



CHAPTER 6

THE HUNTER AND THE PRIZE

When Jem opened his eyes again, he couldn't quite believe what he saw. Instead of the stone walls of the Mihrab, he and his cousins were standing in a glade of forest. "What happened? How did we get here again?" he exclaimed.

Mikael was scratching his head and looking around, perplexed. "Maybe there was a false back?" he suggested.

But the obvious question remained and Munira was the one to ask it. "Then where is the house?" They didn't know. Mikael tried to think up some logical possibilities, but he couldn't find any good answer. He began to fret that there must have been funny mush-



rooms in the soup. He shook his head ruefully, “you’re not supposed to eat anything a stranger gives you.”

“Wait a minute,” said Jem, narrowing his eyes shrewdly. “The forest looks different ... the trees, the leaves. I don’t —” but suddenly a loud noise interrupted him. It sounded like a trumpet or a horn. Then the ground began to shake and a thundering racket surrounded them. The children crouched behind a bush, alarmed.

Jem peeked out and caught glimpses of men on horses between the trees. They were dressed in the same clothing, with cloaks and leather belts and straps. Then he gasped: they were armed with bows and arrows and daggers! The men dismounted and signaled to one another wordlessly. And then it went quiet. So quiet that Jem was afraid to breathe in case they heard him.

The children remained crouched in the bush for a while in silence. Then, cautiously, Mikael looked around. He couldn’t see anyone. “I watched a docu-



mentary once about poachers,” he whispered, becoming increasingly panicked, “what are they doing in our forest?”

Munira’s eyes widened in horror, “what if they’ve come for the *fawn*?” But the moment she said it, she fell silent, as did they all. A man strode into the glade. He was tall and strong with a dark beard and handsome face. He carried a bow, wore fine hunting clothes and there was determination in his eyes.

He appeared to be just younger than their parents. He looked straight at the bush where they were hiding and spotted them immediately. He seemed taken aback to see them. “What is this? Children! Why do you wander here? These woods are dangerous; there is a hunt afoot.”

“We’re lost,” said Jem. He was going to continue, but then Munira, standing timidly behind him, piped up unexpectedly, “why are *you* here? You cannot come and hunt our animals.”

“*Your* animals?” the man raised an eyebrow. “This is the Prince’s Forest. I will hunt as I please.” His voice was deep and commanding, and the children shiv-



ered a little despite their confusion. Then he looked at them more kindly, “but you do not know to whom you speak. Stay close to me until the hunt is over, or my men might mistake you for deer.”

“Is that what you’re hunting? The deer?” Mikael asked anxiously.

“I hunt the white stag,” said the man. “It is an elusive, magnificent creature. It has haunted me too long. I will not rest until the prize is mine.”

Before they could reply, he hushed them and stealthily moved forward. Despite his age and height, he moved lightly, treading the forest path as quietly as the children themselves. They walked for a while and yet the forest grew no more familiar. Jem held his cousins’ hands reassuringly; they’d *have* to reach the end soon. Didn’t his uncle say that the forest was not very large?

Munira thought there was something strange about the trees. It took her a moment before she realised what it was. The birds, whose singing she hadn’t noticed before, had now stopped singing. The leaves had stopped rustling and the branches were still. There



was an uncanny quiet. It felt mysterious – magical even. A low wind began to blow, lightly murmuring. There was something otherworldly about it, as if it had blown here from some faraway place. As it gently stroked her ears, she heard a voice whispering in the wind: ‘awake...’

The hunter stopped. He looked around the trees that surrounded them. “Do you hear that?” he asked. His voice was steady but it was mingled with some fear. They nodded their heads, but he kept talking as though to himself. “I hear a call. It cries ‘awake.’” A queer sort of feeling began to settle within the children, as if a music was playing around the forest walls; a music that had no player and no sound. Minutes later, it came again. “Awake.” It was louder, nearer, more insistent.

The hunter, several paces ahead, suddenly stood straight and looked upwards. “Awake? Awake to what?” he cried in bewilderment. No response came, or none that could be heard. But something moved in the shadows ahead. A rustle in the leaves, a flash of white. The man lowered on his haunches, his bow



ready. He had sighted his prey. Munira clutched her hand to her mouth. The fawn!

The creature came into view, but it was not the fawn. This was a fully-grown stag with a crown of grey antlers. Its body was brawny, its eyes were piercing and its fur was white as snowdrops. It looked straight at the hunter and his bow: calm, unafraid, majestic.

“At last,” said the hunter, “I will end this torment. Today, I have won the hunt.” He raised his bow, ready to shoot his arrow for the kill, when suddenly

ly the stag SPOKE with unmistakable clarity. “You cannot hunt me. I

have been sent to hunt *you*.”

Its voice was deep and fearsome. “Was it for *this* that

you were created? Is *this* what you have been

commanded? AWAKE!”

The man gave a cry, as if he had been struck down by his own arrow. He fell to the ground in a daze and, with







that, the stag was gone. The children watched in awe and wonder. What had just happened? Had the stag truly spoken? And, if it had, what did it mean?

The man knelt where he had fallen, an expression of anguish on his suddenly-aged features. He seemed to have forgotten where he was, so lost was he in his thoughts. The children didn't know what to do and were relieved when he finally recovered himself.

“Come,” he said to them, his voice hoarse, “I must return to the Palace. I will send for your family there.” He seemed so keen to hasten away from that place that the children didn't even pause to question what he meant by ‘palace.’