

HUNGRY DAUGHTERS OF STARVING MOTHERS

Alyssa Wong

Alyssa Wong's considerable reputation rests on only the handful of stories. Still in her mid-twenties, she is the youngest author to appear in this collection. Her work has appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Black Static*, *Tor.com*, and *Lightspeed: Queers Destroy Science Fiction*. Her first published story, "The Fisher Queen," earned immediate acclaim and was nominated for the Nebula, World Fantasy, and Shirley Jackson awards. Wong's fourth story, "Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers," was published the following year to even stronger acclaim, winning the Nebula and World Fantasy awards, and was nominated for the Shirley Jackson and the Bram Stoker awards, and was a finalist for the Locus Award. She was nominated for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2016. She lives in Raleigh.

"Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers" is a warning about compulsion and the corrupting powers of negative emotions.

As my date—Harvey? Harvard?—brags about his alma mater and Manhattan penthouse, I take a bite of overpriced kale and watch his ugly thoughts swirl overhead. It's hard to pay attention to him with my stomach growling and my body ajitter, for all he's easy on the eyes. Harvey doesn't look much older than I am, but his thoughts, covered in spines and centipede feet, glisten with ancient grudges and carry an entitled, Ivy League stink.

"My apartment has the most amazing view of the city," he's saying, his thoughts sliding long over each other like dark, bristling snakes. Each one is as thick around as his Rolex-draped wrist. "I just installed

a Jacuzzi along the west wall so that I can watch the sun set while I relax after getting back from the gym."

I nod, half-listening to the words coming out of his mouth. I'm much more interested in the ones hissing through the teeth of the thoughts above him.

She's got perfect tits, li'l handfuls just waiting to be squeezed. I love me some perky tits.

I'm gonna fuck this bitch so hard she'll never walk straight again.

Gross. "That sounds wonderful," I say as I sip champagne and gaze at him through my false eyelashes, hoping the dimmed screen of my iPhone isn't visible through the tablecloth below. This dude is boring as hell, and I'm already back on Tindr, thumbing through next week's prospective dinner dates.

She's so into me, she'll be begging for it by the end of the night.

I can't wait to cut her up.

My eyes flick up sharply. "I'm sorry?" I say.

Harvey blinks. "I said, Argentina is a beautiful country."

Pretty little thing. She'll look so good spread out all over the floor.

"Right," I say. "Of course." Blood's pulsing through my head so hard it probably looks like I've got a wicked blush.

I'm so excited, I'm half hard already.

You and me both, I think, turning my iPhone off and smiling my prettiest smile.

The waiter swings by with another bottle of champagne and a dessert menu burned into a wooden card, but I wave him off. "Dinner's been lovely," I whisper to Harvey, leaning in and kissing his cheek, "but I've got a different kind of dessert in mind."

Abhh, go the ugly thoughts, settling into a gentle, rippling wave across his shoulders. I'm going to take her home and split her all the way from top to bottom. Like a fucking fruit tart.

That is not the way I normally eat fruit tarts, but who am I to judge? I passed on dessert, after all.

When he pays the bill, he can't stop grinning at me. Neither can the ugly thoughts hissing and cackling behind his ear.

"What's got you so happy?" I ask coyly.

"I'm just excited to spend the rest of the evening with you," he replies.

The fucker has his own parking spot! No taxis for us; he's even brought the Tesla. The leather seats smell buttery and sweet, and as I slide in and make myself comfortable, the rankness of his thoughts leaves a stain in the air. It's enough to leave me light-headed, almost purring. As we cruise uptown toward his fancy-ass penthouse, I ask him to pull over near the Queensboro Bridge for a second.

Annoyance flashes across his face, but he parks the Tesla in a side street. I lurch into an alley, tottering over empty cans and discarded cigarettes in my four-inch heels; and puke a trail of champagne and kale over to the dumpster shoved up against the apartment building.

"Are you all right?" Harvey calls.

"I'm fine," I slur. Not a single curious window opens overhead.

His steps echo down the alley. He's gotten out of the car, and he's walking toward me like I'm an animal that he needs to approach carefully.

Maybe I should do it now.

Yes! Now, now, while the bitch is occupied.

But what about the method? I won't get to see her insides all pretty everywhere—

I launch myself at him, fingers digging sharp into his body, and bite down hard on his mouth. He tries to shout, but I swallow the sound and shove my tongue inside. There, just behind his teeth, is what I'm looking for: ugly thoughts, viscous as boiled tendon. I suck them howling and fighting into my throat as Harvey's body shudders, little mewling noises escaping from his nose.

I feel decadent and filthy, swollen with the cruelest dreams I've

ever tasted. I can barely feel Harvey's feeble struggles; in this state, with the darkest parts of himself drained from his mouth into mine, he's no match for me.

They're never as strong as they think they are.

By the time he finally goes limp, the last of the thoughts disappearing down my throat, my body's already changing. My limbs elongate, growing thicker, and my dress feels too tight as my ribs expand. I'll have to work quickly. I strip off my clothes with practiced ease, struggling a little to work the bodice free of the gym-toned musculature swelling under my skin.

It doesn't take much time to wrestle Harvey out of his clothes, either. My hands are shaking but strong, and as I button up his shirt around me and shrug on his jacket, my jaw has creaked into an approximation of his and the ridges of my fingerprints have reshaped themselves completely. Harvey is so much bigger than me, and the expansion of space eases the pressure on my boiling belly, stuffed with ugly thoughts as it is. I stuff my discarded outfit into my purse, my high heels clicking against the empty glass jar at its bottom, and sling the strap over my now-broad shoulder.

I kneel to check Harvey's pulse—slow but steady—before rolling his unconscious body up against the dumpster, covering him with trash bags. Maybe he'll wake up, maybe he won't. Not my problem, as long as he doesn't wake in the next ten seconds to see his doppelganger strolling out of the alley, wearing his clothes and fingering his wallet and the keys to his Tesla.

There's a cluster of drunk college kids gawking at Harvey's car. I level an arrogant stare at them—oh, but do I wear this body so much better than he did!—and they scatter.

I might not have a license, but Harvey's body remembers how to drive.

The Tesla revs sweetly under me, but I ditch it in a parking garage in Bedford, stripping in the relative privacy of the second-to-highest level, edged behind a pillar. After laying the keys on the driver's seat over Harvey's neatly folded clothes and shutting the car door, I pull the glass jar from my purse and vomit into it as quietly as I can. Black liquid, thick and viscous, hits the bottom of the jar, hissing and snarling Harvey's words. My body shudders, limbs retracting, spine reshaping itself, as I empty myself of him.

It takes a few more minutes to ease back into an approximation of myself, at least enough to slip my dress and heels back on, pocket the jar, and comb my tangled hair out with my fingers. The parking attendant nods at me as I walk out of the garage, his eyes sliding disinterested over me, his thoughts a gray, indistinct murmur.

The L train takes me back home to Bushwick, and when I push open the apartment door, Aiko is in the kitchen, rolling mochi paste out on the counter.

"You're here," I say stupidly. I'm still a little foggy from shaking off Harvey's form, and strains of his thoughts linger in me, setting my blood humming uncomfortably hot.

"I'd hope so. You invited me over." She hasn't changed out of her catering company clothes, and her short, sleek hair frames her face, aglow in the kitchen light. Not a single ugly thought casts its shadow across the stove behind her. "Did you forget again?"

"No," I lie, kicking my shoes off at the door. "I totally would never do something like that. Have you been here long?"

"About an hour, nothing unusual. The doorman let me in, and I kept your spare key." She smiles briefly, soft compared to the brusque movements of her hands. She's got flour on her rolled-up sleeves, and my heart flutters the way it never does when I'm out hunting. "I'm guessing your date was pretty shit. You probably wouldn't have come home at all if it had gone well."

"You could say that." I reach into my purse and stash the snarling

jar in the fridge, where it clatters against the others, nearly a dozen bottles of malignant leftovers labeled as health drinks.

Aiko nods to her right. "I brought you some pastries from the event tonight. They're in the paper bag on the counter."

"You're an angel." I edge past her so I don't make bodily contact. Aiko thinks I have touch issues, but the truth is, she smells like everything good in the world, solid and familiar, both light and heavy at the same time, and it's enough to drive a person mad.

"He should have bought you a cab back, at least," says Aiko, reaching for a bowl of red bean paste. I fiddle with the bag of pastries, pretending to select something from its contents. "I swear, it's like you're a magnet for terrible dates."

She's not wrong; I'm very careful about who I court. After all, that's how I stay fed. But no one in the past has been as delicious, as hideously depraved as Harvey. No one else has been a killer.

I'm going to take her home and split her all the way from top to bottom.

"Maybe I'm too weird," I say.

"You're probably too normal. Only socially maladjusted creeps use Tindr."

"Gee, thanks," I complain.

She grins, flicking a bit of red bean paste at me. I lick it off of my arm. "You know what I mean. Come visit my church with me sometime, yeah? There are plenty of nice boys there."

"The dating scene in this city depresses me," I mutter, flicking open my Tindr app with my thumb. "I'll pass."

"Come on, Jen, put that away." Aiko hesitates. "Your mom called while you were out. She wants you to move back to Flushing."

I bark out a short, sharp laugh, my good mood evaporating. "What else is new?"

"She's getting old," Aiko says. "And she's lonely."

"I bet. All her mahjong partners are dead, pretty much." I can imagine her in her little apartment in Flushing, huddled over her

laptop, floral curtains pulled tight over the windows to shut out the rest of the world. My ma, whose apartment walls are alive with hissing, covered in the ugly, bottled remains of her paramours.

Aiko sighs, joining me at the counter and leaning back against me. For once, I don't move away. Every muscle in my body is tense, straining. I'm afraid I might catch fire, but I don't want her to leave. "Would it kill you to be kind to her?"

I think about my baba evaporating into thin air when I was five years old, what was left of him coiled in my ma's stomach. "Are you telling me to go back?"

She doesn't say anything for a bit. "No," she says at last. "That place isn't good for you. That house isn't good for anyone."

Just a few inches away, an army of jars full of black, viscous liquid wait in the fridge, their contents muttering to themselves. Aiko can't hear them, but each slosh against the glass is a low, nasty hiss:

*who does she think she is, the fucking cunt
should've got her when I had the chance*

I can still feel Harvey, his malice and ugly joy, on my tongue. I'm already full of things my ma gave me. "I'm glad we agree."

Over the next few weeks, I gorge myself on the pickup artists and grad students populating the St. Marks hipster bars, but nothing tastes good after Harvey. Their watery essences, squeezed from their owners with barely a whimper of protest, barely coat my stomach. Sometimes I take too much. I scrape them dry and leave them empty, shaking their forms off like rainwater when I'm done.

I tell Aiko I've been partying when she says I look haggard. She tells me to quit drinking so much, her face impassive, her thoughts clouded with concern. She starts coming over more often, even cooking dinner for me, and her presence both grounds me and drives me mad.

"I'm worried about you," she says as I lie on the floor, flipping listlessly through pages of online dating profiles, looking for the emptiness, the rot, that made Harvey so appealing. She's cooking my mom's lo mein recipe, the oily smell making my skin itch. "You've lost so much weight and there's nothing in your fridge, just a bunch of empty jam jars."

I don't tell her that Harvey's lies under my bed, that I lick its remnants every night to send my nerves back into euphoria. I don't tell her how often I dream about my ma's place, the shelves of jars she never let me touch. "Is it really okay for you to spend so much time away from your catering business?" I say instead. "Time is money, and Jimmy gets pissy when he has to make all the desserts without you."

Aiko sets a bowl of lo mein in front of me and joins me on the ground. "There's nowhere I'd rather be than here," she says, and a dangerous, luminous sweetness blooms in my chest.

But the hunger grows worse every day, and soon I can't trust myself around her. I deadbolt the door, and when she stops by my apartment to check on me, I refuse to let her in. Texts light up my phone like a fleet of fireworks as I huddle under a blanket on the other side, my face pressed against the wood, my fingers twitching.

"Please, Jen, I don't understand," she says from behind the door. "Did I do something wrong?"

I can't wait to cut her up, I think, and hate myself even more.

By the time Aiko leaves, her footsteps echoing down the hallway, I've dug deep gouges in the door's paint with my nails and teeth, my mouth full of her intoxicating scent.

My ma's apartment in Flushing still smells the same. She's never been a clean person, and the sheer amount of junk stacked up everywhere has increased since I left home for good. Piles of newspapers, old food containers, and stuffed toys make it hard to push the door open,

and the stench makes me cough. Her hoard is up to my shoulders, even higher in some places, and as I pick my way through it, the sounds that colored my childhood grow louder: the constant whine of a Taiwanese soap opera bleeding past mountains of trash, and the cruel cacophony of many familiar voices:

Touch me again and I swear I'll kill you—

How many times have I told you not to wash the clothes like that, open your mouth—

Hope her ugly chink daughter isn't home tonight—

Under the refuse she's hoarded the walls are honeycombed with shelves, lined with what's left of my ma's lovers. She keeps them like disgusting, mouthwatering trophies, desires pickling in stomach acid and bile. I could probably call them by name if I wanted to; when I was a kid, I used to lie on the couch and watch my baba's ghost flicker across their surfaces.

My ma's huddled in the kitchen, the screen of her laptop casting a sickly blue glow on her face. Her thoughts cover her quietly like a blanket. "I made some niu ro mien," she says. "It's on the stove. Your baba's in there."

My stomach curls, but whether it's from revulsion or hunger I can't tell. "Thanks, Ma," I say. I find a bowl that's almost clean and wash it out, ladling a generous portion of thick noodles for myself. The broth smells faintly of Hongtashan tobacco, and as I force it down almost faster than I can swallow, someone else's memories of my childhood flash before my eyes: pushing a small girl on a swing set at the park; laughing as she chases pigeons down the street; raising a hand for a second blow as her mother launches herself toward us, between us, teeth bared—

"How is it?" she says.

Foul. "Great," I say. It settles my stomach, at least for a little while. But my baba was no Harvey, and I can already feel the hunger creeping back, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

"You ate something you shouldn't have, didn't you, Meimei." My ma looks up at me for the first time since I walked in, and she looks almost as tired as I feel. "Why didn't you learn from me? I taught you to stick to petty criminals. I taught you to stay invisible."

She'd tried to teach me to disappear into myself, the way she'd disappeared into this apartment. "I know I messed up," I tell her. "Nothing tastes good anymore, and I'm always hungry. But I don't know what to do."

My ma sighs. "Once you've tasted a killer, there's no turning back. You'll crave that intensity until you die. And it can take a long time for someone like us to die, Meimei."

It occurs to me that I don't actually know how old my ma is. Her thoughts are old and covered in knots, stitched together from the remnants of other people's experiences. How long has she been fighting this condition, these overwhelming, gnawing desires?

"Move back in," she's saying. "There's so much tong activity here, the streets leak with food. You barely even have to go outside, just crack open a window and you can smell it brewing. The malice, the knives and bullets. . . ."

The picture she paints makes me shudder, my mouth itching. "I can't just leave everything, Ma," I say. "I have my own life now." And I can't live in this apartment, with its lack of sunlight and fresh air, its thick stench of regret and malice.

"So what happens if you go back? You lose control, you take a bite out of Aiko?" She sees me stiffen. "That girl cares about you so much. The best thing you can do for her is keep away. Don't let what happened to your father happen to Aiko." She reaches for my hand, and I pull away. "Stay here, Meimei. We only have each other."

"This isn't what I want." I'm backing up, and my shoulder bumps into the trash, threatening to bury us both in rotting stuffed animals. "This isn't safe, Ma. You shouldn't even stay here."

My ma coughs, her eyes glinting in the dark. The cackling from her

jar collection swells in a vicious tide, former lovers rocking back and forth on their shelves. "Someday you'll learn that there's more to life than being selfish, Meimei."

That's when I turn my back on her, pushing past the debris and bullshit her apartment's stuffed with. I don't want to die, but as far as I'm concerned, living like my ma, sequestered away from the rest of the world, her doors barricaded with heaps of useless trinkets and soured memories, is worse than being dead.

The jars leer and cackle as I go, and she doesn't try to follow me.

The scent of Flushing clings to my skin, and I can't wait to shake it off. I get on the train as soon as I can, and I'm back on Tindr as soon as the M passes aboveground. Tears blur my eyes, rattling free with the movement of the train. I scrub them away angrily, and when my vision clears, I glance back at the screen. A woman with sleek, dark hair, slim tortoiseshell glasses, and a smile that seems a little shy, but strangely handsome, glows up at me. In the picture, she's framed by the downtown cityscape. She has rounded cheeks, but there's a strange flat quality to her face. And then, of course, there are the dreams shadowing her, so strong they leak from the screen in a thick, heady miasma. Every one of those myriad eyes is staring straight at me, and my skin prickles.

I scan the information on her profile page, my blood beating so hard I can feel my fingertips pulsing: relatively young-looking, but old enough to be my mother's cousin. Likes: exploring good food, spending rainy days at the Cloisters, browsing used book stores. Location: Manhattan.

She looks a little like Aiko.

She's quick to message me back. As we flirt, cold sweat and adrenaline send uncomfortable shivers through my body. Everything is sharper, and I can almost hear Harvey's jar laughing. Finally, the words I'm waiting for pop up:

I'd love to meet you. Are you free tonight?

I make a quick stop-off back home, and my heart hammers as I get on the train bound for the Lower East Side, red lipstick immaculate and arms shaking beneath my crisp designer coat, a pair of Mom's glass jars tucked in my purse.

Her name is Seo-yun, and as she watches me eat, her eyes flickering from my mouth to my throat, her smile is so sharp I could cut myself on it. "I love places like this," she says. "Little authentic spots with only twelve seats. Have you been to Haru before?"

"I haven't," I murmur. My fingers are clumsy with my chopsticks, tremors clicking them together, making it hard to pick up my food. God, she smells delectable. I've never met someone whose mind is so twisted, so rich; a malignancy as well developed and finely crafted as the most elegant dessert.

I'm going to take her home and split her open like a—

I can already taste her on my tongue, the best meal I've never had.

"You're in for a treat," Seo-yun says as the waiter—the only other staff beside the chef behind the counter—brings us another pot of tea. "This restaurant started as a stall in a subway station back in Japan."

"Oh wow," I say. "That's . . . amazing."

"I think so, too. I'm glad they expanded into Manhattan."

Behind her kind eyes, a gnarled mess of ancient, ugly thoughts writhes like the tails of a rat king. I've never seen so many in one place. They crawl from her mouth and ears, creeping through the air on deep-scaled legs, their voices like the drone of descending locusts.

I'm not her first. I can tell that already. But then, she isn't mine, either.

I spend the evening sweating through my dress, nearly dropping my chopsticks. I can't stop staring at the ugly thoughts, dropping from her lips like swollen beetles. They skitter over the tablecloth

toward me, whispering obscenities at odds with Seo-yun's gentle voice, hissing what they'd like to do to me. It takes everything in me not to pluck them from the table and crunch them deep between my teeth right then and there, to pour into her lap and rip her mind clean.

Seo-yun is too much for me, but I'm in too far, too hard; I *need* to have her.

She smiles at me. "Not hungry?"

I glance down at my plate. I've barely managed a couple of nigiri. "I'm on a diet," I mutter.

"I understand," she says earnestly. The ugly thoughts crawl over the tops of her hands, iridescent drops spilling into her soy sauce dish.

When the waiter finally disappears into the kitchen, I move in to kiss her across the table. She makes a startled noise, gentle pink spreading across her face, but she doesn't pull away. My elbow sinks into the exoskeleton of one of the thought-beetles, crushing it into black, moist paste against my skin.

I open my mouth to take the first bite.

"So, I'm curious," murmurs Seo-yun, her breath brushing my lips. "Who's Aiko?"

My eyes snap open. Seo-yun smiles, her voice warm and tender, all her edges dark. "She seems sweet, that's all. I'm surprised you haven't had a taste of her yet."

I back up so fast that I knock over my teacup, spilling scalding tea over everything. But Seo-yun doesn't move, just keeps smiling that kind, gentle smile as her monstrous thoughts lap delicately at the tablecloth.

"She smells so ripe," she whispers. "But you're afraid you'll ruin her, aren't you? Eat her up, and for what? Just like your mum did your dad."

No, no, no. I've miscalculated so badly. But I'm so hungry, and I'm

too young, and she smells like ancient power. There's no way I'll be able to outrun her. "Get out of my head," I manage to say.

"I'm not in your head, love. Your thoughts are spilling out everywhere around you, for everyone to see." She leans in, propping her chin on her hand. The thoughts twisted around her head like a living crown let out a dry, rattling laugh. "I like you, Jenny. You're ambitious. A little careless, but we can fix that." Seo-yun taps on the table, and the waiter reappears, folding up the tablecloth deftly and sliding a single dish onto the now-bare table. An array of thin, translucent slices fan out across the plate, pale and glistening with malice. Bisected eyes glint, mouths caught mid-snarl, from every piece. "All it takes is a little practice and discipline, and no one will know what you're really thinking."

"On the house, of course, ma'am," the waiter murmurs. Before he disappears again, I catch a glimpse of dark, many-legged thoughts braided like a bracelet around his wrist.

Seo-yun takes the first bite, glancing up at me from behind her glasses. "Your mum was wrong," she says. "She thought you were alone, just the two of you. So she taught you to only eat when you needed to, so you didn't get caught, biding your time between meals like a snake."

"You don't know anything about me," I say. The heady, rotten perfume from the dish in front of me makes my head spin with hunger.

"My mum was much the same. Eat for survival, not for pleasure." She gestures at the plate with her chopsticks. "Please, have some."

As the food disappears, I can only hold out for a few more slices before my chopsticks dart out, catching a piece for myself. It's so acidic it makes my tongue burn and eyes itch, the aftertaste strangely sweet.

"Do you like it?"

I respond by wolfing down another two slices, and Seo-yun chuckles. Harvey is bland compared to this, this strangely distilled pairing of emotions—

I gasp as my body starts to warp, hands withering, burn scars twisting their way around my arms. Gasoline, malice, childish joy rush through me, a heady mix of memory and sensory overstimulation. And then Seo-yun's lips are on mine, teeth tugging gently, swallowing, drawing it out of me. The burns fade, but the tingle of cruel euphoria lingers.

She wipes her mouth delicately. "Ate a little too fast, I think, dear," she says. "My point, Jenny, is that I believe in eating for pleasure, not just survival. And communally, of course. There are a number of us who get together for dinner or drinks at my place, every so often, and I would love it if you would join us tonight. An eating club, of sorts."

My gaze flickers up at her thoughts, but they're sitting still as stones, just watching me with unblinking eyes. My mouth stings with the imprint of hers.

"Let me introduce you soon. You don't have to be alone anymore." As the waiter clears the plate and nods at her—no check, no receipt, nothing—Seo-yun adds, "And tonight doesn't have to be over until we want it to be." She offers me her hand. After a moment's hesitation, I take it. It's smaller than mine, and warm.

"Yes, please," I say, watching her thoughts instead of her face.

As we leave the restaurant, she presses her lips to my forehead. Her lips sear into my skin, nerves singing white-hot with ecstasy. "They're going to love you," she says.

We'll have so much fun, say the thoughts curling through her dark hair.

She hails a cab from the fleet circling the street like wolves, and we get inside.

I run into Aiko two months later in front of my apartment, as I'm carrying the last box of my stuff out. She's got a startled look on her face, and she's carrying a bag stuffed with ramps, kaffir limes, hearts of

palm—all ingredients I wouldn't have known two months ago, before meeting Seo-yun. "You're moving?"

I shrug, staring over her head, avoiding her eyes. "Yeah, uh. I'm seeing someone now, and she's got a really nice place."

"Oh." She swallows, shifts the bag of groceries higher on her hip. "That's great. I didn't know you were dating anybody." I can hear her shaky smile. "She must be feeding you well. You look healthier."

"Thanks," I say, though I wonder. It's true, I'm sleeker, more confident now. I'm barely home anymore, spending most of my time in Seo-yun's Chelsea apartment, learning to cook with the array of salts and spices infused with ugly dreams, drinking wine distilled from deathbed confessions. My time stalking the streets for small-time criminals is done. But why has my confidence evaporated the moment I see Aiko? And if that ravenous hunger from Harvey is gone, why am I holding my breath to keep from breathing in her scent?

"So what's she like?"

"Older, kind of—" *kind of looks like you*—"—short. Likes to cook, right." I start to edge past her. "Listen, this box is heavy and the van's waiting for me downstairs. I should go."

"Wait," Aiko says, grabbing my arm. "Your mom keeps calling me. She still has my number from . . . before. She's worried about you. Plus I haven't seen you in ages, and you're just gonna take off?"

Aiko, small and humble. Her hands smell like home, like rice flour and bad memories. How could I ever have found that appealing?

"We don't need to say goodbye. I'm sure I'll see you later," I lie, shrugging her off.

"Let's get dinner sometime," says Aiko, but I'm already walking away.

Caterers flit like blackbirds through the apartment, dark uniforms neatly pressed, their own ugly thoughts braided and pinned out of

the way. It's a two-story affair, and well-dressed people flock together everywhere there's space, Seo-yun's library upstairs to the living room on the ground floor. She's even asked the caterers to prepare some of my recipes, which makes my heart glow. "You're the best," I say, kneeling on the bed beside her and pecking her on the cheek.

Seo-yun smiles, fixing my hair. She wears a sleek, deep blue dress, and today, her murderous thoughts are draped over her shoulders like a stole, a living, writhing cape. Their teeth glitter like tiny diamonds. I've never seen her so beautiful. "They're good recipes. My friends will be so excited to taste them."

I've already met many of them, all much older than I am. They make me nervous. "I'll go check on the food," I say.

She brushes her thumb over my cheek. "Whatever you'd like, love."

I escape into the kitchen, murmuring brief greetings to the guests I encounter on the way. Their hideous dreams adorn them like jewels, glimmering and snatching at me as I slip past. As I walk past some of the cooks, I notice a man who looks vaguely familiar. "Hey," I say.

"Yes, ma'am?" The caterer turns around, and I realize where I've seen him; there's a picture of him and Aiko on her cellphone, the pair of them posing in front of a display at a big event they'd cooked for. My heartbeat slows.

"Aren't you Aiko's coworker?"

He grins and nods. "Yes, I'm Jimmy. Aiko's my business partner. Are you looking for her?"

"Wait, she's here?"

He frowns. "She should be. She never misses one of Ms. Sun's parties." He smiles. "Ms. Sun lets us take home whatever's left when the party winds down. She's so generous."

I turn abruptly and head for the staircase to the bedroom, shouldering my way through the crowd. Thoughts pelt me as I go: Has Aiko known about me, my ma, what we can do? How long has

she known? And worse—Seo-yun's known all along about Aiko, and played me for a fool.

I bang the bedroom door open to find Aiko sprawled out across the carpet, her jacket torn open. Seo-yun crouches on the floor above her in her glorious dress, her mouth dark and glittering. She doesn't look at all surprised to see me.

"Jenny, love. I hope you don't mind we started without you." Seo-yun smiles. Her lipstick is smeared over her chin, over Aiko's blank face. I can't tell if Aiko's still breathing.

"Get away from her," I say in a low voice.

"As you wish." She rises gracefully, crossing the room in fluid strides. "I was done with that particular morsel, anyway." The sounds of the party leak into the room behind me, and I know I can't run and grab Aiko at the same time.

So I shut the door, locking it, and mellow my voice to a sweet purr. "Why didn't you tell me about Aiko? We could have shared her together."

But Seo-yun just laughs at me. "You can't fool me, Jenny. I can smell your rage from across the room." She reaches out, catches my face, and I recoil into the door. "It makes you so beautiful. The last seasoning in a dish almost ready."

"You're insane, and I'm going to kill you," I say. She kisses my neck, her teeth scraping my throat, and the scent of her is so heady my knees almost bend.

"I saw you in her head, delicious as anything," she whispers. Her ugly thoughts hiss up my arms, twining around my waist. There's a sharp sting at my wrist, and I look down to discover that one of them is already gnawing at my skin. "And I knew I just had to have you."

There's a crash, and Seo-yun screams as a porcelain lamp shatters against the back of her head. Aiko's on her feet, swaying unsteadily, face grim. "Back the fuck away from her," she growls, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You little bitch—" snarls Seo-yun.

But I seize my chance and pounce, fastening my teeth into the hollow of Seo-yun's throat, right where her mantle of thoughts gathers and folds inward. I chew and swallow, chew and swallow, gorging myself on this woman. Her thoughts are mine now, thrashing as I seize them from her, and I catch glimpses of myself, of Aiko, and of many others just like us, in various states of disarray, of preparation.

Ma once told me that this was how Baba went; she'd accidentally drained him until he'd faded completely out of existence. For the first time in my life, I understand her completely.

Seo-yun's bracelets clatter to the floor, her empty gown fluttering soundlessly after. Aiko collapses too, folding like paper.

It hurts to take in that much. My stomach hurts so bad, my entire body swollen with hideous thoughts. At the same time, I've never felt so alive, abuzz with possibility and untamable rage.

I lurch over to Aiko on the floor, malice leaking from her mouth, staining the carpet. "Aiko, wake up!" But she feels hollow, lighter, empty. She doesn't even smell like herself anymore.

A knock at the door jolts me. "Ma'am," says a voice I recognize as the head caterer. "The first of the main courses is ready. Mr. Goldberg wants to know if you'll come down and give a toast."

Fuck. "I—" I start to say, but the voice isn't mine. I glance over at the mirror; sure enough, it's Seo-yun staring back at me, her dark, terrible dreams tangled around her body in a knotted mess. "I'll be right there," I say, and lay Aiko gently on the bed. Then I dress and leave, my heart pounding in my mouth.

I walk Seo-yun's shape down the stairs to the dining room, where guests are milling about, plates in hand, and smile Seo-yun's smile. And if I look a little too much like myself, well—according to what I'd seen while swallowing Seo-yun's thoughts, I wouldn't be the first would-be inductee to disappear at a party like this. Someone hands

me a glass of wine, and when I take it, my hand doesn't tremble, even though I'm screaming inside.

Fifty pairs of eyes on me, the caterers' glittering cold in the shadows. Do any of them know? Can any of them tell?

"To your continued health, and to a fabulous dinner," I say, raising my glass. As one, they drink.

Seo-yun's apartment is dark, cleared of guests and waitstaff alike. Every door is locked, every curtain yanked closed.

I've pulled every jar, every container, every pot and pan out of the kitchen, and now they cover the floor of the bedroom, trailing into the hallway, down the stairs. Many are full, their malignant contents hissing and whispering hideous promises at me as I stuff my hand in my mouth, retching into the pot in my lap.

Aiko lies on the bed, pale and still. There's flour and bile on the front of her jacket. "Hang in there," I whisper, but she doesn't respond. I swirl the pot, searching its contents for any hint of Aiko, but Seo-yun's face grins out at me from the patterns of light glimmering across the liquid's surface. I shove it away from me, spilling some on the carpet.

I grab another one of the myriad crawling thoughts tangled about me, sinking my teeth into its body, tearing it into pieces as it screams and howls terrible promises, promises it won't be able to keep. I eat it raw, its scales scraping the roof of my mouth, chewing it thoroughly. The more broken down it is, the easier it will be to sort through the pieces that are left when it comes back up.

How long did you know? Did you always know?

I'll find her, I think as viscous black liquid pours from my mouth, over my hands, burning my throat. The field of containers pools around me like a storm of malicious stars, all whispering my name. She's in here somewhere, I can see her reflection darting across their

surfaces. If I have to rip through every piece of Seo-yun I have, from her dreams to the soft, freckled skin wrapped around my body, I will. I'll wring every vile drop of Seo-yun out of me until I find Aiko, and then I'll fill her back up, pour her mouth full of herself.

How could I ever forget her? How could I forget her taste, her scent, something as awful and beautiful as home?