

THE FURYCK SAGA: BOOK 4

HALLOW WOOD

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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CHAPTER ONE

'I want those barricades in place now! Now!' Eadmund bellowed from the ramparts, turning back to squint at the stone spires guarding the entrance to Oss' harbour. His heart quickened; his body tensing in anticipation. 'Morac!' He turned to the old man who emerged, panting, from the tower below. 'Go to the hall! Get the fires burning high! Have them prepare for wounded men!'

Morac swallowed, his beady eyes unusually big and blinking. 'Are they here?' Turning to the headland, he could see the distant signal fires glowing against the dull morning sky.

Eadmund wasn't listening. 'Sevrin! Go to the square! Find Ketil and Una. I want their fires burning too. Heat the water! Wet the hides!' He turned to Arlo, his head archer, who already had his men lining the ramparts, bows in hand, quivers slung over their shoulders, flaming braziers nearby. 'Is there anything you need?'

Arlo shook his head. 'We're ready, my lord.'

Eadmund turned his attention back to the harbour, staring at the towering stones that threatened anyone who dared to attack them.

Thorgils was lighting the signal fires on his way back to the fort.

Ivaar was coming.

Ivaar spat over the side of *Shadow Blade*. His second ship, *Iron Wolf*, followed closely in its wake. He wanted to vomit, but his men were already looking at him sideways, and he didn't want to give them another reason to have even less confidence in his leadership.

He was no lord anymore.

He was trapped in the service of the man preparing to take the crown meant for him. The man who would steal all the gold and glory he had promised his own men.

Borg Arnesson.

The man who had, in the end, proved even more ambitious and ruthless than he was. The man who was about to beat him at his own game.

And there was nothing that Ivaar could do about it.

He wiped a cold hand across his blonde beard, which had grown wild since his days as the Lord of Kalfa, and leaned towards his helmsman. 'Seppa, don't get too far ahead of that idiot. We need him ready when we are.' It was the last thing he wanted to say. The humiliation of his fall had been compounded by having to follow the youngest and thickest of the black-haired brothers from Tingor: the dim-witted Toki Arnesson.

Ivaar peered up at the familiar dark cliffs rising along their port side. His father had turned the wild cluster of islands into a kingdom, envisioning a legacy of Skalleson rule for centuries to come.

He would never have expected such a sudden end.

Ivaar tried to shake away the image of Eirik's body, slumped in that chair in Saala; wine dying his white beard a deep, deathly red.

But he couldn't.

'We're not going to make it!' Torstan screeched as he rode beside Thorgils, who was bent over Leada, his red curls bouncing in the freshening breeze.

Thorgils worried that his friend was right.

There were eight of them charging up the island, racing against the line of ships they could see weaving around the stone spires. If they didn't arrive back at the fort in time, there would be no hope of getting inside before Ivaar and his men were on the beach.

Thorgils glanced at Torstan. 'Then let's go faster!' he grinned, though his throat had gone dry with thoughts of what Ivaar would do if he took the fort. 'Ha! Ha!' Digging his heels into Leada's flanks, he urged her on. 'Come on, girl! Faster!'

Isaura was trying not to panic as she gripped Leya's little hand, pulling her up off the hall floor. Her youngest daughter had tripped over, and though there was only the slightest of grazes on her knee, she was wailing as though she had lost her entire leg. 'Ssshhh, now,' Isaura soothed distractedly, her eyes focused on Ayla, who was helping Bruno to a table by the fire. 'It's just a scratch.' Bending down, she smiled quickly. 'Why don't you go and see if you can find where that white cat has gone? Perhaps she's already had her kittens? Go on, go and see.' And standing up, she motioned for Selene to come and take her little sister, who had quickly ceased her crying, easily distracted by the thought of kittens.

Isaura hurried to Ayla, who looked unusually pale. 'Is it Ivaar?' she asked, shivering, though it was a warmer than usual summer morning on Oss. 'Is he finally here?'

'Yes,' Ayla nodded, pouring a cup of water for Bruno; noting the fiery spark in her husband's eyes at the sound of that name. 'He's here.'

'But where's Thorgils? Will he make it back in time?' Isaura panicked, glancing at the hall doors which had remained closed since Morac's arrival. 'It's a long ride from Hud's Point.'

Ayla started to smile reassuringly at her friend, but she could feel her body shudder in protest. 'I'm sure he will. He would do anything to be here to protect you. Now come, let's go and help Runa get everything ready.' She took Isaura's hand, pulling her towards the kitchen. Soon, many men would be injured, she knew, and they needed to be ready to help them.

Evaine bumped into Ayla as she raced towards her father. 'Watch where you're going, dreamer!' she snapped, shaking her head, irritated by Ayla, and by her father, who seemed more interested in talking to Runa than anyone else.

Morac was giving his wife a long list of instructions about preparing the hall, and Runa was having trouble remembering them all. 'Morac!' she interrupted. 'I have to make a start. I will come back to you once I've prepared the tables. For now, though, you must let me begin!'

'Yes, yes, of course.' Morac felt anxious. Everything they had worked so hard to achieve was about to be destroyed. And where was Morana? Why hadn't his sister come to his dreams, offering her advice? Telling him what to do?

'Father!' Evaine hissed as she strode past Runa and grabbed Morac's arm. 'Where is Eadmund? I need to see him. Those men won't let me out of the hall!' She pointed to the doors which were now blocked by two armed men.

'We're keeping everyone where I can see them,' Morac insisted. 'I can't have children running around distracting the men out there while they're working

with boiling liquid. It's unsafe. And once Ivaar and his allies reach the walls, they will fire into the fort for sure. It's too dangerous.'

'But I must see Eadmund!' Evaine's eyes were frantic. 'He left before I woke. I must see him. If something happens... I haven't even said goodbye!' she sobbed.

Morac was not about to be moved by a few tears, but he did need to placate his daughter before she consumed what little time he had to prepare. Gripping Evaine's other arm, he bent to her ear. 'Nothing will happen to Eadmund. Morana will be watching, keeping him safe for you. We need Eadmund, don't we? All of us. He will not be hurt. Not now that *she* is here.'

Evaine was confused. 'Who? What do you mean?'

Morac glanced around but the hall was filled with a heady din of activity, and no one was looking their way. 'Last night they were planning to raise the woman. Draguta. She will stop anything from happening to you and Eadmund. She will protect us all.' Morac frowned, not sure if that was the truth, but he spoke with such calm authority that he could see Evaine's face relax as she stared up at him.

'You're sure?'

Morac smiled. 'Morana will know that we're in danger here. You have nothing to fear.'

Morana bent over the bowl.

She had been vomiting all morning. Her head felt as though it was being banged with an iron rod. The constant pounding made her wince as waves of nausea rolled up through her aching body. She could barely lift an eyelash without cringing.

But she had never felt happier.

'You're sure you wouldn't like some water?' Yorik wondered from his position by the door. 'Or wine?' It was a humid day and the stink of the chamber, and of Morana, most of all, was turning his stomach. He was desperate to leave and inhale some fresh air, but he felt obliged to make sure that she was alright.

After what she'd achieved?

He had never felt happier.

'No,' Morana croaked, sitting back against the bed and wiping her mouth. She glared at him. 'You should not be here! You must be with Draguta. We cannot afford to have her and Jaeger plot against us. Remove us from the next stage. *We*

must be the ones she trusts to guide her now. You and I.'

Yorik nodded, certain she was right.

He couldn't stop thinking about her.

Draguta.

She was exquisite. Unexpectedly delicate. Ageless. Intoxicating. The most powerful being he had ever met, yet surprisingly human. Yorik was overcome with an urgency to be by her side, assisting her. Caring for her. Helping her familiarise herself with life again –

'Are you listening to me?' Morana barked, disturbed by the dreamy look on Yorik's grizzled face. He appeared utterly dazed, although, after the ritual, she was hardly surprised. The complex mix of herbs and seeds had created such a powerful trance that she still felt half trapped in the Dolma.

Morana smiled. The Dolma. Such dark bliss, death, and emptiness.

Raemus' prison.

But not for long.

'Yes, yes, I shall go to her,' Yorik said eagerly, opening the door and taking a welcome breath. 'Shall I send your niece? Perhaps she could attend to you while you are... incapacitated?'

Morana grinned. 'Well, if you can convince Jaeger to let her go, then yes, I'm sure she'd be happy to come and clean out my sick bowl.' She watched the door close, then frowned, gripping her belly.

Something was wrong.

Meena stared at the stain on the flagstones, trying not to inhale the stench of death in the chamber or the smell of fear wafting up from her armpits.

Jaeger was stumbling about, hurrying to dress. She could sense his desperation to leave to be with her.

That woman.

And she was indeed a woman.

Meena had thought that Draguta would resemble some sort of decaying monster, like the ones in her nightmares, but she was beautiful.

Beautiful but evil.

Meena could feel it.

She swallowed, reaching up to touch her swollen face. It hurt to blink, and

she was trying hard not to, but Meena was so terrified when she thought of what would happen next that her eyes wouldn't stop twitching.

'You will wait here,' Jaeger muttered, almost to himself as he tugged on his boots. 'I shall send someone up with food. Someone to clean up the mess.' He glanced briefly at the enormous, bloody stain covering his chamber floor, ruing the loss of his servant, Egil, who had been with him for longer than he could remember. But, he was easily replaceable, Jaeger knew. He stared at Meena, who was almost completely still as she sat at the table. It was unusual to see her not tapping her head. 'We will talk when I return. About what will happen next.' He smiled, then yawned. His throbbing head was a confused mess, and he was struggling to see straight.

Meena didn't even nod.

Jaeger stood and walked towards her, touching her bruised face, momentarily troubled by what he had done to her. Blinking, he quickly abandoned any thoughts of guilt and shame. 'Everything will be better now that Berard has gone. Now that they've all gone.' Jaeger kissed the top of her tangled mop of red hair and strode towards the door, suddenly ravenous. 'You'll see, Meena. Everything will be better now.'

Meena watched him go, wishing that she'd left with Berard and his family.

Why had she thought to stay? What could *she* possibly do to help?

Listening as Jaeger turned the key in the lock, she dropped her eyes back to the flagstones, to the stain Egil had made as he died.

And she had killed him.

And she had stayed behind for a reason, and turning towards the evil book that lay open on the table before her, Meena knew very well what that reason was.

'How many ships?'

Bram stood on the ramparts beside his old helmsman, Snorri, who had a better pair of eyes than him. It was drizzling, and his beard was dripping down his tight-fitting mail shirt. He looked up accusingly at the darkening sky. No one needed rain now.

Not when they had invaders to burn.

Eadmund also turned to Snorri, holding his breath, watching as he screwed

up his weather-beaten face, squinting into the distance.

‘Ten. Maybe twelve,’ Snorri said, at last. ‘Maybe more hiding behind the spires. They’re going in and out. It’s hard to keep track.’

Bram’s eyes widened. That was a lot of ships.

‘Go and find Ayla. I need to speak to her,’ Eadmund said to Bram. He turned to Sevrin who was squeezing his way along the ramparts, past the archers, heading for his king. The ramparts around Oss’ fort had always been too narrow for anyone’s liking, but there was nothing Eadmund could do about that now. ‘Are the fletchers at work?’

Sevrin nodded. ‘They are.’ He looked across the harbour, watching as the dark shadows of enemy ships bobbed around the spires. The wind was picking up, and their visibility was reducing rapidly.

‘And you’ve men watching the rear of the fort?’

‘All around,’ Sevrin said. ‘Any sign of Thorgils and Torstan?’

Eadmund shook his head, his eyes wandering back to the narrow neck of land that rose alongside the harbour, stretching out far past its entrance.

Those ships would be here soon.

He hoped his friends would hurry.

The currents around the jagged, black stones were wicked. Like his mother.

Twisted and dark. Hidden and mysterious.

Borg Arnesson laughed at the looks on the faces of the men around him: grey with fear as they glanced up at the tall shards of rock that threatened their chances for glory. His mother had seen him breaking into that fort, though, so Borg felt no such terror. He felt confident that his destiny did not have him ending up as Ilvari’s supper. Turning around, he was pleased to see his brother’s ship, still following closely. Borg hoped he’d made the right choice sending Toki with Ivaar Skalleson. That conniving bastard was not a man to be trusted, but he was heavily outnumbered now. Ivaar had no choice but to follow the man who would be his new king.

Borg smiled, catching glimpses of flames up on the cliffs. He was not surprised to see that they were expected. ‘We land fast!’ he cried, scanning the pale faces of his dark-haired crew who bent over the oars, hoping they’d make it to land. ‘Beach quickly! Shield walls! Archers at the rear! We’ll take them off the

ramparts, then work the gates and wait for Toki and the Bastard to break in from the other side!’

His men barely grunted in acknowledgement. Borg didn’t notice as he turned his gaze up to the stone fort that sat atop the hill in the distance.

Soon, this would all be his, and his enemies would loosen their bowels as his fleet swarmed the harbour. ‘Victory!’ he shouted joyously, thinking of how quickly he could get his bride into his new bed; his queen, he corrected himself. Queen Falla of Oss. ‘Victory will be ours!’

‘Faster!’ Thorgils screamed into the rain; the heavy rain that had turned the ground soft and slowed their progress. He could see the fort now, but he could also see the first ships entering the harbour. Leada was tiring beneath him, and Thorgils didn’t blame her as she snorted and blew furiously, her legs struggling up the long incline towards the fort. She had the heaviest weight to lug up the island, and he was asking her to do it at the fastest speed possible.

But he had to get everyone back in time.

Thorgils kicked her again, hearing Leada grunt in protest, feeling the thunderous pounding of her hooves, the shuddering of her muscles as they stretched to their limits, propelling them both forward.

‘Faster!’ Torstan yelled beside him, panicking, his face numb from the wind, his vision blurred from the driving rain.

Turning around, Torstan saw the fear in their men’s eyes.

Terrified, just like he was.

They weren’t going to make it.

‘Do you see anything? Any sign of Jael coming?’ Eadmund wondered, peering into Ayla’s eyes in the murky light of the windowless tower room. He had not wanted her up on the ramparts where everyone could hear their conversation.

Ayla shook her head. ‘No, I’ve not seen anything.’

Eadmund sighed, unable to hide his disappointment. ‘Well, go back to the

hall, then. But if you see anything, have someone bring you back. Even if I'm sleeping, have me woken, Ayla. I need to know.'

'Of course,' she said quietly, jumping at a sudden bellowing from above.

Eadmund was quickly distracted, eager to get back on the ramparts. 'Erdon, see Ayla back to the hall,' he said, motioning to the man who was struggling in through the door with a large cauldron. 'I'll take that.'

Erdon nodded and lowered the cauldron onto the dirt floor, motioning for Ayla to follow him.

'Grab a shield, man!' Eadmund barked. 'I need you to keep her safe!' And, picking up the heavy cauldron, he turned towards the stairs.

Shadow Blade sailed past the tiny cove.

It was far in the distance, almost entirely hidden behind a pair of jagged black rocks which rose out of the frothing sea to shield it from view. Not many knew it was there. Not even his helmsman, it seemed, as Seppa's attention was fixed straight ahead.

Ivaar knew Oss' coastline well. He knew the safest places to climb the cliffs; the fastest route up to the fort; the best places to beach their ships.

But he wasn't leading Toki near any of them.

And he didn't know why.

'Open the gates!' Eadmund cried, watching the horses crest the hill. His eyes darted back to the beach where the first ships were being rushed up onto the black stones, watching as swathes of dark-haired, heavily tattooed men jumped into the water, shields up, swords and axes at the ready. 'Arlo! Pin them down on the beach! Sevrin! Take command. I need ten shield men! Three archers! Bram, get your bow! With me!' And Eadmund ran to the stairs, his men grabbing their weapons as they scrambled after him.

By the time they made their way out of the guard tower, the gates were already being dragged open. Eadmund pointed to one of the guards. 'Get more

men. You're going to need to close them in a hurry! I want you ready with the beam as soon as we're through!' And he turned, shield up, running away from the fort towards the straining horses, his small group of men charging after him.

'Shield wall!' Eadmund bellowed as a hail of arrows sped from the ramparts towards the men swarming across the beach, who stopped, quickly forming their own walls. Crouching behind his shield, Eadmund could hear the sound of hooves rhythmically striking the ground; the vibrations intensifying as the horses and their riders approached.

Thorgils saw the shield walls, certain that his heart had stopped. He swallowed, watching as more men flooded the beach, battering their weapons on shields as they raced to join the walls. Arms started pointing in their direction. 'Watch for arrows!' he screamed, and, dropping his head, Thorgils urged Leada on. He needed to get her behind Eadmund's wall and into the fort.

'Archers!'

Thorgils could hear the call from the beach. 'Go!' he yelled, kicking Leada one more time, and despite the length of their journey, and the challenge of the long hill, she dug in deeper, straining, spurred on by those open gates.

Eadmund, Bram and their archers ducked down as arrows shot towards them. The shields held as the arrows struck, thumping into the wood. Eadmund turned to check on the horses. They were getting closer. 'Archers! Draw! Aim! Release!'

Another volley of arrows flew towards the riders.

Torstan grimaced, head low, waiting for the impact, but it was Thorgils who went down ahead of him.

'Aarrghh!' Thorgils cried, feeling Leada jerk beneath him, quickly slipping his feet out of the stirrups, throwing himself clear of her falling body. Cracking his elbow on a rock as he hit the ground, he rolled away from Leada who was roaring in pain, already trying to get back on her feet.

Torstan yanked on his reins, skirting the tumbling, white horse and her red-haired rider, trying to avoid falling with them.

'Leada!' Eadmund pulled out of the shield wall, running towards his injured horse, relieved to see Thorgils back on his feet. 'Archers!' he called. 'Fire at will!' Eadmund waved Torstan and the rest of the riders onwards, towards the open gates.

An arrow had punctured Leada's neck, and she appeared to have stunned herself in the fall. She was shaking her head, blowing angrily, trying to keep to her feet, but she looked ready to fall down again.

‘Come on!’ Thorgils urged, tugging on her bridle as Eadmund grabbed her reins. ‘Come on, girl!’

Bram was there now. ‘We have to go!’ He rushed around to Leada’s rump and slapped her on it. ‘Go! Now!’

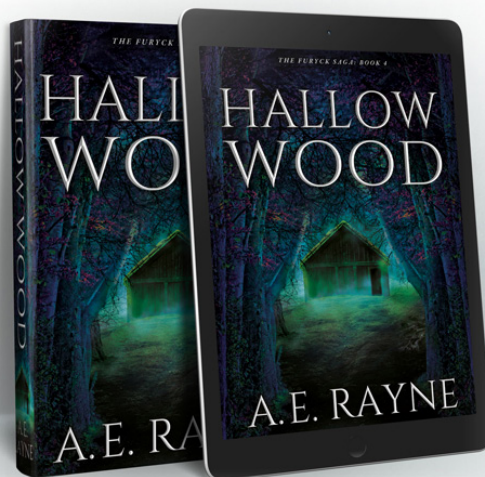
Eadmund and Thorgils ran alongside the limping horse as the arrows flew in endless waves from the ramparts. Arlo was working hard to give their enemies no chance to emerge from their shields until Eadmund and his men were safely inside the fort.

‘Shields! Back up! Let’s get inside!’ Eadmund yelled as he hurried Leada towards the gates. ‘Ready the beam!’

Borg crouched behind his shield wall, assessing his options, watching the gates close, twitching as another clattering of arrows stabbed into the shields protecting his head. He was happy to let the Osslanders use up their arrows. If that old fool, Frits Hallstein, had been right, they would not have many to spare.

And when the arrows were gone?

There would be nothing to stop them getting into Eadmund Skalleson’s fort.



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