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1 - Vol 1: Class 13A

Volume 1: Semester Begins!

Warrior of Light stepped through the large, towering gate that 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 neatly tied around the collar of his neck, ensuring 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 in appearance and an aura of tranquillity – 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?"

Dissidia Academy, 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.

Bartz Klauser.

Considered to be one of the class clowns of Dissidia Academy based on his laid-back attitude and his tendency to hang out with the wrong type of people. Sporting medium-long, light brown hair and a slim figure; he was a guy who enjoyed anything Chocobo-related and causing as much mischief as possible – even when he's oblivious to his own actions.

"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."

"Yes, 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 passed 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 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 with an upbeat grin. "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 swishing and swooping from behind.

However, just as he was about take his leave with his friend, Zidane glanced back to Warrior of Light, a devilish smirk 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. With no time to hesitate, Warrior of Light desperately leapt into a fast sprint in hopes of catching the mischievous thief.

He made his way around the Academy grounds as swift as he could, looking through every window, in every dustbin, passed 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 switched towards the building and glanced up, 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. "That's Academy property! I could have you disciplined for this!"

"Hmm ... you do have a point. But nah, I 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.

Just as he thought he was catching up to the thief, 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 belongs to you?" 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-?" Warrior of Light tried to question back as the badge finally returned to him, having trouble to form words due to his lack of breath.

"I have the most unbearable curse of being mixed up in Zidane and Bartz's constant shenanigans."

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.

"I haven't got time for this..." Squall sighed out with a face-palmed, "I guess you haven't seen the-... Huh?"

Warrior of Light had suddenly disappeared within seconds of hearing the news, leaving Squall on his own in the middle of the corridor.

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

"Hmph ... Whatever." He murmured quietly. "At the end of the day ... We're all screwed."

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 soon reached the staircase and leapt down every few steps

towards the 1st floor, 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. Now, he was seen cursing himself for following through with such a reckless decision.

Finally, he reached the bottom of the staircase, struggling to catch his breath. With no time to rest, he instantly ran towards the entrance of the building where he had noticed the students beginning to crowd around outside. Once exited the building, Warrior of Light twisted round to the direction of the crowd.

A large, elongated board could be seen towering over everyone, filled to the brim with Class arrangements for the academic year. All the students were gossiping to one another – either gleefully or in despair – as they found out where they were placed on the Class board.

Warrior of Light slipped his way through the vast crowd as hastily as he could, gaining the clearest possible view one he broke through to the front. He halted and gazed up to the board. An immense list of names filled up the board, thankfully in large enough print for most to see.

The top of the class board revealed the names in the Academy Council and the Head/Captains of the numerous Clubs. Underneath were the homerooms with the Class numbers and designated teacher 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, the daunting realisation finally set in.

It was all there, clear as day.

"No ... why would they...!?" Warrior of Light breathlessly questioned, overwhelmed with horror.

"AWESOME!" An excited voice exploded from behind, causing him to jump out of his skin in fright.

"This is great, Cloud! All of us are 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 on impact. Two male students stood directly behind him: one with light-brown, medium-sized hair who seemed far too over-excited for his own good; whilst the other had blond, spikey hair and seemed to have an exhausted expression on his face.

Their names:

The Blitzball Captain: Tidus, and the Head of the Chocobo Racing Committee: 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 conscious.

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

want coffee!?"

"Because, Tidus ... you called me at 3am for a game of Blitzball which went on non-stop for three – count them, THREE – hours!" Cloud explained to him in frustration, sounding as though he had constantly reminded Tidus previously of the dilemma. "You have done this to me for the past week! Right now, I'm beyond shattered and on the verge of collapse."

"Yeah, but ... that's no reason to get a coffee!" Tidus laughed out as ushered Cloud towards the Academy building, not realising that his exhausted friend was in a dire state. "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. In mere moments, the two were completely out of sight, leaving only a trail of dust cloud from where Cloud's feet dug into the ground in failed protest.

Warrior of Light turned away and shook his head in dismay.

Great, just what I need ... a Class full of idiots and lost causes!

He gave one last glance to the board with disheartened eyes before leaving the crowd.

Dissidia Academy, 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, making the most out of their only opportunity to do so.

In the meantime, Warrior of Light was up on stage finishing up on last-minute preparations, feeling somewhat anxious.

His mind was running through the Headmistress' set of impending announcements, repeating on a constant loop. Whilst the majority were harmless and to be expected, one notable announcement set him on edge. In fact, he could only imagine to the reaction of the Academy upon hearing the news. Once the final checks were complete, he slipped behind the curtains to the backstage area of the Theatre Room– out of sight from the crowd. During that time, he noticed Headmistress Cosmos approaching him, causing him to abruptly stiffen up.

"Is everything ready?" She questioned him curiously, her kind smile as pure 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 let out a sigh, changing the subject, "I have a feeling the students will be shocked to hear the news I'm about to give them."

"It is to be expected." Warrior of Light agreed, hiding his own bitter feelings as he spoke. "However, 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, silently thanking him.

She stepped out onto the stage in front of the crowd of seated students, all of who beginning to quieten down as they noticed her approach. Warrior of Light watched her step behind the microphone, her body tall and elegant.

He, along with many other students of the Academy, admired Headmistress Cosmos for her calm demeanour, approachable aura and overall position in the Academy – many considering her to be beyond omniscient. Having been Headmistress for 13 years, no one could deny how she had changed the Academy for the better.

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." She spoke out to the room, her tone completely confident and proud. "I hope you've all had a much-needed break."

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

"Well, whatever the case may be, it's time to focus back once again to your studies and

commitments.” 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." She lightly chuckled, "Next is – of course – the seasonal Academy events dates and times: the Halloween Festival will be on the 31st October; the Winter party will be on the 17th December – the last day before the Holiday Break; the Spring festival will commence on the 14th April; and – to finish off – the Summer Sports Festival will begin on the 10th July."

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, wondering 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 the truth.

"...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 - Vol 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.

However, his mind was clearly miles away, staring off into the distance without any focus or acknowledgement of the people around him. He couldn't help but wonder why Headmistress Cosmos would leave the Academy halfway through the academic year, seeing as the excuse given to him was along the lines of 'other' business endeavours.

The true reasoning behind her leave was never brought up during the assembly nor even during their meeting earlier this morning. In fact, whenever Warrior of Light would attempt to delve further in the subject, Cosmos would automatically change the topic before he could finish his question. He gave out a frustrated sigh, feeling as though the Headmistress was purposely hiding secrets from him and the rest of the Academy.

Whoosh!!!

As he eventually reached the 4th Floor, Warrior of Light was given a sudden startle by one of the students rushing passed him like a speeding bullet.

After a brief doubletake, He realised that it was none other than Cloud Strife – completely flustered and streaming with sweat.

The startled Warrior of Light watched him as he hastily slid around the corner of the corridor and immediately out of sight, wondering why he was in such a rush.

Due to curiosity, Warrior of Light decided to investigate.

He trailed Cloud's direction and slyly peered around the corner of the corridor, uncertain on whether it was wise to approach Cloud directly. It didn't take him long to find Cloud, who quickly made his way towards the various vending machines near the end of the hall. The faint sounds of panting and gasping could be heard from him, struggling to calm himself as other passing students began to look in his direction with confused expression.

Cloud hastily reached into his blazer pocket, seemingly struggling to retrieve the money he required. His uniform became increasingly untidy as he searched and searched his various pockets, unable to hide the panic that was going through him.

Finally, he had found a coin, glaring at it with wild, anxious eyes. Warrior of Light could hear him muttering to himself silently, although it was difficult to determine what he was saying.

"Come on ... come on, please ... just one cup of-!"

"CLOUD!" A sudden, loud, familiarly energetic voice abruptly out, causing both Cloud and Warrior of Light to simultaneously leap out of their skin in fright.

For what seemed like a mere second, Warrior of Light caught a glance of Tidus flying passed him towards the shaken-up Cloud, completely oblivious of the Council President's existence. Noticing his friend's immediate approach, Cloud threw the coin into the coffee machine as hysteria overwhelmed him.

However, this was hopeless ... for his hand was caught by Tidus just before the coin had entered the slot of the machine.

"What are you doing here, Cloud?" Tidus cheerfully wondered, his obnoxiously high spirits glowing from his body. "Homeroom is about to start!"

"B-but I ..."

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

Warrior of Light watched the two students pass by him: Tidus seemed to be in his own little world, and Cloud was far too dreary eyed to notice Warrior of Light's presence. Admittedly, there was a sense of sorrow in Warrior of Light's expression, feeling rather disheartened by Cloud's despair. He would hate to be in those shoes right now.

Then, realising the time, he quickly turned back and made his way to his allocated Homeroom. However, just as he casually swung around the corner, he abruptly collided head-on into another student.

Bang!

"Oof-!"

"Ack-!"

The two fell backwards to the floor in surprise, the unexpected encounter throwing them off their course. Numerous sheets of paper flew above them upon impact, catching the air as they descended to the floor.

Soothing the back of his neck due to hitting it against the solid floor, Warrior of Light gradually lifted himself to a sitting position. Although brief, the world around him was somewhat blurry, causing him to become disorientated. It didn't take long for him to recover and open his eyes, noticing the other student towering above him with a hand held out in assistance.

Warrior of Light raised his head, realizing that the student was in fact a fellow Council member:

Firion.

Firion, a silver-haired, strong looking lad with a unique passion for working in the Academy. He was somewhat mysterious in terms of his goals, preferring to show off an approachable, friendly vibe towards whoever he was communicating with. Ultimately, both he and Warrior of Light had a strong, healthy co-operative friendship with one another – although both had a different approach towards their roles as Council Members.

"I'm really sorry about that, Warrior of Light." Firion apologised to him, showing off a sweet, innocent smile in the process. "I should've been more careful."

"Oh, there's no need to apologise." Warrior of Light answered with a fair tone, accepting Firion's assistance to bring him back to his feet. "I was rather distracted as well."

Noticing the mess, the two began to help one another with collecting the sheets of paper in as best of an organized fashion as possible. From the content of the papers, Warrior of Light could guess that they were Firion's lesson notes from the previous academic year. From what he initially assumed, Firion was using them as revision to help him transition into the new semester of lessons.

"I'm assuming you've met my two friends: Cloud and Tidus?" Firion spoke out in a chuckle, collecting up the last batch of sheets. "They're quite the pair of characters."

"Yes, they ... certainly are." Warrior of Light nodded back, remembering the huge difference between Cloud's and Tidus' personalities. "To think, those two are the leaders of the Chocobo Racing Committee and the Blitzball Sports Club ... seems rather barbaric."

"Well, as the saying goes, don't judge a book by its cover." Firion cheerfully responded, a light chuckle escaping his breath as he spoke. "Those two are more reliable than you'd first imagine. On one hand, Tidus is a dedicated Blitzball Champion. He is always seen practising whenever the occasion arises, and his endless enthusiasm is a force to be reckoned with. Many have even gone on to say that his abilities as a team player and Captain could transcend to 'legendary' status if he keeps up his game – I would say he gets that 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. Granted, he does seem to struggle maintaining focus at times, but you give him a job and he'll have it done without delay."

"Really...?" Warrior of Light murmured in light surprise as he passed the remaining papers to his classmate, 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."

"Heh-heh ... 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 with a smirk, holding onto his stash of papers. "Anyhow, I best save Cloud before his caffeine needs hits crisis level."

"He did seem rather shaken up for some reason." Warrior of Light pointed out whilst folding his arms, feeling what he witnessed should be mentioned. "He was attempting to buy a coffee from the machine before Tidus dragged him away."

"I assumed that would be the case." Firion answered back with a sigh, fiddling through his trouser pockets for coins. "I swear, one of these days, Tidus will realise we're all not early morning people like him ... especially Cloud."

"So be it. 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.

Class 13A Homeroom, 8:45am...

The Homeroom was filled with students, chatting away about their own affairs and their activities during the Summer Break. The room was lively, the aftermath of the Summer Break still hanging high in the air.

Warrior of Light entered the room, keeping up his appearance as he stepped forward. Straight away, he made his way over towards his designated seat – situated as the 3rd desk in the front row. Sitting down, he began to glance around.

He could see the students scattered around different sections of the room in their small groups, continuously chatting about the eventful summer and the announcements in the assembly just a moment ago.

At the far back, he noticed Tidus continuously chatting to the struggling Cloud, who was clearly wishing he had more hours of sleep. Joining in their group was Cecil Harvey, who continued to nod and agree endlessly to Tidus' non-stop rant. Cecil was like Warrior of Light in basic appearance, with long, flowing silver hair and a tall frame. That being said, the two were strikingly different from one another when it came to personality. Whilst Warrior of Light was formal and orderly, Cecil was known to be very approachable and stoic with those around him.

Moving on – currently standing as the only female student in Class 13A – Terra Branford was happily speaking to Onion Knight – the youngest student of the Class based on his youthful appearance. The two were close when it came to their companionship, with Onion Knight seemingly the only student in this class that Terra was able to become friends with without shyness becoming a major deterrent. With that said, Terra's presence within Class 13A tended to light up the atmosphere amongst the other students, her pure appearance and timid personality adding to her endearing nature. With bright blond hair and a face of beauty, she could be seen by many as the angel of the class – if not, the entire academy.

Onion Knight, although being younger than the rest of the group by a few years, had the mind of a genius. He could conquer puzzles and equations of various difficulty with ease, and if challenged by a fellow student on an activity or debate, there would be no doubt that he would overcome his opponent in the battle of wit.

This was something Warrior of Light found questionable, feeling as though Onion Knight's aura just came off as cocky and self-righteous.

Warrior of Light's gaze then shifted onto Bartz and Zidane, who were continuously pestering a moody Squall. He felt somewhat empathetic for the Lone Wolf of the Class, knowing first-hand the chaos those two clowns could ultimately cause if given the chance.

Although he had his issues about his new set of Classmates, Warrior of Light found himself becoming more tolerant of the predicament.

It wasn't perfect ... but it had its benefits.

Switching back to the front of the Classroom, he decided to begin preparation for the upcoming lessons, taking out whatever equipment he required for the day. As he took out the items of books and other necessities, he attempted to keep to himself and ignore whatever worthless conversations floated around him.

That was the case, until one specific conversation caught his attention.

"From what I hear, Cid of the Lufaine will be 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 straightened up abruptly, a sudden surge of exhilaration sparked through his body as he heard the name being mentioned.

Cid of the Lufaine, an inspiration during his youth, was soon to visit Dissidia!?

However, the fact he was not informed by Headmistress Cosmos on the event made him sceptical, unsure if Onion Knight was telling the truth or deceiving people to draw unneeded gossip.

"There's a huge rumour going around the Academy." Onion Knight explained to her, his eyes beginning to light up. "Many the teachers were even discussing it in the corridors earlier."

"And ... you believe these rumours?" Warrior of Light lowly murmured in interruption, switching round towards 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 previous 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 one-up each other until the dominant is declared. Terra, watching the two from the side-lines, felt increasingly uncomfortable as the atmosphere between the two became suffocating.

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 Student Council. Onion Knight, on the other hand, found Warrior of Light's continuous attempts to set examples for the Academy and overbearing personality to be a general nuisance.

Their rivalry had always been mutual, clashing constantly ever since the beginning of last year's 1st Semester, with the two always trying to contradict each other with opposing opinions.

"Tch...!"

"Hmph!"

After a few moments of glaring silence, the two broke away from the staring contest with spite, carrying on with their own businesses.

Warrior of Light began to think through this so called 'rumour', taking in the likely possibilities and contradictions. The idea of Cid of the Lufaine visiting the Academy caused Warrior of Light to feel cautiously uplifted. And yet, the fact that this was currently a large, baseless rumour circling round the Academy sent him into a spiral of doubt.

SLAM!

At that very moment, the door swung open, silencing the room in an instant.

The Class began to hear footsteps but could not see anyone enter the room. Warrior of Light lifted his

head as high as he possibly could, his curiosity rising. He could only catch a glimpse of fair-blond hair bobbling across the end of his desk, seemingly tied up in two short twin-tails.

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

Suddenly, a high stool appeared directly in front of the classroom, causing a few students to instantly jump out from their seats. Soon after, 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, giving out a haughty pose. "Oh-hoh-ho...!"

"YOU'RE our homeroom teacher!?" Bartz burst out in hysterics, swinging back on his chair as he let out a booming laugh. "PHA-HA-HAA! ... You're so small!"

Shantotto glared back with absolute distaste, watching Bartz continue with a piercing gaze. His excessive laughter caused the entirety of Class 13A to gasp in horror, bracing themselves for the worst. Warrior of Light awkwardly hid his face in the palms of his hands, wishing he could remove the ignorant fool's mouth permanently.

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 grew severely intimidating. "Rule number 1!"

Unexpectedly, a sceptre appeared in her right hand. She began to twirl it around with relaxed motions, feeling the flow of the sceptre move through the fingertips of her tiny palm.

And then, like a flash, she jabbed it in Bartz's direction.

Whoosh...!

"WHAT THE-!?"

CRASH!!!

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.

Once the whirlwind had disappeared, Bartz was left slumped to the floor – groans of agony escaping his lifeless mouth.

"One shall not insult another in this class ... otherwise one may find their next breath to be their last."

Shantotto coolly stated, her sceptre disappearing from her grasp. "Do you agree, Master Klauser?"

Bartz struggled and murmured 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 answered in sync.

"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.

BANG!

Unexpectedly, a loud slam echoed throughout the room. Every student – who were already on edge after their Homeroom teacher's display of discipline – jumped up by the surprise, including Squall himself.

Gradually and cautiously, they all shifted round towards the direction of the abrupt noise. To their complete surprise, it was Cloud – his head unresponsively laying against the desk.

He was completely unconscious.

It seemed that his over-tiredness finally got the better of him, causing him to give into his desire for rest.

His fellow Classmates continued to gaze towards him in confusion and shock, wondering how to handle the situation. Warrior of Light sighed as he watched Cloud's slumped body lean against his desk, his lower half almost losing the balance on his chair below.

Following immediately after the event, the door to the room suddenly 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 straightened up in shock as he noticed Cloud's motionless body.

"...Ah! I'm too late!"

Warrior of Light awkwardly lifted his hand, "Err ... Professor? I suggest we bring Cloud to the Medical Room."

Without speaking a word, Shantotto gave the nod of approval.

Slip ... bang!

As she did this, Cloud's body slip from the desk and onto the floor.

Moments Later...

Warrior of Light and Firion carried Cloud across the hallway, his feet lifelessly dragging against the floor of the building.

Warrior of Light knew the Medical room was situated on the 1st floor near the Academy Reception, so he opted to direct the path. Feeling somewhat responsible of the situation, Firion joined him with carrying his friends' body to medical care.

With both realising the strain they were about to endure, they took in a long, meaningful breath and commenced to descend the staircase. Unfortunately, they could not take the elevator that was situated on the other side of the Academy, realising that it was currently 'out of order'.

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

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

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

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

Warrior of Light glanced at him with a confused expression, wondering what he was hiding. However, he decided to keep quiet for the time being, knowing to keep out of the business of others.

They continued their struggle 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 Ground 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 murmur inaudibly, as though attempting to either awaken or talk in his sleep.

...It was likely the latter.

They eventually reached the door for the Medical Room, almost dropping Cloud along the way. Both Warrior of Light and Firion glanced at each other, simultaneously counting to three before opening the door. As they hit zero, they suddenly lurched forward, almost losing balance as they passed through.

After a moment to regain their postures, they examined the surrounding room. This room was a first for both Warrior of Light and Firion, who never needed to visit the room during their time at the Academy.

To their surprise, the Medical Room was large and spacious, with many beds situated in an orderly fashion: some of them with closed-up curtains, whilst others were open and vacant.

And then, a young lady – seemingly around the same age as the three – emerged from one of the closed curtains.

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

"Err ... yes! Cloud here had fallen unconscious during Homeroom, we reckon it's due to Over-

Tiredness." Warrior of Light explained in detail, dazzled by the young lady's beauty.

"Oh, that's unfortunate! Well, the Head Nurse is away on an errand, so it's just me for the time being. I'm a Student Nurse, so I'm able to help out in any way I can." 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, equally mesmerized by her beauty.

"Yes, of course." She nodded cheerfully with a beaming smile.

Without delay, she assisted the two as they dragged Cloud over to the allocated free bed. Carefully, they laid him down on the mattress, ensuring that no accident would occur during the transition. Finally, both Warrior of Light and Firion felt relief as the burdening weight lifted from their shoulders. The two instantly began to stretch out, feeling the aches and strains gradually disappear from their bodies. As he did this, Warrior of Light took another glance around the Medical Room out of mere interest, noticing a few students on the 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 meeting you, please let us know when Cloud is at full health."

She bowed back, showing her sweet smile, "I understand. I'll look after Cloud until he fully recovers."

And so, Warrior of Light and Firion bid Aerith farewell and made their way back out to the main area of the 1st Floor. Still stretching out the remaining aches and pains, the two lead the way towards the staircase in hopes of returning to Homeroom in time. As they approached the staircase, they began their ascent up the steps, dragging their feet as they dreaded the excruciating effort back up to the 4th Floor.

However, Warrior of Light halted.

Just as they began the climb, he caught a sudden glimpse of a hulking figure standing idle on the Academy Grounds outside. He froze, glaring through the far away window with a mixture of confusion and horror.

And then, the moment he blinked, the figure swiftly disappeared out of sight.

"Are you okay?" Firion questioned worriedly, noticing his Classmate frozen in place.

Warrior of Light leapt up with surprise, returning to reality. Shaking his head, he wondered if the figure was just a figment of his imagination.

"Err ... Y-Yes! I'm fine!" He hastily commented as an excuse, glancing back to the place where the figure initially stood. "I ... just remembered, I need to go see Headmistress Cosmos."

Warrior of Light hastily leapt up the stairs in an abrupt motion out of Firion's sight.

"Oh ... okay, see you then." Firion muttered as he watched Warrior of Light disappear, left awkwardly on his own.

The Headmistress' Office...

Sitting in front of her desk, Headmistress Cosmos was preoccupied in reorganising some old files on her desk, disposing whatever documents that took up unnecessary space.

During this moment, she heard a sudden, rushed knock.

"Come in." she commanded formally, her goddess-like voice echoing out in direction of the door.

Without delay, Warrior of Light stumbling into the office, gasping for breath.

"Warrior of Light? Is something the matter?" Cosmos wondered in surprise, unexpectedly halting her folder and document organisation as she tended to the student.

With many questions in his mind he desired to bring up, Warrior of Light took no time in explaining himself of his rude intrusion.

"I-I'm sorry to disturb you, Headmistress. I had to take Cloud Strife to the Medical Room and needed

to stop by." Warrior of Light commenced to excuse himself, regain his usual 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 after an initial hesitation, 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 in shock, 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 just having a wild guess here, but I assume Cid's visit isn't the only reason you visited my office in such haste. What's troubling you?"

Feeling as though he was exposed, Warrior of Light hesitantly began to reveal his 'other' reason.

"Just a moment ago, I spotted-!"

Knock, knock!

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

Creak...!

It immediately opened without the need of Headmistress Cosmos' consent.

During this time, Warrior of Light finished his sentence in a low mutter, his eyes fixated on the hulking figure that entered the office.

"...Garland."

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

Warrior of Light continued to glare at Garland as he approached the desk, stricken with horror. The man he had despised for so long had entered the room so casually, as if he was flaunting his innocence on purpose.

It was sickening.

"Not at all, Sir Garland." Headmistress Cosmos shook her head in response, acting oblivious to Warrior of Light's growing anguish.

The man known as Garland was shown to be a tall and buffed, easily towering over anyone who stood before him. He wore a dark black suit in a similar form to all the staff members within the Academy, nothing one would consider out of the ordinary. With his formal sense of attire and overall respectful manner, he certainly had the aura of a Dissidia Teacher.

However, there was one aspect to him that stood out amongst the rest: his rather unique helmet. Wherever he was seen, he always wore a fully-facial, metal-plated helmet consisting of two large horns and an eerily tense expression. No one knew of its origin or its purpose, many tending to speculate that it was a 'fashion-statement' of some capacity or a 'cult' symbol.

Warrior of Light preferred not to know.

As he stood in front of the Headmistress, Garland handed over what seemed to be a sturdy-looking binder. It was filled to the brim with several paper sheets detailing various information on various subjects of importance.

The binder's cover was titled: 'DISSIDIA ACADEMY: 1st Semester Itinerary'.

"I believe this is what you had called me over for, Headmistress?" Garland curiously wondered, allowing Cosmos to take the binder from his possession.

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

Numerous questions shot across Warrior of Light's mind, sending him in a downward spiral of despair:

Why is Garland here?

Why is he being so well-mannered and casual to Headmistress Cosmos?

Why is Headmistress Cosmos acting so calmly?

Why is he suited up like the staff members of the Academy?

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON!?

The Headmistress then unexpectedly switched to Warrior of Light, causing him to jump out of his skin in retaliation.

"Is there anything else you need, Warrior of Light?" Cosmos asked in her calm tone, "If you don't head off to your first lesson soon, you'll end up being late. The last thing I would want is for the Academy's Student Council President to lose his reputation ... especially at the start of the 1st Semester."

Warrior of Light was left completely speechless.

He tried to speak out and ask so many questions that rushed through his mind, and yet none of them emerged from 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..." He murmured in defeat, shaking his head. "There's nothing else, Headmistress Cosmos."

"Then, if you wouldn't mind, I have a lot of work that needs my attention." Cosmos peacefully

concluded with a nod, switching back towards her desk. "Sir Garland, would you be so kind as to escort Warrior of Light to his lesson?"

"Certainly, Headmistress." Garland accepted without delay.

Without saying another word, Warrior of Light followed Garland out of the room. Out of courtesy, Garland held the door open for him as he passed. However, Warrior of Light refused to thank or even look up at Garland in response.

Instead, Warrior of Light took one last glance towards the Headmistress, his expression filled with concern. He was just able to capture a glance of Cosmos raising her head – a small but somewhat sad smile appearing on her face as she met eyes with him – before the door finally closed between them.

Garland led him down the staircase towards the 5th Floor of the Academy, the two not speaking a word to one another. Right now, Warrior of Light's mind was in chaos as the numerous questions and uncertainties continued to consume his thoughts. It did not help with the fact that Garland was escorting him to his first lesson.

He was struggling to hold back his fury, knowing that he could burst at any moment.

Eventually, the two reached the 5th Floor – their destination being the main Art Room of the Academy. As the two passed the row of windows leading into the various classrooms, Warrior of Light briefly observed the students that were sitting in their seats: most eyes focused on the introduction of the subject at hand, whilst others were either whispering to their nearby friends or gradually entering their daydreams.

Outside the classrooms, the halls were as vacant as it could ever be, with only the duo's echoing footsteps breaking the silence.

"I always find that the Academy has the best atmosphere when it's quiet." Garland suddenly expressed, choosing to break the silence on his own accord. "It's rather peaceful, wouldn't you say?"

Warrior of Light abruptly halted, his expression low as it hid behind his long, platinum silver hair. Garland noticed him stop in his tracks, and swivelled round to face him in curiosity.

"Is there a problem?" He asked politely, completely oblivious to the situation.

Either side of him, Warrior of Light's hands drew into fists. They were shaking, as though desperately holding back the fury that was about to break through. Until now, he decided to brush away Garland's involvement with the Academy, believing it was an oversight by the Headmistress. However, his overall presence and attitude continued to dig deep into his consciousness, purposely irritating him to the point of desiring to lash out in protest.

Furthermore, Garland's innocent comment was far too out of character for someone of his background.

Warrior of Light needed answers.

"Why...?" Warrior of Light murmured in a low, menacing tone, his head emerging to face Garland.

"Why are you here, Garland?"

At first, Garland was silent, reading Warrior of Light's repulsed expression before approaching the question.

"Hmm ... well, if you must know: the generous Headmistress Cosmos approached me with a job offer." Garland admitted in honesty, his tone of voice formal yet proud. "Her proposal was for me to take up the role of the Academy's English Teacher. So, long story short, I accepted the offer in a heartbeat and now ... here I am."

"Tsk...!"

This constant positive and upbeat tone coming from Garland continued to infuriate Warrior of Light, setting his emotions further on edge as he let out a tut in disgust. He stepped closer to the man before him, examining him carefully as he hoped to find any sign of contradiction.

With Garland's demonic helmet in the way, this was rather difficult.

"Is there any need for the staring?" Garland calmly pondered, becoming rather conscious of Warrior

of Light's judging gaze.

"You have ruined so many people's lives ... You purposefully caused unemployment, bankruptcy, and even homelessness! You've created so much chaos around the world for your own personal gain, and here you stand acting all innocent and respectful!" Warrior of Light finally lashed out in disgust, pointing the guilty finger without any remorse. "What makes you believe you could start acting all 'friendly' after everything you did!?"

He kept the volume of his voice as quiet as possible, bearing in mind about the lessons happening close beside them.

"Listen ... I'm-!"

"I have AMNESIA because of what you did!" Warrior of Light then bellowed, letting his emotions take control over him. "As my home burned to the ground, you laughed ... as I was left stranded in the streets, you laughed ... as I was neglected from the world, you laughed!"

Garland stood in silence.

"Right now, you should be locked up in the Dungeon Cells ... along with the rest of this planet's scum!"

Garland watched in silence as Warrior of Light's eyes continued to burn like a raging inferno. In comparison, Garland's eyes were blank, empty and unreadable.

And then, Warrior of Light noticed the man shaking his head in a subtle manner, lowering his glare for some odd reason.

"The Dungeon Cells ... is a place no living being would want to be locked up in." Garland eventually expressed, confessing in truth. "I was trapped in that horrific place for 5 years, tortured and broken apart. As I wasted away, I gave myself time to reflect on my faults and sins, including that fateful night. I knew that I did wrong, that I was beyond forgiveness. But alas, I chose to accept my punishment.

"My desire now is to become a changed being, to wipe the slate completely clean. I have tried and failed so many times, it was only because Headmistress Cosmos the option I longed for that I'm standing here today. She gave me the chance to enter society once again as a respectable civilian and even offered me a job within this Academy. For that, I am forever grateful to her kindness."

Hearing him out, Warrior of Light took a moment to gather in all this information, uncertainty and scepticism preventing him to take the excuses into consideration. The idea of Garland becoming a changed man – even becoming an English Teacher within Dissidia Academy – just did not sit well with him whatsoever.

This whole situation was completely absurd.

"I can't trust you." Warrior of Light responded in caution, crossing his arms. "This is just wrong on so many levels."

"Well, whatever you may think about me, we'll have to settle these differences overtime. However, right now, we both have places to go and tasks to complete." Garland concluded with the shrug of his shoulders, realising that time was upon them. "I trust that you can reach your first lesson without my assistance?"

Warrior of Light let out a small nod.

"Then, I shall take my leave." He humbly accepted, stepping forward and passing the idle Warrior of Light. "I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again soon, whether that is in lesson ... or by other means."

As Garland left, Warrior of Light was left on his own in the middle of the 5th Floor corridor, waiting until the man disappeared completely.

Feeling as though his mind had taken a fatal beating from the event that just transpired, he shook his head vigorously. It was all too much to comprehend at once, causing him to question whether life itself was messing with him for the simple amusement.

And yet, all he could do was brush it aside, as though he had to accept the turn of events regardless of his opinion on the matter.

Letting out a deep, bitter sigh, Warrior of Light thought no more of it and headed towards the Art Room.

A Moment Later...

Warrior of Light finally reached the door to his lesson, approaching the plaque that was drilled into the door, reading: Art Studio 1.

He straightened himself up appropriately, checking his uniform and bag so that everything was up-to-standard. In all honesty, he was just delaying the inevitability of facing the scrutiny and subsequent backlash for his late arrival. As Student Council President – along with being Class 13A's President, it would be deemed hypocritical if he were to escape the consequences as he would endorse the same unto others if they were in his shoes.

Taking in a deep, calmed breath, he knocked on the door and finally headed inside.

As he entered, Warrior of Light noticed his fellow classmates of class 13A sitting in their assigned seats. All eyes were set on him, causing him to grow intimidated by their judging gaze. However, he tried his best to brush off the feeling as he stepped inside.

"Apologies for the lateness, Sir." He began his apology, keeping up his 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 utilize the variety of materials and apparatus for their projects. Its walls were filled with various images and works from both famous artists and notable students of the Academy, displaying the different types of movements and techniques commonly seen in the world of Art.

An understandable difference with this room from others in the Academy was the desks – or, more appropriately referred to as 'workspace'. They were considerably larger than the usual classroom desks, allowing more room for students to development their projects on.

In addition, at the front of the Art Studio was a large, towering white board. It displayed insightful facts and information on the famous Artists and Artwork known around the world, along with Art as a subject of creativity and its importance in society.

After a brief overview of the room, Warrior of Light switched back to his classmates, many of whom were continuing to stare at him with gawking and generally surprised expressions. It was as though they were watching something extraordinary unfold before their eyes, awaiting the pay-off.

Warrior of Light gazed back in caution, wondering what had possessed them to act so static and robotic. However, he ultimately decided to ignore, instead continuing to question whereabouts of the 'missing' teacher.

He chose to ask his classmates, "Do you guys know where the teacher-?"

"Ooh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh...!"

Warrior of Light abruptly froze, an eerie shiver slowly crawling up his spine.

"So ... the 'Council President' decides to show up after all!" The haunting, over-the-top voice taunted above, "And here I was beginning to believe that the Academy elected a lazy-@\$\$\$. Skiving. FAILURE for a President! Hehehehe-hee ... It seems I may have to reconsider that though ... ever-so slightly."

Warrior of Light gaze rapidly switched from one direction to the other as he attempted to find the owner of the mysterious voice. And yet, it was to no avail, for only his classmates were in his line of sight.

The students just continued to glare towards him speechlessly – or, to be exact, 'above him'.

"Where are you...?" Warrior of Light breathed firmly, refusing to give into the looming taunts. "Reveal yourself!"

"HERE I AM!" The manic voice roared in instant response.

During that very second, an upside-down, clown-like face appeared from above, causing Warrior of

Light to literally jump up in fright. The unexpected startle sent him falling back uncontrollably due to loss of balance, showing no chance of recovering before-
BANG!

...smacking his head hard against the door behind him.

Warrior of Light slumped to the floor, his head woozy and consciousness faint. Through the aching head and the blurred visuals, he could just about hear the booming, overexcited laughter directly in front of him.

"WHOA-hohohoho-ho...! That was just PERFECT!" The voice roared out excitedly in his manic tone of voice, his laughing growing louder and more insane by the second. "Ho-ho-hoo ... Welp, that's my highlight of the year out of the way, and we're only on the FIRST DAY! I'm DYING of laughter here!" Gradually, Warrior of Light began to sit himself up, his head throbbing extensively as he winced in pain. As his sights returned, he immediately caught sight of the culprit of his torment. From what he could gather, the man before him was clutching his abdomen as he tried to breathe through the hysterics, showing no remorse for his trickery on the poor student.

However, even with everything else that had happened to him throughout the day, Warrior of Light was completely caught off-guard by this current occurrence: the man was levitating in mid-air!

Acting as though he was lying on his back, the man continued to Bob up and down in the air like it was nothing to him. He was wearing the usual formal suit as seen worn by the other staff of the Academy – as one would expect at this point. And yet, he easily stood out from the rest with his eccentric body language and his face and skin.

In terms of his overall appearance, the man had purposely fashioned himself in a style that would resemble a harlequin or insane jester: His skin was as white as a ghost; his purple lips was twisted in a constant smile; and his light brown hair was secured back with a bunch of large, sky blue feathers and trinkets.

"Erm ... y-you must be Mr Palazzo?" Warrior of Light dazedly guessed with a murmured stutter, struggling to regain his footing.

"Mr Palazzo? Ha! I'm not too fond of being addressed by such a name." The man spat with distaste, even though he continued his hysteric laughter regardless, "A pathetic insect like you may call me MASTER Palazzo, seeing as I RULE in these lessons! Hohoho-hoo...! Or, if you so desire, Kefka will do jus fine."

"I ... I see." Warrior of Light nodded cautiously, straightening back into his usual formal posture to swiftly hide his embarrassment.

Wishing to escape the deranged lunatic he called a 'teacher', Warrior of Light directed his attention to his allocated seat, passing Kefka in the process. Kefka's eyes followed the student like daggers, ready to strike if deemed necessary.

Once Warrior of Light perched himself on his seat, Kefka casually flew over to the front of the classroom as if he was swimming, small chuckles escaping his every breath.

"Now then, let us ... begin!" Kefka announced in a grandiose tone.

His tone of voice switched from lightly humorous to horrifying within the same sentence, his very words sending members of the Class on edge.

As Kefka began to make his long – and somewhat psychotic – speech, Warrior of Light eyes averted and searched the room. It did not take long for him to realise Cloud Strife was still missing from the group, meaning he was still in an unconscious state in the Medical Room. This was to be expected, seeing as it was not long ago since both Warrior of Light and Firion had transferred him over.

However, something else caught his sight: Terra Branford. Terra – who was sitting across the room from Warrior of Light – seemed particularly fidgety, showing signs of severe anxiousness as she observed Kefka's erratic ranting. Warrior of light took intrigue in his behaviour, wondering how she was going to handle the next hour.

"...Now then, with the subject of Art: Artists are able to express their own desires and emotions through their own creativity and styles. The ideas of Impressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism are just

a few examples that demonstrates the infinite possibilities of Art as a subject." Kefka continued to lecture, chuckling away feverishly as he expressed his passion to the Class. "But, personally, I don't fancy the 'peaceful' and 'drastically dull' artwork of early generations. No ... I enjoy the EXPLOSIONS, the FLARE, and the INSANITY of recent generations! Hya-ha-ha-haa...!!! Ooh, you can just feel the CHAOS burning within the brushstrokes! It just makes you feel ... wait for it ... ALIVE!!!"

"Eek!"

A small squeak was heard from Terra, taken aback by Kefka's sudden outbursts.

"Stop your squirming!" Kefka immediately barked, disgusted by her 'uncalled for' disruption. "A pathetic child such as yourself has no right interrupting my declaration!"

Warrior of Light could read Terra like a book. He began to assume the possibility of some history between her and Kefka, based upon her reaction. She seemed particularly traumatized by the teacher, acting as if she could faint at any moment.

Please don't faint ... surely one passed out classmate is more than enough for today?

On the one hand, he prayed for this lesson to run smoothly without another 'Cloud Strife' situation. On the other hand, he began to feel sorry for the girl, empathizing with her on the torment she had to endure. For now, he preferred not to pursue out of general respect for his classmate.

He switched his sights back to the front of the classroom, continuing to listen to the madman for a teacher as he ranted on and on about the love for chaos and destruction.

The next hour was beyond unbearable.

Lunch Break, 12:30pm...

Lunch Break finally commenced across the Academy, the bell ringing out in a loud echo throughout the Buildings and Grounds of the Academy in loud, enthusiastic chimes.

A hoard of students rushed from their classrooms towards the direction of the Dining Hall, grasping their food money and tickets ready as they awaited to chow down on the cafeteria's exquisite dishes. With that said, not all students were rushing towards the same direction, as some were already prepared with their own packed-lunches as a preferred option. Gathering with friends and groupies, they headed outside onto the surrounding Academy Grounds, taking in the strong rays of the Sun and relaxing atmosphere.

During this time, Warrior of Light was seen swerving and dodging the impatient crowds in desperation to reach the Academy Grounds. A brief flashback to the previous year reminded him of the constant hassle that became the dread of the day for many. Due to impatience for food, there was never a time when Warrior of Light was left unscathed as he transitioned through the crowd of students. Thankfully, this did not last long, as Warrior of Light was eventually able reach the grounds after what felt like a never-ending barrage of accidental shoves and pushes. He took a moment to gain his breath back, wishing there was a more reasonable alternative to the usual route. Once regaining his energy, it did not take long for him to find a free bench – conveniently situated under a faraway cherry-blossom tree. It was vacant and out of the way from the crowds, perfect for anyone who preferred an ounce of peace.

Stepping over to the vacant bench at a swift pace, warrior of Light was constantly checking for anymore rushing students out of fear that his break would be interrupted.

Thankfully, there was none in sight.

He took no time to perch himself down on the bench, retrieving his packed-lunch from his backpack without a second thought. His lunch consisted of the simple-yet-classic BLT sandwich, a fresh apple, a small chocolate bar, and a bottle of natural-spring water.

Admittedly, it was a rather boring lunch. But, to him at least, it was beyond perfect.

Sipping on his refreshing drink, Warrior of Light felt at peace. He was finally separate from all the inconvenience of both the students and teachers, and it allowed him time to reflect on his day without any interruption. The falling cherry-blossom petals helped clear his mind, giving him the moment of tranquillity he long desired.

Taking a deep breath, he grasped his sandwich and proceeded to take a bite.
"Ah-HAH! Light-o, there you are!" A loud, enthusiastic voice called out abruptly.

Chomp!

Due to the abrupt burst of energy emerging before him, Warrior of Light had completely missed his sandwich and instead bit down on his own tongue.

This was then followed by a tremendous scream of agony, loud enough to be heard across the entirety of Dissidia Academy.

"...aaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!"

Every student and teacher halted in their tracks, glancing around in wonder of where the abrupt scream had originated from.

"Ow...! ...Ouch...!"

"Pfft...! AH-HAH-HAH-HAH-HAAA!!!"

Warrior of Light pressed down on his tongue with his thumb and finger, attempting to prevent the excess blood from seeping out. Sitting beside him, Tidus was seen laughing hysterically for the past 10 minutes, tears flowing from his squinting eyes as he was unable to breathe.

Warrior of Light, on the other hand, wasn't the slightest amused. In his thoughts, he was cursing Tidus non-stop, seeing as it was he who caused the Council President to accidentally bite down on his own tongue in the first place.

"I'm glad you find this funny. (I'm glad you find this funny!)" Warrior of Light sarcastically commented, continuing to bite down on his bitten tongue.

Tidus' over-the-top laughter was beginning to get on his nerves.

"Hahahaha ... b-but that was just ... TOO FREAKING FUNNY!" Tidus burst out in admittance as he gasped for air. "How in the world could you bite your tongue s-so ... SO EASILY!?"

"It's not like I did it on purpose! (It's not like I did it on purpose!)" Warrior of Light then tried to argue, squeezing tightly and painfully on his tongue without even realizing 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 desired to be fed. And yet, all he could do was apply a sliver of his mineral water to frequently clean the blood off his tongue.

Carefully, Warrior of Light lifted his finger and thumb off his tongue, feeling that the cut created from the bite had finally stopped gushing out with blood.

During that time, he caught Tidus staring down at his lunch with a strong gaze, acting as though he was thoroughly inspecting its quality.

"Your food seems kinda ... dull." Tidus lowly muttered in opinion, his wondrous eyes locked in place.

"Wait. You don't have this *every day*, do you?"

Just then, Warrior of Light felt something snap in the depths of his mind, feeling his temper brewing from below.

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

"Whoa, whoa ... chill out, buddy!" Tidus waved to show his innocence, finding his fellow classmate's outburst rather unexpected. "I just wanted to hang out, that's all."

"Well, why me?" Warrior of Light bitterly questioned, finding it odd that Tidus preferred to hang out with him rather than his usual gang of friends. "What about Cloud, Cecil, and Firion? I thought they were your go-to guys?"

"See, usually I would, but ... Cloud's still out cold 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 conveniently happens to be his older brother and our Astronomy Teacher." Tidus answered in length, numbering off with his fingers as he explained the situation. "So, yeah ... I've been ditched."

"...What about you?" Warrior of Light continued to question as he chewed on his sandwich, his

hunger finally overcoming pain. "You're the Blitzball Captain, correct? Do you not have training or something along those lines?"

"Nope. I have training on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I'm usually free on the odd-days." Tidus answered ecstatically, showing of a care-free grin. "Besides, I always see you wondering about the Academy on your own. You're not hanging out with friends or anything. Normally, you're always working and showing a serious attitude towards everyone you come across."

Warrior of Light listened silently, his chewing gradually slowing as he took the words in.

"Thinking about it, you're kinda like Squall in some ways ... just without the gloominess atmosphere hanging around you, along with the lack of care in the world." Tidus continued to express, "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, finding this side honesty from him pleasantly surprising.

He couldn't understand how Tidus was always so cheerful and full of energy, let alone the process of his sudden and crazy decision making. However, he also felt somewhat grateful, taking in his classmate's words to heart.

Maybe it wasn't what he hoped for, but it was still a moment of fresh air he long desired.

Under the blissful cherry-blossom tree, Warrior of Light found that he was in a peaceful state. He was admittedly enjoying the unexpected company, something he never thought he would appreciate – especially from Tidus, of all people.

"Well, thank you for the concern." Warrior of Light smirked as he nodded with gratitude, finishing off the BLT in the process.

Tidus then leapt to his feet, a sudden – and most likely absurd – idea popping up in his head, "Hey! Maybe we should practice some Blitzball drills, you and me! It would be SO AWESOME! And then, we could-!"

He then abruptly froze.

"Ah, apologies. I was never a Blitzball fan. However, I wouldn't mind-..." Warrior of Light admitted in honesty, before switching round to notice Tidus' sudden change of tone. "Is something wrong?"

As he glanced at Tidus, Warrior of Light immediately noticed him staring off to the distance of the Academy Grounds, his face was lit up with a wondrous, yet abnormally cautious expression.

Something had clearly caught his attention, albeit Warrior of Light was uncertain as to its significance. Suddenly, Tidus leapt up onto the bench to gain a better view, his eyes completely focused on the far-off distance. Shocked by his abrupt change of tune, Warrior of Light hastily shuffle back from his initial seating position, covering his remaining food in the process.

"Hey! Feet off the bench!" Warrior of Light barked in repulse, switching to his 'Council President' mode in a flash. "Ehat in the world has gotten into you?"

However, he initially received no response.

After a moment of observation, Tidus abruptly leaped back off the bench in haste.

"Err ... sorry, Light! Got to go!" Tidus called out in a nervous chuckle, before racing off in the distance of the opposite direction. "I'll see you back in class!"

Within a mere flash, Tidus was nowhere to be seen. Warrior of Light sat staring in bewilderment, unable to grasp what had just happened. Everything had happened so fast that he was left completely oblivious to the situation.

"What was that all about...?" Warrior of Light quietly murmured to himself, unable to justify the event that just occurred. "...Weird."

He then shook his head, brushing away the odd situation and got ready to eat his apple. However, as he was just about to take a bite, he heard a fellow student roar out from the distance.

"...Run...!"

He immediately switched round to the direction of the voice, not knowing what to expect.

And then ... his mouth fell open in an instant, his eyes widening in terror.

Who he saw was none other than Squall Leonhart, fleeing for his life. His jaw clenched tightly and streams of sweat flying off his mug, there was no doubt that he was in jeopardy.

Behind him was an enormous dust cloud, consuming everything in its wake. Students caught in its path had either leapt for cover or was instantly consumed, letting out horrified screams as the cloud engulfed them.

However, it was not the dust cloud itself that terrified both Warrior of Light and Squall ... it was the group of students that were causing it to form.

"That's ... a lot of females." Warrior of Light ushered out from the back of his throat, his body frozen in place.

A large cluster of female students were chasing Squall with love-struck expressions, showing no signs of stopping until they have their target.

His body snapping into action, Warrior of Light hastily packed up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. He had no choice but to move, preferring not to imagine what would happen if he was caught in the crossfire.

There was a problem. The moment he straightened up ... loud, deafening screams echoed across the Academy Grounds.

“““KYAAAAAAAAA...!!!””””

Warrior of Light was now a target.

Squall, who was not slowing down, realised what had just occurred immediately.

"RUN! NOW!" He roared out, panting and wheezing as he continued to be chased.

Before Warrior of Light could react, Squall shot passed him at lightning speed. As he passed, he grabbed Warrior of Light by the collar. Without warning, Warrior of Light jolted from his position and had joined Squall in the escape against his own will. He rapidly gained a speed that matched Squall's, feeling somewhat as though he had just entered the Track Team.

Close behind then, the hoard of 'fan girls' were relentlessly on their tail.

"What's going on!?" Warrior of Light called out towards Squall in desperation, demanding answers for this new dilemma. "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'll not stop until they've caught a victim!"

"And ... what'll happen if they do!?" Warrior of Light continued to question, he could feel his stomach churning as he ran through the Grounds.

"Honestly ... I'd rather not know?!" Squall answered hopelessly, 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 sped round a nearby corner, trying to catch their pursuers off-guard as much as possible. The two kept an eye out for whatever hidden gaps or spaces as a means of a swift escape, praying that the gods would offer them a miracle.

They continued to run parallel with the Academy's building, not dropping their pace for a second.

During that moment, 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 hiding place.

"Quick! Through here!" Warrior of Light nudged Squall in haste, hoping their pursuers were oblivious to the escape route.

Noticing the door, Squall nodded back with a firm expression.

The two timed themselves, before diving through the small door and out of the sights of their pursuers. Merely seconds later, the hoard of female students passed the door, causing both Warrior of Light and Squall to duck low behind the nearest cover.

There hearts racing, breaths heavy, and sanities on edge: the two knew they would have been caught if they had missed the escape.

Finally, the pursuers had disappeared ... and the world around them fell silent.

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

Squall took a moment to do the same, gasping for some much-needed oxygen. And then, after a moment of respite, he struggled to his feet. His whole body was violently shaking, immediately regretting the excessive running they had to endure.

"It was ... inevitable. You became their target the moment you were announced as the new Council President." Squall began to explain in a low mutter, taking in many deep recovery breaths in the process. "Ever since this morning's assembly, they've been tracking you down relentlessly."

"A-are you serious!?" Warrior of Light blurted out in horror, unable to believe this revelation. "What about you? Why were they chasing you?"

Squall briefly fell silent, evidently hesitant to answer.

"I ... passed by and said ... 'hi'." He finally admitted, hiding his face in embarrassment as he answered in an almost inaudible mumble.

"Hold on ... THAT'S IT!?" Warrior of Light blurted in horror.

"SHUSH!" Squall quickly hushed him, placing his finger against his own lips.

Warrior of Light hastily covered his mouth in realisation.

"Yeah ... when Bartz and Zidane found out about my mistake, they disappeared and left me behind." Squall murmured bitterly, his teeth grinding hard the moment he mentioned the two names. "... Some friends they are."

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

"I ... I think they're gone now." Squall cautiously assumed, placing an ear against the Fire Exit door. He then indicated with the 'all clear' and gradually opened the door. Warrior of Light rose to his feet, returning to a respectable posture before following Squall back out into the open.

Even though they were back out onto the Grounds, the two continuously checked all directions.

"My guess is that they'll be roaming the Front Entrance of the Academy, so be on the lookout." Squall warned in caution, paranoia setting in his mind.

Warrior of Light silently nodded in response, trusting his instincts.

The two headed over to the Front Entrance, passing the bench under the cherry-blossom tree. With his stomach continuing to growl, Warrior of Light had no choice but to save the remainder of his lunch for a later time.

Suddenly, as they closed in on the Entrance, Squall halted his movement.

"Wait!"

He abruptly forced Warrior of Light to the side, the two hiding away against the nearby wall.

"What are you-!?" Warrior of Light barked out, before noticed Squall holding up a finger once again to silence him.

As though by instinct, the two poked their heads out from their cover. They then watched as Cloud Strife emerged from the Academy's doors, still slightly dazed and holding a coffee cup in his palm.

"Finally, some fresh air." Cloud sighed out in relief, rubbing the small bump on his forehead.

He drew in for another sip of his hot coffee, anticipating the sweet sense of revitalization.

However, as he was about to take his sip, sudden echoes of feminine screams were heard from the distance.

"Hm...?"

Cloud switched around, wondering where the screams were coming from. The screams grew louder and louder, and both Warrior of Light and Squall could only watch in horror as the inevitable events began to unfold.

"What the-!?"

The hoard of female students appeared into view from all directions, ambushing the oblivious Cloud. The surrounded him like an infestation, clutching at his clothes and limbs without remorse.

"Wh-what's going on!? Where are you taking me!? W-wait ... WAIT!" Cloud bellowed out, unable to

break free from the group's unbreakable clutches.

With no possible escape route, Cloud was left trapped at their mercy. He was completely immobilized, being dragged away to the unavoidable abyss that awaited him.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOoooooo...!!!"

Warrior of Light and Squall gazed sorrowfully as Cloud disappeared into the darkness, desperately attempting to break free from the cage of the group's giggly grasps.

"Cloud ... was a valiant ally." Squall stated in his usual dark, gloomy tone, saluting his fallen classmate as a sign of respect. "His sacrifice will never be forgotten."

"You sound like he's going to DIE!" Warrior of Light gasped at him in horror, finding this whole situation unbelievably absurd.

Dissidia Academy, 3:00pm...

The final bell rang out across the halls, signalling the end of lessons for the day.

Students in their various groups left the classrooms feeling free and alive. They began their usual chatter amongst one another, highlighting their day and what their plans were once they exited the Academy building. Whilst most left the Academy without hesitation, others dwindled behind, completing any outstanding tasks.

During this time, Class 13A concluded their final lesson of the day: Maths. As they heard the bell, they swiftly packed up and headed off in their separate directions:

Squall was the first to leave, taking no time to separate himself from Zidane and Bartz – who were constantly nagging him throughout the lesson.

Tidus rounded up his usual gang of misfits: him seemingly ecstatic as always, Firion and Cecil deep in conversation regarding a recent debate, and Cloud left trailing from behind. It was apparent that Cloud's encounter with the hoard of female students had left him in a traumatized state. So, to empathize with his close friend, Tidus constantly attempted to perk his spirits up.

Terra and Onion Knight headed off at their own pace, both seemingly relieved to see the day finally end.

And finally, Warrior of Light packed up his equipment and slung his backpack over his shoulder, ready to move.

However, just as he was about to leave, Firion tapped on his shoulder.

"Hey, do you want to walk home with us?" Firion suggested curiously, a calm smile beaming across his face. "We're thinking of hitting the arcades along the way."

"Oh. Sorry, Firion. I need to speak with Headmistress regarding the upcoming Council meetings."

Warrior of Light answered back, shaking his head apologetically. "Maybe some other time?"

In response, Firion cheerfully shrugged, "Fair enough. Just be sure to let me know about the Council plans tomorrow."

"Yes, I'll let you know when I have everything in order." Warrior of Light grinned in return, waving Firion and the rest of the group off.

As they left, Warrior of Light briefly heard Tidus making a small comment to the other three:

"Light seems to be visiting the Headmistress a lot today. Sounds to me like they're all buddy-buddy! Ahahaa...!"

...before disappearing from sight.

Soon After...

Warrior of Light swiftly reached the Top Floor of the Academy, racing up the vacant staircase without any opposing issues. He reached the Headmistress' Office in no time and patiently knocked on the door.

Knock-Knock!

"Come in."

He heard the usual call from the Headmistress and entered upon command.

As he stepped into the office, he saw Headmistress Cosmos standing up from her desk. She was overseeing the students from her window, casually watching as they exited the Academy. It was as if she was a Goddess to the Academy, balancing her work as Headmistress whilst also maintaining the well-being of her students.

"It's nice to see the Academy's First Semester start off on a high, would you not agree?" Cosmos cheerfully spoke out, twisting round to face Warrior of Light with a cool, innocent smile across her face.

"Well, it certainly was an 'interesting start' ... that's for certain." Warrior of Light answered back in an anxious chuckle, reflecting on his odd experiences throughout the day.

With that, the two began their meeting. Cosmos briefed him on the tasks that were to be investigated before the Council meeting on Friday, such as: upcoming events, any notable issues that may need to be addressed, and so on. In addition, she passed over a sheet of paper, breaking down the tasks she planned for him to pursue.

"I'm sure this will all be simple enough for you, Council President." She coolly grinned, showing confidence in the boy. "Ah! Before I forget. You'll be joined by Cid of the Lufaine at some point during Friday's meeting, so make sure you have a lot to discuss with him."

Warrior of Light gleefully agreed and accepted the sheet of paper, slipping it inside his backpack. However, just as he zipped up the bag, his expression turned to uncertainty. There was something that stuck in his mind throughout the day ... a question that he wished to bring up before it was too late.

He glanced at the Headmistress with a firm gaze.

"Cosmos, if may I ask: Why did you employ Garland into the Academy?" He requested, hoping to settle his mind once and for all. "It's just not sitting right with me, especially with all the harm he has caused in the past."

The Headmistress stood silent for a moment, dipping her head in hesitance.

She knew he would ask the question, seeing it in his eyes when he previously entered her office. However, she had hoped the whole situation avoided a possible misunderstanding, aware of the hysteria it could cause throughout the Academy.

"Garland appeared before me, pleading to wipe the slate clean. He continuously acknowledged his previous wrongdoings ... and promised not to repeat those same mistakes." Cosmos finally began to explain, taking in a deep breath as she spoke. "At first, I outright refused his wishes. I thought to myself that he 'wasn't to be trusted, no matter the excuse'. However, as I further examined him ... I realised he was telling the truth.

"And so, I decided to help him. I hired him as an English Teacher for the Academy, and I've placed numerous measures to monitor his actions in case he decides to go against his promises."

"You've known of his sins!" Warrior of Light argued back, hoping that there was some sense of justification for the Headmistress' risky decision. "He had ruined so many lives ... including mine!"

"I am well aware." Cosmos responded with an understanding nod. "You have nothing to worry about, Warrior of Light. I have taken both his and your words into consideration and have taken full responsibility for this decision."

Warrior of Light drew back with hesitance, unable to find the words.

"All I can tell you now is that you'll just have to trust me." Cosmos assured him.

Warrior of Light held his silence, refusing to give an answer. He strapped the backpack over his shoulder once again, deciding to take his leave.

"I will see you tomorrow, Warrior of Light." She called out in farewell, her kind smile illuminating towards him.

Warrior of Light waved back at her in goodbye before exiting the office ... but did not say another word.

As the door closed, Cosmos sat back down on her desk, letting out a saddened sigh before commencing to her various reports.

Just then, not long after Warrior of Light left, another knock was heard from the door.

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

Click...!

The door opened ... and the sound of large, booming footsteps echoed throughout the office.

"That boy certainly likes to involve himself on the businesses of others." A deep, menacing voice expressed.

"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. However, he is held back by his own setback, and he'll never be able to move forward if they continue to loom over him."

"If you say so, Cosmos." The deep voice accepted, letting out disgruntled tut.

Cosmos halted her reports, hesitating momentarily. She refused to look up at the being before her, knowing it would only cause more stress on her.

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 against the Academy's Governing Body, the decision was final.

In her heart, Cosmos despised the fact that she would soon be replaced against her own will by such a man. There was no doubt that everything she had done for the Academy would be abolished by the time she leaves. There was nothing she could do to prevent the inevitable, only appreciate the time she had left.

Cosmos placed down her black-inked pen and bitterly raised her head, meeting eye-to-eye with the man who towered over her.

The man was no ordinary man. Everything other than his suit differed from the norm. He was roughly twice the height of Sir Garland and gave the impression that he could take down the building with a singular punch. He had four brutal-looking arms – all of which could choke out anyone who opposed him with ease – and two large, demonic wings with piercing talons.

To top it off: he had the face of a demon.

His enlarged fangs were razor-sharp, his hauntingly grotesque eyes were filled with red, and the oversized horns on top of his head could skewer his victims without restriction.

Regardless of her thoughts, Cosmos held her usual pleasant aura, grinning sweetly as she decided to ask the man a simple question:

"Is there anything I can help you with ... Deputy-Headmaster Chaos?"

End of Volume 1.

4 - Vol 2: Wake Up Call

Volume 2: Admiration

"Mm...?"

Cloud Strife's drowsy eyes flickered open, everything around him a blur.

"What's ... going on...?"

As time passed, he groggily began to regain his senses, gradually being able to focus on what was around him. The first that caught his attention was the plain yet heavenly ceiling directly above him. The unique patterns and swirls mesmerized him, his imagination wondering with its heavenly aura. Then, his eyes diverted, noticing a series of large crystal-white curtains surrounding him, further adding to the therapeutic atmosphere. As he momentarily lifted his head, he immediately felt a puffed-up pillow gently rub against the back of his head. Additionally, he noticed the blank-white duvet laid out over the top of his body.

Cloud's suspicions were quickly confirmed: he had woken up in a bed that was not his own.

Usually, he would begin to panic, fretting over the fact that he was somewhere he had never been before and no clue as to how he got there in the first place. However, he had no energy in him to react so excessively. Instead, he began to reflect on the events prior to his current predicament. As expected though, everything that occurred to him throughout the day was a complete haze, with only brief glimpses of memory appearing on brief occasions.

...such as the early-morning Blitzball practise with Tidus.

Oh ... now I remember.

Just then, through that small snippet of memory, the events all came flooding back to him.

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

Cloud immediately switched direction to where he heard the voice, not knowing what to expect. And then, the moment he met eyes with the voice's owner, his heart instantly skipped a beat.

The person who he laid eyes upon gave off a therapeutic aura, as if she was a guardian angel watching over him from above. Her face was smooth and delicate, showing of a sweet and innocent smile that would calm any troubled soul. Her long, chocolate-brown, plaited hair was tied back with a simple hairband, and yet it flowed so majestically. Finally, to add to the heavenly feel, she wore what seemed to be a pure white uniform.

Cloud hastily shook his head, snapping out of his consuming trance.

As one would expect, a plethora of questions began to pop into his mind. Shuffling through the batch, he decided to begin with the simplest.

"Wh-where am I?" He dazedly requested, examining the area around him once again as he woozily sat up on the bed. "Am I ... dead?"

"Wha-!? No, no! Don't be ridiculous! You're in the Academy's Medical Room." The girl hastily responded, letting out a fit of giggles upon hearing his question. "You're two classmates carried you down here saying you collapsed during Homeroom."

Great ... of course I did. His thoughts echoed out in a disgruntled murmur, briefly glancing away in embarrassment.

Whilst his memories of the day came back to him, his time during Homeroom with still rather hazy. He could just about remember listening to Professor Shantotto's speech, Bartz Klauser being blasted to be back of the classroom, and after that ... it was a blank.

Through this, he realised that the lack of sleep had hit him like a truck, his head still throbbing from the impact.

He began to sooth it, flinching as his fingers made contact with the mall bump that had formed overtime.

"Well ... thank you for looking after me ... err..." Cloud began to state in gratitude, showing appreciation to the mysterious girl who tended to his care.

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

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

Aerith nodded cheerfully in acknowledgement, accepting his gratitude wholeheartedly.

She then nonchalantly placed her palm on his forehead, checking to see if the swelling was beginning to diminish. He felt her smooth, soft touch comfort his forehead, causing him to reach the peak of anxiousness.

With his face burning bright red and body as tense as it ever could be, Cloud felt cornered by this unexpected situation.

"Hmm ... it seems to be settling down now. Just to be on the safe side, though: you should probably sooth it with an ice-pack every so often." Aerith began to explain with her kind smile, completely oblivious to Cloud's highly flustered expression. "And, in my opinion, a cup of freshly brewed coffee would help with the drowsiness."

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

Aerith moved her palm off from Cloud's forehead and straightened up, indicating that she was ultimately satisfied with his recovery. she followed up by dragging back the curtains that surrounded him, revealing the Medical Room in its entirety.

Seeing this as a sign to move, Cloud began to shuffle himself over to the edge of the bed. He noticed his shoes were neatly placed on the floor directly below, taking no time to slip back into them. He finally checked the time, noticing the clock that hung on the wall to the left of him:

It read 12:23pm.

Wait ... I've been unconscious for 4 Hours!? He abruptly realised, his eyes widened with disbelief. He quickly began to tie up his shoelaces – hoping to leave the Medical Room and regroup with Tidus, Firion and Cecil as soon as he could. If he was lucky enough, he would be able to stop off for some coffee on the way to the Academy Grounds.

However, as he did this, Cloud heard Aerith's soft voice call out from the distance.

"Oh ... you're ALL here to visit Cloud?" Aerith wondered curiously, sounding as though she was surprised. "He's just about to leave, but ... if you insist."

Did ... did she just say 'all'!?

Frozen in place, Cloud's body completely tensed up as the sense of terror began to consume him. The atmosphere around him was close to suffocating, as if several pairs of eyes were staring at him. He

His mind overcome with fear, Cloud cautiously turned his head.

"...Oh..."

He immediately gave out a small whimper, emulating that of a small pup.

He was immediately surrounded by a hoard of female students. They all stood over him, faces gleaming with excitement as they slowly closed in. Cloud forced a grin to hide his inner nervousness, knowing that no matter what he tried to do next ... he was trapped.

And then, he twitched.

““Kyaaaaaaaaaaa...!!!!!””

In that instant, the female students in unison screamed at the top of their voices ecstatically. Their screams were loud enough to pierce the eardrums of anyone who was unfortunate enough to be in range, shattering windows and other types of glass without resistance.

Cloud leapt out of his skin in fright, swiftly realising that he was now in major trouble. The group towered over him from every direction, their hands ready to reach out and latch onto him.

He was trapped, with no possible escape.

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

for the worst. "NOOOooooooo...!!!"
And then ... the world faded into darkness.

Reality, 7:00am...

Cloud tossed and turned in his sleep, letting out quiet, terrified moans. His body was completely drenched in sweat, trying desperately to escape his nightmare.

However, as he continued to drift, a knock was heard from the door on the other side of the room.
Knock-knock-knock...!

"Oi, Cloud! It's time to wake up!" A voice called out in a loud and energetic tone, obviously entering the room without a second thought. "Come on, man! It's not the weekend yet! You'll be late if you continued to sleep in!"

As he approached the bed, the man caught notice of Cloud's inner torment. The man immediately deduced that Cloud was trapped in a nightmare, which had become a common occurrence ever since he started the new semester at Dissidia Academy. Although he had yet to find out why his friend was having these nightmares in the first place, he came to the assumption at it had something to do with recent trauma that occurred whilst he was at the Academy.

At first, the man felt concerned for Cloud, wishing he could help his friend in some way...

"N-no ... please don't...!" Cloud moaned in his sleep, his face continuing to steam with sweat. "G-get ... get away from ... me!"

...The man then showed an evil, somewhat scheming grin as an idea suddenly popped into his mind. He trod up closer to Cloud's bed, flexing his shoulders to ease the joints in his arms.

"Hm-hm-hmm ... oh, don't you worry, Cloud. I'll save you from your nightmare." The man assured the oblivious sleeping Cloud, chuckling away as stretched his body out.

He loomed over Cloud's bed with an increasingly menacing, his body free of restriction as he began to put his plan into action.

Just then, he firmly grasped his right bicep as he tensed up his muscles. He raised his arm to a roughly 90° angle, refusing to divert his attention from the oblivious Cloud throughout the process. With legs spread out to shoulder-width apart and emulating a proud stance, the man drew in a deep, calming breath.

"Time for the good old..." The man peacefully exhaled.

However – like a spark – the man's tone of voice abruptly switched to loud and monstrous.

"ELBOW DROP!"

The man leapt high in the air, almost reaching the ceiling of the bedroom. With his elbow out, he aimed for Cloud's abdomen. Eyes locked on target, the man descended and struck his prey with full force.

BAM!

"ACK!!!!"

In immediate effect, the startled Cloud woke up in the most painful and abrupt way possible. The man's elbow crushed his abdomen without warning, causing the air in his lungs to escape him. Tears broke from the sockets of Cloud's eyes, gasping out as he desperately to regain oxygen. To sooth the agony, he hastily wrapped his arms around his abdomen, unable to control his body as it rolled off the bed and onto the floor.

Bang!

Cloud rolled around on the floor in the foetal position, continuing to gasp and wheeze. During this time, A shadow loomed over him, watching him from directly above. Cloud hesitantly glared upwards in response, his eyes red and streaming with tears of pain.

"...Urgh...!" Cloud grunted breathlessly, completely devoid of words.

And then, a loud, hysterically menacing laughter echoed throughout the room, the man towering above Cloud crossing his arms in triumph.

"HAHAHAHAA! Now THAT ... is a wake-up call!" The man bellowed out in a fit of giggles.

"W-why did you ... have to do that ... Zack!?" Cloud blurted as air finally returned to his lungs. "Ah, so you're still able to say my name after that?" The man – known as Zack – playfully joked in response. "Hahahaha...! I feel so honoured!"

Zack Fair was Cloud's best friend and fellow housemate of 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. Standing at a tall 6ft 3in, he slightly dwarfed Cloud's 5ft 7in. Additionally, he was significantly toned, the muscles on show being fairly bulked up to the point that he was a force on nature if opposed.

Whilst Cloud was still a student of Dissidia Academy, Zack had already completed his studies a few years prior. Since then, he had taken up arms as a full-time 2nd Class operative of SOLDIER, a super-soldier program linked to the Shinra Electric Power Company based in a nearby city.

His dream: to reach 1st Class status and become a hero to the world.

Zack held out his hand to Cloud, his face beaming with optimism and positivity. Although cautious at first, Cloud accepted the help. As he was lifted onto his feet, he could not help but wince. He could still feel the pain in his abdomen, letting out struggling breathes to endure it.

"You didn't need to ... e-elbow me in the gut." Cloud painfully wheezed, soothing his abdomen in the process.

"What are you talking about?" Zack cheerfully pointed out. "You should be thanking me. After all, I just did you a solid and saved you from another one of your 'nightmares'."

"Yeah, but could you have done it in a less ... excessive way?" He then refuted in a low groan.

As he watched Zack shrug back in innocence, Cloud reflected on how his week of nightmares began to consume his dreams – much to his dread of the thought.

Ever since the 'incident' during the first day back at the Academy, the group of girls had frequently invaded his dreams, thoughts and memories.

It was absolute torture for him.

Cloud began to wonder when these series of nightmares would eventually end, desiring for a decent night sleep for a change. Zack noticed Cloud's troubled expression, letting out a light sigh as he understood the dilemma his friend.

"Standing around here isn't going to get us anywhere, you know?" Zack stated in honesty, casually placing a hand on Cloud's shoulder. "We have places to be and stuff to do."

With that, he turned and made his way towards the bedroom door, flexing the elbow he used to wake Cloud up with. Cloud watched as he left the scene, keeping silent as he took the time to compose himself.

Dining Room, 7:15am...

Cloud eagerly munched on the slices of toast, only now realising the depths of his hunger. He had already scoffed down the eggs and bacon that was included with the breakfast, with only the cereal and mug of coffee remaining.

As Cloud continued to consume, Zack watched him with a stunned gaze.

"Since when did you become such a ... glutton?" Zack questioned hesitantly, sipping his own mug of coffee at reasonable pace.

Cloud temporarily paused on his mass consumption, acknowledging Zack's comment with a wary glare ... before returning to the food.

Within minutes, Cloud had demolished his remaining breakfast. Feeling as though his mission was accomplished, he sat back on his seat with a hand on his stomach. Holding back the burp that began to brew, he felt satisfied with his first meal of the day.

"It's weird, I don't even know why I'm this hungry." Cloud admitted anxiously, 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 mug 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's reliance on coffee became mandatory inclusion to his daily life. In order to survive another sleep-related incident – whether it would be through Tidus' early-morning antics, or by similar means – he would ensure that a coffee was at the ready to revitalize him.

Some may say it was a ridiculous plan, but for him ... it was a matter of life and death.

As the two continued the gulp back their coffees, Cloud decided to keep an eye on the time. Glancing over to the clock on the far-off kitchen wall, he could see it was only 7:20am – meaning he still had some time to relax until his full day of studying.

Zack and Cloud's kitchen/dining room combo was rather small and simple, consisting of the essential equipment for cooking and storing food. Due to their current lack of a decent budget, the room was barren. This was not too much of a problem for either of them, though; if it was comfortable and served the basics for living, the two were content with what they had.

Just then, Zack abruptly snapped his fingers, acting as though a small light bulb had clicked on in his mind. Cloud, having gulped down the last of his coffee, glanced at him with heightened curiosity.

"I just remembered! You have Geography today, right?" Zack asked ecstatically, his face beaming with rising excitement.

"Yeah ... why do you ask?" Cloud responded with uncertainty, cautiously wondering where this conversation was leading to.

"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 indefinitely."

For a small moment, Cloud blankly stared at his friend – the unexpected announcement taking time to process in his head. However, his eyes widened with sudden surprise in a snap. He had no idea how to respond to this news, silently questioning whether this was just a joke.

Sephiroth – as stated by Zack – was a SOLDIER 1st Class operative and Zack's senior. At Shinra, he was the top dog. He was seen by the large majority as a one-of-a-kind hero, inspiring those to follow in his footsteps and serve their nation. This thought had even made its way into Dissidia Academy, with numerous students proclaiming to join SOLDIER as soon as they graduate.

For Zack, the moment he joined SOLDIER, he saw Sephiroth as a rival and a goal. He occasionally declared that he would one day catch up to his senior so that he would achieve the status of 'hero'. It was a momentous task, even going so far as to work and train after-hours just to boost his reputation within the company.

Thinking it through, Cloud was all in favour for Sephiroth becoming a teacher for the Academy, imagining what he would bring to the table with regards to his previous ventures and experiences. That being said, a part of his mind seemed unsure of the idea, feeling as though there was far too much mystery surrounding the change of occupation to make it a simple 'break from SOLDIER'. As questions formed in his mind, Cloud decided to pursue for answers.

"Why would Sephiroth wish to take a break from SOLDIER?" He asked Zack, casually sipping away at a second mug of coffee, "What does he hope to gain out of this?"

"I'll be honest, I haven't the slightest idea." Zack answered back with a shrug, scratching his head as he attempted to remember back to when this had been announced. "He just stated that he 'desired to pursue other projects for the time being'. He never actually gave detail from what I remember."

Cloud nodded thoughtfully, eyes lowering in thought as he silently finished off his second coffee. However, a small chuckle from Zack's direction caused Cloud to once again raise his eyes, wondering what he had to say this time.

"I guess there is this 'other' thing ... I've got myself a date." Zack coolly announced, showing off a cheesy and innocent smile.

"*PFFT...!*"

Within an instant, Cloud spat out his drink in abrupt shock. Zack swiftly ducked under the table, avoiding the spray of projectile coffee.

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

"Hey! No need to be so harsh about it!" Zack drew back, feeling insulted by Cloud's statement. "All I'll say for now is that she's ... sweet and cute."

After swiftly cleaning himself up with a towel, Cloud squinted at Zack with a judging glare.

"...Is it Cissnei?" He then questioned in an interrogative tone, eyes locked onto Zack like daggers across the table.

"Huh..? Cissnei!? Nooooo ... No-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! Didn't I tell you that she 'prefers to concentrate with her Turk work'."

Cloud silently grinned at the thought as he knew exactly the amount of times Cissnei turned Zack down: 17 times over the span of 4 years.

The fact that Zack continued to pursue her after each decline was beyond him entirely.

However, the idea of Zack successfully dating a new girl greatly intrigued Cloud, questioning who this mysterious person was or how they got to know one another. With that said, he needed more information about this 'mysterious female' in order to grasp an idea of how their relationship was going to unfold overtime.

That is ... if this person was even real, of course.

"Seriously though, I need more than just 'sweet' and 'cute'." Cloud stated in a stern tone, not letting this pass so easily. "Come on, do you have any other hint about her? Occupation? Interests? ... Anything?"

"Ah-hah ... all in good time, my friend." Zack cheekily teased, pressing a finger against the side of his nose to indicate that he was keeping it all under wraps. "If I told you now, I'll just be ruining the surprise."

Cloud shrugged his arms whist his eyes rolled, feeling disappointed by the unnecessary secrecy.

Seeing this reaction, Zack showed off a cheesy grin, indicating that it was all fun and games.

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 rose up from his seat, answering it immediately.

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

Cloud then heard him hang up the phone and hastily began to collect his work belongings along with his SOLDIER weapon: a simple bladed sword with the Shinra emblem on it.

"Are you heading out already?" Cloud asked in interest, rising up from his own seat as he spoke.

"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, showing 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, asap." He then added in context, recapping what he was told on the phone. "From what the boss told me, they're supposedly holding mass anti-Shinra weaponry in their bunkers. The problem is: we have no idea what the weaponry are or how devastating they could be."

Cloud nodded with a raised brow, generally interested in this new mission.

Angeal – another of Shinra's 1st Class SOLDIERs – was Zack's highly-respected mentor. Although Cloud had yet to meet this man, he was aware that Zack's mentor was a man of respect and honour – at least, that was how Zack described him. Although not as popular as Sephiroth in terms of overall notability, Angeal still had a considerable number of followers and fans.

He also was a man who had a unique sense of pride, especially when it came to his unique weapon: The Buster Sword. Supposedly, he had never used the weapon during combat and missions, resorting in only carrying it on his back as a 'good-luck charm' whilst wielding other, more disposable blades to do his bidding.

In terms of the Wutai stronghold, Cloud knew from various articles in newspapers and online that they had recently waged war against the Shinra company, citing them as a threat to society due to their practices and ignorance for the environment.

"Be careful." Cloud warned him with a firm expression, aware of Zack's tendency to grow reckless during missions.

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

BANG!

"Ack!?"

As he was about to step through the door, he was oblivious the archway above him. His forehead throbbing immensely after the collision, Zack could not help but awkwardly sooth it in embarrassment.

*"*Snicker...!"*

Cloud attempted to hold back the laughter, finding the situation ironic.

"L-like I said: I'm always careful!" He reminded hastily, trying his best not to act like a complete fool.

Cloud sarcastically nodded, holding a large – somewhat sympathetic – grin of amusement. Zack opened the front door, feeling the warm autumn breeze brush against him. Letting out a deep, confident breath, he stepped forward. As he did this, he raised his arm up towards the bright-morning sky above.

"Hey Cloud! Maybe if this mission succeeds, I'll finally be promoted to 1st Class!" Zack called out in hope, clenching his raised fist as proof of his determination.

"It wouldn't hurt to be hopeful." Cloud commented back in support, keeping up with Zack's optimistic atmosphere.

With that, Zack charged off into the distance, waving back to his friend just before he disappeared into the blinding light.

"Give Sephiroth my regards...!"

With a smile strapped across his face, Cloud began to prepare for the Academy, taking a moment to reflect on Zack's dream of becoming a 'Hero'.

Even though Sephiroth was the 'hero of the world' to most, Cloud never truly acknowledged him as an inspiration. He undoubtedly respected the man and his legendary status, yet it was never enough for him to consider the man as inspirational.

To him, Zack Fair was all the inspiration he needed.

DISSIDIA ACADEMY, Class 13A Homeroom, 8:40am...

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

Class 13A began to gather in the usual Homeroom, waking themselves up from their drowsy states and continuing to chat amongst one another about the usual up-to-date gossip.

Firion, Cecil, and Tidus sat around Cloud's desk, chilling out with Cloud before Professor Shantotto entered to commence morning Homeroom. Although hesitant at first, Cloud eventually gave in and explained to trio about Zack's new 'mystery' girlfriend, knowing all too well that they – mainly Tidus – would kick up a fuss if he kept it 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, anticipating the idea of a 'mystery' romance; and Tidus – as one would expect – had leapt up in abrupt shock, bewildered by the fact that Zack had finally been able to 'bag' himself a girl.

"Do you know the girlfriend's identity?" Firion curiously pursued, casually leaning against the table in

front.

"No. All he told me was that she's 'sweet' and 'cute'." Cloud admitted whilst shaking his head, crossing his arms in frustration. "Aside from that ... I've got nothing."

"I think it's glorious." Cecil proudly stated to the group, his eyes burned brightly. "A couple loving each other in secret. Those close to them unravel the mystery. Just the thought of it makes my heart burn with passion."

Firion, Tidus, and Cloud glanced at Cecil with odd smirks. All three knew full well about Cecil's romanticist tendencies, so this type of comment was to be expected of him.

"Yeah ... keep dreaming, love maniac." Tidus commented under his breath, patting him on the back with his usual cheesy grin.

He then swiftly whipped back to face Cloud, his eager eyes brimming with excitement.

"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." Firion interrupted Tidus' idea, stating exactly what Cloud had been thinking – except in more context and with slight exaggeration. "Zack – on the other hand – is a full-blown SOLDIER operative. He would turn the tables on us before we even make the move on him."

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

"If he were to catch us, it'll be game over." Tidus sighed in denial, not particularly enjoying the idea of being caught in the act. "Think about it this way: neither of us are as ninja-like as Zidane. We would make a mistake before we even reached Zack."

"Guys, we're talking about my best-friend here." Cloud then decided to cut in, feeling the whole situation unnecessary. "He's not the serious 'I'll wipe your memory if you find out' type of guy. There isn't any need to go so far just to find out who this girlfriend is.

"Besides, I'm not going to stalk or force Zack into admitting something he wants to surprise us with. When he finally decides to reveal her identity, I'll be there waiting patiently for who it is."

Ending the conversation then and there, Cloud rose from his own seat and decided to go grab a coffee from the machine. Believing he had time to spare before Professor Shantotto would enter the room, he took this opportunity to reenergize himself.

He passed Onion Knight and Terra on his right, the two discussing away with each other as they usually do. And Warrior of Light on his left, who was patiently sitting at his desk with focus primarily on the book in his hand.

However, before Cloud could exit the classroom, he immediately froze as he caught an ear of Tidus' next comment

"You're boring as usual, Cloud." Tidus murmured, a scheming yet subtle 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.

Cloud's jaw clenched up, his eyes half-open to emulate his frustrated expression.

"Fine, I'll play your little 'game!'" Cloud stated in a serious tone, showing no amusement in being guilt-tripped. "If we're going to tail him, we'll have to wait till he returns from his mission in Wutai. And, we'll have to be extra vigilant ... Zack has the senses of a hawk."

Tidus nodded cheerfully to Firion and Cecil, feeling rather victorious guilt-tripping their friend.

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

Cloud cautiously glared at him, feeling a rising concern in Tidus' upbeat declaration.

...I'm going to regret this.

Noticing the time, he then hastily left the Homeroom to grab his coffee.

Just before Lunch Break, 12:25pm...

Cloud sat patiently in his seat as his Math lesson began to end. He – along with most of his other classmates – watched the clock with anticipation, feeling their hunger was driving them to the point of insanity.

Their Math Teacher – a very intelligent yet stuck up man who referred to himself as 'The Emperor' – waffled on about how he ruled in the field of 'Math'. Whilst the actual subject of Math was included in the lesson, it was vastly inferior to the amount of time The Emperor had spent gloating about his superiority.

Just before the lesson began, Firion murmured underneath his breath to Cloud that The Emperor was a man who bathed in his own ego. It was only now that Cloud had realised that his words were a direct warning to how the lesson was going to play out.

Throughout the lesson, individual students gradually began to slip into a trance of boredom. Some fell into daydreams, their imaginations taking them away to their fantasy-lands as a means of temporary escape. Others ... fell asleep completely, their minds unable to resist the temptation as boredom forced them to the edge of insanity.

Would the torment ever end?

Much to the surprise of both he and the rest of the Class, Cloud was able to keep himself awake throughout the lesson. With only his eyes drooping during certain instances, he was only one of the few to survive the lesson so far.

Only three others survived: Warrior of Light, Onion Knight, and Terra.

Warrior of Light and Onion Knight were mainly focused with their own rivalry, attempting to one-up and belittle each other with their wits at every opportunity. Terra, on the other hand, was struggling to hold her consciousness, her eyes gradually drifting and refocusing as she reminded herself what would occur if she were to fall into slumber.

With only two minutes left before they were free, Cloud could feel the anticipation rising in his soul ... and yet, also the sense of anxiety breaking through.

There were two reasons for this sudden dilemma: the 'encounter' that he may potentially face during the Lunch Break, and the lesson that followed. The 'encounter' was rather self-explanatory at this point; the hoard of female students would be out on the hunt once again, and Cloud was expected to be on the very top of their list of targets.

The 'lesson' that followed was less simple, for it wasn't the usual case of spending an hour listening to introductory lectures and brief activities. For it seems that once Lunch Break ends, he would be sitting in a Geography lesson with Sephiroth as his teacher.

The thought of this impending occurrence had yet to settle in Cloud's mind, still somewhat wondering if this was just a ruse made by Zack. This did not help by the fact that Sephiroth was yet to be seen or heard by him or the others in his Class.

Cloud's mind rattled as thoughts and questions continued to form in his mind throughout the day:

Why was he teaching Geography?

What was so special about that subject?

It was all so confusing.

Drrring-Drrring...!

Just then, the bell finally rang out throughout the corridors of Dissidia Academy, announcing that the day's Lunch Break had officially commenced – much to the relief of Class 13A.

During that very moment, The Emperor finished up on his dismal lecture, allowing the students to leave the classroom. Without a second thought, Cloud swiftly packed up his belongings and slung his backpack over his shoulders, refusing to spend a moment longer in the hellhole of a Math classroom. However, before he was about to leave, he met up with Firion. With his eyes red and drowsy expression, Firion was the most relieved of the students to finally escape the torment they had to

endure. Cecil soon joined them, lazily shaking his head as an attempt to stay conscious. With two out of his three companions by his side, Cloud switched to the direction of Tidus' desk. At first he wondered why Tidus – the most lively and energetic member of the group – was taking so long to join them.

And then he realised ... the answer was obvious.

Tidus was caught drifting away in a deep slumber, sluggishly leaning back against his chair as he snoozed away.

A sudden idea immediately crossed Cloud's mind, letting out a cheeky grin as the opportunity for payback finally arose. As Firion and Cecil watched in intrigue, he hastily stepped over and knelt down to the legs of Tidus' chair. Hoping not to have his plan foiled, he carefully pushed the legs upwards, tipping the oblivious Tidus off-balance.

WHAM!

The moment Tidus collided against the classroom floor, he abruptly leapt back up to his feet in a confused startle.

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

The whole of Class 13A stared at him in silence, eyes peering upon him with a mixture of curiosity and concern. Tidus blushed with embarrassment, glancing away to hide the bright red flush in his cheeks.

"AHAHAHAHAHAHAAA...!!!"

Tidus then switched to hear an uncontrollable laughter coming from non-other than Cloud, who was clutching his stomach in pain as he tried and failed to calm himself down. He was crying – eyes streaming with tears – as his idea became a momentous success.

After a moment of processing the situation, Tidus decided to brush the embarrassment aside and laugh alongside his friend.

Academy Grounds, 12:35pm...

Cloud cautiously peeked around the corner of Dissidia Academy's building, observing for any signs of the dreaded horde of female students. Word had spread across the Academy that they were on the hunt, preying on any of the innocent and unsuspecting victims that happened to be in their line of sight.

Much to his despair, Cloud was left to fend of himself, for his usual backup had gone their separate ways due to mandatory obligations.

Tidus was preoccupied with his scheduled Blitzball practice, where he was 'begrudgingly' being coached by his own Father – the Academy's P.E Instructor. Elsewhere, Firion was running errands with the Student Council, focusing his assistance on Warrior of Light and Onion Knight as they were fulfilling various 'important' tasks for Headmistress Cosmos. Finally, Cecil was summoned by his Brother – Astronomy teacher: Sir Golbez – for a meeting regarding future events.

Cloud had to be as vigilant as ever, believing his life was truly on the line.

After several moments of examining the area, Cloud released a sigh of relief. There was no sign of the female students, meaning they had already moved on from the front section of the Grounds ... or, had yet to commence their search for prey.

Desperately hoping for the latter, Cloud stepped out of the corner, knowingly taking the risk that could likely backfire at any moment.

And then, he felt a tap on his shoulder from behind.

"GYAH...!?"

Cloud completely leapt out of his skin in fright, stumbling back as paranoia overcame him. Covering his head with his arms to block out the world, he awaited his inevitable demise.

"I-is ... something the matter, Cloud?" A light, pure voice questioned worriedly, drawn back by Cloud's unexpectedly over-exaggerated reaction.

Cloud's eyes suddenly flickered open upon hearing the familiar voice, swiftly realising that the person who had approached him was not involved with the horde. As he gradually dropped his arms, his allowed his heartbeat to relax whilst he faced the person standing before him.

Terra Branford gazed at Cloud in awkward confusion, wondering why he was so jumpy.

Brushing away the paranoia with immediate haste, Cloud forced a smile.

"It's nothing." Cloud admitted in denial, letting out a light chuckle. "I was just caught off-guard, that's all."

"I ... see." Terra warily responded with a silent giggle, before pursuing to ask a question in her shy tone. "Well, seeing as Onion Knight is away on his Council errands, I was just wondering: Would you like to join me for Lunch?"

"I – err ... Y-yeah, sure!" Cloud answered awkwardly, generally surprised that she was asking him for company. "...Why not."

Cloud and Terra explored the Academy Grounds for the next few minutes, their eyes peeled in hopes of locating a space to eat their Lunch. Along the way, they were happily making small-talk.

The Academy Grounds were packed with groups of students, all socialising and eating their lunches together as they enjoyed the lively atmosphere. Due to this, irritation began to set in for both Cloud and Terra, wondering if they would ever find a place to sit and chill.

And then, after a while of searching, they finally found a free bench situated on the opposite side of the where they stood. The two acknowledged one another with expressions of determination, knowing they had to act fast before the opportunity disappears entirely.

With a fast pace set in motion, Cloud and Terra began to cross the front entrance of the Academy, their eyes focused solely on the bench in their sights.

However, as they closed in on the vacant bench, a brief glimpse of the Academy Gate caught the corner of Cloud's eye.

He halted his steps instantly, gazing off towards the Gate with widened eyes.

Terra immediately noticed Cloud's sudden stop, switching back to him with a curious expression.

She was about to ask him as to why he stopped so abruptly, but decided to instead follow the line of his sight.

Standing at the Gate were two people, both deep in conversation.

One was a female student, fresh from her morning studies. The other was a slightly older male, seemingly on break from work.

From what Cloud and Terra could see, the man had just passed over a present he had close to his side, giving out a genuine smile in the process. The female student clapped her hands together with excitement, showing her appreciation towards the man as she was handed the present.

Opening the present with glee, it was revealed to be a pink silk hair-ribbon.

The following gestures indicated that the man had offered to tie the ribbon for the female student, suggesting it to be the perfect replacement for the simple hairband she was currently wearing. The female student accepted with a cheerful nod, immediately facing away from the man so that he could see what he was doing.

After a moment of trial and error on the man's part, the ribbon seemed to suite the female student perfectly. The female student swayed as she felt her braided ponytail swish back and forth elegantly, further showing the ribbon holding up her hair in grace.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, the female student threw her arms around the man, eagerly expressing her affection for the man.

"Aww ... how sweet." Terra cheerfully commented, placing her hands together softly against her chest as she watched the couple lovingly embrace.

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

Terra was completely oblivious to notice Cloud's current expression of shock and disbelief, his widened eyes locked on to the couple as he struggled to grasp what he had just witnessed.

He knew the exact identities of the couple.

The man who stood at the Entrance Gate was relatively tall, his posture strong and proud as he showed off his 2nd Class SOLDIER Uniform.

That man was Zack Fair.

From what Cloud assumed, it seemed that Zack was able to finish off his mission in Wutai earlier than initially expected.

However, whilst it was a shock to see his best friend at the Entrance Gate of the Academy: what caused his heart to leap the most was the female student.

With the hair-ribbon now tied in place: her long, chocolate-brown, braided hair was the definition of perfection. Furthermore, her smooth, natural skin was basked in purity, giving of the aura of an angel.

Finally, she wore the same Dissidia Academy uniform as every other female student on site, yet she could easily stand out amongst a crowd.

Her name ... Aerith Gainsborough.

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“HYAH!”

STAB! Splutter...!

Zack Fair lunged forward as he struck his blade into the chest of Wutai's 'Anti-Shinra' weapon, focusing all his strength and attention on taking the abomination down. With a clenched jaw and deathly eyes, his dominance overpowered the opponent before him.

The weapon was a towering bulk of immovable mass – in fact, it was twice the size of Zack.

Its name: Vajradhara Tu.

It was Wutai's ultimate resort to overpowering Shinra and gaining the upper hand in their War. Without this, Wutai would be unable to counter Shinra's advances, leaving them cornered with no options left in their arsenal.

Zack made sure that this monster perished like its brother: Vajradhara Wu, who was currently lying motionless on the ground with several open wounds and lifeless eyes.

As he purged his blade deeper into the Vajradhara Tu's chest, he could feel it begin to stagger and moan. The weapon attempted to flail its monstrous boulder-like arms in desperation, hoping to brush away its puny enemy.

However, it was hopeless for the monster. With life draining from its body at a fast rate, it had lost all focus in its eyes.

And then, the weapon's legs finally gave way from underneath. There was no strength left in its hulking mass of a body, allowing gravity to take control of its weight. As the weapon fell forward, Zack hastily drew his blade out from the beast and leapt out of the way in haste, desperately praying on not getting flattened by the weapon's crushing mass.

CRASH!!!

The weapon collided against the floor of the Wutai fort, causing the whole area to shake violently 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 feet. With his blade grasped securely in his palm, he stepped over to the Vajradhara Tu. Keeping a cautious eye on his fallen foe, he warily prodded the mass of muscle with his blade. The last thing he needed was a surprise attack, so the confirmation of its death was necessary for survival.

The Vajradhara Tu showed no signs of movement whatsoever, the pupils of its eyes completely whited out as saliva began to seep from the corner of its gaped mouth.

It then dawned on Zack: he was victorious.

Glancing at his two fallen opponents, Zack couldn't hold in the overwhelming sensation of joy a moment longer.

"I-I did it...? I did it!?" Zack bellowed out, an explosion of excitement escaping him all at once. "HAH-HAH-HAAA...!!! THIS IS UNBELIEVABLE!"

With the amount of exhilaration running through his body, Zack proudly swung and spun his sword in a swift, fluid motion – ending with a powerful victory pose. Feeling refreshed, he placed the blade of his sword on his back, locking it against the magnet.

Letting out a sigh of relief, he began to reflect on the mission.

As stated on the mission briefing: Zack had to infiltrate Wutai's Fort without any supervision.

It was in the Shinra Company's best interests to not to start an all-out conflict, preferring the mission to be carried out with the least amount of SOLDIER units possible. With Sephiroth way from SOLDIER, Zack's mentor – Angeal – was initially assigned to lead the mission. However, through Angeal's personal request, Zack was roped in to take on the mission as a solo operative.

Zack soon found out the reason behind this abrupt change: Angeal and SOLDIER's Director - Lazard Deusericus – were recently in conversation regarding Zack's skills and overall potential. In fact, Angeal had proposed the Director to allow Zack to prove his worth as a SOLDIER operative. Upon initially hearing this, Zack was left speechless. He felt honoured to lead a mission of such importance for the company; although, he could not help but feel the daunting pressure of fulfilling such a momentous request.

And so, 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 and relief. As he entered the 'Anti-Shinra weapons' stronghold, he valiantly fought against the two monstrous weapons.

It was a struggle, yet he was able to withstand their barrage of heavy hits.

He let out another sigh of relief.

Thank the Goddess its over...

Clap-clap-clap...!

Suddenly, the sound of a pair of hands clapping echoed throughout the building, causing Zack to leap up in fright. He immediately switched and drew his blade out, readying himself for another bout. However, as he focused his attention towards the source of the echo, he caught sight of Angeal emerging from behind a corner.

Angeal was a tall, powerful man who always carried a large, deadly Buster Sword along with his forever tense expression. As rumours had implied, the Sword had never been used during missions, even though it was his primary weapon of choice as a 1st Class SOLDIER operative.

A reason for this was never truly given to Zack, leaving him only to guess that it was family-related. Upon noticing Angeal, Zack hastily re-sheathed his weapon, hiding the embarrassment of almost attacking his own mentor by mistake.

"Well, it seems there wasn't any need for me to interfere in the mission after all." Angeal coolly chuckled, thoroughly analysing Zack's overall performance. "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 you never drew attention to yourself and was able to swiftly complete the mission, so I think I'll be able to let the little nit-picks slide."

Zack's expression lit up with an ecstatic grin.

"I must hand it to you, Zack ... you've certainly impressed me."

Zack knew that Angeal was inspecting his performance from a hidden distance, watching his every movement like a hawk. It left him increasingly anxious, showing awareness that one major slipup would cost him dearly.

Ans yet, the moment he began infiltrating the Fort, the thought of Angeal assessing him had completely disappeared from his mind. He focused himself solely on the mission at hand, allowing him to proceed without much hesitation and doubt

"Thanks Angeal," Zack responded in tremendous gratitude, truly feeling proud to be a member of SOLDIER.

"Now, concerning your status within SOLDIER..." Angeal then began to mutter, 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 operative forever more?

"...I'll have to address at a later time." Angeal concluded.

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

"HUH!?!?" Zack roared out in exaggerated frustration, firmly grasping the collar of Angeal's uniform as let loose everything that erupted in his mind. "YOU CAN'T JUST BUILD UP MY HOPES LIKE THAT AND THEN JUST LEAVE ME HANGING!"

Angeal gazed in bewilderment as the man before him continued to release his fury.

"HOW AM I SUPPOSE TO SLEEP SOUNDLY TONIGHT NOW!?"

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." Angeal explained to him in his calm tone. "I'm sure the Wutai Forces know of our location by now."

Within that moment, Zack began to hear sirens outside the Fort, along with rising commotions surrounding the Fort. Not long after, a stampede of footsteps swiftly emerged from the distance, incoming from a variety of directions.

Zack's expression dropped, realising he had just screwed up.

"Right on cue..." Angeal murmured with a low sigh.

"Err ... Oops." Zack whimpered in a squeaky tone, sweat breaking through his skin.

"What are you going to do now, 'Zack the Puppy'?" Angeal questioned in a serious manner – although a hint of hidden amusement almost broke through.

"Wha-!?! Angeal, you know how much I hate you calling me that!" Zack blurted out irritably, feeling as though the world was beginning to spin.

He then hastily turned and began to scout for a viable escape route, purposely ignoring his mentor's cold glare.

"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 way out. He hastily treaded over towards the back door of the room, only to hear Angeal let out a small murmur.

"I would guess that the Wutai troops 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, his body covered in sweat and shaking with anxiety.

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 fulfil his dream had sent him into an inner meltdown. Throwing both arms over his head, Zack began to pace around, eyes wild as he struggled to rationalise his thoughts.

he then heard the footsteps closing in on them, commotions and shouting echoing from the other side of the doors.

It was only a matter of time before he and Angeal would be caught by Wutai forces.

He was drawing a complete blank.

Snap! Snap!

Zack snapped round to face Angeal, showing a mixed expression of confusion and panic. He immediately noticed his mentor casually pointing skywards. Zack, curious to know what Angeal was implying, took the hint and followed the direction of his mentor's finger.

It was a Ventilation System.

Although it was the most clichéd way of escape, Zack knew that it was either this or facing an entire Wutai Army.

With that said, a couple of questions appeared in his mind: Where would the vents lead to?

...And, with either of them fit through the shaft without any issues – especially with the Buster Sword in Angeal's possession?

"It's just a hunch, but I wouldn't be surprised if this led to the roof of the Fort." Angeal calmly deducted, acting as though he was able to read Zack's mind. "What do you think?"

Zack stepped back hesitantly, uncertain about what he should do. He then noticed his mentor leap into the ventilation system with ease, 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.

Woosh...!

BANG!

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

The Wutai Rooftops...

After some time passed crawling within the never-ending maze of the vent, both Angeal and Zack finally reached an exit.

Angeal was – as usual – correct: the system did in fact reach the roof of the Fort.

Speaking of whom, Angeal 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 over the land. It was a beautiful sight, as though purposely masking the current dilemma.

Angeal stepped out of the system without making a noise, praying not to alert the Wutai troops of their current whereabouts.

Unfortunately, this idea had not crossed Zack's mind.

"PHWAH...! Man! Talk about cramped with a capital C!" Zack exclaimed loudly, obviously bursting out of the vent. "Woo...! At least we're out of there!"

Angeal scowled towards him, attempting to hold back the rising anger that almost took over his calm demeanour. And yet, Zack continued his loud speech, acting as though he had completely forgotten the mission.

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

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

Zack glanced up towards his mentor's face, only to gasp in abrupt horror upon noticing Angeal's current expression. Angeal's eyes were raging like a rabid bull, his temper completely passed the breaking point whilst his lips were sealed tight in desperation of holding back the roar of a lion.

"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 prove of his innocence whilst giving out a slight whimper.

"...Good." Angeal firmly nodded, removing his hand from Zack's mouth before commencing to scout the area.

Zack drew in a few deep – yet quick – breaths, calming himself down after such a terrifying encounter.

He stepped out of the vent and resealed its gate carefully without causing any disruptive sounds. He then turned and treaded over to his mentor's position – who was preoccupied observing the outskirts of the Fort. He decided to follow Angeal's eyes, peering down towards the depths of the fort below as curiosity took over him.

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." 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 whenever 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 as his mentor swivel round, making his way towards a large mound of leaves situated on the other side of the Fort's roof. Angeal reached into the pile and pulled out two large backpacks. As he returned, Zack immediately knew the purpose of the bags.

However, it wasn't to his liking.

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

"Simple. This is the key to our escape." Angeal answered as he noticed Zack's cautious stance.

"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 quietly admitted, glancing away to hide his embarrassment. "...I'm kinda regretting it right now."

Angeal teasingly shook his head, showing off some disappointment in his protégé.

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

Fortunately, this didn't take long whatsoever.

Zack's head instantly whipped round to face Angeal, showing off a scornful, bitter expression in the process. Zack's mind had 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 was with his behaviour.

The expression said it all: This was payback after Zack's earlier vocal explosion.

Zack hastily strapped the pack onto back, making sure no straps were loose and that the fabric wasn't twisted or worn. It was initially a difficult procedure, attempting to avoid slicing the bag with his attached weapon by accident.

Thankfully, this was not the case.

With everything in check, Zack faced his mentor with determination, ensuring that no more screw ups would occur during their escape.

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

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

"..."

After a silent groan, Angeal swiftly explained the instructions of the parachute. He was adamant to leave the facility as soon as possible, fully aware that the Wutai had already realised that the two SOLDIER Operatives had escaped to the roof of the complex.

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

"That's all?"

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

Upon grasping the concept, Zack swiftly leapt into position. Angeal indicated the escape point, pointing 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 two began to hear crowds of Wutai troops forming far below, discussing their next options to capture the intruders.

It was now or never.

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

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

I can do this ... I can do this...

Zack repeated the thought to himself as he charged towards the edge, keeping a positive outlook. Angeal watched him pass at ferocious speed, switching attention between him and the crowds below. "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 was seconds from the edge of the building, his words changed.

"...I can't do this."

In that instant, he began to fall to the crowd of Wutai forces at the bottom of the fort, unable to control his descent.

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

As Angeal roared, gunshots began to fire.

The Wutai had spotted them.

Angeal stumbled back, evading the incoming bullets.

WOOSH!!!

He then heard an object inflate ... and a sudden roar of excitement.

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

Unable to hide his relief, Angeal let out a light chuckle, finding Zack's reaction somewhat typical.

He then took a step back to prepare himself, bag secured on his back behind the Buster Sword.

Without a moment's thought, he leapt off the edge of the complex, pulling the cord just as his feet left the edge. He began to feel the jolt of his body being carried away, the wind brushing passed at a refreshing pace.

Both Zack and Angeal swerved their bodies gracefully evading the bullets that were shot at them. 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 in laughter, fully engulfed in the moment.

Finally, Zack and Angeal soared into the forest, successfully escaping the Wutai facility and completing the mission unscathed ... mostly.

Shinra HQ, later that day...

The Director's office was always very organised and spacious, plenty of room for people to move around freely. 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 surround SOLDIER and Shinra itself.

The director of SOLDIER himself sat behind the desk, filing papers and checking up on the system mainframe.

He had slick-back, blond hair and wore formal-looking blue glasses. His attire 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. All of this was proof of his dedication to his work.

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

Knock-knock!

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

"Come in, gentlemen." The Director called out in a formal manner, assuming it was the two he expected to see.

The doors opened as two SOLDIER operatives entered the room in high spirits. SOLDIER 2nd Class Zack Fair and SOLDIER 1st Class Angeal Hewley stepped up to the arching desk, both bowing

gracefully towards their boss. The Director nodded back in response, greeting both Zack and Angeal as he exited his desk.

Angeal stepped forward, believing the time was right to do so. He positioned himself beside the Director, facing Zack. Zack straightened up his posture, his arms joint behind his back in an organised fashion.

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 yelled out.

His teeth grounded together, keeping his irritations 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 struggled to hide away his emotions, dreading the inevitable.

"...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 curled.

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

Upon hearing those last key words, Zack froze in complete shock.

"...Huh?"

His mouth fell open, eyes wide with disbelief as his mind struggled to process this unexpected outcome. He didn't know what to say or think at all; it just felt as though all thoughts and doubts rummaging through him disappeared in an instant.

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 complete blank.

"Well, for now you can go for an extended break 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 gave a firm nod in response, excitement engulfing him as he relished the fact that he had finally accomplished 1st Class Status.

That was when it hit him: what was he to do for such a 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 before 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?" 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 mission's 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 your emotions are restrained, especially in the heat of the moment."

Zack fell silent, taking in his mentor's advice.

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

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

"What I mean is that there is no such thing as a 'perfect' mission." Angeal responded in a clear tone, keeping to his serious stance. "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 the idea." Zack answered confidently, nodding to show that he thoroughly understood. "I'll be sure to keep it in mind."

"If that is the case, then I'll leave you to your errands." Angeal concluded with a subtle smile, aware that Zack was in a 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 around the corner.

As he left the building of Shinra HQ, he immediately took out his cell-phone and began to type out an email, hoping to promptly meet with someone at Dissidia Academy's Entrance Gates.

Dissidia Academy, 12:35pm...

Aerith Gainsborough emerged from 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. However, before she was able to do so, she needed to meet someone in front of the Academy Entrance Gates. In her hand was her phone, its screen lit up to display an email she had received not long before hearing the Lunch Break bell.

She began to head her way over towards the requested meeting place, slipping passed the large groups of gathering students. 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 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 after that she noticed the person step up towards the Gates from outside the Academy Grounds. A kind and pleasant smile appeared across her face as she spotted the man, straightening up as he 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, dressed in 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 with a light giggle, expressing her appreciation for the fact that he wished to meet her in the middle of his 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!?" Aerith gasped with surprise, feeling astonished by Zack's achievement. "That's amazing! Congrats, Zack!"

"Heh-heh-hee...! 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 was very aware Aerith's lack of fondness for the Shinra Company, particularly their questionable practices and neglect of environmental awareness. Normally he would keep details of his work separate during their time together, only adding it into conversation if required.

However, he believed that today was an exception.

"To commemorate this achievement, I decided for us to start celebrating with this small present I wanted to give you." Zack announced excitedly, 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 his reasoning behind this. "I mean, you were the one who received the promotion in the first place."

"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. "Come on, open it up!"

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 be the perfect upgrade to your hairband." 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 attempted to tie the bow, his tongue sticking out as he concentrated on the task at hand.

Upon completion – along with a few 'trial-and-error' moments, Aerith gracefully switched back to him, showing off her look with 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 cheerfully giggled and swiftly embraced him, showing her overwhelming gratitude towards him.

In return, Zack wrapped his arms around her, feeling appreciative to have her by his side.

The two were so focused on each other's company ... that they were completely oblivious to the figure watching them in the distance.

Meanwhile...

Cloud Strife watched 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 undeniably glad to see Zack finally showing affection for someone, believing that it was a long time coming.

Additionally, he had only known Aerith for a few days, so it was nice to see her returning Zack's affection with her own.

And yet, he could not shake of this odd feeling brewing from deep inside.

His throat felt dry, his heart began to race, and his body felt frozen in place.

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 a series of 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 bothering you?"

"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, noticing it was still free.

"Should we sit?"

Terra nodded cheerfully, "Yeah, before it gets taken."

They hastily rushed over towards the bench, both feeling the emptiness of their insides as they

craved for the 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.

Cloud and Terra perched down on the bench in instant 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 without hesitation.

As they ate, Cloud continued to reflect on what he just witnessed, attempted to understand this odd feeling growing inside of him. The image of the two embracing was forged in the depths of his mind, refusing to leave no matter how hard he tried to forget.

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

This only led to it becoming more prevalent.

"So, do you know that couple?" Terra politely asked, hoping to start a conversation with him.

"Y-yeah..." Cloud nodded in response, although hesitant to answer 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.

"...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 his goals ... 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. It was pleasant for the two students, ignorant to the world around them as they enjoyed each other's company. Even if the topics of the conversation was mundane, the atmosphere alone was just enough for them to relax.

And then, as Cloud leant down to grasp his bag from the floor ... he began to hear a high pitch squeal in the far-off distance.

His whole body froze in an instant.

His eyes widened and muscles tensed, fear struck him without warning.

Terra noticed his sudden jump in reaction, and yet was oblivious to the situation. She watched him curiously, wondering what was troubling him this time. It was then that she noticed the ground beneath her feet begin to vibrate.

It was like a quake, strengthening with each passing second.

Soon after, Cloud rose up with his bag slung over his shoulder and eyes hidden from view.

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

"Sorry, Terra..." Cloud spoke lowly, a vacant grin appearing yet eyes completely devoid of expression. "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 10 minutes left before our next lesson."

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

There was a moment of odd silence between the two ... until Cloud yelled his farewell.

"...See you in Geography!"

With that, he bolted off into the distance, dust emerging beneath his feet as he sped away in desperation. Terra watched him in bewilderment, her mind completely drawing a blank as to what

was occurring.

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 passed Terra at gargantuan speeds, causing her to stumble back in horror. Students leapt out of the way in safety, noticing the group barging through. They swiftly followed Cloud's direction, sniffing him out like rabid dogs.

What followed was his terrified voice, his bellowing pleas echoing throughout the entire Academy Grounds.

"WILL YOU PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE!?"

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

Dissidia Academy's 3rd Floor, 1:00pm...

Lunch Break ended with the sound of the Academy's bell ringing, much to the disapproval of many. Students began to make their way for their next lessons, dispersing from the Grounds and back into the halls of the building.

Cloud made his way towards his destination: the 2nd Geography Room.

As he reached the 3rd Floor corridor, he noticed there was fair lack of students – a sign that he was slightly early.

Admittedly, he was completely worn out, feeling as though he could fall unconscious at any given moment. He was able to successfully outrun the mass of pursuing female students, refusing to repeat the horrors of his previous encounter.

During the chase, he had desperately hidden himself amongst a group of taller 3rd year students, purposely pretending to listen in to their discussions on the dreads of their next lesson. Just as the horde passed his position, he ducked as low as he could without acting out of place.

He had escaped his demise for another day.

With that out of his hair, he began to wonder about the upcoming lesson. He remembered Zack suggesting that Sephiroth would be taking on the lessons for Geography starting from today onward. Ever since the day began, Cloud became rather conflicted regarding Sephiroth as a potential tutor for the subject. He was unable to grasp whether he was excited about the lesson ... or dreaded the idea entirely.

The only way he could find out now was to sit through the lesson itself and 'experience' the Hero of SOLDIER informing him about the geography of the world.

Finally, Cloud reached the door to Geography Room 2.

He took a small moment to gather his thoughts, temporarily erasing any doubts in his mind.

After a moment of clarity, he took in a deep breath and pushed the door forward.

It was then when he heard the voice: powerful, smooth, 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 soon begin."

6 - Vol 2: The Great Globe

Cloud Strife entered the Geography Room with a somewhat cautious pace, his eyes were locked thoroughly on Sephiroth as he felt rather conflicted on meeting the 'Hero' in person.

He – like anyone else – was immediately able to determine that this man was the one of legend: the iconic long, silver hair flowing down to the back of his legs; his sharp, green-iris gaze that drove his opponents into fear; and the tall, powerful stance that many looked up to with inspiration.

As with most of the staff in Dissidia Academy, Sephiroth currently wore a formal dark suit that generally seemed to fit with the intense aura that surrounded him. It was as though the staff uniform was designed with his appearance as a base model.

Sephiroth ... he was truly as sight to behold.

It was then that Cloud switched focus ... and finally noticed the classroom's unique design.

The whole classroom was completely redesigned from the floor up, to the point where Cloud was completely caught off-guard.

The first aspect to the room that caught his eye was the object situated at the very centre of the room: an enormous, towering Golden Globe. Calmly turned on its axis, the globe watched over the surrounding desks that were positioned specifically to fully observe its magnificence.

Its appearance was otherworldly.

Shifting his attention towards the walls and ceiling of the classroom, Cloud immediately noticed the several boards that showcased various holograms, all of which were highlighting specific areas around the globe. These holograms were beyond sharp and clear as they were displayed the boards, so much so that it could be considered on a level above 4K visuals. In addition, the holograms included detailed information on the locations shown, giving facts and figures on any events that had consisted around the world.

Cloud was completely in awe; 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 was unable to take his eyes off from the Globe, finding it an unbelievable sight to behold. It continued to gradually turn on what seemed to be a small spindle-like mechanism underneath, revealing the variety of countries that formed the world.

Sephiroth then stepped up to Cloud's side, even though the boy's eyes were still locked onto the Globe.

"Impressive. Is it not?" 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 finally finish it all yesterday."

"I-it's unbelievable..." Cloud stuttered breathlessly, struggling to grasp reality as he watched the giant Globe continue its rotation. "How were you even able to get this into the room!?"

"You think I was able to move this into the room all in one go? How amusing." Sephiroth coolly chuckled, shaking his head as he corrected the student. "No. I had built the Globe from scratch with parts delivered externally. I had also programmed all the holograms and data to the Globe whilst the parts were being shipped over."

"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 agape and eyes wide with shock. Sephiroth watched in amusement, crossing his arms and smirking at the sight of the boy taken aback by such a magnificent entity. He then switched to his desk, perching himself on the chair and typing up a document on his laptop.

"I suggest you take a seat, Master Strife. The Lesson will be commencing soon." Sephiroth informed

Cloud, reminding him that they were in a classroom and not a museum.

Cloud hastily snapped out of his vacant trance, nodding back in acknowledgment as he only just remembered 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 down, a question popped into his mind.

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

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

Sephiroth glanced back at him in silence, taking a moment to consider the questions set before him. A dark smirk broke through Sephiroth's expression as he answered, "Well, I believe it was necessary move because-"

Crash!

Abruptly, the classroom's door flew open, colliding against the wall at full force. Cloud leapt out of his skin in a fright, bewildered by the sudden interruption. Sephiroth, on the other hand, halted his words as he turned towards the sudden noise.

"CLOOOUUUD!" A roaring, echoing voice bellowed out as the figure sped through the door.

It was in that instant that Cloud knew who had entered the room ... and yet, he was too late to act. The only thing Cloud could murmur out at this point was a dreading "Oh no..."

Woosh...!

Within that moment, an arm caught Cloud by his waist, throwing him completely off his chair and to the floor.

BANG!

"ACK!!!"

Due to the abrupt impact, Cloud felt the air of his lungs escape in single blow. At the same time, his head collided against the floor. He felt his eyes blur and head grow numb, completely disorientating him.

To make matters worse, the culprit of the tackle began to shake his body uncontrollably, grabbing him by the shoulders and throwing him back-and-forth.

"YOU TRAITOR!" The figure's voice roared out in exaggerated fury, his hands tightening on Cloud's shoulders as he continued to shake. "What were you doing with Terra during Lunch Break!?"

Gradually, the air returned to Cloud's lungs, relieving him from the pained gasps and allowing him to answer back.

However, this was easier said than done...

"I was. Only. Hanging. Out. With. Her!" Cloud answered back as best as he possibly could, beginning to feel nauseous due to the nonstop shaking. "Please. Stop. Shaking me. Tidus!"

As though reacting on command, Tidus halted the relentless shaking. Cloud slumped his head back, the world around him continuing to spin as he lost all bearing of where he was situated.

"'Only hanging out', huh!?" Tidus echoed back in dissatisfaction, his voice growling at such an answer, "So, you were trying to snag the cutest girl in our class the moment we were looking away!?" Woozily, Cloud hastily checked around the room, praying that none of the other students in his class were in the room. Thankfully, 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 eccentric 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, her being the 'only' girl in Class 13A has nothing to do with it... Cloud added in his mind, 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 it, "Yeah ... likely story."

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 snapped underneath his breath, his eyes veering over to the front of the classroom in an attempt of indication.

Tidus gazed back in a blank stare, "Hm?"

He then gradually turned his head, having only just realised that they were being watched the entire time. Noticing Sephiroth glaring towards them with his baffled expression, he shot up to his feet in surprise.

Feeling the strength return to his body as Tidus released the grip from his shoulders, Cloud gradually recovered to his feet.

"Ah ... I-I so sorry, Sir!" Tidus awkwardly apologized, embarrassed by his usual melodramatic behaviour. "I didn't realise you were there!"

Sephiroth silently nodded in acknowledgement, deciding not to say a word about the whole ordeal.

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

Tidus' body shivered the moment Cloud whispered 'Sephiroth's' name, switching to 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 torment.

Letting out a tired sigh, Cloud began to rub the back of his head, still feeling sore from being knocked against the floor. He then 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 dropped agape as complete shock and awe overwhelmed him.

Struggling to comprehend such overwhelming magnitude, Tidus became speechless for the first time in his life.

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 that were previously scattered across his desk.

Due to this, a slight surge of frustration sparked in the depths of his mind. Cloud was so close to having his questions answered before Tidus' bombastic entrance, leaving him with a sense of indefinite limbo.

He considered bringing it up again, only to be stopped once more.

Drrring-Drrring...!

The bell's loud ringing echoed across the whole of the Academy, indicating that Lunch Break had officially ended.

As this occurred, the remaining students of Class 13A entered the room; fresh from their much-needed break and prepared for the upcoming lesson. However, as the class stepped into the Geography Room, almost every one of them halted and gasped at the sight of the enormous Globe towering before them.

"Whoa...!"

"What the..."

They all began to comment amongst one another, breathless and at awe with the sight before them

"It's magnificent...!" Cecil Harvey gasped in amazement within the group, most likely during conversation with Firion.

"It's unbelievable." Warrior of Light spoke out formally, standing at the head of the pack as per norm.

"I wonder how much time was dedicated in creating it."

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

And finally...

"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. Seeing the reactions, Sephiroth stepped forward and appeared before them.

"Well, once you've all sat down, I'll answer any questions plaguing your mind." Sephiroth informed them, expressing a small amount of pride in his creation.

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

As Cloud witnessed the rest of Class 13A as they sat before their allocated desks that surrounding the Globe, he noticed Squall Leonhart still standing idly and glaring up at the Globe.

His usual non-existent expression was as clear as day; he could not care any less about the Globe's existence.

"Hmph...! What's so special about it?" Squall muttered coldly, letting out a careless shrug. "...It's only a big, flashy ball."

With that, he stepped over to his designated desk beside two empty seats and purposely separated himself from the rest of the class, deciding there was no point in showing interest.

Leaning back on his seat, Squall glanced out towards the far-off window as he blanked the world around him.

At first, Cloud silently shook his head, finding Squall's attitude towards the Globe rather typical of his character. However, upon noticing the two empty seats either side of Squall, it was to his realisation that the class was short of two students: Bartz Klauser and Zidane Tribal.

A growing feeling of caution began to loom in Cloud's subconscious, a sense of dread and discomfort rising. Based upon previous experiences, Cloud was able to swiftly determine that the duo was up to no good whenever they appeared late for lessons.

Thinking back, Cloud always found that between the two troublemakers, Bartz was rather misunderstood. From what he gathered, Bartz did not usually get fully involved with the mischief, preferring to assist Zidane in his antics 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 eventually shrugged, 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 step over to the Globe with a calm expression, all eyes now fixed on him.

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, students of the class froze in horror, their eyes wide and the red in their cheeks falling pale. There were even some who diverted glances towards the door of the room or even the window as they considered to options of escape.

However, they ultimately found it unnecessary.

"What's with all the nervous stares?" Sephiroth wondered curiously at the class, noticing the students fidgeting restlessly in their seats. "I'm only using this as a pointer for the Globe and the holograms."

On that exact moment, every student in the classroom gave out a loud, relieving sigh. Heartbeats were continuing to race uncontrollably, taking a moment to relax as they realised it was a false alarm. Cloud joined in with the collection of relieving sighs, some of his worries disappearing from his mind. He then switched focus as he noticed both Warrior of Light and Squall face-palming in frustration, finding everyone's reaction rather unbearable to witness. After giving off a silent chuckle; Cloud shifted back to Sephiroth, who finally began teaching his lesson.

"So, to begin with, I'm certain many of you are aware of my previous employment as SOLDIER 1st Class – or in other words: the 'Hero of SOLDIER'." Sephiroth expressed as he began his introduction, 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. So, for now, I'll say that working as a teacher in this Academy is part of my so called 'project'."

Cloud hastily listened in, quickly realising that Sephiroth was answering the questions he asked a moment ago.

And yet, to his disappointment, the information Sephiroth had revealed was only what was already known to a certain degree.

"From today onwards, I shall be your Geography Tutor." Sephiroth continued on, his eyes shifting from one student to another.

Using his sheathed katana, he then pointed to the Globe before him.

"This Globe will be the main asset for our lectures. It is a physical, technologically advanced system that I had manufactured to convey useful facts and information during the studies."

A hand was raised.

"Sir, if I may, why go through such lengths in building the Globe?" Cecil Harvey wondered, finding it odd that such effort would be used for simple academic studies.

"A fine question, Master Harvey." Sephiroth acknowledged, answering the student in honesty. "I felt the Academy deserved the extra 'flare' in their lessons. I believe one of the most important aspects to learning is attention to detail, so why read from the book ... when you can see the world in its full glory. The students all watched on, feeling somewhat hyped up by the motivational speech.

Sephiroth then added, "I'm certain you all will use this Globe effectively and securely during your time at the Academy."

Securely...? Cloud's 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 took no time in progressing to the topic of today's lecture: Environments and Landscape.

Using his Katana as a pointer; Sephiroth swivelled the Globe and landed on specific points of its axis, discussing about the environment varieties and how they had evolved and morphed over time. The students listened in closely with fixed attention, taking in his facts and information with careful consideration.

The lesson continued ... and Sephiroth had the entire class under his control.

20 Minutes Later...

Sephiroth was close to ending his lecture and shift focus onto the lesson's main activity. Before making the transition, 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.

Stepstepstepstep...!!!

During that very moment, Cloud began to hear rushing footsteps from outside the classroom's door. The sound gradually drew closer at a frantic rate, becoming ever more rushed and desperate as it approached. He began to focus his attention more on the door in order, wondering what the noise was coming from.

Not long after, he began to hear faint panting and wheezing sounds amongst the rushing footsteps. All of a sudden, the classroom door abruptly burst open.

BANG!

Many members of the class leapt in fright, spinning their heads round in order to find out what had just occurred. Sephiroth, on the other hand, continued to lecture on, completely oblivious to the sudden event.

"WE FINALLY MADE IT, BARTZ!"

As the door had flown open, Zidane hastily entered the room in a dash, calling out in triumph as he raced onto the scene.

Upon noticing the Globe directly in front of him, he swiftly skidded to a halt. Sliding a considerable distance, he had almost collided into the Globe itself – only stopping at the point where his face was almost touching the metal before him.

After a moment to process his inner thoughts, Zidane took a small, cautious step back to distance

himself from the object before him. Sweat breaking from his temple, he felt as though one wrong move would send everything into chaos.

After finally at a safe distance, he gazed upon the enormous Globe that towered over him, crossing his arms as he curiously examined its beauty.

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's unexpected arrival whatsoever, seemingly concentrating on the current lecture with his eyes locked upon the Globe.

Cloud then noticed the frustrated Squall quickly gesturing to the oblivious Zidane hastily, attempting to catch the oblivious classmate's attention before the situation gets out-of-hand.

It was a useless attempt.

Zidane seemed far too fixated at the Globe that he grew completely oblivious to the world around him, almost as though he was entranced by such magnificence.

"Whoa ... that's a thing of beauty." Zidane stated in a soft tone, amazed by its size and overall design.

"Man, I'm glad I didn't run into that."

However, as he finally noticed Squall's desperate attempt to gain his attention, Zidane felt his body abruptly shift forward with considerable, unexpected force.

WHAM!

Before he knew it, his body had collided face first into the Globe, placing a large imprint of his mug into the gleaming metal.

He then dropped to the floor in a daze, groaning in pain as his face continued to generate a numbing throb.

"Ow ... that hurt ... a lot."

As he regained his stance, Zidane switched to the one person who he knew had collided into him in the first place.

"Bartz, you idiot!" Zidane whispered with an agitated sneer, "You nearly made me break the ball-thing!"

Bartz, lying against the floor in a woozy daze, gazed upon his partner-in-crime with an innocent smirk.

"Sorry, Zidane, I didn't mean to..."

However, his words trailed off as his expression immediately turned from the face of innocence to a horrified gasp. The colour in his skin fell pale, his entire body frozen in place as he watched the situation unfold before his very eyes.

"Err... Zidane!" Bartz answered back in hesitance, his terrified gaze frozen upon the Globe behind his best friend. "I think we just broke it..."

Zidane hastily switched back to the globe, dread and regret swiftly emerging from him.

Cloud and the rest of Class 13A were already reacting to the situation at hand, gasping in fear as they watched the towering Globe snap from the pedestal below and begin to lose balance. It slowly yet surely began to fall off from its axis, heading directly towards the floor below at an unstoppable force.

Creak...! Snap! Crack! Screeeeech...!!!

Numerous sounds of cracking and screeching echoed as it continued its descent, showing no signs of stopping.

Students who were unfortunate enough to be sitting at the desks directly underneath the the falling Globe – Warrior of Light, Onion Knight, Terra, and Squall – hastily launched themselves out of their seats towards a safe area from the impact zone.

And yet, this did not stop Class 13A from panicking ... for the Globe was heading directly towards an oblivious Sephiroth.

Whilst the other students were unable to utter a word from their position, Cloud abruptly leapt to his feet in alarm.

"SIR! GET OUT OF THE WAY!" He roared out to the man in desperation. "SEPHIROTH!"

Sephiroth, having heard Cloud's sudden yell, turned towards him with an unaware gaze.

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

It was too late for him.

"Hm?"

It was then when he noticed the Globe closing in on him from above.

"Oh ... that's why."

CRASH!!!

The Globe collided right on top of Sephiroth, shattering on impact. Pieces of the crumbling Globe – varying from the small and sharp to the large and bulky – flew haphazardly in numerous directions. The students all shielded themselves from the incoming shards, using their blazers or books to block the sharp pieces as swiftly as possible.

As everything eventually calmed, the whole class gazed wide-eyed at the pile of shards that were piled in front of them.

Sephiroth was nowhere to be seen.

He had taken the full impact of the Globe's fall.

Warrior of Light was the first to respond, leaping into action by attempting to remove the pile of metal shards. The rest of the students hastily follow suite, assisting in the mass removal of the shattered Globe.

This left only Cloud, Squall, Zidane, and Bartz to observe the crisis that befell them.

Bartz and Zidane were still processing the incident in their minds, frozen in place with the expressions of unfathomable horror strapped across their faces. Squall – as one would expect – refused to watch the aftermath, rubbing his temple as he wondered why he was associated with the two nitwits.

And finally, Cloud frantically stood with both hands on his head, his mind going into complete meltdown.

This is bad, this is bad, this is bad!

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

"Yeah ... and he just so happened to be Sephiroth." Cloud revealed to the two in a low mutter, feeling the need to add to their looming conscience.

Both Zidane and Bartz switched to Cloud in unison, their eyes widened to a new level.

"Wait ... so we just killed a HERO!?" Zidane yelled back, unable to hide the terror in his eyes as he realised the hell that was about to descend upon him.

"So ... does this mean we have the rest of the lesson off?" Bartz then 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 serious. Either way, this certainly wasn't the time for Bartz to have such an oblivious attitude.

Rumble...!

Just as Cloud decided to assist in moving the various shards, he was met with a loud, abrupt noise echoing throughout the entire room. The rest of the class leapt out of their skins in fright, being thrown completely off-guard by the sound.

CRACK!

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 he could tell that Sephiroth was now 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 was facing completely away from 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 entirely on Zidane and Bartz as though he was ready to strike them down from where they stood. "So, I suggest we postpone the rest of the lesson until it is ... restored." *Shiiiiing...!*

He progressively unsheathed the katana, 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 you all to stand outside the classroom whilst I have a 'word' with Master Klauser and Master Tribal."

Without any need of question, Class 13A nodded to one another and began to leave the room without saying a word in response. Cloud hesitated for a moment as he glanced towards the two soon-to-be victims, feeling rather apologetic for their predicament.

Both Zidane and Bartz were still completely frozen in place, looking as though they were cast under a spell of some kind.

Regretfully, Cloud decided it was best 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...

Click!

For the next few seconds, all the students on the corridor 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. 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 escaping from reality, preferring not to involve oneself in the matter.

Cloud glanced towards him curiously, finding his attitude as typical as ever.

In normal circumstances, others would assume that Squall felt some sort of inner sympathy for his two troublemaking friends. And yet, everyone in his class knew he was unable to care even if he tried.

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

"Heartless ... Angel."

What followed was the sound of a sharpened blade, echoing throughout the distant corridors.

Slash!

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 transcended 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. "Guys...? Guys?"

He was conveniently ignored.

In the end...

Zidane and Bartz miraculously survived Sephiroth's infamous attack, much to everyone's surprise. However, they had emerged from the classroom with soulless expressions, devoid entirely of the personalities they once thrived on.

The rest of the lesson consisted of the class working on the activity Sephiroth had set for them, relocating the lesson to one of the spare rooms in the Academy whilst the Geography room was closed off from use. 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 preoccupied with cleaning up the smashed Globe.

As the lesson eventually concluded, Cloud was unable to locate Sephiroth whatsoever, finding it frustrating that he could not get any more answers from the legendary 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 down from the day's constant chaos.

...Unfortunately, this didn't last long.

"Duuuuuuuuuuude! Geography was freakin' awesome!" Tidus hysterically shouted out, 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.

"What's the matter, Cloud?" Firion questioned curiously as he sat down in the seat in front of the poor soul. "You seem mentally exhausted."

"Urgh ... I'm fine." Cloud sighed out in a groan, rubbing his eyes in desperation to stay awake. "It's just ... been a busy day."

"Well, at least you made out alive this time around." Cecil lightly chuckled as he sat next to Firion.

"The 'Class Clowns', on the other hand ... may need some intense therapy after their predicament." As he was reminded of the situation that had occurred not too long ago, 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 filled out their everyday lives.

During this time, Cloud also caught an eye 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 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 wandering 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 darkened smirk, meaning there was some devious plan rattling around in his mind that Cloud was unaware of.

"Now hold up there, Cloud." Tidus expressed with a low chuckle, showing off his cheeky grin. "You seemed to have forgotten our little 'heist' we've long planned for."

"W-what do you mean by a 'heist'?" Cloud questioned cautiously, afraid of what Tidus had in mind. "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 before he drew too much attention to himself. Tidus, however, waved off the rest of the class with the use of a light apology for his outburst.

As the attention died out, Cloud drew in closer towards Tidus as the four quietly continued with their conversation.

"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 at a normal level. "We were going to track down Zack and his 'cute' new girlfriend, remember!"

At that moment, Cloud's 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 to him at once.

As it dawned upon him, Cloud sat up from his seat, feeling the sudden sense of dread rising within him.

"Cloud? What's wrong?" Cecil then asked him, a hint of concern in his voice.

Tidus watched Cloud with a confused gaze, wondering why he was acting odd so suddenly. Firion, on the other hand, showed off a curious expression, wondering whether something had happened since the morning homeroom registration.

Cloud began to consider his options carefully, wondering whether it was worth admitting to his friends of the revelation he had stumbled upon.

Or to follow through with the plan, keeping the secret to himself for a moment longer.

A part of his mind was desperate to reveal the identity of Zack's date, wanting nothing more than to end this nuisance once and for all. However, the other side of him wished to keep the secret hidden and allow Zack to reveal her identity in his own time.

With the nuisance frustrating him immensely, Cloud finally gave into temptation ... to an extent.

"Well, I can certainly say that she's ... 'cute'." Cloud awkwardly murmured underneath his breath, diverting his gaze from the group.

"Hold up...! YOU KNOW HER!?" Tidus abruptly bellowed out, leaping up to his feet as his voice reverted to its usual loud, boisterous tone.

Cloud hastily leapt up and blocked Tidus' mouth with his hands, physically forcing him back down to his seat.

"Will you stop that!?" Cloud spat out in his aggressive whisper; his teeth anxiously grounded as he refused to release Tidus until he complied.

Tidus nodded back to him in response, his eyes wide with innocence 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, gradually releasing his hands from Tidus in the process. "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 glanced 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 with an honest gaze.

Noticing Cloud's firm expression, Firion decided not to pursue further questions out of satisfaction. Perching himself back on his seat, Cloud continued to convince them, "Anyway, I suggest we wait until he's officially introduced 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, expressing his dissatisfaction without any subtlety. "We were so close to executing the perfect heist, as well."

"For the last time, will you stop calling it a 'heist!'" Cloud bared his teeth irritably, holding himself back from yelling at his obnoxious friend. "Listen, we don't know where they'll be going or if they're even going out together after Academy hours. We just cannot take that risk!"

However, it was then when Cloud began to hear Tidus chuckling away, causing him to feel even more on the edge.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll track them down somehow." Tidus whimsically assured, showing off his upbeat smirk as he returned a glance.

"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 continued to suggest in confidence, his cheesy grin gleaming at his friends. "Also, the date is more than likely set already. I mean, think about it, he took time out of work to go and visit her! Surely the two lovebirds will wish to see one another before the day is over."

"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, slyly returning to the original topic.

Cloud's eyes instantly shifted towards Cecil, becoming further agitated after almost escaping the subject entirely.

Unable to escape the anticipation of his friends, Cloud decided to answer.

"I'm-"

SLAM!

The door to the Homeroom had abruptly burst open ... followed by the sounds small footsteps.

Class 13A hastily turned to face the front of the classroom, knowing that their Homeroom Tutor had made her entrance in the most 'vocal' way possible.

"Sorry I am late." Professor Shantotto announced to the class, giving off an unamused tone mixed in within her usual rhymes. "This bumbling fool got herself stuck at the Gate."

Class 13A glanced at one another with confused expressions, wondering what in the world she was talking about.

However, this was immediately resolved...

"Argh, hell!" A suddenly loud, boisterous voice yelled out in a sulk, "Why do you always make me feel like the idiot in front of everyone!?"

A being of normal height then stepped into the room, carrying with her a stack of large, hefty boxes. Although she was mostly hidden behind the stack of boxes, the students were able to catch a glimpse of some aspects to her appearance: Her long, smooth, lavender hair flowing down to her lower back; along with her darkened skin seemingly pure and soothing.

However, the class then noticed 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 was also taken aback by the sudden appearance of the Elvaan girl, yet what

caused him to become more curious was Warrior of Light's unexpected reaction.

Although it was difficult to see from where he sat, Cloud was able to catch Warrior of Light's already upright posture suddenly lurch at the sight of the 'Elvaan' girl.

Clump!

Just then, the girl dropped the boxes amongst a nearby free corner of the room, 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 the Elvaan girl in full view, struck with awe at her unique beauty: She had navy blue eyes, the bangs of her hair reaching down towards the crux of her nose; she sported a large, ecstatic grin that would be able to compete with Tidus; and wore what seemed to be a lab coat similar to Professor Shantotto's own.

Underneath the lab coat, she was wearing 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 throw at her.

"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 that sat before them 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 out a peace sign towards the class as she gave off an immense cheesy smile.

"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 concluded...

The students gradually began to pack up their bags and scanned 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 enjoying any free time to mingle with the group of students.

Warrior of Light, unexpectedly, seemed to look rather ill and oddly out-of-place, unable to keep his concentration after witnessing Prishe enter 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.

"Oh Man! What a drag!" Tidus groaned out in frustration, abruptly catching the others 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 such a big deal on the matter.

"He's going to be non-stop nagging me and pushing me around!" Tidus continued to complain, ignoring Firion's curious tone.

"The way you say it, he sounds a bit like a bully." Cecil suggested to him nonchalantly, 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 Blitzball is on the agenda, then maybe I can tolerate it." Tidus then admitted, flexing the muscles in his body as if to prove he was just about ready for the challenge.

Cloud's glared at him with bored-like, half-open eyes.

"Why am I not surprised...?"

The group rose 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 stood up, 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 oddly formally, giving off his usual mischievous grin. "Once we've all grouped up, we'll be tracking down Zack and his 'date'. Our mission will be to acquire details on his 'girl' and the purity of their relationship."

Cloud gave out a loud, irritated sigh, finding it impossible to sway Tidus no matter what he did.

"What's your answer, Cloud? Will you join 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 continued to glare at his friend with his agitated gaze, taking his time to answer.

The two parts of his mind were still fighting against one another with no sign of stopping: One part was refusing to join in due to already knowing her identity; whilst the other half was curious about their relationship.

Cloud then let out an inaudible groan.

Much to his dismay, it seemed that his answer was already finalised for him.

Cloud finally drew in a deep breath and answered the question, although his regret loomed within the depths of his mind.

"Fine ... I'm in."

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"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 as he pointed to his opponent. "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!"

The two raged at one another from a distance, the atmosphere surrounding them constantly expanded as it heated up to boiling point. Their auras were close to suffocating, oozing with testosterone and bravado as they refused to give in to the opposing force.

Woosh!

In a mere instant, the two leapt towards each other with both their fists at the ready.

The moment they drew close enough to each other, they began to swing, eyes focused solely on their target.

However, what immediately followed were both their left hands swiftly intercepting the attack, locking their grasps against the other's fists.

Snatch!

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.

CRACK!

Meanwhile...

Cloud Strife stood a few feet away, watching the two combatants trade blows with a bored-like gaze – hopelessly trying not to nod off. With him, the rest of Class 13A were watching with similar expressions, utterly confused by what was happening right in front of their eyes.

The group were currently standing at the centre of the large sports field, situated directly outside the back of the Academy.

They were wearing the Academy's mandatory 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 changing rooms, Group 13A had immediately come across the 'Boy' and 'Old Man' wrestling one another without awareness of the world around them.

"Err ... Do they always do this?" Squall questioned with a 'soulless' expression, stepping up beside Cloud in curiosity of the situation before them. "I mean ... It's been 10 minutes already."

"Yeah, well ... considering they were recently handed the title of 'Most Competitive Father-Son Rivalry in the World' ... it's safe to say that this is a regular thing for them." Cloud awkwardly responded as his eyes continued to follow the conflict, giving off a somewhat 'embarrassed' grin.

Just then, the conflicting Father-Son duo finally broke away from each other, flexing their muscles in preparation for their next bout.

"Is your head hurting, Kid?" The Father teased, showcasing a dark, intense, cocky smirk, "If you go for another bash, you'll end up taking a nap in the mud."

"Oh-hoh...! Don't you worry, Old Man!" The Son yelled back, reckless arrogance building up inside his mind, "I'll make 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 once again.

"Instructor Jecht ... Sir?" Warrior of Light called out from behind the group, finding this whole random ordeal agitating, "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 immediately returned to 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-!"

"Wha-!? 'BEATING ME UP'!?!? What are you talking about, Light!?" Tidus, the Son and fellow Class 13A Student, interrupted with an exaggerated roar, "I was clearly holding 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 locked his son in 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 determine the words 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 ghostly-white. Cloud was caught completely off-guard by the abrupt turn in Tidus' 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 slowly shifted 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, you little squirts! Let us start the session with some intense warmups!" Instructor Jecht then informed the group, once again giving off a cocky grin and bashing his rock-hard fists together.

"Four laps around the Academy Grounds, no stopping for breaks ... NOW!"

For the next 10 minutes, the group began their warmup jog around the Grounds, some students slower than others.

Cloud took up the middle of the group, his mind wandering off in its own world as he began to reflect on the day's odd encounters.

There were two topics plaguing his mind: 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 for, and why Zack kept their relationship a secret for so long; the other topic was regarding Sephiroth, mainly questions still relating to why he had taken a break from SOLDIER.

Just then, a small tap on his shoulder from out of nowhere caused Cloud to abruptly leap out from his skin in fright. In instant reaction, his mind 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 a light-hearted grin. With embarrassment hitting him at the core, Cloud quickly glanced away to hide the fluster in his cheeks.

Cecil was jogging beside Cloud during the warmup laps for quite some-time, even though Cloud was oblivious of his presence. He caught on to Cloud's recent daze not long after they began running, but ultimately decided to stay silent and wait until it was necessary to speak his mind.

"What's with all this spacing out today?" Cecil then curiously wondered, "I mean, you do it a lot anyway ... but you've been doing it far more than usual! Did something happen to you recently?"

"N-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."

"Hmm ... Is that so?" Cecil wondered in amusement, finding Cloud's statement intriguing. However, he then gave out a light chuckle, "It's funny, we've already asked you twice today 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, even though he knew that it was just a light-hearted joke. "I'm just starting to feel that 'maybe' we should hold it off for now. I'm sure Zack's been anticipating this for a while now and it would hurt him if he found out we've known about it the entire time."

"Aww! 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 fully aware of who it was from the moment they spoke.

"Firion, did you have to jump in without warning!?" He blurted out in agitation, his sweat pouring down his face.

Firion had caught up with Cloud and Cecil throughout the jog, listening in on their small conversation.

"What do you mean by Cloud 'hiding something'?" Cecil then asked out in intrigue, confused as to what Firion was indicating to.

"Whenever Zack's relationship was brought up during our 'heist' discussion, Cloud always backs off from the conversation or spaces out." Firion began to explain, becoming very perceptive on the whole matter whilst giving a hint of suspicion in his voice. "I have a feeling that he saw something related to Zack's relationship that didn't agree with him."

"URK-!!!"

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 finally spoke out, stuttering as he jogged. "I spotted Zack at the Academy Gate during Lunch Break with the girl he was dating! I just couldn't figure out her identity..." Cloud then noticed Firion raise an eyebrow, causing his nerves to heighten.

"I see ... so, why do I have the feeling that you're lying." Firion chuckled as he became sceptical, his suspicions continuing to rise.

How did he catch on to that!? Cloud's mind nervously questioned; brushing the sweat from his forehead to distract himself from the unbearable anxiety.

He then had the immediate urge to change conversation.

"A-Anyway, where's Tidus? I haven't seen him at all since we began jogging."

Both Firion and Cecil glanced at each other with unexpected sorrowful expressions, wondering if it was ideal to answer.

"Well, ever since Instructor Jecht whispered in his ear..." Cecil answered somewhat cautiously, his

shifting eyes indicating to the back of the jogging group. "...He stopped being his usual self." As Class 13A began to turn a corner around the Academy Grounds, Cloud took a peek towards the rear. 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 had yet to recover from the wrath of Sephiroth during their previous lesson.

And yet, what was interesting about this development 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 sportsmen.

"What did the teacher say to Tidus!?" Cloud blurted out in a state of shock; eyes wide with horror upon 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!?"

Later that session...

The Class finished the 4-lap warmup, many already feeling as though they could pass out on the spot due to the intense exhaustion. However, throughout the rest of the P.E. lesson, they had worked on the circuit training set up within the whole diameter the Grounds.

Cloud was taken aback by the change in session. He had expected – from Tidus' own words not long previous – that the group would be playing Blitzball for the rest of the lesson. 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 made his way over towards the changing rooms. His body was covered with sweat as the muscles in his body ached and throbbed to no end.

He was 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 as Cloud was about to enter the male changing room, Firion stepped out before him – still in his sportswear.

"Err ... aren't you getting changed, Firion?" Cloud questioned him in an odd, wondering tone.

"Yes, I will do ... eventually." Firion politely nodded, yet his eyes were fixated on the Grounds before them. "Although, it does seem that I will be delayed."

At first, Cloud stared at him with confusion, finding his response rather abnormal. He then followed Firion's line of sight, directing him to face the Academy Grounds.

It was at that moment when realisation struck him completely.

It seemed that Tidus had recovered from his daze and immediately confronted Instructor Jecht ... again.

"Seriously! They're fighting ... AGAIN!?" Cloud yelled out in bafflement, eyes wide and mouth agape 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, believing that more than one person would be necessary to intercept the Father-Son pair ... especially considering Instructor Jecht's brooding stature.

"No, don't worry about that. I've got Cecil on backup if things go awry." 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 setting a cautious gaze on him. "Unless you've changed your mind about participating with the 'heist'..."

"You don't need to give me that suspicious look, Firion." Cloud assured with an irritated expression, finding Firion's constant glare an annoyance. "I'll be there."

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.

Dissidia Academy, 3:00pm...

After changing into his uniform, Cloud made his way towards the allocated meeting point. He made his way through the student-filled corridors on the Ground Floor of the Academy.

Drring-Drring-Drring...!

As expected, the final bell of the day rang throughout the entire Academy, causing the students to rush out from the rooms towards their long-desired freedom. Cloud swiftly turned a corner to evade the crowd's aggression, preferring not to deal with the claustrophobic battle on his way to the Academy Grounds.

However, as he thought he had successfully escaped the crushing crowds of students, he accidentally collided into an oncoming figure.

Trip!

"Whoops!"

He tripped up, causing him to fall onto something oddly soft ... kind of like pillows. Thankfully, he was able to avoid colliding onto the floor, yet 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 as he realised what he had done.

"I-I-I'm sorry about that! I wasn't looking where I was going." Cloud swiftly apologised, eyes shut tight and bowing hastily as the embarrassment took over him.

"Hmph-hmm ... there's no need to worry about that, Cloud." The soothing voice of the figure replied, giving off a light, pure and wise tone. "It was just unfortunate timing."

Cloud then gradually opened his eyes, finding the voice very familiar to him. As he met eyes with the person, he instantly recognised Headmistress Cosmos standing before 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.

A realisation then struck him.

Wait ... the Headmistress!? Then the soft pillow-like objects I felt were her-AH!!!

Cloud's whole body completely froze up upon the realization, his entire face turning beat red at the thought.

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 occurring between him and the Headmistress.

Noticing the abrupt reaction, Cosmos tilted her head with confusion, finding Cloud's sudden behaviour rather abnormal.

"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 as he hid his burning red face.

"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.

And yet, his eyes were 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 clapped her hands together, changing the subject for his benefit. "I was wondering about the Chocobo Racing Committee you'll be leading next Wednesday."

Cloud gave out a light gasp. With everything that had occurred to him throughout the day, the Chocobo Racing Committee had completely slipped his mind.

"Ah! Y-yes, what do you wish to know?" Cloud then formally queried, curious as to what was on Cosmos' mind.

"Well, have you been able to gather a team for the upcoming races yet?" Cosmos responded with a question, her expression beaming with hope.

"Sorry, not yet..." Cloud admitted apologetically, shaking his head, "I'm a team member short."

For the past few days, Cloud was preoccupied with advertising the Chocobo Racing Committee all throughout the Academy. From corridor-to-corridor, he could be seen placing 'The Chocobo Racing Committee needs YOU!' posters, 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 responded through emailing and other forms of social media. However, upon checking up on the number of members, he had gathered a total of only 5 new members who wished to be in the Racing Team itself. On the other hand, he was able to gain 15 others who opted 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 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.

"I am glad you feel that way, Cloud." Cosmos nodded back peacefully. "I'll be cheering for you and your team when the race season commences."

With that, she waved and made her way up the flight of stairs nearby where they were standing, keeping a strong, refined posture as she ascended.

Cloud watched on in awe, his eyes filled with inspiration.

...She must be a Goddess in human form!

Eventually...

Upon finally reaching the Entrance Gate, Cloud stood idly and patiently waited for his friends to arrive. During this time, he observed the hordes of students who passed him as they exited the Academy, rushing out of the Gate and feeling the freedom of the outer world.

He then turned his gaze towards the expanding world outside the Gate, watching the trees peacefully rustling 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 as he was 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 as he hastily checked his surroundings, "W-what are you...? *A-hem!* I-I mean ... you're still here?"

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 on edge and unable to think straight.

"Yes, I had to finish off a few duties in the Medical Room." Aerith responded back with a soft giggle, showing a wondrous expression upon meeting Cloud. "It's nice to see you're looking well. Are you waiting here for someone?"

"Y-Yeah, I'm meeting my friends here ... who should be arriving anytime now." Cloud answered truthfully, although desperately praying for them not to show up. "Anyway, that hair-bow certainly suits you, although I don't think I've seen you wearing it before now."

"Ah, do you like it? It was given to me earlier today as a present." Aerith expressed enthusiastically upon hearing the compliment, moving her head side-to-side to show off her bow in all its purity. "I'll admit, it's already become my pride and joy."

Cloud nodded with a calm smirk, "Well, the person who gave it to you certainly had 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, ensuring that this opportunity would not go to waste.

"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 answered in a casual manner, hoping for her not to catch on to him.

"Ok then. Well, I best head off." Aerith then concluded, heading off to her destination, "I'll see you soon, Cloud!"

Cloud waved her off, watching her with a small across her face as she left the scene.

He felt accomplished, believing luck was finally on his side.

As Cloud continued to wait for the three, he proceeded to watch on as the last of the Students stepped through the Entrance Gate.

Just then, one of the students had caught his attention, noticing a glint of reflective light illuminate from the corner of his eye. It was a female student, standing out gracefully amongst the small group she was walking together with.

She exhibited shoulder-length, dark-green hair and rather pale skin.

Concentrating his gaze, Cloud realized the item that reflected the Sun's light was a red, crystallized ruby gem. It sat firmly within a decorative Hair Ornament that the girl wore with pride.

It then occurred to Cloud that he had known about her from Cecil, having spoken of her a few times before.

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.

It was loud.

It was over-exaggerative.

It was all too familiar.

With a sigh, Cloud twisted towards the direction of the growing voice, bracing for what was about to

hit him.

"ClooouoooOOOOOUUUUDDDD!"

The roaring voice rose to exaggerated heights, closing in on Cloud at tremendous speeds.

Cloud paused his breath, placing full concentration on the timing of when the owner of the voice would encounter him. As he did this, he then took in a deep, considerate breath as muscles in his body tensed up.

And then ... He took a large step to the side.

WOOSH!!!

Within a matter of seconds, a blurred figure flew passed him at a ferocious speed, causing Cloud's to flutter momentarily. Cloud had not even flinched, watching the events unfold before his eyes with an uncaring half-open gaze.

"WOAH!!!"

CRASH!!!

The figure suddenly tripped up over his own feet, causing him to collide face-first against the gravelled pavement and skid across the track just outside of the Entrance Gate.

BANG! CRASH! Skiid...!!!

Cloud felt his entire body cringe up as he witnessed the figure continue his journey of agonizing pain, assuming it would leave a mark. And yet, he just could not take his eyes off the spectacle, finding it oddly intriguing to watch.

And then, Cloud caught sight of Firion and Cecil from the corner of his eye, stepping up beside him as they watched the carnage continue to unfold. Cloud could only imagine that both Firion and Cecil had the same amazed expressions as he had upon witnessing such a rare performance.

Sliiide...!

Finally, after what felt like forever, the tumbling and skidding across the gravel finally came to a halt. Cloud soon realised that he had not blinked once throughout the spectacle, feeling somewhat sorrowful for allowing the event to occur in the first place.

On the other hand, it was satisfying to watch for some reason.

He then turned towards Firion and Cecil, who were – as Cloud had predicted – staring in horror upon witnessing the figure grind face-first across the gravelled pavement.

"Tidus ... hasn't had one of his greater days today, has he?" Cloud admitted to the two, not knowing whether to show pain or amusement.

"Yeah ... I'll be honest, I don't think those marks will disappear anytime soon." Firion commented back, looking away in respect for his damaged friend.

"There goes the beautiful face of our fellow brethren." Cecil announced with a heartfelt sniff, showing off crocodile tears towards the lying Tidus. "...He shall be missed."

Why do students in our Class always exaggerate these things...?

Suddenly, the motionless Tidus raised his arms, slamming the palm of his hands against the ground. Within one heave, he silently dragged his body up to his hands and knees, breathing eerily heavy upon bearing the agonising pain.

Not long after, he turned his head to face the three.

“*GASP...!?!* OOOOOHHH...!!!” All three of them hissed loudly with a cringing tone, noticing the extent of the damage.

Form what they could see, Tidus' face was shredded to pieces. Several grazes appearing throughout the extent of his mug, some even had blood trickling out from the gashes.

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 in bewilderment, struggling to bear the pain that throbbed throughout his face.

"What do you expect!?" Cloud argued back in defence, holding back the tears of laughter that began to creep up to him. "If I took the impact, I would be in the same situation as you!"

"Well, if you DID take the impact, my 'handsome' face would've been saved from being 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.

"You see, there was a reason why our P.E. Lesson changed plans at the last minute." Cecil stated out bluntly, a slight grin appearing whilst he crossed his arms. "Tidus recklessly damaging a section of the Academy's Blitzball Stadium during the Lunch Break."

"WHA-!?! How is that possible!?" Cloud blurted out in shock, unable to fathom the possibility.

"LA-LA-LAA...! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" Tidus echoed out at the top of his voice, desperately using whatever methods he had to drown out the big reveal.

"During practice, he accidentally struck a weak point in the barrier with his notorious Jecht Shot." Cecil proceeded to explain, remembering what he was told earlier by Instructor Jecht whilst assisting to stop the Father-Son brawl. "Supposedly, the event within the stadium mechanics was 'quite' a spectacle."

"It was an accident, in any case!" Tidus pouted arrogantly, glancing 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 commented underneath his breath, silently chuckling away.

Both Cloud and Firion began to let out a few chuckles of their own alongside Cecil whilst Tidus glared at the trio with betrayed eyes.

"A-Anyway, we know why we're meeting here!" Tidus then announced, hastily changing the subject whilst cuffing the blood from his face with his Blazer sleeve. "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's body instantly shuddered as he heard the plan, still conflicted at the thought of going through with the 'heist'.

However, it was too late to turn back now.

"They ... would most likely be meeting at Crescent Lake." Cloud admitted, trying to hide his nervous breath.

"What makes you say that, Cloud?" Firion wondered within risen intrigue, curious as to how Cloud came to such a conclusion.

"Oh! Well ... I hear that Crescent Lake tends to be a hotspot for couples." Cloud quickly elaborated, reflecting 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 to the group so that he didn't feel so out of place.

"It will be quite the trek though, seeing as it is on the other side of the City." Firion pointed out, reminding the others about the reality of the situation "At our usual pace, we'll probably get there by the evening. By that time, we'll most likely have missed them."

"Heh-hee...! That won't be a problem if we run all the way there!" Tidus cheerfully suggested, hopping up and down in preparation for a speedy pace.

"As much as we would love to, Tidus ... keep in mind that the circuit training was brutal on our bodies earlier. The run would kill us before we even reach the Lake!" Cloud swiftly pointed out, desperately hoping that they wouldn't run after the agony they had to endure. "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 back to Tidus, noticing his frustration of being outnumbered in the debate.

After a moment of silence, Tidus gave out a bothersome sigh.

"Fine, we'll walk!" He concluded with a bitter nod, finding it completely pointless to argue at this point.

"But ... we'll have to be fast!"

Cloud, Firion, and Cecil glanced at one another with amused grins, accepting the compromise. They began to head off towards the City, hoping to reach Crescent Lake before the Sun sets.

Later that Afternoon...

The Sun magnificently illuminated Crescent Lake, giving it a pure, majestic atmosphere. The numerous trees surrounding the grand Lake rustled with the light gusts that passed them, 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.

It was the perfect location to escape from reality.

As the day was approaching its end, many of the visitors had started to make their way towards the exit.

However, Cloud, Tidus, Firion and Cecil rushed through the exiting crowd in the opposing direction, completely out of breath and muscles beyond the point of aching. Their eyes hastily examined the area around them, only to soon realise 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 out irritably, his heightened anticipation quickly shattered as if it was a fragile glass item. "I was SO looking forward to seeing his gal as well!"

Cloud briefly glanced at his trio of friends, all looking both exhausted and disappointed.

"Maybe they haven't left yet." Cloud then suggested to them, refusing to believe the journey was a waste of time. "I mean, not all the visitors have left the Lake yet. There's still a chance."

Firion and Cecil glanced to one another with uncertain eyes, doubting the possibility. Tidus, on the other hand, began to show an enthusiastic yet creepy grin, causing Cloud to shuffle back nervously. And then, Tidus launched his whole body onto Cloud, grasping his neck and holding him down with a strong but friendly headlock. With the free-hand, Tidus clenched it into a fist and began to rub his knuckles hard against the top of Cloud's head.

"Man, I knew your curiosity would be your downfall!" Tidus cheerfully joked, chuckling away as he continued to rub his knuckles against Cloud's spiked blond hair. "Welcome to the darr side, my friend!"

"Ah – ow, ow, ow, OW!" Cloud yelled out in pain, struggling to release himself from Tidus' clutches.

"Tidus! W-would you g-get off me!"

On request, Tidus released Cloud and gave him some much-needed space.

"Hahahaha! Sorry dude!"

Cloud stretched out, soothing his head after enduring such an embarrassing assault. After a quick recovery, he examined the area around him once more, searching for any hints of Zack and Aerith.

"If we walk around the whole entire Lake, we're bound to find them before dusk sets in." Cloud proposed to the group, knowing it was their best chance to track the two down.

"Hmm ... apologies Cloud, but I'm opting out." Cecil sorrowfully shook his head, "I have this odd feeling that we're too late. As much as I would love to see Zack's relationship blossom with his girl, the search will only be in vain."

Cloud silently nodded, feeling no need to persuade his friend, although a hint of irony crept up at the thought that he was previously all for the 'heist' not too long ago.

Cloud then turned to Firion, wondering about the stance he would take on the subject.

However, Firion also shook his head in awkward silence, deciding it best to pull out of the heist.

"Argh...! You two are such killjoys!" Tidus abruptly blurted out, annoyed by their haphazard decisions.

"Come on, Cloud! Let's go track down the lovebirds!"

Tidus strode off from the group in disgust, refusing to look back as he hunched up his shoulders.

Cloud watched him walk off with an awkward expression, feeling that Tidus' frustration was slightly overblown.

Prior to setting off, he swivelled back to Firion and Cecil.

"If your minds are set, who am I to judge?" Cloud admitted truthfully with a small grin, accepting their decisions. "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. As he saw them wave back exiting the Lake, both Cloud and Tidus commenced with their search.

An hour or so later...

Cloud and Tidus travelled along the walkway that circled the entirety of the Lake, examining every likely area as thoroughly as possible.

Unfortunately, as they pressed on, the evening was passing swiftly – almost to the point where the setting Sun was soon to drop behind the trees.

With no sign of Zack or his girlfriend within view, doubt was finally setting in both their minds. Tidus refused to give in to the temptation of giving up, believing there was still a small chance of tracking them down.

Cloud, on the other hand, was growing more uncertain as time passed.

Eventually, they had completely circled Crescent Lake – much to their disappointment. They made their way back up to the entrance, calling it a day.

"You know ... I'm starting to think it would've been best to head home with Firion and Cecil." Tidus depressively sighed out, the feeling of failure digging deep into his chest.

"We tried ... at least." Cloud loosely shrugged, wishing he had listened to his intuition.

"Anyway, I best head home. My Old Man is probably going to scold me the moment I step in the door, so I'll take the 'scenic' route back." 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 letting out a long sigh in frustration, giving a whimsical thought on what to do next.

Oddly enough, the idea of watching the Sun set from the Lake appeared in his mind, feeling that he would rather end the day with a fulfilling send off. With everything that had occurred throughout today, it felt necessary to end it on a peaceful note.

With his priority set, Cloud began to find a suitable bench.

However, as he continued his way on the track, two silhouettes in the distance suddenly caught his attention.

What followed ... was an all-too familiar voice.

"Heh-heh...! What do you think to the new uniform?" The larger, masculine-looking silhouette wondered as he proudly showed himself off to the smaller, feminine-looking silhouette. "Do you think I look heroic yet?"

"It really suits you, Zack!" The feminine silhouette answered with a light giggle.

Zack!? So you DID take her here!

Cloud's eyes lit up in a buzz as he silently treaded closer to the couple's position, hoping the two were oblivious to his existence.

Although the area was slowly darkening, there was just the right amount of light to at least determine the details of the two silhouettes. Cloud instantly recognised Aerith, who seemed to be wearing more casual clothing 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.

Witnessing Aerith in her new attire, Cloud felt his heart set pleasantly at ease. It was as though she was engulfed in tranquillity, curing anyone who passes her from the anxiety and depression that loomed over their heads.

As his sight switched over towards Zack, he was immediately caught off-guard by his new attire. His entire body was covered head-to-toe with 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, letting out soundless chuckles of amazement as he watched his best friend revel in his accomplishment.

Stopping by a nearby tree, Cloud hid himself from view as he continued to watch the two. His mind was completely overturned by Zack's sudden success, wishing he could reveal himself to them just so he could congratulate his long-time best friend.

Aerith sat down on a nearby bench, resting herself from what was likely 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 showoff...! Cloud thought in a murmur, shaking his head as he let out a typical sigh. 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 quietly expressed, 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. "Being here with you ... it's like a dream."

Cloud watched on as Zack and Aerith's closest hands gradually joined together, proof of their unbreakable bond.

Upon witnessing the two joining together, a chord struck with Cloud.

With all the odd behaviours he had displayed 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. He was obsessed with the feeling, wishing to be welcomed by it everywhere he went.

Ever since the truth was revealed, it was difficult for him to accept. Somewhat jealous of the fact that she pure light was already occupied by another person.

That person being his 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 constantly being turned down by woman after woman, and then to finally see him break free from those shackles: Cloud found it to be a sight to behold. With the addition of him succeeding in his dream of becoming a Hero, Cloud's respect for the man broke through its peak – both as a best friend and as his inspiration.

As the Sun finally set over the horizon, Cloud turned and stepped away towards the distance, satisfied by what he had seen. A deep smile grew, his heart renewed and assuring that he would support the two for eternity.

Meanwhile, back at Dissidia Academy...

The halls and corridors were glowing with the rays of the Evening Sun, slowly dimming as time continued to shift.

All the lights throughout the Academy were turned off ... aside from one, single bulb.

Situated within Geography Room 2, work was still underway. Sephiroth was preoccupied with rebuilding the Great Globe, refusing to rest until the job was complete. Many of the golden, shattered pieces were finally forged back in their correct positions.

As Sephiroth continued his intense repair, the door suddenly began sprung open without warning. 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, expecting them to enter without a care in the world.

"Still hard or work, I see!" The gruff voice spoke out, pridefully echoing throughout the entire room.

"No wonder people see you as a workaholic!"

"Hmph...! If that is how they see it, then so be it." Sephiroth muttered back in a dark tone, knowing exactly whose voice had spoken. "What do you want, Jecht?"

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 – 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 and turned to face Jecht, 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 shuddering in terror.

"Oh, so I've heard." Jecht playfully teased, unfazed by Sephiroth's deathly stare. "It must be horrific to watch your masterpiece shatter right on top of you, all due to some worthless brats messing around."

"Don't worry ... I was able to handle it." Sephiroth then admitted, his expression showing no emotion whatsoever. "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 you're so obsessed about?"

Sephiroth sat in complete silence as he heard Jecht's question, slightly dipping his head. What soon followed was a small yet deadly grin seeping across, showing how 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 used for his 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.

"...It's 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. This person, oblivious to being watched, was the one and only person in Sephiroth's mind who could possibly 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 Volume 2.

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Volume 3: The Innocent Thief – Part 1

Dissidia Academy, Lunch Break...

A wide variety of students made their way towards the canteen and the surrounding grounds, anticipating the savouring taste of the food displayed before them. They basked in the fresh, open taste of freedom from the constant drag of lessons, releasing all the gossip and chatter built up within them throughout the gruelling lectures.

However, not all Students were free to run around and idle without a care in the world ... for there were those individuals who were tasked with managing the various aspects of the Academy along with the events that took place throughout the Semesters.

They stood amongst the rest of the students as the most devoted and determined in the Academy. They were the Student Council.

Amongst this Council sat ten members, all known to excel in the academic subjects.

The President of the Council: Warrior of Light, lead the team with the crucial task in creating a safe and enjoyable atmosphere throughout Dissidia. He was personally chosen by Headmistress Cosmos, devoting himself to the Academy's interests and showing capability of keeping a strong mind through intense situations.

Assisting him were fellow students in his class and members of the Council: Firion and Onion Knight. Both highly advanced in intelligence and decision making, proving to be valuable inclusions to the discussions during their meetings and events.

However, a rivalry that would equal the Father-Son feud of Tidus and Instructor Jecht had spurred up as of recent, sending the entire Academy into deep gossip.

Council President – Warrior of Light – and fellow council member – Onion Knight – had very opposing mindsets. If ever a topic to arise that interested the two, they would usually end up in an intense conflict of wit and intellect.

Whilst this could be an exciting prospect to witness; for other fellow council members, it was admittedly rather irritating to deal with on a frequent basis.

Warrior of Light, Firion, Onion Knight and the rest of the Council had entered the well-managed Student Council Room. This room was situated on the Top Floor of the Academy, only down the hall from the Headmistress' Office.

The room was very open and spacious, allowing for plenty of breathing space and hospitality. Situated near the centre of the room stood a large, ringed table, completely spotless from dirt and stains. Hanging on the surrounding walls were various notice boards filled with numerous papers, documenting many upcoming events set throughout the current Academic year in addition to important notices stating certain rules and guidelines that always need to be followed – no matter the circumstance.

Moving on to the right side of the room was a large, blank board, used primarily to write down important notes during meetings and placing images from the Overhead Projector above.

Finally, a vast, spanning window overlooking the Grounds of the Academy on the far end of the room, taking in the Sun's strong rays and brightening the area with a pleasant, relaxing gold aura.

The Council sat in their designated seats around the ringed table, holding a strong, constant posture as they faced the President. Firion and Onion Knight placed themselves either side of Warrior of Light's position, taking out sheets of lined paper in preparation of writing down their notes.

However, the President himself kept standing, placing a heavy, filled up binder on the table for the rest of the council to observe. The binder, as thick as one could possibly imagine, held various documents from previous Council meetings. It was organised beyond belief, set in order of date for

accessibility and convenience.

Warrior of Light then took out a singular sheet, filled out entirely on topics to discuss for the current meeting. With this in hand, he took up a bulky black board-marker from the holdall on the wall and neatly jotted down the various topics for all to see. Underneath each title, he allowed space so that any suggestions and ideas from council members could be included.

After filling out the contents, Warrior of Light finally cleared his throat and twisted around to face the table, ready to speak to the Student Council perched before him.

"Welcome to the first Council meeting of the Semester." Warrior of Light announced to the group, showing off a proud and firm stance as he spoke. "As I'm sure you are all aware by now; it is OUR duty to make sure this Academy is thriving and—!"

Catching a glance from the corner of his eye, he abruptly halted his words and shifted direction.

"Onion Knight! Are you even listening to me!?"

Onion Knight was seen leaning back against his chair, his mind elsewhere. He was vacantly staring out of the nearby window, watching the clouds in the sky as they drift passed his view.

He was already bored, showing no respect to his Council President whatsoever.

"ONION KNIGHT!"

It wasn't until Warrior of Light had snapped at him that he had refocused, straightening himself up and concentration set in the direction of the President.

Despite this, his face evidently expressed the boredom that plagued his mind.

"Sorry ... 'President'. The moment you began to speak, my mind was instantly elsewhere." Onion Knight admitted unapologetically, growing increasingly arrogant in his mannerisms. "I'll be sure to do better next time."

"Is. That. Right?" Warrior of Light growled as he responded to his classmate, his teeth grounded with frustration as veins popped from his forehead.

"Are you going to continue with your pointless drivel, or will you ever get to the meat of the meeting?"

Onion Knight then wondered in his cynical tone, a very subtle grin curling from the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, don't you worry ... I'll get to it." Warrior of Light growled through his teeth, his piercing eyes full of fury.

The two locked piercing eyes at one another, tension rising between them as another battle between intelligence was soon underway.

Firion, having perched on the opposing side of the two, rolled his eyes with a frustrated sigh. The unneeded tension was infuriating, wishing there was a way for the two to act like civilized members of the Council instead of attempting to one-up the other.

Considering he already had to deal with the 'other' rivalry within the Academy, this was an issue he preferred not to be involved with.

With that said, the other members watched on in full amusement, silently giggling away and whispering with one another as they watched the carnage unfold.

SLAM!

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.

"For once in our lives, can we PLEASE get through this meeting without the pointless staring contest!?" Firion furiously roared at the top of his lungs, his face flushed as anger boiled within him.

"President, maybe it would be efficient to start with information on the *rumour* that spread as of recent."

The room fell silent in an instant.

Nobody was fearless enough to speak back to Firion, astounded by the sudden loss of temper from one of the Academy's most passive and level-headed students. Even Onion Knight and Warrior of Light – his two classmates – couldn't believe he was capable of such explosive expression.

All members of the room stared at him, frozen in fear as Firion gradually reverted to his normal self.

After a while of silence, Warrior of Light complied with Firion's demand, clearing his throat as he returned to subject of the meeting.

"*A-hem...!* A-anyway, skipping the 'unneeded' filler. Our first main topic is regarding Cid of the Lufaine's impending visit." He formally announced, albeit annoyed he had to skip his rehearsed introduction. "To put it simply ... his visit was scheduled to be *today*."

Firion and Onion Knight briefly glanced at one another, wondering what the President had in mind. Ever since the semester began, Onion Knight had taken in the numerous rumours regarding Cid of the Lufaine's visit as 'true'. He had faith in his intuition, an aspect to his character that never once lead him astray. No matter the prediction or the rumour, his intuition would always end up a correct. And yet, hearing the word 'was' ... caused uneasiness to grow within him.

"Well, I will now put those rumours to rest." Warrior of Light formally proceeded, his eyes swiftly scanning the room as he awaited their reaction. "These rumours are in fact ... true."

Upon hearing this, Onion Knight gave out a relieving sigh as his heart almost skipped a beat. He could not fathom the idea of his intuitions being incorrect, believing it would break him if he was ever found to be wrong.

Warrior of Light, however, was glaring back at him with a scornful gaze, evidentially infuriated by Onion Knight's irritating reaction. He held the temptation of making an additional comment, aware that it would only stir up an argument once again.

Noticing this death-stare, Onion Knight took no time to retaliate, mimicking Warrior of Light with a mutual glare of disdain.

However, as his sight locked onto Warrior of Light, he caught a small hint of growing excitement behind the irritable expression. From what Onion Knight could assume, Warrior of Light worshiped Cid of the Lufaine as a hero and an inspiration.

"...Heh!"

Onion Knight slipped a small, sudden chuckle by accident.

In immediate reaction, Warrior of Light's piercing glare on him lit up like an unyielding flame, veins popping from his forehead as he struggling to restrain his inner fury.

Onion Knight sunk back on his seat and held his silence, deciding it best to hold back from mocking the Council President any further ... for now.

During this time, the other members of the Council were preoccupied in discussing their delight on the fact that the rumours were true. Many were beyond excited to meet the legend in person, some even becoming flustered in the thought that they could possibly be striking up a conversation with him.

The room was thick with anticipation.

Noticing the conversations becoming overbearing, Warrior of Light placed up a hand to silence them. He had yet to finish on the announcement, and little time to spare.

"Furthermore...!" He called out in a loud tone, his voice clear and sophisticated as attention returned to him. "Cid of the Lufaine is currently touring the Academy with the Headmistress and Deputy-Headmaster as his guides."

The room turned unexpectedly silent, the surrounding eyes growing wide.

"As a matter of fact, he will be taking part in this very meeting."

The Council Members instantly switched to one another in surprise, showing a mixture of anticipation and nervousness.

A hidden smile formed on Warrior of Light's face, seeming as though he was struggling to hold back his own excitement. Onion Knight was the same, shaken up with hyped up adrenaline.

"Will the Headmistress also be joining our meeting, President?" One of the Council Members curiously asked, respectfully raising a hand as she spoke.

"I haven't been informed but I suspect she will." Warrior of Light returned with a hopeful nod.

Onion Knight knew exactly who had asked the question, glancing over to the female member.

She was approximately around the same age as most of the members in the room and could be

recognised with her long, fair-blond hair. It was elegantly tied up with a dark-blue ribbon, effectively complimenting the contrast in colours. She was brimming with confidence and self-pride, so much so that she could give Warrior of Light a run for his money.

Onion Knight personally knew her as a close friend to Terra Branford, although was unaware as to how they became friends or when their friendship commenced.

There was one aspect to her that was certain, though: she was Class 13F's respected President, and a student who strives to be an influential role model within the Academy.

Her name: Celes Chere.

Drawing in a deep breath, Warrior of Light proceeded onto the next topic of the meeting as Celes nodded back in satisfaction.

"Now then, our next topic of interest..." He began to announce, placing a finger towards the second topic on the board, "is to establish plans for the first event of the semester: The Social and Sports Club Open Day."

Dissidia Academy's Annual Club Open Day; an event where students involved in a variety of club activities set up a plethora of stalls and attractions to entice potential new members to join their proud establishments. Every year, the Open Day was a competitive battlefield, Clubs using whatever sleazy tactic they could muster to draw in the required numbers.

It was a day many Clubs had obsessed over, yet it was also a day many non-member students feared ... especially the Academy freshmen.

"President, sir. From what I can recall: some Clubs have already started." Another member of the Council commented, aware of some sport-based Clubs already commencing in afternoon and afterschool sessions – such as the Blitzball Club.

"Yes, that is correct." Warrior of Light nodded back, expecting such a question would emerge from his fellow Council Members. "Due to high demands from supported organization, many Clubs are required to start sessions as early as possible. Whilst I personally see this as an unreasonable requirement, it ultimately can't be helped."

Abruptly, Onion Knight gave out a loud, obnoxious yawn, "That's all well and good, but ... a date would be helpful."

Warrior of Light's brow reactively twitched, trying desperately to retrain the temptation to throttle Onion Knight in explosive anger. He was very much aware that Onion Knight was purposefully testing his patience, seemingly focused on getting a hyperbolic reaction out of him.

Warrior of Light vowed to not give in to such petty behaviour.

His teeth grounded, Warrior of Light turned to the boy and answered his demand.

"If you must know, it'll be this coming Tuesday." Warrior of Light murmured bitterly, giving Onion Knight a judging gaze as he spoke. "If you're *child-like* mind was a little more patient, you would've eventually had your answer."

Onion Knight bit the inside of his lip as he fiercely glared back towards the Council President, unable to retort.

Warrior of Light was fully aware of Onion Knight's true age and reason for entering Dissidia Academy a few years ahead of his year group. Any jab or insult that related to Onion Knight's age, height and appearance would easily trouble in the boy's heart.

Even though they were rivals, Warrior of Light was careful to tread over such remarks. He would only cross the line if the occasion deemed it necessary.

Admittedly, the restraint was proving to be much more difficult overtime.

Knock-knock...!

Just then, a sudden knock on the door echoed throughout the room.

Many members of the council leapt out of their skin in abrupt fright. Warrior of Light switched towards the door, swiftly stepping over to greet their expecting visitors.

Onion Knight continued to watch in silence, his hand clenched into a fist as the Council President's small comment dug deep into him. In that moment, he shook his head and let out a rejuvenating sigh,

quashing what negative thoughts he had in order to prepare an ideal first impression for the incoming visitors.

Warrior of Light opened the door, straightening himself up and sustained the urge to lose composure over meeting his hero.

"Welcome to the Student Council Room, Cid of the-!" Warrior began to welcome with pride, only to halt mid-sentence.

"...Eh?"

He could only see Headmistress Cosmos, who stood before him with a cheerful and pure.

"It's a pleasure to be here, Warrior of Light." A sudden, deep voice spoke up from below both Warrior of Light and Cosmos.

Warrior of Light gradually lowered his eyes to the floor, his mind completely overturned by the unexpected direction of the voice. He had assumed Cid would be standing before him with the Headmistress, going so far as to imagine a tall, humanoid figure standing idle at the doorway.

And then, just as his gaze spotted the owner of the voice, Warrior of Light's expression twisted with disgust.

Below him and Cosmos stood a Moogle; a small, white-furred creature with small, reptilian wings and a large red bobble on its head. In its full appearance, a Moogle was considered as one of the adorable creatures on the planet. Some would even worship them as a deity or mascot of the world.

However, in this very moment, 'cute' was the last thing on Warrior of Light's mind. His body shuddered as he was in denial of his gaze, hoping this was all a prank to make him crack.

"Y-you're ... Cid of the Lufaine?" Warrior of Light anxiously stuttered, his feet shuffling back as he continued to stare at the Moogle below.

Cosmos instinctively turned away momentarily, hiding her smirk and giggling reaction.

"Yes, that is correct." The Moogle answered in honesty, respectfully bowing before the Council President.

The whole room froze.

Every Council Member in the room was left dumbfounded by this sudden revelation. They had all heard the tales of the 'Legendary Cid of the Lufaine' yet had never seen a verified image of him – only speculations and concepts made by online fanatics. This also included Warrior of Light, who was unable to comprehend the revelation.

Cid stepped through into the room, silently yet cheerfully examining the area around him. Onion Knight slowly rose from the table in order to grasp a good look at the legend, his eyes wide with shock and awe just like the other Council Members. However, unlike his fellow Council Members, he was not left speechless.

Instead, a gleaming, enthusiastic smile had spread across his young face.

Ah-Hah!!! I'm not the smallest person in the room anymore!!!

Onion Knight's mind was screaming out with joy, ecstatically throwing his fist up in the air as he found his small stature was not as much of a setback to him in this current time.

On the other hand, Warrior of Light could not take his eyes off Cid, his horrified expression frozen in place as he watched the Moogle waltz around obliviously.

As far back as he could remember, Warrior of Light had always adored the stories of Cid of the Lufaine, from his astounding feats or valour to his breath-taking wisdom. Cid was a true hero in his eyes, a being that could never be compared no matter the circumstance.

And yet, the idea that during his whole life, he had looked up to ... a Moogle!?

"C-Cid of the Lufaine ... my hero ... a Moogle?" Warrior of Light murmured breathlessly, sweating gawkily with a distant expression.

Whoosh ... Bang!

With that, Warrior of Light lifted his head dreamily and fell back from where he stood. He fell flat onto the floor and lost consciousness upon impact.

All eyes in the room snapped towards the direction of where Warrior of Light had landed, some taken

by surprise. Additionally, Cid and Cosmos glanced down to the Council President with curious gazes. "Hmm ... Isn't it wise for him to be taken to the Medical Room, Miss Cosmos?" Cid of the Lufaine openly question, tilting his bobbing head in genuine wonder. "The boy seems rather ill." "No need to worry, Master Cid." Cosmos pleasantly assured, showing an atmospheric aura as she smiled down. "Our Council President tends to overreact. Once he recovers from his little fuss, he'll be as right as rain."

Cid nodded awkwardly, understanding her words. With that said, there was still an underlying feeling of concern for Warrior of Light's wellbeing.

Hastily placing a hand over his mouth, Onion Knight was desperately trying not to laugh out loud in the presence of Cid. Watching the entire scene unfold in front of his tear-filled eyes, he immediately cemented the memory as he imagined how he would use it to further tease Warrior of Light during future arguments.

However, another thought had left him genuinely curious, his gaze shifting to Cid of the Lufaine in intrigue.

He wondered as to how his friend Terra would react if she were to stumble upon Cid of the Lufaine's unique appearance. From the many occasions that he could recall, Terra was known by many for her fondness for Moogles. In the past, she was incapable of resisting temptation to cuddle anything that bared resemblance to the mythical creature – whether it was a stuffed toy or the real thing. There were moments where her obsession was so severe that Onion Knight had struggled to pry her of a Moogle no matter how hard he fought to restrain and separate her.

With his gaze following the Moogle around the room, a sense of looming dread was cast over him. He imagined a scenario where Terra had locked Cid in her arms like a steel trap, hugging and smothering the poor Moogle to the point where he was unable to breathe.

It was a hypothetical scenario, yet one that made Onion Knight feel eerily uncomfortable – as though his conscience was ordering him to 'not let Terra anywhere near Cid of the Lufaine'.

Speaking of said Moogle, Cid hopped up onto the table with a feather-like leap, allowing himself to gain a clear view of the Council Members perched before him. Cosmos took a spare seat next to Firion and elegantly sat down, anticipating involvement in the meeting's discussion.

Cid twirled – giving out the familiar Moogle '*Kupo*' noise as he spun on his two tiny feet – and proceeded to bow before the Student Council in respect.

"Now then, it is my pleasure to meet you all." Cid formally greeted, returning to an idle – yet bobbing – stance. "As I'm sure you are already aware, I am Cid of the Lufaine. It is an honour to join in with this meeting. If there are any questions you wish to ask me, feel free to ask away."

In that very moment, one certain question appeared in every Council Member's mind – as if in sync with each other:

Was Cid of the Lufaine always a Moogle!?

However, they all concluded that the question was far too dishonourable to mention, and so kept silent for the time being.

That was all, except for one member ... Celes Chere.

With her arm raised in pride and anticipation, she was desperate for her question to be answered. The other members glared towards her with caution, expecting the unexpected.

"Cid, sir. How were you able to accomplish such amazing feats with your ... small stature?" She generally wondered, her eyes gleaming with eagerness.

Cid glared over towards where Celes sat, his thoughts and expressions unreadable to the audience in the room. Then a small chuckle escaped his breath, indicating that the expression he would be showcasing was an amused grin.

"An interesting question. However, this is a question I cannot answer at this moment in time." Cid responded, 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 succeed.'"

Onion Knight's brow suddenly rose up with delighted surprise, finding Cid of the Lufaine's words of

wisdom enlightening.

SLAM!

Just then, a random palm slammed against the surface of the round table, causing members of the Council to leap out of their seats in abrupt fright. Only Cosmos, Cid, and Celes stood their ground, simply turning to the direction of the hand in wonder.

Just then, a low, tired groan echoed around the room.

"Nn...!"

What followed was a shaking body emerge from the floor. With long, silver hair covering over the face and a zombie-like tone looming over, the rising figure gave off a demonic aura. And then, the figure finally raised his head, revealing his face from behind the long hair.

Dazed and confused, Warrior of Light examined the area around him, attempting to remember why he had fainted in the first place.

"Cid ... the Lufaine ... Moogle..." He murmured lifelessly 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 at once. He hastily straightened up his stance, brushing back his now unkempt silver hair and neatened up his uniform.

"S-sorry about that, sir!" Warrior of Light bowed apologetically, flustered in embarrassment. "I'll be able to continue the meeting now."

Cid calmly nodded back, acting as though he was showing off an accepting smile.

Throughout the next fifteen minutes, Warrior of Light continued to discuss through the main topics of the meeting, pointing and scribbling on the board as he explained. On various occasions, he eagerly allowed Cid and Cosmos to suggest options and alterations that could benefit the topic at hand.

Firion and Celes also contributed towards many of the topics, including themselves where they felt their opinions were required.

Onion Knight, however, took a backseat in his mind and watched as the meeting pressed on.

Overtime, a single question gradually formed within his head, starting off as needless curiosity to genuine intrigue. To be specific, he had noticed that a certain someone was missing from the room, yet he could not confirm the identity of the person of interest.

At first, he scanned the table of Council Members, only to find that every member was present and accounted for.

He then shifted his focus onto the two visitors ... and immediately realised the missing person's identity.

Fwip!

He rose up a hand, the question sticking in his mind like glue. Warrior of Light switched to Onion Knight in a snap, unexpectedly being cut off from one of his long-winded speeches.

"What is it now, Onion Knight?" Warrior of Light broodily asked, eyes glaring irritably. "If it's another one of your ill-mannered comments then you'll be shown the door."

"No, it's a legitimate question." Onion Knight shook his head in certainty, his expression filled with honesty. "In fact, it's a question I'd like to ask the Headmistress."

Cosmos glanced over to Onion Knight with a curious expression, her kind smile giving him a sensation of tranquillity.

...Although the mention of 'Headmistress' caused an eye to twitch momentarily.

"What do you wish to ask me, Onion Knight?" She cheerfully asked out, tilting her head slightly.

"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, giving context to his following question.

"However, only you and Cid arrived to join in with our meeting. So, I'm wondering: Where is Deputy-Headmaster Chaos?"

"Hm ... hm-hm-hmm!!!"

A small giggle suddenly escaped Cosmos' breath at the question, quickly placing a hand against her

lips in order to prevent her laughter from fully escaping.

The Council Members were all staring at the Headmistress with curiosity, wondering as to why she was in a fit of giggles. Warrior of Light, Firion, and Onion Knight watched on with awkward expressions, completely oblivious to the reason behind this change in character.

Finally, Cosmos took in a deep, calm breath to control her emotions, allowing herself to settle down before answering the question.

"Unfortunately, Deputy-Headmaster Chaos is unable to join us for the meeting today." Cosmos began to answer, pausing every-so-often to keep herself in control. "You could say ... he's a little caught up."

Elsewhere...

Crowds of Students gathered around the rear Entrance Door of the Academy Building; a small, cramped Fire-exit door that led towards the Academy Grounds.

Noticing the growing crowd, Tidus, Cecil, Cloud and Terra with wonderous expressions, questioning the sudden rise in commotion. They slithered through the gaps in the crowd, passing giggling and laughing students. Tidus took charge of the group as they closed in on the door – eager to find out the cause of commotion, whilst Cloud positioned himself towards of the rear – finding this entire occurrence bothersome as exhaustion filled his bloodshot eyes.

Finally, they reached the front of the crowd with the door in full view.

They then entered a state of shock, taken aback by the reason behind all the commotion.

"Ah ... Ah-hah ... AHAHAHAHAHAA!!!"

Deputy-Headmaster Chaos had accidentally lodged himself between the door, unable to break free due to his large body mass and solid structure. He was hunched over, his usually constant fanged jaw lowering into a frown as crippling embarrassment had consumed him.

Students were snapping photos of him from all directions, their cell-phones flashing as they continued to cry of laughter and non-stop amusement.

"HAHAHAA...! A-ha! Ah-haha...! AAH-HAHAHAA!!!" Tidus wheezed underneath all of his eruptive laughter, hugging his abdomen in pain. "I-I can't ... I CAN'T BREATHE!!!"

Cloud was the next to lose the control over his emotions, struggling to breath as he hid his fits of laughter. Cecil and Terra both instantly followed: Cecil chuckling away underneath his breath whilst Terra was seen hunched over and hand over her giggling mouth.

And then, a deep yet almost inaudible grumble was heard underneath the crowds' commotions.

"What a pain..." Chaos muttered.

Back at the meeting...

""Oooh...!""

Warrior of Light and Onion Knight had both murmured in sync to each other, eyes widened at the thought of a situation so ironic.

As expected, the rest of the Student Council erupted in laughter.

"S-so, in the end, we called the emergency services ... and left him behind." Cosmos finished her explanation in a complete stutter, welling up with tears streaming as she could not hold back her giggling any longer.

"They should be arriving anytime now." Cid informed them, seeming to be the only person in the room who had not broken into fits of laughter. "I am sure he'll be pried out from the door in no time."

Warrior of Light silently switched to the board behind him, his shoulders shivering as he purposely hid his own chuckling.

Ten Minutes later...

The Meeting finally concluded, with Council Members packing up and leaving the room in dribs and drabs.

Warrior of Light stayed behind to eagerly discuss with Cid of the Lufaine, acting oblivious to the Moogle appearance as they conversed about a variety of topics. Headmistress Cosmos – as Cid's personal guide – also stayed, although it was more out of obligation rather than actual interest.

Onion Knight swiftly packed up his items and left the room with the other Council Members, feeling a fresh sense of relief as he entered the Top Floor corridor. It was then that he noticed Terra waiting for him, pleasantly waving in his direction as he approached.

The two made their way to the staircase, discussing the Council's meeting and laughing away at Deputy-Headmaster Chaos' recent misfortune. Terra updated him by explaining that the emergency services were eventually able to break Chaos out from the door after a few failed attempts. Because of this, the entire framework was now bent out of shape and unable to hold the door in place.

Unfortunately for the Deputy-Headmaster, the repair costs were coming out of his wage.

As they continued to chuckle and giggle away, they soon reached the 5th Floor – leading to their next lesson: Food Tech.

It was the one subject that Onion Knight despised, seemingly due to the teacher in charge of the upcoming class ... or just due to his genuine struggle of the subject of cooking.

Suddenly, Onion Knight halted his movement, his expression dropping without notice. He closed his eyes and listened out to his surroundings, feeling a sense of trouble hanging in the air.

Noticing him stop in his tracks, Terra slowed down as turned to him in confusion.

“Onion Knight, why are you-?”

CRASH!!!

Just then, a loud noise erupted from the Floor below them, followed immediately by a deafening scream.

"It came from the 4th Floor!" Onion Knight loudly commanded his companion, hastily rushing back to the staircase. “Terra! Quick!”

“O-ok!”

Terra complied and followed him close behind, unable to hide the worry in her eyes as they both reached the staircase.

It took no time for them to reach the 4th Floor corridor, their hearts racing as they searched for the cause of the noise.

Hastily scanning the area, Onion Knight desperately searched every room in his sights. Terra did the same, peering into each room as they rushed down the corridor.

So far, they found nothing out of the ordinary.

They continued their way around the corner of the empty hallway, reaching a series of doors that held the ‘Math Rooms’.

That was when Onion Knight instantly caught one of the doors left open – leading to ‘Math Room 4’.

As if by instinct, he ran up to the door and entered the room without a hint of hesitation.

He then gasped out in horror.

"What in the...!?"

The room had been a complete mess.

Sheets of paper was spread out across the entire floor; a large, smashed window could be seen allowing gusts of wind to enter; various desks were toppled over; and ... a small, fresh bloodstain was seeped into the wall directly ahead of him.

Terra soon entered the room behind him, her eyes widening as the terror set in.

Their eyes shifted from the blood on the wall to the floor.

A female student with shoulder-length, dark green hair was lying lifelessly on the floor next to the bloodied wall, signs of blood trickling from her head. She was completely motionless, yet only faint signs of breath could be heard escaping her mouth.

Standing between them and the unconscious girl was another, male student. He had dark, blond hair tied back in a long tail. He was evidently breathless and obliviously had his back to them, acting as though he was also in complete shock.

"Wait, that's...!" Terra breathless gasped in sudden realisation, racing over towards the unconscious girl. “RYDIA!!!”

Terra carefully yet frantically tended to the limp Rydia’s wounds, using the material from her uniform

to secure the head injury. She also noticed that Rydia's Hair Ornament was missing from her head, assuming it was either stolen or separated from her during the situation.

Onion Knight stood frozen in place, glaring over to the male student before him. It had not taken him long to identify the student, immediately recognising the blonde-furred tail that was far too iconic to ignore.

The boy gradually turned to Onion Knight, his body shaking as his expression was filled with confusion.

His heart racing in terror, the bewildered Onion Knight called to the student.

"Zidane ... what have you done?"

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"I-I ... I didn't do it!"

Zidane took a step back, his body uncontrollably shaking in terror.

"I swear to you ... this wasn't my doing!" He yelled out in a sheer panic, pleading that Onion Knight and Terra would believe him.

In retaliation, Onion Knight took a cautious step forward. His intense gaze refused to deviate from Zidane, feeling the suffocating tension in the air. Zidane glanced over toward Terra and the unconscious Rydia, before switching back to Onion Knight with fear draining the colour from his face. "You've ... got to believe me." He begged in a whimper, acting as though he was on his last moment alive. "...Please."

With his expression growing tense, Onion Knight took in a deep breath so he could recompose himself.

Thinking the situation through, he wished he could believe his classmate. Zidane was known throughout the Academy as a cheeky delinquent and trickster, yet there had never been a time where his petty pranks would purposely harm a victim – at least, not to Onion Knight's knowledge. Ultimately, questions would need to be answered, regardless of Zidane's pleading to be 'innocent' in the eyes of the public. There need to be an alibi, otherwise the consequences will fall on the yellow-tailed thief.

"I cannot simply let you go, Zidane." Onion Knight sorrowfully shook his head, glancing around the entirety of the room as he spoke. "Regardless of your innocence, you are a key witness. You need to tell me everything about the incident from your point of view."

Zidane froze up, sweat forming from his forehead whilst anxiously taking in a breath.

"I ... I got here not long before you guys did." Zidane desperately began to explain, his body entirely shaken up. "I heard a crash! I heard a scream and I-!"

Step-step-step-step...!

"What's going on here!?"

Zidane was then interrupted by a loud, commanding voice, causing every conscious student in the room to jump up in fright.

Onion Knight swiftly span round to face the new arrival. Although he acted surprised, he knew exactly who owned that voice – much to his displeasure.

As he met the gaze of the new onlooker, Onion Knight could only scowl in bitterness as his body tensed up.

Warrior of Light stood at the open door, his gaze left wide open with horror. He scanned the entirety of the room, taking in the extent of the incident to the miniscule detail. He was left speechless, sick to his stomach at the deplorable sight before him.

Onion Knight hastily glanced at Zidane, who had stood frozen in fear at the sight of Warrior of Light. The beads of sweat were now a waterfall, his mouth trembling as he realised his chances of leaving the room as an innocent man was next-to-nothing.

Onion Knight then switched to Terra, who continued to cradle the unconscious Rydia in her arms, tending to her wounds – particularly the blood trickling from on her head.

The atmosphere was cold and silent, the breeze from the smashed window creeping in like a curious ghost. Shivers crawled up their spines, setting the severity of the situation.

Onion Knight couldn't think at all, with the inclusion of Warrior of Light's unexpected appearance ... everything for Zidane was about to become ever-so worse. He was desperate to find a solution, one that would resolve the impending disaster that would soon fall on them.

Finally, however unpleasantly, Warrior of Light was the first to break the silence.

"What've you done to that girl, Zidane!?" Warrior of Light bellowed out in absolute 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, Light!" Zidane pleaded back, stuttering and shaking violently as ever. "I would never-!"

"She's missing a valuable Hairpiece; something that she would always wear wherever she goes." Onion Knight regretfully analysed, remembering the times he had seen Rydia hanging around in the Academy. "The only time I would suspect she wouldn't wear it is during P.E. or at home. Even then, jewellery of such value would certainly be kept somewhere safe and secured."

Zidane watched Onion Knight with a terrified expression, not knowing how to defend himself from the sudden influx of allegations.

"To see her in such a condition – and with the room in a damaged state, no less – it is more than likely that there was resistance between the 'culprit' and the 'victim' before the final blow was executed. The victim was knocked unconscious ... and the jewellery was promptly stolen."

Warrior of Light nodded in silence, taking in what Onion Knight had stated whilst continuing to glare at Zidane with further detest. It was apparent that he had already made up his mind.

Just then, another student appeared from behind Warrior of Light, hearing the commotion from the distance.

"There seems to be quite the commotion over here..."

It was Firion.

At first, he was oblivious to the situation, showing off a playful curiosity as he wondered why his classmates were gathered in the room. However, he quickly realised what had occurred, dropping his façade in an instant as he looked on in sudden shock.

Warrior of Light swiftly turned to Firion with a serious expression, holding a strong resolve as he finally took necessary action.

"Firion, I need you to get assistance from the Medical Room." Warrior of Light demanded calmly, keeping a cool mind as he spoke. "Whoever is in charge over there, inform them that an incident has occurred in Math Room 4 – and be quick about it!"

Without hesitation, Firion gave a firm nod and rushed off to the stairs, passing oblivious students without so much of an acknowledgment. As Firion disappeared down the staircase, Warrior of Light directed his attention back to the scene of the incident.

This time, his attention was directly on Onion Knight, temporarily dowsing any resentment for the boy in order to cooperate.

"Onion Knight, once Firion returns, I need you to locate the Headmistress and inform her of the situation – and preferably direct her to this room, if possible." Warrior of Light commanded. "For now, though, please close off this room from the rest of the Academy – the last thing we need would be a spreading commotion from the other students."

Onion Knight nodded compliantly, not speaking a word.

"Thankfully, this room should be empty for the rest of the day." Warrior of Light then sighed, feeling somewhat relieved. "It'll be free for thorough investigation."

"Wait, then ... what'll be your plan?" Onion Knight questioned as he came to an odd realisation. "In a situation like this, I'd expect *you* to be the one to grab the Headmistress."

There was a moment of silence, Warrior of Light glaring at a cautious Onion Knight before expressing his answer.

"Normally that would be the case..." He admittedly nodded at first. "However, there's something that I should have done since the first day of the Semester..."

As he spoke, his piercing glare was set on Zidane.

"...and detain the Thief."

""You're going to ... WHAT!?!?""

Onion Knight and Zidane yelled out in abrupt shock and despair.

BANG!

It was all over in a flash.

Warrior of Light immediately charged over to Zidane, sending him to the ground in one swift swoop. Ensuring that no window shards were near Zidane as he struck the floor, Warrior of Light detained his fellow classmate with a firm grasp of his wrists and a locked down position.

"You won't get away from me this time, you piece of filth!" Warrior of Light growled in disgust, gaining control of the two as he forced Zidane back to his feet.

"Hold on, President! We're still unsure if Zidane's the culprit to this whole mess!" Onion Knight desperately objected, finding Warrior of Light actions entirely absurd. "We should at least hear what he has to say before forcing such actions."

"He's called *Zidane the Thief* for a reason!" Warrior of Light firmly argued back, shifting Zidane towards the door in the process. "Stealing is his specialty – that's an undebatable fact! If he had the chance, I'm sure he'd place the blame on Bartz and escape with his tail between his legs!"

His tone then lowered to a haunting degree, showing no remorse in his decision.

"But not this time ... this time he'll be locked up in the Detention Room for questioning." He growled intimidatingly, tensing his grip on the silent Zidane. "And soon ... he'll finally be kicked out of the Academy with his reputation in ruins."

The moment the last sentence was stated, Zidane's gaze erupted with terror and despair.

"No, Light! Please! You have to understand!" Zidane suddenly resisted, frantically flailing about to release himself from Warrior of Light's unbreakable grasp. "I didn't-!"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Warrior of Light abruptly bellowed, his eyes flaring with fury. "You'll NEVER call me by that nickname!"

Onion Knight could only watch as Zidane was taken away by Warrior of Light's, failing to break free. There was nothing he could do at this point, feeling ultimately defeated.

Before they disappeared, Onion Knight caught a glimpse of Zidane's final expression: He was mortified.

Onion Knight gave out a loud groan, soothing his head as though he was trying to get rid of a migraine. He then turned to 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's the culprit?" Terra hesitantly questioned, her eyes serious and pure as she gazed back at him. "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 at least a suspect." Onion Knight analysed with certainty, although showing hints of hesitancy. "It doesn't help either that he has a proven record of past *mischievous* antics."

"But it doesn't seem reasonable. Zidane wouldn't just go so far *just* to steal a piece of jewellery. That's not like him at all." Terra instantly rebutted, her seriousness brimming from her expression.

"I've seen Zidane do some mischievous acts in the past, but he's always been considerate and has never gone beyond playful banter."

Onion Knight fell silent as he gathered his thoughts, his brow raised at the surprise of hearing Terra's statement.

He considered her argument, agreeing to the fact that Zidane would not go as far as intentionally injuring someone for the sake of stealing – based on the normal circumstances. If injuries did occur ... he would no doubt show guilt and apologise – such as the situation with Sephiroth during the *Great Globe Incident*.

Onion Knight's gaze wondered around the room, continuously searching for any kind of clue to help the case. To his dismay, there was nothing else aside from the obvious – meaning he would need to investigate to the smallest detail.

Unfortunately, with Rydia's safety and wellbeing set as the priority, his time was overwhelmingly

limited.

The Lunch Bell will sound off at any moment...

Much to his frustration, Onion Knight would have to do as Warrior of Light requested before assembling further investigations. His mind was at light speed, imagining potential plans he could execute before the allotted time would run out.

He switched back round to Terra, his gaze set with determination.

"If we're going to find out the truth behind this incident, we'll have to structure a plan-of-action."

Onion Knight began to explain to her, feeling adamant to find the truth. "Once Rydia is safe in the Medical Room and this room is fully closed off from the public, we'll join with the rest of our class for the upcoming lesson."

"But, wouldn't that mean abandoning the crime scene and the investigation entirely?" Terra wondered with concern, biting her lip in the process as she cradled the unconscious Rydia in her arms. "We can't just walk away!"

"There's no need to worry. It'll only be a temporary setback." Onion Knight assured with certainty, understanding Terra's worry. "As soon as the lesson ends, we'll return here and fully investigate the room."

Terra listened on in silence.

"Admittedly, it'll be difficult." He then continued. "By the time we get back: The Headmistress, other members of the Student Council, and possibly the public services would also be investigating the scene. We may end up being turned away."

As she glanced down towards Rydia, a question of uncertainty formed in Terra's mind.

"But ... how are we going to convince both the Headmistress and the Student Council that Zidane is innocent?" Terra cautiously asked, thinking the situation through. "By the time we get back, rumours of the events would have already spread across the Academy."

Onion Knight drew in a deep sigh, raising his head and crossing his arms as he wondered the depths of his mind.

"True ... 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 Warrior of Light."

Dipping his head, Onion Knight glanced towards Terra, desperately attempting to figure out how to pass the obstacle.

However, in the end, he only let out a small shrug.

"We'll continue as we were told ... at least, for the time being." Onion Knight sighed in defeat, deciding not to waste any more precious time. "I'll stand in front of the door and wait for the Medical Staff to arrive. In the meantime, you can continue managing Rydia's injury."

Terra gave a determined nod, accepting her current role.

Satisfied, Onion Knight turned and stepped outside of the room, securing the scene of the incident from the rest of the Academy. Closing the door almost entirely – with a small gap so he could communicate with Terra, he watched on for any signs of Firion or the Headmistress.

Drring...! Drring...!

Only a minute after Onion Knight stood guard, the Academy's bell rang throughout the halls.

He drew in a deep breath, expecting for a plethora of students to appear from the corner at any given moment. Praying for the Headmistress to arrive soon, he held up a firm stance.

As expected, Students began to flood from the staircase, gossiping and chatting away without a care in the world. Many walked past Onion Knight, most of them completely ignoring him as he continued to stand in front of the room. There were a few who noticed him awkwardly standing at the door, glancing oddly in his direction before continuing with their own business.

And then, Onion Knight caught notice of his fellow classmates appearing from the staircase.

Cloud Strife, Squall Leonhart and Tidus appeared as a three-man group: Tidus had taken the lead as he constantly ranted away. Behind him, Cloud and Squall seemed equally bored out of their minds,

wishing there was an end to his non-stop chatter. Between them, Squall had fallen into a very gloomy expression, whilst Cloud seemed to be close to nodding off – something that was the norm for them.

“Ah!”

Abruptly, Tidus spotted Onion Knight and immediately rushed over to him – much to Onion Knight's sudden displeasure. He was one of the few people Onion Knight truly did not wish to meet at this moment in time, knowing it was wishful thinking that Tidus would leave him be no matter how he tried to avoid conversation.

Cloud and Squall decided to follow Tidus, hoping Onion Knight would be a fresh cast of sanity. Onion Knight hastily took a swift peek through the gap of the room behind him, checking on Terra and Rydia whilst he still had the chance. As he confirmed they were safe, he closed the door completely and switched back to the trio.

“Hey man!”

“Wha-!?”

To his abrupt shock, Tidus had loomed over him with a cheesy, obnoxious smile.

A shiver ran down Onion Knight's spine, feeling a sudden sense of claustrophobia. This was further impacted by Cloud and Squall as they stood either side of Tidus, enclosing the young Onion Knight into a minuscule, cornered space. With Cloud's drained expression on the left, Squall's gloomy expression on the right, and Tidus' hyperactive expression at the centre: Onion Knight was left struggling to breathe.

“What's up, Onion Knight?” Tidus innocently greeted him, his cheesy grin as large as his enthusiasm. With his back flat against the door, sweat began to break from the skin of his forehead.

“I-I'm fine!” Onion Knight stuttered, unable to hide his hyperventilation. “I-is it possible for you to ... t-take a step back?”

“Oh? How come?” Tidus asked back in surprise, unable to grasp the reason behind Onion Knight's request.

Onion Knight gulped, anxiously clearing his throat.

“I-it's just that...” He then struggled to answer, failing to form his words as the tension of his surrounding classmates loomed 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 obliviously echoed, showing confusion in the matter.

“Well, I...” Onion Knight muttered almost inaudibly, his legs shaking whilst he felt the world began to collapse around him.

Just get the hint already!

Unlike Tidus, Cloud suddenly snapped back to reality from his daze and realized Onion Knight's crippling dilemma, nudging Tidus as he took a necessary step back. Squall – glancing over to Cloud with a confused expression, at first – decided to follow his action and give Onion Knight some space. On the other hand, Tidus did the exact opposite.

“Also, why are you standing here? The classroom for our Food-Tech lesson is across the other side of the corridor!” Tidus pursued to question, abruptly shuffling forward towards Onion Knight. “Is there something happening on the other side of this room?”

I'M GOING TO SAY IT!

Onion Knight's thoughts cried out in agony, desperate to break free.

“Please, just...!”

“Uh, Tidus...” Cloud called to his friend with caution, noticing that Tidus was oblivious to the situation he was causing.

“Huh? What's the matter?” Tidus wondered and he glanced back.

But it was too late.

“IS IT TOO MUCH TO ASK FOR YOU TO BACK OFF!?” Onion Knight abruptly roared, his mind completely snapped. “I CAN'T BREATHE WITH YOU TOWERING OVER ME LIKE THAT! DO YOU

EVEN KNOW THE MEANING OF 'PERSONAL SPACE', YOU DENSE FOOL!?"

Tidus leapt back in fright.

Around them, passing students suddenly glanced over to them with a curiosity, wondering what was causing such a commotion. With such an outburst, many assumed a fight between students was soon to break out.

DAMN! I said it! I said it! I SAID IT!

Onion Knight cursed himself over-and-over in a constant loop, feeling to pits of despair for admitting his height complex. The numerous eyes that gazed upon them intensified, all now growing curious of the sudden event.

"I-I'm sorry, Onion Knight." Tidus innocently apologized, showing off 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 in an anxious stutter, feeling a desperate need to deflate the situation before rumours were to spread.

However, his mind still held an inkling of malice:

Yes, don't worry ... I'll kill you in your sleep...

"Is something wrong out there, Onion Knight?" Terra then called out in curiosity, having heard his sudden outburst. "Also, did I hear Tidus just now?"

"Huh? Hey! Is that Terra in there?" Tidus gasped out in surprise, trying to sneak another peek into the room. "What's going on?"

"Erk!? D-don't concern yourself with what she's doing!" Onion Knight quickly snapped, desperately attempting to deter Tidus from catching a glance of the situation. "She's ... just treating someone at the moment."

"She's ... *treating someone*?" Tidus echoed in vacant wonder.

Feeling his own curiosity growing, Cloud decided to pursue Onion Knight on the situation.

"So, let me get this straight: you're standing here because someone's gone and injured themselves?" Cloud casually summarised.

"...Yeah, that's about right." Onion Knight mumbled in a low sigh, feeling caught in a corner.

Straightening up his posture, Onion Knight begrudgingly gave in. He decided to reveal the situation as quick and simple as he possibly could, informing the trio on a mild level – avoiding a few details for confidentiality reasons. He specifically opted to avoid mentioning the identity of the victim – aside from her gender – and the student that was apprehended at the scene.

Finally, Onion Knight requested the trio keep the information to themselves for the foreseeable future.

"That's horrible...!" Cloud gasped in shock, horrified to hear such an incident occur. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Ahh, I'm sure she'll be fine! I bet you that she's a real trooper!" Tidus cheerfully laughed off, holding a positive vibe for the sake of lightening the mood.

Cloud and Onion Knight returned an anxious smile, appreciating his never-ending beaming grin for once.

On the other hand, Squall refused to share the sentiment, rolling his eyes in mental agony.

"Tsk...! Whatever..." He muttered with an arrogant tut, lacking in the sympathy shared by the other three. "I'm sure the culprit will get what he deserves ... it'll save me further headaches in the future, anyway."

...Eh?

Onion Knight froze in a sudden jolt, his expression dropped in an instant.

Hold up ... he knew Zidane was involved!?

Onion Knight's struggled to comprehend the new revelation, his thoughts wild and unreasonable.

But ... how!? How did he know!?

Just then – as if perfectly timed – four members of the Medical Staff appeared, carrying bags and cases of necessary medical equipment. Amongst said equipment included a stretcher to move Rydia securely to the Medical Room.

The four students stepped aside to allow leeway for the staff, Onion Knight even holding the door open for them to pass through.

In that moment, Firion appeared before Onion Knight, previously following the Medical Staff from behind after directing them to the room. The two nodded to one another, fulfilling their tasks as requested. They then stood next to each other and waited for Rydia to be tended to.

The group of students watched as Terra assisted the unconscious Rydia's safe move from the room, her expression still sick with worry for her friend.

Firion then checked the time, flicking his wrist to glance at his watch.

"Aren't you guys supposed to be in class right now?" Firion questioned his additional three classmates. "I'm sure Food Tech has already started."

Onion Knight checked his own watch, only now remembering the time.

"Ah, man! Do we have to go!?" Tidus suddenly complained, as though hoping to find a way out what awaits them. "This looks so much more interesting!"

"You idiot, this isn't some simple entertainment." Squall responded in disgust, reminding Tidus how severe the situation is. "Read the atmosphere for once."

"I know, I know!" Tidus sighed back in a mixture of frustration and sorrow, looking down on himself. "I just felt like skipping Food Tech, you know."

Cloud looked on to Onion Knight and Firion, "What are you guys going to do?"

Hearing this, the three Class 13A students directed their attention to Onion Knight and Firion – whilst also implying Terra based on Cloud's wording.

Onion Knight and Firion glanced at one another, wondering to themselves what was to be done from here. The investigation took priority, that was for certain. Anything else – Food Tech included – would need to be placed on the backburner.

The thought of missing a class was painful for Onion Knight and Firion. Their perfect attendance for the foreseeable semester would never be the same.

However, this case was a necessary exception.

"We'll join the class once we're done here." Onion Knight finally answered, keeping a determined mind. "It'd be great if you could inform the teacher."

"Fine by me." Cloud coolly accepted. "We'll make sure she understands the situation."

With that, the three classmates began to make their way towards the Food Tech room, Cloud leading the trio whilst dragging the pouty Tidus against his will. However, Squall halted his movement, seemingly acting as though there was something on his mind. He then glanced back to Onion Knight directly, his glare sharp and condescending.

"Onion Knight..." Squall called out to him in a low murmur. "Choose your friends wisely ... you wouldn't want to end up with any odd-balls."

With that, Squall left them and followed the other two. The speechless Onion Knight watched him disappear with a suspicious expression, feeling a sense of rising caution in the air.

...He had to tread carefully around Squall from now on.

"I'll ... update the Headmistress." Onion Knight warily stated, shaking his head to return to reality.

"Go on ahead, I'll hold down the fort." Firion nodded back, positioning himself at the door with a firm stance.

Onion Knight thanked him and hurriedly rushed up the staircase, praying that Headmistress Cosmos would still be in the Council Room – or at least in her Office by now. If not, the only other possibility of her whereabouts would be with Cid of the Lufaine.

Regardless, he was desperate to find her as soon as possible ... even if it meant searching the entire Academy.

And then, the moment he reached the 5th Floor, he noticed Headmistress Cosmos rushing towards him in a controlled yet hasty pace.

"S-sorry for the delay – **huff ... huff...** – I heard about the incident." Cosmos apologized through her exhausted panting, trying to regain her breath. "Is the Female Student safe?"

"She's being treated by the Medical Staff and is currently on route to the Medical Room as we speak." Onion Knight explained with a serious nod, giving a confident expression.

Cosmos gave out a sigh of relief, "Thank goodness..."

Without the need for another word, Onion Knight lead the Headmistress back towards the room of the incident.

The moment they returned to the 4th Floor of the Academy, Cosmos and Onion Knight had entered the room. Firion followed behind them, glad to see them return so soon. However, he was also deep thought, his eyes wandering at the sight of the crime scene before them. During the short time he had guarded the door, he was able to claim a pair of latex rubber gloves.

He began to investigate the Math Room, crouching close to the floor of where the incident took place and picked up possible evidence of the event that occurred not too long ago.

It was as though he was a true Detective.

During this time, Terra chose to stand out of the way, taking her time to recover from managing Rydia's injury and wellbeing. Taking a seat in the far-off corner of the room, she watched her two classmates and the Headmistress search the crime scene from tip-to-toe.

Onion Knight took in the scene at great detail, his mind analysing the many aspects to this whole ordeal and hoping for it all to make some sense.

Silence filled the room ... until the Headmistress spoke her mind.

"Has the culprit been detained?" Cosmos turned to question the students, an evidence of concern breaking through her expression.

Onion Knight initially hesitated to speak out, wishing not to namedrop a fellow classmate without definitive proof that he was the true culprit.

For now, he decided to answer truthfully.

"Warrior of Light apprehended a possible suspect. Our ... classmate: Zidane Tribal." Onion Knight admitted to her, expressing mixed feelings on how to approach the topic. "Terra and I had found him here facing an unconscious Rydia. There was ... no one else in the room at the time we found them." Cosmos slowly nodded, "Was there any crucial details about the victim we should take into account? Injuries or anything that could enlighten the case?"

"She was found with a head injury from colliding against the wall after – what my guess was – some sort of conflict with the culprit." Onion Knight recalled from memory. "She was also missing a Hairpiece that she usually wears in public."

Cosmos then fell silent, frowning her brow as she came to terms with the situation.

Onion Knight switched over to Firion, who was preoccupied with taking photos of the scene. Through his reconnaissance, he took photo evidence of the broken window and the small, cracked blood mark on the wall, believing they were the key to finding out the truth. Additionally, Firion jotted down notes regarding details of the crime scene with a small notepad, breaking down the important facts whilst they were still fresh in his mind.

There was no doubt that he was prepared for everything.

"Have you found anything, Firion?" Onion Knight curiously called to him, noticing the level of focus he had on the investigation.

"Well ... I found evidence that would certainly work against Zidane." Firion stated with certainty, causing Onion Knight to tense up in caution. "However, there's also evidence that contradicts Zidane as the culprit. In fact, it doesn't make any sense with the knowledge we have on the situation at this point in time."

Onion Knight stared at him in confusion, "What do you mean by that?"

"There were a few strands of long brown hair found on the floor. No student involved in the incident has this hair colour, so that rules the possibility there may have been another person here at the time of the incident." Firion openly explained, acknowledging Rydia, Zidane, Onion Knight and Terra as persons 'involved' with the incident.

As he continued, Firion placed the hair-strands in a small, clear-plastic pouch that emerged from his

pocket.

"Also, if you look closely, there are small pieces of fabric caught on the shards of glass from the smashed window." he pointed out to Onion Knight and Headmistress Cosmos. "It's clearly torn from a student's blazer."

"I see..." Onion Knight murmured with intrigue, squinting at the glass shards upon being directed by Firion. "So, how would this prove a complication in the what we know of the incident."

Firion coolly smirked, as though he was proudly one step ahead of Onion Knight, "If you look closely, the direction of the torn fabric is facing as though the cloth was exiting the room instead on entering, meaning that the potential culprit had smashed the window during an escape."

"...Eh?"

Onion Knight, Cosmos, and even Terra were left in a state of confusion.

"Wait ... but Zidane was still inside the room when we found him!" Onion Knight pointed out, further validating Firion's position on the matter. "What about Rydia's uniform? Maybe it's possible that she hit the glass during the confrontation."

"See, that was what I first thought as well. However, I noticed her uniform was fully intact when the Medical staff tended to her." Firion quickly verified as he shook his head, showing no hesitation or uncertainty in his tone. "Taking that into account, the fabric on the window shards seemed far too unlikely to be a coincidence."

Onion Knight was left deep in thought, feeling as though more holes regarding the incident were continuing to appear by the second.

He then murmured to himself, "...The Hairpiece..."

Headmistress Cosmos caught his whisper, glancing over to him with a curious gaze.

"Would you like to speak your mind, Onion Knight?" She asked him.

Onion Knight nodded, a cast of confidence eclipsing him.

"When we found Zidane, there was no sign of a 'Hairpiece' in his possession. He had no bulky pockets, nor anything hidden in his hands." He explained to them, remembering everything he could about the event. "Considering how swift Terra and I were when we reached the room, it would've been impossible for Zidane to hide the Ornament in time. Maybe he knows where it is, but ... judging by his reaction when we found him, I think he only knows as much as we do right now."

A small moment of silence filled the room. All were deep in thought as the one vital question emerged in their minds.

Was Zidane truly the culprit?

CLAP!

Just then, Headmistress Cosmos abruptly clapped her hands together. Onion Knight, Firion, and Terra leapt up in sudden fright, returning to reality as she switched to the Headmistress.

"Well then, it seems a difficult ordeal has been brought upon us." Cosmos narrated in an upbeat tone, as if she were planning to speak out in riddles. "However, as much as it pains me to say: we won't be able to find our answers standing idle. We'll have to move this investigation up ... to the 'next' level." The students were left speechless, unable to grasp this sharp change of expression in Headmistress Cosmos' approach.

Eventually, Onion Knight decided to break the silence.

"What do you have in mind, Headmistress?" He curiously asked her.

"I have an idea in mind that may help us solve the case." Cosmos proceeded to enlighten them, as a cunning smirk forming from the corners of her mouth. "Given the current circumstances, I'll need some time to prepare. I'll have this room closed off from public access for now and will set up for an Academy Assembly."

"Is it a good idea to have an Assembly so soon?" Terra then questioned with concern as she approached the trio. "I don't mean to step out of line, but ... I'm just concerned we may accidentally spread misinformation."

"Hm-hmm...! You don't need to worry about that, Miss Branford." The Headmistress assured her,

showing an aura of playful confidence. "I'll explain everything in due time. You three just worry about your lessons."

Onion Knight, Firion, and Terra turned to each other in oblivious confusion.

However, they ultimately decided to place their trust in the Headmistress. The three followed her requested and prepared for their current lesson, retrieving all their belongings and proceeded to leave for Food Tech.

However, before he was about to step through the door, a small glimmer caught the corner of Onion Knight's eye.

"Hm?"

He turned towards the direction of the glimmer. There – hidden underneath a nearby desk – Onion Knight noticed a miniscule shining object on the floor. He wondrously approached the desk and knelt before it, examining the object at a closer angle.

To his surprise, it was a red, crystallized jewel.

Without a moment of hesitation, he picked up the jewel at the cusp of his palm. Feeling conscious that he could lose it, he held it as securely as possible during his brief observation.

Was this part of Rydia's Hairpiece...?

"Onion Knight! Are you coming?"

As he heard Terra's voice call out to him from outside the room, Onion Knight carefully dropped the jewel into his Blazer pocket and left the room to join Terra and Firion.

Finally, upon reaching the Food Tech Room...

Onion Knight, Terra, and Firion immediately caught a whiff of the mixture of aromas engulfing their surroundings, entrancing them of the beauty of freshly cooked food. They could hear the voices of their fellow classmates, gossiping and discussing with each other as they continued cooking their exquisite food.

Firion and Terra were drawn to the smell with great anticipation, unable to resist the temptation of the fresh aroma. However, Onion Knight felt a sense of irritation overcome him, unable to appreciate the art of cooking as he refused to make eye contact with the teacher leading the class.

"Sorry we're late, Miss." Terra apologetically called out, oblivious to Onion Knight's change in attitude.

Footsteps then approached the trio, causing a cold shiver to run up Onion Knight's spine.

"No Problem. Your classmates informed me of the situation." The Female Teacher answered back in understanding. "I'm sure you three are already aware, but we've just begun making scones."

"..."

Onion Knight grunted in disapproval, refusing to acknowledge the Teacher standing before them.

Noticing the attitude, the Teacher then switched to Onion Knight directly, glaring down on him with ominous intimidation.

"Is something not to your liking ... Onion Knight?" the teacher warily questioned; her piercing glare stuck deep within the boy.

"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 strictly demanded, crossing her arms as she towered over him.

Onion Knight hesitantly abided to her demand and lifted his head, glaring directly at his Food Tech Teacher in displeasure.

The Teacher was wearing a neat, white chef uniform over her plain-white shirt and smooth, black-laced office skirt. Although held back by hair-netting, her dark-silver, wavering hair was thick and luscious – giving off a sense of dark beauty underneath her strict aura.

Her name: Cloud of Darkness.

"S-sorry ... Miss." Onion Knight apologised in detest, feeling belittled by the presence.

"Apology accepted." Cloud of Darkness calmly nodded, returning to her initial tone. "Now then: Firion,

I need you to assist Bartz with his scones as he's on his own ... and clearly struggling. Terra and Onion Knight: you two will be paired up for this session."

The three responded with accepting nods, shifting to their designated workspaces without question. The Food Tech room was styled exactly like a large, open kitchen. Filled with various cooking equipment and several machines processing at once, the walls were covered in various posters and sheets of paper reminding students of the ideal diet and unique recipes. Air vents were situated throughout the room's ceiling, allowing for steam and smoke to be vented out efficiently.

And, of course, the ingredients found throughout the room were of plenty.

For the next 30 minutes, Onion Knight and Terra had quickly set up and began cooking making their scones. Hoping to catch up with the rest of their class, it had not taken them long to prepare the first set for baking.

Everything was going smoothly ... until it came to the baking.

Every attempt was an utter failure – burnt to a crisp and left completely inedible.

"Onion Knight! Throw them away and try again!" Cloud of Darkness commanded the instant she spotted Onion Knight's failure. "You're wasting tonnes of valuable ingredients."

"Wha-!?! Again!?! B-but ... it's my 5th attempt!!!" Onion Knight yelled back in despair, unable to accept his constant failures.

"Tsk...! Such irony! You call yourself the 'Onion Knight' and yet you cannot even cook something as simple as scones!" Cloud of Darkness returned in a mocking tone, a low, darkened chuckle escaping her breath as she spoke. "Just look at Squall's! Utter perfection! I would even consider it a masterpiece compared to the travesty on your baking tray!"

Feeling humiliated beyond belief, Onion Knight glanced over to Squall's workspace ... and was left in complete shock.

The entirety of Class 13A gathered around Squall's work area in awe, gazing at his tray of perfectly browned scones with admiration and inspiration. Squall showed off no expression whatsoever, finding the attention agitating and a clear invasion of his personal space.

"Woah! How did you make them SO TASTY!?" Tidus wondered out loud with his usual burst of excitement, chomping down on one of the scones. "Are you an undercover Chef or something!?"

Squall glared at his over-excitable classmate with scorn.

"Err ... no." He flat-out denied, desiring to end this overwhelming attention. "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 taste of greatness in his mouth as he followed Tidus' in scoffing down a scone.

Slap!

"Knock it off!" Squall yell out, immediately slapping the scone out of Bartz's grasp. "...Take your time with it, at least."

Onion Knight dipped his head in depression, feeling the utter defeat from his terrible cooking skills. Terra placed a hand on his shoulder and quietly giggled, giving her usual sweet smile of assurance.

"Don't worry, Onion Knight." Terra comforted him, briefly eyeing Squall's workspace in the process.

"I'm sure you'll get it right ... one day."

"It doesn't help with 'Miss Strict' over there constantly dragging me through the mud whenever I slip up." Onion Knight depressingly pouted, glaring towards Cloud of Darkness with detest. "She's been mocking me about my poor cooking skills since Day One!"

"Well, look on the bright side: at least Warrior of Light isn't here to mock you senselessly." Terra then reminded him, pointing out that the Class and Council President was nowhere in sight.

"That's ... true." Onion Knight admitted as he raised his head, only just realising the absence of his rival. "I'd expected him to return by now."

Click!

Just as he finished his sentence, the door to the Food Tech Room suddenly opened. A member of the Medical Staff entered the room and instantly caught attention of Terra and Onion Knight. The rest

of Class 13A turned and watched the Medical Staff with curiosity, wondering about the commotion. "Onion Knight. Terra Branford." The Medical Staff Member hastily called, trying to gain back her breath. "Rydia's just regained consciousness ... and she wishes to speak to you!" Onion Knight straightened up. His eyes were set as the thought of finally escaping the lesson crossed his mind. He switched to Cloud of Darkness' direction, hoping she would approve of his unexpected leave.

"It's fine, they can go." Cloud of Darkness formally approved, nodding towards the Medical Staff Member without a second thought.

Onion Knight felt his heart leap with determination, swiftly packing up his work surface and leaving the room with Terra within seconds of approval.

Cloud of Darkness glared as the two left, wondering as to why they were in such a rush.

The Medical room, Dissidia Academy's 1st Floor...

Both Onion Knight and Terra reached the Medical Room with no time to waste. As they opened the door, they both caught a glance of Rydia sitting up on one of the medical beds – conscious yet seemingly distant to the world.

"Rydia, how are you feeling?" Onion Knight politely asked her, stepping up beside the bed with Terra by his side.

"I'm ... fine, thank you." Rydia returned with a cheerful yet absent smile. "I just wanted to say *Thank You* for earlier."

Onion Knight and Terra smiled back appreciatively, relieved to see Rydia making a safe recovery. However, a sense of uncertainty crossed Onion Knight's mind as he noticed the lack of focus in her eyes.

He sat down on the chair close to the bed and focused solely on her.

"Rydia – if it's ok with you – there's something important I'd like to discuss." Onion Knight informed her, expressing a serious tone as he spoke. "Do you remember anything about the incident that took place earlier? Do you know the person who attacked you? DO you know why they attacked you?" Rydia hesitated, having trouble to form her words.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to, Rydia." Terra then assured her kindly, feeling her friends struggle to speak.

"I..."

As she finally broke her silence, tears could be seen forming in his eyes.

"I'm sorry ... I can't remember the incident at all."

Just then, her tear-filled face fell into the palms of her hands, breaking down in tears. Terra hastily perched next to her on the bed and placed an arm around her to comfort her, feeling pained to see Rydia in such a state.

"M-my Hairpiece..." Rydia continued to weep, unable to stop sobbing. "It was a gift from my Mother! I m-must get it back!"

Onion Knight leaned back on his chair in silent frustration, feeling as though they hit a sudden roadblock in finding the truth.

Without Rydia unable to recall anything in context of the incident that befell her, the difficulty of solving the case rose exponentially. He was left in his own thoughts, brainstorming for whatever potential leads that was left at his disposal.

However, aside from Zidane, he was at a loss.

Click! Swing...!

Just then, the door to the Medical Room opened. A proud yet unexpectedly excitedly Headmistress Cosmos emerged, approaching the students with an aura of positivity.

"There's no need to worry." She assured the sobbing Rydia, showing a calm smile as she stepped up to the bed. "We'll solve this case and reunite you with your Hairpiece in no time."

At first, Onion Knight and Terra glanced to one another, unable to determine what the Headmistress

had up her sleeve. They then switched back, hoping to hear some good news from all of this. "Could you please tell us what's on your mind, Headmistress Cosmos?" Onion Knight openly requested, his heart beating with anticipation.

"Well, it's rather simple." The Headmistress answered, giving a rare, excitable smirk during her explanation. "During the upcoming Assembly, the Academy will proceed with a 'Court Trial'." Onion Knight stared blankly, struggling to process what he had just heard.

"I-I'm sorry, did you say ... a *Court Trial*?" He vacantly requested, rising from his seat in the process. "Won't we need Lawyers? A Prosecutor? ...A JUDGE!?"

The Headmistress looked upon him with light amusement, showing no change in attitude.

"I'll be bringing in an old friend of mine: an official High-Judge in the Court of Law." Cosmos proudly answered. "However, I have decided that two *gifted* Students will be bestowed the roles of 'Lawyer' and 'Prosecutor'."

Onion Knight and Terra listened in intensely.

"I will appoint Warrior of Light the role of Prosecutor." Cosmos then announced. "Whilst you – Onion Knight – will defend Zidane in the upcoming Court Trial."

Onion Knight stared at her in bewilderment.

"...What?"

10 - Vol 3: Fuelling the Fire

The Detention Room, Dissidia Academy's Top Floor...

Situated close to the Headmistress' Office and Student Council Room, the Detention Room was small, plain, and as boring as one would expect. Used to isolate delinquent and rebellious Students from the rest of the Academy, many would compare it to an Interrogation Room or a Prison Cell. The walls of this room were blank and devoid of personality, only a small sized window existed – its sole purpose to allow a limited amount of natural light into the room. Situated within this room holds only a small, mahogany desk and two plastic chairs opposing one another, further verifying the room's primary purpose to interrogate those who had committed heinous acts on the Academy and its occupants.

Thankfully, there are specified limits to the use of this room.

As stated within the rules of Dissidia Academy:

- Students can only be held within this room for the maximum of 2 Hours.
- Students must always be supervised by a qualified member Staff or a selected Student Council Member.
- The Detention Room must never be locked when in use.

It was simple ... yet effective.

SLAM!

Just then, the door to the room abruptly swung open, colliding against the wall with significant impact. Two Students entered the room: a stern-faced Warrior of Light leading the way with Zidane Tribal in tow.

The moment they entered, Warrior of Light forcefully shoved Zidane forward, acting as though he was an aggressive warden in a prison. His eyes were burning with intensity, showing no remorse in his expression as he stared down his troublesome classmate.

The anxious Zidane stared back at him as he regained his balance, unable to find the words to break the tension between them.

Squeak...! Click!

Warrior of Light gradually closed the door behind him, his gaze refusing to shift from Zidane in the process – giving off the perception that Zidane was merely a cockroach to him.

"C-come on, Light. There's no need to be so forceful." Zidane playfully yet nervously stuttered, hoping to settle the vitriol cast upon him. "I mean, you could have just-!"

"Sit down."

Warrior of Light showed no hesitation as he interrupted the yellow-tailed boy, gesturing him to one of the chairs in the room.

Immediately falling silent, Zidane complied with Warrior of Light's command.

Screech...!

He drew back the seat from under the table and perched down in silence, eyes wavering towards Warrior of Light with increased caution. Warrior of Light sat down on the opposite seat, his attention solely set on Zidane as he continued his intimidating silence. Zidane sat uncomfortably on his seat, awkwardly averting Warrior of Light's death glare as best as he could.

Finally, with a pen and a notebook set on the table, Warrior of Light broke his silence and began his interrogation.

"Due to previous reputations, I'm sure you understand why I detained you." Warrior of Light expressed with a severe tone, his intimidation towering over the anxious Zidane.

Zidane hesitated at first, feeling as though the walls around him were gradually closing in.

"Hehe... Y-yeah." Zidane nervously chuckled, playing off the serious aura to prevent becoming

overwhelmed. "You could say – I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

As he spoke, Warrior of Light commenced with jotting down his notes – further setting Zidane on edge.

"I see..." Warrior of Light lowly murmured, glaring back at him with a clear cast of doubt. "For someone who's just been accused of *Theft* and *Assault*, you seem more 'chilled' than I expected you to be."

"Hahahaha...! You know me, Light!" Zidane reactively played off. "Considering everything that's happened, I've got to keep a cool head ... right?"

"..."

Warrior of Light was completely unconvinced, staring back at Zidane in judging silence before jotting down a few more notes.

Zidane let out a deep, frustrated sigh.

"Tsk...! Who am I kidding...?" He then quietly muttered, throwing away the playful demeanour like a useless mask. "You'll never believe me, no matter what I say."

"...Oh?" Warrior of Light glanced back at him with intrigue, a hint of ridicule in his tone. "And what makes you say that?"

"You've detested me since Day 1." Zidane then exclaimed, remembering their brief encounter on the first day of the new Semester. "All because I *temporarily* stole your dumb badge."

"I can't deny, you certainly made things ... inconvenient." Warrior of Light formally admitted.

"However, to simply claim that I 'detest' you is unfounded."

"*Unfounded?* I'm not a moron, Light." Zidane scoffed amusedly. "The way you acted when you detained me earlier was proof enough that you despise me. If I remember correctly, you called me: '*a piece of filth*'."

"Hmm ... so I did."

Hearing Warrior of Light's uncaring response, Zidane sat back in his seat as he continued to speak his mind.

"You think I'm 'guilty', don't you...?" He playfully assumed, hoping to turn the tables on the accusation. "You believe I was the one who assaulted Rydia. You believe *I* was the one who stole her Hairpiece. In fact, I bet you already saw me as the 'guilty' party the moment you entered that room."

"Do you have any proof that I'm wrong?" Warrior of Light hit back in an instant, his glare intensifying as he awaited an answer.

Zidane abruptly froze up, thrown completely off his stride as he backed into a corner once again.

"No, I don't..." He regretfully admitted, his body tense as he thought of a snappy comeback. "Do *you* have any proof that I'm the culprit, though?"

"Don't get cocky with me." Warrior of Light growled with a slightly raised voice, holding his dominance. "There is an investigation in progress as we speak. So, I'd suggest you mind your mouth if I were you."

A hidden grin began to curl from the corner of Zidane's mouth, noticing the slight change in tone from the Council President.

"Face it, Light. You're blinded by your own arrogance." Zidane assured him, waving off the serious tone. "If you weren't so 'self-centred', things would go a lot smoother for you."

"Tsk...! I told you not to call me by that nickname." Warrior of Light reactively gritted his teeth. "How can I – or anyone else with a sense of logic – consider your opinions as 'truth' if you're always pulling such pranks and rebellious acts?"

Zidane leaned back on his chair, placing his hands behind his head as he coolly answered, "I can't deny, I like to pull a few pranks every now-and-then. But ... I do have my own 'Code-of-Conduct'. I will always prioritize the safety and wellbeing of others over my own. And, I always return the items I steal ... eventually."

"Somehow, I doubt that..." Warrior of Light cautiously grunted, adding a few more notes in the process. "Does that mean you considered the safety of Sephiroth and your classmates when you

carelessly collided into the Great Globe?"

"THAT ... was an accident." Zidane lurched forward in hasty response, the sense of lingering trauma rearing its ugly head. "No one was injured in the end, remember? And besides, Bartz and I were ... justifiably punished for it."

"Fine..." Warrior of Light mumbled, swiftly returning to the main topic at hand. "When I detained you, you claimed that you were '*not the culprit of the incident*' that transpired in Math Room 4. Tell me, why were you at the scene of the crime?"

"Erk!"

Zidane's tail suddenly twitched, causing Warrior of Light to narrow his gaze with intrigue.

As though to purposely avoid eye contact, Zidane awkwardly glanced away from Warrior of Light's tense gaze.

"I-I ... was just-! You know...! I was just i-in the room next door ... when it happened." Zidane stammered as he spoke, sweat appearing to slide from his brow. "I heard the scream ... and I came running to check it out, that's all."

Slam!

"Too vague!" Warrior of Light slammed in complaint, straightening up his posture as he pursued the interrogation further. "What are you hiding from me, Zidane? I require a fool-proof alibi! What were you doing in the room next door to the incident?"

"N-nothing! I was doing nothing!" Zidane hastily shook his head, refusing to comply.

It was then that he knew: Warrior of Light had hit the jackpot.

"Come now, Zidane." Warrior of Light menacingly teased, refusing to dwindle. "You can't surely believe that you'd get away with just 'that'? I need details."

"I know that!" Zidane yelled back, his demeanour falling apart completely. "It's just ... I don't feel it's the right time for me to explain my side of the story. At least ... not right now."

"And when would be the *right time*?" Warrior of Light hastily pursued, towering over Zidane as he took to his feet. "Honestly, I see *NOW* as the best time for you to come clean. The more secrets you hold from me, the more it'll bite you back when all the cards are on the table."

"Come on, man...!" Zidane then sighed in a slump. "What happened to the *fair* Light who helped Bartz when he was in a jam on the first day of Semester?"

"I told you ... to stop calling me by that nickname!" Warrior of Light blurted out, agitated by Zidane's insistence.

"But your name is such a mouthful!" He complained in 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 hesitated in surprise, lowering his head in 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!"

"Stay on topic!" Warrior of Light demanded, refusing to diverge any longer. "Why are you trying to avoid this!? You were so desperate in proving your innocence, and yet you're constantly refusing to explain your side of the situation!"

"Because you have a clear bias against me!" Zidane shot back, standing his ground against his accuser. "If I told you now, you'll only spin the narrative in your favour!"

Warrior of Light fell silent, frozen in place as he stared daggers upon Zidane.

Zidane saw right through him. The yellow-tailed boy had seen it before: people who care little of the situation aside from their own benefits. Even though he was backed to a corner, he refused to give in to the pressure.

Letting out a small groan in frustration, Warrior of Light realized the inevitable had arrived. He felt it was unnecessary to pursue the interrogation further, believing he would only be wasting time.

Instead, he opted to leave this mess to the higher-ups – the Academy Teachers – whilst he figured out his next move.

He left his seat and stepped towards the door, "We're done here."

"H-Hey! What am I supposed to do now!?" Zidane demanded in bafflement; his palms firmly pressed against the desk as he yelled. "You can't just leave me here!"

Warrior of Light veered his head back in acknowledgment, "Relax. I'll have a member of staff watch over you whilst I consult with the Headmistress. Just sit tight and behave."

Zidane then watched as the Council President left the Detention Room, slumping back on his seat in defeat.

Alone in the room, he let out a long-winded sigh.

"...But it wasn't me, I swear..."

Outside the Detention Room...

Click!

Warrior of Light stood in silence in the middle of the Top Floor corridor, hearing the room close behind him.

He took a moment to regain his composure, staring towards the large, open window before him – deep in thought.

"...I told him not to refer to me by that silly nickname." Warrior of Light groaned, crossing his arms and keeping his usual elegant posture.

"Why don't you just tell everyone your 'actual' name?"

Hearing Zidane's words echo throughout his mind, his expression twisted into an angered scowl.

"How can I when I don't even have one?" He bitterly growled, his body completely tensed up at the thought.

That name. 'Light'.

Why was he so against such a petty – yet harmless – nickname?

He was fully aware that others only used it for convenience, yet deep down he felt as though he was being mocked for lacking a true name. It was a reasonable concept on the surface, as still it irritated him more so than anything else.

Was that due to their misguidance? Or, was it an internal issue that he needed to resolve?

Swiftly returning to reality, Warrior of Light focused on his attempted interrogation with Zidane.

Overall, it was unsuccessful. Nothing crucial was gained from Zidane for the case, and all it left was more questions and frustrations for the Council President. All he could recollect was the words directed at him, echoing throughout his mind in a repetitive loop.

"What happened to the 'fair' Light who helped Bartz when he was in a jam on the first day of Semester?"

"Tsk...!"

Warrior of Light bluntly tutted in rejection, brushing off the lingering reflection before it became to troublesome.

"You seem like a lost lamb standing in the middle of this corridor." A sudden, deep voice then called out to him. "Is something on your mind?"

In that instant, a repulsive shiver crawled up Warrior of Light's spine as he regrettably recognised the voice that approached him. He could feel a looming shadow tower over him, breathing down his neck like a ghoul closely observing its next victim.

"Some breathing room would be much appreciated, Garland?" Warrior of Light moodily retorted.

"...Apologies."

As requested, Garland took a step back, allowing Warrior of Light room to feel comfortable with the space around him.

Warrior of Light let out a low sigh in relief.

"Well, now I know how it feels like to be Onion Knight..."

He then directed attention onto Garland, an irritable expression cast upon him.

"So, why are you here?"

"Well – if you must know – I was taking a short stroll around the Academy..." Garland began to explain, setting an odd tone of gracious and formal under his demonic-looking helmet. "During this stroll, I just happened to notice your presence nearby."

Warrior of Light's gaze narrowed with a cast of doubt, feeling an ulterior motive was being considered by the ominous teacher.

"I had recently heard about the incident. It saddens me to hear about the assault on the poor girl."

Garland continued, expressing his sympathy for Rydia. "I was just discussing with the Headmistress on the subject, and she spoke about you dealing with the supposed 'suspect' of the case at hand. And so, I thought it would be wise to check up on your interrogation."

With a sigh, Warrior of Light nodded in understanding as he complied.

"I see ... unfortunately, the investigation was unsuccessful." Warrior of Light admitted as he switched his sight towards the Detention Room door. "I gained nothing out of Zidane ... and in the end, all he did was waste my time."

"Do you wish for any assistance?" Garland suggested upon hearing his woes, showing his generosity.

Warrior of Light glared towards him with hesitation, cautious as to whether to take him up on his offer.

"Yes ... I could do with some help." He bitterly admitted as he eventually gave in, gritting his teeth as he spoke. "I need you to watch over Zidane whilst I speak with the Headmistress. He has just over an hour until he's able to leave the room."

Garland nodded as he understood the situation.

However, Warrior of Light found himself already regretting his decision, grumbling to himself. He despised the fact that he required assistance from the Garland – the last person he wished to be associated with right now.

Unfortunately, the decision was already made.

"if you require The Headmistress, she is currently situated in the Medical Room currently." Garland indicated, stepping past the student as he approached the Detention Room.

In contrast, Warrior of Light began to step passed Garland with the Medical Room set on his mind. Feeling there was no need for further discussion, he refused to speak another word to the teacher. Even so, he heard Garland call out to him.

"Just on a side note, it would be rather pleasant if you began calling me as 'Professor' Garland."

Just then, Warrior of Light whole body horrifically jerked in abrupt reaction.

"OVER MY DEAD BODY!" He bellowed out in a burst of anger.

With haste, Warrior of Light disappeared down the staircase and out of sight.

Garland silently watched him leave, seeming amused underneath his demonic metal helmet.

He then turned ... and entered the Detention Room.

Medical Room, Dissidia Academy's 1st Floor...

Onion Knight was seated on his chair, frozen in place with eyes widened in shock.

The room was in complete silence, the three students staring at their Headmistress in disbelief. On the other hand, Headmistress Cosmos stood was standing with a proud, gleaming smile across her face.

Struggling to comprehend the absurdity he just heard, Onion Knight broke the tension for clarification.

"I'm ... defending Zidane?" Onion Knight muttered with disbelief. "Th-that's ridiculous! How could I be a Defense Attorney!? I don't have the training, the qualifications, nor even the knowledge for the profession! How can I defend someone of the accused!?"

Terra and Rydia nodded in agreement, wondering if the Headmistress had lost her mind.

"It may sound absurd, but your determination and calculative mind-set is more than perfect for the job." Cosmos assured him, giggling away nonchalantly. "Also, do consider that this isn't a 'true' Court Trial. This is more of a ... first-hand experience for the Academy's students. I plan for this Trial to help the Students towards an effective thought process in the event of a real-life setting.

Additionally, it'll allow both you and Warrior of Light to overcome a long-restrictive psychological weakness."

"A psychological weakness...?" Onion Knight vacantly echoed, questioning her meaning of the phrase.

And then, as he briefly thought about it, he leapt out of his chair in sudden detest.

"Wait ... Are you referring to my 'short stature'!?"

"Oh! N-no! Not at all!" Cosmos hastily corrected, waving her hands to show her innocence. "I would call that more of a ... 'physical' weakness."

"Erk-...!?"

Onion Knight reactively shuddered, feeling as though he was insulted regardless of her reasoning.

"Anyway, you'll understand what I mean in due time." Cosmos then casually admitted, chuckling away. "Hm-hmm...! Just thinking of the rivalry between you two on the stage just enthrals me with excitement! Oh, I can't wait!"

Onion Knight blankly stared at the Headmistress, unable to comprehend what was dancing around in her mind.

Then, Terra decided to pose a question, taking the Court Trial into account.

"Sorry to butt in, Headmistress Cosmos. But ... what would happen to Zidane if he's given the Guilty verdict?" She curiously asked.

The Headmistress switched to her with a raised brow, thinking about the question before answering.

"Well ... he would be excluded from the Academy with immediate effect." She casually admitted.

""*Excluded!*?"

Both Onion Knight and Terra felt terror run down their spines as they blurted out their shock, concern set upon them at the realisation of Zidane's potential fate.

""*A-hem!*""

Clearing her throat, Headmistress Cosmos returned attention on her and continued.

"Now then, there's something I wish to ask you, Onion Knight." She confidently announced, refusing to let such a daunting reality soil her anticipation. "Without a shadow of a doubt, do you believe Zidane is Innocent?"

Onion Knight hesitated upon hearing the question, lowering his gaze to the floor as he recollected the events.

The Evidence came to mind.

Whist some pointed the finger on Zidane as the culprit, others were clearly a contradiction to the case. There were too many questions to confirm the true context of the case, and a Court Trial may just be the necessary way of resolving the looming mystery set upon them.

With that, Onion Knight gazed up at the curious Cosmos.

"I believe in Zidane's innocence." He admitted in truth, hesitation in his tone yet eyes set on his task.

"I'll defend him to the end."

Cosmos acceptingly nodded, "Then it is settled."

Click! Swing!

Just then, the door of the Medical Room opened, a familiar figure entering in haste.

"Headmistress Cosmos, I'm sorry! I wasn't successful in Zidane's-!"

He halted his apology, noticing who was in the room with the Headmistress.

"...Huh?"

Completely caught off guard, Warrior of Light stood amongst Onion Knight, Terra, Rydia, and Headmistress Cosmos like a deer in the headlights.

"...And so, the fool finally entered the field." Onion Knight murmured underneath his breath, gazing upon his 'rival' with mocking eyes.

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.

"Oh...? Is that a threat?" Warrior of Light murmured in a dark, creepy voice, provoking the situation.

"And what if it was a threat?" Onion Knight confronted him, standing up to show he was no pushover.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

The Headmistress slowly clapped, deciding to break the tension.

"Now then, it's nice to see you two in good spirits! However, shall we-?"

She was rudely cut off before she could finish her sentence.

"I see ... so the pint-sized 'genius' developed a mouth to go with his cocky demeanour." Warrior of Light mockingly taunted, crossing his arms as his glare towards Onion Knight intensified.

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING 'PINT-SIZED'!?" Onion Knight suddenly snapped in fury, refusing to let such an insult slide.

YANK!

"AH!?"

"OW!"

Just then, both Warrior of Light and Onion Knight suddenly felt their ears being pinched against their will. Terra and Rydia reactively wince at the sight, caught off-guard by the sudden intervention.

The two slowly turned their heads, feeling a sense of despair as they noticed it was Headmistress Cosmos who was aggressively pinching their ears.

"I would prefer not to be interrupted." Cosmos eerily expressed to them.

Warrior of Light and Onion Knight gulped as their bodies trembled.

"...Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-YES, MA'AM!!!" The two yelled out in unison.

Cosmos gave them a silent yet simple nod, showing her dominance in the situation. Terra and Rydia held their silence as they watched the fearful event unfold, feeling they would only make the situation worse if they spoke up.

"Good. I'd prefer you two save your disdain for each other until we enter the Court Trial." Cosmos admitted as she released their ears from her grip, casually reverting to her usual personality.

"Did you just say ... 'Court Trial'?" Warrior of Light echoed in a confused manner, blankly staring at the Headmistress as he soothed his ear.

"That's correct." Cosmos proudly confirmed.

Shen then proceeded to explain the details of the upcoming Assembly, hoping that everything she said was clear to him

During her speech, Warrior of Light began to show a variety of emotions – some rather unexpected: It began with curiosity ... and then immediately followed by shock and uneasiness.

"Are you sure about this, Headmistress? This all seems rather...?" He then cautiously asked.

"AH-AH! I haven't finished!" Cosmos instantly interrupted him, shutting him down before he could question her mindset.

"...Sorry."

Headmistress Cosmos then proceeded to detail the roles given to him and Onion Knight, fully engrossed in her own words to notice the stark shift in Warrior of Light's expressions.

From the previous signs of uncertainty, Warrior of Light's expression curled to an abrupt sense of pride and cunning intrigue. Hearing that he would face Onion Knight in a battle of wits along with bringing Zidane to justice, he could not help but show his enthused interest in the role of Prosecutor. Finally, as Cosmos concluded her explanation, Warrior of Light glanced over to Onion Knight with a confident – yet, somewhat malicious – smirk.

"Oh ... this will certainly be interesting." Warrior of Light lowly muttered.

Sensing the threat, Onion Knight's eye twitched irritably as he knew his task of defending Zidane was going to be an uphill battle. Just seeing Warrior of Light's smugness irked him, feeling his disgust rapidly boil over at the seams.

However, instead of expressing his anger through the usual bickering and arguments, he chose to shift the subject.

"Please enlighten me, 'Prosecutor'." He mockingly pressed Warrior of Light, the corner of his mouth twitching as he grinned back. "How was your interrogation on Zidane? Were you able to retrieve anything useful from him?"

In a blink of an eye, Warrior of Light's reaction switched from smug to annoyance.

"No." He admitted in honesty, letting out a depressed sigh. "His answers were either too vague ... or he would avoid the question entirely."

Onion Knight, Terra, Headmistress Cosmos, and even Rydia looked on in surprise, all wondering why Zidane refused to comply.

"I don't understand." Onion Knight murmured under his breath, deep in thought. "Why would he try to hide his alibi? When we found him, he was certain of his innocence."

"Tsk...! Is it not obvious?" Warrior of Light bitterly waved off, finding their reactions pointless. "He has *no alibi*. He's simply avoiding the subject to hide his guilt."

Abruptly, the four of them – including the Headmistress – instantly shot a glare towards Warrior of Light without warning, causing him to jump back in shock.

"H-hold on now ... why are you all glaring at me like that?"

"Did you provoke him, by any chance?" Cosmos questioned, curious as to how the interrogation had unfolded between them.

"N-no, I didn't-!"

"Zidane may have clammed-up due to the constant pressure." Terra then suggested, accidentally interrupting him.

"I did what I was required to-!"

"Well, no wonder you failed!" Onion Knight then blurted out, intentionally interrupting him. "Why would anyone want to speak to you after all your nagging!?"

It was at this moment that Warrior of Light finally snapped.

"WILL YOU ALL PLEASE STOP INTERRUPTING ME-!"

Drrring-Drrring...!

The Academy bell suddenly rang throughout the building, an indication that the current lesson had concluded, and the Afternoon Homeroom was soon to begin.

Clap!

Just then, Cosmos clapped her hands together.

"Right then, you three!" She heartedly announced, indicating to Terra, Onion Knight and Warrior of Light. "Without further ado, we must leave Rydia to her recovery. We'll move on to the Theatre Hall and prepare for the impending Trial."

With that, the Headmistress swiftly took lead and exited the Medical Room in an excited rush.

Onion Knight and Terra decided to follow, shrugging to each other. As they left, the two waved to Rydia in hopes for her successful recovery. On the other hand, Warrior of Light was left gazing blankly towards the door, unable to move his body in disbelief.

He then quietly sighed to himself.

"...Perfect ... just perfect..." Warrior of Light muttered as his eyes expressed a lack of enthusiasm.

"Even the Academy Bell decided to interrupt me."

He stepped to the opened door, following the others out the room.

"What has the world come to...?"

Main Hall, Dissidia Academy...

The Headmistress lead the group to the Theatre Hall, a hint of pride in every step she took as she anticipated the upcoming event.

As he followed close behind, Onion Knight began to wonder about the process of the Trial. Would the structure be exactly like an official Court Trial? Or, will liberties be taken due to the lack of experience from both the Defence and the Prosecution?

However, as he cast aside the thoughts, he noticed Terra squirming anxiously beside him – causing

him to grow cautious about her involvement.

"Terra, you don't need to involve yourself in the Court Trial." Onion Knight suggested to her, keeping his eyes forwards. "If it gets overwhelming for you, you can step away at any time."

Terra shook her head in response.

"Thanks for the concern, Onion Knight ... but no. I want to do everything I can to assist you." She exclaimed, expressing a strong resolve in her tone. "Rydia's my friend and I'm a witness to the incident. It would be wrong for me to cower from this."

Taking her feelings into account, Onion Knight returned an earnest smile to her.

"Well, I couldn't ask for better company." He admitted in complement, cheerfully nodding away as he emulated her resolve. "And besides ... I'll need all the help I can get."

It was not long before the group reached the Theatre Hall's entrance.

With a small push of the doors, Headmistress Cosmos stepped into the Hall with a grand stride – revealing the room at its absolute finest. Onion Knight and Terra looked on with amazement, taken aback by the sheer transformation of the Theatre Hall's grand appearance.

Even Warrior of Light – as he caught up with the other three – was left in sheer amazement of the transformation.

It was completely redecorated to replicate a Court of Law: Various strong wooden stands were set to house the Judge, the Defence, the Prosecutor, and what would be the Witness'; Flags were positioned throughout the various areas of the Hall, all designed elegantly with the logo of the Academy; Furthermore, it was all lit up accordingly to focus on the stage.

It was as though this upcoming Trial had a high-production budget.

"Welcome to the Court Room. Cosmos proudly announced, gesturing towards the stage as though she was a tour guide. "This will be where the battle for the truth will commence."

The three students were speechless, observing the Hall with trance-like stares.

The Headmistress continued, "Our audience will arrive at any moment, and the Judge for this Trial will soon make his appearance. So, we'd best set up before the chaos ensues."

"Wait ... an audience?" Warrior of Light echoed abruptly.

"That's correct." Cosmos cheerfully answered with an excitable nod. "The entire Academy will be watching the Trial – both students and staff. So ... no pressure!"

With that, Cosmos stepped over and onto the Stage to gain a closer inspection of the Court design, acting completely nonchalant on the entire scenario. Warrior of Light was left frozen on the spot, finding this all too sudden for him.

Onion Knight noticed him standing in bafflement, turning to him with a low, mocking grin.

"Are you having doubts, Warrior of Light?" He teased, fuelling the fire for their upcoming battle of the wits. "You needn't worry. I'll be sure to hand you your loss before the day ends."

Warrior of Light immediately broke out of his frozen state.

"Your confidence is endearing, Onion Knight." He answered back in retaliation, returning the taunts.

"I'll be sure to wipe off that smugness from your face before you realise your failure."

As they stared daggers at each other, Onion Knight and Warrior of Light stepped up to the stage – With an embarrassed Terra following behind.

With Headmistress Cosmos directing them, Onion Knight and Terra headed to the Right side of the Court whilst Warrior of Light took the Left side. Warrior of Light held his elegant posture as he took his position on the Prosecutor Stand, showing his perfectionism in embracing the role.

However, the moment Onion Knight stepped up to his own position ... he immediately noticed a design flaw.

"T-this Stand ... is too tall for me."

Upon that moment, a sudden burst of laughter echoed throughout the Theatre Hall.

"Pfft! AH-HAHAHAHAA! AAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA...!!!"

Warrior of Light was the first to notice Onion Knight's predicament – hence the laughter. From his point of view, only Onion Knight's head could be seen emerging above the Stand.

"*Snicker...!* T-that's ... that's perfect!" Warrior of Light wheezed, almost collapsing due to the loss of breath.

"DO YOU HAVE A DEATH WISH!?!?" Onion Knight bellowed out from his Defence booth, his temper rising to boiling point.

He then noticed Terra desperately holding back her own laughter, placing her fingers over her lips as tears began to emerge.

"Don't fall to his level, Terra ..." Onion Knight threatened her, eyes glaring at her in betrayal.

"I-I'm sorry, I c-can't help it!" Terra struggled to respond, showing her back to him as she attempted to subdue her giggles.

Unbeknownst to the three students, Cosmos was also chuckling – albeit silently.

Snap!

She then snapped her fingers.

"Prishe! I need a box!" She called out to the area behind the stage.

"PRISHE IS HERE!?" Warrior of Light desperately spat out, instantly dropping his laughter.

"YOU'RE GIVING ME A BOX!?" Onion Knight also bellowed out in embarrassment.

In that instant, the Elvaan girl – Prishe – appeared from behind the curtains of the stage without delay. In her procession, she was carrying a sizable, wooden crate she had found in storage.

"Is this the box you required, Headmistress?" She curiously wondered as she stepped up to Cosmos, showing an upbeat grin.

"That will do perfectly."

As per Headmistress Cosmos' request, Prishe swiftly placed the box behind the Defence Stand. She then turned to Warrior of Light, suddenly giving him a cheerful and energetic wave.

"Hey Light!" she called out to him, showing him a large, boisterous smile.

"Stop calling me by that nickname!" Warrior of Light reactively yelled back, the nickname becoming a psychological trigger. "A-anyway ... why are you here, Prishe? What happened to you assisting Professor Shantotto?"

"Headmistress Cosmos personally requested my help to set up the Court Trial." Prishe pridefully answered back, emulating a joyful expression. "So, I thought: 'to Hell with being the Doc's errand girl!' and now ... I'm the Bailiff! Awesome, right!?"

Warrior of Light slumped forward onto his Stand upon hearing Prishe's answer, feeling somewhat concerned at the thought of her taking the role as the official Bailiff.

...And he was not the only one thinking this.

"Why do I have the feeling there'll be some 'intentional' injuries during the Trial?" Terra whispered to Onion Knight.

"I think The Headmistress desired some '*muscle*' to keep the Court from becoming difficult to manage." Onion Knight silently replied, losing colour in his skin at the thought of Prishe unleashing a rampage on the Court.

SLAM!

"Eep!"

Just then, the Door of the Theatre Hall abruptly opened.

Onion Knight, Terra, and even Warrior of Light leapt back in sudden fright – even a small *Eep!* accidentally escaped from Terra's mouth in reaction.

As they all peered over to the direction of the door, they saw a large, bulked figure – sporting a clad of silver armour – approach the stage. The clad of armour was shaped and morphed into an intricate design, featuring a cape that dropped to the figure's feet and horns of the helmet that curved downwards. The individual armour echoed throughout the Theatre Hall as the mysterious person stepped forward, embracing an aura of intimidation to all that face the figure.

This intimidating atmosphere caused Onion Knight to suddenly feel a chill crawl up his spine, not knowing how to approach this new individual.

"Ah, High-Judge! It's an honour to see you again after so long." The Headmistress gracefully greeted

the armoured man, bowing to the large figure.

The 'High-Judge' responded by silently shaking her hand and bowing in return, still engulfed in his intimidating aura.

Onion Knight and Terra looked on in surprise, conscious at the thought of answering to the armoured individual as the Court's Judge. They silently glanced at each other, both feeling the events of this Court Trial may take unexpected turns.

However, it was Warrior of Light who decided to enter the lion's den.

"Excuse me, High-Judge, may I ask as to who you are?" Warrior of Light requested, oblivious to the engulfing aura of intimidation.

The armoured individual switched to Warrior of Light, judging eyes glaring from behind the Helmet ... and then chose to remove it and reveal his identity.

Click! Click! ...Shift.

As he removed his helmet, Onion Knight, Terra, Priske, and Warrior of Light watched in cautious anticipation.

The first aspect of the High-Judge was igh-Jufdge his short, blond hair and hazel eyes. His expression was tense and stoic, hinting of his experience throughout the many years as a Judge.

"My name is Noah fon Rosenburg." The High-Judge answered upon request, his dark yet sophisticated tone booming as he spoke. "However, you shall refer to me as the High-Judge 'Gabranth'."

11 - Vol 3: 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 to this assembly, many of you may have 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!” Prishe 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, Prishe noticed that the students weren't complying with her 'order'. Just then, the wall in her mind instantly disintegrated.

“I said ... RISE, YOU ASSHATS!!!” Prishe 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. Prishe 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 Prishe 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 Prishe like daggers. Prishe, 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 Prishe adjusted her eyes, an abrupt chill crawled down her spine. Shantotto was in fact glaring towards her with furious eyes. Prishe 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 Prishe'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 Moogle 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 peaked 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 - WHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!!!?!"

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 with sweat, and mouth gaping in terror as he caught sight of Warrior of Light's finger pointing directly towards his position.

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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's 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 your 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!!!”

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!!!” 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 should 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-NOOO!!!" 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 at 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 - Vol 4: 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 a 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 your 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 stairs 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 no 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 led 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 at 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 trial ... then does that mean another person is behind this?" Terra wondered, noticing a contradiction between the second assault and Zidane's 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 to 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 - Vol 4: 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 only for a short amount of time. It was as though he was able to breathe again.

Zidane's 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 the 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 - Vol 4: 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 fraction 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.

“SquaaaAAAAAAAAALLLL!!!” 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 shack and the damp coldness of the water.

“Wha-!? What’s going on - WHOA!?” Cloud yelled 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 Clouds 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, Selphie!" 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-Proffessor 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-ahahaha ... 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 ... Heyahahaha – 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 - Vol 4: 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 Squaaaaaalllll ... 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 filming 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 obviously 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.

“They’re 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 - Vol 5: 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 PUPUBLIC 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 situation.

"So ... why did you 'lay down your wrath' on Bartz?" Terra questioned him, curious to the reason why there was a scream not too long ago.

Onion Knight froze up, muscles tensing up abruptly. It was then, when Terra made her mistake.

"Ah, you want to know, Terra?" Bartz suddenly popped up from behind her, causing her to squeak with a jump of fright. "Why don't I show you instead? I bet you'll love it!"

Onion Knight switched towards Bartz with desperation, "WAIT, BARTZ, DON'T SHOW HER!"

... However, it was too late.

Bartz had swivelled the absentminded Zidane around towards Terra, his expression lit up like a beaming candle. Without a second hesitation, he showed her Zidane's 'happy-face'.

Terra froze in position, her eyes wide and blank as her thoughts struggled to process what she had

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 - Vol 5: 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 it's 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 ..."

BADOOM-BADOOM-BADOOM...!!!

"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, he 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 first 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!"

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“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 possibility. 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...

“Celeeeeeeeeeesss...!” 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 piecing 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-NOOOOOOOOOOOoooooo.....!!!!!!" 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 to 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.

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“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 of 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 covered 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 - Vol 5: 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 inspect 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...! ...AAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

Thud!

He had fallen off 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 Ultimecia." 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. Commotions 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 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 - Vol 5: 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 Prishe, 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.

"Prishe...?" She breathed out, a sudden spark of hope emerged within her chest.

Without hesitation, Terra ran over towards Prishe, 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 regrettably – 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 were 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 wandered 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 Zidane and Rydia (although only from behind) ... that’s all.”

“OBJECTION!!!” Onion Knight bellowed out whilst holding out his index finger, almost cutting off 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 Zidane 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!

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He never saw ... the 'second culprit'? Onion Knight thoughts echoed as he froze up, his eyes turning wide with horror. *But, he was in clear view of the window ... How did he not see it!?*

Through this new dilemma, the audience of the court erupted in chatter and discussion, shocked by the sudden turn of events. The Theatre Room became consumed in confusion and doubt, many wondering if the testimonies and revelations of the trial still held validity. Questions were being thrown carelessly, some even demanding an explanation.

Onion Knight felt as though he was being crushed by an immense weight, fully aware that many were turning against him by the second. He had to sway the court back to his side as soon as possible, fearing that the entire trial was about to spiral out of control.

However, his options were severely limited.

Reflecting on the evidence presented to the court so far – along with the few he had yet to reveal – he could only highlight four that could possibly reignite his influence on the trial.

The first piece of evidence worth noting was Rydia's lost – now found – Hair Ornament, the strongest Onion Knight had that could potentially shut down the surrounding doubt. In fact, he couldn't help but beat himself up for not including it in his earlier debate. However, there is a considerable downside revolving around Celes' current reputation, especially with regards to the eligibility of her two testimonies.

Was her statement on the 'shadow-like figure' trustworthy?

Whilst he thoroughly believed in Celes' first testimony, her second 'botched' testimony caused the entire court to determine her involvement as a reliable Witness moot – and so, lost any convincing argument to rectify this troublesome contradiction. In addition, Warrior of Light would easily cast the option out, dismissing it with the likely excuse of:

"Seeing as Celes' statements are untrustworthy, it is hypothetically plausible that Zidane could have hidden the Hair Ornament in a different location and later on moved it into his locker between the time of Friday's trial and when possibly Celes – and certainly myself – stumbled upon it."

He hated the idea that Celes' major mistake caused both of her witness testimonies irrelevant, yet he knew this direction would get him nowhere.

The second piece of evidence was the Damaged Blazer found in Laboratory Room 1 on the 5th Floor, a piece of evidence just as vital as the Hair Ornament. Although, just like the Hair Ornament, various setbacks terminated its potential: The Blazer could have been placed in that dusty cupboard at any point during the previous week. Onion Knight could easily see this being used against him, downplaying it as a mere case of coincidence.

Moving on, the third notable evidence ... was the pouch of 'long-brown hair' hidden in the depths of his pocket. His hand sub-consciously patted the pocket, his temptation to showcase the pouch to the court rising. And yet, even at this point in the trial, he still couldn't bring himself to reveal it. Both his head and his heart were telling him – no, demanding him – not to give in and reveal the hairs to the court.

Soon ... but not now. He silently yet irritably assured himself, his jaw automatically tensing up at the thought.

Only one other piece of evidence was left ... one that only he knew existed.

As Onion Knight continued to ponder in silence, Warrior of Light gazed from his Stand with the most satisfied grin he could ever conjure. Watching his opponent crumble from his pedestal from the weight of all who began to doubt him. It was only a matter of time before the gavel falls and end this already overly-prolonged trial.

However, there was an odd sense of uncertainty wavering in the depths of his mind, as though

something just wasn't sitting right with him. His eyes shifted over towards the Witness Stand, a wary gaze cast upon the awkwardly fidgeting Cecil Harvey. With narrowed eyes, Warrior of Light began to wonder about Cecil's account of the incident.

Did he only see Rydia and Zidane during the time of the incident?

As much as this new development in the trial satisfied him immensely, a small part of him grew cautious. He couldn't figure out the exact means of the feeling, yet there was a sense of dissatisfaction upon how Cecil revealed this new information.

For now, he held his silence, waiting to see how Onion Knight will refute Cecil's claim – and if he had the evidence to justify his stance.

"Do you have any viable evidence to prove there was a 'second suspect' at the time of the incident, Defence?" The High Judge questioned with severity, placing pressure on the already anxious Onion Knight.

Drawing a deep breath, Onion Knight quickly responded, "Yes, Your Honour. If I may, I would like to present a new piece of evidence to the court."

High Judge Gabranth straightened up with intrigue, wondering what the Defence had in store. Cecil looked on with surprise, curious as to how Onion Knight could prove fault in an event he clearly remembers. Based upon the overseeing crowd's intense gazes, it seemed Onion Knight's own reputation was riding on what he was about to reveal.

"Hold it!" Warrior of Light interrupted, taking up the usual stubborn tone. "How could you possibly disprove Cecil's claim? He was clearly telling the truth, so why not just accept that you were wrong and move on."

Onion Knight sternly shook his head, "How could I when there is still evidence that certifies the existence of a third entity?"

He then held out his hand, pinching what seemed to be a small, bright-red object between his thumb and index finger. Everyone in view leaned forward with squinting eyes, trying to figure out what in the world he was holding up – Warrior of Light, Cecil, and Gabranth included.

"Defence, could you please enlighten the court on what you are holding right now?" Gabranth requested in strain, almost losing his entire balance from peering out to far.

"Certainly, your Honour." Onion Knight nodded in confidence, holding a straight face from seeing everyone around him making complete fools of themselves. "You see, at the end of our initial investigation after the incident occurred, I had stumbled across this small, red trinket on the floor. Whilst Firion did an immaculate job with his detective work, this was one that was unfortunately overlooked at the time."

Warrior of Light immediately pursued, "If that's the case, when why was this not brought up during the early stages of Friday's Trial?"

As if automatically, Onion Knight slyly smirked, knowing exactly what his opponent was trying to do. Warrior of Light was using the same pursuit he himself used during Celes Chere's first testimony, presumably in order to call out the hypocrisy of Onion Knight's statement.

Onion Knight couldn't help but find Warrior of Light's attack oddly endearing ... if it wasn't for the fact that the attempt was unbelievably petty.

"I believe the answer's quite simple, Warrior of Light." He answered with a careless shrug, acting as though he had overturned the possession of control. "Just as how Celes decided to keep her silence regarding Rydia's Hair Ornament until her time as a Witness, or even just as how *you* decided to hold back the footage of Celes until the perfect moment: I decided it was necessary to hold back this particular piece of evidence until the right time."

Warrior of Light let out a low, inaudible grumble, finding his opponent's comeback beyond bothersome. He had no choice but to hold his tongue, believing it best to save his rebuttals until a more appropriate time. Even so, he continued to stand firm, showing that he was far from giving in.

"So be it." High-Judge Gabranth accepted with a nod, although his increasingly grimacing expression showed that he still needed answers. "However, I must ask ... what exactly is that

‘trinket?’”

Having heard the question, the court’s audience continued to listen in curiosity, many of whom were unable to see the ‘trinket’ in question due to its miniscule size.

Onion Knight switched to Gabranth, giving off an earnest smile as proof of the honesty he was about to portray in his next words.

“I haven’t the slightest idea, Your Honour...”

Bang!

The whole court audience dropped to the ground in sync, overcome with disappointment of being let down from Onion Knight’s build up. Gabranth almost fell off his chair, letting out a disgruntled mumble as he struggled to comprehend the dismal answer. Even Zidane seemed perplexed by the uncharacteristic answer, sitting by the side-lines with a clueless expression.

However, the most overreaction came from – expectedly – Warrior of Light, who had slammed both fists and forehead due to being overwhelmed with boiling infuriation.

“All that allusion, all that build up ... and you deceive us with an insignificant BLUFF!?” He bellowed out in absolute disgust, feeling as though he had just been insulted.

Onion Knight held his grin, thoroughly enjoying his rival’s over-the-top outburst – although he’d rather not have Warrior of Light find that out. Placing that aside, there was another reason he showed such a peculiar expression, continuing to hold out the red jewel in confidence.

“No need to fret, Warrior of Light.” He coolly assured, “I may not know the origin of this red jewel, but I do know what it’s origin *couldn’t be*.”

“*Couldn’t be...?*” Warrior of Light muttered in clueless echo, becoming more confused by the second. “What exactly are you...?”

His voice trailed off, acting as though the cogs in his mind began to turn. Before he realised, the answer became as clear as day.

“-The Hair Ornament!”

“Ding-ding-ding! We have a winner, folks!” Onion Knight announced in an exaggerated showman-like voice.

Warrior of Light stood completely stunned, unsure whether to feel perplexed or bitter of his opponent’s sudden reignited stride. However, he held strong caution, believing this will only be short-lived.

Onion Knight switched to Gabranth with haste, reverting to his usual tone, “Your Honour, I request that we inspect Rydia’s Hair Ornament and cross-reference with the red jewel.”

The word ‘cross-reference’ caught the attention of the onlooking audience, many drawing an anticipated gaze as others began to theorize whether the jewel was connected to the Hair Ornament or not – and if not ... what the jewel could possibly be connected to.

Anticipation arose, and so did the vast array of questions.

Gabranth gave a nod as he crossed his arms, deciding to take the Defence up on his request.

Warrior of Light, although showing no effort in hiding his resentment, took out the Hair Ornament from underneath his stand. Neither he or Onion Knight knew what would come of this ‘cross-reference’, both wary of the possibility that this could possibly lead to a dead end.

“Now, without further ado ... where’s my bailiff?” Gabranth then wondered, realising that Priske had not returned since she escorted Celes out of the Theatre Hall.

Onion Knight held up his hand, as if waiting for permission to speak. With Priske still absent, he came to a sudden realisation that Terra also had yet to return, causing him to feel concerned of her and especially Celes’ wellbeing.

“Your Honour, should one of us go out and find her?” He suggested, hoping he would get the chance to locate Terra and Celes in the process.

However, Gabranth shook his head in firm decline.

“That won’t be necessary, Knight of the Onion.” He declared somewhat proudly, nonchalantly rising from his seat.

I wish he would stop calling me that... Onion Knight thought as he gave out a low groan.

There was a slight pause as Gabranth began to clear his throat with a casual cough. Onion Knight and Warrior of Light glanced to one another, giving off confused shrugs as they both wondered what the High Judge was about to do.

What came of it ... was an earthquake.

“PRISHE!!!!” He bellowed out at the top of his lungs, his volcanic voice erupting throughout the Theatre Hall ... along with the rest of the entire Academy. “RETURN TO THE COURT THIS INSTANT OR FACE THE WRATH OF MY ALMIGHTY GAVEL!”

BANG!

Immediately, as if by command, the Theatre Hall's entrance doors swung open with haste.

“WAIT, YOUR HONOUR!” Prishe screamed out as she burst into the room with an exaggerated panic. “I'M HERE NOW! SO PLEASE HAVE MERCY-!”

And then, due to her uncontrolled forward momentum, she tripped...

“-Oh, crap!”

...and fell down the steps.

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG ... CRASH!!!

Everyone watched her as she tumbled and rolled down the flight of steps, wincing and cringing as the agonizing descent continued all the way to the end. Even the High Judge Gabranth and Professor Shantotto reacted to the continuous fall, twitching as they witnessed each and every impact with the steps.

Finally, Prishe landed face-first against the firm flooring of the Theatre Hall, her body sprawled out like a discarded lifeless doll as she came to a halt.

A pained murmur then escaped her breath.

“...That hurt.”

Onion Knight couldn't help but sympathise with her pain, only able to imagine what torment she had just endured. Warrior of Light felt his teeth grind, struggling to hold back his cringing expression after witnessing such a fall. Cecil couldn't take his eyes off her, finding such an over-the-top descent both horrifying and mesmerising at the same time. Furthermore, members of the audience began to react in a similar fashion, whispering to one another as they wondered if Prishe was going to be alright. And then there was Gabranth, who couldn't care less.

“Bailiff, would you care to enlighten the court on how long you were standing behind the door for?”

He questioned her in a severe tone, evidently more concerned about her delayed reappearance than her current wellbeing.

Prishe gave out a sudden gasp.

“I promise you, Your Honour, I had only just arrived when you called!” She hastily justified herself in a panic, recovering to her hands and knees

She's lying. Warrior of Light muttered in his thoughts, gazing at her with a bored-like expression.

She's definitely lying. Onion Knight echoed in agreement with his opponent – although unaware that the two had matching thoughts.

Grabranth's glare intensified as he became more sceptical of Prishe's poor excuse, his piercing eyes seeing through her bluff all too easily. Prishe, her eyes watering due to the immeasurable pain from the fall, froze on the spot. Her hairs standing on end and shivers crawling up her spine, she could feel the surrounding cynicism weighing down on her conscience.

With that, she immediately leapt back on her feet.

“A-anyway ... Reporting for duty, Your Honour!” She announced with a hasty salute, desperate to shift conversation. “What is it that you would like me to do?”

Suspicious... Both Warrior of Light and Onion Knight thought in sync.

Letting out a low sigh, Gabranth instructed her on the task at hand, “Pass over the Hair Ornament and the red jewel.”

Prishe began to obey Warrior of Light's direction as command, “Of course! I'll fetch them for – wait

... is that all? I mean, you could have asked them to-!"

"Do as I command, Bailiff." The High Judge interrupted before she could finish, shutting her down without remorse.

"Urk-! F-fine, gotcha chief!" She stuttered in a quick response, sweat running down her brow as the sense of fear engulfed her.

Without another word, she snatched both the Hair Ornament and the red jewel from Warrior of Light and Onion Knight's hands respectively. Before anyone had time to blink, she was already standing before the High Judge with the requested items in hand. The swift movements caught Onion Knight and Warrior of Light completely off-guard, the two glancing at one another in abrupt shock.

Gabranth took the items from Prishe's possession, his eyes scanning over them as though ensuring they were legitimate. Prishe began to fidget on the spot, anxiously waiting for the next order.

"You can stand down now, Bailiff." Gabranth then nodded to her, his attention mainly focused on the evidence before him.

In that instant, Prishe gave out a long, exhausted sigh of relief. She stepped aside as requested, taking her position beside the Judge's Podium as the court's bailiff once again. Hands behind her back and a smile across her face, she couldn't help but feel as though she dodged a bullet.

"Stand up straight and look professional." Gabranth abruptly muttered, noticing her beginning to slouch.

"Ah ... sorry!" She squeaked as she froze, her posture as straight and presentable as a statue.

Satisfied, the High Judge turned to Onion Knight with an expecting glare, causing the young acting-attorney to freeze up on the spot.

"Now then Defence, enlighten me with your thoughts." He sternly requested, his haste to proceed the trial more apparent than ever before.

"Yes, Your Honour!"

As requested, Onion Knight swiftly stepped down from his box and shifted to the centre of the stage. Warrior of Light cautiously watched him as he approached, his consciousness set to use whatever methods necessary to keep his opponent from bouncing back. Cecil also kept a cautious eye on the Defence, anxiously wondering what was about to follow.

Clearing his throat, Onion Knight began his analysis, "Your Honour, upon initial overview of the Hair Ornament, you would notice it harbours a red jewel very similar to the one I presented to the court – although significantly larger in size if we were to compare the two."

Gabranth did just as Onion Knight had suggested to him, his eyes set on the ornament – specifically the jewel embedded in its centre – and compared it to the one handed to him separately.

"I can certainly see that." He nodded sternly, barely showing any reaction whatsoever. "What's your point?"

"Well, here's where I see the problem: Why does the smaller jewel exist?" Onion Knight pursued to question, casting an eye to the entire crowd in the process. "The usual excuses would be: 'Oh, the smaller jewel simply fell off during the confrontation between Rydia and the culprit!' or, 'Maybe it dropped off when Rydia was knocked unconscious!' Well, too that, I must firstly point out ... the blacksmith was certainly sloppy on quality-assurance."

Members of the crowd let out quiet chuckles and giggles in reaction, amused by the unexpected comment by the Defence.

"Furthermore, I would also question the location of the smaller jewel's socket." Onion Knight continued with his serious tone, holding back the sense of heightened ego upon hearing the audience's reaction to the joke. "Your Honour, would you be so kind in finding it for me?"

Gabranth momentarily shot a piercing glare at him, becoming increasingly suspect of his true intentions. He then shifted focus back on the Ornament, holding it up close to his eyes. He analysed every section of the Hair Ornament: left, right, up, down, inside and out. Every second passed, and he grew more infuriated as luck seemed to escape him.

Watching the High Judge, Onion Knight held his patience. A cunning grin began to emerge, believing

he had bet on the right horse for taking this approach. He was confident – some would even say he was adamant – that this will turn the court case back in his favour. It was only a matter of time. In the distance, Warrior of Light noticed his opponent's grin form. It was at this moment where he too began to show a smirk, waiting for his opportunity to rain on Onion Knight's parade.

"Nothing." Gabranth finally grumbled in defeat, "There wasn't a socket in sight."

This conclusion resulted in many eyes widening in honest surprise, some believing there would be a 'designated' socket for the miniscule jewel to slot back into place.

"Thank you, Your Honour." Onion Knight nodded appreciatively, clapping his hands together as he continued to inform the court. "So, we return to the original question: why does this jewel even exist? How did it become a vital piece of evidence to the case? I believe there's a simple answer ... the jewel came from the culprit's possession, not the victim."

"Objection." Warrior of Light casually butted in, letting out a bored sigh. "I'm baffled that you're actually convincing anyone with that pathetic attempt of a bluff. You're supposed to be proving the existence of a 'second' culprit, and yet here you are stalling for time AGAIN!"

"Well, maybe if you hadn't of INTERRUPTED, I would have gotten to that point!" Onion Knight responded irritably, showing no hesitation of returning fire to his opponent. "Believe me when I say that this has everything to do with the second culprit."

Warrior of Light shrugged the response off like it was nothing to him, deciding to add fuel to the fire.

"Then could you at least speed up the process? Our witness is beginning to feel left out."

At that moment, Onion Knight awkwardly switched over to the Witness Stand, noticing Cecil Harvey was idly fidgeting.

Realising he was included again, he waved off the Prosecution's indication, "Ah-ha-haa ... don't mind me, I can wait."

"I don't see why you shouldn't be included, Cecil." Onion Knight coolly suggested, hoping nobody caught on to the fact that he completely forgot about the Witness. "What's your take on the jewel?" Cecil initially hesitated, not knowing how to answer the question. However, after a sly eye shift to the left, his expression lightened up with realisation.

"What if ... it actually came from the Hair Ornament's jewel?"

The grin strapped across Onion Knight's face suddenly twitched, "That's a g-good idea, but the jewel on the Ornament shows no sign of dam-."

"-He's right." Gabranth interrupted with a low tone.

Onion Knight abruptly span around to face the High Judge, the smile now completely wiped from his face and all the colour in his cheeks turned instantly pale. Gabranth was holding up the Hair Ornament to the nearest light, standing up from his seat to gain a better view. Although challenging to see from where he stood, Onion Knight caught an eye of the jewel reflecting the light's rays. And there, he saw it ... the dent the exact same size as the red jewel he found during the investigation.

"No ... no, that's not-!" Onion Knight stuttered in denial, his feet shuffling backwards.

"...Possible?" A mocking voice murmured, finishing his sentence ominously.

Onion Knight gradually turned, his mouth unable to close as he faced Warrior of Light directly.

"What were you expecting, Onion Knight?" He patronizingly questioned, beaming with a grin as large and haughty as could be. "Was your plan to bluff your entire way through the case, just expecting the court to believe you? Were you thinking, 'Oh, this jewel isn't part of the Hair Ornament ... I KNEW IT! THERE'S A SECOND SUSPECT!' or something along those lines? Did you really, REALLY think it was that simple!?"

Onion Knight stood speechless, unable to respond.

Placing both palms on the table, Warrior of Light glared directly into his opponent's eyes, "Face it, Onion Knight, you were reaching too far ... only for it to blow up in your face."

Ba-doom ... Ba-doom...

Anger and fury began to brew deep within Onion Knight, wanting desperately to lash out at Warrior of

Light. He felt ridiculed, he felt isolated, and he felt as though his own mind betrayed him. If given the opportunity, there was no doubt that his temper would take control of him.

...

However, he had no choice but to concede, his mind highlighting the ramifications that would follow if he were to release the built-up fury inside him.

Turning his back on Warrior of Light, Onion Knight silently returned to his Defence Stand, his eyes lowered to the floor as he dragged his feet across the stage. Everyone around him watched warily, not knowing how he was going to react.

Although currently feeling on top of the world, Warrior of Light was particularly cautious. He knew he was purposely kicking the hornet's nest, he just didn't know what would happen in return.

Thankfully, it seemed to him that Onion Knight was keeping his temper under control for the time being.

"Well then, I guess that ends that discussion." Gabranth concluded to break the tension, deciding it best to move on. "For now, we'll update the evidence records."

I messed up. Onion Knight cursed in his mind, his fists clenched and body trembling at the thought. *I don't understand, I thought I was on the right track!*

He watched helplessly as the High Judge placed down the two items, desperately wishing he could object.

This isn't right...! There's something missing!

He was standing on the front edge of his box, his mind running rampant as he tried his best to figure out the missing piece to the puzzle.

"Defence, this is your last chance." Gabranth's voice echoed out severely, noticing Onion Knight was facing a dilemma. "Is there anything else you wish to ask the Witness before we move on?"

Admittedly, Onion Knight was desperate for more time. He couldn't think of anything regarding the Hair Ornament that was contradicting or missing, yet he knew it was there. Not only that, a section of Cecil's previous testimony wasn't sitting well with him. More than anything, he needed clarity, otherwise all his efforts would have gone to waste.

With that, he hastily attempted to buy time.

"Yes, Your Honour, I would like Cecil Harvey to detail the events that occurred between Rydia and Zidane from his perspective." He adamantly announced, his eyes lit with a determined flame. "I want to ensure that we have every detail."

Gabranth glare narrowed at the Defence, gaining a sense that the boy was merely wasting time. He then switched focus to the Witness, wondering what his response would be.

"Err ... I mean, I guess..." Cecil shrugged anxiously, crossing his arms as he thought about the scenario. "I'll be honest, it was difficult to see what was happening from where I was standing at the time."

Witness Testimony 2: Cecil Harvey.

Cecil nervously cleared his throat, "At first, I only saw Rydia and Zidane-!"

"OBJECTION!!!" A loud, booming voice suddenly interrupted.

Witness Testimony ... UNSUCCESSFUL!

"Your Honour, it has become clear to me that the Defence is wasting the court's time!" Warrior of Light stated adamantly, standing by the validity of his interruption. "There's no point in continuing this any further!"

"Wha-!?" Onion Knight blurted out in shock, feeling as though he was thrown into a corner. "I wasn't-!"

"I agree with you, Warrior of Light." The High Judge nodded sternly, his expression showing hints of

disappointment for the Defence. "Mr Harvey, thank you for your time."

"Oh ... sure, no problem." Cecil responded in surprise, issuing a courteous bow. "I'm sorry I couldn't have been of more help to you all."

"Wait, Your Honour! You have to reconsider-!" Onion Knight pleaded, almost shouting to hold the court's attention to the matter.

However, he was completely ignored.

"Not to worry, Mr Harvey. Your testimony was very much appreciated." Gabranth stated as he returned the courtesy, allowing him to leave the Witness Stand.

"PLEASE! LISTEN TO ME!" Onion Knight yelled out helplessly, demanding their attention.

However, he fell on deaf ears.

BANG!

As Gabranth banged his gavel, Cecil Harvey stepped away from the stand and sat back on his seat within the depths of the crowd. Silence hung in the air, Onion Knight leaning forward on his Stand in despair as his entire world began to crumble. In the corner, Zidane had watched the entire catastrophe unfold with soulless eyes, as though contemplating if it was worth fighting for his freedom any longer.

The Defence's influence on the court was dissipating at a horrifying rate.

In fact, it was almost no existent.

Onion Knight was at a loss, his mind still rushing to find answers and contradictions only to end up with nothing. His hands clawed against his scalp, he was praying for a miracle.

Letting out a deep sigh, Gabranth stood up from his seat, "Before we move on to our Final Witness, I believe a moment's recess is required."

Warrior of Light playfully shrugged in response, "So be it, Your Honour. Although, let's be honest here, the Guilty verdict is all but confirmed by now."

His heart racing and beads of sweat breaking through his skin, Onion Knight was stuck in complete limbo. He couldn't speak a word, no matter how desperate he was to speak out against the decision.

"We will return after a 20-minute recess." The High Judge ultimately concluded, preparing his gavel.

"Court is Adjourned."

BANG!

Outside the Theatre Hall, 4:20pm...

BOOM!

His breaths racing rapidly, his cheeks completely flushed, and face pouring with stress: Onion Knight was on the edge of a breakdown. He had burst through the Theatre Hall doors without consideration for their wellbeing, his mind set only on rectifying his calamity at this current time. He had 20 minutes to find new, conclusive evidence, otherwise Zidane faces the Guilty Verdict. Without thinking, he leapt into action and charged towards the staircase in the distance, ignoring whatever or whoever passed him along the way.

"What the-!? Wait, Onion Knight!"

He was even oblivious to Terra, who was making her way back to the Theatre Hall. Due to the speed of his sprint, she hadn't even realised it was him until she took a double-take. By that time, he had already disappeared up the staircase in a flash.

"Where is he going?" She vacantly questioned, oblivious to everything that occurred since she left the courtroom.

Not long after, Warrior of Light emerged from the Theatre Hall's doors, along with the crowd of students who were thankful to finally be stretching their legs. He was curious to see where Onion Knight was disappearing off to in such a hurry, although ultimately couldn't care any less for his rival. He was close to handing Zidane the guilty verdict ... and that satisfied him greatly.

Warrior of Light's eyes then shifted, catching a glance of someone who had passed him from the

corner of his eye. It was Cecil, obviously chatting away with Firion, Cloud and Tidus regarding his recent involvement with the trial.

Watching as Cecil disappeared into the crowds of students, hints of uncertainty began to show on Warrior of Light's expression.

For some unknown reason, he was feeling oddly troubled.

4th Floor, Math's Room 3...

BANG!!!

Onion Knight stumbled through the door with full force, almost tripping over at the sheer velocity of his momentum.

"*Wheeze ... wheeze..." He gasped exhaustedly, struggling for air after climbing the staircase at such speeds. "Note to self ... during next Council Meeting ... request elevator installation."

Straightening up, he took no time in examining the room that had been engraved into his psyche at this point, switching on the lights in the process.

The room of the incident hadn't changed whatsoever since the initial investigation a few days ago. In fact, it was as though the room was left untouched. This was unsurprising seeing as Headmistress Cosmos issued a temporary ban to not enter the room until further notice, however he would have expected the room to at least be cleaned up over the weekend.

Casting the insignificant thought aside, he continued to search every nook and cranny of the room, his eyes darting back and forth as he focused on finding any anomalies that was previously overlooked. He even checked the areas that were already investigated, including the broken window and the cracked, blood-stained section of the nearby wall.

Finally, after a thorough analysis, he came to a swift conclusion ... nothing new was found.

CRASH!!!

"Dammit, dammit, DAMMIT ALL!!!" Onion Knight roared out in unrelenting rage, kicking over a nearby innocent desk as his fury was impossible to contain any longer.

He immediately placed the desk back where it was supposed to be, hiding any possibility that he had allowed his anger to take over. He then stood silently at the centre of the dormant classroom, thinking of other possibilities that were overlooked.

Whist he still had the strands of brown hair, it wasn't enough to use as a viable means of proving Zidane's innocence. There was also the Lion's Head keychain he found during his search in the 5th Floor Lab Room, however he needed more to convince to court of Squall's involvement. Finally, there was the Damaged Blazer, but even then, he only had Celes' photos as a means of ... evidence.

"...I forgot to bring the blazer to court." He murmured blankly as his eyes widened enormously.

The realisation struck him like a loaded truck.

"I'M SUCH AN IDIOT!!!" He bellowed out as he threw his hands over his head.

Onion Knight then proceeded to sprint passed the door and back out into the corridor towards the staircase.

...He forgot to turn the lights back off.

5th Floor, Laboratory Room 1...

BANG!!!

"Come on, this time!" Onion Knight yelled as he burst through the doors of the Lab, his body on the verge of collapse.

Just like Math's Room 3, the Lab Room had barely been tampered with since he had last investigated it.

However, on second glance, there was one notable change ... there was no damaged blazer in sight. Alarm bells range in Onion Knight's head, his mouth murmuring 'no' underneath his hasty breath.

From what he could recall, he had previously left the blazer on the Lab desk nearby the corner cupboard where he initially found it. However, upon his return, it was gone.

Onion Knight cursed at himself, disgusted by his own carelessness. He searched everywhere, from underneath each of the desks in the room – including the teachers – to every cupboard he came across. He found chewed up gum and rappers underneath every desk, stacks of used school books in most cupboards, and science equipment such as Bunsen-burners and Microscopes stashed in every other notable place.

However, there still no Damaged Blazer.

Onion Knight turned to the final place he had yet to investigate, his heart racing faster than ever before. His desperation was crushing him psychologically, knowing that this was he last chance to save Zidane.

Struggling to keep his focus in check, he stepped up to the corner cupboard – the same cupboard that initially contained the blazer in its crumpled state. He grasped hold of the handle, taking a few seconds to breathe, and opened the door.

Nothing.

There was nothing.

No evidence. No blazer.

Nothing.

“...No...” Onion Knight muttered.

He shut the door and opened it again – believing he was witnessing an illusion.

“N-No!” He blurted out.

He shut the door ... and opened it one last time.

“No-no-no-NO!!!” He shouted in denial.

He dropped to his hands and knees ... and roared out in despair.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO...!!!!”

That was it. He failed.

In his mind, the moment he leaves the Lab Room ... he would lose the court case.

24 - Vol 6: The Final Witness

Volume 6: The Innocent Thief – Finale

The late afternoon breeze was blissful, gently brushing passed the nearby trees and bushes as it made its way through the grounds of Dissidia Academy. Students of plenty were scattered across various areas of the grounds, either chilling or chatting with their friendship groups.

There was one hot topic running rampant through everyone's minds: The court case.

The events that transpired during the current court trial had put everyone on edge, excitedly anticipating what would soon be the climax of the dramatic battle between Onion Knight and Warrior of Light. Many conversations highlighted the betrayal of Celes Chere, the mystery of the second culprit, and – to add insult to injury – Onion Knight's spiral towards failure.

Whilst there were a considerable number of students placing their faith on Onion Knight to win the case, many others had either jumped ship to join the Warrior of Light faction or took a neutral position as a precautionary measure. Some members of opposing factions would even begin arguments about who was in the right, leading to heated disputes that were ending friendships left and right. With the abundance of negative emotions coursing through the Academy, it was a difficult time to find some much needed peace.

Observing from a safe distance, Warrior of Light was sitting on a lone bench – deep in thought. Considering his sharp rise in recognition amongst the Academy students, the last thing he needed was to be bothered by them before the trial's grand climax. As he needed this time to think everything over, any distraction could cost him dearly.

Thankfully, it seemed the gods were swayed in his favour for now.

As he watched the numerous conversations continue to thrive, a sense of conflict grew within his mind. Ever since Onion Knight had sprinted off the moment the court trial reached recess, he couldn't help but wonder whether it was worth chasing after his rival. Considering his desperation as he 'fled' the scene, it would make sense to pursue the situation.

And yet, here he sat, lost in his thoughts with no desire of face his opponent.

So, why was he feeling like this?

In his eyes, everything was set in stone. He was on his way to win the court trial, set the Guilty verdict on Zidane, and expel him from the Academy once-and-for-all. Additionally, he had exposed Celes for the tampering of court evidence and overall incompetence, completely turning the tables on Onion Knight.

Justice will be served, and the thought alone satisfied him greatly.

...at least, that was what he initially thought.

Within the depths of his sub-consciousness, Warrior of Light came to realise that an aspect of the trial was bothering him. It was as though there was an anomaly; an occurrence during the trial that seemed unfinished.

At first, he considered the 'vortex incident' to be the issue, still clueless as to why it appeared before them from out of nowhere. Headmistress Cosmos' ignorance on its existence had not helped the situation either, causing him to question how the vortex came into existence in the first place.

However, Warrior of Light ultimately decided to discard its relevance to the court trial for the time being, believing that the Headmistress had a justifiable reason to dispel it from the court and ignore its existence.

So, discarding that event ... what else was there that could be considered an 'anomaly'?

Warrior of Light recollected the events of the trial, starting off from the moment it commenced and proceeding up until the end of Cecil's Witness Testimony. Considering there was already an ungodly

amount of information he had to take in during the case, it was unbearably difficult to micro-navigate through his memories just to find the reason for his uncertainty.

His brows began to furrow and body fidgeting on the spot, Warrior of Light felt as though he was spiralling into psychological chaos. And yet, he refused to throw the doubt aside, believing that any cracks in his mind-set was guaranteed to be used against him during the final leg of the court trail. Just the thought of seeing Onion Knight's smug grin sent him into overdrive, adamant that the anomaly existed.

And then, within the deepest, darkest pits of his thoughts ... was a voice.

...Is Zidane truly the culprit?

Warrior of Light shook his head immediately, swiftly glancing around to see if the question originated from any of the nearby students – assuming it emerged in one of their many conversations.

However, as he checked all directions, not one person was nearby or calling out to him.

“Fantastic ... I'm now hearing things.” He quietly murmured with a tired sigh.

Returning to his thoughts, he decided to reflect on the specific events revolving around Cecil Harvey's testimony. When compared to the other testimonies given throughout both trials, Cecil's was certainly the shortest.

Granted, the reason it was cut so short was due to Warrior of Light's own impatience – that he would undeniably admit. However, if the testimony had continued as to Onion Knight's insistence, it would end up becoming a never-ending loop of bluffing and reaching for a hint of contradiction.

Such a thought irritated Warrior of Light beyond the edge of his sanity, so much so that veins began to pop out of his forehead without him even realising it.

Focus ... Focus...!

Slapping his own cheeks, Warrior of Light was conscious not to let his thoughts drift from the main topic.

He reflected on the testimony Cecil had described to the court, analysing each sentence running through his head just as Onion Knight had done during the trial. Of course, just as Onion Knight had found during his cross-examination, the only aspect of the testimony that was questionable was the lack of the possible 'third entity'.

And yet, all the evidence shown by Onion Knight's hand was barely enough to back such a ridiculous conspiracy.

Heh ... Onion Knight was certainly in over his head. Warrior of Light smirked in hidden amusement, finding it surprising he lasted so long in convincing the court that there was a 'second culprit' from the beginning. *I swear, that whole 'child prodigy' aspect to him I just a façade.*

At this point, Warrior of Light was close to brushing the thought of an 'anomaly' aside by concluding that it was just anxiety playing on his mind.

...And yet, there was no evidence to confirm the dismissal of the 'second culprit'.

“There is plenty...” Warrior of Light murmured underneath his breath, arguing with the mysterious voice that loomed. “Any possibly of a third entity died when Celes was found tampering with evidence. There's no doubt ... Zidane is all but confirmed Guilty at this point.”

If Cecil continued his second testimony, would you continue to claim such a-?

The looming voice was suddenly cut off.

“You wished to speak to me?” A monotoned, bored-like abruptly voice murmured as a silhouette of a male student stood over the pondering Warrior of Light.

Warrior of Light immediately straightened up, “Ah! I was wondering when you would show.”

He swiftly took to his feet, facing the person before him with a confident grin. He completely blanked the looming voice that questioned his stance, purposely acting oblivious.

Even so ... he could never fully extinguish the voice of his growing doubts.

“Is there a problem?” The silhouette then muttered in question, crossing his arms.

Taking his usual formal posture and firm expression, Warrior of Light met eyes with the student before him.

“Nothing for you to be concerned about.” He then grinned, “We just need to go over your upcoming Witness Testimonies one more time ... that’s all.”

Meanwhile...

Far up on the 5th Floor of the Academy, Onion Knight sat on the floor of Lab Room 1 with his back against wall. Beside him was the corner cupboard where he had initially found the Damaged Blazer, the cupboard door loosely hanging open by its hinges. Directly above his head was a pulled-out window, allowing him to just about hear the various gossips and debates being made by the students. Outside, it was as lively as ever.

However, inside this room, everything felt like it was frozen in time.

Onion Knight’s eyes were lifeless, barely focusing on anything that was in view. His body refused to move from his place, knowing whatever he did now would be pointless. He feared the thought of leaving the room entirely, hoping the inevitability of losing the court case would never arrive. If he could, he would just stay frozen in place and wait for the entire situation to blow over.

The despair of failure hung over his head, sucking away any hope of turning the tables in his favour during the last leg of the court trial.

He had failed Zidane.

He had failed Terra.

He had failed Headmistress Cosmos.

And ... he had failed himself.

Creak...!

Hearing the Lab’s door gradually open in the distance, Onion Knight peered up with a half-hearted gaze. He watched as the person who entered the room silently stepped over to him, wondering how this person was able to find him up here. Regardless, he kept his mouth sealed, believing he had no right to ask.

The person approached Onion Knight from the side, placing their back against the wall and carefully slid down to his level.

Now sitting side-by-side, the two stared blankly off into the distance in momentary silence.

Finally deciding to break the awkward tension, the person – Zidane – turned to Onion Knight with a grave expression.

“No luck?” He asked with a dry smile, no hope in his tone whatsoever.

“Heh...! How could you tell?” Onion Knight motionlessly chuckled as a response, attempting to show some amusement in his own anguish.

“Just a hunch.” Zidane muttered with a light shrug, showing off a brief grin.

There was another pause, both struggling to find the right words in this situation. They took a moment to listen to the student conversations that were in earshot of the window – although, based on what they heard, it wasn’t exactly help heal their struggling mental states.

Finally, Onion Knight let out a depressed sigh.

“You probably would have had a better outcome ... if someone more qualified was representing you in the court trial.” He solemnly murmured in honesty, deciding it best to express what was going through his mind.

Zidane glanced at Onion Knight, before letting out a sigh of his own, “If you’re trying to read my mind, you’re doing a very poor job.”

Onion Knight abruptly twitched upon hearing such an unexpected rebuttal, glancing back at Zidane with a confused expression.

“I’ve always been marked as a thief, as a mischief-maker, as a scumbag, you name it.” Zidane continued, reflecting on his past actions. “Regardless of who would want to defend me, most would likely give up before the first day ended. I mean, who would want to defend someone as notorious as me? Just give me the guilty verdict and be done with it already!”

As he spoke, Onion Knight immediately thought of Warrior of Light’s antagonistic approach to the

case.

“And then, there’s you.” Zidane then stated firmly, showing pride in what he had to say. “You knew about my notoriety way before you were tasked to Defend me, but you accepted anyway. When I heard about it, I thought, ‘You must’ve lost your mind!’ When it came to the trials, there were so many times where I expected you to give up ... but, somehow, you were able to overcome the obstacles no matter the difficulty.”

Onion Knight’s shoulders relaxed, staring wide-eyed at Zidane as he was left completely speechless by the defendant’s kind words.

“You know: maybe there are people out there who’s better suited for this.” Zidane then concluded with an honest, upbeat grin, “But, I know for certain ... they would’ve never gotten as far as you, Onion Knight.”

“Zidane, I...” Onion Knight attempted to retort, only for the words to not come out of his mouth. However, before Onion Knight could find the words, Zidane leapt back to his feet in one fluid motion. Onion Knight hastily did the same, his knees almost giving out as he rose due to how long he had spent on the floor.

“Welp, I’ve said my piece.” Zidane shrugged nonchalantly, placing his hands behind his head as his golden monkey-tail freely swished back-and-forth. “We’re still not finished yet, dude. So, don’t go giving up on me just yet ... please.”

“R-right...!” Onion Knight stuttered with a nod, before finally expressing the words he had struggled to express. “Zidane, thank you.”

“Heh-heh-heh! Don’t mention it.” Zidane then chuckled in his usual, playful manner. “Besides, after all of this is over, I’ll be the one thanking you.”

With that, he made his way out of the door without another word, leaving Onion Knight alone on the Lab Room. Onion Knight watched on with renewed determination, his posture strong and his eyes now focused on his role as Defence.

As Zidane left the room, Onion Knight turned to the open cupboard on his right, deep in thought. *Question is: how am I going to convince the court of Zidane’s innocence without the Damaged Blazer?*

Even with the words of encouragement, Onion Knight still could not shake off the dilemma that haunted him. If the Blazer had not gone missing in the first place, he would already be planning his next moves for the final part of the trial.

He knew the exact identity of the Final Witness. However, without the Blazer in his procession, the likelihood of Onion Knight in winning the trial would be next-to-nil. With time running out, he was a standstill.

What do I do...?

“Onion Knight, there you are!” A voice abruptly called out to him, causing him to leap out of his skin in fright. “I’ve been looking everywhere!”

His heart racing, Onion Knight snapped towards the direction of the unexpected – yet familiar – voice. “Terra!?” He blurted out in surprise, taken aback by her unexpected – and somewhat well-timed – entrance.

Her breaths heavy and body slouched against the door of the Lab Room in exhaustion, it was clear as day that she had meant what she said. Seeing her in such dire shape, Onion Knight quickly approached her so that he could support her.

And then, as she came more into view, he froze on the spot.

“Huh? Onion Knight, is something the matter?” Terra worriedly asked, noticing his odd reaction.

Onion Knight’s eyes widened, his body tense and mouth agape. He staggered forward, wondering if he was being deceived by his own gaze. In response, Terra cautiously shuffled back, oblivious as to why he was acting weirdly out-of-character.

“You...” He murmured in a low voice, his glare piercing into Terra.

“Onion Knight, your freaking me out.” Terra responded in terror, beginning to believe he was being

possessed.

Placing his hands on her shoulders, Onion Knight's eyes lit like a reignited flame ... and erupted with rage.

"YOU HAD IT ALL ALONG!?"

She let out a light, confused squeak, "...Eh?"

"THE BLAZER!" He yelled out at the top of his lungs, indicating to what she was carrying with her.

"THE BLAZER IN YOUR ARMS!"

Terra let out a sudden gasp of realisation.

"Do you realise the troubles I went through believing I had lost it!?" He continued on maniacally. "I could have lost the entire case!"

"Ah! I – I'm ... I'm so sorry, Onion Knight!" She wholeheartedly expressed in stutter, her entire body trembling. "I realised you left this back here when I found Celes. I wanted to get it back to you before it was too late, but...!"

She couldn't finish her explanation, feeling as though she had no right to make excuses. Falling silent, she hesitantly hugged the Damaged Blazer in her arms, waiting to be lectured by Onion Knight on her incompetence.

However, the subject wasn't on Onion Knight's mind whatsoever, instead...

"Thank you." He quietly muttered as he lowered his head, letting out a sigh of relief. "Thank you for remembering it, Terra."

The unexpected sentiment of gratitude left Terra speechless, her mouth left open as she struggled to form the words for a response.

Onion Knight glanced up as he noticed her frozen reaction, "Huh? What's with the troubled look?"

"Ah! N-Nothing! ... It's nothing." Terra hastily answered, only to fall into hesitation.

Completely oblivious to her uncharacteristic reaction, Onion Knight returned to focus on the Blazer now back in his possession, his emotions becoming ecstatic at the thought that there could still be a chance to turn the case back in his favour. All he needed now was to plan his next moves.

Without a moment to lose, he swiftly took the Blazer from Terra's arms and placed it on the Lab table nearest to them. With its sleeves and fabric spread out across the table surface, the two took no time to thoroughly begin analysis the damaged piece of uniform.

"Onion Knight, I thought you'd already analysed the Blazer." Terra briefly reflected, wondering if it was necessary to go over the evidence for a second time.

"To an extent." Onion Knight admitted in a low voice, as though he regretted not fulfilling the initial investigation. "Before I was rudely interrupted by our prosecutor in shining armour, I was only able to search its pockets."

As he explained, he picked out an object from the depths of his pocket, observing it from the pinch of his finger and thumb. Terra's eyes widened at the sight of the object as it dangled into view, recognising it in an instant.

"Isn't that a-!?"

"Lion's Head Keychain." Onion Knight finished her sentence, holding it up high in the air. "I don't think I even need to inform you as to who this belongs to."

"Yeah, but ... why do you have it?" Terra then questioned, acting somewhat confused to the entire ordeal.

"It's evidence to the case." Onion Knight answered in truth, turning to her to show his honesty. "At first, I thought it would work as a separate piece of evidence during the court trial. However, I soon realised it wouldn't make as much of an impact unless it is paired with its original companion."

Without further ado, he slipped the Keychain back into the lower left pocket.

"Onion Knight!?" Terra gasped out in horror, bewildered by such a reckless decision. "You can't do that!"

"Hm? What do you mean?" Onion Knight glanced back with an oblivious gaze, taken back by the unexpected overreaction.

“You’re doing exactly what got Celes into trouble in the first place! You know ... ‘tampering with the evidence!’?” She continued to express, her face taken with fear and anxiety. “Warrior of Light won’t hesitate to chew you out in court!”

She expected Onion Knight to regret his choice, only to be met with an unsuspecting subtle grin.

“I know that ... and that’s why I’m doing it.” Onion Knight exclaimed with a nod, showing confidence in his decision. “If Warrior of Light catches wind that I initially removed the Keychain from the Blazer, we’ll lose the remaining amount of influence we have on the case.”

Terra held her tongue, struggling to hold back her complaints yet could see that Onion Knight was well prepared for the possible consequences. She was cautious as to how he would resolve the issue, however assumed it best to trust him.

The two proceeded with the examination, looking over the extent of the damaged uniform whilst there was still time on their side. They rechecked the remaining pockets – even though Onion Knight was fully aware of their contents. They then checked over the inside material, including the name tag that Onion Knight initially found as blank.

“Nothing.” Onion Knight groaned out in conclusion, almost ripping out the tag in growing anger. “No matter how I look at it ... it’s always blank.”

Terra continued to stare over the Blazer’s tag, feeling somewhat unsure by Onion Knight’s conclusion. She was left deep in thought, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her as she scanned the small extension of blank-white material.

“Terra, there’s no point in searching for something that isn’t there.” Onion Knight then suggested to her, noticing her silent gaze. “And besides, we best finish up here before the break ends.”

“But ... there is something.” Terra firmly denied, shaking her head. “It’s almost impossible to see from the naked eye, but if you look at it closely ... it’s there.”

Complying to her suggesting, Onion Knight took one last look at the tag, his eyes squinting hard as he was desperate to find a hint of ink or tampering on the blank piece of material.

In his mind, he had a cast of doubt in the legitimacy of Terra’s statement. He wanted to believe her words, and yet he struggled to find any signs of proof that helped her claim.

He was about to give up ... when he finally noticed a faint line creased into the material.

A beaming grin broke through Onion Knight, gradually regaining faith in his intuitions.

“Well, Terra. It seems you were right on the money.” He lightly chuckled, holding up the tag closer to his gaze. “Now, to figure out the name...”

“It looks like the first letter is a ‘C’.” Terra deduced in an instant, confident in her sights.

“Maybe...” Onion Knight murmured in thought, considering the possibility. “Or, it could be part of a letter. I reckon it’s an ‘S’.”

“You ‘reckon’...?” Terra echoed in uncertainty. “Do you see the ‘S’ with your own eyes? Or, is that the letter you *wish* was displayed on the tag?”

“What are you suggesting, Terra?” Onion Knight questioned back defensively, as though hurt by such concerns. “You should know me enough by now. I’m not one to throw around baseless opinions and undisputed facts. I only state the absolute truth, for that’s the code of a genius.”

Falling back due to hesitancy, Terra chose not to pursue her looming concerns in belief that Onion Knight would make the right choice.

“Fine, I’ll say no more on the matter.” She mumbled quietly, showing her obedience in his statement. “Just ... promise me one thing: Please, don’t let your personal biases drive your resolve.” Onion Knight stared back at her with a visibly confused expression, unsure as to what she was implying.

However, after a moment of thought, he nodded in acceptance.

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of falling for the same mistakes as Warrior of Light.” He waved off with playful amusement, hoping to dispel any of Terra’s worries. “All that matters to me is finding the truth ... and securing Zidane with the *innocent* verdict.”

Letting her shoulders soften, Terra gave out a single not in response.

And then, her body jolted at a sudden realisation, immediately searching through her pockets as she remembered the 'other' item she had found.

"What are you doing?" Onion Knight questioned curiously, wondering why she suddenly started acting strangely.

"I ... I mean, Celes and I ... found something earlier...!" She hastily attempted to explain as she continued to fiddle her pockets. "AH! Here it is!"

Without a moment's hesitation, she held out a small clear pouch.

"Where did you find it?" Onion Knight requested, his expression switching to serious as he took the pouch from Terra's palm. "And ... what is it?"

"It was found in the cupboard where the Blazer was stashed." Terra answered in a rush, fully aware of its importance to the case. "It's a-!"

Drring-Drring-Drring...!

"Students of Dissidia Academy!" A quirky female voice abruptly called out through the Lab Room's intercom. *"Please return to the Theatre Hall ASAP! The Final leg of the Trial will soon commence!"*

Glancing up at the intercom, Onion Knight muttered out underneath his breath.

"...Time's up."

The intercom announcement continued.

"{Oh Crap! That means me too!} Err – Will see you all there! Heh-heh...!" The voice concluded in haste, before leaving the mic on as she raced out of the room. *"{Crap! Crap! Crap...!}"*

Step-step-step-step...!

...CRASH!

"GAAAH! I STUBBED MY TOE!!!"

BEEP!

The transmission ended.

"Eh-heh-heh...! Prisha sure is the life of the party, isn't she?" Terra commented as she awkwardly giggled, unsure as to whether she found Prisha's quirky display amusing or embarrassing.

"Let's just say that there's a unique 'charm' to her character." Onion Knight murmured back with crossed arms, before switching back to serious mode. "Come, Terra! We best make haste!"

"Wha-!? Wait! Onion Knight!" Terra yelled out as she noticed him sprint off without warning.

However, it was too late.

He had already sped through the door.

"Oh great..." Terra muttered as she let out a bothersome sigh, snatching up the Damaged Blazer and racing off to catch up to him. "Onion Knight! Wait up! You forgot the Blazer AGAIN!"

Theatre Hall, Behind the Stage Curtain...

Zidane sat on hidden away on a single chair, his hands and legs fidgeting on the spot as he restlessly awaited Onion Knight and Terra to show up. His breaths were hasty, his eyes darting from one direction to the other, and his mind running frantic with thoughts of dread and despair.

He was an erratic mess.

The tough front Zidane presented as he reassured Onion Knight was just an act. On the outside, he was his usual confident, fun self with the drive to enjoy life to its fullest. However, on the inside, he was a cowering child with no idea on how his future will turn out after this trial finally concludes.

Will he be found Innocent? Or Guilty?

It had been a long journey of hardship for him.

His future rests on the hands of his Defence and fellow classmate, and no matter the conclusion ... will always be grateful to the boy.

Speaking of whom ... WHERE IS HE!?

Zidane was driven close to insanity waiting for Onion Knight to make an appearance, feeling the hostile aura of Warrior of Light gradually closing on him. He felt nauseous, desperately holding back the temptation to throw up and faint. He could hear the time ticking on, counting down the time to his

impending doom.

This was it ... it was over for him.

“Phwah! Made it in time!” Onion Knight blurted out as he burst through the curtains. “I swear, this Academy needs elevators!”

Noticing Onion Knight enter the scene, Zidane instantly rose to his feet and stepped towards him. His face hidden within the bangs of his hair and his breaths fallen silent.

“Ah-hah! Zidane, there you are!” Onion Knight called to him, beaming with heightened confidence. “Are you ready for-!”

Just then, as Onion Knight was finishing his question, Zidane grabbed hold of his collar.

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, ONION KNIGHT!?” He roared manically, shaking the off-guard Onion Knight back and forth. “Seriously, dude! I’ve been waiting forever hoping you would turn up! I don’t think I could have lasted another minute with Warrior of Light’s death stare!”

The two briefly switched sights in a snap, noticing a silent Warrior of Light as he stood far off in the distance. His gaze was horrifying, glaring back at them with the intent of humiliating the two once the final leg of the trial commences.

He was like a carved statue, awaiting the inevitable to finally arrive and dispose of the accused.

“SEE WHAT I MEAN!?” Zidane then expressed wildly, his panicking reaching overdrive.

“O-ok. I get it. Just please. Let go. Zidane!” Onion Knight hastily plead, dizziness gradually kicking in as he was thrown back and forth on the spot.

Finally, Zidane released Onion Knight from his erratic clutches, his breaths irregular and loss of rationality. Quickly fixing his ruffled uniform, Onion Knight held his composure in front of his defendant.

During this time, Terra slipped through the break in the curtains, the damaged Blazer in hand.

“*Phew...!* Could we bring up the fact that this Academy is in desperate need of elevators?” She pointed out as she desperately tried to regain her breath.

“After this all ends ... I’ll be giving Headmistress Cosmos a piece of my mind.” Onion Knight declared, feeling a mandatory meeting will be required regarding the ‘Elevator crisis’.

Placing the subject of elevators in the back of his mind, he swiftly returned to the main topic.

“Rest assured, Zidane.” He stated in confidence, turning to his defendant with a renewed sense of resolve. “I’ll secure that ‘Innocent’ verdict, no matter the cost.”

Zidane met eyes with Onion Knight as he continued, gradually forcing his mind to settle as he listened to the boy’s words.

“You gave me the strength to see this trial through when we spoke in the Lab Room, and for that: I am most grateful.” Onion Knight nodded with certainty, his confidence at an all-time high. “I promise you, your faith in me will not be in vain.”

Hearing this, Zidane’s eyes lightened, the panic and anxiety in his mind finally subdued. The sense of warmed and certainty was drowning out the fear and doubt, convincing him that his future was in safe hands.

However, a looming shadow stepped up behind the trio, towering over them with a condescending glare.

“Convince me.”

Onion Knight, Terra, and Zidane all switched to face the approaching presence, their bodies tensioned and gaze holding strong as they faced the student before them.

“Do you mind repeating that, Warrior of Light?” Onion Knight requested as he held a cautious stance, his expression tensioned at the sight of his opponent.

“I want you ... to convince me of Zidane’s innocence.” He repeated with a low, formal tone, showing no emotion in his words. “That is all.”

With that, he turned and stepped through the break of the stage curtains, heading over to the Prosecution Stand with a powerful stride.

The three watched on, completely frozen in position as they took a moment to process what had just

occurred. At first, they thought their minds were playing tricks on them, finding Warrior of Light's words completely out of left field.

And then, as the cogs in the minds gradually began to turn once more, they began to wonder why Warrior of Light would state such an uncharacteristic notion to his opponents.

Was it to do with conflicting emotions? Or, was he deliberately throwing them off their A-game? "What are you up to?" Onion Knight murmured underneath his breath, wishing he could see what was going through Warrior of Light's head.

There was a moment of silence, the time to take the stage dawning upon the three. Drawing a deep breath, Onion Knight stepped forward towards the curtain break. He was very much aware of what he would soon face and knew that what may transpire could break the bonds between friends and classmates.

He had no choice, whatever second thoughts that may still loom within him had soon dissipated. His mind set, his resolve firm, and his confidence strong: it was time to face the Final Witness.

"Good Luck, Onion Knight." Zidane called to him with a firm expression.

Just as Onion Knight reached the curtain, he halted. Terra, who was close behind him, abruptly stopped herself in realisation that she would topple over him.

"Zidane, just be aware..." Onion Knight warned as he peered over, his eyes focused solely on the matter at hand. "You may be required to take the stand."

Zidane froze upon hearing his warning, realising the possibility had not occurred to him.

Leaving it at that, Onion Knight left Zidane in his own thoughts as he stepped through the curtain break and onto the stage.

Theatre Hall, Court Stage...

"The Prosecution is ready, Your Honour!" Warrior of Light announced in his formal tone, his posture as tall and proud as ever.

"The Defence is also ready, Your Honour!" Onion Knight proudly announced in response, eyes focused solely on the trial set before him.

"So be it." The High Judge Gabranth nodded, his booming voice echoing throughout the Hall.

"Ooh, ooh! The Bailiff is ready, Your Honour!" Priske then jumped in, her fist clenched and eyes emulating flames as her excitement consumed her.

The entire court was silent, all eyes on her with confusion and curiosity.

"Bailiff..." Gabranth lowly murmured, glaring down on Priske with disapproval.

"Oh, come on, Judge! I've been dying to say it at least ONCE through this damn trial!" She complained back, throwing her arms up in protest. "At least let me have this!"

Donk!

Onion Knight, Warrior of Light, and the rest of the court winced as they witnessed the gavel whack Priske on the centre of her head.

"You shall not speak unless I deem it necessary." Gabranth informed mercilessly, showing no sympathy for the quirky Elvaan Girl.

"Tsk...! Killjoy." Priske quietly muttered back in a pout, rubbing her head and pained tears seeped from her eyes.

"What was that?" Gabranth glared with his dagger-like glare, preparing the gavel for another round.

"Urk-! N-nothing, Your Honour!" She hastily responded, straightening herself up as she awaited instructions. "I apologise for my ... outburst."

"Well then, without further ado..." The High Judge then sighed, switching over to face Warrior of Light's position. "Prosecution, you may proceed."

Upon hearing Gabranth call upon him, Warrior of Light nodded back with a subtle smirk.

"Yes, Your Honour." He answered formally, eager to battle. "I call upon my Final Witness to take the stand!"

As he announced to the court at the top of his voice, the entire room was suddenly filled with a cloud

of dread. Amongst the crowd of students sitting in the audience, a lone figure rose from his chair. The students – including the student's classmates – watched on in gasps of shock, completely unaware that this student was a witness to the case. They could not believe they would witness such a betrayal, anticipating what events could unfold throughout the climax of the trial.

The student stepped out from the seating area and towards the Witness Stand, the atmosphere engulfed in the dread and severity of the situation.

Onion Knight watched the student take to the stand, his expression tensioned as he anticipated this development. He had awaited this very moment, refusing to falter even if it was his fellow classmate. His goal was to defend Zidane at all costs ... even if it meant breaking apart a years-long friendship between two classmates.

Zidane felt his spine shiver as he saw his long-time friend face the court as his opposition, sadness and dread suffocating him. He never wished for this to happen, desperately hoping there was any other way.

Finally, sitting amongst his fellow classmates, was the horrified Bartz. He refused to believe his eyes, knowing there was no way his friend would turn against Zidane. In his mind, he wondered if he was witnessing a nightmare, pinching his arm in hope that he would soon wake up.

However, he realised that this was reality.

And so, for the first time in his life, Bartz felt broken and betrayed.

"Witness, please that your name and Academy status to the court." Warrior of Light requested, showing off a dark smile as he watched the chaos of the audience unfold.

Here we go...

Onion Knight placed both hands on the surface of the Defence Stand, prepared to everything that was about to be thrown at him.

The student, with his uncaring eyes directed to the court, introduced himself.

"My name ... is Squall Leonhart."

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“Wait a minute ... Isn’t that the guy you bumped into the other day?” A female student in the crowd pointed out to her friend beside her, recognising Squall as he stepped up to the stage. “Squall ... Right?”

“Yeah...” The other female student responded in a soundless murmur; her eyes fixated on Squall as she struggled to find her words. “...That’s him.”

As Squall took the Witness Stand, he felt an abrupt shiver crawl up his spine. The feeling of the entire audience peering down on him grew overwhelming, believing this centre of attention to be bothersome and unwarranted.

Ultimately, he waved off the inconvenience, thinking nothing of those behind him as he focused on the Court Trial.

“Hey, Rinoa.” The initial female student quietly muttered as she nudged her friend, her body restless as heightened anticipation overtook her. “Do you think we should call out to him? Maybe he’ll recognise us!”

“Wha-!?! Selphie, no!” The other female student – Rinoa Heartilly – hastily hushed her friend, her eyes wavering as she felt conscious of the audience around her. “We’ll get kicked out if we do that!”

“Awh! You’re no fun!” The initial female student – Selphie Tilmitt – disappointingly booed back, crossing her arms as she continued to watch the Trial.

Rinoa sighed at her hyperactive tomboy of a friend, finding her personality a handful at times.

As she switched back to watching the Trial, she remembered her previous encounter with Squall.

Their conversation was unfortunately brief, yet the aura of mystery surrounding him left her intrigued. For some unknown reason, she wanted to know more about him as a person.

She could feel an abundance of feelings and emotions bottled up within him, locked away in a psychological cage as he continued to show off his cold, unwelcoming exterior.

In her mind, Rinoa related him to a bird trapped in a cage, praying to be set free from the restraining shackles placed upon him – only to have those prayers bluntly ignored by the society around him.

(Maybe I’m just overthinking it...)

As she whisked away her wondering thoughts, her gaze veered to the audience around her – curious as to their various reactions.

They were what she expected: shock; excitement; anticipation; and curiosity.

However, she then caught a glance of an individual.

She leaned forward on her seat to gain a clearer view, believing her eyes were not deceiving her.

“Hey ... Selphie?” She murmured to her friend as her eyes continued to stare at the student. “Do you see that guy?”

Selphie glanced over upon hearing her name, “Hm? Oh, yeah! Isn’t he in the same class as Squall?”

“Yeah...” Rinoa nodded vacantly. “But ... why does he look so sad?”

Further along the row of seats from them was Bartz Klauser.

He continued to stare at the events unfolding on the stage, his expression filled with distraught and heartache.

Meanwhile, on the Theatre Stage...

“My name ... is Squall Leonhart.”

Squall’s voice echoed throughout the Hall as he introduced himself, his expression as cold and firm as stone.

Every member of the court watched on in silence, all intimidated by Squall's overall presence. Even on stage, members of the court were tense, unsure how to approach the irritable student without feeling judged by their actions.

Onion Knight stood as firm as a statue, refusing to waver as he set his sights on his moody classmate. He felt that all the preparation and endurance of the trials had led up to that very moment, believing they were destined to face each other eventually.

With everything he had at his disposal, Onion Knight was certain he had enough evidence to prove Zidane's innocence *and* Squall's guilt in the process.

All he had to do was play his cards right.

"Squall ... Leonhart."

The High-Judge Gabranth was heard muttering from his seat, glaring down upon the new witness with a judging gaze.

"Please answer the Prosecution's second ques- Guh!?"

Gabranth was then caught off-guard by Squall as he shot a returning glare in the High-Judge's direction, the student's piercing eyes locked directly at him.

"Just get on with it already." Squall commanded in his careless tone, scoffing at the pointless question.

"What the-!?" Priske then reacted in bafflement, taken aback by the student's disrespect. "Hey! You have no right to speak to the *High-Judge Gabranth* like-!"

"Shut it, Long-ears." Squall then retorted, interrupting the Elvaan girl mid-sentence.

"Eh...? '*Long-ears*'!?"

In that moment, Priske's emotions elevated from shock to fury, storming up to the Witness Stand with fists clenched and veins popping from her forehead.

Squall watched her violent approach, expressing no signs of reaction nor retaliation to her outburst.

"You know what: SCREW YOU! I'm gonna deck you *so hard* that you'll end up sucking your own-!"

However, just before she could land a strike, she was restrained by a sudden force from behind. She felt a pair of arms lock over her shoulders as she was dragged away from the Witness Stand against her will.

She then noticed that the Prosecution Stand was empty.

"That's enough, Priske!" Warrior of Light yelled hastily, forcing every ounce of strength in his body to restrain the Elveen girl. "Please refrain from assaulting the witness!"

"Don't get in my way, Light!" Priske argued back with her arms flailing and legs kicking out. "This A-hole's been asking for a *boot to the head* ever since he dropped from his mother's womb!"

"I-it's not worth the hassle!" Warrior of Light responded in his struggle, realising harrowingly how resilient Priske was when stuck in a conflict of raw strength. "He's just a little ... blunt."

"Oh-hoh...! '*Blunt*', you say?" Priske then chortled, scoffing at the poor excuse as she continued to thrash around in protest. "His mouth won't be the only thing that's '*blunt*' after I'M THROUGH WITH HIM!"

Without Warrior of Light realising, Priske had loosened her boot instinctively.

WHAM!

"Oof!"

"HA-HAH! DIRECT HIT!"

Priske threw her arms up in celebrated joy as she flung her boot at the unsuspecting Squall, causing him to stumble as the boot struck him directly in the left eye.

"Serves you right, you heartless *Son-of-a-B*!"

Bang-bang-BANG!!!

"ORDER! I WILL HAVE ORDER!" Gabranth bellowed in command, towering up from his seat and he struck his gavel. "I will NOT allow senseless violence to escalate in my courtroom!"

After that, an emergency *2-Minute* recess was swiftly called.

After a brief pause...

“Our bailiff would like to say a few words to the court.” High-Judge Gabranth announced in an unimpressed tone, his patience on edge.

Standing beside the Judge’s Podium was a reluctant Prishe, fidgeting awkwardly as she felt numerous pairs of eyes bearing down upon her.

She then murmured underneath her breath.

“I’m ... ‘orry...”

“Louder.” Gabranth demanded firmly.

“I’m sorry! I crossed the line and abused my position as bailiff!” Prishe then yelled out, overwhelmed with humiliation. “Can we move on now?!”

Gabranth gave a single nod, shifting his attention to the Witness Stand.

“Is that an acceptable apology, Mr Leonhart?”

Squall Leonhart stood idle on the Witness Stand with an icepack pressed over his left eye, the piercing glare of his remaining eye staring at the two with an apathetic expression.

“Denied.”

Prishe snapped immediately.

“DO YOU WANT ANOTHER BLACK-EYE?!”

“PRISHE!”

Gabranth bellowed at his bailiff, disgusted by her attitude and lack of etiquette.

“Tsk...!”

Prishe yielded bitterly, growling underneath her breath.

The High-Judge sighed out, soothing his temple as he returned focus to the court trial.

The audience watched on with blank expressions, many struggling to process the event whilst others were still shocked over the unexpected outburst.

However, amongst the shock and discomfort was one individual chortling away without a card in the world.

“BWA-HAHAHAHAHAA...!!! CHAOS!!! ABSOLUTE CHAOS!!!”

It was Kefla, exploding in fits of laughter after witnessing the ordeal.

“I’m in heaven!”

WHAM!

““WILL YOU SHUT UP ALREADY!””

Either side of the laughing clown was Conductor Kuja and Professor Ultimecia, both reacting to Kefka’s manic cackles with a synchronised chop to his cranium. Kefka slumped back against his seat, left in a complete daze.

“...Eh-hehehehee...”

Watching the crowd’s reactions and commotions from the stage, Terra felt a combination of anxiety and second-hand embarrassment.

(Why will this nightmare end...?)

Finally, the High-Judge Gabranth announced to the court, acting at the end of his rope.

“Please. Continue.”

“Yes, Your Honour.” Warrior of Light accepted with a sigh, deciding to answer for his witness and fellow classmate. “Squall Leonhart is another member of Class 13A. Whilst I have no record of any preferred extra-curricular activity, I can confirm that he has a significant link to case – specifically to our *notorious* Defendant.”

“Please elaborate to the court, Prosecution.” Gabranth then requested, straightening his posture against his seat.

“I’ll have the *man* himself answer this request, Your Honour.” Warrior of Light answered, passing over to his antisocial witness. “Squall, please reveal to the court of your affiliation with the Defendant.”

At first, Squall was as silent and condescending as ever, his arms crossed whilst returning a deathly glare – causing Onion Knight to roll his eyes.

However, an inaudible sigh escaped Squall's breath.

Onion Knight leaned forward in piqued interest, ensuring every word and detail from the stubborn witness is documented.

"He's my..." Squall murmured hesitantly, choosing his words carefully as he lowered his gaze.

Various members of the court perked up in curiosity, wondering how Squall considered his relationship with Zidane and Bartz as a trio. Two notable students were staring intensely, perched on the edge of their seats as they anticipated Squall's words.

For Zidane and Bartz, they felt like the next words were their lifelines.

Squall grumbled as he answered.

"He's just an acquaintance."

Fwoosh...!

In that instant, Zidane and Bartz sunk back in their seats, their faces turned pale as they struggled to process the context behind his blunt words.

(After all the years we've known each other, he only sees us as 'acquaintances'...?)

"...Fine." Warrior of Light nodded in confirmation, holding a stoic posture as he proceeded. "And, for the record: this also means you're also somewhat affiliated with his friend and partner in crime ...

Bartz Klauser?"

Squall nodded.

"Yes. He's also just an acquaintance."

Every word was a stab to the heart for the two classmates, feeling as though their once-unbreakable bonds were ripped from their bodies. They were lifeless in their seats, unable to focus on the trial before them.

Both Onion Knight and Terra noticed their reactions, feeling empathetic of their unfortunate revelation.

"So be it." Warrior of Light muttered with a stoic expression, preferring not to meddle with the melodrama. "I'd rather avoid wasting anymore of the court's time, so let's-!"

"Wait."

Before Warrior of Light could finish his statement, Squall interjected in abrupt haste.

Taken aback by the unexpected interruption, Warrior of Light switched back to the cynical witness with an irritated gaze.

"...Yes, Squall."

"As someone who knows the defendant personally, I want to add my opinion on this whole ... headache." Squall requested with a sigh, feeling as though he had to speak his mind.

Warrior of Light nodded, "Go ahead."

Before Squall proceeded, he glanced over to Zidane.

Even though he was barely focused on the trial at this point, the disheartened Zidane met eyes with Squall.

There was silence between them, acting as though they were attempting to read each other's thoughts. Zidane sat up on his seat with a hint of renewed hope, praying that Squall's antagonistic tone was just a mere ruse to satisfy the audience.

Unfortunately, reality was cruel.

"Zidane is Guilty."

Zidane's eyes widened in horror, Squall's damning words echoing through his mind.

"No matter how anyone spins it ... this entire fiasco was inevitable." Squall stated in a loud, clear voice, his gaze locked onto the defendant with unwavering eyes. "Zidane continued to pull his pranks and tricks believing his was invulnerable. He showed no remorse for his many victims, only laughing at their expense."

Zidane shrivelled up in his seat, covering his ears as he attempted to block

“It makes me happy ... to see him finally face the consequences of his actions.” Squall concluded with an emotionless expression, his lifeless eyes staring down Zidane like daggers piercing their target.

And just like that, Zidane’s heart shattered.

He was a lifeless shell, unable to rationalise Squall’s comments as the betrayal clouded his mind. He wondered if the vast memories of Squall joining him during his pranks were simply fabrications created from his imagination, yet he was certain that they were real.

Even though he was aware that his pranks on people bothered Squall, he always felt that his friend was at least tolerant in following through with the plans – even when it was only to keep Zidane grounded in his lofty ambitions.

(When did he change his tune...?)

Watching the emotional devastation between the two former friends from his Defence stand, Onion Knight clenched his fists against the table surface – feeling he was close to losing his composure.

“Onion Knight...” Terra murmured cautiously, noticing her friend’s reaction from the corner of her eye.

“Terra let’s give Squall the reality-check he deserves.” Onion Knight growled resentfully, overwhelmed with fury and determination.

Initially shocked by Onion Knight’s declaration, Terra nodded to him with equal determination – committed to prove Zidane’s innocence once-and-for-all.

“I think I’ve heard enough teenage melodrama for an eternity...” The High-Judge Gabranth groaned, rubbing his temple before proceeding with the trial. “Mr Leonhart, please present the court with your first statement.”

Hearing the High-Judge’s command, Squall switched and gave a single yet firm nod in acceptance.

Witness Testimony 1: Squall Leonhart.

“The morning of the incident, Zidane approached me with his plans to prank Professor Setzer Gabbaini.” Squall proceeded to explain, no hint of hesitation in his voice. “He detailed every step of his plan: How he planned to initially **scam** Professor Gabbaini out of pocket with **a rigged game** of blackjack; how he then planned to **lure** the Professor to Math Room 3 through **a fake promise** of returning his coin ... if he showed Zidane – and Bartz – all of the **upcoming Math test answers**; and finally, how he planned to set off **a domino effect of tricks** to humiliate the Professor in front of his upcoming class at the time.

“After explaining his plans, he simply stated that: *‘If anyone got in my way ... they’ll suffer the consequences’*.” He then added, shaking his head at the thought. “Obviously, I declined. I told Zidane that he was taking his pranks *way too far*, and that I wanted *no part* of it. In fact, I warned him that his elaborate prank would likely *backfire* on him considering the potential risk of injury – both accidental and intentional. Worst of all, if he were to get caught, I guaranteed him that he would be *expelled* for his actions.”

Squall then paused, acting as though he was disappointed in the eventual outcome.

“But, as you’re already aware ... my warnings fell on deaf-ears.” He murmured. “Zidane followed through with his plan without my help. I carried on with my day and it wasn’t until after the *incident* when I found out Zidane’s plans fell apart.”

Squall paused once more ... before finishing with one last comment.

“Karma is a tough mistress.”

Witness Testimony ... Complete.

The court room was silent, everyone processing the statement until it was etched into their brains. Onion Knight hastily jotted down his plethora of notes, sweat forming from his brow and carpal tunnel

breaking out through his wrist. However, he refused to yield to his irritable pain, desperate to include every detail and additional thoughts.

Finally, as he finished '*dotting his I's*' and '*crossing his T's*', Onion Knight placed down his pen and breathed out.

"What're your thoughts, Onion Knight?" Terra wondered to him in a quiet tone, cautious that the rest of the court – especially Squall and Warrior of Light – was unaware of their conversation. "Do we have anything we can use against his testimony?"

Onion Knight was hesitant to answer, scanning through his notes thoroughly before he could determine his approach.

The main aspect of the testimony that caught Onion Knight's attention was the detailed reveal of Zidane's initial prank – an aspect of the case that he had overlooked. The fact that he had missed such a crucial detail infuriated him, realising he had numerous opportunities to ask Zidane.

(If I knew the details of Zidane's prank from the offset...)

Onion Knight then shook his head hastily, reminding himself that there was no point dwelling on the past.

He focused on the new information and how he could utilise it for the trial, analysing every aspect of the testimony – including the flaws.

"His lies are obvious." Onion Knight deduced, tapping his notes whilst his face was filled with disdain. "Our problem ... is how we prove his lies."

"So, do you suggest we pick at his testimony until we find the contradiction?" Terra then recommended with an innocent smile.

Onion Knight smirked back, amused by the suggestion.

"Oh, you know me *too* well."

During this time, the High-Judge Gabranth nodded in satisfaction.

"A valiant testimony, Mr Leonhart." He stated wholeheartedly, switching to Warrior of Light's direction. "Anything you wish to add before we proceed with the cross-examination, Prosecution?"

At the Prosecution stand, Warrior of Light stood with his arms crossed.

He glared at Squall with an unsatisfied tone, acting as though he was attempting to communicate with the witness through facial expressions. His face was tense and unbreakable as he awaited a response from the uncaring witness.

On the other hand, Squall was unfazed by the intense eyes staring at him, avoiding eye-contact entirely as he glanced away irritably.

"No, Your Honour." Warrior of Light then answered, refusing to shift his gaze from the Witness. "I have nothing to add at this current time."

Onion Knight noticed his opponent's odd reaction, caught off-guard by the unexpected discrepancy between the two.

(Even Warrior of Light knows he's lying...! This is going to get interesting...)

"Well, without further ado..." Gabranth announced awkwardly, feeling he had no other choice except to proceed. "Defence, you may now cross-examine the Witness."

"I'm ready, Your Honour." Onion Knight answered confidently, his eyes set on his target.

Cross-Examination 1: Squall Leonhart

"Squall, if you can recall: we recently had a discussion regarding your past relationship with Zidane and Bartz." Onion Knight recollected as he proceeded with his questions. "Could you elaborate to the court how long you've been close frie-... I mean, '*acquaintances*' with them?"

"Objection!" Warrior of Light yelled out abruptly. "This is a needless question. The court already knows that Squall was acquainted with Zidane and Bartz for some time."

Onion Knight switched directly to the High-Judge.

"Your Honour, the initial answer documented to the court was far too vague." He argued respectfully,

standing behind his decision. “There is a lot more established history behind their relationship beyond a simple ‘*acquaintance*’. We require the context to legitimise the testimony.”

“...Do you have any evidence to support your argument?” Gabranth requested crucially, acting on the verge of sustaining Warrior of Light’s *objection*.

SLAM!

“Try me.”

In response, Onion Knight slammed his palm against the stand’s surface, placing a folder with the title: ‘**Squall Leonhart – Interrogation**’ dated the previous day.

The entire court – including Gabranth and Warrior of Light – peered forward as they wondered what Onion Knight placed on the desk.

However, Onion Knight smirked confidently, noticing Squall’s reaction the instant he placed the folder on the table.

Although his expression was as firm as stone, the colour in Squall’s face fell pale.

“No way...! Onion Knight, you archived the *entire* conversation?!” Terra gasped as she scanned the contents of the folder.

“That’ll be the first AND last time I ever pull an all-nighter.” Onion Knight breathed out in confirmation, his shoulders drooped as he felt the fatigue. “...Never again will I subject myself to such torment.”

He then focused his attention on the High-Judge Gabranth.

“Your Honour, this folder contains a transcript detailing the conversation between Squall, my associate Terra, and myself.” He then explained, opening the folder to the first page in the process.

“I ensured *every* detail of the conversation was included: his friendship with Zidane and Bartz dating back to the age of ten; his reluctance to involve himself in their schemes – aside from one incident involving their previous school’s Headmaster; And – most significantly ... how he called them his ‘*close friends*’.”

“Bailiff ... the folder.” Gabranth requested with a nod, using Prishe to retrieve the new evidence.

“That’s ridiculous!” Warrior of Light yelled in detest. “Your Honour, surely you’re not thinking of adding that into evidence?! There’s a high chance the contents are-!”

“Hush.” The High-Judge interrupted with a powerful voice, waving off Warrior of Light’s concern as he received the folder. “Allow me to be the judge of that.”

After that, Gabranth flicked through the folder’s contents in silence, scratching his chin as he was absorbed in the text.

Onion Knight watched the High-Judge intensely as he awaited the verdict, praying Gabranth would accept the transcript into official evidence.

“Interesting...” Gabranth murmured before switching to the witness. “Mr Leonhart, can you confirm to the court that you had the conversation in this transcript?”

“Tsk...!”

Squall scoffed reactively, avoiding eye-contact entirely as he was reluctant to answer the High-Judge. However, after a moment of reflection, he turned back to face Gabranth directly.

“The conversation described in that transcript ... is true.” He admitted in a bitter scowl. “Every word.”
(**YES!!!**)

Onion Knight’s thoughts erupted in glee as he clenched his fist, feeling triumphant in hearing Squall’s answer echo throughout the court walls.

The audience gasped in shock as they heard Squall’s answer, muttering and gossiping amongst each other in anticipation of how the trial would proceed with the information. Even the trio of teachers – Conductor Kuja, Professor Ultimecia, and Kefka – were intrigued by the new information.

With Squall’s admittance to the transcript outed to the court, his earlier comment regarding his association with Zidane and Bartz rendered moot and – more importantly – places doubt in the legitimacy to his testimonies.

It was the exact boost Onion Knight required to strengthen Zidane’s innocence.

"Fine. I'll accept the transcript into evidence." Gabranth decided ultimately with a sigh, returning the folder to its owner.

Warrior of Light threw his arms up in distraught, losing his composure in disbelief.

Onion Knight snickered as the sight of his opponent's reaction, satisfied in witnessing the amusing display of human emotion.

"I must say, you both have a habit of revealing evidence at oddly convenient timing." Gabranth then muttered to the two sides, tensioning his posture. "It's rather unorthodox..."

"I'm sorry, Your Honour." Onion Knight bowed respectfully, although beaming from ear-to-ear.

Warrior of Light lowered his head, grumbling to himself inaudibly.

"For the remainder of the trial, I'll overlook the issue ... considering it'll likely happen again."

Gabranth then announced, acknowledging the apology in the process with a respecting nod. "Just promise me that whatever remaining 'evidence' you both have up your sleeves are undeniable to the case."

Both Onion Knight and Warrior of Light glanced up to the High-Judge, considering their positions and the evidence in their possession before both accepted Gabranth's request.

Onion Knight slipped his hand inside his pocket, feeling the pouch of brown hair-stands.

(*Soon...*)

"Defence, please continue your cross-examination." The High-Judge Gabranth commanded to Onion Knight.

"Yes, Your Honour." Onion Knight accepted confidently, twisting back to Squall's direction. "Squall, you explained to the court that you '*warned Zidane that his elaborate prank would backfire on him*' and that you wanted '*no part of it*'. Tell me: if you could turn back time after knowing what would happen, would you've done more to stop him from carrying out his plan?"

Squall considered the question momentarily, reflecting on the conversation he had that very morning.

"No. I'd let it play out the exact same way." Squall answered eventually, shaking his head with a firm expression.

Onion Knight widened his gaze in surprise, taken aback by the blunt opinion.

"But ... why? If you had another chance, you'd be able to prevent the attack on Rydia." He then argued. "Why wouldn't you take that opportunity?"

"Because Zidane would never repent for his sins, nor would he understand the consequences of his actions." Squall retorted arrogantly. "He would just continue his pranks and inconvenience others in the process. Eventually, he'll escalate his pranks to ridiculous levels, causing problems far beyond what happened the other day. People will end up gravely injured, property would be damaged, laws certainly broken ... all because he wanted to play childish games."

(*He's acting like he's Zidane's guardian angel.*) Onion Knight wondered in his mind, finding Squall's empowering mind-set repulsive. (*What's going on in his damn head...?*)

Onion Knight shook his head in furious rejection.

"You can't seriously believe that Zidane would-!"

"Objection!" Warrior of Light yelled in interruption, his patience running thin. "Stop addressing hypotheticals and stick to the topic, Onion Knight!"

"Objection Sustained." The High-Judge stated in instant agreement, finding the conversation tiresome.

"Dammit...!"

(*I need a different approach...*)

With his previous lead resulting as a dead-end, Onion Knight reflected on Squall's current Witness Testimony.

Upon scanning through his notes, he highlighted the quote referring to Zidane's allegedly stating: '*If anyone got in my way ... they'll suffer the consequences.*' It was the most frivolous statement of the entire testimony – if not, the entire case.

There was no evidence nor revealed context that reinforced the claim against Zidane, and yet the

statement alone could further damage Zidane's reputation permanently if Onion Knight ultimately lost the case.

However, as much as he desired to call '*defamation of character*' on Squall's blatant lie, Onion Knight had no obvious piece of evidence to tackle the accusation. And, whilst he could bluff his way into coercing Squall to stumble on his own words, it would only be a fruitless attempt without the compelling evidence.

Placing the statement aside, he was left with one other option.

"In your testimony, you stated that you '*carried on with your day*' and that you only found out about the results of the prank '*after*' the incident occurred." Onion Knight recounted as he called to the witness. "Squall, can you inform the court how *you* found out about the incident on the day?" Squall glared at Onion Knight with condescending scorn, knowing exactly what Onion Knight intended in his questioning.

"Objection!" Warrior of Light called out hastily to shut down his opponent's new approach. "Stop wasting the court's time with these pointless questions, Onion Knight! This is clearly a set up to-!" "No. Let me answer the question." Squall then interrupted the Prosecution, accepting the challenge with an intense frown. "What's the harm in adding some more context to the testimony?"

Both Onion Knight and Warrior of Light tensed up equally, unable to predict Squall's mindset as they awaited his response.

"For the most part, the day up until the incident was as average as you can get." Squall proceeded to explain, no hints of hesitation in his voice whatsoever. "Boring lessons, tedious topics, insufferable classmates: you know, the typical student life. And, of course, if you speak to any of Class 13A, they'd all confirm I attended those lessons – including our prestigious Defender and Prosecutor here."

Warrior of Light and the reluctant Onion Knight nodded in confirmation, both agreeing they witnessed Squall attend those very lessons – along with Zidane and Bartz.

"Lunch Break was no different. I grabbed my lunch from the Dining Hall and ate my food outside ... away from everyone else." Squall continued. "After I finished, I stumbled into Cloud Strife and Tidus – who informed me that an incident happened right where Zidane planned to execute his prank." As Squall concluded his speech, silence filled the courtroom as everyone watched the stage with a blank stare.

"There. Now try and pick *that* apart." Squall then provoked Onion Knight directly.

"Tch...!"

Onion Knight felt as though he was forced back by the stubborn Squall, knowing the Witness was shutting down any attempt to shift the blame from Zidane onto him.

"You know ... that could've been its own testimony." Terra murmured to Onion Knight casually.

"I'm not wasting my time picking apart that slog of a testimony." Onion Knight murmured in an unimpressed response. "He's trying to goad me on."

"O-oh ... right."

Terra fell into an awkward silence, realising her comment was unhelpful in the current scenario. *(Although, that doesn't rule out a possible contradiction...)*

Onion Knight's mind wondered, stoking his chin as he considered his next move.

(I know he's lying ... I just need to catch him out with the right piece of evidence...!)

He felt the pressure looming over him as numerous eyes shifted to his direction, expecting a response to Squall's challenge. Warrior of Light, the High-Judge Gabranth, and even Priske focused on him, awaiting to inevitable retort.

However, Onion Knight was struggling.

"Defence. Anything else you wish to question our witness before we move on?"

Gabranth's low, booming voice echoed throughout the courtroom, pressuring Onion Knight to respond out of impatience.

"It's pointless, Your Honour." Warrior of Light shrugged mockingly, shaking his head at the poor

excuse of a Defence. “He’s lost his edge. He has no evidence to counter the testimony nor any other way to bluff himself out of his rut.”

Onion Knight tensed up as he heard Warrior of Light’s scathing words yet prioritized his focus on the subject, knowing that rushing in unequipped would only lead to humiliation and ultimately losing the trial.

He retraced his steps, considered every piece of evidence at his disposal, and recollected every previous testimony that could potentially contradict Squall’s testimony and additional statement. Regardless of outward appearances, he believed he had a piece of evidence that would overthrow Squall’s testimony and solidify his lead. However, no matter how hard scanned over his current ammo, no piece of evidence stuck out to him as an easy contradiction.

Onion Knight considered using the brown hair strands, yet he knew it would only backfire on him due to the illogical timing.

“Tsk...! Are we done now?” Squall murmured irritably, his feet shifting to the edge of the Witness Stand in preparation to leave.

“...”

Onion Knight switched to Zidane with a firm yet desperate glance, hoping to reassure his classmate and defendant that would not lose the case.

However, he was then met with Zidane staring back at him with an intense gaze, causing him to jolt in abrupt fright.

(*‘...It has all of my notes and plans regarding the prank I was going to pull on Professor Gabbaini...’*)

Onion Knight’s eyes widened as he heard Zidane’s word echo throughout his mind.

With time against him, Onion Knight rustled through his blazer pocket, praying the highlighted item was still in his possession.

“Onion Knight, what are you-?”

Fwip!

Emerging from his blazer pocket was a singular orange pocketbook.

Onion Knight scanned through its pages hastily ... and grinned eerily.

“If there’s nothing else to ask the Witness, then I see no need in keeping Mr Leonhart-”

“HOLD IT!!!”

Before the High-Judge could finish his statement, Onion Knight roared out in swift interruption.

“Oh, great...” Warrior of Light grumbled underneath his breath, predicting what would follow.

“Knight of the Onion, what’s the meaning of this?!” Gabranth questioned in bafflement, insulted by the rude interruption.

“I apologise, Your Honour. However...” Onion Knight proceeded to respond, switching his attention back on Squall with a determined glare. “We’re not done yet.”

The unimpressed Squall met eyes with the persistent Onion Knight, disappointed that he was forced back into the entire debacle at the last minute.

“Squall, I have one last question regarding your testimony.” Onion Knight informed as he straightened his posture, engulfed in overwhelming confidence that he skipped the High-Judge’s approval to proceed. “Could you please remind me: What was your response to Zidane when he asked you to be involved with the prank?”

Squall stared at the Defence Stand in condescending silence, feeling as though he was about to fall into a trap.

Warrior of Light was prepared to object Onion Knight’s obnoxious pursuit, and yet a minor part of him anticipated his opponent’s approach with morbid curiosity.

Although furious to be interrupted with such disrespect, Gabranth held his tongue – somewhat curious to see what the Defence had up his sleeve.

And then, with a low sigh, Squall answered Onion Knight’s eerie request.

“I declined.”

“OBJECTION!!!”

Just as Squall answered, Onion Knight bellowed out at the top of his lungs, pointing his finger directly at the Witness with unbreakable pride.

"You're a liar, Squall!" Onion Knight then proceeded to accuse, yelling out as clearly as possible.

"You accepted Zidane's request for help!"

"OBJECTION!!!" Warrior of Light rebutted in desperate haste. "Where's the proof!"

"Here's my proof!"

Fwoosh!

Fuelled with a burst of adrenaline, Onion Knight threw the pocketbook towards Warrior of Light's direction – expected his opponent to catch it.

Slap!

However, due to the unexpected motion, the pocketbook missed its intended directory and slapped Warrior of Light directly in the face.

"Ow."

The stone-faced Warrior of Light was stiff and emotionless as he peeled off the pocketbook from his face, his reaction delayed as he was unable to process the unpredicted occurrence.

"Read it and weep!" Onion Knight then called out in adrenaline-fuelled exaggeration, acting ignorant on the situation before him.

"Onion Knight ... was that really necessary?" Terra murmured to him with a half-open stare, acting unamused her associate's actions.

"Yes. Yes it was." Onion Knight responded with a firm nod, flaring his nostrils with pride.

Warrior of Light read through the pocketbook with a thorough gaze, absorbing every detail to understand the perceived contradiction.

"Could you offer some context to the court regarding this ... surprise evidence, Defence." Gabranth requested in agitation, feeling out of the loop.

"Yes, Your Honour." Onion Knight nodded in acceptance, restraining his excitement. "Warrior of Light is currently holding Zidane's '**Prankster NoteBook**', a collection of notes and drafts relating to his pranks – including logistics and associates involved."

The High-Judge raised an eyebrow upon hearing the last section of Onion Knight's statement, curious of the revelation's extent.

"And guess whose name is mentioned frequently throughout the '*Professor Gabbaini*' prank." Onion Knight then teased, nudging his head towards Squall's direction.

"Interesting..." Gabranth murmured in thought before indicating to Priske. "Bailiff, if you would..."

"Yessir!"

Priske leapt into action, approaching Warrior of Light to retrieve the pocketbook.

However, just as she was about to grab the evidence from the Prosecution's hand, Warrior of Light spoke his mind.

"How does this prove Squall's a liar?"

"Wait, what...?"

Onion Knight was blindsided completely, his adrenaline and excitement crumbling in an instant.

"This pocketbook only showcases Zidane's *ideas* for his numerous pranks prior to acting on them."

Warrior of Light then addressed as he passed the book onto Priske. "Squall is mentioned in the scribbles as a likely partner in crime *but* there is no, proof of validation regarding Squall's involvement. If you expected this to be a dairy, you are sorely mistaken."

Onion Knight stood bewildered, feeling as though he had hit an unexpected brick wall.

He attempted to defend his objection, and yet no word formed from his mouth – only stutters and inaudible noises.

He was at a complete loss.

"..."

The High-Judge received the pocketbook and proceeded to flick through the pages, analysing the section regarding the notorious prank as thoroughly as possible.

Both Warrior of Light and Onion Knight twisted to face the High-Judge, anticipating his opinion on the matter.

Warrior of Light's expression was set in stone, confident that he disproved the contradiction. On the other hand, Onion Knight was fidgeting anxiously, verging on devastation if the contradiction was found invalid.

"Defence, do you have any other evidence to back up your claim?"

In that moment, despair fell on Onion Knight.

The pocketbook was the only viable evidence in his possession that alluded to Squall involvement with the prank. Whilst his Interrogation folder helped place doubt on Squall's honesty during his time on the Witness Stand, it was not enough to reinforce Onion Knight's current claim.

"Your Honour, I..." Onion Knight muttered as his voice trailed off.

"Speak clearly." High-Judge Gabranth commanded with his booming voice, dissatisfied with the Defence's hesitation.

Onion Knight stood frozen in place, unable to speak.

"Onion Knight..." Terra murmured to him, consumed with worry.

And then, Onion Knight sighed out.

"Your Honour, I don't have supporting evidence on the claim."

His damning words echoed throughout the Theatre Hall, the entire audience hearing him as clear as day.

"No way..."

"...Did Onion Knight screw up...?"

"...What'll happen now...?"

Questions formulated amongst the audience, all wondering how Onion Knight's blunder could affect the Defence's position. Even several teachers were muttering to one another, debating their opinions on the new outcome.

The whispers continued to spread, echoing throughout the hall like birds twittering amongst the trees.
Bang-bang!

"Order in the court." Gabranth commanded sternly, silencing the gossips immediately before proceeding with the situation. "Defence, the evidence presented fails to certify Mr Leonhart's involvement with the defendant's '*prank*'. Unless there's irrefutable evidence to support your claim, I must decline the accusation and proceed with case."

"NO! Your Honour, you can't-!"

"OBJECTION!!!"

The entire courtroom shook as the mysterious voice bellowed out in sudden protest, cutting off Onion Knight's plea instantly.

Every member of the court turned to face the voice's owner, all completely shocked by the disruptive yell.

"F-Firion...?" Onion Knight murmured in an inaudible breath, blindsided completely by the interference.

Approaching the stage with his head held high and fists clenched with confidence was the court case's Detective Firion.

"I apologise for the interruption, Your Honour." Firion stated to the High-Judge formally, bowing to show his respect. "However, I cannot stand aside on this occasion ... for I have the supporting evidence you request."

""""*GASP!!!!*""""

The audience reacted in further shock and awe, all perched on the edge of their seats as they awaited the reveal.

The High-Judge Gabranth soothed his temple, feeling exhausted by the entire fiasco before answering Firion.

"Proceed."

Upon hearing the confirmation, Firion stepped up towards the Judge's Podium with a clenched fist up close to his chest.

Every pair of eyes watched him approach with piqued anticipation, wondering what the Detective had up his sleeve. Additionally, Warrior of Light watched on with severe caution, once again prepared to strike down the evidence when necessary.

In that moment, Firion held out his evidence – it was a singular USB Stick.

“Stored in this drive is footage of Zidane and Squall's conversation, showcasing the former's request for the latter's involvement in the prank.” The Detective explained thoroughly, ensuring no detail is ignored. “The video is dated and timed: **14th September at 8:53am**. The location is based at one of the tabled benches just outside of the Academy's building, and the pocketbook is in full view of the camera.”

Gabranth glared at Firion in stone cold silence, processing the information before retrieving the device from the Detective's hand.

“How did you acquire this piece of evidence?” Gabranth then wondered as he proceeded to set up the laptop and overhanging projector.

“During the twenty-minute recess, I returned to the Security Room and investigated the footage on the day of the incident once more.” Firion admitted in honesty, acting proud of his results. “It isn't much, but ... the footage speaks for itself.”

Just then, the video appeared before the High-Judge's screen – along with the projector's screen.

The details were exactly as Firion described: a series of benches displayed just outside of the Academy's building, the date and time matching to Firion's description, and – most importantly – Zidane and Firion sitting opposite one another on the bench closest to the camera.

As shown on the footage, the two were deep in conversation, Zidane pointing at the opened pocketbook with Squall glaring over the notes warily. Although fuzzy, the notes and scribbles on the opened pages matched the pocketbook's pages of the planned prank considerably.

Throughout the footage, Academy students passed the duo obliviously, none of them curious to overhear their conversation or glance at the book on the table.

To them, it was an ordinary day.

Just then, the Zidane in the footage stared at Squall directly in the eyes and mouthed a very clear question – even though the footage was silent.

“...I really need you for this one, man.” He expressed to his friend, refusing to falter as he asked the very important question. “Are you in?”

Squall stared back in silence momentarily, considering the proposal.

And then, albeit subtle ... Squall nodded.

Cross-Examination ... Complete!

DISSIDIA ACADEMY: Final Fantasy

By ZaronNitro

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Dissidia Academy: A prodigious school for the ambitious and talented, where students strive to accomplish their goals and dreams.

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