

REALM RAIDERS



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Chapter 9

In which the search for tooth, blood and claw leads to murder

by **Rachel V. Green**

Rhen was fucked. There was no way she could block a strike from the thirty-foot Azrani giant towering in front of her. His arm alone was twice as thick as her entire body, for fucks sake! And the reach of the fangblade was preposterous, making toys of her swords as it sang through the air. The thought that her ancestor had sent her to this place to liberate the damn thing, almost made her scream in frustration. It was a good job she hadn't told her companions what they'd really been seeking, Hoji and Greton would never have agreed to this suicide mission.



She hit the ground hard, breath exploding from her lungs as the weapon's teeth - curved and yellowed - missed her by millimetres. The fetid breath that still clung to them washed over her in a wave of rotting horror

Avarax roared his frustration to the dark heavens, his tattered wings outstretching to obscure half sky, his six-inch claws drawing geysers of blood from his own bastard palms.

If Rhen had been any less of a woman, she would have pissed herself right then and there. Instead, she took the moment of the beast's distraction to scramble backwards on the wet stone floor, ignoring the bite of pain as shards of debris cut into her palms. She would put up with that, and much more, to put just a few precious feet between her and the mutant. She'd never seen anything so fucked-up in her entire life. What the hell were the Azrani feeding this guy?

Nearby, the priest who'd summoned the beast was chanting. Loudly. Some shit about Vouring and the sacred duty of the Azrani to protect the weapon that helped seal him at the Citadel. Even as she prepared to be skewered by the fangblade, Rhen took a moment to shoot the sanctimonious prick a look of pure disgust.

As a rule, she tried to respect the beliefs of others. Although she followed no religion herself, she'd always held the opinion that whatever helped you sleep at night was fine with her. But this asshole was taking the piss. His *god* had told him Rhen was here to corrupt the magic of his sacred ruins, but that was bullshit. Against her better judgement, Rhen was in this shithole to make sure that when the original seal inevitably failed, Vouring could not break free of his restraints.

She didn't want to be there, covered in blood she hadn't intended to spill, with images of Telgin fresher in her mind than they'd been in years. She didn't. And she certainly didn't want to be facing a fucking giant bat-cunt, while trying to figure out how to relieve him of a weapon that could tear her a new one, as easily as she could rob a rich man of his coin. She was here because she had no choice. And the Azrani priest could go fuck himself if he thought she'd take his judgement on top of everything else.

Avarax struck again, this time bringing the nightmare-blade down spine first, the flat bronze edge just as likely to split her in two as the teeth had been. She rolled at the last second, and the ground shook with the impact of the fangblade just inches from her back. Vibrations travelled through her as Avarax drew back, dragging the heavy weapon with him. Rhen didn't wait to see what he'd do next; she launched herself upright, whirling to sprint for the nearest cover.

With the rumbles of the monster's rage ringing in her ears she leapt over ruins, her feet slipping on wet moss, catching on vines. She desperately wanted to look back, but kept her eyes fixed on a nearby wall, knowing that if she didn't reach it before the rumbles were replaced by a grunt of intention, she was a dead woman.

If Rhen were going to die, it would be with a cock in her cunt and a glass of whisky in her hand. A heart-attack at sixty-five was what she'd planned for herself, after a life full of fucking, fighting and fleecing the rich. Thirty-eight was too young to die. She hadn't seen nearly enough of the realms yet, hadn't gutted enough bad people, or accumulated enough wealth to be able to sleep on a bed of money. All dreams she fully intended to realise. Usually, she avoided shit like this on principle. The jobs she normally took, like the ones that had first brought her into contact with Hoji and Greton all those years ago, were a featherbed compared to this. Relatively low risk for high reward,

those jobs could be settled by the quick flash of a blade in the dark, or a brief, violent struggle. This was something else entirely.

Rhen reached the ruined temple wall, its ornate carvings lost on her as she flung herself around it, grateful for any shelter. She pressed her back to the stone, which shifted alarmingly, as if it might collapse. The sound of Avarax pounding towards her was hardly reassuring.

‘Shit!’ she spat, fumbling to slip her useless blades back into their sheathes. Greton and Hoji’s blood was still sticky on her fingers, the memory of their horrified expressions slowing her thoughts to treacle. But she shoved the image aside. She had to find a way to survive this, and reflecting on the gut-wrenching horror of what she’d just done wasn’t going to contribute to that aim.

A fucking *fangblade*. She should have guessed. The Azrani were famed for them, though Rhen had never heard of anything on this scale before. The creature that had donated the teeth must have been a behemoth.

By bastardising the original Vouring prophecy for his own ends, Rhen hadn’t had a clue what Tooth, Blood and Claw meant. She’d only decided to come to Azra because the Temple of Nine had seemed as good a place to start as any. But that bucktoothed monstrosity had to be what she’d been sent to find. A Toothed blade, wielded by a Clawed hand. The only question that remained was whose Blood would seal the deal? Hers? Or had Hoji and Greton already served to fulfil the prophecy, the red stain of her betrayal opening the path to restore Vouring’s seal?

Fuck. Her mind had all but disintegrated. She didn’t have time for guilt now, at any moment the pig-snouted face of Avarax was going to bear down on her from over the wall. If he didn’t just flatten it on top of her.

With that horrifying thought in mind, she darted forwards, slipping between two stone walls slick with green slime, just as the rock at her back exploded. The sound rang in her eardrums, forcing her head down but she kept moving. The walls protected her from most of the flying debris, though her left calf took a stunning blow as she fled.

Fled. Rhen never fled before. Admittedly, she’d never faced a giant bat-hog before either, but still, the principle was the same. She needed to find a way to turn the tables on this motherfucker and stop running.

She jumped over the roots of an enormous tree, which over the centuries had snaked through cracks in the wall like the tentacles of a giant squid, eventually bowing the old temple so that what once must have been a passageway, was now no more than a narrow gauntlet. It gave Rhen an idea.

‘Come on then, you fucker!’ she shouted over her shoulder, though Avarax clearly needed no encouragement. He’d stepped over the rubble of her last shelter and was busy demolishing the entrance of the gauntlet with nothing more than his hairy, three-fingered fists.

‘Come get me, handsome!’ she called as she ran, because Rhen had never killed anyone she hadn’t taunted first.

Not until Greton anyway.

‘Head in the game,’ she muttered, leaping over the last root to emerge at the edge of the ruins. She took a chance and paused to scan the vista, trying not to imagine Avarax’s breath on her neck.

There. Buried half a mile away in the dense jungle. A ravine, made visible only by the sharp depression in the lush canopy.

Rhen didn’t hesitate. She set off running into the trees, her feet skidding on wet leaves, clothes snagging on branches with every step. She let nothing slow her, drawing her swords to slice through vines, powering onwards as if Vouring himself was on her heels. Which if she didn’t get that fangblade, he might very well be before long.

How had she got here? Three days ago, she’d been drunk in a bar at Hazreen Harbour, eye-fucking the barman and spending gold like it was going out of fashion. She’d been back from the Lazrean job for less than a week, weighed down with enough wealth that it should have kept her off work for a year. Three days ago, her only goal had been fucking that barman. Now she was running for her life in an Azrani jungle, trying to save a bunch of realms she knew little about.

It had all started with the arrival of that fucking letter. She’d been too drunk to read it, so she’d ignored it, stuffed it into her satchel only to find it there the next day, an unwanted harbinger of change just waiting for her to sober up.

Fearlin Kaegan. The Bane of Fell Gods. One of the nine captors of Vouring. Her ancestor and surely the author of her current predicament. What. An. Asshole. The letter had to have been written by him.

She hadn't thought of her family in years. Unlike some of the nine families, Kaegan's line had always celebrated their roots. Her parents shouted their lineage from the damn rooftops, practically counting down the days until Vouring's restraints would weaken and one of their own would be called upon to strengthen them once more. Rhen was the oldest of three children, the heir to the Kaegan family's expectations, and she'd decided early on that no matter how much status and wealth being a Kaegan could give her, she wanted none of the pressure. At thirteen she'd left the family estate without a backward glance, assuming, naively, that would be enough to free her from the possibility of being called to serve.

She'd travelled the realms ever since and, her time in Telgin's filthy pit aside, had mostly survived unscathed. Until now.

That damn letter had changed everything.

Rhen had no interest in stopping Vouring from returning. For all she knew, a world ruled by a mad god might actually be worth seeing. But Fearlin Kaegan's letter had made it clear she had no choice.

Rhen had no fucking clue what it all meant. But the threat had been ominous enough for her to drag herself out of bed and start looking for Hoji and Greton.

Did she feel bad for not telling the two men what they'd been getting themselves into? In all the years they'd known each other, she'd never told them she was Kaegan's descendant, and therefore they'd had no concept of the danger involved in this particular mission. The Relic had been the reason. None of her usual sources had fed her information, there'd been no buyer. The fact was Hoji and Greton weren't the type to want to save the realms from Vouring's second coming. No, she didn't feel bad. They deserved to be lied to. Hoji had gone behind her back on that job last year, cutting her share down to a third of his own. Despite her clearly telling him to fuck the fuck off, a drunk Greton had still tried to touch her up that night in the Hogs Head.

But they *were* dead, and that was a different thing all together. She'd never wanted that. But now wasn't the time to dwell on it.

She took a branch to the face, which almost knocked her on her arse and caused blood to well on her left cheek, but she couldn't stop now. The ravine must surely be close. It had to be. Avarax was gaining on her, the sounds of him crashing through the trees growing louder by the second. He'd been slowed by his size in the dense jungle, but his strength propelled him forward anyway and any second now, Rhen expected to feel his brittle, curved claws slicing across her back.

She was slowing. It had been too long since she'd last sprinted for her life and at some stage she'd clearly become complacent. Her lungs burned and her legs grew heavier with every step. Where was the damn ravine?

Before she could come to it, a deafening roar made the last remaining birds take flight from the trees around her. An almighty crash came just metres behind her and she spun to see the Avarax thrashing face-first in the scrub.

A man stood to one side of the beast, leaning against a tree as if it were just a slow Sunday in the Quiet Realm, and all he had to do that day was relax. He was dressed in black army fatigues, reminiscent of those from the earth realms, with an array of knives strapped to his hips and thighs. But his hands were free of weapons, just crossed over his chest like he didn't have a care in the world. He lifted a dark eyebrow as Avarax climbed awkwardly to his hands and knees, a languid smirk spreading across his face.

'Who the fuck...?' Rhen muttered, but her eyes were dragged back to the bat-hog as he lumbered to his feet, hefting the fangblade back to an attack position.

Rhen didn't wait around to ask more, she spun on her heel and started running again, but this time she couldn't help looking back. The man was gone, but over Avarax's head something enormous was rising. Rhen faltered, almost tripping over her feet as she turned fully to face it, running backwards, unable to tear her eyes away. Black and scaled, with wings that put the Azrani mutant to shame, a fucking *dragon* had found its way to Azra. Its amber eyes were venomous as fire roiled at the back of a yawning mouth. Its wings beat powerfully, felling trees to either side, and it climbed higher and higher, its claws extending towards the running Avarax. But the beast didn't even notice, so focused on his prey that he was oblivious to the most dangerous creature in all the realms. Dragons didn't need magic.

They didn't fangblades, or necromancy. A dragon this size could reduce the jungles of Azra to blackened char with a single breath.

Rhen's foot went from under her and suddenly she was weightless. Avarax launched himself forwards, and together they fell. The underbrush caught Rhen in its unforgiving embrace, and she twisted violently to avoid being crushed beneath the beast. Still falling, her elbows slammed into sharp rocks, ribs bruising as she hurtled downwards, the dark sky flashing in and out of sight as she rolled arse over tit. A roar sounded, though whether it was Avarax or the dragon she couldn't tell. It didn't matter, she had the bat-hog exactly where she'd wanted him. His wild grunts were a beautifully welcome noise to Rhen's battered ears.

Speed was her only hope now. And speed was what Rhen had always excelled at. The moment the ground flattened out she was on her feet, sword already in hand. As Avarax hurtled towards her, all she had to do was lash out in a single sweeping movement, and the Azrani giant was cut open from cock to snout, his beastly black bowels spilling into the ravine with little more than a wet squelch.

The silence that followed her strike was gratifying.

Rhen looked up, chest heaving, to see the dragon circling the ravine high above her. On its back sat the man with the slow smile. She couldn't see his face from that distance, but it was clear he guided the dragon as it tilted suddenly sideways and veered out of sight.

Rhen watched it go with a creeping sense of unease unfurling in her guts. No one but Hoji and Greton had known she was coming here. No one knew what she sought or who she was. And yet this stranger had appeared out of nowhere, to... help her? No good could possibly come of that.

When she was sure the dragon wasn't going return, she wiped her sword on her leg and bent down.

'Thanks for this,' she told Avarax, his beady black eyes blinking stupidly as she yanked the fangblade from his hot fingers. 'I wouldn't have known what to look for, if you hadn't waved it around like a dude with dick complex.'

The massive blade was heavy, and Rhen only managed to drag it a few feet before she collapsed down on a flat rock, embarrassingly knackered. She spent a happy few minutes listening to the last gurgling breaths of the Avarax, picturing the priest's face when he eventually found his prize pig rotting down here in the muck. But eventually she lumbered back to the body, hacked off one hand so that the Teeth of the fangblade could be accompanied by a set of Claws, and smeared the blood of the Avarax over the whole lot for good measure. Who fucking knew whose blood the prophecy was referring to.

With one last look to dark sky above, Rhen began dragging the fangblade back to the portal.