Merge Without Conflict

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Contents

Chapter 1

THE LAB AT MIDNIGHT

The university physics building always looked abandoned after dark, even when it wasn't. Corridors that smelled faintly of solder and burnt coffee, fluorescent lights buzzing like exhausted insects, a vending machine that sold exactly nothing worth eating. Clara liked it that way; emptiness made it feel like the world had paused long enough for her to think.

She pushed open the heavy fire door to the computational lab and blinked. Most nights, she'd find just the hum of the cluster nodes and maybe a forgotten hoodie. Tonight, there was a silhouette at the back row, lit by the glow of a monitor—no GUI, no IDE icons, just a terminal window in a soft phosphor green.

The typing wasn't frantic. It was deliberate, almost mechan-

ical. No wasted keystrokes, no mouse clicks. The man at the desk didn't look up, didn't acknowledge her, didn't show any sign that he knew anyone else existed. That irritated her for no good reason.

Clara dropped her bag onto her usual workstation. The impact sounded too loud in the room,

but the stranger didn't flinch. She logged in, opened her research folder, and stared at the

document titles with mild disgust: `Chapter_Final.docx`, `Chapter_Final(2).docx`, `Chapter_Revised(Final).docx`.

No matter how hard she tried to stay organized, the project always decomposed into chaos.

She opened the newest file. Word loaded slowly, like it resented being woken. She tried to write a sentence. Deleted it. Wrote another. Deleted that too. The silence in the room intensified, broken only by the stranger's perfect metronome keystrokes.

Finally, curiosity got the better of her. She swiveled around. "Hey," she said. "You know the department closes this place at two, right?"

No response. The typing continued. She tried again, louder. "Hey. You good?"

The stranger hit a key that made the terminal beep and then

stopped. He turned his head slowly, like he'd been pulled out of another dimension.

"I heard you the first time," he said. Voice steady, syllables clipped. "I'm working."

Clara blinked. "Yeah, I can see that. I just figured—whatever."

He stared for one beat too long, then turned back to the terminal. The typing resumed. No small talk, no apology, nothing.

She pretended not to watch him out of the corner of her eye. The screen was full of text—paragraphs, maybe pages. The lines had tildes along the left margin. She recognized that pattern from somewhere. Some ancient editor. Probably the kind people who live in basements used for fun.

She tried to focus on her own work. Word autosaved. The stranger typed at a constant tempo like a machine that didn't believe in errors. Eventually, she gave up and swiveled again.

"So what are you writing?" she asked.

"Text," he said without turning.

She exhaled sharply through her nose. "Yeah, I got that part."

Silence stretched again until he finally spoke, still not looking at her. "If I tell you, will you stop trying to talk to me?"

"That depends on the answer."

He sighed almost imperceptibly. "A chapter. Of something."

"Like a thesis?" she asked.

"No." He paused. "It's fiction."

Clara blinked. Of all the answers she expected from a nocturnal terminal goblin, that wasn't one of them. "You're writing a novel in a terminal window?"

He finally stopped typing. His fingers hovered over the keys, poised and irritated. "I'm writing a novel in vi," he said. "There's a difference."

Clara opened her mouth to argue, realized she didn't know enough to even start, and closed it again.

She turned back to her Word document, suddenly hyper-aware of every click, every slow dialog box, every autosave freeze. The stranger resumed typing with that absurd consistency, as if he had direct neural input to the machine. She didn't know why it bothered her. Maybe because she felt slow next to him. Maybe because her tools felt clumsy and his didn't. Maybe because the room, which once felt comfortably empty, now felt occupied by someone who belonged here more than she did.

Outside, rain started ticking against the windows. Inside, Clara sat in the half-lit lab, staring at a blinking cursor that refused to yield, listening to the precise mechanical progress

of a story she couldn't see. After forty minutes of pointless edits, she shut her laptop. "I'm getting coffee," she muttered. "Want anything?" The stranger paused again. A long pause. Then: "Black," he said.

It wasn't quite a truce. More like an opening bracket—one that would need a closing pair in some chapter yet to be written.

The hallway outside the lab was colder than the room, as if the building itself had stopped paying for heat years ago. Clara hugged her jacket tighter and made her way toward the single beverage machine at the end of the corridor—the one that brewed something legally allowed to be called coffee but never actually deserved the word. She fed coins into the slot. The machine shuddered, hissed, and spat out two steaming cups that tasted vaguely of roasted disappointment. She took a sip from hers, winced, and tried again. Nope. Still terrible. The stranger could suffer through the other.

As she walked back, the rain hammered harder against the long windows lining the stairwell. The outside world was a smear of yellow streetlights and black glass. Clara paused for half a second, staring at her own reflection—hair slightly frizzy from humidity, eyes tired, folders poking out of her bag at weird angles. She looked like someone who lived between obligations rather than inside a life.

Then she pushed the stairwell door open with her shoulder and headed back. When she reentered the lab, He hadn't moved. She couldn't even tell if he'd breathed. Same posture,

same fingers hovering just above the keyboard as if the machine needed to earn each keystroke. The terminal glowed with new paragraphs since she'd left.

Clara set the cup down beside him without ceremony. "Here. Black."

He stopped typing long enough to glance at it. "Thanks."

That was it. No smile, no acknowledgment beyond bare minimum linguistic effort. He lifted the cup, took a careful sip, and resumed typing. Clara watched, baffled.

She sat back at her own workstation and opened her thesis draft. The document blinked onto the screen with its familiar font and paragraph spacing—both of which she now hated for reasons that had nothing to do with typography. She tried again to write. One sentence, then a second. Words arranged themselves into academic patterns. "This work explores—" Delete. "In this chapter I will demonstrate—" Delete. For someone who could ramble endlessly in her head, she was remarkably incapable of producing text that didn't feel like beige wallpaper.

The tapping from the stranger's terminal became a metronome again. Clara listened without looking directly at him. The absence of hesitations in his rhythm bothered her more than the silence had. She could hear where he paused just long enough to think, then resumed with the kind of precision that didn't sound like drafting but more like executing. Eventually she gave up pretending she wasn't

distracted.

"What are you actually writing about?" she asked again.

No answer.

She waited.

Still no answer.

"Look, you asked for coffee, the least you can do is—"

"It's a story," he said suddenly.

Clara blinked. "About what?"

He exhaled through his nose, as if explaining simple things took significant effort. "About a systems engineer stationed on a remote observatory who finds patterns in radio noise that might not be noise. Then things get complicated."

Clara stared. "Okay, that's actually interesting."

"It's not," he said. "Not yet."

"Wow. Sounds like someone's fun at parties."

He didn't rise to the bait. He just kept typing.

"Why vi?" she asked, genuinely curious this time.

"Because it doesn't get in the way." "It's editing at the speed of thought. hjkl like a heartbeat. No Ctrl keys. No nonsense. Pure muscle memory."

Clara sipped her terrible coffee. "Word doesn't get in the way either."

He snorted softly. Not a laugh, but dangerously close. "Word is the way."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"It does if you use tools for a living," he said. "You either work through the tool or the tool works through you."

Clara glanced around the lab. "Pretty philosophical for someone writing fiction in the physics building."

"I'm not philosophical. I'm practical." He stopped typing long enough to drink again, then added: "I write code the same way. Small edits, fast feedback, no friction."

"That doesn't apply to prose," Clara insisted.

"It does if you care about writing."

He spoke without arrogance, without salesmanship, without even looking at her. Just a statement of fact about how he saw the world.

Clara leaned back in her chair, folding her arms. "So you're telling me that writing a novel in vi is... caring about writing?"

"I'm telling you it's caring about craft."

She didn't have a comeback for that. Not immediately.

The lab returned to its rhythm: the hum of equipment, the rain against the windows, the occasional mechanical hiss from the HVAC system. Clara stared at her Word document again, annoyed by its presence even though it had done nothing wrong.

"You ever use version control for your drafts?" The stranger asked suddenly, so quietly she almost missed it.

"Excuse me?"

"Version control," he repeated. "Git. Fossil. Mercurial. Pick one."

Clara blinked at him. "Why would I use version control for writing?"

"Because it tracks history." He typed a few more characters. "History matters."

"I have autosave," she argued weakly.

"That's not history. That's panic prevention."

Clara opened her mouth, then closed it. "What kind of person uses git for a novel?"

"The kind who doesn't want to lose work," Adrian said.

She stared. "Do you really do that? Like, for real? git commit for every chapter?"

"For every change," he corrected. "Chapters are arbitrary."

Clara rubbed her forehead. "That's insane."

"It's disciplined," he countered.

"Same thing."

"Sometimes."

He paused again, hands resting on the keyboard. Clara could almost feel him evaluating whether to continue speaking, as if words cost CPU cycles.

"I don't like losing state," he said finally.

Clara didn't fully know what that meant, but she knew it wasn't just about text files.

She turned back to her Word document and stared at the blinking cursor again. Academic prose waited inside her like a reluctant animal—skittish, easily startled, prone to running away if pushed. But something about his certainty made her want to try again, if only to prove she wasn't incompetent.

She typed a sentence. Then another. Then a third.

None of them were anything special, but they existed, and for tonight that was already a small victory.

Hours passed. The rain softened. The building settled around them like a tired beast.

Sometime near three in the morning, Clara's eyes burned from staring at the screen. She saved her document, closed

her laptop, and rubbed her neck.

The stranger didn't move.

"A normal person would be asleep right now," she said.

He replied without pausing: "Most people waste half their lives asleep."

"That's not how biology works."

"Biology is a constraint," he said. "Constraints can be optimized."

Clara laughed before she could stop herself. It echoed faintly across the lab, too loud for the hour. Adrian's typing paused mid-keystroke. He looked up at her for the first time since she'd returned—the first full look, not a sideways glance.

His eyes were dark, focused, and unreasonably awake.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just... you sound like someone who schedules dreams around productivity metrics."

He blinked once. "That would require predictability."

"You don't believe dreams are predictable?"

"I don't believe anything is predictable until measured."

Clara shook her head, smiling into her coffee cup. "I'm going to regret asking this, but what's your field?"

"Systems theory," he said. "Complex adaptive systems. And whatever applies to them."

She waited for more. There wasn't more.

"Clara," she offered.

He looked at her, confused.

"My name," she clarified. "Since we're apparently sharing things now."

After a beat, he nodded. "Adrian."

The introduction hung in the air like an established variable, simple but binding.

She stretched, grabbed her bag, and stood.

"I need sleep," she said. "Biology wins tonight."

Adrian nodded once in acknowledgment. "See you tomorrow."

It wasn't a question. It wasn't hope. It was a forecast, stated the way one might state that systems conserve energy or that commits create history.

Clara paused at the door. "Maybe."

She stepped into the hallway before she could decide whether she meant it.

The hallway was emptier than when she'd arrived, which made no sense because it had been empty then too. Now

the emptiness felt intentional, like the building was holding its breath until she was gone. Clara pushed through the double doors and stepped out into the night.

Chapman Street was slick with rain, reflecting streetlights in long trembling stripes. Her umbrella stayed folded in her bag. A little water never killed anyone, and the shock of cold helped pry her mind loose from academic sludge. She started walking, coffee cup in hand, city humming in distant layers: wet tires on asphalt, late buses groaning at intersections, some drunk undergraduates shouting two blocks away. Normal sounds. The kind she knew how to categorize. There was nothing normal about the lab tonight. Or about Adrian.

Clara replayed the encounter because there was no way not to. The silence in the lab had felt like a third person in the room—someone old, patient, unimpressed with small talk. She knew labs could be like that late at night; the machines never slept and human beings tried to impress them by pretending they didn't need to either. But this was different. He wrote fiction in a terminal.

Who did that?

Not "someone quirky," or "someone eccentric," but someone deeply architectural in how they related to reality. Someone who treated writing like code, who committed prose the way she committed data analysis scripts—incrementally, with diffable changes and traceable history.

She didn't know if that was admirable or pathological. Maybe both.

Rain hit her hard enough to sting. Water ran down her jacket sleeves, pooled at her collarbone, slid down her spine. She didn't mind. At least rain made sense. Atmospheric systems behaved in patterns. Chaotic, sure, but modeled. Predictable in aggregate.

Conversations weren't like that. People weren't like that. Adrian definitely wasn't like that.

She tried to fit him into a category because that was how she processed things: sort, label, store. Was he rude? No, not exactly. Rudeness implied intent to offend. He had displayed no such intent. He simply operated on a narrower communication frequency than most people, as if human language was a tool to be used sparingly. Was he arrogant? Maybe. But arrogance usually came with performance— louder words, visible confidence, a need to win. Adrian used fewer words than strictly necessary and didn't seem to care if anyone understood him. That wasn't arrogance. That was... focus.

Clara stepped around a puddle, then stepped directly into another one, cold water flooding her shoe. She hissed through her teeth but didn't stop walking. The coffee cup warmed her fingers and nothing else. She tipped her head back and let the rain hit her face. It grounded her.

She thought about his line: "I don't like losing state."

That had lodged itself somewhere inconvenient.

She knew what state meant in computational terms: the stored conditions of a system, the information needed to resume or evaluate behavior over time. Losing state meant losing continuity. Losing the thread. Resetting.

Plenty of people didn't like losing continuity. That wasn't weird. But the way he said it—flat, unguarded—felt like a window into a brain that treated everything as a system with internal variables that shouldn't be overwritten.

She wondered what counted as "state" for him. Memories? Relationships? Plans? Code? Fiction? All of the above?

Clara crossed College Avenue on a blinking red light. No cars. A delivery cyclist shot past, muttering something into his headset. Somewhere behind her, a late-night siren wailed—ambulance, not police. She knew the difference by timbre alone.

Her apartment wasn't far—ten minutes if she walked fast, fifteen if she slowed. Tonight she slowed. It gave her more space to inspect what was bothering her.

It wasn't that Adrian was strange. Academia bred strange like a petri dish. It wasn't even that he challenged her writing tools; she'd heard that debate before—Word vs Scrivener vs LaTeX vs whatever hipster plaintext thing had just launched.

No, what bothered her was the sense that he was built for this—for late nights, for precision, for systems that didn't

flinch under scrutiny. She wasn't sure what she was built for. Some days she thought research. Other days she thought fiction. Mostly she thought deadlines.

She rounded the corner into her neighborhood. Shoebox apartments. Dim porch lights. Bicycles chained to railings. A small cat stared at her from under a parked car, eyes reflecting streetlight in green shards.

Clara fumbled with her keys, finally opened the main door, and climbed the stairs to the third floor. The hallway smelled faintly of curry and wet laundry. She liked that smell. Human. Lived-in. Not sterilized by fluorescent lights and grant funding.

Inside her apartment, she dropped her soaked jacket onto a chair, toed off her ruined shoes, and let the coffee cup fall into the sink with a hollow plastic clatter. The rain was still audible through the thin windows, a steady sheet of white noise that made the space feel smaller and safer.

She plugged in her laptop, opened it, and stared at the Word document again. The sentences she'd managed in the lab sat there like tiny flagpoles in a battlefield, absurdly proud of themselves for existing. She tried to read them, but instead she heard keystrokes—his keystrokes—clean, precise, unbothered by indecision. Was she jealous? God, maybe she was. Jealous of someone who wrote without tripping over their own doubts every ten seconds. Jealous of someone who could choose a tool and commit to it fully. Jealous of someone who didn't seem to care whether the output was

good or bad or publishable or sane, just that it existed and could be improved. She shut the laptop again.

Sleep. She needed sleep, not amateur psychoanalysis.

Clara peeled off her rain-soaked clothes, pulled on an oversized sweater, brushed her teeth mechanically, and fell into bed. The rain kept on. The city kept on. Her thoughts refused to.

She saw the tildes on his screen—those strange little placeholder marks. She saw the black coffee cup beside him. She saw the way he didn't smile, didn't apologize, didn't explain unless directly asked.

She saw the way he said "See you tomorrow" like it wasn't a guess.

Clara closed her eyes.

"Maybe," she whispered into the dark.

She wasn't sure who she was answering.

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About the Author

Julian Caspian Fairchild is a technologist and writer whose
work explores the boundary between systems and intimacy:
what we automate, what we avoid saying, and what still
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