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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Twelve Months

Once upon a time there was a woman who had two daughters. One was her own child, the other a stepchild. She loved Holena, her own daughter, with all her heart. But she couldn't even stand the sight of Marushka, the stepchild. This was because Marushka was so much more beautiful than Holena. Marushka, the sweet child, didn't know how beautiful she was and so she never understood why the stepmother scowled every time she was with Holena.

Mother and daughter made Marushka do all the housework alone. She had to cook and wash and sew and spin, tend the garden and care for the cow. Holena, on the other hand, spent all her time preening and hanging around like a fine lady. Marushka never complained. She did everything she was told and patiently endured their grumbling and complaining. Despite all the hard work she did, she became more beautiful every day, and despite her lazy life, Holena became uglier every day.

"This will never end well," thought the stepmother to herself. "Soon the boys will come courting and once they see how beautiful Marushka is, they won't pay any attention to my Holena. We'd better do everything we can to get rid of Marushka as soon as possible."

So they both grumbled all day long at Marushka and treated her badly. They made her work harder, they

beat her, they didn't give her enough to eat, they did everything they could think of to make her ugly and mean. But it was all in vain. Marushka was so good and kind that, despite their hard and cruel treatment, she became more beautiful every day.



One day in the middle of January, Holena was lazy and planned to do nothing, but she had to have a bunch of fragrant violets to put in her bodice.

"Marushka," she ordered sharply. "I want some violets. Go to the woods and get me some."

"Good heavens, dear sister," cried poor Marushka.

"What are you thinking? Who ever heard of violets growing under the snow in January?"

"How lazy you are," shouted Holena. "And you dare to argue with me! Go now and if you don't come back with violets, you'll die." And so Holena and Marushka took turns shouting at each other. The stepmother intervened and took Holena's side. She grabbed Marushka roughly by the shoulder, pushed her out of the house and slammed the door.

The poor child climbed the mountain slope slowly, bitterly crying. Everywhere was a thick layer of snow without a trace of a human or animal in any direction. Marushka wandered on, weak from hunger and

trembling with cold. "Dear God in heaven," she prayed, "please take me away from all this suffering."

Suddenly she saw a glowing light in front of her. She struggled towards it and finally discovered that it was coming from a large fire burning on the top of the mountain. Around the fire were twelve stones, one of them much larger and higher than the others. Twelve men sat on the stones. Three of them were very old and had white hair; three were not so old; three were middle-aged; and three were handsome young men. They didn't talk. They sat silently staring at the fire. They were the Twelve Months.

Marushka hesitated before she entered. Then she stepped forward and said politely, "Gentlemen, may I warm myself by your fire? I'm shivering from the cold." Great January nodded his head, and Marushka reached towards the flames with her stiff, cold fingers. "This is no place for you, my child," said Great January. "Why are you here?"

"I am looking for violets," replied Marushka.

"Violets? This is not the time to search for violets with snow on the ground!"

"I know, sir, but my sister Holena says I must fetch her violets from the woods, or she will kill me, and my mother says so too. Please, sir, can you not tell me where I can find some?"

Great January slowly stood up and walked to the youngest Month. He gave him a long staff and said, "Here, March, you take the high chair."

So, March took the high chair and began waving the staff above the fire. The fire blazed up, and immediately the snow began to melt everywhere. The trees got buds, the grass turned green again, little pink daisy buds appeared, and lo and behold, it was spring! As Marushka watched, violets began to appear among the leaves, and soon it looked like a large blue spread of violets had been laid out on the ground.

"Well, Marushka," cried March, "there are your violets! Pick them quickly!"

Marushka was overjoyed. She bent down and collected a large bunch of violets. Then she thanked the Twelve Months politely, wished them a good day, and hurried away. Imagine Holena and the stepmother's surprise when they saw Marushka coming home through the snow with her hands full of violets. They opened the door, and immediately, the scent of the flowers filled the whole cottage.

"Tell me, where did you get those violets?" asked Holena gruffly.

"High up in the mountains," said Marushka. "The ground up there is covered with them."

Holena grabbed the violets and fastened them to her waist. She kept smelling them herself all afternoon and made her mother smell them too, but she never said to Marushka, "Dear sister, would you like to smell them too?"

The next day, when Holena was once again idling in the corner by the chimney, she decided she wanted to eat strawberries. So she called Marushka and said:

"Come here, Marushka, go to the forest and bring me some strawberries."

"For heaven's sake, dear sister," said Marushka, "where can I find strawberries at this time of year? Who ever heard of strawberries growing under the snow?"

"How lazy you are," Holena screamed. "And you dare to argue with me! Go now, and if you don't come back with strawberries, it will be the death of you."

Marushka and Holena were yelling at each other in turn. Once again, their stepmother intervened and sided with Holena. She roughly grabbed Marushka by the shoulder, pushed her out of the house, and slammed the door. The poor child climbed up the mountain slowly, bitter and weeping, with a thick layer of snow everywhere and no trace of any human or animal in any direction. Marushka wandered on, weak with hunger and trembling from the cold. Finally, she saw the glow of the same fire she had seen the previous day. With a happy heart, she hurried towards it. The Twelve Months sat around the fire, just as before, with Great January on the high chair.

Marushka politely bowed and said, "Gentlemen, may I warm myself by your fire? I'm shivering with cold."

Great January nodded and Marushka reached out with her stiff, cold fingers to the flames. "But Marushka," said Great January, "why are you here again? What are you looking for this time?"

"I'm looking for strawberries," replied Marushka.

"Strawberries? But Marushka, my child, it's winter and strawberries don't grow in the snow."

Marushka sadly shook her head. "I know, sir, but my sister, Holena, says I must get her strawberries from the forest or she will kill me, and my mother says the same. Please, sir, can you not tell me where I can find some strawberries?"

Great January slowly stood up and walked over to the Month sitting opposite him. He gave him the long staff and said, "Here, June, take the high chair."

So June sat in the high chair and began waving the staff above the fire. The flames flared up, and with the heat, the snow melted away in an instant. The earth turned green, the trees covered themselves with leaves, birds began to sing, flowers bloomed, and lo and behold, it was summer! Soon small white blossoms covered the ground under the beech trees. These quickly turned into fruit, first green, then pink, then red, and with a sigh of delight, Marushka saw that they were ripe strawberries.

"Well, Marushka," shouted June, "there are your strawberries! Pick them quickly!"

Marushka picked an apron full of strawberries. Then she thanked the Months politely, said goodbye, and hurried home. Imagine again how surprised Holena and the stepmother were when they saw Marushka coming through the snow with an apron full of strawberries! They opened the door, and immediately the smell of the strawberries filled the whole house.

"Hey, where did you get them?" asked Holena rudely.

"From high up in the mountains," answered Marushka, "they grow under the beech trees."

Holena took the strawberries and gobbled them up one after the other. Then the stepmother ate as much as she wanted. But it never occurred to them to say, "Here, Marushka, take one too."

The next day, as usual, Holena was sitting in the corner by the chimney when she got the idea that she wanted red apples. So she called Marushka and said, "Come here, Marushka, go to the forest and get me some red apples."

"Good heavens, dear sister," gasped Marushka, "where can I find red apples in winter?" Marushka reached up and pretended to pick an apple.

"How lazy are you?", shouted Holena. "Go now, and if you come back without red apples, you will be dead."

For the third time, the stepmother intervened and sided with Holena. She grabbed Marushka roughly by the shoulder, pushed her out of the house, and slammed the door. So the poor child went back to the forest. There was a thick layer of snow everywhere without a trace of human or animal in any direction. This time, Marushka hurried straight to the mountaintop. She found the Twelve Months still sitting by their fire, with Great January still on the high stone.

Marushka bowed politely and said, "Dear sirs, may I warm myself by your fire? I am shivering with cold."

Great January nodded, and Marushka reached for the flames with her stiff, cold fingers.

"Why are you here again, Marushka?" asked Great January. "What are you looking for now?"

"Red apples," replied Marushka. "My sister, Holena, says that I have to bring her some red apples from the

forest, or else she will kill me, and my mother says the same. Please, sir, can you tell me where I can find a few?"

Great January slowly stood up and walked to one of the older Months. He gave him the long staff and said, "Here, September, take the high chair."

So September took the high chair and began waving the staff above the fire. The fire burned and glowed. Suddenly, the snow disappeared. The fields around

them looked brown and yellow and dry. The leaves fell from the trees one by one, and a cool breeze spread over the stubble. There were not many flowers left, only wild asters on the slopes, and meadow saffron in the valleys, and under the beeches, some ferns and ivy. Soon, Marushka saw an apple tree that was heavily laden with ripe fruit.

"There, Marushka," called September, "there are your apples. Collect them quickly."

Marushka reached out and picked two apples. Then she chose another.

"That's enough, Marushka!" cried September. "Don't pick any more!"

Marushka immediately obeyed. Then she thanked the Twelve Months politely, said goodbye, and hurried home. Holena and her stepmother were more surprised than ever to see Marushka come through the snow with red



apples in her hands. They let her in and took the apples from her.

"Where did you get them from?" asked Holena.

"From high up in the mountains," answered Marushka.

"There are plenty of them up there."

"There are plenty? And you brought back only two!" cried Holena angrily. "Or did you pick more and eat them on the way home?"

"No, no, dear sister," said Marushka. "I did not eat any apples, really. They only let me pick two. They called out to me not to pick any more."

"I wish the lightning had killed you!" screamed Holena. After a while, the greedy Holena stopped scolding her to eat one of the apples. It tasted so delicious that she declared that she had never tasted anything so good in her life. Her mother said the same. When they had both eaten the apples, they began to crave more.

"Mother," said Holena, "bring me my fur coat. I am going up the mountain myself. There is no point in sending that lazy sister again, for on the way home, she will just eat all the apples again. If I find that tree, I will pick all the apples, and no one will be able to stop me."

The mother begged Holena not to go outside in such weather, but Holena was stubborn and would go. She threw her fur coat over her shoulders, wrapped a scarf around her head, and then headed up the mountain slope. There was a thick layer of snow everywhere without a trace of a person or animal in any direction. Holena wandered and wandered through the snow,

determined to find those beautiful apples. Finally, she saw a light in the distance and when she reached it, she discovered that it was the great fire around which the Twelve Months were sitting. At first, she was afraid, but soon she became bold and pushed her way through the circle of men, and without even asking for permission, she reached out her hands to the fire. She didn't even have the courtesy to say "hello."

Great January furrowed his brow. "Who are you?" he asked in a deep voice. "And what do you want?"

Holena looked at him defiantly. "You old fool, what business is it of yours who I am or what I want!"

She shook her head nonchalantly and walked into the woods. The furrow on the forehead of Great January deepened. Slowly, he stood up and waved his staff above his head. The fire went out. Then the sky darkened, an icy wind blew over the mountain, and the snow began to fall in such thick flakes that it seemed as if someone, high in the air, was emptying a huge feather bed. Holena couldn't see a step ahead of her. She struggled through. Now she walked into a tree, then she fell into a snowdrift. Despite her warm coat, her limbs began to weaken and become numb from the cold. The snow continued to fall and the icy wind continued to blow.

Did Holena finally regret being so bad and cruel to Marushka? No, she still had no regret. Instead, the colder she got, the more bitter she thought of Marushka, and even more bitter she thought of the good God Himself. Meanwhile, her mother waited and waited for her at home. She stood by the window as

long as she could, then opened the door and tried to look out into the storm. She waited and waited, but Holena did not come.

"Oh dear heaven, why is she staying away so long?" she thought to herself. "Does she love those apples so much that she can't leave them, or what is the matter? I think I have to go out and look for her myself."

So the stepmother put on her fur coat, threw a scarf over her head, and set out. She called out, "Holena! Holena!" but no one answered. She struggled up the mountain slope. There was a thick layer of snow without a trace of a person or animal in any direction. "Holena! Holena!" But there was still no answer. The snow fell fast. The icy wind moaned on.

At home, Marushka prepared the food and took care of the cow. But neither Holena nor the stepmother returned. "What could they be doing all this time?" Marushka thought. She ate her dinner alone and then went to work in the spinning room. The spool was full and the daylight faded and there was still no sign of Holena and her mother. "Dear God, what could have happened?" cried Marushka anxiously. She peered out the window to see if they were coming.

Finally, the storm had blown itself out. The wind had died down. The fields shimmered white in the snow and high in the sky, the icy stars sparkled brightly. But there was no living creature in sight. Marushka knelt down and prayed for her sister and mother. The next morning, she prepared breakfast for them. "They must be very cold and hungry," she said to herself. She waited for them, but they did not come. She cooked for

them, but they still did not come. In fact, they never returned, because they both froze to death on the mountain due to the cold.

So our good little Marushka inherited the cottage, the garden, and the cow. After a while, she married a farmer. He was a good husband to her and they lived happily ever after, together in the cottage.

