

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter 8

In which our heroes cannot believe what they see

by Frank Dorrian

The glare of Azrani torchlight died as the temple doors slammed shut with an earth-shattering boom. Rhen threw a hand across her face, eyes screwed shut against the darkness and stinging dust that engulfed the team. Greton's coughing pushed through the last echoes of the doors' thunder, somewhere off to her side.

'Fuck... me.' Hoji hawked and spat somewhere behind, the splatter echoing fivefold through the dark. 'Greton - get us a bastard light going, will you?'

Rhen turned her back on the doors, scrubbing grit from her eyes as a blurry light flickered into being at her side, arcing a gritty wad of her own over Hoji's huge silhouette. He jumped as the glob sailed past, a wet slap echoing morosely back toward the team. Hoji grumbled to himself, wiping the hand he combed through his hair on his pants. 'Thanks, boss.'

Rhen ignored him, her eyes roving over what little she could see of the temple. Greton's light was weak, barely dusting the sharp edges and corners of stone some twenty feet ahead of them. 'More light,' she snapped, her impatience getting the best of her.

'I'm not a fucking beacon, Rhen,' Greton panted, 'give me a minute, would you?'

'I said: more light.'

Greton sighed. Ruined arm clutched gingerly to his chest, he raised the other overhead, the fistful of light in his palm detaching, wavering as it rose. Light pulsed through the darkness in pale waves, growing brighter, rising to the sound of the sorcerer's straining. Rhen turned away with a hiss as a blinding flash tore through the shadows, riding the crescendo of Greton's pain.

'Prick!' Rhen saw Hoji bent double before her as she blinked back searing afterimages, the warrior clawing at his eyes and shaking his head. 'You've blinded me, you half-spell shitstain!'

'Shame...' Greton wheezed. 'Won't... be able to see me... clap your sister's cheeks again, eh?'

'Little fucking fairground trickstering, smartmouthed, arsebuggering, shitworm...' Sparks bounced from the ground as Hoji lifted his hammer and stepped toward the fallen mage. Greton raised his hand toward the warrior, a crackle of malign power forming around it.

'Stow it, the pair of you, before I stick a sword up both your arses,' Rhen spat, stepping through the middle of their impending scrap, the pair's grumbling following her. She paused a step or two past them, squinting through the glare from above to scan the temple.

They were in a sprawling vestibule, so vast that Greton's blazing light lit up a hundred-foot half-circle of mouldering stone floor around them. The temple darkness lay impenetrable beyond it, shrouding whatever lay in wait within its depths. Ahead, though, near the edge of the light, great statues towered upon crumbling plinths, their grim features weathered and steeped in lingering shadow. A broad path ran between their sandalled feet, littered with rubble and flaked in patches with faded gold paint, stretching onward into the murk.

'It's the Nine,' Rhen said, stepping closer, unable to keep the strain from her voice as she took in one likeness after another. She pointed to the statue on her left as Hoji and Greton appeared either side of her, the head of its long weapon lost to the darkness that lurked above. 'Tharaful, the Spearstorm.' Her finger moved to the one



on the right, its open hands raised before it, fingers clawed as if clutching something unseen between them. 'Zulog, the Wandering Flame.'

Hoji took a step forward, hammer hefted over his shoulder, sniffing the air loudly as they gazed up at the team's legendary forebears. He hawked loudly, and spat again, the glob arcing with a faint whistle before landing silently somewhere amidst a pile of rubble twelve feet away. 'Place stinks like a sack of Azrani arseholes,' he grunted. Greton sniffed the air in kind.

'Cuntface is right,' he said, a small flame bursting into life as he thrust his hand out to his side. 'For once. Something's not right with this place. It's been defiled.'

Rhen stepped forward, her swords screeching from their scabbards. 'Vouring.' She spat again herself as she stepped over the rubble in her way, the taste of the god's name like shit upon her tongue. 'You two, take point on our flanks, and stay sharp-sharp. Let's make this job quick and get the fuck out of here.'

The team passed between the fading forms of the Nine, following the path onward with Greton's light trailing after them. The likenesses of those that had bested the Devourer of Light before should have been grand - imposing. Instead, they crumbled, rotted like propped-up corpses. Worse, the further they went, what should have been the majesty of Kaegan, the Bane of Fellgods, was but a pair of broken feet amid a pile of decaying rubble.

Rhen raised a sword out at her side and called a halt. The silence that followed their footsteps more dreadful than the ruin brought upon this sacred place by Vouring's evil. Her eyes hardened as they skimmed over Kaegan's remains, sliding quickly onwards into darker shadows.

'There,' she said, pointing ahead with the sword in her left hand. Faded lines were just visible in the darkness, carved into a sprawling, arching relief. A yawning void opened up in the midst of it, refusing Greton's light.

'It's a depiction of the Nine's War,' Rhen breathed, climbing the rubble with her sword-dancer's grace. She paused at the top, poised upon the balls of her feet, Greton and Hoji making a damnable racket as they scrambled up beside her. Her sword-point traced the worn flow of the carving, faded and rotted images of the Nine mid-charge, her weapon pausing upon the monstrosity at its apex. Vouring - the only part of the relief that had withstood the god's corruption.

Lip curling at the beast's passive arrogance, she jabbed a blade toward the opening. 'We're headed the right way for the altar. Greton - get your light in there.'

The mage waved his light forward with a pained grunt, back arched, hunching over his wounded arm. Rhen chewed her lip as the light drifted forth, ducking into the darkened passageway. Something told her the mage's wound from the fight with the yixtal was worse than he'd made out. He wouldn't last much longer, and they'd be fucked in this place without him.

'Arsehole to nowhere,' Hoji muttered, as the light failed to show anything beyond more darkness in the passage.

'Had a few of those, Hoji and me,' Greton creaked.

'Plenty more of 'em to come,' said Hoji.

Rhen rolled her eyes. 'Not if you two don't shut up, and get a fucking move on,' she snarled, hopping down the rubble toward the passage with the sound of the pair's idiotic snickering following her.

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'Keep that fucking light going!' Rhen hissed somewhere ahead, hunched over her drawn swords and prowling through the murk like a gravehound. Greton bit back pain, scrubbed sweat from his brow, and spared the flickering light a sour glance. It was shrinking, despite his efforts, and suckling slowly away at his Aether reserve

with every minute he kept it going. There was still no end in sight to this corridor - no branches, no twists, no turns, no fucking anything other than a wretched trudge between crumbling walls chased with rotted carvings. Hoji caught his eye and shrugged, already half-shrouded in shadow as the light ebbed again.

He channelled another thread of Aether into the light, feeling another fragment of his soul deflate. No use telling Rhen, scrawny bitch was always too focussed on the mission to give much of a fuck about anything else, and it wasn't like she gave a shit about the crew anyway. This was all about the money. For all of them.

'Just get it done, get paid, get your arse home,' he whispered to himself. Sooner he was free of these two ballbags the better, especially that smug prick Hoji. He can eat a fucking foot-long, week-old...

The thought cut off as the light guttered, darkness swallowing Rhen.

'Fuck.' Greton paused, drew a breath, and prepared another thread of Aether. 'Sorry, boss, hold up I'll have it -' Hoji strode past him, warhammer turning in his hands, vanishing into the murk ahead where Rhen had gone, the sound of his footsteps quickly fading. 'What the - hey! Wait! Wait, you idiots!'

Greton pumped Aether into the light, more than he should have - tried to make it blaze - but instead the spell guttered and faded. It withered down to a bare spark, shadows spilling across the wall at Greton's side. He was utterly alone.

'Fuck it!' Greton's breaths rasped against the inside of his skull, his heart beating thunder against his chest as he drew on the last of his Aether, coating his arms in Stoneskin armour again, the very last dregs of it awakening as threads of fire through the gauntlets, a blazing web of glowing cracks. 'What...' He held a gauntlet aloft, stumbling blindly forward in a pathetic panic as the light from the fire magic failed to illuminate where the wall to his side should have been. As his legs tangled like a lame child's, Greton hit the floor on one knee and stone-clad fist, a streamer of embers spiralling from its glowing cracks.

A faint scream reached Greton's ears.

His head snapped up, eyes raking the darkness past the swirl of embers circling him, seeking something - anything - the emptiness of his Aether reserves gnawing at the edges of his being. He gave a cry as an ember slapped his cheek with a searing kiss, freezing mid-flinch as a scream shattered the silence beside his ear. A face - in the ember - charred down to the skull, agonised as it twisted away into the darkness. Another scream, another drifting ember, and they were all around him. Pained faces. Burnt mouths, squealing their last pathetic gasps, begging mercy, tearing at him with accusation. Some he knew, most he didn't, but they all cried the same three words.

Murderer.

Butcherer.

Torturer.

'Get the fuck away from me!' Greton fell back with a shrill cry, stone-clad hands swiping, tearing black streaks through the embers, only for them to reform, swell, grow. He scrabbled backward to the storm of their hate and pain, watching them tighten, drift together, merge. Broken voices found unity as the embers took form, sliding across one another in a blistering tempo, until they roared as one in a molten choir.

Murderer! Butcherer! Torturer!

A head rose before Greton, rippling with flame, white-hot eyes blazing within blackened pits as long, burning arms unfolded, slamming claws into the shadowed ground in bursts of sparks.

You killed us! You burned us!

A smouldering corpse towered over Greton, legless and scorched, its heat tearing at his flesh as it dragged its torso toward him. You burned us! You burned us! Forge-flames billowed from its mouth with every word, faces twisting through its burning flesh in endless rivers of pain, sending Greton scurrying backward in terror. Its hand

shot out as his back met the wall, clamping about his ruined forearm in a splatter of molten stone, lifting him from the ground.

You burned us all! You burned us all! It hurts! Oh, it fucking hurts, Greton!

Greton screamed, the heat of the thing's hand searing through his flesh, the stink of it choking him through the pain. He could feel the bones of his arm charring, blackening into ash, cracking open, as the thing lowered him into the flames of its mouth, a hundred burnt hands clawing at his legs from the depths of its throat.

It fucking hurts, Greton!

A faint scent found Greton's nose as he groped for his empty reserves, flames racing up his thighs. Aether - drifting from the corpse-thing's throat. It was unmissable, unmistakable, to a mage - no matter the pain, no matter the terror - they'd seek it like a moss-smoker seeks a fix.

Still screaming, arm beginning to crumble, Greton slammed the stone-covered palm of his free arm into the middle of the corpse-thing's face, right between its eyes, staring into them with gritted teeth. 'Give me your juice, cunt!'

He opened up the hollow of his reserve - bared it to reality like a whore flaunting an unpoxed tit - and inhaled the Aether emanating from the corpse. The thing's screams distorted, wavered, a song wrought upon broken strings. Its form writhed, churned, disintegrating and reforming as it fought against the hunger of Greton's drained Aetherwell. A final scream guttered out like a snuffed candle, the corpse-thing burst apart into embers, and Greton hit the ground in a cloud of dying sparks, clutching at the charred ruin of his arm.

'Fuck the lot of you!' he screamed at the darkness. 'You all fucking deserved it! Every single one of you!' He bent double over his pain, weeping like a child. The thing's touch still blazed, still seared, but... Stoneskin scraped against Stoneskin, crumbling and flaking away with the ebbing of the spell. 'What...'

Greton summoned a small light in his palm and cast it overhead - darkness fleeing in a watery circle around him, revealing the same mouldering stone. His arm was whole - still broken, but whole.

'An illusion...' Greton muttered, a laugh leaving him as he stood. 'Just a bit of light play! Ha!' He shunted a thread of his stolen Aether into the light. 'Boss! Hoji! Stay where you are, I'll be with you in -'

Greton turned as light caught on a figure at its edge. 'Who - wait! No!' He stumbled back, Stoneskin armour forming on his limbs half a heartbeat too late.

Blood hit stone.

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'You're not her.'

Hoji's hammer smashed Eika's head into pulp once again, skull a bloody ruin down to the still-flapping jaw. Small, bloated hands reached for him desperately, blackened with rot, dark blood spurting from a ruined throat as it repeated itself mindlessly again. 'Hoji! Hoji, where are you? I can't see - I can't see! The water's rising! I'm scared, Hoji! Help me!'

'Fuck off.'

Bone crunched, the hammer took the Eika-thing in the side and sent it spinning away into darkness. Hoji sagged, leaning on his grounded hammer, sweat coursing down his bare arms. Chest heaving, he closed his eyes, the same voice rising from behind him, the same words dragging cold knives down his spine.

'Hoji! Hoji! Hoji, where are -'

'I said: fuck off!'

Hoji spun, an overhand blow splattering the groping corpse that came stumbling through the murk, lit by a faint, ghostly light. Another appeared at his side, all sodden nightclothes and lank, matted hair hanging in black ropes. There was an almost believable moment of betrayal on its imitation of his sister's face, before the hammer smashed it into a pile of bloody, rotting chunks.

'Hoji! Hoji!'

'Where are you?'

'Hoji, where are you?'

'I'm scared...'

'Help me!'

More and more of them appeared, a swarm of shuffling, rotting things wearing the face of a dead child surrounding him, their voices growing as they closed in, shuffling wetly on sloughing feet. The sound of Eika's tears was overwhelming, gnashing at Hoji's skull, sinking freezing daggers through the skin of his soul. For a moment, he froze.

He knew it wasn't her - Eika had been dead for fifteen years, now. Abducted, found by the Tallaheim town guards, trapped, and drowned, in a flooded cellar. It was some cruel spell, or curse, an illusion, maybe. A fragment of Vouring's corruption, or something else, come to tear and pry at scars that still throbbed with a bitter ache.

'I swear on the Nine, if this is some shitty joke of yours, Greton, I'll shove this hammer up your arse sideways.'

'Hoji!'

'Help me!'

With a roar, Hoji spun, hammer swinging, tearing foetid holes through the swarm surrounding him with every blow. Still, they came, the sound of Eika's fear growing deafening - skull-splitting, and leaden - sending him down to his knees as the hammer was pulled from his hands.

Eika's dead face surrounded Hoji, wet hands groping him from every angle, sodden skin slipping from rotten fingertips. 'Get the fuck away from me!' He sunk a fist into one, a half-dozen rotten little hands clamping shut about the arm, dragging it and him into their midst.

'Help me!'

'Hoji, where are you?'

'No! No! I...' Tiny hands clutched at Hoji's eyes, dug at every orifice in his head, filled his mouth, tore at his skin. 'Eika... I'm sorry... I should have stayed home with you. I...'

Thunder boomed. The swarm of corpse-Eika's scattered with a stinging flash of lightning, and Hoji hit the ground beside his fallen hammer. A spray of grit and sand clung to the tears on his face as he picked himself up, the wind slithering over the sweat on the back of his neck. He glanced about him, blinking his vision clear of grit. A stormy sky roiled overhead, cut and veined by ghost-pale lightning, and ringed by the broken edges of crumbling temple ruins.

'What...'

When - how - had they gotten outside?

A noise from behind made Hoji turn, a pallid flash of lightning laying bare the horror that awaited him upon the sands, freezing him down to the marrow.

'Rhen?'

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Darkness. Rhen hated darkness.

And now, it enveloped her utterly.

She turned about in a slow circle, blades gripped tight, stance low, the sound of her steady breathing the only thing she could hear. Greton and Hoji had vanished some heartbeats ago when the shadows fell, and she didn't dare call out to them. Her skin crawled, fear's kiss making its way down her spine upon cold, prickling spider legs.

Calm, Rhen. Calm, she told herself, tongue raking over dry lips. The darkness felt... thick, almost tangible, as though it were trying to touch her. She shuddered. It's Vouring's corruption trying to slow you. Make you frightened. You're Rhen - the Shadowpurse, the Gravestepper. You're the greatest thief that Rathelon's gutters ever shit out upon the world, and you're not scared of fuck all. You outsmarted the Sothaki demons at Hallion's Gate and stole their Emberstone with your own two hands. You...

'Rhen.'

She froze where she stood, half-crouched in darkness, fingers numb upon the hilts in her grasp. That voice... that wretched fucking voice. She closed her eyes. It's not possible, she told herself, trying to keep her breathing steady, willing her heart to stillness. Not here. Not now. Not ever.

'Rhen.'

I left you behind.

'Look at me, you little bitch!'

Rhen turned against her will as the voice punched through her with a frigid thunder, the obedient child filled with the fear of punishment, a whimper dying in her throat as a shape emerged from the darkness.

There are some shadows that leave a stain upon the core of the soul - shadows that cannot be outrun, that resist both the bleaching of the light, and the consumption of still greater darkness. Ones that linger like a burr just beneath the skin, refusing to be dislodged, and digging in just enough when forgotten to remind their victim that they are still sharp, no matter the years between.

Telgin was one such shadow.

The old pit boss stood before Rhen yet again - half-emerged from the darkness behind him, his skin stained and steeped in it, like a thing steeped from a colourless world. She'd have recognised that voice anywhere, though, known that stained croupier's motley tunic he never took off, and never washed. Known the mixed stink of dullmoss, sweat, and shitty house ale that followed him everywhere.

A smile spread across Telgin's stubbled face, his long moustaches bristling. His eyes glistened, two pale pinpricks staring from the depths of utter voids, raking her up and down as they had when she was a child.

'That's better, my little knife.' His voice slid over Rhen's skin like cold oil. 'Did you think you could hide from me, here, Rhen? That you lost me, back in Rathelon?'

Telgin's form came closer, still half-submerged and dragging the darkness with it like a cloak of clinging filth. His grin widened; crooked teeth clenched. Rhen's blades trembled in her hands, her body refusing to move into her sword-stance.

'I will never let you go, little knife,' Telgin hissed, eyes glistening brighter, 'you can't get rid of me. I'm the only thing that makes you real.'

Rhen managed to raise a sword between them, its point wavering, her head spinning. Images, memories - old horrors, all - birthed themselves anew behind her eyes, a pierced abscess. 'You fucking stay back from me,

nonce. You don't fucking touch me anymore.' Her teeth ground, she tasted blood. 'I cut your throat once - I'll cut your head clean off!'

Telgin laughed. He was close enough now for her to see the gash she'd put in the cunt's neck before she'd fled his gambling pit in Rathelon - a gaping thing that ran from throat to beneath his left ear, bleeding shadows over his tunic like dark mist.

'Don't threaten me, you little bitch!' Telgin roared. 'I'll give you to the den lads, again. You liked that, didn't you? Something to fill that gaping fucking emptiness in you for once.'

The darkness thickened before Rhen could do so much as shudder - grasping her limbs, dragging her deeper within its maw. She could feel them again - the unwanted hands of countless strangers, their violating touch sliding across her skin yet again. Eyes awoke in the darkness around her, a swarm of them leering at her, sucking down her torment with that same hollowness of Telgin's. The noises of the gambling pit filled her ears, wormed through her skull like parasites. Dark fingers wrenched Rhen's eyes open when she screwed them shut, forcing her to look upon Telgin, and that smile of his that stretched into obscenity.

Something brittle shattered within. Terror took Rhen's mind, swallowed it whole, left a ragged wound that filled itself with rage. She broke free of the hands with a scream, halving the distance between her and Telgin in three strides, leaping the rest with a sword gripped point-down in both hands. She landed atop the pitboss in a maelstrom of brutal stabs, plunging her blade down through the fucker's grinning face - again, again, again.

'All these years,' Telgin hissed, his voice fading into the darkness as Rhen split his skull apart and let shadows spill out. 'And you still... scream like a little pig...'

'Fucking die! Fucking die! Fucking die!'

Rhen collapsed atop the pommel of her sword, exhausted astride Telgin's broken body. His voice, and the sounds of his pit, vanished beneath the sob she let loose, tears cutting scalding trails through the blood on her face. Her skin crawled, felt dirty, her soul gouged by things that should have stayed dead - that never should have been.

'Never again,' she wept, 'you'll never touch me, ever - fucking - again.'

'Rhen?'

Rhen snapped bolt upright with a scream, blood flying as she brandished her sword at the figure before her. She blinked - rage melting into confusion.

It was Hoji. The warrior's face was a mask of disbelief as he looked upon her, his hammer sagging in limp hands, and head shaking slowly.

'Ho... Hoji? What...' Thunder roared overhead, lifting Rhen's gaze. A vast circle of dark sky roiled above them, lined by the crumbling silhouettes of ancient ruins. 'This... where?'

'What have you done?' Hoji's face twisted into a mask of fury. 'What have you fucking done?'

'He touched me,' Rhen sputtered, 'I...'

Lightning flashed, throwing the swathe of sand around them into pallid relief, unveiling the rotting ruins of an ancient arena.

And what remained of Greton's face beneath her.

Rhen recoiled, fell on her arse in the sand, scrabbling back from the mage's body. 'I didn't,' she stammered, 'not him, it was - it was...'

Her eyes drifted from the bloody splatter of Greton's head in the sand to meet the warrior's, and that time-cured coldness took her again.

Hoji came for her with a roar that drowned the thunder, hammer hefted, and eyes bulging for bloody murder. Rhen didn't think, didn't give it a moment. She'd already closed off her heart. There was no going back, no way out from this mess.

And no one could ever know.

She snatched up her fallen sword and spun to the side through a clumsy, evasive cut and tumbled onto her back. In a gritty spray, Hoji's hammer smashed into the sand where she'd been sprawled, and he collapsed beside the weapon, choking. The one eye she could see of his held nothing but hate, as blood spilled through the fingers clutching at his ruined throat. The fingers of his other hand brushed her boot. She kicked it away, unblinking as she watched him take his last, dying gasp, the one eye of his she could see filled with nothing but hatred.

Another slash of lightning tore through the sky, another wave of thunder rolled over Rhen, before she let go of the breath she'd held onto. Danger gone; panic ripped through her.

What the fuck now? What do I do? Think. Think. Th-

Words echoed through the hollow of her mind. Reminding her of why she was here.

'Bound... by blood. By tooth. By claw.'

Rhen pushed herself to a crouch, eyes tearing through the shadows on every side, palming one of her dropped swords as she eyed movement. A hunched thing prowled near the edge of the sand, its face hidden by hooded robes, but its form and voice unmistakably Azrani. A single eye caught the weak moonlight and glowed at her like a night creature's for a heartbeat before vanishing. It came to a halt before what looked to have once been another faded carving of the Nine waging their war against Vouring, and turned to her, the weak light catching upon it. There was a ceremonial cut to its dingy garb: a priest of the Nine. It bared crooked tusks at her in a snarl.

'I know why you have come, thief,' it said, voice dripping with disdain. 'Your lies cannot hide you from my sight.'

Rhen ran her tongue over her teeth and considered her options, which were few and pathetically far between.

'The Devourer was bound by Blood. Tooth. Claw. And in this sacred place we have sheltered that power since his fall. Yet you dare think to infect this land with your corruption?' The Azrani priest's head shook slowly, full of threat. 'No.'

It flung bestial hands out to its sides in a flurry of tattered robes, its shrivelled wings unfurling. Knotted arms trembled as it raised them overhead, lightning slashing the clouds again, its voice more terrible than the thunder that pounded the ruins.

'Avarax! We have need of your strength, brother! Come to me!'

There was a long moment of silence where the thunder held its tongue, and then something slammed into the ruins high above, spraying great chunks of stone across the area. Rhen gazed up, open-mouthed, her sword almost falling from her hand.

A great form was hunched and crouched upon a broken steeple, its eyes white orbs blazing with the moon's light as they stared down at her. Lightning flashed, peeling darkness from a monstrous Azrani, enveloped in the embrace of its torn wings. A forest of ancient spears bristled upon the mountain of its back, from its bestial mane, strips of rotting banners still rippling from some.

It leapt from its perch as shadows came rushing back to hide it, falling with the noise of a storm rushing through its ragged wings, landing between Rhen and the Azrani priest with a force that tore her from her feet. She slammed down on her back with a cry, staring up at the monstrosity towering over her.

'Take up our sacred blade, brother Avarax,' the priest's voice echoed from the arena, 'and show this interloper the mercy you bestowed upon the Devourer's legions! Protect the seal!'

The beast lurched forward onto the palm of one vast hand, grunting as if pained as it reached up to clutch at something on its back. It heaved - once, twice - and, with a harrowing cry of pain, tore loose a great fangblade from its back in a torrent of dark blood.

A *fangblade*. A moment's clarity prodded Rhen through the utter terror unfolding before her. Fang, as in *Tooth*. The very thing she was here to find. Her eyes fixed on the weapon; a great length of dark wood and brass, laced with a single, killing edge of monstrous teeth.

"You've got the wrong idea," Rhen tried to tell the Azrani priest, her hands lifting in a hopeless effort to placate the beast before her. But the priest remained annoyingly silent, and the beast snarled.

Its heaving breaths stirring the sand beneath it, Avarax raised its head, and sunk into a crouched Azrani fighting stance, levelling the ancient weapon's blunt head towards Rhen. Its roar shook stones from the ruins above, the ground quivering as it leapt for her.