

The river hears no cries

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Prompt: *Fairytale and Myths Competition 2024*



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Thank the heavens for thunder. It roars over the nasty little squabbles in the mortal world to remind all that nothing is more important than Mother Nature herself. My fingers trail over the books on my bookshelf before finally picking one. "The River Snail Maiden", the title reads. It's a folktale for children, but currently I am willing to do anything to save myself from the boredom of being stuck in my room. I hate it when my mom starts picking fights with my dad.

"Oh you ingrate! I made you happy! Why, I-

"-am in luck! Look at this beauty! This river snail has to be as big as my pot!" The farmer exclaimed in delight as he admired the humongous river snail he had encountered on his way back home. "This must be a sign of good fortune! I must bring it home." The farmer, although tired from a long day's work, felt rejuvenated at the thought of possessing an item sent by the heavens. He carried the river snail all the way back to his house and prayed to the snail every day before heading out to work. After a few weeks, the farmer started to notice certain differences. He would go out in the mornings leaving the house in a complete mess only to return finding it spotless. A scrumptious dinner would be awaiting him on the table, and new clothes were set on his bed. Delighted as the farmer was, he wanted to find out how such a feat was achieved by the heavens. On a fine morning, he left the house as usual, hovering around the vicinity for a while before circling back to sneak a peek into his house through his window. There, he saw a beautiful maiden climbing out of the shell of the river snail. The farmer couldn't contain his excitement, so he called out to the maiden: "Hey! You-

"-want to talk about happiness? I was happy before I met you! I sacrificed everything for this family! I cook, I clean, I work!" I can hear my mother screaming, the sound resonating through my mind. Tsk.

"I never asked you to! You chose to be a housewife! You chose to marry me!"

"Chose? I never had a choice! You cut me off from my family and took me far away from my hometown! You took everything from me!"

"I-"

"-promise to love you for the rest of my life. Stay with me, oh divine goddess." The farmer pleaded. The Maiden was shocked. As an immortal, she often took pity on the struggling mortals and would wander around the mortal realm attempting to help as many as she could. She was only planning on a brief stay at the farmer's house before moving on to aid the next poor mortal. She felt no feelings of affection for the farmer, only sympathy for his destitution. Food and clothing was all she was willing to offer. Seeing that the Maiden remained silent, the farmer became agitated. He ran towards the shell of the river snail with an axe and shouted, "I won't let you go until you promise to marry me! I know you love me!" The Maiden now panicked. She could not afford for her shell to get harmed, so she tried to reason with the farmer. "I am not in love with you, dearest farmer. Seeing that I have done so much for you already, kindly set me free!"

The farmer saw the terrified look in the Maiden's eyes, and knew that he held a powerful bargaining chip. Why let slip a free wife who could keep him comfortable for the rest of his life? The farmer sneered, "You can dream on about leaving." The Maiden weeped, but she was powerless. The naive young immortal soon became a bitter housewife, imprisoned within the four walls and forced to work tirelessly to provide for the family. The Maiden finally found the resolve to give up, to have her shell smashed by the farmer, reducing herself to a mere mortal. Yet, in a tragic twist of fate, she

soon found out that she was pregnant. Her love for her baby daughter made her delay her plans to leave the farmer for good. After all, her daughter was too young to travel with her. No, she must wait till the time was right, till her daughter turned old enough to understand her and fight alongside her. She couldn't leave her daughter in the hands of a farmer whose body had long forgotten how to work.

Thus, the Maiden lived on, biding her time.

"Baby, baby." My door swings open, and my mother rushes in. Tears were streaming down her face, and her hair was a mess, but she doesn't bother to tidy herself up. "If Mommy leaves, will you come with Mommy?" She looks at me pleadingly, hands tight around my shoulders. I slowly lift my eyes to match hers.

"Mom," I started. "I think you're too agitated. You should sleep. You'll forget all about your fight today after a good rest."

Her hands slip away from my shoulders in disbelief just as my dad walks in. He is smiling as he lifts my mother up.

"I'm sorry if we disturbed you, baby. Dinner is ready outside! I bought you your favourite milkshake!" My dad presses a kiss on my forehead and I beam back at him. My mom's glazed eyes suddenly snap back to my dad.

"I cooked dinner! I did everything! How can you-" My mom trails off as my dad puts his hand to her mouth.

"Now, now. Don't be hysterical in front of our daughter." My dad smiles apologetically at me before dragging my mom out of my room.

The Maiden's Happily Ever After never came. Her shell remained intact, glistening under the sun without a crack to be found. Yet, something within her seemed to have shattered. Oh, she murmured. It was her heart.

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Footnotes

Adapted from the folklore "The River Snail Maiden".

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