

VOLUME 2:
OF WANDERERS
AND MOONLIGHT



TIVECT

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**TIVECT Volume 2:
Of Wanderers and Moonlight**

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I. Moonlight

The path ahead of him was dark; he was lost.

The mines were barren and desolate, the only sign of habitation a narrow cobblestone path eroded from the rain. The lanterns on either side were out; they had not been lit for decades. In more than one place, cliffs had collapsed in on themselves, leaving dark, gaping holes half-visible in the moonlight. The rubble that remained beneath them, too, had been eroded, and a gray dust as fine as ash had settled upon it. The dust fell after the rainy season twenty years ago and had not moved since, a thin veil burying the ground from the glinting stars above. This was the Northern Slate Province.

This was Red Shirt's homeland.

He tentatively set a foot down on the path ahead, expecting the ground to cave in below him. It supported his weight, but he moved carefully anyway. Where he had stepped, the dust scattered and revealed several shiny, polished cobblestones below. He recognized that stone—his home was built of it. *Had been* built of it, he corrected himself—his home no longer existed. When he walked down his street-cave, the entrance, and the houses inside, had collapsed.

Lighting a torch, he noticed that his red shirt was tattered from the long journey. There was nowhere to get a new one, of course, aside from talking to one of those dirty *merchants*.

The Past Merchants were a widespread organization across Tivect World which collected remnants of the everyday life of the past. They gathered all the machines, textiles, and spices that they could find and distributed or remade them. The rumors said that they even kept old vehicles in their warehouses. "Desperate to keep the past alive," was their organization's motto. It was a highly illegal business, but they had gained a large following, and authorities had done nothing to challenge them. It was said that their founder was Trader Jeff himself, the man that Red Shirt had met on a green, grassy coastline so many years ago.

Red Shirt despised the Past Merchants—they betrayed every value that he held close to himself, advocating capitalism, science, and a return to the past. They believed that progress was fundamental, and that the stars were the destiny of Tivect civilization. Yet, despite this, perhaps the real reason he hated them were because they reminded him of himself.

As a child, Red Shirt had seen a future of light and technology, a future where vehicles roamed not the sky, but the void between stars, carrying his descendants to the worlds far beyond. His innocent eyes had seen this future and looked to it with hope.

Then, without warning, the Global Rescale Event shattered this future.

As he was contemplating his past, listening to the lonely toll of a carillon in the far distance, he tripped over something. Looking down, it was a chipped plasteel hull panel buried in the ground, its white paint obscured by the dust. The hull of a vehicle. It was everything he hated, everything he swore to bury forever; yet, despite this, he wanted to uncover it and let it see the starlight once again.

Red Shirt knelt on that gray cobblestone path, the hard, rocky pebbles grating into his knees, and dug away at the dry dirt surrounding the hull panel. Over the years of his journey, his

hands grew rough, calloused, and numb; he hardly even felt the dirt as he dug. After a time, the panel gleamed white in the the moonlight under the stars one last time—the coat of dust was washed off by his tears.

II. Sunlight

The sun gives new life to a weary traveler.

Red Shirt slowly opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep on top of the hull panel, and it appeared that he had slept the entire night. Looking up, he noticed bright yellow sunlight filtering through gaps in the ceiling of the mines—it illuminated the entire space, bringing light to the cracks in the cliff walls. Only after a minute or so did Red Shirt notice the person standing at one end of the tunnel, leaning against the gray rocks. The aquatic blue color of her shirt was visible in the light.

“Who? You- you look like...” he started. He had not talked to a person for months, walking alone on his solitary expedition across Tivect World and encountering only wandering Past Merchants, whom he despised.

“The great philosopher Cyan Shirt?” she replied, her azure eyes gleaming with mystery. “I am Cyan Shirt II, his daughter.”

“Why are you here, in these mines? Doesn’t your family live in the Old Capital City?”

“I thought I would give the ‘explorationism’ a try, since I had heard so much about it; at least, you seem to be enjoying it... *Red Shirt*.”

“You know my name?”

“Everyone knows your name. Don’t expect your decisions to suddenly lose their impact on you, or on the rest of the world. Every action you take, every word you speak, adds up, and makes you the person you are. It doesn’t matter that your reign was in the past. It will always be present in your mind.”

“Your father, Cyan Shirt I, was a fool. Don’t speak of his philosophies to me. He knew nothing about fulfillment. *Self-intrinsicism*... He was a- a- a capitalist, and a failure! You should be less like that man.” Red Shirt realized he was close to yelling, but didn’t care.

“You should be less like him, too, Red Shirt.”

“Like him?! I am his antithesis! I am his rival, the most opposite that one could ever be!”

“Yet at the same time, you two are identical.”

Red Shirt was silent, not understanding.

Cyan Shirt II walked over and sat on the ground near the hull panel. “When I was just a child, my father continually told me about the work that needed to be done. ‘Do your work well,’ he said, ‘and you will be a successful and happy person.’ I lived by those words as a girl, constantly trying my hardest in my education and in my daily life. But then, once, I went to the Southern Slate province on a short trip. We saw poor proletariats working in a factory, pounding sheets of metal into vehicle hull panels. This was perhaps the last remnant of manual labor on Tivect World. Their clothes were scraps, and their faces seemed haunted by depression. I asked him, ‘Why do these people suffer so?’ He responded, ‘They didn’t work hard enough.’ Work hard enough? They were pouring every last ounce of energy into those metal sheets, for hours at a time, while we just stood by and watched. ‘That’s just the way the world works,’ replied my father.”

“See? I am telling you, these are radical ideologies!”

“But are they as radical as yours?” she responded.

He stood up. “I’m leaving.”

“Before you go... you might want this,” she said, tossing him a small, opaque plastic bag.

Without opening it, Red Shirt put it in his backpack. Bitter, he walked away, leaving a trail of dust hanging in the air. The sunlight receded into the distance as he got deeper into the mines, the only light coming from blueish mats of dimly glowing fungi growing out of the walls.

I just want togetherness! Equality! That’s what Explorecom is all about, he thought. *What’s so radical about that?* He shook his head, wondering if he had simply imagined Cyan Shirt in the first place. Was she really there, sitting on the stone path next to the hull panel, the warm sunlight landing on the ground around her?

The fungi began to disappear, the light fading around him. Red Shirt didn’t know where he was going, or what he was trying to find—he just knew that he had to walk, to explore; after all, that was his goal all along. Enveloped in a sea of darkness, he stepped forwards blindly, only the crunch of gravel beneath his feet accompanying him. Sunny pastures were half a kilometer above him now, their light green fields buzzing with life. Above and beyond them, the rush of gleaming waterfalls from the floating islands drowned out the sound of the wind, golden specks of light flowing between ground and sky; ethereal trees and reeds and gateways riding high above the clouds with the power of the Tivect Sun Engines, built centuries ago in a golden age. Yet, here was Red Shirt, in a dark mine, lost and likely hallucinating. What a contrast, he thought grimly. But this was what he had chosen.

Suddenly, he tripped and lost his balance, falling forwards. Where he thought the ground would be was only an empty void—after about a second, he landed at the bottom of a pit, hitting his left leg, hard. He heard an uncomfortable snap and pain shot through his body. That was all he remembered before he lost consciousness.

III. Cyan

In an age long ago and nearly forgotten...

She stepped out onto the white concrete in front of the Cyan Estate, her family's ornamental ponds in the distance glittering in the sun. Her vehicle was parked ahead: a sleek, gold-plated starship specially produced by a top manufacturer. This was an ordinary day for Cyan Shirt II.

"Good luck, daughter! Work hard and you shall be rewarded," her father reassured her, waving from the mansion's door. She was heading to an annual Cyan Industries meeting concerning the Space Expansion Program, the corporation's latest initiative aimed at obtaining a monopoly in space transport.

Arriving at the skyscraper in her vehicle, she noticed a greater quantity of starships leaving the spaceport than last time she had been there. *A reminder of this meeting's importance.*

"CEO Cyan Shirt. We are glad to experience your presence," said the man at the farthest end of the circular table. He sat near a bright window, the whole of the Tivect Capital City glowing in the sunlight behind him. He was the current Space Manager for Cyan Industries, one of the most powerful positions in the company. "I believe you called this meeting to discuss the Expansion Program?"

"Precisely," she responded. "Now, Manager, if would you direct us to the current profits from space transport."

The Manager gave a somewhat false smile and waved his hand, gesturing for the hologram to appear. It faded in unexpectedly quickly and had far richer color than most projectors—*surprising how fast these technologies advance*, she thought.

He spoke efficiently and cleanly, his voice projected around the room by the speakers. "You will note that the combined profits from the Zenduron Guild, Zetelovox Spacing, Cyan Industries, and the Purple Shirt Corporation over the past five years mark a unique trend in space exploration and transport. Unlike the linear growth which we had anticipated in the first years after the release of commercial spaceflight vehicles, there is instead a strongly exponential growth pattern. Directors of Starward Accounting?"

Someone at the far right side of the table spoke up. "We will permit the AI to display the data in the most efficient method as possible."

The graphs on the hologram quickly shifted positions, and a new one was added. The numbers were arbitrary—an obvious upwards curve existed, indicating success and prosperity. Cyan Shirt was pleased with this outcome. Cyan Industries, everyone was sure, would soon claim the spot as the most powerful corporation on Tivect World.

Suddenly, the walls began to disappear. Her coworkers were unfazed—they had all gotten used to the periodic updates of Tivect, and knew that the disembodied feeling of a suspended consciousness would soon regress to a normal state as the update passed over them; but, for several seconds, nothing changed.

Then, with a snap, the world froze, transmogrified into a cube of dirt. The sunlight glimmered through clear, cloudless sky—the floor gone, azure nothingness flared up on all sides. Around her, things fell into that nothingness, no longer suspended by imaginary ground: pencils, tables, people—people! Sealed inside the cube, Cyan Shirt was struck with paralyzing agony, immobile as her coworkers fell away and disappeared like specks into the blue. It seemed as though it would last for a lifetime.

She finally realized the true identity of Tivect World: a simulation; a game; a falsehood and a lie, which could be shattered at any moment to reveal the harsh reality of nothingness. This world was not only meaningless; this world was nonexistent.

The destructive issue was eventually patched, and the world physically returned to its former self, but Cyan Shirt's mind, and the minds of the populace, would never be the same.

"If even this world is but an imagined myth, then what is our economy and what is our money?" she proclaimed, delivering her speech to the entirety of the Capital City. "What is our collective belief in capitalism, in the future, and in ourselves? If even the most stable of bedrock can be shattered in seconds, then surely the same is true with all things. There must not be division among us; our only hope is to work together!" Just as Red Shirt was the face of Explorationism, Cyan Shirt led the rise of new Communist theories across Tivect World, denouncing her own past beliefs and those of her father: beliefs in progress, technology, credit, and the free market. Exploecom, she asserted, was the only way to survive.

Protesting the businesses and corporations, looting and destroying private property, and promoting a new Explorationist and Communist way of life, the Cyan Revolution was the greatest economic shift that Tivect World had seen since the end of the Intercontinental Waste War centuries before.

The past burned with the factories and office buildings, the spaceports and data centers, and their ashes lay strewn across the land as fertilizer for the new agrarian world.

In the first years after the Global Rescale Event, Cyan Shirt joined an Explorers' guild, heavily devoted to Explorationism; yet, this fervid desire to explore every block of Tivect World soon faded into tranquility and calmness.

The daughter of a philosopher that she was, Cyan Shirt alone began to find peace in the state of the new world. Eventually leaving the guild to adventure on her own, she noticed the natural world recovering from the intense past industrialism, even as radical ideals demolished the last of civilization's stability.

Across the ridge-peaks to the east of the Northern Slate Province, lush bamboo forests blossomed with life under the golden light of the sun.

IV. Skies of Abundance

A vehicle always remains a home.

Red Shirt awoke to the sound of water dripping. His body ached, and his left leg felt broken. The last time he had broken a bone was as a child, and the doctors had fixed it in minutes; there were no doctors now.

He turned to his side—sharp pain in his leg—and checked his backpack for his belongings: inside was nothing but water, some food, and the white plastic bag that Cyan Shirt had given him.

I might as well open it, he thought.

He took the plastic bag and, with a pop, it opened; it had been vacuum-packed, so the cavern's stale air rushed inside. The bag contained a small metal object whose smooth rubber-and-metal surface was instantly familiar; as Red Shirt ran his hand along its outline, he was thrown into his past, into the ancient, forgotten age that was his childhood.

The misty silhouettes of his memory became firm and real, the peoples' faces now appearing with perfect clarity—his friends, his family, his classmates and peers, beckoning him towards home.

"Where is home?" he asked. "Home is gone, destroyed."

"No," replied his mother, standing in a verdant field, colorful vehicles darting through the sky behind her. "Our home is our starship. One day, our family will live on a world far, far away, a world where anything is possible. One day, we will finally be truly free."

In the dark cavern deep below the grassy fields, Red Shirt clenched the metal vehicle key tightly in his hands as it scanned his fingerprint and his retina. The key's small display activated, bathing the cavern in blue light and casting Red Shirt's shadow on the walls.

If he followed the path that the key projected, Red Shirt knew that he could get back to the light caverns he came from. With a burst of effort, he stood up on his one good leg, the other painfully scraping the floor; aiming the key at the ground, he limped forwards. Each step shot bolts of searing agony through his body, but there was no greater agony than the realization of what his actions had done: he had taken a world of perfection and beauty, a world with a bright past and a brighter future, and single handedly torn it to oblivion. His family would never reach the stars, nor would any family—Tivect World had fallen from the galactic stage and regressed to a time of starvation and hardship. *All because of me*. Continuing to limp through the dark labyrinth, the key casting a blue glow upon the cracked slate walls and dry, sandy floor as it plotted his path.

"There is one thing that I have left to do," declared Red Shirt to the empty mines. "I must restore our civilization."

The tables of fate had turned upon him once more—Red Shirt, the radical leader who had wiped his own memory of the past for his Explorecom ideals, ultimately decided to restore the memory of the billions still alive on Tivect World: he would bring them back to their pasts, remind them of their success, and revitalize the technologies of old.

In the darkness, a plan suddenly rushed through Red Shirt's mind. He knew what he had to do to save Tivect World.

The Sky Islands held the last of Tivect civilization's advanced technologies, and the powerful minds that had developed them. Unable to reach to the stars after the rise of anti-vehicular sentiments, the Tivect government and Red Shirt himself had been unable to impose their preindustrial ideals upon the Sky Outposts, science research centers and starports high in the upper atmosphere. Upon these famed Sky Islands of Tivect World, vast expanses of solar grass and bamboo were suspended in the azure sky by archaic flying jellyfish, their tendrils drifting as streamers above the miniature landscapes below; these islands of ethereal beauty were the only things spared by the Global Rescale Event, and by Red Shirt's actions.

If he could only reach the old vehicle, and uncover it from the dry, dusty ground, he could fly to the islands and seek the aid of the last bastion of Tivect science and progress.

Advancing ever forwards, he followed the blue glow through the labyrinthine passages, crossing abyssal ravines, ducking underneath fallen beams, and navigating bioluminescent fungal patches which extruded from the cavernous slate. He recalled the mines of his childhood: these same hallways were bathed in the warmth of sunlamps, friendly faces peeking from behind corners and the smell of roasting bread drifting from his favorite restaurant. *My only dream is that, one day, this land will return to how it was.*

Then, after hours of walking, he saw it: the near-surface passageway where he had left Cyan Shirt. Key in hand, he stepped into the space, noticing the orange hue of the light passing through the cracks above—it was nearly sunset. Kneeling down on the ground next to the hull panel, Red Shirt scraped away the dry gravel to reveal a keyhole. He inserted the key and turned it.

Red Shirt jumped backwards as the ground began to rumble, the vehicle's old engines revitalizing at the familiar touch of the key. Gray slate gave way to solid white plasteel as the walls of the hallway crumbled to make room; an artifact of the ancient past arose from its burial grounds to see the sky once more. With a roar, the engines surfaced, their rush of blue light melting the gravel and piercing the air. Rotating in the new cavernous space that it had carved out, the Red Shirt's old vehicle opened its doors for the first time in decades.

He stepped inside, the ancient retinal scanner still recognizing his green eyes, even if the soul behind them had been irrevocably changed. Enveloped in the familiar white walls and plasteel scent, Red Shirt's old instincts rushed back to him. Sitting down in the pilot's chair and feeling the smooth surface of the control interface, he charted a course for the Sky Islands.

The vehicle broke free from the mines and rushed into the orange setting sun, a celestial brush painting the vast sky ahead bold magenta.

V. Archipelago

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

Trees like coral swayed in the atmospheric breeze, their leaves reflecting the orange-crimson sky, while the long grass below their branches waved serenely, teal with vitality. Prismatically refractive drops of dew evaporated and condensed on the plants' surfaces in a never-ending cycle.

Supporting this ethereal landscape were vast, translucently pink membranes, gelatinously pulsing, their delicate tendrils trailing down towards the planet below and their chlorophyll-infused flesh harvesting sunlight. These were the jellyfish of the skies, ancient colonial organisms that had lived symbiotically with the species of their atmospheric environment for thousands of years.

Passing through the fine mist of a cloud, Red Shirt's vehicle ascended to view the entirety of the sky island's vast expanse. This one, along with others, was home to the science outposts which had stayed untouched by Explorecom—he gazed out the window and saw small specks tilling the fields below: the Tivect scientists and their families. The cockpit of the vehicle, like the island, was orange in the sunset. After being underground for days, the warmth was pleasant on his face.

Sliding several switches on the control panel, he began to descend. As he got closer to the ground, he could make out surprised smiles on the faces of the people running towards him.

"A traveler from Below?" they called in disbelief. "Civilization there still lives?"

Muffled through the glass window, their voices reminded Frederick of his past, carrying an old accent that was lost after the Global Rescale Event.

"Come out, good friend from our past! Tell us your story!"

Red Shirt exited the cockpit and pushed open the doors, stepping down to the soft grass and smelling the clean, sweet air. Yet, when he looked up, he saw that their smiles had vanished, replaced by shock and dread.

"R-Red..." a child whispered, hiding behind her father, who was starting to step backwards.

"Why are you here..." he asked, less a question than a statement of fear. The others had joined him in his slow creep away from the landing site.

Reflected in his horrified eyes was not Red Shirt, the man, but Red Shirt, the crazed radical leader of the Explorecom takeover who had murdered the Great Taliop and single handedly shattered the golden age. His tattered red garment embodied death itself.

"I was here to talk to you about-" said Red Shirt.

"Get away from us!" shouted a man, cutting him off. His face was distorted in rage: "All these years, we've done nothing to hurt you. You have a whole world to yourself; at least spare us this one small island!" He grabbed a stone from the ground and hurled it, striking Red Shirt's leg.

The other scientists soon followed, assaulting this monster who had taken nearly everything from them.

Hit by stones on all sides, and already in a weakened state from the earlier fall, Red Shirt feared that he would die here, in the sky islands. *It could all end now, without even repairing the damage I caused...* Collapsed on the ground, his consciousness began to fade.

Then, an aquamarine shape appeared in the corner of his vision, walking towards the crowd: Cyan Shirt!

"This is not the Red Shirt you know," she announced. "Allow me to speak."

The rocks stopped flying, and the people turned away from Red Shirt, their voices falling to whispers.

"He wears the garments of the Red Shirt," they debated in hushed voices; "how could it be that he is not the same?"

"Look to the Pearl Tree, the product of years of biological experimentation." Cyan Shirt directed their gaze towards a tall tree in the distance, its bark silver and its wide leaves carrying shiny purple fruit. "It now produces healing fruit and ground-nutrients which we all benefit from, but what did it do three years ago? It leached away all the water from the pasture, drying out the ground and causing the crops to starve."

"But how does this have anything to do with *him*?" replied a scientist, confused.

"The tree once destroyed a part of our home," she continued, "but it went through its transformative phase and now gives back what it took, fertilizing the land and feeding us. The crops here now grow twice as fast, and are far more healthful. In much the same way, Red Shirt's experience in the mines far below us changed him as a person, and he is now ready to revive our world into a new golden age! A great leader, a determined man, and a philosopher who has lived many lives: we must give him a chance!"

"Far-fetched," muttered one of them.

"I say we just send him back in the vehicle, or throw him off the edge."

"He's done enough damage already."

"I will not permit you to attack him," Cyan Shirt asserted. "We will give him the support he needs for one year, to redeem himself, and to restore Tivect World. This is my conclusion."

The people of the sky island looked unconvinced, but they shook their heads and walked away.

"Eat a fruit from the Pearl Tree," instructed Cyan Shirt, then she turned to follow them.

Getting up with difficulty and slowly walking towards the tree, Red Shirt didn't know what to think. The people hated him, unforgiving for what he had done, but Cyan Shirt seemed to trust him with full confidence.

He reached the tall tree after the sun had set, limping through the darkness with only the jellyfishes' pink glow from the edge of the island lighting his path. In the pink light, the tree's shiny, silver bark appeared alien in nature, its ridges like the mountains of a distant world. In the dark leaves above lay large violet spheres: the healing fruits.

As he looked up and outstretched his hand, one of these fruits fell, landing in his palm. Like an onion, the outer layers fell away as he peeled it. Within laid a small, glowing pearl, opalescent and pure. Placing it inside his mouth, Red Shirt suddenly felt stronger—its sweet flavor diluted across his entire body as it melted on his tongue, repairing his muscles and regenerating his skin. The product of biological experimentation, she had said... *if only they had developed this tree before the Global Rescale Event, we'd never have suffered those Malthusian crises that it caused.*

Newly revitalized, Red Shirt observed the world below. In the distance, the green pastures of the Northern Slate Province regressed to rugged mountains, their slopes carpeted with bamboo and their peaks capped with white snow. Waterfalls and rivers flowed through the canyons, making their way further east, towards the center of the continent, where the Tivect Capital City was located. What was once a bustling city, a glaring yellow network, a blot of lights hiding the stars and dirtying the natural landscape with smog, was now dark and quiet. The air was pure. This world was the way it was supposed to be. Stepping away from the edge of the island, Red Shirt noticed that the lights of the station buildings nearby were also out: the scientists and their families were asleep now. He didn't need a bed to sleep, though: the soft blue grass would do perfectly.

VI. Restoration

Upon awakening, Red Shirt must learn of the sky island's true beauty.

Only now, in the high atmosphere, could Red Shirt truly appreciate the sunrise. The tilling machines, on their morning circuits around the island's farmland, shined golden, as did the tips of the grass. The breeze possessed a refreshing coolness.

He saw a man in the distance, walking towards him from behind a rolling hill. As he approached, Red Shirt noticed a shiny yellow mechanical pencil in the pocket of his clean white lab coat. His long dark hair trailed behind him, and his face possessed a thin smile—the Scientist's Smile, it was once called. It betrayed a sort of unique analytical confidence, a coldly logical mind that knew it could not be swayed by emotion, and had been common among the intellectuals of the Tivect Golden Age. He carried a small notebook in his left hand.

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

Red Shirt shook it tentatively. He noticed that, interestingly, the man's shirt was not actually yellow—traditionally, one's name-color was a large part of one's personality. "I'm Red Shirt."

"Yes, yes, I've heard all about you. 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." The Smile remained on his face, his dark eyes reflecting the island's trees, like pure glass.

Red Shirt was oddly reminded of his encounter with Trader Jeff, decades ago, in the fields by the shining seashore. He, too, had believed in the supremacy of reason over all things, but with a sort of greed that this man did not seem to possess.

"Firstly, I'd like to regain the support of the others," Red Shirt said. "Only with their support can I truly cause change."

The scientist frowned slightly. "Relying on the support of others not nearly as dedicated to your cause is purely unnecessary. You, Red Shirt, are dedicated due to emotion. I'm dedicated because of my logic. We can accomplish what they cannot."

He sat down and opened the notebook he was carrying; as he was flipping through it to find a blank page, Red Shirt saw complex mathematical notations and diagrams, incomprehensible letters and symbols covering the page.

He reached into his pocket and took out the yellow pencil. Its sharp graphite tip glinted in the sunlight as it arced down towards the paper. In efficient, clean strokes, he drew an outline of the island, gray circles representing the jellyfish and thin lines for their tendrils. Upon their backs, he placed rocky cliffs and swaths of grass. "This is a sky island. Red Shirt, how do the sky islands stay afloat?"

"Well, the air-plants cooperate with the jellyfish, converting energy from the sunlight into glucose through photosynthesis and sending it to the jellyfish through the tubules beneath the membrane; in turn, the jellyfish gives the plants the water it's collected from the atmosphere. By

maintaining this symbiotic relationship, the plants can survive and the jellyfish can keep the island afloat. These concepts are elementary—we all learned them in school at a young age.”

“Yes, yes. But back in your compulsory education, did you consider the sky islands to be an important part of your life?”

“Huh?”

“Did the knowledge of the way the islands were sustained in any way affect you?” pressed Yellow Shirt.

“I suppose not, although we all believed in self-intrinsicism, so the quest for knowledge was important.”

“Indeed. Yet, there was another reason why all students across Tivect World were taught this concept. The sky islands are the model of a perfect society—working in harmonious competition, the plants must provide energy to the jellyfish in return for water. Those who cannot provide enough energy fail to obtain enough water, and thus either change or die, resulting in constant evolution and progress. Much like these plants, the corporations of our golden age had produced an ideal climate for science, for innovation—it was projected that we’d have colonized another world in but twenty more years, had the Global Rescale Event not happened.”

“...and I shattered all of that,” said Red Shirt.

Yellow Shirt nodded. “You did not perceive the world through the lens of rationality. And thus, the sky island that was Tivect World scattered, the air plants dying and the jellyfish falling from its starry heights. So, I ask you now: what must you do to restore the balance?”

“I was thinking of spreading the word about science, and sharing the technologies that persist on these islands, through a series of books.”

“The dissemination of ideas? This is your flaw—you believe in a fantasy, the infallible strength of the Tivect people. They’re just biological organisms, dictated by their impulses, their desires, and their greed. In this state, they would never even pick up a book in the first place”

“Surely some still remain among them who-”

“There aren’t enough. No change of this magnitude would take place without the implementation of more... drastic measures. That’s what I hope we can collaborate on.”

Red Shirt became concerned. *Pure logic can favor many unthinkable things...*

“You know of the Neural Manipulation Project, correct?” continued Yellow Shirt.

“That program that was discontinued decades ago? I know of it from the time that I ordered the scientists to wipe my memories, the giant machine that 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 people, 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 stopped talking, looking behind him: Cyan Shirt had walked up, looking confused. “Yellow Shirt? You rarely go outside; I’m surprised that you’re here this morning.”

“I was just talking to our new guest,” he said carefully, as he closed the notebook, “telling him a bit about the island.”

“I see.”

“I should return to the lab to start the next set of experiments.” Yellow Shirt got up, picked up his notebook, and set off down the hill towards the buildings. Only when he was out of sight did Red Shirt notice that he had left the mechanical pencil, still glittering on the ground. He picked it up and twirled it in his fingers.

“I’m troubled by that man,” he told Cyan Shirt. “He seems to have some vast plot, some plan to change our world—and I fear that he won’t change it for the better.”

“Yellow shirt is... an interesting scientist,” she responded, observing the pencil spinning and reflecting the light. “When he was a child, he was born into a poor proletariat family in the Southern Slate Province, working at the machinery. Then, he picked up a hand-console from a wealthy tourist, and learned programming. He developed a deep mental connection with computers and AI, and began to hone his already-powerful skills of logic.”

“I’ve always found computer science to be arcane and complex,” responded Red Shirt.

“Indeed, that’s true of many people. But this man... among the scientists here, many say that his brain itself is a computer. He’s a difficult person to emotionally get along with, but he is certainly a powerful asset.”

“He spoke of the Neural Manipulation Project. Is it true that it’s still ongoing?”

“Hmm? That ended decades ago. What did Yellow Shirt say about it?”

“He said that you’ve inherited it, and that it’s still being developed...”

She shook her head. “He must have been testing you, or something of that nature. The project is most certainly over with, having been stopped due to logistical and ethical reasons.”

A brief pause.

“You see, we had tested this on a man living on a farm out to the east of the capital. We had implanted in his mind the conviction that the next month would be a rainy season, despite the forecasts and simulated predictions. This was not meant to be harmful, and it would do nothing to hinder his daily life.

“Unfortunately, the next month arrived, and he began to show signs of insanity: lost trains of thought, confusion, and forgetfulness. When asked about whether it was raining outside, he would answer, ‘I know that it is’, and avert his eyes from the window—the sky was perfectly clear.

“One day, when a scientist entered his house, he was not there; his body was later discovered in the fields outside, parched from thirst, with his mouth open and his face pointing towards the sky. According to reports from his neighbors, he had run out of his house into the center of the dry field days before, and had not responded to their calls.

Red Shirt said, “he thought that it was raining, and that he could drink the water from the sky...”

“Precisely.”

“This is a truly dangerous technology, and I’m glad that it’s been discontinued. I believe that I understand what Yellow Shirt was trying to tell me: I must be careful with the power that I have.”

Cyan Shirt’s blue eyes became vaguely clouded with uncertainty, but it passed quickly.

“Well, Red Shirt, I hope you’ve begun to appreciate the beauty of the Sky Islands. If you’re ready to do what you say, and restore Tivect World, you’d best get started: we have a printing press behind the lake which synthesizes at a speed of 2,000 pages per second. Anything that you hope to write can be produced there.”

He nodded, and she, too, walked away, in the other direction from the buildings.

Red Shirt glanced up at the azure sky, the white, wispy clouds passing overhead: like the sea foam of the beach and the snow in the northern winter, they reminded him of his home.

He looked down again, at the yellow mechanical pencil in his hands. Its lead looked shinier than ever: thin, clean, and dark. In the palm of his hand, it gleamed. Through his mind rushed ideas, memories, convictions: there was only one way to save Tivect World.

To be continued