

## Chapter One: The Bread That Wasn't There

Nobody remembered the forest had a name, not anymore.

It used to be called something long and lovely, like *The Wildgreen Hollow* or *Whisperwill Forest*, but now people just called it ~~t~~he Forgotten Wood. Some folks said it was cursed. Others said it had swallowed up too many travelers to be anything but evil. But Hansel knew better. He didn't believe in evil forests.

Commented [HP1]: I would suggest taking another look at this name, maybe considering something more unique?

He believed in hunger.

"Did you take the last crust?" Gretel's voice was sharp and already tired, even though the sun was barely up. Her eyes were narrowed slits as she glared at the empty bread tin.

Hansel wiped crumbs from his lips quickly. "No."

"You did!" she groaned. "That was supposed to be for both of us."

"I was hungry!" he said, and then, softer, "I'll ~~find~~ get more today."

Gretel ~~didn't answer right away~~. She stared ~~atout the~~ a small, cracked window, watching the morning fog stretch and sigh against the crooked trees in the distance. Their hut sat at the edge of the village, and beyond it was the forest—dark, tangled, and much too quiet.

"There isn't more," she finally muttered. "The ~~village baker's~~ ovens haven't ~~baked in~~ been cold for a week. ~~The baker~~She's gone. So ~~i~~'s the miller. And Mama..."

Hansel swallowed hard. He didn't like thinking about Mama. She ~~had~~ left months ago with the village elders to "search for new land," but none of them ~~had~~ ever ~~co~~ame back. People said they ~~got~~ were lost, or worse. The village was shrinking, ~~stale~~ like bread left out too long—drying up and flaking apart. Only the children remained now. The children and the shadows.

Commented [HP2]: I would recommend replacing this with a description of why the village needed new land. For example:

... months ago with the village elders to search for new land—a place unaffected by the blight rotting all the grain. But none of them had ever come back.

"We'll go in," Hansel said suddenly.

Gretel blinked at him. "Where?"

"The forest. We'll go today."

She laughed once, ~~humorless~~. "You're a fungus-brained ~~lunatic~~loon."

"There's food in there. I know it." ~~He~~ Hansel stood up and grabbed his slingshot from the wall, where it hung like a limp vine. "We don't have any ~~more~~ other choice."

Gretel shook her head, but she didn't argue ~~again~~. That's how bad things were—bad enough for his sister, who hated dirt, bugs, and getting her boots muddy, to follow him into the trees ~~people feared crossed themselves to avoid~~.

**Commented [HP3]:** This is a bit confusing—I would suggest either rewording it or changing it to something like I've indicated here.

They left just after the ~~church bell~~ ~~clocktower~~ chimed ~~once for the morning-noon prayer hour~~. No one ~~was there to~~ ~~stopped~~ them. ~~Nobody even looked up~~.

**Commented [HP4]:** I adjusted the first sentence mentioning the church bell because if there's essentially no one left in the village, who would ring the bell for prayer? A clocktower would be automated, avoiding the confusion. The second sentence adjustment was for the same reason—who would be there to even look up as they leave?

The trees swallowed them fast.

It was different than they expected. The forest didn't seem dead—it hummed. The moss glowed faintly green, and leaves rustled in a breeze they couldn't feel. A sparrow darted past Hansel's head and vanished between two gnarled branches shaped like elbows. Gretel held her scarf over her nose.

"It stinks like wet ash," she ~~muttered~~ ~~said~~.

**Commented [HP5]:** Don't be afraid to use "said" the majority of the time. Also, this could be a place to use some description, like:

"Don't be such a daisy," Hansel said. "Look—those might be mushrooms over there."

"It stinks like wet ash," she said, her voice muffled by the knitted wool.

He scampered off the path, which was really just a faint line of flattened grass, and crouched beside a rotting log. "Yep. Puffcaps. I think these are edible?"

"You *think*?" ~~she~~ ~~Gretel~~ hissed. "You *think*?! You said you read the forager's guide!"

"I skimmed it! It was missing pages!"

Gretel groaned ~~into her scarf~~. "If I die of mushroom poisoning, I'm going to haunt you ~~so hard~~ ~~for the rest of your miserable life~~."

**Commented [HP6]:** Edited for tone! "Haunt you so hard" brings the reader out of the story a bit, as it feels like a very un-fairytale thing to say.

Hansel ignored her. He poked the puffcap with a stick and it deflated in a ~~puff cloud~~ of greenish ~~smokedust~~.

"Ew."

"~~Yep~~ ~~Nope~~. Not edible," he ~~confirmed~~ ~~said~~.

They walked ~~in silence~~ for a while after that, pushing through brambles and odd thickets of blue-leaved trees that ~~didn't belong anywhere near this part of the continent~~ ~~neither of them had ever seen before~~. Birds cawed in ~~triplicate~~ ~~ets~~, and once, a branch fell behind them with a loud *crack*, but when Hansel turned around, there was nothing there.

*Just a squirrel*, he told himself. ~~Probably~~. *A really... ~~hefty~~ ~~fat~~ squirrel.*

“We should’ve left crumbs [along the path](#),” Gretel whispered.

Hansel rolled his eyes. “That’s a fairy tale thing. Crumbs don’t work. Birds eat ‘em.”

She frowned. “Then how are we supposed to find our way back?”

Hansel hesitated.

“...I [might could](#)’ve tied string around some trees near the start.”

“You [might could have](#)? Hansel!”

“I was *going to!*” he protested. “But then you rushed me and said—wait, wait—what’s that?”

They both stopped.

Ahead, through the trees, was a glimmer. Not sunlight—this light was too pink, too sweet, almost like the glow from [crystalline rock](#) candy when you hold it up to a window. The air smelled...-warm. Sugar, cinnamon, and a little something darker, like burnt caramel.

Hansel stepped forward. So did Gretel.

The forest opened suddenly. Not into a clearing—into a *yard*. A real yard, [but](#) trimmed with gumdrop bushes and licorice ~~root~~ fences. In the center stood a cottage, small and crooked, with [white](#) frosting along the eaves and peppermint shutters. The walls were made of gingerbread, or something that looked very much like it, though it shimmered oddly in the light, like it was covered in thin glass.

“Is that...?” Gretel whispered.

“Yeah,” Hansel breathed. “~~It’s real.~~”

“But how?”

“I don’t know.”

They stared in silence for a minute. Then Hansel took a step forward.

“Wait,” Gretel grabbed his sleeve. “What if it’s a trap?”

He looked back at her. “We’re starving.”

She didn’t let go.

“What if it’s *hers*?”

Hansel didn't ask who she meant. They both knew the stories—the woman in the forest who lured children [into the dark wood](#) with sugar and never let them leave. But that was just [a bedtime nonsense story](#), right? Just another tale meant to keep kids out of the [Forgotten Woods](#).

Still...the air felt heavier here.

A curtain in the candy window twitched.

Hansel froze.

"...Did you see that?" he asked.

"Yeah," Gretel said. "Someone's inside."

The cottage door creaked open slowly. [But n](#)No one stood in the doorway.

And then a voice floated out—soft, sweet, and [strangesickening](#).

"Come in, children. You must be cold. And oh-so hungry..."

Hansel took a step back.

Gretel didn't move.

**Commented [HP7]:** I love the alliteration here! However, I'd love to see a word more specific than "strange." What's strange about it? As an example, I put "sickening."