

CHAPTER 161 – START YOUR ENGINES

Kai locked the Mana Engine in place and gave it a good whack. One of the professors of the Academy drifted around the placement of the engine and gave it—and Kai—a critical look.

“Once more ought to do it,” said the ghost.

Kai gave another obliging whack with one of the tools of his Profession, a [Simple Rubber Mallet]. It allowed him to do all sorts of wood joinery without marring the surface or damaging the lignin structure of the wood.

Although Kai did not consider himself an idiot in regard to the most ancient and respected custom of woodworking, he certainly did not know what the hell lignin was before acquiring Carpenter.

A great deal of knowledge had saturated his brain when he made the choice, which had been utterly easy.

He could have selected a different Profession if he wanted, but why give up the Experience boost that he received? More importantly, he had an actual teacher to help him.

Professor Tofaru was a gruff young woman who was, regrettably, very much dead. Had she not been, Kai would have been quite taken with her. He liked her no-nonsense approach to things, and she was a highly skilled Master Carpenter in the world before this.

Her tutelage had helped him already achieve level 5 Carpenter. There was plenty of wood to work with, and while the others were busy doing one thing or another, Kai took the few spare moments he had to himself to work.

His [Simple Saw] couldn't cut the massive ironwood, but there were lesser trees around that he could cut up into various types of lumber that would be useful later.

At the very least, he could supply them with a commodity they were all missing: doors.

Some of the bracing structure for the Mana Engine had been crafted by Kai, with advice kindly given by Professor Tofaru.

“Professor Tofaru?” Kai asked, standing up and giving the strange collection of tubes and metal that was the Mana Engine a critical look.

The spectral figure drifted nearer. “How many times must I tell you? Call me Tof or Professor Tof at the absolute worst if you must.”

Kai didn't feel comfortable not using her proper name, but he inclined his head all the same. Respecting knowledge and leadership in people who came before was a tradition that was hard for him to shake.

Even Kai's great grandmother remembered the days of having a King at the helm, and Kai had grown up with stories of how good such times were before things changed.

It wasn't until later in his life that he realized that his great grandmother was only remembering stories that *her* mother had told her.

Regardless, the tendency to be royalists ran strong in Kai's family and continued in him, regardless. He had a strong desire to see that *this kingdom* was not taken away by swindlers and businessmen.

Now, in a weird sort of twist, Sam and Raiko were the new King and Queen.

The fact that both of them seemed to know what they were doing, were functionally immortal—as all monarchs should be in Kai’s book—and were decent people only cemented Kai’s loyalty.

He watched Matt eyeing the Mana Engine as well. Neither of them knew what they were looking at, but it was an oddly comforting thing to do.

The Mana Engine could be their salvation, because they sure were not going to outrun the Black City without it. Kai had placed his faith in this little thing to make sure that their kingdom survived.

Kai wasn’t sure where Matt’s loyalties were, but he found himself believing that the man was as loyal as he could be. They were no longer in Hawai’i, so he couldn’t *technically* call him a haole, but to Kai’s frame of mind he still thought of him as such.

Albeit one that he was rapidly coming to like far more than he ever thought possible. Sure, he was crude and crass, but he was not so cruel as he once thought. What he had once represented was being stripped away bit by bit.

If Matt put his imperialistic knowledge to work for the Kingdom of Sil’mara, Kai thought he could forgive him for his past. After all, he had been a remarkably successful businessman for somebody so young. He understood things that Kai simply could not wrap his head around.

Not that he’d ever admit to such.

“So, is it running?” Matt finally asked, rubbing the back of his neck with a chuckle. He truly couldn’t tell. The Mana Engine wasn’t like any other kind of technology on Earth.

He had been waiting to see if somebody would state that it was operational, rather than openly admit he had no idea. But his lack of patience got the better of him in the end.

Cables snaked out of the Mana Engine, weaving throughout the common grounds. Nobody trusted to put this creation beyond the walls. It needed to both be protected and kept hidden.

There was no replacing it, after all.

A willowy elven ghost put her chin in her delicate palm and looked at the Mana Engine up close. A hiss of sparkling steam spat in her face, but being a ghost had its upsides and the glittering cloud passed through her harmlessly.

She tapped a dial, and to Matt's surprise, there was a sound just as he had expected there would be had she been corporeal.

Even the professor looked startled by this.

"Professor Aldoverre?" Matt asked curiously.

She tapped again, but this time her finger went through the small dial, indicating some measurement that Matt could only guess at. He had largely forgotten everything that Aldoverre had done while possessing his body, but he kept a keen interest in Alchemy.

Like the others, he had no difficulty in picking Alchemy as his Profession of choice. As a Poisonmind, it was the perfect complement to his Job.

The bonus to Alchemy's Experience didn't hurt either.

In reality, he would have picked Alchemy anyway, even if he didn't have a bonus. It was too good a match for his Job and its methods that dealt with poisons of all kinds.

Not only could he make poisons to empower himself, but they were effectively HP potions at that. How could you pass up such a golden opportunity?

Besides, unlike everybody else, healing spells didn't seem to work on him. Matt didn't have a buddy that would generously poison him at every opportunity, so his Alchemy would work just fine for that.

Matt had finely honed senses for deals, opportunities, and paths to progression. While not all of his previous talents transferred well to his new world, his sense for opportunity never failed him.

He had felt it with Sam all the way back at the first campfire, and he felt it with Professor Aldoverre.

In fact, he felt it with Sam and Raiko on quite a number of occasions, as if he needed more prompting.

Team Sam and Raiko all the way, he thought to himself. Though I should keep an eye on Kai. Not sure how the big guy feels about them, but he uses 'King' and 'Queen' a little too much for sincerity's sake, I think.

There wasn't much that Matt would lay his life on the line for, but those two and this place they were making? That was worth dying for.

Matt never could have imagined it back on Earth. There was *nothing* worth dying for then. But here? Real change could happen. It wasn't just a slogan that was trotted out to appease the masses, but never actually followed through with.

"The steam," Matt said after another pressure relief valve opened and emitted a tiny whistle of glittering steam. "It must be made of mana, right?"

Aldoverre turned her pixie face toward him. "It *is* a Mana Engine," she reminded him. "Although, I believe you are on to something. Regardless, see this line here? You need to give it a quarter-turn to limit the release or else it'll never get the fluctuations under control."

Matt dutifully followed her instructions. He would have preferred to use the tools that the professors had back at the Academy, but they were touchy about anybody using them when they weren't being possessed.

And as much as Matt appreciated the benefits of possession, he wasn't keen on having it happen again anytime soon.

The tiny hiss as the Mana Engine started up again was soon stifled as Matt finished turning the small bolt with his bare fingers.

It was something he never would have thought about before, but with his superior Strength, he could use his fingers like tiny monkey wrenches.

No wonder Sam keeps upping his Strength.

Matt's Poisonmind gave him a good deal of Strength, and many poisons enhanced the burgeoning stat. It was too bad that Alchemy didn't, but it gave him poisons, which was almost the same thing.

He longed to get the coveted [Poison Creation] Skill Sphere that Aldoverre said was just a few levels away. That would be when his Job and Profession truly began to shine.

If only I could get a Path, he thought to himself as the Mana Engine began to rumble, splutter, and with a final tweak here and there under the watch of his mentor, began to purr.

Lenal hefted the [Spirit Lantern] Raiko left behind in the safety of the common grounds and attached it to her belt. The ghostly flames danced about the metal frame that seemed to be perpetually dusty no matter how many times she brushed it off.

The elf shrugged, looking over the note in Sage Raiko's flowing script.

“Needs mana tinctures until a less janky solution can be found. Look after it in the meantime, refuel when obvious.”

Lenal sighed. Included with the lantern were a couple of paste-like [Mana Tinctures] enclosed within hollow pieces of bamboo and stoppered with wax.

Clearly, Raiko was resourceful, but Lenal knew the alchemy goods would be better preserved within her Inventory, so the elf gladly put them away.

A couple of Aker Academy spirits materialized out of the lantern, waving in greeting to Lenal as if it was just another day at school. Their smiling faces somewhat blunted the grief of losing her home.

For it wasn't completely gone anymore.

And in a way, neither were the professors. Most of the staff had passed on. As Lenal understood it, they were able to make the choice to stay or go.

It was something the professors talked about at length and quite openly. They were fascinated by what happened to them, though frustrated as well at losing a corporeal body. And in the true nature of academics everywhere, they had begun to discuss, theorize, and argue about what was happening to them.

Lenal clasped her hands together and greeted them in return, doing a poor job of hiding her tears.

With that settled, the elf climbed over the cables leading to the Mana Engine. Using [Identify], she examined the state of the machinery with fascinated interest.

Surprisingly, its condition hadn't deteriorated at all during its transport from the castle to this island. The issue was balancing the energy generated.

With two Skyshards, instead of just one, and the Sacred Tree guiding the First Layer mana currents, the Mana Engine required a dramatically different level of power than before. It did appear to be fully capable of such, so long as it was properly adjusted.

No sole person was the master of this creation, however, and so adjusting the Mana Engine truly was a group effort.

It was fascinating to see Kai with Professor Tof, and Matt with Professor Aldoverre, working together like the students they could have been if they had been born into a better world.

Those two had minds of academics, no mistake. It was a shame that neither seemed to care beyond their current task.

With a sigh, Lenal crouched down with Professor Nihl watching over her shoulder as the Mana Engine finally started up and, for once, didn't shut down immediately.

A wave of pressure rolled out from the engine, an expanding pale green dome that rippled in the air.

Lenal turned and faced the Black City, now looming even larger and more terrifying than before. She had every faith in the professors, but even still, she watched with a wary elven eye for the slightest of changes in its distance.

After several minutes of careful observation, she came to one rather unsettling conclusion: it was keeping pace.