

The Mech Touch Chapter 15: Father

The center of the Bright Republic lay in Rittersberg. Though Bentheim surpassed the founding planet with its vibrant economy and liberal housing regulations, Rittersberg still remained the seat of government of the hundred-planet state. Only inherited and distinguished families were allowed to live in its luxurious housing districts.

In one such district, a row of modest villas rested alongside a placid river. In the backyard of one of those villas, a man reclined in a folding chair as he held a fishing pole in front of him. An empty bucket lay beside him, waiting for fishes to carry back home.

An aircar approached the guarded district. After the local defense systems checked its transponders and scanned the vehicle for any threats, it approved the vehicle's approach. The aircar smoothly descended onto the landing pad next to the garage.

The door opened to reveal the chiseled face of a man in uniform. The man marched briskly towards the back, as if already aware the occupant of the villa spent his time there.

"Father."

Benjamin Larkinson turned his gaze away from the bobber and beheld the new arrival. "Ark. As carefree as ever I see. You've even taken the time to visit your dear old dad. How are the kids?"

"Rambunctious as ever." The uniformed man smiled a little as he loosened up. "I don't know how you managed to raise all seven of us."

"I had a good wife, as do you, Ark. No matter how much the service takes up your time, don't forget your family. You can do anything if the

happiness of your wife and children are at stake. It's half the reason why I made it this far."

Ark nodded. "Speaking of which, I might have news of my elder brother."

"Ryncol... I have no idea what he's embroiled himself with. He's always been the most reticent of you bunch. He loves his own son like a treasure, so why did he not come to me? Does he think I will treat him any less? Pah."

"We've spent some time digging into Ryncol's movements of the last year before he disappeared. There's a couple of times when he went off the grid. I suspect he went incognito in order to visit a conflict zone. Accounting for travel time, it should match the times he couldn't be traced."

Benjamin grimaced at those words. "Pirates. What has my boy done now? I didn't raise any of you to make dealings with the scum of the galaxy."

"The trail ends there, unfortunately. We don't possess enough information to infer which conflict zone Ryncol frequented. We're analyzing all of the data devices he left behind, but he's been very disciplined with the trails he left behind, so we're not expecting much from those sources."

Sighing, Benjamin closed his eyes as he leaned back on his chair. "Tell me about my grandson."

"There are some anomalies surrounding Ves that paint a suspicious picture. While he had been an unremarkable student in the Rittersberg University of Technology, he's performing above average

in the month-and-half that he's been active so far. It's as if he's given wings now that he's free."

Benjamin smiled at the report. "I always expected Ves to catch up to his potential once he got over his inability to join our career path. I'm glad he finally found his way and embrace his role in the world."

"The financing still remains troublesome. Despite receiving a production license grant, Ves is unable to leverage this asset. If nothing unexpected happens, he will fail to meet his impending interest payment. Father... will you give him a hand if he's come up short?"

"No. Not even at the very last moment. Ryncol went through the trouble of procuring those loans, so we should see his plans through the end. I don't believe he has lost grip of his son even if he's indisposed."

The river flowed gently along the stream. The sun shone brightly in the skies. A serene calm descended on the pair as the father kept fishing while the son organized his notes, sending over the relevant documents to his father's comm.

"How's my grandson's work? He's not making more Fantasia variants, is he?"

"He sold most of his 1-star virtual licenses to raise money. He's completely committed to mastering the Caesar Augustus. I bought his first mech, which is unmodified, and tested in simulations."

"Was it up to par?"

"Not really." Ark shook his head in disapproval. "If Ves produced a mech as shoddy as that in the real universe, he'd get chased away as soon as he tries to certify it at the association."

In most of civilized human space, weapons such as mechs faced stringent controls. Designers and manufacturers were only allowed to produce a mech if they owned the necessary licenses. When they finished producing a mech, they needed to be certified at the local Mech Trade Association before it receives permission to be put on sale.

The MTA was a transnational nonprofit organization with branches in pretty much every human state. A colossus of the mech world, they regulated the civilian production and sale of mechs. Most states like the Bright Republic gave them official backing to do so in their territories because they were good at it and adhered to strict neutrality, never overstepping their bounds.

In any case, if Ark said that Ves' product couldn't pass the MTA's strict certification, then he had a long road ahead of him. If Ves managed to shore up his weaknesses within a month, then he may be able to produce a mech that passed certification. But that required a lot of progress in a very short time.

"It comes down to time, huh." Benjamin mused. "If the interest payment didn't hang over his head, Ves wouldn't be rushing with building a mech beyond his capabilities. It's convenient timing on the bank's part that they chose to hang such a term over his head without compromising a single step."

Ark shifted another set of documents over to Benjamin's comm. "We've looked at the Cloudy Curtain Planetary Bank. The shareholders and employees are clean. Their books are also in order. The situation is just as it appears. The bank made a negative assessment of the

viability of Ves' business, and just wants to claim the assets before they depreciate in value."

"Greedy bastards. I'm glad to hear they're nothing more than that, though. Saves me the trouble of another visit."

"According to the latest reports, Ves should be working on a new virtual mech right now. Do you want me to snap it up when he puts it on sale?"

"Yes, and keep buying one of every variant he sells in that game of yours. I want you to track his progress in this way and give him a little push while he's at it. Don't buy any more, though. I don't want him to grow complacent."

"Understood, dad. Anything else?"

"Keep digging into the so-called Future Sons Technology Institution. Any organization with the clout to grant a production license of the Caesar Augustus shouldn't be an obscure player."

"We still can't make much progress on that front since they're based in the New Rubarth Empire. Their corporate laws are too opaque, deliberately so. Even if we use our sources, they won't be able to get anything."

Benjamin spat to the side. "Ark, I don't need to know the shareholders or donors of the institute. Just find out if a New Rubarthan or a foreigner taking advantage of the local laws is pulling the strings."

"That should be doable. I'll pass on your instructions."

"That should be enough on your plate for now. Leave me to my fishing. I'll go over the documents later and send you my thoughts in a day or two."

"Very well. Goodbye."

As Ark left the villa, Benjamin relaxed his eyes and smiled. He held a steady grip on his fishing pole.

"What kind of father abandons their son?"

The fish still didn't bite.

Back on Cloudy Curtain, Ves released an exhaustive breath as he finished fabricating the Nero in Iron Spirit.

The customized Caesar Augustus model still had its problem spots. However, with prior experience and the various modifications he made to mitigate a few bad spots, Ves encountered fewer risks during fabrication. The C1A Nero as he named it still caused some difficulties, particularly with its armor plates which Ves hadn't modified. Finding a solution for the armor plates

The System offered a fallback. Its Store sold various goods as long as Ves could afford the price. The cheapest alternative armor he could find in the shop cost at least 1000 DP. Ves preferred not to buy them, because the armor plating was several generations behind current standards.

No one wanted to buy a C1 variant with crappy armor. A big part what made the Caesar Augustus was its sword and shield, which were made out of the same expensive alloys as its armor. Cutting back on the

armor meant not just lowering the C1's defense, it also affected its offensive power.

Luckily, it wasn't a problem he needed to concern himself with today. Ves put the Nero on sale once he ironed out the remaining kinks revealed by the last-minute tests.

[C1A Nero]

Base Model: Caesar Augustus C1

Purchase price: 950,000 gold (-50%)

Premium Price: 60,000 bright credits

Charging 60,000 bright credits for the Nero was stretching the model's value. It only offered a marginal improvement in performance and a slight decrease in repair cost to any player interested in a Caesar Augustus model. Still, seeing how his previous mech got sold fairly quickly, Ves hoped his handcrafted Nero at least provided higher profits. He wanted to see some validation in the work he put in his models.

Now that he finished the Nero, Ves ought to go back to the Designer and create another variant. The problem was that Ves couldn't achieve a breakthrough in either improving the C1's internals or replacing its armor. It came down to a lack of skills and resources.

"I can't afford the things I need." Ves sighed. "Stupid System. Why did the pagoda thing reward me with a Caesar Augustus."

He checked his Status again in order to see how much catching up he still had to do.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Novice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 175

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] [Assembler Proficiency I]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Novice

[Mathematics]: Incompetent

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

[Metallurgy]: Apprentice

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

Evaluation: An all-rounder in incompetence.

"I've acquired a decent amount of skills, but I've split my attention." Ves concluded as he saw how many low-level skills he currently possessed. "I should either finish upgrading my Electrical Engineering or pick up Mediumweight Armor Optimization I. Raising my Assembly sub-skills can wait for later once I start fabricating the real thing."

Nothing changed after staring at his Status for ten solid minutes. "Come on System. I'm at the end of my rope. You haven't sent me a mission for a while now. Why not give me something to work with? Do you expect me to beg my grandpa for a loan or something?"

[You have received a new mission. Please check the Mission page for the details.]

"YES! Finally!" Ves celebrated as he raised his fists with a grin. He then knelt on the ground, kowtowing towards the computer terminal. "You are my god, System."

He kept praising the System and its timely missions, completely forgetting the times he cursed the System for giving him missions with ridiculous demands.

[Mission]

Mission: Tutorial Part 4 - X-Factor

Difficulty: B-Rank

Prerequisites: Completed Tutorial Part 3

Description

Some have characterized the profession of mech designer to the modern Prometheus. Are mechs purely machines, or are they something more? Please design a mech with a prominent X-Factor, ranking at least E- or higher.

Reward: 1 random 10-year medium armor production licence, 200 tons of raw materials reserved for armor production

The rewards attracted Ves' attention. With a production license and a couple of containers of raw materials in the bag, Ves faced much less financial pressure in gathering the other materials required to

fabricate his desired C1 variant. This mission was essential to his future planning.

"Uh huh." Ves scratched his head. "What the hell is X-Factor?"

[User, please research diligently and form your own answer to the riddle of X-Factor. There are no wrong answers.]

"Okay. Whatever." Ves had the feeling this problem was a lot bigger than anyone thought.

Chapter end