

# Currying Favour

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## DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

1 kg daikon radish  
1.2 l water  
225 g rice flour  
200 g prawns  
soy sauce, sesame oil,  
other seasoning,  
condiments, garnishes

} *chai dao kueh*

50 g ginger juice, fresh  
250 ml milk  
sugar to taste

} ginger milk pudding

chicken  
rice

} chicken rice

Guadalberto “Wallace” Enríquez Gomez, technologist, 55

Teng Choo Min, Steph, pharmaceutical chemist postdoc, 31

Teng Choo Jun, Tony,  
computer science  
undergraduate, 24  
Alex Smith, physics  
undergraduate, 22

} Thermago

Two Interviewers

Waiter

## 1.

*TONY and STEPH in kitchen. TONY is peeling and cutting up a daikon radish on a kitchen counter. STEPH is trimming the antennae off prawns over the sink. On the stove, a saucepan of water approaches a boil. STEPH finishes with the prawns, and drops them in the water, then covers the saucepan and sets a timer; TONY starts grating the radish. STEPH comes over to the counter and completes the mise-en-place, consulting a handwritten recipe: salt, sugar, sesame oil, pepper and water in one bowl, and rice flour and water in another. They work in silence for a while.*

**Tony** (*grumble grumble*)

**Steph** What's up?

**Tony** This is dumb.

**Steph** What?

**Tony** (*brandishes grater*) this! *Zeh*,<sup>1</sup> it's 2016. Why are we using a manual cheese grater?

**Steph** Because authentic *chai dao kueh*<sup>2</sup> —

**Tony** — by which you mean Ma's —

**Steph** Whatever, *chai dao kueh* is made from grated radish —

**Tony** Chinese food doesn't even have cheese.

**Steph** Same difference la, does it matter what you use? As long as it's shredded then can already right?

**Tony** No! Not that! *Zeh!* This workflow is *not optimal!*

**Steph** (*facepalm*)

**Tony** I mean, half the things we're doing can probably be automated. Don't we have a food processor?

**Steph** ...Blender.

**Tony** See? We have the technology!

**Steph** (*wearily*) Not the same.

**Tony** Like, think about it, *zeh*, why do we want to grate the radish in the first place? So laborious, why not just use big big pieces?

**Steph** (*rolls eyes*) *xiao di di*,<sup>3</sup> have you ever had *chai dao kueh* with big pieces of radish in it? It's for the texture, luh. Small pieces makes it smooth.

**Tony** (*not paying attention*) Might as well use a food processor, or — (*realises something*) hey!

**Steph** Whaaaat.

**Tony** (*reaches overhead and opens cabinet, revealing a plethora of random kitchen gadgets*) look at all this stuff! You only use them like once or twice and then you forget about them.

<sup>1</sup>*Zeh*: (Teochew) big sister.

<sup>2</sup>*chai dao kueh*: (Teochew) Stir-fried steamed radish cake.

<sup>3</sup>*xiao di di*: (Chinese) Little brother (diminutive).

**Steph** — (*mildly insulted*) I have a spreadsheet —

**Tony** Like that buy for what? I bet we could — hmm, what's this thing — (*rummages around*)

**Steph** — oi, don't touch — (*reaches for gadgets*) mine! —

*STEPH's timer goes off: ding!*

**Tony** (*pointing at stove*) the prawns!

*Torn between food and annoying little brother, STEPH chooses food. The prawns are done; she fishes them out and lets them cool under running water, setting the boiling fluid aside. Meanwhile, TONY has located a microplane grater, with which he attacks the radish with gusto, cackling gleefully.*

**Steph** (*trapped at sink*) No! You can't do that!

**Tony** (*cheerfully*) technically, I'm already doing it —

**Steph** And how much time do you save by doing that, anyway? We're only making one batch of *chai dao kueh*!

**Tony** (*brightly*) But now that batch will be tastier!

**Steph** (*sputters helplessly, hands full*) arghh fine. Two batches. That's going into your share, and I'm making my half with the radish that you grated *properly*, you hear?

**Tony** Even better! We get two data points. FOR SCIENCE!

**Steph** (*laughs despite herself*) You're still not allowed to say that —

**Tony** (*microplaning furiously*) Whatever, *zeh*.

**Steph** — you're not even being halfway scientific!

**Tony** (*ignores, still grating*)

**Steph** Let's see. What's your hypothesis? Where's your protocol? Wh—

**Tony** *Zeh*, don't like that can? See? I'm almost done. So fast, right?

**Steph** Don't be silly luh.

**Tony** Look, I did half the radish with the cheese grater, and I've used the microplane for the other half. Okay? Both grated, but one fine, one coarse. You're using Ma's recipe right? Cook the same way lor. Tada! Controlled experiment. (*very pleased with himself*) Null hypothesis: they'll taste different. How different, I dunno, but that's not important, right?

**Steph** (*snatches microplane*)  $n = 2$  is not statistically significant!

**Tony** Sooooo empirical, *zeh*.

*STEPH doesn't dignify that with a response, and plays along. She gets to peeling the prawns. TONY puts the coarsely and finely grated radish in two separate bowls, then joins her.*

**Steph** It's probably gonna taste like crap.

**Tony** Really? We didn't change very much.

**Steph** Yes we have! We've — you've — changed the surface-area-to-volume ratio of the radish fragments — different thermal and diffusive characteristics —

**Tony** — (*sardonically*) wah, *zeh*, so big words, so impressive no wonder got PhD —

**Steph** — do you know what that's going to do?

**Tony** Only one way to find out! FOR SCIENCE!

**Steph** Stop that!

**Tony** I'm a scientist too!

**Steph** For the last time, computer science isn't actually science!

**Tony** Whatever, *zeh*. Okay, if you're so professional: how would you do it?

**Steph** Hypothesis: it's going to cook and diffuse more quickly.

**Tony** Awesome!

**Steph** ?

**Tony** I mean, the structure comes from the rice flour right? We're keeping that the same, so that means we're just going to have *chai dao kueh* that actually tastes like radish!

**Steph** ...aha! Alright, then I'm going to make the white one —

**Tony** What?

**Steph** — don't complain arh.

**Tony** No!

**Steph** Then what's that about the radish taste?

**Tony** Black is obviously superior!

**Steph** But then how do you taste anything other than —

**Tony** Who cares? It's black!

**Steph** (*facepalm*) That's just soy sauce and lard, you idiot. (*chuckles*) Do you even know what radish tastes like?

**Tony** Sure, it tastes like whatever *chai dao kueh* is *supposed* to taste like, right?

**Steph** (*drily*) and not soy sauce and lard.

**Tony** (*considers*) well, I had white once. That wasn't too bad.

**Steph** You do realise that the fried *chai dao kueh* back home contains basically no radish, right?

**Tony** Exactly, so this will taste better!

**Steph** So, you're gonna try white, then?

**Tony** Nope! *Real man chai dao kueh* is made with —

**Steph** (*groans*)

**Tony** What? (*points at mise-en-place with half-peeled prawn*) We're adding them anyway what, right?

**Steph** (*rolls eyes*)

**Tony** (*enthusiastically*) Alright, on! See *zeh*, this is going to be the best *chai dao kueh* ever! (*pops the last, freshly-peeled prawn into mouth*)

**Steph** (*smacks him*) Oi!

**Tony** (*mouth full*) Yum.

- Steph** That's coming out of your share. (*passes him an extra metal tin*) Come, grease this.  
*TONY brushes oil onto the inside of the tin. STEPH puts the heads and shells back into the saucepan, and gets it boiling again.*
- Tony** What are you going to do with the prawn stock, *zeh*?
- Steph** Dunno.
- Tony** Then make for what?
- Steph** Aiyah, throw away will feel very *sayang*<sup>4</sup> lah. I guess we could freeze it, or something.
- Tony** Like that won't be fresh any more. How about...we add it to the *chai dao kueh*?
- Steph** (*stirring*) ...you want prawn-flavoured *chai dao kueh*.
- Tony** Yeah, sounds good.
- Steph** ...that tastes like radish.
- Tony** And soy sauce and lard!
- Steph** (*facepalm*) I'm so making white.
- Tony** (*sadface*)
- Steph** What?
- Tony** (*puppy eyes*)
- Steph** (*sighs*) Okay okay fine, I'll do both. Science, right?
- Tony** *Zeh*, you're the best.
- Steph** (*scoffs*) You wash up arh.
- Tony** Anything you say, *zeh*!
- Steph** Oh. Really? Now we're going to have 4 batches. Whose fault is that? (*a new thought occurs to her, and she grins mischievously*) And, hey, actually, —
- Tony** Uhh.
- Steph** — if you think about it, we really should have 8, right?
- Tony** Oi!
- Steph** With and without the prawn stock what.
- Tony** No fair!
- Steph** (*enjoying this*) Okay! We have 3 controlled categorical variables: radish particulate coarseness, prawn stock, and *or eh*<sup>5</sup>/*peh eh*.<sup>6</sup>  $2^3 = 8$ , right, so 8 samples.
- Tony** But —
- Steph** (*imitating*) FOR SCIENCE!
- Tony** Well, it's not — I mean — gahhh. Fine.
- Steph** Okay, then (*rummages around cupboard*) do this. (*holds out cupcake tin*)
- Tony** Cupcakes?

<sup>4</sup>*sayang*: (Singlish) wasteful. From Tagalog.

<sup>5</sup>*or eh*: (Teochew) black.

<sup>6</sup>*peh eh*: (Teochew) white.

**Steph** What, you want to wash two more tins?

**Tony** Aiyah, *zeh* ...

**Steph** Go!

**Tony** (*grumble grumble*)

*STEPH retrieves two more empty bowls, and splits up the mise-en-place, adding prawn stock to half of the rice flour mixture and water to the other half. TONY dumps the two cake tins into the sink, and gets about greasing the cupcake tin. As they talk: STEPH prepares wok, stir-fries half the coarse radish before hydrating with half of the soy-sauce mixture, then half of the stock-free rice flour fluid.*

**Tony** Eh, *zeh*.

**Steph** Whaaaaaat.

**Tony** My friend and I are, like, going to start a company.

**Steph** Orh. Yah, you did say. Alex, is it?

**Tony** Well...when we were setting it up, I was like, I like cooking, right? So how about...a food startup?

**Steph** ...a food startup.

**Tony** Yeah!

**Steph** ...I now have more questions.

**Tony** (*delightedly*) You want to join us?

**Steph** (*sputtering*) What? No! What makes you think I'll quit my postdoc just to work for you??

**Tony** Well you don't have to quit...

**Steph** (*sighs and shakes head, focusing on cooking*)

**Tony** Anyway. So hor, *zeh*, if we're going to cook, and if I needed to use—

**Steph** Nope.

**Tony** Eh walau you didn't even—

**Steph** No, I won't let you use my things.

**Tony** But—

**Steph** You won't take care of them properly la, hor.

**Tony** Eh *zeh* no leh, I can one! Sumpah!

**Steph** See la, you arh, even *chai dao kueh* also can do until liddat, (*gestures with spatula*) “optimise” this recipe until we have to do all the steps *eight times*—

**Tony** Don't liddat leh, maybe the radishy black prawn *chai dao kueh* is going to be eight times better!

**Steph** (*scoffs*)

**Tony** *Zeh*, please leh? At least until we have a working prototype, then we don't need to *kachow*<sup>7</sup> you any more. Can?

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<sup>7</sup>*kachow*: (Singlish) bother.

**Steph** (groans)

**Tony** (puppy eyes)

**Steph** (sighs) Okay, fine.

**Tony** Wooooo!

**Steph** ...but I'll supervise. Don't let that go to your head arh.

**Tony** (pauses, shrugs, then, deliberately) Wooooo! (dances out of kitchen)

**Steph** Eh where you going? Come back help leh!

**Tony** (offstage) Aww yiss

*STEPH, shaking her head, prepares a second batch of batter, this time incorporating prawn stock. Lights out.*

## 2.

*TONY and ALEX at her place, ostensibly to do problem sets. For some reason ALEX's duct-taped a dog collar onto her Roomba, Sigmund. It whirrs around the room doing its Roomba thing.*

**Tony** ...um, Unix is — well — okay, can I at least assume they know what an OS is?

**Alex** Oh, yes. Continue.

**Tony** Right. So. Unix was probably the first universal operating system. Because of this historical legacy, the Unix philosophy — Do Exactly One Thing, Well —

**Alex** Philosophy? (sniggers) “Unix is love, Unix is life” —

**Tony** Okay, like, in a factory. You could automate a task of making a thing by designing a machine that does all the things needed to make the thing in its entirety, right? From start to finish. But that means that every time you have a new thing to make, you need a new machine. With Unix, it's, like, if you need to make a new thing, you just put basically the same thing-making things together in different ways.

**Alex** (quoting) “Compact tools with well-defined behaviours that can be composed to yield arbitrary complexity.”

**Tony** (smiles) Yeah, like `cat`, which shows the contents of a file — it's basically `return`<sup>8</sup> in a monadic sense —

**Alex** (sharp look)

**Tony** Okay, fine, no more monads. What about `kill`<sup>9</sup>? Or `awk`<sup>10</sup> and `sed`,<sup>11</sup> or —

**Alex** Hey, the coreutils aren't Unix by themselves—

**Tony** —But we can redirect `stdin/stdout`<sup>12</sup> with pipes —

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<sup>8</sup>`return`: Let  $f$  be a function whose output takes values in a monad as  $f : a \rightarrow Ma$ . `return` is the unique function satisfying, for all such  $f$ ,  $(f \gg= \text{return}) = (\text{return} \gg= f) = f$ .

<sup>9</sup>`kill`: sends a signal to a process (by default `SIGTERM`, which mostly terminates things)

<sup>10</sup>`awk`: Pattern matching utility, named after its creators

<sup>11</sup>`sed`: Stream Editor

<sup>12</sup>`stdin/stdout`: Standard input/output: the usual way of obtaining input and output (provided in C/C++ with `stdio.h`) from a terminal interface.

Alex — So Unix is about pipes?

Tony — No, it's about composability —

Alex — Okay, no. Stop. Just. No.

Tony What?

Alex Also: what the *fuck* does this have to do with *cooking*?

Tony I'm getting there —

Alex Don't take this the wrong way, but if we try selling this to the food people, instead of the tech people, this is gonna happen: one of us — probably *you* — accidentally says something entirely opaque like, I dunno, (*hesitates*)

Tony (*helpfully*) “a monad is a monoid in the category of endofunctors”?

Alex — (*facepalm*) that —

Tony But —

Alex — *boom* — investor stops giving fucks —

Tony Come on!

Alex — we lose attention, and then we lose money. But mostly attention, since we don't technically have the money yet. Okay, from the top. Now you're suggesting that we assemble a bunch of — well — let's call them “cooking coreutils,” yes?

Tony Well...yeah, kinda.

Alex And then sell them.

Tony Yeah.

Alex How is any of this novel?

Tony Of course it is! Have you seen anyone attempt to bring monads and cooking together?

Alex Trivially, everyone does.

Tony Only implicitly —

Alex — that's top-down. Away from the abstractions: don't you actually cook? Or do you just prove that a given meal configuration exists and then expect it to assemble itself?

Tony (*insulted noises*)

Alex Oh, right, your sister does that for you.

Tony I'm not *that* useless!

Alex Aaaaanyway. See, programmatically speaking, you *can* get away with just proving stuff and expecting it to work. The only difference between programming a solution, and actually solving the problem, is implementation and execution — but those are trivial given a proven-correct solution. That's the whole point of these, right? (*gestures at hard copy of problem set*) Programming is the hardest bit.

Tony And meatspace is different?

Alex Very expensively different. Moore's Law doesn't shrink knives.

Tony (*harrumphs*)

Alex And, like I was saying: cooking coreutils *already exist*! No, really, hear me out. Think

about it: what do you use a potato peeler for, other than peeling potatoes?

**Tony** Err, peeling other things? That are not potatoes? I dunno —

**Alex** — exactly, see: compact tool with well-defined behaviour. *man peeler*:<sup>13</sup> it peels stuff, the end. And you can do whatever you want with the potato once it's peeled: arbitrary complexity, right there.

**Tony** (*not convinced*)

**Alex** Knife: cutting things. Fire: heating things — modulo pots, pans, whatever. Put them together in different ways, and *bam*, food processing pipeline. Composability!

**Tony** Alright, but — *you're* the pipe. How do you automate this?

**Alex** Well, that's the problem with meatspace, right? You don't. You can't. It'd be hilariously expensive.

**Tony** Can't be that bad, right?

**Alex** (*kicks passing Roomba*) Look at this guy.

*ALEX's Roomba wobbles a bit, then gets back to its usual space-filling pattern*

**Alex** (*cooing*) Good boy!

**Tony** (*facepalm*) Dude.

**Alex** Ever wondered how much they spent on the R&D to develop those? Go on, guess.

**Tony** I dunno, a few million?

**Alex** More like a few *hundred* million — and this guy lives in two dimensions doing nothing but sucking up dirt! Cooking is way more complex—

**Tony** — but you're assuming that we need to automate a conventional kitchen. Like, you're probably imagining a bunch of robot hands floating around doing cooky things — we don't even need a kitchen. Imagine maybe a bunch of food processing units —

**Alex** And to pass food between them?

**Tony** ...how about a literal pipeline?

**Alex** (*groans*)

**Tony** Like, you know, food-grade tubing —

**Alex** And permissions? What happens if you accidentally typo something as *setuid root*?<sup>14</sup> What would *rm -rf /*<sup>15</sup> do?

**Tony** Ah. Hm. Didn't think about that. (*pause*) What if we —

**Alex** Dude. No. If you want people to take us seriously — seriously enough to *give us their money* — we need an idea that's actually concrete, instead of trying to reinvent kitchen practices using category theory and monads (*rolls eyes*), or designing *seriously* impractical cooking robots, or — look, *I* wouldn't invest in us, dammit, and I'm our

<sup>13</sup>*man*: Gives documentation about a supplied command (the “manual”)

<sup>14</sup>*setuid root*: In Unix systems the root user (i.e. the “superuser”) has unrestricted access to the system internals, whereas ordinary user accounts do not. *setuid* permits a command to be executed with the access privileges of the command's owner (usually root). This can be used for (very destructive) mischief

<sup>15</sup>*rm -rf /*: Delete all files when run as root (normal users get access denied on system files). The most obvious such mischief. These days an additional flag *--no-preserve-root* has to be (deliberately) supplied, preventing novice Unix users from accidentally nuking their filesystem

fucking CEO!

**Tony** Whoa, okay, chill!

**Alex** And I think we might be missing something. Like — okay, so soylent is like the ultimate food time-saver: instead of cooking, you just rehydrate and eat slash drink the thing — done in 5 minutes. Sounds great, right? Quick, efficient, nutritious, whatever. So why isn't everyone eating nothing but soylent? Especially you, Tony, Mr. Optimal Solution?

**Tony** Because it tastes like crap?

**Alex** *Technically*, it tastes like soy and lentil—

**Tony** (*snorts*)

**Alex** But anyway, so — if we're planning to market software, or automation, as a way to save time in the kitchen — well, people who *really* want to save time won't be cooking in the first place —

**Tony** — oh, fuck —

**Alex** — and so we've been targeting ourselves at the vanishingly small intersection of the sets of people who for some reason want to cook, and people who also want to spend as little time as possible actually cooking —

**Tony** Alright! I get it. (*flops back into chair*) Wow, this is hard.

**Alex** (*considers for a while*) Compsci majors, tsk. Should have gotten a real engineer on this instead of—

**Tony** (*looks up*)

**Alex** Uh, I mean — cooking is very much a meatspace problem — if we *still* want to play with food (*pokes TONY*), we need meatspace solutions.

**Tony** So, hardware?

**Alex** Yup. Hardware.

**Tony** (*sighs*) Okay.

**Alex** Mmm.

**Tony** Ideas?

**Alex** Dunno. (*beat.*) No, really. I don't cook.

**Tony** Yeah, it's cool — deadline's in three months, we'll think of something. (*pause*) P-set?

**Alex** P-set.

*They get to work. Lights out.*

### 3.

*TONY and ALEX in STEPH's kitchen. On the counter: an electric kettle and a meat thermometer (stuck inside the kettle) connected to a laptop.*

**Tony** Alright. (*pause*) So...sure about this?

**Alex** It's a trial by fire! Well, technically, heating element, but eh.

**Tony** Yeah, but if you screwed up the calibration—

**Alex** I didn't. Trust me—

**Tony** My sister would *kill* me.

**Alex** — I mean, what could possibly go wrong? (*pause as she considers what could possibly go wrong*) Well, okay, let's see, the thermometer could be faulty, or we could be picking up local inhomogeneities, or —

**Tony** Not helping.

**Alex** Wasn't this *your* idea?

**Tony** Yeah — but I meant to *sous vide*<sup>16</sup> the *steaks*...

**Alex** And wait an hour for dinner? (*makes face*)

**Tony** I don't think my sister would mind...

**Alex** Dude, are we testing this or what? What's your sister got to do with any of this?

**Tony** ...I dunno, man, we've not actually put anything edible in that.

**Alex** Only one way to find out!

**Tony** How about something cheaper? We could try sous-vide eggs. (*pause*) What? I like eggs.

**Alex** Wuss.

*STEPH enters*

**Steph** Need any help?

**Tony** (*starts*) Hey *zeh*. Nah we're good.

**Alex** (*tentatively*) Hello, Steph.

**Steph** (*ignores her, talking to TONY*) Don't break my stuff hor, they actually cost money.

**Tony** (*rolls eyes*) Yeah, I love you too, *zeh*.

**Steph** Okay arh, don't say I never — you bought lobsters?? (*eyes widen, like a shark smelling blood*)

**Tony** Yup!

**Steph** Oooooooh.

**Alex** Yeah, we're experimenting with our prototype for the—

**Steph** (*to TONY*) Experiment? On lobster?? Eh, don't anyhow play hor—

**Tony** It's okay la, *zeh*, we're pretty sure it works. Plus, we have backup food, we're making steaks too.

**Alex** (*brightly*) Surf and turf! His idea.

**Steph** (*sharp look*)

**Tony** (*weak grin*) We'd sous-vide the steaks as well, but, you know, backup. And you wouldn't let me use the—

**Steph** Alright, alright. Point taken.

*STEPH watches intently as ALEX fills the kettle with cold water from the sink,*

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<sup>16</sup>*sous vide*: (French) under vacuum — cooking technique involving poaching a vacuum-sealed pouch of food in water under precise temperature control.

*then plugs in the peripheral cables. ALEX notices that she's still around, and looks at her questioningly*

**Steph** Carry on.

**Tony** What? Orh, it's OK la, *zeh*, we can *gao dim*<sup>17</sup>—

**Steph** Yah, I'm just curious la. What *is* that thing?

**Alex** Our—

**Tony** (*interrupting to show off*) Our prototype! For the thing we made!

**Steph** ...that statement contains literally no information.

**Tony** (*proudly*) Okay, *zeh*. Watch.

*TONY plops a marinated lobster tail, wrapped in a ziplock bag, into the electric kettle.*

**Steph** Wait, you're boiling that thing in my kettle??

**Tony** Aiyah, *zeh*, got ziplock bag.

**Steph** Is that food-grade?

**Tony** And we're not boiling them now, the recipe says 15 minutes at 46° C. Don't worry—

*TONY gets the kettle started; it begins roaring*

**Steph** (*sputtering*) What??

**Alex** (*excitedly*) Here we go!

**Steph** No! Stop!

*STEPH moves to retrieve lobster, and is physically restrained by TONY*

**Steph** /My kettle!

**Alex** /It works!

**Tony** *Zeh* maintain pls

**Steph** (*distraught*) My lobster!

**Tony** *Our* lobsters.

**Alex** /It lives! IT LIVES! AHAHAHA

**Steph** /Oh my god I'm so going to kill you —

*The kettle goes click and stops roaring. STEPH calms down and stops struggling.*

**Steph** What was that?

**Alex** Our prototype. We wrote a bang-bang<sup>18</sup> controller for the kettle's power supply, which we use for regulating the internal temperature within some preset interval.

**Steph** (*suspiciously*) Bang-bang?

**Alex** Technical term.

*As they watch, the kettle clicks, roars for 3 seconds, and goes off again.*

**Alex** Damn, it's boring now. Oh well.

<sup>17</sup>*gao dim*: (Teochew) handle this.

<sup>18</sup>bang-bang: feedback controller where the output variable takes exactly two discrete values

**Steph** I can't shake the feeling that there's something wrong somewhere.

**Tony** ~\\_(`\`)\\_/~

**Steph** So ...a water bath. And you're keeping it at basically constant temperature.

**Tony** (*glances at laptop screen, trying to look nonchalant*) Yes, *zeh*, we know how sous vide works.

**Steph** (*sighs*)

*Awkward silence as they stare at the contraption cooking their dinner, punctuated by clicks every few seconds.*

**Steph** Tony.

**Tony** Yes, *zeh*?

**Steph** What's the point of this?

**Tony** Sous vide lor.

**Steph** No — we already have a sous-vide immersion circulator —

**Tony** — which you never let me use —

**Steph** — listen first la! It cost me like \$200. That's pretty affordable —

**Tony** (*imitating*) “they actually cost money—”

**Steph** They do! But what's so new about this?

**Tony** (*quietly*) That's not really why you don't let me use it, *zeh*.

**Steph** ...

**Tony** Anyway! No, this isn't just for sous-vide la, hor. Think of it as, like, a fucking *tok kong*<sup>19</sup> thermostat. As long as it uses electricity, we can poke a thermometer inside and use this to regulate temperature.

**Steph** A very *expensive* thermostat?

**Alex** Actually, no, that's the clever bit. It's computer-controlled, and computers are expensive — but these days, everyone has a computer! So instead of using a built-in computer, we treat it as an accessory for one that you may or may not already own.

**Steph** Hmmm.

**Alex** Computer-controlled cooking, minus the computer.

**Tony** See *zeh*? I can be clever too!

**Alex** Actually —

**Tony** (*sharp look*)

**Alex** (*pause, then, drily*) Yes, mmmm. Good job. Well done.

**Steph** ?

**Tony** (*smugly, to STEPH*) Ha! I made a toy that you don't have — and it's more *zai*<sup>20</sup> than your stoopid—

**Steph** Okay okay whatever, fine!

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<sup>19</sup>*tok kong*: (Singlish) Up there.

<sup>20</sup>*zai*: (Singlish) cool.

**Tony** Anyway —

**Alex** — does anyone else smell plastic?

*All freeze. Indeed the acrid smell of burning plastic wafts through the air — some audience members have probably also picked up on this.*

**Steph** (*murderously*) What. Did. You. Do.

**Tony** (*abruptly*) Ehehehe. Gotta go!

**Steph** (*snarling*) Come back here, you little —

*TONY scurries away, leaving STEPH and ALEX to fix the mess. ALEX reaches over to dismantle the setup.*

**Alex** (*disconnecting hurriedly*) Bad kettle, bad!

**Tony** (*offstage, fading into distance*) Zeh you gao dim arh

**Alex** You're being very naughty...

**Steph** (*facepalm*)

*Again, STEPH is torn between wanting to murder annoying little brother and taking over meal preparation. Again, she chooses food.*

**Steph** Augh! Little bother. (*fishes lobster tail out of kettle and inspects the damage, then glances at remaining lobster tails*) These aren't even the heat-safe ziplock bags!

**Alex** (*timidly poking at water*) How'd you know that?

**Steph** I know what my stuff is. I have a spreadsheet.

*STEPH discards the contents of kettle, while ALEX watches. STEPH notices ALEX not doing anything.*

**Steph** Don't just stand there!

**Alex** ?

**Steph** What about those? (*points at raw steaks and the two remaining lobster tails.*)

**Alex** Uhhh.

**Steph** ...you don't cook.

**Alex** I set things on fire. Does that count?

**Steph** (*boggles*)

**Alex** Nah. Cooking's his department. Although I'm given to understand that he mostly outsources it to you.

**Steph** (*suspicious glare*)

**Alex** (*shrugs*)

**Steph** Here. Wash. I'll do the food. Once you're done, fill it up with water and a tablespoon of vinegar and boil it. Properly.

*STEPH and ALEX swap places, working in silence: ALEX scrubs the kettle down, while STEPH stares at the ingredients laid out before rearranging the mise-en-place into her preferred configuration.*

**Steph** (*abruptly, too distracted to actually start cooking*) What the fuck just happened?

**Alex** (*shrugs*)

**Steph** You said it was a prototype, right?

**Alex** Yep.

**Steph** I mean, that doesn't exactly inspire confidence in this ...thing. Is that a bug?

**Alex** I don't think anything's wrong with it, though. Where's the vinegar?

**Steph** (*points*) Oh?

**Alex** Yeah, I think it worked as expected? The water seemed like it was the correct temperature...

**Steph** And the burning plastic? (*sniff sniff*)

**Alex** Well...(*gets the kettle going*) it's pretty evident that the ziplock bag melted from contact with the heating element — boiling water isn't hot enough to burn plastic, although it'd still have been pretty toxic. Seems like — (*considers for a bit*) ha! Dumbass.

**Steph** What did you just call my brother??

**Alex** Hey, I get to be pissed off at him too, alright? You'd think that after taking the credit for making this, he'd take responsibility for screwing up too, but noooooo.

**Steph** So what did happen?

**Alex** Turn-on transient.

**Steph** (*frowns*) I'm a chemist, not an electrical engineer.

**Alex** (*vaguely insulted*) I'm not — actually, you know what, nevermind. Your kettle's designed to boil water *really* quickly, right? What's that say about the temperature of the heating element?

**Steph** (*parses this statement*) Ahhh.

**Alex** You're supposed to let it equilibrate *before* putting anything in. And it wasn't fully filled — you don't have the water as a thermal buffer — so with direct contact—

**Steph** Yeah, okay.

**Alex** Melty funtimes. (*sniffs*) Or not.

**Steph** (*considers*) Wait, hang on, then why did he just—

**Alex** (*pointed silence*)

**Steph** Oh. He didn't really make it, did he?

**Alex** You think?

**Steph** (*shaking head*) Then why—?

**Alex** You're his sister, you tell me.

**Steph** (*throws her a dirty look*)

*They revert to working in silence.*

**Alex** (*chuckles*)

**Steph** (*thrown off*) ...what?

**Alex** Hey, it's OK, I'm not, like, secretly planning to poison you or anything —

**Steph** (*narrows eyes suspiciously*) Hm.

**Alex** Actually, um, nevermind.

**Steph** You don't cook...but you agreed to this. (*gestures at device*)

**Alex** Basically, yeah.

**Steph** And you don't think that's a bit strange? I mean ...how does that work for you, then?

**Alex** I kinda assumed I'd learn how it goes as I did it.

**Steph** And?

*At this point the kettle has been boiling rather violently for a while now.*

**Steph** (*trying very hard to ignore ominous rumbling*) I mean, not to put too fine a point on it, but this hasn't exactly been a very successful kitchen expedition for you, has it?

**Alex** It's, like — like any other kind of big project, I guess? There's a big problem that we're trying to solve, and it can be broken up into, like, a dependency chain of subproblems, some of which we can attack in isolation. Getting the thermometer to talk to the laptop? Shorting out the thermostat on the kettle? Writing a bang-bang controller? Those are subproblems. I can solve some of them. Although I couldn't necessarily tell you why — not my department — but does that matter, anyway?

**Steph** Hang on, did you say—

*The kettle suddenly sputters forcefully enough to lift off the counter, land awkwardly, and topple over; STEPH and ALEX manage to avoid most of the splashing, with some squealing. ALEX somehow pulls the plug. Both of them look at each other, at a loss for words.*

**Alex** Oh. Right.

**Steph** (*furious*) Tony!

*STEPH exits. ALEX shrugs, pulls phone from pocket, glances at it for a few seconds before propping it up near the stove where she can see it as she cooks. She carries on from where the siblings left off, getting the fire going, grilling a steak to the sounds of offstage violence, and flipping it once with surprising deftness. She clearly has no idea what she's doing. Lights out.*

#### 4.

*Past midnight. TONY and ALEX in the university workshop; the kettle from the previous scene lies on the workbench, with its base removed; its (resistive) heating element is warped out of shape. ALEX is tinkering, TONY is on his laptop. Sigmund putters around in the background.*

**Alex** (*poking remains with soldering iron*) —and, oh, we didn't even use food-grade solder to short this thing out. Imagine how angry she'd be if she found out. Actually, nevermind. Is food-grade solder actually a thing? You should Google that.

**Tony** (*grunts*)

**Alex** You know, we probably should have done this *first*, instead of destroying the whole —

**Tony** Shush.

**Alex** And then having to buy a whole extra kettle in exchange for a broken—

**Tony** Shut up.

**Alex** Wow, someone's sore. I can't possibly imagine why. (*glances over*) I mean, it's not like someone got lied *to*. Or lied *about*. *Someone* got steak for dinner anyway.

**Tony** ...and no lobster.

**Alex** I think that was pretty justifiable, all things considered. (*pause*) Someone's sister seems pretty nice.

**Tony** Alright, alright!

**Alex** You were right, though! Her cooking is *amazing*!

**Tony** (*under breath*) I dunno, mine was kinda tough...

**Alex** (*talking over him*) I really should come over for food more often. Next weekend, maybe?

**Tony** (*groans*)

**Alex** What? At least she didn't try taking credit for my work. Right in front of me. How refreshing!

**Tony** I said I was sorry!

**Alex** You wouldn't be so defensive if you were.

**Tony** (*throws hands into air*) Hey! I did contribute the idea for—

**Alex** Oh come on, you can do better than that.

*They lapse into silence.*

**Alex** Why'd you do it, though?

**Tony** Do what?

**Alex** Pretend to be smarter—

**Tony** (*abruptly*) I'm not dumb, okay.

**Alex** Whoa, chill. Nobody said you were—

**Tony** You were thinking it!

**Alex** (*placidly*) That's hardly fair.

**Tony** But you were!

**Alex** No, you're not dumb, you're just ... okay, maybe a little bit—

**Tony** Ha!

**Alex** I was going to say "a little bit insecure." (*pause*) Like so. (*pause*) What's up?

**Tony** She's always like that.

**Alex** (*arches eyebrow*)

**Tony** When we were little she — yeah, I guess you're right.

**Alex** ...go on.

**Tony** What.

**Alex** You were in the middle of something.

**Tony** (*sigh*) Do you know what it was like growing up with Steph? Hah. Of course not. (*pause*) She always got the new things. It sort of makes sense, I guess, what with her being the eldest and all. (*shrug*) We only had one computer, but *she* would use it most of

the time, so it was *her* laptop. *Her* desk. *Her* books — even when she didn't need them any more. Up until college all my textbooks had her name on them.

Alex What's wrong with that?

Tony Nothing's *wrong*. It's not like we could have afforded two sets of everything anyway. But...I dunno la. Not like I could do anything about it. Ever tried arguing with someone seven years older than you? You can't win. I never won an argument with her, so by default she was always right.

Alex Mhmm.

Tony We used to help our mother at work — Ma sold noodles for a living — but then Ma never really let me do anything important, unless *zeh* was supervising me. Of course, right? Need to let *zeh* take care of the *xiao didi* so he doesn't do anything dumb. Until she left for college. And by the time I followed her here she'd already bought herself all that stuff — *her* stuff — and wouldn't allow me to use them unsupervised—

Alex Well, duh.

Tony Why?

Alex (*are-you-stupid stare*)

Tony Oh come on! That was an exception, I can take care of her things.

Alex (*pointing at kettle*) You lied to her! About just a kettle! Which you could have just bought yourself — actually, we probably should have spent the money on that instead of lobsters —

Tony (*grunt*)

Alex ...You were trying to bribe her with food, weren't you? Not cool, man, you can't just buy affection—

Tony Just let it go, dude.

Alex Fine. But all that mess, just over this little fella (*pokes innards of kettle with soldering iron again*). Now imagine if you'd broken her \$200 thing.

Tony Were you even listening? It's because she thinks I'm—

Alex That too. You done fucked up, son.

Tony It wasn't *supposed* to go that badly—

Alex —*you* weren't *supposed* to take the credit *and then* fuck everything up.

*Silence*

Alex (*quietly*) Do you do this very often?

Tony Huh?

Alex The lying thing.

Tony No!

Alex Oh really. Only to your sister, then?

Tony (*incapable of a lucid response, he merely looks down sighs*)

*More silence. TONY hunches over his laptop, not looking at the screen. ALEX pauses in her attempts to extricate the heating coil, looks over, sighs, shakes head, removes her gloves, plasters on a fake smile, reaches over, and touches*

*TONY's elbow.*

**Alex** Hey.

**Tony** (*not looking up*) Hm?

**Alex** It's cool.

**Tony** (*no response*)

**Alex** Dude. I've known you for like two years now. You're not dumb — you wouldn't be here if you were.

**Tony** (*looks up at her*)

**Alex** I mean it, dude. I think you're overreacting...but I'll talk to your sister. Alright? And *you*, in the meantime, need a better way get over this ridiculous need to prove yourself. Categorically *not* at my expense. Well, our expense (\$\$\$), but mine in particular. Is that clear?

**Tony** (*nods apologetically*)

**Alex** Alright, then. (*shifts herself over*) What's this?

*TONY and ALEX start discussing changes to the existing design. Lights out.*

## 5.

*Two months later: Untyped Lambda interview day. ALEX and TONY are presenting to a panel of three interviewers, including WALLACE. They have half a working prototype on the table: an egg-shaped temperature sensor and a USB dongle, presently plugged into the presentation laptop. The slides are watermarked with a logo that says "Thermago."*

**Alex** — And that's all we have for you. Any questions?

**Interviewer 1** Yes.

*Long silence.*

**Tony** (*expectantly*) Yes?

**Interviewer 1** ...Honestly, I think this would work far better as an open-source project than as a startup.

**Tony** (*winces*)

**Alex** How's that?

**Interviewer 2** She means: how do you plan to make money out of this?

**Interviewer 1** Fundamentally it appeals to a *very* niche market: amateur modernist cooks who haven't already fronted the sunk cost in buying professional-grade equipment.

**Tony** Well that sounds familiar.

**Alex** But. Um. Won't this make that more accessible? Which might make it less niche?

**Interviewer 2** But accessible enough to give good returns on investment?

**Wallace** (*interjecting*) It's not like we haven't previously funded hardware projects before, though —

**Tony** —you guys funded sandwich-making robots last cycle!

**Wallace** Indeed. Although that was a rather ...eye-opening experience.

**Interviewer 2** (*shudders*)

**Alex** ?

**Wallace** (*sigh*) Look, I don't think any of us doubt your goals, or your originality, or the feasibility of making this, whatever. At least, I'm impressed. But our experience with hardware projects in particular has made us a little wary about ideas that are, um...

**Interviewer 1** Completely useless?

**Wallace** ...that don't suggest an ...obvious path to monetisation.

*Other interviewers nod somewhat vigorously*

**Tony** ...and sandwich-making bots are profitable??

**Interviewer 2** That was then. We've learned from that.

**Alex** I thought you guys *weren't* aiming to make money with this? It's not technically *your* money, anyway...

**Interviewer 1** We're not. But if *you* don't make money, then your idea won't last very long out there, will it? Might as well skip the chase and put your project up on GitHub or something.

**Interviewer 2** And, in any case, we *do* have to be held accountable to the venture capitalists for whom we're acting as intermediaries.

**Tony** But — look, our operating costs won't be that high once we're done with the R&D — and we're basically done, look at that—

**Interviewer 1** That is also true, but — well, just don't get your hopes up.

**Wallace** Unless —

*Pregnant pause as he appears to consider something*

**Interviewer 2** (*gets tired of waiting*) Well, that was certainly a good effort.

**Wallace** Yes, it was ...interesting.

**Interviewer 2** We'll get back to you once the results are out. In the meantime, though, don't hesitate to seek out additional sources of funding.

**Interviewer 1** You said something about a Kickstarter campaign?

**Tony** We're working on it now — going live in a few days.

**Interviewer 1** Well, there you go. Use that as a gauge for how popular it's going to be.

**Wallace** We'll keep a look out for you guys.

**Alex** (*packing to leave*) Thank you for your time.

*WALLACE grunts, gets up, and follows TONY and ALEX out of the room.*

**Alex** (*to TONY*) Well, that could have gone better.

**Tony** Meh.

**Wallace** Ms. Smith: a word in person, if you please?

**Alex** ...alright? (*long expectant pause*)

**Wallace** Meaning that I've something to ask you without your COO hanging around. No offense meant.

**Alex** ? (*quizzical glance at TONY*)

**Tony** None taken. It's OK, I can wait in the lobby.

*TONY nods to ALEX and exits*

**Wallace** Right, I'm going to make this short, because I'll have to interview the next group of applicants, but — you're familiar with the structure of our accelerator programme?

**Alex** (*nods*) Untyped Lambda consolidates venture capital from seed investors who don't have the technical expertise to decide, with confidence, what's worth funding. You give out \$150,000 in exchange for 8% equity, and we attend a two-month boot camp on the premises.

**Wallace** Good, You've done your homework. However, I'd like to make an offer of a somewhat more ...personal nature.

**Alex** What?

**Wallace** Oh, in that they involve my personal funds. After all I, too, am occasionally an ...angel investor.

**Alex** Oh! That's great!

**Wallace** Well then! This might not be quite the best time or place to discuss this. Perhaps we could meet somewhere more...conducive?

**Alex** Uhh, okay, sure!

**Wallace** Let's meet, say, Saturday, to discuss this arrangement. I'll contact you on the cell phone number you provided? With your permission, of course.

**Alex** Actually, hang on, that's my COO's number. Here, have my personal one. (*scribbles number on back of name card, and offers the card.*)

**Wallace** (*taking offered card*) Thank you, that will do very nicely. (*stows card in pocket*) There's something ...different about you.

**Alex** Thank you! I'll pass the compliment along to—

**Wallace** No, I mean *you*. (*points*)

**Alex** Um.

**Wallace** Yes. You. (*pacing around ALEX*) I gotta tell you, female CEOs are rare. Most of them claw their way to the top after years of playing their colleagues against each other — battle-hardened manipulative types, all of them — playing with a handicap *has to* make you ruthless. Then they fight to defend themselves from the enemies they made on the way up. No rest for the wicked, you know. And yet here you are, CEO from day one, hands unsullied. But still so driven, so intelligent, so powerful — and yet so ...pure. (*wheels to face her, takes a step in, grins*) I like that.

**Alex** (*shrinks away*)

**Wallace** Or at least, that's the face you wear. Understandable — naïveté is not a good survival strategy, but it *is* a good excuse. What's a girl like you doing in a place like this? (*chuckles*) Something doesn't compute. (*pauses and flashes a bigger grin*) But I like that even better.

Alex ...

Wallace (*clears throat*) Anyway, gotta go. I'll get back to you. (*strides away*)

Alex (*vaguely weirded out*) ...sure?

*Lights out*

## 6.

*ALEX and TONY in the back of an Uber car. ALEX is visibly, if mildly, distressed; TONY doesn't seem to notice. It is raining quite heavily outside.*

Tony Extra money seems useful.

Alex Oh? He wasn't super detailed—

Tony Still, though. I mean, we *could* get extra money—

Alex Um.

Tony Hm? What's up?

Alex I'm not so sure we should go for it.

Tony What??

Alex ...yeah.

Tony (*sighs*) Look. We're actually serious about this startup thing. Right?

Alex Uh-huh.

Tony Serious enough about it to want to go into it full-time.

Alex Sure!

Tony Then as COO I kinda need to tell you that we're running out of money. (*chuckles*) Heh. COO.

Alex What's so funny?

Tony It's just — weird, I guess. Half a year ago I was basically playing along because hey, why the hell not? And now I'm actually feeling obligated — I dunno, actual *duties* to this weird outfit — that didn't exist until I filled out a bunch of forms, and then suddenly — magically — it did. Don't *you* find that weird?

Alex ...no.

Tony (*smile, and enthusiasm, fade a little*) Right. Exactly.

Alex ?

Tony Strange that I'm telling you this, too, but — extra money's always good for the company, right? I mean, what's the worst that could happen? Don't answer that.

Alex I dunno, something about it seems kinda *off*.

Tony ...

Alex What! Geez, that guy gives me the creeps.

Tony I dunno, he seemed to be on our side during the Q&A. And, well, you agreed to discuss it, anyway. It'll look bad for us if you backed out now.

**Alex** Hey, it's more like he straight up told me that we were going to talk about it.

**Tony** ...

**Alex** What? I didn't really have a choice.

**Tony** Trivially, you always do — and anyway, you do now. Just that one of these choices sucks for the company—

**Alex** —and the other only sucks for me, hey?

**Tony** Well — they finish deciding who to let in in two weeks' time, right?

**Alex** ...yeah, fine, I get you.

**Tony** In which case we probably shouldn't do anything to piss them off for the time being. Especially not, you know, the guy who seems to be pushing for us?

**Alex** Okay. *(pause)* I hate to say this, but I guess you're right.

*They lapse into silence. The rain continues beating down on the car.*

**Alex** Hey.

**Tony** ?

**Alex** If I meet up with him — will you come along? Just to make sure that he doesn't do anything creepy.

**Tony** *(less enthusiastically)* Sure.

**Alex** Alright. *(pause)* Thanks for that, at least.

**Tony** *(checking Facebook on phone)* Mm.

*More silence. Lights out.*

## 7.

*The day of the meeting with WALLACE. Lights turn on, revealing TONY on his phone, pacing back and forth some distance away, with a half-eaten plate of black chai dao kueh on a nearby table next to his open laptop, which shows Thermago's Kickstarter campaign page. They've so far currently collected \$10,000: good, but only 7% of their funding goal. In an adjoining room STEPH is skyping their mother.*

**Steph** Ma, I told you already la, it's because *(pause)* aiya, want to start a new business also need money what. Last time the stall also —

*TONY pauses; walks over to table, checks the Kickstarter page again, and takes a few bites; continues pacing and listening while chewing.*

**Steph** Ma, do business here is different! Not like last time sell *mee pok* like that. *(pause)* Ya la! Nowadays got Internet, people can just Google see where got good *mee pok* right? Here also liddat lor. Internet can get money one.

*TONY abruptly stops; he sits down on the edge of the stage.*

**Steph** What? No!! He's not *actually* selling *mee pok*, that's just— *(pause)* No! I won't! And anyway *ang moh* don't eat *mee pok* one—

*Tony hangs up, leaps to his feet in one explosive motion, and continues pacing*

**Steph** *(pause)* Aiya, *di di's* friend wants to do something different. It's like — uhh — aiya you ask him explain himself also better la hor. *(pause)* OK OK. *(to Tony in the next room)* Tony!

*TONY swoops into room and grabs the laptop off the desk, making to carry it off into the next room*

**Steph** Hey! Mine!

**Tony** Not like you're using it now, right? *(walks away without waiting for response.)*

**Steph** Well...fine. *(calling after TONY)* Bye Ma! *(starts as doorbell rings) ??*

*offstage: TONY opens the door and lets ALEX in. They talk as they walk onstage*

**Tony** Yeah, just wait here for a bit, I need to Skype my mom. *(to laptop)* No, Ma, she's a friend. Aiyo. Tell you don't have already...*(trails off as he walks offstage)*

*ALEX stand awkwardly; STEPH comes over to see what the fuss is about. She's much friendlier to ALEX now.*

**Steph** Oh! Hello, Alex. Have you eaten?

**Alex** *(shakes head)*

**Steph** *(taken aback)* Oh! Do you want lunch? It's late, but I can still cook for you—

**Alex** *(lights up)* Ooh! *(catches herself)* It's okay, Steph, I'm meeting an investor later with Tony over dinner.

**Steph** Oh, right. *(pause)* How about something light? Like a dessert? A simple dessert?

**Alex** Hmm. *(rubs belly)* I could make room for that.

**Steph** *(cheers up noticeably)* Ah! *(bustles off to kitchen area)* This shouldn't take too long.

**Alex** *(follows her there)*

*STEPH gathers ingredients and equipment from various locations: ginger (50 g), milk (quarter litre), sugar. ALEX watches, mesmerised. STEPH starts by leaving the milk to warm over an induction heater, and begins peeling some ginger with a spoon.*

**Alex** So. Um. Steph.

**Steph** Mhmm?

**Alex** I've been wondering — Tony claims to know his way around the kitchen, but almost every time I've come over—

**Steph** *(inspects peeled ginger)* Mmm. *(starts microplaning peeled ginger)*

**Alex** —you've been the one cooking. How often does he cook, anyway?

**Steph** Hmm. *(still microplaning; not paying attention)*

**Alex** Steph?

*STEPH doesn't respond. ALEX shrugs and gives up trying to get her to talk. STEPH collects the juice obtained from straining the grated ginger in a serving bowl.*

**Alex** So what's this?

**Steph** *(now checking temperature of milk with an immersion thermometer)* Ginger milk pudding. Ever tried making cheese before?

**Alex** Uh. No?

**Steph** Well, when milk curdles, it separates into curds and whey, and the curds are used for cheese making. Chymosin — a protease conventionally extracted from juvenile animal stomachs—

**Alex** (*makes face*)

**Steph** — is traditionally used for curdling — but ginger also contains a protease, which, predictably, the biologists call *ginger protease*—

**Alex** (*arches eyebrows*)

**Steph** — yeah, I know, right? (*stirring in sugar*) It's got lower milk clotting activity than chymosin, so this gives us an overall more delicate gel with less residual fluid — custard, rather than curds and whey. (*checks temperature*) Hmm. (*stirs further*) Gotta be gentle with this, though.

**Alex** Gentle?

**Steph** (*in full-on lecturing mode*) Observe that I'm using the lowest setting on the heating element, and stirring continually — although slowly enough to avoid unnecessary mechanical agitation.

**Alex** Like you're making drugs! (*hurriedly deflecting umbrage*) Or, uh, whatever your post-doc's about. Chemical stuff. Damn.

**Steph** (*too busy educating to be offended*) Actually, the basic idea isn't too different from most drug synthesis procedures. In pharmaceutical applications we are usually concerned with how we could potentially scale a reaction up into an industrial process, meaning that we generally try to increase yield and reaction rate, usually by performing reactions at high temperature and pressure. On the other hand, protein chemistry exhibits all sorts of hysteretic behaviour, since it relies on specific conformations of the tertiary structure, and denaturation is usually irreversible, rendering high temperature conditions untenable. Usually these result in a well-posed optimisation problem, for which a specific set of reaction conditions and durations emerges as optimal solutions — this constitutes a recipe. In this case, the gel formation rate increases with temperature, but ginger protease denatures very rapidly around 70° C. These two constraints yield an optimum reaction temperature at which the gel forms most rapidly.

*STEPH inspects the thermometer again and nods. She turns off the induction heater, and pours the milk from height into the serving bowl into the ginger juice, then sets a timer.*

**Alex** (*long pause*) Okay. Now what?

**Steph** (*starts timer*) Now we wait for the gel to form. Give it five to ten minutes.

*They stare at the bowl; nothing interesting happens.*

**Steph** Of course, things get more complicated than just that — like, the ginger juice will oxidise under air if it isn't prepared fresh — and there's necessarily some loss of precision — I don't have the equipment to hold milk at 65° C —

**Alex** —but with slow enough heating we can at least assume quasistatic equilibrium, since water's heat capacity is high enough that the convective relaxation time is much lower than the heat transfer timescale—

**Steph** (*smiling*) Exactly! Wow, this is so much more fun with you.

**Alex** Heh heh.

**Steph** Tony usually acts dumb to annoy me when I break out into jargon.

**Alex** Well, if you think about it, chemistry's kinda just applied physics...

**Steph** Maybe we could do this more often?

**Tony** You *what??*

*STEPH and ALEX turn to see TONY standing at the door of the kitchen area.*

**Alex** Oh, hey, you're done.

**Tony** I am so done.

**Alex** What?

**Tony** (*to STEPH*) So, what, you're giving her cooking lessons now?

**Steph** Well, I wouldn't mind that—

**Tony** Oi, *zeh*, please la hor, I learned how to cook from Ma for, like, twenty years, and you *still* won't—

**Steph** (*pinching bridge of nose*) Tony, the reason why I don't let you cook with my things is because the only recipe it seems like you can consistently follow is the one for disaster. Every time.

**Alex** Tony—

**Steph** And that wouldn't be a problem if it didn't happen to be my stuff you always end up—

**Tony** Always about your stuff your stuff—

**Steph** — which she doesn't *destroy*—

**Tony** You've barely known her for just these few months! Wah lau eh *I'm your own brother!*

**Steph** But she's actually really quite — well, I mean — not that you're, uh—

**Tony** Not that I'm what? Har? Say la!

**Steph** ...

**Tony** Orh, liddat la. 看不起小弟弟是不是?<sup>21</sup>

**Alex** ??

**Steph** (*sighs*)

*Beat.*

**Alex** Tony...

**Tony** And you!

**Alex** What? What did I do?

**Tony** You — you. Er. You're trying to cut me out of the loop? Uh.

**Alex** What.

**Tony** (*defensively*) I mean, if you could learn how to cook, then you wouldn't need me around any more? And that's. (*pause*) Um.

<sup>21</sup>看不起小弟弟是不是: (Chinese) kàn bù qǐ xiǎo dì dì shì bù shì; looking down on your little brother (interrogative).

**Alex** Dude. You're doing that insecurity thing again.

**Tony** ...

**Alex** You are, aren't you?

**Tony** ...yeah. I guess.

**Alex** (*sighs*) God dammit Tony.

**Tony** ...

**Alex** ...

**Steph** ??

**Tony** Should I leave?

**Alex** ...probably yes.

**Tony** Alright. I'll be in my room.

**Alex** (*wearily*) ...be up in a bit.

*TONY leaves*

**Alex** This is the *worst* day.

**Steph** ...and what was *that* about??

**Alex** Hm.

*Uncomfortable silence.*

**Alex** Are you guys always like this?

**Steph** Um.

*Silence.*

**Steph** Eh. He'll get over it. He always does.

**Alex** So you don't let him cook? Ever?

**Steph** I do! When I'm around.

**Alex** You know, he *does* have a point.

**Steph** Hey, I told him that if he wanted to cook, he had to buy his own things. And preferably not set fire to my kitchen.

**Alex** ...and you don't see a problem with that?

**Steph** What? I think I'm quite justified. Like, he blew up my kettle! You were there, weren't you?

**Alex** I blew up your kettle.

**Steph** Oh. (*pause*) Right.

**Alex** And you don't find this kinda weird? Not even a little bit?

**Steph** Did I tell you about the time I went for a conference last year? He tried sharpening all my knives with the same sharpener.

**Alex** ...and? He ruined the knives?

**Steph** He broke the sharpener.

**Alex** ??

**Steph** Yeah, I know, right?

**Alex** I'm sure he was just trying to help!

**Steph** Oh, sure, "help."

**Alex** Besides, he *does* know how to cook. Right?

**Steph** Sure. *Mee pok* is difficult, I'll give you that. But it's...different?

**Alex** Do tell.

**Steph** Like, he knows how to cook, sure, but that's not actually very hard. I mean, with enough practice you could probably train a well-behaved monkey to execute a recipe. That's not the hard bit. The hard bit is knowing what's going on, and why — and for that, he's just — arghh.

**Alex** (*winces*)

**Steph** And, you know, the good thing about monkeys is that *some* of them can follow instructions.

**Alex** ...harsh, dude.

**Steph** (*barrelling on*) He can't even do that! Always doing random *dumb* things, calls it "science," ugh.

**Alex** Isn't that a *good* thing? After all—

**Steph** It is — if you're making something new. But it doesn't cut it if you're trying to learn how to make something that already exists. Like, okay, take chicken rice. (*catches quizzical look*) Classic Singaporean dish. Suppose that you wanted to see what it would taste like if you used, I dunno, quinoa instead (*shudders*), or whatever's in fashion with those health freaks these days. Sure! Great! But you haven't done anything to *improve* chicken rice, because in the process of making this change, the abomination that you've brought into being has ceased to be chicken rice altogether. *By construction.*

**Alex** Gosh, listen to yourself — I have literally no idea what chicken rice *is*, and you *still* sound like some kind of stodgy traditionalist—

**Steph** —isn't that the whole point of *having* a recipe?

**Alex** What happened to optimisation, though? (*catches sharp look*) What? I mean, they don't all have to be *material* changes — you said earlier that recipes solve optimisation problems, but there's always the possibility that you've got traditional recipes that aren't *really* optimal, right? What about fixing them?

**Steph** And what is tradition to *you*? I'll tell you what it is: tradition is how knowledge of the *what* persists in the absence of the *why*. Tradition is how you do science without knowing you're doing science. Tradition is generations of iterative convergence in the general direction of optimality — but if you don't know where you *are*, if you don't know how to figure out *which way* to go, then breaking with tradition isn't exactly the smart thing to do, is it?

*Long pause.*

**Steph** And, more importantly, knowing how to make something edible is not the same as ensuring that you still have a functioning kitchen once you're done with the food. Especially when it happens to be *my* kitchen.

*Beat.*

**Alex** But you don't think it's a good idea to teach him all that?

**Steph** Oh, you think I didn't try?

**Alex** And?

**Steph** I dunno, won't it make more sense for him to get his own things? At least he'll actually feel a need to take care of them that way. I've been trying to get that into his head for — wow, um. For as long as I can remember. I think.

**Alex** (*under her breath*) wow you guys are *seriously* screwed up.

**Steph** Come again?

**Alex** You know, I don't think that's how he's taking it.

**Steph** How not? That's *literally* what I've been telling him. Repeatedly.

**Alex** Okay. You want to know what I think? *You* are a control freak with trust issues.

**Steph** *Excuse me?*

**Alex** Yeah.

**Steph** (*hard glare*)

**Alex** Hear me out, okay? Tony's not a total ass. He's actually fairly sensible most of the time!

**Steph** (*snorts*)

**Alex** And that's exactly the problem! *You* don't seem to think so, because manifestly he doesn't act that way around you. I'm calling observation bias.

**Steph** Riiiiight.

**Alex** Hey, I'm serious.

**Steph** And I'm skeptical. I've known him since he before he could stop drooling into my homework in primary school.

**Alex** But you're you. I'm making a claim that you — specifically you — literally cannot empirically falsify. You'll have to take me at my word, or not at all.

**Steph** (*opens her mouth, but no reply comes*)

**Alex** So: if he falls over himself again and again, trying to get in *your* good graces — and only for you — then I should really be asking: why?

*Tense silence, broken by the timer going off. Wordlessly, STEPH retrieves a spoon and passes it to ALEX, who takes it, and the bowl of pudding, and leaves the kitchen. STEPH sits down and fiddles with the necklace that she wears.*

## 8.

*ALEX and TONY at table in a private booth at Ambrosia (WALLACE's restaurant of choice), with food on it, awaiting WALLACE's return. A waiter loiters nearby.*

**Tony** (*tries to talk with mouth full*) sho ghooood.

**Alex** You might want to behave, maybe?

**Tony** (*shrugs, swallows*)

*On the table are three foam pumps (red, yellow, green) and a pile of what look like tortilla chips.*

**Alex** What's that, anyway?

**Waiter** (*suddenly appearing*) Complimentary appetiser, ma'am: "Sea Foam."

**Alex** ...how do you eat this??

*The waiter smiles unhelpfully, and goes back to loitering*

**Alex** Tony. Something's not right about this.

**Tony** (*not listening*) Kind of reminds me of *orh luak*<sup>22</sup>—

**Alex** (*tilts head*) Are those, like, Singaporean nachos?

*Beat*

**Tony** No. Categorically, no. But hey, I figured it out! I think.

**Alex** ...

**Tony** Watch! You take one of these (*picks up a chip*), and do this (*puts chip under the yellow foam pump and gives it a healthy squeeze, covering it with foam*). Here, eat this.

**Alex** ...that looks like a nacho covered with soap.

**Tony** It's good!

*ALEX pops it into her mouth grudgingly, then lights up*

**Tony** Right?

**Alex** (*mouth full*) Hmm. I have no idea what I just ate, but yeah. Um. Wow.

**Tony** This place is amazing! That guy's probably a total foodie. (*instagrams food setup excitedly*)

**Alex** ...

**Tony** I wonder what those other things are. Let's see—

*Just as TONY finishes loading another chip with two healthy squeezes of the contents of the red pump (violently red foam), WALLACE returns and takes his seat across then. ALEX puts up a fake smile.*

**Wallace** Ah, I see you've started helping yourselves. (*winks at ALEX*)

**Tony** (*stealthily devours foamy chip*)

**Wallace** How do you like the place?

**Alex** It's really nice.

**Tony** (*nodding, mouth full*) Mmm. Mmhmm.

**Alex** Looks pricey, though.

**Wallace** Oh, no worries, my treat.

**Tony** Mmm. (*motions frantically at waiter, who seems not to notice*) Mmmph!

**Wallace** Um.

**Alex** Tony?

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<sup>22</sup>*orh luak*: (Teochew) oyster omelette.

**Tony** Mmm mmph! (*swallows, tearing up*) Ahh hot hot hot

**Alex** Dude, you okay?

**Tony** (*gasping, shakes his head*)

*TONY stands up, and rushes past the waiter off stage. The waiter seems unperturbed.*

**Wallace** Red pump?

**Alex** (*nods*)

**Wallace** (*shakes head*) House hot sauce. They make it with ghost peppers. How much did he take, anyway? (*sees noticeable reduction in fluid level*) Hooooo boy. (*motions to waiter*)

**Waiter** Yes?

**Wallace** Today's specials for us — and get someone to check if our friend's okay.

**Waiter** Of course, sir. (*exits*)

**Wallace** Thank you. (*turns to ALEX and grins*)

**Alex** (*nervous smile*)

*Deliberate, uncomfortable silence; WALLACE unblinkingly maintains eye contact. The waiter returns and pours two glasses of red, leaving TONY's place empty before leaving.*

**Alex** (*looking pointedly at TONY's place*) Um.

**Wallace** We'll be announcing our decisions tomorrow.

**Alex** (*thrown off*) Huh? Oh. I know.

**Wallace** Of course you do. (*pointed silence*)

**Alex** ...and?

**Wallace** Let's just say that the reception to your sales pitch has not been altogether ...favourable.

**Alex** Ah.

**Wallace** Any plans from here on?

**Alex** Well...

**Wallace** No matter. You know better than I that your present financial configuration is ...suboptimal. In view of this ...uncomfortable...situation, I have a proposal for you that I hope you might perhaps find ...compelling.

**Alex** You'll fund us, then?

**Wallace** Well, not quite *fund*. (*pause*) I'll be blunt: I have things that need doing, I need someone to do them, and I'll be willing to pay. You fit the bill.

**Alex** Ah. You're offering us jobs?

**Wallace** "Us?" (*pause*) No. *You*.

**Alex** Uhhhh.

**Wallace** (*waits for it to sink in*)

**Alex** And our startup?

**Wallace** (*beat*) Mine.

Alex What?

Wallace Think about it this way. Untyped Lambda declining to enrol you says ...something about your valuation. Or lack thereof. Functionally, I'm offering to buy over Thermago at above valuation — very generously, if I might be so bold — and retain its employees. Well, one employee.

Alex ...and Tony?

Wallace — will be ...appropriately ...compensated. As will you, to be fair.

Alex Oh. *(long pause)* That's it?

Wallace There will be additional ...stipulations, of course — but nothing for you to worry about.

Alex Wait, so — you're expecting me to drop everything I'm doing — everything I've done so far — and pack up and just work for you? On whatever side project that you happen to need manpower for? Just like that?

Wallace Good heavens! Don't be silly. I'm perfectly capable of hiring people the normal way, you know — lest you think I'm giving you some kind of special treatment — which, I concede, technically, I am *(flashes grin)*.

Alex ...

Wallace You'll be working on something specifically related to all this — but something ...valuable enough that I think it would be imprudent for me to reveal more without having first secured your ...acquiescence. Thermago won't die. It'll become a part of something greater — although it might not emerge in any recognisable form.

Alex *(frowning)* ...

Wallace Tempting, isn't it? I understand you'll need some time to consider this offer.

Alex ...*(her phone buzzes with a new message, but she doesn't check it)*

Wallace Call me when you've decided. But until then — *(leans over to whisper, ALEX shrinks away but doesn't have enough space to retreat)* keep it to yourself.

Alex ...please don't do that.

Wallace It's fine — I own the place. *(flashes grin)*

Alex ...

*Silence. The waiter returns with a brown soup, served in transparent spherical bowls.*

Alex ...is Tony OK?

*The waiter smiles unhelpfully and leaves, just as TONY reenters.*

Tony Wow, this place is coooool.

Alex Tony—

Wallace *(throwing her a sharp look)* Ahem.

*WALLACE holds ALEX's eye contact; she nods slowly. While all this is happening, TONY, who keeps talking all this while, starts helping himself to ALEX's soup.*

Tony *(obliviously)* Like, so that thing was really, really spicy, right? So I was, like, trying to rinse my mouth in the washroom, and that waiter dude suddenly appeared with a

glass of milk. Like, wow! He was all, like, are you okay? Take this, it'll help! And it did! But it wasn't enough, so he brought me the kitchen to get more. The kitchen! It's so awesome! There's all kinds of cool stuff going on, all at once. So many shiny things! They have, like, liquid nitrogen, and explodey things, and the smells! Oh man, the smells. A little bit of everything, coming at you in waves, like...I dunno, but it's kinda familiar. Like...(hesitates) like a hawker centre, I guess. From back home. You know? (pause) From home.

Wallace (raises eyebrow)

Tony (tries soup) Whoa. Hmm. (long pause, then perks up) Hey, Alex, wanna go see? (lowers voice) And we should really — (notices change in demeanour) Alex?

Alex (slowly plastering on fake smile) Hmm?

Tony (seemingly mollified by fake smile) So? Kitchen? Now? Yes?

Alex Uhm.

Wallace (interjecting) What was that you said?

Tony Me?

Wallace (impatiently) Yes, you. (pause) Home?

Tony I grew up in a kitchen. No, really. My mother sold noodles for a living in a hawker centre—

Wallace ?

Tony (notices) It's a street food market kind of thing. She couldn't afford a caretaker, so she just brought me along to work.

Wallace Kitchens don't seem very child-friendly—

Tony Well, yeah, no, there was my sister to mind me until I was old enough to realise that fire isn't good for your face. But, uh. Yeah. So. You're a kid, right?

Alex (to herself) Still a kid.

Tony And at some point your mother decides that you're too hyperactive to stay in the stall, which is really just a tiny kitchen, and you go outside, and all around you are smells of things, and colourful signs, and you run around and there's so much going on — yeah.

Wallace Sounds ...unsafe.

Tony Of course! (grinning in reminiscence)

Wallace ...I see. (pause) Did you end up cooking?

Tony Ma taught *zeh* — my sis — how to cook, and my sis taught me.

Wallace ...were you any good at it?

Tony (chuckles) Hey, nobody's born knowing how to cook, right? I screwed up a lot when I was little. But my sis always got me out of trouble. Sometimes she'd even feel sorry for me and tell Ma that it was her fault so that Ma wouldn't get too mad at me. Heh. (helps himself to more of ALEX's soup)

Wallace ...how often?

Tony Nah, she wasn't *that* nice.

Wallace No — how often did you cook?

**Tony** Whenever Ma let us. When we were growing up she'd even let us run the stall by ourselves sometimes, when she needed to rest — Ma *really* wanted my sis to take over the stall one day, I guess. (*more soup*)

**Wallace** ...really.

**Tony** When *zeh* won a government scholarship for college they had a really big fight about it. And a bigger one when she came over here to do her PhD. I guess Ma felt a little guilty about it, because when it was my turn to go to college she was totally fine with letting me come over and join her. I really was quite surprised. (*slurps soup*) Wow, this is really good. What's in this? Is that veal? I'm getting some mushroom, too — (*takes more*)

**Wallace** ...fascinating. So *you're* the reason why Thermago is making cooking equipment?

**Tony** (*proudly*) Yup!!

**Wallace** (*eye contact with ALEX, arches eyebrow*) I see. Well, that's fine, then. (*examines soup*) I think it *is* veal...

**Alex** Sir.

**Wallace** (*tries the soup*) Hmm.

**Alex** Sir, I've made up my mind.

**Tony** ?

**Alex** About the deal we discussed, earlier.

**Tony** What deal?

**Wallace** Oh, good.

**Tony** (*realises that ALEX isn't comporting herself in a manner portending good news for him*) What deal??

**Alex** I've come to the conclusion that you're a fucking slimeball.

**Tony** !!

**Alex** And you just heard him talk about — if you had *any* idea how much this means to him — and you're still just — no. /This is wrong. I won't do this — I won't let you make me. I won't. Fuck you, I WON'T!

**Tony** (*silently miming and mouthing, horrified*) /No! Don't piss him off! Abort! Abort! (*resignedly*) Oh god dammit. Alex, why??

**Wallace** Oh. (*pauses, recalibrating*) Bad ...but ...good. (*long pause, then, to TONY*) Would you like a job?

**Alex** ??

**Tony** Uh oh. I'm pretty sure I already have one?

**Wallace** That pays you?

**Tony** And it's one I happen to like...(nervously) What's going on? What's that about a deal?

**Wallace** What's going on is that, as of now (*glancing meaningfully at ALEX*), Untyped Lambda is ...declining to fund you.

**Tony** Oh, crud. (*to ALEX*) What did you do??

**Wallace** And, therefore, so am I.

**Tony** This is *so* your fault.

**Alex** (*face in hands, sighs*)

**Wallace** Meaning your ...job, such as it is, isn't going to be around for very long.

**Alex** (*horrified silence*)

**Tony** Oh. (*pause*) Wait, but — why did you ask us here?

**Wallace** To propose an ...alternative arrangement. Involving offers of employment. To you. Well?

**Tony** Just me? That's not fair, what about her?

**Wallace** (*raises eyebrow*)

**Tony** I mean, yeah, okay, that happened, *but still!*

**Wallace** (*appears to consider*) Very well: both of you.

*ALEX opens her mouth to speak, but is silenced by another sharp look from WALLACE.*

**Wallace** Well, if you'll let me explain what all this is about: how much do you know about where we are? (*gestures around*)

**Tony** This place? Uh, I dunno, it's really cool-looking, but I don't think I've ever heard of it. Is it new?

**Wallace** No. Actually Ambrosia's been in continuous operation since ...before *you* were born.

**Tony** What? But all that cool stuff—

**Wallace** —*is* new. In fact, it's *mine*.

**Alex** What?

**Wallace** Ah, the lady speaks.

**Alex** But...but you're not—

**Wallace** (*wearily*) Ah. Of course you do your homework. (*takes out phone, starts composing a message*) Yes, I *did* invent a functional programming language named after Haskell Curry<sup>23</sup>. I *did* get involved in a bunch of startups in the nineties. I *did* multiply my life savings by putting it all in Bitcoin. And, yes, I *did* found Untyped Lambda. But the Wikipedia article about me doesn't specify what *else* I do with all that money — and I assure you, I do a lot.

**Tony** (*admiringly*) You're a food person!

**Wallace** (*he's been here before*) I am a food person.

**Tony** Wow! I *knew* you were a total foodie!

**Alex** (*sighs*)

**Wallace** You ...could say that, yes. But, anyway, Ambrosia. My first foray into selling food. When I was a regular here in the eighties, it was barely even a restaurant — some Asian ethnic food place run by two brothers who, for some reason, thought that the name was

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<sup>23</sup>Haskell Curry: American mathematician and logician who pioneered combinator logic. There are *three* programming languages named after him: Haskell, Brook, and Curry. Also named after him is *currying*: a mathematical operation that turns a function of two variables into a function of one variable.

a very funny pun on three words in their language. (*shakes head*) They sold it to me when they left the Bay Area after rents started going up in the nineties. I spruced the place up — you might have noticed.

**Tony** Okay, so what do you need me for?

**Wallace** Well, you might have noticed that it's not my day job. I am, after all, still a technologist. I run Untyped Lambda, after all! But it's as much my baby as Untyped Lambda is — remember the sandwich bot? It lives in the kitchen now. We have an AI that cooks up flavour and texture combinations — pun intended. Did you like the oyster foam? It *imagined* that. *We* made it happen.

**Tony** (*awed silence*) Cool.

**Wallace** But now, owing to a series of rather regrettable decisions involving some ...(*pauses as he sends message and puts phone away*) former employees, it so happens I'm in need of new ...culinary input. And, for a change, I'd like to have a *chef de cuisine* who's actually *human*.

**Alex** What??

**Tony** What, for real?

**Wallace** Oh yes. That kitchen you saw? All yours. Do what you want. Make things. Invent things. Whatever you can think of. Go wild.

**Alex** (*gawks*)

**Tony** Wow! This is great! (*to ALEX*) Then why did you just go all batshit on—

**Alex** ...um.

**Tony** Oh, riiiiight. You don't cook. Ahhh. Hey, what do you know, it came in handy for once.

**Alex** (*tugs TONY's elbow worriedly*) Dude. No.

**Wallace** Oh, and she can help too.

**Alex** (*freezes*)

**Tony** (*beat*) But she doesn't cook. What's she gonna do, then?

**Wallace** Well, that's up to you, you're her ...boss. Will be.

**Alex** Wait, WHAT?

**Tony** Really? Wow.

**Wallace** Really. (*pause*) So, what do you say?

**Alex** (*motioning frantically "no"; TONY doesn't seem to notice*)

*Tense silence.*

**Tony** (*slowly*) You know, I think the reason why I like cooking so much is because *zeh* is *so damn good* at it — and I was never quite as good, no matter how hard I tried. *Zeh* didn't even want to sell food — she just ...stopped — she even ran away from the stall to an entirely different country — and yet she's somehow *still* so damn good. All my life I wanted to be just like *zeh*.

**Alex** (*groans worriedly*) Oh no, not *now*—

**Tony** And yet, on some level, I knew I could never measure up. (*long pause, then looks at*

*WALLACE, smiling faintly*) But I guess this means I can now.

**Wallace** Well spoken! So—

**Tony** Thanks, but no thanks.

*Beat.*

**Wallace** ...come again?

**Tony** I said no.

**Alex** *(a little too hurriedly)* He said no. *(beat)* Wait, what?

**Tony** *(glances meaningfully at her phone, then, to WALLACE)* Really no. I guess I actually like being me after all. Much appreciated, but we'll be fine.

**Alex** *(checks phone, eyes widen)*

**Wallace** Really, now.

**Tony** Mhmm.

**Alex** Mhmm indeed.

**Wallace** *(starting to lose some composure)* That seems rather ...ill-advised. Are you sure? After all, without funding—

**Tony** *(wry smile)* We'll get by.

**Wallace** With nothing?

**Alex** *(defiantly)* Not *nothing*.

**Wallace** *(ignoring her)* Well. *(long pause)* The offer stands, if you should...reconsider.

**Tony** We're fairly confident we won't. *(glances at ALEX, who is grinning)* Us, and the two thousand people who read about our Kickstarter on SeriousEats while we were all having the appetiser.

**Wallace** *(beat)* ...two...*thousand??*

**Alex** So far. *(quiet fistbump with TONY)*

*The waiter arrives with the main course. Lights out.*

## 9.

*The kitchen, two months later. TONY, ALEX and STEPH on their knees, hunched over an ice cooler box filled with chicken stock, with the heating coil from the erstwhile kettle immersed into it at one end. There are cloves of garlic, spring onions, and a few chickens bobbing around in it. TONY stirs the fluid from time to time with a soup ladle. The coil is plugged into a laptop at some distance. ALEX is scribbling furiously on a clipboard. Sigmund putters around, trapped in an unending cycle of bouncing between the cooler box and two of the counters. A dewar sits nearby.*

**Steph** — or you could brine it, to prevent it from getting dry.

**Tony** And chicken usually gets dry because it's overcooked. And is breast meat. Which is a very *ang moh*<sup>24</sup> kind of problem to have.

<sup>24</sup>*ang moh*: (Singlish) Caucasian. lit. red hair.

**Alex** (*pauses mid-scribble*) ...ang moh??

**Tony** Technical term.

**Steph** (*slaps playfully*)

**Tony** Eh, *zeh*, now can?

**Steph** No, not yet.

**Tony** Aww. (*stares at liquid surface expectantly*)

**Steph** (*continuing in lecture mode*) Now, you might imagine that with sufficiently precise temperature control, overcooking generally isn't an issue.

**Tony** Or you could just eat the bits of chicken that are, you know, not breast.

**Alex** ...technically, *you're* the foreign devil here...

**Tony** (*snorts*)

**Steph** I hate to say it, but Tony does have a point.

**Tony** Ha!

**Steph** Unfortunately, though, temperature control isn't the only thing you need to worry about, because biological substrates are *very* complicated. Getting your meat *technically* cooked isn't all there is to it — if we leave them in for too long, other reactions (with lower rate constants) *will* eventually cause the meat to soften up, or, in the case of chicken, get mushy — which we of course don't want to happen. (*pause, checks timer*) We don't have much longer to wait.

**Tony** Yesssss. How much longer?

**Steph** Wait larh.

*Long pause*

**Tony** *Zeh*, now?

**Steph** No!

**Tony** (*puppy eyes*) Only a little bit early *nia*, is okay one —

**Steph** Patience!

**Tony** ...K.

**Alex** Why not sous vide, though?

**Tony** Poaching in stock is tastier!

**Steph** And traditional.

**Tony** And that!

**Steph** The chicken skin collects and retains fluids that are released from cooking, just like a natural sous vide bag. If done right, these fluids rapidly congeal into a jelly when the chicken is immersed in ice water — which is also traditional.

**Alex** But—

**Steph** Yes, for more precise temperature control, true sous vide is of course usually the answer, but in this case there's *actually* a good reason for not doing it: we need stock to make the rice — hence the name.

**Alex** (*pause*) We could—

**Steph** (*interjecting*) —there’s no fucking way I’m gonna drop my immersion heater in anything that isn’t plain water. Have you tried washing the insides of that thing?

**Tony** (*psst*) Don’t. It’s a bad idea.

**Steph** (*nods*)

**Alex** And you’d know because?

**Tony** (*goes back to stirring*) ...it’s a bad idea.

**Alex** (*scribble scribble*) ...bad idea.

**Steph** Exactly. Luckily, we have your egg things. (*chuckles*) You like them *that* much, huh.

**Tony** (*looks up from stirring*) Come on, *zeh*, it’s called “Thermago.” Call it that.

**Steph** ...Thermago things.

**Tony** (*smiles*) Now?

**Steph** Soon lah, almost. (*relenting*) Aiyah ok la, get ready first.

*While STEPH speaks: TONY and STEPH put on gloves and safety goggles; ALEX retreats to a respectable distance. TONY opens the dewar; STEPH retrieves two cups of stock, setting them aside in a bowl on a counter.*

**Steph** (*to ALEX*) Do you know just how *bothersome* it is to make this the usual way without professional equipment? You need a bucket of ice water on hand to dunk the chicken into when it’s done cooking. And it’s delicate enough that you might accidentally break the skin when you do that — and then no more jelly for you. And for heat you usually can only do one chicken at a time over a stove — two, tops — and you need to be *so* careful about the temperature. Whereas now —

*STEPH’s timer goes off.*

**Tony** ALRIGHT! Let’s do this thing!

**Steph** (*giggles anticipatorily*)

**Alex** Hang on — (*whips out phone and starts recording video*) alright, smile for the Kickstarter crowd!

*While TONY speaks: STEPH unplugs and pulls out the heating coil, leaving it to rest on a plate near the laptop*

**Tony** (*to camera*) Backer update: Hey guys! Just another day in the food lab. Don’t try this at home! We stress-test our stuff so that you don’t have to — although “stress” might be understating it a little in this case. (*turns attention back to dewar*) Enjoy!

**Steph** Thank God for the Internet. (*pause*) Ready, Tony?

**Tony** Ready!! (*pause*) You’re really OK with this, *zeh*?

**Steph** Go for it. I measured it out yesterday, based on her calculations. (*to ALEX*) You *did* get the numbers right, didn’t you?

**Alex** (*hands up*) On my honour as a physics major.

**Steph** Well, then—

**Tony** FOR SCIENCE!

**Alex** FOR SCIENCE!!

**Steph** ...(shrugs) for science. (*grins*)

*TONY slowly pours the liquid nitrogen in the dewar into the cooler; there is much fogging, bubbling and hissing. STEPH stirs the contents as he pauses while pouring. ALEX coos delightedly while recording. Mad scientist cackles all round.*

**Alex** You jelly? (*giggles*)

*The activity inside the cooler eventually starts to die down.*

**Tony** Did it work?

**Steph** (*inspecting, prodding with ladle*) I think so.

**Tony** Woooooo! Lemme see! (*sticks head into fog over cooler*)

**Steph** Try not to breathe too much of that.

**Tony** (*hurriedly withdraws face from fog*)

**Alex** What next?

**Steph** We'll fridge the chickens once it's finally settled down. Next up: the rice. (*heads over to the counter where she left the warm chicken stock*)

**Tony** Aww yiss chicken riiiiice! (*manipulates chickens with ladle excitedly*)

**Alex** Question, though.

**Steph** (*turning*) Yes?

**Alex** Are we *really* going to eat *three chickens*??

**Tony** (*brightly*) I can have some of yours! ( *rubs hands*) You have *no* idea how desperate people can be for a good plate of *kway png*<sup>25</sup> when they haven't had one for *months*.

**Steph** Months? (*pause, turns back to counter*) Years. ( *rubs hands*)

*Lights out. End.*

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<sup>25</sup>*kway png*: (Hokkien) Hainanese chicken rice.