

The Mech Touch Chapter 7: Queen of the Skies

[Winner: CassieTheFox.]

"I... lost."

TheSeventhSnake sat back in his chair, exhausted even though he had been playing a simulation. The desperate dodging, the careful shots, that impulsive dive at the end. The high-intensity action echoed with his heart.

He did not even begrudge his loss to CassieTheFox. That final dive had been an attack that would have resulted in a Pyrrhic victory at best. Fighting in a way that killed 1000 men while losing 800 might be fine in Iron Spirit where repairs were cheap and fast. In the real universe, such a reckless action was a good way to find yourself into a coffin or retired to a desk job.

[Triceratopssss: THAT WAS AMAZING! :O]

[TheSeventhSnake: I know. I'm going to pay for it in repairs.]

[Triceratopssss: Man, you really should have won. That dive was so brilliant, especially the way you contorted your mech at the last moment.]

[TheSeventhSnake: Nah, I deserve that loss. I was too caught up in the moment to realize the Fantasia's legs couldn't possibly penetrate the shell of an Excelsior.]

For all his practice sessions, he still lacked the maturity and experience of an actual pilot. He was still young, so he could afford to make those kinds of mistakes.

[Triceratopssss: So how was the Seraphim? Do you regret buying it?]

[TheSeventhSnake: It's definitely worth it, though I can't say the same for everyone. It has a very uneven performance. As long as you have enough energy, it's great, but if you run out, you're dead. I have a feeling I'm not going to be finished performing diving attacks.]

[Triceratopssss: Yeah it would suck if you have to face off against a heavy mech again. They could just tire you out. So how does it compare to your other flight mechs?]

[TheSeventhSnake: The firepower isn't the best. It's fast and agile, but it came at a cost to armor and endurance. It's the perfect long-ranged harasser, but there's other mechs that can do the same job a little better. Still I like this mech. Its really beautiful and I love the cloud generator. It makes me want to pilot this mech all day.]

[Triceratopssss: Do you mind if I share the replay with the others?]

[TheSeventhSnake: Haha sure. Do what you want.]

While TheSeventhSnake dove back into the arena, Triceratopssss sent the replay to his friends with a note to check out the new variant. Not everyone watched it, as a lot of them were not in the game or weren't interested. Those that did found the Seraphim to be a very impressive looking variant of the old Fantasia. Only when they searched for the mech in the market place did they receive a fright. Some of them even left disparaging comments in the mech's store page.

"8800 gold a piece? I don't even earn that much in a year!"

"Whoever pays 3300 credits for this underspecced mech is an idiot."

"Fucking get your brain checked you greedy price gouger!"

"This mech is too sexist! There's no reason at all enlarge its front chest. Mechs don't wear bras!"

Some of these potentates forwarded the replay to their other friends and mentioned the Seraphim's price. This caused a further ripple in admiration over the mech's beauty and scorn over its price. In the end, the sensation died down and nobody took the plunge to purchase the mech.

In the meantime, TheSeventhSnake kept throwing himself into solo matches. He achieved a record of twelve wins and five losses so far, an impressive ratio, but nothing to boast about. Very few flying mechs appeared in the Bronze League, so some pilots went into battle without carrying ranged weapons. These hot-blooded youths who wanted to get right into the opponent's face could only cry as the Seraphim gracefully drew a rainbow in the air while pelting them with energy bolts.

Only snipers and heavy mechs posed a threat to him. Their advantage in firepower or armor was so decisive that they had the Seraphim in the palm of their hands.

The next match proved to be the most exciting one of the day for TheSeventhSnake. His opponent surprisingly piloted another flying mech.

[Player Profile]

Nickname: Dire_Wolf

League: Bronze

Wins / Losses / Draws: 524 / 360 / 3

Equipped Mech: Lost Constellations Model VF-5 (Custom)

Weight Classification: Medium

"Damn, this is a scary opponent. What is up with that insane win ratio. I've never seen a ratio that high in the Bronze League."

TheSevenSnake was sweating in his seat. The Mech model also caused him to raise his vigilance. The Lost Constellations company was one of the more mysterious mech manufacturers even way back then at the start of the Age of Mechs. They adhered to a different design philosophy and were the first to introduce animal-shaped mechs in the battlefield.

The famed Model VF had been designed like a vulture. It traded speed for power and endurance. Though slow to catch up to any light mechs, it pumped out powerful shells from its cannons that could even shred heavy armor as long as it fired long enough. Though its ammunition was prone to run in extended battles, the Model VF was still able to pose a threat in melee range with its powerful reinforced claw and beak attacks.

The VF-5 his opponent piloted was undoubtedly a customized variant. Anything could be different from its stock model. TheSeventhSnake had no way of guessing what his opponent preferred, and simply reserved his judgment.

The battlefield finally loaded, revealing an empty urban environment. The map consisted entirely of a densely packed downtown city. Metal skyscrapers blocked the views of both players while also diminishing the effectiveness of their sensors.

"I could get ambushed easily by the VF if I blunder around. It's best to wait for my opponent to come to me." TheSeventhSnake deduced.

He chose to ascend straight up and chose a random, mid-sized skyscraper to land upon. The roof offered plenty of space but very little cover. The Seraphim turned off its wings before extending its hair sensors.

This time TheSeventhSnake maintained a passive scan. Essentially he just extended his mech's ears and hoped to catch a sound made by the enemy. This time he wanted to get a drop on his enemy. If he could take the time to make his first shot, he might be able to cripple the VF's wings.

He stayed patient as five minutes passed. The time limit for a solo battle was 30 minutes so he had plenty of time to spare. He was prepared to stand there and wait 25 minutes if necessary. He really couldn't relax against an opponent with such an impressive win record.

The sweat trickled down the back of his neck as he continued waiting patiently. The alarm at the thirteenth minute almost threw him off the seat.

"Finally, you moved."

The Seraphim retracted its sensors, turned around and carefully approached the edge of the roof in the direction of the opponent. He spotted the VF-5 hovering at a generous pace, reserving its speed but making sure to keep up a juking pattern in its flight.

"He's trying to draw me out. And he doesn't know my Fantasia is sporting a flight system."

The enemy was aware the Fantasia boasted a considerable sensor range. Instead of fruitlessly trying to search the Seraphim, he instead flew around seemingly lazily. The VF-5's flight appeared slow, but it held considerable power in reserves. The VF-5 hid a number of short-range boosters underneath its wings to assist with dodging and carrying out swooping attacks.

TheSeventhSnake chose to take his time to aim. His sensors had detected the VF-5 a fair distance away. Together with all the sensor pollution the crowded urban environment offered, he had a 90% certainty the enemy hadn't spotted him yet. The Seraphim's Red Eye module shone a little brighter as it locked on to the VF-5's left cannon, just underneath its wing.

Since he hadn't received any sniper training, TheSeventhSnake fired upon the moment he felt a buzz.

The energy bolt that left the DMR's barrel soared through the air in a rapid flight towards the vulture-like mech. The VF-5, perhaps caught off-guard by the projectile's unexpected angle, reacted too late.

The wing and the barrel of its left cannon took a glancing blow. It resulted in minor damage to the VF-5's flight systems but the damage the barrel sustained made the weapon inoperable.

Dire_Wolf seemed to be enraged as the VF-5 opened its beak to let out a piercing scream. This sound wave disrupted Seraphim's lock on the vulture-like mech, causing him to miss his follow-up shots.

The VF-5 explosively activated all of its boosters, ascending quickly towards the Seraphim. TheSeventhSnake abandoned his position and took to the skies himself. The Seraphim widened the distance while continuing to fire back at the enraged vulture.

The VF-5 could only helplessly dodge the shots while trying to keep up. It excelled at bullying ground mechs by shredding them with its powerful cannons, but with one already disabled and the other firing out of its effective range, the vulture performed rather poorly. Only its secondary machine guns achieved consistent hits, but their caliber was so small that even the Fantasia could tank a few bullets as long as they didn't land in the same location.

However, it somehow suffered only glancing blows on its chassis so far. TheSeventhSnake kept trying to hit the VF-5's essential systems, such as its wings or its engine, but only managed to clip armor or negligible systems.

"This bastard's dodging pattern is strange." TheSeventhSnake grew more suspicious as his shots kept leading away from where he wanted them to go. "I got it. He's fooling my aim assist!"

The early versions of aim assistance were easy to fool. Certain movement patterns easily led its internal computers to overcompensate its aim in a faulty direction. This wasn't easy to accomplish in practice. It took an unusually avid mech pilot to even be aware of this solution.

In any case, now that he knew what was wrong, he disabled the Red Eye. This pretty much had an immediate impact on his DMR's accuracy. His shots spread much wider now, sometimes missing the vulture by thirty meters even. He couldn't help it. Firing a rifle in midair was hard enough. Travelling swiftly while trying to dodge the vulture's return fire only added to the instability.

Nevertheless, the almost perfectly random distribution of shots threw the vulture off-guard for a second time. Since even the Seraphim's pilot couldn't predict where his shots landed, his opponent could forget about figuring out a pattern.

The exchange continued on for a handful of minutes. The VF-5 appeared miserable as its chassis sported a lot of scorch marks and ran low on ammunition. It succeeded in preserving its important systems, only suffering major damage to its massive wings. The vulture was built to be robust among the fliers, so even if it lost half its wings, it still maintained its capability to stay afloat.

The Seraphim on the other hand survived the sporadic barrage of solid projectiles with a few dents. It suffered an unlucky hit at the end when a cannon shell managed to hit the rifle. The impact and subsequent explosion irretrievably wrecked the weapon, leaving the lightly armed Seraphim without a ranged weapon.

"Just as well. I only have a third of my energy left."

Both sides knew it this match would be decided up close. The Seraphim ceased running, turned around and approached the VF-5 cautiously while unsheathing its combat knife. The rainbow cloud spurting from its rear gave the angelic mech a majestic appearance, as if it was a queen that claimed the skies as its domain.

The VF-5 let out an indignant cry from its beak as it accelerated in a sudden fashion, eager to challenge the interloper. While its half-wrecked wings reduced the power of its flight, its plentiful thrusters still provided a substantial amount of explosive acceleration. The vulture flew out with its sharp and menacing claws stretched out. The force of its approach enough to wreck any Fantasibased chassis in a head-on collision.

TheSeventhSnake flitted to the side and used his superior agility in the air to keep his mech safe. He swiped the VF-5 with his combat knife, scoring occasional hits but unable to deal any critical damage. The cloud generator spurting out so many colorful clouds that the streets were almost completely obscured. This didn't affect either mech's

performance, as they both switched to alternate vision modes that could easily see through the clouds of vapor.

Somehow the VF-5's pilot managed to orient his mech in a way that presented its most armored portion towards the Seraphim. This let the VF-5 use its abundant armor to block the small knife.

If the Seraphim's arms possessed more power and carried a better weapon, then it would have carved the VF-5 apart by now. Instead, it had to dodge the VF-5's fatal claw strikes with every approach, suffering a few glancing blows in return, one of which simply sheared off both its legs at the knees.

TheSeventhSnake felt constricted, and as his energy reserves fell to the last 10%, he again staked odds to a final blow. He stopped dodging sideways and flew towards the VF-5 head-on. The vulture noted the change in strategy and extended its claws and its beak in anticipation.

At the last moment, the Seraphim chose to dodge to the bottom right, straight at one of the VF-5's claws. The reinforced limb tore through the Seraphim's thin armor plating. The angelic mech's head crunched loose while its torso had been sliced half-way through, disabling countless essential systems.

The VF-5 suffered catastrophic damage in return. The Seraphim's combat knife sunk deep in its chest armor, and while it suffered little damage so far, the close-ranged strike possessed enough momentum to carve through its plates. Red liquid leaked out of the gaps.

The Seraphim had succeeded in piercing the cockpit with its last gambit. Both mechs lost their propulsion and fell.

[Winner: TheSeventhSnake.]

Chapter end