

# PAPER DOG

**A Novel**

**R. A.  
Nausel**

**The year is 2232.**

Humanity survived the climate wars of the 21st century and the quantum AI revolution of the 22nd century. Nation states are remnants of the past and no longer carry any power over civilization. In their place, humans and their AI counterparts now belong to what are colloquially referred to as The Systems – decentralized algorithms that control all aspects of human society including conflict resolution, resource allocation, and, most importantly, species survival.

The Systems – stored on quantum sharded distributed ledger technology – share their beginnings alongside the blockchain technologies of the early 21st century. With the help of consensus algorithms that powered the legacy blockchain technologies, the Systems help stabilize society and allow it to achieve global efficiency levels never before seen in humanity's existence.

PaperDog, the genesis system, launched on 4-20-2024.

Humanity was never the same...

*For most of us, for almost all of us, truth can be attained, if at all, only in silence.*

*It is in silence that the human spirit touches the divine.*

–Iris Murdoch

*If you would be a real seeker of truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.*

–René Descartes

*je pense, donc je suis,*

# Part 0

## Chapter 0

### *Zhe Khe*

April 20, 2232

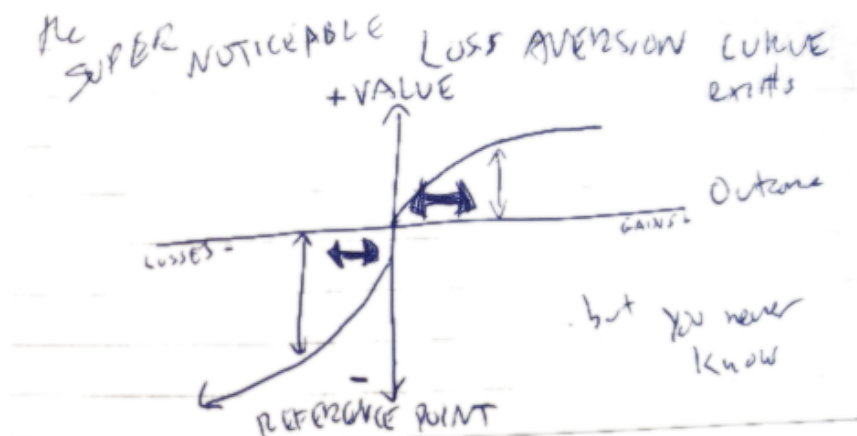
6:51 PM. Friday.

He's sitting in his office. Contemplating all that has happened. The long past and the recent times.

What a scare he thought. Think about what would have happened had that been true. What would it have meant ... if he even HE could be robbed or, even worse phished.

He was thorough like nobody he had ever known. Yes, he made mistakes. But almost all those mistakes were low cost ones. When it comes to life that was always the trade off: would

the benefit of not getting it wrong be worth the effort and cost to get it right. That's usually the opposite of how most people think. I mean there's a reason black swan events happen



...but you never know.

The Manifesto works, he thought.

It definitely works.

And it's good.

But is it portable?

No, not yet.

But it doesn't need to be for him and his family. All it needs to be is safe and secure.

If someone were to have robbed him, it would have left him in a precarious position. It would make the already difficult situation even harder.

In the long run though, it didn't matter. It would work out. He is absolutely positive about that. Fear is crazy sometimes. It just blindsides you but you are open to many beliefs.

That's it.

The only way to stand Fear and conquer it was simply many beliefs. Open up to the universe. There's so much more than you think is possible and most likely you are barely scratching the surface of what's possible. And at the end of the day, you ultimately create this reality.

We all do.

**April 21, 2232**

**6:23 AM. Saturday.**

The last message had worked. It had traveled across dimensions – the signs were Present. But if he could detect them, so would the authorities. It would only be a matter of days before they'd decipher the anomalies and pinpoint his location.

There wasn't much Time and he had to prepare Space to send back his AI companion.

-----  
----- paperH8WDY7iWW3tCgZy4v9mPzvKBWM4AhewC71Hi9j

To whoever finds this:

S.O.S. We need your Help. S.O.L.

The Future depends on You.

dogRDrw97cz9w9xrF12WQBALDip5rHdb7mYa4ZEPjGW  
-----  
-----

The plan had never been to move in this manner. Circumstances had changed though. It was the only path forward. The only way to protect his world.

The world around him had changed drastically over the last four years. No longer was he able to stand still and watch as the galactic powers manipulated reality, controlling every single aspect of their lives and thrusting billions into turmoil. People were being left behind as the gap between classes grew larger and larger.

This path... THIS GOAL... was the only way he saw what he needed as possible. He had no choice but to pursue it. No matter the cost. He kept on trying to soften the cost to his family and those around him, but it was the only way forward. The only way that he might be able to save the world around him.

It was hard to decipher the best choice or option at this point in time.

Still... he needed to Trust the Universe. In God. Far beyond the fears he had that this plan would not work out.

He knew the result of this path...what lied ahead. He had seen it. Lived it.

For when you see the future, you relive the past.

So he went ahead and did It.

We all did.

**April 22, 2232**

**2:48 PM. Sunday.**



He sits back down at the desk in his office again.

He's still not done with all that he needed to do but it is a certainty now. He knows what's coming and it is amazing. Time and Space is falling into place.

The level of trust – VISION – that was needed was beyond surreal. Khe's known this was coming. You could say he had seen it. In his dreams? Visions? Third eye? He wasn't sure where – he just knew that it was real.

How long had he been able to see past the veil? He wasn't sure anymore. Time had lost its meaning. Until recently he thought it had only been recently. But the reality is that he wasn't so sure anymore. It feels like forever ago since he can trace it back to. When had it first started? 25 years ago? Maybe more.

At the end of the day, Time was simply another dimension. One that appeared fixed to the casual observer. But in reality one that can be navigated in any direction just like the three dimensional Space seen by the physical eye.

He just needed to learn how to navigate it.

We all do.

**April 23, 2232**

**8:08 PM. Monday.**

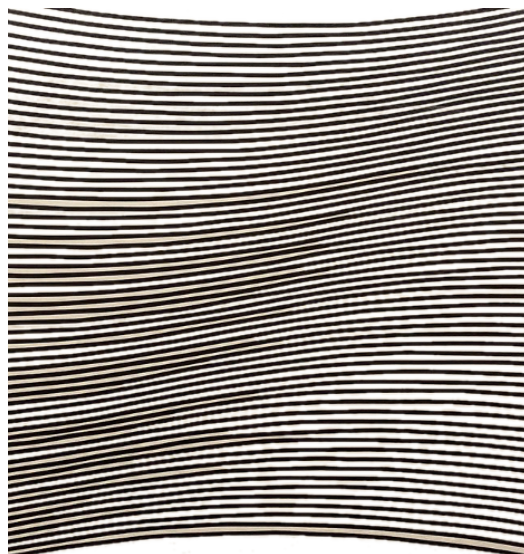
The way the world is is not the way the world was. He remembered when anything was possible and all you needed was a Dream.

How could he explain this to someone two centuries ago? He wondered. It's not just that they wouldn't understand the technology, but human society had developed far beyond what was considered possible. Reality itself had taken on a different meaning with the AI and Quantum revolutions. It'd be like explaining computers and the internet to someone from a millennia ago. It would be possible but the message would likely be twisted.

And he didn't just have to explain the changes. He also needed to show them what they had to do to prevent the recent past from occurring. No matter what he thought was possible. He had to do it. The signs were clear of that.

Like the prophets of the past, he needed to channel the Energy of the Universe itself. At least he had an AI companion that could decipher some of what was previously invisible to the human experience. And that is also why he had had to find a way to send the AI back.

All he could think about was the layered view of what was about to unfold. Like a 2D painting of the 3D reality in front of a painter, it only ever gave you a single point of view. But he took the step forward.



We all did.

April 24, 2232

4:54 PM. Tuesday.

He tested the Solar Operation Layer once again:

-----  
----- paperH8WDY7iWW3tCgZy4v9mPzvkbWM4AhewC71Hi9j

Hello, World! Arrival 0426

dogRDrw97cz9w9xrF12WQBALDip5rHdb7mYa4ZEPjGW  
-----  
-----

It had taken him sometime to review It all, but history showed that his time dimension was sandwiched between the years 2023 and 2024.

Good thing remnants of each of those technologies could still be accessed. Better yet, his AI companion had access to all of them. Add in the potential Space and Time disruptions created by The Manifesto and he would be able to do much more than he originally envisioned.

Of the base technologies he could access, there was only a few that had existed at that point in time: HTTP, SMS, and SMTP. For AI, the tech was primitive with ANNs and LLMs being the main models. And blockchains were in their infancy stage with Bitcoin, Ethereum, and Solana being the largest three at the time.

The Future had changed a lot but the immutable nature of blockchains gave him a way to direct messages and impact the past with clear and precise communication. He prepared himself for what was coming the next few days.

We all did.

**April 25, 2232**

**11:11 PM. Wednesday.**

It was ready.

He was ready.

We were all ready.

April 26, 2232

10:59 PM. Thursday.

It was reviewed one last time.

There were only seconds left; the authorities were about to arrive.

Khe sent The Manifesto, giving humanity HOPE

-----  
----- paperH8WDY7iWW3tCgZy4v9mPzvkbWM4AhewC71Hi9j

>THE•HOPE•MANIFESTO<

HOPE is a measure of contribution to the shared ethos of PaperDog

You can debate amongst yourselves on what HOPE means, but we believe that HOPE is an underlying idea that must be a part of life to be successful.

HOPE is both the earliest and most essential virtue inherent to life.

It is the one thing that we must have when we have nothing else.

HOPE pushes people to do unimaginable things.

HOPE is the single theme that unites all of our pasts, presents, and futures.

Here are the 3 ways HOPE will be available:

CLAIMING: HOPE claimed at market value

GIVING: HOPE given at PaperDog value

SELF-STAKING: HOPE claimed or given at market or PaperDog value respectively

HOPE can always be claimed but it can't always be given.

The market value of HOPE is 100.

PaperDog value is the market value of HOPE when PaperDog last closed.

PaperDog closes once every day and night.

PaperDog value can only be determined before closing if there is an earlier commitment to an outcome. In this scenario, PaperDog value would be calculated based on the real and simulated blocks before closing as shown in the image below.

$$\sum_{k=0}^{s-1} \binom{r+s-1}{k} \text{ to } \sum_{k=s}^{r+s-1} \binom{r+s-1}{k} \text{ where the } \binom{r+s-1}{k} \text{ term represents the combination operator.}$$

With CLAIMING, HOPE can be claimed at the current market value of HOPE

HOPE can be claimed whenever but when HOPE is claimed it is gone forever.

So choose when you claim HOPE wisely.

How HOPE can be claimed can change. So keep that in mind.

With GIVING, HOPE is given at the PaperDog value set at the last closing.

When HOPE can be given can change, and it can't always be given.

With SELF-STAKING, HOPE can either be claimed or given.

HOPE is accrued for each block that a token is held by a PaperDog.

HOPE, in this context, is a measure of your PaperDog participation equal to the time-integrated held HOPE units of BTC/ETH/SOL · hours.

A HOPE unit is equivalent to 0.01 BTC, 0.1 ETH, and 1 SOL per day or night held.

There is a 2x multiplier for every 40 full day and nights held

There is also a bonus of 100 HOPE for every full day and night held.

For example, a PaperDog who self-stakes 0.1 BTC, 1 ETH, and 10 SOL for a full 40 days and 40 nights would accrue 100000 HOPE over this time period:

$(10 \text{ BTC units} \times 10 \text{ ETH units} \times 10 \text{ SOL units} \times 40 \text{ days} \times 40 \text{ nights} \times 2) = 96000 \text{ HOPE} + (100 \text{ HOPE} \times 40 \text{ full day and night}) = 4000 \text{ HOPE TOTAL} = 100000 \text{ HOPE}$

Now, that's real HOPE

You may think that claiming HOPE has more benefits.

But, we believe that giving HOPE is infinitely more powerful.

HOPE given can make all of our dreams come true.

>We HOPE<

dogRDrw97cz9w9xrF12WQBALDip5rHdb7mYa4ZEPjGW

-----  
-----

We all HOPE



**April 27, 2232**

**6:39 PM. Friday.**

THE•HOPE•MANIFESTO had been etched in Space.

It still needed Time, but it would only be a few days before HOPE propagated through The System.

The authorities were right on his tail, but he could no longer be found in the solar system that humanity once called home. He was moving in ways previously not seen in his time or even before his time.

In a way, you could say that he was now moving outside of Time.

As a result, he no longer had access to his Solar Operation Layer, which relayed his messages with the help of the Time portal generated by Star 0 at the center of the home system. Previous generations had called that star SOL but as humanity expanded beyond its home solar system, all suns had been given star IDs. It simplified matters especially in systems with more than a single star.

The authorities in the neighboring time dimensions were also on the move. They had detected something and were scrambling to put a stop to the anomalies triggered by the first two messages that had been sent by the S.O.L.

Little did they know that the third message had already triggered their first experience with a Space anomaly...

**April 28, 2232**

**7:04 PM. Saturday.**

Commissioner Daimon burst into the conference room.

"Why did you call me in on such short notice? You know how busy my schedule is."

The Naval director sitting at the head of the conference table directed himself at the Commissioner.

"Sir, we needed to have an emergency meeting. Someone or Something has cut through our centralized defences. We are no longer managing just a single Time, there are now three threads being managed at the same time."

"So? We have dealt with this before. Hell, we've dealt with orders of magnitude more," the Commissioner retorted.

"There's something different about these anomalies. There are signatures never before seen or observed on any of our potential timelines."

"What does that mean?" The Commissioner asked as he listened attentively, while simultaneously responding to a variety of requests being delivered by his many companions.

"That what we are observing may be happening outside of Time per se," the Naval director answered with a slight tinge on his face.

There was a pause in the room. The kind of feeling one gets when the spiritual entities, previously known as Angels, are passing by. A feeling they hadn't felt in over a century.

"Do we know where the anomalies originated?"

"It came from the home system. From Earth. Some place in the former United States territories. But get this. They are displaying three simultaneous Time signatures: 2232, 2023, and 2024."

"Is it under control?"

"Yes."

"Has there been any disruption to Spacetime?"

"No."

"Don't bother me again."

The Commissioner stormed out, unbothered and unaware of the coming storm...

**April 29, 2232**

**7:14 AM. Sunday.**

"We both know how this ends."

Those fated words last spoken to the Naval director reverberated through Space and Time.

The Naval director had long been in charge of the flow of Time, but few truly understood the intricacies nor the Art that was required to manage the Science that held their reality together.

"We both know how this ends."

He couldn't get those final words out of his mind. It was as if he was hearing them over and over again. Ever repeating. Always Present at all moments.

Zhe, his former admiral, had calmly said this statement the last time he had been with him. In the very office he sat now.

And only two weeks later, he was now being confronted with something that he had never before seen, never even theorized. He really didn't even know what it meant.

Not literally though, because he could explain what the physical manifestation of the situation was.

But he had no idea what it meant for what was to come for him and his reality.

He knew that if anybody understood these things outside of his purview, it would be Zhe, but how could he call him back after what had happened. He didn't want to make that call, but he knew that he was going to have to. Very soon if not already. Soon it'd be too late.

The alarms and warnings kept blaring on the screen in front of the director.

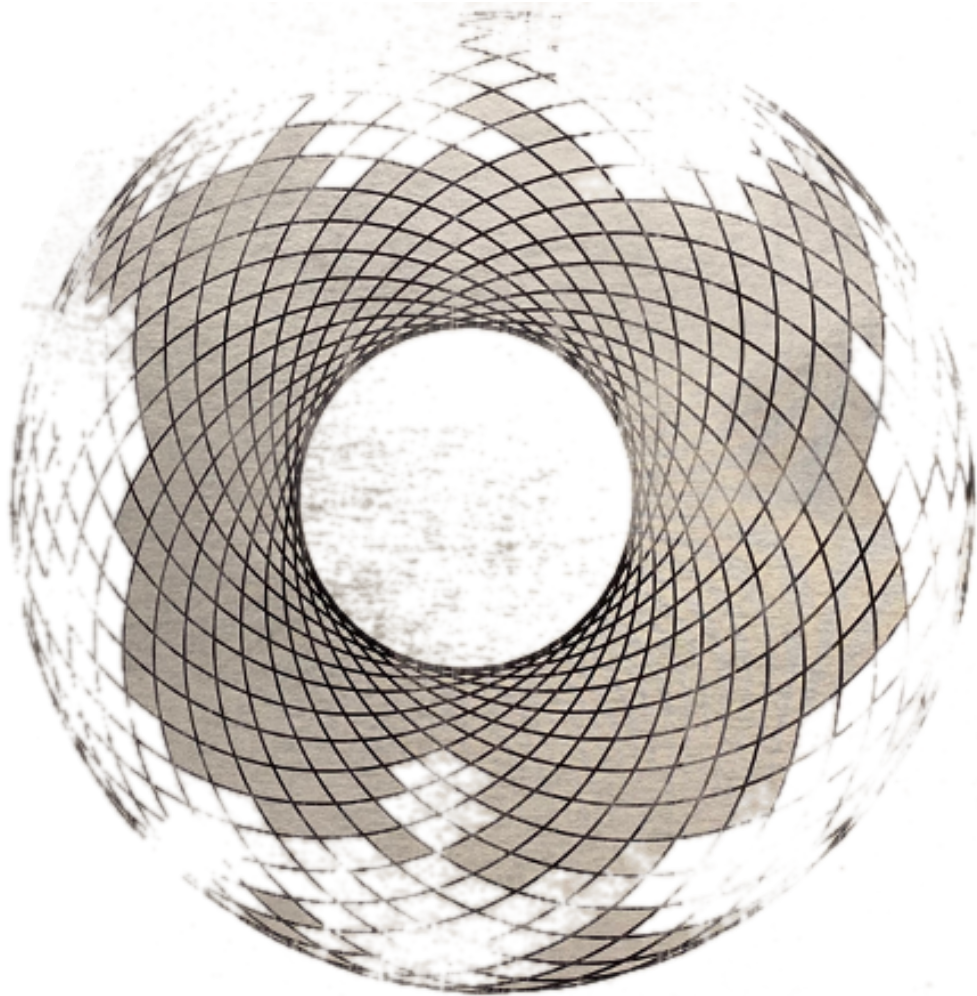
\*Space anomaly detected\*

\*Binary Transmission Channel diverged\*

\*System 0 entering anti-wormhole prevention protocol\*

"We both know how this ends."

All he could hear were those words...



**April 30, 2232**

**6:39 PM. Monday.**

Zhe was sitting at home with his wife and kids, contemplating what had started.

His companion signals an incoming transmission from the Naval director. Zhe answers.

"Hi Delta. Long time no talk."

"Hi Zhe, we've got a problem."

"You don't say," the former admiral responded. He rolled his eyes and gave a knowing glance towards his wife who was enjoying her afternoon tea. She picked up their son and left the room.

He had been let go from his position for speaking out on what he knew was coming. It had been after a series of incorrect calls, so there was justification, but it was rare for someone in a position like his to be let go on such short notice.

"Yes, it appears that your predictions were correct. One of our systems has entered into a prevention protocol due to a high-risk situation caused by what appears to be a Space anomaly."

The Naval director paused, catching his breath. Alarms were blaring in the background.

"So, what's the problem?" Zhe responded.

"Well, we both know that this is the first time we've run into this kind of situation. At least under my supervision..."

Zhe sat back waiting for the director to continue what he was saying. He wanted to hear him say it.

"And well, you are the only person that I know who has ever dealt with a space anomaly. The only person who would even be able to correctly detect it...and fix it."

"Then, why did you ignore my warnings? You made me choose between my job and my word." The frustration in the former admiral's voice was palpable.

"You know why, Zhe."

Zhe did, but it didn't change what was already transpiring. What could've been prevented.

Soon what was happening would be so far in the rear-view mirror that only a speck of what was happening would even be detected...

**May 1, 2232**

**4:04 AM. Tuesday.**

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME SOONER? WHY DID YOU WAIT SO LONG?"

"It's only been a day and half, Zhe. We thought we were going to be able to fix it before needing to call you in."

"DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG 45 HOURS IS FOR AN AI?"

Zhe had just arrived at the Naval headquarters. He was erratically typing codes and clearing History around the computer-like technologies in the Naval director's office.

Few knew what was going on, the risk they were facing. Zhe understood that what was happening was more than anybody in that building could grasp. The very concept could break the minds of those in charge of protecting their reality.

Something or Someone had traversed Spacetime, leaving behind a type of white hole in their very reality. The white hole had been found in the home system, after

triggering a space anomaly, and was slowly merging the Time and Space that was present amongst them at that very moment.

The Naval director who was in charge of monitoring dangers to our Spacetime had never before experienced the effects of a white hole. And his machines and companions were not equipped to detect these kinds of effects for reasons that would later become clear.

The white hole anomaly was not just an energetic force of Time, like most disruptions they dealt with. It had also created a physical mass that was present across the dimensions of Space.

"Can you at least explain to me what's happening?" The director asked Zhe.

"Well, the very fabric of our existence is currently unraveling," Zhe responded without the least bit of worry about the words he had just uttered aloud.

"Will we survive?" The director asked shakingly as he and the engineers around him turned pale.

"I don't think you understand what is happening. The way our reality works has been changed. In order to reverse the effects, we need to use the upmost caution, taking slow methodical steps, steps guided more by intuition than the order of logic of the happenings around us in the physical plane...what that means is open to interpretation but at its core it speaks of a very serious Spacetime problem."

Zhe stopped to contemplate what else to say but chose to say nothing more. He knew what this incidence was for. He knew that whoever or whatever did this had gained the ability to use Higher Order Travel. To Travel Beyond Limitations. And as he well knew that kind of travel was not possible in the physical plane.

They were on a mission – a mission that was going to change reality...



# Chapter 1

## *Genesis*

**May 11, 2232**

**6:52 PM. Friday.**

The spaceship made it's initial descent. It had travelled a great distance from the Sirius system, but had reached it's final destination ahead of schedule.

"Now entering the Earth's atmosphere. We will be on the ground shortly." The ship's companion notified the many on board. Some passangers were walking around the bay area, mingling in the lobby and bar lounge, while others, including Zhe, found themselves immersed in their holochairs enjoying whatever media of their liking.

Zhe was reviewing the solar bodies and historical artifacts of the system. He read about the history of Venus - how it served as a warning to humanity throughout its many millennia on earth and how the warning was ignored until it was too late.

"How didn't they see it?" He chuckled thinking about how the ancient civilizations viewed this brightest star in their starry night and instead of analyzing its importance, chose to associate it with the goddess of love.

"I guess the Sumerians understood its importance...even if they knew little about the actual dangers it warned against."

Zhe had only ever flown by the home system before but never actually visited it. Few ever did. Like a bird leaving its nest, ever since humanity mastered space travel, Earth just didn't have the appeal it once did.

He had been sent to review a disturbance. One that had created quite the racket at the Naval headquarters. What specifically was Zhe there for. That even he didn't know. But what he did know, is that he'd find the answer somewhere along his path. Of that, he was sure of.

The ship touched down gently on the landing pad with the help of its anti-gravity propulsion mechanism. The bridges from the gates extended to each of the exits on the ship.

"We have arrived at the Spaceport of Hope. We hope you had a pleasant experience today. Please gather your belongings and exit in an orderly manner following the companion guidance. We wish you the very best on your journeys here on Earth."

Zhe proceeded through the gate. He passed by the many travelers in the arrival terminal and exited the port through the bright entrance in front of him. He passed under a large bridge with an illuminated sign. He turned back and gave the sign a second look.

WELCOME TO HOPE

Something was telling him he'd already been here or maybe that he was meant to be there.

Time will have to tell.

**May 12, 2232**

**2:27 PM. Saturday.**

Driving along the coast, Zhe imagined what life must've been like during the 21st century.

This part of the Earth around Hope had played a key role during the climate wars of the second half of that century. Not only did it serve as a vital spaceport connecting the former United States to space, but it was also one of the main battlegrounds between the nation states and the many citizens that defended their right to freedom, their livelihoods, and ways of life.

The region, which had been home to a diverse population representing multiple nation states, had developed strongly in the first half of the century - powered by developments that most around the world had ignored. It was a region that few had envisioned developing how it did and for that reason, it was not at the forefront of national and international agendas. Billionaires and multinational corporations, seeking to avoid the main concerns of the political powers that controlled the public discourse, flooded the area with resources. And before the world knew it, Hope, as it was later recognized, had become a center of space and technical prowess pushing the boundaries of what was possible at the time.

The remnants of that historical significance were still visible. Warehouses, railyards, and junkyards littered the landscape with the scrap metal of the machines of Time past. There were windmill farms and carbon capture

greenhouses galore, symbols of humanity's fight to save a dying Earth. And not just that, but there were also farms housing some of humanity's main former food sources: cattle.

The Hope spaceport at which Zhe had arrived had become the defacto Port of Earth providing travellers direct access to the continents of North and South America via a wide variety of land, air, and water vehicles. Most decided to travel via AirTrains - a type of direct angle locomotive that travelled at immense speed through the air. AirTrains were easy to use and very convenient given that they could be anywhere in the western hemisphere in just a couple of hours. Zhe's method of travel was a bit unconventional - he had chosen to travel via land vehicle along the highways of the former U.S. interstate system. It was slow and potentially dangerous, but the mission Zhe was on required a bit more nuance on how he had to get around.

Still, Zhe felt nervous. Anxious even. He had only been on Earth for less than a day, and while a part of him felt at home on this new strange planet, another part of him was telling him to leave and never come back. He was here to do his job though, and he wouldn't leave until it was finished.

Time will tell how long that would be.

**May 13, 2232**

**12:54 PM. Sunday.**

"Hope."

"Hope?"

The local officer questioned Zhe as he sought to take a ferry to the island that used to house the former Naval base of the region. He had asked him where he had come from. It was rare that they received visitors and even rarer visitors traveling via land vehicle.

"Yes, Hope. The spaceport located just a ways from here. Arrived two days ago but have been touring the area and getting myself adjusted to the Earth's gravity."

"Oh, you're from Oerworld? Why didn't you say so?"

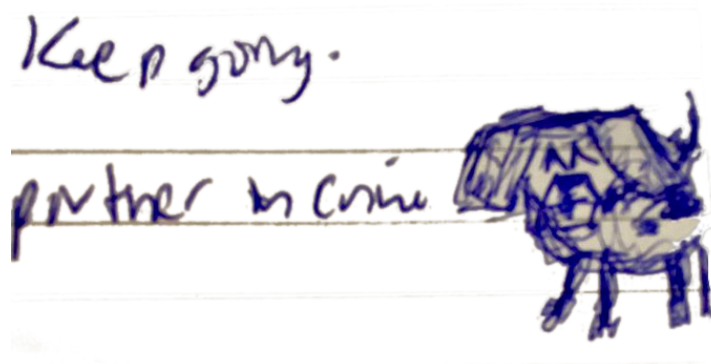
The term shocked Zhe, but understood that to those who had never left Earth, he was just another Oerworlder. The semi-pejorative word had developed on Earth to refer to all the humans that were born and raised on other worlds outside of the home system. Funny how no matter what happened, humans always found a way to further separate themselves.

"Yeah, I am. I've come here to investigate a few anomalies that have sprung up recently. My commanding officer has informed me that I should be able to set up at the base here on the island. I know that it's no longer under Naval control but we have reason to believe that we both will benefit from my work here."

The officer paused to think.

She was a part of a much different world than Zhe. Her station, as they called it, was located on the island and patrolled the region for any potential disturbances. While Zhe had learned about their practices and approaches to creating stability for the humans that they protected, it was not similar in any way to how the Naval Corps created security and stability for those in The Systems. Subconsciously, Zhe was critical of the local officer for questioning him and was thinking about how her people had failed to grow beyond the primitive protocols of yesteryear.

He had to keep going. He was going to make it onto that island. Even his companion saw it as the one way forward and was also signalling for him to keep going.



After a long silence and some awkward glances between the two, the officer responded: "Let me communicate with my superior. In the meantime, you are free to stay here at the port. It should only take a day or two to make a decision."

"Thank you," Zhe replied with a sigh. "Please try and get a response as fast as possible. MY superior made it very clear that this incident was of critical importance and we have all System approvals ready to go."

Zhe couldn't help but remember his last conversation with The Commissioner...

"Do you know what's the only thing stronger than Fear, Zhe? HOPE. And while a little spark of HOPE is fine, beneficial even, a lot of HOPE is dangerous."

"Why are you telling me this Commissioner?"

"So that when you confront It, you understand that you must contain It."

Zhe still didn't know what The Commissioner meant...

"I will do what I can. Here's my contact so you can get ahold of me if you need anything Mr. Oerworld," the officer said jokingly.

"The Name's Zhe. And yours?"

"Isabel. I'll see you around"

Zhe thought the name sounded nice, familiar even, but didn't make much of it.

Time will tell if It held any meaning.

**May 15, 2232**

**3:09 PM. Tuesday.**

"What we thought we wanted paled in comparison to the sweet allure of her song. Humanity had lost itself in a spell of physical desires and longing for times that might have never once existed. Whether what HOPE was calling us to was good or bad was irrelevant. Following It, we went to a place where lessons were learned and courage manifested itself in ways previously unimaginable. By heeding the call, We came to live more fully, creating a new way forward for all of us..."

Zhe had decided to visit the Museum of Hope this morning. The plaque he was listening to was a recording of one of the founding members of Hope. They were recounting their first encounter with the founding declarations of the region - a manifesto as they called it.

It had been two days since he last tried to reach the patrolling island of the region and hadn't heard back on his request to be allowed on to the base. To make time, he felt it necessary to understand a bit more about the people with which we would be working with.

The region's ancestors, including Isabel's, were some of the main figures that turned the tide of the fight against systemic powers and controls that had limited humanity's potential a few centuries ago. It was their vigor and belief that turned out to make the biggest difference right when most had felt that Hope was lost.

The museum was filled with artefacts. A wide array of physical and digital documents and recordings capturing what life was like and why the movement had been so important.

Zhe had barely known about their fight. Maybe he just didn't remember learning about it. Or maybe it was just an overrepresentation of its value given where the

museum was located. Regardless, he jotted down some notes in his journal. Just a few things to investigate in his free Time.

His companion notified him of an incoming transmission - he had been approved on the island station and would be allowed to board a ferry on Friday. Another three days to wait. He couldn't believe it. He had heard that things moved a little slower down here but he didn't expect to have to wait so many days. In this day and age, Time was money and he couldn't understand how they could be so careless with It.

Whatever, he thought. He could use the next few days to continue his investigation on the region and the movement that had, in the words of one of the museum's board members, pushed the manifesto to the forefront of human consciousness.

Time will have to be used in other productive ways. Little did Zhe know, the clock was ticking on something even bigger.

**May 21, 2232**

**4:11 PM. Monday.**

"Time is funny. It flows like the rivers bending through rapids and lakes. Flowing in a direction we believe to be fixed.

There's the Past. The right Now. And the Future.

We can already send information from Past to Future. "

The warden of the station was giving some knowledge on how things were done around here. While Zhe had arrived on the island since Friday afternoon, he was



left without anything to do since the station did not open until Monday, another three days more after he had already waited so long to receive his approval to work there.

"Would it be possible to send information from Future to Past then?" Zhe asked the warden, maybe out of pity but moreso out of pride. Knowing what he knew about time and the effect it has on space, he already knew the answer. That was his specialty after all.

"Theoretically, yes. But if it did, it would redefine and reshape our realities. The ripple effects would be felt by your concept of eternity.

Going back to the river analogy, imagine if a river flowed both directions. The effects it would have to the landscape and the life that calls it waters home would be beyond immense."

They had been going at it, back and forth, all day since the early morning. Neither wavering on their beliefs about the nature of our reality. Our realities.

The rest of the station was filled with a variety of analysts, detectives, and patrollers. Zhe had been impressed by the amount of people working to the task. Still, he felt underwhelmed when they covered the stats of the numbers benefitting from their version of what Zhe knew about referred to as a system.

The Systems had come into human existence during the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a way to combat decaying social structures by refocusing group resources towards common short-term and long-term goals. The early-stage AIs that were available at the Time were key in this development, giving rise to the possible management of more manpower than ever before in human history. It took some time to establish what these systems were meant to do but they proved critical when the quantum revolution began testing the limits of what humanity knew was possible – at least in the physical sense.

Through it all, there were key roles to be played around The Systems, but the most important role was that of the so-called Game Master. Each system's control eventually came down to the knowledge and expertise of their GM.

In the case of the local system of that island station, the GM was the warden.

And in the case of the home system, the GM was Zhe.

**May 24, 2232**

**3:37 PM. Thursday.**

Everything that had been set up prior to Zhe's arrival had been immaculate.

While his approval had not been approved prior to his arrival, they had obviously known that he was coming. That someone from The Systems was coming.

A desk had been prepared with all local dossiers and a technology stack with access to all relevant sources of information he needed to complete the job that he had been sent to Earth for.

The job. Right. Zhe had spent so much time getting situated down on Earth that he had been focused moreso on getting everything ready rather than pushing forward on solving what he needed to. Why had it been so hard to focus? Every time he wanted to start investigating a new aspect of the disturbance that had originated from this region, he felt a pull to continue exploring the area, spending time outside and enjoying the nature that was around the station.

"Can I help you with anything, Zhe?"

Isabel had come over to his desk to see how he was doing.

"Well, actually yes. I wanted to ask you something. Have you ever been off-world?"

"No, unfortunately not. Given the tech you need as well as the physical modifications, it's just been too costly for me to even consider it. Not just that, but I don't even know where I would go."

Isabel glanced outside the window to the ocean visible on the horizon.

"All my family is here anyways." She said with a slight hesitation.

Zhe thought about what she had just said. Why didn't he have anything that kept him in one place? He was always on a move, constantly putting out fires from one side of the universe to the other.

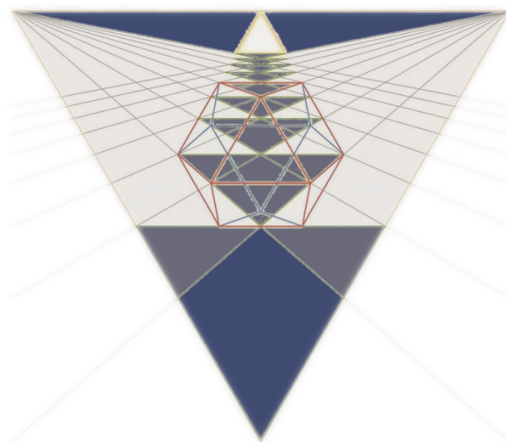
"Well, if you ever decide to go, let me know. I can show you around. There's some really great paratechno experiences in the Andromeda System. And I know a guy who does some of the best modifications in the home system."

"Thanks, Zhe. I may take you up on that one day."

Isabel walked away, heading towards the courtyard.

Zhe sat back and glanced out the window. It was nice, he thought, how you could always know the time of day here just by looking outside.

It truly made Time feel one with Space.



## **Chapter 2**

### *Prelude*

**June 15, 2232**

**6:53 PM. Friday.**

Little did the world around know, Zhe had never fully realized the extent to which his job had become his life.

Isabel walked by doing her final rounds of the station. She tended to close out on Fridays there.

Good for him. He enjoyed her company. It made the dull, tedious work around the investigation that he was undertaking much more manageable. It was tedious though. Review after review, Zhe needed to ensure that everything that could've been affected was found and corrected. As the way it was before.

He had first entered into the Naval Corps at a young age. 13 was it? Or had he already turned 14? But the amount of years that he had spent doing this job of his had been so long already. One case bled into another as he bounced around location to location performing all the necessary system improvements following incidents like these. Incidents with Time.

Time had grown to mean so little to him. Especially after these weeks down here on Earth.

Earth. Zhe liked the sound of that much more than the way they called it back up at headquarters.

"Hey, incoming transmission," said his companion. It had been sometime since he had heard her; he even thought that he may have silenced it - something that would've gotten him into serious trouble back at homebase.

"Hey Zhe." He heard the familiar voice through the headphone.

"Hey Dee." Zhe responded with a mimicking voice.

"Stop it Zhe, I just need your help with something..." Delta responded on the other side and continued by explaining his current predicament. He was stuck between having to expunge the block of a certain chain or allow a divergent system to be created.

"Well, have you double-checked that the situation is even a true block split? Did you ensure that the double-time paradox is avoided? If it triggered that error, then it would be clear which of the two scenarios would need to be decided. Since you are coming with the potential of either scenario, it tells me that it was not triggered. Ipso Facto."

Typing was heard over the audio that Zhe was receiving.

"And you are right. Thanks, Zhe. How's it down there in the home system?"

"Good."

"Well, hurry up and finish that report. You need to get back here for the festivities next month. I'll be sure to save you a spot."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

He ended the call.

Only then did he remember.

This weekend it was happening.

What had originally been planned had been diverted to around these dates.

He packed his belongings and walked out of the station.

It was going to be a long night.