



Epic Tales



The Distant Fire

Based on an Ethiopian folk tale adapted by Chip Colquhoun

Illustration by Heather Rose

When Abel's mother grew sick, she could no longer work in the fields collecting coffee berries. This meant she could no longer make any money.

In those days, in the country of Ethiopia, you could only see a doctor if you had the money to pay him. So Abel had to start working in the fields himself, collecting coffee berries—even though he was only six years old.

The fields belonged to a very rich man called Panya. He was very rich because he didn't pay much money to the people who worked for him. When Abel asked Panya for work, Panya said,

"You can work for me. You are half as tall as your mother, so I shall give you half the money."

Abel replied, "But my mother is sick! We need money for a doctor! Even the money that you paid my

mother was only enough for our food. I will work twice as hard as her, and collect twice as many coffee berries—so please can you pay me twice as much money?”

Panya thought this was very funny, and he said, “Alright then. If you collect twice as many coffee berries as your mother, I will pay you double. But I do not think you will do it.”

Maybe because he was younger than his mother, Abel was much faster going through the fields of coffee plants. But because he was smaller, his hands couldn't grab as many coffee berries at once. So in the end, he only picked as many berries as his mother had done.

When Panya found out, he laughed again—but said, “Alright Abel. You have shown me that you are as good as your mother. So I will pay you the same as your mother.”

Abel knew this wouldn't be enough to afford a doctor yet, because he also needed to buy food for him and his mother. But he thanked Panya anyway, and said, “Tomorrow I will be better.”

On his way home, Abel had to pass a cake shop. The smell of the cakes inside was so very sweet! He stopped and looked in through the window; his mouth was full of water because he wanted to try a cake so much.

A man came out from the cake shop to meet Abel, saying, “Hello! I am Hakim, the baker. Would you like to try one of my cakes?”

Abel was about to nod his head—but then he remembered his mother. He said, “I cannot. My mother is sick, and I need to buy food for us both. I need to have lots of energy for tomorrow, so I can work even better for Panya and collect more coffee berries.”

Hakim smiled, and said. “You are a very good boy—so here's

what I will do. I will give you a cake for free. Perhaps it will give you even more energy for your work tomorrow!”

Abel was very thankful! He walked away from the cake shop with two lovely surprises: a delicious cake, and a brand new friend.

The next day, Abel managed to pick a few more coffee berries than the day before—so Panya paid him a little more money. But it still wasn't enough to buy food and a doctor—so Abel decided to save the extra money. He said, “Soon I will have enough to pay the doctor.”

Once again, on his journey home, Abel stopped near the cake shop. Hakim came out to see him, asked if Abel's mother was feeling any better, and gave Abel another cake for free—so Abel could have even more energy the next day.

This went on for a while. Each day, Hakim gave Abel a free cake that helped him pick a few more

coffee berries than the day before, so Panya paid Abel a little more money—but after buying food, Abel still didn't have enough to pay for a doctor. So he kept saving the extra money, and each time he told Panya, “Soon I will have enough to pay the doctor.”

But then, one evening, when Hakim asked Abel if his mother was feeling any better, Abel looked very sad and said, “She is getting worse. I do not know if I will save enough money for a doctor in time.”

Hakim wanted to help, but selling cakes did not make much money either—especially when he gave some away to people like Abel for free. All Hakim could do was offer to pray for Abel and his mother, and try to save a little money himself too.

The day after, when Abel went to collect his money for picking the coffee berries, he found Panya in the garden sitting with some of his rich friends. They were all looking

at the mountains that surrounded the country of Ethiopia.

Panya was saying, "There is so much snow at the top of those mountains! It must be very cold up there. Humans are very lucky that we have shirts, and we can make fire—I bet we could not stay alive one night at the top of a mountain without a shirt and a fire to keep us warm."

Suddenly, an idea popped into Abel's head—so suddenly that he didn't really stop to think if it was a good idea; he just used it anyway. He said, "I bet I could stay alive one night on the top of a mountain without a shirt or a fire! What would you give me if I could?"

Panya thought this was extra funny, and all his friends did too. But Panya said, "Alright then. If you can survive one night at the top of the highest mountain with no shirt or fire to keep you warm, I will give you half of everything I have: half of my fields, half of my

houses, half of my servants, and half of my money.

"But I really do not think you will do it. You said you would pick twice as many coffee berries as your mother, and you did not manage that. What makes you think you will do any better this time?"

Hmmm... Do you think you could stay alive for a whole night at the top of a tall, rocky, freezing mountain?

Abel was worried, but he said, "My mother is very sick. I have to try."

That night, Abel was on his way home to say goodbye to his mother before going to the mountain. As he passed the cake shop, Hakim came out to see him, and ask if his mother was any better.

Abel said, "Oh, Hakim. I think I have done something very silly. Panya has said he will give me half of everything he has if I can stay alive for one night at the top of the

highest mountain without a shirt or a fire to keep me warm. I have said I will do it, because I need the money to pay for the doctor—but I am only six-years-old! I am worried I will not come back.”

Hakim put a hand on Abel’s shoulder, and said, “You are a very good and brave boy, Abel. Let me help you.

“First, I will give you a cake so you have the energy to climb the highest mountain and stay awake.

“Second, I will climb the mountain next to your mountain, and build a fire for myself. You can look at the fire: it will not keep you warm, but maybe you will feel comfortable knowing you have a friend nearby.

“Together, I am sure this will give you all the strength you need to survive one night at the top of the highest mountain.”

Abel was extremely thankful! He went back home to say goodnight to his mother, then

took off his shirt and went to start climbing the highest mountain.

Panya and his friends stayed at the bottom of the mountain. They watched Abel climb; they wanted to make sure he didn’t take a shirt with him, and that he didn’t light a fire when he got to the top.

Panya and his friends didn’t see Hakim climbing the next mountain along; nor did they see Hakim light a fire on the side of his mountain.

Abel saw it, though. Once he was at the top of the highest mountain, Abel was shivering really hard—it felt like the cold was biting at his bear chest, back, shoulders, arms, fingers, cheeks, and nose! But Abel looked at Hakim’s fire, and thought of his friend. This put a smile on his face, and helped him to pretend he wasn’t cold at all.

Even so, a night is very long, and soon Abel was so tired from shivering that he fell onto his knees. But he kept looking at Hakim’s fire,

remembering his friend—and the smile stayed on his face.

Even then, the night wasn't finished. Hakim's fire suddenly got smaller; maybe Hakim had fallen asleep, and wasn't looking after the fire anymore? The cold reached Abel's heart, and he started to close his eyes...

...but then the birds began to sing, letting everyone know that the sun was coming up over the horizon to start a new day. Abel heard them, and grinned: he had done it! He had stayed alive for a whole night!

Panya and his friends were amazed when Abel climbed back down. Panya said, "I am a man of my word: I will give you half of everything I own. But I have to ask: how did you do it?"

Abel smiled and said, "It was easy! My friend Hakim lit a fire on the mountain over there, so I could see it and think how wonderful it is to have a good friend. That thought kept me alive."

But when he heard this, Panya got angry. "So you cheated! You told me you would stay alive for one night at the top of the highest mountain without a fire to keep you warm—but you did have a fire! You do not deserve half of everything I own. In fact, I do not want a cheat like you working in my coffee fields—you will not work for me again!"

Abel said, "But the fire was not close enough to keep me warm! I could only look at it!"

Panya shook his head. "Looking at a fire is just as good as feeling the warmth from a fire. You are a cheat!"

All of Panya's friends agreed with him.

Abel began to cry. "But if I have no work, I cannot make enough money to pay for a doctor for my mother...!"

But Panya just said, "I do not care. You should have thought of that before you cheated."

And with that, Panya and his friends went home—leaving Abel crying at the bottom of the highest mountain.

Not long later, Hakim climbed down from his mountain. When he saw Abel crying, he ran over to hug his friend and find out what was wrong.

Abel told Hakim everything that Panya had said. Afterwards, Hakim thought for a long time with a very serious look on his face.

Then, suddenly, Hakim grinned. He said, “Do not worry, Abel. You will have everything that you should have. For now, go home to your mother and let her know you are still alive. Here: take this cake that you can share with her, to cheer you both up.”

Abel was confused. “What are you going to do?” he asked.

Hakim just said, “You will know soon enough.”

Later that day, Panya and all his friends received a letter which read:

**YOU ARE INVITED TO A
SPECIAL CAKE FEAST!**

**Your local baker is having a party
to show off his newest
and finest cakes!**

**The most delicious sweets and
flavours are in these cakes; they
are fit only for kings and wealthy
men like you.**

**Come this evening—
for one night only, you can
munch on these
marvellous morsels for free!**

Panya and all his rich friends loved getting things for free; it meant they didn't have to spend any of their money! So they all accepted Hakim's invitation.

That evening, Hakim welcomed all the rich men into his cake shop. Hakim's assistants held the door open for the rich men, took their coats, and showed them to a large table in the middle of the shop where they could sit down.

The table was full of cakes—the most colourful, most enormous, most delicious-looking cakes you could possibly imagine. Hakim had used all the finest flavours in the world—I bet your favourite flavour was there, for sure!

As soon as Panya saw all the cakes, his mouth began to water. He rubbed his hands eagerly; he couldn't wait for Hakim to bring out the knives and the napkins so he could cut off a piece of this cake and that cake—and maybe that cake and this cake too—and give them each a try.

Hakim kept going in and out of the kitchen, each time coming back with another fancy cake. But he still wasn't bringing any knives or napkins. Still—Panya's mouth was so full of water now that it was really hard not to dribble: he really wanted to get one of those cakes in his mouth! If it wasn't for Hakim's assistants standing in the way, or wanting to be polite in front of all

his friends, Panya might have just snatched a cake from the table and taken a bite.

At last Hakim brought out one final cake, then stood and smiled at all the rich men looking at the cakes. He could hear their tummies rumbling.

Panya began to get a little cross. Hakim still hadn't brought out any knives or napkins! Panya's mouth was so full of water now that he had little lines of dribble drooling from the corners of his mouth: he really wanted to smother his tongue with some of that fluffy sugary goodness! If it wasn't for Hakim's assistants standing in the way, or wanting to be polite in front of all his friends, Panya might have just snatched a cake from the table and mashed it into his face...!

After about a minute, Hakim suddenly clapped his hands together. All his assistants immediately covered up the cakes and carried them all out into the

kitchen. Hakim said, "Thank you, gentlemen! I hope you enjoyed munching on my cakes!"

The rich men watched the cakes leaving the room. Some of them looked very sad to see the cakes go—but some of them looked angry.

One of the angry ones was Panya. He said, "You horrible man! You did not let us munch on any of your cakes! You invited us here just to tease us. I will visit the prince, and we will have you put in prison for this insolence!"

But Hakim looked confused. He said, "Please, sir—is not looking at a cake just as good as munching on a cake?"

Panya was furious. "Of course not! Looking at a cake is certainly not just as good as munching on a cake!"

Hakim said, "But surely, sir: if looking at a fire is just as good as feeling the warmth of a fire, is not looking at a cake just as good as munching on a cake?"

Panya suddenly closed his mouth tight. He realised what Hakim had done—and he didn't know what to say.

But all of his friends knew. Every one of Panya's rich friends agreed that looking at a cake was not just as good as munching on a cake—and so looking at a fire was not just as good as feeling the warmth of a fire.

And so Panya's friends told him that, if Panya really wanted to be a man of his word, he had to give half of everything he owned to Abel.

In the end, Panya wasn't upset about it. He had been impressed by Abel, and now he was impressed with Hakim too. Panya felt he had learned some very valuable lessons. And even after giving half of everything he owned to Abel, Panya was still a very rich man.

Abel was so incredibly grateful to Hakim. With half of Panya's money, Abel was now very rich too.

He paid a doctor straight away to help his mother get better; he paid Hakim back for every cake he had ever given him — paying ten times the amount the cakes were worth; and he made sure that neither he nor his mother ever went hungry again.

And when they had dinner that night to celebrate, what food do you think was on the table?

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