

The Mech Touch Chapter 6: Taking Flight

When Ves uploaded the new Seraphim design on the market, he quickly bought the required. Unlike the 2R-E, the Seraphim boasted a much more complex integration of disparate components. A working model demanded that Ves take much better care of the fabrication and assembly of parts. His increased proficiency in working with the 3D printer helped him in printing out parts with less deviation than normal, which further assisted him in making the assembly occur without many problems.

Ves received a nasty fright once he saw the final bill for the frame.

"I already have to spend 4400 gold on the raw materials alone. If I let Iron Spirit automate its production, then the final price will at least be doubled."

A 1-Star mech that cost 8800 gold to buy was an absolute luxury in the game. It took an average player months to build up such a fortune.

Ves decided to add a credit price to his model. "Since it's a high performing model, I can at least feel justified if I charge real money for the Seraphim."

He set a modest price of 3300 bright credits per model, which was already at the floor of what the game asked of him. If he sold his mechs with bright credits, the cost of materials and manufacturing would also be deducted from the same currency, so in essence Ves earned no profits at this price. 3300 bright credits still put the Seraphim well into the premium bracket. Ves felt a little nervous of competing against more well-designed models that mech pilots could acquire at this price.

"I don't believe my Fantasia will do too badly. It's one of the few flight-capable mechs in this tier after all. That's got to be worth something."

Ves refused to sit on his laurels after he finished putting the Seraphim on sale. There were thousands of customized Fantasia models and millions of other 1-Star variants in the market. Hundreds of new creations popped up every day so Ves had to go the extra mile in order to make his product stand out from the competition.

First he visited all the major mech enthusiast board on the galactic net and shamelessly made some posts exaggerating the Seraphim's performance. He then visited Cloudy Curtain's virtual mech pilot community and exhorted the Seraphim as a patriotic purchase, as it integrated the planet's famed Festive Cloud Generator.

Though his online postings might generate a minor amount of attention, there was really too much crap on the net these days. His pathetic attempts at advertisement might as well be a drop in the ocean. After considering the issue for a few minutes, Ves decided to take the plunge and enlisted a short-term advertising service from the game.

Iron Spirit featured a sprawling market, and the developers recognized that some designers wanted their own creations to stand out. So Iron Spirit's market place offered several methods in which to make a model stand out, such as putting them on top of search results, or putting them on display in the virtual environment.

The cheapest option started at a thousand bright credits a day, and Ves bought a package deal of 9,000 credits for ten days of sporadic advertisement. This only left Ves with 11,000 credits in his accounts, which almost turned him into a pauper.

"Making money comes later. Right now, it's best for me to complete the System's mission. I'll earn much more once I receive a real production license. Peddling thousands of digital mechs in a game just can't compare to making a single sale in the real universe."

After finishing his publication, Ves had plenty of time left so he got back to the designer to come up with cheaper variants. His experience with modifying the Fantasia model helped him figure the areas that could be improved.

"Hm, let's start with up-armoring the chassis."

As Ves tinkered with his designs, someone else on Cloudy Curtain logged into Iron Spirit and checked out Ves' profile as a habit.

"Oh?" Triceratopssss widened his eyes. "Chasing Clouds finally uploaded a new mech. Let's see if it looks stupider than his first creation."

The teenager figured the new Fantasia might sport an exaggerated chest or something. What he encountered instead was a marvelous visage. The highly customized mech looked like a Fantasia on steroids. Its wide, stretching wings occasionally poked out of the celestial clouds that emitted from the rear. The rainbow coloration offered little utility in combat, but it made the Fantasia look as if it stepped out of heaven.

Only the custom mech's menacing red eye and lengthy marksman rifle gave the model some teeth. Triceratopssss quickly figured out the mech had been made for sniping in the air. Aerial sniping was one of the most difficult specializations a pilot could focus on, but at least this mech included a built-in aim assist module.

"So it's called a Seraphim, huh. It sure turned the Fantasia into something incredible."

The mech excelled in both looks and performance. Though Triceratopssss intended to specialize in piloting medium weight mechs, he nonetheless grew interested in buying the Seraphim and

adding it to his mech stables. His eyes scrolled down the specifications sheet in admiration before ending up at the prices.

"PFFF! What! 3300 credits! That's a ripoff! At least the gold price looks more reasonable."

Unfortunately, 4400 gold was out of his price range. He hadn't outgrown his Groenig-Halman mech yet. Triceratopssss calmed down and stopped his impulsive urge to purchase the Seraphim.

If he knew that the gold price of the Seraphim doubled once the hand-crafted model was sold, he'd likely spit his lunch.

As for paying in credits? A kid like him only had 50 credits in pocket money, far too insufficient to splurge on an in-game item. His parents would scold him for wasting so much money.

"This mech is out of my price range. There's no way I can buy this luxury model. But... I think I know someone who can. Lemme check my friend list."

[Triceratopssss: Yo buddy, are you available?]

[TheSeventhSnake: Whaddup?]

[Triceratopssss: I found a new mech variant on the market. I think you'll be interested.]

[TheSeventhSnake: It must be something weird if you're taking the time to tell me about it. Give me a name, I'll check it out.]

[Triceratopssss: Fantasia 2R Seraphim.]

[TheSeventhSnake: Damn, you're right. This is the best Fantasia I've seen up till now. But what is up with the price. I could buy a top performing flight mech with all that gold and still have some left for some bling.]

[Triceratopssss: All of those mechs look like birds or underfed men. This is one of the few Fantasia's with a decently integrated flight system. You can even do some cool tricks with the cloud generator. Just give it a spin, man.]

[TheSeventhSnake: Why are you trying to push me this mech anyway? Do you know Chasing Clouds?]

[Triceratopssss: Nah. I lost an arena match against another custom Fantasia by the same designer. I've been keeping my eye on him since then since he managed to come up with something stupid.]

[TheSeventhSnake: Ok, let me see his profile... the Fantasia 2R-E, right? It's the only other model on his account. Oh...]

[Triceratopssss: ...]

[TheSeventhSnake: HAHAHAHA XD]

[Triceratopssss: Yeah, I know.]

[TheSeventhSnake: You've GOT to send me the replay footage of that match!]

[Triceratopssss: Forget about it.]

[TheSeventhSnake: Pleaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaase?]

[Triceratopssss: I'll send it to you if you'll buy the Seraphim.]

[TheSeventhSnake: Sure. Done.]

Triceratopssss checked his friend's public profile and indeed, the angelic mech had just been added to his mech stable. He was sure TheSeventhSnake bought the mech with credits. Earning gold in the Bronze League was hard. The snake could afford to waste a couple of thousand credits away with a rich daddy.

Having no other choice, Triceratopssss sent the replay file to his friend. A few minutes went by.

[TheSeventhSnake: XD XD XD XD No wonder you're so obsessed! You got pounded by someone's ass! That last moment is literally gold!]

[Triceratopssss: Please don't laugh too much. I'm going to have to live with it for the rest of my life.]

[TheSeventhSnake: You should show this replay in class, everyone will love it.]

[Triceratopssss: Ugh, not anytime soon. Are you entering a queue already or what? I want to see your Seraphim in action.]

[TheSeventhSnake: Alright alright.]

As a bonafide second-generation rich kid, TheSeventhSnake lived a comfortable life. He possessed decent looks, a wide circle of friends and did well in school. Other than the frequent absence of his overworked parents, he lacked nothing in his life.

Being a potentate was just the icing on the cake. His parents hired retired mech pilots to tutor him in piloting ever since the government revealed he was one of the 3.5%. Naturally, they didn't hope he make a career out of it. Just the status of reservist was enough to make the both of them crazy, since it offered many generous benefits in daily life, which included subsidies and priority access to universities. His parents even bought him a personalized mech simulator so he could play Iron Spirit at home.

Right now, the matchmaking finished finding an opponent for TheSeventhSnake. Curious, he checked his opponent's profile while the game loaded the battlefield.

[Player Profile]

Nickname: CassieTheFox

League: Bronze

Wins / Losses / Draws: 307 / 276 / 0

Equipped Mech: Orion Inc. Excelsior EE-26 (Stock)

Weight Classification: Heavy

"A girl, eh? The Excelsior is a tough nut to crack."

Many players ranked the Excelsior as one of the top 50 1-Star stock mechs in Iron Spirit. Its four heavy legs provided remarkable stability while its centaur-like torso boasted 20% more armor than a bipedal equivalent. What made the mech so infamous was that it had been crammed with energy weapons. It boasted enough lasers to tear

anything in the air to shreds. Only the mech's slow speed, average target acquisition and terrible heat venting issues stopped it from reaching the top 10.

Lucky enough, the map selected by the game featured lots of canyons amid a desert environment. The Excelsior wouldn't be able to find a pool of water to assist it in venting any excessive heat.

Once the match started, TheSeventhSnake instantly engaged his Astoria wings and ascended the canyon, finally landing on top of a plateau with a commanding view. Though his flight had followed a jerky and unstable trajectory, it was nonetheless impressive that he maintained control of his mech despite flying the mech for the first time.

"Hm, the Astoria is a lot rougher than the flight systems I trained with. There's no stabilization."

Regular reservists only learned how to control a flying mech in their last years in class. TheSeventhSnake had a head start due receiving plenty of tutoring. Otherwise he wouldn't have been confident in purchasing and using the Seraphim in battle while his friend Triceratopssss spectated this match.

"You must be watching me, right? Let me give you a show then!"

The Fantasia 2R Seraphim extended its hair sensors in every direction as it engaged in active scanning. This revealed its position, but TheSeventhSnake didn't mind it as he knew the Excelsior couldn't reach this high up. After a few seconds, his radar displayed a new blip.

"So she's not even hiding. Good, saves me the trouble of combing the valleys."

CassieTheFox chose to make her stand in an open field with only a few cliffs and canyons nearby. Her choice reflected a desire to keep all angles clear so her lasers would have a clear line of fire. Her Excelsior's quadruple legs had already dug into the soil, increasing the mech's stability. CassieTheFox wanted to slug it out.

"I'm not afraid of you!" TheSeventhSnake roared as he lifted off and flew towards his opponent, toggling on the cloud generator in order to announce his passage.

The Excelsior had been caught off-guard by the majestic entrance. The Seraphim immediately opened fire, its DMR spitting out compressed energy bolts at a telling frequency. Some of them even landed glancing blows on the Excelsior despite the Seraphim's speedy flight.

The enemy pilot regained her composure upon getting his. She raised her Excelsior's arms and released a cascade of laser fire from its built-in barrels. The Seraphim's ECM helped muzzle the accuracy of the lasers, but the barrage of fire overwhelmed his awkward dodging.

"You annoying fly!" CassieTheFox screeched in the public channel. "It doesn't matter how many gimmicks you use, I'll still swat you down!"

"Try hitting me more than a couple times before you boast!"

The girl realized she was overreacting and calmed down, slowing her fire rate. Though it meant her chances of hitting the Seraphim went down, it also delayed the time when her mech grew too hot to continue firing lasers.

The battle between the two mechs progressed into a battle of attrition. The heavier mech relied on its prodigious armor to tank the DMR's punishing blows, while the Seraphim relied on its aerial superiority

and ECM to avoid most of the lasers shot in its way. The Excelsior would be at a disadvantage once its heat had built up too much, but the Seraphim would also fall into trouble once its energy reserves ran out. Flying wasted a lot of energy.

The Seraphim constantly ejected energy packs from its chassis as TheSeventhSnake kept dodging in the air. The mech had painted half the sky with streaks of rainbow clouds, as if it was transforming the battlefield into a piece of heaven. All of that would stop once the Seraphim exhausted its energy. Without flight and a working rifle, the light mech was a sitting duck.

"It's so unfair to let heavy mechs fight against light ones. This really is the Seraphim's worst matchup."

Heavier mechs offered more space for armor, energy, cooling and weapons. They always won battles of attrition due to their higher overall capacity. The Seraphim would run out of energy long before the Excelsior could no longer handle the heat.

Something had to change.

He stopped firing his DMR and detached the energy feed before letting it drop. Instead, he retrieved the combat knife from its holster and held it with both hands. The Seraphim flipped in the air and proceeded to accelerate downward, knife slicing the air as it thrust the weapon forward.

"Are you crazy?!" CassieTheFox asked in surprise, though she was whooping in joy as she narrowed her firing angle.

Now that the Seraphim dove towards her Excelsior, it became a lot easier to hit. Several beams of superheated light landed upon the

slimmer mech's head, ruining both the ECM and aim assist. This made it easier for her to land her shots. However, most of the lasers hitting the torso seemed to burn only redundant armor. Only the hits against the wings of the flight system achieved some real damage.

Fortunately, the Seraphim pretty much relied on momentum to dive downwards, so the loss in downward thrust hardly affected the mech by now. Its cloud generator kept pumping out a colorful stream of vapor, making it seem as if the falling Seraphim was the embodiment of God's punishment.

The distance between the two mechs closed rapidly, and just before the two mechs collided, both pilots moved.

The Excelsior wasn't stupid to just stand there and take the hit. CassieTheFox redirected her emergency power towards the Excelsior's legs, allowing it to jump to the side with a surprising spring.

The Seraphim already anticipated such a move. With only a hundred meters to go, the feminine mech made another aerial flip, adjusting its fall along the enemy's trajectory while pointing the mech's heels downwards.

The two collided in a massive crash with an impact that echoed across the canyon walls. Triceratopsss, who had been spectating to the side with rapt attention, could not even distinguish whether the Seraphim's suicide bombing had succeeded. Smoke, flame and colorful smoke engulfed the crash site, making it unclear if anything was still left intact.

"Damn it, who won?"