

Grace of a Wolf Book 2

Grace of a Wolf Chapter 3 - Grace: Protector Chapter 3: Grace: Protector

The wind steals every bit of the warmth the strange wolf had gathered, and I crouch behind a tree to block the worst of it.

A slinking shadow skulks forward, slowly coalescing out of the abstract darkness of the forest.

Andrew.

His lithe wolf body slinks forward, lips curled back in a snarl.

My mysterious protector tenses, fur bristling along its spine. Another low, menacing growl rumbles through its chest.

Andrew's head snaps back, releasing a bone-chilling howl that echoes through the forest. Answering calls rise from all directions. I know those sounds. The pack is coming.

Whoever my furry furnace is, he isn't known to the pack. Which means he's an intruder—which means...

The massive wolf at my side snarls, snapping its jaws at the air between itself and Andrew. A clear warning for him to keep his distance.

"Shit." My soft whisper is enough for my protector's ears to swivel in my direction, and I press myself against the tree trunk, hoping I don't get in its way. No, not *it*. Him, I think.

His identity might be a mystery, but he still kept me warm and safe, at least for the last few hours. I don't want him hurt.

Pressing a hand against his flank, I whisper, "You need to go. They're all going to come for you."

The massive wolf beside me throws back his head, unleashing a howl that shakes the very earth beneath my feet. The sound reverberates through my chest, a primal force that steals the breath from my lungs. Even Andrew, cocky and aggressive moments ago, shrinks back, his ears flattening against his skull.

As the last echoes fade, an eerie silence descends upon the forest.

Then, like a dam breaking, answering howls erupt from every direction. The predatory sounds have goosebumps erupting, as if they weren't already pimpling my skin, and I shudder even without the wind.

Andrew recovers quickly, circling us with renewed aggression. His lips curl back, exposing gleaming fangs as he snarls. My protector responds in kind, hackles raised and muscles coiled tight beneath his thick fur.

This isn't my fight, but I'm somehow caught in the crossfire all the same.

The clash comes without warning—at least for me. Some signal I don't recognize has them both darting forward in a whirlwind of fur and fangs, snarls and snaps.

My protector's massive size gives him an advantage, but Andrew is quick and nimble. They tumble across the forest floor. Andrew occasionally escapes the strange wolf's jaws, darting away a few steps with his tail tucked, before dashing back in.

He knows he's unmatched; his body language screams that he's on the defense, even to someone like me, who's rarely seen a true wolf fight. I'm not often around when the betas fight with each other.

I can barely follow the action, but even I can see the moment the tide turns. My protector's jaws close around Andrew's hind leg, and the smaller gray wolf lets out a piercing shriek of pain.

The sound cuts through me like a knife. Andrew might hate me, but he's still Rafe's best friend. Still someone I've grown up with for the past several years...

Andrew wrenches free, limping badly as he scrambles away. His yelps of pain fade into the distance as he flees, leaving behind tufts of fur and spatters of blood on the forest floor.

Relief floods through me, but only for a second. Reality slaps into me as my protector stands tall and arrogant, watching Andrew's pathetic retreat.

The rest of the pack is coming. I can hear them drawing closer, their howls growing louder with each passing second. My wolf isn't safe.

My mysterious protector turns back to me, his storm-sky eyes gleaming with what almost looks like satisfaction. But there's no time for that now. He needs to leave, to get as far away from here as possible before the pack descends upon us.

Without thinking, I dash forward. My palm connects with his hindquarters in a resounding smack that startles us both. "Go!" I yell, my voice cracking with desperation. "Run! You need to get out of here before they come!"

The wolf whirls around in a sleek movement that has me cringing, preparing for retaliation. But there's no time for regrets. "They're coming. All of them. You need to keep yourself safe. Go!"

He tilts his head, one paw raised as he inspects me. A wolf's gaze is intense, but this time I almost feel like prostrating myself to the ground and lifting my neck. Like I'm a wolf myself.

There's a presence to him that even Alpha lacks.

He can't be some random shifter. He must be another alpha wolf himself—a rogue, probably.

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The approaching howls have me almost in tears from frustration. The pack is close now, too close. Any moment, they'll burst through the trees.

"Run!" I shout again, waving my arms. "Get out of here!"

The wolf takes a step toward me, and for a wild moment, I think he might try to drag me along with him. But then he pauses, ears swiveling as he tracks the sounds of the approaching pack.

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Our eyes lock one final time, and I swear I see something like regret in those dark gray depths. Then he's gone. The massive form melts into the shadows of the forest, leaving me alone once more.

I slump against the nearest tree, suddenly exhausted. All my adrenaline dumps in an instant, leaving me shivering against the rough bark. My hands shake as I run them through my tangled hair, wishing I didn't feel like sobbing at my protector's absence.

The pack is coming. With all of them here, at least *one* of them should have the presence of mind to bring me back to Alpha and get me away from this hunt. It should be long over by now.

But home doesn't feel very much like home anymore.

Rafe was my only ally in this pack. Without him, I'm a miserable and lonely human, adopted on a strange whim even Alpha's never fully explained. Just that he knew my parents long ago.

He takes care of me well enough, I guess. But he isn't *home*. Not like Rafe.

And now I'm alone, without even a furry furnace to keep me company.