

The Mech Touch Chapter 8: Visitor

Ves' face soured as his eyes skimmed through his analytics page in Iron Spirit.

"Really, what am I paying so much crap for? I thought advertisements are supposed to work!"

He only had twenty days left to complete the System's mission of selling a hundred virtual mechs. So far, Ves only managed to sell his handcrafted Fantasia 2R Seraphim. That meant the other mechs he sold lacked his personal care and attention. Not only did their specs degrade, they also sold for twice its already ludicrous price.

When Ves visited the Seraphim's store page, he encountered hundreds of disparaging comments.

"8800 gold XD! Do you lack a few brain cells? Are you autistic? Then go ahead and buy this gold-plated piece of turd!"

"Can anyone lend me 8700 gold? I promise to pay you back once I dominate the arena. No one can withstand my secret weapon of crapping rainbows!"

"DON'T BUY THIS MECH! This is an over-engineered piece of shit that simply slaps a lot of extra parts together. Just buy a real flying mech instead!"

With comments like these splattered over his mech, no wonder he couldn't make an additional sale. Ves had learned a valuable but expensive lesson with this experience.

"I lost sight of my target audience. I thought I could have slapped a lot of components together without consequence. But the Bronze Leaguers are mostly a bunch of kids with little gold and credits to spare."

1-Star Mechs acted as training wheels in the game. As training tools, most potentates didn't bother to make an emotional connection to the mechs they piloted, considering them to be horribly outdated. The Bronze Leaguers paid more attention to the amount of performance they could squeeze at a given price.

It was a good thing he hadn't spent the rest of his time in vain. Other than stuffing Lucky with ores, he also extensively reworked the Fantasia 2R into a new variant. It had been his most major project to date, flexing all of his new skills to his limit, especially the Light Armor Optimization sub-skill.

The new Fantasia variant sported complete matte gray armor plating. Ves had painstakingly removed its original armor plating and replaced them with the newer and more efficient Mirin-21 Ultralight Armor Plating. To retain and even improve the mech's durability, Ves had to recalculate every plate's profile and thickness, bulking up the mech in many areas. Despite the increase in armor, the mech's weight still enjoyed a considerable reduction, making it faster and nimbler on the ground.

Ves felt highly satisfied with his work so far. He appreciated the miraculous powers of the System for allowing him to get accustomed to such amazing procedures in a matter of days instead of months.

In a good mood and prompted by his rich creativity, he even added in the Fayette ECM and the Festive Cloud Generator onto the custom mech's head. In keeping up with a ghost theme, he set the clouds to generate only greyscale colors, nicknaming the mech the Phantasm.

[Design Evaluation: Fantasia 2R Phantasm.]

Variant name: Fantasia 2R Phantasm

Base model: Fantasia 2R

Original Manufacturer: Kezia Armaments

Weight Classification: Light

Recommended Role: Scout/Ambusher

Armor: C-

Carrying Capacity: F+

Aesthetics: B+

Endurance: D+

Energy Efficiency: D

Flexibility: C

Firepower: D-

Integrity: C

Mobility: B+

Spotting: B

X-Factor: None

Deviance: 8%

Performance improvement: 11%

Overall evaluation:

[You have received 50 Design Points for completing an original design with a performance improvement of over 10%.]

[Your have been rewarded with a lottery ticket for achieving superior performance improvement with minimal deviance.]

Ves widened his eyes at the second message. The System evaluated his custom work to the same standards as the industry, which made sense now that he thought about it. He had learned this in college but forgot about it when he grew delusional from possessing the System.

Overenthusiastic designers who pumped in a lot of resources into a mech and only achieved a couple of percent improvement over the stock model were regarded as trash.

On the other hand, designers who changed only a few things here and there and can still achieve an improvement of over a dozen percent were regarded as masters in their field.

Ves had gained the System's approval with the Phantasm's economical design. With three cheap components, he partially re-engineered the

old Fantasia 2R's frame into a stealthy predator. The Phantasm could do everything the stock model was capable of, but just a little better.

The real star of the show was Ves' tedious swapping of its armor. The Mirin-21 might have offered less protection, but it weighed a lot lighter. Padding the Fantasia with additional form-fitting plates offered better protection but still managed to achieve an overall weight reduction. Not every newly graduated mech designer could accomplish the same. Without cutting down redundant and inefficient sections while making sure their spots remained somewhat covered, Ves could never have improved the armor so effectively.

And now he held another lottery ticket. Like an eager kid with candy, Ves quickly switched to the Lottery page and spun the metaphorical wheel.

"Come on, give me something good, like a production license or a bag of credits."

[You have received a Strength Candy.]

[Strength Candy]

Increases Strength by 0.1 upon consumption. Strawberry flavor.

Ves fell on his knees and let out a frustrated scream. "C'mon System! I worked so hard the last few days! Why don't you throw me a bone or two?"

He felt like a wizard who decided to pump some iron in the gym. Developing his muscles was an unnecessary luxury that provided little help in his predicament.

Well, since he received it, he might as well use it. After popping the gift in his mouth, he checked his status again.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Novice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 113

Attributes

Strength: 0.7

Dexterity: 0.7

Endurance: 0.6

Intelligence: 1.2

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Novice - [3D Printer Proficiency I]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Mathematics]: Incompetent

[Mechanics]: Apprentice - [Jury Rigging I] [Speed Tuning I]

[Metallurgy]: Apprentice

[Physics]: Novice - [Lightweight Armor Optimization I]

Evaluation: Should pursue a career in designing space shuttles.

He hardly felt the increase in strength, but after looking at the other benefits the System had brought, he felt pretty content. The System might not think highly of Ves right now, but he knew it could change in the future.

"After I complete two good designs, I will have enough DP to buy a new sub-skill."

The past week, Ves benefited a lot from the sub-skills he had already bought. Even though they offered the lowest tier of knowledge, they vastly improved his existing competencies and sharpened his instincts.

He currently considered whether to buy additional sub-skills, or begin upgrading his existing ones. One would widen his base of knowledge and the other one would deepen it. Neither of the choices were wrong, so Ves had a hard time making a decision.

The doorbell rang, interrupting Ves' introspection. He wasn't expecting any visitors, nor did he order something to be delivered. Curious, Ves activated the front door's camera.

"Hey Vessie? Are you in? It's me, your cousin!"

"Melinda!" Ves exclaimed. He jogged over to the front of the workshop and met his cousin with a hug. "Long time no see!"

"No thanks to you, little Vessie." Melinda smiled as she ruffled her younger relative's hair. "I see you changed your digs. It looks very.. ehh.."

"Small? I know it doesn't look impressive, but I'm stuck with it so I might as well make it my home."

The two entered the workshop's small living apartment and sat down on a beaten-up sofa. Lucky, who had been happily napping in the middle, meowed with indignation as he was pushed to the side.

"Oh, its so cute!" Melinda gushed as she picked up the cat. "What's its name?"

"I call him Lucky. I'm counting on him to turn my life around." Ves responded, then sighed. "I know you didn't come because you missed me. Tell me what the family wants."

The Larkinsons had been an established family of mech pilots for at least 200 years. Though they lacked wealth and a deeper foundation in the circles of power, they managed to firmly root themselves in the military. Together with dozens of other families, they constituted the Bright Republic's unofficial military aristocracy.

"Grandpa's been busy at headquarters, so he couldn't spare much time searching for what happened with your dad. With his resources, the only thing he managed to figure out was that it wasn't related to the Mech Corps."

Talk about Ves' missing dad lowered his mood. He tightened his fist. "I don't know where dad ended up, but I'm sure he's still alive."

"We all hope so, Vessie. But life has to go on. We can't put our lives on pause. Your aunts and uncles are quite worried about the debt your dad accrued in order to afford all of.. this. It's too extravagant. They think you're still 20 years too young to take up the responsibility to run your own mech business."

"So they disapprove huh?"

"They only want what's best for you." Melinda replied as she put her hand on his shoulder. "You can still turn around and give up the assets to the bank. With your qualifications, my dad can fast-track you into the Mech Corps as a technician. You'll be able to get loads of hands-on experience repairing and modifying next generation military mechs. Your job prospects will improve a lot once you've got a couple of tours of service under your belt."

Ves shook his head. "It sounds safe, but it's too slow for me. I want to make a name for myself as a mech designer, not a technician or repairman. Most star designers start their career young."

"That doesn't mean you have to follow their footsteps. Without a formidable background like wealth or connections, you don't possess the qualifications to enter a cutthroat business like selling mechs."

He wanted to tell Melinda that she was wrong. Ves did enjoy a background advantage. His father's Mech Designer System had given him a lot of help and could be counted on to help him find his footing in the business. But he couldn't mention it to his cousin. The System was strange and unique, and Ves might lose his life if others wanted to rob this advantage.

"Melinda, I understand where you're coming from, but I chose to shoulder the risks. This is my father's legacy, after all. He gave up his home, his savings and even his personal mech to scrounge up the loans to fund this little workshop. At worst, I'll just be declared bankrupt and the assets will get taken away a little later. It's not shameful for an entrepreneur to suffer a bankruptcy. At least I'll be content to know I tried."

His cousin sighed, but didn't press on. "I thought you'd choose to do so. I guess the only thing I can bring back to the family is to tell them about your resolve. Grandpa also told me that if you decided to stay this course, he'll lean on the bank to make sure they don't pull any dirty tricks."

"Thanks. It helps out a lot if I don't have to worry about the bank changing its terms. I'm confident I can work this out on my own. I already have some plans in the works."

"Oh? Can you show me some of your work?"

Ves brought his cousin to the working area of the shop. He activated the terminal and logged into his Iron Spirit designer account.

"I've been trying to make a name for myself as a designer in the game. I've made a deal with... eh, I can't say who. I only need to do well and sell enough virtual mechs to receive some additional start-up resources for my real business. Let me show you my two latest designs."

The Seraphim awed his cousin for its graceful appearance. She grinned and pinched Ves' cheek.

"So you started to fiddle with the Fantasia, huh? Do you need me to introduce you to some ladies I know?"

"Melindaaaaa! I'm not a kid anymore. So other than its gender, tell me what you think about my mech."

"Hm, The Seraphim showcases your fundamentals. You've impressed me with how decently you incorporated all of the components together. While I'm not too familiar with the Fantasia chassis anymore, I'm sure it performs decently in the air. It's just.."

"Yeah, I know. It costs a fortune for a 1-Star light mech."

"At least your Phantasm looks impressive." Melinda commented as she browsed through the specs sheet. "I'm not a technician, but even I can see you've worked hard reworking its armor. This is really solid work. If I was still in Bronze I'd definitely give it a spin."

"What's your current league?"

"I've been in Platinum for a while. I can break into Diamond if I work hard."

"Heavens."

Reaching Diamond rank at her age would be an impressive feat. Only freaks of nature and nurtured aristocratic elites could boast such an accomplishment. Sometimes Ves felt that his mech piloting talent had gone over to Melinda. The universe wasn't fair sometimes.

Melinda noticed Ves' expression and flicked his forehead. "Hey, no need for those thoughts. You might not have inherited all of your father's genes, but you definitely have his heart. Besides, Iron Spirit is just a game. Many of my colleagues in the Bentheim Planetary Guard don't even take it seriously. When you make a living piloting and fighting with the real thing, a game just feels too fake."

Nodding, Ves agreed with her words. "I know. Designing mechs in Iron Spirit is just a springboard for my real universe business. If I manage to achieve enough sales, I can receive a grant of some sorts."

"I'll be sure to recommend your models to the munchkins back home." Melinda smiled as she thought of pinching the faces of her cute little nieces and nephews.

The Larkinsons weren't exactly unified like real aristocratic families, but they kept in touch even as they spread out over many planets in the Republic. The younger generation often met up and played together, if not in person then in Iron Spirit.

Being left out of many of these circles due to lacking the aptitude to pilot a mech had distanced Ves a little from the peers of his age. Melinda was one of the few who kept a proactive friendship with him. It was times like these when he faced some difficulties did Ves realize how much family meant to him. A warm feeling embraced his heart and he gave his cousin another hug.

