Midnight Tides

Steven Erikson

Chapter One

Listen! The seas whisper
and dream of breaking truths
in the crumbling of stone

Hantallit of Miner Sluice

Year of the Late Frost
One year before the Letherii Seventh Closure
The Ascension of the Empty Hold

Here, then, is the tale. between the swish of the tides,when giants knelt down and became mountains. When they fell scattered on the land like the ballast stones of the sky, yet could not hold fast against the rising dawn. Between the swish of the tides, we will speak of one such giant. Because the tale hides with his own.

And because it amuses.

Thus.

In darkness he closed his eyes. Only by day did he elect to open them, for he reasoned in this manner: night defies vision and so, if little can be seen, what value seeking to pierce the gloom?

Witness as well, this. He came to the edge of the land and discovered the sea, and was fascinated by the mysterious fluid. A fascination that became a singular obsession through the course of that fated day. He could see how the waves moved, up and down along the entire shore, a ceaseless motion that ever threatened to engulf all the land, yet ever failed to do so. He watched the sea through the afternoon's high winds, witness to its wild thrashing far up along the sloping strand, and sometimes it did indeed reach far, but always it would sullenly retreat once more.

When night arrived, he closed his eyes and lay down to sleep. Tomorrow, he decided, he would look once more upon this sea.

In darkness he closed his eyes.

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The tides came with the night, swirling up round the giant. The tides came and drowned him as he slept. And the water seeped minerals into his flesh, until he became as rock, a gnarled ridge on the strand. Then, each night for thousands of years, the tides came to wear away at his form. Stealing his shape.

But not entirely. To see him true, even to this day, one must look in darkness. Or close one's eyes to slits in brightest sunlight. Glance askance, or focus on all but the stone itself.

Of all the gifts Father Shadow has given his children, this one talent stands tallest. Look away to see. Trust in it, and you will be led into Shadow. Where all truths hide.

Look away to see.

Now, look away.

The mice scattered as the deeper shadow flowed across snow brushed blue by dusk. They scampered in wild panic, but, among them, one's fate was already sealed. A lone tufted, taloned foot snapped down, piercing furry flesh and crushing minute bones.

At the clearing's edge, the owl had dropped silently from its branch, sailing out over the hard-packed snow and its litter of seeds, and the arc of its flight, momentarily punctuated by plucking the mouse from the ground, rose up once more, this time in a heavy flapping of wings, towards a nearby tree. It landed one-legged, and a moment later it began to feed.

The figure who jogged across the glade a dozen heartbeats later saw nothing untoward. The mice were all gone, the snow solid enough to leave no signs of their passing, and the owl froze motionless in its hollow amidst the branches of the spruce tree, eyes wide as they followed the figure's progress across the clearing. Once it had passed, the owl resumed feeding.

Dusk belonged to the hunters, and the raptor was not yet done this night.

As he weaved through the frost-rimed humus of the trail, Trull Sengar's thoughts were distant, making him heedless of the forest surrounding him, uncharacteristically distracted from all the signs and details it offered. He had not even paused to make propitiation to Sheltatha Lore, Daughter Dusk, the most cherished of the Three Daughters of Father Shadow - although he would make recompense at tomorrow's sunset - and, earlier, he had moved unmindful through the patches of lingering light that blotted the trail, risking the attention of fickle Sukul Ankhadu, the Daughter of Deceit, also known as Dapple.

The Calach breeding beds swarmed with seals. They'd come early, surprising Trull in his collecting of raw jade above the shoreline. Alone, the arrival of the seals would

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engender only excitement in the young Tiste Edur, but there had been other arrivals, in ships ringing the bay, and the harvest had been well under way.

Letherii, the white-skinned peoples from the south.

He could imagine the anger of those in the village he now approached, once he delivered the news of his discovery - an anger he shared. This encroachment on Edur territories was brazen, the theft of seals that rightly belonged to his people an arrogant defiance of the old agreements.

There were fools among the Letherii, just as there were fools among the Edur. Trull could not imagine this broaching being anything but unsanctioned. The Great Meeting was only two cycles of the moon away. It served neither side's purpose to spill blood now. No matter

that the Edur would be right in attacking and destroying the intruder ships; the Letherii delegation would be outraged at the slaughter of its citizens, even citizens contravening the laws. The chances of agreeing upon a new treaty had just become minuscule.

And this disturbed Trull Sengar. One long and vicious war had just ended for the Edur: the thought of another beginning was too hard to bear.

He had not embarrassed his brothers during the wars of subjugation; on his wide belt was a row of twenty-one red-stained rivets, each one marking a coup, and among those seven were ringed in white paint, to signify actual kills. Only his elder brother's belt sported more trophies among the male children of Tomad Sengar, and that was right and proper, given Fear Sengar's eminence among the warriors of the Hiroth tribe.

Of course, battles against the five other tribes of the Edur were strictly bound in rules and prohibitions, and even vast, protracted battles had yielded only a handful of actual deaths. Even so, the conquests had been exhausting. Against the Letherii, there were no rules to constrain the Edur warriors. No counting coup. Just killing. Nor did the enemy need a weapon in hand - even the helpless and the innocent would know the sword's bite. Such slaughter stained warrior and victim alike.

But Trull well knew that, though he might decry the killing that was to come, he would do so only to himself, and he would stride alongside his brothers, sword in hand, to deliver the Edur judgement upon the trespassers. There was no choice. Turn away from this crime and more would follow, in waves unending.

His steady jog brought him past the tanneries, with their troughs and stone-lined pits, to the forest edge. A few Letherii slaves glanced his way, quickly bowing in deference until he was past. The towering cedar logs of the village wall rose from the clearing ahead, over which woodsmoke hung in stretched streams. Fields of rich black soil spread out to either side of the narrow, raised track leading to the distant gate. Winter had only just begun to release its grip on the earth, and the first planting of the season was still weeks away. By midsummer, close to thirty different types of

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plants would fill these fields, providing food, medicine, fibres and feed for the livestock, many among the thirty of a flowering variety, drawing the bees from which honey and wax were procured. The tribe's women oversaw the slaves in such harvesting. The men would leave in small groups to journey into the forest, to cut timber or hunt, whilst others set out in the Knarri ships to harvest from the seas and shoals.

Or so it should be, when peace ruled the tribes. The past dozen years had seen more war-parties setting out than any other kind, and so the people had on occasion suffered. Until the war, hunger had never threatened the Edur. Trull wanted an end to such depredations. Hannan Mosag, Warlock King of the Hiroth, was now overlord to all the Edur tribes. From a host of warring peoples, a confederacy had been wrought, although Trull well knew that it was a confederacy in name only. Hannan Mosag held as hostage the firstborn sons of the subjugated chiefs - his K'risnan Cadre - and ruled as dictator. Peace, then, at the point of a sword, but peace none the less.

A recognizable figure was striding from the palisade gate, approaching the fork in the trail where Trull now halted. 'I greet you, Binadas,' he said.

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