

A cold night breathed its wrath upon a dimly lit village in a low valley. Winters, in what is now Louisiana, could do harm to men, at least it is known by the Koasati tribe. Despite heat from knit and fire, the wind touched the skin of many.

The village story teller, Choba Biyakka, or Big Hawk, brightened the night with tales of many creatures great and small. The children leaned forth in wonder, their eyes like ember sparkling by the licking flames.

"Now, taiyosis and nanis (girls and boys), it must have crossed your minds the thought of the opossum's pouch. Why must it be there? It is a marvelous tale of being. Our story begins with a small opossum mother, Ayokpa (happy), who lived deep in a mossy wood...

Ayokpa had five joeys, all girls, Okchisko (huckleberry), Skaafoto (mint), Hassolwa (moss), Baiya (white oak), and Pakaali (flower). Their family never quarreled, as to not disturb Mother Earth. The day, during which their story takes place, was sunny and warm, so bright that light reached to even the furthest nooks.

Ayokpa led her many babies to a small clearing at the eastern edge of the woods. It was much cooler and shadier in this clearing, for it was in the east where the sun rises. It was a late hot afternoon, therefore the sun was on the other side of the wood. Ayokpa feared for her babies' safety against the sun's intensity. They gathered near a berry shrub and began happily plucking away at the sweet, ripe fruit.

Pakaali munched on her berries, but something darted about five feet in front of her. What it was, she did not know. She decided to ask her mother. .

"Iki (mother), what is that creature? He is small, but he may hurt us," Pakaali pointed towards the shadow, which leaped eerily away just as her finger fell upon it.

"Children, come away from here. I must tell you what that animal is. But, you must never approach it, for you will be in danger if you might," Ayokpa guided her puzzled kin away from the bush, to where the little light shone brightest.

"That creature is a bat called Balkalaho (lie), and is very untrustworthy. Another opossum

whom you do not know told me of a time where Balkalaho took her children and would not return them if not for the courageous deed of the brave falcon. Be careful babies, I would not like you to be taken."

Suddenly, in a burst of rough wind, Balkalaho the bat swooped to Ayokpa's babies and snatched them all in one fell swoop.

"Aha Ayokpa! They are mine!," Balkalaho carried the squirming joeys away from the clearing to a deep cave.

Ayokpa was in shock. Never had her babies left her side. And now they were in possession of a bat, one who would surely harm them. She realized there was no use begging Balkalaho for their return, so she set off for help, attempting to stifle her tears.

"Someone! SOMEONE! That bat Balkalaho took my precious children and will not release them! Somebody, PLEASE!" Ayokpa was desperate. She could hear no response, until Choskani (duck) wandered in to the clearing in which Ayokpa hollered from.

"Ayokpa, what is the matter?" Choskani sighed. He seemed troubled, but that is far from the subject.

"Oh Choskani! I was sure no one would come! Balkalaho has stolen the little ones and taken them somewhere. We must save them!"

"Wicked creature is he! Well, I must aid you. It's the neighborly thing to do. Where did the evil one fly? I am a creature of wings, so perhaps I can spot him up in the skies," said Choskani in a determined sort of tone. His life had never been very exciting, so he jumped at the opportunity to save some lives.

"I cannot thank you enough!" Ayokpa said while embracing the feeble duck. Choskani took to the skies and caught a rough breeze. His majestic way of flight was marvelous to observe, what with being one of the more lavishly feathered birds, the mallard. He scanned canopies, bogs and swamps, creeks, and even a small boulder cluster. And that was where he noticed a screech.

Down below, Balkalaho was scratching through clumps of mud packed pebbles. The wind did most of the work, however, and Choskani couldn't tell the purpose to dig. Balkalaho had no intention of harming the joeys, all he wished to do was to frighten Ayokpa. This was always the

case, to frighten victims and take something from them which they treasured. Often this plan worked, especially under these circumstances.

Choskani gled down from the high, careful not to make a sound. His gentle webbed feet made little noise. One step, two steps, and a final. Balkalaho turned, ripped a fistful of gravel from the sticky ground, and thrust it at an unsuspecting Choskani. This of course caught the poor duck off guard, and he immediatly ran forth to the air.

He flapped his wings and gulped the wind and soon landed by Ayokpa. Seeing not a single joey was in the duck's arms, she rested her head in her paws. What a sorry act this was, and Choskani felt a lump of guilt stuck in his throat.

"Dear dear, Ayokpa. I am truly sorry, but I could not get to your younglings. May luck find you somehow." Choskani, still feeling as guilty if not more than before, took off.

"Luck. No one out in this woods will ever come." The wind swirled around this hopeless creature, and all at once a mighty wolf was upon her.

"Do not attack! Please, withdraw from any aggressive behavior!" Ayokpa cowered beneath some nearby shrubbery, as the great predator crept closer.

"There, there. I haven't come to hurt you. Don't you recognize me, Ayokpa?" the creature leaned close to Ayokpa, breathing heavily.

"No I - wait a moment! Palkit Waso! I believed to never see you again!" the opossum left from the shrubs and embraced Palkit Waso (fast wolf).

"Yes, yes, I've come back to the wood. Now then, what could be your troubles. Where are the little ones?"

"That's the trouble Waso! Balkalaho has snatched them up and taken them. Choskani, what a weak thing, tried to rescue them, but for some reason could not. You must find them! Quickly!" Ayokpa pressed her paws against Palkit Waso's meaty leg and urged him forth.

"Well then, off I go, I shall return in a short time," the large wolf glanced back, and then sprinted into the trees.

Ayokpa was deep in thought. She was surely in good hands, the mightiest wolf in the wood was on her side. Only moments later, an enormous rustling signaled Palkit Waso's approach.

"Waso! You made quite short time! Any luck?" said Ayokpa, who was beginning to quiver.

"Uh, oh dear, how shall I put this? My friend, I myself, the greatest among our wood's

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creatures, couldn't save your dear kin." Waso bowed his head in a deep and seemingly perpetual silence.

"Oh Mother Earth, why must you torment me so?" the meek little opossum murmured. She knew now of little hope to save her daughters.

Palkit Waso slowly wandered away, unable to face Ayokpa. As for her, she had wandered in the opposite direction.

She traveled for some time, till she found herself head first in a patch of thistles.

"Oof! What in..." Ayokpa turned and saw a small, wriggling creature scuttling from a hole.

"Ayokpa! I apologize for my hole, I now see it as a hazard! What are you doing without..."

It was a mole who popped up and into the blazing heat, head first and obviously having a tremendous day based on his cheerful appearance. But, the mole was cut off, for Ayokpa was feeling quite the opposite.

"Do not even finish Yokbono (mole)! I've been through enough today and I refuse to be reminded of them."

"Please, tell me what happened," Yokbono said.

"Fine. You know Balkalaho, correct?"

The small mole nodded with a silent sniff of the air.

"Ayokpa! I smell him and, what is that? The younglings? What might be going on here..."

Yokbono was curiously catching a scent. Another instant, and he was gone, down into his precariously built hole.

The mole continued tunneling, pausing every once in a while to snatch a grub through his teeth. For a moment it seemed as if the hole would cave, but not so, for Yokbono turned and packed it as he scurried along.

Finally, after chipping cautiously at a loose stone, Yokbono tunneled upward and popped up into a burst of fresh sunlight.

"Balkalaho!" the blind creature shrieked, attempting to catch a wiff of the joeys.

"Beware mole! I am in the possession of many a hot rock, and as I speak I am preparing a fistful!" the bat stood before the joeys with the rocks in hand.

"You fool! I care not of rocks, all I wish to possess is the little ones!" Yokbono proceeded

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forth, and at each thrust of stones, he cringed.

Unlike the others, the brave mole did not stop from pain, for he was a small but determined hero. Could this be a moral, you might ask? Well, that is for you to decide.

A bright sun burned down on the mole as he crossed the valley. Joeys beside him, he approached Ayokpa whose eyes were brightest of all.

"You've done good Yokbono. A good and worthy conquerer are you." Ayokpa gathered her young near, embraced each individual including Yokbono, and stared at the sky.

"Iki, what is wrong?" asked Hassolwa.

"I was just in wonder, is all. How might I protect you, my joeys, from that wicked bat? He will surely return after a defeat," Ayokpa replied in deep ponder.

"Here, I shall aid." Yokbono stepped towards Ayokpa, reached out a claw, and delicately slashed a cut in the center of Ayokpa's stomach, "All you must do is place your young within and they shall be protected."

Ayokpa thanked Yokbono graciously, and scurried off. However, you may be in thought of how the mole could've done this, being ever so blind. It was his heart that led him, not his eyes. And you must let your heart lead you too.

"Now my children," said Choba Biyakka, "off to dreams. I hope you remember to beware of bats and notice the opossums pouch."

Simple ending indeed. But what you make of it could be much grander...