

VOLUME 3:

REASON AND
COELACANTH



TIVECT

CADECRAFT & AMC45

**TIVECT Volume 3:
Reason and Coelacanth**

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I. Coelacanth

The Southern Slate Province, 12 years before rescale

The stream's cool water sparkled, refreshing snowmelt washing away the industrial grime on the childrens' faces. The mossy grass was lush and soft beneath their feet; the valley's greenery had finally returned after a long winter. They were tossing a ball back and forth, appreciating the last few days before they would go back to work.

Joyful laughter was interrupted by a sudden cry of excitement: "Coelacanth!"

The boy to the right of Yellow Shirt, about two years older than him, was pointing at the rushing water. A heavy blue fish, about the size of his family's Connectitrack module, was swimming upstream—it was trying to reach The Lake, a fish breeding zone high in the mountains.

"Let's grab it," said the boy. "We can roast it, and the whole village won't have to worry about buying food rations tonight! This could help keep us in the Economic Proficiency Zone!"

The others nodded enthusiastically, except for Yellow Shirt. "But... it's a rare fish, trying to get up the river," he protested. "It never did anything to us! Why would we hurt it?"

They looked at him, confused.

"It's just a fish..."

"We have to eat, don't we?"

"It's the logical thing to do! Those food rations are more expensive than they seem."

Yellow Shirt looked around, frowning. His friends did what was logical, without considering what was right and wrong. He had never appreciated them for that, taking the emotion out of the things they did.

The fish had gotten several tivits further up the stream as they talked, and the other boy moved forwards. "I'm grabbing it."

Yellow Shirt looked away, hearing a splash then the slice of metal against flesh as the fish was cut open.

"We'll get to eat! We'll get to save money!"

The children laughed, smiled, ran for the village to tell the others.

He watched the fish as they carried it away, shiny pink guts spilling out, dark scales coated in fresh water and a layer of crimson blood.

At dinner time, they placed the large fish above the fire to cook. The flesh turned a rich pinkish-brown and the scales flaked and fell as it turned on the spit; embers flew and dispersed into the air; the freshly chopped wood crackled. The stars above were shining clearly, the small blue dots of satellites and starships dancing and orbiting in their midst like bioluminescent fish carried on a deep-sea tide. The blue spring butterflies had retreated back into their plant-hives for the night. Gathered around the roast, the eight or so families of the village conversed.

Twayse, a large, muscular man named after the color of his shirt, "2a7800", was overseeing the cooking. "It is done!" he announced after some time, grabbing the spit and sliding

the sizzling fish off onto a large plate. Everyone crowded around, smiling, the delicious aroma sparking excitement in their eyes.

Yellow Shirt alone sat away from the fire, in the darkness beneath an awning. The cold night air surrounding him, he wondered, *why is it that a fish must die for our village to be content?*

The other children, their plates stacked high with bread and juicy meat, came over to him, the fire behind them turning them into silhouettes.

“Here,” said a girl, handing him a plate, “this one’s for you—it’s the best part of the fish!”

“I don’t want to eat the fish,” said Yellow Shirt, looking down at the dark rocky ground. “It’s not right; he should be swimming up to The Lake. The coelacanth fish are rare, and only live here, in the Southern Slate province. This is like eating a part of our ancestors’ identity, a part of who we are.”

She shook her head, her expression invisible in the dark. “Well... if you really don’t want it, I guess I’ll find someone else to give it to.”

“I don’t understand your logic,” another boy complained. “You always tell us to do what’s ‘right’, but it doesn’t make sense!” He turned and started walking back towards the fire.

Yellow Shirt was silent: they would never understand.

When they had left, he stepped through the darkness towards the box of leftover synthesized rations provided by the Teicrell Corporation. The voices faded; the box lid creaked open.

The Teicrell Corporation had been supplying technology and rations to their village for decades, charging a low price per box. The Corporation owned countless mine systems, including the one right next to the village, and obtained the bulk of their labor by maintaining small, efficient villages, whose efforts in the mines would be rewarded with continued supply of goods. Their terms stated that they would only ship out supplies, however, if the village fit into an Economic Proficiency Zone—that is, if the amount of profit derived from their work in the mines exceeded the costs of shipment of supplies. Thus, the harder the population worked overall, and the less supplies they consumed, the more secure their position would be. Though many outsiders, and practically every member of the expansive Tivect middle class out in the big cities, considered this system to be cruel, it was understood to be the logical way to maintain efficient mine systems, which were crucial to all heavy industries; furthermore, those born and raised in the villages found this to be their only way of life.

Ten packs of rations remained. They were from several days ago, uneaten, and the one whose wrapper he tore off tasted more stale than normal. *But it’s better than eating a harmless fish. A fish that we should never have touched, let alone killed. I don’t care what they say about the Economic Proficiency Zone, about the Corporation’s continued service... we should live life the right way.*

The footsteps of someone approaching jolted him from his thoughts.

“So, son, following your emotions yet again?” The silhouette of Yellow Shirt’s father sat down next to him and set the extra plate of fish on the ground. “Don’t you remember what we taught you?”

Yellow Shirt knew these words: he had been reminded of them for his whole life. “The emotional ideals may feel like perfection, but nothing is perfect; they confuse the mind with uncertainty and moral dilemmas. We must use logic, and only then is the one true path made clear. Do what makes sense, and you will never go wrong.”

“Very good. Now, eat the fish.”

Reluctantly, he skewered the piece of fish with his cold metal knife and placed it in his mouth. Its flavor was savory and rich, but he derived no enjoyment from it.

“Now we can save the rations, which will keep for longer, and we will be able to save more money,” asserted his father. “Thank you—just finish the rest of this fish.”

Yellow Shirt nodded, re-wrapping his unfinished ration pack and placing it back in the box. “It’s... it’s the logical choice.”

“It is indeed.”

II. Mine

The Southern Slate Province, 12 years before rescale

The next day, mine work resumed. Yellow Shirt awoke before the sun had fully risen above the mountain ridge; the peaks behind him glowed golden, but the ground below was cast with shadow. Miniscule drops of dew clung to the grass, reflecting the sky above in its liminal stages between night and day.

The mine entrance was framed by wide slabs of slate protruding at a consistent angle, parallel to each other; the few sharp edges that remained remembered the plasma-powered cutting machines that had been deployed there long ago, but the majority had softened over decades of rain and snow. Moss grew over the sunward faces like a lime green carpet that spilled down over the entrance. A small stream cascaded over the rocks, producing a waterfall only half a meter thin then disappearing into the thick mountainous grass below to gurgle off into the verdant meadows.

This was the last bit of greenery before the true mines began.

Walking into the mines was like entering the mouth of a fabled Greatfish in the seas surrounding the Western Atolls, the wide, dark hole gaping, as if it could swallow and digest the whole valley in hydrochloric acid. He'd lived next to the mines his whole life, but entering them to operate the machinery felt like leaving his home. They were obscure, alien, a shifting jungle of rocks and dirt. Even now, it seemed that a tunnel was on the verge of collapsing—people frantically swarmed around an entrance, their hard hats glinting in the harsh lantern light.

“Yellow Shirt! They need your help with the rock fall in Tunnel 8!” shouted one of the adults, pointing down a narrow torch-lined hallway to the left.

He quickly turned and rushed inside. The commotion of the entrance faded as he ran down the tunnel, but the crunching gravel beneath his feet continued to echo cacophonously off the walls and into his mind: it was crucial to arrive as early as possible, to prevent further damage. Mineshafts had collapsed multiple times in the past; this brought back vivid memories.

Running down the cramped hallway, Yellow Shirt recalled the shift in constellations two years before. Without warning, the dark sky above the field had become broken one night, like some cosmic puzzle whose pieces were mismatched; stars which used to form intricate shapes were now on the other side of the sky.

“What happened?” he had asked his family, pointing upwards in the dark, “Where did the Flying Caribou go?”

His father had sighed. “The stars are not what they used to be, son. The scientists over in the big cities, far, far away are trying to change the sky so that people can live there.”

“All the way up there, in the stars?”

The man nodded. “They say that it'll help our world, our economy, that we're moving towards a future out in the galaxies. Don't worry about it too much—you'll get used to the new constellations in time.”

His father stood up and left, through the grasses and back towards their house. Walking away, he muttered, “They’re trying to grow a civilization in the sky when they can’t even support the civilization down here...”

Yellow Shirt had pondered those words, but couldn’t figure out what they meant. He thought of the scientists in the big cities, the shining skyscrapers: *you’ll be there one day*, he recalled someone saying—he forgot who. *Just like how the mines shift, so too do the seas of fate. You will find your paths, even if I did not find mine. You will find yourself facing hardship, and you must remember that there will always be two choices: the one guided by your heart, and the one guided by your mind. We, the people of this world, did not get to where we are with beauty and poetry; we got here with the certainty, the conviction, of logic and reason; our hearts shall drag us ever downwards, while our minds shall send us to the stars.*

The lantern light grew brighter and he heard echoing voices ahead—Yellow Shirt was approaching the area of the rock fall. Upon arriving, the walls of the tunnel opened up to reveal a vast cavern.

The cave was vast, the shadows cast by spikes of pale ivory ore fading out into the darkness beyond; below the roughly-carved stairs that led down from the entrance, it seemed that half the village was scrambling at the mine-lift, trying to clear out debris and pull it up. From this angle, he could only see part of the grimy metal platform, but something shiny and silver glittered there, half-visible inside the dark chute that led into the lower abyss—not reflecting the yellow lantern-light, but producing a cool light of its own.

The lift had been designed like a pulley: one platform went down as the other went up. It was normally regulated by a gear system, which had been buried and broken by the rock fall. If the others couldn’t keep the lift up by their strength alone, a highly valuable chunk of ore was about to plunge and be lost.

Twayse looked back from the mass of people at the lift, looked Yellow Shirt in the eye, and shouted, “Get to the emergency override center!”

He’d memorized a map of the mines, so he knew that the center was high up, dug into the cave walls and accessible by only a small yellow ladder at the entrance. Luckily, the ladder had not fallen during the collapse.

As he climbed, though, those cold, thin metal bars ringing below his hands, he looked down to find a horrifying sight. The ore was not alone on the lift platform—four expert miners, too, were standing there, too, throwing heavy white chunks up and out of the shaft to save as much of the crystal as possible. But far worse was the *other* side of the lift: 18a830, Yellow Shirt’s close friend, stood on the farther platform, slowly slipping into the abyss as the other platform was lifted. He was trying to grip the wall of the chute to climb out, but his hands were slipping.

“Turn the lever!” shouted Twayse from below. “It’ll stack the other side with rocks so that the ore and the miners don’t fall any farther!”

“But- but 18a...”

Twayse couldn't hear him.

His hands clambering up on their own as he stared horrifyingly downwards, Yellow Shirt's body soon reached the emergency override center. He pulled himself over the rocky edge and into the room. A table with two red levers dominated the space, lit only by a small barred window; his heartbeat echoed between the concrete walls. He knew that pulling the rightmost lever would lift the ore and the miners out of the mineshaft—and cover his friend with rocks.

Far below, out the window, Twayse was still shouting. "Please, Yellow Shirt, use reason now, of all times; it's one life, versus *four*! 18a knows, too... y-you can't just sit and watch!"

The crowd began to lose its grip: 18a's side continued to rise to the surface, while the miners began to drop further into the darkness...

"*Pull the lever!*" yelled 18a as his platform nearly reached the ground level, "I can jump off!"

A count of one, two, three, then 18a jumped.

Yellow Shirt stared on, still immobilized by fear, as 18a's weight left the platform and it accelerated upwards towards the rocky ceiling. Screams echoed across the cave as the other platform plunged; the red levers behind him remained untouched. He recalled nothing after that.

III. “Logos”

The Southern Slate Province, 12 years before rescale

“Yellow Shirt, what have you done?”

This was outside the mines, in the village again.

Amid a cacophony of voices, his father’s stood out the most. “*What have you done?*”

“I-I saved my friend...”

The villagers looked down upon him, the midday sun beyond darkening their faces in shadow.

“And you let our *future* fall into the abyss?!” “Those were our greatest miners, that ore was our greatest find, it could have kept those supplies coming to our village for years.” “Now we have nothing. The Teicrell Corporation will not support us anymore—” “Four people, dead...” “There’s practically no chance of recovering it.” “How did it come to this?” “—we’ll be leaving in under a week, perhaps even tomorrow.”

“Leaving?”

“Yes,” said his father, “our ore production has always been precarious, but this pushed it over the edge. We will disperse and head to the cities to become proletarians.”

Yellow Shirt did not know what to say. *Proletarians: those who used to toil in the heavy manufactories, away from nature and the sun for days at a time...*

His father turned away from him, facing the other villagers: “Let’s begin packing our things. Leave the mining tools—we won’t be needing them anymore.”

They walked away, leaving silence in their wake.

Yellow Shirt gazed around him, at the resin-coated wooden planks that his home was built of, at the waving green grass, at one of the prismatic azure butterflies that emerged like a blue wave over the mountain every spring, their sparkling wings resonating with the golden sunlight. Every year, he and his friends would scan the sky for the first of the butterflies, waiting for that vast fluttering, those millions of specks of light blue paint splattered across the deep acrylic sky. The butterflies would land gracefully on plants, settle on rooftops, drift into the childrens’ nets—yet that was all over now. This was the last butterfly; he would never see his valley in spring again.

There was no coelacanth fish for dinner. Instead, they ate the last of the bland Teicrell Corporation food rations in near-darkness. After a time, 18a walked over to Yellow Shirt, his flashlight flickering at low battery, and sat down next to him.

“Why didn’t you pull the lever?”

“I didn’t know those miners very well, but I knew that I didn’t want you to die...”

“Yet were we all not taught to suppress the emotion, to use logic in all circumstances? It is what made our civilization so great in the first place.”

“Great? What’s great about it, about this life, this world? How is it great to have your emotion extracted, eliminated?”

“My death would have meant nothing,” said 18a, shaking his head in the darkness. “Yet those miners, and that ore—they were what let us stay in this village all these years, the best ones among us. You should have realized. You should have known.”

“But I- I *don’t* know. I *never* know. Every time I make a choice it’s just *wrong*.”

“That’s because only logic is certain to be right.”

“But logic never *feels* right.”

“Then perhaps you must simply change the way you see the world.”

Yellow Shirt recalled that memory: *our hearts shall drag us ever downwards, while our minds shall send us to the stars*. “I can’t change the past, can I?” he asked.

18a paused for a moment, then someone called from a nearby building: “18a! Come inside, you’ve got to start packing!”

Turning back once final time, Yellow Shirt’s friend finally replied: “You can’t change the past, but you can change the future.”

Gravel and pine needles crunched as he stood up and walked away.

The next morning, that rocky mountain ground slowly gave way to fine golden sand as they marched down from their village into the lower-altitude desert that surrounded the Southern Slate Range. Yellow Shirt carried a heavy bag on his back, filled with not only his possessions, but also the last remaining bits of valuable ore, which he could sell upon reaching a city. The beads of sweat running down his face distracted him from his inner thoughts, that confused, cavernous labyrinth of emotion and logic haunted by pulleys and levers.

From time to time, he would look up from the ground to see shiny metal pods go by on the Teicrell Material Transport Rail, an extensive network that zoomed across the mountainside and down into the eastern manufacturing plants. The morning sun was blinding here, though, so he mostly kept his head down.

Two hours into the journey, the valley opened up into a vast overlook, the eastern desert stretching out in front of them. Dust blew on the dry wind; the sweet mountain air and spring pine trees were now far behind them.

Four hours into the journey, the sun was beating down as they passed through a monotonous sea of sand.

Six hours into the journey, Twayse announced, “We’ll reach a junction soon, and we will have to split up. There aren’t enough factory jobs in one place for the whole village to stay together.” It was true: each small town on this side of Tivect World only had a few increasingly obsolete low-skill job openings, so one town alone could not accommodate the forty or so unemployed villagers.

“I wanna go to the Eastern Plains,” begged one of the children. “Everyone says they have good bread!”

“Now, now,” said her mother, “you can only go to the Plains if you are an expert in algorithms and computers.”

“When can I learn that?”

Her mother shook her head. “It’ll be a while...”

Yellow Shirt pressed onwards without speaking; he tried not to be noticed.

When they arrived at the junction, they refilled their water bottles and took a break. The junction’s shade shelters were made of shiny titanium and wide carbon-fiber nets which cast clean shadows onto the hot sand. This sleek, modern architecture astonished the villagers, who had lived their whole lives in worn-down cabins with rusting equipment. He heard someone—the boy who grabbed the coelacanth—exclaim, “Is this what it will be like in the towns?”

From the other side of the junction, where no one was looking, a crisp voice answered, “It is indeed. Are you all from a mining village?”

Yellow Shirt looked to see a tall man walking towards the villagers. He wore a bright teal shirt and a silver sun-protecting hat with flaps covering his ears and neck. A small hover vehicle was parked on the sand behind him, and the dust it had kicked up was still settling; it had landed in complete silence.

“Yes,” responded Yellow Shirt’s father, setting down his bottle and standing up. “We are of a Teicrell village which is no longer in operation.”

“I see,” said the teal-shirted man with a smile. “Well, such circumstances are projected to work out perfectly for all of us, then. My name is Cyan Shirt I, CEO of Cyan Industries, and I would like to personally offer some of you jobs at my corporation.”

Yellow Shirt’s father was visibly surprised, though many of the villagers were confused. “A-a job at Cyan Industries?”

“Indeed. Increasingly ossified by a flood of homogenous bourgeoisie mindsets, our company’s technological progress is slowing at an alarming rate—we seek new perspectives which can broaden our views and present unprecedented solutions to currently-unsolved problems. Thus, Cyan Industries has begun recruiting youth from the mountains, whose hardships have produced different, potentially desirable characteristics. Anyone below twenty standard Tivect years of age can join our coastal training facilities for free, which comprehensively teach algorithms, energy systems, artificial intelligence with limits, and overarching principles of vehicular computing. Those who complete this course will be guaranteed a job at Cyan Industries starting at fifty thousand UTCD a yea-”

“*Thousand?!?*” interrupted a villager in shock.

“Indeed. Though it is a modest salary, countless opportunities for promotion and career advancement will naturally be available.”

The villagers began to converse in quiet, shocked voices—*fifty thousand universal Tivect currency digital*—unbelieving of this pristine cyan man of the technological cities. Yet he stood

there before them, his sleek metal vehicle glowing in the sunlight as proof of his origins. His personage was so foreign that none dared question it.

“Edulon Teicrell is one of our many competitors,” he continued, “and I assure you that Cyan Industries does not tolerate such blatantly abusive labor practices as you certainly experienced in the mines. Your youth will be in good hands.”

Still in disbelief, Yellow Shirt’s father started, “When... how long will the training course take?”

“Eight years. Come to my vehicle, and I will explain to you the details and provide legal documents, assuming you choose to take advantage of this opportunity.”

The whole village crowded around Cyan Shirt’s hover vehicle, which projected blue holograms into the air to accompany his lengthy and technical explanations. In the presence of the vehicle’s environmental control field, no one overheated or became thirsty; an hour later, he concluded.

Yellow Shirt’s father turned to face the children, who were watching from farther away. “Given my knowledge of legality, I would say this man’s offer is legitimate. But are all of you alright with this? You will be leaving us, but your lives will be filled with opportunity, and you will head forth into success.”

Without hesitation, 18a nodded; he had also been listening to the terms. “I accept this opportunity.”

“Me too,” agreed another child.

“I, as well.”

And then, everyone was looking at Yellow Shirt. Their gazes carried uncertainty, the same uncertainty that had infused Twayse’s voice as he had yelled to pull the lever: would he abandon reason yet more? His mind flashed with crumbling stone and glimmering ore.

But this pressure of a thousand tivits undersea crushed down on his confusion, solidifying it into something firm, an unbreakable conviction. He would not abandon logic for emotion. Never again.

He stepped forwards and nodded. “I will take this opportunity, and I will shape my future.” *My future, not our future. This journey is mine and mine alone.*

“Well,” said Cyan Shirt, shaking the hand of Yellow Shirt’s father, signing a stack of holograms, and looking at the children, “are you ready to head to the seaports?”

IV. Among Stars and Seashells

The Western Seaports, 12 years before rescale

Storm clouds kept the seaports in constant darkness, but it was a peaceful darkness, a darkness of contemplation. Wide, arcing waves crashed soundlessly in the distance, and their thin reverberative ripples lapped against the black sand before retreating into the vast colorless sea. All seemed to be colorless here, except for the people: amid pale mangrove branches and bleached seagrass darted fisherman wearing bold red and orange; they reached into the water and expertly grabbed the fishes with blue handheld nets. Meanwhile, the brilliant multicolored flags of fishing boats, their painted oars churning through the waves, fluttered from the other side of the harbor in the salty breeze.

The town itself was bustling with life: chimes echoed across the polished sea-stone streets as brightly clothed workers burst out from beneath shale rooftops covered in sea coral. Yellow Shirt was lost amid the clanging of smithies, the smell of fish in the streets, the artificially colored fountain in the center of town; here, his past—and even his conviction of logic—were forgotten; here, there was nothing but life and vigor.

Yellow Shirt had been separated from most of his village, except for two other children. 18a and the others had gone to the larger port town farther north, but Yellow Shirt's connection with them had waned after the mine incident, so he felt little sadness. His new town's countless fish markets and open doors, on the other hand, beckoned to him.

"You a newcomer?" asked a tall, bearded man in the street. He had one robotic eye which occasionally sparked electric blue, but his orange shirt blended in with the orange-painted wall behind him. Yellow Shirt stopped and peered inside the building, which was lit by bright seashell lanterns and overflowed with voices and laughter. "Yes—what business is it that you run here?" he responded.

"Ah, I'm the Mechanicist, owner of the vehicle repair shop upstairs and patron of this tavern. Come on in, you can try some of the beverages the Port Towns are famous for!"

"Alright," said Yellow Shirt.

Inside, the Mechanicist bought two sea-eel drinks, whose contents, he explained, were derived from eels all the way down on the seafloor. He sat down at a fish-scale-encrusted table and handed the second drink to Yellow Shirt. "So, what's your name?"

"I'm Yellow Shirt."

"There've been lots of newcomers recently," he said. "I take it you're from the mountain villages?"

"Yes—a Teicrell mining village."

"Teicrell, yes. I get my tools from them. So, if that's the case, then you must be here for that Cyan education campaign everyone's been talking about."

“Indeed. I hope to learn vehicular computing and eventually work for the corporation.” Yellow Shirt took a sip of the drink, savoring the salty, almost-umami flavor that had been rare in his village—it reminded him of eating seasoned fish, a delicacy back then.

The Mechanicist smiled. “Ah, computer science—logic is such a beautiful thing, is it not?”

“Logic...” then Yellow Shirt looked down with a start and noticed that the fish scales decorating the table had familiar speckled, ridged edges. *Coelacanth*.

“Hmm? Something the matter?”

“It- it’s nothing.”

The orange-shirted man’s expression shifted to one of worry. “Was it... your life in the mountains? Are you remembering something? Because this port town—it’s a place of new beginnings.”

Yellow Shirt looked around the tavern again and noticed that many of them were young, like him. He could see it in their faces, in the way they moved and talked: they were from mining villages too. “Yes,” he responded, “it was something from the mountains. But that’s over now.”

“If I were you, I’d take a walk down by the beach later. It always seems to clear my head.”

“Alright, I’ll consider it.” He took his cup from the coelacanth-encrusted table and finished it. “Thank you for the drink, Mr. Mechanicist. I’ll be back here often, so I’ll likely see you again soon.”

“See you, Yellow Shirt.”

He stepped out of the tavern and into the evening streets.

Coelacanth. To have obtained the scales for that table, they would have needed to kill a coelacanth. Did it matter? Walking down the streets towards the shore, he recalled the words of everyone else back at his village: *It’s just a fish...*

The bright, bustling town gave way to a moonlit beach, silent waves serenely coalescing along the dark-gray sandy shore; the golden lights of distant ships shone like ghost lanterns below the starry sky.

In the ancient days, he was told, before the Waste War, people used to put alcohol in their drinks. It meddled with the brain, stimulated the emotions—was Yellow Shirt just some anomaly born with alcohol running through his veins? Was he somehow eternally drunk, and that was why he couldn’t bear to see the coelacanth dragged out of the river?

The sea coalesces in its regular cycle, the waves, the tides, the melting and refreezing of glaciers; life is just a sine wave.

He stared out at the vast black horizon, recalling the words he once read in his father’s copy of *Blue Scale* by Cyan Shirt.

If we each find the maximum of our sine wave, constantly trekking from the valleys to those rounded peaks, this world shall be ours for the taking.

The horizon seemed vast, stretching out in all directions, a perfectly impenetrable line.

Our hearts shall drag us ever downwards, while our minds shall send us to the stars.
Footsteps from behind, and a flicker of orange: the Mechanicist.

V. World's End Sandcastles: The Horizontal World

The Western Seaports, 12 years before rescale

“Yellow Shirt,” said the Mechanicist with a sigh, “sit down.”

“Here? In the sand?”

“Yes; you can brush it off later.”

Yellow Shirt sat down and touched the black sand with his hand—it was dry and fine, but the grains seemed to stick together.

“Alright—now you must build a sand castle.”

“For what purpose?”

“You will see.”

He took a handful of the sand, which molded itself at his touch, and placed it in front of him. Using his arms, he could sweep more of it into one place, building the castle's base. This process continued for several minutes, until the castle had a solid foundation. The evening air was pleasantly, near-unnoticeably cool, and the constant white noise of distant waves filled his ears with pure silence; he focused his eyes solely on the castle ahead of him. Yellow Shirt kept building: he constructed towers, walls, battlements, and thin flags which were supported only by the cohesive strength of the black sand. The Mechanicist did not say a word.

The courtyard was not efficient enough, he decided, since wagons would take up the majority of the space, forcing pedestrians to walk along the narrow sides in single-file. He carefully scraped a section of wall inwards, and scooped up the resultant sand with his finger; this he used to create thin beams which held up the structure above. The widened walkway would allow for greater efficiency in the marketplace, bolstering external trade—yet the treasury could be easily invaded, having large, open windows. To combat this insecurity, Yellow Shirt began a new series of castellated walls which surrounded an open courtyard, preventing would-be invaders from easily accessing the riches inside. He then began work on another tower to accommodate more people, then a greenhouse to provide food, then—

“It's been an hour,” said a far-off voice.

Yellow Shirt looked up, then back, and saw the Mechanicist sitting behind him. Suddenly, the sound of the waves returned to his perception, and he saw the starry sky above, which had earlier been hidden by clouds. Compared to the miniature scale of his castle, the ocean beyond the distant silhouetted trading ships was infinite in its vastness.

“You spent an hour building that tiny castle. Now, follow me over to the shore.”

Yellow Shirt stood up and followed the man, whose orange shirt, lit by the stars, stood out from the long bleak shoreline. He stopped just before the coalescing high-tide waves.

“Yellow Shirt, my sister once told me that she wanted to sail the far waves on that horizon and explore the distant unknown. She said that the sea pulled her, drew her heart towards it, and that she had no choice but to go. We were young children then, and I had laughed at such a joke: only the Western Atolls existed beyond the horizon, and they offered nothing of value, since the automated probes had already extracted all geographic and biological data.

“‘But it’s true,’ she said: ‘I want to see something new, to explore!’ I had just laughed again.

“When she grew older, she would go fishing on her own, in our small family boat, sometimes for ten hours at a time. She would always return with strange, exotic fish that no one had seen before, and they fetched high prices at the market.

“I once climbed up to those high cliffs”—the Mechanicist turned and pointed towards a series of weathered rocks north of the town, whose silhouettes grew upwards, blotting out the stars until they reached the base of a tall lighthouse that beamed across the night sky—“and I looked for our boat on the sea. After a few minutes, I spotted it out on the open ocean, a singular orange speck in the distance. No one had ever gone out that far.

“‘It’s dangerous,’ my father warned her when she returned, ‘to venture that far out into the sea. No one will be there to help if things go wrong.’

“‘But I’m a good sailor, and I know how to navigate,’ she protested. “Things *won’t* go wrong.

“‘Besides,’ he continued, ‘there’s nothing to be found out there. All the best fish are along the nearby coasts.’

“One night,” the Mechanicist continued, “my sister didn’t come home for dinner. We went out to the cliffs to search, and saw nothing. In the morning, she still wasn’t back. Days passed, then weeks, then finally a scrap of tattered orange fabric drifted onto the beach. A merchant found it. It was her sail.”

He looked up towards the tall lighthouse in the north, but his expression was difficult to read in the darkness. “We built that lighthouse in memory of her, to guide sailors home before it’s too late.”

“I- I’m sorry for your loss,” said Yellow Shirt.

The Mechanicist’s tone turned from mournful to serious: “What happened to your sandcastle?”

“Oh, that? I’m not sure—I can’t see it from here.” He walked around, looking for the sandcastle along that dark beach, but he couldn’t find it.

“You lost it?”

“It appears so.”

“For an hour, that castle was your world. You built it, you improved it, you blocked out everything else. And then, you walked away into the wider, ‘true’ world, and that micro-world was lost. Beware the true world, Yellow Shirt. You may now look back at that castle as an illusion, as a simulation; yet, for an hour, it was your *reality*. Sometimes, we feel that drive to explore, to get away, to follow our misleading hearts into that dangerous, distant sea. But all it does is take everything away from us. Our perception *is* our reality, and our perception is all that matters.

“Some say that even the stars are a lie, that the night sky is an illusion; they wonder whether our world is smaller than a sand castle along the infinite shoreline of existence. I say that those aren’t our questions to ask.

“I don’t like talking philosophy, but this is the one time I have to say something. I’m worried for you. Stay in sight of that lighthouse, Yellow Shirt.”

The next day, Yellow Shirt found himself before the great sliding metal door at the school’s entrance. The sun was rising on the awakening port town far below him; the morning air was crisp this high in the cliffs; seagulls squawked as they flapped from their cliffside nests to the sea to fetch fish for their young. Other recruited students walked up the path behind Yellow Shirt with familiarly uncertain expressions. Some were around his age, though many were younger. He could tell they were from the villages too: their arms were muscular from work in the mines, their gaits confident as they walked up the steep rocky path, and their eyes—their eyes reflected the very same memories of those alpine peaks, blue butterflies still dancing in that azure replica of the sky...

A gathering of the students had formed in front of the door, all somewhat nervous to be the first to enter.

Yellow Shirt took the lead and stepped on the pressure plate. The door slid open smoothly, welcoming him into a wide, brightly-lit hall. The air bore the fresh scent of new construction, the walls were white and clean, and morning sun poured through the huge windows above. Projected blue arrows on the polished andesite floor ahead pointed right, towards a doorway which branched off from the main hall—the entrance to a classroom.

“Find the seat with your name on it,” instructed a tall, serious man once they entered the bright room. Upon his shirt gleamed the tipped-scale Cyan Industries insignia. “I am the manager of this facility, Jeffyron Endzarken. It is my job to ensure you are all thoroughly educated before leaving eight years from now to become valuable members of the corporation. It is a pleasure for me to meet you all.”

Yellow Shirt had never been in a school before; in his village, he had learned by investigating minerals in the mines and discussing philosophy beneath the stars. The clean formality of this facility sharply contrasted against those rugged mountains, as did the abstract lectures and the mathematical equations and the sharp-resolution holograms that hovered infinitesimally close to the white walls and morphed around his fingers when he touched them.

By the end of the day, Endzarken and the facility AI had provided each student with a mobile storage device, used for accessing notes, datasets, assignments, and vernacular texts. After a series of lectures on logic and reason, they were dismissed and sent back into the city. Indeed, this training progressed along Cyan Shirt’s plan: those recruited from the mountains were to be taught the corporate values, and the values of *Blue Scale*, and the logistical know-how of working with the powerful modern technologies that Cyan Industries relied on, but they would mostly be allowed to think and solve problems for themselves.

Yellow Shirt’s mind soon left behind the bitter melting of snowflakes, the hot summer sunlight, the sweet scent of pines, the loud crumbling rock falls, and the squelch of wet grass; he entered the world of a pure white canvas, closing the door on all that rough raw emotion behind him. Day by day, lesson by lesson, his eyes became flat and calculating as he converged with

ever more precision on his conviction. His stylus sweeping across a virtual page for endless hours, his mind became an enigma to his peers and even his instructors. Deep in elaborate lemmas and proofs—deeper than he had ever ventured in the abyss of the mines—he abandoned his schoolwork within the first weeks, instead using rationality alone to calculate far into the night. Weeks became months, and months condensed into drops of logic in his thoughts. But when Yellow Shirt finally emerged from his room weeks later, he presented a solution to the Engine Problem, an issue in vehicle navigation logic that had plagued the company for decades.

Incredulous, Enzarken inquired, “you devised this yourself?”

“Indeed; each of these files”—he motioned towards his storage device—“is penned by my own hand.”

In the following years, he solved three more of Cyan Industries’ problems, and one problem belonging to a competitor, generating technological and economic changes that echoed across Tivect World. Each time, the mountains disappeared further into the void behind him.

Four years later, Yellow Shirt sat on the steps in front of the facility, taking in the evening breeze as he looked out over the vast ocean. The sun was setting, and the students would be heading back to their lodging soon. Several white birds darted and squawked through the air as they returned to their cliffside nests with mouthfuls of fresh pink fish and crustacean; to the north, the lighthouse flickered. He, however, was busy contemplating an equation: the birds were mere automatons, the humidity a mere field.

A bit farther down the rocky path, he saw movement: someone with a cyan shirt and long dark hair. Her appearance was unfamiliar to him, certainly unlike the rough, orange- and red-clad fishermen with whom he had become accustomed to over his stay in the port town. Perhaps it was a representative from Cyan Industries.

As she approached, though, he noticed that she had no company insignia. Her deep green-blue eyes were strangely familiar.

“Are you a traveler?” he inquired. “This facility is off-limits to non-Cyan Industries-personnel.”

“A traveler? I suppose you could say that. My name is Cyan Shirt.” At his look of uncertainty, she added, “the Second.”

“Ah, you bear resemblance to your father. I did not expect to encounter one as notable as yourself upon these cliffside. What brings you to these port towns?”

She walked over and sat down on the ledge next to him, then took a shiny yellow mechanical pencil out of her pocket.

“I’m actually here to see this facility myself. I take it you’re one of the mountain villagers my father recruited four years ago?”

“Indeed.”

“I was the one who gave him the suggestion, but my father... he is... somewhat dogmatic in his principles.” Cyan Shirt spun the pencil around in her hand, an efficient, practiced motion. Its yellow metal surface glinted in the late sunlight. Another three twirls of the pencil, then she

continued. “Cyan Shirt I has taken over our very way of thought with *Blue Scale*. In his youth, he was a unique philosopher, one who was willing to take risks, but now he sticks to his principles unquestionably. He sees change as a constant, but only in one direction. His whole philosophy is one-dimensional.

“In the pages of *Blue Scale*, change means more money, it means more success, it means carefully-directed technological expansion facilitated by existing institutions. He never would have dreamed up something as absurd as recruiting mountain miners to revitalize the company. He thinks it’s all one path, a path directed by logic gates and switches, progressing ever-forwards with reason and reason alone. But I think differently.”

Yellow Shirt watched the spinning pencil intently. Her fingers moved quickly in a repeated cycle, twisting over and around, flexing backwards and forwards, yet the pencil spun perfectly on one axis, carving out a planar circle in the cool evening air. A cycle—like the waves, the tides, a sine wave.

He recalled the rough mountains of his youth, the unbalanced rocks framing the mine entrance, the shrubs scattered randomly on the hillsides, the bends of the mossy alpine creek. The mountains had cycles too, seasons, the summer and the autumn, the winter and the butterfly-filled spring. But those cycles were natural, not carefully defined and constrained like that rotating pencil.

In the ports, their boats rocking to the waves, the fishermen lived a life of uncertainty, tossed along by the waters of fate. In much the same way, the other recruited children had grown up surrounded by rock-falls and failing equipment, their lives defined by risk. On the other hand, Cyan Shirt...

She tapped his shoulder. “Hey, are you listening to me?”

He awoke from these thoughts with a jolt. “I’m sorry. I was simply thinking...”

“Ah, perhaps I should apologize, then. No one’s thoughts deserve to be interrupted.”

For once, Yellow Shirt was surprised. “That’s not what Endzarken teaches us. He says we should always share our thoughts to others, to ensure they’re following a logical path. ‘Individual nature is inclined to be chaotic, so society’s purpose is to counteract this.’”

“Fascinating, how different peoples’ opinions are. My father wrote nearly that exact line in his book—that must be where your instructor heard it. But I say that our thoughts and emotions are our own, and they don’t always have to be logical.”

“Emotions?”

“Yes, emotions. Everyone says to suppress your emotions, right?”

“Of course; they only hinder us.”

“I expected they’d be teaching you that. I despise all that apatheia.” She sighed. “The Mechanicist has really gotten to you, too, hasn’t he?”

“You know of him?”

“Well, he is... well-known in this town. His sister died at a young age, and then his son, Blue Shirt, abandoned him in a rush of pre-Explorecom idealism and headed east. He was left with nothing.”

“I didn’t know that last bit. But I believe he’s shown me the right way to see the world.”

“He’s known for trying to do that. Hmm. I’d like to tell you a story, if you have the time?”

“I do; I can return to my lodging at any time.”

Cyan Shirt nodded and began: “Out in front of my home, we have a sand garden. Every morning, the drones fly over with rakes, combing it into fine concentric circles. Several rocks lie amid the sand, and my father often sits there to write. But the sand must be groomed every morning, for it is loosely held together and blows out of shape in even the lightest of breezes.

“I was walking down the beach earlier today to see the fishing boats, and felt the soft black sand beneath my feet. It was held together firmly, with an interesting texture. Interested, I reached down to grab some, and brought it back to my vehicle’s micro-laboratory—it turns out that tiny interstitial fauna hide among the sand grains, dwelling in the gaps between them and using small pincers to hold on to several at a time. By connecting the grains in this way, these invisibly microscopic animals increase the sand’s viscosity.

“I realized that our minds are that beach, and our emotions are the interstitial fauna. They may feel like a hindrance, like something that slows us down, but they are crucial for the cohesion of thought: without passion, we would slip and fall, lost in a tumble of loose, meaningless proofs and logic statements. Without passion, any sandcastle we tried to build would just collapse back down to the ground.”

Sandcastles...

Yellow Shirt felt a confusion, a division in himself, just like after the mine accident four years ago. Emotion and logic, again, here, a debate assaulting him on the cliffs.

“We believe in logic,” the fishermen and sailors asserted while adjusting their sails by the swell and tumult of the tides; “I believe in emotion,” this daughter of a corporate machine seemed to be saying as she methodically spun her pencil along a clear, geometric axis. And then—

“Well, I believe I’ve learned all I needed to. Take this pencil; you’ll figure out how to spin it with practice. I don’t think I’ll be needing it anymore...”

“I don’t use physical media—”

She dropped it into his hand and stood up. “Yellow Shirt, believe me. You will use this.”

“You’re leaving already? And how do you know my na- ”

But she had already turned and walked away into the sunset.

He observed the pencil in his hand, still gleaming yellow in the last of the light.

The last day of his training came four short years later. “You are about to become full-time employees of Cyan Industries,” announced Jeffyron Endzarken that afternoon as the sun neared its peak once more. “That means leaving this town and heading east, to the corporate offices in the large cities or to the villages of the Breadbasket. I trust that you will remember everything you learned here, and that you will fulfill your purposes with success.”

Yellow Shirt walked down the rocky cliff path for the last time, the gulls crying overhead. The sky was blue and cloudless.

Back in town, he went to the tavern to find the Mechanicist. He no longer got lost in the town's crowds and colors, fish and shale roofs; rather, he navigated them with a certain efficiency and precision, quickly reaching his destination. In those eight years, he had grown taller than that old orange-shirted man, and his hair had grown long. His eyes now reflected the world at perfect angles, calculated reasoning piercing through brick and sand.

"You kids are leaving, I hear," the Mechanicist said with a sigh when he entered the crowded tavern. "Are you planning to go live in the cities or out on the plains?"

"I will be more productive on the plains, for busy environments distract with their noise." Yellow Shirt took out the yellow pencil and twirled it, a habit now.

"I see. Before you go, will you come see something? I had been meaning to show you for a while now, but you've never had enough time. It's an hour's walk from here."

"Certainly—this is my last day here, and I'll likely not return." Yellow Shirt put the pencil back in his pocket. "Shall we leave now?"

"Alright. Follow me."

Heading south, they left the port town behind, the bustling chatter of the fish market fading into the steady white-noise of the waves. The ground returned to that monotonous gray-black, sand grains crunching below their feet and salty air blowing by on a faint sea breeze. Thin faded strips of seaweed washed ashore, clinging to chunks of muted-brown driftwood; the sky overhead was on the threshold between the bright blue of midday and the darker, more-subdued gray of a coastal afternoon.

"We head to the end of this beach," declared the Mechanicist, pointing far ahead to where the stretch of sand met dark, jagged cliffs which joined the sea; the horizon was visible through an arch in the lava rock, and the waves churned below.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the cliffs: the sea was louder here, as if agitated by the sharpness of the stone ahead compared to the gentle sand behind them; seagulls, too, flocked and squawked, darting through the cool afternoon sky.

"We go inland here—this is all one large peninsula, so we can cross through the mountains to reach our destination, the bay," the Mechanicist instructed.

"Is there a trail?" asked Yellow Shirt.

"Yes, a footpath, but it is hardly used." He turned towards the inland lava rock, the sea at his back, and scanned the cliffside—there, the entrance.

Reddish vines hung in front like a curtain and golden lichen sprawled through cracks in the stone. The Mechanicist led the way, pushing the vines aside and entering into the cliffside cavern.

Bioluminescent mushrooms lit the tunnel a soft teal, and drips of water echoed from the stalagmites. Green liverworts burgeoned in that turquoise light, contrasting with the dull rust-red of ancient seashells littering the floor. The cave was angled upwards, towards the top of the cliffs, and as they progressed, the seashells were slowly replaced by clumps of orange moss.

The two travelers eventually returned back into the blinding sunlight. As Yellow Shirt's eyes began to re-adapt, they were met with a wide expanse of red, leafy trees, rising out of the ocean mist. The forest was vast—it stretched out seemingly endlessly beyond the cave—and was high enough that the sea was no longer visible. In the distance, the swaying outline of crimson canopies merged with the blue sky in a blaze of halation, and strange birds called above the muted sound of waves. A faint floral scent drifted on the breeze.

It was a half-hour's walk through this red world, made longer by the grown-over, run-down state of the trail. Evidently, very few made this journey. Yet the leaves eventually returned to the typical gray-blue of the coasts, and sea fog once again shrouded lichen-encrusted cliffs. They emerged onto the sand of a new beach at the center of a wide bay. The ocean stretched out ahead of them again, flat against the horizon like a plane.

"We are here." The Mechanicist reached and took out the fishing pole on his back.

He raised his fishing pole into the air, and declared: "Hydrozoans below, hear my call!"

For a minute, there was nothing. Then—

The gentle surface of the sea cracked in a frothing burst, waves violently crashing against the cliffs like great ripples in an ornamental pond; the rumbling echoed across the bay, and within that dark chasm of sea-water grew rose-colored lights, a multitude of them, like the stars of another world's night sky which had finally emerged from behind a dark cloud: the legends of the depths, the abyssal jellyfish. They arose from the ocean and arced through the air with grace, with grandeur, their glowing pink tentacles trailing to scrape the water below; the sky was filled with a sea of pink membranes which coalesced and expanded as one, filtering and scattering the sun's golden light. *A force capable of lifting even great islands into the sky*, thought Yellow Shirt. *A force beyond our power as mortals.*

"These are the true Hydrozoans of Tivect World. Long forgotten in the shadow of those youthful beings powering our own sky islands, these ancient organisms have dwelled beneath the sea for eons. Look at their grandeur, Yellow Shirt. Remember that the struggles of our own world—the politics, the economics, the drive towards the stars—are nothing in the face of true time; similarly, in the face of the universe, even this sea of jellyfish is but a sakura-colored speck of dust. One day, all shall fade away"

"H- how do you control them?"

The Mechanicist said cryptically: "An exploit." He paused for a moment to take in the jellyfish, drifting in the sun. "They will return to the sea when we leave. It is time to go—you should start packing your things."

As they walked back into the midst of the crimson trees, the pink membranes descended behind them. The leaves closed in above, blocking out the sunlight: the world of illusions had befallen them once more.

The next day, Yellow Shirt boarded the train to the Eastern Plains.

VI. Wheat

The Eastern Plains, 4 years before rescale

He stepped off the train onto dry, dusty ground. Watching it depart, a glimmering metal snake rushing past the farmland into the distance, he wondered where its other passengers would be headed: north, to the Capital City, with its tall glass-coated towers and corporate data centers of legend? South, to the spaceports, the gateways to the stars? More likely, to yet another one of the countless eastern villages, preparing to live in yet another self-sustaining wheat field, isolated under the hot sunlight of the plains.

The train glinted on its track one last time in the horizon, then it was gone. Yellow Shirt took in his surroundings.

The tall wheat rustling, solar-powered farm machines crawling on their paths across the fields, and the sea of rolling golden hills stretching endlessly towards the blue horizon: this was the World's Breadbasket; this was Yellow Shirt's new home.

As a child, he had never left of his mountain village in the Southern Slate Province. He would work in the mines for his whole life, he was told, because there was no other choice. He had heard only stories about the North, the East, the icebergs and lush forests, the plateaus and deserts; the Sky Islands and Western Atolls, too, existed only in his dreams. Yet now, with the vast landscape sprawled out before him, the mid-summer sun beating down, and his mountain home infinitely far away, he understood the truth of this world. Its size was immeasurable, and so was its detail.

He stooped down to investigate the carcass of a cicada, a decaying brown husk lying in the dust. A trail of ants crawled beside it; their chitin shimmered, shiny in the sunlight. There were ants in the mountains, too, but these had red shells instead of black ones and were far larger.

Then someone tapped his shoulder. "You a newcomer?"

"Hmm?" Yellow Shirt stood up and turned around to find a tall, frowning woman with a wide-brimmed solar-panel hat standing behind him. Her clothing was shiny and silver, as if to reflect the sun, and it glinted like the exoskeletons of the ants; similarly, her face coldly deflected his gaze. "Yes, I'm new here. I just got off the train several minutes ago."

"My town used to be small and peaceful, but now there's new people like *you* arriving by the dozens from those trains." Silver Shirt, as she would customarily be named, scoffed and looked away into the distance, as if glaring at the train which had disappeared beyond the horizon. "Well, I suppose I'll have to get another house and wind turbine built. Follow me to the buildings." She pointed out into the distance, an arbitrary direction amid endless wheat.

As they walked, Silver Shirt continued denouncing the newcomers: "My family has lived in these fields for centuries—since before the Waste War, the records say. We were here long before Cyan Industries turned this place into a storage box for their workers, even before Standard Wheat and Rice put in these big automated farm bots; we tilled the land ourselves, lived with only two turbines.

“You people don’t know the first thing about life in the plains—without a solar hat, you’ll get heat stroke before long. Luckily they just sent us a new shipment. Oh, and avoid the ants.” She stopped and pointed at the ground, where red strings of them were marching between wheat stalks. “A few people have already been stung...”

Yellow Shirt sighed impatiently. “I’ve already researched the ecosystems and lifestyles of the plains. Once we reach the town, I will make adequate preparations. Let us move quickly.” He was losing energy in the sweltering sunlight; beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

“Tired already? We’ll reach the town in ten more minutes.”

An eternity later, the wheat opened up as the small dirt path transitioned into a smooth stone walkway. Several single-story homes were clustered around a central lake—more like a pond, since it was only a hundred tivits wide—and a larger white-metal building stood directly ahead, with a digital sign that read “General Store” in slowly scrolling blue letters.

“Get a hat in there, then you can tour the town,” said Silver Shirt, pointing at the store. “I’ll put in a request to build another house; it’ll get done in a few days, so you can stay in the temporary lodgings for now.” She walked away, shaking her head.

The store’s interior was bright, fresh, and comfortably cool. Besides the solar hats on a rack in the center, the shelves were sparsely dotted with various necessities, like insect repellent and prepackaged foods. The one other shopper, who was observing the beverages, wore a Cyan Industries emblem on his also-silver shirt and had a youthful face. He turned around when Yellow Shirt walked in.

“Do you have any recommendations for a hat model?” Yellow Shirt asked the shopper, “I’m new to the town.”

“Sure,” the shopper replied, smiling, “though it depends on your situation. Are you here to work for one of the corporations?”

“Indeed; in fact, I too work for Cyan Industries.”

“Ah, excellent! There are a few more of us in this town, whom you’ll likely meet. So, where are you from?”

“I’m from...” he paused, remembering the mine collapse. *It would be too complicated to explain.* “...from the port towns. It’s my first time in the plains.”

“I see. I’m from the city myself, and have never been that far west. Well, if you’re from Cyan, that means that you will not be spending much time outside—you can get one of the smaller, cheaper models, like this one.” Though all the hats were products of Purple Corporation, they varied in price and model. He grabbed a flattish, circular one off the rack and handed it to Yellow Shirt. The dark blue solar panels on top glittered, fresh off the manufacturing line.

“Thank you for the recommendation. I’ll now head to the lodgings”

“Of course! See you around.”

Yellow Shirt walked out of the store wearing the solar hat, then headed towards the temporary lodgings.

The Eastern Plains were truly unique among the regions of Tivect World, he had learned. Much of the Continent had either industrialized and urbanized with the major waves of the first

industrial revolution—like the great cities farther east and the Northern Slate Province—or had been populated as a result of industrial necessity—like the Southern Slate Province’s mountain villages and the network of factory-towns clustered in the icy central mountains. On the other hand, the Eastern Plains had never truly felt the societal effects of industrialization, retaining their agrarian lifestyle and their spread-out population of peasantry for many centuries. Even as machines replaced farmers, the values of self-sufficiency and individualism remained heavily ingrained in the region’s culture, and families like that of Silver Shirt kept their feet firmly planted in the ground alongside their wind turbines. As the author of *Blue Scale*, Cyan Shirt I admired these self-intrinsic values, and thus he had chosen the plains to host his most valuable employees, hoping that the tranquil sea of wheat and the deflective gazes of its inhabitants would shape them into individuals worthy of Cyan Industries’ legacy.

And thus, the temporary lodging unit that stood in front of Yellow Shirt. Though externally small, it was more of an elevator which descended into the ground; once he entered its glass doors and dropped into this subterranean layer, he saw a hallway extending forwards some four-hundred tivits. Around twenty rooms (only one taken) were ready to buffer the vast numbers of employees migrating to the Eastern Plains until new housing could be constructed.

He chose the first room on the right, scanning his face to confirm his identity. The room was small, with only a bed, two screens, and simple lighting, but it was temporary—he would get a house above ground in several days once the machines had finished constructing it. Though it was still early, he knew that he would need energy for the next day’s setup and work, so he got into bed and quickly fell asleep.

The next day, when Yellow Shirt rode the elevator up to ground level and stepped out of the glass doors into yellow morning sunlight, the dozen or so inhabitants of the village greeted him. The majority of them were repairing field robots or sweeping the husks of cicadas off the stone pathways with brooms; it seemed that people here were more accustomed to early rising than in the port towns. He, too, grabbed a broom and assisted in cleaning the paths, which had been covered by dead insects in the night.

After several minutes, the doors of the housing unit opened, and its other inhabitant emerged, yawning. Her hair was short and lightish pink; she had no recognizable corporate emblem, but appeared to be from the cities by the space-efficient way she walked that was typical of those used to compressed streets. “Morning.”

“Good morning, Adfours,” said the Cyan employee Yellow Shirt had seen in the shop.

“More cicadas?” she asked, kicking one of the husks aside as she walked. “Where do they even come from?”

“They spawn in the wheat as non-destructive organisms, but they are short-lived. This pile-up on the ground happens every morning for the spawning season, which lasts a few months.”

“*Months?*” she complained, then suddenly seemed to notice Yellow Shirt: “Oh, hey. You’re another new person. Orange Shirt?”

“Yellow Shirt,” he corrected.

“Ah, right. After a few days, you get so used to seeing the yellow wheat that it gets hard to recognize other colors. I’m ad470c, but everyone calls me Adfours—nice to meet you.”

“How long have you been here? I see you’re still in the temporary lodging.”

“Four days? Five days? I forget, honestly.”

The Cyan employee laughed and walked over. “That’s what happens when you’re here for too long. Every day feels the same. I’m Zeolf, by the way; I wasn’t able to introduce myself in the store.”

“Nice to meet you as well, Zeolf,” replied Yellow Shirt. *Having connections in this town will be useful.*

“So, Yellow Shirt, what’s your job for Cyan?” he asked. “I’m an aerospace navigation engineer.”

“I’m general-purpose: they told me they’d need me to assist with various difficult tasks company-wide.”

“Hold on,” Adfours interjected, “isn’t general-purpose only assigned to those mountain village recruits?”

“I… am not aware of that. Perhaps they’ve changed the system; in any case, I don’t know what the first assignment will be.”

“Interesting,” she replied. “Well, I’m a space satellite controller, specifically for asteroid mitigation. Actually, speaking of that, get ready to see a meteor shower, ‘cause there’s a large asteroid headed here in two months.”

“Was that the one in the news?” asked Zeolf, curious.

“Yep. It’s a big deal. We’ve got it sorted out, though—the lasers’ll split up the asteroid into small pieces, then they’ll rain down across the Continent. I’ve heard that it might have useful metals, too, though no one’s sure.”

He recalled the meteor showers of his hometown: the mountains were close to the stars, so the nights were always clear. Besides the constellation shift, the stars were pure and unfiltered, unlike along the coast or down here in the plains, where they were always covered by clouds. The meteor showers came seemingly at random, sparks of pink and amber suddenly flickering through the sky in the dark before bed; once, a millitivit-sized piece landed by the river, and the children scoured the meadows near the river for hours to find the small impact crater.

If a meteor were to land in this endless land of wheat, and no one was there to see it, would it make a crater?

“Well, I’m gonna go get breakfast,” said Adfours, breaking Yellow Shirt out of his thoughts.

“I will too,” said Zeolf.

“I’ll join you soon,” replied Yellow Shirt. He stared at the cobblestone below his feet. It was nothing like mountain slate.

Over the next weeks, he slowly got accustomed to the hordes of dead insects and the rustling of wheat, the days blurring into gold-tinted mundanity. His house was built, his job started off well, and his neighbors grew to become his friends. To reflect on the past was difficult, for it took liquidating a jagged mountain range of memories into a simple plane—but what better place to do so than a literal plain, horizontal in all directions? That journey down from the mountains became a linear equation in his mind, his memories marching forwards and building off one another, growing into an uncontested truth: logic always wins.

Each evening was identical to the last.

Four years passed.

The buzzing of a thousand acres of cicadas filled his ears; the sun was setting, a wide red disc on the blazing orange horizon, and the paniced stalks of wheat cast long shadows backwards into the plains. Above him, the same network of stars from his mountain village was slowly emerging in a web of glowing blue. The moon arose from the opposite horizon. In the distance, specks of light from town gleamed through the crops.

A shred of paper—its red color faintly visible in the dark—landed at Yellow Shirt's feet. And then the world froze.

VII. Unity; or, Fall of Logos

The Eastern Plains

The No Distribution Block, Endzarken had explained to his students, was widely considered to be evidence of this world's true origins. It was discovered along the northwestern seacoasts hundreds of years ago when a farmer unearthed it from her field; it was said that the block's sides were too smooth to grip and its edges were sharp enough to cut tungsten, so scientists had to use magnets to guide it to the lab.

Precisely eight tivits a side, unbreakable, unmeltable, and perfectly reflective, the cube could be neither natural nor manmade, for it surpassed all known materials science. It glimmered in the laboratory—and later in a museum—for all eyes to see, its unreal form sending a clear message: “I am not of this world.” Yet one distinct feature stood out from the perfectly smooth surface. On one of the faces was inscribed the text: *No distribution!*

Due to its irregularity, many chose to ignore the cube, living their daily lives rather than being distracted by existential debates; this attitude was reflected in the pages of *Blue Scale*, where Cyan Shirt I advised the populace to look at the ground below their feet and focus on the objectivity of their perceived reality. However, among philosophers, the Source-Code Interpretation emerged as a predominant belief. It held that the cube proved the world was a simulation created by an omnipotent entity from beyond the fourth wall, and the cube was an artifact from this development that unintentionally remained visible. Hence, *reality* was considered meaningless.

On this day, in this instant, the Source-Code Interpretation would be proven right.

The world flashed in front of Yellow Shirt's eyes, distorting itself; the sprawling sea of wheat disappeared, leaving nothing but a swath of orange, a red setting sun on a canvas of vermillion—only vermillion sky beneath him, only vermillion sky to his sides, except for one cube of dirt. The dirt block cast shafts of volumetric shadow through the open air behind it, a monolith of darkness extending outwards in the opposite direction of the sun, stretching towards some unknown infinity; yet the whole of the plains, the mountains, every single drop of water in the sea, was gone. The boundaries were twisted and confining but simultaneously limitless, the world rendered into nothingness. It was a frozen moment, a moment caught in the bold clutches of that red light, a moment so utterly still and silent that it was a barrage of raw noise to Yellow Shirt's ears. He looked to his side and saw another speck in the void, far far away. Then he noticed more of them, including the image of Zeolf nearby, frozen mid-stride as he was walking, a cup in his hand, the drink frozen in motion as it sloshed, red sunlight glinting off a drop of the liquid, perfectly round. Other entities appeared, too—a vehicle control panel, a rock, a cicada—slowly littering the vermillion sky with their suspended forms.

Then the moment was over, and the world returned to normal. His feet felt solid ground, the dark linear silhouette of the plains returned to the horizon, the wheat kept on waving, as if nothing had changed.

But Yellow Shirt looked down at the ground and touched a stalk of wheat with his hand. It felt odd, different—as if it was made out of sand...

He sprinted back to town to find everyone out in the cold evening streets, looking around in silence.

“D-did you...see that?” Zeolf asked him quietly when he approached, still holding his drink in a trembling hand.

“Yes. It’s all...”

“...sky...”

“Yes.” They both were silent for a moment, letting their minds analyze and calculate. Yellow Shirt eventually said, “In all physicality, not an atom of this world has changed.”

The ground felt fragile, as if it could pop out of existence at any moment; the black line of the horizon minutely flickered in infinite tension.

“In all physicality, yes,” replied Zeolf—he clearly had come to the same logical conclusion. “But what does physicality even mean now?”

Yellow Shirt recalled the words of the Mechanicist back on the black-sand beach: *some say that even the stars are a lie, that the night sky is an illusion.*

Later that night, he could not sleep, for his mind was filled with only the void.

The next morning, the sun appeared once more over this false world, casting rays of false light into fields of false crops. The cicada carcasses were back, and as they tumbled across the ground, a man, running, appeared in the distance. The closer he got, the more anomalous his form became: he was young, but his green eyes were gaunt, wild, and unbelieving, as though he had just witnessed the death of a friend. His tangled brown hair, unprotected by a solar hat, was soaked in sweat. His shirt, tattered and torn, was a bold red.

The red-clad man ran through town, turning his head back and forth fervently, gaze blazing between the buildings, the wheat, the people; each desperate footfall silently shook the ground.

“This world,” he cried in agony upon reaching the center of town, “is too small!”

He ran off without stopping before the others could ask who he was or where he was headed. But Yellow Shirt felt the weight of the man’s fading footfalls, that he was a herald of greater change, a sign that the world would never be the same.

True to the philosophies of *Blue Scale*, Yellow Shirt kept working like normal, trying to reel in his mind from the falsity of his surroundings. He recalled building sand castles with the Mechanicist, that sense of reality from detail—he would keep his eyes focused on the ground, not looking up at the sea; he would stay in sight of the lighthouse, continue spinning that shining pencil in his hands, for it was his only tether to logic.

The next day saw the rise of chaos.

The still air burned under the high noon sun, the crops distorted by sweltering heat, and Yellow Shirt was inside his air-conditioned house when he saw a flicker of red outside the window. He cautiously slid the door halfway open, letting in a rushing wave of heat as he peered out. In the center of town lingered a crowd of around ten newcomers, all lacking solar hats and reflective clothing. Instead, they wore bright red clothing, not unlike the shirt of the man who had run through town the day before. They carried banners and standards, too, all equally red, and threw pamphlets into the hot air which drifted down and landed on the gravel. “Join us in our revolution!” commanded one of them, sweeping Yellow Shirt with his gaze.

The world may physically be the same, but psychologically, these people have been disillusioned. When faced directly with the problem of existence, it is only natural that radical, irrational solutions will emerge...

A messenger then galloped in on horseback, and the rare clop of hooves echoed across the town like a strange drumbeat from the ancient agrarian times, slowing until the center of town, where he dismounted. He raised his crimson banner into the air and declared: “This world is too small for there to be division among us. We have but one path forwards, the path of glory and union, of shared planetarian destiny. We can look upwards at those false stars no longer—*down with the vehickles!*”

“Down with the vehickles!” repeated the crowd in a fervent chanting chorus. “Down with the vehickles!”

One of the red-clad stooped down and grabbed a heavy gray rock, staggering under its weight. She approached towards Yellow Shirt’s vehicle with lopsided steps and took aim, then—before he could say a word—chucked the rock like a shot-put straight through the vehicle’s windows, which shattered with a crash. It punctured a hole through the floor of the vehicle and thudded roughly in the dust below alongside shards of glass.

The other townspeople had also gathered near and looked on, stunned in disbelief, as the rock-thrower picked up another piece of metamorphic ammunition. The rest of the revolutionaries began to march off towards other parts of the town and destroy more ships; but their raw, intense chorus still blazed through the chaos—*down with the vehickles!* Their leader continued to denounce the independent phlegmatic materialism of *Blue Scale*, which had caused the Tivect people to lose sight of their values and their unity. To save this all-too-small world, he cried, they must explore every single block beneath their feet.

The second rock to hit Yellow Shirt’s vehicle struck its engine, setting the entire interior alight in hot red flames which licked out the windows like hungry tongues, threatening to burn the dry wheat. The sky turned from blue to gray as heavy chemical smoke blotted the sun.

“To all you townspeople who stand here today: we enter a new age in which our true purpose shall be fulfilled. As Cyan Shirt II declared of late, the falsity of this world exposes the falsity of an economy—we have no more need for currency! As Red Shirt declared, this world is too small for us to be divided! Explorecom is our new idealism!”

The mention of Cyan Shirt’s name caused Yellow Shirt to start, but the speaker continued.

“The casting of these stones were the wake-up call that you needed, but now we all know our true purposes. We can unite as one and find our salvation in this illusory world—it is for this reason that I, Bob of the North, declare the foundation of the First Explorers’ Guild of the Eastern Plains!”

Bob mounted his horse, summoned his allies to his side, and rode off into the wheat fields, leaving dozens of smoldering vehicles and a gathering of townspeople behind him. Thus began, in but one short day, the great Explorecom Revolution.

VIII. A Sea of Cicadas

The Eastern Plains

The false sun rose again over the false horizon.

Following the long line of explorers, she pushed aside long stalks of wheat which sprang back to cover the path behind her; she planted one foot after the other in the rough gravelly dirt, trying her best not to trip on rocks or step on an anthill.

The sun blazed overhead, and without a solar hat—the Guild leader would never permit such a dangerous artifact—she had felt the full brunt of its rays for the past five hours. Heavy beads of sweat burdened her forehead and the heat blurred her vision. Even a month after cicada season, the dry air still faintly smelled of the insects—a tangy, organic scent.

Next year, when the cicadas re-emerged, they would find overgrown wheat fields and abandoned towns; there would be no one to sweep their carcasses off the cracked stone pathways, and henceforth there would be no end to the height of their piles. In a hundred years, she wondered, would they bury the whole of the plains in those dark exoskeletons? To an observer in the mountains, it'd be a sea of darkness, wings and shells covering dead wheat. From orbit, it'd be a dark patch on this world, a tombstone over the fields of a forgotten past. They would pile up to be deeper than the ocean, and denser than it too, flattening down into layers of husk-formed sediment, directly proportional to the depth. Were one to walk, one would slip and tumble down into the corpses until they became packed closely enough—suspended in the midst of a dark equilibrium. The fields, the houses, the machines would be forever far down in the impenetrable depths; meanwhile, the cicadas would fly above like seagulls on the hot breeze, growing, reproducing, and dying, each one increasing the height of this sea. Where would explorers go? Would they, too, be buried? Or would they wear snowshoes and trudge over the crunching, festering wings? Perhaps the whole exploration effort would be impeded, for the cicadas would develop endless layers up towards the false infinite sky, each one growing at a rate faster than the prior; they would suck the life out of the trees, the salt out of the ocean, the very water vapor from the air—water, what a beautiful thing, what a delicacy. Blue, so blue, like the sky, like a scale... how wonderful... water...

She felt someone shaking her. “Wake up!”

Somewhere farther off: “Does she have heat stroke?”

“I think she just fell asleep.”

“We’ve been walking for a while. How about we take a break?”

“Yeah, good idea.”

She opened her eyes to the sight of a brilliant half-orange, half-star-covered sky; she was lying on her back. The constellations above looked exactly like the ones from before Global Rescale: distorted, split up by strange refractions in the space settlements. Even the might of the Explorecom Revolution couldn't reach them—even the piles of cicadas would never reach the height of those orbiting asteroids. Meanwhile, along the right side of her vision blossomed orange and magenta clouds, illuminated from below by the setting sun; the hot, golden air was

reminiscent of the dusk that from *that day*, the dusk when she had descended from the skyscrapers and spoken to the populace of unity and revolution.

"Cyan Shirt, are you awake?" It was the Guild leader.

"Y-yeah..." She pushed herself up, the rough gravel digging into her palms. "This world... why do we explore this world, but not the stars?"

"Cyan Shirt, are you alright? We'll take a break if you need it."

"Was this what my father felt like?"

The window was open, illuminating grains of sunlight suspended above the bed. Despite that, the air was still and hot, and those motes drifted lazily from light to shadow. She frowned and observed the bamboo outside the window, then looked back at Cyan Shirt I on the bed. Reclining back, her father coughed; without medicine—it was banned by the government—his health was decaying. He suddenly clutched her arm and spoke:

"Ah, but to think—qubits dancing beneath our hands like obedient puppets, the power of the stars within our grasp, and the very atoms of this universe themselves bending to our omniscient will: wherefore do you seek to eliminate these abilities, the labor of our collective minds for the past millennia working tirelessly in an endless conquest of the universe? Wherefore do you seek to send us back to those primeval days, the days when we had not mastered this world, but the world had eluded us? Wherefore do your followers cast away the grand responsibilities they have inherited, like the crawler-crabs of the atolls abandoning their shells as the sun rises once more? It is with true confusion that I observe your efforts, your struggle against all that our people have struggled for; please, if you would only explain it to me, before we descend back into the clutches of this universe; please, if for nothing but the knowledge that I so seek... ah, but you will not tell. The contents of your mind shall remain a secret forever."

Hours later, he breathed his final breath. She had been searching through old paper maps in the adjacent room at the time, and would never know if he declared any final words. It would haunt Cyan Shirt II for the rest of her life.

"Was this what my father felt like?"

"Cyan Shirt, we're resting for the night."

Someone some ten tivits away yawned—"I'm tired."

The orange horizon continued to dim as sunset gave way to stars; the last of the evening's heat was fading.

Cyan Shirt II responded: "Alright."

The Guild leader walked away to lay down. Meanwhile, Cyan Shirt pushed herself off the ground and walked out into the fields.

In the stillness of the evening, all was silent but the rustling of pitch-black wheat parting at her footsteps. Below her, the ground was coarse and rocky; the tall stalks scraped her legs, hands, and clothes (though she didn't care—they were already dirty and torn from weeks of exploring); the silhouette of these rough, untended fields stretched out to the horizon. But above

her, the glimmering, blazing-blue constellations were still cleanly pierced and refracted by the spacenet, drifting along like the fish in her father's glittering ornamental pond. What brilliant cerulean those stars were—far clearer than when she lived in the cities. If she ignored the rough wheat below her, she was suspended in a sea of stars.

But was it wrong to think beyond the reality at her feet, to think into space, when she knew that such space was imaginary? Yet at the same time, Red Shirt's explorationist dream was imaginary. It was all imaginary... so what did it matter if she just kept walking, if she never turned back to the guild's caravan?

But a glimmer of light in the distance awoke her from her thoughts. It was white-blue—an electric light—and arose from the far-off horizon. Solitary like an anglerfish in the sea of darkness it shone, beckoning strangely, out of place, anachronistically: since the ban, she hadn't seen an electric light for months.

As she walked towards it, the air grew colder yet, and the wheat grew denser. She continued on for several minutes until reaching a small, overgrown path that cut through the fields; next to it loomed an broken-down harvester, and hanging from one of its solar panels was the electric light. It harshly illuminated the scene: vines had taken hold of the harvester, wrapping around it and firmly planting it in the ground; the white paint was peeling and scraped, revealing dirty titanium beneath; cicada husks were piled on the hard gravel below.

As she approached, the gravel crunched beneath her feet. Upon hearing her, something moved on top of the harvester, slightly shaking its frame; she couldn't see what, though, because its roof was cast in shadow. "Who's there?"

"First, I'd like to know who *you* are," said a man's voice from above—his simple, level tone clashed with the overgrown backdrop. "If you're with the explorers, I advise you leave."

"I'm not."

"Why should I believe you?"

She thought for a moment. "The explorers believe in unity—they wouldn't wander off by themselves at night."

"So you know the explorers well. I presume you lived among them for some time?"

He'll know if I lie. "Yes. I don't support Explorecom, though."

The man paused, then swung his legs over the roof of the harvester and dropped down with a thud. The light now revealed him: his hair was long and dark and he wore a simple, surprisingly clean white shirt. In his pocket gleamed a yellow mechanical pencil. He leaned against the harvester and observed Cyan Shirt, then smiled—an impassive, logical smile, the Scientist's Smile, as it used to be known—and replied: "and this is coming from the person who put the *com* in Explorecom?"

"So you know who I am."

"Of course; you changed history. But I assume you left the guild because you now understand your naivety. I was once like you, too—all emotion, no reason. When you saw me last, I had already gotten over it."

When you saw me last... “Ah, Yellow Shirt from the Seaports—I knew I’d seen you before. You’ve changed a lot in only eight years.”

“Indeed.” Yellow Shirt took the pencil out of his pocket and spun it, the lead tip shimmering.

“You’re spinning the pencil even more efficiently than me now.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to practice in these past months. All I do now is eat, sleep, write, and think. The latter is conducive to pencil-spinning. But, Cyan Shirt, to the point: I left the light on this harvester to attract people like you—fellow outcasts who still long for logic, still stargaze at night. Of course, not even I could have predicted that *you* would be here, but the fact remains that I have a purpose. You likely feel as if you’ve lost your own purpose, so let me tell you and spare you the thinking: we must restore logic and end the plague of exploration. I’ve done the calculations, and everything adds up: we can save this world.”

“Calculations? But there are no more computers, no more datasets, no more artificial intelligence—”

“I don’t need technology.” Yellow Shirt tapped his forehead. “I only need time.”

He really has changed. He’s become a machine... but there’s likely no one else in this world who still believes in logic. I’ll have to trust him.

“Is that so, Yellow Shirt? Tell me the plan.”

“We need to find a vehicle.”

The next morning was rainy, but it wasn’t the dreary kind of rain. No; the rain fell from a bright blue sky, glimmering prismaticly in golden sunlight—blue, pink, flecks of silver traced each drop as it gracefully splashed into the puddles under the warehouse’s hole-ridden roof. Rather than hammering on the corrugated metal, the rain gently tapped it, a chorus of multi-tonal pings which formed the backdrop to the churning of dirt and the grating of shovels.

“You’re sure it’s here?” Cyan Shirt leaned against her shovel to catch her breath.

Yellow Shirt nodded. “During my training, I learned of the existence of underground vehicular storage units, or UVSUs, which were kept secret by Cyan Industries. There is one in every province—luckily this one was near my town—and they are kept twenty fathoms underground to withstand harsh environmental conditions. I’m surprised you, as CEO of Cyan Industries, never learned of them.”

“My father was very secretive with his projects, hiding some so deep inside the layers of databases such that he alone knew of their existence; he promised he would tell me everything one day, but he never got the opportunity.”

“Was he separated from you when the guilds formed?”

“He died.”

“I see. My condolences.”

They kept digging.

Eventually, when the sun was high and the hot rain mixed with sweat, Cyan Shirt's shovel finally hit metal: a clang reverberated around the warehouse. She scraped some wet dirt away to reveal a solid white surface buried beneath the ground. Cleaned and polished from the rainwater, it glistened—it likely had not seen the light of day for years. “It's here,” she called to Yellow Shirt.

“We will need to find an access key port, which will be located on the top of the vehicle. I will then produce an imitation digital key, which should take several hours.”

She nodded and continued to excavate the vehicle's upper surface as he walked over.

They reached the key port several minutes later: like the rest of the white metal plating, it was bright, clean, and out of place in the dirt of these overgrown plains. Its soft surface glowed with a faint blue light from another era. Cyan Shirt reached out to touch the port out of instinct, as though she was scanning her fingerprint for her very own vehicle, which she had long since destroyed.

To her surprise, as she depressed the glowing surface, it clicked and a hologram message projected into the air: *Vehicle Storage, Eastern Plains: Cyan Shirt II (ID 0x000054F3) is cleared for access.* “It looks like we won't need a fake key after all,” she remarked.

The vehicle's door slid open.

IX. Archipelago

To Cyan Shirt I, the sky islands were the perfect system: a symbol of progress, beauty, and self-intrinsicism.

“Daughter, everything in life is simple: with enough hard work, you’ll be able to accomplish whatever you want.” Cyan Shirt I looked up and smiled; the wide expanse of white concrete beneath him shone in the blinding sunshine under the Capital City’s famous blue sky from all those decades ago. Cyan Shirt II, meanwhile, stared up at the vehicle controls looming in front of her.

“But I can’t reach the joystick!”

“Then work on eating well and growing taller. Meanwhile, study the flying lessons Mr. Zetelovox made for you. I’ll be heading to the pond; make sure to be there before lunch time.” He turned and started walking off towards the Estate, his footfalls reverberating on the concrete.

“Father, wait—help lift me out of the seat!”

Cyan Shirt I looked back and shook his head, smiling: “you can climb out on your own.”

The ladder’s rungs were spaced far apart, and at ten years old, she could hardly reach the rung below with her foot. It was a stretch, and the metal rungs were slippery and burning hot in the sunlight—

It was a long way down to the concrete.

Several minutes later, she limped painfully into the medical bay. The gleaming machines quickly went to work on her broken leg with their needles and lasers, but the estimated progress bar projected in front of her inched forward ever so slowly—meanwhile, the clock on the wall ticked away, and just before the healing was finished, it struck lunchtime. She’d be late.

The clock in this vehicle, though, did not move. “It looks as though the clock is broken, along with other features,” noted Yellow Shirt once they entered the cockpit, staring at the dirt packed against the window. “And the safety systems and climate control are nonexistent—this is a very bare-bones vehicle.”

“Well,” replied Cyan Shirt, “time no longer really matters in this eternal cicada-season. And safety? I’m a good pilot.”

She reached towards the joystick ahead of her. Unlike in her old vehicle, it didn’t conform to her grip, and there were no neural sensors to auto-customize the controls; nonetheless, the activation button was exactly where it should be. Just as she did on her very first successful flight, she pressed it until a click and the engines hummed to life. The heavy dirt packed outside the window began to shift down, filling the gaps below the vehicle as it inched its way out of the ground.

“So, Yellow Shirt, you say there are still people there? Scientists?”

“Indeed. I know the nature of these people, for I communicated with them during prior work: they are some of the few in this world who are certain to be unfazed by the Global Rescale

Event. Their analytical skills and pre-Explorem technologies are now necessary for us to save this world.”

“I suppose. I still don’t fully understand, though. Your plan seems infallible in all aspects but one: you expect people to listen to the written word when literacy itself is now a social taboo?”

He thought for a moment. “You will understand in time.”

The dirt continued to shift as cracks of daylight glittered toward the top of the window, the world above just barely out of sight.

“By the way, Yellow Shirt, how did you survive all those months without joining a guild? Surely most food had expired.”

“These are wheat fields, and among them cicadas; there was food all around me.”

“They’re... edible?”

“Flavorful, in fact.”

Eventually, the vehicle gained enough force to break out of the ground, light rushing into the cockpit. Cyan Shirt piloted it upwards until its hull grinded against the corrugated metal roof, but after increasing the strength of the engines, the roof’s sheets too gave way and they broke into the hot open air. As they rose, the warehouse’s broken roof and the sea of gold below slowly began to recede, replaced by wispy clouds. Suspended between earth and sky, Yellow Shirt gazed out the window to the west—still, an endless horizon of wheat. But beyond that infinity, he knew, hid his hometown—abandoned by all but the cavern-dwelling blue butterflies in their hibernation, ready to wash over the melting snow like an azure wave at the first hint of spring; under the sea hid the great jellyfish, bioluminescent gelatin pulsating sakura-pink in the abyssal dark; even farther than that were the Western Atolls, greatfish flourishing amidst the towering lily pads. Staring out over the midday horizon, he was impaled with a greater nostalgia than he had felt before, recalling not just the suffering of his past, but also the joy and beauty. Yet his gaze then hardened as he felt the pencil in his pocket and looked up to those dark specks high in the atmosphere: *the past is gone, unchanged, irretrievable; now I must shape the future. I must shape it with the power of my own hands, with the sharpness of my mind.*

That was the last time Yellow Shirt felt the emotion of nostalgia; after a moment of contemplation, he wiped it from his mind.

The clouds grew thicker and denser, obscuring all vision and wrapping their ship in a heavy haze of white noise, until they punched through into a blinding brightness. As their eyes adjusted and Cyan Shirt eased the hum of the engine, the vast sky island sprawled ahead: the grass was bright and turquoise, strips of light decorating each blade as it waved in the atmospheric breeze; meanwhile, pure white buildings and arrays of deep cerulean solar panels glistened in the distance, nestled in valleys populated by ethereal wispy coral-trees; farther beyond the hills, stretches of bold vermilion farmland were dotted with glittering tilling machines. Pools of shining fresh water perfectly reflected the clouds in the azure sky. Contrasted

with the dull, pale-yellow sea of wheat below, the island's sea of color was blinding in its silent intensity.

The vehicle slowed to a complete stop. Yellow Shirt glanced at Cyan Shirt, who was silently staring out over the island; bold sun and blue-green grass sparkled in her eyes.

"It—it's truly beautiful..."

"Indeed. Now we must land and explain our position to the scientists."

"Can you not just sit and admire this for a moment? It is the very world we want to restore, to preserve. It has only been months since I last saw a sparkling cityscape, but it feels like decades..."

He sighed. *Even among us, restorers of logic, the emotion of longing persists. She must learn to forget it if she hopes to protect this place.*

They admired the island for some more time, but eventually the glass doors of those far-off buildings began to open and their miniscule inhabitants approached, crossing the turquoise grass.

He tapped Cyan Shirt's shoulder and pointed. "We should land."

They exited the vehicle to find a crowd of scientists gathered near the island's edge. "Travelers from below, welcome to the sky islands!"

"It's... Cyan Shirt, from Cyan Industries!" a scientist declared after seeing her face. "We are overjoyed to see that you are still alive, after the world below went silent."

"I will fetch food, water, and a change of clothes."

"Please, recount to us how you escaped the darkness below!"

After the crowd had settled down, Yellow Shirt stepped forward to speak. "As you likely know, the universe's rescale precipitated a destructive revolution across Tivect World, overturning much of our past society's progress. While you upon the sky islands continued to seek reason, science, and progress, the vast majority sided with the Explorecom revolution, allowing their emotions to overpower their logic as they condemned our race toward the stars.

"Among the revolutionaries was one named Red Shirt, who violently pushed for explorationism—the ideal of exploring every tivit of Tivect world. When the Great Taliop died by his hand, the Tivect Union ended, bringing about an era of guilds and factory-burning. Among them also was one who pushed to end the former economic order—the very Cyan Shirt II that you see at my side."

The island's inhabitants shared glances and began to mutter among themselves.

He continued: "but she has changed! In the wake of these calamities, she has ridded herself of all emotion and understood that logic must be restored, choosing to embark upon this journey. Similarly, this world is not beyond its end—on the contrary, it is on the brink of a vast restoration."

"You are wrong," said one scientist. "In the past months, we have witnessed firsthand the rage of the people, the destruction of vehicles, the loss of centuries of texts and datasets, looking

on from above as smoke filled the skies. You cannot drag us, the last logical people this world, back down there with you into the flames.”

“If you were to simply hear my plan, you would know this is not the case.”

“You say this,” said another from the crowd, “but the facts are right in front of us: the world below has long burned to pure ash.”

Cyan Shirt then spoke. “Is that so? Then why, when I look beyond the edge of this island, do I still see blooming mountain ranges, clear flowing rivers, and vigorously burgeoning shoots of bamboo? We cannot abandon the natural world below which still lives, nor can we abandon the people there whom we once called allies; they were unwillingly claimed by the Global Rescale Event, and it is our duty to save them. Your mind may think they are beyond saving, but the hope in your hearts—”

Yellow Shirt looked at her sharply. “Cyan Shirt.”

“I know what I’m saying,” she responded in a low voice. “Their pathos is strong; I must appeal to it.” Cyan Shirt continued, speaking to the crowd: “The hope in your hearts tells you that the ash-covered hellscape is but a vision, and it implores you to look with your own eyes. This hope is why you left your homes when our vehicle appeared over the horizon. For once, listen to it.”

The islands had been drifting west while they spoke, crossing fields and dunes and eventually reaching the grassy coastal hills of the northwest. Far below—so far below that it looked nearly two-dimensional—shone a brilliant blue sea, ringed by sandy coastlines and texturized by coalescing waves.

One of the scientists stepped forward. “I will support your project.”

I see, realized Yellow Shirt. *She is using their emotion as a tool, directing it as one would a pencil.* He took the pencil out of his pocket and twirled it horizontally in front of his eyes, splitting sea and sky with a thin yellow line. *Life truly is a sine wave...*

More among them nodded, staring at the life-filled landscape below. They had realized the truth of Tivect World.

As the months passed, Cyan Shirt integrated into the sky island’s community, building ties with the other scientists as they worked on the world-saving project: a mass printer, one that could print at up to 2,000 wide-data pages every second. She also used her knowledge, exclusive to those high in the Cyan Industries hierarchy, to improve the scientists’ agricultural efficiency and overall quality of life. By planting new tree species and nurturing the island’s environment, she quickly gained their respect.

Meanwhile, Yellow Shirt stayed shut in his house for days on end, working on his own projects and research; he kept his doors opaque and his windows shut, the room illuminated only by a sun lamp at his desk. His waking life became one with the keyboard and pencil, his consciousness deep in the webs of equations and databases, numbers and words strewn about him, even in his sleep. Occasionally, he would order metals or parts from the printing facility, which he collected quietly under the glow of the moon.

Machine-generated summary of data

Search parameters: Subject 25, experiment days 233, 238, and 257

[...]

Day 233:

Subject 25 is asked whether the following season will be rainy; gives a negative answer. Wave-based manipulation v0.1.4 is applied to Subject 25 for ten minutes at a strength of 5% with prompt "the next season will be rainy". Subject 25 is asked again whether the following season will be rainy; gives a hesitantly affirmative answer.

[...]

Day 238: Subject 25 is asked again whether the following season will be rainy; gives a confidently affirmative answer. Weather data indicates there is no precipitation.

[...]

Day 257: Subject 25 is asked whether it is rainy; gives a confidently affirmative answer. Subject 25 is observed carrying an umbrella while walking outside. Weather data indicates there is no precipitation.

One day, Yellow Shirt emerged into the sunlight after a week of solitary work and headed to the top of a hill, sitting beneath a coral-tree; nearby, Cyan Shirt noticed, and she walked up to sit beside him. “How can you spend so long on your work without leaving your house? What is the purpose of your tireless endeavors?”

“My work is integral to this project,” he responded simply, “and must be completed as soon as possible.”

“But *why*? We have no time limits—our lives stretch out before us, a million opportunities along the way, so why do you choose to deprive yourself of the joy of watching a sunrise with others, the satisfying waving of the dew-dotted grass in the morning, the laughter of those around a dinner table? Why do you deprive yourself of *happiness*?” Her deep cyan eyes shimmered, but Yellow Shirt did not see it; he kept his eyes on his spinning yellow pencil.

“Happiness? The purpose of visiting the sky islands is not to achieve happiness; the purpose is to implement a solution which will restore Tivect World to its former order. For this plan specifically, efficiency is essential. Even now, I study the surface of the sky islands as a metaphor for the ideal world: if you consider the jellyfish which keep the islands afloat—”

“Enough with the metaphors!” Cyan Shirt took the pencil out of his hands and stood up. “There’s something you aren’t telling me, something I—and everyone else on this island—can’t work on the project without.”

He thought for a second. “Red Shirt.”

“Red Shirt? What about him?”

“He is the centerpiece of this plan, the core around which all else orbits. He brought the world to this state, and he will be the one to bring it back. I have been working efficiently such

that, when he arrives upon this island, he will have all that he needs to immediately send a message to the Tivect people.”

“The printing press?”

“... Yes.”

Machine-generated summary of data

Search parameters: Subject 25, experiment day 264

[...]

Day 264: Subject 25 is missing. Journal of Subject 25 is found. Excerpt from entry equivalent to experiment day 262 reads: “The water pipes stopped working, probably because of all the flooding from the rain. I can just go outside if I need to drink water, though.” Entry ends. There are no further entries.

“Cyan Shirt, I had not told you and the others this detail because animosity toward Red Shirt’s actions likely lingers among the scientists. Until Red Shirt is found, keep this aspect of the plan a secret.”

“So you’ve been concealing this from me the whole time. How can I trust that you aren’t still hiding other *small details*?”

“All the pieces have fallen into place with the addition of Red Shirt; you can analyze it yourself and see the truth in my words.”

“I haven’t thought about it for nearly as long as you have—”

“Then trust me.”

Cyan Shirt dropped the pencil on the grass and walked away.

Yellow Shirt spoke to himself: “and this is how emotion drags one down...”

Machine-generated summary of data

Search parameters: Subject 25, experiment day 265

[...]

Day 265: Body of Subject 25 is found on a path in a nearby wheat field; cause of death deemed to be dehydration. Time of death deemed to be experiment day 263. Weather data indicates there has been no precipitation for the past two months.

Cyan Shirt chose not to tell the other scientists, fearing their reactions. But in her own mind, she tried to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. Standing on the edge of the island in the evening, staring out at the Western Atolls below like black teardrops in a dark churning sea, images flashed before her eyes: burning vehicles, raging crowds, gleaming skyscrapers, and the ornamental ponds outside the Cyan Estate.

Yellow Shirt’s calculations had been complicated. It was evident that, while he had been in the plains, he had devoted his computational mind to thought day and night; yet Cyan Shirt’s mind, the mind of a philosopher, felt at a loss amidst a sea of variables. The very basis of the

plan—the dissemination of Red Shirt’s writings, which would advocate a return to the past—was conceptually distant to her. The man who spearheaded the revolution, swearing never to forget the words of his friend Blue Shirt? The man who killed the Great Taliop in the winter coup? Surely he was even now reclining in the luxurious seats near the palace pools, contemplating his perfervid dreams of exploration—

But wait. He wiped his memory to go explore, according to the official press—perhaps he, too, was changed by dwelling among the forests and plains. I shall find Red Shirt—if not to unlock the secrets of this puzzle, then to unlock the secrets of the world.

Thus began Cyan Shirt’s quest to locate Red Shirt, the infamous leader of the Exploecom Revolution, as he wandered the world below. As the island’s roaming path in the sky swept the breadth of Tivect World, she timed her daily vehicle trips to the ground such that she would land once in every region, scouring every block as she searched—ironically, she knew, she was fulfilling Red Shirt’s own dream of exploration...

Weeks passed, then months, then years; the pearl tree she had planted near the pond grew and blossomed, placing on their tables fruits proprietary to the long-since-disbanded Cyan Industries; the ruins of cities below were overtaken by wide-petaled flowers and green vines, metal and glass consumed by the bright, burgeoning nature; Yellow Shirt continued his work; Cyan Shirt continued her search.

And then, over a decade after the Global Rescale Event, she found Red Shirt in a cavern in the Northern Slate Province. After a brief exchange of words, she gave him a key she had synthesized—the key to a vehicle half-buried under the cavern’s rubble—then returned to the island, awaiting his arrival. In but an instant, the course of the world had been redirected.

Yellow Shirt did not dream. He had trained his mind to instead subconsciously churn away at problem-solving while he slept, a process which softened even the most formidable questions into a neat, malleable mass easily manipulated by his waking self. He typically slept until his alarm vibrated—no more and no less.

But one day, just as the dark chalkboard of his subconsciousness was about to appear at the closing of his eyes, unexpected sound gathered around him, half-muffled by the thick walls. Like the those bustling evenings of the port towns, footsteps echoed on the pavement outside and voices rang—the busy golden streets and scent of assorted fish returned from deep in his memory. But when he opened his eyes fully and made the opaque window translucent, the white room was flooded with soft blue evening moonlight, a sharp contrast to the warm glow of a firelit seaside avenue; and rather than colorfully-dressed fishermen, the scientists in their pale clothes were clambering down the street and out of the valley. Off the island, framed by the hills and reflected in the pond, there rose from the distant clouds a shining white vehicle. Even though this was the event he had been waiting for, the event he had anticipated for years, he took a moment to register it; when he did, his eyes widened: *the arrival of Red Shirt.*

He observed from his window the crowd of scientists, clustered near the edge just as they had been on the day of his own arrival. But this time, he knew—although from this distance he

could not hear their words or see their expressions—hostility would quickly build. These moments were crucial: both Red Shirt and the scientists would need to reach an understanding, such that hostilities would not result in injury—or even death. He remained attentively focused on that distant gathering, his hands tensely gripping the windowsill. Then, on the path right in front of his window, came rushing Cyan Shirt; the Scientist’s Smile returned to his face, for he knew that she would settle the situation. He re-covered the window, returned to his bed, and closed his eyes; his alarm would ring several minutes later than usual.

The next morning, Yellow Shirt arose and checked the camera systems: Red Shirt was under the Pearl Tree on the hill, sitting in its long shadow against the morning sun.

Yellow Shirt left his house calmly, carrying only his notebook. He walked along the smooth pavement path out of the valley and towards the pond. The grass was clean, covered in golden dew that reflected the sunrise—*I walk onwards into a new dawn in Tivect history*. The determined logician surmounted the last hill and, for the first time with his own eyes, saw the Red Shirt of legend. Here was the bringer of chaos and the key to this world’s salvation.

He smiled.

“My name is Yellow Shirt,” he said, extending his free hand.

Red Shirt, still sitting, shook it tentatively, uncertainty in his gaze. “I’m Red Shirt.”

“I’ve heard all about you.” He recalled the psychological analyses and carefully chose his tone so his words would find their maximum effect. “Now, I’m a rational man, unlike some of those emotion-driven fools you met yesterday. I understand your value as a leader, and as someone with great intrinsic power. I believe that I can show you how to repair the damage you’ve done.”

Red Shirt’s emerald eyes, he noticed, wandered to the distant buildings near the valley, which had begun to bustle with morning activity. “Firstly, I’d like to regain the support of the others. Only with their support can I truly cause change.”

Their support... that support will not exist until the plan has been executed.

“Relying on the support of others not nearly as dedicated to your cause is purely unnecessary. You, Red Shirt, are dedicated due to your emotion. I’m dedicated because of my logic. We can accomplish what they cannot.”

He sat down and opened his notebook, flipping with his left hand to find the next blank page. With his right, he took the yellow pencil out of his pocket. This was intended to give Red Shirt a visual understanding of his purpose, to embody the perfection of the sky islands on paper such that his goal was in sight. Based on the analyses, it would work. Yellow Shirt outlined the island in wide, arcing pencil-strokes, working efficiently yet in such a detailed manner as to maintain his audience’s attention. Soon, it was all reproduced in lead, identical to the island he had observed while hovering in the vehicle on that day many years ago. “This is a sky island,” Yellow Shirt began...

They spoke of islands, societies, and worlds, seeking to pinpoint the true nature of reality. Through the discussion, Yellow Shirt directed Red Shirt—as he had learned to do from Cyan Shirt—towards a realization: that the printed word alone would not change Tivect World.

“You know of the Neural Manipulation Project, correct?” he finally asked.

“That program that was discontinued decades ago? I know of it from the time I ordered the scientists to wipe my memories, the giant machine I was placed in.”

“It was never discontinued, Red Shirt. We’ve worked on it here, on these sky islands, inheriting the task of a previous generation of scientists. The manipulation was perfected around a year ago—we can now produce false memories, beliefs, and convictions in the minds of individuals, all through an efficient, miniscule mechanism which could fit into the palm of your hand. The latest iteration has not yet been tested, but the simulations are never wrong. And you see...”

He heard footprints behind him and stopped talking. Judging from the softness of the sound, it was Cyan Shirt. She had come at an inopportune time, but it mattered not—Red Shirt had heard what he needed to hear. Just before he turned away, he saw a flicker of a smile on Red Shirt’s face, a gleam in his green eyes: it was confirmed.

In his house later that day, Yellow Shirt heard a knock on his door.

“Enter,” he said.

The room was illuminated with white daylight for a second as Red Shirt entered, then plunged back into darkness as he closed the door.

“So, Red Shirt, I take it you know now what you must do?”

“Yes.”

He pointed at a tall, glowing array of multicolored lights that flickered against the wall. “The manipulation input terminal is there. It will scan your intentional, surface-level thoughts, which may be emotions, interrogatives, convictions, or commands. Once these are inputted, the system will summarize the input and ask me for confirmation. I will confirm the request with this button and direct it at the whole of Tivect World below; by reflecting off the clouds, the raytracing should reach across the extent of the Continent. The neural manipulation will take effect immediately.”

He turned the window translucent and looked out at the island. “Red Shirt, you must erase all their memories of the Global Rescale, of a world beyond our own, and force them to accept logical soundness as their only paradigm. They must all look away from the vast sea of illusion and back down to the ruined sandcastles that comprise our world; only then can those arches and bastions be rebuilt. Focus on these thoughts, such as to implement a conviction among the people which lasts for their lifespans. We shall reduce and eliminate emotion and existentialism, and thus I have dubbed this process the Reduction. After all, the only true prison is the mind.”

Yellow Shirt turned away from the window and saw Red Shirt already at the input terminal, his head leaning against the array of flickering sensors as they read his thoughts.

Filtered through his shirt's tattered red fabric, the lights all faded to a harsh ruby; reflected by the polished metal floor, they tinted the entire room deep crimson. Every speck of that light glimmered ominously with obscured intention, hidden by the same shirt, no doubt, that Red Shirt had worn while rushing through the town in the plains: *were my calculations correct? Will he make the right choice—is he currently making the right choice?* Yellow Shirt's grip on the edge of his desk tightened.

Suddenly, a knock on the unlocked door reverberated through the room, and seconds later, it burst open to reveal Cyan Shirt, blinding morning sunlight pouring into the room from behind her.

As she stepped forward, the red-filtered light illuminated her face, her widening eyes tinted dark purple: "You... how could you... YOU!" She pointed at Yellow Shirt with a trembling arm, her face contorting in rage. Red Shirt remained focused on the machine.

"Cyan Shirt, you knew this was necessary from the very beginning. Your emotions masked it, but it was always the case—"

"You're inhuman. To use this technology—to revive it from the past where it belonged, to deface the grave of that farmer—I thought you had grown better since that day on the cliffs, but you've grown into something far worse. You're a- a calamity in the shape of a man."

"There is nothing you can do to stop it; this is how the calculations have played out, and none can deny the numbers."

"*THE NUMBERS?! You think that's all that matters? You think the NUMBERS will save that pitiful mountain village of yours?*"

"Simply wait and see."

"Red Shirt, stop this! Leave this room, immediately!" She grabbed his shoulder and shook him violently, but he did not respond, staring out into some iridescent future.

Yellow Shirt reached for his notebook and flipped to an earmarked page. "You see, the Reduction is a process integral to restoring logic, for it essentially wipes the world of radical emotional ideals—"

Just then, Red Shirt finally lifted his head from the wall, turned, and spoke calmly, arresting both of them mid-sentence: "This process shall not be named the Reduction, for I have reduced nothing. I have learned through experience that the loss of memory causes pain alone."

"You didn't... follow the formula?" Yellow Shirt asked, his confidence wavering.

"I did not. As I was saying, this process shall not be named the Reduction."

"You—what have you done?!" In realization, he frantically reached for the controls on his desk, ready to cancel the operation, but Red Shirt held up the remote in his own right hand, his finger on the central button.

"Rather," he continued, "we shall name this the Tivection, for it shall remind us all of who we are."

"Stop! You cannot deviate from the formulas, the solutions I spent years perfecting, the answers that will save this wor—"

Red Shirt pressed the button.

X. Tivection

One can be present only in one's own domain; yet when one's domain is all-encompassing, omniscience logically follows.

When Global Rescale first tore the world to pieces, setting forth the flames of Explorationism, only those sheltered in the sky evaded Red Shirt's fervent chaos. But the Tivection pierced the surface and the heavens alike, encompassing all in its refractive rays.

The casting of rays was instantaneous, a flash-flood from a cloudless sky, and thus all those upon Tivect World understood it simultaneously. Between every blade of grass and every stalk of wheat, to the blue depths of the oceans and the peaks of weathered slate, among hollowed, vine-covered, wind-torn towers in the Capital City, and into the dusty fungi-lit caverns of the Northern Slate Province darted an idea—an idea captured in simply a phrase.

Cyan Shirt saw the glimmer in her father's eyes, and the hint of a genuine smile, as she glanced back towards the ground below her vehicle before taking off into the azure sky for the first time. She saw too the curiosity that sparkled on his youthful face in those faded paper images of him before he had published Blue Scale—a curiosity that lasted even afterwards, when he was buried in research and corporate management yet still found time to ponder the constellations that danced in reflection on his ornamental ponds; and even when he lay on his dusty deathbed after the revolution, he had desperately sought the secrets in her mind, all because of the joy that knowledge brought him. All this time, he had been driven not only by logic—but also by emotion...

Yellow Shirt, meanwhile, saw the Mechanicist standing halfway along the seaport's night horizon, silhouetted against a dark ocean filled with glinting waves. At his feet was the miniscule sandcastle; but it was lit by the stars and the vast full moon, every grain of sand sparkling, a microcosm of the universe. Scale was nothing in this world.

Now, the great rose-colored jellyfish rose above him, clear seawater dripping from their tendrils, then before his eyes their forms dispersed and scattered into a flurry of semi-translucent cherry blossoms. On the wind these flew, escaping into the endless distance beyond the sea as each caught the light, filtering pink. The blossoms shrank to motes in the far wind, like the butterflies vanishing over the mountaintops. However: the birds still called; the sea breeze still touched his face; the sand beneath his bare feet was still tactile and rough. The last spring scent of those blossoms was replaced by the crisp sweetness of an oceanic summer. Even amid flickers of even the truer reality beyond, this feeling, this emotion—this *life* was still just as real. Yellow Shirt looked behind him to see the laughter of his friends as they beckoned him towards the sparkling water of the mountain river.

Beyond these flashing visions stood Red Shirt, a smile on his face. Though the man's lips did not move, the words reverberated through Yellow Shirt's soul—and souls across all of Tivect World:

There shall be unity among us.

For if there is no meaning in life, then why do we not create it? Not under fervent, mindless Exploecom, nor under cold, unyielding logic, but by a new knowledge of this world. A simpler paradigm, one that accepts and mirrors this world of possibility—both the turrets of the sandcastle and the starlight that shines upon them.

“I had a friend once, when I lived in the Northern Slate Province,” said Red Shirt as the world returned to the present. “His name was Blue Shirt. He built his life around vehicles as a designer, an engineer, and a pilot—he did so because he had discovered the joy and freedom of soaring among the clouds. Blue Shirt’s vehicles brought him little profit, for they were weak, delicate, and effectively useless in a region whose economy was fueled by mining and rice fields; but the vehicles brought him happiness. He told me that back in the port towns, no matter how long he gazed out at distant ships, his father forbade him from sailing due to the death of a relative. When he became knowledgeable enough about the world to survive on his own, he rushed straight to the land of slate: he had heard that the lush bamboo-covered mountains were like waves, coalescing across the seasons and teeming with life. Yet it was less a sea and more a pond—for when Blue Shirt ventured south in the winter, he encountered harsh alpine peaks like tsunamis, gaping precariously over pitiful settlements half-buried in the snow far below. Seeing the raw, unconcealed hardship in those mining villages justified an idea that he had harbored for his whole life: that all were secretly suffering—the miners being the only ones who showed it—and the world would be better-off without the philosophies of Blue Scale. And when Blue Shirt fell during the Global Rescale event those many decades ago, he took the Blue Scale with him into the abyss. He took all of it—the efficiency, the progress, the prosperity, the exploitation, and the claustrophobia of living inside already-sketched lines. He fell so that all of us could learn, for a time, the experience of pure, unrestricted freedom and emotion. For that time, it was beautiful—the reason the sky was littered with the crimson flags of Explorers’ Guilds, and the ground with burning vehicles; the reason block after block was tread upon, and money cast away; the reason blossoming vines now grip those skyscrapers and drag them into the ground.

“But Blue Shirt’s fall has reached its end, and I can guarantee that he felt no pain as he disappeared into the abyss. Like all things, life is a sine wave in constant fluctuating motion—and now the time has come for us all to restore balance. In doing so, we cannot take Blue Shirt's sacrifice away; we must hold dear within us and among us these dreams of exploration as we temper them with knowledge and strive towards a new future. What will this future look like? We shall know in time.

“You can’t change people like you can machines, Yellow Shirt. Believe me—I’ve tried. But no matter what I did, no matter how many times I tried to erase my past, I couldn’t stop seeing the glimmer of vehicles in the night sky. And emotional idealism will only take you so far, Cyan Shirt; this world is built upon more than joy and sorrow. The only way for us to move forwards is to accept both sides of ourselves: the logic—and the emotion.”

Yellow Shirt set his pencil down on his desk. “Red Shirt, that smile of yours when I told you of neural manipulation—after all this time, it wasn’t the Scientist’s Smile...”

“No, Yellow Shirt. Why must you overcomplicate things? A smile is a smile, and that’s all there is to it.”

XI. Epilogue: Fall of Logos; or, Balance

In the end, all journeys come to a close.

Such simplicity: something I could never have dreamed of a day ago, or even decades ago, back in the mining village. Overflowing with complexities, with the lies of the stars and the clamor of un-halting algorithms, my mind had forgotten what lies beneath my feet.

Yellow Shirt sighed and reached for the yellow pencil in his pocket, but it was not there; he had left it on the windowsill. He moved over and took the pencil, then offered it to Blue Shirt. “I no longer have need for this,” he told her.

“Do any of us?” she replied—the first thing she had said in several minutes. “But you should keep it, simply for memory’s sake.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

They stood in silence until Red Shirt spoke: “If Tivect World is to truly come together as one, the scientists no longer have need for isolation.”

Cyan Shirt looked back out the door, still open behind her. “Yes. These islands...”

Yellow Shirt nodded. “...are no longer necessary.”

After the vast sky-propulsors had been shut down, the islands slowly drifted back down into the Eastern Sea. As the high clouds disappeared above and the waves approached below, the sunrise bloomed deep gold, the light reverberating through ethereal trees and dew-covered grass, the whole archipelago glowing in a farewell to the sky. And finally, the islands settled into the shallow sea: the ancient jellyfish departed to rejoin their kin in the deep; likewise, the three who had changed the world—the Philosopher, the Scientist, and the Revolutionary—went their separate ways, their vehicles zooming once more into the horizon.

In the decades to come, Tivect World’s society would be rebuilt: vine-covered skyscrapers restored, farmland fertilized, and cicada husks swept away into the horizon; industrial and aerospace progress returned with new agreements upon ethical standards and a new Tivect space age was ushered in. It took many years, but vehicles once more roamed the clean azure sky.

Now, the colorful bustle of the port towns echoes too throughout the streets of the Capital City; the air across Tivect World is full of music and laughter and the scent of new foods. For without Blue Scale, individual philosophies harmonize into a sea of belief and life. Museums full of Blue Shirt’s salvaged vehicles have appeared amid efficient factories and slate peaks.

Yellow Shirt now stands, over a century after he left, in the alpine valleys of the Southern Slate Province. The old buildings of his town are overgrown with moss and collapsed from snow damage; but beyond them, a wave of blue spring butterflies is cascading over the mountains. Their wings glitter in the sun, just as they always have, even when no one was there to see them.

Tivect World is finally united.

Notes and Credits

At the world's end, may those who contributed be remembered.

Notes:

All the references in these works are used fictitiously, and the vast majority are not faithful to reality—take the cicadas, who in real life leave behind not mounds of dark carcasses but instead light brown exoskeletons clinging to branches, and who emerge not annually but instead in multi-year cycles. Their adaptation to a new context—Tivect World—allows them to behave in completely different ways and serve completely different roles in the story. Similarly, the various ideologies across Tivect World, such as Red Shirt's and Cyan Shirt I's, do not attempt to represent, adhere to, glorify, or denounce existing ideologies on Earth; they serve their own roles in a story which is fundamentally about reason, emotion, and a balance between the two, emerging from completely different histories and contexts than those with which readers are familiar.

On the other hand, many in-world references do indeed transfer over to the actual video game of Tivect—for instance, the No Distribution Block was indeed a 4th-wall-breaking block in the game's Old Version, and the Tivection is based on the real raycasting test in which numerous rays were cast across the land from the mind of Red Shirt. Due to this, I hope that readers explore the vast world of Tivect in its original video game format online at <https://tivect.com/>.

For the exigence of this entire book series, which took me over two years to complete, please read the preface to the 2023 Revised Edition of *TIVECT Volume I: Global Rescale*.

Thank you for reading.

Credits:

Thank you to AMC45, for your excellent game, and for creating this world;
Eyecee Yuupi, for editing (of the first book) and literary inspiration;
Shadow “Agathokakological Apatheia”, for diction support;
and Other Cad, for being a better programmer than me

- Cadecraft, 2023/08/15 and 2024/05/05

Tivect World will return in TIVECT Cyan Saga: An Anthology