



Book Six Preview

Hiraeth

(Longing for Home)



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*"Ychydig o galonnau sy'n dod o byd i gartref eto.
Few hearts find home again."*

— Cathyoran saying

A few months after the fall of Cathyor...

The road into Aliselle Falls came down out of the low foothills in a long slow descent. A smaller place than Brianna had imagined, making her heart ache for Brynn. Stone and timber houses along a river, a chapel with a metal steeple that caught the afternoon light, unpaved streets, fields beyond, and farther still the dark suggestion of forest before the distant mountains. She stood a long moment at the bend in the road, looked down at it, and felt nothing.

That was the part she hadn't been prepared for. Not the expected exhaustion, the blisters, or the dirt worked permanently into the creases of her hands, nor the weight of the sword on her back and baby prince Cian in her arms. She had been a biume for three generations of House Ahearne and knew what hard travel did to a body. The hardest part was the silence inside her chest where Cathyor had been. Brianna thought she would grieve the whole way, weep at the sight of any roof that wasn't on fire. Instead she stood in a road, looking down at a place she didn't know, and her chest was simply empty, as though the grief itself had walked off ahead and was waiting for her somewhere.

Prince Cian stirred in the sling against her chest and made a soft sound that wasn't quite waking. Brianna put her hand against his back. He was getting heavier. He'd been an infant when she carried him out of Brynn through the candle maker's tunnel and he still was, but a baby learned to weigh more when carried for a season. She'd begun to feel it in her shoulders three weeks ago.

Dygwr Tynged hung across her back in the harness Cormac had strapped around her shoulders in the small throne room a lifetime ago. She hadn't adjusted it since. The leather had molded itself to her in places, and there were salt stains at the buckles from sweat and rain and



more than one river crossing to avoid patrols, but she hadn't taken it off except to sleep, and she didn't intend to. Carwyn and Gethin had come out of the castle with her. They had not come out of Brynn. Somewhere in the rain soaked streets behind her—she didn't know which one, couldn't remember even half of that terrible night—they had stayed to hold pursuit, while she ran. There had been no shout or farewell. She'd only known they were dead because she was still alive, several streets later, no one had caught her, and there was only one way that was possible. She'd reached Tomas's door alone with the baby at her chest and the sword on her back and the silence behind her, and had carried all three of those things every step since.

Brianna adjusted prince Cian's weight against her hip and started down the road into Aliselle Falls.

The town was larger up close than it had looked from the road. A grain mill at a creek off the river, a blacksmith's forge with smoke coming from the chimney and a young apprentice's shadow moving in the doorway, and a market square where three women in plain farmer's dresses haggled over a basket of root vegetables, barely looking up as she passed. Brianna kept her head down, not knowing what she looked like to them. A traveler, just a widow, or a strange old woman with a baby. The sword on her back would draw eyes and there was nothing she could do about it, but she had crossed more roads than she could count with the blade strapped to her, and had survived because most people assumed it was a relic, or her dead husband's, or for sale.

Brianna needed rest, food, and a place to sleep, a home, everything. She stopped a boy of perhaps ten at the edge of the square. He had the sun-browned arms of someone who worked outside, and he looked at her face first, not at the sword, which she registered as a kindness. "Boy. Is there an inn here?"

"There's the public rooms at the back of Wellerson's, the purveyor." He pointed. "But one's full already."

"That will do. Thank you." She turned toward where he had pointed, and felt rather than saw the man who had stopped in the middle of the street behind her.

Brianna didn't look back at once. A woman alone with a baby didn't whirl around when she felt eyes on her. She walked three more steps toward the purveyor's, listening. The man behind her hadn't moved. He was simply standing there.

Brianna stopped, and turned.



He was younger than her, perhaps by a few decades, broad across the shoulders, some gray in his beard, weathered in the way of a man who had once been a soldier and never quite lost the trained eye. He stood very still with a sack of grain on his shoulder, and he wasn't looking at her face. He was looking at the hilt of Dygwr Tynged where it rose above her left shoulder, and his face had gone the particular gray of a man who has seen something he wasn't prepared for.

Brianna's hand moved without her telling it to, her right hand, to the small knife at her belt. She had killed two men with it on the road and she could take another, to protect Cian.

The man's eyes came down from the sword to her face. He didn't move otherwise, and spoke in the old tongue.

"Pwy ydych chi, fy chwaer?" Who are you, my sister?

Cathyoran. The words stopped her. She hadn't heard her language spoken aloud by another mouth since the fall of Brynn. The silence inside her, that had walked ahead of her all the way down out of the foothills, broke open.

Brianna didn't answer, she couldn't. Her hand stayed on the knife, her eyes filled with tears, and she stood in the middle of a market street in a foreign town with the last Ahearne sleeping against her chest and his sword on her back and a Cathyoran soldier she had never seen before in her life standing fifteen feet from her, speaking the language of her dead.

The man set the sack of grain down very slowly, he didn't approach her, just stayed right there and raised his hand, kissing his fingers, touching them to his chest.

"I served them," he said, in the old tongue still, quietly. "I commanded, on Ayuwasi, under Cormac's banner. I knew that sword on his father's back before it was his." He paused, watching her face. "I don't know your name, but I do know what you're carrying. I have a farm outside town, with an orchard. My family is there. We have food and a room. There is no one in Aliselle Falls who will ask questions if I bring a cousin home. Dewch gyda mi." Come with me.

Brianna still couldn't speak. Her hand on the knife didn't move, nor did the one on prince Cian, and her eyes were full and her throat had closed around the language she hadn't heard in months.

The man waited, standing there, hands open at his sides, and his eyes on her face.

When she could finally speak it was in the common tongue, because the old tongue would have broken her. "Your name."



"Jonathan Al'Shane."

Brianna closed her eyes. The name meant nothing to her, she hadn't known every commander of Cathyor. But the cadence of it was right, and the man who carried it had kissed his fingers and touched his chest in the gesture every Cathyoran soldier learned as a boy, and his accent was of the western highlands where the Ahearne summer house had been. She'd heard that accent in her childhood. It belonged to the dead.

She opened her eyes. "Brianna," she said. "Carlon. The House Ahearne biume."

His face didn't change but something behind his eyes shifted, the way a deep pool does when a stone drops into it.

"The prince?" he asked. Very quietly.

Her hand left the knife, and she gently rubbed prince Cian's back through the sling. "Yes," she said. "He lives."

Jonathan Al'Shane closed his eyes, and kissed his fingers, touching his chest a second time, and Brianna saw two tears track down through his beard before he opened his eyes again and bent and picked up his sack of grain.

"Come," he said in the common tongue. "My wife will want to feed you. Her name is Gertrude. She's not Cathyoran, but she's the best woman I've ever known. Dewch."

Brianna followed him, not because there was nothing else to do, but because she felt the emptiness inside her recede just a little. A small thing, hardly more than a breath of warmth where there had been cold. But it was something, and after so many weeks of nothing, something was almost more than she could bear.



Around the same time, to the north...

The fire had burned low without Marged realizing it.

She sat on the cold ground, arms around her knees, chin in her hands, and watched the embers without seeing them. Aeron was somewhere far away, distant in a way her Dryad had never been before, and Marged couldn't tell whether that was the Dryad's choice or her own. She'd stopped tracking the days. She thought it was perhaps two months since Brynn. It might have been three. It might have been six weeks.



She had been moving south, along game trails, eating what she could gather easily, mostly not eating, and she'd set up a fire tonight because the cold had finally gotten into her bones in a way she could no longer ignore, but it had burned out and Marged was somewhere else.

The grief was a weight in her ribs now, a hum in her hands, her sisters were all dead, she was not, and that there was no way on Innatraea to make that right. Cathyor was dead, she was not, and there was nothing right about any of it.

Her Gosgordd—her war band, her sisters—had been ambushed on the road back to Brynn and killed. She remembered Aeron carrying her into the forest while her home burned, and weeping the whole night against her Dryad's hands. She'd woken at dawn beside a freshwater spring with a horse tied to a tree. Aeron's gift, permission to go, forgiveness. It hadn't stopped Marged from riding to Brynn at first light. She'd still believed, then, that there might be something she could do.

Marged had reached the treeline above Brynn, under the morning light, and looked down at her home burning. Aedonians moving through the streets without resistance, kicking in doors, stacking the dead. She'd collapsed in the saddle and wept until there was nothing left. Then Marged took off her cloak—woven with the Coeden Gysegredig, the Sacred Tree and Sword of her order—and let the wind take it. Watching it tumble across the grass, nothing but empty cloth. She'd turned the horse and ridden away from Brynn without looking back. I do not need to look. I have seen. That sentence had been in her mind ever since. I have seen. I have seen.

The horse had gone lame some weeks later and she'd let it go in a meadow with good grass. Marged had walked alone then. She didn't weep at the fire, her body had run out of tears. What remained was a weight she couldn't set down and the cold she had finally noticed.

A branch cracked behind her to the left.

Marged was up before thought. Her misericordia Poen—"Pain"—was in her right hand and Rheolaeth—"Death"—was in her left, she had crossed the fire and put her back to a tree in less time than it took her to register that she had heard the branch. The hum in her hands was gone, they were cold and steady. Aeron came suddenly near, closer than she had been in weeks.



"Hold," said a man's voice from the dark beyond her firelight. Young. An accent she couldn't place right away. He hadn't stepped into the light yet. "We mean no harm. We saw your fire."

"Two of us," said a second voice, also young, slightly to the right of the first. "Hunters. We've got a buck, thought you might want to share."

Marged did not move. "Step into the light," she said. "Slowly. Hands where I can see."

They came together, two young men of perhaps eighteen, one a little taller and broader, the other short and lean, both in plain hunting leathers, bows slung over their shoulders, hands deliberately open and away from their belts. The taller one was carrying a gutted buck across his shoulders. The shorter one was a half-step ahead and slightly to the side, the way a man walks when he's the one looking for trouble so his friend doesn't have to.

They stopped at the edge of her fire's light, saw her with both blades up, and they didn't flinch. The shorter one looked at her face first, not at the blades. The taller one looked at the blades and then at her face and his expression didn't change, but Marged saw him register what the blades were. Misericordias weren't hunting knives, they were weapons of war. He didn't say anything about it.

"My name is Brandon," said the shorter one. He spoke slowly, the way you would to a hurt animal. "This is Rory. We're from a town a day south of here. Aliselle Falls."

She hadn't asked where they were from. He had said it anyway. Carefully, like he knew she was dangerous.

"We saw your fire," Brandon said again. "We've got meat. We're happy to stay and share it, or move on. Your call."

Marged stood with her back against the tree for a long moment and looked at them. They were boys. She'd killed men older than them with her knives, loved women older than them whose bones were now buried somewhere deep in the forests outside Brynn.

"Stay," she said.

Marged didn't lower the blades. She slid down the tree until she was sitting, and set both knives on her knees, blades pointing out, and watched them.

Rory moved very carefully to the other side of the fire, set the buck down, drew a knife from his belt with two fingers, showing her the motion, and he began to butcher. He didn't



look at her while he worked, instead he gave her his profile, his hands were slow and steady while he worked.

Brandon sat down opposite her across the fire. He didn't draw a weapon. He pulled a flask from his belt and offered it across the flames. "Whiskey," he said. "It's terrible."

She did not move to take it. He took a swig and set it down on a rock near her side of the fire and pulled his hand back.

The fire built itself back up when Rory fed it. The buck began to cook. Brandon talked about where they had taken the animal, the run of weather, a stream they'd crossed that morning. He never asked her name, or where she had come from, nor did he look at her blades.

After a long time Marged picked up the flask.

The whiskey was terrible. She didn't say thank you, just set it down on the rock again and pushed it back toward his side of the fire with her boot. Brandon took it, drank, and pushed it back. They passed it that way for a while without speaking.

When the meat was ready Rory cut her the best portion, laid it on a flat stone at the edge of the fire, and pushed the stone toward her with a stick. She ate. Marged hadn't eaten meat in days. The grease ran down her chin.

"My home," she said. It wasn't a safe thing to speak, she didn't know them, and they were just boys, but Marged needed what she felt to leave her body somehow.

They didn't move. Brandon was looking at the fire. Rory was eating slowly, watching the dark beyond the firelight.

"My sisters," she said. "Outside Brynn. We were ambushed."

"How many?" Brandon asked, his voice soft.

Tears came to her eyes, remembering. "I don't know. All of them. They had something that stopped our magic." Her voice did not break. It came out flat and even, that of a soldier giving a report. "Aerona carried me out. The rest died..." Marged choked.

Rory said, "I'm sorry, lady."

Marged closed her eyes.

She had not been a lady in months, only a woman moving through the forest, and before that she had been a corpse on a horse. A lifetime ago Marged had been a sister of Trefn Cyfwiander, and before that she a girl in a Cathyoran village whose two older brothers had



teased her about being too small to swing a sword. Lady was what a commoner called a noblewoman, or what a Cathyoran boy called a stranger when he wanted her to know he saw her.

She opened her eyes. The fire was higher now, the boys were across from her, and Aeron was far away again. She didn't have a word for what she felt. Some hardness inside her had moved very slightly. Not broken, not dissolved—moved.

"My name is Marged," she said. "Llewellyn."

Brandon's eyes came up to her face very slowly. He understood what she had said, if not the details. He didn't say anything for a long moment. Then he kissed his fingers and touched the center of his chest, and Rory did the same a heartbeat later.

"Marged Llewellyn," Brandon said.

Marged wept then. She'd thought there were no tears left, she had been wrong. She wept and the boys didn't move toward her or even look at her. Rory tended the fire, and Brandon talked again, softly now, about a hawk he'd seen, and the stream, and the way the weather was breaking.

They talked until the fire was embers again, and then they fed it, and they talked until dawn. Marged didn't speak much after she had given her name. The boys talked with each other and sometimes to her. She just listened, and when the gray light came through the trees Brandon stood, stretching, and spoke, "We're going home, Marged. There's room in the wagon if you want a ride south."

She put Poen and Rheolaeth back into their sheaths.

"South to where?" she said.

"Aliselle Falls," said Rory. "It's not much. But it's quiet."

She thought about it for a long time. The sky paled. Aeron was near her now. Marged could feel her in the trees like a hand at her shoulder.

"Quiet," she said.

"Quiet," Brandon agreed.

Marged nodded once, did not say yes, but she stood up and walked over to the edge of the clearing, following them out of the woods. She climbed up into their wagon and sat down, knees against her chest, blades out, and waited as the boys hitched their horse that was tied nearby. Marged didn't know where she was going, not really, but anywhere was better than here.



Months later...

The fire was already burning when they reached the clearing. Jonathan saw the smoke through the trees first, then the flames. Oak and rowan, for sacred rites. Something else underneath—a bitter smell, hot and sharp, that he placed after a moment as blackthorn. Marged's addition. She was standing at the far edge of the fire with Brandon and Rory when he came up the path with Gertrude, and she had the quiet set look of a woman who had laid the wood herself and meant every stick of it.

The clearing was a long oval in the deep woods, ringed by oak and rowan and a single old yew. They couldn't explain that one tree, they weren't native here, or the ring of flat stones at the clearing's center. Crilla had found the place in her early days on the farm and had known what it was for, as a Weaver knew certain things. The four women—Gertrude, Crilla, Brianna, and Marged—had been coming here together for months. Tonight was the first wider circle. For Cathyor.

They came in pairs and small groups along the forest path. Crilla carrying a basket of bread and salt. Then Deitrich and Emilia, hand in hand—him limping on the old wound in his thigh that the season's cold weather had begun to wake. Jonathan watched him come and said nothing. You didn't mention a man's weakness. You simply adjusted your pace when you walked beside him, and that was all. Then Josephine and Tobias Thane—the man was quiet and steady, a former soldier who had followed Josephine here the way a good man does, without needing to explain it.

Brianna came last.

Jonathan saw the sword before her face. Dygwr Tynged, on her back. She hadn't worn it in months. It had been hanging in the rafters of their guest room, neither of them spoke about it, and that silence had been its own kind of language between them. Tonight she had buckled it on once more.

He looked away.



None of the children were with them tonight. Alaina, Robert, and Jacob were old enough to watch the smaller ones. This grief wasn't for little hearts to carry.

They stood in a loose circle around the fire. Eleven.

The rite and words were his, being the oldest soldier in their circle. He'd spoken them before over campfires on Ayuwasi, in muddy fields after battles whose names he could no longer separate, beside graves dug in foreign soil. The dead deserved to hear the language they had spoken in life.

"Heno rydym yn sefyll yn y Cylch y Cofio." Tonight we stand in the Circle of Remembering. "Heno rydym yn galw'r meirw." Tonight we call the dead. "Rhiannon, clyw ni." Rhiannon, hear us.

The circle answered, ragged but together. He heard the Cathyoran voices land first, sure-footed, and the others a half-beat behind, finding the shape of the old tongue with care. "Rhiannon, clyw ni."

Brianna stepped forward to the fire. She didn't speak for a long moment, just held something in her closed hand—a folded square of cloth.

"Chwiorydd," she said. Her voice did not break. "Buoch chi farw'n dda. Bydded i chi ddod o hyd i heddwch yn y byd nesaf." Sisters. You died well. May you find peace in the next world.

She dropped the cloth into the fire. It burned.

The circle answered: "Boed iddynt ddod o hyd i heddwch yn y byd nesaf."

Jonathan watched her step back, face steady, shoulders set, holding herself like a soldier delivering a report—everything given, nothing left to carry. He'd seen that posture a thousand times, worn it himself.

Marged stepped forward. She had no cloth or paper. She had a carved wooden token that she'd whittled herself in the months since arriving in Aliselle Falls. She hadn't told anyone she was making it. Brandon and Rory's faces said they had known.

"Marw yn dda chwiorydd, oherwydd buoch fyw yn ddewr." Die well sisters, for you have lived with courage.

The token went into the fire.

Marged stood there for a long moment, hands open at her sides. Then she said, very quietly, "And the woman I was. I don't know yet if she is dead. I will burn her token when I do."

The circle answered: "Boed iddynt ddod o hyd i heddwch yn y byd nesaf."



Jonathan felt those words land somewhere different. You buried soldiers, burned their names and let them go. But to stand in a circle and name yourself among the dead—to say you didn't know yet whether you had survived—that was a different kind of grief. He knew it, had carried a version of it for years before Gertrude's hands, and the slow work of living on a farm had given him back to himself. Jonathan looked at Marged and saw a woman still in the middle of that road.

He stepped forward.

The pin was in his palm—small, bronze, dark with age. The House Ahearne horse stamped into it. The kind of thing a soldier earned on the day a campaign closed. He'd carried it since Ayuwasi. Through the long march home, buying the farm, marrying Gertrude, the years of peace. He'd kept it in a box in his workshop and had taken it out that morning, holding it in his hand while the light came up.

"Byw yw marw, marw yw byw." To live is to die, to die is to have lived.

The pin went into the fire. He watched the flames take it.

Gertrude's hand came to his back, between his shoulder blades. She didn't look at him, simply put her hand there. He felt the warmth of her palm through his shirt.

Deitrich stepped forward, leaning on Emilia's arm. He named three men—apprentice smiths who had worked beside him, men he hadn't seen since the fall. He had small things. A button. A bent nail. A scrap of leather. They went into the fire one by one, and Deitrich's face didn't change, but his hand on Emilia's arm tightened with each one.

Emilia named two healers who hadn't survived. Josephine named one more—a young woman of seventeen, lost on Ayuwasi like so many others. Tobias spoke more names. Men Jonathan hadn't served with but could see in his mind, because the dead all looked alike in the end. Tobias fed an old rusted knife to the flames, saying nothing else.

Crilla stepped forward and named Chaya. She placed a dried rose apple flower in the flames, and her eyes found Gertrude's across the fire. Jonathan caught the look between them. It held a story only women truly ever knew—remembrance of their own.

Gertrude stepped forward, her hand leaving him. She had no Cathyoran dead, no soldiers except him. But she had a longer road of grief behind her than anyone in their circle knew. She held a small twist of dried orchard leaves bound with red thread, and placed it in the fire.



"For the kingdom of Cathyor," she said, in the common tongue. "Which I never saw, but my husband loved, and which I now grieve because he does. Boed iddi ddod o hyd i heddwch yn y byd nesaf."

May she find peace. The kingdom as a woman.

Jonathan didn't move. His wife had just given his grief a shape he had never found for it himself, in a language that was not hers, in a circle she had entered for his sake.

Brandon and Rory stepped forward together. They were the youngest in their circle by more than a decade and hadn't fought in any wars, but they'd grown up around men and women who had. Heard stories of graves and bones that never made it home. They each had a river stone, polished smooth, that they'd carried in their hunting pouches for years. They placed them in the fire.

When all the tokens had burned the circle stood in silence, and Crilla came forward with the basket. She passed out bread—black, dense, baked that morning. Each person broke a piece and held it. Then the salt in a small carved bowl. Each person took a pinch and pressed it to their bread.

They ate.

The fire burned down slowly. No one spoke. The smoke smelled of oak and rowan and blackthorn winter.

Jonathan's eyes lifted from the embers and found Brianna's across the fire.

She was already looking at him, had been looking at him, he realized, for some time. There was a question in her face—she was waiting to see if he would meet it.

The sword was on her back. It had been the afternoon she came down the road into Aliselle Falls, when he had stood in the street with a sack of grain on his shoulder, recognized the hilt of a blade he hadn't seen in years, and his heart had broken open. He hadn't asked her, in all the months since, who the infant was, because he'd known the moment he saw her, and some knowledge was too dangerous to put into words. He had fed her at his table, given her a room in his house, and watched the boy grow, never asking.

Jonathan inclined his head, the smallest fraction. A soldier acknowledging an order he hadn't been given aloud.

Brianna returned the inclination, held his eyes a moment longer, then looked away.

Movement. At the edge of his vision. Marged.



She hadn't moved, and her face was still wet from her own naming. But her eyes had gone hard and they were on Brianna, then him, and Jonathan felt the look land the way a blade does—precise, deliberate, and final.

Marged knew.

He didn't know how. She had never asked him, but she'd seen something—the sword, or their silences, maybe the careful way Brianna never named a husband, the wrong age of an infant she called grandson, some piece of it or all of it—and arrived at the truth. Now she was telling him, in the small motion of her chin, that the knowledge was hers too and that it would stay where it was.

Jonathan looked back at her, did not speak, or move. But a look passed between them that had nothing to do with the ritual. Marged held his gaze, then looked back at the fire.

Gertrude, beside him, was holding his hand and watching the embers, she hadn't looked up.

The fire burned lower. Crilla gathered the empty bread basket, and the circle began to break—Deitrich easing his weight off Emilia's arm to stretch his bad leg, Josephine murmuring something to Tobias, Brandon stepping back for the lantern at the edge of the clearing. Their ritual was done, and the night was cold.

They watched the last names go to ash.

Brianna spoke to the circle. "Marw yn dda, oherwydd buoch fyw yn ddewr."

The circle answered, each to a face they chose, a vow given to the living and not to the lost: "Marw yn dda, oherwydd buoch fyw yn ddewr."

Die well, for you have lived with courage.

They all walked home together when the embers went out. Three of them, walking among the others, carrying one more thing.

