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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The War of the Alligators

In a vast river, in a deserted land where no human had ever set foot, lived many alligators. There were more than a hundred, perhaps even more than a thousand. They ate fish and animals that came to the river to drink water, but mostly fish. They took naps on the sandy shores and sometimes played in the water on moonlit nights.

They all lived peacefully and happily. But one afternoon, while they were napping, an alligator suddenly woke up and raised his head because he thought he heard a noise. He listened carefully, and far, very far away, he indeed heard a deep and distant sound. Then he called to the alligator sleeping beside him.

"Wake up!" he said. "There's danger."

"What is it?" replied the other, alarmed.

"I don't know," answered the first alligator. "I hear an unfamiliar noise."

The second alligator heard the sound too, and in a moment, they woke up the others.

They all became frightened and ran from one side to the other with their tails raised.

And their worry was not for nothing, because the noise grew louder and louder. Soon they saw a tiny cloud of smoke in the distance and heard a "chug-chug" on the river, as if someone were splashing the water far away.

The alligators looked at each other: what could that be?

But an old and wise alligator—the wisest and oldest of them all, who had only two good teeth left on the sides of his mouth and had once traveled all the way to the sea—suddenly said:

"I know what it is! It's a whale! They're big and spout white water from their noses! The water falls backward."

Hearing this, the young alligators began to scream in fear, diving headfirst into the water. They shouted:

"It's a whale! Here comes the whale!"

But the old alligator shook his tail at the nearest little one.

"Don't be afraid!" he shouted. "I know what a whale is! It's afraid of us! Always afraid!"

With that, the young alligators calmed down. But they soon became scared again because the gray smoke suddenly turned black, and they all clearly heard the "chug-chug-chug" in the water. Terrified, the alligators submerged themselves, leaving only their eyes and the tips of their noses above water. And that's how they saw that immense thing pass before them, full of smoke and churning the water—it was a paddle steamer, navigating that river for the first time.

The steamer passed by, moved away, and disappeared.

The alligators then emerged from the water, very angry with the old alligator because he had misled them by saying it was a whale.

"That's not a whale!" they shouted into his ears, for he was a bit deaf. "What was that that just passed?"

The old alligator then explained that it was a steamer, full of fire, and that they would all die if the ship kept passing by.

But the alligators burst out laughing because they thought the old one had gone mad. Why would they die if the steamer kept passing? The poor old alligator was truly crazy!

And since they were hungry, they started looking for fish.

But there wasn't a single one. They couldn't find even one fish. All had fled, frightened by the noise of the steamer. There were no more fish.

"Didn't I tell you?" said the old alligator. "We have nothing to eat now. All the fish have left. Let's wait until tomorrow. Maybe the steamer won't return, and the fish will come back when they're no longer afraid."

But the next day, they heard the noise on the water again and saw the steamer pass by once more, making a lot of noise and releasing so much smoke that it darkened the sky.



"Well," the alligators said, "the ship passed yesterday, passed today, and will pass tomorrow. There won't be any more fish or animals coming to drink water, and we'll die of hunger. Let's build a dam then."

"Yes, a dam! A dam!" they all shouted, swimming with all their might toward the shore. "Let's build a dam!" Immediately, they set about building the dam. They all went to the forest and knocked down more than ten thousand trees, especially lapachos and quebrachos because their wood is very hard. They cut them with the kind of saw that alligators have on top of their tails, pushed them into the water, and nailed them across the river, one meter apart from each other. No ship could pass through there, neither big nor small. They were sure that nothing would come to scare the fish anymore. And since they were very tired, they lay down to sleep on the beach.

The next day, they were still sleeping when they heard the "chug-chug-chug" of the steamer. They all heard it, but none got up or even opened their eyes. What did they care about the ship? It could make all the noise it wanted; it wasn't going to pass through there.

Indeed, the steamer was still far away when it stopped. The men aboard looked through binoculars at the thing blocking the river and sent a boat to see what was preventing them from passing. The alligators then got up and went to the dam, peering through the logs and laughing at the steamer's predicament.

The boat approached, saw the formidable dam the alligators had built, and returned to the steamer. But then it came back to the dam, and the men in the boat shouted:

"Hey, alligators!"

"What is it?" the alligators replied, sticking their heads between the logs of the dam.

"That thing is in our way!" the men continued.

"We know!"

"We can't pass!"

"That's what we want!"

"Take down the dam!"

"We won't take it down!"

The men in the boat talked among themselves in low voices and then shouted:

"Alligators!"

"What is it?" they responded.

"You're not taking it down?"

"No!"

"Fine then, until tomorrow!"

"Whenever you like!"

And the boat returned to the steamer, while the alligators, overjoyed, slapped their tails in the water. No steamer was going to pass through there, and there would always, always be fish.

But the next day, the steamer returned, and when the alligators looked at the ship, they were speechless with astonishment; it wasn't the same ship anymore. It was another, a gray-colored ship, much larger than the other. What new steamer was this? Did it want to pass too? It wasn't going to pass, no way. Not this one, nor any other!

"No, it's not going to pass!" the alligators shouted, rushing to the dam, each taking their place among the logs.

The new ship, like the other, stopped at a distance and, again, sent a boat that approached the dam.

An officer and eight sailors were inside. The officer shouted:

"Hey, alligators!"

"What is it?" they replied.

"Won't you take down the dam?"

"No."

"No?"

"No!"

"Very well," said the officer. "Then we'll blow it up with cannon fire."

"Go ahead!" the alligators replied.

And the boat returned to the ship.

Now, that gray ship was a warship, an armored vessel with terrible cannons. The old and wise alligator who had once gone to the sea suddenly remembered and barely had time to shout to the other alligators:

"Hide underwater! Quickly! It's a warship! Careful! Hide!"

The alligators disappeared instantly underwater and swam toward the shore, where they remained submerged with only their noses and eyes above water.

At that very moment, a great white cloud of smoke emerged from the warship, a terrible boom sounded, and an enormous cannonball struck the dam, right in the middle. Two or three logs flew to pieces, and then another cannonball fell, and another, and another, each one splintering another part of the dam until nothing was left. Not a log, not a splinter, not even a chip.

Everything had been destroyed by the warship's cannons. And the alligators, submerged with only their

eyes and noses above water, watched the warship pass by, whistling at full power.

Then the alligators emerged from the water and said: "Let's build another dam much bigger than the last one."

And that very afternoon and night, they built another dam with enormous logs. Then they went to sleep, utterly exhausted, and were still sleeping the next day when the warship arrived again, and the boat approached the dam.

"Hey, alligators!" shouted the officer.

"What is it?" the alligators replied.

"Take down that dam!"

"We won't take it down!"

"We'll destroy it with cannon fire like the last one!"

"Destroy it... if you can!"

And they spoke with pride because they were sure their new dam couldn't be destroyed, not even by all the cannons in the world.

But a while later, the ship filled with smoke again, and with a horrible explosion, a shell detonated in the middle of the dam because this time they had fired explosive shells. The shell exploded among the logs, shattering the enormous beams. The second shell exploded next to the first, and another part of the dam flew into the air. And so they continued destroying the dam until nothing was left. Nothing at all. The warship then passed in front of the alligators, and the men mocked them, covering their mouths.

"Well," the alligators said, coming out of the water, "we're all going to die because the ship will keep passing, and the fish won't return."

And they were sad because the little alligators were complaining of hunger.

The old alligator then said:

"We still have a hope of saving ourselves. Let's go see the Surubí. I traveled with him when I went to the sea, and he has a torpedo. He saw a battle between two warships and brought back a torpedo that didn't explode. Let's ask him for it, and even though he's very angry with us alligators, he has a good heart and won't want us all to die."

The truth is that many years ago, the alligators had eaten one of the Surubí's nephews, and since then, he hadn't wanted anything to do with them. But despite everything, they went to see the Surubí, who lived in a huge cave on the bank of the Paraná River and always slept next to his torpedo. Some Surubís can be up to two meters long, and the owner of the torpedo was one of those.

"Hey, Surubí!" all the alligators shouted from the entrance of the cave, not daring to go in because of the incident with his nephew.

"Who calls me?" replied the Surubí.

"It's us, the alligators!"

"I have no dealings with you and don't want any," grumbled the Surubí.

Then the old alligator stepped a little into the cave and said:

"It's me, Surubí! I'm your friend, the alligator who traveled to the sea with you!"

Hearing that familiar voice, the Surubí came out of the cave.

"Oh, I didn't recognize you!" he said affectionately to his old friend. "What brings you here?"

"We've come to ask for your torpedo. There's a warship passing through our river and scaring away the fish. It's a warship, an armored vessel. We built a dam, and it destroyed it. We built another, and it destroyed that one too. The fish have left, and we're going to die of hunger. Give us the torpedo, and we'll sink it."

Upon hearing this, the Surubí thought for a long time. Then he said:

"Alright; I'll lend you the torpedo, even though I still remember what you did to my brother's son. Who knows how to make the torpedo explode?"

None of them knew, and all remained silent.

"Very well," said the Surubí proudly. "I'll make it explode. I know how to do that."

They then organized the journey. The alligators tied themselves together, from one's tail to another's neck, forming a long chain of alligators that stretched more than a block. The immense Surubí pushed the torpedo into the current and positioned himself underneath it, supporting it on his back so it would float. And since they had run out of vines to tie themselves, the Surubí grabbed onto the tail of the last alligator with his teeth, and off they went. The Surubí supported the torpedo, and the alligators pulled, running along the shore. They climbed, descended, jumped over rocks,

always running and dragging the torpedo, which created waves like a ship due to their speed. But the next morning, very early, they arrived at the place where they had built their last dam and immediately started building another one, much stronger than the previous ones, because on the Surubí's advice, they placed the logs very close together. It was truly a formidable dam.

They had barely finished placing the last log when the warship appeared again, and the boat with the officer and the eight sailors approached the dam. The alligators climbed onto the logs and poked their heads out the other side.

"Hey, alligators!" shouted the officer.

"What is it?" the alligators replied.

"Another dam?"

"Yes, another one!"

"Take down that dam!"

"Never!"

"You're not taking it down?"

"No!"

"Alright," said the officer. "Then we'll destroy it with cannon fire, and to make sure you don't build another, we'll destroy you afterward with cannon shots. Not a single one of you will be left alive—not big, not small, not fat, not thin, not young, not old—like that very old alligator I see there, who has only two teeth left on the sides of his mouth."

The old and wise alligator, seeing that the officer was mocking him, said:

"It's true I have only a few teeth left, and some are broken. But do you know what these teeth are going to eat tomorrow?" he added, opening his immense mouth. "And what are they going to eat?" the sailors replied. "That little officer," said the alligator, and he quickly climbed down from his log.

Meanwhile, the Surubí had placed the torpedo right in the middle of the dam, instructing four alligators to hold it carefully and submerge it until he gave the signal. They did so. Then the other alligators submerged near the shore, leaving only their noses and eyes above water. The Surubí submerged next to his torpedo. Suddenly, the warship filled with smoke, and with a terrible explosion, a shell detonated right in the center of the dam, because this time they had fired explosive shells. The shell exploded among the logs, shattering ten or twelve of them into a thousand pieces.

But the Surubí was alert, and as soon as the hole opened in the dam, he shouted to the alligators underwater holding the torpedo:

"Release the torpedo! Quickly, release it!"

The alligators let go, and the torpedo surfaced.

In less time than it takes to tell, the Surubí positioned the torpedo right in the center of the gap, aimed with one eye, and activating the torpedo's mechanism, launched it toward the ship.

Just in time! At that instant, the warship fired its second cannon, and the shell was about to explode among the logs, splintering another part of the dam. But the torpedo was already reaching the ship, and the men aboard saw it—or rather, they saw the whirlpool a

torpedo makes in the water. They all cried out in fear and tried to move the warship so the torpedo wouldn't hit it.

But it was too late; the torpedo struck the immense ship right in the center and exploded.

It's impossible to describe the terrible noise of the explosion. The torpedo went off, splitting the ship into fifteen thousand pieces; chimneys, engines, cannons, boats—everything was hurled into the air, miles and miles away.

The alligators gave a great shout of triumph and ran like crazy to the dam. From there, they saw through the hole created by the shell the dead, wounded, and some living men being carried away by the river's current.

They climbed and piled onto the two logs that remained on either side of the gap, and when the men passed by, they mocked them, covering their mouths with their paws.

They didn't want to eat any of the men, though they certainly deserved it. Only when one who had golden stripes on his uniform and was still alive floated by did the old alligator leap into the water and, snap! In two bites, he ate him.

"Who is that?" asked an uninformed little alligator.

"That's the officer," replied the Surubí. "My old friend had promised he'd eat him, and he did."

The alligators removed the rest of the dam, which was useless now since no ship would pass through there again. The Surubí, who had taken a liking to the officer's belt and cords, asked if he could have them. He

had to pull them out from between the old alligator's teeth because they were tangled there. The Surubí put on the belt, fastening it under his fins, and hung the sword's cords from the ends of his big whiskers. Since the Surubí's skin is very beautiful, and with its dark spots resembles that of a snake, he swam for an hour, back and forth in front of the alligators, who admired him with their mouths wide open.

The alligators then accompanied him back to his cave, thanking him countless times. They returned to their place afterward. The fish returned too, and the alligators lived—and still live—very happily because they have finally gotten used to seeing steamers and ships carrying oranges pass by.

But they want nothing to do with warships.