

A collection of paintbrushes and glass gems on a dark blue surface. The brushes are of various sizes and colors, with some showing signs of use. The glass gems are in various shapes and colors, including clear, green, and orange. The background is a dark blue surface with some paint splatters.

# Sortmind

Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy

*Thanks for reading the ancient first draft as well as for your excellent comments on the final manuscript.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The New Hire

*Thursday, April 13, afternoon*

Peter Trantor adjusted his tie in the reflection of his office window. Suzanne Ramsae also occupied the reflection, bent over her laptop in her black business suit in the corner armchair, honey-colored hair falling over her shoulders. Peter checked his watch. "Relax. I'm sure she'll be here soon," Suzanne called over.

Downtown Canterra lay awash in afternoon sunshine far below. "She was supposed to be here at three-thirty," Peter fumed. "Do you think InterBank's going to bail?"

"No, she really sounded interested when I confirmed this morning. I'm sure she just ran into some sort of delay."

Peter returned to his desk chair. "Maybe's they're freaked by the damn truck bomb. Maybe this Winstead woman had a little talk with her CEO. You know how many accounts we've lost the past week."

She shrugged. "Six isn't so bad. We'll recover. Limited Access will work for any business. That level's perfectly safe. We can convince anyone of *that*. Believe it or not, McMahon's dug in his heels. He still wants LA Sortmind."

"Really? The library? Even after last week?"

"He had his own access up to the Restructure and he knows it's the future of libraries. I'm supposed to meet with him again this evening--only time he had available. Said he'd give me a tour of the damage. It really wasn't so bad. I guess except for the people."

Peter winced. Forty-eight people dead. "I really can't believe the director can push even LA through the mayor and council."

"It's a librarian thing, I guess. Sort of anti-censorship and all. But I think we can convince everyone LA's the way to go. McMahon's okay with \$124,000. He says they've got the budget for it this year."

"Not bad." Peter looked at his watch. Of course First Canterra InterBank was a far more lucrative proposition. Twenty million for Limited Access to all forty-four branches, plus Full Access for top officers generating additional real-time access fees. *If* Ms. Anna Winstead actually decided to show today.

The office door banged open. A young man lurched inside, no suit coat, tie askew, long hair in disarray, deep-set gray eyes glittering.

"Excuse me, sir!" Janice, the tenth floor receptionist, called from behind him. "You can't go in there. They're having a meeting."

"Hey, lady, I sure as hell can come in here! I'm the new programmer!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Trantor," Janice said. "He just shot straight past me."

"It's all right, Janice," Peter said as Suzanne closed her laptop and stood. He watched the newcomer's eyes fasten on Suzanne's long slender legs, then up to the lacy, fully filled white blouse beneath the black coat. "When Ms. Winstead arrives, just show her in. Meanwhile I'll say hello to our new programmer."

Janice grimaced and closed the door behind her.

"You must be Mr. Starck, then," Peter said offering his hand. "I'm afraid we have only a couple minutes, but--" He cut off, dumbfounded, as Starck just looked at his hand. Peter finally dropped his own. Well, some programmers had this sort of attitude, after all.

Starck was still staring at Suzanne. "Wow, you sure have some great babes here! Saw a couple on the way in. 'Course you can tell that Janice bitch is way uptight, though. Must be pushing sixty!"

Peter heard Suzanne gasp. He cleared his throat and sought Starck's fluttering eyes. "So ... uh, Mr. Starck, how was your HR orientation?"

Starck gazed back blandly. His faint mustache twitched. "Huh?"

"Your--first day's orientation--" Peter stammered. Who'd hired this guy? But of course it had to be Roseparker.

"Hell, didn't go to no orientation, dude. Just got here. Know I'm a little late, but thought I'd better report to the goddamn head of this joint first."

Peter could feel Suzanne flowing into Sortmind beside him. Starck had been due in Human Resources this morning. But he'd just awakened two hours ago, thrown on that filthy white shirt, stained blue tie, and grease-smearred jeans, spent half an hour gawking at the damage to the first floor of the library a few blocks east, then entered the Trantor Building and pressed the elevator for ten. Peter frowned. Usually he could easily zero in on personality type. But he couldn't get a fix on this Starck character.

"Well, Mr. Starck, HR will be open for another hour, so I suggest you get down to the fifth floor and at least get started on the onboarding process."

"Hell, with that, dude! I got news! Boy, do I got *news!*"

Peter began to wonder if the entire HR scenario shouldn't begin with an exit interview. He was dismayed that he, who made split-second decisions involving hundreds of thousands of dollars at a pop, was staring in numb shock at this *entity* who'd just crashed the tenth floor.

"Well ... and what is this news?" Peter said, trying to muster some measure of authority. Sortmind could pull the answer out of Starck's mind, but Peter was so repelled by this rude youngster that he was reluctant to synchronize with him.

"Later, dude! Introduce me to this sexy dish here first!"

Suzanne stepped up. "Suzanne Ramsae, Vice President for Sales, Mr. Starck. And I'd certainly appreciate it if you'd watch your language with me."

Peter was impressed. Suzanne certainly had more on the ball than Peter, yet Sortmind told him she was also too disgusted to synchronize with Starck. This was

unheard of at Trantor. *Everyone* synchronized with everyone else. Well, except whenever Peter was pissed off at Roseparker. Such as right now. He shut down the message already forming to his Vice President for Software Development, which would have consisted of *Where the hell did you dig this idiot up?* Roseparker would undoubtedly note the cutoff and run upstairs to protest, as he always did. Don Roseparker definitely needed something like a software upgrade himself--perhaps into something approaching rationality. Now it looked as if Peter would have to fire Rosie's new hire on the spot.

Meanwhile Starck flopped into one of Peter's armchairs, swiveling it back and forth, dead grass and dried dirt clumps protruding from his torn cowboy boots.

"Mr. Starck, if you please," Peter said, jerking a cupped hand up to motion Starck from the chair.

"Aaah, screw it. I'm tired, dude. My feet are killin' me, man."

"Excuse me? Sir?" Peter demanded.

Suzanne placed a hand on Peter's arm and said coolly: "Mr. Starck, you were expected here at eight AM."

Albert blearily rubbed his wispy mustache. "Huh? Really? Jeez, what time is it now?"

"It's four!" Peter exploded.

Albert leaned back and closed his eyes. "Aw man, I hope you guys aren't a bunch of damn clock watchers like at goddamn FeverBurger."

"*What?*" Suzanne and Peter gasped together.

"Aaah, I had this asshole manager at the FeverBurger who was always on my ass about bein' late. Screw 'im is what I say. Who needs clock watchers? That's why I got *into* computers, man--where everything's loose and easy. I don't need no damn stress is what I say." He opened his eyes. "I can't believe this *piece* is head of-of--of whatever you said! She's only twenty-four! She oughta be posing for *BoobGirls!*"

Peter was stunned by the alert, hungry look in Starck's eyes. Was Starck really using Sortmind to access Suzanne's Ramsae's age? Was he really searching for videos of her in the shower? Why was he knocking Peter off balance? Meanwhile Suzanne folded her arms and barked: "Mr. Starck, we're expecting an important visitor and we're requesting you go to HR on the fifth floor immediately."

"That ... that's right," Peter said.

"Aaah ..." Starck said, again closing his eyes. "You think you're such hot shit just 'cause you make this stupid telepathic *bullshit.*"

Peter stared. "Excuse me, Mr. Starck, the whole *purpose* of this company is to--to--"

"What Mr. Trantor is trying to say," Suzanne put in, "is that we seem to have made a mistake in offering a position to you, and we request that you exit this building immediately."

Peter blinked, then nodded to her with a confirmation message: *Thanks. Call Security too.* He should have done it himself but he couldn't recall the code.

"Screw Security," Starck drawled, oozing further into the chair. "They don't scare me none. I'm a goddamn *programmer.*"

"*What?*" Peter said. How could Starck have seen that message? No way would they have set up a new hire with that level of Sortmind access. There was Startup Level to complete HR processing, but--

Peter flung himself into Starck's HR records and gagged at a tremendous knot of Bleedthrough data, *ten million terabytes* of it. "*God ...*" Stories Starck had written in grade school, conversations with Uncle Custer, observations of fence posts and clouds, report cards from junior high, photographs of his first car, all the comic books he'd ever read, all the beers he'd ever drunk. None of it should *be* there.

"Peter, are you okay--" Suzanne began, then winced as she too blundered into the unfolding data. "Oh my God!"

"Yeah, this Bleedthrough trip," Starck grinned. "You mothers are about to go down the fuckin' tubes, ya know. Your database is *corrupt*, whaddya think of *that?*"

"What--what the hell do you know?" Peter finally shouted. "Get out of that chair! Get out of this office!"

"Like I say, I'm a fuckin' *programmer*, dude! Know what I'm talkin' 'bout, man. And you're on some ego trip about your code just 'cause you wrote some fuckin' Telepathic Kernel. Well, it's shit software, man, it's a fuckin' *mess.*"

"You--you *can't* know about--" Peter checked himself. Starck obviously did know. Even Suzanne didn't know about the Kernel. Sure enough, he was getting a message from her:

*The Telepathic Kernel?*

"Later," he said. "When the hell's Security getting here?"

"I forgot to send it," Suzanne said. "Sorry! Doing that just now. I just--I just--"

Peter tried to synchronize with her but saw she was also battered by the continuing onslaught of Bleedthrough documents churning out of Starck's mind. *What on earth's going on here?* he managed to send.

"I'll tell ya what's going on, dude!" Starck crowed. "It's all gonna screw up! This whole company's going straight down the fuckin' drain, you can bet your ass on that! 'Cause I got *news!*"

"Right, right ... well, look ... we don't care ... just get out ..." Peter said. He was the damn CEO, why couldn't he issue a simple order to a trespasser? Where was Security? Why wasn't Janice doing something?

"Hell with it, dude. Get this, and it comes straight outa the damn Sortmind news feed: *Thalia's pissed off!* The mayor's gonna ream ya good!"

"The--the mayor?" Peter bleakly focused on the feed: *City of Canterra, Office of the Mayor, Thalia Aster. In the wake of the library bombing and the increasingly severe*



*malfunctioning of Trantor Group software, I am invoking Public Safety Ordinance 43.25a, directing Manfred Pierce, Deputy Director of City Information Services, to investigate all Trantor Group software, policies and procedures.*

"Aw, crap!" Peter said. "She can't invoke some idiot law to--to--"

*Mr. Pierce will have access to all Trantor Group software at the topmost network level. The Trantor Group will provide Mr. Pierce with office, computers, and all other necessary equipment, passwords and protocols to accomplish this task.*

"We're a goddamn private company! She can't stick some goddamn city bureaucrat here!"

"Wow," Suzanne said. "Is that the same guy who was nosing around here last month?"

Peter didn't have to say a word, as they'd both just called up video for the idiotic meeting with Pierce and the mayor last month. He told her the same thing that day: *total unconstitutional interference*. He turned to Starck, still lazing in the big black armchair. "Look, everyone knows the damn problems. We know everyone's in shock about the library bombing, but that's all political stuff. If they don't like our product, hell, I don't know, just don't buy it, I guess ..." Thank God the Sons of Telepathic Death idiots were too stupid to know the location of the Trantor Building and picked the library instead.

"Crapping in your pants, I see!" Starck laughed. "Don't worry, Manny's a pussycat!"

"Manny?"

"Manny'll solve all your little glitches! 'Course, I could solve 'em all too. No biggie. I got a *lot* of programming experience."

Peter sighed. He had to pull himself together. It'd been a long day and he simply wasn't focusing. "Okay, Mr. Starck. We've heard enough. Now get out."

"'Course, I'm more of a poet. I'm writing a whole book of poetry about Sortmind. *My God Sortmind, the Future of Us All!* Got a hundred twenty-seven poems already. Wanna hear one?"

Peter saw the digital manuscript of *My God Sortmind, the Future of Us All!* but couldn't bring himself to look past the title page. There was something cold and lizard-like about it. "N-no ..."

"Mr. Starck, we don't want to hear your poems," Suzanne said, stepping forward. "Please leave at once."

Peter saw the effort she made to avoid the same book of poetry, and the endless random life events pouring out of Starck's mind in short-circuiting bolts of raw energy. "Well if he won't leave, we'll just have to--" He checked himself in shock.

"Have to *what?*" Suzanne cried.

Peter took a sharp breath. He'd almost revealed Level One Weaponry right there. Only he and Roseparker had that clearance. Nevertheless, it was tempting to call up a

short burst of AI-guided laser fire and reduce the concept of Albert Starck to smoking cinders. Still, Suzanne wasn't supposed to know it existed and to his relief she was so rattled she didn't probe further.

On the other hand, Peter had a terrible feeling that somehow Albert Starck already knew about Level One. If so, he was one brave--if deranged--young man to remain in that chair, throw his head back, and sing:

*Now here's a network plugged into everyone's mind 24/7!  
With no computers or network bullshit, Sortmind is heaven!  
Screw the Internet! Its day is over, so have a good cry!  
Assholes who don't care shit about telepathy can just die!*

"Just ... just stop ..." Suzanne said.

Peter turned back to Starck. How could HR ever have condoned such a monstrous breach of--of--

"Hell, no, I'm above all that! I'm a *programmer!* We programmers are so much *better!*"

Peter only now registered the stench oozing out of that chair along with the continuing static from his mind. Male body odor, piss, and sewage. No Trantor employee would ever let himself smell like that. Peter finally let himself reel with the cold realization that some major glitch in HR had produced this *street person* instead of a valid Trantor candidate. He wondered if he should try to ease into Starck's mind and figure out who this guy really was. But there were so many strobing mental fireworks-- Starck closed his eyes and bellowed:

*With a single global telepathic framework we'll have everything we desire!  
World peace, and cosmic understanding without a single fiber optic wire!  
So wipe out the warring factions polluting our planet to cancer!  
Billions of people will just plug in and know the fucking answer!*

"Dammit! Where's Roseparker? *How did he hire you?*"

"God, he sounds like some Open Telepathy freak," Suzanne said, finally bringing out her smartphone and punching for Security. Until now Peter hadn't considered that they'd have to physically drag this idiot out of here. At least Suzanne had the presence of mind to finally act. Was she also wondering, as Peter was, whether there was an additional glitch in the Sortmind messaging system? Was that why she'd resorted to her phone? His synchronization with her was so far off he wasn't even sure he could send her a message. "Security," she spoke. "Ron? Is that you? We have a disturbance up here in Peter's office--yes--just get up here. We have a trespasser. At least a couple of you. Yeah. Dangerous. Right."

"We gotta have worldwide, and *free!*" Starck yelled. "This asshole *beta testing* sucks! Now it costs a *fortune* just to find the square root of nine! It was better when it was free!"

"You know damn well we can't even *think* about marketing a free app any further!" Peter shot back.

"That's because you're incompetent! The Kernel's *corrupt!*"

"Forget it! It's some minor glitch in the InterLayer Relay Transference Module. It's going to take a month to go through every line of--of--"

*Shut up, Peter! Shut up!*

"Hey, that's real interestin'. I'm sure Manny'd love to know more about InterLayer Relay Transference."

"Screw Manny!"

"Hey, don't insult the dude! He's a great guy. He helped my bud Eddie with some incredible hacks. Eddie was havin' some trouble with this credit card company and Manny got into their servers--"

"You *know* the bastard?"

"Hell, yeah! We go way back. We're programmers, man! I was with the City myself for a while. Then Thalia fired me. Hadda go to the FeverBurger last month. But I said fuck *that*. Man, tell you what, I could fix this goddamn InterRelay crap myself for a song. I love this goddamn Sortmind so much! Man oh man!"

"Look. Just shut up. Wait for Security. Go quietly. We won't press charges or anything." Peter was so scrambled he had difficulty contacting Canterra Cleaning Services for an estimate for disinfecting his black armchair.

"Man, I can't *believe* your fuckin' attitude. We gotta *save the world.*" Starck finally yanked off his wrinkled tie and tossed it behind his head. "I *hate* fuckin' ties!"

Peer closed his eyes. He wasn't going to try to manhandle Starck, though he could feel his adrenaline rising and he definitely wanted to throttle the son of a bitch.

"I became a programmer in order to save the world, asshole," Starck said. "Simple as that. If you don't like the fuckin' concept, go to hell. Bet you don't give a shit about the Amazonian rain forests, either."

"Uh ... Mr. Trantor?" Janice said, peeking through the door. "We have a--a visitor, I guess you could say--"

"Great!" Peter said. "Ron, he's in that chair there. He needs to--"

But it wasn't Ron. A young woman in a dark red business suit twice as expensive as Suzanne's strode into the room with a giant black laptop bag across her shoulder and her slim right hand outstretched.

"Hello, there. I'm Anna Winstead from First Canterra InterBank."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Mindwipe

Peter stared. The woman was shorter than Suzanne, slight, her posture unflinchingly erect. She had fluffy light brown hair, pale skin, and intense brown eyes. Her small round face might have been pretty except that her cheeks were so full that she looked like a squirrel storing nuts. Peter fought not to laugh. For God's sake, First Canterra InterBank had sent them a squirrel! What was wrong with him? God, if he could only *think*.

"I--we--" Suzanne gasped into the silence. "We were just--"

"I--I'm Peter Trantor," Peter said, grasping Anna Winstead's slim hand in a tight burst of carpet static. "Ow!"

"Oh!" she laughed, dragging Peter into the deep wells of her mocha eyes.

"Whoa! I bet *she* likes sex!" came the guffaw from the armchair. Peter whirled to Starck sprawled in the armchair, legs splayed, huge bulge in his jeans thrusting out.

"You!" Peter said, then caught himself and turned back to Ms. Winstead. "I--excuse us. We--have a--a new programmer here, I mean--just leaving and all--"

"Fuck it! I got *Sortmind*, babe!" Starck cried. "I want *all* your documents, honey! I gotta know *everything* about you! I mean, *wow!*" He eyed Anna Winstead up and down. Peter caught himself doing the same thing. Sexy dark blue lingerie peeked from the medium-breasted V of her trim crimson suit coat. Cute squirrel. Extremely. But hard-edged. Intimidating. Peter fought to keep from searching for the same documents Starck probed in ecstasy. His customer's privacy was important to him. He wouldn't just go cruising through anyone's Bleedthrough documents.

Was the Kernel really corrupt? Surely InterLayer Relay just needed an overhaul, didn't it? How did Starck get the level of access to find Bleedthrough documents anyway? Had Rosie hired a *hacker*?

"Mr. Starck was just leaving," Suzanne said. She turned to Starck and hissed: "Out of that chair. *Now.*"

Starck didn't move. Peter gestured to Suzanne. "Ms. Winstead, this is, uh, Suzanne Ramsae, our Vice President for Sales."

"Nice to meet you," Anna said, setting her laptop bag on Peter's conference table. Of course. She was here to buy something. The product! Limited Access Sortmind! Why couldn't Peter get that straight?

"It's *fate* that she's here!" Starck shouted, jumping from the chair and pointing to Anna's chest. "*Now* I see! I see it *all* now! I was sent here to get to *know* her, if you know what I mean and I think you do!"

"Uh, actually, Mr. Starck has just, uh, failed to meet expectations and isn't to be hired after all," Suzanne said. "He'll be leaving right now. We're sorry for any

inconvenience.”

“That--that’s right! Ms. Ramsae will be escorting Mr. Starck out at this time ...” Peter said. “Then you and I can ... can ...” Anna Winstead dubiously regarded Starck, who stood swaying in front of her, mouth slack, gray eyes wide with lust and fascination. Then she turned back to Peter and again fastened those endless brown eyes onto him, cocking her head for an explanation.

“I mean ... we can’t have disturbances ... now ... can we?” Peter managed.

Meanwhile a testy message from Suzanne chopped into his mind: *I’m the one who should be discussing the sale of LA Sortmind with her, Peter!*

“We have to *know* you!” Starck cried. “*Anna Winstead!* You’re so fucking *mysterious!*”

“Mysterious?” Anna said, turning to Peter and dragging his eyes back into hers. “Are your programmers always so ... *charming*, I suppose is not the word?”

“Well, he’s certainly not our programmer anymore.” Against his will Peter fought through Starck’s Bleedthrough documents, but couldn’t find his way. The normal Trantor Group patterns just were not there, even at Startup Level. It was a thousand-acre junkyard in there. Then he pulled out in horror.

“Suzanne, this guy’s Mindwiped! How did we not *know* that?”

“It can’t be! Trantor Group don’t Mindwipe,” Suzanne said, but her wide blue eyes told him she’d also done the search. “How did he get *in* here?”

“I don’t know! Goddammit, I’ll kill Roseparker!”

“Hey, dudes, don’t be so hard on us Mindwiped is all I can say!” Starck chortled. “Thalia said I couldn’t work for the City anymore ‘cause I’m Mindwiped! Is that fair? To send me to a goddamn FeverBurger for minimum wage? When I know so *much?*”

Peter stared back. What had fooled him from the beginning was that Starck’s eyes weren’t the drooling blankness of the typical Mindwiped that hung out at the library or the homeless shelters. Starck was a Partial Mindwipe, with enough remaining structure to allow him to function at a minimal level, to have an apartment and the FeverBurger job he’d just walked away from. Sortmind also offered an estimate of the day Starck’s meager savings ran out unless he landed this programmer position at the Trantor Group: Friday, May 12.

*So what? We can’t have him!* Suzanne messaged. *And anyway he’s got Full Access as a Mindwiped. He’ll get by.*

So that was how Starck had Full. Damn the City Council for passing that ordinance. The only thing that saved Peter’s trade secrets from the hordes of Mindwiped in this city was the fact that even at free Full they simply couldn’t understand what they found, even if they managed to drift into the highest levels.

A Partial Mindwipe, though, someone who was apparently buddies with Thalia’s darling IT programmer Manfred Pierce, was another matter.

Peter did have a few eccentrics on his staff, but they were all loyally Trantor

Group. His staff couldn't Mindwipe, not unless they were at the top levels and crazy enough to do five thousand searches within a couple minutes. The programmers knew how to pace themselves, though. Peter himself had wondered if he'd gotten close to losing it on a couple occasions when he was up to two AM trying to chase down this Bleedthrough bug. But he always knew when to pull back.

"Well!" Peter breathed out. "Mr. Starck, we, uh, certainly seem to have had a ... a big misunderstanding here! I believe there's still time for you to run down to HR on five and let them know that you'll be picking up your ... final paycheck for ... for eight thousand dollars ..."

*That's insane!* Suzanne transmitted.

"For ... for services rendered today ... compensation, and ..."

*I'm buying the motherfucker off, Suzanne, can't you see that?*

"Shit, ain't nobody can buy me off!" Starck cried. "All I want is this *Anna woman!* She's driving me *nuts!*"

Anna backed away, eyeing her laptop bag on the conference table.

"Listen, I'm sorry," Peter said. "For this terrible disturbance. We can certainly postpone our meeting for another day. Believe me, this isn't how the Trantor Group operates. We just had this--unexpected visitor--right before you came."

"You say he's Mindwiped?" Anna said. She turned to Suzanne. "You told me you'd solved that problem. That with Limited Access there'd be no brain damage."

"Well, that's true," Suzanne said hastily. "No problem at all with Limited. All your top officers with Full would have to do would be to limit themselves to less than a hundred searches a day, depending on personality matrix. Believe me, there are a lot of transactions you can complete with just a handful of Full Access searches. Any other bank will be left in the dust after you finish accessing the entire state of the world economy in mere *seconds.*"

Though Peter was relieved to see Suzanne easily slip into marketing mode, he wondered if it was appropriate now. They had a rattled customer facing a Mindwiped bum who looked as if he were about to reach out and grab her breasts.

"Where the *hell* is Security ..." he muttered.

"Listen, I suppose ... possibly ... I should come back another day ..." Anna murmured, as Peter, even without trying to search, could read *never coming back ever.*

"No! Don't go!" Starck moaned. "God, I *want* you!"

To his dismay Peter found himself pushing right behind Starck's ANNA WINSTEAD search, delving for any scrap of Bleedthrough he could find. But there was nothing. Starck was right. She *was* mysterious. Well, not everyone in Canterra was spilling Bleedthrough. That might be a clue there, Peter mused. What if InterRelay wasn't supported on Levels 800-900ZL when the subject was a woman, or a bank operating officer, or was both those things and had brown eyes, or--or *squirrel cheeks*--

"Ms. Winstead, I assure you this is a totally unforeseen occurrence," Suzanne said.

"I suggest we adjourn to Conference Room C down the hall and discuss our proposal there?" She shot Peter another message: *You take care of Starck this time. I can straighten this out.*

Peter blinked. He was the CEO. How could she order him around?

"Well, I suppose everyone's a bit jumpy these days ..." Anna said, indicating Starck staggering back to his armchair and flopping sideways in it, both legs over one arm of the chair, his long greasy hair on the other. "What with the bombing and all."

"I assure you it's under control," Suzanne repeated. "But I know what you're saying. I happened to be in the library last week when the bomb went off. I was up in the director's office on the eighth floor. We were discussing the library moving to LA Sortmind. It was definitely loud. The whole place shook. But the architect looked at it and said it was stable."

"Really?" Anna said. "Weren't you just terrified?"

"Well, right at first. But I was able to call up schematics of the building and estimate the force of the explosion from what I'd heard, and I just knew we were okay. They evacuated everyone down the stairwells at the back, and we were safe."

"Suzanne's our young genius," Peter put it, wincing at the forty-eight people who *hadn't* survived. "She does amazing things with Sortmind."

Suzanne inclined her head at the compliment. "And the bombing is, unfortunately, just politics," she went on. "We know everyone's worried. And we know we've definitely got to help calm the city down. We're sure that Limited Access and subscription fees that are out of reach for the merely curious will do that. The political factions will cool down after a while. This isn't a religious thing, after all. It's just data accessed in a new way."

"Hey, Earth bitch! Piss on your shit! I'm a million times smarter than you!" erupted from the armchair.

"Dammit, where's Security?" Peter demanded. Again he fought the temptation to reveal way too much by activating the ceiling lasers. But how would he explain to Anna Winstead--or Suzanne--what he'd done?

A man charged into the room.

"Thank--" Peter began, but it was only Dr. Donald L. Roseparker, Vice President for Software Development.

"Hey, Peter, I've been trying to message ya! Why'd ya cut me off?" Peter looked away from Roseparker's eager green eyes behind thick black glasses. He always hated looking up to the six-four Roseparker.

"We're having a problem here with your darling new programmer," Peter spat. "By any chance did you see Security coming up here?"

"Security?" Roseparker said. Then he eyed Starck lying across the armchair.

"Yeah, I guess we need 'em. Sorry this messed up, man. But I've patched the hack and we're okay now."

"You--patched the *what*?"

"Yeah, someone hacked the HR database and somehow a request for a janitor 1D got upgraded to a 6A Programmer, and then *this* dude showed up. Weird, huh?"

"*Weird, huh?* Dammit, Don, this has *completely* fucked up!" Again Peter was pulled into Anna Winstead's luminous brown eyes. "I--I mean--" He whirled to Starck. "Get up out of the goddamn chair, asshole! I mean it! I've had it! You're upsetting our customer, for God's sake!"

"I'm really not upset--" Anna began.

"Ain't moving, Earth shit," Starck said. "You Earth shits are all alike! Fuck ya all!"

"Anyway, the interface is all patched up now, and I see you decided to pay this intruder eight thousand bucks for showing up today," Roseparker grinned, his glossy slicked-back blond hair glowing beneath the fluorescent lights. "Not bad for a half hour of insanity, huh?"

"Dammit, Don, we don't *get* hacked! This is the goddamn Trantor Group, in case you've forgotten!"

Roseparker shrugged. "Want me to toss this dude out for ya?"

"Just--just wait for Security. I don't want to pay for your eye getting gouged out." Peter turned to Anna and tried to take a deep breath. "Look, I'm really sorry, we can reschedule. I'm sorry we've inconvenienced you."

"*I'm* not sorry I've inconvenienced you!" Starck declared. "Hey, babe, you're holding *out* on us! I can't get *shit* outa you, you're so fuckin' mysterious!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry--" Peter babbled.

"You damn Earth shit! You think you can stop me? The *saucers* are coming to beam me up! Your planet *sucks*! You're so full of *war* and *carbon dioxide*!"

"Snap out of it! Get out of here!"

"Listen to the *violence* in your voice! Planet Cnzaar shall triumph! *Planet Cnzaar shall triumph!*"

"Goddammit, where's Security?"

"Here, sir," spoke big Ron Maxwell in his gray Security uniform, followed by two other large Trantor security officers, one extending bright pink plastic handcuffs, the other drawing his pistol.

"Kill him!" Peter cried, pointing.

Starck widened his eyes in astonishment.

"Oh my God ..." Anna Winstead whispered.

"Uh, I mean, what I mean to say ... it's his *records* that're like ... a jumble of *insanity* ... we've got to kill those *records* ... that's all I meant, really ..."

"Screw you assholes! I'm an *alien*!" Starck screamed as Ron pulled him onto the floor, turned him over, and jerked his arms behind his back. The other officer secured the handcuffs. "I'm from *Cnzaar*! We'll fry you all! You're so addicted to violence!"

"Shut up, sir," Ron said, hauling Starck to his feet.



"You despoil the planet! You ignore climate change! The ice caps are melting but you don't give a shit! But Cnzaar is here to *save* you miserable shits!"

"Wow, Peter, this guy is really gone," Roseparker said.

"Thanks for hiring him," Peter said.

"Dammit, it was a *hack*, Peter. Don't worry, we'll trace it down. Look, I'm sorry it happened, but it was out of the blue."

"This is our goddamn *business!* Which we have to *protect!* Which *he's* fucking up! We have to *anticipate* this shit! Damn it to hell, Don!"

"Look, all I asked for was a 6A programmer--"

"Cnzaar! Cnzaar!" Starck snarled as the guards marched him out of the office. "Cnzaar shall triumph over all *assholes!*"

"That's the Tillotson novel everyone's been nuts about," Suzanne put in. "Have you read it?"

Peter reeled into hysterical laughter. "Aliens from *Cnzaar!* God, what *bullshit!* He must've downloaded all of Tillotson's stupid science fiction novels! That'd be enough to Mindwipe anyone! Oh, jeez!"

"Peter, calm yourself right now!" Roseparker ordered.

Peter turned. "*You--telling me--?*"

"Control yourself!" Roseparker nodded towards Anna Winstead.

"*Dammit ...*" Peter muttered, ashamed it was Rosie who'd pointed out how thoroughly he'd just lost it.

"Where shall we take him, sir?" Ron called from the opening elevator door.

Peter shook his head. "I don't care. Give him his eight thousand dollars and just dump him at the library."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Trantor Guarantee

Suzanne turned to Anna Winstead. "Well, I suppose ... we should begin the presentation?"

"Well ... I really should be ..." Anna said, again eyeing her laptop bag on the conference table.

Peter exhaled. "Suzanne, I think we should postpone our sales presentation for another day. This has certainly been an unusual event, and ... I would appreciate it if you would assist Dr. Roseparker with getting to the bottom of this security glitch." He nodded to the bank of elevators, where one door had just closed on Starck's obscenities and the shouted commands from three security guards, and another opened for Roseparker.

"Are you serious?" Suzanne said. "We haven't even gotten started!"

"I insist. We need to postpone for another day. Ms. Winstead is understandably upset."

"Well, actually--" Anna began.

Suzanne's furious message drowned out whatever Peter might have heard from Anna: *I'm VP Sales and our customer is right here! You can't send me off with Rosie to chase down some hack. He said it was fixed anyway.*

"Don!" Peter called out. "Hold the elevator for Suzanne, will you? I want her to study the glitch with you."

"Sure, no prob," Roseparker said, holding open the elevator. "Headed to HR right now."

Peter turned to Suzanne's glare. *I'm serious, Suzanne. Not only do I want you to check on Rosie's fix, but Ms. Winstead requires a fresh apology from the very top. I have to reset this entire scenario. Hopefully I'll be able to set up a new meeting for tomorrow or Monday. We don't want to blow this deal.*

Suzanne managed to morph her scowl at Peter into a polite smile for Anna Winstead of First Canterra InterBank. "Well, guess I'll be going. Nice to meet you, and hopefully we can talk again tomorrow or Monday."

Anna nodded. "That would be nice."

"Absolutely." Suzanne nodded frostily to Peter and marched for the elevator.

"Well!" Peter said, gently shutting the glossy black office door.

Anna smiled weakly. "So ... I guess that was ... exciting?"

"Well, I guess! What I really want to do now is apologize for this disturbance, Ms. Winstead, and assure you that The Trantor Group is ... is a reliable ... I mean, very reliable ..."

Again he had to break free of those whirlpool eyes. But this led to taking in the

prim crimson suit over that frilly lingerie. A freckle on the swell of her cleavage--

"I mean ..." Peter fought to calm himself. Had he really done too many searches last night hunting for the Bleedthrough glitch? Why was he so flustered? How could he convince Anna Winstead his product was okay? "Again, I'm so sorry this--*person* somehow got through HR. It was really quite a shock. I mean ... as you can see, there's no way he would really ever be ... Trantor Group material, you know."

Anna nodded.

"Would you care to have a seat here at the table? Can I get you some water?"

"Well, I really can't stay long. Look, it's my turn to apologize as well, Mr. Trantor. If you must know, some of my colleagues at First Canterra were so opposed to my speaking with you today that they deliberately ran my last meeting over, trying to keep me from coming. Arguing and arguing, you know. I think a couple are Citizens Against Telepathy members, to tell you the truth. They were *rabid*." She nodded at the empty armchair still reeking of Starck. "A little like our friend today, I guess, but in the opposite direction. I finally had to ask the president to adjourn the meeting and let me get over here."

"Oh ... well. I'm glad you could make it."

She sighed. "I thought maybe we could briefly introduce ourselves and set up another appointment. But it's late, and I really do have to get home and get Robert's supper ready. He gets so fussy sometimes."

Peter checked her fingers. No rings. Divorced, with a young son?

"Well ... that's fine. More or less what I was thinking. In fact, we could reschedule with Janice right now."

Anna shrugged. Peter could bring up both his schedule and that of every officer at First Canterra InterBank and make the appointment himself, but he preferred the old-fashioned touch, with Janice maintaining his calendar and keeping him sane. But he couldn't read Anna's posture. She didn't want to sit, she didn't want to go to the reception area and schedule, she just stood there with those fathomless brown eyes locked onto him. What was she probing for? Weakness in his company? Weakness in him?

"I understand you're to testify at the Council meeting next week," she finally said.

Peter stared back. "Oh ... that. Well, the mayor invited me to speak. I know everyone's concerned, but I do want to emphasize that after the Restructure, everything's definitely improved. Cases of Mindwipe are way down. Almost nonexistent, really. Limited Access Sortmind is the way to go. And we're getting a handle on the various other glitches."

"This Bleedthrough problem."

"That's ... close to a solution, I think. We're looking at InterLayer Relay Transference. That has to be the core issue."

She cocked her head. God, just like a squirrel, needing to store information in her

cheeks for the winter. Peter fought off another bout of giddy laughter. What was wrong with him? Damn, she really would be cute if her cheeks weren't so--so--

He looked away. How could he dissemble to this cute determined squirrel? If Sortmind truly was the future, if telepathic access to worldwide information was the only possible path, he had to be completely honest. "Well, certainly the problem's not licked yet. We *hope* it's InterRelay, but if not, we'll get to the bottom of it, no matter what. I mean, of course the mayor's mad at me!" he added with a feeble laugh. "But I do try to see it from her point of view. I mean, here we have some people getting overloaded with information ... with--with unfortunate results. I mean, we didn't even have much publicity for the August rollout, but the response was, well, you know what the response has been. In its original form, frankly, the app was probably addictive. Sure I get the mayor's concern. That's why we completely restructured the product a few weeks after releasing the app."

Peter winced. The mayor hated his guts for dumping ten thousand newly homeless people in downtown Canterra. The human stream hadn't stopped until word got out that you'd Mindwipe shortly after downloading the app.

"Limiting the amount of data you can get does seem like the way to go," Anna observed.

"That, and the real-time fees do encourage people to make discriminating use of the product. Even those signing up for Limited think twice about getting over a few hundred a month."

"So you do think Limited will work for all our bank transactions?"

"Absolutely. And a few senior executives will have Full, of course."

"Of course."

Peter was shocked by the curiosity in her gaze. Was she really so eager to flow into ... *everything*? "Well, Ms. Winstead--"

"Oh, call me Anna, please, if we're to be working together."

"Well! Sure then, Anna. Call me Peter, then."

"I certainly will."

"Well, Anna, I do want to give you my personal guarantee of excellent Trantor Group customer service for First Canterra InterBank." What a gorgeous smile she had! How could he spew a standard marketing spiel to such a cute banker squirrel? "We're constantly implementing newer safeguards, and working round the clock to get the software to ... to an absolute state of perfection, of course."

"Which we know is impossible!" she laughed.

"Well, absolute perfection ... then again, I know what you mean. Nothing can be perfect, yet we can strive, I guess ..."

"It's just that my colleagues are worried about this Bleedthrough thing. I'm not personally, of course. But several senior officers are talking about minds being hacked and all."

"Well, they probably just don't understand the mechanics behind it, which is really simple at heart. There's no way anyone's brain can be hacked into. Since we found that everyone emits a unique brainwave signature, it's more like everyone is a separate radio station. The only reason nobody realized this before was that the signal was too low to be detectable. Our technology just found a way to amplify the signal. It's really just like radio. We don't need any mechanical implants, which puts us way ahead of all the people experimenting with wetware."

Anna shuddered. "Anyone who'd want a chip implanted in them ..."

Peter nodded. "Definitely. And I want to emphasize that the Trantor Group has never had any urge to take in or distribute anything other than normal, digital data. Sort of like a super Internet. We're not sure how this Bleedthrough-type information began coming in, but we're determined to get to the root of it all. I can certainly agree with the mayor there. After all, our customer's privacy is our top concern. We definitely never want to take anything *out* of anyone's mind."

Anna looked across the conference table and the Canterra skyline glowing beyond. "I understand what you're saying about brainwaves being so faint. Maybe just a tiny percentage of very sensitive people have ever been able to pick them up."

Peter nodded. "That one was of the key concepts I considered when the idea for Sortmind came to me. That some people *could* pick up the signal on their own."

"Right ... that we're all always broadcasting ... we just can't pick it up ... although maybe everyone does have glimpses ..." She turned back from the window. "Well, you do seem determined to get to the bottom of all this."

Peter nodded. "Yes ... yes, of course. We believe in our product." He grimaced. They *couldn't* give up. It was the only way to keep the threat of multibillion-dollar lawsuits at bay. "And we've already got some other solutions in the works. One is amazingly low-tech. My colleague Roseparker calls it a Telepathic Tablet. It records a person's brainwaves as the tablet is digested and then provides a couple hours of Sortmind access. It also seems to ameliorate any ... overload problems, though we don't understand how yet."

"Wow!" said the lovely squirrel, smiling up at him.

Why was he babbling this stuff? Those tablets were a corporate secret. How had that Starck guy gotten to him like that? Or this Winstead woman for that matter? He had to calm down, focus on the question here.

Which was?

God, she was beautiful!

Had he really overdone Sortmind the past few weeks? Could the CEO of the Trantor Group possibly Mindwipe?

"Well, I do need to be going," Anna said, pulling out her smartphone to check the time. Peter noticed that she didn't even wear a watch. Her slim wrist and hands were naked. Intoxicating. She was so slender--Peter could gather her in his arms right now.

They were alone in his office. And she smiled at him!

No, this was wrong!

"Well, well ... I do hope we can do ... business together ..." Peter stammered.

"Oh, I think so. I want to assure you that, no matter what my colleagues think, I'm very sympathetic to the idea of telepathy. I do think it's the future."

"Really? I mean, of course! That's our Trantor motto, after all."

"Well, I should know. My boyfriend's in the Open Telepathy Foundation. Although I haven't joined myself. They do get a little too mystical for my taste, if you know what I mean."

"You ..." Peter moaned, deflated. Boyfriend! What about the fussy child she had to get home to? "Well, to tell you the truth, the OTF's actually made no end of problems for us." He blanched. He'd just insulted her boyfriend! Was that Robert? Was he really fussy about his dinner? Or did she have a boyfriend as well as a child? "Uh, I mean, political problems for us, that is, probably quite inadvertently, but ..."

Again he drifted into her eyes. But she seemed to have no expression whatsoever, and that was terrifying. She could be a smooth-faced sexbot who'd just rolled off the assembly line in Tokyo. She struck him as being young, maybe mid-twenties, when at first he'd assumed she was in her thirties, as he was. At that moment the laptop bag on the conference table emitted a paralyzing beep. Peter stared at the infamous PL logo, bright red against black.

God, how had he not noticed that before? That wasn't a standard laptop, but a PortaLawyer supercomputer connected to the Justice Information System. PortaLawyer subscribers proudly affixed that gold-rimmed label to their bags so that everyone knew not to screw with them. *Anna Winstead was a top-level banker. Wouldn't she sue anyone who crossed her?* Without thinking Peter threw himself into a full-scale Sortmind investigation of her JIS code, her level of access, judgments awarded for and against her. She obviously didn't have the telepathic link to the JIS, and it appeared she didn't even know that the Bleedthrough had somehow captured the entire Justice Information System. Only a handful of Sortmind users had stumbled across that so far.

What was even stranger was the paucity of information about her account. Peter couldn't make sense of it. There should be terabytes of data about her JIS usage, but all Peter got was a five thousand-character ASCII text dump. Dull, scattered data, adding up to nothing--when he wanted--so much *more*.

He shook his head as the accumulated Verifying Sensation of over seven hundred searches hit him hard--the flood of pleasure, the rush of certainty, the union with the myriad paths of truth--the paths crisscrossed, they blasted clear off the planet to the furthest galaxies--

Anna reached inside her laptop bag to stop the sound. "I'm so sorry. I just need to check ..." She pulled out the computer and opened it. It too had a huge PortaLawyer logo on it. If she'd brought out a tarantula Peter would have been no less horrified.

"Oh ... that's--no problem! Of course not! None whatsoever! Go right ahead there! Just ... take your time ..."

He stared as she keyed in commands. She might not know that the JIS had bled through, but she would when First Canterra Interbank finally got Sortmind. The JIS was the most advanced artificial intelligence interface on the planet. The PortaLawyer made the highest-end laptop look like a 1980's desk calculator. They were always on, always connected to the entire world's legal systems, always monitoring. You didn't even need to be a lawyer to engage in the most abstruse legal battles. PortaLawyers had been banned from most judicial proceedings following cases where they'd defeated seasoned trial lawyers in courtroom debate.

Somehow Peter's own Sortmind database had captured the entire damn thing one afternoon in early March.

Of course, you had to be ruthless enough, combative enough, and rich enough to carry a half-million-dollar AI supercomputer laptop wherever you went. But apparently Anna Winstead of First Canterra InterBank was one of them. Was she suing for emotional distress even now? For allowing Albert Starck to hurl vile suggestions at her? Could she be suing Peter Trantor for staring down her cleavage?

The Trantor Group was collapsing. The CEO couldn't even think anymore. He'd unleashed an app that Mindwiped people, and lawsuits had to be on their way, massive, company-annihilating lawsuits. Why was Peter so afraid of the legal system? Now that the Justice Information System was tangled into his own database Peter could go into the JIS himself and monitor any lawsuit aimed at the Trantor Group, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He just couldn't understand it. Was this how the Mindwiped navigated? Continually accessing huge globs of incomprehensible information, sorting just enough concepts to get by, never really putting anything together?

Did his Legal Department feel the same way? Why was the Trantor Group paralyzed at the thought of the law? They weren't criminals, after all. They were businessmen and businesswomen marketing a product. Okay, the first iteration had flaws, but telepathic access to information *was* the future. They had to have it.

Anna scanned her screen. Then she smiled. "Oh, that's *nothing!* I wouldn't respond to *that!*" How could she laugh so enchantingly? Didn't the existence of the PortaLawyer prove she was a greedy businesswoman out to swindle every dime she could from her unsuspecting victims?

"I ... I know how those pesky lawsuits can go ... and all ..." Peter whispered.

"Oh, it's nothing, really--one of my customers at the bank was unhappy just now, and somehow the JIS wanted me to make a *slander suit* against him out of it, can you believe that? But that's my *customer*. If he's unhappy, there must be a reason, don't you think?"

"Of ... of course!"

"I'll just hit *Cancel*. That's better customer service than suing him for slander,

don't you think?"

"Well, yes ... definitely!"

"I'm so sorry for the interruption," the beautiful deadly squirrel said, closing her computer. "I think we were talking ... about the OTF? That you were having problems with it? Maybe I could talk to Robert."

"Oh, it's ... really nothing important. I was just saying that ... well, it's all just politics, you know. Citizens Against Telepathy wants us shut down, but the Open Telepathy Foundation wants us to be sort of a church for telepathy, or something. They do seem awfully religious. I try to pay them no mind, but when they start fighting in the street with CAT, and both sides get so irrational ..."

"Hmm ..." she beamed into his eyes as she expertly slid her PortaLawyer back into its bag and zipped it shut.

God, he'd insulted her precious Robert again. Was she smiling to lull him into complacency? Because the PortaLawyer was most dangerous in the bag, turned on, accessing everything from within its dark womb. Was she about to auto-avenge his thoughtless calumny of the man who shared her bed? Wasn't Peter jealous of darling Robert? Didn't he want him out of the picture, shredded through the windshield of his car? It had to be obvious that Peter wanted Anna Winstead, wanted to undress and fondle and kiss, and penetrate and thrust--

No! Where did these thoughts come from? Was his lust that apparent? Could she pick it up? With her connection to the Justice Information System, this young lady could clean out Peter's bank account in seconds. Though he had much more powerful access to the JIS through Sortmind, he couldn't fight back. The whole concept of the legal system reduced him to the same babbling this woman engendered.

"Well ... I guess I'll be seeing you maybe sometime next week, then?" Anna said, slinging her PortaLawyer across her shoulder. "This has all been very--entertaining, I guess. Thanks for the background on your Sortmind. We'll be in touch."

"You--you--certainly ..." Peter muttered, unable to take his eyes off her bag.

"Well, good afternoon, then." Peter opened his office door and watched her march for the elevator. Fantastic little ass. Fantastic cute squirrel. Sexy shoulders. Sexy waist. Sexy chest. Deadly.

As Anna waited for the elevator, she and Janice chatted about the fine weather. The elevator dinged and Anna turned, smiled, and waved to Peter across fifty feet of corporate carpet. Peter dragged his mouth closed and waved a few shaky fingers back.

*Anna Winstead.* Could she possibly find him attractive? Hadn't Margaret said he was good-looking? Something about his mouth and chin being "finely sculpted"? She'd told him that their first time in bed. Said he moved fluidly, "like a cat on a crowded mantelpiece." Maybe Margaret thought she was a poet. But she'd done wonders for Peter's ego. Up to the point where she took up with that Tad asshole. He couldn't believe he hadn't spoken to her in a year. God, she'd been *everything*.



Maybe if he worked out more. He wasn't a beefcake. How could you be a beefcake at a hundred twenty pounds? Peter ate and ate and never gained an ounce. Did women really want beefcake? Could Peter possibly reprogram himself into beefcake? What would *that* take? Hell, this Winstead woman had been *laughing* at him. Laughing at him for being a cat on a crowded mantelpiece. She had a boyfriend and she was laughing at him and suing him even now.

Should he try to access all her JIS info again, see if he could make sense of it? He could feel tens of thousands of questions lining up in his spent mind. But what if he really was close to Mindwipe? What if Anna Winstead was the query that pushed him over the edge?