

# Contents

Chapter 1: Red Receives the Basket and Warning	1
Chapter 2: Entering the Woods and Meeting the Huntsman	2
Chapter 3: Red's Shortcut and the Wolf's Stalking	3
Chapter 4: Wolf Tricks Red with a Riddle	8
Chapter 5: Wolf Arrives at Grandmother's House First	15
Chapter 6: Red Arrives and Senses Something Wrong	17
Chapter 7: Red Confronts the Wolf and Fights Back	19
Chapter 8: The Huntsman's Rescue and Final Showdown	20
Chapter 9: Aftermath and Red's New Resolve	23

## Chapter 1: Red Receives the Basket and Warning

Mother stands by the hearth, ladling steaming broth into a covered basket lined with a checkered cloth.

She glances toward the window, her hands steady as she fastens the lid and tucks in a jar of honey.

Red, wrapped in her scarlet cloak, paces by the door, her boots scuffing the worn floorboards as she peers eagerly outside.

Red asserts her independence, responding to Mother's concerns by insisting she is capable of making the journey alone and that Grandmother needs her help.

Mother, visibly anxious, wipes her hands on her apron and steps between Red and the exit, placing the basket firmly in Red's arms.

She fixes Red with a serious stare and says, 'Promise me you'll stay on the path and come straight home after?'

' She adds further warnings about the mist and the dangers lurking in the woods, wishing Red had waited until daylight.

Red nods impatiently, adjusting the heavy basket in her grasp and glancing toward the forest's shadowy edge, determined to prove herself.

Red lifts her chin, clutching the basket tightly as she steps toward the door, her eyes shining with resolve despite the tremor in her voice. Red lifted her chin, the familiar weight of the basket grounding her as she edged toward the door. Her mother's warning echoed in the quiet room, but Red refused to let it sway her. She gripped the handle tighter, determination burning in her eyes even as her voice wavered. She wasn't a child clinging to her mother's skirt anymore—not after all the times she'd braved the woods alone, not with Grandmother waiting. Red's gaze held steady as she stepped past her mother, resolve shining through her fear. She needed to do this. Grandmother

needed her, and Red was ready—even eager—to help. Mother’s hands hover at Red’s shoulder, her eyes searching Red’s face for reassurance even as she tries to let go. Mother’s hands hovered uncertainly at Red’s shoulder, her fingers twitching as if to pull her daughter back, but she forced herself to let go. Her eyes searched Red’s face, hungry for some sign of reassurance, even as Red gripped the basket more firmly and edged past her. “Oh, Red,” Mother murmured, voice thick with worry, “I only worry because the woods are full of shadows, and not every creature means you well.” The words clung to the air, heavy with memories of past dangers. “Promise me you’ll stay on the path—and come straight home after?” Her tone was gentle but unyielding, a plea wrapped in unbreakable resolve. Mother lingers at the door, watching Red disappear into the mist, then bolts the door behind her, scanning the tree line for movement.

Mother presses her trembling hand to the window pane, eyes searching the shifting fog for any sign of movement, her breath quickening with each passing moment. Red’s mother stood in the doorway, her hands still dusted with flour from the morning’s baking. She reached out, smoothing the edge of Red’s hood as if the gesture might shield her daughter from whatever waited in the forest. “Oh, Red,” she murmured, her voice edged with worry. “Please be careful out there. That mist hides more than shadows.” Her eyes lingered on the swirling gray beyond the garden gate, her caution born from old scars and memories she rarely spoke of. Mother presses her hand to the door, her breath shallow, eyes flickering between the silent trees and the thickening mist. Mother pressed her hand to the door, her breath coming in shallow bursts as she watched Red’s figure dissolve into the gathering mist. Her eyes darted from the silent, brooding trees to the thickening veil that swallowed the path. If only the girl had waited for daylight, she thought, fear prickling along her spine—there were things in those woods that no lantern could keep at bay. With a firm, practiced motion, she slid the bolt home, her heart heavy with worry and memories she dared not name. —————

With her mother’s warnings echoing in her mind, Red stepped beyond the threshold and into the chill of the morning mist, the weight of the basket grounding her resolve. The narrow trail ahead seemed to blur at its edges, the world hushed except for the distant call of crows and the soft crunch of leaves beneath her boots. Each step carried her farther from the safety of home and deeper into the uncertain hush of the forest, where every shadow seemed to watch and every breeze whispered of secrets yet to unfold. As she pressed on, Red’s thoughts wandered uneasily between her grandmother’s illness and the stories that haunted these woods—until a sudden rustle up ahead drew her to a cautious halt.

## Chapter 2: Entering the Woods and Meeting the Huntsman

Red, wrapped in her red cloak and clutching a wicker basket, prepares to enter the forest path.

Her mother grabs her shoulder, reties the loose knot of Red’s cloak, and hands her a linen-wrapped bundle of herbs, reminding her to deliver them directly to Grandmother and avoid lingering.

Red promises not only to be quick, but also demonstrates awareness of potential dangers in the woods, referencing her knowledge of what lurks there.

Mother reties the knot on the linen bundle, tucking it securely into Red’s basket, then presses the basket into Red’s hands with gentle insistence, her eyes full of concern. Muttering about the biting chill that had settled over the morning, Mother retied the knot on the linen bundle, fingers nimble despite the cold. She tucked it securely into Red’s basket, her motions brisk but careful. Pressing

the basket into Red's hands with gentle insistence, she looked her daughter squarely in the eyes, concern etched deep in every line of her face. "Take this bundle of herbs for your grandmother," she said, her voice low and firm. "The air is sharp today, and she'll need them for her cough." Her hands lingered a moment longer on the basket, as if reluctant to let go. "Go straight there, Red, and don't dawdle on the path," she cautioned, worry tightening her tone. "I worry for you in this cold, and it's best not to linger." Red tucks the linen bundle carefully into her basket, glancing up with determination before stepping toward the door. Red tucked the linen bundle carefully into her basket, fingers lingering for a moment on the neatly tied knot. She glanced up, determination flickering in her eyes as she caught her mother's worried gaze. The chill in the air made her shiver, but her resolve remained firm. "I promise, Mother," she said, voice steady yet warm. "I'll walk quickly and bring the herbs straight to Grandmother, without stopping." With a final nod, she stepped toward the door, her red cloak trailing behind, ready to face the familiar dangers of the woods. Mother releases her grip, reassured by Red's determination and caution, then double-checks the locked cottage door and scans the treeline for movement, her worry lingering but assuaged by Red's readiness.

Red glances nervously toward the tangled shadows, clutching her basket a little tighter. She takes a steadying breath and steps forward, determination flickering in her eyes. Red shifted her weight from foot to foot, her gaze flickering warily toward the tangled, whispering shadows at the forest's edge. She clutched her basket a little tighter, as if that small gesture might ward off whatever darkness waited within. Still, she drew a steadying breath and squared her shoulders, a spark of stubborn determination lighting her eyes. She assured herself in a low, urgent murmur that she'd be fast—she had to be. The woods, she knew from experience, were darker than they looked, and she was painfully aware of what lurked between the trees. But her promise stood, firm as ever. She would be quick. Red, motivated by concern both for her grandmother and her family's safety, sets out with resolve and alertness into the shadowy woods.

---

With the huntsman's warning echoing in her mind, Red presses on, her footsteps quickening as she leaves the safety of the main path behind. The trees crowd closer, branches whispering overhead, and every rustle in the undergrowth reminds her of the unseen dangers lurking in the gloom. Unbeknownst to her, as she navigates the twisting shortcut, watchful eyes are already tracking her every move, drawn by the promise of an unsuspecting traveler venturing too deep into the heart of the woods.

## Chapter 3: Red's Shortcut and the Wolf's Stalking

Red clutches her wicker basket, weaving briskly between brambles as she mutters directions under her breath, determined to reach her grandmother faster by taking the overgrown shortcut.

Behind a thick stand of ferns, The Wolf crouches low, nose twitching as he follows the scent of bread and herbs.

He pads silently from shadow to shadow, sharp eyes tracking Red's every footstep.

Suddenly, Red halts at a fork, hesitating.

The Wolf emerges, brushing leaves from his fur, and addresses her in a gravelly, oddly polite voice: 'Lost, little one?

The Wolf emerges from the shadowy undergrowth, brushing leaves from his coarse fur. His yellow eyes linger on her, head tilted in apparent curiosity, though his lips curl in a faint, unsettling smile. The Wolf emerged from the shadowy undergrowth, his hulking shape unsettlingly silent as he brushed a scatter of damp leaves from his coarse fur. His yellow eyes fixed on her, unblinking and cold, though his head tilted with a feigned curiosity that did nothing to soften the predatory edge in his gaze. A faint, unsettling smile curled on his lips as he addressed her, his gravelly voice oddly polite. “Lost, little one? The woods can be unkind to those who wander too far from the path.” The woods twist for those who hurry.

The Wolf’s eyes glint in the dim light, his voice low and steady as he steps closer, blocking the narrow path with his presence. The Wolf’s eyes caught the dim light, reflecting a glimmer of something unreadable as he stepped forward, his bulk filling the narrow path and forcing Red to halt. His voice slid between the trees, low and steady, almost soothing if not for the chill it carried. “Do you, little one?” he murmured, letting the words linger as he surveyed her grip tightening on the basket. The Wolf’s mouth curled into a patient, almost fond smile, and he inclined his head, feigning concern. “The woods have a way of changing when you think you know them best,” he continued, each syllable deliberate, weaving doubt through the hush of leaves. “Every shadow keeps a secret.” Red meets the Wolf’s gaze, her voice steady, though her fingers tremble around the basket handle. Red met the Wolf’s gaze, her eyes steady even as her fingers trembled around the basket’s worn handle. The woods twist for those who hurry, the Wolf had said, a warning curled within his words. She gripped the basket a little tighter, chin lifting in quiet defiance. “If secrets are hiding,” she answered, her voice calm despite the thrum of her heart, “they’ve always kept quiet for me.” The Wolf circles a fallen branch, his eyes glinting as he draws a step closer, lowering his tone to a velvet hush. The Wolf circled a fallen branch with deliberate grace, each pawstep soft as velvet against the moss. His eyes glinted in the half-light, predatory and patient, as he drew a step closer to Red. The hush of his voice seemed to slip beneath the rustle of leaves. “Perhaps,” he murmured, the words curling like smoke, “they’ve only been waiting for the right voice to coax them out.” Red lifts her chin, eyes steady on the Wolf, even as the wind rustles the leaves overhead. Red lifted her chin, meeting the Wolf’s gaze without flinching, even as the restless wind sent a shiver through the tangled branches above. Her fingers tightened around the handle of her basket—a small anchor against the wildness lurking in the shadows. “Then let them listen well,” she said, her voice steady and low. There was no bravado, only certainty. “I don’t scare easily, and I don’t lose my way.” The words settled between them like a promise, stubborn as her heartbeat and just as fierce. The Wolf circles closer, eyes glinting beneath the tangled branches. The Wolf glided through the underbrush, circling closer with deliberate patience, his eyes glinting beneath the tangled branches. Every step seemed measured, calculated—a predator sizing up his prey. With a low, almost silken voice, he offered a crooked smile and murmured, “Bravery is admirable, but even the sure-footed can stumble when the path decides to shift beneath them.” The words hung in the hush of the forest, curling around Red like mist. She gripped her basket tighter, the warning lodging in her chest as the woods seemed to twist and darken, branches shifting in the uncertain light. Red grips her basket tighter, replying that she knows these woods and is visiting her grandmother, but the conversation shifts as the Wolf claims to have seen her grandmother recently, telling Red she is tired and wishes not to be disturbed.

Red clutches her basket a little tighter and peers into the dim light of the cottage, her voice warm but edged with a flicker of uncertainty as she glances at the figure in the bed. Red clutched her basket a little tighter, her knuckles whitening against the woven handle as she peered into the shadowy room. The figure beneath the quilt looked unfamiliar, but she kept her voice as steady

as she could, letting warmth soften the edge of her uncertainty. She took a cautious step closer, her red cloak brushing the floor. "I always come by to check on her," she offered, glancing at the sunken face on the pillow. "Especially when she's not feeling well. She says my visits cheer her up." Red hesitated, searching the figure's eyes for some spark of recognition. "Have you seen her today?" The Wolf smiles thinly, his eyes glinting as he watches Red for any sign of suspicion. The Wolf's smile was a thin, practiced thing, barely stretching the corners of his mouth as his sharp eyes flicked over Red, searching for any hint of suspicion in her gaze. With a tilt of his head, he adopted an air of gentle innocence, as if the forest's shadow had never clung to his fur. "Why, yes," he said smoothly, his voice warm and convincing, "I saw your grandmother not long ago. She seemed rather tired and asked me to let her rest undisturbed for now." The words drifted between them, honeyed and soft, as the Wolf watched her closely, measuring how much she believed. Red shifts her basket nervously from one arm to the other, glancing toward the cottage door with concern. Red shifted her basket from one arm to the other, the woven handle digging into her palm as she glanced uncertainly at the cottage door. Her brow furrowed, concern flickering in her eyes. It was odd—Grandmother usually cherished visitors, even when fatigue weighed heavily on her. Red hesitated, voice tinged with gentle stubbornness as she pressed, "That's strange... she usually loves company, even when she's tired; are you sure she wanted to be left alone?" The Wolf offers a reassuring smile but glances toward the closed bedroom door, subtly positioning himself between Red and the entrance. The Wolf offered Red a reassuring smile, his sharp eyes flicking briefly toward the closed bedroom door as he subtly shifted, placing himself squarely between her and the exit. With a tilt of his head, he managed a look of gentle innocence. "You know how the elderly can be," he murmured, his tone soothing, almost conspiratorial. "Sometimes their moods change so quickly; perhaps she simply needed a moment of peace before greeting you." Red hesitates at the doorway, clutching her basket tighter as she eyes the Wolf with uncertainty. Red lingered at the threshold, fingers tightening around the woven handle of her basket. She glanced at the Wolf, her uncertainty flickering in her eyes before she shifted her gaze toward the dim interior. Of course, it made sense to visit her grandmother—she always did—but today she had come bearing fresh bread and golden honey, a small comfort for an ailing woman. Maybe, she thought, she could slip inside quietly, just a quick peek, so as not to disturb her grandmother's rest. The Wolf pats the edge of the bed invitingly, his eyes glinting as he watches Red hesitate at the doorway. The Wolf patted the edge of the bed, his claws hidden beneath the covers, and watched Red linger uncertainly at the doorway. His eyes glimmered with a predatory patience as he tilted his head, letting an air of innocence soften his voice. "Oh, but wouldn't it be a shame to wake her if she's finally managed to fall asleep?" he murmured, the question wrapped in feigned concern. "Why not sit with me for a moment?" he coaxed, a sly smile curling at the corner of his mouth. "Tell me more about your grandmother's favorite treats—perhaps I could help make her more comfortable." Even as he spoke, his gaze never left Red, measuring every flicker of hesitation, every nervous glance, as if savoring the unfolding game. Red hesitates at the doorway, clutching her basket a little tighter, her curiosity and concern warring with her mother's advice. Red lingered at the threshold, fingers tightening around her basket as she weighed her mother's warning against her own restless curiosity. The Wolf's gaze followed her, his head cocked in a mimicry of innocence that set her nerves on edge. Still, her concern for her grandmother pressed her forward. "Grandmother loves stories while she eats," Red offered, unable to hide the note of pride in her voice. "Sometimes I'll tell her about my walk through the woods—though Mama did warn me not to talk to strangers along the way." Even as she spoke, Red felt the familiar tug-of-war between her impulsive nature and the lessons meant to keep her safe. The Wolf leans in closer, his eyes glinting with curiosity as he gestures invitingly to the seat beside him. The Wolf leaned in, the silver glint in his eyes

sharpened by a mock curiosity. With a graceful, almost courteous gesture, he patted the empty seat beside him, as if inviting her into a harmless confidence. “Oh, but surely I’m no stranger if I’m here looking after your dear grandmother,” he purred, his tone sugared with false innocence. “Why don’t you tell me what else she enjoys, so I can be certain she gets only the best care?” His words wound around her, gentle and persuasive, masking the predatory patience that lingered just beneath his smile. Red hesitates near the door, glancing uncertainly between the Wolf and the silent room beyond, clutching her basket a little tighter. Red lingered on the threshold, her grip tightening around the woven handle of her basket. The Wolf, eyes glinting with calculated innocence, tilted his head as if genuinely pondering her words. “I suppose that’s true,” he mused, the corners of his mouth lifting in a mockery of warmth. “She likes wildflowers by her bedside and warm milk at night; you must be very thoughtful if you’re helping her rest.”

As the words settled between them, Red felt a flicker of pride mingling with her unease. She glanced from the Wolf’s inscrutable gaze to the dim corridor beyond, heart thudding. For all the danger lurking in the forest—and, perhaps, here in the cottage—she could not help but wonder how much the Wolf truly knew about her grandmother’s little comforts, and why he seemed so intent on drawing her deeper inside. The Wolf leans in closer, his eyes glinting with curiosity as he tries to gather more about Grandmother’s habits. The Wolf leaned in, his sharp eyes catching the dim light as he drew just a fraction closer, his posture one of gentle curiosity. With a tilt of his head and a disarming smile, he carefully masked the predatory edge in his voice. “Of course, my dear, I only wish to ensure your grandmother’s utmost comfort,” he murmured, each word wrapped in feigned concern. “Tell me—does she often have visitors, or is it usually just you who comes by?” His gaze lingered, watchful and intent, as if the answer were nothing more than a passing interest, though beneath the surface, every syllable was calculated. Red clutches her basket a little tighter, glancing toward the bedroom door with a hint of uncertainty. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, the woven reeds creaking quietly beneath her grip. She cast a wary glance toward the bedroom door, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. “It’s mostly just me,” she admitted, her voice quiet but steady as she met the Wolf’s gaze. “Mama says it’s safer that way, since the woods can be dangerous for strangers.” The WolfHe subtly shifts closer, casting a shadow over Red’s basket as if sizing up its contents. The Wolf edged closer, the faintest hint of a smile curling at the corners of his mouth as his shadow crept over Red’s basket. His eyes lingered on her, just a heartbeat too long, their depths unreadable. Tilting his head in a display of feigned innocence, he let his words slip out softly, almost admiringly. “Such devotion,” he murmured, the compliment laced with something darker beneath its surface. “Your grandmother is very fortunate to have you all to herself.” RedShe hesitates at the threshold, peering past the Wolf toward the shadowed bedroom, a flicker of doubt crossing her face as the Wolf steps subtly between her and the door. Red lingered at the doorway, the woven basket pressed close against her chest, its weight suddenly more noticeable. She offered the Wolf a hesitant smile—one that didn’t quite reach her eyes—her fingers tightening around the handle as she managed, “Thank you, I just want her to be safe and happy, that’s all.” The words slipped out, earnest and unguarded, revealing the anxious hope that had carried her through the twisting forest and now held her steady at the threshold of her grandmother’s shadowed room. The WolfRed hesitates, glancing toward the bedroom door, her fingers fidgeting nervously with the handle of her basket. Red hesitated at the threshold, her fingers fussing nervously with the handle of her basket as she glanced toward the bedroom door. The Wolf, ever patient, tilted his head and let a gentle, coaxing note slip into his voice. “And you always come at the same time, don’t you?” he murmured, leaning in just enough to feel her discomfort. “That way your grandmother knows exactly when to expect you.” His words, so

innocently phrased, seemed to settle over Red like a silken trap, inviting her trust even as his eyes never quite lost their predatory gleam. Red glances toward the cottage door, her grip on the basket tightening as unease flickers across her face. Red's fingers tightened around the handle of her basket as she cast an uncertain glance at the cottage door. The Wolf's gaze lingered on her, his voice honey-sweet with false innocence as he inquired about her visit. Red hesitated for only a heartbeat before answering, her tone steady despite the flicker of unease in her eyes. She explained that she always came in the afternoon, just as she was now, so her grandmother wouldn't worry—after all, it had become their little routine. The Wolf folds his paws neatly, masking his anticipation as he watches Red for any sign of suspicion. The Wolf folded his paws with deliberate care, his posture the very picture of patient civility as he watched Red for the faintest flicker of suspicion. His grin stretched wider, lips curling to expose a hint of teeth, while his gaze lingered with a glint of secret hunger. "How thoughtful," he remarked, letting the words roll out smoothly, as if genuinely impressed. "Routines do make it easy to look after those we care about, don't they?" The question hung in the air, innocuous on its surface, yet laden with a subtle probing—an invitation for trust, even as he masked his anticipation beneath a veneer of innocent curiosity. Red shifts her weight anxiously, debating whether to trust the Wolf or check on her grandmother herself. Red shifted her weight from foot to foot, eyes flicking uncertainly toward the bedroom door. Her fingers toyed absently with the edge of her red cloak, betraying her anxiety. Despite the Wolf's smooth reassurances, doubt gnawed at her. She just hoped Grandmother was truly resting, not feeling worse than usual. The thought tugged at her stubborn streak—maybe she should check for herself, just to be sure. The Wolf rises smoothly, blocking Red's view of the bedroom as he gestures invitingly, his posture both reassuring and subtly obstructive. The Wolf rose in one fluid motion, his broad frame effortlessly eclipsing Red's view of the bedroom door. With a practiced gesture, he beckoned her forward—yet his body remained a subtle barrier, reassuring and disarming all at once. Tilting his head in a display of innocent concern, he let his voice slip into a silky register, the very picture of considerate hospitality. "Perhaps," he suggested, as if the idea had just occurred to him, "you should let me check on her first, just to be certain she's well enough for visitors." Red takes a tentative step toward the bedroom door, her wary eyes flicking from the Wolf to the quiet room beyond. Red lingered at the threshold, her fingers whitening around the wicker handle of her basket. The Wolf's head cocked in exaggerated innocence, but a prickle of unease crawled down her spine. She swallowed, forcing her voice to remain steady despite the tremor in her chest. "Thank you," she said, eyes fixed on the dim sliver of her grandmother's room, "but I think I'd feel better if I checked on her myself—just for a moment." With that, she edged forward, every muscle taut with wary determination. The Wolf steps subtly between Red and the door, his shadow falling across the threshold as he gestures for her to wait. The Wolf's eyes narrowed, the shadows deepening around his lupine features as he leaned in, his voice dripping with honeyed concern. "Of course," he murmured, each word carefully measured, "but do be careful not to startle her." He let the warning linger in the air, his gaze unwavering, as if savoring the effect. "After all," he added, almost as an afterthought, "sudden surprises can be so... unsettling." Red inches closer to the bedroom, her eyes flickering uncertainly between the Wolf and the threshold, tension mounting in the small, shadowed room. Red hovered at the threshold, the hem of her red cloak brushing the worn floorboards. Her gaze darted from the Wolf's narrowed eyes to the dim room beyond, uncertainty flickering across her face. Swallowing her fear, she edged closer, her words barely more than a whisper as she tried to steady her voice. She promised, "I'll be very quiet," each syllable colored by a fragile determination, her hand tightening around the basket as if it could shield her from the tension coiling through the shadowed room. Red is suspicious but is coaxed into a longer conversation in which the Wolf presses for details about her routine, her

grandmother's habits, and the safety of her visits.

The Wolf steps closer, his eyes glinting with sly confidence, gesturing invitingly toward a shadowy trail that disappears into the thicket. The Wolf glided a step closer, his eyes narrowing with sly confidence as he extended a paw toward a shadowy trail curling into the thicket. His voice slid through the hush of the forest, low and persuasive. Perhaps he could show a quicker way, he suggested, his words heavy with insinuation. The woods, he murmured, were tangled with winding paths, but he alone knew shortcuts others would never dare to take. Trust him, he urged with a coaxing smile—if reaching the destination before nightfall was truly the goal, then his route was their best chance. Red reveals she is usually the only visitor and her visits are routine.

The Wolf feigns concern and tries to persuade Red to let him check on the grandmother first, but Red insists on going herself.

The Wolf, seeing Red's stubbornness, offers a shortcut again, but Red remains wary.

The Wolf circles ahead, intent on reaching the cottage before Red, armed with new information about her habits and their vulnerability.

---

As Red presses on through the tangled shortcut, the woods seem to close in around her, every snapping twig and shifting shadow heightening her unease. Meanwhile, the wolf, now armed with knowledge of Red's routine and her grandmother's frailty, slips silently ahead, intent on reaching the cottage first. Yet, as Red approaches a fork in the path, she finds the wolf waiting, no longer hiding but eager to engage her in a new way—one that promises confusion and delay. With the cottage drawing near, a cunning challenge emerges, setting the stage for a dangerous game of wits between girl and predator.

## Chapter 4: Wolf Tricks Red with a Riddle

Red, gripping the basket tight and stepping over slick roots, quickens her pace toward Grandmother's cottage.

She halts as a low growl emerges from the underbrush, and The Wolf steps into her path, tail swishing and nose twitching at the scent of bread and herbs.

The Wolf, eyes glinting, blocks the way and tilts his head.

He proposes a riddle, promising to let Red pass if she answers correctly.

The Wolf narrows his eyes, blocking Red's path and awaiting her reply. The Wolf stepped smoothly into Red's path, his shadow stretching across the forest floor, eyes glinting with cunning interest as he regarded her. He lingered there, a barrier of fur and teeth, the air thick with the scent of danger and damp leaves. With a voice as silky as velvet, he laid out his terms, patient and predatory, "Here are the rules, little Red: answer my riddle and you may walk freely." His gaze sharpened, a sly smile curling at the edges of his mouth as he let the threat hang between them. "But fail—well, let's just say your journey ends here." He paused, savoring the tension, awaiting her reply. "Do you accept my challenge?" Red stands tall, determination flickering in her eyes as she grips her basket tightly. Red squared her shoulders, her small hands tightening around the worn handle of her basket. Determination glimmered in her eyes—bold, unwavering—as she faced the Wolf



barring her path. If this was the only way through the tangled, shadowed woods, then so be it. Ignoring the unease coiling in her stomach, Red met the creature's gaze and declared, her voice steady with resolve, that she accepted his challenge. The Wolf circles Red slowly, his eyes gleaming as he prepares to speak the riddle. The Wolf moved with deliberate slowness, circling Red as if savoring the tension in the air. His eyes gleamed with a predatory light, each step measured and silent on the mossy forest floor. Pausing just long enough to let the silence stretch, he fixed her with a gaze that was both inviting and menacing. "Very well, Red—listen closely," he purred, his voice silky with menace, "for the stakes are your freedom and your fate." The Wolf lowers his head, eyes gleaming, as the forest seems to hush in anticipation. The Wolf lowered his massive head, fur bristling as his amber eyes glinted with an unsettling intelligence. Around them, the forest seemed to hush, the usual chorus of birds and insects stilled by his presence. A sly smile curled his lips as he regarded Red, savoring her tension. "The riddle I pose is one that has tangled many minds before you," he murmured, his voice a velvet threat in the silence. "So prepare yourself, Red." The Wolf circles Red slowly, his eyes glinting with anticipation, savoring the tension in the air. The Wolf moved in a slow, deliberate circle around Red, his powerful shoulders shifting beneath the dark, bristling fur. Each step was measured, predatory, and his yellow eyes never left her face. As he drew closer, anticipation flickered in his gaze—a cold, patient delight in the game he was about to play. He lowered his head, voice curling out like smoke, and murmured, "Should you answer incorrectly, I won't be so merciful as to let you wander back the way you came." The words hung in the tense air, a promise sharpened by the glint of his teeth, and Red could feel the weight of the threat coil around her, as tangible as the Wolf's circling presence. The Wolf leans in, his golden eyes gleaming, as the forest around them falls eerily silent. The Wolf leaned in, his muzzle almost brushing Red's shoulder, golden eyes gleaming with a hungry intelligence. The hush of the forest pressed in, thick and expectant, as if the trees themselves were holding their breath. His voice slithered out, low and velvety, weaving through the silence: "Steady your nerves and sharpen your wits," he murmured, each word a quiet threat. "For once the riddle is spoken, there will be no turning back." The Wolf leans forward, eyes gleaming, lips curled in a sly smile, awaiting Red's final confirmation. The Wolf leaned forward, his yellow eyes catching the dappled sunlight, lips curling into a sly, predatory smile. He let the silence stretch, savoring the tension in the air as he watched Red's uncertain gaze. "Are you certain you're ready, Red?" he murmured at last, his voice as smooth and dangerous as a blade in velvet. "For the path ahead vanishes if my riddle defeats you." The words slipped out like a challenge, each syllable weighted with the promise of danger, as he hovered between patience and hunger, waiting for her final confirmation. Red squares her shoulders and meets the Wolf's eyes, determination flickering in her gaze. Red squared her shoulders, refusing to let the tremor in her chest reach her voice. She met the Wolf's golden eyes head-on, the flicker of determination burning brighter within her gaze. "I'm ready, Wolf," she told him, steady and unflinching. "Ask your riddle, and let's see whose wits are sharper tonight." Red, stubborn and curious, pauses, brushes mud from her cloak, and listens as The Wolf recites his riddle with deliberate pauses: 'What has teeth but cannot bite?'

Red narrows her eyes, clutching her basket a little tighter. She takes a cautious step back, glancing at the shadows flickering behind the Wolf, her voice trembling with a mix of challenge and uncertainty. Red narrowed her eyes, the familiar weight of her basket grounding her as she tightened her grip. A cautious step back pressed her heel into the damp earth, mud clinging stubbornly to the hem of her red cloak as she brushed it away with one quick, impatient swipe. Shadows flickered behind the Wolf, their shapes uncertain, and Red felt her heart thump with both fear and something sharper—a stubborn, reckless curiosity. Her voice, trembling but defiant, broke

the tense silence: was this all just a performance? Teeth, but no bite—was the Wolf simply toying with her, or did he mean to frighten her into fleeing? Red’s words, edged with both challenge and uncertainty, hung between them as she stared him down, unwilling to be cowed. The Wolf circles closer, eyes glinting, his voice low and measured, watching Red’s reaction intently. The Wolf moved in slow, deliberate arcs, circling ever closer, his gaze never leaving Red. His eyes caught the waning light, glinting with a predatory patience as he watched every flicker of her expression. Red, stubborn as ever, hesitated only to brush a smear of mud from her cloak, her curiosity holding her fast instead of fear. The Wolf’s voice slipped into the hush between them, low and measured, each word carefully chosen, “Games and fear are cousins, Red—sometimes, the prize is knowing who walks away hungry.” The truth of his words seemed to ripple through the air, making her chest tighten with something she could not yet name. Red narrows her eyes, fingers tightening around the basket’s handle as she leans forward, voice steady but trembling at the edges. Red paused at the edge of the tangled path, stubbornly brushing mud from the hem of her red cloak. The basket’s handle bit into her palm as she tightened her grip, narrowing her eyes at the looming figure before her. Though her voice was steady, a faint tremor betrayed the tension swirling inside her as she leaned forward, not backing down. “If it’s a prize you want, Wolf,” she said, determination flaring in her gaze, “then tell me—what do I lose if I answer wrong?” The Wolf’s eyes glint in the dusky light, his voice curling around the words like a promise and a warning. Red paused on the tangled path, stubborn curiosity flickering in her eyes as she brushed a smear of mud from her cloak. The Wolf watched her with a patient intensity, eyes glinting in the fading light. His voice slipped through the dusk, smooth as silk, curling around her like the mist that crept between the trees. “Your path, Red—every step you take from here could belong to me.” The words lingered, half warning, half promise, as his gaze measured her resolve, waiting for the moment she might falter. Red narrows her eyes, tightening her grip on the basket, her voice steady but her heart pounding as she stands her ground. Red narrowed her eyes, the forest’s shadowy hush pressing in around her. She tightened her grip on the basket, feeling the rough weave against her palm as her heart hammered in her chest. Mud clung stubbornly to the hem of her cloak, but she brushed it away with a swift, impatient motion, refusing to let discomfort distract her. The Wolf’s words echoed, low and dangerous, but she stood her ground, curious despite the tremor beneath her steady voice. If she wanted to avoid getting lost to him, she thought, she’d have to choose her steps—and her answers—very carefully. The Wolf’s eyes glint as he circles, his voice a low rumble that trembles the air between them. The Wolf’s eyes glinted with a predatory sheen as he circled closer, each step measured, his presence both a warning and an invitation. Red, stubborn as ever, paused to brush a smear of mud from her cloak, her gaze unwavering as she met his. The Wolf’s voice rumbled low, the sound curling through the hush of the woods and settling somewhere deep in Red’s chest. “But we both know, Red,” he murmured, his grin sharp, “that it’s not the teeth you should fear—it’s what waits in the shadows behind the grin.” ’ Red frowns, tapping her chin, and guesses ’a comb.

Red frowns, tapping her chin thoughtfully as she voices her uncertain guess. Red tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her eyes as she reached out with tentative fingers. The object in her hand was lighter than she expected, its shape unfamiliar yet oddly intriguing. She turned it over, studying the glint of metal and the pattern of its teeth, then mused aloud, voice soft but laced with stubborn certainty, “Hmm. Is it... a comb?” ’ The Wolf grins, pretends to be impressed, then slyly offers a second riddle, inching closer and sniffing the basket.

The Wolf grins, exposing sharp teeth beneath his lips as he edges closer, nostrils flaring, sniffing the air above Red’s basket. His eyes flicker with sly amusement, but there’s a predatory glint beneath

the charm. The Wolf's eyes glinted with sly amusement as he circled Red, his voice curling through the shadows like smoke. "My, my, what a clever little thing you are, Red." He licked his lips, a slow, deliberate gesture that suggested hunger of more than one kind. "I must say, your answer has left me quite... ravenous for more." He leaned in, the faintest hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth, as if savoring a secret only he understood. "But tell me," he continued softly, his gaze never wavering from hers, "can your wits keep pace with a second challenge? Or are you only clever with words, and not with secrets?" The Wolf's tone was both invitation and threat, his patience that of a predator certain his quarry had nowhere left to run. Red tightens her grip on the basket, taking a small step back as the Wolf leans in, eyes glinting with cunning curiosity. Red's fingers tightened around the wicker handle, knuckles paling as she instinctively stepped back. The Wolf leaned in, his grin wide and eyes glinting with a sly, unsettling curiosity. She met his gaze, chin lifted despite her racing heart. Secrets are best kept in the right company, she thought, and she let the words slip out with a confident tilt of her head. "Secrets are best kept in the right company, Mr. Wolf," she told him, her voice steady even as she edged her basket away from his probing stare. "But I suppose I can play along—if you promise to keep your snout out of my basket." The Wolf leans in, nostrils flaring as he inhales deeply near Red's basket, his gaze flickering between her face and the bundle she clutches. The Wolf leaned in, nostrils flaring, drawing in the mingled scents of damp moss, morning air, and something more elusive—something tucked away in the basket Red clutched so tightly. His gaze flickered between her anxious face and the bundle, a sly grin curling his lips as he feigned admiration. "Ah, but secrets," he mused, his tone sliding effortlessly into a purr of temptation, "they have a scent all their own. My snout can't help but follow where temptation leads." Inch by deliberate inch, he edged closer, his breath warm and unsettling. Then, with a glint of mischief sharpening his eyes, he offered another riddle, his voice smooth as velvet. "Now, for your second challenge: What lies beneath the skin, yet hides from the eye, growing stronger with every lie?" Red grips the basket tighter, eyes narrowing as the Wolf's nose hovers dangerously close, her voice steady but her stance shifting subtly backward. Red's fingers tightened around the basket's handle as the Wolf's nose hovered dangerously close, his grin widening with feigned admiration. She held her ground, though her feet shifted ever so slightly backward, refusing to let him see any hint of fear. Her eyes narrowed, stubborn and unyielding. "If it's truth you seek, Mr. Wolf," she said, her voice steady despite the tension coiling within her, "you'll find my basket holds none for you—perhaps it's the heart that swells with secrets best left unspoken?" The words slipped out, sharp and sure, as she watched the Wolf inch a little closer, his next riddle already curling on his tongue. The Wolf leans in, nostrils flaring as he inhales the basket's aroma, his shadow stretching over Red's shoes. The Wolf leaned in, nostrils flaring as he drew in the sweet, earthy scent rising from the basket. His shadow stretched, long and predatory, across Red's small shoes. With a grin that was all teeth and cunning, he pretended to be impressed by her answer. "Ah, the heart—so delicate, so easily bruised," he murmured, voice velvet-soft yet edged with danger. "Yet your answer reveals more than you intend, Red." As he spoke, he inched closer, sly amusement flickering in his eyes, ready to offer another riddle, weaving his words like a silken trap. Red grips the basket tighter, taking a subtle step back while eyeing the Wolf's creeping advance. Red's fingers tightened around the basket's handle as she watched the Wolf's sly advance, his grin stretching wider with feigned admiration. She took a subtle step back, her heart thudding against her ribs—a warning she refused to ignore. Still, she kept her chin lifted and met his gleaming gaze, voice steady with the stubborn bravery she was known for. "Careful, Mr. Wolf," she said, not flinching from his looming presence, "sometimes a bruised heart is sharper than teeth." The Wolf grins wider, inching even closer, nostrils flaring as he inhales the basket's scent, his gaze lingering on Red with hungry calculation. The Wolf's grin stretched even

wider, teeth flashing beneath the dappled light as he leaned in, his nostrils flaring to draw in the basket's aroma—a mingling of sweet bread, ripe fruit, and something else he found tantalizing. His gaze lingered on Red, hungry and calculating, as if measuring her fragility. With a voice smooth as velvet, he feigned admiration, then let his words curl slyly in the air: “Sharp words from a sharper tongue,” he mused, the compliment edged with mockery. His eyes flicked to the basket, then back to her. “Yet I wonder,” he continued, inching even closer, “does your basket hide more than your heart dares reveal?” The question hung between them, thick with implication, as the Wolf watched for the smallest flicker of doubt in Red's eyes. Red tightens her grip on the basket, edging it protectively behind her as she locks eyes with the Wolf, her stance unyielding despite his looming presence. Red tightened her grip on the basket, instinctively edging it behind her as the Wolf's shadow stretched across the mossy ground. She met his gaze, stubborn and unflinching, refusing to let him see even a flicker of fear. The Wolf's grin widened, feigning admiration as he crept closer, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “Maybe it does,” Red shot back, voice steady despite the thudding of her heart. “But you'll have to mind your step—some secrets bite back harder than wolves.” Her words hung in the air, defiant and daring, a warning delivered with the fierce compassion that always seemed to get her into trouble. The Wolf edges even closer, nostrils flaring as he inhales the basket's scent, his gaze lingering hungrily on Red's guarded arms. The Wolf edged closer, nostrils flaring as he drew in the scent of Red's basket, his gaze lingering hungrily on the girl's guarded arms. A sly grin curled his lips—one that feigned admiration for her caution, though his eyes glinted with something far more calculating. “Now, now,” he murmured, voice low and velvety, almost soothing despite the threat beneath it. “No need for bared teeth—I'd never bite the hand that feeds me riddles.” His tone danced between mockery and promise as he inched even nearer, letting his curiosity show just enough to unsettle her. “But you know,” he added, with a patient tilt of his head, “curiosity does make a wolf bold.” Red tightens her grip on the basket, eyes never leaving the Wolf as she takes a careful step back, her posture wary but unyielding. Red's fingers tightened around the wicker handle, her knuckles pale against the woven reeds. She took a measured step back, never allowing her eyes to stray from the Wolf's sly grin, her own expression steadfast despite the tremor of wariness in her chest. The Wolf's sharp gaze seemed to dance with secrets as he inched closer, offering another riddle with mock admiration. Red's voice came low but unwavering, her words threaded with both caution and defiance. Boldness, she reminded him, could be a dangerous game—especially for those who hadn't bothered to peer into the shadows at the bottom of her basket. The Wolf leans in closer, nostrils flaring as he takes a slow, deliberate sniff, his yellow eyes glinting with sly intent. The Wolf leaned in, his snout hovering dangerously close as he drew in a long, deliberate breath, nostrils flaring to catch every trembling note of fear and innocence. His yellow eyes glittered with sly intent as his lips curled into what might have passed for a friendly grin. Feigning admiration, he let a low, silken chuckle slip from his throat and, inching ever nearer, murmured, “Then perhaps it's time I discover if your basket's secrets taste as sweet as your riddles, Red.” Red shifts the basket protectively to her other arm, her eyes narrowing as she plants her feet, watching the Wolf inch forward with a cautious defiance. Red shifted the basket to her other arm, the woven handle digging into her palm as she planted her feet with stubborn resolve. Her eyes narrowed, never leaving the Wolf's sly, glinting gaze as he crept a step closer, feigning admiration before offering another riddle. She tipped her chin up, voice steady despite the thrum of nerves in her chest. If the Wolf thought she'd be easy prey, he'd soon learn otherwise. “Step any closer and you might just find the bottom of this basket isn't as empty as you hope, Mr. Wolf,” she warned, her tone sharp with a mix of challenge and compassion—protective not only of herself but of whatever hope she carried for her grandmother. Red, motivated by urgency, engages in a wary, verbally sparring exchange with The Wolf, refusing

to reveal the true contents or her purpose.

Red clutches the basket tightly, glancing down the path with anxious impatience, eager to continue on her way. Red's fingers curled tighter around the basket as her gaze darted anxiously down the winding forest path. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, impatience flickering across her face. The urgency in her chest pressed her onward—Grandmother depended on her, and she'd given her word to arrive before midday. "I really can't stay and chat," she blurted, her voice clipped and earnest, each word propelled by the promise she'd made and the worry gnawing at her heart. The basket's weight seemed heavier with every moment lost, but The Wolf lingered, quick to block her way and distract her further. The Wolf leans in closer, voice gentle and curious, blocking Red's path ever so slightly with his large paw. The Wolf leaned in, his massive paw settling across the narrow path so subtly that Red barely noticed she was hemmed in. With a voice as soft and curious as a gentle breeze, he coaxed her, "Of course, dear child... but surely your grandmother wouldn't mind if you told me—just briefly—how you find your way through such a tangled forest." His amber eyes glimmered with feigned innocence as he tilted his head, appearing interested. "Is it a winding path you follow, or do you take the old stone bridge?" he asked, each word dripping with patient intent, drawing her attention away from her urgent errand and deeper into conversation. Red shifts her weight anxiously, gripping the basket tighter and glancing toward the path, her feet already edging away from the Wolf. Red shifted her weight from foot to foot, fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. Her eyes flickered toward the path ahead, every muscle in her body coiled with urgency. "It's really quite simple," she said, her words tumbling out as if speaking them might push her feet forward, "I just follow the main path straight ahead." Already, her toes edged toward the sun-dappled trail, impatience prickling under her skin. She shot a pleading glance at the Wolf, voice low and hurried. "But I truly must hurry before the sun climbs too high." The Wolf tilts his head, feigning innocent curiosity while edging closer to Red, eyes glinting with sly intent. The Wolf tilted his head, an air of innocent curiosity draped across his features as he crept a little closer to Red. His eyes, however, glinted with something far less benign. "Isn't there a fork just past the old willow tree, dear?" he mused, voice honeyed and inviting. "Do you turn left toward the clearing, or right where the wildflowers bloom?" Even as he spoke, he maneuvered to block her path, intent on keeping her attention fixed on him and away from her urgent destination. Red clutches her basket tighter and steps anxiously toward the path, glancing over her shoulder with impatience. Red's fingers tightened around the handle of her basket as she stepped anxiously onto the narrow path, the urgency in her movements unmistakable. She shot a quick, impatient glance over her shoulder, her red cloak swirling at her heels. "It's left at the willow," she said, her words tumbling out fast—almost as if she hoped the answer alone might hurry her feet. That landmark was easy to remember, a detail she clung to with stubborn certainty. But even as she spoke, her gaze drifted ahead, restless and uneasy. "Please, I can't delay any longer," she added, voice trembling with the weight of worry for her grandmother and the prickling sense that every moment lost mattered. The Wolf maneuvers to distract her further, intent on learning the cottage's location.

Red tightens her grip on her basket, her jaw set. She tries to step around the Wolf, eyes narrowed, refusing to meet his gaze, her body tense with both fear and resolve. Red tightened her grip on the basket, knuckles pale beneath the worn handle, and set her jaw with a stubborn determination that had gotten her into trouble before. She refused to meet the Wolf's gaze, her narrowed eyes fixed instead on the tangle of roots at his feet as she tried to edge past him. Fear coiled in her stomach, but she forced her voice steady, unwilling to let it show. She kept her words curt, clipped—"I told you, I'm just out for a walk—and that's all you need to know." She squared her shoulders, every

line of her body tense with resolve. “Now, please let me through. My grandmother is waiting for me, and I’m not about to let anyone or anything get in my way.” The Wolf leans in closer, blocking the narrow path with his hulking frame, his eyes narrowing with growing suspicion as he studies Red’s determined face. The Wolf inched closer, his massive form eclipsing what little sunlight filtered through the trees, effectively sealing off the narrow path. His eyes, sharp and glinting with suspicion, roamed over Red’s taut posture and clenched jaw. There was a sly curl to his lips as he studied her, as if savoring the scent of her fear. “Ah,” he murmured, letting his words coil through the air as smoothly as smoke, “but it seems to me you’re hiding something far more interesting than a simple basket of bread—why so defensive, Red?” Red tightens her grip on the basket and squares her shoulders, standing her ground as her eyes flash with resolve. Red’s fingers tightened around the handle of her basket, knuckles whitening as she squared her shoulders and refused to back down. Frustration burned in her chest, but it only strengthened her determination. Her eyes flashed with hard resolve as she fixed her gaze ahead. Whatever they thought they knew, it had nothing to do with them—she would not let anyone stand in her way. “It’s none of your business,” she insisted, voice firm. “Move aside, or I’ll find another path.” The Wolf narrows his eyes and steps closer, blocking the path entirely, his tone sharpening as suspicion mounts. The Wolf’s eyes narrowed to calculating slits as he glided forward, his hulking form eclipsing the narrow path through the twisted trees. There was no mistaking the shift in his demeanor; suspicion sharpened his voice to a predatory edge. “Really now, Red?” he purred, every syllable a subtle threat. “You expect me to believe you’d risk these dark woods for mere bread and tea?” The words coiled in the air between them, heavy with doubt as he leaned in, senses prickling for any hint of a lie. “What are you truly carrying that’s worth defying a wolf?” Red tightens her grip on the basket and squares her shoulders, her eyes blazing with determination as she steps forward, refusing to back down. Red’s knuckles whitened around the basket’s handle as she planted her feet, chin lifting with unmistakable defiance. Frustration simmered beneath her resolve, but she refused to let it show as she met her interrogator’s gaze head-on. Let them believe whatever they wanted, she thought fiercely—she would not be bullied into betraying the woman who depended on her. Her grandmother’s trust was not something she would break, not for intimidation or threats, not for anything. Red squared her shoulders, eyes alight with determination. She would not fail her. The Wolf narrows his eyes, stepping closer to block the narrow path, his voice low and insistent. The Wolf narrowed his eyes, calculating, each step forward shrinking the space between them until his bulky frame blocked the narrow forest path. His voice slithered out, low and insistent, as he watched Red’s rigid stance and the way her fists clenched at her sides. “Trust is a fragile thing, Red—are you sure your secrets won’t shatter it?” The words hung between them, heavy with unspoken threats, as he waited, patient and predatory, for her resolve to crack. Red tightens her grip on the basket, eyes flashing with defiance as she edges sideways, searching for any gap past the Wolf. Red’s fingers tightened around the wicker handle of her basket, knuckles white beneath the fraying red wool of her cloak. Her heart thudded, but she refused to let the Wolf see even a flicker of fear. Instead, her eyes blazed with stubborn defiance as she edged sideways, carefully weighing the distance between herself and the shadowy trees behind him. “My secrets are mine to keep,” she declared, every word laced with a fierce protectiveness that brooked no argument. “Nothing you say will shake my loyalty to her.” With her chin held high, Red scanned the dappled light for an opening, determined to stand her ground—no matter how close the Wolf crept or how dangerous the path became. The Wolf leans in closer, his eyes narrowing as he circles Red, blocking her path more aggressively. The Wolf leaned in, his breath chilling the air between them as he circled Red, each step deliberately cutting off her escape. His eyes, sharp and predatory, narrowed with sly amusement. “Loyalty, hmm?” he murmured, his voice silk over steel. “But loyalty can be

blinding—what if your devotion leads you both into danger?” The question slipped from his lips like a threat disguised as concern, his posture growing more aggressive as he blocked Red’s path, hunger and calculation warring behind his gaze. Red stands her ground, fists clenched at her sides, her eyes locked defiantly on the Wolf as she refuses to step back. Red planted her feet firmly, fists clenched at her sides as she faced the Wolf, refusing to budge an inch. Frustration tightened her jaw, but her eyes never wavered from his. She would not let fear—or the Wolf’s sly words—pull her away from what mattered. Danger, she thought, always finds those who go looking for it; she would not be lured off her path by his games. Not today. Not with Grandmother’s safety at stake. Her stubborn resolve burned brighter than the crimson cloak wrapped around her shoulders, a silent promise that she would not be moved. In this tense verbal duel, Red, while maintaining her defensive stance, inadvertently reveals some details about her route—namely, that she takes the main path and turns left at the willow tree—under pressure from the Wolf’s probing questions.

Realizing the Wolf’s manipulations, Red, frustrated but determined to protect her grandmother, refuses to say more and insists on passing.

The Wolf continues to press, questioning her motives and trying to undermine her confidence, but Red stands her ground, declaring her loyalty and independence.

Eventually, Red darts past him, cloak snagging on a branch, while The Wolf lopez after her, now armed with clues about her path deeper into the woods.

---

Unbeknownst to Red, the wolf, now privy to her destination and route, wastes no time in slipping through the trees, driven by cunning intent. As Red navigates the tangled path, reassured by her own resolve, the wolf takes a swifter, unseen shortcut through the shadows of the forest. While Red believes herself to be one step ahead, a more perilous game is already unfolding at the edge of her grandmother’s cottage.

## Chapter 5: Wolf Arrives at Grandmother’s House First

The Wolf pads silently through the underbrush, nose twitching at the lingering aroma of stew drifting from Grandmother’s chimney.

Driven by hunger and cunning, he circles the cottage, claws scraping against the bark as he peers through the window to spot Grandmother resting in bed.

With a low growl, the Wolf raps sharply at the door, voice pitched high to mimic Red’s, calling, ‘Grandmother, it’s me—Red, with your soup.

The Wolf stands close to the door, claws hidden behind a checked basket, voice raised to a sweet, wavering pitch. His ears strain for any sound from within, every muscle tensed in anticipation. Standing mere inches from the weathered door, the Wolf concealed his lethal claws beneath a checked basket, every sinew taut with expectation. He pressed his ear to the wood, straining for the faintest shuffle within, then rapped sharply, letting a low growl curl into the air before swallowing it down. When he spoke, his voice rose in a sweet, wavering imitation—almost convincing, almost innocent. “Grandmother, it’s me—Red, with your soup. Let me in, I’ve brought your favorite!” The words rolled out sugar-slick, each syllable carefully crafted to coax trust, while his amber eyes

gleamed with hunger and anticipation. ' Inside, Grandmother frowns, her frail hands gripping the quilt as she listens to the odd cadence in the voice.

Sensing danger, she rises unsteadily and secures the latch, her breath rattling.

The Wolf, impatient, presses his weight against the door, making the hinges groan.

Grandmother grabs her walking stick and knocks it against the floor, calling out, 'Who's there?

Grandmother grips her walking stick tightly, her eyes narrowing as she peers into the shadows, her voice trembling with a mix of fear and determination. Grandmother's frail fingers clenched tighter around her walking stick as she steadied herself, the wood trembling slightly in her grasp. Her sharp eyes scanned the wavering shadows that crept across her small parlor, narrowed with a mixture of fear and unyielding resolve. Summoning what strength she had, she knocked the stick firmly against the floor. "Who's there?" Her voice quavered but did not break, echoing through the hush of the house. "Show yourself now! Don't think you can sneak up on me in my own house!" State your name!

GrandmotherShe clutches her shawl a little tighter, her eyes searching the shadows for the face that demanded her name, a flicker of hurt and worry passing across her features. Grandmother clutched her shawl a little tighter, the thin fabric bunched in her trembling hands as she peered through the dim light, searching the shadows for the face that had so sharply demanded her name. Hurt flickered across her features, mingling with worry; yet her voice, though frail, carried a gentle firmness as she answered, "Well now, child, you know me—I'm your Grandmother, Margaret Whitaker." There was no accusation, only a weary resignation in her words as she continued, her gaze softening despite the tension knotting in her chest. "There's no need for such harshness in your voice. But if you must ask, perhaps it's because these days, trust is in short supply—even among family." ' However, instead of remaining silent or evasive, Grandmother decides to assert herself further.

The Wolf clears his throat, pressing his snout closer to the door, striving to soften his gruff voice. His paw trembles with impatience as he struggles to mimic the granddaughter's tone, forcing a sweet, wavering lilt into every word. Clearing his throat with a calculated rasp, the Wolf pressed his damp snout ever closer to the cottage door. He forced patience into every trembling paw, straining to wrap his coarse voice in a veneer of innocence. "Grandmother," he cooed, echoing the granddaughter's sweet, uncertain cadence, "it's me, your little granddaughter. I've come to help you, just like always." His tone wavered between syrupy affection and desperate urgency as he leaned in, claws flexing with anticipation. "Would you let me in, please?" The words rolled off his tongue, honeyed and false, as he waited for a sign that his deception had taken root. She raises her voice, challenging the intruder, 'Well now, child, you know me—I'm your Grandmother, Margaret Whitaker.

There's no need for such harshness in your voice.

But if you must ask, perhaps it's because these days, trust is in short supply—even among family.

' The Wolf, momentarily thrown by Grandmother's boldness, hastily feigns a cough and croons, 'Ahem—ahem!

Grandmother, it's me, your little granddaughter.

I'm here to help you, just like always.



Would you let me in, please?

' As Grandmother hesitates, debating whether to unlock the door, the Wolf crouches low, ears flat, eyes fixed on the window, searching for another way inside.

The wind stirs the leaves as both predator and prey make their decisions—one to invade, the other to defend.

---

Meanwhile, as the wolf settles into his disguise and the house grows eerily quiet, the distant sound of footsteps approaches along the forest path. The wolf positions himself, every muscle tensed, while shadows lengthen across the parlor. Unaware of the danger awaiting her, Red draws closer to the cottage, basket in hand, already sensing that something about this afternoon is not as it should be.

## Chapter 6: Red Arrives and Senses Something Wrong

Red clutches her wicker basket and knocks sharply on the weathered cottage door, listening as the hinges creak open.

Peering inside, she notices the fire is burning low and the air feels unusually still, with no sound of Grandmother's usual humming.

The Wolf, disguised in Grandmother's shawl, lies stiffly in bed and quietly sniffs the air, watching Red's every movement.

Red sets the basket on the table, her eyes narrowing as she studies the unfamiliar shape beneath the blanket.

She steps closer and, in an attempt to maintain normalcy and perhaps mask her own suspicion, she playfully mimics a sore throat, saying her voice is off today.

Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tightly, her gaze flickering nervously between the figure under the covers and the familiar room. Red hesitated on the threshold, her basket trembling slightly in her grip. The shadows in her grandmother's dim room seemed to crawl along the walls, and the figure in the bed looked unfamiliar, swathed in blankets. She took a cautious step closer, her heart thumping with both worry and stubborn curiosity. "Grandmother?" she ventured, eyes narrowing as she studied the face on the pillow. Something was wrong—she could feel it in her bones. The eyes that met hers were far too large, shining strangely in the gloom, and when the reply came, the voice held a roughness that didn't belong. Red's brow furrowed. "Why are your eyes so big?" she pressed, her compassion warring with a growing sense of unease. "And your voice—it's not quite the same. Are you feeling alright?" She moved closer still, refusing to let fear stop her, determined to understand what was happening to the woman she loved. The Wolf, seizing this opportunity, encourages her to come closer with soothing words, reassuring her and urging her to approach the bed.

Red gives a sheepish smile and sips from a mug of tea. Red gave a sheepish smile, fingers curling around her mug as she took a careful sip of tea, buying herself a moment. Her voice, when she spoke, was scratchy—noticeably different. "You caught that, huh?" she admitted, the corners of her mouth quirking upward with a mix of embarrassment and bravado. "My throat's a little sore

today. Nothing serious, I promise—just one of those days when it feels like my vocal cords are staging a protest.” Despite the raspy sound, her eyes held their usual spark, as if determined not to let a mere sore throat slow her down. Red, motivated by her desire to help Grandmother, prove her independence, and now to maintain the ruse, hesitates before inching forward, trying to spot anything else unusual while gripping her basket tightly.

The Wolf leans forward slightly, his gaze fixed on the child, a predatory glint lurking behind his feigned concern. The Wolf leaned forward, his posture deceptively casual as he fixed his gaze on the child, feigning a weary concern that barely masked the predatory glint in his eye. His voice, low and gruff, rumbled through the dim room as he beckoned, “Come closer, child, so I may see you better.” He let his words linger, inviting innocence to step within reach. “The shadows are deep in this room,” he continued, thickening the illusion of frailty, “and my old eyes struggle to make out your sweet face.” The Wolf lifts a clawed hand, beckoning gently, his gaze fixed hungrily on the child. With a slow, deliberate motion, the Wolf lifted one clawed hand, his talons gleaming dully in the half-light as he beckoned the child nearer. His yellow gaze never wavered, fixed hungrily on his innocent prey. In a low, gravelly tone meant to soothe even as it threatened, he murmured, “Don’t be afraid, little one—the closer you are, the better I can ensure you are safe from the cold and darkness.” The words slithered between his teeth like a promise, soft and inviting, yet edged with something far more dangerous. The Wolf pats the edge of the bed with a clawed hand, motioning for the child to approach. The Wolf’s clawed hand patted the edge of the bed in a slow, almost inviting rhythm, the gesture both patient and predatory. His yellow eyes glinted beneath the shadow of the cap, never straying from the trembling child at the doorway. In a low, gruff tone that barely masked his hunger, he beckoned her closer. “Let me hear your gentle voice, child,” he murmured, the words rolling out with practiced tenderness. “Lean in and tell your dear grandmother how your journey through the woods has fared.” The invitation hung between them, thick with false warmth, as he motioned again, urging her into the circle of lamplight—where every fearful detail of her answer would be his to savor. The Wolf pats the bed beside him with a paw, his eyes glinting hungrily in the dim light. The Wolf settled himself among the tangled sheets, a sly smile ghosting across his muzzle as he patted the empty space on the bed with deliberate invitation. In the dim, flickering light, his eyes glinted with a predatory hunger, their depths unreadable and cold. His voice sank to a low, gruff rumble, each word carefully measured to mask his intent with feigned warmth. “The night air clings to you, my dear,” he murmured, beckoning with a gentle sweep of his paw. “Come nearer and let me wrap you in this warm blanket, so no harm may befall you.” The promise curled in the air between them—soft, deceptively safe—while the Wolf’s gaze lingered hungrily on the trembling figure at the threshold. The Wolf licks his lips, ready to spring if she gets close enough.

---

Red hesitates at the threshold, her instincts screaming that something is terribly amiss. The urgency of her mission wars with her growing fear, each detail in the room reinforcing her suspicion. As she edges closer, tension coils in her chest—she knows she must deliver the medicine, but every step brings her face-to-face with her unease. The flicker of movement beneath the blanket and the hungry gleam in the wolf’s eyes push her to the brink, forcing Red to make a choice: trust her senses or ignore them. What happens next will demand all her courage.

## Chapter 7: Red Confronts the Wolf and Fights Back

Red enters her grandmother's cottage, suspicious of her grandmother's strange appearance.

She questions her 'grandmother' about her eyes, voice, hands, and teeth, pressing for answers.

Instead of answering directly as in the original plot, the Wolf responds with playful, rhyming speech, attempting to distract and further engage Red in conversation by probing her about her own journey and secrets.

The Wolf, still motivated by deception and hunger, tries to draw out Red's story and delay being discovered.

Red edges closer to the bed, her gaze darting between the Wolf's face and the fireplace poker, fingers trembling as she brushes against its handle. Red stepped quietly into the dim cottage, her heart fluttering with anticipation and unease. As she approached her grandmother's bedside, she paused, noticing something strange—the old woman's eyes seemed unusually large, glimmering from the shadows. Red's brows knit together; concern pressed at her chest. "Grandmother," she ventured, her voice soft but tinged with worry, "why are your eyes so... large?" She leaned in, searching the familiar face for reassurance, but instead heard a voice that sounded hoarse, thin and unfamiliar. Red's pulse quickened. "And your voice—it's different. You sound hoarse. Are you feeling alright?" She reached out, impulsively brushing a hand against her grandmother's blanket, stubbornly refusing to let her unease go unspoken. Red tightens her grip on the cold iron poker, her gaze flickering nervously between the Wolf and the shadows dancing on the walls. Red's knuckles whitened around the cold iron poker as she circled the bed, wary eyes darting between the looming silhouette in the rumpled covers and the restless shadows dancing along the walls. Her heart hammered with suspicion, but compassion kept her feet moving, drawing her closer. Unable to contain her curiosity, she paused at the foot of the bed and nodded toward the creature's outstretched arms. "And your hands—why are they so big and rough?" she asked, her voice a stubborn mixture of fear and bravery, echoing through the dim room. Red edges closer to the fireplace, her eyes darting between the Wolf's mouth and the iron poker within arm's reach. Red lingered near the fireplace, her fingers brushing the handle of the iron poker as she circled the bed. Her gaze flickered uneasily from the Wolf's cavernous mouth to the gleaming teeth within. Something was wrong—she could feel it prickling at the nape of her neck. Drawing a shaky breath, she dared to lean closer, her voice betraying an edge of suspicion as she asked, "And your teeth, Grandmother—why are they so sharp?" The question hung between them, heavy and trembling, while her hand inched just a little closer to the poker for reassurance. Red remains wary and continues to question her 'grandmother,' but the Wolf's tactic is to deflect suspicion through conversation rather than immediately answer with sly explanations.

The Wolf's tongue flicks over his teeth as he circles a tree, his gaze never leaving Red, his steps silent but deliberate in the dappled shade. The Wolf moved with predatory grace, his tongue flicking over sharp teeth as he slipped from shadow to shadow, circling the ancient oak where Red lingered. His eyes, pale and unblinking, never strayed from the girl's bright figure—so vibrant and vulnerable beneath the dappled sunlight. With each silent step, his intent sharpened, hunger mingling with the thrill of deception.

He let his voice ripple through the stillness, sly and rhythmic, as if weaving a spell. "Ah, what a curious girl," he murmured, feigning innocent wonder as he watched her skip through the wood, the basket swinging from her arm, laden with treats as sweet as she appeared. His gaze flickered

to the crimson bow at her throat, calculating. “Tell me, dear Red,” he coaxed softly, gliding closer, “where does your journey go? And what secrets do you carry, beneath that lovely bow?”

Every word dripped with patient cunning, the Wolf’s questions curling around Red like the shadows themselves, inviting her to step closer, to trust—while he circled, ever waiting for his moment. The tension rises as Red becomes more suspicious, setting the stage for her moving closer to a weapon, preparing for confrontation.

---

As Red’s cries echo through the cottage and out into the forest, the chaos inside is matched only by the desperate pounding of her heart. The wounded wolf, now enraged and cornered, prepares for a final attack just as distant footsteps thunder down the path—her plea for help has not gone unheard. The approaching presence signals that the struggle between Red and the wolf is far from over, setting the stage for an encounter that will decide both their fates.

## Chapter 8: The Huntsman’s Rescue and Final Showdown

Red, gripping her empty basket in one hand, pushes open the creaking cottage door, her boots scraping against the rough wooden floor.

She spots the Wolf, disguised in Grandmother’s shawl, crouched on the bed and baring its yellowed teeth.

The Wolf lunges, claws raking the air, while Red snatches up a nearby iron poker, swinging it defensively.

Outside, the Huntsman, drawn by Red’s frantic shouts and the sound of breaking glass, bursts through the window, splinters flying.

Red scrambles away from the shattered window, clutching her torn cloak, eyes wide with terror as she gestures desperately toward the door. Red scrambled backward, shards of glass crunching beneath her boots as she pressed herself against the far wall. Her trembling fingers clutched the torn edge of her cloak, heart hammering loud enough to drown out the chaos outside. Eyes wild with terror, she shot a desperate glance toward the door, voice breaking as she shouted, “Huntsman! Over here—please, help me! She’s coming back, I can’t get out!” The plea hung in the air, raw and urgent, as she strained to listen for footsteps—any sign that her frantic call had been heard. The Huntsman lands heavily among the shattered glass, axe raised, scanning the shadows for any sign of the Witch. With a thunderous crash, the Huntsman landed among the shards of broken glass, boots crunching as he steadied himself. His axe gleamed in his grip, poised and ready, while his sharp eyes swept the darkness for any flicker of movement—any trace of the Witch lurking in the shadows. Without taking his gaze from the shifting gloom, he called back in a steady, commanding voice, “Stay behind me, Red—I’ll keep you safe!” He raises his axe, shouting a warning, and advances on the Wolf, forcing it away from Red.

The HuntsmanHe steps between Red and the Wolf, gripping his axe tightly and fixing the Wolf with a steely glare, his voice ringing with command. With a swift, purposeful stride, the Huntsman stepped between Red and the snarling Wolf, his axe gleaming in his grip. His eyes narrowed, unwavering as he leveled a steely glare at the beast. Raising his weapon, his voice rang out with unyielding authority, “Stay back, beast! You’ll not harm her while I draw breath.” As he

advanced, each determined step forced the Wolf to retreat, his presence alone a shield between Red and the creature's menace. The WolfRed scrambles backward, clutching her cloak, eyes wide with terror as the Huntsman steps between her and the Wolf. Red scrambled backward, her fists knotted in the fabric of her crimson cloak, terror painted across her face. The Huntsman stepped forward, interposing himself between her and the looming Wolf, his axe raised in warning. Muscles tensed and lips peeled back to reveal gleaming fangs, the Wolf's hackles bristled as it prowled just beyond the blade's reach. A guttural snarl twisted from its throat, voice thick with contempt and possession. "You think your blade frightens me, mortal?" it rasped, yellow eyes never leaving Red. "She was mine first." Red retreats a step, half-hidden by the Huntsman's broad shoulders, trembling but watching the Wolf's every move. Red let out a sharp gasp, her fingers knotting anxiously in the folds of her crimson cloak as she instinctively edged back, pressing herself behind the Huntsman's reassuring bulk. Though her body trembled, fear tight in her chest, her gaze never wavered from the Wolf—wide-eyed, caught between terror and a desperate flicker of hope. The HuntsmanHe plants his feet firmly between Red and the Wolf, muscles tense, unwavering in his defense. Planting his feet firmly between Red and the looming shadow of the Wolf, the Huntsman tightened his grip on the axe, every muscle coiled and ready. His eyes, sharp from years of vigilance in these woods, never wavered as he raised the blade, voice cutting through the tension—steady, yet fierce. "Step away, Wolf, or face the edge—her life is not yours to claim." With each word, he advanced, forcing the snarling beast to retreat, his presence a wall of unwavering resolve between the girl and the encroaching danger. The WolfRed trembles, watching the Wolf's eyes flicker between her and the Huntsman, desperation tightening her grip on his arm. The Wolf lowered itself, sinewy muscles bunching beneath its mottled fur as it eyed Red with a predatory calculation. Its voice rumbled out, thick with menace and dark promise, even as the Huntsman advanced, axe raised high and warning shout echoing through the trees. "You cannot protect her forever—my hunger is patient," the creature intoned, the words lingering in the cold air like a threat. Red clung tighter to the Huntsman's arm, her trembling fingers betraying her terror, while the Wolf's gaze flickered between them, calculating, waiting for its moment. RedShe clings to the Huntsman's cloak, her knuckles white, heart pounding in her chest as the Wolf's eyes lock on hers. Red's grip on the Huntsman's cloak tightened until her knuckles went pale, her breath catching as the Wolf's gaze bore into hers. The Huntsman stepped forward, his axe raised high, voice booming a warning that echoed through the trees. Red pressed herself closer behind him, her heart hammering against her ribs. Her voice shook as she peered out from her fragile shelter, barely more than a whisper: "Please—don't let him take me." The HuntsmanHe plants his feet firmly, gripping his axe with both hands, preparing for any sudden move the Wolf might make. The Huntsman planted his feet firmly in the mossy earth, both hands tightening around the haft of his axe as he fixed his vigilant gaze on the Wolf. The beast snarled, pacing at the edge of the clearing, but the Huntsman's presence was an iron barrier. Glancing back at Red, he caught her frightened gaze and, with a steady, resolute voice, promised, "Trust me, I won't let him near you." Then, raising his axe in warning, he stepped between her and the looming threat, advancing until the Wolf, cowed by his unwavering determination, slunk back into the shadows. The Wolf circles warily, muscles coiled, testing for weakness as the Huntsman shifts to keep himself between Red and the looming predator. The Wolf circled with deliberate slowness, sinewy muscles taut beneath its mottled pelt, yellow eyes never leaving the man's hands on the haft of the axe. Each step was calculated, a silent test for any flicker of weakness. The Huntsman shifted, boots grinding into the leaf litter as he kept his body squarely between Red and the hungry beast. When the man hefted his axe and barked a warning, the Wolf's lips curled back from its fangs in a dark parody of a grin. A low, guttural growl rumbled from its chest, and with a voice as cold and sharp as winter air, it

promised, “Then prepare to bleed for her, woodsman.” The Huntsman tightens his grip on the axe, planting his feet firmly between Red and the advancing Wolf, ready for the inevitable clash. The Huntsman stepped forward, muscles taut as he positioned himself squarely between Red and the snarling Wolf. His fingers tightened around the haft of his axe, the familiar weight grounding him as the beast’s yellow eyes flashed with hunger. Raising the blade, his voice rang out, unwavering and resolute. “Steel yourself, Wolf—I’ve felled greater beasts than you, and I will not falter now.” Each word was a promise, forged from years spent patrolling these woods, and as he advanced, the Wolf faltered, forced back by the sheer force of the Huntsman’s conviction. The Wolf recoils, a cry escaping her lips as she clings to the Huntsman’s arm, while the Huntsman braces himself, feet planted, axe raised defensively. Red shrank back, a cry slipping from her lips as she clung desperately to the Huntsman’s arm. The Huntsman braced himself, feet rooted in the snow, axe raised and glinting coldly in the pale light. The Wolf prowled in a slow circle, calculating, its eyes gleaming with hunger and malice. Then, in a sudden flash, it lunged—jaws snapping so close to the axe that the metal caught the beast’s breath. Its voice rumbled out, savage and guttural, a threat woven into every syllable: “We’ll see whose blood stains the snow tonight.” The Huntsman steps firmly between Red and the Wolf, boots crunching in the snow, every muscle taut and ready for the Wolf’s next attack. With boots crunching through the crusted snow, the Huntsman planted himself firmly between Red and the looming Wolf, his presence a shield against the beast’s hunger. Every muscle in his body was drawn taut, ready for the Wolf’s next lunge. Raising his axe in a wide, warning arc, he advanced, forcing the creature to retreat with each deliberate step. His voice rang out, commanding and unyielding, as he confronted the predator: “You’ll find no easy prey here—back down, or face your end!” The Wolf scatters as the Wolf paces in a tense circle, circling both Red and the Huntsman, claws digging deep into the frozen earth. Snow scattered in ragged bursts as the Wolf paced a tense circle around Red and the Huntsman, its claws digging furrows into the frozen earth. The Huntsman advanced, axe raised, shouting a warning that rang through the brittle air, forcing the Wolf to edge away from Red. Yet the Wolf’s gaze never wavered, eyes fixed hungrily on the girl. It recoiled, lips curling in a venomous snarl, but even as it retreated, its voice dripped with cold assurance. “She will cry your name as you fail her,” it promised, the words slithering between them, a threat as sharp as its teeth. Red clutches the Huntsman’s coat, her fear mingling with a newfound courage as she stands her ground. Red’s breath caught in her throat as the Huntsman raised his axe, his shout ringing in her ears. Fear fluttered in her chest, but even so, she clutched the coarse fabric of his coat and forced herself upright behind him. Though her voice trembled, she called out—defiant despite the quaver—“He won’t fail me—I’m not afraid of you!” The words hung in the air, brave and stubborn, as she stood her ground against the Wolf, courage rising to meet her fear. The Wolf plants himself firmly between Red and the Wolf, muscles coiled, eyes never leaving the beast. The Huntsman stepped forward, firmly planting himself between Red and the looming Wolf. His muscles tensed, every fiber of his body poised for a fight as he lifted his axe, the steel glinting in the filtered forest light. Eyes locked with the beast’s, he spoke in a low, unwavering tone that brooked no argument. “If you come for her, you’ll answer to me first.” Each word rang with a quiet promise, and though his voice never rose, it carried the certainty of someone who would not hesitate to strike. The Wolf crunches beneath its paws as it prowls, trying to find an opening past the Huntsman’s steadfast defense. Snow crunched beneath the Wolf’s paws as it prowled just beyond the reach of the Huntsman’s raised axe, each step calculated and silent. With unblinking eyes fixed on its adversary, the Wolf began to circle, its lean body shifting smoothly through the pale light. The menace in its gaze was matched by the low, velvety rumble of its voice as it broke the tense silence, taunting the man who stood between it and Red. “Bravery is wasted on doomed hearts,” the Wolf murmured, the words

curling in the frigid air like a promise. The HuntsmanHe raises his axe higher, muscles taut, ready to strike as the Wolf hesitates, hackles bristling. Muscles taut and eyes narrowed with unwavering resolve, the Huntsman stepped forward, planting himself squarely between Red and the snarling Wolf. He raised his axe higher, its blade glinting menacingly in the dim forest light. With a voice cold as steel, he issued his warning, gaze fixed on the beast: “Then let your doom begin with me.” The words hung in the air, low and unyielding, as he advanced, forcing the Wolf to retreat, hackles bristling and eyes darting, challenged by a protector who would yield nothing. The Wolf circles, hackles raised, but the Huntsman maneuvers between Red and the predator, his stance firm and deliberate.

As the Wolf attempts to dart past him toward the door, the Huntsman swings his axe, driving the Wolf back toward the hearth.

The objective is to protect Red and subdue the Wolf;

the outcome is that the Wolf is cornered, Red is shielded behind the Huntsman, and the standoff sets the stage for the final confrontation.

---

As the dust settles and the echoes of the struggle fade, the battered silence in the cottage reveals the cost of their ordeal. With the Wolf defeated and the immediate danger gone, Red and her grandmother are left to reckon with what has transpired, each marked by the events in their own way. The huntsman, weary but resolute, offers comfort, yet it is Red who feels the weight of change pressing upon her. In the hush that follows, new questions arise—about safety, courage, and the choices that will shape Red’s path forward.

## Chapter 9: Aftermath and Red’s New Resolve

Red stands at the table, carefully tying her red cloak with trembling hands as she eyes the wicker basket full of bread and herbs.

Mother briskly ladles steaming tonic into a cup, her gaze flickering to Red’s preparations.

She sets the cup down with a firm clink and blocks the door, voice low and steady: ‘You will stay within sight of the path, Red, and you will not stray, do you understand?’

Mother steps closer, her hand tightening around the handle of the teapot, eyes never leaving Red’s face as she waits for an answer. Mother stepped closer, her grip tightening around the handle of the teapot, knuckles pale against the worn ceramic. She set the cup down with a firm clink, planting herself between Red and the door. Her eyes, sharp with worry, never left Red’s face as she spoke—her voice low and steady, allowing no argument. “There are things in those woods that you cannot outrun, Red. The path is the only place you are safe.” She leaned in, her presence a silent barricade. “Promise me you will not wander.” Red glances toward the window, fingers twisting in her cloak, curiosity flickering behind her cautious tone. Red set the cup down with a firm clink, her small body blocking the doorway as she glanced toward the window. Shadows stretched along the floorboards, and though her voice was low and steady, curiosity flickered in her eyes. She twisted her fingers in the edge of her red cloak, resisting the urge to peer out into the dusk. “I promise, Mother,” she said, stubborn and brave as ever. But the words came with an undercurrent of uncertainty, her gaze lingering on the forest beyond their home. “But... what if something calls

from the shadows?” Mother’s hand tightens on Red’s shoulder, her gaze unwavering and fierce. Mother set the cup down with a decisive clink, her palm pressing against the wood as she moved to block the door. Her hand tightened protectively on Red’s shoulder, fingers digging in just enough to make her point clear. Her gaze, unwavering and fierce, locked onto her daughter’s eyes. “If something calls,” she said, her voice low and steady, the weight of old fears woven through every syllable, “you keep your eyes forward and your feet moving—nothing in those woods means you well, Red.” ’ Red nods, her jaw set, and grabs the basket tightly.

As she moves toward the door, Mother’s anxiety surfaces more openly.

She implores Red not only to stay on the path, but to promise she will call for help if anything strange happens, her voice trembling with memories of past dangers: ‘Promise me you’ll call for help if you see anything strange, anything at all.

Mother grips Red’s wrist tightly, her eyes wide and voice trembling with worry. Red had barely reached for her cloak when her mother’s hand caught her arm, fingers tightening with a familiar urgency. “Wait—please,” she said, her voice low but trembling at the edges. The memory of past dangers seemed to flicker in her eyes as she searched Red’s face. “Just... promise me you’ll call for help if you see anything strange. Anything at all.” She hesitated, holding Red’s gaze as if sheer will could shield her daughter from the shadows beyond their door. “I need to hear you say it,” she insisted quietly, the weight of old fears pressing into each word. “After everything that’s happened, I can’t let you go without that promise.” Red squeezes her mother’s hand gently, trying to offer a reassuring smile despite the worry in her own eyes. Red squeezed her mother’s hand, her fingers small but determined, and tried to summon a reassuring smile—though the worry flickered plainly in her eyes. She felt her mother’s grip tighten on her wrist, heavy with fear and the weight of memories neither of them could quite forget. Still, Red held her mother’s gaze and promised, her voice steady despite the tremor in her heart, “Okay, Mama, I promise—I’ll call for help if anything seems wrong, I swear.” I need to hear you say it.

After everything that’s happened, I can’t let you go without that promise.

’ Red, sensing the gravity of her mother’s worry, hesitates but finally says, ‘Okay, Mama, I promise—I’ll call for help if anything seems wrong, I swear.

’ With a final look of resolve, Red steps outside into the crisp air, the promise of dew clinging to her feet.

---

The path stretched ahead, dappled with morning light, and as Red walked forward, her heart carried both the weight of promises and the quiet strength to keep them.