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A chill traced its way up her spine, but she pressed forward, steeling herself with the stubborn courage she'd always carried. Still, uncertainty twisted her words as she edged closer to the bedside. "Grandmother," she began, her voice quivering in the dim light, "why is your voice so rough?" . . . . .	7
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## Chapter 1: Red Receives a Warning

Red stands at the threshold of the cottage, tying her crimson cloak around her shoulders while her mother packs a wicker basket with fresh bread and a jar of honey.

Red's mother closes the basket with a firm snap, then grasps Red's wrist, her eyes scanning the shadows at the forest's edge.

She warns, 'Stay on the path, Red.

Do not stray, no matter what you hear.

' Red pulls her hand free, insisting she knows the way, but her mother steps closer, lowering her voice.

Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red straightens her cloak and lifts her chin, determination shining in her eyes as she steps back from her mother's grasp. Red straightened her crimson cloak, determination flickering in her eyes as she slipped her hand from her mother's gentle grasp. She lifted her chin, refusing to let uncertainty show. "I promise, I know the path by heart," she said, her voice steady and sure despite her youth. "I don't need anyone to hold my hand every step of the way." The words hung in the air between them, bold and earnest, as Red faced the looming forest with a mixture of courage and stubborn pride. Red's MotherShe gently places a hand on Red's shoulder, her eyes searching her daughter's face for understanding. Red's mother reached out, her hand settling gently on Red's shoulder. She searched her daughter's face, her gaze earnest and edged with worry. "Knowing the path isn't the same as knowing what waits among the trees, Red," she said quietly, voice low and stern, as if hoping the gravity of her words would pierce through the stubborn bravery she saw in Red's eyes. Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red lifts her chin, meeting her mother's eyes with quiet determination. Red lifted her chin, her gaze steady as

she met her mother's worried eyes. She gently pulled her hand free, the gesture quiet but resolute. Her voice was soft, threaded with the kind of conviction only the young possess. "But if I never walk alone," she murmured, not backing away as her mother stepped closer, "how will I learn what waits—and how to face it?" The forest beyond their cottage loomed with secrets, but Red's curiosity and brave heart refused to shrink before them. Red's MotherShe gently tucks a stray lock of hair behind Red's ear, her eyes searching her daughter's face for understanding. Red pulled her hand away, her chin lifting in quiet defiance. But her mother stepped closer, concern etched deeply into the lines around her eyes. With a tenderness born of habit and worry, she tucked a loose strand of hair behind Red's ear, her fingers lingering as if to anchor her daughter in place. "Learning is not just about walking alone, Red—" she said softly, her gaze searching Red's face for understanding, "—it's about knowing when to let someone guide you, especially when the woods can change without warning." 'The Wolf has been seen again.

Promise me.

' Red shifts the basket in her grip, glancing toward the sunlit sliver between the trees, and nods.

Her mother presses the basket into Red's hands, brushing stray flour from her own apron, and watches as Red steps onto the narrow footpath leading into the woods.

Birds scatter from the branches overhead as Red takes her first steps, the crunch of gravel loud beneath her boots.

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Behind her, the cottage receded into the gentle hush of morning, every step carrying Red further from her mother's worried gaze and deeper into the shadowed edge of the forest. The sunlight faded in patches, dappled by leaves thick with secrets, as she crossed the threshold where familiar paths gave way to the unknown. With each stride, her mother's warning echoed in her mind, mingling with the quiet thrill and apprehension of entering the forbidden woods.

## Chapter 2: Entering the Forbidden Woods

Red steps onto the narrow path leading into the woods, clutching a woven basket packed with bread, honey, jam, and tea for her grandmother.

Her mother, standing just outside their cottage, intercepts her, more insistent than before, expressing heightened concern about wolves prowling near the old path.

Red's MotherShe places a gentle but firm hand on Red's shoulder, her eyes filled with worry as she leans in, blocking the doorway and searching her daughter's face for a sign of hesitation. Red's mother stepped into the doorway, her figure blocking the exit, a gentle but unyielding hand settling on Red's shoulder. Worry clouded her eyes as she leaned in, searching her daughter's face for even a flicker of doubt. "Red, please, listen to me for a moment," she murmured, her voice both soft and stern. "The woods aren't safe today—I've heard talk of wolves prowling near the old path." Her grip tightened slightly, as if she could keep her daughter close through sheer will. "I can't let you go alone, not with the dangers out there. Your grandmother will understand if we wait, or if we go together." Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red gently tries to step around her mother's hand, her eyes earnest and pleading. Red's small hand hovered over her mother's, gently attempting to slip free from the firm grip that blocked her path. She raised her eyes, wide and earnest, her voice

soft but steady as she pleaded her case. Grandmother needed the bread and honey—Red had promised she'd come. If only Mother would believe her; if only she'd let her try. Red insisted she would be careful, that she'd stay on the main path, and she swore she'd return home before sunset. All the determination and worry in her heart shone in her gaze as she tried to step around her mother, hoping her words would be enough. Red's MotherShe squeezes Red's shoulder gently, her eyes searching her daughter's face for any sign of hesitation. Red's mother stood squarely in the doorway of their cottage, blocking her daughter's path with a protective stance. Her hand, firm but gentle, came to rest on Red's shoulder, squeezing just enough to remind her of the seriousness in her gaze. Worry flickered in her eyes as she searched Red's face for any trace of doubt or fear. "Oh, Red," she murmured, voice low and edged with concern, "your heart is so kind, but promises mean little if danger finds you first." The words lingered in the morning air, heavy with maternal anxiety. She hesitated, then added, her tone both pleading and stern, "Please, let me come with you—or at least wait for your father to return. Just this once." Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red gently takes her mother's hands in hers, looking up with pleading eyes, her basket ready at her side. Red's small hands closed gently over her mother's, her grip both pleading and steady. She looked up, determination shining in her wide eyes, the woven basket bumping softly against her hip. Her mother's arm formed a barrier at the cottage threshold, hand resting firm on Red's shoulder—a silent warning. But Red's voice was quiet and urgent as she searched her mother's face. She reminded her, with quiet conviction, that no one knew the woods better than she did, and that waiting any longer might mean Grandmother would go hungry. All she asked, just this once, was for her mother's trust. Red's MotherHer grip tightens gently on Red's shoulder, her eyes pleading for understanding. Red's mother stepped in front of her, blocking the narrow path that led from their cottage to the edge of the woods. Her hand found Red's shoulder, gentle yet insistent, fingers tightening just enough to keep her daughter close. The worry etched in her eyes was unmistakable as she searched Red's face for understanding. "I wish I could trust that the woods will be as gentle with you as you are with them," she murmured, voice thick with concern. "But a mother's worry never rests, Red." The words hung between them, weighted by all the stories and recent dangers that lingered beneath the green canopy beyond their home. Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red gently squeezes her mother's hand, her own voice steady but her eyes pleading for trust. Red reached out and gently squeezed her mother's hand, grounding herself against the worry she saw etched in those familiar eyes. Her own voice was steady, though the silent plea for trust shimmered in her gaze. "I understand your worry," she said softly, searching her mother's face for a sign of relenting. "But I promise—I'll keep my hood up, my eyes open, and my feet on the path." The words tumbled out with the conviction only the young and determined possess. She glanced toward the shadowed line of trees, heart fluttering at the thought of her waiting grandmother. "Grandmother is counting on me," Red added, her tone threaded with both resolve and compassion. Red's mother pleads with Red to wait for her father or let her accompany Red, but Red insists she cannot delay, emphasizing her promise to her grandmother and her familiarity with the woods.

Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red holds up the basket proudly, her eyes bright with determination, clutching the handle tightly as she looks up at her mother. Red's small hands gripped the basket as she held it up for her mother to see, her eyes shining with a determined spark. "I promise I'll be careful," she insisted, standing tall despite the oversized cloak draped over her shoulders. She glanced down at the neatly tucked bread, the jar of jam, and the special tin of Granny's tea—all packed just as her mother had instructed. "Everything you asked for is here," she said, her voice steady with conviction. "I know the way, and I'll stay right on the path, just like you said."

There was no mistaking the resolve in her gaze as she added, softer but no less certain, “Granny’s counting on me. I won’t let you down.” Red’s MotherShe gently tucks a strand of hair behind Red’s ear and squeezes her hand, her eyes full of concern. Red’s mother brushed a stray lock of hair from her daughter’s cheek, her thumb lingering just long enough to convey both warmth and worry. She squeezed Red’s hand, her own knuckles pale against the woven basket Red clutched, and her voice softened—yet carried an unmistakable sternness. “I know you’re growing up,” she said, searching Red’s face for any sign of hesitation, “but the woods can be tricky.” Her eyes darted to the shadowed treeline beyond their cottage, then back to Red. “Promise me you won’t talk to strangers, and come straight home after you’ve seen Granny.” The words hung between them, heavy with the weight of recent troubles, as Red nodded, eager but not immune to her mother’s worry. After several heartfelt exchanges, Red’s mother reluctantly relents, pressing a red cloak onto Red’s shoulders and making her promise to keep it visible as a warning to predators and as a sign of protection.

Red’s MotherHer mother gently drapes the red cloak over Red’s shoulders, her hands lingering as if reluctant to let go, her eyes searching Red’s face for reassurance. Her mother draped the red cloak over Red’s shoulders, her hands lingering, reluctant to let go. She fussed with the fabric, smoothing it across Red’s collarbone, her eyes searching her daughter’s face for reassurance she couldn’t quite find. “Promise me you’ll keep this cloak on at all times,” she murmured, voice thick with worry. “It’s not just to keep you warm.” She pressed the edges of the material, as if to reinforce its protection. “It’s a signal—to the wolves, and anything else lurking in those woods—that you are not alone. That you are watched over.” Her gaze grew stern, the line of her mouth taut with concern. “I know you want to be brave,” she continued, her hand finally dropping away, “but my heart aches at the thought of you wandering those shadows.” Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red pulls the cloak closer, meeting her mother’s anxious gaze with a determined but gentle smile. Red drew the red cloak tighter around her shoulders, feeling the weight of her mother’s worry in every careful movement. She met her mother’s anxious gaze head-on, offering a gentle but determined smile—a silent reassurance as her mother’s hand lingered, reluctant to let go. Yet Red’s eyes spoke what words could not: she would carry her mother’s caution with her into the forest, holding each piece of advice close with every step she took. She understood, even as she masked her own nervousness with bravado, that her mother’s fears came from love—a wish to keep her safe. Red reassures her mother, promising to stay on the path, keep her cloak on, and heed her mother’s warnings.

Her mother gives final reminders about not talking to strangers and hovers anxiously as Red walks beneath the trees, watching for danger and listening to the forest sounds.

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As the last glimmer of her mother’s cottage faded behind her, Red pressed deeper into the woods, her senses sharpening with each cautious step. The trees closed in, their twisted branches weaving shadows across her path, while the distant echo of the huntsman’s warning lingered in her mind. Heart pounding with a mix of excitement and unease, Red quickened her pace along the unfamiliar shortcut, unaware that something—or someone—was already watching her from the gloom ahead.

## Chapter 3: Red Meets the Stranger

Red clutches a wicker basket lined with a red cloth, carefully stepping over tangled roots as she follows the narrow path toward her grandmother's cottage.

She pauses to adjust her hood and scan the thick underbrush, alert after her mother's warnings.

Suddenly, The Wolf emerges from the shadows between two gnarled trees, his fur bristling and nose twitching as he sniffs the air.

The Wolf blocks the path, lowering his head as if in greeting.

He speaks with a slow, deliberate cadence, 'Where are you off to, little one, so deep in the woods?

The Wolf steps from behind a gnarled tree, his yellow eyes glinting as he blocks the narrow path, a slow, unsettling smile curling across his muzzle. From the tangled shadows, the Wolf slipped into view, his massive shape eclipsing the slender path. Yellow eyes glinted beneath the tangled canopy, their gaze unblinking as he studied his prey. A slow, deliberate smile curled across his muzzle, revealing just a hint of the teeth beneath. In a voice as smooth as velvet and twice as dangerous, he inquired, "Where are you off to, little one, so deep in the woods?" His words hung in the air, laced with mock concern. He let the silence stretch, savoring the tension, before continuing, "Not many venture here alone." His head tilted slightly, as if he were puzzled by such courage—or such foolishness. "Are you not afraid of what might be lurking in the shadows?" The question lingered, weighted by the promise of secrets best left undisturbed. ' Red, determined to appear brave, stands tall and replies, 'I'm bringing food to my sick grandmother.

Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red lifts her chin and grips the basket tightly, her voice steady with determination as she looks ahead along the forest path. Red squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, fingers tightening around the handle of the wicker basket. The forest loomed ahead, shadowed and deep, but she refused to let fear show on her face. She was on a mission—her grandmother depended on her. Determination steadied her voice as she looked down the winding path, silently assuring herself: She would not be afraid of these woods. No matter what waited between the trees, nothing would keep her from delivering the basket of food to her ailing grandmother. She pressed forward, heart pounding but resolve unshaken, certain that nothing could stop her from reaching the one she loved. ' The Wolf's eyes narrow as he circles her, tail flicking, and suggests a shortcut, pointing his snout toward a faint trail.

The Wolf's lips curl into a cordial smile as he pauses, nose pointing toward the shadowed shortcut, his gaze fixed intently on her, tail swaying with feigned nonchalance. The Wolf's lips curled into a cordial smile as he paused, nose tilting toward the shadowed shortcut. He circled her with leisurely grace, tail swaying with a studied air of indifference, though his eyes never left her face. "The path to Grandmother's house can be dreadfully long and dull," he murmured, voice low and coaxing, each word measured to sound helpful. His gaze flicked toward the barely trodden trail that cut through the underbrush, its entrance cloaked in green shadows. "But if you're seeking a touch of adventure—and perhaps wish to arrive before the sun climbs too high—there's a quieter way, just here." He gestured smoothly, the movement almost casual, inviting her attention to the hidden trail. "See how it winds through the sweetest glade," he continued, painting the picture with sly enthusiasm, "where the wildflowers bloom brightest. Wouldn't you like to see it?" Red hesitates but grips her basket tighter, declining his offer and insisting she knows her way.

Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red straightens her shoulders, her grip tightening on the basket as

she looks ahead with calm determination, a hint of caution in her eyes. Red hesitated, her fingers tightening around the wicker handle as she weighed the stranger's offer. Calm determination settled over her features, and she straightened her shoulders, meeting his eyes with a steady gaze. "I appreciate your kindness," she said, her voice quiet but unwavering, "but I know this path very well." A hint of caution flickered behind her brave facade. "Grandmother's cottage isn't far, and I prefer to walk on my own." With a small, reassuring smile, she glanced up at the sun-dappled leaves overhead. "It's a lovely day, and I have everything I need." The Wolf watches her with calculated patience as she steps around him and continues down the path, while he slips silently into the undergrowth, planning his next move.

Red's objective to reach her grandmother is met with delay and suspicion, while the Wolf's motivation to deceive and hunt is set in motion by their encounter.

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Unbeknownst to Red, her brief detour has given the Wolf all the opportunity he needs. As she lingers among the wildflowers, the Wolf melts away into the forest, his mind already racing ahead to the cottage. What began as an innocent encounter on the path now shifts, as the Wolf moves swiftly and purposefully toward his true target—Red's unsuspecting grandmother.

## Chapter 4: The Wolf Arrives First

The Wolf, his fur slick with dew, pads silently through the undergrowth and circles the cottage, nose twitching as he catches the scent of illness and bread.

He presses his ear to the warped wooden door and hears Grandmother's rasping cough.

With a guttural growl, he rears up and scratches at the latch, mimicking a human knock.

Inside, Grandmother rises shakily from her bed, clutching her shawl, and shuffles to the door, her voice quavering as she calls out, 'Who is it at this hour?

' The Wolf, voice low and gruff, answers, 'It's Red, I've brought you breakfast.

' Grandmother hesitates, then unlatches the door, only to have the Wolf shove it open, knocking her backwards.

He lunges, teeth flashing, as she grabs a poker from the hearth and swings at his muzzle, managing to graze his snout before he overpowers her and drags her toward the bed.

The Wolf glances at the red cloak hanging on a peg by the door, eyes narrowing as he considers his next move.

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Outside, the forest hushes, disturbed only by the faint crunch of footsteps drawing nearer. With Grandmother hidden away and the disguise complete, the Wolf settles into his role, every sense sharpened as he waits for the final piece of his plan to arrive. Meanwhile, unaware of the danger awaiting her, Red approaches the cottage, her basket swinging at her side and her heart full of trust.

## Chapter 5: Red Enters the Cottage

Red approaches the cottage, basket in hand, and knocks on the weather-beaten door.

The Wolf, cloaked in Grandmother's nightgown, ambles across the creaking floorboards and calls out in a hoarse voice, 'Come in, dear.

' Red enters, noting a strange, musky odor and the heavy silence as her eyes adjust to the dimness. Setting the basket on the table, she hesitates, scrutinizing the figure in bed.

The Wolf, with a clawed hand hidden under blankets, beckons her closer.

The conversation turns unsettling: after Red inquires about the roughness of the voice, the Wolf elaborates ominously about the cold that seeps into bones, then tries repeatedly to coax Red closer, using soothing yet insistent words, emphasizing warmth and safety and urging her to come within reach.

Red, sensing unease but driven by concern, inches forward, the tension mounting as the Wolf grows more persuasive and intent on drawing her near.

The scene ends with Red on the threshold of the bed, the Wolf poised to spring, both locked in a tense psychological standoff.

Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red pauses at the doorway, clutching her basket tightly. Her eyes scan the shadowed room, searching for the familiar softness in her grandmother's face, but something feels... off. She hesitates, her voice trembling as she steps closer to the bed. Red lingered at the threshold, her small fingers curled tightly around the handle of her wicker basket. The air inside her grandmother's cottage felt heavy, thick with shadows that clung to the corners and stretched long across the quilted bed. Red's gaze flickered anxiously over the shape beneath the covers, searching for the gentle features she remembered, but the face that met her eyes seemed strangely unfamiliar—sharper, somehow, and more distant.

**A chill traced its way up her spine, but she pressed forward, steeling herself with the stubborn courage she'd always carried. Still, uncertainty twisted her words as she edged closer to the bedside. "Grandmother," she began, her voice quivering in the dim light, "why is your voice so rough?"**

The silence thickens as Red waits for an answer, her heart pounding in the dim light. With each cautious step, the sense of unease grows, and the figure in the bed shifts beneath the covers. In that charged moment, the truth begins to surface—Red is no longer alone with her grandmother.

## Chapter 6: The Wolf Reveals Himself

Red enters the dim cottage, basket in hand, her boots crunching over scattered pine needles near the door.

The Wolf, disguised in Grandmother's shawl, lies stiffly in bed, keeping his snout half-hidden under a quilt.

Red sets the basket down on the rough-hewn table and steps closer, squinting at the figure in bed. The Wolf, using a raspy, imitated voice, beckons Red closer by patting the bed and says, 'Come nearer, child, so I may see you better.

' Red hesitates, glancing at the strange, musky scent in the air and the sharp glint of the Wolf's yellowed teeth peeking from beneath the covers.

She edges nearer, reaching out to touch the Wolf's paw, frowning at its coarse texture.

The Wolf shifts, tightening his grip on the blanket, and prepares to spring.

The objective is for Red to realize something is wrong, while the Wolf maneuvers her into striking distance.

The scene ends with Red asking, 'Grandmother, what big eyes you have,' as the Wolf's tail twitches beneath the quilt, ready to reveal himself.

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Outside, a distant rustling breaks the tension, unnoticed by both predator and prey as the struggle inside the cottage reaches its fever pitch. Unbeknownst to Red, help is closer than she realizes; footsteps approach through the tangled undergrowth, drawn by the chaos within. As the Wolf lunges and Red scrambles for safety, the door creaks open, and a new presence enters the fray, altering the course of their desperate encounter.

## Chapter 7: The Huntsman Intervenes

Red enters the dim cottage, clutching her basket, and is confronted by the Wolf disguised as her Grandmother.

Little Red Riding Hood (Red) Red hesitates on the threshold, tightening her grip on the basket. She peers warily at the figure in bed, her voice trembling just a little as she steps closer, scanning the shadowed face peeking out from beneath the quilt. Red hesitated at the threshold, her basket dangling from her arm, heart fluttering with a mix of hope and unease. The shadows in her grandmother's cottage seemed deeper than usual, swallowing little details she'd always known by heart. She stepped closer to the bed, her voice trembling with concern as she peered at the figure beneath the quilts. "Grandmother? Is that you?" she asked, uncertainty threading through her bravery. As her eyes adjusted, she couldn't help but notice the pair of eyes gleaming back at her—far larger and more intense than she remembered. Red's curiosity overcame her fear, and she tilted her head, unable to keep the observation from slipping out. "My, what big eyes you have." The Wolf shifts beneath the quilt, his gaze never leaving Red, a sly smile curling beneath the oversized bonnet. The Wolf shifted beneath the quilt, careful not to disturb the ruse, his predatory gaze fixed unblinking on Red as she lingered in the doorway, basket clutched to her chest. The oversized bonnet shadowed his features, but it could not conceal the sly curl of his lips. With a voice smooth as velvet and just as dark, he offered, "The better to see you with, my dear," each word dripping with a patient menace, the lie slipping effortlessly from behind his cunning smile. Little Red Riding Hood (Red) Red edges closer, her grip tightening on the basket as she studies the Wolf's strange features. Red perched on the edge of her grandmother's bed, the scent of wildflowers from her basket mingling with the musty air. The room felt colder than she remembered, shadows pooling in the corners, and her grandmother—bundled beneath the heavy quilt—looked different



somehow. Red's gaze lingered on the shapes beneath the bonnet, curiosity tugging at her. Slowly, she tilted her head, her brows knitting together as she studied the face partially hidden by the pillows. "And Grandmother, what big ears you have," she remarked softly, a note of wonder and concern threading through her voice, as she reached out, almost instinctively, as if by touching her grandmother's hand she could reassure herself that everything was as it should be. The Wolf's furry ears twitch atop his head, poking out from beneath the quilt as he leans forward, voice low and inviting. The Wolf's furry ears twitched atop his head, barely concealed beneath the edge of the quilt as he leaned forward, every movement calculated and smooth. Shadows flickered across his sharp eyes, and his voice, low and inviting, curled through the dim cottage air. "The better to hear you with, my dear," he murmured, the words slipping from his disguised lips as a predatory gleam glinted in his gaze. Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red takes a cautious step back, her grip tightening on the basket as her eyes widen in fear. Red took a cautious step closer to the shadowed figure lying beneath the quilt, her heart pounding with a mixture of concern and unease. The light filtering through the cottage window glinted off a row of sharp, unfamiliar teeth peeking between her grandmother's lips. Red's brows knit with worry as she forced herself to meet those unsettling eyes, her voice a whisper trembling with curiosity and doubt. "Grandmother, what big teeth you have," she murmured, the words escaping her almost before she realized it, as if speaking them aloud might help her make sense of the strange transformation before her. The Wolf throws off the quilt, revealing his true form as he lunges toward Red, claws outstretched. The Wolf's lips curled back, revealing a glint of razor-sharp teeth in a grin that was all hunger and malice. A low, rumbling growl vibrated in his throat as he tensed, every muscle coiling with anticipation. Still cloaked in the frail illusion of Gran's shawl, he beckoned Red closer with a trembling hand, his eyes fixed unblinking on her. Then, in a voice that slithered between affection and threat, he whispered, "The better to eat you with, my dear!" In the next heartbeat, he surged forward from the rumpled bed, all pretense falling away as the true predator emerged. The Wolf attempts to lure Red closer with imitations of Grandmother's voice, but Red grows suspicious due to the Wolf's strange tone.

The Wolf nestles deeper beneath the covers, keeping his sharp eyes on Red, his voice trembling with a practiced frailty. He curls his claws beneath the patchwork quilt, every muscle taut, a low, almost imperceptible rumble in his chest as he beckons Red forward with a wavering hand. The Wolf, swaddled beneath a faded shawl in the dim light of the cottage, fixed its gleaming eyes on the trembling child at the threshold. With a voice that curled through the room like smoke—soft, inviting, but edged with hunger—it beckoned, "Come in, dear child. Don't be shy." The creature masked its impatience beneath a gentle smile, lips stretching over sharp teeth. "It's so good to see you." A bony hand, disguised beneath wrinkled skin, patted the patchwork quilt, urging her forward. "Come closer, so your poor old Grandmother can see you better." Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red hesitates at the doorway, clutching her basket tightly and peering into the dimly lit room, trying to make out her grandmother's face. Red hesitated at the threshold, her fingers tightening around the handle of her basket. The room was shrouded in an uneasy gloom, shadows pooling in the corners and swallowing the familiar features of her grandmother's cottage. She peered into the murky light, searching for the comforting lines of Gran's face, but something felt off—wrong in a way she couldn't quite name. Swallowing her nervousness, Red took a cautious step forward. "Grandmother, your voice sounds so strange—are you feeling alright?" she asked, her tone wavering somewhere between concern and suspicion, her curiosity warring with a prickle of unease as she edged closer to the bed. The Wolf stretches a trembling paw from beneath the covers, eyes glittering hungrily as he beckons Red to approach. From beneath the threadbare quilt, the Wolf extended a trembling paw, its claws barely concealed by the edge of a faded sleeve.

His eyes glinted hungrily in the dim light, tracking every hesitant step Red took. He forced a gentle rasp into his voice, shaping it to mimic Gran's familiar tones as he beckoned her closer, growling softly with feigned frailty. "Oh, it's just a touch of a cold, my dear—come nearer, so I can hold your hand." The invitation hung in the air, sweetened with false concern, while he tensed his limbs beneath the covers, patience sharpening his predatory intent. Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red hesitates at the foot of the bed, clutching her basket tightly and peering uneasily at the shadowed figure beneath the covers. Red hovered at the edge of her grandmother's bed, fingers tightening around the handle of her basket as she tried to steady her breath. The figure beneath the quilt seemed strange, limbs stiff and eyes shining with an unnatural brightness in the gloom. She leaned forward, her curiosity battling with caution, and let her voice tumble out in a whisper that trembled between suspicion and concern. "But Grandmother, what big eyes you have!" The Wolf blinks slowly, keeping his gaze fixed hungrily on Red, his claws hidden beneath the blanket. The Wolf blinked slowly, his gaze never wavering from Red, the barest glimmer of hunger flickering in his eyes. Beneath the blanket, his claws curled with anticipation, hidden from view. He tensed his limbs, the low rumble of a growl vibrating in his chest—a sound barely audible, yet undeniably predatory. Summoning the trembling timbre of Gran's voice, he beckoned Red closer, murmuring with calculated sweetness, "The better to see you with, my child." Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red takes a hesitant step closer, her brow furrowing as she studies the unfamiliar shape beneath the covers. Red hovered at the edge of the bed, uncertainty flickering across her face as she took a cautious step forward. The lump beneath the quilt seemed oddly shaped, and as she squinted, her curiosity overpowered her hesitation. Her brow knit in confusion, Red leaned in a little closer, voice trembling with a mix of wonder and suspicion. "And Grandmother, what big ears you have!" she remarked, her words lingering in the dim, uneasy hush of the room. The Wolf's ears twitch eagerly as he leans forward, maintaining his gentle facade while his eyes gleam with hungry anticipation. The Wolf's ears twitched with anticipation as he leaned forward, every inch of him a study in feigned frailty. Maintaining the gentle illusion of Gran, he let his eyes glint with a predatory hunger, barely masked by a practiced warmth. He tensed his limbs beneath the covers, ready to spring, and let a low, coaxing growl slip from his throat. "The better to hear you with, my sweet," he murmured, his voice laced with false affection as he beckoned Red closer, savoring the thrill of the hunt hidden behind his kindly disguise. Little Red Riding Hood (Red)Red hesitates, clutching her basket tightly, her eyes wide with growing alarm as she steps back. Red hesitated at the threshold of her grandmother's bedroom, the basket trembling in her grip. Something was wrong—her pulse thrummed in her ears as she took a cautious step back, her gaze fixed on the hunched figure beneath the quilt. The Wolf, muscles coiled and eyes glinting, offered a low, unnatural growl that sent a chill through her. Red's voice quivered as she forced herself to speak, alarm widening her eyes. "Grandmother, what big teeth you have!" she breathed, torn between dread and the desperate hope that she was mistaken. The Wolf bares his sharp teeth in a menacing grin, springing forward from the bed toward Red. The Wolf's lips curled back, revealing a jagged row of teeth in a smile that belonged nowhere near a grandmother's face. Muscles coiled beneath the threadbare quilt as he leaned forward, the soft growl rumbling in his chest a poor imitation of Gran's gentle invitation. Eyes glittering with hunger, he beckoned Red closer, voice dripping with mock affection as he purred, "The better to eat you with, my dear." Red openly questions these oddities, displaying both caution and bravery.

As the Wolf reveals his predatory intent, the Huntsman bursts in, axe raised, prepared to intervene. The Wolf, sensing the threat, warns the Huntsman to stay back and tries to negotiate, expressing his desperation and hunger.

Red, emboldened, refuses to be cowed, insisting that her grandmother deserves justice and urging restraint, not violence.

The Huntsman stands between Red and the Wolf, resolute in his protection but also willing to give the Wolf a chance to surrender.

The Wolf crouches low, lips curled in a snarl, eyes darting between the Huntsman and Red. His muscles tense, ready to spring, claws carving lines into the dirt. The Wolf crouched low, muscles coiling beneath his ragged pelt, claws gouging restless furrows in the damp earth. His lips peeled back in a snarl, breath hot and ragged as his eyes flickered between the Huntsman's rigid stance and the trembling figure of Red behind him. Desperation sharpened his voice into a guttural warning. "Stay back, Huntsman," he growled, each word edged with poisonous intent. "I have nothing left to lose." His tail lashed, punctuating the threat as he bared his fangs, hunger glinting in his gaze. "Every moment you stand in my way, my hunger grows sharper." He shifted his weight, a subtle invitation to violence. "Move aside, and maybe you both walk away with your skin intact." The Huntsman steps forward, axe raised, positioning himself firmly between Red and the snarling Wolf. The Huntsman stepped forward, muscles tensed and axe raised, planting himself squarely between Red and the cornered Wolf. His eyes never wavered from the beast's bared fangs. Voice steady and resolute, he declared, "You won't lay a claw on her while I still draw breath, Wolf—find your mercy, or face my blade." The words hung in the air, a clear warning forged from both courage and compassion, as he stood his ground, ready to defend the innocent at any cost. Little Red Riding Hood (Red) Red steps out from behind the Huntsman, voice trembling but eyes fierce, clutching her basket tightly as she faces the Wolf. Red stepped out from behind the Huntsman, her grip on the wicker basket so tight her knuckles blanched. Though her voice trembled with fear, the fire in her eyes refused to waver as she faced the Wolf, who snarled and snapped, desperate and cornered by the man's steady blade. "Please," she said, breath catching as she stood her ground, "don't hurt him." But her chin lifted, stubborn and brave. "I won't let you frighten me into silence any longer; my grandmother deserves justice." The words escaped her in a rush—half plea, half declaration—echoing in the tense air between predator and prey. The Wolf lowers his stance, muscles coiled, eyes flicking between the Huntsman's sword and Red's trembling hands, preparing to lunge. The Wolf lowered his stance, muscles taut beneath his ragged pelt, every sinew braced for violence. His yellow gaze darted between the gleaming edge of the Huntsman's sword and the tremor in Red's clenched hands, weighing his dwindling options. A guttural snarl curled from his throat as he bared his fangs, voice thick with hunger and bitter cunning. Mercy, he spat inwardly—mercy was for those who had tasted its sweetness, not for creatures hollowed out by hunger and regret. His bones ached with emptiness, a gnawing nothingness justice had never filled, not for her and not for him. And he knew, with a predator's certainty, that the Huntsman's blade would do nothing to sate the void yawning within. The Huntsman tightens his grip on his axe, planting himself firmly between Red and the snarling Wolf, his eyes cold with resolve. The Huntsman tightened his grip on the axe handle, planting his boots firmly in the mossy earth between Red and the snarling Wolf. His eyes, cold with resolve, never wavered from the beast's. "You speak of emptiness, Wolf," he said steadily, voice carrying the weight of a man who had faced fear before, "but I see only the hollowness of your choices." The muscles in his arms tensed, every inch of him poised and vigilant. "Step away from Red," he warned, compassion hardening into steel, "or this night will end with your hunger silenced forever." The tense standoff continues, with the Wolf cornered and desperate, forced to consider escape as the Huntsman prepares to strike if attacked.

As the echoes of the deadly struggle faded, a heavy silence settled over the cottage. Shadows flickered along the walls as Red and the huntsman surveyed the scene, the reality of what had transpired slowly sinking in. Injuries and trembling hands told their own stories, but the danger had finally passed. Now, with the Wolf defeated and her grandmother safe, Red faced the uncertain aftermath, where choices would carry consequences beyond the cottage door.

## Chapter 8: Aftermath and Consequences

Red kneels beside Grandmother's bed, gently tucking a woolen blanket around her frail shoulders.

The Huntsman stands near the open door, sharpening his axe on a whetstone while scanning the edge of the woods through the window, boots caked with mud from the clearing.

Red gathers scattered herbs and places them on a cracked table, determined to help Grandmother recover.

Grandmother, voice raspy, instructs Red to fetch water from the well and asks the Huntsman about the Wolf's fate.

Grandmother sits propped against her pillow, voice barely a whisper, hands trembling as she gestures weakly toward the door. Her eyes flicker with worry as she turns to the Huntsman, searching his face for reassurance. Grandmother's voice, though thin and raspy, was threaded with the same gentle resilience that had always soothed Red's childhood fears. She lifted a trembling hand toward the chipped enamel pail at the hearth, her gaze pleading but kind. "Red, child..." The words came softly, almost a sigh. "Would you fetch me a pail of water from the well?" She pressed a papery hand to her throat, her breath shallow. "My throat is dry as old kindling."

Her gaze drifted to the Huntsman, a flicker of anxiety shadowing her worn features. She gathered what strength she had, her frailty no match for the concern that trembled in her next question. "And Huntsman—tell me," her voice wavered, "what became of that dreadful Wolf? Is he gone for good?" Even now, illness could not smother the quiet resourcefulness in her eyes, nor the love that laced her every word. Little Red Riding Hood (Red) Red picks up the empty pail, glancing anxiously at the Huntsman as she heads for the cottage door. Red's fingers curled around the empty pail, her knuckles white with determination as she stole an anxious glance at the Huntsman. She tried to mask her worry for Grandmother, but her voice trembled with urgency as she promised, "I'll hurry to the well now." Pausing at the cottage door, she looked back toward the Huntsman, her eyes bright with hope and just a flicker of lingering fear. "And please, tell her—the Wolf won't trouble us ever again." With that, she swung the pail at her side and slipped out into the dappled sunlight, her resolve carrying her through the threshold and into the uncertain morning. The Huntsman lays his hand gently on the bedpost, offering a steady presence as Red slips out the door, bucket in hand, the tension in the room slowly unraveling. The Huntsman rested his calloused hand on the bedpost, a silent reassurance to both the weary grandmother and the nervous girl. As Red slipped quietly past him, clutching the bucket, the tightness in the air began to ease, the cottage exhaling a breath it had held too long. Meeting the old woman's anxious gaze, the Huntsman offered a steady nod and said in his calm, resolute way, "Rest easy, ma'am—the Wolf is no more; he won't cast a shadow on this cottage again." His words hung in the room like a sturdy shield, their promise as solid as his presence. The Huntsman replies, 'The beast won't threaten your door again,' then steps outside, leaving muddy footprints on the wooden floor, intent on checking the perimeter for any lingering danger.

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As dusk settled over the quiet clearing, the cottage glowed with warmth and safety once more, and for the first time in many nights, peace returned to the hearts within.