



IN AGONY REBORN

AERYN RUDEL

Beast Master Xekaar awoke to pain.

He lay for a moment on his cot, letting the pain soak into his body to remind him of who he was and how far he'd come. The pain brought memories, wavering and dreamlike. He saw the blunt, square face of the *duzusk* warrior, the trollkin leader whose cannon had nearly destroyed him. He remembered the searing agony of flame, the momentary weightlessness as he was flung through the air, and then the thunderous impact as his body was reacquainted with the earth. He remembered dragging himself across a battlefield littered with corpses to drain the last wisps of life force from a dying titan, using the stolen energy to hold his mangled body together long enough to crawl to the next titan, and the next.

Slowly he clamped down on the agony, using his mortitheurgy—magic drawn from affliction of the flesh—to quell the worst of it. The pain subsided along with the memories that had come with it. He sat up and ran his hand across the cratered surface of his face. The skin had healed, but the flesh was rigid and stretched; without the salves he applied each morning, it would crack and weep.

He heard the titans rousing in their pens nearby and then their trumpeting calls as they smelled the enemy in the distance. Two lesser paingiver beast handlers entered his tent, their heads bent low in deference.

“See that the titans are fed,” Xekaar said. “But not Asura.”

The beast handlers nodded and withdrew. Xekaar rose from his cot and began strapping the lacquered, articulated plates of his armor to his chest

and limbs. He put on his mask, which hid the worst of his injuries, then picked up his whips, two eight-foot lengths of articulated metal tipped with talon-like hooks. The whips were attached to gauntlets that covered his hands and forearms, providing additional protection during close combat. He slung the whips over his shoulder and left the tent.

The camp was swarming with activity, and skorne warriors moved with purpose through the organized rows of tents. The enemy was near. Battle was imminent.

Xekaar moved silently through the camp. Most individuals moved out of his way—even the Cataphracts and Praetorians, members of the warrior caste, which was nominally above his own. He occasionally heard the word *var'keth* murmured as he passed. It meant “the risen,” one who had returned from the dead. It made him smile. It was true in a sense; the trollkin’s cannon *had* killed him, and only his will and his knowledge of mortitheurgy had kept him from the Void. When he returned, he was different: the pain had remade him into something stronger, more resilient.

He soon reached the beast pens, a wide stockade that held five titans. Beast handlers stood nearby, tasked with ensuring the warbeasts remained calm until needed. They were obviously struggling to maintain control in the pens, and the two nearest the gate were unable to hide their relief as Xekaar approached.

“Open it,” Xekaar commanded. The paingivers opened the gate, and he stepped through.

He now stood alone among five of the deadliest creatures in the skorne army. Each stood twelve feet tall and had four arms—one large primary set above another, smaller, set. Each arm ended in a three-fingered hand adroit enough to wield a weapon, given proper training and motivation. The titans’ low-slung, blunt-faced heads featured tiny eyes, wide mouths, and a pair of tusks each longer than a Cataphract’s spear. The beasts had been outfitted for war, with heavy armored plates strapped to their bodies and limbs as well as steel points gleaming from their tusks. Their huge fists, their primary weapons in battle, were reinforced with spiked war gauntlets.

He could feel the titans’ simmering anger. It was an aura of strength he could exploit to power his magic or to vastly increase the fighting ability

of his beasts. Left unchecked, though, it could cause the beasts to frenzy, attacking friend and foe alike.

Xekaar reached out with his mind to the nearest titan and siphoned away some of its rage. It quieted, and he approached it to run his hands over its leathery skin. After confirming its armor was properly attached, he inspected the vital barbed metal spikes sunk into nerve bundles across the titan's body. These pain hooks could be manipulated by a skilled paingiver to produce a variety of effects, channeling the creature's agony to heighten its fighting prowess or even quicken its ability to heal wounds. Assured that all was in place, Xekaar moved on to each titan in turn with similar results. His paingivers had done their jobs well.

Finally he came to Asura, the largest and most powerful of his titans. The huge beast was a smoldering cauldron of rage, a multi-ton avalanche of flesh and steel aching to be released upon the enemy. Xekaar was more careful as he examined Asura's armor and pain hooks, and he devoted more of his will to keeping the beast calm. They had gone through this ritual a dozen times, but caution was always needed when dealing with the veteran warbeast—improperly managed, Asura's strength and rage could be as dangerous to Xekaar as to the enemy.

“Soon,” Xekaar whispered to the beast. “Soon you will take the pain I have given you and unleash it upon the enemy.” He twisted a pain hook beneath one of Asura's primary arms, and the mountainous body jerked, rage growing in the creature's mind like a firestorm. Xekaar left his hand on the pain hook, feeling the titan's body quivering. “Pain is the fire of rebirth,” he said. “It changes us, makes us stronger than our enemies.” He knew most paingivers saw their beasts as little more than tools, but to him, each was a vessel for his pain. Each time he sent one into battle, it was *his* pain that drove it, strengthened it, impelled it to triumph over the enemy. This was the gift he gave his beasts, just as it had been given to him by the trollkin warrior years ago.

The blast of a war trumpet sounded over the low din of the camp. Asura raised his tusked head and bellowed a war cry in response. Xekaar smiled, the motion pulling at the tight, cracked skin on his cheeks and sending a jolt of pain down his body.

It had begun.



The enemy—porcine creatures called farrow—appeared to be a disorganized mob. Their weapons and armor were crude; their tactics, undisciplined. Their leader seemed to command more by force of will than by any true ability. Yet these creatures had destroyed more than one skorne scouting party, and worse yet, a powerful leader calling himself Lord Carver was uniting the disparate populations into something resembling an empire.

The farrow had spread themselves out in a ragged line across a small canyon. Behind them loomed the largely intact ruins of a skorne fortress abandoned after a recent earthquake but now claimed by the farrow. This would not stand. Xekaar would drive them out or kill every one of them, as tasked by Lord Assassin Morghoul, the head of his caste. Xekaar and other handpicked leaders would reclaim skorne holdings in the Bloodstone Marches, establishing a network of fortresses that could supply the war effort farther west.

Tyrant Berix had arrayed his Cataphracts in a tight line across the canyon, shields locked and spears jutting forward. Berix was a skilled and respected warrior from a prominent noble house, and Xekaar naturally deferred to him on military details. Though Xekaar carried the responsibility for the success or failure of their mission, warriors were not comfortable heeding the direct orders of someone from the paingiver caste, and he had no reservations about letting Berix command them. Ultimately, the fate of this battle would not be decided by the strength of any warrior. It would be decided by pain, and by rage, and by the thunderous impact of a titan's fist.

The farrow warriors were hanging back because their own warbeasts were charging up the canyon, three massive bipedal boars melded with machinery and wielding heavy cleavers in what looked like warjack fists. They looked like an amalgamation of giant boar and the smoke-belching machines the humans used in battle. They would smash the skorne line to pieces if they weren't stopped.

"Tyrant Berix!" Xekaar called out. The other leader was standing just behind the Cataphracts, shouting orders. He turned toward Xekaar, a deep frown on his angular face. "Open the line," Xekaar said.

The tyrant gave a crisp nod and shouted an order. The Cataphract line immediately broke into two double rows of warriors, leaving a good twenty feet between them. Xekaar reached out, touching the minds of his titans and urging them forward. “Paingivers!” he called. “Behind me!” He would need their help to manage all five of the titans.

The earth shook as the massive beasts moved forward, tossing their heads and bellowing. They passed through the skorne ranks and out onto the open field, Xekaar and his paingivers close behind them.

The farrow beasts were closing the distance quickly, and their scent further enraged the titans. Paingiver whips snapped, scoring the warbeasts’ bodies and quieting them for the moment—all but Asura. Xekaar unfurled one of his own whips and snapped it forward, slashing open the warbeast’s hide. A minor wound, but Xekaar added a healthy dose of his own will to the pain, heightening it and sending it surging through the titan’s body. Needing no further encouragement, the beast charged forward at the three farrow warbeasts.

Xekaar urged the remaining four titans forward as well, and the ground shook as they barreled toward the enemy. He ran behind his beasts, letting their pain clamor through his connection with them and fill him with its strength. Pain had remade him into the weapon he now was, and through that pain he would dominate the enemy.

The lead farrow warbeast and Asura had nearly reached one another. Xekaar drew from deep within his reservoir of mortitheurgical energy, fueling it even further with memories of the agony that had nearly killed him, churning his magic with his personal rage. He let it build and then released it, a wracking torment that flowed from his body in a wave of arcane agony. It struck the farrow warbeasts, and they faltered, squealing in pain and terror.

Asura collided with the first farrow beast an instant later. His right war gauntlet crashed into the enemy’s head, snapping off one of its tusks and gouging a deep and bloody furrow. The beast staggered to the right, only to be struck by Asura’s second war gauntlet. Blood plumed and the titan bulled forward, gouging the great boar’s belly with his tusks. The farrow struck back with its cleavers, but Xekaar’s mortitheurgy had robbed the strength from the creature’s blows, which deflected off the

titan's armor.

The rest of the titans had now joined the fray, crashing into the remaining enemy warbeasts or barreling into the lines of warriors. Xekaar felt all of it as flashes of rage and pain sensed through his connection with his beasts. He heard Tyrant Berix shouting the order for the rest of the skorne to advance, then the clattering of hundreds of armored bodies on the move.

Xekaar continued to move forward, both whips now in hand. The tide of battle had moved away from him, and he found himself between his warbeasts and the advancing skorne warriors. It was an eye in the storm of battle, though the occasional farrow slipped past a titan's fist and rushed him. He cut them down with his whips, slashing their throats or ripping open their bellies before they could get within striking distance. All the while, he pushed his beasts. Asura had reduced the first farrow warbeast to a twitching wreck of ruptured flesh and shattered bone, and Xekaar urged him to charge again, this time directly into a knot of farrow warriors with long pole cleavers. Another farrow stood in their midst, and from that one Xekaar could feel power faintly emanating. This was the warlock controlling the enemy warbeasts—and when he died, they would be weaker and easier to kill.

Farrow weapons gouged Asura's hide but did not slow him. He swept the enemy aside or simply pounded them into the dust. The farrow leader was giving ground, retreating as his army disintegrated, trying to flee the blood-splattered titan barreling toward him.

Xekaar smiled. Pain would not remake this one; he would simply be snuffed out beneath its inexorable advance.

