
Different Futures

ONE of the guys tells Gippal over breakfast that the praetor of New Yevon has given notice of his intention to visit. There's a lot of guffawing at that, suggestions that the guy might be after one of Gippal's famous interviews, like he means to stand in the desert in his priestly robes and dig for machina parts like a scavenger. Gippal promises to give them all a show; he'll put this praetor through his paces, he tells them, show him the Al Bhed and their sympathisers mean business. If he's here to propose some kind of alliance against the Youth League, Gippal will make him wish he'd never been born. The Al Bhed had nobody in their corner for hundreds of years; now the Yevonites, sorry, *ex*-Yevonites, can have a taste of that for

themselves.

It's only when breakfast is over that he realises who the praetor of New Yevon actually is. There was some news recently about the former praetor resigning, and the name of his successor is one so familiar to Gippal that his chest clenched involuntarily when he read it in the dispatch. *Baralai*.

So when Baralai turns up at unholy o'clock – he was always the kind of person who insisted on getting the important business out of the way first thing – all the guys working on the machines stop what they're doing and crowd around. And Gippal can't back down when they're all watching him.

"Here for an interview, huh?" he says, placing both hands on his hips and doing his best to use his slightly greater height to his advantage. "You wanna join the Machine Faction?"

"No," says Baralai, surely even more confused than he's letting on.

The best way to deal with this, Gippal has already decided, is to give his very best impression that he's never met the guy before. "Then who are you, man?" he says. "You just here to waste my time? I've got stuff to do, you know."

“I’m –” and he looks lost, hurt, but eventually Baralai stiffens and assumes a different expression, one that Gippal guesses is his *praetor of New Yevon* face. “I’m here on behalf of New Yevon,” he says, more loudly. “As the new praetor, I –”

And then Gippal raises a hand and gives his men what they were waiting for. “What, you wanna be friends now?” he says. “You guys finally realised what machines can do, huh? Yevon decided to play nice with the Al Bhed at last?”

“I’m sure you’ll agree there’s some value in negotiating,” says Baralai.

Gippal scoffs, throwing his head back in exaggerated amazement. “I don’t believe it,” he says. “The Yevonites have finally realised they can’t just walk all over everyone else, is that it? How long did it take – four hundred years? I suppose you want me to congratulate you.”

“I’m just here to *talk*,” Baralai says, and Gippal can tell that he’s starting to lose his cool. Beneath that mild-mannered surface, there’s real power; Gippal knows that better than most. And he can prod at it until it all comes out and Baralai ignites with rage. He can say more about Yevon, how they shamed and subjugated the Al Bhed for centuries, and he can send Baralai away having thoroughly humiliated him, pursued by the laughs of Gippal’s men as he turns around and walks back over the

bridge.

And he's about to do it, he *is*, until Baralai adds, in his quietest and most wounded voice, "*Gippal*."

Gippal feels a strange sensation in his throat; he looks at his men and barely registers their jubilant expressions, and then he turns back to Baralai, and says, "Wanna talk in private?"



They end up in Gippal's quarters, a small bedroom that used to be some kind of archive of Yevonite reliquaries. He's the only one who chose to live on site – the rest of the Faction clearly thought there was something weird about it, but Gippal likes to be close to the machina, just in case something goes wrong with them outside working hours. He's conducted a few late-night investigations over the last few months, spanner in hand, alerted by a distant clank at a pitch slightly different from the others; but it's never been anything he hasn't managed to sort out, even half-asleep.

But now, he's sitting on his bed with undeniable trepidation, and Baralai's sitting next to him – the bed being

the only thing approaching furniture in the room – and each of them is looking everywhere but at the other.

“So,” says Gippal, at last, “what were you gonna talk to me about?”

Baralai lifts his head, and says, “Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” says Gippal, playing innocent.

“You *know*,” says Baralai. “Treating me like that in front of all your supporters. Letting them all laugh at me, acting as if you didn’t know me –”

“It makes them happy,” says Gippal, ignoring the last part. “You know how much they hate Yevon – they’re desperate for a chance to get their own back. You know what, I thought you’d feel the same. Can’t believe you got mixed up with those guys, especially after what they did to us.”

“*New Yevon*,” says Baralai firmly, and Gippal can tell this is a pitch he’s made before. “It’s not the same thing. People are scared, Gippal: they’re desperate for stability. There’s so much change around here, and they need something familiar to hold onto. Older people especially: they’re angry and frightened. We don’t want them to be unhappy.”

Gippal frowns, and then says, “They’re scared of progress. And so are you.”

“Not scared,” Baralai insists, “just sceptical. All this change is happening so fast – don’t you ever think we

need to take a moment to ask ourselves whether it's actually good for Spira?"

"Is this why you came here?" says Gippal crossly. "To give me a lecture about how we're not allowed to move on? You should be going after the Youth League, if that's what you think. My guys are just doing what our people have done for generations."

Baralai shakes his head. "That's not why I came. I wanted to tell you something." He looks up. "Our recorder's made an appearance."

"Paine?" says Gippal, incredulous.

"That's right," Baralai replies. "She's travelling with the High Summoner. I thought I should tell you. I'd tell Nooj, too, but ... I'm reluctant to get involved in his activities. I suspect the welcome I'd receive at the Mushroom Rock Road would be even less enthusiastic than the one I've had here in Djose."

"Did she say anything to you?" Gippal presses him, pushing away the small flicker of guilt the last remark has provoked.

Baralai shakes his head again. "That's what's curious about it. She spent the entire visit with her back turned, as if she didn't want me to recognise her. But her identity was unmistakable."

“So she’s avoiding us,” says Gippal thoughtfully. “I wonder why.”

Baralai laughs at that, a bitter laugh that Gippal finds almost shocking: back in the Crimson Squad days, Baralai’s laugh was light and boyish. But, he supposes, they’ve all changed since then.

“She’s no different from any of us,” Baralai points out. “We haven’t exactly seen much of each other over the last two years. I don’t suppose you’ve spent a great deal of time with Nooj recently.”

“Yeah,” says Gippal, “you’re right.” He swallows, and adds, “I don’t see why we haven’t, though, you know? I guess we’ve all just been busy. I mean, back then we were all pretty good friends.”

Baralai looks right at him, and says, “Pretty good friends?”

“I mean the four of us,” Gippal clarifies awkwardly. Because Baralai knows as well as he does: *friends* doesn’t begin to cover what the two of them were to each other. They were the first to connect, finding both Nooj and Paine odd and standoffish; despite Gippal’s unapologetic loyalty to his people and Baralai’s traditional Yevonite background, they found it easy to form a bond. And before long, that bond deepened further than either of them would have expected; before long, they were

stealing away whenever they had the chance to take a moment to themselves, finding some deserted outcrop or unoccupied cabin or, at their most desperate times, the alley behind an unattended chocobo stable, and lying in each other's arms, and gazing into each other's eyes, and drinking in each other's breath, kissing, *kissing*.

"I thought you'd at least send a letter," says Baralai, quietly.

Gippal considers a few things he could say in response to that – he's never been the best at expressing himself in writing, he was waiting for Baralai to write first, he didn't even know where Baralai was for the majority of the past two years – although, to be fair, Bevelle was an easy guess – and then he settles on, "I didn't know you were interested."

"Interested?" Baralai repeats; and then he springs into a standing position, and turns to face Gippal, his hands pressed tightly against his sides as if he's restraining them from doing anything more violent. "*Interested?* After everything we did – all that time we spent – you thought I *lost interest?*"

"You were getting into all that New Yevon stuff!" Gippal protests. "What else was I meant to think, huh? Hardly suggests you wanted to hang out with an Al Bhed. Let alone –" He clenches a fist in frustration. "The Crimson

Squad was – a time in our lives. And once that time was over, I guess I thought that was it for you and me.”

“So it meant that little to you?” Baralai says, his voice strained.

“No!” Gippal says immediately, driving the same clenched fist into his blanket to insist on the point. “I thought *you* were the one who didn’t care. Didn’t hear a word about you for months, and then turns out you’re involved in New Yevon – what was I meant to think, huh? I always – it *always* meant something to me. It meant a lot.” Because now, looking up into Baralai’s brown eyes as he stands there, he can’t pretend otherwise. As much as the last two years have allowed him to forget, meeting again is all it takes to have brought everything back. And he knows, now, that the memories aren’t enough on their own.

“Baralai,” he says, trying to ignore the hoarseness creeping into his voice, “I’m a proud guy. I don’t like admitting when I’ve made mistakes – but, hell, this was a big one. I should’ve looked for you. I should’ve made it clear I wanted to see you.” He stands, slowly, positioning himself so he’s the mirror image of Baralai, and even though he’s so close that their feet are almost touching, Baralai doesn’t back away, because that’s the kind of guy he is. “I came to the wrong conclusion,” Gippal says

carefully. “And I know you’re just as stubborn as I am, but, man, it sounds like you did too. Cos those things I should’ve done – you ought to have done the same.”

Baralai stares at him for a moment – his gaze fixed steadily on Gippal’s functioning eye – and then he says, “Yes. I should have sought you out. It sounds like we both made the same mistake.” He pauses. “I’m sorry. I suppose my involvement in New Yevon would give you the wrong impression. It was all very sudden; I knew the original president’s son, and – well, that’s not what matters. I still like you, very much.”

Gippal can’t suppress his grin – there’s something about that last sentence, plain and polite at once, that was so very Baralai. The kind of thing he’s lacked for two years without even knowing how much he needed it.

“So,” he says. “This is where we kiss, right?”

“You’re terrible,” says Baralai, and he leans forward to press his lips against Gippal’s laughing mouth.

The feeling of his kiss is so familiar: it reminds Gippal of a time when the worst thing to worry about was the evaluation of his combat skills by dour Yevonite bureaucrats. Before the Den of Woe, which he barely dares think about, even now; before the girl from Besaid Island brought the Eternal Calm, and Spira found itself having to change for the first time in centuries. Before Gippal be-

came the leader of his people, and had to publicly demonstrate his opposition to those he had once called friends. It reminds him of being young, and wanting to give himself to the cause – back when *the cause* was something clear and definable, not something with so many potential solutions. Defeating Sin was what everyone wanted; but now, taking Spira forward could go thousands of ways, and only one thing is certain: no one of those ways will suit everyone.

“You OK?” Baralai murmurs, and Gippal realises he’s lost in thought, standing there immobile while Baralai’s lips sweetly traverse his own.

“Sorry,” he says. “Thinking about how much has changed.”

“Not everything has,” says Baralai. “You’re just how I remember. *This* is, too.”

“You’re right,” Gippal admits. “Guess I’m just out of practice.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” says Baralai, almost inaudibly, and he gently manoeuvres Gippal backwards until they’re both on the bed again.

They say little after that, falling back instead into the old routines that are no less thrilling for their familiarity. Gippal slowly tugs Baralai’s bandanna away from his head, letting Baralai’s white hair fall over his face and then

brushing it away so he can kiss his forehead; Baralai lifts Gippal's eyepatch, and places his lips reverently against the scarred skin underneath. Gippal undoes each of the tiny buttons that hold Baralai's ornate Yevonite collar in place, unwinding the red rope that threads through it, and dresses Baralai again with a new collar of kisses, just as Baralai unstraps and unzips Gippal's armour with a skill that betrays his experience.

They don't undress entirely, not with half the Faction on the other side of the door, but a few adjustments to their clothing suffice to allow them to explore each other's bodies for the first time in two long years. And as they do, Gippal realises how foolish he was to think this could never happen again. His views on Spira's future don't match Baralai's, sure, but that shouldn't be any more of a roadblock than their different backgrounds were in the first place. Baralai was right: if New Yevon can give people the stability they crave, it has its purpose. And besides – New Yevon, the Machine Faction, even the Youth League: none of it matters nearly as much as this feeling. Baralai beside him again. He won't let go of it this time.