

THE HUNTRESS

by Sharon Reynolds

She woke to the sound of hushed voices and tiptoed to the bedroom door.

"Do we really have to do that so fast?" the policewoman asked into the phone arm. "She's just lost her parents, for God's sake."

Jamie closed the door quietly. She knew what the woman was saying. It had been only three days since the murders. The psychologist assigned to the little girl, had said that she was still in shock. Hence no tears. In fact she had become very self-assured and defensive. They could not know that Jamie had always been that way.

Her father had been a survivalist. A man who had desperately wanted a son. Given a daughter. He had made the best of it. Jamie was supposed to have been James Jr. He had taken no argument from his wife about the slight name change to Jamie. When she was old enough to understand, he treated her like a boy. As such, her father loved her and she exceeded many of his expectations. A natural tomboy, she detested anything feminine. Taking her pleasures in sports, hunting, fishing and camping were her favorites.

The three of them had planned the trip to New York for a long time. Her father had had some business to attend to. Then they were all going to New York state country for some hunting. This time with arrows.

James had prepared his daughter well. On her eighth birthday he had given her a crossbow - one sized and weighted just for her. - an expensive and dangerous toy. She had made him proud by learning how to use it quickly. Even fashioning her own arrow bolts for it.

They had not been in the city for two days when tragedy struck. Jamie had been sent down to the restaurant to pick up the sandwiches for their trip. While she was downstairs, a burglar had broken into the hotel suite. In a fire fight, both her parents and the thief were killed. She had been the one to call the police.

Quietly, she closed the door and looked around the bedroom. Her duffle bag with her camping supplies was still in the closet, as was her crossbow. The police had left it there, thinking it had belonged to James. Quickly she hurried over to the closet, slipped out of the nightgown they had almost had to force her into, and pulled out her comfortable shirt and jeans. Tennis shoes and a leather coat with tassels off the shoulders rounded off her favorite mode of dress.

Over one arm, she put the strap of her backpack. Over the other, her bow and quiver. No one was sending her to a place for girls. Opening the window, she slipped out, closing it behind her. Grabbing the first rung on the iron work, she hurried down the fire escape and off into the night.

Jamie had never been to the city before. Any large city. Her father had owned a large farm in Wisconsin. Yet, here she was, walking the night time streets of downtown Manhattan. The streets were poorly-lit despite the abundance of street lamps. The rain of the day before had made the street itself appear almost liquid. Black and forbidding. Still, she pressed on. A dark frown marred her oval face. She knew the police would not be able to find any relatives. Her mother had been an orphan. Her grandparents on her father's side, had been killed in a car accident only two years before. There was no one to put claim on her.

The night grew colder. She had no money, not that it would have helped. She wasn't old enough to rent a room anywhere. Still frowning, she stalked down an alley, stepping over a wino who had made his drunken

refuge near its entrance. In the back, near a stone wall, Jamie found a heap of garbage. Old boxes, plastic bags and trash. She noted a box a little less dilapidated than the others and reached over the trash to get it. She managed to pull it free, and shook out the old newspapers and styrofoam curls it had contained. Setting it up against a part of the wall that was less cluttered, she turned it upside down on top of her. Quietly she set a booby trap with the crossbow, just in case. Using her backpack as a pillow, she lay down on the damp pavement and closed her eyes. She was still angry. Sleep did not come easily.

Vincent stepped cautiously from the shadows of the foliage that had grown up around the junction pipe tunnel entrance. Since the last large rock concert, the custodial people really had not done much with the park. A sparkle lit his incredibly clear blue eyes. So much the better for him.

It was a warm summer night, though still a bit damp from the rain of the night before. The scents of flowers, wild and domestic mingled in the pleasant breeze. The kind of evening where putting one's bare feet in a cool pond would be the ultimate thing to do. Yet Vincent knew that such pass times were not for him. Not Above. Father had lectured him over and over again about the evils of the world Above. What people would do with him. To him if he were every caught. He had almost been killed by a car as a child there, all for the sake of a wish. Still, the park offered a solitude that was not possible Below.

Over the years, he had learned to become one of the shadows. Eight years of serious practice had made him as quicksilver as the lion which he so resembled, and as hidden as the mythical unicorn. Vincent smiled, thinking of unicorns, feeling the freedom of the night, letting it fill him with the joy of being.

His last birthday had brought official manhood to Vincent. Though his physical growth had come some time before, he was twenty-two, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, and six foot two inches tall. From a small sickly infant to the tallest most respected member of the community had been quite a step. Father had nominated him to be a part of the Council, though that decision had not come to a vote yet.

Quickly he moved to a place within the night shrouded ramble that he called his own. A thick length of ancient hedging that had been overgrown by thorn bushes and weeds. Here, where the moon could be seen so starkly, still protected from passerby. He drew off the old woolen cloak and lay it on the grass split stone walk. Sitting down cross-legged, he listened to the nocturnal song of the park. His keen sense of hearing picking up every familiar sound.

Morning came with the stone cold realization that she was, truly alone. Jamie woke, instantly alert. Nothing had tripped her booby trap. She hadn't really wanted to hurt anyone anyway, but she had always been taught to protect herself first. She disentangled the twine that had set her crossbow and set the bolt back into her quiver. The bow she swung over her shoulder and pushed the box over. The morning's light was bright to her eyes. She squinted, hefting up her backpack.

An empty soft drink bottle skittered across the pavement as she kicked it. Two steps and she came upon it again. This time she kicked it with purpose. It came to a halt at the mouth of the alley. The wino was gone.

The air smelled stale. Not like the clean breeze of home. The city had not yet awaken. She walked passed a deli that had just turned on their lights. Passed another store front. She paused only long enough to put several pennies into a gumball machine that sat just outside the door. Red, blue and white gumballs were dropped carefully into her coat pocket.

She frowned, trying to remember the way to the park. Her father had only been with her for the briefest

time during the trip. They had gone there by car. But he had made it special. She remembered the park. The carousel. The bridges and walks. Had made notes of everything, though at the time she hadn't thought she would have to use that information.

She stopped, tensing as a police car with full lights and siren passed by her. She let go a grateful breath as it continued on down the street. They would be looking for her too soon. There was only one place she could elude them. One place where her training would allow her to survive on her own, even at only ten years old. Central Park.

Jamie used the rest of the day to patrol the park. To familiarize herself with her new home. Only one mounted police officer patrolled this area of the park. She watched and timed him, using a stick as a sundial. The people came and went. Taking no real notice of her. The numbers of them thinned as the day drew out, only to reappear some time after six for a few hours. She sat quietly on a bench, eating a peanut butter sandwich she had made from the provisions in her backpack. The crossbow was tucked safely under the bench, but still in protective reach.

The sunset began to darken behind the trees. Soon the park would be empty. She ducked into the foliage as the policeman made his rounds again, just to be sure that there was no one in that area after dark. When he had gone, she took one of the lighted paths and went under a bridge. There the walkway split into a fork. One led off to a more maintained area, the other one filled with brambles and tall grass. She took the wider path.

Hands on hips, Jamie stood in front of the beginning of the briar patch. A faded wooden sign warned that this place was dangerous. Gave it a name. The Ramble. A quirk of a smile touched her lips. It was perfect! Wild enough to have attracted small local game animals, yet not so far from where she could collect bottles and such for money.

Vincent moved swiftly through the park. It had been several days since his last visit to his favorite place. The day Below had been trying, and he longed for the freedom of the night again. It was long after sunset. There would be few if any people in the park to contend with.

He stopped short as he approached the beginnings of the Ramble. There was something different. A broken branch here, a bit of crushed grass there. The night bird that usually greeted him, did not call to him as she always did. His eyes shifting nervously, he approached the foliage with more caution here. He cursed his cloak for the rustling it made over the low underbrush. Easing into the first half of the place, he saw no more than was usual. Still his senses kept sharp.

He came upon a rabbit snare and side stepped it. Someone was definitely in his secret place. Further on, his keen hearing picked up the sound of soft breathing, as if that someone were asleep. Vincent thought for a moment to retreat, but he had become too curious about someone who would prefer the Ramble to other parts of the park, especially at night.

He was about to continue his investigation when his foot fell on a pile of leaves containing a branch. What happened next was a blur of sound and pain.

The cry of the young girl he had just come upon. Her frightened face at seeing him. The snap of the branch and a swish, like a bird given to sudden flight. Pain from behind, that at first knocked him forward only to let him stagger back a step, until it seared through him and he dropped to hands and knees, then fully onto the ground. He had no time to cry out. No warning.

Jamie heard the snap as her booby trap went off. She kept low, knowing the arrow would sail above her. Yet,

as she looked up, a large shape moved to reach for her. She cried out in fright. Just as the arrow let fly.

Carefully she approached the still form, lying on the grass. It was draped in an old fashion cloak. A very well used one at that. The stranger had fallen face forward. Long golden hair spilled out onto the grass around the enveloping hood.

"Oh God," Jamie swallowed. "It's a street person." She knelt down quickly by the figure. Her father had told her about some of these people. To watch out for them. But unlike her father, Jamie had felt sorry for them. She shivered. Suddenly realizing that now, she too, was one of them. It had to be a man just by proportions, Jamie reasoned. Yet with long hair?

The arrow stood up out of his back. She hesitantly stepped between his legs and gripped it. One quick pull and it was out. She stared at the blood on its tip, grateful that she hadn't used one of her barbed arrows for the trap.

"Mister?" she questioned, pushing on one shoulder. "Mister?"

Vincent could not answer. He couldn't catch his breath. Jamie pushed harder with both hands, rolling him over on his back.

'*Oh God,*' she mouthed. Vincent saw the young girl's face twist into a mask of fear and revulsion. But, as if in a dream, she in the moonlight, the sounds began to fade. His eyelids fluttered and the darkness closed in on him.

He awoke to the sound of car horns in the distance. The calling of the night's insects. The crackling of logs and twigs on a fire. Warmth returned to his face and across his chest, where the strange tightness did not reach. The fire was small. Made in a stone urn. The cold chill in the air pricked the hair on his back. He was half-sitting, half-lying up against the base of an old statue. His cloak was draped around one shoulder and over his lap.

Breathing in was painful. He rattled with the movement. A hand to the tightness revealed it as the torn remnants of his undershirt. Used as a binding around his chest, bandages.

"Can you talk?" Jamie asked curious, as she poked at something that was in the hot coals of their fire with a stick.

"Y...yes." Vincent cracked. The girl's brown eyes never wavered far from him. It was not fear now, but mistrust.

"That's some costume," she commented. Vincent peered at her through the curtain of his long bangs.

"You know... that it... is not." He grimaced through the pain. Showing the white tips of his long canine teeth.

"I'd give you something, but I don't have anything for pain," she explained. "You'll just have to work it out." She gazed at him with more attention. "What are you anyway?" There was no malice in her voice.

Still Vincent dropped his head. He let it rest again against the cold stone statue base. Its coolness easing the pounding, and the nausea in his stomach. Beads of perspiration clung to his forehead.

"It's okay," she continued. "I'd say you're some kind of side show freak. Right?"

Jamie pulled the something out of the coals a little more. Looking again to the injured stranger. "You gotta name?"

"It... It's Vincent."

"Jamie... Does it hurt real bad?"

Vincent nodded weakly.

"I'm sorry," Jamie apologized. "But I gotta protect myself now. I'm all I've got." Vincent pulled his head up to try to see what she was doing. His eyes were watering, but not enough for him not to see the hindquarters of a rabbit that she had pulled from the coals. The skin was charred but edible. "You want some?"

"N... No." He closed his eyes, not wanting to watch her eat. Mentally he began to check himself. There was a cold wetness at his back in one large area. It seemed he had been pierced from behind, but the pain wouldn't let him centralize the area in his mind. Whatever it was, didn't seem to have come all the way through his rib cage, and luckily for him. It hadn't hit any vital organs. At least, he hoped not. He had glimpsed the small crossbow sitting up against a large rock near them.

His breath caught in his chest again. Forcing him forward in a fit of coughing. Jamie watched him closely, wiping the remnants of her meal on her jeans to clean her hands. When it had subsided, she pulled a piece of cloth from her back pocket and wiped the pinkly tinged saliva from one corner of Vincent's mouth. He leaned back again. Too weak to do any more. Allowing her to put an ear to his chest.

"Uh oh." She did not explain, as she hurried over to her backpack. "You're gonna need a doctor."

"N... No!" Vincent stammered. "No... Doc... tors."

"Oh yeah," Jamie thought. "They'd probably put you to sleep or something?" She eyed him, annoyed. "You know, I really didn't need this. All I wanted was a place to stay away from the police. At least until I could get some money together."

Vincent moaned, trying to calm his heart. To reduce his breathing enough so the pain would not be so intense.

Jamie looked sourly at him. "You're in trouble. Looks like my arrow went through a lung. Saw what happened like that in a deer once. It wasn't very pretty. If I can't get you to a doctor, you'll die."

Vincent closed his eyes again, berating himself for not listening to Father's warnings. "Father..." he whispered.

"Father?" Jamie echoed. "You Catholic? You want a priest?"

Vincent's breathing came in ragged gulps. His voice but a shadow of itself. "My... father," he tried to explain. "Doctor." He licked dry lips and tried again. "Tunnel..." He pointed the direction. "Father..."

"Oh come on!" Jamie put her hands on her hips. "Your father lives in a tunnel?" But Vincent could not answer. Again his coughing consumed him. "Okay... Okay." she said, trying to think. She danced nervously on the balls of her feet. "Tunnel, huh... Tunnel..."

Vincent lay his head back again, wheezing loudly. "Pipe.... Tunnel. S... .O... S." Jamie looked up. The morning would soon be on them. Somehow she knew that getting this Vincent person to his father before dawn was all that was important. But he was too big for her to carry, or even to try to haul. They'd never make it.

"Okay. I'll see if I can find this tunnel of yours," she said unconvinced. Quickly she ran from the Ramble in the direction he had pointed. With a little scouting, she found the junction tunnel. The inside was damp and smelled of mud and old masonry. Light from outside barely made it into the chamber. There was no one there. No sign of a camp. Nothing. Just walled off pipes and a large iron grate.

"SOS," she mumbled. "SOS." Finding a rock, she went up to the closest small outcropping of pipe and paused. Now how did that go? She fought to remember. James had taught her the basics of Morse Code, but the lessons were not fresh. How many dashes, how many dots? And why was she doing this anyway?

Father stood up at the loud old fashion signal. It was in original Morse Code. Not that modified by the tunnel dwellers. The emergency SOS. Young Pascal almost leaped into the office chamber.

"Father," he said worried. "It's coming from the outside junction chamber. The one in Central Park."

Children playing?" Father suggested. The SOS repeated.

"I don't think so. Up top it's around three in the morning. And.... Well....I didn't want to tell you. I promised not to but.... inent is up there."

"All right." Father's face flushed with an anger he knew he had to suppress. At least until they could find out what was going on. "Run, get Cullen and Sarah. Tell Cullen to meet me at the junction."

"Yes, sir."

Jamie nearly bolted when the secret door slid back. She had been banging away on the pipes it seemed forever. A younger man and an elderly one and one somewhere in between stood with lanterns in hand. The bearded man also holding a black doctor's bag.

"You Vincent's father?" she asked quickly. Father squinted in the lamp light. He couldn't tell if this stranger was male or female in the dimness. The eyes were almond shaped, the face oval, the clothes were like those of top side boys. But the voice was that of a girl.

"I am," he confirmed.

"Good. He's hurt pretty bad. He needs a doctor like right now!" Instant anxiety filled the older man's face.

"Then, by all means, take me to him." Father saw the pony tail swing as they hurried into the park. He had not had the time to ask her name. She was yet a stranger. Yet she was willing to risk the dangers of the park at night to help his son. Such courage in a child of her age was rare. Genuine concern had shown from the dirt-smeared face.

Jamie forced her feet still. She looked around the subterranean chamber for the fourth time. Away from Vincent, lying face down on a hospital like bed. The men hovered around him. She wanted to run away, to go back up to the park. She had kept foot pace with them during the long walk down, but there had been so many twists and turns, odd almost invisible doors, that she doubted seriously if she could find her way back on her own. It made her all the more angry.

She spotted a beaten up chair and sat down. Her feet swinging with impatience. She watched other people come and go and blinked at the raggedly-dressed older woman who came in. The bearded man was telling her something, and several times they had looked in her direction. She sat still with her crossbow and quiver over one shoulder. Her backpack over the other.

The woman turned from them and came closer. "Hello," she said pleasantly. Jamie was struck by the softness in her warm brown eyes. "My name is Sarah."

"Jamie."

"That's a nice name, Jamie. Do you live near by?"

"No." Jamie paused, biting her bottom lip. She wondered if she should tell them about her parents or not. Could she trust them? "I... I don't have any parents." She blurted. Frowning, she crossed her arms over her

chest. "I don't need anyone!"

"But, surely there must be someone."

"No," Jamie sighed. Almost wishing at that point that there were. "No one." She stood up, dragging one tennis shoe across the stone floor. "Is he gonna be all right?"

"Jamie?" Vincent opened his eyes. Her name on his lips. Without pretext, she hurried over into his line of vision.

"You'll be okay now," she said, hesitantly touching the top of his head, his hair. She was surprised at how soft it felt.

"What about you?" Vincent asked tiredly.

"Just tell somebody to show me the way out of here and I'll be on my way."

Whether the pained look that crossed the leonine features were from his wound or what she had said, it hurt Jamie to see it. "I... I guess I could stay," she said, thinking. "At least until you're better. Do you... want me to?"

A weak smile slipped along the cleft mouth. Father's attentions had helped him to breathe a little easier. "I... would like that, Jamie. Very... much."

END