

HUNTER

THE UNWOVEN TAPESTRY

BOOK TWO

MORGAN CHALUT

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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“**B**ARD ACRES, A PLEASURE TO SEE YOU,” Bruno greeted him warmly, signing off on the receipt a page had handed him. “He’s waiting; you can go right in.”

“Thank you, Bruno. Hello, Arthur.”

The page grinned at him and ran off.

Bright boy — Elementalist if I remember, of course I remember, ha! I will have him recruited in no time — half in my pocket already, I simply need to take more of a hand in his orders and see how he does. Fifth-generation Order-dweller, he would be excellent as a hand-for-hire in any village I sent him to, brothers and sisters are all builders —

Whitman went through the office door Bruno guarded. “Elliott.”

The Head of the Order looked up from his paperwork and gave a tired smile. “Acres.”

“Did you sleep?” Whitman helped himself to a seat in the sunken conversation pit, settling with a sigh, and massaging his tired leg muscles.

“I don’t remember the last time I had a full night of sleep. And too much to do these days. With the aches and pains of getting older, it’s a miracle I catch any night-bees at all. What do you have for me?”

Whitman handed over a portfolio from his satchel. Elliott took it with a sigh and adjusted his reading glasses to scan the first page.

“In the last few months, I have traced travel patterns and, at the risk of sounding paranoid: our blood mages have disappeared. Certainly not all together — the numbers I last had suggested that they would be hard to move *en masse*, but other than some possible distribution to a few towns here and there, the rest are gone.

“That said, the ones that we did manage to pin, point us vaguely in the direction they might be headed. I put trackers in those woods, and they agree some large group came through there, but the way that they disbanded in the first place suggests that we will never track them all down. They might be under timed orders, and we could all be attacked with little warning. Like the last insurgence I waylaid.”

“You always bring me such heartwarming news ...”

“Yes, well, you never demand the impossible of me, do you?”

“I gave you more people.”

“Untrained and unready. I need *time*, Elliott, to gather information, and time is the last thing we have. No matter what, this war will cost us dearly.” *And more than it already has, impossible as it might seem* —

“This war will cost everyone dearly. Our goal is to make their cost the higher.”

“If it lasts for too much longer, we will never recover.” Whitman knew the frankness of his words would not keep him in Elliott’s favor, but he was only human.

“We have to know what their plans are before we can prepare for anything. Is Kina speaking yet?” Elliott’s change of subject was not unwelcome.

“Nothing but broken pieces. We have put together what little we can make of it, and efforts continue. Mentalists struggle to learn what was done to her so as to undo it, but in the meantime, we have to make do with meager sips.”

Elliott sighed and rubbed his eyes. “All right, continue.”

Whitman gave a bitter smile. “Still no sign of Ruben. Not a peep, which means either he has been killed and they do not want to brag until the timing suits them, or whoever is guarding him is impressively tight-lipped. It would speak well of their discipline.

“Nobles migrate to the palace from their estates for news and to find safety in numbers. There have been reports of four raids for supplies and fear mongering, the latter working perfectly well. Attacks have resulted in small injuries, only a few of them serious — deaths have been rare in these encounters. Dire threats appear reserved only to those who fight back, which makes the rest hesitate all the more.

“However, with the information we have from those raids, we have drawn a vague idea of the numbers they might be feeding, which fits roughly into my calculations. We can assume their base is within a close distance. The numbers are there for you, at the bottom.”

Whitman took a breath and went on, “My trackers are searching for cave structures as the blood mages used before, but I imagine that our discovery of their previous location will keep them shy of such structures unless they have a quick escape to the surface that we know nothing of.”

“How populated are these areas here?” Elliott asked, pointing to the map Whitman had provided.

“With the nobles out of residence and most of their staff with them, I imagine their stewards will be running those households with a skeleton staff — perhaps twenty to forty in each?”

“How many manors are there?”

“Twelve, based on census reports from the palace. A few towns and villages are peppered in the area. I have people in many of those, but not all. Recruitment has increased, but —”

“Good. I expect their reports to come in soon.”

Whitman released the tension in his jaw. “Four new ciphers have gone out *this month*. With the number of people aware of them, I need new ones created and distributed every three weeks. As often as not, I expect reports in any of the updated ciphers, which means we will have to translate them in each. It will be confusion.”

“That many? That often?”

“*And* we must be prepared for those to be intercepted and interrupted with more frequency than before. My rapid recruitment

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means that I have dozens more eyes and ears and hands, but also dozens more mouths — and neither my people nor I are infallible.”

Elliott nodded. “It will be worth it.”

Whitman shrugged a stiff shoulder. “One can hope.” He pulled Kina’s drawing from his satchel and showed Elliott. “Do you know this woman?”

The Head took it and studied her face. “No. Should I?”

“One of Kina’s. She is important, but until we can communicate properly, we will not know why.”

“How close are we to that?”

“The Mentalists have asked us not to overtax her with questions. They struggle to explain their magic to me, so I cannot make suggestions on that front. Too, the surgeons are determined to ensure she is well-rested, and so I have little time for my own attempts to hack at the root. We had a breakthrough a moment ago, however, creating its own problems, but I know I can find a solution. Soon, I hope.”

“I will speak to the surgeons and Mentalists to give you more time.”

“I doubt I could use the time you find for me,” Whitman smiled wryly. “I am already going to be late for a meeting with one of my contacts. He will wait, but I need to receive what he has to tell me.”

“I’ll let you go, then. Thank you for this,” Elliott gestured with the portfolio.

“I wish it was more,” Whitman rose to his good leg with a suppressed groan.

“Standing shouldn’t be that difficult at your age,” Elliott smiled, clapping him on the shoulder and going back to his desk.

Whitman received the comment without one of his own. Elliott was lost in paperwork before the spymaster reached the door.

* * *

Whitman stepped into a servants’ hallway, about half as wide as a regular one, meant to pass between rooms to save time when the passages were bogged down with people who didn’t need to be there. The pages used them, and occasionally students, but generally only servants were allowed to. Doors on either side of

him opened to other corridors, or rooms of the wealthy in this part of the Order.

He opened the door into one such room, the size of a closet. Inside it sat a tall stool and a door that locked from the inside, with a hatch that Whitman could open. The last was covered in a thick cloth that couldn't be seen through. He'd had Annette check it when Donovan's magical discovery had been made, in case a person could increase their vision to see through. The cloth, she had determined, allowed his voice to pierce, but would keep his identity hidden. Whitman set his crutch aside and perched on the stool, resting his legs with a quiet exhale of relief.

Ready, he opened the door's hatch and said, in a voice deeper and more gravely than his own, "I apologize for keepin' you waitin'. Other business 'eld me. What information do you 'ave for our employer?" His accent was strong, and he was careful not to use it anywhere except in situations like these in case he was ever overheard and recognized.

Whitman's contact hurried over to the door and leaned against the wall beside it, clearly worried about being overheard, despite the room being soundproof. Though, of course, he wouldn't know about that.

"What kept you? I've been waiting!" he hissed.

"Yeah, we covered that. Never your mind — I said business. Now speak up!"

"It took me a bloody age to get in here. The security's been doubled and *Mentalists* are roaming the halls looking for reasons ... This is the last job I do for you."

"I doubt that, mate. I have some choice ruse for you to fulfill and a mummer like you would think twice to pass it up."

"Oh yeah? Mummer, aye, but coward as well. There are jobs even I can't fool, mark me."

"I mark you well, friend, and we'll get to that. But first, my information."

The man sighed sharply. "I gave that page of yours my report."

"With drawings, I 'ope."

"What I could put together."

"Good. Tell me."

The contact cleared his throat and seemed to straighten. Then, in a tone clearly practiced, much clearer and calmer than before, said, "The butcher gave a package twice the size as the cut of meat requested, so I followed, and after a *winding* route through the city, I finally came upon a rundown house. The gentleman's glance was enough to give it away, so I waited there for him. Sure enough, after traversing the streets for another twenty minutes, he showed, package in hand."

"You're sure it were the same package, mate? I told you *follow*. What if he passed it off?"

"It was the same package. Trust me."

Whitman did. Theil's memory was near perfect, better than Whitman's own.

"If you don't mind?" Theil said, sniffing at the interruption.

"Move on, then."

"I shimmied up the roof and watched through a hole. The package was passed, unopened. The gentleman went on his way, and my new friend started off on his own path. They didn't talk and seemed to hold no love for one another. I followed this bloke, and he was far and away superior at avoiding notice than my previous friend. He even had hats to change, and his cloak was reversible. He stopped for tea at one stand, and cheese at another, searching for a tail. Saw me, lost me. I had to switch to rooftops to find him again — luckily he's missing a toe or three."

"Aye?"

"A limp, but he's practiced moving — must have something shoved in his boot to keep his foot from sliding, but when he hurried, it showed, and I picked up his gait from above."

"Keen."

"Yes. And difficult. If he sees me again, I'm dead. Mentalist trash — I know his kind."

"Where'd 'e lead you?"

"Did you hear me? He saw my damn face!"

"If I know you, you was wearin' some kind of disguise, aye?"

"Of course I was, I'm not a fool. But if he recognizes me ..."

"We'll deal with 'im, all right? Where'd 'e lead you?"

Theil gathered his thoughts. "Eventually to the backdoor of an inn. It has a cellar that I couldn't get into."

"So 'ow'd you 'ear what they said?"

"Vent pipe. Barely noticeable, but I'd seen it years ago when I was drunk behind that same inn and thought it odd. They were quiet, but not expecting listeners."

"Blood mages?"

"A *pack* of them. Going on about recruitments and cursing their leadership. Apparently a new player took the field a few years ago and they don't like this person's methods. Says she's burning through resources, pushing people too hard."

"She?"

"Definitely, but no name — they were clever enough for that. I waited outside and counted seventeen exiting, with another four waiting inside to leave until they thought no one would connect them."

"Big meetin'."

"Bigger than I expected, certainly."

"Did they do any magic while in th' cellar?"

"None that I heard but, as my contact was late, and judging by the fact that they only traded off the package once, I don't imagine it was a particularly important meeting. I would have had at least six trades. Or four with two fakes."

"Which is why we're glad you're on our side. Did yeh find out what were in th' package?"

Theil's voice was shaky now. "I went back to the butcher's and poked around after he locked up. I knew you'd ask."

"Kind of you. What'd yeh find?"

"A dead street urchin and half a dozen jars of his blood. Th-the butcher came back while I was there and I barely got out without him seeing. *Barely*. He — he chopped the boy into pieces. I vomited on the street over; I won't eat for a month. Screw your next job, I'm — I'm not doing anything like that again."

Whitman sat for half a moment while his mind processed the information. "The boss wants yeh t'join them."

"No he doesn't, you damn fool, what would he want that for?"

"He needs yeh to join th'crew, be one o'them, a new recruit. We 'ave no one else so close inside and you're perfec' fer th' job. You know that was comin'."

Theil paced jerkily around the small room, muttering angrily under his breath. When he came back to the hatch he snarled, "I

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tell you about a plot of more than *twenty* Hunters right under your *nose* with a murdered boy and you want me to *join* them? What kind of sick, twisted —”

Whitman interrupted with shushing sounds. “Theil, now Theil ... You’re the best we ’ave. Yeh learn language and body motion like a babe learns t’breathe. Yeh put on characters like a new shirt. If you don’ do this, there’s no one else.”

“They’ll make me kill for them.”

“Aye, probably.”

“You’re a bastard.”

“I’ll get yeh a knight’ood.”

“A barony. Somewhere far in the mountains where I never have to hear your stupid, fake accent again.”

Whitman sighed. The accent was good, but he couldn’t fool Theil’s ear. “If yeh tell me wot I need t’know, I’ll send yeh on your way with a smile.”

“Who are you, really?”

“Why would yeh want t’know? Issa dangerous thing.”

“You’re sending me to my death. What danger could I be?”

Whitman didn’t answer, but silence was answer enough.

Theil was quiet for a long moment and then laughed ruefully. “A wicked tongue earns no allies.”

“Can we trust yeh?”

“You can never trust someone like me.”

“Will yeh do this?”

“How do I inform you? They’ll be watching me; I won’t send letters.”

“I’ll find yeh. You’ll ’ave notes a’fore you go, contacts.”

“Make sure it’s someone clever you send. If they give me away, I’ll make sure they don’t survive my escape.”

“I believe yeh.”

“Right.”

“Keep your eye out fer th’magus boy.”

“Right.”

“Theil, are we losin’ yeh?”

“I’m wondering how they’ll do it. Because they’ll want the blood ... My — father taught me how to drain hogs when we hunted and you string them by the ankles ...”

Whitman sighed again, pity welling up in his breast. Against his better judgment, he said, "If yeh don' think yeh can do th'job ..."
He pinched his ear in frustration, but continued, "... we will find someone else."

"No, you won't."

"No, we won'. You're the best we 'ave. If we 'ave you."

"You have me."

"Not f'much longer."

"As long as it takes. Some sins don't fade."

Whitman knew, even without seeing him, that the man was staring at his wife's locket.

"Our boss is not th'one who can grant forgiveness. He's th'one who causes th'need of it."

Theil scoffed. "Don't tell me who you are. When they torture me, I don't want to give you away. I have guesses, anyway. I will demand one thing of you, though, and I'll have your word on it."

"All right ..."

"When they do capture me," he took a breath. "You send someone to kill me. Don't let them torture me? If they keep me alive, you send someone, and you see it done quickly."

Whitman nodded gravely. "I'll see it done."

Theil took another shuddering breath and then choked out a laugh. "I always knew I'd die a poor actor. Drunkards die young, but curses live forever. And they take the living with them." He started crying softly.

Whitman listened, torn between himself and his duty. Duty meant sacrifice. Sacrifice of the few meant life for the rest. Whitman looked at his wounded knee and focused on the ache that never went away. Everyone made sacrifices. Some were worse than others.

Listening to Theil's sobs, he was horribly grateful for his injury. He knew with absolute certainty that if he was whole, it would not be Theil trying to infiltrate the blood mages' inner circle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan Chalut (she/they) has been writing since she learned that anyone was allowed to do that; it wasn't illegal or anything! While it didn't slow down her talking, it at least gave her parents and six older siblings (and her poor, poor teachers) a break once in a while. She hopes to continue to discover characters and worlds she can plot and explore and share.

Morgan lives in Dallas, Texas with her delightfully handsome and silly, charming, supportive, and lovely husband, Philip. They have two dogs together: Caramel, who absolutely wants to be your friend, and Sammie, who very definitely does not.

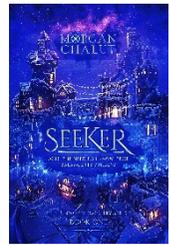
You can find out more about the world and works of Morgan Chalut at *morganchalut.com*.

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