

### Chapter 23: Sell

When Ves logged into Iron Spirit, he visited the support section in order to register a free virtual license. The game charged a lot of credits for the virtual license of the The Marlin Solutions 1004-HRF 5th Generation armor plating. Considering that anyone could make a living if they designed and sold even a halfway decent mech, the prices weren't unreasonable.

The support staff processed his request promptly. Ves had made this request before so they still possessed all of his information. After confirming that he possessed an authentic production license for the armor, he received his approval half an hour later. With all the paperwork done, he loaded the Marc Antony's design file into the virtual workshop.

"Let's get to working."

Still motivated from his previous evaluation, Ves had no trouble getting into the right mood. The Marc Antony embodied aggressive passion, so in order to keep its X-Factor intact, Ves entered a state of mild frenzy.

With the help of his much more comprehensive Assembly skills, he operated his 3D printer with gusto. Parts rolled off the printer as if he printed paper. It was not as if his skill in operating the 3D printer had improved remarkably. The reason for his increased fluency was that his knowledge base had increased. He knew better how to tweak the printer in such a way that it resulted in less problems when fabricating a particular component.

Rigid armor needed to be treated much differently than delicate sensors. Heat affected one procedure much more, while another fabrication process couldn't be done properly unless vibrations stopped. All these kinds of trivial details that Ves neglected to learn had come to the front of his mind. The ease in which he applied the newly learned knowledge impressed him of the power the System wielded once again.

Naturally, not every component came out perfectly. Knowledge did not necessarily translate to better tool use. It was like learning how to play a piano by studying a book. At least the armor plates came off without any deficiencies. The HRF required a lot of processing to produce, but all it took was time and loads of resources. As mass production armor, it had been developed in a way to make it easier to produce in bulk. Fabricating one set of armor plates for his mech was easy.

Ves moved to the assembler and worked to put the parts together. From the internal frame, to the components, to the artificial musculature, to the cabling and pipes, until finally he molded the last pieces of armor in their places. His Assembly skill allowed him to optimize the order in which he put the components together, avoiding a couple of difficulties arising from inconvenient spacing. Working with parts that lacked any major defects also helped smooth the process along.

Frankly, the fabrication process could still be improved. With his prior experience in working with the Caesar Augustus, Ves felt confident he wouldn't screw up if he had to fabricate the Marc Antony in his real universe workshop.

His biggest difficulty was actually sustaining the proper intent while fabricating the mech. Despite his best efforts, it took over a day of work to finish the mech, and it was impossible to maintain the same mood throughout the fabrication process. He took brief pauses whenever possible, but his time constraints urged him to keep working.

He nearly collapsed when his virtual workshop finished testing the finished mech. Lucky left his perch at the couch and bumped his head against his body with worry.

"Haha, I'm fine buddy."

The specifications sheet showed his mech possessed no faults. Only minor errors marred the mech's performance, but they only impacted it in a minor fashion. In other areas, the specs performed as expected.

"Now I have to set the price."

The art of pricing was a subjective and delicate art. The Caesar Augustus CA-1 sold for a default price of 50,000 credits in the in-game market. As Ves had built the CA-1 himself once before, he knew the game set the base model's cost of 'raw materials' at 40,000 credits. Without taking into account the cost of labor and the time spent to produce the model, Ves could expect a profit of 10,000 credits a sale just for pumping out the base model.

The Marc Antony cost a lot less to produce. Iron Spirit only charged Ves with 18,000 credits for the raw materials. He had to thank the HRF armor plating for that. The reduction didn't entirely account to the cost savings in reality, but that was because the fees associates with the licenses remained fixed. Even if Ves replaced every component of the Caesar Augustus with discarded paper and wood, he'd still pay several thousand credits at a minimum.

The Caesar Augustus only outperformed the Marc Antony by about 35%. If Ves wanted to set a price based on utility value alone, he'd set the credit price at about 29,000 credits. This provided Ves a profit margin of 11,000 credits, a significant improvement for a variant that's cheaper and faster to produce than its base model.

It's not all sunny though. Not all mechs were sold through credits. A lot of players spent their in game gold to buy the virtual mechs. The exchange rate between gold and credits was never fixed, as players with certain privileges could buy gold for credits, but not the other way around. The BSBH Corporation didn't want to lose any money on their game. This also meant that mech designers like Ves could not earn any real credits when players bought one of his designs with gold.

"Fucking greedy bastards. With the astronomical amount of revenue they're earning each year, they could spare the 0,01% of money they earn to remunerate the designers that work their asses off in their virtual workshops."

Ves was able to disable the gold prices if he wanted to. Plenty of elite designers did so in fact. These famed designers produced great works that sold well even if players had to fork real credits for their work. Ves had no fame or reputation to rely on to sell his products with real money, so he left the gold prices alone.

"With two weeks left to go until the Young Tigers Exhibition starts, I don't have the time to advertise my mech. I'll just set a reasonable price to keep sales going.

[CA-1C Marc Antony]

Tier: 5-star

Base Model: Caesar Augustus CA-1

Purchase Price: 425,000 gold (-50%)

Premium Price: 25,000 bright credits

The in game price of 425,000 gold was a steal for a mech with such a performance. However, even if the handcrafted version got sold, the automated mass production models still remained within tolerance at 850,000 gold. It was unfortunate that Ves wasn't exactly sure if the X-Factor still worked if the game took over production.

"It'll introduce a weak link between the trinity of designer, mech and pilot. The intent of a cold machine in charge of pumping out mechs and nothing else will pollute the emotions I've invested in the design."

Perhaps the design's impressive X-Factor rating of C- as given by the System might get demoted to a D or E rating. "It probably won't drop any further. My

intent is so strongly embedded in its contours that some of it will likely stick even if the most unfeeling robots worked on my design."

And from what he understood, the game would be stupid to simulate such a tedious process. Iron Spirit merely copied the mech designer's handcrafted design, reduced the specifications a little, and slapped a doubled gold price for its efforts. In such a case, the X-Factor should retain a large amount of its potency.

"At least I hope so. X-Factor can't be measured as far as I know, and I'm still not completely certain it can express itself in a virtual game."

Ves planned to look it up later when his model got sold. He logged onto the galactic net to do his usual marketing routine. He left messages at message boards and online communities. Hopefully the mech received enough exposure from someone to make the first sale.

"All I can do now is wait on that front."

He checked his spending account and found he could afford to fabricate the Marc Antony again. Having nothing better to do for the next two weeks, he dove into the virtual workshop again to handcraft another mech.

"I'm going to need all the practice I can get. The more models I build, the better I'll be able to build the real version of the Marc Antony."

Screwing up in the virtual world only resulted in a few hundred credits worth of damage. Messing up in the real world might mean writing off a million credits if the mistake was costly. He couldn't afford to get tripped up by the more challenging portions of the fabrication process.

Meanwhile, many light years away from Cloudy Curtain, Ark Larkinson sat at his desk, processing the paperwork for the day. His comm unit lit up as he received a call.

"Heya uncle Ark."

"Melinda." The man smiled, releasing his hard-faced expression now that he spoke to one of his favorite cousins. "Since you're calling me while I'm still on duty, I suspect you have something that can't wait."

"Right-o. You know about Ves right? That he's recently received a pair of production licenses from god knows where?"

Ark frowned at the mention. The so-called Future Sons Technology Institution were run by people he'd never heard of, received donations from empty shell companies, and offered no means to apply for any of its grants. As far as the Larkinsons had found out, the FSTI was a cover for a third party influence. The question was who. The Vesians? The New Rubarthans? The Terrans? Ark dismissed those options from his minds. Ves was too insignificant to bother manipulating.

"We're still looking into this organisation. New Rubarthans can be remarkably opaque in their bookkeeping."

"They're running so many plots against each other that they've taken shady accounting to the highest level." Melinda grinned, not really worried about what was happening with Ves. "The kid is fine. The production licenses are held in his name, so the institute can't take that away from him now."

"Let's shelve this discussion for later. What did you call me for, Melinda?"

The woman's grin widened. "Ves finally did it. He just released a mech that looks like its going to be his first money maker."

"He was working on modifying the Caesar Augustus. That's not an easy thing to do. It's been only a month or so since he received the mech production license. When I checked on his progress, all he released so far were models with only marginal changes."

"This time it's different. He's successfully incorporated the HRF armor."

"That is.. faster than we'd expected." Ark replied, his eyebrows raised. "The technicians I consulted at the depot told me it's not simple to fully replace a mech's armor."

Though he lacked the technical background to understand the finer points in mech design, as a veteran mech commander he still knew a thing or two. If replacing a mech's armor with a different composition was so easy, then the market would be flooded with re-armored mechs.

In actuality, any seasoned mech designer could do the same, but they disdained playing around with customizing someone else's design. They'd rather work on their own projects, in order to avoid losing a massive amount of revenue paying licensing fees.

Melinda swiped her hand, causing her comm unit to send a document over to her uncle. "You should look at the mock up images and the spec sheet. It's an exceptional work for a designer as fresh as Ves."

"He has my respect so far." Ark nodded as his eyes swept over the specifications with a laser focus. "It's a shame what happened to Ryncol, but the sudden responsibility has done the boy a lot of good."

"Boohoo, my little Vessie is all grown up now. He doesn't want to cuddle with big sister Melinda anymore." Melinda mock-cried with fake tears. Then she resumed smiling. "Anyway, I'm here to borrow some credits from the family. I spent all my salary on some new digs, so I can't take my little cousin's mech for a spin. And you know I don't play Iron Spirit all that often so I don't have enough gold either."

"You don't have to worry on that account. Your uncle Kantor bought every single mech the boy released in the game and reported back to us of his impressions."

"Well this ain't one of Ves' practice designs. This is the real deal, a mech that Ves plans to sell in the real universe." Melinda slammed her fists together. "I think we owe it to him as a family to push along his sales."

"Your grandpa was quite clear on this, Melinda. We will only purchase one mech for testing purposes, no more."

"Then at least give me the credits to play-, ahem, TEST the new mech. I can do the job just as well as uncle Kantor."

"He won't be happy."

"Then he can buy the mech with his own money."

The two Larkinsons stared at each other over the comm, its signals instantly sent across star systems. "Fine. You'll have your credits. I expect a professional review of Ves' work. Don't try to slant things in his way."

"Sure, sure, I know how to do my job."

Ark slid his hands, opening up a small menu. After selecting his banking options, he prepared to send over some cash to Melinda. "How many credits?"

"Only 25,000 bright credits. It's a lot cheaper than his Nero thingie."

"That does sound cheap, for a variant based off the Caesar Augustus."

After sending the credits, Melinda bid him a quick goodbye, leaving Ark alone in his office and a terminal full of reports to sign off. He resumed reading the latest report, an intelligence update that remarked about the unknown parties being sighted near the country's border to the alien race referred to as the Basilisks.

As a commanding officer in the Bright Republic's Mech Corp, he knew more about the undercurrent running throughout this star sector the last few years. Explorers, mercenaries and pirates have sporadically shown up at the borders

of an alien race they should not have any dealings with. It smacked of another third party interfering in their star sector.

Not that they'd find any evidence, and even if they did, so what? Unless it's the Vesia Kingdom or any of the other third-rate states, the Bright Republic couldn't afford to confront the bigger powers.

"The woe of a small country." Ark smiled ruefully. The issues concerning Ves paled in comparison to what was on his plate.