

The Little Hermit Crab



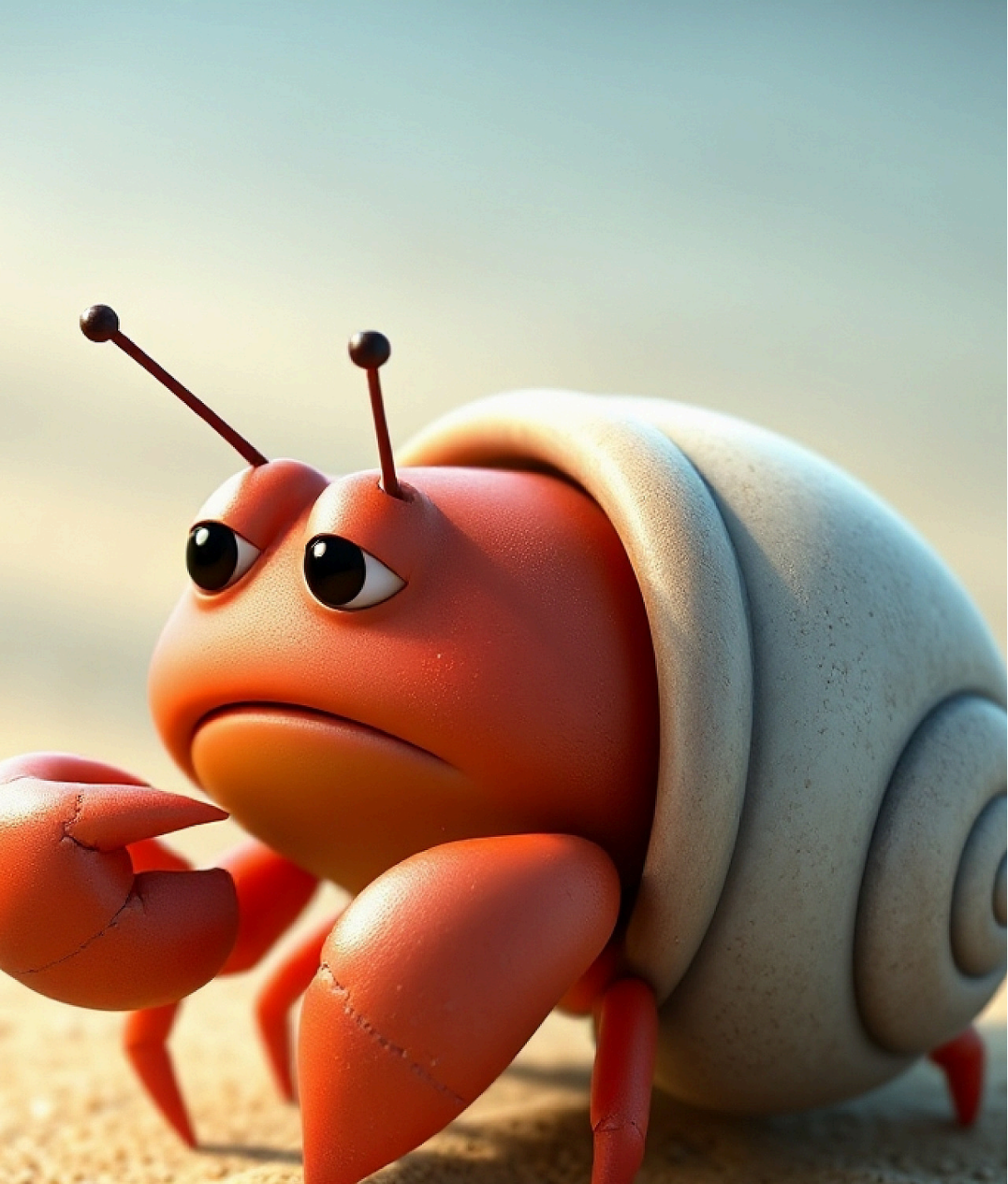
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Down in the bright blue ocean, where sunbeams danced on the sand, lived a little hermit crab. His skin was coral-red, and his two dark eyes sat on short stalks like tiny periscopes. He carried a pale grey spiral shell on his back. Lately, that shell felt tight. It pinched his soft curled body, and his eight little legs could barely tuck inside.



Every morning the little hermit crab wiggled and squeezed, but the grey shell would not stretch. "I have grown," he said with a worried sigh. "My shell is too small for me now." He looked at his one slightly larger claw and wished it could fix things. It could not. A shell is not something a crab can mend.



So the little hermit crab set off to find a new shell. He scuttled past swaying green seaweed and soft pink coral. "A bigger shell must be somewhere," he said, waving his small antennae. The ocean was wide and full of wonders, but every shell he passed was either cracked, or full, or far too big for a crab the size of a plum.



He found a white shell half buried in the sand. He tugged and wiggled, but it was stuck tight. "Too heavy," he mumbled. He tried a thin shell near a rock, but it crumbled at his touch. His too-small grey shell pinched more than ever, and his dark round eyes grew rounder with worry.



"Maybe over here," he said, climbing a smooth stone. He peeked into a purple shell, but a sleepy fish already lived there. "Excuse me," he whispered, and backed away politely. He checked a striped shell, a spotted shell, and a curly shell. Each one was wrong. The little crab's hopeful heart began to feel small.



Near the tall rocks, someone was watching. It was a sea snail with a smooth glossy shell in warm cream and amber swirls. Her body was soft and pale peach, and her gentle wide eyes blinked kindly. She had seen the little crab try shell after shell. Slowly, calmly, she glided closer.



"Hello, little one," said the sea snail with a calm, friendly smile. "You look tired and worried. Are you searching for something?" The hermit crab's antennae drooped. "My shell is too small," he said. "I have looked everywhere, but I cannot find one that fits me." He felt shy, but the snail's kind face made him feel safe.



The sea snail nodded slowly. "I know these rocks well," she said. "I have lived here a long, long time. Let me help you look." The little crab's dark eyes lit up. "Would you really?" he asked. "Of course," she said. "Two pairs of eyes are better than one. Follow me, and we will search together."



They began among the rocks, where the water was cool and green. The sea snail glided along the stone, her cream and amber shell shining like a small lantern. The hermit crab scuttled beside her on his eight tiny legs. "Look in the small cracks," she said gently. "Shells like to hide there." He peeked into every crack he could find.



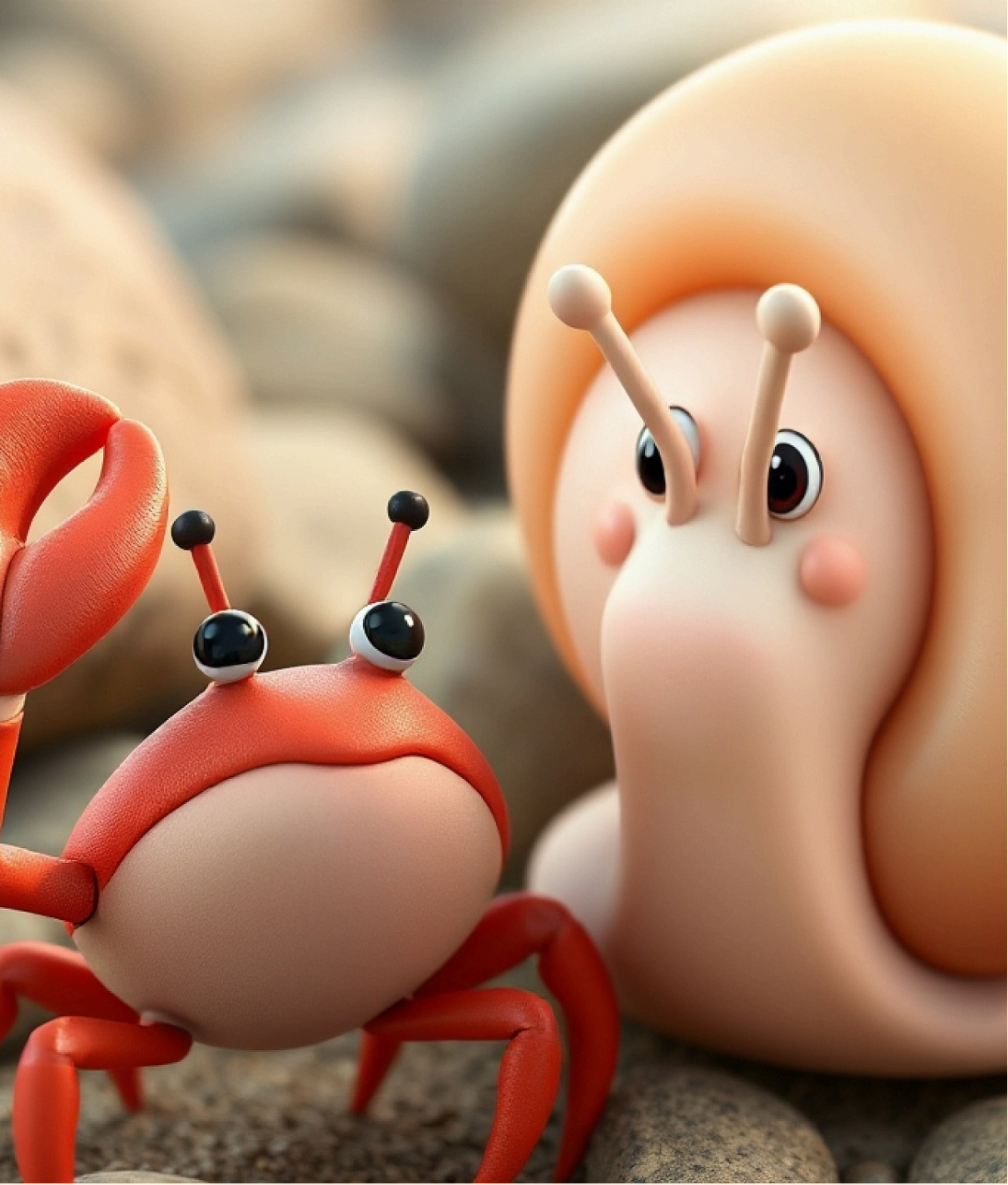
They searched under a flat grey stone. They searched beside a clump of waving weed. The little crab found a broken shell and a sandy shell, but neither one would do. "Keep going," said the sea snail softly. "Good things take a little patience." Her calm voice made the little crab feel brave again, and he kept on searching.



Then, tucked between two round rocks, the sea snail stopped. "Look here," she said, and her gentle eyes smiled. There lay an empty shell, a pale pink spiral with a wide smooth opening. It looked just right for a crab the size of a plum. The little hermit crab stared at it and held his breath.



"Try it," said the sea snail. The little crab wiggled his soft curled body into the pink spiral shell. It slid on smoothly, with room to grow and no pinching at all. "It fits! It fits!" he cheered, waving his larger claw. He turned in a happy circle, and his dark round eyes shone like two bright beads.



"Thank you, thank you!" said the hermit crab. "You helped me when I could not find it alone." The sea snail smiled her gentle smile. "I am glad to help," she said. She did not ask for his old shell or anything at all in return. She simply watched him spin happily in his new home.



The little hermit crab understood something warm and true. A real friend helps and asks for nothing back. "Will you stay with me?" he asked shyly. "We could explore the ocean together." The sea snail's wide eyes crinkled kindly. "I would like that very much," she said, and they started off side by side.



After that, the two friends were never far apart. They drifted past pink coral and green weed. They peeked at sleepy fish and counted the little shells along the sand. The hermit crab carried his new pink spiral proudly, and the sea snail glided beside him with her cream and amber shell glowing softly in the blue.



When the sun sank low and the ocean turned soft and violet, the two friends rested on a smooth stone. "My shell fits, and I have a friend," said the little crab happily. The sea snail nodded. The ocean hummed gently all around them. Helping and sharing make friendship grow, and true friends help without taking advantage.