

# Chapter 1: The Contest

Todd stepped onto a hoverdisc and breathed deeply. Was he excited or nervous? Probably both. Camilla came over, her voice happy, as usual, as she said, “Congratulations on making it to the championship!”

He smiled slightly and replied, “Thanks, Camilla. I hope I can win this.”

“I hope so too!” she assured him. She smiled at him with her beautiful, innocent smile, and then hurried off.

Todd didn’t expect her to stay around to calm him. She was, after all, in charge of the event. The bubbly, young, 21-year-old, didn’t appear to be the in-charge type. She was sweet, happy, and always positive. Yet, she noticed every detail and ran events incredibly well.

Todd waited for his name to be announced and rode the hoverdisc through the entrance. The crowd cheered him on wildly. He smiled at them and waved, his nervousness giving way to the excitement of the crowd. Many in the crowd started chanting, “Todd, Todd, Todd!”

Next his opponent was announced and many in the crowd started chanting, “Nolan, Nolan, Nolan!” Todd had never fought Nolan in a tournament before. Nolan was from the planet Iublion. People from Iublion seldom visited Tristan, except for big events. This was a big event. Every planet in the Alliance of Planets was invited to attend and send their martial arts champion to the competition.

Todd was surprised to make it to the championship fight. Honestly, he was surprised to win his planet’s championship. Yet, there he was.

The announcer instructed them to step onto the platform, so he stepped off his hoverdisc. Nolan did the same. They sized each other up. Nolan was definitely bigger than him. Todd didn't get to the championship by being the biggest and the strongest. He wasn't small either. He stood about 5'10", and he was strong, but not extreme body-builder type strong. He won fights because he was smart and fast. He looked again at Nolan and hoped he was fast enough. Nolan was about six feet tall, and lean, but quite muscular.

The bell sounded, so Todd and Nolan both came out fighting. The fight didn't start well, as Nolan immediately hit him hard across the face and followed it with an elbow in the stomach. Todd had to shake it off and focus. He grabbed Nolan and swept his legs. Nolan fell, and Todd followed up with a punch. Todd was only down by one.

The match remained close, and the crowd was all glued to it. Even Camilla, who was trying to make sure the awards were all ready, stopped and watched. Both Todd and Nolan were amazing! Camilla had watched Todd fight many times. She'd lived around the Mansion since her mother became the cook; so she'd seen Todd around often. Todd grew up in the Mansion because his grandfather, Adam, was the king of Tristan and Overlord of the Alliance of Planets, which most people either called "A-Op" or "The Alliance" for short.

But Todd wasn't fighting as Tristan's champion because he was the king's grandson. He was fighting as their champion because he was good.

Camilla held a trophy in her hand as she watched Todd break Nolan's hold on him, spin out, and land some kind of very fancy kick right in Nolan's face. That had to be painful. They wore protective suits that kept them from getting seriously injured, but their faces had no protection. They had to be guarded well.

Nolan stumbled backward and almost fell off the platform. He tried to shake it off and come back with a strong series of hits, but Todd was too quick to land a hit on. Instead, Todd came in with a roundhouse kick, followed by a strike, and again swept his legs. Nolan fell backwards – hard – and had the wind knocked out of him. He didn't get up.

Todd was immediately declared the winner! The crowd cheered and there was a big deal made over giving him the trophy.

As he accepted it, he looked out over all the fans, very aware of the pain from all the hits he took, but it was worth it.

Nolan wasn't there to accept his second place because he was put on a hoverpad and taken to a back room to make sure he wasn't injured. Fortunately, healing was an advanced art on Tristan.

Nolan wasn't injured, not any worse than Todd was anyway. Once he could breathe again, he told everyone that he was fine and would go out to get his award in a moment. He just needed a minute to himself.

When the doctors left, Nolan took advantage of the moment alone. He had prepared for the event of coming in second. He opened his case to take out his steriopic prick. They were strictly forbidden to use in contests, but that's exactly why he had it. He looked in his case. It wasn't there. Instead there was a note that said, "Not this time!" and was signed with a lightning bolt.

"No!" Nolan almost screamed.

No one knew who "Lightning" was. He'd foiled many plots in Tristan, and was known to occasionally leave his mark on other planets as well. Still, no one had ever caught him in the act, and no one knew who he was. Everyone just called him "Lightning," and it was often said that Lightning strikes when

you need him the most. So many people were in his debt, and everyone was curious who he was.

“Cor!” Nolan swore. Few actually remembered how “cor” became a swear word, as it was also used to show excitement and surprise. Yet, most people in the system used “cor” as a swear word too.

Nolan hit his fist on the hoverpad. “Cor!” he swore again. His plan had failed. There was nothing he could do but settle for second place.

He walked out late to receive his second place trophy. The crowd cheered wildly for him, but he shook his head dejectedly. Second wasn’t good enough.

Todd was there smiling and extended his hand to Nolan to congratulate him. Nolan reluctantly shook it. “You are an amazing fighter,” Todd complimented. Nolan did not respond.

The crowd again cheered wildly as the top three contestants raised their hands in victory.

“One final announcement,” the announcer called out. “A reminder to all that tomorrow the king will announce the Tristan Challenge here at noon!”

The crowd again cheered, and they were dismissed. Todd and Nolan each stepped on a hoverpad and flew through the exit to backstage.

Camilla was back in the locker room waiting for Todd. “Congratulations, Todd! I’m so excited for you,” she praised as she gave him an excited hug. Then, with her normal happy smile, she explained that Nolan was going to try to accidentally prick him with his steriopic prick and accuse him of using performance enhancing drugs to have him disqualified.

Todd stepped back, looked thoughtful, and asked, “How do you know that, and how did you stop him?”

“I didn’t stop him,” Camilla explained. “Lightning struck.”

Todd nodded. That made sense. “How do you know?” he asked.

Camilla showed him the paper that had Lightning’s mark on it and said that she’d been informed of what happened by someone who worked at the event.

Todd laughed. He wasn’t going to let something that could have gone wrong and didn’t ruin his excitement. He nodded conclusively. “Well, all is well. He failed, and I won. Let’s get going.” He picked up his things.

“I’ll meet you outside later,” Camilla suggested. “I still have work to do. The event isn’t over until it’s all cleaned up. I don’t have to do the cleaning, but I do have to see that the crew is on it.” She happily headed out the door.

Todd headed outside. There was a big crowd waiting for him. Many cameras were floating around, and everyone wanted pictures with him. He had girls giving him their com-codes, and several invited him to dinner. Todd was used to getting attention from girls, as he was the prince of Tristan; but the crowd was over-whelming, even for him.

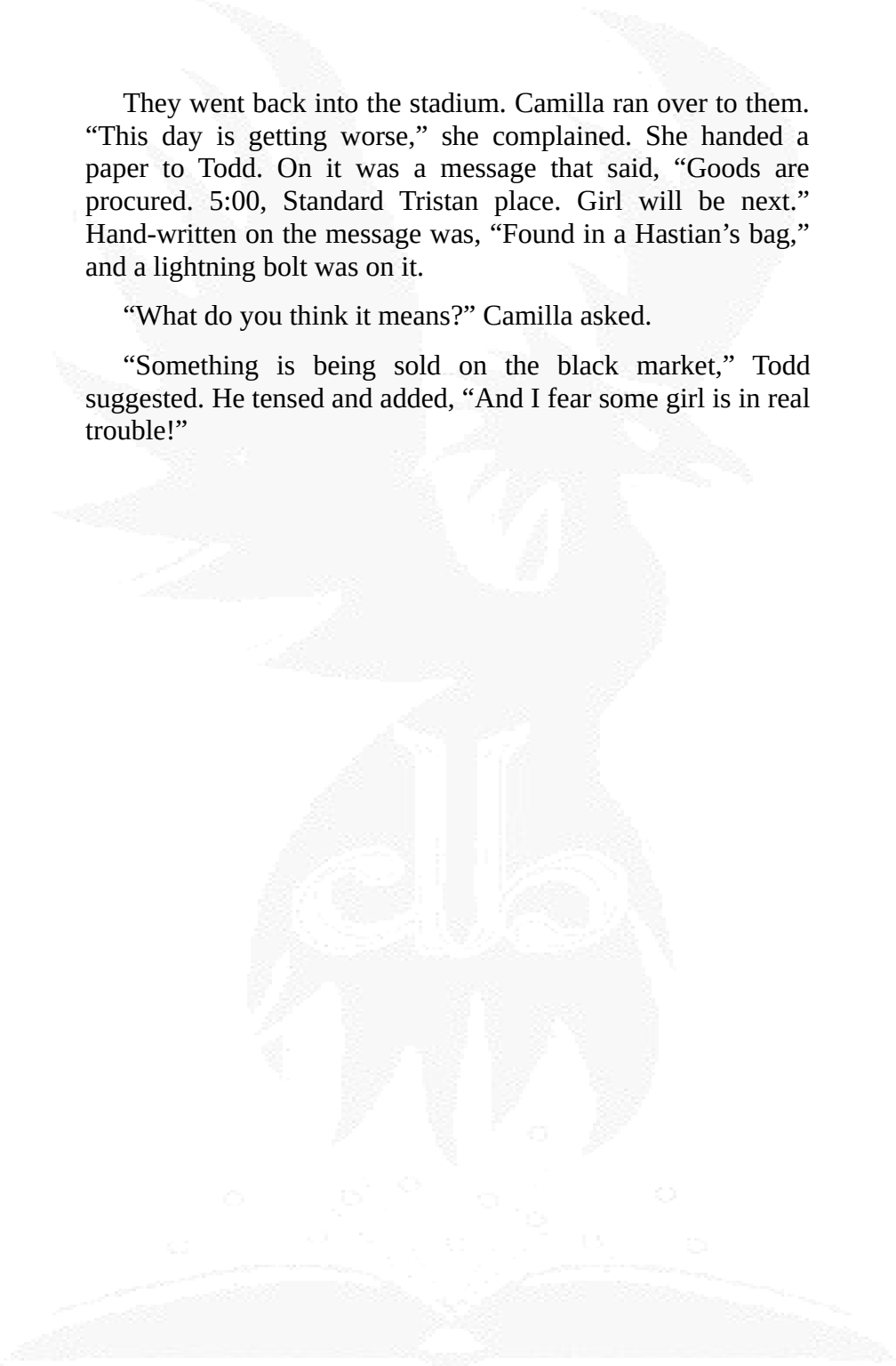
In the end, he had to run away, for the girls began to mob him. If only he had a hoverdisc with him, but he didn’t; so he ran around the corner and bumped into Emma, his best friend. They’d grown up together, as her father, Milton, was Lord Adam’s councilor.

“I’ve been looking...” she started.

“Shh!” Todd warned her as he pulled her behind a column, and the crazed girls ran by.

“Adoring fan club?” Emma asked.

Todd nodded and suggested, “Let’s sneak out the back.”



They went back into the stadium. Camilla ran over to them. “This day is getting worse,” she complained. She handed a paper to Todd. On it was a message that said, “Goods are procured. 5:00, Standard Tristan place. Girl will be next.” Hand-written on the message was, “Found in a Hastian’s bag,” and a lightning bolt was on it.

“What do you think it means?” Camilla asked.

“Something is being sold on the black market,” Todd suggested. He tensed and added, “And I fear some girl is in real trouble!”