

Mother, Daughter

I come from a line of women who don't fear the dark.

Aidan says that I'm good in darkness. Since daylight burns my eyes, I guess it's a compliment. He can handle the dark too (in fact, I think he sees better in it than me); he's just asked me to come outside with him tonight because it's September. Wandering striges come through our territory from up north around this time to get away from the impending winter, and they don't discern between prey and people. So it's safer to go outside in pairs.

Besides, most wanderers hate halfbloods.

So I've been waiting for fifteen minutes. It's pitch black outside; no clouds. We live too far outside of town to have streetlights. Bored, I focus on an old photograph we have on the TV stand.

Dad and my mother. We used to go on that Ferris wheel all the time until it was shut down and sold for scrap. Mother always made us go at night because the lights looked prettier in the dark. And besides, she detested daylight.

I see Aidan. He spots me through the window, and when he waves impatiently I motion that I'm coming. As I exit, I have to remember to lock the door. One of Dad's rules.

"You look like a girl," Aidan says as I walk up. He's not wearing a jacket, even though the air fogs when he speaks. The light purple pattern of striations running up his bare arms stands out faintly, like a bruise-coloured web; similar to mine, except mine are light blue. His eyes shine faintly gold in our porch-light.

I make a face at him. "No shit, *dhampir*."

"*Halfling*," he says.

I ignore the jab. Halfling's a word that the humans use for halfbreed faelings, like 'dhampir' for halfblood striges. They're the equivalent of yelling '*Halfblood!*' from across the room. 'Strige' and 'faeling' are Old Words for the purebloods; Fae names from the days before they interbred with humans.

"You know I could beat your ass," I say.

Aidan grins wickedly. “You could? Well, like mother, like daughter.” I try to shove him, but he dodges. “You feeling strong tonight?”

I shrug. “I’m normal. You?”

He lazily stretches his arms over his head. “I’ve got some energy to spare.” He gestures at the forest. “Want to race?”

I eye the trees. They’re tall, widely spaced, and almost all of them are leafless. Striges are probably out, but that just makes it dangerous. Besides, I could easily outrun one. “Race you? In my woods?” I laugh exaggeratedly. “To your place. You’re on.”

Without waiting for an answer I dash forward and leap into the air. Our road is built with a curve, with the inner side leading to a steep drop down to the forest floor. I land on a massive tree bough that creaks under my weight. Nimbly, I launch forward.

“Cheat!” Aidan yells, and I grin wildly. The sound of him catching up spurs me on. A twig whips me in the face as I jump. The pain stings, but adrenaline numbs it.

I run fast, maybe 20 miles per hour. But just as I think I’m winning, I misstep. The branch under my shoe snaps like a pretzel and there’s a split second of weightlessness; then my veins fill with a shot of ice and I plummet downwards. Instinctively I lash out and try to grab something, anything, and my right arm almost gets yanked out of its socket as I grab a tree branch only six feet off the forest floor.

I don’t hear anyone behind me. Aidan probably took a detour. “Son of a bitch!” I yell weakly. My heart pounds wildly, more from the thrill of survival than the threat of the fall.

My mouth tastes a little metallic from where I’d accidentally bit my tongue. I spit out a thick globule of reddish spit. Letting go of the branch I drop down, landing clumsily. A thick blanket of dead leaves squishes wetly under my shoes.

I’m alone. Normally I’d be fine, but there’s a gnawing feeling on the back of my neck that I’m being watched, and that I just happen to be crippled and on my own.

Worried that my arm may be broken, I try to move it.

Pain stabs through my nerves like molten lead and I almost cry out. I can't lift the arm past my waist. It's not dislocated, but something is definitely torn. I swear loudly and profusely, using several colourful expressions. I can't run like this.

"Aidan!" I say, grasping the arm to my side. It doesn't feel safe to shout. But there's no sound except crickets chirping and a lonely breeze that rattles the bare branches like dead bones. "Aidan!" I say a bit louder.

I'm about to panic. Before Mother left us three years ago, she'd come home at night covered with deep, bloody scratches, and her faeling eyes wide with adrenaline. Every day afterwards, a wandering strige would limp into town, half dead from shock.

The striges living around town never complained as long as people stayed out of their territories, but they always kept away from us. Even Aidan's father wouldn't come into our territory.

Aidan hasn't answered me; I mean, even he wouldn't leave me crippled in the woods during strige season. I've a feeling that he might not be alright, but I force it down. *He's fine. He's totally fine. He's just an ass. No need to panic.*

Another breeze rattles the branches. It brings with it the sweet, pungent smell of dead things. I force myself to take a deep breath. My breath fogs the air, and I shiver.

"Son of a *bitch*," I say loudly.

Frustrated, I look up. My heart drops down to my feet.

A figure sits in the tree above me. His strige's eyes shine fully golden in the faint light. Seeing that I've noticed him, he bares his teeth in a painful grin.

"Hi there," he says. "You okay?"

His voice is pandering, like he's talking to a toddler. He sounds like he's maybe twenty, with a New York accent. Definitely not female.

I try to sound calm, but my heart is pounding. "I'm fine."

He cocks his head. "But you're *hurt*. Didn't mama faeling ever tell you not to go where the monsters could get you?"

I try to look unintimidated, but he laughs. “You’re not as loud as your friend. Filthy halfblood.” Another flash of sharp teeth. “They always fight, but I like running.” He pauses dramatically. “Do you like running?”

Dread roils in my stomach as I avoid his golden gaze. My heart feels like it could burst. I swallow deeply. My throat is like sandpaper, overwhelmed with the foul aftertaste.

“No.”

The strige shakes his head, faking disappointment. “Wrong answer.” He drops down from the tree, landing silently. From here, deep purple striations stand out darkly under the skin around his face. His golden eyes are empty, like the dead skeleton of the lightless Ferris wheel.

My heart stops.

But as the wanderer moves to strike, a massive roar echoes through the forest. He falters, then his face contorts into an expression of fury and he roars back; a terrifying, unnatural sound.

Another roar answers him, just as loud and twice as strong. The deep bass note reverberates through the trees. The strige shrinks from it as though it’s physical pain, and bares his teeth like a dog backed into a corner.

There are two figures standing under the trees in the direction of the noise; one a fully grown adult and one younger. I recognize the little one. *Aidan?*

The adult one roars again and the strige flinches like a small child. As he does, his eyes flicker in my direction for a second, wondering if I’m a good enough prize to fight a fully grown challenger for.

But the adult moves as though to run, and the wanderer’s face pales. Wordlessly, in hateful respect, he backs off and with one last venomous look my way, turns tail and runs.

I realize I’m holding my breath.

The two figures come forward, Aidan and the other, who I recognize as his father and who eyes my injured arm with an air of worry. I’m grateful; I feel too weak to think.

Aidan looks as bad as I feel; his nose is bleeding down his neck, and he looks like he might have some broken ribs. “Christ, Ellis” he says raggedly. “Are you alright?”

I smile unconvincingly.

“Feral ones don’t care for territories,” his father says, staring off in the direction of the wanderer.

“No respect. Good thing you were close to the road.”

“Yeah,” I say. I suddenly feel extremely tired, and want nothing more than to go.

As we walk, I feel the eyes watching me. I can feel them sizing me up, wondering if I’m a worthy opponent. Someone who can fight.

Well. Like mother, like daughter.