

HARVESTING EARTHLINGS

For Fun And Profit

Philip Raymond Brown

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For my fabulous wife, Sarah. Without your love, support, and technical knowledge, including but not limited to, teaching me the word “geosynchronous,” I would have never completed this novel. Thank you, sweetheart.

"I was a pretty good fighter. But it was the writers who made me great."

–Jack Dempsey

"The evil was not in bread and circuses, per se, but in the willingness of the people to sell their rights for full bellies and the excitement of the Coliseum..."

–Widely attributed to Cicero

"For what it's worth: it's never too late to be whoever you want to be. I hope you live a life you are proud of, and if you find you're not, I hope you have the strength to start over again."

–Widely attributed to F. Scott Fitzgerald

CONTENTS

1. The Indentured Warrior	7
2. The New Coliseum	21
3. The One.....	43
4. The Dinner Party.....	51
5. The Upset.....	69
6. The Congressman.....	79
7. The New Tenant.....	91
8. The Titanics	103
9. The Kid Blackie	123
10. The Concealment.....	137
11. The Six.....	145
12. The Inaugural Harvest	151
13. The Mutiny of the Bounty.....	161
14. The Live Stream	175
15. The Resurrection.....	183
16. The Field	189
17. The Lady and The One	199
18. The Craig Colony	209
19. The Public Enemy	217
20. The Pretty Boy.....	229

21. The Baby Face.....	237
22. The General	243
23. The Man on the Second Moon	251
24. The Tribunal.....	261
25. The Recusal.....	275
26. The Bonus Army.....	281
27. The Interrogation.....	295
28. The Nurse	307
29. The Cabin.....	317
30. The Valedictorian.....	327
31. The Hard Left.....	335
32. The Halanamania	341
33. The Main Event.....	353
34. The Invasion.....	367
35. The Aftermath	381
36. Epilogue	393
37. About the Author.....	397
38. Acknowledgements.....	398

CHAPTER ONE

THE INDENTURED WARRIOR

The Once Idyllic Planet Dagan
January 3, 1934

He waited. That was what he did now. Before, there had been a time of growing and changing and moving. Now, he only waited. Most of his Kind were sent straight from the transport to the Arena. They had no time to train or the opportunity to grow. Waiting had given him time to think, which he had used to draw some conclusions about himself and his place in the Great Galaxies. For example, he had decided that, despite his planet-wide fame and glory, he was nothing more than a slave.

The despotic ruler of planet Dagan, Conservator of the Throne Arixn, and his vast army of sycophants would insist that he was not a slave. That, instead, he was a hero. That the unspeakable acts of brutality he inflicted in the Arena were for the glory of Dagan. That Live Skiirmiishing had garnered him more wealth in one match than anything he had earned in his former bouts in a simulator.

But his lonely wait between live matches had given him time to think. While obediently training for his next opponent, in his brief moments of clarity between fights, he came to realize that Live Skiirmiishing was simply a distraction for the people of Dagan. Every three months, he would fight to the death in the New Coliseum as a way to misdirect the attention of the mere citizens while Conservator Arixn consolidated his control over the planet.

Although once considered a great intellectual, he now struggled to recall his former life. He had been a respected scholar and athlete. A warrior poet, albeit a virtual reality warrior. The Great Striker, Tashan Zho. An eight-time Skiirmiishing champion whose early retirement from the simulator preceded an equally distinguished career in Academia as a professor of anthropology at the planet's leading university. He had once been caring. He had once been....sentient.

But that was all in his past. Zho was now infamously known throughout Dagan as the Criminal Zho. A living, breathing asset of the Merriment Industry or MI, as Arixn's sycophants referred to it. He was nothing more than chattel. A machine whose sole purpose was to maim and kill, all to divert the attention of the mere citizens. And, of course, for the amusement of his masters. In fact, since all semblance of his former life had been stripped away and he had nothing left to do, Zho would dutifully begin preparing for his next Skiirmiishing opponent immediately after dispensing with the last.

Vice Conservator Hoaon, the Chairman of Hoaon Industries and the reputed inventor of the Transference Protocol, had once assured Zho that no Gladiator would ever die in the New Coliseum during Live Skiirmiishing. That if a match ever became so violent

that a competitor was near death, Hoan would use the Transference Protocol to shift the Life Force from the dying combatant into the body of a fresh, healthy host warrior. Hoan's assurance had once been so meaningful to Zho that in a particularly violent Skiirmiish, he delayed executing the finishing blow on his opponent until confirming that Hoan had first completed the Transference.

But that was long ago. After years of inflicting carnage in the New Coliseum, Zho welcomed death and assumed that his challengers felt similarly. Zho routinely told his handlers that if he was ever lucky enough to be on the brink, they should refrain from using the Transference Protocol and, mercifully, allow his Life Force to end. Of course, as loyal employees of the Merriment Industry, who were also terrified of Conservator Arixn, they would dutifully forward Zho's wishes to their superiors. But the answer was always the same-The Criminal Zho was far too valuable an asset to die in the Arena. Sure, his termination would free Zho from the endless cycle of death and reincarnation. But Skiirmiishing ratings would suffer, and the Merriment Industry would lose its most valuable asset. Arixn could never allow that to happen.

For months Zho did nothing but train, patient and silent, until the moment when his next opponent, his purpose, was unshackled in the center of the Arena and could not escape. That is when Zho would hear the glorious sound of his walkup music echoing throughout the Coliseum. He then knew that his prey, his purpose, was in range, awaiting its fate. Then Zho would begin his long, familiar walk toward the entrance. At last, his waiting was over.

Someday, he thought sadly. His Kind might overcome the reprogramming that controlled their most basic urges. But alas, he could not. He was a Live Skiirmiisher, and his purpose had entered the Arena. And, no matter whatever or whoever it was, Zho intended to kill it.



"She wouldn't dare show that artificial face here in my Coliseum," Conservator Arixn snarled after learning that Princess Halana would be in attendance that day at the Live Skiirmiish matches.

"She would dare. Security informs me that she is already here," Vice-Chairman Hoaoon responded.

It had been eight years since the Life Force of Princess Halana was discovered inside a child in the Craig Colony on the distant planet Earth. After her rescue, the mere citizens of Dagan assumed that Halana would take her rightful place as Queen. After all, she was the only living heir to the Throne. However, one member of the Daganian High Council had no intention of relinquishing power. Although no one would have ever suspected, it was the jovial, mild-mannered High Councilor Arixn, the Chairman of the Merriment Industry, who orchestrated a crisis to seize control of the government. The coup was so swift and complete that it was over before anyone realized that the state of emergency justifying his actions was created entirely by Arixn.

For years, his colleagues on the High Council had underestimated Arixn and his Merriment Industry. As Chairman Dondor commonly reminded him, "Merriment is not even

industry; it's entertainment." Arixn despised Dondor, whose outright dismissal of Arixn's life's work only further embittered him.

Chairman Dondor of the Finance Industry was not the only High Council member to underestimate Arixn. General Rogu of the Military Industry and Chairman Popu of the Agricultural Industry did so too. Of course, what each of these far more accomplished Daganians failed to realize was that, as Merriment Industry Chairman, Arixn regulated the stage, screen, and news media. And as Arixn privately confided to his most trusted sycophants, "He who controls the news media shapes the daily narrative of Daganian society."

His plan was elegant in its simplicity. After Colonel Raea Samson and Dr. Tashan Zho had spent months on Earth, finding and rescuing Princess Halana from the Craig Colony, Arixn traveled to Earth to retrieve the Princess. In his absence, the Merriment Industry instructed the Daganian media to report that Arixn had singlehandedly rescued the Princess. Of course, since Halana would immediately debunk the 'Arixn as Savior' narrative, it was vitally important for Arixn to discredit the Princess before her return to Dagan. Arixn accomplished this with ease.

After Halana was rescued from the Craig Colony, Council Members Arixn and Hoaon landed on Earth, under the pretext of accompanying Halana on her return to Dagan. Once Halana was reunited with the two Daganian High Councilors, Hoaon insisted that the soon-to-be Queen Halana use his Galaxy Class Starship to most expeditiously return to Dagan.

However, on the journey back, Hoan's Starship was mysteriously beset with various technical problems, most notably to its Interstellar Drive. Hoan's vessel was left drifting in space, delaying Halana's return to Dagan by several months. This delay gave Arixn and Hoan, who had quickly returned to Dagan in Arixn's Galaxy Class Starship with Zho in the brig as a prisoner, to prepare the Daganian media for Halana's belated arrival.

When Arixn returned to Dagan, the mere citizens were joyously celebrating the news of Princess Halana's rescue from the infamous Craig Colony. As Arixn had instructed, there was no mention in the media of the roles played by Colonel Samson or Dr. Zho. The legend of Arixn's gallant rescue of Princess Halana captured the attention of the mere citizens. After repeating this narrative over several news cycles, the Merriment Industry turned to stage two of Arixn's plan.

Pundits were assigned to media outlets to question the wisdom of immediately turning the leadership of Dagan over to Princess Halana. Repeating the same talking points supplied by the MI, the pundits universally referred to Princess Halana as "an uneducated teenager who had spent the previous eight years trapped in the body of an Earthling child." Although they were not allowed to deviate from the MI script, the analysts did have the 'journalistic freedom' to insert the words "I'm sure that the Princess is a nice person but" before parroting the MI talking points across the broadcast media.

The personal attacks on Halana were not limited to the news media. One of the most vocal critics of Princess Halana was a

comedian named Hatra Kondra, who seemingly worked MI talking points into almost every public appearance.

"I get it-the Princess is a very nice person. But, she has no education," Kondra would tell his young audience before delivering jokes recycled from other comedians around the Great Galaxies, predominantly about failed relationships, sex acts, and a poor track record investing money.

"I'm sure that the Princess is a nice person, but imagine being trapped in the body of a child for eight years. Eight years. Surely that would drive even the nicest Daganian insane? Hell, I'd go crazy if I was trapped in a room with a child for one day," joked Kondra during another live comedy stream. Although few audience members were entertained by his new material, eliciting laughter was now a secondary objective. His new role was parroting MI talking points. And since Kondra was a purported comedian and presumably had no political ambition, his opinions carried additional weight, particularly with the young audience. Indeed, Kondra even appeared to be speaking out at personal risk by criticizing the heir to the Throne.

In reality, since his criticisms of Halana were verbatim from MI talking points, Kondra was in no actual danger. Unsurprisingly, since the pundits were also carefully chosen by Arixn, they all had similar expert opinions, all of which agreed with Arixn. Each had long been on the MI payroll and understood that it would be career suicide to disagree with an official narrative circulated by Arixn. As a result, every panelist or expert interviewed on Daganian broadcast media was in universal agreement that "although Halana was a nice person, she was not ready to assume the Throne."

The next stage in Arixn's bloodless coup was for the Daganian public to hear from carefully selected academics who, by sheer, undisclosed coincidence, were also benefactors of large research grants from either the Merriment Industry or Hoaon Industries. As instructed by the MI, the academics attacked Halana's lack of formal education. Some even challenged her to appear on Daganian media and respond to rigorous questioning to demonstrate her intellectual prowess. When Halana did not accept, the academics contended that her absence was a tacit concession that she lacked the intellectual capacity to do the job.

Of course, undisclosed to the Daganian public was that Halana was still trapped in Hoaon's malfunctioning Galaxy Class Starship and couldn't dispute anything said about her. A detail that her critics never mentioned. To the public, it appeared that Halana was hiding somewhere on Dagan, afraid to answer the charges leveled by the experts and the comedians, like Kondra. Since Halana didn't even try to defend herself, it was presumed by the general public that the various talking points must be valid and that Halana was simply a coward.

One physically striking female pundit, Irina Yeo, became so enraged during an on-camera monologue that she challenged Princess Halana to a Live Skiirmiish.

"With or without weapons, your choice, Your Majesty," Yeo barked, her voice dripping with contempt as she issued the challenge.

"Everyone claims that Princess Halana is so nice. Well, nice people don't insist on ruling a planet because their dead father was once the King. So, Princess, if you truly have the courage of a

Queen, you can meet me Friday night in the New Coliseum. Two Daganians will enter the Arena, and only I will leave. What do you say, Princess? Are you as brave as your dead father was?" the diminutive Yeo snarled into the camera drone.

Yeo never explained how Halana's ability to Skiirmiish was relevant to her suitability to govern Dagan, which had adopted a worldwide philosophy of non-violence over a century before. Indeed, previous leaders were so dedicated to that creed that Dagan had recycled its military weapons long ago. Yeo repeated her challenge on any medium that would allow her. When Halana did not respond, Yeo returned to each show to call Princess Halana a coward.

In weeks, opinion polls, entirely funded and controlled by the MI, confirmed that the mere citizens of Dagan believed that their planet should not be ruled by one as uneducated, cowardly, and possibly insane as Princess Halana. The news media repeated this mantra so aggressively that the mere citizens reached a near state of frenzy. Riots, reputed to be orchestrated and funded by the MI, spontaneously erupted in cities across Dagan. Panic swept through the once idyllic planet, which appeared to be on the brink of revolution. Then, when all seemed lost, High Councilmember Arixn interrupted all Merriment Industry broadcasts to calm his Daganian brothers and sisters and offer a solution.

As Arixn piously explained:

"It saddens that our beloved Dagan is in a desperate situation. I will always be a loyal follower of Princess Halana and her wonderful family. As you know, her late father was one of my dearest friends. That is why I took the great personal risk of

traveling to the primitive planet Earth to rescue his daughter Princess Halana and bring her home. But my brothers and sisters, you have made it clear that Princess Halana is not yet ready to be Queen. I hear you and understand. And my friends, I am sure you will also agree that Dagan needs a leader that we can all trust until Princess Halana is ready to be Queen. It is widely known that I have no interest in politics. Frankly, it sickens me. My only purpose in life is to bring Merriment-to supply joy and laughter to the people of Dagan. Well, this crisis is too important for me to worry about my happiness. So, for now, I will put aside my joy and focus on the greater good of my beloved planet, Dagan. I reluctantly agree to serve Dagan until Princess Halana is ready to do so. Please understand that I agree to do so at a great personal sacrifice. And, I will only agree to do so as the Temporary Conservator of The Throne".

Again, speaking entirely from MI talking points, the pundits, now secretly known among the mere citizens as the "Blathering Class", fell over each other issuing platitudes, applauding Arixn's proposed solution. They universally marveled at Arixn's selflessness and devotion to the Royal Family and his complete lack of self-interest in offering to take total control of the planet. Opinion polls, conducted and financed entirely by the MI, confirmed that the mere citizens believed that Arixn alone could be trusted to protect the Throne of Dagan until Halana was educated correctly and emotionally stable to rule the planet.

Not only did the people of Dagan overwhelmingly agree to have Arixn as their leader, they demanded the imprisonment of any High Council member, bureaucrat, or mere citizen who opposed

Arixn's plan. Opposition is Sedition became the new MI talking point repeated among the Blathering Class. Arixn would henceforth be officially known as the Savior of Halana and would serve in a unique position that he created, called Temporary Conservator of the Throne. In this new role, Arixn had absolute authority over the government of Dagan until Princess Halana was deemed fit to assume the Throne.

The Opposition is Sedition campaign was so successful that only one member of the High Council refused to resign. The lone holdout, Chairman Dondor, contended that the consolidation of so much power in one Daganian, particularly one who also controlled the news media, would create a de facto dictatorship. The Blathering Class responded with universal umbrage at any insinuation that they were not a fully independent media. Of course, since they were all on the MI payroll, it was already questionable whether any of them were "independent" or actually in the "news media." Soon after that, in an apparent display of independence from influence, a mob of enraged Arixn supporters looted and burned Dondor's home. Dondor disappeared and fled the planet the next day.

Arixn's first official act was to issue an Executive Order that his office would automatically terminate when a Board of Healthcare Professionals confirmed that the Princess had recovered from her traumatic experience on Earth, and a board of Academics verified that the formal education of the Princess was comprehensive enough to allow her to correctly govern the planet. Arixn did not disclose to the public that he would personally select all Health Care Professionals and Academics serving on those Boards.

To assist Arixn in his temporary position, Arixn appointed High Council member Hoaon to the newly created position of Vice-Conservator of the Throne. In selecting Hoaon, Arixn stressed that Hoaon was also a Savior of Halana, a point the Blathering Class happily parroted over several more information cycles.

After Arixn and Hoaon had complete power over the government of Dagan, they acknowledged that the Great Striker Tashan Zho and Colonel Raea Samson had played supporting roles in the mission to Earth rescuing Halana. Moreover, Zho's role in the rescue was only disclosed as background to further explain that Zho had since been charged and had already plead guilty to various criminal charges, most notably arson, burglary, and treason. Since Zho was one of the all-time great Skiirmiishers, this was devastating news to the mere citizens of Dagan. To lessen the blow, Arixn made a special announcement.

"We are all devastated over the news of Tashan Zho's guilty plea. However, Dagan is a planet of laws, and even an athlete as great as Zho is not above the law. And although I cannot excuse his lawlessness, I do have a surprise for you that may lessen your disappointment. The Criminal Zho has agreed to come out of retirement and resume his Skiirmiishing career. His only condition is that we do not simulate his matches. Instead, Zho will compete in a new sport called Live Skiirmiishing. And although regrettably, it will involve extreme physical violence, I reluctantly agreed. The new Live Skiirmiish matches will be held on the final day of each month. To further accommodate the demands of The Criminal Zho, I have converted the old municipal stadium into a state-of-the-art Live Skiirmiish facility. It is already the largest venue of its kind

on the planet, but once the renovations are complete, it will seat One-Hundred -Twenty-Thousand."

In fact, Zho had never asked to participate in Live Skiirmiishing. When previously offered the opportunity by Arixn, Zho adamantly refused. But after learning that the Princess was still trapped in space after several weeks, it was made clear to him that Hoan's vessel may return to proper functioning if Zho agreed to compete. Almost immediately after Zho agreed to fight in Live Skiirmiishing, Hoan's Starship resumed normal functions, and Princess Halana was whisked safely back to Dagan.

Zho's life would never be the same, but at least Princess Halana was safe. For now.