

King of Blades

By

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INT. TOWN HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAWN

The sun's rays sift through the creamy beige curtains, warming them and casting a small patch of white onto the nearly barren carpet floor.

A cell phone rings against the backdrop of MAKOTO, a lithe but sturdily built 16 year-old girl kneeling by the foot of her single bed, cramming the last of her folded clothes into an already stuffed roller case. Her flowing silver hair spills behind her into a small pool, and her blue star eyes flip between her case and pictures of her friends and family atop the dresser nearby, almost bidding her farewell.

The phone chimes to hail a missed call, of which Makoto takes only passing notice while she clicks her case shut.

INT. TOWN HOUSE - STAIRWAY - DAWN

As Makoto descends the loamy staircase, her ears perk to the crackle of a stovetop igniting in the kitchen, from whence her paraplegic father, YOSHIHIRO, hovers to the staircase in his sleek hoverchair. The silver-haired man aims his coffee bean tan eyes at the blue star ones of his likewise maned daughter.

YOSHIHIRO

Well, look who's ready before the sun is even up. How's my little angel doing?

MAKOTO

I'm not your "little angel," Dad, but I'm as ready to go as I've ever been.

YOSHIHIRO

Good to hear.

Yoshihiro drifts away to bid Makoto safe passage to the kitchen, where ERI awaits, rice bowl in hand and midnight blue hair tied in a small horn.

ERI

Good morning, Makoto.

MAKOTO

(offhand)

Good morning, Mom.

Makoto darts between Eri and the kitchen table, stuffing food into her mouth.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO
 (between bites)
 I'd love to stay and talk, but I
 have to hurry. The train's leaving
 soon.

Finished with her hasty meal, she snatches her luggage,
 bolts for the front door, puts on her shoes...

MAKOTO
 Well, I'm going out.

ERI
 (in good will)
 Good luck.

...bursts out of the house, and closes the door behind her.
 Yoshihiro then hovers to a nearby window, through which he
 and Eri watch Makoto march down the street.

YOSHIHIRO
 And off she goes.

ERI
 Yeah.

Eri's cloudy blue eyes then track to the kitchen table,
 which is now missing roughly half of the food originally
 placed there.

INT. RAILWAY TO ORBIT - TRAIN CAR - MORNING

Makoto treads to her forward-facing seat, stows her luggage
 beneath it, and sits down. Seconds later, the train
 computer's holographic avatar, Y.A.A.K.O.V., materializes
 before his audience.

Y.A.A.K.O.V.
 Good morning, everyone, and welcome
 aboard the Railway to Orbit Red
 Dawn Line. I'm your 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 as he continues speaking...

(CONTINUED)

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. Keep your legs
and arms inside the train, and hang
on to your heads, everyone! This is
gonna be a bumpy ride!

Y.A.A.K.O.V. gazes to the sky, his body poised to sprint.
The train's engines rumble in accord...

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

EXT. RAILWAY TO ORBIT - CHIBA STATION - MORNING

...and thunder for takeoff. Makoto looks out the nearby
window...

Y.A.A.K.O.V.
And we have liftoff! Yeah!

...before she lurches into the back of her seat as the train
takes off.

TITLE CARD: KING OF BLADES

The train rides an ethereal, luminescent track through the
air, otherwise free of the bonds of gravity.

EXT. EARTH'S UPPER ATMOSPHERE - MORNING

Soon, the train breeches the clouds and rockets to a
colossal orbiting hulk of a city atop the remains of the
moon. Through the windows, Makoto glimpses the face of the
cataclysm-scarred Earth below.

INT. RAILWAY TO ORBIT - ARCADIA STATION - COMPRESSION
CHAMBER 33G - MORNING

The huge double doors ease shut...

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

...and a web of air jets HISSES.

AIR JET TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - OFFICE - DAY

HAROLD sits on a fragmented ring of bow benches, his sneaker-clad feet crossed atop a small table round. His arms otherwise crossed before his chest, he presses his equally wiry glasses against his fair, freckled nose and bats some of his straw blond hair away from his forehead. His dull wine-red eyes rove about the area.

At the great desk at the far end sits his bald-shaven colleague, KIERAN. A faint red tan darkens his already midnight brown skin. His strongly built face also houses his black beard stubble and solitary tree sap yellow right eye, the left sealed with a charcoal eye patch.

His nose buried in his holobook, Kieran sifts through note after daunting note of this year's attendance.

KIERAN
(sifting through his notes)
So, let's see, here...

Harold's eyes fix on him.

HAROLD
Quite a crowd this year, huh?

KIERAN
Ah, yes, Harold. Quite a lovely bunch indeed. I can hardly remember the last time we...

Kieran's head swerves from side to side.

KIERAN
Wait. Where's June?

Harold glances at his holographic clock...

(CONTINUED)

HAROLD
She should be here,
right...about...

...and the door flies open to hail the late arrival of a frantic and exhausted JUNIPER, her otherwise tidy, shoulder-length moss hair snagged on a pinstriped stocking. Her near-deathly pale skin almost blends into the door behind her. Her clouded amethyst eyes widen with anticipation for the start of the competition.

JUNIPER
(panting)
Sorry...I'm late... Don't start
without me.

HAROLD
Now.

She then scampers to the table and hovers between Kieran and Harold.

JUNIPER
Hope you guys remembered to get the
list, because the last few arrivals
just came this morning.

Harold squeezes his eyes open and shut...

HAROLD
Oh, don't worry. I've got the list
here.

...and then summons a holographic list to the table between himself and Kieran, at whose opposite side Juniper plops.

JUNIPER
So, who've we got?

HAROLD
Well...

Tapping a corner of the list, Harold enlarges the noble visages of first one competitor...

HAROLD
There's Xavier "Ironhide" Gusteau,
who won a fight by making his
opponent--and I quote you,
Kieran--the "filling for a
shield-and-temple sandwich"...

...then another...

HAROLD

...Clark "The Wild One" Owens, who won a fight where he got struck by lightning...

...and a third, urging Kieran to grin.

HAROLD

...and Tulio "El Dorado Loco" Hernandez, who somehow bit clean through an opponent's sword...which, despite this all being simulated, I still think shouldn't be possible.

Juniper, however, droops and slouches in her seat...

JUNIPER

(visibly disappointed)

Yeah, they're all great fighters, Harry, but none of them are real champs like...

...but then jolts herself with rekindled interest...

JUNIPER

Wait a minute.

...and straightens.

JUNIPER

Is he here?

HAROLD

(blunt)

Yes.

Juniper squeals.

JUNIPER

(excited)

I knew it I knew it!

HAROLD

What are you so excited about?

JUNIPER

What? The same thing everybody else is going to be excited about: Joshua "the Demon of the Blood Moon" Strada.

(CONTINUED)

HAROLD

May I remind you that he has single-handedly monopolized the title of King of Blades for the past nine years?

KIERAN

If by "monopolized", you mean "become an audience favorite and raked in great PR for us", then certainly.

Juniper tilts her head...

JUNIPER

That's not what the word means, is it?

HAROLD

Well, not exactly, but you get the idea.

...and the visage of a silver-haired samurai girl appears.

JUNIPER

(curious)

Ooh, who's that?

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ENTRANCE - DAY

A SENTRY floats past Makoto as she stands at the entrance to the Milky Way Stadium. She stares until another sentry pops into her face.

SENTRY 2

Hello.

Makoto flexes her fist, but then eases herself at the sentry's smiling screen.

SENTRY 2

Ah, I see you're registered for this year's Children of the Earth event.

MAKOTO

Uh...

SENTRY 2

Right this way, young lady.

It floats through the entrance...

(CONTINUED)

SENTRY 2

Oh, wait. I almost forgot.

...but then pauses as it turns back to her...

SENTRY 2

This is for you.

...and blips a tiny static bolt into Makoto's wrist.

MAKOTO

What did you do?

SENTRY 2

Check your N-pad, and you'll see.

Makoto blips the N-pad--a small, disc-like patch inserted into her skin--to find a holographic map of her own body dressed head to toe in vague silhouettes of ornate gear.

MAKOTO

My starting weapons and armor, I presume?

The sentry blips a cheery smile.

MAKOTO

I'll take that as a yes.

SENTRY 2

You've got the right idea.

The sentry spins to the entrance...

SENTRY 2

You've got fifteen minutes until you need to be center stage. You can get there through the locker rooms to either side of me.

...and then back to Makoto. Sure enough, the locker room doors flank each side of the entrance hallway.

SENTRY 2

Good luck.

The sentry floats away, leaving Makoto to pace to the girls' locker room and disappear inside.

CRANE ZOOM IN TO

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA - DAY

The stadium is filled with prismatic crisscrossed lights...

KIERAN (V.O.)

Ladies and gentlemen! Children,
teens, and everybody between! We're
your hosts, Kieran McCain, Juniper
Green, and Harold Richtofen, and
welcome back to this
year's...Children! Of the Earth!

...as the audience ripples with excitement.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

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

HAROLD (V.O.)

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

JUNIPER (V.O.)

I can hardly wait.

KIERAN (V.O.)

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

The uproar dies down to the arrival of FRANCIS, an aged,
somewhat portly man whose frosted black and white hair
complements his simple tuxedo and bowtie but stands out from
his deep tan complexion.

KIERAN (V.O.)

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

Francis stands tall center stage...

FRANCIS

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the
exhibition match of the 50th annual
Children of the Earth, set for 8
minutes!

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

(CONTINUED)

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 ring is a lanky, fairly built boy with a tattered black mat for hair and iron brown eyes.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

A gladiator, making his Children of the Earth debut.

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

FRANCIS (V.O.)

He stands 173 centimeters tall, weighing in at 70 kilos.

He is now dressed in a simple but elaborate brigandine vest, his head adorned with a gray headband. His boots are outfitted with metal blades like mutant ice skates. Tied at his hip via rope rests a sheathed hwando.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

Fighting out of Dongducheon, Korea! Presenting...!

He is...

FRANCIS (V.O.)

Gil Dong "Hangeul Pride" Rhee!

The audience greets him with a loud cheer.

FRANCIS (V.O.)

And his opponent! Fighting out of the red corner!

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

(CONTINUED)

FRANCIS (V.O.)
A samurai, making her Children of
the Earth debut.

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

FRANCIS (V.O.)
She stands 169 centimeters tall,
weighing in at 58 kilos.

A quick scan of her person reveals Makoto to be dressed head to toe in regal, midnight blue composite plate reminiscent of Medieval Japan. A long, silk scarf hangs from her shoulders. Tied to her hip via silken cord rests a sheathed katana with the word, "kusanagi", engraved in its pommel.

FRANCIS
Fighting out of Chiba, Japan!
Presenting...!

She stares across the stage...

FRANCIS
Makoto "Angel Blue" Yamasaki!

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

JUNIPER (V.O.)
You know, if I had to pick a theme
for this fight, it would probably
be "Sword/Shield/Hands."

KIERAN (V.O.)
I don't get it.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Eh, me neither. Let's just get to
the fight!

KIERAN (V.O.)
My pleasure.

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

KIERAN (V.O.)
In three...two...one...

The two combatants bathe in cybernetic blips and lights, and then vanish into the battle simulator.

WARP TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - GRASSY MEADOW -
SUNNY DAY

They find themselves standing at opposite ends of the sunlit meadow. Birds chirp in the distant woods encircling it, and thin wisps of cloud hang overhead. The warmth of the sun's rays caresses all it touches.

Makoto draws her hand to her katana.

MAKOTO
Good luck, Gil Dong.

Gil Dong, instead of reciprocating her good will, spits to the side.

MAKOTO
(under her breath)
How rude...

The arena computer chirps its baleful signal...

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)
Fight!

...and Gil Dong charges at Makoto, his eyes flaring with pride and his hwando brandished.

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

He leaps at Makoto with his outstretched leg, only to be parried...

KIERAN (V.O.)
Oh, nice parry by Mako--!

...and lashed out with her katana.

KIERAN (V.O.)
(excited)
Oh! And a beautiful follow-up hack to the leg!

Gil Dong recovers, landing on his feet.

HAROLD (V.O.)
It looks like that strike hit one of the studs on Gil Dong's shin guard, though.

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - 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!

Kieran and Harold loll their eyes at her, urging her to shrug back.

JUNIPER
What? You're both thinking it.

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - GRASSY MEADOW -
SUNNY DAY

Gil Dong continues his assault, Makoto her counterattack.

KIERAN (V.O.)
Gil Dong's doing well, but he just
can't breach Makoto's defenses, can
he?

HAROLD (V.O.)
His attack pattern seems too
linear.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
He's attacking her in a straight
line?

HAROLD (V.O.)
Yeah, I suppose.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Looks more like he's just attacking
her nonstop.

KIERAN (V.O.)
Points for aggression, but it's
really not helping otherwise.

At one point, Makoto grabs Gil Dong's ankle, flips him...

KIERAN (V.O.)
Ooh! And Makoto flips Gil Dong head
over heels--

...and follows up with a lash to his neck, blocked by his
hwando.

(CONTINUED)

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Whoa!

KIERAN (V.O.)

And there's the vicious follow-up
strike!

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Any further up and she might've
taken his head clean off!

They break away, stand ready...

MAKOTO

You're good, but you lack
discipline.

GIL DONG

I'll show you discipline!

...and resume their battle, partially oblivious to the horn
blaring a countdown in time to each number...

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)

Five...four...three...two...one...

...until it looses a long blast to halt.

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)

Time!

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 scratches and bruises.

WARP TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - BOOTH - DAY

Kieran half clenches his fist atop the table.

KIERAN

Sword wins!

JUNIPER

I thought you said you didn't get
it.

KIERAN

I didn't at the time. Now, I do.

(CONTINUED)

HAROLD

Don't call this fight just yet,
Kieran. May I remind you that time
ran out?

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA - DAY

Makoto and Gil Dong rematerialize outside the simulator and step away, the highlights of their duel on display for all to see.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Oh, of course. Guess we leave it to
the judges, then.

Francis marches to the center of the arena to deliver his verdict.

FRANCIS

Ladies and gentlemen, the five
judges have rendered their decision
for this fight, ending at 8
minutes. Declared the winner by
Split Decision: Gil Dong "Hangeul
Pride" Rhee!

Gil Dong raises his fist in triumph amidst the thunderous applause.

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ENTRANCE - DAY

Makoto walks alone, her arms half sagging. She stares once again along the walls, observing the simple but elegant arched ribbing above, and returns her gaze forward almost too late to avoid colliding with PRASHASTI--a lanky middle-aged woman with a low, lopsided jet black ponytail and brick red-tinged mud skin.

PRASHASTI

Whoa! Whoa! Hold it there! Hold it
there!

The two of them screech to a halt and step back from each other.

MAKOTO

Who are you?

PRASHASTI

Isn't it polite to introduce
yourself first?

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

Uh...yeah... Sorry. My name's Makoto.

PRASHASTI

And I'm Prashasti. Nice to meet you.

Prashasti hangs her head to the side...

PRASHASTI

I mean it's kind of clear that you've never been in Children of the Earth before, but you took to it like a duck to water.

MAKOTO

It's not that different from the kendo lessons I took at home. Except that it hurts more when they cut you. A lot more.

...and then rights herself.

PRASHASTI

By the way, since you're obviously new to Arcadia, why don't I take you on a tour around the city?

EXT. TREE OF HEAVEN MONUMENT - EVENING

Makoto and Prashasti round the street corner into a circular causeway. Several pedestrians pass by as they gaze upon the electrified canopy of a colossal tree-shaped spire, its branches mimicking the occasional sparks that fire into the air.

Prashasti waves to the great tree...

PRASHASTI

And that is my favorite spot in all of Arcadia: the Tree of Heaven Monument.

...which Makoto scans from canopy to roots and then back again.

MAKOTO

How aptly named.

(CONTINUED)

PRASHASTI
And beautiful.

Prashasti lowers her arm.

PRASHASTI
It transmits power to the whole
city. And before you ask, no, I
don't know how it does it.

She eyes the balcony beneath the branches.

MAKOTO
Hopefully, no one gets shocked when
they're watching the city from up
there.

PRASHASTI
To my knowledge, nobody has.
(half embarrassed)
Well, except for that one time when
somebody dared me to lick the
lowest branch.

She stares at Prashasti, and neither of them notice a random
BYSTANDER getting shocked on the balcony.

BYSTANDER
(out of earshot, barely
conscious)
Medic!

Prashasti at last breaks the otherwise silent awkwardness
with a wave...

PRASHASTI
But I digress.

...and points to a homely stretch of buildings at the far
end of the causeway.

PRASHASTI
See that little stand down the
street?

Makoto's eyes follow Prashasti's finger...

MAKOTO
The one with the big sign that says
"Moonphase?"

PRASHASTI

Yeah. During Children of the Earth events, that stand gives you weapons, armor, and stuff.

...and then reacquire her face.

MAKOTO

Like the shops in old RPGs, then.

PRASHASTI

Yeah.

Makoto blips her N-pad and notices a curious number on the holographic display.

MAKOTO

My scorecard, I presume?

PRASHASTI

That's right. The higher your score, the better your chance to make it into the tournament phase. And the better gear you can get. You are allowed to trade gear with other contestants, by the way, as long as you stay within your score.

MAKOTO

And where can I find this gear?

PRASHASTI

Well, usually...

EXT. MOONPHASE - FRONT COUNTER - DAY

Makoto scans the shuttered box building that is Moonphase, her eyes resting upon the inventory list taped to the lip of the counter. She crouches down for a closer look, twitching to find stat ratings and classifications but no price tags.

She rises to her feet and stretches her neck as XIANGZHI, the owner of Moonphase, struts to the stand. Makoto sees first her name with a quick glimpse of her name tag, and then the rest of her.

Xiangzhi is a violet-haired, cobalt-eyed young woman--which cannot possibly be her natural hair or eye colors--wearing clothes that show more of her lemon-orange skin than Makoto herself would dare.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO
You must be Xiangzhi.

XIANGZHI
I take it Prashasti sent you here.

MAKOTO
Friend of yours?

XIANGZHI
Ever since we were young.

Makoto bows her head in reverence.

MAKOTO
My name's Makoto Yamasaki. It's
nice to meet you.

XIANGZHI
You don't have to be so formal
around the likes of me.

MAKOTO
I'm playing the part of a samurai's
daughter in this competition.
Shouldn't I stay in character?

JOSHUA (V.O.)
A samurai's daughter, eh?

Towering behind Makoto is JOSHUA, and Makoto turns back to his voice. There, she sees the imposing pale-skinned visage of a stone-faced, pale skinned, middle-aged giant with disheveled ash brown hair and cloud gray eyes.

Makoto extends her hand to Joshua, only to have it slapped away. The giant about-faces with a lazy but condescending sneer...

JOSHUA
I'm sorry, but I speak with
warriors, not pale shadows.

...and marches off. Xiangzhi seats her head in her hands as she leans into her counter. Makoto passes her a stern but gentle look.

MAKOTO
What's the deal with him?

XIANGZHI
You'll have to forgive him. He's
the 9-time undefeated King of
Blades.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO
(partly astonished)
Wait.

She takes an awkward step...

MAKOTO
That was the Joshua Strada? As in
"the Demon of the Blood Moon?" The
man who--

XIANGZHI
Yes, yes, and no.

...and then rights herself.

MAKOTO
Sorry. I kind of started to lose my
head for a second there.

XIANGZHI
It happens to all of us.

Xiangzhi too rights herself and brushes her short pants with
both hands.

XIANGZHI
But enough of that. How can I help
you?

MAKOTO
You mean besides handling equipment
in Children of the Earth and
telling me where the competitors
stay during said competition?

Makoto triggers a chuckle from Xiangzhi as she mounts her
hand to her hip...

XIANGZHI
Try heading to Starlight Rise. It's
where all the other competitors are
staying, from what I hear.

...and then points down the street.

XIANGZHI
It's that way, by the way.

FADE TO

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - RED SUN WING - EVENING

The ping of the parting elevator door bids Makoto leave. As she walks down the expansive hallway to her suite, she glimpses door after door to one suite after another. She almost bumps into Prashasti standing in front of one door as she returns her gaze forward.

MAKOTO
(astonished)
Prashasti?

PRASHASTI
We just keep running into each
other, don't we?

Makoto steps back to regain her bearings...

PRASHASTI
And before you ask, that's right,
Makoto. I'm your coach.

...and holds them with a half blank look.

MAKOTO
Okay.

Prashasti tilts her head with a goggle.

PRASHASTI
What?

Makoto shrugs.

PRASHASTI
No, shouldn't you say something
like, "You've got to be kidding?"

MAKOTO
They assigned you as my coach for a
reason, didn't they?

PRASHASTI
But I thought for sure you thought
I was a total ditz by now.

MAKOTO
I've noticed that you know your way
around the city, and judging from
the fact that you're my coach, you
must know a lot about the
competition. That's not the mark of
a total ditz, and I should know;

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO (cont'd)
I'm friends with a couple back
home.

Prashasti smiles reassured, and then points behind Makoto...

PRASHASTI
Speaking of friends, look who's
coming your way.

...who tracks her finger to see Gil Dong passing by.

GIL DONG
(flat)
You again? I thought I killed you
at the arena.

Without even looking back, Gil Dong marches further down the hallway.

MAKOTO
(deadpan)
And good evening to you too, Gil
Dong.

PRASHASTI
Just ignore him for now.

He stops at another door, blips it unlocked by touching his wrist-embedded N-Pad to the side, rips the door open, and half slams it shut as he slips into the room therein. The approaching TULLIO pauses to mull this same door, his hand wrapped around his chin.

He is a willowy but taut 16 year-old boy whose moss green eyes rove about from within his dirt complexion, a small rat tail dangling from the back of his dark brown-haired head.

FADE TO

INT. INTO THE NIGHT - LOBBY - EVENING

The muted technopop heartbeats and strobing dance lights greet Xiangzhi through the almost glassy expanse of lobby as she struts her way to the arced bar at her left...

INT. INTO THE NIGHT - EAST WING BAR - EVENING

...where there stands CLARK--a taller, fairly built man whose faded beige visage holds a set of amber eyes, a scraggly mat of midnight blue hair, and a mighty jawline. He looks up from the complicated code running on his N-pad's display and cocks an eyebrow as Xiangzhi sidles up to the counter.

BARTENDER

What can I get for you, miss?

XIANGZHI

(to the bartender)

A Jade Dawn, please.

BARTENDER

Really?

XIANGZHI

With a little umbrella.

BARTENDER

...Coming right up.

The bartender disappears behind the counter and sets to work on Xiangzhi's toxic order.

CLARK

Long time, no see, Xiangzhi.

Resting her arm on the counter, only now does Xiangzhi notice Clark.

XIANGZHI

Has it really been that long,
Clark? And what kind of name is
Clark Owens, anyway?

Clark strokes his chin.

CLARK

(joking)

So, you know who I am.

XIANGZHI

(playing along)

Of course.

The bartender looses a yelp as something sings his eye.

(CONTINUED)

XIANGZHI

But then again, it is just opening week. Given time, you might not even make it into the tournament phase.

CLARK

We'll see about that. Just you watch.

XIANGZHI

No bet.

Xiangzhi returns her gaze to the bartender as he returns with her shimmering green drink. The paper umbrella sifts little of its seemingly radioactive light. Clark winces to cover his face with his hand.

BARTENDER

Here you go. One Jade Dawn with a little umbrella.

XIANGZHI

Thank you, sir.

She snatches the drink...

XIANGZHI

Remind me to do you a favor later.

BARTENDER

Will do.

...flicks the umbrella with her finger several times, and gulps down a hardy swig of the drink. It seems to hum and crackle as she claps the cup on the counter.

CLARK

(half gagging)

How much alcohol is in that thing?

XIANGZHI

(impish)

Trust me. The alcohol's the least of your worries.

Grasping the glass again, Xiangzhi hoists it to the flashing light array leaking through the sound wall...

XIANGZHI

Here's to Arcadia.

...and gulps down another swig. Again, she claps the cup on the counter, her exhaling visibly electrified.

(CONTINUED)

CRACKLE TO

INT. MAKOTO'S SUITE ROOM - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Gil Dong opens the door, surprised to suddenly feel the heavy mist of a hot bath as he prepares to shed his shirt. A quick glimpse of the room therein alerts him to something wrong, even more so as a bar of soap hurtles past his nose and knocks the closing door. Turning to the launch site, he just as quickly shields his eyes from the equally frightened and embarrassed Makoto hiding in the tub.

GIL DONG
(frantic)
What are you doing here?!

MAKOTO
(frantic)
Taking a bath, obviously! What are you doing here?!

GIL DONG
I don't know!

MAKOTO
Then go away, you pervert!

Makoto leaps to her feet to charge at the fleeing Gil Dong...

GIL DONG
Okay! Okay! I'm going!

...but, glimpsing her still naked self, retreats to the tub with a squeal.

INT. MAKOTO'S SUITE ROOM - NIGHT

Braced against the door to the bathroom, the wide-eyed Gil Dong wheezes, but then glances down to spot a crudely fashioned teleporter gate platform at the foot of the door, whereupon is etched a barely legible name that steams his blood and narrows his eyes.

FADE OUT

BLINK TO

INT. MAKOTO'S SUITE ROOM - MORNING

Makoto blinks her heavy eyes to two identical brown-haired, turquoise-eyed faces beaming down at her from atop the same pair of shoulders. Their 16 year-old conjoined owners, YUKIKO and NATSUMI, brace their respective arms and legs to either side of Makoto.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(singsong)
Guess who!

They hop off of the bed as Makoto kicks at them...

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(singsong)
Ha ha! Missed us again!

...and hauls herself upright.

MAKOTO
(still half asleep)
Ungh... Yukiko? Natsumi? What are you two doing here?

YUKIKO
You want the long version?

NATSUMI
Or the short version?

MAKOTO
Whichever one makes you less annoying.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
Short version it is!

Makoto more or less ignores Yukiko and Natsumi as they blather. She simply rises up to smooth out her sheets...

YUKIKO
See, after you left, a representative from Arcadia came to announce a big lottery at our school...

NATSUMI
To send one lucky student into space and report on this year's Children of the Earth.

(CONTINUED)

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
And guess who won. That's right;
us!

INT. MAKOTO'S SUITE ROOM - BATHROOM - MORNING

...brushes her teeth in front of her sink...

NATSUMI
Well, actually, I won.

YUKIKO
(joking)
No, I did.

NATSUMI
(playing along)
Whatever. But given our...how
should we say, "condition"...

YUKIKO
The student council had to bend the
rules a bit so we could both go.

NATSUMI
I mean, it's not like we could help
it.

YUKIKO
It's just how we are, anyway.

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - RED SUN WING - MORNING

...and paces down the hall to the elevators.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
And wait. There's more.

YUKIKO
We even got the chance to pick
competitors to follow. Lots of
people were in similar lotteries
all over the world.

NATSUMI
Of course, the limit was normally
one per competitor, but...again
with how we are.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

And let me guess. All the other competitors were picked, so you picked me.

The three girls in two bodies stop at the elevators, awaiting future company.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

(a la tacky buzzer)

Buuu!

("normal")

We got first pick.

Makoto breathes a sigh, and the passing Gil Dong catches her eyes. He, in turn, screeches to a halt and shoots a glance back.

MAKOTO

You!

GIL DONG

You!

Yukiko points at Makoto.

YUKIKO

(joking)

You!

Natsumi points at Gil Dong.

NATSUMI

(joking)

You!

They shift their hands to open palms...

NATSUMI

(joking)

Him!

YUKIKO

(joking)

Her!

...shrug at each other...

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

(almost laughing)

Them!

...and share a giggle, triggering a roll of Makoto's eyes and a shake of Gil Dong's head.

EXT. TREE OF HEAVEN MONUMENT - BASE - DAY

Prashasti strides along the causeway to the Tree of Heaven Monument with her arms spread wide to either side, breathing in and out as much air as her lungs can hold. Her eyes open to the sulking visage of SERGEI, an aged man in a trace military jacket and boots. His otherwise bald head sports a low, flat, gray mohawk. A small tuft of similarly colored beard adorns his squared chin.

He merely glances back as Prashasti stops beside him.

PRASHASTI

I take it Tulio's little prank last night went well, Sergei?

SERGEI

Evidently.

Prashasti sidles up beside Sergei, her hands behind her back.

PRASHASTI

So, it looks like the two of us are rivals again. Coaching our proteges to hopes of victory.

(joking)

Well, maybe I shouldn't say "coach" as much as I should say "blab."

Sergei does not answer; his eyes are fixed on a small plaque embedded in the monument's trunk.

PRASHASTI

(awkward)

Uh...lovely weather today, isn't it? Artificial gravity thingy holding up well, too.

Again, no answer.

PRASHASTI

(half frustrated,
intentionally stilted)

I wonder if it is going to rain tonight, or maybe we'll see a clear view of Earth.

He says nothing.

PRASHASTI

Not in the mood to talk, huh?

(CONTINUED)

SERGEI

Not much to talk about aside from
that monster.

PRASHASTI

Monster?

Sergei storms off...

PRASHASTI

Hey. Where are you going?

...leaving Prashasti to flap her arms at him.

PRASHASTI

(exasperated)

At least tell me about the monster!
Rude!

EXT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM HALLWAY - MORNING

Makoto, Gil Dong, Yukiko and Natsumi walk in a loose
triangle through the pristine glass hallway shaft that leads
to what should be the hotel gymnasium.

GIL DONG

All I'm saying is that he set me up
to peep at you.

MAKOTO

I figured that out when I heard you
storm out of my suite.

At the far end of the hallway, they see Tulio standing
beside a simple, barren bench near a huge set of double
doors.

GIL DONG

Within the conversation...

He glances at Gil Dong, rubs the back of his neck with his
hand, and rights himself, his hands twitching for the healed
ant bites on his face.

TULIO

Ah, if it isn't my old roommate,
Gil Dong?

Gil Dong and the girls stop short of Tulio...

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG
(flat)
Hi, Tulio.

...at whom Makoto pinches her chin.

MAKOTO
Old...roommate?

TULIO
Ah, never mind that. Just,
um...who's your roommate, anyway?

Makoto eyes Yukiko and Natsumi, noticing the N-pad embedded between the valley of their clavicles and the fissure at their necks.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(defeated)
Okay. We lied. There was no
lottery.

YUKIKO
We were on the same train to
Arcadia as you.

NATSUMI
We got assigned to your room after
your exhibition match.

Makoto shrugs and glances aside.

MAKOTO
Yeah. I didn't believe your lottery
story anyway.

TULIO
Well, I suppose that answers that
question. Now, Gil Dong...

Tulio scans between Makoto, Gil Dong, Yukiko, and Natsumi,
and then reacquires Gil Dong.

TULIO
You're still going on about last
night, aren't you?

Gil Dong does not answer.

TULIO
Come on. It's just a harmless bit
of fun.

GIL DONG

You call warping me into another competitor's bathroom while she's taking a bath a harmless bit of fun?

TULIO

Says the dude who sicced me with a colony of fire ants.

Makoto cannot help but crack a snicker.

TULIO

Where'd you get them, anyway?

GIL DONG

A present from my grandpa.

Tulio touches his finger to the back of his hand, blips his N-pad...

TULIO

Well, perhaps I should get straight to my point. I've got a little something to make it up to you two.

...and summons a call for six tickets from his N-pad.

TULIO

(tacky)

Presto!

Makoto and Gil Dong examine first Tulio's tacky smile, and then the tickets.

MAKOTO

That's something you just happened to have lying around, isn't it?

TULIO

We've got to keep the story moving.

GIL DONG

Story? What story?

FADE TO

INT. RIVER OF HEAVEN WATER PARK - POOLSIDE - DAY

The six of them now dressed in various swimsuits, Makoto fits her hand above her eyes as if a visor, while Tulio, Gil Dong, Yukiko, Natsumi, and Prashasti take to the water's edge. She paces off to sit on a bench by herself.

A short while later, Tulio hauls himself out of the water and peers down at Gil Dong as he breeches the surface.

TULIO

So, Gil Dong.

Gil Dong swims to the ledge to meet Tulio...

TULIO

How are things going between you and Senorita Yamasaki?

...and rests his crossed arms.

GIL DONG

If you mean romantically, I assure you there's nothing going on between me and Split Foot.

TULIO

Split Foot? That's an insult, isn't it?

GIL DONG

Only to the Japanese. And even if she wasn't, there's no way I'd be involved with her. We're rivals, nothing more.

He too hauls himself out of the water.

GIL DONG

By the way, what's the deal with you and treating girls like toys?

TULIO

What do you mean?

GIL DONG

Teleporting me into Makoto's hotel room, for one.

TULIO

If you mean to imply that I'm a pervert, it's a bit more complicated than that.

(CONTINUED)

Gil Dong shakes his head.

In response, Tulio dashes beside Yukiko and Natsumi from behind as they talk...

TULIO

Watch. When you push this button...

...and pets them between their necks, triggering a ticklish wince with dual gasps. They fumble Tulio's hand away as they turn back to him.

TULIO

That happens.

GIL DONG

(sarcastic)

Uh-huh.

Tulio then reaches for the twins' cleavage...

TULIO

And when you push this button...

...only to be intercepted and slung back into the water by Prashasti...

PRASHASTI

That happens.

...who then stretches her arms above her head. Tulio bursts through the surface of the water and latches on to the ledge.

PRASHASTI

And before you ask, I competed in Children of the Earth once.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

Really?

PRASHASTI

Really.

TULIO

Oh, yeah. You got creamed that year, didn't you?

Prashasti's arms droop by her side.

PRASHASTI

(bashful)

Well...yes...

(CONTINUED)

A dual giggle from the twins later, Tulio heaves himself out.

TULIO

By the way, thanks for illustrating my point back there.

PRASHASTI

You mean my throwing you into the water?

TULIO

More like showing what happens to perverts in public.

GIL DONG

I'm just glad Makoto didn't get to do that to me.

Yukiko and Natsumi glimpse Makoto's absence.

YUKIKO

Speaking of Makoto, has anyone seen her?

NATSUMI

Last I checked, she was right next to us.

YUKIKO

Same here.

NATSUMI

Then how should I know?

Gil Dong points to Makoto sitting at the edge of the deep end of the artificial sea and grins.

Unaware, Makoto splashes her feet in the water, counting on her extended fingers.

MAKOTO

(under her breath)

The landmarks. The food. The living space. The view of Earth.

She closes her hand and smiles to herself...

MAKOTO

(under her breath, thinly amused)

Your stories don't do this city justice, Dad...

(CONTINUED)

...when suddenly, Gil Dong heaves her off the ledge and into the water. Victorious, he puffs his chest and clenches his fist at his heart.

GIL DONG
(proud)
Ha ha! Let that be a lesson to you!
Underestimate me, and...!

But his triumph morphs to horror as he sees Makoto failing to breach the surface of the water.

GIL DONG
(nervous)
Oh, no...

INT. RIVER OF HEAVEN WATER PARK - UNDERWATER - DAY

The sinking Makoto claws and scratches for the surface, only to sink deeper, until at last, she opens her mouth and swallows water while trying to gasp for air. The last thing she thinks she sees is a silhouette diving into the pool and swimming to her rescue.

FADE OUT

PRASHASTI (V.O.)
Okay. Is she breathing?

BLINK TO

INT. RIVER OF HEAVEN WATER PARK - BENCHES - DAY

Makoto opens her eyes to face first the ceiling, and then Gil Dong kneeling over her.

GIL DONG
I don't know. I'm not trained in
CPR.

She coughs up some pool water.

TULIO (V.O.)
Oh, look. She's coming to.

Gil Dong snaps his head to Makoto, unaware that his hand is squishing into her chest...

GIL DONG
Huh?

(CONTINUED)

...until she punches him in the jaw. She sits up on the floor, her arms crossed at her chest, and glares at the recovering Gil Dong.

MAKOTO
(enraged and embarrassed)
If you ever do that again...

Cracking his jaw into place, Gil Dong returns Makoto's glare.

GIL DONG
(agonized and frustrated)
Hey, I saved your life!

MAKOTO
Right after pushing me into the water?

GIL DONG
Not my fault; you never told me you couldn't swim.

Makoto opens her mouth to object, but then sinks her eyes. Yukiko and Natsumi mount their hands at their respective hips and shoot Gil Dong twin sneers.

NATSUMI
Well, since you're the one who pushed her in...

YUKIKO
Why not teach her?

TULIO
They've got a point.

Gil Dong roves his eyes between Makoto and their audience, and then lowers his shoulders.

GIL DONG
(hesitant)
Fine. But just for today. Okay?

Tulio mock salutes...

TULIO
(tacky)
Yes, sir!

...at which Gil Dong can't help but snicker. No sooner does he turn back to Makoto, however, than he sees her trying to ease into the water.

GIL DONG

Makoto!

Makoto hops out, almost bumping into Gil Dong...

GIL DONG

What are you, dense? You know you
can't swim!

MAKOTO

I can learn just fine on my own.
Watch me.

...and then goes for the water again, caught by Gil Dong's
hand clamped on her wrist. She tenses up, but then eases
off.

MAKOTO

Okay. I heard their suggestion, and
I agree.

GIL DONG

(reluctant)

That makes two of us.

Makoto looses a grudging but respectful huff.

MAKOTO

By the way, where's your coach?

GIL DONG

You mean Sergei? Probably standing
someplace unimportant.

EXT. RIVER OF HEAVEN WATER PARK - ENTRANCE - DAY

Sergei stands alone, scanning the River of Heaven park
building. A stroke of his beard flags the arrival of Clark
from behind him.

CLARK

Excuse me, sir, but I'm going to
have to ask you to step away from
the entrance.

No answer.

CLARK

Hey, I said move.

Clark strides to Sergei and reaches for his shoulder...

(CONTINUED)

CLARK

Are you deaf or something--?

...but in a screaming blur, finds himself thrown to the ground by his arm. Sergei strides off.

SERGEI

(muttering)

Usa scum.

Clark sits up and dusts himself off, watching the departing Sergei.

FADE TO

EXT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM HALLWAY - EVENING

Their rolled towels draped across the backs of their necks, Makoto and Gil Dong pass by the entrance of the gymnasium, which Gil Dong peers inside.

GIL DONG

(thinly impressed)

Well, look at that.

Makoto stops with a glance back to Gil Dong.

MAKOTO

(blunt)

Almost as impressive as my picking up swimming so quickly, I'll bet? What can I say? I'm a fast learner.

GIL DONG

That doesn't even compare to this. Look.

She too peers inside the gym.

MAKOTO (V.O.)

Okay. This is impressive.

GIL DONG (V.O.)

Yeah. Too bad no fights here count towards our scores, or else I'd eliminate you right here and now.

Makoto leaks a flat stare at Gil Dong...

MAKOTO

(sarcastic)

Oh, sure you would.

(CONTINUED)

...who stands undaunted and unamused. His eyes rove between the gymnasium entrance and Makoto.

GIL DONG

You know, it's kind of stupid how we have to sign up for matches at the stadium in order to earn points.

MAKOTO

Maybe for those who want to get the competition over with...

Makoto summons her score card from her N-pad, where it shows the schedule for upcoming matches...

MAKOTO (V.O.)

...but I suppose it's a matter of both encouraging active participation and ensuring equal opportunity.

GIL DONG

In other words?

...and then dismisses it.

MAKOTO

Everyone gets a chance, but they all have to take it.

GIL DONG

Okay. I guess that makes sense.

She jolts her hand as her cell phone rings...

MAKOTO

Hold on. I need to take this.

...digs into her pocket, fishes out the phone, and puts it to her ear.

MAKOTO

Hello, Mom.

ERI (V.O.)

Hello, Makoto. Glad to see you're okay. Just wait until you come home with such great stories to tell me.

MAKOTO

Like Dad, right?

ERI (V.O.)

...What?

A tense pause.

ERI (V.O.)

Makoto?

MAKOTO

I'm still here. And...well, I'm
sorry, but I'll just tell you
straight.

A deep breath, and a clench of her fist.

MAKOTO

I don't expect to return. In fact,
I plan not to.

ERI (V.O.)

...What?

Instead of answering, Makoto simply sags her cell phone by
her side...

ERI (V.O.)

Makoto, are you there? Makoto--?

...and hangs up to see Gil Dong standing by the gym's empty
help desk, his arms crossed at his chest.

GIL DONG

Who was that?

MAKOTO

My mother. She calls me every now
and then to let me know how things
are going back home.

GIL DONG

Which would be Japan, right?

MAKOTO

...Yeah...

Gil Dong uncrosses his arms and paces toward Makoto...

GIL DONG

(insulting)

You must be so damn proud of your
country, huh?

...stopping at arm's length from her side.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

Are you kidding? After everything Japan did to the world, it could sink beneath the ocean for all I care.

He cocks an eyebrow.

GIL DONG

That's...not something I'd expect to hear from the mouth of a Japanese. Even with such a troubled past, why would you hate your own homeland?

Makoto shrugs...

MAKOTO

I don't hate it; I just don't care for it.

...stows away her cell phone, and hangs her arm.

MAKOTO

It's one of the reasons I came here.

GIL DONG

What other reasons did you have?

MAKOTO

I'd...rather not talk about it right now. But let's just say that I see becoming the champion as just a means to an end.

She walks away from the gym...

MAKOTO

Good night.

...pauses to turn back with a thin smile...

MAKOTO

Thanks for the swimming lessons, by the way.

...and resumes her trek to her suite room.

CLASH TO

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM - GYM SIMULATOR -
ANCIENT AMPHITHEATER - DAY

Makoto, Gil Dong, Tulio, and the Itous are locked in a deadly free-for-all, enclosed within the crumbling amphitheater ruin. The simulator's structure seems to rattle with every blow they land on each other.

Gil Dong, in his signature light brigandine, attacks with his hwando and grieve edge.

Makoto, in her majestic keepsake medium plate armor, replies with her katana.

Tulio, clad in a regal flowing purple robe and gilded breastplate, is armed with a jeweled rapier and main gauche.

And Yukiko and Natsumi, together in their crude but heavy plate armor, carry a single colossal war hammer between them.

The five of them clash and break away.

TULIO
(trying to maintain face)
You've improved since this event
started. What's new?

MAKOTO
Improved?

TULIO
Of course. Just a few weeks ago,
you went down after one blow.

Yukiko and Natsumi rest their hammer across their shoulders.

NATSUMI
To be fair, that blow was from us.

YUKIKO
All you did was cushion it, Tulio.

Tulio rights himself, watching Makoto and Gil Dong do likewise.

GIL DONG
Less babbling, more battling.

MAKOTO
He's got a point.

(CONTINUED)

TULIO
Of course he does.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
Our pleasure.

The five ready their weapons and brace themselves for another clash. Suddenly, the amphitheater fizzles and crackles away to yield a huge, whitewashed dome interior.

GYM COMPUTER (V.O.)
(repeating)
Simulation terminated.

All the combatants' weapons and armor vanish into pixelated dust as their respective owners rematerialize atop circular lights outside the simulator.

FIZZLE TO

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM - OUTSIDE THE GYM
SIMULATOR - DAY

They all glance first at each other, then at the slouching Sergei at the simulator controls.

Sergei storms off...

EXT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM HALLWAY - DAY

...and stomps his way down the halls, away from the gym.

MAKOTO (V.O.)
Let me guess. That was your coach.

He pauses to shake his head clear.

GIL DONG (V.O.)
"Coach" being a term we use really loosely, and his name is Sergei. All he ever tells Tulio and me is stuff like, "You're doomed," and, "Why prolong your suffering?"

He looks back to the gym...

MAKOTO (V.O.)
How'd you get stuck with him?

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG (V.O.)

The same way you got stuck with yours, obviously.

...and then keeps walking.

YUKIKO (V.O.)

Our coach just says stuff like, "Try to win," or, "Do better than you're currently doing."

NATSUMI (V.O.)

And let's not forget, "49 years and still no Queen of Blades. Just King after King. What's up with that?"

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM - DAY

The five now stand near the entrance of the gymnasium.

MAKOTO

Hmm. Maybe, they say that to motivate us to be independent.

GIL DONG

You mean to get us to train on our own?

TULIO

Most likely. And yeah, I know. It's kind of stupid.

MAKOTO

But not completely ineffective.

Makoto, Gil Dong, and Tulio rove their eyes in awkward silence while Yukiko and Natsumi grin at the ceiling vents.

EXT. ARCADIA POLICE HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Flanking the entrance to the building is a lone police officer armed with an empty, blank coffee mug. Then, he spots Sergei plodding down the street alone, his hands folded behind his back.

SERGEI

Can I help you, officer?

He stops.

(CONTINUED)

OFFICER 1

Not much, sir. I was just bored,
and I felt like I needed someone to
talk to.

SERGEI

No surprise, given this city's
almost nonexistent crime rate.

OFFICER 1

What do you want to talk about?

SERGEI

I didn't want to talk until you
stopped me. I was just thinking
about something someone won't stop
raving about.

OFFICER 1

What would that be?

SERGEI

That in 50 years of Children of the
Earth, there have only been Kings
of Blades, never Queens.

The officer pinches his chin.

OFFICER 1

Hmm... Now that you mention it,
that does seem a bit odd,
especially considering that people
of all ages and both genders
compete on equal terms.

SERGEI

Well, this same person who won't
stop raving thinks that having
babies aside, anything men can do,
women can do. And vice versa.

OFFICER 1

What do you think?

SERGEI

Theoretically, yes. Practically,
no.

Sergei turns away...

SERGEI

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a
walk to finish.

(CONTINUED)

...and resumes walking.

SERGEI

You'd best return to your post
before your superiors catch you.

The officer watches Sergei disappear around a corner before returning to his post.

FADE TO

INT. INTO THE NIGHT - EAST WING BAR - NIGHT

Xiangzhi leads Makoto and co. to the counter, where she rests her arm before the already active bartender. She lets a smile breach her face as she sees his arm slither beneath the counter.

BARTENDER

A Jade Dawn, Ms. Ruan?

XIANGZHI

Yes, please.

Her fingertips drum the counter.

XIANGZHI

(singsong)

And don't forget the little
umbrella.

The bartender whips forth the noxious concoction...

BARTENDER

I didn't.

...which Xiangzhi accepts. Makoto, Gil Dong, Tulio, Yukiko, and Natsumi shield their faces as Xiangzhi downs her drink.

TULIO

(half gagging)

You must really want to do your
liver in.

CLARK (V.O.)

You're not the first person to say
that, and you won't be the last.

Clark arrives to the counter as Xiangzhi exhales an electric half-belch and rests her cup.

(CONTINUED)

XIANGZHI
Clark. Perfect timing.

CLARK
Always a pleasure, Xiangzhi.

MAKOTO
Uh, excuse me.

Makoto raises her finger, but Xiangzhi puts her free palm forth.

XIANGZHI
Just consider him my "business partner," Makoto.

The others ogle, urging Xiangzhi to rove her eyes between them and then slap her forehead.

XIANGZHI
Oh, where did I leave my manners this time? Ha ha!

Clark shakes his head...

CLARK
It's all right. Let me guess.

...and tracks his finger between Makoto and company...

CLARK
Makoto, Gil Dong, Tulio, and...

...before letting it hover between Yukiko and Natsumi...

CLARK
Uh, which one of...?

...who point to their respective selves.

YUKIKO
Yukiko.

NATSUMI
And Natsumi.

CLARK
Thank you.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(giggling)
You're welcome.

Clark lowers his hand, half-ignoring Xiangzhi as she gulps another shot of her glowing drink.

CLARK

Xiangzhi has told me quite a bit about you 5...uh, there are 5 of you, right?

MAKOTO

Indeed. Thanks for considering us so highly.

Xiangzhi exhales a slower, more controlled cloud of electric mist while Clark turns to Makoto.

CLARK

Don't get the wrong idea, young Ms. Yamasaki. This is still a competition.

MAKOTO

I know. So, if we face each other, you'd better act like we've never met, because I'll do the same.

CLARK

I assure you. I'll do more than that.

Yukiko mounts her hand at her hip and turns her eyes to Natsumi...

YUKIKO

(joking)

Isn't he a little polite for an usa?

...but then catches Clark glaring at her...

YUKIKO

(shocked)

Oops!

...and plasters her hand over her mouth. Natsumi's hand covers it as well, and both twins smile sheepishly at Clark.

NATSUMI

(sheepish)

Sorry, sir. She didn't mean that as an insult.

He huffs.

(CONTINUED)

CLARK
(stung)
She'd better not have.

As Xiangzhi sets her cup down again, the bartender turns his attention to Makoto.

BARTENDER
Can I get any of you something?

MAKOTO
No thanks. We don't drink.

BARTENDER
Suit yourselves.

Tulio bounces his eyes between the dance floor and Clark, letting his hand creep to his chin.

TULIO
So, Clark, is it?

CLARK
You probably should've figured that out when Xiangzhi called my name.

TULIO
What? Can't you take a joke?

XIANGZHI
He's not one for that brand of humor.

GIL DONG
That makes two of us.

XIANGZHI
Three, really, if you include your girlfriend, Gil Dong.

Gil Dong leers at Xiangzhi...

GIL DONG
(half exasperated)
She's not my girlfriend!

...and then snaps his head from side to side to see Makoto suddenly absent.

GIL DONG
(surprised)
Wait a second. Where is she?

Yukiko and Natsumi shrug.

(CONTINUED)

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
She seems to wander off a lot
lately.

Tulio squints between Gil Dong and the now enlivened dance crowd. He then grabs Gil Dong's arm...

GIL DONG
(surprised)
Hey, what are you---?

...and yanks him through the sound wall to the dance floor.

INT. INTO THE NIGHT - MAIN DANCE ROOM - EVENING

The crowd jumps in time to the beat of the music, waving their glowsticks and chanting...

CLUBBERS
(chanting)
Go! Go! Go! Go!

Tulio shuffles through the crowd, dragging Gil Dong behind him until they see Makoto dancing center stage. Amidst the crowd, Gil Dong cups his hands to his mouth and shouts aloud...

GIL DONG
(shouting, barely audible
through the crowd)
You're beautiful, Makoto!

Though Makoto cannot hear him, she sees his lips move as she dances, and she smiles at him.

FADE TO

MONTAGE - THE COMPETITION PROGRESSES - OVER THE NEXT FOUR MONTHS

--Prashasti signals Makoto, Yukiko, and Natsumi for a quick talk in the cafeteria.

--Makoto trains alone in the gym simulator.

--On her way to the gym, she explores other features of her N-pad, including an Arcadia network browser. Prashasti looks on but decides not to butt in.

--Tulio defeats an opponent in a simulated forest clearing at the Milky Way Stadium.

(CONTINUED)

FRANCIS (V.O.)
Tulio "El Dorado Loco" Hernandez!

--Prashasti stands atop the balcony of the Tree of Heaven Monument, blissfully unaware of Clark scanning its canopy from the ground below.

--Kieran, Juniper, and Harold watch the updated list of competitors and their points in their office.

KIERAN
Any comments, June?

JUNIPER
Not really, no.

--Josuhua defeats an opponent in a simulated temple ruin at the Milky Way Stadium.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
Joshua "the Demon of the Blood
Moon" Strada!

--Sergei stands beside a tall building alone, staring at the scarred Earth above.

--A cryptic message reaches an officer standing outside the police station.

--Gil Dong defeats an opponent atop a simulated plateau at the Milky Way Stadium.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
Gil Dong "Hangeul Pride" Rhee!

--Leaving the gym, Makoto sees an incoming call on her cell phone, but decides not to answer it while she browses through housing options listed on her N-pad.

--Yukiko and Natsumi defeat an opponent at the mouth of a simulated cavern at the Milky Way Stadium.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
"The Inseparable" Yukiko and
Natsumi Itou!

--Xiangzhi sends off another competitor from Moonphase, and then rests her chin in her palm. Once alone, she turns her gaze to the Tree of Heaven Monument.

--Makoto, Gil Dong, Tulio, Yukiko, and Natsumi prepare to train together in the arena simulator.

(CONTINUED)

--Makoto defeats an opponent in front of a simulated palace gate at the Milky Way Stadium.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
Makoto "Angel Blue" Yamasaki!

--Gil Dong lies awake in his bed at night, staring at the ceiling with his fist raised.

--Makoto lies awake in her bed that same night, her hand creeping to her heart as she breathes a sigh.

FADE TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - BOOTH - DAY

Kieran, Harold, and Juniper sit together at the announce table, greeting the cheering crowd.

KIERAN
Ladies and gentlemen, the 50th annual Children of the Earth tourney is steadily reaching its climax, right here, in Arcadia!
(scolding but jovial)
And for those of you with dirty minds, please, get your heads out of the gutter.

A small wave of chuckling ripples over the crowd, urging Juniper to smirk.

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA - DAY

Onscreen at the arena stage center, the audience sees highlights from various segments of the competition thus far.

(cont'd)

Anyway, as you're all aware, the next phase of the competition is very, very close: the tournament phase!

JUNIPER (V.O.)
And you know what that means for the winner. Right, folks?

The audience shouts out in accord with Juniper.

(CONTINUED)

(cont'd)

That's right; the winner gets this shiny sword right here!

The highlight footage gives way to the light of the Sword of Ages, a crucifix trophy in a starlight skin.

(cont'd)

Behold! The Sword of Ages!

(cont'd)

And, let's not forget the title of King of Blades.

It parts the highlight curtain behind it to reveal Joshua's dark visage.

(cont'd)

The fighter to beat appears to be none other than nine-time defending champ Joshua "the Demon of the Blood Moon" Strada, who has remained undefeated for the longest time.

ZOOM OUT TO

INT. HOTEL SUITE - HUB CHAMBER - DAY

In the hub room of the hotel suite, Makoto, Gil Dong, Tulio, Yukiko, and Natsumi sit and watch the glimmering holograph projected from the silver ball on the floor.

(cont'd)

Victory seems to be a given for this man, but let's not lose faith in all else who have come this far.

Kieran's commentary fades into the background, and Gil Dong scoffs at the dark visage on screen.

GIL DONG

(to himself)

Heh. I'd sure like to take him on, sometime.

Tulio ekes his attention to him and smiles.

TULIO

You don't say.

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG

Sure. If I can get past you schmucks, I can topple Joshua no problem.

TULIO

He's been undefeated for nine years straight.

GIL DONG

Nobody stays undefeated forever.

Makoto clenches her fists atop her knees and glances downward.

TULIO

By the way, nice of you to invite us over, Makoto.

Her head rights itself to meet Tulio...

MAKOTO

It's the least I could do after all this time.

TULIO

And for that, we're all very thankful.

...who jumps to his feet and stretches his hands above his head.

TULIO

To think of how close we've all gotten over the course of this event.

GIL DONG

Close?

TULIO

Indeed. It's almost as if we were meant to be together. You, me, Makoto, and the twins.

Yukiko and Natsumi leak a dual scowl...

TULIO

Yukiko and Natsumi.

...which gives way to a dual smile.

(CONTINUED)

TULIO

Oh, what fights they would be if we all faced each other in the tournament phase.

GIL DONG

You know, come to think of it, how long has it been since this event started?

MAKOTO

Long enough for some of us to grow used to calling it home.

GIL DONG

That does explain why you haven't even touched your cell phone since you told me about your plans for moving here.

Makoto rises from her mini-couch, and Gil Dong rises to meet her. They face each other as they encircle the mini-couches.

GIL DONG

(unapologetic)

Oh, I'm sorry. Was that supposed to be a secret between us or something?

MAKOTO

No, but it was something I was uncomfortable having you tell anyone else.

GIL DONG

So, what? You wanted to tell them?

MAKOTO

As a matter of fact, yes.

GIL DONG

Then why didn't you say so before?

MAKOTO

I did say so before! At least five times! The least you could do is pay attention!

GIL DONG

When were you going to tell them, anyway? When you had the trophy in your hands? When you'd announce to everyone watching that you'd proven

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG (cont'd)
yourself worthy of being called a
citizen of Arcadia?

They stop at their original spots and leer. Tulio raises his hands and shuffles out of their conflicting lines of sight. Yukiko and Natsumi are distracted by their game of rock/paper/scissors.

GIL DONG
We're headed back to our room.

MAKOTO
Okay.

GIL DONG
(sarcastic)
Hopefully, Sergei will tell us
something useful, for a change.

Gil Dong about-faces to the door and strides off...

TULIO
Oh, come on, Gil Dong. Do you have
to be so pessimistic all the time?

...quickly followed by Tulio. Together, they slink out the suite door and let it ease shut behind them.

Makoto finds her fist clenched at her chest. Finished with their game, Yukiko and Natsumi crane their necks around each other to track Makoto...

NATSUMI
Hey, Makoto, where are you going?

MAKOTO
To get some rest.

...as she disappears inside her and the twins' bedchamber with a clunk of her door. The twins prepare to stand up but then eke a mirrored twinge of their eyebrows.

INT. GIL DONG'S SUITE ROOM - DAY

Gil Dong stands over Tulio as he twists a hinged multitool to tighten a loose bolt in his teleporter gate at his desk. Gil Dong gleans the teleporter gate.

GIL DONG
That's the machine that sent me to
Makoto's bathroom while she was
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG (cont'd)
taking a bath, isn't it? At the
beginning of the competiton?

Tulio stops and looks up to Gil Dong.

TULIO
Consider that evening a successful
test run.

GIL DONG
Test run?

TULIO
Yeah. I tried to bring you back
from said--

GIL DONG
Wait. How did you get it in there
in the first place?

TULIO
I snuck it in there while you and
Makoto passed each other in the
hallway that evening.
Unfortunately, it burned out on my
end. I'm surprised it didn't set
off any fire alarms.

Tulio holds his multitool between his thumb and forefinger
and rests the teleporter gate beside his desk.

TULIO
Someday, I hope this thing can be
of better use.

GIL DONG
Better use?

TULIO
Yeah. For the people of both Earth
and Arcadia. For now, I'm trying to
make it more portable, so I don't
have to set up any gates. The only
problem is that no one's willing to
test it.

GIL DONG
Because they're afraid that you'd
end up disintegrating them or
something?

(CONTINUED)

TULIO

Or worse.

GIL DONG

Worse? How?

Gil Dong lets a cringe creep across his face, and then he shakes his head.

GIL DONG

(uneasy)

Uh, never mind...

Tulio rises from his desk and sets down the multitool.

GIL DONG

So, why did you put so much effort into it? I thought you'd be in to Children of the Earth as much as everybody else in Arcadia.

TULIO

Not really. I care about bettering people's lives more than competing. Either way, it doesn't mean I can't have a hobby...

(joking)

...like testing my hopes and dreams on you and your girlfriend.

Gil Dong clenches his fists at his sides, his eyes zipped shut. Tulio crosses his arms at his chest as he stands by the door.

GIL DONG

(seething)

Have I told you once? I've told you a million times.

Gil Dong snatches a pillow from the bed nearby and thrashes Tulio's face with it.

GIL DONG

(borderline ballistic)

She's! Not! My! Girlfriend!

Tulio laughs off his beating. Gil Dong cracks a smile as he drops the pillow.

GIL DONG

But hey. Anyone who's out to make people's lives better is okay in my book.

(CONTINUED)

TULIO

In more ways than you may know, my friend.

They both look about the room.

GIL DONG

(half stung)

Where is Sergei?

TULIO

He's never around when you need to tell him anything, is he?

GIL DONG

True.

TULIO

I've known him to do that for as long as I can remember. He says it's his way of getting--

GIL DONG

(interrupting)

Yeah, I know. Getting others to act on their own as he once did. Thanks to you and the girls, I'm quite familiar with that and the last living World War III vet crap--which, I'll admit, is quite believable, given his attitude.

Tulio tilts his head sideways.

TULIO

Then we might want to pay attention next time he does stay for a meaningful chat.

GIL DONG

God knows when that'll be.

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM - GYM SIMULATOR -
DUSTY FARMSIDE - DAY

From atop a decrepit wooden, three-rail fence, one rusty tin can after another is shot.

At the far end stands Clark with a white, black-scarfed, broad-brimmed hat atop his head. In his hand is an ivory-handled revolver, which he blows off and holsters at his hip. A snap of his fingers dismisses the simulator.

FIZZLE TO

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - GYMNASIUM - OUTSIDE THE GYM
SIMULATOR - DAY

Outside the simulator, he sees Sergei standing with his arms
crossed.

CLARK
(exasperated)
You again?

SERGEI
I could say the same about you.

CLARK
What do you want this time?

Sergei gives an icy glare.

SERGEI
The same thing I've wanted since
the end of World War III, vile usa:
your evil out of my life.

CLARK
(confused)
Evil? What evil?

SERGEI
Your being one of the last of your
kind, for one.

Clark clenches his fist at his side, and then relaxes it.

CLARK
You're right. There should be more
Americans in the world.

SERGEI
No, there should be none.

CLARK
Oh, so you're here to kill me? I
thought you Arcadians were better
than that.

SERGEI
I'm not an Arcadian, nor will I
kill you.

Sergei turns away...

(CONTINUED)

SERGEI

And I swore I would never kill
another human being again.

...and marches off.

(cont'd)

But however many of your "people"
there are left, they have no right
to call themselves human beings.

Shocked, Clark clenches both fists. Sergei pauses at the entrance and turns back to let Clark look him in his burning cold eyes...

SERGEI

Especially after what they did to
the old world.

...as he closes the doors.

EXT. MOONPHASE - FRONT COUNTER - MORNING

Makoto and Xiangzhi stand opposite each other at Moonphase's desk. Between them hovers the image of a seemingly bleeding katana. Its description reads...

"Sengo Muramasa, a master swordsmith who lived in Japan's Muromachi period (14th to 16th centuries), created swords that were said to create bloodlust in their wielders. Once drawn, the legends said, they had to draw blood before they could be returned to their scabbards, even to the point of forcing their wielders to injure or kill themselves."

XIANGZHI

What do you think? Insane, right?

At first amazed by the prodigious stats of the sword, Makoto then narrows her eyes, gleams its blade, and flickers to Xiangzhi.

MAKOTO

It's cursed, isn't it?

XIANGZHI

Why else do you think it's rated so lowly?

MAKOTO

Well, it's either that or the thin red lines that make it look drenched in blood. That's always a bad sign.

(CONTINUED)

XIANGZHI

Mostly in RPGs, but point taken.
Whatever the case, be very careful.

The blade vanishes into Makoto's N-pad in a vortex of pixels.

MAKOTO

I plan to.

WARP TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - GHOST TOWN STREET
- DUSTY DAY

Makoto and Clark stand at opposite ends of the street.

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)

Fight!

Clark snatches his pistols from the holsters at his hips and opens fire upon Makoto, who blocks the incoming stream of bullets with only her armored gauntlets.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

(barely audible over the
gunfire)

Whoa! Clark's trying to end the
fight early, huh?

KIERAN (V.O.)

(barely audible over the
gunfire)

That's pretty much how all of his
victories have ended up so far.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

(barely audible over the
gunfire)

What?

When the gunfire passes, Makoto's armor is heavily scratched, dented, and perforated, but she herself still stands.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Doesn't look like he did much this
time...

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Look at that.

(CONTINUED)

HAROLD (V.O.)

Not much of a surprise, considering
how her armor is specially designed
to deflect piercing weapons and
projectiles, such as bullets.

She lowers her hands...

MAKOTO

(hurt but still confident)

My turn.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Wait. What did she mean by--?

...lunges at Clark, grabs her sword, and dashes through him
as she draws it, leaving him standing.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

...What just happened?

HAROLD (V.O.)

Give her a second.

Suddenly, Clark explodes in a geyser of bloody pixels.

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)

Finish!

Makoto winces as a spasm of bio-electric feedback lurches
from her sword through her arm.

WARP TO

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ENTRANCE - DAY

The victorious Makoto paces down the hallway to the
entrance, where Gil Dong, Tulio, Yukiko, and Natsumi await.

GIL DONG

(backhanded)

Okay. I'll admit it. You did good.

The Itous raise their right eyebrows at Gil Dong.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

Good? Good?

NATSUMI

She just slapped that sissy like a
soggy sweat sock.

(CONTINUED)

YUKIKO
(offhand)
Nice alliteration.

NATSUMI
(offhand)
Thank you.

A spasm wracks Makoto's arm and lurches to her head, Tulio the only other to notice.

MAKOTO
(suppressing pain)
Sure.

TULIO
(thinly concerned)
Is something wrong?

Makoto shakes her head clear and brushes aside the pain.

MAKOTO
Oh, it's nothing.

TULIO
(trying to play along)
Very well.

An awkward silence hangs in the air as Makoto rolls her shoulders.

YUKIKO
These awkward silences seem to come
up a lot lately.

NATSUMI
Tell me about it.

Tulio smiles and shrugs his shoulders while Gil Dong simply rolls his eyes.

MAKOTO
By the way, do you know who your
next opponent is?

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
Who?

TULIO
Take a wild guess.

He flares his N-pad's holodisplay to the tournament bracket, which shows Yukiko and Natsumi's match selected next. Their opponent: Joshua.

(CONTINUED)

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI (V.O.)
Ooooooh...

The twins turn their eyes to each other and grin.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
Wish us luck!

Makoto nods accord but twinges an uneasy frown to her side.

MAKOTO
(under her breath)
Something tells me you'll need it.

WARP TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - GREAT WALL
BATTLEMENTS - SNOWY MORNING

A snowflake falls on Natsumi's nose, urging Yukiko to brush it off.

NATSUMI
Thanks, sister.

YUKIKO
(joking)
If you ever need anything, you know where to find me.

NATSUMI
(playing along)
That goes double for me.

The computer chirps its baleful signal...

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)
Fight!

...and with a dual grin, the twins launch themselves at Joshua as he stands his ground.

KIERAN (V.O.)
And here we go! The Itous make the first move!

They fight.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Well, they're certainly holding up well, Kieran.

(CONTINUED)

KIERAN (V.O.)

Well, you did say so yourself that they were confident that they could take him.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Oh, yeah. I forgot.

HAROLD (V.O.)

(blunt)

You'd probably forget your own head if it wasn't attached to your body.

The twins continue their wild, reckless assault...

KIERAN (V.O.)

(excited)

Oh! And a devastating series of hammer blows! Those ladies just aren't giving Joshua an inch!

...culminating with a mighty blow to the skull that sends him sliding across the floor in a heap.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Ooh! And one right in the kisser!

Yukiko and Natsumi cheer as Joshua's seemingly lifeless body bowls over an oil beacon and vanishes into the fire.

YUKIKO

Mess with the best--!

NATSUMI

(half interrupting, half finishing)

Lose like the rest!

YUKIKO

(half joking, half irritated)

Hey! I wanted to say that part!

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Ha ha! That ought to send him packing!

NATSUMI

(half joking, half irritated)

Well...you said the part I wanted to say...so there!

HAROLD (V.O.)

Don't be so sure, Juniper. It looks like the worst is yet to come.

(CONTINUED)

Their delighted bickering fades into alarmed stares as the still-burning Joshua hauls himself to his feet, slumps by the wall...

JUNIPER (V.O.)

What do you mean, Harold? Look at him slouching there, burning, suffocating, and...

...and starts...

JUNIPER (V.O.)

(confused and disturbed)
Laughing...like a maniac...?

His laughter rises to a fever pitch as his head bends backwards.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

You know...now that I think of it...when was the last time he ever took that much punishment in a single match?

He rights himself, grips his montante...

KIERAN (V.O.)

(audibly worried)
Longer than he's ever had reason to hold back, I'm afraid...

...and raises it at his side. Yukiko and Natsumi clench their hammer and shudder in their skin.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

Uh-oh...

JOSHUA

(sadistic)
Uh-oh, indeed!

Joshua brandishes his montante high, lunges forth, and lays into the twins, cackling as they crumble before his blood-crazed onslaught.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Oh, my god! Joshua's gone berserk!

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Worse than that; he's lost it!

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA STANDS - EVENING

From the stands, Makoto can only watch the simulator display in horror as Joshua sunders the twins' hammer, slashes out their legs, and gores their torso. He points to the camera, and then tears his montante up the twins' middle, whirls it around his head, and beheads them both.

SPLIT TO

INT. MAKOTO'S SUITE ROOM - NIGHT

Yukiko and Natsumi spring upright in their bed.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(horrified)
SISTER!

Gasping, they open their eyes, look up and down their shared body, and lock them at their corners. After a teary pause, they close their eyes, press their inner cheeks together, and wrap their arms around their torso, sobbing.

FADE TO

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ENTRANCE - EVENING

Makoto trudges away from the arena, rolling her neck and shoulders. She turns her wrist and glimpses her N-pad, skimming first her inventory slots, and then the tournament bracket. There, she sees Gil Dong and Joshua as potential opponents.

She returns her eyes forward to see Gil Dong approaching.

GIL DONG
Hey, Makoto.

MAKOTO
Hi, Gil Dong. Are you ready for
your match? It starts in about 20
minutes.

Gil Dong snaps his arm in front of himself to see Joshua as his next opponent.

GIL DONG
(confident)
I was born ready.

He lowers his arm and blips the tournament bracket display away.

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG

Well, except for two things. One:
why do you keep holding back?

MAKOTO

What do you mean?

GIL DONG

Lately, you keep flailing your arms
in matches like you're holding two
swords instead of one. You did it
in your match against Clark and in
the one you won just now.

MAKOTO

Oh, yeah.

Makoto raises her hand and clenches it in a limp fist.

MAKOTO

I've been taking dual-wielding
lessons from Tulio. Guess they
translated a bit too well.

GIL DONG

Well, at least you've got the
technique down.

She lowers her hand and smiles, though her eyes stay dim.

MAKOTO

What can I say? I'm a fast learner.

GIL DONG

(chuckling)

Yes, you are.

Gil Dong shifts his shoulders.

GIL DONG

And two: After the match--

MAKOTO

You mean if you win?

GIL DONG

When I win, Makoto.

An invisible cringe streaks Makoto's brow.

GIL DONG

After the match, would you mind
if...

(CONTINUED)

Gil Dong chokes up, drums his hands, shrinks his face...

GIL DONG
(uneasy)
...if I...took you on a date?

MAKOTO
(trace surprised)
A date?

...and then forces back his composure.

GIL DONG
It's not like we'd be "going out"
going out.

MAKOTO
Oh. So, it's more like gathering
intel, then.

GIL DONG
We've been...friendly rivals, for
lack of better words. It's only
natural.

Makoto nods.

MAKOTO
Then, uh...why don't you close your
eyes?

GIL DONG
Why?

MAKOTO
Because I have some information
that could be key to your victory.

GIL DONG
What is it?

MAKOTO
(stern)
Close your eyes and you'll find
out.

Gil Dong closes his eyes.

GIL DONG
Here. You happy?

Makoto smiles and kisses Gil Dong on the cheek.

GIL DONG
(awkward)
What...?

Gil Dong opens his eyes...

GIL DONG
...did you...?

...to see Makoto beaming at him.

MAKOTO
(jubilant)
I just kissed you.

Makoto fumbles back her original composure, her face flushed with blurred streaks of red.

MAKOTO
(bashful)
For luck. I just, um...kissed you
for luck.

Gil Dong lets a twinge of red creep up on his face.

GIL DONG
(unnerved)
Uh...thanks...I think...

The crowd drums its applause as Kieran, Juniper, and Harold announce the next match.

MAKOTO
Looks like the match is about to
start. Get ready.

Makoto darts away from the entrance and rockets up to the stands, where Yukiko, Natsumi, Prashasti, and Tulio await her. Gil Dong, however, begins to sag.

WARP TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - VOLCANO BANK -
SMOKY EVENING

He can barely maintain his composure as he and Joshua stand at opposite ends of a burning field of blackened rock and sulfuric smoke.

GIL DONG
(to himself, distressed)
Makoto...

(CONTINUED)

The computer chirps its baleful signal...

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)

Fight!

...and without hesitation, Joshua lunges at Gil Dong, ready to slam his montante on his head.

KIERAN (V.O.)

And here we go!

The two combatants lock in mortal combat.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Gil Dong, the red and black gladiator, vs. Joshua, the charcoal and midnight...well, knight.

HAROLD (V.O.)

The first key advantages Joshua has in this matchup are his extraordinarily sturdy armor and massive range and attack strength with his montante. Gil Dong is faster, more agile, and more mobile, but none of his attacks can do well against Joshua's armor.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

So, it's like trying to fight a train with a stick?

HAROLD (V.O.)

Not that lopsided. Gil Dong does still have the terrain on his side, his attire being more adaptable to extreme environments than Joshua's.

JUNIPER (V.O.)

You mean Joshua's cooking in his armor right now?

KIERAN (V.O.)

He will be if he doesn't finish the fight soon.

Gil Dong tosses a clump of ash at the knight's helmet and flees up the slope.

HAROLD (V.O.)

Ah. It looks like Gil Dong has some plan in mind.

Joshua recovers and charges after him.

(CONTINUED)

KIERAN (V.O.)
It had better be a good one, 'cause
there goes Joshua.

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - VOLCANO RIM -
SMOKY EVENING

Gil Dong climbs ever higher, goading Joshua by kicking loose
rocks as he tries to pursue. A stray lava bubble bursts from
the crater below...

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Oohoo! I felt that bubble pop from
all the way here.

...and splashes beside Gil Dong.

HAROLD (V.O.)
Are you sure that's not the atomic
toxic curry you ate fifteen minutes
ago?

Joshua reaches him and prepares to strike, but Gil Dong
throws another fistful of ash at his helmet. He then rushes
at him and tackles him to the slope, aiming at the volcano's
edge...

KIERAN (V.O.)
Oh, and a tackle from Gil Dong!

...but falling short as Joshua heaves him away and slams him
into a boulder.

KIERAN (V.O.)
And oh! Counter by Joshua!

Gil Dong struggles to his feet as Joshua leaps to his...

GIL DONG
What's the matter, "Demon of the
Blood Moon?" Afraid to face me like
a man?

...and swats his hwan do away with the tip of his montante.
The sword sails into the volcanic crater below and melts
into pixels.

GIL DONG
(ruffled)
Okay. I'll admit you're good.

Gil Dong retaliates with a sweeping kick and a jump to his
feet...

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG
 (trying to maintain bravado)
 But you're still nothing compared
 to me...

...and then launches a proud, patriotic haymaker at the knight's helmet...

GIL DONG
 Because I am Hangeul! And no one
 can take that pride from me!

...which instead lands square in Joshua's palm. Joshua crushes Gil Dong's fist in his hand, sinking him to his knees as he screams in pain and tries to wrench it free.

JOSHUA
 (mocking)
 Haven't you heard?

Joshua whips Gil Dong like a ragdoll...

JOSHUA
 Patriotism is dead!

...and plasters him flat at his feet, stomping on his throat as he falls. Triumphant, he aims his montante at the downed Gil Dong's heart...

KIERAN (V.O.)
 Oh, no. Don't do what I think
 you're about to do!

...but instead gores his right hip joint, yielding a strangulated howl of agony and defeat. From there, Joshua rips off his leg and uses it to hit him over the edge. He eases his grip on the severed leg as Gil Dong sinks into the lava below and burns to pixels.

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)
 Finish!

WARP TO

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ENTRANCE - EVENING

Makoto catches up to Gil Dong just before he can leave the arena.

MAKOTO
 Gil Dong!

He stops...

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

What happened out there?

GIL DONG

Go away.

...lets Makoto reach for him...

MAKOTO

Gil Dong...

...then tears his arm away from her hands...

GIL DONG

I said go away!

...and storms off. Makoto stays riveted to her spot as Prashasti, Yukiko, and Natsumi approach her from behind.

PRASHASTI

Just let him go, Makoto.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

Yeah.

She spins to her comrades with a dull lull in her eyes.

MAKOTO

I wish I could, and I know I should.

NATSUMI

But what do you see in that arrogant jerk?

YUKIKO

Besides being a great sparring partner?

Yukiko and Natsumi look at each other.

YUKIKO

What? I'm right, aren't I?

NATSUMI

Yeah, but that's about it.

A flustered Makoto paces away, her fists clenched at her sides. Yukiko and Natsumi reach after her in vain.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

Where are you going?

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO
(under her breath)
To get something to eat.

INT. GIL DONG'S SUITE ROOM - EVENING

Gil Dong flops onto his bed, his arms spread out as if to be crucified. Tulio, meanwhile, searches around his desk for his missing teleporter.

TULIO
(panicked)
Where is it?

GIL DONG
(uninterested)
Where's what?

TULIO
My teleporter! It's gone!

A deep, uneasy exhale escapes Gil Dong.

GIL DONG
(muttering)
This is all her fault.

Tulio stops searching and turns to Gil Dong...

TULIO
Excuse me?

...as he sits up...

GIL DONG
This is all Makoto's fault. She
made me lose.

TULIO
That's stupid.

GIL DONG
How?

TULIO
You turned her blessing into a
curse; she kissed you for luck, and
you let it get to your head.

...narrows his eyes...

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG

What do you expect me to do?

TULIO

What you're going to do is put
aside your elephantine ego, march
down to the cafeteria, and
apologize. Right now.

...and then jumps to his feet.

GIL DONG

Why? Why should I apologize for
something that's her fault?

TULIO

We've already established that it's
your fault, not hers.

Tulio narrow his eyes to a stern but fair stare.

TULIO

So, just do it.

Gil Dong glares at Tulio, bares his teeth, and clenches his
fists at his sides.

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - CAFETERIA - EVENING

Alone at a table in the bustling cafeteria, Makoto tries to
drown her sorrow and confusion in her meal.

She pauses on a bite and rattles her head. Looking down to
watch her chopsticks clamp on another bite, she lifts them
halfway to her mouth and swallows.

Suddenly, she feels a spell of as-yet unknown fatigue grip
her and fumbles her chopsticks.

Her vision blurs, her head spins, and her tongue goes numb.
She glimpses her hand and tries to clench and relax it, but
it coldly resists.

She hauls herself to her feet and trudges to the elevators,
fumbling past one table after another as the crowd looks on,
all the while losing more of her breath.

All too late, she falls in front of the elevators. The last
thing she thinks she sees is Gil Dong leading a medic squad
to her rescue.

FADE OUT

FADE TO

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - NIGHT

Sensors blip the gentle rhythm of Makoto's fading heart as Gil Dong sits by her comatose form's bedside. A nurse stands nearby. Gil Dong scans Makoto, and then glances to the nurse.

GIL DONG

Is she going to be okay?

The nurse shuffles her clipboard in her arm and dismounts her pen from behind her ear.

NURSE

You're lucky you came in when you did.

GIL DONG

What happened to her?

NURSE

Initially, we thought it was puffer fish poisoning, but something about the symptoms seems a bit off.

Gil Dong looks back at the comatose Makoto.

GIL DONG

So, she'd normally be dead by now, right?

The nurse murmurs and nods assent.

GIL DONG

Well, just in case she wakes up, would you mind if I...?

Gil Dong pauses, and then turns to the smiling nurse...

NURSE

I don't see why not.

...who paces to the door and twirls her pen in her fingers.

NURSE

(under her breath)

Love has been known to make miracles happen, after all.

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG
What did you say?

NURSE
(brushing off the question)
Oh, nothing. Don't mind me.

She exits, leaving Gil Dong and Makoto alone. Gil Dong returns his gaze to Makoto, scoots his chair closer to her bedside...

GIL DONG
(barely audible)
God, if you're up there, I don't
know if you'll listen to the prayer
of someone like me...but
please...save her.

...and drifts off to sleep.

GIL DONG
(barely audible)
Save...Makoto.

FADE TO

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - MORNING

At last, Makoto opens her eyes. She raises her hand to clear them and focus on a sleeping Gil Dong beside her, at whom she can't help but crack a smile. This, however, quickly morphs into an enraged scowl as she sees his head on her chest.

The sensors flatline as Makoto breaks free and thrashes Gil Dong awake and to the floor.

Gil Dong, massaging his head in pain, sees Makoto sitting up in her hospital bed, her pillow clamped across her chest and her eyes narrowed to shamed tears.

GIL DONG
(agonized and frustrated)
Ow...

Makoto, instead of apologizing, heaves her pillow at Gil Dong's face. Gil Dong swats the pillow out of the air with his free hand.

GIL DONG
(sarcastic)
Oh, sure. That's the thanks I get?

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO
For bringing me to this place and
using me as a pillow?

GIL DONG
Hey, I saved your life! Again!

Makoto jumps to her feet, snatches the pillow from the floor, and brandishes it...

GIL DONG
(more concerned than
insulting)
Don't you get it, Split Foot? If it
wasn't for me, you'd be dead!

...but then lowers it...

MAKOTO
(calming down)
I...guess you have a point there...

...and plops it at her feet.

MAKOTO
I'm sorry, Gil Dong. It's not like
me to lose my head.

GIL DONG
Damn right; that's my job.

Gil Dong fumbles over his tongue and shakes his head.

GIL DONG
Oh, wait. That came out wrong.

Makoto ekes a faint smile...

WIPE TO

INT. STARLIGHT RISE HOTEL - RED SUN WING - DAY

...that gives way to a bashful cringe as Yukiko and Natsumi sandwich her head between theirs in a bear hug.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
Makoto!

MAKOTO
(embarrassed but in good will)
Let me go. Seriously.

The twins release Makoto and step back...

(CONTINUED)

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

But we're so happy to see you okay!

MAKOTO

Yeah, I'm sure you are.

...and giggle in unison.

YUKIKO

Oh, and did we mention?

NATSUMI

That we have a message from Gil Dong?

MAKOTO

A message?

Yukiko and Natsumi touch their hands just above their shirt's neckline and blip their N-pad to show Makoto an intercepted message. Makoto hesitates, but the twins prod her with a dual beam.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

We'll be out shopping if you need us.

MAKOTO

Make sure to keep track of all the favors you'll owe.

Unseen by them all, Prashasti's left shoe sits alone at a hallway corner.

WIPE TO

EXT. MIDDAY SUN CINEMA - ENTRANCE - DAY

A sentry floats by as Makoto leans beside the door. She checks her N-pad and creases a frown at the time. Returning her eyes to the crowd, she spots the approaching Gil Dong.

GIL DONG

Hi, Makoto.

MAKOTO

Hi, Gil Dong. And before you ask, yes, I've been waiting for you for the past 8 minutes.

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG

That still makes us at least three minutes early.

Checking her N-pad's clock, Makoto confirms Gil Dong's rebuttal with a faint nod.

MAKOTO

...You're right.

She minimizes its holographic display and stows her hand at her side.

MAKOTO

So, what brings the two of us here? You did lose, after all.

GIL DONG

(half bashful, half reluctant)
Well, instead of a chance to gather intel, consider it an...apology...for my being such a jerk to you, especially since you're in the finals now.

The couple turns to the entrance of the building behind them, marveling at the cinematic atmosphere.

MAKOTO

It's amazing to see one of these in this day and age.

GIL DONG

I know, right? Nobody I know at home knows of any movie theaters anymore.

MAKOTO

(amused)
Classics never die, do they?

GIL DONG

I guess not.

They then stare back at each other.

MAKOTO

Now, before we get this under way, I think we need to clear things up between us.

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG
For once, we agree.

MAKOTO
Right. I'll go first.

Makoto stirs...

MAKOTO
(nervous)
You see...let's start with...
...bounces her folded hands downward...

MAKOTO
(stammering)
I've...been meaning to tell you
this for a while, now...but I...
...unfolds her hands and waves them about...

MAKOTO
...never got around to it,
because...well, uh...it's simply a
matter of--

GIL DONG
(blunt)
I love you.

...but then freezes and snaps back to the deadpan Gil Dong.

GIL DONG
It's time I finally come clean. I
love you.

Gil Dong smiles at Makoto, whose cheeks turn bright red...

MAKOTO
(embarrassed)
Gaaah!

...as she grinds her fingertips into his scalp. The two of
them tousele in mutual protest.

MAKOTO
You took the words right out of my
mouth!

GIL DONG
Hey! You were just letting them
hang there!

Makoto breaks away and clenches her fists at her sides. Gil Dong brushes his hair down with his hands.

MAKOTO

I didn't want it to be too big a shock.

GIL DONG

I could've taken it.

MAKOTO

Then tell me to just tell you next time!

They share a wince, but then slack themselves and join hands.

MAKOTO

I must've looked really childish back there.

GIL DONG

That makes two of us.

They smile...

GIL DONG

So, uh, what movie do you want to see?

MAKOTO

I'll save that for when we get our tickets.

GIL DONG

Let's go, then.

...and walk together to the nearby ticket booth.

EXT. MIDDAY SUN CINEMA - EATERY - DAY

Makoto claps her hands together, chopsticks ready...

MAKOTO

Itadakimasu!

GIL DONG

Uh, why did you just say that?

...but stays her chopsticks short of her bowl of noodles.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO
(inquisitive)

Huh?

Makoto and Gil Dong sit opposite each other at a small table. Each has an overstuffed tray of assorted food waiting to be devoured.

Gil Dong taps his finger beside one of his plates.

GIL DONG
Oh, um. Well, it's not like the food can hear you or anything, so why do you say that before eating?

Makoto sets her chopsticks aside.

MAKOTO
I guess it's just a part of my culture that I never outgrew. Something about thanking the planet and its inhabitants for the effort they put into the food.

Gil Dong rolls his eyes and shakes his head...

MAKOTO
I know it sounds stupid.

GIL DONG
No, it's not that. It's something Joshua said before he defeated me.

...which he then rests in his hand as he glimpses the ceiling of the expansive eatery.

GIL DONG
"Haven't you heard? Patriotism's dead."

Makoto seats her head in her hand.

MAKOTO
I'd have thought that more people in Korea would be as overtly proud of their heritage as you are.

Gil Dong returns his gaze to her.

GIL DONG
Sadly, you'd be wrong to think that. Lots of people in Korea call me "stuck in the past."

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

You sure act that way when you're
in the arena.

GIL DONG

Someone has to.

He sighs.

GIL DONG

It's almost as if my people have
forgotten about their history.
Their national pride.

MAKOTO

What about their past animosity
toward Japan?

Makoto points to Gil Dong's food, which they both note is
largely Japanese.

GIL DONG

(feigning matter-of-factness)
What? I don't hate all things
Japanese. That would just be, you
know...asinine.

MAKOTO

(amused)
So, you do have a brain in that
thick skull of yours.

Gil Dong can't help but leak a smile at Makoto.

INT. MIDDAY SUN CINEMA - THEATER - DAY

The movie on screen shows a match illuminate a ramshackle
bunker, wherein two SOLDIERS sitting opposite each other at
a map-carpeted desk. One leans in his chair, smoking a
cigarette. The other rustles his hands over each other. A
tattered American flag hangs on the wall behind them.

SOLDIER 1

Look. I don't make orders, private.
I follow them and relay them to
you. If you want to stay in this
unit, you'd better follow them too.

SOLDIER 2

That doesn't change the fact that
what we're doing is wrong. And the
people of the planet hate us for
it.

(CONTINUED)

The first officer leaps to his feet and slams his hands on the desk.

SOLDIER 1

I don't give a damn about the people of the planet. You and I are U.S. Marines. We follow orders, and that's all there is to it. Kapeesh?

Makoto bursts out laughing...

MAKOTO

(laughing)

What an asshole! He's going to get killed for sure, eh, Gil Dong?

...and then sees Gil Dong smirking at her.

MAKOTO

(slightly surprised)

Gil Dong?

GIL DONG

(snidely joking)

Oh. So you are human, after all.

She can't help but crack a smile at Gil Dong as they both resume watching the movie.

MAKOTO

By the way, where's Tulio?

Gil Dong shrugs.

EXT. ARCADIA POLICE HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Tulio stands outside the police building while two police officers stand at attention.

OFFICER 1

Sorry, sir, but those are the rules.

TULIO

Hey, check my clearance if you have to. I'm with you guys.

OFFICER 2

We can't let you into the office without a badge code. We don't make that rule.

(CONTINUED)

TULIO

I know you don't, but something very important to me was stolen.

Tulio blips his N-pad to invoke a long, holographic book page peppered with obscure diagrams.

TULIO

And according to this section of your manual, people like me are cleared under special circumstances.

OFFICER 1

I don't think your being in Children of the Earth qualifies as a "special circumstance".

A dart sails through the air and embeds itself in the building wall, forcing Tulio to dismiss the page.

OFFICER 1

Hey. Where'd that come from?

TULIO

(blunt)

Somebody's blowgun, obviously.

He leans in close to the dart, spots a tiny slip of yellow paper...

TULIO

Ooh, what's this?

...plucks it free of the dart, unfolds it, and scans it.

TULIO

(pretending to read aloud)

"Help. I've been kidnapped by a man in a mask, and he's threatening to bring Arcadia crashing into the Earth. He says he wants repatriation for the destruction of the United States of America at the end of World War III. P.S. Tulio, if you're reading this, in exchange for this information, I want a ride through your teleporter thingy."

The officer cocks his eyebrow at Tulio...

OFFICER 1

Really?

TULIO

No; it's just a picture of a mushroom sticking its tongue out.

...who flips the fell note to both officers. They all ogle at the crude sketch.

OFFICER 1

I...I don't get it. Is it some kind of reference?

OFFICER 2

If it was, it'd be the most obscure reference I've ever heard of.

Tulio cocks an eye at the sketch and stirs his head.

OFFICER 2

You know what it is, don't you?

His eyes flicker wider as he sees a doodle of an island chain buried in the mushroom cloud.

TULIO

I can't say for sure, but I might have an idea.

The shadow of a floating sentry looms behind him.

TULIO

(trace worried)

There's something behind me, isn't there?

INT. MIDDAY SUN CINEMA - THEATER - DAY

The movie on screen shows a team of military engineers scrambling to shut down their computer systems. Monitors strewn about the room show a web of missiles centered on the continental United States. One OBSERVER barges through a side door.

OBSERVER 17

(frantic)

I just hit the kill switch. Did it work?

An engineer points to the closest monitor. The observer can only watch in despair as the web blooms into oblivion.

(CONTINUED)

OBSERVER 17
 (horrified and defeated)
 No, no, NO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The audience freezes as its members watch what was once the continental United States of America erupt in nuclear fire and shroud the Earth in volcanic fallout. Makoto and Gil Dong likewise cringe and shudder together, lending each other an arm.

The screen turns black, marked only by the words...

"7000 years ago, God ended us with water. Yesterday, we ended ourselves with fire." --Cpt. Sergei Lenovsky

FADE TO

EXT. TREE OF HEAVEN MONUMENT - CANOPY - DAY

They stand together at the railing.

MAKOTO
 I heard that World War III was a disaster, but I had no idea it could've been that bad.

GIL DONG
 (trying to shrug it off)
 Makoto, it's just a movie.

MAKOTO
 I know, but the thought of a war that nearly wiped out all life on Earth... It's...it's hideous.

Gil Dong rests his hand atop Makoto's shoulder...

GIL DONG
 No wonder people make such a big deal of Children of the Earth, huh?

MAKOTO
 I suppose so.

...but then snatches it away.

MAKOTO
 Here, we can fight to the death without fear of dying. We channel otherwise evil tendencies to good use. To entertain the masses.

Makoto returns her gaze to Gil Dong...

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

All because of the mistakes our
ancestors made, like their
ancestors before them.

...while he droops in melancholy.

GIL DONG

Sergei was right. As long as there
are humans, there will be conflict.

MAKOTO

Yeah.

Makoto steels her eyes and forces out a determined smile.

MAKOTO

But there will also be resolution.

Gil Dong leaks a dull snicker.

GIL DONG

That's kind of unrealistic, isn't
it?

MAKOTO

Idealism and cynicism are two ways
of looking at the same reality, Gil
Dong. I consider myself somewhere
in the middle.

GIL DONG

But here we are now, making those
same stupid mistakes. If there's a
god up there and he gave us a
second chance before the war, then
boy did we blow it. Literally.

Makoto pauses to scan the sky.

MAKOTO

You know, before I left the
hospital, the nurse told me you
prayed as you stayed by my bedside.

GIL DONG

Hmm?

MAKOTO

You said, "God, if you're up there,
I don't know if you'll listen to
the prayer of someone like me, but
please, save her. Save Makoto."

GIL DONG

I'm not sure why I prayed that, to be honest.

MAKOTO

Wasn't a large portion of the Korean population Christian once?

GIL DONG

Even if it was, nowadays, it's about as relevant to us as Shinto and Buddhism supposedly were to you.

MAKOTO

So, somewhere between not really and sort of kind of?

He nods.

MAKOTO

Still, you've got to admit. There's power in prayer.

GIL DONG

Not all of it good. Some of the worst things humans have ever done were in the name of a higher power. It makes me wonder if there really is a god up there when there's evil in the world.

A sentry floats up to face Makoto and Gil Dong, its "face" beaming to greet them.

MAKOTO

Well, by that logic, if there isn't a god, why isn't there nothing but evil?

But then, Gil Dong twinges in alarm just before the sentry blips red and fires a knockout cable into his face. A shocked Makoto snaps to the crumpling Gil Dong...

MAKOTO

Gil Dong!

...but then, another knockout cable strikes the back of her neck.

BLACK OUT

EXT. TREE OF HEAVEN MONUMENT - CANOPY - LATER THAT SAME DAY

Makoto forces herself awake to see her arms and legs bound in thick, antiquated rope.

MAKOTO
(to herself)
Again with the passing out...

Darting her eyes all about her, she sees the still unconscious Gil Dong lying beside her in similar bondage. Her eyes turn skyward to see dozens of hijacked sentries hovering around the Tree of Heaven Monument's canopy.

Looking further about, she sees other bound hostages, only some of whom stirring back to consciousness, all bound to the tree. Then, she sees Clark wearing Tulio's stolen teleporter fitted to his vest and holding an oblong detonator in his hand.

MAKOTO
Clark?

Clark turns to Makoto...

CLARK
Oh. Good to see you're awake.

...who tightens her fists behind her back.

CLARK
I'm sorry I got you and your friends mixed up in all this, but...

MAKOTO
(stern)
Don't be. If you want me to ask what's going on, you'll be disappointed.

Heavy booted footsteps come from below...

CLARK
(trace regretful)
Then it's a good thing for the both of us that I don't, nor do I expect you to understand.

...and a platoon of police officers encircles the Tree of Heaven's base. One officer holds up a megaphone and shouts to the canopy.

(CONTINUED)

OFFICER 3
Drop your weapons and surrender
now, or we will use lethal force!

CLARK
Stand back, all of you!

OFFICER 3
Give us one good reason why!

Clark hangs his hand over the railing, revealing the detonator.

CLARK
Because if I let go of this device,
all of Arcadia will fall from the
sky!

A tense pause, a hushed wave of whispers amidst the officers, and Clark motions to release the detonator in bold defiance. Another officer raises another megaphone.

OFFICER 5
What do you want?

CLARK
What?

OFFICER 5
What do you want us to give you for
you to back away from the hostages,
shut down your detonator, and
surrender?

CLARK
My homeland: the giant nuclear
crater formerly known as the United
States of America. And for all of
you to treat people like me as
equals.

The first megaphone blares its response.

OFFICER 3
We don't negotiate with terrorists!

CLARK
Say the people who bombed America
200 years ago!

Makoto sits upright...

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

You're wrong.

...and Clark backs away from the railing...

CLARK

Do you know what really happened at
the end of World War III? Do you?

...and turns to Makoto.

CLARK

Well, let's just say it's the real
reason my homeland doesn't exist
anymore.

He brandishes the detonator first at one hostage...

CLARK

You...

...then another...

CLARK

...and you...

...and then across the entire bound audience at his feet.

CLARK

...and all of you. You dropped
every single nuke ever made on
America.

MAKOTO

That was the work of a network of
crazed extremist hackers, and you
know it.

CLARK

(emphatic)

Every. Single. Nuke.

MAKOTO

(emphatic)

Crazed. Extremist. Hackers.

Clark staggers, hesitates...

CLARK

...Well, uh...

...and then tries to right himself and puff out his chest.

(CONTINUED)

CLARK

Think that's the messed up part?
Most of the people who died never
even wanted to go to war.

MAKOTO

And yet, they all supported your
country's bid to conquer the world.

Makoto's stern but calm retort staggers Clark further.

CLARK

And...uh...what about the...?

MAKOTO

Other countries obliterated?
Billions of people killed? Planet
that our ancestors almost blew to
bits? We all know the whole story,
Clark.

Gil Dong rouses himself to see first the dauntless Makoto...

GIL DONG

(under his breath)

Makoto...

...and then the crumbling Clark.

CLARK

And? The point is?

MAKOTO

The point is that you've got it all
wrong.

Makoto stirs her hands behind her, feeling her bonds to be
childishly loose.

MAKOTO

Look, Clark. When I first came to
Arcadia, I felt that my homeland
could sink beneath the ocean for
all I cared. I've learned a lot
since then.

CLARK

Like?

Her hands catch Gil Dong's eye, bidding him to nod.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO

Like coming to appreciate my home for what it is. Sure, Arcadia's a great place for its natives to live in, but as you clearly demonstrate, humanity itself is still flawed. I wouldn't be surprised if half the city lost their ancestors to yours as well.

A deep breath later, she eases her eyes and tone.

MAKOTO

But these people are not those people; they're them, no more and no less.

EXT. ARCADIA POLICE HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Tulio stands over a fallen rogue sentry, its knockout cables spent. The other officers stand ready for any surprises.

MAKOTO (V.O.)

And after everything our ancestors did to each other, we've realized that even you Americans deserve life.

The sentry's hood pops open, revealing a powerful, complex nuclear armament with a dial primed for detonation.

CLARK (V.O.)

What are you saying?

Tulio and the officers jump back in shock.

MAKOTO (V.O.)

I'm saying that...well...

One officer calls into his N-pad for a bomb squad. Tulio signals him to belay the call...

MAKOTO (V.O.)

You, me, all of us.

...scoops up a nearby sledgehammer, and prepares to pulverize the sentry.

MAKOTO (V.O.)

We're all children of the Earth.

EXT. TREE OF HEAVEN MONUMENT - CANOPY - DAY

Makoto leaks a thin smile.

MAKOTO
 (coming to a realization)
 No matter where we're born or where
 we live.

Clark glances between her, the other hostages, and the railing. He releases his thumb from the detonator, but nothing happens.

CLARK
 (shocked)
 Huh?

Several more failed detonations later, Gil Dong jumps free of his bonds and tackles Clark.

MAKOTO
 And another thing: you're really
 bad at bluffing.

Makoto slips out of her bonds.

MAKOTO
 And tying knots.

CLARK
 (smarmy)
 Duly noted.

GIL DONG
 Also, the destruction of America
 was 170 years ago, not 200.

CLARK
 (irritated)
 Okay. Okay.

EXT. ARCADIA POLICE HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Tulio crouches over the now-sledgehammered sentry, its "nuclear armament" demolished. Several officers and onlookers gawk while Tulio dusts off his hands.

OFFICER 4
 How did you know that would work?

(CONTINUED)

TULIO
(deadpan but smooth)
I didn't.

This officer's jaw drops. Only then does Tulio spot Clark's vest, folded and undamaged behind the sentry's opened faceplate.

INT. HOTEL SUITE - HUB CHAMBER - NIGHT

Makoto, Gil Dong, Tulio, Yukiko, Natsumi, Prashasti, and Sergei are in Makoto's hub suite. Tulio, Makoto, and Gil Dong's laughter joins that of Prashasti and the twins.

TULIO
(suppressing his laughter)
Wait. Wait. It gets better.

The laughter pauses...

TULIO
When the bomb squad arrived and took a look at the device I had smashed, they found out that it was just a pizza oven with a lawnmower engine!

...and then resumes before everyone calms down to catch their breaths.

TULIO
Anyway, that's how I got my teleporter back.

As everyone straightens themselves, Gil Dong is the first to speak.

GIL DONG
So, what's Clark looking at?

TULIO
He's being charged for kidnapping, sabotage, and falsified terrorist attack. Also, stealing my teleporter.

GIL DONG
So, disturbing the peace, then?

TULIO
Yeah. He said that all he wanted was for discrimination against people of American descent to stop.

(CONTINUED)

He smiles.

MAKOTO
What's his punishment like?

Suddenly, Tulio's N-pad blips a message...

TULIO
Hmm?

...and his eyes jolt wide at the news of Sergei's hospitalization.

GIL DONG
(bemoaning)
Not again.

FADE TO

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM LOBBY - DAY

Makoto and the others sit on benches outside the double doors leading to the emergency room. At last, the operation light dims down, and the NURSE appears through the doors.

MAKOTO
What happened?

NURSE
Supposedly, he collapsed while leaving the Milky Way Stadium. He must've heard about what happened at the Tree of Heaven Monument.

She takes a breath.

NURSE
(blunt)
I...I think he's about to die.

Yukiko and Natsumi widen their eyes...

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(through a faint gasp)
Die?

...and leap up from their seat.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
No! He can't die!

(CONTINUED)

NURSE

Can and is, apparently. 196 years is a very, very long time for a human to live. Frankly, I'm amazed he survived World War III.

Makoto stands up.

MAKOTO

May I go in?

The nurse hesitates as Gil Dong stands up as well.

GIL DONG

I'm coming with you.

Makoto roves her eyes between Gil Dong and the nurse. Suddenly, Prashasti appears in a whirring flash, wearing the teleporter gate vest.

PRASHASTI

What'd I miss?

Tulio sneaks a thumb up to himself.

INT. HOSPITAL - EMERGENCY ROOM - DAY

Sergei lies alone on the hospital bed. He sees Makoto and Gil Dong enter.

SERGEI

(weak)

Makoto? Gil Dong?

GIL DONG

It's been a while since we've had a meaningful talk, huh?

SERGEI

Talk is meaningless.

GIL DONG

You want meaningless talk? Then look over there.

Gil Dong points to the holoscreen.

GIL DONG

You always did want to see Joshua lose the title, didn't you? Now, here's your chance.

(CONTINUED)

SERGEI

Chance. That's a pretty word.

Sergei returns his eyes to Makoto and Gil Dong.

SERGEI

Is it chance that today is the day that I finally get to see my brothers in arms again? Chance that I saw that stunt you two pulled at the Tree of Heaven?

He pauses, and then fixes his gaze on Makoto.

SERGEI

It certainly isn't chance that you're up against Joshua, is it?

MAKOTO

I guess not. And I can't promise that you'll see him lose, but I can promise this.

On screen, Juniper coughs on a bite of oversized roll cake.

MAKOTO

I will fight him. And I will free him.

SERGEI

Free him? From what?

Sergei tilts his head.

MAKOTO

Think about it. All this time, he lived to fight my father. Why, then, is he still in Children of the Earth?

GIL DONG

Uh...the same reason Sergei basically hasn't wanted to live anymore?

SERGEI

After everything I saw and did during World War III, I don't deserve to live anymore; I have no other pur...

(coming to a realization)

...pose...?

Makoto smiles.

MAKOTO

That's right. Joshua must think he has no purpose in life other than to be the King of Blades. One way or another, I'll make him see otherwise. For his sake.

Gil Dong places his hand on her shoulder.

GIL DONG

You'd better win. For all our sakes.

Sergei manages to eke a smile of his own.

MAKOTO

I will. But first, we need to talk strategy.

FADE TO

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ENTRANCE - DAY

As Makoto reaches the stadium, she sees her parents waiting for her, her father's hoverchair purring as it floats on the air.

YOSHIHIRO

Hello.

She gasps.

MAKOTO

(shocked)

Mom? Dad? What are you doing here?

Eri tilts her head sideways.

ERI

What? We can't come see our daughter win the championship?

Makoto closes her eyes and bows her head...

MAKOTO

...After everything that's happened, I'm not sure I can win anymore.

YOSHIHIRO

Neither was I when I could still compete, but I fought all the same.

(CONTINUED)

...but then straightens to face her parents.

MAKOTO

I know. You told me every time you came home with a trophy in hand.

YOSHIHIRO

(vaguely joking)

Home? I thought Arcadia was your home now.

MAKOTO

You told him what I told you over the phone, huh?

ERI

That, I did. And you've learned your lesson since then, I presume?

MAKOTO

Let's just say that recent events have proven me wrong.

YOSHIHIRO

Then you learned the same lesson I did after that train crash. That and the importance of raising you.

She ekes a smile to greet the Arcadian national anthem ringing from the arena floor.

YOSHIHIRO

There's the anthem playing. You'd better hurry. We'll be watching you, Makoto. Just look to your friends.

MAKOTO

Duly noted.

FADE TO

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA - DAY

The roar of the crowd dies down as Francis arrives, flanked to either side of the arena by Makoto and Joshua.

He stands tall center stage...

FRANCIS

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the main event of the day! Presented by

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

FRANCIS (cont'd)
 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 Taylor
 Chamberlain.

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

FRANCIS
 Aaaaand now! This is the moment
 you've all been waiting for! Live
 from the Milky Way Stadium! In
 Central Arcadiaaaaaaaaaaaaa!
 IiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiIT'S time!

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

FRANCIS (V.O.)
 15 minutes in the Grand Final match
 of the 50th annual Children of the
 Earth! Introducing first! Fighting
 out of the blue corner!

Makoto takes her place at the far end of the ring.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
 A samurai, holding an event record
 of 44 wins, 13 losses, 1 draw.

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

FRANCIS (V.O.)
 She stands 169 centimeters tall,
 weighing in at 58 kilos.

...to reveal the culmination of her modifications to her
 samurai attire. She now wears a modified version of Tulio's
 gilded cuirass, carries the Itous' hammer with a shortened
 handle and a spike crowning its head, and flies Gil Dong's
 headband instead of her usual helmet.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
 Fighting out of Chiba, Japan!
 Presenting...!

She stares across the stage...

(CONTINUED)

FRANCIS (V.O.)
Makoto "Angel Blue" Yamasaki!

...and the crowd greets her with a wave of applause.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
And her opponent! Fighting out of
the red corner!

Joshua takes his place at the opposite end of the ring.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
A knight, holding an event record
of 58 wins, 0 losses.

Pixels swarm his body and then just as quickly vanish...

FRANCIS (V.O.)
He stands 203 centimeters tall,
weighing in at 126 kilos.

...to impart his familiar armor and sword.

FRANCIS (V.O.)
Fighting out of Rome, Italy!
Presenting...!

He raises his head to glare at Makoto...

FRANCIS (V.O.)
The reigning! Defending! Undisputed
King of Blades!

...who stands unfazed...

FRANCIS (V.O.)
Joshua "the Demon of the Blood
Moon" Strada!

...while another wave of applause washes over the stadium.

Francis signals Makoto and Joshua to march to two circular
lights to either side of him...

KIERAN (V.O.)
Really not a lot to say this time.
This match will now begin...

...which they do. Makoto spots her friends and parents in
the crowd and smiles at them.

KIERAN (V.O.)
In three...two...one...

The two combatants bathe in cybernetic blips and lights, and then vanish into the battle simulator.

WARP TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - BEACH - STARRY NIGHT

Makoto and Joshua stand opposite each other from either end of the beach.

The arena computer chirps its baleful signal...

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)
Fight!

...and Joshua uproots his montante and lunges at Makoto.

KIERAN (V.O.)
And Joshua makes the first move already!

Makoto dodges the thunderous sweep and counters with a swing of the Itous' hammer.

KIERAN (V.O.)
And would you look at that?

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Look at what? Makoto's inventory?
Looks like she's got quite a change of gear since last time. I mean...is that the Itous' hammer?

KIERAN (V.O.)
Evidently. She also seems to have incorporated Tulio's cuirass into her armor.

HAROLD (V.O.)
That should work better against Joshua's sword than her usual armor.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Oh. Isn't that Gil Dong's headband in her inventory too?

(CONTINUED)

KIERAN (V.O.)

Yep.

HAROLD (V.O.)

Now, I have a question.

KIERAN (V.O.)

That's a first.

HAROLD (V.O.)

Indeed. Why would she replace her helmet with a cloth headband?

JUNIPER (V.O.)

The only reason I can think of is that it's a good luck charm.

KIERAN (V.O.)

A good luck charm?

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Yeah. You know, like from a guy she likes.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Well, let's see if that luck holds out.

Eventually, Joshua knocks Makoto to the sand with a sweeping blow to the back.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Ooh! And a devastating slash to the back there!

JUNIPER (V.O.)

Good thing she's wearing armor, or she'd be an angel food pancake by now.

Hurt but still able, Makoto barrels away from Joshua's continued assault and rises to her feet.

KIERAN (V.O.)

Looks like she's still going strong.

HAROLD (V.O.)

Not a big surprise.

Makoto lashes out with her katana as she hops away from a blind swing of Joshua's montante...

(CONTINUED)

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Wait. What's this?

...and stands at attention, holding it and a matching wakizashi ready.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Makoto just pulled out her katana!
And a...wakizashi?

A fleeting glimpse of Joshua reveals the hammer's head lodged in his helmet.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
First off, are you allowed to have more than one weapon?

Joshua, unable to dislodge the hammer, peels his helmet off...

JUNIPER (V.O.)
And second, why does she even have it?

...and prepares to charge again...

KIERAN (V.O.)
To your first question, as long as they're within your point total, you're allowed to have them. To your second...not a clue.

...but pauses as he sees the visage of his idol ready to fight.

JOSHUA
(elated)
Yoshihiro Yamasaki.

Joshua swings his montante to his side and crouches down.

JOSHUA
We meet at last.

Makoto smiles, closes her eyes...

MAKOTO
(under her breath)
No. I'm his daughter, Makoto.

...and charges at Joshua.

JUNIPER (V.O.)
And off she goes!

They fight.

KIERAN (V.O.)
It's anybody's fight!

JUNIPER (V.O.)
I'm on the edge of my seat! For
real!

EXT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA STANDS - DAY

Yukiko and Natsumi clench their fists on their respective knees, glean each other out the corners of their eyes, and jump to their feet.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(cheering)
Makoto! Makoto! Makoto! Makoto!

The twins' chanting bids Tulio and Prashasti to join them.

PRASHASTI
(cheering)
Makoto! Makoto! Makoto!

TULIO
(cheering)
Makoto! Makoto!
(under his breath)
Hey, this is kind of fun.

PRASHASTI
Less chatting, more cheering!

The chant ripples through the crowd...

JUNIPER (V.O.)
What's this? It looks like the
crowd's cheering for Makoto.

HAROLD (V.O.)
It doesn't look like it at all.

...and sweeps up Gil Dong...

GIL DONG
(cheering)
Makoto! Makoto!

HAROLD (V.O.)
They're really doing it.

...until all but Yoshihiro, Eri, and the three commentators in the booth above shout Makoto's name.

(CONTINUED)

JUNIPER (V.O.)
Can the fighters hear the fans?

KIERAN (V.O.)
No, but there's certainly no harm
in cheering for your favorites, is
there?

CROWD
(cheering)
Makoto! Makoto! Makoto! Makoto!

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - ARENA SIMULATOR - BEACH - STARRY
NIGHT

Makoto parries a thrust aimed at her legs, swings her katana over Joshua's head, dives beneath his upward counterattack, and thrusts the katana and wakizashi upwards, shutting her eyes against the impact. When she opens her eyes, she sees the katana and wakizashi's crossed tips skewering Joshua's throat.

She draws her swords and watches him fall backwards. After a glimpse of his defeated but surprisingly warm smile, she sighs in triumph.

ARENA COMPUTER (V.O.)
Finish!

WARP TO

INT. MILKY WAY STADIUM - BOOTH - DAY

An ecstatic Kieran flails his arms about his seat; an overcharged Juniper bounces off the walls of the booth; and a calm Harold simply smiles to the storming applause below.

KIERAN
(excited)
That was incredible! Did
you see that?! Did you see
what I just saw?! I don't
think I'd believe it if I
saw it a hundred times!

JUNIPER
(overreacting)
Oh my god, I don't
believe it my eyeballs
are asploding from all the
action! Get me a table to
flip! Get me a microphone
to yell at! Get me a camera
to eat!

EXT. RAILWAY TO EARTH - ARCADIA STATION - MORNING

Makoto stands beside Yoshihiro and Eri, trophy in hand. A sentry takes her N-pad...

SENTRY 1
Come back soon.

...and floats off.

YOSHIHIRO
I'd say I didn't want to come home
when I won my first title either,
but that would be lying.

MAKOTO
Yeah. Now, let's go home.

But then, a familiar face tugs at her.

MAKOTO
Oh, wait.

ERI
What is it?

She passes the trophy to Yoshihiro...

MAKOTO
Hold onto this, please.

...but pauses before she can dash off.

MAKOTO
There's one last thing I need to
take care of before we go.

Eri glances into the crowd, and then turns back to Makoto...

ERI
Make it quick.

...who races off to meet Gil Dong.

GIL DONG
Fancy seeing you here again.

MAKOTO
Yeah. It's funny, isn't it?

Gil Dong nods, and clears his throat.

(CONTINUED)

GIL DONG

Uh, what I mean to say is
that...you know how you said you
learned something before that last
match?

MAKOTO

What about it?

GIL DONG

Well, I learned something too.

He scans the crowd of people flowing by...

GIL DONG

I still love my homeland and am
proud to call myself Hangeul, but
that doesn't mean I can parade
through the streets and claim
international superiority. All
things considered, there's no such
thing as a "best country in the
world," or even a worst.

...returns his attention to Makoto...

GIL DONG

But you...more than anything
else...helped me see that...so...

...and eases his arms around her.

GIL DONG

...thank you.

She slips her arms beneath his. Together, they close their
eyes...

GIL DONG

(tender)

Goodbye, Makoto.

...pull each other in...

MAKOTO

(equally tender)

Goodbye, Gil Dong.

...and kiss.

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI

Um, Makoto...?

Yukiko and Natsumi interrupt.

(CONTINUED)

MAKOTO
(startled)
Oh, Yukiko! Natsumi! Sorry!

YUKIKO AND NATSUMI
(through a beaming giggle)
Apologize to your parents, not us.

Yukiko and Natsumi clasp their hands behind their back, lean aside, and dash back to the train, where Yoshihiro and Eri await Makoto as she waves Gil Dong goodbye.

FADE TO

BLACK

Ending credits roll, during which the fates and futures of the cast are revealed in stills.

Tulio watches footage of the most recent Children of the Earth.

Prashasti returns to the Tree of Heaven Monument, where she helps retrieve and repair the offline sentries.

Xiangzhi begins work at her favorite night club, while still maintaining her "shop."

Clark is sentenced to community service, which he uses to start an anti-racism campaign throughout Arcadia--with Tulio and Xiangzhi's help.

Joshua announces his retirement by discarding his N-pad.

Sergei's corpse is sealed in a wooden coffin and ejected into space, where it will burn in Earth's atmosphere.

Yukiko and Natsumi tell of Makoto's long, hard journey to become the Queen of Blades throughout school.

And Makoto, awaiting the homeroom teacher to start the day's lessons, gasps in delight to see the arrival of a new transfer student: Gil Dong Rhee.