

King of Blades

Episode 1: Long Live the King

Written by

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EXT. BEACH - DAY

Waves wash against the pristine, sandy shoreline and glisten in the sunlight filtered through the clouds above. A samurai and a knight face each other, ready for battle.

The samurai, YOSHIHIRO (34), wields a katana and wears white composite plate armor with red and black highlights reminiscent of medieval Japan.

The knight, JOSHUA (31), holds a montante at his side, pointing backwards. He is covered head to toe in pitch black plate armor reminiscent of medieval Spain.

Joshua charges at Yoshihiro and engages him in a fierce battle. After several exchanges, they stand facing each other again, weapons ready. A thin line of bright red pixels shimmers on Yoshihiro's cheek where blood would be in real life.

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The fight is being streamed on a large wall-mounted TV set in the living room of a well-kept, middle class house.

KIERAN (V.O.)

(fading in)

...moving beautifully, today,
ladies and gentlemen! Truly a
battle worthy of the final match of
Children of the Earth!

The commentary continues in the background, accompanied by that of his colleagues, Juniper and Harold. The silhouettes of three elementary school girls peek over the edge of the couch.

One girl, MAKOTO (8), wavers in her seat as she points to the sea on screen.

MAKOTO

Come on, Dad! Force him into the water! He can't move easily there!

The other two, conjoined twins YUKIKO and NATSUMI (8), jump to their feet, revealing their having one body and two heads between them.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

(excited)

Slice him! Dice him! What are you waiting for?!

Makoto's mother, ERI (32), walks in on the girls and sets a tray of food on the table in front of them.

ERI
(joking)
You know he can't hear you, right?

Makoto shrugs. Natsumi, the left half of her and Yukiko, grabs a rice ball and bites into it.

YUKIKO
Yeah, but it's fun to cheer anyway.
Right, sis?

NATSUMI
(still chewing)
Uh, yeah. That's right, sis.

Eri turns to watch her husband continue fighting the knight on screen. Yukiko grabs another rice ball and eats alongside Natsumi. Makoto, instead, picks up a curry udon bowl and a pair of chopsticks but pauses to look at Eri.

MAKOTO
Want to sit with us, Mom?

ERI
Sure. Why not?

Eri circles around the couch, sidles up beside Makoto, and wiggles her way into an empty space between Makoto and the armrest...

ERI
Scoot over.

Makoto and the twins comply, and they all settle down to see...

EXT. BEACH - DAY

...Joshua flipping forward with an acrobatic downward stroke. Yoshihiro parries the attack, sidesteps, and strikes Joshua in the back of his helmet, barely missing his neck.

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Makoto jolts in her seat.

MAKOTO

Ooh, almost!

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Joshua retaliates with a wild swing at Yoshihiro's head. Yoshihiro ducks, but Joshua follows up with a downward stroke to Yoshihiro's helmet. Another swing knocks the helmet off and sprawls him.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Ooh, and Strada knocks off
Yamasaki's helmet, straps and all!

Yoshihiro rolls out of the way just in time to avoid a diving stab from Joshua and scrambles to his feet, his katana held behind him.

HAROLD (V.O.)

That had to cause some major
whiplash to Yamasaki at the very
least.

His back turned to the sea, Joshua readies his montante again.

HAROLD (V.O.)

And now that his head and neck are
unprotected, he's that much more
vulnerable.

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Yukiko and Natsumi hold their breaths and almost drop their half-eaten rice balls. Makoto tightens her grip on her udon bowl and chopsticks.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Don't count Yamasaki out just yet,
Harold. We've seen him come back
from worse than this.

MAKOTO

(under her breath)

You got it. You got it.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

Yoshihiro digs his katana into the sand and flings a clump at Joshua's visor, but it misses. Joshua charges at Yoshihiro again, briefly bogged down by the water washing up around his feet.

HAROLD (V.O.)

Perhaps, but even established veterans lose from time to time.

The two exchange blows again.

KIERAN (V.O.)

That may be, but right now, it's still anybody's fight.

Joshua tries to tackle Yoshihiro, who spins away from him...

KIERAN (V.O.)

And it looks like the fight just...

...and sends him crashing into a huge boulder behind him.

KIERAN (V.O.)

(excited)

...turned in Yamasaki's favor!

As Joshua stumbles away from the boulder, Yoshihiro slashes out both of his legs at the knee joints. Shimmering red pixels spill as the sword connects.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Down goes Strada!

Joshua crumples to the ground and tries to fend off Yoshihiro's follow-up attacks.

HAROLD (V.O.)

If he wants to stay in this fight now, he has to beat the clock.

A bell rings, the battlefield dematerializes...

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA - DAY

...and Yoshihiro and Joshua materialize outside the simulator in the middle of the arena, physically unscathed. Highlights of their duel play on the holographic projection above, including Joshua knocking Yoshihiro's helmet off and Yoshihiro cutting out Joshua's legs.

The crowd watches in the jam-packed stadium seats surrounding the two combatants.

KIERAN (V.O.)
What a fight!

JUNIPER (V.O.)
What a fight indeed, Kieran! I was on the edge of my seat the whole time!

HAROLD (V.O.)
Calm down. The judges haven't made their decision just yet.

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Eri glimpses between Makoto and the twins, the former fishing out some noodles from her bowl and blowing on them and the latter swallowing the last bits of their rice balls.

HAROLD (V.O.)
Now, for those of you not paying attention, each fighter can be awarded up to fifty points: as many as ten for damage, ten for aggression, ten for strategy, ten for field control, and ten for style.

Eri nods along with the ongoing commentary.

ERI
(under her breath, anxious)
Come on. Come on. Come on.

Makoto swallows a bite of her udon, and Yukiko and Natsumi grab two more rice balls.

MAKOTO
It's okay, Mom. I know he won.

YUKIKO
Really? He hardly got any hits in on Joshua.

NATSUMI
Yeah. He didn't even chop off his legs all the way.

Yukiko and Natsumi bite into their rice balls, and Makoto looks back at the TV.

MAKOTO
(confident)
Guess we'll find out right now.

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA - DAY

The tuxedo-clad announcer, FRANCIS (48), approaches the center of the arena with an antique microphone in one hand and an index card in the other. He stands between Yoshihiro and Joshua while another official carries a gold-colored crown resembling a ring of tiny swords beside him.

FRANCIS
Ladies and gentlemen, after fifteen minutes, we go to the judges' score cards for a decision. All five judges score this contest forty-eight to forty-seven for the winner by unanimous decision
aaaaaaaaaaaaand still!

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Yukiko and Natsumi leap to their feet, jump around, and scream for joy, unwittingly squishing their rice balls in their hands. Eri throws her hands above her head and claps while cheering. Makoto pumps her fist and grins, leaving her chopsticks in her bowl.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
The Undisputed King of Blades of
the Children of the Earth...!

Yukiko and Natsumi stop jumping...

FRANCIS (V.O.)/YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
Yoshihiro "the Angel of Death"
Yamasaki!

...and then resume jumping. Eri drops her hands to her sides. Makoto puts her udon bowl on the table and smiles at Yoshihiro on screen.

EXT. RAILWAY TO EARTH - ARCADIA STATION - EVENING

With his newly won Crown of Blades on his head and a gray suitcase trailing behind him, Yoshihiro walks amidst a crowd of people trailing into and out of numerous trains.

Just then, a rustic melody rings from the wristwatch-like N-patch strapped to his wrist. He taps it and sees an image of Makoto projected from it.

YOSHIHIRO

Hey, Makoto.

MAKOTO

Dad, Mom and I saw your match today! You were amazing!

YOSHIHIRO

Thanks.

MAKOTO

The twins came over to watch with us...well, actually, they kind of got locked out of their house. Again.

Yoshihiro snickers.

YOSHIHIRO

You know, I couldn't have done it without you.

MAKOTO

Huh? What do you mean?

YOSHIHIRO

I mean, if I'd lost, you and your mother would never let me hear the end of it.

Makoto pinches her chin with her free hand and nods assent, eking a faint smile. Then, she lowers her hand.

MAKOTO

Hey. If you catch the Red Dawn line, you can make it home tomorrow for breakfast.

YOSHIHIRO

I'll make sure of that.

MAKOTO

Great. I'll see you then. Love you, Dad.

YOSHIHIRO

I love you too.

The projection disappears, and Yoshihiro lowers his hand and grips his luggage. Just then, Joshua arrives, carrying a bulky backpack on his back and looking around the area until he spots Yoshihiro.

JOSHUA
Hey, Yamasaki!

Yoshihiro turns to see Joshua approaching him.

JOSHUA
You did great back there.

YOSHIHIRO
Thanks. You were pretty good
yourself.

JOSHUA
Not as good as you, obviously.

He narrows his eyes with a determined smile...

JOSHUA
But next time we meet, that crown
is mine.

...and then glimpses the train marquee overhead to see that his train is departing soon.

JOSHUA
Oh, I have to go. It was a pleasure
talking with you.

YOSHIHIRO
Likewise.

Yoshihiro watches Joshua walk away and boards his own train.

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - MAKOTO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

In the dim light of a flashlight, Makoto lies in her bed with her hands beneath her pillow and stares at the ceiling, her eyes drifting shut. Yukiko and Natsumi lie in a sleeping bag on the floor nearby, holding the flashlight.

At the foot of Makoto's bed and the twins' sleeping bag are a sheathed toy katana and a squeaky mallet duct taped to an old plastic broom handle.

YUKIKO
Hey, Makoto? Are you awake?

Makoto turns her head to the twins, who sit up together in their sleeping bag.

MAKOTO

Yeah. What is it?

YUKIKO

We've been thinking. What if we all got into Children of the Earth someday?

MAKOTO

We'll have to wait until we're grown up, but I can see us all competing there.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

For sure.

Yukiko and Natsumi turn their body to Makoto.

NATSUMI

...and you know...

Makoto sits up in her bed.

MAKOTO

Yeah?

NATSUMI

Wouldn't it be wild if you won the Crown of Blades?

MAKOTO

What? Me? No way.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

Yes way.

MAKOTO

You know I'm more into books than swords.

NATSUMI

Oh, come on. If your dad can win, so can you.

MAKOTO

Just because he's great, doesn't mean I am.

...and gleans the toy katana.

MAKOTO

...although, I guess I could win if
I put my mind to it.

Yukiko and Natsumi nod assent, then grin at each other and stand up, letting the sleeping bag crumple at their feet.

YUKIKO

But you'd still have to get past
us!

Yukiko puts her hand on her hip and Natsumi clenches her fist at their shared chest.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

(a la Francis)

The inseh-pair-able Yukiko and
Natsumi Itou!

MAKOTO

(joking)

Considering that you two only have
one brain between you, I don't see
you getting past me.

The twins drop their hands...

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

(playing along)

What's that supposed to mean?

MAKOTO

My point exactly.

A knock rings through the door.

ERI (V.O.)

Girls, keep it down in there,
please.

MAKOTO

(frantic)

Sorry, Mom!

YUKIKO AND

NATSUMI

(frantic)

Sorry, Mrs. Yamasaki!

Makoto plops down in her bed, Yukiko and Natsumi scramble into the sleeping bag, and they all tuck themselves in and drift off to sleep.

EXT. JAPANESE SUBURB - VARIOUS - NIGHT

The lampposts illuminate parts of the empty, tidy, sparsely lit streets. This view soon reveals the well-lit but nearly empty train station...

EXT. RAILWAY TO ORBIT - NIGHT

...where a luminescent, ethereal train track forms from the sky above and leads into the station below. The train appears and rides the track toward the station, but suddenly, it slips off the track and careens to the ground below.

INT. TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

Alarms blare, lights flash, and the train rattles as it plummets. Loose carry-ons tumble about as some passengers try in vain to secure them.

CONDUCTOR (V.O.)

(trying to remain calm)

Attention, passengers! We've lost control of the train! Please remain seated, keep your seat belts fastened and all valuables secured, and brace for--!

Radio static cuts off the conductor's announcement, and Yoshihiro braces himself against his seat, watching from inside as the train plummets toward the earth.

Some of the other passengers close their eyes in prayer. Others grab onto the sides of their seats, the seats in front of them, or the poles nearby.

CONDUCTOR (V.O.)

(frantic)

Hold on!

Yoshihiro closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

EXT. RAILWAY TO ORBIT - NEAR CHIBA STATION - NIGHT

The train turns over to its side...

CONDUCTOR (V.O.)

(frantic)

Everybody, just hold on--!

...and slams into the ground.

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - MAKOTO'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Makoto opens her eyes and jolts upright in her bed at the distant boom of the crash. She catches her breath and starts to lie back down, but she glimpses smoke rising from behind the houses across the street through her window.

EXT. JAPANESE SUBURB - YAMASAKI HOUSE - NIGHT

She opens the window and leans outside, listening to the sirens of emergency vehicles blaring as they speed toward the crash site and the indistinct chatter of neighbors leaving their homes for a better look. Her eyes widen and her mouth hangs agape.

INT. TOWN HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - MORNING

Makoto and Eri sit together in the chairs. Makoto eyes the other people sitting in the nearly full waiting room, and then sees a DOCTOR enter near the front desk.

DOCTOR
Eri Yamasaki?

Eri stands up...

ERI
Yes?

...and the doctor approaches her.

DOCTOR
I have good news and bad news. The good news is that your husband has regained consciousness. The bad news is that he's paralyzed from the waist down.

ERI
(wavering)
Can we see him?

Makoto stands up beside Eri.

MAKOTO
Doctor?

The doctor turns to Makoto.

MAKOTO
Can't you fix his spine or
something?

DOCTOR
That's his decision.

INT. YOSHIHIRO'S HOSPITAL ROOM - MORNING

Eri and Makoto stand beside Yoshihiro lying in his wiry hospital bed. A heart monitor beeps a steady rhythm.

MAKOTO
What do you mean "no"?

YOSHIHIRO
I mean just that, Makoto.

Yoshihiro scoots upright in his bed, his now immobile legs weighing him down.

YOSHIHIRO
It's not worth the risk anyway.

MAKOTO
(tearing up)
But you're Yoshihiro Yamasaki.
You're the King of Blades. You
can't quit now! You're at the top
of your game!

YOSHIHIRO
I was. Now...

He gestures to his legs. Eri puts her hand on Makoto's shoulder.

ERI
Makoto, please. He's made his
choice. All we can do is respect
that.

Makoto looks down and clenches her fists at her side. Then, she looks up...

MAKOTO
No, Mom. That's not all I can do.

ERI
What?

...and brushes Eri's hand away.

MAKOTO

I made him take the train. I'm the reason he's hurt.

ERI

What do you mean?

MAKOTO

Next year. I'll enter the competition and make this right.

Eri widens her eyes.

ERI

Makoto, no. I forbid you from entering.

MAKOTO

Forbid nothing, Mom. I'm going.

ERI

No, you're not.

MAKOTO

Yes, I am!

YOSHIHIRO

Excuse me.

They both look at Yoshihiro.

YOSHIHIRO

Why don't you let me train you, Makoto?

ERI

Yoshihiro, we're not encouraging her. She's too young.

YOSHIHIRO

She's too young right now, but with a few years of training, she'll be ready.

Eri glimpses between Makoto and Yoshihiro.

MAKOTO

Define "a few years".

YOSHIHIRO

As long as it takes to get you ready. Besides, you have to be at least twelve to enter.

Makoto sighs.

MAKOTO
That's true.

YOSHIHIRO
So, what do you say?

MAKOTO
All right.

Eri nods.

MONTAGE - MAKOTO'S TRAINING - OVER THE NEXT 10 YEARS

- Makoto waves her toy katana around in her room. At some point, she unwittingly knocks over the squeaky mallet and pauses, but then, she resumes swinging the toy katana.
- She watches a video of a past match that Yoshihiro won.
- She tries to do push-ups, sit-ups, squats, and pull-ups alone at a playground, barely managing any.
- In a sword fighting class, she fights another student to a standstill while Yoshihiro--now in a hoverchair--watches her.
- Yukiko and Natsumi are carried away from the base of a tree on a stretcher. Makoto watches from among the other onlookers, holding back her tears.
- Makoto does more push-ups, sit-ups, squats, and pull-ups alone at a playground, more successfully this time. Several kids playing nearby glance at her, then resume playing.
- She stands in the backyard of her house, waving her toy katana around with weights on her wrists. Yoshihiro scoots beside her.

YOSHIHIRO
Don't tighten up your grip so much.
Hold it more in your fingers.

- Late at night, she stays up at her desk, studying complicated library textbooks.
- Back in her sword fighting class, she defeats another student, pointing her sword at his face.

- Yoshihiro and Eri eat together at their dining room table. Makoto enters, grabs a plate of food, and leaves. Eri's gaze tracks Makoto as she leaves, and then, she looks to Yoshihiro.

- Makoto runs laps around the playground while Yoshihiro times her using his N-patch.

- At school, Yukiko and Natsumi sidle up beside Makoto and wave at her...

YUKIKO

Hey, Makoto.

NATSUMI

Sachi's having her birthday party at the pool, and you're invited. Want to come?

...but she gives them only a passing glance focusing on her sword fighting class schedule instead.

MAKOTO

Sorry. I can't make it.

- Makoto loses a match in a simulated training zone to a combat drone.

- She does yet more push-ups, sit-ups, squats, and pull-ups alone at the playground.

- She again practices her sword fighting in the backyard, this time using a weighted replica katana. Yoshihiro hovers beside her.

YOSHIHIRO

Okay. I think that's enough for now.

She pauses to scan Yoshihiro's chair. A notification appears on her newer model, quarter-sized N-patch stuck to her hand...

MAKOTO

No. Let's keep going.

...but she dismisses it and resumes practicing.

- She runs more laps around the playground, timing herself with her N-patch. Yukiko and Natsumi catch sight of her as they walk by with a small group of friends. They stop and turn to Makoto as she runs, Natsumi waving her hand over their heads.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
Hey, Makoto!

But Makoto continues running, taking only passing notice of the twins, who pout at her lack of reaction.

- She defeats the combat drone in another match in a simulated training zone.

END OF MONTAGE

INT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - MAKOTO'S BEDROOM - MORNING

Now a teenager, Makoto sits alone on her bed, skimming a holographic note on the penny-sized N-patch stuck to her wrist. Its opening section reads...

Congratulations on qualifying for this year's Children of the Earth. You've been randomly selected from the pool of 437 fighters as an exhibition fighter.

She scrolls through more of the note with several flicks of her hand, pausing on another section, which reads...

...score is accumulated based on your number of victories and determines the equipment you can access.

She resumes scrolling, pausing on still another section, which reads...

You can, of course, trade equipment with other players--even if they're eliminated--as long as your score allows...

She scrolls through the note several more times and then dismisses it.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Makoto descends the staircase, lugging a midnight blue suitcase beside her. Yoshihiro and Eri await her by the front door.

YOSHIHIRO
Well, look who's ready before the
sun is even up. How are you on your
big day?

MAKOTO
As ready as I've ever been.

YOSHIHIRO
Good to hear.

Eri steps aside toward the kitchen.

ERI
Aren't you going to stay for
breakfast?

MAKOTO
I have food packed for the train
ride. I'll be fine.

ERI
But the train won't be here for
another thirty minutes.

MAKOTO
Maybe not, but I'd prefer going
early.

Eri pauses.

ERI
You know, you're still very young.
You don't have to do this just yet.

MAKOTO
Mom, we've been over this. Twenty
times, in fact.

YOSHIHIRO
She's right. You said so yourself.
She made her choice. All we can do
is respect that.

ERI
(to Yoshihiro)
No, I said that you made your
choice.

MAKOTO
About Dad refusing surgery, yeah,
and now, I've made mine. I can do
this. I will do this.

ERI
...All right, but stay in touch
with us, okay?

MAKOTO
Okay.

Makoto glimpses Yoshihiro's hoverchair.

MAKOTO

And Dad?

YOSHIHIRO

Yes?

MAKOTO

Thanks for all the training.

EXT. YAMASAKI HOUSE - MORNING

Makoto opens the door, steps outside, and waves to her parents inside.

MAKOTO

See you.

YOSHIHIRO

Bye.

ERI

Good luck.

She closes the door behind her, looks to the sun...

EXT. JAPANESE SUBURB - VARIOUS - MORNING

...and walks toward the train station. A cat yawns atop a neighbor's fence post.

EXT. RAILWAY TO ORBIT - CHIBA STATION - MORNING

She arrives at the station and sees the train arrive from high above and dock at the station, the luminescent track disappearing behind it. She hesitates at the gate but then taps her N-patch to the gate's sensor, passes through the gate, and boards the train.

INT. TRAIN CAR - MORNING

She sits down, ignoring the other passengers crowding inside. The train computer's holographic avatar, Y.A.A.K.O.V., materializes before the passengers.

Y.A.A.K.O.V.

Good morning, everyone, and welcome aboard the Red Dawn Line of the Global Atmospheric Railway Network, or G.A.R.N. for short. I'm your

(MORE)

Y.A.A.K.O.V. (cont'd)
guide, Y.A.A.K.O.V.: Your Automated
Artificial...
(awkward)
...uh, something...
(normal)
Anyway, for those of you who don't
know the rules, regulations, etc.,
etc., in case of an emergency, the
exits are...

Y.A.A.K.O.V. jabs his increasingly numerous "hands" every
which-way...

Y.A.A.K.O.V.
...here, here, here, there, here,
and right next to that old guy's
head.

...and then absorbs all but his original pair.

Y.A.A.K.O.V.
Fasten your seat belts. Put your
tray tables away.

EXT. RAILWAY TO ORBIT - CHIBA STATION - MORNING

An array of ion projectors pulses beneath the train,
reforming the luminescent track leading into the sky.

Y.A.A.K.O.V. (V.O.)
Keep your legs and arms inside the
train, and hang on to your heads,
everyone! This is gonna be a bumpy
ride!

The train floats just above the track...

Y.A.A.K.O.V. (V.O.)
Ten...nine...eight...oh, who cares
about that stuff anyway? One!

...and takes off, riding into the sky.

Y.A.A.K.O.V. (V.O.)
And we have liftoff!

INT. TRAIN CAR - MORNING

Makoto looks away from the window and breathes a sigh. She fishes her hand into her pocket, pulls out a pair of wireless earbuds, and inserts them into her ears.

She taps her N-patch to summon a music playlist and then taps the Shuffle icon, prompting a frenetic technopop song to play in her earbuds. She drums her fingers to the music...

EXT. EARTH'S UPPER ATMOSPHERE - DAY

...as the train breaches the clouds and rides the ethereal track to a colossal orbiting hulk of a city. Before long, the train arrives at a huge set of double doors, which open to let it inside.

INT. COMPRESSION CHAMBER - DAY

The train stops at the platform and settles down as the track disappears behind it. The doors ease shut...

Y.A.A.K.O.V. (V.O.)
We're almost ready to drop you off.
Just sit tight.

...and air jets hiss.

EXT. RAILWAY TO EARTH - ARCADIA STATION - DAY

Makoto faces a floating SENTRY that resembles a giant Tetris block with a TV monitor for a face. It flashes a cheery smile...

SENTRY 1
Enjoy your stay in Arcadia.

...and floats away, taking her luggage with it. On its back is a bumper sticker with an ornate sword pattern and the words, "49 and counting."

Makoto watches the sentry leave, glances at a nearby map of the city, and walks onward. Along the way, she passes...

EXT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - ENTRANCE - DAY

She sees a huge crowd of people around the towering hotel building, some entering, some leaving. Many talk about the upcoming competition, some even wagering with each other. Unknown to her, a lanky woman, PRASHASTI (38) exits the hotel and looks down the street.

EXT. RIVER OF HEAVEN WATER PARK - ENTRANCE - DAY

Makoto pauses to scan the park, with attractions that include steep, twisting water slides; a wave pool; and ground fountains; but then shakes her head and moves on.

EXT. TREE OF LIFE MONUMENT - DAY

She watches the branches of the metallic tree and can almost hear a faint electric hum coming from within. Finally, she reaches...

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ENTRANCE - DAY

She looks around to see the spectators streaming into the giant metallic bird's nest of a stadium and the thirteen holographic placards lining the hallway.

Each placard commemorates a previous King or Queen of Blades and all of the Crowns of Blades won throughout the past forty-nine years, as well as the year each crown was won. Joshua's placard is right after Yoshihiro's and lists nine Crowns of Blades won, tying Yoshihiro's record.

Makoto stops in front of these last two placards, her eyes fixed on Yoshihiro's. She lowers her gaze, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and then opens her eyes again, steeling herself. Then, she proceeds to the girls' locker room.

INT. ARENA - DAY

Tens of thousands of spectators fill the stadium seats and cheer. Prismatic lights crisscross through the air.

KIERAN (V.O.)
Ladies and gentlemen! Children,
teens, and everybody between!
Welcome back to this year's
Children of the Earth!

The audience ripples with excitement.

INT. COMMENTARY BOOTH - DAY

The lead commentator, KIERAN (50), sits in the middle of the booth. To each side of him are JUNIPER (35), a woman with a green beret on her head; and HAROLD (28), a young man with wiry glasses.

KIERAN

I'm Kieran McCain, and with me as always are my faithful associates, Juniper Greene and Harold Richthofen.

JUNIPER

That's right, folks. And what an event it's going to be this year! With over four hundred fighters from all over the world, who knows who's going to win?

HAROLD

Nobody yet. We'll just have to watch and see.

JUNIPER

I can hardly wait.

KIERAN

I'm sure the audience can't either, June.

INT. ARENA - DAY

The uproar dies down as Francis arrives, pausing only to adjust his bow tie.

KIERAN (V.O.)

And to introduce today's exhibition fighters, here's Francis Teague.

Francis stands tall center stage...

FRANCIS

Ladies and gentlemen, we! Are! Live! This is the exhibition match of the Children of the Earth, set for ten minutes!

...waves his hand to the audience...

FRANCIS

Presented by Into the Night. Happy from Sunrise to Sunset. Sanctioned by UN Sports Arcadia. Commissioner: Elijah Afolayan. Our five judges scoring this competition are Giovanni Bonanno, Rory Giles, Xianghua Lee, Alejandro Mendez, and Herb Soren.

...and summons a wave of excitement from the audience.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

Introducing first! Fighting out of the blue corner!

Taking his place at the far end of the arena is GIL DONG (18), a fairly built teenage boy, roughly the same age as Makoto.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

A gladiator, making his Children of the Earth debut. He stands one hundred seventy-five centimeters tall, weighing in at seventy kilos. Fighting out of Dongducheon, Korea! Presenting...

A cloud of pixels gathers around his body and then just as quickly vanishes.

He is now dressed in a brigandine vest, his head adorned with a gray headband. His gloves are outfitted with metal spikes and his boots have metal caps. Tied at his hip with a rope rests a sheathed short sword.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

Gil Dong "Hangul Pride" Rhee!

The audience greets him with a loud cheer.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

And now, introducing his opponent! Fighting out of the red corner!

Makoto takes her place at the other end of the arena.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

A samurai, making her Children of the Earth debut. She stands one hundred seventy centimeters tall, weighing in at sixty-one kilos. Fighting out of Chiba, Japan! Presenting...

A cloud of pixels gathers around her body, and then just as quickly vanishes.

She is now dressed in midnight blue composite plate armor reminiscent of Medieval Japan. A long, silk scarf hangs from her shoulders. Tied to her hip with silken cord is a sheathed katana.

She stares across the stage...

FRANCIS
Makoto "Angel Blue" Yamasaki!

...as the audience greets her with another loud cheer.

FRANCIS
And when the action begins, the
battlefield will be as follows!

A holographic display materializes high above Francis' head, forming the image of a pristine, grassy meadow on a clear day.

KIERAN (V.O.)
A meadow. A bit too peaceful for a
battlefield, wouldn't you say?

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Almost an ideal battlefield, to be
honest. Perfectly flat, few
obstacles. I don't see any issue.

HAROLD (V.O.)
We're about to find out if any
issues do come up...

Francis signals Makoto and Gil Dong to come to two circular lights to either side of him, which they do.

HAROLD (V.O.)
...in three...two...one...

Cybernetic blips and lights engulf the two fighters.

INT. ARENA SIMULATOR - MEADOW - DAY

They find themselves standing at opposite ends of a grassy, sunlit meadow. Birds chirp in the distant woods, and thin wisps of cloud hang overhead.

Gil Dong smirks at Makoto and steps back.

GIL DONG
I'm gonna enjoy this far more than
I should.

Makoto rolls her eyes at Gil Dong as she grips her katana.

The arena computer sounds its signal...

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)
Fight!

...and Gil Dong charges at Makoto, short sword drawn.

KIERAN (V.O.)
And here we go!

He leaps at Makoto with a flying side kick, only to be parried and lashed at with her katana.

KIERAN (V.O.)
(excited)
Oh! And a beautiful exchange
between the two fighters already!

Gil Dong recovers, landing on his feet and following up with a spin kick to Makoto's helmet, knocking her to the side.

HAROLD (V.O.)
It looks like that strike hit
Rhee's shin guard, though.

INT. COMMENTARY BOOTH - DAY

Juniper is now standing with both fists clenched and raised, hopping up and down in her seat as she chants...

JUNIPER
(excited)
Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!
Fight!

Harold rolls his eyes at her, and she shrugs back.

JUNIPER
What? You're both thinking it.

INT. ARENA SIMULATOR - MEADOW - DAY

Gil Dong and Makoto continue to exchange blows. In one exchange, fakes out a charge, prompting Makoto to step forward, and he kicks at her face. Makoto steps back just in time to avoid the kick and retaliates with a slash, missing his ankle.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Rhee's pouring on the pressure, but Yamasaki's not giving in easily.

HAROLD (V.O.)

But it doesn't look like Yamasaki's capitalizing enough on the opportunities presented to her.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

That could be a big time error, huh?

In another exchange, Makoto grabs Gil Dong's ankle, flips him and follows up with a lash to his neck, blocked by his short sword.

GIL DONG

You're good, but I'm better!

MAKOTO

Just shut up and fight!

In still another exchange, Makoto fakes out a strike to Gil Dong's leg but goes for his arm instead. Gil Dong catches Makoto's katana and tries to wrench it out of her hands. When that fails, he kicks her down, but she rolls back up to her feet, katana still in hand.

KIERAN (V.O.)

It's anybody's fight!

JUNIPER (V.O.)

This is getting exciting! I'm on the edge of my seat!

Eventually, the two stand off. A weary Makoto glimpses herself and the equally weary Gil Dong to see shimmering red pixels where there should be blood spilling from their collective cuts and bruises.

Suddenly, Gil Dong throws his short sword at Makoto's face and charges at her, jumping up and preparing to kick at her face. Makoto deflects the thrown sword, grabs Gil Dong's leg, pulls him past herself, and retaliates with a slash to the back of his neck.

Gil Dong crumples to the ground, bloody pixels spilling from the wound. Makoto swings her katana to her side, eyeing the defeated Gil Dong.

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)
Finish!

INT. COMMENTARY BOOTH - DAY

Kieran half clenches his fist atop the table.

KIERAN
And that's it, ladies and gentlemen! It's all over!

JUNIPER
Not bad for an exhibition battle, huh?

HAROLD
Indeed.

INT. ARENA - DAY

Makoto and Gil Dong materialize outside the simulator and step away, the highlights of their duel on display on the holographic projection above. The commentators discuss these highlights until Francis appears at the edge of the arena.

HAROLD (V.O.)
And here to make it official is Francis Teague.

Francis approaches the center of the arena.

FRANCIS
Ladies and gentlemen, this contest has come to an end at four minutes, twenty-nine seconds. Declared the winner by knockout...

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - FOOD COURT - DAY

An older but still visibly muscular Joshua sits at the bar counter alone, watching the results of the match on a projector with a stuffed roll in his hand.

FRANCIS
Makoto "Angel Blue" Yamasaki!

He glares at the projector.