

IT's morning, and the ship is docking at last; the air is full of sailors' shouts as the ropes are secured. Baralai is standing on deck, still in the same place that the four of them took leave of each other last night, his hands pressed serenely against the rail, every inch the perfect Yevonite. Gippal wonders briefly whether he even went to bed at all, but as he draws closer, he concludes that Baralai looks too well-rested to have been there since then; he must just be an early riser.

He claps a hand against Baralai's back, and murmurs against his ear, "Plotting our course, navigator?"

Baralai responds to the greeting with a grin, as Gippal knew he would; he turns to face him, and says, "Something like that. Last night was fun, wasn't it?"

Gippal snorts. "I mean, at least Nooj actually talks to me these days."

"See," says Baralai, "he's nice really." He looks out at the brightening sky again. "I thought those guys would be up by now."

"Wouldn't count on it," says Gippal. "They're probably busy down there."

"Busy? Doing what?"

He shrugs, and casually replies, "Well, you know. I think that conversation finally put an end to the tension between them. My guess is that they're making lots of surly, angsty babies right now."

Baralai blinks, and then his eyes widen, and his cheeks turn a little darker – Gippal turns away, trying to hide his smile. He likes it when Baralai gets flustered like this; even more so when it's his own doing. Baralai, he thinks to himself, is kind of adorable.

“You're awful,” says Baralai, smiling. “That is not the image I wanted to have in my head this morning.”

“Happening right underneath where you're standing,” Gippal teases, throwing an arm around his shoulders.

Baralai squirms out of his grasp, taking hold of Gippal's wrist to lower the arm back down. His grip is oddly strong, but then, Gippal reflects, Baralai has already shown his aptitude for a variety of weapons; they wouldn't be standing here otherwise. He's well aware that there's more to the unimposing, neat Yevonite than he first thought.

“So,” says Baralai, who seems too keen on changing the subject to have remembered to let go of Gippal's wrist, “six weeks until the next trial.”

“Uh-huh,” Gippal replies.

“Are you going back to Bikanel?” Baralai asks him.

Gippal feels himself smile: not for the first time, he's impressed by Baralai's knowledge. Most Yevonites are unaware of where the Al Bhed make their Home, and the Al Bhed like it that way – it's safer to be unmapped, free to live the way they always have without having to deal with curious or hostile visitors. But Baralai is hardly a threat: he's made it clear

to Gippal, ever since they first met, that he's one of the rare Yevonites with no ill will towards his kind.

"Yeah, back to the island," he says. "I'm being groomed for an elite role among the Al Bhed leadership." He makes sure to say it in a bored tone: sure, he's showing off, but he wants to let Baralai know he has at least some shred of self-awareness. "It's kinda tedious, actually."

Baralai laughs. "I'll be doing something similar. My father is insistent that I," – he puts on a snootier voice than usual – "*ascend to the highest ranks of the Yevon clergy*. I would have thought Yevon would be content with whatever small part each of us can play, but I suppose my father doesn't share that opinion. So it's six weeks of praying and studying for me."

Winning the respect of the Al Bhed nation is more about spending hours fiddling with machina and triumphing in the occasional drinking contest, but Gippal nods. "Yeah, it's a drag," he says.

"I'll be looking forward to coming back to this," says Baralai.

"Yeah," says Gippal again. "I'll miss it." Ah, what the heck. "I'll miss you."

Baralai's face immediately lights up with a smile; it's just about the loveliest thing Gippal has ever seen. "You will?" he says.

"Course I will," says Gippal.

Baralai is silent for a moment, pensive, and then he smiles again and says, “You know what?”

“What?” Gippal murmurs, and instead of answering, Baralai leans in and kisses him.

Oh, Gippal thinks, *that*. Baralai’s kiss is hard, insistent, passionate: Gippal pushes back against him eagerly, meeting it with his own fervour, pressing him against the deck rail. Baralai’s body against his – it feels so right and perfect. Gippal never wants this to end: to hell with the Crimson Squad, he thinks for a moment, to hell with Home, Yevon, all of it – he just wants this kiss, forever.

“Is that OK?” Baralai asks, after they’ve broken apart. “I mean, do you –”

“Are you *joking*,” says Gippal, louder than he intended. “You know I’m gonna be spending the next six weeks going absolutely crazy now? Counting down the seconds until we get to do that again?”

Baralai laughs. “Sorry.”

Gippal shakes his head in mock exasperation, and a voice behind him says, “Morning, boys. We interrupting something?”

He turns around as Nooj limps into view, with Paine not far behind. Gippal notes with interest that her cheeks are somewhat flushed, and that she doesn’t seem to want to look him in the eye. “Good night, was it?” he says with a grin, and his

suspicious are all but confirmed when she scowls and turns away.

“No worse than your morning, I daresay,” Nooj fires back.

“Get stuffed, Noojster,” says Gippal, and Nooj raises an eyebrow and smirks at him.

Baralai seems almost as embarrassed as Paine is, but he says mildly, “You guys keep your secrets, and we’ll keep ours.”

“Secret,” Nooj echoes with a snort, “sure thing. I’ll see you both at the next exercise. Hope you learn how to handle a gun before then.”

Gippal signals goodbye with a rude gesture that Nooj definitely doesn’t see: he’s already turned around and is making his way to the ramp that leads to the dock. “Asshole,” Gippal mutters, not without affection.

“I suppose we should get going too,” says Baralai.

“I guess,” says Gippal reluctantly, and he leans in for another kiss, just a brief, light one this time. “See ya.”

Baralai nods. “Can’t wait.”