

Qubit's Incubator



Charley
Brindley

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Qubit's Incubator

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Brindley C.

Qubit's Incubator / C. Brindley — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

Catalina Saylor is allowed to work in Qubit's Incubator on probation for thirty days. If she proves her idea within that time, she will be allowed to stay and try to obtain a patent on her device. Qubit's Incubator is a work place for bright people with good ideas who have no resources to develop their ideas. If they are accepted, they will be provided with a workspace, equipment, and other benefits for thirty days. If they are not successful within that time, they will leave with nothing.

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Charley Brindley Qubit's Incubator

Qubit's Incubator

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This book is dedicated to

the memory of

James Seth Brindley

Some of Charley Brindley's books

have been translated into:

Italian

Spanish

Portuguese

French

Dutch

Chinese

and

Russian

Other books by Charley Brindley

- 1. Oxana's Pit*
- 2. The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry*
- 3. Raji Book One: Octavia Pompeii*
- 4. Raji Book Two: The Academy*
- 5. Raji Book Three: Dire Kawa*
- 6. Raji Book Four: The House of the West Wind*
- 7. Hannibal's Elephant Girl*
- 8. Cian*
- 9. Ariion XXIII*
- 10. The Last Seat on the Hindenburg*
- 11. Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book One*
- 12. Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book One*

13. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book One: Exploration*
 14. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Two: Invasion*
 15. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Three*
 16. *The Sea of Tranquility 2.0 Book Four*
 17. *Sea of Sorrows, Book Two of The Rod of God*
 18. *Do Not Resuscitate*
 19. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book Two*
 20. *The Rod of God, Book One*
 21. *Henry IX*
- Coming Soon
22. *Dragonfly vs Monarch: Book Three*
 23. *The Journey to Valdacia*
 24. *Still Waters Run Deep*
 25. *Ms Machiavelli*
 26. *Ariion XXIX*
 27. *The Last Mission of the Seventh Cavalry Book 2*
 28. *Hannibal's Elephant Girl, Book Three*
- See the end of this book for details about the others

Chapter One

West Chelsea, New York City

Tuesday morning, 10 a.m.

“Thank you for the opportunity.”

Catalina took the offered straight-back oak chair. She watched the man behind the desk as he read her CV.

Thirtyish, confident, well-dressed. I wonder if he's the owner or manager?

She adjusted her short blue skirt, then rested her tightly clasped hands on the iPad in her lap.

Victor Templeton was clean-shaven, with a little gray sprinkled throughout his sun-bitten hair. His face looked weathered, tired. He watched Catalina for a moment, but her steady gaze didn't waver. He wrote the number “7” on his notepad.

“Whatcha got...” he glanced at her CV, “Miss Catalina Saylor?”

Catalina's hand shot to the right side of her thigh, where she patted her skirt.

They're gone! She panicked. How could I lose them?

Her heart raced. Jerking her hand one way then another, she finally felt a familiar object, then the second one.

There you are. Thank God!

The concealed pocket held her treasures. All her skirts and dresses had pockets hidden within the folds of cloth. She never wore pants or shorts. Without her talisman, she would be lost.

“Sound imaging for the blind,” she said in answer to his question.

Victor spun a yellow pencil on his desk. “Hmm...like a bat's echolocation?”

Catalina's breathing returned to normal as her heart rate slowed. “Something like that, but using AI to convert the radar bounces into a non-visual image.”

Victor scribbled the number “8” on his notepad. “Non-visual image.” It wasn't a question; he repeated her phrase as if trying to give it substance. “Being fed into the blind person's optic nerve?”

“No. To her fingertips, making her surroundings into a tactile image.”

“You have ten minutes to sell this idea to me.”

Catalina tossed her head to the side, like a girl with a long strand of hair irritating her face; however, her short chocolate-brown hair, neatly brushed and pushed back, hardly covered her ears. A little blush on her cheeks would have added depth to her statuesque beauty, but she never wore makeup, thinking it was a waste of time. Maybe someday, if she ever wanted to advertise her availability for dating.

She opened her iPad and placed it on the desk, facing him. Reaching over the top, she pressed a key.

A stick-figure with a long cane materialized on the stark white screen.

Catalina sat back, keeping her eyes on Victor.

As he watched the iPad, the figure mobilized and made its way along a sketched-in street. The figure slowly morphed into a human form—a woman, then clothing was added; a flowery blouse and long skirt, both in black and white.

She tapped her cane on the sidewalk, feeling her way along.

The sidewalk and buildings took on more detail as the sounds of murmured voices and traffic came from the iPad speakers.

Color was added to the woman's clothing as she made her way through the passing pedestrians; chartreuse for the skirt, and a shocking orange for her blouse. The outlined buildings became shops,

with books and jewelry displayed in the windows, while a convenience store came into view ahead of her.

“Who did this animation?” Victor asked.

“I did,” Catalina said. “Most of it.”

He used his pen to slash through the “8” and wrote “9” beside it.

The blind woman came to a street crossing and stopped when the end of her cane dropped off the edge of the curb.

She tilted her head, listening.

“Anyone there?” Her voice came from the speakers.

A girl, maybe ten years old, came to her side. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m blind. Can you help me across the street? This is Forty-seventh, right?”

“Yes, it is.” The girl took her hand. “What happened to your eyes?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Step down.” The girl led the woman off the curb and into the street. “We can cross now. You were hurt in the war?”

“Yes. What’s your name?”

“Monica. We’re in the middle of the street, but we still have the light.”

“Do you live nearby?”

“Two blocks. Mama sent me to the store for baking powder. Get ready to step up on the curb.”

The white cane tapped ahead of the woman. When it touched the curb, she felt for the height.

“If you can’t see, why do you wear sunglasses?”

After stepping up on the sidewalk, the woman felt for her glasses and removed them.

“Oh,” Monica said.

The woman’s eyes were cloudy orbs, scared and misshapen.

“I see what happened. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Thanks for helping me.”

“What’s your name?” the girl asked.

“I’m Cindy.”

A knock came at the office door, then a young woman with red hair peeked in. “Your next appointment is here.”

Victor kept his eyes on the video as he held up his hand toward her in a ‘Tell the applicant to wait a few minutes’ gesture.

Catalina stared at the redhead. *Dangly earrings. Perfectly shaped, gold enclosing jade stones. Ovals!*

The young woman glanced at Catalina, then nodded to Victor and closed the door.

The video suddenly rewound back to the stick figure in the first frame. It started as before, but now, as the animation progressed, the white cane was equipped with a shiny metal cylinder wrapping around the shaft, near the handgrip. A bracelet of similar design circled the woman’s left wrist. Both had blinking green LEDs while emitting a soft beeping sound.

When the woman came to the curb, she shifted the cane to her right hand, then held up her left, with the palm forward. The beeping sound accelerated. She cocked her head to the side, then after a moment she slowly shifted her open palm to her left. She paused there, then moved her hand all the way around to the right.

The blind woman waited until the sounds of traffic stopped, then held out her palm to her left, apparently checking for any cars turning right, and into her path.

Satisfied it was clear, she stepped off the curb and walked confidently forward, avoiding a yellow taxi that had stopped halfway into the crosswalk.

She was soon on the other side of the street and striding toward her destination.

Victor leaned back in his chair as Catalina took her iPad, turned it toward her, and clicked off the video.

"Nice. I understand the concept," he said. "But not only will it require some very dense coding, you'll have to work out the computer-human interface."

"I know it won't be easy."

"Are you a coder?"

"I did most of the programming of the demo video."

"Where did you learn to code?"

"I'm teaching myself."

Victor marked out the "9" and wrote "10." "Why do you need Qubit's Incubator?"

"For a place to work. And I'll need electronic test equipment, too."

"Why can't you work at home?"

"I share a small apartment with a roomie who loves to party and make lots of noise."

"You don't party and make noise?"

"I used to."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"No other place to live?"

"I can't afford a place by myself, or the equipment I need."

"Your parents?"

"Not an option."

"Do you have a job?"

She nodded.

"How much do you make?"

Catalina hesitated, wrinkling her brow as she gazed at a picture on the wall behind Victor. It was a large horizontal oval containing Egyptian hieroglyphs. The symbols were embossed characters chiseled into stone.

"I work in a café." *Die with...* She tried to work out the translation. "With extra shifts and tips, I clear around four thousand a month." *Die with what?*

"And you can't get your own place on that?"

"I have...um...other expenses." *Die with memories...but what is that last part?*

He marked out the "10" and went back to "8." "What are they?"

"Why do you need to know all this?"

"Miss Saylor, do you want help from the Incubator?"

"Of course I do." *Dreams!*

"Then I need enough information to make a decision. If you're over your head in credit card debt and all you can do is make minimum payments, you'll never get out from under that load of debt working at a café."

Die with memories, not dreams. She smiled. *All within a perfect oval frame.*

She took a deep breath, examined her nails for a moment, then exhaled. "I dated a guy for almost a year. I thought we had a future together, but he tricked me into running my four credit cards up to the limit, then when we couldn't charge anything more, he bailed on me."

Victor lined through the "8" and wrote "10" again. "You see that door?" He pointed across the room, opposite from the door the young woman had opened earlier.

Her shoulders slumped. She nodded. "You're rejecting me?"

"Go through that door, pick out a vacant desk, and get organized. Then—"

Catalina squealed with delight, jumped from the chair, and stepped to the end of his desk. "I'm accepted?! I can't believe it. Can I hug you?"



“No. As I was saying, come back to see me at four this afternoon. Now, wipe that smile off your face and go find a desk. You’ve got thirty days to prove yourself.”

“Yes, sir.” She actually did wipe her hand across her broad smile, leaving behind a serious frown. “I’m on it.” She hurried toward the door.

Victor smiled as he made a note on the edge of her application—30 days.

Chapter Two

Catalina pushed open the door to find a large warehouse. She stepped inside, letting the door close silently behind her.

The place had apparently been some sort of assembly factory many years ago.

The underside of the corrugated ceiling was about seventy feet above her head. Twenty feet up, a wide balcony ran along the sides of the building. Many doors lined the outside perimeter of the balcony. A few were open, but she couldn't see inside the rooms.

A large block-and-tackle hung from a steel girder. A metal hook, the size of a wrestler's arm, was suspended below the rusting block on a rusting chain. Someone had hung a large doll from the hook.

Catalina tilted her head and squinted at the doll, which had a noose around its neck.

Is that Donald Trump?

The central open area of the huge floor had thirty desks placed haphazardly about. Most were occupied by men and women concentrating on their computers or building models of strange devices.

One young man glanced up at her, then returned to assembling a tall Tinker Toy gadget on his desk.

Surrounding the open area was a collection of cubicle work areas. She saw several rows of these cubicles, forming semicircles around and away from the open area, like an amphitheater. She could see into some of them, and most were occupied.

Find a vacant desk, he said.

Catalina walked through the open area, passing around a few cleared desks.

It's so quiet in here.

Someone coughed. A chair squeaked. No other sounds could be heard. But there was an air of intensity about the place, like a classroom during a calculus exam.

She came to an unoccupied cubicle. She placed her iPad on the cleared desk and tried the chair. Leaning back, she gazed about at the blank walls of the workspace.

Just needs a few pictures to...

"Hey, Pissant."

She almost fell over backwards. "W-what?" Looking up, she saw a young Black woman peeking over the wall.

"Pissants live in the bullpen," the woman said. "You don't become a drone until you've accomplished something."

"Drone?"

"This cubicle don't belong to you." The Black woman disappeared.

Did she call me a 'pissant'?

Catalina collected her iPad and went to the open area of the bullpen.

She found a desk with a Scotch tape dispenser, stapler, pencils, and an old-school computer.

Sitting at the desk, she opened her iPad and searched for a Wi-Fi connection.

"What're you doing?"

She jerked around to see a scruffy old man with one hand on his hip and the other holding a steaming cup of coffee.

"I-I-I'm..."

"I-I-I'm..." he mocked her in a singsong voice. "Get out of my chair."

Catalina grabbed her iPad, stood, and backed away. "Sorry."

"Over there."

The old man pointed with his coffee cup toward the edge of the bullpen, where a gray metal desk and matching chair stood like salvaged government-issued office furniture relegated to the outliers.

She went to the desk, and when she sat in the chair, she could feel the cold metal through the fabric of her skirt.

The desk was turned away from the others in the bullpen, facing a brick wall that looked more like a weathered outside wall than the inside of a building.

Her hand, as if by its own accord, felt for the pocket in her skirt. Slipping her hand into the pocket, her fingers searched for something. When they touched the smooth surface of one of the objects, she smiled.

High above was a large skylight providing a view of the blue sky, but only a dim gray glow came through the ages of caked-on grime.

Opening her iPad, Catalina searched again for a Wi-Fi signal. Finally, she found 'Qubit Inc.' The cursor blinked, then a message popped up, demanding, 'PASSWORD.'

She looked over her shoulder at the other pissants. *They're not going to be any help.*

The 'low battery' LED began to blink on her iPad.

She saw an electrical outlet embedded in the brick wall, twenty feet away. She took the charging cord from her purse.

Six feet long. How am I going to reach that outlet? Move the desk? Glancing at the others, she shook her head. *Invisible little pissant. That's all I am. Do I really want to do this? At least at home I can charge up my computer and get online.*

Turning back to her iPad, she tried 'qubit' for a password, then 'Victor,' but neither was acceptable.

If I try a third time, it might lock...

"Bullpen."

Catalina turned to see a man standing behind her. "What the hell? I took a cubicle, and someone told me to go to the bullpen. I went there and found a desk. Then some snippy guy told me to get out of his chair and come over here. So now I guess this is your desk and I have to go back to the middle of the floor and wait to see if any desk remains unused. Why is everyone so mean in this place?"

The man smiled, watching her smolder.

"Well, at least you can smile," she said, then closed her computer and rolled up the power cord.

He was about thirty-five, heavysset, with a shaved head and thick black beard. His faded blue shirt had long sleeves buttoned at the wrist.



He toyed with a red rubber band using a sleight-of-hand trick where the rubber band seemed to flip from one pair of fingers to the other two when he folded them into his palm, then opened them. Using his thumb so smoothly in his palm, it almost seemed like magic as the band jumped back and forth.

Tattoos of beautiful jaguars slipped from beneath his cuffs, sinking their bloody claws into the backs of his hands.

Catalina stood, ready to go look for another desk.

“‘Bullpen’ is the password.” His voice was soft, unthreatening. He sipped from his bottle of Coke.

“Oh.” She sat back down. “Thank you.”

She opened her iPad and typed in the password.

‘Qubit’s Incubator. Connected, secured.’

After opening a browser, she went online to her webpage.

A blurred view of the Alps filled the screen. As the panoramic image sharpened, it slipped into a video from the viewpoint of a drone aircraft approaching the tallest mountain.

“The Matterhorn!” the guy whispered.

Catalina nodded as she watched the screen.

The drone turned slightly to the right, flying toward a huge glacier. As the video zoomed in closer, a red dot appeared on the snow-covered ice field. The dot grew larger and became a woman in a red jumpsuit. She waved to the drone. Closer still, and one could see skis, ski poles, and a yellow backpack.

When the drone was a few feet away, the woman smiled, adjusted her goggles in place, then pushed off.

The drone turned to follow her down the slope as if it were on a pair of skis fifteen feet behind her.

“Wow,” the guy exclaimed. “You did the CGI?”

“Yeah. That twenty seconds of footage took three weeks of coding.”

“I believe it. Beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She looked up at him. “I’m Catalina.”

“Adu Dhabi Wilson.”

“Really?”

“I was born in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, when my parents were stationed at the diplomatic mission there.”

“So, I should call you ‘Adu’ or ‘Will?’”

“Most people call me ‘Joe’ or ‘Pissant.’”

She smiled. “I like ‘Joe.’”

“It seems you need an extension cord.”

“Yes,” Catalina said.

“And desk supplies.”

She nodded.

“Come on.”

Joe led her thorough the bullpen, where half of the twenty-four people looked up from their work, glaring at him as if he were a turncoat.

She followed him along an aisle between cubicles.

Outside the last ring of workspaces, he motioned to his left. “Kitchenette.” A few steps farther. “Bathrooms. And...” He came to a door beyond the bathrooms. “Supply room.”

He pushed open the door to reveal rows of metal shelves.

“Cool,” Catalina said. “Pencils, tape, staplers, tablets—”

“Extension cords.” He handed her a new cord, along with a surge protector.

“Great. Can I take some other things?”

“Sure. Take whatever you want. All this stuff’s for everyone’s use.”

She loaded her arms and started for her desk. “What’s the deal with the bullpen and the cubicles?”

“Something to drink?” Joe asked as he headed for the kitchenette.

“Yes.”

He tossed his empty Coke bottle in a trash bin and poured a cup of coffee. “If you take the last cup of coffee, start a new pot. We put away two or three gallons a day. Sodas and juice are in the fridge. If you see something running low, add it to this list.” He waved toward a dry-erase board on the wall beside the fridge. ‘Jif Crunchy Peanut Butter. Mayo. M&Ms’ were listed on the board. “We take turns on runs to the grocery store.” He opened a small canister. “This is petty cash for the store. The Good Fairy replenishes the cash when it runs low.”

Opening the fridge, he showed her the contents—Coke, 7-Up, Mountain Dew, Dr. Pepper, juice...

“A bottle of OJ, please,” she said.

He reached for the orange juice, glanced at her load of supplies, then balanced it on top of her stack.

Closing the fridge, he led her back toward her desk. “When you’re accepted to incubate, they toss you into the bullpen to sink or swim. If, after the first thirty days, you’re still a viable tissue mass, you get a cubicle. Two months later, if the gods smile upon you, you rise to the top.” He pointed up.

Above them, Catalina saw the balcony going around the four sides of the bullpen and cubicle area. Two circular staircases led up to it. To the right, where Joe pointed, were fifteen doors. Some of them were open, but most were closed.

“What are they?” she asked.

“Private offices.”

“For who?”

“Monarchs.”

“Wow. And those, too?” She nodded to fifteen more doors on the left balcony.

A young woman with a Dr. Pepper went up one of the staircases and turned to her right, while the redhead from the outside office climbed the opposite staircase and went to one of the offices. She didn’t knock at the closed door, instead pushing it open and stepping inside.

“No. That side’s the dorm.”

“What?”

“Dorm rooms.”

“Who gets those?”

“The lucky ones.” Joe sighed. “How I would love to live up there.” They watched the other woman go into one of the dorm rooms. “Come on,” Joe said. “Let’s get you settled. I’ve got six days to become a drone, or die.”

“Will you make it?”

“Most pissants die of self-inflicted trauma before they metamorphosize into worker drones.”

Catalina leaned close to Joe. “Who’s that old pissant? The curmudgeon?”

“William Thomas Edison.”

“What’s he working on, a newfangled plow?”

Joe laughed. “He’s designing a system to collect water from the air using nanotubes.”

“Really? What’s inside the nanotubes?”

“No one knows. He’s not talking until he makes it work.”

* * * * *

After Catalina ran the extension cord from the outlet to her desk, she plugged in her iPad to charge the battery.

On her way back to the supply room, she stopped by the restroom. While washing her hands, her eyes fell on the cap of the cold-water faucet.

After drying her hands on a paper towel, she took two objects from her skirt pocket. The first was a small oval brass nameplate with ‘Evangeline Psychiatric Hospital’ engraved into the metal. The second was a micro screwdriver. She sipped the nameplate back into her pocket and removed the leather sheath she’d fashioned for screwdriver.

Working the sharp edge under the chrome cap on the faucet, she popped it off.

She rinsed the metal cap and dried it.

Holding it to the light, she admired the curlicue ‘C’ imprinted in the cap.

“Sweet,” she whispered. “A perfect oval.”

After removing the hot water cap, with its pretty ‘H’, Catalina cleaned it and dropped both caps into her pocket. She then slipped the screwdriver into its sheath and put it away.

In the storeroom, she found a desk lamp. She took the lamp and a box of colored chalk back to her workspace.

As she sipped her orange juice, she read research articles and doctoral theses from JSTOR—short for Journal Storage—a digital library of academic journals. Her interests were in the latest developments in organic electronics.

After two hours, she leaned back and rubbed her eyes. She looked at the brick wall for a moment, then up at the dim light coming through the dirty skylight.

Next, she read a scholarly thesis for over an hour, trying to decipher the technical jargon. At lunchtime, she went to the kitchenette, and in the fridge she noticed several containers with names written on them.

“Don’t touch anyone else’s food.”

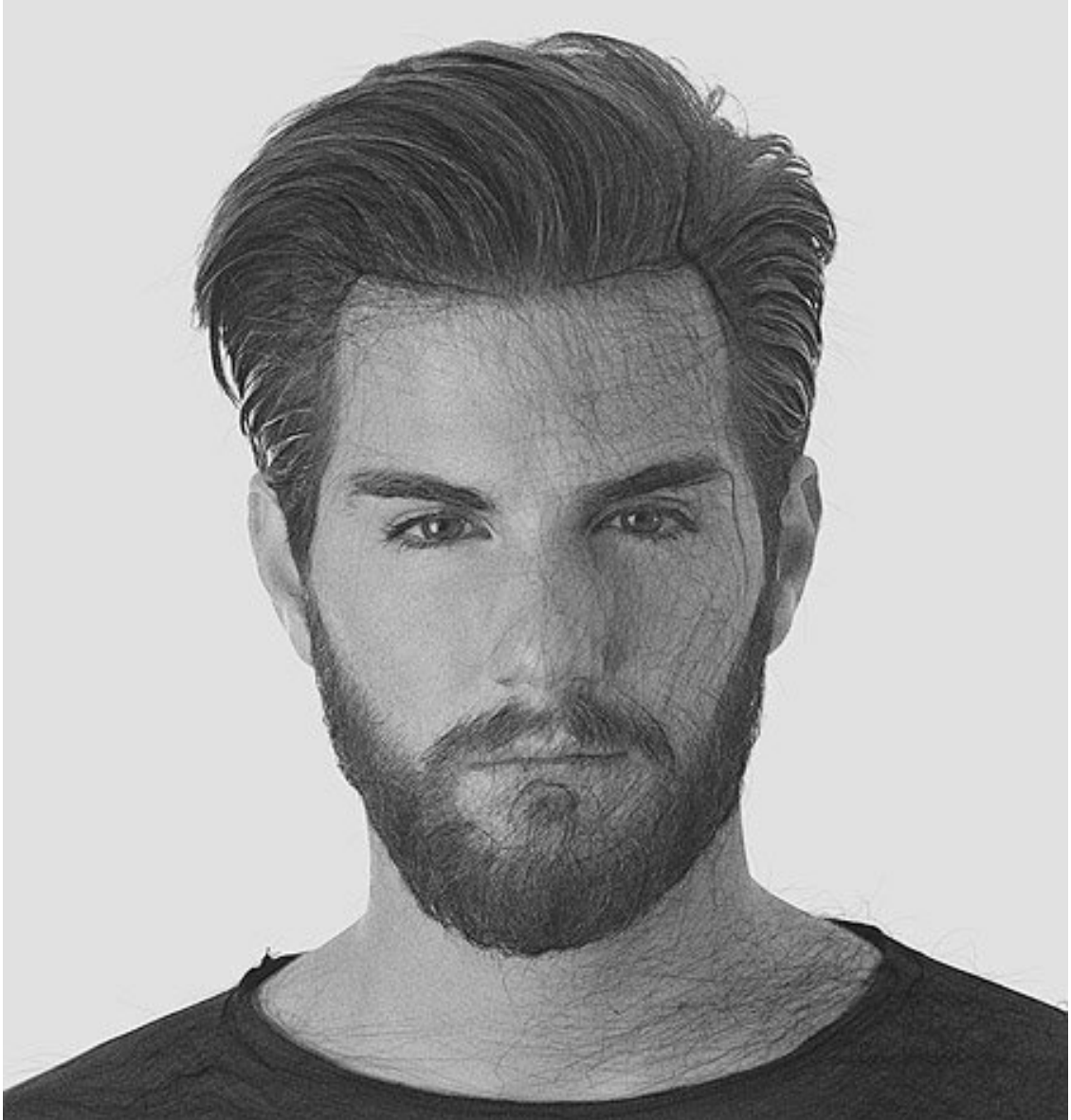
The guy reached past her to take a pink Tupperware bowl with ‘McGill’ written on the side in black Magic Marker. He elbowed her out of the way to reach for a Snapple Peach Tea.

“Excuse *me*.” She stepped away from him.

Without replying, he took his bowl to the microwave. As his food warmed, he wrote ‘Chunky Beef Soup’ on the dry-erase board mounted on the wall where several other grocery items were listed.

He leaned back against the counter next to the microwave, folded his arms, and stared at Catalina.

His two-day-old beard was dark brown and neatly trimmed. His Persian blue eyes could have been cheering, had he let them. His longish hair was a shade lighter than his beard. Athletic and trim, he just missed being likeable.



She ignored him as she checked the freezer for something to heat for her lunch.

“Pissants eat Ramen Noodles.” He glanced at the timer on the microwave.

Catalina took a packet from the freezer; ‘Barbeque Beef and Rice.’ She read the instructions.

“Seven minutes,” he said when the microwave dinged.

“It says ‘Five.’”

“It takes seven, Pissant.” He took his hot food and cold drink, then brushed past her. “And clean up after yourself.”

She watched him go to one of the cubicles.

Obnoxious Drone dick.

She set the timer for five minutes.

After taking a Snapple Straight Up Sweet Tea from the fridge, she sipped it while waiting for her lunch to heat.

The barbeque beef was barely warm after five minutes. She set the timer for two more minutes.

Rude Drone McGill. He could have been nice about it.

She returned to her desk, and while eating, she found an article on synthetic nerves.

As she read about an artificial nerve system developed for use with prosthetic devices, she clicked on the links to more research papers.

Her forgotten lunch grew cold as she studied tiny organic circuits printed on a person's skin. Thirty minutes later, she was startled when her phone chimed.

"No phones!" someone shouted from behind her.

She turned to see several people glaring at her. The old man made a cutting motion across his neck.

After clicking her phone onto 'Airplane mode,' she answered the call.

"Hey, Cat. How's it going?" Marilyn, her roommate, asked.

"I'll text you," Catalina whispered.

"Why can't you talk?" Marilyn whispered also.

"Just text."

"Okay."

'I just pissed off all the Pissants again with the phone call,' Catalina texted to Marilyn.

'You can't use your phone in that stupid place?'

'Apparently not. Like everything else, I learn by being yelled at.'

'So, you got in?'

'Only for thirty days. If I produce something in that time, I might get to stay longer.'

'At least you're in.'

'Right.'

'I'm ordering pizza. Cecil, Mack, and Debbie are coming over. What time will you be home?'

'Don't wait up.'

'You ordering in?' Marilyn asked.

'No, they have food here.'

'All right. I'll see you when I see you.'

'KK.'

Catalina went back to her reading and found a post-grad student at MIT had used a 3-D printer to produce a human-like hand with synthetic nerves.

She was startled by someone standing beside her chair.

The redhead she'd seen in Victor's office stood staring at Catalina's computer.

Oh, God. Another obnoxious Drone.

"What's up?" Catalina asked. The redhead's dangling jade earrings held her attention.

"It's five after four, Saylor."

Catalina glanced at the lower right corner of her screen. "Yes, it is. Thank you." She stared at the redhead.

"You have an appointment with Mr. Templeton."

"Oh, crap!"

She scooted back and grabbed a notepad. The woman led her toward the door of Victor's office, opened it, then went in ahead of Catalina.

"Miss Saylor." Victor waved her to a chair in front of his desk.

The redhead took the chair next to her. She crossed her legs, adjusted her emerald green skirt, and positioned a note pad on her thigh.

"What do you think of this place so far?" he asked.

Catalina thought for a moment. "Hostility, rudeness, everyone is mean..." She glanced at the redhead. "Except for Joe."

"Yeah, he's a nice guy. Did you find everything you need?"

"I see we have printers, a scanner, and a copy machine, but no Three-D printer."

"Why do you want a Three-D printer?"

"I want to print a hand, and also some organic circuits." Catalina noticed from the corner of her eye the redhead looking at her, then the woman looked at Victor.

"What type of Three-D printer are we talking about?"

“A Dremel Three-D-Twenty.”

The other woman wrote on her notepad. “How do you spell that?” she asked.

Catalina spelled it for her.

“What will you do with the hand and circuits?” Victor asked.

“The echolocation AI program I’m writing will need tons of data for machine learning.”

“Yes, I suppose it will. What computer language are you using?”

“Python.”

“Is it hard to learn?”

“Well, if you’re familiar with Perl and Java, it’s not too difficult.”

“Hmm...I see.”

“What’s with the dorm rooms?” Catalina asked.

“Candidates with special circumstances will sometimes be assigned to a dorm room.”

“Define ‘special circumstances.’”

“After two weeks, if you’re still here, we’ll talk about that. In the meantime, I need your statements from the four credit card companies and any other past-due bills you have.”

“They don’t send paper statements anymore.”

“But you can email them to me, right?”

“Yes.”

“And your bank statement.”

Catalina glanced at the redhead, who was taking notes again.

“Mr. Templeton,” Catalina said. “Why do you need my financials?”

“Curiosity. Is it a problem?”

She shrugged. “I guess not.”

“Is there anything else you need?” he asked.

“AWS Cloud Computing would be nice.”

“Why do you need that?”

“My iPad won’t be able to handle the data-crunching.”

“We have a Power Edge T-Six-Thirty server.”

“I used that to get online, but it’s too old and slow. It would take a year to process one hour’s worth of data.”

“We’ll discuss AWS after two weeks. Anything else?”

Catalina shook her head.

Victor opened a manila folder and removed some papers. He slid them across the desk.

“What’s this?” Catalina asked.

“Our contract.”

She flipped through the papers. “Eight pages?”

“No, just four. There’re two copies.”

After reading the first paragraph, she turned to page four and saw a place for her signature. He’d already signed his name.

“Take it home with you tonight and read it over. You can sign it tomorrow.”

“And if I don’t sign?”

“Then we can’t help you.”

She stared at the contract for a moment. “Can you give me the abridged version? Just the high points?”

“It says Qubit’s Incubator agrees to provide a safe and quiet workspace for you in exchange for five percent of the net profits, if any, from any product or idea produced during the term of this contract. You may receive other benefits as deemed necessary.”

“It takes four pages to say that?”

“There’s a lot of legal details. That’s why I think you should take the time to read it before you sign your name.”

“What if I never produce a marketable product?”

“Then we terminate the contract, and you’re free to leave us, owing nothing.”

Catalina held out her hand to the redhead, palm up.

“What?” the redhead asked.

“Your pen.”

Catalina signed the first copy, passed it to Victor, then signed her copy.

“Okay.” He placed the contract in the folder. “How’s your workspace?”

“It’s fine. A little bleak, but that’s okay. What’s the work schedule?”

He handed her a key card. “If you leave after six p.m., be sure the door is locked. I expect everyone to be here from eight to five, except Sunday and Sunday Plus One.”

“Sunday Plus One?”

“We used to call it Monday, but we no longer have Mondays. On the day after Sunday, everyone comes in late and leaves anytime after two. Tuesday is the start of eight-to-five. Saturdays are casual, come in late, leave early. You’re free to come in on Sunday if you want to.”

“Okay. Do many people work late?”

“Most of the probationers put in a lot of time.”

“Probationers?”

“You’re here on probation for the first thirty days. I think probationers are called ‘Pissants’ out there.” Victor tilted his head toward the bullpen.

“Yes, and the Drones get cubicles.”

“They do.”

“And Monarchs get upstairs offices?”

He nodded.

“How does a Drone become a Monarch?” Catalina asked.

“Receive a patent on an idea or device.”

“A patent. Okay.”

“Do you have to give that café...” He glanced at the redhead.

“Hugo’s Blue Plate Special,” she said.

“How did you...” Catalina began. “Nevermind.”

“Do you have to give notice when you decide to quit?”

“It’s just a phone call. I don’t have to do anything like a two-week notice. Hugo can easily find someone to take my place.”

“You should probably make that call today.”

“All right.” She stood. “I better get busy.”

“Don’t forget those financials.”

Chapter Three

At 7:30 p.m., Catalina heated a cup of Ramen noodles.

“How you liking those noodles?” a slim Black guy asked as he took a glass bowl covered with aluminum foil from the fridge.

“Not bad,” Catalina said. “I like them because they’re quick and easy.”

The microwave dinged, and she took out her steaming mug, while holding the door open for him. “Your turn, Drover.”

He wrinkled his brow. “You know me?”

“Yes, and also your name is on the tin foil.”

He laughed. “Call me ‘Alex.’” After removing the foil, he placed his bowl of mashed potatoes and gravy in the microwave.

“I’m Catalina Saylor.”

“Really? Catalina is an island. How you spelling that last name?”

She spelled it.

“Cool play on words by your parents. An island and a sailor.”

“Yeah, they were pretty cool.”

He glanced at her but didn’t ask about the word ‘were.’ “Whatcha working on?”

“Converting echolocation sound waves to tactile impressions.”

“Holy crap.”

“I know, and I have only twenty-nine days left to prove the concept. How about you?”

“I’m working on flexible solar cells,” Alex said.

She sipped from her cup of noodles. “How flexible?”

“Like a cloth that could be made into clothing.”

“Nice. I could take a walk in the sunshine and charge my dead phone at the same time.”

“And your boyfriend’s phone, too.”

“Screw him,” she said. “He can get his own charger.”

“Ouch, harsh. What he do to you that’s so bad?”

“He dumped me. I’ve got to get back to it.”

“Yeah, me, too. I got seven days till I drop dead.”

“You’ll make it,” she said.

The microwave dinged. “Later.”

At the edge of the bullpen she noticed a large chalkboard on the wall next to a projection screen. It had a list of names, dates and information. Across the top was ‘Patents Granted.’

The first one was Wayne Poncar, Therapeutic Water Body.

Next was Dwight Calister, Stair Climbing Wheelchair.

Followed by several more names and their inventions.

When she walked back through the bullpen, she saw nine people still working.

As she ate at her desk, she watched a YouTube video of a prosthetic hand. She turned off the sound so she wouldn’t get yelled at.

Halfway through her noodles, she began coding a new program.

When she leaned back to stretch her arms over her head, she realized it was after midnight. Swiveling around in her squeaky chair, she saw all the pissant desks were vacant. Through the doorway into one of the cubicles, she saw a guy working at his computer.

Drone dick McGill. Why are you still here?

She shrugged and turned back to gaze at her brick wall. After a moment, she stood, shoved her chair out of the way, then pulled the desk away from the wall.

She noticed McGill scowl at her when the screeching of the desk on the concrete floor caught his attention. She ignored him.

In front of her desk, she stared at the bricks for a moment, then opened her box of colored chalk.

Around 1 a.m., Catalina heard McGill make a lot of noise at his desk, apparently preparing to go home.

I guess he wants me to know he's leaving. Good riddance to an ugly annoyance.

She didn't turn to give him the satisfaction of knowing how irksome she thought he was.

It was after 4 a.m. when she went out through the side door, then checked to be sure it locked behind her.

* * * * *

Catalina got almost three hours of sleep, then rode her moped back to the Incubator.

With a cup of coffee and cream-filled donut from a Krispy Kreme box left over from the day before, she was back at her coding.

At 9:30, Joe came to her desk.

"You're drawing something on your wall," Joe said.

Catalina looked at it for a moment. "Yeah, I started on it last night."

"What's it going to be?"

"Not sure yet. What's your project?"

"Telephoto glasses."

"Really?" She was quiet for a moment. "How do you control them?"

"It'll be a heads-up display on the inside surface of the glasses. Eye movement will turn it on and off, and operate the amount of zoom."

"I would love to have a pair of those," she said. "I could be on a road trip and zoom in on a mountain range in the distance without ever taking my hands from the wheel."

"Exactly."

"Cool idea."

"Thanks," Joe said.

"Who's that redhead?"

"Victor's assistant, Tracy."

"She's not very friendly."

"All business," Joe said. "Well, back to work."

* * * * *

In the outer office, Tracy pulled open her desk drawer. She picked up a dangly earring with an oval jade stone encircled in gold and slipped it through the hole in her left earlobe. When she looked for the second one, it wasn't there. She shoved aside pencils and paperclips but couldn't find it.

"What the hell?" she whispered as she opened another drawer.

* * * * *

At 3 in the afternoon, two workers wheeled a large crate up to the side of Catalina's desk. Without a word, they opened the box and removed bubblewrap.

Catalina grinned. *The 3-D printer!*

Tracy came to watch the men work.

They soon had the machine setup and plugged into Catalina's surge protector.

One of the men turned it on and ran some diagnostics, while the other man cleaned up the packing material.

Apparently satisfied all was in order, the guy handed a clipboard to Tracy. “Your signature, please.”

Tracy signed the form, then traded the clipboard for a thick manual.

The two men took the crate and packing material and left the building.

Several people in the bullpen stared at Catalina, Tracy, and the new printer.

After Tracy gave the manual to Catalina and started for the outside office, one of the pissants asked, “Why does she get a Three-D printer?”

“Beats the hell out of me, Crammer.” The door swished closed behind Tracy.

As Catalina read the manual, McGill came to examine the printer.

“Why do you get a Three-D printer?” he asked.

“It’s not mine, McGill. It belongs to the Incubator.”

“How can we use it when you have it way the hell over here?”

“It has Wi-Fi. If you’ll get your crayons and a large poster board, I’ll try to draw a picture of how a Wi-Fi peripheral device can be connected to a server. The drawing will be big and simple, something you might comprehend.”

Joe laughed as he left his desk in the bullpen.

McGill turned to glare at Joe when he came toward them.

Joe smiled at McGill.

“I know how Wi-Fi works, Pissant,” McGill snapped. “But why didn’t they install it next to the server instead of way the hell over here?”

Catalina took a 32 gig memory chip that came with the instruction manual and plugged it into a slot on her iPad. “That’s something you’ll have to take up with Tracy.” She flipped a page in the manual.

* * * * *

By 5 p.m., she’d installed the nylon filament roll that came with the printer and was ready to print the sample image from the memory chip.

As the printer hummed and nylon filament was pulled into the print head, a bright red object began to form.

Several pissants and two drones came to watch as layer upon layer built up on the bed of the printer.

“What is that?” someone asked.

Catalina shrugged as she watched.

“Some sort of statue?” another pissant asked.

“Maybe.”

“It’s a chess piece,” Joe said.

Catalina smiled.

“A knight.”

“Yeah,” McGill said. “A knight.”

It took only five minutes to produce the three-inch tall knight.

Catalina cut it free from the printer bed, examined it, then handed it to Joe.

“Nice.” Joe passed it to McGill.

“The edges are rough,” McGill said.

“So?” Journey Covey, the Black woman who’d told Catalina to get out of the cubicle, took the knight from McGill. “Five minutes ago, it was just a coil of red nylon string.”

“Can a Three-D printer print a Three-D printer?” Joe asked.

Everyone stared at him.

“Probably the outside parts,” Catalina said. “But not the internal structure, or the electronics and coding.”

“You could print all the parts,” Journey said. “But you’d have to code the programming.” She passed to knight to another drone.

“What are you going to print next, Catalina?” Joe asked.

Using her phone, she clicked a photo of him. “Your hand.”

* * * * *

It was almost midnight when the last pissant left the building. All the drones and monarchs had left hours before.

Catalina went to the storeroom and took a spray bottle of Windex, along with a roll of paper towels.

She opened a back window and stepped out onto the fire escape.

After glancing around, she went up the metal stairs to the roof, then made her way along the parapet in the dark until she came to the skylight above her desk.

She looked down at her workspace for a moment, then at the bullpen and rows of cubicles.

It took a lot of Windex, and a half-roll of paper towels, but she finally cleaned away the years’ accumulation of crud, leaving the glass sparkling in the moonlight.

* * * * *

The next morning at sunrise, she was back at her desk. The glow from above, cast her work area in a warm, yellow radiance. Turning in her chair, she saw the bright sunlight painting the far wall in golden orange while filling the whole place with beautiful natural light.

Just before seven, McGill came in and glanced about, smiling. When he saw Catalina watching him, he frowned. She duplicated his ugly grimace.

The brightened work area seemed to cheer everyone else as they came in, even old man Edison.

“When did they clean your skylight?” Joe brought his coffee and a spare chair to her desk.

“I have no idea.” She grinned. “It was like that when I got here.”

“You know...” He sipped his coffee. “That cleaning guy could have slipped and fell off the roof in the dark.”

“Or he could have fallen through the skylight.”

“Yeah, that would’ve made a mess on your desk.”

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