

Nominox Salutations

Yarn

In the depths of B.552, a clandestine signal passes from one shadowy figure to another, a silent agreement sealed with a nod. Nox, a youth with an air of innocence masking his true intent, receives the signal, his cue to begin the artful dance of thievery in the heart of Tirasheppo. Within this enclave of the Twin Cities, where freedom takes on a different guise for those born into its confines, life thrums beneath the surface of overbuilt bunkers and labyrinthine alleys.

Tirasheppo, ruled by a mosaic of families and gangs, stands as a testament to the precarious balance of power within the Shin Sekai Federation. Among its denizens, whispered tales paint it as both the most perilous and densely inhabited layer in the sprawling urban expanse.

In the hushed undercurrent of the bustling crowd, Nox pauses momentarily, a subtle rhythm of taps echoing from his fingers—a superstitious quirk born of countless successful pickpocket endeavors. With measured steps, he navigates the throng, a phantom weaving through the fabric of the city, striving to evade notice.

Among the sea of faces, his mark, Mitch, stands amid a tide of well-wishers, exchanging pleasantries with practiced ease. Nox's window of opportunity shrinks as he closes the distance, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips as he whispers “FucKing SighTLESS PlayBOY. GONNA steal your shIT without you KNOWing a thing. AYE aye, I will.”

A muttered oath slips from Nox's lips, barely audible above the din, as he sizes up his oblivious prey. With the finesse of a practiced thief, he moves to relieve Mitch of his burden, only to halt abruptly as the piercing gaze of a guard settles upon him, suspicion hanging in the air like a palpable threat.

A serendipitous distraction grants Nox a fleeting reprieve, as a passerby engages Mitch in conversation, diverting attention elsewhere. Seizing the moment, Nox readies himself, his fingers tracing a familiar pattern of luck upon his palm before he reaches once more for his prize.

"Hey, Kid," the guard interjects, disrupting Nox's focus with an unexpected intrusion.

Nox takes a quick breath before tapping his right hand with his left then rubbing a circle on his palm. With his good luck ritual done he goes to grab the bag again

Startled, Nox stumbles momentarily, his excuse tumbling from his lips with practiced ease, a tale of impaired vision spun on the fly. “My eye sIGHT, reALLY bad. MutatION. BareLY see, excuse ME.” Regaining his composure, he retreats into the anonymity of the crowd, only to reemerge from a different angle, his resolve undiminished.

Perplexed, the guard's scrutiny lingers, his confusion deepening until Nox's accomplice—a youthful figure with a knowing nod—collides with him, drawing his attention away in a flurry of indignant words, "Hey!? What's wrong with you?! Can't you watch where you're going?". In the ensuing chaos, Nox seizes his opportunity, a ghost in the urban landscape, disappearing into the shadows once more.

But it wasn't good enough as the guard's alarmed cry pierces the air, Mitch's attention flickers momentarily, his brow furrowing in confusion before dismissing his muscle's aggressive stance with a casual shrug.

With the pickpocket's attempt thwarted, tension crackles in the air as all eyes pivot towards the would-be thief, their expressions a mix of surprise and disdain.

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in," one voice jeers.

"Seems we've got a little troublemaker on our hands, a handsy-mandsy" another chimes in, lips curled in a sneer.

Before Nox can react, frustration boiling over into desperate action, a punch is thrown, aiming for Mitch in a bid to secure the bag and make a swift exit. But fate intervenes in a sudden twist as the guard's cries are drowned out by a chorus of chaos.

A jaw-clenching impact reverberates through the crowd as Nox's accomplice swiftly dispatches the guard with a well-placed blow, veering off into the anonymity of the throng.

In the ensuing melee, blows rain down indiscriminately, each strike finding its mark with brutal efficiency. As Mitch reels from the assault, his guard faltering under the onslaught, Nox seizes his chance, fingers grappling for purchase on the bag's strap.

Yet, in a cruel twist of fate, the bag's stubborn resilience delays his escape, his fingers fumbling as Mitch seizes the opportunity to retaliate. With a swift tug, Nox finds himself yanked off balance, crashing to the ground in a jumble of limbs.

"You think you can just waltz in here and help yourself?" Mitch snarls, his voice dripping with contempt.

Before Nox can muster a response, a resounding clang echoes through the chaos, leaving Mitch momentarily stunned. Seizing the opening with lightning reflexes, Nox springs into action, his instincts guiding him towards a swift counterattack, driving his knee into Mitch's face with unbridled force. As the blow connects, his accomplice seizes the opportunity, snatching the bag and discarding their makeshift weapon that had stunned Mitch just a moment before, in a hurried bid for escape.

"Run, damn it!" the young accomplice urges, their voice echoing through the chaos.

Without a backward glance, Nox flicks a defiant gesture at Mitch before vanishing into the throng, a wraith slipping effortlessly into the shadows. Behind him, an enraged cry pierces the air, signaling the success of his escape as he finds refuge amidst the anonymity of the crowd.

Peering back from his vantage point of safety, Nox stifles a laugh at Mitch's misfortune, reveling in the poetic justice of the moment.

Later that day, within the confines of their makeshift shelter—a decrepit warehouse steeped in forgotten history—Nox celebrates his victory alongside his accomplice, a boy no older than fourteen with wild ashy hair.

"Hell yeah, man!" Uchino exclaims, admiration gleaming in his eyes. "That kick was pure badass! Diago won't be talking shit this time."

As they settle in, the bag securely in their possession, hanging from a rebar sticking out of the pillar Uchino rests against, Nox offers his gratitude to Uchino for his timely intervention, tracing symbols upon the door in a ritualistic gesture of thanks.

"Good jOb, savED my ass BACK there. I oWe yOU one.," Nox acknowledges, a hint of sincerity lacing his words as he offers the boy a backwards wave. "MEssed up my RITUALs and was PUNISHED by it. Damn STEN's messing me UP."

"You gotta be careful about that shit, Kyanta." Uchino replies as Nox turns to take a seat near him, not wanting to be far from the treasured bag.

But their moment of triumph is short-lived as a chilling voice of near-gurgles breaks the silence, drawing their attention to a figure lurking in the shadows of the rafters—a familiar face from their enigmatic circle.

"You really went for it, huh?" Sal remarks, his tone a mix of awe and amusement.

With a wry smile, Nox nods, their daring escapade now a tale to be shared amongst their clandestine brotherhood. "DanN right we DID! Great gains gotTEN! Even suCKER punched the UmOR. Felt his face bone ON my knee, real NICEly."

"Poor decisions. Poor decisions. I've warned tha both of you Kunos." Sal says calmly, a single hand letting him dangle from the rafters.

"Your warnINGS are SHITE. You ain't NO STEN!" Nox lets out in a quick burst.

"Yeah, sure, whatever, Sal. You're just being sad that you won't be recommended to Diago after this." Uchino remarks as he scratches his head, pulling his hood up and entering one of the side rooms.

"Not yet, I'm not. But you two keep messing with the faces around here like that and you'll be the sad ones." Sal responds

"Fuck them FACES. I'll steal THEir faces, see how gOOD they are then" Nox exclaims as Sal's purple tongue snakes out in a leisurely stretch, revealing it's length as he twists it around his hanging body, eventually retracting it and giving a licking itch to his arm. Nox's curiosity gets the better of him, and he gingerly peeks into the bag, feigning nonchalance as he shifts his weight against it.

Inside, a jumble of unfamiliar items greets his gaze, their significance lost on him. But amidst the confusion, a faint glow emanates from within, casting an ethereal light upon the contents. The bag itself seems to pulsate softly, akin to a luminescent beacon in the dim confines of their shelter.

"That's not your usual haul, Nomox," Sal remarks, his voice carrying a hint of intrigue. "Seems you've stumbled upon something rather peculiar."

Drawing a languid yawn, Sal elaborates on the enigmatic connection between Nox and the old world creatures he mimics, mocking that he can't 'steal their faces' but instead 'steals the faces of now extinct night critters', similar to his own 'tousia.

"You say that, but why would I, or you for that matter, have the ability to mimic creatures that don't exist anymore?"

"It's your personal sten," Sal explains, his words tinged with a sense of unsure wisdom. "A symbiotic bond, if you will. But the intricacies of such phenomena elude even my understanding. I'm still not fully sure of your theories or views."

Nox's brow furrows in contemplation, grappling with the implications of Sal's revelation.

"Like it's got an umbilical cord in me or some shit?" Nox muses aloud, his skepticism evident. "My view is that I don't know shit. And I live in trash."

Meanwhile, Uchino returns, a stolen bottle of water in hand, his presence a reminder of their shared existence amidst the sweltering heat of the Bottoms as sweat drenches his jacket..

"Fucking love trash," Nox declares with fervor, his eyes alight with the thrill of scavenging. "Know how much good shit these poor kunos throw away? Found a whole statue in the pits once. Took its head and made a door holder with it... So much useful shit."

But Sal's admonitions cut through their reverie, his words a sobering reminder of the dangers lurking beyond their sanctuary. "They're gonna turn those fires on one day earlier, and you'll be gone," Sal warns gravely. After letting go of the planks holding him and slamming against the compacted floor, giving a roll to ease his strain.

Undeterred, Nox remains steadfast in his convictions, preferring a swift demise amidst the flames to a slow decay in the clutches of their oppressors. "Better in the fire amongst trash than blown apart by some trout! Least it will be quick, and I'll be doing what I love."

Sal pauses for a moment, licking the side of his head as a form of scratching before asking, "Did you say door holder?"

"A good death, I think," Nox muses, his tone tinged with grim resolve. "Don't want to be around them when I purge them."

As the conversation turns to the peculiar door holder crafted from a discarded statue, Sal's interest is piqued, prompting further inquiry.

"Yeah, a door holder. Hold the door for the bad Sten to leave." As Nox explains his beliefs, Uchino nods along, agreeing with Nox's opinion on a fiery death as opposed to a death at the hands of someone else. "Don't want to be around them when I purge them. Too much bad yomo for me."

"Yom- Okay. Listen," Sal interjects prefaced with a sigh, his demeanor shifting as he begins to enter a serious topic for the group. Nox's senses prick with a sudden awareness, a subtle shift in the atmosphere drawing his attention. Before he can fully process the anomaly, a cloaked figure materializes before them, eliciting a startled cry from both Nox and Uchino.

"Niaji," Sal addresses the newcomer with a nod of recognition.

With a swift reflex, Nox lashes out, sending his shoe hurtling towards Niaji in a panicked reaction, connecting with his face, eliciting a slight flinch from the enigmatic figure, his expression obscured by the shadows of his hood and a durable mask that features swirls and eyes..

"Well, that's the introduction," Sal remarks, unfazed by the chaos unfolding around him.

In the aftermath of the unexpected encounter, Nox's nerves are still on edge, his movements jittery as he emits an odd, high-pitched noise of agitation.

Sal continues, explaining Niaji's role in his endeavors, his words punctuated by the tension lingering in the air. "He's been helping me secure jobs that keep me clear of the gangs," Sal explains, his tone tinged with gratitude. "Fully freelance, no ties to any family."

Nox's curiosity piqued, he interrupts, eager to assess the potential gains from their newfound partnership.

"Well past making me squirt myself," Nox interjects, his voice tinged with a mix of apprehension and intrigue. "How much money are we talking?"

In response, Niaji offers a respectful half-bow, his presence imposing yet enigmatic.

"Huia," he greets in a measured tone.

"Huia, odd-man," Uchino responds, his own wariness palpable in the air.

Acknowledging the greeting with a series of quick head nods, Nox's mind races with possibilities as Sal reveals the fruits of their collaboration.

"I've almost amassed enough to procure a grononit blade, with just a handful of jobs" Sal declares, his satisfaction evident.

"Great-scrap, that's impressive," Nox remarks, his fascination with weaponry evident. "I prefer scrap metal blades myself, but to each their own."

Uchino remains a silent observer, sipping his water as the conversation unfolds around him. Meanwhile, Nox's agitation simmers beneath the surface, his frustration evident as he questions the absence of an entrance ritual for the newcomer.

"Only you do that," Sal replies nonchalantly, prompting a wave of exasperation from Nox.

"Really?!" Nox retorts incredulously. "I knew something felt off in here. It's all the bad yomo you guys let in. Fucking kunos."

Sal's response is calm, a stark contrast to Nox's escalating emotions. Leaning back in a relaxed manner, resting his body in an awkward stance, but seemingly comfortable for him, Sal attempts to diffuse the tension.

"Calm down, Umor," Sal advises, cursing towards Sal.

Nox directs his ire towards both Sal and Uchino, his frustration palpable as he questions their oversight.

"I expected this from Sal, but even you, Uchino?" Nox laments, his disappointment evident.

As the conversation shifts, Nox takes the opportunity to retrieve his other shoe, pondering the situation with a mixture of weariness and curiosity.

"It's gonna be a little while," Nox explains, his tone measured. "Need to catch my breath after that ordeal."

Sal's response is pragmatic, highlighting the urgency of disposing of the bag to avoid unwanted attention.

"The longer it's here, the more they'll look for it," Sal explains. "Once Diago has it, I'm sure word will spread to stop looking for it."

Curiosity piqued, Uchino reflects on the contents of the bag, noting its intriguing glow.

Nox, however, remains indifferent to its contents, dismissing it as beyond his comprehension. "No clue, bunch of shit I don't understand," Nox admits. "It's too new for me to grasp."

Uchino adds "I think it was just a job to see if we had the stuff to do it."

"You mugged Kitchen-Mitch to prove you weren't scared? Surely there was another way of going about this." Sal's concerns turn to the repercussions of Nox's impulsive actions, prompting a defensive response from the young thief.

"So?" Nox shrugs. "Not like I'm out and about. I stick to my turf, my kingdom, and I rarely leave except to come here or scavenge for supplies. Trash, food, thankfully both are in the same place."

Sal's gaze drifts upward, contemplating the ceiling as he muses on Nox's eccentricities. "Odd one, you are, Nomox."

"So I've been told." Nox retaliates, "My personality matches my looks."

"Well, Niaji," Sal addresses the cloaked figure. "You've met him. Are you okay to offer us a better cuaoa now?"

Niaji's response is cryptic yet decisive, his lowered voice carrying a weight of authority and an odd robotic tuned voice.

"If you vouch for them, then it's your head," Niaji states firmly.

"Nike." Sal states, happy with Niaji's response, while Nox interjects with his trademark brashness, suggesting a more equitable negotiation.

"That's not a good trade, I think," Nox remarks. "Should do a better job negotiating. I would have said my hand; that's as high as I'll go."

As the conversation veers into strange tangents, Nox's irreverent banter continues unabated, his mind seemingly fixated on the practicalities of using a statue as a door holder.

"Regular heads decay too fast," Nox muses, his tone matter-of-fact. "A statue is much better for holding doors."

Niaji's response is enigmatic, a noncommittal hum in response to Nox's ramblings.

"I think he's getting excited over there," Nox remarks, his own enthusiasm palpable. "So am I."

Sal interjects, offering reassurance that Niaji's intentions are benign, albeit driven by his own agenda.

"Just let him speak," Sal advises, his tone measured. "His words are harmless, but he ensures his objectives are fulfilled."

Nox, undeterred by the skepticism directed his way, jests about his own propensity for self-inflicted harm through his words.

"I harm myself and others with my words all the time, thank you," Nox quips. "Mainly myself. Alright, you got me, only myself. I don't talk to anyone else."

Niaji's gaze remains fixed on Nox, his silent observation lending an air of scrutiny to the exchange.

Nox's stream-of-consciousness dialogue takes a philosophical turn as he questions the purpose of their current gathering.

"What the fuck are we doing here right now?" Nox muses, his confusion evident. "What's going on right now?"

Niaji's doubt surfaces, prompting a brief exchange between him and Sal as they deliberate on Nox's reliability.

"He has spun himself into confusion, are you certain you want to trust this?" Niaji queries, his gaze flickering between Sal and Nox.

"He'll be fine," Sal assures, his confidence unwavering. "You just gotta give him the goal, and he'll stick to it."

Nox interjects once more, his words laced with a hint of defiance as he challenges the status quo.

"Something you can't begin to handle, I spun myself into the truth!" Nox retorts cryptically, his tone defiant.

Before Niaji can redirect the conversation, Nox launches into a diatribe about the purported lies of the government regarding the Máncátír population.

"Think about how much food it would take to feed them," Nox muses, his thoughts racing. "Or think about the smell of their waste. What about when they shed?"

Niaji attempts to steer the conversation back on track, but Nox persists, adamant in voicing his theories causing Niaji to do a double take towards Nox as his conspiracy theories continue to flow unchecked, his skepticism directed towards the official narrative surrounding the Máncátír population and the supposed rise in crime statistics.

"Or think about this: the crime statistics don't add up either," Nox asserts, his tone incredulous. "Having these dangerous beasts full of hate and violence living among us? Crime would be outrageous. And the hygiene issues alone would lead to the spread of countless viruses. It's all an inside job and cover-up."

As Nox rants, Niaji interjects with the details of their upcoming mission, bringing the conversation back to the task at hand.

"Target is a unique one. It's a Thorton. A real Ritta," Niaji explains, his voice steady. "She has a vacation in the sub-seas in a couple of days. I've secured you four ports into the area. You'll have to locate her; she'll likely be on a boat, so you'll need to procure one yourselves."

Nox's skepticism momentarily subsides as the practical details of the mission are laid out.

"No way there are that many Máncátírs around," Nox remarks dismissively. "Just a hoax. They're drawing attention away from the cyber robot armies they're making. They want another, a third, damn war with the A.I. In that they are bringing doom, machine horrors onto us... Anyone you recommend getting a boat from down there?"

Sal nods in agreement, acknowledging the significance of the task ahead.

"Right. Haven't been to the seas yet. It'll be an interesting day," Sal remarks, his anticipation evident.

Nox's attention turns to the matter of security, prompting a swift response from Niaji.

"No," Niaji interjects firmly, redirecting the conversation back to Sal. "Remember the one rule. She's just a Thorton. Shouldn't have any. But she does possess some information on one of the local faces."

Nox accepts the clarification with a simple affirmation, eager to proceed with the mission.

"Good, good. Aye aye," Nox acknowledges.

"Need to ensure that 'formation don't leak anywhere." Niaji states as Sal replies with a "Nike."

As the discussion winds down, Sal proposes a strategic approach to their task, prompting a question for Niaji.

"I've heard the seas are fairly big," Sal begins, his voice contemplative. "Any chance of just hiding there tonight and waiting for the Ritta?"

"It's better to go soon and be prepared than rushing down there." Nox thinks openly.

"I doubt many of the workers there will be particularly perceptive of some new hands. New kuno come and go." Niaji states.

"You do stink. Easy enough to blend in" Sal says with a playful smile towards Nox as the rodent-like man sits up from the lying position he had gained at some point, wrapping the bag over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I live in trash. What the hell else would I smell like you douar kuno! I even eat trash. What a terrible insult you threw, you weird purple tongued blue skinned turtle." Nox defensively replies before making sure he is aware of the mission, "We're killing her, right?"

"You're down for some murder, Nomox?" Sal questioned.

“Yeah, I could go for some murders.” As Nox agrees to the task without hesitation, Uchino’s eyes begin to dim, realizing their new task and not totally sure if he’s up for such an action.

“Nike.” Sal says with a nod, looking over to Niaji, saying “Told you he’s good for it.” which make Niaji look back to Nox, worried.

“Don’t worry, kid. I’ll do the deed.” Nox says as he tosses the bag to Uchino to hold. “I know how to cleanse myself of the bad yomo.”

“And if the yomo becomes too heavy, I’ll be there to-” Sal’s words to calm Uchino are cut short as Nox interjects with,

“Can I keep the head?”

“Okay, well... That’s the question.” Sal sighs and looks to Niaji who is simply staring at Nox, an intense air around him.

“I mean, I don’t want to... Just curious if I can.” Nox replies, almost an innocence about him.

Unsure how to respond, silence engulfs the room for a moment as Nox and Uchino stare at Niaji, awaiting his answer. “I... Thought they decayed too fast?”

“Yeah, for a head door hold. Gonna use this one for a paper weight. All my important papers and stuff.” Nox responded, motioning as if he was placing a head on a desk.

“You said you don’t want it, you were just curious?” Niaji questioned, getting irritated by Nox’s antics.

“I don’t. But tht’s what I would use it for.”

“What important papers?” Sal questioned after a moment. “What papers? All you have is metal and plastic... And a bit of scavenged clothes?”

“The papers I steal from people. I read and laugh at them.” Nox said, motioning towards one of the corners of the warehouse, where he keeps his things. “I like to read the posters too. Like ‘No Dumping’. That one makes me angry.”

“I would prefer if she kept her head. While there are ways of identifying her, that’s the easiest.” Niaji states as Uchino nods, agreeing with both the disdain for the posters and the wish to not decapitate someone.

“Damn. Can’t have anything in this place... WAIT!”

“Oh, shit.” Niaji states, getting more and more worn out from Nox’s onslaught of words.

“You can take Sal’s head but I can’t her’s? That’s kinda fucked. Kind of hypocritical of you. Shame on you.”

“Sal doesn’t need to be identified.”

“He totally does. How am I going to talk to his Sten without his head?”

“He doesn’t even have records.”

“He does in my important papers.”

“Dare I ask what a Sten is?”

“Doesn’t even know what a Sten is and you want us to work for him, Sal?” Nox scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Sten is the essence of a person. Or thing. Sten is everything and everyone. You have nami stens, which are great beings of essence. They hold domain over specific areas of reality, and concepts. My personal nami sten is Numi Homan. The sten of recovery and luck and shadows.”

Ignoring Nox’s latest ramblings, Niaji looks to Sal and says “I’ll await the report of her death.”

“You do you, you Sten-less souin.” Nox says before quickly receiving a backhanded slap by Niaji.

Nox's irreverent attitude persists, even in the face of Niaji's admonishment. As Niaji prepares to leave, Nox continues to banter, unfazed by the slap he receives from the cloaked figure.

"Fucking slapped me," Nox bursts out laughing, his defiance undiminished. "Who the fuck slaps someone? I don't even know who you are."

Niaji, visibly annoyed by Nox's lack of respect, struggles to maintain his composure before finally departing with a sigh of irritation.

"Truly a unique bunch you are, hold no respect, yet you wish to work for the Marauders" Niaji remarks before walking away.

Nox, now feeling victorious, motions for Uchino to join him as it’s time to drop off the bag, his swagger evident in every step.

Meanwhile, Sal and Uchino exchange a brief conversation, their attention turning to the practicalities of their upcoming task. Sal offers advice to Uchino, urging him to catch up with Nox to ensure their plans remain intact. “He might leave your doings out of the chat with Diago, so you might need to do the talking. Plus he might get himself killed if he talks.”

“Yeah... What do you think my nami Sten is?” Uchino questions before leaving.

“I don't even know what would all be included in that to give a hypothetical answer.”

As Uchino departs to follow Nox, Sal reflects on the absurdity of their situation, pondering how he ended up in the company of such an eccentric individual.

As Uchino and Nox settle into their seats at Diago's restaurant, a sense of unease settles over them, exacerbated by the stares of the regulars. Nox, ever the eccentric, slides the bag off his shoulder and passes it to Uchino, whispering a warning about his tendency to say outrageous things if questioned.

“I’m gonna say some crazy shit if they ask me anything. You got this, I believe in you.”

Led to a booth, they are presented with menus by a Marauder member. Nox, in his usual fashion, attempts to order a drink that doesn't exist, much to the bewilderment of their server.

“Give me a dumpster fire, smooth, two ice, and a shot of grim.”

“Ah. We don’t.” The waiter pauses for a moment, thinking about the menu, before saying “Yeah, we don’t have that.”

“That makes sense, I just made it up.” Nox says with a wide smirk as Uchino gives him a confused expression, telling the waiter they’ll take a few ‘basic bubbles’.

Undeterred, he settles for a more conventional option, though not without expressing disappointment at his failed attempt at inventing a new cocktail.

“You know they put putty in bones on the surface? Makes them stronger. Like concrete putty. They just slam their bodies into the ground and throw themselves off buildings. Just break themselves so they heal stronger.” Nox made up, completely believing his own words as they formed upon exiting his mouth. “You know what sounds good? An Arch-Arachnid.”

“A what?”

“It’s a food made from spiders.”

“I wonder how they lived through the war?” Uchino questioned before Nox said with absolute confidence.

“Robots spared them, I bet. Knew they would taste good to eat. I envy the feats they must have had. So many crunchy and hairy spiders running in their robotic mouths. I could eat a spider right now. A real big one.”

“I... I don't think they had mouths.” Uchino questioned.

“What?”

“Pretty sure that’s now how robots... Or computers, or any of that works.”

“How else would they survive? I feed my computer with meat parts.”

“How?” Uchino asks, bewildered at this concept. “They don’t eat, just.. They just take electric energy.”

“Just rub it all over and find the meat port. Shove it in and let the holy Sten do its work.”

“Wait, you have a computer?”

“Cheya! I have three.” Nox states, holding up his three fingers, causing Uchino to only now realize that each of Nox’s hands only have three fingers and a thumb. “One even works.”

“Alright, let’s just.. Get something to eat.” Uchino states, wanting to get off the topic and get some food.

“I could really go for one of them spiders.. Think they got them here?” Nox questions as Uchino reads the menu, scanning the variety they have and is forced to pause and glance at Nox when he notices one of the desserts.

“I’m unpleasantly surprised that they have this, but they have fried arachnid-funnels.”

“Oh hell yeah! I should have known this was a place of class and culture, I’m moved to pure joy!” Nox calls loudly, drawing attention to them.

As they wait for their drinks, Nox and Uchino engage in their usual banter, discussing topics ranging from spiders surviving the war to Nox's unconventional feeding habits for his computers. Their conversation takes a peculiar turn when they discover a menu item featuring fried arachnid-funnels, prompting Nox's exuberant approval.

Their meal progresses pleasantly enough, with both enjoying their food. However, their evening takes a turn when a man approaches their table, inquiring about something they supposedly have for Diago. Nox nods towards Uchino, deferring to him to handle the matter.

Showing the bag to the man, a Moroon, one of Diago’s Marauders, Uchino trembles a bit, explaining, “Ye-yeah, uh... We were told that he had set out a... A... He wanted this bag, and so we went and got it.”

Nox chimes in, “I punched and kneed that guy that had it.”

“You?” The Moroon questions, “You two are the ones that jumped Kitchen-Mitch earlier?”, to which Uchino nods.

“Yep, that was us.”, with Nox claiming “I laughed at him after I took it.”

This causes the Moroon to clasp his hands together, saying with a sigh, “Alright, c’mon.”, directing them to follow, where he leads them through a door, not far away, passing through a bit of the kitchen and up a set of stairs, where they find a circular room, considered the VIP room, only for the higher ranking marauders.

With Uchino showing an obvious nervousness, he hides his hands in his pockets and lowers his head into his hood, as the Moroon takes them through another door before stopping, not going any further but directing them to continue through one more door, which he does hesitantly, his grip tightened on the bag that it whitens his knuckles.

Uchino and Nox now find themselves in the presence of Diago and his associates, surrounded by the relaxed atmosphere of the VIP room, a flavored vapor in the air which eases their nerves. Diago, engrossed in a game of pool, acknowledges their entrance with a casual gesture, while Nox, struggling to suppress his habitual door-turning ritual, glances at the men at the table with a mixture of pain and disgust.

Their attention is drawn to Mitch, his freshly broken nose a testament to their earlier encounter, as he points to them and says “That’s them!”. Nox's sardonic comment about Mitch's sentience prompts a raised eyebrow from Diago, who seems bemused by the idea of the two youngsters defeating the supposed tough guy.

“Wait, Kitchen-Mitch works for the Marauders?” Uchino questions, staring at Mitch for a moment before a large man stands from his position off to the side and stares at them. His darker complexion and preferred clothing blending him with the shadows.

“Oh, a nemphair, don’t see those types every day.” Nox mumbles to himself, causing Uchino to peer back to him for a moment, only now seeing Mitch’s guard from earlier, to whom he gives a faint wave to before shrugging off his presence.

As Uchino hesitates, his gaze shifts to the guard he had encountered earlier, offering a casual wave before dismissing him. Nox's laughter at the gesture lightens the tension momentarily. Diago explains the interconnected nature of the community, where everyone works for or collaborates with the Marauders to some extent.

“Of course.” Diago states, his demeanor cool, calm, almost reassuring. “Everyone around here either works for, or with, us.”

Uchino questions the rationale behind taking Mitch's bag, prompting Nox's whimsical comparison to a monopoly. Diago clarifies their position, emphasizing that they're not a monopoly but rather a trusted entity among various groups. Nox's offhand remark about a "trust system" elicits a chuckle from Diago, amused by the unconventional perspective.

"The point was to see who had the round ones to take on someone of such name stature as Mitch."

Uchino's response was blunt, laced with profanity, "That's... Fuckin' stupid."

A sly chuckle escaped Nox's lips, a mischievous glint in his eyes, drawing Uchino's ire even further.

Uchino's disbelief was palpable. "How are you the leader? Was that your idea?"

Nox, unable to contain his amusement, was on the brink of hysteria. "Man that's why I like you, Uchino," he remarked, the tension thickening with every word exchanged.

But Uchino wasn't swayed. "Why the fuck would I work with an idiot?" he shot back, his frustration mounting, with Nox adding in the background “This is why he won’t join me. I’ve offered for him to co-rule my trash kingdom... He turns it down every time.”

As the verbal sparring escalated, Diago, the calm amidst the storm, intervened. "Actually, no. I'm just a face. Though I'm not appreciating this tone or words."

Nox's laughter bubbled forth, bordering on hysteria, while Uchino's patience wore thin. "You're just fuckin' stupid. You should have sent us after one of your enemies, Nox is weird, weird I can handle, but you.. No." Uchino retorted, his voice laced with barely contained anger.

Diago's warning cut through the escalating tension like a knife. "Now, I've warned you a first time. I won't tell you a second. Lower it."

But Nox, seemingly unfazed, found amusement in the chaos. "Plausible deniability though, I guess is why they didn’t have us go after the enemy. But why are you guys playing poker?" he quipped, his smirk unwavering.

As the confrontation reached its peak, Diago's patience wore thin. "It's not poker, it's a- Shut up!" he snapped, his frustration evident. "This constant disrespect has ensured you'll never make it

here, you're free to leave. Only because I'm in a good mood from finding out that Mitch and his Catir were beaten by a couple of Marous."

Nox, ever the provocateur, seized the moment with a devilish grin. "Cool, that sounds good. But I don't punch chiefs for free, gonna need some money." he declared, his words laden with defiance. "Or permission to eat out of your trash, cause that spider was good."

Uchino, sensing the impending storm, looked over to the nemphair and gave a tilt to his head before looking to the door, a glimmer of apprehension in his eyes. "Wait a minute, you guys are working with a mancatir?" he exclaimed, his disbelief echoing through the room.

"I warned you." Diago said before sparking a match as everyone seems to take a sturdy stance. "Just get them."

"Damn, should have just asked for the trash." Nox mumbled, looking down in disappointment.

The nemphair straightens himself and stretches as a low gurgling growl escapes his throat. As he takes a step towards them, Uchino turns as fast as he can and runs out of the room, Nox following after a moment, catching up with what was happening.

"Wait, that's a mancatir, I fuckin' knew it was an inside job! The evidence was there all along!"

As Uchino pushes past several of the people that accidentally got in their way, he jumps down the set of stairs and pauses, reentering the restaurant proper, making sure Nox is still with him, only to see Nox just barely make the jump down to him as the nemphair stops at the top of the stairs, his eyes reflecting the light and causing them to appear soulless as he snarls at them.

A piercing scream turned into a howl is heard as the entire restaurant freezes, Uchino pushes Nox past the stairs to get the two back to running, with Nox looking for a quick escape, seeing in his peripheral Uchino just barely dodging a large, thick, hairy arm covered in blood.

Uchino takes a sharp turn, with the dark beast following him, as Nox jumps over a ledge, landing on a table on the floor beneath them, where he flips over and ruins the couple's meal that were eating there. It takes him some seconds to get back up, only to look up in time to be tackled by Uchino who rolls over him and forces him back up with him, pushing him towards the way they had entered originally.

Mostly remembering the way, and more focused on where the mancatir had went, Nox sees the doors they had came in are further away than one of the windows, next to the seats and decides to flail himself through the window instead, where he lands on a scrap roof, sloped and slick, causing him to begin to slide down, causing his instincts to kick him off it and instead grab onto the nearby walkway, causing several people to pause and stare at him for a moment before offering to help him up.

Getting onto the walkway with the help of bystanders, Nox peers to the window and calls for his friend, "Jump out the window, Uchino! It worked pretty well for me! Got a lot of faith in the Sten that you'll make it, buddy!" Nox's words fall silent as suddenly a body flies into him at a high speed, causing him along with some of the bystanders that aided him to be thrown off the walkway and slam into the floor a few feet beneath.

“Fuckin’... Sten.” Nox grunts as he holds his head and coughs, a bit of blood coming up showing some form of internal bleeding. “I should have just stayed in my trash kingdom.”

Before Nox can get back to his feet, he hears metal scraping, which he realizes is the creature sliding down from the roof just above him, letting out a loud, ear piercing screech.

Quickly pushing his body to slink into a hiding place nearby, his mind rushes, not sure what to do as he sees a couple of sparks fall from the sky, before a series of high pitched sounds that are akin to what he has heard ‘birds’ described as accompanying it. Just before the creature hits the ground, Nox watches, in slow motion, a large opening appear in the ground, where the mancatir falls right through, only to appear a few stories above them as a mirrored opening appears along the bottom of the building above them..

By this point, everyone is running and panicking as the dark creature falls through the ground again, only to reappear in the sky above, again, beginning a loop of falling, never losing momentum but instead gaining it. A man, dressed in all black calmly walks up to the hole in the floor, a pistol holstered to his side, showing to be a part of the military, with a rectangle appearing in the wall of the restaurant that Nox and Uchino had been in, as another man walks out of it, joining the military officer, dressed in a school uniform from the upper layers. The two stop for a moment, admiring the loop that the creature was now in, flailing and howling as it kept falling past them.

“Well, Kyuu?” the man in a school uniform questioned, awaiting orders for what to do now.

“Your tousia is as impressive as ever, Prescott.”

“Ah, c’mon, code names for a reason.” Prescott said with a motion from his hands.

“Relax. Everything down here is about family. They’ll protect yours as much as they protect their own.”

“Family? Pffft, think I give a shit about any of these people? It’s for the brand, Kyuu.”

“That’s nice to know.” Kyuu said, taking a drag from a device. “You’re not even in suit.”

“Yeah, but the powers are being used, the name is being called, people will know, it’ll spread. Actually, this looks better, shows that even in my off time I stop to help the little people.”

As Kyuu watches the creature picking up speed, constantly writing and flailing, screams of fear and anger emitting from it, he questions, “Could you slow it down?”

“Ehh, I could change the direction to being horizontal instead of vertical.. Gravity would eventually slow it down, but.. That can get a bit dangerous.”

Looking back towards the window it had crashed out of, Kyuu lowers his head as Prescott questioned.

“What the hell are we doing here, anyways?”

“You recall Chimera?”

“The weird ass immortal you were speaking with?”

“He wants out. Offered to give us info to take out this whole region in exchange for a total restart.”

“How total are you talking?”

“Full treatment.” Kyuu states, the light from the device he huffs lighting the shadows cast on his face by his dark hat.

“Hmph.” Must have a lot of information to buy him that... Want me to just kill this thing?” Prescott asks coldly.

“Technically, we’re supposed to keep them as safe as we can.” Kyuu says, directing his focus back to the creature. But I don’t feel like doing the documentation and dealing with him. Files say he’s one of the more dangerous ones, openly killing children and commonly causing fights.”

With this said, the portal on the ground closes and the mancatir slams into the metal, splattering into mush while going straight through two floors.

“Raid should be over. Surprised no guns or ‘tousias came out. Didn’t even hear anything.” Kyuu states as the two stare down at the creature’s remains. “Must have been a peaceful day.”

Another portal opens next to them against the wall as the two enter it, leaving the scene.