

# CODE: Stasis

Vessel's Short Stories

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**This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.**

Boris Sanders began writing at a very early age, so much so that, to his mother's surprise, the doctor who delivered him insisted having seen some marks that resembled words inside her womb. His intellect is quite advanced, having learned 37 languages by the age of 14, of which 35 were created by him, don't have a written form, and are only spoken and understood by him. In addition, he has a photographic memory, as long as an actual photo was taken at the time.

In his spare time Boris likes to swim in waterless pools and investigate the mysteries of the universe, while sitting on his comfortable couch, effectively doing nothing. He has a particular taste for olives of any kind.

*First of all, I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, as she has supported me through all the writing and publishing process. (See? I mentioned you first this time.)*

*Second, I dedicate this to my newborn daughter, when her smile isn't enough to motivate me; her constant crying will do the job.*

*Last, but not least, I would like to dedicate it also to my Middle and High School history teacher, Carlos. Not only did he teach history with passion, but was also willing to read the literacy works of a 13 year old.*

*And a Special thanks goes to Olga Iordache, whose feedback was invaluable.*

What do all the historic greats have in common? Could it be talent? Effort? Maybe intelligence? Or something else entirely?

Four stories, one secret.

Code Stasis will make you see the past in a way you never imagined before, while also giving invaluable insights on a possible future.

*“There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.”*

- William Shakespeare

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## Vessels of the Past

What if history isn't what the general public believes it to be? What if humans didn't do everything quite on their own?

Humankind shaped this world to its content, or so we were led to believe. Humankind has a secret that goes back to its roots.

We had help, and it came inside some common looking crystals.



## Evolution of Ideas

Charles stormed into his room, slamming the door after him. He was livid, pacing around his bed, his shoes leaving muddy stains on the pastel rug, but he was oblivious to it, the only thing he could think about was his father's words.

He was so unaware of his surroundings, that the silver-haired woman seated on his chair by the fireplace went completely unnoticed.

"He declined, didn't he?" she asked, with her hands resting on her crossed legs.

Charles jumped, his heart racing, it took him a few seconds to realize it was only Lucy. "How many times have I asked you not to appear out of nowhere like that?" he said, as he wiped his sweaty hands on his khaki pants.

"I lost count, to be honest. But this time it was your own fault, I've been here the whole time," Lucy got up and straightened her white dress, almost the same shade as the easy chair she was seated on. "But more importantly, he declined, didn't he?"

"Is it that obvious?" said Charles, as he passed his right hand through his dark, brown hair, it normally felt silky to the touch, but now it felt greasy.

"Well, you wouldn't have done 12 laps around your bed if he'd have said yes, would you? Unless he did say yes, and you're having second thoughts." Lucy said, while fixing her eyes on his, raising a suggestive eyebrow.

"I'm not second guessing myself! I have no doubts that this trip is the right thing to do," said Charles, gazing back, he had always been told that his blue eyes could pierce through a heart of steel, but that was nothing compared to her. Lucy's purple eyes were so keen and intelligent that it always made his knees weak.

"Good, if all we have to do is convince him, it's still doable; much easier than if you were the one that needed convincing."

"As if he was that easily coerced!" Charles exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air, "He is behaving just like he did with medical school. Who, in their sane mind, would send a man, who can't stand the sight of blood, to the best medical school in Britain? And he had the nerve to complain that I wasn't putting enough effort into it." Charles' voice boomed, and a red vein pulsed on his large forehead.

"Try looking at it from his point of view, you are asking for a hefty sum. And besides, didn't you learn some useful things at the medical school? Edinburgh was good for you." Lucy said, as she played with her silky, silver hair.

"I did learn interesting things, a lot of them, actually, from politics to taxidermy, just not medicine," he hated when she took his father's side. "Wasn't my personal guide supposed to help *me*? Are you sure you are not *his* guide?" he said, more to himself than to her, while sitting on his bed.

“Don’t be like that. You know I’m on your side.” Lucy said, sitting down next to him.

“I know...” Charles still felt uncomfortable when she got too close, it was difficult for him to get over the whole ‘ghost-like’ idea.

“Good,” she said, with a white smile so perfect that even the skeletons from the medical school would be jealous. “Now that we got this out of the way, let’s discuss our plan to convince him.”

“I wish I had your confidence... You should know that father is not an easy man to deal with.”

“So, what? Are you going to simply give up, then? Maybe you should just become a parson as he wishes,” she stood up and made her way to the window, deliberately avoiding his gaze.

“That’s just the second-best thing for him after a doctor. But wouldn’t it be good for you if I did become a parson? I mean, you are a guiding angel, aren’t you?” It never made sense to Charles that she pushed so much for him to work with science, and on top of that, she rarely ever mentioned religion, definitely weird behavior for an angel.

“What can I say? I’m unusual, I guess.” Lucy said, turning her back to the window and locking eyes with him again.

“Unusual? You show up in my dreams, appear and disappear at whim, and seem to know just about everything. I don’t think ‘unusual’ is a strong enough word to describe you.”

“You forgot to say that I’m gorgeous,” she said, between laughs.

Charles could feel his cheeks burning, “You will never let it go, will you?” he averted his eyes from her, fixing them on his vast, beetle collection on top of his wooden shelf.

“But it was so cute! The first time we met you wouldn’t stop staring. How many times did you say I was gorgeous, again?”

“Eleven...” he confessed, grudgingly, but it was true, she was indeed beautiful. Her short nose and fair skin, free of any marks, paired together with those profound, purple eyes, it was such a sight that he wasn’t even surprised when she revealed herself to be an angel. “But let’s focus on the pressing matter! You said something about a plan?”

“I thought you had already given up,” Lucy said, raising an eyebrow.

“We might as well try it. It’s better than being a parson.”

“Not only that, but it’s your best chance of actually making a difference. If you were to give up now, I’m sure you would regret it... Now, all we have to do is to convince your father that this expedition isn’t just an excuse for you to go on a riding and hunting trip around the world.”

“It isn’t! I really intend to work!”

“I know, but there will be a fair share of hunting and drinking involved, right?”

“I suppose...” Charles said, scratching his head. “But that’s not why I want to go...”

“I know that, but you don’t have to convince *me*, you have to convince *him*, and all he sees is his son trying to get free tickets to travel around the world, instead of becoming a doctor or a parson.”

“What do you suggest I do, then?” Deep down, he already knew what his father thought, Charles just couldn’t see any way around it.

“You better get a quill and something to write on, this may take a while,” she said, lying on his bed and getting comfortable.

“Just a moment,” he said, as he hurried to fetch them. He wondered again at her strangeness. As she adjusted herself on his bed, the springs did not squeak in protest as they did when he moved. That’s because she weighed nothing. Because technically, physically, she was nothing. He could see her, but she wasn’t really there. If he tried to touch her, his hand would pass right through.

*I wonder how can she touch the bed, while she doesn’t have a body, but better not ask unnecessary questions to an angel, he thought, or else she might perceive me as disrespectful.*

“Why are you taking so long?” she sounded impatient, despite how comfortable she seemed to be on the bed.

“Pardon,” Charles let go of his useless thoughts and focused on the task at hand. A few seconds later he had a few pages of parchment, ink and his favorite quill ready. “I’m ready.”

“Great, let’s start by getting some allies, your brother-in-law, Josiah, might fit like a glove...”

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It was early morning when Charles arrived at the small harbor. The weather was good, clear sky and calm sea, apparently this time they would actually set sail, unlike their failure 2 weeks earlier. Charles had been so disappointed when the boat had to return to shore, that not even Lucy could lift his spirits.

The only ship in sight was the HMS Beagle, Charles took a moment to appreciate the vessel’s size and beauty. It was over 90 feet long, and the two tallest masts seemed to be almost as tall. They would travel around the world in it, using only the force of the wind and human ingenuity, the thought alone brought a smile to Charles’ face.

“Are you ready to make history?” Lucy asked, suddenly appearing by his side on the busy dock, good thing only he could see her, otherwise it would surely cause a commotion.

“You may be exaggerating a bit. I’m just excited for the chance to investigate the geology of so many different places,” Charles was finding it difficult to keep his excitement in check.

“Maybe you are being too humble,” she said, flashing a blinding smile.

“I’m just glad I will be able to follow Lamarck’s footsteps.”

“You will do much more than follow his footsteps, Charles.” Her voice was so full of confidence, that he wasn’t sure the boat would be big enough to carry it.

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“You will prove him wrong.”

“Prove Lamarck wrong?” Charles was left dumbfounded by the very notion of it. *Sure, I have a few theories that diverge from some of his ideas, but proving one of the most brilliant scientists of his time wrong isn't such an easy task*, he thought, but before he got the chance to answer her, he was interrupted.

“We are setting sail around noon, I think you got here a bit too early, Sir,” said one of the sturdy sailors, carrying some heavy-looking wooden boxes inside the vessel.

“I know, I just couldn't wait anymore. Is Captain FitzRoy around here?”

“He is in his quarters, but I can fetch him for you, sir. What name should I give to the captain?” said a younger sailor, already on the boat.

“Charles Darwin.”

## A Poet's Tale

Will was staring at the empty streets of London through his window. It was around noon, but not a single person could be found, not even a carriage. He wiped the sweat of his receding hairline with a rag and put it next to the blank piece of parchment on his desk.

“Are you going to keep spacing out?” asked K., standing in the corner of the room.

Will turned his tired eyes to the man. He had to look up, K. was over 6 feet tall, towering over him. “What do you expect me to do? There’s no work because of this damned plague.”

K. adjusted his black vest, covered in handmade, golden ornaments, then gazed into Will’s eyes. If his stature wasn’t imposing enough, his intense, scarlet irises would do the trick. “Don’t you call yourself an artist? Create!”

“Easy for you to say since you don’t have to eat. Creating art for the sake of doing it won’t put food on the table,” Will gently rubbed his empty stomach, which howled in response. “I shouldn’t have left the countryside.”

“But then you wouldn’t have met me, would you?” said K., with a playful smile, as he took a step towards Will, considering how small the room was and how big his legs were, after just a step the two men were just a foot apart.

“Sometimes I question whether that was for the best or not,” said Will, in a low voice. He took a step towards K., only to pass through the man as one would expect to pass through a ghost. Will reached for a bottle of wine and poured himself a glass as if this strange encounter hadn’t occurred.

“Alcohol at this time of the day? You have reached rock bottom,” the red-eyed man said, with scorn on his face.

“And what other choice do I have? Better than drinking the damned water, I would rather be drunk than dead,” Will said, between sips.

“If you don’t pay more attention to your health you are going to end up being both.”

“It’s not like I’m being negligent out of a whim. If it wasn’t for the help I get from friends I would have starved a month ago,” Will had just emptied his glass, but his thirst had not been satisfied, so he poured himself another one.

Silence lingered in the small room for a few minutes, they could hear wood creaking under Will’s weight as he walked back to his desk, not bothering to avoid K. and passing through him again.

Will sat down at his desk and stared emptily at the blank piece of parchment in front of him. K. was the one who broke the silence. “I guess I have no choice but to lend you a hand.”

“Except you can’t give me a hand, you are not really here.”

“Figurative speech. And *I am* here, in mind at least. But as I was saying, I will help you get some money.”

“And how will you do that? Magic? Everything is closed and there’s no work,” Will said, as he emptied his glass and left it on his desk.

“I will help you write a masterpiece,” K. said, matter-of-factly.

Will burst into laughter, “For a moment I thought you had a real plan. You make it sound easy, ‘creating a masterpiece’... And besides, there’s no money in writing.”

“There is, if you get the right person as a patron. An Earl would probably be delighted to fund you if you dedicated it to him, for instance.”

The gears in Will’s brain started going faster, he wasn’t sure if it was for the excitement of the prospective plan or the wine taking effect. “I guess I could give it a try, I’m not particularly busy anyway. But for it to work the piece needs to be truly outstanding.”

“I have the perfect story in mind, I already told it to another human some time ago, but I believe you can give it an entirely new light.”

Will could feel his excitement disappearing as suddenly as it had arrived. “Is that what you had in mind? Your brilliant plan was for me to repeat someone else’s story, but in greater detail?” He felt ashamed for even believing in K. in the first place.

“The world is not black and white, Will. And the last time I told this story was during the Roman empire, it’s been over a thousand years.”

Sometimes Will forgot how ancient the being he was dealing with was. It sent shivers down his spine just to think about it, but it wasn’t enough to shake his discomfort. “But still, I won’t be regarded as the author, will I?”

“A moment ago, you were worried about putting food in your belly, and now you are all about the glory?” K.’s scarlet eyes seemed to burn like wildfire as he made strong eye contact with Will. “The story will be as yours as you make it. The last version was brief and simple, I’m sure you can turn it into a masterpiece. You have the talent, and the story itself is not only beautiful, but based on a true experience.”

Will’s curiosity had grown almost as vast the crown’s purse, it was so rare for K. to reveal anything about his past, that he couldn’t let a chance like this go to waste. “What is the story about, then?”

“A goddess falling in love with a human,” K. said, gazing into the distance.

Will was puzzled, “I thought you said it was based on a true story.”

K. sighed, “And it is.”

Will scratched his well-trimmed beard. “Then, by ‘goddess’, do you mean one of your kind?”

“Yes, and she was not just one of us. She was the best of us all.”

Will could barely contain his excitement, such a story was unprecedented, he could barely understand what K. truly was, not being entirely sure that K. wasn't just some kind of demon or Fae that got sealed in the crystal that Will always kept in his pocket, ever since he found it.

But the idea that there had been love stories featuring these beings and humans was now brewing within him, he could feel the inspiration coming. "Tell me the story, then!" He said, as he haltingly grabbed his ink and quill and put them near his parchment.

"She was beautiful, possibly the most beautiful being I will ever lay my eyes upon. She possesses some kind of quality that attracts men, much like a siren's voice will attract sailors. But that's not what makes her so great, she is sharp, bright, and possibly the most intelligent being I will ever meet." K.'s voice was dreamy, it was so unlike him that Will was momentarily taken aback.

"It seems like you fancied her quite a bit," Will commented, as he wrote a few notes on the parchment.

"Yes, but not in the way that you are inferring, she was like a sister to me. I miss her deeply."

Will could feel the melancholy in K.'s voice, he felt bad for him, but that wouldn't stop him from hearing the rest of the story. "And what's her name?"

It took a while for K. to answer, the silence was starting to get awkward when he broke it. "The first person to write this story called her Venus, for the sake of consistency, I suggest you keep it."

"Roman goddess of love and beauty? I suppose it makes justice of your description of her."

"It was Ovid's idea, but let's not dwell on details, the story has yet to start."

"Sorry for the interruption. Please, keep going." The last thing that Will wanted was for K. to give up on telling the story, he was already hooked by it, more than he was willing to admit.

"She met a young man, smart, skillful, and renowned for his appearance, let's call him Adonis. The details of how he came across her crystal are irrelevant, but he did. She saw raw potential in him, he had all it took to become a leader, and she was willing to transform that rough diamond into a precious gem."

After saying it, K. went silent for a full minute. Will's anxiety couldn't hold any more "And what happened then?"

K. eyed him, and the intensity of his stare made Will regret saying anything. Whenever he looked into the man's eyes, the bright red color reminded him he wasn't dealing with a man at all. A few moments later, K. continued "However, Adonis was way too young. Regardless of how much charisma he had, his mind was set only for hunting. But Venus wasn't the type to give up so easily, she accompanied him during the hunts, trying all possible means of convincing. She even decided to try going hunting completely naked, in an attempt to grab his attention."

K. went silent again, but this time, Will knew better than to say anything. He simply wrote a few notes on his parchment and waited patiently for him to continue.

After what seemed to Will a lifetime of waiting, but had probably been around two minutes, K. resumed the story. “But apparently, he was immune to her charms, he only cared for hunting, regardless of what animal it was. She tried explaining how much difference he could make if he applied himself, how far he could go, and that even being remembered forever in history was within his reach. But he didn’t listen, for all he had space for in his mind and heart was hunting.”

Another pause, K. moved to the empty corner of the room and was facing the door, his back turned to Will, which was already getting used to the sudden stops during the story.

“The situation upset her, and she decided to stop seeing Adonis altogether. After a while he started to worry about her absence, thinking something may have happened to her. No matter how many times he would call her name, or rub her crystal, she wouldn’t answer. He went back to his house, and before going to bed, pleaded once again for her to appear. That night, she appeared in his dream, and he was delighted. Just knowing that she was fine lifted a huge weight off of his shoulders, they spent the whole night talking, and she started to get through him, the fact that they could have physical contact in dreams certainly helped, as they even shared a kiss.”

Will was expecting a pause and started to get up to get some more wine, but as suddenly as K. stopped the story, he resumed it. Will went back to his chair hastily so he could keep notes.

“She asked if they could be together for longer, plan a better future for him, he accepted, but it had to wait, for he had planned to go boar hunting the next morning. Venus managed to get into a piece of his mind, but young and careless as he was, his heart still beat for hunting. She urged him to reconsider, to call off the hunt and stay with her for longer, but he didn’t listen. As the sun rose, Adonis grabbed his hunting equipment, got his dogs, and left.”

K. turned back towards Will, and as he did, Will noticed something resembling a tear, rolling down the man’s cheeks. Perhaps the reason for him to face the wall earlier hadn’t been so arbitrary, after all.

“When she woke up, she was in the middle of the woods, her crystal on the grassy ground. She called for Adonis, but got no answer. She couldn’t move more than a few feet away from her crystal, it’s our prison after all, but she searched the best she could. The first signs she saw were the injured dogs, whimpering under a tree, and just a few feet farther she saw him. His body was pale, with a large tear in his torso, where the tusks of the boar hit him. It was the first time in over two thousand years that she cried. Legend says that a beautiful white and purple flower grew on the spot that Adonis’ body laid.”

Will wrote a few more notes after K. had finished the story, he could feel the inspiration flowing through his body, he knew he could transform it into a masterpiece. But one question still loomed in his mind, “Why was the flower white and purple?”

“It’s the color of her hair and eyes...” K. said, passing his hand through his own silver hair.

After pondering for a moment, Will went through his notes. “You were right, K., this story can become a masterpiece.”

“I’m always right about these things. It’s your job to make sure it does, though. But please refrain from revealing details about my kind, make it so it resembles Roman gods.”



“I wouldn’t try to write about your kind, either way, it’s way too complicated to explain the concept, especially considering that I’m not sure I understand it myself.”

That brought a smile on K.’s lips. “And I would rather it kept this way. Now work on it, you can only have one debut!”

As K. said it, Will was brought back to the task at hand and started going through his notes again. “There’s so much to be done, it’s going to take a while to finish...”

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Will worked on the story for months on end, and after putting blood, sweat, and tears into it, it was finally done. After he showed it to K., all that would be left would be to get it published, getting an earl for a patron had proved feasible, although his patronage was depending on the perceived quality of his work. “K., it’s done, would you like to go through it together?”

As Will said it, K. materialized out of thin air in front of him, he felt uneasy whenever that happened, but never let it show.

“I’m all ears,” said K., sitting on Will’s desk.

Will read his entire piece, which he entitled ‘Venus and Adonis’, after many minutes of reading, he was expecting K.’s critique.

“It has a lot of sensual bits, but it’s definitely well-written,” was all that K. said.

“Well, as you said, I should be using Roman god concepts, and since Venus is the goddess of Love, Beauty, and Sex, it made sense to make it more explicit. What do you think? Bad idea?” Will was feeling insecure after the entire poem was done, while he was writing he felt confident that it was going to be a masterpiece, but now that it was done, he wasn’t so certain anymore.

“No, not a bad idea, actually. Sex sells. And as I said, it’s well written, that’s what counts. Just don’t forget to add the dedication to the earl, and of course, to sign it. You don’t want it to be considered as ‘author unknown’, do you?”

Will grabbed his quill and started adding the finishing touches, on the head of the parchment he wrote:

*‘To the Right Honorable  
Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton,  
and Baron of Tichfield.’*

Then, following K.’s advice, Will moved the quill to the end of the page and signed his first work.

*Your Honorable in all duty.  
William Shakespeare*

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## The Visionary

“What are you looking so serious for, Mike?” asked a young man, that was laying comfortably in Mike’s bed.

“So, you decided to show yourself again, Ruriel? It’s been a while. And don’t call me Mike, please,” Mike answered, without taking his eyes off the paper in front of him.

“What? Am I supposed to call you Michael? Give me a break, no need to be so formal all the time. And by the way, you didn’t answer my question,” Ruriel said, sitting on the bed, his short, silver hair was a mess, it was apparent that he had been sleeping for a while.

“My name is not Michael anymore, and you know it. Now, please, stop interrupting me, I’m trying to write a speech,” he sighed, it was always difficult dealing with Ruriel.

“Man, you’re no fun, all you do is work. And too bad for you, I will keep calling you Mike, besides, it’s past time that you started calling me Ruri, everybody calls me that.” Ruri was fidgeting with his fingers as he spoke.

Michael closed his eyes, and did a silent prayer, he was under pressure and his patience for Ruriel’s reckless behavior was depleting quickly. “That would be disrespectful, regardless of your behavior, you are still a servant of the lord. And speaking of work, shouldn’t you be doing the same? Don’t you have your own duty to fulfill?” Michael said, turning on his chair to face Ruriel.

The two men locked eyes for a few seconds, Michael’s brown eyes didn’t show any discomfort while staring deep into Ruri’s, despite his unusual white iris. Ruri shrugged and looked away a few moments later.

“How can you be so careless? You need to fulfill your duty to the lord, don’t you?” asked Michael.

“The others will do it, it’s fine if I just wait,” Ruri was looking down at his bare feet, pale as snow.

“When the Lord put you in my life I was sure it would be for you to guide me into the right path, but I start to think it’s the opposite, I’m the one that must save you,” it was the only explanation Mike could come up with, either that, or it was a test of his resolve.

“Save me? I’m fine, I don’t need any saving. I’m the one that got the best deal out of this situation,” half a smile flashed across Ruri’s face, but it didn’t convey any happiness.

“What do you mean? You disappear months at a time, apparently sleeping for the whole time you were gone!”

“You see, that’s the trick. They all have to deal with reality, and I don’t. Each of us has a special ability. Some are extra smart, others are creative geniuses, and I’m the visionary.”

“You? A visionary? Are you sure you know what this word even means?”

A devious smile flashed across Ruri's face, "Exactly, but it isn't the same meaning you know. While all of my kind can visit past memories while dreaming, I have the unique gift of seeing the future."

"The future? Can you glimpse at God's divine plan, then?" he had never known that Ruriel had such an incredible gift.

"Well, kind of. The future isn't fixed in stone, you know? Every little action can potentially change it. But with my ability, I can put myself in so many variations of the future, it's amazing! I've seen one in which all men had been extinct, there were only women in the world, it was unreal! There was another future when everything was automated, and people just partied the whole time. There are endless possibilities! And while I explore them all, the others will solve the problems. I'm sure one day I will wake up and our duty will be fulfilled."

Michael couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I feel pity."

"For them, right? They have to work and face reality, while I have this amazing gift."

"No, I pity you, Ruriel. You are just escaping your responsibility, running. All the while letting others do all the work. How can you even be sure that if they achieve their objective, that you will be rewarded as well?"

"The Chief is going to solve it, I'm sure of it. And by the time she fixes her problem, all the others will be solved already, including mine." Ruri said, as he carefreely leaned on the bed, using his hands as pillows.

"Chief? So, in other words, do you mean an Archangel?" Michael was confused, he didn't know angels had a ranking system between them.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. She surely has the face of an Archangel." Ruri smiled, looking at a fixed spot on the wall.

"Do you trust her that much? Shouldn't you at least try to do something by yourself?"

"I trust her entirely if anyone can do it, it's her. I'm 90% sure that new president is with her."

"Really? Kennedy? How can you tell?" Michael had talked with Ruriel several times before, but this was the first time he was revealing so much about himself and the other angels.

"It's just a hunch, but I'm normally right about this kind of stuff."

Michael lost interest instantly, "So it's nothing but a guess? I should have known better than to expect you to have any concrete information."

"If you had lived for as long as I have, you would have learned to value your gut feeling too."

"Except you spent most of that time in a dream world! Desperately trying to escape reality, while all the others are actually changing it!" Michael was out of breath, he could feel his heartbeat rising. "I already wasted too much time with you. Begone, I have work to do." He said, turning his back to Ruriel and focusing again on his notes in front of him.

“You are boring as always, Mike,” Ruri said, and as he did, he disappeared into thin air.

Michael was finally alone again. Before he went back to work, he took a glimpse of the clock, he was full of dread, too much time had been wasted with Ruriel’s shenanigans. He grabbed his pen firmly and kept working on his speech, even if Ruriel didn’t want to be part of the change in the world, he would.

Hours passed, and when Ruri decided to reappear, Mike was sleeping in his chair, snoring lightly. Ruri approached and took a peek over Mike’s shoulder and read the page he had been working on before falling asleep.

“I guess I can give a hand every once in a while,” Ruri said in a low voice.

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Michael was focused. The pitcher had an ominous look on his face, but Michael wouldn’t let it get to him, he knew he could hit it. In less than a second, the pitcher threw the ball and Michael swung with all his strength.

He felt the bat connecting with the ball, and a second later it was flying high, a home run.

“I would have never guessed that this was your kind of dream, Mike,” Ruriel was suddenly standing right next to him on the field.

“Dream?” as he said it, Michael noticed that the thousands of people that were watching the game didn’t really have faces, he felt his stomach turn, and disappointment filled his chest.

“I always thought you were more of a football guy, but I have to admit that this baseball uniform fits you,” Ruriel said, casually.

“Can’t you leave me alone? Don’t I deserve peace at least when I’m asleep?”

“You were the one that preached about fulfilling one’s duty, weren’t you? Now, bear with me,” as Ruri finished his sentence, the baseball field and everything around it shifted.

Michael found himself in Atlanta, a city he knew well from his childhood, but something was off. He recognized the streets, but the buildings were much higher than he remembered, and the cars were models he had never seen or even heard of. He was so overwhelmed by everything that was happening, that he almost didn’t hear Ruriel.

“What do you think of your hometown, Mike?”

“Where are we, really? This can’t be the same Atlanta that I was born in,” since it was a dream, maybe Ruriel had messed everything up as a prank, it sounded definitely like something that he would do.

“The question is not ‘where’, but ‘when’. This is Atlanta about a hundred years from now. If your work bears enough fruit and the next generations take it seriously, this is how it will look like.”

“What? Will I be a politician in Atlanta or something?” Ruriel wasn’t making any sense.

“Don’t focus so much on the city itself, that’s not why I brought you here. Look at the people.”

And so he did. There were people walking on the street, chatting, and using some technological devices that resembled a small walkie talkie. As he observed, a bus stopped a few feet away, and he saw the people entering it and finding themselves seats, the remaining were left standing.

By the time the bus left, Michael had tears running down his cheeks.

“So, you finally noticed, huh?” said Ruriel, casually.

Michael started walking through the city, looking around more attentively, Ruri was following him a few steps behind. After walking for a good thirty minutes, Michael took a seat on a bench in a park he had ended up in. “They are the same...”

“Yes, it took a while, but there’s no segregation anymore. Black, white, Latinos, all are treated the same way,” said Ruri, taking a seat next to Mike.

They were touching shoulders, it was the first time they had made physical contact. Michael looked at Ruriel’s arm, white as a piece of paper, and then back at his own, chocolate brown. The difference was apparent, but in the world they were in, that wouldn’t matter. “How?” was all that Michael could bring himself to say.

“As I said, this is the result of your work and the work of thousands of others. It wasn’t easy, and many people had to die until it got to this point, but don’t you think the result is worth it?”

He didn’t have to answer that. Of course, it was worth it, he would give his life for this to happen, without a second thought. “Is it only in Atlanta?”

“No. I can show you other places, the rest of Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina. All over the country, it’s the same.”

Michael was elated, he could barely hold all the excitement he was feeling. “Show me, then, Please!”

“I will. But don’t forget, this isn’t a fixed future yet, it’s just a possibility. For it to become a reality, you will have to devote your life to it, even more than you have been doing until now. And that’s not all, you will have to motivate and inspire the next generations to do the same. It’s a lot of work.”

“I will do it. I will do whatever it takes.” Michael said, without a shadow of doubt present in his voice.

“That’s good to hear. Now, prepare yourself, our next stop is Alabama!”

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The next morning, even though he had sore muscles and back pains from sleeping on his chair, Michael woke up reinvigorated. He decided to write an entirely new speech, and the pen just flew through the paper, words flowing out of it so fast that he feared the paper would be torn apart, but he couldn’t help it, he had to get these feelings out of his chest.

Hours passed before he even realized it, and he had written a new speech that couldn’t even be compared to the one he had started writing the night before. It was hard for him to admit it, but

Ruriel was the one that made it possible. And Just as he thought about that, he heard the angel's voice.

"This one is much better, Mike," Ruri was peeking through Mike's shoulder, his white eyes focused on the speech, and a shining smile formed in his mouth.

"This is thanks to you, Ruriel. Now I know why God put you in my path. Together we will change the world!" Last night had opened Michael's eyes to the real possibilities of the future, he had more energy than ever to fight and be the difference.

"Yeah, about that..." Ruri's face was serious, there was no trace left of the smile that was there a few moments ago.

"What?" Michael was puzzled, Ruriel always wore a carefree expression, it came to a shock that he could have such a sorrowful face.

"I've got to go," Ruri had an empty look, avoiding Michael's eyes.

"What do you mean? How can you leave after what you just showed me? We can achieve that! Don't give up now!"

"You don't need me anymore, you were already on the right path, I just gave you a little push, and now you are all set."

"And you are just going to disappear? What are you going to do? Escape reality again?" Right when Michael started to believe that Ruriel was more than what met the eye, he was let down again, he could feel betrayal filling his chest.

"Exactly the opposite. My vacations from reality were too long already. But for the future you saw to actually happen, your work isn't enough. You are going to be an important part of it, but not the only one."

"Do you plan to guide someone else, then?" Michael was disappointed with himself, while Ruriel was thinking about the greater good, he was only thinking of getting the angel's advice for himself.

"Yeah, Mike. And I will need your help getting there," a thin smile formed on Ruri's face, a bit of joy appeared to return to his eyes.

"Of course, I will help in any way I can. But could you stop calling me "Mike" already? I changed my name so many years ago!"

"Deal, I will call you by your right name, but promise to send my crystal through airmail, I've been stuck on the bottom of the sea for a few hundred years in the past, and I've made it a point not to travel on boats since then."

"Okay, airmail it is."

"Thanks, *Martin*. I used your 'real' name, happy now?" Ruri said, rolling his eyes. "By the way, did you think of a name for this speech yet?"

"Not yet, I had just finished it when you showed up."

A devious smile flashed on Ruri's face, "What about, 'I have a dream'?"

Martin chuckled, "Yeah, that seems appropriate," it was weird for him that this might be the last time he would talk like this with Ruriel. He had loathed his behavior since they met, but he had become part of Martin's life. But he couldn't be greedy, to receive the guidance of an angel was already plenty of honor, to begin with. And now it was time for someone else to receive that honor. That struck his curiosity. "By the way, where should I send your crystal?"

"South Africa. There's a guy there that needs my help too."

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## Vessels of the Future

Humankind's future is uncertain, but alike its past, we won't pave it alone.



## A City of Hope

“The series of hurricanes in Texas continued their rampage until yesterday, when it finally gave a breathing space to the locals. It’s estimated that over 50% of the harvest was lost, so we should expect the prices to rise even further in the next weeks. Now, up next, our correspondent in Europe will comment about the efforts of divers to recover historical artifacts from the Amsterdam Museum, over 50 years after the city was claimed by the ocean.”

“That’s enough news for today,” said Henry to himself, turning off the TV. “The prices are going to raise even more... Who thought I would live to see the end of the world?”

But his thoughts were interrupted, as the door to his shop opened. He looked up while keeping his right hand under the counter, over his old .38 revolver. Two men came in, both were wearing black suits that seemed to be worth more than his entire shop. *Difficult to believe there are still people wearing these kinds of clothes*, he thought. “May I help you?”

“I hope so. I’ve been told you are the only remaining cobbler in this part of the city.” Said the taller of the two, he seemed to be young, about Henry’s age, between his middle twenties and his thirties. The man’s eyes were covered by sunglasses, but from what Henry could notice, he had been crying.

“Wrong. I’m the *only* cobbler still doing business in the city. The others either died or left for better parts,” said Henry, still measuring the men firmly, with his sapphire eyes.

“Well, I suppose shoes aren’t the most profitable business during the apocalypse...” said the other man, who was shorter and had a stockier build.

“Yeah, I’m barely making ends meet.” Henry lied. The business was doing okay, in times that getting a new pair of shoes was near impossible, fixing the old ones was the alternative to walking barefoot. He earned enough to live better than most of the people in the neighborhood, but he wasn’t about to share that with such a suspicious duo. “What may I do for you, gentleman?”

“Those are my father’s shoes,” said the younger man, putting a pair of luxurious, business shoes, the leather was top notch, and the design was certainly Italian. “Can you have them ready by tomorrow morning?”

“Well, that depends. What’s wrong with them?” Henry grabbed one of the shoes and examined it, but they seemed to be in perfect condition.

“Nothing. I just want them polished, make them as if they were new.”

Henry was dumbfounded by the response. Nobody cared about how their shoes looked anymore, as long as they were in good condition. But he wasn’t about to refuse work, regardless of how odd a request it may be, especially such an easy one. “Sure. I can have them ready by tomorrow, then. Sorry to be so blunt, but how do you intend to pay?”

“Do you still accept cash, or are you only dealing with food rations?”

“Food rations work better around these parts, but if you don’t have it on you, I can take cash too.”

“Here,” said the older man, putting a few notes on the counter, “I will give you the other half of the payment tomorrow, when we come to get them.”

Henry didn’t count the money, but just at a glance, he could tell it was about five times more than the service was worth. His moral compass was tingling, but he kept silent. Food was about to get more expensive, and those men didn’t seem like the type to be worried about money. In the end, he decided to just grab the money and put it in his pocket.

“Be extra cautious with those shoes. They are my father’s favorites. I don’t remember a day in which he wasn’t wearing them.”

That wouldn’t come as a surprise for most people, who only owned one pair of shoes, but that definitely wasn’t the case for these guys, “And what occasion is important for him to part with the shoes for a whole day?” he asked, before he could contain himself.

The man’s face darkened, “His funeral,” he said, in a sober voice. Henry immediately regretted asking the question in the first place.

“I see... I’m sorry for your loss. I assure you they will be ready by tomorrow morning.”

The mood was so dense it could have been cut by a knife, luckily for him, both men left shortly after. It was already early evening, so he decided to close the shop for the day. He took the expensive shoes and went to the back, where he kept most of his equipment. Henry laid the shoes on his workbench, but instead of starting to work on them, he went for a beer first.

“Dammit, is it the last one already?” he cursed, as he took it from the fridge. “God only knows when I will have the chance for another one, with the prices raising every other day”, he said, to himself, as he took the first sip.

Henry walked dragging his feet to the workbench, rested his beer on the side, and started to work on the shoes. It was still odd that such an easy job had such big pay, but he wasn’t complaining. It took him only about 10 minutes of work and the left shoe was shining as new. It was truly a beautiful work of art, he could see that the shoe had been made by hand and using leather of the best quality.

“It’s a shame that such a nice shoe will be buried.” He thought, as he put the left shoe back on the bench and grabbed the right one. But before he started, he noticed something was off. And upon closer inspection, the internal leather sole had been ripped and then glued together, and it definitely wasn’t the work of a professional. It probably would go unnoticed for just anybody else, but a cobbler would notice. Henry considered leaving it as it was, but his profession’s pride spoke louder. “It’s not such a big deal, and for the money they are paying, it’s only fair I do a good job,” he thought, as he carefully removed the sole.

However, he didn’t expect to find something hidden inside the shoe. It was some kind of shard, it was transparent and irregular. As a man that worked with his hands, he couldn’t resist the urge to take it and examine it closer. It didn’t seem special, like something that might be used as a

paperweight. “If he took the time to hide it inside the shoe, then it certainly is worth something... Could it be a rough diamond?” he whispered, under his breath, excitement for the discovery filled his chest, but he couldn’t help but worry that it might be some kind of elaborate plan from those men. For all he knew, they could have done it on purpose and had some ulterior motive to it.

“It’s not a diamond, it’s a crystal.” He heard a female voice say next to him.

Henry was startled *Someone broke in!* was all that came into his mind. Break-in and robbery weren’t such uncommon occurrences, as people got hungrier and more desperate. He tried to reach for his gun, but cursed, as he remembered he had left it under the counter of the shop, instead he grabbed a hammer that was sitting on top of his workbench and turned to face the intruder.

He didn’t expect her to be the most beautiful woman he had seen in his entire life. Her fair skin and silver, silky hair didn’t fit the profile of a robber, and he couldn’t help but notice her eyes were purple. *Who the hell wears contacts while invading someone else’s house?* He thought. *But maybe that’s the point, maybe she’s just a distraction, as others do the muscle work.* Henry raised the hammer and asked in a commanding voice, “How many are with you? Where are they?”

“I’m alone, but-”

Henry interrupted her before she could finish “Don’t lie to me! Come here!” he said, as he went for her arm, only to have his hand pass through her image. He looked at her, wide-eyed, “What’s happening?” he asked, almost blind by fear. His gaze fell back to the bench, where his beer stood. “I just drank half a can, I shouldn’t be hallucinating...”

“And you aren’t. Now, can you put that hammer down before you end up hurting yourself?”

He hadn’t even realized he was still holding the hammer up, ready for a swing. He slowly lowered it, and put it on the bench, his mind was buzzing with so many questions, he didn’t have the willpower to oppose her. “What the hell are you?” was all he managed to say.

“That’s... complicated. For now, let’s say I’m a guide. And thanks, by the way. If it wasn’t for you taking the crystal out of the shoe, I would end up inside the earth for years, and then it would probably be too late.”

“A guide? Of what? And being too late for what?” Henry rested his fingers on top of his eyes, wishing this was all a nightmare.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, but we don’t have much time right now, so I will give you the general idea. I will explain everything in full detail eventually. I’ve been guiding people through millennia, and the former owner of these shoes was my last vessel. As you touched the crystal that makes you the next vessel, if you so wish. In normal circumstances, that would mean I would guide you and help you develop your full potential while working towards the benefit of mankind, but now we have bigger problems.”

“What? You can’t just dump all of that like it’s nothing. I don’t even know what you are or how to call you.” He felt as if his brain was about to short circuit.

“Sorry, I know it’s sudden, but we are running out of time. It’s a matter of life and death. And you can call me Lucy, by the way.”

“Life and death? Of whom?”

“Mankind.” She said, simply.

“Are you serious?” Henry looked at her, hoping she would play it off as a joke, but she held his gaze, and he could see it in her eyes that she was dead serious. “And what do you want me to do? Should I give this crystal thingy back to the family of the deceased?”

“That depends. Do you trust them to be responsible with the fate of the world?” her purple eyes were locked in his, her gaze was so strong Henry felt like she was staring directly at his soul.

“Well, I don’t know them very well, but they certainly have more means to help you than me.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“For starters, I’m just a cobbler. I’m nothing if not ordinary.”

“History is made by ordinary people doing extraordinary things. I can see that you have the potential, we just need to work on it, just like a rough diamond.”

“Okay, suppose I decide to help, what are we gonna do? You didn’t even tell me what’s this big threat.”

“You seriously didn’t figure that part out by yourself? Look around.” She said, waving her hands. “The world is broken, the climate is going crazy, natural disasters are an everyday occurrence, and yet people are not adapting. At this rate, the planet will wipe out human life entirely.”

“I know all that, there’s a reason why many people say this is the apocalypse. But what would you have me do? It’s not like we can just leave this planet and go to another.”

“The answer is not to leave the planet, but to change how you currently live. You must adapt to the new environment, not hope that it will accommodate your needs.”

“That makes sense, I guess... But what can I help you with?”

“According to my calculations, we still have a few years until we reach a critical point. Until then, we will gather the resources we need to build a city like no other before, it will be the last, safe haven of mankind.”

“Mankind? Isn’t that too much to hope for? Aren’t we talking about a single city?”

“As I said, it will be a city like no other. But don’t worry, I will guide you through every step of the way. I even have the perfect name for the city in mind.”

“And what’s it?”

“Emporion.”

Code: Revelation - Preview

# **CODE: REVELATION**

**BOOK ONE OF THE EMPORION CHRONICLES**

## Chapter 1: I Hate My Job

Max was taking his morning shower, still half asleep; it was just past 6:30 AM and he hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. However, his morning drowsiness was interrupted.

"Master, you have exactly two minutes and 35 seconds to finish your shower, or you will have to skip breakfast," said X200, Max's personal robot, in its mechanical and emotionless voice while standing in the center of the bathroom.

X200, 'X' for short, was the result of many hours of work. The robot had a humanoid structure, following the latest robot fashion, and even its face was supposed to resemble a human's but without skin. However, instead of tendons, bones and blood, he had wires, metal and circuits.

"Thanks, I can't wait to eat that cheap cereal," answered Max, as he stepped out of the shower, which made the water stop immediately.

He started drying his pitch-black hair, which no matter how much he tried to brush always came out spiky. He looked in the robot's general direction, but it was too blurry to see more than a silhouette. He put on his glasses, obscuring his otherwise attractive hazel eyes, and suddenly the world was in high definition again. He took a set of clothes from a pile that X had previously prepared, and put on his usual work outfit: a sky-blue, long-sleeved shirt and black slacks, both crumpled but perfectly clean.

"Always a pleasure to help, Master," answered the robot, with a tone that was supposed to resemble happiness, but never quite worked. The price one pays for trying to build his own robot.

"I could swear that even if you could understand sarcasm, your answers couldn't get better than that, X."

"Sarcasm? Unclear. I am familiar with the term and its meaning, but its usage is not comprehended, Master."

"Don't worry about that X, I would have to upgrade you so much for you to understand it, that I believe Julia would kill me," said Max, while he sat down at the kitchen table and poured some cereal in his hovering bowl. It worked exactly the same as his other regular bowls, but it made a great piece of decoration. He glanced at the fridge's front screen, noticing a blinking light. *Dammit, out of milk again. Now, I'm gonna have to eat this dry*, he thought, as he reluctantly grabbed a spoon.

"Is that what you call 'a figure of speech', Master? Otherwise, I could call the police for you."

"I fear what she would do to me after she was done with the cops, to be honest. Forget about it X, you were right, it was just a figure of speech. I would say that you don't need to worry, but I won't, mainly due to you not having feelings, but also because I'm not really sure that it would be true. No hard feelings. Get it? 'Hard' feelings, because you are made of metal and stuff."

"Was that an attempt at humor, Master? I could detect a joke pattern, but my systems cannot find where the humorous part is."

“Sometimes you sound just like Julia. Even my own robot doesn’t like my jokes,” Max said, as he finished his cereal.

“Master, your Vertical Train will arrive at the closest station in 5 minutes, according to their schedule. I would advise you to hurry, or you might miss it. That would result in you being late for work. Again.”

“The ‘again’ was really unnecessary. But although I hate to admit it, you’re right. I’ll get going. I’ll be stopping by a few stores on my way home. My anniversary with Julia is tomorrow and I don’t have a present yet. I should be home at eight; have dinner ready by then,” Max said, as he left the apartment.

Max headed towards the Vertical Station. One of the few perks of renting such a small apartment was that the station was within walking distance, and it wasn’t even necessary to use the Horizontal Line as a connection. As soon as he set his feet on the metallic streets, several ads appeared on the ground around him. He normally ignored them all, but today one of the ads got his attention. It was a trailer for some historic movie; he guessed it probably took place between the year 2000 and 2050 based on the almost square-shaped cars. He watched it come alive with the movements of the led lights under his feet, but before he could get a grasp of what the movie was about, he decided to leave. As X had said, he had less than 5 minutes until his train arrived, and there was no time for distractions.

But the movie’s setting still lingered in his mind. It seemed crazy to imagine that at some point there were cars on the streets, side by side with people. The chances of an accident happening were so high that he doubted he would have had the guts to even leave the house. It made much more sense that the streets were solely for pedestrians, and that the cars hovered hundreds of feet above them. Although crashes weren’t unheard of, they were extremely rare.

After walking for two more blocks of other residential buildings, he arrived at the station and got into the smallest queue he could find, waiting for the train to arrive. Half a dozen drones were buzzing around, checking the validity of each person’s ticket. A few seconds before the train stopped, one of them approached him and he pressed his thumb against its sensor. A green light flashed, and it moved on to the next person in line. A few moments later he got inside. It was crowded, as always, but he managed to find a place to stand next to the train’s glass walls. It was built in a way that the passengers had a panoramic view of the city while the train travelled.

Weirdly enough, that was one of Max’s favorite moments of the day. From there he could see the entire level 21 as the train kept going up. All the different styles of buildings, some made of concrete, metal or even glass, most of them almost as high as the sky, just about 500 feet from the ground. He could also see the Horizontal Line going around buildings, moving so fast that one could mistake it for a streak of light. The people walking on the streets below become smaller and smaller, until the train went into the fake sky and stopped at the 20<sup>th</sup> level.

The city had 50 levels in total, amounting to a total height of 5 miles. That meant that only the people on the first level could actually see the sky when they looked up. All the people in the other 49 levels saw only a gigantic screen that mirrored the actual sky.

Sometimes Max's commute to work was the best part of his day, just because he got to appreciate the view. He was born in this city and had only seen the world outside through pictures and videos online. Even though he remembered his great-grandparents talking about swimming in the ocean and standing on top of a mountain, all of that sounded alien to him. As stunning as the pictures looked and as excited as they sounded when talking about those things, he never truly thought of visiting those places himself, risking a trip through the savage and scary world outside.

Living on the first level was his dream instead, where he would be able to see the true sky whenever he looked up, instead of a screen, and the view would include the unreachable mountains far away, instead of only buildings. But Max knew deep down it was borderline impossible for him to achieve that dream; he was from the middle class and only the richest people in the city could afford an apartment on level 1.

Max was still daydreaming only to be roughly brought back to reality; with a maniacal scream, he realized that he had just missed his stop. Looked like X was right after all, he was indeed going to be late. The word 'again' reverberated in his mind.

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"Maximilian Gutenberg, you are 5 minutes and 47 seconds late. You can choose between having this time reduced from your vacation time or deducted from your salary," Max heard a flying drone utter, as soon as he set his feet inside the office.

"But the train was delayed!" Max replied, without even thinking, as he scratched his large and slightly crooked nose.

"My systems indicate that the average delay today is 1 minute and 21 seconds. I will consider that in my calculation. New calculation: you are 4 minutes and 26 seconds late. Would you prefer to have it reduced from your vacation time or deducted from your salary?" The drone's red blinking light was focused on him.

Max knew there was only one way to get out of this situation. He checked his surroundings, and as soon as he confirmed that it was clear, he lowered his voice to a whisper and said, "Code Orange, overwrite command 34D-8, subject: Maximilian Gutenberg."

"Processing... Systems reloaded. Congratulations for being on time today, Maximilian Gutenberg, I wish you a good day," answered the drone, already flying away.

Max knew it was wrong to use codes like that on the work drones for his own benefit, and he didn't do it all the time, but when someone has a boss like Max's, one must adapt.

Delio Vargas was in his late fifties and slightly overweight, but what people first noticed when meeting him was his mustache. It was a thick, silver mustache, and it was so exaggerated that whenever Max saw it, it reminded him of those old walrus cartoons that were popular so long ago.

But it wasn't due to his physical attributes that Max had problems with his boss. Delio used to say, quite regularly, that he didn't trust computers. Although Max always believed that he said that simply to cover up the fact that he didn't know how to use them properly, which was odd, considering that when he was born everything was already automated and computers were part of



everyday life. It got to such an extent that technical support had to install an actual printer for him, even though it had been almost 20 years since the last one had been produced, simply because he didn't like to read reports on the computer and preferred paper.

Delio always gave Max the computer work he himself was supposed to do and threatened to fire him if anyone found out about it. On top of that, he constantly complained about Max's work, his poor punctuality, and even his hair and clothes.

Max had just sat down at his desk when he heard footsteps approaching.

"Maximilian! I asked you to give me the report on the energy distribution of levels 17 to 21 yesterday, and I haven't received anything! That's unacceptable!" Delio said, in his usual loud voice. Max suspected that if Delio were to appear on the radio, half of the people in the city would go deaf.

"Mr. Vargas, you asked me to do this report yesterday at 6:55pm," Max tried to keep calm. He was already used to Delio by now; if he raised his voice, it would be much worse.

"And what's the problem with that? Work knows no time; it's always there!"

"But Mr. Vargas, my shift is only until six. I had already worked overtime by staying until seven to finish the quarterly report on nuclear power plant productivity!"

"There! That's the problem! You did *only* one hour extra! You shouldn't leave until you've got no work left, regardless of how much time you must stay here to do it! It seems to me that you do overtime only for the money in it!"

"With all due respect, sir, I don't get paid for it at all." Max was grinding his teeth, doing his best not to lose his patience.

"And neither should you! It's not this company's fault that you aren't competent enough to do your job in the regular work hours, like everybody else!"

"But Mr. Vargas, you requested the report after regular work hours in the first place." He let it slip, pondering whether Delio hadn't just contradicted himself. But again, he knew the man simply didn't care.

"You've got the guts to talk back to me after not doing your job!? That isn't what working is! You should answer me with a simple 'yes, sir', and considering how often you screw things up 'sorry, sir'! I want you to do that report by the end of the day, but to teach you a lesson I want it for all the levels, not just those five! If you fail to comply, God help me, I will have you fired!"

"All levels? I won't finish before nine!" Max was already clenching his fists.

"What did I just say? Are you stupid or something?" Delio's head was getting red; Max could see a vein pulsating in his neck. "Only answer me with 'yes, sir'! Do you understand me?"

Max had to pause for a few seconds before answering. He really needed that job, he needed the money to pay his rent. If he got fired, not only would he have to move back in with his parents, but his idea of one day proposing to Julia would be gone. With all that in mind, he took a long breath and answered. "... Yes, sir."

“Good! Now hurry up and start already!” Delio seemed satisfied with himself. He marched towards his office, which was just a few feet away, and closed the door behind him.

Max was glad that he was gone. It was taking a humongous amount of self-restraint to not throw at Delio all he had in mind, or maybe just punch him in the face; he wasn't quite sure which he would prefer. But thanks to this little exchange between the two of them, now he had much more work to do than he could have anticipated. He would have to skip lunch if he were to have any hope of buying Julia's present before the day was over.

He opened the grid distribution system, but was interrupted before he could even start. “Hey man! Is this the Energy Department?”

Max looked up from his computer screen to find a guy around his age in front of his desk, but they couldn't be more different; he was around six feet tall, and his sapphire eyes had a look that emanated confidence. *I wonder if I would be confident like that if I looked more like this guy*, Max thought. “Yeah, can I help you with something?” he said instead.

“Yeah, I've got this report on the marketing expenditures that you guys had last month,” he said, waving a few sheets of paper. “I thought my boss was kidding when she said to print the stuff, kinda weird to have it on paper.”

“Tell me about it. Delio's the department's head, he's in that office over there,” Max said, pointing at the door. “But did you come here just to deliver that? You could have just sent a drone.” It was normal to receive reports from other departments, but nobody ever delivered them in person.

“Yeah, I know. It was more of an excuse to come to this level,” he said, with a wink. “I'm gonna take a detour to Accounting on my way back. It's close, right?”

“Just take the elevator two floors up to the left.”

“Thanks, Max, my man!” he said, passing on his way to Delio's office.

Max was surprised; he didn't remember telling him his name. “Sorry, I'm terrible with these things, but do we know each other?”

“It's me, Steve, man! We met during the analysts training, about two years ago!”

“Of course!” Max said, as he scratched his nose. He vaguely remembered that training, but certainly didn't remember the people that were there with him. “Sorry man, I'm not that good with faces.”

“No problem! I'm the opposite; I never forget a face, kind of a gift I always had,” said Steve, passing his hands through his perfect, sandy, blond hair. “But I gotta go, or I won't have time for my detour! Thanks for the help, anyways!” he said, and went towards Delio's office.

Max wondered how much time this little talk with Steve had cost him. As soon as he was gone, he worked on that boring report for so long that he couldn't think straight anymore. He managed to finish everything just after eight o'clock. It wasn't easy spending the entire day having eaten only cereal, and he even had to take a few extra minutes to print the entire thing and leave it in Delio's office, who had left a few hours ago without a word. Regardless, he was glad it was finally done.

He left the office in a hurry; he knew it would be hard to find a store that was open at this time of night. He thought about ordering online, as the service was available 24 hours and it would be delivered within a few minutes. If he did it that way, he wouldn't have to worry about the present any longer. But Max knew Julia well, and despite her saying that presents weren't necessary, she would certainly be happy if he got her something special or, if possible, even unique.

With that in mind, Max decided to take the Vertical Train to level 26, notorious for its high concentration of small, independent stores that had a diverse selection. If he had any luck, some might still be open.

Max suspected that it would be too late once he arrived there, though. He knew he should have bought the present in advance instead of leaving it to literally the last possible moment, but money had been tight. Max barely made enough to pay for rent, food and the occasional treat, so his only option was to wait for payday, which happened to be that very same day.

Once he arrived at the vertical station, he darted towards the shopping sector, but it was already almost 9 p.m. As he had expected, all the stores were closed, and the few movements in the street were of the employees leaving.

Max had almost given up, but suddenly he saw a single independent store that still had its lights on. He ran towards it, only to see, as soon as he got in front of its door, red letters saying 'closed' appearing on it. It was almost like fate was playing tricks on him.

## Chapter 2: First Encounter

“Please sir, let me in! It will be quick, I swear!” Max couldn’t believe how unlucky he could be in one single day.

“We’re closed, boy. But please come back tomorrow, we open at ten,” said the shop owner, from behind the closed door. His voice was weirdly squeaky, getting Max’s attention.

“I can’t wait until tomorrow! It’s for an anniversary. If I don’t have it by tomorrow at dinner time, it will be meaningless!”

“Can’t you just buy it online? All the kids do that these days anyways. You’d probably just come in, take half an hour looking and then leave, just like half the people that pass through this damned door.”

“I wanna give her something special! She could order anything online herself! I promise I will buy something if you just let me come in!”

“You must be really desperate to promise to buy something in a dump of a store like mine, especially without even seeing what I have to sell,” he chuckled. “Come in, boy, quickly, before I change my mind.” As the man opened the door, Max could see that he was a dwarf, around a foot shorter than himself, and one of his eyes was bigger than the other.

“Thank you!” Max hurried inside without even thinking.

As soon as he entered the store, the smell of mold filled his nostrils. That was shocking in itself, considering how serious Hydra was about air quality. Once Max recovered from the initial shock, he noticed the store was bigger on the inside than he had originally thought. But that wasn’t what surprised him the most; its interior was so old-fashioned that it could very well be a museum. The mysterious atmosphere made the hair on the back of his neck tingle. There were functional wooden shelves, to Max’s surprise, that seemed to be made of real wood, almost reaching the ceiling, packed with all kinds of exotic items, from porcelain to stuffed monkeys. He would never have expected that such a place even existed in Emporion, it appeared to belong to another era. Of one thing he was certain: If what he was looking for was something unique, he had come to the right place.

As he started to search for a present that would fit Julia’s tastes, he looked at several objects: some handmade totems that seemed to have an African origin, some Persian rugs, and even old paintings of mountains, trees and the sea, in the artistic style that was typical of what used to be Asia. But none of those things were the right present for her. He was starting to regret the commitment he had made with the owner until he saw something promising. The store had a section fully dedicated to rings and jewelry in general, all handmade by people instead of robots. Or at least that was what the signs claimed.

Although these options seemed better than the other items in the store, Max was still having trouble finding something that he thought Julia would like. That was until he saw a golden ring with a pearl as an adornment. Julia loved the sea, even though she had never seen it personally. Max

suspected the pearl was either produced by oysters bred in captivity or collected by robots from wild animals, but regardless of which it was, he was in a hurry and running out of options.

“I will take this one,” Max said, putting the ring on the counter.

“Really?” the man seemed shocked but quickly recovered. “I mean, of course! It will cost you a thousand credits.”

“What? You must be kidding me! I bet that’s more than all the rings you have here combined! Five hundred credits sound more than reasonable.” Although Max wanted to give Julia a nice present, he also needed to eat, even though he hadn’t done much of that today.

“But you see, it was handmade! And by human hands, that is! But since I like you, I will let it go for seven hundred credits, but not a single credit less!” It seemed that even though the vendor supposedly didn’t make many sales, he still knew how to negotiate.

“That’s still too expensive! Come on, help me out here!”

“It’s a small price to pay for such a beautiful present! She will be overjoyed! And just ‘cuz I like you, boy, you can choose any jewelry box in the store, for free! And besides, it’s not like you have many other options right now, is it?” The dwarf had a little smirk on his face.

“I guess I will take it, then.” Max felt as if he had just lost yet another battle. He was wondering just how many times he could lose in one day. “Which boxes do you have?”

“That’s what I like to hear, my boy! I’ve got this beautiful mahogany box with hand-drawn images on it,” said the vendor, as he brought it out. It was made of dark wood with rough shapes and symbols all over its surface.

“What else have you got? I don’t think that goes well with the ring.”

“What about this one? It’s made by authentic Asian descendants!” The vendor showed him a jewelry box with the image of what seemed to be a geisha, it looked like it was made of porcelain.

“That’s better, but still... I don’t know, I’m not sure if it’s a good fit either.”

“Come on boy, it’s getting late. What do you expect, a jewelry box in the shape of an oyster? I don’t have that!” He seemed to be regretting the decision of offering the jewelry box in the first place.

“What about that one over there? The gray one.” Max pointed at a box that was behind the man, at the height of his head.

“Huh? Oh, that one. Yeah, I forgot about it. It’s ancient, made even before the city. It’s probably worth something, but nobody pays any attention to it. It beats me why. It’s made of a good material, you see, marble!” he said, while putting the box on the counter.

Max wondered why someone would use marble to make a jewelry box, but regardless, he liked its classical design. “I will take it.”

“Great! Finally, I can go home!” said the vendor, as he hastily put both the ring and the box in a shopping bag, and gave Max the usual scanner for him to pay.

“I hear you.” Max could feel how tired he was, as he put his finger on the scanner, and with his fingerprint, the payment was completed in a second.

Once the deed was done, Max left the shop and went directly home. He had forgotten to update X about his arrival, and as a result, his food was cold when he finally got home. However, his hunger had gotten to such a level that he ate it as it was, not even bothering to heat it up.

Before going to sleep, Max sat on his bed to look at the gifts he had just bought. The ring looked even more beautiful with the light of his room reflecting on the pearl. He then opened the jewelry box to put it inside, but the box wasn't empty.

“Dammit, he sold me a box with trash inside! It's all dirty, and there's even a piece of glass in here!” Max removed an uneven piece of glass from the box, wondering who would put that kind of thing in a jewelry box. Had he not been careful, he might have cut his hand.

“It is unsafe to hold a sharp shard like that, Master. Also, I suggest you go to sleep sooner rather than later; it is past eleven hours.”

“You're right, X. It's not a big deal; I'll just clean it tomorrow morning before leaving for work,” Max replied, as he threw the piece of glass back inside the box, put the box and the ring on top of the nightstand, and went to sleep.

“Good night, Master.”

“Good night, X,” Max replied, even though he knew it made no sense to wish a robot good night.

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As he opened his eyes, Max found himself in an ample room. The floor and ceiling seemed to be made of marble, and there were several Greek columns around him. He couldn't see very far due to the area's poor illumination, but he could hear water splashing somewhere. He came to realize that he wasn't alone for he could hear voices, sometimes whispers, and even laughter at times, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. They were talking in a weird language he didn't recognize, but he was certain that they were men's voices.

He ventured through the dark with caution, following the voices. The closer he got, the brighter it became, until he got close enough to notice the source of the voices. There were five men, all of them naked, in a huge pool right in the middle of the room, talking to each other. As he got closer he was sure one of them would spot him, but none of them reacted, so he took the opportunity to study them further.

One of them talked more than the rest. He was the only one with a beardless face, and his neck seemed bent slightly forward, but what caught Max's attention were the man's eyes. They were two different colors: one was black as the night, and the other blue as the sky. Maybe it had something to

do with his different eyes, but the man had a powerful stare. Max was still analyzing him when he was startled by a voice next to him.

“Do you like what you see? You’ve been staring at him for a while.”

Max then noticed a little girl next to him. *What an odd place for a child to be*, he thought. She was cute, but unconventional. She had silver hair, which was weird for a child to have, to say the least. Her skin was as pale as a sheet of paper, and Max wasn’t sure whether his eyes were deceiving him, but her eyes seemed purple. *It must be a trick of the lights*, he convinced himself.

“What is a little girl like you doing here? And how come you speak English and they don’t?” She couldn’t be more than 7 years old, and Max felt weird asking questions of someone so young, but he had so many that it was hard for him to even know where to begin.

“Oh, sorry, you can’t understand, can you? Let me give you a hand with that,” the girl said. She snapped her fingers, and suddenly the men switched from whatever language they were speaking to English.

“And then I charged into the center of the enemy formation. As soon as I met Darius, he thought he had me because he had prepared for it, but of course, I had expected him to be, and had a counter measure: a double phalanx! That broke his center, and he had to flee for his life!” said the man with the mismatched eyes, and all the others started laughing.

Max stepped out of the shadows. Now that he could understand what they were saying, they didn’t seem so threatening. “What’s a phalanx?” he asked, as he got closer. He couldn’t explain it, but that man had something different about him.

But no one answered. Worse than that, nobody even looked at him; he was utterly ignored, and their conversation continued.

“How cute! Are you trying to make friends? They can’t hear you, dummy.”

“Why not? And you still didn’t explain why you’re here; and how did you change their language like that?” Max decided to ignore the brat’s insult.

“Well, I kind of work here. Yeah, I guess you could see it like that,” the girl said, balancing herself on the tips of her toes playfully. It was clear now that she was deliberately choosing which questions to answer and which to ignore.

“So, you’re trying to convince me that a little girl like you works here? What are you in charge of, playing with dolls?” Max was trying to make fun of the obvious lie that the girl had just told him, until he realized something. “Oh my god, are you being kept here against your will? Are they hurting you here?”

“Hurting me? I think you’ve got it wrong.”

“You don’t have to hide it, I can help you! As soon as I find a way out, I will sneak you out with me.” Max was already scanning the room, looking for an exit.

“You don’t understand. Watch: Alexander!” the girl said, now looking at the man with the mismatched eyes, and he instantly looked at her, got up in a hurry, and ran in her direction despite being naked.

As soon as he was just two feet away, he bowed. “Nike! Do you have a message from the gods for me? Or maybe an omen?”

“Yes,” she answered, with a devious smile. “The gods say that the only way for you to win your next battle is to prove yourself worthy. And to do that, you must carry a horse on your back.”

“A horse, you say? I shall do as the gods bid, but I’m not confident of how I could possibly accomplish it.”

“Use your intelligence instead of brute strength, Alexander. But you must do it now.” It was weird for Max to see such a young girl commanding such a big man. He’d had his doubts before, but was sure now that she definitely wasn’t normal.

“Hmm...” Alexander scratched his beardless chin. “Well, a baby horse still counts as a horse, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, a smart idea, just as I expected from you. Just make sure no one sees you. You don’t want to start a rumor that the king is going crazy.”

“I will do it at once, Nike! Thank you for helping me!” Alexander bowed again, and stormed out of the room, still naked and ignoring the cries of the men that had been talking with him before.

“As you can see, I’m fine here. No need to try to sneak me anywhere!” Nike was now looking at Max with a cheeky smile, as if she was purposely not telling him everything.

“Ok, that was weird. Where are we, anyway? And did you just ask a naked man to carry a horse just to make a point? And why can you talk with them, but I can’t?” Max had so many questions that he could barely keep his thoughts straight.

“Do you always ask so many questions? Jeez! We don’t have that kind of time; there’s more to be seen.” And with that, the world around Max shifted, and everything changed.



## Chapter 3: Wildest Dreams

As the world around Max unfolded, he found himself in a completely different place than before. The first thing he saw was a huge chandelier hanging from the ceiling, maybe bigger than himself. It was certainly unique, with beads and engravings all over, and it illuminated the entire room, even though the room itself was enormous. Paying more attention to his surroundings, he noticed that the chandelier wasn't the only reason for the room's brightness; it was the furniture, which was covered in gold. It seemed that someone had painted all the wood or metal of the furniture with golden paint, and that made the room much brighter than it ought to be.

This time it seemed that he was alone; the girl, Nike, was nowhere to be seen. He decided to explore and went closer to a table to inspect it. It appeared it was made of the finest materials, and it had beautiful drawings and colors on it. The walls around were white, but with golden frames and symbols decorating them. In the center of the room there was a huge bed with green curtains; it had a beautiful design and golden details fixed to its top.

If Max had to guess where he was, he would've said a king's room. It was so luxurious and all of it seemed to be ancient, no technology in sight. He was still exploring the room's details when the doors flew open and a man stormed in. He was clearly nervous, and was speaking with someone in an exasperated tone in a weird language that Max couldn't make out. He thought it sounded like French, but he wasn't quite sure. After all, languages weren't that important when everybody in the world shared one.

Max noticed that there was an old lady behind the man, and as soon as she got inside the room, the man slammed the door shut in one swift movement. He was pacing the room, and one of his hands was on his head, pulling his short black hair, while the other was scratching his beardless chin. He was talking quickly, and seemed quite stressed. The woman didn't say anything, but was giving him her full attention, until she suddenly looked at Max.

"Sorry, youngling, you can't understand him, can you? I will fix it for you." She snapped her fingers, and at this moment, three things happened. First, the man instantly switched to English; second, Max noticed that the woman had exactly the same impossible purple eyes that Nike had; and third, he recognized the man that was with her. He was none other than Napoleon Bonaparte.

"I gave them one job, and that's the result?! I should have known! If you want something done well, you have to do it yourself! I would have done better, or my name isn't Napoleon!" shouted the then emperor of France.

"Calm down Napoleon, you know your stomach gets worse when you get yourself stressed like that. There's no such thing as an accident; it's fate misnamed." The old woman was talking to Napoleon as if he was her grandson.

"You are right. I don't mean to complain, but sometimes the pressure of running an empire is just too much! Sometimes I think it will be impossible to win this war..." Napoleon sat down on the bed with his head in his hands.

“Impossible is a word to be found only in the dictionary of fools! You are capable; remember what happened in Marengo? You won even though you were outnumbered.” Now she sounded more like a teacher than a grandmother.

“Why am I in Napoleon’s bedroom? What the hell is happening here?” Max was sure he was losing his mind.

“You are seeing a tiny fraction of my life, child. I want you to understand some of it,” she said, looking again at Max, her purple eyes fixed on his. He noticed that even though she was old, her eyes showed vast experience, as if she was much older than a person could possibly be. It also seemed that Napoleon couldn’t hear anything that she was telling him.

“Are you some kind of war councilor or something?” Max looked towards Napoleon, who was now talking again in French, and apparently didn’t require an answer to keep the conversation going. “Why are you showing me this? Why am I here?”

“Are you uncomfortable here, dear? Well, we still have one more stop, anyway.” And just as she said it, the rich room they were in turned instantly into a small village.

The village was simple, with several small houses mostly made of wood. There were lots of people, apparently of Indian descent, walking around, including several kids. Again, Max noticed that no one was paying him any attention. It was as if he was invisible, which he actually believed he was, as crazy as that sounded.

Some distance away from the rest of the people, there were a man and a woman looking at the horizon, talking. Just as a bug feels unexplainably attracted to light, he felt compelled to approach them, and as Max got closer, his suspicions were proved correct. Despite the woman being in her forties and the sun being relentless, her skin was as white as snow. And as soon as he approached, she looked at him, smiling just as before, and her purple eyes seemed to sparkle in the sunlight. Max heard her fingers snap, and just as it had happened before, the man started speaking English.

“When I admire the wonders of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in the worship of the creator,” said the man, while appreciating the sunset.

He was bald, short, and was wearing round glasses. Based on his appearance, and their surroundings, Max came to the impossible conclusion: the man was none other than Mahatma Gandhi himself.

“The creator will be pleased that you like the work,” she answered, turning to look at the villagers. “It’s your mission to save these people, to free them and all the others, and I will aid you.”

“I am but a servant,” Gandhi said, humbly.

“No, you are a leader! You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

“I see. You always help me see the bigger picture; I am truly blessed to have you by my side.”

“You must live as if you were to die tomorrow, but learn as if you were to live forever. I will help you with the latter,” she said, with a soothing smile.

“Wait a minute,” Max said. “Are you actually trying to tell me that you were the one that told Gandhi ‘You must be the change you wish to see in the world?’”

“Yes, and I believe you just saw the exact moment it happened,” she answered plainly, now looking at him.

“So, you were friends with the naked Greek guy, Napoleon and Gandhi, is that it? Are you some kind of ghost with a god complex?” It was difficult for Max to make sense of everything that was going on. It seemed that the more information he got, the more confused he became.

“Well, just so you know, ‘the naked Greek guy’ was Alexander the Great. And answering your question, I’m not a ghost.” It took a while for Max to realize that she had finally answered a question about herself, mainly because he was still perplexed, thinking that he had seen one of the biggest conquerors in ancient times not only naked, but running to carry a horse because a little girl told him to.

“It looks like even you can run out of words.” She seemed to be entertained by the whole situation. “I showed all of that to you for a reason, Maximilian. I have a mission, and all those people that you saw tried to help me accomplish it, but they failed. I believe with you it could be different.”

“Let me see if I’ve got it straight. You want me to help you do something that neither Alexander the Great, Napoleon, nor Gandhi could do? Who do you think I am? That’s way above my pay grade.”

“It’s not titles that honor men, but men that honor titles. It wasn’t the case that those great men tried to help me; they became great men exactly because they tried to help me in the first place.”

“Are you promising me success in exchange for me helping you? Are you trying to involve me in a pyramid scheme?” Max had to admit that a ghost running a pyramid scheme would’ve been a first.

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to answer your questions now; our time is almost up.” She looked uneasy. “We will talk again, and I’m sure you will change your mind. You’re still young. The more sand that escapes from the hourglass of our lives, the clearer we should see through it.” And just as she said it, everything around him started to fade.

The village was gone, the people vanished, and even the dirt under his feet disappeared; he was now standing on a white floor. Everything had become white. The only thing left was the woman, but even she was starting to fade. Her paper-white skin became transparent until it was completely gone. The last part to disappear was her big purple eyes, staring deeply into Max’s, as if she was looking into his soul.

And then Max woke up.

## Author's Notes

I hope you enjoyed the Vessel's Short Stories.

If you liked Code Stasis, please leave a review, it's of great help to indie authors, such as myself.

And if you are interested in how the story continues, I invite you to continue reading [Code: Revelation](#), available in e-book and paperback.

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