

Chapter 104 Red Alert

3rd Person

By dawn a red alert emergency order was spread through the Nightfang Pack on every TV screen, radio station and webpage. The Alpha's pups were missing, believed to be kidnapped by Eve Mechant and in grave danger. The entire pack was ordered to be on the lookout for any of the children or Eve, with search parties quickly filling every corner of the territory.

Far from Eve's hideout on the city's outskirts, the pups huddled together in the back of a windowless van, their young ears tuned to the conversation happening on the other side of the locked doors. It was hard to focus on what was happening: they were tired, hungry, frightened and desperately needed a restroom, but they were also curious and on the lookout for any opportunity to escape.

The men who took them from the alley had been callous and rough with the children, but otherwise hadn't harmed them. After shoving them into the van they didn't say another word or even acknowledge their existence, instead starting the engine and speeding off into the night. They'd been driving for what felt like hours, and when the van finally stopped the shifters jumped out and left the pups on their own. The air smelled a bit salty and every now and then they heard something which sounded like a foghorn blaring in the distance. If only they could see outside!

Soon after the kidnappers disappeared, they returned with a fourth partner, hovering outside the van and speaking in low voices. The fourth member was a woman, and from the sound of it, she was the true ringleader of the gang. Unlike her colleagues, she'd seen the kidnapping alerts blaring on every news outlet, and she had the sense to realize that the four children in the back of the van were very likely the Alpha's missing pups.

"What do you mean, you found four pups in an alleyway?" She was asking, "you didn't take them, did you?"

"Of course we took them! It was too good an opportunity to turn down." One of the kidnappers answered, "they were right there like lambs for the slaughter."

"Those lambs probably belong to the Alpha!" The woman informed them angrily, "it's all over the news that his children are missing."

"One of the girls did say their father was an alpha." The tallest man, distinctive for his unusually deep voice, noted.

"She said an alpha, not the Alpha." One of his compatriots argued. "Besides, what would the Alpha's pups be doing alone in that part of town – and in the middle of the night no less."

"They were kidnapped, they probably escaped." The woman gritted out, "Where are they? I want to see them."

After a moment of muffled shuffling, the double doors at the back of the van clicked open, swinging outward as the kidnappers gradually came into sight. Standing in front of the three thugs from the alley, was a fierce looking cat shifter dressed in black leather, with her hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun. She didn't look as frightening as the others, but she also didn't look friendly either. She took in the sight of the wide eyed pups, then whipped around to berate the men.

"You idiots," she hissed, "you didn't notice their resemblance to Blackwell? You didn't recognize the little one? She's been in the tabloids since she was born!"

"It was dark!" The men answered helplessly.

"It was dark?" She repeated fiercely. "Is that what you're going to tell the Alpha when he finds us, 'Oh, we're sorry we kidnapped your children, the lights were out. Honestly, how many sets of quadruplets do you think are in this city?'"

"It's not our fault, they didn't tell us." The third man argued weakly.

"I don't understand." The tall man admitted, "isn't this a good thing. The Alpha is the richest man on the continent, we can ransom those pups for their weight in gold."

"Gold won't do you any good when you're dead." The woman bit back. "The Alpha will kill you for laying your hands on them, without a second thought. You know his reputation."

"But we didn't know! We can give them back and say we found and rescued them. He might even give us a reward." The first man insisted.

"I swear, you three dumbasses are going to land us all in a grave." The woman cried, throwing her hands up. "They're children, not lost pets who can't explain what happened. They'll tell their parents everything – they'll tell them you took them."

"We won't!" Ryder exclaimed, drawing their attention. "If you take us home, we won't say 'nything. We just wanna go home, we'll tell them whatever you want."

"See!" The same man insisted, "we can make it work."

"No we can't." The leader sighed. "Whether they talk or not – how do you think it will look for convicted traffickers to turn up with the pups and say they miraculously found them? No one in their right mind would believe that!"

"I might." The shortest man shrugged.

"That's because you were dropped on your head too many times as an infant." She countered. "No – you leave this to me, we have to get them off our hands and fast, and then we need to get out of town for a while."

"But who would buy them?" The tall man questioned, "you just said it would be suicide."

"No one on this continent would." The woman mused aloud. "Maybe we can kill two birds with one stone. Get out of town and find someone to take the pups in one go?"

"It would have to be someone pretty brave to take on that risk." One of the shifters posited.

The woman grinned now, a cruel, lethal glint in her dark eyes. "What do you know about King Aimon, in the Southern Isles?"

"Not much." The tall man confessed, "just that he's been building his power a lot in recent years."

"That's one rumor." The woman conceded, "another is that he hates Ethan, he's jealous of his wealth and influence, and he'll take any opportunity he can get to undermine him."

"How do you know that?" The first man asked.

"Because I have friends other than you dolts: privateers who work the shipping lanes in the region." She announced.

"You mean pirates?" The shortest thug muttered curiously.

"Hey, I don't call your friends names." She quipped.

"No, you just call us names." He grumbled under his breath.

Oh stop whining and get them to the docks." She ordered, turning to the pups with a wide smile. "Guess what kids, we're going on an adventure."

"I don't wanna go on an venture." Riley told her stubbornly.

"Too bad." The woman sneered. "By this time next week we'll be halfway to the Southern Isles, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

Riley, Paisley, Parker and Ryder exchanged nervous glances. They were still praying their Mommy and Daddy would find them, but the more time that passed, the less likely it seemed.

They knew that for the foreseeable future they had to look out for each other, for there was no telling when – or if – Ethan and Jane would rescue them. They clasped their hands and nodded in agreement without ever saying a word. They would get through this together.

Jane and Ethan returned to the penthouse around mid morning. The pups trail had gone cold hours earlier, but neither Ethan nor Jane had been willing to give up the search. It wasn't until Jane was practically falling over where she stood that Ethan decided they had to stop – if only to rest.

When they got back to the apartment Jane shifted, but she couldn't bring herself to step past the doorway. She stood there completely naked, staring helplessly at the toys scattered across the living room floor. If the pups had been home she would have scolded them to pick up after themselves, but now she didn't give a damn about the mess or their tidiness. Ethan gently shut the door behind her, trying to nudge her further into the room. "Come on sweetheart."

Jane couldn't move. "Is it ever going to end, Ethan?" She asked hoarsely.

"Is what going to end?" He murmured, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind – knowing it would help ground her, but also needing to feel her skin against his, needing to feel her safe in his arms.

"This—" Jane whimpered, gesturing at the empty apartment. "The constant struggle. It's just one emergency, one disaster after another, and it never stops. I never have time to even catch my breath, before the next crisis is on me."

"I'm so sorry, Jane." Ethan professed, helping her turn to face him and cuddling her close. "This is all my fault, if I never believed Eve, if I never let her into our lives, none of this would ever have happened."

Jane shook her head, "We can't think like that now." She said, her lips moving against his skin as she took comfort in his scent. "It won't help anyone to place blame, including and especially not the pups."

"I don't understand," Ethan confessed, looking down at her. "Two days ago you would have gladly tarred and feathered me for all this. Has something changed?"

"Yes," Jane nodded, pressing her forehead to his chest and fighting back a sob, "Ethan, Everything's changed."
