in bitter frustration, barely able to extinguish the enraged anger that plagued his mind. With that said, he was admittedly thankful for her interference, knowing that the situation could have been considerable more worse if he was left unrestrained.

Terra swiftly ushered him back to the Defence Stand, leaving Warrior of Light to his lonesome.

Still deep in thought, Warrior of Light eventually shifted himself back to the Prosecution Stand, completely unfazed by what had just occurred between him and Onion Knight. Whilst he had yet to say a word to the court since Celes' explosion of emotions, his vacant gaze faced his opposition as he waited for the continuation of the trial. Only time will tell whether Celes' – and in some respect, Onion Knight's – words had an effect on his mindset.

"I hereby issue a second penalty to the Defence for his unwarranted outburst to the Prosecution and, more importantly, ignoring my instruction to cease." The High Judge Gabranth informed in his harsh tone, showing no remorse for his decision. "If the Defence decides to act out of term or waste the court's time throughout the rest of the trial, a final penalty will be issued. The Defence will then be dismissed from the court until further notice. You have been warned, Knight of the Onion."

Now situated back on top of his box, Onion Knight felt his entire body shake in fear, realising the consequences of his actions. With two strikes by his name, he had no choice but to regard his position as 'walking on thin ice'. With everything that had happened during the recent events, this penalty was truly a bitter pill to swallow. However, he decided to accept the predicament without retaliation, believing there was nothing to be gained if he were to challenge the High-Judge's judgement.

"I'm sorry, Your Honour." He apologised in honesty, expressing responsibility for his actions. "I'll be sure not to disappoint in the future."

Calming his mind, he took this opportunity to prepare for future confrontations, actively reminding himself that any irrational actions or behaviour would cost him the court case. He was aware that Headmistress Cosmos had personally bestowed this role upon him, and so it would be a disrespect to her goodwill if he continued to act so foolishly during such a crucial event.

Onion Knight straightened his posture, demonstrating his unbreakable resolve. Despite this, a single

thought troubled in his mind, urging him to act before he lost the chance.

“Terra, go check on Celes.” He instructed in a firm whisper, noticing his partner’s fidgeting from the corner of his eye.

“Wha-!?! A-are you sure?” She wondered hesitantly, unsure whether such an order would be wise.

“Don’t worry about me, I’m sure I can handle it for the time being.” He assured her with a confident nod, “Besides, Celes needs you more than I do right now.”

Terra nodded back in acceptance, placing faith in Onion Knight. She then immediately left the Defence Stand, rushing to the entrance of the Hall without pausing to look back.

“Prosecution, please call upon your next Witness.” Gabranth requested to Warrior of Light, ignorant to Terra’s swift exit. “We’ve wasted far too much time as it is already.”

“Y-yes, Your Honour.” Warrior of Light stuttered as clearly as possible, struggling to hide his inner conflict. “My next Witness-!”

Woosh!!!

“WHA-!?!?” Warrior of Light gasped in sudden shock.

“HUH-!?!?” Onion Knight blurted out in unexpected reaction.

“Oh, for goodness sake; WHAT NOW!?!?” Gabranth groaned irritably, finding the interruption nonsensical.

With all widened eyes directed to the centre of the stage, a large, blackened circular vortex erupted out of nowhere. It had grown to be the size of an adult human, warping and shaping itself into a distinctive form. Whilst it was expected for this vortex to be vacuuming the air and the contents of the Theatre Hall, it was instead sending out a gale of wind along with sparks of lightning and miniscule, unidentifiable pieces of debris.

“Mm-hm-hm-hmm...” A dark, muffled voice echoed throughout the hall, its sinister vibe sending chills down the spines of many. “Oh, how long I have waited for this moment...”

Gabranth slowly rose from his seat, his expression twisting to a scowl as he searched for the owner of the mysterious voice.

“Reveal yourself!” He furiously demanded, the muscles of his body tensioning as he grew increasingly wary.

And then, a bulky, intimidatingly muscular arm shot out from the centre of the vortex, clenched up into a devastating fist as it rained terror and anarchy on all who were unfortunate to witness. The skin of the hand itself was of a purple colour scheme, whilst the rest of the arm was engulfed in an unbreakable, metallic gauntlet. It seemed that this mysterious figure was of an ancient warrior, giving an impression that he – based on the darkened tone of his looming voice – desired nothing more than to commit an act of revenge.

Many students cowered in their seat, not knowing what to do. None would dare approach the vortex, fearing their eventual demise.

Aside from one.

Having been engrossed with watching the eventful court trial, the woman rose from her seat and treaded over to the powerful vortex. There was no fear to be seen, no hesitation shown, and no sign of regret: she was ready to face whatever the mysterious figure brought to the table.

“You naïve fools expected a simple human – a *student* for that matter – to be the culprit of this assault case!?” The mysterious figure chortled menacingly, his arm waving and flexing to express his amusement. “Well, I must inform you all that YOU WERE WRONG! For it was I: GILGA-!”

SNAP!

Poof...!

Before the mysterious figure could finish his prideful statement, the vortex vanished without a trace. With the sinister voice now gone, the hall was filled with awkward silence. Everyone wondered what had just

happened, glancing at one another with fear and terror still fresh in their eyes. They then gazed across to the person who had approached and eradicated the vortex with ease.

Stood just before the stage was a rather disinterested Headmistress Cosmos, lowering her right hand after what seemed to be a swift snap of the fingers. With her eyes half open and her expression showing an irritated pout, it was apparent that she wasn't going to allow any opposing force to ruin the flow of the court trial. She was as graceful and elegant as ever with her execution, yet her surrounding aura was frightening to withstand.

With no sign of the vortex reappearing, the Headmistress switched back to the audience with an innocent smile and overall pleasant expression.

"Please forget this ever happened." She requested in her goddess-like tone, waving off the anomaly as if it never existed in the first place.

The students stared back anxiously, unsure whether they should comply with the abnormal request. Fear of the mysterious figure was still fresh in their minds, wondering what horrors waited for them if the figure were to return.

And then, Cosmos' terrifying aura thickened, her pleasant expression narrowing to a more threatening vibe.

"Repeat after me: you will *not* remember the vortex ever appearing on this stage." She commanded in a passive-aggressive tone, her pure gaze piercing the souls of the students in the process.

""*We will not remember the vortex ever appearing on the stage.*"" The audience the answered in unison, acting as though they suddenly turned into mindless robots.

Onion Knight and Warrior of Light observed the entire scenario play out with baffled eyes, internally questioning what in the world just happened.

With the audience finally settled, the High Judge perched back on his seat with fumes of anger escaping from his body. As a precaution, he vowed that whoever – or whatever – would dare decide to interrupt the progression of the trial would meet their end by his hand. Time was precious, and it was in his interest to use it wisely.

"Prosecution. Next Witness. NOW." He demanded furiously, shooting the death stare towards the Prosecution Stand.

Warrior of Light hastily nodded, trying his best not to lose his nerve, "Yes, Your Honour. Before we were rudely interrupted by ... whatever that was, I was about to explain that my next Witness is one who had gained an outside perspective of the assault incident. I can assure the court that his insight is highly valuable to this case."

Onion Knight held his breath momentarily, wondering if the next Witness was who he expected it to be. He had mentally prepared himself for when 'that' encounter would finally commence, even though he had doubts that it would run smoothly after how Celes' time on the stand had ended.

He also couldn't help but wonder: *who are the remaining witnesses?*

However, it seemed this question would soon be answered ... partially.

Strong, sturdy footsteps were heard approaching the Witness Stand, showing no signs of hesitation in his stride. The male student, with his long, silver hair and tall posture, looked to the court with absolute radiance. It was apparent that he was unfazed by what had previously transpired on this very Stand, and was truly confident that what he had to share with the court would turn the case on its head.

Onion Knight watched the man emerge with an expression of astonishment; realising that not only was he wrong with his prediction ... he had no idea that this person would even be linked to the case.

"Witness, please state your name and Academy status to the court." Warrior of Light requested sophisticatedly, a subtle grin casually breaking through his hardened expression.

The Witness cleared his throat, feeling as though this was his grand introduction, and answered with a clear tone:

“My name is Cecil Harvey, a Student from Class 13A ... and I believe that Zidane is Guilty.”

22 - Arc 3 (3): An Outside Perspective

Entrance Hall, Dissidia Academy...

Terra Branford burst out from the Theatre Hall doors in haste, desperately hoping she could find her close friend Celes Chere. Her heart was leaping from her chest, her eyes darting from one direction to the other as she was faced with the emptiness of the Academy's Entrance Hall.

Celes – and Priske, who had accompanied her – were nowhere to be seen.

Reflecting back to the moment she left the Witness Stand, the depth of distraught in Celes' expression was still fresh in Terra's mind. The sadness, the bitterness, and the anguish: all these feelings were displayed as clear as day in front of the entire Academy. In that very moment, everything that was expected from Celes' usual character was completely discarded.

... And it horrified Terra.

She struggled to think of where her friend could possibly be, intimidated by the mere thought of the Academy's colossal size. It didn't even help that she was crucially limited on time, meaning that every second wasted could potentially impact the fate of the court trial. Onion Knight gave her this chance, and she had to make it count.

It was then when Terra's eyes swayed to the entrance doors of the Academy, noticing the slight breeze of the open air through its windows. The realisation struck her immediately: if she were to circle the Academy grounds, she would have a formidable chance of spotting Celes – whether it would be through one of the windows of the Academy building or within the parameter of the grounds itself.

It was a long shot ... but, then again, the likelihood of success with any other given option would have been minimal at best.

Terra quickly made her way towards the entrance, the pace of her steps rising to a trotting speed. With time continuing to loom over her, she grew increasingly desperate. She was determined to find Celes, and she had faith that she would succeed.

The very moment she passed through the Entrance doors, she immediately began her search...

... Only to come back 10 minutes later in dismay.

"Well that went nowhere..." She sighed in frustration, her shoulders drooped and head hanging in depression.

She had circled the entire building and searched all throughout the Academy Grounds, yet she failed to locate any possible sign of her missing friend. She began to ponder the other possibilities of Celes' whereabouts, hoping somewhat that she was able to at least narrow down the options. However, she couldn't help but begin to panic, time becoming overwhelming and the lack of success taking its toll.

She could still be anywhere: on the Roof, in the Student Council Room, in Class 13F's Room, or even...

With her arms crossed and brow furrowed, Terra knew she was at a loss.

"...Oh!? Hey, Terra!" A voice suddenly echoed in surprise, catching the unsuspecting Terra off-guard.

Having almost leapt out of her skin in fright, Terra switched towards the direction of the voice in a heartbeat. And in that very moment, her initial shock turned to wide-eyed realisation. In the distance, standing in front the stairwell that led up to the other 5 floors of the Academy, was the one other person Terra was adamant to locate.

"Priske...?" She breathed out, a sudden spark of hope emerged within her chest.

Without hesitation, Terra ran over towards Priske, completely disregarding any 'no running' rule that the Academy had implemented. And yet she didn't care, she was still on the clock and luck was finally in her favour.

The moment she halted in front of the Elvaan girl, she immediately grabbed her hand with overwhelming gratefulness.

“Oh, thank goodness.” Terra sighed in relief, still short of breath after her sudden rush. “Prishe, do you know where Celes is right now? I’m in desperate need of finding her.”

“Y-yeah...” Celes stuttered with a hesitant grin, feeling caught out by Terra’s enthusiastic outburst. “I mean ... she wanted to be left alone, but I guess there shouldn’t be any harm if you were there with her.”

Terra looked at her with a puzzled expression, “What do you mean by that?”

As Terra let go of Prishe’s hand, Prishe went on to admit anxiously, “After we left the Theatre Hall, Celes had ... well, she wanted to go up to the Lab Room for a bit. I think she said she ‘wanted to check something’, but it was hard to tell because she was muttering.”

Terra nodded in understanding, her eyes lowered as she wondered what was in Celes’ head at the time.

“Right ... Thank you ever so much Prishe, I’ll go check on her.” She then bowed politely in gratitude, before making her way towards the staircase.

“Ah! You want me to come with?” Prishe hastily offered, abruptly bounding with energy. “I bet I’ll be awesome with the investigation stuff!”

Halting in her tracks, Terra turned to Prishe with an awkward yet innocent smile, “O-oh. Not to worry, I should be fine on my own. I think you may be needed back at the court trial anyway.”

With that, Terra disappeared, making her way up the circling staircase to the 5th Floor of the Academy. Prishe stood in silence, frozen like a statue. With Terra now nowhere in sight, the Elvaan girl gradually – and regretfully – glanced over towards the doors of the Theatre Hall. Her eyes narrowed, her teeth clenched hard, and the expression of dread instantly consumed her: Prishe showed nothing but scorn for ‘that’ place.

“... I don’t want to go back to that hell-hole.” She groaned in a low murmur, her body shivering at the mere thought.

It wasn’t long before Terra had reached the 5th Floor corridor, having rushed up the staircase so fast that she almost practically flew up them. She zipped passed each and every door along the elongated corridor, her mind discarding any thought of distraction as only one door was set in her sights.

And before she knew it, she was already standing before that very door.

“... Laboratory Room 1.” She breathlessly confirmed to herself, her fingers crossed in hope that her friend was on the other side.

Although hesitant at first, Terra grasped the door handle and pushed forward, her resolve absolute. And there, standing by her lonesome at the far corner of the room, was Celes Chere. Her face was hidden as she had her back turned to Terra, motionless as a statue. On the lab desk beside her was the Academy blazer – one of the vital pieces of evidence for the court case – spread out in the open. And finally, the cupboard opposing Celes was fully opened, its emptiness now on full display.

It seemed that Celes’ sights were transfixed by something within the cupboard ... but Terra had no idea what it could be.

“Celes...?” Terra called out cautiously from the opening of the Lab door, uncertain as to what reaction would be received.

Then, as if time itself had slowed to a crawl, Celes gradually turned to Terra.

Terra froze up at the sight of witnessing Celes’ face, a soundless gasp escaping her breath as she took in the devastating sight. Celes was in a horrendous state: her eyes were severely bloodshot; streams of tears had seeped down and stained her cheeks; her once long, well-kept fair-blonde hair a mess; and her overall attire had become crumpled.

As if automatically, Terra ran up and embraced her close friend, overcome with sorrow for seeing Celes

in such emotional pain. At first, Celes didn't react, acting as though her mental state had become completely blank. However, this was only for a short amount of time, as once her thoughts processed the sudden occurrence, she returned the embrace.

"Celes ... I'm so, so sorry." Terra sobbed apologetically, her body shaking as she held her dear friend. "Why...?" Celes absently responded, her voice raspy and dry. "You're not the one at fault, Terra. This was my doing, and so I'm the one who should live with the consequence of my mistake."

As if feeling undeserved of such sympathy, Celes separated herself from Terra's embrace. She stood back from her friend, her anxious eyes refusing to meet Terra's own. On the other hand, Terra stared at Celes with a pained heart, wishing nothing more right now than to rectify her punishment.

"Celes, you shouldn't beat yourself up about this! It's not like you're the actual culprit!" Terra then appealed in excuse, frantically hoping to break Celes out of her depressive state. "There is no doubt in my mind that your heart was in the right place. After this trial, we'll convince Warrior of Light that we're trying to help the case."

"Stop trying to justify my actions, Terra." Celes defensively spat back, her voice becoming more shaky and bitter overtime. "What I did was inexcusable. I tampered with the evidence, remember? That alone is a felony that anyone could simply brush away. And regarding Warrior of Light, I assure you that one of the first things he will do once this trial is over is revoke my membership in the Student Council."

Terra stood in nervous silence, unable to respond back. She couldn't find the words, any attempt to respond only ending in a wordless, stuttering breath. She felt helpless, hating herself for being unable to find enough resolve to convince Celes, ultimately believing that she was failing as a friend.

After a moment of being consumed in the dreading atmosphere, Celes decided to speak up again.

"Tsk...! Anyway, right now we have a more important issue to deal with." She expressed, changing the subject entirely as if wanting to bury her unforgivable sin. "For starters ... Onion Knight forgot to take the blazer with him to the court trial."

"Heh-hee ... Yeah, he's not going to like that one bit." Terra giggled awkwardly, imagining the tantrum Onion Knight would make the moment he realises that he made such a rookie mistake.

"But also..."

At that very moment, Terra noticed Celes' eyes divert towards the open cupboard beside her, curious as to what was catching her attention. She then followed the direction of Celes' sights, expecting to find something that would shock her to the core.

And yet, she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"Do you see it?" Celes asked her with a low murmur, her body tensing up at the sight.

"Wait, what am I supposed to be...?" Terra wondered with uncertainty, her words trailing off as she re-checked the contents of the 'empty' cupboard.

And then, without warning ... her eyes widened.

"No way! That can't be-!" She gasped with horror, switching back to Celes with abrupt realisation.

"No doubt about it." Celes confirmed with a severe glare, knowing exactly what was going through Terra's thought process.

The two of them returned their attention to the anomaly before them: Celes' tattered expression morphing to a sense of disgust, whilst Terra just stared on as if struggling to come to terms with what was being shown right in front of her.

For at the very centre of the cupboards bottom surface – where the Academy blazer was previously situated in its mishandled state – was a long, singular strand of hair.

It was silver.

Back in the Courtroom...

“...” Warrior of Light groaned silently from his Stand, pinching his temple irritably. “Cecil – I mean, Witness ... all we required was your name and status at the Academy. There was no need for you to state your opinion yet regarding whether the Defendant is guilty or not ... even if it’s indisputably correct.”

“Ah ... right, sorry, my mistake.” Cecil Harvey apologised consciously, evidently feeling awkward being up on the stage. “I admit, I’m not exactly used to this ‘serious’ tension. I literally spent the entire day thinking of how I was going to introduce myself to the court, and ended up going overboard regardless.”

“Y-you ... you spent the ENTIRE day rehearsing your introduction!?” Warrior of Light then echoed in bafflement, unable to believe what he had just heard from his Witness. “Discarding the fact that you hadn’t paid any attention in class, please tell me you at least focused some of your thoughts on your testimony?”

There was a pause, Cecil taking time to ponder the question given to him. Based on delay of response alone, Warrior of Light completely expected for the worst.

“I ... may have forgot.” Cecil finally answered somewhat anxiously, as though bracing for what he was about to receive.

SLAM!

“THAT’S THE EXCUSE YOU’RE GOING WITH!?!?” Warrior of Light exploded in instant reaction, his hand slamming against the surface of his Stand so hard that no one would be surprised if it went right through. “Cecil, I specifically told you yesterday to focus on solidifying your testimony! How in the world could you forget to do something so crucial!?”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly planning on forgetting about it.” Cecil clarified defensively, his eyes diverting as he spoke. “I just got carried away, that’s all...”

The two continued on, both showing no signs of concluding the bickering anytime soon. During this time, Onion Knight leant against his Stand in boredom, his fingers tapping against the Stand’s surface as he awaited pressing on with the trial. The initial shock of Cecil’s reveal as the next witness had swiftly subsided, leaving him now wondering when this torture would end.

And it seemed like he wasn’t the only one who was thinking this, for the High-Judge Gabranth seemed uninterested. He was sat back on his chair, his arms firmly folded and his irritated eyes only half-open. Even some of the students in the audience had lost their enthusiasm ... to the point where a few had fallen asleep entirely.

Warrior of Light continued his babbling: “And furthermore...!”

“OH, ENOUGH OF THIS ALREADY!!!” Onion Knight roared out, his patience completely spent. “We have much more pressing matters to deal with right now, namely the COURT TRIAL!”

Both Warrior of Light and Cecil froze, just realising that they both got carried away in their bickering. They felt the countless pairs of eyes bearing down on them without remorse, the unforgiving aura engulfing them to the point of psychological suffocation.

“**Ahem...!*”

Warrior of Light was the first to attempt breaking out of this awkward tension, feeling as though he was backed into a corner. Clearing his throat, he held out his proud posture in an attempt to show his professionalism. Seeing this, Onion Knight couldn’t help but roll his eyes in irony.

“Well then, seeing as though we already know your stance on the case, I see no reason for delaying the testimony any longer.” Warrior of Light announced firmly, playing ignorance to the intimidating stares. Gabranth nodded, “I agree. Now then Mr Harvey, please enlighten the court with your first statement ... and NO DAWDLING!”

Cecil leapt in fright, “Y-Yes, Your Honour, sir!”

Onion Knight prepared himself, his eyes fixated on Cecil with both anticipation and caution. He was aware of the current position he was in: after how Celes’ time on the Witness Stand had concluded, he

found himself on thin ice. Any mistakes made, any piece of information overlooked, or any chance to turn the tables back in his favour missed ... would cost him Zidane's innocence.

His gaze momentarily shifted over to Zidane's position, wondering about the Defendant's own reaction to the current situation.

What he found wasn't a surprise to him whatsoever ... and yet, it was disheartening to witness.

Zidane sat motionless on his seat, his eyes lifelessly staring at Cecil as he awaited the impending testimony. His shoulders had sunk at the realization set in: his fellow classmate had betrayed him. He was heartbroken, knowing that someone who he respected had turned against him.

Onion Knight felt sympathetic for Zidane's turmoil, believing that the worst was still yet to come.

He then shifted back to Cecil's direction, his thought process already beginning to set the questions necessary for this testimony.

Why was Cecil so persistent in naming Zidane as 'guilty'? Onion Knight began to wonder, 'Where was he when he witnessed the incident take place? What did he see...?'

Witness Testimony 1: Cecil Harvey.

"I was on the Academy Grounds with my friends at the time of the incident, not long after we found out about Deputy-Headmaster Chaos predicament with one of the ... Fire Exit doors." Cecil began in detail, although having to pause so that he could hold back the urge to chuckle.

It seemed that the mention of the 'Fire Exit' incident had caused many others to reactively snort and giggle, the moment the incident occurred still fresh in their minds. Even Onion Knight and Warrior of Light had to turn away momentarily in order to hold back their silent chuckles.

"Damn it all..." Deputy-Headmaster Chaos, who was sitting beside Headmistress Cosmos, groaned out in displeasure; his four bulked up arms crossed and the aura around him warping into a demonic form.

"Ah-haa-haa ... there's no need to fret, Chaos. I'm certain that 'embarrassing' memory will dissipate eventually." Headmistress Cosmos patted him on the shoulder angelically, showing of her pure, innocent smile. "...Maybe in a few hundred years, though."

She then turned away from him to hide her hysteric giggles.

Chaos' fangs clenched in fury, "Oh, you heartless wench..."

Shifting perspectives, the High Judge Gabranth looked on in confusion, oblivious to the reason why there was an elongated pause.

However, Cecil pressed on.

"That was when I heard some faint noises from above, originating from the direction of the Academy building. I looked over out of curiosity, wondering what was occurring, only to immediately hear a scream and a smash of glass. I immediately noticed Zidane's face from the 4th Floor's smashed window, looking directly at another person with dark-green hair – that presumably being Rydia. At the time I didn't know who it was, but I noticed Rydia slump to the floor and out of view from where I stood."

Witness Testimony ... Complete.

Onion Knight finished jotting down his notes seconds after hearing the testimony, silently placing down his pen and overlooking the notes in its entirety. He couldn't deny that the testimony alone was adequate, openly commending him for committing to such detail considering his set-back.

However, what piqued Onion Knight's curiosity was regarding the events outside the testimony itself ... along with one major contradiction.

With that in mind, he was able to mentally plan his cross-examination without any struggle whatsoever, assuming it would run rather smoothly in execution. He may not have Terra by his side, but there was no

doubt in his mind that he would be able to hold strong.

... or so he hoped.

“Defence, you may cross-examine the Witness.” Gabranth announced in his strong, echoing voice. Onion Knight glanced over to Warrior of Light momentarily, cautiously wondering if he was about to conduct any of his heinous schemes. And yet, all he could see was Warrior of Light standing in silence, patiently waiting for the cross-examination to begin. He showed no signs of having any tricks of his sleeves or potential plans of sabotage, giving of the impression that he was an honest Prosecutor. With his eyes narrowed, Onion Knight refused to believe this possibility.

“I’m ready, Your Honour.” He then responded in confidence, concentrating on the case at hand.

Cross-Examination 1: Cecil Harvey.

“Cecil, you had stated at the very beginning of your testimony that you were with your friends at the time of the incident.” Onion Knight commenced, ensuring that he would gather as much detail as possible before pursuing the inevitable contradiction. “I’m assuming these ‘friends’ would be Cloud and Tidus?”

Cecil confirmed with a nod, “That is correct. I was also with Terra not too long before that time, however she promptly rushed off to meet up with you after the Student Council meeting concluded.”

Finding this consistent to his own recollection of the events, Onion Knight pursued with his questioning, “If that’s the case, then I must ask: did either Cloud or Tidus witness the incident as well?”

“No.” Cecil shook his head in honesty, “They had already wondered off without me when I saw the incident unfold.”

Onion Knight then instantly switched towards the direction of the audience, his eyes locked on to the two individuals.

“I request both Tidus and Cloud to confirm Cecil’s statement to the court.” He promptly announced, refusing to hold back.

Although both were uncertain at first, Cloud Strife was the first to rise from his seat. All eyes shifted to his direction, causing him to feel rather conscious about his sudden inclusion to the trial.

“It’s true. We didn’t even realise Cecil had left us at the time until we got back inside the building.” He expressed, being as honest as he possibly could.

In that instant, Tidus launched up from his own seat in haste, rising up so fast that he almost threw the unexpected Cloud off his feet.

“Yeah, man! We thought he was just being quiet, it was only when we turned around that we realised he had completely vanished!” He agreed in his over-the-top, vocal tone. “It freaked me out, dude!”

Finding their words sufficient – although, finding Tidus’ exaggerated outburst unnecessary – Onion Knight indicated for the two to retake their seats. Both returned to their seating positions, Tidus plonking himself down without a fuss whilst Cloud cautiously lowered himself in hope of not being taken out again.

With that, Onion Knight directed his attention back to Cecil, satisfied with the outcome.

“Well then-...”

“Objection!” Warrior of Light suddenly called out, “Onion Knight, where exactly are you going with this?”

“I’m simply clarifying some aspects that were missing from Cecil’s testimony.” Onion Knight responded with a careless shrug, a calm smirk breaking through his serious expression.

Warrior of Light murmured in disapproval, “Hmph...! More like wasting our time.”

“Objection!” Onion Knight then hastily attacked, “...Hypocrite.”

SLAM!

“HOW DARE YOU CALL MY SUCH A THING, YOU INSUFFERABLE HALFLING!” Warrior of Light spat out in insult, smashing his fists against the surface of his stand.

Onion Knight returned fire in infuriated reaction, “WHO ARE YOU CALLING A HALFLING!? YOU TWO-FACED, EGOTISTICAL, SON-OF-A-!”

BANG!!!

“ENOUGH!!!” Gabranth roared at the top of his lungs, his intimidating voice shaking the room to its core. “The next one to throw out inconsequential insults to the other will face the wrath of my holy gavel!”

“Urk...!” Onion Knight blurted in regret, remembering that he was already on his last chance.

“Tch!” Warrior of Light tutted, his anger fuming from his ears.

As the two reverted their heightened tension, Gabranth peered down at Onion Knight with his piercing gaze.

“You may continue your cross-examination, Defence.”

Onion Knight nodded back hesitantly, afraid to face the onslaught if he were to defy – or irritated – the High-Judge again.

“M-moving on then.” Onion Knight stuttered as he scanned over his notes, quickly reforming himself.

“Out of curiosity, Cecil: how far away were you standing from the 4th floor window during the time of the incident?”

“Hmm...” Cecil pondered momentarily, “It’s hard to say. I certainly wasn’t directly underneath it, otherwise I would have been showered by the falling glass. On the other hand, I wasn’t too far away considering I was able to see Zidane’s face rather clearly at the time. So, I can’t say the exact measurements, but if I were to guess ... I would have been just about central between the position of the window and the edge of the Academy Grounds.”

Onion Knight couldn’t help but find this statement rather feeble yet decided against pursuing it further, knowing it would get him nowhere. That being said, a small margin of the statement caught his attention, wondering if that was more of an assurance of safety or an additional – albeit minor – contradiction.

Falling glass...

Having jotted down the note, Onion Knight continued his interrogation, “On the later section of your testimony, you stated that you ‘immediately noticed Zidane’s face from the 4th Floor’s smashed window’. Are you 100% certain it was Zidane that you saw?”

“I’m positive.” Cecil answered concisely, no indication of hesitation or discrepancy in his tone.

Onion Knight decided to pursue further, “I see, so if you don’t mind me asking-?”

“Objection!” Warrior of Light called out in boredom, cutting him off before he could get to the meat of his question. “Onion Knight, there’s no point badgering the witness if your questions are getting you nowhere.”

“Objection Sustained.” Gabranth muttered with a sigh.

“Tsk...!” Onion Knight tutted in displeasure, holding back his increasing frustrations.

His follow-up question would have clarified Zidane’s expression when he initially ‘stumbled’ upon the incident, yet it seemed his opponent was onto his possible attempt to stall for time. He believed this was somewhat crucial in his goal to convince the court of Zidane’s innocence, even if it felt like he was grasping for straws.

However, thinking it through, Onion Knight was more than aware that his question would’ve highly likely led him nowhere once again, seeing as he Cecil could have been standing too far away for seeing Zidane’s facial features in absolute detail. It was a frustrating outcome, yet he had no choice but to drop the subject entirely.

At this point, Onion Knight had only one option left in his arsenal, having held it back long enough to build the tension.

His muscles tensions and his stance as firm as ever, Onion Knight focused his sights towards Cecil's position. In contrast, Cecil glanced back at him with a confused expression, wondering why his fellow classmate was giving him the stink-eye. Warrior of Light watched cautiously from a distance, wondering what his opponent was up to.

"Defence, do you have any other questions for the witness?" Gabranth asked curiously, preparing his gavel.

"Only one, Your Honour." Onion Knight answered as requested yet refuse to divert his gaze.

"Well, get on with it, then. It'll be nightfall by the time this ends." Warrior of Light commented irritably, seemingly having lost all sense of patience.

Is he still bitter about the fact that I interrupted his bickering earlier? Onion Knight began to wonder, the corner of his mouth twisting to an amused smirk. *Haaa...!*

"Cecil, overall I must applaud you for enlightening the court with an informative testimony." He complimented earnestly, showing his gratitude. "However, I can't help but notice that you've missed a key component to the incident, one that strikes me surprised that you completely neglected to inform the court ... considering you had such a clear view of it at the time."

"What ... do you mean, Onion Knight?" Cecil questioned back, acting clueless.

There was a mixture of reactions from the court; some were echoing the similar expressions to Cecil, whilst others were beginning to realise what Onion Knight was referring to. Warrior of Light was one of the latter, his brow narrowing as he grew more cautious.

Onion Knight pressed forward, "Could you please remind the court of who you saw at the time of the incident."

Cecil paused, showing awareness of the possibility that he was being led into a trap. Considering the track records from both Onion Knight and Warrior of Light when it came to them luring their witnesses into a corner, caution was an understandable stance to take at this point.

However, he had no other choice but to answer his request.

"At the time of the incident, I saw Cloud and Rydia (although only from behind) ... that's all."

"OBJECTION!!!" Onion Knight bellowed out whilst holding out his index finger, almost cutting of Cecil due to his heightened anticipation.

Cecil gasped reactively, his feet shuffling back slightly as he took the full force of Onion Knight's pursuit. Wide-eyed and immensely confused, he had no idea what he was up against. All he could do was brace for the incoming assault and hope for the best.

Warrior of Light veered forward, preparing himself to counter his opponent.

"Cecil, I have no idea if you're bluffing to the court or simply playing ignorance, but I cannot let such a blatant contradiction go unnoticed!" Onion Knight expressed, exaggerating his words to prove his resolve in the pursuit. "You stated to the court that you saw only Cloud and Rydia at the time of the incident. However, the testimonies made by Bartz Klauser and Celes Chere led to the conclusion that there was a third entity during the time of the assault, who had 'escaped' through the smashed window. This was further proven with the evidence gathered from the smashed window on the 4th Floor: Math's Room 3 and the additional evidence found on the 5th Floor: Laboratory Room 1. And so, from where you stood at the time, there was no way you COULDN'T see the third entity!"

Cecil stood speechless.

"OBJECTION!" Warrior of Light hastily countered, pointing directly at Onion Knight with fire in his eyes.

"Are you missing a few screws in that head or yours, Onion Knight? If you remember from Celes' time on the Witness Stand, it was proven that the evidence had been tampered by Celes herself, meaning anything in that room relating to the case was falsified and rendered her entire testimony moot!"

"OBJECTION!" Onion Knight struck back, refusing his opponent to taint his pursuit for the truth. "No need to worry, Warrior of Light, I remember you backstabbing your previous Witness very clearly."

However, I will argue that the footage you handed to the court only showed Celes tampering with the strands of hair and the opened window in that room. She DID NOT touch the damaged Blazer in the corner cupboard, meaning her testimony holds relevance to the case!"

"Err..." Cecil murmured in uncertainty, wanting to speak up between to two.

He was ignored.

"Fine, so be it! Disregarding Celes' inclusion, Bartz's testimony on hinted to the possibility of a second culprit, and the evidence to support the claim isn't strong enough to fully confirm this 'culprit's' existence!" Warrior of Light struck back without a second thought, showing that he wasn't going to let Onion Knight take his pedestal. "For all we know, Bartz was only protecting Zidane!"

"WHAT!?! We can't just throw away Bartz's testimony so carelessly, it would completely bring us back to square one!" Onion Knight spat as he slammed his palm against the surface of his Stand. "Do you have no trust in your Witnesses at all!?! Besides, the smashed window clearly proves of a third person, the shards of glass was directed inside the room whilst the tufts of fabric proved that someone had escaped out the window's opening! And so, Bartz was clearly telling the truth!"

"About that, I-!" Cecil spoke up more clearly, hoping to catch their attention.

He was still ignored.

"Preposterous! You cannot just assume that there was a third identity all because of some whimsical speculation!" Warrior of Light accused, his tone becoming more hostile as he spoke. "Furthermore, there is a likelihood Zidane set it up in such a way so that we would question the other possibilities."

"Who's the one spouting 'whimsical speculation'!?! Stop dragging Zidane through the mud the mud with your ignorant accusations!" Onion Knight responded in defence, "How could you even assume Zidane was the one behind the assault if you didn't see it-!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

"Let the Witness speak!" The High Judge Gabranth bellowed out in command, regaining order.

Onion Knight and Warrior of Light halted their argument, both breathing heavily as they attempted to catch their breath. Both then turned towards the direction of Cecil, waiting in anticipation for what he had to say.

Cecil took a deep breath, restoring his composure, and answered with truth, "... I only ever saw Cloud and Rydia."

Onion Knight's eyed widened with horror, "...C-Come again?"

A darkening grin grew from Warrior of Light's lips.

The crowd of students in the audience gasped and whispered to one another in shock.

"...There was never a 'third' person from where I stood."

Cross-Examination ... Complete!

DISSIDIA ACADEMY: Final Fantasy

By ZaronNitro

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Within the halls of Dissidia Academy, life as a student is an adventure! Follow the Heroes of Final Fantasy as they fulfill the variety of challenges that lie before them, setting the path towards their future! However, underneath the depths of this highly established Academy ... lies a darkness that may throw the entire world into chaos.

