The Mech Touch Chapter 14: Fiddling

Reading through the Mech's specifications, Ves felt all of his satisfaction disappear. He accomplished the difficult task of building a highly advanced mech, to be sure. His lack of understanding and his poor proficiency with the equipment caused several problems with the mech. The Caesar Augustus he fashioned paled in comparison to a factory standard stock model. Several criteria showed a few percentage points of deficiencies.

Those percentage points might as well be a chasm in the mech market. When pilots wanted to buy a stock mech, then they at least demand them to adhere to standards. There was no way any sane pilot paid full price for a substandard licensed copy.

Ves took the time to search up the Caesar Augustus and its variants, what few they were. Unlike in the real universe, the Caesar Augustus enjoyed a little more popularity. Logistical issues such as limited energy mattered little when you played Iron Spirit's shorter game modes, such as the 1v1 and the 2v2 arenas. The tricky problem of frequent repairs could be solved with a wave of the hand as the game took care of everything as long as you had gold or credits to spend.

The players who bought the Caesar Augustus tended to be more affluent than normal, but also demanded more of their mechs. Their willingness to pay a little more for a higher performing mech didn't help Ves at the moment because his own product was trash.

"Still, I have no choice but to get rid of it. I've pumped a fortune of credits in its virtual construction. I should at least be able to recoup the cost."

With no other choice, Ves switched to the sales page and put his first Caesar Augustus on sale. He put a tentative price of 45,000 credits.

The price range made it seem like a deal, even if it didn't perform up to spec.

[Caesar Augustus C1]

Tier: 5-star

Base Model: Caesar Augustus C1

Purchase Price: 750,000 gold (-50%)

Premium Price: 45,000 bright credits

Hopefully some schmuck will snap it up without reading the specifications too deeply. Otherwise he'd have to go back to the store and lower the price again in order to get rid of it faster. He still lacked a lot of credits and had no reserve left to build another virtual mech.

"I'll check back in a few days." Ves said hopefully, but he could not keep out the grimness from hsi tone. "One thing's for sure. If I want to untangle this cluster fuck, I desperately need to become proficient in electrical engineering."

Ves checked his Status, and found he had gained enough DP to afford the first Skill in the Skill Tree. As a major skill category, Electrical Engineering was cheap to learn but very expensive to master, but that was a problem for later. Right now, he spent 200 DP to acquire the first tier of the skill, which the System called Incompetent.

Raw information and knowledge streamed into Ves' mind. More knowledge than he could handle tried to nestle within in his brain in a span of minutes, and it almost caused him to blank out. He dropped to

the floor and tried to hold his screams as he held his head. Countless irrelevant pieces of data pressed against his mind.

Lucky even got frightened enough to jump up to a cabinet, wary of any intruders.

The pressure eased off after ten or so minutes. Ves let out deep breaths as he tried to regain his composure. Most of the data seemed to have been tossed to the back of his mind, inaccessible for the moment. Perhaps the subsequent skill upgrades unlocked portions of it. Strange.

In order to regain his calm, he took a break, taking Lucky out for a walk. He and his father lived near this stretch of forests and plains for many years. The house of his childhood in the suburbs had been sold, the new owners taking in the property with gusto. Instead, his father moved to build a second-hand modular workshop just outside the town. Its location closer to nature afforded better privacy and made sure nothing else got damaged if his workshop blew up for some reason.

"Do you remember a life before the System gifted you to me?"

The gem cat meowed with a puzzled tone as he explored the nearby bushes.

"Don't know, huh?" Ves said as he stretched his arms and raised his head to look at the wispy colorful sky. "This is my home planet. I lived her for almost my entire life. The only time I left was when I went to college in the capital."

The planet Rittersberg seated the government of the Bright Republic. They heavily controlled the climate in order to make it optimal for

human to live there. Sprawling cities, fancy villas and vast stretches of Terran and indigenous wildlife turned it into a paradise, an expensive one, but idyllic nonetheless.

Still, Ves vastly preferred the rugged and untamed lands of Cloudy Curtain. The terraforming corporations who transformed the ball of rock into a live-sustaining planet only stuck around to do the bare minimum. They left with their fat paychecks even as incongruities popped up. The local air smelled different than the standard Terran norm. The summers never lasted long and it was cloudy pretty much every day.

This was his home. He was an inhabitant of Cloudy Curtain first, and a citizen of the Bright Republic next. Few woes occurring in the rest of the galaxy concerned him here on this quiet planet. This corner of the galaxy was on the outskirts of civilized territory. It held few stars, not much exotic resources and only a few small alien polities shared the Bright Republic's rimward borders.

Mech battles only happened occasionally. Besides the wars between the Republic and the aggressive Vesia Kingdom, the most the Mech Corps had to handle were lone criminals and small bandit groups too weak to prey in the bigger neighborhoods.

This led to a life of peace and stability, an enviable state of affairs for some people. His father purposely left the livelier planets of Rittersberg and Bentheim in order to make his home in snoozy Cloudy Curtain. When Ves grew up on this planet, he felt no different from his classmates and other people around him. Only when he studied at Rittersberg did he realize that the rest of the galaxy moved in different speeds.

It both scared and excited him.

Eventually, Ves firmly entered this complicated, murky world in order to fulfill his dream to become a mech designer. Just this decision alone brought him into contact with the government, trade associations, suppliers and more. He felt connected to the galaxy, as if anything he did affected the rest of human civilization. Only a little, but it felt as if his existence mattered.

"Hm, what kind of crap am I thinking? I should go back to work." Ves decided, and led Lucky back to the workshop.

In the meantime, he made a call to Melinda.

"Hi cousin."

"Hey Ves, I was about to mail you back this weekend."

"So do you have any results you can share with me?"

Melinda sent a few documents over the interplanetary comm. "The Caesar Augustus is a rare beast, so the Mech Corps never officially purchased any of its models. However, it did come into contact with a few models piloted by pirates fleeing the authorities of the bigger empires. They even captured one intact, more or less."

"Did they do anything with it?"

"The Mech Corps may be penny pinchers sometimes, but they won't throw away a functional mech. An ace pilot took it over and piloted it for a few years before it got embroiled in a border skirmish with the Vesians. It lost its left leg and a chunk of its waist. When it came back to the hangar, the Corps decided it was more trouble than it was worse trying to fix it up again, so they sold the rest for scrap."

"Damn, so it's gone now right?"

"Yup. Recycled down to the seats."

"Well, there goes my hope of refurbishing it. So anyway, the Mech Corps must have learned a thing or two about the C1, right?"

"Nothing officially, but I tracked down one of the technicians that serviced the C1."

That was impressive, and also a little dangerous. Melinda could get in trouble if she harassed a veteran too much.

"Don't worry about it, cousin." Melinda smiled over the comm. "He found the Caesar Augustus to be a bitch to maintain, but he still misses it. He freely gave me the notes he kept about the mech. I've sent it through this connection, so you should already have them in your storage."

"That's going to help out a lot. Thanks for taking the time."

"I'm looking forward of what you can do. Be sure to give me a call and show off your work when you finish a design!"

"Will do!"

When Ves returned to his workshop, he perused the documents Melinda sent over. The retired technician had conveyed his thoughts in a haphazard manner, with no apparent order in his many ideas. Ves spent quite some time to iron out the disordered words and plentiful jargon into something legible.

What he got opened his mind. The technician was evidently proficient in improvisation and jury rigging. He kept the Caesar Augustus going for years even without official replacement parts from National Aeromotives. Though the notes contained no schematics or blueprints, just getting to know the changes and the reasoning the technician came up with already gave Ves ideas for his own customization plans.

His newly gained skill in electrical engineering also helped him puzzle out the crude drawings of rerouted cables and shifted systems. The retired technician spent some of his spare time trying to come up with a better layout for the most problematic tangles. Not many of them looked viable, but the technician succeeded in coming up with some optimizations, making the mech a little easier to maintain.

After digesting the material, Ves had the urge to work on a design immediately. He quickly switched over to the Designer and started incorporating some of his ideas on the Caesar Augustus.

He worked on the easy solutions first. He moved a few components, sometimes shifting them just a millimeter, other times swapping them from left to right. Following these actions, he uncrossed a couple of cables and rerouted them through a different channel.

When Ves stepped back and admired his changes, he realized the technician's suggestions did have a basis on reality. The modifications he made according to the suggestions made the mech a little less troublesome to produce and maintain.

"Now that I've picked all the low-hanging fruit, it's time for the real work to start."

Ves intended to redesign C1 practically from the ground up. Just making a few changes here and there just didn't cut it. So Ves bit his lips and started to test the viability of more drastic modifications,

some suggested by the technicians and some he figured out himself after handcrafting its design in the game.

The changes he sketched improved the base model only incrementally. With limited knowledge and a lack of component licenses, Ves faced limitations everywhere.

At its heart, a humanoid mech imitated the workings of the human body. Though hundreds of years of progress have made a mech's mechanical workings increasingly more sophisticated, it still adhered to the same rules. If Ves arbitrarily cut off a few cables or messed around with its proportions, he might cause the the design to cascade into an unworkable mess just like if he messed around with an actual human body.

Some people started to question whether mechs would evolve to constitute life. Ves wasn't interested in these philosophical discussions that popped up every once in a while in college. He did not delude himself into thinking he was playing God by fashioning new mechs. Ves always thought his classmates who talked that way treated the mech designer occupation as a luxury. Ves preferred to hang out with the more down-to-earth crowd that treated the job as a way to assist the mech pilots that defended their homes.

A week went by as Ves made some accomplishments. He also earned enough DP to upgrade his Electrical Engineering skill to Novice. With his improved insights in electrical engineering, he also simplified a couple of problematic spots. This necessitated a drop in performance, but what he lost in specs he gained a lot more in ease of manufacturing and repair. While Ves had made some minor progress in taming the beast, it still maintained its essential wildness and ferocity.

"I still have a long road ahead, but I'm reaching the limits of what my skills and imagination can do."

He only managed to come up with a half-finished design. While he wanted to wait until he could afford a few more skills with his steady income of DP, he had to validate his design by fabricating it personally. Without getting hands-on, all of his work remained theoretical.

Ves finalized the design when he reached the limits of what he could do. He named the variant the Nero after a famous person who lived in the same time period as Caesar Augustus in Ancient Terran history. Frankly, Ves knew very little about history. He just made a casual search on the galactic net for some cool names and Nero popped up as some dude with a mixed evaluation. This fit in nicely with what he thought about his, which is what he also thought about his recently finished design.

At least he hadn't gone ahead and named the design the Bastard Son.

The System's evaluation of the design was mild, to say the least. All of its core systems and armor remained the same as its stock model, so the System gave him a low rating for effort. The only thing Ves managed to pry from the System was a base reward of 10 DP due to the design being based on a complicated lastgen model.

He was ready to start fabricating a virtual mech. When Ves logged into Iron Spirit and visited the market section, he found to his surprise that someone actually bought his half-baked Caesar Augustus.

TheGrandGreenRoad.

The user name sounded like a complete stranger. Ves checked his friends list and found nothing. Searching the galactic net only revealed that the player wasn't a celebrity.

"Who the fuck is TheGrandGreenRoad?"

Well, whoever he was, he saved Ves a lot of trouble. "Whatever. Since the mech got sold, I have enough credits to fabricate the Nero."

He threw the identity of the buyer to the back of his mind and entered the virtual workshop to go to work. He was eager to see if the Nero he produced could match the specs of a standard C1.

Chapter end