

The Silver Lady

by J.A. Pak

There's a world inside the shell. With trees and grass and sky. The sky is this very pale pinkish white. I've entered at the edge of a forest. Before me lies a small path that circles to a pretty cottage garden, which in turn takes me to a large, two-storey house. The roof is a lush green—I think there's grass growing on the top. Grass that's been cut very short so that it's like a carpet—and it's dotted all over with tiny white daisies. The windows are heavy with flower boxes, the flowers in them gigantic and candy-colored. My legs begin to walk up to the front door. I can't stop.

"Hello, my darling," a voice calls out. There's a woman looking through a curtained window near the door. "Let me open the door, my darling!"

She's beautiful. Tall, maybe eight feet tall, with long, curly silver hair. She's wearing an apron. A nice, crisp white apron with two big pockets below the waist. As she waits for me, she smoothes out her apron with the longest fingers I've ever seen.

"You've lost your way, haven't you, darling?" she says. Her voice is so soothing, glossy paint gliding on walls. "Come in and rest. Have a nice cup of tea, and then we can figure out what to do with you."

She has me sit at the square kitchen table. She gives me a cup of tea. All the while she keeps staring at me.

"My," she says, sitting down next to me, "it has been a long time since a stranger has come our way."

She inspects my arms, my hands.

"My, what beautiful bracelets you have on," she says. "And your rings! You sparkle like a rainbow, my darling!"

"Thank you. They're wedding gifts. From my father-in-law." Then I think I'd better say his name, to protect me. "From the Great Djinnaye Altan. My father-in-law."

"The Great Djinnaye Altan," she repeats, smiling wryly.

"You have heard of him, haven't you?" I ask nervously.

"Yes, my darling. A great Djinni indeed. It would be nice to have such a father-in-law. But then, one would have to marry. Which would be a shame."

"So you know who the Great Djinnaye Altan is?" I repeat, afraid.

"Yes, my darling. Who hasn't heard of the Great Djinnaye Altan?" Her voice twinkles and I think she's teasing me.

"Then can you tell me how to get home? Back to his palace. I don't know how I got here. I was in a room and I saw a seashell—"

"A seashell, my darling?" she says, almost purring.

"Yes. Does that sound strange to you?"

"Not strange. Not at all. Seashells are quite common. I am not particularly fond of them myself, but I will admit that some seashells are very pretty indeed."

"What is this world, please?"

"Oh, my darling, you're getting yourself all worked up and that will do no good. Not to you. Not to me. As I said before, we will figure out what to do with you. Now relax yourself and finish your tea. I make a very good cup of tea, if I do say so myself. I can bake some scones, if you're hungry. Tea and scones are so lovely together. Like rain and lightning."

"No. I had my breakfast just a moment ago. Thank you."

"Then drink your tea, my darling. It will make you feel better. Nothing like a good cup of tea, they say, which I find to be generally true. And then we will talk. I will tell you all that you want to know. And perhaps more."

My tea is almost gone. My head feels strange, the room becoming dark. I can't keep my eyes open. I'm surprised to find I'm half asleep.

"Now that's better, my darling," I hear her say. She has such a beautiful, soothing voice.

When I wake up, I'm lying on a wooden slab. I can't move.

"Now, listen, my darling," the silver lady says. "The second you touched the seashell your fate was sealed. There is nothing you or I can do. So think nothing more of it. I will now tell you where you are. This is the home of the Ghoul Crona. I am his servant. I am

compelled to do everything that my lord Crona commands. He is not easy to care for. He likes to collect things. Woe to any servant who must care for a lord who collects things! See, look there. His latest passion is the jeweled arms and hands of great ladies such as yourself. I do not know why. But how can we ever understand the passions of others, unless we share their passions ourselves? And I certainly do not share Crona's passions. But as his bonded servant, I must serve his passions as if they were my dear own."

I see that there's a shelf which is high up near the ceiling, one that circles the whole room. The shelf is sparkling with huge jewels—diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, lapis lazuli, corals, pearls, strings and strings of them—all hung on willowy arms and hands.

"Yes, I'm afraid you are waiting for Crona. He will be delighted to see you. As I said before, we haven't had a stranger visiting us in a great long while. The seashell used to wash up on shores, to be found by one pretty lady or another. But about a thousand years ago, the Great Djinnaye Altan locked the shell up, so we've been quite hungry. You must have been naughty, because he will occasionally send us naughty creatures, bad witches and Djinn and the like. Oh, my master will be pleased! He'll be back any minute now. He likes to go fishing in the afternoons."

Terrified, I try to move my arms and feet. I can't. I try calling out to Deacon, to Youri, to Channa. I try to vanish into smoke. Nothing. There is nothing I can do. All my great powers gone. I can't even speak.

"There really is nothing you can do, my darling," the silver lady says kindly. "It's the tea. The tea has dulled all your powers. As you can see, you will not be able to lift even a tiny finger. Poor thing. I hate to see you struggle so. If you'd like, I can give you more tea. So you will sleep and not know what will happen."

No! I scream inside. It's my only chance, to stay awake and try to find a way to fight.

I hear someone coming up the pathway. The door opens.

"You! Come and get the fish!"

"Yes, Master," the silver lady says. "Master, we have a visitor."

"A visitor!"

The voice changes. It sounds like a delighted little boy. Into the room comes a giant, a very good-looking and even sexy one, like a movie star. A lock of thick hair brushes over one eye. Impatiently, he sweeps it away.

"Look at her jewels!" he cries out. "And what lovely arms to mount."

He sighs with pleasure.

"Will you have your tea first, Master?" the lady asks.

"No. I can't eat. I'm too excited. I must work now. Or maybe I should wait. Prolong the pleasure. It is not often that we get a visitor nowadays. No. I'm too excited. Let's do it now. I've never seen jewelry so magnificent. She shall be the centerpiece of my collection."

"She's all nice and clean so I haven't had much to do. No nasty sand or anything. And doesn't she smell nice? I'd like some of her perfume. I thought we could pickle her after you've removed the arms."

"Yes. That would be nice. And then we can have her with lots of cabbage. Lots of stewed cabbage."

"And onions! With juniper berries! That would be lovely, Master. I look forward to it. I will get you your tools, Master."

"I think we will have to sharpen all the knives before we start. We haven't used the tools in a very long time. I want to do a pristine job."

"I think you are right, Master. I shall do that now."

A few minutes later, I hear the silver lady sharpening knives in another room. The giant stays with me, measuring my arms, my hands, each finger.

"How will I mount your arms?" he asks, looking at me from different angles. "I think I will do the classic v shape. I'm so out of practice. Let me look at my notes."

There's a book he wants on a shelf, a large, heavy, leather-bound book.

"I wish I'd take better notes," he says, struggling with the book. "This diagram isn't making that much sense now. It's been too long. I should have had a professional do it. Let's see."

He looks around the room until he finds a pair of arms in the shape that he wants. He studies the arms for a long time.

"I don't know," he says to himself.

He comes over to me and lifts up one of my arms, comparing it to the mounted arms he has in his other hand.

Move! Move! Move! I scream in my head, desperate to save myself. I have to move; I have to fight. *Arms, move! Choke him! Choke him!*

The giant gasps in surprise. So do I. Because it's not my arms that are attacking Crona—it's the mounted arms in Crona's hand. In fury they grab him by the neck. The giant falls backward but quickly regains his balance, ripping the arms off. Immediately another set of arms grab him. And then another, and another. All the arms in the room, the vast collection lining the ceiling, spring down towards him in terrible blood lust.

"Help! Help!" the ghoul screams.

The silver lady rushes into the room.

"Oh, my," she says. "I'll be right back, Master."

She comes back with a huge butcher knife. Holding it high in the air, she swings the blade, chopping the giant's head right off.

"Oh, that was lovely," she says, surveying her work. "What a clever girl you are, my darling. I want to eat you up. You do smell wonderfully delicious, my darling. I was looking very forward to eating you with cabbage. But—by rights you deserve my gratitude for freeing me. I must do the proper thing and let you go. It was my disobedience to the Lady Karma that got me into this wretched situation in the first place. I rue the day I bit the heads off my baby sister. The tea will wear off in an hour or so. Sleep until then, my darling."

I feel terrible when I wake up. The worst headache ever, all my blood vessels throbbing like they want to turn my brain inside out.

"So how do I get home?" I ask the silver lady. She's busy mopping the blood off the floor.

"I do not know, my darling," she says, seeing me now as a nuisance.

"You don't know."

"Not a clue."

"Then what should I do?"

"Go back the way you came, I imagine. Now go along. I have a lot of cleaning up to do as you can see. Doesn't his blood smell horrible? It's that diet of his. Too much fats. I'm going to have to flood the floor boards. Rub the wood with plenty of rosemary and juniper. It'll take days, I fear." She sighs, but with deep contentment. "Well, the sooner I get started, the sooner things get done! I've never been much of a procrastinator."

The silver lady holds the kitchen door wide open and scoots me out. She starts humming as she gets back to work, completely forgetting about me.

As I start for the woods, I see the giant's headless body lying on the grass. Birds are already picking it over. I don't suppose she'll want to pickle that. The smell is pretty rank and I run to get away.

In the woods, I start blindly calling out for help.

"Deacon!" I call out. I don't really believe he'll hear me. That anyone will hear me. But I'm so frightened and I don't know what else to do. "Youri!"

Still—Channa must realize by now that I'm not in my room. Ever since the Rain Viewing Festival, when Youri reprimanded her for losing sight of me, she's kept a pretty close eye on me. She's not someone who likes to be reprimanded. They must be looking for me. Even if it's just Channa. I scream out again. *Channa!* Nothing. Maybe time passes differently in this world. Maybe in my room, only a second has gone by. I can't be sure of anything anymore. I could be trapped in here forever. No—not forever. I can't be trapped here forever! I start walking faster, looking frantically for some kind of sign or marker signaling the way out of the shell. If I got into the shell, there has to be a way of getting out of the shell. Right? There

has to be an exit somewhere. Right? I just don't know what it's going to look like. And that's what worries me. It could look like anything. A leaf. A pebble. With no flashing neon sign to point the way.

The hopelessness of it all calms me down. I look up at the pearly white sky with its streaks of pink. The shell? I reach for it, the top of the shell, and with everything I have, try to shoot right out of the shell. It just makes my headache worse and I have to lie down. I'm going to die here, I think, and I can't help crying, sobbing, my fingers digging into the dirt.

Trapped inside a seashell, almost pickled and eaten for dinner—could my life become any more bizarre?

