

SCARS OF CAEN HALFAUG

BY AERYN RUDEL

For Rochlof, traveling through the ley lines was an agonizing experience. The uncorrupted natural energy that pushed him along sent spikes of pain through his body, stabbing at the gangrenous core of blighted flesh deep within him. Having traveled this way many times, he expected the pain, but its intensity struck like a battering ram each time. The pain had become almost unbearable when he and his companion finally emerged at their destination in a flash of green light. Mercifully, the anguish faded to a dull ache seconds after leaving the arcane pathway of the ley line.

Rochlof drew in a deep breath of cold air as he saw and smelled the landscape around him. They'd arrived somewhere in the north, on tundra that was nearly featureless save for a railway that cut through it. The smell that filled his nostrils was more telling: the distant scent of steel and grease was unmistakable—the stench of men at war. Underneath this prominent odor was something insidiously unpleasant, a ripe corruption that caused him to wrinkle his snout and cough.

A dragon had been here. Its presence was unmistakable. A large portion of the railway was blackened and twisted, the steel slick with icy rime. The ground around the mangled tracks had been transformed into a field of frozen ash and the sparse vegetation that could survive in the climate had been scoured away, leaving only bare, scorched earth.

"This is different," Caelan said. "It's too cold. We're not far enough north . . ." She trailed off and frowned.

Rochlof looked down at the young waykeeper. Her head barely reached the top of his thigh. She smelled clean, wholesome, and pure. "Another dragon? Different from the first?" he asked. Making human speech was irritating and required him to modify the flesh of his throat to accommodate the crude syllables. The effort, unfortunately, was necessary to communicate with most humans.

The rest of their party had arrived through the ley line now: thirty Wolves of Orboros and the cabal of blackclads who had accompanied him to the first site of dragon blight. The Wolves, led by the tall human called Berrick, moved forward to encircle Caelan and Rochlof. They would protect their

mistress until ordered to do otherwise. The druids stayed together, silent and grim.

Caelan closed her eyes a moment, obviously concentrating. "Yes," she said after a few seconds. "It is similar to the last, but its blight has corrupted the nexus in this area in a different manner."

He chuffed in agreement, then remembered most humans wouldn't recognize that sound. He nodded stiffly. "I smell it, and I feel it. Cold. Stagnant. The other was hot and changeable."

"It's another dragon," Caelan whispered, almost to herself. "What can that mean?"

Rochlof said, "Nothing good. But our task remains unchanged. We must heal this blight. Now."

She looked up at him. Her face was passive, but he could see fear in her eyes. She took a deep breath and nodded. "You are correct. Let us find the nexus and cleanse it."

"Be warned, there are men nearby, and their machines," Rochlof said. "I scented them when we arrived. They may be headed this way."

Caelan nodded. "Berrick," she called out. "Have your men scout down the railway. There are enemies approaching."

The tall warrior obeyed instantly, pointing his cleft spear left and right. The Wolves split into two groups and headed east and west, following the railway. The druids, who owed no allegiance to Caelan, stayed where they were. Rochlof could smell something akin to fear on the blackclads, an anxiety that would be undetectable to a human. Their apprehension was certainly due in part to the danger of their situation: they stood upon a dragon-blighted field in enemy territory. Some fear was to be expected. But beneath that lay the scent of a deeper worry, of the doubt that came with serving a difficult master and partaking in an inordinately difficult task. It was a scent with which he was quite familiar. He himself reeked of it.

As he watched Caelan move toward the ruined tracks, following a ley line to the heart of the blighted energy in the

area, Rochlof's mind turned to the task Krueger had given him. The Stormlord had instructed him to aid Caelan in her task but to secretly *preserve* a small portion of the blight in each area. All other considerations were secondary. He was uniquely qualified for such a mission, and this was the reason he had accepted Krueger's bargain and turned from Morvahna the Dawnshadow to surreptitiously ally himself with the powerful druid.

The blighted flesh within him twitched, as it often did, sending a slight ache through his body. He closed his eyes and focused his own magic, using techniques learned

through long years spent with Morvahna. He surrounded the cancerous growth in his body with power, sealing it off from the rest of his flesh and denying its influence. Though the pang receded, a subtle weariness remained in its place. It was becoming more difficult to stem the spread of the blight.

He had carried the blight within him for many years. At first he had endured it stoically as penance for failing his first mistress, Potent Selestria, by not dying alongside her. The red men and their machines had invaded Selestria's territories, led by the enigmatic and powerful creature called the Old Witch. They had sought to study the ancient dragon blight in Selestria's domain, which she protected from exactly that type of intrusion. The potent's forces had met the invaders near the site of the greatest blight. Rochlof had fought viciously, aided by Selestria's magic. But the cunning Old Witch had cornered the potent, isolating her from Rochlof and the rest of her forces. He had felt the death blow, felt Selestria's life snuffed out in an instant, leaving a hole in the center of his being. Still he had fought on, even without her, his rage and grief making him implacable. But in the end there were too many foes, and he was finally cut down and left for dead.

After the battle Rochlof had been horrified to discover he had survived. Still, he felt compelled to live on despite his monumental failure. Horribly wounded, he had crawled through the dragon-blighted landscape as his flesh slowly knit. Thirst and hunger had gnawed at him, but he knew that eating or drinking anything from the corrupted land would surely kill him. Eventually, his injuries and the crushing grief of his loss had weakened his resolve. When he found a pool of water at the bottom of a deep crater he knew had once contained the blood of a dragon, he could not stop himself from drinking his fill. Even diluted by water and time, the blood was still potent and deadly. Its rot had taken hold within him, becoming an evil cyst that continued to grow slowly within him even today.

Rochlof shoved the terrible thoughts from his mind, drew in a deep breath, and followed after Caelan. The druids moved behind him. They were Krueger's as well, and he had no doubt they were watching him to make sure he fulfilled the bargain he had struck with the Stormlord.

Some twenty yards from the railway Caelan stopped and knelt to run her hands over the scorched ground. Rochlof could feel the energy thrumming through the waykeeper as her magic sank into the earth, searching for the blight infecting it. She looked up at him as he approached.

"I've found the nexus," she said. Her face looked pained, pinched by the effort of her magic and the physical and spiritual strain the blight placed on every living thing. "I need your help."



The acrid smell of burning coal filled Rochlof's nostrils, and he turned to the east and saw a black plume of smoke rising into the air. The humans of Khador were still some distance away, but they would be here soon. His hands opened and closed, the long talons on his fingers flashing like ivory daggers. He held no love for any of the men of the Iron Kingdoms, but the red soldiers who had cost him so much—those, he hated. There was work to do, however. The indulgence of slaughter would come soon enough.

"To the east!" Rochlof shouted, the rough, unnatural tones of his voice slicing through the relative quiet.

The group of Wolves who had started west down the railway quickly backtracked and moved to join their compatriots. Half the blackclads broke off to join them. The others stayed behind, ostensibly to protect Caelan from the Khadorans if they arrived before she could finish cleansing the blight.

"Can you aid me with this? As you did before?" Caelan asked, pulling Rochlof's attention back to her.

Rochlof growled low in his throat. "I believe so, but by the stench of their machines, I can tell the humans are coming in force. Your Wolves will need me."

Frowning and clearly concerned, she turned in the direction the human warriors had gone. Rochlof had noticed a strong connection between Caelan and her Wolves, one born of long association and many shared battles. "Berrick is strong," she said. "He will hold them until you are needed." Her voice sounded clear and confident despite her fear; she had given the Wolf leader a command.

Rochlof's ears pricked forward, the equivalent of a smile for a human. He could tear her to pieces in an instant, but if she feared him, she did not show it. Her unwavering focus reminded him of Morvahna.

The thought of the Dawnshadow sent a tremor of guilt through him. She believed he served her in this endeavor, as he had for many years, but her failures had left him no choice. She had promised to heal the blight within him, had even shown him how to halt its spread with magic, but she had not fulfilled her pledge. Krueger had offered him similar assistance, but the Stormlord possessed superior knowledge of the blight and the dragons that caused it. Krueger was confident he could heal Rochlof, and with the blight inexorably gnawing at Rochlof's flesh and soul every day, Rochlof had felt he had no choice but to accept the Stormlord's offer.

He raked a long talon across the palm of his right hand. Flesh parted and blood flowed, staining his white fur crimson. Rochlof began to chant, reciting the ancient words Morvahna had taught him for the ritual that would help cleanse the blight from the nexus.

Caelan looked up at him, her eyes distant and hazy as she sought to focus her own magic. Rochlof's chanting grew louder as he focused his will toward a subtle variation of the ritual that Krueger had taught him. It altered the shape of the magic, molding it into something with an almost imperceptible difference. This variation would aid Caelan's efforts to heal the blight in this area, but it was also specifically intended to leave some behind, preserved within the otherwise wholesome nexus. This small cyst of draconic corruption would be undetectable to anyone not specifically looking for it. The effect was not entirely dissimilar to the way Rochlof held the blight at bay within his own body.

Rochlof was keenly aware that it was the blight within his own body that allowed him to do as Krueger had asked. He did not fully understand why the Stormlord wanted to preserve some portion of the blight in these areas, only that it would aid his understanding of the dragons. In the end, Rochlof had chosen to believe Krueger's mission served some greater good, a good that would include Rochlof himself—leaving him free of corruption and able to serve the Circle Orboros as the warwolves in his family had done for generations with unwavering strength and loyalty.

The smell of smoke was stronger now, but he was nearing the end of his part of the ritual. Anger, hot and caustic, surged through him as the final words left his mouth. He turned to the east and saw the Wolves of Orboros forming into battle ranks, with the Wolves up front, their cleft-bladed spears leveled, and the reeves behind with cocked and loaded crossbows. All but two of the blackclads had moved up to flank them so their magic could both aid their allies and smite their enemies.

The Circle forces were impressive, but they paled in comparison to the mass of red-armored men and machines marching down the mangled railway toward them. Rochlof saw four ranks of heavily armored soldiers with stout shields and long pikes advancing together, shields locked in a wall of crimson steel. Behind them towered a huge bipedal machine, what humans called a warjack. The twelve-foot-tall construct gripped a gargantuan axe in each hand. Smoke boiled from its back, and the eyes in its small head glowed with a fierce red light. Worse yet were the six unarmored men in heavy grey cloaks; they stank of ill-wrought, unclean magic. Each of them wielded a stout two-handed axe, its blade shrouded in wan bluish light.

The Khadorans approached unhurried; they knew they possessed the advantage of numbers and arms. Rochlof saw one of the druids look back at him and nod. He would be needed soon.

Rochlof glanced down at Caelan. The waykeeper's eyes were closed, her mouth moving in silent evocation of her magic. He could feel the stagnant chill beginning to dissipate as the blight was scoured away, but she would need time to finish the

ritual properly. She would also need his strength to complete the final cleansing—strength desperately needed elsewhere. He had only one choice, and it was an uncertain one.

Rochlof reached down with one massive hand and gripped the top of Caelan's head. Her eyes flew open, and she tried to jerk away. "No," he said, "trust me."

Their eyes locked. He saw she was afraid of him, but behind that fear was anger at his unwelcome intrusion. He was again reminded of Morvahna. He said urgently, "I have to go aid the others. You must finish the ritual without me."

Again she tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip, holding her in place. She glared up at him, rage and terror warring across her face. "I cannot," she said sharply. "I need you."

"I know. This is the only way," he replied, and pushed her head back. He held his slashed palm over her, made a fist, and squeezed. Blood ran freely from the wound, trickling onto Caelan. She flinched as the warm fluid splashed her face, but then understanding dawned in her eyes, and she did not turn aside from the crimson cascade even as it ran into her mouth and down her throat.

Rochlof released her and said, "It will be enough. Finish the ritual."

She nodded and closed her eyes. He could feel her power regathering, within it a subtle note of his own power, the distinct savagery of warping energy. He knew the blight he carried would not be transmitted to her through his blood, as he had sealed its influence away inside of him. He possessed that much control over it, at least.

As the enemy approached the Wolves and druids, reeves began firing their crossbows over the heads of the spearmen in front of them. Many of the bolts simply rattled off the shields of the Khadoran pikemen, but some quarrels found their way through eye slits in helmets or through the joins between gorget and breastplate.

Now the Khadoran sorcerers—humans called Greylords who dabbled in unnatural elemental magic—began to spread out, moving as a single unit along the left flank of the pikemen. One shouted orders to the warjack, which followed him.

Rochlof could see what was about to happen. He left Caelan's side and bounded over the frost-covered ground, moving behind the Wolves and toward the Greylords and their warjack. Two of the blackclads saw him coming and began running in the same direction.

Now the Wolves and pikemen met. The Khadorans did not charge; they simply pushed into their lightly armored opponents with the inevitability of an avalanche. The explosive tips on their pikes detonated seconds after impact,

and Rochlof saw the bodies of Wolves go flying, limp and boneless in death. Before he turned away, he saw Berrick dash into the hole left by the pikemen's initial strike, his spear arcing out in a lethal jab that caught a Khadoran beneath her helmet and severed the woman's head from her neck.

Rochlof sensed magic gathering in the direction he was running. The Greylords were weaving a spell. In response he felt the familiar warmth of the blackclads' magic as they marshaled the earth's power to turn aside the mystical assault. As they finished their incantation the Khadoran sorcerers stepped forward, spread their hands in front of them, and launched a blast of frigid air from their outstretched fingers. The spray of rime and ice struck the invisible shield the druids had erected around themselves and the closest Wolves and dissipated harmlessly.

The sharp, angry voice of one of the Greylords—a man with a long white beard and the bearing of a leader—rose over the din of battle, and the other Greylords pulled back. Through their number came the warjack, both axes raised.



"Get down!" Rochlof howled as he ran forward, nearly on top of the druids. They threw themselves to the ground, and Rochlof summoned the feral magic that dwelled within every purebred warpmag. He felt it gather in his core and surge up into his throat in a tide of unstoppable power. Rochlof opened his mouth wide and unleashed the death howl. The piercing cry was a concentrated cone of murderous sound that crashed into the Khadoran warjack and two of the Greylords behind it. The 'jack's armor buckled as it staggered back. The sorcerers behind it burst like overripe melons as the cacophonous wail pulped flesh and bone, leaving behind only gory, unrecognizable chunks.

Not wasting his advantage, Rochlof summoned feral strength into his body as he charged the reeling warjack. Disturbingly, this use of his magic caused long, bony barbs to push through the flesh of his knuckles—a minor manifestation of the blight within him. He pushed this from his mind as he barreled into the 'jack. His talons sank into the plate steel of its hull to tear huge gashes in the armor, though not deep enough to damage the internal workings beneath. A shout from the Greylord leader caused the warjack to pull away and level a swipe with its right axe at Rochlof's head. He ducked, let the blade pass over him, and then slammed his entire bulk into the machine, knocking it backward again. A short, sharp scream told him the warjack had trampled one of the Greylords behind it.

Then the blackclads sent their own assault against the 'jack, and bolts of sizzling force arced from their outstretched fingertips to detonate against the machine in a flash of green light. The strike did no discernible damage, but the towering machine was forced back a few more steps.

Rochlof chanced a look to his right where the Wolves were battling the pikemen. It was not going well. The Khadorans were better armed and had heavier armor, and he saw many dead Wolves on the ground. The reeves had abandoned their ranged attacks and had joined the fray with the short blades on the stocks of their crossbows. They wouldn't last long. He looked behind him to where Caelan was still hunkered on the ground, two blackclads standing in front of her holding voulges in a defensive pose. She pressed one hand to the blackened earth, her face set in hard lines of deep concentration.

"Aid the Wolves!" Rochlof howled at the blackclads near him. He held no real sway over them—they were Krueger's—but they were no fools, and their mission aligned with that of the Wolves, at least for the moment. They hurried off, firing bolts of force at the pikemen as they went.

Rochlof turned his attention back to the warjack, which was now steaming toward him, smashing its axes together in deafening metallic clangs. The bellowed orders of the Greylord who commanded it rose over even that din. He let the machine come at him, drawing once more on his savage

magic. He felt the blight within him pulse hungrily as he invoked his birthright. It added its power to his, and even though a part of him raged against it, he was filled with a sudden euphoria. Letting the blight have its way felt good, and he wasn't fighting it.

Rochlof's magic took hold and his body became insubstantial, light as a breath on the wind. A bank of white fog rose up around his ethereal form and rolled toward the warjack, a thick carpet of creeping mist that almost certainly obscured the machine from the Khadoran soldiers behind it.

The warjack barreled in, both axes swinging. Rochlof stepped lightly around the first strike, but the warjack was quicker than he anticipated, and the second axe whistled down in a furious overhand blow. Rochlof twisted aside, allowing the weapon to crash into his shoulder rather than split his skull. The immense pain only increased his fury. Shaking off the blow, Rochlof charged forward and *through* the warjack, his ghostly magic rendering him incorporeal. He smelled grease and smoke as he passed through the machine and caught a glimpse of its inner workings—gears, pistons, and a huge sphere in the middle of it all that pulsed blue and red. Then he was beyond and behind the warjack.

Aware of the remaining Greylords behind him, he again called upon his innate magic, this time to shield his flesh from their sorcery. He felt the icy blasts of their spells as no more than cool gusts of wind as he reached out with both claws and grabbed the warjack in an iron grip. A howl of pure fury burst from his mouth as he lifted the construct from the ground, planted his feet, and, in an astonishing display of strength, flung the multi-ton machine directly at the nearest group of Khadoran pikemen. The warjack crashed into the troops like a great red meteor, flattening three of them beneath its bulk and knocking half a dozen others from their feet.

Seizing the opportunity, Berrick and a number of Wolves raced in to dispatch the downed pikemen with their spears, easily finding gaps in armor plate as the soldiers struggled to rise.

Rochlof suddenly felt the pain in his shoulder subside, and the bleeding stopped. He glanced behind him and saw one of the blackclads a few steps away. The robed woman nodded once and then moved off to join her compatriots. Rochlof was thankful some blackclads could use their magic to heal creatures who served the Circle Orboros.

He glanced back to Caelan and saw she hadn't moved or shifted position; she still needed more time.

The warjack was damaged but not destroyed, and as it climbed to its feet the Wolves who had been dealing with the downed pikemen scattered, returning to their brethren in the battle line. The remaining pikemen, emboldened by the presence of the warjack, locked shields and advanced again. The Greylords maneuvered behind them, their leader once again shouting orders to the axe-wielding warjack.

Rochlof rushed in, and the Wolves parted to allow him through. He reached the pikemen first and lashed out with his claws to rend flesh, tossing armored bodies aside like kindling as he fought. Two lances detonated against his body, scorching his fur and the flesh beneath it. He stepped back and loosed another death howl, obliterating the pikemen immediately in front of him and leaving a hole in their line. He charged through, while the Wolves streamed in behind him to deal with the remaining Khadorans.

He heard grunts of effort and cries of pain as the Wolves came to desperate grips with their enemies. They outnumbered the Khadorans now, but the warjack and its Greylord escort still tipped the odds in the enemy's favor. Now behind the lines of pikemen, Rochlof charged the damaged warjack again, flooding his muscles with bestial strength. Instead of lashing out wildly, he sidestepped the machine's first strike, caught its arm with both hands, and yanked savagely. Steel tore, pistons shrieked, and hydraulic fluid sprayed like blood over Rochlof's white fur as the warwolf ripped the warjack's arm from its chassis. The construct stumbled away, fluid gushing in diminishing pulses from the empty socket.

Rochlof pried the axe from the disembodied hand of the warjack, tossed aside the limb, and took the weapon in a two-handed grip. He normally entered battle bolstered by the might of a druid like Morvahna guiding his actions, enhancing his attacks, and healing his wounds. He had no

such support here. Wielding something as crude as an axe was distasteful, even dishonorable, but the warjack's armor was heavy, and the weapon would bite harder than even his claws could tear.

Resigned to this tactic, Rochlof charged. The warjack brought its remaining axe up to defend itself, but the warwolf leapt into the air and brought his own weapon down at an angle the warjack could neither reach nor deflect. The axe bit deep into the machine's hull just above its head, and a shower of blue sparks burst from the gaping hole. Rochlof let go of the axe and danced backward as the 'jack toppled over and lay still.

The remaining Greylords had begun fleeing to the east, and he let them go. He turned back to see the Wolves finishing off the rest of the pikemen with spear thrusts or crossbow bolts fired at point-blank range.

They had won, but at a huge cost. More than half the Wolves had been killed. Their leader, Berrick, moved stiffly up beside Rochlof, clutching a wound in his leg.

Berrick pointed his spear to the east, his face impassive. "A train is on its way," he said in a voice oddly high-pitched and mismatched to his muscular frame. More smoke was now visible to the east, multiple clouds of black soot larger than the one that had heralded the force they'd just defeated. This train doubtlessly carried additional Khadoran soldiers and warjacks—certainly more than they could hope to defeat.

One of the blackclads who had been guarding Caelan came up beside them. "She is not finished. The blight infecting this nexus is more complex than the last. You must hold." This was the first time any of Krueger's druids had spoken to Rochlof, who looked back at him evenly. The man appeared young beneath his cowl but seemed as nondescript as the rest of them.

Rochlof glanced down at Berrick. The Wolf hefted his spear, its cleft blade stained a gaudy crimson, and said, "Then we will hold."

The warwolf flexed his claws and chuffed in agreement. This time he refused to nod.



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