

The Mech Touch Chapter 9: Psst. Wanna buy a mech?

After a hearty talk, Melinda had to leave in order to catch her flight back to Bentheim. As Ves accompanied her to the door, she turned around and bumped her communicator with his wrist.

"What's this?" Ves asked as he activated his comm. It unfolded into a brochure.

"It's the Young Tigers Exhibition."

"Isn't it a competition for younger mech pilots to showcase their skills? I hear the Mech Corps and the local mercenary corps organize this event to recruit outstanding pilots."

The Bright Republic publicized the YTE every year. It had practically turned into a national holiday. His father even brought him to an event when he was little. Before he found out his aptitude made piloting mechs an unreachable dream.

"That was ten years ago." Melinda said and reached over and tapped the brochure, flipping it over to the next page. "In recent years they expanded the program to include a mech designer contest. It's not as thrilling as the mech battles, but the Mech Corps and a few big players pay a lot of attention to the people who do well in the contest."

"I see." Ves nodded as he read through the brochure. "It's conveniently open to mech designers who have just graduated or are in their final years in college. I guess the Republic wants to make sure it hasn't missed any talents."

"You should check out the rewards."

Ves did, and widened his eyes.

1st Prize - Gold Cup, 1 million bright credits

2nd Prize - Silver Cup, 500,000 bright credits

3rd Prize - Bronze Cup, 200,000 bright credits

If he won first prize, then even if he couldn't meet the interest payment, he could at least afford other necessities. The raw materials to build up a mech didn't come cheap.

"These aren't even the real rewards, Ves. If you stand out during the competition, you might be able to get an audience with the real movers and shakers of the mech business. You can get job offers and commissions if they like your style."

Ves smiled ruefully when he heard those words. "The bigwigs probably aren't interested in a small businessman like me. I'm not one of those geniuses with fancy degrees from Mars or Estelon."

Mars was the technological capital of the Greater United Terran Confederation, the oldest and most prestigious human superpower. Estelon was a hub of high tech mech companies and stellar universities of the New Rubarth Empire, the most militarily dominant human state.

"Most of those geniuses already have their future careers lined up, probably with one of the Galactic 500." Melinda responded with a scowl. "When they come back to visit sometimes, I sometimes wonder if I'm talking to a Terran or Rubarthan. It's like they forgot their roots."

"The Republic is a third-tier power, after all." Ves lamented, not entirely sincerely. He loved his home country and its high living standards. There were benefits to loving in a peaceful backwater. "Our nextgen mechs are probably considered lastgen by the first-tier superpowers."

Those destined for greatness couldn't be contained by the small Bright Republic. Ves knew it was no use to feel jealous about those endowed with great opportunities. It all came down to strength! If Ves failed to win the first prize, then he just wasn't cut out for it. With the System backing him up, he might not excel in anything now, but it could be a different story a decade later.

He waved his cousin goodbye and returned to his terminal. He re-read the brochure for the YTE and registered for the competition after making sure he met all the requirements.

"Good thing the YTE starts in two months. I'm not confident of winning anything in my current state. Hopefully it'll be different when time passes."

Ves went back to work. He logged into Iron Spirit and put in the hours to craft the Phantasm in his virtual workshop. Seeing each component roll out of the 3D Printer and place them in the appropriate place helped him understand his creation further. When he finished the assembly and tested its specs, he put the new variant on sale.

[Fantasia 2R Phantasm]

Tier: 1-star

Base Model: Fantasia 2R

Purchase Price: 3600 gold (-50%)

Premium Price: 750 bright credits

Comparing the new Phantasm to his earlier Seraphim showed a stark contrast in price levels.

[Fantasia 2R Seraphim]

Tier: 1-star

Base Model: Fantasia 2R

Purchase Price: 8800 gold

Premium Price: 3300 bright credits

His handcrafted Phantasm only sold for 1800 gold, which represented a great deal. The next models after his first Phantasm would be fabricated automatically, leading to a slight reduction in quality and a doubling of prices. Still, at 3600 gold a customer would not be disappointed at the Phantasm's performance.

After Ves proudly put his mech on the market, he visited the usual mech enthusiast boards on the galactic net and boasted shamelessly about the Phantasm. Not every mech designer chose to create a variant with a re-imagined armor configuration. At the very least, Ves hadn't found any other Fantasia variant on the market with a full-body Mirin-21 armor replacement.

A few days passed by. Nothing else changed except occasionally picking up Lucky's gems. The benefits it provided remained minor as

ever, but Ves still remained optimistic. Once his cash flow improved, he planned to buy a few exotic minerals and find out if Lucky was worth his Gold classification.

Ves worked on a fourth Fantasia variant these days, this time focusing on endurance and energy efficiency. He wanted to design a model that lasted longer and could run over long distances without negatively affecting its performance in battle.

Though it emphasized different demands, Ves could still copy most of his work on the Phantasm to save time. After all, the Phantasm really presented a total baseline improvement over the original Fantasia 2R.

In the meantime, Ves' store page started to receive some views. Surprisingly, a repeat customer bought his handcrafted Phantasm. TheSeventhSnake had also bought Ves' handmade Seraphim. Perhaps TheSeventhSnake could be called a fan.

Then came the younger generation of the Larkinsons. While most only intended to give their big sister Melinda a face by take a look, some of them grew enchanted by the Seraphim's regal grace or the Phantasm's dark elegance.

One rich nephew impulsively bought the Seraphim with credits, wasting three months of his personal savings. A couple of other nephews and nieces purchased the Phantasm, recognizing its superior performance as an ambush predator. A few even bought the 2R-E as a joke, intending to surprise their friends with the model's ultimate move.

Thus Ves achieved 23 sales this week. Together with the original Seraphim, he achieved 24 sales in total, almost overcoming one-fourth of his mission goal.

Only when Ves finished his latest customization did he log back in to check out his store page. His eyes widened with satisfaction as he realized Melinda had given him some much needed help.

The Phantasm sold well enough at the start, but its sales tapered off as no one else seemed to be interested as only an occasional customer would come and buy. They must have been defeated by the Phantasm in a match.

Together with the 50 Design Points Ves received from developing his latest design, he gained a total of 73 DP. He only needed a little more than a dozen mechs to accumulate 200 DP. Once he reached that point, he could treat himself to something good from the System's Skill Tree or Store.

He uploaded his newest work in Iron Spirit, and again he painstakingly built up its first model by hand. Just like when he fabricated the Phantasm, he felt a deeper connection with the Fantasia chassis by being involved in every step of the way. Once the model had been built up, Ves immediately chose to put it on sale.

[Fantasia 2R Nomad]

Tier: 1-star

Base Model: Fantasia 2R

Purchase Price: 3400 gold (-50%)

Premium Price: 700 bright credits

The Nomad weighed more than the Phantasm, courtesy of its extra energy packs and armor plates. The Nomad nonetheless came without the other model's Fayette ECM and Festive Cloud Generator modules, which ultimately resulted in a lower price. Ves judged the Nomad's performance wasn't shabby, but it lacked a certain wow-factor the previous two variants possessed.

"I'm starting to run out of ideas. I don't think I can force myself to pump out another Fantasia variant again without purchasing new parts, which I can't afford."

With only half a month left to go, Ves needed to do something about the mission the System gave him. The Nomad's introduction to the market might help progress his sales, but he doubted he could achieve a hundred sales before the deadline passed.

"I need to go out and push my mechs in person."

Frankly, Ves was too poor to afford a more sophisticated solution. While he gained a healthy amount of credits from the sale of his virtual mechs, he needed to reserve the capital for his mech boutique's future operations. Besides, his previous ad purchase in Iron Spirit had been like a drop in the ocean.

Ves dug into the assorted pile of junk the workshop stored in its backyard, managing to scavenge a broken, window-sized holographic picture frame. With his technical skills, it was a cinch to restore it. He fixed it up and also welded a lengthy pole underneath its frame.

Once it worked, Ves loaded all of his mech designs in the picture frame's memory. After a quick thought, he also added in some footage copied from some public replays featuring his mechs winning. Naturally he ignored the matches where his mechs lost miserably.

Ready to go out, Ves took the board and called for an aircab.

"Hey Lucky, you wanna go out and take a look downtown?"

Once his transportation arrived, he took a leisurely trip to the downtown area of Rodrigo's Rest. Having lived in the suburbs for much of his life, Ves was more than familiar with its streets. He knew where all the kids hung out after being released from school. He arrived at the local gaming center and took a spot next to the other people holding their boards ready.

Lucky meanwhile jumped about here and there, exploring the trees and lantern posts in perplexed curiosity. Ves wasn't worried he'd run off, so he let his pet explore to his heart's content.

"You new here?" A grungy guy looking like he needed a couple showers asked.

"Yeah."

"Why're you here?"

"What else? I have to sell my product urgently." Ves helplessly confessed. "Anything I should know? The Dos and Don'ts?"

Grunge head mentioned a few short tips. "Above all else, don't annoy the managers. They want kids to come in and out without any hassle."

The two along with the others waited patiently for the kids to come out of school. Once the first eager teenagers arrived, Ves went to work.



"Do you need a new mech that's swifter and lasts longer? Then I've got a mech for you!"

Naturally, most potentates ignored the people soliciting their products. Only a couple of young pilots spared a glance, but their eyes only stayed focused for a second or two before they entered the game center.

Standing for hours at a time holding an animated board tired Ves out. He gritted his teeth and carried on with his work to push his mechs into the minds of the visiting players.

Things changed once Lucky returned. The cat evidently had his fill of exploring the environment. It effortlessly jumped on top of a trash can near Ves and rested languidly atop its cover like a king surveying his serfs.

The cat's fine workmanship and agreeable expression attracted a few girls.

"So cute!!"

"Can I pet it?"

"It's such a big baby!"

Lucky appeared overwhelmed, but Ves put a hand on its neck to calm him down. "Please don't press against my cat. He's young and hasn't been out very much."

After realizing the young women weren't out to hurt him, Lucky meowed and stared at them with his shiny eyes.

"So adorable!! Let me take a picture with him!"

"I love his liveliness. It's even better than the dog I have back home. Did you build him yourself?"

Ves coughed awkwardly and shamelessly answered, "I was involved in its creation, yes. Lucky is unique and isn't for sale, but if you're interested in my other creations, how about you take a look at my Phantasm?"

As groups of squealing girls tried to pet and take pictures with Lucky, Ves allowed them to do so as long as they behaved. The cat seemed to lap up all of the attention, as if he was making it up for the times when Ves appeared too preoccupied with his work to play with his pet. Nonetheless, the steady stream of girls allowed Ves to conveniently insert a few mentions of his products.

"Be sure to search for the Fantasia 2R Phantasm when you visit the in-game market! It's the perfect mech if you want to look good while kicking your friend's ass."

Maybe 99 out of a 100 girls paid zero attention to Ves' words. If the one girl who actually paid attention visited his store page, then Ves felt his hard work was worth the trouble.

Surprisingly, his increased strength allowed him to stand on the sidewalk and last a little bit longer. Holding the picture frame up tired him a little less than he expected. His physical strength also translated into mental strength in a way Ves couldn't really figure out. He felt the effects anyway. This made him reconsider the utility in upgrading his other 'useless' attributes.

"Maybe upgrading my dexterity will make my thoughts nimbler, and upgrading my endurance will increase my willpower. The System isn't what it seems in the first place. There's a lot depth to it and I've only dipped my toes so far."

After the sun started to dip down below Cloudy Curtain's horizon, Ves called it a day. He ate a quick meal at a local restaurant and took a shuttle ride home. Sinking tiredly into his sofa, Ves activated the System and checked his progress.

[Mission Progress: 35/100 sales.]

He sold twelve mechs today. If his sales kept up the same pace, then he'd definitely accomplish the mission within a week. He also accumulated 198 DP. With just a few more sales, he'd reach the threshold of 200 DP, opening up a lot of options in the System's Shop and Skill Tree.

Though other mech designers might scoff at Ves' pathetic street peddling, all of his hard work had paid off for him personally.

Naturally, Lucky contributed much to his success. He picked up the sleepy cat and stroked his muzzle.

"You've done a good job acting cute. I'll order a few treats and have it delivered tomorrow."

Lucky meowed in contentment.