

The village was deserted. I could not imagine where everyone had gone. I told myself they had run away: my mother had taken my sisters to the safety of the forest. I would go and find them just as soon as I had found out who was screaming. But as I stepped out of the alley into the main street I saw two men lying on the ground. A soft evening rain was beginning to fall and they looked surprised, as though they had no idea why they were lying there in the rain. They would never get up again, and it did not matter that their clothes were getting wet.

One of them was my stepfather.

At that moment the world changed for me. A kind of fog rose before my eyes and when it cleared nothing seemed real. I felt I had crossed over to the other world, the one that lies alongside our own, that we visit in dreams. My stepfather was wearing his best clothes. The indigo cloth was dark with rain and blood. I was sorry they were spoiled: he had been so proud of them.

I stepped past the bodies, through the gates and into the shrine. The rain was cool on my face. The screaming stopped abruptly.

Inside the grounds were men I did not know. They looked as if they were carrying out some ritual for a festival. They had cloths tied round their heads; they had taken off their jackets and their arms gleamed with sweat and rain. They were panting and grunting, grinning with white teeth, as though killing were as hard work as bringing in the rice harvest.

Water trickled from the cistern where you washed your hands and mouth to purify yourself on entering the shrine. Earlier, when the world was normal, someone must have lit incense in the great cauldron. The last of it drifted across the courtyard, masking the bitter smell of blood and death.

The man who had been torn apart lay on the wet stones. I could just make out the features on the severed head. It was Isao, the leader of the Hidden. His mouth was still open, frozen in a last contortion of pain.

The murderers had left their jackets in a neat pile against a pillar. I could see clearly the crest of the triple oak leaf. These were Tohan men, from the clan capital of Inuyama. I remembered a traveller who had passed through the village at the end of the seventh month. He'd stayed the night at our house, and when my mother had prayed before the meal, he had tried to silence her. 'Don't you know that the Tohan hate the Hidden, and plan to move against us? Lord Iida has vowed to wipe us out,' he whispered. My parents had gone to Isao the next day to tell him, but no one had believed them. We were far from the capital, and the power struggles of the clans had never concerned us. In our village the Hidden lived alongside everyone else, looking the same, acting the same, except for our prayers. Why would anyone want to harm us? It seemed unthinkable.

And so it still seemed to me as I stood frozen by the cistern. The water trickled and trickled, and I wanted to take some and wipe the blood from Isao's face and gently close his mouth, but I could not move. I knew at any moment the men from the Tohan clan would turn, and their gaze would fall on me, and they would tear me apart. They would have neither pity nor mercy. They were already polluted by death, having killed a man within the shrine itself.

In the distance I could hear with acute clarity the drumming sound of a galloping horse. As the hoof beats drew nearer I had the sense of forward memory that comes to you in dreams. I knew who I was going to see,