

Retrievers

Alessia's head snapped against the forest's dirt floor with an audible crack, a flash of white light shattered her vision for a moment. She blinked several times before rolling to her side and planting her hands on the frozen ground. She didn't have a lot of time but she used the few minutes she did have to right her mind that was clouded and jumbled. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, ignoring her curly black locks that had come undone from her ponytail and was now a frizzy mess.

"Alessia, are you still with me?" Ritesh's gruff voice was hard to hear because it was breaking up as it came over her earpiece. She hoped that it was her concussion causing the poor connection and not damage to the earpiece, because Conrad was going to sell her soul to a Yokai if she'd broken it... again.

Alessia stood up and stumbled a little as the world started to spin around her. She grabbed a tree to keep from falling over. "Alessia! I need you over here!" Ritesh shouted, his voice cold and harsh, indicating that he was starting to panic.

Alessia tried to shake it off, but she needed a little bit longer. "You're going to have to give me a second, I still feel like I'm on a roller coaster." She said.

"Hurry up!" He snapped.

Alessia snorted, "Sure thing, let me just magic my brain damage away for you." she shook her head again, letting go of the tree, time was running short. She started back towards Ritesh at a slow pace, anything faster and she might puke. The scene she burst back in on was worse than she'd been expecting. Ritesh was on his back with his knee up against the vampire's chest to act as a barrier and keep a little distance

between them. He had a large gash on his head and the blood from it was dripping into his graying hair.

The vampire's teeth snapped out of his gums and he tried to dive for Ritesh's neck. Ritesh threw up his knife and the vampire pulled away, hissing like a snake. Alessia saw her wooden knife resting in the dirt a few steps away. Taking care to walk slowly and more importantly quietly, she slipped over towards it. Ritesh had seen her movements and punched at his opponent to keep the vampire distracted. Alessia grabbed her knife and flipped it so she was holding the tip of the blade.

With a smooth movement, she sent the knife streaking through the air. Something must have alerted her opponent because he looked back at her. With a shout of surprise, he tried to jump away, but Ritesh grabbed his wrist causing the vampire to fall flat on his face next to him. Ritesh then slammed his knife into the thing's neck. The vampire screamed in pain and tried to pull away but it was too late. Ritesh stood up and brushed off his leather pants, scowling at the figure lying still on the ground next to him.

Alessia had already dismissed the vampire as a threat and was studying the forest around them for the werewolf. "I think he's gone." She sighed. He'd left the moment she'd been thrown out of the fight, instead of helping his companion he had run, leaving the vampire to die. Most Mythics had a fierce loyalty to each other, apparently not these two.

"Are you alright?" Ritesh asked her as he leaned over the vampire to study the thing's fangs.

Alessia sighed rubbing her temples, "I'm fine, I think I might have landed on my earpiece." Ritesh nodded, kneeling, and gripping the fang. Alessia winced looking away, this part always made her skin crawl. Ritesh snapped the fang off causing Alessia to make a face. Once Ritesh had both fangs in hand he patted the vampire down, pausing at one of its pant pockets. He reached in and pulled out a small coin with the symbol of a crown stamped onto its front. He stood up and wrapped the fangs and coin in a silk cloth before securing them in his pocket.

"Did we get what we need?" Alessia asked.

"Yes, let's go."

"It's a pity the werewolf got away though. We're going to have to track him down before getting paid." Alessia sighed.

Ritesh shrugged, "It happens. Don't worry too much about it."

"If I had been paying closer attention and hadn't let him throw me like that then he wouldn't have gotten away," Alessia muttered.

Ritesh chuckled, "You wouldn't be the first Retriever to lose a werewolf, even Lamronaraps have trouble hunting them." Alessia made a soft humming sound, not agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. Retrievers and Lamronaraps both hunted Mythics that had broken the law; however, Retrievers only hunted those Mythics who had committed crimes that were punishable by death. In today's case, the vampire and werewolf were part of a crime circle that sold humans as a food source to hungry criminal vampires.

Lamronaraps were different, they hunted any Mythic who broke their laws and brought them to justice. They were pretty amazing at what they did and Alessia had

dreamed of becoming one as a little girl; however, she had quickly realized that there was a great deal of politics that went on inside their group. Besides Retrievers hunted criminals to better the world while Lamronaraps arbitrarily took down those who angered them. Alessia wasn't interested in all that, so she had joined with Ritesh instead.

"We should head out now, I doubt that the werewolf will come back. He'll run and hide somewhere in the Gated. We'll have Conrad start searching as we head to meet the Clan leader."

Alessia nodded, "Whatever you say, boss." She followed him back through the woods toward the road, still keeping an eye on the tree line, waiting for a vengeful werewolf to appear. However, Ritesh, like always, was right and they made it back to the truck without incident. Ritesh slid into the driver's seat and Alessia sighed as she sat down on the passenger's side. Her head was still pounding and she knew that it wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

Alessia opened the glove box and pulled out the bottle of Tylenol resting inside, she quickly opened it and swallowed a few of the pills, gagging a little as they went down. Ritesh snorted and threw her a plastic water bottle.

"Why am I always the one getting concussions." She whined.

"You're not, you just whine about them louder than I do." Ritesh said, pressing the voice control on his truck's dashboard, "Call Conrad." he said.

"Calling Conrad." A voice repeated back to him followed by the dialing tone.

"W-what's up boss." A young man asked through the speaker, his stutter making him pronounce several of the letters more than once.

“We lost the werewolf, he ran off after throwing Alessia a couple of feet. I need you to do your computer wise teck thing and see if you can track him down again. My guess is he went to hide in the Gated.”

They could hear the sound of a keyboard being typed on, “Is Alessia a-alright?” He asked.

“It feels like someone is ringing a gong right next to my ear.” Alessia complained leaning back in her chair with her eyes closed.

“I don’t know w-what that f-feels like.” Conrad replied, sounding confused.

“Unpleasant. It feels unpleasant.” Alessia muttered, of course he didn’t know what that felt like, he’d never had a concussion.

There was a pause then Conrad asked, “D-did you break my earpieces again?”

Ritesh rolled his eyes, “We’re going to have to call you back, we’re almost at the Clan’s hideout.”

“W-wait! D-did she?” He demanded, sounding annoyed.

Ritesh hung up on him, “Do you feel up to coming in with me?” He asked, pulling into a parking lot and getting as close as he could to the club's entrance.

“Of course, I’m not letting you go in there by yourself.” Alessia snapped unbuckling and stepping out of the truck to shiver as the cool night air hit her. Ritesh climbed out and they started to make their way across the parking lot and to the club's entrance. The night was still young so the vampire's hideout would be mostly empty; however, the guard was still at the entrance.

The vampire eyed them as they approached. “We’re here to see Elder Ruki.” Ritesh said before they had even reached him.

The vampire opened his mouth but Alessia cut him off. "Yes, we have an appointment."

"Jasper!" The guard called, not taking his eyes off the Retrievers.

A young man poked his head out of the club, "Yes, Victor?"

"Please inform Elder Ruki that his guests are here."

"Alright, give me a minute." The young vampire said pulling his head back in and disappeared from sight. The three stood in awkward silence for what felt like forever to Alessia but was really only a few minutes. Jasper stuck his head out of the door to look at them again, "Elder Ruki wants them escorted to his office immediately."

Victor nodded, "Take them in then." He stepped out of the way and the two followed Jasper into the vampire's hideout. The club wasn't open yet so the strobe lights and loud music hadn't started. Alessia looked around in curiosity, this was the first time she's been here when it wasn't crowded with vampires and blasting popular music to a deafening level.

Alessia followed her mentor down a flight of stairs and onto the dance floor. The stage was on the far side of the room and a band was starting to set up in preparation for the night. Alessia glanced back at Ritesh and jumped a little when she realized how far away he had gotten. She hurried to catch up to them as Jasper opened a hidden door that led down to a lower level. Alessia shivered slightly as she climbed down into the dark damp hallway only slowing when she was just a pace away from Ritesh.

Jasper passed several doors before stopping in front of a larger white door with silver paint around the doors trim. Jasper raised his hand to knock but just stood there with his

hand up staring at the door. Ritesh and Alessia looked at each other, eyebrows cocked as they waited, unsure of what else to do.

Finally, they got sick of waiting, “You're going to knock sometime this year, right?” Alessia asked, folding her arms.

“Yeah, it's just... I've never disturbed an Elder before, you know.” Jasper said, fidgeting.

“It's not that big a deal?” She snorted.

“Elders are the most powerful vampires in their clan, that's why they're the ones in charge. So a young vampire should be worried about angering one because they don't want to die. Be kind to the poor kid.” Ritesh admonished reaching forward and knocking for Jasper.

“Who is there?” A voice snapped at them from the other side.

“It's Jasper, Elder Ruki, I have the Retrievers with me.” He said quickly.

There was an audible sigh, “Send them in child. You can leave.”

Jasper opened the door and stepped out of the way so they could get past him.

“Thank you Jasper.” Ritesh said, closing the door and looking around the office. It wasn't large but it wasn't a closet either. A vampire with white hair and ice-blue eyes sat behind a large desk, paper stacked in front of him. He leaned back and eyed them. Alessia shifted a little forcing herself to not let him disturb her or make herself conscious. Elders always seemed to radiate a power that put her on edge.

“I'm glad to see you've returned Retriever Ritesh, I hope you have good noise for me.” Ruki said leaning forward.

Ritesh pulled out the silk cloth and slid it to the vampire. “Your rogue vampire is dead, but his partner got away. My team is looking for him now, but there's no guarantee that we will be able to find him.”

Ruki frowned, “That’s not what I wanted to hear, but I am glad that Birsha has been executed. That being said, I hired you so that those two’s criminal activities would not draw the attention of the Lamronarap Council. I hired you for a job and you said you would have it done by tonight, you haven’t fulfilled our agreement.” He said, pulling out the coin to eye it. All vampires in a clan held a coin with their Elder symbol stamped onto it. Ruki’s symbol was the Crown.

“We are aware that the job isn’t finished; however, you said you wanted to meet with us today, so here we are. I’m not here to ask for our pay... yet. We will be back for that when the job is finished.” Ritesh said.

Ruki nodded, “Is there anything I can do to help you find Birsha's partner?”

“No, we already have someone on top of it. We will do all we can to bring him to justice, Elder.” Ritesh said.

Ruki nodded and stood up, “I appreciate your effort.” He opened a safe that was tucked in the side of the room. He pulled out a small case, putting it on the desk and opening it to pull out a few stacks of cash. “I’ll pay you for half the job now. Come back when you find the other one, then I’ll pay you the rest.”

Ritesh grabbed the stacks and made them disappear into the cargo pockets of his pants. “Understood, have a good day Elder Ruki.”

Ruki nodded absentmindedly, “I’m sure I will, happy hunting.”

Ritesh pushed back out of the office followed closely by Alessia. “Why did he pay us?” She asked softly as they climbed back up to the still closed club.

“Elder Ruki is a kind man, I figured he would pay us a little, I didn’t expect half. He must be in a good mood.” Ritesh mused stepping out onto the dance floor.

Alessia snorted in disagreement, “He asked us to kill a member of his Clan, how kind can he be?”

“You have to remember that vampires join clans to be under the protection of an Elder. They pledge to abide by that Elder's rule and in exchange, the Elder protects them from other vampires, werewolf, and even Lamronaraps. When Birsha broke the law it meant that the Lamronarap Council would hold his Elders responsible. If Elder Ruki had killed him, there wouldn’t have been any recourse, but if he killed the werewolf then he could get in trouble.”

“Do you honestly think that the Lamronarap Council would punish him for killing a murderer?” Alessia asked, stepping out into the cool air, she was still learning to wrap her head around the political aspects of the Mythic world.

Ritesh laughed climbing into the truck, “The Lamronarap Council are a bunch of narcissistic, easily irritated, and self-serving pricks... so yes, they would punish him for it because it fills their ego.”

Alessia sighed as they turned out onto the main road, “I'm so glad I'm a Retriever and don't have to deal with that crap.”

Ritesh chuckled and opened his mouth but he was cut off by the phone ringing. “Answer phone.” He said.

“W-why d-d-do plants hate m-math?” Conrad's voice asked over the speaker.

Ritesh sighed, shaking his head but Alessia cut him off before he could tell Conrad to grow up. "Why?" She asked.

"Because it g-gives them s-square roots!" Conrad said with finality.

Alessia laughed a little at the stupidity of it, "I like that one!"

"W-what d-do you call a boomerang that d-doesn't work?" He asked again.

"This is the last one." Ritesh said at the same time Alessia asked, "What?"

Conrad waited a moment for dramatic effect, "A s-s-stick!" Alessia chuckles again.

"Do you want to tell me about the werewolf or do you want to keep telling stupid jokes?" Ritesh snapped.

"W-what do you c-call a pig t-that d-does karate?" Conrad asked, Alessia snorted having to cover her mouth to suppress her laughter. Ritesh shot her a glare and Alessia bit her lip looking anywhere but at him.

"Werewolf! Conrad, now!" Ritesh demanded.

Conrad sighed, "You're no fun, b-boss. I found h-him, you w-w-where r-right, his hiding in the Gated. Got a s-sister down there, he arrived at her home an hour ago. She's s-seems like a good woman. Two little ones in the house, s-so be careful not to h-hurt them. I'm s-sending you the address."

"How did you find him?" Alessia asked.

"Camera at a s-store near the apartment c-complex where the s-sister lives."

Conrad said.

"Do witch covens allow you to use their cameras?" Alessia asked.

“W-what the w-witches d-don’t know w-wont hurt m-me.” Conrad said hanging up.

“I feel like that’s a bad philosophy to build your life around.” Alessia said.

Ritesh shrugged, “I’ll talk to him about it, it’s always best to stay on a witch’s good side. Pull up the address, let’s see how late we have to be out tonight.” Alessia pulled up the address on her phone’s GPS.

“We’re in luck, it’s only twenty minutes out.” She said. The two fell into a comfortable silence as they drove. They pulled onto a side road that led to the middle of nowhere. Once they had reached the end of the road and were well isolated from humanity, Ritesh parked and climbed out. He walked to the side of the road and pulled out his flashlight, shining in on the ground as he looked around. Four metal stacks were barriers in the ground, each one had a flattened head with the same symbol scratched into it.

The symbol was actually the combination of several Celtic signs merged into one powerful spell designed to fulfill a witch’s need. In this case, it was the entrance to the Gated, one of many Mythic hiding places created and maintained by a witch coven. Most places wouldn’t let people in without screening them properly to avoid criminals because, like Ruki, they didn’t want the attention of the Lamronarap Council, but the Gated’s lead witch didn’t care.

Ritesh started to dig in the ground with his boot, drawing lines that had been placed hundreds of times before. As he connected the lines to make another Celtic symbol in the soil, the area around him started to glow a soft green and vibrate. With a

quick step, he moved back to the truck and got in as the vibration of the dirt became audible as a high pitched whine.

“I hate this part.” Alessia muttered as the vibrating dirt started to expand creeping towards their truck. As it passed by the front wheels of the truck started to sink as if falling into a vat of quicksand. Ritesh gripped the steering wheel tightly as the whole vehicle lurch downward, falling forward through the ground, plummeting them into blackness as Mother Earth ate them. After no more than a minute the truck's front wheels hit solid ground. Seconds later the back wheels did the same and the soil that had swallowed them started to flow back upwards to form a solid ceiling above them.

“See, that wasn't too bad.” Ritesh said starting the car back up and drove forward down the road that was now ahead of them towards the Gated's residential area.

“I will always hate that, no matter how many times we do it, I will always hate it.” Alessia said leaning forward as the lights of the hidden Mythic city came into view. They were several hundred feet under the ground, so the whole city relied on the witch's they paid to protect them. Witches cast spells that change carbon into oxygen. Witches' spell's kept the earth's crust from falling in and crushing them. Witches' spell's prevented human technology from finding them. The list went on and on.

These places were amazing to Alessia, the fact that a whole city of different races of Mythics could live in peace proudly being what they were was fascinating. Often dangerous, and potentially deadly, but still fascinating. They drove past the first few homes, they were run down and falling apart. Many of them looked no better than sheets of metal stuck together by a child's leftover gum, but the people here still preferred it to life on the surface where they had to hide what they were.

They passed the last of the makeshift houses and started to see some homes that were a little nicer. Shortly after that, they passed the first store, before seeing a few apartment buildings coming nearer.

Alessia was watching the map closely as they neared their destination. Ritesh slowed so she could look at the apartment names as they passed. "It's this one on the right." She said as she spotted the name on the short building. It looked like a bad motel out of an old movie, the paint was falling off the shudders and the main entrance was darkened as the light bulb that had once shone had been smashed years ago.

"This looks inviting." Alessia said, stepping out of the truck.

Ritesh chuckled, "Keep an eye out for the perp, I'll grab some more gear."

"I'll keep both eyes out for him, but if he goes out a back door then I can do nothing about it."

Ritesh nodded, pulling down the tailgate and looking over the rows of weapons. He selected two Raging Judge Magnum and loaded them with silver-tipped rounds. Ritesh pauses before closing the tailgate to grab an extra silver knife for him and Alessia.

"When we go in, our first priority is to make sure those kids are out of the crosshairs." Ritesh reminded her as he passed her the weapons.

"Don't shoot the kids." Alessia said cocking her revolver, "sounds like a good plan."

"Let's not traumatize them either." Ritesh said, walking up a set of wooden stairs half expecting them to cave under his weight.

Ritesh stopped by the door and waited for Alessia to take up her position by the door, handgun raised, before knocking. There was no answer and neither of them heard any movement inside, not surprising with how late it was. Ritesh knocked again, loader. He continued to do so until after a few minutes a soft, "Coming." Could be heard from inside. Ritesh stopped his pounding and waited patiently. The door opened a crack, a woman could barely be seen standing in her nightgown.

"Hello? Who are you?" She asked, running her hand through her messy hair.

Ritesh pulled out his badge and showed it to her, "My name's Ritesh, Ma'am, my team and I are Retrievers. We are here to collect your brother."

The woman's face fell and she lost what little color her skin had held, "I don't know where he is." She whispered, trying to close the door.

Ritesh put his foot in the way, "Ma'am, we know he is inside your home. If you do not allow us in then we will have to come in by force. We would prefer not to do it that way as we do not wish to endanger you or your children, please allow us to do our job. Your brother chose his path, don't let those bad decisions hurt the rest of your family."

The werewolf hesitated, Alessia was a little surprised that Ritesh was willing to lie to this woman so easily, they had no authority to enter the home without the ruling Covens permission; however, Alessia understood his concern, if they waited for permission and the perp found out they were here he might hold his family leverage to get them to leave him alone. They had to convince the woman to let them in now.

"He promised me he didn't do anything. He's innocent, please believe me. He's helping take care of us, he would never do anything so horrible." The woman

whispered. Alessia rolled her eyes, why were families so blind? Did she really believe her brother was a good man?

“I’m sorry ma’am, but we’ve had your brother on video selling humans as a blood source to vampires. Please step aside.” She still hesitated, so Alessia stood up and moved to where she could be seen. The sights of the gun seemed to make the woman realize how serious of a situation this was because she finally stepped back and opened the door.

Ritesh and Alessia cautiously entered, “Where is he?” Ritesh asked.

“He took the master bedroom.” She said pointing to a door just off the main entrance.

“Where are your kids?” Alessia asked, moving towards the closed door.

“Why?” The woman asked, getting visibly more upset.

“We need to make sure they are safe before talking to your brother.” Ritesh comforted her.

“In that room.” The woman said pointing across the room towards another closed door.

“Alright, please keep them out of the way.” Ritesh said, pulling out his revolver and moving to cover Alessia as she put her hand on the doorknob. She held up three fingers, slowly counting down, when she hit zero she opened the door quickly, entering the darkened room. She frowned as her eyes fully adjusted and she could make out the bed, the empty bed. She turned to check the sides of the room for the criminal, Ritesh came in behind her and closed the door with his foot.

“I don’t see him.” Ritesh said. Alessia nodded squinting at the shadows of a corner. Something was off about them, she studied it closer, was it moving? The shadow suddenly morphed into a large brown wolf as it lunged at her.

“Found him!” Alessia shouted, eyes widening. The wolf flew at her, his front legs hit her square in the chest. Alessia grunted as she suddenly found herself sprawled out on the ground with ten large claws digging into her chest. Ritesh raised his revolver but the werewolf snapped at his arm. Ritesh pulled back, saving his arm but the revolver was caught in the things massive jaws.

“Shoot him.” He called to Alissia. Alessia realized that her gun was several inches away from her grasping hand, well out of her reach due to the large wolf pinning her. She reached for her knife instead, wincing as the claws ripped her skin digging deeper as the werewolf snapped at Ritesh, forcing him to stay back.

“Are you alright kid?” He called, concerned at her lack of movement. Alessia grunted as she found the knife hilt by her belt and gripped it tightly.

“I’m just great.” She hissed pulling the knife out and slamming it into the wolf’s rib cage. The thing howled and tried to snap at her but Ritesh jumped at him forcing the wolf to look away from Alessia. Alessia pulled her knife out and went to slam it back into his side. The wolf must have understood what she was going to do because he jumped back off of her. Alessia scrambled back towards Ritesh, who stepped in front of her protectively. Alessia glanced at her chest for a second and winced at the blood-covered leather and cloth.

“Well, that hurt.” She complained, climbing to her feet.

“Go right.” Ritesh said, keeping his eyes on the werewolf. Alessia nodded and moved to the right of Ritesh, moving closer to the werewolf and her firearm that was still lying on the ground. The werewolf saw what they were doing and jumped forward to get in between them and the weapon. Ritesh growled and lunged at him. The wolf snapped at him and Alessia took the opening and joined the fight, slicing at the thing’s neck with her knife. The wolf jumped to the side then turned to bite at her but Ritesh pressed him again and the wolf backed up again, leaving her revolver in the open. Alessia and the werewolf noticed it at the same time and lunged for it. Alessia grabbed the handle at the same time as the wolf’s jaw dug into her shoulder, plowing her over yet again.

She snarled but kept her grip on the weapon this time. She jammed the barrel into the chest of the thing and pulled the trigger, sending a silver round into his heart. The wolf yelped, then went limp as life left his body. She grunted and shoved the wolf off of her, letting him slump to the floor.

“You alright?” Ritesh asked for what felt like the hundredth time that night.

“Fine, but I am so done with today.” she grumbled.

Ritesh nodded, “Go check on the sister, I’ll get the body out of here and clean up the room.” Alessia nodded, wincing as she walked out of the room. She was going to need stitches when she got home. She found the woman sitting in her children’s room, holding her two scared children and crying softly. Alessia crouched down next to her, feeling the harsh realization of what they had done to this family weigh on her. The woman was obviously struggling and her brother, though an evil dirtbag, had been helping her financially. Alessia pulled out her business card and set it down between them.

“I know this is hard and please believe me when I say I’m very sorry. If you need anything feel free to call me.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do. How am I going to pay rent now?” The woman whispered.

“I’ll help find you a new job, one that pays enough for you to move somewhere nicer and support your family. Is that something you’ll let me do for you?” Alessia asked. The woman looked at her in surprise but nodded. Alessia smiled gently at the children. She’d make sure they could move on.