

stepfather grumbled mildly that she spoiled me, and the little girls, my half-sisters, jumped around us for their share of the hug and the blessing.

So I thought it was a manner of speaking. Mino was a peaceful place, too isolated to be touched by the savage battles of the clans. I had never imagined men and women could actually be torn into eight pieces, their strong, honey-coloured limbs wrenched from their sockets and thrown down to the waiting dogs. Raised among the Hidden, with all their gentleness, I did not know men did such things to each other.

I turned fifteen and my mother began to lose our wrestling matches. I grew six inches in a year, and by the time I was sixteen I was taller than my stepfather. He grumbled more often – that I should settle down, stop roaming the mountain like a wild monkey, marry into one of the village families. I did not mind the idea of marriage to one of the girls I'd grown up with, and that summer I worked harder alongside him, ready to take my place among the men of the village. But every now and then I could not resist the lure of the mountain, and at the end of the day I slipped away, through the bamboo grove with its tall, smooth trunks and green slanting light, up the rocky path past the shrine of the mountain god, where the villagers left offerings of millet and oranges, into the forest of birch and cedar, where the cuckoo and the nightingale called enticingly, where I watched foxes and deer and heard the melancholy cry of kites overhead.

That evening I'd been right over the mountain to a place where the best mushrooms grew. I had a cloth full of them, the little white ones like threads, and the dark orange ones like fans. I was thinking how pleased my mother would be, and how the mushrooms would still

my stepfather's scolding. I could already taste them on my tongue. As I ran through the bamboo and out into the rice fields where the red autumn lilies were already in flower, I thought I could smell cooking on the wind.

The village dogs were barking, as they often did at the end of the day. The smell grew stronger and turned acrid. I was not frightened, not then, but some premonition made my heart start to beat more quickly. There was a fire ahead of me.

Fires often broke out in the village: almost everything we owned was made of wood or straw. But I could hear no shouting, no sounds of the buckets being passed from hand to hand, none of the usual cries and curses. The cicadas shrilled as loudly as ever; frogs were calling from the paddies. In the distance thunder echoed round the mountains. The air was heavy and humid.

I was sweating, but the sweat was turning cold on my forehead. I jumped across the ditch of the last terraced field and looked down to where my home had always been. The house was gone.

I went closer. Flames still crept and licked at the blackened beams. There was no sign of my mother or my sisters. I tried to call out, but my tongue had suddenly become too big for my mouth and the smoke was choking me and making my eyes stream. The whole village was on fire, but where was everyone?

Then the screaming began.

It came from the direction of the shrine, around which most of the houses clustered. It was like the sound of a dog howling in pain, except the dog could speak human words, scream them in agony. I thought I recognized the prayers of the Hidden, and all the hair stood up on my neck and arms. Slipping like a ghost between the burning houses, I went towards the sound.