

CAROLINE TUNG RICHMOND

THE
GREAT
DESTROYERS

Scholastic Press / New York

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By the time I reach the doorstep of the Jade Lily Lounge, I'm sweating and panting yet still running late. I even sprinted all the way up Stockton Street, but it's already 4:44 in the afternoon, meaning I've got sixteen measly minutes to prep for the match ahead. I usually like to give myself at least an hour to stretch and warm up and run a ten-point diagnostic on my Goliath before a fight, but I'll be lucky to suit up in time for this one.

But I won't forfeit the match. I need to win it, no matter how late I am or how illegal it might be. How does the old saying go? *Desperate times call for desperate measures?* Well, right about now, I'm neck-high in the desperation department. Cash is cash, and my fingers are positively twitching to get ahold of that prize money.

I barge through the front door of the Jade Lily even though the sign has been flipped over to read *Closed, Please Come Again*. A neon light greets me on the far wall, flickering on and off in a frightening shade of green. It's shaped like a daisy, not a lily, but I

doubt the clientele notices the difference. As far as bars go, the Jade Lily is on the seedier side. The floors are always sticky and the glasses never quite clean, but the regulars don't seem to care. They keep returning to this little hovel in San Francisco's Chinatown, and it isn't because of the weak drinks or chatty staff. There's something else that lures them in.

Old Wen stands behind the bar in his usual spot, wiping down the counter with a cigarette balanced between his prune-like lips. A Philips radio plays behind him, offering an update about Kennedy and Khrushchev and that treaty they've been cooking up over Vietnam. The war has been simmering for years, but now they're going to shake hands and put a lid on it apparently.

"You're late," Old Wen says, not bothering to take the half-burnt Newport out of his mouth.

"I know, I know. Got caught up with something." That "something" happened to be a detention at school. During my seventh-period home ec class, my teacher Mrs. Davis was giving a lecture on our future wedding registries and which type of silverware to include. It was complete Dullsville if you ask me. So while the rest of the class scribbled down the various kinds of spoons that we should register for—a different one for soup, dessert, tea, and then grapefruit of all things—I decided to look over the strategy notes for my match this evening. I thought I was doing a decent job of sneaking a peek at them until I looked up to find Mrs. Davis standing over my desk with her nostrils huge and flaring.

"If you got here any later, I would've had to cancel," Old Wen

says, tapping his cigarette against an ashtray. “Not very professional.”

“Sorry, Mr. Wen,” I say, but only half meaning it. *Professional* is a funny way to describe an illegal mecha fighting ring, which is exactly what he’s talking about. It’s a far cry from my varsity matches at school, where there are regulations and rulebooks.

“Your mother was never late, you know,” Old Wen is quick to point out. He has mentioned this before, how my mom would arrive ten minutes early to every shift, the picture of the perfect employee. I only wish I could say the same about her parenting.

I glance at my watch. 4:45 already. “Key, please?”

Old Wen takes a drag of his smoke and says, “You sure about this?”

He didn’t seem all that reluctant when he penciled me into the schedule last week, but I keep that to myself. It’s taken me over a month to convince him to let me fight in the first place, and I think he only did it because he has a soft spot for my mom. Years ago, they worked together at the Jade Lily—him in the kitchen and her waiting tables. Back then the place was a friendly sort of establishment that served up a decent shrimp lo mein and garlicky green beans.

Over the years though, the ownership of the Jade Lily has transferred a couple times. Out went the lunch buffet and in came the bar with the dodgier clientele, not to mention the under-the-table fighting ring in the abandoned boxing gym down in the basement.

Yet one thing has stayed the same this whole time, and he's standing right in front of me. Old Wen hasn't changed much since my mother first met him eighteen years ago. He still has the same graying hair that barely covers his scalp and the same sun splotches that form a map on his cheeks. And his falcon-sharp eyes don't miss a thing, so think twice before you try to pilfer a dime out of the tip jar.

"I need to suit up if you want me to make it on time," I remind him.

With a sigh, he fishes a small silver key out of his pocket but still doesn't hand it over. "You'll be facing the Ravager in the pit."

"Fantastic," I say, but I cringe inside. The Ravager earned his nickname by smashing his opponents in the face even after the refs have declared him the winner. Despite that gruesome image, I take the key from his fingertips. My family needs this money.

Before I turn to go, Old Wen leans toward me to whisper, "Aim for the right ankle. I noticed him limping a little on the way in."

I slip that juicy bit of intel into my pocket. That's Old Wen for you. One minute, he's waxing poetic about my dear mother who died too young, and the next, it's all business, all money. I'm pretty sure he's put a bet on me today, even though he isn't supposed to, as the bookie. We either swim together or sink together, and a sly street cat like Old Wen has no plans on drowning any time soon.

"Go on and good luck," Old Wen says, but I'm already winding my way through the restaurant's kitchen and making a beeline to

the locked door by the utility sink. That's where the key comes in. I open the thick metal door that leads down to the basement, which used to house Chan's Boxing School, now out of business. The owners of the Jade Lily bought the place for a steal, and they've drawn up plans to convert it into an underground bunker in case the negotiations between Kennedy and Khrushchev fall through and we end up with another Cuban Mecha Crisis on our hands.

I shudder thinking about it—how close we teetered toward a global disaster. Back in October the Soviets decided to secretly move a brigade of their mechas to Havana. We're talking four thousand of Khrushchev's finest Vostoks—twenty feet tall and armed to the teeth with machine guns in each hand and a belt of grenades around their titanium waists—and they were twiddling their deadly thumbs in America's backyard, just a hundred miles off the coast of Florida. As soon as Kennedy caught wind of it, he demanded that the Vostoks be removed or else.

For thirteen terrifying days, the whole world held its breath while the US and the USSR played one heck of a game of chess. Some of the rich white folks fled San Francisco, but the rest of us had to stay put. At school, we had duck-and-cover drills every day, where we would curl into little balls underneath our desks, as if that would save us from World War III. But eventually Khrushchev backed down, thank God. He does have some bark in him, but none of Stalin's bite.

In any case, the basement bunker is merely a cover story. The Jade Lily's owners have been hosting mecha matches down there for

nearly five months, and they've been raking in more bread than their bar upstairs makes in a year.

At the bottom of the steps, I enter a narrow hallway. If I go right, I'll round a corner and walk into a large open space that has been converted into the fighting pit, with rows of folding chairs surrounding it. Voices echo from that direction.

"Last call on bets," I hear one of the bartenders say. "Better get 'em in before the match starts, you cheap drunks!"

Laughter rumbles into my ears, and I can tell that there is a decent crowd gathered for my fight. There'll be eight matches total and most of the spectators will stay for the whole night, with their wallets thinning after each round, but they'll remain glued to their seats for hours. It's blood-pumping entertainment, after all, and what's more entertaining than watching two people climb inside giant robots and try to knock each other out?

I take a left in the corridor, which leads me to the prep rooms. I hurry to the one reserved for me because I don't want anyone seeing my face. That's why I took the long way here instead of going through the main entrance on Waverly Place. If anybody recognized me, they could tip off the state's oversight board that I'm making money off illegal fighting, which would put an end to my athletic eligibility at school and quash any career prospects I might've had. Granted, female fighters have pretty skimpy options in the professional fighting world since there are so few of us and we never get to headline the big-time matches in Vegas or Atlantic City. But I'll take skimpy over zilch.

The prep room used to be a storage area, but it's been stripped bare aside from the basics that a fighter needs. A ladder. A sink for drinking water and rinsing out bloody cuts. A single esterium battery, the size of a paper towel roll. And there, right in the middle of the room, a Goliath.

It's a 301C model, a sports-grade version instead of the weaponized ones that the military has been using since World War I. Like all mechas, it's shaped like a human being—two arms and two legs, connected by a V-shaped torso. Its engine is tucked in between the hips, giving the Goliath the necessary oomph to punch, kick, jab, thrust, run, climb, and whatever else you need it to do when you're squaring off against another fighter in the pit.

Since my prep time is ticking away, I skip my usual warm-up and go straight into getting suited. First, I slide the battery into its slot on the Goliath's back. It glows the prettiest color of blue, rich and dark, like the ocean at sunset. The blue hue comes from the esterium itself, originally discovered in the Dakotan plains in 1932. It's a real wonder of a power source, clean and long-lasting, but there's a limited supply. There are only a few dozen esterium veins that have been discovered worldwide, and its price is further driven up by the fact that it requires a long refinery process to turn a lump of esterium into the glowing liquid that fills my battery.

That's why there's a five-dollar cover charge to watch the matches tonight. A good chunk of that goes to the Jade Lily's owners, but it's also to pay for the batteries.

The very first generation of mechas, however, weren't powered by esterium but by good old gasoline. This was back during World War I, when a German engineer named Wolfgang Althaus was tasked with a mission—to help the Kaiser's soldiers survive No Man's Land, that deadly stretch of battlefield full of barbed wire and mustard gas that could drown men in their own juices. Althaus's solution came in the form of a mobile suit of armor, which was controlled by a series of levers and buttons. His early mechas—dubbed *Kriegsmaschinen*—were slow and clunky, but they got the job done by ferrying the Germans across No Man's Land without their men getting turned into Swiss cheese.

Not long after that, other countries scrambled to roll out their own mechas. There was the Soviet *Vostok*, the British *Condor*, the French *Colosse*, the American *Goliath*, and so on. By the end of WWI, over forty million people had died, but the mechas lived on, growing bigger and faster and stronger year after year, with each country trying to one-up one another, Germany in particular. A couple decades later when World War II broke out, Hitler used his massive mecha armies to conquer half of Europe while his pal Hirohito amassed a gigantic empire that stretched across the Pacific, from the Philippines to Thailand, and took a big bite out of China. And the Japanese didn't stop there. They tried to invade us too. In December '41, they sent a fleet of ships carrying thousands of their *Kyojin* mechas to attack Pearl Harbor, and we barely beat them off. There's a decent chance that we'd be speaking Japanese today if the war hadn't swung back in the Allies'

favor—and that’s because the US introduced a new mecha into the mix.

The esterium-powered Goliath.

It was three years in the making and required over a hundred scientists at a secret lab in New Mexico to create a working prototype, but the 9890A model changed the war. Tens of thousands of them were soon marching across North Africa and liberating France and pushing into Germany while more of them landed on Okinawa and steadily swarmed north, island-hopping toward Tokyo. Without the need for gasoline, these Goliaths were lighter and faster and didn’t have to stop every few hours for refueling. They steamrolled over the Kyojin in a matter of months.

“Eh, you almost finished in there? Eight minutes,” Old Wen says on the other side of the door.

“Sure thing, boss,” I call out.

I climb up the ladder to reach the control panel between the Goliath’s shoulders, switching on the buttons one by one until the whole machine hums to life. That’s when I swing open the abdomen and clamber inside the cockpit. It looks like a giant cocoon from the outside—the lower half is constructed out of solid steel to protect me from incoming hits, but the upper half is made out of latticed metal so I can see and hear what’s going on.

I settle into the cockpit and put on the sensory sleeves that control the Goliath’s movements. They cover my arms from shoulder to wrist and the same goes for my legs, running from thigh to ankle. Then I tug on the gloves and boots. The material is stretchy

and soft, but it has a thickness to it due to the dozens of tiny wires running inside it, which attach to each corresponding limb on the Goliath.

I wrinkle my nose because the previous fighter who used this mecha obviously didn't take the time to wipe down the equipment. It stinks of sweat. Otherwise, the Goliath seems to be in working order. It might be showing its age, but it's still an upgrade from the one I use at school, which is a post-WWII model that had its heyday almost twenty years ago. Richer schools can afford to buy new mechas every year, ordering them from swanky catalogs that tout "all steel frames!" and "deluxe models available!" Then they donate their old ones to teams like mine. If it wasn't for my dad, who's a mechanic, and my little brother, Peter, who's a human encyclopedia when it comes to gadgets, I doubt I'd have a functioning mecha week after week.

I really wish that Peter were here now. He's usually buzzing around me before each match, acting as my engineer because he knows Goliaths inside and out even though he's only thirteen. But there's no way I told him about my little after-school activity here at the Jade Lily today. Our dad has no idea either. His face would probably turn violet if he caught wind of what I'm doing, which is funny when you consider that he fought in his fair share of illegal matches when he was young. But he has made it clear that I'm never to step foot in an off-the-books game.

Those matches are no place for girls, he has told me more than once.

So you're saying that Peter could go if he wanted to? I'd retort.