

The Mech Touch Chapter 4: Behold My Ultimate Move!

Engulfed by the satisfaction of a new purchase, Shifter66 hopped into the 2R-E's cockpit. Without even spending time to grow familiar with the modified mech, he entered the arena and initiated a search for an opponent. Shifter66 wanted to dive right into a battle with his new baby.

As a fairly new and unskilled pilot, Shifter66 naturally got matched against a pool of similarly low-skilled players. Iron Spirit featured a sophisticated matchmaking system, and the lowest segment was the Bronze League.

Every potentate who played Iron Spirit started from the Bronze League. Only by winning a sufficient amount of times would one gain the opportunity to promote to the Silver League, which most mech enthusiasts consider it to be the real beginning of the game.

That was because the developers enacted a lot of restrictions to the matches taking place in Bronze. Players could only earn a little amount of gold, though they also had few opportunities to lose it due to simplifying repair costs. Matchmaking in the lowest league also didn't cross star systems, which meant that most low-tier players fought against opponents from the same planet.

Bronze leaguers were also limited from purchasing any mechs rated higher than 1 stars, which really frustrated a lot of kids who wanted to dive right into big and modern mechs.

As for Shifter66, he hadn't been exposed to the world of mechs for long. The mechs he already had access to already occupied his full attention.

His view changed into a preparatory screen. The game found an opponent for him. After confirming his mech, weapon and map preferences, he waited for his opponent to do the same.

After a short wait, the boy's mech landed upon a grassy hill. The first thing he did was to engage his sensors to see if his opponent was in range. One of the few good things about the Fantasia 2R was its fantastic scanning power, courtesy of its hair-like sensor bundle attached to its head.

The mech found an energy signature fairly quickly, which meant his opponent wasn't hiding. The boyeagerly commanded his mech to move forward, only to trip and almost fall backwards his mech's balance fell apart.

"Ah what the?!"

Only until now did it sink in to him that having a gigantic rear wasn't all that good. He wrestled with his neural interface for several minutes, trying to find a running posture that wouldn't tip him backwards. He finally managed to accomplish a crude stance by bending his mech's torso forwards, which had the unintentional effect of making his rear more pronounced.

"Who cares, as long as it works. Let's try the booster."

Upon activating the Gemini's powerful thrusters, the Fantasia practically rocketed forwards. Only through some haphazard steps did Shifter66 manage to keep his mech on his feet and vaguely control his direction forward.

"WOOHOOO!"

As the boy further adapted to the mech's forward momentum, he found himself wild with joy. He could practically feel the wind whipping his mech as he casually broke through his personal speed record.

Unfortunately he neglected one thing. His opponent hadn't been twiddling his thumbs.

"Shifter66 eh, too bad you're piloting a light mech. My Groenig-Halman eat light mechs for breakfast." The player known as Triceratopssss boasted.

He had the wins to back it up. KRH Heavy Industries' Groenig-Halman models offered a good balance between weight, energy and armor. They generally suffered against heavier mechs, but anything lighter couldn't go through its armor before the G-H pulverized them.

The G-H's design mimicked a gorilla, so it could bend down on all fours and sprint surprisingly fast in a short duration. Triceratopssss had already seen the blazing energy signature approaching him on his scanners, so he readied his posture to dodge and chase after the lighter mech. He already licked his lips as he imagined his G-H's powered arms tearing the soft Fantasia's frame apart.

"Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly."

However, the Fantasia 2R-E ran forward so uncontrollably that Shifter66 doubted he could even regain control without crashing into the ground. Only until his forward view revealed his opponent's G-H model did he realize he couldn't do anything but crash head-on. Unable to even fire his mech's pistol with all the jostling, the boy plainly threw it to the side, instead choosing to draw the Fantasia's default sword from the embedded scabbard in the back.

"I don't believe my baby will lose to you!"

The G-H appeared to be frozen in shock, but as the distance dwindled, it regained its composure and crossed its meaty arms forward. The sword glanced off one of the arms, failing to penetrate its thick armor. The forward momentum nonetheless allowed it to travel forwards and pierce the G-H's chest. The armor yielded helplessly, letting the sword cut deep into the mech and slice through important systems and cabling. The G-H lost 35% of its energy and all of its weapons on its left side.

An even larger collision followed. The rest of the Fantasia's frame slammed forward, dealing more damage to the lighter mech than the G-H due to the differences in mass. The Fantasia's upper torso disintegrated from the impact, shards and other debris flying in every direction. Its head crushed into a pancake against the G-H's torso, somehow barreling past the heavier mech's armor and penetrating through the cockpit embedded deep within.

Triceratopssss practically had a fright when his viewscreen burst apart. He hastily commanded his remaining functioning arm to toss the immobilized Fantasia from his partially crippled mech.

"Get off me!"

The feminine mech crashed against the ground face down with its rear pointing upwards.

Triceratopssss had no time to do a detailed damage assessment. Instead he lumbered his mech over to the fallen frame of his opponent's mech and aimed his arm cannon. While the pilot didn't recognize the Gemini module attached to the Fantasia's rear, he nonetheless recognized it was an essential component.

[Unable to fire. Ammunition feed disrupted.]

The G-H's pilot cursed and abandoned his ranged options. He readied his fist for a punch.

Shifter66 frantically tried to command his wrecked mech to move. "Damnit, why isn't she moving!?"

"This is the end of the road for you, punk!"

Just as the G-H landed the punch, a hatch on the Gemini blew apart. It revealed a hard shelled cockpit, which ejected instantly from the Fantasia with substantial thrust. While it didn't travel with the force of an armor piercing shell, it nevertheless possessed enough force to smash apart the G-H's ramshackle torso armor and pound its pilot into meat sauce.

Exhaust smoke spurted out of the Gemini's gaping cavity. Burn marks littered the immobilized Fantasia and the surrounding foliage as the decapitated Groenig-Halman mech collapse like a puppet with its strings cut.

[Winner: Shifter66.]

"Huh?" The boy groggily wondered as the rewards from the win poured in. "It worked? I won!"

It had been a complete fluke to eject the redundant extra cockpit. In the final moments, the boy pretty much pressed every neural button he could find, trying to get his mech to do something other than being a sitting duck. Ejecting the cockpit was one of the last options left.

"Hahahaha! I knew my wouldn't disappoint!"

Shifter66 spent a significant fraction of his newly earned gold to instantly repair his mech. More expensive mechs required manual repairs or payment of real credits to get it done instantly. Fortunately, Iron Spirit didn't bother to milk excessive fees from its beginners, so the boy had nothing to worry about. He threw himself back into the arena.

Triceratopssss, who turned out to be a boy just a year older than Shifter66, simply sat stunned in the simulator. He couldn't believe he got done in by an ejected cockpit. He loaded the replay of the last match, fast-forwarding to the final moment before slowing down the playback to leave him with plenty of time to watch.

The same incomprehensible action happened again, just in a different perspective. Triceratopssss chose to watch the event from the side. He could see the immobilized Fantasia billowing out ejection fire and smoke from its battered rear module. Its left hatch blew apart, making room for the abruptly accelerating metal shell that protected the empty cockpit.

Normally, any ejecting cockpit followed an upwards trajectory as soon as it left the chassis of the mech that held it. If Triceratopssss had just been a little more patient, he could have let the cockpit fly harmlessly in sky. Instead he could only watch as his past self moved the G-H into punching range of the Fantasia, thereby exposing its damaged torso to his opponent's crazy strike. He pretty much impaled himself onto the enemy's lance.

"This isn't real. This stupid mech looks so dumb and ugly. Who the hell made this mech? This Shifter66 must be trolling if he's bored enough to bring such a mech into the arena."

Triceratopssss opened a window showing the statistics of the Fantasia 2R-E. The numbers made little sense to him, as he hadn't been studying mechs very long. Following the link to the seller called Chasing Clouds, he found out next to nothing as the account had been created very recently, with no other mechs for sale. The seller's privacy settings caused Triceratopssss' impromptu investigation a dead end.

"Well, if I can't find anything out about the seller, then let's check Mr. Shifter66. I want to see whether you're a pro playing on an alt account."

Though Triceratopssss spent his time in the Bronze League, he occasionally fought against opponents with a much higher apparent skill level on occasion. These monsters mostly consisted of expert mech pilots with a successful career in the upper leagues of the game. Sometimes expert pilots with real-life mech combat experience also took the game for a spin, causing many helpless Bronze Leaguers to cry helplessly as they got beat up in turns.

When Triceratopssss loaded into Shifter66's next match, he already saw that the battle had reached the peak. The Fantasia 2R-E had difficulty catching his much lighter opponent, who happened to be piloting a Fantasia 1R.

As the predecessor model, the 1R lagged in several areas compared to the 2R. Nonetheless, the 1R the opponent piloted was the stock model, granted him a decisive advantage in agility and short-ranged mobility.

The forest environment also bogged Shifter66 down. His 2R-E couldn't find a clearing to put his substantial boosters to good use. Without the extra speed afforded by the boosters, his 2R-E had been rendered into an overweight mech, clumsily trying to turn its sluggish frame in the direction of his flitting opponent.

The 1R's pilot played it smart, Triceratopsssss noted. The 1R seemed to be wary of Shifter66's mech boosters. It neither faced the 2R-E directly in the front and behind, using its superiority in lateral movement to keep the mech to the sides.

The boy could only grit his teeth as he endured the light laser blasts digging into his Fantasia's rear armor. He only managed to endure until now because the enemy's Fantasia lacked the capacity to field heavier firepower. However, just its basic pistol possessed enough punch to eventually slag the 2R-E's armor into a puddle. Shifter66's own pistol had already been shot to pieces and he could only try to make potshots with his heavier but unwieldy marksman rifle.

"You asshole! Are you a monkey or a man? Stand still for a moment!"

The 1R ignored the complaint, and resolutely kept up its dodging. The boy knew he couldn't let this merry-go-round continue, so he activated his boosters and just rocketed into the trees. His mech crashed through the trees with minor difficulty, though he accumulated internal structure damage with each tree felled. He couldn't keep this up for long.

Nonetheless, Shifter66 managed to retake the initiative. The 1R's pilot panicked. Allowing the 2R-E to build up distance meant exposing him to powerful laser fire. He hastily followed after the rocketing mech, inadvertently lining up right behind the 2R-E's Gemini system.

"Behold my ultimate move!" Shifter66 yelled as he slammed his fist on the secondary ejection button. The Fantasia's twin cockpit whooshed forward from the Gemini model in another fiery blast. This time the cockpit kept up a straight forward trajectory. Changing that setting was the only thing the boy prepared in advance before he dove into his next match.

The cockpit rocketed backwards with a speedy but avoidable trajectory. The 1R could easily step sideways if it kept its chassis in the correct stance. Unfortunately the stock model chased after the 2R-E with full speed, allowing for very little leeway to dodge immediately. By the time the 1R managed to shift its torso, the blazing cockpit slammed its right shoulder to pieces.

The Fantasia 1R massed much less than the G-H, so the impact this time resulted in much heavier damage even though it occurred off-center. Practically half its shoulder and the entire arm blew apart. The battered cockpit flew off in a random direction with the Fantasia's gun stuck in its shell.

"Haha, you're mine now!"

The boy was ecstatic to see his gamble succeed. He stopped the boosters, causing his mech to abruptly slow down and trip. It took an embarrassingly long time to get his mech up its feet, but the kid felt too flushed with success to feel any bother about it. The 2R-E lumbered back to the crashed 1R model.

The loss of a shoulder and an arm shouldn't have crippled a Fantasia 1R. most of its essential systems rested in its waist, so as long as it possessed two functional legs, it could still outplay the 2R-E. The pilot eventually lacked the skill to compensate for its damage, as all he could accomplish so far was to run around in circles.

The boy stopped his approach and raised his mech's rifle. The beams had a little difficulty keeping up a consistent aim, but the sheer number of shots succeeded in punching through the 1R's poor chassis.

[Winner: Shifter66.]

"Hahaha!" The boy laughed as he raised his fist. He had won again, proving him that his gold was well-spent. Though clumsy, his mech held a few surprises, and anyone who thought he was an easy target would get a nasty present.

Triceratopssss on the other hand cursed Shifter66's luck. He felt a little glad that he wasn't the only pilot who fell for the 2R-E's trick. He kept spectating Shifter66 as he mindlessly dove into the arena.

Subsequent matches proved that the boy had celebrated too early. Matchmaking had adjusted Shifter66's opponents after he kept relying on cheap tricks. These slightly more seasoned pilots recognized the Gemini add-on and knew what it could do. Though they laughed at the 2R-E's rear-heavy appearance, they still treated their enemy seriously.

The lighter mechs generally ran rings around Shifter66, taking small bites at a time and leaving him with little opportunity to strike back. The heavier mechs proved to be easier opponents for him, as they were less capable of dodging his newly invented ultimate move. Only the heaviest 1-star mechs could shrug off the damage caused by the sudden collision.

Remembering that he had to go home for dinner, the boy eventually called it a day. Win a couple more wins than losses in his record, the potentate felt that buying the Fantasia 2R-E was one of the best decisions in his life. Before he logged off, he added the designer in his address book.

Oblivious to the potentate, Ves looked at his System's notification with a puzzled expression.

"The mission finished that quickly? I can't believe there's someone stupid enough to buy the mech I put on sale."

Lucky concurred with a meow while shaking its mechanical behind in Ves' direction. The young man playfully picked up the pet and cuddled him against his chest.

"At least the stuff you crap out can be sold."

Now that he finally received some Design Points, Ves switched back to the shop and browsed its catalog with greater attention. The previous time he just took a casual look, choosing to ignore the more unrealistic entries as pure nonsense. Now that he swept his eyes past them again, Ves widened his eyes.

"If the System is really capable of doing this with Design Points, then meeting the next interest payment is in my grasp!"

Ves reached an unconscious threshold in his mentality. He had always been a little bit skeptical of the System which suddenly intruded in his life. Now though, he felt ready to embrace it with all its oddities.

While some designers counted on their fancy degrees to start their careers, others threw money and connections at the problem. Ves only needed the System to pave his way to the top.

[You have received a new mission.]

[Mission]

Mission: Tutorial Part 3 - Mass Production

Difficulty: F-Rank

Prerequisites: Completed Tutorial Part 2

Description

A Mech Designer should not be content at selling a model once. Real designers must have flocks of people begging to purchase their products. Please sell a hundred virtual mechs of your own creation within a month.

Reward: 1 random 10-year combat mech production licence

The System screwed him for real this time. "How am I suppose to sell a HUNDRED of them in a month?!"

Chapter end