

*IN A WORLD RULED BY MEN, ONE WOMAN WILL RISE*

# THE BURNING SEA



A.E. RAYNE

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*THE FURYCK SAGA: BOOK TWO*

SAMPLE CHAPTER

A.E. RAYNE



## CHAPTER ONE

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‘So, that’s Aleksander?’

Eadmund turned to his wife, but Jael was already rushing across the glistening black stones towards her grandmother who was being helped over the side of the Brekkan ship.

‘Jael!’ Edela’s ashen face broke into a smile as she was swept into a bone-crushing hug. ‘You’re alright!’

Jael pulled back, happy but puzzled. ‘Alright?’ She shook her head. ‘Yes, of course. And so are you, which is even better!’ Her face froze as she turned to the figure waiting awkwardly next to Edela.

‘Jael.’

That voice. So familiar.

‘Aleksander.’ Jael swallowed, her eyes flicking nervously towards his face. She could feel the rain misting lightly over them as they stood shivering on the beach. It was early spring, but snow was still lingering on the ground, and the air was frigid. The beach was a hive of activity as the Osslanders hurried to prepare their ships for the upcoming battle with Hest and Jael was suddenly conscious that the shipbuilder’s attention had drifted towards her. ‘Let’s get you inside, Grandmother,’ she said quickly, her deep green eyes running away from Aleksander’s dark, searching ones. ‘You look chilled to the bone!’

‘Well, it’s not everyone I would cross those evil straights for,’ Edela shuddered, her wrinkled face mottled with cold. ‘And yes, I haven’t felt my feet since we left Andala!’

‘You go with Jael, Edela,’ Aleksander mumbled. ‘I’ll see to the men and bring your chest.’

‘Your chest?’ Jael looked surprised. ‘Are you staying a while, then?’

Edela glanced at Aleksander, who blinked and turned back to the ship. ‘If you’ll have me, I may,’ she croaked. ‘Anything to avoid going across that sea

again in a hurry!’

Jael frowned, thinking that her grandmother had shrunk since she had last seen her, six months ago. She wondered why they had come in two ships but resisted the urge to turn around, not wanting to catch Aleksander’s eye. She kept her gaze fixed straight ahead as she helped Edela across the slippery stones, towards the hill that led up to the fort.

‘Eadmund?’ Edela blinked up at the powerful-looking man waiting for them, his thick fur cloak billowing in the stiff breeze. She turned and stared at her granddaughter, a smile curling her pale lips. ‘So, the tincture worked then?’

Jael laughed. ‘I suppose it did.’ She smiled awkwardly at her husband, who frowned at her. There was no sign of warmth in his usually cheerful hazel eyes.

‘Yes, it worked very well, thank you. And it is good to see you again, Edela,’ Eadmund Skalleson said politely. ‘Although, I’m not sure I even remember our first meeting.’ He took the shivering old woman’s hand and slipped it through his arm, leading her up the muddy hill.

‘Well, I expect you had other things on your mind, like marrying my granddaughter here,’ Edela smiled, squeezing Jael’s hand, so happy to see her again.

‘Or, it could have been the 20 cups of ale I had before you arrived,’ Eadmund said wryly.

‘Perhaps,’ Edela chuckled, shivering as low-lying clouds swallowed the sun. It had been a fair afternoon, but rain was quickly sweeping in. ‘It appears that you have come a long way since then.’

‘Yes,’ he murmured through tight lips. ‘I have. Hopefully, we all have.’

Jael peered at her husband, still battling the urge to turn around and see how Aleksander was faring. Her long, dark hair, damp from the rain, clung to her angular cheekbones. Her body was tense and numb from the cold, but she could feel an unfamiliar heat burning her cheeks. Jael wasn’t sure why they had come to Oss, nor how Eadmund was going to cope with having to face Aleksander. Not now. Not when everything had fallen into place for him.

For both of them.

And then there was the matter of her pounding heart and her fluttering stomach.

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‘Edela!’ Biddy scrambled out of the chair and hurried to help her inside. ‘Quick, come sit down!’

‘Grandmother?’ Jael peered at Edela’s face which was rapidly turning whiter than snow. ‘You don’t look well at all. Are you feeling alright?’

‘Yes, yes, I’m fine,’ Edela muttered, collapsing into the nearest chair, grateful for the softness of the thick furs that lined it; grateful too, for its proximity to a blazing fire. She couldn’t stop shaking.

‘What are you doing here?’ Biddy wondered as she bent Edela forward and unpinned her wet cloak. She hung it quickly over a stool, wrapped a fur around Edela’s shoulders, and started removing her boots. ‘Are you alone?’

‘No, Aleksander brought me,’ Edela murmured, her voice growing fainter. She, too, looked towards the door, confused. ‘But, where has he gone?’

‘Aleksander?’ Biddy’s eyes widened and met Jael’s. Jael turned hers to the floor.

Eadmund sighed. ‘I had better go and find him, so he knows where to bring the chest.’ Not looking at anyone, he ducked his head and slipped through the door.

Jael hurried over to Edela, ignoring Eadmund’s abrupt departure and Biddy’s furtive looks. Their large house was well insulated and warm, but Jael could see that Edela was shaking. She reached out and touched her head. ‘You’re not cold at all. You’re burning hot!’

Biddy left Edela’s damp boots next to the fire and felt her forehead. ‘Yes, you’re very hot,’ she frowned. ‘Let’s get you into bed, and I’ll go and make something for that fever.’

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‘Do you need some help there?’ Thorgils Svanter asked, his head cocked to one side, studying the stranger who was struggling up the hill with an old, wooden sea chest, a long line of Brekkans trailing in his wake. The king had been told about the unfamiliar ships down on his beach and had sent Thorgils to investigate.

No one had been expecting visitors this close to their departure for Saala.

‘Not with the chest,’ Aleksander panted. It was a steep climb up to the fort, and the mud made it slow going. ‘But I do need to find my way around inside.’ He looked up at the thick, stone walls of King Eirik Skalleson’s fort.

Jael’s new home.

He didn't want to be here.

Thorgils frowned and reached out a hand. 'Here, give me a handle, and I'll show you where to go. Are you here to see someone in particular?'

'Jael.'

They both looked up.

'He's here to see Jael,' Eadmund said matter-of-factly, staring at the tall, dark-haired figure before him. 'This is Aleksander Lehr.' Eadmund turned, and, without waiting for either of them, headed towards the gates. 'I'll show you to the hall. Your men will find food and ale there. Then we can go to the house.'

Thorgils' bright blue eyes popped out from under his bushy red hair as he hurried to catch up. He peered at Eadmund's unimpressed face and back to Aleksander's wary one. He was an unfortunately handsome man, Thorgils considered with a frown; that wasn't going to make things any easier. 'Ahhh, Aleksander. We've heard all about you, haven't we, Eadmund?' Thorgils smiled lightheartedly. 'The only man who can beat Jael Furyck in a fight. Well, apart from me, that is!'

'You?' Aleksander blinked. 'You beat Jael?'

'Well, you needn't look so surprised,' Thorgils huffed. 'It was a fair fight, but she proved no match for my superior skill with a sword!'

'She let you win,' Eadmund grumbled. 'And you know it, too.'

Thorgils looked sideways at Aleksander. 'Well, that would be one version of events, but no matter what anyone might say, Jael has never admitted to it.'

'No, she's far too kind for that,' Eadmund muttered.

'Jael? Kind?' Aleksander snorted. 'In a fight?'

Both men stopped and stared at him, unsettled by his easy familiarity with the woman they felt some ownership of. Jael was Eadmund's wife and one of Thorgils' closest friends.

Aleksander didn't know where to look.

'We should go.' Eadmund turned his head up to the darkening sky. 'I think it's about to piss down.'

Aleksander nodded, lowering his eyes, not wanting another sight of the man who had taken Jael from him. Here he was, near her again, and all he wanted to do was grab her hand, run to the ships and disappear back to Andala together. He shut that thought away, knowing that it was too late now. She was lost to him.

He had known it the moment he saw her.

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‘Edela!’ Aleksander dropped his side of the chest to the floor and rushed over to the bed. ‘What happened?’ He looked up at Biddy who was applying a cool cloth to Edela’s forehead.

‘She has a fever,’ Jael said quietly as she moved out of Biddy’s way. ‘Did you not notice?’

‘Me?’ Aleksander looked surprised as he sat down on the bed and grasped Edela’s icy hand. He shook his head. ‘She was very quiet, but you know how much she hates the sea. I just thought it was that.’ He turned to look at Edela, his dark eyebrows pinched together in concern. Aleksander had become increasingly close to her since Jael had left Andala. She had always been like a grandmother to him, but recently she had become his closest friend.

‘My ears *do* still work you know,’ Edela grumbled, her eyes closed tight. ‘And you needn’t worry about me. No doubt all that rain and freezing water just gave me a chill.’ She coughed, and it rattled deep in her chest. ‘I shall be on my feet soon, so do not go and collect wood for my pyre just yet!’

Jael smiled, and her eyes met Aleksander’s. She looked away, feeling that annoying heat on her face again. ‘Well, try to sleep. You look worn through. We will leave you with Biddy and come back when you’ve had a good rest.’

‘Alright, alright,’ Edela sighed. Her eyes felt so heavy and grainy that she had no desire to open them at all. ‘I won’t need long, I promise. I have so much to tell you...’

Jael stared curiously at Aleksander. It was his turn to look away.

‘Why don’t we go to the hall?’ Eadmund suggested. ‘I’m sure you could do with a drink after your journey and my father will be getting impatient to speak to you.’ He patted Thorgils on the shoulder and headed for the door.

Thorgils remained frozen to the spot. He had seen the looks between Jael and Aleksander, subtle as they may have been, and was certain that Eadmund had seen them too. He wasn’t sure he wanted to go to the hall with any of them. ‘That sounds like a good idea,’ he said unconvincingly, inclining his head towards the door.

‘Come on,’ Jael smiled at Aleksander, who seemed reluctant to leave Edela. ‘It will give Biddy a chance to think.’

Biddy looked up from the kitchen table. She was already sorting through her dried herbs, picking out some elderberry flowers and yarrow leaves, ready to make a fever tea. ‘Yes, you go,’ she murmured distractedly. ‘Have something to

eat there. Edela looks as though she needs a good rest after such a trying day.'

Aleksander sighed, took one last look at the sleeping patient, and followed Jael to the door. 'It's good to see you again, Biddy.'

Biddy's eyes were bright as she stared at that familiar face. 'And you. Now hurry along, and leave me to my thinking!'

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Oss' hall was filling quickly as sodden warriors cut short their training sessions in the Pit and hurried inside to dry themselves by a warm fire with a well-earned cup of ale.

Eirik Skalleson twirled his long, gold and white moustache as he watched Eadmund and Thorgils rush in through the doors, Thorgils shaking the rain out of his bushy head like a dog. He frowned, rolling his hands over the well-worn armrests of his wooden throne. 'Your brother's here,' he muttered to Eydis, his 13-year-old daughter who sat alongside him. She was blind, and although her other senses worked better than most, she had stopped being able to smell Eadmund coming since he'd been knocked into shape by Jael over the winter; he'd never smelled so good.

'And Jael?' Eydis asked, sitting a little taller, shuffling towards the edge of her small wooden chair.

'Yes, and Thorgils, and...'

'And, Fyn?' Eydis blushed, but her father was too busy frowning to notice.

'No, someone new. The someone who is hopefully going to explain why two of Lothar Furyck's ships are taking up room on my beach and why all these Brekkans are drinking in my hall!' Eirik eased himself out of his chair with a grimace and made his way towards the stranger, who had stopped by the nearest fire.

'Eadmund, Thorgils,' Eirik nodded, taking a cup of ale from his steward. 'Jael.'

'Hello, Eirik,' Jael said distractedly. 'This is Aleksander Lehr. From Andala. He brought my grandmother to visit me.'

Eirik's eyebrows shot up, his small blue eyes full of surprise. 'Oh, did he now?' He peered at Aleksander. 'And Lothar lent you *two* ships for that, did he?'

Aleksander stumbled beneath his fiercesome glare. 'I, ahhh, no. He has sent you a gift. Well, it's from Edela, really. He wanted it safely delivered to you so



you could start preparations. Edela just happened to want to come and see Jael at the same time.'

'Preparations?' Jael's focus sharpened. 'For what?'

'Yes, what is this *gift* you have brought me? Besides an old dreamer, who, I must admit, might come in very handy,' Eirik mused, pulling on his beard, his fingers catching in the little silver nuggets braided into its white tip.

Aleksander coughed. The salty sea had dried his throat, and his awkwardness around Jael and her husband had only worsened it. 'I have a note from Lothar which explains it.' He dug into the small pouch hanging from his sword belt and pulled out a rather damp looking scroll, handing it to Eirik. 'But in short, Edela has made a weapon that should help your fleet.'

'Edela?' Jael looked confused. 'Made a *weapon*?'

Aleksander took the cup of ale Thorgils offered him, supping deeply. 'Mmmm, she found the idea for it in an old Tuuran book. We experimented, she and I, and then took it to Lothar.' He smiled sadly, unsettled by Edela's sudden decline. 'It will help, but you will need some time to prepare your ships if you are to use it. That's why I'm here. To show you how it works.'

Eadmund frowned, and not for the first time since those ships had arrived. 'We're leaving in 10 days. Will there be time?'

Aleksander's stomach rumbled loudly as his eyes wandered to the servants who were busily filling the hall tables with trays of pork, whale, chicken...

'Aleksander,' Jael muttered, nudging him in the ribs. 'Will there be time?'

'Yes, yes,' he nodded. 'We will have to work fast, but yes, there will be plenty of time.'

Eydis snuck herself around her brother's waist, squeezing him tightly, and Eadmund found his first real smile of the afternoon. 'Hello, Little Thing.'

Eydis didn't speak. She knew there was a stranger present, and could feel an awkwardness in the group because of it.

'Hello, Eydis,' Jael smiled. 'I have good news for you. My grandmother is here. You remember her from the wedding?'

Eydis' milky eyes lit up. 'Is she? Really?' She frowned, confused, certain that the person in front of her, who she couldn't see, was not an old Tuuran dreamer.

'Yes, my friend, Aleksander, brought her here from Andala.'

'Oh.'

Aleksander squirmed. It seemed that no one wanted him here, not even a little blind girl. 'Hello, Eydis,' he said gently. 'Edela has told me all about you. She is looking forward to helping you with your dreams.'

'Is she?' Eydis' face shone as she turned it towards his deep voice. 'But *where* is she?'

'She took ill on the journey,' Jael said quietly. 'She's back at the house. Biddy is making up something to help her.'

Eadmund could see the worry etched onto his wife's pale face and he momentarily forgot his ornery mood. 'And you know how quickly Biddy can cure a fever. I'm sure Edela will feel better soon,' he said encouragingly, hoping to reassure Jael and Eydis both.

The deep crease between Eirik's wild eyebrows relaxed slightly. He turned to Aleksander. 'Perhaps we should get something into your growling belly before we speak further? Come up to my table,' he smiled. 'You can sit next to me. I want to hear all about this weapon. Made by an old woman?' He shook his head in disbelief as he led them up to the high table where Thorgils was waiting. In fact, Thorgils wasn't waiting at all. He already had a chicken leg in one hand and a dumpling in the other. 'And perhaps when Edela is well she can tell me what she sees for our battle with Hest?' Eirik said with a twitch as he helped his daughter onto the bench. Eydis was yet to reveal anything about their upcoming battle with Haaron Dragos, and he was growing more pessimistic by the day.

Aleksander mumbled to himself as he took a seat on the other side of the king.

Eirik frowned. 'Is there something I should know?' he wondered sharply, grabbing his own chicken leg. His eyes lit up. 'Something Edela has seen, perhaps?'

Aleksander instinctively looked towards Jael.

Jael seemed just as interested as Eirik, ignoring her plate and the ale she was being offered.

'Well, yes, she has seen that it will... not be a success. She tried to tell Lothar. Many times. But he didn't want to hear anything she had to say. He threatened her to be quiet. He doesn't want word of her dreams spread around Brekka, or the islands.' Aleksander couldn't ignore the mouth-watering food any longer and quickly pulled his eating knife from its scabbard. 'He was relieved when Edela asked to come with me to see Jael,' he said through a mouthful of roasted pork.

'Oh.' Eirik looked crestfallen. He turned to Jael. 'And have your grandmother's dreams ever been wrong?'

Jael could feel everyone's eyes on her, and she hesitated. It was Edela who had convinced her to leave Aleksander and start this new life on Oss with Eadmund Skalleson. 'No,' she almost whispered. 'No, she hasn't.'

Eirik's shoulders slumped as he worked the deep crease back into the space between his eyebrows. 'Well, that is not what I wish to hear, but I suppose it is no more than you have been warning me.' He lifted his head and surveyed the filthy warriors elbowing their way to the tables around the hall, knives out, lips wet. His warriors, who had spent the bitter, storm-chased winter training for this battle. His loyal men, who would risk their lives to fight for him, their king, because he had chosen to make an alliance with Lothar Furyck of Brekka.

He didn't doubt the wisdom of that alliance when he looked at Eadmund, who, despite his miserable face, had finally returned to him and was a warrior once more. But it was he, as king, who was responsible for their lives and he who would have to bear the heavy weight of their deaths.

Eydis reached out and gripped her father's hand, sensing his distress, feeling guilty for her failure to dream of what would come. After Ayla left, her ability to focus her dreams had slipped away, disappearing almost entirely. She felt lost.

'But perhaps Edela has only seen what will befall the Brekkans?' Jael suggested, trying to cheer Eirik up. 'We might have better luck against Haaron's ships?' She could feel Aleksander's eyes bulge at that. 'Especially with this weapon of hers.' But looking at the downcast faces around her, Jael realised that she was going to have a hard time convincing anyone else of that.

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Biddy frowned as she pressed her palm to Edela's forehead again; she was definitely getting hotter. Biddy Halvor had dealt with many fevers in her 54 years and knew that they were often the first sign of a very bad end, especially in the elderly. And Edela, despite the youthful twinkle in her eye, was certainly that now.

The door flew open, and Jael rushed in, escaping a heavy downpour, Aleksander close behind her. Jael's two Osterland hound puppies, Ido and Vella, stretched themselves awake and hurried to investigate the stranger. Aleksander put his hand down for them to sniff, and they seemed satisfied enough that he wasn't going to cause any trouble.

Biddy raised an eyebrow, noting Eadmund's absence. As much as she was thrilled to see Aleksander, she had seen the troubled look on Eadmund's face and worried about what effect Aleksander's arrival would have on his sobriety.

'How is she?' Jael wondered as she hung her sodden cloak over Eadmund's

chair and hurried to check on her sleeping grandmother. Biddy's face told her all that she needed to know.

'Getting worse, so far,' Biddy muttered, removing the cloth from Edela's forehead. She had barely put it on, and it was almost dry. She dipped it into a bucket of water and wrung it out. 'But hopefully, the sleep is helping. I'm sure she just got a bad chill on that ship today. Nothing more.'

Aleksander came to stand beside Jael, his face as anxious as hers. 'I hope so. She seemed well before we left. She couldn't wait to get here.'

Biddy placed the cloth back on Edela's head and stood up. 'Well, knowing Edela, she will be bustling about in the morning as though nothing happened.' She lifted up the bucket and wandered through the kitchen, into the back storage room. 'There's stew left in the pot if you're still hungry!' she called over her shoulder. 'I didn't have much of an appetite.'

Jael glanced at Aleksander, not hungry at all. She looked down at her grandmother again, trying to remember if she had ever seen her ill. She couldn't.

'Jael,' Aleksander said softly, touching her arm. 'We can't make her better by staring at her. You need to come and warm up. You're shaking.'

Jael followed him to the fire and perched on a stool, quiet and distracted as she removed her wet boots. She looked up suddenly, frowning. 'Why did you really come?'

Aleksander ignored her question and held his hands out to the flames instead. It was a warm house, he thought, but a cold island and the rain had left him shaking too. 'Edela came to keep you safe,' he mumbled, at last, not wanting to lose himself in those eyes again. Those green eyes of Jael's had haunted him for six months. The absence of them had been a hole in his heart, and it was nowhere near repaired yet.

'Safe?' Jael shook her head, confused. 'And you? It must have been hard to convince Lothar to let you go?'

'It was,' he said wryly. 'Naturally. But I needed to come to keep Edela safe. Although, so far that part hasn't worked very well, has it?'

'Safe from what?'

'It's a long story,' he said quietly, his voice disappearing under the loud crack and spit of the fire as rain dripped down the smoke hole. 'Best told by Edela. Hopefully soon.'

Jael knew better than most how stubborn Aleksander could be. One quick look at his face told her that there was nothing more coming on that subject. She picked up a log and added it to the fire, desperate for more heat. 'Well, how are

things in Andala, then? How is my uncle?’

‘Happier than you could imagine now that he’s married your mother.’

Jael’s head snapped up. ‘What? What do you mean, married? *How?*’

‘Well, poor Gisila... he gave her no choice apparently. Just told her it was going to happen. He didn’t even wait for us to return from Tuura. They were married when Edela and I arrived home.’

Jael blinked, feeling the thud of her heart, loud in her ears. ‘Tuura?’ She shook her head in disbelief. ‘You went to *Tuura*? Why would you do that?’ She was horrified. Tuura was nowhere any of them should have gone again.

Not after that night.

Aleksander ducked his head, not wanting the memories of their visit to haunt him anew. ‘Well, that’s part of the reason we’re here.’

‘And you won’t talk about it until Edela wakes up?’

Aleksander stared at her blankly. He wanted to tell Jael everything, but what he and Edela had uncovered in Tuura was a dark tangle of mystery and threat. It was Edela’s tale to tell. He only hoped that she would be well enough to tell it before they all left for Saala.

Jael sighed, worried and frustrated. ‘So, my mother is Queen of Brekka again. You’ve been to Tuura. And what about Axl?’

‘Axl?’ Aleksander sat back from the fire, warm at last. ‘He is much changed. You’d be impressed.’

‘Ha!’ Jael scoffed. ‘So, he’s stopped listening to those stupid boys, then? Stopped dreaming of taking the throne from Lothar?’ She wriggled her frozen toes, sticking her wet socks closer to the flames.

‘He has, or so he says, at least. He’s been training with Gant and me. He’s staying at the hall again, in his old bedchamber. You have nothing to worry about there that I can see.’

Jael was surprised. She wondered why her brother had changed. Or what had changed him. ‘And you? How are you?’

Aleksander’s dark eyes retreated. ‘Best we don’t talk about that.’

Jael felt incredibly sad. They had known each other their whole lives. Aleksander had been raised in her family after his parents were killed when he was 10-years-old. They had been inseparable; lovers since they were 15. And now? Now they were here, together again, but so far apart. It felt as though there was a great mountain between them, and as much as she wanted to, Jael couldn’t just reach out and touch him. Make him smile again.

‘You seem to like it here, though...’ He looked up at her, and his eyes were



harder, more challenging now. 'With him.' Aleksander glanced at the door, but they were still alone. Biddy had not returned from the back room, obviously keen to give them some privacy.

Jael opened her mouth to speak, but the words refused to come out. She stared into those challenging eyes, then away, back to their goodbye, when they had promised to be together again. When she had sworn to come back to him.

Six months ago.

And the guilt of all that had happened since then lay heavy in her heart like the weight of a giant anchor, pushing her down to the bottom of a dark, cold sea.

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'How many is that, then?'

'Three,' Eadmund grumbled irritably. 'I've had three.'

'More than usual for you these days.'

'Well, it's a more than usual day, wouldn't you say?'

Thorgils sighed and nodded. He looked around the barely lit hall. Despite the arrival of two shiploads of Brekkans, it had been a quiet sort of evening, with most conversations taking part in small groups; some around the fires, some in shadowy corners. The Brekkans had kept mostly to themselves, uncomfortable with the idea of forging friendships with those they had grown up determined to destroy.

There had been a thoughtful hush around Oss for the past few weeks as everyone prepared themselves for the battle to come. There was excitement, and the days were filled with earnest preparation and last minute training, but it was also a time for contemplation. It was no easy thing for a small cluster of islands to take on the mighty Kingdom of Hest, even if they were allied with the power of Brekka.

Their last attack on Haaron Dragos had been an ill-conceived disaster. The ships that had come back, had come back light, and it had taken four years to rebuild their fleet. And their confidence.

Thorgils tried to smile as he drained the last mouthful of ale from his cup and wiped a hand through his thick, red beard. 'I wouldn't think too much on it. Nothing to worry about there.'

Eadmund eyed him morosely. 'No? You're not thinking about Isaura anymore? Wishing you could be with her?'

Thorgils frowned, pulling a small whetstone from his pouch. He picked up his blunt eating knife, which had barely coped with a tender piece of pork, and began scraping it across the stone. He'd done nothing but think about Isaura since she'd been forced to marry Eadmund's brother, Ivaar, nearly eight years ago. And he'd thought about her even more since her visit to Oss over the winter. Every day was fresh torture, imagining her with Ivaar. 'It's not the same,' he tried unconvincingly.

'It *is* the same. Exactly the same,' Eadmund said harshly, not wanting to feel the truth of it on his tongue, but there it was. There was no escaping it. He'd seen it in Jael's eyes. 'You and Isaura loved each other since you were children. She was taken away from you and forced to marry someone else. You saw each other again, and nothing had changed between you. You'd be with her in a heartbeat, and she you.' Eadmund pushed away his cup, not wanting to feel even worse. 'How is that any different from Jael and him?'

Thorgils glanced around, but there was no one near their table. He leaned forward, lowering his voice anyway. 'It *is* different,' he insisted hoarsely. 'You have to remember that. It *is* different because I've been alone since Isaura left. There's been no one else for me, no one but my nagging mother. But Jael fell in love with you. And you know it. Everyone can see it. The way she looks at you? The way she is around you?' Thorgils sighed, feeling wistful. 'Jael loves you. She may have loved him, but now she loves you.' He turned his attention back to his sharpening. 'It's late. Go home to your wife. That's where you need to be. Not here keeping that cup company.'

Eadmund wanted to believe it was as simple as Thorgils insisted, but the dark shadows creeping into his mind warned him that everything had changed and that nothing would ever be the same again.

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Jael closed her eyes as the door creaked open.

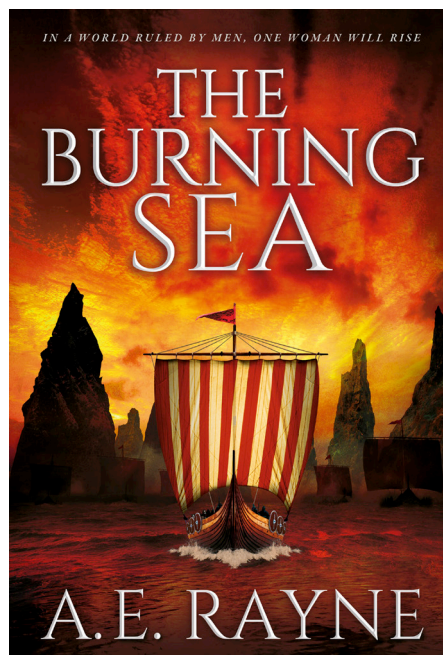
She hadn't been able to sleep, worrying about Edela, fighting the urge to get up and check on her, even though she knew that Biddy was there, sleeping near her. And Aleksander. Eadmund hadn't come back from the hall, and that had left her unsettled too. Jael had almost been glad for his absence in an odd way.

Eadmund crept towards the bed with a frown. Jael hadn't left a lamp burning for him, which made it impossible to see. The night sky was submerged beneath

heavy rain clouds, so there wasn't even any help from the moon. He stretched out a hand and was happy to feel the furry lump that was Vella, lying in her favourite spot, on his corner of the bed. She was much fluffier and softer than her brother, so even Eydis could tell them apart.

Jael didn't stir as Eadmund sat down and yanked off his boots. Leaving his cloak in a heap beside the bed and his trousers on top of it, he slid onto the thickly padded mattress, pulling two layers of furs over himself. His body remained tense, though, and he made no move towards his silent wife. Sighing, he wriggled himself down the bed, pushing Vella around with his cold feet, until he had slipped them under her warm little body.

Eadmund stared into the black abyss of the room. He would talk to Jael in the morning. Before things ran away from them both, he would talk to her.



AVAILABLE NOW

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on AMAZON