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# Hold the Chain

SERIES PITCH OF THE MONTH






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# Hold the Chain

—Matthew McFarland

## Nutshell

The combatants in the flying city of Taranis' gladiatorial arena are friends, comrades, and even lovers—until the gates come down and the crowds start cheering.

## Characters

The main cast members of *Hold the Chain* are the participants in the gladiatorial combat of the Green Ring, the arena of Taranis. They might be the combatants, the trainers, or even the staff that work in the arena. The important thing is that they are not truly members of the society of Taranis at large.

An entire community of people work, some of them as detainees, in the arena, allowing the group to set all, or most, of the action in the Green Ring. Playing a prisoner restricts the locations of scenes you appear in. If this starts to chafe, direct the plot toward a development granting you greater freedom of movement.

DramaSystem series tend to expand their scope over additional seasons. In *Hold the Chain* you might stick mostly to the arena in Season One, moving out into the broader city in subsequent seasons.

Possibilities for characters include:

- up-and-coming fighter who has made a name for himself by defeating a popular warrior
- innocent man unjustly sentenced to the Green Ring
- old, jaded, grizzled trainer
- escaped prisoner living in the walls and shadows of the Green Ring
- revolutionary legend hiding among the warriors
- former loyalist sentenced to the Green Ring as part of a palace coup

- weaponscrafter
- Green Ring technician
- traveler from another city imprisoned on a trumped-up charge
- young Delegate having doubts

## Setting

Taranis is an immense airborne city, circular and miles in diameter, kept aloft by huge furnaces in the underbelly. These furnaces use a superior chemical catalyst to create their combustion. This allows them to propel the city along, recycling waste, trash and any other solid matter. A single pound of fuel keeps the furnaces burning for years, so don't worry about running out and plummeting to the ground. The authorities wouldn't lie to you about a thing like that!

Very few people are allowed to see, much less service, the engines. The privilege of being a furnace-tender is a highly coveted one. Furnace tenders do not receive salaries — instead, they can have nearly anything they want, free of charge, merely by asking. In return, they are forbidden to speak of their jobs, how the furnaces work, or which of the labyrinthine tunnels beneath the city actually lead to the furnaces and which are double-blinds or dead ends.

No one alive has ever seen the ground, and although other flying cities exist, contact between them is extremely rare. In bygone decades, the cities engaged in regular contact and traveled along predetermined routes. They have drifted from their courses, however, and become isolated from one another. No wireless transmission technology exists. To send messages to another city, which hasn't happened for nearly twenty years, you'd have to take a flying craft out to find it.



Made of metal and wood, Taranis cannot expand. New buildings are forbidden and impractical, and birth rates strictly monitored. If too many people are born, the city literally has nowhere to put them. New materials are impossible to come by. Even if Taranis made contact with another city, it would have nothing to trade. Popular wisdom states that the ground is hostile and contains no useful resources. The inhabitants of the city eat farmed or trapped birds, increasingly rare domesticated pigs, and plants grown in rooftop gardens. They catch rainwater in specially designed machinery, mostly for drinking and cooking. Only the wealthiest can afford to bathe; most use dust and vacuum hoses to keep clean. The rest don't bother.

An immense, corrupt bureaucracy called the Delegation governs the city. Delegates are appointed and confirmed through a system of arcane nominations, background checks, and voting by existing delegates. Dense legalistic procedure in practice permits delegates to choose whoever they wish to join the city government. Delegates control resource allocation, building and demolition permits, education, scientific development, and of course, justice.

On paper, all people have equal voices to bring grievances before the Delegation, and delegates enjoy no exemptions from the law. Any delegate may be accused of a crime, at which point, if the accusation is determined to have a reasonable basis in fact, the delegate is temporarily removed from office until an investigation occurs. In truth, though, voicing dissent or accusing a delegate earns you a quick ticket to the Green Ring.

The most popular form of entertainment in Taranis is gladiatorial combat. The city hosts five "rings," four on the edges of the city and the largest, the Green Ring, in its center, within sight of the Delegate Hall. Delegates often lunch in the stands of the Green Ring, watching the combatants train.

The Green Ring is an immense, circular building with high outer walls. Once polished and gleaming, over time they have become caked with paint, ink and adhesive as people plaster up drawings or paint images of their favorite

warriors. In recent months, one phrase, always scrawled in black ink or grease, has become more common. The Delegation sends a cleaning crew to excise it whenever it is reported: *Hold the chain.*

Within the Green Ring, bleacher-style seating surrounds the metal floor of the arena. The metal of the Green Ring is largely copper, which, over time, has oxidized to take on a greenish hue—hence the name. The arena itself is smaller than one would assume, looking at it from the outside. This is because the space between the outer wall and the bleachers is filled with machinery, armories, training grounds, holding cells, and kitchens to prepare food for spectators and combatants.

Five boxes, encased in thick glass, permit Delegates and other people of import to watch the proceedings free from deafening crowds. They place bets on favorite warriors and watch in satisfaction as the fighters they condemned meet their ends.

Some combatants choose the life of a gladiator. Willing gladiators, called "warriors," are well compensated and enjoys lives of luxury outside the ring. Others, however, are criminals and dissidents sentenced to the arena. These unfortunates, called "divers," seldom survive a first match.

A bout in any of the arenas is a fight to the death. Sometimes the combatants fight with simple weapons, most commonly knives, swords, clubs, or staves. Other fights feature barehanded battle. Occasionally, combatants engage in enhanced matches, in which both participants wear steam-powered metal exoskeletons. These devices make for quick fights, though, as one solid blow is more than enough to kill. During an enhanced match, combatants either try to end the fight quickly by landing a death blow, or outlast opponents by conserving steam power.

Engineers also make matches interesting by slowly heating the metal of the ring or piping in scalding steam at random points during the match. In the outer rings, the fight ends when one combatant kills the other. The Green Ring, though, adds another wrinkle.

Bouts in the Green Ring are timed. At the end of the predetermined time, which varies

depending on the nature of the bout and how much the fight coordinators have been bribed, the floor slides open to reveal the endless sky beneath. A pair of chains launches out from the walls, and the combatants, assuming both still live, try to avoid falling to their doom. The force of the air pressure, however, is so intense that the only way to do this is to grab the chain and keep a tight grip on it until the floor closes—and that doesn't happen until one of the combatants is dead. In many bouts, both combatants are still alive when the floor opens, and both grab the chains and clutch them for dear life. In such instances, the crowd in the arena—which can number nearly 10,000—rises to its feet and chants: “*Hold the chain! Hold the chain!*”

In Taranis, the phrase “hold the chain” is a common affirmation, meaning roughly “don't give up” or “stick it out.” To the revolutionaries plotting the downfall of the Delegation, it means something else, as well—“Be patient. Our time is coming.”

The combatants in the Green Ring, however, know little of the nascent revolution, at least as the series starts. The revolution has been a long time in coming, but it gains strength every day, with every man or woman unjustly sent to die in the Ring. The revolutionaries want justice for all, they want the Green Ring and the other arenas shut down, they want to send a scouting party to the ground and see if it is, in fact, uninhabitable, and they want to make a concerted effort to locate other cities.

## Surviving the Ring

Since DramaSystem PCs only die when their players consent, any gladiator characters in the main cast will by definition be the ones who always survive their bouts. This fits with dramatic convention. If your series was a TV show, the series regulars would be the ones winning the matches, with the doomed opponents played by guest stars. At the end of a season or during sweeps, a shocking cast change might occur, but that's not something that can happen at any time.

Should two PCs meet in the Ring, and neither player finds it fitting for their gladiators to bite the dust, you'll need to narrate the results, with or without the Procedural Resolution system, to

account for this seemingly impossible outcome.

With the outcomes of bouts between main cast and supporting characters preordained by the system, you'll want to focus on stakes other than mere survival. What emotional impact does a victory have on the character? It might matter not just whether the gladiator wins, but how.

In many series, a gladiator's matches recede into the background, occurring as brief snippets of narration referred to in dramatic scenes, either in preludes or through dialog. Make sure to feature this key aspect of life in Taranis before getting to that point, though.

## Themes

- **Corruption:** The Delegation is hopelessly corrupt, and the delegates condemn people to death on a whim.
- **Hunger for Fame:** Combatants are celebrities. What would someone do to become beloved—or feared?
- **Excellence:** The Green Ring is a crucible, the perfect place for a hero to rise.
- **Exploration:** No one remembers ever seeing anything off the edge of the flying city except clouds and stars. What's *down* there? Does anyone know?
- Freedom
- Chains
- Flight
- **Scarcity:** What are people *really* eating?
- **Dirt:** When it rains, people go their rooftops to be cleansed.
- **Technology:** Few people understand what's keeping the city up.

## Tightening the Screws

Expect the narrative to build toward a momentous, city-changing event: Contact from another city, the Green Ring's prisoners being freed, the start of the revolution, or riots from starving citizens. Tension between the characters can stem from their relationships with people outside the Green Ring, or from the city as a whole.

- The city's engines sputter, and the city drops ten feet. Widespread fear grips the city, and the Delegates announce a special bout starring famous warriors. This might possibly include the characters, or they

- might be the undercard.
- During a bout, an unidentified aircraft flies over the arena. The pilot winds up in the Green Ring the next night. Alternately, when the floor opens the craft flies *under* the arena and might be able to save a diver.
  - A Delegate takes a tour of the Green Ring, pausing to ask personal, insulting questions of the combatants.
  - A mysterious revolutionary, never seen directly, feeds the characters information about the world outside, intending to use them as an army once the rebellion starts.
  - A character's relative or loved one starts fighting in one of the outer arenas. Even if she survives, she'll only wind up in the Green Ring, possibly fighting the character.
  - The characters hear rumors of cannibalism in the city.
  - A new diver arrives, and points out one of the warrior characters, claiming him to be a member of the secret police.
  - The chain has been coated with lubricant.
  - A technician offers to make sure that a character wins a bout, for a price. That price might be monetary, or involve some other, more visceral favor.
  - One of the trainers is found murdered. The only ones who know about it are the characters.
  - An engineer imprisoned in the ring claims to have invented a way to send voices over the air, and that this technology could be used to contact other cities. He offers to share this technology with the characters if they can get him out unharmed.

## Names

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### Combatants

Tanner  
 Prentiss  
 Max  
 Belle  
 Winston  
 Emil  
 Jerome  
 Tiberius  
 Cooper  
 Pellyn

### Delegates

Lord Braxus  
 Lord Fairchild  
 Mr. Samuel  
 Ms. Arachne  
 Prelate Cellan  
 Prelate Imogen  
 Director Wolfe  
 Director Virden  
 The Honorable Mr. Lux  
 The Honorable Mrs. Chesner