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Chapter 4: Red's Suspicion and Bold Entry

Red steps cautiously along the muddy path, gripping the basket tighter as her boots squelch in the soft earth.

She pauses and raises her voice boldly, unafraid: 'I know someone's out there.

Show yourself—now.

I'm not afraid of you.

Red tightens her grip on the basket's handle, her eyes scanning the shadowed trees for any sign of movement. Red tightened her grip on the basket's handle, shifting it protectively behind her as she peered into the shadowed trees, every sense alert for the faintest rustle. Her voice rang out, steady but edged with wary determination. "I know someone's out there. Show yourself—now. I'm not afraid of you." Even as her heart thudded in her chest, she refused to let fear betray her, standing her ground beneath the looming boughs. ' The Wolf, cloaked in an ill-fitting shawl, emerges from behind a crooked birch tree, sniffing the air and fixing his gaze on the basket.

Red adjusts the basket on her arm, glancing down the winding forest path with determination. Red shifted the weight of the basket on her arm, her fingers tightening around its handle as she glanced down the winding path that disappeared into the shadowy heart of the woods. Determination flickered in her eyes. "I'm looking for my grandmother's house," she explained, her voice steady despite the uncertainty in the air. Her gaze traced the trail beyond the towering oak tree she knew so well. "She lives right at the end of this path, past that old oak. I promised her I'd bring this basket of treats." The promise lingered in her mind, echoing with the warmth of her compassion and the weight of her responsibility. Red continues, stating she is looking for her grandmother's house at the end of the path and that she promised to bring a basket of treats.

The Wolf adjusts the shawl around his shoulders, his yellow eyes flickering with a polite smile that never quite reaches them. The Wolf adjusted the shawl draped over his shoulders, the coarse fabric doing little to hide the restless twitch of his tail. His yellow eyes flickered with a smile—polite, practiced, but never quite touching the depths of his gaze. Straightening with an easy grace, he projected the air of a seasoned wanderer. "Just a weary traveler, young miss," he said,

his tone smooth as river stones, each word carefully chosen. “The woods can be dreadfully lonely, you know—one must keep moving, lest one lose oneself entirely.” His gaze lingered, gentle yet searching, as he inquired almost offhandedly, “Might I ask, are you alone on this path?” The Wolf straightens, his tail barely concealed, and replies smoothly, ‘Just a weary traveler, young miss.

The Wolf’s nose twitches, and he steps a little closer, eyes glinting with curiosity and a barely concealed hunger. The Wolf’s nose twitched, catching something on the breeze that made his amber eyes glint with sudden hunger. He prowled a step closer, his voice velvet-soft, yet edged with sly curiosity. “Mm, what is that delightful scent you carry?” he mused, breathing in deep as if savoring the air itself. “It drifts on the breeze, tempting and golden.” His gaze lingered, almost affectionate, but sharpened with intent. “I wonder, is it something you cherish—or something you would share?” The woods can be dreadfully lonely, you know—one must keep moving, lest one lose oneself entirely.

Might I ask, are you alone on this path?

’ He leans forward, sniffing again, ‘Mm, what is that delightful scent you carry?

It drifts on the breeze, tempting and golden. I wonder, is it something you cherish—or something you would share?

’ Red edges sideways, keeping the Wolf in sight and inching closer to the cottage gate, her grip tightening on the basket.

The Wolf steps forward, craning his head as if to peer at the basket, hunger barely masked by a toothy smile.

Red glances at the cottage door, calculating the distance, determined to reach her grandmother’s safely.

The wind rises as Red boldly steps onto the cottage’s stone porch, refusing to turn her back to the stranger.

A tense silence lingers between them, broken only by the creak of the porch beneath Red’s feet. With the truth exposed, a dangerous negotiation hangs in the air, as the Wolf, no longer hiding behind false pleasantries, begins to lay out his own terms. The standoff is far from over—instead, a new game is about to begin.

Chapter 2: The Wolf’s Proposition

Red stepped carefully along the muddy trail, clutching a woven basket against her hip as she scanned the undergrowth for signs of movement.

She paused to adjust her red cloak, noticing a patch of wildflowers, and bent to gather some for her grandmother, brushing soil from their stems.

Suddenly, a deep voice rumbled from behind a tree: ‘Good morning, sir.

Is there something you need?

’ Red greeted the Wolf first, her tone polite yet cautious, surprising him with her boldness.

Red straightens her back, chin raised, and fixes The Wolf with a steady look, though her fingers whiten around the basket's handle. Red drew herself up, shoulders squared and chin lifted, refusing to let her uncertainty show as she met the Wolf's gaze. Though her knuckles whitened around the handle of her basket, her voice remained clear and steady. "Good morning, sir. Is there something you need?" she asked, determined not to betray the flicker of wariness beneath her calm exterior. The Wolf circles Red slowly, eyes glinting with curiosity and a hint of challenge. The Wolf moved in a slow, deliberate circle around Red, his eyes shining with a mixture of curiosity and challenge. His gaze never left her, measuring her resolve as she straightened and met his eyes, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. He let a sly smile curl across his muzzle, voice warm and teasing as he observed, "My, you're a bold one to greet me so politely, knowing the tales they tell about wolves in these woods." Red lifts her chin slightly, her eyes steady and unflinching as she faces The Wolf. Red lifted her chin, the movement subtle but resolute, her eyes meeting the Wolf's yellow gaze without a flicker of fear. She tightened her grip on the basket's handle, her knuckles whitening, yet her voice remained steady. Stories, she knew, had a habit of growing claws and teeth of their own, but she would not be ruled by rumors. She met his gaze unflinchingly, a glint of determination in her eyes, and said that stories were often exaggerated, and she preferred to judge for herself who deserved her courtesy. The Wolf steps slightly closer, his eyes glinting with curiosity and a hint of challenge. The Wolf stepped a fraction closer, the dappled sunlight catching in his eyes and casting a flicker of both curiosity and challenge. Red straightened in response, her fingers tightening around the basket's handle. She knew the stories the villagers whispered—knew his reputation for trouble—but something in his gaze held her. With a half-smile curving his lips, he murmured, "Perhaps, but caution is seldom wasted on paths shadowed by old hunger." The words lingered in the stillness, weaving a subtle warning through the gentle rustle of leaves. Red lifts her chin slightly, her eyes steady as she squares her shoulders, refusing to let the Wolf's insinuation unsettle her. Red lifted her chin, eyes steady as she squared her shoulders. The Wolf's reputation shadowed every inch of space between them, but she refused to let his sly insinuations unsettle her. Her fingers tightened around the basket, the woven handle digging into her palm—a grounding weight amid the uncertainty. Caution was wise, she acknowledged, but she would not allow it to turn her steps or words to trembling. The Wolf circles slowly, his gaze fixed on Red, testing for any sign of hesitation in her stance. The Wolf prowled in a slow, deliberate circle, his amber eyes never straying from Red. Each measured step pressed into the mossy earth, a calculated test for any flicker of hesitation in her stance. Red straightened beneath his gaze, clutching the wicker basket with knuckles pale against the handle. She tried to steady her breath, keenly aware of the stories that trailed in the Wolf's wake—tales of clever words and vanished travelers.

A smile played at the Wolf's lips, both inviting and edged with something sharper. "Yet even the bravest hearts can falter," he murmured, his voice as smooth as moonlit water, "when the shadows draw close and the teeth behind a smile sharpen." The words seemed to linger in the hush between them, curling through the air like mist, tempting her to doubt her own courage as he circled closer, never breaking eye contact. Red lifts her chin, her eyes unwavering, fingers white-knuckled around her basket as she faces The Wolf. Red lifted her chin, refusing to let the Wolf see even a flicker of fear. Her fingers tightened white-knuckled around the worn handle of her basket, the only shield she had between herself and the darkness gathering in his eyes. Yet her gaze never wavered. "Then let your shadows and teeth come," she said, voice steady despite the tremor in the undergrowth behind her. "I have learned to walk through darkness without losing my way." The Wolf emerged, his fur gleaming silver in the dappled light, nose twitching as he sniffed the scent of bread, herbs, and the faint tang of iron from Red's basket.

Red straightened, meeting his gaze and tightening her grip on the basket, not flinching from his reputation.

Red bites her lip, fingers tightening around the basket as she casts a worried glance down the shadowed path. Red paused at the edge of the woods, her basket swinging lightly from her arm. Mother had been clear: stay on the path, keep your distance, don't take risks. Yet the thought of her grandmother—alone, ailing, perhaps in need of help right now—gnawed at her with every step. If I listen to Mother, I should keep my distance, she mused, glancing back at the sun-dappled clearing behind her. But if I wait too long, Grandmother might be in trouble before I get there. The choice pressed heavily on her chest, an invisible weight she couldn't shrug off. Why does it have to be so hard to choose? she wondered, lips pressed into a determined line as she stepped forward, heart pounding with both worry and resolve. Red fidgets with the basket handle, biting her lip as she looks from the path ahead back toward the woods. Red fidgeted with the handle of her basket, her fingers tracing the worn wicker as she bit her lip in thought. Her gaze darted from the winding path ahead back toward the shadowed edge of the woods, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. She weighed his offer, heart pounding with urgency; Grandmother needed her, and every moment counted. Surely Mother would understand, she reasoned silently. For Grandmother's sake, maybe just a little faster—yes, Mother would forgive that, wouldn't she? The Wolf circled, tail low but ears pricked, watching Red's hands as their conversation grew tense—Red openly acknowledged her awareness of his nature and the dangers he posed, referencing her mother's warnings and the urgency to reach Grandmother.

Red stands her ground, her grip tightening on the basket handle, eyes narrowed as she watches The Wolf's every move. Red stood her ground, the handle of her basket digging into her palm as her grip tightened. She watched the Wolf's every subtle movement, not missing the way his golden eyes tracked her, his head cocked in silent calculation. The tension between them coiled in the cool forest air, almost tangible.

She drew in a steadying breath, her voice unwavering as she met his gaze. She let him see the steel in her eyes, letting the words fall sharp and deliberate: she knew exactly what he was, and she knew better than to trust him. If he was waiting for her to let her guard down, she warned, he would be waiting a very long time.

Her heart thudded fiercely in her chest, but Red refused to look away, determination radiating from her small but unyielding frame. The Wolf's tail flicked, his posture relaxed yet alert, eyes never leaving Red's face as he circled a step closer, testing the boundary she'd drawn. The Wolf's tail flicked, betraying a restless energy beneath his otherwise languid posture. He circled a step closer, eyes never wavering from Red's face, probing the invisible boundary she'd drawn between them. His voice, smooth and almost tender, slipped into the hush between them as he watched her every movement. Trust, he mused, was a luxury seldom afforded in these woods—especially to someone with his reputation. Yet necessity, he admitted with a sly tilt of his head, had a way of forging strange alliances. In that moment, as the tension hummed and his charm vied with the hunger in his gaze, Red sensed the truth of his words: sometimes, the forest made companions of creatures who should have been adversaries. Red's grip tightens on her basket, her eyes never leaving the Wolf as she takes a cautious step back, the brittle leaves crunching underfoot. Red's grip tightened around the handle of her basket, fingers whitening as she took a cautious step back, the brittle leaves crackling beneath her boots. The Wolf's gaze tracked her every movement, his head cocked in silent anticipation. Red kept her eyes locked on his, her voice steady despite the tremor of tension threading the air. "Maybe so," she said, her words quiet but resolute, "but I'd rather walk

alone than owe you a debt I can't repay." The Wolf's lips curl into a slight, knowing smile, his gaze steady and unblinking as he steps just out of her direct path, neither blocking nor yielding entirely. The Wolf's lips curled into a slight, knowing smile, his gaze steady and unblinking as he watched her, every inch of his posture both inviting and subtly menacing. He moved just enough to step out of her direct path—not blocking, not yielding, but claiming the space between them with quiet confidence. "Then walk alone, if your pride is worth more than your safety," he murmured, his voice low and smooth, the words curling between them like mist on a cold morning. His eyes tracked her every movement, head tilted with an almost playful curiosity, even as tension hummed in the air, thick and electric. Red narrows her eyes, tightening her grip on the basket at her side as she takes a careful step back, never turning her gaze from the Wolf. Red narrowed her eyes, her grip tightening on the basket at her side as she edged back, careful not to let her gaze stray from the Wolf. His amber eyes tracked every subtle movement, his head cocked in patient anticipation, as if weighing her resolve. Despite the chill that crept along her spine, Red's voice remained steady, her words edged with both caution and challenge. Safety has a price too, she reminded him, and she couldn't recall him ever offering anything for free. The unspoken tension stretched between them, thick as the shadows beneath the trees. The Wolf's lips curled in a faint, knowing smile as he stepped just close enough for Red to hear the low rumble of his words, his gaze never leaving her face. The Wolf's lips curled in that familiar, knowing smile as he stepped just close enough for Red to catch the low, velvet rumble of his words. His gaze, unblinking, lingered on her face, sharp and unreadable. "Not for free, no," he murmured, every syllable threaded with a dangerous sort of charm. "But sometimes a bargain struck in shadow is better than a promise made in daylight." The words seemed to linger in the hush between them, as if the trees themselves strained to catch their meaning, while the Wolf watched her with a patient tilt of his head, waiting for her answer, tension flickering in the air. Red's grip tightens on the basket in her arms, chin lifted in quiet defiance as she meets the Wolf's gaze head-on. Red's fingers curled tighter around the basket, her knuckles whitening as the Wolf's gaze bore into her. She refused to flinch, lifting her chin and meeting his eyes with steady resolve. The Wolf's head tilted, his expression unreadable, lingering in the expectant hush between them. Red didn't waver; instead, she spoke with quiet courage, her voice sharp and unwavering. "If you want something from me, say it plain—no riddles, no games." Each word was a challenge, her determination shining through as she stood her ground, refusing to be intimidated by the creature lurking in the shadows of the path. The Wolf lowers his voice, nostrils flaring as he inches closer, eyes glinting with keen interest. The Wolf inched closer, lowering his voice to a near whisper, nostrils flaring as he drew in the mingled scents between them. His eyes glinted with a keen, unsettling interest, their depths reflecting both hunger and something more complicated. He watched her carefully, gaze flicking to the hem of her cloak as he tilted his head, curiosity sharpening the lines of his face. "Very well, Red—I want to know what you're carrying beneath that cloak, and why the scent of iron follows your every step." The words slipped from him smooth as velvet, persuasive and edged with a hint of danger, tension spooling tighter in the silence that followed. Red's hand tightens on the edge of her cloak, her eyes narrowed as she watches the Wolf's reaction, body poised between fight and flight. Red's fingers curled tighter around the edge of her cloak, her knuckles pale against the crimson fabric. She watched the Wolf's gaze, unwavering, as he tracked every subtle shift in her stance. Her heartbeat thudded in her chest—steady, determined, ready to act. With a quiet, brave defiance, she let her words slip between them, her voice low and steady. If he thought she would show him anything, he was welcome to try, but she warned, the iron she carried wasn't just for show. The threat lingered in the air, sharper than the glint of metal at her hip, and she faced the Wolf with narrowed eyes, poised between fight and flight. The Wolf pressed for details about Red's cargo, drawn by the

scent of iron, but Red warned him that the iron was not merely a deterrent.

The encounter ended with Red refusing any alliance, asserting her independence and readiness to defend herself.

The Wolf, amused and intrigued by her boldness and strength, melted into the shadows, leaving Red to hurry onward, senses sharpened by the meeting and her resolve strengthened.

As the woods closed in behind her, Red pressed forward along the winding path, the Wolf's words echoing in her mind. Each step seemed to weigh heavier with the knowledge that she was not alone in the forest, and a new vigilance colored her every movement. Yet as she neared the heart of the trees, the peaceful hush was broken by a sudden summons—one that would set her on an unexpected course and reveal that her journey was far from ordinary.

Chapter 1: Red Receives Her Mission

Red stands beside the table, tying her scarlet cloak, while her mother briskly packs a basket with bread, cheese, a small jar of honey, and chamomile for Grandmother's sleep.

Red gently tightens the knot of her scarlet cloak and glances at the basket, her tone light but her eyes searching her mother's face for reassurance. Red's fingers moved deftly, gently tightening the knot of her scarlet cloak beneath her chin. She stood beside the kitchen table, her gaze lingering on the basket as her mother tucked in a loaf of bread and a sprig of thyme with practiced hands. Red's tone was light, almost playful, but her eyes betrayed a flicker of concern as she glanced from the basket to her mother's face, searching for reassurance.

"Did you remember to pack the chamomile?" she asked, her voice soft amid the rustle of wrapping paper. "Grandmother always says it helps her sleep, especially when the forest owls keep her awake."

Her mother's hands paused for a moment, and Red caught the gentle smile that reassured her, even before the answer came. Red's MotherShe pauses, pressing a gentle hand to Red's shoulder, her eyes clouded with worry. Red's mother paused, her hands stilling over the basket as she pressed a gentle hand to her daughter's shoulder. Worry flickered in her eyes, but her voice remained steady and kind. "Of course, darling," she assured Red, "I tucked it right beside the honey." Her gaze lingered on Red a moment longer, practical and protective. "But remember—stay on the path, and don't talk to strangers, no matter how curious you feel." Red swings the basket over her arm, glancing toward the shadowy edge of the woods with a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation. Red looped the scarlet cloak around her shoulders, fingers nimble as she tied the knot beneath her chin. Beside her, her mother moved briskly, tucking fresh bread and a small jar of honey into the basket. Red watched her with a determined glint in her eyes, then swung the basket over her arm. She glanced toward the shadowy edge of the woods, excitement and nervous anticipation fluttering in her chest. "I promise, Mother," she said, voice steady despite the butterflies, "straight there and straight back—no dawdling, no daydreaming, even if the daisies are blooming." Red demonstrates initiative and eagerness, double-checking the contents and expressing gratitude for her mother's trust.

Her mother places a firm hand on Red's shoulder, reminding her to go straight to Grandmother's, not to stray from the path, and to avoid talking to strangers.

Red gently cradles the basket, her fingers tracing the weave as she looks up with a determined nod. Red accepted the basket with both hands, the rough weave pressing reassuringly beneath her fingers. She met her mother's gaze, her eyes shining with quiet resolve. "Thank you for trusting me with this. I'll take good care of it," she said softly, determination settling over her like a cloak. As she traced the pattern of the worn handle, she promised herself she wouldn't let anything happen to its precious contents. Red reassures her mother with repeated promises of responsibility and care.

Before leaving, Red asks her mother if there is anything more she can do, further showing her willingness to help.

Red straightens her shoulders, offering a determined smile before reaching for the doorknob, her eyes briefly meeting her mother's as if seeking both approval and reassurance. Red straightened her shoulders, drawing in a steadying breath as determination flickered in her eyes. With a small, reassuring smile, she reached for the doorknob, pausing just long enough to meet her mother's gaze. "Don't worry, Mom," she said softly, the promise in her voice firm. "I'll be careful—and I'll get everything done just like you said." Her hand lingered on the cool brass for a heartbeat, as if gathering her courage, before she turned and stepped forward, eager to prove she was ready for the responsibility entrusted to her. Red's MotherShe offers a small, encouraging smile, her eyes lingering on Red with a mix of pride and worry. Red stepped toward the door, her hand already brushing the rough wood, eager to prove herself. Her mother watched her with a gaze that held both pride and worry, lips curving into a small, encouraging smile. "I know you will, sweetheart," she said softly, her voice warm but edged with the weight of experience. Then, as Red glanced back, her mother's expression grew more serious—practical, protective. "Just remember, being responsible means thinking ahead, even when things don't go as planned." Her mother affirms the task: deliver the basket to Grandmother, who is unwell, and trust in Red's responsibility.

Red stands by the kitchen table, glancing at the basket prepared with care, her posture attentive and expectant. Red lingered by the kitchen table, her gaze resting on the carefully packed basket—fresh bread, a jar of honey, a folded napkin embroidered with the initials G.R. Her hands, clasped in front of her, betrayed a quiet anticipation. Brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, she finally broke the morning hush. "Mother, is there something you need me to do today?" she asked, her voice bright with readiness and concern. "I'm ready to help however I can." Red's MotherI gently hand Red the basket, looking her in the eye with both warmth and concern. Red's mother pressed the woven basket gently into her daughter's hands, her fingers lingering for a moment as she met Red's gaze, a blend of warmth and worry in her eyes. "Your grandmother isn't feeling well," she said softly, her voice full of both reassurance and practical concern. "I need you to take this basket of food and treats to her, and I trust you to deliver it safely." The weight of both the basket and her mother's faith settled on Red's arms, a reminder that this errand was as much a gesture of love as it was a responsibility. Red accepts the basket, reassures her mother, and prepares to leave for her grandmother's cottage. Red accepted the woven basket from her mother's hands, feeling its reassuring weight settle against her arm. The aroma of fresh bread and herbs drifted up, mingling with the morning air. She met her mother's worried gaze and offered a steadying smile, her determination shining through. "Of course, Mother—I promise to go straight there and make sure Grandmother gets everything she needs," she said, her voice gentle but unwavering. Adjusting the red cloak around her shoulders, Red gave her mother's hand a quick, reassuring squeeze before turning toward the forest path, resolve guiding her every step as she set off for her grandmother's cottage. Red takes up the basket, feels the weight of her promise,

and steps toward the door with renewed determination, voicing her resolve to fulfill her task for her grandmother, her mother, and herself.

Red steps out of the cottage, pausing at the threshold as the cool morning air brushes her cheeks. She tightens her cloak around her shoulders, takes a steadying breath, and sets off down the winding path, her footsteps leaving faint impressions in the dew. Red lingered on the cottage's threshold, the cool morning air brushing her cheeks and tugging at the edges of her crimson cloak. She drew the fabric tighter, feeling the weight of the promise she'd made settle around her shoulders. The world was waiting just beyond the dew-sparkled stones at her feet, wide and uncertain. There was no turning back now—she would face whatever lay beyond this door, not just for Grandmother, but for herself as well. With a steadying breath, Red stepped forward, her resolve as clear as the faint impressions her footsteps pressed into the wet grass. She crosses the dew-sparkled threshold into the morning, motivated by the desire to prove her maturity and help her loved ones.

With each step into the shadow-dappled forest, Red feels the weight of her promise settle comfortably on her shoulders, unaware that the path ahead holds more than just the familiar calls of birds and the scent of pine. As the woods deepen around her, she senses the beginning of something unforeseen—a shift in the morning air that hints at new encounters and choices she could never have anticipated.

Chapter 5: The Unexpected Alliance

Red stands near the table, her basket in hand, watching the Wolf pace by the hearth.

She offers bread and honey, but with gentler words, expressing a desire for companionship and understanding, not just a transaction.

Red acknowledges the forest's dangers for both herself and the Wolf, and proposes an alliance: the Wolf will help protect Grandmother's cottage from threats, and Red will provide food and secrecy.

Their negotiation reveals mutual caution and wit—Red assures the Wolf her silence is his first payment, emphasizing trust is earned gradually.

Red gently places her basket between them, her gaze warm and inviting as she settles in, ready to start a conversation. Red nodded, stepping a little closer and lowering her basket between them with gentle care. Her eyes held a warm invitation as she settled in beside her companion, the hush of the woods wrapping softly around them. She glanced at the treats nestled inside and offered a quiet smile, her voice thoughtful. It had simply felt right to bridge the space between them—after all, sometimes you needed to be near someone to truly talk. Sharing these small comforts was her way of reaching out, hoping her gesture would ease the distance and open the way for conversation. Red sits down beside her basket, glancing up with a tentative smile. Red hesitated for a moment, then stepped closer, her determination softening into something more tentative as she set her basket gently between them. The woven lid rattled against the ground, but she didn't seem to notice. With a careful glance upward and a small, uncertain smile, she explained her presence. She'd wanted to check on things—to see how everything was going—and maybe, just maybe, offer some company if it was needed today. The Wolf, wary but moved by Red's warmth and lack of immediate expectation, accepts the deal, warning her of potential consequences if the villagers discover him.

Red stands tall at the edge of the clearing, her red cloak bright against the dark green shadows, meeting the Wolf's wary eyes with a steady, challenging gaze. Red stood tall at the edge of the clearing, her red cloak a bold slash against the deep green shadows. Across from her, the Wolf's wary yellow eyes flickered, but she met his gaze without flinching—steady, challenging, unafraid. The scent of pine and damp earth hung between them, as tangible as the tension in the air.

"The forest isn't as safe as it once was," she began, her voice low but unwavering, "not for you, not for me, and certainly not for Grandmother." Red squared her shoulders, compassion and courage mingling in her expression. "I don't want any more trouble, and I have a feeling you don't either." Her words carried a quiet determination, quick-witted as ever; she watched the Wolf for the slightest reaction.

"So here's my offer," she continued, not breaking eye contact. "Help me keep watch over the cottage. Keep the real threats away from us." She let the promise hang there before adding, softer but no less resolute, "And in return, you'll never go hungry. I'll see to that." Her lips curved in a half-smile, a secret pact between unlikely allies. "No one needs to know what we're doing. What do you say?" The Wolf circles Red slowly, eyes narrowed, testing her resolve. With a slow, deliberate gait, the Wolf began to circle Red, his narrowed eyes gleaming with both curiosity and challenge. He watched her, measuring every flicker of uncertainty in her face, every hint of determination. The proposal she offered—guarding Grandmother's cottage from the dangers lurking deeper in the woods—hung in the air between them, audacious and fragile. Pausing just close enough for Red to catch the low rumble of his voice, the Wolf tilted his head, lips curling in a half-smile that was both charming and dangerous. "You'd trust a wolf at your door, just like that?" he asked, the question woven with disbelief and a trace of something softer, an invitation for her to reconsider, or perhaps to prove herself. Red crosses her arms and meets the Wolf's gaze steadily, her stance firm but not hostile. Red crossed her arms, the gesture deliberate—a shield, but not a wall. She met the Wolf's gaze, her eyes unwavering, her voice steady. "Trust is earned, not given," she told him, each word measured yet resolute. "You'll prove yourself, one night at a time." Though her stance was firm, there was no hostility in it, only a clear challenge—and, perhaps, a hint of hope that he would rise to meet it. The Wolf narrows his eyes, testing Red's resolve and searching her face for any sign of bluff. The Wolf narrowed his eyes, his gaze sharp and unblinking as he searched Red's face for any flicker of hesitation, any hint of bluff in her proposal. His tone was velvet-soft, almost teasing, but beneath it lay a keen edge of calculation. "And if I refuse," he murmured, lips curling in a half-smile, "what's to stop you from telling the whole village there's a wolf lurking in the shadows?" The words hung in the air, half threat, half invitation, as he watched for her reaction, probing the boundaries of her resolve. Red folds her arms, chin lifted, watching the Wolf with steady, unflinching eyes. Red folded her arms across her chest, chin lifted with unwavering resolve as she fixed the Wolf with a steady, unflinching gaze. She let the moment stretch between them, her courage a silent shield. "If I wanted the village to come hunting," she said quietly, her voice edged with both warning and promise, "I'd have shouted already—so consider my silence your first night's payment." The words hung in the cool air, her meaning unmistakable: this was a bargain, and she would not be easily swayed. The Wolf narrows his eyes, then slowly extends a massive paw, sealing the pact with a wary, grudging nod. The Wolf narrowed his eyes, studying her with a mixture of suspicion and reluctant admiration. Slowly, almost ceremoniously, he extended a massive paw, the gesture heavy with the weight of old grudges and new possibilities. His voice, low and edged with sly amusement, curled through the hush between them. "Clever girl," he murmured, the words both a warning and a compliment. With a wary, grudging nod, he sealed their pact, but could not resist adding, "You have yourself a deal—but if the villagers ever come

with torches, you'd best hope I'm still on your side." Red assures him tonight is for comfort, and the Wolf, touched, shares tea and bread with her.

Their alliance is forged not only in practical cooperation but also in growing empathy and cautious trust.

The Wolf wraps his large hands around the chipped mug, his claws careful against the porcelain. He doesn't meet her eyes, but the tension in his shoulders eases, just a little, as the steam rises between them. The Wolf wrapped his large hands around the chipped mug, his claws curving carefully so as not to scratch the porcelain. Steam curled between them, softening the lines of his face as he stared into the cup, still refusing to meet her eyes. The tension in his shoulders eased, just a little, as he bowed his head in quiet acceptance. "Thank you, Red," he murmured, his voice low and rough with something like surprise. "It's been a long time since someone offered me a drink without expecting something in return." The words seemed to linger between them, warmer than the tea, and for a fleeting moment, the hunger in his gaze was replaced by something gentler, almost grateful. Red settles into the chair opposite, watching The Wolf's hands as he wraps them around the mug, her gaze careful but not unkind. Red settled into the chair opposite, her posture relaxed yet attentive as she watched The Wolf's hands curl around the chipped mug she'd just filled. The steam rose between them, blurring the sharp edges of his claws, but not her resolve. Her gaze was careful, measuring, but not unkind. "No expectations tonight—just a little warmth, if you'll take it," she said quietly, her voice carrying the gentle certainty of someone who'd learned to offer comfort without strings. The Wolf wraps his hands around the mug, eyes flickering briefly to Red before dropping to the steam rising between them. The Wolf wrapped his hands around the mug, his fingers lingering on the rough ceramic as he bowed his head in acceptance. Red filled the chipped mug with steaming tea and nudged it gently across the table, her eyes meeting his for a moment. He let his gaze flicker up to her—briefly, almost shy—before dropping to watch the swirl of steam between them. "I appreciate that, truly," he murmured, his voice smooth yet edged with caution, as if each word carried more weight than it should. The corners of his mouth curled into a wry smile, and he added with a quiet chuckle, "though old habits make it hard not to wonder what warmth might cost in the end." Red wraps her fingers around her own mug, eyes never quite leaving the Wolf as steam curls between them. Red wrapped her fingers around her own mug, the warmth seeping into her palms as she watched the Wolf across the table, her gaze never quite wavering. Steam curled lazily between them, blurring the lines of his cautious posture and the hunger in his eyes. As she poured the hot tea into a chipped mug and slid it toward him, she spoke quietly, her voice threading through the tension in the air. "Sometimes the cost is only trust—one sip at a time." —————

As the tentative peace settled between Red and the Wolf, the air in the cottage felt changed—thick with cautious hope and the lingering shadows of old fears. Yet outside, the forest held its breath, aware that this fragile alliance was only the beginning. With Grandmother safe but uncertain, and the Wolf's loyalties newly tested, a new urgency stirred beneath the surface. It would not be long before the consequences of their bargain demanded action, propelling them all back into the heart of the woods, where the true race was about to begin.

Chapter 3: Wolf's Race to Grandmother's House

Red hastens along the muddy path toward her grandmother's cottage, warily eyeing the signs of the Wolf's recent presence.

The Wolf emerges, his demeanor conflicted and cautious, no longer intent on ambush but rather drawn by curiosity and a longing for connection.

Meanwhile, a parallel scene unfolds: the Wolf and Grandmother exchange words through her cottage window at dawn.

Their conversation is tense, with Grandmother displaying sharp suspicion and resilience despite her illness, and the Wolf oscillating between charm and ambiguity, hinting at his inner conflict and shifting motivations.

Back on the path, Red is determined to reach her grandmother and remains suspicious of the Wolf, openly stating her distrust but acknowledging their uneasy alliance as they walk side by side.

The Wolf expresses a newfound desire to protect Red, influenced by her bravery and his own loneliness, but insists that his motives are survival rather than friendship.

Both Red and the Wolf agree to proceed together, each maintaining caution and wariness.

The chapter closes with the two navigating the forest together, trust still fragile but a tentative partnership forming.

As Red and the Wolf weave their way through the tangled forest, the uneasy quiet that settles between them is soon broken by the distant sound of footsteps. Unbeknownst to them, another figure is drawing near—someone whose presence will test the limits of their fragile alliance. Just beyond the trees, the woodsman approaches, his arrival poised to shift the balance of trust and danger on the path ahead.

Chapter 6: The Woodsman's Arrival and Decision

Red stands at the threshold, clutching a basket, her shoes caked with mud.

She spots the woodsman striding up, eyes narrowed, scanning the clearing for movement.

The Wolf, fur slick and dark from rain, lingers in the shadow of an oak, tail low but ears perked.

The woodsman halts, lowering his axe and pointing it toward the Wolf, but this time, his attention is divided—he is wary not only of the Wolf but also of a new, unspoken threat.

'Step aside, Red.

Woodsman steps forward, planting himself firmly between Red and the shadowy path, his axe resting on his shoulder but his eyes sharp and scanning the trees. The woodsman stepped forward, planting himself squarely between Red and the shadowy path that twisted deeper into the trees. His axe rested casually across his shoulder, but his eyes swept the undergrowth with a vigilance honed by years of protecting the village from unseen dangers. He fixed Red with a steady, unyielding gaze. "Step aside, Red. This isn't the time for games—there's real danger up ahead, and I won't have you getting in the way." Red plants her feet firmly on the path, refusing to budge, her eyes narrowed in determination. Red planted her feet firmly on the well-trodden path, refusing to budge even as the shadows pressed in around her. Her eyes narrowed with determination, a spark of challenge in their depths. "Danger?" she scoffed, her voice steady and unyielding. "If you think I'm turning back just because you say so, you've got another thing coming." Woodsman

steps forward, eyes scanning the darkening path, blocking Red's way with a protective stance. The woodsman stepped forward, boots crunching softly on the leaf-strewn path. His broad shoulders shifted, forming a solid barrier between Red and the deepening shadows ahead. Eyes narrowed, he scanned the darkness for any sign of movement—ever vigilant, as always. Without taking his gaze from the gloom, his voice rumbled low and steady, edged with impatience. “I don't have time to argue—if you insist on staying, at least follow my lead or we're both likely to regret it.” The words left no room for protest; beneath his gruffness lay an unyielding sense of responsibility, a clear warning shaped by experience and principle. Red narrows her eyes and crosses her arms, but steps closer to the Woodsman, ready to follow his lead—if a bit reluctantly. Red narrowed her eyes, arms crossing tightly over her chest—a small act of defiance she couldn't quite suppress. Still, she stepped closer to the Woodsman, drawn by both unease and a stubborn sense of responsibility. “Fine,” she conceded, her voice edged with resolve, “but don't expect me to just fall in line without knowing what we're up against.” Even as she braced herself to follow his lead, Red's determination flickered in her gaze, making it clear she intended to stay involved every step of the way. Woodsman scans the treeline, axe ready, signaling Red to stay close as they move forward cautiously. The woodsman swept his vigilant gaze along the shadowy treeline, every muscle tensed as he hefted his axe, ready for whatever might emerge. With a curt motion, he signaled for Red to stay close at his side. “Step aside, Red,” he murmured, voice low and steady. “There's a wolf stalking these woods, smarter and hungrier than any I've seen—keep your eyes sharp and your questions for later.” He moved forward with careful precision, every sense attuned to the threat he knew was lurking just beyond the reach of daylight. This isn't the time for games—there's real danger up ahead, and I won't have you getting in the way,’ he says, voice rough.

WoodsmanThe woodsman tightens his grip on his axe, jaw clenched, eyes scanning the shadows between the trees where the wolf might lurk. The woodsman's grip tightened around the worn handle of his axe, his jaw set hard as he peered into the gloom where moonlight tangled with the shadows. He didn't trust the silence—not after all the stories, not after all the blood. That beast's caused enough harm, he thought, voice rough as gravel when he finally spoke. “I can't let it hurt anyone else, Red.” His gaze flicked toward her, then back to the thicket, vigilant for any hint of movement. “Every time it prowls these woods, another family mourns. It ends tonight.” The words hung heavy in the damp air, as much promise as warning, the woodsman's resolve etched into every line of his face. Red grips her cloak tighter, eyes scanning the darkening forest. Red gripped her cloak tighter, the rough wool pressing into her palms as her gaze darted through the shadows deepening beneath the trees. She could still hear the echo of his words—That beast's caused enough harm—rolling through the hush between them. Swallowing, she forced her voice steady, her determination outweighing the tremor in her chest. “I know what it's done,” she said quietly, the memory of claw marks and broken branches fresh in her mind. “But if we go after it, we have to be careful—it's clever, and it won't go down easy.” Her eyes never left the shifting undergrowth, every sense alive with the silent promise of danger, and yet she refused to let fear dictate her next step. WoodsmanHe grips his axe tighter, eyes scanning the darkening tree line for any sign of movement. The woodsman's grip tightened around the worn handle of his axe as he peered into the deepening gloom beneath the trees. Every rustle of brush set his muscles on edge; he'd seen too many innocent lives torn apart by the wolf's hunger to allow another tragedy. His jaw clenched, voice coming out rough and unwavering as he declared into the dusk, “Careful or not, I won't stand by while it preys on the helpless—not anymore.” The conviction in his words echoed through the quiet forest, a promise forged from years of vigilance and hard-won principle. Red grips her cloak tighter, eyes fixed on the darkening tree line, heart pounding with fear and

resolve. Red gripped her cloak tighter, the coarse fabric bunching in her fists as she stared out at the darkening tree line. Her heart hammered in her chest, fear twined with the thread of stubborn resolve that always surfaced when danger threatened those she loved. That beast had caused enough harm already, she reminded herself, glancing briefly at her companion whose voice was rough with warning. Swallowing, Red steadied her breath and spoke, determination sharpening her words, “Then let’s make sure we’re ready, because if we fail, it’s not just us who’ll pay the price.” Red refuses to step aside, insisting she won’t turn back and urging caution.

The woodsman, instead of fixating solely on the Wolf, admits there’s something more dangerous in the woods.

Their conversation reveals that Red made it safely to Grandmother’s house with the Woodsman’s help, and Red questions his motives, learning he was nearby because of Wolf tracks.

Red sits on a wooden stool near Grandmother’s fireplace, her red cloak draped around her shoulders, as she ponders the Woodsman’s timely assistance. Red sat on the creaking wooden stool, the warmth of Grandmother’s fireplace brushing against her cheeks. Her red cloak, still dusted with the memory of the forest’s shadows, draped around her shoulders. She let out a quiet sigh of relief, heart still fluttering from the day’s journey. Gratitude welled up in her chest—she had made it to Grandmother’s house safely. If not for the Woodsman’s timely guidance, she might have wandered in circles beneath the towering trees.

She traced the embroidered edge of her cloak, mind replaying every step through the tangled woods. The Woodsman had appeared just when the path seemed most uncertain, his steady voice and sure footsteps keeping her from losing her way. Red couldn’t help but puzzle over his arrival, so perfectly timed it almost felt planned. Was it simple kindness that brought him to her side, or did he have another reason for being in the forest at just that moment? The questions lingered, unwelcome guests among the comfort of the hearth’s glow, as she gazed into the flickering flames and wondered what secrets the woods still held. Woodsman glances at Red with a gentle smile, then scans the darkening trees as if searching for hidden dangers. The woodsman glanced at Red with a gentle smile, his hands resting easily on the haft of his axe. Yet even as he offered her comfort, his eyes swept the darkening trees, vigilant for the dangers he knew too well. “I was nearby gathering wood,” he explained, his tone steady and fair-minded, “when I heard your footsteps, Red.” He paused, gaze lingering on the shadowed undergrowth as if searching for movement. “I couldn’t let you wander alone—after all, the forest hides more than just fallen branches.” Red glances nervously at the shadows near the trees, clutching her basket tighter. Red glanced nervously at the shifting shadows beneath the trees, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. The memory of the Wolf’s gleaming eyes still sent a chill down her spine, despite the safety of the Woodsman’s presence. Turning to him, her voice soft but edged with lingering fear, she said, “Thank you, Woodsman, for helping me reach Grandmother.” She hesitated, searching his face for reassurance. “But I still feel a shiver when I remember how closely the Wolf was trailing me—did you know he was there before I did?” WoodsmanThe Woodsman glances toward the shadowy trees, axe in hand, eyes watchful for any sign of danger. The woodsman shifted his grip on the axe, eyes narrowed as he scanned the shadowy fringe where the trees pressed close. He hadn’t missed the faint imprints left in the soft earth earlier—the telltale marks of the Wolf. That knowledge had kept him alert, every sense sharpened, and it was the reason he’d lingered so near Little Red. Protecting her had been his only thought, every step calculated to keep danger at bay, even before she’d realized someone watched over her from the gloom. As the tension escalates, Red insists the Wolf isn’t the threat today, warning of another danger lurking.

Red stands firm between Woodsman and The Wolf, her gaze unwavering, subtly signaling urgency and inviting Woodsman to shift his focus. Red planted herself firmly between the Woodsman and the Wolf, her stance unyielding as she met the Woodsman's wary gaze. "He's not the threat today," she said, her voice calm but carrying an edge of urgency. Her eyes flicked subtly, urging the Woodsman to look beyond old grudges. "I know you're used to chasing his shadow, but something else is stirring—something worse. If we keep our eyes locked on him, we'll miss it." Every word was deliberate, her determination radiating as she silently pleaded for him to shift his focus before it was too late. Woodsman grips his axe tighter, eyes flickering warily toward the treeline where The Wolf's silhouette lurks just out of sight. The woodsman's grip tightened around the worn handle of his axe, knuckles blanching as his gaze darted to the shadowy treeline. There, just beyond the reach of dappled sunlight, The Wolf's silhouette lingered—a constant threat, familiar and hated. Years of vigilance had etched suspicion deep into his features, and now, though Red's voice rang steady with conviction, his skepticism wouldn't waver. He kept his eyes fixed on that lurking shape, jaw set, and said, voice rough with disbelief, "You expect me to just ignore the monster I've hunted for years because you feel a shift in the wind?" Red steps closer to the Woodsman, her gaze flicking past him to where The Wolf watches in silence, his eyes sharp and unblinking. Red took a deliberate step closer to the Woodsman, her fingers curling into the edge of her cloak. Behind him, The Wolf lingered at the tree line, silent but watchful, his eyes sharp and unblinking. Red's gaze flicked past the Woodsman to the animal, then back again, her voice unwavering as she said, "I expect you to trust that I see more than shadows, and right now, the real danger is moving while we argue." Determination burned in her eyes, her stance making it clear she would not be swayed by fear or doubt—not when someone she loved was at risk. WoodsmanThe Woodsman narrows his eyes, shifting his grip on the axe as he glances warily at the silent, watchful Wolf lingering just beyond the tree line. The woodsman narrowed his eyes, his grip tightening on the axe handle as he watched the Wolf, who lingered beyond the tree line in unnerving silence. He didn't trust the beast—never had, and it was habit now to keep himself braced for trouble. Yet Red's insistence made him pause, just long enough for suspicion to flicker into curiosity. His voice was low, edged with skepticism as he glanced between Red's trembling hands and the Wolf's unsettling calm. "If you're so sure, Red," he said, nodding toward the still figure in the shadows, "then tell me—what's out there that's worse than the Wolf? And why is he so calm while you're the one trembling?" Red glances toward the treeline, where The Wolf stands silently, eyes narrowed, his usual bravado replaced by something unnervingly cautious. Red's gaze flickered to the treeline, where The Wolf lingered in uneasy silence. His hulking form, usually so threatening, seemed diminished—ears flat, golden eyes narrowed with a wariness she had never seen before. Red squared her shoulders, pushing away the prickle of fear that threatened to rise. He's not the threat today, she told herself, and her voice, unwavering, echoed the certainty in her heart: even the Wolf knows when to hide from what's coming. The Wolf steps from the gloom, eyes reflecting a flicker of fear, his gaze locked not on Red or the Woodsman, but on the darkening trees beyond. The Wolf stepped from the gloom, his sleek form momentarily haloed by a shaft of dying light. His eyes, bright and wary, flickered with something almost like fear—not for Red, nor for the Woodsman, but for whatever might be lurking in the deepening shadows behind them. He lingered at the edge of the clearing, muscles taut beneath his fur, and said nothing. Red, sensing the tension ripple through him, squared her shoulders and spoke with quiet resolve. "The Wolf's silence isn't weakness—it's warning," she said, her voice carrying through the hush that had settled over the forest, as if to remind both friend and foe that sometimes, danger wore more than one face. WoodsmanRed steps between the Woodsman and the Wolf, her gaze fixed on the darkening treeline beyond, her voice trembling with urgency. Red stepped between the Woodsman and the Wolf, her stance

unwavering despite the tremor in her voice. The darkening treeline beyond seemed to draw her gaze, urgency flickering in her eyes. “If we waste another heartbeat on old grudges,” she said, her voice steady now, “whatever’s coming will find us divided—and that, Woodsman, is how we all get devoured.” The words hung between them, as stark and unyielding as the gathering dusk, forcing the Woodsman to weigh his principles against the imminent threat looming in the forest shadows. The woodsman, skeptical, asks for proof, and the Wolf himself finally speaks, his silence a warning of the greater peril.

The group realizes that old grudges must be set aside to face a new, unknown threat together.

The scene ends with the woodsman lowering his axe, agreeing to listen to Red, and the Wolf stepping into the lamplight, united in caution.

As the tension in the room slowly ebbed, a fragile understanding formed among the unlikely trio, each aware that the true test lay ahead. With the woodsman’s axe lowered and the Wolf’s intentions exposed to the flickering lamplight, an uneasy peace settled over them. The old boundaries between friend and foe blurred, replaced by the need to forge a new pact. As the night deepened and the shadows grew longer, all eyes turned to the Wolf, awaiting the promise that would bind them together against the darkness closing in.

Chapter 7: A Promise Sealed with Trust

Red kneels beside Grandmother’s garden, gathering wild mint and yarrow, her basket brushing the dewy grass.

The Wolf approaches, but rather than quietly assisting as before, he initiates a tense exchange with Red.

He presents her with a challenge: to fill a bucket not just with water, but with something valuable—stories, secrets, or something more precious—implying her freedom could be at stake.

Red, demonstrating her bravery and resolve, insists on understanding the Wolf’s motivations before complying.

A subtle negotiation unfolds, with Red asserting her own agency: if her freedom is at stake, she will dictate the terms.

The Wolf acknowledges her stance, warning that her choices influence his mercy or hunger.

The Wolf sets the battered metal bucket at Red’s feet with a deliberate clang, his yellow eyes fixed on her, waiting for her reaction. With a deliberate clang, the Wolf set the battered metal bucket at Red’s feet, the sharp sound echoing between them. His yellow eyes locked onto hers, unblinking, a sly smile flickering at the corners of his muzzle. “There you go, Red,” he said, voice velvet-smooth but edged with intent. “You’re going to fill this bucket for me, one way or another.” The words lingered in the hush of the forest, less a threat than a promise, and he waited, head cocked, hungry for her reaction. Red edges away from the bucket, her eyes flicking warily between it and the Wolf. Red edged away from the bucket, her heart thudding as she watched the Wolf’s movements with wary eyes. The heavy pail landed at her feet with a dull thunk, and she darted a glance from its battered rim to the Wolf’s unreadable face. Uncertainty pricked at her, but

curiosity pushed through her fear. “What do you mean—fill it with what?” she asked, voice steady despite the tremor she could feel in her hands. The Wolf crouches down, his yellow eyes glinting as he nudges the bucket closer, the air thick with unspoken threats. The Wolf crouched low, his fur brushing the damp earth, and nudged the battered bucket closer until it rested at Red’s feet. His yellow eyes glinted, sly and unblinking, as he tilted his head in a gesture almost tender—almost. The air between them pulsed with the silent promise of danger. Voice smooth as river stones, he murmured, “With whatever you can offer, Red—stories, secrets, or something far more precious.” Red clenches her fists at her sides, voice unsteady but determined as she glares up at the Wolf. Red’s fists clenched tightly at her sides, knuckles whitening as she stared up into the Wolf’s cold, unblinking eyes. Though her voice trembled, there was no mistaking the resolve in it as she met his gaze. “I won’t give you anything,” she said, forcing each word past the tightness in her throat, “unless you tell me why you want it.” The bucket sat heavy at her feet, but she refused to look away, drawing herself up with every ounce of courage she could muster. The Wolf leans closer, his eyes never leaving hers, as the wind rattles the leaves overhead. The Wolf leaned closer, the gleam in his eyes fixed entirely on her as the wind rattled the leaves overhead. With a slow, deliberate movement, he set the bucket at Red’s feet—a gesture both courteous and unmistakably predatory. His voice, soft yet edged with something darker, slipped into the hush between them. “Because what you give me, Red,” he murmured, the words lingering like a promise and a threat, “determines whether you walk out of these woods—or whether you stay.” Red grips the handle of the bucket, her knuckles white, eyes locked on the Wolf with wary resolve. Red gripped the handle of the bucket so tightly her knuckles turned white, refusing to let fear show as she stared down the Wolf. He set the bucket at her feet, the gesture deliberate, almost mocking. The woods seemed to hush around them, every bird and breeze waiting for her next move. Red drew a slow breath, summoning the resolve that had carried her through darker moments. If her own freedom was at stake, then she intended to set the terms. “If it’s my freedom you want to bargain with,” she declared, voice steady despite the thudding of her heart, “then I’ll choose what goes in that bucket—and you’ll hear every word of it.” The Wolf crouches low, eyes glinting as he nudges the bucket closer, the air thick with anticipation. The Wolf crouched low, muscles coiled beneath his midnight pelt, eyes glinting with a sly warmth as he nudged the battered bucket closer. The scent of berries and something wilder hung thick in the air between them, charged with unspoken possibilities. With a tilt of his head, he set the bucket at Red’s feet, his voice velvet-soft yet edged with intent. “Fair enough, Red—just remember, every choice you make tips the scales between mercy and hunger.” The words lingered, as if he’d left her with a puzzle only she could solve, his gaze never wavering from her face. Despite the tension, Red recognizes the Wolf’s effort to help and cautiously allows him to participate in preparing herbs, but only under her strict supervision and Grandmother’s watchful eye.

Grandmother, aware of the shift in dynamic, warns the Wolf to behave or she will call for help.

Red offers a small, genuine smile, making eye contact with The Wolf to show sincerity. Red offered a small, genuine smile and met The Wolf’s gaze, holding it just long enough to show she meant every word. She nodded, acknowledging the effort he’d taken—whether out of kindness or necessity, she couldn’t be sure. “I see you went out of your way,” she said softly, her voice threaded with both curiosity and gratitude. “I appreciate that.” The Wolf lowers his head slightly, a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. The Wolf lowered his head, the usual mischief in his gaze softened now by something almost vulnerable. He held Red’s eyes, searching for understanding, and when she nodded, acknowledging his effort, he let out a quiet breath. It wasn’t only hunger or curiosity that had driven him—he wanted her to see it, too. That he was capable of more than trouble. That his

actions hadn't been just for himself; he needed her to notice that he could do good, too. Red offers a small, genuine smile, her posture relaxing as she holds The Wolf's gaze. Red offered a small, genuine smile, her posture finally relaxing as she held the Wolf's gaze. In that quiet moment, she nodded, acknowledging the effort he'd made. "I do notice," she said softly, the words carrying more warmth than she'd intended. "And it means more than you think." The Wolf carefully follows Red's instructions, handing her herbs as directed, and Red continues to watch him closely.

The chapter establishes a higher-stakes, wary cooperation, with trust being tested and negotiated rather than quietly established.

As morning sunlight warmed the garden, Red and the Wolf worked side by side, a fragile trust blooming between them—a promise, sealed not with words, but with the quiet strength of new beginnings.