

VALE OF THE GODS

THE FURYCK SAGA: BOOK 6

A.E. RAYNE

PROLOGUE

'You won't come back.'

Jael didn't know the voice.

She frowned. In the darkness, it was hard to get her bearings.

But he was there. Somewhere.

His voice, a warning.

She shivered, turning away from the threat that she could feel. The unfamiliar sense of fear.

Her breathing was panicked now, her body starting to shake, her bottom lip quivering.

She didn't want him to see.

If he saw...

If he saw, he would defeat her.

Her chest rose and fell in time to her thundering heart.

'You won't come back from this. Not now.'

Jael glared up at him. He was taller than her.

Stronger.

'You don't know me,' she insisted, cross with the weak tremble in her voice.

Where was Aleksander?

Panic.

She didn't look around, her heart thudding louder. Faster.

'You think your father will save you, little girl?' he sneered. 'Little bitch. He can't save you. No one can save you now, Jael.'

Jael hated Ronal Killi. But that wasn't Ronal's voice.

Jael didn't know that voice.

Ronal was standing over her, his friends behind him – his bigger, older friends – and she was lying on her back, a broken sword in one hand, blood running into her mouth from where he'd punched her, cutting her lip.

They were in the forest.

He had followed her. Jael was mad she hadn't heard him.

She'd beaten him in front of his father, humiliated him in the training ring again and again, and he'd waited to take his revenge. He'd waited for weeks, eyeing her slyly. Watching her. Whispering to his friends about her.

Leering at her.

And now?

The forest was so quiet. Jael couldn't even hear Tig, though he was nearby, somewhere, she knew. She hoped Ronal wouldn't hurt him.

And then Ronal lunged, wrapping his thick hands around her throat. Jael jerked her head from side to side, slippery pine needles in her hair, the crunch of leaves in her ears. Ronal was squeezing her throat, laughing, leaning over her.

Or was he?

Shadows masked his pudgy face.

'I have you now, little bitch. You're mine, and *I* will end you.' He laughed.

Someone laughed.

'You thought you could stop me? You? Ha! You don't know me. Don't know what you're up against. And you won't. Not until it's too late, little *bitch*.'

'Jael!'

She could see Ronal's eyes now as he jerked his head in the direction of the trees, his friends urging him to hurry.

'I'll get you, Jael,' Ronal hissed, spitting in her face before spinning away. 'I'll get you.'

And then boots running, and suddenly Aleksander was there.

'Jael?' Gripping her hand, he pulled her up, into his arms. 'What did they do to you? Are you alright?'

Jael shook her head, confused. 'What are you doing here?' She was panting, struggling to catch her breath.

Not in the forest anymore.

Aleksander saw the sheen of sweat on her brow, her dark hair wet on her face, her eyes unable to focus on his. He gripped her hand, feeling it tremble. 'You were screaming. Having a nightmare.'

It was dark in the chamber, but Jael could see the silhouette of her brother in the doorway; Gant too. 'I'm fine.' She shook her head, wanting to be alone. 'I'm fine. Go back to bed.' Tugging her hand away, she waved it at them. 'Just a bad dream.'

Nodding their sleepy heads, Gant and Axl disappeared into the corridor.

Aleksander didn't move.

The lamp beside the bed flickered, highlighting the deep frown between her eyebrows.

'What happened?'

'I don't know. It was about Ronal. That time he attacked me in the forest.'

Aleksander frowned just as deeply, confused. 'Why him?'

Jael rubbed her eyes, trying to think. 'Something he said that day. I keep hearing it. The same words.'

'What?'

'You won't come back. He said that over and over. He wanted to kill me. I heard him telling his friends that he was going to. You won't come back to the fort, I'm going to stop you.' She shivered. 'He kept saying it.'

Aleksander squeezed Jael's hand, trying to get her to focus on him. 'You killed Ronal.'

'Ronal was a boy,' she snarled, eyes sweeping the furs where a disturbed Vella was trying to make herself comfortable. 'A nothing boy.' She stopped, staring into Aleksander's eyes again. 'A boy. And I had a sword. And I killed him with it. And nobody's life was in danger. Nobody's but mine.'

Aleksander's shoulders relaxed, and he smiled, understanding now. 'And you did it alone. But you're not going to be alone going to Hest, are you? You're a queen now. A queen with armies from Brekka and Iskavall and the Slave Islands. Alekkans too. You're not alone, Jael.'

'No, I'm not,' Jael mumbled, wriggling away from him, feeling a cold draft slip under the door. She pulled the fur away from Vella, over her arms. 'But it's not enough. Armies and men aren't enough, are they? Not for who we're going to face. *What* we're going to face.' She lowered her voice. 'I'm going to lead those men to slaughter. Take them away from families who'll never see them again. *I'm* going to do that.'

'What choice do you have? Staying here would see them slaughtered *with* their families. You have to go. *We* have to go. We all do.'

Jael could feel her wedding band, cold against her finger, listening to the echo of that voice in her head. Aleksander was right, she knew.

But perhaps, so was he?

'You won't come back,' he threatened again. 'I won't let you.'

PART ONE

Walls

CHAPTER ONE

Eadmund threw back the fur and sighed.

He couldn't sleep. His dreams were torturing him, leaving him tired and confused. He saw Evaine naked, writhing on the bed before him; Morac dying on the floor, his mouth wrenched open, wine in his beard. He heard the hungry wail of his son, the agony of Rollo as Jael killed him, and Draguta's voice loudest of all. It was an urgent echo in his mind and body, never letting him go.

Defeat Helsabor with Jaeger.

Bring back Briggit Halvardar and her Followers.

And then...

Eadmund frowned, rolling onto his side, hearing the angry creak in his narrow cot. And then what? Something was nagging at him. Like a word hanging near the tip of his tongue; a thought almost formed. He couldn't grasp it, couldn't see it, but it was there. Or in Helsabor.

But what?

The flap of the tent was dragged open as his determined steward bustled in. Berrick. Draguta had insisted upon him accompanying Eadmund on their journey to Helsabor. A king, she barked, poking a stern finger at him, could not act like a common man. A king must be treated like a king, especially in front of the men that king wished to follow him into battle.

So now Eadmund had Berrick, a slightly-built, snivelly sort of man who shuffled about in a constant state of prickly irritation. A man who insisted upon waking his king while it was still dark.

'You're awake.' It wasn't a question.

'It appears that I am.' Eadmund coughed, taking the silver goblet Berrick offered him as he struggled into a sitting position, a sharp pain searing through his right eye. For some reason, it reminded him of Jael, and he almost smiled.

Then, imagining Draguta's disapproving face, he frowned.

'King Jaeger is outside, talking with Gunter and Berger. Going over plans.'

Berrick liked to gossip. He reminded Eadmund of Morac: a slippery-tongued old grumbler, always manoeuvring himself into the position that would most benefit him.

'Well, then,' Eadmund said, clearing his throat again and handing back the empty goblet. 'I'd better join them.' His shoulders tightened into fist-sized knots as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, watching Berrick lay out his armour.

Dropping his head into his hands, Eadmund scratched his head, not wanting to think about Draguta or Jael, or Jaeger most of all. He tried to think of his son, knowing that Sigmund would be with Draguta soon and if he didn't do what she wanted...

Standing with a sigh, Eadmund reached for his trousers, unable to raise a smile.

'Aarrghh!' Jael dropped onto her backside with a plop, gritting her teeth, not enjoying the cocky look in Karsten's blue eye. 'Fuck!' She threw herself at his legs, gripping and twisting and toppling him to the ground. 'You fuck!'

Thorgils burst out laughing at the surprised look on Karsten's face just before it slammed into the dirt, Jael over the top of him now, hauling him onto his back, her forearm across his throat.

Berard joined in. 'Karsten's not going to take that well!'

Thorgils slapped him on the back. 'You're right about that.' And just as he said it, Karsten twisted his legs around Jael's, trying to flip her over. 'Though I've a feeling Jael's not going to let him do much about it.'

Berard's eyes widened as Karsten and Jael grappled, arms flailing around like battling worms; blinking as Jael chopped Karsten in the throat with the side of her hand; watching as his brother collapsed back onto the ground again.

Thorgils roared with laughter as Karsten rolled, struggling onto his knees, gagging, trying to breathe. Jael threw herself onto his back, arms around his throat, securing him, kneeling him in the hip, forcing him down onto the ground.

Karsten couldn't breathe as he lay there, dirt in his eye, in his mouth, his neck in Jael's vice-like grip, feeling her arms tighten. He couldn't move her. He tried, and despite being certain that he was stronger than the Queen of Oss, he couldn't break her hold. Eventually, reaching out a hand, he tapped the ground.

Jael released her arms, standing back, watching as Karsten rolled over.

He blinked into the sunshine, trying to see the angry creature who towered over him without a hint of humour in her eyes. Two eyes. Green and bright and mean. Two eyes, not like him who lay there in the dirt with the one eye she had left him after taking the other.

Jael's face softened as she held out a hand, pulling him to his feet.

'That wasn't quite the beating I had in mind,' Karsten rasped, bending over, hands on thighs. He shook his head, sweat flying from his red face. 'Not at all.'

Jael smiled, picking up her sword. 'Well, don't give up. I'm sure you'll catch me on a bad day.' And walking towards the railings, trying to suck in a breath, she could almost see the look on Karsten's face as he muttered irritably behind her.

'Not bad,' Thorgils admitted with a raised eyebrow. 'You might be able to defeat Jaeger with that.'

'Jaeger?' Karsten spat, grabbing the water bag Berard was holding. 'Jaeger's mine.' He glared at Jael, wiping a hand over his dripping, blonde beard, daring her to disagree. 'And only mine.'

Jael shrugged. 'I've a feeling there'll be plenty to go around when we get to Hest, so help yourself.' She shook her head, ignoring the water bag Karsten was offering her. 'I'm going to check on Ivaar, then, Thorgils, we need to go and find Beorn. I want to test out those catapults. Make sure they're going to get up a hill, otherwise what's the point in taking them to a place like Hest?'

'Jael!'

Jael spun around feeling her aching body tense at the sight of a puffing Bidy pushing her way through to the railings. 'What?' She hurried out of the training ring, her throat tightening. 'What's happened?'

'It's Gisila,' Bidy panted. 'You need to come!'

Meena tied up her boot with shaking hands.

They had been shaking since the night when Dragmall had rescued Morana. Since they had escaped from the city with Else.

Jaeger had left too. Gone to attack Helsabor with Eadmund Skalleson.

Having discovered that Morana had fled, and knowing how Draguta would feel about that, Jaeger had been reluctant to leave Meena behind. In the end,

though, he had simply kissed her and suggested she keep out of Draguta's way. Hide in the chamber until he returned.

Which she had.

She had only left it to sneak down into the kitchen for a few leftover scraps, and though she had no appetite, and there was likely no point in feeding herself now, she did; trying not to let her mind wander to Berard, knowing that he was not safe, as much as she was not safe. Draguta could, and would simply reach into any chamber, in any fort, and hurt anyone she liked, however she liked. They were all figures on Draguta's map table, waiting to be lifted up and moved around.

Or thrown away when they were no longer needed.

Meena swallowed, knowing how much Draguta had enjoyed torturing Morana by leaving her a prisoner inside her own body. Perhaps she wasn't going to try and kill her at all? Perhaps she had something even worse planned?

The sudden banging on the door had Meena scrambling off the bed in a shaking mess of red hair and chattering teeth. She squeezed her hands together, unable to speak.

The banging continued, and, eventually, Meena shuffled and shook towards the door, unlocking it slowly, dragging it open.

To Brill.

Meena blinked, trying to read something in the servant's dull eyes.

'My mistress wishes to see you in the hall,' Brill said, struggling to even lift her head to look at Meena. 'Now.'

Jael hurried into the chamber past Entorp, who was unpacking his satchel onto a small table, releasing all manner of strange odours as he uncorked his jars of salve. 'Mother?' Axl was on one side of the bed, dark rings under his eyes as he glanced up at his sister.

Edela was there too, with Eydis.

'Mother?' Jael dropped to her knees, gripping Gisila's hand as her mother opened her eyes.

'Aarrghh!' Gisila cried, writhing in agony.

'Ssshhh, now,' Edela soothed, moving behind Jael to reach Gisila's head. 'Entorp is coming with that salve. It will help, I promise. And Derwa is off in the

kitchen getting something for the pain. Don't worry. Try to stay calm.'

Jael looked up at her grandmother as Gisila closed her eyes, clenching her jaw. 'Has someone gone for Gant?'

Edela nodded, smoothing her hand over Gisila's furrowed brow, humming low in her throat. 'Ssshhh, now.'

Gisila loosened her grip on Jael's hand, her body relaxing in the bed. She opened her eyes, blinking at the brightness of the candlelit room. 'Amma? What happened? Runa...' Her voice was just a faint breath, and her body was quickly taut, twisting in pain again.

Axl swallowed, his eyes on his sister. 'Amma's gone. Eadmund's son and his wet nurse too. Runa's dead.' His voice was flat, for although Axl was relieved that his mother had come back to them, his heart was aching for Amma. He was struggling to stay still, to remain in Andala while they prepared for their departure. While they trained and readied their weapons and made their plans.

He wanted to leave. Now.

Gisila gasped as Entorp placed his hands on her stomach.

'I've tried to warm them up, but I'm afraid my hands are always a bit cold,' Entorp said bashfully. 'Perhaps you should do it, Edela?'

Edela shook her head. 'I think it's best if I stay up here. Gisila won't mind, will you?' she smiled. 'After all, she's had a lifetime of my cold hands.'

'Amma should be in Hest soon,' Jael said, watching her mother squirm as Entorp started applying his salve around her stomach wound, surprised that the smell of it didn't affect her anymore. She blinked, not wanting her mind to wander back to the time when it had. 'Edela's convinced that they won't hurt her.'

Their grandmother's confidence in that had gnawed away at Axl for days. 'Why? Why won't they hurt her? Jaeger killed his first wife, didn't he? So why are you so confident, Grandmother?' He distractedly patted his mother's hand as the pleasant aromas of yarrow and goldenrod permeated the room. 'Why?'

Edela sighed, sensing Eydis twitch on her stool near the end of the bed. There really was no choice but to tell him now. 'Amma is pregnant. I suspect Draguta took her for that very reason.'

Axl's mouth remained open, his weary mind struggling to comprehend her meaning.

Despite being just as tired, Jael was quicker. 'Because it's Jaeger's baby?' she guessed, her eyes on her brother.

'I suspect it might be,' Edela mumbled, watching Axl's jaw working away.

No one knew what to say about that, so they said nothing, confusing Gant who had just walked in. 'What is it?' he panicked, looking from Axl who was frowning to Edela who appeared troubled, to Gisila whose eyes were still closed. 'Gisila?'

Gisila opened her eyes, turning towards his voice, groaning again as the pain bit. 'Gant.'

He hurried to the bed, barely noticing that Jael was there as she hopped out of the way. 'Gisila.' Kneeling on the floor, he took her hand, surprising no one. Over the past few days, they'd all seen just how much Gant cared for Gisila, but what they hadn't seen was how Gisila felt about Gant. But now, with tears running down her cheeks as he bent over her, kissing her forehead, now, there was no longer any question.

Everyone stared at them, except for Eydis, who sat perfectly still, listening.

'Where have you been?' Gisila whispered. 'I thought you'd be here.' Closing her eyes, she smiled through the pain. 'I told you not to go anywhere, remember?'

Gant smiled back, tears in his eyes. 'I remember. And I won't. Not again, I promise.'

Jael frowned, but Gant was too busy watching Gisila to see.

Axl was too busy glowering at his grandmother to notice.

But Edela's eyes were on Jael, knowing precisely what that meant.

'If we approach through there, we'll get too many killed before Draguta has a chance to do anything.' Eadmund was growing impatient with Jaeger's inability to think; to care enough about his men to want to protect them. He thought in bursts of anger and impulse with little regard for carrying a thought through to its conclusion.

Thinking like that would get them all killed.

'I'm not here to listen to your opinions!' Jaeger barked, his voice hoarse. He'd been feeling increasingly unwell since they'd left Hest. Three days on horseback in teeming rain, terrorised by a sharp westerly wind had left him chilled to the bone, and he felt irritable that Eadmund was talking to him so far away from the fire. His body was hot and cold, shivering and sweating interchangeably.

But he wasn't about to let Eadmund Skalleson know it.

'Draguta sent both of us to claim Helsabor. I don't think she imagined all the

plans would be yours,' Jaeger growled.

Eadmund shrugged. 'It's no loss to me whether you die in Angard, but Draguta... she wants you on the dragon throne. Her heir. If you choose to think with your cock and not your head, you'll be a king without any men. Maybe not a king at all. Briggit Halvardar and her Followers might kill you before you've even drawn a sword.'

Jaeger jammed his teeth together, annoyed. Annoyed because Eadmund was right. Dreamers were trouble, and Briggit would be watching them.

Waiting for them.

'Draguta wants us both to succeed. She won't sit on the sidelines. She'll be there, helping us. She wants Briggit and Helsabor,' Jaeger grumbled throatily, eyes narrowed against a rare burst of sunshine, though he could see the moody sky would not allow it to linger for long. He took the cup of wine his servant offered him, suddenly wistful for Meena. 'You think Briggit can hurt us when Draguta has the Book of Darkness? Ha! It's a wonder she puts so much faith in you when you have none in her.'

Eadmund stepped forward, studying Jaeger's angular face. He could see the gleam of sweat shining on skin that looked unusually pallid; the amber eyes that were oddly red, blinking, tired-looking; the strained sound of Jaeger's voice. 'I know that not everyone can be stopped by that book. Look at what Jael did. What she continues to do. What her grandmother and my sister can do with their own book. How *they* can stop Draguta.' Eadmund shivered suddenly, certain that Draguta was listening. 'If you want to return to Hest, to your castle and your throne, you'd better be prepared to use your own head. I'm sure you're used to your father or your brothers saving you from yourself, but now there's only you, and I wouldn't be confident that anyone will come to save your sorry arse this time. I certainly won't.'

Jaeger's anger exploded like a jar of sea-fire, but he bit down on it, feeling the wine swirling around his aching throat, knowing that his men were watching and that Draguta would be at her seeing circle, interested to see how nicely they were playing together. He smiled, though his eyes were flaring with anger. 'Seems to me that if anyone needs to worry about what Jael Furyck can do, it's you. You being the one Draguta wants to kill her. So shut your fucking mouth about me.' And striding towards his horse, he decided that they'd done enough talking.

It was time to get their men to Angard.

Jael sat on her mother's bed, thinking about Eadmund. She could almost feel his tension building like a wave in a storm-whipped sea, and she felt troubled by what that might mean. Thinking about Eadmund led to thoughts of Sigmund, and then Runa. And Fyn. Bram too.

'Jael?'

She blinked, coming back into the room. Edela was talking to her, Bidy and Eydis hovering nearby as she sat on the bed. Everyone else had left, and Jael knew that she should go too. Gisila had closed her eyes, and there was so much to do in the fort. 'What did you say?'

'I was asking about your dream. Axl mentioned you were screaming last night.'

Jael's eyes darted to the right where Ido and Vella were licking up the remnants of the broth Bidy had spilled on the floor. Ido was limping, and whimpering, but not prepared to miss out on any of his sister's fun. Jael relaxed her face before turning back to her grandmother. 'No idea. Just a flood of images, voices, words. Like being in a blizzard.' She saw Eydis frown. Edela too.

Dreamers, she knew, could read minds.

So why was she lying to them?

Neither of them said anything, though, and Bidy was too busy fussing around Gisila to notice.

'Have you seen Fyn today?' Jael asked, changing the subject.

Eydis' neck lengthened, her spine straightening, suddenly more alert. 'No. No one has seen much of him since Runa's pyre.'

'Not even Bram?' Bidy wondered. 'I should have gone to see how he was. Taken him a stew. Poor man. Will you two stop licking the floor. Shoo now! Get outside!'

Ido and Vella scampered and limped past Jael as she turned to Bidy. 'Bram's keeping busy. Thorgils has an eye on him, but I'll need to go and find Fyn. He's avoiding me too.' She stood, grimacing as she put her weight down on her right ankle, surprised to discover that she must have twisted it fighting Karsten.

'Jael, wait.' Edela struggled to her feet, stiff after spending so much time sitting by Gisila. 'I'll walk with you.'

Jael waited while her grandmother creaked around the bed, a familiar look of determination in her tiny blue eyes. She ushered her through the door, with a look back to her mother, who appeared to be sleeping comfortably now.

The hall was humming with activity, preparations for the army's departure intensifying with every passing day. Since the night of the barsk attack, the need to make themselves safe had been at the forefront of Jael's mind, but they were never going to be truly safe until she took the army to Hest to defeat Draguta.

'I had a dream about Eadmund last night,' Edela said, her voice low as she grabbed Jael's arm.

Jael wanted to stop, but she didn't. Everyone's eyes were on her, and she could sense how many people had questions they needed answered, including Axl who was trying to extract himself from a conversation with Bayla Dragos. 'What about?' Her heart beat faster.

'He is preparing to attack Helsabor.'

'What?' Now Jael did stop. She pulled her grandmother close, out of the way of Branwyn who was trying to shoo a chicken outside. 'What do you mean? *Eadmund*? On his own?'

Edela stared into Jael's tired eyes. 'With Jaeger Dragos. With the Hestian army.'

Jael stood back, frowning. '*Helsabor*?'

'Eadmund does Draguta's bidding. He will only be there because of her.'

'So Draguta wants Briggitt Halvardar?'

'She must. And all those Followers too. They will have heard about what happened in Hest. What Draguta did to the Followers there. They will not be friends or allies. She will seek to defeat them, I imagine. To remove another threat. And the Helsaborans under Briggitt are a powerful threat indeed.'

Jael felt strange. Draguta attacking Helsabor was a gift she had not anticipated, though the idea that they might face one enemy instead of two was encouraging. 'But why now? Why would she send them there instead of here?'

'Why?' Edela shrugged, her eyes on the doors as Fyn made his way inside, his head low, hoping to avoid everyone as he quickly found some food. 'Perhaps Ayla may have some thoughts? She saw inside Briggitt's head many times while she was ill with that sickness. Why don't you speak to Fyn and I'll go and find Ayla.'

Jael nodded, a sad smile on her face as she watched Fyn scrambling to fill a plate with flatbreads and cheese, his floppy auburn hair hiding his face. 'Alright, but come and find me. I'd like to know why Draguta wants Briggitt so badly.'

Edela's thoughts had quickly turned to Ayla and whether she was speaking to Bruno, and she only mumbled in response as she hurried for the doors, almost tripping over the puppies who were busy tangling themselves around her feet,

trying to lick her broth covered boots.

Jael turned away, taking a deep breath as she headed towards Fyn.

Amma couldn't stop hearing the sound of the sword as it punctured Runa's chest. It was a noise so sickening, so terrifying, that she had frozen with terror, convinced that she would be next, so it had almost been a relief when she realised that the men wanted to take her too.

To Hest.

That's all they had said when they'd pulled her out of the fort, filthy hands over her mouth, dragging her towards their ship.

To Hest, where Jaeger Dragos would be waiting.

Amma looked over at Sigmund who lay asleep in Tanja's arms. The sea was calm at long last, and if she had not been so terrified, Amma might have felt hungry. But one look at Tanja's tear-stained face reminded her that she had every reason to feel terrified, and none at all to feel safe.

The crew had thrown a few furs at them, a couple of water bags, some food, and then ignored them. Most of them didn't appear threatening, and Amma didn't feel fearful of what they would do to them. She knew they would be under orders not to hurt her.

Well, she hoped they would be.

Sigmund too.

And they needed Tanja. They had obviously realised who she was; grabbing her out of her sweetheart's arms, running a sword through his chest as he tried to protect her, just as they had Runa's.

And Gisila.

Amma's face was numb from the biting wind, but she could feel the tears as they slid down her cold cheeks, dripping onto the nightdress covering her knees.

Was Gisila even alive?

Was Axl?

Amma remembered the blood; Gisila lying in the corridor so still, the axe she had tried to fend the men off with tossed away. Turning to Tanja, she held out her hands. 'I'll take him,' she said quietly. 'You need some sleep.'

Tanja barely blinked, but she tucked Sigmund's swaddling cloth more tightly around him, and the fur around that, before handing him to Amma. She leaned

against the high back of the stern, closing her eyes, blinking them open as the ship hit a wave with a smack.

Amma peered down at the sleeping baby, trying to see if he looked like Eadmund, but she couldn't. Her mind wandered to who her own child would look like.

Wondering whose child it was.

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