

IC H A P T E R XXVI: THERE MUST BE SOMETHING IN THE AIR

"Over that ridge is definitely the straightest way to go," Zack stated.

"Yeah, the straightest, but is it the best?" Cid replied. They stood amid a tumbled pile of rocks looking out over a shallow valley. To the north a line of rugged looking hills barred their way. "That climb doesn't look like it would be easy. There seems to be a cleft in the hills to the east. See, over there? That might be a better way."

Zack looked in the direction Cid was pointing.

"Perhaps," he replied. "But you can't really tell from here. And finding out for sure is going to take us a couple of hours out of our way."

"I know," Cid replied. "But I'm not sure the ridge in front of us is passable. I'd hate to start climbing up there only to find we can't get through. That would waste even more time."

Zack stood there weighing the possibilities for a few moments.

"It's a shame Roshnialu can't give us better directions," Cid mused.

"True," Zack replied. "But she told Lai Li she'd never been to the valley, and had only spoken to a few Chadara who had. At least she had some general directions, enough to keep us from getting lost. I think we should consider ourselves lucky that she could tell us as much as she did."

"You're right," Cid said, looking over at Zack. "We'd probably never find the valley without her. In fact, we'd probably still be wandering around trapped in that Cetra base if it wasn't for her. Not to mention the fact that she saved your ass from dying. I'd say it's damn lucky we met her."

Zack was still looking at the hills in front of them, a slight nod of his head the only indication that he had heard.

"Well, it couldn't hurt to ride up to the ridge and take a closer look before we make up our minds," he said slowly.

Cid followed his gaze.

"I suppose not," he replied.

They stood there for a moment in silence. Then Cid turned around.

"All right, let's get back to the others."

They walked back down the steep slope they had climbed to get a better look at what was in front of them. The others were waiting for them, camped in a shallow bowl of land surrounded by rocky hills.

"Well, have you figured out which direction is north yet?" Yuffie questioned sardonically.

"Very funny," Cid replied without humor. He looked up at the sky. The setting sun cast long shadows on the ground around them. "Looks like we're going to have to do a little trail blazing in the hills tomorrow. Could be a tough day. We might as well stay camped here for the night. It's already getting dark, and I'd rather tackle those hills in the full light of day."

"I kinda figured," Barret commented. Cid noticed that Barret had started a fire and had already broken out the cooking equipment. Surprisingly it had been found that he was the most proficient cook of the lot, not to mention the most willing to perform the task. Yuffie and the guys were absolutely useless, and the one time Yuffie had jokingly offered to assist him Barret had quickly shooed her away. Amanda was helpful but hadn't the slightest idea what they were doing, and though La Lai was competent at the job she never seemed to have her nose out of the notebook they had found at the Cetra base. Roshnialu was actually the most helpful of the women, but though she was very good finding and making dishes out of the native flora, none of it was cooked and meat did not seem to be a part of her diet. Barret wasn't about to live off that rabbit food she made. No, he wanted real food, salted meats and real vegetables, cooked like they should be. And if it meant it was up to him to prepare them, then so be it.

Cid had been surprised himself not so much by the fact that Barret volunteered to do the cooking, but by the fact that he wasn't half bad at it. Seeing this side of the man made him realize just how little he really knew about his friends in Avalanche. It was easy to forget Barret had a child and had once been married. They never got to see that side of him.

Cid sat down beside the chendu and started inventorying what was left in his pack. Roshnialu had told them it would take about two to three days to reach the valley. By Cid's calculations, they should have more than enough provisions, especially

with Roshnialu supplementing what they had brought with native food. Still, you couldn't be too careful. Along with his cooking Barret also ate a lions share of the food, and Yuffie seemed to eat a surprising amount as well. He had no idea where she packed it on that small frame of hers. He was trying to conserve as much of what he had as he could just in case the others ran low.

Water was a bigger problem. Unless they found a way to replenish their supply, it looked like it would run out not long after they had reached the valley in question. He turned his face skyward, but it was empty except for the blazing sun. He had seen what he thought might be storm clouds off in the distance to the west earlier, but the sky above their heads had remained clear. Still, he had discussed this with Roshnialu through Lai Li, and she hadn't seemed concerned. She seemed to think they would manage to find water along the way, though where she thought it would appear in this parched landscape was more than he could fathom. But then again, she knew the place a helluva lot better than they did.

Soon the pleasant smell of cooking filled the air. Satisfied, Cid piled his belongings back in his pack and stood up, looking over there little group. A slight frown creased his features.

"Where is Lai Li?" he questioned.

"She went off a little while ago," Yuffie responded.

"Off?" Cid said tightly. "What do you mean, off?"

"She just took a little walk over that way," Yuffie continued, waving her hand vaguely toward the hills to the east. "She had that notebook with her, and she said she was going to find a more comfortable spot to look it over."

"No doubt to get away from your constant complaining," Barret cut in.

"I don't complain ALL the time!" Yuffie immediately shot back.

"Where did she go?" Cid cut them off before it could go any further. "You know no one is supposed to wander off by themselves!"

Yuffie gave him a look.

"Relax," she replied unconcernedly. "Rude went with her. I'm sure they're fine. They're probably both sitting somewhere staring at that notebook. I've never have taken Rude to have an interest in such things."

"Yeah, well, just goes to show," Cid replied, relaxing just a bit. "Still, even so, I'd rather they didn't go off by themselves. Besides, Barret almost has dinner ready. Think you could go fetch them for us?"

Yuffie scowled.

"Why should I..." she began.

"You're the one who saw where they went!" Cid snapped immediately, as if he had been expecting her to protest. "I'd send Amanda, but I don't want her wandering out there by herself either. You may be a pain in the ass, but at least you know how to take care of yourself!"

Cid stood there glaring at her. For a moment she hesitated, then shrugged and walked off toward the hills, perhaps mollified by his backhanded compliment.

Even so he heard her muttering to herself as she left.

She walked up into the hills, climbing quickly and with the ease of someone long used to traveling in this kind of terrain. Truth be told, the land around them now reminded her a lot of Da-Chao back home. Though the lighting was a little different, the landscape was quite similar. With just a bit of imagination she could picture the faces of the gods carved in the stones above her.

Yuffie reached the top of the hill. She looked around, but saw no sign of Rude and Lai Li. She stooped down and looked carefully at the ground. She could make out faint footprints in the dust, leading off to the left, up a steep slope onto the next hill. She pulled out her shuriken, just as a precaution and started up the slope. It was not very far. She crested that hill. She stopped for a moment to admire the view. The hill dropped away sharply in front of her, forming a steep canyon, the walls of which were lined with various strata of rock, each layer seeming to have it's own distinctive color. The countryside might be inhospitable, but she had to admit, it was beautiful to look at.

A muffled sound caught her attention. She turned and her eyes widened in surprise as she saw Rude and Lai Li no more than ten feet from her, lying on the ground together in a passionate embrace, the notebook, apparently forgotten, on the ground beside them, the pages being flipped by the gusty breeze that was blowing over the hill.

For a moment she just stood there, too stunned to move. Her first thought was to turn around and go back the way she had come without saying a word. But she realized that wouldn't work out. What would she tell Cid? Then she decided she'd just stand there until they noticed her. She stood there watching them, waiting for one of them to come up for air, but neither one of them seemed anxious to do so. After about a minute of so she started to tap her foot impatiently, but the two took no notice. She teased a small stone out of the dirt and kicked it down the hill. She watched it bounce down into the canyon below. She looked at Rude and Lai Li again, but they were oblivious. Yuffie sighed. Damn, didn't they ever have to breathe? Finally she decided to take a more direct approach.

"Hey!" she yelled.

Lai Li sprang to her feet, her eyes falling on Yuffie immediately. Her face flushed crimson as she quickly adjusted her hair and smoothed her blouse. Rude leaped up as well, his face white with surprise, his hand reaching into his jacket. He stopped and stood completely motionless when he saw Yuffie. The look on his face was so comical that she couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"What's so funny!" he snapped.

It took her a few moments to calm down enough to answer him.

"Oh that was great," she said, still snickering. "I wish I had a camera."

"Oh, Yuffie," Lai Li said. "We were just.."

"Yeah, yeah," Yuffie cut her off. "It's pretty obvious. I don't need to hear the details. Dinner is almost ready. Cid wants you to come back to camp."

Lai Li finished dusting herself off and picked up the notebook.

"We found something interesting," she said.

"I'll bet," Yuffie replied.

"In the notebook," Rude said gruffly.

"I'm sure everyone will be glad to hear it," Yuffie replied. "C'mon."

They followed her as she led them back to camp. She kept glancing back at them, while Lai Li pretended not to notice and Rude just glared at her. He continued to look at her even after they had reached camp, looking like he was expecting her to make a public announcement, but she said nothing.

Lai Li held up the notebook.

"I've translated some of what's in here," she said. "It looks like it's the personal journal of Talisheedra."

"Who?" Barret questioned.

"Remember when Ellengio first told us about the crystal materia?" Lai Li replied. "Talisheedra was the Cetra scientist who invented the shield generator."

"Oh, okay," Barret said slowly.

"Really?" Zack said, looking interested. "And it actually survived all this time?"

"Apparently," Lai Li replied. "I'd like to know what kind of material this paper is made out of. Actually, it doesn't even feel like paper. Some kind of cloth-like material."

She started examining the pages carefully.

"So did you find out anything useful?" Cid asked.

"I haven't gotten very far yet," Lai Li replied. "And I wouldn't exactly call it useful. Interesting would be a better word."

She flipped the book open and paused for a moment to find her place.

"There's a lot here about the building of the generator, but it's all pretty mundane," she said slowly. "Okay, here we go, listen to this:"

The construction is almost complete. We have been working nonstop for almost a month now, and everyone is exhausted. Sometimes I am so tired I can feel myself falling asleep right where I stand. The Chadara are tireless workers, yet even they cannot go on forever without rest. But we must get the shield up before Jenova can escape from the planet. I know they have the capability, or are very close to it. Already I have heard rumors, rumors that they may already be here on Grouchoon. They may already know what we are trying to do, and if that is so I fear for all of us. There is no doubt in my mind that if they have found out our plan they will understand it's significance, and will do everything in their power to stop us. Galmenthan does not agree with me. He still thinks the Jenova are not capable of such intelligence, of realizing what we are doing. He is such a fool! Does he still think the attack on Talcor was just luck, that Jenova didn't plan it at all? Just like those other fools in the high council, he thinks Jenova only acts by instinct. No, Talcor was the culmination of a well executed, one could even say brilliant, military campaign. But no one on the high council would ever admit that, none of them could even SEE it. They are so blinded by old traditions and their own arrogance that they cannot see Jenova as an intelligence equal and yes, even in some ways superior, to our own. For five hundred years we believed that, and it is what has led to our doom.

But I for one, will not underestimate them. Some of us have realized the truth, if only too late to save our planet. But if we can get the shield up, at least we may be able to save others. Even after they conquer Shinialynn they will not be satisfied. They are driven by the need to expand, just as we would have been given the chance. They are not so much different from us, after all. Another thought the old timers would find abhorrent. But I submit that it is true. Even after five hundred years of war, I find that I cannot hate them. At any rate, Jenova cannot be allowed to expand, not be allowed to reach other planets where they can destroy other civilizations, others who are innocent. Shinialynn is lost, but it is only one planet among many. Even though I mourn the fact that I will never set foot on it again, I will not shy away from the truth, that it is by our own hand, our own stupidity, that this has come about. We have no one to blame but ourselves.

Lai Li looked up from the book.

"The next entry starts with something unrelated. She may touch upon this again later in the book, but I haven't gotten that far yet."

"What does she mean by their own stupidity?" Amanda questioned.

"Looks like the Cetra are more like humans than even they might like to think," Zack said. "It appears their own arrogance about their superior intelligence is what led to their downfall."

"Perhaps," Lai Li said slowly. "Maybe I'll find out more later on. But it's too dark to translate anymore tonight. Besides, I smell something good."

"The foods all ready," Barret announced.

They sat down beside their chendu and quickly finished off the meal, all of them being hungry and tired from the long days journey. But even so by the time they had finished night had fallen. Most of them settled down and slipped into the tents they had pitched. Zack was about to do the same when Roshnialu came up beside him and beckoned for him to come with her.

"What is it?" he questioned.

She didn't reply, of course, just took hold of his hand and led him away. He looked back at the camp, then around them in the night, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. His hand fingered the hilt of his sword, but there was no sign of danger, and somehow her attitude did not indicate to him that there was any trouble brewing.

They climbed up a steep hill, one of the many surrounding the camp, and not far from where Lai Li and Rude had gone, actually. But they climbed higher, right to the crest of the hill. It was quite dark now, and the hill around them was shrouded in darkness, with only the stars above their heads for light, but Roshnialu led him on unerringly.

Finally they stopped. The east side of the hill faced out over a steep gully, the hills beyond stretching away in the distance. Roshnialu sat down right by the edge of the cliff and patted the ground beside her.

"What is it?" Zack said, more puzzled than ever. Nevertheless he obeyed, easing himself down beside her. She said nothing, just pointed to the east. At first he saw nothing, but then he realized there was a faint glow in the sky in that direction. Beginning to suspect why they had come up there he sat beside her in silence.

They didn't have to wait long. The faint light grew brighter, and then a sliver of silver light seemed to burst above the line of hills to the east. Zack nearly had to turn away, his eyes being so accustomed to the darkness that had until a moment ago surrounded them. But his eyes adjusted quickly. He watched in awe as the thin sliver of light grew, becoming a beacon, seeing the rounded edge looming up over the hills, waiting for the curve to reach its limits, and to start to diminish as the heavenly orb reached the midpoint in its ascent above the horizon. But it just kept getting larger, seeming to fill the sky until he gasped at the size of it. Light flooded around them, brighter than any night sky had a right to be, nearly as bright as day, yet very different. The silvery reflected light filled the landscape with an eerie glow, casting long shadows from hill and rock, and yes, even themselves. Shadows that were dark as the night had been just a few minutes before. Zack just sat there, speechless, as Shinialyn rose into the sky, nearly four times as large as the moon he was accustomed to.

For all the time they had been here, it was the first time he had seen Shinialyn in the night sky. He didn't know why they hadn't seen it earlier, on some other night. There was probably some complicated scientific explanation. Obviously Roshnialu had known this was going to occur. Not that it mattered. He wasn't thinking about that right now, he couldn't. All he could do was stare. Never in his life had he seen anything so beautiful. The planet shone like a jewel, a huge pearl in the sky, and seemed close enough that if he just extended his hand, he could wrap his fingers around it. The surface of Shinialyn showed none of the planet's features, of course, they were hidden beneath the silver energy field that was created by the shield around it. Yet looking closely at it now, he saw the surface was not featureless. Currents seemed to ebb and flow through it, like water rippling on the surface of a pond. Occasionally darker spots would appear, flaring wide and then disappearing almost as quickly, yet for a fleeting moment, he caught a glimpse of browns and blues that may very well have been the surface of the planet.

He turned to see Roshnialu looking at him, her blue eyes seeming larger than he had ever seen them, sparkling with light, her face bathed in the soft silver glow.

"It's so beautiful," he said. "Thank you, thank you for bringing me up here to see it."

She did not reply, but smiled at him, and almost without realizing it he felt her hand slip into his own. She looked up at the planet above them again, her long hair falling shimmering in the light at the slight shift of her head. Zack sat there, looking at her now.

For a long time they just sat there in silence, yet the time hardly seemed to pass at all. Zack watched as a slight breeze played across Roshnialu's features, gently brushing against the strands of her hair. She was so much like Aeris, and yet so different. He had a comfortable feeling being around Aeris, a feeling he did not get from anyone else, at least, not until now. He had always thought it was because of what had happened together, because of their love, but that wasn't really it. The real reason was because he remembered her from before. She was the only concrete thing he had from his past, and because of that he didn't want to let go, because, for all his non-caring attitude, he didn't want to be alone. But that wasn't love, he knew that even though he had been trying to hide from that truth all this time. He knew it, for if he didn't he never would have walked up on top of that hill in Gongaga, never would have given up like that.

He still was looking at Roshnialu. She turned toward him once more, noticing that he was staring at her. A slight furrow formed in her brow, a questioning look on her face, but it vanished as soon as he smiled at her.

Yet now here he was, on an alien planet, with even Aeris far away, yet he felt content, more content in fact, than he ever had since he had lost his memory. And it was all because of the woman in front of him. Aeris had been half human, Roshnialu was not even that. She was a completely alien species to him. Yet it didn't seem to matter. Somehow they had formed a bond, made a connection against all odds. After all his searching back on his world, after all the time trying to find himself, he thought it incredibly ironic that he would find peace on a world light years from his home.

Roshnialu was still looking at him, the smile slowly fading into a thoughtful expression. Gradually he found his face drifting slowly closer to hers, their eyes locked on one another.

Perhaps it was because she was one of a kind, perhaps it was because she had lost everything as well, perhaps it was just something in the air. Whatever the reason, he suddenly realized that Shinialyn was not the only beautiful thing out tonight.

And then their lips met.

Reeve sat in front of his tent, his eyes roaming over the hills that surrounded the campsite. They had decided to stop near the base of a steep butte for the night, its cliffs looming formidably over them in the darkness. They had all watched in awe as Shinialyn had risen into the sky not long ago. But the excitement of seeing the glowing orb eventually wore off, and they turned to the more mundane yet satisfying pleasure of getting some sleep. Reeve was on first watch tonight, so he was denied that pleasure, at least for a little while. Realizing that the light given off by the planet above them would make it difficult to sleep, they had moved into the shadow of the butte, shrouding themselves once more in darkness.

The camp was quiet now. Reeve wasn't sure if the others were all asleep, for, although the sound of talking had long since ceased, he could still see some of them moving restlessly.

He was a bit envious. Not that he was particularly tired. It just seemed kind of senseless to him to keep a watch. Nothing seemed to live out here. They were far away from any cities, anyplace inhabited. Nothing had bothered them since they had started their journey. It was just a precaution, he realized, and a prudent one at that. It was just that it was so boring, he almost wished sometimes that something would happen.

He watched the dark shadow of the butte for a while. It had stretched out far into the desert to the north when they had first pitched camp, but now it was much closer to him, and shrinking at an almost visible rate as Shinialyn rose into the sky. The shadow's edge stood no more than a few meters from him now. Soon the planet would break over the top of the butte and shine down on them once more. By then the camp would be asleep, not caring anymore about the light, except for the watchman, of course.

No, he didn't mind staying up. It was only for a couple of hours anyway, before Elena was to relieve him. It was just so boring, it was difficult to keep awake sometimes. What he really needed was a good radio.

The others were quiet now, all obviously asleep, or at least he thought so until he saw Aeris stir. She had been lying on her back, perhaps looking up at the stars, but now she sat up. She looked around at the others for a moment, then turned toward him. Slowly she got up and approached.

"Can't sleep?" he questioned.

She didn't answer, just stood there for a moment. Then she turned in a slow circle, looking at the silver flecked hills around them.

"It's a beautiful night," she said as her gaze returned to him.

"Yes it is," he said slowly.

"Hard to believe," she continued. "I thought our own planet was beautiful, but this one is too." She glanced up in the sky. "And Shinialyn is. And probably untold others, all up there somewhere in the heavens. The universe is filled with beautiful things. Even here, on this inhospitable world, we are surrounded by it."

Reeve wasn't really sure what to make of what she was saying. He just nodded agreeably.

"I'm glad I came here," she said. "I'm glad we all did. In spite of the danger. There is power here, the power to heal. Don't you feel it?"

Reeve paused for a moment.

"Umm, not really," he replied.

"That's because you are not letting yourself," she replied. "It's very strong here, very strong tonight. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is because the great silent one is in the sky."

She walked a few paces away, until she passed out of the shadow of the butte. Instantly she was surrounded by silver light. Almost it seemed to glow around her. She raised her hands to the planet above.

"Talk to me, oh silent one!" she commanded. "You are the home of my people. What wondrous tales could you tell me, if you were free? What tales of the Cetra?"

Reeve sat there watching her with a bemused smile. She stood motionless for a few moments, then dropped her arms.

"Nobody home?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"It doesn't matter though. Grouchoon has enough tales to tell," she said, apparently undaunted. "Even now I can hear it. It's singing Reeve. I know you can't hear it, but it is. I don't know the song, but it's beautiful too."

"100 bottles of beer in a hall?" Reeve suggested.

"Oh you are so silly," she replied. "I'm serious."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm still not used to this Cetra stuff, this talking with the planet and all. To me it's you who's acting a little odd."

"I can't help it, I feel giddy. Almost like I'm drunk," she said, spinning around again, much faster this time.

He looked at her and smiled again. He couldn't picture that.

"Drunk on moonshine?" he suggested. It seemed appropriate with the light still surrounding her.

She swept her arm in front of her.

"This is the moon," she pointed out.

"Planetshine, then," he corrected.

"I don't know," she replied. She walked over to him, back into the darkness and dropped down to her knees right beside him. "There's some kind of harmony. I can't explain it. I feel like an enormous burden has been lifted from me. I almost feel like I can fly!"

"That will certainly make the trip a lot easier for you," he commented.

She shook her head. Her hair, unbound, swirled around her.

"You're funny tonight," she said.

"I'm funny?"

"Yes," she replied firmly, leaning closer to him and looking straight at him, as if waiting for him to challenge her statement.

"Not really what I'm known for," he replied slowly.

"Just to those who don't know you," she said. "There's much more to you than meets the eye, Reeve. You're one of the most complex people I've ever met."

"Me?" he replied, sounding genuinely surprised. "On the contrary, I'm exceeding simple. There's nothing to me. There's nothing special at all. I'm an extremely ordinary person."

"No no no no," she countered, shaking her head more vigorously, until he felt her hair brush against his cheek. "You don't fool me. You can't hide from me behind your modesty. That's another thing. I've never met someone with so little ego."

Reeve made a face.

"Thanks a lot."

"No, I mean it in a good way," she said quickly. "You never ever put yourself ahead of others. You always sensitive to what other people think and feel. I find it extremely endearing."

Reeve's eyebrow arched at the word.

"There's not many men like that, Reeve" she continued. "You're one of a kind."

Reeve felt his face begin to redden.

"Oh stop," he said. "It's you who are one of a kind. You're the special one."

She put her finger up to his lips to shush him.

"Don't you try to deflect the conversation," she said. "We're not talking about me tonight. I've been thinking about this a lot, and I don't think I've ever properly thanked you for all you've done for me."

"Oh I haven't..." he began, but her warning finger cut him off.

"Don't deny it," she said. "You were willing to give your life for me. That's something I can never repay. When I found out my resurrection had been the cause of Jenova's return, it was you who tried to cheer me up, who made me realize just how important I was to you all. You always seem to be there when I need someone Reeve. Always."

Reeve looked down at the ground, thoroughly embarrassed now.

"I...it..." he stammered.

She leaned closer to him.

"Kiss me."

His head shot up.

"What?"

"Kiss me," She repeated, her face inches from his own.

"But...I...what about Zack?"

"That's part of it," she replied. "For all this time, I've held back, because I knew he needed me. I was the only one who could help him. Tifa told me a while ago to be selfish, to just make up my mind and not worry about whether I hurt anyone. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't hurt him. But now...somehow...I feel he's found his place. I don't know how I know, but he doesn't need me anymore. He's healed."

Reeve just sat there looking at her for a long time.

"Even so," he said finally, glancing at the others. "Do you really want to do this right here? What will the others say?"

Aeris made a face.

"They're all asleep," she pointed out. "Besides, it's only a kiss."

"But Aeris, don't you think.." he began.

"Oh now you're being ridiculous!" she said. She grabbed hold of him and pulled him to her, pressing her lips against his. For a second he remained stiff, almost as if he were going to pull away. Then suddenly his whole body relaxed. His arms came up around her, holding her tightly. For long minutes they remained motionless. And suddenly the air around them was filled with light. Their lips parted, and Reeve saw that Shinialyn had crested the butte, and now shown down upon them, haloing Aeris in it's silver light.

"I must be dreaming," he whispered.

He could hardly believe this was happening. He reached up and caressed her cheek, as if to confirm the reality of it. She reached up and took hold of his hand.

"No, it's no dream Reeve. It's real."

"My god," he said, no louder than before. "I've thought about this moment since we were together on the southern continent. I can't believe it's actually happening."

Aeris just slipped her arms around him again. She was still looking at him, her eyes dark pools in the light.

"I love you Aeris," his voice barely to be heard.

She smiled.

"I know you do," she said, just as softly. "I've known from the beginning, I think. I just wish I could have appreciated it sooner. I didn't want to cause you any pain."

His grip tightened on her.

"It was all worthwhile," he replied. "I'd wait a thousand years, if that's what it took."

She smiled and leaned closer once again.

"Kiss me," she said.

This time there was no hesitation.