

“Are we lost Kai?” Solomon said in exasperation as the two trekked up the mountain switchback.

Kai shook their head and cheerfully replied, “You know... every great explorer before us has uttered similar words and they have become a little cliché. The explorers most likely traveled the realm at large AND discovered something about the unknown land upon us. So take a second. Breathe in the air, enjoy the scenery and embrace the mystery of discovery!” Kai hoisted themselves up onto the rocky ledge and turned to offer a helping hand to the begrudging Solomon below.

Solomon glanced around, “Can you direct me in what direction I should view said *scenery*?” He only saw the tall rock cliffs of the Stormchaser mountains surrounding the two with few scenic sights to behold. He reached for Kai’s hand as they aided their ascent.

“Weren’t you just worried about being lost?” Kai snickered. “Look, there was no mandate that you needed to come. The study visa was really only meant for me. You are lucky that the dean ‘awarded’ me the assistant endorsement for my year excursion. YOU asked ME...no ...you BEGGED me to let you come with!” Kai jokingly mocked Solomon’s grumbling as the pair continued the hike.

“I might have reconsidered if you told me your frugal ass was going to find every excuse to be lost in the wilderness without a guide...” Solomon dragged his feet up the slope pushing large bits of rubble from the lightly traveled path.

“We... are not lost! Merely exploring the outdoors!” Kai chirped excitedly, “There is great discovery to be had where we’re headed and I don’t want to miss a single thing!” Kai retrieved a crumpled paper from their pouch. “Let’s use Rutherford Woodcroft as an example. Would this noble and naturally inquisitive man ever let a moment of adventure pass him by? OF COURSE NOT! He took exploration into his own hands and is now one of the most marked members of the Athenium! Fantastic!”

“I mean... he is wealthy now. He barely has to set foot outside without a carriage. I bet he owns one of those air balloons.” Solomon stumbled behind Kai’s brisk pace as they reached another section of large boulders they needed to climb.

“Heh... Rutherford Woodcroft definitely doesn’t own one of those magnificent engineering feats.” Kai tossed their bags onto the ledge and tightly gripped the cracks to heave themselves up. After a few gasping breaths, Kai returned to Solomon’s underwhelming retort and gaze. “Regardless, I...no...we are here in the name of discovery and curiosity. That means documenting every plant and animal species we find to return to Crescent Fall Academy. Imagine the construction and creativity that others will be able to do with our documentation.” Kai beamed at the thought of their increasing fame. Solomon, straight faced, waved Kai back in order to toss his belongings and the inordinate number of samples onto the rocky ledge.

“CAREFUL! Some of those samples are still live from Mishan!” Kai snapped. “Some of those samples could be detrimental to the native species. Not to mention, if they die we can’t study them.

“Probably not anymore then...” With some careful arrangement, Solomon crawled up the cliff face and recovered the bags.

“Let’s take a short rest here. We need to keep moving soon. If we aren’t moving down this mountain before noon, the weather will kill us...” Kai grabbed for Solomon’s bags and

began gingerly checking the glass containers for flaws. Solomon sipped water from his water skin and rested his eyes before the journey forward.

To Be Continued...