**Shevirat ha-Kelim**

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**Shevirat ha-Kelim**

by [Lyra_Sanzennine](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Lyra_Sanzennine)

**Summary**

*The Breaking of the Vessels.* AU (Canon divergence).
Power and submission. Meteor and Holy. Atonement and forgiveness.

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“So I’m your bride now?” she asked bitterly as he let her slide down the length of his body to land on her feet.

“Marriage was once defined by sex and childbirth. So in a manner of speaking, yes.” He smirked. “Can you be trusted not to run away?”

“Where would I go that you couldn’t find me?”
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Important notes: This story takes place when Sephiroth is in his early 30s and Aeris is in her mid 20s

This is a work of fantasy. I am a full advocate for safe, sane, and consensual BDSM. Fantasy is different from reality. Rape culture is a real problem. If I ever met this version of Sephiroth in real life, even if he looked like Hugh Jackman’s Wolverine, I would run screaming in the opposite direction, and you should too.

That said, my sexuality is what it is, and I find consensual BDSM erotica just kinda…boring. Consent in real life is sexy and a non-negotiable requirement. Consent in fiction limits my ability to explore the themes that this story is built on.

Lastly, if you happen to identify with Sephiroth in this story, seriously, remember: safe+sane+consensual. Also, use safewords. And take care of your sub - we have delicate hearts sometimes and sub drop is scary shit.

Please consume responsibly.

Acknowledgements:

Lilly_White, for being the bestest long-time fan and beta reader that I totally don’t deserve. Go read “Border of Taboo.” It’s so rich and mature, and all of her writing is objectively better than mine. I may not have written this story if it wasn’t for her messages and continuous support.

sakurablossomhime for beta reading, tolerating my long rambling emails, writing me whole essays on characterization and sharing all the feelings. *Muah*

Inspirations:

Ayaheartright’s “Checkmate: Schemes and Subjugation” - so good. so up my alley, in fact, that I debated whether I should even write this story, thinking maybe I didn’t have anything to add to the world that wasn’t already in here.

Chthonia’s “Invictus” – everything I wish I could pull off but am completely unable to. I have read and reread this unfinished story for almost a decade.

Lisalu's "A Glad Day" - an epic length fanfic that has haunted my soul probably for over a decade.
Shevirat ha-Kelim (The Breaking of the Vessels)

The ten vessels that were meant to contain the emanation of God's light were unable to do so. Will, Wisdom and Understanding remain, but all other values have been shattered.

The Breaking of the Vessels is a fresh start, and a challenge to the structures that we equate with our own civilized life. It is, in short, an eruption of chaos into the heart of our spiritual, conceptual, moral and psychological structures.

-Adapted from Lurianic Kabbalah

Prologue

How did it come to this, Aeris wondered? She closed her eyes as she ran her tongue down the long, smooth length of Sephiroth’s cock.

Today should have been her wedding day. The day she became Mrs. Fair, after seven blissful years.

She looked up at Sephiroth and re-positioned herself at his feet. Green eyes stared down at her steadily as he sipped his whiskey. Leaning forward to take him into her mouth, she felt fear and arousal coil in her belly when her throat contracted against the intrusion. She took a moment to breathe deeply through her nose and pressed forward.

Did he notice?

Would he punish her again for poor performance?

She tried to remember her black haired SOLDIER and his thousand watt grin. The way he would suddenly scoop her up in his arms to plant sloppy wet kisses on her mouth. *Eww, Zack!* She would always exclaim.
Today he would have slid that little gold band onto her fourth finger.

Aeris reached up and touched the circlet that rested just above her clavicles. The one that Sephiroth had screwed shut around her throat the day after he’d fucked her for the very first time.

Zack had always been so gentle when they made love. Nothing like this. There was nothing soft about the way Sephiroth’s fist curled in her hair, pulling her upwards. Though it didn’t hurt, exactly - he always grabbed enough to distribute the pressure across her skull, and she knew his movements well enough by now to rise at the first sign.

She climbed onto his lap, all thoughts of her once-fiancé driven out by the touch of fingers sliding into her pussy. Her mouth opened under the insistent pressure of his lips. She was so wet – she was always wet for him – the tops of her inner thighs slick with arousal.

She stroked the line between his pectorals absentely as she moaned into his mouth.

“What are you?” he asked, lips warm against the shell of her ear.

She shivered in his arms. “I’m your slave,” she responded automatically, breath hitching as he pressed up against that spot deep inside her.

He made her beg him to fuck her, and the pornographic phrases poured from her lips, varied and shameless, because she doesn’t try to resist anymore.

He carried her to the bed and placed her down on hands and knees. Pressed down on the center of her back until she arched to his satisfaction. Then he entered her.

How did it come to this?

Chapter End Notes

Ok so....I should warn you - I like Sephiroth unrepentantly evil. So this story gets dark and psychologically rough.

But here are my promises dear reader:

1. There's a carefully planned happy ending!

2. I am not going to glorify rape in the sense that Aeris will absolutely not just like...be ok with all this because wow it feels so good *eyeroll*

3. The resolution to this story does not revolve around Sephiroth discovering that his parents are Lucrecia and Vincent instead of Jenova and Hojo and suddenly turning into a good guy.

I hope you enjoy reading this story. I have certainly enjoyed writing it.

-Lyra
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 1

Aeris stared at Tseng in shock as he prepared the needle and tourniquet.

“You can’t do this,” she said, her voice surprisingly firm.

Tseng’s lips pressed together in a grimace. He looked up from the tools in his hands to the terrified young woman he’d stolen off the streets of Midgar. “I’m sorry. My orders come from the top.”

From the top. That could only mean one thing.

“You’re telling me Sephiroth ordered you to kidnap me and take a blood sample?” Aeris blinked. “Why?”

Tseng shrugged, but she could tell he knew what this was about.

“Tseng, please,” Aeris begged. “I’m supposed to get married in six weeks. Please, you don’t have to do this. Just let me go. I won’t mention this to anyone.”

He looked at her with pity in his eyes as he stepped forward and motioned for her to sit on the lone arm chair in the room. “You know I can’t do that.”

Aeris stepped backwards until her leg brushed the chair. He put a hand on her shoulder and gently but firmly guided her to sit.

“Oh Gaia, what is happening?” Aeris breathed. “Does Zack know this is going on?”

“I doubt it,” he responded.

“What are you going to do with my blood?” Aeris asked, a note of panic in her voice.

He shrugged again as he wrapped the tourniquet around her arm and flicked her vein. “I don’t know the specifics. But I’ve also been ordered to get a urine sample and deliver them to the labs.”

Aeris barely felt the needle puncture her skin. Her vision swam as the dark fluid rose slowly and steadily up the needle body. Laboratory testing. Biologic samples. All her worst nightmares suddenly come true.

She had thought - foolish in hindsight perhaps - but she had thought she was finally safe. When Zack had returned from that Nibelheim mission seven years ago and told her that something had… happened with the general…when months later it was announced that Sephiroth had murdered the Shinra family and seized control of the company, the military, and the official government….when the Turks had stopped following her in the aftermath of the coup…even then it had taken years for
her to stop watching her back and jumping at shadows.

And now she was back in the lion’s den. The players had changed, but the game was the same. 

Tseng unwrapped the tourniquet from her arm and tucked it and the blood sample into his navy suit. He pulled out a small, clear plastic container with an orange lid.

“The bathroom’s through that door,” he said, handing her the container. “Please, for your own sake, don’t take too long and force me to come in there to check on you.”

Aeris licked her dry lips and took the plastic object from him. She walked in the direction he’d pointed to and numbly opened the door and shut it behind her.

She stared at the offending specimen collection device and contemplated breaking it under her shoe and telling Tseng to go fuck himself. But what would the point of that be? She knew he had the physical power and legal immunity to drag her to the labs in Midgar Tower so that the scientists could extract whatever they wanted from her.

It would be best to comply for now. There would be an opportunity to escape, but that opportunity was not in this bathroom, with its simple facilities and lack of windows.

She left the bathroom minutes later and wordlessly handed Tseng the sample. With her heart trying to pound its way out of her chest, she didn’t have the emotional bandwidth to feel embarrassment.

Tseng took the container and placed it in the pocket of his trousers. He straightened his suit and then nervously cleared his throat.

“I need you to take off everything you’re wearing and give them to me. Then I will leave.”

Aeris took a deep breath to calm the adrenaline coursing through her body.

“Is this what you do, Tseng?” she asked him. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, and she shook slightly with rage and terror. “Abduct innocent women and…and…”

He wasn’t looking her in the eyes. He kept his gaze fixed somewhere above her right ear. “Aeris, I am not doing this to you because I want to. But I am a professional and I will follow my orders. Please take off everything you’re wearing, including any jewelry.”

Aeris raised her left hand to her chest protectively, fingering the emerald solitaire that was her engagement ring.

“Tseng. Tell me why I’m here,” she demanded quietly. “Why did Sephiroth order you to do this?”

He shook his head. “I’m sure he will tell you himself, soon enough. Now, please, I can’t stay here all day. There are other things I need to do. Just take everything off before I do it for you.”

Aeris bit down on her lip and felt tears prick at her eyes. She blinked them away.

She pulled the ring from her finger and handed it to him, trying to think through the despair that coursed through her. He took it from her without a word, still not meeting her eyes, and placed it in his breast pocket.

Her fingers felt fat and clumsy as she unbuttoned her dress and slid it off her shoulders, her hands were shaking so badly. She let the material pool around her ankles and then kicked it to the side. She bent down and unbuckled her sandals before stepping out of them.
Then she looked at him and waited.

“Aeris,” he said though gritted teeth.

An angry flush stained every inch of her pale skin from forehead to cleavage. She reached behind her back and unsnapped her bra, letting it fall to the floor. Then hooked her thumbs into the band of her panties and bent down to step out of them. She kicked the fallen garments towards her crumpled dress and folded her arms in front of her chest.

“Happy?” she choked out.

She saw him give her a once over before walking over to her discarded clothes and shoes and gathering them in his arms.

She contemplated kicking him in the head while he was bent down, but she knew enough about self-defense and her own meager abilities to know that she would not be able to knock him unconscious with a single blow, which would mean engaging in a fruitless tussle that she would rather not think about.

He straightened and cleared his throat. “I also need you to hand over the ornament in your hair.”

Aeris gasped and her hand shot to the white materia in her ponytail without thinking. Every hair on her body suddenly stood on end as her instincts reacted to this sudden primal threat. She would never have guessed that being stripped naked would feel like nothing compared to the fear of being separated from her mother’s heirloom.

“No,” she said. Her eyes darted towards the door that led out of the room they were in.

Tseng looked at her. The seconds ticked by. Then he sighed and walked towards a small table with two simple wooden chairs set against the wall behind him. He placed her articles on the table and then turned towards her.

She ran for the door without another thought.

His hand closed around her upper arm and she felt her body wrenched backward. Gaia, for such a slim-built man he sure punched above his weight class. She felt herself crushed against his lean body and his other arm wrapped around her to pin her arms down by her sides. With his eyes fixed on her hair, he reached up and grasped the small white orb atop her ponytail and yanked. Her head jerked backwards with the force but the elastic snapped almost immediately, causing Aeris’s face to collide with his lapel.

He quickly released her, placed the white materia in the same breast pocket that held her engagement ring, and strode over to collect her other things. Without another word, he opened the door, stepped out, and shut it behind him with a loud bang.

Aeris lunged at the door and grasped the handle, but unsurprisingly, it didn’t budge.

She turned her back to the door and allowed herself to collapse onto the ground, burying her face in her hands. Tears fell, wet against her palms, as she tried to process how her life had been turned on its head so quickly.

It couldn’t have been more than an hour or two ago when she had started locking up her flower shop for the day. She remembered humming tunelessly to herself and thinking about how good Zack’s lasagna would be when she got home. It was pretty much the only thing he’d learned to cook, and there were few things better in life than eating pasta on the couch with her fiancé while binge
watching the latest dramas.

*The Flower Girl* was a dream come true. She and Zack had spent years scrimping and saving to open that shop, a tiny above-plate storefront that proudly displayed her skills. She’d picked out the aquamarine color and painted the walls herself. The tall windows let the sunlight in and kept her and her flowers warm throughout the day and well into the dusk. She grew all her goods herself, and her clients quickly realized that Aeris sold blooms that couldn’t be found anywhere else in the city.

Between the revenue from her store and Zack’s very decent First Class soldier salary, it would only be another year before they could afford a down payment on a modest above-plate flat for Elmyra.

As she’d slid her key into her store’s front door lock, with images of her mom strolling the streets of Upper Midgar and gooey lasagna in her mind, a moist rag had been suddenly pressed over her face. A sweet chemical smell had assailed her senses and she’d clawed at the arm around her chest, barely registering navy blue fabric in her peripheral vision.

She’d woken up in this room, groggy and disoriented.

Aeris looked up and brushed away the tears. The adrenaline was dissipating, leaving what would no doubt turn into a pounding headache in its wake.

The room she was locked in was simple, almost sterile. Off-white walls and dark hardwood floors. The armchair she had sat in earlier as Tseng stole her blood was grey and velveteen and surprisingly plush. An area rug sat beneath it and a small table stood beside it.

To the left was a round table and two chairs, and beyond those pieces of furniture was a large bed covered in white and grey bedding with another area rug beneath it.

No windows.

Was this to be her prison?

She supposed it was better than Hojo’s lab.

She really didn’t want to think about what Sephiroth had brought her here for.

Was Hojo even alive? There had never been an announcement about him after the coup, since all of his research was highly classified.

Aeris struggled to her feet and shivered, noticing the cold air against her naked skin for the first time. She padded over to the bed and pulled the comforter off of it and onto the floor, barely noticing the rich, smooth quality of the fabric. She pulled the flat sheet free and draped it around herself.

Tseng had said that Sephiroth would tell her why she’d been kidnapped. That meant he would be here at some point. She wasn’t about to prance around naked in front of him when he finally deigned to show up. But until then, she needed to sleep. It was probably late into the night by now, and the pounding in her skull that kept time with her pulse was becoming unbearable.

She picked the comforter back up and crawled into bed beneath it, trying to think of how she could possibly hold her own against the most powerful man on the planet.
Aeris was lying with her head beneath the covers, hiding from the light she’d neglected to turn off, when she heard the soft sound of the door opening.

She threw the comforter off and sprang up to a sitting position.

She sucked in her breath. Nothing would have prepared her for this moment.

He stood across the room in full military regalia. When he had merely been Shinra’s great general, he’d always worn his leather combat uniform and armor. As the current de fact leader, she’d seen him on TV in crisp suits more often than not. But she knew he was also SOLDIER’s commander in chief, and here he was in front of her, silver hair a sharp contrast to the clean black panels of his sharply cut uniform. White gloves encased his hands, one of which held a slim folder.

He regarded her impassively.

There had been so many things she’d been planning on saying to him.

Who do you think you are? You can’t do this to me! I have rights! Please let me go home, I’m sure this was all just a bad decision made in haste and no one needs to know about it it’s fine please just let me go home to Zack he must be so worried what are you going to do when he files a report on me I mean you can’t just keep me hidden here forever that is actually certifiably insane this can’t be happening oh Gaia.

She couldn’t find her voice.

He walked slowly over to the table and sat down on one of the chairs, facing her. He placed the folder on the table.

“Aeris,” he said gently. “Please, join me.” He gestured at the empty chair across from him.

She swallowed, then pressed her lips together in determination. She pushed the covers off her legs and stood up with as much dignity as she could muster. It was not easy to walk over to him while clutching the sheet to her body with her fists, trying to keep from tripping over the wayward corners.

She carefully lowered herself into the chair, and adjusted the sheet to hug her shoulders more tightly.

She swallowed again before summoning her voice. “Why am I here?”

His gaze on her face was more intimidating than she could have imagined. She was accustomed to the eerie sensation of looking at mako eyes. She had long gotten used to Zack, but his bright blue eyes were always alight with a smile, the corners crinkling as he teased her when she went fishing for compliments by asking inane questions like does this dress make me look fat?

These glowing green eyes were framed by thick dark lashes beneath silver eyebrows and there was no laughter in them.

She imagined that if she asked him a stupid question, he might just calmly reach across the table and choke the life out of her.

“Aeris Gainsborough, daughter of Gast and Ifalna Faremis,” he said conversationally. “I knew your father, before he fled north with your mother.”

Her mind raced through the math. “You…knew my father…you would have been a child then,” she
said softly. She had not expected this conversation.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Professor Gast was a brilliant man, and one of the few scientists I actually respected. I saw him as the father I never had.”

Aeris blinked at him.

He studied her. His eyes raked her up and down and Aeris was suddenly acutely grateful for the table between them.

Finally she cleared her throat and said, “Sephiroth…Sir….Can you please tell me why I’m here?” And without clothes, her mind added silently.

“Seven years ago,” he answered, “I discovered something in Nibelheim – the truth about my heritage.” He paused. “I discovered that I was the last Cetra.”

Aeris felt her mouth slip open. So that’s what happened on that fateful mission that had triggered a turning point in global history. But what did he mean he was the last Cetra? What madness had created this super soldier? She knew that he was wrong - knew without a doubt that she and her mother were the last of the Cetra people, but she damn well wasn’t about to bring that up now.

“I thought that for over six years, until I finally had enough time to read through the rest of the research archives and Professor Hojo’s secret documents. You see, Aeris, I knew that you and your mother were held in the labs all those years. But I thought you both died during your escape.”

He reached across the table and held her chin gently between forefinger and thumb. Aeris flinched but held still, too scared to pull away.

“Imagine my delight when I discovered that there’s still a Cetra female on this planet.”

His words felt like a physical blow, knocking the wind out of her. She wrenched away from him and leaned as far back as the chair would allow.

“And as the descendent of the highly esteemed Professor Gast, I have decided that you are, in fact, the only creature on this planet worthy of bearing my children.”

The blood and urine samples. He was testing her for…

“We will wait until your lab results come back, of course. Tseng tells me you’re a healthy, active young woman and that you’ve been monogamous with Commander Fair for seven years. But I am a cautious and patient man.”

Aeris felt the blush creep up her cheeks and her mind went into overdrive. She could barely comprehend his words. Terror froze her body in its place as she gaped openly at him. Images rushed through her head, of herself heavy with child, of Zack pacing anxiously at home, of the silver haired world leader that had no doubt featured in nearly every straight woman’s sexual fantasies at some point, of herself locked forever in this godforsaken room with the power to control her own body stripped from her, of Sephiroth, *The Sephiroth* for Gaia’s sake holding her down and-

“You had me abducted by the Turks. For breeding. You brought me here to breed.” It wasn’t even a question coming out of her mouth. Just impossible statements. What century was this? These things did not happen. He couldn’t just-

But of course he could. Just as Hojo had held her and Ifalna for all those years.
He was the highest ranking person on the planet. He had the power to make her disappear. He had the power to make anyone who would care about her disappearance disappear.

“Yes,” he said. “I know this must be hard for you to absorb. As I said, I’m a patient man. This may not sound reassuring right now, but I do promise that you will enjoy our…relationship.”

He was insane. Certifiably, criminally insane. Aeris clenched her fists tighter in the swaths of cloth covering her body.

He opened the folder that lay between them to reveal a black pen and several sheets of blank paper.

“There is the matter of your mother and fiancé,” he said, pushing the folder and its contents towards her.

“You will write them each a letter explaining that you’ve discovered something very important about your heritage, and that you needed to investigate it.”

Aeris gaped at him. “Six weeks before my wedding. You expect me to convince them that I left on a random adventure without any notice six weeks before my wedding?”

“I leave it to you to convince them as needed,” he replied, unfazed.

“And why, exactly, should I do this?” she asked. She was afraid of the answer, of course she was afraid. But she needed to hear it anyway.

“Simple,” he answered. “If you comply with my wishes, Commander Fair will continue on in his fine career and Elmyra will be relocated to a nice little neighborhood in Kalm. If I find you especially pleasing, I may even arrange for her to win a minor lottery, enough so that she can live the rest of her life in comfort.”

He paused and stood up, looking down on her.

“If you choose to defy me, I will send Commander Fair on increasingly dangerous missions until he dies, and I will have the Turks arrange an unfortunate accident for Elmyra. Then I will have Tseng take you to the Midgar Tower labs where you will spend the rest of your life. I will have you strapped down for my use and you will bear my children anyway. If, or more likely when, that becomes tedious, you will be impregnated through artificial insemination. Under carefully monitored lab conditions, I think we should be able to get more than a dozen singleton offspring from you before you finally hit menopause.”

He said it all so calmly, as a matter of inarguable fact.

All her worst fears laid bare for her to live into.

He leaned over and picked up the pen between pristine white gloved fingers. He handed the pen to her and she took it automatically, the instrument that she would use to write away her freedom.

“Make your choice,” he said, before turning and striding from the room.

The door clicked closed behind him.
Chapter End Notes

Good lord, Sephiroth. What the fuck?
Chapter 3

Aeris sat at the table for a long time after Sephiroth left, numbly processing her fate. She stared at the blank pages in front of her before pushing them away and rising to her feet.

She had to think. This was no time for hysterics.

She turned her head towards the bathroom. First, a shower. Then, sleep. When she woke, and she could only assume that would be around morning time, given the lack of sunlight or a clock to differentiate the hours, then she would start on the letters.

What if he came back before she finished, a distant part of her wondered? Well, he would just have to wait then. He couldn’t very well expect her to work emotional miracles. He’d left the burden of the letters’ contents and subtleties to her. She couldn’t string a single coherent sentence together right now if she tried.

Aeris let the sheet slip down her body to the floor as she passed the bed.

When she reached the shower and stepped into the tub, she briefly entertained the idea of drowning herself. But really, what was the use. She didn’t have it in her, it probably wouldn’t work, and if it did, she wouldn’t put it past Sephiroth to exact vengeance against her loved ones. She couldn’t be so selfish.

The warm water on her face and body made her feel much more human, heating through her cold limbs and fingers.

Could she actually go through with this? Aeris shuddered at the thought. She didn’t really know anything about the man, other than his reputation as a super soldier and military genius. He didn’t make many public appearances, preferring to delegate much of those responsibilities to his ministers. But he was a decorated war hero and he’d overthrown Shinra by spilling an awful lot of high profile blood, so at the very least she knew he was capable of great violence.

If she was going to be subjected to violence one way or another, surely she should choose the less awful path?

What did it matter anyway? It’s not like he’d given her a real choice. She would do anything to protect Zack and her mother.

Oh Zack. Zack. Zack who at this moment must be worried sick about her. Who had probably already called her mother to ask if Elmyra had seen her. Zack who she had no doubt would scour the planet end to end, corner to corner, to find her and bring her home.
She had to keep Zack safe from the totalitarian powers that could so easily destroy his life, as they had apparently already done to hers. She had to keep Zack safe from himself, because she didn’t doubt that if he got too close to the truth and became a nuisance to Sephiroth, he would find a way to end her former lover.

Former.

She would probably never see Zack again.

Gaia, she might never see anyone else again.

No, stop that. Breathe. She calmed herself, forcing her mind to focus on the feeling of her fingers massaging the shampoo into a rich lather all over her skull.

She didn’t know what game her abductor was playing at, but he had been so civil during their exchange, up until that last bit. He did have the power to lock her in the labs and do whatever he wanted to her. It must mean something that he was choosing to do this instead.

It was simple really. Not much of a choice at all. She would do what she had to do. Just as she’d always done, growing up in the Midgar slums.

First, keep Zack and Elmyra safe. Second, learn what she could about the madman that had decided to play god with her life and find a way to manipulate him into making a mistake. Third, find a way to get the white materia back.

Fourth, try to hang on to her dignity.

Aeris’s fingers drifted to her lower abdomen. She stared, unseeing, at the tiled wall.

How long could she keep him from finding that little copper device?

When the door opened the next evening – at least she assumed it was evening – Aeris was seated at the table, her face in her hands, two completed letters laid out in front of her, and most of the other sheets of paper she’d be given lying in crumpled balls around her chair.

Some of the drafts were nonsensical ramblings. Two had attempts to include a hidden message to Zack before she had torn them in frustration, crushed them between her palms, and hurled them at the wall.

More were perfectly serviceable works rendered useless by tearstains.

Aeris looked up to see Tseng roll in a serving cart loaded with covered platters, a bottle of wine, stemware, and what Aeris dared to hope were clothes. He slowed to a stop as he approached her.

“So he’s turned you into a maid?” she asked him. “No job’s too low for a Turk, I guess.” She glared at him through bleary eyes rubbed red.

He didn’t rise to her provocation. “I told you, I’m a professional. Let’s just say it’s a point of pride that Sephiroth trusts me with his most sensitive tasks.”
Aeris scoffed at that and looked away.

“Here,” Tseng said, as he handed her a folded pile of red fabric.

She took it with barely a glance. The cloth was soft and light in her hand.

“You have ten minutes to make yourself presentable,” he said. “Use them wisely.”

She gritted her teeth and headed for the bathroom. She slammed the door shut behind her. Her nerves were on edge after a long day battling despair and she hadn’t eaten in maybe thirty hours. The gnawing pain in her stomach wasn’t doing her mood any favors.

Aeris let the bed sheet that had become her sole source of comfort drop to the floor around her ankles and she shook out the garment Tseng had given her. It was a simple, knee length red dress with a modest keyhole opening in the front. The artfully crinkled outer layer was lined with a soft inner sheath, and two wide ribbons trailed down from the sides.

She pulled the outfit over her head and looped the ribbons into a large bow at the small of her back. It didn’t escape her notice that Tseng had not given her anything else to wear. Humiliation and fear fought to the forefront of her thoughts before she shoved them back. She had survived for over thirteen years in the slums before moving above-plate with Zack. She could be tough as nails when she needed to be.

Aeris turned to face the mirror above the vanity.

No question about it – she looked terrible.

Her green eyes were bloodshot and swollen, her auburn hair tangled and standing out in unkempt loops.

Maybe she should just go back out like this.

Aeris sighed to herself and admitted that probably wasn’t the safest thing to do. She knew what she’d been brought here for. She didn’t want to find out what Sephiroth would do if he found her un-presentable.

She reached out and turned the cold water tap on and splashed her face liberally. Then she started opening the vanity drawers to see if there were any tools or supplies. The bathroom was surprisingly well stocked – all the necessities had been prepared, including packages of toothbrushes and toothpaste, a hair dryer, combs and brushes, elastics. Even an assortment of feminine hygiene products. She guessed that meant Sephiroth was reasonable enough to realize that he wasn’t likely to impregnate her on the first try. That was heartening.

There was also an entire drawer full of quality make up. Black mascara and eyeliner. Various shades of lipstick. She wondered vaguely who had been given the task of curating that collection.

It didn’t matter. She slammed the drawer shut. She might have enough presence of mind to clean herself up properly before Sephiroth arrived - it was a matter of self-preservation – but he couldn’t expect her to doll herself up for him now, and in the mere ten minutes she’d be given to get ready.

She hastily brushed her teeth, combed her long hair out, and plaited it down her back.

Her fingers lingered at the back of her head by the top of her braid. The white materia. Her mother’s heirloom. The reminder of its absence sent a pang through her chest.
When she stepped back out into the bedroom, Tseng and the serving cart were gone. One place setting at the table had food and cutlery, the other had only the folder with Aeris’s completed letters inside. The half empty bottle of red wine sat uncorked, along with two full glasses in their proper places. The discarded drafts had been taken away, and the only thing that sat on the floor by the chair closest to the food was a beautiful pair of red stiletto heels. Utterly impractical, certainly painful to walk in for more than a few minutes, the open toed shoes flaunted crisscrossed satin bands at the front, wrapped around the heel and ankle, and crisp little red bows at the back of each ankle.

She sat down in her chair, bent to pick up each shoe, unbuttoned the ankle straps and slipped them on. They were exactly the type of thing that Aeris might admire in a department store but would never wear- or be able to afford - but foot pain was unlikely to be a problem tonight.

So she was to be romanced before she was raped. Aeris wasn’t sure that made things any better.

She looked at the plate of food in front of her. The savory scent of garlic and soy made her mouth water. A line of perfectly seared rare tuna stakes were lined up across the center of the plate, with creamy mashed potatoes and glistening bright green sugar snap peas nestled against either side.

Her stomach let out a loud growl. Was she meant to wait for him?

Impossible. She was too famished and the meal was too enticing for restraint. A part of her wished she could slow down to savor the rich texture and exotic flavors of the fish. She had only had such a nice meal a handful of times in her life, since Zack’s earnings had been diligently funneled into digging her and Elmyra out of poverty.

She had cleaned more than half her plate when the door opened. She looked up and froze, fork in midair.

He was in civilian wear this time. A plain white dress shirt with the top two buttons undone, tucked into crisply pleated black slacks. The shine on his black leather Oxfords was almost obnoxious.

Aeris placed her fork back onto her plate. Was she meant to stand up?

“No need for formalities,” he said as he approached her. “You must be starving. I’m glad you’re enjoying your meal.”

She kept her eyes trained on him for a few moments in silence as he sat down across from her. Then she resumed eating slowly, deeply uncomfortable under his gaze.

He opened the folder and scanned the contents of both letters. A smile flitted across his lips.

“Well done,” he said. He closed the folder and pushed it to the side. “And good choice. To your new life.” He raised his glass to her.

Aeris almost choked. How could he be so cruel?

He lowered the glass without drinking when it became clear she wasn’t following suit.

“Come now, Aeris. You have everything to gain by pleasing me, and much to lose by trying my patience,” he said. He swirled his wine in a well-practiced movement.

“Lose…” she responded. “You just took my whole life away from me.” She clenched her fists in her lap and looked down, unwilling to meet his eyes.

“I think there are worse things in life than coming under my power and being cared for as you have
been.” She could hear amusement in his voice. “There’s been an endless line of women trying to do just that for over fifteen years.”

Aeris mentally scoffed. How unsurprising for the world dictator to turn out to be a megalomaniac.

She thought of Zack, the way he called when he was going to be late. The way he always wore a jacket, even though he never felt the cold, just in case she needed another layer. The way he complained about being a pack mule as he proudly carried all their bags with a broad smile on his face.

“Then why couldn’t you have bothered them instead of kidnapping me before my wedding? I’m only a half Cetra anyway!”

He didn’t answer, so Aeris glanced up to see him studying her.

“I’ll make you a deal tonight,” he said, “If you are agreeable, and if you answer my questions to my satisfaction, I will answer three of your questions in return.”

Aeris looked heavenwards and took a deep breath. He wanted to play truth or truth with her before raping her. Everything that had happened in the last thirty hours of her life was utterly ridiculous.

But three questions – that needed some thought. She couldn’t let this opportunity slip away. Information was power.

“Fine,” she said, as she grasped the delicate stem of her goblet. She lifted it in his direction and bit out the words, “To my new life.”

The crystalline clink of their glasses rang in the silence.

The smooth red liquid filled her mouth with flavors of plum, black cherry, and a hint of oak and pepper. She thought about downing the glass – it would be easier if she suppressed all her inhibitions and higher functions. It would be easier to give up her freewill, that sharpened spirit, and blame it on the alcohol. None of this was her fault, and if she was going to be raped and used and forced to forfeit control of her own damn body, then wasn’t she entitled to inebriation such that all that was left was a tall, gorgeous, near perfect specimen of masculinity that maybe she could pretend she chose?

But no. Information. Power. She needed her wits.

A little chemical assistance wouldn’t hurt. Just enough to take the edge off her nerves.

She resumed eating. She wasn’t about to waste any bit of the precious food in front of her.

And Sephiroth began to question her.

First, he wanted to know about her wedding.

So she told him, between bites of her meal, with hatred burning black and hot in her chest. She told him about the small ceremony and celebration that she had planned with Zack’s army friends, Elmyra and her knitting circle ladies, the girl who worked part-time for her at the flower shop, and her friends from the horticulture club and the environmental protection organization she volunteered at. She told him about how it was going to be a potluck because the wedding budget was so tight, they didn’t want to spend frivolously on a party for one night when they had the rest of their lives to plan for and her mother to take care of.

He wanted to know about her dreams.
So she told him, eyes downcast, about how *The Flower Girl* was her pride and joy. She wondered how long it would be before the building owners reclaimed the space and the shop was torn open and renovated for someone else to move into. She told him how the store was only her short and midterm goal, and how she dreamed of leading a movement to end the use of mako energy, and help usher in a new era of clean technology, because she was a Cetra, and each night the Planet’s cries rang through her soul.

She wondered if this was his sick idea of foreplay. Her heart felt heavy, waterlogged, at the thought of all her plans and dreams, snuffed out because a higher power had decided that she was better used to make him babies. She was certain that the only reason her eyes remained dry was because they had shed all their tears earlier that day.

He wanted to know about her communion with the Planet.

So she told him about the deep, aching sensation of Gaia crying for reprieve. She told him about the peace and tranquility of being held in The Mother’s embrace in her times of need. She told him about the unshakeable knowledge that time was an ever flowing current that could not be stopped, but that its river would soon run dry and leave all the children parched and dying.

He refilled his glass and then stood up.

She lifted hers and emptied its contents into her mouth.

“I had always thought that I was alone in this communion,” he said. “I am grateful to have found you, Aeris.”

*What?*

Aeris stared after him as he walked towards the armchair and lowered himself into the seat.

She knew, in no uncertain terms, that she *was* the last Cetra. Whatever delusions he was harboring, they were dangerous. What was he communicating with, if not the Planet? She knew that mako did not grant SOLDIERs this ability – she’d probed Zack about it thoroughly over the years.

“Come,” he said, and motioned to the floor by his feet. “Have a seat.”

Aeris swallowed hard and stood up slowly, feeling shaky and unstable in her impractical footwear. She smoothed the dress down her front briskly and made her way over to him, thankful that she didn’t fall over.

She sat down on the lush, pale grey area rug in front of him with her legs folded together and her left arm braced against the ground for balance. Her eyes travelled from his immaculate shoes up the long, lean length of his legs and torso to rest on his mouth.

She wasn’t ready for this. She wished she had drunk more wine.

“When did you lose your virginity?” he asked, his tone almost conversational, but his gaze intense.

No, she wasn’t ready, and she didn’t like this new line of questioning at all. She felt her cheeks burn.

“When I was nineteen,” she answered, jaw tight.

“With Commander Fair?”

She nodded.
“How often does he fuck you?” he asked.

She felt her back straighten and her posture become defensive. “He doesn’t – why are you asking these questions?”

Sephiroth sipped his wine. “That doesn’t matter. What matters is whether or not you want a chance to ask yours.”

Aeris clenched her fist by her leg. “We make love maybe once or twice a week. Less recently,” she admitted. They’d both been so busy of late.

He nodded absently as he contemplated her. “Do you come when he fucks you?”

Her whole body was vibrating in anxiety and aggravation.

When she and Zack made love, it was long and leisurely, playful and sweet. He was always so careful with her, so responsive, adjusting pace and angle for her comfort. He loved her and he wore his heart on his sleeve. He always coaxed the sweetest climaxes from her body after he finished, and she would lie in his arms, sweaty with their limbs entangled, as he ran his fingers gently up and down the length of her side.

“No,” she answered, eyes fixed on the floor.

Sephiroth placed his glass on the side table and leaned forward. He reached out and stroked his thumb against her lower lip. She closed her eyes.

“Look at me, Aeris.”

She wasn’t entirely sure why, but she obeyed. Everything ceased to exist except for mako green.

Her breath turned staccato.

“Open your mouth.”

She swallowed and slowly complied, her lips parting as he withdrew slightly.

He entered her mouth with his forefinger, and his skin was dry and firm against her tongue. Her eyes were wide, fixed on his.

She didn’t know what to do. Zack never did this.

He slid the length of his digit along her tongue, came almost all the way out before pushing back in again, too far, triggering a spasm in her throat. Aeris flinched but fought to remain still. Then another finger was in her mouth, filling the space completely. She looked away to the side.

“Look at me.”

The pressure of his fingers changed and Aeris felt herself respond intuitively, raising her chin and tilting her head backwards. She met his eyes and wanted to melt into the floor.

He thrust his digits in and out of her mouth, slowly. She could feel his callouses against the soft tissue of her tongue. His knuckles were still mostly dry, catching against her top lip.

Then he pulled away and sat back, leaving Aeris with a shameful hot sensation between her clenched thighs.
He took a slow sip of his wine and said, “You may ask your three questions.”

Aeris blinked. She pressed her eyes closed for a moment to gather her thoughts, and shifted into a more comfortable position.

“You said you brought me here to…breed…” she started, “But that clearly isn’t the whole story. What do you want from me?”

He considered her before answering. “Most members of your gender are tedious, and needy. Even the most logical and ambitious require too much,” he waved his hand dismissively in the air, “time, attention, commitment. I saw an opportunity to rebuild the Cetra race while satisfying my needs, and I took it.”

She wanted to punch him. “So real women are too much work and you decided to turn me into your sex slave?” she translated.

“Is that your second question?”

She gulped, and hastily replied, “No! No,” she paused, thinking carefully. “My second question is, how long are you planning to keep me in this room? I mean, after I have your children,” she suppressed a shudder, “are you still going to keep me locked up? How is that even going to work?”

“I will consider that a single, multipart question, since you’ve behaved so well tonight,” he said. “The answer, my pet,” Aeris flinched at the supposed endearment “is entirely up to you. Once you have proven your loyalty and shown me that I can trust you, I will let you go wherever you please.”

Aeris’s heart was pounding so loudly it was affecting her hearing. So he sought to control her by using both carrot and stick.

One last question, then.

She forced herself to look at him with a strength and determination she didn’t feel. “Tseng took something from me – an heirloom passed down from my mother. How do I get it back?”

Sephiroth smiled at that, and the expression sent a chill through Aeris.

“I promise you this, Aeris,” he said. “Once you’ve become mine, I will return your materia to you.”

She wondered what that was supposed to mean.

“Now,” he said, leaning forwards again with his hands free, “stand up.”

He helped her up with a hand firmly on her upper arm, then raked his gaze up and down her body. Aeris trembled, feeling like a goddamn sacrificial lamb and hating him for it.

Carrot and stick, what else could she do?

“Take off your shoes,” he said.

She bent down awkwardly to unbutton the straps and enthusiastically kicked off the footwear. She straightened and looked anywhere but his face.

His large hand came up to grasp hers and he pulled her gently towards him. She let him lead her until she was sitting in his lap. His face was level with hers, and he smelled of sandalwood soap, wine, and a hint of spice.
She closed her eyes and tried to relax her body. There was no point in resisting. She consoled herself with thoughts of her new mission – freedom and the white materia. She needed to have both. If she had to debase herself to get them, well, it’s not like her pride was going to help anyone, least of all her.

His fingers found their way under her chin. “Kiss me,” he commanded.

She leaned forward and obeyed. His lips were soft and warm against hers. She tried to think of Zack. Zack who gave her sweet pecks whenever the thought struck him. Zack who kissed her with hunger and need, his tongue dancing in time with her own as his hands caressed her tenderly.

Sephiroth’s hand was in her hair, pulling the elastic from the base of her braid, and loosening the ropes of her tresses with his fingers. He slipped one strap of her dress down her shoulder, then the other, and coaxed her arms up until the straps were free and hanging down by her ribs. He grasped the garment and pulled down, exposing her breasts.

She squeezed her eyes shut in pain as he wrapped her hair around his fist in one hand and pinched her nipples roughly with the other. She sucked in air between her teeth, her head pulled backwards forcing her body to arch up to him.

He alternated between soft touches, barely grazing, and teeth clamped firmly down on her sensitive skin; warm wet tongue against the taut pink peaks of her nipples, and the bruising force of his palm manipulating her flesh.

His every movement declared that this was not an act between lovers, that he did not care for her comfort or enjoyment. This was a declaration of ownership, and Aeris had no doubt that her body would bear the marks of his proclamation the next morning.

Aeris whimpered but didn’t move.

He pushed her skirt higher up her thighs and his fingers left her breasts to slide down against the length of her slit.

“Aeris,” he said. “You’re dripping.”

She clenched her teeth and didn’t respond. She both cursed and thanked her ancestors at the same time, for this vestigial trait of evolution. Humiliation burned through her body but a part of her was grateful for her shameful physical reactions, because surely it was better to minimize the physical trauma of rape than to cling to some useless, probably masculine, notion of pride.

One finger, then another, shoved deep into her folds. He pressed upwards, relentlessly, and his thumb traced circles around her hardened clit, its path made smooth by her slick arousal.

Aeris cried out, more in pain than pleasure. The sensations he forced on her were too much, too fast. She instinctively reached out and grasped his wrist. “Please,” she breathed.

He slowed slightly, his expression unreadable. “Remove your hands,” he said.

She forced herself to let go and dropped her arms limply by her sides.

She wouldn’t look at him, and she wouldn’t cry.

Sephiroth kissed her again, claiming, demanding, and she opened her mouth and let him plunder her until he pulled back and said, “Now fuck yourself.”
She closed her eyes again. Gaia, did he have to keep using that word? She pushed the tattered shreds of her dignity from her mind and concentrated on rocking against his hand. Better this than his previous assault.

Slowly, steadily, he began to meet her thrusts with his fingers, pressing up into her body, sending aches of longing through her nerves. She hated this, and she wondered when he would get on with it.

“Aeris,” he breathed into her ear, sending goose bumps racing down her neck and arms. “You will come for me.”

What?

She stopped moving and opened her eyes, staring at him in disbelief. He met her gaze, unblinking.

“I can’t,” she whispered. There was no way. He couldn’t expect her to do that. Between fear and despair, hatred and revulsion at both herself and him, how could he expect her to achieve orgasm like this?

She wished he would just rape her and go away. Then she could curl up and cry herself to sleep. What was the point of delaying the inevitable?

He must be getting off on this. On his power over her. On his ability to make an unreasonable demand and then watch her bend over backwards to fulfill it.

She felt another wave of loathing wash through her.

“You will,” he said. “We have all night.”

She shuddered at the thought, as she realized he might be serious. That he could keep her like this for hours if needed. Wasn’t he a busy man with things to do? What had all that nonsense about women demanding too much time been about, if he was willing to stay here all night until he forced an orgasm from her?

But then again, he had probably been talking about consenting women with free will and legal rights.

An image flashed through her mind, of herself, curled on his lap, drenched in sweat and tears, too exhausted to be physically capable of climaxing. What would he do then?

Best not to find out.

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. Silver strands obscured her vision and blocked out the rest of the room, the light, her thoughts of consequences and her self-respect.

She tried to think of Zack as she ground down on his hand, tried to imagine his eyes clouded with desire, but it was too strange. The cognitive dissonance was too much. Zack would never treat her like this, would never touch her like this. Zack would happily pleasure her, unhurried, lips and tongue soft on her clit until she exploded under his mouth, crying his name.

She couldn’t think of Zack. She would burst into tears at any minute if she kept going down that path.

She breathed in deeply, taking in Sephiroth’s clean scent. She dug through her memories, back to her adolescence, when she, like every other girl, would stare up at Shinra’s recruitment posters that always featured their prized young general. She mined her memories for long forgotten fantasies of a
delicate little flower girl and the deadliest man on the planet, when she used to dream of him sweeping her off her feet and carrying her off into the sunset to do unspeakable things.

The very things he was forcing on her now.

Her muscles clenched around his fingers. Her breaths came in short gasps.

She dug for the imagined experience of standing before him, tall and proud in his leather and armor, towering a full head above her. In her fantasies, he’d never asked, just taken as he wanted, as she’d wanted him to.

His shoulders were hard and sculpted beneath her hand, his chest a firm flat plane against her inner arm. Her hair was plastered around her face from exertion.

She focused on the sensation building between her legs, the heat and pressure climbing steadily upwards. Nothing else mattered, because she had to do this. She had to come for him as he’d ordered. She was not going to find out the consequences if she failed. She would obey, she would please him, she would do exactly as he asked, because she was his now, she was his, she was –

“Come.”

Aeris cried out, her voice catching in her throat, her mouth open against the warm skin of Sephiroth’s neck, as she came, hard, spasming around his fingers as she rode the wave of her ecstasy.

Falling back to earth was a cruel sensation, and nothing would have stopped the tears that burst from her.

She felt him pull out and wipe his hand off against her thigh. He adjusted his grip on her body and then stood up. He was carrying her to the bed.

She was too tired to fight him. Too exhausted to think about what came next. Let him do what he wanted. She didn’t need to participate.

He placed her gently on the bed and pulled the covers up around her.

She blinked up at him without understanding. But the trials of the last day and a half, and her earth shattering orgasm, had left her so empty, so she just closed her eyes to let sleep overtake her.

Was it just her imagination when she heard him lean in and whisper, “From this moment on, Aeris, there are two rules that govern your life. You will obey me in all things, and you will never come without my permission.”

She felt lips against her temple, his soft breath against her hair, and then the lights were off and she was alone.
It didn’t take Aeris long to realize that he was warping her mind.

Their interactions continued like that for, a week? She’d lost track. The lights had started to turn on and off on a schedule, probably simulating daylight hours. Her days were blurred together between sleeping in, eating alone, and meditating on the nature of life, the Planet, and free will.

She’d started doing exercises to alleviate the boredom.

Sometimes he ate with her, sometimes he watched her eat. There was always wine.

There was never underwear.

She was already looking forward to seeing him each night, if only because her days were so interminably long and boring. She wasn’t going to admit that it might have anything to do with his hands or body.

Sometimes she felt the edge of hysteria seep into her chest, as she thought about what her friends would have thought.

The second time he’d touched her, she’d lain in his arms, his fingers in her mouth and pussy. He’d ordered her to suck, and she’d done so. Tentatively at first, then with firmer strokes of her tongue as his touch stoked her desire. In the end, she’d thrown her head back against his shoulder and cried out around his fingers as she came.

He’d held her as she returned to her senses, stroking her back and kissing her hair. Then he’d left.

The next night was more of the same. It was getting easier as he came to know her body and she learned to relax around him. Frightening how quickly one could get used to the unimaginable.

Once, she took a bobby pin from the bathroom and tried to pick the lock of the bedroom door. Of course that had been fruitless – she didn’t have the slightest clue what she was doing. She’d curled up in a ball against the door, much like that first night when Tseng had left her alone, dreaming of Zack and their flat, the oversized blue couch that cradled her through so many catnaps, and the heavy down comforter they would snuggle under in the cold winter nights.

She missed his jet black hair, hardened with an obscene amount of hair gel each morning. She missed the way he’d respond when she teased him about bankrupting them for hair products – the way he’d wink at her and quip, “It’s for the ladies. You know I can’t deny them these rock hard spikes.”

She missed the twinkle of mako blue that left nothing hidden of his joy and delight.

To her despondent heart, Sephiroth’s stoic, unreadable features were a poor substitute.

At some point he’d commanded her onto hands and knees on the bed, and she was so tense as he
played with her, she could barely stay upright. It was humiliating. He’d pushed her head down until she was propped up on her forearms. She’d rested her head on her wrist and he let her hide behind the curtain of her hair, her eyes clenched tight, as he pulled her hips back.

He’d dipped his thumb into her wet folds, commenting mildly on the state of her wanton cunt, before pulling out to press the slick digit against her anus. She’d gone shock still at that, every muscle in her body tense.

He’d chuckled and told her to relax as he thrust two fingers deep inside her vagina. She’d squirmed in discomfort, but he ordered her to stay still, saying that one day she would offer all her holes for his use, but that it wouldn’t be today.

It hadn’t been easy to come in that position. It may have taken her nearly an hour of desperate concentration as he manipulated her body. She wasn’t sure if she felt shame anymore, if she was beyond that or if it was shame that made her burn for his touch and ache to hear his whispered commands.

Eventually the boredom of her days prompted her to ask him for something to help pass the time.

Tseng had handed her a stack of books the next day, doing a commendable job of hiding his discomfort. She scanned the titles - The Joy of Sex, Domination and Submission, Women and Love… She scoffed and rolled her eyes, but accepted them anyway, leaving them in a pile by the head of the bed.

“Tseng,” she began tentatively, speaking to him as he set the table. “Can you tell me…are Zack and my mom ok?”

His hands stilled for a moment before continuing their work. “The Turks aren’t keeping tabs on your mother, Aeris,” he answered, “But I have no reason to believe that she’s unwell.”

“And Zack?” she prompted, heart in throat.

She walked over to help him finish the set up. It had become a part of their routine. Her situation was not Tseng’s fault. It had taken her a few days to fully accept that, but she knew that if he had refused Sephiroth’s orders, her capture and incarceration would have just fallen to someone else. Frankly, she was glad that it was him. Better the devil you know, and Tseng always seemed a bit softhearted for someone who was supposedly perfectly amoral and had probably murdered enough people in Shinra’s and Sephiroth’s names that he must have lost count by now.

Sometimes she thought she saw him looking at her with that expression in his eyes, some mercurial mixture of regret and desire. Aeris always returned those glances with a shy smile, and Tseng always blinked and returned his face to its neutral mask.

That was fine. There was something there. And she needed all the allies she could get, if she ever hoped to win back her freedom.

Tseng sighed as he handed her the cutlery. “I see Commander Fair at headquarters a few times a week. He looks tired and he’s irritable in a way that I’ve never seen before, but other than that, he seems fine.”

Aeris wanted to ask a hundred questions. Was Zack asking around about her? Had he believed the letter she’d written for him? He would have known her penmanship, but did he guess at her duress? She wasn’t even sure which outcome to hope for, and the ambivalence weighed heavily on her spirit.

“Did he ask you about me?” she finally questioned in a small voice.
Tseng looked at her sadly. She remembered that he had always been respectful of Zack. Even seemed to genuinely like him, if a Turk could be said to like anyone.

“Of course he did,” he said, “And I told him the truth – the Turks have had nothing to do with you since Shinra fell and Hojo’s research division was shut down.” He paused, considering his words, his expression uncharacteristically soft. “Aeris, if you want my advice…put Zack out of your mind. Nothing good can come from that kind of hope. If he knew where you were…it would just get him killed. You know he can’t take on Sephiroth.”

Aeris felt the sting of tears at the words that she knew to be true.

“So I should just give up hope then?” she asked in a whisper.

“No,” he said, taking her hand in his. He squeezed gently. “No, you’re too good for that. Hope is what makes you, you.” His black eyes bore into her with their intensity. “Play your cards right, and hang in there. He’s not going to keep you in this room forever.” He paused, thinking. “I can’t promise you anything. Truthfully, I’ve never seen Sephiroth act like this. He usually isn’t particularly interested in women. In the past, he would just sleep with someone occasionally, probably just to get it out of his system. So whatever’s happening between you two is uncharted territory. But that also means that you matter, Aeris.”

He let her go and stepped back.

“So make it count.”

The following night, Aeris noticed that a portable sound system had been left on the side table.

After their meal, Sephiroth retired to his armchair – when had she started thinking of it as his? – a glass of whiskey in hand. He wore black jeans that night, perfectly cut to his figure, accentuating his long, lean legs. His grey linen shirt was open at the throat.

She followed him and sat by his feet. It was automatic. He didn’t need to tell her anymore. She rearranged her short blue skirt to more modestly fold around her legs, though she wasn’t sure why she bothered.

“Aeris,” he began. “You will dance for me tonight.”

She looked up at him in surprise, shook her head in denial. Dance? Her? Little Aeris of the Sector 5 church?

There was no way she could do such a thing.

He reached over and turned the music on. Breathy notes filled the air, reminiscent of the melodies of the Cosmo Canyon natives. All earthy bass and smooth wood flute.

She tried to imagine her limbs moving in time to the slow beat of the music. No, there was no way. She prayed the floor would open up and swallow her whole. Funny how she could be naked and orgasm in front of him, but the thought of performing like this made her so nervous she feared she would throw up.
“I can’t,” she whispered. “I…”

He stared down at her from his seat, unimpressed. He moved to hand her his glass. “Do you need some courage?”

She took the glass carefully in both her hands, and licked her dry lips. She knew it was useless to deny him. He would get what he wanted from her, and it was always only a question of how much humiliation she would suffer before that happened.

Without another thought, she downed his drink, wincing at the astringent taste as it burned down her throat. She never knew why men liked the stuff.

It wasn’t enough, though.

“Can I have another?” she asked him in a small voice. He nodded.

She rose and walked over to the table that bore their empty plates and a cut crystal decanter of amber fluid. She poured herself another liberal shot and tipped it back with one smooth motion. Disgusting, but effective. She felt the room spin a bit after a few seconds. She noticed that he’d dimmed the lights.

She put the glass down on the table and poured two more fingers of the drink before carrying the glass back to Sephiroth. He took it from her and settled back in his chair.

She stood in front of him, trembling.

“Go on,” he said, gesturing at her. A wave of his hand, like an invitation.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, willing the alcohol to work its magic through her veins. The spinning sensation was almost pleasant. She swayed slightly to the music and imagined that she was at an old friend’s wedding, drunk off life and flirting with the cute brunette groomsman. She twisted her hips from side to side as she imagined making come hither eyes at her target, her arms raised above her head.

She tried to ignore the fact that her pretend dance partner kept trying to morph into Sephiroth, all tightly packed muscles, absurdly vain silver hair, and large powerful hands.

Aeris turned her back to him as she danced, trying not to think of how she must look, waving her ass from side to side. Was this what he wanted?

She turned back to face him as he commanded her to take off her clothes, slowly.

She was really no good at this. She had never been much of a dancer. She certainly had no practice as a stripper.

She gripped the bottom of her tank top and pulled it over her head, gracelessly, before tossing it away to the side. Her breasts bounced free. Gaia, she hated this.

Thank Gaia for mind-altering libations.

He commanded her to touch herself. And what could she do but obey? She pressed her lips together as she stroked her breasts, feeling not the least bit sexy. But fear was apparently her aphrodisiac of choice these days, and she could feel the wetness seep out between her thighs.

She hooked her thumbs into the elastic waistband of her short skirt, and pulled down. She stepped
out of her last piece of clothing and stood before him naked. It was an unfamiliar feeling. His eyes drank her in and she resisted the powerful desire to shrink from his gaze and try to cover herself up.

“Turn around,” he said, “and bend down.”

Her face flamed. She couldn’t believe this. Not his command, because really, she had expected it, but rather at the fact that he could still make her flush like this.

She turned around and bent over at the waist, her legs perfectly taut, with her hands braced against her knees.

“Spread your legs further and arch your back,” he said. She complied.

“More,” he said. Her back felt like it was going to break. “Good girl,” he purred.

She tried not to think about what his view must be like. She could feel the air, cold against her wet folds.

“Touch yourself,” he said. “I want to see those fingers in your cunt.”

Aeris bit back tears and did as she was told. Her body didn’t register pleasure as she fingered herself. It was too much, too uncomfortable, too awful to be forced to do this. But her hand was soon covered in her fluids anyway.

“Very good, my pet,” he said. She could hear a smile in his voice. “Now lie down in front of me and make yourself come.”

He said it so casually, like it was an everyday request. Like, *now fold in the whipped egg whites*, or, *now set the table for dinner dear, our guests will be here soon.*

She hastily pulled her fingers out of her body and stood up straight. The room spun again, and she was so, so grateful to be slightly drunk.

She sat down in front of him and leaned back until her head and shoulders sank into the thick piles of the rug beneath her. From this angle, if she tilted her head backwards a bit, she couldn’t see him. She closed her eyes and brought her hands down her body, one hand to touch her clit and the other to insert her middle finger as deep as she could.

It wasn’t as good. It wasn’t like when he did it. She couldn’t reach far enough. Couldn’t exert such exact pressure on that spot.

Aeris gasped quietly as she manipulated herself. She chanced a glance up at him and saw him calmly watching her, sipping that damn whiskey.

There was no way in hell Zack could have pretended to be so immovable while watching her do something like this.

A distant part of her mind wondered if maybe Sephiroth was gay and this was all some elaborate game that a girl like her could never understand. She bit back a giggle.

Her breath became quietly more erratic as she approached the edge. Just another few seconds and she would –

“Very good, pet,” he said. He rose from the chair and came towards her. He knelt at her side and bent down to kiss her. She whimpered slightly as his lips left.
“Now come, and keep your eyes on me as you do.”

She stroked herself as she looked up into his heavy lidded eyes. She could feel her vision clouding, that familiar sensation that always made her roll her eyes back before they closed and her face clenched in ecstasy.

She cried out as she exploded, her gaze fixed on mako green pools that glowed in triumph.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4

The arrival of her period brought her crashing back down to earth. It was a reminder of what he’d brought her here for. Supposedly. For someone who claimed to have abducted her for impregnation, he certainly wasn’t doing any of the things that would actually lead to that outcome.

She wasn’t about to remind him, though. Let him play his games. She didn’t doubt that the harsh reality of her new life would reveal itself soon enough.

Aeris told him over dinner that night, and, blushing, asked if she could be given some underwear during these times. He nodded and agreed that was reasonable.

Maybe it was the false sense of security under the assumption that she would be spared a few days of…activities…in her state, but somehow she found the courage that night to ask about his heritage.

“Sephiroth,” she started carefully. “If you are a Cetra…who were your parents? I always thought my mother was the last full blooded member of our kind.”

His expression softened and his mind seemed to wander away as he answered, “My mother is Jenova. An ancient member of our people who was long ago betrayed by humans. My father, well,” he sneered slightly as he looked into the distance, “it doesn’t matter who he is.”

Jenova…Jenova…Aeris struggled to unearth the memory from a forgotten conversation with her mother all those years ago.

“Ancient member?” she asked. “What do you mean?”

His smile was terrifying, all feline poise and sharp teeth. “Mother is older than you can imagine, little one. Let’s just say that I was born from the unhappy marriage of science and magic.” He stood up and headed for his armchair. “Nonetheless, here we are. You and I. The last hope of our people.”

Aeris felt her stomach clench, an unpleasant sensation after just filling it with her meal.

All things considered, she was fairly well prepared for what happened next. She’d been expecting it for some time, after all. It was almost anticlimactic.

He ordered her to kneel at his feet, and she did so, with eyes demurely downcast. In her peripheral vision, she saw him reach up and slowly unbutton his shirt. The iridescent black fabric fell open to reveal smooth, sculpted pectorals and chiseled abs. Aeris could feel the primitive parts of her brain respond to the stimulus. She had been almost constantly naked with him since she’d been brought to this prison, so much so that she was almost comfortable with it, but he had largely remained clothed
each time.

It was a good thing that she was experienced in dealing with perfect male specimens. After six years of free access to Zack’s body, lean and powerful soldier muscles didn’t overly faze her.

“Come here,” he said, “I want you to touch me.”

Aeris climbed into his lap. Her dress bunched up around her thighs. She didn’t want to do this, didn’t want the intimacy. She would prefer he remain a horrible concept that overcast her existence rather than flesh and blood beneath her fingertips.

She traced the lines of his clavicles. His skin was warm and soft to the touch. She watched as a vein in his neck pulsed with the rhythm of his heartbeat and idly wondered if one day she could find a way to plunge a knife in that spot.

Her fingers grazed over his nipples and they hardened in response. Her hands wandered lower, down the admittedly fascinating crests and valleys of his abdominals. She smiled to herself as she imagined scrubbing soapy clothes down the length of his torso.

He motioned for her to return to the floor. She waited on her knees as he undressed, leaving only his open shirt on. She tried not to stare at his cock, standing proud and erect, tried to look anywhere else.

He sat back down and reached out to cradle the back of her head in an open palm. He pulled her in, gently but firmly. “I expect you know what to do,” he said.

She wet her lips before contact. And she did, generally, know what to do. He was slightly smaller than Zack, for which Aeris was silently thankful. If she had been honest with herself, some part of her had feared ever since that first night, that he would be fantastically endowed and make her life even more of a living hell.

He let her set the pace, and stroked her hair idly as she served him. Given the events of the last week, she figured he was easing her into it, and that the worst was yet to come.

The worst had not yet come.

Aeris’s days passed in a haze. Her period came and went. The hours stretched on forever, and she had taken to lying on the ground in the middle of the room, bare limbs in contact with cold wood, trying to probe the Planet for information.

It didn’t really work that way though.

Everything seemed…fine. Surely if something had happened to Elmyra or Zack by now, she would know it in her bones. Gaia’s melancholy continued, but it didn’t seem particularly distressed at its last child’s situation.

She could only assume that Sephiroth had kept his promises.

The problem now was, and she could barely admit it to herself, her increasing preoccupation with that unfulfilled heat between her legs.
He hadn’t touched her in a week. Just repeated his daily ritual of dinner and a blow job, and then left her hot and bothered with nothing left to do but sleep.

It was stupid. This was all so stupid. But the lips are an erogenous zone, and so she guessed that it was the sensation of his soft, smooth skin against her mouth, night after night, his rare groans of pleasure – and if she were honest with herself, those quiet sounds were like little trophies, evidence that she did have some infinitesimal power over him, however meaningless it ultimately was - and the fact that she had nothing to entertain herself with except pornographic textbooks. It was all driving her to distraction.

It was disgusting.

There was nothing sexy about the way that he held her head firm as he spilled his seed into her mouth. The way he pulled back and kept his heavy lidded gaze on her, watching as she swallowed what he’d given her.

In her boredom she had flipped through the Kama Sutra, gotten all sorts of unwelcome images into her head of her captor, and thrown the book across the room in frustration.

Women and Love was far worse. The vivid descriptions of other women’s fantasies had drawn her in before she knew it, and she didn’t know when her hand had found its way under her skirt, as she read one account after another, reclined upon the bed.

At some point she thought about stopping. But she was too far gone. The mounting pressure too great. And why shouldn’t she seek her own pleasure? What did he think he was doing, keeping her locked up, getting her off night after night, and then suddenly stopping?

Her orgasm came in waves, rocking her body from head to toe, forcing her to arch as the release spilled through her nerve endings. All that tightly wound energy, finally dissipated.

Aeris slept like the dead afterwards.

There was, at least, one good thing that came from the stupid books Sephiroth had given her, Aeris thought, as she leafed through another text while waiting for Tseng to show up to initiate their nightly rituals. Some of them were filled with legitimately instructional content and diagrams.

Aeris had never had the need or the opportunity to learn anatomy. Frankly, her busy schedule these days didn’t give her much time to learn anything new that wasn’t directly related to her work – like how to track her revenues and expenses for business taxes and how to apply for renovation permits. It was actually refreshing to have the time and space and resources to read something just for the sake of doing so.

Who knew about this male prostate thing? Or the legs of the clitoris?

After she helped Tseng set the table and changed into her outfit for the evening, she sat on her chair with her eyes closed and envisioned the diagrams she’d been studying earlier, repeating back from memory the anatomic names and functions. It was one of the only ways she had to exercise her mind these days.
She opened her eyes at the sound of the door and watched Sephiroth as he took his seat across from her.

He studied her for a few breaths and then leaned forward with his elbows propped against the table and his chin resting upon his knuckles.

She knew, in that moment, without a doubt, she was in trouble.

“Aeris,” he said mildly. “There’s something different about you today.”

“Oh,” she replied with an awkward, forced laugh. “Maybe it’s my hair? I did kind of pull it into a different…” she trailed off under the weight of his glare.

“Aeris. Pet. Is there something you want to confess? I don’t like being lied to.”

It was always like this. The way he looked at her, his gaze stripping her bare of anything she tried to hide behind. How did he know? He always knew.

Oh, but she wanted to lie. How could she confess to that? She couldn’t possibly say such a lurid thing out loud. She shook her head in feigned innocence.

Sephiroth sighed, stood up, and said, “Take off your clothes.” It was tone that brooked no argument. It was probably the same tone he used to command men to their deaths in battle.

Aeris watched as he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Was it her imagination, or was the air around him actually pulsating with a menacing, dark energy? She swallowed, and stood, leaving their untouched meals behind.

She stood in front of him, heart pounding loudly in her chest. She entertained the fleeting idea of locking herself in the bathroom. But she’d never reach the door before he seized her. Or he’d let her hide and then wait for her to come back out with her tail between her legs and even more disobedience to atone for.

Her hands moved to the back of her neck to pull down the zipper. She turned her gaze downwards, avoiding the intensity of his eyes.

“Now lie face down across my lap, Aeris,” he said, his voice deceptively soft, practically purring.

Her eyes widened. She wasn’t a simpleton. Even though her sexual experiences were limited to Zack and their mutually mainstream preferences, she knew exactly what he intended to do to her.

She didn’t move an inch.

“Little one, you are just making this worse for yourself,” he said. A cruel smile played across his lips. “You know this night ends with you obeying every order like a good girl, so why add to your punishment? You know the consequences if you fail to please me. The terms of our agreement have not changed.”


A wave of revulsion coursed through her. The truth was that she had begun to forget. As they slipped into their uneasy routine, it had been easier and easier to simply do as she was told without examining the reasons why.

It wasn’t just self-preservation that made her submit to his demands. There was more at stake. And
she still hadn’t gotten any closer to figuring out how to escape.

She clenched her fists at her sides and forced her legs forward until they nearly touched the side of his thigh. Driving anything that remotely resembled pride out of her mind, she leaned forwards and got into position with his help.

Her hands were braced against the floor, blood rushing uncomfortably to her head. Her bare ass was centered in his lap and he stroked her almost lovingly.

Seconds crawled by.

The first strike was more shocking than anything else. Aeris blinked at the sensation of his large open palm against her soft skin.

She gritted her teeth as he slowly rained down blows across her cheeks and thighs, each sharp slap leaving a warm burning in its wake. She had no delusions about the control he was exerting in his movements. This was child’s play to a super soldier who could probably break her spine with a single motion if he wanted to.

Aeris hadn’t made a sound all the while, carefully containing her voice behind her clenched jaw. Her face burned with humiliation. It was all she could do to prevent herself from struggling off his lap.

Then without warning his fingers were pressing their way into her, and a noise escaped her throat, somewhere between a startled cry and a whine of indignation. He thrust in and out and Aeris was horrified to realize how quickly the dry friction disappeared, as her natural lubricant was spread over the surface of his skin. When had her body begun to betray her like this?

She cursed his hands and his cock and the stupidly well-muscled thighs beneath her belly. She cursed the books he had deigned to give her that were meant only to turn her into a more accomplished plaything. She cursed herself for her lack of control and inability to be the ice queen.

And of course, she kept all those curses silent, locked in her heart, because she was too busy moaning and squirming shamelessly against him, back arching automatically whenever he pressed particularly deep.

He pulled his fingers out and wiped them against the backs of her thighs, leaving only his other hand to trace light circles across her back and shoulders.

“Now tell me Aeris,” he said calmly. “Why am I punishing you?”

She fought to catch her breath. Dangling upside down while he did what he did had made her so dizzy.

She searched for the words, but must have taken too long. The next thing she knew he was spanking her again, and the blows came hard and fast, against the same spot on her right buttocks, and *Gaia* it hurt!

A strangled cry escaped her lips and she trembled against him. Ok, this was not fun anymore. Not that it had ever been fun, but she wanted this session to end *now*. Did not want to experience that stinging, burning pain again.

Sephiroth shoved his fingers back into her canal and Aeris’s mind reeled from the transition. She panted.

“Aeris, answer me.” He drove his hand into her hard and deep
“I touched myself!” she exclaimed, as his thrusts rocked her entire body against his legs. Her breasts bounced with each motion. If she had a second to think she would have died in mortification.

“That in itself is not a crime, pet,” he said. “What else?”

She was moaning with abandon. Everything he had denied her all week was rushing to the surface now. He didn’t need to command her anymore – she was chasing her release in desperation.

“I, ah-” she gasped, “I came without permission.” Oh yes, if she was still the same bright-eyed girl that Tseng had chloroformed what seemed now like an eternity ago, she would have melted into the ground in shame.

But she was so close now. She pushed back against his hand without any sense of how brazenly she was moving against him. She needed, she needed to –

And then she was empty again as he returned to her punishment. Each strike rang loudly through the room. He was targeting the exact center of each cheek, quick and methodical in his delivery of her discipline. Aeris pressed her face against his leg and screamed as the white hot pain washed out every thought from her mind and every other sensation from her body. She couldn’t move, couldn’t escape, his arm was pressed firmly against her back, holding her in place. Time stood still and all she could do was pray, pray silently because her vocal chords were too busy crying, that it would be over soon.

Mercifully, he finally stopped. He gently cupped her sore bottom as she tried to catch her breath in short gasps, trembling in his lap. She could feel his erection straining against his trousers, pressed against her hip. The bastard was turned on by this.

His voice was thicker, less smoothly controlled than usual, as he said, “What have you learned tonight, Aeris?”

Learned? How could she learn? That required thinking, and she was far too busy shuddering and trying not to think about what he’d just done to her.

Ok, think Aeris, think.

“I…” she breathed out, bit her lip. “I will never come without permission again.”

She would say the words, but she would not think about what was falling from her lips. She would not think about how life could have so swiftly gone from safe and sane to this journey through a sadist’s wonderland.

“That’s my girl,” he said softly.

She winced as he stroked her inflamed skin. She still didn’t dare to move.

“Aeris, I expect you to be grateful when I correct your behavior,” he said.

Oh she was grateful, alright. Grateful that she was still face down and didn’t have to meet his eyes.

She swallowed and said in a tiny voice, “Thank you.”

“Thank you for what?” he drawled.

What? What did he mean thank you for what? The thick fog of her mind was making her slow.

He squeezed her ass and she yelped in response. She’d be bruised for days after this.
“Thank you for….showing me I was wrong.” Did that even make sense? She didn’t know what she was saying. Anything to make him let her go and leave her alone for the night.

“That’s my girl,” he said. She could definitely hear the smile in his voice now. She had no doubt that he’d enjoyed what he’d done to her.

He pushed her off his lap and she toppled gracelessly to the floor. The cold wood felt wonderful against her heated rear. She touched her tender skin gingerly to find that it was radiating heat.

Sephiroth pulled a long strip of black fabric from the pocket of his trousers and Aeris barely had the time and presence of mind to realize what it was before he leaned forward and tied it around her head. She marveled that he’d kept a blindfold in his pants and wondered if it had always been there just in case or if he’d always intended to use it on her tonight.

She heard the rustle of fabric as he divested his clothes and the soft creak of the bed as he sat back down.

Whatever was going to happen to her, it was easier with the blindfold. The darkness made it so easy to forget who she was, who he was, and everything that actually mattered.

All that existed was his rough hands in her hair, and the taste of his precum against her lips. She parted her lips and licked the tip of his shaft without being told. His skin was so soft and smooth against the wetness of her mouth. She felt the fire in her belly ignite at the sensation, and it didn’t matter if she hated herself for it.

She sucked him eagerly, guided gently by his hands. He pulled her this way and that, until his entire length was slick, and she embraced the fact that she only needed to act, and not think.

And then he was shoving in, slow and deep, forcing her to take him further in her mouth than she’d ever done before. Her reaction was instantaneous and instinctive. Her body tensed, her arms shot up against his legs to push away in self-preservation, but his hold on her head was firm and he would not be denied.

He had always let her set the pace before. But she had always known that wouldn’t last.

She couldn’t breathe, so she couldn’t scream.

“Aeris, put your arms down,” he said, in that damnably calm voice. He pulled back so that his cock only rested at the front on her mouth.

Oh, she thought about biting down, as she gasped desperately for air, trying to regain as much oxygen as possible before he inevitably dove back in. She fantasized about the feeling of purchase against her front teeth, and the way he’d yell out in shock and pain. Maybe he’d accidentally break her neck as he threw her away from him.

She did nothing but breathe. Cowed little flower girl sex slave.

The pace he set was relentless, but she learned to take in air before every deep, probing plunge. She controlled her reactions, feeling the panic that set in every time pain blossomed in her throat and threatened to make her heave, and then shoved those feelings far, far down. Thrashing mindlessly would waste precious oxygen, and she needed to focus her energy on meditating, moment to moment, on the feeling of his fingers in her hair, on the tearing sensations around her scalp, of the soreness of her strained jaw.

“Aeris,” he hissed as he pulled back to let her catch her breath. “I want you to swallow.”
He pressed back into her throat, and she swallowed around him. The pressure against her soft plate was almost unbearable.

“Again,” he moaned. “Keep going.”

She swallowed around him, massaging the head of his cock with her throat muscles, praying for him to come.

Who knew how long he fucked her mouth for. When he finally finished, coming with a loud cry and spilling his hot seed against the back of her tongue, her jaw was aching and her chin was covered in saliva. She wiped away the fluids with the back of her hand.

He lifted her into the bed and lay down against her body. She trembled with cold and need as he caressed her bare skin, taking time to stroke her breasts and belly.

Without fanfare, he pushed two fingers between her legs and drove her body upwards and back. She moaned with abandon and rocked against him. Her hands came down to grip his knuckles and forearm as she tried to ride the sensations to completion.

“Sephiroth, please,” she begged.

She immediately regretted her incoherent, mindless plea, as he responded by pressing into her harder, curling his fingers further inside her. She screamed and her movements changed instantly as she tried to move away and angle her hips to lessen the stimulation. Too much, too much, her mind cried out. Maybe her voice too. She didn’t know anymore. All she knew was that he was holding her down, preventing her from moving, preventing her from doing anything other than taking it, taking his penetration, taking what he gave her, which was so much more sensation than her brain could process it might as well have been pain.

She begged him to stop. She begged for a pause. She begged to come. She begged for anything and everything that came to mind until finally he pulled out and thrust his fingers deep into her mouth, ordering her to suck him clean before he kissed her deeply, harshly, and then whispered good night, and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Sigh. Poor Aeris.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all the lovely readers who left comments and kudos. Never fails to make my day. ^_^

Chapter 5

She couldn’t look him in the eyes the next day. The memories of what he’d done to her and the way she’d responded to him were too raw.

Her ass was purple and blue and a little tender to sit on.

Sephiroth stroked her hand gently from across the table. Her uncertainty and discomfort after the previous night must have been obvious, because he said unprompted, “Aeris, look at me.” When she slowly raised her eyes to his face, he continued, “You are doing very well, pet. I’m quite pleased with your progress.”

Aeris flushed and looked away. If that was supposed to be helpful somehow, he was way off the mark. She refused to acknowledge any tiny treacherous part of her that might have lit up at his words.

But…if he was actually happy, then she needed to press her advantage. She needed to remember who she was and that there was a world beyond the four endlessly boring walls of her cage. She needed to learn about her imprisoner.

Aeris fought to corral her thoughts into some cohesion. The dullness of her days had dulled her wits. It was a frightening realization.

“Sephiroth,” she started tentatively. “We’ve been so…intimate….but I still barely know anything about you.”

“What do you want to know, Aeris?” he replied.

She wanted to know what he was, what his mother was, what his supposed communion with the Planet really was, and what he intended to do with her in the long term.

“Do you have any hobbies?” she asked. Gaia, that sounded so stupid.

“These days?” he responded, raising an eyebrow. “Between politics and the military, and enjoying you, there really isn’t much time left over.”
She hated the way he said that. She was a human being damn him, not an ice cream cone.

She suppressed the thought of him licking her between her legs.

“Politics…” she trailed off, “You know, come to think of it, not much changed after you overthrew Shinra. I mean, my life was better for a while,” before he’d snatched her off the streets of Midgar and thrown her into this room, “Since the Turks stopped monitoring me. But…” she searched for words to put it delicately, “If you’re a Cetra, like me, then why didn’t you put an end to mako production?

He looked amused. As if he was delighted that his pet kitten had enough brain cells to rub together to question him on global energy policy.

Aeris bristled under his condescension but kept her face open and curious.

“Mako energy is a disgusting invention of humans, isn’t it?” he asked rhetorically. “Only those wretched creatures could design a way of sucking the Planet’s lifeblood dry just so they can have their phones and televisions and cars.”

She didn’t point out that they were both at least half human.

“So why let it continue? If I had the power to stop what we’re doing to the Planet, the power you actually have, it would have been the first thing I did.”

Sephiroth chuckled. “How naïve,” he said. “You would have turned civilization on its head, taking away everyone’s energy sources, without a replacement?”

She definitely hated him. “No, not all in one go. It could be done in phases, as a system of clean energy sources are built to replace reactors one, or a few, at a time.”

There was a hunger in his eyes that set Aeris on edge. “Ah, idealistic little Aeris. You will be an excellent mother for my children.”

She felt like she’d been doused with ice water. “You haven’t answered my question,” she quietly insisted. She wasn’t going to let him distract her that easily.

Sephiroth nodded at her approvingly. “Very well,” he said. “There are two reasons why I haven’t ended the use of mako. One, I lack the resources to force change. I’m not a god yet, Aeris. There are many entrenched interests at play, and affecting those in political and business arenas is a slow and tedious game. And military enforcement is not the answer either. My soldiers are already spread thin keeping the peace and stamping out dissent. I’m not prepared to fight a revolution just because the masses aren’t ready to sacrifice some creature comforts for the greater good.”

Aeris filed away his words in her memory. A dozen questions fought to burst out of her, not the least of which was, what did he mean by not a god yet?

“And the second reason?” she asked instead.

“The second reason is because I have greater plans in play.” He stood up and advanced towards her. “But that is a topic for another day.”

Aeris felt her body instantly respond as he reached out and stroked her lower lip. Even before he made contact, the split second foresight of his touch was enough to send cresting sensations flooding down her body, her nerve endings coming alive in lightening succession. Desire pooled in her lower belly.
Hating her traitorous biology was becoming exhausting. It was a fight she knew she was steadily losing.

He wasn’t nearly as rough with her this time, though he still set the pace, telling her in no uncertain terms when to lick, when to suck, and when to bob her head up and down in rapid succession.

“Aeris,” he said gently, as he stroked her hair while she licked up and down the length of his shaft, “I expect you to be able to take all of me in your mouth.”

She froze and raised her eyes up to him in fear. She had never been able to do that. Her gag reflex wasn’t the worst, but it had always gotten in the way. Zack had never minded, always perfectly content with how she used hands and lips and tongue to pleasure him.

“I want to see your lips wrapped around the base of my cock, Aeris,” he said, firmly guiding her mouth back onto his length. “I want to know that I’m deep in here.” His fingers brushed the column of her throat.

Her anxiety must have been on clear display, because he said, “Don’t worry, pet. As I told you before, I’m a patient man. I know you can’t do that just yet. But I look forward to watching you learn.”

Tseng handed her a gift the next day – a simple rectangular box wrapped in matte black paper.

“What is it?” Aeris asked in surprise, gingerly taking the package from him.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It arrived in my office early this afternoon with a note from Sephiroth saying that I should give it to you, and that you would know what to do with it.”

Tseng was looking at her with open curiosity. She stared back at him in silence. There was absolutely no way she was going to open a “present” from Sephiroth in front of another person. While she didn’t have the slightest idea what might be within, her sense of self-preservation was on high alert.

Luckily, Tseng got the hint and left without another word.

She tried to tell herself that she was not eager to see what was within, that this was not likely to be anything that would bring her happiness, but she couldn’t fully silence the small voice inside her head that dared to hope this unexpected gift might at least help alleviate her boredom.

The black paper came off to reveal a beautifully packaged, glossy black box designed just like one that might hold a hair straightener. She lifted the tab and groaned at what was nestled within.

It was a translucent pink silicone phallus, twice as long as a normal man, of reasonable girth, and with delicate veining molded all around.

She tried to ignore the sudden ache that churned between her legs. Oh, she knew what he wanted her to do with it, alright. Since he had made it perfectly clear that she wasn’t to spend her days chasing her own pleasure, that only left one option.
She wished she had a window to throw the offensive “gift” through. Instead, she had to settle for shoving it into the bottom of her bathroom vanity and slamming the drawer shut.

Sometimes she dreamt of Zack.

_They were in Costa del Sol for their sixth anniversary and he seemed unusually preoccupied. Aeris held his hand as they walked in the direction of the sunset, away from the main beach resorts. He carried a pack with everything they needed - snacks, water, towels, keycards – leaving her, as always, free to relish the feel of the balmy wind through the light fabric of her sundress._

_The further they walked, the quieter it became, until it had been a while since they’d last seen another lone adventurer or another couple in search of privacy. Two storks danced in the distance above the gently churning waters of the ocean._

_They sat above the shoreline, on the outcropping of large rocks that lay at the base of the plateau overhead._

_She turned to smile at him and make some idle comment about the beauty of the orange sky, but there it was in his hands, a tiny red velvet box with an emerald solitaire set in gold cushioned within._

_“I thought it matched your eyes,” he said, uncharacteristically awkward in his nervousness._

_Aeris smiled at him wordlessly, feeling her heart catch in her throat._

_“Aeris, I’ve loved you for six years,” he said. She couldn’t remember the last time he seemed so serious. “And I want to have the chance to love you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?”_

_She couldn’t remember if she actually said yes, or just threw her arms around him, tears flowing down her face._

_She loved everything about this man, who literally fell from the sky and into her life. Who made her laugh and kept her safe. It was a rare girl who could venture this far out from the resort’s borders so late in the day without fearing wild creatures or malicious humans. But she knew without a doubt that Zack’s arms were the securest place on the Planet, and nothing was as delicious as the feel of those arms around her, holding her tight against his hard body, his warmth radiating through her skin to chase away the wind’s chill._

_Nothing except, perhaps, the feel of the cold water lapping against their naked skin, as she ground against his shaft buried deep inside her. The setting sun cast his features into soft relief. They made love with his feet planted in the sand, her legs wrapped around his hips, their lips locked as though drowning and their only source of oxygen was each other. The waves grew higher as the tide came in, but her First Class felt solid as mountain, and the thrill of fear only added to her delight in their play. Who else but Zack Fair could make even the unstoppable force of the ocean at dusk seem conquerable?_
There were nights when Sephiroth didn’t spend his time putting fingers or phallus into her body. It was….strange.

He would sit in his armchair and command her to curl up against his calf with her head resting on his thigh. He would stroke her hair absently while reading through the days reports or simply reclining with his eyes closed.

At first, Aeris didn’t know how to react. She spent the first such evening tense and distracted, jumping every time he shifted in his seat when he turned the page of what he was reading.

Eventually she came to accept that maybe some nights he simply had too much work to do – it was still difficult to reconcile the once-legendary war hero turned dictator and the concept of endless paperwork – and that some nights he was just too tired to fool around with her.

Almost despite herself, she found herself relaxing into him when he was like this. She would close her eyes and enjoy the feeling of his fingers gently caressing her scalp. It didn’t matter anymore that he was obviously petting her like a domesticated animal. It was….nice….to be cared for like this.

She tried not to think about when she started equating being petted with being cared for.

Having a night off for her mouth was a welcome reprieve, that much was certain. Sometimes she felt like her jaw was perpetually sore these days.

Once, he seemed so content to just sit in silence with her, she’d found the courage to look up and ask if there was anything else he’d be willing to give her to help her pass the daytime hours.

He’d opened his eyes languidly and smiled down at her. “There are many things I’d be willing to give you, pet,” he’d said, “You just need to negotiate for them.”

That had shut her up real fast.

Aeris didn’t know how many days had already passed since he’d disciplined her. But she did know one thing for certain.

She was. Losing. Her. Mind.

She had to broach the subject. She had to ask. He was obviously waiting for her to.

It was time. There was no point in putting it off any longer.

Nevertheless, the words stuck in her throat during dinner.

It’s just sex, she tried to tell herself. Just sex, nothing more. She’d known it was inevitable for weeks now, ever since the first night she spent in this goddess forsaken room. It was the lack of sex that was driving her batty, and sure, that had been entirely unexpected, but now she had to roll with it.

It wasn’t just the pent up frustration, though that alone would have been enough to bring her to this point. She was spending more and more of her daytime hours fighting the urge to touch herself.
Sephiroth had promised far harsher retribution if he was forced to teach her the same lesson twice. Especially, as he’d said, in such a short time frame. She had no desire to find out what he meant by that.

She knew now, with full confidence, that she could not get herself off without him knowing. It was in the way her body responded. To his presence. To his touch. In the way that she flushed and felt arousal slam through her with such force it literally dazed her each night. If she dissipated that tension, she wouldn’t be able to fake those reactions. He would know within moments, just like the last time.

Aeris was not going through that experience again.

But beyond the unbearable frustration that even had her snapping at Tseng – once she hadn’t been able to contain the acerbic comments that spilled out from her and before she knew it she had called him a ball-less sack of Beachplug mantle that didn’t have the fortitude to do any number of reasonably honorable things, like leave her door unlocked, or tell Zack where she was being held so he could storm the building with a righteously furious legion of Third Class at his back, or even just slip her a steak knife to end her life, and he’d just looked at her in that unshakeable way of his and oh she’d wanted to strangle him before he quietly said, “Do you really want me to start a war for you? Or to help you kill yourself?” And she’d gasped and pressed her hands to her mouth before fleeing to the bathroom and slamming the door behind her so that she could be alone to process her shame.

Beyond all that, it was the cabin fever.

_The Joy of Sex_ bore thirty four pages with their corners folded down – one for each morning she’d woken up to find that reality persisted, and her captivity wasn’t a product of a terrible dream.

She had to get out of here. She was ready to do anything.

Sephiroth had said, that second night, that he would let her out once she’d proven her loyalty, whatever the hell that meant. She didn’t actually believe him, of course. He’d have to be mad to set her loose and then expect her to keep his secrets after what he’d done to her so far.

He’d also promised to return her mother’s materia to her once she’d become his, whatever that meant.

She knew what that meant.

It’s just sex, she kept repeating to herself, as she watched Sephiroth methodically consume his dinner. Just sex.

Never mind that she had only ever had sex with Zack. Who she loved and who loved her more than life.

It didn’t mean anything. This was not her fault. She didn’t have a choice, not really.

She just had to ask.

“Sephiroth,” she paused to clear her throat. “I’ve been meaning to ask….” she trailed off. Her face felt warm. She couldn’t imagine anything more uncomfortable than this moment.

He studied her in silence, his face its usual blank mask. “Yes?”

She had to go for it. It was time. There was no point in putting it off any longer.
“You said you brought me here to make babies,” she blurted out before she could talk herself out of it, “But we haven’t even had sex yet. What exactly are you waiting for?”

A stream of stupid thoughts ran unbidden through her head as she watched him slowly smile and lean back into his chair. Thoughts like, he knows how babies are made, right? Maybe she shouldn’t make that assumption. The man had been raised within the Shinra Corporation and who knew what their sex ed programs were like or if they even existed? But he sure knew how to make her scream when he wanted to, so really, he knew an awful lot of things about human sexuality, so he must know how babies are made so Aeris please stop thinking and Gaia why wasn’t he saying anything?

Thankfully, he finally spoke.

“You want to know why I haven’t fucked you yet?” he asked.

Aeris looked away. She really hated it when he said that. “Yes,” she bit out.

“I would be happy to answer your question, little one,” he responded, “But you have to ask it properly.”

She clenched her fists in the pink chiffon of her dress and stole a glance upwards at him. He looked perfectly severe tonight, in tailored black sateen that contrasted sharply with his silver hair. He was running his finger along the stem of his wineglass.

“I don’t know what that means,” she said. Properly. What defined proper? Once upon a time, proper might have meant refined and classy. But it certainly didn’t mean that in this room.

“Then you haven’t been paying attention,” he said. She could hear the subtle velvet threat in his voice.

Alright, in that case, Aeris supposed she probably did know what he meant. She took a deep steadying breathe.

There was no point in putting it off any longer, she reminded herself. She was ready for whatever he would do to her, whatever he would force her to do, tonight. It was all going to happen anyway. Better now while she still had a sense of self. Better for it to still be her decision to go down this path he’d paved for her, rather than tearfully tumbling downhill through it without any sense of agency.

However he might debase her, she was the last Cetra, and the fact remained that the megalomaniac had chosen her to, supposedly, rebuild their fallen people.

So she would play his games, and as long as she could remember who she was, she would find a way out of this.

Aeris met Sephiroth’s eyes and asked, without faltering, “Will you please tell me why you haven’t fucked me yet?”

That hadn’t been so bad. This was fine. She could do this.

He looked delighted. He looked hungry. And not for the gourmet presentation that still lay on the plate in front of him.

“I’m glad you asked,” he said. “The answer is simple – I’m not interested in fucking something that isn’t my property.”

She hadn’t expected to hear him say that. But she couldn’t pretend to be surprised either. From the
very beginning, he had made it clear that he was staking his ownership of her, little by little.

Aeris’s mouth twitched. “I didn’t realize you still didn’t consider me your property,” she said carefully. “Since you brought me here and now control every aspect of my life…I’m not sure what else is missing in your definition.”

Sephiroth’s gaze flicked down her body before coming back to her face. Aeris was grateful for the table between them. “My sweet little flower girl,” he purred with silken menace, “I know that you are my property. You have been ever since you were first carried into this room. The problem is that you don’t yet know it.”

“Okay,” Aeris acknowledged, licking her dry lips anxiously. “Okay, then what do you want from me? I really do think you need to spell this out for me.”

“What I want, little Cetra, is for you to become mine,” he said.

“But how?” she cried. “How do I do that if I haven’t done it already?” She already obeyed his every damn order. What more could he possibly want from her?

“How does anyone become anything, Aeris?” She flinched at hearing her name. “Through word and deed.”

Aeris felt her stomach fall out from under her. She closed her eyes and steeled her resolve. She could do this. She had to do this. They had to move forward.

“Okay, then I’m ready. I…I want to be your property,” she stammered. “Will you please show me how?”

Sephiroth’s serpentine smile was all she could see as he stood up slowly and walked to her chair.

“Very well,” he said, extending his hand, “Shall we begin?”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thank you very much to all you lovely readers who took the time to leave kudos and comments.

This chapter is…a bit intense. It shouldn’t need to be said, but just in case: none of this counts as anything close to consent! This is not safe, nor sane! Although PLAYING at this kind of stuff, in the context of a consensual and loving relationship, is hella fun. I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Chapter 6

Aeris did not expect Sephiroth to start by tenderly carrying her to the bed, laying her down, and kissing a path downwards from throat to belly.

His silken hair was cool against the bare flesh of her arm. His lips soft against the exposed tops of her breasts and warm through the chiffon that covered her torso. He had never touched her like this before – he usually favored quicker and more direct contact – a firm pinch of her nipple or a rough full handed squeeze of her backside.

Aeris didn’t know how to react to his change of pace. She trembled with anxiety, fight or flight instincts awake and kicking, screaming at her not to trust, not to let her guard down.

But then he was pushing the flowing fabric of her dress upwards and nudging her legs apart. The first shock of his tongue against her nub was almost enough to unravel her. Weeks of unfulfilled desire and pent up frustration came rushing through her body all at once, as though the floodgates of her nervous system were suddenly thrown open. Nothing could have prevented her reaction, the way she tossed her head backwards and arched into his mouth. Her fingers gripped and twisted the sheets. She wanted to thread them through his moonlight hair and guide him home, but she didn’t dare.

His lips and tongue were so warm, so gentle, against her swollen, needy flesh. She moaned with abandon as the pressure built, all thoughts driven from her mind except the singular need to achieve satisfaction.

He brought her to the cliff’s edge and then pulled back. Aeris’s strangled banshee cry of frustration would have mortified her at any other time of her life.

Sephiroth stood up and looked down at her from beside the bed. She curled her legs beneath her and sat up, breathless and dazed, with barely suppressed fury. Him and his stupid, stupid games.

“Tell me what you want, Aeris,” he said, the barest of smirks flitting across his mouth.
What she wanted? She wanted so many things.

_I want you to let me go._

_I want to be free._

_I want you to die in a trashcan fire._

_I want Zack to save me._

_I want you to fuck my brains out._

“I want to be your property,” she choked out past the lump in her throat.

“Mmmm,” he acknowledged quietly. “Is that all? I warn you, little one, if you don’t ask for what you want, you may never get it.”

Aeris studied him through the haze of her arousal. The way he stood so casually yet seemed to fill the room, as only a military man could. The way the light glinted off his infuriatingly perfect silver hair and highlighted the cut of his cheekbones and the bow of his mouth. The way the rich black fabric of his shirt curved against the outline of his deltoids and pectorals. The way his piercing green stare never wavered from her face, demanding her honesty, her vulnerability.

Aeris swallowed thickly and resolutely ignored the phantom pressure within her chest. She whispered, “I want you to fuck me.”

“Well then, my dear,” he said with a cruel smile, “Let’s not keep you waiting too much longer.”

He extended his hand and Aeris cautiously took it, allowing him to pull her to her feet so that she stood before him with her back to the bed.

“Undress me,” he commanded.

Her fingers shook as she carefully brought them up to the topmost button. Sensitized as she was, she could feel his body heat in her finger tips, though she never once actually touched him. One by one, she unfastened each pearlescent black button until her fingers reached the top of his black leather belt. She hesitated a moment before grasping the rectangular gunmetal buckle and pulling the leather strip free of its constraining loops. She made quick work of his trouser button and zipper and after another moment’s hesitation, pulled his shirt free from where it had been neatly tucked.

As she pushed the black fabric off his shoulders to fall to the ground in a heap behind his feet, some distant part of her mind noted the fact that this was somehow the first time she’d ever seen his torso completely bare.

Aeris stepped away as Sephiroth walked around her to sit on the edge of the bed.

That cool, imperious gaze held hers as he said, “You may remove my shoes.”

She glanced downwards at the shiny black oxfords. His right foot was extended slightly towards her.

With an inaudible sigh, she knelt down to untie the thin laces and carefully pulled his shoes free. She set them to the side and quickly removed the black wool socks he wore underneath, rolling them down the length of his lower calf and ankles to reveal pale skin and light blue veins.

Sephiroth lifted his hips slightly when she raised her hands to grasp the tops of his trousers. She pulled the fabric and belt down over the hard curve of his hipbones. The backs of her fingers brushed
lightly against the long muscular lengths of his thighs as she pulled the garment free.

Now she could clearly see the outline of his erection, straining against the smooth black silk and modal of his tightly fitted designer briefs. Perversely, she felt a thrill rush through her at knowing that his calm demeanor was nothing more than an act.

Finally, she drew that final piece of clothing down his legs, carefully stretching the fabric away from his cock.

And there he was, dictator, tyrant, lord, and master, hands braced gently against the edge of the bed on either side of his hips, silver hair pooled in thick tendrils behind him on the mattress. All smooth white skin and rippling muscles. Mako eyes studied her intently.

Aeris sat back on her heels and waited, resisting the urge to nervously rub her arms.

Sephiroth leaned forward and said, “What are you?”

What did that even mean? Why did he always ask her such inane questions?

*I'm a person!*

*I'm a Cetra.*

*I'm a daughter.*

*I'm a fiancé….*

“I'm a florist?” she asked him, knowing full well that it wasn’t the correct answer.

The corner of Sephiroth’s mouth twitched upwards and he arched his eyebrow.

“I'm….your property?” she bit out. Damn him. *Damn* him. Gaia help her, how was she going to get through this night?

“Mmm,” he murmured his agreement, nodding absently. “That doesn’t quite roll off the tongue though, does it, little one? What does one usually call someone who is the property of another?”

Aeris felt her mouth open a fraction and then close again helplessly. She stared at him as her mind immediately supplied the answer.

*Slave.*

Aeris tucked her chin down and closed her eyes. She drew a deep breath and forced her mind on the physical sensations of her body – the cool air against her bare arms, the prickle of the rug against her knees and shins, the soft chiffon against her thighs, and the pulsing hot pressure between her legs.

“I'm waiting, little one,” he said.

There was nothing more to contemplate. She’d already made her decision. She just needed to keep following through.

“Slave,” she whispered her response to the floor.

“I didn’t catch that,” he coldly intoned.

“I’m your slave,” she repeated, louder this time, though her voice still came out choked.
“How unconvincing,” he sneered.

Aeris clenched her fists and looked up. “I’m your slave,” she said again, with an edge of desperation. “I know I am. I’ve known it ever since our first conversation. You’ve made it perfectly clear that you can do anything you want to me, and I got the message. Now please,” she paused to swallow and breathe, “What do you want me to do?”

The glow of his eyes faded slightly behind heavy lids as he looked down at her.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked softly. “I want my slave to please me.”

Aeris tore her eyes from his gaze to look down at his cock. His length twitched slightly in anticipation, and a bead of precum glistened in the light.

Without another thought, she inched her body forwards and took the tip of him into her mouth. The muscles of his thighs tightened under her hands and a nearly inaudible gasp escaped his lips, as though he hadn’t quite been prepared for her to be so brazen.

*Good*, Aeris thought viciously.

He wanted her to *please* him? Well she would damn well show him.

She fairly attacked his cock. What she lacked in skill and finesse, she made up for with sheer enthusiasm. As perverse as it seemed, it was somehow so much easier to lap and suck at Sephiroth’s hard member than to look him in the eyes and *talk*. She ran her lips and tongue up and down his shaft until her saliva coated him completely, then impaled her mouth on him, taking him as deep as she could, ignoring the spasms in her throat.

The salty taste of him was gone so quickly, washed away by her actions, leaving only the scent of his soap in her nostrils and the smooth texture of his skin against her lips and tongue.

She bobbed her head up and down, not caring what an inelegant display she was putting on, thinking vaguely that men often liked sloppy, eager blow jobs. And wasn’t that what he wanted? For her to *please* him in a way she had never done before? To pretend that she *liked* this when in the past she had just dutifully serviced him or passively let him fuck her mouth?

Then his fist was in her hair and her head was pulled backwards. She panted and looked up into his piercing gaze.

“My, my,” he growled. “So my little florist can show some passion, hmm? But there is something I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Aeris waited, her neck slanted at an uncomfortable angle, his face too close to hers as he watched her squirm.

“Tell me, little florist, did you enjoy the gift I gave you?”

Oh no.

Oh *no*.

Aeris’s gaze slid over to the bathroom door, remembering the pink phallus she had thrown into the bottom drawer.

“Have you been practicing?” he asked.
Aeris stared at him in wide eyed fear. His hand tightened further in her hair and he gave her head a gentle yank.

“Answer me,” he commanded.

She thought about lying. *Just say yes,* her mind screamed! But there was no way she could say it convincingly, and who knew what he would do if she outright lied to his face?

“No,” she whispered.

His hand shifted in her hair so that his palm firmly cradled the back of her scalp. He sighed. “It was given to you for your sake, to make your life easier as you learned to serve me. I am very disappointed in you, Aeris.”

He struck her lightly across the face.

Aeris flinched and tried to pull away, but his hand behind her head held her firmly in place. It hadn’t hurt, was really more of a strong tap across her right cheek with the open palm of his hand, but the shock of it left her stunned and blinking.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Aeris?” he asked, her name on his tongue like a silken caress.

“I…” she trailed off, her mind blank.

His free hand laced itself in her hair to cup the back of her head while his other hand pulled free. He slapped her across the left cheek.

She gazed up at him, stunned, as he ran his finger gently along the curve of her lower lip.

“Yes?”

A whimper escaped from her lips and her fingers twitched against the side of the mattress where they were braced between his legs.

“I’m sorry?” she breathed. And as soon as the words were spoken she regretted the intoned question.

“Hmph,” he replied, switching the position of his hands again to land a firmer blow against her right cheek. “I don’t think you are, but I suspect you will be soon enough.”

Aeris’s cheeks burned, more from the dark pit of writhing emotions he’d stoked in her than anything physical.

“Shall I remind you what happens to unpracticed, self-professed slaves?” he asked.

Nothing happened as Aeris continued to look up at him, pinned in place by his hand in her hair. The silence of the room rang loudly in her ears, punctuated only by her breathing.

He was waiting for her to respond.

“Yes…please,” she whispered.

“Hmph, very well,” he said, looking for all the world like nothing could be more tedious than this moment. “Let the record show that I do not consider this pleasing, little florist.”

His free hand wound its way into her hair so that her head was trapped firmly between his palms.
“Are you ready, then?” he asked.

Aeris pressed her lips together and steeled herself for what she knew was going to happen next. She nodded slightly.

“Then open your mouth, little florist.”

He started slowly enough, guiding her face back and forth, until his length was slick from her tongue. Then he thrust into her mouth while pressing her forward and down, hard, on his cock. Aeris’s wail was muffled almost before it could be heard, and she fought instinctively to turn away, to break his hold, but his fingers in her hair just held her tighter in place.

He fucked her mouth in a way that she had never been fucked before. She struggled to breathe, to contain her gag reflex, as tears pricked out of the corners of her eyes. Each time she thought that she could not continue, that she would throw up all over him or have a panic attack from oxygen deprivation, he pulled back to give her a few seconds to cough and pant. And then it started all over again.

At long last, he finally released her, allowing her to collapse backwards, away from him. She coughed and wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand, then mopped at the sweat along her hairline with her forearm.

“What have you learned, little florist?” Sephiroth purred. Aeris chanced a glance up to see him leaning back slightly with a cruel, self-satisfied smirk on his lips.

*I’ve learned that you’re a monster,* she thought, as she straightened her spine.

“That it’s in my interest to make use of your gifts,” she bit out.

“Very good,” he said. “You may thank me now.”

Oh, it wasn’t just her imagination. He definitely looked amused.

“Thank you…” she said, unable to keep the confusion from slipping into her voice.

“For?” he asked, tilting his head slightly as he regarded her.

“For…” Aeris’s mind raced to figure out what he would want to hear. “Giving me a way to practice…and reminding me that I should…do so for my own sake?”

The way that he leered at her from on high made Aeris tremble.

He gave one last *hmph* in acknowledgement and stood up in a fluid motion. He gestured with his arm and open hand. “Take off your dress and get on the bed. On your hands and knees, facing away from me.”

Aeris uncurled her limbs and stood up, stretching her legs out a bit to shake off the stiffness that had formed in her muscles. It took only a second to reach under her left arm to undo the clasp and draw down the zipper that held the delicate garment in place around her body. She slipped the straps off her shoulders and let the dress fall to her feet, shivering slightly at the cool air against her skin.

She slowly climbed onto the mattress, carefully keeping her mind blink, her thoughts at bay.

She was wet between her legs. Could feel the slick sensation of her lower lips rubbing against each other as she crawled forward.
Biology. Just biology. Nothing to be bothered about.

She stopped when her feet cleared the edge of the mattress. She waited, muscles twitching in anticipation, gaze fixed firmly on the blank wall ahead.

The gentle touch of his fingers between her shoulder blades, caressing down the length of her spine, made her jump slightly before she forced herself to relax. To hold still. His fingers lingered at her tailbone for a moment before travelling across the curve of her backside and down the line of one thigh.

“Tell me what you want, Aeris,” he whispered as he slowly trailed his fingers back up along the inside of her thigh.

Aeris closed her eyes and bit down on her lip, suppressing a whimper.

She wanted to be free. She wanted the silver haze of arousal to stop clouding her thoughts and senses, and the pulsing ache between her legs to go away. And apparently there was only one way to achieve all three.

“I want you to…fuck me…” she said in a tiny voice.

He chuckled mirthlessly from behind her as he dipped his fingers into her wet folds and circled her clit. “Louder. I didn’t hear you.”

“I want you to fuck me!” she cried. She wished she could collapse onto the bed and hide her face in shame.

“Why should I do that?” he asked.

Because you supposedly want to impregnate me? Her mind screamed. She wisely kept her mouth shut. That was definitely not the right answer. That was not what this conversation was about.

“Because…” Aeris groped for answers. “I’m your slave…”

That was it, right? Hadn’t he said that earlier in the evening? He didn’t want to fuck something that wasn’t his property?

“And?” Sephiroth asked in a bored tone.

And? And what?

Aeris’s body shook as he drove his fingers in and out of her at a tortuously slow pace.

“I don’t know!” Aeris exclaimed in frustration. “What do you want from me?”

“I already told you, little one. Perhaps you should pay more attention.” His fingers pressed down within her against that spot and Aeris collapsed as the sensations overwhelmed her. He grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled her back into position. “I want you to please me.”

“How?” she gasped, arching into his touch. “I don’t know how!”

Sephiroth’s long-suffering sigh made her grit her teeth.

“Beg me for it.”

Aeris’s cried out, half in pleasure, half in despair, as his skilled fingers continued to work her, pulling
away and changing pressure and speed each time she got too close to the edge.

“Please! Please fuck me.” She crushed the sheets beneath her fingers and ground backwards against his hand, clenching her eyes shut, wishing she were anywhere else.

“Is that the best you can do?” He scoffed. “Do you really intend to continue being such a disappointment, Aeris? Perhaps I should leave since you are continuing to waste my time.”

She wailed and shook her head, then tucked her chin down against her chest.

Just words. They were just words. All he wanted from her were words.

Sticks and stones…but words will never hurt me... Wasn’t that how it went?

What rubbish. Words could be everything. Words enabled thoughts. Words defined reality.

In the beginning, there was the word.

But what choice did she have? The choice to go through this again, on another night? To steadily have her will and identity stripped from her as the outside world became a fainter memory and the fog of arousal became her only reality? To let him fully break her until she said and did anything and everything he wanted anyway?

She couldn’t let that happen.

She had to live. Had to be free. Had to get out of here.

And not just for herself, though that would have been enough.

And not even for Zack, that loveable goofball.

Because truthfully, she knew that if she never came home, Zack would, eventually, be fine. He would search for her, mourn her, and then one day, maybe years from now, he would move on. Zack who was nothing short of wonderful would, without question, find another wonderful woman to love and settle down with. It was all, really, inevitable.

But who would take care of her mother? Who would steward the Planet?

Aeris was a daughter twice over.

Who would speak with the Planet if she broke? Who would teach future generations of part-Cetra children about their biological legacy, the magic that flowed in their veins?

Who would provide for Elmyra, the woman who had worked herself to the bone all these years to give Aeris the best life she could? Elmyra who had never found the time to find a new man, putting all her hope for the future into her daughter. Elmyra, who, even if Sephiroth kept his promise of putting her up in Kalm, would probably die of heartbreak, alone, wondering what had happened to her daughter.

Aeris had promised herself that she would get through this night. That she would move forward, regardless of whatever Sephiroth did to her or made her do.

She was going to keep that promise.

She was going to let go.
She was going to wrap that florist, that fiancé, that Cetra, that daughter, that person in a tight cocoon of memories that had nothing to do with this forsaken place, this cruel monster of a man, and she would find her afterwards.

“Please fuck me,” she gasped, no longer listening to the words spilling from her lips, “Please. I need you inside me. I’m your sla—” she moaned mid-sentence as his hand drove into her harder. “I’m your slave… I’m your slave and…”

“Yes,” he hissed in satisfaction. “And?”

“I want you to come inside me… I want you to…” Aeris trembled as she tried to stay upright. “…plant your seed in me. Please, please…”

“Do you want me to use you?” his low baritone growled softly in her ear.

Pink and green spots danced behind Aeris’s tightly closed eyelids. She shivered at the sensation of his warm breath against the shell of her ear. “Yes,” she pleaded. “I want you to use me. Please use me. I’m your slave. You can do anything to me.”

And there it was. The absolute truth. Whatever other filthy lies might have fallen from her swollen lips, that last part was true.

Aeris mewled as Sephiroth withdrew his hand. Her head spun from the sudden lack of warmth and pressure.

And then something larger, firmer, was pushing against her entrance. His hands gripped her hips and she felt the bed dip on her right side as he brought one knee up to brace himself.

He guided his cock into her and slowly slid forward until her backside pressed firmly against the front of his body. Aeris let out a keening wail at the sudden sensation of fullness, of completeness. Of him touching her in all the ways that she’d so desperately needed. He was so hot and hard inside her and it felt so, so good.

He fucked her slowly, precisely. Long smooth strokes as she ground her ass against him seeking more.

Aeris put up a valiant effort trying to hold herself up, but it wasn’t long before she collapsed and fell forwards, her arms and legs having turned to jelly under the overwhelming pleasure that radiated through her body. He let her remain in that position for a moment, moving forwards to compensate, bowing over her body.

Then his hand was in her hair again, pulling her head backwards, forcing her to arch her back as far as she could so that she could stare up at his face hovering inches above her. Through eyes half closed in passion, she met his gaze and saw the cruel slant of his mouth, the gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

“Look at me, Aeris,” he breathed. “I want you to look at the man you so prettily begged to be used by.”

He drew back and thrust forward again, tilting his hips to send delicious shivers throughout her body. “Is this what you wanted?” he asked, holding her gaze.

Aeris wordlessly whimpered her agreement.
He released her hair and withdrew from her.

“Turn around,” he commanded. “Legs up.”

She obeyed without thought, rolling onto her back to face him. His long silver hair was draped over one shoulder, the tendril tips tickling her side. He grasped her legs under her knees and hooked them over his shoulders before plunging into her again.

Aeris gasped at the intense sensation that lanced through her. Doubled up like this, the angle at which he took her made every deep thrust so overwhelming she thought she would scream.

Without thinking, she clutched at his wrists, where his hands were braced on either side of her head. Dug her nails in to the firm, warm flesh.

“Put your hands above your head and hold them there,” he ordered.

Aeris forced herself to open her hands and drag them above her head, crossing them at the wrist to lie against the mattress.

“What are you?” he asked. His body loomed large above her, muscles taut.

She closed her eyes. Blocked him out. “I’m your slave,” she answered.

“Again,” he said.

“I’m your slave.”

He fucked her harder, faster.

“What does my slave want?” he rasped.

“To please you,” she answered, bucking her hips against his.

“Then open your eyes and watch as I come inside you.”

Aeris opened her glazed eyes and fixed her gaze on his mouth.

“Count down from 10. Slowly.” He reached out and wrapped one hand gently around her throat.

So this was how one fell to a monster, Aeris thought.

“10…9…8…” she whispered, moaning between each breath.

“Counting down her fate.

“7…6…5…”

A metronome for her own debasement.

“4…3…”

Begging to be fucked.

“2…”

Begging to be used.
“1.”

His last thrusts were erratic. His eyes closed and his mouth fell open. He let out a deep, guttural groan as he spilled his seed inside her.

Aeris trembled in the aftermath, too overcome to do anything but hold still as he pulled out. She felt a hot trickle run down her swollen labia.

Sephiroth bent down and kissed her, hard and deep. Aeris moaned into his mouth as he stroked the side of her breast with his fingers.

“You’ve done very well tonight, Aeris,” he said, voice shaking ever so slightly. “Shall I reward you?”

He didn’t wait for her response before plunging his fingers back inside her hot, engorged sex. Aeris cried out in surprise when he slid down and placed his mouth firmly on her clit. He kissed her passionately and she writhed beneath him, feeling the familiar, desperately needed pressure build steadily upwards.

“Come for me, Aeris.”

She ground up against his hand and arched into his mouth. Rode the firm press of his fingers and the soft strokes of his lips and tongue to a plateau that held for one endless, breathless moment. And then she screamed her release, again and again, with each wave of cresting, shattering pleasure that tore through her.

Sephiroth chuckled as she collapsed back into the bed, the tension dissipating from her body as the first hints of afterglow began to seep into her veins. He curled his fingers inside her, drawing a despairing whine from her lips as her hips rocked against his hand of their own accord.

“Oh you aren’t done yet, little slave. We’ve only just begun.”

Aeris woke up the next morning alone.

She went through the motions of hygiene numbly, washing the sleep from her eyes and the sticky, dried substances from her thighs.

She sat down afterwards on the edge of the bed, the crumpled white sheets stained with the evidence of last night’s sins, soft and cool beneath her bare thighs. Minutes ticked by while she wrestled with her psyche – that little voice that wanted to hurl all manner of vicious slander at her for what she’d done. The one that whispered dirty, filthy, slut, whore...

Aeris told the treacherous little voice to shove it.

No one ever literally died of shame. She could learn to wear it proudly, if that’s what she had to do, she thought, as she remembered the way she’d screamed herself hoarse as he’d made her come over and over again. The way she’d been so greedy for it.

The sound of the door opening shook her from her reverie and she looked up in surprise to see
Sephiroth walk in with a stylish black leather duffle bag in hand. He looked pristine as ever in a cream turtleneck sweater under a dark grey sports jacket and matching trousers.

“Good morning,” he greeted her smoothly. “I trust you slept well?”

Aeris didn’t bother to answer, just stared at him openly, wondering what he was doing here. He was breaking the pattern.

He walked to her at an unhurried pace and set the bag down beside her on the bed. Aeris watched as he opened it and pulled out an oversized pair of sunglasses, a gauzy cream colored silk scarf, a simple, thickly woven mid-thigh length cream dress, a light pink trench coat, and tall brown leather boots.

“We,” he said with a sly smile, “are going on a trip.”

Aeris’s heart skipped a beat.

It couldn’t be that easy. She let him fuck her in exactly the way he’d wanted, and she was free of this godforsaken room? She suddenly felt lightheaded.

“But first, I have a promise to keep,” he said, reaching back into the bag to withdraw a thin, beautifully fashioned black box that was about the size of his splayed hand.

“Come.” He grasped her hand in his free one and led her to the armchair. He sat down and motioned for her to kneel.

Aeris held her breath as he slowly freed the lid.

When it finally came off, her eyes widened at the sight. Nestled within rich red satin was a gold circlet. The metal was about the width of her forefinger. A nearly invisible line ran across its cross section on the left and a tiny, headless screw was visible on the right.

Suspended from a small gold clasp in the center was the white materia. The orb shimmered a wintry pale green and Aeris felt her heart catch in her throat at the sight.

She had remembered, of course, his promise to return her birth mother’s heirloom, once she became his. It was a statement that she had clung to yet been afraid to believe, fearful that it might just be a pretty lie.

An old memory pushed its way to the surface of her thoughts. *Always keep this with you, my baby – it is the last hope, the last line of defense, for all life on Gaia. I entrust the faith of our people, our final wish, to you.* That was what her mother had said to her, so many years ago, when they’d fled the laboratories.

A surge of gratitude washed through her and she reeled with the force of her emotions, struggling to remember that it was Sephiroth who’d taken her birthright from her, even if it was Tseng’s hands that did the deed. Giving it back now hardly even began to make up for the crime in the first place.

She watched silently as his strong fingers lifted the elegant circlet out of the box and found the tiny screwdriver included within. He made quick work of removing the gold screw and opened the large ring so that two gold arcs rested in his hands, in the shape of a rounded W.

“This is an eternity collar, Aeris,” he explained quietly. “A symbol of your submission. Once you put it on, it will never be removed.”
Her mouth slipped open as she met his penetrating, deadly serious gaze. She’d always thought of sex collars as black leather bands with buckles and steel rings. She’d never imagined something so beautiful and insidious.

“Do you accept?” he asked, his voice so deceptively soft and almost kind.

Aeris felt tears prickle her eyes and she quickly blinked them away. Did she accept? How could she not? Turn away from this opportunity to have her mother’s secret, unknown magic back on her person…that hidden primeval power that was one of the last legacies of her people?

She would sooner die.

“Yes,” she whispered, feeling her heart break all over again.

“What are you?” he asked her, his fingers gently gripping her chin.

“I’m your slave,” she responded emotionlessly. Automatically.

He nodded once. “Then you should look the part. Lean forward.”

She did as he bid her, sweeping her hair up and to the side as she tilted her head down between his spread knees. The slow scrape of the gold components set her teeth on edge and her heart pounding, as she found herself gripped with an irrational and disproportionate fear that the hinge would catch on the delicate flesh of her throat.

The collar slid shut with a final scratch of metal against metal. It felt heavy and cold against her skin.

She closed her eyes as he leaned in to replace the screw.

And then he was finished and she sat back on her heels. She resisted the urge to finger the white materia and settled for relishing the feel of its reassuring weight against the space between her collarbones. She didn’t want him to see what having the bauble back meant to her.

Sephiroth sat back and waited.

“Thank….you…” Aeris whispered cautiously. It seemed to satisfy him.

“Now get dressed,” he commanded coldly.

She did it quickly, with hands trembling in nervous anticipation. She was going to leave this room. She was finally going to walk out of that door. This horrible, plain cell that had been her prison for five endless weeks.

She hardly dared believe it.

As she dressed, she realized that this was the most clothing she’d worn since her abduction. Her fingers caressed the supple leather of the boots as she pulled them over her calves, and she savored the feel of the heavy cotton shell of the trench coat, wrapping it tightly around her body before tying the long belt into a bow over her stomach.

Gaia, it felt good to have so many layers between her skin and the outside world. To be covered, except for a peek of her bare knees between the tops of her boots and the hem of her coat.

Unexpectedly, Sephiroth took the scarf from her before she could wrap it around her neck. His fingers gently brushed her bangs backwards, away from her forehead, and Aeris tilted her face towards the ceiling, instinctively responding to the light pressure against her scalp. He wrapped the
long length of fabric gently around her throat and up over her hair before tying a knot beneath her earlobe.

She picked up the sunglasses from the bed and slid them onto her face.

Sephiroth lifted the duffle and extended his free hand to her. “Shall we?” he said with a slight smile.

Aeris looked at the proffered palm, vision darkened by the brown lenses of her shades, still not quite believing this was really happening. She gingerly placed her hand into his and let him lead her out the door.

It clicked shut behind her.

The hallway she stood in looked like any typical office hall – speckled beige vinyl flooring, off-white walls, and bright florescent lights. Only a few dozen steps led them to the elevators, where she saw the large, block printed number 63.

Aeris’s mouth slipped open. There was only one building on the entire planet that had so many floors.

Sephiroth pressed the up button and a moment later, the doors opened with a hydraulic hiss. The glass encased compartment before her eyes confirmed it – she could clearly see the mako power plants in the distance, and the familiar sprawling city scape blanketed with a thick green fog of pollution. She had never seen Midgar from quite so high up before, but there was no mistaking it.

She was in Midgar Tower. Sephiroth had held her just thirteen floors above Zack’s office.

Aeris felt sick as she stepped into the elevator and placed her hand on the glass wall to steady herself. When the lift began to move upwards, she turned to see that Sephiroth had pressed the topmost button – Roof.

Before she could open her mouth to question him, a ding rang through the air and the doors swished open. He pulled her forwards by the hand, up a half flight of stairs that led to a heavy metal door that he opened with a keycard produced from his inner breast pocket. He pushed the door open part way, and Aeris felt her heart flutter at the first warm touch of sunlight on her face in weeks.

“Aeris, I will warn you only this once.” Sephiroth said, shaking her from her momentary bliss, “Any indiscretion on your part will condemn my staff. I wouldn’t want the deaths of such good people to weigh on your conscience. Given your nature, I suspect you might never recover from the guilt.”

Her hand twitched slightly in his grasp, heart too leaden for any other reaction. She wanted nothing more than to be alone right now. To sleep for a week. To mourn the loss of her innocence after every falsity he’d extracted from her.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked her, releasing her hand and extending the crook of his arm instead.

She pressed her lips together and silently wrapped her hand around the inside of his lower bicep. He pushed open the door and they stepped through, greeted by the sight of a small airship parked in the middle of the roof. A rolling metal staircase flanked by, presumably, the captain and a stewardess, led up to the entrance of the aircraft.

“Good morning, Sir, Ma’am!” the brown haired man wearing the black and gold pilot’s hat chirped. “Where to today?” He moved to take the duffle bag from his employer.

“Good morning, Reynfred.” Sephiroth answered, smoothly. “We’re heading to Icicle Inn.”
A chill ran down Aeris’s spine at how perfectly normal, charming even, he sounded.

“Splendid! A little ski vacation for the lovely lady, then?” The pilot reached out to grasp Aeris’s fingers and bent to place a quick kiss on her knuckles.

“Hmm, perhaps,” Sephiroth answered, tilting his head to look down at her contemplatively. A hungry smile crossed his face. “Though I think the lady and I might be too otherwise occupied for skiing. Isn’t that right, my dear?”

Aeris didn’t trust her voice to respond, settling instead for ducking her head and turning towards Sephiroth’s broad figure in a parody of bashfulness.

The pilot laughed, and Aeris clenched her jaw at the carefree sound. “Excellent! Well what are we waiting for? Let’s get going! The flight will be about six hours, and Sara here will be on hand to make your trip as comfortable as humanly possible,” he said, addressing Aeris.

The blonde haired stewardess extended her hand to give Aeris a polite handshake and a small smile. “Please don’t hesitate to ask me for anything. As long as it’s feasible, I’ll be sure to take care of it,” she said earnestly.

Sephiroth let his arm drop and Aeris took the cue to let go and step back slightly. He moved towards the base of the staircase that was only wide enough for them to proceed single file.

“Ready?” he asked.

Aeris turned her face slightly towards Sector 5 and allowed herself to feel one last pang of longing. For her mother’s crumbling house and her battered church beneath the plate. For the above-plate apartment she’d shared with Zack. For the cheerful girl she used to be, what already seemed like an eternity ago.

Who would she be, the next time she set eyes on Midgar?

Aeris took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Felt the cool, infinitesimal thrum of the dormant white materia against her throat beneath her scarf.

She said goodbye to the girl she’d once been, and stepped onto the staircase.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Thank you again for the lovely notes.

And an especially huge thank you to LeVath for gifting this story with fanart. So pretty!!! A fanfic writer's dream come true.

This chapter was originally planned to be a few paragraphs describing relocation from point A to point B, but somewhere along the way a whole porno wrote itself. Hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7

Aeris tried not to gawk at her surroundings. The airship was the single most luxurious environment she had ever been in.

The main compartment held two cream colored leather armchairs with a small round coffee table in between. A pale gray couch that looked like it could easily accommodate four or five people sat along one curved wall. The white walls, dark wood accents, and plush beige carpet underfoot, all lit by warm overhead recessed lights, lent the room an open yet inviting air.

“If you’ll excuse me, ladies,” Sephiroth coolly intoned, “I have important matters that need to be addressed. I will summon you if needed.” With that, he disappeared behind a solid cherry wood door that led to the back of the aircraft.

Aeris sank silently into the nearest corner of the couch and twisted her body to stare out the round glass window behind her. She pulled one the embroidered gold satin throw pillows out from where it was tucked against her side and hugged it in her lap. Sara took a seat in the chair closest to Aeris as the airship rumbled to life and they began to ascend vertically into the sky.

There had once been a time when Aeris had longed to see the naked sky above Midgar’s plate, and beyond its persistent mako smog. A mere five weeks ago, she would have been unable to contain her delight, at either the lavish accommodations or the prospect of seeing clear blue expanses and soft white clouds from above.

“First time flying?” Sara asked kindly as Aeris watched the Midgar landscape fall away until its skyscrapers and roads became mere dots and lines far beneath them.


“It’s something else, isn’t it? But I know it can be pretty scary the first time,” Sara said.

Aeris was grateful for the misinterpretation of her anxiety.
“But don’t worry,” Sara reassured her. “Reynfred and I have been flying this beauty for the president for almost six years now. She’s as trusty as she is gorgeous, and Reynfred is one of the best pilots in the world.”

Aeris reached up and carefully removed the sunglasses from her face. She blinked at the other woman as her eyes adjusted to the light. It was odd to hear her refer to Sephiroth as the president, though of course, that was his official title. It had somehow slipped to the back of her mind, never quite suitting him. Zack always talked about him as simply Sephiroth, never bothering with titles and honorifics. Habits unbroken from their years together in SOLDIER.

From the time they counted each other as friends.

“What’s it like?” Aeris asked. “Working for him?”

“Oh my goodness!” Sara gushed, leaning forward in her excitement. Her clear blue eyes twinkled in genuine delight. “Honestly, it’s like a dream. I get to fly all over the world in this,” she gestured at their surroundings. “And President Sephiroth is always such a gentleman. I used to work at the Azure Villas in Costa Del Sol, and our guests were usually super rich and even more demanding. But the president is so calm…and he doesn’t really need much.” Sara shrugged. “Half the time I just spend these trips reading. Oh that reminds me,” she stood up and walked behind the other armchair, bending down to rummage through a short shelving unit hidden behind elegantly carved wooden doors.

When the stewardess came back, she was carrying a heavy pile of books and magazines. She deposited the stack on the coffee table. Aeris could make out what looked like an eclectic collection of science journals, business and political magazines, and fantasy literature.

“It sounds like the president doesn’t want to be interrupted, otherwise I would tell you that you could nap in the bedroom-office back there,” Sara waved towards the back door. “But if you get tired, you should feel more than free to nap on the couch. I can bring you extra pillows and blankets if you like. And if you’re not feeling sleepy, there’s a lot of reading material on this airship. Or we can talk if you want. It’s totally up to you.” She paused for a second before asking. “Would you like me to take your coat?”

Aeris clutched the pillow tighter against her. There was no way she was going to part with her hard won clothing. She was going to enjoy every minute of the constricting feel of all her layers while it lasted.

“No, thank you. I’m feeling a bit chilly,” she lied. “But I would love to talk.” Five weeks of hearing nothing but Sephiroth’s and Tseng’s voices and she was grateful for the sound of exuberant, feminine chatter.

“Okay!” Sara agreed, curling up a comfortable distance away from Aeris on the couch. “Well I’d love to know more about you. You’re Midgarian, right? You have that accent. Can I ask what you do? And how did you meet the president?”

“I…” Aeris trailed off uncertainly, unsure of how much was safe to divulge. “I’m a florist,” she finally answered, while trying unsuccessfully to fend off the salacious memories that simple statement evoked. “As for how we met…I don’t think Sephiroth wants that story to get out.” How easy it was to deflect using the truth. “Not that I don’t trust you-” Aeris added hastily.

“Oh, no, it’s fine!” Sara exclaimed, waving her hands reassuringly. “I totally get it. The paparazzi are vicious, especially when it comes to this president.” She laughed and confided in a conspiratorial whisper, “I’m actually a member of the Silver Elite myself. But I never leak them content. It’s totally
not worth risking my job over.”

Aeris inwardly rolled her eyes. Zack had once been a member of the underground fan club that reported on all manner of gossip about Shinra’s precious general.

“I gotta say though,” Sara said, tilting her head in consideration as she studied Aeris, “in all my years as a stewardess on this ship, I’m pretty sure we’ve never shuttled a lady friend.” She paused and looked upwards, appearing to sift through her memories. “Nope… never. I would remember something like that. You must really be something else.”

Aeris cringed at the statement but fought to hide her reaction. The stewardess was far too perceptive.

“Who do you usually fly around?” Aeris asked, and not just to change the subject. She was genuinely curious.


Aeris felt a grin spread across her face. It felt good to smile. When had she last done that?

They spent the next few minutes comparing notes on the best vacation spots in Costa Del Sol and Mideel, and the least overpriced areas of Midgar for real estate. Aeris savored the idle conversation. The lack of innuendo. Sara was so refreshingly guileless that Aeris felt a sharp sense of loss when she finally stood up.

“Okay my dear, I’m going to go start on lunch.” Sara said, stepping towards the front of the airship. “Put your feet up, relax, and enjoy yourself. Just call if you need anything. And the bathroom is that way.” She pointed in the direction of the cockpit and to the left. “Is there anything I can get you right now? A drink maybe?”

Aeris’s thoughts immediately went two crystal goblets on a small table in an almost sterile room, half filled with burgundy liquid. The thought made her feel vaguely ill. “I would love a tea, please. Chamomile, if you have it?”

With a quick nod, Sara disappeared behind a door to the right of the cockpit, where Aeris assumed the kitchen must be.

Aeris turned her attention back to the window, once again unsettled in the absence of soothing chatter, with nothing but the steady rumble of the engine and the loud hum of rushing air to accompany her thoughts. Outside, the crystal blue of the northern ocean was coming into view. Small clouds floated above land and water, like kernels of snowy popcorn.

If she was the first lady friend aboard this ship, then she might be the first woman Sephiroth was taking to… wherever they were headed within Icicle Inn. Aeris wondered if they were going to a resort. But knowing Sephiroth, that would be too public. A cottage then, perhaps.

Sara pressed a steaming mug into Aeris’s hands and then disappeared again just as quickly. Aeris clutched the round handle and let the hot liquid warm her palm through the curved ceramic exterior.

A seed of hope began to grow in her as she contemplated the endless miles of ocean beneath, in between sips of tea that oddly made her feel more normal. More human. Such a simple thing, but it had been her choice. A choice of beverage. Something so insignificant, she hadn’t had such thoughts since escaping the labs.

Tseng had said the same thing as Sara – all those weeks ago. That this had never happened before. That Aeris’s presence in Sephiroth’s life was an oddity. And if that was the case, then maybe, just
maybe, he was improvising as he went. The Great Sephiroth, winging it. Aeris suppressed a slightly hysterical giggle at the thought.

But if he wasn’t following a tried and true script, then she could probably nudge his decisions in all sorts of ways. The seed had been planted the moment he’d told her they were going on a trip – the moment she first dared hope that she was leaving that cell. She’d played his game for five weeks now, and it was time to volley back.

Aeris was nothing if not a green thumb. And she would find a way to feed and water that seed until it grew into a giant fucking bean stalk.


Aeris didn’t know when she’d fallen asleep, with her head against the back of the couch and the empty mug clutched in her hands on top of the pillow. She groggily opened her eyes to Sara hovering above her with a tentative hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, sorry to wake you. The president wants to see you and he asked me to send you in,” Sara said, inclining her head towards the back door.

“Oh, okay,” Aeris responded. She straightened out her spine and unfurled her legs, wincing at the stiffness that had set in. “What time is it?”

Sara gently took the empty mug from Aeris’s hands. “Just past one. We’re about halfway there. I didn’t wake you for lunch since you seemed so sound asleep. There’s still a bunch of food on the president’s desk, but you just let me know if you want something else, alright? I’d be happy to whip you up a sandwich, or some pasta, or even some salmon and veggies.”

“Thank you.” Aeris reluctantly pushed the pillow off her lap and stood up, eyeing the solid wood door and swallowing past the slight flutter in her throat. Her hands reached up automatically to disentangle the scarf from her sleep mussed hair and she dropped the billowy fabric onto the seat behind her. She straightened her rumpled pink trench coat and strode towards the back of the airship with a confidence she didn’t feel. Hesitating for another moment, she finally knocked on the door, a perfunctory two taps, before grasping the ornate handle and pushing it open. She stepped through and let the door shut behind her.

Sephiroth sat in a high-backed beige leather chair at a large mahogany desk. Directly in front of her, a bed dominated the entire back of the airship, dressed in rich cream bedding and embroidered taupe pillows. Sephiroth’s discarded sports jacket lay across the foot of the bed. A loveseat sat against the windows on Aeris’s right. The close quarters and symmetrical line of windows along either side of the curved walls gave Aeris the sense of being in a brightly lit cocoon.

And there wasn’t just “a bunch of food” on the desk, as Sara had so casually stated. There was an entire spread. What looked like bite sized vegetarian sushi rolls, a selection of cheeses and deli meats, and a platter of brightly colored fruits lined the back edge of the desk, all barely picked through. There was also a flute of frothy orange liquid and a half empty tumbler of whiskey with an orange slice and maraschino cherry. A stack of folders overflowing with papers sat in the far corner of the desk.

Aeris’s mouth watered, as she was suddenly reminded of the fact that she had barely eaten dinner the
previous night, and had nothing to eat since their marathon session.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked, in the calmest voice she could muster.

“Hmm,” Sephiroth agreed as he coolly appraised her, his sharp eyes running up and down her body. “Take off your clothes.”

Aeris’s fingers twitched at her sides and for a few heartbeats she just stared back at him without moving, calculating the likely outcomes of her scant options. With a resigned glance out the window at the endless blue horizon, she untied the belt of her trench coat and shrugged it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the ground in an audible heap. The cream dress quickly followed, and Aeris shivered at the sudden chill against her skin. The realization that her newfound and short lived armor only consisted of two pieces of easily removed clothing soured her mood.

She bent to unzip her boots.

“You can keep those on,” Sephiroth said, interrupting her actions.

Aeris straightened and crossed her arms over her bare chest. She glared at him and waited. It only seemed to amuse him, judging by the minute upward twitch of his lip.

Sephiroth stood and wordlessly guided her to stand in front of the desk, beside the large chair. His warm hand against her back steered her until the front of her thighs pressed against the wood. He gently bent her forward so that her upper body lay against the table top, her breasts and cheek pressed flat against the cold surface with her palms face down on either side of her head. She shivered.

“Don’t move,” Sephiroth said softly as his fingers lingered for a moment along the small of her back.

Aeris heard him step away to rummage through a bedside compartment. When he returned, she briefly glimpsed the black leather eye mask in his hands before he slipped the elastic strap over her head. Deprived of sight, the background roar of the airship was suddenly too loud. Her fingertips flexed against the smooth lacquered wood beneath her. She heard the creak of leather as he sat back down.

“You must be hungry,” Sephiroth said. His fingers leisurely caressed her shoulders, her back.

Then there was a finger, feather light, running along the curve of her lower lip, and the touch of something cold and firm. Aeris parted her lips to accept the object Sephiroth gently slipped into her mouth, his fingertip brushing against the tip of her tongue as he withdrew. The sweet, tart juice of a strawberry filled her mouth as she tentatively chewed.

He caressed the curve of her backside before slipping a grape into her mouth. Aeris trembled.

“I spent some time with this little mystery,” Sephiroth said as he brushed his fingers against her neck, close to the front on her collar. “I’ve never encountered materia like this before. What is it?” A prosciutto-wrapped melon pushed past her lips.

“It’s nothing,” Aeris lied after she finished chewing and swallowed. When had lying become so easy? The words flowed naturally. “It’s just a memento from my mother. I’m not sure what it does.” Half-truths flowed even easier.

“An inert materia passed down from Ifalna, the last full blooded Cetra on this planet?” His knee gently nudged her legs apart so that he could stroke the backs and insides of her thighs. “I think you’re keeping secrets from me, little florist.”
Creamy brie on a hearty cracker came next. Aeris licked her lips where the soft cheese caught against them.

“I really don’t know what it does,” she repeated earnestly. “There are so many secrets of….”she hesitated, “our people…that have been lost.”

“I suppose that’s true,” he agreed, as he stroked her gently between her legs, the pads of his fingertips brushing softly against the sides of her clit, down the length of her outer lips. Aeris jerked in surprise and stilled again when a warning hand pressed down against her back.

“What did your mother tell you when she gave you this relic, then?” he asked, as he fed her a roll of mortadella.

“I don’t remember,” she lied. “I was only maybe seven years old at the time.” He didn’t need to know that she’d repeated her mother’s words to herself every night as a child. A mantra against the darkness.

Sephiroth pressed harder against her clitoris and Aeris moaned in response, struggling slightly to hold her position bent over his desk as her legs quivered. When moments passed by and he didn’t question her further, Aeris decided it was time to go on the offense.

“I want to see my mother when we get back to Midgar. Elmyra. She must be going out of her mind being worried for me.” Aeris waited, body tense, in the silence that followed. If she could get him to agree, if she could somehow attain that much freedom of movement-

Without warning, his fingers pushed inside her, and Aeris grunted softly and tried to refrain from bucking against his hand.

“What a time to talk about your mother,” Sephiroth teased, stroking that spot deep inside her.

“I’m pretty sure-” Aeris gasped undulated her hips slightly, gripping the table harder, “-that it’s your fault we started talking about-” she moaned through gritted teeth, “-mothers.”

Sephiroth replied, “Perhaps,” as he moved to stand behind her.

“Well?” Aeris pressed. “Will you let me see her when we come back?”

He cupped the curve of her ass. “No.”

Aeris tried to stand up and got half way before his powerful hand on the center of her back forced her body down again.

“You have not earned that privilege yet, little one,” he purred, as he resumed caressing her. “Besides, Zack would find out about it, I think. And the last thing you want is to set him off on some fool’s quest to save you.” He paused, tracing her spine. “Do you really think you could keep this secret from your mother? They always have a way of knowing.”

Aeris didn’t know how he could have any knowledge of such things, when he was supposedly an orphan raised within an institution.

“Then when can I see her? What do I have to do to earn that privilege?” Aeris nearly spat.

His finger was circling her clit again. It was getting harder to think clearly.

“Once you are carrying my child, I think,” he answered, whispering in her ear.
She shivered at the feeling of his hot breath against the delicate skin, and shuddered at the reminder that someday, one way or another, he would discover her IUD.

“But for now, I’d be willing to let you write to her again. To reassure her that you are in good hands.” Those same hands grasped her hips, fingers digging slightly into her flesh. “If…”

“If?” Aeris prompted, slightly breathless.

He didn’t answer her. Just dipped his hand between her legs again and twisted to coat a finger in her juices. He pulled away but kept one hand on her ass. Then a wet digit was pressing against her anus and Aeris instinctively jerked to the side in a futile attempt to get away. He just pressed her harder into the desk, much less gently this time.

“If,” Sephiroth continued, stroking the puckered opening while Aeris’s muscles twitched beneath his hands, “the next time I do this,” he pressed slightly and Aeris held her breath, “you respond properly, I will let you write to your mother.”

Aeris marveled silently at his perverted sadism.

“Do we have a deal?”

After another pause, she nodded her assent. Baby steps, she tried to reassure herself. Sephiroth was going to do whatever he pleased with her body anyway. What mattered was regaining her freedom inch by painfully slow inch if that’s what she had to do. One thing would lead to another. She just had to keep playing along. Eventually, one day, he would misstep.

She felt his hand shift between their bodies as he moved to free his cock. His hard member pressed against her and slid in easily. When he fucked her, it was hard and fast, without much regard for her comfort or satisfaction. He came with an animal grunt, and pulled out of her, letting his semen trickle down her thighs.

“You’re dismissed,” he said curtly, pulling the blindfold away from her head.

Aeris struggled to stand up, blinking in disorientation at the too-bright sunlight that filled the room, her head spinning.

“You may eat more if you want, and sleep in here or go back out to the main room – whatever you like.” He withdrew a tissue box from the desk drawer and pressed it into her hands. “Only do not disturb me. There’s more work I need to do.”

With that he turned from her and sat back down, reaching for his stack of papers.

Aeris slowly pulled out several tissues, staring at his back, slightly baffled and heavily irked, and wordlessly wiped up the slippery mess covering her thighs.
I have waded into the frightening world that is Tumblr. You can find me here. Come chat with me about anything. I'm pretty open about things, both personal and fandom. Would love to hear from you.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 8

In the end, Aeris decided to stay in the room with Sephiroth. Partially to avoid having to talk to Sara after being freshly fucked, but also to take advantage of this opportunity to study her captor.

She dressed quickly, pulling the trench coat closed around her frame despite the fact that she was flushed and overly warm from their previous exertions. She took the sushi platter and loaded it with a selection of the other offerings, then reached over the desk to grab the mimosa.

She ate slowly, on the loveseat, in between sips of the cold, fizzy beverage. Sephiroth ignored her, seemingly engrossed in his work. He read through paper after paper, pausing occasionally to scribble notes on the documents.

It was a curiosity, Aeris thought, as she contemplated the back of his head while chewing her food. For someone rumored to be a rather distant and hands off ruler, he seemed to be buried in work a lot.

When she was full, she stood and stretched, stifling a yawn. The bed looked so soft and inviting, and she didn’t relish the thought of more cramped muscles after another few hours on the couch. With a sigh, she reluctantly took her coat off again and draped it over the arm of the loveseat before bending down to remove her tall leather boots.

Her last thoughts before sleep took her as she lay between the silky sheets was that her dress matched the linen – how fitting for a sex doll – and that she would have to find out what he was doing all the time. Maybe there was a way to use his work to her advantage.

When they finally landed hours later and disembarked from the airship, it was in a clearing on the outskirts of Icicle Inn, over an hour’s drive from the main resort areas. A young, sharply dressed valet awaited them, holding the keys to a sleek black sports car. Aeris wondered if the man was a Turk trainee – there was something familiar about the way he moved.

Sephiroth took the keys and they bid their three attendants goodbye. Aeris let her fingers linger on Sara’s hand, silently wishing that she could keep the stewardess with her. Tseng wasn’t likely to be wherever they were going. There was a good chance she would be completely alone with Sephiroth, and for who knew how long. The thought did not sit well.

They sped away from the airship towards the base of the mountains and drove up winding, snow
covered roads, each content to keep the silence. The setting sun stained the skyline a deep orange. Soft white flakes drifted slowly, dreamily, downwards all around them, coating the evergreens as far as the eye could see.

Aeris tried not to think about this strange pilgrimage back to the place of her birth. This distant part of the planet she’d never had the chance to visit but would have grown up in if it hadn’t been for Hojo, and Shinra.

Her first life had been as a prisoner; an experimental subject in the service of greed. Her second, a strange and lonely girl who heard whispers on the wind. Her third was the one filled with Zack, who had first taken her to see the sky and broken the chains of poverty and fear.

Here, in this place of her birth, she would start her fourth life.

But Aeris wasn’t a child anymore. This time she didn’t have to be just a product of her circumstance.

They finally pulled up to a chalet in the middle of nowhere. It was ridiculous, really. Three stories, all dark red wood, with a wraparound veranda and a beautiful high-peaked roofline. Aeris thought about what the world might be like if even half the upper crust’s wealth was put towards helping the slum dwellers of Midgar.

The last chalet they had passed was a ten minute drive back. All around them was nothing but snow banks and tall thin trees, their skeletal branches bare except for the glittering white that clung to them like icing.

Sephiroth led her up the paved path to the house. It had been shoveled recently, probably by the valet, but was already covered in a thin layer of fresh snowfall. They reached the carved wooden front door, and he unlocked it before pushing it open. Then he suddenly scooped her up into his arms.

Aeris yelped in surprise as Sephiroth tossed her slightly into a firmer grip. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying you over the threshold,” he answered simply, as he strode through the door.

“Why?” she felt a muscle twitch in her jaw in aggravation.

Sephiroth flicked a switch on the wall with his elbow, still holding her against him. “In honor of ancient Cetra traditions, when brides were stolen and couldn’t be trusted not to run away.”

Aeris wondered where he got his information from. Ifalna had told her stories of a peaceful, matrilineal people. If there had been any bride stealing, it would have been after the Great Fissure, when a portion of the Cetra population had decided to stay in place, forsaking their calling and their birthright for the comfort of settlement. In other words, ancient humans. But there was no sense in arguing that point.

“So I’m your bride now?” she asked bitterly, as he let her slide down the length of his body to land on her feet.

“Marriage was once defined by sex and childbirth. So in a manner of speaking, yes.” He smirked.
“Can you be trusted not to run away?”

“Where would I go that you couldn’t find me?”

“That’s my girl,” he said, as he reached for the belt of her trench coat. He untied the knot and pulled the coat away from her shoulders, then stowed it in the front closet before bending to remove his shoes.

Aeris followed suit with her snow covered boots, then let him lead her around the corner to the main living space. The last rays of the sun filtered through floor-to-ceiling windows set between wooden support beams, illuminating the open concept area in a warm glow.

Sephiroth waved his hand towards the massive kitchen. The stunning room boasted espresso stained cabinets, stainless steel appliances, and white marble counters. “You may do whatever you want with the kitchen – it’s all yours. I prefer to take my meals at seven, noon, and eighteen thirty. It should be fully stocked, but if there’s anything you want, I will order it for you.”

He paused just long enough for Aeris to realize that he expected her to cook for him. She wanted to snort in disdain at how contrived it all seemed.

He continued, “You should get settled in and rest. I don’t need dinner tonight, but if you’re hungry, you can help yourself.”

Aeris cocked her head to the side and spoke after a moment. “You’re not afraid that I’ll poison you?”

Sephiroth simply grinned at her. “There is nothing in this house that can harm me. At best, I might get indigestion if you decided to use rat poison.” He raised his brow at her suggestively. “Would you like to know the consequences if you were to do something so displeasing?”

Aeris pressed her lips together and looked away, taking in the large wooden dining table and high backed chairs next to the kitchen area.

“How long are we staying here?” she asked, still not meeting his eyes.

He ignored her, leading her by the hand through the living room area that featured plush bone colored couches around a brick-framed hearth. They walked up the stairs and into the first room on the left.

“This will be your room,” he explained. “Everything you need should be here.”

The carefully designed room, with warm neutral tones and reclaimed wood accents, was more beautiful than the nicest hotel she’d ever stayed in with Zack. It was making her dizzy. She felt like she was floating through a dream.

Sephiroth grasped her by the waist and bent her into the curve of his body, tipping her chest and face backwards. His hand came up to gently cup her cheek and he lowered his lips to meet hers. When he withdrew, she blinked at him in a daze.

“Goodnight, my little florist. I will see you at breakfast.” And with that, he stepped out into the hallway and closed the door with a click.

For three agonizingly long breaths, she stared at the doorknob. When she finally lunged for it, not even really knowing what she was hoping for, it was to find that the handle turned easily, that it was a perfectly normal bedroom door, unlocked, and that she could walk into the darkened hallway if she wanted.
Sephiroth was nowhere in sight, having already disappeared into one of the many other rooms on the floor.

The ambivalence nearly broke her. That she could stride right out of this house if she wanted to – if she dared – was like a lodestone around her heart. But she had said it herself, where would she go that he couldn’t find her? What would she do – trek for two hours through the winter wilderness towards that last chalet she’d seen, hoping that someone was home, and that they would be able to defend her from a furious Sephiroth? If there was anyone home, she’d just end up getting them killed.

Aeris took a few deep breaths before stepping back into the room and closing the door.

It’s okay, she told herself shakily, just pretend you’re Tseng. You’re here for reconnaissance. This is research for the Investigation Sector of the General Affairs Department.

She eyed the large birch dresser that sat opposite the bed and started opening the drawers. She sucked in her breath at the sight of heavy socks, scarves, gloves, turtleneck sweaters, jeans, and even sweatpants. Still no underwear though. Aeris rolled her eyes at that.

She fingered the clothing and felt pure joy trill through her bones. Without another moment’s hesitation, she stripped off the silk scarf and cream dress she was wearing and replaced them with a bright pink sweater and gray flannel pajama pants. The thick, coarse material against her skin felt so good, and she hugged herself, rubbing the ribbed sleeves of the turtleneck idly.

Finally, she spared a glance upwards, at the large mirror that sat atop the dresser. Her auburn curls hung around her face in a tousled mess. Her green eyes looked sunken and haunted, and her face was slightly thinner than she remembered. Gaunter. The stress of captivity had taken its toll on her in the last few weeks, despite how well fed she’d been the entire time.

Zack had always told her she was beautiful. That it was the joy that danced in her eyes that made her unforgettable. And she’d known for years now that her face could charm its way out of all manner of sticky situations like speeding tickets and late rent checks.

She didn’t feel particularly beautiful these days.

Aeris closed the drawers and stood, walking to the nearest of two other doors in the room. The first one she opened led to a walk in closet, and she wondered why anyone would need so much space for clothing. It was sparsely filled, like you would see in a lifestyle magazine, with brand new winter boots and stilettos, coats and lingerie. A mirror covered the entire back wall of the closet.

The last door led to an ensuite bathroom that was nothing like the austere accommodations of her previous cell. White and rose marble tiles and counters shimmered against warm wood walls, and a large tub dominated one end of the room, a frameless glass shower the other. The thought of soaking in the tub for hours, uninterrupted by a certain tyrant, sent a delicious ache through her. She promised herself she would come back after checking out the food situation.

She padded through the dark hall, down the stairs and back to the kitchen, wincing slightly at the creak of wood beneath her feet that echoed through the silent house. It was just as he’d said – the kitchen was fully stocked. Jaw-droppingly so. A spice drawer with more jars than she’d ever know what to do with. A pantry with numerous types of flours and grains in identical, neatly stacked and labeled containers. Oils that she didn’t even know existed (avocado?) as well as tins of readymade foods. The fridge was a cornucopia of fresh fruit and vegetables, and choice meats like smoked duck breast and filet mignon. Aeris shut the door, once again feeling overwhelmed.
She walked back a few paces to grab a spoon from a drawer and opened one of the cupboards she’d rifled through earlier. She knew exactly what was going to get her through this night – the perfect accompaniment to a leisurely soak in an unnecessarily large and fancy bathtub.

Aeris’s hands closed around the jar of peanut butter and without another thought, she whisked her spoils back to her bedroom.

Breakfast came and went without incident. Aeris was no gourmand, but she knew her way around a kitchen well enough. Sephiroth ate the omelet and drank the coffee she served him with military efficiency as he largely ignored her in favor of reading through the day’s news on his tablet.

When he finished, he stood up and curtly informed her that she was free to do as she pleased until lunch. Then, to Aeris’s exasperation and relief, he just disappeared up the stairs, leaving her to putter in the kitchen alone.

She would never, ever admit it. It annoyed her to even realize it. But the simple pleasure of having something to do was profound. A little light cooking and cleaning had never felt so satisfying. She felt productive wiping the marble counter. It was disturbing.

As soon as she finished cleaning up the morning’s mess, she ran up to her bedroom and changed into jeans and a thick sweater, threw on the beautifully cut down-filled coat that hung in her closet, and grabbed a pair of knee-high fur-lined boots. She hurriedly pulled them on at the front door before throwing it open and running outside.

The air was crisp and clean and sweet in a way that was unimaginable in Midgar. Costa Del Sol was warm and balmy, the wind tasting of mineral and brine. But this was something altogether different. Aeris breathed in deeply, filling her lungs greedily, savoring the feel of frost against her nostrils.

The sky was such a clear blue that it made her heart ache, to know that there was still such beauty on the planet, and to know that she would not be able to hold onto this moment. That sooner or later she would return to the capital, and to reality, from this dark fairytale dream of menacing kings and captured brides against a backdrop so glamorous it was starting to muddle her thoughts.

But for now, there was snow. And Aeris had never seen snow before. Not like this. Winters in Midgar passed in a gray-green fog, with occasional precipitation turning to slush as soon as it hit the plate.

Here, the sunlight glinted off the endless snow banks so brightly she had to squint her eyes. She reached down to touch the fluffy stuff, taking it into her hands and crushing it gently until it packed down into a quarter of its original volume.

She passed the morning living fully in that moment, cherishing only the joy of being alive. Watching her breath fog in front of her face, and kicking the fresh snowfall upwards to watch it spray. She lay in the snow banks and swiped her arms back and forth and gave thanks to the planet for clean air, white snow, a yellow sun, and crystal blue sky.
Lunch did not pass without incident.

While Aeris washed and prepared vegetables, she didn’t notice as Sephiroth approached her from behind – he moved so silently and she was facing away from the stairs. She nearly dropped the knife when warm, calloused hands slipped under her sweater to stroke her stomach. He cupped her breast and pulled her lower body backwards against him so that she could feel his erection as he ground it against her ass.

She gasped at how quickly her body responded. At the spark that ignited in her core and rushed outward as a pulse of heat racing through her veins.

She gripped the handle of the knife. Thought briefly about stabbing it between his ribs. Then let the blade slip from her fingers to land safely on the cutting board when he bent to press hot lips against her neck and the space behind her ear.

“I’m trying to cook,” she stammered, pushing her hips against him in a way that was meant to dissuade but probably had the opposite effect.

He ignored her. Kissed down the side of her throat and asked, “What are you?”

Aeris’s jaw clenched for a moment. Then she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, letting the words fall from her lips. “I’m your slave.”

He fucked her on the cold ceramic tiles. Stroked her to climax with clever fingers coated in both their fluids.

Then left her alone to finish preparing lunch.

In the midafternoon sun, Aeris stood near the edge of a cliff ledge some distance behind the house. Far down below, the waves of the northern ocean crested and broke against the crags. The winds carried the whispers of the Planet, as she sang of grief and joy, the bittersweet pain of a mother who yearns for grown children who’d long ago forgotten how to dream.

It would be so easy, to step forwards. To tumble down down down and let the ocean take her broken body.

But I am still Your daughter. I have not forgotten my dreams. Or Yours.

And who would she have to be, to keep fighting for those dreams?

Whoever I have to be. Whatever I have to do. I’m ready.

But how? How does one become what they are not? How does one become what they have to be? Hadn’t he said it before?

Through words. And deed.
Thank you to everyone who took the time to leave comments. I've been having a rough few weeks at work and reading your notes has helped me get through some exhausting days.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Heed the warnings. This chapter is dark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 9

Aeris carefully balanced the plate of warm chocolate chip cookies on her palm as she walked up the stairs. She stopped in front of the second door on the right, took a deep breath, and knocked softly. After a few moments, it opened and Sephiroth appeared behind the doorframe, glancing down at her in surprise.

She cleared her throat. “I thought you might like a snack,” she said, lifting the platter slightly. “You seem to be working really hard.”

He arched a brow at her in response, as if to say, *I know what you’re doing.* Aeris felt her stomach flutter. She hoped she wasn’t quite that transparent – she barely knew what she was doing herself. But after a pause, Sephiroth stepped back in a gesture that suggested she could come in.

It was the first time she’d seen the study, and she took a moment to appreciate the snow peaked mountains that stood beyond the room’s large windows. Exposed redwood beams decorated the ceiling in geometric patterns and hundreds of books lined the many shelves along one wall.

Sephiroth sat down in the cream leather chair at the oversized desk that dominated the room, and pushed a few papers out of the way to make space for the cookie tray. A world map sat off to the side of the desk, along with an open laptop displaying enlarged images of ancient runes carved in stone. He picked up a cookie and chewed it thoughtfully, studying Aeris as she fidgeted.

She took a deep breath and forced her hands to still. Then she met his eyes and said firmly, “I’d like a restore materia please.” That eyebrow arched again and Aeris tamped down the odd flutter in her chest at the motion. “You’ve been kind of…rough lately. And I’m sore,” she mumbled.

She willed herself to hold her ground under his probing gaze, though couldn’t suppress the hand that came up to nervously tug at a lock of her hair.

“How about a potion?” he finally asked.

Aeris let out the breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, and pretended to think about it, though she’d already been through the possibility of this conversation. “I’ll take it, if that’s all you’re willing to give me. But I think a cure spell would be more effective, since I can target it. And… I don’t think potions are recommended when you’re trying to conceive.”

Seconds crawled by. She prayed that he didn’t know about her innate healing abilities, that she could cast curative magic without the aid of materia. She was pretty sure she’d never allowed the Turks to
see her do it. Then again, who knew how deep their surveillance had been?

“Ifalna was able to heal without the help of materia,” he said, expression inscrutable.

Damn Hojo and all his damned experiments. Aeris looked down and reached for her most reliable half-truth. “I spent most of my life living in a human house. I never learned to do most of the things my mother could.” Real regret tinged her voice.

It seemed to be enough to convince him. He rose from the chair and walked to the furthest bookshelf. Aeris watched him open a carved cabinet door and rummage within before returning with a small green orb. With his free hand, he calmly undid the button of her jeans and pulled the zipper down, all the while holding her gaze. Aeris stood her ground and refused to look away.

His warm palm cupped her mound while his middle finger slid further in to stroke between her lips. Then it pushed slowly into her dry passage, making her wince. He crooked his finger in that come hither motion and she swayed, vision clouding slightly at the combination of searing discomfort and the bolt of pleasure it sent through her body. She felt the slight surge of magic in the air, the sudden scent of ozone. A slow pulse of warmth pooled and dissipated between her legs before he withdrew his hand.

“Better?” he asked.

Aeris nodded, trying to ignore the intensity of his gaze. “Yes. Thank you.”

Sephiroth took her hand and placed the cure orb in her palm, then stepped back, looking at her in a way that said he expected her to leave now.

Aeris gripped the materia tightly in her hand, and carefully kept her face neutral. Had it really been that easy? Ask, and receive? If she behaved the way he wanted, would he really keep agreeing to her requests? She wondered how much of this was part of his carefully planned manipulation and how much was sheer arrogance.

Aeris swallowed and steeled herself. “Are those Cetra runes you’re looking at?” she asked tentatively, glancing at the laptop screen. “What are you working on?”

The corner of Sephiroth’s mouth twitched faintly. “Yes, they are. Do you know how to read them?”

Aeris shook her head slowly. “No,” she answered. “Maybe I did a little, when I was a kid. But it’s all gone now.”

“As I thought,” he drawled.

She felt her cheek twitch at his condescension. Trying her best to sound nonchalant, she asked, “What are you trying to figure out?”

Sephiroth smiled, “Something important about our heritage.”

His words took Aeris back to the first night they’d met, when he’d pushed paper and pen towards her, sealing her fate. She opened her mouth to question him further, but his hand was against the small of her back, turning her gently but firmly towards the door.

“That’s enough prying for today, little one.”

Aeris glared at him, clutching her prize tightly in her hand, as the door closed slowly in her face.
The days passed in a blur of daily routines. Cooking and cleaning and sex, punctuated by the freedom of a book in her hands or the crunch of snow beneath her boots.

The date of her wedding came and went. Sephiroth didn’t seem to notice. Aeris tried not to think about it.

He taught her how to ride him just the way he liked – with hands braced behind her on top of his tightly muscled thighs, arched backwards to proudly present her breasts. She would roll her hips around and around, grind from side to side like a dancer. She learned to pursue her pleasure with abandon, knowing that he was drinking in her expression, though she kept her eyes tightly closed – the self-satisfied look in those heavy lidded eyes were more than she could bear.

In those moments she would mewl at the ripples of pleasure that traveled through her, and only after they were finished would she pause to think about the invisible chains that held her to this place, to this house, to his body.

Then one afternoon, as Aeris returned from her walk, she suddenly felt Sephiroth’s malice emanate from the chalet. It happened as she reached for the handle of the front door. Intuition thrummed in her bones and screamed at her to run, so she turned and fled down the path without thinking.

Or she tried to. She hadn’t gotten more than two steps away before the door was thrown open and a hand wrapped itself in her hair and tugged backwards, causing her to stumble into the solid wall that was Sephiroth’s body.

She scrunched her face against the pain in her scalp and straightened up against him. She tried to put some distance between them, but he just wrapped one arm around her waist and picked her up off the ground like she weighed nothing. He strode into the house, kicked the door closed behind him, and dumped her in the middle of a couch in the living room.

Aeris stared up at him in wide-eyed fear and tried not to shake. He wasn’t looking at her so much as through her, eyes unfocused as though his thoughts were far away. He reached down and pulled off her boots, then tossed them away without a care for how they dripped slush onto the floor.

“Did something happen?” she asked cautiously when he unzipped her coat.

Sephiroth ignored her as his hands continued their brusque removal of her clothing. He tugged her sweater over her head. Pulled her socks off and tights down and threw them to the side. Rough hands shoved her into position so that she faced the kitchen on all fours, knees tucked beneath her body and chest pressed against the armrest.

His fingers dug into her hip and the side of her belly, and Aeris thought she felt his hands shake with tightly restrained energy. She was suddenly terrified. The certainty that he could kill her in the space of a breath was a cold fear that swept through her, leaving her trembling in position, like an animal
that instinctively knew her survival depended on not drawing a predator’s attention.

What was going on? He’d never treated her like this before, even though she’d been a prisoner from the very beginning.

The sound of her own breathing was all she could hear for long moments in which the only thing that changed was the slight flex of Sephiroth’s fingers against her flesh. Then he growled – actually growled – a low, guttural sound in his throat, slapped her once sharply across her backside, and snarled, “Don’t move,” before disappearing behind her and up the stairs.

Aeris didn’t even think about it. Her mind had blanked out in fear.

When he returned to stand behind her, she heard the quiet snap of something elastic, and she turned her face to see Sephiroth adjusting a latex glove over his left hand while holding a bottle of lube in his right. She didn’t even have time to react before he reached over to grasp her by the throat, harsh fingers curling around her jaw to force her to look forward again.

“You will hold this position,” he hissed.

He released her and sank backwards on the couch onto one knee. Aeris gritted her teeth at the sudden cold, wet sensation of the lube smeared against her anus. His finger started to probe her puckered hole.

“Now, what do you say?” he demanded, his voice thick with some emotion Aeris couldn’t decipher.

Her mind raced to catch up. What was he talking about?

The pressure of his finger increased and Aeris squirmed beneath him, automatically clenching her muscles against the intrusion.

“Aeris, this is not the time to try my patience,” Sephiroth snapped.

She closed her eyes and dug her fingernails into the upholstery. Tried to remember the conversation from a lifetime ago on board his airship, when she’d bargained with the devil for the right to write a letter.

She tried to slow her breathing and relax her body. Couldn’t quite do it, but hopefully it was enough. She opened her mouth to stutter, “Please…finger my…ass.” She winced at her own words that only came out in the barest whisper.

He spanked her hard on her right cheek. The sound of flesh striking flesh rang through the silence of the room. Then nothing else happened while he waited for her to figure it out.

Aeris took a deep breath and channeled every wish, every drop of her desire for the whole thing to be over, into a single, heartfelt plea. “Please finger my ass,” she begged. It sounded authentic even to her ears.

Sephiroth made some rumbling sound of approval and then pressed his forefinger against her. She forced her muscles to relax, and in the next instant, the pinching pressure disappeared and was replaced with a foreign warmth and a diffuse, throbbing ache she’d never felt before. Aeris whimpered at the stretching sensation of her anus tightly gripping his finger, and some part of her started to quietly despair that he might actually fuck her there and surely that would kill her.

He thrust in and out of her slowly and she pressed her cheek against the armrest, panting.
Why did he even want this?

Aeris’s eyes flew open and she squealed when he withdrew nearly all the way and pressed a second finger against her.

“No, please,” she gasped. “I can’t—”

“Be silent. There are times when I enjoy your pleading,” Sephiroth snarled. “This is not one of them.”

She bit down hard on her lower lip and screwed her eyes shut. Fought against all her instincts which screamed at her to buck her hips to escape his probing fingers and get the fuck away from him, but somehow she held herself still and let the stretching, pulling pain encompass her completely. Both fingers were in her ass and she felt that strange, pulsating need grow as he fucked her with his hand. She felt fuller than she’d ever felt before, yet somehow so, so empty. She needed…

The only sound was that of her ragged breathing. She had never been this terrified. Her juices were dripping down her thighs.

Sephiroth noticed. “My, my. If I had known you were so eager for this, I would have started preparing you sooner.”

Aeris let out a strangled cry as he shoved his fingers into her body, all the way up to the knuckles. She clawed at the couch as he flexed his fingers.

Without warning, he withdrew completely, and Aeris collapsed against the couch. Her limbs felt like jelly after their prolonged tension. Then there was something hard and cold pressing against her ass, and after the forceful intrusion of his fingers, the plug slipped in easily. She gasped but didn’t say a word as the object settled into her body, putting just the slightest tension against her muscles and feeling almost comfortable except for the persistent feeling of fullness and that unfulfilled twinge deep in her core.

In the next moment Sephiroth was turning her body roughly, pulling her up so that she lay on her back with her head on the armrest. The glove was gone. He unzipped his trousers and released his cock, already hard and glistening. His hands came to grip her on either side of her face, and she obediently opened her mouth to take him.

He was brutal.

Aeris’s body surged upwards as he thrust hard down her throat. She clambered desperately backwards so that the armrest lay beneath her shoulder blades. So that she could bend further back to take him. She tried to shake her head, to dislodge him, but he held her fast and she became a creature of pure instinct, arching off the couch and tilting her head backwards as far as it could go. He gripped her throat. She choked as saliva threatened to run up her nose. Tears pricked her eyes and she felt faint from the blood rushing to her head.

He released her so that she could gasp for breath. And then it continued.

Her existence shrank down into that moment. Second to second. The pain in her throat. The sweet taste of air. There was nothing else.

He picked her up and pushed her onto her knees on the center of the couch. She hung limply against the cushioned back, desperately trying to catch her breath. His hands were on her hips and then he was fucking her, slipping inside her body as easily as if he’d lubed up her pussy instead of her ass. She felt so full from the pressure of his cock and the plug. It was too much. Aeris felt herself
becoming delirious.

He fucked her however he wanted. Hard and fast. Pushed her down onto the floor and drove himself into her body. Paused only long enough to stand and pull her up, shoving her against the wall and lifting her so that her legs were wrapped around his waist. He positioned her how he pleased, pushed her roughly back into place if she stumbled or collapsed. He ground her into the side of the couch. Twisted the butt plug this way and that as he fucked her.

And again, she was hanging upside down on the side of the couch as he plunged into her throat.

On and on it continued.

And she was gone. There were no more thoughts. No decisions. No personhood. Just the blind, automatic obedience that followed each movement of his hands, each nudge of his knee. As though she didn’t exist except as an extension of his body, his will. As though her entire being was just pure sensation; pleasure and pain. As though she were just a vessel, and he filled her completely.

She whimpered as he crushed her chest against the cold floor, slamming his hips against her ass. She pressed her forehead against the hardwood. On and on he fucked her until finally, finally, he came with a furious grunt, digging his nails into the flesh of her hips.

Then it was over and she was shaking and panting on the floor. Sephiroth stood up and said, “Clean up.”

And then he left.

Aeris lay on the floor until her breathing returned to normal.

She was numb.

Empty.

Unseeing eyes turned towards the stairs.

One breath. Then another.

Finally, she slowly picked herself up and limped to her room.

She pulled the plug out and grimaced at the hollow ache and slight stinging sensation it left behind.

Stainless steel. Heavy in her hand. The head was egg shaped and smaller than a golf ball. Thin curved neck. A flat loop of steel formed the base.

She washed it with soap and water. Left it on a hand towel by the sink.
Turned on the shower and got in.

The water grew cold.

She let it.

I think I deserve this.

I’m just an object.

I don’t deserve hot water.

I don’t deserve anything.

Some hours later, she stood in the darkened hallway in front of the study door, towel wrapped around her body, hair dripping cold water onto the carpet.

She shivered.

Stared forlornly at the swirling wood grain.

Knocked twice.

Silence.

She didn’t cook breakfast. Just poured herself some cereal and milk and stared at it until it was all soggy.

Her face was wet. Vision blurred.

Aeris tore her gaze from the bowl to look up at him as he slowly approached. She looked down again. Away.

“I’m…sorry…” she mumbled, barely audible. “I didn’t…make anything…”

After a moment, his hand gently tilted her face up. She met his eyes. Saw concern flicker across hard features. And maybe regret. At any other time, it would have been fascinating, and she would have
memorized every detail for later reference.

Instead, she trembled. Then shook. The tightness in her chest threatened to choke her. She buried her face in her hands and tried to shrink away from him.

And then she was being lifted. Held in both arms. Crushed gently against his chest. And he was warm, and strong, and smelled of pine and spice. She curled up against him and sobbed into his black cotton shirt.

Why couldn’t she stop crying?

When they reached her bedroom, he opened the door without dropping her. Kicked the covers aside with a foot to lay her down in the bed, and crawled in after her. He held her in silence, her back pressed against his chest, his arm wrapped securely around her stomach, the front of his thighs nestled against her legs.

He stroked the back of her hand as her tears slowly subsided. Until all that was left was the occasional hiccup and tremor.

“What happened yesterday?” Aeris whispered, wiping at her face.

Sephiroth sighed into her hair and said slowly, “I’ve been searching for an ancient temple. We thought we had a promising lead. But it turned out to be nothing. Just the ruins of a small village.”

“Oh.” Aeris shivered. As if that explained anything. She pulled his arm tighter around her. His body was so warm and she had been cold ever since he’d left last night.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked in a tired voice.

She stared out the window at the snow covered forest beyond. The frost glittered like diamond dust. “No. Not really.”

“What is it then?” His hand found its way under her shirt to caress the soft expanse of her belly.

“I don’t know,” she sniffled. How could she put into words what he’d done to her? How it had made her feel?

“Do you want me to say I’m sorry? For doing what I did?” he asked with genuine curiosity.

Aeris shook her head against the pillow. What good would that do? It would mean nothing. What did it matter what he did to her, when everything had started with her captivity? Why did it matter how he treated her, if he abused her, if she was only here to breed and entertain?

Her cheeks were wet again with tears. Why couldn’t she stop crying?

Sephiroth’s fingers stroked the side of her breast. “Tell me what you need, little one.” It was an order, issued with a firmness that expected compliance.

Aeris turned her face further into the pillow, damp where her tears had soaked into the fabric. “I don’t know!” How could she know how to fix this? She didn’t even know what this was. And why did it matter, if she was only a slave?

He propped himself up on one elbow and held her gently, silently contemplating her face. After another moment’s consideration, he bent and nuzzled the nook behind her ear. “What happened yesterday was a mistake.” He placed a kiss against her neck. “But you have been very good. Do you
know that? I’m very happy with you.”

She shuddered in revulsion. Words and actions meant to soothe her – placate her – but they sounded so wrong coming from his mouth. So false. This wasn’t the Sephiroth she knew. The man he’d already shown himself to be. The gentle touch of hand against her thigh was all wrong. Just lies. Lies.

She clutched the pillow and refused to look at him. “I know what you’re trying to do,” she sniffled, “and it’s not going to work.”

His hand stilled on the curve of her hipbone. “Is that so?” he wondered. “And why is that? Is this not what you need? My regret? To be cared for?”

Yes.

No.

She didn’t know. Only knew that he’d whittled a cavern into her heart when she’d thought herself unbreakable.

“What you did to me…” she whispered, “that was real.” She shook her head slightly. “Pretending to be nice now… I don’t know why you’re even bothering. You can save your breath.”

He let the silence hang between them, trailing fingers idly along her hip and thigh as they lay there.

Finally she spoke again, “I’m just your slave, aren’t I? Isn’t that what you’ve drilled into my head?”

Tears burned behind her tired eyelids. “I’m just…” Worthless.

His hands were suddenly on her jaw, turning her face back so that he could study her with a frightening intensity. There was a gleam in his eyes, a frown on his lips. Anger? She couldn’t put her finger on it. Maybe it was just her blurred vision. But then he sat up and wordlessly pulled the clothing off their bodies. She didn’t resist. When they were both naked under the covers, he ran his finger along the curve of her collar, watching her all the while. The silken fall of his hair was cool against her skin where it brushed her ribs.

“Open your mouth,” he commanded. His face was back to that mask of cool superiority.

She shivered. This was the Sephiroth she knew. There was a surreal comfort in that. She let her eyes slide away from him.

The fingers gripping her jaw just tightened, and he said, “Aeris, you will obey me.”

And Gaia help her, she did. She opened her mouth. He slid his forefinger in and traced the surface of her tongue. His mako gaze was searing.

“What are you?” he asked, removing his finger to skim her bottom lip.

There was a tiny flutter in her chest. Just the barest little feeling. She could almost tell herself it was just a random twinge. His words shouldn’t have had such an effect. But she answered in a tiny voice, “I’m your slave.”

Why did that response come so naturally?

It didn’t matter. They were just words. Words…
He pressed two fingers deep into her mouth and held them there while she licked and sucked at them obediently with her eyes closed. He pulled his hand back and nudged at the folds between her legs. When he slid his wet fingers deep into her, she moaned and arched against him involuntarily.

“What are you?” he asked again, harsher.

Aeris felt lightheaded. Why did he keep asking her that? “Let me go,” she protested feebly.

In response, he curled his fingers inside her, pressing up against that spot and making her cry out, overwhelmed. His thumb came around to gently stroke her clit and he stared down at her all the while, waiting expectantly.

“I’m your slave,” she gasped, writhing under his touch. And Hades be damned but somehow this felt right. It felt honest. To have him hold her and force her like this. To have him pick up where he’d left her yesterday – not with some sorry attempt at normalcy, but here, like this, cruel and demanding and utterly unreasonable.

His thumb was still circling her clit, carefully teasing in a way that dissolved all rational thought. He bent to nip at her throat. Teeth and tongue on her skin. He was sucking at the tender flesh, intending to mark her. And it seemed like pure electricity was crackling along her nerves. The touch of his mouth on her neck and his hand between her thighs was all she knew, all other troublesome thought driven out.

He shifted his body to cover hers and pressed his cock against her entrance. “What are you?” he demanded again, almost snarling.

She was sore, but she was ready, and some unspoken need drove her forward. She wrapped her legs around his hips and her hands around his forearms that were braced by her head. “I’m your slave,” she whispered, staring up into those glowing green eyes that demanded she not look away.

He slid into her slowly, and the friction and pressure of his entry against her aching flesh was as terrible as it was delicious. And… for the first time, he was making love to her. He was fucking making love to her! She wanted to laugh. In fucking missionary position, no less.

She dug her nails into his skin. Clenched her inner muscles around his cock.

He hissed his satisfaction against her throat. Kissed and nipped her from collar to ear. “That’s right. You are mine, little one. Mine. My perfect little Cetra.”

And even though she closed her eyes and some fading part of her was screaming no, no, I know what you’re doing, still, his skin was warm, and his body on top of hers was heavy and reassuring, and she needed all of it right now. She felt like she could drown in the sea of her vulnerability without this anchor in her arms.

“You are everything I expected you to be, and more,” he breathed into her ear.

And… she wanted to believe him. Needed to believe that she was safe in his power. That she was wanted. Desired. That even though he could do anything he wanted to her, he would choose to do this, and not that.

He drove his hips hard against her body. “My obedient little florist. I would burn the world for you.”

She clawed at his back and bit down on his shoulder. She would never even want that. Why was he saying these things? Why did they sound so right? Lies lies lies.
And it didn’t matter because she needed it to be real.

“You are *mine*, Aeris,” he growled against her hair. “My slave. My Cetra. And I will never let you go.”

She buried her face in his neck and thrust her hips up to meet him as he continued to whisper in her ear, telling her that she was beautiful and perfect, and crafted especially for him. That she would be the mother of their race, that he would find them a new home, wipe away the filth and the sins of the past, and build them a shining future on untainted soil.

And at any other time, she might have thought, *you’re not a god, Sephiroth, and I wasn’t created for you.* But for now, his words were enough and they were everything, and she was *his*, and they could figure it out together, as long as he held her like this, as long as he didn’t let her go, as long as he was the sun and the stars and the world, it would be okay, it would be okay, it was going to be okay.

In the aftermath of her ecstasy, she fell asleep in his arms.

And he let her.

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Mom,

*I know you must be going out of your mind worrying for me. I am so, so sorry. If I could have done this differently, I would have.*

*Just know that I am still okay, and I will see you soon.*

*There are things that I still need to do. Places I need to investigate.*

*But I promise I’ll come back when it’s all over.*

*With love,*

-Aeris

She stood in the hallway, dark except for the pale rays of early morning sunlight that slanted through a single window. The letter was clutched in her shaking hands and she took a deep breath before knocking on the door to the study.

Sephiroth opened the door after a pause. He glanced down at her in silence. There were shadows beneath his tired eyes. Mere days ago Aeris would have thought it impossible for him to look this vulnerable.
“Can I come in?” she asked quietly.

He didn’t answer, just stepped back slightly to let her pass.

She pressed the letter into his hand and he scanned it quickly before placing it on the desk.

Aeris met his eyes and held his gaze wordlessly. There was that tightness in her chest again. That urge to curl into his body and bury her face in his neck.

*But I am the last Cetra,* she reminded herself, though the memories of last night were still throbbing like a fresh wound. But she couldn’t stop here. Had to keep going. Had to remember who she was.

*I have a fiancée, and a mother, and friends, and a life to get back to. Forward. Forward. Keep going forward.*

In that moment, she wanted nothing more than for him to pull her into his arms and tell her it was going to be okay. She needed to get out of there, before it was too late.

Finally, she spoke. “I want to help you. Will you take me to the ruins?”

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**Chapter End Notes**

So. This chapter has been through numerous rounds of rewriting and tinkering, with multiple rounds of feedback from three different people. Special thanks to Lilly for continuing to give great critique. In the end, for it to make sense and be at least close to what I wanted, I had to dig pretty deep into my experience and memory. That was...a process.

And THIS is the first (but not last!) time when sakurablossomhime asked me HOW CAN THIS POSSIBLY HAVE A HAPPY ENDING?? You’re just going to have to keep trusting me. :)

If you’re still reading and enjoying, please leave a comment below. Keyboard smashing is more than welcome and will be happily taken to mean “I love this story, thank you for writing.” If you think something is fundamentally missing in the emotional progression here, let me know! I welcome thoughts like “I don’t get why Aeris would do X or think Y.” This story is extremely important to me and I’m committed to writing it with all the skill I can muster.

Thanks for reading. Happy New Year! See you soon.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

My favorite thing about fanfic is reader-author interaction. I've thoroughly enjoyed the conversations I've been able to have with a few of you wonderful people in the comments. You give me life. <3

also, look, some plot development!

Chapter 10

They drove away from the chalet the next morning in silence. The soft rumble of the car and the crunch of snow beneath its tires were the only sounds. Sephiroth had largely left Aeris alone since their conversation in the study, interrupting her only to say that they would be leaving at ten hundred hours and that she could pack a small suitcase with whatever she liked.

When they arrived at the rendezvous point, Sara, Reynfred, and the young valet from before were already waiting for them. People and luggage were transferred from one vehicle to the other with well-practiced efficiency. Aeris saw the stewardess and pilot look at her and Sephiroth’s faces, and then exchange the briefest of glances. It didn’t escape her notice that there was considerably less small talk this time, as though Sephiroth’s staff knew their boss well enough to read his moods and could sense when it was best to just do their jobs quietly.

The flight southeast to Junon passed quickly enough, with Sephiroth holed up in the airship office the entire time. Sara didn’t ask about Aeris’s solemn expression or her obvious exhaustion. She probably assumed they were having a lover’s quarrel, which was as far off the mark as it was disturbingly accurate. But it was easy to get the jovial stewardess talking, so Aeris asked her about everything from the latest celebrity gossip to the current economic situation in Wutai. Sara’s animated chatter was a welcome distraction from Aeris’s dark, muddled thoughts.

When they reached the airbase, Sephiroth came out of the office wearing his battle uniform. The black leather coat gleamed under the bright lights of the airship. Aeris had always been too keenly aware of how broad he was, but she had forgotten what a downright intimidating figure he cut in those enormous grey pauldrons.

He was carrying the white silk scarf and the sunglasses that she had worn on their flight out of Midgar. Aeris looked askance at him, since she was already wearing a turtleneck to cover her collar, and he answered simply, “Paparazzi.” With a wry twist of her mouth, she grudgingly accepted the accessories and put them on, tucking the ends of her long hair into her coat before wrapping the scarf around her head.

They landed inside the Junon airbase, with various military airships parked in neat rows in the
distance. Aeris watched as their scant luggage was transferred from Sephiroth’s private craft to a nearby B1-Alpha helicopter. The sight of the black armored vehicle sent a chill up her spine. This was certainly no pleasure craft, but the preferred mode of transport for Turks and SOLDIERs on long haul missions.

Two people were already waiting on the ground, in front of the helicopter’s open doors. Both were dressed in crisp navy suits, and after another moment Aeris realized that one figure was Tseng and the other was a blonde woman sporting a chin length bob cut that she’d never seen before. Aeris’s expression softened at the realization that Tseng would be with her during this next leg of their journey. She tamped down the desire to throw herself into his arms and plead for sanctuary.

Sephiroth walked ahead and Aeris watched as the two Turks saluted their commander in chief. Tseng turned to climb into the pilot’s seat while Sephiroth walked around the front of the craft, disappearing from her view. The female Turk jumped up through the main compartment door and turned to offer a hand to Aeris. It was as slight as Aeris’s own, but the agent’s palms and fingers were as calloused as any SOLDIER’s, belying her otherwise delicate appearance.

“My name’s Elena,” the woman introduced herself as she helped Aeris buckle herself into one of the seats that lined the helicopter’s interior.

“Oh. I’m-” Aeris started to reply automatically, but Elena quickly threw a hand between their faces and interrupted her.

“No, no. Don’t tell me. Your identity is confidential, and I like my job and my neck just the way they are,” Elena said with a strained smile.

Right. Of course. Aeris mentally shook herself. Her thoughts felt sluggish in the thick fog of her brain.

“Sorry,” Elena continued, seeing Aeris’s troubled expression, “it’s just that Tseng is basically impossible to lie to, y’know? The man sees through everything.” Just as Elena finished securing her own restraints, the helicopter roared to life and they began to ascend. “And I just got promoted into his inner circle, which is basically a dream come true, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Of course,” Aeris reassured her, noting the way Elena’s eyes shone when she spoke of Tseng. “Oh, and congratulations on the promotion,” she added belatedly.

“Thanks!” Elena responded.

After a few beats of silence passed between them, and it became clear that the Turk was content to say nothing more, Aeris tentatively asked, “Do you know where we’re going?”

Elena gave her a strange look before responding, “South, to the island just off of the mainland.”

Not Mideel then, or she would have just said so.

“Sephiroth mentioned that he’s looking for an ancient temple,” Aeris probed. “Why is that?”

Elena shrugged. “Something about long lost magic and the key to the Promised Land. I think it’s supposed to give us an alternative to mako energy.”

That…didn’t make any sense. There was no ‘key’ to the Promised Land. It wasn’t even a place, but simply the end of the Cetran journey, when they finally returned to, and became one with, Gaia. Yet again Aeris found herself wondering what lies and mistaken assumptions were held in Shinra’s research archives.
“It all sounds a bit too good to be true, if you ask me,” Elena continued. “But, you know, president’s orders. We’ve spent a lot of resources looking for this mysterious temple.”

“Oh?” Aeris prompted, grateful to have been left in the company of a loose-lipped Turk.

“Yeah!” Elena gestured with both hands. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to find anything in a jungle? Even a giant temple - if it actually exists - can’t be seen from the air. The trees have taken over everything. So we’ve had teams of Turks and archeologists looking for this thing for years. On foot.”

Aeris blinked at the other woman while she digested the information. Years. He’d been searching for years. No wonder he’d been furious.

She shook herself from her reverie. “And you thought you had a lead?”

Elena rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, who knows if the geezers are translating the runes correctly? They thought they could triangulate, like, the moon and the north star or some such voodoo, and it would lead us to the temple.”

“But you did find something, right?” Aeris chewed on her lower lip.

“I suppose,” Elena shrugged again, looking off into the distance. “It kind of looks like piles of rocks to me, but if it’s important enough for President Sephiroth to come see it in person, then I guess that counts as something.”

The low rumble of the engine reverberated in Aeris’s ears as she searched for her next question. Finally she asked, “What will happen now? Do you have any other leads?”

Elena shook her head. “Not that I know of. And I don’t really know what happens now. If it’s anything like the last few years, we’ll just go back to combing the island.”

“That sounds…slow and painful,” Aeris replied, with a perplexed look on her face.

“Tell me about it,” Elena huffed. “But there’s really no way other way to search through a jungle. And these missions are highly classified, so there aren’t that many search parties deployed.” She paused and then blanched as if she suddenly seemed to realize something. “Oh shit. I just assumed you had full clearance since the president brought you along. Gaia, I can’t believe I just did that. What a rookie mistake!”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Aeris quickly reassured her, holding both hands out with fingers splayed. “I do have clearance.” She was supposed to become the mother of Sephiroth’s children, and he had called her his bride. That essentially make her the empress of the known world, didn’t it? “And even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t say anything to get you in trouble. I promise,” she added.

Elena eyed her doubtfully but didn’t respond. Her stiffened posture clearly indicated she was no longer open to conversation.

With no other pressing questions to ask of the young Turk, Aeris leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. She sank into the steady vibrations of the aircraft and willed them to soothe the muscles that ached from long hours of travel and the stress of the past few days. She needed to think on all the information that Elena had so carelessly divulged.

And in between those thoughts, she tried to ignore the phantom twinge in her chest whenever her mind wandered, unbidden, to memories of an alpine chalet and entangled limbs and the desperate desire to hold on to a single moment and never surface to reality.
Aeris was startled awake when the metal door screeched open. Sephiroth stepped through the cockpit and Elena quickly unbuckled her safety belts so that she could rise and walk to meet him by the aircraft’s main door.

“It’s time?” Elena asked. Sephiroth nodded in response.

Elena reached down to pick up a bundle of canvas straps and buckles, and stepped into the body harness, securing it around her slender frame with practiced movements. When she was finished, she locked a heavy carabiner through an attachment point built into the wall so that she was connected to the helicopter by several feet of nylon rope. She nodded to Sephiroth to indicate that she was ready. He grasped the door’s release mechanisms and twisted the locks before pulling the door to the side, allowing a torrent of air to rush into the compartment.

Elena rolled a heavy hoist and winch system over and locked it into place while Sephiroth walked over to Aeris to help her out of her safety restraints and onto her feet. She gripped his hand tightly as he led her to the door, adrenaline surging every time the helicopter was jostled by a burst of wind.

Sephiroth pulled down on the large metal hook of the hoist and wrapped the cable twice around his arm. “Hold on to me,” he said.

Aeris stepped close to his body and wrapped her arms around his waist. She looked up at him in disbelief. “Shouldn’t we be harnessed?” she asked, voice strained over the buffeting winds.

He simply raised his eyebrow at her. “Just don’t let go.”

Aeris scoffed. Safety protocols were obviously for mere mortals and not the Great Sephiroth. But she didn’t have more than a second to indulge her irritation before he wrapped his free arm around her and stepped off the platform into empty air.

Instinctively, Aeris tightened her grip around him, fingertips sinking into the smooth leather of his coat. She pressed her face against the expanse of his bare chest and squeezed her eyes shut to block out the sight of the wavering skyline as they swung erratically along their decent.

After an endless, breathless minute, they were close enough to the forest floor to let go of the winch. Aeris watched as the cable retracted and the helicopter slowly pulled away.

“They will return in half an hour,” Sephiroth explained.

Aeris looked around and saw that countless different species of flora surrounded them, along with the persistent buzz of cicada. Broad palms and thick-leafed rubber trees fluttered gently in the humid breeze, and sparse rays of sunlight filtered through the dense foliage above to illuminate the jungle interior in gold-hued green.

Scattered around them, interspersed among the trees, were the remains of numerous small stone structures. Their walls had crumbled long ago, reclaimed by the planet, with vines, moss, and sturdy bushes all vying for space. Chunks of crushed limestone lay about, fallen from what Aeris assumed had once been stone houses.

“I thought the Cetra were nomads,” Aeris mused out loud. “Why would they have built this place?”
She slowly picked her way through the underbrush towards the nearest stone foundation while unzipping her coat. The heat of the jungle as intolerable in her winter wear, and sweat had already broken out along her back and across her brow.

“We’ve theorized that this was a mining village,” Sephiroth answered. “There are large limestone cliffs south of here. If there is a holy temple on this island, a significant amount of materials would have been needed for construction.”

Aeris turned to look back at him over her shoulder. “Then shouldn’t the temple be close by? If they had to haul that much stone?”

Sephiroth shrugged. “Perhaps the temple was built in a location the Ancients considered holy, and this area was the nearest mine. The expedition parties have already begun a radial sweep outwards from this position.”

“And what exactly are you hoping to find in this temple?” Aeris asked as she reached out to touch the rough stones of a crumbled wall. Elena had mentioned the Promised Land and energy sources. She wanted to hear what Sephiroth had to say.

“Hope,” was his curt response. Then after another moment, “And the future.”

Enigma after enigma. Would she ever get a straight answer from him? Aeris sighed and closed her eyes concentrating on the texture of the cool stone beneath her fingertips. Faint traces of magic lingered here, the imprints of souls long since returned to the planet.

She stole a glance at Sephiroth, who had drifted farther away to another pile of broken rock. He had removed his left glove and was stroking the remains of what appeared to be a rotting wooden support pillar. A thoughtful frown marred his features.

Aeris turned her gaze back to the ancient structure at her fingers. It had once housed her ancestors, of that she was sure. Something in her blood sang with the knowledge of these people that she would never know, the hardships that they had endured so many thousands of years ago, in service to their goddess, to their planet.

Something in her blood resonated with the emotions that had once saturated this place – duty, determination, fear.

“Do you sense anything?” Sephiroth’s voice cut through her reverie.

“No,” she lied, even as the tremors of her ancestors’ resolve continued to pulsate through her chest. “I think this place is too…common. This isn’t hallowed ground. Whatever magic once lived here, it’s long gone.”

She prayed his vast ego would accept that explanation and was relieved to see that he seemed satisfied with her answer.

“Do you sense anything?” she asked him in return.

Sephiroth didn’t respond, only curled his gloved hand into a tight fist. Aeris watched as his eyes narrowed, staring at the pillar before him with such intensity she half expected it to burst into flames. The corner of his mouth twitched.

“You said you were following a clue,” she said carefully. “Why did you think you were close to finding it?”
Sephiroth tilted his face upwards, as if searching for answers from the heavens. For the second time since her capture, Aeris was struck by how tired he looked. It was there in his slightly slackened jaw, the barely perceptible droop of his shoulders. How terrifying to know that she could now read him so well, when at first he had seemed inscrutable.

“There was another site discovered a few months ago,” he told her. “The archeologists believed it to be an astronomical observatory. They thought they could read the design of the building, and that the clues would point in the direction of the temple. Clearly they were mistaken.”

Aeris’s fingers twitched against the porous rock and she pushed away the curiosity that thrummed through her bones. To see such a relic of her forgotten heritage, to feel the remnants of her ancestors’ dreams in such a place – it was all she could do not to light up and immediately demand to be taken there.

But what would be the point, other than to sate her hunger for history? She still didn’t know what Sephiroth was actually after, or why, and she had nothing with which to fight him, if somehow the opportunity arose.

So Aeris would do what came so naturally, after all those years of dodging the Turks and surviving the slums. She would feign ignorance and detachment. Obliviousness. Sephiroth, like the rest of them, would grow to underestimate her.

One day, when the time was right, she would ask him to take her to the observatory. And on that day, she would be ready.

But for now, it was enough to know that her people had once lived and labored here, that in some long forgotten age they had possessed the technology to build mines, and observatories, and temples. That the evidence of their toil still stood to this day. And perhaps one day, she would understand what they had worked so hard to build, in Gaia’s name.
Chapter 11

Sephiroth, it turned out, lived in the penthouse suite of the most ostentatious condominium in Midgar.

After returning to Junon, they’d transferred back to Sephiroth’s private airship for the final leg of their journey. The ship had touched down on the helipad of a concrete and glass skyscraper. Aeris had walked by it plenty of times in the past, but she’d never once stopped to think about what might be on the building’s roof.

After saying goodnight to Sara and Reynfred, Sephiroth escorted Aeris through the rooftop door to the elevator that took them one story down to his suite, accessed with the flash of a keycard that disappeared back into his clothes as quickly as it had been produced. Aeris dragged her luggage behind her, filled with clothes she had taken from the chalet, and her hard won restore materia.

The elevator opened to a small hallway, reminiscent of a luxury hotel except that there were only two other entrances – an emergency stairwell labeled with a bright green EXIT sign, and a set of double doors carved from mahogany.

Aeris followed Sephiroth to the front door of his home, openly gawking at her surroundings. Their boots clicked softly against the marble tiles as they walked past a round wooden table that sat beneath a crystal chandelier. She marveled at the fact that there was an entire chandelier in the hallway that served only to lead to a single dwelling.

Sephiroth pushed one of the doors open after once again flashing his keycard at an access panel. The foyer beyond was the size of a normal room. Dark walnut floors gleamed beneath their feet under the twinkling lights of an elegantly wrought metal chandelier. Pale gray walls sported oversized gilded mirrors.

And past the foyer was...another entrance way. This time with an actual closet, and although it was large enough to hold a large family’s worth of winter gear, only three dark overcoats hung within. Her coat joined them. Sephiroth’s battle gear did not.

Aeris took off her boots and tucked them into the closet, even though Sephiroth made no move to remove his own. He led her further into the suite, to the main living area. The enormous room boasted two sets of furniture, both arranged for conversation. On the left, curved grey couches and chairs surrounded a circular ottoman. On the right, two oversized cream leather couches and four matching chairs encircled a large glass and bronze coffee table. Contemporary chandeliers hung over the center of each arrangement, their lights embedded in small round crystals that protruded from
dozens of delicately curved metal branches.

Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding glass doors was a balcony that spanned the full width of the room. Aeris could make out the faint outline of furniture outside. Despite herself, she was looking forward to seeing the exterior space in the morning light, if only to confirm that it alone could house two families.

She turned to face Sephiroth. “I never took you for the type to live like this. When Zack used to tell stories about you, he made it sound like you didn’t care about this kind of stuff.”

The corner of Sephiroth’s mouth turned upwards ruefully. “He wasn’t wrong.”

“So what happened?” Aeris asked. “Everything changed when you became president?”

“You could say that, yes.” Then he gestured to a hallway on the left. “This leads to my rooms. You are not to go beyond that entrance.” He began walking in the opposite direction at a brisk pace. Aeris followed, suitcase in tow. He led her beyond the kitchen and turned to stride down the hallway. They passed by a ten seat dining room and what appeared to be the library. They stopped at the next door. “This is your room,” Sephiroth explained, gesturing at the closed door. “Other than my quarters, you have free reign of this place.”

Then he bid her goodnight and disappeared back around the corner, leaving Aeris blinking in confusion. With a soft sigh, she opened the bedroom door and stepped inside. She was used to his brusque manner by now.

A king sized four poster bed greeted her, carved from espresso-stained oak. It was covered with a shimmering bronze comforter and wintry grey pillows. It looked soft and inviting, and without another thought, Aeris pulled the scarf off from around her head and let it drop carelessly to the floor. The rest of her clothes soon followed, landing in a pile at her feet. Before turning off the lights and climbing into the bed, she fished out the restore materia from her luggage and clutched it tightly in her palm.

The sheets were cool and smooth against her skin. Between her fingers, the green orb glowed as Aeris cast cure over and over again, letting the steady depletion of her remaining energy lull her into sleep. There was nothing to heal, but the familiar twinge of magic coursing through her veins, the feeling of connection to Gaia’s lifeblood through this tiny piece of crystalized mako – it was enough to soothe her strung out nerves and get her to the next day.

Aeris slept with the orb beneath her pillow, like a child that still believed in fairies and happily ever after.

They didn’t speak of the ruins again.

Sephiroth returned to work. Groceries appeared twice a week in the outer hallway by the elevator. Aeris learned that if she wanted anything in particular, she could leave a note on the hallway table and the next delivery would include her requests.

They ate breakfast together each morning at the kitchen island. She was always alone for lunch, and usually dinner as well.
A Wutain maid came to clean the place each week. She always offered Aeris a kindly smile, but refused to speak any further with her, claiming to have no understanding of Common.

She missed Tseng’s daily visits.

What was she thinking? She missed Zack. She missed home.

One afternoon she stood outside the hallway to Sephiroth’s rooms until she found the courage to move past the invisible threshold. It was only a few steps before the recessed door became visible on her right. Her heart hammered in her chest as she slowly reached for the knob. If it was open, if she entered, if he discovered her transgression-

Locked.

Of course.

Aeris tried not to think about the way her heart leapt each night when Sephiroth came home. That little thrill when he commanded her to present herself on her bed – on hands and knees, back arched, waiting. She craved his touch. Hungered for his fingertips ghosting down the length of her spine.

It was just the loneliness. Long days passed in solitude in the home theater room or curled up with a book on the sun drenched balcony.

She learned to clean herself inside and out on Fridays before he came home. So that he could kneel by her side in the foyer while she stared at her reflection in the mirror – naked, on all fours, one of his fists in her hair pulling her head back, three fingers of his other hand sliding oh so slowly in and out of her ass. He would just watch her as she panted and trembled, struggling to stay upright. Until he finally commanded her to come, and she would bring a hand between her legs to rub at her hardened nub, closing her eyes to shut out their image in the mirror.

He would carry her to bed afterwards. Would hold her close and kiss her hair. As though he were proud of her. As though he cared.

So it was almost a relief when the day finally came, at the tail end of her period when he said, “I’ve arranged for a fertility specialist to come see you next week.”

Aeris’s eyes widened. She leaned back against the living room ottoman, watching Sephiroth tuck himself back into his trousers from her seat on the floor. She could still taste him in the back of her throat.

“It’s only been three months,” she protested feebly. “These things can take time.”

He nodded in agreement. “All the same, there’s nothing to lose with an early consultation. We have both the time and resources for it.”
She looked away, mind racing. Her palms prickled with sweat. A fertility specialist would surely
discover the IUD. Probably immediately. Did these things start with a physical exam? A blood test?
But maybe it was for the best. For this farce to finally be over. Maybe afterwards she could leave this
place. See her mother. Isn’t that what he’d said?

Sephiroth noticed her distress. “Aeris, is there something you’d like to tell me?” he asked. His gaze
seemed to burn into her temple.

Confess now or have her secrets revealed by another? Which was worse?

Sephiroth leaned forward to grasp her chin in his fingers, tilting her face back towards him. The way
his eyes bore into hers made her feel like all her thoughts were nakedly on parade.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat.

“What are you hiding, little florist?” Sephiroth asked, with a tone like black ice.

Now. The time is now. Get it over with. No more lies.

“If there’s something you should tell me, now is the time,” he said, as though reading her thoughts.

The unspoken threat hung between them. It would not go well for her if the doctor discovered the
IUD. What would she do – pretend like she’d forgotten it was there? How would she explain that?
No woman trying to conceive would forget that she had an IUD.

Sephiroth just looked at her, unblinking. As though he had all the time in the world.

No more lies. It would be okay. Afterwards, she would walk the streets of Midgar again.

“I have an IUD,” she whispered.

For a moment, there was no reaction. But before Aeris could start to wonder if Sephiroth knew what
she was talking about, she saw the slight tightening of his lips, the muscle twitch in his jaw. He
released her chin and sat back, eyes still on her face but oddly unfocused.

“It’s copper,” she explained, trying to fill the silence with anything other than the sound of her
pounding heart. “Not hormonal. That’s probably why it wasn’t picked up in the blood tests.”

His fist clenched by his thigh. He shifted in his chair.

The air was crackling. She smelled ozone. Like the time he’d taken her across his knees but so much
worse.

“I’m sorry…” she said in a tiny voice, shrinking back instinctively, even while a voice in her head
asked what she had to apologize for.

Sephiroth stood, towering over her curled form. His tightened fists were shaking. Aeris held her
breath and dared not think what would happen next.

Without warning, he turned on his heels and strode away from her, towards his rooms. He
disappeared into the hallway and Aeris heard the door slam shut. She stayed in her position on the
floor until the energy in the air dissipated and her pulse returned to normal.

Then she took herself to bed.
He was gone for five days. He’d left by the time she woke the next morning and didn’t return home afterwards.

On the second day she stood in front of the elevator, her finger hovering over the down button.

But she couldn’t push it.

On the third morning there was a note on the outer hallway table.

Aeris,

*I will be bringing a gynecologist to see you tomorrow morning. Please be prepared.*

-Tseng

The extraction was performed on her bed, on a portable gynecology examination device shaped like a large wedge with stirrups that folded outwards. Tseng waited in the living room.

The physician worked briskly, politely informing her that she fully understood the confidential nature of her visit, and that she took great pride in having the president’s trust. If the president wasn’t ready to disclose his relationship to the public, and wanted more privacy in his personal life, well, it certainly wouldn’t do for the media to find out about this.

The wedge was uncomfortable. The speculum was cold. She barely felt the forceps.

A sharp pinch and the device was out.

Just like that.

No more barriers.

On the fifth day she paced. Paced across the expansive balcony. Paced across the living room. Paced in front of the elevator.

There were bags under her eyes from being unable to sleep.
She could just push the down button. It would be so easy. Down the elevator, across the lobby, out the front door. No one would stop her. She could hide in the alleys of Midgar.

And then what?

So it was a relief when Sephiroth finally came home. No more siren’s call of decisions that weren’t really decisions at all.

He was wearing his military formal wear again. The same uniform he wore on that first night. The warm glow of the chandeliers highlighted his pale hair and the smart cut of his trousers accentuated his long, lean legs. Had he always looked this good? Is this how she’d seen him when they first met? He led her to the sitting area and settled into an armchair. He bid her kneel on the floor.

It all felt so familiar.

“Did you miss me?” he asked, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Yes.

No.

Fuck you.

Aeris didn’t respond. Any of those sentiments could have tumbled out of her mouth.

Sephiroth reached into his pocket to extract a crystal phial, about four inches long and shaped like a teardrop with an ornately crafted silver lid. Pale blue liquid swirled within. He slowly unscrewed the cap and leaned towards her.

“Open your mouth.”

Aeris stared at the offering with blatant suspicion. “What is it?”

A smirk twisted his lips. “I will tell you after you’ve taken it.” That it didn’t matter what the concoction was, she would drink it anyway, was left unsaid.

She hesitantly parted her lips, a tight knot of anxiety blooming beneath her ribs as she watched the phial come towards her. He tilted the blue liquid into her mouth and Aeris grimaced at the tang of medicine and magic, spice and fruit. She turned her face away and coughed into the back of her hand.

Sephiroth replaced the cap and tucked the empty phial into his pocket. He sat back and watched her expectantly.

“Well?” she asked, unable to keep the petulance out of her tone. “What was that?”

“Well?” she asked, unable to keep the petulance out of her tone. “What was that?”

“A elixir I acquired from Wutai,” he responded. “A carefully guarded formula known only to the apothecaries that serve the royal house. They say it was developed millennia ago from the fallen scales of their sea god. To help the Emperor’s wives act pleasing to a man who was more often than not old and repulsive.”
Aeris gaped at him as cold dread seeped into her limbs. She’d heard rumors about the licentious ways of West. During the war, men would snicker to each other about the dirty sluts those prim little plum blossoms turned into behind closed doors - that it must be ‘something in the tea.’ She’d always figured it was just disgusting propaganda talk, but now…

“In other words,” he continued, “an aphrodisiac. One, I might add, that cost more than what you would have earned in a lifetime as a…florist,” he said, enunciating the last word slowly, as though two short syllables could dredge up a hundred salacious memories.

It did. Heat pulsed between her legs.

She swallowed hard, her mouth dry. “Why would you need to give me that? Are you afraid that you’re old and repulsive?” The room seemed to tilt slightly. Vertigo somehow gave her the courage to say, “I mean you are a lot older than me, and with all that grey hair…”

Oh goddess, Aeris, shut up, she thought. What are you doing?

Sephiroth hardly seemed bothered by her limp taunts. If anything he looked more insufferably smug. “You’ve spent the last three months lying to me, little florist. And I promise that tonight you will repent and beg for forgiveness. The aphrodisiac is my gift to you. To make this night go easier for you, and to help us start anew.”

Aeris squirmed under his gaze and felt the heat travel up her body to stain her cheeks. She fixed her eyes on his shoes. “So now what?” she bit out. “Are you just going to have me kneel here all night?”

Sephiroth laughed. “So eager, are we? Well then, you may go to your room and wait for me. I will join you in a few minutes.”

It was all the permission she needed. She all but ran to her bedroom and slammed the door shut behind her. Her pulse was racing and she felt too warm beneath her sweater and jeans. Images flashed through her mind so fast, of his hands on her body, of his lips on her throat, that it almost felt like she wasn’t thinking at all. Just paralyzed, rooted in place.

Mere minutes later the door opened, and he was there. Naked expect for black leather pants that clung to him like a second skin. His bare feet moved silently across the hardwood floor. In his hands he held six coils of hemp rope. He dropped them carelessly on the bed.

Aeris stared at the rope.

“Strip,” he commanded.

A lifetime ago, she would have hesitated. Debated the merits of trying to make a run for it. Wrestled with her pride and humiliation.

Now she didn’t bother. Just grasped the hem of her sweater and pulled it over her head. Let her jeans fall to the floor and kicked them out of the way. She stood before him, naked and unashamed, waiting and shivering.

He picked up a coil of rope and unwound it slowly, all the while watching her face. “Have you ever been tied up?” he asked.

“No,” she admitted.

A satisfied smile flitted across his lips. “Good.”
He stepped towards her and gently ran a length of the rope down along her jaw. She winced at the touch, though it was surprisingly soft against her skin. Its earthy scent filled her nostrils.

“Give me your hand,” he said.

She extended her arm and watched as he carefully wrapped the cord around her slim wrist in neat, parallel lines. A half dozen loops and a knot later, he moved on to her other wrist. When he was finished, he led her towards the bed and motioned for her to lie in the center of it. Each length of rope that hung from her wrists was wrapped and tied securely around the upper bed posts.

Aeris pulled experimentally against her bonds. They didn’t budge or tighten.

Sephiroth casually skimmed his fingers down the length of her body as he moved towards the foot of the bed. Goosebumps rose in the wake of his touch. His hand grasped her shin and he gently pulled her leg outwards before wrapping another coil around her ankle and tying it to the lower bedpost. Her other leg received the same treatment. And finally, the last two segments of rope were wound around her thighs, just above the ankles, and anchored to the upper bedposts.

She was held open, unable to close her legs or shy away from his touch. She’d never felt so exposed.

He slowly lowered himself to sit by her side at the edge of the bed. Aeris kept her eyes on the blank ceiling.

“How does it feel?” he asked.

“Why does it matter?” she retorted.

“It does matter, little florist,” he drawled. “How can you repent if you aren’t in the right mindset?”

He stroked the side of her breast with his fingertips.

Electricity danced down her side at his touch. She found herself arching towards him for more. With a humorless smile, he leaned down and captured her mouth with his lips.

His hand was soft against the curve of her breast and the warm scent of spice cocooned her.

Suddenly a fire was stoked within that threatened to overwhelm all rational thought. His tongue traced her lower lip in a leisurely line and she let her head fall back against the cool pillow, opening her mouth for him, letting him taste what he wanted.

Her thighs strained against their bonds. She wanted to rub them together. To soothe the ache that blossomed between them.

She was helpless. Bound and drugged.

And Gaia, she wanted him.

Heated lips against her throat and teeth grazing the edge of her earlobe drew a shameless moan from her. Had he ever seduced her like this? Surely she would have remembered if he had?

Those powerful hands were everywhere, and for the first time since she’d known him, they were only gentle. No fingers thrust into her mouth, no assault against her nipples. Only caresses down the length of her arms, fingertips tracing the curvature of her ribs and the subtle crests and valleys of her belly.

When his explorations finally reached her thighs, she wanted to scream. The pulsing need, the hollow ache, they were too much. She needed him to fill her, and she needed it now.
He pulled away to look at her as he let his palm come to rest atop her mound, his fingers curving gently over her entrance. She was flushed and breathless.

“Do you remember what I told you, that night before I fucked you for the very first time?”

She didn’t bother to answer, just shook her head slightly. Did his mouth always look like that? Why in Gaia’s name did a man have a mouth like that? She wanted to lean up and reclaim his lips, but he was out of her limited reach.

“You asked me why I hadn’t fucked you yet,” he said quietly. “Do you remember my answer?”

Oh. He actually expected her to respond. Aeris fought to drag her mind back to some semblance of function.

“Because…you wanted me to be your property first,” Aeris mumbled. Why was he talking so much? It wasn’t normal for a man to talk this much after tying a woman up. Then again, there was nothing about Sephiroth was remotely ordinary.

“No. Because you had not yet accepted your role as my slave.” He dragged the pad of his middle finger across her clit, already slick with her arousal and Aeris trembled beneath him at the delicious sensations that rippled through her body. “Here I had thought we’d made such progress, only to discover you’ve been lying to me all along. Do you have any idea how disappointed I am in you?”

His words shouldn’t have felt like a knife. Maybe it was the drugs. If they could arouse her like this, then surely they were affecting her emotions too?

All her thoughts were suddenly wiped out in the next instant, when he raised his hand slightly and brought it back down with a swift snap of his wrist. The plane of fingers struck her swollen clit and Aeris screamed in shock at the sharp pain that rang outwards from her core and left a throbbing warmth in its wake.

“Tell me little florist,” he continued, in the same mild voice, as if he hadn’t just struck her in the single most sensitive place on her body, “what good is a slave that lies to her master?”

Aeris didn’t answer. What could she say? She stared up at the ceiling and waited for the next blow to fall.

He didn’t disappoint her. Her scream rang off the walls. She struggled uselessly against her bonds but his hand remained where it was, gently resting on top of her pussy. Her skin felt so hot beneath his hand.

“What do you think would be an appropriate punishment for your crimes?” he asked softly. “Shall I do this—” he slapped her between her legs again, ripping another scream from her lips, “until you beg for mercy?”

Aeris shuddered beneath her bondage with her eyes tightly closed. It didn’t make any sense. The pain was all consuming, but each time it faded and left her only wanting. Wanting him to cover her with his body. Wanting him to enter her with his cock.

Blood flow and drugs. A potent combination.

“Aeris,” he whispered, breath hot against her cheek before he gently took her lower lip between his teeth, “tell me, how many times should I spank you?”

She moaned into his mouth and kissed him with naked hunger. How was she supposed to answer
that question?

“Once for each day you wasted my time, perhaps?”

Three months. It had been three months since he started fucking her. What did that mean then? Aeris struggled through the thoughts required for simple math. All she wanted was his fingers deep inside her.

“Shall we call it ninety then?”

No, no absolutely not. She would surely die. Aeris shook her head as her arms strained to break free. His lips were caressing the curve of her ear again, sending waves of longing down the length of her body.

“What then, little florist?” he whispered into her ear. “Tell me what you deserve.”

Think. She had to think. Not about teeth on her throat. About…wasted time. Yes. How much time had she wasted? Five days before ovulation and the day of. That’s what she’d read, wasn’t it?

His fingers were plucking gently at her taut nipple.

“Answer me, Aeris,” he commanded.

Six times three. “Eighteen,” she gasped.

“Oh?” She could hear the smile in his voice.

“Fertility window,” she mumbled. As though that explained anything. “Three months.”

Because that was what this was about, wasn’t it? Breeding?

It didn’t seem to make any sense anymore. Maybe it never did. What was he doing? None of this was necessary for breeding.

“Very well,” he agreed. “Eighteen.” Then he kissed her and his mouth was warm honey against her tongue. She opened for him like a flower, inviting him to taste and plunder.

Even though she knew it was coming, the stinging strike still took her by surprise. Pain flashed outwards from between her thighs, blanking out all other sensations in a shock of white. Her thighs fought to close, to protect herself, but the ropes held her tight.

Mako green eyes looked down at her calmly. “Count,” he commanded.

She counted off each slap of his fingers against her tender flesh. From one to eighteen. Each blow ripped another cry of agony from her throat before she choked out the count between gasping breaths. Sweat beaded along her brow. Her skin chaffed beneath the ropes, rubbed red from her futile struggles.

When it was over, she was shaking, and her mind was still. She barely registered him untying the knots around the bedposts and unraveling the cords from around her limbs. Before they were even fully removed from her wrists, her hands were in his hair and she had folded herself into his lap. She didn’t even remember moving. The ropes fell into careless heaps on the floor.

She kissed him with an urgency she’d never felt before. Maybe not even with Zack.

But in this moment, she craved this man who had torn her life apart to rebuild it in his image. Who so
casually took control of her body, her senses, as though it were his birthright, as though it were inevitable. This man who forced pain and pleasure on her at his whim.

And now she wanted satisfaction. She wanted to ride him until they both broke. She wanted him to scream her name.

“What do you say, little florist?” his teasing voice broke through the haze of her arousal. His fingers grazed the warm metal of her collar.

She licked his neck before letting the words flow between nips of her teeth against his skin. “Thank you. Thank you. I’m sorry.” They were just words. Just words spoken under chemical influence. They didn’t matter.

He murmured his approval against her hair. “I forgive you.”

And her heart soared at those words. She didn’t have the energy to spare to cross examine or suppress those feelings. They simply were. And in this moment, just this moment, she was a woman, enraptured by a man, and she longed to please him.

They moved as one, like lovers of old who knew each gesture intimately. He leaned back and shuffled upwards towards the head of the bed. She pushed herself down along the length of his body, trailing kisses across his abdomen, tracing the lines of his muscles with her tongue. She peeled the warm leather off his legs, careless in her haste.

His cock was like satin against her lips, and she tasted him eagerly, reveling in the slick saltiness of his precum and the fresh scent of his soap. The sensation of his smooth length against her tongue sent a pulsing heat down her belly.

Aeris looked up to see Sephiroth with his head tilted back, his eyes closed. One hand idly stroked her hair while the other rested at his side. He’d never let go like this before. Never enjoyed his pleasure with such abandon.

She took him as deep as she could in one smooth stroke, swallowing around the head of his cock as he’d taught her. The way his face clenched and his mouth fell open as he moaned – it was all the reward she wanted. She sucked him harder. Savored every groan and sigh she drew from his lips.

Emboldened – surely it was the drugs – and sensing that the unspoken rules of this session were entirely different from any other time they’d fucked, she climbed on top of him without waiting for instructions. He looked up at her with heavy lidded eyes, fingertips caressing the curves of her hips, as she slowly lowered herself onto his cock. She was so wet, he slid in almost effortlessly.

She rode him hard. Not with elegant undulations meant to please the eye, but with a desperate need to relieve the ache between her thighs. She rubbed at her clit as she fucked him and he thrust up to meet her at the pace she set. She came with a scream, clenching hard around him as her vision faded to black.

He continued lazily thrusting into her even as she slowed her movements, panting in the afterglow. It was enough to ignite her all over again. As though her orgasm were nothing more than foreplay. As though none of her tension had dissipated and her release had only primed her for more pleasure.

She needed him to fuck her.

As if reading her thoughts, Sephiroth slipped out from under her and sat up. He pulled her into position, on hands and knees in the center of the bed. And his fist in her hair felt so good. So right. The way he claimed her body with his own. The way she fit against him like this.
Inevitable.

When he came inside her with a loud grunt, fingers digging into the flesh of her hips, she remembered. No more birth control. No more barriers. Just a man, and a woman, and the laws and whims of nature.

And for some reason, the thought of his semen inside her made her hungry for more.

The next morning, Aeris handed Sephiroth a cup of coffee from across the breakfast bar in the kitchen. Strong and black, just like every other morning. He looked relaxed, well rested. The opposite of how she felt.

He was eyeing her in that way of his, as though she were a specimen under observation. She avoided his gaze.

“How do you feel?” he asked. The smooth baritone of his voice practically purred with satisfaction. “I thought you enjoyed yourself last night, yet you can’t seem to look at me this morning.”

She slammed her mug down on the counter and glared at him. His every hair was in its proper place. The crisp white linen of his dress shirt flaunted its elegant weave in the morning light. His expression was as smug as ever and Aeris found her fingers tightening around the ceramic as she fought down the urge to throw her coffee in his face.

“I guess I did enjoy myself last night,” she responded. What was the point in trying to lie about it? Bitterness dripped like poison from her tongue. “You made sure of that, didn’t you?”

Sephiroth smiled at her in a way that sent a sudden chill down her spine. “Hmm,” he inclined his head towards her. “Would you like to know how it was done? What was in the elixir?”

There was that tingling again. That warning sensation that heralded danger. How did he keep doing that to her even after all these months?

“How do you know what it was made of?” she asked carefully, eyes narrowing in suspicion. “You said it was a Wutain secret.”

“I lied,” he answered. So casually. “I mixed it myself. Four parts water, one part potion, one part ether, with a splash of lime and a few drops of orange bitters.”

Aeris felt her heart fall like a dead weight into her stomach.

“Isn’t it incredible how powerful a placebo can be?” he continued, before sipping again at his coffee. “Did you really think it was made from a sea god’s scales?”

She didn’t answer. Just stared at him with lips fallen open, her throat dry.

All that desire, that desperation…for it to have been real…

No, he had to be lying. Lying about his lie.

His green eyes looked glacial in the pale sunlight. “I wonder, little florist, how you really feel about
me. Under all that defiance and pride,” he raked his gaze up and down her body before draining the
last of his coffee and standing up. “There’s no shame in admitting you want me, Aeris,” he said as he
walked towards the hallway to head out for the day’s work.

She barely heard him. Blood was roaring in her ears. Her head pounded as she tried desperately to
sort through the facts and grasp reality. But Sephiroth was like a black hole that bent reality around
himself.

Sea god. Placebo.

Shameless little sex toy.

Who was she anymore?

He turned back to face her before he disappeared around the corner. “I will be home tonight at
twenty two hundred hours,” he told her curtly. “Be ready at that time for my use.”

And then he was gone and she was alone in the suite.

 Weeks later, Aeris knew what she would see before she even looked at the little plastic device sitting
on the bathroom counter. No amount of pacing would change the results.

Two pink lines.

Inevitable.

Chapter End Notes

How was that? Did it live up to your expectations?
Chapter 13

Chapter 12

Aeris intercepted Sephiroth in the hall when he returned home. Surprise flickered across his face at the uncharacteristic gesture.

“I’m pregnant,” she informed him briskly, not caring to mince words. “You’ve won. Now I want to see my mom.”

She watched as a slow smile curved his lips. “Well, well,” he replied. “Pregnant on the first try?”

The urge to roll her eyes and snort in disgust was great but she somehow managed to suppress the reaction. He was preening. How utterly male.

“I guess so,” she agreed, with as little venom in her voice as she could muster. “Now, you promised me that after I got pregnant I could visit my mom.”

Sephiroth’s eyes dropped to her stomach and Aeris crossed her arms in response, as if she could hide her invisible condition from that sharp gaze.

“I would hardly call that a promise, Aeris. As I recall, it was more of a passing thought. In the heat of the moment.”

Aeris gritted her teeth, hands clenching at her sides.

“But,” he continued, “I think it would be fair to grant you this.” He walked past her, towards his quarters and said, “After your ultrasounds have confirmed that you and the child are in good condition.”

She turned to watch his back as he walked away from her. “And when is that, exactly?”

He didn’t respond, just disappeared out of view. Aeris heard the door shut behind him.

Typical.

At the appointed time, Tseng met her in the hallway outside the suite’s front door. He cleared his throat and said awkwardly, “You look well.”

Aeris gave him a blank stare and settled for fiddling with the scarf that covered her hair rather than something irrational like reaching forward and wringing his neck. They rode the elevator down to the underground parking lot in silence. She followed him to the sleek black sedan parked a few paces
away from the door and climbed into the passenger seat.

The streets of Midgar were the same as she remembered. The car’s heavily tinted windows cast the outside world in a shade of grey that matched her mood. Nothing had changed in her months of captivity. The world carried on without her.

When they reached the parking lot of the private clinic, she turned to Tseng and asked, “What would happen if you drove me out of the city and let me disappear?”

His eyes softened at her question. For a moment he didn’t speak. “I think… Sephiroth might just burn all of Sector Five to the ground.”

She nodded to herself. “Thank you,” she said genuinely, “I needed to hear that.”

They unbuckled their seatbelts. Before Tseng’s fingers touched the car door lever, Aeris asked, “Do you remember, all those years ago, in my church?” Gaia, that was almost a decade ago. “When you told me about your family in Wutai, and how you were just trying to do what you could? To do the least amount of evil, and try to help your people, even though they called you a blood traitor?”

Tseng didn’t look at her. He fixed his gaze forward at the clinic door in front of them.

“All those times we prayed together for a quick end to the war. To your gods, and mine,” she recalled sadly. Seconds passed and the air slowly grew cooler as the chill seeped in steadily from outside. She took a deep breath and wondered aloud, “Would you let me go, now, if I asked?”

Aeris watched his Adam’s apple quiver as he swallowed. A long pause passed before he replied, “No.”

She gave him a soft, sad smile. “I’ve always wondered if you were full of shit, Tseng. I still don’t know the answer to that. But will you promise me something?”

He turned then to look at her, and there was that unspoken glimmer in his eyes again.

“I’m going to have Sephiroth’s baby. And I didn’t ask for this. I don’t want any of this. But it’s going to happen anyway.” She paused to take in the sight of him silently absorbing her every word. “And you know what? I still hope that one day we’ll be free. So will you promise me that when the time comes, you’ll help me?”

His lips fell apart slightly and for a moment he dropped his gaze, unable to continue looking her in the eye. When he raised his head again, he answered simply, “Yes.”

Aeris nodded and forced a cheerful smile onto her face. “Thank you,” she said, and then turned to open the door. The crisp fall breeze tugged at her silk scarf. She pulled her trench coat closer around her body.

Tseng opened the clinic door for her and Aeris walked into an empty waiting room. A nurse sat behind the reception desk.

“No other patients?” she asked Tseng curiously. She’d never seen an empty clinic of any sort before in a metropolis like Midgar.

“We cleared Dr. Okeke’s schedule for the morning to ensure your privacy, ma’am,” the nurse answered cheerfully. “Please, follow me.”

Tseng stayed behind while Aeris followed the young woman deeper into the clinic. They entered the
first room on the left. Cutting edge monitoring equipment she’d never seen before, a single chair, and the nurse’s desk filled the small room. The nurse quickly took Aeris’s vitals, her weight, and a blood sample. Then she guided Aeris further down the hall to the doctor’s office.

A woman with dark brown skin and tight black curls pulled back in a ponytail turned away from her computer screen at the sound of polite knocking against the doorframe.

Dr. Okeke smiled warmly at Aeris as she took a seat. “It’s good to see you, Ms. Doe,” she greeted. “And so soon after we took out your IUD. Congratulations!”

Aeris gave her a wan smile. “Yes. Thanks.”

Kind brown eyes regarded her with mild concern. “Is everything alright?” Dr. Okeke asked.

“Yeah,” Aeris’s hands fidgeted in her lap. “Just tired,” she lied.

“Ah,” Dr. Okeke nodded in understanding, “There may be plenty of that, especially in the first trimester. It usually gets better in the second one though. Your body is making a new person, and that is a lot of work, even though you can’t see any of it right now. Make sure to get enough rest and be good to yourself. And you just let me know if I need to set the President straight, because believe me, I will,” she said with a wink.

Aeris internally scoffed. She appreciated the sentiment, but if only the woman knew.

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The rest of the appointment passed with rapid fire questions and answers. Aeris would return to the clinic at seven, fourteen, and twenty weeks of pregnancy for ultrasounds. Then there would be standard checkups every month, then every two weeks, and finally weekly in the last month leading up to her expected due date. Morning sickness apparently wasn’t confined to the morning hours and didn’t affect everyone. She would probably not spend all her waking hours vomiting, thank the goddess.

Aeris felt a bit dazed on the ride home with all the new information she’d been given. Several pamphlets were clutched in her hands for later reading. The next time she left her phantom delivery person a note, she requested pregnancy and childcare books in addition to specific groceries, and no less than two dozen tomes arrived a few days later.

It was a good thing, too, that she had useful reading to fill her time. Sephiroth’s visits had decreased significantly ever since he’d found out about her pregnant state. It left a hole in her heart that she could barely admit to herself. Her efforts to chat with the maid were still met with a polite smile and a shrug. She found herself eagerly awaiting each prenatal visit, as they gave her a chance to ask Tseng about the outside world and to speak with Dr. Okeke about at least some of her feelings and anxieties. The safe ones. The ones she could share.

She was largely spared the horrors of morning sickness. There were a few bouts of nausea and the occasional instance when her appetite would vanish after a passing whiff of a perfectly normal food product. Nothing more serious.

The first ultrasound showed a tiny little bean at the top of a circular cavern. One embryo, in its rightful place. There was a pang in Aeris’s chest as she looked at the black and white image.
The second ultrasound showed a fetus, head and body already clearly defined. Tiny little appendages. It was laying on its back in a black cavity only twice its size. A miracle of life and the product of evil. Silent tears dripped down her face that night, alone in bed, print out in hand.

This is my child. This is Your child. May it keep You company on this side, long after I have returned to the Lifestream to join You in the Promised Land.

The third ultrasound showed a baby. Fragile little fingers. Nose, lips, and ears. Aeris watched its heart beat on the monitor.

“Congratulations, mama,” Dr. Okeke said with a bright smile. “It looks like you’ve got a healthy baby girl.”

A girl. A daughter. A Cetra female to continue the pilgrimage that Aeris had failed to even begin.

She felt hot tears prickle at her eyes, and a surge of something powerful and indefinable in her heart.

“Do you know what you’re going to call her yet?” Dr. Okeke asked, as she continued her measurements.

“Tiqvah,” Aeris answered, the name like a prayer on her lips.

“Hope, huh? Good name,” Dr. Okeke replied.

“We’ll call her Tiqi,” Aeris clarified, still unable to tear her eyes away from the image of her baby on the ultrasound screens.

That night, she waited for Sephiroth to return home and when he did she handed him the ultrasound print out.

“I'm having a daughter. I'm going to name her Tiqvah, and I want to see my mom now,” she said, with an unwavering gaze and a heavy heart.

Sephiroth said nothing as he studied the small black and white picture in his gloved hands. Finally he looked up at her. “Very well. I'll have Tseng make arrangements for tomorrow morning.”

Tseng drove her to the outskirts of Kalm. Beneath Aeris’s light jacket, the slight bump of her belly was unnoticeable. It was unfashionable to wear turtlenecks this time of year, but Aeris had chosen the pale pink garment anyway to hide her collar. She didn’t want any accidents with a scarf that could slip off at any moment.

They pulled up next to an identical black car with tinted windows. Elena stood at attention by the driver’s side door.

Aeris got out and walked around to where Tseng was holding the other vehicle’s rear door open for her. She stepped in and Tseng had barely finished closing the door behind her when she was enveloped in a crushing hug and the familiar scent of Elmyra’s hand lotion.

“Aeris. Oh Gaia, it’s really you.”
She’d never been so happy to hear her mother’s gravelly voice. For an endless moment, she just held on to that hug with her eyes closed. All her prepared speeches and explanations vanished in an instant. Here, in her mother’s arms, for just another minute, she wanted only to be a child without a care in the world.

The sound of Elena driving off in Tseng’s car brought her back to her senses, and she pulled away to look at the woman before her. Her light brown hair was shot through liberally with grey. Elmyra had pulled it back into the same bun she always wore, with bangs framing the right side of her face. Deep lines were etched into her skin, more than she should have had for a woman only in her fifties. Aeris thought of them as proud battle scars from a life of hardship.

Rough, work-hewn hands grasped Aeris’s. “Sweetheart, what’s going on? You’ve been gone for eight months and in that whole time all I got was two cryptic letters and then all of a sudden today the Turks showed up to take me here."

Aeris didn’t say anything. Just looked down at their entwined hands and tried to fight back the tears.

“You know you can tell me anything, right Aeris?” Elmyra probed gently. “Gaia, I’ve been so worried about you, but here you are, and… you look good sweetheart. Thank the goddess. Oh and Zack has been going out of his mind. He’s been searching the streets ever since you disappeared. Whenever he wasn’t sent away for work, anyway. He’s going to be so happy to see you. Oh I can only imagine…”

Elmyra trailed off as Aeris burst into tears. Sobs wracked Aeris’s body, and Elmyra moved with a mother’s instinct to protect and care for her own. She held Aeris close and stroked her hair gently without saying another word.

Aeris had long ago stopped asking Tseng about Zack. Knowing more about what he was up to, how much more weight he might have lost in her absence, or worse yet, that he might have already given up on her, would have only brought her more grief.

When the tears finally subsided, and she really did feel much better after such a good cry, she sat back and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Remember in that first letter,” Aeris said between sniffles, “I told you I’d found something about the Cetra?”

Elmyra nodded and reached out to tuck a stray hair behind Aeris’s ear.

“So who’s this other Cetra you found?”

Aeris looked down at the dark grey carpet under her feet. “Sephiroth.”

The older woman almost choked. “Sephiroth? The Sephiroth? As in President Sephiroth?”

Aeris nodded without looking up at her mother’s astounded expression. She continued, “And you said I looked good?”

“Yeah…” Elmyra said, dazedly. “Like you’ve gained some weight in a good way and you’re almost glowing…” she trailed off again. Aeris looked up in time to see the moment it hit her. “Oh Gaia, you’re pregnant.”

For a moment, mother and daughter just looked at each other in silent understanding. Then Elmyra’s
mouth hardened into a line. “Sweetheart, let me get this straight. You run off for eight months, right before your wedding, come back pregnant with Sephiroth’s baby, and the first thing you do is cry in my arms?”

Aeris felt a knife twist in her gut. Shame burned at her cheeks at the implication of her mother’s words.

“What the fuck did that man do to you?” Elmyra demanded, taking Aeris by surprise. “I swear on the Lifestream that I will put a fucking knife in his heart if he hurt you. I don’t care how powerful he is, I will kill that man with my bare hands if I have to.”

Aeris gaped at her mother in open shock. “Wow, mom, language,” she said, unable to help herself. A small smile tugged at her lips, but was quickly replaced with a frown as she realized that Tseng was standing just outside of the car and had probably overheard the overt threats on his employer’s life.

“Aeris, I am a slum-born and -raised Midgarian woman and there is nothing on this planet that’s more dangerous than a mom scared for her baby. Now tell me. What did he do to you?”

Sephiroth had warned her of this, so many months ago, when he said that mothers could always tell when you were hiding the truth. She couldn’t convince Elmyra that her relationship with Sephiroth was normal or healthy, but she had to at least get her off the warpath.

“Mom, I can’t tell you what I’ve been up to. We’re dealing with the president here, and he’s a very private person. You’re just going to have to believe me when I say that… he’s taken very good care of me.”

And he had. She wanted for nothing except her freedom. Every creature comfort was given to her. Even her cooking and tidying were really more for her own sake, to have something productive to do, rather than a forced necessity. She knew he could just as easily have fresh meals delivered each day.

“You can see that, can’t you?” It was true. Pregnancy became her. Prenatal vitamins, baby hormones, and a life of luxury had made her skin clearer than ever, her hair fuller and silkier than before.

“There have been ups and downs,” Aeris continued, her voice strong, “but I’m fine.” She paused before adding, “Also, emotional, because, you know, hormones.” It was as good an excuse as any. And probably true enough.

She could tell Elmyra was hardly convinced.

“And Zack?” her mother asked. Elmyra’s brown eyes bore into Aeris’s and missed nothing. “You loved that boy so much. What would make you run off like that without a word?”

Nothing would have prevented the sorrow that clouded Aeris’s face at her ex-lover’s name.

“I miss him,” she said honestly, eyes downcast. “And I wish I didn’t hurt him like this. But I have a duty to my people.” There, again, the truth. She had a duty to the people she loved. “Please don’t tell him anything. We’ll tell him when we’re ready.” She assumed that must be true. If Sephiroth was allowing her to walk in public, albeit under escort, then he had to know it was only a matter of time before news traveled to Zack.

Elmyra looked heavenward and heaved a deep sigh. “I can see you’ve made up your mind,” she conceded. “You were always a stubborn girl. Even if I’m sure you’re keeping something horrible
from me. You’re an adult, and you’re free to make your own choices.”

Aeris fought down the bark of laughter that threatened to spill out of her at such ironic words.

“I’m just happy you’re safe. But remember, Aeris, you can tell me anything. I will always be here for you,” Elmyra finished gently.

Aeris nodded, even though she knew she would carry these secrets to her grave. Even if she did manage to escape one day. It would do Elmyra no good to know what her daughter had lived through.

With a final hug, they wordlessly agreed to leave Aeris’s mysteries alone.

“So when are you due?” Elmyra asked tentatively.

Aeris gave her a watery smile. “Five more months.”

“Wow.”

“…Yeah,” Aeris agreed.

“I’m going to be a grandma in five months…” Elmyra mused, “…and Sephiroth is the father.”

“Yeah.”

Elmyra squeezed Aeris’s hand. “Once I get over the shock, I’m going to be very excited. I promise.”

“I know,” Aeris replied.

After a moment of awkward silence, Elmyra asked, “So why are we all the way out here in Kalm?”

“Oh,” Aeris said with her first genuine smile since she’d stepped into the car. Sephiroth had followed through on one of his first promises to her, even without her asking. When Tseng had arrived to pick her up in the morning, it was with a certified money order in hand, enough for a deposit on any house they might take a liking to. “We’re here to take you house shopping.”

“What?” Elmyra exclaimed.

“It’s only an hour’s drive from Midgar, the air is much cleaner out here, the houses are bigger, and Sephiroth is rich,” Aeris counted off the reasons. There was no sense in being coy about it. “It’ll be good for you to finally get out of the city.” She added softly, “I’m glad I can do this for you, mom.”

Elmyra looked at her daughter in a way that only a mother could, with a mixture of affection, bemusement, suspicion, judgment, and unadulterated love. “I don’t know how to drive,” she protested feebly.

“You can learn,” Aeris reassured her with a pat on the hand. “You’ll have plenty of free time to learn now that you’re retired.” Elmyra raised an eyebrow at her, and Aeris responded, “What, you think I’m going to let you keep scrubbing floors for a living while I give girth to the president’s baby?”

Elmyra laughed at that, though it still sounded a bit strained to Aeris’s ears.

Aeris reached past Elmyra and knocked on the window to get Tseng’s attention. She watched as he quickly tucked his PHS back into his suit jacket and opened the driver’s door.

“Ready to go?” he asked. At Aeris’s nod, he sat down behind the wheel and they made their way
deeper into the town.

Their realtor met them at the first house on their itinerary and drove in front of Tseng to each subsequent address. Like all of Sephiroth’s handpicked employees, he was quick to reassure them that their privacy was in good hands. Without any pressure tactics, he carefully explained the features of each house they visited.

Aeris watched with quiet pleasure as Elmyra’s eyes lit up when they toured each offering. Nothing Aeris saw fazed her, not after spending the last several months in Sephiroth’s penthouse suite. But she knew that the beautiful four bedroom homes they visited were more than Elmyra had ever dreamed of.

“Aeris, are you crazy? I can’t live here,” Elmyra objected. “What would I do with all this space? How would I even keep it clean?”

Aeris shrugged, “I’ll ask Sephiroth to arrange a cleaning service for you. And if it helps, you can think of it as a home for your grandkids, not just for yourself.”

Even as she quietly examined the tangled feelings that followed her word choice – grandkids, plural – she could see the gears turning in Elmyra’s head.

When they stepped into the eighth house, they knew it was the one. The red brick exterior looked inviting, the parquet and beige carpet floors were warm and unpretentious, and the enormous fenced-in backyard was large enough to fit a playground set and more.

Happy and exhausted, Aeris watched as Elmyra signed the offer papers and Tseng handed the realtor the money order. They agreed to meet again in three days for the inspection, at which time, if the women were happy with the findings, they would pay for the house in full, sign the final papers with a lawyer who would be waiting in the wings, and immediately receive the keys to Elmyra’s new home.

Aeris slept on her mother’s shoulder during the drive back to Midgar, waking only when they reached Elmyra’s dilapidated house in the slums. She hugged her mother goodbye and promised to see her in three days. It was just enough time for Elmyra to wrap up her affairs and pack up the necessities.

Tseng drove Aeris home and bid her goodnight at the door to Sephiroth’s suite before she let herself in. She hung her coat up in the front closet and kicked off her shoes. She wiggled her tired toes before padding in to the living room.

He was waiting in his favorite chair with a glass of scotch in hand. Aeris walked towards him until her feet hit the edge of the area rug, several feet away from where Sephiroth sat.

“Did you enjoy your outing?” he asked. Those unnaturally bright eyes regarded her as he calmly sipped his drink.

The shadows of his black sateen dress shirt emphasized the curves of his muscles in a way that Aeris found utterly distracting. She’d given up denying her desires ever since that night. “I did,” she admitted. “And we found a house.” She paused before inclining her head a bit and biting her lip. “Thank you,” she finally whispered.

He leaned forward to put his drink down on the coffee table. “Come here,” he bid, with an outstretched arm.

Aeris stepped into his reach and allowed him to gently pull her onto his lap. She curled up against
him and rested her cheek against the warm, smooth fabric that covered his shoulder.

“I told you from the very beginning, you had everything to gain by pleasing me, and that I would keep my promises.”

Thinking back, it was true. He had kept each of his promises. Giving back the white materia, letting her write to Elmyra, and now this…

“So I guess this means you’ve found me pleasing?” Aeris asked tiredly. She let her unfocused gaze take in the city scape beyond the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Midgar was awake, her neon billboards and yellow street lights washing out the stars.

“Beyond my expectations, Aeris,” he answered, bare fingers stroking her taut, rounded belly. “And as long as you continue to do so, I will give you everything.”

Except the one thing that matters most, she thought silently. She closed her eyes and snuggled closer into his embrace. The scent of sandalwood soap filled her nostrils. She was so tired. The floating feeling of giving in to sleep was slowly overcoming her.

Then suddenly, her eyes snapped open and she sat up, instinctively looking at Sephiroth in surprise and delight.

“What is it?” he asked, brow furrowed in concern.

Without a word or further thought, she took his hand and placed it on her stomach. It had been such a tiny sensation. Like a kernel of corn popping inside her belly. “I felt her move,” she breathed.

There it was again. Just a tiny pop against her side. “Did you feel that?” she asked, eyes shining in excitement.

Sephiroth’s large, splayed palm was so warm against her body. “No,” he replied, amusement flickering across his features.

That was okay. Aeris kind of liked the idea that for a few more weeks, the joy of Tiqi’s movements would be hers alone.

“So I assume this means that Tiqi will soon be kicking me?” Sephiroth’s eyes looked oddly soft as he gazed down at Aeris’s stomach beneath his hand.

She giggled. Maternal hormones must be making her crazy.

“What’s funny?” Sephiroth asked, looking openly puzzled.

“I just…never thought I’d hear a word like tee-kee come out of your mouth,” Aeris confessed.

Sephiroth bent to kiss her, lips soft against her own. Without a word, he stood up with a smirk on his face and carried her towards her bedroom.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13

The house inspection turned up nothing but minor annoyances, all easily repaired. A railing needed to be installed at the entrance of the basement walk out. A tub spout would need to be replaced. The shingles were aging and the roof would have to be redone in a few years.

Elmyra signed on the dotted line, over and over again. There were so many papers. It was a whirlwind, and if it had been their own money, Aeris was sure they would have been shaking with anxiety.

When all other parties had left, Tseng explained that he would set up a new bank account for Elmyra, where ten thousand gil would be deposited each month for her to spend as she saw fit. Elmyra nearly went into shock after hearing the outrageous number. She’d been pulling in less than two thousand a month all her life from her housekeeping work, and with the constant repairs needed to keep the house functional, they’d lived almost exclusively hand-to-mouth until Aeris’s floral business had grown enough to make a material difference in their lives.

Elmyra didn’t protest it, though. Aeris knew how street-smart her mother was, and had no doubt that she would carefully squirrel away most of the funds. Elmyra had spent most of her life making it on her own, ever since her husband had died in the war. There was no way she’d trust in an enigmatic stranger like Sephiroth to take care of the family forever.

They said their goodbyes and left Elmyra to begin unpacking her scant belongings. What she’d brought from the old house were mostly sentimental keepsakes from Aeris’s childhood and a few photos of her late husband. And her cast iron pans. She would never part with those. Whatever else the ludicrously spacious house needed, she would buy new with Sephiroth’s money.

Tseng drove Aeris back to Midgar. It was barely past two in the afternoon when they arrived at the city entrance.

“You’re not taking me home?” Aeris asked, when she noticed that they weren’t heading in the usual direction.

“No,” Tseng confirmed. “Sephiroth asked me to bring you to his office. His afternoon’s pretty clear and he said he wanted to celebrate with you.”

Aeris’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. Knowing Sephiroth, ‘celebrate’ probably meant ‘force some kinky sex act on her.’

“He’s not afraid we’ll accidentally run into Zack?” she asked.

Tseng shook his head. “Zack left for a mission to Junon late this morning.”
“Oh.” She rested her head lightly against the car window. Thoughts of Zack still brought a wave of melancholy with them, but it wasn’t so bad anymore.

The elevator was empty when it arrived at the parking lot level. Aeris watched as Tseng produced a key from his suit pocket and inserted it into the Service slot at the bottom of the control panel. He pressed the button for the 70th floor. As they ascended without interruption, she turned to face the glass wall of the compartment so she could see the buildings of Midgar fall away from them as they climbed higher and higher still.

The last time she’d been in this elevator, she’d been consumed with the thought of finally being free of her tiny cell. Of being able to feel sunlight on her face again.

Now she was returning to this forsaken place. Freer than she’d been since Tseng had first brought her here, but still no less a slave. Unconsciously, she fingered the eternity collar hidden under her powder blue turtleneck.

At least the white materia rested reassuringly between her clavicles. Thank Gaia for the silver linings in life. Gratitude was the only way to keep her head above water.

The metal doors opened with a ding and Aeris followed Tseng out into the hallway.

“This whole floor used to be President Shinra’s office,” he said conversationally. “You should have seen it back then. It was this hideous postmodern shrine. A total waste of space.” They walked past an empty boardroom encased in glass walls. Twenty high-backed leather chairs surrounded a long mahogany table. “When Sephiroth took over, he had the floor remodeled and turned into useful rooms. The executives loved him for it. Or at least the ones who survived the coup did.”

Aeris nodded absentmindedly. They approached the end of the hall, where a set of heavy wooden double doors marked the entrance to the president’s office. Tseng knocked, a perfunctory three taps. After a few moments, the door opened to reveal Sephiroth dressed in a crisp black suit, white shirt, and dark jade tie.

“Sir,” Tseng said in greeting.

Sephiroth nodded slightly and Tseng took that as his dismissal. With a nod in return, he turned on his heel and headed back down the hall. Aeris followed Sephiroth into the bright and spacious office. Filtered sunlight streamed through two walls that were built almost entirely from glass, warming the hardwood floors and wood paneled walls. A large wooden desk dominated one half of the room, its surface clear except for a monitor, keyboard, and mouse that sat to one side. Behind the desk hung an oversized painting of the Lifestream flowing through the arctic tundra at night.

“Did you buy the house?” Sephiroth’s voice broke through her thoughts.

Aeris tore her eyes from the luminous painting to look at the man in front of her. His hands came to the loosely knotted belt of her mid-length jacket. He pulled it open and began to undo the buttons.

“Yes,” she answered, with a wry smile. Of course. Straight to the fucking with a side of idle conversation. Typical.

Sephiroth gently pulled the jacket from her shoulders and let it fall to the ground by his side. “And is Mrs. Gainsborough happy?”

“She is,” Aeris agreed, only a little reluctantly.

He grasped the hem of her sweater and pulled it up over her head. “And are you happy?” he asked.
Aeris sighed as she reached up to pull the elastic band from her hair. Her ponytail was uncomfortably askew after being pulled through the tight neck of her sweater. Her auburn tresses tumbled down her bare back in rich waves. She let the dark brown band hang around her wrist like a bracelet. “Happy enough, I suppose.”

It was easier like this, not resisting.

His fingertips leisurely brushed against the sides of her breasts before he let them trail down to the waistband of her black tights. “Then I think it’s time you thanked me properly,” he whispered into her ear. “Wouldn’t you agree, little florist?”

She shivered.

He bent down to unzip her brown leather boots and she balanced herself with a hand on his shoulder as he carefully removed each shoe and placed it to the side. If it weren’t for the fact that they were standing in the middle of his office, the president’s office, the whole act would have been almost normal.

From his crouched position, he reached up and slowly rolled the thick elastane material down the length of her legs until she could step out of the garment.

She stood in front of him, naked except for her collar. It felt like all of Midgar could see them through the bare windows. With one hand he gently pinched her nipple before dropping lower to possessively trail his fingers across her firm, lightly rounded belly.

Arousal hit her like a wall. Pregnancy hormones had driven her libido to a fever pitch. So much so that she had taken to finding her own release each night that he neglected her. Even though he’d told her long ago to never to come without permission, it seemed that pregnancy changed everything, and he either didn’t notice or no longer cared.

Her own hands were never quite satisfactory, though. It was like she needed to be pounded until she physically couldn’t take it anymore.

But she’d rather die than admit that.

Sephiroth stepped back to drink in the sight of his property, and Aeris flushed from equal parts desire and discomfort at the way he was looking at her.

“Put your hair back up, stand with your feet shoulder width apart, and put your hands behind your head,” he commanded. “You will hold that position until I move you.”

It was madness the way her pussy suddenly felt slick at his words. She wondered idly if any of Sephiroth’s soldiers got aroused by his orders.

He walked behind his desk and opened a drawer. From within, he withdrew a single coil of rope, many times longer than the ones that he’d used on her in the apartment, a small bottle of lubricant, and a jeweled steel butt plug larger than she’d ever taken before. The green crystal in its base glinted in the sunlight.

Aeris swallowed, but didn’t move. The sight of those hemp cords in his large hands made a delicious ache run through her lower body. She watched as he knotted it with practiced movements before he wordlessly slid the rope around the back of her neck to let twin lengths trail down the front of her body. Three overhand knots followed, a few inches apart, so that they rested along the midline of her chest.
The earthy scent of hemp filled her nostrils. Stronger than usual because of her newly enhanced sense of smell. It always surprised her how soft the ropes were against her skin, barely even causing an itch. She looked forward to being bound, and she shuddered to think that Sephiroth’s tastes might leave an imprint on her sexuality, even if she managed to escape him one day.

She watched him tie a large figure eight knot further down the rope before pulling the cords through her legs and up her back so that the knot was nestled between her thighs and around her clit. She trembled and resisted the urge to close her legs and grind against it.

He moved around her body, efficiently pulling the twine this way and that. The soft whistles of hemp rubbing against itself were the only sounds in the otherwise silent office. Occasionally he shifted her position and a few times he stepped back to judge his handiwork before returning to make an adjustment.

When he was finished, her limbs were free but her torso was wrapped in artistic geometric patterns. Her growing breasts were framed by twisted coils of rope, and her swollen belly was similarly outlined with clever knots and weaves.

Aeris fidgeted under Sephiroth’s appraising gaze.

“Uncomfortable?” he asked in a way that suggested he knew she wasn’t experiencing any physical discomfort. The rope bondage actually felt surprisingly natural against her skin.

“No,” she answered slowly, hands still behind her head. “It’s just…” she struggled to admit it to him, but he was looking at her with that steadfast expression and she knew he would extract the truth from her eventually. “I just feel huge,” she finally admitted, avoiding his gaze, “and I don’t know why you would want to do something like this given my… condition.”

In the next moment, he closed the distance between them. The fabric of his suit jacket brushed lightly against her exposed skin. He lifted his hand to cup her jaw and his thumb traced her lower lip before gently pressing forward. She opened her mouth without being told, and the sensation of his rough skin against her tongue caused her eyes to flutter shut and a moan to escape her mouth.

“Your body is changing because I planted my seed in it, Aeris,” he said firmly as he thrust his thumb slowly in and out of her mouth. “And you carry it well. You are as lovely now as you have ever been.”

She really shouldn’t feel delighted by those words. Or so desperately in need of his body.

He guided her to the edge of the desk with a hand at the small of her back, and then slid it up between her shoulder blades to bend her over the cool wooden surface. A soft nudge of his shoe against the inside of her foot had her shuffling her feet further apart. She squirmed against the desk, the knot between her legs sending sweet shivers of pleasure through her core.

She felt him spread her cheeks apart before pushing the rope to the side. The cold, wet sensation of lube was quickly followed by the hard press of steel against her ass. She gasped and closed her eyes, forcing her body to relax. It wasn’t so difficult anymore, just a tight stretching sensation, a bit of a pinch, and then the quick sliding motion of the cold plug being pulled into her body before her sphincter caught around its neck.

He brought her back up to a standing position and she looked up at him through heavy lidded eyes. Being plugged always made her desperate for something to sate the ache in her pussy.

“Is there something you want to ask for, little florist?”
He knew. He knew how badly she wanted him right then. How much she wanted to lean forward and grind down against his thigh. It probably wouldn’t take much stimulation by that damn knot before she fell apart.

“I want you to fuck me,” she panted. Why bother to deny something so obvious?

He smiled at her. “In good time. For now, you’re here to serve.”

Before he led her behind the desk, he bent to retrieve her jacket from the floor. He sat down in his black leather executive chair and folded the garment before placing it at his feet. She knelt on top of the makeshift cushion while he undid his zipper and pulled his cock free.

She had barely found a comfortable position before he wrapped her ponytail around his hand and pushed her head down onto his erection. Hard and fast was his apparent mood, and Aeris groaned around him. She hated it when he did this - spending time to turn her on only to forcibly shove his cock down her throat. Her protests died quickly though, as she turned her attention to accommodating his girth, and pleasuring him with firm strokes of her tongue the way he liked.

It would end when it ended, and there was nothing she could do about it. If anything, experience had taught her that an unfocused performance tended to draw the ordeal out longer. She concentrated on matching the timing of her breaths to the beat of his thrusts.

Just as her jaw was beginning to ache, a loud buzz sounded from above. She looked up and Sephiroth stilled his movements, though the firm pressure against the back of her head made it clear that he expected her to continue.

He pulled the vibrating PHS from his inner breast pocket with his free hand and activated the screen. Aeris took the opportunity to lick up and down his shaft to give her tired mouth a break. She watched as he read something on the device’s screen, his frown deepening. Soon after, he put the PHS on the desk and pulled away from her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, wiping their fluids from her face with the back of her hand.

“There’s something I have to attend to,” he answered, tucking himself back into his trousers. “Nothing to worry about.” He helped her to stand with a steadying hand on her upper arm. “Get dressed. I’ll be back in ten or fifteen minutes, and then we’ll continue this at home.”

She looked at him dubiously as he straightened his suit and smoothed down the front of his black trousers. “I’m supposed to get dressed like this?” Aeris asked, looking down at her body harness.

“Of course,” he replied. “Your clothes will fit on top and no one will see anything with your jacket on.” He walked briskly towards the door. “Ten minutes,” he repeated, before leaving the room. The door closed silently behind him.

Aeris heaved a deep sigh and picked up her jacket before walking dejectedly to the pile of clothing in the middle of the office floor. What had been the point of bringing her here today if he was just going to leave her hot and bothered and then bring her home afterwards?

She contemplated lying on the black leather couch and getting herself off. It would take much less than ten minutes. But it would be just like Sephiroth to return early and she shuddered to think of what he would do to her if he found her masturbate without permission after being given such explicit instructions. She could clearly remember the day he’d told her not to try his patience, and that he had no qualms about spanking her until she begged for mercy, even in the third trimester. It wouldn’t harm the baby, and pregnancy was apparently no excuse for disrespectful behavior.
Grumbling to herself, she pulled her discarded clothes back on and wrapped the jacket around her body. She couldn’t be sure – the glass windows were a poor substitute for a mirror – but she was fairly certainly that Sephiroth had been right about the ropes being invisible beneath all her layers.

With nothing else to do but wait, she eyed the executive chair behind the desk. Toys and bondage be damned; she was not going to pass up on this opportunity to sit in the president’s chair. Before she could talk herself out of it, she walked over and gingerly sat down, squirming slightly at the sensations that rippled through her ass and from her clit. She took a deep breath and resolutely tried to ignore the plug and rope. She stared at the large potted ferns that stood in the corners of the room and idly wondered if Sephiroth had designed the place himself, or had simply given free reign to contractors.

She shook herself from the strange and useless thought. She didn’t know what she was doing or what was going on with her mind these days. What had happened to her? She’d fought so hard to guard her identity even as she said and did everything that Sephiroth demanded. That girl she used to be…that scared little thing wrapped up in a tight cocoon of memories…would those memories still lead her back to that person?

Who was she now?

Tired, defeated, obedient, pregnant little Aeris.

At least she wasn’t scared anymore. Come what may.

She turned to look out the window in front of her, where Midgar sprawled outwards in every direction. Two mako reactors could be seen from this vantage point. Their tall chimneys spewed a continuous stream of pale green fog skywards, the toxic byproduct of siphoning the Planet’s lifeblood. This high up, the people of the city were less than ants, only visible if you were squinting directly at them.

Was this what it felt like to wield such incomprehensible power? To sit above it all like a god, where human beings became abstract concepts, or worse, moderate inconveniences?

Is this how the world would look to her, years from now, after so much time at Sephiroth’s side?

Before Aeris could go too far down that gloomy line of thinking, a knock sounded against the door.

And she found herself staring into startled, mako blue eyes.

Chapter End Notes
I commissioned some sexy art for this fic that's almost done. I'll share it with you all when I post the next chapter.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warning: sexually-driven despair ahead.

Special thanks to Lilly for providing excellent feedback on my first draft of this chapter. It's so much better now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14

It was like a nightmare in slow motion. The way her heart felt like it would punch its way out of her chest. She couldn’t breathe. The ringing in her ears was deafening.

“Aeris?” Zack gasped. “Sweet Shiva…”

And then he was moving. Closing the distance between them with long strides. Coming straight across the room with his arms up to embrace her.

She panicked. Felt her eyes widen in cold fear.

He couldn’t touch her. If he hugged her now, he’d feel the ropes beneath her clothes. And he couldn’t know. Could never know any of this.

The bondage. The collar. The plug.

Her shame.

She dashed back behind the desk. Stared at him with horror in her eyes, her mouth slightly open as if trying to form words that wouldn’t come.

She watched his face fall. Looked helplessly at him as his forehead crinkled in confusion and hurt.

“Aeris, what-” he shook his head slightly in bafflement, “I don’t understand. What’s going on? Where have you been? Why are you here? Why…”

_Am I running from you?_

Oh Gaia. Zack was _here_. Finally in front her. Hadn’t she dreamt of this? Fantasized about every aspect of this moment? It should have been her dream come true. Instead, she was hiding behind a desk, palms sweating, thoughts clamoring so violently she could barely hear herself think.

“Aeris…are you okay?” he asked.

He’d…changed his hair. Cut it shorter than it used to be. Just as spikey though. Same old SOLDIER First Class uniform. Mako blue eyes so bright and hopeful it was like a knife in her chest.

She should have been throwing herself into his arms. Begging him to take her out of this place.
“Aeris, say something,” he pleaded. “Tell me what’s going on! I looked everywhere for you and no one knew anything all this time, and now you’re here?”

His eyes had once been her sky. All those years ago when she’d lived beneath the plate and had never seen the real thing. He’d been her joy. Her hope. As though the Planet had said daughter, you are worthy, and here is a good man, worthy of you.

Now here they stood, at the pinnacle of Midgar. Everything gone to shit.

Zack, I’m so sorry.

Before she could say the words aloud, the door opened again, and in walked Sephiroth. His eyes quickly flicked over them. “Commander Fair,” he greeted stoically.

“You!” Zack hissed, rounding on Sephiroth. “What the fuck is going on? You sent me to Junon this morning, then I was ordered to come back, and Reno tells me you’re waiting for me up here, and when I get here…!” he gestured sharply in Aeris’s direction.

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow and replied, “I’m going to let your behavior go, for now, since I understand this is an unusual situation.”

Zack clenched his gloved hands. “Gee, thanks,” he snapped. “Now talk. Why is my fiancée here and why does she look scared to death?”

“Ah, yes,” Sephiroth answered without missing a beat. “I’m sorry for the way this happened. I was called away for something urgent and I didn’t realize Aeris had come to see me as well.”

Aeris stared at him. That bald-faced lie. That he could say such a thing without so much as blinking…

She wanted to throw up.

“But now that the three of us are here, I suppose there’s no delaying this conversation.” Sephiroth tilted his chin towards the couch, “I suggest you take a seat.”

Zack made a choking sound in disbelief. “Just fucking tell me!”

Sephiroth nodded with feigned resignation before turning his head towards Aeris. “My dear?” he said gently. “It’s time.”

Time? Time? She only just managed to prevent herself from giving away the game by looking down at the floor and hiding behind the cover of her bangs.

“Aeris, would you like to sit down first?” Sephiroth asked at the same time Zack hollered, “What the fuck is going on?”

She could see Zack staring at her in her peripheral vision. “Listen, Zack, I…” her voice caught in her throat. But she had to continue. He couldn’t know. For his own sake. For her sake. Even if it broke her. He couldn’t know.

She stole a glance at Sephiroth and saw the nearly imperceptible narrowing of his eyes as he waited expectantly for her to continue.

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she forced herself to speak. “I found out that Sephiroth’s a
Cetra,” her voice was barely more than a strangled whisper. “And we…” Stick to the truth. It’s easier that way. “Well… after I found out, we went to the Southern Island to-

And she saw the way Zack seemed to crumple before her eyes. Where there’d been a furious, defiant, and elated man, standing in front of her, now his shoulders slumped and he was looking at her with those gorgeous blue eyes that showed every fragment of his breaking heart.

“No, Zack, it’s not like that! We…” She couldn’t find the words.

Wasn’t it? Wasn’t it exactly like that? Her head was spinning. She wasn’t even sure what made sense anymore.

“We went to see Cetran ruins,” she tried to clarify.

“That’s what you wrote to me about?” he asked, his voice breaking. “When you said you had to ‘investigate your heritage?’ You were running off with my boss? Right before our wedding?”

She winced and looked away. Pieces of the truth were awful. The actual truth infinitely worse. Nothing she could possibly say would ever make this right.

Zack closed his eyes and scrunched his forehead as though pained. “And Sephiroth’s a Cetra now? What the fuck. What kind of sick fucking game is this?”

Sephiroth looked at Aeris pointedly.

“It’s true,” she replied. “I know it’s true.” And that would be enough for Zack, who knew so well the depths of her intuition.

If she said it a few more times, would she even come to believe it herself?

She felt sick. Her clammy hands were cold as ice.

“Wo-ow,” Zack laughed without a hint of humor. “Whaaaat? You are fucking kidding me.” He shook his head and stared up at the ceiling. “You…this…and…this is how you tell me?”

Without warning, Zack launched himself at Sephiroth, fist flying through the air. The sweet scent of ozone spiked through Aeris’s nostrils as the temperature plummeted. She sensed the crackle of an ice spell in mid-cast, and watched in helpless horror as Sephiroth effortlessly caught Zack’s fist and twisted his arm behind his back. His other arm came around to grip Zack around his abdomen, pinning him against his body so that both men now faced Aeris.

“Careful now,” Sephiroth taunted, lips a hairsbreadth away from Zack’s ear. “A fight between you and I, here, would probably kill the lady and her unborn baby.”

With a grunt, Zack wrenched himself out of Sephiroth’s grasp, and Sephiroth let him go. Zack glared at the other man, right hand twitching longingly for his absent Buster Sword. “Baby? Did you say baby?”

Sephiroth glanced at Aeris and replied calmly, “She’s carrying the future of our race.”

Zack stared back and forth between the two of them, while Aeris kept her eyes fixed on the floor.

“Is this true?” Zack asked, his pained voice begging her to deny it. “Aeris, is this true?”

She couldn’t look at him. Couldn’t face the betrayal she knew to be written so clearly on his features. She kept her face tilted down, blinking away the hot tears that threatened to spill over.
“I…” she whispered, throat dry. “I’m so, so sorry, Zack.” The words tasted like bile on her tongue. But there was nothing else to be done. They were all just puppets, dancing on the puppet master’s strings. But right now she had to think. Had to get him out of here before she broke and could no longer keep up the ruse. “My dreams…and pride….” she begged, “As the last of the Cetra…you can understand that, can’t you?”

*If you want to be a hero,* he’d so often quoted his late mentor, *you have to hold on to your dreams and your pride.*

Who would have thought she could twist a knife like that?

Silence hung between them. Then Zack laughed. A slightly hysterical sound she’d never heard from him before. He covered his face with his gloved hands. “I can’t believe you just said that,” he muttered. “This can’t be happening. Sephiroth’s a Cetra and he stole my fiancée. And here I thought you were just a monster. What the actual fuck.”

Aeris didn’t say anything. Just moved to hug herself only to drop her hands to her sides as soon as she felt the bite of rope digging further into her skin.

Zack looked at her with reddened eyes. “I don’t get this, Aeris. Eight months. No word. How…” he trailed off, looking utterly defeated. “I know you hated being the last… but… Gaia, this can’t be happening.”

And she wanted to scream. That no, no, it should never have been like this. That they should have raised half a dozen babies and grown old together through the decades. That she would never, ever want to hurt him and that he was all she’d ever wanted in a man.

But all she said was, “I’m so sorry.” *Gaia, Zack, I’m so sorry.*

He saw her guilt and shame and regret and looked away. Couldn’t stand to look at her lying face a second longer. He spun around to face Sephiroth instead. “You fucking asshole. You used to be my friend. Before all this,” he waved his hand at the office walls. “I bled for you. How could you do this to me?”

“Duty before sentiment, Commander Fair,” was Sephiroth’s impassive reply.

Zack was shaking his head again, as if he could somehow clear the fog in his mind. “All these years,” he rubbed tiredly at his eyes with the base of his palms. “I quit,” Zack finally said. “I need to get out of here.” Without another backwards look, he strode towards the door.

But Sephiroth stepped into his path and said simply, “You may go now, SOLDIER, but I don’t accept your resignation.”

Zack stared at him in awe. “The fuck you don’t.”

“I don’t,” Sephiroth repeated, utterly unmoved. “I need you to keep the peace. You may take as much leave as you need - with full pay. Once you’ve had a chance to think things through, I know we can come to an understanding.”

“With all due respect, Sir,” Zack responded acidly. “Go fuck yourself.” He walked around Sephiroth and continued towards the door.

“Zack,” Sephiroth called behind him, “I’m sure I don’t need to explain that the information about my genealogy and the baby is highly classified?”
Zack didn’t even slow down. Just pulled the door open and left, slamming it shut behind him.

Aeris stared at the door, unseeing, as her useless fantasies evaporated in the seconds that crawled by – those precious moments where he would still be in the hallway beyond, when she could still run after him and scream that it was all a lie, that she would love him until the day she died, that her twenty three tiny wishes had never once changed.

She looked down at her hand, where the emerald engagement band had once encircled her finger. Not a trace of it now. Nor would there ever be again.

Then Sephiroth stepped in front of her and before she knew it she had fisted the fabric of his suit and she was screaming into his chest. He held her tight against the solid wall of his body as she trembled and clawed at him.

“I hate you,” she sobbed into his clothing. “I hate you.”

He picked her up as though she weighed nothing and carried her to the couch. Held her in his lap while she cried into his shoulder.

Zack was gone and this was it. This was it. Her and her owner, in his domain. Always in his domain. Her one chance had come. And now it had left.

He’d left…

Sephiroth silently stroked the back of her neck while the minutes crawled by until finally, finally, her tears ran dry, her rage and pain all spent. She hiccupped in his arms. His once pristine clothes were smeared with tears and mucus.

“You know you can never go back, don’t you?” he asked, with lips pressed lightly to her temple.

“Is that why you did this?” she asked. “To prove a point?” Her eyes felt hot and swollen.

“It was the only way forward,” he said gently. “You should be proud. You saved his life today.”

She shivered in his embrace. Was that what she’d done? Then why did heroism feel so empty?

“You knew this day had to come,” he whispered against her hair.

And she had known, hadn’t she? Had known it ever since he’d lengthened her leash. But she’d refused to think about it all this time.

Could it have been different, if she had? Could she have been free, now?

He pulled the elastic from her hair and loosened her tresses with his fingers. His hand on her hip was gentle and warm. She leaned her face against his wet lapel because there was nothing else left to do. Nowhere left to pretend to run.

“Now Zack is free,” he continued, petting her hair. “Free to be angry. And sad. Free to move on.”

That should have hurt a lot more than it did. Those words would have cut a hole in her chest mere months ago. Now there was just a twinge. A fleeting thing. And she was so tired.

Free. Free… At least Zack was free.

He was untying the belt of her jacket. And she didn’t fight it. Had nothing left to fight with. She let him slide the garment from her shoulders to drop to the floor by his feet.
“And you are carrying the future of our race,” he said as he ran his fingers down the length of her arm. “You and I, we will make this Planet anew.”

What did that even mean? Why did he always blather on like this? With soft, near-religious fervor. As though the end justified the means. As though he alone knew destiny’s endgame, and that she should feel honored for her role in it.

She didn’t resist when he pulled the sweater over her head. The rest of her clothing followed. And then she was in his lap again, naked except for the rope harness that so lewdly showcased her body.

She didn’t say anything. There’s was nothing left to say. He’d won.

She was here. And Zack was gone.

He’d won.

Nothing left to cling to. Just him.

He’d won…

His fingers were caressing her thigh.

“There’s one more thing I want from you. And then I will take you home.”

Home, to her gilded cage. Aeris squeezed her eyes shut. The feather light touch of his calloused fingers against her taut nipple made her want to shriek.

“I want you to offer me this.” His knuckles grazed the curve of her backside.

He… he couldn’t…

She laughed into his chest. She must have totally lost her mind, to be laughing like this. He wanted her to offer her ass. Now. Here. After all that.

Of course he did. Of course he did. Of course.

She squirmed against him as her mind once again registered the sensation of the plug, forgotten in the earlier chaos.

“And if I don’t?” she asked wearily. *What will you do, Oh, Great Sephiroth? What will you do that you haven’t already done?*

He nuzzled the shell of her ear and whispered, “I will punish you for disobedience. Until you beg for forgiveness. Until you cry for mercy.”

His fingertips trailed down to brush against her lower lips where the coils of rope bit gently into her skin. He nudged the hemp slightly to the side, just enough to access her clit, and softly stroked the sides of her hardened nub.

“But that’s not what I want,” he murmured in her ear. “I want you to submit. I want you to give yourself to me completely.”

Yes, of course. Of course he did. Of course.

This final taboo. What had she expected? He’d been preparing her for months.
Her eyes were dry. There were no more tears left to spill.

He ran his thumb, so gently, across her lower lip. “Will you give yourself to me, Aeris?” he asked.

And her mind screamed no, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, even as her treacherous heart wailed yes, yes. Because there was nothing else left. No flower shop. No fiancé. Just a mother she had to protect and a Planet she’d failed to save.

There was only his hand in her hair and his lips hot against the hollow of her throat. This man who was the father of her child. Who wanted to own her completely.

Just one last flag to plant.

“If your answer is yes, then open your mouth and look at me,” he commanded.

Okay. Okay. Nothing left to think about. Just do. Obey. It was easier this way. His body was always so warm. He could be so gentle when he wanted. He would take her home afterwards and she could go to sleep.

She parted her lips. Fixed her gaze on his mako green eyes, so perfectly framed with thick black lashes. His fingers pushed slowly, steadily, into her mouth. His other hand pulled the ropes further out of the way so that he could sink two fingers deep between her legs. She moaned around him, a desperate, broken sound, and ground down instinctively on his hand. The combined pressure of the plug and his fingers and the rope knot was nearly too much.

Her throat spasmed when he forced himself deeper, but she could handle it. She didn’t break eye contact. She was too well trained.

“Tell me what you want, Aeris,” he said, sliding his fingers out of her mouth to let her speak.

It was all so familiar. They’d done this before. So many times. But this time – this time was different. She felt hollow. She just wanted this to be over. “I want you to use me,” she answered.

And he should. He should use her. She deserved it. What kind of person did this after smashing the heart of the man she’d loved?

“How do you want me to use you?”

His eyes were glowing brighter than she ever remembered them being. His fingers curled inside her and she closed her eyes, shuddering at the waves of pleasure that coursed through her. So much blood flow. Pregnancy had heightened everything.

“I want you to use my ass.” The words came easily. It was so easy to submit to him now. Fighting him had drained her completely, but giving in, now, was no effort at all.

His mouth twitched. The ghost of a triumphant smile not quite suppressed. He stood up and looked down at her and said, “Then bend over the back of the couch and present yourself to me.”

She rose to her knees on the soft cushions and draped her torso over the couch as he instructed. The ropes dug into her body where she leaned against them.

“Spread your legs for me, Aeris,” he commanded from behind her.

She slid her knees further apart and rested her cheek against the cool black leather. Inevitable. Inevitable. This had all been inevitable from the beginning.
She’d never stood a chance.

His fingers were on the jeweled base of the plug. Twisting, pulling. She closed her eyes and grimaced at the tight stinging sensation of the steel dragging against the inside of her body, the sudden release of pressure, the aching soreness it left behind.

*Clunk.* He discarded it on the wooden coffee table behind them. She watched his reflection in the glass window. Watched him walk to his desk before returning with lube and something else in his hands. He slipped the object into her palm — a curved, silicone vibrator, designed to fit against her clit. He thumbed the control. She held it loosely in her hand, only distantly aware of the prickles it sent all across her palm and up her arm.

He was behind her. Pulling his cock free from his trousers. Preparing the lube.

Inevitable. She never should have fought him. What had been the point?

He pulled the rope aside and pressed his erection against her anus. His hand was fisted in her hair, tilting her head up and back so that she met his eyes in the window’s reflection.

“Tell me what you want,” he said again.

No more fighting. “I want you to fuck my ass,” she answered, in a small, tired voice. And maybe she did. It would be easier that way. “Please. Please,” she begged brokenly. To get it over. To finish this game. To give in completely.

The thrill of conquest, the high of total victory — it was there in the cruel twist of his lips, the broad set of his shoulders.

“What are you?” he asked.

“I’m your slave,” she said.

His cock pushed into her body and she let out a strangled groan at the new sensation. It was bigger than anything he’d forced her to take before. Hot where the plugs were always cold. Forgiving where steel and silicone were too rigid.

“What are you?” he growled again in her ear.

“I’m your slave,” she answered again, eyes shut tight. She was quivering, trying to relax her muscles. The pressure of his cock in her ass was too, too much. She couldn’t take it. Yet she had to. She slid the vibrator between her body and the knotted rope, holding it firm against her clit with the pressure of her hand.

“What are you?” he snarled as he pushed himself fully into her body. The smooth fabric of his suit was cool against her fevered skin.

She ground down against the vibrator, chasing the delirious waves it sent rocking through her. It was the only way she could take him. Let the pleasure drown out the pain.

“I’m your slave,” she cried through gritted teeth.

He pulled out oh so slowly, and the absence of his cock inside her was like the dull emptiness of her days that passed one after another, alone in his apartment, aching for his return. Torture and relief.

He thrust back in. Claimed her again. Filled her completely.
“Again,” he hissed. His hands on her hips were shaking.

“I’m your slave,” she repeated.

He picked up the pace. “Again.”

“I’m your slave,” she breathed, chasing her orgasm. Clenching around him. It sounded like a vow.

“Again!” His eyes were closed now. He was riding her body to his completion.

And she said it. Again and again. Over and over. As he took her. As he fucked her. As he declared his absolute victory.

He waited for her to come. Waited until she screamed and pulsated around him before he finally allowed himself release.

And as she lay limp against the couch, waiting for him to finish, hearing him utter that deep, guttural groan that spoke to some primal, unknowable part of her psyche, she thought, yes, yes, I’m a slave. I’m a slave. I’m his slave.

And it was true. It had been inevitable. He had called her by name, and she was his.

She was his slave.

She was his slave.

She was his slave.

Chapter End Notes

Whooooo. Who's ready to climb out of this deep dark hole with me? Almost there. Stick around!

Here's a gift for you lovely readers. Aeris in rope bondage

Please leave your thoughts and comments below!
Chapter Notes

motherhood is really fucking hard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 15: Interlude

Time passed steadily in the final months of Aeris’s pregnancy. There was the nursery to prepare. The baby clothes to buy. The constant trips to the bathroom.

When her water broke, it was a simple matter to get her to Midgar General Hospital. It wasn’t like in the movies – standing in the street and then falling over at the sudden burst of fluid cascading from between her legs. She was at home in the penthouse, alone and bored as ever, knitting her third baby blanket. She’d never had the desire to learn before, but with all the newfound free time both she and Elmyra had, it had been easy to pick up the basics with her mother’s instruction. It gave her something to do. Busied her hands and let her mind float to some faraway place.

It was a strange sensation, this moment that marked the beginning of the end of her pregnancy. Almost like peeing herself in random spurts. She ran, or waddled, to fetch her PHS after shoving a folded cloth into her underwear. Sephiroth had given her the device shortly after their encounter with Zack, and loaded it with exactly four numbers – his own, Elmyra’s, Dr. Okeke’s, and Tseng’s.

She texted all four of them with a single message.

Aeris (10:05am): I think my water broke

And received back a flurry of messages.

Elmyra (10:05am): About time!

Elmyra (10:05 am): I’m heading to the hospital now.

Elmyra (10:06 am): I’m going to be a grandma!!!

Tseng (10:06 am): omw

Dr. Okeke (10:15 am): Wonderful!

Dr. Okeke (10:15 am): I’m just going to wrap things up in the clinic.

Dr. Okeke (10:15 am): I’ll see you at the General by 11.

By 10:20am, Sephiroth still hadn’t replied.
Aeris (10:20 am): Hi?

Aeris (10:21 am): I know you’re probably busy

Aeris (10:21 am): Tseng’s on his way now

Aeris (10:22 am): I guess I’ll see you at the hospital?

And then she shoved the PHS into her back pocket and busied herself with final preparations, absently rubbing her swollen belly all the while. The hospital bag was already waiting in the front hall. Had been sitting there for weeks, in fact. The only thing left to do was make sure her plants were watered one last time. If everything went well, she’d be home in a day or two. If not, it could be weeks. But all signs pointed to a normal, healthy pregnancy, and Dr. Okeke didn’t expect any complications.

After filling her watering can in the kitchen sink, she carried it out to the main balcony. What had once been an austere though luxurious open space, with chaise lounge recliners and an artful sprinkling of contrived greenery kept alive by the maid, was now practically a jungle. It had started with a few potted herbs. Rosemary, parsley and mint. When Sephiroth didn’t seem to mind, she gradually let herself get carried away. Tomatoes, peppers, spinach, eggplant, and so much more now lined every inch of the of the balcony border. She harvested far more than Sephiroth, Elmyra, and herself could eat, and she regularly sent Tseng off with bags of vine-ripened vegetables to share with his department. And with a PHS in hand, it was easy to figure out what materials she needed to make even her most elaborate visions come to life. She’d built a whole structure into the far side balcony wall so that trails of dark green ivy, bright pink petunias, soft ferns, and deep blue morning glories cascaded downwards in living waterfalls.

Everything she touched blossomed like the desert after rain. Even this high up in the sky. Even with only tainted Midgar soil to work with. The earth knew her touch and drank thirstily from her cup, and it gave Aeris some measure of comfort to know she could still do this.

Sephiroth enjoyed the new space too, though he never said much beyond a cursory ‘nice flowers’ that one time. She could see it in the way he spent more time outdoors when he was home on the weekends. The way he seemed to relax into the seat closest to the trailing vines, in a way he never did anywhere else, before beckoning her to come join him.

The doorbell rang as she finished pouring the last of the water into the cilantro. She carefully tucked the watering can against two large pots where it was unlikely to be knocked over by the wind, and waddled to the front door. As she stepped into her shoes, her hand reached up and lingered at her throat, bare without the collar that had been locked around her neck for nearly a year. Sephiroth had removed it a month ago in the likely event that he wouldn’t be around when she went into labor. It would, after all, be impossible to explain to Dr. Okeke why Aeris needed to wear a scarf as she gave birth.

She missed the hum of the white materia against her skin, and wondered when Sephiroth would collar her again so that she might have it back.

Aeris shook herself from her dark thoughts as she reached for the door handle. It was time.
Labor took hours. No one ever talked about it. Movies only ever showed the pushing, panting, sweating part. But it was really a whole lot of waiting around at first. Aeris was prepared though. She’d read all the well-known pregnancy and baby texts, and even some of the more obscure ones. The contractions came every twenty minutes or so in the beginning, and Aeris would grit her teeth and just wait them out, feeling the tightening wave of aching tension sweep through her lower back and pelvis before slowly dissipating again. She knew they would get stronger, and more frequent, as her cervix slowly dilated itself to ten centimeters.

Ten centimeters.

Who could fathom the mysteries of the female body?

Dr. Okeke came in to check on her once in a while. “You still want that epidural, right?” she’d asked, shortly after finishing her initial examination. They’d talked about Aeris’s options months ago, and the good doctor had confidently assured her, “Just get the drugs, my dear. Trust me. It’s incredibly safe and you will be in the best hands possible. Modern medicine is amazing. And don’t for a minute think that painkillers somehow make you weaker, or less of a mom. No matter how this goes down, you are a champion, and a goddess, and it will be the hardest work of your life.”

And Aeris had nodded, because enduring that level of pain when she didn’t have to just seemed foolish. But for now, she was content to wait a bit before asking for the anesthesiologist. Some strange, curious part of her wanted to experience this discomfort. Wanted to know what it felt like as the pains became worse and worse. She felt safe in this exploration of sensation with the medical team never far from hand.

The labor and delivery suite they’d set her up in was clearly the finest Midgar had to offer. It barely even looked like a hospital room, with the obvious exception of the biometric monitoring devices that were still tucked away in the corner. The hospital bed that Aeris sat on was spacious and surprisingly comfortable, and the blue couch Elmyra was perched on was plush and long enough for her to lie down and sleep. It even had pillows. Combined with the oak hardwood floors and warm sconce lights on the walls, the suite was really quite inviting.

Elmyra happily took on the burden of conversation in between Aeris’s contractions, wondering out loud, “What color do you think Tiqi’s hair will be? Her eyes will be green, I would think, since you both have green eyes. But the hair? Was Sephiroth’s hair always white like that?” and “Oh, I hope she looks just like you, sweetheart. That would make me so happy. But you’re both so good looking, Tiqi’s going to be gorgeous either way.”

Aeris smiled and squeezed her mother’s hand, buoyed by the joy that radiated from Elmyra.

After another hour so, the contractions strengthened past the point of interesting and became distinctly undesirable, making her grit her teeth and close her eyes, counting each second until they passed. And she was still just getting started. It was impossible to imagine how the pain would steadily ramp up from here until somehow a human head pushed out of her vagina. So the next time a nurse came in to check on her, Aeris asked for the epidural. When the anesthesiologist arrived, Aeris turned to Elmyra and held both her hands tightly. She didn’t want to see the enormous needle, the one that would go into her spine, or think too much about how it reminded her of her childhood in Hojo’s laboratory.

It was too late though. A cold, irrational fear had gripped her, and her hands were clammy and her heart was pounding so loudly she was sure the doctor could hear it.

“Sweetheart,” Elmyra said gently, “You can still say no, if you want. It’s your choice.”
Aeris stared down past the wide curve of her belly and fixed her gaze on her knees. “I don’t know, mom. Should I? I don’t know if I can take the pain.”

Elmyra kissed her on the forehead. “I wish I could be more helpful, but I’m as new to this as you are. I’m here for you, though. I’m going to be here the whole time.”

Some small distant part of her wished that the father was here, too.

Behind Aeris, the anesthesiologist spoke up, “Don’t worry Ms. Doe, I know everyone gets scared of needles, but this isn’t going to hurt. I’m going to give you a numbing agent, and then you’re going to feel some pressure against your back, and that’s pretty much it. It’s nothing compared to the contractions you’re already having.”

The woman’s soft, reassuring tone did much to calm Aeris’s nerves, and after taking a breath she nodded, and said, “Okay, I’m ready. Go ahead, please.”

It all went exactly as promised. The cold, wet feeling of iodine being wiped across her back, the brief prick of a needle and the gradual numbing that followed, then the sensation of a surprising amount of pressure against her lower back even though her body was perfectly still. And then the doctor was done, and she very quickly wrapped up, collected her things, and left, promising to return in a bit to check up on how ‘Ms. Doe’ was doing.

From then on, it was an intensely medicalized process. Small devices had been strapped to her stomach earlier, after she’d been admitted, so that the baby’s vitals could be constantly monitored. Now Aeris’s nurse inserted a catheter down below and an IV into the back of Aeris’s hand, and looped a blood pressure cuff around her upper arm which automatically inflated and deflated itself at regular intervals.

She tried to ignore how powerless and...studied...it made her feel. At least she liked and trusted Dr. Okeke, and that certainly made all the difference. Besides, Sephiroth would probably execute the entire ward if anything happened to Aeris or their baby, and there was some perverse comfort in that.

The screen by her bedside showed four sets of numbers. The largest one, labeled FHR, read 142. Tiqi’s heart was pulsing at a hundred and forty two beats per minute, tiny thing that it was. And in just a few more hours, she would be here.

The Planet was singing in Aeris’s ears, a joyous atonal melody that had steadily increased ever since she’d first fallen pregnant. Now, it was so loud that Aeris only had to close her eyes to be swept up in the goddess’s euphoria that another daughter was about to take her first breath among the living.

In the face of divine elation, Aeris’s melancholy and regret were nothing.

It made her wonder why she’d ever waited so long. Why she’d bothered fighting so hard.

And, truthfully, Aeris couldn’t wait to meet her baby. This child she’d named hope.

With the epidural in place, the contractions were transformed from aching, twisting pain to pressure - increasingly powerful waves of pressure all through her core, as her muscles involuntarily tightened and pushed and squeezed. Dr. Okeke examined Aeris and kept her informed of how much she’d
dilated and suggested that she try to nap as much as possible.

“Active labor usually lasts hours for first time moms,” Dr. Okeke kindly reminded her. “And then after that, the really hard work starts. You could be pushing for one to two hours, so you should get as much rest as you can before we get there.”

So time passed in a haze of half-sleep, with Aeris regularly woken by the pangs of her body.

And when she had nothing better to do, like when she woke to find Elmyra sleeping peacefully on the couch, she texted Sephiroth.

Aeris (1:14pm): *Situation normal*

Aeris (1:20pm): *Will you be here soon?*

Aeris (1:23pm): *Honestly I’m kind of scared*

Aeris (1:23pm): *I have no idea what I’m doing*

Aeris (1:23pm): *Mom doesn’t know anything about this stuff*

Aeris (1:23pm): *Only the dr knows*

Aeris (1:24pm): *I mean, yeah I guess I read a ton so actually I know a lot of things but still*

Aeris (1:27pm): *Shouldn’t you be here?*

Aeris (1:27pm): *Since it’s completely your fault?*

Aeris (1:32pm): *Sorry that was rude*

Aeris (1:40pm): *I wish you were here*

When he finally replied, she felt that weak, fickle thing she called a heart flutter at the words on the screen.

Sephiroth (2:01pm): *I’m proud of you.*

Sephiroth (2:02pm): *Looking forward to meeting my daughter.*

When no other messages seemed forthcoming, Aeris put the PHS back on the bedside table and closed her eyes. Might as well try to get some more sleep.

It was, quite literally, the hardest work of her entire life. Maybe escaping the labs had been harder, but she’d only been a child, and didn’t remember much of it. Those days that she’d spent singlehandedly ripping up the floor boards of the abandoned Sector Five church, then tilling all the soil with nothing more than a rusty, woefully insufficient trowel, before finally planting her first crop of yellow Tiny Bee lilies, were nothing compared to this.

Now Aeris understood why it was called labor.
“Okay here we go. Aaaand push!” Dr. Okeke coached, from where she stood between Aeris’s legs at the foot of the bed. “1…2…3…4…5…6…7…8…9…10!”

Aeris bore down with all her strength, gritting her teeth and grunting loudly with the effort. It wasn’t painful, but the unbelievably intense pressure in her lower core and against her rectum was very uncomfortable and she was utterly exhausted after having pushed for well over an hour. Elmyra wiped her sweat-matted brow and neck between contractions with a cool, wet cloth and squeezed her hand.

“You’re doing so great, mama!” Dr. Okeke cheered. “It looks like Tiqi’s going to come out with a beautiful head of brown hair.”

“Ahh, my granddaughter’s going to have your hair!” Elmyra beamed, just as another contraction hit.

“…Yay,” Aeris panted in response, after she collapsed back against her pillow.

And on and on it went. With Aeris groaning and grunting and screaming with the effort, until she thought she couldn’t possibly have enough energy left to finish this.

But finally Dr. Okeke said, “Okay this is it. One more push and the head will be out! Ready?”

Aeris grumbled and took a deep breath, a part of her not quite believing the good doctor. But she closed her eyes and reached out her senses to embrace the Planet’s song, seeking comfort and strength beyond her own person. And she pushed with all her might, screaming and shaking with the force of her effort.

“That’s it! Head’s out! Amazing job! Okay, just one more push, and the shoulders will follow! Aaaaaaand pushpushpushpushpushpuuuush….!”

And then it was suddenly over before Aeris even realized. She laid there breathless and trembling, while gentle hands untied the back of her hospital gown and pushed the stiff blue fabric down to her suddenly deflated stomach. And there was a tiny, naked, indescribably soft creature lying on her chest, perfect miniature fingers curled gently against her breast. She stared down in awe at matted brown hair and slightly purple skin. Ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes. A little bump of a nose above miniscule, puckered red lips.

Her daughter. This was her daughter.

In that perfect, suspended moment, Aeris barely noticed Elmyra’s excited babbling about how beautiful her granddaughter was, or Dr. Okeke’s explanation that the next few contractions would deliver the placenta and then they’d just need to apply two or three stitches before it was over.

All she could see was the baby in her arms, this child called Tiqvah, flawless and utterly helpless, resting on her chest. The surge of pure emotion that rushed up from her belly to her throat was so powerful it physically shook her, and Aeris was suddenly sobbing, tears flowing freely down her face as she looked at her daughter, cradled in her arms.

And in that moment Aeris felt her world shift. Where once she had been an entity, an individual, now she too had joined in the legacy of all the women that had preceded her – that unbroken line of females making life, generation after generation, millennia after millennia, until this point, here, now, where a mother called Aeris held a daughter called Tiqi and welcomed her into the world.

And Tiqi’s eyes, it turned out, were brown.
“I’m going to tell everyone that Tiqi gets her eyes from me,” Elmyra quipped, watching rapely as one of the nurses helped Aeris position the baby for breastfeeding.

Aeris chuckled tiredly without looking away from the tiny little lips that parted not nearly far enough before latching on to her nipple. She winced at the pinching sensation as she dreamily replied, “Sure, mom. That makes sense.”

“It’s not unheard of for two green-eyed parents to have a brown-eyed baby. Though it is pretty rare,” Dr. Okeke mused.

Aeris smiled down at the soft bundle sleepily nursing at her breast. There was a tightness in her chest, as though her heart was filled to bursting with the knowledge that she would do anything for this scrunchy little face. “It makes sense,” she said softly, looking up to share a meaningful glance with Elmyra. After all, for the daughter of the last Cetra and whatever the hell Sephiroth was, anything was possible.

Tseng drove Aeris home in the early evening the next day.

“No sex for at least six weeks,” the doctor had warned before signing her discharge papers. “I’ll come see you then to make sure you’re all healed, but if anything happens before I visit, or if you have any questions, don’t hesitate to call, okay?” Then she’d handed Aeris an envelope and said with a wink, “That’s a letter for the president about the sex ban. You tell him those are the doctor’s orders.”

But Sephiroth and sex were the furthest things from Aeris’s mind at the moment. She spent the entirety of the drive home in silence, fixated on the slumped little figure beside her, strapped into a purple and grey car seat. Nothing else mattered. Tiqi’s heavy, sleepy head was covered in a tiny white knitted hat and was tilted down against her shoulder as though she were boneless. She stirred slightly at the bumps in the road and sighed contentedly in her sleep.

Elmyra had reluctantly parted ways with them to drive back to her home in Kalm, wondering aloud why they’d ever thought it was a good idea to move her out of the city in the first place, at a time like this. But Aeris had assured her that she would manage and Elmyra had promised she would visit tomorrow, and they’d left the hospital grounds heading in opposite directions, each eager to get back to their own, familiar beds.

When they reached the penthouse, Aeris pulled her keycard from her jacket pocket and held the door open for Tseng who was carrying the dozing newborn in her heavy car seat. Sephiroth was standing in the living room, gazing out at the Midgar skyline, still faintly illuminated by the dark orange rays of the setting sun. He turned to face them when he heard their footsteps approach.

“Sir,” Tseng greeted with a nod before placing the car seat carefully on the ground.

Though the contact was as smooth as he could manage, Tiqi’s arms fluttered upwards and her tiny mouth opened with a gasp. She didn’t wake, it was just the startle reflex, nothing more. But Aeris felt
her heart skip a beat as she watched her baby settle back down into the cushioned seat. Aeris carefully bent down to free Tiqi from her restraints and gingerly made her way to the nearest couch with the baby cradled in her arms.

“Thank you for bringing my family home, Tseng,” Sephiroth said. “You’re free to go.”

Tseng nodded again and spared Aeris a glance before responding, “Thank you, sir. Have a good night.”

Aeris barely heard him or noticed him leave. Through the floating haze of sleep deprivation, the words my family echoed through her thoughts.

*I suppose we are a family now.*

Beside her, she felt the cushion dip and heard the soft creak of leather and the whisper of fabric.

“So this is my daughter.”

Aeris raised her head to look at the father of her child. “Would you like to hold her?” she asked.

At his slight nod, she carefully shifted Tiqi into the crook of Sephiroth’s arm. It was strange to see such a dangerous man awkwardly hold such a fragile creature. She watched him gaze down at their daughter fondly.

“You didn’t come to the hospital,” Aeris said in a small, tired voice.

“I didn’t think it would be prudent for me to be seen in the obstetrics ward,” he answered without looking up. “The last thing you need is for paparazzi to know who you and Tiqi are, especially if you want the freedom to take her out.”

“Oh.” That seemed…thoughtful. The logic was probably perverted, but Aeris was too tired to think further on it.

“You’ve done very well,” Sephiroth said, in that way of his. As though it were his right to make such a judgment.

It should have infuriated her, but it didn’t. Instead, Aeris was oddly content, sitting here and looking at her…family…like this. She didn’t say anything further. It was best not to push Sephiroth, to just enjoy these quiet moments when they happened.

He held their daughter until she stirred and began to cry, then handed her back to Aeris and watched in silence as mother put babe to breast.

. . .

The newborn period, the fourth trimester – it was nothing short of torture.

Aeris drifted from one day to the next, alert and somehow functional despite waking up every hour or so to Tiqi’s cries. Nursing became pure agony each time Tiqi latched onto her aching, cracked nipples. And hormone surges regularly left her in tears, sometimes from such an intense love that it felt like her heart would rupture, sometimes from the psychic pain caused by Tiqi’s cries and the desperate desire to do anything to make it stop.
Aeris’s abs didn’t work properly anymore. Her pregnancy-loosened joints were always sore. Her body hadn’t been her own for a year now, but this was something else entirely. Where Sephiroth had dictated the movements and functions of her body only when he’d wanted to use her, now she found herself a complete and utter slave to a wailing, helpless infant.

Around the clock. Without end.

One day Sephiroth walked into the nursery in the early morning and found Aeris kneeling on the ground, with her face buried in her hands. Tiqi was crying, little limbs flailing, with her rash-reddened bum exposed to the open air.

“I can’t. I can’t. I can’t do this anymore. I’ve changed her six times already and I can’t. I just can’t,” Aeris sobbed.

By the end of that week, she found out that Sephiroth had bought Elmyra a suite on the tenth floor of their condominium. And she still owned the house in Kalm.

There were the achingly sweet, quiet moments, too. When Tiqi slept, skin to skin, on Aeris’s chest. The whisper of deep, measured breaths from this new life that she’d created. She would watch her baby’s eyelids flutter in dream, breathe deeply of the intoxicating honey scent of Tiqi’s downy head, and wish with all her heart that she could live in this moment forever.

Dr. Okeke cleared Aeris for sex right on schedule, pronouncing her well-healed and free to do as she liked. She reluctantly told Sephiroth the news that night, and was surprised when he simply nodded in response.

Later, after leaving Tiqi with him to go brush her teeth and prepare for bed, she paused to look at her reflection in the mirror. Puffy, bloodshot eyes. Hair perpetually pulled back in an awkward, messy ponytail. Her once firm abdomen was now squishy and slouchy in a way that made her feel like an alien in her own body. She looked as worn down as she felt.

No wonder Sephiroth wasn’t interested.

She should feel relieved, shouldn’t she? Maybe he would never be interested again. Maybe he hadn’t bargained for the consequences of childbirth and motherhood on his little sex toy. Good. Maybe he would leave her alone.

So why was she crying again?
It got easier over time.

Elmyra was a godsend, helping out with day and night duties. Aeris’s body slowly healed and strengthened. Sleep gradually improved to the point where she was no longer a zombie, at least. And nursing became a joy – treasured moments of quiet reflection, the blissful sensation of pressure gently released, and the knowledge that this body of hers could feed and nurture and grow a brand new person.

Little by little, the passage of days started to mean something again. She started noticing the taste of food again. Cuddling with Tiqi out on the shaded balcony became a pleasure rather than just another desperate opportunity to catch a few minutes of sleep.

And one morning she found a message in the kitchen that read,

*Ask your mother to babysit tonight, and make yourself presentable. I’ll be home at 2100, after dinner.*

He made her ask for the collar back, and she did so without much fuss. It felt so good to have the white materia resting against her throat again, even if it was getting harder to remember why it mattered.

It was almost like a ritual, the way he proceeded in reclaiming her. He tied her limbs to the four posts of the bed and trailed hot wet kisses down the length of her body. When he licked along her lower lips, she surged upwards against his tongue and she threw her head back and moaned. She was more sensitive than she’d ever been in her life, and she could only guess that it was some wonderful aftereffect of childbirth – all that extra blood flow turning her body into a thing primed for pleasure.

Sephiroth noticed. He pulled back to look up at her with a quirked eyebrow, and she mewed and gyrated shamelessly beneath him, begging him to continue. He held her heated gaze for a long moment, then seemed to decide something as a smirk twisted his lips.

He made her come, over and over, until she begged him to stop. Sweat-slicked and exhausted, she’d lost count of the number of times her body had succumbed to the powerful waves of pleasure that seemed both unending and nearly effortless. And there was nothing she could do to make him stop. Her wrists and ankles were red and raw from straining so hard against her bonds.

He didn’t fuck her that night. Just untied her and stroked her back until she fell asleep.

Sex was terrible, though. Inelastic scar tissue and hormone-induced dryness made sex painful no matter how turned on Aeris was or how many times she came before he penetrated her. Sephiroth quickly lost patience in trying to adequately prepare her or find a more comfortable position. Sometimes he held her down and fucked her hard until he finished, and Aeris just buried her face in the sheets, gritted her teeth, and prayed for it to be over. More often he just fucked her in the ass.

It was so much better when he did that. She could take him there now with relative ease. And a vibe held to her clit quickly had her screaming her pleasure as he pounded into her body.

It scared her to think of the day when her period would come back. If he wanted to impregnate her immediately, there was little she could do to stop him from trying, other than begging for more time.
She stopped wearing scarves around Elmyra. It was too much effort and she just didn’t care anymore. The first time Elmyra saw the collar around Aeris’s neck, she gave her daughter a strange look, and Aeris said blithely, “Sephiroth knows how much this materia means to me, so he had this necklace custom made. I couldn’t really say no. And it’s actually kind of beautiful, don’t you think?”

Elmyra just shook her head, as if to say, kids these days. And they never mentioned it again.

It was so easy to lie when she was really just telling the truth.

Watching Tiqi grow from useless wailing lump to giggling, sitting, crawling delight made Aeris feel a joy she could never have imagined before becoming a mother. It wasn’t the speechless, wide-eyed awe of seeing the sky for the first time in living memory. Or the reverence of watching the unstoppable waves of the endless, moonlit ocean crashing against the sand in Costa del Sol. It was a quiet wonder, the kind that one couldn’t help but share. And so often she found herself turning to Sephiroth when Tiqi demonstrated a new skill for the first time to flash him a guileless grin, and he would smile slightly in that way of his, and say very little, before pulling her into a hug or bending down to give Tiqi a kiss.

She would never forget the first time he came home and Tiqi toddled over to greet him saying “Dada! Dada!” And how Sephiroth’s face had so quickly softened at the sight of his daughter. How he’d dropped down to one knee to wrap his arms around the tiny tot before whispering “Hi, Tiqi,” into her wispy chestnut hair.

But for every beautiful, precious moment, there were the screeching tantrums. The endless diapers. The bone-deep fatigue that never really lifted thanks to regular night time wakings and the ceaseless care that a human infant needed. The loneliness of long days at home alone, without an adult mind to connect with when Elmyra didn’t keep her company. Play dates with other Midgar moms and their kids helped, whenever she could get Tseng to escort her to a nearby park or family center, but truthfully she was tired of the same old mom conversations about baby food and baby sleep and baby education and blah blah blah.

There were days when she was so touched-out after dealing with a crying, clingy child all day that by the time Sephiroth came home, she just wanted to scream and lock herself in a room, alone. And when he wanted to have her on those days, it was a disaster. She’d beg him for space, he’d ignore her and order her to bed, and the night would end in anger and frustration when Sephiroth eventually pulled out, limp and agitated. Apparently he didn’t enjoy a weeping, frazzled sex slave.

After the last such incidence, he came home the following evening and gave her a small green orb after she nursed Tiqi to sleep. It was a run of the mill manufactured fire materia. She stared at the orb in her palm in bafflement before looking up at him.

“I expect you to take good care of my child, and yourself,” he said. “And I also expect you to come to bed willingly.”

Aeris bit back the accusation on the tip of her tongue. The one thing that would really help make life work was babysitting. Elmyra did her best to help out, but she had never cared for a baby before, and wasn’t a ‘natural’ baby person. Aeris didn’t want to ask her mother for more than she was already giving, which was already so much. Sephiroth had made it clear, though, that he would never allow
a stranger to care for his child.

“And how is this supposed to help?” Aeris asked, before immediately regretting her tone and clenching her fist protectively around the materia. “I mean, thank you. I’m grateful. I just…”

He gave her an indulgent smile. “Think of it as a stress outlet. You may go to the roof and use it undisturbed. But if it doesn’t help, you can always return it to me.”

Aeris gripped the orb harder and brought it to her chest. As if she would ever give him an excuse to take it away from her. “That’s…very thoughtful of you,” she mumbled. “And I’m sure it will help.”

From that point on, Aeris always carried the fire materia in her pocket, along with the restore materia Sephiroth had given her nearly two years ago. And, it turned out, it was deeply satisfying to blast fireballs into the sky from the rooftop of the second tallest tower in Midgar.

It almost made her feel powerful. It almost made her feel free.

In the permanent fog of sleep deprivation, the days turned into weeks, turned into months so easily. Like the gentle trickle of a creek. When she was alone with Tiqi, her baby was her world, her only focus. When there were others, or when she was outside, she focused on nothing at all – her peripheral vision and senses all tuned to the broader environment to make sure that Tiqi was safe.

So the world, and time, passed by. She walked by her old flower shop one day, with Tseng at her side and Tiqi in her pram, to find that it had been converted into a bustling cupcake store. She never walked that route again.

One routine bled into the next

Until one day, a few weeks before Tiqi turned two. They were walking home one evening when Aeris suddenly sensed energy in the air. A split second to smell the ozone. A loud crack and a heavy blow to her back. She saw Tseng fall forward, boneless. Searing, white-hot pain blinded her vision.

And her last thought before she collapsed on the ground was, Oh, Gaia - Tiqi!

Chapter End Notes

Can I confess something? It would mean a lot to me if you hit that kudos button.

To the wonderful commenters - I love having conversations with you folks and each of you are the readers I am trying so hard not to disappoint.

Oh, and is Sephiroth going to realize that he's so in love with Aeris after she gets
kidnapped and is put in mortal danger? So he starts being nice to her?? It that how you get your happy ending?? hell no.
Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the love after the last chapter. You made me so happy. ^_^ On with the story!

Warning: Some violence ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 16

Waking was like floating upwards through molasses. No light, just faint voices trickling through Aeris’s mind.

...did WHA........crazy.......get...all killed...

...oth’s wife...

...didn’t tell you.......would say no...

...damn straight......said no.......fucking insane...

...see...either way...he’ll bargain...lose his family....

Aeris twitched, and the slight movement sent an aching pain through her left side. Her right arm was numb. It felt like she was tied to a chair, bound by each ankle and with her hands behind the chair’s hard back. She tried to open her eyes only to realize she must be blindfolded. Light leaked in around the edges of the dark fabric.

Then she heard the piercing wails of Tiqi screaming “Mama! Mama! Mommeeeee!” somewhere in the distance, and adrenaline flooded her body. She struggled instinctively against her bonds, desperate to free herself and reach her baby.

“Well, well. Looks like the bitch is finally awake,” a man’s voice said.

Aeris tried to block out the sound of Tiqi screaming and the deafening pounding of her heart. She had to think. Breathe in, breathe out. No one seemed to be approaching her. The bonds weren’t budging.

“We have to take them back,” a woman said.

“Are you nuts? This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. We’ve finally got that fucking bastard where it’ll hurt the most.”

“This is suicide!” another voice hissed. “We can’t keep them here! Oh Gaia, we are so dead.”

“If we take them back now, we will be dead. We’ve come this far. Now we just gotta complete the mission. Darren’s delivering the message now.”
“What message?” a gruff voice hollered.

“To publically announce a one billion gil investment in clean energy and commit to dismantling the reactors within five years. If he wants to see his wife and kid again.”

“Fuck!”

“Hey, fuck you. You’re just pissed because you didn’t think of it.”

“No, you fuckin’ chocobrained idiot. Did ya think this through at all? Sephiroth don’t negotiate. What are you gonna do when he calls your fucking bluff?”

A pause, and then-

“Are you fucking kidding me? An innocent woman and a kid? When the fuck-”

“Okay, first of all, this bitch is hardly innocent. She’s the president’s woman, and that makes her complicit in all his fucking bullshit. Second, we’re terrorists. How the fuck is this any different than the people we killed in the bombings?”

“It is different-”

“Why? Because you didn’t have to look into their eyes when they died? Well, Barret, you won’t have to look into hers either. We can keep the blindfold on for you.”

“You’re fucking disgusting, man.”

“They dropped Sector Seven. Have you forgotten that Sephiroth killed my whole family when they dropped that plate? Wutai? That fucking demon deserves all the pain in this world.”

Aeris was reeling. They’d been kidnapped by AVALANCHE, the eco-terrorist group. And Sector 7…the media had blamed AVALANCHE for that disaster. To hear now that it hadn’t been them…

“I’m out,” the gruff man – Barret – said.

“Well I’m still in.” Another woman’s voice this time.

Aeris counted six voices so far. Tiqi was still screaming, the sound making her sick with fear. “Please,” she croaked through a mouth as dry as sand. “Where’s my baby? I’ll co-operate and do anything you want, but please don’t hurt my baby.”

She flinched as something warm and wet landed on her cheek. Someone had spit on her.

“Wish I could have said that before the fucking Turks dropped the plate. My kids were five and three. But I guess the lives of slum rats don’t matter to you fucking shithead rulers.”

Aeris kept her mouth shut. Should she tell them where she’d come from? No - they wouldn’t care.

“Look, we have to decide what we’re going to do,” a voice said. Calmly, reasonably. “I can’t support this plan. I’m with Barret. I would never have agreed to this if I’d known about it beforehand. But now that we’re here…”

“What are you suggestin’?” Barret asked.

“That we walk away, boss. And leave them to it.”
“What?”

“What are you going to do? Fight your own team to return them? I’m suggesting we cut ties now. If this stupid plan somehow works, then Gaia wins. And if it doesn’t, AVALANCHE at least lives to fight another day.”

“Please,” Aeris begged. “Don’t do this. You were right before. Sephiroth isn’t going to negotiate. If you take my baby and I back to Midgar tower, you can just drop us on the curb and I’ll never say a word about what happened. Please.”

A hand slapped Aeris hard across the cheek, snapping her head to the side.

“Shut up. No one asked you.”

A pause.

“Well?”

“Yeah….Okay…let’s go.”

“No!” Aeris screamed. “Please, no! Sephiroth is going to kill you all if you harm us! Don’t you understand? You say he ordered the plate dropped? What do you think he’s going to do if you kill his family?”

Another pause. All Aeris could hear was her own ragged breathing and the thundering of her heart.

“Get the kids outta the city.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What?” Aeris cried. They couldn’t be serious. This was insane.

Another slap across her face. Harder this time. Tears stung Aeris’s eyes beneath the blindfold.

“Shut the fuck up you pompous little bitch. Casualties are a fact of war. Maybe this is just what the people need. To see just how much of a demon that man really is. Maybe your death will be the beginning of the revolution.”

She heard the muffled footfalls of people leaving the room. The mumbled partings. Tiqi had stopped screaming, and that scared Aeris more than anything.

The room was suddenly so quiet.

“Please. My baby – where is she?” Aeris begged of whoever was left.

“Relax. We locked her in a closet. Your kid’s fine.”

Aeris clenched her jaw. Was that supposed to reassure her? The thought of Tiqi, terrified and alone, trapped in the dark, pounding frantically against the door, made her sick to her core.

“You don’t have to go through with this,” Aeris pleaded, even though she knew it was futile. “No one else has to die. Please. Just let us go. I don’t want anyone else to die.” Her blindfold was soaked now with her tears.

Her head tilted backwards as the fabric was pulled from her face. She squinted against the suddenly too-bright light. The man in front of her was slim. Brown hair. Casual jeans and a plain dark grey t-
shirt. She would never have noticed him on the streets of Midgar. There were two others in the room, a blonde haired young woman and a grizzled man with short, greying hair. They were in a rattily furnished room. Peeling wallpaper. No windows. A basement, most likely.

The man gripped her chin hard. “See, now you know what we look like. ‘A’int no gettin’ offa this train we’re on.’ Get it yet?”

Aeris swallowed. It took all her self-control not to wrench out of his grasp. She trembled under the naked hatred of his glare.

“Well, you are a pretty one, aren’t you?” the man snarled. “Those big doe eyes.” He spit at Aeris again and the dribble landed on her chin. “A little plain, though. Always thought that cock-sucking monster would keep a bombshell at his side.” He paused to consider her. “Maybe you’re hiding something better under all those clothes, eh?”

“Ugh.” Aeris could hear the woman roll her eyes. “Men. You’re all so gross.”

“You gonna object? Bitch has what’s coming to her.”

“Nope.” The woman waved her hand in disgust. “You do whatever the fuck you want to with that whore. I’m gonna go check on the kid.”

Aeris watched in wide-eyed horror as the woman left the room, before tearing her gaze back to the man in front of her. “Please please please don’t hurt Tiqi. Please.”

“Relax,” the man said again. “No one’s gonna hurt your brat, as long as you play nice, and Sephiroth agrees to the terms. Now let’s see what you’re hiding under there. No harm in looking, right?”

His hand reached for the edge of Aeris’s scarf, and she only had a second to feel panic rise in her throat before the silk fell away.

“Fuck me. Is that…?”

“Shit” The older man leaned forward from his seat on the tattered green couch. “I’m pretty sure that’s a collar. Is there a clasp?”

One hand wound roughly in Aeris’s hair and yanked her head forward while the other traced along the curve of her collar.

“Nope. Looks like just one tiny screw. Fucking wow. Are you his sex slave or something?” The man jerked her head back before letting go.

“Would explain some things,” the older man mused. “Like why no one even knows about her or the kid.”

“Shiva’s fucking tits. So that’s why he keeps you around, huh? Bet he’s got you trained to suck dick on command.”

Aeris stared hard at the ground, face aflame, angry tears clouding her vision. She pulled against her bonds with renewed strength, horrified at what was bound to happen next.

“Huh. She’s not even denying it,” the older man said. “You’d think if she was his wife she’d be acting all indignant.”

“Shut up,” Aeris choked.
“I think you’re right.” The look in the man’s eyes was dark and hungry, and it made Aeris lean back against her chair, as if she could get away from him. He reached out and grabbed her breast, squeezing with cruel fingers, making her cry out in pain. “I bet he comes home every day and fucks you in the ass. Isn’t that right, sweetheart? Does he make you call him master? Does he make you beg for his dick?”

Hot tears spilled down Aeris’s face. She couldn’t move. Couldn’t stop this assault. Couldn’t help Tiqu. Gaia, when had her life turned into this nightmare? First Sephiroth and now this man. She’d never felt more helpless. More terrified. When had she become so helpless? What had happened to the smart, strong-headed girl that had survived in the slums and dodged her Turk watchdogs?

When did she become this?

“You must be really well-trained to serve a high maintenance guy like that. And it’s not every day you meet a real life sex slave. I’ve gotta see what this pussy of yours can do.”

She watched, defenseless, as the man’s hand reached for the button of her jeans. Sagged into the chair and closed her eyes as he pulled down the zipper, as if that alone could shut out reality. Maybe this was just how it was now. An object passed from one set of hands to another.

“Don’t worry. If we take you back to Sephiroth, I’m sure he won’t mind. You’ve already pushed a baby out of here, right? What’s another dick or two?”

His hands were grasping the denim waistband and pulling downwards.

And then she felt it. The pressure of two small orbs hidden in her pocket.

Her body tensed. Her eyes snapped open. The fire materia was right there. Right there. She’d never cast before without holding the crystalized mako. Wasn’t even sure it was possible.

*Magic is just the knowledge of the Ancients. The knowledge of the goddess.*

If she reached with her mind. If she concentrated on the image of fire. The knowledge that was in her blood. In her mind. In her pocket.

*Please. Please. For Tiqu. For me. Please. I will not let myself be raped here. I won’t!*

Heat and light exploded outwards from her, knocking her assailant backwards and into the air. His body skittered across the floor and his partner shot to his feet.

She didn’t have time to be surprised. She grunted and threw another fireball as the man groaned and tried to climb to his feet, only to watch it shimmer and disappear as it hit an invisible wall. She turned to see the older man with his arms up, the glint of a bracer full of green materia peeking out from beneath his sleeve.

She called up another blaze, but casting like this was sluggish and he was too fast for her. He had his own magical barrier up before her fire spell fully formed. Useless. Blocked again.

*Gaia.* Now they were both advancing on her, fury in their eyes. Aeris trembled.

Aeris heard the words, “What the fuck is going on?” a second before she caught sight of the woman running back into the room. “I heard-”

Then a deafening *crack* shook the room, as though something had hurtled through the building with enough force to break its foundation. Everyone turned to look for the source of the sound. And then
there was black leather and silver hair flying across the room with inhuman speed. The *zing* of steel slicing through the air almost faster than the eye could follow it. The woman’s face frozen in pained horror before she fell forward into a pool of blood. The older man, standing closest to Aeris, crumbled to the ground, stabbed through the heart.

The last one was trying to scramble away, still on hands and knees when Sephiroth turned to face him. Sephiroth slowly walked towards the man, lifted Masamune, and thrust the long blade straight down through the man’s back and deep into the floor. A piercing scream ripped through the air.

“Stay,” Sephiroth drawled.

And then a familiar voice said, “…Shit.”


“Find my daughter,” Sephiroth commanded. “I’ll get Aeris.”

He was behind her in the next moment, sawing through the ropes with a dagger. She was still staring at the man on the ground, impaled by Masamune. Too shocked to fully understand what was happening.

“Is he…still alive?” Aeris squeaked as she tried to rub some feeling back into her wrists.

“For now,” Sephiroth said. He knelt before her to work at the coils around her ankles. “He looks newly scorched. Did you do that?”

“Yeah…” Aeris responded in daze.

Sephiroth smiled. “That’s my girl.”

As the last of the rope fell away from her feet, both Aeris and Sephiroth turned their heads at the sharp wail that pierced the air.

“Tiqi,” Aeris gasped. A moment later, Zack ran back into the room, buster sword strapped to his back, and a screaming, kicking toddler held tightly against his chest.

Tiqi’s face was red and fat tears were falling steadily from her swollen eyes. “Mommy! *Mommy!* Daddy! Mommy!” she screamed, her voice cracking and hoarse, as she reached for Aeris.

Aeris shot to her feet and ran to Zack, nearly falling to the ground when one numb leg refused to move properly. Sephiroth caught her and steadied her with an arm, helped her stand so that she could take Tiqi into her arms. She clutched her daughter and buried her face in Tiqi’s mess of tear-drenched chestnut curls. The weight of her daughter made her back burn, from the spell that had hit her when this whole mess had started, but she pushed the pain away. She wasn’t about to drop Tiqi for anything.


“Zack, take my family outside.”

Zack looked Sephiroth warily for a moment before nodding and motioning Aeris to follow.

“You’re not coming?” she asked.
Sephiroth looked over at the man on the floor, impaled and writhing. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Aeris swallowed, remembering what the man had said about his dead children and how he’d come to be in this place. “Please—”

He cut her off with lips on her mouth. Then broke away and said, “Go.”

She turned and followed Zack out of the room, up the stairs, and out the front door. Into the streets of the Midgar slums. It was dark, but beneath the plate, it was always hard to tell the time.

“How long have I been gone?” she asked Zack. Tiqi was sniffling into her neck and already starting to drift off to sleep, exhausted from having cried so hard for so long.

“Just a few hours, I think.”

“And Tseng? Where is he?”


“I can’t believe…you came after me,” Aeris whispered.

Zack scratched the back of his neck and shrugged again in that achingly familiar way of his. “Well, when I got the call from Sephiroth about you two being missing…I wasn’t going to say no, Aeris.”

His eyes lingered on the collar around her neck, but he didn’t say anything.

“Thank you, Zack.” Her eyes were misty again. “It means a lot. After everything that’s happened.”

He held her gaze, and she could see regret and sorrow reflected in his blue eyes, darkened in the dim lighting. “Hey. No problem. I’m glad you and the munchkin are okay.”

Behind them, the front door of the ramshackle house creaked open, and Sephiroth stepped out, Masamune in hand. Zack straightened out of habit.

“The Turks will be here in a few minutes,” Sephiroth said. “Would you like a ride back up?”

Zack shook his head. “It’s okay. It’s a nice evening for a walk. Could sure use it after all that.”

Sephiroth nodded. “Very well.” As Zack turned to go, he said, “Thank you, Zack. For coming out here tonight.”

Zack’s mouth twisted in a parody of a smile. “You didn’t need me anyways.”

“My opinion hasn’t changed from before,” Sephiroth said. “I need you to keep the peace. Will you consider coming back?”

Zack gave his former commanding officer a considering look before glancing at Aeris and then back to Sephiroth again. “Maybe,” he answered. “We’ll see. See you around.” Then he turned and disappeared into the nearest dark alley, gone as suddenly as he’d come.

Sephiroth watched him go before closing the distance and wrapping his arm around Aeris. “I’m going to burn this place to the ground,” he told her, with a glint of madness in his mako eyes. “Would you like to watch?”

Aeris gave him an odd look. How was she supposed to answer that? “No one else is alive in there right? And…only if you promise you won’t wake the baby.”
Sephiroth chuckled. “I make no promises.”

He extended a gloved hand and the crumbling building burst into flame. Aeris stared in awe at the display of power. Sephiroth’s fire spell was orders of magnitude beyond her own.

Tiqi didn’t wake to the roar of the blaze, or the groans and bangs of crumbling wood and steel. Behind them, their Turk escorts pulled up in their black armored vehicles. If there were residents watching the destruction, they did so from the safety of their darkened homes, too scared to come out and join such an intimidating crowd.

Aeris watched the building burn. She let her unfocused gaze take in the dancing flames as she held Tiqi close and thought about how she’d come to stand in this place, with Sephiroth’s arm around her. Solid and comforting. The soft expression on his face as he watched Tiqi sleep in her arms in the orange light of the fire.

It was bizarre and unsettling, this feeling of safety standing in the embrace of this killer.

And Zack…oh, Zack. Only now, as the adrenaline began to wear off, could she feel a flicker of happiness at having seen him again. It hurt, too, but at least now she knew he was okay. She’d never had the courage to ask Sephiroth about him before.

But mostly, she thought about the accusations that had been hurled at her. *Bitch* and *whore* and *sex slave*. All the vile things the man had said. So many truths. Yet from the mouth of that hateful stranger…

And the one word that haunted her most of all… *complicit*. She was complicit in it all.

She squeezed Tiqi tighter and watched the house burn to ash.

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Aeris lay on her stomach in bed as Sephiroth stroked the bare skin of her back with his fingertips.

“The scar will fade” he said. In the days since her abduction, he’d insisted on having her lie down like this while he cast cure at the jagged scorch mark left behind by the lightening spell that had struck her.

Sephiroth pulled her into a sitting position before reaching over to grab the box he’d dropped on her nightstand. He opened it to reveal a carbon-black cuff edged in gold and delicately embossed with silver. Six gleaming orbs, in four different colors, were embedded into the metal.

“Give me your foot.”

Aeris looked at him in surprise and confusion but extended her right leg anyway. Sephiroth’s warm hand grasped her foot and pulled it into his lap. He opened the bracer and fastened it around her ankle, screwing it shut with two nearly invisible black screws, much like her collar.

“What...?” Aeris wondered, still too stunned to speak properly. Now that the bracer and its materia were against her skin, she could sense the enormous amount of power that now thrummed through her body. She felt lightheaded and almost weak from the weight of such magic, and yet the knowledge of the Lifestream pulsed like a heady drug in her veins.
“It’s a modified Minerva Band,” Sephiroth explained. “The materia in it cannot be removed without destroying the armor. And the band itself cannot be removed without this screwdriver or specialized equipment.”

Aeris couldn’t tear her eyes from the arsenal around her leg. “Well someone could always cut my leg off, right?”

She reached out her senses and focused on the single red orb. Fire. The shadow of a celestial spirit. Life and death and rebirth.

What had he given her? This one orb alone must be priceless.

“I should think you’d be able to kill everyone by the time they figured that out and decided to do it,” Sephiroth said dryly.

“Yeah…” Aeris murmured. She traced the yellow orb with a finger. Dozens of different flavors of magic were contained within. Healing spells, defense magic, elemental powers. Skills learned from the monsters that roamed Gaia. Zack had told her stories acquiring these kinds of abilities during his adventures, but she’d never held such a materia before.

And the others – destructive magic like she’d never sensed before, healing magic more powerful, and more draining, than any simple Restore she’d ever held in her hands. She wasn’t even sure she’d be able to cast these without some training.

She looked back up at him in wonder. That he would give her this…

“You’re not worried that I’d use these on you?” she asked in a daze.

“Hmph,” he smirked. “Come and try.”

She thought about the ease with which he’d set the slum house ablaze.

“This is really going to limit my shoe options,” Aeris said with a small smile.

“Is that such a high price to pay?”

“No, I suppose not.”

Aeris studied him in silence, and Sephiroth seemed content to let the peaceful moment linger. Ever since the incident, she’d been quieter than usual. Deep in thought, even when playing with Tiqi. And now, with this in her possession…

“Sephiroth…did you order the Turks to drop the Sector Seven plate?” she asked quietly.

He leaned back, startled at the question. “Is that what AVALANCHE told you?”

It was answer enough.

“Why?” She needed to know.

“Sacrifices need to be made, sometimes,” he said. “One day you will understand. Everything that I do, I do for our shining future. All the sins of this world, even the ones that I commit for that goal, will be made right. This I promise you, Aeris.”

The way he said that, with such confidence, such certainty, made her shiver. Only madmen talked like that.
“We’ve been together for almost three years.” The words shook her. Three years. “We have a toddler. But I still don’t really know anything about you.”

“What would you like to know?” he asked softly. He pulled her close. Her naked body curled against his clothed one.

Aeris looked down at the beautifully wrought cuff around her ankle and the priceless weapons that were now almost a permanent part of her body. And she knew that this was the moment. That the time had finally come.

She could choose, now, to keep her eyes closed. To keep pretending like all of this was somehow okay. She could choose to accept his gift, his tenderness and vicious protectiveness, and keep telling herself that it would get better. That he cared, and that he could be gentle, and that somehow that was enough.

Or she could own what he had given her. She could remember all those times, years ago, when she’d promised herself that she would be ready when the time came. And just like that, so easily, he’d turned her into a walking arsenal.

She was ready and she couldn’t close her eyes anymore.

Her fingers threaded in the impossibly smooth strands of Sephiroth’s hair and she reached upwards to capture his lips and kiss him deeply. Her tongue slid into his mouth and danced alongside his. She licked at his lower lip and dragged her leg against the length of his thigh. With heavy lidded eyes, she whispered earnestly, “I want to know everything.”

She quickly pulled off his clothes and shucked them to the floor. She wanted him bare beneath her seeking hands. Wanted his hot skin under her hungry mouth. He needed to remember how passionate she could be. What it felt like to have her straddle him and pin his hands to the bed so that she could press open mouthed kisses all over his throat.

He closed his eyes and moaned beneath her. He arched into her touch as she licked and nipped her way down the warm sculpture of his body. When she took him into her mouth, she started slow. Teasing kisses and long strokes of her tongue. And then all the way in, deep down her well-trained throat.

Sephiroth threw his head back and groaned. His hands in her hair twitched. “What is this?” he gasped.

She came up for air and said, “I’m saying thank you.”

She worked him with a vigor like never before. Even when he’d pretended to drug her, it hadn’t been like this.

It was exhilarating. The feeling of magic coursing through her veins. The thrill of each moan she dragged from Sephiroth’s lips.

It was like she’d been asleep for years, floating through each day in the haze of maternal duty. In the fog of her helplessness. She’d forgotten so much in these years. Forgotten who she was. Who she could be. She’d let him, and then their daughter, erase her.

But since the incident…those vile words that were nothing more than the truth had been an ice cold shower for her mind. Thank the goddess for cruel blessings. Now her vision was clear. Aeris was finally awake again, and she could see the path forward.
And she could not – would not – let her daughter grow up in a ‘family’ like this. With a father like this.

So it was with that newfound sense of purpose that she prepared Sephiroth before climbing back on top of him and letting herself sink slowly onto his hard cock. She rode him in all the ways he liked, as best as she could. Her body was still not what it once had been. Neither as limber nor as strong. But she bent backwards and gyrated against him anyway. Squeezed him tight with her muscles and watched as his eyes clenched shut. Listened to the sharp intakes of his breath. She leaned forward and rode him hard and fast, not caring in the least that it brought her no pleasure.

When he began to near the edge, she moved faster, scrunching the sheets with her fists and pulsing tightly around him as if to milk him of every last drop of seed.

They lay together in the aftermath and she curled against him as their breathing returned to normal. When her heart rate finally slowed, she asked quietly, “Did you ever find that temple you were looking for?”

“No,” he murmured contentedly into her hair.

“That’s a shame,” she said idly. “Wasn’t it going to fix the mako energy problem?”

A noncommittal mumble was his only answer.

She propped herself up on an arm to look down at him. Yes, now was the time. Here, like this, with Sephiroth looking up at her, relaxed and unguarded like never before. No more living like a sleepwalker.

“Take me to that observatory you found all those years ago. You and I… we can find your temple together.”

Whatever ancient power Sephiroth sought, Aeris was certain that it would respond to her over him. She could figure out a way to use it against him. She could find a way to break free.

“Let me help you build that future,” she said. Unseen, she stroked the smooth edge of the Minerva Band with her toe.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re curious, Aeris is now carrying: Enemy skill, Comet, Phoenix, Ultima linked with MP absorb, Full cure. Sephiroth does not fuck around. Non-fandom readers, don’t worry. The details of what magic she’s packing are not important to the story.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Canon’s take on Scarlet’s character is a flaming pile of misogynistic garbage. I am throwing it out the window and writing her the way I want.

Chapter 17

It took some convincing to get Sephiroth to agree.

How would they find the temple when all efforts had failed so far? She wasn’t entirely sure, but she reasoned they could tap into the energy signatures of the planet and trace the Ancients’ path from there. In the same way ‘their’ ancestors had located natural mako wells in times long gone. Perhaps if they worked together and linked their energies, they would be strong enough to find the way. Aeris barely knew what she was saying, but it all sounded appropriately mystical and reverent, and Sephiroth had nodded thoughtfully at the idea.

What about Tiqi? That was easy, she’d come with them of course. She could travel in a sling on Aeris’s back when necessary.

Sephiroth had been immensely skeptical, but Aeris would have none of it. “You chose me because I’m the last Cetra,” she’d reminded him. “Our people were nomads. I was born for this.”

He’d shaken his head, amused at her audacity and still unconvinced. “You wouldn’t last a day,” he’d said.

“So train me,” she’d countered.

So he did.

It took months of preparation before they could set out.

There were logistics like getting Tiqi out of diapers. And the sheer amount of time needed to get Aeris into fighting condition. Sephiroth had her registered as a new member of the Turks, reporting directly to Tseng. And a few eyebrows might have been raised within the division when the rumors started circulating, but they all knew better than to ask too many questions.
Tseng had been reticent about what happened to him during and after the incident with AVALANCHE. He’d cleared his throat, rubbed absently at the space beneath his right clavicle and said, “I’m still here.” He’d avoided meeting Aeris’s eyes, and she’d wondered if Sephiroth had done something to him as punishment for letting his family get kidnapped.

Turk conditioning and combat training was grueling, and made especially difficult since Aeris’s core strength was so diminished. What pregnancy and motherhood had taken from her was hard to earn back, but not impossible. She did more pushups each day now than she’d done in her entire life prior. Reno and Elena took turns training her, mostly in defense and evasion. Elmyra stepped in and spent more time babysitting, even though she was none too pleased about the prospect of her granddaughter being taken from her to go traipsing in the wilderness for who knew how long.

Aeris would go home most days, exhausted and strangely happy, eager to see her daughter and play endless tickle games with her.

Then one Saturday morning, Tseng drove her to a facility on the outskirts of Sector 8. After clearing multiple security checkpoints, they walked down endless hallways lined with identical wire glass windows and unmarked doors. Finally they stopped at a set of double doors labelled **Networked Munitions Testing**.

Aeris looked at Tseng in confusion and he shrugged. “Scarlet asked us to meet here.” He swiped his badge and opened the door for her. “After you.”

The room inside was filled with automata. Cameras and robotic arms were everywhere. Tangled black cables ran all along the edges of the room and across all the desks, many of which sported computers and laptops that displayed various technical specs, blueprints, or test videos. The back half of the enormous room was an empty testing chamber walled off with thick glass. To the left were rows upon rows of machine guns, broadswords, and three staves that looked out of place, as though they’d only been brought here for this particular meeting.

A woman stepped out from where she’d been crouched behind a giant robotic leg mounted to a steel support frame overhead. She looked to be in her mid-forties, though something about her made Aeris suspect she could be older and just took really good care of herself. Her blonde hair was pulled back and pinned into a bun and she was wearing a casual green shirt and fitted jeans. She pulled the goggles from her face as she approached them.

“So this is the girl,” Scarlet said. “Huh. Not what I expected.”

That statement, and the way Scarlet’s sharp blue eyes razed her body and seemed to find it wanting, set Aeris’s teeth on edge. “Hi?” she replied.

Scarlet flicked her eyes towards Tseng. “You can wait outside.” When he seemed to hesitate, she said with a raised eyebrow, “You don’t trust me with Sephiroth’s plaything?” She gave a strange laugh that sounded like *kyaa haa hah*. “Sorry, darling, but custom weapon making is strictly a one-on-one activity.”

Tseng straightened his tie uncomfortably and looked like he was making an effort to not roll his eyes. “Very well, Scarlet. Aeris, please scream if she does anything…odd.”

Scarlet laughed again as she watched Tseng retreat while Aeris looked on in confusion.

“I’m not his plaything,” Aeris tried to protest after the door clicked shut.

“Oh please,” Scarlet scoffed. “There’s no need to pretend with me. Giving birth to his kid doesn’t
nullify my statement.” She walked over to the weapons cache and picked up an iridescent staff.

“How do you know so much about him? And us?” Aeris was genuinely curious. She couldn’t quite keep the suspicion out of her voice.

Scarlet shot her a sly, sidelong look. “I’ve known that man for almost as long as you’ve been alive, kid.”

There was something about the way that she’d said that. Aeris’s mouth worked soundlessly for a second, trying to find a suitable retort, but then Scarlet gave that horrible laugh again and said, “Don’t worry, buttercup. I’m not sleeping with your man. Sephiroth may still be nice to look at, but he’s a bit old for my liking. I prefer my boy toys younger, dumber, and with more free time.”

At Aeris’s shocked expression, Scarlet rolled her eyes. “If you were a man, you’d understand instantly.” She handed Aeris the staff and gestured towards the testing chamber.

“You…aren’t what I’d imagined from the times Zack mentioned you,” Aeris said slowly. Scarlet stepped back to give her some room and Aeris gave the staff a few experimental twirls. Her technique was still shoddy. She’d only gotten a bit of self-defense training from Zack years ago and hadn’t practiced too much yet with Turk-issued training equipment.

“Well, Zack’s only seen me around HQ. And it isn’t easy making it in a man’s world.” Scarlet’s lips twisted into a bitter smile. “I had to claw my way up that ladder under Old Man Shinra.”

Scarlet left the room to retrieve the next staff. This one had a solid metal core that flared outwards at the head into three curved prongs that framed a red crystal. She handed the new staff to Aeris and took back the other one.

“How’s the Minerva Band?” Scarlet asked.

Aeris caught her staff in mid-swing and looked at Scarlet in surprise. “It’s great,” she answered. “Did you…were you the one that made it?”

A self-satisfied smile crept across Scarlet’s face. “Who else would Sephiroth trust to engineer that thing? It’s a work of art, if I do say so myself. You must be a very special toy.”

Aeris’s face flamed. She turned away from Scarlet and continued testing the heft and balance of the staff in her hands. When they switched to the third staff, this one crowned with an aquamarine orb surrounded by an iridescent metal halo, Aeris asked, “Do you normally work weekends?”

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“Often,” Scarlet responded. “It’s the only time I have to tinker. I have to spend office hours fighting with Reeve over budgets and dealing with idiots. Can’t complain too much though. My budget doubled ever since Sephiroth took over and shut down SOLDIER and BioEng.”

Aeris had known about the discontinuation of the SOLDIER program, of course. Zack had whined to her about it plenty the year it had happened. But she had only guessed at the latter since the Turks had stopped surveilling her all those years ago. Good, she thought viciously. Hojo’s department had been nothing but one cruel ethical violation after another.

They spent the next few minutes talking about the weight and length of the various staves. Which one felt more natural in Aeris’s hands. Then Scarlet slipped a few materia into the slots of the last staff, gestured at the far wall, and told Aeris to have at it.

Aeris would be lying if she said it wasn’t fun to blast elemental magic from the end of a real weapon.
“For some reason I always thought your department just built silly giant robots,” Aeris confessed as they switched over to the next staff.

“Ugh. I bet you heard that from Zack.” Scarlet brushed her bangs back from her face. “SOLDIERs are such meatheads. No vision at all, and no appreciation for scientific advancement. All they want to do is swing their swords. The tech isn’t perfect yet, I can admit that. But it’s getting better every day. Unmanned combat is the future, believe me. And whoever’s paying my bills is going to own that future.”

Aeris cringed. She could see why Sephiroth was friends with this woman.

“And, it’s amazing how so few people get this,” Scarlet continued. “But my department was the only weapons department under Shinra. Same thing with Sephiroth’s rule. Where do SOLDIERs think all their fancy swords come from?”

Aeris let the arc of electricity crackle and fizzle before turning back to Scarlet, suddenly struck with a thought. “Did you make the Masamune?”

“Sure did.”

“…Wow.”

Scarlet scoffed. “It’s just a really long sword. Where did you think it came from?”

“Wutai…?” Aeris confessed. She felt silly saying it now, but that had been the common assumption on the streets. Masamune was, essentially, an odachi after all.

“Right,” Scarlet drawled, “because Shinra found a traditional Wutain sword smith to forge their enemies a custom sword in the middle of a war. And by the way,” she added, “It’s insulting how many people think Sephiroth pulled that ridiculous thing out of a mako well or something.”

“Then…how did you make it?” Aeris asked.

“Honestly, kid. Masamune’s not some mystical holy relic. It’s literally just a really long sword. The magic is in Sephiroth’s strength and his ability to handle such a big weapon. I just experimented with different designs until we found the sweet spot. And then some big, hot machines and a bunch of burly guys with hammers did the rest.”

“Oh,” Aeris replied thoughtfully. “And you engineer staves too?”

Scarlet shrugged. “The basics are easy. It’s just a big stick. And the way we supercharge them for spell enhancement…well, it’s not too different from wiring a robot. Instead of cables, we use mako channels. Instead of EMG signal magnification, we have mako-mediated magic amplification.”

“…Wow,” Aeris said again, not having understood a word of that. She handed the last staff back to Scarlet, her tests concluded.

Scarlet snorted. “Don’t let any of those pigs tell you that I slept my way to this position.”

Weeks went by before Aeris saw Scarlet again in Midgar Tower. After the end of the day’s training,
Tseng escorted her to Scarlet’s office on the 69th floor. The corner suite was modern and functional, with a sleek slate-colored desk and a minimalist design. Three monitors and a separate laptop partially hid Scarlet from view.

It was a shock to see how stunning the older woman looked. She was wearing a black blazer over a red satin blouse with a plunging neckline that flaunted her ample décolletage. A tight black pencil skirt showed off the curves of her hips. Expensive-looking black leather pumps, artfully pinned back blonde hair, and expertly applied make up completed the look.

*So this is what a man-eating executive looks like,* Aeris thought. There was probably a lot she could learn from someone like Scarlet.

Scarlet walked to the back corner of the room and picked up the staff that was propped against the wall. She held it out for Aeris to take.

The cold, silver pole fit perfectly into Aeris’s hands, and the moment her fingers wrapped around it, she felt the weapon pulsate. A large azure crystal formed the head of the shaft, protectively surrounded by four golden prongs.

“Load her up,” Scarlet suggested. She crossed her arms and sat back against the edge of her desk with a smug smile.

Aeris reached into her pocket and retrieved her restore and fire materia, carefully placing them into two of the weapon’s four slots. She couldn’t help but grin at the feeling of power running all along the length of the weapon shaft. The staff seemed to pull at her life energy and draw it upwards to the materia, then further up into the translucent crystal that now glowed faintly.

“This is amazing,” Aeris breathed. “Thank you.”

“Of course it is.” Scarlet tilted her chin up arrogantly. “I made it. I gave you a fifty eight facet apatite crystal for maximum power amplification before discharge. Hollow titanium body for the perfect balance between weight and strength. I wouldn’t recommend beating a Grand Horn to death with it, but you probably could if you had to. Now run along before you get too excited and blow up my office.”

As Aeris turned to leave with a disdainful-looking Tseng at her side, Scarlet said, “Oh, and one more thing. Don’t get my bankroller killed out there.”

Aeris looked at Scarlet in disbelief and shoved her hope and guilt deep down. “And how would I do that, exactly?”

Scarlet just cocked an eyebrow at her. “Didn’t the boys teach you? Woman is always the downfall of man.”

At first it didn’t bother Aeris when the weeks went by without another period. It had only been a few months since her cycle had come back, and her body hadn’t figured out its new rhythm yet. But when one month turned into two, a feeling of dread started to build in her throat.

She couldn’t risk buying a pregnancy test at the Midgar Tower drug store. If Sephiroth found out, he
could well change his mind about letting her out of the city. So before two months turned into three
she insisted that she was ready to go. Tiqi was out of diapers and willing to sit in a sling on Aeris’s
back. She could cast all her spells, even the ones that drained most of her energy with a single shot.
She probably couldn’t hike a whole day carrying Tiqi, but the energetic toddler would never stand to
be trapped in a sling that long anyway.

They flew out of Midgar by helicopter, stopping at Junon to refuel. Tseng and Elena dropped them
off. Sephiroth carried flares in a pack, along with other basic necessities. When they were ready to be
fetched, the Turks would find and retrieve them from the jungle.

The drop point was an enormous ruined site. Trees and vines had overtaken the place, but it was
clear that the main building was a cylindrical stone structure perched atop a sprawling support base.
Only a few observation windows in the roof of the structure were still intact. Crumbling limestone
stairs covered in moss led up to the observatory.

“Ready?” Sephiroth asked.

Aeris looked at him pointedly. “I think you’re going to have to carry Tiqi.”

The child was standing by Aeris’s legs, holding onto her mother’s hand and pointing at Masamune.
The oversized sword was held loosely in Sephiroth’s hand and glinted brightly in the sunlight.
“Scary!” Tiqi exclaimed.

“That’s right, baby,” Aeris said, “That’s a very scary sword. Don’t touch it, okay?”

“Scary,” Tiqi said again, nodding.

Sephiroth smirked and knelt down with his right arm extended. “Come here, Tiqi.”

Tiqi obediently walked to her father and then giggled as his arm closed around her small body and
drew her close. Then Sephiroth launched himself upwards and bounded up the treacherous stairs in
four graceful leaps.

“Show off,” Aeris muttered under her breath. She slung her staff across her back and carefully made
her way up the steps, using her hands to steady herself when she slipped.

When Aeris reached the top, Tiqi ran over and held her hand while Sephiroth cleared the doorway of
vines with Masamune. The three of them walked into the observatory together.

Moss covered every inch of stone inside the huge, circular room and a moist, earthy scent permeated
the air. Aeris looked up to study the stonework of the broken, vaulted roof and hoped that nothing
came loose on top of their heads. With a happy noise, Tiqi let go of her hand to explore the
surroundings, toeing rocks and poking at tufts of moss. It made Aeris smile to see her daughter free
from the rules and boundaries of the city. She exchanged a quick glance with Sephiroth, and he
nodded slightly to say that he would keep an eye on the kid.

Aeris walked to the nearest observation window and took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she tried
to shut out the sounds of Tiqi’s chattering. She placed her palm against the cool, moss-covered stones
and tried to concentrate. The lingering vibrations of ancient magic pricked at her palms and
fingertips. Awe and fear, devotion…the same emotions that she’d sensed in the mining village.

What were you doing here? Aeris wondered of her ancestors. Why did you build this place?

Small, soft fingers brushed against her own and Aeris opened her eyes to see Tiqi sitting on the
window ledge, held securely by Sephiroth’s arm around her body.
“Mommy?” Tiqi asked, looking at Aeris with wide brown eyes.

Sephiroth’s free hand came up, gloveless, to cover both of their much smaller ones.

“What do you feel?” he asked.

Aeris shivered. He still had this effect on her when he stood close like this, even after all this time. He took up so much space. She looked around, wondering where he’d left Masamune and saw it propped against the wall a few feet away.

“I’m not sure,” she answered, closing her eyes again and trying to concentrate. “This place was definitely important to the Cetra. I feel like…their spirits are trying to tell me something. But I can’t make it out.” She thought for a moment before saying, “Let’s spend the night here. This place was built to study the stars, wasn’t it? Maybe they will tell us something.”

Sephiroth readily agreed. They made camp inside the observatory after kicking stones out of the way to make room for their mats. The hours passed quickly, with Tiqi happily exploring every nook and cranny under Aeris’s supervision while Sephiroth patrolled the perimeter. They’d brought emergency rations, of course, but Aeris wasn’t surprised to see him return with what looked like the carcass of a large, predatory bird in tow. They didn’t know how long their journey would last, after all.

He ordered her to gather firewood and clean and prepare the carcass.

“I’m happy to get the wood,” she said. “But…I don’t know the first thing about plucking a bird.”

“Neither do I,” Sephiroth replied unabashedly. “You will have to learn.”

Aeris rolled her eyes. “I guess this wasn’t part of your SOLDIER training, huh?”

“That’s correct. SOLDIERs are usually sent on short extermination or investigation missions. And SOLDIERs in a war are always supplied with army rations. We do not hunt for our food.”

She sighed and reluctantly agreed to get to work. If he’d already gone to the trouble of doing the hunting, she supposed it wasn’t too much to ask that she do the rest. Not that she really had a choice in the matter.

At first she tried her best to pluck the bird, grabbing fistfuls of feathers and yanking them out with all her might. But it was slow and exhausting work, and eventually she pulled out the blade tucked into her brown leather boots and started to skin the thing. It was disgusting, and a bit wasteful, but efficient.

She saved the two long red tail feathers for Tiqi, much to the tike’s delight.

When the sun went down, Aeris curled up with Tiqi on their mat and laid there until her daughter was fast asleep. She carefully slipped her arm out from beneath Tiqi’s head and rolled away, then walked over to where Sephiroth stood by one of the windows. Countless stars glittered overhead. It was nothing like Midgar’s light-polluted sky. She pressed her fingers to the stone of the window opening at Sephiroth’s nod and closed her eyes, reaching out with her senses for…anything.

“What do you feel?”

Aeris frowned. “I don’t know.” A tingle in her fingertips perhaps. A pull upwards to look above the horizon. She opened her eyes and gazed out into the night. Hundreds of constellations probably hung in the sky, but she didn’t know how to read them. Didn’t know the first thing about star navigation.
One star burned brightest of all, directly ahead.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing at the white ball of light.

Sephiroth stepped behind her. Too close. She could feel the warmth of his body at her back. “Hesperus,” he said. “The evening star.”

*Evening star*…a memory stirred. “Seems important.”

His fingers were tracing the space behind her ear, down the line of her throat to the edge of her collar. She swallowed and tried to shake him off. “What else do you know about that star?” she asked.

She could hear the faint smile in his voice. “The Ancients wrote a lot of lore about it. The evening star and morning star are one and the same. A constant cycle. One star rises and sets, and then the other is born.”

“Life and death…” Aeris whispered, looking up at the sky thoughtfully. “Resurrection and rebirth…” What was it that Sephiroth had said to her all those years ago in the ruins of the ancient village? That he was looking for hope…and the future?

“Perhaps,” Sephiroth pointed up at the few windows that remained partially intact in the crumbled ceiling overhead, “these were used to track its trajectory.” He gestured with his arm, tracing an arc in the air.

“You think so?” Aeris turned to look at him.

He nodded. “I do.”

Something stirred in Aeris’s chest. It pulled her back to the tapestry of the sky. She could almost see the evening star travelling along the curve that Sephiroth had drawn, silver thread against the inky black night.

“I think we should go that way.” Aeris pointed. West. “I don’t know why…I just…sense something.”

“Follow the evening star? Very well. We will set out in the morning.”

Aeris blinked. That had been a lot easier than she’d expected.

“Unless you’re uncertain?” Sephiroth asked with a raised eyebrow.

She shook her head. “No. No, I’m certain.” Certain enough, anyway. Though she had a vague, unsettled feeling somewhere low in her stomach.

The evening star. Life, prime, and death. What had her ancestors been thinking when they had followed its path? She wondered what they would really find at the end of their pilgrimage.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Sephiroth stepping forward, closing the distance between them. She instinctively stepped back. His hand was on her chin, tilting her face up, and his lips were soft against her mouth. He let her go and she stumbled backwards again to escape him. She bumped against hard stone. His eyes glowed so bright in the darkness, tinting his eyelashes green.

“The night is young. Take off your clothes.”

A shiver ran through her.
“Here?” she asked, incredulous. “It’s cold, and Tiqi’s right there.” Her eyes slid over to where their daughter slept a few feet away.

Sephiroth leered at her and slid one hand into her hair, close to the scalp. He tugged gently but firmly, forcing her head to tilt back and to the side, exposing her throat to him. Heat pulsed between her legs in response. It was like he’d pulled on a leash and flooded her body with a sharp wave of sensation. It made her vision blur.

“I will keep you warm. And if Tiqi wakes, you may go to her.”

Aeris stifled her moan by biting down on her lower lip.

“What are you?” he asked, his mouth only inches from her own. His fingers stroked the side of her breast overtop of the thin fabric of her shirt.

“I’m your slave,” she gasped.

He stepped back to give her space and looked at her expectantly. It made her miss the heat of his body. It really was chilly in the jungle at night.

He waited for her to obey him. So she did, sighing as she stripped off her clothes without finesse. It was nothing he hadn’t seen a hundred times before.

Tiqi didn’t wake. Sephiroth didn’t bother to take his clothes off. He fucked her against the wall and she clung to him with her legs wrapped tightly around his waist and her arms around his neck. She bit down into the corded muscles of his shoulder. It helped her stay silent as he thrust hard against that spot deep inside that sent waves of pleasure coursing through her body.

And over and over again, she told him, *I’m your slave, I’m your slave,* as he drove himself to completion. Because that’s what he wanted to hear. Because he would allow for nothing else.

But when he came inside her, his seed hot and slick, his breath ragged in her ear, she thought, *soon, soon. Soon I will be free. I swear it.*

. . . . . . . . .

They made their way slowly through the endless jungle, tracking continuously southwest. Sephiroth seemed content to let Aeris lead the way, though he silently studied the atlas of the night sky after every sunset.

Tiqi walked, for the most part. Sometimes her father carried her. Aeris had never seen her daughter so happy.

Aeris learned to field dress and cook all manner of wild game. Including one time Sephiroth had brought her several horrifyingly tall mushroom creatures with eight rows of pointy teeth.

“Are you sure this isn’t poisonous?” she’d asked.

“I purged it of anything toxic,” he’d said, gesturing at the materia in his bracer.

She’d been convinced he was testing her, and instead of demanding that he bring her something more…*normal,* she’d just wrinkled her nose and gotten down to the messy business of carving out
the vicious maws. It was a delight to find that the strange fungi-like creatures were actually deliciously firm and nutty in flavor. They became almost a regular part of their nomadic diet.

For the most part, when they encountered monsters on their journey, which was at least half a dozen times each day, Sephiroth hung back with Tiqi and watched as Aeris fought them singlehandedly.

“Um, a little help?” she’d yelled the first time, after taking two consecutive stings from the wasp-like creatures that had all but surrounded her. She’d swayed dizzily as poison flooded her system.

“What doesn’t kill you will only make you stronger,” he’d called to Aeris. “Did you not ask me to train you?” Then he’d mused to Tiqi, “Though perhaps I should have given your mother a ribbon before we left Midgar.”

From the safety of her father’s arms, the toddler had nodded and said solemnly, “Riiih-bun.” And then, pointing at the creatures, “Daddy? What’s dat?”

“Those are Slaps,” he’d responded. And he’d proceeded to lecture Tiqi on the characteristics and abilities of the horrible little fiends while Aeris struggled to throw up a barrier spell before flash-frying the whole lot of them with Ultima. It had been overkill, perhaps, but it had been worth it. Those stingers had hurt.

“I asked you to train me before we left Midgar,” Aeris had huffed angrily after catching her breath and casting White Wind to purify her body of poison. Anxiety had bubbled in her belly. The healing magic wouldn’t hurt her unborn child, but she wasn’t so sure about the poison. And she couldn’t bring it up with Sephiroth.

“Experience is the best teacher,” he’d said, before dropping Tiqi to her feet and walking onwards.

They made camp each night beneath the stars and the tree canopies. Aeris’s long hair steadily became a knotted, greasy mess, but Sephiroth’s remained as smooth and immaculate as always. She wondered how he did that. The Silver Elite used to gossip about whole bottles of shampoo and conditioner used each day, but he obviously wasn’t carrying anything so frivolous in their small pack of supplies.

On the nights that he demanded her submission, she did so reluctantly, blushing with embarrassment at how dirty she was, especially compared to him. But he never said anything to humiliate her. Just used her quietly in the flickering yellow light of the campfire. She started to suspect that he wanted her pregnant again.

If only he knew. What would he do then?

And finally, one day, they found it. They’d followed Aeris’s lead the whole time, and as they’d gotten closer, the phantom feeling that she was retracing her people’s footsteps had grown steadily stronger.

The ziggurat loomed ahead of them, partially hidden behind a thicket of overgrown trees. Its treacherous looking staircase led up several stories to a single arched doorway.

“We’re here.”
The temple was deathly silent, except for Tiqi’s insuppressible chatter. A thick layer of dirt and debris covered the roughly hewn stones, as though no one had stepped foot in the musty interior for thousands of years.

“This is the Temple of the Ancients,” Aeris said in awe. “I can feel it…all their knowledge…floating here…”

They walked down the long, narrow corridor. It was dark inside, with only a few rays of sickly daylight coming in from the entrance.

Aeris’s fingers brushed against the limestone walls as she walked. She could sense the spirits of her ancestors. “You’re…happy to see me? But scared? Why?”

Sephiroth looked at her from the corner of his eye but said nothing.

At the end of the hallway was an altar carved from a single slab of stone. In the center of the altar was a hole about the size of her palm, shaped like an angular hour glass lying on its side.

“Mommy, what’s dat?” Tiqi asked, pointing to the altar.

“I don’t know, baby…” Aeris replied. “A keyhole, maybe?”

Sephiroth reached into his coat and pulled something out. He held a flat stone in the shape of the keyhole in his gloved fingers. It looked like it was made from the same material as the altar, except it gleamed with fine green rivulets of petrified mako.

“I take it that’s the key?” Aeris asked.

Sephiroth nodded.

“Is it a rune?” she asked on a hunch.


Aeris shivered. She watched Sephiroth place the keystone into the altar. As soon as his fingers left the surface of the rock, the mako in the stone began to glow, steadily building into a blinding green light. She squinted and looked away from the source and covered Tiqi’s eyes with her hand.

The temple quaked around them and she felt the ground jerk beneath her feet. Tiqi started crying. They were descending. The rocks and whatever else the place was built out of thundered all around them as the floor lowered itself into the belly of the temple. Aeris bent to comfort Tiqi, holding her daughter close and whispering reassurances in her ear.

When the dust and the floor settled, they found themselves in another long corridor, lit by torches embedded every few feet along the stone walls. Aeris looked around in wonder at the intricate mural that was painted all across the walls. The flickering of the flames made the primitive images of her people seem almost alive with motion.

“What is this place?” she wondered aloud.

Sephiroth walked ahead while Aeris continued to stare at the larger than life images. Tiqi was gripping her hand and thigh and sniffing quietly.

The first painting showed two priests with ceremonial staves held in hand, flanking a ziggurat that bore a faded diamond symbol in its center. The next, a gathering of people beneath the moon. Then,
the priests again, this time flanking an altar with the diamond symbol on top of it.

Aeris walked further down the corridor, keeping a firm grip on her staff and Tiqi’s small hand.

The next images sent a tremor down her spine. In one, a priest held the diamond aloft and a large circular object was depicted hurtling towards the group gathered around him. And then…flames. Fire engulfed all the people portrayed. Aeris couldn’t tell if they were dancing or trying to flee.

They caught up to Sephiroth who stood in front of another stone altar at the end of the passage. He looked at Aeris as she stepped forward to stand behind him. She let her eyes flick over the crudely chiseled stone and the translucent image of a pyramid that somehow floated above the altar’s surface. She carefully rested her staff against the altar’s edge and then turned to pick Tiqi up and balance her on a hip.

“What’s dat?” Tiqi asked, pointing first at the hologram and then the engravings that ran along the edges of the large stone slab.

“I don’t know,” Aeris murmured. She traced her fingers along the dusty runes and felt electricity run up her arm and into her core. Her ancestors were speaking to her. She could hear…

“Black….materia…?”

Her eyes were closed. She didn’t see Sephiroth step behind her or lift his arm to gently run a knuckle along the back of her neck.

“That’s it,” he whispered. His deep baritone seemed to melt into the echoes of the ghosts that called to her, their voices like silk against her skin. “That is the knowledge. With it, I will become one with the Planet.”

One with the Planet? What did that mean?

“Where is the black materia?” Sephiroth asked, his voice hypnotic.

The question seemed to reverberate through her very soul. Without conscious thought, she asked it in turn to the spirits. Something in her hungered to know. She could almost taste the power that was within reach, that seemed to surround them in all directions.

“The temple,” she said, with eyes still closed. “The temple itself is the black materia.”

Sephiroth’s hand was soft against the nape of her neck, beneath her collar. “I see,” he whispered. “Then how can it be used? Remember Aeris,” he whispered, “this is the path to our shining future.”

There was something deeply wrong in that statement. But somehow she couldn’t bring herself to stop and think about it further. Curiosity drove her forward. She wanted to know. Needed to know everything there was to know about this mystical place that had been built by her people.

And they told her.

“The hologram is a puzzle,” she said out loud. “Each time you solve it the temple shrinks. Until it’s small enough to fit into your hand.” She opened her eyes. That meant it would kill whoever was inside.

The price of power was steep.

“Hmm. Well done.”
Aeris dazedly turned to face Sephiroth. Dark energy seemed to be rolling off him in waves.

Tiqi started to cry, her high-pitched wails echoing off the bare stone walls. Her daughter’s fear was like a slap in the face. Aeris shook herself and refocused her gaze. Sephiroth’s eyes were glowing brighter than before. She felt a leaden lump settle into her stomach.

“What did you mean earlier, when you said you’d become one with the Planet?”

Sephiroth’s lips curled into a chilling smile. He chuckled darkly. “It’s simple,” he said. “When the Planet is injured it gathers spirit energy to heal itself. The ultimate destructive magic – Meteor” he gestured at the murals, “– will create a wound that threatens the very life of the Planet. I will be at the center of the injury and merge with the Planet’s life energy.”

Aeris was reaching for her staff before he’d even finished speaking, but Sephiroth was faster. He knocked the weapon away from her with a casual swipe of his arm. Aeris stared at him in horror and a memory flashed from so long ago when this nightmare had first started. When he’d told her that he was not a god yet. It slowed her down. Cost her precious seconds that could have been used to cast something from her bracer.

She tried anyway. She willed Ultima to flare to life.

Too slow.

Magic sizzled through the air and a sleep spell engulfed her and sapped all the energy from her limbs. She could hear Tiqi screaming but she sounded so far away. Aeris fought the downwards pull of her heavy eyelids but it was a fight she couldn’t win.

The last thing she heard before the world went dark was Sephiroth’s promise.

“I will be reborn as a god. And we will rule over my new world.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18

Aeris’s eyes snapped open and only her finely tuned mom instincts prevented her from bolting upright. Tiqi was tucked under the crook of her arm and they were lying in her bed back at Midgar.

She looked towards the window. Pale grey-blue light that seeped in around the edges of the curtains. Dawn? It had been late afternoon when they’d climbed the temple steps. Had she been asleep for the last twelve hours? Where was Sephiroth? She had to find him.

Heart pounding, she carefully extricated herself from the sleeping toddler, breathing a sigh of relief when Tiqi did little more than twitch and whine a bit before settling back into deep sleep. Without wasting another minute, she tiptoed out the door and into the hallway, pausing only to grab hold of her staff that was propped up in the corner of the room.

The apartment was silent except for the barely audible background hum of electricity. The kitchen and living areas all looked exactly as she’d left them a month ago.

She didn’t have time to think about what she was doing. Her feet carried her straight to Sephiroth’s quarters. His words reverberated in her head.

*Meteor. Wound. I will be reborn as a god.*

She barely saw the carved wooden door in front of her. Had to blink away the images of fire and brimstone and the vision of her ancestors, running in terror or dancing in rapture, she still didn’t know. But more and more, she thought it the latter.

The door was locked, as always. She knocked. No response.

How could she have let this happen? She’d always known Sephiroth was mad under that carefully constructed façade. And now she’d handed him the key to all his plans. All these years he’d been searching for this temple, and she’d led him straight there and given him all its secrets.

He was supposed to have been looking for an energy source. The Promised Land.

*He didn’t lie to you,* a treacherous little voice whispered inside her head. Now he would *have* the Promised Land. He would consume it.

Gaia, *why* had her people created such a thing?

Between her clavicles, the white materia burned cold.

She raised her staff at the ready and pointed it straight at the door. She couldn’t afford to be afraid anymore. She had to stop him. There would be nothing left to lose if she didn’t.
Power surged from her hands and through the staff, blasting a bolt spell out of the apatite crystal. The wood splintered and flew apart with a loud bang. The smell of ash filled her nostrils. She waved the debris away and strode through the jagged opening.

The room beyond was…almost barren. The space was as enormous as everything else in the penthouse, but instead of the usual luxuriously modern trappings, there was only a bed covered in white linens, a desk, and a chair. The walls were bare. The room looked untouched.

She could see three other doors, two on the left and one on the right. She went right. The door led to a walk-in closet the size of a bedroom and built like a high-end retail store. Most of the shelves and rods were empty. Only a handful of basics could be seen, formal and casual wear alike.

All these years. She’d been living with a lunatic.


She crossed the bedroom again and opened the first door on the left. It led to a lavish ensuite bathroom. Sunken marble tub. Separate glass-enclosed shower. Huge double vanity. No signs of life except for the soap in the shower, the toothbrush and toothpaste on the counter, and a single hand towel.

One last door then.

When she opened it, she nearly screamed.

The room beyond held a grotesque humanoid female thing that floated inside a tall, cylindrical specimen tank. The room was dimly lit by sickly blue light. A mako-powered generator whirred at the back of the room, and the water filtration system gurgled away quietly.

The creature had what was once a beautiful human face with long silver hair, and a woman’s torso without arms. Shriveled, veiny scar tissue covered every inch of its skin and gnarled red tentacles sprawled out from its back. Three bulging, malformed eyeballs were on its torso. A thick rubber hose was embedded in its abdomen. It led to a sealed valve at the back of the glass chamber.

On the creature’s head was a metal helmet.

And it read JENOVA.

Oh Gaia.

My mother’s name is Jenova, he’d said.

And now she remembered. What Ifalna had told her all those decades ago. Almost like a story meant to frighten a child into submission. But her mother had never used it that way. Had only ever told Aeris the stories as history lessons to carry forward for future generations.

How could she have forgotten?

This was the Calamity from the Skies. The alien creature that had made Planetfall thousands of years ago. A virus that had nearly wiped out her people and devoured the Planet’s life force.

It was her father’s gravest mistake. Gast had been the one to misidentify the abomination as a Cetra, all those years ago before he’d met Ifalna.

And this was Sephiroth’s mother?
Oh Gaia. Hojo, what did you do?

Aeris felt sick.

Sephiroth was Calamity’s son.

And now he was finishing what his ‘mother’ had started. He would call Meteor down and ravage the Planet.

She fought down the urge to wretch. She could deal with her feelings later. Right now, she had to act. Had to deal with what was in front of her. There was only one thing to do.

She had to fix her father’s mistakes.

She raised her staff and summoned another bolt of lightning. The sound of the glass exploding was deafening. Mako-tainted water splashed onto her clothes and flooded the floor.

The creature slid to the bottom of its holding tank and lay sprawled face down.

With every ounce of power she possessed, Aeris threw a fireball at the monstrous thing. She turned her face away from the blinding flash of light and instinctively brought her hands up in defense. She saw red behind her closed eyelids. The building seemed to shake with the force of the explosion. Heat seared at her cheeks, and when she opened her eyes again, the whole room was ablaze.

Shit! Shit! Letting herself get carried away like that had been downright stupid. She didn’t want to burn the whole building to the ground! She blasted ice around the perimeter of the room to quell the flames, then sent another stream of fire at her target. Thick black smoke filled the room, stinging her eyes and scratching the inside of her throat.

Somewhere in the apartment, an alarm began to wail.

It’s okay, she thought. They need to evacuate anyway. Might as well be now.

It took only a few more minutes to finish the job, alternating between killing fire and containing ice. In the end, there was little more than charcoal and molten metal left in the room.

She ran back to Tiqi. The fire alarm was still blaring throughout the complex. She burst into her bedroom and to find her child red-faced and crying, rubbing at her eyes.

“Shhhh, shhhh, don’t worry baby. It’s going to be okay.”

Empty reassurances. She dropped the staff onto the mattress. If she didn’t find a way to stop Sephiroth, it would not be okay.

Where was her fucking PHS?

She lunged for the bedside dresser. Top drawer. Thank the goddess she’d left it there before their journey.

It took forever to turn on. She threw it on the bed next to Tiqi and looked around. The rucksack that contained all their travelling supplies was sitting by the wall, thank Gaia. She picked it up and tossed it onto the bed next to her staff.

She could hardly think through Tiqi’s screams and the shrieking of the alarm. She ran to the closet and pulled out extra pants, a sweater, a heavy coat.
She picked up the PHS and dialed Elmyra, holding her breath through each endless ring. *Pick up pick up,* she screamed internally. The call went to voicemail. Aeris screeched in frustration. Of all the times to be in Pilates or to have forgotten her PHS at home!

She ran out the door, shouting over her shoulder at Tiqi, “Stay there, I’ll be right back!” She sprinted into the nursery, to Tiqi’s dresser, and yanked the drawers open. Pants. Socks. Jacket. It would have to do. She called Elmyra over and over but there was still no answer.

She stuffed everything into the pack and barely managed to close it and sling it across her back. Then she picked Tiqi up in one arm and held the staff in the other. She made her way to the foyer as quickly as she could. The alarm was screaming in the front hall.

She ran past the elevator and headed straight for the stairwell that led up to the roof. When they finally reached the open air, she sat down on the cold concrete and pulled Tiqi into her lap. With one arm wrapped reassuringly around the sniffling toddler, she laid the staff down in front of them and pulled her PHS free.

Her hands shook as she dialed Tseng and waited for the call to connect. He answered before the first ring even finished.

“Aeris?”

“You remember your promise?” she panted. “When the time comes?”

A pause. Then, “Yes.”

“Well it’s now,” she said. “You need to get your helicopter and come get me. I’ll explain on the way. But you have to come right now.”

Another pause. This time longer. Her heart was thundering. He couldn’t say no.

“I’m on my way.”

“Oh goddess, thank you thank you thank you,” she gasped.

The line disconnected.

She called Elmyra again. No answer. She sent Elmyra a text that read *get out of Midgar NOW,* before tucking the PHS back into her jacket.

“Sorry, baby,” she said to Tiqi. “I can’t find Grandma.” She clutched her daughter close and kissed her soft chestnut curls. “You’re going to have to come with me.”

“With Mommy,” Tiqi sniffed.

“It’s going to be cold,” Aeris warned. “And probably dangerous.”

Tiqi nodded and squeezed her dark brown eyes shut. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“We’ll come back when it’s all over and find Grandma, okay?” Aeris wiped the tears off Tiqi’s cheeks with her knuckle. “I promise.”

And then there was nothing left to do but wait for their ride and steel herself for the journey ahead.

In a strange way, she was going home for the very first time.
Non-fandom readers I tried to make this accessible for you. Please let me know if it didn't make sense. Happy to answer questions and edit as needed.
Chapter 20

Aeris’s anxiety quieted as the helicopter rose into the air and Midgar shrank and disappeared behind them. It felt good to be on their way. To get away from the green-tinted city on her terms for the first time in years.

As they flew north, Tseng radioed Rude and Zack to mobilize all Turk, SOLDIER, and army forces. It was a wonder how they barely questioned him. All available personnel would work to evacuate Midgar, the nexus of human activity over which Meteor would fall. Even if Aeris was able to stop Sephiroth, only the goddess knew what could happen between then and now.

Once all the necessary calls had been made, Aeris yelled into her headset, “Did you take me home? What happened while I was asleep?”

Tseng’s voice crackled in her ears. “I flew you out of the temple and back to Junon. Rude took you back to Midgar from there.” His jaw tightened. “Then I returned to the temple with an automaton on Sephiroth’s orders.”

“And?” she prodded, when he lapsed into silence.

“And then I waited by the chopper. Sephiroth didn’t tell me what he was doing. One minute there was a pyramid and the next it was gone. I saw him standing at ground zero with something in his hand. And then…”

“Yes?”

Tseng looked as if struggling to find the right words. “He grew a wing. One giant black wing. And then he flew off.”

Aeris frowned, remembering the gnarled tentacles that had grown out of Jenova’s back. She wondered what other mutations might be hidden in Sephiroth’s genes.

“What did I see, Aeris? What is Sephiroth? And what’s going on?”

She answered grimly, “He’s a monster. He’s trying to kill the Planet, and I’m going to stop him. It was my fault he got the black materia in the first place, and I swear I’m going to make this right, Tseng.”

He pressed his lips together and nodded like the consummate professional he was. “And where am I taking you?”

“To the City of the Ancients.”
The hike through the Sleeping Forest took longer than she’d hoped. Tiqi slept during most of the journey through the tall and narrow evergreen trees, strapped to Aeris’s chest with a teal colored mei tai wrap in the traditional Wutai way. The heavy rucksack and staff further weighed her down and the going was slow.

Her feet knew where to carry her, though. The Forgotten Capital seemed to call to her in ancient tongues, in the tune of a lullaby that her mother used to sing.

In three days, if she succeeded, she would rendezvous with Tseng at the drop point. If she failed, nothing would matter.

When she finally emerged from the forest, the sun had set, she was covered in sweat, her feet and back ached, and Tiqi was screaming to be set free. Tiqi’s cries echoed across the dead city that lay in the cradle of the mountains, carved from stone and built up in twisted and spiked shell-like structures.

Aeris shushed her daughter and dragged herself to the nearest abandoned house. It looked like a snail shell and it sheltered them from the biting northern winds. The interior was modest, but the furniture still stood, as if frozen in time. Tiqi ran around and touched everything while Aeris unpacked some rations and used controlled streams of ice and fire to refill her water bottle. After eating, they climbed into the stiff and chilly bed and Aeris curled her body around Tiqi to keep her warm.

Tiqi sniffled as she tried to fall asleep. “Gramma?” she asked.

“Grandma’s going to be okay,” Aeris whispered. “Tseng promised he’d find her and get her out of Midgar. We’ll see Grandma soon.”

“Oh-kay.” Tiqi nodded. And then, “Daddy?”

Aeris didn’t say anything. She kissed Tiqi’s hair and closed her eyes. It would be best if Tiqi forgot all about her father.

It took them a long time to fall asleep.

Tiqi cried for daddy the whole time.

The next morning they walked hand in hand to the center of the city, over winding paths carved into stone that looked like the vertebra of a spinal cord. Hidden behind tall, bony trees was a building shaped like a giant conch shell. They climbed the spiral steps into the edifice that hid the secret heart of the city deep below the ground.

Down and down and down they went. Tiqi soon grew tired and wanted to be carried.

The buildings down here were built upon pillars that rose from the surface of an underground lake. Rays of sunlight illuminated the cavern and its azurite walls from an opening somewhere in the distance, bathing everything in shimmering blue and gold light.

As they made their way across the stepping stones to the large raised altar in the center of the lake,
Aeris wondered what her life could have been like, if she had lived in this city, hundreds of years ago when it had been filled with lit hearths and ancient songs and the thundering footfalls of dance. She would never know the rich culture and heritage she’d been denied, growing up in a glass cage and beneath the plate of Midgar.

Aeris looked down at Tiqi, who had grown uncharacteristically docile. She seemed to be in awe of her surroundings, quietly taking in the glimmering colors of the cavern walls and the tall spires that surrounded them. Aeris’s eyes softened as they took the final steps up to the sacred altar. The magic of this place was palpable and even Tiqi could feel it in the marrow of her bones.

She dropped her pack and staff at the edge of the dais and walked to the center. Tiqi trailed behind her. Aeris knelt down and raised her hands in prayer, and Tiqi did the same. Aeris couldn’t help but smile as she closed her eyes and prepared to drop into the deep trance of communion with her Planet. She would trust Tiqi to behave in this holiest of places. She would trust the goddess to take care of her daughter. And she would trust her body to do what it needed to do.

So Aeris began to pray.

For this world that had given her Ifalna’s wisdom, Elmyra’s devotion, and Tiqi’s laughter. Cumulus clouds painted gold by the sunset. The scent of lilies after rain and the taste of chocolate on her tongue. For land and sky and stars and sea. For all of this, she gave thanks.

For Zack, that loyal, ignorant, loveable fool. For Tseng, who’d buried his soul in the name of duty. For AVALANCHE, their hands stained crimson from their righteous crusade. Each a lost child, groping in the dark. For all of them, she prayed, that it was not time for the culling.

Because she believed, with every fiber of her being, that there was still hope.

For them.

For me.

For us.

Such irony, The Great Fissure. Those nomads had settled to build their mines, their towns, their temple. The settlers went on to become humans who went on to become a blight upon the earth.

But it had all started from the devotion of her people to their goddess. To store that most divine relic. That final kill switch.

From the ashes of this world, a new one would be born.

That had always been divinity’s plan. The black materia had always been the goddess’s failsafe.

But please, not now, not like this, not by his hand.

They can change.

I can change.
We can still change.

The white materia glowed bright against her throat, pulsing in time with her heartbeat.

Tiqi slept peacefully, curled up on the ground by Aeris’s thigh. Deep in trance, she didn’t sense the dark presence that clouded the sanctum, didn’t hear the whistle of air as he plummeted towards the dais from above.

She raised her head at the sound of boots landing lightly on the ground in front of her. It took time for her eyes to focus, for her mind to piece together sensory inputs when a moment earlier she had been floating in the endless green warmth of the Lifestream.

He loomed above her like a demon, with Masamune held loosely in his left hand. His lips were pulled back in a sneer.

Oh goddess no. No, I need more time!

“Well, well,” he drawled, raking his eyes over her kneeling form. “How appropriate for you to wait for me on your knees. It’s almost as though you were anticipating your punishment.” Masamune’s tip inched forward until it lay flat against the underside of Aeris’s chin, tilting her face upwards. “What do you think the consequences are for treasonous slaves, hmm?”

Aeris’s heart was trying to jackhammer its way out of her chest, but she kept her face carefully blank. Her eyes flicked down to Tiqi’s sleeping form.

“How did you find me?” she asked. He shouldn’t have been able to make his way through the Sleeping Forest. Only a Cetra would be able to stay on course in that spell-laden place.

“The same way I found you so quickly after the AVALANCHE incident.” Sephiroth raised a condescending eyebrow. “Didn’t you realize it then? Your collar is embedded with a tracking device.”

Aeris clenched her jaw. That fucking collar. She wanted to reach up and tear it from her throat. The white materia burned brighter. Sephiroth’s gaze flicked down toward it.

“So many lies, little florist,” he murmured. “You said you wanted to help me build the future, yet here you are, on the eve of my victory, summoning…what, exactly?”

She glared at him and kept her mouth shut.

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t know. You can’t recall what your mother told you.”

He wasn’t wrong. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I’m still going to stop you.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Oh yes, pet. I’m going to enjoy watching you try.”

Aeris’s fingers twitched in her lap. “Why don’t you just kill me now and be done with it? Wouldn’t that be the smarter thing to do?”
Sephiroth’s mouth twisted into a bitter grimace and he withdrew Masamune. “Do you really think I went through all that trouble of training you, molding you, only to have you disappear into the Lifestream with all the others? They will live within me, as a part of me. But you, Aeris... I would have made you a goddess.”

For a second, something dark and triumphant flared within her.

“But perhaps I should rethink my plan.” Sephiroth raised his hand towards Tiqi and magic pooled at his fingertips.

Aeris could sense the sleep spell forming, so she let him cast it while she wove a series of protective spells around herself. Tiqi didn’t even stir when the tendrils of Sephiroth’s magic encircled her. Now she would stay asleep regardless of how much noise her parents made as they tried to destroy one another.

“I would have let you grow a whole new world,” he continued softly. “Filled with colors you could only imagine in a cesspit like Midgar. Now, I think, I may just keep you chained to a bed. Perhaps I should have done that from the very beginning.”

Aeris’s eyes widened at the bitterness in his voice. She had hurt him. She could see it in his seething mako green eyes.

Good. If she could destabilize him enough, maybe she could somehow make it out of this alive.

“You may move Tiqi.” He gestured with Masamune at the railing that surrounded the platform. “We wouldn’t want her to get hurt now, would we?”

Aeris carefully pulled Tiqi into her arms and carried her to the side, keeping an eye on Sephiroth the entire time. She picked up her staff and walked back to the center of the dais, holding it defensively in front of her body.

Sephiroth’s lips curved into a thin smile as he raised Masamune.

“You wanted me to love you, didn’t you?” Aeris asked in a quiet voice. “That’s really sad. I loved Zack. He was a good man. But you? You’re nothing but a monster.”

Rage flared in Sephiroth’s eyes and for a second he bared his teeth before the mask slammed back into place. “I suppose it’s my own fault you’ve become so badly behaved. I’ve been far too lenient with you since Tiqi was born. But don’t worry, pet, there’s time yet to correct our mistakes.”

Masamune arched upwards so fast that Aeris’s eyes could barely track it. It was all she could do to deflect the blow and dive out of the way. He slashed at her again and sliced through the thick beige fabric of her pants.

He was toying with her. She had no delusions about how long she would last if he seriously meant to end her.

She twisted out of Masamune’s reach and summoned a barrage of pure energy that flew at her target, straight and true. But Sephiroth just smirked and extended his palm as if to block the missiles and Aeris watched in horror as her magic shimmered out of existence before it could so much as graze him.

He struck twice more, slashing through the tight weave of her red jacket. She winced at the hot sting that lanced across her arm. Warm blood seeped from the shallow cuts.
She rolled to the side and landed in a crouch. She was already panting.

He lowered Masamune and said, “You may kneel at my feet and beg for mercy any time, little florist. If you do so very sweetly, I may even forgive you.”

Aeris gripped her staff tighter. “You think you’re so special. The chosen one. The last Cetra.” She blasted him with her strongest fire spell but it arched away from him, unable to penetrate his barrier. “You don’t even know what Jenova really is!”

She couldn’t dodge the next flurry of attacks. He cut through her pink sweater so many times it barely even covered her front.

“Jenova is my mother, and she was a Cetra betrayed and murdered by humans,” he hissed. “The truth of this was written in the Shinra archives by your father’s own hand.” He batted away a lightening spell with Masamune’s blade. “Jenova and her people should have ruled this world, but I will do it in her stead.”

Aeris dove again, barely managing to avoid having her boot shredded by Masamune’s tip. “No! You couldn’t be more wrong! I don’t know what my father was thinking when he found it, but that abomination was not a Cetra.” Somehow she was able to parry his next strike, and the force of the blow left her arms shaking. “My ancestors didn’t have tentacles and wings, and neither do I.”

She saw Sephiroth’s eyes widen as he realized that she must have seen the specimen tank. For a split second Masamune wavered. She threw another torrent of fireballs at his face and was stunned to see them actually strike. A thick cover of smoke exploded around his body. Then he waved his arm and the air cleared. A faint streak of soot across his jaw was the only evidence she’d managed to affect him at all.

Her heart plummeted. She couldn’t win this fight. That had been a direct hit with her strongest spell.

She was going to die here.

His eyes burned with fury and she met them, unblinking, raising her staff.

“What did you do?” he snarled.

Aeris swallowed hard and tilted her staff into an offensive stance. She could lie. She could try to placate him. Could she buy enough time that way to somehow finish her prayers?

He moved so fast her eyes only saw a blur of black and silver flying through the air. A sharp strike of the edge of his hand against her arm sent the staff skittering across the floor. Then his fist was in her hair, sharply yanking her head back. His mouth inches away from hers.

“What. Did. You. Do.” His hand tightened its hold, drawing tears from her eyes. His lips were peeled back, baring his teeth.

He’d done this so many times. But this time, something inside her snapped.

“You want to know what I did to your precious mother?” she asked through clenched teeth. “I burned that monster to ash. I don’t know how Hojo created you, but that kind of mistake will never be made again.”

For one endless moment, nothing happened. Her heavy breaths were the only sound. Then he let her go and stepped back, raised Masamune, and thrust forward.
Aeris gasped as the blade pierced her below the left clavicle. White hot pain wracked her body. Her vision blanked out.

This was it. She was going to die. Tiqi was going to die.

But it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter. Focus. They would rejoin their Planet in the Lifestream.

What mattered was the white materia. The Planet itself.

Focus. Time was almost out.

She barely heard Sephiroth say, “Mother is a part of me. She will live on, in me, through me, forever.”

Oh goddess, I beg of you, oh giver of life. Don’t let this evil win. I will join You in the Promised Land. I will come home. But I beg You to save Yourself. And I beg You to save them. Please save them.

“But you, little slave. You will have the rest of eternity to atone for your sins. And I will savor every last drop of your contrition.”

She could feel hot blood seeping out from the wound, across her chest and back. Her legs were collapsing, unable to keep her up through the pain. But she didn’t fall to the ground, held up by the force of Masamune’s blade against her bone.

She gritted her teeth and pushed the pain away.

I’m ready to come home, if that is Your will. Bring me home, oh mother of life. Bring Tiqi home. Only save Yourself. Save them.

She thought of Elmyra. She thought of Zack. Tseng and the others that had trained her. Her friends from a lifetime ago.

Please save them.

The white materia burned, hot against her throat. Then light burst forth from within it, so bright she had to squeeze her eyes shut. Electricity seemed to sizzle through the metal of the collar, but it didn’t shred her skin. A crack echoed through the cavern and Aeris’s eyes flew open. She stared at the two gold arcs that fell away from her body. The white materia, free and falling through the air, emitting a brilliant, pale green light. It clattered to the floor and rolled off the dais and into the water below.

The lake erupted around them like a geyser and Aeris was plunged into the icy water, dragged down by the undertow.

She didn’t even have time to scream Tiqi’s name.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I forgot to say last chapter that I watched Sephiroth kill Aeris in the original game back when I was 15 years old. And it left such a hole in my heart. Back during my teenage fanfic days, when my first group of internet friends made Aurora Magazine for Aeris Seph content, Aeris resurrection fics were so common it almost got annoying.

Writing this AU to allow them to fight it out on the altar, and allow her to survive the encounter...is the fix-it fic I've probably always wanted to see. Anyone know any others?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 20

Aeris slowly blinked open her eyes. She was warm and weightless, floating in a gentle current of green light. Her limbs felt heavy. She tried to lift her arm and watched as it sluggishly drifted upward.

Ti..qi…she thought. She spun around in slow motion, looked past the blurred, sepia images that seemed to surround her. Tiqi was there, to the side, staring in awe at the threads of light that were carrying them ever forward.

Aeris tried to scream Tiqi’s name but nothing came out. She swam through the current and wrapped her arms around Tiqi’s soft little body. Aeris looked down and Tiqi looked up. Green eyes met brown and Tiqi grinned in that guileless way of hers and pointed ahead.

Aeris’s eyes followed the path of Tiqi’s finger to the faded image in front of them. She squinted at it and the image sharpened to reveal a teenage Sephiroth standing in front of a Wutain village. His hair fell to the middle of his back. His commanding officer barked out an order. Sephiroth pressed his lips into a line and raised his arm. One by one the houses burst into flame. Villagers ran from their homes, their hair and clothes smoldering. The infantry gunned them down.

Inside the Lifestream, Aeris covered Tiqi’s eyes and looked to the right. Another image. Sephiroth as a boy, no more than ten years old. His hair brushed the top of his shoulders. A training sword was driven deep into the skull of a Dual Horn. Eighty three seconds, a voice announced over the intercom mounted above the glass walls. This concludes today’s experiment. Tomorrow I expect you to achieve a kill time of seventy five seconds...

Aeris swallowed and held Tiqi closer. She looked left. Another image of Sephiroth, younger still, sitting in a metal chair, his face blank. A black-haired man in a lab coat – Hojo – fastened steel restraints around his wrists and ankles. The man held up a translucent silicone rod and the boy
opened his mouth, clenching his teeth around it like a bite guard. Hojo turned and picked something up from a tray – a syringe filled with a thick, glowing green fluid...

An image shimmered above Aeris. She tilted her face up to see a silver-haired child sitting in the lap of a kind-looking man with short brown hair, a bushy moustache, and glasses. They were reading a picture book about a bright yellow chocobo...

A memory stirred at the back of Aeris’s mind – Ifalna’s gentle voice telling her about Gast, the father she’d never known. *His moustache tickled. And he was always pushing his spectacles up on his nose. Your father was a kind man. He would have loved you so much.*

A different voice echoed through the Lifestream, breaking through Aeris’s thoughts. *Sephiroth…* It was barely a whisper. *My son…*

Aeris turned around to find Sephiroth standing behind her, eyes fixed on a memory. Jaw slack, as if unable to turn away. She followed the path of his eyes and let the memory draw her in.

“You told me Lucy died giving birth to Sephiroth.” Gast was shaking. *A notebook was clutched in his hand.*

“And?” Hojo responded. *He brushed a lock of greasy black hair away from his face.*

“I found her notes!” Gast lifted the leather-bound notebook and shook it in front of Hojo’s eyes. “How could you?”

“Lucrecia knew what she was getting into. I didn’t coerce her into anything.”

“Gaia, Hojo. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

Hojo sniffed. “I seem to recall you were just as eager to restore the Cetra as we were, Gast.”

“I was wrong! Jenova isn’t-”

“Ohhh?” Hojo’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “And what’s made you change your mind about that, hmm?”

Gast’s eyes flickered and he visibly swallowed. He took a step back.

“You found something…didn’t you?” Hojo demanded.

Gast clenched his fist. “What happened to Lucy?”

Hojo sneered. “She’s-”

A whimper cut Hojo off. Both men spun to face the child that stood in the doorway.

A five year old Sephiroth sniffled, “Professor Gast?”

Aeris shook herself out of the memory and turned to see Sephiroth clutching his head. His eyes were squeezed shut. He was panting.

You’ve always known…haven’t you? Aeris thought.

Through the tendrils of the Lifestream, the woman’s voice drifted to their ears once more. *My son…* Sephiroth fell to his knees, hunched over, his whole body shaking.
A tinny, ringing noise sounded in Aeris’s ears. She squeezed her eyes shut and clamped her hands over Tiqi’s ears as it grew louder and louder and louder still…

Aeris groaned as feeling gradually returned to her body. She blinked her bleary eyes and pulled herself up onto her hands and knees.

She was soaking wet and chilled to the bone. She looked up from the hard-packed ground to see that she was in a dark cavern filled with luminescent blue crystals. The edge of a small lake was a few feet away. She must have washed up from there.

With a gasp, she jolted upright and almost screamed at the agony that exploded from her shoulder. Clenching her jaw against the pain, she looked around wildly for Tiqi and breathed a sigh of relief when she found her off to the side, almost within arm’s reach. Aeris cast a quick heal spell over her injury and crawled over to scoop her daughter into her arms. Tiqi’s clothes were sodden and she was cold to the touch, but her breaths were strong and steady.

Reaching down with her hand, Aeris anxiously rubbed at her stomach. She seemed fine. She wasn’t bleeding as far as she could tell. Everything seemed to be in its proper place.

Even her staff and the rucksack had washed up with them.

Aeris twisted her neck to take in the cavern around them. Her eyes widened and she clutched Tiqi tighter as she took in the sight of Sephiroth shakily standing up from where he’d been crouched on the ground. Masamune lay on the ground beside him.

He didn’t look at them. His eyes were fixed on the crystalline pillar at the center of the lake. Encased in crystalized mako was a woman no older than Sephiroth. She looked as though frozen in time, her long brown hair pulled up into a neat, high ponytail, with long bangs framing the front of her face. She wore a plain white dress and her hands were folded atop her chest, her eyes closed as if in sleep.

The family resemblance was unmistakable.

Sephiroth clenched his fists and started muttering to himself. “I am a Cetra. I was born to rule this world. I am the chosen one. I must take back this Planet.”

Tiqi stirred and made a mewling sound. Without looking down, Aeris fed a trickle of energy to the Minerva Band, causing heat to blossom upwards from her ankle to warm her core. She rubbed at Tiqi’s arms and legs to transfer the warmth. Then as subtly as she could, Aeris inched across the cold dirt towards her staff, still holding Tiqi in her lap. She closed her fingers around the weapon and slowly dragged it to her side. Maybe she could sneak away without alerting him. She shifted her body into a half-crouch.

Sephiroth pointed backwards at her without turning to look at them. “Don’t even think about it.”

Aeris froze. Tiqi blinked open her eyes and smiled up at Aeris. “Mommy?” she said, before looking around in curiosity.
Aeris swallowed and forced herself to speak. “Is that your m-

He spun to face her, eyes wild. “We’re leaving. Now.” He strode towards them.

“Is her name Lucrecia?” Aeris asked.

Sephiroth yanked Aeris up by the arm. Tiqi toppled off her lap and started wailing. He gave her only a second to gather the screaming child into her arms. It was all Aeris could do to stay on her feet as he shoved her forward. The staff and Masamune lay forgotten on the ground behind them.

The cavern led to the back of a waterfall. Sephiroth pushed her forward along the wall’s edge, past the thundering cascade, until they found themselves out beneath the open sky. Mountainous peaks rose all around them. Only Gaia knew how far the Lifestream had carried them, or how long they’d been unconscious.

A massive ball of flame hung in the sky. Meteor. It wiped all thoughts of Lucrecia from Aeris’s mind.

If Meteor struck the planet, nuclear winter would follow. The ash would blot out the sun. The Lifestream would gather to heal the wound. And Sephiroth would absorb that energy to become a god.

“You see, Aeris? My apotheosis is upon us.” His fingers dug into her arm. “Your little display of defiance did nothing to alter destiny.”

Aeris barely breathed as she watched Meteor hurtle towards them.

Tiqi rubbed at her swollen, red eyes and looked up in awe at the fireball.

“Now, why don’t you close your eyes and pray, little slave? Pray that when it’s done I’m feeling more merciful.” He let go of her and stepped away. A single black wing slowly unfurled itself from his back. One experimental flap and it was fully extended. The great, feathered monstrosity was larger than the man himself. “When Meteor strikes Midgar, I will fly to the wound. I will collect you when it’s over.”

Aeris glanced in Midgar’s direction, eyes following the trajectory of the fireball.

It had to have worked. The white materia had activated before falling into the water. The Planet had carried them here specifically, for some reason. But she didn’t know what she was waiting for. Didn’t know what the last stand even looked like.

Meteor was plummeting. It eclipsed the sun and plunged the world into a dim and crimson hellscape. It would be over in minutes.

*Oh Gaia, is this really the end? Will you not save them?*

Meteor’s searing heat had probably already destroyed Midgar by now

Tiqi was resting her head against Aeris’s shoulder. Tears flowed down Aeris’s face.

And then it happened. It started slowly at first - it took her moments to even notice the change in light. Beyond the horizon, partially hidden by the peaks of the mountains, tendrils of magic began to rise up from the earth. Radiant threads of blue energy converged and twisted, circling Meteor. Cradling it, surrounding it.
“Holy…” Aeris whispered, eyes wide.

Meteor’s blazing red surface slowly disappeared behind the gently undulating waves of light. Where the sky had been dark and enflamed only a minute ago, now it was so bright, it was all she could do not to look away. She kept her eyes fixed on the miracle, vision blurred by her tears. She would not look away from this. She would not look away.

Meteor was crumbling before her eyes. Pieces of it broke away from the main body and disappeared into the light.

It was over.

She’d won. Thank the goddess.

The Planet and its people were safe. They would live another day.

And then Sephiroth’s hand was around her throat. She screamed and met his furious eyes. His pupils had somehow become slit like a serpent’s. His teeth were bared. His fingers squeezed.

She dropped Tiqi. Tiqi slid down against Aeris’s body and landed on the ground.

“What have you done?” Sephiroth roared.

Aeris’s hands came up to grip his wrist, nails digging into his flesh, desperately trying to dislodge his hold. She couldn’t breathe.

“What have you done? How? How could this have happened?”

She couldn’t breathe.

Tiqi was screaming.

“All these years. All my plans.” The mako green of his eyes glowed hellishly around those twin black slits.

She couldn’t breathe. Tiqi was screaming. Tiqi was pounding her tiny fists against Sephiroth’s thigh.

“You’ve ruined everything!”

She couldn’t breathe. Tiqi was clawing at Sephiroth.

Sephiroth screamed in rage and kicked out.

Aeris watched in horror as Tiqi flew high into the air. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. Her feet were dangling above the ground.

Tiqi’s soft, tiny little body crashed down onto the ground. The side of her head struck a boulder. Blood was pooling under her face.

Aeris couldn’t scream. Her hands flew, unthinking, to Sephiroth’s chest, her palms flat against his exposed skin. Power burst out of her, hot and raw and blinding white. The scent of lilies assaulted her nose. She couldn’t hear anything except an endless tinny ring in her ears.

She landed on her feet. His hand left her throat. She pushed and lunged away and didn’t look back.

*Oh Gaia, Tiqi! Tiqi!*
She pulled her baby into her arms. There was blood everywhere.

She cast and cast and cast. Heal spell after heal spell. Green magic flared around them.

It was raining.

Water fell from the skies. Onto Tiqi’s face. Onto blood soaked hair.

Tiqi’s soft brown eyes fluttered open. Aeris sat back in shock. Even a string of her most powerful heal spells shouldn’t have worked like that.

Why was it raining?

It didn’t matter. She clutched Tiqi tight to her body and ran. Away from the waterfall. Away from the river. Away from him. Far into the forest beyond. Downhill, stumbling all the way.

Tiqi was crying, but Aeris could hardly hear her over the blood roaring in her ears.

Only when she was so exhausted that she could no longer stand, did she allow herself to collapse. She dropped down onto the soft, moss covered dirt, and let Tiqi fall gently on top of her. A quick look around showed they were alone. The forest was silent except for the chirping of birds and the distant roar of water.

She buried her face in Tiqi’s hair and let herself cry. In terror. In gratitude. In fatigue.

And she finally heard what Tiqi was saying.

“Daddy! Daddy! Daddy where? Go back! Go back! Daddy go!”

Aeris wanted to laugh. She was not okay. She might never be okay again. “Baby. No. We’re not going back. He’s gone and he’s never coming back.”

Did she dare to believe her own words?

She stood up and lifted Tiqi into her arms. Tiqi was screaming louder now.

She kept walking.

She kept walking and she kept looking over her shoulder. But there was no one there. Only the endless forest.

She walked until her arms burned. Until the sun hung low in the sky. Until the forest opened to the edge of a cliff and she could see out for miles and miles and she knew beyond a doubt that they were in the middle of nowhere and they would die in these vast mountains.

No supplies – the pack had been left in the crystal cavern.

No weapon. Only the materia embedded in her bracer.

Nothing to even hold water. Just Aeris in her torn clothes soaked in dried blood, a crying toddler, and an unborn baby.

They were going to die.

Why? She asked the Planet. Why would You do this to me?
The Planet didn’t answer.

Aeris sank to her knees in the dirt and looked out over the valley below and the mountain ranges beyond.


Aeris looked at her daughter through tired eyes. Tiqi would die here in this wilderness.

Even after all that had happened in the last day, the fetus still seemed to be hanging on. Aeris was already almost four months along. That gave her, at most, three more months of reasonable mobility, one month of slow plodding with little ability to carry Tiqi, and another month of contingency in case of an early birth.

There was no way she would make it out of these mountains alive, with Tiqi in tow, before the baby came.

Aeris rested her forehead against Tiqi’s and thought back to the early months of Tiqi’s life. They had been hard enough, even with Elmyra spoon-feeding her and holding Tiqi during the day so she could catch an hour or two of sleep. Even with a team of medical professionals and the best facilities Midgar had to offer. Out here, assuming she had an uncomplicated birth…there would be weeks of painful healing. She wouldn’t be able to move around much. There’d be months on end with barely any sleep. All the while trying to feed and care for two helpless children. Even if she could stockpile a few months’ worth of food and found a cave for shelter, she wouldn’t have the energy to cast ice and fire spells to make water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning. She wouldn’t have the energy to heal them if anything happened. And if Aeris herself got sick…

She could not give birth in the wilderness, all alone with a two year old.

They were going to die.

Unless…

She felt physically ill at the thought.

What was she going to do, throw herself at his feet? Pray that he was still sane enough to do the right thing after he’d nearly killed Tiqi in his rage? Promise to do anything and everything if he would just make sure their kids got back to civilization?

Aeris squeezed her eyes shut and rocked back and forth with Tiqi in her arms.

What kind of mother would let her child die here?

But what kind of woman would go back?

When she reached the clearing, her body was ready to fall apart. Everything hurt. Her shoulder throbbed beneath the healing scar tissue. Her arms burned from carrying a sleeping child. Her feet ached. She wanted to plunge headfirst into the river beneath the waterfall and drink until she was filled.
She carefully laid Tiqi down on the ground, at the base of a tree, and cast a barrier spell around her to ward off any curious creatures. Thankfully, Tiqi didn’t wake up.

Aeris had spent the whole journey back working herself into a tangled ball of nerves. What if he was gone? What if he was just waiting for her to come crawling back? Was this really a saner option than trying to survive alone in the wild with two babies?

She shook herself and slowly crept towards the waterfall. She could still turn back. Or just find a way to grab her weapon and supplies and then try to make it on her own. At least then she would have her baby sling and water bottle and rations.

The forest gave way to the clearing. And it was silent.

Aeris stepped closer, eyes alert for any signs of movement. The sun was setting.

He was…lying on the ground. Exactly where he must have fallen earlier.

The wing was gone.

Was he…dead…?

Aeris cautiously approached, ready to cast her strongest spells in an instant’s notice.

He didn’t stir as she crept forward.

Her heart was hammering in her chest.

Something was very, very wrong. Was he really dead? Could she really have killed him?

*How?*

Palm held out with deadly green magic already pooled at her fingertips, she closed the last few feet to stand at his side. Then she knelt down and cautiously reached for his limp wrist. No reaction. His skin was cool to the touch. She felt for his pulse and found it, faint and slow.

How had she done this?

Just as she was about to stand, to rush into the cave to retrieve her things, she heard a low moan. Her head snapped back towards him. His brow and mouth twitched. He made a gasping sound, so soft she nearly missed it.

Then he slowly opened his eyes and turned to look at her.

And those eyes…were brown.

Chapter End Notes

Dear readers, this chapter was the first that required extensive re-writing with a lot of writer-angst and suffering and banging my head against a table wondering why I
couldn't get the emotions right or in the correct order. Starting here, I originally had a plot device that served to simplify (and therefore cheapened) the interactions between Aeris and Seph, and Lilly thankfully convinced me the device needed to go. The fourth draft of the next chapter is done. If it only requires minor adjustments then I will post it next Sunday. If it's still a disaster then I will need to take a few weeks off at least to forget about the story so I can come back with fresh eyes.

tldr; talk to me please. I am suffering. :)
Okay. I'm finally posting this. The most challenging 6k I've ever written. Writing this chapter has been a somewhat horrible experience of emotional writer-highs and writer-despair. Hopefully I can get back to being myself again after putting this out into the world.

I'm pretty sure Lilly wrote me 10k+ words of analysis and advice for this chapter. Let's show her some love. She's working on a new novel called The Dragon's Concubine, which I am SUPER EXCITED ABOUT. Check out her hot sephy-looking villain here. I am super into his character design and already planning to write smutty fanfic of her work after it gets published. :D

Okay....enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 21

Brown. His eyes were brown. How…?

She watched as Sephiroth moaned, twitched his arm, and closed his eyes again. He lay still. She could barely see the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest.

Against her better judgment, driven by morbid curiosity, she walked to his side and nudged him with her toe. No reaction.

Her hands were shaking. Was she supposed to feel…happy? Viciously triumphant? She didn’t know what she felt, other than fear.

She had no idea what was going on.

Best not to think then. This was not the time for navel gazing.

She bent down and stripped Sephiroth of the twin bracers he wore around his wrists, loaded with rare and powerful materia. She slipped them both around her forearm and jogged back to Tiqi, who was still napping under the tree.

“Mommy?” Tiqi murmured sleepily when Aeris picked her up and carried her behind the waterfall, back into the crystal cavern. She held Tiqi’s head gently against her chest so that Tiqi wouldn’t see Sephiroth as they passed.

Aeris set Tiqi down beside her things. Tiqi rubbed her eyes and then started poking at the prongs of Aeris’s weapon and rolling the materia around in their slots.

I’m going to have to get firewood, Aeris thought as she rummaged through her pack to find her water bottle. She gulped down half the lukewarm liquid before bending down and raising it to Tiqi’s lips.
Should I do that now or wait til Tiqi’s asleep? She sat down on the ground and watched as Tiqi wandered away to explore the nearest outcropping of glowing blue crystals.

Aeris’s gaze drifted to Sephiroth’s mother, frozen within the crystal pillar in the center of the cavern. Why did the Planet bring me here, Aeris wondered. It had to have something to do with Lucrecia’s body. The coincidence was too great.

But…not now. She could think about that later. Right now she needed to focus on logistics.

How was she going to find food and take care of Tiqi at the same time? How was she going to prepare for a journey that could take months? Or years, even?

What if he woke and came in here and tried to kill them? Would she be able to fight him off, unarmed as he was now?

What if he never woke at all?

She didn’t know which was worse. If he couldn’t be reasoned with or if he died…And how, exactly, was she going to reason with a lunatic?

“Mommy? Food,” Tiqi said. She padded back to Aeris and climbed into her mother’s lap. “Fooood!”

Aeris’s stomach growled at the reminder. They hadn’t eaten all day. She pulled the rucksack close and dug through its contents to find the remaining rations. They would only last another few days at best. If she didn’t find and prepare things that Tiqi could actually eat, it would stunt her growth. She unwrapped a protein bar and handed it to Tiqi who squealed in delight when she saw that it was covered in chocolate.

Aeris closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath. She wanted nothing more than to sleep, but despite the bone-weary fatigue, her mind kept coming back to the image of Sephiroth lying, unresponsive on the ground. Vulnerable, possibly for the first time in his life.

Except…that wasn’t true. What she’d seen in the Lifestream, she couldn’t un-see.

She shoved the thoughts from her mind and cradled Tiqi in her arms until they both fell asleep.

Hours later, Aeris woke and rolled away from Tiqi. She dug out the emergency sewing kit from the bottom of the rucksack and stitched her torn clothes back together beneath the pale light of the glowing crystals. Then she cast a series of barrier spells around her daughter and tiptoed out of the cave with the empty pack slung over her shoulder.

The day had been warm and humid, but the night air was chilly. She guessed that they were in a mountain range near the equator, which could be any number of places on three continents.

Sephiroth was still lying in the exact same place as before. She bent down and checked his pulse. It was a mere ghost of the slow and steady thudding she used to feel beneath her head when she rested it on top of his chest. It still made her nervous to leave Tiqi alone in the cave, but the chances of Sephiroth waking before she returned were next to none.

She wondered what she’d done to him. That white light that had burst out of her hands – it hadn’t felt like destructive magic. If anything, it had felt more like a healing spell.

She left him on the ground and walked further from the river to the edge of the forest. She stuffed her bag with fallen branches and then filled her arms with as much wood as they could carry before returning to the cave.
They would need fire for warmth and, eventually, to cook. She’d take Tiqi out to forage, or maybe even hunt, in the morning. She had no idea how she would manage to hunt with a toddler in tow. If she was lucky, there would be fish in the river and she would just have to figure out how to catch them.

Survival, first; strategic planning later.

She didn’t even look at Sephiroth as she passed.

When Aeris and Tiqi came out the next morning, he was still lying in the same position

“Huh?” Tiqi gasped. “Daaaddy!” She let go of Aeris’s hand and ran over to Sephiroth

“Tiqi, don’t” Aeris started to say as she caught up and tried to pull Tiqi away. But the child had already plopped down on her knees and was poking at her father’s face. Aeris sighed in relief when Sephiroth’s only response was a slight scrunch of his brow and a low moan. She shook her head. It was truly a wonder, the resilience of a child’s brain. Tiqi probably didn’t even remember the horrors of the previous day.

Aeris crouched down at Sephiroth’s side. Whatever she’d done to him, it was more serious than she could have imagined. He looked…smaller somehow. Was it just because he’d never once been defenseless like this, in all the years she’d known him? She had no doubt that a carefully placed bolt spell, in his current state, could permanently stop his heart.

Her fingers twitched. It was a tempting thought.

“Daddy? Wake uuuup!”

No response.

A thought niggled at the back of Aeris’s mind. For a minute, she closed her eyes and reached out with her senses. He felt…different. Ordinary, somehow. Was it just because he’d never once been defenseless like this, in all the years she’d known him? She had no doubt that a carefully placed bolt spell, in his current state, could permanently stop his heart.

Her fingers twitched. It was a tempting thought.

“Daddy? Wake uuuup!”

No response.

A thought niggled at the back of Aeris’s mind. For a minute, she closed her eyes and reached out with her senses. He felt…different. Ordinary, somehow. She’d never noticed it before, had always chalked it up to being in some permanent state of anxiety and terror around him. But he’d always exuded a subtle, dark energy that seemed to flare when he was angry. Now, there was nothing.

No mako eyes. No sinister aura.

Aeris pressed her lips together and stood up. She walked to his feet and bent down to grasp him around the ankles. Grunting, she started to drag him across the dirt. Gaia, he was heavy. But it was satisfying to see that aggravatingly perfect hair pick up all that debris.

“Mommy?” Tiqi asked, looking at Aeris in confusion.

“Come on, baby.” She tilted her head towards the waterfall.

Tiqi jumped to her feet and pushed on Sephiroth’s shoulder. “Hrrrrggeeghhhh!” she grunted dramatically, screwing her eyes shut and gritting her teeth.

Aeris couldn’t help but laugh. Then she winced. The kid was treading on Sephiroth’s hair.
They dragged him into the cave and left him a safe distance from the fire. Then Aeris grabbed her staff and set back out with Tiqi.

It took Aeris all morning to catch her first fish with the prongs of her staff. She could just imagine the look on Scarlet’s face if she ever found out how her priceless one-of-kind creation was being used. She’d almost given up and was about to go find a pointy stick when inspiration struck. Aiming a poison spell at the next fish that passed by, she was able to stab it when its fins stopped working. Another simple spell purged the poison and then it was lunch time.

Tiqi happily splashed at the water’s edge while Aeris scraped away scales with the edge of the dagger she carried in her boot. By the time it was all done, she’d cut herself at least a half dozen times. After closing the wounds with healing magic and washing away her blood, she seared her catch with fire magic and they ate with their hands.

They slept on the opposite side of the fire from Sephiroth that night.

“Mommy?” Tiqi asked, as she snuggled deeper into Aeris’s chest.

“Yes, baby?”

“Daddy seeping.”

For a long moment Aeris didn’t say anything.

“Mommy? Daddy seeping.”

Aeris sighed and closed her eyes. “That’s right, baby. Daddy’s sleeping.”

It was hours before she could fall asleep herself. Each time she heard him moan or shift, she jerked awake in fear and her mind started churning all over again about what she would need to do to keep them all alive and to prepare for the journey ahead.

She had to keep Sephiroth alive. Fate, apparently, had a cruel sense of humor.

Days later and Sephiroth still hadn’t woken. His lips were chapped. His cheeks were starting to look sunken.

Tiqi had already started refusing fish, and she threw tantrums more frequently in her hunger. They were down to their last protein bar, which had only lasted this long because Aeris had carefully rationed pieces as bribes and rewards.

They would need cooking implements for longer-term survival, so Aeris dug clay from the riverbank and tried to remember that one pottery class she’d taken six years ago. The first attempt at firing the pots and bowls ended in disaster, with a hastily thrown barrier spell just barely protecting Tiqi and herself from exploding shards. It was only afterwards that she recalled the clay needed to fully dry out first, which meant at least a week would go by before she could stew anything. Maybe she could speed up the process with a steady stream of low-energy warmth. It was worth experimenting, at least.
She took Tiqi out to forage and brought back amaranth, orange berries, and gnarled finger-like tubers hued in deep purple. When they returned from one of these trips, she found Sephiroth awake, though still prone on the ground.

She approached him with caution, keeping a firm grip on Tiqi’s hand to make sure that Tiqi stayed behind her. She doubted that he could harm them the way he was now. She could probably melt him into the floor with a blast of Ultima. Still…the memories of what he’d been capable of were fresh in her mind.

“What did you do to me?” he rasped, his voice barely even a whisper. Those mundane brown eyes watched her as she walked towards him.

She didn’t answer. Jaw clenched, she knelt at his side, keeping some distance between them. She tilted her water bottle towards his mouth with a rigid, outstretched arm. He drank a little but most of it sloshed onto his face and neck and trickled into his hair to mix with the dirt.

Tiqi leaned around Aeris’s shoulder to grin at Sephiroth. “Daddy? Are you wake up?”

Aeris took Tiqi’s hand and pulled her away from the man that had nearly killed her. They sat on the other side of the fire and Aeris let Tiqi fall asleep in her arms. She watched Sephiroth’s hand rise a mere inch above the ground. Then his boot twitched twice before falling still again. His fingers scratched at the dirt and he closed his eyes.

She didn’t get any sleep that night.

He was wasting away. The degradation of his body was far more extensive than what six days of starvation should have done to a man. His leather coat already looked baggy on his frame and his lips were cracked and bleeding. He still couldn’t even lift his arm, which made her relax enough to finally get some sleep during the night.

Aeris sat down at his side with a roasted fish in her hands. He’d barely been able to drink water for the first two days after waking up, but that morning he seemed to have regained control over the muscles in his head and neck. She crumbled a bit of fish between her fingers and brought it to his lips. He turned his head away.

“Really?” she scoffed. “You’d rather die than let me feed you? Because you will, you know.”

He didn’t answer, and it made her grit her teeth in anger.

“So it was perfectly okay for you to make me beg and crawl but this is intolerable. Gaia, I should just kill you now.” She ate the fish herself. It smelled delicious and didn’t taste half bad. She handed a chunk to Tiqi who munched quietly at her side, a foot away from Sephiroth’s hip.

“Why don’t you?” he asked, still not looking at her.

“Because I’m not a Nibel wolf or an Elfadunk,” she snapped. Their cubs weren’t nearly as vulnerable, their births not nearly as traumatic. “Because I love my daughter, and I want her to see her grandma again.”

“Your daughter?” Sephiroth echoed.
Aeris hadn’t let Tiqi touch him since he’d regained consciousness.

As if she knew they were talking about her, Tiqi looked up and climbed to her feet. She bent forward at the waist and held her fish out towards Sephiroth. “Here, Daddy!”

“No, baby. Don’t.” Aeris pulled Tiqi into her lap.

Tiqi looked up at Aeris in confusion. “Tiqi share?”

It was like poison at the back of her throat, the bitter taste of hatred and guilt. How had they come to this place where she was teaching her daughter not to share? To Sephiroth, she said, “Do you even remember how you almost killed her?”

Sephiroth frowned at the cave’s ceiling. He turned his head to face them and his eyes flickered over Tiqi before meeting Aeris’s gaze. “I’d never harm Tiqi,” he rasped.

“Well you did. You kicked her into a boulder. She should have died.”

His eyes flew back to Tiqi’s face and he looked horrified. “Impossible.”

“I don’t care what you believe,” Aeris said. “I have no reason to lie to you.”

“Then how…”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Whatever magic I summoned that did this to you…also saved Tiqi.”

Aeris watched as Sephiroth tried to lift his hand towards his daughter. It shook in the air, several inches higher than he’d been able to get it before. But it wasn’t enough to reach any further than the fabric of Tiqi’s pants.

Tiqi giggled and poked at Sephiroth’s gloved fingers. His face tightened before he dropped his hand back onto the ground. He was trembling.

“Daddy?” Tiqi asked.

Sephiroth’s fingers flexed helplessly. He looked away from them.

“It’s nice to know that you actually care about her,” Aeris said. “Since you barely even helped raise her. So how about this - if you want to be a father, you can start by promising not to hurt us and by helping us get home. Can you do that?”

For a long moment, he said nothing. Then he slowly turned his head back to face her. His eyes were cold but he nodded, ever so slightly.

“Good.” She held up another piece of fish between her fingers. “Now open your mouth,” she said, echoing the command he’d so often given her.

An ugly scowl darkened his face. With hatred burning in his eyes, he slowly parted his dry lips and let her slip the morsel between them.

“Doesn’t feel very good, does it?” she said as she watched him chew. “Being helpless like this. Doing exactly what I tell you to do.”

He looked like he wanted nothing more than to strangle her.
“I could kill you. I could leave your food in the dirt and let you try to reach it with your face. And I could walk away with Tiqi right now and there would be nothing you could do to stop me. But this is what I’m choosing to do instead.” She held up another piece of fish between her fingers and offered it to him like a challenge. “I’m giving you another chance to be a decent human being.”

His jaw tightened before he glanced at Tiqi. Then he reluctantly opened his mouth again to let Aeris feed him.

He didn’t look at her. And she didn’t make him.

She sat back and hugged Tiqi, dropping a quick kiss on her soft cheek. Tiqi giggled and resumed eating the fish in her hands. Aeris studied Sephiroth in silence.

His hair was filthy. Not just from the dirt. Grime and grease too, like any other human. It was plastered to his scalp in little sections.

Here lay The Great Sephiroth.

Who could have imagined it would come to this?

.               .               .

Mother and daughter foraged and explored each day. The mountains were beautiful - endless lush green framed by the clear, winding river that they were careful not to stray too far from. It never rained and was always humid. Sometimes a great, rolling mist would billow up around them and make it impossible to see beyond a few feet. It was a terrifying experience each time, but it soon became clear that the Planet was intervening to keep them safe. They never once ran into a predator.

Aeris’s hands grew more calloused day after day. They had never been particularly soft, accustomed as they were to the dirty work of gardening. But now her days were a constant cycle of accumulating cuts and scrapes and then healing them with a grimace.

Tiqi didn’t hurt herself too often, thank the goddess. She was a naturally cautious child, and usually didn’t touch things that Aeris told her were dangerous. But there were the inevitable bruised elbows and skinned knees, and the sight of her daughter’s blood and the sound of her wails would piece Aeris’s heart. Each time Tiqi had an accident Aeris wondered when the inevitable would happen – a serious injury or illness, the kind that would normally require a doctor or worse, a hospital. What would she do then? She vowed each time that she would make it home, no matter what it took.

He was awake when she returned to the cave that evening. Aeris ignored him as she stoked the fire and cut fish and tuber roots into her new clay pot. She glanced up regularly to make sure Tiqi was still safely exploring the cavern and never too far away. When the food was cooked through, she transferred some to her lumpy, ill-formed clay bowl and brought it to Sephiroth’s side. She would feed Tiqi later, when the soup had cooled.

“Can you sit up?” she asked him.

He looked at her from the corner of his eye. “No,” he said, his voice as dry and rough as sandpaper.

Aeris sighed and reached towards him.
“Wait.” He grasped her hand.

The feeling of his skin against hers sent a shot of adrenaline racing through her blood – fear and revulsion and hope. Aeris pulled her hand away, surprised at how easy it was to do. He couldn’t grip her with any amount of strength.

He shrugged a shoulder to draw her attention to his pauldrons. “There are clips under my coat. It will be easier if you take off my armor.”

She grudgingly pulled his lapel back and felt along the brown leather straps that crisscrossed his chest. Her thumb found each clip and unfastened them. She pulled the leather away and tossed it behind her before pushing the heavy pauldrons off his shoulders.

“How long has it been?” he asked as she snaked her arm beneath his back to push him into sitting position.

“Since we washed up here?”

He nodded. His tired, brown eyes were fixed on her face.

She stepped behind him and hooked her arms beneath his armpits. She could feel how much weight he’d lost. With the help of his legs pushing against the ground, she dragged him a short distance backwards so he that he could lean against a stalagmite. “Nine days,” she huffed.

His fist clenched at his side. “How did you do this to me?”

She retrieved the bowl of soup before sitting down on the dirt floor in front of him and crossing her legs. She glanced over at Tiqi to make sure she was still cautiously exploring the edge of the cavern’s lake. Then she took a moment to look him over as she caught her breath.

In the three years that she’d known him, she’d never once seen a hint of facial hair on that eerily perfect face. Now, dark stubble grew and shadowed his jaw like any other man. Dark roots were also starting to show around his hairline.

“I don’t really know,” she confessed. “But if I had to guess… I think I purged you of whatever Jenova essence was in your body.” She paused for a moment. “Your eyes are brown now and your hair’s coming in black. Did you know that?”

He closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“You know, from the very beginning, I knew you weren’t a Cetra.” She stared at him with hard eyes. “My mother would have known if there was another surviving line somewhere. She would have told me to go find you.” She watched Sephiroth grit his teeth as she plowed on. “And another thing. You never sensed the spirit energies in those ruins. That little village you first took me to? I lied when I told you that I couldn’t feel anything there because it was too ‘common.’ I figured you would buy it because you’re an elitist jerk. But even you should have known that all Cetra tended to the Lifestream, from all that research you supposedly did.”

“Are you finished?” he seethed.

“No. There’s also this.” She brazenly reached out and poked at the coarse dark stubble on his chin. Power was apparently getting to her head. “This is new. Did you even have facial hair before now? I think I would have noticed some stubble after three years of living with you.”

He batted her hand away with a shaking arm and then immediately dropped it back to his side. His
shoulders slumped in fatigue.

“So how, exactly, could I have done this to you if you were really a Cetra? That wouldn’t make any sense.” She paused a moment before saying, “I think you’ve always known about Lucrecia and what Jenova really was.”

He didn’t answer her, and that stoked the fury in her chest.

“And…I just…” she groped for the right words. “If you convinced yourself you were a Cetra…how could you have wanted to kill the Planet?”

“It must be nice,” he sneered. “Being a righteous, perfect little Cetra. Growing up with a mother who taught you the culture of your people. Who was willing to die to protect you.”

Aeris felt the blood drain from her face. “I can’t believe you just said that to me.”

“Why?” The blue light of the cave’s crystals glinted in his brown eyes. They were the only part of him that seemed furiously alive. “Did you not have the privilege of two mothers that would have done anything for you? Am I mistaken?”

“Oh, right. Because it was such a privilege to watch Ifalna die to save me from Shinra,” Aeris said, shaking. “And to have you threaten to kill Elmyra if I didn’t do whatever you wanted.”

“I returned Elmyra to you. And gave her two new homes at that.”

“I’ve never once wanted your money, Sephiroth, and neither did my mom. And you don’t get points for ‘giving back’ what you had no right to take away in the first place!”

She turned to leave but Sephiroth caught her wrist with weak fingers. She shook him off.

“What was it like,” he asked quietly. “After you escaped the labs? Growing up in Elmyra’s house, being raised as her daughter…did she give you dolls and blocks and crayons?”

Aeris clenched her fists. Of course Elmyra had given her those things. They were mostly second hand and some of the best toys she’d ever gotten were just empty packing boxes that Elmyra brought home from her clients’ houses.

“Would you like to know what I had?” he asked. “I had Shinra telling me that I was the hero the world needed. And that was why a second-rate scientist was always injecting mako into my veins.”

Aeris grimaced at the memory of a silver-haired child strapped to a metal chair. Zack had told her once that SOLDIER mako showers felt like bathing in hot acid. She couldn’t even imagine what a direct transfusion would feel like.

“That was why they only ever gave me swords and guns to play with,” Sephiroth continued. “Because heroes needed to train all the time.” He laughed bitterly. “Then I found Hojo’s notes in Nibelheim. I learned that I was nothing but a monster. That my birth and everything they had done to me after Gast left…was experimental.”

He sagged back against the pillar and closed his eyes.

“Hojo didn’t know what he was doing,” he said softly. “They weren’t turning me into a hero. They were just…testing the limits of this enhanced body.”

Aeris looked away. They’d done the same to Ifalna. She could still remember her mother’s ghostly
pale skin, drenched in sweat, after a session on Hojo’s operating table.

But she wasn’t ready to give in to compassion. Not after everything she’d been through.

“Do you think that justifies what you’ve done?” she asked. “You went on to become the most powerful man on the Planet. And with all that power you decided to steal my identity, keep me a prisoner and rape me for three years.”

Tiqi toddled over to stand at her side. She looked up at Aeris’s face in curiosity. Aeris wrapped her arm around Tiqi automatically and gave her a squeeze, still glaring at Sephiroth. “Nothing in the past can excuse what you did.”

Sephiroth opened his eyes and looked at Tiqi with an inscrutable expression. “I’ve given you my story. Take it as you will.”

Aeris frowned at him. He refused to meet her eyes.

Tiqi tugged at Aeris’s sleeve and said, “Mommy angry?”

Aeris looked down at Tiqi and nodded. “Yes, baby. Mommy’s angry.”

Sephiroth smiled wryly. “Really now. Shouldn’t you be happy?”

Aeris didn’t respond. Nothing about this situation made her happy.

“You’ve made it clear that you hate me,” he said between shallow breaths. “I was going to fulfill Cetran prophecy…re-write history…It would have made all those years in Shinra mean something.” He swallowed and his fingernails dug into the hard-packed dirt floor. “And now…you’ve taken even that away from me.”

Aeris watched him turn away and wished that she could enjoy her vengeance. But apparently she had too much of her mother in her. Or not enough, because she still said softly, “That was never your prophecy to fulfill. And I think this only just begins to make us even.”

Surely that was true. But tit for tat felt empty nonetheless.

Tiqi tugged again at Aeris’s sleeve, pulling her out of her dark thoughts. “Daddy angry?” she asked.

Aeris pressed her lips together and said, “You’re right, baby. Daddy’s angry, too. Daddy could have changed the world, but he kept on hating it instead.”

A weak smirk flickered across his face. “Says the girl who has only ever been loved.”

“Says the man who never cared about anyone other than himself,” Aeris retorted.

She stood up and tried to pull Tiqi away, but Tiqi squirmed out of her grasp and sat down next to Sephiroth. Aeris watched Tiqi snuggle up against the broken man who’d dreamed of apotheosis. With an odd lump in her throat, she remembered the silver haired child who’d once sat in her father’s lap. What kind of man might he have been, if Gast hadn’t abandoned him to the mercies of Hojo and Shinra?

Aeris turned her back on them as Sephiroth wrapped a tentative arm around Tiqi. She ate her dinner straight out of the pot, perched at the edge of the lake, her eyes fixed on Lucrecia’s crystal prison without really seeing her.

She let Sephiroth go hungry that night rather than look into his bitter eyes again. He didn’t complain.
He could sit up for longer and longer periods of time now. And one day when Aeris took Tiqi’s hand to lead her out of the cavern for the day’s work, Tiqi said, “Tiqi stay!”

Aeris paused mid-step and turned to look down at her daughter. Without the child in tow she could actually hunt. Literally every task would be so much easier. But could she really leave her with Sephiroth?

“Are you sure baby?” Aeris asked.

“Stay with Daddy!”

She let Tiqi run to Sephiroth and plop down in his lap. She frowned at him. “If anything happens to her, I will kill you.”

Sephiroth gave her a faint, dry smile. “Of course. I’d expect nothing less.”

Aeris clenched her jaw and wondered if she was making a huge mistake. She watched Tiqi bend Sephiroth’s thumb up and down as she sang, “Daddy finger, daddy finger.”

She shook her head in defeat. “Alright, baby. You win.”

She paused on her way out and turned back, popping the Restore materia out of her staff. It was the one Sephiroth had given her a lifetime ago. The one she’d asked for in the Icicle Inn chalet. She handed it to him and saw recognition flit across his face as he curled his fingers around the orb.

“Just in case,” she said. Then she ruffled Tiqi’s hair. “You be good, okay?”

Tiqi nodded solemnly. “Oh-kay!”

Aeris strode towards the cave entrance with her staff in hand and the rucksack strapped to her back. When she reached the waterfall, she stopped, turned around, and tiptoed back until she could just make out their voices. Sephiroth was turned away from her, and Tiqi was partially hidden from her view by Sephiroth’s body.

“…you well, Tiqi?” Sephiroth asked, running his fingers through Tiqi’s shoulder length brown hair.

“Pee-kah-boo!” Tiqi chirped.

Aeris could hear the smile in Sephiroth’s voice. “I see you.”

“Pee-kah-boo!”

“I’m glad you’re okay, Tiqi. I’m…sorry I hurt you. It will never happen again. Promise.” He held up his pinky finger.

Tiqi giggled and pointed at Sephiroth’s hand. “Baby finger!”

Sephiroth wiggled his finger in the air. “Yes, this is Daddy’s baby finger.”

“Daddy happy?” Tiqi asked.
Sephiroth shook his head.

“Mommy sad too,” Tiqi said.

“You’re right, Tiqi. Mommy’s sad. And angry. It…wasn’t supposed to go this way.”

“Hmmm,” Tiqi pouted, before asking hopefully, “Daddy be happy?” She stood up in Sephiroth’s lap and kissed him on the cheek.

He hugged her tight and pressed his forehead against her temple. “I don’t think I’ve ever known how to do that, Tiqi. Maybe you can teach me.”

Aeris turned to go with a heavy heart. She’d heard enough. They’d be fine in each other’s company.

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Sephiroth slowly regained his strength. He started walking for short periods. But it was clear that he’d never be able to wield Masamune again.

He was watching Tiqi splash in the riverbank under the rosy light of the setting sun. Aeris watched him. His coat lay on the ground beside him and she could see the curves of his ribs which had always been hidden beneath layers of thick, corded muscle.

“How much of your madness was Jenova’s fault?” she asked, finally deciding to voice the question that had been weighing on her mind. “You told me once that you heard the Planet crying, but now you know that’s impossible.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Is that what you wish to hear? That the alien I called mother whispered in my ear and made me do what I did?”

Aeris didn’t respond. She looked over at Tiqi who was digging holes in the mud with her hands. It was answer enough and it aggravated her. A part of her had dared to hope.

He turned his face away. “This world that had only ever used me…why would I treat it any differently? I didn’t need Jenova’s voice in my head to make me do what I did.”

Aeris sighed and looked up at the orange-tinted clouds. Why couldn’t he have just taken the easy way out of this? Let them both play pretend with a sanitized little fantasy? But he’d never really lied to her in all these years. Apparently he wasn’t about to start now.

After a while, she asked, “So what will you do now?”

He grimaced. “I can’t even cast cure now. Not even with the help of my bracer. You’ve made me less than a common man.”

She hadn’t known that, and as much as a part of her wanted to rub it in his face it also meant that their journey back to civilization would be that much harder. “That does make you pretty useless,” she agreed without venom. “But that doesn’t answer my question.”

He remained silent, staring off into the horizon. Something about the lost look in his eyes and the slackness of his jaw made Aeris want to slap him.
She rose to her feet. “Let me make something clear,” she said. “I’m sorry you had such a terrible childhood. What happened to you was awful and criminal and if you hadn’t already killed Hojo and Shinra I would want to do it myself. For both our sakes.” She paused to breathe deeply through her nose. “But I’m not going to be your shrink. I’m not going to hold your hand and tell you that it’s going to be okay and that you can choose to be a better man. It’s honestly already a miracle that I haven’t killed or castrated you.” Sephiroth wouldn’t meet her eyes as she plowed ahead. “But the fact is, I need you to get home. If you care at all about your children—”

His head snapped towards her, eyes widening in realization as he stared at her midsection.

“Yes, children,” she said. “If it was just Tiqi I would have left you to die without a second thought.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “How far along are you?”

“Four months.”

She watched him blink as he did the math. Conflicted emotions flashed across his face as he remembered the night he’d given her the Minerva Band and all the firepower that had launched them on this journey.

“Yeah, that night.” For a moment she said nothing more and just let him gaze in silence at her stomach, its gentle swell hidden behind her red jacket. “I don’t know how you’re going to do it, but if you want your children to live, then you have to get it together and find a way to do the right thing for once in your life.”

She walked over to stand beside Tiqi, who was still too busy playing in the mud to pay her any mind.

“Do you remember what you said to me the first time we met?” She stared hard at Sephiroth. “You handed me a pen and said ‘make your choice.’ And then little by little you stripped me of my pride and my identity until I just did whatever I had to do to survive you.”

There was that guilt in his eyes again. For the first time since she’d known him, it was directed at her. Maybe because for the first time in his life, he knew what it felt like to be merely mortal.

“I guess now I’m just asking the same thing of you. Now you have to choose between your pride and the lives of your children and their mother.” She shrugged and picked Tiqi up. “So make your choice, Sephiroth,” she said, before turning and heading back into the cavern.

Chapter End Notes

Why was this chapter so hard to write? So many reasons. Because I am way too in love with Sephiroth and want to forgive him far too easily? Because I'm such a properly socialized young woman that I habitually make excuses the same way the media makes excuses for crimes committed by white men? Because I find it so difficult to hold on to anger when I am not actually personally angry? Because I find it incredibly difficult to show Sephiroth grappling with challenging and "emasculating" emotions?

Sigh.
Was this satisfying? (You didn't REALLY think I'd cheat you by making it a seph's-really-a-good-guy-it-was-Jenova's-fault story, did you?)
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

thank you again to everyone who commented on the previous chapter. it was really gratifying to see so much appreciation for the results that took so many attempts to get sort-of right. honestly, most of what y'all loved about that last chapter was thanks to Lilly pointing out the numerous flaws with the first 5 drafts.

this chapter is very talky. do i even know how to write dialogue. How does one make a conversation about complex philosophical topics seem natural?

Chapter 22

Sephiroth never came to her to say that he would help them get home. But he watched Tiqi while Aeris hunted. In the mornings he helped her cut slices of meat to dry out beneath the scorching midday sun. In the evenings he peeled the fibrous cores from the stems that Aeris harvested so that they could weave them into ropes.

One night she woke to find him missing, and she untangled herself from Tiqi before walking out of the cavern to find him standing at the edge of a nearby cliff. He was gripping a green orb in his hand – the Restore materia. Aeris watched as his arm shook before it dropped to his side. His shoulders slumped. He stared out at the valley below, as if contemplating the merits of stepping off the ledge.

He turned and met her eyes. She couldn’t see his irises or the whites of his sclera in the darkness. No mako glow.

“What’s the point of a man,” he asked, “who once thought he was a god, and now is nothing?”

*Your only purpose is to get us home*, she wanted to say. But she didn’t. Instead she said, “You can be whatever you want to be, Sephiroth.”

“How?” he asked, his voice dead and dry.

It was a fair question to ask for a man raised as a weapon. It was a question she didn’t particularly want to think through. A question she had no obligation to think through.

She gave him back his own words. “How does anyone become anything?” she quoted. “Through word and deed.” Then she turned around and went back to Tiqi.
Days after their conversation at the cliff, Aeris woke to Tiqi stirring restlessly in her arms. Her skin felt hot to the touch. Tiqi twisted in discomfort, crying, “Mommy, mommy!” and all Aeris could do was hold her daughter tight and stroke her back, whispering empty reassurances into her hair through the night.

Cure magic only affected injuries. It was useless against illness.

By morning, Tiqi was shivering and only wanted to lie in Aeris’s arms. Tiqi’s voice grew hoarse and she choked on her thick phlegm. Aeris felt her heart stop every time she heard air rattle wetly in Tiqi’s throat.

Aeris looked up as Sephiroth approached. “I need to get more food,” she said. Foraging was hard work and they were never able to stockpile much. The jerky they’d made wouldn’t do Tiqi any good. She needed soft, simple foods her body could digest. Aeris needed to dig for more tubers.

She was exhausted from the night, having barely slept thanks to Tiqi’s constant cries and movement. Her body ached from holding her child. But she didn’t have a choice. She had to go.

“Stay with her,” Sephiroth said. “I’ll go.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Aeris said. “I don’t think you’re strong enough for that yet.”

Sephiroth’s lips hardened into a line. “She’ll cry if you leave her. I’ll be fine.”

Aeris was too grateful to argue. He turned and walked out of the cavern, with her rucksack slung over his shoulder.

Hours later, he came back with a bag full of tubers and arms full of wood. His face looked ashen and he was shaking, though he tried to hide it. Aeris didn’t say anything as she watched him stoke the fire and fill the pot with water from the lake. She cradled Tiqi’s sleeping body as he washed the purple tubers and cut them into the pot with her dagger.

When the food was cooked and cooled, he mashed the roots with his fingers and handed Aeris the bowl. She tilted it into Tiqi’s mouth and watched with her heart in her throat as Tiqi tried to drink.

The second Tiqi swallowed, she started screaming and shaking her head. Tears rolled down Tiqi’s face as she cried, “No, no, no.”

Aeris bit down on the inside of her cheek. She would give anything and everything to make her baby okay. But all she could do was pray.

It went on for days. Tiqi barely ate or drank anything. Aeris barely slept. And when she wasn’t worrying about Tiqi, questions ran around and around in her head. About Sephiroth. About herself. About them.

Questions she still wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answers to.

It was late afternoon when Sephiroth returned that day. He found her holding Tiqi in her arms, out in the fresh air by the river, beneath the shade of a tree. She was gazing down at once-plump cheeks that were hollowing out.

He took one look at her tearstained face and sat down on the ground beside her, reaching out to brush Tiqi’s damp hair away from her forehead.
“We have to make it home,” Aeris said. “You understand that, don’t you?”

“I know. We will.”

He sounded as confident as he had in the past, before they’d come to this mountain. And she needed to hear that self-assurance so badly right now. Her emotions were frayed like thread scraped against the countless shards of glass that lay between them.

“Why did you do it?” she asked, with her eyes still fixed on Tiqi. And the words poured out of her because there had been little to do but think, day after day, trapped here with nothing else to do but hold her sick child close. “Why did you take me if you only ever wanted to kill the Planet? Why did you do all those things to me if you wanted to make me a goddess? Why did you give me this?” She lifted her bare foot and the gold edges of the Minerva Band glinted in the sunlight. “Why are we here and why can’t I hate you?”

She wanted to hate him. For everything he’d taken from her. For causing them to wind up here. But she couldn’t. The truth of who and what he was had eaten at her soul every time Sephiroth left in the morning to find food for Tiqi. Every time he drew water from the lake so that Aeris could wipe Tiqi’s brow.

“I didn’t bring us here, Aeris,” he said softly. “The Planet did. And you should hate me. That you don’t is…” his voice grew thick as he trailed off. “I should go. I’ll leave you two alone.” He shifted onto his knees so that he could stand up.

Aeris reached out and grasped his hand. “Don’t. Stay with me.” She didn’t want to be alone anymore with nothing but worry to keep her company. “Talk to me. I don’t care what you say. Just talk. I can’t stand the silence anymore.” It was never supposed to be silent. Tiqi was always chattering.

He reluctantly sat back down. He looked down at Aeris’s foot, then ran a finger along the materia embedded in the cuff of her Minerva Band. “You want to know why I gave you this?”

“Yes,” she said. It was as good a place to start as any. “It was a weird thing to do.” Having Scarlet build custom armor for her. Providing priceless materia. “You could have just…”

“You want to know why I didn’t simply lock you away? So that you would never be stolen from me again?”

Aeris was too tired to roll her eyes. “Or you could have just increased the number of Turks watching me.” That would have been a normal thing to do. Shinra had done that plenty of times in her life.

“The thought never crossed my mind,” he confessed.

“Why not?”

Sephiroth sighed. “Do you really find it so unbelievable that you matter to me?”

Aeris snorted. “You almost choked me to death.”

He frowned. “I spent ten years planning for that moment,” he said slowly. “The singular event that would justify everything that had happened in my life. You defeated me, and I lost control. It’s not something I’m proud of.”

She wasn’t sure that counted as an acceptable excuse. But it was true enough that he’d always been careful with her, knowing that he was strong enough to harm her with half a thought.
But so what if she mattered to him? That didn’t mean anything. Prized possessions always mattered to their owners.

“Why did you want to make me a goddess,” she asked, “when you never treated me like a person?”

He turned away to face the river and let the silence hang before saying, “Do you know what you look like when you play with my child? When you work in your garden? Or when you commune with the Planet when you think no one’s looking?”

Silence sat heavy between them. She waited for him to continue.

“I never considered locking you away after AVALANCHE,” he admitted. “I wouldn’t deny you and Tiqi the sun, after all the years I spent in a glass cage.”

“That’s exactly what you threatened to do when we first met,” she reminded him. “Were you lying then?”

“No,” he said with a wry smile. “But I never doubted that you would choose the other path.”

She took a steadying breath and looked him in the eyes. It still felt a bit strange to see brown irises and mussed silver hair with dark roots. Finally she asked, “What you did to me...were you trying to get revenge?” The words felt thick in her throat. “For my father leaving?”

His eyes widened in a display of genuine surprise. “Not at all. I cherish my memories of Professor Gast. He was the one good thing in my childhood.”

“Then why? Why did you treat me like that?”

He looked at a loss for words.

“Do you even realize that what you did to me was wrong?”

“Aeris…I…” he opened and then closed his mouth again before saying, “I told myself that I was meant to be a god. And gods dictate morality.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course you think that. Get the power, make the rules. Do whatever you want and justify it after. But I’ll let you in on a little secret. That’s not how the Cetra thought. Our goddess never handed down a moral code or a book of rules.”

His brow furrowed. “Then what did you have?”

Aeris shrugged. “The call to grow life wherever our feet touched the soil. To bring out the full beauty inside each of the goddess’s different creations.” She almost smiled at how confused he looked. “It was never about obedience.”

“How would such a system not descend into chaos?” he demanded.

“Simple,” she said. “The goddess lives in everything. As the Cetra nurtured life to its full expression, we always did it in harmony with our surroundings. And that applied to ourselves more than anything. As I grow and live and make choices, I do it knowing that the goddess that lives within me wants to be at peace with the goddess that lives within you.”

Now he looked well and truly uncomfortable. “I see. Then by Cetran standards I have behaved wretchedly.”

“Pretty much. Though that’s true by human standards too.”
He frowned. “I was under the impression that you enjoyed it, though. You were a very quick study.”

An angry flush crept up her cheeks and she smacked him in the chest. “Just because I responded to some of the weird things you did – it doesn’t make it any less awful that you forced it all on me!”

He pressed his lips together and looked away. “Am I wrong then in thinking that we had evolved beyond that? I may have forced you in the beginning, but afterward?”

“Look…in a different situation, I might have really liked some of the things we did.” She ran an agitated hand through her tangled hair. Memories of rope coiled neatly around her wrists and ankles flashed through her mind. “And I won’t lie, we had a lot of great sex. But that doesn’t make me want to forgive you for anything.”

He didn’t respond. It was about as much as she expected. She wasn’t holding her breath for an apology from Sephiroth of all people. After a moment she asked, “Have you always been so…kinky?”

One corner of Sephiroth’s mouth twitched upwards. “Yes.” At Aeris’s questioning expression, he added, “Let’s just say I had a formative experience in my adolescence about the…psychological benefits of bondage and control. It helped me deal with my treatments in the labs. And I continued on from there.”

She didn’t know what to say to that.

“But you were the only one I ever went so far with.”

Aeris shifted in discomfort. She didn’t really want to know that. It was too intimate a detail. Her eyes flicked over Tiqi who was still fast asleep in her lap and she changed the subject. “So why didn’t you just increase my security after AVALANCHE?”

It took him a while to answer, as though he wasn’t entirely sure himself. “When I realized that you’d defended yourself by casting from materia you weren’t even holding…I was so…” he seemed to be searching for the right word. “Proud. I was proud that you could do the impossible. I was proud that you were mine. No one would ever lay hands on you again because you were more than capable of seeing to that. You didn’t need the Turks. And I…” he turned back to look her in the eyes. “Maybe I wanted to see how far you could go. This creature that I called mine.”

“I’m not a creature,” she said.

A ghost of a smile flitted across his lips. “No, I suppose not.”

A long moment passed until Aeris finally looked away. “You’re awfully talkative today. How come?”

He gave her a small, self-deprecating smile. “I suppose there’s a simplicity in living like this – without the burden of godhead. Knowing that all I need to do is get my children and their mother to safety.”

The question was on the tip of her tongue, but she didn’t ask it. What he did afterwards was up to him. All his reasons and his answers didn’t make up for the past. But justice had been served, as far as she was concerned. She wasn’t going to drag him in front of a jury after he helped them get home, especially when they probably wouldn’t be able to confirm his identity. Let him go on living. The Great Sephiroth, defanged and declawed.

“We will leave soon after Tiqi recovers,” he said, breaking through her thoughts. “I’ll make the
Aeris nodded and closed her eyes. It was comforting to hear the confidence in his voice. The way he could still make it sound like everything was well in his control.

Sephiroth shifted closer, leaning back against the tree. Aeris let her head fall onto his shoulder. She slept like that til dusk.

Tiqi’s fever broke after another two days. She grinned at Aeris and rolled out of her arms, stretching and stumbling and looking around.

“Hi Mommy!” she said. “Daddy where?”

“Daddy’s out hunting,” Aeris replied with a tired smile. Seeing Tiqi on her feet again was like having a boulder lifted from her chest.

“Hun-ting! Tiqi hunt too.”

Aeris smiled. “Sorry baby, you’re staying here with me until you’re all better.”

“Mommy? I’m oh-kay!”

Aeris reached out and ruffled Tiqi’s hair. “Thank the goddess. You are.”

Sephiroth continued to grow stronger each day. They stocked supplies until they were finally ready to leave the cavern that had been their makeshift home for weeks. Aeris would carry the rucksack full of jerky. Sephiroth would carry their pots and bowls in a large fur bag tied closed with twine. The fur would double as a blanket on cold nights.

The slight bulge of Aeris’s belly was clearly visible now in her stained blue tank top.

The morning of their long journey down the mountain, they stood in front of the crystal pillar.

“It seems wrong to leave her like this,” Aeris said.

Sephiroth didn’t respond. His melancholy gaze was fixed on Lucrecia’s frozen form.

“Why do you think she’s here?” Aeris asked. They needed to figure it out. The Planet had brought her here for a reason.

“Jenova was a millennia-old organism that still managed to retain some level of sentience,” Sephiroth mused. “When I carried its cells I was nearly indestructible. Perhaps…”

“Yes?” Aeris prompted when he seemed to get lost in thought.
He took a slow, deep breath. “Hojo injected Lucrecia’s fetus with Jenova cells. That’s how I was made.”

Aeris’s cheek twitched. His voice was monotone, as though the atrocity of his creation were a mundane occurrence.

“Maybe there are still Jenova cells active within her body,” he concluded.

Aeris closed her eyes and put one hand on Sephiroth’s arm and the other on top of Tiqi’s head.

“Mommy?” Tiqi asked, looking up in curiosity.

Aeris sensed nothing out of the ordinary. She opened her eyes and looked thoughtfully at Lucrecia’s body in the crystal pillar. “Tiqi, stay here with Daddy, okay?”

When Tiqi nodded and Sephiroth took her hand, Aeris stepped closer to the water’s edge and stripped off her clothes until she was standing in nothing but her Minerva Band. She walked into the frigid lake and shivered. Goose bumps rose over every inch of her skin. She clenched her teeth and swam the short distance to the outcropping of rock and petrified mako at the base of the pillar. She pulled herself out of the water and placed her palms against the crystal prison that held the body of Sephiroth’s true mother.

And yes, there it was. Faint but distinct. The seething dark energy that she now knew to be Calamity’s essence. This was how Sephiroth had felt, before she’d taken him down.

“You’re right,” she called out to him, teeth chattering. “I can feel the Jenova energy in her that you used to have. But…why doesn’t Tiqi feel like this?”

Sephiroth hoisted Tiqi into his arms and she twisted her torso to better see Aeris. “Lucrecia’s embryo was augmented by whole Jenova cells. As I grew, they grew with me. I suspect that the components of my body were, effectively, lined and strengthened by a layer of Jenova cells.”

Aeris tilted her head to the side. “So you used to be made of Sephiroth cells and Jenova cells.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “But it stands to reason that my gametes were entirely my own. Hence why Tiqi feels native to this Planet.”

Aeris smiled dryly to herself. Good to know that Sephiroth’s sperm hadn’t been tainted.

“Okay. Then I just have to do the same thing here that I did to you.”

He nodded in agreement.

Aeris closed her eyes and took a deep breath, pushing away the sensation of her frozen, wet skin and ignoring the instinct to shiver.

She’d done this once. She could do it again.

She tried to remember the feeling of raw power bursting out of her hands. The way Sephiroth’s skin had felt beneath her palms as Holy’s blue light crumbled Meteor into dust. But it was no use. She couldn’t relive the kind of sheer desperation that had given birth to that kind of magic.

But something in her blood called her forward anyway. Pulled her down until she sank to her knees and forgot about the icy water dripping from her hair, down along her bare back and thighs. She felt her pulse slow, her breathing become deep and even, as she gave herself completely; to her goddess,
to her Planet. She was warm and her hands on the surface of the crystal felt steady and sure.

She was here, as the Planet had intended. And she would do her duty, with grace upon her lips.

A flash of white light filled the dark cavern, so bright it left colored spots on the backs of her closed eyelids. The spicy-sweet scent of lilies floated on the air and Aeris felt cool water falling all around her— a healing rain manifested from nothing, clinking musically against the surface of the lake and the petrified mako. Then, almost as quickly as it began, it was over. She opened her eyes to see that Lucrecia was gone, body dissipated into light to rejoin the Lifestream. The crystal pillar had melted away underneath the rain.

The last traces of the Calamity had been purged from the Planet.

*May you finally find peace, Lucrecia*, Aeris thought.

She swam back and climbed out of the lake, shivering as she wiped water from her limbs. Then she felt a touch at her shoulder and she turned to see Sephiroth standing with his chest bare and his long leather coat held out for her to wear. She blinked in surprise before sliding her arms into the sleeves and wrapping the overly large coat tight around her body, grateful for his lingering warmth.

“Mommy?” Tiqi tugged at her sleeve. “That Daddy’s coat!”

Aeris smiled down at Tiqi as she wrung her hair out. “You’re right, baby. Mommy’s wearing Daddy’s coat.”

She glanced up to see Sephiroth walking towards Masamune. The sword had lain in the same spot, untouched since the moment the Lifestream had brought them here.

She tilted her head to the side. “I don’t think we can take that with us.” She could only imagine how much the sword meant to him, having been with him for nearly twenty years. But it was far too large and heavy to be anything but a burden on their journey.

“I know,” he said as his hands wrapped around Masamune’s hilt. He dragged the impossibly long blade back towards Aeris and Tiqi and knelt on the ground. Then he tilted his head to the side and gathered his hair over one shoulder. With his free hand, he held Masamune in place, its tip resting on the dirt floor. One smooth motion and over three feet of silver hair fell in a heap.

He stood and pulled Masamune up by the hilt with both hands, and then drove it deep into the ground in front of the pile of hair so that it stood like a grave marker.

Aeris silently shrugged off his coat and handed it back to him. She put her own clothes back on, heart heavy with sorrow and relief. Two generations had paid the price for the sins and misguided dreams of their parents. And Aeris swore that Tiqi and her sibling would live their lives free of the shadow that her father had named ‘Jenova.’

She strapped the rucksack to her back and wrapped her fingers tightly around her staff. Sephiroth picked up the bag full of Aeris’s pottery. Then they each took hold of one of Tiqi’s hands and walked out of the cave, never once looking back.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

warning: angst and some maybe graphic childbirth stuff ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 23

They hiked down the mountain, following the flow of the river. Through dense thickets and uneven ground. To the constant sound of water trickling over stone, and Tiqi’s endless chatter.

“Mommy? What’s dat?” Tiqi asked.

“It’s a tree, baby,” Aeris said.

Then a few seconds later. “Mommy? What’s dat?”

“That’s also a tree,” she said. She wasn’t a botany textbook after all.

“Ohhhhh! Tree! Tree! Baby tree!” Tiqi cried, pointing at a bush.

On and on it went, driving Aeris to the brink of her patience. And then Tiqi wandered away to try and touch some plant that was probably poisonous. Aeris suppressed a sigh and tugged on Tiqi’s hand.

When Tiqi grew tired, Sephiroth strapped her to his back in the teal mei tai wrap and slung his fur bag over his left shoulder.

“Daddy talk to Tiqi!” she sang.

So he told her about how the mountain range was likely formed by tectonic activity, when one plate subducted under another. He told her about how the river was formed by tiny streams merging together and carving valleys through the rock.

“Mnhmm!” Tiqi said, her eyelids growing heavier and heavier as she bounced along on Sephiroth’s back. Soon she was fast asleep, cheek pressed against the leather of his coat.

They made camp each night, sleeping beneath the stars wherever they liked, knowing that no predators would disturb them thanks to the Planet’s intervention. Sephiroth would often sit with Tiqi in his lap and the Restore materia gripped tightly in his white-knuckled hand. Tiqi would twist around to look at him and say, “Daddy, are you trying so hard?”

Sephiroth would smile sadly and press a gentle kiss to her forehead.
Then Tiqi would giggle and say, “Is oh-kay, Daddy, try again!”

As the months went by, Aeris’s feet became swollen as her body retained more water and the pressure of her belly strained her veins. Sephiroth returned to their campsite one night to find Tiqi asleep and Aeris awake, rubbing at the skin around the Minerva Band. It was starting to chafe and pinch her flesh.

He knelt down in front of her and frowned.

“Edema,” she explained, recalling the technical term from the pregnancy books she’d read.

He didn’t say anything. Slowly, he pulled back the lapel of his coat and reached into an inner pocket. Aeris’s eyes widened when he withdrew his hand to reveal a tiny screwdriver, smaller than her pinkie finger.

“You’ve had that with you this whole time?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He sighed. “Because you would have no reason to believe that I was giving it to you in good faith. I didn’t want you to think I was trying to tempt you into taking it off.”

He held the screwdriver out towards her. She gently grasped it between her fingers and held it in her lap, staring hard at the small device. If she took off the band, she would be defenseless. In their current states, he could overpower her easily whenever she didn’t have her staff in hand.

Could she really trust him? She would have no choice but to rely on him when she gave birth. But now? It still made her nervous.

She looked up into his steady brown eyes. “I want to hear you say it.”

“What?” he asked, puzzled.

“That you won’t hurt me. That you won’t force me to do anything against my will.” Her hands were shaking, imperceptibly. “That I can trust you.”

Sephiroth glanced away and closed his eyes. She watched him take a long, shuddering breath. Then he looked back at her and said, “You have my word. I will not hurt you. I will not force you.”

“Why not?” she demanded.

He smiled slightly with genuine sadness and amusement. “Because I’m not a god, Aeris. And because…I promised I would get you home.”

They held each other’s eyes for a long moment. Then she slowly handed the screwdriver back to him and extended her right foot. “I can’t reach.”

His calloused hand on the back of her ankle was warm. His fingers strong. He gently pulled her foot into his lap and bent closer to remove the two tiny black screws that held the Minerva Band in place. It came open with a whisper of metal on metal. Aeris left her foot in his lap as he replaced the screws and set the armor and screwdriver on the ground.

She rubbed at the strip of pale white skin, stained pink. The tan line was stark even in the pale light of the campfire.
His hand tentatively wrapped around her swollen foot. When she didn’t pull away, he squeezed gently. She closed her eyes and sighed as he massaged away the ache.

She let him hold her through the cold night.

A few weeks later he said, “We should find shelter and stay there until after the baby is born and you’re ready to keep going.”

“How?” she asked, rubbing her hard, swollen belly. Her faded and dirty blue tank top didn’t reach the waistband of her pants anymore, leaving a few inches of skin exposed. By her estimate, she still had a little over a month to go before the baby came. She couldn’t walk fast or far these days on her swollen feet, but a little progress was better than none.

He looked up at the sky. “The rainy season is coming,” he answered. “We should expect at least four months of it.”

That didn’t make her happy at all, but it wouldn’t delay them too much. She would have needed most of that time to recover anyway. So they kept hiking until they found a small cave to call home.

One night, after Tiqi had fallen asleep, Aeris caught Sephiroth staring at his left hand. His right gripped the Restore materia. She walked over to him and saw the jagged cut that split his palm. It had stopped bleeding but was still leaking clear fluid. Without a word, she knelt on the ground with him and took his hand. She drew her fingers over the length of the cut, hovering millimeters above his broken skin. Warmth bloomed between them as the green glow of her Cetra magic sealed the wound.

The weight of his hand felt good in hers. She traced the callouses on his fingers and the pale scar tissue left behind on his palm. It was the first time she’d seen a scar on his body. She’d never thought too much about it before. Had always assumed that his body didn’t bear scars, unlike Zack’s, because he was too good of a fighter to ever get hurt.

“You’ve never scarred before now?” she asked.

Sephiroth didn’t look up from where his hand was held in hers. “No,” he said. “I suppose the Jenova cells always took care of it.”

He didn’t say anything more, but Aeris could see the lost expression in his eyes. The face of a man who didn’t know who or what he was anymore. She knew the feeling well.

She found herself touching his face. He looked up at her, startled.

He was still oddly handsome, with his dark roots and straggly silver hair. She ran a tentative finger against the rough black hairs of his beard, thinking idly that facial hair looked terrible on him and that he should really get rid of it the first chance he had.

He caught her gently by the wrist and pulled her fingertips to his lips.

Tears stung her eyes. It had been nearly half a year since they’d been intimate. The last time had been by a campfire, much like this.
His mouth was warm beneath her fingers and her heart ached with a loneliness that felt like pain. She was pregnant and he was the father and Tiqi’s cuddles didn’t make up for the contact she needed. And it made her head spin to think about because she was pretty sure she was supposed to hate him but it was getting harder and harder to remember why.

She leaned forward and kissed him. His beard scratched her face but his lips were soft beneath hers.

“Aeris?” he whispered.

“Shh,” she said.

Her hands came up to push the leather coat off his shoulders. He shrugged out of it and let it fall to the floor behind him. Her fingers traced the still-perfect skin of his clavicles, down the planes and curves of his muscles. He was still strong and taut beneath her hands, though slimmer now than he used to be.

He sighed at her touch. His hand hovered at her hip, as though afraid.

“What are you doing?” he murmured.

“I don’t know,” she answered sadly. “I just need this right now.” She looked up into his eyes. “Is that okay?”

Ironic, really, that she was asking for his consent.

He swallowed. Then nodded. “May I?” he asked, fingers grazing against the hem of her shirt.

She nodded and he slowly pulled the garment off of her to expose heavy breasts and a firm rounded belly. They each shucked their pants and then lay down together on the fur. It was rough and scratchy, but better than the cold dirt. She curled up against him, pressing her back into his chest. His leg nestled between hers. He gently stroked her breast, her thighs.

She reached between her legs to grasp his cock. It didn’t take much to stroke him to readiness. To slip him between her folds and wriggle back against him until she was fully impaled.

He felt so good inside her. Hot and pulsating. One strong arm cushioned her head while the other held her firmly by the curve of her hipbone. She pushed back against him and arched her back at the pleasure that bloomed like warm honey from her core.

Up here in the mountains, there was a hole in her heart that gnawed at her every day. A longing for something she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Something fundamentally missing that left her empty and confused.

But when he thrust into her like this, she forgot. The world faded away until there was only the flickering of the fire, the soft sounds of their moans, the aching pressure that built between her legs and demanded release.

His lips were warm against the shell of her ear, his breath ragged. She stroked herself to the tempo of his gasps, thinking only of the tight knot of pleasure that erased the ever present aches in her feet and all along her back. He ground his hips against her in that way that she loved, hitting that spot again and again. She bit down on her bottom lip to keep herself silent. Her fingers on her clit and the pressure of his cock inside her drove her upwards to the brink until her mouth fell open and she gasped and shuddered in his arms.

She sighed as a sleepy contentment began to fall upon her like a blanket. With her eyes closed, she
lazily clenched her muscles around him and ran her fingers along the length of his forearm, feeling the fine hairs tickle the pads of her fingertips as he thrust into her, faster and more desperate. Then his breath hitched against her ear, his arm tightened around her. He fell back against the fur and Aeris felt the tension melt away from his body. She was still in his arms, his softening cock still inside her. A trickle of hot semen ran down her leg and onto the fur when she shifted closer against his chest.

He held her, palm flat against her belly, as their breathing returned to normal.

The baby kicked. And it reminded her of something.

“What was it like,” she murmured, “growing up inside Shinra the way you did?”

“Lonely,” he said with his lips pressed against the skin beneath her earlobe. “I had nothing to call my own. And no one to call a friend.” Silence lingered between them for a while before he whispered, “I remember wanting this stuffed chocobo more than anything. It was the bestselling toy the year before you were born. It had blue marbles for eyes…and a little messenger bag. I thought it would be nice to pretend to have a pet chocobo. Something to keep me company.” He sighed into her hair. “But they only ever gave me swords and guns and mako injections.”

After a moment he asked, “What was it like for you?”

“Lonely,” she said. “I was always different from the other kids. It’s hard growing up with voices in your head that no one else can hear. I guess…you can understand that.” She smiled wryly to herself. “All my life I had to hide who and what I was. And then…” she laughed at the memory. Why was it coming up now? “Along came Zack. And you know what he said to me? He said… ‘I will always accept you.’ Can you believe that?” Her eyes filled with tears. She cried easily these days. Mom hormones and all.

“I can,” Sephiroth said.

“He was your friend, wasn’t he? How could you have done that to him?”

“I thought anything and everything was mine for the taking,” Sephiroth admitted. “Zack would move on. He would be fine.”

Aeris swallowed past the lump in her throat.

“It wasn’t until you were taken from me that I realized what Zack must have felt.”

She stared into the fire. “When did you start caring? It couldn’t have been from the beginning.”

He was silent for a moment. And then finally said, “Icicle Inn. When I thought I had hurt you. When I did hurt you.” He knew well that physical harm was far from the only form of pain.

“Why?”

He sighed into her hair. “I don’t know. Seeing you like that made me realize it wasn’t at all what I wanted. I wanted the woman who could still look at me with defiance after swearing she was my slave. The woman who wormed her way into my office to acquire materia and to spy on my work.”

“You make no sense,” she said. Her eyelids were starting to feel heavy.

“I may have made you beg in bed. But did you ever really bow down to me in life?”

“And that’s what you wanted?” she mumbled, eyes closing as she succumbed to sleep.
“Angeal used to say ‘you have to hold on to your dreams and your pride.’ I don’t know anyone else who’s done that more so than you. Do you?”

She squeezed his hand but didn’t answer. She was already fast asleep.

Aeris was ready for the labor pains when they came, early one morning before the dawn. She left a sleepy Tiqi in Sephiroth’s arms and walked out into the rain, towards the stream.

Everything progressed much faster this time. She remembered reading that subsequent births were usually easier than the first. She knew what to expect, and her body had been through it before. She walked through the contractions, feeling the smooth pebbles of the riverbank beneath her feet and the cool water between her toes. As the sun slowly rose above the horizon, turning the sky from indigo to pale grey, she gave thanks to the goddess for getting them this far, and for the strength to see this through.

She stripped off her clothes and left them on high ground. Misty rain covered every inch of her bare skin. She waded deeper into the water as her skin heated up. The contractions came and went, cresting through her body, tightening her belly into a boulder before softening again. She sat down in the stream and let her fingers trail over moss-slick stones, groaning her agony into the empty clearing. The Planet sang in her ears and Aeris gave herself to its song.

Sephiroth and Tiqi joined her by mid-morning. He helped Tiqi take off her clothes so that she could join Aeris in the water. Then he removed his boots and rolled up his pants and stood watch on the river bank, occasionally offering Aeris the water bottle or a handful of berries.

Sometimes she lay in the water, leaning back against her elbows with her head tilted to the sky. Sometimes she crouched on her hands and knees. As her labor went on and the pains came faster and grew longer, she stopped thinking and gave in to her instincts, moving this way and that in a desperate attempt to seek relief.

When Aeris started screaming, Sephiroth stripped down to nothing so that he could hold Tiqi in his arms while letting her stay close to her mother, explaining all the while that Mommy was bringing a new baby into the world, and that it hurt but it would be over soon, and Mommy would be okay. Tiqi watched in wide eyed awe and clung to Sephiroth’s hand.

And then there was just the pain that came in steady waves. The overwhelming urge to bear down. Aeris listened to her body and did what it told her. She could do this. She had to do this. Just as every woman before her in that unbroken line had done since the dawn of her people. Squatting in the stream, hair plastered to her head with sweat, she bore down and brought her baby into the world.

In the end she lay back on the riverbank and held Tiqi’s hand as Sephiroth kneeled between her legs and gently cradled the head of their second born child. He pulled the tiny body out of its mother, assisting with that final contraction, and lifted the baby into his arms.

He laid the child against Aeris’s chest. “It’s a boy.”

Aeris cried in joy and relief. That it was over. That a new life had begun. That Tiqi would have her first friend. That soon they would go home.
Sephiroth covered mother and child with his leather coat. Beneath the garment, Aeris stroked the indescribably soft skin of her son’s back, fingers lingering over the wisps of matted black hair that covered his head. “Tiqi, say hi to your baby brother,” she said. Then she clenched her jaw as a softer wave of pain coursed through her body. When it passed, she opened her eyes to see a fragile little arm poking out from beneath the coat, and four tiny fingers and an even smaller thumb wrapped around Tiqi’s pointer finger.

“Ohh, baby so cute!” Tiqi squealed.

Aeris wondered when her daughter had gotten so big. Tiqi seemed like a giant now compared to her new brother. Aeris kissed Tiqi on the cheek and closed her eyes happily.

And then Sephiroth’s low, strained voice said, “Aeris, I think something’s wrong.”

She looked up into his worried brown eyes and felt a chill run through her. Nothing was allowed to go wrong. They weren’t equipped to deal with anything out of the ordinary.

“What is it?” she asked. She wiped the droplets of rain away from her eyes.

“I think… your placenta broke. And the missing piece hasn’t come out,” he said. “You’re losing a lot of blood. Is that normal?”

No, it most definitely was not. The pleasant hormonal fog of afterbirth cleared as adrenaline and dread flooded her veins. She racked her brain for any memory of the books she’d read, cover to cover, during her first pregnancy.

Retained placenta. Extremely dangerous. Hemorrhage and infection.

She felt her mouth go dry. She might very well die, here, by the river.

“You’re going to have to remove it,” she said, with a calm she didn’t feel.

“What?”

“By hand. You’re going to have to get it out of me.” Manual extraction was how it was usually done anyway. The only differences here were Sephiroth instead of a highly trained OBGYN, and a stream in the middle of the mountains instead of painkillers in an operating theater. What could possibly go wrong?

Aeris closed her eyes and swallowed hard. If she died here, the baby would die too. Would Sephiroth manage to get Tiqi back to civilization? Best not to bring it up. He had to focus on the task at hand.

She looked up and met Sephiroth’s eyes. “Okay. Listen to me. You’re going to take your hand and put it inside me. Okay? Feel around. You’re going to have to go into the uterus, okay?”

He was staring at her like she’d lost her mind.

“You don’t have a choice. I’ll die if you don’t get it out of me.”

Tiqi was looking back and forth between her parents. She knew something was wrong.

“So you’re going to have to reach past the cervix. If we’re lucky it will still be mostly open.” Thank the goddess for all the reading she’d done. “And you’re just…” she swallowed, “going to have to feel around until you get it all out.”
She was shaking.

Sephiroth clenched his jaw. His eyes bore into hers. “You’ll bleed to death. I can’t cast.”

_I know_, Aeris thought, _that’s probably why I’m going to die_. But out loud she said, “Sephiroth? You’re a normal man now. And normal men _can_ cast. It’s just…a different mechanism from when you had Jenova cells in you.”

Tiqi was crying and clinging to Aeris’s arm. Aeris turned her face to kiss her daughter’s hair. She reached up to grasp Sephiroth’s hand.

“You can do this,” she said. And with a pitiful attempt at lightheartedness, she said, “Tiqi will help, won’t you Tiqi?”

Tiqi wailed in fear.

Aeris squeezed Sephiroth’s hand. He’d never looked so scared.

“Sephiroth?” she swallowed and blinked tears from her eyes. “I trust you.”

After a moment, he nodded. He withdrew his hand from hers and fished the Restore materia out of his coat pocket.

She dug deep and summoned the energy to cast a series of targeted paralysis spells on her body so that she wouldn’t thrash around and hurt the children. If only there was painkilling magic. Why didn’t that exist? She wanted to laugh away the bubbling hysteria in her throat.

Sephiroth knelt between her legs.

_I love you, Tiqi_, Aeris thought, eyes fixed on the tearstained face of her daughter. For her son, she thought, _I’m so sorry_.

Sephiroth slowly pushed his hand into her broken body.

She threw her head back and _screamed_ and the world went black.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

research shows that power turns people into assholes and that the more powerful you become and the longer you live like that, the more difficult it becomes to see the world from the perspective of common folk. the way to counteract this effect is to actively seek to understand and serve others, and to constantly minimize the power differential between you and those who are less powerful.

multiple people have said something to the effect of "is the only way to redeem seph to destroy everything that makes him who he is" or "i don't like this non-powerful black-haired sephiroth" to which i say, "actually, yes, i think so," and "i totally get it, i don't like it either, and i did it anyway because real life character growth is often hard earned and painful."

lalalalala this is not why people read fanfic, i know. here we are anyway.

seph's got even more to go through. but do read the epilogue please. if you've come this far, you might as well, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24

Aeris blinked her heavy eyelids open and found that she was warm, and dry. The ground beneath her body was flat and her head was pillowed on something firm. A toddler was staring down at her with wide brown eyes and a baby was lying on top of her chest.

"Oh! Mommy wake up! Mommy wake uuuuuup!" Tiqi cried. She grinned and hugged Aeris. "Mommy are you wake up?"

Aeris licked her dry lips and croaked, "Hi Tiqi. Yes…I'm awake."

Her body felt heavy and bruised all through her core. She looked down to see Sephiroth’s coat covering her legs and stomach. She tried to flex her leg and immediately regretted it as pain lanced upwards. Best to stay as still as possible.

"Daddy cry!" Tiqi said, with brow furrowed and lips puckered in a pout. "Mommy sleep and Daddy cry!"

Aeris tilted her head back to look up into Sephiroth’s face. She was lying on his thigh and his fingertips were gently twined in her hair. Dark bags sat beneath his bloodshot eyes.

"Daddy was crying because Mommy was asleep?" Aeris asked without looking away from
“Yeah! Daddy scared,” Tiqi said. “Daddy cry so much! So much bloooood. Is yucky!”

Aeris almost laughed. “I’m okay now, baby. I’m okay.” She reached out her hand to pull Tiqi into the curve of her arm. “Were you scared too?”


Aeris smiled. “Mommy’s okay, now. I promise.”


Aeris stroked her son’s downy black hair. “I know, baby,” she whispered, glancing back up at Sephiroth. “Thank you.”

He gave her a weak half-smile before closing his eyes and falling asleep right where he sat.

While Aeris gradually recovered, Sephiroth did nearly everything. He brought food and wood back to the cave. Took Tiqi out to play in the rain when she got bored of sitting around with Aeris and the baby. Held Tiqi through the night and patted her back to sleep when she woke to the baby’s cries. He cooked their food and took their son out to the stream to wash up after every all-too-frequent bowel movement.

They were both so exhausted. It could barely be called living.

“What will you name him?” Sephiroth asked one night after Tiqi had fallen asleep. He carefully brushed a strand of hair away from Aeris’s face and tucked it behind her ear. Then he lifted a bowl of soup up to her lips and tilted it into her mouth.

Aeris looked down at the sleepy bundle in her arms. His tiny mouth seemed to be almost permanently attached to her sore, cracked nipples. He had Aeris’s green eyes, framed by thick black lashes. “Machar,” she said. Tomorrow.

Sephiroth’s tired face grew soft. “Good name.”

“Do you want to hold him?”

Sephiroth glanced over at Tiqi, fast asleep on the other side of the fire. It was a rare opportunity. He nodded, and watched as Aeris used her pinkie finger to break the seal of Machar’s mouth around her nipple. Sephiroth gently slid his hands under Machar’s head and bum and carefully brought the newborn up to his bare chest. Machar didn’t complain, content as he was with a belly full of milk.

Aeris leaned back against the stone wall of the cave and watched Sephiroth kiss the top of Machar’s head. A father holding his son. It made her heart ache with a familiar longing.

“I never knew my father,” she said. Ifalna had been pregnant when Hojo had captured them.

“I know,” he said softly.
“What was he like?”

Ifalna had only told her stories of their time together in Icicle Inn. Never anything prior to the days before Gast helped her escape from Shinra.

Sephiroth smiled to himself. “Brilliant. And patient. He wasn’t just a scientist, he was a natural teacher. Long before I ever entered my first SOLDIER classroom, he’d already taught me most of what I know of materia theory.”

“How was he biologist?”

“He was.” Sephiroth nodded. “But little boys like talking about magic a lot more than gene theory. And Gast inhaled knowledge like it was air. He understood magic to be the knowledge of the Ancients, encoded in the Lifestream and crystalized into mako. The fact that we still haven’t figured out how that code is written, or by what mechanism exactly we are able to read it, just made him all the more curious to study the link between cell biology and materia.”

A tightness curled through Aeris’s chest. To have had a father as well-studied as Gast…what might she have known, if he had lived to teach her? “What else?” she asked.

Sephiroth closed his eyes and thought for a moment. “He smelled like tobacco and caramel candy. And whenever he left to go on a research trip he always came back with a treat for me.” He grimaced. “Like that salty black licorice they make in Bone Village. I’ll never forget that particular horror,” he said fondly. “Quite possibly the worst thing I have ever eaten. But I can still remember how Gast laughed as he ate a handful in front of me.”

Aeris smiled sadly. “What happened to him?”

Sephiroth shrugged one shoulder without disturbing Machar. “One day he just disappeared and never came back. I was living in a complex with the other orphans—” at Aeris’s questioning glance he explained, “The ones raised inside Shinra to become Turks. It was a decent place, all things considered. But Hojo only waited about a week before he moved me into the labs…I asked him what had happened to Professor Gast, but he never answered me. It was only after I went through his notes a few years ago and found out that you were Gast’s daughter – that’s when I figured that he must have gone into hiding with Ifalna to protect her from Shinra.”

“Hojo killed him…didn’t he?” she said, looking down at her feet.

Sephiroth nodded. “I believe so.”

She stared hard at Sephiroth, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Did you make him suffer? Before you killed him?”

She dug her fingernails into her palms at the wave of postpartum emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. Grief for what she would never know. Ambivalence for what lay ahead. Would her son grow up knowing his father? She didn’t know what she wanted anymore.

“Only a little,” he replied with a small smile. “I’m not a complete sadist.”

Aeris rolled her eyes and stretched out on the ground with her head propped up on Sephiroth’s thigh. “I guess that’s for the best,” she yawned, before falling sleep.
Her body healed. She was a living testament to the tenaciousness of life. Even though she probably wouldn’t be able to bear children again, the thought didn’t upset her.

When the rains cleared and the dry season began, they left with Machar strapped to Aeris’s chest and with Tiqi holding Sephiroth’s hand.

Along the way, she watched as Tiqi fell and demanded that Daddy kiss her scraped knee better. As Tiqi yelled “Daddy I’m swimming! Tiqi fish! Tiqi fish!” before Sephiroth scooped her up in his arms and laughed “I caught the Tiqi fish,” while blowing raspberries against her stomach.

On the day of Tiqi’s third birthday, he presented her with a wooden toy he’d whittled with Aeris’s dagger.

“Daddy what’s that?” she asked, holding the rough object in her hand.

“It’s supposed to be a chocobo,” he said. “Happy birthday, Tiqi.”

“Ohhhh,” Tiqi breathed in awe, holding the toy up to the light. She had no idea what a chocobo was. “I love it!” She hopped over to Sephiroth and threw her arms around him. “Daddy can you tell me a story?”

Aeris watched with Machar cradled in her arms as Sephiroth sat down by the fire and pulled Tiqi into his lap.

“One upon a time,” he began, “a very bad Nibel dragon kidnapped a beautiful princess.”

“Why?” Tiqi asked.

“He wanted to make the princess stay with him forever,” Sephiroth said.

Aeris blinked in surprise. That wasn’t how the fairytale went.

“Why?” Tiqi asked again.

“I don’t know, Tiqi. Maybe because he was lonely. Everyone in his life left…Professor Gast. Nurse Kalla…Even his first friends, Genesis and Angeal. Everyone seemed to leave and the dragon didn’t want that to happen ever again.”

“Ohhh,” Tiqi said.

Aeris shifted in discomfort and adjusted Machar in her arms.

“And after Gast disappeared, only the very bad man that created the dragon was left. And he did a very bad job raising the dragon.”

“Maybe he bad,” Tiqi said, wagging her finger in the air. “He was a bad man. Bad man and bad dragon.”

Sephiroth nodded. “The dragon was very mean to the princess. He didn’t care about what she wanted and he took her away from everyone she loved so that he could have him all to himself.”

“Very bad dragon,” Tiqi said.

Aeris grimaced. Very bad dragon, indeed, she echoed in her mind.
“Then one day, the dragon and the princess had a baby girl named Hope. And the princess…she loved that baby so much. Her love poured out of her like pure white light, and it burned the evil out of the dragon’s blood.”

“Ohhhh,” Tiqi said, looking very serious.

“Suddenly, the dragon wasn’t a big powerful dragon anymore. Now he was just a man. But he didn’t know how to be a man, you see. He had to learn.”

“He have to learn,” Tiqi said.

“And the princess went on to have another baby named Tomorrow. The Princess was so strong and brave…she almost died bringing him into the world.”

“So scary!” Tiqi said. “Is she dead?”

“She ended up being okay.” Sephiroth smiled. “But it was the scariest moment in the dragon-man’s life. He thought he was going to lose everything. It was much worse than the day the Princess had taken away all his powers.”

Aeris felt something warm bloom in her chest. That was quite the confession, coming from him.

“So scary…” Tiqi murmured.

“So the dragon-man kept trying to learn. To show the princess that he now realized…everything he’d ever wanted was right here. He didn’t have to be a fierce dragon and force the world to obey him. And little by little, through word and deed…he could learn to be a man.”

Sephiroth lapsed into silence.

“Huh?” Tiqi asked. “What happened next, Daddy?”

Sephiroth looked up and met Aeris’s guarded eyes. “I don’t know, Tiqi.” He kissed her on the forehead. “Ask me again on your fourth birthday.”

The mountain eventually gave way to plains. Tall, coarse grass as far as the eye could see.

They walked north to Nibelheim. Their boots were falling apart. Tiqi had outgrown her shoes and wore fur wrapped around her feet with twine. Their threadbare clothes stank without easy access to flowing water.

Finally, one day, they saw the tiny structure far in the distance. Houses with their pale stone walls and red roofs poking out from between the trees. Aeris sank to her knees and cried in relief that the end was, at last, in sight.

When they got closer to the village, Sephiroth turned to her and said, “Will you cut my hair?”

She turned to him in surprise and took a moment to really look at him. His hair had grown out to his shoulder blades and it had come in black instead of silver so that he looked like a skunk. She’d gotten so used to it she’d long ago stopped thinking about it as anything out of the ordinary.
Rough black facial hair covered his lower face. He was completely unrecognizable, but the silver hair would raise unnecessary questions. So she nodded and pulled out her dagger. Sephiroth sat in the grass and held Machar against his chest while Tiqi watched Aeris work. The dagger was too blunt now to cut hair, so Aeris fed fire magic through the blade until it was red hot.

The acrid scent of sulfur filled the air and Tiqi whined before hopping a short distance upwind.

When Aeris was finished, Sephiroth stood, handed Machar back to her, and dusted off his head. He looked terrible. Short black hair didn’t suit him at all. Looking at him like this made her feel wretched in a way she didn’t understand.

They picked their things back up and resumed walking towards the village.

“How did you do it all this time?” he asked her quietly. “With everything that Shinra put you through…and then everything that I put you through…how did you hold on to hope? How did you keep on fighting?”

Aeris flicked her eyes towards him but didn’t slow her pace. She squeezed Tiqi’s hand. “I suppose it’s because Ifalna taught me that I was a servant of the Planet. She used to hold me at night and say that we weren’t helpless victims. Just temporarily delayed guardians that would get back to our duties one day.”

“He mm,” he murmured. But she could see the envy that lurked in his eyes.

“So no matter what happened to me. No matter how hard it was living in the slums, or how much you tried to break me, as long as I remembered that I lived my life for Gaia, I always had the energy to fight on. To take care of myself and the people that I loved. So that we could keep on doing our best for those around us.” She pursed her lips in thought. “Except for those first two years of Tiqi’s life and a bit before,” she admitted, “The two of you really did make me forget for a while.”

He frowned and glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “Was it really so simple?” he said ruefully. “Ifalna told you to serve the Planet, and so you did?”

“Well, no,” Aeris huffed. “Not quite that simple. She also used to tell me that ‘gratitude is the path to happiness.’ And I learned to practice it every day. I don’t just serve the Planet because I was told to. I’m grateful that Gaia gave me life. That She gave me Elmyra and Tiqi and, like, ice cream.”

She couldn’t wait to get her hands on ice cream again. She’d craved it often before Machar had been born. At the first opportunity, she promised herself she’d inhale a whole carton of it. From the corner of her eye, she caught Sephiroth looking at her in amusement, probably remembering all the times she’d complained to him about the injustice of it all.

“So, yeah,” she shrugged, pulling her thoughts back to the topic at hand. “I think it was always a matter of holding onto that perspective.” She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment before saying, “Actually…that’s another thing Ifalna used to say to me. She used to say something like ‘There is very little truth in this world. Most things are just what you choose to see and believe.’ ”

Sephiroth shook his head. “Meaning?”

“Well,” Aeris said carefully. “When you found Hojo’s notes in Nibelheim, it changed everything, didn’t it?”

Sephiroth’s jaw tightened.

“But nothing had actually changed. The only thing that changed was what you thought it all meant.
You went from believing that you were enduring torture to becoming a hero to believing that Hojo only did those things to see what he could create. And *then* what did you tell yourself?

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“When you decided to take over the world,” she said, “What did you tell yourself?”

He looked towards the horizon. “That Jenova should have ruled this Planet and that fate had created me to do it in her stead.”

Aeris nodded. “The truth is there’s never been any proof that ‘The Promised Land’ exists. The Cetra believe that at the end of their journey, they will return to and become one with Gaia. It’s a story handed down through the generations. It gives us hope. Pushes us on. We tell that story because we want to.” She smiled sadly at his befuddled expression. “So the question is – what will you tell yourself now?”

Eyes downcast, he said, “I don’t know.”

She left the subject alone. He would figure it out when he was ready.

They neared the edge of the village with Tiqi asleep on Sephiroth’s back. In another hour or two they would reach civilization. They would bathe and eat and maybe even sleep on a real bed for the first time in over a year. She would find a way to call Elmyra and they would figure out how to put their lives back together and function in society again. She’d have to find work to feed the family. Would she go back to selling flowers? What else could she even do?

If she had the energy, she would have sprinted all the way to the village. Running water couldn’t come fast enough. And at the same time, she thought as she looked at Sephiroth, reality seemed to be closing in on them too quickly.

What would he do after? What did she even want?

Aeris turned to him and said, “Do you regret it? What you did?”

She wasn’t sure why she was offering him an olive branch now. And it was the worst of vague questions. He’d done so many things.

“I’ve never seen the point of regret,” he answered quietly. “What good is it to look back on the past? It changes nothing.”

Aeris frowned at his words and opened her mouth, but he continued, “How can I regret taking you? If I hadn’t done so, I never would have known you. And Tiqi and Machar would never have been born. Despite all that happened, I don’t regret Gast abandoning me either. If he hadn’t done that, *you* would never have been born.”

Sephiroth’s bittersweet expression made something ache in her chest.

“So would I go back in time to change it all, if I could? The answer is no.”

Aeris looked away, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze. The town grew closer and closer and her
heart soared with each weary step.

Then Sephiroth slowed to a stop and Aeris turned to look back at him. He took her hand in his and glanced down at the dry, cracked skin of her knuckles and the ragged edges of her dirty fingernails.

“There are men on this planet who would die for you,” he said. “But I would live for you, Aeris. For you, and our children, I would learn to live.”

Aeris didn’t say anything. There was a lump in her throat she couldn’t move.

“I don’t expect anything from you after we reach the village.” His hand tightened around hers, as though his body were rebelling against his words. “We both know that you’re free to do as you wish. I just wanted you to know where I stand.”

Unable to find her voice, she looked away and gently pulled her hand from his.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Chapter End Notes

Sigh. I am sad. Are you sad?
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Apologies to anyone still reading this as an original novel. There’s a bunch of canon stuff in here that barely gets mentioned and doesn’t really matter but I felt was important to include anyway for canon reasons.

Chapter 25

The village, it turned out, was Nibelheim. They’d returned to the place of Sephiroth’s birth.

The mayor took them in. His daughter, Tifa, had been the first to approach them after they’d dragged themselves into town. She’d taken one look at them, heard Aeris’s incoherent explanation of how’d they’d gotten there, and immediately led them to her father’s house.

The first several times Aeris took a shower, she cried. Free flowing warm water. The luscious scent of pineapple, pear, and honey shampoo. The feel of rich white lather beneath her fingers, coating her frayed and tangled hair. The small luxuries of modern life were almost more than she could bear after their year-long ordeal.

Tifa’s blue flannel pajamas were so soft and warm against Aeris’s skin and it made her want to curl up in her host’s plush childhood bed and never leave.

She cried when she tasted peanut butter. And bread. Goddess, bread had never tasted so good.

She cried at the rich smell of coffee. At the luxury of being able to put spoon after spoon of sugar into it.

She cried as she watched Tiqi devour a Nibelberry juice popsicle, her heart on the edge of bursting the entire time as she basked in her daughter’s silent joy.

Tifa insisted on taking her to a hairstylist and a nail salon. And Aeris cried when she saw the new haircut that fell in soft waves down to her chin. “Oh sweetheart, I had to,” the stylist had said. “Your hair was too much of a mess. I saved as much as I could. But you can always grow it back!” And Aeris had shaken her head because that wasn’t it at all.

She cried again when she learned that Holy’s light had scattered across the globe and destroyed every active mako reactor. Tifa told her about The World Regenesis Organization and how it had spent the last year building the new city of Edge and working on energy and technology solutions for a world now forced to live with rotating blackouts.

That night she left Tiqi with Tifa and her husband, Cloud, who Aeris had a passing acquaintance with as an old friend of Zack’s. She walked to the open fields at the outskirts of town so that she
could kneel down and pray. She gave thanks for Meteor, she gave thanks for Holy, and she gave
thanks for the role the Planet had called her to play. And Gaia sang in Aeris’s ears and in her heart.

The next morning the whole town ran out of their houses and up the hill to the abandoned Shinra
manor which had been set ablaze. Aeris’s eyes quickly picked Sephiroth out of the crowd.

She ran up to him. “Did you…?”

“Yes,” Sephiroth said.

A few seconds passed as she recalled that he’d been born in that very building.

“You wouldn’t believe what I found in the basement as I was setting it on fire,” he deadpanned.

“Oh?” She blinked as a cloud of smoke stung her eyes.

“My mother’s lover. An ex-Turk made immortal after Hojo experimented on him and Lucrecia was
forced to save him through…questionable means.”

“Huh,” she said, completely unsurprised to find there were yet more victims of Hojo’s legacy.

“It will be good for Vincent and I to talk, I think.”

Aeris reached out and squeezed his hand. They stayed and watched until the flames burned
themselves out and the manor was little more than ash billowing away on the wind.

Elmyra arrived a few days later and there were yet more tears, with Elmyra cycling back and forth
between hugging Aeris, showering Tiqi with kisses, and marveling at her new grandson who had
Aeris’s forest green eyes. Then Tifa and Cloud took the kids away so that the adults could have a
private conversation.

When they were alone, Elmyra struck Sephiroth across the face. “You bastard,” she choked. “What
did you do? You think a dye job and some contacts can change who you are? I always knew there
was something wrong about you and your relationship with Aeris. Do you really expect me to
believe that this isn’t all your fault?”

Aeris lunged to catch Elmyra’s hand before she could hit Sephiroth again, and both women watched
in shock as Sephiroth sank to his knees in a traditional Wutain gesture of humility and contrition. “I
acknowledge that I took your daughter from you,” he said quietly. “And I’m ready to accept your
judgment.”

Aeris released Elmyra’s hand and looked at the man kneeling in front of her mother. She had a funny
feeling in her stomach. The sight of Sephiroth on his knees, clean shaven and dressed in new jeans
and a black t-shirt that Cloud had purchased for him – everything about it was wrong. He looked
almost normal. Like a fashion model with a haircut that didn’t quite suit his face.

Elmyra turned to Aeris, stunned. “What happened in the last year?”

Aeris shook her head. “One day, I’ll tell you everything. I promise. But not now.”
Elmyra didn’t like that at all but she pressed her lips together and grudgingly accepted it. “Then what are you going to do?”

Aeris shrugged. “Go home, I guess. Figure out how to live again.” She reached down and grasped Sephiroth’s hand, pulling him up to his feet. “Can we…stay with you? At least for now?”

“Sweetheart of course you can live with me! I would love to have the kids around. They’re the reason why we bought that house in the first place.” Elmyra glared at Sephiroth. “But that doesn’t automatically mean he has to come along.”

“I know,” Aeris said. “I just…Look I’m not making any long term decisions right now. I need time to…sort things out and get my head straight. And just do normal things, too, you know…like learn how to use a computer and a dishwasher again.”

Sephiroth’s mouth twitched.

Elmyra grimaced. Then she sighed. “Fine.” Her expression softened after a while as she looked at Aeris and steadfastly ignored Sephiroth. “I’m just glad you’re home, sweetheart.”

Aeris threw her arms around her mother and said, “Me too, mom. Me too.”

It took two weeks to get back to Elmyra’s house. Elmyra had flown to Nibelheim in her haste, but it was too much to transport all five of them by air. So they drove to Costa Del Sol, then took the ferry across the ocean, then drove the rest of the way to Kalm.

After taking care of the necessities – buying new clothes and shoes for the kids, mountains of diapers, and enough food to feed the entire family – Aeris spent a few days simply sitting in Elmyra’s backyard and watching Tiqi play. Sephiroth was scarcely seen during those days, but he always returned at night to help put the kids to sleep.

When she felt sufficiently recovered, Aeris started the painstaking task of creating the family budget. Elmyra was forthright with her about how much money she’d saved before Meteorfall, and how much it took to run the house. Aeris factored in the needs of the kids and herself. Sometimes she factored Sephiroth in too, not knowing yet if she wanted him to stay. With all that had happened in the last year of their lives, it seemed wrong now to take his children away from him.

The money would last years, but not a lifetime. Four or five people to feed and clothe was a lot, and she wouldn’t be able to do it on a flower merchant’s earnings. Especially not in a post-Meteor economy. Though she longed for her little turquoise flower shop, it would be unwise to open a store now.

And she wasn’t going to rely on Sephiroth for anything.

She looked at the Minerva band sitting on the corner of her desk, and the staff propped up in the corner of the room. She could probably fetch a small fortune for those, but it hurt to think about parting with them rather than bestowing them upon Tiqi and Machar.

A half-baked plan started to form in her mind. But before she could get to that, there were important meetings that had to happen and many important papers to sign. Like the kids’ birth certificates. Tiqi
had never had one, and had never formally been given a last name. Aeris hadn’t thought much of it back then, in the haze of first time motherhood. And there had never been a need when her life was so structured and everything was handled in the shadows by the Turks.

Now, she printed the names *Tiqvah Gainsborough* and *Machar Gainsborough* for the very first time, and felt tears threaten to fall onto the newly inked certificates.

Then she passed the paper to Sephiroth and watched as he penned in *Kaphar* under the section labeled ‘Father.’

*Kaphar. To cover over.* An ancient Cetran concept that atonement is an outward action that covers over the error. It was all Aeris could do to keep the astonishment from her face. Her heart felt like it was fluttering in her throat.

The pen in Sephiroth’s hand hovered over the paper. He looked up at Aeris. “Will you allow me to use your name?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “What?” she said, taken aback. “What about Lucrecia’s name?”

He tapped the pen against his lips. “Crescent is a fine name. But I have no attachment to it and I think it would be better not to link me back to her. It could raise questions down the road.” The look he gave Aeris was almost shy. “I…was thinking that it would be easier for me and the children if I went by Gainsborough. But only, of course, if you will allow it. Otherwise I can choose something common like Sato.”

For a long moment Aeris said nothing as she thought through his request. His logic made enough sense on the surface. She wondered if he was aware that this would turn them into a married couple in the eyes of society. It was hard to imagine that he didn’t understand the implication, but all she said was, “Is that really the name you want to go by for the rest of your life?”

“It would be my honor to do just that,” he said.

His words made Aeris feel something she couldn’t define. Bright and warm and queasy all at the same time.

“You won’t miss ‘Sephiroth?’” she asked.

“You may continue to call me that, if you wish,” he said. “But it’s the name that Hojo gave me, because *he* dreamed of creating a god. I have no need for that name now.”

One corner of Aeris’s lip tugged upwards in a mirthless smile. It felt as weird as anything that had happened to her in the last several years, but she found herself saying, “Okay. Go ahead.”

And as she watched Sephiroth pen in the name *Gainsborough*, a dozen scenarios flashed through her mind. Sephiroth signing the kids up for school without being questioned about his right to do so. Sephiroth stealing the kids away in the dead of night and taking them overseas where she would never find them again…without being questioned about his right to do so. She stared hard at the man in front of her and asked herself if she was making a huge mistake. Then she remembered clutching his hand before he dug her placenta out of her body. The way he’d looked at her before they entered Nibelheim.

She watched him pen in the date next to his signature. He looked up from the paper and said, “Thank you.”
The next day she told Sephiroth and Elmyra that she was going to the nearby city of Edge for a few days.

“No problem, sweetheart. You take as long as you need,” Elmyra said. “What will you be doing there?”

“Getting some advice,” Aeris answered. “Career advice.”

Elmyra beamed. “Oh that’s wonderful! I am so proud of you.” Then she left to go make dinner with Tiqi running behind her to ‘help.’

When they were alone with Machar, Sephiroth asked in a quiet voice, “Are you going to see Zack?”

Aeris’s jaw tightened. “I don’t think that’s any of your business, actually.”

They stared at each other, the silence only made bearable by Machar’s soft gurgles. She could see the conflict in Sephiroth’s eyes and the way his fists were clenched in his lap.

Finally he said, “You should. I’m sure he would want to know that you’re alive.” He swallowed and cleared his throat. “And I agree with your mother - take as long as you need. I’ll take care of the children while you’re gone.”

The next afternoon she hopped onto the express bus that would drop her off in the heart of Edge, the new world capitol. Tifa and Cloud lived there, as did most of the resettled population of Midgar.

Aeris stepped out of the bus and walked into the World Regenesis Organization’s headquarters. It was a simple, unfussy building made of brick and glass. Only a few stories tall, but sprawling. She headed straight for the front desk which was manned by a single security officer.

“Hi, I’m here to see Scarlet,” she said, forcing herself to sound as though she had every right to be here.

The officer punched a few buttons into his phone system. “Your name?”

“Aeris.”

A click. “Scarlet,” said the scratchy voice through the intercom.

“Hi Scarlet. You have a visitor. Aeris?”

There was a long pause before she said, “Send her up.”

Aeris took the elevator to the third floor as instructed. She caught sight of Tseng in the hallway. He was wearing a suit as always, except now it was black instead of navy. He stared back at her in surprise. Aeris put a finger to her mouth and winked at him before knocking on Scarlet’s office door and then opening it. Tseng nodded in return and continued on his way.
So the Turks were working for the WRO now, she thought as she let herself into Scarlet’s office. That was hardly surprising. Turks were like cockroaches, really. They could survive anything. Aeris made a mental note to herself to catch up with Tseng later.

The room wasn’t nearly as big or lavish as Scarlet’s previous one in Midgar Tower. But it still had a window, at least. The woman herself looked just the same as Aeris remembered. Perfectly pinned up blonde hair, expertly applied lipstick and mascara. Plunging neckline beneath a smart grey suit.

“I thought I told you not to get my bankroller killed,” Scarlet sneered.

Aeris shrugged. “Well. Sometimes things happen when you’re trying to save the world.”

“Yes?” Scarlet raised an eyebrow. “You saved us from the giant ball of fire?”

“Sure did!” Aeris chirped, bouncing a bit on her feet. She had no idea what she was doing. But she’d gotten so good at doing things out of desperation, she didn’t think too much of it anymore.

“In that case I suppose I won’t kick you out of my office. Why did you want to see me?”

“Are you doing weapons development for the WRO now?” Aeris asked, because Scarlet liked to talk about herself.

“Ugh.” Scarlet scowled. “Clean tech research. And I’m working for Reeve of all people. But I suppose we’re all still alive so can’t complain too much. Now, out with it. What do you want?”

“Career advice,” Aeris said, when she really wanted to say a job.

“Listen, kid. I made you two fancy toys because Sephiroth wanted me to. And then you went and disappeared. And judging by the state of the world,” Scarlet’s eyes raked up and down Aeris’s body, “and the fact that you’re standing here looking way too skinny, you really did get your sugar daddy killed. And now you’re coming to me doing that thing that the young’uns are taught to do. So let me level with you.”

Aeris opened her mouth to interject because she if she was doing that thing, she would really love to know what that even was, but Scarlet just kept going.

“No, I’m not going to hire you. I don’t have the budget and even if I did it would go to an engineering grad. And no, I don’t know anyone who’s looking that I can refer you to. And no, it’s not part of my job description to ‘coach’ lost girls because us women gotta stick together.”

Aeris felt her face flush. Why had she thought it was a good idea to come here?

“But I will give you this one piece of advice,” Scarlet said. “Never think that you can’t do something just because you aren’t one hundred percent qualified. No man I’ve ever known has ever let that stop him. Even when you are actually qualified, everyone’s got a case of the imposter syndrome. So just figure out what you want to do, what you can do, and how to learn how to do the rest of it. Got it?”

Aeris nodded, dumbfounded.

“Good.” Scarlet waved her hand at towards the door. “Now get out of my office.”
Aeris treated herself to an early dinner and a strawberry and vanilla ice cream cone to unwind from her encounter with Scarlet. Then she checked in to a two-star inn, kicked off her shoes, and climbed into bed. The sheets were stiff and scratchy, but it felt so good to stretch out her limbs and take up all the space without having to worry about Machar’s fists and feet flailing all over the place as he dreamed.

She tossed and turned for hours thinking over Scarlet’s words. Despite the older woman’s harsh attitude, she really had given Aeris an important piece of advice. And by morning, Aeris knew just what to do with it. All that time she’d spent in pampered captivity – some good had come out of it after all. She and Machar wouldn’t even be alive right now if it hadn’t been for all that time she’d spent, well, *studying* in Sephiroth’s penthouse.

She used the inn’s computer to look up Dr. Okeke, and just as she’d hoped, the OB/GYN had set up a clinic in a nice neighborhood within the city. She taxied there and spoke to the receptionist, explaining that she had been an important client three years ago, and that she was happy to wait until lunch if the doctor would be willing to see her then.

Dr. Okeke recognized her immediately, and was happy to take her out to lunch. She tried to make the customary small talk but Aeris awkwardly sidestepped most of her well-intentioned questions. Especially the ones that danced around what had happened to Sephiroth.

“The truth is,” Aeris said when their meals arrived, “I came to see you to ask for a big favor. I want to become an OB/GYN. And I was hoping you could help me get there.”

Dr. Okeke put her fork down and blinked at Aeris in surprise. “Oh. Okay, well…when did you do your undergraduate studies, and in what field?”

“I never went to college,” Aeris answered.

Dr. Okeke frowned. “I see…”

“My family didn’t have the money,” Aeris confessed with a shrug. “And I always had to work so that my mom and I could get by. But now things are different. I’ve done the math. With what we’ve saved, I should be able to feed the family and go to school.”

Dr. Okeke’s kind brown eyes looked at Aeris with pity and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I see. It’s a long road…and hard work…”

Aeris outright laughed at that. “I’m no stranger to long roads and hard work,” she said. “When Meteor fell, I was trapped in the middle of a mountain range and pregnant with my son.”

“No,” Dr. Okeke gasped.

“And after I gave birth I coached my partner through a manual extraction of a retained placenta.”

“Gaia, no! That’s…” Dr. Okeke closed her mouth and opened it again before saying, “That’s honestly too wild to be made up. How did you manage that?”

“Well, I had a lot of time on my hands when I was pregnant with Tiqi,” Aeris said. “I read a lot. Sephiroth didn’t want me out in the public eye too much so there were only so many things I could do with my time.”

“But to retain that kind of information…you must have been very serious about your reading!”

Aeris rested her chin on her knuckles and glanced upwards, thinking. “I suppose I’ve always had a
pretty good memory. I never thought about it before.” She’d been able to hang onto Ifalna’s teachings all this time, after all.

“You’re an amazing woman,” Dr. Okeke said sincerely.

“Thanks!” Aeris grinned. “So you see, I’m very serious about this. This is what I want to do with my life. I don’t know if you know this - I was so scared when I had Tiqi. But you were so wonderful to me the whole time. And looking back, I can’t believe you gave me an actual letter for Sephiroth about how we weren’t allowed to have sex for six weeks.”

Dr. Okeke laughed. “For a man like that, I felt like I had to put it in writing!”

“Woman’s intuition.” Aeris nodded. “You have no idea how grateful I am for how much you looked out for me.”

“I was only doing my job,” Dr. Okeke said.

Aeris leaned forward. “Well, that’s exactly what I want to do for other people. I want to give other women the care you gave me. And…I want to share the strength that I found on that mountain.”

Dr. Okeke sat back in her chair and looked at Aeris in admiration. “Well then.”

“So you’ll help me?” Aeris said, daring to hope for the first time.

“Aeris…” she smiled. “It would honestly be my pleasure.”

Aeris’s smile was so wide it hurt her face.

“So what’s your son’s name?” Dr. Okeke asked.

“Machar,” she said.

Dr. Okeke smiled. “Good name.”

With her plans for the future secured, there was only one more thing left to do. She found a payphone and punched in Zack’s old number. The one she still knew by heart. She held her breathe as it rang.

“Hello?”

The familiar tone of his voice in her ear warmed her to the core, and for a long moment she couldn’t speak.

“Helloooo?”

“Hi Zack,” she whispered.

A pause. And then, “Aeris?”

“Yeah,” she said, “It’s me. Can I…” she swallowed. “Can I come over? Where are you now?”
“Gaia…Aeris. Yeah…of course…I’ll be right there. I just need to tell the guys I’m leaving.”

He gave her his address and she repeated it back to him before hanging up. By the time her taxi pulled up to the quaint brick low-rise, he was waiting for her in front of the lobby door.

He wore the beige uniform and brown boots of a WRO peacekeeper. His hair was longer now, black spikes trailing down past his neck. And goddess, she’d forgotten how bright those mako blue eyes were. How much time she could lose just gazing into them. She ran into his arms and buried her face in his chest. He smelled of wood and citrus and his arms around her body were strong and held her firm.

He took her hand and led her up a flight of stairs to his one-bedroom suite. When he closed the door behind her, she looked up at him and tried to find the words. She didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t the first time they’d seen each other since she’d disappeared before their wedding. But it was the first time they’d been together without Sephiroth standing between them. No collar around her neck. No rope around her body.

She started babbling. “I never wanted to leave you. It was never supposed to be like this. I didn’t have a choice. And I couldn’t – I didn’t know how – and I was so scared, Zack –”

The words were pouring out of her mouth like a waterfall of nonsensical half-thoughts. So she let her body speak for her instead. She reached up on tip toe and planted her mouth on his. He moaned and let her tongue slip between his lips. She was already unbuttoning his uniform, pushing the rough fabric down his shoulders and to the floor. His skin felt like hot satin beneath her fingers. And he still knew how to kiss her in just that way, with long strokes of his tongue against hers. It used to make her melt when he did that. Made her tingle from head to toe.

Instead she felt a flash of Sephiroth’s teeth against her ear. A memory of his body, warm and solid, when she shook in fear at the thought of losing their daughter.

Zack was unzipping her jacket. She let him. Their clothes fell to the floor without ceremony, piece by piece.

His fingers against her breast were so soft. He touched her with reverence, like she could break at any moment. And it should have been beautiful and it should have been perfect, but somehow it was all wrong.

She wanted his fingers in her hair. That slight pain against her scalp.

She bit down on his shoulder and he carried her to the bed.

He kissed a path down her belly and she let him. Let him lick and stroke her until she was wet and ready. His hard length felt familiar in her hand as she helped him slip on a condom before guided him in between her legs.

There was nothing wrong. She’d missed him so much. Her heart felt like bursting every time she met those mako blue eyes.

But the memories kept coming. Of screaming in agonizing pleasure as she strained against her bonds. Of Tiqi fast asleep on Sephiroth’s back.

She opened her eyes as she arched up to meet Zack’s thrusts. But even then the stucco of the ceiling faded to the image of her hands cutting away the last of Sephiroth’s silver hair with a flame-hot dagger.
Her finger nails dug into Zack’s back. She tightened her legs around him. His thrusts came faster and faster until he groaned his release into her hair. Then he rolled off of her and discretely disposed of the condom before lying back, panting. She finished herself off as he gently stroked her breast.

And then they held each other in silence in the afterglow.

“Aeris?” Zack said, voice tentative. “That…wasn’t very good for you, was it?”

She sighed and nuzzled further into the crook of her arm. “What? Zack, why would you say that?”

“You seemed pretty distracted.”

Guilt and melancholy washed through her at his words.

“I was distracted too, if I’m being honest,” he confessed. “I should have told you before we started…you know.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I just didn’t know what to say, I guess. You were there and it all happened so fast, and Gaia, it was so good to see you with this cute new haircut.” He tugged gently on a lock of Aeris’s hair.

She shifted in his arms and sighed. “What did you want to tell me?”

“Well,” he said, “it’s been four years…”

Dread sat heavy in her stomach, pushing away what little pleasant afterglow was left. “Oh Gaia…you’re with someone, aren’t you?” Because of course he was. Girls were always falling all over Zack. She felt a bit sick at the realization. She really should have thought this through more.

“No, no, it’s not like that!” Zack shifted beneath her so that he could look into her eyes. “Well, it’s a little like that, but it’s not like that.”

Aeris smacked his arm. “Dummy. Just spit it out. I’m a big girl now. I can handle it.”

Zack looked sheepish as he ran his hand through his hair. “I can’t believe we’re talking about this right after sex. Life is so weird.”

Aeris smiled at him fondly, secretly glad that they were talking about it. They’d always been completely honest with each other, and it was so good to know that they still could be, after all that had passed between them. It made her muddled feelings easier to deal with, somehow.

“Her name’s Lillian and she’s a gym teacher,” Zack said. He had a goofy little smile on his face. “She’s super cute and really good with kids. You’d like her.”

Aeris closed her eyes as jealousy spiked through her. When it passed to a soft murmur, she said “Can’t wait to meet her, then. How long have you been seeing each other?”

“About a month,” Zack said. “We’re not, like, steady yet or anything. But I was going to ask her this week. So I’m feeling pretty weird right now.”

Aeris threw her arm around his chest and gave him a squeeze. “It’s okay. We won’t do it again. I’m feeling pretty weird too.”

“I’ll bet,” he said. “So…what happened to Sephiroth? I assume you two had something to do with that craziness in the sky?”

“Yeah.” She wondered how much was safe to say at this point. One day, she promised herself, she would tell Zack everything. But not yet. “Sephiroth tried to destroy the world. And,” she shrugged.
“I killed him.” It was true, in a way.

“Oh.”

They held each other in silence for a long while. “I have a son now,” Aeris said.


She knew what he meant. In four years, so much had changed. Their paths, it seemed, had diverged too much to ever go back to the way they’d been.

“Zack?” Aeris asked in a small voice.

“Yeah?”

“I love you, you know that?” Her eyes were starting to sting with unshed tears.

“Aeris, I…” he was silent for a moment, taking time to just look at her, this woman who he’d almost married. “I love you too.”

“Can we still be friends?” she asked.

“I’d like that,” he said.

She poked him on the nose. “I’m just using you for your hugs, you know.”

He nipped her finger. “I do give the best hugs!”

“You do,” she said, snuggling closer. “You really do.”

She spent the day with Zack, catching up on everything she’d missed in his life as he took her on a tour of the city. He told her all about how much he loved working for the WRO, but that wasn’t surprising. Zack had always been easy to please.

They parted ways after dinner, and Aeris caught the last bus back to Kalm. The ride was peaceful and lonely, with hardly any people sharing the vehicle with her. She missed the kids so much it was like a physical ache. She’d never spent such a long time apart from them.

She didn’t fight her feelings as the bus took her closer and closer to home. Just let her mind wander where it wanted, and it usually landed on Sephiroth. Sephiroth splashing in the river with Tiqi. Sephiroth rocking Machar when she was too exhausted to do it any longer. Sephiroth using Masamune for the very last time to cut off his hair. Sephiroth, harsh and demanding, hand around her throat and fingers in her mouth.

And Sephiroth…broken and lost, reaching for her like a man about to drown.

They couldn’t go back. To any of it. Not to the chalet. Not to the penthouse. And not to the mountains. The past was in the past, and it would do no one any good to keep letting it taint the future.
If there was any path forward, she would just have to find a way to make it work. If that was what she wanted. She still wasn’t quite sure.

When she finally got home the whole house was already asleep. She unlocked the door as silently as she could and tiptoed into the room that served as the office. She was tired from the trip and the last few days in general, but too wired to lie down. So she figured she could start looking into the online resources that Dr. Okeke had mentioned until they lulled her to sleep.

She sat down in the chair and pulled out the gifts she’d brought home. Chocolates for Elmyra and bright yellow marshmallow chocobos for Tiqi. She set them on the desk and noticed the books that were stacked on one side. Curious, she reached for the closest one. *The Clean Tech Revolution.*

She stood up and rifled through the rest. *Renewable Energy Finance, The Law of Clean Energy, The Hype about Hydrogen, Harnessing Solar Heat,* and so many others. There were enough books here to keep a man busy for years. She smiled to herself, remembering that Sephiroth had once consumed a whole library full of biology texts and experiment notes in a single week.

Then her eye landed on something different, mixed in with all those published tomes. A small, leather bound notebook. She opened it, thinking it might contain his notes from the texts he’d read so far.

Paragraphs of Sephiroth’s cramped scrawl were penned in black ink. Aeris read on without thinking.

> Living like this is agony. Someone speaks and my hand itches for the feel of Masamune in my palm. It used to be so easy to end a conversation. Fear, alone, was enough. Anything I wanted at my fingertips. Except for what actually mattered I suppose.

> At night, when everyone sleeps, is the worst. The silence. I find myself craving Jenova’s voice. Doubting who I am without its whispers. There are nights, like this one, where I don’t think I can make it to morning. I think that it might be easier just to leave and end myself. Maybe it would be better for the family that way. Maybe it would be safer for them.

> But I know the sun will rise. Tiqi will laugh. Machar will cry. And Aeris might give me that look again. The one that makes me think I should stay. Maybe that’s just wishful thinking. I don’t know anymore. I can’t trust my senses.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and flipped a few pages forward.

> Vincent understands. He knows what it’s like to fight with the demons inside you. He swears he’ll stay with me, as long as it takes. Forever if need be. To atone for his sin of not being able to save Lucrecia. He needs to learn to live again too. He’s not much better at it than I am.

> I’m grateful not to be alone on this journey.

She flipped to the last entry.

> I need help. I can’t do this alone.

> There are rumors of a sage in Cosmo Canyon. One who practices the ancient arts of the heart-opening herb. They say he helps his students see divinity. And to learn that all reality is a creation of your word. I don’t know what that means.

> Aeris still hasn’t returned from Edge. She’s with Zack now, I’m sure of it. She has no reason to stay here, with me. And I have no ability to keep her.
It doesn’t matter. I meant what I said. I will learn to live. If not for Aeris, then for the Planet. Do I not owe it that much? A lifetime of labor, in payment for this second life?

I can’t stop thinking about Aeris and Z

When she returns, then. I will tell her. Vincent will come with me.

And if she doesn’t ret

I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. It might be a long time. But she will have Elmyra. The children will be fine. When I come back, they will have a better father, and I will be a man that she deserves. Even if she doesn’t want me then, I will still have become that man. And that is something worth doing, in and of itself. Isn’t it?

Aeris blinked away tears and closed the notebook, tucking it back amongst the many texts that covered the desk. She made her way down the hall, grateful for the thick carpet that silenced her footfalls. When she reached Tiqi’s room, she slowly pushed the door open.

Sephiroth lay in the middle of the floor mattress, his bare feet peaking over the bottom edge. Tiqi slept, tucked under one arm, her cherubim face obscured by the fall of her soft brown hair. Machar was lying on his belly on top of Sephiroth’s chest.

She stood there for a long moment, looking at her family. They may have been born and forged under unimaginable circumstances, but they were her family nonetheless. She wouldn’t trade the kids for anything.

And Sephiroth…

She could hold on to her lingering hatred of him…if she wanted to. But what was the point of poisoning her own soul to hate a memory?

This wasn’t the first time the Planet had given her a damaged seedling grown in tainted soil. She could give him a good home, help him put down strong roots. And stand back to watch the jungle grow.

The Planet sang in her ears.

Is this what You wanted all along, she wondered?

No answer, of course. But she felt a contentment that ran deep in her bones.

She crept into the room and gently pulled Sephiroth’s hand from where it was wrapped around the side of Machar’s diaper-covered bum. Sephiroth opened his eyes and blinked at her in surprise.

She didn’t say anything. She gave him a small smile and lowered herself into the bed so that she lay with her head pillowed on his arm. She carefully lifted Machar and set him back down onto her own chest. The baby barely stirred.

“Aeris?” Sephiroth whispered

“Shhh,” she said. “We can talk about it in the morning.”

She burrowed deeper against him.

She didn’t know what tomorrow would bring, or how hard the road ahead would be. For now it was enough to live in this moment. To know that she’d saved the world, reunited with her mother and her
best friend, and secured her future. She would give her children a good life. She would be here for years to come to continue her people’s legacy of caring for the Planet.

It was enough to come home and rest with her family. With this iron-willed man who swore he’d fight his own demons and would never give up. It wasn’t to say that she would stay with him. He would go on his quest and she would go on hers. Maybe it would work out, or maybe it wouldn’t. But they could try. After everything they’d been through together, the least they could do was try.

She smiled to herself and surrendered to sleep.

For now, this was enough.
Epilogue

Nine years later...

He looked up from his steaming tea and smiled at the older blonde woman sauntering towards him. She pulled out a chair and sat down. “Kaphar Gainsborough huh?” she asked. “I have to say, I never would have imagined this.”

Sephiroth let his eyes take in the familiar features. Her highlighted hair wrapped up in a French twist. Those blue eyes as fierce as ever, though her eyelids sagged with the weight of age. The stress lines around her mouth and along her forehead were more pronounced. But she still looked damn good in that black leather jacket and those knee high black boots.

“Scarlet,” he said with a nod.

She wasn’t being at all subtle with the path that her eyes traced up and down his body. There was a twist to her mouth that he couldn’t read.

“Do you like what you see?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Don’t take this the wrong way Se-, Kaphar,” she quickly corrected herself, “but it’s a little weird to see you like this. You look like a hot version of Hojo.”

Sephiroth nearly choked on his tea. He dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. A decade ago a comment like that might have driven him into a rage. But time had done much to mellow him, and he supposed her assessment was true enough.

He’d grown his hair out over the years. It stopped around mid-back now thanks to nuisances like split ends and breakage. He’d never experienced such things when his body had been laced with Jenova cells. Now he wore his thick black mane in a high ponytail, letting his bangs frame his face much like they used to, back when they were still silver.

His brown eyes sat behind a pair of wireframe glasses thanks to the wonderful effects of aging on his human body. So yes, he probably did look a lot like his late father. If he traded in his tailored black suit for a lab coat, the resemblance would probably be uncanny.

“I’ll… take that as a compliment,” he said.

Scarlet waved her hand dismissively. “You’re at least twenty years too old for me now, babe. Take it however you like.”

Sephiroth laughed. “Were you always this charming?”
Scarlet made a show of examining her red manicured fingernails. “Yes,” she said. “That’s why you kept harassing me until I finally pity-fucked you.”

Sephiroth shook his head, remembering how fascinated he’d been with the gorgeous older engineer when he was just a Second Class SOLDIER. “That’s not how I recall it happening,” he mused, “But I hope you never change, Scarlet.”

She smiled. “So how are the kids?” she asked, her voice laced with sarcasm.

He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “Trying. Insane. Tiqi is a pre-teen terror and Machar is a nerd,” he said fondly. “They’ll probably blow up the house one day.”

Scarlet snorted. “And the wife?”

Aeris wasn’t technically his wife, but he didn’t point that out. “She’s great. She’s already made a name for herself in both Edge and Kalm.”

“Oh?”

“She spends a day in each city serving well off women who have to fight their way onto her waitlist, and another two days working in poor clinics who wouldn’t be able to afford her services.”

“And the fifth day?”

Sephiroth shrugged. “Cetra magic. You should see the backyard. I think she’s built a mako well into it and is trying to grow a new biofuel.”

Scarlet straightened in interest.

“And she recently published some groundbreaking research into the targeted use of curative magic to trigger apoptosis in cancer cells.”

It was an idea she’d come up with when reflecting on the way she’d purged the Jenova cells from his body. It had taken a deep understanding of both anatomy and magic to make those connections, and medical science would likely advance by great leaps thanks to Aeris’s work.

Scarlet crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “Sounds like you chose well.”

Sephiroth grinned. “Of that, I never had any doubt. She is the single most impressive woman I have ever known,” he said with unabashed pride.

“Ha! So I guess I’ve been dethroned as the standard by which you measure all other women.”

Sephiroth made a show of patting her hand. “You’ll always have a special place in my heart, Scarlet.”

“I better,” she said. “You owe me if this works out.”

“I will owe you big,” Sephiroth agreed. Then his face turned serious. “You think the chances are good?”

“What’s the ask?”

“A hundred million gil.”

“Well,” she said with a twist of her head, “Sachdeva’s more than good for the money, and he is
looking to sink it into sustainability tech. So you just have to convince him you’re worth it.”

He gave her a look with that smile, and she still knew how to read him after all these years. She said, “So I’d wish you luck, but you obviously don’t need it.”

Sephiroth raised his teacup to her and nodded his thanks.

She looked down at her watch and turned to glance behind her back. “Ah, right on time. My lunch date is here,” she said, waving at the tall, well-muscled young man that had just walked into the café. His windswept blonde hair and white t-shirt all but screamed surfer. She stood up and said, “Let me know how it goes. If Sachdeva goes for it I know a few folks you should approach for Series C funding.”

Sephiroth stood up and shook Scarlet’s hand. “I will. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. She turned to leave and then paused to look back at him. “If and when you’re ready for another round of world domination…you know where to find me.”

Sephiroth laughed. “You’ll be the first person I call,” he promised.

Aeris breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the front door behind her. She kicked off her nude leather heels and dropped her purse on the floor. It was late and she was tired after spending the day at a medical conference and then meeting up with Zack and Lillian for an early dinner. She smiled at the memory of how radiant Lillian had looked, six months pregnant with their third child. It was a low risk pregnancy and it wasn’t always easy to find times for Lillian’s checkups, but none of them would ever dream of having someone else oversee the birth of a Fair-family baby.

She wriggled her toes and hung up her jacket. She couldn’t wait to get out of the pencil skirt and pink silk blouse. Then it dawned on her that the house was oddly quiet. Silent, actually. Which never happened at eight PM in the Gainsborough residence. There were usually screams of Maaachiiiiii! Followed by shrieks of stop calling me that! And Sephiroth’s weary voice saying, Tiqi, stop antagonizing your brother. Machar, give your sister back her PHS.

Curious, and a little concerned, Aeris walked deeper into the house and poked her head into the living room. She found Sephiroth sitting in his favorite armchair. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him in a grey dress shirt with two buttons undone, pressed black trousers, and shiny black dress shoes. This was not how they normally greeted each other after a long day’s work. In the hectic day-to-day, it was easy to forget just how devastatingly handsome he still was after all these years.

“Hi?” she said, with open confusion on her face. She leaned against the door frame and crossed her arms. “Where are the kids?”

“At your mom’s house for the next two days,” he replied.

“Oh?” She tried to wrack her brain for what could have triggered this. They certainly hadn’t discussed it.

“Tomorrow is the tenth anniversary of Meteorfall,” he said.
She knew that, of course. It was a statutory holiday and a day of thanksgiving.

He patted his thigh, inviting her to sit. She walked over to him with a bemused smile on her lips and folded herself into his lap.

“I’ve secured Series B funding,” he said. “The paperwork was signed yesterday.”

Her mouth fell open and her eyed widened. “That’s fantastic! Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” Sephiroth said, “Two hundred and twenty five million gil.”

Aeris whistled. “Double congratulations.”

“Over the next year, we are going to make Edge and Kalm completely Lifestream and carbon neutral. And then after that, we roll it out to the rest of the Planet. I’ve also started the paperwork to open a science and tech center in two developing regions of Wutai.”

Aeris leaned back against him and rested her head in the crook of his shoulder. “I’m really proud of you, Sephiroth.” A part of her couldn’t believe it was finally happening.

“Aeris?” he shifted beneath her and gently tilted her face up with a finger under her chin. It made her shiver unexpectedly. It wasn’t the kind of thing he usually did. “There’s something I need to tell you, now that we’re here. Now that I’ve made it.”

Her breath hitched.

“These last ten years have been more than I ever could have hoped for,” he said. His eyes never left hers. “Living with you and the kids. Making up with Zack.” Though that had involved letting Zack punch him in his very breakable nose and Aeris had not been at all impressed at having to clean up their mess. But it had been more than worth it. “Building this company out of nothing. I have been happier than I ever imagined. So I never told you this. I barely even admitted it to myself.” He placed a chaste kiss on her lips. “But I want more.”

Aeris’s heart was pounding in her chest. “And what is it that you want?” she asked.

His hand came up and hovered in the air between them, uncertainty written on his face. She saw him swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Saw fear give way to desire as he stared at her mouth. And then, oh so slowly, as if allowing her every chance to escape, his fingers trailed down the side of her neck.

Her nerves sparked to life and her body woke in a way it hadn’t for…over a decade.

It wasn’t that they hadn’t been intimate in all these years. They squeezed sex into their lives here and there like any other working couple with rambunctious kids in the house. And their sessions were sweet and sometimes awkward and hilarious and always ended in sweaty, tangled limbs and tender moments in the afterglow.
But she knew what he meant. She’d felt it too and never given voice to those thoughts.

She didn’t know how to say out loud, *I think I want you to pull my hair and fuck me with your hand around my throat. It’s never been as good as when we were…like that. But I don’t want to go back to that. And I’m scared of what will happen if we even try. I’m scared of what it will bring up for me and for you. I’m scared that these feelings make me a bad person. A bad woman. A bad example for my daughter. But there’s a craving somewhere deep down in the center of my brain for those things that you used to do. Sometimes I want it so badly it hurts.*

The pad of his thumb traced the curve of her bottom lip. He was looking at her like he wanted to devour her.

“Aeris,” his murmured, “I don’t know how to do this. I’m scared you’ll leave if I ask.”

She closed her eyes and let her lips fall open. Let her body tremble as his fingers ran along the line of her jaw and down the column of her neck. He was touching her like he had every right to – not with tentative or casual caresses, but like he owned her.

And it made her hungry for more.

He pulled away and she opened her eyes with a disappointed mewl.

“Aeris, this is too important. We have to talk about it.”

She sighed. He was right, of course. It was the only safe and responsible thing to do. But it was still disappointing not to be able to close her eyes and let him sweep her away.

“Okay,” she said. “What, exactly, do we have to talk about?”

There was a vulnerability in his face that both saddened and reassured her at the same time. “Do you trust me?” he asked.

She blinked in surprise. Because of course she trusted him. “Yes,” she said.

Sephiroth nodded. “And have we come far enough?”

Her mouth twisted into a half smile. “For what?” she asked. She knew what he meant, but if they were going to ‘talk about it’ they should do it clearly.

“For you to submit to me,” he said. “Willingly.”

She was surprised at the blush that crept up her cheeks, and how his words made her want to duck her head and hide her face. And here she thought she’d grown past such embarrassment.

She turned away and took a moment to compose herself. Then she looked him straight in the eyes and thought about all they’d accomplished together over the last decade, and about what she really wanted. It was time to come clean. To this man who’d rebuilt his dreams from nothing. Who spent his weekends teaching their children kata and helping her experiment with the jungle in their backyard.

She smiled as she remembered something that the morning’s keynote speaker had said. *People always overestimate what can be done in a year and underestimate what can be done in ten.* And oh, those first years had been hard, with Elmyra’s stony judgment, Zack’s baffled and well-intentioned encouragement to just leave, and the sheer lack of time between their parental responsibilities and their burgeoning careers. Sephiroth had tried so hard, and everyone could see it,
but there had still been the awful fights, the impossible negotiations. And the insults and accusations hurled in those darkest moments that Aeris always wished she could take back the second they left her mouth.

Now she couldn’t imagine life without him. And she could ask for what she wanted.

“Tell me what you want to do to me,” she whispered.

A slow, predatory smile spread over his face. “I want to tie you to the bed and fuck you until you can’t breathe,” he said. “Until you scream so hard the neighbors come calling.”

She bit down on her lip and looked up at him through her eyelashes. “Sephiroth, I’m almost forty.”

“And I’ve never wanted you more.”

She smiled and felt warmth unfurl in her chest. She felt the same about him. Adored each wrinkle around his eyes and the little roll of pudge around his belly that made him frown when she poked it.

She took his hand in hers and brought it up to her mouth. Licked his forefinger from base to tip and watched his eyelids grow heavy and his expression turn smoldering.

“Yes, I’ll submit to you,” she said with a cheeky grin. “I’ve wanted to for years and I honestly thought you’d never ask. But I have one condition.”

“Oh?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Will you marry me?” she asked.

Surprise and joy and tenderness flashed across his face. The corners of his mouth pulled up in a smile. “I thought you’d never ask,” he joked. “But aren’t you supposed to propose on bended knee?”

Aeris shrugged. “I guess that’s only fair, since you changed your name for me. I’ll do it later. The ring’s in my purse.” She’d bought the titanium band months ago and had kept it there, ambivalent but not knowing what she was waiting for. She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I don’t want to get up right now.”

He kissed her, deep and lingering and Aeris shivered in his arms. “So you’re really ready to chain yourself to me for the rest of your life?” he asked.

She laughed. “Are you kidding? I’ve been waiting for ever to put a collar on your finger. You’re mine, Sephiroth, and I think it’s time the rest of the world knew it. Don’t you agree?”

The way that he looked at her with those warm brown eyes melted her heart. “Do you have any idea how much I love you?” he said.

“Yes, but I’d like to keep hearing it. You’re the greatest tragedy that ever happened to me, and I love you more than anything.” She reached up with her face to nuzzle his nose. “Now take me to bed, please. I’ve been a very bad girl and I need to be punished.”

He was grinning like a dork. “As milady commands,” he said, scooping her up in his arms and rising to his feet.

She giggled all the way to the bedroom like a nervous teenager. The next chapter of their lives was going to be even better than the last. She just knew it.

And she couldn’t wait.
The End
Acknowledgements and Afterword

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Acknowledgements

For my daughter, who has inspired a love in me like nothing else. Who gives me the unshakeable confidence of knowing there is nothing I wouldn’t do for her health and happiness. Who is so bright and full of life that I actually think she could redeem Sephiroth.

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For everyone who left comments as I progressed through this story. You helped keep me going. I read and re-read your comments when I was sad, either from writer’s anxiety or real life stress. You told me what you liked and wanted more of. You told me what you hoped to see. And even though this story was planned out from the beginning, your comments affected the content and made it richer.

For Aisha, whose prompting inspired me to write so much unexpected content this year. You’re another source of inspiration for strong female characters.

For the Landmark Forum, which taught me what it means to have integrity, that I am my word, that reality is created by language and that I choose the story I want to tell with the words that come out of my mouth, and that YOU are a creation of my listening.

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to share this story with you. Thank you for reading.
Afterword

There are many reasons why I wrote this story. The most salient is my very personal and powerful journey through motherhood, loss of self, and rediscovery of personal power.

In the hormonal mess of that first year, I lost my sexuality. I couldn’t stomach the thought of BDSM anymore and I despaired at the thought that this could be a permanent state. It felt so WRONG to look at degrading pictures of women or to think of my go-to fantasies. But BDSM is inextricable from my sexuality and it pre-dates any conscious understanding I had of sexuality.

I also lost my ambition when the only thing that mattered was my baby. When I went back to work after a year, and slowly came back to “my old self” my BFF said, “It’s so good to see you get your ambition back. I was worried it was gone for good.” “Me too,” I said. And we talked about how I should write about this experience, before it faded from memory.

And then. The magic week happened. Around when my daughter was a year and a half old and I finally night-weaned her. My hormones re-balanced. I was suddenly in love with my husband again. Even though I was still barely sleeping, I was “back” in way that made me question the nature of free will. If so much of who I AM was determined purely by the state of my hormones, then do we even have free will?

I wanted to write the BDSM story of my dreams. It makes me crazy that Fifty Shades of Grey was a cultural phenomenon. Good BDSM erotica is SO hard to find. I’m proud of what I made here.

I wanted to write a story full of amazing women because the women in my life are incredible and so hard working and it infuriates me that there still aren’t nearly enough strong female characters in mainstream fiction and even fewer in fandom.

I wanted to write a story about overcoming all the odds. Of choosing who you want to be. Of accepting that the past is the past and has nothing to do with the future, unless you insist on making it.

This is, at its core, a story about two people utterly destroying each other, and then learning to live again. #DOP

I wanted to write a story that redeemed Sephiroth. But I wanted you to really feel his crimes before that happened. I’ve noticed how easy it is to forgive Sephiroth for burning Nibelheim and trying to destroy the whole world (and whatever war crimes he must have committed in Wutai). These are all abstract concepts. Writers often find it relatively easy to have Aeris or Cloud forgive him because it’s easy to hold abstract concepts at bay. But in this story, you spend half a novel in Aeris’s shoes, being personally victimized. It shouldn’t be easy to forgive Sephiroth. But I want us to forgive him anyway. Not because he’s sexy with the long silver hair and glowing glacier eyes. I want us to forgive Sephiroth because he has superhuman will (canon) and if he just turned that commitment in
the right direction, then his actions would show us that he should be forgiven.

We all do shitty things in our lives. I want this fantasy story to show that anyone can change. Not because someone is trying to change them. But because they want to. And when that commitment is there, and it’s real, I hope that we will all rally around that person.

In case you missed it. Especially if you read this story as I went, spread out over nearly a year:

In Chapter 8 Aeris asks Sephiroth what he's looking for. He says "Hope. And the future." She then goes on to name the kids the Hebrew words for Hope and Tomorrow. In Sephiroth’s birthday story for Tiqi, he says, "he now realized - everything he’d ever wanted was right here."

One of the first things I did in the early stages of drafting the story plan was to name the kids, and Sephiroth post-breaking. Tiqvah, Machar, and Kaphar have lived in my heart for over half a year and it’s been torture keeping them to myself.

This is the website that inspired the title: [http://www.newkabbalah.com/shev.html](http://www.newkabbalah.com/shev.html)

And the title heavily shaped the themes and course of the story.

According to Luria, when the vessels broke, the world we reside in was created from the shards. Only 6 of 10 vessels fully shattered, and if all had broken then the universe would have been thrown into complete chaos. Will, Wisdom, and Understanding remained. The spiritual, moral, aesthetic, and material values need restoration and repair. “The Breaking of the Vessels heralds a new birth.”

[https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-in-lurianic-kabbalah/](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tikkun-in-lurianic-kabbalah/) says tikkun [“repair” or “fixing”]…follows the breaking of the vessels…is to be achieved by human beings through their contemplative action.

Some final thoughts to leave you with. I don’t know how much of Sephiroth’s inner journey you can imagine, from the way I’ve chosen to write this story. But we spend the entire first half of the novel in Aeris’s head, seeing her struggle through the fine balance between trying to retain her identity and sense of self, and preserving her sanity. What she is forced to do causes such cognitive dissonance, it caused me actual pain to write some of the most intense chapters in the first act (6, 9, and 14 to be precise).

When she then throws Sephiroth’s words back at him, telling him to “make his choice” between his pride and the lives of his children, when she quotes him saying “How does anyone become
anything? Through word and deed.” I wanted you to know that if Aeris could survive what she did and come out as strong as she did, then Sephiroth could do something very similar.

Just as Aeris lost herself in "word and deed" in her submission, Sephiroth FINDS himself and creates himself in "word and deed" through his commitment to his family. The more he plays the role of a good father (because he has to or everyone dies), the more human and a good person he becomes. It's like faking it til you make it.

Also critical to this story and the integrity of the characters is that Sephiroth never gets down on his knees and begs Aeris to forgive him. He doesn’t waste energy on empty promises and degrading pleas. If he did that (just as in real life) even if she forgave him she would lose respect for him. Note he never once says sorry (I’m not saying he shouldn’t, but he didn’t). Sorry is a past-facing, ultimately meaningless word. It changes nothing. Instead, Sephiroth’s redemption comes from him acting, and then acting, and then acting more. It is his actions that matter, and those actions make a difference for the future.

I love this story, even if my ability to execute on my vision isn’t quite up to scratch (like every author probably). It is the story I’ve always wanted to tell. It is a story I could not tell until this point in my life, when I’ve finally lived enough to say all these things. Here you go, world. My heart and soul in 100k words.

Thank you for reading.

Chapter End Notes

Hi. Are you reading this? wow. It’s over! Thank god. I’m finished publishing my first novel, just as I get ready to start yet another new job. Crazy times, man.

I’m going to add to this universe though. There’s a bunch of married life consensual BDSM scenes I intend to write for Aeris and Seph. I also want to write a short story about Seph and Scarlet when they were young. And I might even write about the first time Seph comes home after his soul-seeking journey to Cosmo Canyon. Is there anything else you would like to see? Feel free to leave prompts in comments!

If you’re reading this…if this fic left you with feelings…if you had a good time…let me know? If you were too scared to comment on a rapefic during the first half of this novel, now there’s no reason to be scared! If you don’t know what to say, you can leave an emoticon or a reaction gif! It would mean a lot to me to know that you made it all the way to the end.
Lots of love.
-Lyra

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!