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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Passage Of The Yabebirí

In the Yabebirí River, located in Misiones, there are countless stingrays because "Yabebirí" precisely means "River-of-the-Stingrays." There are so many that sometimes it's dangerous to put even one foot in the water. I knew a man who was stung by a stingray on his heel, and he had to limp for half a league to reach his home; the man was crying and collapsing from pain. It's one of the strongest pains one can feel.

Since the Yabebirí also has many other fish, some men go to catch them using dynamite bombs. They throw the bomb into the river, and it explodes, killing millions of fish. All the fish nearby die, even if they are as big as a house. And all the little ones die too, which are of no use at all.

Now then, once a man went to live there, and he didn't want them to throw dynamite bombs because he felt sorry for the little fish. He didn't oppose fishing in the river for food, but he didn't want them to uselessly kill millions of tiny fish. The men who used bombs were angry at first, but since the man had a serious character, although he was very kind, the others went to hunt elsewhere, and all the fish were very happy. So happy and grateful were they to their friend who had saved the little fish that they recognized him as soon as he approached the shore. And when he walked along the bank smoking, the stingrays followed him, crawling

through the mud, very happy to accompany their friend. He knew nothing of this and lived happily in that place.

And it happened that one afternoon, a fox came running up to the Yabebirí and dipped his paws in the water, shouting:

"Hey, stingrays! Quick! Your friend is coming, wounded!"

The stingrays, who heard him, rushed anxiously to the shore and asked the fox, "What's happening? Where is the man?"

"He's coming!" the fox shouted again. "He fought with a tiger! The tiger is coming, running! He's surely going to cross to the island! Give him passage because he is a good man!"

"Of course! Of course we'll give him passage!" the stingrays replied. "But as for the tiger, he won't pass!"

"Be careful with him!" the fox warned. "Don't forget that it's the tiger!"

And with a leap, the fox disappeared back into the forest.

Barely had he done this when the man pushed aside the branches and appeared, all bloodied and his shirt torn. Blood was dripping from his face and chest down to his pants. From the folds of his pants, the blood fell onto the sand. He staggered toward the shore because he was badly wounded and entered the river. But as soon as he set foot in the water, the stingrays that were crowded at the shore moved aside for him, and the man waded chest-deep to the island without a single stingray pricking him. And as soon as he arrived,

he collapsed unconscious on the very sand due to the great amount of blood he had lost.

The stingrays hadn't yet had time to fully pity their dying friend when a terrible roar made them leap in the water.

"The tiger! The tiger!" they all shouted, darting like arrows to the shore.

Indeed, the tiger that had fought with the man and had been chasing him had arrived at the bank of the Yabebirí. The animal was also badly wounded, and blood was running all over his body. He saw the man lying as if dead on the island, and letting out a roar of rage, he plunged into the water to finish him off.

But as soon as he set a paw in the water, he felt as if eight or ten terrible nails had been driven into his feet, and he jumped back: it was the stingrays, defending the river crossing, who had stabbed his paws with all the strength of their tail spines.

The tiger stood growling in pain, holding his paw in the air; and seeing all the water at the edge murky as if the bottom mud was being stirred up, he realized it was the stingrays who didn't want to let him pass. Then he shouted angrily:

"Ah, I know what this is! It's you, cursed stingrays! Get out of my way!"

"We won't move!" the stingrays responded.

"Move!"

"We won't! He's a good man! You have no right to kill him!"

"He wounded me!"

"You wounded each other! That's your business in the forest! Here he's under our protection! You shall not pass!"

"Let me through!" the tiger roared one last time.

"NEVER!" the stingrays replied.

"We'll see about that!" the tiger bellowed.

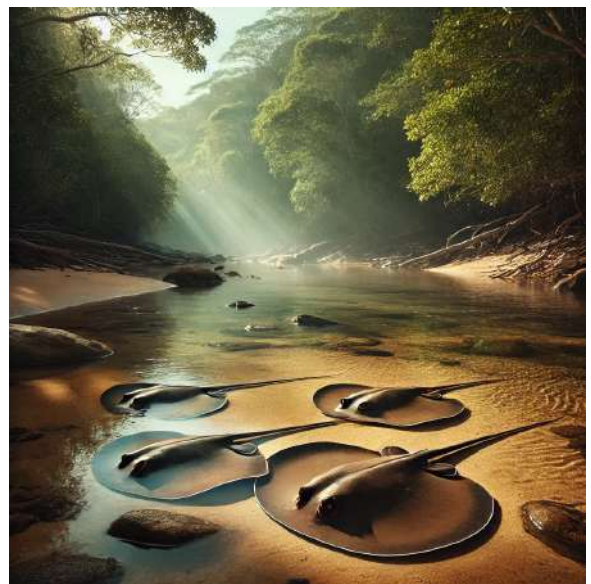
And he stepped back to gather momentum for a huge leap.

The tiger knew that stingrays are almost always near the shore, and he thought that if he managed to make a very big jump, perhaps he wouldn't find any more stingrays in the middle of the river, and thus could eat the dying man.

But the stingrays had guessed this and all rushed to the middle of the river, passing the word along:

"Out of the shore!" they shouted underwater. "Inward! To the channel! To the channel!"

And in a second, the army of stingrays hurried into the river depths to defend the crossing, just as the tiger made his enormous leap and landed in the middle of the water. He fell, wild with joy, because at first he didn't feel any stings and thought the stingrays had all stayed at the shore, deceived.



But he had barely taken a step when a true rain of stings, like stabbing pains,

stopped him in his tracks: it was the stingrays again, piercing his paws with their stings.

The tiger tried to continue, but the pain was so atrocious that he let out a howl and ran back crazily to the shore. He collapsed on the sand sideways because he couldn't bear the suffering; his belly rose and fell as if he were utterly exhausted.

What was happening was that the tiger was poisoned by the stingrays' venom.

But although they had defeated the tiger, the stingrays were not at ease because they feared the tigress might come, and other tigers, and many more... And they wouldn't be able to defend the crossing any longer.

Indeed, the forest roared again, and the tigress appeared, going mad with fury upon seeing the tiger lying sideways on the sand. She also saw the water murky from the stingrays' movements and approached the river. Touching the water almost with her mouth, she shouted:

"Stingrays! I demand passage!"

"There is no passage!" the stingrays replied.

"Not a single stingray will be left with a tail if you don't let me through!" the tigress roared.

"Even if we lose our tails, you shall not pass!" they responded.

"For the last time, let me through!"

"NEVER!" the stingrays shouted.

The tigress, enraged, had unwittingly placed a paw in the water, and a stingray, approaching quietly, had just stabbed her entire sting between her toes. At the

animal's roar of pain, the stingrays smiled and said, "It seems we still have tails!"

But the tigress had an idea, and with that thought in mind, she moved away, following the river upstream without saying a word.

But the stingrays understood once again what their enemy's plan was. The plan was this: to cross the river elsewhere, where the stingrays didn't know they had to defend the crossing. An immense anxiety then seized the stingrays.

"She's going to cross the river further up!" they shouted. "We don't want her to kill the man! We must defend our friend!"

And they writhed desperately in the mud until they muddied the river.

"But what can we do?" they said. "We don't swim fast... The tigress will cross before the stingrays there know they must defend the crossing at all costs!"

And they didn't know what to do. Until a very clever little stingray suddenly said:

"I've got it! Let the dorados go! The dorados are our friends! They swim faster than anyone!"

"That's it!" they all shouted. "Let the dorados go!"

And in an instant, the word spread, and in another moment, eight or ten rows of dorados—a true army—swam upstream at full speed, leaving trails in the water like torpedoes.

Despite everything, they barely had time to give the order to block the crossing to the tigers; the tigress had already entered the water, was already swimming, and was about to reach the island.

But the stingrays had also hurried to the other shore, and as soon as the tigress found footing, the stingrays threw themselves against her paws, shredding them with stings. The animal, furious and mad with pain, roared, leaped in the water, and sent clouds of water flying with her paws. But the stingrays kept rushing against her legs, blocking her passage so effectively that the tigress turned back, swam again, and went to lie down on the shore, with her four paws monstrously swollen; she couldn't go eat the man from there either. But the stingrays were also very tired. And what's worse, the tiger and tigress had ended up standing and were entering the forest.

What were they going to do? This greatly worried the stingrays, and they had a long conference. At last, they said:

"Now we know what's happening! They're going to fetch the other tigers, and they'll all come. All the tigers will come, and they'll cross!"

"NEVER!" shouted the younger stingrays, who didn't have as much experience.

"Yes, they'll pass," the older ones replied sadly. "If there are many, they'll end up getting through... Let's consult our friend."

And they all went to see the man, for they hadn't had time to do so yet, being busy defending the river crossing.

The man was still lying down because he had lost a lot of blood, but he could speak and move a little. In a moment, the stingrays told him what had happened and how they had defended the crossing against the tigers

who wanted to eat him. The wounded man was deeply moved by the friendship of the stingrays who had saved his life, and he shook hands with real affection with the stingrays nearest to him. Then he said:

"There's no remedy! If the tigers are many and want to cross, they'll get through..."

"They won't pass!" said the little stingrays. "You are our friend, and they won't pass!"

"Yes, they will pass, little friends," said the man. And he added, speaking softly:

"The only way would be to send someone home to fetch the Winchester rifle with many bullets... but I have no friend on the river besides the fish... and none of you can walk on land..."

"What shall we do then?" the stingrays asked anxiously.

"Let me think, let me think..." the man said, passing his hand over his forehead as if trying to remember something. "I had a friend... a little capybara that was raised at my house and played with my children... one day he returned to the forest and I think he lived here, in the Yabebirí... but I don't know where he might be..."

The stingrays then gave a cry of joy:

"Now we know! We know him! He has his den at the tip of the island! He once spoke to us about you! We'll send for him right away!"

And no sooner said than done: a very large dorado sped downstream to look for the little capybara, while the man dissolved a drop of dried blood in the palm of his hand to make ink, and with a fish bone, which served as a pen, he wrote on a dry leaf, which was the paper.

And he wrote this letter: "Send me the Winchester rifle with a full box of 25 bullets with the little capybara." He had barely finished writing when the entire forest trembled with a deep roar: it was all the tigers approaching to engage in battle. The stingrays carried the letter with their heads out of the water so it wouldn't get wet and gave it to the little capybara, who ran off through the reeds to take it to the man's house. And it was just in time because the roars, though still distant, were approaching rapidly. The stingrays then gathered the dorados who were awaiting orders and shouted to them:

"Quick, comrades! Travel the whole river and sound the alarm! Let all the stingrays be ready throughout the river! Let them all gather around the island! We'll see if they can pass!"

And the army of dorados sped off immediately, swimming upstream and downstream, making streaks in the water with the speed they carried.

Not a stingray remained in the entire Yabebirí who didn't receive the order to concentrate along the riverbanks around the island. From all parts—from among the stones, the mud, the mouths of little streams—the entire Yabebirí's stingrays came to defend the crossing against the tigers. And in front of the island, the dorados crossed back and forth at full speed.

Again, it was just in time; an immense roar made even the water at the shore tremble, and the tigers emerged on the bank.

There were many; it seemed that all the tigers of Misiones were there. But the entire Yabebirí was boiling

with stingrays, who threw themselves toward the shore, ready to defend the crossing at all costs.

"Let the tigers pass!"

"There is no passage!" the stingrays replied.

"Pass, again!"

"You shall not pass!"

"Not a single stingray, nor stingray's child, nor grandchild, will be left if you don't let us through!"

"That may be," the stingrays replied. "But neither the tigers, nor tigers' children, nor tigers' grandchildren, nor all the tigers in the world will pass through here!"

That's how the stingrays responded. Then the tigers roared one last time:

"We demand passage!"

"NEVER!"

And the battle began then. With a huge leap, the tigers threw themselves into the water. And they all fell upon a true floor of stingrays. The stingrays were piercing their paws with stings, and at each wound, the tigers let out a roar of pain. But they defended themselves with swipes, flailing wildly in the water. And the stingrays flew through the air with their bellies torn open by the tigers' claws.

The Yabebirí looked like a river of blood. The stingrays were dying by the hundreds... but the tigers were also receiving terrible wounds and retreated to lie down and roar on the beach, horribly swollen. The stingrays, trampled and crushed by the tigers' paws, did not give up; they kept coming to defend the crossing. Some flew through the air, fell back into the river, and threw themselves again against the tigers.

This terrible struggle lasted half an hour. After that half-hour, all the tigers were back on the beach, sitting from fatigue and roaring in pain; not one had passed. But the stingrays were also exhausted. Many, very many, had died. And the remaining ones said:

"We won't be able to withstand two attacks like this. Let the dorados go to seek reinforcements! Let all the stingrays in the entire Yabebirí come immediately!"

And the dorados sped off again upstream and downstream, going so fast they left trails in the water like torpedoes.

The stingrays then went to see the man.

"We won't be able to resist any longer!" the stingrays told him sadly. And some stingrays even cried because they saw they wouldn't be able to save their friend.

"Go away, stingrays!" the wounded man replied. "Leave me alone! You've already done too much for me! Let the tigers pass!"

"NEVER!" the stingrays shouted in unison. "As long as there's a single stingray alive in the Yabebirí, which is our river, we'll defend the good man who once defended us!"

The wounded man then exclaimed happily:

"Stingrays! I'm almost dying and can barely speak, but I assure you that as soon as the Winchester arrives, we'll have quite a party; I assure you of that!"

"Yes, we know!" the stingrays replied enthusiastically.

But they couldn't finish speaking because the battle was starting again. Indeed, the tigers, who had rested, suddenly stood up, and crouching as if about to leap, roared:

"For the last time, and once and for all: let us pass!"
"NEVER!" the stingrays responded, rushing to the shore. But the tigers had also leaped into the water, and the terrible struggle resumed. The entire Yabebirí now, from shore to shore, was red with blood, and the blood foamed on the beach sand. The stingrays flew torn through the air, and the tigers roared in pain, but no one stepped back.

And not only did the tigers not retreat, but they advanced. In vain, the army of dorados sped upstream and downstream, calling to the stingrays: the stingrays had run out; they were all fighting in front of the island, and half had already died. And those who remained were all wounded and exhausted.

They then realized they couldn't hold out another minute and that the tigers would pass; and the poor stingrays, who preferred to die rather than give up their friend, threw themselves one last time against the tigers. But it was all useless now. Five tigers were already swimming toward the island's shore. The stingrays, desperate, shouted:

"To the island! Let's all go to the other shore!"

But this was also too late: two more tigers had plunged in, and in an instant, all the tigers were in the middle of the river, and only their heads could be seen.

But also at that moment, a little animal—a poor, small, reddish, furry animal—was swimming across the Yabebirí with all his might: it was the little capybara, who was arriving at the island carrying the Winchester rifle and the bullets on his head so they wouldn't get wet.

The man gave a great shout of joy because there was still time to come to the stingrays' defense. He asked the little capybara to push him with his head to turn him onto his side, because he couldn't do it alone; and once in that position, he loaded the Winchester like lightning.

And just at the moment when the stingrays, seeing in despair that they had lost the battle and that the tigers were going to devour their poor wounded friend—in that very moment, they heard a gunshot and saw that the tiger who was ahead and already stepping on the sand gave a great leap and fell dead, with his forehead pierced by a bullet.

"Bravo, bravo!" the stingrays shouted, crazy with happiness. "The man has the Winchester! We're saved now!"

And they muddied all the water, truly crazy with joy. But the man continued calmly shooting, and each shot was another tiger down. And for each tiger that fell dead with a roar, the stingrays responded with great flips of their tails.

One after another, as if lightning struck their heads, the tigers were killed by bullets. It all lasted only two minutes. One after another, they sank to the bottom of the river, where the piranhas ate them. Some floated later, and then the dorados accompanied them to the Paraná River, eating them and making the water splash with delight.

In a short time, the stingrays, who have many offspring, became as numerous as before. The man recovered and was so grateful to the stingrays who had

saved his life that he went to live on the island. And there, on summer nights, he liked to lie on the beach and smoke by the light of the moon, while the stingrays, speaking softly, pointed him out to fish who didn't know him, telling them about the great battle they once had against the tigers, allied with that man.