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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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# The Story of Two Coati Cubs and Two Human Children

Once upon a time, there was a coati who had three children. They lived in the forest, eating fruits, roots, and bird eggs. When they were up in the trees and heard a loud noise, they would dive headfirst to the ground and run away with their tails raised.

One day, when the little coatis had grown a bit, their mother gathered them atop an orange tree and spoke to them:

"Little coatis, you are big enough to find food on your own. You must learn this because when you are older, you will roam alone, like all coatis do.

"The eldest of you, who loves hunting beetles, can find them among rotten logs, where there are plenty of beetles and cockroaches. The second, who is fond of fruits, can find them in this orange grove; there will be oranges until December. The third, who only wants to eat bird eggs, can go anywhere because bird nests are everywhere. But never go searching for nests in the open fields, for it is dangerous.

"Little coatis, there is one thing you must fear greatly: dogs. I once fought them, and I know what I'm telling you—that's why I have a broken tooth. Behind the dogs always come men with a loud noise that kills. When you hear this noise nearby, dive headfirst to the ground, no

matter how high the tree is. If you don't, they will surely shoot you."

Thus spoke the mother. They all climbed down and went their separate ways, walking from right to left and left to right, as if they had lost something—because that's how coatis walk.

The eldest, who wanted to eat beetles, searched among rotten logs and weed leaves and found so many that he ate until he fell asleep. The second, who preferred fruits above all else, ate as many oranges as he wanted, for that orange grove was deep in the forest, just like in Paraguay and Misiones, with no humans to bother him. The third, who was crazy about bird eggs, had to wander all day to find only two nests: one of a toucan with three eggs and one of a dove with just two. In total, five tiny eggs—not much food—so by evening, the little coati was as hungry as he was in the morning. He sat sadly at the forest's edge. From there, he could see the open fields and thought about his mother's advice. "Why doesn't Mama want me," he said to himself, "to search for nests in the fields?"

As he pondered this, he heard a bird's song far away. "What a strong song!" he exclaimed in wonder. "That bird must have huge eggs!"

The song repeated, and the coati started running through the forest, taking shortcuts because the song had sounded far to his right. The sun was setting, but the coati raced on with his tail held high. Finally, he reached the forest's edge and looked out over the fields. In the distance, he saw a human house and a man wearing boots leading a horse by a rope. He also

saw a very large bird singing, and then the little coati slapped his forehead and said:

"How silly I am! Now I know what bird that is—it's a rooster! Mama showed it to me once from up in a tree. Roosters have a beautiful song and many hens that lay eggs. If only I could eat chicken eggs!"

It's well known that nothing delights the small creatures of the forest more than chicken eggs. For a moment, the little coati remembered his mother's advice. But desire got the better of him, and he sat at the forest's edge, waiting for night to fully fall so he could go to the chicken coop.

Night finally fell, and then, tiptoeing and step by step, he made his way to the house. He arrived and listened carefully: not a sound was heard. The little coati, overjoyed at the thought of eating a hundred, a thousand, two thousand chicken eggs, entered the coop, and the first thing he saw at the entrance was a chicken egg—a splendid egg lying alone on the ground. He thought for a moment about leaving it for last, as dessert, because it was such a big egg. But his mouth watered, and he sank his teeth into the egg.

As soon as he bit it—CRACK!  
—a terrible blow struck his face, and immense pain shot through his snout.



"Mama, Mama!" he screamed in agony, jumping all around. But he was trapped, and at that moment, he heard the deep bark of a dog.

While the coati waited at the forest's edge for night to fully fall so he could go to the chicken coop, the man of the house was playing on the lawn with his children—two blond little ones aged five and six. They ran laughing, fell, got up laughing again, and fell once more. The father also tumbled, much to the children's delight. They finally stopped playing because it was getting dark, and the man said:

"I'm going to set the trap to catch the possum that's been killing our chicks and stealing eggs."

He went and set the trap. Afterward, they ate and went to bed. But the little ones weren't sleepy; they jumped from one bed to the other, tangling themselves in their nightshirts. The father, who was reading in the dining room, let them be. Suddenly, the children stopped their jumping and shouted:

"Daddy! The possum is caught in the trap! Tuké is barking! We want to go too, Daddy!"

The father agreed but insisted the children put on their sandals, as he never let them go barefoot at night for fear of snakes.

They went out. What did they see? They saw their father crouching, holding the dog with one hand while lifting a small coati by the tail with the other—a little coati still, squealing rapidly and sharply like a cricket.

"Daddy, don't kill it!" the children pleaded. "It's so small! Give it to us!"

"Alright, I'll give it to you," the father replied. "But take good care of it, and above all, don't forget that coatis need water just like you."

He said this because the children once had a wild kitten to whom they often gave meat from the pantry but never provided water, and it had died.

So they put the coati in the same cage that had belonged to the wild kitten, which was near the chicken coop, and they all went back to bed.

And when it was past midnight and all was silent, the little coati, still hurting from the trap's teeth, saw by the light of the moon three shadows approaching stealthily. The poor little coati's heart leaped when he recognized his mother and two brothers who had come searching for him.

"Mama, Mama!" the captive murmured in a very soft voice to avoid making noise. "I'm here! Get me out! I don't want to stay here, Ma... Ma!..." And he cried inconsolably.

Despite everything, they were happy to have found each other and showered one another with affectionate nuzzles.

They immediately set about freeing the prisoner. First, they tried to cut the wire mesh, and all four worked at it with their teeth, but they couldn't make a dent. Then the mother suddenly had an idea and said:

"Let's go get the man's tools! Humans have tools to cut metal. They're called files. They have three sides, like rattlesnakes. You push and pull. Let's go get one!"

They went to the man's workshop and returned with a file. Thinking one alone wouldn't be strong enough, they

held the file together and began working. They got so enthusiastic that soon the entire cage was shaking from their efforts, making a terrible racket. The noise was so loud that the dog woke up and let out a deep bark. The coatis didn't wait for the dog to investigate the commotion and dashed back into the forest, leaving the file behind.

The next morning, the children eagerly went to see their new pet, who was very sad.

"What should we name him?" the little girl asked her brother.

"I know!" the boy replied. "Let's call him Seventeen!"

Why Seventeen? No forest creature had ever had such an odd name. But the boy was learning to count, and perhaps that number had caught his attention.

So he was named Seventeen.

They gave him bread, grapes, chocolate, meat, grasshoppers, and delicious chicken eggs. They managed, in just one day, to get him to let them scratch his head. Such was the sincerity of the children's affection that by nightfall, the little coati was almost resigned to his captivity. He constantly thought about all the tasty things he could eat and about those cheerful, kind, blond human cubs.

For two nights in a row, the dog slept so close to the cage that the prisoner's family didn't dare approach, much to their sorrow. And when on the third night they came again to fetch the file to free the little coati, he told them:

"Mama, I don't want to leave here anymore. They give me lots of eggs, and they're very good to me. Today

they told me that if I behave well, they'll let me roam free very soon. They're like us. They're little ones too, and we play together."

The wild coatis were very sad but accepted his decision, promising to visit him every night.

Indeed, every night, rain or shine, his mother and brothers came to spend time with him. The little coati gave them bread through the wire mesh, and the wild coatis sat outside the cage to eat.

After fifteen days, the little coati was allowed to roam freely, and he would return to his cage at night on his own. Except for a few scoldings for wandering too close to the chicken coop, everything was going well. He and the children adored each other, and even the wild coatis, seeing how kind those little human cubs were, had grown fond of them.

Until one very dark night, when it was hot and thundering, the wild coatis called for the little coati, but no one answered. Worried, they approached and nearly stepped on a huge snake coiled at the cage entrance. The coatis immediately understood that the little coati had been bitten while entering and hadn't responded because he might already be dead. But they were determined to avenge him. In a flash, the three of them confused the rattlesnake by darting here and there, and in another moment, they pounced on it, tearing its head apart with their teeth.

They then rushed inside, and there lay the little coati—swollen, trembling legs, and dying. They tried in vain to move him; they licked him all over for a quarter of an



hour, but it was no use. The little coati finally opened his mouth and stopped breathing—he was gone.

Coatis are almost immune, as they say, to snake venom. The poison hardly affects them, and there are other animals, like the mongoose, that resist snake venom very well. Most likely, the little coati had been bitten in an artery or vein, causing the venom to spread quickly and leading to his death. This is what had happened to the little coati.

Seeing him like this, his mother and brothers wept for a long time. Then, having nothing more to do there, they left the cage, turned to look one last time at the house where the little coati had been so happy, and returned to the forest.

However, the three coatis were deeply concerned, and their worry was this: What would the children say when they found their beloved little coati dead the next day? The children loved him dearly, and the coatis themselves had grown to love the blond little ones. So they all had the same thought—to spare the children that great sorrow.

They talked for a long time and finally decided: The second brother, who resembled the youngest coati greatly in appearance and behavior, would stay in the cage in place of the deceased. Since they knew many of the house's secrets from the little coati's stories, the children wouldn't notice anything; they might find some things a bit odd but nothing more.

And so it happened. They returned to the house, and a new little coati replaced the first, while the mother and the other brother gently carried away the youngest's

body. They took him slowly back to the forest, his head hanging and swaying, his tail dragging on the ground. The next day, the children did notice some strange behaviors from the coati. But since he was just as kind and affectionate as before, they suspected nothing. They formed the same little family as before, and, as before, the wild coatis visited the now-domesticated coati every night. They sat beside him, eating pieces of hard-boiled eggs he saved for them, while they told him stories about life in the jungle.