



CHAPTER 3

New Alliances

Refugees fleeing from the emperor's campaign of conquest make their way into Ferncliff Forest in increasing numbers. It provides safety and shelter for many who can reach its borders. The emperor has not attempted to send armies, *but that will change*, thinks Austin Ringhorn, Minotaur, former gladiator, and now forest protector. Austin is the leader of the Heroes of Woodhaven, named after the city he established within the mythical forest. He has a reputation as a genius in strategy and a fearsome fighter. He comes from a land called Taurdron, a nation of barbarian Minotaurs in the northwest.

Many races are part of his forces; those that share the love of the woods are his allies, even humans, who he distrusts the most. Austin has a strict policy for any who wish to join his cause. In the last two years since the emperor made his move against the human cities, five assassins have tried to kill him, all human. Humans are segregated. They are welcome to stay if they honor the rules of the forest, but joining Austin's forces is another matter, and it is not easy. Add in the fact that his people sold

him to humans, who put him into the arena for sport, and you start to see why he does not trust them. However, their numbers grow, and some are healthy and strong.

He could use the extra men. Recently the emperor has been sending forces to test Austin's defenses; he fears soon that a large army will come to wage war in his home. The Minotaur became famous during the Treaty War, where he named the city of Woodhaven within Ferncliff Forest. There he and a small group of protectors defeated the tyrant Ru Feranar and his army of warlords. Now, twenty-eight years later, another tyrant has taken his place, and if rumors are true, he is worse than all who have come before. Austin looks down at his maps and lists.

Seven thousand will not be enough, Austin thinks to himself, going over his plan. Austin's thoughts are interrupted as a centaur enters the room.

"Austin, a human requests a meeting with you," says Alantier, a centaur with a deep voice.

"Who is it this time?" asks the Minotaur, not looking interested. The centaur's eyes give away his surprise to his old friend.

"Alias Kaynan, former prince of Arcacia," he responds.

Austin now looks interested, as one of his major problems might have just been solved. "Describe him to me," he says.

The centaur looks confused for a second and answers as best he can. "He is around 5'8", slender build, with dark hair; you can see the elven in him for sure," answers Alantier hesitantly.

Alantier continues, "He has the air of royal bloodlines about him, but his hands are calloused and dirty, so he is used to hard work...oh, and I heard he dabbles in magic."

Austin looks pleased after the description. "Tell him I will meet him, and with no more than two advisors," commands the Minotaur with a smile that looks like a

growl. "Bring them here as soon as possible"

The centaur cannot help but smile at his friend before departing.

Now alone, Austin tries to estimate how many forces Alias already has and how many more will come to the aid of a former prince. The Minotaur knows the benefit of having a true heir to a throne within his ranks. Leaders are not always the best fighters, yet they have other benefits. Many of the humans here are brave people who would love to fight back, given the chance, and with refugees scattered throughout the lands, Alias is just what he needs to build an army that can do more than protect one forest.

The brilliant military strategist has broad plans. He knows he can't hold out in the forest; too much destruction will be done to the woods. He plans to take the fight to the emperor, to start attacking his outposts and supply lines, to build an army big enough to retake cities. Such things cost money and supplies. The Minotaur knows that farmers will help and families will provide, and that sure helps, but money can buy many men that would sooner sit by and wait for the darkness to come to them. If the emperor goes unchecked, his forces will advance on all the known lands, eventually enslaving the world.

Austin has heard rumors from rebel forces of giant reptilian creatures within the ranks of the enemy, some ridden and others sent out in packs. One was reported to be as big as three ships in length. Some say they come from the Black Desert, others say from a faraway island. All agree they are fearsome to behold. Most refugees fear the clans the most. Austin has never come across a clan member but thinks maybe they were the first assassins sent to kill him some time back.

Now he must focus on Alias and the forging of an alliance with the half-elf. Austin grabs his huge battle-axe and heads

to the meeting place, anxious to gauge the former prince and his loyalties. He thinks of his trusted friends, who should be arriving shortly, for they are the only three who helped him earn his freedom from the Arena. One of them, Vikus, taught him how to be a great fighter and strategist. He was a mentor during his time as a slave and became as family. Austin found out the three had become slaves just to help him see his destiny fulfilled, for they were the Three Rowan of legend, members of the Order of the Sacred Tree.

The one called Father Wishbone, the healer of the group and yet a seasoned warrior himself, spoke of a time when Austin's military strategies would decide the fate of the lands. The one called Dirk, an elven blade master, who was the oldest yet acted the youngest, had spoken of his travels as a spirit and the visions he witnessed of the Minotaur's deeds. Austin feels this is the time. This is when the downtrodden rise up, when the slaves are slaves no more, a time for valor and courage in the face of evil. Austin's movements seem to him not to be of his own, as he is carried by destiny's wind. It draws him close to the place it has fated for him in its infinite web of possibilities, a place that may be the birth of an alliance that stems the tide of evil. But it also may be the place where he dies.

Alias Kaynan sits with five of his supporters around a fire, eating stew with some stale bread, the night air heavy with uncertainty. They talk of their quest for an alliance and the rumors of their leader Austin Ringhorn.

"Austin has been generous to our people, if not talkative," remarks Alias, reaching for his cup.

"Everyone we talked to here has only good words to say."

“We must still be careful, I have heard nasty rumors about the Minotaur,” explains Hawkins, a human of medium build.

Grahl, a large human with a red beard, leans forward. “There are also nasty rumors about Alias...so I would not put my faith in words, only deeds.”

“This is true,” Alias replies to Grahl. He smiles at his longtime teacher and advisor. Pulling out an arcane book with runes on it, he draws the eyes of all who sit with the former prince.

“That book again? When are you going to stop with your obsession?” asks Stephan.

“When I master it,” answers the former prince. Grahl looks up from his plate with a concerned look on his face.

“As long as it does not interfere with your sword training,” announces the burly man with stern eyes. Alias looks at his longtime mentor and smiles mischievously.

“Of course, I would never think of such a thing,” he says dramatically. Still holding a lopsided smile, he begins to concentrate on the book in his lap. His lips move in flutters as his fingers trace the page. After almost an hour he looks up and rubs his eyes. Looking around, he sees Grahl and Hawkins talking to a centaur. He makes his way over and introduces himself.

“Greetings, Master Centaur, I am Alias Kaynan; it is good to meet you.” The centaur looks down on the human with a look of curiosity.

“I am Alantier; I have been instructed to tell you Austin will meet you tonight, as soon as you’re ready.”

Alias washes his hands in a basin as Grahl approaches.

“You should not go alone, my lord,” Grahl says.

“I will not offend the man on our first meeting,” says Alias, wiping his hands. The centaur’s sharp hearing picks up the

private conversation.

“You may bring no more than two advisors, and no weapons are allowed,” he says, as Alias is strapping on his long sword. A look of concern crosses over Grahl’s face, but a stern look from Alias quickly changes it.

But Hawkins seems irate. “My lord, this is foolish,” he says, looking as if he might attack the centaur.

“Enough! If he wanted us dead, we would all have been killed by now,” Alias says with heat in his voice. Hawkins looks at the centaur with anger in his eyes.

“With the southern resistance at your back, they would not dare,” he finishes, gesturing to the camp.

“I understand your concerns, but my word is final. You can stay if you want,” says Alias, gesturing for Grahl.

“I am sorry, my lord; I will control myself,” says Hawkins, looking at the floor.

“Fine, my friend; let us be on our way.” The centaur looks at Grahl and Hawkins with uncertainty.

“We use no torch. If your friends cannot see in the dark, you must lead them with a rope,” explains the centaur. “We have a long journey, and the terrain can be rough.”

After securing the rope around Grahl and Hawkins, Alias turns and looks up at Alantier and says, “We are ready.”

Without hesitating, the centaur begins to move at a fast pace, his horse half moving in at a quick pace. After an hour of traveling in the pitch-black forest, Alantier stops and brings the travelers to a stop. The silence of the night is broken by a series of bird chirps. Alantier responds in kind. Several moments later all hear a loud metal *ping* getting closer and closer.

“I think I see a dwarf,” announces Alias in the dark, his eyes as red as Alantier’s.

“He is an ally; his name is Sai Kophuk,” explains the centaur, shifting his body, and then a dwarf comes out of the woods clad in armor from head to toe, marching to a song of dwarven heritage. The dwarf is hard to make out to the humans, who can barely see at all.

“Well, I don’t think we are being followed. I have our elves and dryads keeping a good lookout, I tell ya,” booms Sai, who reeks of liquor and sweat.

“Fine time for hello and greetings, but we best be on our way,” says the dwarf as he takes up the rear position.

When the group happens upon a meadow, bathed in starlight, Alias and his men get a better look at the dwarf. Standing 4’3”, the stocky dwarf looks strong and powerful. His armor is adorned with many spikes, and even his helm has a crown of metal points. The dwarf’s beard extends over his breastplate, and many scars crisscross his face, leading down to his beard.

The group does not pause as it plunges once again into complete darkness. Alias can only imagine how disoriented his friends are as they walk blindly, being led through the dark. He hopes his instincts about Austin are correct. Feeling responsible for more than just his own life, Alias starts to regret his determination. He begins to go through his feeble spells, in case things go wrong. The centaur never checked for spell components, and most spells of minor importance need no such things.

But what spells would do any good here? thinks the former price. *Blinding light, a pulse of energy?* His thoughts begin to wander for a time. Alias reasons his other few minor spells are of no help at all. Ever since the formation of the wizard council, higher levels of magic have been forbidden and increasingly difficult to find.

Now concerned, he glances at the dwarf and the many spikes on his knees and elbows and his deadly and ominous-looking gauntlets. The centaur has unnerved him from the beginning but seems to have a glimmer of good nature. The dwarf, however, seems a very dangerous individual to have at their backs.

A series of distant howls splits the night and brings all to a stop. Alantier peers into the night for several moments.

“Dread Wolves, but no worry; they don’t have our scents,” the large centaur states, still looking into the dark.

The dwarf gives a grunt of displeasure and says with disappointment, “Too bad. The pack don’t stop till all are dead, I tell ya.” He then kicks the ground and shrugs his shoulders. Alias notices Hawkins, his longtime friend, looking around in panic, sweat pouring down his forehead.

“It’s nothing; try to relax,” Alias says to his friend, putting his hand on his shoulder.

Alantier resumes his trot, and the time for comfort is short as they press into the darkness. Alias does not see Hawkins’s tears falling freely as he clutches a small dagger underneath his shirt.

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Austin hears the group approach his fire, where he sits with his large axe across his knees. He gets up and stretches to his full height, which is over nine feet. Alantier gestures for the three men to enter the small encampment, and with Sai, they stand guard.

“Welcome, there is food and drink for all. I bid your company, Alias. As your men dine together, so shall we, privately.”

Walking with his friends to a table covered with much food and drink, the former prince tries to assure his friends.

“It will be fine. Austin is just being cautious. Eat and be merry; this alliance could be the start of change.” He then picks up some food and eats it quickly.

“Wait here,” he says to his friends, and grabs a mug of mead. Walking back toward the Minotaur, Alias feels very small as he approaches the fire and sits down.

“I thank you for letting my people and the refugees take shelter,” states Alias sincerely, still trying to eat.

“It is my hope that we can help each other. I do not own the forest, I only ask that the forest is respected and the boundaries that we set are not broken,” responds Austin. “As to helping each other, I am also of like mind.”

Both men stare long at each other, gauging their commitment to their respective cause.

“How many able men and women follow you?” asks the Minotaur, breaking the silence and getting to the point.

“Six thousand in total, three are here now,” responds the half-elf. “The rest are in small groups in the southlands, causing as many problems as they can for the enemy.”

Austin thinks for a moment before responding. Then he says, “Keep it that way, but send the word out that there will be extra pay and support for families left behind. I want those numbers to grow, as a matter of fact, and I will send additional troops of my own. I think it might take days to come to a full agreement, so I request you stay here and send one of your men back to the camp to spread the word, and we will go over the details.”

Alias hesitates and looks into the Minotaur’s eyes. “That’s it, that quick? We just hammer out the details? What if I am a spy?”

It does not take Austin long to answer. He says, “I look into your eyes, and I like what I see. I will be honest, I want to use

you to build an army,” states the Minotaur with determination. “And in time take the fight to the emperor,” he finishes.

Alias laughs deeply. “I want to use you to do the same,” he admits with a boyish charm.

“Let us always be so honest with each other, Lord Kaynan,” states Austin, looking right into his eyes. Alias turns to leave and hesitates again, remembering the words the Minotaur used.

“You said earlier you would be in charge of only the military, now you call me ‘Lord.’ Let us start our pact of honesty in good faith,” says Alias in regal tones. Austin notes to himself how sharp the former prince is and is thankful for such a quality.

“You are a leader. You were a prince of Arcacia, and the people need a true royal icon to rally behind,” says Austin honestly. “My strength lies in military strategies and the length of my arm on the battlefield, not in inspiring the masses and setting the laws.”

Alias smiles again at the Minotaur’s honesty, a trait he admires. “This is true,” he replies with a lopsided smile. He then walks to where Grahl and Hawkins are sitting.

“It went better than I had hoped, my friends. Hawkins, I need you to go and prepare a rider to escort Austin’s forces to our southern resistance groups. You will also bring word of extra pay and support for the families, so spread the word quickly.”

Hawkins looks panicked, almost grief-stricken. “I won’t leave you. I don’t trust them,” he says in a rush. Alias mistakes the panic as genuine concern.

“You will be back by morning, now stop panicking and gather yourself,” says Alias with a stern voice. Hawkins looks over at Austin before bowing curtly and joining the centaur to head back to the camp.

“What’s gotten into him? You should have heard him while you two were talking,” remarks Grahl, stuffing his mouth with roasted pork.

“These are dark times, my old mentor. He is just tired and stressed,” replies Alias thoughtfully as he watches Hawkins depart.

“So you are obviously pleased. What do you think of him?” asks Grahl, looking at the Minotaur over Alias’s shoulder.

“I think he is honest and very smart, a good judge of character. I think we can depend on him,” replies Alias, refilling his mug.

“I also think he can be trusted, my lord, and I think we would be dead if not,” whispers Grahl, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

“This is true,” says the former prince, downing his mug quickly. “This is true.”