

# The Hunter's Tale

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Published on Lush Stories on 08 Sep 2008



*In Larissa's bed, who is the hunter and who the prey?*

<https://www.lushstories.com/stories/love-stories/the-hunters-tale.aspx>

It was mid October. Across the bristling hillside the cedar and silver birch trees were slowly swallowing the withered sun. Soon the night would reclaim them. And soon, thought Larissa as she felt the evening frost sting her fingers, soon the snows would come, and then perhaps he would come too. He had come to her last fall. Trekking back to Fort Compton to sell his furs and to shelter for the winter, he had asked whether he might rest awhile. He had stayed nearly a week. In their giving and taking, Larissa had thought they were merely bartering need for need, as he had bartered with Mohawk and Seneca. Only when he left, did her winter truly arrive, and only then did her empty heart discover the cost of their trade. Now her sole comfort was the prospect of his return. So Larissa watched the skies and counted the days, and waited. The first snow arrived a few days later. To the other farmers around Kimberling it was an early, unwanted guest. But Larissa welcomed the snow like an old friend. She busied herself, stabling the horses and stacking logs next to the fire and stove. From the cupboard she retrieved a pair of old silk sheets and laid them across the thin mattress of her bed - just in case, she told herself. She took out a white, laced dress that her grandmother had bequeathed her. Holding it against her body, she pushed up her hair and regarded herself in the mirror. Then she pulled a face at her reflection and put the dress away. It snowed for three days and nights, sifting floury, thick flakes upon the trees and pastureland. On the fourth afternoon, Larissa was looking out towards the west. There she spotted a figure, pulling a string of mules, shapeless and almost indistinct against the grey, white and black of the forest. Her heart leapt as she recognised his loping stride. From the farmhouse she tracked him as he worked his way down the ridge and across the fields. Behind him lay a trail of footprints in the thick carpet of snow. Tomorrow, she thought, his prints will have gone, and soon he will have gone too. She put on her greatcoat and ran out to meet him by the Dutch barn. 'You've come back,' was all she could think to say. Nathan was bearded, weather-beaten and weary. Even under the thick bearskin coat, he seemed thinner than she remembered. 'Yes,' he agreed uncertainly, as if surprised to find himself there. 'Eat or sleep?' she asked. 'Eat,' he answered. As Nathan tended to the mules, Larissa heated up some stew and poured him a large glass of rye beer. He was hungry and devoured the food in quick, heaped spoonfuls. They sat in awkward silence but, as he ate, he watched her with appraising, hunter's eyes. And she watched him too, occasionally touching his arm across the table, as if by accident, but really to

convince herself that he was not some cruel apparition that her loneliness had summoned from the past. Almost as soon as he had finished, he fell asleep by the fire, lulled by the journey, the warmth and the beer. When he awoke, Larissa was beside him. She had changed into her grandmother's dress. Nathan admired her slim forearms and calves, browned by the long summer days working the fields, and now reddened by the fire's glow. She had loosened her hair and it tumbled over her shoulders in liquid tresses, as dark and deep as her eyes. The sleep had refreshed him. He drew her face to his and tried to kiss her but she pulled away. 'Not yet. I want to wash the forest from you.' 'It'll take more than soap and water,' he shrugged. She poured him a bath by the fire. Nathan struggled out of his dirty, ragged clothes. 'I'll wash what I can,' she called from the kitchen, 'but I'll burn the rest of your clothes. I'll give you some of John's.' Through the doorway she watched him from behind. His body was lean and hard. Even shaving, his movements were easy and economical. Larissa brought Nathan fresh clothes as he towelled himself off. Now, she found a quite different man before her, beardless and younger-looking. 'I barely recognise you,' she laughed. But at once they seemed easier with one another, as though the year apart had been no more than a few days. They lay beside the fire. He told her of the summer, of his dealings with the Indian tribes and of his hunting, but mostly of the forest. 'The forest scares me,' she said. 'It's so wild. I'm always careful to keep to the paths because I'm afraid of getting lost.' 'That's because you fight it. You want to control it, like this farm. But you have to surrender to its moods. Then the forest will protect you, just as it protects the wildcats and wolves.' 'Exactly,' she laughed. He stroked her hair. 'One day I'll take you with me. We can trek for a week and I'll take you to Magic Lake. I'll teach you to trust the forest. Soon you won't want to leave.' She told him about the farm. It had been three years since John had died and each year had been harder for her. He asked her about the harvest, the prices she had gotten for her produce, how she managed to cope. 'Haven't you thought of re-marrying?' he said. Larissa blushed. 'Oh, my neighbours would marry me off in a moment, but the sons just want an unpaid servant and the fathers want my land. I'm better off on my own.' As she spoke, the firelight cast flickering shadows on her face like clouds drifting across the moon. He stroked Larissa's cheek as if to dispel them. She ran her hand across his chest. She felt a ridge of hard skin beneath his shirt. She unbuttoned it and found a long, jagged scar, still livid. 'How did you get that?' she asked, touching it tentatively. Her fingertips traced the length of the scar. Before he could answer, she had bent forwards and licked it. Nathan pushed back her face and kissed her mouth. She smelled of soap and lavender. Larissa closed her eyes and his lips stroked the lids, brushing her lashes. As his hands stroked the nape of her neck, his lips traced her cheekbones until he was again kissing her mouth, his tongue hungrily exploring her own. To Larissa each kiss seemed to be a smooth pebble gliding across a shaded lake, barely rippling the surface of her skin but stirring deep undercurrents of desire. Nathan drew her up and led her to the bed. They knelt against each other, his chest pressing hard against her breasts. Through her dress he could feel her hardened nipples and she could feel his hard flesh. He pulled the dress over her head and, as it shook free, a cascade of water-falling hair lapped against their faces. He caressed her throat, drowning in the dark, flooding waves. She eagerly undressed him in her turn. With each kiss she felt the calm and order of her life receding as he led her from the narrow track of

her daily existence farther and farther into a bewildering forest of emotions. Soon, she knew, she would lose all bearing but onwards she went, guided only by her instincts, her needs and her lover. Now his lips were on her throat, her shoulders, and then her mouth again. As each kiss grew harder and deeper, she imagined herself tumbling down ravines and hillsides, falling head-over-heels and then landing on the snow-cool softness of the silk sheets. Nathan had pushed her down onto the bed. His hands were feasting upon her, sliding across her body, scooping her breasts into his mouth. He sucked her nipples, as hard and sweet as wild cherry stones. She gasped. He licked her belly and slipped his tongue into its recess. Now, for Larissa, there was only submission to the chaos of her senses. Her fingers were in his hair, pressing his face lower until he tasted her salty sweetness. Nathan ran his fingers through the thicket of her hair, massaging the soft mound above her slit. As he pressed and rubbed his palm against her, he lowered his head between her thighs and sucked on her pink, yielding lips. Then with broad, slow strokes his tongue claimed her clitoris. Larissa groaned and spread her legs wider. Up and down, his tongue slid over her, flooding her limbs with tides of exquisite agony. After several minutes Nathan stopped licking and, looking up at her face, grinned. 'You're so smooth and wet and warm,' he whispered. 'We've waited so long for this. Tell me how much you want it.' 'Oh yes, darling,' she murmured. 'I've wanted you so much. I couldn't wait any longer.' Then, as he held her gaze, he slipped two fingers into her. She closed her eyes, gasping and bucking against his hand. He slid in and out of her, all the time watching her face and feeling her heave against him. Then he withdrew and held his hand above his mouth. She opened her eyes and watched him catch a silver thread of her juice on his lips. 'You taste so sweet - like wild honey,' he said, licking his fingers. He eased them back into her, and resumed licking at her clitoris, fingers and tongue working together in a sensual duet. Swiftly he brought Larissa to the edge of a tantalising precipice; then, as she felt herself about to plummet, desperate for the headlong, ecstatic fall, he withdrew. Tenderly he rubbed around her slit and nibbled at her breasts. 'Not yet, my love,' he whispered. Gradually her breathing slowed and her moaning receded. At that point he gently drew back the hood of her clitoris, revealing the lovely, pink bud and started sucking on it, gorging himself on her succulent fruit. 'Don't stop. Never stop,' she cried. But Nathan ignored his lover. He brought her gasping to the brink for a second, and then a third time. Larissa could stand it no more. 'I want you in me, darling, please,' she pleaded. He sat back and wiped his mouth with his forearm. 'No, no,' she said, 'Here.' She drew his face to her mouth and lapped at his lips and chin, savouring her own juices. He pulled away and pressed her back against the bed. Kneeling above her, he ran his hands across her shoulders, over her taut breasts and down to her hips, admiring her body and his control of it. He cupped her buttocks and pulled her on to his lap. Then he spread her thighs, brown and slick with wetness, wider yet. He rubbed her slit with the palm of his hand and, with his thumbs, parted her and drew her on to him. 'Oh God, you feel so big and hard and wet,' she gasped. His hands were beneath her, pulling her against him. Her long legs enveloped his waist, holding him tightly as she arched against him. She wanted to feel his full force. At once she was lost again to the one, all-consuming sensation, feeling him in every part of her, and wanting to stay in this sacred place forever. Beyond the forest of their bed, the wind sighed, the larch tree beat its branches against the

window and the beasts howled. Larissa held Nathan within her as their bodies ebbed and flowed with the rhythms of the night. He thrust into her deep and hard and steady. Then faster and harder yet. Still harder. Only Larissa's shoulders were on the bed as she clung to her kneeling lover. She felt herself coming to the edge of her precipice again. Only this time he was with her, pulling her against him as he pressed ever deeper. With one last lunge he drove her back against the bed. She took his full weight upon her as she felt herself falling, tumbling through the air, sobbing breathlessly and clinging even tighter to her lover. His cries mingled with her screams as he expelled his seed into her. Their bodies shuddered in fits of ecstatic relief, squeezing every last sensation from their coming. Larissa and Nathan lay in each other's arms. Their wanting bore the briefest rest. Larissa leant upon her elbow and stroked her hair against Nathan's matted chest. 'So is that the forest you wanted to take me to?' she said. 'You're right, I don't want to leave it. In fact, I need to explore it further.' He smiled as she kissed him again and felt him harden in her hand. They slept very little that night. When Larissa awoke, Nathan had already made coffee. He sat beside her on the bed, combing her dark locks between his fingers. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'I have to go Fort Compton soon. But afterwards I could come back here and help you on the farm. Would that be alright?' She smiled at him with loving eyes, and sipped her coffee. Who is the hunter now, she wondered, and whom the prey?