

Burning Rage

An Eowyn story

"When will this finally end?" Bored, Eowyn leaned against the smooth stone wall.

Thalea shot her a warning look. "Straighten up, you represent the Order!" the elder huntress whispered quietly.

The girl reluctantly took a stance. It had been a year since Thalea had found the then fourteen-year-old Eowyn half-dead and had taken the girl with her. A year since Eowyn had started the training to become a huntress.

She had learned a lot during this time. Not so much in martial arts, where hardly anyone could fool her, but all the more in terms of strategy, cunning, and planning.

However, she had little use for all the ceremonial pomp. Of course, she worshipped Aria—she had been born under the sign of the goddess and even entered into her Order. Nevertheless, the last two hours seemed like a huge waste of time. She would much rather have been training in the temple's cellar or strolling with her bow through the nearby forest, the tops of which she could see through the window. The trees swayed in the gentle breeze, seeming to beckon and taunt her simultaneously.

Thalea's elbow landed in Eowyn's ribs. From the looks of it, those present were kneeling down for the final prayer.

Relieved, Eowyn imitated them. While the priestess at the altar spoke grandly, Eowyn involuntarily wondered whether the goddess really put so much importance on all these rites. For her a short prayer under the stellar constellation of Aria's bow or amidst the rustling leaves of the forest was enough to feel close to her goddess.

Eowyn sighed. She was probably an exception once again. The girl glanced unobtrusively over the crowd. Most of the faces showed the appropriate mixture of awe and solemnity. Eowyn hurried to get

her own features under control. Thalea was right. The Order of the Huntresses was held in such high esteem in most cities not only because of their excellent skills but also because they acted with Aria's blessing and in her name.

Without the goddess, they would be little more than a gang of bounty hunters.

The priestess at the altar spoke her final words, and Eowyn stood up, satisfied. Finally, the high festival that had lasted for the last three days was over, and they could get on with their daily business.

Thalea, who was in charge of Eowyn's training, barely shook her head as she stood up as well.

Eowyn sighed again. Apparently, she had been a little too hasty.

The crowd began to disperse, and Eowyn also turned toward the exit.

"Wait," Thalea held her back. "Dara wants to talk to us."

"An assignment?" Eowyn pricked her ears. She was eager to finally prove herself, to do something significant. So far, she had only been allowed to accompany Thalea on small things. She had to stand by most of the time while Thalea settled an argument or taught some troublemakers a lesson.

Eowyn felt that this was a waste of her talents. Both Thalea and she had much more to offer. Besides, it didn't matter how often she watched Thalea mediate—she would never become a diplomat.

"I'm afraid that's all I know," Thalea sighed. It wasn't easy for her to give up all the adventures that made up the life of a huntress, and train Eowyn instead. "Come." She led the girl out of the meeting room through a side door.

Dara was already waiting for them in the hallway. Eowyn liked the woman who had been in charge of the small group of huntresses in Bantor for about two years. She was comparatively young for a principal, around her mid-forties. Her short red hair was styled up in spikes, and she wore a floor-length, light-colored robe over the black

battle dress of a huntress.

She winked at Eowyn conspiratorially. "Seems that Aria has finally answered your prayers."

"You give me an assignment?" Eowyn exclaimed enthusiastically.

"The both of you," Dara corrected her, "you're not ready for it alone."

"I am!" Eowyn insisted defiantly. She had already been through a lot in her young life and had more than enough fighting experience.

"Not everything can be solved with muscle power," Dara admonished her with a benign smile as if she knew what was going through Eowyn's mind.

"That's what I'm also trying to impress on her." Thalea rolled her eyes.

"But it can save you lots of time and effort," Eowyn replied with a grin.

"Luckily, I know you're not serious," Dara replied. She led them into a meeting room where a man dressed in peasant clothes was waiting for them.

At first glance, Eowyn noticed his nervousness, and the smell of his sweat tickled her sensitive nose. Involuntarily, the girl took a step back and breathed in shallowly through her mouth.

Thalea gave her a questioning look, which Eowyn confidently ignored. She knew that her senses were much finer than everyone else's.

The man eyed the three armed women, intimidated. His gaze slid over Dara and Thalea to Eowyn and faltered in irritation.

Eowyn pressed her lips. She hated this one moment that happened every time she met someone. It didn't matter whether she was the clan leader's daughter or Aria's huntress, what outfit she wore, or how she behaved—as soon as people saw her eyes, they knew she was different. Although even she did not know why.

Perhaps she was merely a freak of nature, a tasteless joke of the

gods, who had endowed her with above-average strength, exceptionally keen senses, and purple eyes.

She was an outsider, no matter where she went.

"These are Thalea and Eowyn," Dara introduced them energetically, attracting the man's attention back to her. "The two huntresses will take care of your request. Can you please summarize it for them?"

"Of course." The man cleared his throat with one last suspicious glance in Eowyn's direction. "My name is Jandor Thimal. I come from a village about a day's journey west of here, in the foothills of the mountains. About ten days ago, there was a terrible forest fire. We had a lot of trouble containing the flames so they didn't spread into the valley and onto our fields."

Eowyn listened to the report with a furrowed brow. That didn't exactly sound like a job for the huntresses.

"Do you think the fire was started on purpose?" Thalea asked in amazement. Her thoughts must have been going in a similar direction.

"No." Jandor shook his head. "Better said, I don't know."

"The story continues," Dara interjected. "Please proceed," she turned to the man.

He nodded eagerly. "In the days that followed, we saw more fires blazing in the mountains, but as the forest on our mountainside was already charred, we were in no danger and paid no further attention. This summer is very hot and dry, so all it takes is a campfire that hasn't been carefully extinguished." He took a deep breath. "About a week ago, however, most of our fields were set on fire without warning. A boy herding the goats nearby told me about a roaring ball of flame that rolled in from the mountains. He only escaped with his life because he drove himself and his goats into the nearby river and dived in until the danger had passed. When he told the village about it, we didn't want to believe him initially, but the devastation speaks

for itself."

"Couldn't he have unwittingly caused the fire himself and made up the story to distract suspicion?" Thalea interjected.

"The thought had occurred to us too, of course, but the tracks tell a different story."

"What kind of tracks?" Eowyn leaned forward with interest.

"Fire," he replied in an ominous voice. "It really does look like a fireball has burned its way through the grass."

"Maybe a Drakken," Thalea said musingly.

"That was our first thought, too," the man replied. "We've set traps, to no avail. There don't seem to be any Drakken in our area. Still, our neighboring village was burned down completely. No one can say how or why." He shook his head sadly. "We immediately started digging a protective trench around the village. I really hope that it can save us. When I left, it was almost finished. And there are barrels of water everywhere. But our harvest is lost completely. I don't know how we're going to survive the winter."

"What exactly are we supposed to do?" asked Thalea.

"We hope you can find out who is responsible for these fires and stop it."

"Am I right to assume you can't pay for our services?" Dara asked calmly.

Jandor wiped his sweaty hands uncomfortably on his pants. "We'll find a way."

"Our services are not cheap," Dara continued impassively. "And you say you barely have enough to survive the winter."

"We need help." Desperation flickered in his gaze.

"You could contact the official authorities."

Eowyn gasped indignantly. The huntresses usually were paid for their services in hard cash, but she never regarded them as simple mercenaries who abandoned those in need if they were not wealthy enough.

"The nearest garrison is a good three days away!" she exclaimed. When Jandor returned with the troops, there might not even be a village left—if the army came in first place. From bitter experience, Eowyn did not have too much faith in the helpfulness of Timsdalian soldiers.

Dara gave her a sharp look, which silenced Eowyn. "I just want everyone involved to be aware of the situation."

"What does that mean?" Jandor looked just as puzzled as Eowyn.

"Since you cannot pay us properly, I cannot instruct any of my huntresses to accept your commission. The decision is entirely up to them." She gave Eowyn a small smile.

"I'm in!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. If necessary, she would go alone. She had no doubt that she could do it.

"I'm coming with you," Thalea grumbled. "I've put up with you for too long to let you end up as a barbecue spit."

Eowyn gave her an indignant look. "A little more confidence, please!"

"I would have if you hadn't gotten us into such trouble last time."

"I had everything under control!" Eowyn replied defiantly. At least, almost everything. "I could have managed on my own."

"I have no doubt about that. But our entire fee would have gone on compensation payments for broken limbs and disfigured faces."

"Are you finished now?" Dara interrupted the banter dryly. Her eyes turned to Eowyn. "Since there's no fee this time that can be used to make amends, I'd be grateful if the collateral damage was kept in check."

"It wasn't my fault!" Eowyn insisted. How could she help that the cocky son of her last client thought he could touch her without being asked and run into her fist—three times?

"Whatever." Dara opened the secretary standing against the wall. She quickly wrote a few sentences on paper, dripped a little wax underneath, and pressed her signet ring onto it.

"What is this?" Eowyn quietly asked. She had never seen an assignment confirmed so formally before. Usually, a handshake was enough. After all, no one messed with the Order of the Huntresses.

"I'm not sure." Thalea stepped closer with interest.

"As you cannot pay us for our services, I propose a slightly different arrangement," Dara explained and handed the document to Jandor. "In return for our help, your village agrees to provide shelter and food for passing huntresses. I would like your signature here." She pointed to the relevant spot.

Jandor hesitated.

"You can write, can't you?" Dara asked to make sure.

"Yes, but ... I'm not sure if I'm allowed to make such a commitment for our entire village."

"As you wish." Dara pursed her lips. "Take your time to think about it; we are in no hurry."

Eowyn stifled a smile as she watched Jandor's deliberations. The consideration Dara asked for was hardly worth mentioning; in fact, hospitality demanded it. Dara probably only insisted in the first place so as not to start a rumor that the huntresses were working for free. Jandor, however, looked as if he feared that hundreds of women would be invading his remote village to have a good time.

Finally, he issued a long-suffering sigh. "Agreed." He took the pen and scribbled his name on the paper.

"Very well," Thalea rubbed her hands together vigorously. "We should leave right away."

Elated, Eowyn followed her instructor outside. She was obviously not the only one looking forward to some action.

Less than an hour later, they were on their way to the village. Eowyn and Thalea were used to traveling light. Their horses trotted along the dusty country road, and Eowyn enjoyed the warm wind on her face. Because of the hot weather, they had foregone their usual black

leather outfits, opting instead for light cloth pants and matching shirts. The only things Eowyn had not wanted to part with were her weapons. The weight of the two daggers in her boots and the sword on her hip was very reassuring. Not to mention the small throwing stars concealed in the gauntlets on her wrists.

Laughing, Eowyn spurred her horse. Although she had been living with the huntresses for a year now, she did not feel particularly comfortable behind city walls.

"Not so fast!" Thalea called after her, and Eowyn pulled regretfully the reins before turning around in the saddle. Jandor had fallen far behind them with his cart, and Eowyn grimaced. "Do we have to wait for him? He's just holding us up!" she complained to Thalea, as her companion caught up with her.

The huntress gave Jandor an appraising look. "Too bad he didn't want to leave the cart behind." She sighed. "At this rate, we won't reach the village today."

"Is something wrong?" Jandor asked as he finally reached them and looked at the two women uncertainly.

"If the situation in the village is really that critical, we'd better ride ahead," Eowyn suggested without waiting for Thalea's decision.

Thalea cleared her throat admonishingly, but Eowyn ignored her. She had waited so long for a proper mission that any further delay was unbearable.

Jandor seemed torn. "Are you sure you'll find the correct village?"

"It's the one with a fire trench around it, right?" Eowyn grinned mockingly.

"What she means by that," Thalea said emphatically, "is that you can describe the route to us as precisely as possible. Surely, there are clues by which we can recognize your settlement."

"Besides, it's not about the village," Eowyn interjected. "We're supposed to find whoever is causing the fires, and it's unlikely to be one of your people." They might have to head into the mountains.

The prospect made Eowyn's heart beat faster. It had been a long time since she had roamed through untouched forests. The small clusters of trees that were called forests in Timsdal only elicited a weary smile from her.

"Whatever you say." Jandor glanced nervously over at Eowyn. He obviously didn't know what to make of her—a fifteen-year-old girl with strange eyes who wasn't afraid to give her opinion to a grown man. And he didn't even know the half of it.

"Then that's what we'll do," Thalea decided, taking a map out of her saddlebag. Using Jandor's clues, she had no trouble finding the right village. "I know the settlement," she finally explained. "I've been to this area a few times."

"Go on then!" Eowyn pulled on the reins to direct her horse forward.

Thalea said goodbye and nodded encouragingly to Eowyn. Together, they let their horses trot off. "Would it really be so hard to let me do the talking?" Thalea asked reprovingly as soon as they were out of earshot. "You may have many talents, little one, but tact and diplomacy are not among them."

Eowyn hated it when the huntress called her a little girl. "Why talk around when communication is much faster with plain words?"

Thalea rolled her eyes. "Sometimes I wish I'd gone to a different pub that night; then I wouldn't have such a rebellious brat on my hands now."

"Oh yeah?" Eowyn exclaimed challengingly, firmly pushing back the images of their first acquaintance. "At least this brat is making you outgrow yourself. Whoever gets to the top of that hill first!"

"I'm serious!" Thalea grabbed Eowyn's reins before Eowyn could spur on her horse. "We both know you are better than others in certain areas. But when your superiority leads to contempt, it becomes a weakness. Your gifts were given to you, just like everyone else's were given to them. You have done nothing to earn your talents, so

they do not give you the right to elevate yourself above the others. In addition, circumstances can very quickly turn to your disadvantage. Few people can cope with feeling inferior."

"I know that very well," Eowyn pressed out. She had been ostracized and teased all her life because her difference could not be hidden. "So you think I should suffer the disadvantages of my 'gifts', as you call them, in silence without being allowed to use them to my benefit in return?"

"No." Thalea shook her head slowly. "I mean, you shouldn't let the experiences of your past poison your future."

"Whatever," Eowyn grumbled. She had absolutely no desire to think about this new lesson right now. "We should hurry. If I'm not mistaken, human lives are at stake!"

They reached the village towards evening. Fortunately, it was still intact. The almost ten-foot-wide and six-foot-deep ditch around it had obviously served its purpose. The excavated material had also been piled up outside the ditch as an additional protective wall. Eowyn let her gaze wander over the surrounding area to where fields full of vegetables and grain were supposed to rise.

"It's all burnt," she murmured in dismay. Jandor had not exaggerated; the situation of these people was critical.

Thalea cleared her throat. "This can't possibly be the work of a few disgruntled Drakken. The pests do set fire to fields, but this looks like a targeted attack." She pointed to the charred trail that ran all the way round along the protective trench. "Besides, the ditch wouldn't have stopped the Drakken. The females can fly."

Earth trickled down beneath her feet as Eowyn carefully climbed the hill of piled soil and made her way down the other side.

"Make sure you don't slip into the pit!" Thalea called after her worriedly.

"No problem," Eowyn replied. "The earth is soft enough to pro-

vide support." Her feet sank deep with each step. Carefully, she approached the ditch, the bottom of which was covered in muddy water. "The people here have been lucky. The village must sit on an aquifer. Who knows if the trench would have done any good otherwise."

"Do you see any tracks?" Thalea joined her and squatted down.

"No." Eowyn shook her head. In some places, the piled-up earth looked baked. Apart from that, not even her sensitive senses could make out anything. No footprints, not even the tiniest hint.

"Maybe the residents saw something." Thalea knocked the dust off her hands and straightened up.

"Any idea how to get across?" Eowyn asked. There was no bridge to the other side, and the village gate was locked.

"They've certainly seen us already." Balancing on the moat's edge, the huntress stood directly opposite the village gate and raised her hand. "My name is Thalea Ariasen; Jandor asked us for help in the temple of Bantor."

Eowyn looked skeptically at the gate, which didn't budge a bit.

"We've come to help!" Thalea raised her voice again.

"Are you sure someone is listening?" In her mind, Eowyn was already estimating how much of a running start she would need to jump over the ditch. Unfortunately, the village wall loomed barely three feet behind the moat, not leaving enough room to slow her momentum, but perhaps she could use it to scale the wall...

"Where is Jandor?" A suspicious voice broke through her brooding.

Thalea gave Eowyn a triumphant smile. "He'll join us tomorrow morning at the latest; we didn't want to waste any time."

"Stay where we can see you!"

Eowyn put her hands on her hips as the village gate opened a crack. Thalea and she really didn't look like two fire devils.

A few men scurried out and pushed a long plank across the ditch.

"I'll go first," Thalea decided and stepped onto the improvised bridge. The plank wobbled under her weight, and Eowyn crouched down to stabilize it.

Her performance would only be half as impressive if Thalea ended up in the water.

As soon as the huntress reached the other end, Eowyn followed her light-footedly across the plank. Despite all the admonitions, she couldn't help but show off a little now and then.

Thalea, who was already engrossed in a conversation with the men, barely noticed. She nodded curtly to Eowyn and followed the men inside.

Unfortunately, the villagers could not offer them much help besides refreshments. There were several sightings of a kind of fireball that approached the village and then left again after failing to find a way in.

"When did the last attack happen?"

"Yesterday," came the answer from several throats. "Although it wasn't really an attack," one of the men admitted. "The thing did a tour around the village and disappeared back into the mountains. As long as we stay in the village, we seem to be safe, but we can't hole up forever."

"Have any of you heard of similar incidents in the past?" Thalea asked.

"No." The people around her shook discouragedly their heads.

"Is it a demon?" a woman asked anxiously.

"There's no such thing," Thalea waved it away. "Have you seen anything that makes it move? Is there a chain pulling it or some kind of drive?"

"You think someone designed this thing?" Eowyn asked quietly.

Thalea shrugged her shoulders. "The inventors in Quessam come up with the craziest things. I can't think of any other explanation."

"What about magic?" a man interjected uneasily.

"No." Thalea smiled placatingly. "I'm sure the Mage's Guild has better things to do than threaten a remote village."

Eowyn nodded. She didn't believe that a mage was at work here either. Simply because the guild, despite its lofty name, could not accomplish such a thing. After all, they hadn't been able to do anything against the fog line that had engulfed Eowyn's home a year ago. The mages were nothing but a bunch of pompous busybodies.

"Let's go," she nudged Thalea with her elbow. Whatever the solution to this riddle was, they wouldn't find it in the village.

For a moment, the huntress looked as if she wanted to object; after all, dawn was not far off, but then she nodded.

"You really want to hunt that thing down?" The people's voices spoke of awe and bewilderment.

Thalea straightened her shoulders. "That's why we're here."

"That would be the death of you!" one man raged. "My village was burned to the ground. I saw what happened to people who got in the way of the beast. There were only bones left after the thing rolled over them."

"Beast?" Eowyn asked. "You think that thing is alive?"

The man shuddered. "It seems like that."

Eowyn gave her instructor an uneasy look. She had never heard of a fire creature before. Thalea put on her huntress' face, to not show anything of what she thought.

"Thank you." Thalea nodded to the group. "Can you provide us with some water bags?"

"Sure." The man who had greeted them first gave a wave to a couple of lads. "I'm just afraid it won't be enough to protect you from the fire."

Eowyn felt the same way. On the other hand, a lot would have to go wrong before they got into a direct confrontation with the thing. Thalea never took unnecessary risks.

Loaded up with water and torches, they set off again. It wasn't difficult to follow the scorched trail, which headed more or less straight for the mountains. Thalea and Eowyn, therefore, made good time.

"What do you think awaits us?" Eowyn broke the tense silence after a while.

"I haven't got the faintest idea. I really hoped we were just dealing with a Drakken gone wild. But we can safely bury that idea." Thalea pointed to the three-foot-wide track that stretched out in front of them. In the immediate vicinity, Eowyn could see other scorch marks that seemed a little older than the one they were currently following. It looked as if the fireball had visited the place several times already.

At dusk, they lit their torches to better see the path, and set up camp only when the terrain became too steep and rocky for them to continue their journey safely. By then, they had already reached the burnt part of the forest. Ash and dust hung in the air, and tree trunks rose up as burnt stakes.

Eowyn wrapped her arms around her knees and moved closer to the campfire. There was an eerie silence in the air that she didn't like at all. "What's the plan?" she asked, trying to dispel her trepidation.

"We can't make any plans until we know what we're up against. So, for better or worse, we must gather more information."

"From everything I've seen so far, the thing doesn't seem particularly eager to provide information."

"Ha ha," Thalea grumbled. "Still, nothing happens without a reason. Something must have caused these attacks. If we can find the cause, we will find a way to stop them."

"Could it be an attack by Horigan?" Eowyn asked. She knew next to nothing about Timsdal's barbaric neighboring country, except that the people there were very warlike and poor and that the border ran somewhere through these mountains.

"That would be a possibility," Thalea said thoughtfully. "But speculation won't get us anywhere. We'd better rest so we're awake

and strong in the morning." She took Eowyn's blanket from the saddlebag and threw it at the girl. "I'll take the first watch."

They had to leave their horses behind around noon the next day. Undeterred, they followed by foot the scorched trail, which stretched deeper and deeper into the mountains.

This made no sense to Eowyn. Why would the fireball attack settlements and people and then simply leave again? What was the purpose behind this?

At least the lowland villages seemed to be out of danger unless the fireball decided to return on another way. The thought gave Eowyn pause. Could they be following the wrong trail? Could the village they were trying to protect be already destroyed.

"What's going on?" Thalea asked in alarm. "Did you hear something?" Over the past few months, she had learned to trust Eowyn's senses and instincts.

"No, I just had a thought." Eowyn described her fear in brief words.

"Hmm." Thalea looked at the scorched tufts of grass sprouting from the ground here and there. "If only we knew how fast that thing is. Whether we're gradually catching up with it or if it's running further away from us."

"I'd guess the second one," Eowyn admitted sullenly. "The smell of smoke is getting weaker and weaker. Maybe we'd better turn back."

Thalea looked around carefully. "There seems to be a clear view of the valley back there." She pointed to a small rocky plateau that loomed about half an hour's walk away from them. "We should get an overview and then decide."

"Agreed." Eowyn shouldered the heavy water bag and set off.

Thalea was right. The rock formation offered an excellent view. Shocked, Eowyn looked at the tangle of fine black lines that marked

the scorched paths of the fireball. It had clearly done more than just destroy a village and countless fields.

"Do you notice anything?" Thalea shielded her eyes with her hand so that she could see better.

"Looks like someone's mad as hell at the people here," Eowyn returned gloomily. The scale of the destruction would put the whole region in serious trouble.

"No," Thalea contradicted slowly. "It's a search pattern."

"What do you mean?" Eowyn tried to find some structure in the maze of paths.

"It looks like this thing is searching for something."

"And for what?"

"I have no idea. But it must have realized that it's not there. Do you see? Back there is Jandor's village and the trail we're following. The thing hasn't come back."

"We'll find it anyway, won't we?" Eowyn was not comfortable leaving the defenseless humans at the mercy of an unknown danger that could return at any time.

Thalea grinned. "Don't worry, you'll get your chance."

"That's not the point ..." At least not exclusively.

"I know. This is bigger than we thought. Something strange is happening here, something we definitely need to investigate."

"Then we shouldn't waste any time!"

Tirelessly, they pushed further into the mountains until the light conditions forced them to take a break.

A strange noise woke Eowyn from her sleep in the middle of the night. "What is that?" she turned to Thalea, who had half sat up listening.

"I don't know," the huntress admitted uneasily.

"Then we should go and see!" Eowyn reached for her sword while Thalea lit a torch. Eowyn didn't wait for the huntress to finish.

The moonlight was enough for her to see her way. She ran ahead as fast as she could and heard Thalea following her, cursing.

The noise faded, but she had memorized the direction from which it had come. The traces of soot she spotted now and again also helped her find her way. Strangely enough, they became fainter and fainter, as if the mysterious fire was gradually cooling down.

"I think there's a cave!" Eowyn shouted, pointing to a man-sized crevice.

Thalea rubbed her fingertips over the dark stone. "Soot," she murmured with little enthusiasm. "We won't be spared anything." She pushed her way carefully through the opening. The light from the torch illuminated a winding corridor. The smell of fire was much stronger there.

"We're on the right track!" Eowyn dashed ahead.

"Wait!" Thalea called after her, hissing.

Eowyn did not listen. She was sure her senses would warn her of any danger in time.

"Let's get some more torches at least!"

The huntresses followed the cave passage for several hours, using the traces of soot as a guide to stay on the right path. Thalea's torch supply was running low, and her determination waned.

"I don't think this walk will take us anywhere," she mumbled, exhausted. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and she swayed with exhaustion.

Eowyn wasn't quite as exhausted, but the effort still sapped her strength. "Why don't you rest, and I'll look around a bit more?"

"Sure," the huntress grumbled. "As if I'm going to let you walk around here without supervision. I'll get a lot to hear back home if anything happens to you." She straightened her shoulders. "Besides, we're about to run out of light. We must hurry forward."

However, another problem awaited them around the next bend.

The corridor forked, and both paths seemed to be frequented by the fire creature.

Eowyn looked around indecisively. The corridor on the right led further into the depths; the air there was dry and hot. In contrast, the one on the left ... Eowyn faltered and stepped closer excitedly. It was perfectly round as if it were not of natural origin.

"How is that possible?" Thalea had noticed it, too, and stroked her hand in amazement over the polished surface of the tunnel. "We should take a closer look." Decisively, she set off.

After a while, Eowyn realized, "This passage leads back to the surface." The air became fresher, and the slope of the ground increased.

Suddenly, Thalea stopped, threw the torch to the ground, and kicked it out hastily. With a finger to her lips, she motioned to Eowyn to be quiet and pointed ahead.

Eowyn could make out a faint glimmer of light in the distance. They had reached the cave exit.

They crept on cautiously, and Eowyn fumbled for her dagger. It might be of little use against the fire creature. But it would help against its creator.

"By Aria's bow!" Thalea exclaimed in shock as they approached the exit. The entire mountainside had been burnt down. As far as the eye could see, no trees were left; everything had been burnt to ashes.

"The fire must have happened weeks ago." Eowyn let her gaze wander. A flicker caught her eye, and she took a closer look. "There's the culprit!"

"Where?" Thalea stepped up next to her.

Eowyn pointed in the direction of a huge burning ball. "There seems to be another cave. Why doesn't that thing just go in there?"

At that moment, the glow intensified into a blindingly bright light. The flames flared up, and the sphere tripled in size. A roar joined it, something between the sound of a crackling fire, howling

wind, and unbridled rage.

"Whatever this is, it's very angry," Thalea murmured.

"That means it's alive," Eowyn added, concerned. "It's not a machine, and it's not magic."

"A being made of pure fire?" Thalea shuddered. "I've never heard of such a thing before."

"I did," Eowyn suddenly remembered. Why hadn't she thought of this before? "It's an old legend of my people that father told me once. It says that in the beginning of all time, when the world was young and the seas so hot that only the wyrv serpents could survive in them, beings of fire rose from the depths of the world to walk the earth. But their flames consumed all life, animals, and plants, so the gods banished the Ikashar—as the fire creatures were called—back into the seething core of the earth to make room for the diversity of life. Whenever the earth shakes, it is a sign that the Ikashar are running against their prison walls in an attempt to break free and rule the earth once again."

"A nice fairy tale," Thalea commented dryly. "Believe me, earthquakes have nothing to do with ancient fire creatures who want to take over the world."

"I realize that!" Eowyn snapped back. "Still, there could be something to the story. Or do you have a better explanation to offer?"

"Unfortunately not," Thalea admitted. "But Ikashar or not, the question remains as to what we should do now. We can't let the creature roam free; it causes too much damage for that."

"Unless we want to divert a river, I'm afraid I don't know what we can do about it."

Thalea scratched her chin. "We could blow up the tunnel and trap the creature on this side of the mountain. If I'm not mistaken, we're currently in Horigan territory. Let them deal with it."

"The huntresses are independent of any state," Eowyn reminded her.

"That may be true, but some countries are nicer to us than others. I certainly don't feel obliged to Horigan."

The roar of the creature increased and then abruptly faded away. Instead, it began to move.

"Uh-oh," Eowyn gasped. This thing was damn fast, no wonder they hadn't been able to catch up with it. "It's coming back; we'd better get to safety!"

"That way!" Thalea began to scramble up the mountainside. There was a ledge about thirty feet above the cave that was big enough to hide them from the fire creature—in case it had any eyes.

Eowyn watched intently as the sphere hurtled towards the cave. It was indeed rolling across the floor, there were no recognizable limbs. It seemed to be made of molten fire held in shape by some unknown force.

Without noticing the two huntresses, the creature disappeared inside the mountain tunnel.

"We should go and see what exactly made it so angry down there," Eowyn suggested.

Thalea tiredly rubbed her eyes. "Let's get a good night's sleep first."

"You rest first," Eowyn offered. "I slept for a few hours last night."

Eowyn waited until Thalea's breaths became deep and regular and slipped out of the improvised camp. Her instructor was in no danger. There was not a single living creature for miles around.

As quietly as she could, Eowyn scrambled down and, a short time later, reached the place where the fire creature had been. She was right, there was another cave, but its entrance had been bricked up with large boulders and a massive stone door in the middle.

Eowyn stopped in surprise; this was unexpected.

The stones showed enormous traces of soot and were strangely

distorted in places, as if their surface had been melted by enormous heat and then solidified again.

The stones still radiated warmth.

Eowyn put her fingertips to the rock to try it out and hastily pulled them back again. The fire creature had done a great job; she could hardly touch the stone without burning herself. Eowyn took a step back and let her gaze wander attentively.

There were footprints in the dust, a whole path worn out by heavy boots.

People were in this cave, and the fire creature wanted to get in for some reason.

Was it so intent on destruction and devastation that it would go to such lengths just to satisfy its hunger for blood?

Eowyn couldn't imagine that. It had caused some suffering in Timsdal but could have done so much more. The people there were way more vulnerable to it than those entrenched in this mountain. So, what did the beast really want?

Eowyn took her gloves out of her pocket and regretted not wearing her black leather cloak. She had a feeling it would have been handy right now. However, she didn't want to risk returning to camp to change. Thalea would wake up and surely forbid Eowyn to look around on her own.

Eowyn brought her head as close to the rock door as she could without scorching herself and listened intently. A soft clanging sound reached her ears as if a blacksmith was hammering on an anvil. She also picked up a distant roar that she couldn't place. However, it was so far away that she decided to ignore it.

She carefully searched the door for a lock or a hidden lever and discovered a kind of pulley connected to the door. The mechanism was probably intended to keep out fire creatures or animals. People presumably didn't stray into this area anyway.

Eowyn carefully set the device in motion and hoped that the thick

chain would hold. Although it had not been directly exposed to the fire creature's attack, its limbs were still deformed.

The door creaked open, and Eowyn gritted her teeth with the tension to prevent the heavy chain from slipping through her grasp. The scraping of the door seemed unbearably loud, and she listened intently outside, towards Thalea and the fire creature that was still lurking around somewhere, and inside the cave.

The hammering continued unperturbed, and nothing else stirred.

Eowyn breathed a sigh of relief. The gap was now wide enough for her to squeeze through. She hooked the chain onto a ledge and scurried through the opening. Once inside, she gave her eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light and silently set herself in motion. The hammering grew louder. It was accompanied by a sound that made Eowyn pause in surprise. It was the same mixture of roaring flames and the furious howling of the wind that the fire creature was emitting.

"Yes, you go ahead and rave," a spiteful, croaking voice rang out in tact with the clanging blows. "You've caused us enough trouble; now, you're ours!"

The howling grew louder.

"Yes, that's it!" the man exclaimed with satisfaction. "You're not quite at the end yet. Show me what you've got, you bastard! I still need it a little hotter."

Eowyn crept closer, uncomprehending, and peeked around the next corner. The main tunnel continued, but a spacious chamber opened up to her right. A bald, muscular man with a leather apron and a bare torso was repeatedly and powerfully bringing a large hammer down on a workpiece. A few feet away from him, flames leaped up from the floor.

Frowning, Eowyn leaned further in. The man had his back to her and was so engrossed in his work and his nasty tirade that he didn't notice.

He picked up his workpiece and placed it in a large water barrel. Steam rose up with a hiss, and he examined carefully his work. Apparently satisfied, he left it there and picked up a long, roughly arm-thick stone rod. He approached the fire pit and plunged the stick forcefully into it a couple of times.

The howling that followed was mixed with equal parts of pain and anger. The flames rose higher.

"That's a good boy," the blacksmith sneered. "We both still have a lot to do." He took a gripper to pull the next blazing hot workpiece from the flames.

Eowyn thought she recognized a stone grid that covered the pit, on which several pieces of metal awaited further processing.

Gradually, everything fell into place.

The two fire creatures surely belonged together. Somehow, the men that lived in this cave had managed to capture one of them and were holding it captive to use its fire for their own purposes. The second creature was trying to save its companion. Perhaps it had searched for its friend on Timsdal's side at first. Or it believed that all humans were in cahoots and had, therefore, attacked the villages, to force the liberation of his friend. The attacks could also have been a cry for help, an attempt to draw attention to what was happening in the mountains.

Eowyn had no idea how intelligent these creatures were. They certainly seemed to have more than just animal instincts, but they were so different that they definitely understood humans no better than humans understood them.

Either way, Eowyn had a very personal aversion to cages of any kind. Her mind was made up as soon as she realized what was happening here.

The blacksmith set to work again. He felt so confident and secure that he didn't even look around once.

Eowyn relaxed her muscles. She knew exactly where to hit him to

render him harmless. She wanted to avoid bloodshed as far as possible. She waited until he put the hammer down and turned to the water barrel. Then she sprinted, pushed herself powerfully off the ground and drove her elbow with all her might into the hollow of his neck.

The man let out a surprised grunt of pain as he fell to his knees. The barrel tipped over, and the content spilled out onto the floor.

Damn! Could the water harm the fire creature? Could it even destroy it?

This brief moment of fright proved to be a grave mistake. With a furious shout, the blacksmith wheeled around, the sword he had been working on clutched tightly in his paw.

Eowyn jumped back. Not fast enough. The blade caught her across the stomach. Fortunately, it was not sharpened yet, but the impact vibrated painfully through her body, squeezing the air out of her lungs.

"What the he... a girl?" Obviously irritated by her gender and youth, the blacksmith glared at her.

Eowyn didn't give him a chance to gather his wits. Ignoring the pain in her midsection, she leaped and slammed her foot hard against his lower jaw, spinning around and sending him to the ground with another kick. Metal clanged as he crashed against the table with the weapons and and didn't stir.

Eowyn screwed up her face. That had been damn loud. She'd better hurry. She rushed to the fire pit and peered inside. Some of the water had indeed reached the floor. The fire creature had retreated into a corner and was doing its best to keep its piece of ground dry by vaporizing the spreading water.

Surprisingly, it seemed to be considerably smaller than its friend.

Eowyn had no time to ponder possible connections. She grabbed the stone staff and started to lift the heavy grate. Her clothes began to smolder where she touched the hot stone, and Eowyn had to be damn

careful not to burn herself. Panting and sweating, she managed to push the grate aside with incredible difficulty.

The creature roared, and Eowyn realized belatedly that it was probably not a good idea to face it unprotected. There was no guarantee that it would appreciate her part in its liberation.

She hastily ran to the vault's exit to get to safety. A desperate, angry howl sounded after her, and she turned around in surprise. The creature was still in the pit.

It couldn't get out, Eowyn realized. It had no limbs to pull itself out, and the walls were too steep for it to roll up.

The blacksmith groaned softly. Time was running out for her. Eowyn listened tensely into the distance. If more men arrived, she would be lost.

The blacksmith struggled to get up. Eowyn ran to him, grabbed the back of his head, and thundered his forehead onto the stone floor. All tension drained from his body as he sank to the ground with a groan like a fallen tree.

Startled, Eowyn felt for his pulse.

Springy footsteps in the corridor caused her to wheel around in alarm. She drew her dagger, ready to hurl it at any intruder.

Thalea skidded around the bend.

At the last moment, Eowyn managed to hold back her throw.

"What's going on here?" Thalea asked sternly as she quickly grasped the situation. "You call this standing guard?"

"We have to free the fire creature and get out of here," Eowyn shouted. "You'll have plenty of time to scold me later."

"To scold you?" Thalea gave Eowyn a grim look as she passed and knelt down next to the blacksmith. "I could have you thrown out of the Order for that!"

"Fine," Eowyn grumbled. "But we have to get out of here first!"

"You're lucky he's still alive." Thalea straightened up.

"We need to move him to the side," Eowyn said. "He shouldn't be

in the way when the thing comes out of the pit."

"You actually want to free it?"

"Yes," Eowyn replied firmly. She would not negotiate that.

"I think it would be better to leave it in there. These creatures—whatever they are—are dangerous."

"Only because they were provoked. I think these men somehow startled the two creatures with their tunnels. They captured, imprisoned, and tortured this one," Eowyn added tremulously. "I can't abandon it. I just can't." She swallowed. "You know why," she added quietly.

Thalea eyed her silently for a moment before nodding reluctantly. "Yes."

"We have to get it out of the pit somehow. It can't do this on its own."

"I don't see a ladder anywhere," Thalea remarked.

"The grate!" Eowyn remembered. It was still half over the pit. The creature could use it as a ramp if she broke some part of it off.

"What are you going to do?" Thalea asked, confused, as Eowyn pushed apart the junk on the floor with her feet in search of the hammer. Instead of answering, she grabbed the heavy blacksmith's tool and brought it down on the grate with all her might. The stone cracked. Eowyn delivered another blow so powerful that her arm up to her shoulder went numb for a few seconds. She shook it out, panting; at least it had done some good. A thick crack ran through the grate, and Thalea broke it in two with a well-aimed kick.

Over her racing heart and panting breath, Eowyn heard bawling voices. It sounded as if more men were approaching.

"We're getting company," she whispered uneasily to Thalea.

The huntress' head jerked around. "How many?"

"It's hard to say. But I don't think they've noticed anything yet; they're just going their own way."

"We should take no chances, hurry!"

"You go first," Eowyn said, following a sudden impulse. Things could get very uncomfortable once the fire creature was freed. She didn't want Thalea to come to any harm because of Eowyn's decision.

"You don't think I'm going to leave you behind, do you?" Thalea grabbed the grate and began to push it into the pit. "The principal would never forgive me for that."

Eowyn put her hands on the bars as well. "You were going to have me thrown out of the Order anyway."

Thalea rolled her eyes. "We do have to leave this cave alive for me to do this, don't we?"

"I'm serious," Eowyn replied. "I have no idea how that thing in the pit will react."

"You do realize that we shouldn't let the the two of them run around freely?" Thalea asked.

"And what do you suggest instead?"

The huntress frowned thoughtfully.

Eowyn listened anxiously to the footsteps of the approaching men. They were only five minutes away at the most.

"I have an idea," Thalea finally announced. "You're sure you can manage here on your own?"

"Yes."

"Good. Give me three minutes." Thalea ran off.

Eowyn nervously counted down the seconds. The men were getting closer. If her plan went wrong, if the creature didn't crawl out of the pit, or the men appeared too soon, she would be in a real trouble.

She decided that she had waited long enough. With difficulty, the girl pushed the grate into the pit and hastily retreated to the opposite wall. Holding her breath, she followed every flicker of the flames.

Hesitantly, gropingly, the creature began to move.

Eowyn was on the brink of grabbing it herself and dragging it out. She could already hear the men talking, wondering why it was so

quiet in the smithy. They would come and check in a moment.

As if the creature had sensed her impatience and nervousness, it accelerated its ascent. Or perhaps it had realized that it was free at last.

Flickering, it rolled out of the pit, and Eowyn marveled again at how small it was as if it was shrinking all the time.

"Come on, get going!" she spurred it on with a hiss. "Run away!"

It paused at the tunnel's threshold, swaying back and forth indecisively, as if it could sense the men coming around the bend. Its girth swelled, and a low rumble spread from it like waves.

Eowyn couldn't stand it. "No!" She ran towards the creature, waving her arms. It was too weak, too exhausted, and the men had already defeated it once. She had no idea how they did it and had no desire to find out.

A breath of wind from the cave entrance caused the flames to flare up. The creature leaned towards the fresh air and rolled off faster than Eowyn could have imagined.

A man came strolling around the corner and stopped when he saw the girl.

"Hey? What's going on?" His surprised exclamation was drowned by a cry of pain as Eowyn's throwing star dug into his sword arm.

Eowyn took off running, fully aware that a whole horde of men were at her heels. She skidded around the bend and saw the bright crack of the doorway shimmering in front of her.

Eowyn barely slowed down, instead let herself slide across the ground, legs first, under the heavy stone slab. She felt her skin burning beneath her thin trousers, a sharp stone leaving a painful tear on her thigh. Never again would she go on a mission without her full leather gear!

She pulled herself to her feet, ignored the pain, and released the chain. The door crashed to the floor, and Eowyn rammed her second dagger into the pulley to block it. It wouldn't stop the men forever,

but at least it bought her some time.

Limping, she ran up the slope; looking out for the fire creature which had disappeared.

"Hurry up!" Thalea stood at the cave entrance, her face wagging anxiously. "Is everything all right?"

"I'll survive!" Eowyn's trousers were damp with blood against her skin, but she would worry about that later.

"Get in there!" Thalea pushed her into the cave and lit a match, holding it to a thin string. "Run!"

"What are you up to?" Eowyn asked, panting as they hurried along the tunnel.

"Block the entrance. Take cover!" Thalea shouted almost in the same breath, pulling Eowyn down with her.

An explosion shook the cave, dust and small stones trickled down. "That should do it," Thalea said, slowly straightening up. "I hope the idiots from Horigan leave the fire creatures alone in the future."

"I hope so, too," Eowyn grumbled. "Do you have enough black powder for the other side as well?" she added, understanding Thalea's plan.

"Yes." The huntress nodded. "After all, Timsdal has on its own more than enough idiots that need our protection."

"Speaking of protecting ..." Eowyn pointed ahead, where two large glowing orbs slowly rolled towards them.

"What are the chances that they want to thank us?" Thalea asked nervously.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," Eowyn muttered, loosening her muscles. She was utterly exhausted but wouldn't give up without a fight.

The two creatures paused briefly and backed away again.

"At least they're not attacking directly," Thalea sighed and cautiously set off. Forward was the only direction open to them anyway.

The flames of the creatures provided enough light so that the two huntresses could easily find their way.

Eowyn noticed that the two fireballs kept merging, gradually becoming similar in size as if the larger one was giving off some of its heat to the other. Perhaps that was why they lived deep underground; they needed the embers to live just as much as humans needed food or air.

"Looks like we are being escorted by two living torches," Thalea commented with amusement as the creatures persistently and tirelessly showed them the way.

Eowyn grinned. "I'd say we've not only successfully completed another mission, but also discovered one of Alrion's oldest secrets. Too bad we can never reveal it."

Thalea nodded. "That would probably be better for both sides."

"And what do we tell Jandor and the others?"

"What *can* we say? That it was a giant Drakken gone wild." Thalea shrugged her shoulders. "No one would believe the truth anyway."

Thank you for reading.

I hope you enjoyed this story from Eowyn's youth with the huntresses. I would love to hear how you liked it and if you'd want to read some more of her bonus adventures.

Love, Elvira