

IN A WORLD RULED BY MEN, ONE WOMAN WILL RISE

WINTER'S FURY



A.E. RAYNE

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THE FURYCK SAGA: BOOK ONE

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Jael Furyck's feet were slowly freezing, in wet socks, that clung unpleasantly to numb toes, sitting in damp boots, which, although new, were already leaking. She tried to focus on the uncomfortable sensation of her cold feet, pressing them harder into the wet wool, into the soft, damp leather of her boots, into the reeds that lined the hard mud floor. She tried to imagine them twisting and strong, like the roots of the oldest tree in Brekka, buried deep in the earth, solid and unwavering. If she could do that, if she could focus on her feet, then maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't say anything. Maybe there was a chance she could control the urgent, angry fire coursing up through her body and into her mouth. No! Not her mouth, her feet, her feet! She must stay there, thinking of her feet, so far away from her mouth. She had to ignore the screaming violence throbbing at the base of her throat, demanding to be released. She couldn't let him, them, all of them, watch as she lost control.

Lothar Furyck sat impatiently on the edge of his finely carved throne and waited, glowering furiously at his niece's continued silence. His announcement, moments earlier, had guaranteed a hasty reaction from her but where was it? Jael had a fierce temper, and this was to be the ultimate humiliation of her, and, by extension, her whole family, but so far she would not play his carefully constructed game. Her face remained impassive, and although he was certain she was raging internally, she said nothing, which caused an uncomfortable silence to creep around them both. But Lothar had to say something, though, or the moment would be lost to him. The people in the hushed hall, sitting on their cold benches, looking up at him and her – soon those people would start to wonder what power he truly had over any of them.

Lothar bit down on his annoyance, cleared his throat sharply, and spoke as if there had been no awkward silence at all. 'And so, the wedding feast will take place on Oss, in 15 days. Enough time for you to find a dress, I hope.' He waved

one hand dismissively in the direction of Jael's well-worn trousers and cloak. 'And enough time for the rest of us to be back in Andala before the Freeze.'

Lothar glared down at her, his bulging eyes demanding a reply, and this time Jael knew she had to trust herself with a word or two; what choice did she have? Her whole body trembled with rage, but she had to try. 'Will I be able to take my horse?' she asked dully, her lips barely moving.

Lothar thought for a moment, not really caring, just relieved that she was finally speaking. 'Yes, you may. But you will give up your sword. You won't need it where you are going.'

There was an audible murmur around the hall at that, which surprised Lothar and sent another bolt of fury shuddering down Jael's rigid spine; her sword! 'That was my father's sword,' she muttered through gritted teeth, her devastation revealing itself at last.

'That was *my* father's sword,' Lothar growled, leaning forward to impress upon her his position atop the high seat, the ancient throne of the Kingdom of Brekka. 'And, as king, as the Furyck heir, it is *I* who own that sword, not you. It is centuries old, handed down from king to king. How or why you received it when my brother died, I do not know.'

She wanted to launch herself at him then. To rip out his vile throat, lying hidden behind the rolls of gelatinous fat gathering around his sagging chin; to watch his life-blood course down his bloated belly until he was white with death. Take her sword?! She was seething now and stood on the edge, ready to abandon all reason, but then, remembering her feet, she dug her toes deep into her boots, clamping her jaw shut and fixing her face with an unnatural smile. He wasn't going to humiliate her any further; she wouldn't give him that. 'As you wish, my lord.'

Lothar frowned, disappointed. He had watched her desperately trying to gain hold of her temper, and it looked as though she had succeeded. Oh well, he conceded, he had hit his mark at least; she was badly, if not fatally, wounded. He could feel the growl of his dead brother at his back then. Here he was, sitting on his brother's throne, selling his beloved daughter off to his enemy; this was a good day. Just the thought of Ranuf's indignant face imbued him with confidence, and the smile that curled from his wet mouth was wide and brimming with satisfaction.

'Good,' Lothar said coolly, glancing at his son, Osbert, who was struggling to contain his annoyance at Jael's calm reaction; he too had hoped for more than this damp fire. 'We will speak more of this tomorrow, but for now, we must

begin the meal before it's cold and tastes like shit. Alp!' he barked at his servant, who was hovering anxiously behind him. 'Have the food brought to the tables!' Alp bowed his head silently and left. 'And drink!' Lothar yelled after him. 'More drink!'

Jael was rooted to the spot as the hall suddenly burst into life around her. The servants started moving again, bringing dishes to tables, filling cups with ale and mead, conversations sparking quickly around them. It felt as though every pair of eyes had turned on her and Jael was desperate to escape. Glancing quickly around the hall, she spotted her mother, Gisila, lurking uncomfortably near one of the large fire pits, the shock of Lothar's words furrowing her brow. Jael made straight for her.

Gisila, who had once been queen in this, Brekka's King's Hall, had now seen her family brought to a new low. She glanced wistfully towards the high table, where Lothar and his vulgar son sat. She could still see her husband, Ranuf, up there and she on his right, dressed in fine garments, so far away from the plain homespun she had been reduced to since her demotion to nothingness. Gisila felt hot tears stinging the corners of her eyes, then the sudden pull from behind, as Jael grabbed her roughly by the arm and hurried her outside.

Dark rain clouds rushed across the face of the moon; a storm was brewing, but Jael barely noticed as she stalked down Andala's main street, her head bent and hood up to avoid the latecomers heading for the hall. Gisila walked quickly beside her, struggling to keep up with both her daughter and the panic that was growing in her chest.

When they reached Gisila's small cottage in the centre of town, Jael pushed her mother inside and slammed the door behind them. Gisila's servant jumped in surprise, then, with one look at Jael's furious face, she made herself scarce, merging into the shadows at the back of the sparsely furnished room.

Jael dropped her hood and turned towards her mother, narrowing her hard, green eyes accusingly.

'I, I didn't know,' Gisila spluttered quickly, sensing the angry fire that was coming. 'I didn't know.'

Jael was too wild to speak. Her eyes roamed over the poverty of the cottage, at the erosion of their old life. When her father had ruled, their freedom had been assured; now everything had changed. Lothar could and did play with them as he wished. He was a capricious man and delighted in subtle torment.

'You cannot marry that man,' Gisila muttered crossly behind her. 'He is nothing. His family is nothing! His father was a slave, Ranuf's enemy and a slave!'

It's an insult. The worst that Lothar has done to us!

That was like her mother, Jael thought, always seeing a slight from her own perspective.

'Where's Axl?' Gisila turned and directed this towards her servant, Gunni, who was silently preparing the beds for the evening.

'I don't know, my lady,' came the nervous reply.

Gisila glanced at her daughter. 'He will have something to say about this, I'm sure.'

Jael said nothing; her head was a mess of hot fury and building sorrow. She couldn't keep up with her thoughts as they tumbled over one another, desperately seeking a way out of the hole that Lothar had so happily trapped her in. Running her hands distractedly through her long, dark hair, Jael frowned. She was far too old for marriage, or so she had believed until a few moments ago. Why would Eirik Skalleson want her for his son? How could this be happening? Now? After all this time?

Pulling the hood up on her black, woollen cloak, she ducked through the door. 'I will go to Edela. She'll know what to do.' She turned and left before her mother had even looked up.

The wind whipped the door shut with such a bang that Gisila shuddered. Folding her arms across her chest to ward off the chill that had entered the cottage, she returned her gaze to the fire. There was nothing her mother could say that would stop this, she was certain. Lothar had found a way to remove Jael as a threat to his presence upon the throne. And with her gone, they would all be exposed, for she was their protector and Lothar knew it. Without her, they were weak and vulnerable, just as he wished. Gisila shivered and stared into the amber flames, tears running freely down her dispirited face.

Jael strode up the steps to her grandmother's cottage, which sat on a small rise, hidden inside a windswept grove of trees. A line of bones and stones strung about the porch chimed chaotically to announce her arrival.

Axl opened the small door, smiling in surprise to see his sister, although the look on her face quickly soured his. 'Jael? Are you alright?' he frowned. She didn't reply, staring past his tall, gangly frame into the dull glow of Edela's cottage. Axl knew well enough not to prod any further. 'I was just leaving,' he mumbled

hastily, squeezing past Jael and out into the night. Wrapping his cloak around his broad shoulders, he hurried down the steps, wondering if his mother knew what had happened.

Edela Saeveld sat in her fur-thick chair, just to the right of a low-burning fire. She studied her furious granddaughter with one raised eyebrow, patting the wooden stool in front of her. 'Well, come on then, you may as well tell me what your storm is all about today,' she smiled, her weathered face creasing with an easy humour, which, she noticed, did little to change the fierceness of the face that was considering her.

Jael didn't sit down.

Edela frowned, her smile disappearing. 'What has happened then, Jael? Tell me.'

'Well, you're the dreamer, Grandmother,' Jael spat crossly. 'Why don't you tell me? Why *didn't* you tell me?! You see everything that is going to happen. Why didn't you see this?' She was almost screaming and quickly clenched her jaw, trying to calm herself down. She loved Edela above all people and didn't want to release her fury now, not when it was Lothar who truly deserved the lash of her tongue.

Edela blinked her tiny blue eyes and her face suddenly cleared. 'Ahhh, so he is marrying you off then?'

'You knew?' Jael's eyes bulged. 'Of course you knew!'

Edela stood, grimacing at the familiar ache in her right hip as she hobbled towards her granddaughter. 'I will make you some tea, and you will sit down, and we will talk. If you wish to yell, go and yell at the moon. It is full enough out there to hear you, I'm sure, even over that wild wind.' And, with that, she bustled away to her kitchen, rummaging around the overfilled shelves, heaving with pots and cups, fresh and dried herbs, and all sorts of strange items that no one dared ask about. Edela was more than a dreamer, gifted with visions of the future; she was Andala's healer, called upon to cure all manner of ailments. After 27 years of looking after Jael, she had grown used to easing red, hot tempers.

Jael sighed heavily; there was no shifting her grandmother, experience told her that. She moved the stool closer to the fire and sat down, her entire body vibrating with the urge to run out into the night and stab her sword through one of Lothar's bulbous eyes; if he wanted it so much, she would happily give it to him! Marry her to an Islander? Banish her from Brekka? She shook her head. And what about Aleksander?

Edela came back with a cup and lifted her iron cauldron from its hook,

carefully pouring hot water over her medicinal sprinklings. 'Here, let this sit a while, then drink it. It will help with all that fire in there.' She waved at Jael's creased forehead as she replaced the cauldron and came to sit in her chair.

'Thank you,' Jael mumbled shortly. 'Now, tell me everything.'

Edela leaned back, feeling the comforting warmth of fur beneath her bones. 'Ha! Everything?' she smiled, rubbing her cold hands together. 'Well, I knew you would be married one day. Yes, I did see that.'

'And you didn't think to tell me?' Jael was incredulous, almost spilling the hot tea. 'Grandmother! Why wouldn't you have told me that? I could have done something! Aleksander and I could have made plans to leave before this happened. Anything but this!'

Edela inhaled the sweet scents of skullcap and chamomile as they steeped in Jael's cup. 'Yes, I could have told you, I know that,' she said calmly. 'Being a dreamer is not about revealing everything you see, though. It's not as simple as that,' she sighed, suddenly weary. 'And yes, of course, you could have run away. But I saw you in my dreams with this man. I saw, so strongly, that it was meant to be. There is something about you and him together that is important. I know this is not what you wanted, but it was so clear to me that this marriage must be. I had no choice but to stay quiet.'

'What?' Jael shook her head. 'No, no! You should have told me! You should have given me a choice. If you knew, you should have left it up to me to decide!'

Edela sat, untroubled. 'Perhaps. Perhaps you would have found your way to him somehow. But who am I to take that risk? To interfere with the plans the gods have made for you? And not your gods either, Jael, but mine, the Tuuran gods, for they are the ones who show me my dreams, and I am bound to do their work. They told me that you must be with this man, so who am I to argue?'

Jael scowled. She didn't want to hear this. Her grandmother had guided and advised her throughout her life. Her visions of the future had always come true - well, those that she had told her about, at least. There was no reason to doubt her now, as desperate as she was to. 'But Eadmund Skalleson? Eadmund the Drunkard?' she snorted. 'That's the husband your gods see me with? Are you sure you have the right man?'

'Well...' Edela admitted, with a twinkle in her eye, 'that part of my dream is a little confusing, but yes, he is the one I have always seen.'

'The one?' Jael felt ready to vomit. She absentmindedly sipped the hot tea, grimacing as it scalded the tip her tongue.

'You must remember that he hasn't always been known by that name, has

he? He was Eadmund the Bold when you fought him all those years ago.'

Jael thought on that, trying to recall the fleeting moment she had trapped him beneath her sword, so long ago now; she didn't remember him at all. She gritted her teeth, overcome by another burst of seething rage. 'No! I'm not going to do it! I'm not going to leave Andala! What about Axl? Who will look after him? Or you, or Mother? And what about Aleksander...' her angry eyes softened suddenly, and she sighed.

Edela reached out and took Jael's hand, her eyes full of sympathy.

Jael snatched it back. 'You never thought Aleksander and I were meant to be together. I knew that,' she said harshly.

'No,' Edela admitted. 'That is true, as much as I love you both. But you and Eadmund, I believe, *are* meant to be. I have dreamed about this since you were born, in many different ways, over and over.' She stared earnestly at her granddaughter. 'I know it for certain. He is the father of the child you will have.'

Edela's words were delivered so easily, that Jael almost didn't hear what she'd said, but the shock suddenly flooded her entire face. 'Child?' she breathed, as realisation dawned, belatedly. 'Of course, that's what they want me for. They don't want my sword. They want my belly full of heirs!' She looked defeated, deflated. 'And you see that as my future? A mother? A wife?'

'Yes, there is that, but you will have your sword, of that I have no doubt.'

'Well, not according to Lothar, who has claimed it as his own.'

Edela raised her eyebrows, then smiled. 'Things are not always as they seem, I promise you that. Our lives shift and change like the clouds. Nothing stands still, not while we are living,' she sighed. 'I see you with your sword. What sword that is, I do not know, but there is one in your hand, always.'

Jael felt confused, if not slightly heartened by that news. But a child? With Eadmund the Drunkard? How was she going to tell Aleksander?

Osbert was drunk; drunk and pissing against the side of the blacksmith's shed when he saw Jael heading in his direction. Blinking a few times to clear his cloudy vision, he shook off his dripping cock, resettling his fur cloak about himself. Standing just a little bit taller than normal - he was not a large man, much to his own irritation - he stepped out into the street, seizing hold of his cousin's arm as she flew by.

Jael jerked her head around in surprise, wrenching her arm out of his grip. Seeing it was Osbert, stinking of drink, she was eager to be gone, but again he reached out and grabbed her roughly, his sharp fingernails pinching into her now. She glared down at him, her face betraying no signs of the discomfort he was causing. 'What do you want, Osbert?' she fumed, as the wind screamed between them.

He almost stumbled then, his footing uncertain in the thick mud, but he righted himself quickly, narrowing his mean eyes. 'This could all have been so different, Jael,' he slurred through freezing lips. 'You need not have become a pawn in my father's game. You could have stayed here, in Andala, as you have always wanted to, as Queen of Brekka, as my wife.' He was leaning closer to her now, his spittle flying towards her in the wind.

Jael curled away from him in disgust, yanking her arm free and standing her ground firmly. 'You?' she mocked. 'You think *you* would make a better husband than the Drunkard? You think I'd rather have Osbert the Coward in my bed?' she seethed at him. 'No, Cousin, your father has made me a much better match than you would ever have been. I'm touched by the honour he has shown me.'

Her words slapped Osbert harshly across the face. Colour rose in his cheeks as he pursed his small, thin lips, trying to contain his fury. 'If you say so, Jael', he bit down, eyeing her threateningly. 'But, just remember... while you're on Oss, with your new husband, your fat belly, and your runt litter of slave princes, it is *I* who will be here watching over *your* family.' His satisfaction bloomed as he watched the twist in Jael's face. 'You never know what accident may befall them if you're not careful. I'd hate for you to lose another member of your dwindling family.' His threat expertly delivered, Osbert smiled and turned, stumbling away to the King's Hall, where he planned to warm his bones and drown the miserable bitch out of his head.

Numbed by his words, Jael watched as Osbert's hunched figure was sucked back into the night. If anyone was capable of true evil, it was her cousin. He had a strange obsession with her. He had wanted her as his wife, but thankfully Lothar had seen no benefit in such a marriage for his only son. She had rebuffed his constant advances and made a fool of him on many occasions; now that would come around to haunt her. He was right; she would have to leave everyone behind, with Lothar and Osbert to watch over them. She may as well be leaving a litter of kittens to the mercy of two starving dogs.

Aleksander was waiting when Jael arrived back at Gisila's cottage, his dark eyes troubled. He wasn't easy to anger and even now, when faced with losing the woman he loved, he still managed to retain a level of unnatural calm. They had been inseparable for 17 years, lovers for the past 12. He wouldn't accept that this was the end; he couldn't lose her.

'Jael.' Aleksander came towards her as she entered the cottage, but Jael's arms remained firmly at her sides, her face expressionless as she stood there silently in front of him, Axl, and her mother.

She could barely look at Aleksander's face; that very handsome, sad face. His thick eyebrows hooded deep, brown eyes, almost black, but so kind and understanding. How he had endured her furious ways, she would never know. Dropping her head, Jael ignored the desperate looks and went to warm her hands by the fire. She shivered as some feeling returned to her body, reluctantly turning around to face them.

'What did Edela have to say?' Gisila wondered anxiously. She had been talking about nothing else since Axl and Aleksander had arrived.

Jael ignored her.

'Where were you?' she asked, staring accusingly at Aleksander.

He was surprised by that.

'I was hunting. I told you before I left,' he answered defensively, coming to join Jael by the fire. 'I went to the hall to find you. Gant told me what had happened, so I came straight here.'

'You're back late.'

'It was treacherous out there. I could barely see, and I wasn't going to risk Ren.' He shook his head, confused. Worried. 'I'm sorry I wasn't there when Lothar made his... announcement.'

Jael swallowed hard at the unwelcome reminder, dismissing his words. She was angry at him, unfairly. What could he have done to make anything different? In fact, it would have made it worse to have him there; worse for him to be humiliated in front of everyone as his lover was taken from him and given to another, less worthy man.

'Jael.' Gisila was insistent now. 'What did your grandmother say?'

Jael sighed, walking a treacherous path in her mind as she considered what to reveal. 'She... she thought it was... the right thing to happen. She had seen that it would happen.' Jael couldn't say anymore. She looked away into the corner of the room, her heart and head clouded with confusion.

Aleksander's face fell. He could tell that she had made up her mind to go along

with Lothar, not to fight or run; Edela must have said something to convince her. Jael had always been impossibly stubborn. If she believed in a cause, she would never give in; he had witnessed that enough times. But now, as she hung her head and hid her face from them all, he knew. He turned and left the cottage, without another word.

Jael turned to see the door hanging open in his wake. Her shoulders drooped; this was not going to be easy, whichever path she decided to take.

‘The right thing?’ Axl looked doubtful as he strode over to face his sister, who was almost as tall as he was. ‘How is this the right thing for you, or us? They will make you a breeder, and you will be lost to Brekka forever. There will be no hope of me taking the throne from Lothar without you, which of course, he knows.’ He was disgusted and frustrated. He had imagined Jael would do anything to stay in Andala, that she would never give up the chance to reclaim their father’s throne. He didn’t understand her lack of reaction at all.

Jael turned on Axl. ‘How will my staying here change anything?’ Heated now by the warmth of the room and her own discomfort, she removed her cloak and threw it over a stool, leaving the fire to stand further away, uncertain how or where to be. ‘What have we been able to do to weaken Lothar’s position since he arrived?’ she whispered hoarsely. Lothar’s spies were everywhere, and she didn’t want the wind carrying her words out into the night. ‘He has the army behind him. He has turned all of Father’s men to his favour. There is nothing here for us. No future, no hope. It’s gone, Axl!’ She gestured around the tiny room, to the dried mud and reeds on the floor, the rough-hewn furniture, the absence of any real light. ‘Does this look like the home of Brekka’s royal family anymore?’

‘Well, we won’t know now, will we?’ Axl spat defiantly, his temper rising to match hers.

Jael stepped closer to her brother, glaring into his simmering, hazel eyes. ‘You think I can do something to change this?’ she demanded, frowning. ‘Kill Lothar? And then, what? Kill Osbert? And how would his men respond to that? Happily? I don’t imagine so. Or, we could run, but where would we go? Lothar has allies in nearly every kingdom, and those he isn’t allied with would still turn us in. No one wants him for their enemy. We would never be safe! Is that what you want? For our family to run until we are hunted down and slaughtered? Can you see Edela living like that?’

‘Stop!’ Gisila implored, coming between her two children, pushing them apart. ‘Come and sit down, both of you. It is no night to be on different sides. We must stay united if we are to stay alive.’ She sighed deeply. The sudden change

in their circumstances had left her feeling so much older than her 52 years. Her long, dark hair was now thick with silver strands, her much-admired figure, frail and thin. She had been Queen of Brekka for nearly 30 years, married to Ranuf, a man she had fought and argued with, loved and despised, in equal measure. The shame of being reduced to this lesser existence had damaged her pride, the loss of her husband had broken her spirit, but she had hope still, and that hope was living within Axl and Jael. She knew the way back to her rightful place in Brekka was through them; if only she could keep them believing that.

‘And what of you, Mother?’ Jael wondered sharply. ‘Why didn’t you know that any of this was coming?’

Gisila looked surprised. ‘Why would I?’

‘You and Lothar are very friendly, Mother,’ Axl said, joining his sister. ‘Especially since Rinda died.’

Gisila felt offended to be under attack. ‘Not like that, we’re not! Nor have we ever been, if you’re to know the truth of it. Lothar may wish for things, but I am no slave as things stand, and therefore he will not get anything from me that I do not wish to give. And I do not wish to give that!’

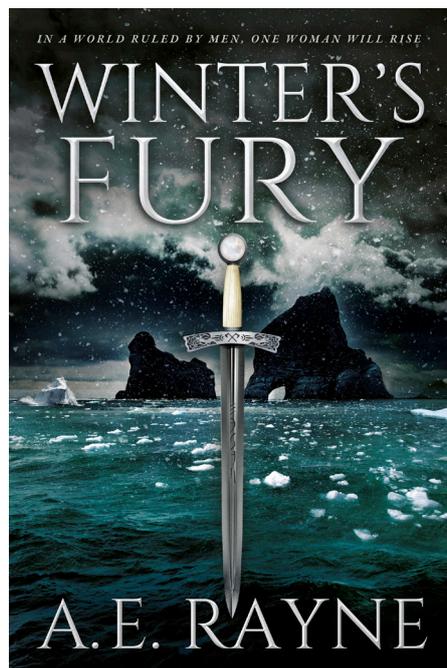
‘Still, you have always been unusually close to him, Mother.’ Jael was not prepared to accept her words so readily and was looking for a fight.

‘And if I am?’ Gisila whispered crossly. ‘I need to keep us all safe. It is not just the two of you who are thinking of our future.’ She shook her head, tears leaking into the heavy creases around her swollen eyes. ‘I’m trying to keep us all alive! Do you think I want to do that? Charm and placate the man who stole the throne from you, Axl? No, I do what I must to protect us all. It is not easy, but what choice do I have?’

Tears slid down Gisila’s drawn face and Axl, who hated to see his mother cry, put one arm around her shoulder.

Jael stared blankly at the door, wondering where Aleksander had gone, wanting to be with him but at the same time desperate to grab her horse and ride until she couldn’t be found. Inside her head, she was screaming for a way out, but Edela’s words echoed, imploring her to keep to the path before her, the path that only Edela and her gods could see.

And beside her, Gisila sobbed, and Axl simmered. And Aleksander had gone.



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