

ZANARKAND was too loud: there was too much colour, too many surprises, and everyone always seemed to be making the merest excuse to celebrate something. On the morning that Auron entered the reception room on Jecht's houseboat and found Zandra from next door busy arranging a huge number of brightly-coloured balloons, he realised it would be a waste of time to question it.

"Oh, it's you," said Zandra, who had always been suspicious of him, for some reason: she seemed to think his interest in Tidus was born of some vaguely nefarious intentions. *Look, he'd thought about saying to her on more than one occasion, if Jecht hadn't asked, I'd be nowhere near him, or this hideous place.*

"It's Tidus' birthday," she informed him. "He's eight today. I don't suppose you got him a present?"

"I didn't realise that was expected," he admitted, sitting down and observing the gaudy decorations. "Birthdays aren't celebrated where I come from." He felt the need to explain further, as if talking at greater length might convince Zandra that he could be trusted. "Most of us don't even know the date we were born. We just go by the years: last year I was twenty-five, this year I'm twenty-six."

She was looking at him curiously, with an expression that mixed amusement and irritation, and he realised too late. "You're twenty-six?" she echoed.

"No," said Auron quickly, trying to cover the slip-up. "Not –

did I say twenty-six? I meant, er, forty-six.” He didn’t even know if that sounded reasonable. What did a forty-six-year-old man look like – should he have claimed to be even older than that? In life he’d had no cause to tabulate the appearance and age of others, especially not those twenty years older than him.

Zandra merely raised her eyebrows, and Auron cursed himself internally – he’d certainly not made much progress in persuading her of his integrity – before Tidus appeared at the doorway.

“Happy birthday!” Zandra exclaimed immediately, shooting a look at Auron that prompted him to utter the same greeting, trying (but, he was acutely aware, failing) to sound enthusiastic. She bent down to embrace Tidus; he squirmed a little in her grasp, and said, “Is Mom coming?”

“Maybe in a minute, dear,” she said. “I got you a present – don’t you want to see it? I’m afraid Auron didn’t get you anything.” She eyed him again over Tidus’ shoulder.

Tidus, too, turned to face him, with all the solemnity that a newly-minted eight-year-old was capable of. “I don’t want anything from him anyway,” he said.

Auron stifled a sigh, and rose from his seat. He could deal with hostility from one of them, but both at once was more than he could take. He didn’t want to ruin what was apparently Tidus’ special day, either. He walked out onto the deck and looked out over the city and all its frantic motion. Absurd

vehicles flitted from one building to the next; people scurried along underneath them. It was exhausting even to watch. He certainly felt a lot older than twenty-six.