Chapter 160 Kiara (Interlude)

Kiara crouched low in the grass, her muscles tense.  She could also sense the prey in the low grass assessing her back from inside its burrow.  Her sister was far to her right, her black tail up in the air, twitching to attract prey’s attention.  She huffed at her black sister as she had learned the tail trick by pure accident and got much praise from Father.  Kiara preferred to surprise her prey rather than lure it out anyway.

She moved forward, her nose and whiskers parting the grass as she approached the now-distracted bunny.  The bunny leaped from its burrow and targeted the black tail.  Kiara’s white mass flashed forward to intercept the prey before it disappeared.  She summoned two phantom whips and slammed the bunny into the ground.

Adrial’s black, shiny mass of fur rose from the grass and growled in dismay as Kiara killed the blink bunny and took the prey from her grasp.  Kiara hissed in amusement at her sister’s failure again.  Kiara picked up the broken body of the large rabbit and pranced over to Father.  She dropped the corpse at his feet and sat back, waiting while Adrial went searching for another bunny burrow.

The human she called Father Storme scratched her behind her white ears, “Good girl, Kiara.  You are getting much better control of your phantom limbs. Still need to work on your camouflage.” Kiara could change her fur to match the surroundings, but then she couldn’t use her whips. Maybe in time, she would be able to do both.

She purred in appreciation at the scratching but tapped the rabbit with her paw.  “You have to be one of the most spoiled phantom cats in the Sphere,” Father chuckled at her.   He reached down and grabbed the ears of the rabbit and pulled it straight up, taking the fur pelt with him.  The mass of flesh left behind was deconstructed into its bodily parts. Father made the rabbit fur disappear into his special space, a trick she really wanted to learn for herself.

Kiara’s purr heightened as she pawed the mass and teased out the liver.  She lapped up the liver and chewed the juicy and rich organ, trying not to lose any of the blood as she worked it in her mouth, savoring the taste.  She moved on to the kidneys next.  They were more chewy but still delectable.  The heart was the last organ the phantom cat chewed on before stopping and looking up at Father with her glowing red eyes.

“I am not cooking the meat for you,” Father told her.  She looked at the pile and turned around, flicking her tail and leaving the rest of the rabbit.  She could get another rabbit and enjoy just the tastiest parts.  Adrial trotted past her with his own bloody prize in her maw to show father. Her sister still could not manifest her phantom whips, so her rabbit was bloody. Kiara thought the internal parts were probably crushed and would not taste as good mixed together.

Seven rabbits later, Kiara was finally full of liver and kidneys, so much so her stomach hurt. She took to lounging in the grass. There was no need to do any more work, and Father still would not let them fight the unihorn goats. Though Adrial was still hunting, Father admonished Kiara’s laziness, “Kiara, you wanted to come and hunt today. And after just an hour, you are done?” She yawned at him and closed her eyes to nap. She had worked hard today and even thought her camouflage was getting better.

She knew the man who she considered Father was not her real father and that he had killed her true mother and father as well. Kiara had inherited memories of her true parents. Her instinct told her that it was a world where the strong survived. She had, at first, been biding her time and growing, planning to get revenge. But eventually, Father Storme grew on her. Her sister immediately thought her Father was the alpha and did whatever she could to please him in return for food until it became ingrained in her nature.

Now, Kiara did trust Storme. He was good to them and even gave her the pretty collar that flashed a blue light and protected her from an attack. It had taken Kiara a few weeks of play-fighting with her sister to figure out that the collar took time to recharge. That was not the only thing the black collar could do.

It could also protect her from a fall at a great height. She learned this when she leaped off the flying ship toward the ground. The collar got warm, and she landed much more softly than expected. She tested this a few more times to confirm it. Her sister had chased her up the skyship and jumped with her each time, thinking it was a game until the collars were expended, and she landed normally.

She rolled in the grass. Father Storme was playing with the male named Bleiz. They were hitting each other with metal sticks, making it hard to sleep. Still, she did her best to tune them out. She did not understand their fascination with the long metal sticks. Claws were much easier to control.

Storme whistled, signaling for her to come. She stretched, rolled onto her back, stretched again, and then plodded over to him. Her sister, Adrial, had been busy as over a dozen mutilated rabbit bodies abounded, each one brought to Father Storme to gain a brief pat. Then she saw it and growled discontentedly.

A one-horned goat had clear claw marks, and its throat ripped out. She had not heard her sister attack the creature, and Father clearly told them not to hunt it. Did Adrial get praised for disobeying? “Your sister is stepping up her game, Kiara,” Father said, scratching behind Adiral’s ears. Her black sister was basking in the praise, especially in front of Kiara.

Kiara bounded away and looked for a goat, ignoring the whistles to return. She was the better hunter, and now she needed to prove it before they left this strange place. She raced past two blink bunnies, swatting them aside with his phantom limbs. She paused, sniffing the air for the smell of goat, and changed her direction. Two of the goats appeared over the hill and charged her in unison.

She waited patiently for them to reach her, ready to leap and lash at both with her phantom whips. Then, there was a flash, and both goats were beheaded and crashed into the ground. Father stood in front of her and slowly turned to face her, “Kiara, I said it was time to go. I am very disappointed in you.”

The power of Father Storme was undisputed. Kiara felt some guilt and walked slowly forward, nudging his hand with her head, seeking forgiveness. “I forgive you,” Father said, scratching her ears.

Kiara trotted to the goats and pawed them. Since they were killed, she might as well get a chance to taste their livers. She started purring until Father caved and used his magic to dissemble the parts so Kiara could get liver without working for it.

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Kiara was watching the land pass below out of the glass on the flying ship. Looking down, with everything so small, made her feel powerful. Her sister was next to her and hissed at a large bird passing far below. Kiara swatted her sister’s head with her paw. She was stupid as the bird was far too far away to hear the challenge.

Her sister had really started to annoy her with her lack of forethought. Even more so, Adiral’s larger body and elementary control over her phantom limbs, whenever they wrestled allowed her to win almost every time. She was smarter than her sister, but her sister had brute force, as Father called it.

“They are getting big so quickly,” the woman called Cilia said from the steering chair behind her. Kiara looked at her briefly and then at Father before watching the ground below again.

Father responded to her, “I know. Adrial is now two hundred and seven pounds, and Kiara is one hundred and forty pounds.”

“How big will they get?” The one called Leda asked.

“Wynna found someone to do a reading on them who was visiting from the lowlands. She specialized in reading aspects of creatures. Adrial will be bigger than Kiara, around six hundred pounds fully grown. Kiara will be about four hundred pounds when fully grown. But I didn’t tell you Kiara has a remarkable beast core,” Father Storme said with pride. Kiara knew he was proud of her and purred contentedly.

“Incredible,” Leda said. “How large was her core?”

Father replied to her, “Adrial’s is just four aether units with a max size of six. It should fully mature to six. Kiara’s is fourteen with a max size of twenty-three,” Storme said, wearing a prideful smile.

“Twenty-three!” Cilia remarked while bringing the flying ship toward the city below. “That is more than most mages!”

Father beamed with pride, “Normally, a beast core already has its spell forms imprinted on it when it is born. The just need to learn how to channel aether through it. That is how they manifest their abilities. Kiara’s beast aether core is larger than normal and has an aether matrix of eight. Her phantom whips and chameleon shift only take two spell slots each.”

“What about Adrial?” Leda asked, approaching the large cats to pet them. Adrial rolled onto her side so her long, lush black fur could be petted. Kiara remained on watch as they descended to the familiar city.

“She has just the normal-sized beast core for a phantom cat. It is four, using all her space. Although she still has trouble using her chameleon ability even after two years.” Father told the two women.

“That is why we are going to Lloth? Are you going to see if Kiara can imprint different spells on the remaining four slots?” Leda asked while giving Kiara the same attention she gave her sister.

“Yes, the chameleon ability and air whip are both tier-two spell-like abilities. Lorae found a beast tamer that can inscribe abilities on beast cores if there is room. It is a rare ability, and very few creatures have space on their cores for anything new to be added,” Storme noted.

When Lorae’s name was mentioned, both cats looked at father. Lorae could communicate with them with a series of mental images. It was more for Adrial’s benefit, as Kiara had built a decent understanding of the common tongue over two years. The flying ship landed, and they departed into the city. Kiara was on Storme’s left, and Adrial on his right.

Both cats’ haunches now came up to Storme’s waist. Adrial was thicker, more muscled, and had a shiny, black long-haired coat. Kiara’s coat was a brilliant white but tended to stain easily. Father was constantly having to clean the red blood off it after they hunted in the dungeon. The two feline guards were impressive, and the crowd parted for them but stared as they walked the streets.

Kiara knew Beliz was weaving through the crowd nearby, hidden from her sight but not all her senses; her keen eyes could pick up the swirls of dust he disturbed when he moved. Adrial was tracking anyone who got too close with her soft-glowing green eyes, while Kiara’s red eyes did the same on her side of the street.

When they reached the destination, Lorae came rushing out to hug Adrial, who purred loudly at the attention, and the two exchanged mental images in a manner of conversation. Kiara huffed as Lorae preferred Adrial, probably because they were both dark-skinned. Also, for the simplicity of conversation, Kiara mused at her sister’s lack of intellect.

“I didn’t forget about you, Kiara.” Lorae came over and wrapped her arms around Kiara’s thick neck. Images flashed back and forth between them, and Kiara tried to resist purring but let out a low hum anyway. Lorae was a good, excitable little one. And she had two cute—but annoying frost cats she was training.

As if summoned by her thought, the two gray frost cats came bounding into the room. They were still young and immediately tried to climb Adrial, who just stood there and purred at the attention. After the greeting, Storme addressed Lorae, “Did he arrive?”

“The Beast Tamer arrived yesterday. He wants five thousand gold just to look at Kiara’s core, though,” she bit her lip.

Storme shrugged, “I am willing. It is just gold. I also have a few runic weapons to drop off for sale if you want to run them to Tallot later. Just failed experiments, but they should sell for a few thousand gold.”

Lorae smiled, “Great!! I will get the Tamer, and you can wait upstairs in my apartment!!” Lorae dashed away. They climbed the guild hall stairs up to Relik and Lorae’s apartment.

Relik was on a sofa, sewing something. He looked up, and even though Kiara knew him, a deep foreboding went through her in the presence of an apex predator. Adrial stepped behind Storme for protection, but Kiara remained at his side, her knees a little weak.

“Storme! Good to see you again!” Relik stood and shook their wrists with him before sitting, “Been working on mending some old clothes.” There was a pile of shirts and pants on a table.

Storme questioned, “Isn’t a simple magic mending spell easier?”

Relik chuckled, “Back when I started delving into dungeons, we always mended our own clothes. I am trying to remember how to get the stitching tight. Lorae is going back to Skyholme soon to take her first delve in your dungeon, and part of the Duskhunter training is mending clothes. Sometimes, you can end up in a dungeon for months and need to have a good array of skills.”

Storme paused, “I thought you were having her wait?”

“We have a dozen children going back to the Guild Residence in Skyholme to play on the first level of your dungeon. No offense, but other than the hippogriff, it has to be one of the easiest dungeons I have ever encountered.” Adrial took a position behind Relik’s sofa while Kiara remained at Storme’s side while he sat.

“I can not thank you enough for remaining with us last year during the Black Maurader invasion,” Storme said with genuine appreciation.

Relik waved his hand, “We just fulfilled our job posting and protected our interests. Getting the Progenitor Dungeon for three days a week from you for five years was overly generous, Storme.”

Storme relaxed into the chair. “I was able to secure the bounties on the Sky King and four of his lieutenants. Three of whom you killed. It is unfortunate the Mage Hunter got away.”

“Two hundred and fifty thousand for the Sky King and fifty thousand each for the lieutenants,” Relik provided with a smile. “The adamantine coins the Sky King dropped more than made up for it. When do you plan to leave?”

“To hunt the Mauraders? Soon. Loriel wanted me to wait until after the islands’ defenses were rebuilt and improved. Trade has been steadily increasing, which has brought in a lot of coin for the rebuilding.” Kiara yawned as Storme and the dangerous elf continued to talk about unimportant things.

It wasn’t long before the Lorae returned with a short human in fine silk clothing. Kiara sniffed the air as they entered, and it was not a human, something similar, but not quite a human. She wondered how his liver might taste. It spoke immediately on seeing the white phantom cat, “Ha! I thought she was pulling my leg when she said she found an albino phantom cat!! But it looks on the surface that it is true. Maybe this trip to Llorth was worth it!!”

The small being moved to approach Kiara, and she sensed wrongness and rose, her back arching and fur standing on end as she made a long, low, reverberating growl. When Father Storme did not reprimand her, she remained ready to attack, and the man stopped a distance away. Father Storme spoke to him, “Good halfling, may I have your name?”

The halfing had paused, “Beast Tamer Timmer,” he extended his hand. Storme and the Timmer shook, and Storme gave the hand sign for Kiara to relax. She was pleased to note that her sister’s tail had been twitching, and she had been ready to help her.

“You dress oddly for a Beast Tamer,” Storme said skeptically, “I have your fee,” he handed the Tamer a pouch. He took it, and it disappeared in the same manner Father could do.

“This is only the second white phantom beast I have ever seen!! Remarkable. Did you know that the anomaly causing the white fur and red eyes strengthens their beast core? Of course, you do!! That is why I am here. Do you mind if I examine it?” The Tamer was excited as he moved closer, and an instrument appeared in his hand. It had a strong metallic scent to Kiara as he focused it on her. “Remarkable!!”

The halfling put the device away. “Your phantom cat does have a strong beast core with space to imprint another ability.”

“You are telling me things I already know,” Storme said, irritated. I traveled a long way to meet you and paid you a sizable sum. Lorae shied into the frame of the doorway. The Beast Tamer was proving to be not very professional.

Timmer smiled, “Ah, you have!! Well, as you know, beings like you and me have an aether core that can imprint spells to be cast. Sometimes, we have an affinity that makes inscribing certain spells easier.”

“And your point?” Storme said, getting impatient at the apparent dandy. Kiara sensed his dissatisfaction and tensed her muscles, ready to act. Maybe she would get to taste his liver.

The man spoke rapidly, “Beasts have a beast core. Also called a primal core. They can only inscribe abilities with affinities that their core is attuned to. Your phantom cat’s core is remarkable in that it has three affinities to which it is attuned. Normally, a phantom cat’s beast core only has illusion and air affinities for its chameleon and phantom strike abilities. Your beast also has a third affinity—mind magic!! I will give you one hundred thousand gold for it right now.” Kiara only mildly understood what was happening and shrunk back slightly.

“Kiara is not for sale. And I do not think you are Beast Tamer,” Storme said with growing anger.

The small being held up his hands, “I am more of a mind mage. I can see my attempt to influence you to sell failed. I apologize for even trying. I return your fee to you,” he quickly produced the bag and tossed it to Storme. “I will go as high as two-hundred and fifty thousand. This white cat is simply a must for my collection.”

Relik stood, his powerful aura washing through the room and causing the halfling’s legs to go weak. “My friend said his companion was not for sale. It is time you leave my home halfling.”

“Ah, but you still need me. Beasts can not imprint abilities on the cores! It requires outside intervention, and I can provide that! There is not another mind mage within fifty thousand miles that can do what I can do! I devoted my life to modifying beast cores. I can give the cat the ability…” he paused, thinking, “to turn invisible…or communicate with you telepathically…or attack a target with a mind blast…or even fly!!”

“Enough!” Storme barked. “I will not deal with you. Not only did you try to use your mind magic on me, but you also do not value the creatures. You are lucky I did not kill you where you stand. If this was my home, I would have.”

Relik shrugged, “I am okay with you killing him. A mind attack is as good as a physical attack to me. But it is your decision, Storme.”

Lorae, from the doorway, squeaked, “Sorry.”

Timmer had gone pale and was backing out of the room. All confidence and bravado were gone. When he got outside the room, he ran down the hallway toward the stairs. Storme was shaking his head. Lorae entered the room, “Sorry, Storme. He came highly recommended and has one of the most unique menageries in the Sphere. I didn’t know he was a mind mage. Thank you for not killing him, as it might have caused me some trouble.”

“You didn’t know, Lorae. Now that I know it is possible,” his hand rubbed the top of Kiara’s head, “I need to find someone who can help Kiara learn a new ability.” Kiara understood most of what transpired and started purring loudly. She was going to get stronger.