

SORTMIND

a novel by
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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-smeared 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 blearily 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.”