

The Mech Touch Chapter 12: Duo Queue

The battlefield finished loading, revealing a ruined city. Craters, broken mechs and other war debris littered the landscape. Eerily, no life moved in the city. All was still, except for the desolate wind howling between the cracks of fallen skyscrapers.

The silence ended as a brilliantly colored streak rose in the air. The Fantasia R2 Seraphim readied its long ranged rifle and scanned the surroundings vigilantly.

"Come on! Let's stop hiding like rats." TheSeventhSnake publicly declared. "I'm right here! Shoot me if you can!"

Nothing responded to his taunts. The slim, grey Phantasm that popped up from the side of a broken tank shook its head.

"I told you they wouldn't fall for it. Congratulations for revealing your position. Now get down and stop wasting your limited energy." Triceratopssss said as he tried to accustom himself to his new mech.

The Seraphim cut back on its wing thrusters, allowing the mech to find some cover among the streets.

"This is why I hate 2v2. Everyone's constantly playing these clever strategies. The 1v1 arena is a lot more straightforward."

The Phantasm's pilot kept his mech in the shadows as he explored their surroundings. "I'm not saying you're wrong, but remember it was your idea to duo queue with two Fantasia variants. We have to play a little dirty if we want to win as a pair of light mechs."

The two versus two arena provided a more intricate combat experience compared to the solo queue. With a teammate at your back, pilots had a lot more leeway in bringing a specialized mech to battle.

For example, one player could pilot a heavy mech laden with missile launchers and magazines. Such a mech could rain death at long and medium range, but was as helpless at a kitten once an enemy got close. However, a teammate kitted out in a melee mech could keep off any mech that approached in the assurance that he won't get shot down from range.

Compared to such a classical synergistic team up, a combination of two light mechs hardly sounded optimal. Neither mechs possessed toughness and staying power. If they weren't able to shred their enemies apart in the first ten minutes of a match, then they'd run out of juice.

Luckily, light mechs still possessed some advantages. While Triceratopssss kept his Phantasm behind cover, TheSeventhSnake's Seraphim engaged its active scanning mode. The mech's hair sensors extended out and released invisible pulses, most of which bounced back when it encountered the plentiful debris in the map.

"My scanners are having a hard time picking up anything with all of this junk blocking my scans. My radar is full of false positives. I'm practically broadcasting my position here."

"It's better than nothing. At least you'll attract the enemy for us while I find a good ambushing position."

The bait had been cast, and it only took a couple of minutes for the fish to bite. The Seraphim noted a large energy signature strolling down the main avenue.

"I got an incoming mech. With an energy signature this large, it's bound to be a heavy mech. No sign of its partner."

"They're playing the same game as us." Triceratopssss guessed as he moved his Phantasm a little closer in order to peak at the approaching opponent. "Do you want me to stay hidden or find an opportunity to jump the heavy?"

TheSeventhSnake mulled both options before finally deciding on a course of action. "It depends on the heavy. From what I can guess, it's likely to be a frontliner. Your Phantasm won't have an easy time peeling its armor if that's the case."

Triceratopssss only carried a basic pistol in his Phantasm's limited loadout in order to make room for a sword. He could peel apart most mechs fitted out as riflemen but faced some trouble against heavy knight-type opponents.

"Don't do anything fancy. Just sit back and be ready to back me up."

"Okay boss."

While the Phantasm slunk into the bowels of a giant commercial complex, the Seraphim flew into the air and over the skyline. He easily caught sight of the enemy mech, which revealed itself to be a model unfamiliar to TheSeventhSnake. The bipedal mech wasn't built as a knight. Instead, it appeared to sport a shotgun and a pair of shoulder-mounted lasers. The energy weapons tracked the Seraphim in the sky and let loose a barrage of beams.

The Seraphim snapped back with a couple of shots of his rifle, trusting his auto-aim to ensure it hit the heavy mech. The heavier the mech, the larger its energy signature, which meant that tracking systems had

an easier time maintaining a lock. In the meantime, the flying mech cut back its thrust and dropped to the roof of a ruined apartment building, which cut its line of sight.

"Tops, the fucker's a striker. Its armor doesn't look too heavy, but he's sporting a really big shotgun. If he manages to draw a bead on you while you're closing in, you're dead."

"No worries, pal. He won't get me if I come from behind. Just keep attracting his attention." Triceratopssss cockily replied.

The Seraphim flew back into the sky and shot a couple more times. He had an easier time tracking the heavy mech than vica versa. Even though the Seraphim ran a little hot, its still a much lighter and less energy intensive machine. The constant roof hopping insured the heavy mech had to waste a lot of time reacquiring his targeting lock for his shoulder weapons.

TheSeventhSnake wouldn't be so daring if the heavy mech wielded a long-ranged rifle, which the enemy pilot could fire on instinct instead of relying on computer-guided algorithms. In the lower tiers of Iron Spirit, such computer-based targeting always worked like shit.

"I'm in position, Snake. You want me to go in?"

"The other guy's still lurking around. You might get sniped before you know it."

"I'll take that risk. I really want to peel this heavy guy's face with my sword. He's just so arrogant."

The Seraphim took a few glancing blows from the lasers as it rose to fire another volley. TheSeventhSnake guessed that the pilot took over

manual targeting for his shoulder-mounted lasers. That meant the enemy would take time to switch back over to his shotgun when pressed in close range.

"Okay, let's do it. I'll make a few dives to attract his attention. Don't wait too long or I'll get screwed!"

After taking a deep breath, TheSeventhSnake jumped off the roof, spread his mech's wings and made a high-speed dive towards the enemy, all the while releasing a rainbow stripe. His rifle awkwardly shot a steady stream of energy bolts, most of which dug shallow holes into the heavy mech's plating.

The Harconix Light DMR fitted the Seraphim well. It possessed good range, a fairly high accuracy and didn't gobble down too much energy. Unfortunately, its punch had always been a little under-tuned among long-ranged rifles. The heavy mech, despite being under constant fire, practically ignored the DMR's shots, confident his armor could withstand the damage for the moment.

TheSeventhSnake gritted his teeth. "I've learned a few new tricks."

The great thing about energy weapons was that the wielder could change its power on the fly. He flicked a special switch and paused his shots. Instead, the rifle's chamber started to accumulate energy and heat. As TheSeventhSnake jinked his mech to the side, he fired his overclocked rifle after a full second of charging.

A bolt three times the size of his regular shots escaped from the barrel. The energy projectile drew a thin white line as it streaked across the air and hammered the heavy mech's shoulder, straight up crippling one of its laser cannons.

The heavy mech panicked a little. It jogged towards the nearest structure, eager to find some cover against the threatening fly buzzing over its head. Its remaining laser cannon ineffectively released a barrage of automated shots, most of them missing due to the Seraphim's speed and active ECM.

Just as the mech barged through the entrance, Triceratopssss' Phantasm dropped from the ceiling. Its emergence happened too sudden, and the heavy mech barely rotated its lumbering torso halfway before his sword sank straight down its neck with the full momentum of a falling mech.

The heavy mech exploded into sparks as the sword managed to stab through its power source. The Phantasm pulled out its weapon and flourished it with pride.

"Hahaha, Suq Madiq!" Triceratopssss elatedly boasted as he approached the smoking mech and squatted up and down near its face. "You just got owned by the master swordsman!"

"What are you standing for?! Fucking move!"

The warning came too late. A thin but powerful line shot straight through the Phantasm's torso, obliterating the cockpit in an instant. A loud sonic boom reached the mech moments later, not that it helped.

"A sniper!" TheSeventhSnake exclaimed, and flew full throttle in the direction of the previous shot. "Why did he stay hidden to the point of letting his teammate die first?"

He already made a couple of conclusions after rethinking the hidden mech's previous behavior.

"This guy is confident in his marksmanship but not to the point of handling two opponents at once. So he let his dumb loud teammate take the lead, certain that we can't resist the bait. Once we're revealed, we don't have anything left to hide."

While the Seraphim tried to vary his flight, the next sniper round snapped off half of its wings. TheSeventhSnake struggled to maintain control. He chose to veer to the side but maintain his altitude. Whatever was left of his wings were redlining and were on the verge of shutting down.

TheSeventhSnake was in a bad position. Pinned down by a sniper and with half of his mobility gone, he hadn't even caught sight of his remaining opponent. What he did have was a general idea of where his enemy hid. He remembered clearly that the shot came from the direction of the tallest building in the city.

"I can make it. I only need a couple of seconds."

The Seraphim's remaining wings glowed red as the pilot redirected an ungodly amount of energy in its direction. A brilliantly white flare erupted out of the damaged wings, propelling the Seraphim with supreme speed in the direction of the skyscraper. The unexpected overload happened just as the sniper shot his third round, causing it to miss narrowly as the Seraphim had already raced past its original trajectory.

"I got you now!" TheSeventhSnake yelled as his wings finally broke apart from the stress. His overheated mech blared warnings at him as his rear torso's internals were beginning to melt. Since he couldn't accumulate any more heat, he decoupled and discarded his rifle, instead choosing to draw his combat knife.

Sheer momentum drew the Seraphim onto the roof of the battlefield's only intact skyscraper. The light mech's feet skidded across the surface of the roof as the Seraphim did its best to bleed off its momentum.

The opponent's model surprised TheSeventhSnake. It was another Phantasm. The grey model set its unwieldy rifle aside and drew its own combat knife in response to the Seraphim's approach.

"This is going to be tricky. My mech has higher specs, but its already half-dead. My enemy is still fresh."

The two mechs dove into each other, their knives clashing loudly while their limbs released punches and kicks. Both their cloud generators worked at full steam. The Seraphim generated a lot more clouds, but the black and grey smoke persisted in staying present.

The duel between mechs progressed in the same manner. Knowing that his mech couldn't hold on for long, TheSeventhSnake summoned all of his passion and unleashed it onto the opponent with only a casual regard for defense. The Phantasm player remained cool under pressure, focusing on pure defense in order to outlast his opponent. Once the Seraphim broke down, he could easily swoop down and claim victory.

"As if I'd let you!" TheSeventhSnake yelled as he went forward and extended his mech's free arm, deliberately taking the Phantasm's cautious knife swing.

The Seraphim's arm got sliced through, but the Phantasm's knife lost its momentum, rendering it still for just a fraction of a second. The Seraphim leaned over with its shoulder and bashed it against the unprepared Phantasm, knocking it off-balance. The Seraphim then swung his knife with an underarm swing, cutting ruthlessly into the Phantasm's belly, right where the cockpit rested.

"I've avenged you." TheSeventhSnake sighed as the game confirmed his victory.

"That was COOL!" Triceratopssss exclaimed in the party chat. "That last moment when you sacrificed your arm, I swear the enemy Phantasm just froze."

"I guess he's too new. His marksmanship is top notch, but I think he lacks experience in close-quarters combat."

"Kind of funny how he chose to use that particular model as a sniper. It's not a bad choice in the light weight class, but there's better options out there."

"It's the third Phantasm I've seen so far this week. The Fantasia variants from Chasing Clouds are beginning to pop up here and there in our local server."

Triceratopssss let out a disappointed sigh. "They used to be our secret. You're practically his first customer. You got all of his mechs right?"

"Yeah, except for the 2R-E, the one with the big behind. I just can't bring myself in piloting such a mech in battle."

"I wonder what Chasing Clouds is up to these days. He hasn't introduced a new mech for sale in a while."

Despite the lack of new models, the Phantasm and Nomad enjoyed modest daily sales. In fact, a couple of potentates even bought the 2R-E a couple of times as a joke.

Ves' initial attempts to push his models onto young girls had achieved a small ripple effect. Other girls interested in the feminine looking mechs bought them to play together with their friends. Boys wondering what the fuss was all about checked out the mechs in the store, and bought them as well for different reasons.

Though not the cheapest or most effective mechs, the Fantasia variants succeeded in establishing a foothold in Cloudy Curtain's digital battlefield. They had never been bad models to begin with, they just lacked public exposure.

While sales hadn't grown to the point that they had gone viral, Ves nonetheless enjoyed a steady stream of DP even after his last tutorial mission had finished.