

The Mech Touch Chapter 16: Pieces of the Puzzle

From the esoteric manner in which the System described the X-Factor, Ves felt a headache coming. What was all of this stupid talk about Prometheus and life?

A mech was a weapon, a tool in which humanity used to wage war. In ancient history, when humans wanted to find a means in which to leverage a power greater than the human body could carry, they turned to horses. When cavalry added their weight to a charge, a normal footsoldier possessed few means to resist such force.

With the rise of machines and the fuels that could power their insatiable appetites, warfare evolved. The deadliness of a single soldier remained limited, but could be multiplied if they operated tanks or airplanes. Though the uses of infantry never faded out even until this day, the primacy of machines over man in matters of warfare reigned supreme ever since.

The introduction of mechs to the battlefield reinforced this principle. Melding the human form with the awesome power of machinery, the mechs provided humans with an excellent means to wage warfare on the ground. In the past 400 years since the first mechs stomped all over a battalion of infantry and tanks, they remained the mainstay of human planetary warfare.

Ves thought deeply and could not wrack his brains in figuring out where this elusive X-Factor fitted in. It sounded a lot like the metaphysical bullshit that remained a popular topic of conversation among the dreaming students back in college.

"Man, why am I trying to figure this out myself?" Ves shook his head. He sat down in front of his terminal. "Let's see what the galactic net has to say about the X-Factor."

The topic appeared to be obscure, but due to the sheer size of the galactic net, Ves found plenty of sources.

"Does the X-Factor exist?" An interviewer asked the older gentleman across the seat.

"I do not know." The professor replied, shaking his head. "In all my years of researching and developing the neural interface that allows pilots to control a mech like their own body, I have never come across a case where the mech provided measurable feedback to the pilot. The vague stories I've heard about the X-Factor all originates from the mouths of mech pilots, who aren't exactly the most authoritative voice in the area of mech design."

"So you're saying it might be a hoax?"

"I try to keep an open mind, so I'm not inherently dismissing the theory. If someone is able to present me with stronger proof in the form of hard data, then I'd happily convert into a believer. But from what I have found out so far, the primary sources that speak about the X-Factor are mostly veteran pilots suffering from borderline PTSD. Age, combat stress and mental injuries all contribute to hallucinations that mislead them to think a mech is doing more than it should. We haven't conducted enough research on the impact of prolonged use of the neural interface to a pilot's psyche."

"Alright, so you remain skeptical." The interviewer nodded. "Then professor, let's change to a different tack. Do you believe that mechs are alive?"

The academic let out a contemptuous laugh. "Let me ask you a question for once. Do you believe that mechs can think for themselves?"

"Hmmm at some level they do. All mechs possess computing power. Without processors to regulate a mech's operations, the pilot would be overwhelmed by irrelevant data. They act as the unconscious mind of a human's body. Since the infrastructure for an unconscious mind already exists, who's to say a mech can't also support a thinking mind?"

"Just because they have the potential to do so doesn't mean that makes it so. In your eyes, there's a small gap between processing data and independent thought, but in my eyes they are separated by a chasm as wide as the distance between galaxies. We humans have worked on artificial intelligence for thousands of years, but for all our advances we have merely achieved a facsimile of sentience. Computers still can't independently dream or formulate their own desires without an actual human hand-holding their train of thoughts. And never mind these complex desires. The most fundamental part of life is to reproduce, and I have never seen a mech become attracted to another!"

The interviewer laughed modestly. "Certainly that's true. However, they don't have to lift a finger to reproduce themselves. Us humans are doing it for them by developing ever newer mechs. Perhaps we might live in a future someday where the number of mechs outnumber the humans piloting them. Are we raising our own doom? What do you think about that scenario?"

"Accumulating war materiel is a natural state of affairs. No matter if you have 1 mech or 30 mechs, the pilot remains firmly in control. All the conspiracy theorists out there who believe that mechs are the remnants of an ancient machine civilization don't know what they are talking about. The first mechs have been developed using gradual advances in technology, all neatly documented and traceable without any alien influence."

The interview went on for a few more minutes along the same vein. Ves had an inkling of what the X-Factor was all about.

"I suppose most people think just like me, that mechs don't think for themselves." Ves mused as he scratched his head. "But can I still say the same now that I have the System?"

Ves had gone through a lot since the first time he received the System. He interacted through its menu like it was a software program, but he also talked to it like the System was an individual. Certainly the System responded like a living being, even showing some emotion underneath its robotic exterior. The question was if displaying these emotions merely fell into a programmed response. Was the System programmed to follow instructions all this time?

"Goddammit, this is just like the chicken and egg problem. It just goes round and round."

He learned to disregard problems he couldn't solve in a short time. Ordinarily he'd just ignore this issue, but since the mission forced him to figure out the X-Factor, Ves had no choice but to continue wracking his brains around the question of life.

"Man, let's find a more practical source of information. I need more hard facts and less wishy washy talk." Ves thought as he went back to the starting page of the galactic net.

Interviews provided by mech pilots tended to be more direct. Since they weren't scientists, they didn't fear ridicule if they said something wrong.

"Eric is my partner for life." A female pilot gushed as she watched over the technicians servicing her damaged mech. "I can't count how many times he saved my life. The more I pilot him, the more I become him. I put half my mind in his body ever time I connect with the neural interface. I don't believe Eric hasn't learned a thing or two from me in all these years. There were many moments I got into trouble in the

battlefield. If Eric hadn't mentally nudged me here and there, I might have never escaped those deadly moments. If it was legal to marry a mech, I'd already be standing here wearing my bridal dress."

"I don't know why I'm still alive." A wounded mech pilot rasped as he beheld the stumps of his arms. "I knew I was a goner as soon as three bastards popped out of nowhere. My mate died, his cockpit blown apart before he could dodge. Something just snapped then. He was my friend, the partner I always shared my patrols with. Even our mechs had been a pair ever since they rolled off the factory. I guess my mech felt the same, because he fed his anger into me while I channeled my fury back into the frame. You know what happened next. We tore those bastards to shreds."

A shaggy-haired prisoner of war sat down on a metal chair behind a metal table. He looked around the interrogation room with distaste. "You want to know my secrets? Hah, you unfeeling murderers don't know the first thing about the mechs you're piloting. Have you ever rubbed your hands against them affectionately? Have you sat down next to their gigantic feet and tell them about the stars? Did you for one tiny moment stop murdering innocents long enough to treat your mechs like a person? I guess not. That's why I've been able to kill over two hundred of you bastards with just me and my mech. Because I was never alone."

"I've chased after the oft-rumored X-Factor for my entire life." An elderly executive stated as he sat behind an imposing desk in his office. "I bought and piloted over three thousand mechs. Bipedal, quadrupedal, humanoid, avian, reptilian, whatever the shape, you can be sure I piloted it at least once. I've also painstakingly tracked down over a hundred damaged, scrapped or second-hand mechs piloted by some of the most famed aces in the galaxy. All of them were excellent machines, especially after I restored them to their glory."

"So did you manage to fulfill your life's ambition?"

The old man smiled wistfully. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. I certainly think that the X-Factor exists now more than ever. But is everyone fated for it? Perhaps us three-and-half percenters are not the cream of the crop we believe to be. Maybe only 3.5% of the 3.5% of humanity possess the right aptitude to trigger the X-Factor. But these so-called superpotentates cannot all be blessed. They need the right mech to unearth their full potential. But that's just a random idea I'm tossing out, don't take it too seriously."

"A mech is lifeless. It isn't born, it's created. It doesn't die, it gets destroyed." A famed New Rubarthan ace pilot said as he resolutely stood before his mech in a hangar. "All of these myths about the silly X-Factor are mistaken. I believe in the endless potential of the human heart. When one puts his body and soul to a single purpose, he can achieve 110% or even a 120% of his maximum potential. The mech is not the source, but the means in which we pilots can achieve miracles. I don't disrespect the pilots who believe in the X-Factor, but they attribute too much of their success to their mechs and not enough to their humanity."

Ves always believed mechs were machines. They were born for the purpose to be used, and if they failed to perform up to spec, then they'd be discarded as heartlessly as one would throw away a broken chair. You might feel some affection for sitting on it for years on end, but in the end it was just a piece of furniture.

But now he came across plenty of hearsay that suggested that mechs were more than unfeeling tools. They had to capacity to think, to feel emotions, to make decisions on their own, even if only faintly. Was this what the System referred to as the X-Factor? Though skeptics provided plenty of viable alternatives, Ves leaned more in favor to the idea that mechs could possess life.

Still, his beliefs changed nothing by itself. His mission wasn't to uncover the mystery behind the X-Factor. Instead, he had to design a

mech that incorporated the vaguely defined X-Factor. How the hell was he supposed to bring life to a mech?

Then he remembered that he might have already touched the threshold. He activated the System and switched to his old designs. He called up the Seraphim's evaluation.

[Design Evaluation: Fantasia 2R Seraphim.]

Variant name: Fantasia 2R Seraphim

Base model: Fantasia 2R

Original Manufacturer: Kezia Armaments

Weight Classification: Light

Recommended Role: Aerial Marksman

Armor: D

Carrying Capacity: F

Aesthetics: A

Endurance: D-

Energy Efficiency: D-

Flexibility: C+

Firepower: C

Integrity: F+

Mobility:

Spotting: B

X-Factor: F

Deviance: 44%

Performance improvement: 17%

Overall evaluation: The Fantasia 2R Seraphim features a superior aerial performance at a horrible cost. Its performance in close-ranged combat has been sacrificed for powerful long-ranged firepower. The mech is able to outperform its opponents as long as it has energy to spare, which isn't much. The Seraphim further shines out due to its attractive appeal.

The description commented on the Seraphim's fundamental attributes. Nothing in it hinted at anything metaphysical, yet the System still gave him an F in X-Factor. Ves almost couldn't believe it. The Seraphim, a kludgy variant of the four hundred year old Fantasia model, carried the potential to ignite a mech pilot's performance beyond its pinnacle.

"What makes the Seraphim so special? The R2-E, Phantasm and Nomad are also based off the Fantasia, but why don't they have a whiff of X-Factor?"

The puzzled nagged at Ves. He felt as if he had the pieces in front of him, but he just couldn't make it fit. He doubted spending more time in the galactic net would help. A lot of the people who researched it never experienced the X-Factor for themselves.

Maybe he should find someone closer. He considered calling Melinda, but he didn't want to distract her from her work. Serving in the Bentheim Planetary Guard was a great honor for a pilot as young as her. Ves already crossed the limit when he asked her to pass over information on the Caesar Augustus.

"I don't need to find a real pilot. Iron Spirit is supposed to simulate reality accurately. Can it also simulate the X-Factor?"

It was an interesting question that Ves had no way of answering, but he was willing to bet the answer was favorable. He went to his store page and checked his sales log. Only five players bought the Seraphim. Four of those only piloted the mech occasionally, with mixed results.

Only one player piloted the Seraphim frequently and with considerable prowess. A Bronze Leaguer with the nickname TheSeventhSnake.

Chapter end