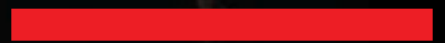


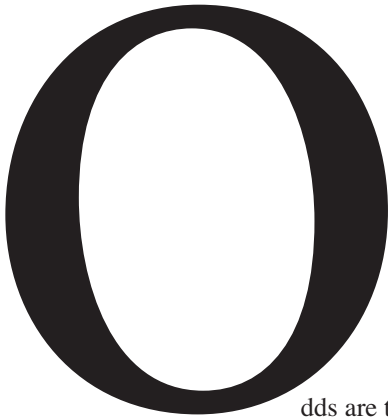
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In an exclusive interview  
with a Contenders crew member,  
Dominick Cancilla learns about  
the wild side of reality TV



# Contenders



dds are that those few Americans who have never watched *The Contenders* are, for one reason or another, either unable or unwilling to watch television at all. The success of the “game without rules where the only prize is the only prize that counts — your life” is completely unprecedented. It overthrew the rule that only the networks could have top-rated shows, and it changed forever the concept of reality TV. Because games do not last for a set amount of time, the show does not have regular, fixed-length seasons. Viewers never know which episode will be the last in a particular Series, which increases tension and viewership. Over the seven Series broadcast so far, the longest lasted twenty episodes, the shortest five episodes, and a total of 59 Contenders have died. As one commentator put it, if you want to see more violence, you have to watch the news.

Both because of its success and its subject matter, *The Contenders* has a great deal of security associated with it. Locations are not announced ahead of time, employees are given the option of on-screen anonymity, and the game’s few rules are only revealed as they are violated. It is for this reason that *The Spook* was very surprised to receive a request for an interview from someone working at the core of the show — particularly since it came with an assurance that this would be a no-holds-barred discussion, so long as the interviewee’s identity was not revealed.

Needless to say, we jumped at the chance.

We met with our subject in a Los Angeles hotel room at the beginning of April. The interview lasted almost four hours (its duration due in part to the fact that we were not allowed to use any recording equipment but had to promise that all responses would be quoted verbatim). Not once were we stonewalled, and no questions were avoided. We hope it will prove as enlightening for you as it was for us.

**THE SPOOK:** We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to ask you a few questions about *The Contenders*. But before we get the ball rolling, how would you like to be referred to in the interview?

**SUBJECT:** Just call me X.

**THE SPOOK:** All right. So, “X,” what can you tell our readers about your credentials? Why should we be talking to you about *The Contenders*?

**X:** I was with the show from the beginning. I’ve been intimately involved with every episode, so I know pretty much all there is to know about it. But I feel like the secrecy policy has gone overboard. People have a right to know what they are looking at.

**THE SPOOK:** Fair enough. And how would you describe the show itself? From your perspective?

**X:** It’s kind of like “The Most Dangerous Game” made real. In fact, that was originally going to be the title of the show, “The Most Dangerous Game,” but there were copyright problems. Besides, I think *The Contenders* has a better feeling about it. Anyway, at the beginning of each Series, six people are chosen at random from the residents of the town where the game is going to be played and become our Contenders. If there’s a reigning champion, only five people are chosen. *The Contenders* are miked up and given a gun, and a camera man follows them, filming pretty much every move they make until the game is over, which is when only one of The Contenders is alive. If a reigning champion wins three times, he or she doesn’t have to play any more. But you know all that already.

**THE SPOOK:** I hadn’t heard about the show’s original title. Can you give us any more details on its origin?

**X:** I don’t think there’s much that hasn’t already been all over. In the first place, it was inspired by *Survivor: New York*.

**THE SPOOK:** How so?

**X:** Well, that was the first episode of *Survivor* not filmed in the wilderness. People were dropped in Manhattan with \$5 and the clothes on their back and were supposed to live for a month. The idea was that they’d be homeless, panhandle, look for charity, stuff like that. But one of the contestants started mugging people for money and there was that whole controversy because the camera and boom mike operators didn’t stop him. The idea for *The Contenders* came after the court decided that the studio wasn’t responsible for the behavior of contestants.

**THE SPOOK:** But it wasn’t an easy road from there.

**X:** No way! It’s a pretty radical thing they wanted to try. All of the network lawyers practically ran screaming. And after Series 1, there was the Congressional inquiry.

**THE SPOOK:** Is that what inspired filming Series 2 in Washington, D.C.?

**X:** Oh, don’t get me started on that! What a fiasco! When the number came up for Bob Browning —

**THE SPOOK:** The nephew of a Senator who was one of the show’s biggest opponents.

**X:** Right. When his number came up, we thought we were doomed. Thank goodness he won! We made a new policy that when the government assigns the numbers they screen out prominent people, and we didn’t make Bob come back for Series 3, just to show we knew we’d made a bit of a mistake in the first place. I think that was pretty fair, and the Senator must have thought so too because he pretty much backed off after that.

In that same series, we had the problem with the motorcycle thing where that kid got run over, and Mercedes Kim who shot those non-Contenders. That could have been the end right there, if public opinion hadn’t gone our way, but we were lucky that the targets ended up being gang members, and another Contender took Mercedes out before things went too far. Both of those were unfortunate incidents, but unpreventable.

Safety really is the number-one concern, but sometimes things happen. You just can’t control it. Our camera men all wear vests, for example, but one did receive a serious scalp laceration when a stray bullet hit his camera. We all felt terrible about that. Fortunately, it was a minor wound and our technicians were able to save the tape.

**THE SPOOK:** There was certainly a lot of work just keeping the series going at first.





“It’s just that Series 7 was so incredibly popular, what with the reigning champion being nine months pregnant, that we thought it would be the best test of the market.”

**X:** A lot of work goes into every Series of *The Contenders*. We’re working on the eighth right now.

**THE SPOOK:** And where does that take place?

**X:** I don’t want to say. It causes hassles if the location is public knowledge before hand. The media just swarms.

**THE SPOOK:** Series 7 was just released on DVD.

**X:** Right. That’s 86 minutes of the very best stuff, edited down from the seven-hour marathon when we repeated all of the episodes back-to-back. You can get it at Best Buy, dvdplanet.com — the usual places. There might be a complete, unedited, DVD set released for Christmas if sales are good.

**THE SPOOK:** And how have they been?

**X:** Phenomenal, actually. Some places can’t keep it in stock. We’ll probably end up going back and releasing the whole show, right from Series 1. It’s just that Series 7 was so incredibly popular, what with the reigning champion being nine months pregnant, that we thought it would be the best test of the market. They’re releasing *The Simpsons* on DVD as whole seasons, so why not a game show?

**THE SPOOK:** You mentioned that the Series 7 DVD has been edited. Does a lot of editing go on in preparing the weekly episodes of *The Contenders*, or is footage

pretty much presented as it is filmed?

**X:** Well, since cameras are rolling on six people at all times for the duration of the game, obviously there is some editing going on. If you’re asking whether what the audience is shown is manipulated to change the truth, then no. We might intercut for drama, but that’s it. One thing that was changed for the DVD, just so nobody accuses us of anything, is that the footage of testicular removal surgery that was shown to illustrate Jeff Norman’s condition has been replaced with hand-drawn graphics. It turns out that some people in the audience were turned off by the surgery footage.

**THE SPOOK:** That’s certainly understandable — it makes me cringe just thinking about it!

**X:** Right. I think it’s important to point out just how much work goes into these shows. The biggest problem, aside from keeping the occasional rogue contestant in line, is controlling the media. If we had journalists following us around, not only would our liability skyrocket, but the results of the game would be known long before the show was aired, and that would kind of defeat the purpose. Fortunately, we get a lot of cooperation from law enforcement, and folks who become involved in events are generally pretty good about keeping their mouths shut.

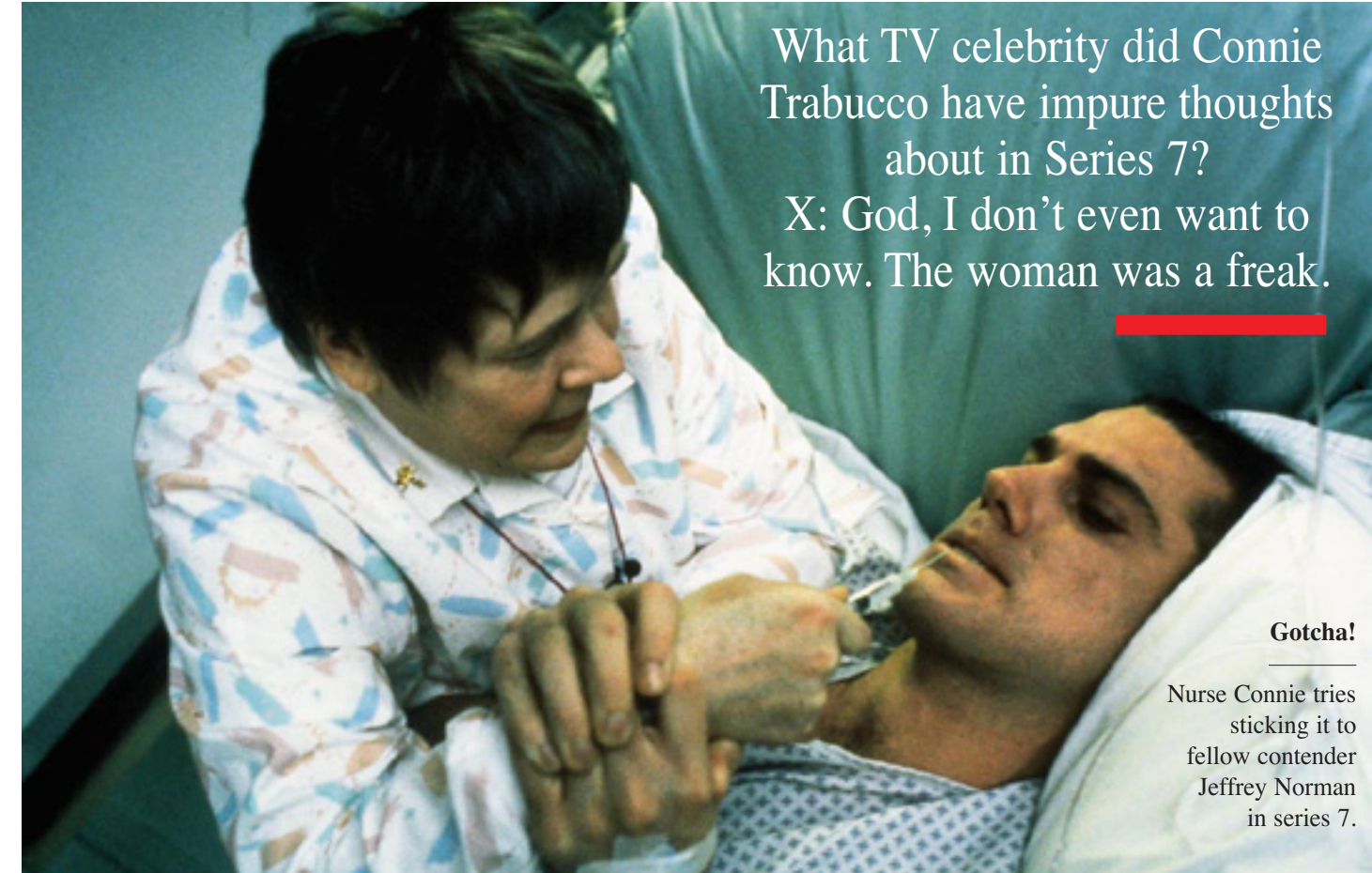
**THE SPOOK:** On the subject of security, how do you respond to those who say that the lottery by which contestants are chosen is somehow fixed?

**X:** There’s no way it could be, honestly. It’s overseen by one of the country’s most reputable accounting firms. The numbers are selected using a state-lottery-type device. Some people think that we’re assigning people to numbers after the fact and ask why we don’t just use Social Security numbers. But we couldn’t do that because it’s illegal to use Socials in that way. Besides, if we were choosing people, I think we’d probably try and have more, let’s say “beautiful people” participate. They’re good for ratings.

**THE SPOOK:** Are you by any chance thinking of Michelle Hartman in Series 4?

**X:** All the time (laughs)! It was a crying shame that she didn’t make it through the first episode. Lindsay Berns was pretty good in Series 7, if you like them young and too innocent to put on a bullet proof vest the right way ’round. And remember that Dawn Lagarto was pretty foxy back in Series 5 when she first started and before she was showing pregnant. Man, I could have just eaten her up! And I bet I’m not the first guy to say so.

**THE SPOOK:** There have been a seemingly unusual number of people in dramatic situations chosen to be Contenders. Roc



What TV celebrity did Connie Trabucco have impure thoughts about in Series 7?

X: God, I don't even want to know. The woman was a freak.

**Gotcha!**

Nurse Connie tries sticking it to fellow contender Jeffrey Norman in series 7.

Daymon in a wheelchair, Anne Miller with that mental problem —

X: Bipolar, borderline schizophrenic.

**THE SPOOK:** — the narcoleptic in Series 4, which was a hoot, and, of course, Dawn pregnant in Series 6 and 7. What are the odds?

X: They really aren't that bad. This is a big country, everybody has something interesting about them. Coincidences and odd choices are bound to happen. As a little tease, I'll tell you right now that two of *The Contenders* in Series 8 used to be married. They were divorced only a month before the game started. I've been trying to think of some kind of tag line about life being community property or something, but so far no luck. It might seem impossible, but the town was small, so the chance of people somehow being related was increased.

**THE SPOOK:** What about allegations that the whole show is a massive hoax?

X: Please, there's just no way (laughs). Seriously, there are so many witnesses, so many graves, if you want to be creepy about it, and so much obviously undoctored footage, that it's just impossible. This would have to be the world's biggest snuff film, and frankly I think we'd have trouble getting actors at this point, don't you?

**THE SPOOK:** True. But the violence has also raised questions. If you're going to feature violence, why not show more of it on screen?

X: That's one we hear a lot. "Why isn't there more gore? Why don't we see the guy getting clubbed to death, instead of it just being out of frame?" The answer is: we're on television. It'd be different in a movie, but we have to be careful about language and sex in order to keep it in prime time, and since youngsters might be watching, we want to keep the gore to a minimum. You'll notice that we've removed the bleeps and fuzzed faces from the DVD version, by the way.

**THE SPOOK:** So you guarantee that everything we see — and don't see — is real.

X: Sometimes, scenes have to be recreated. For example, we don't film people going to the bathroom or engaging in intimate activities. Or at least we didn't. We had a change in policy for Series 8 about the intimate activities part, because of what happened with Jeff in Series 7. We might not air it, but we'll film it, and maybe there'll be a special edition DVD or something. Anyway, if something important happens off camera, we have to recreate it, and for obvi-

ous reasons the people involved generally can't recreate it themselves.

**THE SPOOK:** Can you be more specific about what happened with Jeff?

X: He and his wife conspired to break the game's rules. They did it by getting some "conjugal" time alone, away from the camera. If we hadn't let them do that, they couldn't have tried to mess things up.

**THE SPOOK:** Speaking of the rules, another reason that some people say the game is fixed is that the rules are not explicitly spelled out during broadcast.

X: That's not true. We definitely point out rule violations by quoting rules. The thing is, we try to make sure that the only way people will be able to become thoroughly familiar with how the game is played is by watching it. That way, if a person is a frequent viewer and they are chosen as a Contender, they might have an edge over their competition. Look at Lindsay Barnes in Series 7. She knew that being a Contender gave her the equivalent of a carry permit for whatever firearms she liked, so she brought her gun through a security checkpoint and into a mall. In the same Series, Franklin James, who was practically a Luddite and thought the whole thing was fake by the way, didn't know and had his gun taken



away from him at the same checkpoint. Things like that can make quite a difference.

**THE SPOOK:** So, to give our readers a leg up, what exactly are the rules?

**X:** There are a lot of piddly ones, but the big ones are you can't commit suicide, you can't take hostages or put innocents in significant danger, you can't run for it, you have to obey game boundaries, and no weapons of mass destruction. Obviously, you also can't interfere with the production crew or try and avoid your assigned camera man. We also really heavily discourage full body armor and barricading. Also you can't break the law. If you could, then you could just rob a convenience store, get thrown in jail, and be pretty much safe from the other Contenders. Bad TV.

**THE SPOOK:** In Series 7, a Contender takes one of his children as a hostage and tries to run out of bounds. Why was he allowed to be so close to his children when that was a violation of rules?

**X:** That was a mistake on the part of his camera man. The wife said she was taking the kids, and the camera man should have reported right away that she was dragging her heels. You can see what happened as a result. I still have nightmares about Tony holding that knife to his poor baby's throat. Thank God things turned out the way they did.

**THE SPOOK:** In Series 3, one Contender used dynamite to kill another. Why was this allowed? Isn't dynamite a weapon of mass destruction?

**X:** Actually, that rule was added after Series 3, just like the parts about body armor and barricading. Manny Jakes got the bright idea of covering himself in Kevlar and never leaving the house. He would have probably won eventually if two other Contenders hadn't pooled resources and blown him up. This caused two problems, though: if two Contenders barricaded themselves, the game would just never end. Also, because a full case of dynamite was used, several other houses were destroyed in the explosion and fires, and quite a lot of windows were shattered. That's a lot of liability. Fortunately, Manny's closest neighbors had pretty much all left the area when they saw what Manny was up to so there were no innocent lives lost.

**THE SPOOK:** What about Manny's camera man.

**X:** We lost him, too.

**THE SPOOK:** How many camera men have you lost over the course of the series?

**X:** Three. The one with manny, the one shot by Pearl Kincaid in Series one, and one guy who just overbalanced in the back of a pickup truck on the freeway. We have rules for the camera operators, too, to keep them safe. They can't get into the action, they can take off if they're in grave danger, they can shoot gunfights from a distance. That kind of stuff.

**THE SPOOK:** Can we expect any other rule changes in the future?

**X:** That's a definite yes, actually. After Series 7, we decided to make it against the rules for Contenders to remove the microphones and tracking devices we put on them. In fact, we will start using ankle transmitters, like those LoJack kind of things used for criminals, to prevent Contenders from trying to lose themselves. We're also considering disqualifying pregnant people, but we're worried that women would start getting pregnant just to get out of participating.

At one point we also considered having a rule about Contenders not being able to cooperate with each other. That came up way back when we were filming Series 1 and *The Contenders* got together and made a peace pact. That would have really screwed the pooch, if we had to wait for five people to die of natural causes for the game to end (laughs). Fortunately, we were able to stop food deliveries and utilities to the house where they were holed up, and the pressure got to Duke and he went off. It was pretty spectacular, him going through a room of people like that, caught from six different camera angles, and I think that all of those people who didn't hang with the Series for its first five installments were really kicking themselves in the head when they heard what they had missed. So we don't really feel the need to make a rule because of how things worked out, and we really haven't had a problem since.

**THE SPOOK:** We've all seen your private security force go into action when Contenders break the rules. Just how far is your force prepared to go?

**X:** We run a number of scenarios during training and practice, up to and including killing Contenders. That would only happen in an extreme circumstance, such as if a Contender was about to do something that would harm an innocent non-contestant and there was no other available course of action. Most of the folks on the force are ex-military, so they know what they're doing and can do what has to be done. We just hope it'll never come to that. Though

Tony did almost get his clock punched with the kidnapping thing.

**THE SPOOK:** Certainly. On a little lighter subject, do you find that Contenders enjoy the same kind of celebrity as Survivor contestants used to get?

**X:** Well, most of them won't be getting soap-opera walk-on parts or endorsement deals (laughs). Seriously though, a portion of the sales of posters, trading cards, tie-in books, and all of that goes to the Contenders' estate where appropriate. Most of them get enough to cover a nice funeral, and in some cases it'll buy their survivors a house or put them through college. Dawn's action figure, for example, is just raking in the money, as are postcards of her ultrasound. Her Glock 17 sold for \$4,367 in auction on our Website, by the way. We put out a special edition of the video Dawn and Jeff did for Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart" which is selling well. And speaking of auctions, Jeff's wife has been selling his paintings on eBay to pay her legal bills. They're getting big money, which amazes me since they're boring as hell.

There's also some talk about allowing Contenders to get corporate sponsors. They could wear logo merchandise on screen in exchange for weapons or a bullet-proof vest or something. That's still in discussion.

**THE SPOOK:** You mentioned Jeff's wife. What is the situation with her?

**X:** I really can't go into that. We had the court records sealed so we could reveal everything in Series 8. All I'll say is we found a mutually satisfying solution to the problem, and it's going to be a big surprise.

**THE SPOOK:** Speaking of surprises, the town that the game takes place in is always a big mystery. Can you tell us how locations are chosen?

**X:** Whew! That's a bigger question than you might think. There are a lot of things to consider — the ability to isolate, the cooperativeness of local government, the type of people who live there. We look for well-rounded communities with a decent size population and interesting filming locations. In Series 7 and 5 we went to the current champion's home town, because that introduces an interesting element. We might choose a location based on its publicity value as well.

**THE SPOOK:** Like Washington, D.C.

**X:** Please, let's not go there again (smiles).

**THE SPOOK:** Can you tell us some of the locations you're considering in the future?

**X:** Well, in general terms. We're thinking of running a series in a prison. I'd like to try

one in a theme park or resort of some kind, or maybe on board a cruise ship. And we're looking at foreign locations. Our goal is to eventually be able to play the game anywhere in the world.

**THE SPOOK:** That's pretty exciting. Any other innovations in store?

**X:** There are some things we're playing with. Running with more Contenders, using large teams or couples, limiting the choice of weapons. I don't like that last one. The creativity of the Contenders is a big thing for me. But one of the producers thinks it would be more exciting if we didn't allow firearms, since there would be more hand-to-hand that way. But that wouldn't be fair to the weaker players, and besides the free Glocks we give out are almost a *Contenders* trademark.

**THE SPOOK:** No celebrity edition?

**X:** Somehow I don't think so.

**THE SPOOK:** Well, I see it's getting a little late here. I've got ten final questions I'd like to run through really quick with you, just to wrap things up. How does that sound?

**X:** Shoot.

**THE SPOOK:** Can people volunteer to be a Contender?

**X:** No, and before you ask, you can't nominate your mother-in-law, either.

**THE SPOOK:** How are the bodies of Contenders disposed of?

**X:** We deliver them to their families or a designated institution.

**THE SPOOK:** Isn't a Contender killing a Contender murder?

**X:** We have taken every precaution to ensure that nothing about *The Contenders* violates the law. Before we begin filming in a town, we work everything out with local and state officials. That's part of the reason why the game has to stay in bounds. So no, a Contender killing a Contender isn't murder in a legal sense, but an outside person killing a Contender *is* murder. We had that case in Series 4 where the guy killed his wife and then his defense was that she was "as good as dead" already. Moron.

**THE SPOOK:** Your favorite Contender?

**X:** Easy. Tony "The Hammer" in Series 6. The man had style and managed to get rid of three opponents without using his gun. I was almost sorry to see Dawn kick his ass.

**THE SPOOK:** Your favorite Contender moment?

**X:** Tough one. (Thinks for a moment.) I'm torn between the kung fu thing in Series 3 for the action, and the birth of Dawn's kid for the raw tension.

**THE SPOOK:** What happened to the footage that had to be recreated at the end of Series 7?

**X:** Basically, the camera was not treated well and was therefore not functioning correctly at the critical moment. That was probably the biggest single loss we've ever had in the show. That footage would be priceless. Damned amateurs.

**THE SPOOK:** Does the show reimburse non-Contenders for property damage and medical bills?

**X:** Yes, in general. We only wouldn't if it looked like someone were trying to put themselves in danger for the purpose of getting money. We also pay the medical bills of the reigning champion in order to get him ready for the next Series. We kind of do that quietly, since we like the "no prize but your life" line.

**THE SPOOK:** How do you respond to

people who say *The Contenders* glorifies violence?

**X:** Hell, real life glorifies violence. We admire action heroes and generals more than we do people who run soup kitchens. What *The Contenders* does is glorify individuals and the human spirit. It shows how you can fight adversity, and that more people have what it takes under pressure than you might think.

**THE SPOOK:** What TV celebrity did Connie Trabucco have impure thoughts about in Series 7?

**X:** God, I don't even want to know. The woman was a freak.

**THE SPOOK:** What's next for *The Contenders*?

**X:** More action, more tension, more real people in real danger. And like the Monkees say, you'd better get ready, we may be coming to your town. ~