

# Chapter 4: A Moral Dilemma

## Kase

I didn't want to do this.

In the citadel's ceremonial chamber, I sat on the place's only chair. Stone walls and a thin line of people formed a circle with me at its pinnace, and in the center of this open space stood today's potential thrall. The little boy looked at me with such wide eyes while his notes warbled between terror and awe. Over the years, I'd gotten used to that strange mix of tones, sung to me from nearly everyone I met, but hearing it from someone so young pained me.

Turning to Yosai, standing to my left and behind me, I lifted an eyebrow.

"A child?" I said. "Why would you bring me someone so young?"

"Because his notes are strong, Kase. They'll bolster your strain significantly," Yosai said, "and after we explained what we wanted from him, he was more than eager to come with us. He has nowhere else to go."

Meaning the boy wouldn't be missed by anyone, one of the many homeless people who lived on Zoln's streets. Meaning he'd fall into silence if I refused him.

This was what they did to me. I understood the logic behind their actions. If I was to free us from the Empire, I must become an indomitable force, one that might—if we were *very* lucky—convince the enemy to leave Ostiu be without committing us to another devastating war. One of the easiest ways we'd found to make me stronger, at least with magic, was by taking thralls so their notes could sing alongside mine in the great symphony.

I also knew that every potential thrall I refused failed to see the next dawn because my location's secrecy was paramount to my safety, and for this alone, I might take every one of them who was presented to me.

But taking new thralls had always... disturbed me. I'd never determined if the lick of shame along my insides, the sense that I'd violated someone, that came with every new addition of notes originated from me or him, the one whose life memories crowded a crevasse in my mind. He'd always regretted what he'd unintentionally done to Xia, especially since he'd known his loss would leave her a husk.

Unlike him, I didn't have my death planned out. I had no reason to believe my thralls would experience the same devastation as my *ravsinka*, the permanent erasure of the part of herself that she'd given to Lyle. So, my disgust could be his, not mine.

On the other hand, I hated what becoming a thrall did to someone, and I *knew* that thought was all mine. I'd taken dozens of thralls over the years, and all of them now looked to me for purpose. For fulfillment. They'd do *anything* I asked of them, and I did mean anything. I'd tested this a lot as a child, and every time, their alien need to please me had compelled them to follow my every command. They were like puppets, only living when I pulled their strings, and when considering this, I believed death might be a better fate than becoming a thrall.

None of this hesitation plagued me with the boy. As I fought to keep from glaring at Yosai while he gently smiled in response, I wondered if my keepers had uncovered one of my weaknesses, but how could they know the savage need to protect that rose in me around children? Small ones rarely inhabited this citadel, and my keepers didn't know that a ghostly copy of Lyle Cunningham with his famous compassion for the innocent slept in my head. No one did, not even Xia.

They had, however, always looked for ways to force me into taking new thralls, especially in recent years. I'd become more... choosy as I'd gotten older, which frustrated the hell out of them. Perhaps one of their observant eyes had noted unintentionally favorable behavior toward children from me. They'd certainly pried similarly buried desires, hopes, and pining wishes from me in the past.

"We'll speak of this later," I told Yosai.

He inclined his head, and as I faced the boy once more, I flowed to my feet. I couldn't close my eyes or take a deep breath in preparation as I might like. Too many people were watching me: my keepers in black and a few other scattered around the chamber's edge. They couldn't know how much my heart broke as I padded toward the boy or how much those shards twisted when he cringed away from me.

I crouched in front of him, bringing myself to his eye level, and for a moment, I just waited there. After he'd relaxed a little, I sent a first tendril of music to him through the song.

*What's your name?* I asked.

I wasn't sure if he could hear me or rather, whether he'd perceive the specifics of what I'd said. All listeners could hear my strain of music in the song, much like all could hear what emotions I bled into the symphony, whether intentionally or not. Those who could understand me when I spoke—truly spoke, without tongue or voice—were less common, although still prevalent.

Only one person could speak back to me in the same way, but she wasn't here.

"Jhi," the boy said and after a pause. "If it pleases the honored mageling."

So, he could hear me speaking. That was a plus.

With a smile, I said, *You don't have to be so formal with me, Jhi. I get enough of that from the stuffy people around us.*

Jhi darted his gaze around the chamber, probably noting the stiff postures and blank masks of our audience. When a giggle escaped from him, he slapped a hand over his mouth with his eyes wide above it. I patted the air to calm him down.

*Please. I beg you,* I said. *Simply be yourself around me. Can you do that?*

Slowly moving his hand down, Jhi asked, "Is that what you want?"

*It is.*

Jhi dropped his hand to his side, working very hard to relax—I could tell—and his effort widened my smile.

"I'll try," he said.

*And I can ask nothing more,* I said. *Will you sit with me?*

Folding to the ground, I gestured in front of me. Jhi hesitantly edged closer, trying to maintain a respectful distance while also honoring my professed wish, but when he eventually sat, our knees were touching.

Oo, bold. I hoped that would stick around afterward.

*Do you know why you're here, Jhi?* I asked.

Hugging himself, the boy said, "Kind of? That man over there said a mageling like the revolutionary lived nearby and that I could help him if I wanted. Are you a *liiares*, mister?"

My keepers, all around the room, shifted, probably disturbed by the kid dropping his previous term of respect, and on noting this, I suppressed a delighted giggle.

*Oh, I LIKE you,* I said. *In answer to your question, I am. Would you like to see my magic?*

The boy's breath caught before he slowly nodded.

*In that case, we'll start small,* I said. *Your intentions about today's plans are—*

*Avan,* I hated Truthseeking. It had always been the weakest of my *liiaresim* and *always* left me with a headache.

*—still undecided,* I finished once I'd managed to read the boy. *And...*

I pulled a small globe of water from the air to hover over my head and in a fit of mischief, asked the shadows around us to cap the torches that were bolted into the walls. After the chamber had

dropped into black, I heard water splashing nearby, followed by Yosai spluttering, and thanking the shadows, I bade them to relax. As torchlight made its hesitant return, it flickered over disoriented and irritated adults, but I had eyes only for Jhi's delight.

*I have a couple of other magic types too, I told him, but they involve the body, and I don't want to accidentally hurt you.*

Jhi's eyes had taken on the avid gleam that only the zealots among my keepers wore while his notes loudly jangled in the song. Sighing, I prepared for unwanted adulation and a return to formality.

"*Avan*, you're amazing!" Jhi blurted.

Oh. That... wasn't...

With heat rising in my cheeks, I scratched the back of my neck.

*You think so?* I asked.

"Of course!" Jhi said. "How'd you do it?"

Taking my free hand, he flipped it back and forth before leaning forward to peer into my eyes, as if seeking my method of magic there. All the while, I scrambled to find an answer to his question.

I couldn't tell him how easily most of it came to me, as natural as breathing. That might induce the worship I'd expected of him. I couldn't tell him how carefully I had to use it. If I directed more than the faintest singing at my *liiaresim*, it caused... bad things in nearby listeners, and learning that would return him to scared. So, I took the silly route.

Leaning back on my hands, I smirked at Jhi.

*I did it magically, I said. How else?*

Snorting, Jhi doubled over to giggle into his lap, and while waiting for him to control himself, I delivered a metaphorical slap to the people bristling on the sidelines. They might force thralls on me, but *I* got to decide how I made them mine. If that was to have a little boy treat me like a normal human being instead of a god, like they wished, then they could deal with it. Stiffening, they backed off, but I could still feel the resentment pouring off of them.

"Ok," Jhi eventually gasped. "What do you want from me...? What's your name?"

*You can call me Kase,* I said.

Nodding, Jhi asked, "What do you want from me, Kase?"

And now came the hard part.

*Do you know what a thrall is?* I asked.

"Sure," Jhi said. "Who in Ostiu doesn't know the stories...? Oh."

His face fell, taking my heart with it, as he contemplated the proposed scenario.

"Why do you want me?" he asked with stiff shoulders and his hands clasped in his lap.

I couldn't tell him that I didn't, that the idea of thralls made me sick to my stomach. In this moment, he needed me to be an all-powerful mageling, explaining to him why he was worthy of my attention.

*Your notes are strong and so, would make me strong,* I said, *but mostly it's because—*

I didn't want him to die.

*—you're brave. Not many have the courage to come as close to me as you have, and most find my magic disturbing or terrifying, not amazing. It's made my life...*

How to finish that thought?

Jhi's face screwed up, making something change in his notes, and after listening to them for a moment, I recognized the flavor of their beat.

*Lonely? Lonely? Lonely?* pulsed from him.

Damn. His notes *were* strong.

*Yes,* I said. *I'm very lonely.*

Even Xia expected something from me. No one wanted me to be near them simply for who I was. Instead, it was always something about my *liiaresim* that attracted them.

Humming to himself, Jhi straightened, staring at me as if trying to use his own Truthseeker magic.

"Will you hurt me?" he asked.

Oh, how that question stung.

*Never,* I said with my singing to him rigid. *I never hurt the innocent, not intentionally at least.*

A few people in the audience stumbled to lean against a wall while Jhi rocked back as if struck.

*Wincing,* I said, *But sometimes, I will do so without meaning to.*

Sniffing, Jhi dashed his hand under his nose, trying to hide the red glaze it had come away with. Even if it hadn't worked, I appreciated the boy's effort to hide what I'd done.

"Was that supposed to hurt?" he asked. "You'll have to do better than that, *honored mageling.*"

Lightning bolted me to the ground while the chamber went absolutely still. Had he... *challenged* me?

And laughter took hold of me. It bubbled and echoed in the stillness while I clutched my stomach.

Oh, this was bad. I wasn't supposed to show emotion unless I needed to manipulate someone, but I couldn't help it. This kid had pushed all the right buttons, and the welded shut door to the vault where I kept unrestrained Kase had flown open. Centimeter by bloody centimeter, I hauled it closed once more, and all the while, I worried about what my keepers might do in response to this mistake.

Whatever it would be, making Jhi my thrall had become doubly important now, but even still, I had to give him a choice in the matter.

*I really do like you, Jhi, I said, which is why I'm warning you that I don't know what will happen if you agree to my request. You may not be the same person after I take from your notes, so know that if you want to refuse, it won't offend me. In some ways, I'd celebrate it.*

"Why are you trying to argue me out of this?" Jhi asked. "I've obviously made my decision already."

And part of me rejoiced at that. But most of me wept.

*Then, give me your hand, I said.*

I didn't need the contact, but it seemed to help the other party in this exchange. When Jhi did as I'd asked, fear sparked to life in his eyes, something he quickly smothered. I squeezed his hand.

*I will never intentionally hurt you, remember? I said. This will be quick and easy, and once it's done, once you're mine, I will make sure you're cared for. I will keep you safe. You have nothing to be afraid of. I promise.*

Except what he might become as a thrall. Except the loss of a portion of the notes that made him who he was.

"Ok," Jhi said, squeezing my hand back.

With a quick smile, I said, *Now, we have to appease the stuffy people around us. They do so love their ceremonies. Repeat after me.*

"I, Jhi with no family, offer my notes to the honored mageling," Jhi said. "May he take of them as he wills."

He dipped his head, and it was my turn.

"I, Kase, also with no family name, humbly accept this generous gift," I said. "I will make good use of what I take, and you will forever be honored for your sacrifice."

*You ready?* I asked.

Lifting his head, Jhi nodded, and I dove into the song.

*Avan*, every time I did this, it felt like coming home, and I struggled to remember why I couldn't stay here. The tinkling notes, snippets of melody, and tunes dancing among the rest filled an empty part of me, one of the many that were locked in their crevasses and vaults, but this emptiness sat at my center. Hearing so many seemingly discordant bits of music weave and twine into the most mind-numbingly wonderful symphony almost, *almost* made me whole, or as close as I could get to that state.

This was the song, what others called the bloodsong. They chose this name because they believed the symphony was tied to the blood of the Ostium people, but that idea had always rung false to me. As many notes sang in the Ibisian Empire's portion of the symphony as the Ostium's. Once, I'd even heard faint trills from somewhere far distant, somewhere I'd never seen on a map, and these were only humanity's contributions to the symphony. Grass, stone, thought paths in the brain, what pinned us to the ground, *all* of these added their parts as well. *Everything* sang, not just the Ostiums. So, I didn't use the bloodsong as its name because that wasn't what the symphony was. It was the song of the world, and I refused to call it anything less.

And I'd joined with it for a reason, not simply to enjoy it.

For an hour here—a time that would seem like mere seconds outside—I listened, picking apart the music around me. This was always done in two parts, completed simultaneously.

Part of me analyzed how a brief shift to a minor key in part of the symphony made the whole of it echo with melancholia before it resumed its lilting wander. The rest of me simply felt it. A swell of rising notes nearby had me anticipating the finale of its grand crescendo, the sensation and sound of it running through me moments before it played in the song. The great symphony rang around me, and I was always a beat ahead of it.

I was seeking something specific in this rolling music, though, and soon enough, I found it: a pattering of notes interspersed with the others, one I'd attuned myself to while speaking with Jhi. Anticipatory, yielding, these notes must be approached with caution. Too often, I'd been hasty with my selection from what someone had offered, and the thrall I'd made had been an empty sleeve, only filled when I gave them something to do. I wouldn't make that mistake again, not here. Not with this boy.

So, I listened to him sing, tried my best to tie specific notes to how they affected his personality, and pinpointed the ones whose loss would do him the least damage.

Then came my least and most favorite part of the process. I sang my strain of music with its many added notes toward him, and his notes responded to it. Our music stretched toward one another, sound brushing against sound, and dear *avan*...

Doing this always skewed my focus. It was different for every person I touched. With some, I experienced a fuzzy warmth that quickly dispersed to nothing in me. With others, it was like touching an electric current: so much energy washing through me that it was almost too painful to maintain my hold.

With Jhi, a fierce protectiveness had me roaring inside. I had to shield these notes, keep them from anyone who might taint or silence them. I had to keep them from harm.

Including any I might give.

His notes had begun merging with mine. Cursing at myself, I ripped through my strain, forcing Jhi's notes in a diminuendo *away* from me. As our music separated, I frantically snatched the notes that I'd marked earlier, finding an acceptable place for them in my strain. They integrated, becoming mine, and it was as if a horse had kicked me in the chest.

Oh, I'd have to play with this addition to my strain of music later. Jhi's notes had made a change in it, the faintest shift in key, but unlike with *chanarii*, altering the notes of a *liiares* could prove enormously perilous, for *all* involved.

For now, I'd have to follow the pattern of personality that I remembered from this morning, at least until I could fix this. Unfortunately, I had something much more pressing to occupy me right now.

Withdrawing from the song, I found things in the chamber much the same as before. Sure, my keepers and the strangers in the wide circle around me were shifting in place, but everything else was surprisingly the same.

Everything except that Jhi's hand wasn't in mine. He was sprawled on his back across the floor. With his hands pressed to his head, he roughly shook it, and a scream, high-pitched and unreasoning, rattled in the air between us.

Between blinks, I went from sitting at his side to kneeling over him with no memory of having gotten there. Taking hold of his wrists, I pried his fists away from his temples, revealing empty, blue eyes.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I kept repeating this like a chant to myself, even as I sang to Jhi.

*What's wrong? I need you-*

His screaming jumped in pitch, and flinching, I clasped his tiny wrists in one hand while brushing the other through his hair, like Xia did with me when I needed help calming down.

"Jhi, I need you to tell me what's wrong," I said in a surprisingly soothing voice. "I can't fix it if I don't know what the problem is."

Slowly, life returned to a once empty blue, and as Jhi focused on me, tears formed in his eyes.

"I'm not right," he said. "Please, Kase, I'm not right."

Oh. I knew what this was.

Setting my jaw, I stopped my fingers at Jhi's temple.

"I understand," I said. "I need you to listen to my voice, all right? Just listen to me-"

I continued rambling as I slowly increased my singing's volume, distracting the boy until I could use my Mindbreaker magic on him.

*It's ok. Everything will be ok.*

I looped what I hoped wasn't a lie through Jhi's thoughts until his hiccupping sobs fell silent.

"It's ok," he dreamily said. "Everything will be ok."

I showed him my best fake smile, hoping it looked real to him.

"That's right," I said. "I'll make sure you're ok."

Then, my Somadept magic sent him under, there to dream until I woke him up. Doing that might take a while, though, because when I sat back on my heels, flames had formed rings in my vision, narrowing my field of view to pinpricks.

"Pon liiares?" someone said above me.

"Aiko."

With a slow breath out, I rocked to my feet, facing the woman behind me. Much shorter than me, I could always see the bump of her brown ponytail on the top of her head. I rarely got to see her similarly brown eyes, as she was almost bowing to me. My first thrall, she was usually the quickest to respond to my needs, such as when I'd summoned a handful of them for an unspecified task on surfacing from the song.

I gestured to the boy at my feet.

"This is Jhi," I said. "He's having trouble adjusting. I'd like it if he were taken somewhere secluded and comfortable, please. As soon as I have a moment, I come by to check on him."

*Keep him well-guarded,* I added.

Unlike Jhi, Aiko couldn't understand the specific words I spoke into the song, but she'd know what I'd meant to convey anyway.

"Va, pon liiares," she said, dipping her body further toward the ground.

Turning away from me, she flicked her fingers, and two more thralls, Yan and Ryang, pushed through the ring of onlookers to join her. With Jhi taken care of for now, I rounded on Yosai and the other keepers near him.

We needed to have *a talk*.

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