

A Hunter Family
A Pack of Dawn and Destiny Short Story
By K. M. Shea

My parents were dead.

They'd been dead for a month, and sometimes I still woke up in the morning and was surprised because I didn't smell Mom's favorite coffee or hear Dad making breakfast.

Tears pricked in my eyes at the thought. I didn't even try to hide that I was silently crying as I sat slumped on a bench and stared at the ceiling.

I'd bawled enough in public over the past month that the tears were more of a constant companion than an embarrassment.

Who cares about something like being embarrassed when I lost my whole family in one night?

I ignored the wizards, shifters, vampires, and occasional fae that strode past my bench. Instead, I stared at the door and wondered why I'd been summoned to the Curia Cloisters today.

Maybe they finally figured out where they were going to place me?

I glanced at Jared of House Bellus who lingered near the door of the conference room I'd been summoned to. He was a thirty-something wizard who was serving as my escort for today. I'd been staying at House Bellus—the wizard House of the Midwest Elite, the top wizard in the area. But that was a temporary situation.

I was a hunter. I couldn't live with a bunch of wizards.

I was *supposed* to live with other hunters, but since I was the last of both the Sabre and the Ward hunter families, I was a legacy. Which meant that I'd never be able to take on another hunter name and would be expected to relaunch my own family. With the hunters already struggling to survive, no one wanted to take on a kid who wouldn't add to their family's power base.

Well, no one except the Quillons.

But I'll sign myself up to serve a bunch of vampires before I go to them.

It was Quillon hunters who had killed my parents. In an accident.

Everyone kept telling me it was a tragedy, and the Quillons tried to tell me they were honor bound to take care of me. But there was no way I was going to live with my parents' *killers*.

There weren't any hunter families left to try to pawn me off on, though. Unless they found a family overseas?

"Phillipa Sabre?" a woman called.

I sniffed as I stood up and turned around to face the door of the conference room.

The woman smiled at me and beckoned me into the conference room.

I tugged on the black sweater I was wearing, then cautiously followed her inside.

There were a couple of Curia Cloister officials inside that I recognized since they'd been trying to figure out what to do with me since the night my parents died, and an older couple I hadn't seen before.

I slid into an empty chair placed around the giant conference table and curiously studied the couple.

They looked like they were in their late eighties and were dressed like storybook grandparents.

The woman was comfortably plump with wrinkled but strong hands, white curled hair, and a black cardigan with red flower buttons. The man—her husband I assumed based on the way she clutched his arm—was bulky through the shoulders with a complexion that was a leathery tan color from days out in the sun, and had on a light blue dress shirt, trousers, and hiking shoes.

The couple smiled at me—their eyes a vivid shade of hazel—and my hunter senses jerked alert.

Wolves. They're werewolves. What are they doing here?

“Phillipa Sabre,” the woman began. “We called you in today because we’ve found a home placement for you.”

My eyes flicked from the werewolf couple to the lady, but I stayed silent.

The woman gestured to the werewolf couple. “Santos and Dulce of the Northern Lakes Pack have put in a request to adopt you.”

I must have heard that wrong. There's no way.

I scratched my ear and frowned. “What?”

“Santos and Dulce of the Northern Lakes Pack have put in a request to adopt you,” the woman repeated.

I stared at her, then gawked at the werewolf couple.

“Hello, Phillipa,” the woman werewolf, Dulce, smiled. Her voice was rich and warm—like vanilla—and she had a slight accent that seemed to make her words brighter somehow. “I am Dulce. This is my husband, Santos.”

The man, Santos, tilted his head slightly, then gave me a mischievous grin that was warm with an affection I didn’t deserve since I didn’t know them.

Who are these wolves?

“We’d like to adopt you,” Santos said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you need a home,” Santos simply said.

“But you’re *wolves*.” I turned back to the lady who was supposed to be finding me a home. “You can’t be serious about this. I’m a *hunter*.”

“I know it’s a little unusual, Phillipa,” the lady said with an insincere smile. “But it could work. There hasn’t been enmity between hunters and werewolves for decades. Both groups have moved on and have carved out places in society.”

She means there's no one else.

The thought sat in my stomach like a gym weight.

My parents are dead, I don't have any other family, and the hunters won't take me. No one wants me.

That wasn’t quite right. Apparently, there was a pair of werewolves who did want me—or at least pretended they did.

Maybe this is a gimmick, and they're going to make me do all the house chores or something?

But as I peered at Dulce, her expression was soft with so much love that it hurt to look at her, so I stared at the wall behind her instead.

“Phillipa,” the Curia Cloister lady started.

“It’s *Pip*,” I snapped.

I was so sick of being called Phillipa. My parents never called me Phillipa—I was Pip. I was going to be Pip.

The room was so quiet I could hear the second hand of the clock that hung over the door tick.

“Because we know what it’s like to lose family,” Santos, the male werewolf, said.

I blinked. “What?”

“You asked why we want to adopt you,” Santos said. “It’s because we’ve lost all our children. We understand pain.” The smile he gave me was one tinged with sadness, but still rich with the kind of warmth I used to see in my parents’ eyes. “You need a family—not replacements. We’ll never replace your parents, nor would we want to.”

“But you still need love and support. We’d like to do that for you,” Dulce added.

“Though maybe it’s a little presumptuous of us to put in an adoption request when you don’t know us.” Dulce patted her enormous leather handbag that rested on the table. “If you like we can be your foster family for a few months—until you’re more comfortable.”

I chewed on my lip as I looked from Dulce to Santos. “You don’t have any grandkids?”

“No.” There was a sad light in Dulce’s eyes. “No living relatives. Just us. Though we do have our Pack.”

They really do get it. They’re werewolves—we’re from completely different species. But they get it.

After a month of pain that threatened to rip my heart into two, that was more important to me.

I could fumble through being a hunter by myself. I could even wait to go after it until I was an adult. But now...I just wanted someone who understood.

“Okay,” I said. My voice shook—I was scared, but this was still my best option. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

Dulce and Santos beamed at me, and for the first time since the Quillon hunters had showed up at my house, some tiny part of me dared to hope that I might be okay someday.

“You want me to keep training as a hunter?” I scrunched my face up as I tried to sort through what that meant.

I sat in one of the three chairs pulled up to the tiny kitchen table while Santos and Dulce worked in the kitchen. I’d only been living with them for about four months, and while I knew their habits and they’d only ever been kind to me, I was still a little boggled by them. I mean, they were *werewolves*.

“Of course.” Dulce stopped chopping vegetables long enough to put her hands on her hips and eye me up. “When Santos and I die, we want to look your parents in the face and tell them we raised you to be a woman they could be proud of.”

Since I’d come to their tiny cottage in northern Wisconsin, they’d acted more like grandparents, which I was grateful for. Not just because I was afraid of being disloyal to my real parents, but because it was different. My entire life was different since I lived among *werewolves*. It made the transition easier because I wasn’t just learning how to live without my parents, I was adapting to an entirely new home situation.

“The Quillon family has offered to pay for your education and help us find tutors and teachers for you.” Santos stirred a bubbling pot. “But all of this is assuming you *want* to be a hunter.”

I bit my lower lip. “Can I?”

“Of course you can,” Dulce said. “You are a Sabre and a Ward! Why *wouldn’t* you be a hunter?”

“Because I live among wolves. It seems...weird,” I said.

“Nonsense.” Dulce went back to chopping. “You are free to be yourself—with us or the Pack. They’ll accept you no matter what.”

Santos tipped his head as he stirred the pot. “I think it’ll be good for the Pack to have a hunter.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because some of those wolves are too complacent and need their tails tweaked. And I think you are just the hunter to do it.” He winked at me.

“I’m not even in high school,” I pointed out.

“All the better then,” Dulce said. “It makes you closer to the ground—and the tails that need pulling.” She erupted into a belly laugh when she caught sight of my shocked expression.

“Ahh, mijita, you are too cute!”

“What does mijita mean?” I asked.

“It’s a term of endearment,” Santos explained. “Something like ‘little daughter,’ though that’s not a perfect translation.”

“Oh.” I shifted in my seat. “Okay.”

Santos and Dulce continued explaining what my new hunter training would look like, and I listened. Or, at least I tried to.

I was a little distracted by the bubbly warmth in my chest.

They really like me, and they want what’s best for me. They’re not trying to change who I am. They love me.

As I sat there, the passion in Dulce’s voice as she listed her demands for my not-yet-existent teachers, and the quiet support in Santos’ eyes chipped away at the rock that had replaced my heart when my parents died.

Maybe they really will adopt me...

“Happy birthday, mijita!” Mama Dulce loudly kissed me on the forehead, then patted my cheeks. “You are so grown up now! You were just a small chickpea when you came to us. Now you are so big and strong!”

“Yes!” Papa Santos puffed his chest with pride as he beamed down at me. “I bragged on you all last week after you threw Rio! You are such a good little hunter!” He tapped the tip of my nose, then kissed me on the temple and gave me a large, thin box covered in pink wrapping paper and topped with a bow that was nearly the size of my head. “Happy birthday, mijita,” he said, echoing Mama Dulce’s well wishes.

Years had passed since I’d been adopted. Happy years—I’d really lucked out with Papa Santos and Mama Dulce. They really had become my family, and they meant the world to me. They’d forcibly made a place for me in a Pack of wolves, tried to recreate some of the family traditions I had with my parents, and shared with me some of the things they used to do with their kids.

They were fantastic, and I loved them with my whole heart.

“Don’t just stare at your gift, open it!” Mama Dulce urged.

“Thank you!” I ripped the paper off my gift, revealing a wooden box that was polished to perfection. I curiously undid the latch, opened the top of the box, then almost dropped it. “Is that—are those...?”

Mama Dulce worriedly wiped her hands on her apron. “Do you not like them, mijita? We asked your teacher for help selecting them.”

“They’re fitted for you,” Papa Santos added.

I gawked at the matching, *silver tipped* daggers. “These are edged with silver.”

“Yes,” Mama Dulce said.

“Silver weapons are used for fighting werewolves.”

“Yes,” Mama Dulce repeated, though this time it held at least a pound of her sassy snark that communicated she was wondering if I’d woken up stupid that morning to state an obvious fact.

“*You’re* werewolves,” I said. “You shouldn’t be giving me a weapon I can fight werewolves with!”

“Why not?” Papa Santos asked. “You’re a hunter. You’ve been training to be a hunter. We’re proud of your accomplishments.”

“It just...it’s not...you can’t,” I said.

Mama Dulce rolled her eyes and elbowed Papa Santos. “She’s just being a teenager and exerting her own will.”

I laughed, a bubbly feeling filling my stomach. “I’m not, it’s just...” I stared at the daggers, then dared to pick one up.

The grip was perfect, and the blade was beautifully balanced. This wasn’t a cheap practice weapon. They’d been hand forged. *For me.*

I hiccupped a little, then set the dagger back in the velvet inlaid box and put the box down on the tiny kitchen table.

I turned around and threw my arms around Mama Dulce and Papa Santos, pulling them into a three-way hug. “Thank you,” I said. “For everything. Thank you.”

Mama Dulce brushed my hair off my forehead. “Of course, mijita.”

“We love you so very much,” Papa Santos rumbled.

We stood in a huddle for a moment, until I finally pulled back. “I love you both, too.” I scrubbed at my eyes, which were glazed with tears I was too stubborn to shed.

Papa Santos chuckled until two bossy meows erupted from our feet. He squatted down to pick up Princess and Prince, slinging a gray cat over each shoulder and murmuring to them as they immediately started purring. (Though when they saw me looking, they took the time to hiss at me—the little brats. They adored Papa Santos and Mama Dulce, but had no love for me.)

Mama Dulce gently patted my upper arm, then hustled into the kitchen to stir the scrambled eggs. “Come—eat! I made your favorite sweet rolls and iced hot chocolate. All that’s left is for the eggs to finish.”

My throat tightened as I set my hand on the wooden box, which meant more to me than I could explain. “Okay.”

The End