

The Mech Touch Chapter 18: Life

Watching TheSeventhSnake's replays impressed Ves. The mech pilot's flamboyant piloting of his Seraphim showed a remarkable mastery of its capabilities. The Seraphim domineeringly claimed the skies, fighting particularly well against other fliers, and launched aggressive attacks against opponents on the ground.

Though Ves knew little of mech piloting, he still recognized TheSeventhSnake's remarkable skill. His aggressive play style and continuous risk taking hid a keen sense of timing. If this Snake wasn't at the threshold of promoting to Silver, he was absolutely in the upper tier of Bronze League.

When Ves noted that TheSeventhSnake had come online and entered matchmaking, he chose to spectate his match. What he saw of the young pilot's performance reaffirmed his judgement. Snake piloted the Seraphim in ways even Ves hadn't imagined.

"But does he have the X-Factor?"

Good piloting didn't necessarily mean one has the X-Factor. Disregarding the phenomenon's vague definition, the X-Factor might not even work in a virtual reality environment! Perhaps TheSeventhSnake was only a good pilot, and nothing more. Still, Ves believed it would be beneficial to his understanding of his mechs if he had a talk with the pilot.

When Ves initiated a call, the mech pilot answered immediately. "Hello. I saw you spectating my last match. Who are you?"

"I'm the mech designer who created the Seraphim variant you're piloting."

"Wow." The pilot gasped. "No wonder I found your nickname familiar. So you're the famous Fantasia customizer."

"I'm researching a new project, and I need some feedback from the people who pilot my older work. Can you spare me a moment of your time?"

"Yes!"

Ves was taken aback at TheSeventhSnake's enthusiasm. This was the first time since he became a mech designer that someone afforded him respect.

"Hey, calm down kid. I just want your thoughts on some stuff, so don't be too stiff." Ves told the player, hoping he wouldn't be paralyzed into silence. "Let me ask you my first question. Your records show that you've been piloting the Seraphim ever since you bought it. What makes you stick with the model? I think you must have realized by now that it isn't the best mech in its weight class."

TheSeventhSnake paused as he tried to formulate his words. "I can't describe it. I never thought about replacing my Seraphim. I love it far too much to get rid of it. The mechs that I've piloted before are all good machines, but they don't fit my style."

"What do you mean when you use the word 'style'?" Ves asked, wondering if it had anything to do with the X-Factor.

"My play style. My way of fighting. Something like that. The Seraphim just clicks with me in a way no other flier could. It's like we're part of the same brain wave. I can feel my passion engulfing the entire mech when I'm deeply engaged in a fight. No other mech can make me feel this good."

"Alright. Let me ask you something else. Have you ever experienced a moment where your mech gave you a push? For example, did the mech warn you of danger while you were unaware of it? Were there moments when you thought doing something was impossible, but you still managed to achieve it because your mech gave you a helping hand?"

TheSeventhSnake fell into silence. "I don't recall any moments like that. I'm always in full control of my mech. What I'm pretty sure of is I feel more at ease with the Seraphim. It's easier to play at my best when I'm piloting the Seraphim than with any other mech. I've even bought your Phantasm and Nomad models, but I never could get quite as comfortable when I play with them. Maybe it's the lack of wings. I've fallen in love with flying."

Ves asked TheSeventhSnake some other questions. What distinguished a good pilot and a great one? Are mechs better when they are smaller or larger? Does he believe in metaphysics?

The young pilot's answered revealed no surprises. The boy wasn't aware of the X-Factor, nor did he seek to pursue anything magical. Ves formed an image of the young potentate. Young, wealthy and well-trained, his view of the mech world had been colored by the many teachings of his tutors. It was therefore no surprise that they avoided telling him about the X-Factor. A young man like him had no business chasing after a fantasy.

"I have one last question." Ves wrapped up the interview. "Try to take a moment before you answer this. Do you believe your mech is alive?"

"Uhh.. I don't know." TheSeventhSnake replied with a confused expression. He scratched his head, trying to recall the times when he piloted the Seraphim. "I'm not delusional. Of course its not alive. The Seraphim's a great mech, but it doesn't have an AI as far as I know.

What I can say is that piloting my Seraphim makes me feel more alive than anything else."

"Alright. Thank you for taking the time to tell me about your experiences."

"Goodbye. I hope I helped."

"You certainly did, don't worry about it."

"Uh, can I ask you something before you go? Are you going to put more 1-star mechs on the market?"

Ves shook his head. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't plan to do so. I've sold most of my 1-star licences so I can't construct any new 1-star mechs. My hands are kind of full trying to start up my real universe mech business."

"Oh, so you're a real mech designer? No wonder."

"That's not to say I still don't have a use for Iron Spirit." Ves responded carefully, naturally not mentioning that earning massive DP was his main reason for sticking around. "Once I earn some revenue, I'm transitioning to 2-star mechs. The profit margin is better in that tier."

He would also have an easier time to reach beyond his limited customer base in Cloudy Curtain. In a few months, he'd hopefully gain enough skills to produce a competitive design.

After shutting down the game, Ves stood up and stretched his limbs, mentally reexamining the interview. TheSeventhSnake spoke with a

peculiar accent that reminded him of the officials working in the capital of Cloudy Curtain. Despite his good upbringing, the young potentate described his piloting in the same vague way as the veterans did when describing their incredible feats that others thought involved the X-Factor.

In other words, the interview provided inconclusive results.

Ves hadn't come much closer to understanding the elusive X-Factor. Was it some kind of energy that hid inside a mech? Was it some evolutionary catalyst that manifested in only a couple of pilots?

"There's one thing all interviews about the X-Factor have in common."

Love. Affection. Grief. Vengeance. Whatever was the case, most of the extraordinary performances mentioned in the galactic net were backed by strong and unrestrained emotions. It seemed unrelated. What do emotions have to do with the performance of a mech? That's like suggesting that an aircar can fly faster if the driver felt happy or angry. It made no sense.

"But an aircar doesn't have a neural interface." Ves remarked as he thought he found a clue. "The neural interface allows mech pilots to receive sensory input from the mech, allowing them to treat the frame like its their own body. Any decision a mech pilot makes is sent as output through the same interface, thus causing the mech to move according to its commands."

Ves went back to his terminal and sought out a few articles about the neural interface.

The neural interface was a highly restricted and highly controlled piece of hardware. Under no circumstances did any manufacturer allow the

neural interface to leak out unnecessary signals. Excessive sensory input would overload a pilot's brains, while excessive movement output would cause the mech to lose control. The neural interface was strictly programmed to detect and block unauthorized signals, and technicians checked them frequently if they weren't tampered with. Pretty much every mech designer and technician trusted the neural interface to work as advertised.

"If thousands of industry insiders are sure there's nothing fishy with the neural interface, then it's not the source of the X-Factor."

Emotions also elicit brain signals, and since those were different from the sensory and movement signals, they were explicitly blocked by the neural interface.

"But.. what if those signals are inseparable?"

Could emotions be conveyed through the same signals, therefore making it impossible for the neural interface to filter them out?

For example, if a mech held a sword over a fallen enemy, did its pilot's desire to kill his opponent get blended in with the same signal that commanded the mech to thrust down its sword?

If a mech spotted missiles flying in its direction, did an emotion like fear accompany its sensor signals of the incoming threat?

Unfortunately, Ves had no background in the neural sciences. Everything he learned about the neural interface in college was how to install it and how to maintain it. A designer had no need to know how the gadget worked in order to use it in their designs. This left Ves unable to answer this question.

"I don't think all those other people who have hunted down the X-Factor are that stupid. If someone like me can think of it, I'm sure they exhausted themselves to death trying to see if the neural interface was capable of doing more."

In the end, Ves was stuck again. With no solid theory on how to achieve the X-Factor, Ves had no starting point in designing a mech that incorporated it. With the huge interest payment looming over him, time began to run out for him. He could not waste the remaining days on a fruitless quest.

Lucky chose this time to barge inside. With a nonchalant walk, the mechanical cat dropped the shiny blue sapphire before Ves' feet. It then nuzzled his legs with its slim but lively body.

"Another gem I see. At least you didn't bury it in the backyard again." Ves picked up the sparkling blue gem and inspected it briefly before storing it in a small safe. "Good job, buddy."

Ves took a break. He picked up his gem cat and sank down on a sofa. He scratched the cat's metallic hide, not really sure if the cat even felt his fingers, but sure acting like it did. Lucky closed its eyes as it lay down comfortably on Ves' lap.

As he looked at Lucky, a strange thought inserted in his head. "Are you alive?"

The cat kept purring as if he didn't understand the question. But Ves knew the gem cat was smarter than he looked. It possessed an AI way more sophisticated than the thoughts of an average household cat.

"What is life?"

The age old question of life engendered a lot of controversy over the years. Many scientists mentioned that life had the ability to learn, adapt and reproduce. These clinical definitions of life try to encompass all manner of life, including even the tiniest bacteria. That made the definition far too broad to be of use in this situation.

Instead, Ves wondered if Lucky could be called a living being. Sure, he probably couldn't mate with another mechanical cat, but Lucky was no different from any other pet. Whether Lucky's responses formed spontaneously or through a large script of possible responses, it didn't matter. Humans worked in the same way if one pulled up their microscopes and sunk deeper into a person's cells and DNA.

"I don't care what the scientists and experts say. Since you're capable of expressing your emotions, you're alive in my book."

Ves was also pretty certain the key to unlocking the X-Factor lay in emotions. If Lucky could express emotions like Love, hate, fear and disgust, why not a mech? Certainly, a mech didn't possess the programming to ferment such redundant thoughts in the eyes of scientists. But what if a mech bypassed the neural blockade? It could borrow the pilot's complex neural system to form its own emotions.

Since the mech neurally connected to its pilot's brain, its emotions mirrored the pilot's own feelings. A mech's anger would neatly mirror its pilot's own hostility towards an opponent. This would only enhance a pilot's current mood and not display anything abnormal in the neural interface.

"I'm kind of reaching out there. How can a novice designer like me get it right while countless of experts missed this gap?"

At this point, Ves stopped caring about the opinions of others. He kept it simple.

"Lucky is alive. The System is also a living being. If these two entities are capable of life, then I believe that Mechs can also live."

If he presented these words to one of the researchers who studied the X-Factor for decades, he'd be laughed and ridiculed at. It was a stupid sounding argument that relied entirely on subjective anecdotal experience. But when he looked down and stroked Lucky's back, he felt no regrets.

"I can't phrase it in any better way, but my faulty logic doesn't matter. My belief is enough. My heart tells me I'm looking in the right direction, and that's good enough."

Now, Ves had finally obtained a somewhat coherent picture of the relation between life and the X-Factor. He felt as if a weight had disappeared.

"Now I have to put theory into practice."

Ves was ready to design a new mech. One that hopefully unlocked the X-Factor.