

A close-up photograph of a brown paper shopping bag. The bag's surface is wrinkled and textured. In the center, a face-like shape is formed by shadows and three circular holes. The holes are arranged with one in the center and two on either side, resembling eyes. The lighting is dramatic, creating deep shadows and bright highlights.

Eulogy

D.T. Conklin

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A novel by
D.T. Conklin

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Thanks to my comrades at Evolved Publishing, including Lane Diamond and John Anthony Allen, for their fine editing work. Thanks to my many beta readers, who provided invaluable feedback and helped me make this a better book.

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**Dedication:**

*Dedicated to Lane Diamond, who taught me everything I know; and to my family, who has supported me throughout it. Final thanks to my brother, who has read this book almost as many times as I have. The poor bastard.*

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### **Recommended Reading:**

[The Black God's War by Moses Siregar III \(Epic Fantasy\)](#)

[Forgive Me, Alex by Lane Diamond \(Psychological Thriller\)](#)

## Prologue

Villeen's father might as well have murdered her eldest brother—now she was forced to finish it. She clenched her eyes shut, unable to look at a heap of rags in the cavern's corner. Pale flesh peeked from her brother's half-shredded, brown robes. A book's corner dug into her breast, but she ignored the pain, only clutching it tighter, wishing she'd found it earlier.

The heap, once her eldest brother, Torden, breathed in with a haggard burst.

His chest rose. It fell.

*Why didn't father kill him? Why this?*

Gravel and moss skittered toward him, sucked in by some strange power. Stones, dust, and tiny leaves of greenish-brown mold—all were dissolved into his flesh, into his unseeing eyes, into his gaping mouth.

Those fragments ceased to exist.

Years ago, her father had discovered a power that he'd called *gentahl*, but what had happened to Torden was more than simple *gentahl*.

Fier, her younger brother, pulled her into a hug. "Maybe Torden will hear us—"

"Torden isn't there."

She'd growled the words more fiercely than she'd intended, and she reached up to clasp Fier's arm. What else could she say? She couldn't tell him everything would end perfectly, that the birds would sing, that sunlight would shine warm against their skin.

She knew better.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean...."

She turned to him, to the tattoos—twisting, twining, ugly things—that covered his face and body, and pressed her forehead against his shoulder. She'd etched the tattoos two days earlier, only hours after they'd discovered their father's treachery. In return, Fier had pierced her own skin with a needle and ink—hours of pain and determination.

They needed to hide.

Of course, neither knew if it would actually work. Their father could've found them so many ways, *gentahl* at the top of the list, and now the idea of a simple tattoo seemed absurd.

But she and Fier had been terrified. They hadn't known what to do. They'd panicked.

They stood in an empty room, no more than a cave, deep beneath the Kurin Mountains. Firelight danced across stone walls, and their shadows, so deep and long and black, wavered in rhythm with the flames. Dusty mold invaded her nostrils until only bitterness remained. In a way, that scent was a blessing. It helped her remember, helped her forget.

Her new tattoos burned, but the discomfort did little to dampen her sorrow. This place, their home, felt foreign and distant. Narrow walls pressed against her. The door stood open to prying eyes, allowing anyone to witness her pain.

Not that anyone could see; no one else lived here.

She plunged an invisible thread of *gentahl* into Fier, slid it into his mind like a needle through a single layer of cloth. Forced it deeper. The door stood open, but *gentahl* could shift reality. She nudged the thread, yanked and twisted it to change her

brother's mind. In that same heartbeat she shifted her own thoughts.

The door closed. Not a swing or a creak, like a normal door. One moment it was opened, the next its edges pressed tight against the cavern's stone.

She hadn't needed to alter Torden's thoughts. He had none.

*Gentahl* was new, unknown, dangerous. It altered thoughts, and those thoughts then changed reality. Red became blue. Chairs became tables. Iron became copper. In theory, the power should've been able to change anything. In theory, it could've returned her brother, their father before he'd become insane, their lives.

If only it were so easy.

A failed attempt—trying to convince someone without the strength to do so, or attempting to convince too *many* people—led to pain, confusion, dizziness, and a headache to pierce stones.

*The more firm the thought, the more difficult it is to shift. The dead can't live, and nothing can return Torden's mind.* A shiver swept across her, and she caressed the tattoos on her arm. *How a man or woman looks... ah, that's the strongest of all.*

Thus the tattoos. They weren't *gentahl*, but they might be enough.

Torden twitched.

"It's dangerous to leave him here," she said, and hugged Fier tighter. "Four days is too long, and Father might return."

"So?"

"We have no way to know what he'll do. I'm sorry, but we must kill—"

"No!" Fier shoved her hands away. He knelt beside Torden and brushed the hair from his brother's face. "Let Father study him. Prophet! Let him come back, and we'll stop him. He's nothing but a self-centered fool."

Her father had discovered *gentahl* long ago, and perhaps the power itself had driven him insane. He'd sunk into darkness like the dust and moss sank into Torden. He'd murdered his eldest son—or near enough that it no longer mattered—then he'd fled the cavern, losing himself amongst the island's populace.

Father was but one man within a vast sea of others.

Fier rubbed his forehead. The days since they'd lost Torden had proven hard on him. He was younger than her, but gray strands littered his otherwise red hair. He gazed at her with green eyes—intelligent, introspective, wise.

"We can't leave him," she muttered. "This is a mercy, and one he deserves. His life would be worse than death."

It would be a rat in the cage, but how to tell Fier that?

"Our father would return for him," she said. "We can't let that happen, but we're too weak to stop it, and our brother doesn't deserve Father's tests. You know it as well as I. Father is too dangerous."

And he was. He understood more of *gentahl* than she could ever imagine—how to twist a mind, to alter it so reality changed. She could accomplish minor things: close a door, conjure a spoon or a knife.

Her father could accomplish far, far more.

Fier shrugged, but he clenched his fist. "Then what do you suggest?"

"I'll put our brother to rest, and—"

"No!" He pulled the book from her hands, flipped to one of the earliest pages, and read it aloud. "'I'll bring fury upon them, but I'll have a reason. I want them to feel. I've

never felt, but I've wished for it. How do I wish for a wish?"

She nodded once, hard.

"A dead man can't feel, Vill. Father must have a reason for this, but—"

She yanked the book from him. Its crinkled pages and loose binding contained their father's notes. Thousands of pages. Torden must've found it.

*Is that why Father did this to him? Too many unanswered questions.*

"The world will change," she murmured. "You know it as I do. He's planned this too thoroughly, and we can't stop it with a word or fist or sword. It will take manipulation, and we must stand at the heart of that. Torden began the change."

"So we'll be the end." He swallowed hard. "But I don't understand why we must kill him."

"A week ago, Father strapped a man to a chair and, for two days, he observed. You think that village will miss their man? The wife her husband? I'd bet so. Ah, but father watched the man's expression, the man's eyes. What was he looking for?"

"I don't want to hear this. You can't be sure that happened—"

"I can, because I saw it. Father doesn't care about you. He doesn't care for me, and he certainly doesn't care for our brother. To him, we're the man in the chair. We're children of the Prophet, nothing more."

Tears tickled her eyes. One dripped to her cheek, and she wiped it away. She knew she was right; her father would use Torden, just as he'd used that villager. He'd grow more powerful.

Torden wouldn't get better. It was too late for that. His mind had already become like a soft butter.

"What do we do?" Fier demanded, as if she could answer all his questions, as if she could twist and twirl their island until it was right.

Nothing could do that.

Their island would sink beneath their father's madness. It would bob and tumble, but how to steady it? Neither she nor her brother held the power to change their faces, their bodies, but she suspected her father did. He could be anyone, anywhere—a whisper in the night, a voice on the wind.

And the whisper could be a maze, the voice a puzzle.

Now she must finish what her father started. She forced herself to look at Torden, at the dust and moss skipping across the floor. His chest rose. It fell.

She'd find her father, her vengeance. The bastard would taste it, wallow in it.

"We burn our brother," she whispered, and her voice trembled as she continued. "We lay him to rest in a way that no one—not our father or even a rat—can hurt him."

Fier paled. "And then? How do we find Father? What do we do *if* we find him?"

"We'll study his notes and do as we must." She lifted the book, allowed a hint of iron into her tone as she glared at its cover. It would take months, perhaps years. "We don't have a choice."

The key to the Prophet's mind lay within.



## Part One

*'They'll stand amongst the corpses of the beloved.'* That's what he said at the end, though I never considered myself one of the beloved, not at the beginning. I was simply a terrified woman then, but now... now I understand. Maybe I wish I didn't.

*Void take me, this is so demon-damned hard.*

*In the beginning, he loved me. Irony, it twists and twirls like a lover's song, but this is hardly a lover's tale. It's one of blades and blood. I wish I could've seen it sooner, but that would've been too easy. I wouldn't have learned to love him.*

*Love. That's all he wanted.*

*In the beginning, he adored his father. Oh, how quickly that was snatched away. But it's different, because he took his father from himself. He had to teach his own lessons, just as he had to teach us ours. If only they hadn't ended with so much bloodshed. If only it would've stopped there, but he never admitted how much the death of his father devastated him. Maybe things would've been different if he had. Maybe, ah, I don't know. Maybe it's pointless to think about. I couldn't have done anything to change it, anyways. I doubt he would've let me.*

*In the beginning, he was a Kilnsman like his father. No, he'd never stepped inside the village, and no, he'd never met a Kilnsman besides his father, but that didn't change who or what he was. He was a Kilnsman, and that meant something to him. The honor of it. See, these things were at the core of who he was. In the end, he was more than his true father. That's why he never relented. That's why he's dead.*

*In the beginning, none of you understood this.*

*I didn't either.*

## Chapter One

Far in the distance a child shrieked, but Irreor Ark ignored it. He panted beneath his father's critical stare, then heaved his longsword into an offensive angle and planted his feet wide.

*Offense. Offense.*

He pivoted as his father circled.

High stone walls surrounded the barrack's courtyard, and wooden overhangs provided some shade. Sand crunched beneath their boots, dust puffed at their ankles, and the scent of their own sweat filled the area. Racks lined the walls, holding an assortment of pikes and blades and cudgels.

The older man clenched two matching blades, with a patterned guardsman's tunic covering his chest—the same as Irreor's, though his father also wore a captain's badge.

Eenan Ark growled and leapt forward.

Irreor skipped to the side, blocked his father's attack with his dagger, then lashed his longsword out in an angled riposte. Twist and step, step and twist—a dance they both knew well. Back and forth they wove, blades sparkling in the morning.

Eenan, a skilled blademaker, blocked each strike and returned a riposte of his own.

Irreor parried them, twisted and rolled, never stopped moving. A speck of frustration built within, for he'd never beaten his father in training. Indeed, he'd never come close, not against a fully-trained Kilnsman. His father slid to the side and Irreor followed.

They'd begun to train before dawn, just as they had for years, and now Irreor's arms ached as the sun crested the city of Farren's skyline. This weariness didn't matter; he needed to win, especially today, on his twentieth birthday.

Just once.

Sure, it was a childish fancy, but what man didn't dream of besting his father?

He grinned as a flash of sparks struck the ground, then swept his dagger in a wide, erratic arc. Too wide. Too slow and unskilled. His father's longsword intercepted the dagger in a precise, steadied motion, and Irreor's weapon cracked and shattered.

Steel fragments littered the ground and, with it, his dreams of victory. And now... now came the punishment. His father wasn't a harsh man—far from it—but he believed in discipline.

"Demon-damn, but what was *that*?" Eenan spat.

Irreor dropped his gaze.

"Birthdays mean nothing, Irreor," his father said. "Not your twentieth and not my fortieth. You know this, and you must train. But, void take me, you also need to relax. Control the anger instead of allowing it the path to your body."

Irreor nodded, unable to argue.

"Loosen your shoulder and ready the muscles to thrust," Eenan said. "Aim for the neck and hold it."

Irreor did, but a voice—raspy, introspective—murmured within his head. It had spoken to him his entire life, rarely far from his thoughts. The voice never answered, never provided a reason for its words.

It simply was.

-He'll hold the stance. Ah, how my general will love his father. How he'll respect him and wish to be like him. Not even his punishment will halt that, and those memories will drive him onward. They'll cuddle him at night.-

Fifteen years earlier, Farren's city council had promoted Eenan Ark to captain their western guard, and he had done it superbly. He oversaw the training, discipline, and organization of two hundred men in a town of over forty thousand.

For the past year, Irreor had also worked in the guard, for the voice had been right. What better man could he become, than one like his father? What better living than as a guardsman?

Protect the city. Save the damsel. Or something like that.

-Can I do that to my general? Can I plunge him into such despair? I'll try. Oh, how I'll try.-

Irreor held the stance, struggling to ignore the voice. Sometimes the words helped. Other times, like now—with his father so close, with that critical eye pinned to him, with his dagger shattered on the ground—it simply distracted him.

His father skirted around him to examine his form, and something tickled the top of Irreor's shoulders, the nape of his neck, as if the voice tugged an invisible thread over the tiny hairs of his skin. He'd learned to somewhat ignore the sensation over the years, but it wasn't always so easy.

-Plans and plans. Doors and keys, but which will be which?-

His sword wavered.

Sweat beaded on Irreor's chin, but he gritted his teeth and steadied the weapon. Once, he'd attempted to tell his father about the voice, but the older man had simply laughed. So now he held it close, a puzzle he attempted to solve without the pieces, a darkened maze he wandered without a light. It was his secret, an obscure thing that appeared and vanished like an untimely storm.

"Release," Eenan said. "Void take me, Son, you'll need to control yourself better than that. A skilled swordsman would tear you to pieces."

Irreor swept his longsword into its sheath and shook his hands to relieve the stiffness. His father was right, but how to admit it? He smirked. "A skilled man's arms actually *move*, unlike mine after a day of this."

Eenan chuckled, no stranger to their lighthearted banter. "It's good for you."

Irreor snorted. "Indeed."

Two guards entered as Eenan's laughter boomed through the courtyard. His father sheathed his blades and clapped Irreor on the shoulder. The closeness felt good, warm, reassuring. Not even defeat could overcome it.

-Ah, and how he'll remember that.-

An old officer named Pernik Syllis said, "He got you again, eh boy?"

Irreor rolled his eyes. True, he was one of Farren's youngest guards, but he was also one of their best—despite his inability to best his father. It was impossible to defeat a true Kilnsman, so no one could look down on him for that. The other guardsman respected him in their own way, which often resulted in a gentle quip.

He could take it.

Pernik nodded at him. "You've got to give him a hard time for the rest of us. He'll work us to the bone if *we* try."

"I'll do that anyways," Eenan said.

Pernik shook his head. "See? We've no hope."

"None. A Kilnsman of eighty is worth more than you ninnies."

Irreor's smile faded.

His father was a Kilnsman, a blademaker from a village far to the north, but Irreor had never visited the place. Would Kiln be like he'd always imagined it—men like his father, women like his mother? At least, like the mother he never knew, the one he'd always wanted to know.

Maybe.

Eenan Ark had brought him to Farren after his mother died, and Irreor remembered only fragments of those times—the briefest scent of lavender, the hazy image of her face.

"Irreor, go to Stonehand's," Eenan said. "He promised me a dozen blades today, and I'll skin the bastard if he doesn't cough them up."

Stonehand's Forging, owned and operated by Krayr Stonehand, enjoyed a reputation as one of the best smithies on the island. Only Synien steel was better. Irreor's father had befriended Krayr years ago, and thus Irreor and the blacksmith's son, Bran, had also grown close.

"And Irreor," his father said, holding out a handful of coins. "Here's your pay for the month, and a little something extra. Call it a birthday present. Buy yourself a new dagger, since it seems yours fell to bad times." He winked. "Just don't let Kipra tear your head off."

Kipra.

She was.... How to describe her? Spitfire. Gentleness. Anger and happiness and fear.

Her father owned a weapons stall in the market, and she helped him sell the pieces. She and Irreor and Bran had grown up together. Through the years, Irreor had trained her, taught her everything his father taught him, and she was nearly as skilled as he with a blade.

Yet there was more to it than that.

She was a fingertip to a parted lip—silence that should've been said, yet words never spoken. He cared for her. Deeper than the deepest pool, he cared for her. Yet she'd never let him say it.

And so he'd held his tongue.

Pernik chuckled. "One of the boys patrolled the market earlier, said the last Synien's still there. Not that you can afford it, but at least you can see it. You're lucky."

Irreor tensed at the thought, perfectly willing to stop thinking of Kipra. The Synien Isle stood just off the western shore, and they produced the best weapons and armor. Every few months, they sent their products across a narrow channel, to the much larger island where Farren resided, and they returned with the supplies to craft more. Not even Krayr Stonehand could compete with a Synien blade, nor could the other smithies in the city, nor any of the smithies of the Inner Empire.

Of course, like Pernik had said, he couldn't afford it. He'd end up with a dagger of far lesser quality. Yet it was a nice thought, something to brighten the morning.

"Get out of here and enjoy your day," Eenan said. "But return before the sun sets. You'll not get *that* much special treatment." He pulled his son closer to whisper, "Despite your mistakes, you did well today. I'm proud of you. Always remember that."

As if something terrible would happen. As if the world would crash to the grave.

Irreor flashed his father a smile and strode from the courtyard, took the path leading over Flower Hill, and meandered down into the Valley of Craftsmen. Few people mingled in the avenues so early, but those who did glanced at him. Everyone knew the son of Eenan Ark, and a guardsman in his own right.

The voice's thread tickled his skin:

-I'll split the city of Farren into three pieces—a small block for the nobles and wealthy merchants, a sizeable market and craft district, and a massive residential area. They need dingy taverns, rickety stores.-

To his right, jutting from the side of a tavern, a sign swung in the breeze. It advertised a lumber warehouse near the center of the city, 'a place to buy the finest spruce and poplar and oak.' The hinges squealed, but the voice's words drowned it out.

-Will they understand what I've given them? Perhaps not at the beginning. In the end, they'll understand it. They'll recognize what I've sacrificed for them, the plans I've laid, all to see them rise above their peers. And their sorrow, I mustn't forget their sorrow. Through that, I'll forge an empire.-

*Thanks for that.*

The voice had once prattled at him for five hours without pause, detailing notes and plans for both island and city. It had nearly driven him mad. Nothing made sense, though he'd often tried to find an explanation. None existed, and with every pause, every inhalation, the voice had repeated one word.

Empire.

*I don't need it right now!*

The city's life and energy invaded his senses: the sour stench of Farren's poor district, the sweetened scent of a perfumer's stand, an ale merchant's throaty hawking, and the commotion of a city filled beyond the point of bursting.

Irreor slid through it with little difficulty.

The smithy's pillars rose from packed sand and clay. It contained only one stone wall, designed to allow for air flow in hot summers, with a massive forge built into its added support. Steady clangs sounded as Krayr dropped his hammer in a firm rhythm. Bran pumped the bellows.

Irreor planted himself before the stocky blacksmith. "My father needs his blades."

Krayr grunted. "He'll get them when I'm damn well ready."

"He said he'd flay the fat from your bones if he doesn't get them today."

None could name Krayr Stonehand fat, especially if they possessed a good eye and relative reason. The man bore bull shoulders that merged with corded arms and a thick neck. Tendons and sinew wormed beneath his skin with every move, and he pinned a hard, blue-eyed gaze on Irreor.

Bran grinned, but managed to withhold a chuckle.

Krayr took a threatening step forward. "He said that, did he?"

"Er... well... not really the fat bit."

"What bit *did* he say?"

"Something about skinning the bastard."

Krayr crossed his arms. "Then *you* made up the rest?"

"Yep."

"Insolent whelp!"

Irreor laughed. "Strange, that's exactly what *he'd* say."

"He's a smart man." Krayr glanced to his son, and then back to Irreor. "You men off to that worthless merchant's tent?"

Bran nodded. "Master Steel received a shipment of Synien longswords three days ago."

"I know," Krayr said. "You don't have to tell me again."

"He sold two to noblemen on the hill, but there's still one—"

"I know! Tell the fool to sell a piece or two of mine. Those Syniens are too bloody expensive, more than five of these!" He shook a length of jagged steel. "The silly noblemen don't know a hilt from a counterweight, and a weapon like that should symbolize something amazing. Those idiots ruin it."

"They *are* good quality," Irreor said.

"Aye, they're good quality." The older blacksmith dropped steel to anvil. "Bran, your mother has a fowl for tonight, so bring yourself back early or you'll see none of it. You're welcome to tag along, Ark."

"I may."

Krayr shrugged. "Watch yourself out there. Crest's been eyeing the area, and there's not many who want to tell him to shove off. Only your father. Don't get caught up in the middle of it, and let your father tend to the brunt of it."

Kylen Crest, an underlord from the city's northern district, had crept into the eastern and western districts over these past months. Added to that, many of the newer guardsmen were his—he owned them, one way or the other. He was one of the reasons Irreor had chosen the guard, to help shift the balance in his father's favor. Little more than a bully, Crest extorted the merchants, harassed the guardsmen, and ever-so-slowly expanded his influence.

"My father doesn't need to take the brunt of it," Irreor said with a growl. "I can —"

"Watch yourself, and that's not a request." Krayr lifted his hammer to smash it down—once, hard. "Trust me, and trust your father."

"Fine," Irreor said flatly.

Krayr waved. "Off with you."

Irreor and Bran fled the forge's heat, squinting into the midmorning sun. The city had grown busier since Irreor had left the barracks, and he pushed through the crowded streets. Many people glanced at his guardsman's tunic and stepped to the side. Bran, however, received no such treatment. Not as dexterous as his slimmer friend, he used his formidable shoulders to part the masses.

"He's right, you know," Bran shouted. "Do what you can, but Crest is a larger problem than you can solve alone. Let the council do their jobs, and he'll return to the north soon."

Irreor grunted. "I don't want to talk about it, Bran."

"Fair enough." Bran's face brightened. "You think Master Steel will still have the Synien?"

"One of the men was at the market earlier. It's still there."

"Think we'll actually get to see it?"

The possibility had never occurred to Irreor. "Of course. Other than a few soldiers or noblemen, who really cares? No one can afford it."

"But what if it is gone? Your man saw it hours ago."

"Trust me."

Streets funneled into the main courtyard, which then opened into a circular expanse, flooded with vendors and merchants. Roads and alleys emptied into it as rivers into a lake, a continuous flow of humanity.

Haral Steel's store stood in the center of the market, within a large, tented stall that he'd quartered into even sections. Weapons and armor of every style hung upon tent poles and coarse wooden planks. Broad tables carried lean daggers, heavy blades, spiked balls, thick cudgels and slender rapiers.

Irreor lost himself.

He waded through the sea of metal, examining each with the practiced eye of a guard captain's son, but careful to touch none. Bran followed at his heels, and they chuckled at one another in hushed tones. These weapons held a mystique that neither could articulate, but the near-magical qualities flooded their veins and minds. Their lives revolved around them—with Irreor's constant training, his duties with the guard, and Bran's work in his father's forge.

A pair of guardsmen marched past, lifting their hands to Irreor, their heavy armor clinking against the cobblestones. Both Irreor and his father preferred lighter armor—studded leather tunic, thin greaves, supple boots and gloves—but many of the other guards preferred heavier. On some days they needed it; the city wasn't fully safe, despite their best efforts, and Crest inched farther south with every passing hour. On other days... well, a pound or two of steel only made a man stronger.

Haral Steel paced a slow circle, offering a curt nod before returning to his rounds. Irreor barely noticed the gesture, but managed a nod in return. Bran nudged him and pointed, and he followed his friend's hand to a dark-haired woman who tended a table at the far side.

Kipra.

Irreor nodded, torn between looking at the blades or Kipra. Her raven hair hung to a curved waist, and she watched the wares with sharp green eyes. She'd inherited high cheekbones and angular features, though she wore them with a definite feminine grace. Two shortswords, the weapons she and Irreor had decided best suited her, hung at her belt, and she rested one hand to a hilt.

She hadn't noticed Irreor, scowling instead as two men entered.

They walked with straightened backs, sneering with a cruelty only power could breed, and ignored—or simply didn't see—Irreor. They focused on Master Steel, and the other patrons scattered. The shorter of Crest's men snickered, but the taller, who towered a full two inches over even Bran, crossed his arms.

"Crest wants the last Synien," he told the merchant.

"It's already spoken for, Remn. I'll be glad to sell him another with the next shipment."

"How long?" Remn fingered a long dagger at his belt.

The store had emptied except for Irreor, Bran, Haral and his daughter. Irreor inched behind the two newcomers, but his friend grabbed his arm. He tugged free. This was why he'd joined the guard, why he'd trained for so long, but Bran had trouble understanding that.

"I'll get five more in six months," Haral said. "I don't know—"