

# Zumrad and Kimmat

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In a country called Uzbekistan, in the city of Tashkent, Zumrad and Kimmat lived in an old rambling house with their mum and dad. Zumrad loved her second mum, and Kimmat loved her second dad. Zumrad's birth mother and Kimmat's birth father had died when the girls were very young. The family spoke fondly about each parent who had passed away.

Many people around them didn't believe that stepmothers and stepfathers could be kind and loving to their stepchildren. Zumrad and Kimmat had heard many fairy tales and folk tales where stepfathers and stepmothers were evil, cruel and unkind. One such story they read at school was that of Cinderella. Zumrad and Kimmat would smile to one another:

“Who makes up these fairy tales?!”

“Our life is so much better than these stories.”

Zumrad loved spending time with her stepmum, cooking in the kitchen and tending to a variety of vegetables and herbs in the garden. She became a great cook herself, learning many recipes from her stepmum. Zumrad enjoyed it most when they cooked her favourite chocolate cake from her mother's old recipe book. One of the few clear memories she had of her mother was of standing on a chair in their old kitchen, watching her measure and mix the cake, patiently waiting to lick the sweet chocolate off the wooden spoon.

Kimmat, on the other hand, felt disinterested about gardening, cooking or cleaning. She enjoyed eating the delicious food cooked by her mum and sister, and she would watch them in the kitchen and wish she had their passion for cooking. It was numbers that fascinated Kimmat, and she loved to solve interesting and complex mathematical problems. If it was her choice, she would do maths all day long. When the whole family sat together in the evening, Kimmat would enjoy annoying them by reading maths puzzles out loud. "Can anyone guess the answer?" she roared with laughter. She loved nothing more than telling her family they had got the answers incorrect: "Wrong! You didn't guess it! It's 3,457,221, silly!" She loved to explain the correct answers in great detail.

One day, Zumrad walked through the door after school and burst into tears.

"I failed my maths test," she said, throwing her bag to the ground with frustration. "Now I have to take this stupid maths test again!"

"I'll help you," offered Kimmat. "You know how much I love maths."

"Would you?" Zumrad sighed with relief.

Every day after school, Kimmat sat at the kitchen table with Zumrad, helping her with her maths homework. Zumrad would watch their

stepmum showering praise on Kimmat for teaching her sister. She saw how easily Kimmat understood maths, but no matter how hard she tried, it was all just a jumble of numbers to her. After three weeks, Zumrad still could not solve one single maths problem from her textbook without Kimmat's help.

One night after dinner, as Kimmat was begrudgingly washing all the dishes, Zumrad called over to her from the kitchen bench.

"What if you do all my maths homework for me and I do all the dishes every day?"

Kimmat threw the dish cloth into the sink, bubbles splashing up onto her nose.

"You're a genius! And you have made me the happiest sister in the world!" she exclaimed, throwing her wet and soapy arms around her.

That night, a secret deal was struck between the two sisters. Zumrad felt relaxed for the first time in months. She didn't have to worry about maths any more and could get back to writing the recipe book she had started. The arrangement suited them both—every day maths, maths and more maths was a joy and a treat for Kimmat. Zumrad's dad would often check in on her, knowing she was struggling with maths.

"Are you getting your head around that maths, Zumrad?"

Kimmat and Zumrad would smile at each other and wink, "All over it, Dad!"

One Wednesday afternoon, Zumrad's maths teacher asked her to stay after class. The secret deal had been exposed.

"How do you think you are doing with maths, Zumrad?" her teacher asked.

"I'm getting my homework done."

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Your homework is excellent, A+. However, your work in class tells me a different story. You are failing every test. Am I missing something?”

Zumrad lowered her eyes, shame engulfing her. She clenched her fist and banged it on her desk—she was angry at maths, angry at her teacher and, most of all, she was angry at herself.

When she got home, she didn’t tell anyone what had happened. The unravelling of the secret deal had given Zumrad a thumping headache. After dinner, she didn’t feel like washing the dishes, choosing to slump in front of the TV instead. Her stepmum scolded her in front of everyone. “These dishes won’t wash themselves, Zumrad! Kimmat is doing homework. Stop watching TV and get to work!”

Now Zumrad was not only angry at her maths, her maths teacher and herself—she was angry at her stepmum. She stomped over to the kitchen sink.

“How has she not noticed that I do all of the dishes, all of the time? A thank you wouldn’t hurt,” she grumbled to herself. “Clearly she loves Kimmat more than me! Maybe there is something in those fairy tales...”

Zumrad cleared the table in a huff, throwing the dishes into the sink, splashing water and food scraps across the bench. Sighing and muttering under her breath, she washed and dried the dishes and mopped the floor. She stopped for a moment as her thoughts collided.

“I am Cinderella! She treats me like a slave, evil stepmother,” she roared to no one in particular.

Storming out of the house, she slammed the door. She ran and ran, following the familiar streets near home. Seething with anger, she didn’t notice when the driver of an old Lada just missed knocking her over by a whisker—there was a gasp, “ZUMRAD!” behind her. She didn’t hear that either.

Finally, exhausted, she sat down on a bench overlooking a canal. She held her heavy head in her hands, sobbing.

She heard someone approaching and saw a shadow stop beside her. She felt the someone sit down next to her. It wasn't a fairy godmother but her stepmum, holding a piece of chocolate cake as an offering. Zumrad turned to her, fresh tears of hurt rolling down her cheeks.

“You love Kimmat more than you love me!” she spat out.

“Why on earth would you think that?”

“I've read Cinderella, and I know what stepmothers are really like!”

“I love you both—equally! You bring so much to my life that I never had before.”

“No, you don't. No I don't! You haven't even noticed I have been doing the dishes all by myself for weeks—every morning and every night. You say nothing to me, yet you constantly compliment Kimmat for doing her homework.”

“Zumrad, qizim, let's go home. If you want, I can help you with your maths.”

“What did Kimmat tell you?” Now Zumrad was furious with Kimmat for betraying their secret.

“Nothing, your teacher rang us; she was worried about you. And I did notice that you were doing all the washing up. I have been waiting for you to tell me that you were struggling with maths. I was frustrated this evening; I'm very sorry that I yelled at you. Did you know, qizim, that I wasn't good at maths at school either? Don't be so hard on yourself. Give yourself time to figure it out. And remember what makes your heart sing. You are such a talented cook, just like your mum. Do you see the joy on Kimmat and Dad's faces when they watch us cook and eat our food?”



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$$a + b^n$$



Zumrad rested her head on her stepmum's shoulder. They walked home together in a peaceful silence, sharing the sweetness of their chocolate cake.

"More cinnamon next time?" Zumrad said.

"You read my mind."

The next evening, they sat with Zumrad's maths textbook and studied together. Mum explained the concepts, the steps—everything in a new way that made sense to Zumrad. She could now solve a couple of the problems herself. Zumrad sighed happily, sat two inches taller, right there next to her stepmum, who loved and understood her.

After dinner, Kimmat decided to read her maths puzzles to everyone like she always did. Dad asked her to stop and do something else.

"No, Dad, let her read them. I am interested too," said Zumrad.

She and Kimmat loved their family's story, and really it had nothing to do at all with the likes of Cinderella's.