

## The Mech Touch Chapter 17: Capture the Flag

Joshua drained the energy drink down his throat and tossed the can to the ground. A cleaning bot appeared out of nowhere to take the garbage away.

"Mom! I'm home!"

An elegant woman entered the foyer whilst carrying a babbling toddler. She approached the teenager and gave him a kiss on his forehead. "Joshie baby! How was school."

"I'm not a kid anymore, mom!" Joshua whined as he avoided his mother's embrace. He ran up the stairs to his room. "And I did fine in school. My mech trainer complimented me again today."

"That's good news. The higher your performance, the higher your rank when you become a reservist. Just don't join the Mech Corps."

"I'm not going to mom." Joshua said as he threw his bag on his bed. "I'm going to play with the simulator again, okay?"

"Don't forget about dinner again."

"Yes mom!"

After fending off his nagging mother, Joshua left his room and went downstairs. He took two flights down and entered the basement. Situated in a cooled and isolated room was his personal mech simulator pod for Iron Spirit. An expensive piece of machinery, it outperformed the rental pods at the game center. His parents even forked out the money to dig a secure set of cables to the nearest galactic net node in order to ensure his bandwidth never conked out.

All of this turned Joshua's pod into the best performing unit on Cloudy Curtain.

As Joshua entered the pod and let it close around him, he leaned his head back into the headrest that served as the neural interface. It hummed as it came to life, connecting Joshua's brain signals to the programs executed by the pod.

The world changed. The cool steel walls of the simulator pod made way for a vibrant world. Many young men and women around his age walked through the digital streets of the starting area. Some sat next to fountains, watching the live streams of popular players that chose to broadcast in public. Others entered one of the many stores in order to shop for a new outfit.

As for Joshua, he pulled up his friends list and tapped at one of the names to begin a dialogue.

"Yo Tops."

"Heya Snake." Triceratopssss greeted as his face appeared at the corner of Joshua's view. "Up for another bout of Arena?"

Joshua shook his head. "Hmmm I don't feel like it. The 1v1s and 2v2s have been getting kind of stale for me lately. I'm ready for something different."

"Oh." Triceratopssss mulled as he switched to matchmaking. "You wanna play Capture the Flag or Base Conquest?"

"Let's do Capture the Flag. It's 5v5 so I feel my skill still matters in that game mode."

The two paired up and entered matchmaking for Capture the Flag as a duo. They first received three random players to fill up their 5-man team.

"Hey fellas." Triceratopssss greeted his new teammates. "Me and Snake here are pairing up as light mechs."

"Medium missile platform." The third player spoke, his tone conveying his distaste in further interaction.

"O-kay. What about the rest?"

"Heavy Knight. Just plant me next to our flag and I'll make sure anyone who takes it will be dead." The fourth player boasted. Defending the flag was the most traditional role in Capture the Flag and perfect for a heavy mech.

"Got any guns on your knight?"

"Nope. But I'm faster than other knights."

"Great." Triceratopssss sighed. "At least you can chase the enemy if someone manages to steal the flag from underneath us. So what about the last guy?"

"I'm a girl thank you." The young woman emphasized with a sneer. "You just get out of my way. If you must know, I'm piloting a Genesis-18."

"The medium spider mech?"

"So you do have more than three brain cells! Congratulations doofus."

"Haha." Triceratopssss deadpanned. "Well, our team's a little light on weight, but we're very mobile. Let's do a 4-1."

"3-2." The missileer interjected. "My mech's a glass cannon. I'm best at supporting the heavy knight and providing long-range missile support."

"I'm attacking from the rear." The spider girl said. "I work best if I can sneak up to them alone, so don't you dare follow me."

Triceratopssss sighed again. Joshua, or TheSeventhSnake consoled him in a private chat. "Don't bother too much. Getting your teammates work together like we learned at school doesn't always work. A lot of players just want to blow off steam."

"God, I hope they make an effort then. My win rate for Capture the Flag is already in the dump due to getting teamed up with egoistic morons."

The matchmaking system released a bell, signifying a successful search of an opposing team. The screen changed into a small lobby where their team could inspect the enemy's loadout while the random battlefield loaded in the background.

TheSeventhSnake analyzed the enemy's team composition and felt a headache forming. "The enemy team has a three-person premade. They're all kitted with the same heavy mechs."

He didn't recognize the variants, but they looked a lot like the strikers he fought the other day.

"One of them carries a bunch of close-ranged heat projectors. The other transformed his arms into medium-ranged ballistic cannons.

The last guy appears to be their long-ranged marksman with his jumbo-sized laser rifle."

It was a composition that lacked mobility but possessed power in spades. Relying on their tough armor and plentiful energy reserves, they could bulldoze anything in their way.

"The two randoms pulled in their team adjusted to the trio and came with their light mechs." Triceratopssss noted. "One aerial scout and one saboteur. That's plenty of mobility for them to plug their gaps."

TheSeventhSnake shook his head. "Not really. You can be sure the three meatheads will stick together. We're either going to face a heavy push or a full-on defense."

"If they keep turtle up in their base, I can bombard them with impunity behind a hill." The missileer said curtly.

"And if their team attacks, their flag will only be defended by two lights."

The map finished loading, causing everyone to appear in a small open fort. A lengthy flagpole stuck out from the middle of the parade ground.

"Alright, let's move."

The spider mech girl crawled over the walls with her eight limbs and disappeared from their view. The missileer took off in the other direction while the heavy knight planted its feet right next to the flag.

Triceratopssss followed TheSeventhSnake on the ground as he flew up in the air.

"The first thing we need to do is find the three heavies and figure out what they're up to." TheSeventhSnake spoke to his fellow teammates. "Me and Tops will scout the enemy first."

As a flyer, Snake's Seraphim traversed the forest prairie environment with effortless grace. Tops' Phantasm could only slink through the trees as third as fast. However, the ground mech was able to minimize its emissions to stay hidden while the flier radiated heat and also color as its iconic cloud generator spewed clouds of vapor.

TheSeventhSnake didn't care if he got spotted by the enemy first. Even as his Seraphim extended its sensor hair in the flowing wind, he was pretty much waiting to get shot at. After piloting the Seraphim for many hours, he grew confident in his ability to dodge.

"Hm?" TheSeventhSnake got distracted as a strange notification popped up. "Someone is spectating me? That's strange. Oh well, as long as he isn't feeding information to my opponents, I don't care."

A barrage of laser fire shot from a cloud. Some of the beams scorched TheSeventhSnake's armor, thankfully not damaging anything essential.

"I'm under fire by their air scout! Engaging! Tops, keep searching for their heavies, don't let this distraction fool you!"

Triceratopssss nodded as his Phantasm kept combing the surrounding area. "Roger that, pal."

"My ground-to-air missiles are ready to fire." The missileer interrupted. "Maintain contact and feed your target lock to me."

"No, stay out of this fight. I can handle this fellow myself. Don't reveal your position."

The Seraphim flared its wings and juked side to side as it fired back with its light DMR. The jerky lateral movements made it hard to hit by the enemy lightweight, but the long-ranged rifle also scored very little hits.

That was okay, because Snake increased his speed and approached with fury. His heart pumped faster and his brain went into a heightened state. His Seraphim holstered the rifle on his back, which was difficult with the wings in the way, and retrieved a pair of heated knives. Like the fangs of a predator, he wielded them in a reserve grip and rocketed in a charging attack towards the enemy flier.

The enemy mech panicked a bit as it had been loaded for long-to-medium range harassment. The pilot felt much less confident in melee than the enemy's so he flew back and engaged his mech's thrusters in order to escape the approaching rainbow mech.

"Death!" TheSeventhSnake yelled as he exerted his Seraphim to the utmost, managing to slowly close the distance at the cost of overheating his mech's wings. "I can take it! My mech is meant to rule the skies!"

The enemy mech dove downwards in order to gain more speed and perhaps seek help from its allies on the ground. However, the Seraphim anticipated the move and accelerated just a split-second earlier. The brilliant decision allowed it to close the distance just enough for Snake to feel the opposing mech's heat.

"You're mine now!"

The light mech gave up escape and flipped in the air, presenting its medium-powered laser rifle at him. The Seraphim crossed its arms just as the lasers pelted its form, causing a lot more spots to blacken and melt away. The enemy mech evidently overheated its rifle, sacrificing its endurance for a massive boost in firepower.

"It's too late!" Snake yelled as he made his Seraphim spin. The rotation allowed it to dodge the last set of lasers while adding momentum to its poised and outstretched knives.

The light mech extended its rifle in desperation, blocking with its bulk. One heated knife snapped right through its body, shearing the weapon into slag. The other knife passed around the weapon and scored a deep blow in the shoulder, practically crippling the mech's left arm.

The Seraphim finished delivering its attacks, leaving it open for the light mech's kick. The feeble attack hardly damaged the Seraphim, but it successfully pushed it away, leaving the half-crippled mech enough space to continue to fall.

Instead of chasing after its prey, the Seraphim holstered its knives and brought its rifle back to its arms. With a calm and steady aim, the Seraphim fired a constant stream of energy bolts.

The first bolts went wide, but as the light mech failed to adjust in time, the next bolts hit its wings. The damage was light, but it disrupted the operation of its wings. The light mech posed an easier target now that its speed reduced. The subsequent energy bolts shredded the rest of the light mech's wings, leaving it incapable of correcting its fall.



"Their aerial scout is doomed." TheSeventhSnake stated as he watched the smoking mech crash into the ground and explode. "What's the situation down on the ground?"

"Their saboteur is good!" The spider mech girl responded. "He got two of my legs, but he hasn't come out unscathed. Don't bother me. Lemme focus on the duel."

"Their heavies are attacking our base! I'm having a hard time keeping them off our flag!" The heavy knight gasped. "Mister missile fan is helping, but I really need more help!"

Triceratopssss also filled in his status. "I've taken their flag since spider mech is doing a good job keeping their remaining light mech occupied. I can either help her out or go back to base. I won't be able to deliver the flag with the heavy boys around."

"Return to base. We need to destroy at least two out of three of those heavies in order to give you an opening to deliver the flag."

"Okay boss."

The Seraphim flew back to base while the flag-carrying Phantasm ran across the terrain while holding a large flag. TheSeventhSnake assessed his mech's damage and energy reserves, and concluded it could withstand one more all-in assault.

"Damnit! They got my sword arm! I'm only left with my shield now."

"Hang on, I'm coming!" TheSeventhSnake responded as he broke through the clouds and flew over his team's base. His sensors rapidly detected the glowing hot forms of the enemy trio.

The close-ranged heat projecting enemy pinned down the heavy knight whilst slowly melting its armor. The medium-ranged ballistic gunner had succeeded in blowing off the heavy knight's sword arm and now went to work on its legs. As for the long-ranged marksman, it had already circled round the sides to suppress their missileer.

To his credit, the missileer used its superior mobility to stay one step ahead of the enemy marksman, taking advantage of the surrounding hills to keep out of its line of sight. All the while, it fired sporadic volleys of arcing missiles onto the other two heavy mechs with the help of the telemetry the heavy knight sent back. The missiles hadn't inflicted any critical damage to the two mechs, but the frequent explosions degraded their sensors and stripped much of their top-facing armor.

The two bruisers were so engrossed in bullying the heavy knight that the Seraphim was practically able to position itself at their rear. It then dove down in a descending, heart-stopping powered fall.

TheSeventhSnake overcharged his DMR, causing its chamber to accumulate so much energy that smoke started to escape. He even overloaded his rear-side cloud generator so that it created a vast rainbow wake that approached the unsuspecting two mechs like the front of a tsunami.

The heavy knight's facing allowed it to see the oncoming attack, and fell slack for a second, which proved to be a fatal mistake as a cannon shell ripped apart its right leg, causing the mech to lose its balance. The heat projecting mech pounced on the vulnerability while the cannoneer reloaded its shells with the confidence his target was already dead.

Just as it was in the middle of swapping its magazine, the cannoneer somehow felt an invisible pressure form from its rear. After switching

to the rear sensor feeds, it suddenly noticed a gigantic attack coming from the air.

"DEATH!" TheSeventhSnake bellowed as he aimed and fired a humongous energy bolt at the flat-footed cannon mech. The bolt zapped through the air like a hot knife through butter. The huge ball of energy splashed against the mech's rifle, coincidentally also damaging its magazine, causing it to explode in a devastating ripple. The bolt fell apart with most of its energy dispersing in the air, but some of the damage landed on the mech's front, ruining its surface internals.

TheSeventhSnake had already decoupled and tossed aside his slagged rifle. With his twin heated knives he struck the damaged and bleeding mech in its head and upper torso. He landed with so much momentum behind him that the knives tore through the remnants of the heavy mech's armor and ruined several of its critical systems, the most important of which was the power reactor embedded near the heart area.

The Cannoneer, now cut off from power, shut itself off. Snake's Seraphim landed its delicate legs against the disabled mech's chest and bent its knees to mitigate its falling momentum.

That left it open to the remaining heavy mech. The heat projector ignored the heavy knight that had been slagged into a molten statue, and ran back to avenge his comrade. With his Seraphim already running hot like an oven, even a glancing hit by the wide-area heat projectors could cause Snake to be boiled alive in his own mech.

Acutely aware of the impending crisis, TheSeventhSnake acted in desperation. In a feat of exemplary control, the Seraphim spread its legs like a stripper and leveraged its grip on the embedded knives to spin around the unpowered mech's torso.

The air flashed with white-hot heat and the projectors fired. The cannon mech's ruined armor suffered a catastrophic amount of damage while some of its internals even caught fire. The Seraphim's exposed legs also melted into a half-puddle shape, rendering them incapable of supporting the light mech's weight.

However, TheSeventhSnake managed to preserve his mech's waist and upper body. The Seraphim leaned over, using the burning cannonner as a shield, and did something stupid. It threw its knives at its opponent. The heat projecting mech got startled and hastily tried to angle its armor against the incoming projectiles, only for them to fall short and land on the ground.

The heat projector grew enraged, and stomped over with his lumbering mech while firing its heat weapon without regard. TheSeventhSnake continued to make his mech hug the increasingly hotter cannon mech, hoping desperately that it would last.

"Tops!"

"Got it!"

The heat projector inadvertently walked away from the center. This left the waiting Triceratopssss a narrow window of approach. His Phantasm swiftly but quietly climbed over the walls of their fort and made a beeline to the center where his own team's flag also rested.

Noticing his mistake, the heat projector's pilot commanded his mech to turn its torso. With his pair of heat projectors poised to fire, the Phantasm was bound to suffer greatly.

That was until TheSeventhSnake managed to pry off his battered and half-molten Seraphim away from its shield. With a disabled pair of

legs, the Seraphim nevertheless crawled forward with all the strength its feeble arms could muster. It approached underneath the distracted heavy mech and reached out to grab on the heat projectors.

The Seraphim succeeded in spoiling one of the heat projector's aim. It unleashed much of its molten fury harmlessly against the ground.

The other heat projector succeeded in hitting the Phantasm. However, the Phantasm suffered no damage beforehand, and with only one projector achieving a hit, the Phantasm maintained its ability to move. With a limping run, Triceratopssss succeeded in planting the enemy's flag right next to their team's unconquered banner.

"YES!"

"WOOHOO!"

"You interrupted my duel!"

While his teammates cheered and grumbled, TheSeventhSnake sank back in his cockpit with a satisfied expression. He could feel the victory invigorating him even as he felt as if the excessive heat had cooked him into a crispy state.

"We won..." TheSeventhSnake smiled as he let out a warm and deep breath. "I'm getting better at this, though my Seraphim won't be happy I trashed it again."

Then he remembered someone had spectated him throughout the entire match. TheSeventhSnake opened his personal page and switched to his stream. He read out the name of his only spectator.

"Chasing Clouds. That sounds familiar..."

Chapter end