

CHAPTER 1 : THE CONTRACT

The summons came from the Department of Homeland Security. Well, it was more of a polite invitation to come discuss a certain matter. Winter Slayde was the kind of man the government could make that sort of offer to. A former soldier, a former analyst in the intelligence services, he had reinvented himself fifteen years earlier as a mercenary... in short, a paid killer for the highest bidder. The civil brigade authorities could have hunted him down long ago. But Slayde was not particularly worried. He suspected they were keeping him in reserve for very special missions—the kind of mission they were about to propose.

Punctual to the minute, his taxi had just arrived. And not just any taxi: it was an aeropter, a craft capable of flying up to an altitude of seven thousand feet, well above the usual dense traffic. Still, you shouldn't assume everyone enjoyed that kind of mobility in 2132. While technology had kept advancing, natural and energy resources had not. That meant only a small portion of the population now had the privilege of moving around. A ride like this, planned to take him directly to the ministry buildings in the center of Mega-

Cleveland, was far from cheap. Not that it was a problem—everything had been paid for in advance regardless of the interview’s outcome. The taxi had no trouble finding a landing spot among the green spaces of the luxurious residence, the villa the mercenary had been able to buy years ago thanks to his astronomical pay. Nonchalant, the man headed for the cockpit while the pilot let the engines idle. A guard accompanied him and invited Slayde to sit in the back after scanning his ID. And, incidentally, verifying he wasn’t carrying any weapons! Then the craft took off toward the clear sky. The model was top-end, with four seats. The cabin even had a minibar. The ex-soldier poured himself a glass of whiskey and sipped it calmly. An hour later the aeropter landed on the ministry taxiport. That length of time might seem long, but megacities had become immense, sometimes the size of what used to be called a county.

A man in a suit and tie was waiting on the tarmac to greet him. He smiled broadly and gave a firm handshake, doing his best to accommodate this unconventional guest. But the mercenary wasn’t fooled, fully aware that a ministry profile like this one could very well have been involved in torturing citizens for state reasons early in his career. He followed his host. Despite being fifty-one, he looked good, his build still enough to intimidate the female staff who glanced his way without showing it. People still thought twice before stepping on his toes in a bar! One distinctive feature: he had a scar over his right eye, an eye miraculously saved. He hadn’t opted for cosmetic correction. Even with that striking scar, his face remained handsome and carried an

undeniable dark charm. After an impressive number of escalators and elevators, they reached a luxurious office. The official seated him with exaggerated courtesy, offering coffee or whatever drink he wished. Slayde assumed this was the person who would handle the matter and was therefore surprised when his real interlocutor turned out to be the head of Homeland Security in person, entering through a side door:

“Major Slayde, was the trip pleasant in our luxury shuttle?”

“I haven’t held that rank in ages. But yes, the taxi was comfortable.”

“To some of us, you’re still one of the family. Your time is valuable... mine too. We’re dealing with an extremely delicate situation, one that requires skills like yours.”

“I figured as much. But that doesn’t mean I promised to accept. To be honest, I’m wary of government-sanctioned executions—those where you find out you’re on a second contract to erase traces of the first. I’ve had enough of that.”

“And we all know what happens to those who try to double-cross you. Nevertheless, this is absolutely not that kind of contract. The job we have in mind is very unusual, even for you.”

“Oh... an eccentricity! You’re teasing my curiosity. I’d be surprised if you offered me something I haven’t already done.”

“Yet that will be the case. I’ll brief you on the context first. But before that... a small formality.”

The director slid a stack of papers and a pen toward the mercenary. Seeing his quizzical look, he added:

“A confidentiality clause. If you refuse the mission, you must not tell anyone. It’s a matter of state security.”

Once the documents were signed, the official continued:

“A few years ago we developed a prototype to travel through time.”

Slayde’s eyes went wide:

“That’s a surprise, I’ll admit. A handy process, I imagine, to go kill your opponents while they’re still in the cradle!”

“No, you’re not even close. First, the process in question doesn’t let you travel into the past but only into the future. And not whenever you please. For a reason inherent to the chrono-dynamics of scalar fields—which would be too complicated to explain to you, and which I don’t fully understand myself—you can only project yourself about a thousand years forward. And you can’t choose your return date at will either. For example, if you stay three weeks in the future, you’ll come back to the present three weeks after the day you left. It’s a kind of communication tunnel between past and future, but without the ability to change the arrow of time, which continues inexorably.”

“All of this is very interesting. But I really don’t see what my role would be in what sounds more like a scientific experiment.”

“I’m getting to that. At first we sent a robotic probe that stayed at altitude to take photos. What we discovered wasn’t encouraging for humanity. At first it was just a vast green carpet as far as the eye could see. Then the drone eventually

identified a city. It looked a lot like our own megacities, though smaller. But most strikingly... it was totally deserted. Hard to establish the cause from the probe's altitude. Even potential corpses were never visible. So the next step was obviously to figure out how we got there, so we could do everything to prevent it. Was it an epidemic, a war... impossible to tell with just a drone. It was essential to send a human on the ground to investigate."

"I see. You built a habitable vessel and you're asking me to carry out the mission."

The director cleared his throat with an embarrassed expression:

"In fact, that is what we did. However, you were not our first choice."

Slayde smiled sarcastically:

"And who was that?"

"Morgan Cox."

"Yes, I know him. A good man. I suppose you chose him first because he was younger?"

"That's part of it, yes. But not only that. You have the unfortunate reputation of not always following orders and sometimes doing as you please. To me, that's more of a quality. However, it scared the board of the scientific committee, who preferred a more "obedient" profile."

"And I suppose your obedient profile had a mishap."

"Yes, exactly. Beyond the loss of an expensive prototype, the repercussions are quite serious. You see, when you project matter into the future, you create an equivalent void in the present continuum. A void that will only be filled

when the vessel rematerializes. There is a delay for the phenomenon to manifest, refluxing from the future back toward the past in the form of temporal waves. We had anticipated that even in a successful trip we'd have to control the consequences of this void... which is the appearance of a kind of black hole. Not a particle-dense black hole like in space, but a quantum chasm that tends to suck in everything around it to make up the differential in atomic mass. We had designed coils coupled to a giant accelerator to contain this physical phenomenon. The intensity remained moderate during the first weeks, then rose sharply when our craft didn't return to bring the matter back. We had to divert a third of the continent's power grid to increase the coils' strength... all while keeping the catastrophe secret from the public."

"I'm beginning to grasp it. And having understood your pilot wouldn't return, you built a second prototype to go investigate what happened."

"Exactly. And if we screw this one up, it will be a world-wide cataclysm that threatens our survival itself. That's why for this second chance we can't afford to make mistakes. I told the board to stop their nonsense! Extreme situation... extreme measures. And I think you're the man for this. You've never failed, you've always kept your cool, and you're capable of great brutality when circumstances require it."

"True, I won't deny that. But what do I get out of it?"

"First, your survival. Because as I've described, if we fail you'll be as concerned as anyone. However, because we're reasonable people, we've planned a substantial reward. And

we'll wipe a number of debts with some NGOs that still want to take you to court. That said, I know you, Major Winter Slayde. Admit it, this uncommon mission piques your interest. You're not just a killer, you're also a hunter. You've gone on safaris, you like exploration and the pursuit of the unknown. You also have a quality your predecessor didn't have. Besides being an excellent soldier, you're also an analyst who worked in intelligence. You've got a sharp mind and the ability to assess a complex situation and fix it—not just pull a trigger.”

“I admit I'm very interested. Tell me more about the technical details.”

“The vessel, which we named the Chronoscafe, is a large sphere about fifteen feet in diameter. Besides the machinery and computers, it contains a survival cell with urine recycling to produce water.”

“Great! I get to drink my own piss...”

“What you need to understand is that any transfer of matter consumes energy. The payload the vessel will carry must be calibrated as closely as possible to what's essential. Even for about three weeks, the amount of water needed without recycling would have been too large. Hence the choice despite the weight of the mini-treatment plant.”

“I hope that won't apply to my... well, you know what I mean.”

The director laughed:

“No, rest assured. Survival rations don't take the most space. However, you were right to ask because there's an unpleasant practical requirement. You must not bring any

future matter back, nor leave any matter there. Which means...”

“That I’ll have to tote my crap and my urine back!”

“Well, it’s pretty much that. In the Chronoscafe it’s not a problem because the toilets handle those details automatically. But if you have to urinate or defecate outside, you’ll need to bring it back to the vessel in airtight bags. That said, we’ve adapted the food rations so you’ll... go less often than usual.”

“Any other surprises like that?”

“The only notable parameter is that the atmosphere is a bit different from now. It’s richer in oxygen, around thirty percent. This is likely because vegetation has grown without limits and there’s no longer pollution from human activity. That can cause headaches and hot flashes at first. But we’ll provide a daily medical treatment to help you cope with the adaptation. Aside from that and the previous point, there won’t be anything special. Oh yes... I almost forgot. Normally the small quantum black hole is supposed to disappear when you return. However, if for some reason you can’t bring back the matter exactly as it was at your departure, it’s possible it will persist partially when you arrive. In that case, we’ve added a removable bridge, itself protected by coils, which could deploy to the craft’s airlock to extract you without being sucked in. But, truthfully, that’s rather theoretical. Some claim that bringing back the bulk will suffice and that smaller omissions will “dilute” by being absorbed by the electroweak force of atoms on a universal scale. One must

hope so, because there's little chance of recovering the first vessel with exactly what it contained."

"Speaking of which, how will I send it back?"

"When you find it, you'll use a special device that will perform the task autonomously, giving you, of course, a sufficient margin to exit the chronoscape. I'm referring, unfortunately very likely, to the scenario where your predecessor is no longer alive to do it. If the time vehicle isn't operational, the same device will run a full analysis that you'll bring back to us, possibly enabling repairs on a future mission. But we're talking a bit in the abstract, and I think at this point it's time for you to see the craft itself and your equipment."

CHAPTER 2 : THE CHRONOSCAFE

The launch area, called the chronoport, is quite impressive. It looks like a sort of gigantic tubular chasm, with the famous coils around its perimeter meant to contain the black hole that will form in the fabric of space-time after the pilot departs. As for the craft itself, although it seemed small from a distance compared to the surrounding structure, it is just as striking once you reach the base after crossing the walkway over the void. The director begins the initial explanations:

“It was not possible to use the takeoff zone from the first craft, because it is completely destroyed by the growing quantum well that we barely hold in check with the coils. You can also understand why all of this cost so much: it’s not just the time vehicle but the entire station around it.”

“Indeed, it’s quite enormous.”

“The whole ship sits on a platform that slides inside the tube. When we send it off, the plan is for it to arrive at least around 65 feet above ground. We are certain of that from extensive geological studies. That is, of course, to avoid fusing you with the raw matter of the terrain. Once it reaches