



Cold Hands, Stone Heart

Alex Jacobs

The cold seeped into my skin, but I opened my eyes and found beauty, blinding and sharp. Awash with wonder, I could only stare. Then I heard a child's voice call to me.

Cold. Very cold. The first thing I feel isn't the pain in my ribs or the throbbing in my head, but the chill that surrounds me. So much more than before. The air is dry and thin and sharp, but still. I expect pain. Why? I look down at my hands, pressed into the ground. No, that's wrong. They're pressed into the expanse of white lying atop the ground, my arms pressed through to the coolness beneath. My fingers are already growing numb, but I can feel the soil between them, hidden by this blanket of...

...snow.

The word comes to me. I let the word wash over me like the chill, mountain air.

These are mountains. I hadn't known mountains before. Fascinating. I have much reason to question myself, question my memories, or lack of them, but I have little reason to doubt this. I turn my head to examine my surroundings. These large evergreen oak trees, oogashi? The name comes to me. They surround this clearing. Overhead the stars shine through a clear, velvet sea on which sails an enormous silver moon-

-I'm in the trees before I realize it, my breathing ragged. I hide from the moon's sight, but I don't know why. I don't question it. Am I afraid? I need to focus!

My breathing quiets. There is no reason to fear here. Ahead of me a soft color, pink, so pale as to be almost white. A flower. It shouldn't be here now; it seems out of place. Like I am. It must have bloomed before the snow came. It never fell on its own, sheltered somehow from the mountain winds, until the frost and ice enclosed it. I see five petals. At their center a collection of strands reach out, no longer pale but vibrant and bright, the image of vitality were it not for the ice that encased them. Perhaps that is why the flower is preserved? Did the cold come on so quickly the blossom had no chance to fall?

The mystery calms me before I realize it.

The ice traces each line of each petal, the stamen held in an eternal dance above them. I reach out towards the mume blossom. I need it. My hand closes around it.

It shatters in my grasp.

There is a gasp behind me. Remembering the moon, I whirl around. I can't have been found so quickly!

But there is nothing to fear. Only a girl. Young. Small. How old am I, myself? I don't know.

"Who are you?" she asks.

I have no answer so I say nothing.

She seems unafraid and comes close, all the while asking questions. "Where did you come from?"

I don't answer. I'm not sure I know. Above?

"How did you get here?"

I feel like I fell, but don't know how to explain. I stay silent.

"What happened to your clothes?"

I look down at my nakedness. It is more inconvenient than embarrassing.

"Aren't you cold?"

"A little."

There is no surprise when I finally speak. She just shrugs. "I'm Rin. Come with me."

Dropping the shattered blossom, I follow her.

We arrive at her home, a shelter of heavy mountain logs and a thick, thatched roof that can still be seen below the snow piled on it. It seems small, an observation confirmed when she opens the door to reveal a single room. An older man and woman - her parents I presume - sit around a fire pit.

The man shouts and reaches for a weapon. The woman reaches for Rin but she jumps away. "I found him Momma! He was outside in the snow and he was naked and cold and I brought him here. I couldn't leave him out there, Papa! Can we help him?" The man, Father, puts his weapon away and the woman, Mother, guides Rin and me into the home.

Rin takes me over to the fire. It's warm and, though the cold doesn't bother me, I enjoy the warmth and light. After ascertaining that her child is unharmed, Mother turns to dote on me. She dries the snow melt off me with a cloth. Father digs in the family's chest and finds garments which he passes to me. They are thin and patched, but I bow my head in what I hope he considers gratitude.

They are too small.

All this time Rin excitedly tells her parents about me. . She describes the copse of oogashi trees where she found me. There's a rumble as the snow on the roof shifts. Mother, finally satisfied that I am not likely to die of exposure, passes me a bowl of some kind of porridge. It is thick and has root vegetables in it, bitter but it warms me almost as much as the fire.

I don't remember falling asleep.

The house is chilly in the morning, the banked fire nearly extinguished. Father and Mother whisper back and forth as they reawaken the flames from the coals. They keep their voices low but I know they are arguing about what to do with me. Satisfied with their work, Mother puts a pot on the fire filled with the remains of last night's porridge. She sighs and I believe I know what she is thinking. I had a portion of their food last night. They are offering me another this morning. How long will I be here? How large are their stores?

After we break fast, Father motions to the door as he wraps himself in a robe. "Come on," he says. "Might as well make yourself useful around here."

Outside he shows me a large wedge and maul and a large pile of wood, and demonstrates how to split it into logs. I learn quickly, splitting the wood. The labor is comforting; I feel a calmness come over me in the repetitive motions. I no longer feel the fear that had troubled me. Father grunts at the work, then heads off into the forest. Rin comes out and watches me as the maul swings, over and over. Well, she watches a little and speaks a great deal, of many inconsequential things. I let her words wash over me like the soft winter wind that brushes the sweat from my skin.

Long after the sun has passed its height, Father returns. He carries tools: something a vague memory names a bow, and a long spear with a large guard a third of the way down the shaft. He seems frustrated as he goes into the house. I keep splitting wood.

After some time, Rin follows him.

They're all very pleased when I bring the boar in.

Mother's mouth is agape and Father showers me with questions. Rin just laughs delightedly. Eventually Father has me carry the carcass back out where he can butcher it properly.

We eat well that night. The meat is rich and juicy, and everyone gets a good cut. Father breaks out a jug of what he names plum wine. "Made it myself," he says proudly. It is sweet and strong and soon he is in good spirits and he and Mother are singing songs I've never heard. We all share the wine with dinner, and then more after.

They sing. They tell stories. The wine makes my head feel light and clouded and all I remember of Father's story is a name, Muhonarak. It seems very, very old. Mother and Rin listen with rapt attention as he speaks of grandeur and death and the passage of great dynasties and ancient heroes. Mother tells a story about a young girl born out of a peach. It makes no sense to me but it makes Rin laugh and even Father seems to enjoy it. Then there are more songs and more wine and a sadness fills me. I think my mother sang to me once. I wish I could remember her songs.

Mother sees my sadness. She comes and rests her hand on my head and I feel myself ache. Father sees this and offers me another cup and I let the sadness go. For now, I am here.

Between the fire and the wine and the roasted meat and the singing the house is warm. We have sweats from drinking and the warmth and I let contentment settle around me as Mother falls asleep, curled up with Rin who long ago had lain down on her sleeping pallet. "Thank you," Father says, then takes my hand before he stumbles and closes his eyes. He sounds like sawing wood.

I close my eyes to rest.

I awaken to light near me, and heat which crackles from the hearth, sparking and sputtering in the darkness of the home, Father and Mother and Rin snore softly as the curl of smoke rises. I look at the fire to see what had awakened me. A cloth had fallen too near the coals, and caught a spark that had danced its way out of the firepit. The cloth had smoked, then caught a small flame, and the sparks had awakened me.

This is dangerous, I know. Fire would destroy this home if it could. I am certain that destruction is the nature of fire. I push the cloth into the firepit, and smother the burnt spot on the floor. Still, there was much here that could burn. Rin's blanket. Mother's broom. Father's coat. I did not want this place to be destroyed.

There is no need to waken them though. They've taken care of me, and now I wish to do the same for them. Before I go to sleep, I put the fire out.

When I awaken it is cold. Not the chill of yesterday's morning, but like that first night outside. My mouth is rough and dry. The pain in my head is different than when I woke up then, but in many ways it is now much worse. And there is Rin, and there are Father and Mother, their faces white, their lips blue.

Oh no.

Rin's skin is cold, and no breath comes from her. I rebuild the fire but she stays cold, unmoving, far past sleep. They all are.

Oh Mother, what have I done?

Oh Father, better that you had killed me.

I wish I had never come to this place. I wish I had never done any of this. Had I never come here, their lives would have continued undisturbed. Had I never hunted the boar, we'd never have had such a celebration. Had I never cared for their sleeping forms they'd not have frozen to death.

And for the first time, my voice calls forth. I shout, I scream, I cry out and my voice flies to the heavens I once knew and to the darkness down below. It carries across this world and to other worlds beyond. It calls to Father and Mother. It calls to Rin. I call to them and plead, I'm sorry! I call to them and beg, Come back!

Please Mother, I whisper, Let them find their way back.

There is nothing left for me. I pack up what I can in an old sack they must have used when they had to make long journeys. I take the porridge but I leave the boar meat and the wine. I do not think I'll have either again.

I head southeast, back through the copse of trees. Back to the oogashi trees where Rin found me. To the Oogashi. Close enough.

Past them, amid the mume , I find another frozen blossom. In the daylight it shimmers in the crystalline ice more vibrantly than in starlight. The sun shines through the translucent petals, breaking into a thousand points of light in the sharp frost. Its beauty makes my heart ache. Father, Mother, Rin, all gone. It hurts, I wish nothing more than to be able to look upon this frozen flower, to have one thing of beauty, one moment of quiet, and I reach for it-
-and I stop. I will not shatter another blossom with my thoughtless actions.

Southeast.

