

Mel Keegan

An East Wind Blowing



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An East Wind Blowing

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Chapter One

He lay so still, so silent in the heather and so well camouflaged by the green and blue pattern of his tunic that the yellow brimstone butterfly came unconcernedly within a hand's span of his face. Unblinking, he watched the fragile wings as it settled on his outstretched forearm to sun itself, and then his eyes moved on beyond it to the throwing knife, which lay with its honed blade in his upturned palm.

The spring day was mild, one of the first warm days of the season. The sun was pleasant on his back and the whole world was so quiet, he might have been the last human being alive as he lay on the crest of the low, heather-clad hillock and scented the breeze. Not far away was a straying flock of black-faced sheep; he heard their voices, and the wind rustling in the young bracken, the hum of bees working among the yellow gorse flowers, and the larks high overhead. It would have been easy to set his head down and doze but he was waiting, working, not lounging here.

Below the hillock was an old, well-worn track leading between the burrows of several colonies of hares, and today Ronan was hunting. Hares were creatures with short memories. He had hunted here only days before, and already they were using the same track again, their signs were everywhere. As he flexed his fingers the blade moved in his palm, catching the sun, and the brimstone butterfly spread its wings. A dog fox had been here before him. He could smell it, and it might have cheated him today: hares were not entirely stupid.

Almost imperceptibly he stretched and decided to wait a little longer before abandoning this hunting ground in favour of another where the fox had not drawn blood recently. Six foxes lived on this part of the moor. He knew them all by sight and they knew him, for humans and foxes shared the same territory, the same game. Sometimes he would cheat them instead, but it did not much matter. Spring had come early this year and the hunting season would be rich.

The old folk were prophesying a good year and a late winter, but to Ronan of Whitestonecliff even

summer seemed years away, and winter was too distant to be anxious about. Every day was almost long enough to lose track of in itself, and he was too busy to spare a thought for other seasons, other years.

To his hands fell a variety of duties, some he cherished, some he scorned, but he had no authority to choose his own work. As the eldest son still living in his father's house, it was his duty to do most of the hunting, but this at least was no imposition. He would have chosen to leave the settlement under the whitestone cliff face and immerse himself in the solitude of the moor. Only there did he feel free, unfettered, where no man gave him orders he was honour-bound to obey, no one watched over his shoulder as he worked, told him he was lazy or inept, or reminded him of who, of what he was.

He should have been a warrior, the son of a warrior. He had always said so, for he could feel the heart of a warrior inside his chest. But the gods had made their own plans for him, before he was born. The father they gave him was an artisan—a good one, but no matter how he tried, Ronan could not discover any

enthusiasm for the stonemason's trade. Every bone in his body was that of a warrior, but not only his father's wishes barred him from the way of the sword.

Tradition also denied him. The implacable gods of tradition seemed determined to strangle him before he reached his seventeenth summer. He was born to a peasant household which owned no land and had never owned any. His place was working the land for others, and if not this labour, then serving them in some useful trade. He was a freeman—his family were not landed but neither were they bonded, and he could carry a warspear in the ranks of the soldiers who marched to battle for the chief in Derventio.

But this was not being a *warrior*, as Ronan had often argued to his father. A peasant freeman could either farm or fight. A fighter made to farm would lose his wits in the sheer tedium of the work, and a farmer made to fight would just as swiftly lose his life through his own ineptitude. One or the other trade was possible, not both. So Ronan would tell his father, and then duck as the man aimed a cuff at his ear.

He was on the point of stirring, abandoning the

heather slope, when his narrowed eyes caught the tiny movement, the twitch of long ears beyond the fronds of the small spring bracken at the edge of the trail. The ears twitched again, and Ronan's sensitive fingers closed about the blade. He came fully awake, his attention focusing on the creature whose quivering nose had just appeared from the bracken fronds. He commanded the accuracy of long practice and the hare died so quickly, so soundlessly, its fellows blinked bewilderedly at it. As they came out of the bracken Ronan got to his feet and brushed down his tunic and leather breeches.

The moor was wide and green, stretching away to the mountains fifty miles in the west, darkened by intermittent woodland, crossed by many streams, and it was his. Ronan did not own it, nor would he ever, but he felt he held dominion here, for he used the moor, served it and was served by it. If it did not belong to him, then no one held dominion over it.

He was broad-shouldered and lean with youth, not a boy any longer and yet not properly a man, though he was as strong as many a grown man. The

sun and wind had tanned him deeply, bringing light streaks among the chestnut-brown mass of his hair. His jaw was clean-shaven, his face smooth, his features handsome, with warmth and candour which would render him boyish for many years to come. He was not permitted to be a warrior, but his hands were hard, leathery, and the fingers that retrieved the throwing knife were callused by hard work.

The hare was a large buck, fattened after the winter, his third catch of the day, and his last. He took it back to the tall, solitary pine where he had hung the others out of reach of the marauding foxes, and there he gutted it, cleaned the knife and slid the blade back into its sheath, which rode at his right side.

Mid-afternoon was warm, the sky pale but clear until it was sullied in the northeast by a pall of massing cloud. Ronan set his back against the rough bark of the pine, rubbing his shoulders there as he watched the clouds. They were coming up on a strong wind, and it would be raining by evening. Even to Ronan, the moor was a desolate place in the rain.

He bit his lip, not relishing the thought of being

tied to Whitestonecliff and home for the whole day. He would run errands, endure the childish bickering of his younger brothers and sisters, while his father worked up the road on the chieftain's land, plying his trade. On the outskirts of the old Roman town of Derventio, the houses had begun to tumble down with age, and there was work aplenty for a good stonemason.

The wind swung about and all at once had the cold, cutting edge of a knife. Ronan pushed away from the tree, gathered the hares and thonged them together. He slung them over his left shoulder and then he was moving, picking his way through the thorny gorse bushes toward home.

On his left hand was the old road Caesar had driven across the moor, a slightly elevated ribbon of white stone, unrepaired in longer than anyone could recall. It cut across the open moorland from Derventio on the banks of the river, to Catreath in the northeast, another garrison town built by Rome.

Rome—city and empire alike—was a hazy concept to Ronan. It was a city he might reach by ship, a long way from the moors of Brigantia which were his home.

A city where the Caesars sat in grand palaces, so the ballad singer said. Once, Romans had lived in Albion, fighting, building forts and roads, even cities, but they were gone now, and Ronan could not be exactly sure who they were, why they had come, why they had gone away again, unless it was to build roads and forts elsewhere.

He had heard great stories of the old days, the hand-me-downs bequeathed by one generation upon the next: how the tribes of Albion fought and died, how Holy Mona, the last fortress of the Druidai, fell, how the Warrior Queen was whipped and outcast, and how she turned like a she-wolf at bay and for a time devoured the conquerors in a lake of blood until she also fell. But at the last, many Britons themselves became almost Roman on the southeast coast, and all the blood that had been spilt was for nothing.

Ronan kicked at the white stone of the old road with a leather-booted foot. It stretched away into the southeast like a long, bleached rib, eventually entering Derventio, but he would follow it for only a mile and leave it again as it passed by Whitestonecliff, within

sight of the village The brace of hares swung at his back and he gazed up, eyes slitted to follow an eagle, hunting like himself. Now, *that* was freedom, he thought, not for the first time. The freedom of the wind and the mountains, which had always remained free even when the invaders came.

His ears were so accustomed to the quiet, he heard the sounds of iron-shod hooves ringing on the road while the horses were still far off and, turning, he shaded his eyes to watch them approach at a trot. These were good horses, finely bred and leggy — horses Ronan recognized, for they belonged to the stables of the old chief who sat at Derventio.

Gruffydd was grey as a badger now, but his body was still thick with muscle. Much of the time he employed Ronan, and often employed his father too. Out of respect for this the youth stood aside to give Gruffydd the road. Five horses trotted up, one on a leading rein. Accompanying their master were the grooms, Cullen and Rua, and at Gruffydd's left hand was his eldest son, Bryn.

Drawing level with Ronan, Gruffydd reined in and

tossed back the folds of his blue-striped cloak. He was a bluff man, silver-bearded, shrewd, with eyes like an old raven and skin like leather. It was difficult to see any shared blood between him and Bryn, for the two were as dissimilar as strangers. A sword slapped at the old man's left thigh, for though he had not fought for years he still considered himself a warrior. Ronan glanced ruefully at the weapon. Bryn also was armed, and well he should be, since he had been taught by the swordmasters and would be chief in Derventio himself one day, perhaps one day soon. Gruffydd was not young.

Bryn was Ronan's age, but taller, broader, a dark youth, smouldering, with blue eyes and features as handsome as Ronan's, though in a quite different way. He wore his beauty like a young horse. It sat well on him, and he was arrogant. His tunic was black and yellow, his cloak was green, and among his fingers heavy rings caught the sun as he reined back beside his father.

The chief's face creased pleasantly as he smiled at the youth on the roadside. Ronan was pleased to return

the expression. A smile lit his face, though he did not know it, transforming earnestness into lush beauty which was engaging.

“Just the lad I wanted,” Gruffydd said cheerfully. “I’d have come looking for you if you’d not been here. Set your eyes to what I’ve brought, lad, and tell me what you see.”

On the leading rein Rua held in his left fist was a little roan stallion, sturdy, barrel-chested, well made and groomed till he shone. Ronan’s green eyes passed shrewdly over the speckled red-grey coat, and he put down the hares to take the little horse’s bridle, run his hands over muscled shoulders and forelegs. “More breeding stock, my lord?”

“Eventually.” Gruffydd watched the boy from Whitestonecliff look over the roan. Shrewd, was Ronan, and clever, especially when it came to nags. “I’ll race him once or twice first. And you’d be interested, I’d wager.”

The understatement made Ronan laugh. “Aye, my lord, I would, if you’re in need of a rider, or someone to train him.”

“We’re looking for both.” Bryn gazed off across the moor as if he had pressing interests elsewhere. His left hand closed about the jewelled pommel of his sword. “You’re the best there is with nags, Ronan, so you’ll come to Derventio and run him for us.”

“Of course you will,” Gruffydd agreed, “but for today, I think it is we who must take lodgings in Whitestonecliff. It’s too late to press on for home, and there’s bad weather coming up.”

As he spoke, Ronan gathered up the hares and glanced into the dull northeast. Clouds boiled there and the wind had lately grown very sharp. The village kept a guest house, and the chief’s party would enjoy the best food Whitestonecliff could provide. It would still be rough fare for Gruffydd and his son. The settlement was small, hardly wealthy, no better or worse than the other outlying villages which clung to Gruffydd’s moorside domain.

The horses moved off and Ronan swung the hares back over his shoulder as he fell into step beside the chief. His eyes searched ahead for the shallow stream. It trickled across the old Roman road, no more than

ankle deep, and ran down by the village, on the south side of the embankment. Gruffydd looked down at him, appraising the boy's face and liking what he saw.

"And you, lad. What will you have for your troubles on our behalf? Some gold coins? A pony of your own? A warspear or a battleaxe?"

It was tempting to claim the pony, but for Ronan it would have been a useless luxury. There were always other people's horses to ride, and a pony was beyond his needs. He shrugged, his smile lopsided and resigned as he looked up at the chief. "I'd like the axe, my lord, but I should take the money for my family's sake."

Gruffydd chuckled. "Duty to family is one of a man's greatest strengths, lad. If my little horse wins, Ronan, an axe for you as well. He runs like the wind but he has a mind of his own. I can tame him with the whip and the spur, but I'd only break his spirit, and I like spirit in a horse as in a man. Work your own kind of magic on him, boy. What is it you do?"

Again, Ronan shrugged. "Understand them, my lord. They're no different from men. You can drive

them with spurs or speak gently. When they crave your gentle words, they try to please you. Like people.”

The insight was uncommon from one so young, and from a poor household. Gruffydd frowned thoughtfully, clearly mulling over the words as he, his son and the stable hands turned off the unkempt old road and followed the shallow stream through the woodland.

Before them, Ronan jumped nimbly from dry place to dry place, knowing every rock, every sheep trail. He could just see the telltale curtain of woodsmoke from the hearths of home. The village drew its name from the great chalk cliff which stood guard over it like a rampart, where the moor gave way to the woods bordering Gruffydd’s rich farmland. In places the rain and snow had washed the turf away from the underlying chalk, and artists many centuries ago had cut into one face of the undulating hills the enormous likeness of a horse. Today, Gruffydd’s people kept the image cut out, for it could be seen for miles and marked his territory.

The overcast came up fast out of the northeast, iron grey and brewing into a mass that threatened serious rain. As they entered the woodland it began with great droplets which fell in a thickening curtain while they followed the winding trail along the forested slope. The air was rich, earthy in the rain. Ronan liked it, though Gruffydd swore lividly.

More centuries ago than anyone knew, men had burned back the woodland and now the village stood in an open area, a cluster of wooden houses with roofs thatched in woven heather. The smoke of cookfires had begun to hug the ground, driven down by the rain, and the sky was heavy, the earth a thickening quagmire.

Ronan raised his hand in greeting to the chieftain. Ewan stood waiting for his guests, a brown wool cloak wrapped about his sheepskins. He was some distant kinsman of Gruffydd's, and quiet pleasantries were exchanged between the two as Ronan took his leave.

Geese honked at him at the door of his own house, and he threw a stick at them. In spring they could be vicious. He swung the brace of hares off his shoulders and pushed on the heavy timber door. It creaked

inward on dry, protesting pivots and he ducked in under the thatch, pushed through the patchwork of door skins that shut out the draught.

The house was companionable dim and he was momentarily blind. It had one room; two hearths were alight and the smell of baking bread wafted from the one in the corner. The younger children had their feet in the big fireplace which was sunk in a depression in the middle of the floor. Brass lamps flickered, augmenting the firelight, but the house was still dim, warm and inviting. The air was smoky and the wind rustled constantly in the thatch.

Across the hearth, Ronan's two younger sisters gave him a look of reproach as he shut the door. The youngest piped, "You're late!"

Ignoring the child, he held up his hares. His mother and the eldest girl were ladling water into the black iron cauldron, while his brothers occupied their hands in the lamplight, cutting hide into thonging. "I met my lord Gruffydd and Bryn on the road and had to walk back with them, or I'd have run and been here in half the time." He handed the hares to his mother. "I'm

not *very* late.”

“But you’re soaked,” she observed. “Put your tunic by the fire to dry before you get your death of cold.”

She was the last human being who cared enough for him to say such things, and Ronan did as he was told with a smile. He shrugged out of the tunic, spread it on the hearth stones and crouched there to warm himself as he listened to the wind singing about the house and the voices of the children. Boyd and Brian were busy with their hide, but little Caelia and the youngest girl, Fiona, were unoccupied and chattering endlessly. Ronan rubbed his eyes, watching his mother and the eldest daughter, Camilla, skinning the hares.

His eldest sister was lovely, red-haired, with a quick temper when she was angered. She was promised in marriage to one of Ewan’s four sons, and would wed in a month. When she was gone it would be easier to provide for the remaining brood. Boyd and Brian were nine and eleven years, and gave Ronan a kind of respect he did not get from the girls. They saw how he was muscled, how hard he had become, how

skilled a hunter he was. When they looked at him they saw a man, and they wondered how the years would change them.

Bearing six children had not troubled his mother greatly. Ronan smiled as she caught his eye over the fire. She wore her dark hair in three long braids. Silver streaks had begun at her temples and wove into the black tresses in lovely patterns. She wore plain grey wool, as did Camilla, but the two were anything but plain, Ronan thought. He sat with his chin on his arm and closed his eyes, growing drowsy as he warmed.

If he chose to wed he could have a house of his own, but even now Ronan knew his heart too well. He was restless, yearning for freedom, wary of being burdened by a wife and a brood of his own. He longed only to be free, to do as he pleased, to leave when and if he chose, and to love where he pleased. His father chided him about his restlessness, which he called idleness, but oddly his mother understood. She never troubled Ronan, and he was grateful.

The woman dropped the quartered hares into the cauldron as the water began to seethe, and watched her

first born drowsing by the fire. Ronan was called wayward because he went against tradition, refusing the peasant loyalties that had shackled poor men for as long as anyone could remember. But he was also clever, and he was like no other boy she knew. In his own way, he was beautiful, putting many a girl to shame, blessed with skin like pale gold, and wide green eyes. Yet it was the beauty from within that won him other's hearts in a moment. A mother had soon recognised this power in him.

He was little like his father in either looks or temperament, but both were stubborn. Ronan was no artisan, nor could he be made into one, of this his mother was certain. For now he would hunt for the family, work horses for the chief, and where he was going, even Ronan did not know, freeman though he was. He would never be allowed to carry a sword among the sons of chiefs and chieftains—being low-born cost him this. He was just young muscle, needed on the land, to work it and defend it, often with his bare hands, like the rest of the freemen labourers. And perhaps to die one night, when an east wind brought

invaders from the sea.

The Angles had come often, and they would come again soon. When the seas calmed in spring and the wind swung around in the invaders' favour, men waited, watched for signal fires and kept their weapons sharp. Next time the Angles came, Ronan was of an age to fight, and his mother's face betrayed the old, too-familiar dread.

In the guest house, which occupied a place of some prestige beside the long, low chieftain's hall, fires and lamps had been lit for Gruffydd and his son. Rain pattered again but the heather thatch was newly repaired after winter and the house was dry.

Servants brought in platters of mutton, pork and cheese, and pitchers of ale stood on the table, some still steaming, while the pokers were thrust back into the fire to heat again. It was not a feast by the standards of Derventio, but Gruffydd was satisfied. He broke the dark bread into pieces and studied the swirl of frothy

liquid in his cup as if it were a scrying glass. At the other end of the table, Bryn carved deeply into a pork haunch, and Ewan fingered a strand of his unbraided hair as Gruffydd sampled the ale.

"Fires were seen along the coast two weeks ago," Gruffydd mused as he soaked a piece of bread in the ale and chewed mechanically.

"Fires?" Ewan reached for the pitcher to refill his own cup. "There was a fight?"

The chief passed a leathery palm across his breast. His fingers locked about his heavy amulet, the warrant of his rank. "Aye, a victory, but not a rout. The Angles went away to lick their wounds and choose other prey. They did not panic, nor run like curs beaten for their impudence. Other prey, Ewan."

"Us." Ewan crumbled bread between his fingers. "We've been lucky, my lord. Two summers have gone by peacefully. Our luck may stretch a little further."

But Gruffydd shook his head. His teeth worked diligently on a piece of pork rind. "Our luck is at breaking point, Ewan. You cannot win against these Angles, for there is no end to them, they never stop

coming. I have said this to my brother chiefs—we should take the battle to them, across the water, stop them on the shores of Gallia before they reach us, before they even unfurl a sail. But it would take a talent I do not possess to make the tribes of our coast fight together, *with* one another instead of against each other, for a change. The Angles are coming, Ewan, sure as an east wind is blowing to fetch them here. We'll give them a fight they'll tell tales about for two score years, eh, boy?" He was looking along the table then, where Bryn was draining a third cup of mulled ale. "And you shall be blooded, my son. For this at least, this season is timely."

Imperceptibly, Bryn's wide mouth compressed. Warmongering was of no interest to him. He was not keen to be blooded, but nor did he fear it. He was hard, with the resilience of youth, and complacent. He was strong, and he knew it; he had been taught well, by the finest swordmasters in the north, and he knew this, too. His wide shoulders lifted in an expressive shrug which made him feel the cold tackiness of his damp tunic, and he said to his father,

"The horse concerns me more. That, and Aemelia."

The old man blinked in surprise. "Your wedding day is set too far in the future for your liking?"

"Not far enough," Bryn corrected gloomily.

"She is well bred and her dowry will be a fine price." Gruffydd was clearly attempting to be practical, but to Bryn's ears he sounded merely mercenary.

"She has all the winsome qualities," Bryn said tartly, "of a buzzard, which would be all well and good, were I also a buzzard!" He paused, drank the third cup of Ewan's potent ale to the bottom and slammed down the cup. His head had already begun to swim. "But I am not a buzzard, and in any case, I'd as soon not wed with anyone, least of all not the last spoiled daughter of a Christian house! They never know when enough is enough. It's simple enough, so they tell me, to wed one, but when you try to unmake the marriage because you have had your fill of it, you learn what they're made of."

Gruffydd would have liked to rebuke his son or at least contradict him, but he could hardly argue the truth. Instead, he merely made disapproving noises

and turned his attention back to his meal. “Then choose another woman. One your mother will approve of, mind! Save your handsome lads for your own time, we’ll have none of your nonsense at home. I’ve seen the lads you chase in the fields, and your tavern wenches, and I’ll have none of them marrying into my house. If you’ll not take Marcus Duratius’s daughter, who will you take?”

Bryn replied with a sullen, stony silence, and Gruffydd sighed, looking along at Ewan.

The chieftain was almost of Gruffydd’s age, and amused. His dark eyes laughed, nested in deep creases, while he concealed his humour behind his cup. “No matter,” Gruffydd said at last. “You’ll keep a while longer, rascal. And with the Angles coming we’ll not be short of diversion to keep us all busy. How many men can you send, Ewan, to fight? A hundred will come with their own weapons from Catreath, but the rest say they’ll hold their ground in case their own homes need defending ... which may likely be the case. We’ll pull a hundred from our neighbours, if we’re lucky. Catreath is full of mercenaries, as usual, looking

for a fight—and wanting pay.”

“How many men?” Ewan rubbed his face. His broad, hard fingers traced the creases about his brow, smoothed his moustache. “Twenty or thirty, my lord, not many more. We’re a small village. Aye, and kill thirty of our young men, and we’ll feel it for a generation.”

The words were telling, since they were all too true. Each year, with the warming winds of spring, the invaders came. Each year, greater numbers came ashore from more ships, and with the close of the fighting season another Angle tribe had settled on British land, ousting the Britons or locking slave iron about their necks. Their fences spread north and west from the coast, pushing inland, and Gruffydd had long known his rich farmland was a prize which enjoyed an uneasy, insecure peace. He kept his warband armed and well mounted, and maintained lookouts along the coast, using the old, crumbling Roman signal towers. The fires were lit when sails showed on the horizon, and every year those fires burned.

Only weeks before the barbarians had attacked to

the south, at Eboracum, but the chief there held the strongest warband in the north country, and though the Angle ships were said to have sailed right up the River Ambri and into the smaller Usan River, almost to the walls of Eboracum itself, the invaders were turned back. But it had not been a decisive victory, as Gruffydd had said. The ships turned south, down the coast, when they should have been forced back out to sea. In the south they would find safe ports, friendly camps in which soldiers healed, grew strong, and armed themselves to attack again.

Some of the chiefs wanted to mass a warband, send out a call to arms to any man who had the heart to fight, and make war in Gallia, Germania, across the Narrow Sea. The chief at Eboracum, Gareth Ironhand, had counselled war for years. His city had run to seed since the Romans left, but it was still a trophy worthy of conquest. The Angles came nearer every season, and skirmishing throughout Gareth's river country was commonplace, even in winter.

No one doubted war was coming, but some disregarded it. Gruffydd watched Bryn soaking an old,

wrinkled, last season's apple in a cup of hot wine, and wondered if it might be the lot of every father to despair over his sons. Bryn was unconcerned. He was too wealthy, too handsome and too idle for his own good. Drinking and bedding were already the death of his reputation—unless he actually desired the reputation of a shameless rake. When weapons amused him, he plied the sword and the axe with the easy grace of the master, and then he cast them aside as if they were mere toys.

He was good. The skills came naturally to him, as they should to the born warrior, but to Bryn it was just a game. To him, the Angle threat mattered less than the fall of the dice, the odds on a horse—and much less than tumbling a peasant's lusty young son in the hay.

Still, Gruffydd smiled ruefully and let Bryn go his way. He had a level head and would come into line soon enough when the fighting began. And he was right about Aemelia Duratius. Her father had been trying to get the girl wed for years, repeatedly raising the price of her dowry with the hopes of luring a man to his doom with riches, since his daughter had become

a woman with all the charm of a cantankerous old she-badger.

Sensing his father's scrutiny, Bryn looked up, brow arched in question. In one so young, the innocently saturnine expression sat uneasily on his features. It was an attractive quality which women of all ages, and many men, found irresistible. Gruffydd smiled faintly and turned back to Ewan.

"Our thanks for your hospitality tonight, but we shall move on in the morning. My little stallion is safely out of the rain? Then we'll bid you good night, Ewan. Your men will have heard news of the battle. Tell them to listen now for the call to arms. No one can say when it will come, but it cannot be long."

"Aye, my lord." The chieftain scraped back his chair and swung a damp cloak about his shoulders. "We'll listen. We've a few of our own young men to blood this season. It's timely, as you say." He settled the cloak about his knotted sheepskins. "If you've all you need, I'll be away to my own hearthside."

"Everything but a hot bath," Bryn said when Ewan had banged shut the door. "These peasant rat-holes are

wretched.”

“But dry enough to suffice.” Gruffydd stretched, listening to his joints creak in protest of the rain. “If we’d pressed on, we’d still have been on the road! A little gratitude would go a long way, Bryn.”

“Gratitude for what?” Bryn remained unimpressed. “It’s their duty to extend their hospitality, and an honour, if they know what’s good for them! For my money, I’d have stayed in Catreath.”

“I know you would,” Gruffydd said dryly. “I saw him. The lad with the brown eyes and the yellow hair.” Bryn grinned impishly. “You’re enough to make a father despair!” But Gruffydd chuckled.

“Or be proud,” Bryn added, with a flex of his supple body as he examined the sleeping skins and turned up his nose.