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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Flamingos' Stockings

Once upon a time, the vipers held a grand ball. They invited the frogs and toads, the flamingos, the alligators, and the fish. The fish, since they couldn't walk, couldn't dance; but because the ball was held on the riverbank, they poked their heads out of the water and applauded with their tails.

The alligators, wanting to adorn themselves, had draped necklaces of bananas around their necks and smoked Paraguayan cigars. The toads had stuck fish scales all over their bodies and waddled around, swaying as if they were swimming. Each time they strutted solemnly along the river's edge, the fish would mock them loudly. The frogs had perfumed their entire bodies and walked on two legs. Each one carried a firefly hanging like a little lantern that swung back and forth.

But the most beautiful of all were the vipers. Without exception, they were dressed in ballerina outfits matching each viper's color. The red vipers wore little red tulle skirts; the green ones wore green tulle; the yellow vipers donned yellow tulle; and the yararás wore gray tulle skirts painted with stripes of brick dust and ash, matching their natural colors.

The most splendid were the coral snakes, dressed in long, flowing gauzes of red, white, and black, dancing like streamers. When the vipers twirled and spun,

balancing on the tips of their tails, all the guests applauded wildly.

Only the flamingos, who at that time had white legs—and still have thick, curved beaks—were sad. Not being very clever, they hadn't figured out how to dress up. They envied everyone's costumes, especially those of the coral snakes. Each time a viper passed by, flirting and undulating their streamer-like gauzes, the flamingos were green with envy.

Then one flamingo said:

"I know what we'll do. Let's put on red, white, and black stockings, and the coral snakes will fall in love with us."

All together, they took flight, crossed the river, and went to knock on the door of a village shop.

"Knock, knock!" they tapped with their feet.

"Who's there?" the shopkeeper called out.

"We're the flamingos. Do you have red, white, and black stockings?"

"No, I don't," replied the shopkeeper. "Are you crazy? You won't find stockings like that anywhere."

The flamingos went to another shop.

"Knock, knock! Do you have red, white, and black stockings?"

The shopkeeper answered, "What did you say? Red, white, and black? There are no stockings like that anywhere. You're out of your minds. Who are you?"

"We're the flamingos," they replied.

The man said, "Then you must be crazy flamingos."

They went to yet another shop.

"Knock, knock! Do you have red, white, and black stockings?"

The shopkeeper shouted, "What color? Red, white, and black? Only big-nosed birds like you would think to ask for such stockings. Get out of here right now!"

And he chased them away with a broom.

The flamingos visited every shop, but everywhere they went, they were dismissed as lunatics.

An armadillo, who had come to drink water from the river, decided to mock the flamingos. Giving them a grand bow, he said:

"Good evening, dear flamingos! I know what you're looking for. You won't find stockings like that in any shop. Maybe in Buenos Aires, but you'd have to order them by mail. My sister-in-law, the owl, has stockings like that. Ask her, and she'll give you the red, white, and black stockings."

The flamingos thanked him and flew off to the owl's cave.

"Good evening, Owl! We've come to ask for the red, white, and black stockings. Tonight is the vipers' grand ball, and if we wear those stockings, the coral snakes will fall in love with us."

"With pleasure!" the owl replied. "Wait a moment, and I'll be right back."

She flew off, leaving the flamingos alone, and soon returned with the stockings. But they weren't stockings at all—they were the freshly shed skins of coral snakes that the owl had hunted.

"Here are the stockings," the owl said. "Don't worry about anything except one thing: dance all night without stopping, dance sideways, upside down, however

you like, but don't stop even for a moment. Otherwise, instead of dancing, you'll end up crying."

But the flamingos, being so foolish, didn't understand the danger ahead. Overjoyed, they put on the coral snake skins like stockings, slipping their legs into the tube-like skins. Delighted, they flew off to the ball.

When everyone saw the flamingos with their beautiful stockings, they were envious. The vipers wanted to dance only with them, and since the flamingos kept moving their legs nonstop, the vipers couldn't get a good look at what the gorgeous stockings were made of.

Gradually, however, the vipers grew suspicious. When the flamingos danced past them, they crouched low to get a better look.

The coral snakes, especially uneasy, couldn't take their eyes off the stockings. They tried to touch the flamingos' legs with their tongues because a viper's tongue is like a person's hand. But the flamingos danced and danced without stopping, even though they were exhausted and could barely continue.

Sensing this, the coral snakes quickly asked the frogs for their lanterns, which were fireflies, and waited together for the flamingos to collapse from fatigue.

Sure enough, a moment later, a flamingo, too tired to go on, tripped over an alligator's cigar, wobbled, and fell over. Immediately, the coral snakes rushed over with their lanterns and shone a light on the flamingo's legs.

Seeing what the stockings really were, they let out a hiss that echoed across the Paraná River.

"They're not stockings!" the vipers shouted. "We know what they are! They've deceived us! The flamingos have killed our sisters and are wearing their skins as stockings! Those stockings are made from coral snakes!" Hearing this, the flamingos, terrified at being discovered, tried to fly away. But they were so exhausted they couldn't lift a wing. The coral snakes leaped upon them, wrapping around their legs and tearing the stockings apart with their fangs. They shredded the stockings in fury and bit their legs to make sure they would die.

The flamingos, crazed with pain, hopped from side to side, but the coral snakes wouldn't uncoil from their legs. Finally, seeing that not a single piece of the stockings remained, the vipers left them alone, tired and adjusting the gauzy dresses of their ball gowns. The coral snakes were certain the flamingos would die since at least half of the snakes that had bitten them were venomous.

But the flamingos didn't die. They ran to the water, feeling immense pain. They screamed in agony, and their legs, which had been white, were now red from the vipers' venom. Days went by, and they continued to feel a terrible burning in their legs, which remained blood-red because they were poisoned.

This happened a very long time ago. Even now, the flamingos spend almost all day with their red legs submerged in water, trying to soothe the burning sensation.

Sometimes they step away from the shore and walk a few steps on land to see how they feel. But the pain

from the venom returns immediately, and they rush back into the water. Occasionally, the burning is so intense that they lift one leg and stand that way for hours because they can't bear to stretch it out.

This is the story of the flamingos, who once had white legs and now have red ones. All the fish know why and make fun of them. But the flamingos, as they heal in the water, seize any chance to take revenge by eating any little fish that comes too close to tease them.

