

SOMEHOW, on Auron's infelicitous descent of Gagazet, bleeding to death and still mad from grief, he had kept hold of his sword. A warrior monk's instinct, perhaps: he had spent his entire adult life protecting *someone* – a priest, a maester, a summoner, and finally, with a spectacular lack of success, himself. He had kept gripping the sword even when his legs gave out, using it like an unwieldy oar to haul himself across the grass of the Calm Lands.

And then, shortly after arriving in Zanarkand, before he had even come close to locating Jecht's houseboat, he had been forced to part with it. It was nothing as unfortunate as an accident, especially now that his body was restored and his mind healing; it had been quite deliberately taken from him. A man had approached him, some overly diligent officer of the law, and said, "Sir, you can't just walk around with that thing. You need a licence."

He had stood there blinking for a moment, handed it over, and then watched as the man walked away, carrying the sword carefully in both hands as if he thought it would strike him of its own accord. That was the first real sign that this Zanarkand was a foreign place.

Of course, he was no longer a guardian, not even a warrior monk, but being without a sword turned out to be no less disturbing than the loss of half his sight had been. The blade had been a faithful companion for long years, and had received its final customisation on the journey to Spira's Zanarkand, a

trade of forty little pieces of something for an Al Bhed man to do something to it that meant he could attack faster and stronger. After that, he noticed, Jecht stopped making jibes in battle about Auron's slower fighting style – the customisation was worth it for that if nothing else.

Once the tumult of the early days in Zanarkand was over, and everyone had been made to understand that Jecht really wasn't coming back, Auron's attention turned to finding a replacement sword. The words of the policeman (he had been in Zanarkand long enough now to learn that term) had remained with him: he needed a licence. Zanarkand was a sanitised place, with layers of bureaucracy that put Yevon to shame several times over. Auron's lack of legal status had already been an issue in attempts to secure bed and board: after a few miserable nights sleeping on a couch in Jecht's houseboat, surrounded by awful gaudy blitzball memorabilia, he had begun lodging with an elderly woman whose bouts of senility meant she sometimes mistook him for her late husband. He paid in cash, which was apparently a rarity in Zanarkand, but he lacked any of the documentation that would have allowed him to open a bank account.

The matter was immaterial: there had been no such thing in Spira. This licence to bear weapons was a more pressing issue. It turned out, serendipitously, that something about Auron's appearance was a magnet for unscrupulous characters. Merely sitting at a bar with an irked expression (which came

naturally) was enough to attract the attention of various participants in Zanarkand's criminal scene. It was probably the eye – he reluctantly conceded to himself that the disfigurement had this one advantage, even if it still made him nauseous every time he caught sight of himself in a mirror. A few nights of networking with these lowlifes, concocting some sensationalist tripe about needing a dagger to take revenge on a cousin, which they lapped up, and he was rewarded with a counterfeit weapons licence of the highest quality.

A few days later, he walked into the only shop in Zanarkand that he had identified as a weapon supplier.

“Good morning, sir,” said the clerk cheerfully.

He grunted a response, and hastened towards the wall where the swords were hung. It had to be conceded that this method of displaying goods for sale was more convenient for the customer than what he was used to. In Spira, everything was kept in boxes behind the counter, and one had to ask the salesperson for what one wanted, basing the request on a list they kept on display, which more often than not turned out to be out of date. Here, one could see the goods before buying them – test them, even. His hand drifted towards the sword that most closely resembled those he used to wield. “How much is this one?”

The clerk was at his shoulder in an instant. “Ah, a fine katana.”

“It is not,” said Auron, who had always believed that mis-

conceptions should be swiftly corrected.

“I beg your pardon?” said the clerk.

“This isn’t a katana,” Auron explained. “The blade is too wide – it has the long hilt, yes, but this design –”

The clerk stepped closer, catching a label that hung from the sword, and turning it around to show to him. “According to my supplier,” he said, “this is a top-range katana of traditional Zanarkand heritage, forged from local steel of the highest quality according to the prized techniques of generations of master craftsmen – now.” He looked back at Auron. “You wouldn’t be suggesting you know more than my supplier, sir.”

Auron considered. “Well, I suppose I am.”

The clerk looked put out.

“How much?” Auron asked again.

“Fifty gil.”

It was a fairly basic-looking weapon, and Auron knew not to even bother asking about special abilities, but he could afford the price, and owning a sword again would be a first step on the road to feeling somewhat like his former self. “May I try it?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon?” the clerk said for a second time.

“I’d like to make sure it suits me before buying it,” said Auron patiently: that surely should have been obvious. “Give it a few swings, you know. Split a sandbag, if you have one hanging up somewhere –”

The clerk suddenly looked horrified. “Oh, sir – oh no. These swords are *ornamental*. I wouldn’t be in the business of selling to – to criminals and scoundrels, sir ...”

“Hmm,” said Auron, doing his best to hide his surprise. He looked over the sword carefully: the blade certainly looked sharp enough not to be merely for show. He was going to have to trust his own judgement on the matter, seeing as trying the thing out was clearly off the agenda. That is, if the man would even sell to him, now that he had revealed his apparently forbidden intent to actually use the sword instead of just hanging it on some wall and leaving it to rust for all eternity.

“Quite right,” he said, in belated response to the clerk’s protests. “I was, er, joking. Look, here’s my licence,” – he scabbled around in his robes for the document before thrusting it towards the clerk – “and I can assure you I have no desire to do anything dishonourable. And fifty gil, you said? Here’s seventy –”

“I don’t take bribes, sir,” said the clerk, inspecting the licence and handing it back to him. “Fifty gil will do nicely, thank you.”

Zanarkand really was different from Spira; there, advertised prices were usually nothing but the vaguest guidelines.

It didn’t matter: once again, he had a sword. Leaving the shop, he hoisted it over his shoulder with a grin. The familiar weight made him bold; he almost regretted that there were no fiends in the vicinity to offer themselves up for a swift slice or

two. He would practise his old moves in his landlady's yard, and if she saw, she would probably ascribe it to one of her hallucinations. He would practise on the deck of Jecht's houseboat too, perhaps: Tidus was too young to think anything of it, and his mother too lost within herself to notice.

He ought to go and see Tidus, he reflected. It had been a few days, and he was, after all, trying to build a rapport with the boy, as difficult and awkward as it had proved so far.

He stopped off at the houseboat on the way back to his quarters. Tidus was there in the main reception room, amusing himself with what appeared to be the latest blitzball action figures. "What's that?" he said, looking up at the sword hilt protruding from behind Auron's shoulder.

"It's a katana," Auron said, unable to resist the joke. "No, it's not. It's a sword. Don't touch it, it's sharp."

"I wanna see," said Tidus, and Auron drew the sword out of its holster and held it carefully out of Tidus' reach.

"Cool," Tidus murmured. Auron suppressed a snort. Apparently this was what it took to gain respect from the boy.

"What's it for?" said Tidus.

"It's for my career," he said. "My job." He was unsure of the precise limits of a seven-year-old's vocabulary.

"You don't got a job," said Tidus.

"Don't *have*," Auron corrected him. "Well, maybe this will help me get one."

Tidus screwed up his nose, announced, “That’s dumb,” and scampered off.

All things considered, it was progress. Auron headed out to the deck, and began his practice. The sword was comforting in his hands: Jecht would have laughed at him for admitting it. Slicing into the air, admiring the shapes drawn by the movement of the blade, he felt reinvigorated. For the first time, he thought he might be able to make a home of this strange city, until such time as Jecht deemed it right for him to return to Spira.

If anyone had turned their attention to the docks that evening, they would have seen a red-robed man leaping about for hours on the deck of one of the boats, inexhaustible even after night fell and the lights of the other vessels moored there were slowly extinguished; they would have heard quiet exclamations of triumph as the swordsman recalled and executed each motion, and the precise strokes of the blade as it drew each slash in preparation for a journey years hence.