

## The Mech Touch Chapter 11: Cash Woes

Ves made the biggest gamble of his life so far. If he won, he'd be able to produce a stellar mech and sell it for a hefty profit, making more than enough money to meet his impending interest payment. Success danced on a string, and each time Ves stumbled, he risked the whole scheme coming apart.

First, Ves needed to grow accustomed to the Caesar Augustus. Fortunately, a real universe production license also counted as a virtual license in Iron Spirit's terms of service. He only needed to send a copy of the license agreement to the game's support to be able to tinker and sell the model in-game.

As a lastgen mech in today's standard, the C1 counted as a 5-star mech in the game. This meant only older, more skilled potentates had the capability to buy the mech. The Caesar Augustus could be sold for a higher price, allowing Ves to earn some actual profits from his sales if he designed a good enough variant.

Iron Spirit's tiered leagues put a cap on how good a mech you could play depending on how well you progressed in the game.

A Bronze Leaguer only had access to 1-star mechs.

A Silver Leaguer had access to 2-star and 3-star mechs, though they could still play around with 1-star mechs if they wanted to have some fun.

A Gold Leaguer had access to both 4-star and 5-star mechs. Most potentates that did not pursue a professional career in piloting mechs languished in this League.

When one reached Platinum League or further, they gained unrestricted access to every mech, even the mythical 10-star mechs. However, the higher the tier, the more expensive the mechs cost to purchase and to repair if it ever got damaged. The fancier mechs even required weeks of in-game time to repair if they got completely destroyed. This meant that a fair number of Platinum and Diamond players still occasionally took a 5-star mech into a match for the purpose of earning some easy gold.

This resulted in 5-star mechs being one of the most profitable tiers in Iron Spirit. High performing models especially attracted attention. However, whether Ves could break into this market was still a question, considering he lacked familiarity and expertise with the Caesar Augustus.

In the 45 days of time before the Young Tigers Exhibition started, Ves needed to produce an extensive and realistic redesign of the C1's stock model. He needed to acquire new sub-skills and credits to buy virtual licenses of the components he needed for his redesign.

In the meantime, he had to release a number of mech designs in the game in order to generate even more credits. Much of the money would be used to buy the real universe production licenses of the components he had used in the game.

It sounded terribly complicated, but actually Ves didn't need to change what he had been doing so far. Essentially, Ves only needed to continue to design variants and put them onto the in-game market to sell.

First, Ves contacted Iron Spirit's support in order to receive his virtual license. A production license of a lastgen mech already cost many millions of credits. He'd be damned if he was forced to purchase a 5-star mech's virtual license, which potentially ran into the millions.

While he waited for his application to be approved, Ves shut off all distractions and loaded the C1 into his the System's Designer program to begin tinkering with it. He wanted to pry apart its shiny armor and see how much of a mess its infamous internals looked like. Besides finding a replacement material for its armor, Ves also needed to optimize the its internals in order to turn the C1 into a competitive mech.

One look and his hopes were dashed. It really did look like someone took a plate's worth of spaghetti and tried to stuff it in a small cup. It was doable, but it mashed everything together and left far too little slack. Cables, pipes and structural supports all crammed right next to each other, sometimes dangerously so. For example, if a certain cable broke and released electric sparks, it could ignite the gas released from a punctured pipe.

Though Ves knew these linkages could produce a catastrophe, he lacked the skills and resources to fix them. He could only document each fault he came across and come back to the problem later. Ves spent the rest of the day combing over each and every component, to the point of dismantling the engine even if he understood little on how the advanced component worked.

Ves took a deep breath when he finished going over the Caesar Augustus. If he wanted to understand the model deeper, then he needed to fabricate the stock model. He took a minute to log into the in-game market and inspected the model's market conditions.

"Damn, that's expensive!"

An average C1 sold for about fifty thousand credits, and that was for an in-game item! 5-star mechs belonged to an entirely different market segment than 1-star mechs. The latter catered to kids while the former was sold to professionals.

The raw materials required to fabricate the mech likely cost tens of thousands of credit as well. Since Ves had set bottom prices to his virtual mechs, he hadn't earned even a single credit or gold even after selling over a hundred models.

"I'm earning a decent amount of DP from every sale. If I raise the price, my mechs won't be able to stay competitive in the market. It's better if I don't change the prices."

The Caesar Augustus represented a marvel of its time. In order to solve its many puzzles, Ves required learning many new skills.

But while he needed to save up a lot of DP, he also couldn't go without credits. Ves switched to his mail and was relieved the game's support approved of his request to claim the C1's virtual license. After loading the mech's stock model in the in-game workshop, he received an unpleasant bill.

"So it costs about forty thousand credits in raw materials to build the base model. Even if the gold price looks a bit friendlier, it's not like I have a bag of virtual gold either."

The lack of cash on hand stymied Ves' progress in researching the Caesar Augustus. There was only so much he could do to play around with the mech's design in the designer.

Ves had learned one important lesson when designing the Fantasia variants. A passionate mech designer needed to get hands-on with his own creations. Just making a few doodles in a design program didn't turn you into a veteran designer. A real expert got his hands dirty, putting each and every part together to see how it works and where any problems might arise.

With only about nine thousand credits on hand, Ves needed to scrounge up at least 31,000 credits from any source he could squeeze. He first checked the System, but couldn't find any option to convert his DP to credits. Perhaps he could buy a few knick knacks from the Shop and sell it for a tidy sum, but that option wasted too much valuable points.

"Should I call Melinda?" Ves wondered out loud.

Family stuck together. If Ves took the time to explain his plans and difficulties to his cousin, he was sure she'd lend him the credits.

"It's not right. It's due to my own poor planning that I'm facing a shortage on credits."

If he cried and went to his family to bail him out, then sure, they might lend him a hand. It would also prove that he'd been in over his head. His aunts and uncles already disapproved of his career path. He wanted to avoid giving them ammunition.

Perhaps sell Lucky's gems? Ves had dug out half-dozen of these little shinies, and they all provided minor benefits when installed onto any mech. Any expert would love them if they realized they could improve their mechs by just installing a single jewel.

Shaking his head, Ves discarded the idea. "Nah, that's a last resort."

If he introduced these gems to the universe, a lot of powerful players would want to know their source. Ves lacked the strength to isolate himself from the connected universe he lived in. It was child's play to track him down once he revealed any oddities.

"Forget about it. I need to figure out something else. What do I have that's valuable but not so much that it can be sold for some quick cash?"

The workshop? Out of the question. The building, 3d printer and assembler constituted the most basic requirements of a mech manufacturer. Ves couldn't part with any of it. He might as well make a deal with the bank about the loan if he gave up on the workshop.

What else did he have? The licenses, for one. Since he had just read through the terms of the Caesar Augustus' production license, he became well aware of what he could do with it. National Aeromotives didn't allow any shenanigans nor did they accept any refunds of a license Ves acquired through a charity grant.

"I still have a number of 1-star virtual licenses. At this stage they're helpful, but not necessary to my plans. I wonder if I'm allowed to refund them. I bought them I bought out of my own pocket after all. Perhaps their terms aren't as restrictive."

Ves searched the galactic net to see whether he could get some money out of the licenses. To his relief, the BSBH Corporation indeed set down a standard policy for returns.

A virtual license could be relinquished within the week at no cost if the purchaser hadn't used it in any of his current models. If the owner possessed the license for more than a year, then the game wouldn't give one credit back.

Ves fell in the situation in between, having bought the licenses for more than a week but much less than a year. Iron Spirit allowed purchasers to get back 75% of their money if the licenses were not in use, and only 50% if they were. These terms only applied to licenses bought personally at normal prices.

Licenses bought at a discount or granted by other institutions didn't count, and unfortunately for Ves, the virtual licenses gifted by the System fell under this category.

Ves' head spun after he combed through all the license agreements, but his work paid off. He knew what he could return and how much money he could claw back from the game. He visited Iron Spirit's support site and submitted a refund application.

[Astoria Experimental Flight System]: 12,500 bright credits

[Fayette ECM Mk. I]: 3,500 bright credits

[Red Eye Assisted Aim Module]: 4,999.50 bright credits

[MTTR Removable Battery Pack]: 1,500 bright credits

[Harconix Light DMR Version 3]: 9,999.50 bright credits

[Mirin-21 Ultralight Armor Plating]: 5,000 bright credits

The total amount of credits Ves expected to get back was 37,499 credits. He left out the Festive Cloud Generator in his refund application because he grew rather fond of it. He intended to incorporate the small, innocuous in his other designs whenever it fit.

As the support staff already received Ves' personal information when he made his previous licensing request, they worked quickly in processing the refund. An hour later, Ves received a mail and a credit transfer that indicated his refund application met with success.

With about 45,000 credits in spendable cash, Ves was more than ready to start producing the Caesar Augustus, at least in Iron Spirit. Yet before he did so, he hesitated.

The Caesar Augustus was a monstrously complex mech. While many processes had been streamlined in Iron Spirit's virtual crafting environment, it still remained a lifelike simulation. If Ves failed to produce a mech that matched the stock model's specifications, at the very worst he'd end up with an unsellable mech.

A mech that remained stuck in place meant no new cash flow. Without another source of credits, he wouldn't be able to produce another virtual mech to advance his understanding of the model and earn more cash.

All of this meant he couldn't fail at the first step.

"I'm not alone in this." Ves realized as he slapped his forehead. "Just because I can't beg for money from Melinda doesn't mean I can ask for advice."

He activated his comm and made a call to Bentheim.

Melinda's face popped up. Instead of the casual clothes she wore in her recent visit, this time she appeared in a formal uniform. "Hey Vessie, what's up?"

"I'm good, but I've got a little trouble."

"Okay, tell it to me briefly. I'm technically on shift so I need to get back to work soon."



Ves nodded and described how he received a grant license of the infamous Caesar Augustus. Naturally the charity the System setup looked squeaky clean on paper, so Ves wasn't worried Melinda would dig into it and find anything improper. He emphasized his determination to tackle the challenge of mastering its design.

Frowning, Melinda tutted her disapproval. "They've sure thrown you off the deep end. The C1 is a beast of a machine, not something a fresh college graduate should come into contact with. This sounds pretty shady."

"Nevermind that Melinda. Just tell me if you can pry something loose from the Mech Corps or the Bentheim Planetary Guard. Without getting you into trouble, of course."

Melinda furrowed her brow. "I can ask the mechanics for some tips. I'll also see if I can dig something up from the archives. I'll pass anything I can find along to you as long as it's not classified or proprietary knowledge."

"Thanks a lot. I'm sorry for troubling you that much."

"Hey, you're family, Vessie. I'd do anything to help. I gotta go back to work now, so see ya later!"

"Bye!"

With that done, Ves turned to a different issue. With his DP steadily accumulating, he should make a tentative shopping list of sub-skills he needed to rework the C1. He opened his Skill Tree and started to comb over the available skills.