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THE EVENING AND THE MORNING

THE PREQUEL TO THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH



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PART ONE
THE WEDDING

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THURSDAY, 17 JUNE 997

IT WAS HARD TO stay awake all night, Edgar found, even on the most important night of your life.

He had spread his cloak over the reeds on the floor and now he lay on it, dressed in the knee-length brown wool tunic that was all he wore in summer, day and night. In winter he would wrap the cloak around him and lie near the fire. But now the weather was warm: Midsummer Day was a week away.

Edgar always knew dates. Most people had to ask priests, who kept calendars. Edgar's elder brother Erman had once said to him: 'How come you know when Easter is?' and he had replied: 'Because it's the first Sunday after the first full moon after the twenty-first day of March, obviously.' It had been a mistake to add 'obviously', because Erman had punched him in the stomach for being sarcastic. That had been years ago, when Edgar was small. He was grown, now. He would be eighteen three days after Midsummer. His brothers no longer punched him.

He shook his head. Random thoughts sent him drifting off. He tried to make himself uncomfortable, lying on his fist to stay awake.

He wondered how much longer he had to wait.

He turned his head and looked around by firelight. His home was like almost every other house in the town of Combe: oak plank walls, a thatched roof, and an earth floor partly covered with reeds from the banks of the nearby river. It had no windows. In the middle of the single room was a square of stones surrounding the hearth. Over

the fire stood an iron tripod from which cooking pots could be hung, and its legs made spidery shadows on the underside of the roof. All around the walls were wooden pegs on which were hung clothes, cooking utensils and boat-building tools.

Edgar was not sure how much of the night had passed, because he might have dozed off, perhaps more than once. Earlier, he had listened to the sounds of the town settling for the night: a couple of drunks singing an obscene ditty, the bitter accusations of a marital quarrel in a neighbouring house, a door slamming and a dog barking and, somewhere nearby, a woman sobbing. But now there was nothing but the soft lullaby of waves on a sheltered beach. He stared in the direction of the door, looking for tell-tale lines of light around its edges, and saw only darkness. That meant either that the moon had set, so the night was well advanced, or that the sky was cloudy, which would tell him nothing.

The rest of his family lay around the room, close to the walls where there was less smoke. Pa and Ma were back to back. Sometimes they would wake in the middle of the night and embrace, whispering and moving together, until they fell back, panting; but they were fast asleep now, Pa snoring. Erman, the eldest brother at twenty, lay near Edgar, and Eadbald, the middle one, was in the corner. Edgar could hear their steady, untroubled breathing.

At last, the church bell struck.

There was a monastery on the far side of the town. The monks had a way of measuring the hours of the night: they made big graduated candles that told the time as they burned down. One hour before dawn they would ring the bell, then get up to chant their service of Matins.

Edgar lay still a little longer. The bell might have disturbed Ma, who woke easily. He gave her time to sink back into deep slumber. Then, at last, he got to his feet.

Silently he picked up his cloak, his shoes and his belt with its

sheathed dagger attached. On bare feet he crossed the room, avoiding the furniture: a table, two stools and a bench. The door opened silently: Edgar had greased the wooden hinges yesterday with a generous smear of sheep's tallow.

If one of his family woke now, and spoke to him, he would say he was going outside to piss, and hope they did not spot that he was carrying his shoes.

Eadbald grunted. Edgar froze. Had Eadbald woken up, or just made a noise in his sleep? Edgar could not tell. But Eadbald was the passive one, always keen to avoid a fuss, like Pa. He would not make trouble.

Edgar stepped out and closed the door behind him carefully.

The moon had set, but the sky was clear and the beach was starlit. Between the house and the high-tide mark was a boatyard. Pa was a boatbuilder, and his three sons worked with him. Pa was a good craftsman and a poor businessman, so Ma made all the money decisions, especially the difficult calculation of what price to ask for something as complicated as a boat or ship. If a customer tried to bargain down the price, Pa would be willing to give in, but Ma would make him stand firm.

Edgar glanced at the yard as he laced his shoes and buckled his belt. There was only one vessel under construction, a small boat for rowing upriver. Beside it stood a large and valuable stockpile of timber, the trunks split into halves and quarters, ready to be shaped into the parts of a boat. About once a month, the whole family went into the forest and felled a mature oak tree. Pa and Edgar would begin, alternately swinging long-handled axes, cutting a precise wedge out of the trunk. Then they would rest while Erman and Eadbald took over. When the tree came down, they would trim it then float the wood downriver to Combe. They had to pay, of course: the forest belonged to Wigelm, the thane to whom most people in Combe paid their rent, and he demanded twelve silver pennies for each tree.

As well as the timber pile, the yard contained a barrel of tar, a coil of rope and a whetstone. All were guarded by a chained-up mastiff called Grendel, black with a grey muzzle, too old to do much harm to thieves but still able to bark an alarm. Grendel was quiet now, watching Edgar incuriously with his head resting on his front paws. Edgar knelt down and stroked his head. 'Goodbye, old dog,' he murmured, and Grendel wagged his tail without getting up.

Also in the yard was one finished vessel, and Edgar thought of it as his own. He had built it himself to an original design, based on a Viking ship. Edgar had never actually seen a Viking – they had not raided Combe in his lifetime – but two years ago a wreck had washed up on the beach, empty and fire-blackened, its dragon figurehead half-smashed, presumably after some battle. Edgar had been awestruck by its mutilated beauty: the graceful curves, the long serpentine prow and the slender hull. He had been most impressed by the large out-jutting keel that ran the length of the ship, which – he had realized after some thought – gave the stability that allowed the Vikings to cross the seas. Edgar's boat was a lesser version, with two oars and a small, square sail.

Edgar knew he had a talent. He was already a better boatbuilder than his elder brothers, and before long he would overtake Pa. He had an intuitive sense of how forms fitted together to make a stable structure. Years ago he had overheard Pa say to Ma: 'Erman learns slowly and Eadbald learns fast, but Edgar seems to understand before the words are out of my mouth.' It was true. Some men could pick up a musical instrument they had never played, a pipe or a lyre, and get a tune out of it after a few minutes. Edgar had such instincts about boats, and houses too. He would say: 'That boat will list to starboard,' or: 'That roof will leak,' and he was always right.

Now he untied his boat and pushed it down the beach. The sound of the hull scraping on the sand was muffled by the shushing of the waves breaking on the shore.

He was startled by a girlish giggle. In the starlight he saw a naked woman lying on the sand, and a man on top of her. Edgar probably knew them, but their faces were not clearly visible and he looked away quickly, not wanting to recognize them. He had surprised them in an illicit tryst, he guessed. The woman seemed young and perhaps the man was married. The clergy preached against such affairs, but people did not always follow the rules. Edgar ignored the couple and pushed his boat into the water.

He glanced back at the house, feeling a pang of regret, wondering whether he would ever see it again. It was the only home he could remember. He knew, because he had been told, that he had been born in another town, Exeter, where his father had worked for a master boatbuilder; then the family had moved, while Edgar was still a baby, and had set up home in Combe, where Pa had started his own enterprise with one order for a rowboat; but Edgar could not remember any of that. This was the only home he knew, and he was leaving it for good.

He was lucky to have found employment elsewhere. Business had slowed since the renewal of Viking attacks on the south of England when Edgar was nine years old. Trading and fishing were dangerous while the marauders were near. Only the brave bought boats.

There were three ships in the harbour now, he saw by starlight: two herring fishers and a Frankish merchant ship. Dragged up on the beach were a handful of smaller craft, river and coastal vessels. He had helped to build one of the fishers. But he could remember a time when there had always been a dozen or more ships in port.

He felt a fresh breeze from the south-west, the prevailing wind here. His boat had a sail – small, because they were so costly: a full-size sail for a seagoing ship would take one woman four years to make. But it was hardly worthwhile unfurling it for the short trip across the bay. He began to row, something that hardly taxed him. Edgar was heavily muscled, like a blacksmith. His father and brothers

were the same. All day, six days a week, they worked with axe, adze and auger, shaping the oak strakes that formed the hulls of boats. It was hard work and it made strong men.

His heart lifted. He had got away. And he was going to meet the woman he loved. The stars were brilliant; the beach glowed white; and, when his oars broke the surface of the water, the curling foam was like the fall of her hair on her shoulders.

Her name was Sungifu, which was usually shortened to Sunni, and she was exceptional in every way.

He could see the premises along the seafront, most of them workplaces of fishermen and traders: the forge of a tinsmith who made rustproof items for ships; the long yard in which a roper wove his lines; and the huge kiln of a tar maker who roasted pine logs to produce the sticky liquid with which boatbuilders waterproofed their vessels. The town always looked bigger from the water: it was home to several hundred people, most making their living, directly or indirectly, from the sea.

He looked across the bay to his destination. In the darkness he would not have been able to see Sunni even if she had been there, which he knew she was not, since they had arranged to meet at dawn. But he could not help staring at the place where she soon would be.

Sunni was twenty-one, older than Edgar by more than three years. She had caught his attention one day when he was sitting on the beach staring at the Viking wreck. He knew her by sight, of course – he knew everyone living in the small town – but he had not particularly noticed her before, and did not recall anything about her family. ‘Were you washed up with the wreck?’ she had said. ‘You were sitting so still, I thought you were driftwood.’ She had to be imaginative, he saw right away, to say something like that off the top of her head; and he had explained what fascinated him about the lines of the vessel, feeling that she would understand. They had talked for an hour and he had fallen in love.

Then she told him she was married, but it was already too late.

Her husband, Cyneric, was thirty. She had been fourteen when she married him. He had a small herd of milk cows, and Sunni managed the dairy. She was shrewd, and made plenty of money for her husband. They had no children.

Edgar had quickly learned that Sunni hated Cyneric. Every night, after the evening milking, he went to an alehouse called the Sailors and got drunk. While he was there, Sunni could slip into the woods and meet Edgar.

However, from now on there would be no more hiding. Today they would run away together; or, to be exact, sail away. Edgar had the offer of a job and a house in a fishing village fifty miles along the coast. He had been lucky to find a boatbuilder who was hiring. Edgar had no money – he never had money, Ma said he had no need of it – but his tools were in a locker built into the boat. They would start a new life.

As soon as everyone realized they had gone, Cyneric would consider himself free to marry again. A wife who ran away with another man was, in practice, divorcing herself: the Church might not like it, but that was the custom. Within a few weeks, Sunni said, Cyneric would go into the countryside and find a desperately poor family with a pretty fourteen-year-old daughter. Edgar wondered why the man wanted a wife: he had little interest in sex, according to Sunni. 'He likes to have someone to push around,' she had said. 'My problem was that I grew old enough to despise him.'

Cyneric would not come after them, even if he found out where they were, which was unlikely at least for some time to come. 'And if we're wrong about that, and Cyneric finds us, I'll beat the shit out of him,' Edgar had said. Sunni's expression had told him that she thought this was a foolish boast, and he knew she was right. Hastily, he had added: 'But it probably won't come to that.'