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Age: 16 years old.

Moving Forward: Two Paths, One Spirit

The moon fades away and the first orange glow streaks the sky mark the beginning of a new day. Observant eyes take in the change, determination shine bright as stars in midnight sky. The girl tightens her hands around her backpack and takes her first step into the deep, dark forest, unaware of the creature on the opposite side whose path will cross with hers soon.

As the Sun begins to rise, a tortoise wakes up, pokes its head from its shell, and starts crawling. Slowly, one step in front of the other. The day seems to last an eternity with the unmerciful Sun casting its rays from the sky above and the heavy burden on its back. No matter how hard it tries, he can't shake the weight from his shoulder. Maybe, just maybe, a thought can vanquish it. He closes his eyes and tries to summon a light, carefree thought, but the weight is still there. Unforgiving and relentless. The tortoise is left with no other choice but to keep crawling towards the world ahead.

I squint my eyes against the blinding sunlight to get a better look at the path ahead. Despite the willpower pulsing in my veins, deep down I have no clue where I'm heading. Destination, as I understand, has its own uniqueness to each being. For me, it remains a mystery.

The nature enveloping me and the heat made the air humid. Sweat drips down my forehead and right into my eye. Exhaustion tugs at my very bones, begging me to stop. 'One step in front of the other,' I keep telling myself. Dried leaves crunch under my boots as I trudge forward, consumed in my thoughts. One minute I was walking...

...and the next I'm lying face-first on the ground.

The tortoise's empty stomach growl louder each passing minute and the fact that he's lying on the ground swallowing dust does not help. Before anyone ask, no, he did not trip. To recite the events that have happened, it merely involved three bully tortoises and a bowl of salad. After walking for what seems like hours, the tortoise

finally found its paradise. A bowl of fine greenery amidst a sea of sand. Filled with profound hope, the tortoise walked as fast as his stubby legs would carry him. He was so close he could almost taste the freshness of the greenery in its mouth. 5...4....3...2...1...

WHAM!

Something struck him hard. He staggered backward a few steps, lost balance, and tumbled to the dust covered ground. Blinking away dust, he could make out three very tortoise-like figures devouring *his* salad. His hope deflated. Defiant, the tortoise gave in to hunger and the heavy weight, still, on his back.

Short, damp tentacles tickle my face. I hastily get up and wipe away the dirt that cling to my hands. Staring down at the moss-covered ground where I have lain, 'One more step,' I tried to tell myself, but this time my legs stood their ground. They did not budge. Worse, they went still. Exhaustion won over me and forced my legs to stop. No, it can't be, because what's worse than going in pointless direction, even if you end up lost in the middle of nowhere, is not getting anywhere at all. There's only one way left. I stared down the muddy path, heave a sigh, and slam my body down to the ground. With the help of gravity, the impact made my body ache all over but it would have to take more than that to stop me. If my legs are not working, then I'll use my arm. Stretching out my right arm, I managed to grab hold a tiny patch of grass. With my left arm, I positioned it perpendicularly to the ground, and without further ado, I started to crawl.

Everything is lost. Still grieving over his stolen meal, the tortoise's mind wandered back to the three thieves.

Moments after the tortoise gave up, the other three, now full, came over. The tortoise opened a bleary eye only to see them smirking at him. 'Maybe they left some meager amount for me,' the tortoise tried to convince himself. The biggest one spoke first, 'Giving up already?' the tortoise remained still. The others' smirk faded, replaced by a laugh. 'Namby-pamby' said one. 'Weak little tortoise,' another chimed in. It was a full course of insults from the other tortoises. When they were done dispiriting the tortoise, they left.

It was their remarks and smirks that have engraved into his mind. The more he thought about it, the more determined he felt. Determined to seek strength. A quest, that's what it is. A quest for strength. The tortoise let go of all the comments and smirks of the other tortoises. His stubby legs, filled with energy, pushed him up and started walking. Despite the heat burning his skin, his empty stomach, and the weight, he smiled, the first in a very long time.

Squish. The tortoise felt its foot stepped on something wet. He looked down and saw that he has stepped on mosses.

Sticks and stones may break my bone but words will never hurt me. Not physically, but psychologically? Yes. The trees looming seem to chant: 'Give up, give up,' Twigs and stones marred my skin as I tried to escape the dreadful chant stuck in my head. The weight of my backpack prominent more than ever. Not much different from the responsibility I carry around in my very heart and soul. Don't we all have them? Responsibility, expectations, hopes, all crushing me at my lowest point. Hot tears fall as I close my eyes, ready to admit defeat. Everything was too much.

I thought of abandoning my backpack. No more responsibilities, expectations, hopes. For once, I might be...free. Removing the straps, I tossed my backpack aside. The weight now gone, I feel lighter. Free.

Empty.

The hollowness rings through my body. Without my backpack I am left with a slim chance of survival. Everything is in there: hope, support, encouraging words, everything. I reached out for my backpack once more, instead my hand sinks right into sand.

The Sun, tipped precariously over the horizon, knew it was nearly time to say goodbye to this fine day. Still, its eyes were glued to the two creatures. Less than a meter apart, each regards the other with respect, and happiness before they depart, going their own ways. Having followed them since the beginning, the Sun shares the air of understanding alongside the two creatures.

We all have traveled so far. The tortoise, started off as a namby-pamby found its strength at last. The girl filled with hope was tested by many, yet she did not yield. Lastly, the Sun who understands that no path is complete without a twist there or a turn here. Our destination may not be at the end of the road but along the way. For curious minds who wonder, what awaits there then? You alone can answer that, and the only way to find out is to follow your path. No matter how treacherous, keep on moving forward.