



MORGAN
CHALUT

SEEKER

DOES THE NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE
BALANCE ITS BURDEN?

THE UNWOVEN TAPESTRY SERIES
BOOK ONE



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MORGAN CHALUT

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

DONOVAN WOKE WITH THE DAWN, a moment before Lucas's breathing changed, indicating his rise into wakefulness as well. Habit was hard to break. The younger man groaned, yawned hugely and rolled to his feet. He washed his face with water from the basin provided while Donovan slid out from under the blanket, feeling much better than the night before. It would be hard to feel worse.

He dressed quickly, the sights from his Seeking still vivid in his mind. If he and Lucas hadn't arrived so late last night, they'd have the child already, and be on their way to the Order by now. Still, haste bred mistakes. It had taken them a few days of riding to get here; Hunters could already be close.

Lucas was better with a blade — and any kind of combat — but both sheathed a regulation foot-long knife into their high boots. Lucas wore a short sword as well. Any time the two ran into trouble, Donovan's job was to run with their charges, while Lucas faced down the problem. Together for nearly six years now, they were a good team, Retrieving children with magic and bringing them to the Order for training. When word had come that there might be a magus in

Philipa, they were the obvious choice — or so they'd been told. Donovan didn't want to get his hopes up: magi were beings from legend these days.

"Ready?" Lucas asked, running a hand through his shaggy hair. He'd lamented the need to get it cut, but they hadn't had time. Safe within the walls of the Order after their last Retrieval, they'd had about half a day to prepare before being sent out once more.

"Ready," Donovan confirmed. He opened the door to the hall.

Their room was reserved for Retrievers, but a call and response were required for it to be supplied. It wasn't safe for innkeepers to be so obvious in their support of the Order these days. When Hunters came through, they weren't generally picky about who got in the way.

Still, he and Lucas had been to Philipa before — twice now — and Hanover was nearly a friend. He and his daughters made good money in the horse-town, housing merchant-visitors in their three-story building. They each nodded to him while he took inventory behind the bar, and made their way into the chilly, fresh air.

A woman lay asleep by the porch, a bottle in her hand showing her penchant for celebration. Despite the early hour, the town was not entirely still. The smells were the same as when they'd arrived: the almost-overpowering scent of horse overlaid with iron, smoke, leather, oil, grain, and dung — but it was dampened now with last night's dew laying over everything. It would snow any day now, and the overcast sky was heavy with promise.

Donovan shivered, rubbing his chest and arms with futile effort through his coat. Lucas gave him a sympathetic look. He loved winter like Donovan loved summer, but he didn't have aching joints to worry about yet.

The entrance-gate wasn't far, and they could see the seven-foot stone wall that encircled the town. Not that it was much of a circle anymore. Through the generations, as the town had expanded, it had been knocked down in places to allow for the growth, and rebuilt as needed. A determined person wouldn't struggle to gain entrance, but anyone trying to steal one of the town's famous horses would have a difficult time of it.

They passed soldiers in red uniforms doing their rounds. One stopped by the unconscious woman to nudge her awake and send

her home. This town had plenty of guards; merchants were always willing to pay their taxes if it meant more security for their wares.

Shops were coming to life as the owners or apprentices hung brightly colored flags to catch the eye and encourage buyers to visit. The brothel across the street from the inn was asleep, most of its business done by now. The balcony was bare, and the musicians quiet. A few men and women stumbled out, yawning, heading home or to work.

Lucas looked relaxed as they walked, but Donovan knew he was keeping a clear eye on everything. Despite his youth, he'd proven time and again to be far more capable than almost anyone else Donovan had worked with during the last sixteen years Retrieving.

They made their way past the shops toward the guardhouse, twisting and turning down the streets until the squat building revealed itself. Soldiers coming off duty were leaving in small packs — none looked especially friendly — but Donovan put out a hand to catch their attention.

One young man stopped, his friends carrying on without pause. He frowned after them but asked, "Help you, sir?"

"Who is the commanding office on duty, please?"

"Gallagher."

Lucas grunted involuntarily and the soldier smirked. "Aye, that's our love of him as well. Might have better luck with whatever you need if you wait a few hours for Vandò to come on duty."

Donovan smiled. "We'll take our chances. Thank you."

The guard carried on, jogging to catch up with his friends, while Donovan and Lucas continued the opposite way. The guardhouse door stood open, with benches available for waiting. The inside smelled strongly of honey, cedar, and sweaty feet. The main room had several desks: some with tired bodies bent over them, soldiers finishing reports of the night's work. Others were home to a dozen fresh-faced soldiers, starting their day with mugs of steaming beverages and hand-held food. Donovan heard shouts from the back of the building: recruits were being put through their paces.

Lucas grinned wickedly at the sound. He'd briefly joined the military as his mother and siblings had done, but found Retrieving more to his preference. With his magic and skills, he could have

climbed the ranks easily, but Lucas had confessed to Donovan early on that he didn't do well under that kind of strict authority. Besides, he loved children and planned to be a father. What better use of his abilities than Retrieving?

They took the familiar path to the office of the on-duty officer and Donovan gave the open door a gentle tap-tap with his knuckle.

"Yes?" came an impatient growl. Commander Gallagher wore his uniform sharply and his beard and mustache were both barely flecked with gray on his weathered face. His desk was crowded, but neat. The wall behind him held a map of the surrounding area, cleanly drawn with notes written here and there. A filing cabinet stood against the wall by the window, covered in small nicks as if regularly used for target practice. Two chairs sat before his desk, but they looked rarely used, the guards left standing, and the civilians taken care of in the front room.

"Who're you?" Gallagher demanded.

Lucas gave a charming smile. "We received notice that a mage was in need of Retrieval." He twisted his heel out slightly to show the knife sheathed there. The blades had plain grips and pommels, but if you knew what you were looking for ...

"You're Retrievers?" Gallagher asked, a touch of fear pushing his tone from irritated to angry.

Donovan nodded. "We'd like to know where our charge is, and we'll be out of your way within the hour."

Gallagher grunted and pushed his chair back from the desk to open a drawer and finger through the crowded files within. Donovan contained his irritation. This man's counterpart usually had the information immediately at hand, ready for their arrival. Bad timing.

"So what are you, then?" Gallagher asked, picking through the pages.

Lucas's eyebrows rose and he looked at Donovan in disbelief.

"I'm a Seeker," Donovan answered calmly.

It wasn't exactly rude to ask, but it was generally accepted that it was the mage's place to offer information about their magic first, if they chose.

"And you?"

Lucas flashed another winning smile. "I'm a Healer. Always happy to assist." His tone was too bright, and Donovan hid his

amusement. Lucas had no time for petty people, but was always the consummate professional.

Gallagher held out a file, but neither of them moved for it. "Well?" he demanded, shaking the stiff paper.

"Generally a phrase is offered up, which we reply to appropriately," Donovan said carefully as he took the file. He flipped it open to confirm what little they'd been told.

"Who has the time?" Gallagher rolled his eyes. "All you need should be there. Have a good day." He sat back down behind his desk.

"The reason for the code, Commander, is to make sure that we're the appropriate people to Retrieve the children. Otherwise, you could be handing them over to anyone claiming to be what they're not."

Lucas's tone was patient, but Donovan could hear the anger seething underneath. This was a matter of life and death.

"Anyone like Hunters?" Gallagher asked in the same tone.

"Exactly like."

"People like them only come here because of people like you. Take all the mages you want, but do us the favor of not bringing them back."

"You —" Lucas started.

Donovan put a hand on his arm, "Thank you. We'll dispose of the record ourselves once we've cleared the boy's contract."

"Fine." Gallagher had already dismissed them in his mind and had gone back to what he was doing when they had arrived.

Out front, Lucas let out a great puff of air, steaming in the cold. "That piece of trash is going to get people killed."

"We'll report him when we get back. There's no doubt he isn't following protocol and he'll be dismissed, with someone responsible put in his place. We can't do anything about it now."

"By stone, I can. I can rip his elbows off and make him juggle! UGH." Lucas kicked at a stone and shook his hands violently. After a moment he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, visibly calming himself. "You said we needed to clear the boy's contract. He's indentured?"

Donovan smiled at how quickly his partner came back to business. "He's working as a hostler's apprentice, so that makes things easier."

“Much,” Lucas agreed.

Instead of taking the child from his family and standing by through the tearful goodbyes, or being offered more than they could fairly take, or having to fight angry relatives who didn't agree with the decision to send the child away, they only needed to use Order funds to buy the boy's contract.

They set off at a fast pace both to complete their task, and to keep warm.

“I want to Seek again before we go,” Donovan said.

Lucas looked at him in surprise. “Oh?”

“If the Order knew that the boy was a magus, as the report suggests, then someone else would know, send it off to the Hunters, especially if that Gallagher didn't keep it to himself. You know how rumors can fly around a place like this. I don't like that I didn't See any last night.”

“Better the enemy you know than the one you don't, right?” Lucas said thoughtfully. “If they have a seat at the shop, you might be able to do it there with little disruption.”

“That'd be the preference.”

“All right, we'll ask. The boy can pack while you Seek and we'll collect our horses after.”

“We shouldn't have left our gear in the room.”

“You're very nervous all a'sudden.”

“I have the bad feeling we might need to run.”

Lucas put a hand to his sword. “It won't be the first time.”

They passed a dozen shops as they returned toward the front of town, all of them with invitingly warm glows. The noise increased as they got closer, stamping and whinnying from the probably hundred stalls inside. This was the larger of the two stables, but the second was across the street, adding its own sounds and smells to the cacophony.

A large sign, made of very thick and colorful glass in red, blue, green, and yellow swung gently out front. A couple of horses peeked out into the fresh air from open stall windows, whickering at passerby.

It was already busy, even at this time of the morning, though Donovan knew from experience in this town that the population of buyers would only grow. He couldn't imagine what it took to run this place as he looked for the owner through the crowds.

“Help you, sirs?” a young boy asked. He might have been twelve — or a scrawny fourteen — with shaggy blond hair and a bright grin.

“We’re looking for the owner,” Donovan told him above the sound.

“Looking to buy? I can show you the beasts if you like — I know all about them. I’m in my sixth year apprenticed.”

Donovan smiled at him. “No, we’re not looking to buy. We just need to speak to the owner.”

“Sure.” He turned around and darted through the crowd.

Donovan and Lucas did their best to follow until they breached the press of humanity, away from the horse stalls, and into a back room of the building. It was much quieter here, but there was a regular stream of boys and girls running messages — offers, no doubt — on bits of paper.

When Lucas and Donovan arrived in the doorway, their little guide gestured to them with aplomb.

“Yes, yes, all right Ruben, go on. Gentlemen, I’m Garth Ward.”

“Ruben?” Lucas asked for confirmation.

The boy looked at him.

“Is that Ruben Smith?”

“Why?” the boy asked suspiciously.

“Can you wait outside the door for just a couple of minutes while we speak to Master Ward, please?” Lucas asked him.

The boy looked at the stable owner, who nodded, and stepped out to close the door, eyeing them as he did so.

“Help you, sirs?” Garth asked.

“We understand you hold the contract for Ruben Smith,” Donovan told him.

“I do. You’re Retrievers?”

Donovan blinked. “Yes.” He held up the file. “Gave it away?”

The stable master nodded. “My third apprentice taken in four years. I’d swear it’s the shop. The last one swore he’d return, but I don’t see that likely. He was an Empath, you know — very good with the customers.”

Donovan flipped to a page of the file. “If you don’t mind ...”

Garth sighed hugely. “I’ll miss him around here — practically one of my own brood, he’s been here long enough.”

“Six years, he said,” Lucas mentioned.

Seeker

“Mother sold him to me when he was just barely eight. She’d found some beau and decided to pay off her debts and leave town. Still, he’s one of my best I can easily say; got a real knack for the beasts.” He signed the form and Lucas countersigned, handed it to Donovan, who tucked it into a pocket.

“Just his contract, then, and you’ll be settled.”

“Ruben!” Garth called. The boy came inside again.

“Aye?” he asked, arms crossed. “Did you sell me?”

“In a sort. These men are the Retrievers and they’ve come to claim you for the Order learning. You’re getting proper schooling.”

Ruben eyed them. “I thought you’d be bigger.”

“Don’t be a loaf, Ben. Go and get your things. They’re in a hurry.”

The boy ran off.

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.#

DOES THE NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE BALANCE ITS BURDEN?

Donovan would prefer to die of old age in his bed, but unforeseen circumstances might force him to do otherwise.

When Donovan is tasked with Retrieving a young child thought to be a magus — the most powerful magic user in any generation — he is thrown headfirst into a world of intrigue and deception where any move he makes could be the one that shifts his people into a position of bloodshed and failure.

There is a war brewing, centuries old. The Hunters, blood mages and child-snatchers, fight the born mages, people of the Order, the school of magic and scholarly pursuit. Donovan must learn who and what to trust and how to endure suffering as he finds more and more about the nature of this endless war and what he can do to stop it.

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