

SCARS OF CAEN FINALE

BY WILLIAM SHICK & AERYN RUDEL

The world coalesced in a flash of green light before Caelan's eyes, and the babbling sound of the Steeltongue River just in the distance filled her ears. She brought the cowl of her cloak up to obscure her face, then hefted her voulge and started toward the river.

She was surprised at how quickly she could sense the dragon blight now and how easily she was able to ward herself from its sickly touch. With her mystic protections in place, she studied the nature of this blight. As at the previous sites she had visited, the blight here resonated with its own unique energy. Caelan realized with some surprise that had she had more time, and had the circumstances been vastly different, she would have embraced the chance to study the unique energy of each of the dragons. Though she would have denied it to his face, Krueger's discovery that he could manipulate and harness dragon blight and intermingle it with the energies of Orboros was at once brilliant and terrifying. It was a core principle of the order that the blight was utterly antithetical to the ley lines, and yet in his mad arrogance Krueger had seemingly achieved the impossible. Had she not seen it with her own eyes she would never have believed it.

Caelan wondered what gains such a revelation might have made possible for the Circle had Krueger not set recent events into motion. She scoffed to herself, as her current plan left her little room to judge Krueger for recklessness. Of course her own impulsive defiance was motivated by a desire to mitigate harm, whereas Krueger seemed determined to imperil their entire order.

She wished she had more time for measured and deliberate action, but the Stormlord had given her none. Though she could imagine the disapproving stare of Potent Donavus, that prospect was not enough to melt the resolve within her now. Sometimes, she knew, one had to become a storm to stop a storm.

Quickly Caelan made her way down toward the natural node formed by the convergence of several ley lines running along the edge of the Wyrmswall to the east, the Steeltongue to the north, and the coast of Shieldpoint Province to the west. As she approached, she spied a cabal of three druids engaged

in a ritual at the node. Several Wolves of Orboros stood in a loose formation around the druids, but it was clear they were not expecting trouble. She was also relieved to see that the blackclads were lower ranking—likely skilled in their specialties but not formidable in power.

Caelan took a deep breath to brace herself for this terrible necessity and pushed forward toward the group, making no effort to conceal her approach. She was counting on the fact that they would not expect anyone except those aligned with Krueger to be aware of this place or their plans. Though powerful, this ley line node was not a primary site for the Circle; its energies were too inconsistent to be fully harnessed except during certain celestial conjunctions. Still, the Wolves were disciplined enough not to simply allow a stranger, even a ranking blackclad, go unchallenged. They quickly closed ranks and leveled their weapons at her.

"This site is under the protection of the Stormlord," the pack leader snarled. "Leave this place."

"I have just come from an audience with the Stormlord," Caelan said. "He informed me the ritual was nearly complete. I made all haste here." She watched intently as her words caused a ripple of hesitation among the Wolves.

"Why?" the leader asked, his confusion evident.

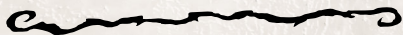
"To stop it," Caelan said. Before the warriors could react, green glyphs of power encircled Caelan's arm, and earth and rock were ripped upward in a tempest from the ground before spiraling forward to tear into the Wolves with lethal force. Caelan wasted no time but rushed ahead through the Wolves as they fell.

Caelan knew she had only moments before the druids performing Krueger's ritual would recover from the shock of being attacked by one of their own. Tapping into the raw flows beneath her, she let loose another blast of stone and grit to shred apart a druid whose back was to her. Caelan lashed out at another with her voulge just as he began to charge her, which caused her powerful blow to land at an awkward angle. She grunted as the weapon connected with bone, sending reverberations shooting painfully up into her hands, and the weapon fell from her numbed fingers.

Seeing the last druid's hands crackling with elemental energy, Caelan didn't spare a second thought for her weapon. She focused her remaining power to send a surge of raw force streaking toward the druid as she flung herself sideways to dodge her enemy's own deadly bolt.

The druid let out a strangled cry. Caelan's invocation had hit him in the throat, the energies burning away most of his neck and lower jaw. Caelan felt his bolt rip by just inches from her as she tucked into a roll. She regained her feet even as her opponent's body hit the ground with a dull thump.

She didn't give herself a chance to consider the lives she had just taken. Instead she focused entirely on the node and what she had to do next. She didn't have the power to reverse Krueger's ritual, but she hoped to disrupt it enough to buy the time she needed to inform the omnipotents. If there were any beings on Caen capable of reversing the damage Krueger had done, she was confident it would be them. She just needed to find a way to reach them.



Rochlof exited the ley line and collapsed, his sides heaving, every cell in his body burning. Traveling through the network was becoming more painful with every passing day as his blighted tissues rebelled against the power of Orboros.



He lay still for a few moments, pushing down the blight with his will and fighting to maintain control over his own flesh. He felt the twisted appendage his right hand had become slowly shift and reform into something he recognized once again.

Rochlof stood, breathed deep, and smelled Caelan. She was close.

Two words loomed large in his mind, Krueger's words: "tolerable loss." The Stormlord had used those words to label Caelan—a useful tool but disposable all the same. She was not a tolerable loss to Rochlof, but what choice did he have? If he could not make the young druid see reason, if she could not perceive the wisdom of what Krueger was doing, he would have to kill her. That blood would stain his soul, worse in some ways than the blight that already infected him.

He had told Krueger it would not come to that, but he had known it was an empty promise the moment the words left his mouth. Krueger had known it, too; Rochlof would do anything to be free of the blight.

He could hear and smell the river nearby. He also smelled blood, the coppery tang of ruptured flesh. A battle had taken place very recently. Rochlof turned and walked toward the river, knowing what he would find.

Caelan stood above the ley line node. The corpses of three druids and their Wolf guards lay nearby. Her back was to him, and a nimbus of greenish light surrounded her. She was obviously engaged in a ritual, no doubt trying to undo the changes Krueger had wrought in the ley lines.

Caelan hadn't noticed him, and Rochlof realized he could take her unaware and kill her easily, securing Krueger's favor and the cure he promised with a single strike. Instinctively he crouched, flexed his claws, and lashed his tail. She was so small, and she wouldn't be able to bring her magic to bear until it was too late. He would tear her apart.

No! Rochlof cursed himself and stood erect again. She deserved better. If he must kill her, at least he would not cut her down from the shadows like a coward. He would face her in battle and let fate decide.

"Caelan," he called out.

She whirled to face him, the emerald light around her fading. She did not look surprised.

"Rochlof," Caelan said. "Has Krueger sent you to kill me?"

Rochlof took a few steps toward her so he would not have to shout—and to put himself in better position for an attack.

"I have no wish to harm you," the pureblood said, "but you must stop what you are doing."

Caelan shook her head. "He's mad, Rochlof. He would avoid one disaster by inviting another much worse. This is not the way."

"Krueger is wise and powerful," Rochlof said. "He takes action while others sit idle. Only he understands how dangerous Everblight is."

"The corruption the Stormlord has brought into the network will grow. You've seen it at work. You know its power."

Rochlof did not miss her meaning, and almost as if she had summoned it forth, a blight spasm rocked his body. It passed quickly, but he felt his flesh ripple, momentarily change, and then settle again.

Caelan stared at him. Her expression was a mixture of determination and pity, and it wounded him more deeply than any blade. She said softly, "Krueger would inflict *that* on all of Caen."

Rage flared within Rochlof. He knew she was right. He knew the danger, but he could not abandon the one hope he had to be free of the blight. In that moment he hated her for not understanding that.

"Do not make me do this," he growled.

"Do what?" she asked. "Can you not even say it? Can you not give voice to Krueger's will?" She raised her hands and green fire sparked to life around them. Rochlof felt her power gathering in the air.

"It is *my* will!" he roared, and he charged.



The first thing Master Huntsman Berrick heard as he left the ley line was an ear-shattering roar. He instantly drew his long knives and scanned from beneath his bronze wolf helm for the source of the noise. He was alone.

The roar had come from a warwolf. *Rochlof*.

Berrick stood and sheathed his blades. They would not be needed . . . not yet. Krueger's instructions, or rather the intent behind them, had been clear. Caelan was an impetuous if talented young druid; Rochlof, a once-noble beast tainted by dragon blight and a misplaced loyalty to Caelan. Either the warwolf would stop Caelan or Berrick would, but he would give Rochlof the chance to prove his loyalty.

Another savage howl ripped through the air, and there was pain in the warwolf's rising cry this time. The battle had begun.

Crouching, Berrick moved swiftly through the low scrub. He was a large man but was well accustomed to moving quietly, and he had no fear the two combatants near the river would see him.

He crested a small rise and looked down on a low hill of scree and dense underbrush. He saw corpses—Wolves of Orboros and druids—lying shattered and broken, and anger burned within him. He hadn't known these Wolves or their masters, but their deaths were wasteful, unnecessary; they had been fulfilling their duty. This was simply more proof, to his mind, that Caelan was a lost cause.

Much of the riverbank was obscured with a thick, white fog. That would be Rochlof's doing. Berrick could see shapes moving in the mist, flickers of virulent green and flashes of brighter white. It was impossible to tell what was happening or who was winning.

Berrick rested his hands on his blades and settled in to watch and wait.



Rochlof pushed his rage down through sheer force of will. It was a ravenous tide he could not fully control if he let it get away from him. When fighting alongside Morvahna, his mistress regulated this unpredictable power. Now, he was at its mercy, and as his fury grew the blight within his flesh rose to the surface.

That rage had gotten the better of him earlier when he'd tried to convince Caelan to abandon her meddling with Krueger's plans. He had been caught off guard by her words, and the anger had simply taken over. He'd attacked, barreling forward to tear her to pieces, a feat he should have easily accomplished. She'd knocked him back with a magical blast of stone. It hadn't injured him, but it had stalled him.

Now a cloud of dense fog surrounded Rochlof. He had summoned it to obscure his presence from Caelan and allow him to gather his wits. He was surprised to discover she was using his own mist against him. Ordinarily he could see through its veil with ease, but she had somehow used her own powers to prevent that.

"Caelan," he called out. He knew it would allow her to pinpoint his location, but he wanted to try once more to talk to her, to persuade her to accept Krueger's plan. "I do not wish to fight you. Please, listen to me." He hated how weak he sounded, the pleading in his voice, but he spoke the truth—he did not want to hurt her.

"I have heard all you have to say, Rochlof." Caelan's voice drifted out of the mist. He still could not see her. "I cannot turn aside. I cannot let Krueger's madness spread."

"Then I must destroy you," he said, almost to himself. He felt crushed by the weight of those words, their finality.

The mist had grown silent, and Rochlof braced himself for Caelan's attack. He tapped into the power of the Wurm, infusing his muscles with iron strength. He saw a flash of green through the mist, and Caelan struck. The ground before him

rose up, an undulating wave of stone and earth that heaved into him, slashing him with jagged shards of stone.

The attack forced him back but did not knock him down. Rochlof set his feet and howled, directing a piercing cone of flesh-tearing sound toward Caelan. He couldn't see his target, but he heard her scream and knew he'd found his mark. Snarling, Rochlof charged forward as he dismissed the fog he'd summoned. As it cleared, he saw Caelan kneeling on the ground, one hand clapped to her head. He could see—and smell—a trickle of blood oozing from her right ear.

She looked so vulnerable, so fragile, and he felt doubt rising over the haze of his rage. He hesitated, slowing the tearing sweep of his claws for a fraction of an instant. It was all the time Caelan needed.

The young druid threw herself backward and pointed her voulge at Rochlof, its blade glowing a fiery green. The conjured spray of stony shards struck him in the chest and face, tossing him backward and tearing his flesh. He landed in a heap ten feet away, howling in agony.

Rochlof quickly regained his feet, his white fur stained a gaudy crimson, and saw Caelan had not retreated. She stood her ground, her voulge still aimed at him. She could have easily followed up with another attack—but perhaps she had doubts about this fight as well.

Either way, they were beyond words now, not that words would have mattered. He turned his fury inward, pushing its power into his battered flesh, knitting his skin and muscles back together. His rage was growing, and he could feel the blight twisting inside him. He could not spare any of his will or focus to fight it now.

He had to get close, where his claws and battle reflexes gave him the advantage. He surged toward Caelan, and again she summoned her magic. This time he dropped to all fours, letting the gout of stone pass harmlessly over him, and closed the distance between them in the space of a heartbeat.

He slammed into her, bearing her off her feet and then pinning her beneath him. She managed to smash her voulge into his snout, knocking his head back, but he recovered instantly, and his claws scythed down to strike her. He felt his claws pierce, but the momentum of his blow was drained at the last moment, and the wounds he inflicted were not instantly lethal as they should have been. She was strong, and the power of Orboros protected her.

Caelan screamed in pain and battered at Rochlof's head with her voulge, but the blows were ineffectual. Pinned down by the huge warwolf, she couldn't get the proper leverage for a full strike. He wanted to end it here, quickly, and he pushed his head down, through her defenses, his jaws parting to grasp her throat and rip the life from her.

His teeth raked the skin of Caelan's neck, and she froze, no longer fighting, accepting her death. Perhaps it was her surrender that awakened the blight within him, perhaps it was his own rage, but before he could bite down, he was wracked with a spasm so sudden and powerful he fell over sideways, all but paralyzed with agony.

Rochlof felt his skin ripple and then burst, disgorging long, serrated spines in a shower of blood and ichor. His limbs twisted, expanded, and then shrank, while his skull seemed to have come loose from his neck—it seemed to be stretching, elongating, becoming something else entirely.

He could do little but whimper in the throes of the spasm, but he saw Caelan had climbed to her feet and was again pointing her weapon at him. Her face was smeared with blood and the expression she wore was not one of triumph. She looked sick and afraid, but he still felt her strength, her resolve.

Green light flashed and a rain of stones and earth struck Rochlof. He could not avoid her magic, but the pain of its



impact was nothing compared to the agony of the blight. Again, Caelan summoned the power of Orboros, and a hammering spray of stone and grit tore into Rochlof. He felt skin and muscles rupture and bones shatter beneath the onslaught. Finally the pain of his injuries eclipsed the agony of the blight spasm.

He was dying. He was sure of it. *Let it come. Let it end by her hand*, he thought.

Rochlof lay on his back, his body a twisted wreck of blight-savaged flesh. He could see Caelan clearly. Her face was set in a hard line, but her eyes were filled with something softer: regret, loss. The blade on the voulge she held was shaking.

Instead of striking, she slowly lowered the weapon and looked off into the distance, as if seeing something revealed to her eyes only. "I am too late," she said to herself. "The ritual has been completed. Krueger has won." Caelan dropped her head in defeat. When she raised it again, her eyes were glistening.

"I will not kill you," she said, her voice a whisper. Her eyes flashed green and Rochlof inhaled sharply as he felt her power fill him through the connection they had shared. Almost immediately the spasms caused by the blight began to subside, and he felt his body twist and shift back to a more normal state. "You have been manipulated by Krueger. You must realize this. He has used you to further his own madness. I will not let it consume you as well."

Rochlof struggled to speak, but he was too weak to muster the control required to create human speech. In the jumble of his mind, he thought of the first time he had met Caelan. She had seemed so meek, so small. How wrong he had been. How wrong he had been about so many things. He shut his eyes, feeling a shame such as he had not experienced since the loss of his first mistress so many years ago.

A scent filled his nostrils, utterly familiar and yet completely out of place, and he opened his eyes again. He knew this smell, and he knew it should not be here now.

He tried to rise, but his ravaged and broken body refused to obey him. He was barely able to lift his head off the ground, and the effort forced a growl of pain from him. Frantically he searched for the scent's source as Caelan gently scolded him for exerting himself unnecessarily. He ignored her, his hunter instincts taking over.

Finally he saw what he had smelled.

Caelan, absorbed in her efforts to purify Rochlof's blight, did not see or hear the huge man rise up behind her.



Berrick charged forward silently, gripping the spear he had scavenged from one of the fallen Wolves. He had hoped this task would not fall to him. He had dared to believe that Rochlof might deter her, but it was clear the pureblood had failed.

Berrick had always been fond of Caelan. She had always shown concern for him and his pack, treating them almost as equals. In a different life, he would have been happy to have her as a master.

Nevertheless, she had betrayed her own, and his oaths were to the Stormlord, as his father's had been. When Krueger had sent his instructions before Berrick set out with Caelan to mend the ley line at the Thundercliff Peaks, the master huntsman had not hesitated to obey. When he had stood against the Khadorans, fully expecting to perish in the fight, it had not been for Caelan but in service to the Stormlord. It had been mere chance that another of Krueger's agents had been there serving as the Stormlord's eyes and ears. The wayfarer had recognized Berrick and transported him away.

Berrick pushed aside these thoughts as he leveled his spear at Caelan's heart. It would be over before she knew what was happening. A swift and clean death was the best he could give her now.



Caelan's profound focus was shattered as Rochlof suddenly sprang up from the ground in a blur of white, fangs bared in a feral snarl, and she saw a great clawed hand sweep toward her. She froze in shock, unable to believe that after everything that had happened Rochlof was still set on her death.

Pain lanced through her side as Rochlof's hand connected, but there was also something odd—she did not feel the tearing of multiple claws through her flesh. The warwolf's blow knocked her rolling to the side. Quickly shaking her head clear, Caelan looked back, expecting to see the pureblood poised to deliver the deathstroke. Instead Rochlof stood squared off with a huge Wolf of Orboros. She looked down at her side and saw a crimson gash where the Wolf's spear had penetrated, a strike that would have run her through but for Rochlof's interference. Then she looked to Rochlof and saw his mangled hand, split apart at the palm where the spear had ripped through it.

Rochlof was struggling to stand as the blight, unhindered by Caelan's purifying magic, began once again to ravage him. As she attempted to pull herself up, she felt a far more intense pain jolt through her body from her left leg. She looked down and immediately had to fight the urge to retch. She had fallen badly, and she could see a hint of white bone jutting from the torn flesh of her awkwardly bent leg.

Rochlof toppled, his body wracked by another massive blight spasm. Wicked bony protrusions ripped through his writhing flesh. The Wolf turned his back to the pureblood and advanced toward Caelan with his spear held high.

She tried to summon the power of Orboros, but fear and pain clouded her concentration. She felt the energy slip just outside her grasp. She steadied herself and was preparing to try again when her eyes finally locked with the fierce green ones fixed on her from beneath the strange Wolf's helm. To her shock, she realized he was no stranger at all.

"Berrick?" It sounded as if the word had taken all the wind from her lungs.

Caelan could see great sadness in his eyes, but he made no reply as he readied his spear to deliver the deathblow.

Suddenly the air was split by an awful and unnatural howl that rang painfully in Caelan's ears, like the wailing of a thousand souls being consumed by the Devourer. She saw Rochlof rise, the once-noble pureblood now horribly twisted by the blight he had allowed to consume him.

Berrick spun around, but he was far too slow. Rochlof was on him in an instant, tearing into the Wolf with limbs that had mutated into great draconic claws. His snout had elongated and was filled with oversized teeth that dripped thick, viscous saliva and turned bright red as they tore out Berrick's throat. Caelan watched in mute horror as Rochlof's keen yellow eyes went black before rolling back into his head like the fearsome predators of the Meredius.

In moments Berrick was reduced to nothing more than tatters of red meat amid a crimson pool. Caelan watched as the thing that had been Rochlof stood for a moment over its bloody work. Now she saw Berrick's spear buried deep in Rochlof's torso. The blighted warwolf wavered for a moment, then crumpled to the ground.

Caelan could feel her own consciousness slipping away. She knew she had to act now or she would perish. She took in a deep breath, focused her mind to shut out the pain, and drew on the power of Orboros. She had just enough mastery to mend the bone in her damaged leg and staunch the bleeding in her side, at least for the moment. Breathing heavily, she carefully pulled herself up and collected her voulge from the ground before making her way cautiously over to the wheezing heap that was Rochlof.

Had she not seen the transformation with her own eyes, she might never have believed that the pathetic, twisted creature before her had once been the majestic and powerful warwolf. Tears stung her eyes and her chest burned with anger—at Berrick's betrayal, at Krueger's manipulation, at her own shortcomings, but most of all at the thought of losing a friend she had grown to care for deeply.

After a moment of hesitation she slowly lowered herself next to Rochlof and placed her hand upon his head. He jerked suddenly, causing her to flinch, but she saw the black orbs of his eyes flash back to their natural yellow.

"Kill me." Rochlof's guttural words were barely comprehensible, but his eyes were clear and bright. "Please."

She reached out to him with her power, desperate to find the connection they had shared, desperate to save him. All she found within him was the roiling sickness, the unbearable agony of the blight. Caelan felt tears flow freely down her face as she realized Rochlof was beyond saving. In embracing the blight to save her, he had condemned himself to its deadly corruption. There was only one mercy she could offer him now.

Runes flashed about her, bathing both of them in brilliant green energy as she summoned all her magic. She felt his body tense and then suddenly relax as her power flowed through him, burning away the pain and the blight. He sighed, and his eyes lost their focus as he breathed his last.

Shaking with grief, Caelan gently stroked Rochlof's head. "Thank you," she whispered.

The air filled with the sound of thunder, and she felt a corresponding surge beneath the earth. She could sense Krueger's pattern falling into place, rippling along the skin of Orboros like the smell of ozone after a storm. The roiling clouds overhead brought to mind the image of great dragon wings eclipsing the sun.

She gazed at the still form of her friend. She had been unable to thwart Krueger's plans, but at least she had brought this one noble being some peace at the end.

Caelan rose, leaning heavily on her voulge, and walked unsteadily from that place without looking back. As she went, she collected all her grief and rage, gathering the strength she would need when she brought news to her superiors of what the Stormlord had done.

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