

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO.FIVE

Barrand became a soldier when he was fourteen. Sarael came through his village providing healing to those in need. Her guardsworn stood beside her, dazzling in their brilliant white tabards. Heads unbowed and eyes sharp. His younger self had never seen anything as fine. Fighters with a righteous purpose. A woman—an avatar—kind and beautiful. With a feeling of absolute certainty Barrand only experienced a few times in his life, he knew what he had to do. He stole his grandmother's old sword, left a note, and set off to learn enough to be worthy of Sarael's service. It was right. As he looked around the Avatar's attending room at the gate to the manor, Barrand knew, with absolute certainty, something was wrong.

Chairs and tables had been set up in the hastily vacated gatehouse to accommodate Sarael's wish to provide care. A line of supplicants stretched out the door of the clinic. Servants in white robes worked beside Sarael, attending those patients who didn't need divine healing. Aeralan was with them, her face puffy and red, eyes miserable and downcast. Barrand felt sorry for the girl, but what did she expect? This was reality, not some poem about forbidden love.

The shutters and doors to the inner bailey were open to capture any breeze the stifling day offered. Looking across the courtyard toward the manor house nearly blinded Barrand from the sunlight reflecting off the light paving stones. Nevertheless, he noticed an increasing stream of black-robed Throkari priests shuttling between the gate and the manor. What was Conthal doing?

Barrand checked everyone's position. Sarael sat beside a bed, channeling light into a wound. Thera was in place, patrolling the line of people outside the door. Good. Everyone was where they should be. He liked it when everything was orderly; it gave him a reprieve from the too familiar burning in his chest.

Still, why the sudden activity with the Throkari? The feeling of wrongness set Barrand on edge. Conthal had visitors from his temples, of course. But, they arrived at their appointed times, in carefully groomed and organized groups—never this black fluttering from gate to house and back.

A Servant directed a stooped and blanket-draped figure to a chair in the center of the room. The old man stumbled past it, wobbling on his cane, and reached out to the chair at Aeralan's station. The hand was dirty. Everything about the figure was filthy. Barrand figured the best thing to do for the man would be to give him a bath and clean clothes. The man sat down with a heavy sigh and set his cane beside him. The Servant shrugged and turned to get the next person in line.

Barrand narrowed his eyes at the seated figure. A remarkably strong and healthy hand for an old man living in squalor. Barrand sighed. Why were these two dismally stupid? His stomach burned again.

He dragged a chair over to sit beside the blanket-clad priest. "You believe this is deceiving anyone?"

Aeralan's eyes widened and she looked like she was about to throw herself on the man.

"Aeralan," Barrand whispered. "Don't be a fool. If he managed to avoid discovery, your reaction is not going to help him stay hidden."

The Servant tucked a lock of dark hair behind an ear and straightened. She turned toward her table of supplies and herbs and fumbled for some of the jars.

“I can’t go to Rynd. I won’t be parted from her.” Varen’s voice was hoarse.

“What can we do for you?”

“Hide me!”

Barrand sat back in his chair and regarded the man. Typical Throkari arrogance. “Why shouldn’t I turn you over to Conthal? You’re his priest. You swore obedience to him and to Throkar. You take your word lightly?”

“Barrand, please!” Aeralan said.

“Why would you believe in a man who deserts his position and runs from the consequences of his actions?” Barrand turned to the shrouded figure. “You endanger her with your cowardice, but she is my responsibility. My word to my goddess won’t be put aside easily.”

“I have someone waiting to meet us outside of the city. My brethren are searching for me and they have guards at the gates. Help us past them and we will escape.”

“The truce inside these walls is what protects Aeralan, stupid boy. You want to strip that safeguard from her?”

The young man’s haughtiness crumbled and he dropped his gaze to his hands. “You’re right. I...hoped.” His shoulders slumped. “I’ll go.” Varen started to rise.

“Wait,” Barrand said. “Let me think. Aeralan, tend him while I try to figure something out. No calf-eyes! He’s a sick, old man, treat him as such.”

Her cheeks reddened, but she jerked her head and started throwing herbs into a mortar.

Barrand stood and continued his pacing around the room. A glance to the courtyard told him the Throkari were still moving around. He walked along the line of patients until he stood beside Thera. “Are there any back exits from Csiz?” he muttered under his breath. “Something the Throkari wouldn’t know about.”

Thera stared at him in surprise. “Are we going somewhere?”

Barrand growled. “Mother Aeralan is trying to make a place for herself in a tragic love story. She’ll do something fatal if I don’t figure out how to get her and her pet Throkari out of here.”

“The priest?” Thera peered over at the shrouded man. “Did he think that fooled anyone?”

Barrand gave her a wry smile.

Thera flicked her dagger in and out of its sheath. “Well...I don’t know of any way over the wall without going through a gate. Gardanath must have an escape plan.”

Barrand stepped out into the sun and his skin started to burn. Damn his fair complexion in this climate. He shifted his armor to rub at the trickle of sweat running between his shoulder blades. He looked forward to heading north for the Summer Festival.

The foyer of the manor was cool and it took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust to the relative darkness. He heard Gardanath’s voice coming from his office. The Avatar rarely spoke below a bellow.

“I’ve given you a list of who I want. Find them.”

There was a murmur of agreement and Gardanath’s squire stumbled out of the office, almost colliding with Barrand. The man barely glanced at him as he scuttled down the hallway.

Gardanath emerged a second later. “Ah, Barrand. Is everything well with Sarael?”

“May I have a word?”

The big Avatar grinned and gestured for him to enter the office.

“We have a problem with one of our Servants.”

Gardanath stroked his chin. “Isn’t this something Sarael should deal with? I don’t have any influence over her people.”

“...and a Throkari priest.”

The Avatar settled back into his chair. “You’re the source of the discontent among our black-clad friends, eh?”

“We need a way for two besotted idiots to leave the city undetected.”

“The pair from the orphanage?”

Barrand nodded. “His people are watching the gates. Is there any way around them?”

Gardanath poured himself a goblet of wine and drank thoughtfully. “I don’t like the idea of Conthal storming around breaking things in a fit of piqué. Why should I help these two and risk my valuables—like Csiz Luan? If my soldiers disobeyed such an order, I’d unleash Ravendis on them with my blessing.”

“What would happen if Conthal breaks the truce? If he kills one of Sarael’s Servants?”

Gardanath glared at Barrand with glacial green eyes. “A god can’t kill another god’s Avatar—can’t even touch them. Conthal would suffer no consequences. Ravendis would complain about it. *Endlessly.*” He grunted. “You make a good case. Better to get them out of the city before I’m forced to endure that. Once outside, they can slaughter each other and it won’t be my problem. Can you get them up to the manor?”

“Bring them here, with Conthal’s minions running around?” The acid bubbled up inside his stomach.

“If you bring them here, I’ll escort them out myself.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

The last patients pressed through the closing gate when Barrand returned to the clinic. Sarael was exhausted. No matter how many times he chided her to reserve some of her healing strength for herself, the Avatar depleted herself each day. Thera was beside her, urging her to drink some of the spicy apple tea popular in Dacten. The lieutenant gathered up her things and escorted the Avatar toward the manor. Sarael would rest before dinner. Marcus trailed along behind them.

He smiled at them and glanced at Aeralan. She splinted the arm of a young boy, his father hovering close by. Varen lay on a cot in a dim corner of the guardhouse, still draped with his dirty blankets.

If he switched clothes with one of the Servants, maybe it would mislead any watchers. Long enough to get them to the manor, at any rate. Barrand scanned the room. Jol was the best match in size and coloring. Wonderful.

When a handful of people remained in line, Barrand approached the Servant. “Father Jol. Aeralan needs to consult with you about a patient.”

He set aside the herb jar he was refilling and glared down his nose at Barrand. Quin wasn’t the only one he disdained. “What does she need?”

“Over there. The old man.”

Jol followed Barrand over to the reclining priest. He gasped when he recognized Varen. “What is this? Does Sarael know this...man...is here?”

Barrand moved several of the privacy screens around the bed. Aeralan finished with her patient and joined them.

“Mother, what is this nonsense?” Jol demanded.

“I want you to trade clothes with the priest,” Barrand said.

“I will not!”

“We need your help in getting them out of the city. Switch clothes and pretend you’re an old man leaving the gatehouse. He’ll pretend to be a Servant—“

“I won’t!” protested the Throkari.

“Shut up, boy. You’ll do as your told, if you want my help.”

Aeralan glared at Barrand and took Varen’s hand. “Please, Jol. He’s not like the others. He would never hurt a Yhellani. Help us get away from them.”

Jol frowned. “Does Sarael know you’re leaving?”

The woman shrugged, embarrassed. “Not yet.” She turned to Barrand. “Would you tell her for me?”

“Me?” Barrand was startled. “Jol would be more appropriate.”

“If you tell her, maybe she’ll forgive me.”

Why did everyone assume that? Barrand had no special connection with the Avatar, he was merely the captain of her guardsworn. He shook his head. “Fine. Jol, are you going to do this or not?”

The rat-faced Servant glowered at the couple. “This is wrong. But I suppose if you’re determined to get yourselves killed, I have no say in the matter.” He sniffed. “Those things you have on just appear to be filthy. There is nothing alive in there with you?”

Varen scratched at his side. “Just dirt.”

Jol sighed and removed his white robe. He wore the traditional gray silk undergarments. Varen stripped off his crusted tunic and drawers and exchanged them with Jol. They shared equal expressions of disgust as they redressed.

“Aeralan will walk Jol to the gate and pass him through. Varen will walk up to the manor in the middle of the Servants. Gardanath will take you two from there to an exit from the city.”

The trio looked frightened.

“Jol come back in about an hour? Shamble around the city for a while, maybe do some begging. You’ll be good at it.”

The Servant stiffened.

Aeralan grabbed the blankets. Before Jol could respond, she tossed them over his head and pulled him toward the door.

“Decrepit old man, Jol,” Barrand murmured as they walked past. The Servant stooped his shoulders and hobbled after Aeralan. He was fairly convincing. “You should wash up, Varen. There’s a pitcher and rags over there.”

Barrand left the Throkari and continued on his route around the room. Other Servants led their patients to the gate, along with Aeralan. When they returned, they began tidying up for the night.

The woman went to each person and explained the plan. They cast glances at Varen, but didn't object.

The Yhellani may not be fighters —damned terrible fighters —but they were brave. Barrand admired that about his charges. When the couple started gazing at each other like lovesick deer, he had to admit the Yhellani weren't necessarily the smartest people, either. He would have thought the Throkari would have more sense. Barrand growled at them and they split apart. This was not going to go well. He had that feeling.

They headed out in a cluster of white. He tried to keep them from drifting too far apart and allowing Varen to stand out amid the crowd. Barrand felt like a sheepdog. The courtyard was empty. The procession of the Throkari priests had ended. He hoped they were out chasing Jol.

Just short of the stairs to the manor door, Conthal stepped out on the landing. Several priests attended him, and Barrand was thankful Dalanar had left the city.

"You seem to have something of mine among your livestock, dog." Conthal regarded Varen with a sneer. "I never imagined anything so revolting: a Throkari dressed as a Servant. I should obliterate you now to remove the taint from my priesthood."

"Leave him alone, Conthal." Barrand stepped in front of the Servants.

"Again, you bark when you should be silent. It's disappointing Sarael never managed to teach you manners. I believe I would be successful. My methods are more...direct." The Avatar stepped down from the platform and paced over to the Servants. They backed away, leaving Aeralan and Varen standing together, hands clasped. "Father Varen, kneel before me."

Varen started to his knees but Aeralan tugged him toward the stairs. "No!"

The young priest turned to her in surprise. "Are you mad?"

Barrand stepped between Conthal and the couple, as they retreated.

Conthal laughed derisively. "Where do you suppose you can hide inside the manor?"

"You'll have to come through me, to get to them, Throkari."

The Avatar's eyes sparkled. "Is that an invitation?"

The couple made it to the first step. The Throkari priests attempted to block the door, but the Yhellani Servants surrounded them, arms linked. It became a battle unlike any Barrand had ever witnessed. The Servants stopped the Throkari from leaving their circle, by the simple means of their presence. Each time one of the priests attempted to escape, they moved arms and legs to block them. Neither side could touch the other aggressively, or risk triggering Ravendis' wrath.

"You are beginning to anger me, Varen. How long do you want your suffering to last before you die?"

Aeralan clawed at the door until she managed to drag it open. Her grip on Varen's arm was white.

Conthal drew in his power and he pointed toward them. The heat was brutal, but Barrand stepped within the sorcerer's reach and nudged his arm aside with an armored shoulder. It was clearly not an attack; it was scarcely more than a gentle bump. It threw off the Avatar's aim and his spell exploded against the wall. A barrage of stone slivers blasted out leaving bloody gashes and cuts on exposed flesh.

“Out of my way!” Conthal pushed by him and headed for the entrance.

Barrand drove past the Throkari and threw his bulk against the door.

Conthal’s face was livid and air wheezed in his lungs. He coughed while snarling at Barrand. When he caught his breath he spoke, “You will regret this, Yhellani dog. I will show you agony like you never imagined.” The Avatar made a gesture as if he swept aside a cobweb, and Barrand was pressed against the wall. He was unhurt, but immobilized. Breathing was only possible in short, shallow gasps. Conthal slammed open the door and entered the building.

It took several minutes, but the spell holding Barrand faded, and he shoved away from the wall. The foyer was deserted. He heard a door slam from the Throkari suite and the Avatar swept in.

“Where are they?” Conthal demanded.

Thera came out into the hall to investigate. “Sarael is sleeping, shut up.”

Despite the lieutenant’s efforts to block him, Conthal shoved open the door to the Yhellani wing. Barrand followed as the Avatar searched each room.

When the Throkari entered her room, Sarael sat up in bed, her blonde hair mussed from sleep. “What are you doing, Conthal? You weren’t invited here.”

“You are hiding my priest! By the accords, I demand you surrender him to me.”

Sarael glanced at Barrand in confusion.

“Varen and Aeralan, My Lady.”

“They certainly aren’t here. Search elsewhere.” She crossed her arms indignantly.

Conthal clenched his teeth and shook with rage.

“Your priest is gone,” Gardanath said from the doorway.

“What do you know of this?”

“I helped them escape.” The big Avatar leaned against the door frame and inspected his fingernails. “You were likely to do something unfortunate if I let it continue. I don’t need Ravendis upset by your little vendetta.”

“How dare you interfere?” Spittle flecked Conthal’s chin.

“If you’re going to have a tantrum, I ask that you leave my city.”

The Throkari’s eyes bulged and black light leaked from the corners. He took a deep breath and turned away. His shoulders were tense and his hands balled into fists at his side.

Barrand didn’t dare move. He’d heard of the sorcerer’s fits, but didn’t believe the stories. Conthal had always been coldly rational.

The sound of the man’s harsh breathing filled the silence. Slowly, it calmed. His shoulders relaxed and he wiped his face with a dark sleeve. Conthal turned to Barrand, hatred burning in the shadowed stone of his eyes. “You will regret this.” Without another word or glance, he departed. A chill settled against Barrand’s spine. He had a feeling of absolute certainty Conthal was right.