

*Viribus*

The boy stopped.

The leaves above his head began to blur and bleed, creating an abhorrent mess of color. The earth began to shift and change, the once solid ground forming waves beneath his feet, shifting and shaking and thrashing him from side to side. All sound faded away as his vision turned dark, and the boy found himself desperately clinging on to those now-tiny wisps of color that just a few moments ago had sickened him.

The boy dropped like a stone.

His knees hit the ground first. The jungle floor tore his skin open, adding a new wound to the legion of scars that inhabited his arms and legs. His hands hit the ground next, palms slapping the earth, his attempt at revenge for the pain it had inflicted upon him. Shakily, he remained there, suspended on his hands and knees. He gasped for air, his lungs unable to hold much more than what he needed to survive until the next breath. He clenched his teeth in frustration as he was hit with a wave of nausea. Concentrating with his entire being, he rested his head on the jungle floor. He interlocked his fingers within his hair, and slid his legs backwards, letting his whole body rest on the earth. He waited a few moments before turning onto his side and pulling his knees up into a tight embrace. He smiled. He didn't pass out this time.

*He stumbled back into the village, a single log of firewood balanced precariously in his arms. He strained under the weight of his load. He lifted up his foot to take another step.*

*But before his foot had dropped, the boy stopped. The log was simply too heavy, and it made no sense to continue trying. The wood slipped from his hand, and slammed against the*

*earth with a loud 'thunk.' The noise resounded through the village, scaring the birds from the trees. But not a single head turned, save his father's disappointed gaze.*

As the boy slowly regained his footing, he glanced around, praying that nobody was around to witness the spectacle. He sighed, both in relief and as a way to test the limits of his lungs. They still hadn't recovered. He continued to rest.

Some time passed, and he decided to continue his journey. His head pounded as he trod along, step by step by aching step. Pain coursed like molten iron through his feet.

He considered turning back, to just go home. He held the thought in his mind, twisting it around and examining every facet, before ultimately discarding the idea. It was silly of him to even consider returning to that place. There was nothing left for him there.

However, try as he might, it proved impossible for him to keep his thoughts from wandering home. Visions of the villagers welcoming him back in with open arms, voicing their lamentations for ever driving him to leave. Oh, how they'd hug him, and hold him, and tell him that they accepted him for who he was, weakness and all. They'd see the error of their ways, and trip over themselves to make their apologies heard.

The boy smiled as he imagined this, but it soon evaporated as he remembered the truth. These hopes of acceptance were mere falsities, illusions of a world that would only ever exist within his head. He brought his arms into view, and gazed upon discolored splotches of scar tissue that ran up and down the length of his spindly appendages. A feeling of spite materialized within him, and he continued walking.

*The log had barely left his grasp when he heard the calls for dinner. A booming yell radiated out from the other youths, and they began racing home. He ran alongside them for a distance, whooping all the way.*

*But a gap began to form. The distance between the boy and the other children grew larger and larger.*

*But just as he was gathering the resolve to double his pace, his lungs closed up, caught in an invisible vice. The boy stopped, and he doubled over, wheezing.*

*A few of the kids turned around, looking to see what the commotion was. They towered over him as their shoulders began to shake with laughter. Tears streamed down every face.*

He had no destination in mind. There was nothing he was running to, only something from which he was running away. Not that he was actually running. His body still ached from his most recent incident.

He didn't know when exactly he was going to stop walking. Scanning the horizon, he spotted a gigantic tree off in the distance. Its towering physique guaranteed safety, and the boy would be able to make the perfect home for the evening. He knew he could make it, but he'd have to move quickly to before night fell.

*The children's laughter ceased at once. A thick blanket of silence surrounded the crowd, broken only by the sniveling of the fallen boy. He knew what this silence indicated. He shut his eyes tighter as he steeled himself for the coming storm.*

*The blow came from above, striking him in the back. Another one whipped him in the leg, and a third struck him in the head before he'd even had a chance to react.*

*Two gigantic hands clasped his shoulders, and lifted him up. The boy opened his eyes, and looked at the blurry image of his father. Though the tears in his eyes distorted the image, nothing could mask his father's disgust.*

*His father's head turned back and forth, his thick neck twisting with muscle and sinew, as he looked at the boys and girls who had run so far ahead of his son. Turning back to the boy between his paws, he spoke, before releasing the boy back into gravity's command.*

*"You gave up."*

*That was the day the boy left.*

The boy sat atop a large hill, gazing wistfully off at the top of the giant tree. He'd decided to rest instead. He'd make it there tomorrow. He looked down the hillside, trying to map out his surroundings, but the earth had swallowed the sun.

The darkness was complete. The boy slept soundly, nurtured by the quiet gurgling that pervaded the area, a soft slurping and slapping that came from somewhere down the hill.

He awoke the next morning, shivering in the cool jungle air. He turned his vision to his goal, towering in the distance, before laying back down.

He stayed there, on his back, staring up at the sky. Clouds drifted in and out of his vision, shifting around, moving every which way. His back stayed affixed to the ground as he watched the dancing in the sky, utterly transfixed. The giant tree stood off in the distance.

As the day passed him by, the boy felt a discomfort. An itch, on his back.

He turned onto his side to remedy the problem. His shoulder scraped along the dirt.

He arched his spine back, and reached behind him. His shoulder slipped a bit farther. A soft 'squelch' could be heard as he shifted into a bit of mud, but the boy took no notice.

The boy wiggled, trying to reach the itch on his back, and moved himself completely onto the soggy mud that caked the hillside. He started to slide down.

He tumbled down and down, his hands trying to scabble and scratch at anything to stop his fall, but nothing could slow his momentum. He skidded to a stop at the bank of a black lake, darker than any dye. His right side became submerged in the murky liquid, and the boy's blue eyes became wide with fear as warmth spread through his left half.

Tar.

The gurgling was louder now. A large bubble popped up next to the boy's face, and slapped the surface as it deflated.

He stared at the sky again, though the clouds no longer took their shapes. They were simply clouds, floating above, stopping above his head to gawk at the trapped little boy, before going again on their merry way.

He was imprisoned in that warm ooze, the tar creeping up his chest. He lay back, unmoving, uncaring, unwilling to do anything but remain still, and die.

Visions of his village appeared in his head.

The sun reached its highest peak in the sky, and the light forced its way into the boy's eyes. He turned his head away, his vision now locked upon the tree that stood off in the distance.

It looked tall.

It looked strong.

It looked powerful.

The boy looked at his body. He looked back at the tree. He began to pull against the tar.

He clenched his teeth, pulling with all his might, but the tar held him back without effort.

He continued to pull, his shoulder screaming with the effort of the battle, and the boy matched his shoulder's anguish with a cry of his own. The tar refused to budge.

He stopped. The situation was hopeless. Nobody escapes the tar pits. What sense was there in making his last moments even more painful?

But just as he was about to surrender, a vision of his father flashed through his mind..

*"You gave up."*

He saw the disgust and the anger. But there was something beneath it. Below the surface of his father's rage, was something more. Sadness.

*"You gave up."*

He remembered how his father's shoulders had dropped when the boy made the *decision* to drop the log.

*"You gave up."*

The boy saw the pain in his father's eyes as he watched his son quit the race.

*"You gave up."*

The boy turned his head, and stared at the tree towering off in the distance. The image of that beacon of hope that he'd foregone in favor of watching a few clouds go by burned itself into his mind.

*"I gave up."*

The boy began to pull again. It was hopeless. It was idiotic. Any other man would've recognized the futility of the situation.

But the boy continued to struggle. With his free hand, he dug himself into the gravelly beach, and continued to fight. And slowly, he began to shift. His body screamed for the boy to relent, but he continued to pull as his clothing began to peel away from his body. Still he pulled as the hair was ripped from his body, and as the boy gave one final pull, the top layer of his skin was torn off, still stuck in the tar as he pulled himself to freedom.

He stood up, screaming and whooping in celebration. He jumped up and down, he punched the air, he turned back to that pit of death, yelling obscenities at the black mass that had tried to keep him down.

He was drunk on the feeling of victory.

He looked around, giggling, taking in the beauty of the jungle.

The colors of the world were so bright.

They grew brighter and brighter, until each leaf on every beautiful tree shone out in its own radiance.

And as he continued to stare, the leaves began to blur and bleed together, creating an abhorrent mess of color. As the adrenaline faded, he felt the strength drain from his muscles as his lungs snapped shut. Turning his vision toward the tar pit, he could see a single indentation in the flat lake of blackness. Right at his feet, was the indentation he left in the tar when he freed himself from its grasp.

As he stared at this monument to what he had accomplished, darkness closed around his vision.

The man fell face-first into the tar. Slowly, he sank beneath the surface.

He died with a smile immortalized on his face.