

PAUL E. HORSMAN

THE SHARDHELD SAGA

Book 2

RUNEMASTER

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There are a glossary and a list of names at the back of the book.

Paul E. Horsman's books:

Zilverspoor Uitgeverij (Dutch Editions):

Rhidauna – Schaduw van de Revenaunt #1

Zihaen – Schaduw van de Revenaunt #2

Ordelanden - Schaduw van de Revenaunt #3 (2013)

Red Rune Books (English Editions):

Shardfall - The Shardheld Saga #1

Runemaster - The Shardheld Saga #2

Shardheld - The Shardheld Saga #3 (2014)

Rhidauna - The Shadow of the Revenaunt #1

Zihaen – The Shadow of the Revenaunt #2 (2013)

Ordelanden – The Shadow of the Revenaunt #3 (2014)

Shadows Under Nadril - A Revenaunt novelette

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CHAPTER 1 – MUUS

Muus opened his eyes to the sound of a rough song in the distance. He groaned, feeling gravel stinging his cheeks. For a moment he lay there, getting used to the hazy world around him, before he tried to sit up. He was on a beach, a man’s length past the surf, facing a long row of pale dunes. He remembered the storm - the heart-stopping sounds of a ship running aground on a reef - the broken mast carrying him to safety through the dark. Now it was day. Icy cold water soaked his clothes, but he felt too tired to move.

Again, he heard the song and he forced himself into a sitting position. The sea was still rough, sending rows of foaming waves to chastise the land. On their backs, the rollers bore a large wooden platform shoreward. Muus caught his breath as he stared at the incoming raft, with its posts sticking in the air. On top of it huddled two small figures, Hraab and Prince Ottil. The boys clung to each other, singing a bawdy warrior song. Muus shouted and ran into the surf.

The waves, angry at being robbed of two lives, grounded their raft with a crash, throwing the boys into the water. They rose spluttering, their song forgotten, and waded ashore.

Muus spread his arms and caught his young friends in a fierce embrace. ‘You’re totally mad,’ he said, tears pricking in his eyes.

‘I wasn’t scared,’ said Ottil firmly, as if continuing an earlier conversation.

‘You were,’ said Hraab.

‘Not.’ Then the prince started to cry. ‘I was. Damn. So what? Anyone would be scared by a shipwreck,’ said he defiantly.

‘Of course,’ said Muus, holding him close. ‘It’s no shame to be scared; you’re not made of stone.’ Looking over their heads, Muus searched the beach and the sea. Where were Birthe and her baby, the paladin and Kjelle? They couldn’t have drowned. It wouldn’t be fair. He

sighed. *Don't fool yourself; the Fates don't care about fair.* He turned his thoughts back to the boys and managed a smile. 'What a grand boat you were sailing.'

Ottil wiped his nose. 'It was the forecastle,' he said. 'The wind blew it into the sea after the crash, right under our noses. We jumped and off we sailed.'

Hraab plucked at his soaking wet tunic. 'Ehhh, I'm getting clean.'

'That wouldn't be a bad idea,' said Muus. 'I don't think you've washed anything since this whole thing began. At least take them off and wring them out.'

The boy lowered his eyes. 'No need, they'll dry.'

'Well, I will,' said Ottill, stepping out of his knee-length tunic. 'Help, will you?'

'Wait, someone's coming,' said Hraab. He pointed down the beach, where three riders came galloping their way, kicking up the surf around them.

'If we're in Brytanna, Nords won't be popular here.' Muus glanced at the two boys. 'Hraab doesn't look Nordish; he could be my little brother. You...'

'I don't look like a proper Nord either,' said Ottill, slipping his tunic back over his nakedness. 'I know. Other boys told me the same, before I bloodied their stupid noses.'

'Well, don't try and bloody mine. From now on you're a Gaul. Do you speak Gaullish?'

'Of course I do, plus a mouthful of Brytan and Old Rom.'

Muus heard a distant yell and knew the riders had seen them. 'Listen,' he said hurriedly. 'We're escaped slaves, our master Kjelle drowned. Remember that.'

'Only you hope he didn't,' said Hraab.

Muus shivered. 'He can't have.' Then he turned to watch the three riders coming through the surf. They were young, he saw, and in good spirits. They didn't look threatening at all, in spite of their spears.

As they came near, the riders reigned in and surrounded them. One, a young man of Muus's own age, with close-cropped, reddish hair, planted his spear in the sand and said something in a foreign tongue.

Muus understood what he meant. He hadn't spoken the other's language for years, but automatically his mind formed answering words. 'We are ship racked,' he said. 'No, wrecked. We ran on the rocks.'

'Shipwrecked?' The young man looked surprised. 'Last night's storm? Where is the wreck?'

Little Hraab looked up at the rider, his eyes large as if in remembered fear. 'We drifted all night, like storm-tossed trash, unable to see. It was scary.'

'I bet it was.' One of the other riders made an averting move with his free hand. 'You were blessed; it was rough last night.'

Muus looked back at the sea. No wreck, nor any reefs to be seen. 'Perhaps the ship sank. The rocks had torn out her bottom.'

'Whence do you come?' asked the first rider. 'You are clearly of the Un-a-Dach, but your words are strange.'

'I haven't spoken our language for ten years,' said Muus. 'We were slaves of the Norden.'

The young man nodded gravely. 'And now you return to your homeland? I wish you joy! How did you escape?'

A breeze coming across the sea set Muus shivering in his wet clothes. 'We were underway to Harflot with our master. I was standing at the mast when we struck, and went overboard with it. I held on to it and kept my upper body out of the water. My master was on the quarterdeck, so he must have drowned. Now we've returned, free at last.'

'Woo!' The rider gravely lifted his spear. 'The Fates were surely with you, friend. What is your name?'

Muus frowned, surprised. 'All these years I had forgotten my name, but now it has returned. I am Terrel, son of Slade, from the village of Owwich.' He felt as if he was talking about someone else.

The riders exchanged glances. Then the redhead smiled. 'I've never heard of Owwich. No matter; my father will know, or else the druid. Who are your friends? The little one could be your brother, but who's the other? He isn't a Nord?' he asked anxiously.

Muus smiled. 'This is Otil, from Gaul. The small one is Hraab.'

'A Gaul, that's good,' said the rider, relieved. 'We have no quarrel with the King of the Gauls. Why, one of merchant Theodgard's peddlers passed through yesterday. They sell the finest wares of Harflot.'

The young rider sat up straight, as if he'd come to a decision. 'Well, it's all very strange. But you and young Hraab are clearly of the Un-a-Dach, and those are to be trusted. You are heartily welcome, friends. We'll take you to our village. I am Gillach, son of Cardoc chief of Windiss.' He gestured to his companions. 'We can ride double. It's not far to the village, but you look too tired to walk.'

Muus glanced at Hraab and saw him nod. *Un-a-Dach? It feels as if I should know that name but I don't*, he thought. Then he shrugged. *I can't do a thing about it*. Weariness enveloped him and everything about him was bitter cold. Thankfully, he mounted behind the rider, clutching at the latter's saddle.

The horses walked a twisting path from the beach through a stretch of grass-grown dunes to a broad stream, with cultivated lands beyond.

'Here's the Winde River,' said Gillach, as they forded the running waters. 'Our village lies behind the bend.'

Muus felt tears sting his eyes. It was like coming home. He knew how the village would look, the round huts under thatched roofs, with chickens, pigs and playing children. His eyes sought a man in a red mantle, and a small woman with black hair like his own. They weren't there, of course; they came from his dreams. He saw Hraab watching him, but for once the boy remained silent.

At the entrance to the village, they were met by a burly man who bore a resemblance to Gillach. He watched their coming impassively and as they came near, lifted his hand in greeting.

'Do you bring us visitors or slaves, my son?' he said, without moving an inch.

Muus stiffened, but Gillach chuckled as he reined in his horse. 'Visitors, father. We checked for flotsam on the beach. Instead of valuables, we found these three. The storm had plucked them from their ship on the reefs somewhere and brought them here.'

Muus clambered stiffly from the horse. 'Thank you for your help, Gillach,' he said. He turned to the burly man, showing his open hands. 'Greetings, I am Terrel, once from the village of Owwich, now an escaped slave of the Nord. My friends are Hraab, and Otil from Gaul.'

The man spread his hands. 'I'm Cardoc, chief of Windiss. The Un-a-Dach are always welcome in our village.' He turned to his son. 'Our guests appear in need of food and warmth. Take them home to your mother's care.'

Gillach dismounted and sent his mates away with the horses. He smiled broadly. 'She will be pleased.'

'That's most important,' said his father. 'I'll see you later, friends.'

As they walked through the village, along paths muddy from the late storm, they were halted by a tall, green-robed man. He looked at Muus with a strange expression on his face. 'I dreamed last night that a stranger came. Now you arrive and the world is in balance once more. But...' He peered at Muus. 'What is your purpose here?'

Gillach frowned. 'Druid Ewynn, with respect, our guests have just survived a shipwreck. They need food, drink, and a chance to rest.'

'A strong mind can overcome the weakness of the body,' said the man dismissively.

‘We would be pleased to speak with you, master druid,’ piped up Hraab. ‘But our brains are dull from lack of sleep and the roaring of the sea in our ears. We wouldn’t do your wisdom justice.’

The druid flinched at that. ‘You are right, child. I am overhasty. You will answer my question later, when you are fed and rested.’ Then he walked away, with the hem of his green robe swirling around his bare legs.

Gillach grinned. ‘He’s very wise, but not entirely of this world.’

Hraab and Otil glanced at each other, but neither said anything.

The chief’s house, next to the mead hall, was a squat building, constructed of rough logs. Inside, in the dim central room, a corpulent woman looked up from her work. She held her stout arms out to them. ‘Oh my poor boys, but you look terrible. Such a nasty thing is a shipwreck. Sit by the fire and make yourselves comfortable. I’d say you’d like a bit of my stew, and fresh bread?’

‘Yes!’ said Otil eagerly. ‘Please,’ he added and the woman laughed.

‘It was a nasty storm,’ she continued, while she filled three bowls. ‘You should thank the Gods you survived. It blew so hard; many of our houses got damaged.’

Muus found her chatter peaceful and while he couldn’t understand everything she said, her words soothed his mind. He sopped up the remaining stew with a crust of bread and propped in his mouth. For the first time since long, he was content. A loud burp escaped him and the woman smiled. ‘Bless you.’ He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

The press of small bodies woke him. As he opened his eyes, a half-circle of children stood staring at him with awe on their dirty faces. He quickly closed his eyes again.

‘Truly,’ said Hraab. The boy was standing beside him with his hands lifted, in the middle of some tall story. ‘Lightning sprang from his fingers to the tops of the mountains. Its mighty noise roared as a dragon’s breath between the cliffs. The deadly machines shooting at us from the summit shattered, raining debris and bodies for the waiting fjord sharks. The lightning followed them down, to the ships that were thinking to kill us. Fires spread and the wails of the dying echoed off the fjord walls, as the enemy drakkars smoked and sank away into the bottomless depths. The sharks ate well that night.’ Hraab’s voice had taken on an unexpected storytelling power, and even the chief’s wife had stopped babbling to listen. ‘That’s him,’ said the boy in a dramatic voice, pointing at Muus. ‘Behold Terrel of Owwich, master of lighting. He is soft-spoken, but his anger is terrible. Truly, a high and wise worker of magics is Runemaster Terrel. Windiss is doing well in aiding him and the Gods will bless Windiss in return.’ Then he brought his hands together and fell silent.

Their hostess sighed and shook herself. ‘What’s this?’ she said, putting her hands on her hips. ‘Shoo, children! Go pester others, but leave the Runemaster in peace.’ With a last, awed look at the mighty visitor in their midst, the children hurried into the sunlight.

‘What did you tell them?’ said Muus in an agitated whisper, his eyes still firmly shut. ‘What nonsense tales were you spinning that no one will believe?’

‘He gave them the truth,’ said Otil, dropping down beside Muus. ‘He wasn’t really exaggerating either. Bards will sing of your deeds that night.’ Then he closed his eyes and fell promptly asleep.

‘But why tell it here?’ Muus opened his eyes, blinking against the light.

Hraab frowned at him. ‘It will be better for you, and for us, when everyone knows you for a powerful Runemaster. And the children will spread the word even faster than our hostess could.’

‘A fine Runemaster I am! I can’t even control whatever power I have and I burn myself whenever I use it.’

‘Help will come,’ said Hraab, sitting back.

Muus looked around as a long shadow fell over him. He recognized the lanky figure of the village druid.

‘Good day,’ said Ewynn absently. ‘I came to see how you were doing.’

‘He’s doing fine.’ The chief’s wife frowned at the intrusion. ‘If they’d all leave him alone. First all those pesky infants come, ruining his sleep and now you. The poor dear needs to rest.’

The druid ignored her protests and sat down opposite Muus. ‘The children are babbling nonsense about you being a Runemaster. You are much too young, of course.’ He eyed Muus suspiciously. ‘Who are you, exactly?’

‘My memory is still misty,’ said Muus. ‘I know I’m Terrel from Owwich, son of Slade. I was stolen from my village by a Viking raider called Largassen. Broken bits of memory float around in my head. I remember pieces of the journey overseas and of the place where they sold me. After that, I was Muus, body slave to the Lord Holderling.’

‘Owwich.’ The druid made a sign, at the same time a blessing and a warding off against evil. ‘I heard what happened there ten years ago. I knew Slade; we studied together. He married Aeylla, a girl of the Un-a-Dach, the rune people of Alben. They had a son called Terrel; that is truth. Their village was pillaged and burned. No one survived and Owwich ceased to exist.’ His pale eyes bored into Muus. ‘You say you are that Terrel? You have much of the Un-a-Dach in you, young man. Not as much as your friend here, but still a great deal. Give me your hand; show me you speak the truth.’

Without hesitation, Muus held out his hand and the other gripped it. As with the Völva Asgisla, he felt a faint tingling. The druid’s face strained and sweat stood out on his forehead. Finally, he sighed. ‘No.’ He let go of Muus’s hand and stared at his own fingers. ‘I can’t read you. The *geis* blocking your memory is strong. It will take years for it to dissolve fully.’

‘I don’t have years,’ said Muus. He squared his shoulders. ‘But I do speak the truth.’

The druid stared at him. ‘Un-a-Dach don’t lie, so I must accept your word.’ He touched Muus’s forehead with his fingertips. ‘You are young; let the *geis* run its course.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why not?’ asked the druid softly.

Muus looked around. ‘I can’t tell you here.’

Ewynn’s brows rose. ‘Come with me then.’ He unfolded his long legs and went outside with Muus and Hraab, leaving Ottil snoring on the bench. As they walked through the village, big-eyed children followed in their path like ducklings. The druid’s house was small, almost bare of furniture and scrupulously clean. Ewynn closed the door, shutting the children out. ‘Sit down,’ he said, waving to a low bench, and sat himself down on the edge of his cot. ‘Now tell me.’

Instead of speaking, Muus took out the shard. Its blue light filled every corner of the hut.

Ewynn’s face had gone white. ‘The skyshard?’ He stared at Muus. ‘Are you the one?’

Hraab looked at the druid, his dark eyes still, his young face strangely intent. ‘Muus is the Shardheld. He has to be made ready.’

Druid Ewynn swallowed. ‘Not by me.’

Hraab smiled gently. ‘Don’t worry, Master Ewynn, your assistance will not be required. Who of your order would be advanced enough to help?’

‘That would be Fardoragh,’ said the druid without hesitation. ‘He’s an Archdruid and as old as the earth. If he can’t assist you, nobody can.’ He sighed in regret or relief as Muus put the stone away and dimness returned with double strength.

‘Where will we find this Fardoragh?’ asked Hraab.

‘He is living to the west of here, past the marshes. I’m not sure he will consent to see you, though. Fardoragh is a recluse.’ Ewynn thought for a moment. ‘You need a guide. I know just the one: Moirra. She’s a girl of your mother’s people, Shardheld. She studied under Fardoragh

and she's about the only one with access to him. She lives alone in the Bloodbogs not far from here. It will take some time to contact her and ask her if she will receive you. I suggest you, eh, rest, sleep and eat in the meantime.'

It took a sevenday and three for Moirra's answer to return. It sounded, barely, positive. She agreed to see the strangers and discuss their problem, but she wouldn't promise anything until she had spoken them. The message, written in runic letters on a writing slate, sounded slightly peevish, echoing the face of Ewynn's servant, whom Moirra had kept waiting for nearly two full days before consenting to see him.

'She isn't an easy one,' said the druid apologetic. 'Besides, she is in retreat, searching for her *uwa'th*, her self-awareness. That is never an easy road.' With a look at the closed face of his servant, he added, 'The chief will give you a guide to her house.'

Two days later, they took their leave of the hospitable Windiss folk, riding double with Gillach and his two friends. The Windiss riders didn't mind their assignment at all. The weather was dry, and they were in good cheer as they rode through the fields.

'That's one big tree,' said Ottil suddenly, pointing at an enormous ash in the middle of a stubble-field.

'Our holy tree,' said Gillach proudly. 'It's the biggest one in the world. We hold our feasts and ceremonies right between its feet.'

On impulse, Muus pulled at the rider's sleeve. 'Stop for a moment, will you,' As Gillach reined in, Muus sprang down and walked over to the tree. It was the biggest ash he'd ever seen. Its gnarled roots were thick as a man's body and in summer, the circle of its shade would be at least six manlengths.

Muus touched his heart. Ritual words sprang to his mind. 'I would beg a gift, great ash.' He stooped and carefully dug a small seedling from between the tree's feet. 'Thank you for your seed, ash tree. May you grow ever stronger.' He put the seedling with a bit of earth into the pouch with the skyshard and climbed back onto Gillach's horse. Nobody said anything, although Hraab smiled slightly.

Muus felt he had to explain. 'It just came to me; the ash helps me to grow in understanding and keeps me rooted to the ground at the same time. I think I can use such guidance.' Then he looked at Hraab. 'Where did I get this idea? I never thought of the wisdom of the trees before.'

'Your understanding is already growing,' grinned the boy. 'Hold on to that little one for a while.'

'Wasn't your father a druid, Runemaster?' said Gillach carefully. 'Perhaps his teachings return to you, now you're back on sacred soil.'

'You could well be right,' said Muus. 'But it's damned unsettling to have memories jump at you from nowhere.'

'I'd say that's better than getting them back all at once.' Hraab wriggled on the horse's broad back. 'If you're finished, can we get on? This isn't the most comfortable seat for someone of my size -- my crotch is feeling a bit stretched, you know.'

The others laughed and they rode away.