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**∴ DURANTE ∴**

*a brief collection of writing samples, love Locke.*

**love is a bird i cannot catch // fanfic snippet - 390 words.**

Dante takes a puff of their cigarette, smoke lingering in the still alley air. “Your question, earlier,” they say, head tipped toward the stars, face angled away, out of sight, unreadable. “You make me realize a possibility I’ve never known before, Vergilius. That’s why you’re dangerous.”

He leans forward instinctively, body truer than his conscious decision to avoid the lure, and sinks into reward that is the faint curve of Dante’s lips, barely limned by the light of the grime-covered traffic lights.

“You make me want to rest,” Dante finishes. They laugh, light, and when they turn back, he sees acceptance drawn in the relaxed planes of their face, mouth bent in a loose smile still painted by smoke—like rest is some terrible thing that they can no longer remember to fear in his presence.

Vergilius pauses, breath caught on a puff of his own. In that second, seeing his expression, Dante laughs again, unreserved this time, and shatters the moment—a purposeful retreat, an honest, open heart too dangerous to bear for more than a single, pulsating beat.

For that heartbeat, Vergilius wants to stop them. Instead, he turns away with a sigh, even as he raises a hand to steady Dante from tumbling off the window.

They linger there for a while more, ten minutes turning into twenty, thirty, with chained cigarettes and Dante’s talk of artificial lungs; vulnerability and worries and the ugly face of the face of the City before them like drifting ash in wind—ever present, ever waiting on the edge of consciousness, but never acknowledged. After all, some monsters are too big to fight and too big to run away from. The only thing you can do is ignore them, eyes closed against their looming maw, feigned ignorance the only relief from the inevitable end.

Eventually, Dante slides back into their room, and Vergilius follows suit, watching as they leave the window guards on the floor of the motel carpet and the locks hanging from stray screws.

“Some fresh air couldn’t hurt,” they explain, as if they hadn’t experienced the dead air a second before, and Vergilius knows it’s a sign to rebuild his walls and redon his armor. Still, he’s a moment too slow, and in his weakness, he’s struck by the vicissitudes in their smile.

“Besides.” Dante laughs. “I can afford the fine.”

**a Star towards false north // fanfic snippet - 445 words.**

At the time, when Dante invites him back onto the rooftops with a lighter and brand name pack in hand, and they clamber up the office stairs to the sight of orange light breaking across the shuttered offices of

the City, Vergilius doesn't realize it'll be the last. The last sunset, the last shared cigarettes, the last of this Dante. But he realizes something.

Maybe it's in the way Dante stands at the edge, toeing the pull of gravity, their figure small against the expansive view. Of course, the terrible reality of it is that Dante has only ever been just a tiny fragment of it all, but the City's elite have always been good at breaking rules. Vergilius considers Dante to be better than most and certainly less tolerable, but—

He likes them a hell of a lot more, too. Even so, there's more days than not where he can't understand them, so he sets his worries aside and takes his first cigarette from their gloves, tinted by the warmth of their hands. He lifts it to Dante's, and a dot of flame leaps at their conjoined sticks with a soft click.

They both take a deep drag in. Vergilius lets his out in a slow exhale and hears Dante do the same, the gray from their lips curling across the skies in dark, beautiful plumes. Vergilius hears Dante breathe in again.

"I want to tell you something," they say, breaking off to take another drag as if beginning is so herculean a task that they cannot even start to comprehend it. And yet, they do. They always do. "I want to tell you about me."

For a moment, they glance at the sky, seeking, before they fix their gaze back onto him, the smoke from their lips pattering nervously at the movement. They stand closer than ever, face shielded only by the flimsiest haze, and it is here, where the smile fades from their face.

"Well," Dante says. "It begins with the night sky, a sea of light, and a Star—maybe two, in some cases."

The corner of their lips tip upward. "I was one of them. As for the other—" A soft breath. "Well, I suppose you'll see." They look away, back to the sky where the sunset is beginning to bleed into the night. The first stars are coming out, and Vergilius wonders if that other is among them.

"It all began in a place quite different from this one. Though, I suppose there's no point in comparing hells, is there?" Dante says, a certainty, and yet hearing them breathe, Vergilius is certain that this one is better than the next.

### **a one-sided game // 1x1 roleplay reply - 458 words.**

There's a saying, a warning, in the station that the waters in the city run deep. Deeper, even, than rivers, harbors, and oceans because even animals know to protect their homes, and crime has rooted itself within the city's heart, gnawing along its pipelines and power grids. Here, it's a painfully learned fact that those who dive too deep are destined to return to the sea, that those who fish in the underworld where violence carries more weight than the law will meet their end in some way or another—but always too soon.

Nevertheless, Nikolai's next week is a search spent on the craggy shoreline, dredging through the silt of the newest reports and trailing lines along his loose contacts with half a foot in the underworld and half a

foot out. For all the strength of the gangs, water has always had a habit of flowing outward, seepage stolen from dripping awnings and leaking tiles and swallowed by nightlife in the pursuit of survival. Because, when people live their lives avoiding the epicenters of crime, a lack of knowledge is, in and of itself, criminal.

Having spent the past few years with ice clinking against his teeth and fruity drinks lingering on his lips, Nikolai knows enough of the crowd to blend in as a survivor instead of a cop. Survivor, because for all of his efforts, he's never been able to hide the desperation of the hunt—only redirect it into something safer, into searching. In the end, they're simply two sides of the same coin, the same questions asked of different intentions—of the victim over the cause or vice versa, just distinct enough to draw a mask.

'Castor', though, seems to have none of the same inhibitions. Dropping down in an empty seat in Baby G's, an invitation sent the afternoon prior, Nikolai indulges in his thoughts, eyelashes falling low, shielding.

Coins and mirrors, they're funny things—man-made purpose reflected onto objects and into the eye; values and reflections destined to change with the passage of time.

Thinking of 'Castor', Nikolai can't help but project shadows of his own image onto the man, convinced that when he looks up, pays, it'll be to the sight of someone who has seen the sea and swallowed it—accepting, drowning, becoming. But when he blinks, and a year passes, will he still feel the same, or will it be swept away like dust on the doorstep? Still, the fact of coins and mirrors is this—that the worth of a penny and the man in the glass are the truth of now.

So Nikolai gambles on the possibility and bets on heads. Neither opportunities nor threats reward you for leaving your back to them, after all.

> *Can you make 8 PM tomorrow?*