

# SCARS OF CAEN SCAEFANG

BY WILLIAM SHICK

Berrick watched as the approaching Khadoran train screeched to a halt along the Iron Highway, the great railroad that connected Khador's major cities with the newly conquered territories in Umbrey. At least it had, until the recent visit from the dragon had ripped it asunder. The creature's touch had torn great furrows in the earth, rending the thick iron bars in multiple places. Berrick's grip instinctively tightened on the haft of his spear as he fought down the anxiousness of impending battle. His breath felt hot and heavy within his bronze wolf helm, and it bit at his nostrils. The Wolf of Orboros had never liked wearing the helm, uncomfortable with the feeling of confinement that pressed in upon him and severed him from the outside world.

As he watched the ranks of Khadorans begin to dismount from their rail transport, Berrick realized there was little need to concern himself with serving beyond this day. Ranks of Winter Guard stepped forth briskly, many of them carrying long rifles on their shoulders. Behind them came numerous smoke-belching, clanking Man-O-War and ranks of gleaming Iron Fangs. Lastly, a group of nimble mechaniks on a rearward flatbed car freed a trio of towering red warjacks from their harnesses. Berrick flinched slightly as the great machines stepped down with a sound like thunder from the railcar.

Slowly he reached up and pulled his helm free of his head, exposing his skin to the bite of the unnatural winter and causing hot steam to roil off him. Berrick breathed in the fresh, cold air, letting it cleanse his lungs, and took in his surroundings unencumbered by the helm. He wondered for a moment if he would experience the same sensations in Urcaen when he joined the Wurm's eternal hunt today.

"Heron!" he shouted to the pack leader of his reeves. "Take your pack and see if you can circle around our quarry's flanks." He pointed toward a distant copse of trees. "Get as many of them as you can to chase you." Berrick clapped his comrade on a bronze pauldron. "Harry them for as long as you can." He'd known Heron for nearly a decade. He had no doubt the reeve pack leader would give the Khadorans a bloody hunt.

"I shall try to not bite them so hard that I leave none for you to bleed," Heron said. The comment was devoid of humor;

the reeve pack leader was as serious as anyone Berrick had ever known. Berrick nodded in thanks and Heron turned away to gather his reeves.

The hunt master heard chuffing behind him. Rochlof said, "And what are we to do while your reeves harry their flank?"

Berrick turned and fixed the pureblood's predatory stare with his own, just as imposing as the warwolf despite having to look up to meet his gaze. "We will take advantage of their distraction to buy you time to complete your mission." Berrick motioned back to where Caelan floated, primal energies swirling about her. "And tonight my pack shall hunt with Orboros amid the wilds of Urcaen."

If Rochlof felt anything over the sacrifice Berrick intended to make, he made no show of it. For several moments human and warwolf held each other's stare as if holding a silent conversation.

"You are worthy of your title, hunt master," Rochlof said, dipping his head in respect to Berrick.

"There is one thing I would ask you before you go, pureblood," Berrick said. "We need to reach them without having to make our way through a hail of bullets."

Rochlof looked to the ranks of riflemen among the Khadoran army and scowled. "It will be only a temporary reprieve," the warwolf rumbled.

"It will be enough," replied Berrick.

Rochlof nodded, and his yellow eyes glowed with emerald pools of light. Berrick smiled as he felt cool, wet fog on his exposed face. Today, they would teach the Khadorans there was still plenty to fear amid the wilds, firearms or no.

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Caelan wrestled with the powerful energies that flowed beneath the dragon-rent earth, the pulse of Orboros a deep thrumming within her head. Sweat beaded beneath her face coverings, and her muscles burned with exertion as she fought to cleanse the corrupted energies that infected the ley line nexus. The power Rochlof had infused her with before he left to aid in the fight against the Khadoran vanguard

had helped her for a time, but that loaned power was all but spent. Caelan had been shocked to feel the difference in the blight here compared to that she had cleansed at the base of the Thundercliff Peaks. Whether due to the comparative strength of the dragons that had infected the two networks or the passage of time diminishing the blighted energy at the previous site, the corruption here was far more severe and more resistant to Caelan's energy.

It did not help matters that, connected as she was to Orboros, Caelan could sense the unfolding battle with a clarity eyes alone could not provide. She knew Berrick and his Wolves had no hope of standing against the new Khadoran arrivals. Her stomach twisted as she thought of the proud hunt master sacrificing his life so that she might have a precious few extra moments to complete her work. The knowledge added to her resolve to push herself beyond her own physical and spiritual limitations. Through her connection to the ley lines, she felt the blood of her pack spilled upon the soil by bullet and blade, and she saw the massive Khadoran army advancing inexorably on the scattered Wolves.

A wave of sickness swept over her as her concentration wavered at the vision and the blighted energy below briefly wormed its way into her. With a grunt of effort Caelan forced it back once more. She was so close; the pulse of Orboros had stabilized and now flooded her with power. In her exhausted condition, though, instead of being an invigorating draught the flow of power was like a tidal wave threatening to drown her. Now was the most critical time. With the flow restored, if the isolated blight broke free of her control it would mix with the currents leaving this place and swiftly contaminate the network well beyond this site. Such an event would be catastrophic.

It was at this point that Rochlof had been of most help to her during the ritual at the Thundercliff Peaks. He had contained the blight and sealed it away, leaving Caelan to stabilize the purified ley lines.

As if bidden by her thoughts, a surge of primal force plunged into the nexus and mingled with her own. Through the connection Caelan heard the voice of Rochlof within her mind. Bolstered by his presence, she attempted to draw upon the last of her inner reserves so that she might complete the ritual. Try as she might, however, she felt like a flame that had burned away the last bit of wood which sustained it and now flickered on the edge of extinction. As the ritual magic began to unravel around her, Caelan saw the physical shape of Rochlof before her. Time seemed to stand still as she heard the pureblood's voice in her mind.

No.

Her eyes widened in horror as she saw Rochlof's hand flash forward, the razor-sharp claws ripping through the chest of one of her guarding druids in a spray of crimson. The other druids raised a shout of shocked alarm at the sudden and brutal death of their companion, but Rochlof froze them with a predatory snarl. Before Caelan's mind could fully process what was happening she saw Rochlof bring a pulsing red mass up to his snout. As if in a dream she heard the warwolf utter strange and alien sounds over the still-beating heart of the slain druid. He cut away her face covering with his free hand and thrust the bloody organ toward her.

*Eat!* The command rang within her mind. Despite her revulsion Caelan found herself doing as Rochlof bid. Coppery warmth exploded in her mouth as she bit down hard on the tough muscle, tearing a great chunk from it to slide down her throat. Somewhere in her mind, as if observing from a great distance, Caelan found herself surprised at how hot the raw muscle was. It repulsed her, but she pushed that instinct away.

*More!* Rochlof commanded, and Caelan continued to eat. She felt a tingle begin in her belly and spread throughout her



body. Like a rush of heat the sacrificial magic burned away the fatigue and exhaustion, infusing her spent muscles and spirit with blazing new energy. Caelan felt the failing tendrils of her ritual reknit and reform, plunging her back into the roiling energies of the nexus.

She did not allow herself a moment to consider what she had done, the obscenity of it. Ignoring the uncomfortable sensation of blood drying around her mouth, she poured all her newfound energy into completing the final acts of the cleansing ritual as Rochlof contained and eliminated the last of the blighted energies.



Berrick shouted an ancient Molgur curse as he drove his cleft spear into the chest of a Winter Guard. Rochlof's mystic fog had successfully concealed his pack from the rifle fire of the Khadorans. Only a few Wolves had fallen to Khadoran bullets, and those early on. The mist had also allowed Heron's reeves to sneak around the Khadoran flanks unmolested. Berrick could hear the twang of the pack's crossbows being fired in the distance.

He felt far less anxiety now that he was engaged with the enemy. It was easy to forget about the overwhelming size of the Khadoran force here. Now his only concerns were the thrust of his spear and the spilling of his enemy's blood while preserving his own for as long as possible.

Berrick wrenched his spear back and thrust forward again, the twin points impaling another unlucky guardsman. Though the hunt master tried to maintain coordination with his pack, they were too few and the enemy too numerous, which hindered the Wolves' effectiveness against tougher opponents. Thankfully, for the time being the more heavily armored Khadorans were still moving forward from the rear ranks.

Berrick busied himself with killing several more Winter Guard, the length of his spear giving him an undeniable edge over the short axes the Khadoran riflemen wielded. He could feel the predatory instinct within him, honed over years of battle and burning at him to drive forward. Berrick knew, however, that he had to be careful not to press so far forward that he would be overwhelmed by weight of numbers.

He picked up the acrid smell of smoke that heralded the lumbering Man-O-War troopers well before he saw the first of them emerge from the Khadoran lines. A hulking form of red steel and glinting bronze, the Man-O-War bore a shield nearly the size of Berrick himself as well as a fearsome annihilator blade whose edge crackled with energy. Thick black smoke poured from the stacks upon its back, filling the air with gritty soot that stung the nostrils. Berrick dodged to one side just before the Man-O-War's halberd sliced through the air where he had stood. He darted forward while the steam-powered warrior worked to recover and thrust his spear with all his might at the Man-O-War's exposed side.

His effort was greeted with a numbing shock to his arm and the screech of steel scraping across steel as the Khadoran heavy plate deflected the points of the spear.

Berrick tried to dart back following his failed attack, but the Khadoran recovered much faster than any human wearing so much armor should have been capable of. In desperation Berrick brought the haft of his spear up to slow the Man-O-War's strike. The annihilator blade sheared through the thick steel with a crackle of released energy, but the spear slowed the attack just enough to provide Berrick the time he needed to narrowly avoid the weapon's bite. The hunt master felt sparks of mechanical energy that crackled along the blade leap out to strike his exposed face.

His spear ruined, Berrick tossed the pieces aside and drew a pair of long hunting daggers from his belt as he continued to put more space between him and the Man-O-War. As he eyed his opponent, the normally deadly blades felt pathetically underwhelming in his hands; he knew he had no real hope of felling this opponent with such weapons. His muscles tensed as he took on a defensive fighting posture and the Man-O-War moved once more to attack.

He knew this fight was unwinnable. It wasn't winning that mattered, but time. Every moment he and his pack held the attention of the Khadorans was another step closer to victory. The idea of his death did not concern him, only the fear of failing in his oaths. He would buy the waykeeper the time she needed. He only hoped that time was nearly done.



With a great sigh Caelan released her ritual and felt her feet return to the earth beneath her. The dried blood upon her face itched, and she avoided looking at the bloody corpse of the druid that lay at her feet. Even had she wanted to spare a moment to reflect on the druid's sacrifice, the chaos of the Khadoran approach would not have offered her the chance. Seeing the world disconnected from the veins of Orboros, Caelan's eyes widened as she realized how perilously close the Khadoran force was to her position. Berrick's Wolves had put up an impossible fight, a last stand worthy of the heroic songs sung among the various packs during times of celebration. Though she could tell that many had fallen already, those that remained continued to stall the Khadoran forces, making them pay in blood for every inch they advanced.

"We must go," Rochlof growled as a sound very much like thunder pealed across from the Khadoran lines. Caelan saw his hackles rise as he glared at the rapidly approaching Khadorans.

She nodded, her chest tightening. She spared one last glance toward the Khadoran line as it swept over the last of Berrick's Wolves, and then she reached down to connect herself once more to the veins of Orboros. She had to return to Lyvene

and report what had occurred. As she felt the familiar tingle of primal energy surround her and the few surviving druids, she couldn't shake a twisting fear that this was far from over.



The world spun as Caelan felt herself wrenched from being merged with the ley lines back to the material world. While there was always some slight disorientation upon exiting ley line travel, the sudden and unexpected emergence played havoc with her senses. Her guts roiled and she fought the urge to vomit. The overwhelming immediate physical sensations numbed her mind to the question of what had just happened. She knew at once they had not reached their destination.

Caelan tried to steady herself, but it felt as if the entire world was violently shaking. She looked up to the sky, but all that looked back was a formless blackness. Slowly the sound of her mind screaming a warning began to make itself heard through her addled state. Turning to check on Rochlof and the few druids remaining of their original party, she felt an intense wave of nausea wash over her again. Dread gripped her as she realized there was something oddly familiar about the sensation.

A strange, oppressive heat bore down from above, and she looked up to see the blackness seem to expand with a muted orange glow. Sudden realization struck her as she watched the blackness contract and the glow race across a black form above.

They had emerged from the ley line directly beneath a dragon.

Caelan saw the unmistakable shape of the dragon's massive head in the distance, illuminated by a massive gout of flame shot into the great furrows the beast had rent in the earth.

Pushing past the disorientation and sickness that assaulted her, Caelan fought to draw upon her connection with Orboros to shield herself from the blight radiating from the dragon. Try as she might, the pure blight separated her from Orboros, like the waves of the great Meredius pulling her farther from shore.

She stumbled as she tried to move away from the dragon and realized the tremors that shook the earth came from its footfalls. She saw one of the druids who had accompanied Rochlof, staggering with his hands pressed hard against his head as if trying to ward off some deafening sound. Caelan instinctively reached out to assist him even though they were several feet apart.

A great talon twice the size of a woldwrath swept by, ripping up rock and earth as easily as a child's finger through sand. Caelan felt herself being yanked back by powerful hands just as the dragon's claw passed mere inches from her face. Even as her own feet left the ground the druid was simply swept away by the titanic foot.

She closed her eyes, expecting her death to soon follow. Instead she heard a growled voice, strain evident in its snarls and grunts. "Must . . . get . . . away . . ."

Caelan opened her eyes to see Rochlof's face in front of hers. The warwolf stood protectively over her, a nimbus of pale green energy surrounding him. She realized with shock that he was still able to draw upon his primal magic and was using it to mitigate the blight immediately around him.

It was not without cost, however. The pureblood's muscles writhed beneath his skin like pulsating snakes. She could hear the snapping of bones as they elongated and shifted. His entire body seemed an ever-changing protean mass. Spines erupted from his flesh in gory waves, and his jaw cracked and popped as it elongated past his lips and his fangs grew to lengths that forced his mouth wide apart. He howled in agony as his body changed and twisted with such rapidity that Caelan feared it would tear itself apart in front of her.

Over the thunderous noise of the dragon above them, she shouted, "We must run! The ley lines beneath this place are utterly corrupted. We cannot travel by them." Rochlof's body continued to be wracked by violent shifting spasms, and for a moment she wondered if he had even heard her words.

"You . . . run," he growled. "Survive . . . Heal this place."

Caelan shook her head at the pureblood's words. She had already lost Berrick and his pack; she was not about to lose Rochlof as well. She placed her hands on him, trying to help support his weight. Several spines erupted from Rochlof's



flesh and pierced her own in painful shocks, and her primal survival instinct kicked in. She yelled for him to move just as the dragon's massive hind foot began to descend where they stood. Caelan pulled on the spasming pureblood, trying to drag him to safety, but he was simply too heavy for her to move on her own.

In her desperation, she flashed to the connection they had shared during their rituals to cleanse the veins of Orboros. With no time to consider, she fought past the waves of sickness from the dragon's corruption and poured her mystic power into Rochlof in an effort to stabilize and contain the blight raging within him as he had done for her during the rituals.

For a heartbeat Rochlof's form seemed to stabilize and she saw predatory clarity return to his yellow eyes. The mighty warwolf seized her in his powerful arms and sprang forward, his leap taking them just beyond where the dragon's foot crashed into the ground with the force of an earthquake.

The shock wave caused Caelan to lose what little control she had over her magic, and Rochlof's body returned to its rapid shifting. At the same moment, Caelan spied the last two druids who had accompanied Rochlof desperately trying to avoid the sweeps of the dragon's claws while navigating the massive rents in the earth. Waving her bleeding hands, she shouted as loudly as she could, hoping to attract their attention so they could come aid Rochlof.

The massive reptilian head of the dragon turned on its sinuous neck, and Caelan felt her heart freeze in primal terror as she looked into the creature's ancient, malevolent eyes. As if in slow motion she saw the titanic jaws open to reveal a glowing chasm that reminded her of a volcano. Before either druid could realize the danger behind them, the dragon snapped them both up into the abyss of its maw.

Caelan dared not move as she was confronted once more with the dragon's terrible stare. Beneath that gaze time seemed to stand still. She was positive that at any moment she and Rochlof would be roasted alive by dragon fire or crushed by the ancient wyrm's jaws. The thought of death was almost preferable to the sensation of having her soul seared by its inscrutable gaze.

Slowly the great wyrm turned away, and the area was buffeted by a sudden burst of wind as the dragon unfurled its massive wings and took flight.



"You don't understand," Caelan asserted. "I believe these attacks on the ley lines are no mere coincidence. There is a larger plot at work." She fought to control the torrent of emotions that still raged within her following their confrontation with the dragon. "The dragons have never shown any interest in the ley lines before, yet we have seen *three* such attacks in less than three days."

Rochlof shook his lupine head in disbelief. "What are you suggesting?"

"There is a greater pattern to these attacks, as if each one is part of a larger ritual. It has taken me until now to see it, but I am certain this has all been set in motion by one of my order, someone highly placed—impossible though that seems to me."

"Why would they bring harm to Orboros, the source of their own power?" Rochlof asked.

It was a question she had been pondering as well, the crux of the situation. "That can't be the end result they are seeking. It must be a means. Any druid powerful enough to set this in motion would know we wouldn't let such damage go unchecked. They would be familiar with the rituals of renewal and cleansing. They must have relied upon our intervention, knowing it would happen, planning for it."

"But toward what end?" Rochlof pressed again.

"I don't know yet," Caelan admitted, "but it's the only thing that makes sense. I think we should find a way to bring word to our superiors. They will know what to do, how to stop whoever is behind this."

Rochlof shook his head. "You cannot allow this taint to infect the veins of Orboros. If what you suggest is true, it's even more imperative that we heal this place. Stopping this plot cannot be more important than fixing the harm done. Only when it is safe here can we send word to Morvahna and Potent Lyvene."

Gritting her teeth, Caelan said, "But that is what they want. We will simply continue being their pawns?"

Rochlof scowled and said, "They cannot have known we would arrive here like this, the route we would take, the timing with the dragon. Ordinarily it would have taken time to discover this new outbreak of blight. We can use that time." The pureblood placed his massive paw upon her shoulder.

Caelan nodded, feeling rising excitement. "Yes, we are ahead of where they would think us to be." She paused to consider this. Ultimately she felt Rochlof was right: she could not let the ley lines be further compromised. Cleansing this place was worth advancing the plot for the greater good of ultimately stopping it. "Very well," she said at last. "We shall cleanse this place. And then we shall take this information all the way to the omnipotents if necessary."

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