

The Mech Touch Chapter 10: White Elephant

Ves kept up his sales routine for a week. He visited different cities each day in order to maximize his exposure. Lucky always accompanied him, and with the help of his charm he managed to draw enough attention to his products to sell a hundred mechs with less than two weeks to spare.

He also accumulated a hefty 263 Design Points, but hadn't spent them yet. He thought it would be better if he received his next mission first.

[Congratulations for completing Tutorial: Part 3.]

[You have received a 10-year combat mech production license lottery ticket. Please visit the Lottery page to redeem this ticket.]

[For completing the mission with time to spare, you have been awarded a bonus lottery ticket.]

The System sure loved lotteries, giving Ves a bad feeling. His luck with the lottery so far had been mixed.

"Hey System, shouldn't you have sent me another mission by now?"

[Please do not get addicted to missions. The Mech Designer System only offers missions in order to guide its users to the right path. Only babies require constant hand-holding. Are you a baby?]

Ves practically spat blood. "Who's the baby?! You are a baby!"

In fact, Ves felt rather terrible after hearing those words. He had indeed grown accustomed to the System's guidance. Now that he lacked a clear mission to strive towards, Ves felt as if he was adrift.

"No, that's not right. I still have to prepare for the Young Tigers Exhibition that start in one-and-half months. I also have to make progress in collecting 5 million credits to pay off my interest in two months."

In other words, he needed to advance his skills and earn a lot of money. Ves could work on that without the System generating another tutorial to tell him how to accomplish those goals.

"Too bad I can't earn any more completion rewards. That reminds me, I still need to use up last mission's rewards."

Rubbing his palms, Ves turned to the Lottery page. He ignored the option to spend DP for a lottery draw and instead selected the option to use the tickets on hand.

First, he activated his bonus ticket. Same as his previous lottery draws, it only entitled him to win an award from the lowest pool of prizes. The low-quality ticket snapped in half, revealing a familiar spinning wheel. Ves vigorously yanked the wheel, causing it to make clacking sounds as the pointer spun over a rapid variety of rewards.

The wheel slowed down after half a minute. Time appeared to slow down as the wheel ticked forward in an exaggerated fashion. It allowed Ves to read the rewards hovering around the pointer.

[Endurance Candy]

[Alien Party Ears]

[100,000 bright credits]

[Lantern of Imperfection]

[1-day Haunt]

The pointer passed over the Endurance Candy, swept past the strange ears, and almost landed at the sum of credits. Ves never objected to having more money.

[You have received a Lantern of Imperfection.]

The System ended up defying Ves' wishes yet again. Instead of receiving something that he could desperately use, he instead received an old-fashioned burnished bronze device that had obviously lived better days.

[Lantern of Imperfection]

Light the lantern and shine it against a mech or component to reveal structural flaws. The revealed flaws are only visible to the holder of the lantern. The lamp contains enough oil to burn for five hours.

"This could be useful." Ves remarked, actually a little impressed by the generosity of the lottery.

Machines that could analyze and reveal structural flaws existed, but only high-tech researchers and manufacturers were able to afford them. The assistance of such a device helped prevent defective material from being incorporated into a mech. For some parts, it was a lot more troublesome to replace once an assembler combined it with other parts and placed it in a mech.

Too bad the lantern only lasted five hours. Ves had no idea where he could buy additional lamp oil either. The System being its usual obstinate self remained silent to Ves' questions.

"Now it's time for the main show." Ves smiled as he beheld the shiny golden ticket that had actually materialized in front of him. With a satisfying pull, he ripped the ticket in half.

Festive bells rang out as a transparent man-sized pagoda dropped down from the roof. The Pagoda consisted of nine stories, and each story spun in an alternating direction. The first story spun to the left, while the second to the right, and the third back to the left, and so on. It all gave off a sense of grandeur to Ves, as if Buddha himself had descended to give him a reward.

The spectacle raised Ves' hopes. If the introduction already looked so impressive, then he surely wouldn't receive something cheap.

[Approach the Pagoda to determine the tier of your reward.]

This was different. Puzzled, Ves took a step forward, and then another when nothing special happened. Somehow, he couldn't get any closer to the pagoda no matter how many steps it took.

A formless pressure arrived that pressed down on his body. Neither gravity nor air pressure changed. Everything else remained the same. Only the pagoda itself rose up in the air, dimming the workshop from Ves' sights.

Ves felt his vision dim from the pressure threatening to burst his head. Nevertheless, he clenched his teeth and kept putting one foot over another. When his consciousness was on the verge of passing out, the pressure disappeared.

He fell to the ground as his breath wheezed as if he had run a marathon. The strange event affected him severely. He didn't exactly know what the pressure represented, but he hoped he did okay.

[Evaluation completed. You are eligible to draw a reward from the 5th tier.]

The pagoda transformed in response to the judgment. Its top 4 and bottom 4 stories slowed down their rotations, eventually falling still. Only the fifth story of the pagoda continued spinning its merry way.

"I don't know exactly what the pagoda did to me, but I guess did an okay job." Ves concluded spuriously. He really had little clue why the System needed to resort to such mysticism in order to give him a simple production license. "I really need to do better next time. I'm not resigned to remain average for the rest of my life."

Now that the test had ended, Ves easily approached the side of the pagoda. Its fifth floor continued to turn, whipping up a small current of air that blasted Ves' face. Even Lucky jumped down from the couch and inspected the strange floating structure. His face looked as if it was wondering what the fuck made it spin.

A small, hand-sized bell appeared in midair. It was one of those bells that hung in Ancient Terran temples. A small cord hung from the clapper that allowed the bell to make its ringing.

[Please pull the cord when ready.]

Ves held the end of the chord and pulled firmly. The bell released a delicate tingling tone, causing the pagoda's fifth story to shine brighter even as its rotation lost its driving force.

Like the regular lottery wheel, the pagoda's many sides portrayed various prizes. Ves even recognized a few of their profiles and determined they were mostly lastgen models. This meant that the mechs first saw commercial release in the last thirty to seventy years, which was a fairly good range.

Any mech models older than lastgen were considered obsolete. Their performance just couldn't keep up with the models currently in use even in an assisting capacity. The price of such mechs often matched the cost of raw materials and production, meaning Ves would never be able to make any profit even if he handcrafted the mech in his own boutique.

On the other hand, newer models also presented a few problems to Ves. The more current the mech model, the stricter its license. Only trusted mech designers and large commercial enterprises received approval to buy them. In addition, newer designs incorporated more advanced technology that required special machines to fabricate.

His 3D printer was just a run-of-the-mill currentgen product with no special features. It was capable of printing almost any of lastgen's specialist components, but if it came to the current generation's fancy tech, then he may need to acquire millions or even billions of credits worth of production lines.

The pagoda finally stopped its lumbering spin. Ves' stomach sunk as he recognized the white, medium-sized mech on its front-facing wall.

[Congratulations! You have received a 10-year production license of the following mech: National Aeromotives Caesar Augustus C1.]

"...Shit." Ves muttered as all of his excitement drained from his expression.

His comm burst up as Ves received a new mail. He numbly tapped the message. It came with a lot of legal bullshit from the so-called 'Future Sons Technology Institution'. Ves skimmed through the lengthy texts.

[...We hereby grant you with an unlimited production license of the Caesar Augustus C1, valid for a duration of 10 years from the signing of the included contract.]

No matter how many misgivings Ves had about the C1, he was stuck with it. He quickly signed all of the contracts to get the paperwork out of his sight. He received another message a scant few minutes later, showing that the local had successfully approved of the contract. Ves now possessed a legal license to produce the Caesar Augustus.

"Fucking double shit." Ves felt like he wanted to cry but had no tears.

The Caesar Augustus had a colorful history. Ves happened to be familiar with it, because it had been a lesson in college on what not to do.

The story started fifty years ago, when National Aeromotives, a renowned manufacturer of aircars and shuttles decided to enter the mech market. They adopted a two-pronged approach.

The first approach was to license a couple of mainstream designs, retool a couple of factories, and pump out loads of shoddy quality but cheaply priced mechs. The sheer quantity of mechs they made allowed them to figure out the intricacies of mech production quite rapidly. The quality of their mechs improved with each new production run.

The second method was to allow Jason Kozlowski, the son of NA's CEO to learn how to design mechs. He directly attended one of Estelon's premier mech design program. An important thing to

mention was that Jason had been a spoiled brat. As could be imagined, Jason spent much of his time on Estelon attending parties and getting drunk off his ass. Only his superior genes enabled him to perform well enough in class to graduate.

Once Jason returned home, he made a high-sounding announcement to the galactic press. He claimed that he would take just one month to design a fully original mech that would outperform all of that period's current generation mechs.

Many industry insiders scoffed at such a boast. Forget about outperforming a current generation mech, many freshly graduated mech designers weren't even capable of designing a model that could outperform a lastgen mech. It took years of experience, learning many skills and acquiring many new technologies to even be capable of producing such a stellar mech.

In any case, the public hung onto Jason's every word. A face this handsome wouldn't renege on his promise, right? After the announcement, a couple of black-suited men quickly brought the prodigal son away from the press conference and he was never seen again for a month. Some conspiracy theorists guessed that National Aeromotives wanted the public to forget about Jason's pledge. They received an unexpected surprise when Jason showed up to the press exactly thirty days later.

A slightly disheveled but attractive young man then proceeded to introduce his month-long effort. He domineeringly named it after the first Ancient Roman emperor, for it was indeed capable of outperforming most mechs of the current generation. Just its majestic posture and stately head design showed that Jason spent quite a lot of time matching the mech's aesthetics to its superb offensive power.

The Caesar Augustus offered supreme offense and supreme defense in the medium weight class. By far the most expensive component was

National Aeromotives' proprietary armor plating, originally designed to protect its most luxurious line of space shuttles from direct microasteroid impacts. Though expensive and difficult to produce, the armor offered superior protection that approached nextgen standards at the time.

The C1 also provided a variety of offensive options. Its main weapons were its two wrist-mounted laser cannons. Missiles mounted on its shoulders provided some long-ranged indirect firing options while a classic sword and shield built out of the same excellent material of its armor made the mech a monster in melee range.

While Jason showed off a holographic model of the white-painted mech and its admittedly impressive capabilities, the experts combed over its specifications. They quickly couldn't hold in their laughter.

The Caesar Augustus hid a bevy of issues underneath its perfect exterior. Jason crammed the C1 with so many gadgets that it affected the frame's integrity. Any damage that got past the armor could easily damage five essential subsystems, either crippling the mech or at least take it off the battlefield. In order to save space, many of those subsystems got tangled together, making it a pain in the ass for any technician to replace even a single faulty power line.

The mech also lacked endurance. It peaked early but had no staying power. Its missile capacity could be emptied in seconds. Its wrist-mounted laser cannons built up an alarming amount of heat that Jason had done almost nothing to mitigate. And even if he did, the mech's average energy capacity meant it couldn't feed the weapons long enough anyway.

Fortunately Jason hadn't been conceited enough to add a flight system to the already over-engineered mech. Its energy would just drain faster in that case!

All of this meant that Ves was now stuck with one of NA's biggest commercial flops in recent times. The C1 was a white elephant that was difficult to produce and required constant babysitting. The most troublesome thing about producing it was that its special armor plating required a dedicated machine to produce. Ves' 3d printer wasn't advanced enough to produce it on its own.

It was impossible for Ves to produce the stock model of Caesar Augustus in two months. He lacked the time, money, skill and equipment to accomplish such a clusterfuck of a production. And even if he did managed to cobble up a model, it was a question whether it would sell. However, the System awarded him with only just one production license, and for better or worse, Ves was stuck with the elephant.

"It's not like I'm stuck with the stock model. I still have the Mech Designer System."

If Ves could use the System to redesign the C1, he might be able to come up with a less demanding version of Jason's first masterpiece. He wasn't ready to give up. A tentative plan already drew in his mind.

Chapter end