

Legitimate Businessman Simulator 0 x

Eziu Soratelli wakes from a dream of winning the blitzball championship trophy to find himself trapped in the workaday life of a legitimate debt collector and real estate attorney on the bottom rung of the corporate ladder in Japan in 1988.

"A dream is but a far off memory," he mumbles to compose himself as he passes Bounty Lane's immigrant workers offering their low-cost alternatives to the Big Lumber's paper product monopoly.

He arrives at the potential first client of the day, a prostitute who is the lone holdout against Tachibana real estate's takeover of a micro apartment condominium. He's just about to get him to sign the paperwork when Tachibana's legal counsel arrives to make it rain with a better offer while the prostitute's long-dead child cries in approval.

Rejected, the desolate Eziu works his sciatica out at a local batting range before sneaking in a quick lunch and sake at McDonald's.

"I guess all hearts ARE tempted to return to the darkness whence they were born, " he says.

Then, he notices his next appointment with a rehab center looking for space to serve wealthy alcoholics who get off on pretending to be homeless.

"But as long as we can form true connections in our hearts, we will always find the light," he thinks.

As he passes the Sea Salt Ice Cream Vendor's first brick and mortar establishment in Kamurocho, Twilight Burg's planned community (and Eziu's first success), he notices the "Re:Connect" graffiti on the traffic light and flashes a shit-eating grin.

Eziu runs across Ayu, the neighborhood's government-mandated dominatrix, who has only been dead weight in Eziu's attempts to focus on his career and build a raft to get off the island to see other worlds. (He actually has an inkling that another is racing to embrace the darkness of the unknown, but he hasn't met him.) Ayu obviously has the potential to be a ray of light holding the darkness at bay who can hold her own with the men. The world of the 80s, however, has no place for someone like her and won't give her a fighting chance to do anything cool.

Eziu patronizingly buys her a paopu fruit to cheer her up after letting her do what she wants to his body and tells her he'll look her up when he makes partner.

At this point, Matthew Angleton disconnects from the Amicus matrix. "Wow, that was wild. It was like I was really a businessman in the real estate boom of the 80s. I can't believe it worked so well first time out," he tells his captors at Xehanort & Xenu Condominium Contractors, Bhutan.

"Can I die in it?" he asks.

"Inconclusive," responds senior Templar Cruise. "But we have evidence you CAN cum."

"Oh," remarks Angleton and looks down.

"When can I go home?" Matthew Angleton asks.

"We told you," says Templar Whittaker. "Once you use the Amicus to find the right legal documents."

"You could have just used LexisNexis," Angleton says.

"Too expensive," says Templar Whittaker.

He then slides Matt into the high-tech MRI tube of the Amicus and blasts him with radiation to send his consciousness back to Japan in the 80s.

Only this time, he occupies the persona of Riku Odinsen, a soon-to-be fairweather friend of Eziyu Soratelli's who supplements his personal injury practice with earnings from bartending. Darkness awaits.

Riku Odinsen (Personal injury attorney and just the best goddamned-bartender in Sotenbori) awakes from a dream of traversing a pristine white tower housing the merchandising opportunities of his childhood to find he's missed the party. His favorite customer Pete's quinceañera at The Grand had been in full swing before he blacked out, he remembers. Pete had even kindly picked up the tab for the whole bar and started a round of Fireball whiskey pong --- Oh. That explains it..

"I must walk the twilight path to dawn to find the hair of the dog," Riku grumbles. "Wait. Why did I say that? That's goofy, right?"

As he walks to the nearest drug store in the early morning hours, he comes across Jin DerElla, a bright young thing out past curfew and worried his girlfriend will see past the cheap heart-shaped necklace he's given her to discover he's a housekeeper.

"It's all about confidence, bro," says Riku. "Love is all about forging bonds in our hearts. Tell you what you do: You buy a forgery of a fancier heart-shaped necklace. That way, the fear of discovering it's a fake will supplant the fear of her discovering that you live in a basement and talk to rats and give you the confidence to face the consequences of her learning your identity. Confidence, man. It's the best."

His good deed done for the morning, Riku arrives at the drug store just in time to hear the “click” of the door unlocking. A “click” that resonates in his heart for inexplicable reasons.

Riku meets up with his boss, a Yakuza middle manager who presided over his signing of the creed of a secret Greek fraternity on his last day in college a week ago. Brother Yensid gives him his first assassination contract: A disgraced former member who has been sniffing around the affiliated sorority too much.

The ambivalence Riku feels when he discovers ex-Brother Iger is actually protecting runaway girls with light in their hearts triggers Riku’s epilepsy and causes him to bust a move on innocent bystanders as he fades into unconsciousness.

"Shit! He's seizing!" shouts Templar Whittaker.

"He's seized it?" asks Templar Miscavige.

"No! He's having a seizure!" replies Templar Whittaker. He jams the Amicus's big red "Disconnect" button, and the tray holding a frothing, spasming Matthew Angleton pops out.

"WHERE'S K(redacted)?!", Matt screams. "WHERE'S K(redacted)?! I can see her heart glowing faintly in the darkness, but I can't find her."

Templar Miscavige whips off his thong and winds it between Matthew's teeth so he doesn't swallow his tongue.

"Shhh.... Shh...." whispers Templar Miscavige as he strokes Matthew's hair, which has been whipped by his frenzy into spikes.

Matthew awakes in a cell of pure white occupied at the moment by only himself, a card table with a notepad and forest green crayon on it, his race car bed and an overhead speaker.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Matthew," a voice says from the speaker. "Are you feeling better?"

Matthew can see the silhouette of a thin man behind a frosted window looking into his room.

"Who are you?" asks Matthew.

"Nobody of importance, but you can call me Mr. X" the voice says. "What's important right now is that you've suffered from a slight case of feedback from a disruption in the Amicus's power source. We are reconfiguring the calibration with the DTD (Door to Darkness) power bank, and we should have you back in Japan looking for those ancient legal documents from the 80s in no time so we can get you back to London soon.

However, your little episode was a dissociative fugue that may weaken your connection to your very self if it keeps happening. You need to do something that reminds you of your true heart."

Matthew looks at the notepad.

"That's right," Mr. X says. "Write."

"Naw, man," says Matthew. "I hate writing. It's too much work for too little return. I came to Bhutan to get away from that bullshit."

"Write or die," says Mr. X and clicks off the speaker.

Matthew grasps the crayon in trembling fingers.

Yakuza 0: A Review-in-Progress by Matthew Angleton

Whenever I fight in Yakuza 0, one word comes to mind that sums up the whole game: "Frictionless". From the quick transition to the battle screen to the simple push of a button that allows the player to switch fighting styles, this game makes being a gangster feel effortless.

Even the open world feels seamlessly integrated with the main campaign. Because the setting is constrained to a few blocks in two districts, the side quests feel conveniently placed on the path to the main quest. Therefore, the many activities feel more like a feature of the setting than a chore distracting from the main quest---

"Good enough start," says a voice behind Matthew Angleton, before whacking him into unconsciousness with a thong and lugging him back to the Amicus.

Eziu Soratelli has begun moonlighting for his adoptive Uncle Scrooge McDontsu's humble private equity firm Kamurocho Royale while working days as Tachibana Real Estate's primary counsel. He's been negotiating acquisitions at a confident pace for Uncle Scrooge in the face of aggressive in-bound interest in the city's Leisure District from the Flintheart Glomgold Syndicate. Eziu's Uncle rewards him with golden retractable Assassin's blades for increasing the firm's Assets Under Management

As he works, he seeks to find out more about the Empty Lot that seems destined to be the key to winning a brewing war between rival Yakuza factions, Tachibana Real Estate and others for the heart of the city. It appears Eziu will never escape his past as a Yakuza enforcer, however, because one day it arrives right at the door of his favorite Paopu Pilsner provider.

Into The Horned King Gastropub (owned by the ever-beautiful Rinoa Heartilly) walks Shadex (De Facto Lord of the Kamurocho Yakuza Underworld and Master of the Hard Sell). The Nobody-who-would-be King crows that Eziu's cousin Kexzu remains a Nobody who is a poor substitute for Eziu's contribution to the clan.

He offers Eziu admittance back into the Yakuza for information about the Empty Lot and the forbidden power it contains while threatening the safety of Eziu's do-nothing brother Wakka, a washed-up athlete turned actor who constantly breaks his face by over-emoting. Eziu declines because he's more interested in his career.

The next day, Eziu must battle hordes of Heartless thugs and Nobodies with imposter syndrome as he navigates the bike paths of Kamurocho. In a dark corridor under the city, Eziu confronts Cousin Kexzu, who wields a giant bong. Eziu uses his Him-bo to handily defeat him.

"Eziu, why did you leave me behind?" Cousin Kexzu calls out as the darkness engulfs him.

"I needed to let my heart be my guiding key rather than allowing myself to slide into darkness," Eziu says.

"Dark...ness..." Cousin Kexzu gasps as he dissolves.

Eziu emerges from the city sewers near the Sea Salt Ice Cream Vendor's brick-and-mortar establishment and leans against the streetlight with the "Re:Connect" graffiti on it while enjoying a rejuvenating Takoyaki snowcone. Tachibana arrives and tells him he's found the owner of The Empty Lot.

Templar Whittaker hits the big red "Disconnect" button on the Amicus, and out pops the slide with Matthew Angleton on it.

"No seizures this time," he remarks. "Good."

"Is this what the 80s were like for you?" Matthew Angleton asks Templar Whittaker as he's led back to his cell.

"Mine were much less realistic and a good deal more violent," Templar Whittaker shouts for no good reason. "You're one step closer to finding the legal documents we need to move forward with the groundbreaking and one step closer to freedom," Templar Whittaker shrieks in congratulations as he gently closes the door of Matthew's prison.

Matthew looks at the frosted glass window. There's no silhouette; so no Mr. X today. The notebook is on the table next to a fountain pen resting in a bowl of Nutella. Matthew licks the tip and begins to write, fighting off the urge to practice his batting swing and the slight headache and loss of self-awareness that comes with it.

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I just hit a point just three-sevenths of the way through the game where the setting feels more expansive and vibrant than it did previously. It coincides with the pacing of the main campaign kicking into high gear. Like everything that came before it, the evolution of the open world activities and activities and the flow of main campaign in conjunction feels seamless. It creates a sense of immersive verisimilitude that evokes the mundanity of the real world, the cinema spectacle of gangster movies and the quirky oddities that pop up in our lives everyday but that we fail to notice.

As someone with background as a researcher in the financial industry, I was immediately engaged by the property management minigame that appears in Kazuma Kiryu's storyline. The activity asks you to acquire properties in opposition to the intrusion of a criminal syndicate's real estate buying spree in Kamurocho and investing in them to turn a profit, and the flow of scouting out property, buying them and watching the numbers go up to progress the sub-story feels extremely satisfying---

"I see you're making progress and have something on your face," a voice interrupts over the intercom.

Matthew turns to the frosted window and sees the blurred silhouette of Mr. X behind the glass. Matthew quickly wipes what we can only hope is Nutella from his cheek with the sleeve of his dope-ass Formula 1 racing jammies.

"I thought nobody was there," Matthew says.

"Nobody was here," Mr. X replies

"Tell me, Matthew: What brought you to Bhutan?"

“Do you know anything about the private equity executives working in the financial industry?”, Matthew says. “Those are the people who fucking burn out, lose all their money, go insane and then wind up homeless and/or “find religion” to seek fake redemption. I came here to reconnect with nature and see a spiritually authentic Buddhist way-of-life.

“It is refreshing, isn’t it? Says Mr. X. Matthew can see the outline of man rub his neck.

“What do you know of the black slate of Punakha Dzong and Ngawang Namyal?”Mr. X asks

“I know those are words you just said.” Matthew said.

“Ngawang Namyal, also known as Zhab-drung Ngag-dbang rnam-rgyal, is the founder of the Bhutanese state,” Mr. X says. “He formed the kingdom by unifying warring states in the mid-16th century. The black slate of Punakha Dzong is a mid-16th century carving that purports to be the legal code of Ngawang Namyal.

What the world doesn’t know is that there were multiple copies of the code. One of those wound up in the hands of one of the co-founders of Xenu and Xehanort Condominium development. Our savior-in-absentia used it to fraudulently claim that he was the most recent incarnation of Zhab-drung Ngag-dbang rnam-rgyal. X&X Condos is an official contractor of the Kingdom of Bhutan , and we own the luxury property and real estate that now holds you prisoner.”

“Yeah, that’s cool, I guess,” says Matthew, eyeing the crusty rim of the Nutella bowl lustily. “Every company likes to have a story that makes them look influential.”

“I can see your heart’s not fully in this conversation at this time,” Mr. X says. “But it will be.”

“What’s up with that Templar Whittaker guy?” Matthew asks. “He’s real off-putting.”

“He’s a spaz, but he’s a specialist in neuroscience and reincarnation, so he’s useful to keep around,” Mr. X says. “I have something to show you.”

A bundle of papers stuck together with something gummy is slid through a porthole in the wall between Matthew’s cell and the room that hides Mr. X.

Matthew picks up the Etch-A-Sketch scribblings.

“The fuck is this?” he says.

“Those are spectrometer readings from your Amicus sessions,” Mr. X says. “As you can tell if you back away from them and squint a little, the closer you get to finding those legal documents, the farther you get away from the light. Do you miss her, Matthew?”

Matthew stammers: “What? Who are you?...

“I don’t even know where she is,” he mutters

“But speak of the devil: it looks like it’s time for your next session,” says Mr. X. Matthew turns to see Templar Whittaker has entered the room.

As Whittaker slides Matthew into the Amicus, he whispers: “May your heart be your guiding key.”

REVELATIONS

Personal injury attorney Riku Odinsen rudely awakens to the realization that ex-Brother Iger is not the true assassination target Brother Yensid ordered him to kill. He is instead the protector of Makoto Makimura, a young blind woman on the run. Riku escapes from an ambush by a gang of heartless street rats of unknown affiliation and takes her into hiding while ex-brother Iger wrestles with the darkness his assailants lure from his heart.

He is forced to sober up when he learns Makoto is a human trafficking victim who was kept in a cage by a man with an X-shaped birthmark. Forced to self-reflect for the first time since sacrificing his eye and independence to King Luoxie of the Shimano Family - Brotherhood of Assassins alliance in penitence for abandoning his brother to certain death, Riku vows to help Makoto get revenge pro bono.

Born again as a new, better person, Riku rescues a bureaucrat from the darkness in his heart and decides to fulfill his civic duty by engaging in a little state capture to help him fund his newfound altruism.

“You should increase the sales tax incrementally every year, for sure,” he tells the bureaucrat.

“But if you really wanna make money, you should declare 90 percent of Sotenbori a Community Redevelopment Area. When an area is blighted or economically depressed enough, it can be designated a CRA. Then the base property tax rate is frozen and the taxes from all increases in valuation are required to be spent on improving the CRA instead of the general fund. Kinda like taking from your retirement to gussy up a blowfish. This qualifies you for federal loans for improvement of the CRA and makes it easier to lure businesses into the CRA with taxpayer-funded incentives that fund Main Street and create jobs. Trust me, Winnie, they’re gonna love you for it. Call me when you need a consult.”

The bureaucrat thanks him by granting him the deed to Club Sunlight, a cabaret club that has seen better days. Riku decides to also use it as a temporary haven for wayward or young princesses of heart to find themselves and ways to be a light against the darkness. His glowing halo catches the attention of The Godmother Foundation, a charitable organization gobbling up all the real estate and entertainment venues in Sotenbori to open consignment shops and Christian media production studios. Duke Oogie Boogie of the Godmother Foundation makes threatening overtures of peace while Riku goes about the business of ensuring VIPs are entertained by the cast members.

After closing for the day, Riku takes a break with his first princess-in-training Yuna, a young hostess who can't quite summon the courage needed to keep the conversation going. In the background, a pianist plinks away a tune Riku vaguely remembers as being called "Dearly Beloved".

"Are-are you okay?" Yuna asks. "You didn't answer the question."

Riku snaps out of a daze as the piano tinkles out: "doo-DOO-dooo. D000-do-do-do. DOOO-de-DOO-DE-DO-de -do-de."

"I'm sorry," he says. "I guess I was daydreaming. But it was more like a far-off scattered memory. I was trying to line the pieces up. You remind me of someone who asked me something important once."

"Even after you dressed me like a sleeping beauty who just woke up to appeal to old food critics?" she asks.

"Especially after that," Riku says. "You probably don't know this, but I joined a Yakuza- Greek hybrid fraternity in college and it cost me my brother and my eye. I did it because I wanted to get off this god-damned island and see the world. But it wasn't the first time I've been tempted by the darkness of ambition."

"VROOOM," the accompanying violin chimes sombrely.

"Vooo-vrrrrm-vrmmm-vrrrrmmm-vrrrm-vrrrrmmmmmm.Vrmmm-vrrm-vrrm-vrrrrm-vrrm."

"When I was a kid, I had two friends. I can't remember the name of either: a boy and a girl. We always wanted to get off this island, but I wanted it more than the others. Both of us had a crush on the girl. She was cute and inquisitive like you, and we competed for her attention. I even competed with that spiky-haired goofball to build a raft to get off the island. I liked her, but I could tell she was more into him. I caught them sharing fruit."

The day we launched the raft, a storm hit and we got separated from each other and cast adrift. I don't remember much from those days, but I remember being so worried for her that I let darkness into my heart and did horrible things to others and the goofball to save her. It took more than a decade for us to find each other. She's safe now, back in our home. But she asked me something before I went away to college."

"What did she ask you?" She says.

"VRRRRRRM," the violin wails. "Vrrrm- vrrm-vrrmmmm. VRRRM-vrrm. VrRRM-vrrm."

"I remember now," says Riku. His one eye opens wide in shock.

"...She asked me to find him for her."

“I know in my heart you will,” says Yuna. “Just...Just promise you won’t get lost in the darkness again. ...OK?”

“OK,” Riku says as he wishes Yuna goodnight and continues on his way.

“DOOO-VRRRM-VRRRM-DOOOO- VRRRRM- DOOOM-VRRRM-DRRVM-DDRVvvvvvvmmm doo-doo-vrrrrmm-vrrm-vrrm-vrrm-vrrm-vrrm.... Vrrrrm. .doo. doo.” the band finishes in unison and collects its tip.

UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

Personal injury attorney and semi-professional tax policy consultant Riku Odinsen continues on the twilight path to redemption by refusing to assassinate an innocent Nobody who bears a remarkable resemblance to Makoto Makimura. Ex-Brother Iger, who has recovered from his battle with the darkness within, proposed the idea to throw Brother Yensid and his faction of the Yakuza Brotherhood of Assassins off of Makoto’s trail, but Riku is appalled.

“I can’t believe you suggested that,” Riku said. “Nobodies are people, too, according to the most recent scientific literature we were just discussing in our purely theoretical discussion on the ethics of murder. In fact, I *don’t* believe you suggested that. I believe it’s in your best interest to agree that nothing of import was said in this strictly academic debate and that I may walk away from it with my hands clean and my heart unsullied.”

Riku flips his eye patch up, pinches the socket closed real quickly and then lets the eye patch flap loose to cover the hole.

“Still painful?” Ex-Brother Iger asks.

“So painful! The darkness cost me the ability to even wink,” Riku says and walks away.

The next day, Riku learns that someone else has bumped off the Nobody and Brother Yensid isn’t completely buying the ruse. He then gets a call from The Grand to alert him that a customer is getting handsy with one of the hostesses and wants to get his blessing to propose to her.

“This fucking guy,” says Riku as he realizes who the call is referencing.

Riku walks into the Grand to find the completely sober and, thus, liable Heartless Prince Charming Nishitani nursing a bad case of blue balls as the object of his affection sings “Someday my Prince will Come” to his rival, Randal Boggs.

“You just cost me completely honest money, you royal douche,” Riku said. “That Nobody was probably gonna die from an accident after signing up for life insurance. My cousin-by-funeral (thus legally unrelated,) Vincent had the paperwork prepared.

"It's for the breast, good sir," the Heartless Prince Charming Nishitani says entirely comprehensibly and without distraction after taking a sip from a pick-up truck engine that only holds 1/10th of his prescribed daily dosage of apple brandy.

"I did the girl a favor," says Nishitani. "A heart lost to the darkness of despair can only be reborn in sacrifice. It was just a Nobody. Not even a person. Might as well not even exist, and thus her contract would have been null and void. Now where is she?"

"When is your clan of medical fraud attorney-assassins going to learn that there are no shortcuts to profit?" Riku says. "Your legal maneuverings didn't win you the blue ribbon at the mock United Nations debate in college, and it won't serve you well here."

"I take umbrage at your insults, sir," Nishitani says as he musters the power of darkness to commence a slap fight with Riku.

Riku decides to practice his power as personal injury attorney by personally injuring Nishitani within his legal rights and flails about in an uncontrollable episode of epilepsy that casts him into unconsciousness.

"The more time I spend in the Amicus, the better I feel I understand the world of Japan," Matthew Angleton says.

"It's uncanny, isn't it?" says Templar Cruise, who can't tear his pants away from Matthew's stark spectrograph readings.

"I myself wandered to many different lands in the 80s to get a better understanding of it and to try and stop the coming darkness," croons Templar Whittaker inexplicably as he releases the "Disconnect" button.

"You know, the worlds of the many nations used to be separate," Whittaker chuckles, scratching a lump beneath his dark hood. "You could only connect with them through folktales told to children that stripped all politics, accents, nuance and creativity from them and replaced them with lighter material."

"I thought that by exposing myself to the light of storytelling, I could find the folklorist who first heard the prophecy of the coming darkness and the key that would be my main chance to lock it away. But I never found him, just the shadows of the original tales he appropriated, creating dark corridors between worlds. Hah ha."

"It sucks to wake from your heart's dream to return to reality, doesn't it?," Matthew says while edging as far away from Templar Cruise as possible.

"Ever since childhood I, uhh, thought I was the perfect match for this childhood sweetheart of mine. She and I dreamed of sailing away from Britain and traveling to different worlds together.

We even had a friend who helped us build a boat. He liked her, too. A little over-protective, but his heart was in the right place. He wanted off that island so bad I think he put a little too much of his heart into the project ”

“We got separated in a storm and cast adrift,” Matthew recalls, frowning. “I never found out what happened to him.”

“The girl and I found each other and were together for a long time before it fell apart, ” Matthew gets quiet. “Ummmm...”

“Thank you for bearing your heart to me,” says Templar Whittaker. “Are you good for one more session today?”

“I could use the escape,” Matthew says and slides back into the Amicus and the many-zippered business suit of Eziu Soratelli.

Real estate attorney and up-and-coming private equity manager Eziu Soratelli wakes from the dream of losing his home in an insurance fraud scheme to find himself in the beach house of the lovely Rinoa Heartilly, owner of The Horned King Gastropub.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue to give me safe harbor from the darkness while I await the light of legal discovery to deliver my payday,” he says. “ And for letting me use your supply of battery acid to wash the ash from my clothes and fingers.”

Rinoa opens her mouth to say something when Shadex’s heartless minions drop onto the lanai from domed skylight and deliver their official Objection Kung-fu. Eziu summons Beast mode to power up his Him-bo to muscle his way out.

On the street awaits Replica Kuze, an android descendant of a long-forgotten cousin lost to the darkness the day before.

“You know in your heart you will never be a legitimate businessman, Eziu,” creaks Replica Kuze. “You and I exist as mere puppets of the Yakuza.”

Replica Kuze cracks his metal fists and summons a group of minions unversed in the ways of mercy.

“How do you even know you are who you think you are? You can’t even remember your life before that day the dark tide washed you ashore outside your adopted father’s speedboat repair shop. Our family took you in when you were a comatose vegetable. You are a weak, pathetic vessel, and the darkness will one day fill your heart and lead you to your true purpose. Now, tell me the owner of the Empty Lot so we can awaken this world to its true nature.”

“I can see myself reflected in the hearts of others, and I will never succumb to darkness” Eziú shouts. “My friends are my power!”

Light erupts behind the mob of minions, and a self-driving Volkswagen Beetle with high beams crashes the scene and barrels through the unversed henchmen and into Replica Kuze. Replica Kuze punches through the hood with both fists and lurches backward, lifting the car’s back wheels as it tilts towards him.

A loud concussion drowns out the discord. Replica Kuze is thrown backward, his fists dislodged from the car as he’s propelled into a nearby bounce house full of aspic and trapped there. The punch buggy drops to the ground, honking in pain. The driver’s door opens and out steps Irvine Kinneas, Tachibana’s personal counsel and 8th level SEED. He wields a bayonet equipped with a key-shaped blade.

The passenger side window rolls down and reveals Tachibana.

“I’ve observed your career in private equity has started to take off,” he says. “Come with me, and we can start gold card and key meetings.”

Eziú spares his adopted cousin not a look and starts on the path toward his Mark of Mastery exam.

Herbie, the autonomous and ailing VW punch buggy, vomits its passengers out in Tachibana’s home neighborhood and limps to the nearest mahjong parlor in hopes of massaging its injuries away in a sauna full of high-stakes earnings.

Eziú Soratelli emerges from the car with Tachibana and Irvine Kinneas to find himself in Little Asia, a thriving immigrant farming community planting the seeds for the arrival of a new crop of multinational fast food franchises in Japan.

Tachibana suddenly slumps to the ground.

“It’s okay,” Irvine says, stopping Eziú from helping him and snatching a wheelchair out from under the rear of the nearest passersby. “He has a heart murmur and just needs regular treatment to re-energize him.”

Irvine gently plops Tachibana down in the chair and the group is allowed to enter the Fast Pass line into the neighborhood, thus garnering ill-tempered looks from others in the crowded alley.’

“Vrrrrroooooom. Vroooooom. Faster!” Tachibana weakly shouts from the wheelchair as Irvine pushes him.

“You seem to command respect and fear here,” Eziú observes. “What’s your secret?”

"No secret," Tachibana says while resting his feet on two dwarfs who he's accidentally permitted to crawl beneath his chair and act as cushions for his calluses while Irvine Kinneas rests from pushing him for a city block.

"My family may have been foreigners to your shores, but I was raised here in Little Asia," Tachibana says and mercifully allows Sleepy and Phil to return to the organ harvesting fields as Irvine returns to push him. "I'm a homegrown entrepreneur," Tachibana says

"Your family's Chinese?," Eziu asks.

"My parents were from China, but family legend says we're actually descended from Bhutanese royalty," Tachibana said. "I actually inherited some property and business there that I'm raising capital to develop. What about you?"

"I don't remember much before washing ashore here," Eziu admits. "I understand a little Italian and a little Chinese."

"Could your ancestors be Napolese Jesuit priests who brought the light of the Gospel to our little island?" Tachibana asks.

"I noticed I do have a Messiah Complex," Eziu confesses. "I believe the key to saving the world is self-sacrifice. But I'm not religious, praise be."

They arrive at the apartment building housing the offices of Dr. Finkelstein, who leads the way to an IV bag. Tachibana lifts up his shirt sleeve, and Dr. Finkelstein carefully begins to give him his infusion of pre-digested quarterly earnings filings.

"Mmmmm... Darkness," the sated Tachibana sighs as he drifts off to sleep.

Eziu spots a faint, X-shaped birthmark on Tachibana's arm and feels a little nauseous as he sits down to read the most recent Moody's credit ratings reports.

INDICATIONS OF INTEREST

Eziu Soratelli and a recovered Tachibana step out of the newly gold-plated Herbie the punch buggy as it idles outside the luscious headquarters of the Tojo Clan.

"Let me do the talking," he says as Irvine Kinneas pulls a giant black box from Herbie's trunk. His eyes flash a gleam of amber. "My most recent infusion of business intelligence should give us an edge in first round bid discussions."

Eziu nods stoically and walks through the Radiant Garden and its ancient stone lanterns to enter into an audience with the interim head of the local Yakuza.

"Master Saruxeq-san," Tachibana says with a bow. "Allow me to introduce my new apprentice: Eziu Soratelli."

"I am already quite familiar with our prodigal son and his business dealings," Master Saruxeq returns the bow. "Has your long absence allowed you to solve the mystery of our lost balance sheets?"

"You will have to tell the Master of Masters that I remain convinced that the answer lies between darkness and light," Tachibana responds. "But I am here today to negotiate a pardon for Ezlukun from the Tojo Clan to get the Dojima family off his back and discuss first round bids for Kamurocho Royale Real Estate. This ambitious private equity firm and its manager represent a valuable addition to the Yakuza's portfolio of restaurants and amusement park development sites."

"If Eziu was aligned with our strategic priorities, then why would the Dojima family exile him in the first place?" Saruxeq replies. "His murder of one of our trusted alternative lenders shows he lacks the discipline to control the darkness in his heart and maintain a relationship with representatives of fixed income markets."

"Saruxeq, you sly fox," Tachibana responds. "I know you are wise enough to see the signs of a Dojima plot to grab power out from under you. I believe Eziu's exile has taught him to capitalize on the darkness and temper it with a lighter touch that will appeal to investors. But allow me to sweeten the deal."

Irvine Kinneas brings forward the long black box and opens it. The shine from within casts a glow on Saruxeq's face.

"Luxembourg government bonds from before the nations were separated by darkness?" Saruxeq exclaims. "These will be worth a fortune once they mature. How did you find these?"

"I developed a friendship with a sushi chef who worked in a district I acquired," Eziu interjects. "We were fishing one day when we pulled up a briefcase full of these from the river."

"I see," Saruxeq says. "Your assets are satisfactory. We will send word of our pardon to the Dojima family. You will find our first round bid in the vase of gummy worms behind me. You will need it to pass the Mark of Mastery exam, resume Yakuza membership and progress this process. Best of luck."

Saruxeq opens a dark corridor and exits. Eziu walks to the vase of gummy worms behind his desk and pulls out a large novelty sword shaped like a key.

A tag attached to it reads: "This is the Return on Investment, forged from your heart's true nature. Use it to unlock your potential and defeat 100 Heartless thugs to pass the Mark of Mastery Exam."

Eziu, Tachibana and Irvine emerge from the conference room to a landing to find the throng of heartless thugs corrupting the beauty of the Radiant Garden into a shell of its former self. Eziu gives a thumbs up to the pair behind him, and they return it as they charge forward. Eziu slides

down the stairs on his first keyblade and slams into the crowd while Irvine Kinneas takes potshots from above and Tachibana silently takes the yakuza down from the shadows.

Eziu breaks out onto the grounds to find a mass of large-bodied Heartless yakuza awaiting him. Summoning the strength of his heart, Ezio grabs the nearest priceless stone lantern and commits righteous blasphemy by dual-wielding his newfound keyblade with the powerful light source. When the irreplaceable artifact crumbles, he picks up the others decorating the garden along the way with little regard for historical value and uses them to enlighten his enemies in the ways of the brawler.

Upon releasing his 100th Heartless thug from its contract, Ezio gets into Herbie with Tachibana.

“A member of my Organization has found the owner of the Empty Lot in Sotenbori,” Tachibana says as they pass the street light tagged with “Re:Connect”. “I also hear that one of the best god-damn bartenders in Japan works there. He could be the perfect pourer for our guests at management presentations as negotiations continue.”

In his personal offices, Dojima family CEO and adult film producer Chad Sexman fumes. He deploys his chief financial officer Shibusawa to the field to recover the company losses incurred by the failures of Shadex, Kexzu and Kexzu’s proxy Replica Kuze to secure the Empty Lot.

Yakuza 0: A Review-in-Progress by Matthew Angleton

Whenever I fight in Yakuza 0, one word comes to mind that sums up the whole game: "Frictionless".

From the quick transition to the battle screen to the simple push of a button that allows the player to switch fighting styles, this game makes being a gangster feel effortless.

The open world feels seamlessly integrated with the main campaign. Because the setting is constrained to a few blocks in two districts, the side quests feel conveniently placed on the path to the main quest. Therefore, the many activities feel more like a feature of the setting than a chore distracting from the main quest.

Even three-fourths of the way through the game, the setting feels vibrant as familiarity takes hold. The open world activities feel apiece with the main campaign in terms of production and engagement. It creates a sense of immersive verisimilitude that evokes the mundanity of the real world, the cinema spectacle of gangster movies and the quirky oddities that pop up in our lives everyday but that we fail to notice.

The result of this is that I find that I’m progressing through the game at a deliberate pace and generally only play two-to-three hours in a session. This creates a rhythm where I might spend

one session just doing a little shopping or spending some time in the arcade before losing Shogi repeatedly on the “easiest” difficulty to an AI that still feels like it’s operating at a level roughly equivalent to “Quantum Computer Overcompensating Because Its T Count is Off”. In another, I might spend a whole session grinding the meatier minigames to get better equipment for Yakuza’s chapter-ending setpieces.

Speaking of those sumptuous mid-plot minigames, it’s kind of a miracle that I feel they respect my time even though both are mostly about making numbers go up repeatedly.

As someone with a background as a researcher in the financial industry, I was immediately engaged by the property management minigame that appears in Kazuma Kiryu’s storyline. The activity asks you to acquire properties in opposition to the intrusion of a criminal syndicate’s real estate buying spree in Kamurocho and investing in them to turn a profit, and the flow of scouting out properties, buying them and watching the numbers go up to progress the sub-story feels extremely satisfying.

I was kind of blown away by the amount of work put into the Club Sunshine minigame. The detail given to the girls’ body language and dialogue brought the game into “Compelling social simulator and mini-JRPG” territory instead of sinking it into the bog of standard dating sims and “Child of Light” level turn-based RPGs. I don’t have the special expertise to analyze where video game developers spend their budgets, but even with some reused models the Club Sunshine production seems staggeringly expensive. If not in dollars, then at least in dev time.

However, I do feel it is missing one important step in the flirtation game. When you’re going for traditional supermodels, you’re supposed to start the ritual by glaring at her in polite contempt for knowing she’s hotter than anyone else and then awkwardly pretending to ignore her.

After you sidle up to the bar or coffee counter, you must prominently stick out your rear for her to contemptuously glare at in return while you’re ordering. If your heart is in the right place, she may decide you’re worth the time and sideswipe your ass with her skirt as she passes. Play it cool, and she may even say “hello” to you and then allow you a return tush swoosh after an embarrassment or seventeen.

THEN you can actually have a discussion with her in which you stumble over your words as you offer a compliment. When she says “Thank you”, it’s appropriate to say in return: “Thank you. Er, I mean: Thank you for your time” before fleeing the scene in a way that allows you to exit with dignity AND keeps your crotch at the perfect level for her to eye as she returns to her phone.

Speaking of unrealistic, Yakuza 0’s main campaign is absolutely BONKERS---

The hypodermic syringe penning Matthew Angleton’s thoughts runs out of ink. Matthew absentmindedly sticks it into the piggy bank full of blood sausage and then jams the needle into his arm to get the dose of B12 needed to counter his vitamin deficiency.

The PA speaker overhead crackles to life with the cool voice of Mr. X.

“I mean it’s crazy, right?” Matthew hears as the thin silhouette emerges from behind what looks like a dark corridor on the other side of the frosted glass. “You may say you hate writing, but you know you have a secret passion in your heart.”

“I loathe it,” Matthew returns with unexpected venom. “It’s exhausting and divorces you from reality.”

When you’re creating something physically, there is a greater chance you can discover a crippling flaw that ruins the whole. Like, if you’re building a pyramid and there are missing pieces, you can objectively tell that the work is flawed because you see signs of instability.

But there are no physics or objective realities in writing. You can write what you and others perceive as the perfect story and then when you step back you find that the foundation is ROTTEN and you failed to communicate your intent.”

“But I’ve read your byline,” Mr. X says. “You were legitimately talented. And when you stopped, I remember hearing a clamor for you to go back to it.”

“Yeah, well, no one’s supposed to get their heart’s content 100 percent of the time,” Matthew replies. “It’s like finding the perfect match and realizing too late it’s the worst thing that could happen to you.”

Silence. And then a sigh from the darkness.

“The things we do to each other, huh?” says Mr. X softly.

“And ourselves,” Matthew responds.

Trigger warning

"As much as it sucked to see you put writing aside, it was even more heartbreaking to hear that your better half stepped away from the craft," Mr. X tells Matthew.

“Are you talking about the first time she did it or the second?” Matthew asks.

Silence from the other side of the glass.

“It took more than a decade for me to find the girl the sea stole from me after we got struck by that storm sailing across the English Channel toward the continent,” Matthew recalls. “I remember grabbing her by the tank top after the tides smashed *The Zanarkand* into gummy pieces of wreckage. I swam toward our friend as he clutched the figurehead shaped like a little mermaid, but it got caught in a current pushing him farther and farther ahead of us toward Belgium. My shoulders and lungs burned as **Krecords lost to darkness** climbed on to my back.

“We were not far away from our friend when the water spout touched down behind the mast,” Matthew continued. “I still don’t know if I hallucinated it, but I swear I saw a hand of darkness emerge from the spout and drag him into the whirlwind. The turbulence tore the girl from my back and pulled me down to the depths.

‘But do not be afraid,’” a voice rang out in my head as consciousness drifted away from me. ‘You can capitalize on this trauma in the future. ...I’m sorry are you fucking eating?’

“That was rude of me,” says Mr. X.

The porthole opens and a paper bag of gummy bears slides through to Matthew’s side.

“Have however many you want,” Mr. X says.

“Times were different back then,” Matthew said. “It was easier to get lost before the internet. I washed ashore at Dunkirk, where I was found by a traveling carnival that eventually brought me through the heart of the continent and down to Italy. My lighthearted acrobatics and preternatural fencing prowess brought in the crowds. Traveling and befriending people who looked and believed differently than me made me want to learn about other cultures and how they clash and co-exist.

From what I was able to piece together, the girl wound up in Cherbourg and landed catatonic. She was taken in by a kindly old inventor and brought to a village on the Swiss border, where she silently listened and read. When her voice returned, she was able to speak French and Swiss.

But more importantly, the light of understanding would flare up in listeners’ hearts when she started to repeat the stories to others. It was like the Age of Fairy Tales in the time before the darkness infected the world, when stories inspired compassion.

When she was working as a server at a cafe, her friend fell pregnant. Her friend also fell sick. Her body’s immune system had turned against her child and was targeting it as a foreign invader. The alchemists told the mother the pregnancy could kill her and her child and herself. She was offered abortion as a choice. She chose not to pursue it.

Kredacted is very Catholic and felt inspired to write about her friend’s bravery. She published the story in the local newspaper. It prompted donations from readers and prayers from the village church.

The woman survived and gave birth to a healthy child. My ex is still friends with them.

So **Kredacted** became known as a miracle worker and ascended to an editor position while writing long-running series of articles on people who found a way to live with chronic illness.

My time in the carnival allowed me to search for both her and the friend who was snatched up by darkness at sea. I even got to visit my maternal homeland of Czechia. I was the first of my

generation to return since the Moscow-influenced Communist government stole my family's home and passively aggressively drove us out of the country during the last Cold War.

There, I found a way to return to Britain. It was also there that I heard whisperings of a boy in the Balkans. His hair had turned silver from his time in an orphanage there that shuttered due to the conflict. I don't think he had the best home life even before that in Britain. That's probably why he was the most eager to leave our island. Last I heard, he joined a gang of war refugees.

I think I became a journalist because I was driven by the childlike curiosity and desire to know more about the inexplicable. However, I found the answer to life's mysteries was usually corruption and stupidity.

Kredacted told me later she had heard the same rumors about our friend. I think we both hoped to find him some day. I think the loss weighed on her heart more than I knew and that she told stories in the belief that one day the name of the teller would reach his ears.

Don't say you weren't warned

"**Kredacted** had moved to the U.S. by the time I had returned to Britain. She had taken a position at a larger news organization. She started writing about a young boy who had cancer. Like her first story, the community lent the boy their prayers and support for the better part of a year. The cancer went into remission.

But then it came back and took his life. She covered the funeral and the family, but it took a heavy toll on her heart.

It was the first time she retired. She stopped writing and became only an editor. She then left journalism and to become a teacher.

But you never really stop being a journalist. When an internet media company launched a highly regarded effort to revive local news in the U.S., **Kredacted** jumped on the opportunity. So did I.

When we finally reunited, it was like meeting for the first time. We took charge of news websites in towns that were right next to each other. We ended up supporting each other in every aspect of our jobs and found ourselves in a relationship without knowing it. I lent my investigative talents to some of her coverage, and she contributed a literary expertise to my writing."

"Sounds like you got your heart's content," Mr. X says. "What happened?"

"Death happened," Matthew snaps. "Confronting death directly and frequently changes you. It steals everything you were and gives nothing back but a desire in your heart to prevent it from happening again.

She quit writing that first time because of grief. And when she was forced to confront death again after returning to writing and covering violent tragedy, the PTSD returned. She couldn't sleep. She didn't eat. She couldn't enjoy herself. She isolated herself from her friends, her family, and her community. She ground her teeth to nubs in the night. She aged three years in less than three months because of the physical toll PTSD took on her.

She wanted to move somewhere where she could be a Nobody who no one knew and cut off her connections to her former life. She blamed herself for not preventing deaths that were out of her control.

I was the last person from her old life that she maintained a relationship with before she left writing for the second time. But I would eventually be cut off, too. She would later reconnect with me, but it would never be the same. I don't know where she is now.

I still wonder what I could have told her that would have saved our relationship."

"I don't," Matthew starts.

"Ummmmm.... "

Matthew rubs the back of his head.

"I don't," he chokes backs his words and looks down.

"I don't think I was the man she ultimately needed me to be."

"Nobody could have been," Mr. X says coldly. "The only person that can save you is yourself.

Your story deserves a better end. For you. And her."

Matthew can hear the slightest of growls in Mr. X's voice.

"What if I showed you how we could make the world a safer, better place?" Mr. X asks. "All I want you to do is finish up your time in the Amicus and see what's at stake."

"I guess I have no choice but to see this through," Matthew says. "You sure know how to foil a spiritual retreat."

"You're not far from the conclusion," whines Templar Whittaker, who has entered Matthew's cell. He jumps up to put a hand on Matthew's shoulder briefly before his short, hooded body thumps to the floor. "You and your ex had a good relationship. The world is just darker than it once was."

"But I know you can find the door to the light," Whittaker whispers as he slides Matthew back into the Amicus and the chaos of Riku Odinsen's career.

Riku Odinsen wakes up from a dream of doing deep dive research on public information about mergers and acquisitions using futuristic technology for a leading British private equity firm to find himself on the dancefloor of the Maharajah.

“My heart’s a battleground,” he sings while grasping an invisible mic stand in one hand and an air guitar in the other.

“Whang. Whang. Wha-Whang-Wa-Whang. Whang. Whang. Whaaang. Whang,” he vocalizes while strumming to a much-sampled hit that has mysteriously disappeared from the Billboard Hot 100. “Whang. Whang. Wha-Whang-Wa-Whang. Whang. Whang. Whaaang. Whang. ”

“Snoitome eurt deen I,” a Yuna grown in confidence with Club Sunlight’s recent expansion in profits joins in as she spins to Riku’s side. Riku bangs his head and swings his rattail wildly as he hands the guitar and mic stand off to Yuna.

“Whang. Whang. Wha-Whang-Wa-Whang. Whang. Whang. Whaaang. Whang. “ Yuna vocalizes.

“Wonk ouy naht noitceffa erom deen I,” she sings. “Snoitome eurt deen I .”

She then holds the invisible mic out to the audience, which joins in song as the Phantom Blot cheers them on.

“You show me how to see that nothing is whole and noo-hooooo-thiiiiing is broooooo-keeeeen,” croons a corpse princess while twerking a skeleton who has hit the glass ceiling right up against the wall.

Riku points to the audience with fingers folded into the shape of keys.

“PEW! PEW!” he shouts.

“In you and I, there’s a new laaaaaaaaaaaaand,” trumpets the mosh-pit of humping Heffalumps.

“Angels in flight,” Yuna shouts as she posts off Riku and is caught by a crowd of towngoers dressed in Halloween costumes from a more innocent time. “Wonk ouy naht noitceffa erom deen I.”

“My sanctuary,” sing a hunchback and Romani woman as they do a traditional dance of heresy together. “My sanctuary. Yeah.”

“Where fears and lies melt awaaay-haya-hay-aaaaaay- yaay,” Riku belts in the middle of a split.

“Music will tie,” Yuna sings while returning Riku upright with a yank of the rattail and pressing her back against his. “Wonk ouy naht noitceffa erom deen I.”

Riku gently takes her arm and whirls her in front of him. Then he pulls her back to face him and they end in unison.

“What’s left of me? What’s left of me now?”

As Riku walks out of the club, he is greeted with light. The van ex-brother Iger and Makoto Makimura drove to the celebration had arrived to the venue late and on fire. Ex-brother Iger was caught in an explosion of promotion in the van upon Riku’s appearance on the street. Ex-brother Iger died but was slated to be reincarnated and given a new chance at redemption as CEO of an embattled advertising studio in the future.

When the glare fades away, Riku catches sight of a noble figure in white disappearing with the still living Makoto Makimura. Considering the courtly bearing of the man in white, Riku figures out that only a prince can help him rescue Makoto Makimura and reluctantly heads to the palace of the Heartless Prince Charming Nishitani.

After a night of betting on cat fights with King Triton, an exhausted Riku Odinsen stumbles into the throne room of Triton’s adopted son Prince Charming Nishitani.

“Where is Makoto Makimura?” Riku asks.

“Your princess hath been ensnared in a contentious business deal and was taken to a secure location by one of the interested parties,” Nishitani says. “As the Tojo clan’s security contractor, I am privileged to know the comings and goings of all financial suitors participating in management presentations. But my oath of non-disclosure means this information is only for me and not for thee.”

“How do I get in on this action?” Riku asks.

“Thou must own the proper assets to enter the process at this stage” the prince says while staring regally at Riku’s crotch. “We are in the middle of management presentations for this much sought-after secret strategic acquisition that your princess is involved with.”

“I believe I am sufficiently positioned to submit a competitive bid,” Riku said. “My portfolio includes a start-up cabaret club that has struck fear in the heart of a kindly charitable organization attempting to convert entertainment businesses in Sotenbori into Christian media production studios and consignment shops. Our large-cap anchor club also partners with local businesses, which should open the door to synergistic follow-on acquisitions if this process involves discussions of a regional opportunistic takeover.”

“I doth be hard,” responds Prince Charming.

“Then shall we confirm my entry into management presentations with the traditional pissing contest?” Riku asks.

“Mix up some of thy spicy specials, and we shall see who is the bigger man,” Prince Charming says.

Riku pulls a bottle of Jack Sparrow whiskey from the darkness of his leather jacket and mixes it with the premasticated capsaicin sewage at the bottom of a bottle labeled "Drink Me." Nishitani takes a chug and starts to sweat as the heart burn takes effect. He relieves himself with a stream of darkness that arcs 50 meters through the air and eats through the floor where it lands.

Riku tells Nishitani to hold his boxer shorts for him. He swallows two liters of his special mix while chewing tropical fruit gum, then unleashes a 375-meter stream while projectile vomiting bright orange puke. Both burn clear through the Roman concrete of the palacial dungeon wall.

"You have bested me in fair combat, sirrah!" gasps Nishitani, sweating a torrent of darkness. "Welcome to management presentations."

"Who are my competitors?" Riku asks.

"Thou must already knowest of the Dojima family," says Nishitani. "They submitted the stalking horse bid that all others must meet. The Omi Alliance is trailing just behind them. The group that seized Makoto Makimura, however, is none other than a noble organization of Nobodies led from their dominion in Camellia Grove. Thy task is to seek out their chief of operations atop the tallest tower in the land."

King Triton erupts into the room.

"My son, thou must flee," he shouts. "Thy royal guard can not be trusted."

Shots ring out as a knight who has shed his oath of loyalty to Nishitani emerges on to the scene. The light leaves Triton's eyes as he slumps to the ground.

A traumatized Nishitani wails as the soldier shoots uncounted bullets into his chest. He collapses as if slain but then channels the darkness of his grief to resurrect himself. Nishitani rises to continue the legal debate with his opposition, leaving the last shreds of humanity on the floor. Riku can hear a faint click from the ether as the security of Nishitanani's palace is unlocked and the darkness takes over the prince's world.

"Hie thee hence from this forsaken ground," Nishitani shouts to Riku. He gives in to his darkest urges and stumbles slowly toward the knight with his arms raised above his head.

"Heaaaaaarts," Riku can hear the hungry growl echo from behind him as he runs away.

"Heaaaaaarts....."

Twilight falls on the world of Japan as Riku Odinsen steps into the tallest tower in the land and encounters a pasty-faced Nobody mindlessly blocking his ascent.

"Nishitani didn't get a chance to call ahead, but he cleared me to enter management presentations," Riku asserts. "I need to talk to your boss."

"It's the end of the day for management," the Dusk-shift receptionist points out while stretching her absurdly long but nondescript limbs. "Come back when the light returns to full strength tomorrow."

Riku stands his ground, so the receptionist spins away from her desk and grabs his arm to lead him out. Riku reaches into his knapsack to pull out his umbrella and use it to push her aside. It's not there.

Instead, his hand grips cold metal. He pulls out a sword with a black hilt and a jagged blade resembling a crimson bat wing. As the Nobody spins, Riku shoves her into the tower's revolving door using his body weight and the flat side of the sword. Her momentum spins the door and sends her flying into the street.

Instinctually, Riku points the sword at the door. It locks instantly.

Riku notices the crossguard. A reptilian slit of a pupil stares at him from the middle of an electric blue eye.

"Hello, old friend," Riku says as he's struck anew with the recollection of the dark deeds he committed after he was cast adrift at sea as a child. "I thought I locked you away," he says.

He notices the faint reflection of a hulking Nobody in the eye's lens and turns around. A thinner figure sidles up beside him.

"How did you sneak THAT in past the metal detector?" asks Organization Chief Risk Management Officer Lexaeus.

"I didn't have it when I came in," Riku responds. "It manifested spontaneously when your receptionist tried to lock me out of progressing up the stairs."

"Fascinating," says Vexen, the Organization's Comptroller. "The accounting department has studied a correlation between business acumen and the power to awaken the heart's true nature and capitalize on it. Certain talented wielders of strategic intelligence can weaponize their abilities in unique ways. "

Lexaeus raises himself to his full colossal height and sniffs.

"You stink of darkness, but you are not one of us," he says. "Building's closed, bub. Take your stench elsewhere."

"Not darkness," Riku replies. "This is The Auditor, the key that unlocks my twilight path to redemption."

Lexaeus pulls out a giant black sword the size of a man.

"You'll have to go through us," Lexaeus shouts.

Vexen pulls out a giant shield made of the accumulated glass ceilings he's shattered and then glued back together on his rise to the C-Suite. Before he can put it into place to protect himself and Lexaeus, Riku sprints, stabs The Auditor into the ground and uses his momentum to springboard off the pommel and launch himself into the air. He raises his foot above his head mid-air and readies to bring it down where Lexaeus stands. Taken off guard, Lexaeus stumbles backward to avoid him and crashes through the door to the tower's depths with Vexen in tow.

Riku charges forward to the strains of butt rock drifting down from the company gym.

"Go now if you want it, an otherworld awaits you," the PA system blares throughout the facility. The music drowns out the "clang" of Lexaeus and Riku's blades. "Don't you give up on it. You bite the hand that feeds you."

Vexen runs at Riku from the side with his oversized shield as Lexaeus dashes forward with his blade aimed at Riku's heart. Riku jumps onto the shield's edge and uses it to vault over Lexaeus's head and onto the stairs behind him. Vexen crashes into the wall.

"Hold now, aim is steady," the singer growls over the loudspeaker. "An otherworld awaits you. One thousand years, you ready? The otherworld, it takes you."

Riku and Lexaeus lock blades again and again as Riku climbs the stairs upward with his back to the ascent and his face to his foe. On the 10th floor, Vexen bursts from the ceiling with an air conditioning unit in hand and sends a freezing blast of air in Riku's direction in an attempt to stall his advance.

Riku tosses his sword, and it slices through the AC. The unit shorts out and Vexen is electrified. He slumps to the ground, unconscious. Riku runs up the stairs.

"Go now into the sand, and the dust, and the sky," the speakers command, causing the invaluable painted screens of the tearoom on the 13th floor to vibrate. They collapse outward as Riku flies backward through them after being thrown by Lexaeus.

The aftershock of the forceful toss causes the lights of the room to go haywire and create a strobe effect.

"No, not now," Riku growls, fighting his epilepsy. He closes his eyes and counts down from 10 to zero to try and stay conscious. He rips off one of his sleeves to create a blindfold and slips it down over his eye. The cool darkness allows him to stay present.

"Go now, there's no better plan than to do or to die," the speakers command as Riku beckons to the circling Lexaeus and then throws The Auditor at the wall behind him.

"Free me, pray to the faith, in the face of the light," the sound system wails.

The lights flicker out completely. The Auditor has landed in the wall's electrical wiring and filled the room with darkness. Riku raises his hand stoically, and it zooms back into his grip.

“Feed me, fill me with sin, and get ready to fight,” the building PA continues.

Atop the roof of the tower, a lone figure in white seated in meditation by a memorial altar is shaken from his calm by the commotion below.

“You know you will, you know you will,” the muffled loudspeakers advise on the last floor. “You know, you know, you know, Yoo know that you will. You know, you know, you know. You know that you will. You know you will...”

“FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT,” the loudspeakers blare as Lexaeus tries to get his bearings. He flails wildly with his sword. Sparks rise up whenever his blade clashes with The Auditor.

“FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT,” resounds as Lexaeus’s sword finds something soft that gives way to his strike and falls to the ground.

“FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT,” roars as Lexaeus raises his sword and slams it point down on the tattered remains of his victim. He grabs the limp thing hanging on the end of the blade.

It feels like a knapsack. Lexaeus hears something on the ceiling above.

“FIGHT, FIGHT, FiiiiiiiiIGHT,” the music echoes in Lexaeus’s ears, drowning out the sound of Riku dropping to the floor behind him. Mind-numbing pain seizes Lexaeus as The Auditor slashes across his back twice, creating the shape of an X. He collapses, and the darkness takes him.

The door to the rooftop opens soundlessly. The man in white rises to greet his guest, catching a glimpse of a titanic body lying in the stairwell. Its state of being is unclear.

“I would congratulate you on your performance on the Mark of Mastery exam,” the figure in white says. “But you obviously already found your Mark before setting foot in our tower.”

Riku Odinsen sheds his blindfold. His iris catches the moonlight shining through the newly descended night and gleams with a very slight amber tint at the rim as he approaches the altar.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” says the figure in a white business suit. “You can call me Xyanc. I manage this Organization’s operations for the company president.”

“I’m looking for a girl and information that can help me get an edge over the competition during management presentations,” Riku says.

"You're late for management presentations, and you're too late to find the girl, as well," Xyanc says. "Makoto has already been moved elsewhere."

"Nishitani hinted this was about something bigger than Makoto," Riku said. "How valuable is the acquisition up for grabs?"

"Enormously," Xyanc responds. "Makoto is the inheritor of a valuable piece of real estate in downtown Kamurocho. The Empty Lot is an anchor property that will decide the success of a proposed citywide redevelopment project that will unlock the Kamurocho's true potential as a business-friendly community catering to the modern entrepreneur and their illegitimate families.

The Tojo Clan, the Dojima family, the Flintheart Glomgold Syndicate, the Omi Alliance and our Organization have been buying up Kamurocho's businesses and real estate in an increasingly brutal war to push each other out and take control of all the properties in the city. The Empty Lot is the last parcel that hasn't been gobbled up. Its central location and barrenness is an opportunity for the acquirer to develop the property into a business that synergises with their existing portfolio and consolidates their control over downtown. Whoever owns this high-value parcel also unlocks the opportunity to receive government endorsement and incentives as a prominent player in a redevelopment scheme that will put Kamurocho on the map and increase the city's tax base."

"What most people don't know is that the Empty Lot is also the location of the door to the heart of all worlds," Xyanc said. "Kingdom Hearts is the energy source that powers the elemental forces of nature and emotional tides of all worlds that share the same sky. When someone loses their heart, it gets absorbed by Kingdom Hearts to power the forces shaping our world and the passions that birth new hearts. Whichever entity controls Kingdom Hearts wins control of the raw elementary forces needed to create unlimited natural resources required for development projects and the power to manipulate people's hearts. The Dojima Family could pollute Kingdom Hearts with the desire to own the best car on the market, and all hearts in all the world would be infected with the desire to buy the newest model from Dojima Engines, headquartered in up-and-coming Kamurocho."

"Where do you get all this business intelligence from?" Riku asks, impressed.

"Our Organization's president David Xanatos Tachibana inherited incalculable resources due to his family's connection to a former ruling dynasty of Bhutan," Xyanc said. "He used his family's wealth and ill-gotten gains from his time as a prominent member in a Chinese gang to bribe his way into the boardrooms of Japan's executive class and profit from their connections. His gangland successes attracted upwardly mobile businessmen who were looked down upon as Nobodies to his cause.

"As you probably remember from high school biology class, someone who loses their heart to darkness becomes Heartless and sheds their humanity," Xyanc says. "When someone with a strong identity and business sense loses their heart, however, they become a Nobody and

retain a faint sense of self while clinging to existence by a thread. We Nobodies retain the memories of our hearts and the emotions within them, but we feel very little.

“I lost my heart to darkness when a business rival poisoned my wife and son,” Xyanc says, nodding at the pictures of the woman and little boy on the altar. “I drifted from place to place, aimless after their deaths. When Tachibana found me and awakened me to the strategic opportunities available through an alliance, I realized the benefits of being a Nobody in his employ and took my new name and position.”

“And you think your Organization is positioned to win this auction?” Riku wonders.

“Our ascent is inevitable,” Xyanc says. “Tachibana’s a transformative figure in the Japanese business community. Everyone who shares his dark ambitions of control and does business with him becomes a Nobody. The darkness in the hearts of the executives of the Dojima family, Tojo clan, and Omi Alliance has hollowed them out into Nobodies of their former selves, and Tachibana’s aspirations and being have taken root in their souls. Regardless of the outcome of final bids, the Organization and its Nobodies win.”

“If you barely exist, what do you gain from this?” Riku asks.

“We will use Kingdom Hearts and the rewards of monopolization to regain our hearts and become whole again,” Xyanc says. “Who knows: Maybe I will even see my wife and son reborn?”

“I could use it to create the resources needed to fund a journey off this island like I did in my youth?” Riku says. “With enough money, I could fulfill my dream of being left the fuck alone to travel, bang and become a shepard in the Isle of Skye.”

“And to generate whatever you need to protect you and your friends in your travels or new home,” Xyanc says. “Yes, we know about your dark past.”

“I would do anything to protect my friends,” Riku admits. “Even sacrifice the heart of all worlds. If you know about my past, you know I am looking for my friend.”

“The darkness shields him from our gaze, but I wouldn’t be surprised to find he’s wheeling and dealing in Kamurocho,” Xyanc says cagily. “Will you help support our bid and protect the girl?”

Before Riku can answer, a shot rings out and Xyanc falls to the ground.

“Thank you for helping us find Makoto’s location,” says Brother Yensid, aiming his gun at Riku. “It looks like the darkness in your heart led me to you in the nick of time. Now, kindly come with me to Kamurucho so we can prepare final bids.”

Panic bites at Riku’s mind, but he counts down from 10 again to push back a seizure and stay conscious as his tormenter brings him to Kamurocho.

Thirteen hours before Riku Odinsen set foot in the tallest tower in Japan, real estate attorney and private equity manager Eziu Soratelli wakes from a dream of being trapped in a giant, futuristic metal tube to find he's missing exposition in the tower's lobby. Irvine Kinneas is finishing up convincing Makoto Makimura to trust him and Eziu as Xyanc stands guard.

Eziu and Irvine leave the building with Makoto in tow and head to management presentations in Herbie, the autonomous gold-plated punch buggy.

"You really work for my brother?" Makoto asks Irvine.

"That's right," says Irvine. "I help him handle matters of the heart. He saw you on a TV broadcast of your grandfather's funeral and sent me to bring you to him."

"It's been so long since I've seen David," she says. "I wonder if he's still finding himself?"

Distracted, Eziu notices a button on Herbie labeled "AA". He absentmindedly presses it while pondering his private equity firm's crippling and attractive debt load, and an anti-aircraft gun with machine gun attachment erupts atop Herbie's roof.

Just in time, too. The Dojima Family has sent its heartless mercenary to abduct Makoto. Eziu mounts the gun and shoots the assassins from their motorcycles and helicopters with ease.

"This is very marketable," he shouts down to the passengers below. He fistbumps the weapon after finishing off the mounted pursuers, and Herbie honks in self-satisfaction.

A new wave of the Dojima family's thugs chase Eziu's gang into an abandoned skyscraper under construction. In the darkness of an upper floor, Irvine Kinneas pulls out his bayonet and grabs Makoto.

"The Dojima family made me a better offer," Irvine tells Eziu. "David Xanatos Tachibana would never forgive me if he learnt I was the one who sold Makoto to human traffickers. "

"It was YOU?!", she asks, enraged.

"It was a mistake," he says, reading from the crib notes he etched deep into the gun barrel to keep everything straight. "Tachibana found me tending to my failing business on the streets of Sotenbori after he ran away from China and started recruiting to establish his real estate front here."

"Growing up with Bhutanese heritage was hard in China," Makoto drones hesitantly as she runs her fingers along the crib notes to make sure she's remembering her own backstory correctly

before Irvine knocks them away. “But growing up the children of a Japanese mother made us outcasts.”

“That’s what made him turn to the Chinese Mafia,” Kinneas responds. “They offered him the power of friendship and belonging. He channeled that to escape to the world of Japan. He found failed businessmen like me and hired us. As soon as we signed contracts, an “X” birthmark like his magically appeared on our arms”. He flexes his arm to show off the emblem.

“I think there’s something else unusual about your family,” Kinneas tells Makoto. “The more I interacted with Tachibana and emulated his business tactics, the more I felt like I wasn’t acting like myself. I didn’t realize it until I grabbed you just now. It feels like I’m being hollowed out into a Nobody, and my identity is covertly being replaced by a greater will.”

“How does this involve Makoto?” Eziu asks, trying to draw attention from Eziu’s attempts to unsheathe the Return on Investment from the heart of his money belt.

“I told you: It was a mistake,” Irvine says. “The Nobodies under Tachibana’s employ enjoyed unprecedented success at criminal enterprises. I took girls off the streets and sold them to human traffickers. I didn’t realize one of them was David’s sister until we saw you on TV and he recognized you.

“David wants to meet you because you are the inheritor of a valuable Empty Lot in Kamurocho,” Kinneas says.” He wants to reunite with his sister, but that property also plays a role in the land grab the Dojima family and other Yakuza syndicates are attempting. But he can never know I was the one who sold you into sexual slavery—” he’s cut short by the switchblade attached to Makoto’s key chain, which she stabs into his thigh.

She runs to Eziu. Irvine slumps to the ground. His cry of pain catches the attention of the Dojima family’s construction protection racket enforcers, the Wreck-It Ralph Squad. Ralph bursts onto the scene wielding a giant buzzsaw and swings it into the air. Eziu parries the buzzsaw with the Return on Investment and causes it to veer off course into the cement floor. It penetrates the ground and cuts a shape around Ralph and his gang in the shape of a keyhole. The floor collapses, sending Ralph and Co. into the darkness. Without thinking, Eziu points Return on Investment at the cavity, and an ethereal “click” chimes in his soul as the hole seals up.

Eziu and Makoto run.

In a hotel room, Makoto asks Eziu the question buried deep in her heart.

“Do you think he was telling the truth?” she says.

“I don’t know,” Eziu responds.

“How did you do that thing with that giant sword of yours?” she asks.

“I don’t know that, either,” Eziu responds “It just came naturally. Like something that I did in another life.”

“I was struck by a strange feeling of nostalgia when it happened,” Eziu reflects. “I remembered fencing on the beach with wooden swords with a friend of mine and sharing star-shaped fruit with a girl I liked. We were making a raft to escape the island. The other boy’s deepest desire was to sail to other lands that were worlds away from Japan. I can’t remember their names or faces, but we must have cast off. The earliest thing I can remember otherwise is washing ashore at my adopted father Auron’s home.”

“I would give anything to reunite with my friends,” Eziu says. “Sometimes I can feel the dark current of the Yakuza and profit drawing me into open waters, and I don’t know if it’s pulling me closer to my friends or further away. I have to believe the intense energy and effort I invested into my Himbo training and my start-up private equity firm will pay off in the end if I just keep working hard. If I had the same opportunity as you, I would meet with Tachibana.”

“Tell him I will meet with him,” she says to Eziu.

Eziu Soratelli finds David Xanatos Tachibana resting after his newest infusion of business intelligence in Dr. Finkelstein’s back alley cardiology clinic in Little Asia. The amber gleam in Tachibana’s eyes shines bright.

“I found your sister,” Eziu reports.

“Thank you,” Tachibana says. “Walk with me.” They head into the alley outside.

“The ties that bind our hearts to our family are invaluable, don’t you think? You are probably wondering why I am interested in Kamurocho when I could do business anywhere,” he chuckles. “In addition to the inherent value of downtown Kamurocho’s residential and commercial properties and accessibility to residents of nearby Twilight Burg, I entered this auction process as a favor to your adopted father Auron.”

“The entrance to the heart of all worlds is hidden in The Empty Lot. It is the most valuable acquisition at stake in this competition between the Dojima Family, the Omi Alliance, the Tojo clan leadership, and the Flintheart Glomgold Syndicate. Chad Sexman framed Auron for murder and insider trading to remove him from the leadership of the Dojima family and take his place to profit from the acquisition. Auron cannot bid for this high-value parcel of Kamurocho from a jail cell, so he employed me to act as his proxy and use my company’s leverage to gain an upper hand in this process.”

“Because of the rapid and mercurial nature of this process, the Empty Lot is the last parcel of land in Kamurocho unclaimed by the competing bidders. All other property has been snatched

up by the warring factions. Your real estate private equity firm and its holdings are valuable enough that Master Saruxeq thought it was worth hedging the emergency reserves of the Tojo Clan in its entirety on your company with its first round bid. The hopes are that the offer raises the price tag of the Kamurocho package on the whole and makes it too expensive for any of the member families or the Flintheart Glomgold Syndicate to afford.”

“After doing business with your father before his incarceration, I was honored to be selected as his representative in this auction and thrilled at the chance to be the first to enter Kingdom Hearts. The resources and power locked away within its darkness will...”

Tachibana stops mid-exposition when Ezio is shot twice: once in the chest and once in the leg. Ezio and Tachibana look up to find the master assassin Clayton lurking above them. Clayton channels the powers of darkness to parkour down to ground level as Tachibana drags Ezio into a side alley.

“The Dojima family must have contracted with the Brotherhood of Assassins to put Clayton on my trail,” Tachibana surmises after whispering a healing spell into Ezio’s ear. “ He’s after me; not you. My heart tells me there is only one thing to do.”

Tachibana bravely walks out into the main alley to surrender to Clayton and steps onto the path to the Dojima family’s torture lounge.

A magically recovered Ezio Soratelli lets his heart guide him to the Dojima Family’s torture lounge, where he finds David Xanatos Tachibana in danger of succumbing to his wounds as Replica Kuze tries to get him to reveal the secrets of the Empty Lot.

“The real Kuze made me heartless so that I can dish out as much punishment as it takes to get you to succumb to the darkness,” Replica Kuze crows, without noticing Ezio has snuck into the room. “Once we seize the Empty Lot and Kingdom Hearts, our dominance over Kamurocho will be complete and our dominance over the hearts, minds, and wallets of all worlds can begin. The infinite energy source that is Kingdom Hearts will power me into eternity, and Chad will lead the family in manipulating the emotional tides to make the desire for the Dojima Family’s products an inextricable part of the lives of every one in all the worlds that share the same sky. And from out of the darkness, we will make a new world.”

“You should be careful what you say,” Ezio interjects. “I was considering partnering with your organization despite our bad blood, but I may take my business elsewhere now that you have violated your NDA. Your progenitor Kuze couldn’t be trusted, either. Even before he lost his heart, he was always scheming to bitter ends.”

“I guess your heart is good enough to lead us in the right direction,” Replica Kuze says and cracks Tachibana’s skull with a blow from his iron knuckles. Ezio stabs Replica Kuze in the back with the Return on Investment and causes his circuitry to go haywire. Replica Kuze stumbles to the wall to prop himself up and remains paralyzed there until he can recalibrate.

Eziu holds Tachibana as Tachibana tries to cast a healing spell on himself, but his heart has been rent asunder by the trauma and can't power the magic, which was never powerful enough to heal a complicated condition like his heart murmur or head trauma anyway.

"Eziu, I know you can stop this war before it causes a market collapse," he says. "May your heart be your guiding key," he gasps and fades away into death.

Makoto comes to the scene too late to reunite with her brother.

"I only came to Japan to find him," she wails. She cradles him for a moment as Eziu prepares his grave. "I promise you," she whispers to the corpse. "I will open the door to the return of our heritage in Bhutan and the power we deserve."

When Eziu returns to lift David Xanatos from Makoto's grasp, he can swear he feels a frisson of energy pass between the dead Tachibana and the live one, like two hearts connecting.

As he turns away with the body, Makoto's eyes alight with an amber tint behind his back. When Eziu turns around, he finds she's disappeared. He dashes through Kamurocho looking for her, taking a right turn at the traffic light with the "Re:Connect" tag to plunge into the darkness of the night.

Matthew Angleton pops out of the Amicus expecting to see the plump, kindly face of Templar Whittaker. Instead, an angular face swims into his vision.

"You've done an incredible job leading us to what we want," says the voice of Mr. X. "I can see your release from this experiment just on the horizon."

When his eyes adjust from the dimness of the Amicus to the bright lights of the chamber, Matthew sees a man with Mr. X's body shape but another recognizable face leaning over him. His skin is drained of color, and his silver-gray hair is tied up in a rattail. He's wearing a black robe.

It's Rixku, the friend Matthew had thought he'd lost to darkness many years ago.

"How?!" Matthew exclaims.

"It's been a minute, old friend," says Rixku. "And now, it's time for me to show you the door to our hearts' content."

He holds out a hand to help Matthew out of the machine. Matthew grabs it and lets Rixku take him through the door of the testing chamber and into an elevator descending into the depths below Xehanort and Xenu Condominium Development's Bhutan headquarters.

Templar Whittaker wakes from a dream of navigating a steamboat down a river on a trip to distant worlds to the feeling that something is amiss. He checks his golden pocket watch.

“Aw, Gee! I missed the window for the last consciousness transfer,” he thinks.

Worried that prolonged time in the shoes of one of Those Who Came Before might trigger another seizure in Matthew, he pulls on his red shorts, slips into his black coat, and hurries to the Amicus chamber. The cot that would be used to slide Matthew out of the MRI is empty. A readout juts from the machine. Whittaker pulls it out.

The only thing on the paper is a bold **x**.

Panic seizes Templar Whittaker, along with a noble feeling of responsibility for Matthew. He hurries to Matthew’s cell. It’s empty. Except for a bundle of papers with text written in different colors. He picks it up and reads as “Vector to the Heavens” pipes in through the loudspeaker system:

The fable of the Miracle Worker and the Spirit Guide

This is the fable of the Miracle Worker and the Spirit Guide.

Take from it what you will.

Part 1

Once upon a time, there was a storyteller who spread news in the name of her faith and community. She told the story of a woman who could be destroyed by her pregnancy but was determined to see it through. Her listeners lent the woman their strength and support. When the child was born, the mother survived in good health.

The storyteller became known as a miracle worker. She spread goodwill and joy.

Then she met a boy fighting the plague. For a year, she told the story of the boy’s battle and raised support from the community. The boy rallied, the disease retreated and all was well. But then the plague came back and took the boy’s life.

The Miracle Worker cut off her hair in grief. She told her own stories less often and focused on teaching others to weave their tales. But she longed to return to telling her own stories.

Part 2

Once upon a time, there was a man who wanted to save the world. His ancestors had been driven from their homeland and robbed of their belongings. He wanted to inspire others to fight injustice.

So, he started spreading news in the name of inciting change.

He traveled to distant lands and told the public of whether their rulers there were leaders or liars. He returned to his ancestors' homeland to tell stories about his family's history.

But his travels left him weary. He had seen little change. He needed a new start.

Part 3

Once upon a time, there was a King who wanted to spread good news to residents of villages and small towns. He put out a call: "One storyteller for every community. Be paid to be the front line in an army of change."

The Miracle Worker jumped at the call. She packed her bags, left her friends behind and headed to a community in the Highlands. The man also answered the call and headed to a Frontier town nearby.

The Miracle Worker and the man met on a Winter's Eve. He helped her find stories in her community. She offered to carry his burden when a child of the Frontier died, and he could not go to her funeral after days of using stories to console his community.

The Miracle Worker let her hair grow back. She told the story of a Highlander who wanted to continue his mother's legacy of bringing school supplies to desperately poor children. Donations to his cause flooded in.

She sought to answer the mystery of who was shooting endangered wildlife in the Highlands. Four boys in masks bragged about being the hunters and hinted at their names. A rule forbidding hunting in the Highlands was passed, but the boys were never caught. The Miracle Worker didn't forget.

The man learnt to raise spirits among the troubled on the Frontier. When a troll threatened to force poor people from their homes, the man told the victims' story. Community members, Knights and rulers rallied to defeat the troll publicly.

The man became known as a Spirit Guide, showing his community the way to make good decisions and uplift others.

Part 4

Once upon a time, three boys in the Highlands were playing with a loaded weapon when it went off. One boy was struck and killed. The two others fled.

Knights found the weapon in a river on the Frontier. The Spirit Guide told the story. When the knights revealed the names of the three boys, a light went off in the Spirit Guide's head. The two surviving boys had names matching those of the masked boys who had killed woodland creatures in the Highlands .

He told the Miracle Worker. She asked the knights. They confirmed the two boys were the same. She told the community. Justice was done.

The next time the Miracle Worker and the Spirit Guide met at a pub, she told him she was grateful. He asked if she wanted him to call her a coach.

She said: “No, I want you to enjoy yourself.”

They formed a relationship that was celebrated by their friends and communities.

Two years later, the King decided he'd had enough of paying for storytellers. So, he culled his tellers of tales.

A sadness fell upon the Miracle Worker. She cut herself off from her community. And her family. And her friends. She stopped eating. She ground her teeth to nubs in the night. Her eyes sunk deeper and deeper into dark rings of sleeplessness, and she aged three years in three months.

She tried to devote herself to her faith and find a way to live off of storytelling on her own terms, but her mind was clouded. She wanted to run away from her old life to reinvent herself in a city where nobody knew her name.

The Spirit Guide wanted to start anew and learn a new craft, one that would allow him to tell stories his own way.

His steps pointed toward two paths: One could take him farther from her. One could bring him closer.

Who's to say why their story ends where it does?

Maybe she was trying to get her priorities straight. Maybe he couldn't.

Maybe they saw other people.

Maybe they were haunted by the deaths they had encountered.

Maybe they stopped talking or maybe they could only confide in each other.

In the end, maybe all they needed to tell each other was: “I believe in you.”

But in the end, they could find nothing to say.

And so, they went their separate ways.

Part 5

Once upon a Winter's Eve, a Miracle Worker and a Spirit Guide sat down to dinner. They hadn't talked for years. She was getting married. He had journeyed far away. She had returned to

helping others tell their stories and he had been adopted as a brother to a child who needed his spirit raised.

She told him she wanted to get back to telling stories of her own. He told her he believed she could. He offered his help.

He told her he wanted to come home and use his new craft to return to guiding a community.

She told him she believed he could. She offered to help.

They left dinner laughing and continued on their way.

It was a good night.

Good night!

Templar Whittaker is surprised to find he's forgotten how to breathe.

"Gosh! He's gone off script," he realizes. "There's only one place they could be."

He exits the scene with the text in his pocket, nestled next to another small scrap of paper.

Final Round Bids

"I can't believe it took me this long to realize it was you!" Matthew Angleton says as the elevator descends into the caverns below Xehanort and Xenu Condominium Development's Bhutan offices, clutching Rixku in a tight embrace.

"Alright, alright, goofball," Rixku squirms away. "Knock it off."

"How did you survive the darkness?" Matthew asks.

"We tried to find you..." Matthew starts. "You can't know how hard **Kredacted** reacted to your loss. We ran out of leads."

"I know," Rixku says. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you until now. We needed your heart to be pure of present-day connections so it could align with the hearts of The Ones Who Came Before. The Amicus wouldn't have worked otherwise."

"I don't think you had anything to worry about," Matthew says. "We never forgot you."

"I've never been more at home in my own skin than I was with you two," Rixku says. "But I didn't really belong in the world of England. My parents never even told me where I came from. You remember? 'You're a precious gift that fell into our laps like a star plummeting out of the heavens'."

"If I'm a star, then where are my groupies?" Rixku and Sora recite Rixku's childhood response in unison.

"Remember how my albinism and lack of knowledge of my birth parents made me an outcast?" Rixku asks. "My preternatural strength meant that I couldn't play on any blitzball teams or else I would give one side an unfair advantage over the other."

"I even started to envy you for making connections with others so easily," Rixku reflects. "My athleticism and charm gave me the upper hand in a lot of our little contests on the island, but your poise, innocence, acrobatic skills and talent with the sword made you attractive as a friend to the other kids on the island. I had to work extra hard to beat you at fencing. I think that's why she chose you over me. Everyone found me intimidating."

"Rixku! If you could listen to yourself..." Matthew says. "I know being the first infant in all the worlds to be born without a heart always made you feel ostracized. But we were your friends. I had to practice every day to beat you at sword fighting. You can't let the darkness of envy and ambition cloud your mind."

"You were my closest friends, but you would have found me in the Balkans and saved me from the orphanage there after we were separated at sea if our connections were that strong," Rixku's eyes grow distant. "I don't take it personally ...any more. It's just science. The only person who can rescue you is yourself. There are no warriors of light, no saviors."

"But I found new friends that didn't care that I was born a Nobody," Rixku says.

Matthew can feel his heart start to plummet as the elevator descends into the caverns below. The intensifying air pressure makes his head swim.

"We heard you found a gang," Matthew says.

"A gang found me," Rixku says. "The orphanage that sheltered me after we were lost at sea shut down due to lack of funds during the breakup of the Balkan states. This is what happens in times of war. Some kids who lose their connections and find themselves lost in the darkness link up with whoever can provide protection and will do whatever it takes to belong. For me, it was a group of refugee children from Sarajevo who were hiding out in a bombed-out toy store where they smuggled cigarettes stashed away in cowboy and astronaut action figures to wealthy Westerners looking to avoid paying the value-added tax. All of this was under coercion by a local puppet maker, by the way.

I started as their lookout, but when rival gangs moved in, our leader decided to expand our internal protection scheme to become a neighborhood racket. That's when I got a taste for

business and looked out the scope of a rifle for the first time. Once we cornered the market on a block, we expanded to the next. My strength and gift for intimidation made me the best choice to lead the security and acquisition department.”

“Rixku, this can’t be true!?” says Matthew. “It’s just not you.”

“It’s who I became, and who are you to judge? I had no friends to help me. You may be a watchdog, but I became a dog of war. The call of money (and my inability to form true connections with the hearts of others) led me to the battlefield. I became a mercenary, fighting in privatized military companies in the War on Terror. When the Blackwater company changed its name to Constellis for strategic reasons and was bought by the private equity firm Apollo, the buyer got me as part of the package.

When a successful security op I led raised my reputation in the C-suite, the head of Apollo introduced me to a network of private equity executives. That’s how I learned of Xehanort & Xenu and the chance to create a better, safer world.”

“You’re right,” Matthew Angleton says. His head feels fuzzier as the elevator descends down the darkening shaft, and his heart beats fast. “We’re not the close friends I thought we were. I want to go home.”

“Your only way home lies through the door to Kingdom Hearts,” Rixku says.

“But that’s in Japan,” Matthew says.

“The true door to the heart of all worlds hides in Japan, yes” Rixku says. “But one of the founders of Xehanort and Xenu Condominium Development discovered a way to create a backdoor that can be used to infiltrate Kingdom Hearts from here in Bhutan.

Our founders-in-absentia realized that the emotional muck left behind when a heart and soul escape the Wheel of Dharma and earn their rest in the Final World drips down through the mountains in Bhutan and coalesces in the roots below them. They used the gummy darkness of the emotional muck to create a facsimile of the door to Kingdom Hearts that bypasses the door in Japan and establishes a direct line of communication with the guardians. This Organization needs control of both doors to fully seize Kingdom Hearts.”

“THERE ARE GUARDIANS?!” Matthew exclaims.

He sighs.

“You know what? What you’re saying is absolutely batshit insane, but it’s still only half as crazy as the religious beliefs spewed by the private equity executives I’ve met. Go ahead and tell me about your bullshit guardians.”

“As I was saying,” Rixku continues, “in the time before the worlds succumbed to darkness, the dreams of children fueled the creation of beings that were elements and ethereal emotions made manifest. You know the deal: One for fire and anger. One for ice and perfectionism. One for stone and fortitude. One for high ambition. And one to speak for them all. They were called Aeons.

The Aeons roamed the world in the time when it was whole. But when darkness enveloped Kingdom Hearts in the wake of the Keyblade War millenia ago and split the worlds of different nations apart, the Aeons retreated to Kingdom Hearts to guard the light from future injury.

Opening the true door to Kingdom Hearts in the 1980s changed the way it powers the fundament of all worlds. Kingdom Hearts remains a light hidden in the darkness surrounding it. But its ability to generate the elemental and emotional tides has been cast askew. The Aeons regulate the elements and emotions of all worlds now, while Kingdom Hearts provides them with the power and materials to do so.

A frontal assault on Kingdom Hearts from Japan would meet too much resistance from aggressive Aeon foot soldiers. Once unlocked, the entrance in Bhutan would basically allow us to leapfrog past the front entrance, where the proximity of Kingdom Hearts to the real world allows its raw energy to be refined into resources and emotional influence. The Bhutan entrance gives us the ability to pass over the front door and land in the twilight center of the heart of all worlds.

There, in the place where light meets dark, we can infiltrate Kingdom Hearts and secure it and the loyalty of the Aeon commanders. Then, we can seize the front door in Japan and the opportunity it creates for exporting power and influence from the metaphysical plane to the physical world.”

“NOW, it all makes sense!” says Matthew. “Let me guess: You want to replicate the Yakuza’s plan to dominate the market by controlling infinite resources while manipulating emotions to create demand? I can see how the resources created by Kingdom Hearts could eliminate Xehanort and Xenu’s costs for developing housing. And the Aeons are security, quality control and labor? So, you would create a demand for gated suburbs catering to families looking to find refuge from the darkness and dangers of our world and build the housing at no cost to X&X?”

“Spoken like someone who has spent a good amount of time researching mergers and acquisitions,” says Rixku. “Your strategic analysis is sound, but you think too small.”

“Not just suburbs, no,” says Rixku. “We would build micro-condos in cities and mixed-use retail residential shopping centers with apartments in downtowns all over the world. Each of those buildings will be mounted with security cameras on every corner and guarded by teams of military and police veterans armed with the latest in surveillance and infiltration technology. The buildings will be accessed with bracelets carrying the personal data of tenants’ hearts and wallets. Tenancy will also come with discounts to select businesses nearby and deals with the

safest airlines and hotels in the world. Private and charter schools associated with us will safeguard students' minds and hearts. Once it leaves product development, the Amicus will become tenants' central platform for entertainment and immersive education. "

Every X&X building will be built with custom-made, water-proof, hurricane-proof, earthquake-proof, nuclear-resistant housing custom built with renewable materials from the heart of all worlds Every grocery store, mall, tennis court, pseudo-autonomous car, smart phone and credit car will track our tenants and implement safety protocols. From the cradle to the grave, X&X will provide everything our tenants' heart desires. And they will live longer and better lives because of it."

"Sounds lucrative," says Matthew. "And when the costs become too burdensome, you divest assets to an acquirer big enough to foot the bill while retaining a substantial stake in the divested business and maintaining control of Kingdom Hearts? Who would have enough money to buy a piece of this action? A government?"

"A government..." says Rixku. "Or a large private equity firm. Or a higher power... We believe our acquisition may herald the return of our saviors-in-absentia.

Our founders immigrated to our sphere of existence from beyond the stars to better understand the mysteries of the heart and the connective tissue binding the worlds so they could learn to instill order on chaos. The spiritual energy centralized in Bhutan attracted one and inspired him to pose as an incarnation of one of the area's rulers. The members of the Tachibana family are his descendants, but they lacked the legal documentation to prove it.

David Xanatos Tachibana started this condominium development company to restore his family's legacy and further our founders' work, but our Japanese arm splintered away from us decades ago and broke off all communication in the process. We don't even know who is in charge. Templar Miscavige told me this after we had been doing business for a while and gave me the responsibility of managing this facility and bringing you into the fold while he attends to matters elsewhere."

"Why did you need me to help?" Matthew asks.

"We don't know who holds the deed to the Empty Lot. Makoto lost control of the property, we know that much. But David Xanatos Tachibana's essence transferred into her body at his death, and since the conclusion of the Yakuza turf war of the 1980s has slowly overwritten her personality with the darkness of his. However, he did not experience the moments immediately after his death as he was being born anew in her. She did. He did not absorb her memories when he took over her body. Those have been lost to the darkness. His memories encompass his life up to his death and then there's a black space between then and when he fully merged with her. When he took over her body fully, he had only his memories from before his death.

Thus, the identity of the deed holder is a mystery we needed you to solve.. As Nobodies, we lacked the ability to form connections with the hearts of The Ones Who Came Before and witness the transfer of the Tachibana estate in Japan. Your heart naturally forms connections to

find truth, and so you were the best candidate to use the Amicus. Once you find out who holds the deed to the Empty Lot, Xehanort and Xenu can claim the property and set things right. And David Xanatos Tachibana can return as the rightful heir to Kingdom Hearts and regain his true body.

“There’s one other way you might help us,” says Rixku. “We are going to need business intelligence on competitors and potential partners to corner the market. Your work in the mergers and acquisitions industry can give us the upper hand in the fight against the darkness. Will you join us?”

Rixku stretches out his hand.

“I don’t know, man” Matthew says and tries to flatten down hair that has been whipped into spikes as the elevator descends.

“Listen to your heart,” says Rixku. “We can’t control people’s minds, but we can manipulate the emotional tides of Kingdom Hearts to influence their moods and inclinations. We can lull them into a sense of complacency. Your head is swimming and you’re feeling dazed now, right? I can see your hair is standing on end. That’s because we’re almost at the door. You’re feeling the pent-up emotional energy within Kingdom Hearts straining at the threshold of our world.

“What are you...?” Matthew starts, then shakes his head to clear the sensation that a drum is beating within his skull. He realizes the pounding is coming from his heart.

“We can tap this energy to make the tenants of Xehanort and Xenu properties feel comfortable with our security measures,” Rixku continues. “When everyone is monitored, we can control the flow of weapons into communities. Every guests’ and tenants’ coming and going will be recorded. Automated reminders to lock up guns in safes matched to ID-encoded bracelets for parents and warning signals whenever the safes are opened. No more kids playing with guns. No more fatal accidents.”

“No more choice,” Matthew points out.

“They make the choice to live in our housing,” Rixku says. “We insert a desire for our condos in their hearts by controlling the emotional tides, but the decision to make a purchase is still ultimately their own.”

“It wouldn’t bring her back,” Matthew says. “It wouldn’t change the fact that those kids died and that nothing we could do could stop it from happening again.”

“No,” Rixku says. “But wouldn’t it give you a sense of closure to know you helped put things right? Your story deserves a better ending. You have the knowledge to help our business succeed and find people willing to share our vision. The more businesses willing to partner with us or open the door to a takeover, the more we can eliminate risk. Guarded transportation to and from schools associated with us. Security teams to respond to the slightest disturbance within the building or outside. Partnerships to provide mental health services whenever needed.

“Why do you need partnerships if you have infinite resources?” Matthew asks.

“Kingdom Hearts can generate infinite resources, but it can’t do it instantly or produce all of what we need simultaneously,” Rixku answers. “It takes time to make materials. Likewise, we can’t influence all emotions simultaneously. The push and pull would drive our tenants insane. We can just twitch a couple heartstrings here and there.”

“That’s another way you can help. You could write our story and our press releases. And our investor communications. You would help us identify competitors who need to be dealt with by surveying the markets and ease acquisition negotiations with the power of your pen. We might even have you do some homework for us and find a government to step in to help with the costs if we grow faster than we can sustain.

Your tale deserves a better ending than you going back to your office and continuing to spin your wheels as another cog in the financial industry machine while playing the dating game at coffee shops. Don’t you want to be the one to write it?”

“Nothing ever ends,” Matthew says. “Things just go on and on and on and pause for a while before getting better or worse.”

“Yes, nothing ends,” Rixku says. “There are no heroes. No saviors. The best we can do is to keep striving for something better to save ourselves. Whatever it takes. Neither Eziu Soratelli nor Riku Odinsen were able to keep the Tachibana family from being robbed of their property, and they would spend the rest of their lives trying to endure the life of the Yakuza. But they found freedom by mastering it and following their own paths rigorously.

And don’t forget their lives before the 80s. They were friends who strove to escape their provincial home because they wanted something new. It was only the forces of darkness that took away their dreams and memories. Don’t you think you have a similar path? To experience something new. Not only experience it, but create it. Plus, women love successful businessmen. You even get expense-free travel to every world of your choice.”

“You’ve thought of everything,” Matthew says. He closes his eyes. “An ending, of sorts.” He takes a deep breath.

“I’ll do it!” he says, just as the elevator stops. Darkness seeps through the gap between the elevator doors. His chest tightens.

“My heart told me you would,” Rixku says. “Now, the only thing left to do is to open the door.”

The elevator door opens onto a dark corridor. They step out of the elevator, and the lights turn on automatically. They illuminate a high-ceilinged hallway. At the end, a giant pair of wooden doors stands shut. They are white as ivory and designed with baroque elegance. A single diamond marks each. The frame is decorated with the carving of a heart. Alternating bursts of light and darkness emanate from beneath the door.

“This entrance locked itself after Kingdom Hearts rejected our founder-in-absentia because of the darkness in his heart. This was shortly before he fled Bhutan in the wake of being deposed for falsely claiming to be an incarnation of the ruler Ngawang Namyal,” Rixku says. “It longs to open again. Now, place your hand over your heart and repeat after me.”

Rixku places his hand on his chest.

“From my chest, I pull this Key,” he says.

“From my chest,” Matthew begins. The compression in his chest worsens as his heart grows heavier. He gasps and feels fingers slide through his skin and grip something metallic. “I pull this Key.”

“So long as I have the makings,” grunts Rixku as he pulls a black blade handle from his chest.

“So long as I have the makings,” Matthew repeats. Every nerve in his chest feels like it has been set aflame as he tugs at the object in his hand. He can’t breathe. He steadies himself by leaning against a door frame. The entirety of a golden hilt and part of a silver blade stick out of his chest. There is no blood or wound.

He looks over at Rixku. The top half of a dark blade with a scarlet edge and an electric blue eye in its hilt is buried in his chest.

“Then through this simple act of taking,” Rixku says.

Matthew repeats the line: “Then through this simple act of taking,”

They both vomit violently.

Rixku tugs on the black handle mightily, and a blade in the shape of a bat wing fully emerges from his chest.

“Its wielder I will be,” Rixku says.

“Its wielder I will be,” Matthew groans and pulls the blade from his heart.

He nearly faints and uses the blade to further steady himself by using it as a crutch. He looks down at it. It’s silver and shaped like a key. It’s a quarter as tall as him. He recognizes it from his sessions in the Amicus. It’s the Return-on-Investment, Eziú’s keyblade.

He looks over at Rixku. He is steadying himself on The Auditor.

The doors expand outward as they both take a deep breath.

Rixku points his blade at one of the doors. Matthew does the same. A beam of darkness fares up from the Auditor and shoots into the keyhole of the door he faces. A beam of light shoots from Matthew’s blade at the other keyhole. Matthew grits his teeth as a “Click!” sound

emanating from the ether reverberates in his chest. The door opens. A twilight abyss awaits. The two Keyblade wielders step inside.

JOINT VENTURE

Matthew Angleton wakes from a dream of being pulled in several directions at once to find himself in a monochromatic landscape in the heart of all worlds. Rolling hills of black and white undulate like the tides and turn the landscape into a roiling biome of shifting terrain. A black-and-white castle straight out of a fairy tale dominates the horizon. Or maybe it sits behind the next hill. Behind the two keyblade wielders, a sliver of electric light escapes through the open back door to Kingdom Hearts. Distance has no meaning here.

The black sky is illuminated with flashes of light in a constant rhythm like a heartbeat.

Beyond the hills, a giant horned black-and-white creature resembling a minotaur wreathed in ivory and onyx flames roars his rage to the heavens and brings an upraised paw down on something heavy. The echoes of a dull "Boom!" reach the hills. The upper body, neck, and head of a pale woman with icy features rises next to the creature. She blows delicately on the object the other creature just bashed, and steam wafts into the air.

"Those are the Aeons of fire and ice who work the forge now at the true door to Kingdom Hearts," says Rixku.

A zebra-patterned carpet flies by as the keyblade wielders dip into a valley in between two of the rolling hills. Matthew feels a thrill of ambition as the wind pick ups in its wake and casts it into the sky, where it fades into the twilight. "I always wanted to fly," Matthew thinks suddenly. "I could turn that into a cape and capitalize on the superhero craze when we set the world right."

"Did Kingdom Hearts always look like this?" Matthew asks.

"It's always shifting," says Rixku. "But this is different. When the true door to Kingdom Hearts was opened in the 1980s, the chaos of commercialism rent the land asunder."

A lanky black-and-white cow gallops across the hills. It trips over its four legs at the crest and rolls down in a ball and lands at the keyblade wielders' feet before getting up and flashing a bucktooth smile.

"Aeon...of...pastoral - " Matthew starts to ask.

"Yeah." Rixku interrupts. "I think we can safely say that's Xlarabelle, Aeon of pastoral serenity and hayseeds, one of the 13 components of the Earth element's agricultural aspect".

"Rixku!" Matthew whispers as the hill beneath them rises of its own accord. "Look!" As the hill rises, the castle seems to uproot itself. It ascends above the hills and comes closer to reveal a main tower decorated with seven stained glass window, each depicting a Princess of Heart. It reveals more of itself, and Mathew can see the tower is surrounded by black battlements and

shorter towers and belfries. The ground beneath the structures rears up, and Matthew can finally see that the white castle is the head of a giant creature made of stone. It stands on four legs made of inverted towers.

Atop the white castle's highest peak, Matthew can see a lone figure resembling a human. It's thin with long, flowing hair. In one hand, it holds an incredibly long katana, glinting as it captures the rays of twilight. An inexplicable feeling of admiration competes with an unwarranted longing to beat the shit out of the man blossoms in Matthew's heart. The man unfurls one black wing behind his back and flies down to meet the two key blade wielders.

"Pitiful Nobody," the one-winged man says upon landing. He sneers at Rixku. "Playing with matters of the heart when you lack the organ yourself. How dare you come to my domain? I would have Alexander demolish you from where he stands, but my mother taught me better manners than that."

"Oh, Aeon of Contempt and Gravity," Rixku says and bows. "Allow me to correct you: I do have a heart now. Forgive us this simple trespass. We have a deal to offer you."

"Wait, you have a heart now?" Matthew asks Rixku.

"I started to feel it beat as the end of your last Amicus session," says Rixku. "It's weak, but it's there. Your ability to form connections really does know no bounds."

"Xephirosth," Rixku addresses the Aeon. "These humans have allowed their worlds to fall to darkness. Our organization has a plan to show them the light. Join your forces to ours and help us impose order on chaos."

"Your little market domination plans are always so similar," Xephirosth retorts. "They never turn out profitable. Why would I put the Aeons and Kingdom Hearts at risk when you have never been able to get the humans under control?"

"The worlds are different now, and we have an expert in mergers and acquisitions assisting us," Rixku says. "Corporate consolidation, overwhelming debt, brain drain and fatigue with the turmoil embroiling the worlds creates an opening in humans' heart for something new that offers the promise of something old: A comfortable, isolated existence far from trouble. Look into our hearts to find the strength in our plan."

Xephirosth glares at Matthew and Rixku. His stare penetrates Matthew's chest. He can feel an alien force searching for something. The experience lasts no longer than a few heartbeats.

"Hmmm," Xephirosth says. "That is new. Intriguing. Oh, his descendants are involved. Yes. We remember when he carved the backdoor to Kingdom Hearts centuries ago. He had promise, but he wasn't able to hold his earthly property or the hub of all worlds. Every generation gets weaker and weaker. Why would we trust David Xanatos Tachibana to succeed where his ancestor failed? He hasn't fully awoken from his sister's heart yet.**"

"The Tachibanas are weak!" asserts Rixku. "This Organization needs a new beating heart and CEO. Tell your Aeons to stand down from the true door of Kingdom Hearts and swear allegiance to the new blood. I know the battlefield. My friend knows the business. A compliant world will open the door to the return of the Aeons to the physical plane, if you so wish.

Our properties will host open mic nights where writers spin fairy tales that dull reality into fantasies for children and restore belief in you. It will be like the time before darkness separated the worlds. With Kingdom Hearts under our custodianship, we will repair the damage done to it and relieve them of their burden of guardianship. You can capitalize on it however you like. As gods, if you want."

"A joint venture, then," Xephirosth muses.

He turns to Matthew. "Your heart is on the verge of being rent in 'twain. Your energy for protecting those you love and wanting a newer, safer world know no bounds, but your remorse and pain hold you back."

"Rixku, I'm suddenly not so sure about this," Matthew says.

"We need him," Rixku says to Xephirosth before Matthew can reply.

"We do not," asserts Xephirosth. "Once he finds your legal documents, you can use your new toy to make a copy of his heart and mind and gain his business intelligence that way."

Rixku's poise cracks.

"But don't pretend you weren't already considering that," Xephirosth says.

Before Matthew can act, a voice calls out from the open backdoor.

"Rixku! Stop!" The silhouette of Templar Whittaker appears framed in the door. "This wasn't part of the arrangement."

Maybe it's the light from the back door to Kingdom Hearts distorting Templar Whittaker's silhouette, but Matthew perceives him as different from before. More regal. A little more charming.

"Gawsh, Rixku, if I knew you were going to stray so far from the plan, I never would have agreed to help your Organization," says Templar Whittaker, finally finding a steady and consistent voice after an untold amount of time trying to blend in with the more sober crowd of the Organization.

"Mickey!" Rixku says. "This is the only way to keep the worlds from falling to darkness. You spent so long seeking a way to restore your own kingdom like the Tachibanas yearned to return the glory to Bhutan. You know that we must do whatever it takes. "

"I agreed to do whatever it takes to help the worlds escape the darkness and turn a profit through monopoly," Mickey Whittaker says. "But going against the Organization's plan to achieve your own ends means you have an ambition that puts the common good at risk. I promised I would help you reunite with your friends and design the Amicus in return for an executive seat in the Organization's boardroom, but I cannot trust you if you're willing to go against management. You were hired for your ability to execute the Templars' plan as a mercenary, not for your abilities as a business executive."

"Little mouse who thinks he's a king," growls Xephirosth. "He doesn't need your help connecting to the girl he lost at sea anymore. Or your assistance in understanding the workings of the heart. He can find her himself, now."

Xephirosth thrusts his katana into the ground before him. "I agree to a pact. Take the sword and achieve all your heart desires."

Mickey Whittaker takes a scrap of paper from his pocket.

"Rixku, if you do this, I shred her number and warn her about you," Mickey Whittaker says. "I held up my end of the bargain because it breaks my heart to see good friends torn apart. You don't have the strength of heart to be entrusted with their protection."

"This is about **her**?!" shouts Matthew.

Rixku makes a move for the katana. He ducks as Matthew swings the Return-on-Investment at his head and then parries a blow to his back with the Auditor without turning around. A metallic shriek riffs the air as Rixku leverages The Auditor against the Return-on-Investment propel himself into a spin that whirls him around to face Matthew. He instead finds himself face-to-face with Return-on-Investment's saw-edged blade and parries it as it slices toward his face.

"I'M THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN PROTECT HER," Rixku shouts petulantly. Matthew can see dark shadows dance in the corners of Rixku's eyes between the teeth of the crossed blades. "YOU HAD YOUR CHANCE, AND YOU FAILED."

A pulse of darkness gathers at The Auditor's hilt. Matthew riposts and jostles Rixku's sword arm into the air. A stream of darkness roars upward into the sky instead of at Matthew's chest. The two keyblade wielders circle each other.

Templar Whittaker moves as if to join in, but Xephirosth glides over to his patch of turf and blocks his path. "Let's allow the two keyblade wielders battle this out," he admonishes Templar Whittaker.

Matthew now stands in Rixku's path to the katana. "You always were competitive," Matthew says. "'I should never have trusted you."

"You can still be a junior partner in this exciting business venture," Rixku levels his sword at Matthew.

“You were going to throw me away as soon as you had the opportunity,” Matthew accuses.

“I was only considering the possibility,” Rixku says. “If your heart wasn’t in the right place, it would have been the measure of last resort.”

“And would have allowed you to take out a rival for her affections,” Matthew Angleton says.

“She would be given a choice just like everyone else who lived in a Xehanort and Xenu property, Rixku says. His eyes dart to the katana. “She could even choose to spend her time with you, if her heart desires. But why would she when you did not have the strength to lift up her heart? She needs a true warrior tested on the battlefield again and again to win in the boardroom. ”

Rixku channels the power of darkness to dash to the side. Matthew thrusts the Return-On-Investment toward Rixku. Before the reverberations from its collision with the Auditor fade, Matthew arcs it over his head and slashes across Rixku’s torso in a vertical slice. Rixku parries the blow with The Auditor, but the force of meeting the Return-on-Investment mid-swipe tumbles him backward.

“My heart may be weak, but I was always stronger than you,” Matthew shouts.

The Return-on Investment unleashes a ray of light. It catches Rixku full in the chest and causes him to fly backward hundreds of feet.

Rixku’s breath is heavy and ragged as he gets up. Darkness pulses from beneath his skin, along the tendons of his arms and legs. The hill on which he stands develops a pockmark as he musters his strength. Matthew braces, and the ground on which he stands dips down on, as well.

Rixku launches himself into the air, the depressed cavity of the hill rising swiftly with his movements to propel him out of sight. Matthew presses his feet down and propels himself upward as the land increases his velocity. The terrain flashes past him as he soars ever higher, passing the flying carpet from before. At the peak of his ascent, Matthew can see Rixku framed against an ivory heart-shaped moon. Matthew angles the Return-on-Investment to torpedo himself toward Rixku. Just before he smashes into his foe, he sees the flash of a smile, and Rixku disappears. Matthew flails his arms as he starts to fall.

A few seconds into the plummet, he sees the carpet from before passing by within arm’s distance and grabs at it. It evades his grasp. The wisps of black tendrils intruding at the corners of his eyes tells Matthew that a Dark Corridor has opened behind him. Before he can flip around, a searing pain slashes across his back. Rixku soars headlong toward the ground from behind him, his bloody keyblade at his side and a grin on his face.

Matthew tries to curl up into a ball to protect his head, the wound in his spine challenging him as the ground quickly approaches. Suddenly, a flat black-and-white patch rushes up to block Matthew’s view of his doom. Matthew hits the flying carpet, facedown, and his descent slows.

He hits the ground cushioned by the now-bloodstained carpet and struggling to retain consciousness.

He sees a pair of sneakered feet walk past him.

Rixku glances over his shoulder and down at Matthew and sneers.

“Heh,” he smirks. “You may be stronger, but I’ve always been smarter.”

Rixku grasps the hilt of Xephirosth’s katana.

“Xephirosth!” he shouts. “I accept this pact. Let us cross the threshold together.”

Matthew’s vision blurs, and so does Rixku’s body. He looks at Xephirosth. He’s also started to blur. Matthew wipes his eyes to find they are not deceiving him. Everything else is crystal clear, including the sight of Mickey Whittaker helplessly looking upward as Rixku and Xephirosth rose into the air.

The blurred forms of Xephirosth and Rixku merge in a pulse of light and darkness. Matthew rubs his eyes again. A gust of wind buffets him and tosses him into a roiling valley. The wind continues to pummel him as he raises his head to see a taller, gaunter Rixku alight on a hilltop, two wings (one black and one white) outstretched and long white hair flowing free. He raises a sword, an elongated black-and-white keyblade curved like the katana.

“And now,” the dual voices of Rixku and Sephiroth pierce the darkness. “We open the door to a new world.”

He turns to Matthew and points the sword at him. An air of contempt cuts through the atmosphere like the shriek of a violin trio nearing its crescendo.

“But YOU will not be joining us,” the voices call out in unison.

The man who is both Rixku and Xephirosth launches from the hilltop in the blink of an eye and barrels toward Matthew and the back door out of Kingdom Hearts behind him, generating the full gravitational force and pull of a tornado in his wake.

Matthew cannot hear his heart above the sound of his doom barreling toward him with a cacophonous “BOOM!”

Matthew Angleton can do nothing to avoid the foe barreling toward him with a tornado in its wake. Every movement worsens the pain stemming from the gash on his back. He manages to raise his head from the terrain in enough time to see the point of Rixku-Xephirosth’s katana keyblade come feet away from his face.

Suddenly, he feels a pull. He is tossed upward just before the katana keyblade strikes. He has a moment to look around. The flying carpet has wrapped around his torso like a bandage and is

elevating him into the air. A brief surge of high ambition emanating from the Aeon strikes Matthew's heart.

"I can survive this," he thinks.

He's not allowed to relish the reprieve. Matthew has avoided foe's blade, but the gravitational force of the tornado drags him behind Rixku-Xephirosth as he dashes through the backdoor to Kingdom Hearts and into the basement of Xehanort & Xenu's Bhutan headquarters. Rixku-Xephirosth whirls around, and the tailwind of gravitational forces whips around behind him and smashes Matthew backward against one wall in the direction of the elevator. He is then blown toward the opposite wall as Rixku-Xephirosth whirls the other way.

With his nerves screaming in anguish, Matthew thrusts the Return-on-Investment's blade outward behind him. The blade sticks into the wall halfway up and Matthew holds the grip in a death grip and hangs from it to swing free. The pulse of gravitational force blows him horizontal so his feet can meet the wall and brace there. He propels from the wall with the keyblade and swings for his foe's head as he drops.

Rixku-Xephirosth parries the blow with the keyblade katana and thrusts forward. Matthew blocks the thrust, but a torrent of gravitational force slams him backward through the open doors of the elevator at the opposite end of the hall as the Aeon of High Ambition unfurls around Matthew and folds him into a ball to protect him from the concussion. The blast tears the roof off the elevator and caves in the wall. Wires knocked loose from the corridor ceiling along the path of the blasts and loosened from the elevator spark wildly and ignite the surroundings. Long hair frames Rixku-Xephirosth's face as he stares daggers at Matthew while flames rage.

Matthew can hear alarm klaxons blaring from the facility's PA speakers. They emit the protocol warning programmed by the Organization Templars in the case of the escape of the formerly One-Winged Aeon.

*"Estuans interius,
We're all fucked! We're all fucked!"*

*What tool let him out?
We're all fucked! We're all fucked!"*

*It's Xephirosth!"
Xephirosth!"*

Rixku-Xephirosth strides confidently down the blazing hallway toward Matthew Angleton's prone body. He raises his katana keyblade as he nears the elevator. Suddenly, a hooded figure leaps over his shoulder from behind.

"Matthew, you've gotta destroy the Amicus!" Templar Mickey Whittaker shouts above the sound of his star-patterned keyblade clashing against Rixku-Xephirosth's katana keyblade.

Matthew can feel the Aeon of High Ambition raise him to his feet and then pull him through the hole in the elevator car's roof to propel him up the elevator shaft. The steel elevator guide rails lining the walls and suspended cables slide past him swiftly as he ascends. He feels a warm updraft speed his rise and looks down. Rixku-Xephirosth is pumping his wings furiously to close the distance between them and giving Matthew a slight boost of warm air fueled by the fire rising behind him as he does.

The alarm klaxons continue to blare their warning.

*"Sors immanis
Et inanis*

*Move the Amicus.
This is serious."*

Rixku-Xephirosth raises his keyblade katana in one arm and jerks the other back to drag Matthew toward the point with a pull of gravity. The alarms bemoan the situation.

*"What happens when the
shareholders learn of this?"*

*When we enter the red
Heads will roll, hearts will stop.*

*Our reserves don't account for this
We might need to borrow debt!*

*Xephirosth!
Xephirosth!"*

A stream of light erupts through the flames and bounces between the walls with a black-cloaked figure in tow. Rixku-Xephirosth angles downward to meet Templar Whittaker as he careens toward him with the illuminated keyblade thrust ahead. The gravity drags Matthew down with his back to the shaft floor as the combatants below him clash. Matthew plummets through the feathers of Rixku-Xephirosth's wings helplessly before feeling a pull as the alarms pick up the tempo to break into a rocking guitar ballad.

Templar Whittaker has grabbed his collar with his free hand while his keyblade is locked with Rixku-Xephirosth's. The arm jerks, and Matthew is thrust upward again as he shouts "Whoooo!!!!". He slashes the Return-On-Investment wildly as he jets through the feathers of Rixku-Xephirosth wings and sees a cut appear on Rixku-Xephirosth's chest.

Rixku-Xephirosth turns on his back and lets the backdraft from his wings propel his rise as he thrusts the keyblade katana at Matthew above him with a sneer. Matthew parries swiftly, and Rixku-Xephirosth swings his blade in a wide arc to block an incoming blow from Templar Whittaker behind him.

Rixku-Xephirosth sweeps his free arm across his chest, and Matthew and Templar Whittaker are smashed against the opposite wall as their foe returns himself up right. Matthew can see the doors of the uppermost elevator exit and the casing holding the elevator motor and winch above him.

He soars upward while slashing cable, the guide rails and wall panels to detach them and slow Rixku-Xephirosth's ascent. His foe slices them apart without breaking speed. He thrusts his blade toward Matthew again.

Templar Whittaker careens off the shaft walls from below Rixku-Xephirosth and bounces on the wall opposite the attacker's raised elbow to arc above him. Templar Whittaker alights on the katana keyblade blade to charge along its length with his keyblade thrust at his foe's face

Matthew's ascent has brought him to the housing containing the elevator motor and winch. He hangs on it and slashes to free it and its contents from its mooring. This starts to drop the whole rig on Rixku-Xephirosth as he swipes a hand to blast Templar Whittaker away from his face. Matthew jumps from the machinery to the doors out of the elevator shaft.

Templar Cruise is putting the final touches on emergency protocols in the Amicus chamber when he hears a loud crash. The doors to the chamber's entrance bulge in his direction and then explode outward as Matthew flies backward through them and hits the wall behind Templar Cruise while Templar Whittaker is tossed to the side of the room. Matthew gets up unsteadily, but Templar Whittaker remains prone.

Templar Cruise steers the full-body MagiTek armor he's now wearing toward the elevator. A bloodied Rixku-Xephirosth with ash-blasted wings erupts from the shaft on the updrafts of a fountain of flame.

The alarm blares dispirited support.

*"Veni, veni, venias,
Ne me mori facias.*

*Shoot him! Shoot him! Shoot him now!
Shoot him or we're gonna die!"*

Templar Cruise thrusts his armored pants forward, and three rocket propelled grenades launch at Rixku- Xephirosth. A fourth has second thoughts and decides to pursue a career as a dud cowering in its chamber.

The three live grenades are also forced to pursue other career trajectories when they meet the centrifugal force of their target's keyblade katana as he spins it in a circle before him. One hits a wall of the Amicus chamber. The other hits the opposite wall. The last decides to take revenge for being born. It bounces back to hit the Magi-tek armor and explodes in front of it.

The alarm takes a realistic approach to recent developments.

*“Veni, veni, venias,
Ne me mori facias.*

*Oh, who’s kidding?
We’re all gonna die!”*

Rixku-Xephirosth wings it over to Templar Cruise’s incinerated MagiTek armor and slams the keyblade katana through its torso. He wrenches the weapon out and Templar Cruise’s impaled and barely living corpse slides down to the middle of the blade.

“Come, come, O come. You’re Nerviosa,” shrieks Templar Cruise along with the chorus of alarms.

“Let’s cut our losses before the deal’s closed.”

Rixku-Xephirosth speeds toward Matthew and barrels into him at full force. The momentum carries the two past the Amicus in the center of the room.

“He’ll make it quick if he’s generous-oh,” Matthew hears Templar Cruise scream in unison with the alarms.

Rixku-Xephirosth stops short, and Templar Cruise’s waist and legs detach from his torso and zip off the blade with devastating force. The lower half of Templar Cruise slams into Matthew as it flies off the blade and sends him tumbling head over heels to the other side of the room.

Matthew raises his head to see his foe standing over him with the upper half of Templar Cruise still impaled on his katana. He reaches down and tugs at the flying carpet wrapped around Matthew.

“You won’t need this where you’re going,” the dual voices of Rixku and Xephirosth growl. He pulls the Aeon of High Ambition from Matthew with a mighty lurch, and Matthew howls in anguish as every fiber of his being feels the wear and tear of the battle. Rixku-Xephirosth runs the katana through Matthew’s chest right below his right shoulder and raises the blade. Pain demolishes Matthew’s heart as he grips the steel to keep himself from sliding into the corpse of Templar Cruise.

“Come cash out, it’s Gloriosa,” wails Templar Cruise.
“Your death throes will be furiosa.”

Rixku-Xephirosth reaches the Amicus and yanks Matthew off the blade.

“After being left to fend for myself for so long, I ceased wanting you to find me,” the voices of Rixku and Xephirosth lament as the alarms reach their frantic crescendo. ***“But I never***

stopped wanting to find her. I sometimes felt I could hear her voice gently telling a story carried on the wind. I wanted to tell her I was OK. And to know she was, too.

“You ‘Warriors of Light’ were supposed to be there for each other, and you let it all slip away,” the dual voices are venomous with contempt.

“But thank you for writing that lovely piece of literature,” the voices admit. ***“It really did make me see into your heart.”***

Matthew’s old friend dumps him onto the Amicus’s cot and slides him into the MRI tube. Darkness greets Matthew one last time as he hears the alarms fade away.

*“Xephirosth!
Xephirosth!”*

DEALBREAKERS

Personal injury attorney Riku Odinsen wakes from a nightmare of endless deal negotiations to find himself taking a smoke break on a rooftop overlooking Kamurocho with Makoto Makimora.

“I know! It’s crazy, right?” Riku says. “My boss King Louxie wanted me to kill you originally so he gets his hands on the Empty Lot, but now he’s offering the chance to sign away the property to him legally and keep your life.”

“My sight has returned, and I can tell you are being an earnest businessman,” Makoto says, fingering the switchblade on her keychain and the key next to it.

“You can...” he coughs excessively. His throat burns, but, inexplicably, so do his back and torso. He gets the coughing fit under control. “Sorry. You can see now?!”

“Yes,” Makoto says. “I found David, but it was too late. The Dojima family stole his light from him before I arrived.”

“You come all the way to Kamurocho to find your brother, and he dies before your hearts get the chance to connect,” Riku says. “I can only hope I find my friend before tragedy strikes again.”

He stubs out his cigarette.

“Our hearts did connect,” Makoto says. Only Riku can hear another timbre to her voice. Like someone else is speaking through her. “And it gave me clearer sight than ever before. I can see deep into your heart, Riku. I can see the ambitious little boy from the islands who never stops trying to escape his fate.” The other tone to her voice resonates even stronger. “But beyond that, I can see a preternaturally gifted boy from another island who raises the spirits of others. I think you will find your friend again at the door to the light.”

The knife on her keychain lengthens and merges with the key next to it as she fiddles with it.

"Before we can do anything else, we have some business we must take care of," Makoto says.

"What do you need me to do?" Riku asks.

"Not you. There's some business I must take care of," Makoto says.

"Then why did you say 'We'?" Riku says. He's caught by another coughing fit, and his ears ring with the inexplicable sound of alarms.

Makoto's blade has elongated to the length of a sword.

"Wait. Why *did* I say it like that?" she says. She looks down and sees that she now holds a keyblade with a pink handle. "But never mind. I must show Chad Sexman and his executive board the light of justice.

Makoto dives off the building backward. Riku rushes over to the ledge in time to see sparks flare from up where the keyblade scrapes against the building as Makoto slows her descent to the balcony 13 floors below. Riku loses sight of her, but the flash of the electric signage reflecting off her blade catches his eyes as she leaps across the rooftops into the darkness.

Dojima family CEO and former adult film producer Chad Sexman wakes from deliberations on how to synergize the Yakuza's business operations with Kingdom Hearts's market domination functions to find Makoto Makimora has charged into his boardroom.

"Who let her in here?" Chad shouts while adjusting himself.

"I let ourselves in," Makoto yells, ignoring her own grammar error. She levels her keyblade (the Deal Breaker) at the desk where Chad, Clayton, Shadex, Shibusawa, and Replica Kuze are gathered. "The Tachibana family finds your bid for the Empty Lot to be far below the asking price. If you want me to sign away the door to the Heart of All Worlds, you must sweeten your offer with the lives of the three lieutenants who stole David's light from him. The hearts of Shibusawa, Shadex, and Replica Kuze are forfeit."

Chad Sexman feels a twitch in the cavity in his chest where his heart should be. After he first met David Tachibana, he could feel himself being hollowed out into a Nobody of his former self by the potential of new business prospects. Sometimes, he felt he acted unconsciously under the will of some inexplicable higher shareholder. Since David Tachibana's death, he had started to feel more like himself. But Makoto's presence provokes a renewed feeling of emptiness in his heart.

"You're a brave one to stand up to the darkness alone with that little trinket," says Chad Sexman. "You know, we were just going over Kamurocho's historic maps and records. The Empty Lot is not mentioned in any city documents. Why would we pay you anything for it? It doesn't officially exist. And soon, neither will you."

Riku Odinsen barges into the boardroom just in time to hear a gunshot. He sees Clayton's pistol is pointed at Makoto, who falls to the bullet. Her keyblade flies out of her hand. Chad Sexman snatches it from the air.

"Pity," he laments. "She never even got the chance to swing it. But it will unlock our chance to create a new world beholden to the Yakuza and regain our hearts."

LEGITIMATE BUSINESSMAN SIMULATOR 0 x: DEALBREAKERS

Real estate attorney and private equity manager Eziu Soratelli wakes from a nightmare of claustrophobia and pain to find himself sitting down to dinner with Xyanc, the manager of Tachibana's Organization.

"What's with the cane?" Eziu asks.

"A member of the Brotherhood of Assassins and brother to King Louxie of the Shimano Family tried to take me out," Xyanc responds. "But he underestimated the power I yield. I can see I'm not the only one not feeling entirely myself, though. You haven't touched your food."

Eziu clutches his stomach as it lurches, like it's reacting to spasms wracking his body. "I think it's just some bad pizza disagreeing with me," he says. "I got a friend's request wrong and figured I would eat it myself. It's been cooling in the fridge for a couple days. I guess it didn't keep. Why did you call me here?"

"I'm afraid Makoto's been shot. She went to exact vengeance on the Dojima Family but was felled before she got the chance to take her swipe at the executive board in their inner chambers. The bullet spared her heart, but she remains in a catatonic state as she awaits her birth by sleep," Xyanc says.

A cosmic tingle creeps down Eziu's spine. Mental shivers shake him from within as he strives to stay present.

"I... I should have been there," he says, holding his right hand to his head and mussing his hair into spikes as he rubs his left eye.

"She's in my care now, but there's a cost," Xyanc says, the volume of his voice fading as the space behind Eziu's eyes is battered with a popping sensation not dissimilar to when ear drums are punctured.

A memory flashes quickly through his mind. A girl standing in front of a rocky spire grasps a keyblade and steels herself to face the darkness gathering atop the edifice.

"I'm sorry: What was that?" Eziu says.

"There's a cost to everything in the business world," Xyanc repeats.

In a flash, Eziu sees the girl's torso arch forward as she's slashed from behind while hovering next to the spire upon which the darkness gathers.

"Did she call for me when she fell?" Eziu asks.

Xyanc is taken aback. "No... I don't think so. The only bystander there to see it was a bartender from Sotenbori."

"Apologies if I seem distracted," Eziu says while rubbing his temple. "I think I may have just remembered someone else I lost to darkness before I washed up here with no memory."

"I am sure everything will come to light in time," Xyanc says. "The bartender brought Makoto to the hospital, and my Organization came to secrete her away until she's safe."

"And the cost?" Eziu asks.

"In return for protecting her from the Dojima Family and the other rival clans of the Yakuza, Makoto surrenders her claim to the Empty Lot to me," Xyanc says. "As a real estate attorney, I ask that you endorse the upcoming signing of the deed and not interfere."

"I don't ... Ummm.... I don't know if it's the legal thing to do," Eziu says.

"Except this is your chance to save a friend," Xyanc says. "You seem to have already lost one before. Stand with my Organization and protect Makimora and Kingdom Hearts from the darkness."

Another flash flits across Eziu's mind. He sees a silver-haired friend beside him grip a black Keyblade as his own hand raises a keyblade with a golden handle. The two charge toward the spire to face the coming darkness together.

"Where do I sign?" Eziu asks Xyanc as he returns to himself.

As Xyanc is drawing up the paperwork needed for the property transfer, the wall of the restaurant explodes inward. Replica Kuze emerges from the hole.

"So, this is the heart of Tachibana's Organization?" Replica Kuze says. Pathetic. Chad sent me here to eliminate any resistance to the Dojima Family's takeover."

Eziu positions himself in the starting stance for the Rush Himbo technique he developed to get a leg up on competitors during the 5K races he organizes for a fake charity that funnels money to his real estate operations. Replica Kuze charges toward him.

Templar Cruise wakes from a dream of gazing longingly at his poster of 1972 pinup Brahne to find himself still impaled on the edge of a katana and missing his lower body parts. The keyblade katana that has run him through hovers above the Amicus controls, putting him within reaching distance of the buttons and dials.

Rixku-Xephirosth adjusts his bifocals with a couple fingers while grasping an MRI Etch-A-Sketch readout in the free hand not holding the sword.

He squints through the darkness in his heart to understand the readout.

"So, it's him who betrayed the Organization!" Rixku-Xepirosth exclaims.

"I share your hypothesis," Templar Cruise says. "We just need a little more data to confirm it."

"As long as his heart holds out..." Rixku-Xephirosth says.

"Wanna get a report on the fight's blow-by-blows?" Templar Cruise asks.

"Naw, dawg," says Rixku-Xephirosth. **"We've seen this fight, like, thrice before."**

Templar Whittaker stirs unseen behind the two conversants.

A pulverized Replica Kuze lies prone in the rubble as Eziu stands above him.

"Now who's the puppet?" Eziu asks.

"Eziu, I am so proud of you!" Replica Kuze wheezes as his servos and gears start slowing. "You really are a legitimate businessman. The darkness has taken over your heart. You've developed your private equity firm so that it's portfolio is ready to be capitalized on and mercilessly took out your competition while doing so. Your karaoke strikes fear in the heart of the common man. You sold a woman out. You fight like a true Yakuza and bear the heart of one. I never would have imagined it from the spiky-haired dolt who washed up on the shores of Auron's speedboat business."

"But you're too late," he says. "Chad's given Shibusawa the key that will open the door to the Heart of All Worlds, and the first thing we'll do when we unleash the darkness within is eliminate all traces of Auron's line, regardless of whether they are his blood or not."

Xyanc has overheard Replica Kuze's speech.

"We don't have much time," he says. "May our hearts reunite at the door to the Heart of All Worlds." He opens a dark corridor and disappears.

Darkness falls upon the Empty Lot at the heart of Kamurocho as Dojima Family CFO Shibusawa arrives with a horde of Heartless minions. He whips out the Dealbreaker and points the keyblade at the middle of the Empty Lot.

Light gathers at the tip of the blade and shoots into air at the middle of the parcel. A two-story pair of mahogany boardroom doors springs into existence where the light ends. They stand unsupported on thin air. One bears the symbol of the yen. The other bears an emblem of a heart. A keyhole connects them.

As Shibusawa approaches the doors, a mob of Nobodies wearing white drops between him and contort themselves into unworldly shapes to block him and his minions from approaching the entryway. The writhing mass splits to reveal Xyanc in a white business suit and brambled tie.

“A meaningless effort,” Xyanc says. “One who earns nothing can gain nothing.”

“I am not a Nobody like you,” Shibusawa. “I’m just a savvy businessman who came from a humble background and seeks to help the world return to the darkness whence it was born.” He and his minions charge forward and entangle themselves in a brawl with the Nobodies.

As Shibusawa makes his way incrementally toward the door, Xyanc sees two headlights pierce the darkness. As the lights approach, it becomes clear that they are the headlights of a gold-plated Volkswagen beetle with a passenger inside. Desperately, Shibusawa tosses the Dealbreaker at the keyhole as Herbie the autonomous punch buggy barrels into the throng of combatants, scattering them into the air like discontinued merchandise.

As Eziu exits the car and gives its hood a fist bump, a cosmic “CLICK” sound erupts from the ether. He looks up to see the Dealbreaker turn in the lock.

Black & White

Eziu Soratelli and the other combatants stand dumbstruck as the door to the Heart of All Worlds opens inward. A tenebrous aura with the cosmic texture of the filmy surface of an opaque soap bubble squeezes through the gap between the doors. Shibusawa scrabbles atop a mound of entwined Nobodies and stretches out a hand. The Dealbreaker disappears from the lock and reappears in his. He throws it at the looming miasma, and it bursts noiselessly but powerfully outward as the Dealbreaker zooms back into Shibusawa’s hand.

The force of the explosion blows four-fifths of the combatants into the sky and out of the Empty Lot and coats the open doors with a sheen of darkness. The coating swells, and the doorway in its entirety grows taller and wider. It creeps up on the alleyways connecting the Empty Lot to the main thoroughways of Kamurocho and stretches to the 13th floor of nearby skyscrapers.

The doorway engulfs Eziu and the chaotic mob without warning. He can feel himself propelled through a dark liminal space and closes his eyes. The sound of waves lapping against a shore forces his eyes and heart open.

Eziu Soratelli finds himself on a shore of black rock looking out on a vast and sparkling sea. An arch of the same black rock stretches high above the shore line. A heart-shaped sun in mid-ascent brightens the horizon. Upon the horizon rests the silhouette of a lone mountain with a coiled peak. Eziu raises his head further and realizes the glittering lights in the ocean are reflections of the stars overhead as they fade away in the dawn.

Islets jut from the empty sea here and there. Each erupts into a mountain or hill. A collection of doors stands rooted to the ground of each isle. They are otherwise unsupported and unattached to any building. Each door bears an emblem, but each isle appears to be populated with doors that match the nature of the island. Where the sea meets their shores, the terrain changes to expand their unique biomes.

One islet is topped by a snowy peak on which stands a frosty, perfect giantess who sculpts art from ice. The ocean water forms an ice floe where it meets the land. The island hosts a door with a snowflake on it. The one next to it bears the emblem of a Christmas Tree. A third bears the silhouette of a faun. They spiral upwards toward the peak, where the giantess turns her head at the intruders and glares malevolently.

Steam erupts where the ocean meets the shore of the islet on the opposite side of the ocean from the chilly isle. Here, volcanic rock erupts where the water meets the land and rises into a mountain topped a roiling caldera. A horned giant with a red mane roars his fury to the heavens and stirs the lava like a soup, rivulets of it spilling out of the sides. Eziu can see a door with the symbol of a surfboard next to one with the symbol of a giant robot. An eroding, desertified outcrop on the leeward side hosts a doors with the silhouette of a lamp on it. The bestial muzzle of the horned giant breaks into a sneer at the sight of the intruders.

“This is what my father Jafar sacrificed his heart to attain...” Shibusawa exclaims in wonder before being interrupted.

A sound like a heartbeat concusses the landscape. The sun expands outward, and a wave rises on the horizon. Some of the doors on the many islands peppering the sea open, while some others merely rattle. The essence of each island enters the open doors, and the open doors release the hearts of the world onto which it opens into Kingdom Hearts. Here, they are absorbed into the ecosystem and maintain its pulse.

Another concussion, and the sun contracts to its original size. The open doors shut, others open, and the wave rolls forward. Eziu can see flashes of doors rising from the ocean floor in its crest before they submerge again. He catches sight of emblems of shark fins, tritons, and a sunken city.

Behind him, Eziu sees through the door frame that the neon lights of Kamurocho have started to seep into Kingdom Hearts. So has the noise of the karaoke singers and the pop music of the discos. Their intrusion seems to irritate and distract the creatures guarding the isles. It's probably the only thing keeping him alive

Shibusawa launches himself from the mound and alights on the arch of rock.

"Aeons!" he shouts. "Calm yourselves. I wield the key to Kingdom Hearts and claim this property in the name of the Dojima Family."

The approaching wave crashes into the shore below the arch with a thunderous hiss that fails to dissipate when its foam does. The hiss is coming from the horizon. A triangular head emerges from the top of the mountain on the horizon, and the mountain uncoils itself to drop in strands into the darkening waters below. A larger wave approaches the shore on which Eziú stands as the crest of the Aeon's head slices through the waves.

Personal injury attorney Riku Odinsen wakes drenched in the cold sweat that heralds a deal announcement to find an otherworldly light seep through the bubble wrap curtains of his luxurious industrial cardboard accommodations in Kamurocho.

He rushes out of his overpriced lodgings to be greeted by the sight of a giant doorway rising in competition with the skyscrapers downtown. Strangely, he is the only one to notice this. The average businessman or woman on the street goes about their everyday business as if a thin portal providing a glimpse at the ethereal plane has become so commonplace as to be unremarkable. Or perhaps their hearts are so clouded by shadow that its light cannot penetrate the darkness of their existence.

Riku runs to a nearby alleyway to get a clearer view. From the distance of 13 blocks away, he sees the doorway swell to swallow a throng of tussling silhouettes in a flash. He blinks the spots from his eyes and sees a beautiful archipelago appear in the doorframe. The combatants are obscured by the shadow of a giant arch on the shore that's appeared on the other side of the door.

"That must be Kingdom Hearts!" He thinks. "Did I catch the glimpse of spiked hair?" "Hmm.... Maybe I should investigate." But then his heart tugs at him. "No. It was a trick of the light. I must think like a legitimate business executive. It's the perfect time for a corporate raid of the Dojima Family offices to get revenge for what they did to Makoto. If I cut out the heart of their operations, the Yakuza will retreat."

Riku's corporate restructuring strategy allows him to economically purge the lower floors of the Dojima Family offices of its redundant Heartless middle managers. He breaks through the glass ceiling into the 26th floor, where Shadex, Master of the Hard Sell, greets him respectfully in the executive sauna. A giant window looks out on the cityscape of Kamurocho and the ethereal doorway that now casts its light on the darkness.

"Isn't it beautiful?" the lieutenant who would be lord of the Yakuza Underworld says. He lights a cigar with the flick of his thumb. "Mmph." He grunts in satisfaction while taking a drag. He exhales smoke in the shape of an χ . "I've been stuck in the Yakuza Underworld for so long that I

had become a Nobody; just a shell of my former self. But now, I can feel the essence of Kingdom Hearts deep in my chest. It feels like my heart has started beating again.

"I can't believe you traditional types," he jabbars feverishly. "We throw everything we have at you, and you still manage to clean house. Never ceases to amaze me.

"But the time has come to put aside our old ways and embrace new business deals," he stretches his arms outwards to embrace the sight outside the window. "Gone are the days when the Yakuza were the friendly neighborhood protection racket. The urban Japanese community accepted us as a necessary part of the local scene. We were there when local businesses and families needed us, and when they didn't, they ignored us and treated us like the common folk. Like we didn't even exist.

"No more. Today, we join the executive class. We will take down the Gods of Industry and become Titans ourselves," he rants. As he does so, the light from Kingdom Hearts coats his body with a glistening sheen.

"The banks will flock to our Heartless thugs as the new debt collection officers and contract security detail," he sheds his jacket to reveal a tattooed back gleaming with sweat. "Customers' hearts will forever long for Yakuza-owned products. The Dojima family's takeover of the Toho clan, Kamurocho and Kingdom Hearts will give us access to the resources needed to control the market for everything from cars to pachinko machines to housing, and we will be the gods of a new world."

Smoke starts to rise from his body.

"But you do not have to be left behind," he tells Riku. "You can also enjoy the good life. What do you say? We wheel, we deal, we Intimidate, we carry on, we go home happy."

"Not everyone will fall for your monopoly, no," Riku says. "I turned to darkness because my heart and business acumen were weak. I hate that weakness. And seeing huckster entrepreneurs like you embrace short-term business schemes with unknown and unsustainable costs just makes it worse."

The light of Kingdom Hearts casts Shadex aflame. He raises both fists to throw fireballs at his foe. Riku summons The Auditor in readiness.

Suddenly, a hole appears in Shadex's head, and he falls and dissipates into motes. Riku turns to the door to the sauna, where Clayton stands with his rifle raised. Chad Sexman appears beside him. "He would have made a good Head of Marketing," he says. "If only he had learned better management tactics." He turns to Clayton. "Take care of this little out-of-control audit for me." He leaves, and Riku returns Clayton's glower.

LEGITIMATE BUSINESSMAN SIMULATOR 0 χ: Conflicts of Interest

“Shibusawa! Stop!” Eziu Soratelli calls out as the tidal wave approaches the shore of Kingdom Hearts. “The deal being offered to you is too far outside your budget!”

It’s too late. The wave breaks upon the arch, but Shibusawa manages to stand his ground. The ocean spray clears to reveal a serpentine body unfurling from the tides. The leviathan stretches up to the sky, its body ending in a beaked- reptilian maw splitting a head crowned with rainbow fins. The Aeon of the Ocean and Volatility glares at the shore. It bends its neck down upon its coiled length and flicks the air in front of Shibusawa with its tongue as the yakuza stands still. It wrenches away and spreads two wings from its back as it samples the essence of his heart.

“The leviathan at the gate has tasted of Shibusawa’s bid and found it lacking!” Xyanc calls. Eziu readies the Return-on-Investment as strains of “*Apocalypsis Noctis*” performed by a Yanki band penetrate the air from the other side of the door to Kingdom Hearts.

“*Caelum, Terra, aversione,*” the singers chant as the leviathan rears up to the heavens. It shrieks and lunges at Shibusawa. “*Magna, Parvus, reversusque. Fortis ductor, praecipio. Quod ligabis lucem vocis.*”

Shibusawa stoically leaps to the side. The leviathan’s bared fangs pierce the rock upon which Shibusawa stood and stick there as the sea serpent seeks to free itself.

“*Cum omnibus lucis plenus, Apocalypse finibus,*” rings through the atmosphere as the Heartless mob serving the Dojima Family launch themselves at the wyrm. They land on its scales and cling there as it shakes itself free from the rock of the arch. Its tail erupts from the surf and knots itself around the arch as the serpent extends its upper half into the heavens, the majority of its mass coiled in a labyrinth of lumps between the shore and the sea.

“*Victum unus qui comedit hic vitae omnia: tenebris,*” the chorus cries.

Shibusawa leaps onto a coil in the middle of the writhing serpent-scape and scrabbles up the next one on a path to make a strike at the wyrm’s heart.

“*Malum incarnatus surgit,*” the chorus sings. Eziu leaps behind his foe and runs up the coils in pursuit. “*Adducentes secum mortem,*” the prayers warns.

Eziu catches up to Shibusawa as the latter crests the serpent’s hills and prepares to launch himself onto the wyrm’s upper reaches, where the Heartless thugs hang in clumps. “*Para!*” the voices exclaim as the Dealbreaker and the Return-on-Investment meet in battle. They repeat the word as neither keyblade wielder gains an advantage

“*Para!*” Shibusawa strikes, and Eziu parries. “*Parrra!*” Eziu strikes back. “*Parrrrraaaaa!!!*” competes with the ring of their blades as their clash splits the air and the reflection of Kingdom Hearts off their weapons casts a blinding light into the atmosphere.

Shibusawa uses the distraction to make his leap upward and lands on a curve of the leviathan’s belly. The Heartless move between him and Eziu to impede his pursuer’s progress.

“Fortis Rex, Bellator,” the singers cheer as Ezio speeds forward. He swings his keyblade without breaking stride when he meets the horde of Heartless thugs.

“In manus gladio.” the chorus cries as Ezio carves a path through the clumps of darkness, swinging his blade in time with the chant.

“Bellum in virtute” the singers bellow. As the Heartless close in from the serpentine curves above him Ezio shoves them aside, pitching them into the roiling sea.

“Victum quod hostibus!” the Yanki band calls in approval.

The leviathan swings its upper body in a circle furiously, the waters of the sea rising violently as it does. Shibusawa desperately sticks the Dealbreaker into the wyrm far below his target and grasps it as the leviathan’s throes threaten to dislodge him.

“Magis mortem venit primum,” the singers wail. Ezio also pierces the leviathan a few feet below his foe. *“Quod est quidam venire.”* The leviathan lowers its head until it is horizontal to where Shibusawa and Ezio hang helplessly. It rears its head back for a deadly lunge as a wall of water as tall as the serpent approaches to flood the city on the other side of the door to Kingdom Hearts.

Suddenly, Ezio spots a golden blur on the shore and smells burning rubber.

“Para omnes! Para omnes! Para omnes,” blares from the stereo of the gold-plated autonomous Volkswagen punch buggy as it races up the arch of rock.

“HERBIE! NOOO!!!!” Ezio shouts as the car launches from the middle of the arch.

“Nunc est tempus!” the singers shriek as Herbie soars through the sky and into the side of the leviathan’s temple, exploding on impact. The leviathan reels its blackened head and neck backward as the wave starts to harmlessly cave in upon itself before it reaches the beach. The horizontal plane now created by the wyrm’s backward arched body gives Ezio a chance to plant his feet on its scales and wrench his keyblade loose.

“Haec est locus,” the song rings out as Ezio sprints toward Shibusawa. Before his foe can regain his composure, Ezio summons Beast Mode, grabs him with one hand and tosses Shibusawa off the wyrm. Shibusawa plummets to the shore far below.

Ezio frees the Dealbreaker from the wyrm’s scales and races along the leviathan’s length with it in one hand the Return On-Investment in the other. A bend in the wyrm pops up in front of Ezio as the leviathan lurches its head up above him to shriek in pain. Ezio propels himself from the lump to soar high above the creature’s upturned beak.

“Omne tandem ex nobis unum!” heralds his descent as he angles the keyblades downward. *“Ubi nos obstandum!”* the singers cry.

Eziu steers his plummet towards the leviathan's crown and carves an X into its face as he falls faster than the serpent can strike.

"OMNEEES!" the singers climax while Eziu lands in the sand next to Shibusawa's prone body while the leviathan sinks into the sea to lick its wounds.

"Do it," whispers a motionless Shibusawa as his body starts to dissipate into motes of darkness. "End it here before I come back as a Nobody. I framed you for that debtor's murder to soil your adopted father Auron's reputation and create a power vacuum I could slip into without putting in the work of an established yakuza family member. I was a fool to think that I, the lowly son of a fallen politician, could rise to the ranks of the executive class without consequence. Do it. It's your legacy!"

"What do you mean?" Eziu says.

"Don't you know? Auron rose to power on a mountain of bodies," Shibusawa says, chuckling weakly. "He tainted his heart with murder to protect you from enemies from your forgotten past and build his empire."

"You mean the man who taught me to beat people within an inch of their lives, ruled over an organized crime family with an iron fist and kept a collection of deadly weapons for me to train with killed people professionally to gain power?!" Eziu gasps.

Eziu raises both fists and cries out to the heavens. "SAY IT AIN'T SO! SAY IT AIN'T SOOOOOO!!!!?????!!!"

"If this be my inheritance..." Eziu says resignedly. He grasps the Return-On-Investment's golden handle in both hands and holds it over Shibusawa's chest.

"DO IT!" screams Shibusawa. "You know it's true. EMBRACE THE DARKNESS!"

Eziu starts to bring the blade down but stops before the tip pierces the business shirt covering Shibusawa's chest and heart.

"No," Eziu closes his eyes and frowns. "Herbie wouldn't have wanted me to end it like this. My heart may be weak. And sometimes it may even give in to an aggressive investment strategy. But it has brought in revenue with each new experience thanks to the business advice of all the friends I've made." He remembers David Tachibana's apparent brutal demise. "And if I think of them now and then and start a trust fund in their memory while skimming a management fee off the top every year, then my heart will remain pure. I don't need to kill in cold blood with my own two hands: Just exploit, manipulate, and murder by proxy and neglect and in the name of self-defense. Your counter-offer is invalid. I know now better than ever: My friends are my power!"

He walks toward the door separating Kingdom Hearts and Kamurocho, pausing one last time when he hears Shibusawa's voice.

“Coward!” Shibusawa grunts. “We’ll meet again.”

Eziu crosses the threshold, failing to notice that the darkness that has now coated the inner door shines intermittently with flashes of unnatural neon light from the streets of Kamurocho. As he turns toward the doorway, he doesn’t see the darkness and false light leak into Kingdom Hearts and split the air in erratic slashes of black and white at the edges of the doorframe, subtly infecting the landscape. Nor does he hear the pop music of the disoes turn thunderous and portentous as it crosses into Kingdom Hearts, the prelude to a cacophony that threatens to rend the fabric of the Heart of All Worlds in ‘twain. From the Kamurocho side of the doorway, the shore is muted and the brief flash that catches Eziu’s eye is justified as the glitter of the stars on the water.

Operating on instinct that comes from a forgotten past life, Eziu points the Dealbreaker and the Return-on-Investment at the doorway. A beam of light shoots at the portal, and the doors swing shut before Eziu can catch a glimpse of the Aeons of Fire and Ice clasping their heads in pain and confusion. The doorframe disappears into nothingness with an ethereal “CLICK”.

The Dealbreaker vanishes from Eziu’s hand, summoned to places unknown.

“We’ll find it again when it’s time,” Xyanc says. “The paperwork is waiting. Are you prepared to use your power of attorney to sign over Makoto’s right to the land and prevent this from happening again?”

“My heart is set on it,” Eziu agrees.

Riku Odinsen braces himself as the master assassin Clayton tosses his rifle to the side and manifests a Sterling submachine gun from the darkness of his suave hunting coat. Riku dives out the 26th story window looking out onto Kamurocho and pierces the facade of the Dojima Family offices with his keyblade. He swings through the glass window of the lightless merchandising section on the floor below. Inside stand the silhouettes of plush memorabilia commemorating infamous executives of the Dojima Family and celebrity investors who have lost their hearts to darkness.

While Riku wanders the room in search of a light switch, weak illumination from the door to Kingdom Hearts makes the room navigable. He passes the silent figure of a man with a hook for a hand when he hears a noise to the side. A stuffed crocodile appears to be trembling. Riku swiftly swings The Auditor and decapitates it.

Clayton erupts from within the crocodile, leaping into the air from the neck-hole. Riku thrusts his keyblade upward and it impales Clayton’s right palm just above the wrist. He drops the Sterling from the hand and staggers backward, knocking over a stuffed cheetah frozen in mid-leap.

A “shing” sound pierces the darkness as an assassin’s blade emerges from the left sleeve of Clayton’s hunting jacket, strapped to the wrist. Clayton closes the distance between himself and Riku, slashing wildly. Riku parries the strikes repeatedly, but Clayton presses the advantage.

Riku stumbles to the door leading out of the merchandising department, and Clayton leaps in for the kill. The force of the colliding combatants causes the door to open onto the executive fluffing chambers, where Chad Sexman is sweatily zipping up his pants. Riku falls backward to the floor as the door between departments remains open.

A prone Riku slams his feet into Clayton’s stomach as Clayton lunges over him with the assassin’s blades aimed at Riku’s eyes. Riku pushes up from the floor and capitalizes on Clayton’s propulsive speed and the strength of his heart to extend the arc of Clayton’s leap using his feet as a brace. Clayton’s momentum carries him past Riku’s face and ends his lunge in a tumble that ends with him facing upwards on the floor.

Riku’s leaping silhouette is framed against the disappearing light fading behind the merchandising department’s broken window as the door to the Heart of All World’s closes. He lands on Clayton’s chest, pinning Clayton’s wrists with his knees. He pummels Clayton’s face to a pulp with both fists and then looks up at the deflated and flaccid Chad Sexman.

“You’re next!” Riku shouts. He raises The Auditor and prepares to pierce Clayton’s dapper cravat.

“Stop!” a voice calls out from the corner of the chamber. Xyanc steps out of a dark corridor and adjusts his brambled business tie. “We can still capitalize on Clayton’s assassination skills. You’re part of the same college fraternity. A little compassion can bring in a dramatic increase in revenue.”

“Makoto will never be safe as long as his heart beats!” Riku shouts.

“She’s already immune to harm,” Xyanc says. “Makoto just awakened from her coma and signed the Empty Lot over to me. She now has the full protection of my Organization, and the transfer of The Empty Lot into my hands. The Kamurocho redevelopment project and Kingdom Hearts are beyond the Dojima Family’s grasp.”

“I can’t believe it!” Chad Sexman says dejectedly and clutches his groin in shame. “All this effort over nothing.”

“You USED me!” Riku snarls. “You engage in shady business practices, you pay the cost!” He raises The Auditor over Clayton’s head.

“What happens when Makoto learns you killed in her name?” Xyanc says. “Death soils relationships. It casts a shadow over everything. Your life as a yakuza has already put your heart at risk.. Makoto may never forgive you for delivering The Empty Lot into our hands, but committing cold-blooded murder on her behalf would stain her very existence with the power of darkness. You’ve lost your heart to darkness before. Would you wish that on anyone else?.”

Riku rises to his feet.

“I promised my friends and myself I would never again surrender to the darkness,” Riku admits. “I know in my heart that what you say is true. Take him and put him in the darkest pit you can find.”

Xyanc nods in respect and tosses him a gun. “Send King Louxie this message: Answer to me or suffer the darkest consequences.”

He turns to Chad Sexman. “You owe me a debt. Your existence is forfeit.”

Insider Information

“So then I told him: ‘Send King Louxie this message: Answer to me or suffer the darkest consequences’,” Xyanc tells Eziu Soratelli while reclining at his seat at the desk of the interim CEO of the Tojo clan.

It’s January 1989, one month after the end of the yakuza turf war.

“Dude! That’s so cool!” Eziu Soratelli says. “That’s why the Shimano family put down the head of the Omi Alliance?”

“And discontinued its effort to buy the Empty Lot. Yes.” Xyanc says and lifts his tea cup from the back of Chad Sexman, who is crouched on all fours by the nearest leg of the desk. “Good boy!” Xyanc says.

“Makoto’s really safe?” Eziu asks.

“Her coma seems to have triggered an identity crisis and memory lapse,” Xyanc says. “She recalls none of what happened after good ole’ boy here’s pet assassin shot her, only that she signed the Empty Lot over to me and must abide by the law of no take-backs. But she will live out the rest of her days as an everyday businesswoman in Kamurocho under my protection.”

Xyanc turns to a glass display cabinet behind him. It holds a scroll of paper and a black stone slate inscribed in a foreign language.

“With the deed to the Empty Lot now in my name and the Black Slate of Punakha Dzhong in my possession, I can now deny any legal claims to the property and block all assertions that the Tachibana family has a claim to the throne of Bhutan and the resources to carve their own road to Kingdom Hearts,” Xyanc says. “If the Dealbreaker is ever recovered, my Organization will control Kingdom Hearts as well as the Kamurocho Revitalization Project.”

“And you used the Empty Lot as leverage to take control of the Tojo Clan?” Eziu asks.

“That’s correct,” Xyanc says. “Our HR department tells me you’ve elected to return to the Dojima Family. Why be a low-level yakuza attorney when I could offer you a retainer?”

“I’ve been having these weird thoughts lately,” Eziu says. “Pieces of my past have been resurfacing in my heart. I want to line them up so they make sense. I visited my adopted father Auron in prison to find out what he knows, but he only told me that his heart’s desire was to see me pursue a simple life as a legitimate businessman. I need to follow my own path to profit, and my heart tells me the only way to do that is to restructure the Dojima Family from within so that I may exploit it.”

“I must confess: I believe the bartender I’ve told you about and who had a hand in the destabilization of the Dojima family is one of your lost friends.” Xyanc says. “Do you recall the name Riku Odinsen?”

“No,” Eziu says. His heart and head pound. And then. “Yes.... I think so. ...The first name at least.”

“Then your friend is the bartender,” Xyanc says. “But I’m afraid I don’t know where he is now.”

“I vowed to always remember my lost friends,” Eziu says. The image of an apparently dead David Tachibana being laid to rest flashes across Eziu’s heart.

“I think I know where to start my search,” Eziu tells Xyanc.

Accounting Errors

Personal injury attorney Riku Odinsen prowls the streets of Kamurocho with a passport in his pocket. For showing true strength of heart, King Louxie gave him a promotion, his own band of enforcers, and permission to expand the Shimano Family’s operations to whole new worlds of business and find a way out from under the thumb of the newly restructured Tojo clan.

He comes upon Brother Yensid and shares a sea salt ice cream with him.

“I finally get to leave Japan. I’m gonna have more fun than any of my friends still stuck in this crazy country,” he tells Yensid.

“Just remember what our fellowship taught you,” Yensid says

“Nothing is forbidden, every law has a loophole,” they recite together.

Riku leaves his fellow fraternity member to succumb to the darkness in his heart.

Riku is walking down Kamurocho’s main drag when he hears a scream. Two Nobodies in his employ are threatening a lone businesswoman. He whips out The Auditor and quickly hands them their pink slips for their shameful business ethics. The businesswoman lifts her head. It’s Makoto Makimora. Their eyes meet, but Makoto’s face fails to show any sign of recognition.

“Makoto, are you OK?” Riku asks.

“Who are you and how do you know that name?” she asks.

“You don’t remember me?” he asks.

“We’ve never met, but I can see the light in your heart battles with darkness!” she screams.
“Stay away from me!”

She runs away.

Riku finds her in the Empty Lot, staring at the ground.

“I’m sorry!” she says. “I was in a coma and am having trouble recovering my memory. The doctors say I lost days of my life due to the trauma of a bullet injury and the death of my brother and that my name’s Makoto. But I feel like someone else and that more was stolen from me than my brother. Give me a moment of peace, please. “

Riku walks to the alley entrance and takes a cig break. He exhales. The expelled smoke obscures a figure crossing the street toward the entrance to the lot. The smoke makes the man briefly appear to have spiky hair.

He does a double-take as the man in a tasteful white business suit approaches, and his heart pounds in recognition.

Riku calls out the man’s true name, the clamor of passing commercial vehicles drowning out the word to all but the two forgotten friends. The other man reaches the patch of sidewalk on which Riku stands.

“I’m sorry. Do I know you?” says Eziu Soratelli.

“You mean you don’t recognize me?” Riku asks. “Come on, man, I know your heart is stronger than that. It drew you to this corner for a reason.”

“Remember when we looked out at the ocean together and dreamt of traveling to other worlds? Remember **her**? She’s OK. Her heart has healed. She asked me to find you. You don’t have to look for her any more. She’s waiting for you on the beach at home.”

A cosmic tremor shakes Eziu from the head to the heart as he recalls sitting on a bend in a crooked starfruit tree and sharing its bounty with a girl whose name escapes the tip of his tongue. But what he does catch is the true nature of the heart of the old friend who so yearned to leave their home to journey to other worlds.

“Riku?!” Eziu says. “You’re older! You look completely different. How long has it been? What happened to your eye?”

“College and secret societies change you!” Riku says. “Your wanderings are over, old friend.” He puts a hand on Eziu’s shoulder.

Makoto walks out of the alleyway, and stands frozen in shock when she sees the two.

“YOU!” she says, staring at Eziu. She sounds different. Harder. A tinge of a man’s voice creeps in to the edge of her tone. “We remember now. It was YOU who allowed the Empty Lot to be stolen from us. You presided over the signing away of the Tachibana inheritance. Xyanc, the new interim CEO of the Tojo Clan, now has the deed AND the Black Slate of Punakha Dzhong that the Tojo Clan already stole from us centuries ago. That was the last piece of documentation we needed to reclaim our inheritance in Bhutan. ”

“YOU DID....WHAT?!” Riku shouts. “You’ve been profiting off new friends while I’ve been struggling to control the darkness in my heart?! Do you know how much money I could have made? And now I find you here failing another woman while the soulmate you swore to protect pines her heart away. “

He summons The Auditor and swings it at his old friend.

“Riku, No!” Eziu says and blocks The Auditor with the Return-on-Investment. “I am who I am because of my old friends. My heart was broken by my failure to prevent what happened to her. That’s why I couldn’t come home until I found her again. I thought she was lost. But I realize now that my heart never forgot her. That’s why I traded the Empty Lot away. I saw another woman in need of protection!”

“YOUR HEARTS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE BOUND TO EACH OTHER, BUT YOU WERE HERE SLACKING OFF AND VACATIONING ON OTHER WORLDS LIKE YOU ALWAYS DREAMED WHILE SHE WAS AWAITING HER BIRTH BY SLEEP WITHOUT YOU!” Riku shouts. **“YOU FAILED ALL YOUR FRIENDS!”**

Riku swings again and Eziu raises his blade. The Auditor collides with metal, but not Eziu’s keyblade. Instead, his blade has struck The Dealbreaker. Makoto holds it as she stands between the two keyblade wielders and faces The Empty Lot.

“Both of you failed to protect this vessel and my inheritance!” a voice that sounds nothing like Makoto. She grabs the Return-On-Investment’s blade and pulls it toward her, then touches it to the opposite edge of the Dealbreaker.

“And now,” the voice rings out. “Light and darkness meet, and the final battle begins!” A light emanates from where the three keyblades meet and streams into the alleyway to the Empty Lot. The entrance to Kingdom Hearts appears once more. Only this time, the doors are weathered. One is faded white. The other is ebony.

“DAVID?!” Eziu shouts, recognizing the voice coming from Makoto’s mouth. The woman backflips away from the two. The figure bows and throws the Dealbreaker at the entrance’s keyhole and sticks there, turning.

“It is I,” the voice says, and the doors slowly creak open as the Dealbreaker reappears in Makoto’s hand. “I was lost to the darkness for so long, but my heart took shelter in my sister’s

body and now is strong enough to gain control. Once I take control of Kingdom Hearts, I can be fully reborn as my old self and regain my inheritance. And then I will right the wrongs that you have wrought!”

The entryway expands and engulfs the three, thrusting them into a nearly unrecognizable Kingdom Hearts.

Eziu and Riku wake from a dream of fairweather friendship to find themselves standing on the remains of a disintegrating beach looking out onto Kingdom Hearts. In fact, the nature of everything around them is disintegrating as chaos rends the scenery asunder. The sights, sounds, and emotions of the 1980s that leaked into the Heart of All Worlds during the Yakuza Turf War of 1988 have taken root in the alien environment and are now tearing it apart in something akin to a coke-fueled party hosted by the new barrage of stimuli that has just entered the domain along with the keyblade wielders.

Ethereal slashes of black and white rip apart everything from the shoreline to the air in front of the Keyblade wielders’ faces. The ebony arch over the beach has lost its legs, and its apex now hangs suspended in the air. The body of Makoto Makimora now possessed by her brother David Xanatos Tachibana holds the Dealbreaker as it stands atop the arch and looks at a sky turned the navy blue of evening twilight. The sun has turned into a heart-shaped moon floating stagnantly in the darkening sky. The landscape and all of its inhabitants are condemned to a monotonous palette of black and white.

The sea beyond the shore has turned into a raging white whirlpool thrashed into an infinite momentum by the writhing black silhouette of a submerged serpentine leviathan. The currents of the tunnel of water shifts the elements of the domains of the Aeons of Fire and Ice erratically. Icebergs detach from the islet of the coldly beautiful giantess who serves as the Aeon of Ice and smashes into the Aon of Fire’s terrain. The volcano atop the Aeon of Fire’s island erupts and sets the Aeon of Ice’s natty dreads alight. The colossal, horned and bestial Aeon of Fire moves to put out the flames and howls as her freezing flesh leaches the warmth from his essence and saps his strength until he’s left kneeling .

Moving lesions of alternating dots and dashes of black and white mar the Aeons/ bodies, and they scream as their outlines and facial features blurs and solidify; blur and solidify. Beyond the lip of the whirlpool and on the sea’s horizon, a castle with a tall tower decorated with stained glass windows seems to move toward the shore of its own accord.

Makoto’s body also blurs as the white specter of David Tachibana tries to detach from it, stretching ghostly tethers as far they can go. Makoto turns her head to the keyblade wielders in the moment of reprieve: “Whatever happens, do not let my brother retire in the Chamber of Waking.” With a snap, the tethers retract and pull David’s heart back into Makoto’s body.

“So that’s where the Chamber of Waking is, hmm?” David says. “Here in Kingdom Hearts I can finally hear the whisper of the Master of Masters ring out in the abyss beyond the stars of many

worlds like our ancestor did when he formulated his plans centuries ago,” David Tachibana says. “It empowers me and affirms what we all know in our hearts to be true: All worlds begin in darkness and so all must end.”

The figure raises its hand in an open palm.

“I will unleash that darkness upon all the worlds, and all feelings of hope and security within them will be snuffed out. I will overwhelm them with assaults of armies of Nobodies and Heartless. For it is in darkness that new worlds are born.”

Tachibana sweeps the hand across the horizon and a single star starts to falter. It plummets into the sea. A door with the emblem of a trident on it winks out of existence.

“But even in the deepest darkness there shines a light that will never go out,” he says. “The new worlds will need an experienced real estate executive to stand up and lead their redevelopment. Someone strong, to stop competing businesses from polluting the worlds with their meaningless choices.”

“I am that executive,” David Tachibana says. “Tachibana Real Estate will build new homes where the people can be safe from every risk the darkness poses.”

Makoto’s outline blurs and disappears. It reappears between Eziú and Riku.

“But **you** will not be approved for a mortgage,” the puppetmaster tells Eziú and swings the Dealbreaker at him. Eziú swings back, but Makoto disappears again before his blow lands. Instead, the Return-on-Investment clashes against the Auditor. Riku sneers behind the parry.

“You always were an impetuous little blockhead,” he says and strikes back.

With his epilepsy under control, Riku flips on his head and spins toward Eziú, his legs wheeling about wildly to try and knock the Return-Investment from his grasp. The whirlpool whirls faster and faster as he spins. Eziú holds steady and strikes at his ankles with the flat of his blade.

Eziú summons Beast Mode and charges at Riku with his blade pointed at Riku’s chest. The coast of the Aeon of Fire’s domain rises upward as if conducted by rapid tectonic movement and rises above the shore of the Aeon of Ice’s domain before slamming down upon it. Riku parries with a downward thrust. The teeth of the Return-on-Investment’s blade catch in The Auditor’s.

“**Riku, stop!**” Eziú shouts. “Can’t you see we’re making things worse?”

The two Keyblade wielders hear a giant “CLANG!” above them. They look up and see that the stained glass windows of the tower that had appeared on the horizon now looms above them. The Aeon has jumped across the whirlpool and landed with the inverted towers that serve as its front legs on the remains of the arch while its back legs steady it on the shore. From here, the keyblade wielders can identify the seven Princesses of Heart depicted on its windows,

“Oh, Alexander, Aeon of holiness and Righteousness, accept this vessel as a sacrifice so that I may be reborn,” David’s voice shouts from Makoto’s lips. “Open the Chamber of Waking unto me so that I may enjoy my birth by sleep and awake in a new body that may tap into the power at the center of the Heart of All Worlds.”

The Aeon’s towered head glares at Makoto’s body, and the battlements and fortifications making up its torso bristle. A titanic cannon muzzle erupts from each shoulder. Eziú whirls his blade around to loosen it from the Auditor’s teeth.

He pushes Riku to the side just as the Aeon unleashes twin rays of divine light directed at the arch. The light disintegrates the remains of the arch and carves twin furrows from the beach into the street beyond the Door to Kingdom Hearts.

The shell of Makoto appears on the tower’s balcony and places a hand on the tower’s facade.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to find my own entrance!” Eziú hears. A dark corridor opens up where Makoto’s hand meets the wall, and the vessel slips inside. The darkness closes up behind it.

The Aeon turns to the two remaining Keyblade wielders, and its guns hum in readiness.

Riku raises a hand, black tendrils rising from his fingertips.

“Riku, no!” Eziú gasps.

“It’s the only way!” Riku says. “I must embrace the darkness!”

He snaps his fingers as the iris of his remaining eye turns a dark amber color.

A dark corridor opens up and engulfs the two keyblade wielders just as dual rays of divine light evaporates the sand on which they stood.

Eziú opens his eyes and finds himself in a circular white chamber decorated with stained glass windows. Seventeen coffins line the floor. The longest sits in the center and is topped by a lid on which lays the statue of a man in repose clasping a katana, one wing draped across his chest. Three suits of armor stand on a pedestal facing each other on the far wall, their hands folded on the hilts of keyblades pointed toward the floor. On a plinth in the middle of the pedestal rests an open book with a heart on its cover. Makoto’s body leans over it.

“Here it is: I knew the Book of Prophecies would hold the key!” David’s voice recites: “On that fated lot, a great war shall transpire. Darkness will prevail and the light expire! Open now the coffin deep, accept this vessel for birth by sleep. And as I slumber wake the guard, the One-Winged Aeon with the mighty sword.”

The lid of one of the smaller coffins starts to slowly slide to the side while a bell tolls high in the chamber’s upper reaches. A feather falls on the coffin of the one-winged man.

“Not so fast, David!” Eziú shouts. “I won’t let you do this.”

“But will you?” Makoto appears at Riku’s side and whispers in his ear.

“Your friends may let you down, but the darkness will always be here for you” David’s voice says. You reek of it. Come! Take my side and be my legal representation in the new world we shall create together.”

“The profits I could make...” Riku says vacuously. Makoto raises her hand, and Riku raises his like a puppet. They make a downward slash in unison, and Eziyu is smashed backward by an ethereal slice of darkness. He flies backward and hits the plinth.

Makoto’s body disappears from Riku’s side and reappears on the plinth. “The profits and the power to protect those you hold dear. Think of how safe your friend back home would be if she had her own little world shielded by darkness to protect her from all harm. Including those whose hearts are led astray by light.”

She sticks the keyblade in Eziyu’s shoulder and raises it with Eziyu on its end. She reappears with a foot on the rim of the smaller coffin, its lid having slid off.

Riku shows no emotion.

“A proper and prosperous ending at last!” Riku says. “Everything my heart desires.”

He lifts the Auditor for a strike.

“But you forgot one thing, David!” he pauses “**NO ONE** gets to beat up on this little dork but me!”

Riku summons his inner Slugger and goes to bat for his old friend. He strikes the Dealbreaker’s shaft with the Auditor, and the impact shakes Eziyu loose.

“Do it! Now!” Riku shouts. Eziyu and Riku swing their keyblades simultaneously at the Dealbreaker and slice through it cleanly. It falls to the floor and shatters into twenty pieces.

“Noooo!” David screams. Makoto’s body collapses.

The bell above clangs in alarm now that the key to the true door to Kingdom Hearts has been lost. Cracks start to appear in the coffin of the man with the katana.

Makoto rises.

“Thank you! I feel...” she pauses.

“You feel like yourself again?” Riku asks.

“I think so!” she smiles.

A burst of light shines through the stained glass windows, and Eziyu sees the door to Kingdom Hearts blur for an instant before resolidifying.

“Riku! We’ve gotta get out of here!” Eziú shouts.

Riku summons a dark corridor that engulfs the three. As it closes, a black wing erupts from the cracking coffin.

The three friends emerge from the darkness in the shallows of the beach’s coast line. The doors back to Kamurocho start to slowly shut. Makoto stumbles to her knees as they emerge from the water, her hair hanging over her face.

“You gotta get up!” Riku urges, wrapping her arm around his neck. He fails to notice an amber glow in her eyes “We gotta go.”

They reach the threshold and hear a “CLANG” behind them. Alexander steadies itself on the shore and lowers its guns toward them.

“Rikuuuuu……” Eziú says nervously. They dash toward the threshold.

“Go!” Riku says to Eziú. “We’ll be right behind you.” Eziú nods and crosses back into Kamurocho.

Makoto’s arm tightens around Riku’s neck. The Aeon’s guns hum behind them.

“NO!” ring out the dual voices of Makoto and David. “We had it. We were so close!” The vessel digs her feet in the sand and twists around Riku so that her back presses against his as he tightens his grip. She wrenches toward the Aeon.

“Kingdom Hearts! Fill me with the power of darkness,” the vessel’s voices scream.

One of Riku’s feet crosses the threshold. He looks behind him as Alexander’s muzzles start to glow. He can feel his grip on Makoto weakening.

Divine rays fire from Alexander’s guns.

“Light…” the dual voices gasp as they see the oncoming blast.

Riku takes a deep breath and swings Makoto’s body forward through the thinning gap between the doors as the rays catch Riku from behind, lacerating his back as he crosses the threshold close behind her.

“My heart!” Riku gasps as he falls into the gap between the crushing doors.

“Leave me.” Riku says, caught in the gap. “I could feel the blast shear a piece of myself away with the skin off my back. Like it’s been tossed into the abyss between worlds. All that’s left in my heart is darkness. I’m no longer whole! I can’t be held legally responsible for what I become when I return to the world of light!”

“Oh no!” Eziu says and grabs Riku’s arm. Through the gap, Eziu can see a human-shaped comet streak through the sky and crash into the orbit of a star as a one-winged figure emerges from Alexander’s tower. Behind one of the doors to other worlds, an albino child with no heart in its chest cries.

“Riku, we may no longer be close,” Eziu says. “But I will **NEVER** leave a friend behind again.” He feels Makoto grasp his arm. “And neither will I,” she says.

The two lurch backward and pull Riku towards them. He pops out of the door and the three friends land in a pile. The doors to Kingdom Hearts shut with a “Click” and disappear.

Eziu Soratelli struggles to his feet and looks down at a half-conscious Riku writhing face upward in the dirt of the Empty Lot as Makoto kneels above him, her hair hanging over her face. As he rolls from side-to-side, Eziu can see the dark, sticky damp blotch that stains his back and leaves a gummy residue behind.

“What have we done?” he hears Makoto ask.

“We have to get him help!” Eziu says and grabs one of Riku’s arms.

“No...” Makoto rises and turns away from Eziu before he can look her in the eyes.

“The costs of doing business with you are too much,” she faces the Empty Lot. She raises her hand to summon the Dealbreaker, but it fails to answer the call. She wriggles her fingers. Nothing happens. She opens and closes her fist. Nothing.

“The Tachibana inheritance; our path to power; our property, home, and Organization in Japan; our brother, our blade; ...everything is lost to us,” she laments.

“It’s just business,” Eziu whines. “We didn’t know. He’s gone now. Your friends will take care of you.”

“Our friends may be our power, but they are also our weakness,” Makoto replies. “Every time I chain my heart to another it results in unrecoverable costs. It’s time to invest in ourselves.”

“Makoto...” Eziu stands with Riku’s arm wrapped around his neck and tries to get a look at her face. “Why are you talking like that? Are you sure you’re feeling yourself? He is...gone...isn’t he?”

“He’ll always be part of our heart, but he’s lost his business priorities” Makoto turns her head toward him. Eziu catches the slightest hint of amber at the corner of her iris. “I control the darkness now. The light of Kingdom Hearts cost him his identity and memory of the wheeling and dealings of the Yakuza turf war. Even if he somehow gets control of our heart again, his memory would only cover up to the point of his death because I would sacrifice my own recollection of the time afterward to delay him.”

"I believe you have the strength of heart to prevent his return," Eziu says.

"We should hope so" she snaps her fingers, and a dark corridor opens. "Take care of yourselves," she says and disappears into the darkness.

Templar Cruise wakes from a fever dream of exclusion from executive deliberations to find that his manager's deadline has arrived.

"I believe you have everything your heart desires," he tells Rixku-Xephirosth as he hovers above the Amicus controls on the end of the keyblade katana.

"So that's how..." Rixku-Xephirosth says dazedly, as if he's trying to recover his first memory. Then, he shakes himself back to reality and corrects himself. **"So it is Xyanc and the Tojo clan who hold the deed to the Empty Lot and Black Slate Edict of Punakha Dzhong. The Amicus has finished copying his heart and mind so we have a backup? And the life support systems stop when the simulation does?"**

"You're clear to do as you wish!" Templar Cruise says.

Rixku-Xephirosth takes a deep breath and slams a fist down on the Amicus's big red "Disconnect" button. But his strength of heart is too much, and the pressure dislodges it from the plate beneath, disrupting the cancellation process.

Rixku-Xephirosth jams the button repeatedly. The button rubs against its connectors, and friction causes the closed circuit linking it to the facility Door to Darkness generator to short out.

"This is what happens when you contract out necessary business functions," Rixku-Xephirosth says. He plucks Templar Cruise from his blade.

"Fine. I'll do it myself." He steels himself and walks toward the Amicus.

Darkness falls upon Eziu's vision as he lugs his friend down Kamurocho's main street at rush hour. He sees a familiar landmark and knows he's only a few blocks away from the plastic surgery center that will save Riku's life.

"I don't know if I can make it..." Riku says weakly.

"I can feel my heart collapsing from exhaustion, too," Eziu confides. "Wait here. I know what can rejuvenate our hearts."

He props Riku up in a sitting position against the nearest traffic signal. He returns with a couple sea salt ice cream pops from the corner's vendor. His limbs give out before he can activate the pedestrian crossing button and slumps down beside Riku.

“Despite everything, I’m glad we could be here together at the dying of the light,” Riku tells Eziu.

“Would you go and see her again if we survive?” Riku asks.

“It would do my heart good to give it a try,” Eziu says. “I wasn’t the person she needed me to be,” he frowns. “I can’t imagine it would be easy to see her even if she has healed. And what she’ll say when she’s learned I’ve turned to organized crime and private equity management.”

“I believe you owe yourself the chance,” Riku says and coughs.

“You’re coming, right?” Eziu says.

“No,” Riku says. “I believe you can do this for yourself. All I would be able to offer is darkness.”

“But I saved you!” Eziu protests.

“You saved me from complete eradication, but you didn’t save me from losing my heart to darkness, you total sap,” Riku says.

He tries to raise his fist to punch Eziu in the arm playfully.

“Ungggh,” he grunts and strains with effort and unbridled aggression, his arm flapping ineffectually. “Unggggggggggh. UNGGGHHHHHHH. “

“Ungh.” he grunts in resignation as he realizes he lacks the strength of heart to follow through on his ambition.

“I don’t know if you should have saved me at all,” Riku says. “If it wasn’t for the risk to you, I might have taken David’s offer. And we serve different families of the Yakuza now. We’re business rivals.”

“We don’t have to be enemies, though,” Eziu says.

“Frienemies forever, then?” Riku asks.

“I think that makes strategic sense,” Eziu says. “Just know I believe you will find your way back to the light. And your friends will be waiting for you when you do. ”

“And I will always be there to beat some honor back into you when you fall victim to fraud or are targeted for sacrifice on the pyre of corporate oversight,” Riku counters.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Eziu responds.

He manages to hold out his hand.

“Deal?”

“Deal!” Riku says and clasps his hand.

The two look above them, smile, and slam their clasped hands on the pedestrian crossing push button high up on the traffic light and tagged in checkered graffiti with the word "Re:Connect".

The two feel a sudden burst of strength and rise to their feet.

Matthew Angleton wakes from a nightmare of heart failure to find Eziu Soratelli and Riku Odinsen turning to face him. The scenery behind them fades away to a pulsating black void.

"Matthew, you have seen enough," Eziu tells him. "We do not know how diversified your investment portfolio is or how long your heart will last, but we know you are listening,".

"We all do the best we can, and sometimes we still slip into darkness and profit loss," Eziu says.

"But darkness is half of everything," Riku tells Matthew. "And sometimes you must embrace it and the risk it poses to generate net income."

"But if I embrace darkness, how will I save my friends from it?" Matthew asks

"You can't save everyone," Riku says. "The only person who can save you is yourself."

"You must be careful who you chain your heart to," Eziu says. "My old friend will tempt me with darkness for years and punish me for my own. Given the chance to do it all over, I would change nothing and still give you this advice: 'Silence the murmurs of your heart when they risk leading you astray.'"

"And I would impart this wisdom to you:" Riku says. "Sometimes you must detach yourself from your heart and let go of all of its honorable desires so you may walk the Twilight Path to Dawn. Let go. We believe your stock will not fall far."

"And Matthew?" Eziu says. "Never lose sight of the light, even when things are at their darkest."

"Got it memorized?" Riku asks.

The two keyblade wielders bow and fade away.

Darkness closes in.

"Silence my heart," Matthew murmurs. His heartbeat slows. "Silence my heart. Silence my ..."

He can no longer hear his heart, only the approach of heavy footsteps. He embraces the darkness.

Rixku-Xephirosth grabs the sliding cot attached to the Amicus and yanks it out of the MRI tube. Matthew Angleton lies there. Rixku-Xephirosth raises his keyblade katana over his head.

“Goodbye, Matthew,” he whispers. “I wish things were different.”

He realizes he cannot see any signs of life in the body on the cot. Matthew’s chest is motionless. Maybe his heart has given out after all. Rixku-Xephirosth leans forward and places his head on it. He can hear no heart beat.

Suddenly, his ears burn with pain, and he feels a thump in Matthew’s ribcage. He jerks his head up and sees Mathew has raised his head from the cot and is grabbing Rixku-Xephirosth’s earlobes. Matthew jerks to the side and slams Rixku-Xephirosth’s head into the left outer wall of the MRI tube. Matthew swings his legs off the right side of the cot and yanks Rixku-Xephirosth’s head in his direction. Rixku-Xephirosth stumbles onto the cot face first, the rest of his body comes next. Matthew grabs Rixku-Xephirosth’s arms and tries to pin him face down.

“Nooooo!!!” Rixku-Xephirosth shouts. **“NOOOOOO!! The deal was done.”**

Rixku-Xephirosth flairs his wings and knocks Matthew off balance.

“This is our world now, and it will be all the better for it!” Rixku-Xephirosth roars.

Rixku-Xephirosth’s throes weaken Matthew’s grip on his left arm. Before all the fingers loosen, Matthew can feel another hand clasp his own. He looks up and into the face of Templar Whittaker. Whittaker nods and summons his keyblade in his free hand.

“Matthew, you know what we have to do!” Templar Whittaker shouts.

Matthew nods. He summons the Return-on-Investment. He takes a deep breath and saws through the joint connecting Rixku-Xephirosth’s right wing to his right shoulder blade. Templar cuts through the left wing’s joint at the connected shoulder blade. Warm black-and-white blood splatters the keyblade wielders’ faces. Rixku-Xephirosth flails the keyblade katana in his right hand aimlessly, swiping it over Matthew’s head. He then jams it into the floor and leverages it to flip himself over onto his back, loosening his grip on the blade as he twists his wrist.

Matthew seizes the initiative and knocks Rixku-Xephirosth’s hand away from the hilt. He grabs the relinquished katana keyblade.

“MY ASSETS!” Rixku-Xephirosth screams while rolling back and forth on the cot. **“MY ASSETS! Their worth was incalculable!”**

Templar Whittaker grabs the cot and tries to jam it into the MRI tube. Rick-Xephirosth braces one bloody shoulder against the tunnel’s opening and pushes the balls of his feet against the frame at the end of the cot to create a wedge that stalls the cot’s momentum. Matthew knocks

the feet off the frame and pulls the cot back out. Rixku-Xephirosth slides off the tunnel wall and lands face-upward on the bed. The obstruction cleared, Templar Whittaker and Matthew slam hard against the cot's frame and push it fully into the MRI tub .

The tube shakes as Riku violently bangs against the tunnel's inner walls.

"I'LL KILL YOU!" Rixku-Xephirosth's voices echo. *"I'LL SUUUUUE YOOUUUUUU!!!!!"*

"Matthew, you *have* to..." Templar Whittaker urges as he struggles to hold the cot in place.

Matthew points the Return-on-Investment and the keyblade katana at the Amicus's opening, but hesitates, letting them dip slightly.

"He was my friend once," he says softly. He takes another deep breath and points both blades at the Amicus again.

A beam of brilliant light shoots out from the Return-on-Investment, while a ray of utter darkness shoots from the katana keyblade. They wind around each other in a helix pattern before reaching the Amicus. There, they form a latticed net engulfing the machine and binding it closed with a "Click"!

The Amicus's MRI tube jolts upward as Rixku-Xephirosth struggles to escape, convex dents popping up on the MRI's roof. Matthew grasps his keyblades by the edges and slams the hilts down on the MRI tube's roof. He hears a "Thump" as Rixku-Xephirosth falls backward onto the cot.

Matthew hears a snap behind him and turns to see Templar Whittaker with his hand raised, suggestively. Matthew taps into the newfound darkness in his heart and snaps his fingers. A dark corridor envelops Matthew, Templar Whittaker, and the Amicus and its console.

The dark corridor dumps its travelers into the hills at the center of Kingdom Hearts, where they come face-to-face with a walking fortress that trains its cannons on the spot where they stand. The backdoor to Kingdom Hearts remains open behind them.

"Oh, Holy Alexander," Templar Whittaker bows before the aeon. "Let us right the wrongs of the past. We have an offer for you!"

The aeon bends its legs and lowers the tower of its head. Matthew can feel the stained glass windows judging him silently. An eternity seems to pass. Finally, the aeon nods and slides open one of its stained glass windows.

Templar Whittaker looks to Matthew. Matthew snaps his fingers again, and a dark corridor envelops them to eject them onto the middle of a pedestal in the Chamber of Waking.

"This is where it ends," Templar Whittaker says, "but not today. Today is just one more tick in the heart beat of the neverending conflict between light and dark. David Tachibana has grown to

once again pose a threat to his sister's heart. That's why the Templars were trying to discover who held the deed to the Empty Lot and the true door to Kingdom Hearts. The DEFINITIVE battle for Kingdom Hearts is set to begin all over again."

"The Templars are the true Organization upholding David Tachibana's legacy. They renamed Tachibana Real Estate to Xenu & Xehanort Condominium Development to hide their connection to the man who tried to seize the throne of Bhutan at the Master of Masters' urging. They will scout out the twenty pieces of the Dealbreaker so that they can reconstruct it and reopen the true door to Kingdom Hearts."

"They will need seven keyblade wielders of light and 13 keyblade wielders of darkness to clash and reforge the ultimate χ -blade. You and Rixku were the first candidates for recruitment. Now that they have the data from your experiment in their records, the Templars can move forward with implementing recruitment programs in their offices around the worlds. Business executives from organized crime families will be given the opportunity to partner with X&X Condominium Development and eliminate the competition.

Once the battle reforges the Dealbreaker, the winning crime family and Tachibana's Templars can take out and absorb Xyanc's upstart offshoot to reclaim the deed to the Empty Lot. From that hallowed ground, they can conquer Kingdom Hearts and use it for their strategic housing and community development scheme in preparation for David Tachibana's return and the worlds' descent into darkness. Xenu & Xehanort's monopoly will weaken the market so that when David Tachibana unleashes his assault on the worlds, their properties will be established as the only place to turn for security and prosperity .

"What about my former friend?" Matthew asks.

"The Aeon of Contempt is supposed to be the guardian of Kingdom Hearts who negotiates with the winner to get the rest of the Aeons to sign onto this exciting business venture," Templar Whittaker. says. "But Rixku's ambition changed the strategic plan and split the Aeon's power between two hearts. There's one way to restore the Aeon of Contempt to its full power" Let its dual hearts battle each other during birth by sleep and see which one takes control of the vessel. Whoever wins will have full control over the Aeon's power and authority.

The Amicus jolts again as if excited by the prospect.

"Whichever wins will come after me for revenge, won't they?" Matthew ponders.

"The way things stand, I'd say that's the likeliest outcome," Templar Whittaker admits. "The Book of Prophecies remains sacrosanct, and its predictions of a coming war between light and dark are unchanged. I will forever be inscribed as a warrior of light destined to fight to prevent the darkness from devouring my world or thwarting my ambitions for monopoly.

"There is one alternative for you: Give Xephirosth back his weapon and take Rixku's place in the joint venture before we seal him here," Templar Whittaker says. "You've proven you potentially have the stronger heart and could emerge victorious from the birth by sleep. A man like you who

touches so many hearts—you could open the right door, and save countless lives. Including that of your lost love. I still have her number if you want it. You would be able to protect her again. This time with the authority of a legitimate business executive. ”

Matthew thinks about it, reviewing everything he saw in the Amicus and the advice of the Ones Who Came Before.

“No, every time I chain my heart to a cause or a person beyond all reason, I dance with darkness,” Matthew says. “There are no heroes; no saviors; just humble hearts trying to do the best they can. And if they can find another light to bathe in before the darkness snuffs it out, then it’s the only protection they’ll need, no matter how temporary or frail it may be.”

His shoulder blades stiffen as resignation wracks his body.

“If I were to take the job and she accepted me back into her life, she would feel compelled to stand by me and risk losing her heart to devotion, duty, and darkness again,” Matthew confesses. “I can’t do that to her or let my heart stagnate by denying it new relationships!”

“I’m walking away from this offer and this fight,” Matthew says. “Burn her phone number.”

He pauses and realizes something.

“But there is one alternative you neglected to mention in your strategic review!” Matthew says. “The heart grows with every new experience!”

He considers the Amicus console.

“Can you reprogram the Amicus to cycle through every single incarnation of the Ones Who Came Before, from the 19th century up through the present?” Matthew asks. “My old friend will relive all the trials, adventures, and triumphs experienced by our predecessors. And maybe in doing so, he will learn to recognize himself and follow his new heart to the light during his birth by sleep.”

“It could be hell for him if the Amicus keeps cycling over and over until the battle for Kingdom Hearts starts again,” Templar Whittaker says. “It could make the contempt in his hearts grow stronger than ever.”

“That’s not my responsibility any more,” Matthew says. “The only person who can save you is yourself. I believe I’m giving him a fighting chance to win dominance.”

“If this is where your heart leads you, I can do nothing more than try to give him a chance,” Templar Whittaker says.

Matthew nods and places a hand on the Amicus as Templar Whittaker reprograms it.

“You know....” Matthew says, facing away from Templar Whittaker. His voice cracks for the briefest moment and he looks over his shoulder.

"I'm sad."

"I would like to think I could never leave a friend behind again," Matthew says. "But here I am, about to abandon Rixku to whatever fate awaits. I feel like I'm robbing him of the chance at a normal life."

"You're not abandoning him," Templar Whittaker insists as a bell tolls above the Amicus and the machine slides into a cavity in the floor. "He is right where he belongs for now. When Kingdom Hearts is threatened again, it may have a stronger guardian than ever before. And when his duty's done, you will meet again and have a chance to set things right."

"I'd like to say I could believe that," Matthew says and walks toward the door back to his world with Templar Whittaker. They cross the threshold and Matthew points the Return-on-Investment and katana keyblade at the backdoor to Kingdom Hearts. The streams of light and darkness issue from the blades in a helix and lock the doors with a "Click."

"Goodbye, Matthew!" Templar Whittaker says. "May you enjoy a peaceful and prosperous retirement."

"Thank you for helping me find the door to the light!" Matthew says.

He snaps his finger and disappears into a dark corridor.

LEGITIMATE BUSINESSMAN SIMULATOR 0 χ: Blank Checks

Matthew Angleton exits a dark corridor outside the burning wreckage of Xehanort & Xenu Condominium Development's Bhutan headquarters and takes a deep breath. Suddenly, his phone alerts him to a new message with his custom victory fanfare ringtone.

"Doo-da-doo-doo. DOOO-DA-DOOOOO!!" he hears.

He checks his texts:

Unknown Sender. OMG. This is hilarious!!! **Link**

Yakuza 0: A Review by Matthew Angleton

Whenever I fought in Yakuza 0, one word came to mind that sums up the whole game: "Frictionless".

From the quick transition to the battle screen to the simple push of a button that allows the player to switch fighting styles, this game makes being a gangster feel effortless.

This effort to encourage frictionless engagement with the game and its systems made Yakuza 0

compulsively playable and wholly enjoyable for me. Yakuza 0 is an open world crime-and-karaoke-em-up set in Japan in 1988. You play as deuteragonists Kazuma Kiryu and Goro Majima as they get caught up in a yakuza turf war in a now legally mandated open world split between the two characters.

The open world feels seamlessly integrated with the main campaign. Because the setting is constrained to a few blocks in two districts split between the characters, the side quests feel conveniently placed on the path to the main quest. Therefore, the many activities feel more like a feature of the setting than a chore distracting from the main quest.

Throughout the game, the setting feels vibrant as familiarity takes hold. The open world activities feel apiece with the main campaign in terms of production and engagement. It creates a sense of immersive verisimilitude that evokes the mundanity of the real world, the cinema spectacle of gangster movies, and the quirky oddities that pop up in our lives everyday but that we fail to notice.

The result of this is that I find that I progressed through the game at a deliberate pace and generally only played two-to-three hours in a session. This created a rhythm where I would spend one session just doing a little shopping or spend some time in the arcade before losing Shogi repeatedly on the “easiest” difficulty to an AI that feels like it’s operating at a level roughly equivalent to “Quantum Computer Overcompensating Because Its T Count is Off”. In another, I would grind the meatier minigames to get better equipment for Yakuza’s chapter-ending setpieces.

Regarding two sumptuous mid-plot minigames, it’s kind of a miracle that I felt they respected my time even though both are mostly about making numbers go up repeatedly.

As someone with a background as a researcher in the financial industry, I was immediately engaged by the property management minigame that appears in Kiryu’s storyline. The activity asks you to acquire properties in opposition to the intrusion of a criminal syndicate’s real estate buying spree in Kamurocho and investing in them to turn a profit, and the flow of scouting out properties, buying them and watching the numbers go up to progress the sub-story feels extremely satisfying.

Come to think of it, there’s a little Assassin’s Creed incorporated into Yakuza 0, too, isn’t there?

The property and club management management and boss battles concluding each neighborhood takeover echo the district takeovers in Ubisoft’s neverending franchise. There’s even a stealth segment where you have to blend in with locals to avoid detection by yakuza thugs.

I was kind of blown away by the amount of work the developers put into the Club Sunshine minigame. The detail given to the girls’ body language and dialogue brought the game into “Compelling social simulator and mini-JRPG” territory instead of sinking it into the bog of standard dating sims and “Child of Light” level turn-based RPGs. I don’t have the special expertise to analyze where video game developers spend their budgets, but even with some

reused models the Club Sunshine production seems staggeringly expensive. If not in dollars, then at least in developer time.

However, I do feel it is missing important steps in the flirtation game. When you're going for traditional supermodels, you're supposed to start the ritual by glaring at her in polite contempt for knowing she's hotter than anyone else and then awkwardly pretending to ignore her.

After you sidle up to the bar or coffee counter, you must prominently stick out your rear for her to contemptuously glare at in return while you're ordering. If your heart is in the right place, she may decide you're worth the time and sideswipe your ass with her skirt as she passes. Play it cool, and she may even say "hello" to you and then allow you a return tush swoosh after an embarrassment or seventeen.

THEN you can actually have a discussion with her in which you stumble over your words as you offer a compliment. When she says "Thank you", it's appropriate to say in return: "Thank you. Er, I mean: Thank you for your time" before fleeing the scene in a way that allows you to exit with dignity AND keeps your crotch at the perfect level for her to eye as she returns to her phone.

Speaking of unrealistic, Yakuza 0's main campaign is absolutely BONKERS. It's like a bad attempt at a soap opera spliced with a blockbuster crime drama with dialogue so earnest that it belongs in a Kingdom Hearts game. Kiryu Kazama and Goro Majima must disrupt the Dojima Family's plan to take over the Tojo clan and monopolize Kamuricho's redevelopment, but this game mostly fails to show the yakuza's effect on the world of Japan. I don't think any of the yakuza crime bosses are characterized sufficiently enough for me to get a sense of who they are, what they do, and why they rose to power, outside of journal entries. Except for Kuze because he's loud and you fight him so much. I kept making excuses for their lack of development by thinking they got more content in future games, but this is the only appearance of most of them

The yakuza were fully integrated members of their communities for a good part of Japanese history leading up to 1988. The fact this game doesn't capitalize on that to show the family bosses more organically interacting with the setting feels like a huge missed opportunity. The attempt to explain them through exposition utterly fails because I don't remember any of that exposition, which means it didn't land. You get a little bit of a substitute with the antagonists of the real estate and Club Sunshine storylines, but it's kind of a shame they get more development than the Dojima and Shimano families with whom Kiryu and Goro already have a pre-existing relationship.

The fact that the yakuza members in the main plot rarely interact with the setting outside of the cutscenes makes the product feel a little patchy. The sidequests tasking the deuteragonists with stopping their business schemes and crime sprees to, say, help a man muster the courage to meet his father-in-law create a living, breathing world that has little to do with being a yakuza other than to underline they were members of their community and not entirely separate from it.

In fact, this game bowdlerizes the real-world Yakuza just as much as the Kingdom Hearts games bowdlerize Disney films and Disney films bowdlerize folk tales and legends. It cuts the teeth out of a fascinating faction of Japanese society to make them into cinematic archetypes.

There are a couple of other little things that bothered me here: I know Kiryu's brother is in this game because he's in the rest of the series (and thus has to be), but I wish he wasn't because his melodramatic character turns gave me whiplash His role as a symbol of Kiryu's vulnerability to coercion was already filled by Kiryu's adopted father and Reina. Also, I don't know how Tachibana was not the archvillain of this game. He's a real estate developer. By definition, he's a creature of darkness. Also some of the references to future games fall flat for those of us who haven't played them.

Despite all that, this game's plot and mechanics were a total blast. The story goes down smooth despite its quirks, and its twists and turns compel you to see it to the end. The characters are super fun to interact with and watch, even though they are very shallow. It was the equivalent of a playable blockbuster adaptation of an airport novel and sparked my interest in playing the other entries in the series. At least until Kingdom Hearts IV drops in 2029.

This blog will be on break while I take a much needed vacation at a spiritual retreat in Bhutan. Until next time... May your heart be your guiding key.

Unknown Sender: THIS is what you're doing in your free time these days?!?!

Matthew: Who is this?

Unknown Sender: It's **Kredacted**, goofball.

Matthew: **Kredacted**?! How did you get this number?!

Matthew adds his old friend's name to his contact's list.

Kredacted: I've been having these weird thoughts lately. My husband and I went to that old Catholic church in the town you used to cover when we were journalists, and my heart was struck by memories of you. I googled you afterward. You're quite easy to find, you know.

Matthew: I guess I always thought it would be disrespectful to do the same to you. I don't like googling friends because it's too much like my job.

Matthew tries to think of something to say.

Matthew: How many years has it been since we had dinner together?

Kredacted: Seven. It's been awhile. You're really in Bhutan?

Matthew: Yeah. I just got out of a spiritual retreat.

Kredacted: Would you recommend it? I'm always looking for a new hot yoga retreat. **Fire emoji**

Matthew cringes as someone trapped in the facility behind him screams in pain.

Matthew: I don't think it's your kind of scene. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's about to go out of business.

Kredacted: You know, I'm going to be flying over Asia soon. I'm about to board a plane to Japan with Dan. We're going on holiday.

Matthew: Why Japan?

Kredacted: Oh you didn't hear? Some wealthy organization has redeveloped a blighted urban area and turned it into a resort. It's called Quadratum.

Matthew: Weird name. Sounds made up. You sure it's a legitimate business?

Kredacted: Yeah. Jiminy Cricket's Lonely Worlds Travel Guide recommended it. It hasn't been the easiest couple years for us. Whole family got long COVID. Even the little one. We're fine, but we need a break.

Matthew: Little one?

Kredacted: It has been a while, hasn't it? Yeah. I have a daughter now. Born right before the pandemic.

Matthew: CONGRATULATIONS! I'm really happy for you!

Kredacted: Thank you. Quadratum offers family-friendly facilities and has even built a child care business over a converted empty lot.

Matthew: Wait. I think I have heard of this place. The ownership is shrouded in darkness and secrecy... I learned about him recently. It's not possible to change your plans, is it?

Kredacted: No. Our hearts are set on it and our reservations are non-refundable. You always worry too much.

...I did miss this, you know. Talking to you.

Matthew: Heartfelt discussions. Late night sessions editing each other's stories in the time between things going wrong...

Kredacted: I think our time as storytellers left us with long-lasting health problems that I, at least, am still coming to terms with.

Matthew: I agree. You're eating better, though?

Kredacted: Yeah. I still have trouble remembering to eat from time to time because of anxiety, but I have my diet mostly under control.

Matthew: I am guessing motherhood stalled your plans to get back to writing full-time, too?

Kredacted: Yeah. I journal sometimes, though.

Matthew: You know, my offer to help still stands... I believe you have the strength to return to it professionally someday and tell stories your own way.

Kredacted: Awww. Thanks, bud, but I'm not ready to talk about that. I don't know when that will change. I DO want to see you, though. Do you think you can make it to Japan? I believe it's time we just ... you know, hang out again. I feel like our hearts were drawn to this place for some purpose. Maybe yours is, too. We could get dinner. Dan will watch the kid. We can catch up.

Matthew: I believe you're right. It would be good to just hang out again. I guess I can do some due diligence on this place during my downtime in preparation for future market conditions, although I'm reluctant to turn this into a business trip.

Kredacted: You never could stop yourself. I don't know if I could reasonably expect to be any other way.

Matthew: I think we have a lot to talk about, much of which is best left unsaid in text. I'll look up flights.

Kredacted: See you there. **Starfruit emoji**

From the lost logs and corporate filings of the True Organization XIII, doing business as Xehanort & Xenu Condominium Development. May your heart be your guiding key.

END OF RECORD