

BRAN

The moon was a crescent, thin and sharp as the blade of a knife. A pale sun rose and set and rose again. Red leaves whispered in the wind. Dark clouds filled the skies and turned to storms. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, and dead men with black hands and bright blue eyes shuffled round a cleft in the hillside but could not enter. Under the hill, the broken boy sat upon a weirwood throne, listening to whispers in the dark as ravens walked up and down his arms.

“You will never walk again,” the three-eyed crow had promised, “but you will fly.” Sometimes the sound of song would drift up from someplace far below. *The children of the forest*, Old Nan would have called the singers, but *those who sing the song of earth* was their own name for themselves, in the True Tongue that no human man could speak. The ravens could speak it, though. Their small black eyes were full of secrets, and they would *caw* at him and peck his skin when they heard the songs.

The moon was fat and full. Stars wheeled across a black sky. Rain fell and froze, and tree limbs snapped from the weight of the ice. Bran and Meera made up names for those who sang the song of earth: Ash and Leaf and Scales, Black Knife and Snowylocks and Coals. Their true names were too long for human tongues, said Leaf. Only she could speak the Common Tongue, so what the others thought of their new names Bran never learned.

After the bone-grinding cold of the lands beyond the Wall, the caves were blessedly warm, and when the chill crept out of the rock the singers would light fires to drive it off again. Down here there was no wind, no snow, no ice, no dead things reaching out to grab you, only dreams and rushlight and the kisses of the ravens. And the whisperer in darkness.

The last greenseer, the singers called him, but in Bran’s dreams he was still a three-eyed crow. When Meera Reed had asked him his true name, he made a ghastly sound that might have been a chuckle. “I wore many names when I was quick, but even I once had a mother, and the name she gave me at her breast was Brynden.”

“I have an uncle Brynden,” Bran said. “He’s my mother’s uncle, really. Brynden Blackfish, he’s called.”

“Your uncle may have been named for me. Some are, still. Not so many as before. Men forget. Only the trees remember.” His voice was so soft that Bran had to strain to hear.

“Most of him has gone into the tree,” explained the singer Meera called Leaf. “He has lived beyond his mortal span, and yet he lingers. For us, for you, for the realms of men. Only a little strength remains in his flesh. He has a thousand eyes and one, but there is much to watch. One day you will know.”

“What will I know?” Bran asked the Reeds afterward, when they came with torches burning brightly in their hand, to carry him back to a small chamber off the big cavern where the singers had made beds for them to sleep.

“What do the trees remember?”

“The secrets of the old gods,” said Jojen Reed. Food and fire and rest had helped restore him after the ordeals of their journey, but he seemed sadder now, sullen, with a weary, haunted look about the eyes. “Truths the First Men knew, forgotten now in Winterfell ... but not in the wet wild. We live closer to the green in our bogs and crannogs, and we remember. Earth and water, soil and stone, oaks and elms and willows, they were here before us all and will still remain when we are gone.”

“So will you,” said Meera. That made Bran sad. *What if I don’t want to remain when you are gone?* he almost asked, but he swallowed the words unspoken. He was almost a man grown, and he did not want Meera to think he was some weepy babe. “Maybe you could be greenseers too,” he said instead.

“No, Bran.” Now Meera sounded sad. “It is given to a few to drink of that green fountain whilst still in mortal flesh, to hear the whisperings of the leaves and see as the trees see, as the gods see,” said Jojen. “Most are not so blessed. The gods gave me only greendreams. My task was to get you here. My part in this is done.”

The moon was a black hole in the sky. Wolves howled in the wood, sniffing through the snowdrifts after dead things. A murder of ravens erupted from the hillside, screaming their sharp cries, black wings beating above a white world. A red sun rose and set and rose again, painting the snows in shades of rose and pink. Under the hill, Jojen brooded, Meera fretted, and Hodor wandered through dark tunnels with a sword in his right hand and a torch in his left. Or was it Bran wandering?

No one must ever know.

The great cavern that opened on the abyss was as black as pitch, black as tar, blacker than the feathers of a crow. Light entered as a trespasser, unwanted and unwelcome, and soon was gone again; cookfires, candles, and rushes burned for a little while, then guttered out again, their brief lives at an end.

The singers made Bran a throne of his own, like the one Lord Brynden sat, white weirwood flecked with red, dead branches woven through living roots. They placed it in the great cavern by the abyss, where the black air echoed to the sound of running water far below. Of soft grey moss they made his seat. Once he had been lowered into place, they covered him with warm furs.

There he sat, listening to the hoarse whispers of his teacher. “Never fear the darkness, Bran.” The lord’s words were accompanied by a faint rustling of wood and leaf, a slight twisting of his head. “The strongest trees are rooted in the dark places of the earth. Darkness will be your cloak, your shield, your mother’s milk. Darkness will make you strong.”

The moon was a crescent, thin and sharp as the blade of a knife. Snowflakes drifted down soundlessly to cloak the soldier pines and sentinels in white. The drifts grew so deep that they covered the entrance to the caves, leaving a white wall that Summer had to dig through whenever he went outside to join his pack and hunt. Bran did not oft range with them in those days, but some nights he watched them from above.

Flying was even better than climbing.

Slipping into Summer's skin had become as easy for him as slipping on a pair of breeches once had been, before his back was broken. Changing his own skin for a raven's night-black feathers had been harder, but not as hard as he had feared, not with *these* ravens. "A wild stallion will buck and kick when a man tries to mount him, and try to bite the hand that slips the bit between his teeth," Lord Brynden said, "but a horse that has known one rider will accept another. Young or old, these birds have all been ridden. Choose one now, and fly."

He chose one bird, and then another, without success, but the third raven looked at him with shrewd black eyes, tilted its head, and gave a *quork*, and quick as that he was not a boy looking at a raven but a raven looking at a boy. The song of the river suddenly grew louder, the torches burned a little brighter than before, and the air was full of strange smells. When he tried to speak it came out in a scream, and his first flight ended when he crashed into a wall and ended back inside his own broken body. The raven was unhurt. It flew to him and landed on his arm, and Bran stroked its feathers and slipped inside of it again. Before long he was flying around the cavern, weaving through the long stone teeth that hung down from the ceiling, even flapping out over the abyss and swooping down into its cold black depths.

Then he realized he was not alone. "Someone else was in the raven," he told Lord Brynden, once he had returned to his own skin. "Some girl. I felt her."

"A woman, of those who sing the song of earth," his teacher said. "Long dead, yet a part of her remains, just as a part of you would remain in Summer if your boy's flesh were to die upon the morrow. A shadow on the soul. She will not harm you."

"Do all the birds have singers in them?"

"All," Lord Brynden said. "It was the singers who taught the First Men to send messages by raven ... but in those days, the birds would speak the words. The trees remember, but men forget, and so now they write the messages on parchment and tie them round the feet of birds who have never shared their skin."

Old Nan had told him the same story once, Bran remembered, but when he asked Robb if it was true, his brother laughed and asked him if he believed in grumkins too. He wished Robb were with them now. *I'd tell him I could fly, but he wouldn't believe, so I'd have to show him. I bet that he could learn to fly too, him and Arya and Sansa, even baby Rickon and Jon Snow. We could all be ravens and live in Maester Luwin's rookery.*

That was just another silly dream, though. Some days Bran wondered if all of this wasn't just some dream. Maybe he had fallen asleep out in the snows and dreamed himself a safe, warm place. *You have to wake*, he would tell himself, *you have to wake right now, or you'll go dreaming into death.* Once or twice he pinched his arm with his fingers, really hard, but the only thing that did was make his arm hurt. In the beginning he had tried to count the days by making note of when he woke and slept, but down here sleeping and waking had a way of melting into one another. Dreams became lessons, lessons became dreams, things happened all at once or not at all. Had he done that or only dreamed it?

"Only one man in a thousand is born a skinchanger," Lord Brynden said one day, after Bran had learned to fly, "and only one skinchanger in a thousand can be a greenseer."

"I thought the greenseers were the wizards of the children," Bran said. "The singers, I mean."

"In a sense. Those you call the children of the forest have eyes as golden as the sun, but once in a great while one is born amongst them with eyes as red as blood, or green as the moss on a tree in the heart of the forest. By these signs do the gods mark those they have chosen to receive the gift. The chosen ones are not robust, and their quick years upon the earth are few, for every song must have its balance. But once inside the wood they linger long indeed. A thousand eyes, a hundred skins, wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees. *Greenseers.*"

Bran did not understand, so he asked the Reeds. "Do you like to read books, Bran?" Jojen asked him.

“Some books. I like the fighting stories. My sister Sansa likes the kissing stories, but those are stupid.”

“A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies,” said Jojen. “The man who never reads lives only one. The singers of the forest had no books. No ink, no parchment, no written language. Instead they had the trees, and the weirwoods above all. When they died, they went into the wood, into leaf and limb and root, and the trees remembered. All their songs and spells, their histories and prayers, everything they knew about this world. Maesters will tell you that the weirwoods are sacred to the old gods. The singers believe they *are* the old gods. When singers die they become part of that godhood.”

Bran’s eyes widened. “They’re going to *kill* me?”

“No,” Meera said. “Jojen, you’re scaring him.”

“He is not the one who needs to be afraid.”

The moon was fat and full. Summer prowled through the silent woods, a long grey shadow that grew more gaunt with every hunt, for living game could not be found. The ward upon the cave mouth still held; the dead men could not enter. The snows had buried most of them again, but they were still there, hidden, frozen, waiting. Other dead things came to join them, things that had once been men and women, even children. Dead ravens sat on bare brown branches, wings crusted with ice. A snow bear crashed through the brush, huge and skeletal, half its head sloughed away to reveal the skull beneath. Summer and his pack fell upon it and tore it into pieces. Afterward they gorged, though the meat was rotted and half-frozen, and moved even as they ate it.

Under the hill they still had food to eat. A hundred kinds of mushrooms grew down here. Blind white fish swam in the black river, but they tasted just as good as fish with eyes once you cooked them up. They had cheese and milk from the goats that shared the caves with the singers, even some oats and barleycorn and dried fruit laid by during the long summer. And almost every day they ate blood stew, thickened with barley and onions and chunks of meat. Jojen thought it might be squirrel meat, and Meera said that

it was rat. Bran did not care. It was meat and it was good. The stewing made it tender.

The caves were timeless, vast, silent. They were home to more than three score living singers and the bones of thousands dead, and extended far below the hollow hill. “Men should not go wandering in this place,” Leaf warned them. “The river you hear is swift and black, and flows down and down to a sunless sea. And there are passages that go even deeper, bottomless pits and sudden shafts, forgotten ways that lead to the very center of the earth. Even my people have not explored them all, and we have lived here for a thousand thousand of your man-years.”

Though the men of the Seven Kingdoms might call them the *children of the forest*, Leaf and her people were far from childlike. *Little wise men of the forest* would have been closer. They were small compared to men, as a wolf is smaller than a direwolf. That does not mean it is a pup. They had nut-brown skin, dappled like a deer’s with paler spots, and large ears that could hear things that no man could hear. Their eyes were big too, great golden cat’s eyes that could see down passages where a boy’s eyes saw only blackness. Their hands had only three fingers and a thumb, with sharp black claws instead of nails.

And they *did* sing. They sang in True Tongue, so Bran could not understand the words, but their voices were as pure as winter air. “Where are the rest of you?” Bran asked Leaf, once.

“Gone down into the earth,” she answered. “Into the stones, into the trees. Before the First Men came all this land that you call Westeros was home to us, yet even in those days we were few. The gods gave us long lives but not great numbers, lest we overrun the world as deer will overrun a wood where there are no wolves to hunt them. That was in the dawn of days, when our sun was rising. Now it sinks, and this is our long dwindling. The giants are almost gone as well, they who were our bane and our brothers. The great lions of the western hills have been slain, the unicorns are all but gone, the mammoths down to a few hundred. The direwolves will outlast us all, but their time will come as well. In the world that men have made, there is no room for them, or us.”

She seemed sad when she said it, and that made Bran sad as well. It was only later that he thought, *Men would not be sad. Men would be wrath. Men would hate and swear a bloody vengeance. The singers sing sad songs, where men would fight and kill.*

One day Meera and Jojen decided to go see the river, despite Leaf's cautions. "I want to come too," Bran said.

Meera gave him a mournful look. The river was six hundred feet below, down steep slopes and twisty passages, she explained, and the last part required climbing down a rope. "Hodor could never make the climb with you on his back. I'm sorry, Bran."

Bran remembered a time when no one could climb as good as him, not even Robb or Jon. Part of him wanted to shout at them for leaving him, and another part wanted to cry. He was almost a man grown, though, so he said nothing. But after they were gone, he slipped inside Hodor's skin and followed them.

The big stableboy no longer fought him as he had the first time, back in the lake tower during the storm. Like a dog who has had all the fight whipped out of him, Hodor would curl up and hide whenever Bran reached out for him. His hiding place was somewhere deep within him, a pit where not even Bran could touch him. *No one wants to hurt you, Hodor*, he said silently, to the child-man whose flesh he'd taken. *I just want to be strong again for a while. I'll give it back, the way I always do.*

No one ever knew when he was wearing Hodor's skin. Bran only had to smile, do as he was told, and mutter "Hodor" from time to time, and he could follow Meera and Jojen, grinning happily, without anyone suspecting it was really him. He often tagged along, whether he was wanted or not. In the end, the Reeds were glad he came. Jojen made it down the rope easily enough, but after Meera caught a blind white fish with her frog spear and it was time to climb back up, his arms began to tremble and he could not make it to the top, so they had to tie the rope around him and let Hodor haul him up. "Hodor," he grunted every time he gave a pull. "Hodor, hodor, hodor."

The moon was a crescent, thin and sharp as the blade of a knife. Summer dug up a severed arm, black and covered with hoarfrost, its fingers opening and closing as it pulled itself across the frozen snow. There was still enough meat on it to fill his empty belly, and after that was done he cracked the arm bones for the marrow. Only then did the arm remember it was dead.

Bran ate with Summer and his pack, as a wolf. As a raven he flew with the murder, circling the hill at sunset, watching for foes, feeling the icy touch of the air. As Hodor he explored the caves. He found chambers full of bones, shafts that plunged deep into the earth, a place where the skeletons of gigantic bats hung upside down from the ceiling. He even crossed the slender stone bridge that arched over the abyss and discovered more passages and chambers on the far side. One was full of singers, enthroned like Brynden in nests of weirwood roots that wove under and through and around their bodies. Most of them looked dead to him, but as he crossed in front of them their eyes would open and follow the light of his torch, and one of them opened and closed a wrinkled mouth as if he were trying to speak. “Hodor,” Bran said to him, and he felt the real Hodor stir down in his pit.

Seated on his throne of roots in the great cavern, half-corpse and half-tree, Lord Brynden seemed less a man than some ghastly statue made of twisted wood, old bone, and rotted wool. The only thing that looked alive in the pale ruin that was his face was his one red eye, burning like the last coal in a dead fire, surrounded by twisted roots and tatters of leathery white skin hanging off a yellowed skull.

The sight of him still frightened Bran—the weirwood roots snaking in and out of his withered flesh, the mushrooms sprouting from his cheeks, the white wooden worm that grew from the socket where one eye had been. He liked it better when the torches were put out. In the dark he could pretend that it was the three-eyed crow who whispered to him and not some grisly talking corpse.

One day I will be like him. The thought filled Bran with dread. Bad enough that he was broken, with his useless legs. Was he doomed to lose the rest too, to spend all of his years with a weirwood growing in him and through him? Lord Brynden drew his life from the tree, Leaf told them. He did not

eat, he did not drink. He slept, he dreamed, he watched. *I was going to be a knight*, Bran remembered. *I used to run and climb and fight*. It seemed a thousand years ago.

What was he now? Only Bran the broken boy, Brandon of House Stark, prince of a lost kingdom, lord of a burned castle, heir to ruins. He had thought the three-eyed crow would be a sorcerer, a wise old wizard who could fix his legs, but that was some stupid child's dream, he realized now. *I am too old for such fancies*, he told himself. *A thousand eyes, a hundred skins, wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees*. That was as good as being a knight. *Almost as good, anyway*.

The moon was a black hole in the sky. Outside the cave the world went on. Outside the cave the sun rose and set, the moon turned, the cold winds howled. Under the hill, Jojen Reed grew ever more sullen and solitary, to his sister's distress. She would often sit with Bran beside their little fire, talking of everything and nothing, petting Summer where he slept between them, whilst her brother wandered the caverns by himself. Jojen had even taken to climbing up to the cave's mouth when the day was bright. He would stand there for hours, looking out over the forest, wrapped in furs yet shivering all the same.

"He wants to go home," Meera told Bran. "He will not even try and fight his fate. He says the greendreams do not lie."

"He's being brave," said Bran. *The only time a man can be brave is when he is afraid*, his father had told him once, long ago, on the day they found the direwolf pups in the summer snows. He still remembered.

"He's being stupid," Meera said. "I'd hoped that when we found your three-eyed crow ... now I wonder why we ever came."

For me, Bran thought. "His greendreams," he said. "His greendreams." Meera's voice was bitter. "Hodor," said Hodor.

Meera began to cry.

Bran hated being crippled then. “Don’t cry,” he said. He wanted to put his arms around her, hold her tight the way his mother used to hold him back at Winterfell when he’d hurt himself. She was right there, only a few feet from him, but so far out of reach it might have been a hundred leagues. To touch her he would need to pull himself along the ground with his hands, dragging his legs behind him. The floor was rough and uneven, and it would be slow going, full of scrapes and bumps. *I could put on Hodor’s skin*, he thought. *Hodor could hold her and pat her on the back*. The thought made Bran feel strange, but he was still thinking it when Meera bolted from the fire, back out into the darkness of the tunnels. He heard her steps recede until there was nothing but the voices of the singers.

The moon was a crescent, thin and sharp as the blade of a knife. The days marched past, one after the other, each shorter than the one before. The nights grew longer. No sunlight ever reached the caves beneath the hill. No moonlight ever touched those stony halls. Even the stars were strangers there. Those things belonged to the world above, where time ran in its iron circles, day to night to day to night to day.

“It is time,” Lord Brynden said.

Something in his voice sent icy fingers running up Bran’s back. “Time for what?”

“For the next step. For you to go beyond skinchanging and learn what it means to be a greenseer.”

“The trees will teach him,” said Leaf. She beckoned, and another of the singers padded forward, the white-haired one that Meera had named Snowy locks. She had a weirwood bowl in her hands, carved with a dozen faces, like the ones the heart trees wore. Inside was a white paste, thick and heavy, with dark red veins running through it. “You must eat of this,” said Leaf. She handed Bran a wooden spoon.

The boy looked at the bowl uncertainly. “What is it?”

“A paste of weirwood seeds.”

Something about the look of it made Bran feel ill. The red veins were only weirwood sap, he supposed, but in the torchlight they looked remarkably like blood. He dipped the spoon into the paste, then hesitated. “Will this make me a greenseer?”

“Your blood makes you a greenseer,” said Lord Brynden. “This will help awaken your gifts and wed you to the trees.”

Bran did want to be married to a tree ... but who else would wed a broken boy like him? *A thousand eyes, a hundred skins, wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees. A greenseer.*

He ate.

It had a bitter taste, though not so bitter as acorn paste. The first spoonful was the hardest to get down. He almost retched it right back up. The second tasted better. The third was almost sweet. The rest he spooned up eagerly. Why had he thought that it was bitter? It tasted of honey, of new-fallen snow, of pepper and cinnamon and the last kiss his mother ever gave him. The empty bowl slipped from his fingers and clattered on the cavern floor. “I don’t feel any different. What happens next?”

Leaf touched his hand. “The trees will teach you. The trees remember.” He raised a hand, and the other singers began to move about the cavern, extinguishing the torches one by one. The darkness thickened and crept toward them.

“Close your eyes,” said the three-eyed crow. “Slip your skin, as you do when you join with Summer. But this time, go into the roots instead. Follow them up through the earth, to the trees upon the hill, and tell me what you see.”

Bran closed his eyes and slipped free of his skin. *Into the roots*, he thought. *Into the weirwood. Become the tree.* For an instant he could see the cavern in its black mantle, could hear the river rushing by below.

Then all at once he was back home again.

Lord Eddard Stark sat upon a rock beside the deep black pool in the gods wood, the pale roots of the heart tree twisting around him like an old man's gnarled arms. The greatsword Ice lay across Lord Eddard's lap, and he was cleaning the blade with an oilcloth.

"*Winterfell*," Bran whispered.

His father looked up. "Who's there?" he asked, turning and Bran, frightened, pulled away. His father and the black pool and the godswood faded and were gone and he was back in the cavern, the pale thick roots of his weirwood throne cradling his limbs as a mother does a child. A torch flared to life before him.

"Tell us what you saw." From far away Leaf looked almost a girl, no older than Bran or one of his sisters, but close at hand she seemed far older. She claimed to have seen two hundred years.

Bran's throat was very dry. He swallowed. "Winterfell. I was back in Winterfell. I saw my father. He's not dead, he's *not*, I saw him, he's back at Winterfell, he's still alive."

"No," said Leaf. "He is gone, boy. Do not seek to call him back from death."

"I *saw* him." Bran could feel rough wood pressing against one cheek. "He was cleaning Ice."

"You saw what you wished to see. Your heart yearns for your father and your home, so that is what you saw."

"A man must know how to look before he can hope to see," said Lord Brynden. "Those were shadows of days past that you saw, Bran. You were looking through the eyes of the heart tree in your godswood. Time is different for a tree than for a man. Sun and soil and water, these are the things a weirwood understands, not days and years and centuries. For men, time is a river. We are trapped in its flow, hurtling from past to present, always in the same direction. The lives of trees are different. They root and grow and die in one place, and that river does not move them. The oak is

the acorn, the acorn is the oak. And the weirwood ... a thousand human years are a moment to a weirwood, and through such gates you and I may gaze into the past."

"But," said Bran, "he *heard* me."

"He heard a whisper on the wind, a rustling amongst the leaves. You cannot speak to him, try as you might. I know. I have my own ghosts, Bran. A brother that I loved, a brother that I hated, a woman I desired. Through the trees, I see them still, but no word of mine has ever reached them. The past remains the past. We can learn from it, but we cannot change it."

"Will I see my father again?"

"Once you have mastered your gifts, you may look where you will and see what the trees have seen, be it yesterday or last year or a thousand ages past. Men live their lives trapped in an eternal present, between the mists of memory and the sea of shadow that is all we know of the days to come. Certain moths live their whole lives in a day, yet to them that little span of time must seem as long as years and decades do to us. An oak may live three hundred years, a redwood tree three thousand. A weirwood will live forever if left undisturbed. To them seasons pass in the flutter of a moth's wing, and past, present, and future are one. Nor will your sight be limited to your godswood. The singers carved eyes into their heart trees to awaken them, and those are the first eyes a new greenseer learns to use ... but in time you will see well beyond the trees themselves."

"When?" Bran wanted to know. "In a year, or three, or ten. That I have not glimpsed. It will come in time, I promise you. But I am tired now, and the trees are calling me. We will resume on the morrow."

Hodor carried Bran back to his chamber, muttering "Hodor" in a low voice as Leaf went before them with a torch. He had hoped that Meera and Jojen would be there, so he could tell them what he had seen, but their snug alcove in the rock was cold and empty. Hodor eased Bran down onto his bed, covered him with furs, and made a fire for them. *A thousand eyes, a hundred skins, wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees.*

Watching the flames, Bran decided he would stay awake till Meera came back. Jojen would be unhappy, he knew, but Meera would be glad for him, He did not remember closing his eyes.

... but then somehow he was back at Winterfell again, in the gods-wood looking down upon his father. Lord Eddard seemed much younger this time. His hair was brown, with no hint of grey in it, his head bowed. "... let them grow up close as brothers, with only love between them," he prayed, "and let my lady wife find it in her heart to forgive ..."

"Father." Bran's voice was a whisper in the wind, a rustle in the leaves. "Father, it's me. It's Bran. Brandon."

Eddard Stark lifted his head and looked long at the weirwood, frowning, but he did not speak. *He cannot see me*, Bran realized, despairing. He wanted to reach out and touch him, but all that he could do was watch and listen. *I am in the tree. I am inside the heart tree, looking out of its red eyes, but the weirwood cannot talk, so I can't.*

Eddard Stark resumed his prayer. Bran felt his eyes fill up with tears. But were they his own tears, or the weirwood's? *If I cry, will the tree begin to weep?*

The rest of his father's words were drowned out by a sudden clatter of wood on wood. Eddard Stark dissolved, like mist in a morning sun. Now two children danced across the godswood, hooting at one another as they dueled with broken branches. The girl was the older and taller of the two. *Arya!* Bran thought eagerly, as he watched her leap up onto a rock and cut at the boy. But that couldn't be right. If the girl was Arya, the boy was Bran himself, and he had never worn his hair so long. *And Arya never beat me playing swords, the way that girl is beating him.* She slashed the boy across his thigh, so hard that his leg went out from under him and he fell into the pool and began to splash and shout. "You be quiet, stupid," the girl said, tossing her own branch aside. "It's just *water*. Do you want Old Nan to hear and run tell Father?" She knelt and pulled her brother from the pool, but before she got him out again, the two of them were gone.

After that the glimpses came faster and faster, till Bran was feeling lost and dizzy. He saw no more of his father, nor the girl who looked like Arya, but a woman heavy with child emerged naked and dripping from the black pool, knelt before the tree, and begged the old gods for a son who would avenge her. Then there came a brown-haired girl slender as a spear who stood on the tips of her toes to kiss the lips of a young knight as tall as Hodor. A dark-eyed youth, pale and fierce, sliced three branches off the weirwood and shaped them into arrows. The tree itself was shrinking, growing smaller with each vision, whilst the lesser trees dwindled into saplings and vanished, only to be replaced by other trees that would dwindle and vanish in their turn. And now the lords Bran glimpsed were tall and hard, stern men in fur and chain mail. Some wore faces he remembered from the statues in the crypts, but they were gone before he could put a name to them.

Then, as he watched, a bearded man forced a captive down onto his knees before the heart tree. A white-haired woman stepped toward them through a drift of dark red leaves, a bronze sickle in her hand.

“No,” said Bran, “*no, don’t,*” but they could not hear him, no more than his father had. The woman grabbed the captive by the hair, hooked the sickle round his throat, and slashed. And through the mist of centuries the broken boy could only watch as the man’s feet drummed against the earth ... but as his life flowed out of him in a red tide, Brandon Stark could taste the blood.