

# Writing Samples

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## Sabbatical

You have no idea what you should have expected when you finally met Death, but this was decidedly not it. Across from you in the diner booth, with its slightly sticky table and flickering overhead light, the woman (entity? god?) chuckles like she can hear your thoughts. For all you know, she can.

"I can't, by the way," she says unprompted, her drawl just as thick and slow as the last time she spoke. "Y'all just always think the same things: '*What did I do to deserve this?*'; '*Can she hear my thoughts?*'; '*Can I get out of this?*' Wondering if I know what you're thinkin' is just the most consistent one." She takes a deep pull of her clove cigarette and you can't help but say it:

"Those things will kill you."

Apparently, those no smoking campaigns were very effective.

She stops mid-drag and simply stares at you, the breath held unnaturally long. Mere carcinogens wouldn't dare raise a hand to her. You stare back; it's probably some kind of sacrilege but you still do it. She breaks out into raucous laughter. A few other patrons of the diner glance over before looking away again. You're pretty sure they know what she really is. "Honey, that's—" She shakes her head and takes a deep breath, like she's never smoked a day in her life. "That's not all how this works." She still puts it out in the empty ashtray out of courtesy. "Right then, you and I need to have a little talk. Think you can manage that?"

You think about it even though you're fairly certain you're meant to just say yes immediately. If this is a dream, how long you take to answer is irrelevant. And if it's not, you have a feeling you really want to spend some time contemplating exactly what you might be saying yes to first. In the time the cogs of your mind are spinning and grinding, you take some time to watch Death.

She seems content to wait, which makes a lot of sense. If she truly is Death, why would waiting ever bother her? You take a breath to speak finally and she laughs again. It's wry and almost fond this time, with a raised eyebrow. "I don't actually have all the time in the world to sit here and chatter away with you, nice as you might be. I have a job to do and, Fates willing, so will you." You don't know how to decipher that so you tell her you're ready to listen and she gives you a smile. Rather than being ghoulish, it's warm like someone that's known and watched over you since before you were born. Maybe it's the gentle wrinkles over her dark, sun-warmed skin. Maybe it's her comfortable, just barely broken-in clothes. Maybe it's all of it. "Before we get started, we might as well get that question you've got burning in your throat out of the way, before you end up with acid reflux or something."

"I'm dead, right? I'm dead and this... diner is the... Afterlife?" You look around to try to figure out if you would really mind sitting here for the rest of eternity and the best you can come up with is 'so long as I never have to go to the bathrooms'. A glance out the large bubble glass window between the blinds' tiny slats adds 'venturing out into the lightless night' too.

"Yes and no," Death sits back in the squeaky cushions as she tries to figure out how to best explain it in a way you'll understand. You know the look. Your parents gave it to you, teachers, older siblings and cousins and friends. The look that say 'you're not dumb, you're just not experienced enough for this'. "You are most definitely dead, kiddo. Sorry about that. It was quick, if that makes you feel any better. This here is a waystation of sorts; a place to wait until you pass on, if you're meant to. Otherwise, you end up like them." She jerks a thumb over at the barely moving people hunched at one end of the long lunch counter. You hadn't even noticed but looking at them for too long makes you feel like going to sleep and you suppress an involuntary yawn. "Yeah... You sure know how to slide the hard questions in there, don't ya?" She whips off her dingy hat and runs a hand through the tightly coiling salt and pepper curls underneath before she replaces it. "Well, anything else?"

You think for a moment. This feels almost like interviews you'd do for office jobs, the ones that always have postings but would never hire. So you take the advice of one of the videos you watched before the last one. "What's your typical day like?"

Death blinks at you and bursts out into her loudest laughter yet. "You're a quick study, aren't ya?" That's when you're sure about what comes at the end of this. "I drive around," but you know the word she says isn't actually 'drive' but something your brain can't make sense of yet, "and I collect souls along the way. Stop in places like these, get them a hot meal, and help them to the next step. Most go quiet, they know what's happened. Some don't want to believe it. Some fight, those can be hard." Death sobers for a moment then takes a slow deep breath. "It's an eternity, I suppose, it's got its purpose. I just like to think I've earned myself a vacation. Let's call it an indefinite sabbatical. I need someone to fill in for a while, once I get them trained up. Think you might be interested?"

You don't have to think about your unfulfilling job, your consistent boredom, your wish for something to change even the slightest bit, your tiny glimmer of hope. There's no hesitation this time.

"Absolutely."

## Mid-City Morning

There's a certain sort of serenity to the city when it's this early in the morning. People are awake, of course. People are always awake at this level of the 'plex, tossing together enough calories to force them through to their first breaks. But it's quiet. Peaceful. Thoughtful. The filters you need this close to the ground force out most of the air-based pollutants, but they can never quite get out all the smells that make it feel like home.

The slightly charred smell of bread left too long to toast. Lenna is usually the culprit in the 'plex, too busy trying to press their suits and get them to sit just right for their boss. There's always some meeting they need to look perfect for, always.

Caffies release perfectly timed olfactory loads, chemical reactions designed for peppiness. If enough people have their windows open and you're lucky, those little pods can wake up anyone on the level from a dead sleep. Anyone but Hartley, that is. Folx say their room is sealed like a tomb with good reason, that maybe they're secretly a vampire running away from problems in SouMet or a cherch-merc in their safehouse. Pretty sure they just work late.

The artificially clean scent let loose when the drying enclosures are opened. Someone in this 'plex is always forgetting their clothes in the racks overnight, too tired after wearing smiles or hauling components to assemble whatever the newest Upper trend is going to be before they move on like they always do.

Then there's the one smell you get every morning if you're up early enough, the one no one likes to talk much about: the gut-churning scent of blood and oil before the scheduled morning rain rinses it away. The evidence of what happened the night before. Cherch-merc bait, luring in those vultures worse than a bad rumor.

It's usually not a problem in this 'plex since it's mostly residential. The only bar here is a tiny one owned by the Mendezes, right next to their bodega. They make sure trouble here gets taken care of fast to protect their investments, I guess. There aren't a lot of vampires or other supes around besides, something about ley lines and wards if you ask some people. Or because of the one bar if you ask me. No 'droids to malfunction here either, since no one would waste the money on one here. Nothing that could cause trouble, by anyone's estimation.

I wrinkle my nose in disgust at the smell, tucked haphazardly under the frying protein squares and spices just added to the evening's dinner to simmer throughout the day. The display in countertop flickers to life with a special report about the damages done to some new prototype 'droid, carnage strewn across sectors and levels, the fashions already springing up from the wreckage like macabre flowers, the charity events to honor the truly dead already being announced for the following sundown...

I shake my head, sigh, and knock back my Caffie. I had to leave for the rail soon or be late to my desk again. The rumors from that, true or otherwise, would set me back and shove me back down a level. No one wanted that. Besides, the reports would be broadcast every step of the walk to the station. No one in the Met misses anything for very long.

## Buzz

One might think, looking at me from afar, that my life is easy. I want for nothing. I am the only untouchable person in this city. My hair, however it is coiffed for each appearance (and it is different for every appearance), has nary a single follicle misplaced or askew. My skin might well be porcelain for all the pores you can see. My clothing is the trend before it becomes trendy, the lightning spark that starts the conflagration. Secrets simply float into my waiting, upturned palms so that I may deliver them to the masses to slake their thirst for drama. Those masses think of me as an idol resting so far above they can hardly stand to look for fear they may be burned.

I am the Voice on High, delivering unto them the words they so violently crave to sustain their drives for ever greater accomplishments. I am the one thing they believe immutable and infallible.

They think me perfection given flesh.

They are wrong, of course. It is merely a facade, donned as needed to hold everything together. I am mortar, the glue dragging the sliding pieces of the city back into their proper places so the march may continue ever forward. I work tirelessly to ensure that all is as planned from the lowest SouMet dreg to the perpetually incumbent executive dynasties that believe themselves at the top. Each one serves a purpose and must be moved and nudged just so. That is what I have been tasked with, as was my predecessor before me and theirs before them to the founding of the Metropolis Arcology Region and the establishment of its endowing corporate benefactors.

I force myself out of my revelry to focus again on the task at hand. One cannot simply rely on the words of a cherc-merc in Metropolis, overflowing folders of evidence be damned. Anything can be forged or falsified with enough patience and resources. The truth might need to be massaged into something more palatable and workable besides. One can never just publish what they are given. That is the absolute first thing my employees learn and must comprehend.

Interns and assistants can never be trusted with something this sensitive. Too much responsibility, too much trust, and they may think themselves just as capable without me. They are not yet aware of who we answer to, of course. They could never grasp the nuance and weight of the situation, so blinded by ratings, hits, and potential fame from a byline. In truth, I am protecting them from their own ambitions by doing this work myself. The same way that I protect every life in this city, even when I must ruin a few.

So here I am, wires flowing from the ports at my temples and nape like water to control every function of this state-of-the-art 'droid. It provides me with the anonymity I need to perform this particular bit reconnaissance. It has been far too long since I had to do this kind of legwork, not since I was a cherc-merc myself all those many moons ago. Hunt down secrets for whoever could pay me best and sometimes act on them. Sell my skills to the highest bidders. A twitch of the corner of my mouth is the only concession to nostalgia I allow. I had found the highest bidders possible and there is work to be done for them now.

I am in a quiet little SouMet nightclub, a band playing softly in the corner as a 'bot moves soundlessly through the tables of no more than two to gently place glasses down before gliding to the next. No one orders food here. This is not that sort of establishment.

Some of them are vampires, demi-criminal lords of the undercity seeking a moment of reprieve and solitude.

Some are from above, socialites and climbers that want to look aloof and unaffected in order to potentially snag a promotion in whatever company has trapped them with its false promises of sky-top views, dazzling galas, and private hover car services. They are there to be seen, seeming to want to remain unseen.

A few are locals, watching helplessly as yet another morsel of their subculture is slowly gentrified and cleansed to be made palatable for those in the levels rapidly approaching the ground.

A smattering of cherc-mercs prowl the edges, hoping for that case-breaking snippet of gossip or confirmation of hearsay. Necessary but not worth my time. An assistant will verify before posting it nestled within some hourly blast to be seen and swiftly forgotten by all but those close enough to care.

Noise and nothing more. More important things need to be handled first.

There are some flickers of interest once the detritus is cleared away.

A pair of feuding vampire family heads are making a deal in the back, their voices just barely registering and forming into a feed in the corner of the HUD overlaying everything. Apparently, the crackdowns of the overcity security forces shoved them into this alliance and an abrupt end of a turf war. Interesting spice to pepper in somewhere as needed, to lift the mood after something heavier. A wonderful little restaurant is ready to blossom into the next hottest eatery sat on the contested turf. I make a note to ask if the owner wants the publicity, out of 'professional courtesy'. They will be receiving it either way as that section of SouMet needs an economic boost and the powers on high have dictated it.

One of the most ambitious young climbers of the largest aesthetics provider in the city is holding court in the most conspicuously inconspicuous spot possible, just to the left of the door and forming a perfect equilateral triangle with it and the band. Scientifically proven to draw attention and bloodlessly move you up the social ladder, sound enough as I had completed and published the research. For someone who had only been stitching together uniforms and functional apparel a few years ago to be draped in their own designs before release to the mid-level masses is no mean feat. Commendable but only fodder for a slow news day.

A maker is watching the band with obvious curiosity and avid interest. They too have spotted the tells and subtle giveaways. Perhaps they too have noticed that they are already starting to be covered and masked away. If they are as good as they so loudly proclaim, they should have. It would not remain obvious for much longer.

Interesting. Inconsequential. Insignificant in the long run. Those people would never truly change this city.

Two of the most notorious cherc-mercs in all of Metropolis have eyes for my mark and it nearly gives me pause. Their intelligence is not what I am here to confirm but their appearance here is almost confirmation enough in and of itself. They rarely drag themselves out of the true SouMet, the undercity that people are always so afraid of, for anything less than the most urgent of business. Or at least, this is what I have come to know.

The real gem of this eve is cloaked in shadows that would leave them obscured to human eyes. Their focus is single-minded and attached to the band playing across the intimate little room. Filters flicker over my vision in a rapid cycle as I attempt to confirm the patron's identity but all fail. A REC blocking device, basic but potentially effective as it interrupts prying eyes.

Considering my database of faces and personal information is the most complete aggregate in Metropolis, seeing nothing at all is a feat worthy of attention and undoubtedly expensive. That confirms that this was no ordinary barfly. Something like that can only be purchased by a select few.

The concealed figure golf claps as the band finishes, just subdued enough to be polite but not enthusiastic enough to be conspicuous. I curse softly in both my flesh and in my 'droid husk as they slip through a side door that never allows me to confirm their identity. The useless cherm-merc who gave me this information must have tipped them off with their oafishness. They are far more cautious than any normal diver of the depths of the city. I will need to use some other means to tease out that particular truth.

I make my way into a side room, a charging station for the bar's assorted 'bots and the rare loaned 'droids. I shed that skin like a serpent and resurface in my workspace, surrounded by the tools of my trade and little else. Sterile, cold, empty, and filled only with the low hum of electronics and the cooling system. It is... surprisingly lonely and, for a fraction of a fraction of a heartbeat, I am filled with regret. The pedestal I have been placed on is unfortunately too small to hold anyone but myself. No one to share triumphs, failures, or anxieties at the end of a day. Not even a pet.

This is what I have chosen but I only regret for a moment. I keep everything together. I keep it all from collapsing around our ears and burying us all alive. I am Atlus and I must remain standing.

Several calming breaths and a Rise'n'Shine shot later, I am ready to face the city for the morning blast. It will not have the buzz to shake the world from the top curve of the climate dome arcing over the pristine 'Dis rooftops to the lowest possible reaches of Soumet. It will not topple corporate empires or bring CEO dynasties to their knees. It will not provide the materials needed to strengthen the foundations of this place. It will likely not even be remembered by lunch. That is fine. The shape of this masterpiece will come together perfectly when the time is right for it.

I look perfect, as is expected. I have to or the masses may worry and panic and doubt. I take one final steadying breath, deliver my trademarked smirk for the drone cameras, wait for the exact necessary microseconds, and begin as I do every day.

“Good morning, my lovely Metropolis denizens. Do I have some buzz for you today...”

## Choice

“We have a new assignment.” It’s said flatly, as if Hartley would really rather be doing anything else in this world, up to and including going back to ‘Dis and attending a gala in the biggest gown imaginable with their cropped black hair pulled and teased and extended and styled into something massive and impossible to maintain, worthy of their abandoned family name. That in itself is a tip-off that this wouldn’t be a normal assignment. He rubs at the fade starting to grow back thick and kinky after only a few days and sighs, considering their efficient little apartment kitchen.

Coffee first, the real stuff, then diving into whatever this is. Garou places a carafe and two mugs in the only clear spot at their oversized but still cluttered table. Only a few files and tablets have to be nudged aside and nothing clatters to the tiled floor. Small victories. “You like working, Hartley,” he says patiently, and somehow their compact form fills with even more rage and indignation. Ah. This one might mean they have to go up to ‘Dis then and that always set them on edge. “We could always turn this one down. We’re not exactly hurting for money after all.”

Hartley sighs heavily and shakes their head, arms covered in ink crossing over their chest. He thinks he spots a new one, wedged in between two larger pieces to help integrate them a bit better, but it might just be a trick of the light. It was always hard to tell with Hartley. “I don’t want to rest on my laurels, and I don’t want to go soft.”

Garou lets out a tiny snort, completely unable to hold it back. It’s laughable, considering their constant training and conditioning.

“Don’t give me that,” they snap back with a snarl. “I left Nuages for a reason.”

That sobers both of them for a moment, memories of their first meeting and assignment floating back. The question Hartley never really answered still hangs in the air: if they hated the ways those at the top lived so much, how the top of SouMet society conned and manipulated and turned each other into their social step stools to reach just a little bit higher, why choose to do their dirty work as a *cherch-merc*? Garou recovers first.

“Alright, what about this seems off to you?” he asks softly, pouring both their cups exactly the way they like. Hartley takes their pure black and inhales the rich scent deeply before answering. He wasn’t sure why but just the scent of real coffee always put them at ease.

“It’s another look into that upstart vampire, the one working in prosthetics and regrowth.”

Garou nods, still mixing cheap sugar substitute and powdered creamer into his coffee. They could afford the real stuff if he wants but some habits die hard.

“The last *cherch-merc*s who worked this found nothing too out of the ordinary,” Hartley continues, eyebrows scrunching together, “mostly that they’re intensely private. Makes sense if you’re trying to build something that might do any kind of good.”

He nods again. He is the one who kept up on reports from other teams and competing organizations, not much of this was new. Something has to be coming, it’s just a matter of what and when.

“They got fired.” Garou’s eyebrows shoot up and he lets out a soft noise of understanding. There it is. It certainly explains why nothing else had come from that crew, considering how good they had been. “Yeah, I know,” Hartley says wryly and then takes a sip of coffee.

“Someone needs something desperately then,” Garou murmurs to himself. “Someone with clout who wants the best money can buy. Anything less than tearing down that new company is unacceptable.” He goes silent for a moment, the only noise Hartley nervously cracking the knuckles of one hand. “They could do a lot of good for SouMet first if we can stall this out long enough.”

“And what about all the good we’re doing if they just fire us first? We—” He gives Hartley a withering look, the servos in his mechanical arm whirling louder as if in indignation and cutting off the selfish tirade before it can go any further. “You’re right. That’s...” They wave a hand upwards as if to indicate their upbringing in ‘Dis and the entire social structure of Metropolis speaking through their mouth. They aren’t wrong about how deeply ingrained the behaviors and culture are, or how far they’ve come in trying to unlearn even the smallest part of it. It still rears its ugly judgmental head far too often for Garou’s tastes. “So, what do we do?”

Garou takes a long sugary sip as they think. “We take the assignment and get to the bottom of whatever this is. Better to know what’s happening and pass the info on if whoever is hiring just plans on firing us if we don’t deliver fast enough.” Hartley nods solemnly, the way they do when they’re already making their contingency plans. He just sighs heavily again, picks up a tablet, and starts reading up on what they should already know.