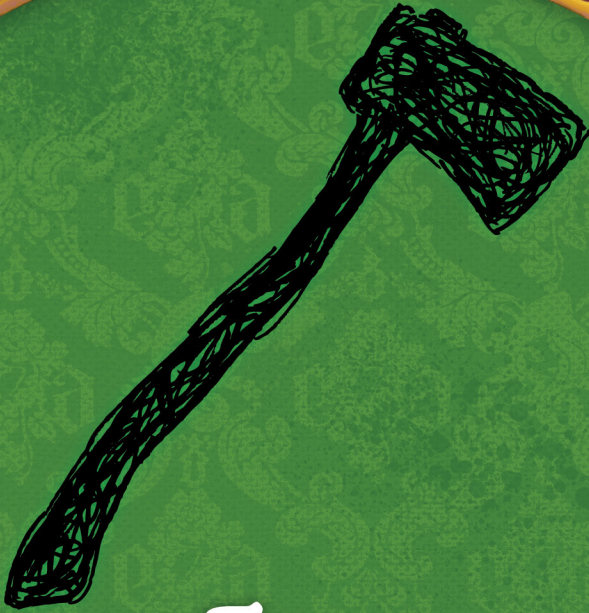




Ever After High



Hunter Huntsman's
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Hunter Huntsman's Story



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BY SHANNON HALE



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
New York Boston



TOMORROW, HUNTER HUNTSMAN WOULD BE leaving for his second year of boarding school at Ever After High. Hunter Huntsman needed to pack.

He pulled out a drawer of his dresser and dumped the contents into a bag.

“There,” he said heroically. “Packed.”

That done, he grabbed his ax and went to breakfast. The cabin was small, so in good weather, his family dined outside.

“Morning,” said his mother as he came out of the house. She was as tall as he was, her shoulders broad



beneath her flannel shirt and denim overalls. A firm bun tamed her brown hair. “Packed?”

“Yea, ma’am,” he said.

Hunter hung his ax beside his mother’s on the ax stand.

“Morning,” said his father, hanging up his own ax. He looked a lot like his wife—just taller, broader, and full-bearded. “Packed?”

“Yes, sir,” said Hunter.

“Pack?” said his baby sister, Fern, banging on her high chair with her tiny toy ax. “Pack, pack, pack!”

“You bet, Ferny,” said Hunter, tickling her neck and speaking in a high voice. “You little teeny-cutesy baby, you!”

Fern giggled. Hunter’s parents cleared their throats as if to say *No Huntsman should speak in a baby voice*. Hunter straightened and got to work eating.

He downed three huge bowls of porridge while trying to avert his gaze from the plate of sizzling chicken sausage. Whenever he looked at it, all he could see was a cute little chick.

“Chicken sausage?” said his mother.

“No, thanks.”

The Castleteria at Ever After High had offered piles of veggies and fruit, soy turkey, and vegan sausage. He’d spent his first year there never eating anything that had once had a face. When he got home for the summer, he just couldn’t go back to eating meat. Hunter hoped his parents hadn’t noticed. A Huntsman a vegetarian? It was unthinkable!

“Since you’re packed,” said his father, “I could use your help out in the woods today.”

“Of course!” said Hunter.

“I want to check my traps.”

Hunter’s huge and noble heart sank.

The three of them cleaned up the dishes and fetched their axes.

“Come back soon,” said Hunter’s mother, resting her ax on her shoulder. “I’ll need you to watch Fern while I go chop down that lightning tree.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Hunter and his father said.

“Bye, Ferny!” Hunter said in a manly voice.

Fern banged her ax. “Bye-bye-bye!”

The woods were wet with dew and as sparkly in the morning sun as unicorn hair. Hunter followed his father, both holding their axes in Huntsman Safety Pose—over one shoulder. They stepped on

stones and tree roots to keep from leaving footprints. There was no danger, but a Huntsman never let his guard down.

Hunter's father was, after all, the very same Huntsman who'd refused to kill Snow White for the Evil Queen, the same Huntsman who'd come to Red Riding Hood's rescue. And one day Hunter would relive those same stories and play the same role as his father had. He had spent his whole life training for his hereditary fairytales.

They reached the first trap, sitting on the forest floor. Empty.

The Huntsman crouched by the wooden cage. "The spring mechanism was sprung, and I see squirrel hair in there, almost as if a squirrel was captured but opened the door and got away. Strange..."

"Yeah," said Hunter, loosening the neck of his faux-leather hooded shirt. "Strange."

They traveled to a trap hanging from a tree.

"Look at that," said the Huntsman. "Same thing. You'd almost think these animals are learning how to escape by themselves."

"Yeah, almost," said Hunter, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

The third trap was as large as a bear—and there were bear hairs inside but no bear.

"Huh," said the Huntsman, rubbing his chin. "I don't get it."

"Well, you know animals," said Hunter. "Wily as they come."

"I suppose..."

Hunter didn't like lying to his father. He shut his eyes and sighed.

"Tired, son?"

"Uh...no, I'm fine," said Hunter.

He *was* tired, in fact, but he didn't want to mention that he'd been up half the night just wandering the woods, finding his father's traps, breaking them open, and perhaps letting the cute, fuzzy animals inside run free. That information might not go down too well with his father.

Hunter first went on a solo hunt last summer. He'd tracked and cornered a fox, raised his ax, and heard mewing. Behind the fox, he had spied three baby foxes curled up, looking at him with large, dark, glistening eyes. He'd lowered his ax and never had the heart to hunt again.

Hunter was relieved to be returning to Ever After

High. This summer had been exhausting, having sleepless nights and saving animals behind his father's back. A Huntsman who didn't want to hunt? Unthinkable!

They walked to the next trap, his father lecturing as they went.

"A Huntsman is loyal. A Huntsman is true. A Huntsman serves royalty unceasingly. A Huntsman heeds all cries for help—"

Just then, they heard a cry for help that sounded like this: "*Help!*"

Hunter and his father leaped into Huntsman Defense Stance—ax in one hand, the other hand held out, knees slightly bent, hair tossed by the breeze. They stood back-to-back, turning, listening to determine direction.

"Help!" came the call again.

"I'll save you!" the father and son cried in unison. Then, as had been Huntsman tradition for hundreds of years, they enacted the Huntsman-To-the-Rescue Move. With shoulders back, chests out, they tore off their shirts, showing that nothing—not even a shirt—could get between them and Saving the Day.

The two Huntsmen held the pose while invisible trumpets played a heroic fanfare.

Hunter was never sure where those trumpets were or what magic made them play. But he liked them.

Father and son ran south through the woods at the speed of rampaging bulls.

"Help!" a man in farmer garb was crying on the ground, holding his ankle.

"We're here!" said the Huntsman. "What is the trouble?"

"I was looking for firewood, and I saw ... I saw ... I swear I saw ... a wolf!" said the man. "And I started to run, but I fell and twisted my ankle, and any second that wolf might come back and eat me!"

A wolf? In these woods? No wolf would dare roam so close to his father's home, Hunter thought. But they had to be sure. Leave a wolf to itself, and next thing you know it's breaking into a grandma's house and shedding all over her nightgowns.

"I'll go scout," said Hunter.

His father nodded. He picked up the man in both arms and began to carry him back to the man's house.

Hunter got on his knees and searched for wolf tracks. He recognized the prints of deer, a moose, a badger, several squirrels, a family of bunnies, and a fox with a sliver in its paw (poor fox)—but no wolf. The man had probably just seen the badger and gotten nervous. But just to be certain, Hunter ranged out farther.

He spent all day in his search, but all Huntsmen had a creed: No matter how often someone cries wolf, always take it seriously. It was almost evening, and he was about to return home when he heard the desperate tweeting of a robin in trouble.

Hunter didn't need to do the Huntsman-To-the-Rescue Move again. That was just for people saving. A good thing, too, because he didn't have a second shirt.

In Huntsman Stealth Mode, he ran through the brush and around trees in absolute silence. Up ahead, he could see a mother robin on the forest floor hopping around her fallen nest. But before he could get any closer—there was a girl. A girl with strawberry-blond hair and a simple working dress, the kind a maidservant might wear. She crouched down and tried to mend the nest.

He couldn't be sure from the back, but he thought she looked familiar. Could she be a fellow student at Ever After High? Her kindness melted his heart like a chunk of butter in porridge. And the plaintive tweets from the mother bird were enough to bring a tear to his eye.

Hunter fetched some tree bark, pine boughs, and a honeycomb. A few minutes later, he had made a handsome birdhouse. More of a bird castle, really. He could make almost anything from whatever tools he had on hand. His father used that innate Huntsman skill to make traps and weapons. What would he think if he knew his son had used it to make a birdhouse? Or even a bird castle?

Using Huntsman Stealth Steps, Hunter crept up to a tree behind the girl's back, hung the bird castle on a high branch, and retreated.

From the branches of a far-off tree, Hunter watched the girl discover the bird castle. He couldn't make out her face from that distance, but her gestures of happiness made his heart glow. And the delighted chirping of the birds put a gooey smile on his face.

His heart beat harder. Maybe he should go introduce himself. Maybe he and this forest maiden

could become friends and, like, go on a date or something—but, no. Hunter stopped himself. This year at school was his Legacy Year. In a few short weeks, he would sign the Storybook of Legends and promise to become his generation's Huntsman in the tales of Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood. Meeting—dating?—a kind forest maiden was not part of his destiny.

Besides, a breeze reminded him that his shirt was torn. The Huntsman-To-the-Rescue Move had unfortunate consequences.

So Hunter put his ax over his shoulder, turned his back to the girl, and hurried home. But on the way he did something he'd never done before—he allowed himself to daydream.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times bestselling author SHANNON HALE knew at age ten that it was her destiny to become a writer. She has quested deep into fairy tales in such enchanting books as *The Goose Girl*, *Book of a Thousand Days*, *Rapunzel's Revenge*, and Newbery Honor recipient *Princess Academy*. With the princely and valiant writer Dean Hale, Shannon coauthored four charming children, who are free to follow their own destinies. Just so long as they get to bed on time.



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THE BEGINNING.

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