

RUSALKA

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Act I: By a moonlit meadow near a lake, three Wood-Sprites sing, dance and tease the Water-Gnome, ruler of the lake's underwater realm.

The Water-Gnome becomes aware of his daughter Rusalka, a water-nymph, sitting sadly amid the branches of an overhanging willow tree. When he questions her, Rusalka tells him she has fallen in love with a mortal, a prince who often comes to the forest to swim in the lake. Invisible to all mortals, Rusalka has embraced the Prince as a wave but now longs to take on human form so that he may see her and embrace her in return. Further, she wants to leave the chilly waters of the lake and live in the sunlight as a human.

The wise Water-Gnome warns Rusalka against such a transformation saying that humans are full of sin, to which Rusalka replies, "But they are full of love!" Doubtful, but giving in to his daughter's pleas, the Water-Gnome tells her she will have to consult the witch Jezibaba who lives in a hut on the edge of the lake. Despairingly, the Water Gnome sinks into the lake, and Rusalka addresses the moon, begging it to tell the Prince of her love.

Rusalka calls for Jezibaba, and the witch appears. She tells the water-nymph that if she becomes human and is betrayed by her lover, both she and he will be eternally damned, but Rusalka is undeterred. Jezibaba further warns Rusalka that by becoming mortal, she will lose her power of speech. Heedless of Jezibaba's warnings, Rusalka insists, and the witch brews a potion and gives it to Rusalka to drink.

As dawn breaks over the lake, the Prince appears followed by a party of hunters. They have been pursuing a white doe which has unaccountably vanished, and the Prince senses something strange about this place. He sends his hunters away, hoping to be alone with his thoughts. Suddenly he sees a beautiful girl, her long hair streaming around her shoulders. The Prince hails her as his fantasy; telling her that though she is mute, her lips will answer to his kisses, he embraces her. Rusalka happily lets him lead her away, ignoring the Water-Gnome and her sisters whose grieving can be heard from the depths of the lake.

Act II: Beside a pond in the garden of the Prince's castle, a Gamekeeper and a Kitchen Boy gossip about the approaching wedding of the Prince and his strange new bride. They suspect witchcraft, but note that the Prince is notoriously fickle. He will probably lose interest in his mute and nameless bride, they say. Already he is paying attention to one of the wedding guests, a beautiful and ambitious Foreign Princess.

The Prince enters with Rusalka. He wonders why she is so cold and what makes him tremble in her embrace. Still, he says, "I must have you!" The Foreign Princess appears, reproaching the Prince for ignoring his guests. Jealous, she mocks Rusalka's muteness and says to herself, "If I can't have him, let both their happiness die!" The Prince sends Rusalka away to dress for the ball. As soon as she is gone, he begins courting the Princess, and the two go into the castle where singing and dancing herald the beginning of the ball.

In the deserted garden, the Water-Gnome suddenly rises from the depths of the pond and voices his despair over the sad fate in store for his daughter. Soon Rusalka runs from the castle in tears. Able to speak to non-mortals, she begs her father to forgive her desire to become human. She

tells him that the Prince no longer loves her. "I am neither woman nor nymph," she weeps. "I cannot die, nor can I live. My heart is empty."

The Prince and the Princess come into the garden, and the Prince expresses his love for her. Rusalka rushes into his arms, but he rejects her, "Your embrace freezes me!" The Water-Gnome reappears, and lures Rusalka into the pond as the Prince throws himself at the feet of the Princess. Scornfully, the Princess laughs wildly and tells him, "Speed after your chosen one to the depths of hell."

Act III: The doomed Rusalka comes to the lake once more. She longs for death, but knows that the fate awaiting her is worse than mere death. Jezibaba hears her and sardonically asks, "Weren't the kisses tasty? Wasn't the bridal bed warm enough?" To Rusalka's pleas, she retorts, "Love was short, grief will be long."

But under the force of Rusalka's despair, the witch weakens. There is a chance for Rusalka to save herself, she says, if she will spill the blood of the human who betrayed her. "Kill the Prince," says Jezibaba, handing Rusalka a dagger. But Rusalka hurls the weapon into the lake declaring, "He must be happy, even if I am not!"

Rusalka will now become a "bludika," a spirit of death, doomed to exist in the lowest depths of the lake, emerging only at night to lure humans to their death. Rusalka's sisters reject her, saying, "You can never join us again. Your grief spoils our merriment." Crying "Woe, woe," Rusalka vanishes into the lake.

The Gamekeeper and the Kitchen Boy arrive, hoping to consult Jezibaba about the Prince, whom they are convinced has been bewitched. The witch makes a frightening appearance, and the two manage to stammer out that Rusalka has betrayed the Prince. But the Water-Gnome has overheard and, before Jezibaba can answer, surfaces and thunders that it was the Prince who deceived Rusalka, not the other way around. Terrified at the supernatural happenings, the Gamekeeper and the Kitchen Boy flee. Jezibaba laughs at the world's folly.

The three Wood-Sprites dance and sing in the moonlight, but when the Water-Gnome tells them of Rusalka's plight they weep and run away.

The Prince emerges from the forest, distraught and searching for his "white doe." He senses Rusalka's presence and cries out, "Come back to me!" Miraculously, Rusalka does. Bitterly she reproaches him, "Why did your lips lie? Why did you betray me?"

The Prince begs Rusalka's forgiveness and asks her to kiss him. Her kiss means death and damnation she says, but the Prince is resolved. Their lips meet and he dies in her arms, while deep beneath the water the voice of the Water-Gnome cries out, "All sacrifices are futile!" Rusalka sadly thanks the Prince for letting her experience human love and, commending his soul to God, descends into the lake, down to the realm of the demons of death.