

Chapter 175 - First Blade

Not as painful or exhausting as his days at the estate, but infinitely more frustrating. Kai had to stretch his patience threefold to study under the gnome's tutelage.

Edgar made clear he had no desire to teach him. From abstruse explanations to tedious lessons on material composition and rune synchronization, the little gremlin put more effort into trying to make him quit their arrangement than teaching him.

His favorite assignment was to have Kai draw a rune combination three hundred times and ignore him for the rest of the day. It might have worked if it wasn't for a detail the gnome couldn't have predicted.

Mana Echo made any repetitive task trivial.

Kai grasped the true potential of his profession skill when paired with an obsessive teacher. He could rest his mind and let the ability take over his hands, improving the quality of the copy as he grew more familiar with the runes.

It was true, his progress was slower than doing it manually, but he also gained muscle memory with a lot less effort. If he had to do a hundred more repetitions to balance it out, it was still more than worth it.

Pulling on his ears, Edgar grunted something about cheating brats, but he couldn't deny the results.

Between a grumble and a curse, he pointed out each foolish mistake and what he needed to improve. Be it just to let him know how inept he was. "You are supposed to draw runes, not abstract art. What are these sloppy angles? My great-great-great nephew could do better when he was five, and his mother had dropped him on the head in the crib."

Spirits, he makes it hard to be grateful.

There was value in figuring out things for himself, though Kai would always pick having a competent teacher if given the choice. The gnome could point him in the right direction and avoid pitfalls miles ahead, too prideful to give erroneous instructions. Kai had never progressed so rapidly since Dora left.

It'll all be worth it. It'll all be worth it. It'll all be worth it...

Drawing perfect runes was the basic requirement, then he had to combine and tune them to the material he wanted to enchant. Kai couldn't complain, Mana Echo had drastically reduced the boring part, and he enjoyed the problem-solving aspect.

If he wanted to design the enchantment for the sea serpent's fangs, he had to do it properly from start to finish. Edgar demanded the schematics meet his standards. No two pieces of steel or bone were the same, and so should each weapon or tool be uniquely fitted.

After two weeks, Edgar begrudgingly accepted that Kai wasn't going to quit, and they reached a sort of understanding. The runesmith would give him an hour of proper education if Kai didn't bother him for the rest of the day. An hour and a half if the gnome liked the baked bribes he brought.

I've checked seven times and there are no mistakes.

Kai anxiously chewed his cheek, awaiting judgment on his latest dagger schematic. The previous twenty-two attempts had been deemed inadequate to be inscribed by the runesmith.

Too sloppy, too unbalanced, too ugly, drawn by a thousand-year-old grandma with dementia and trembling fingers. Kai had heard them all. He had taken every criticism without complaint—within earshot of his teacher—and adjusted.

His twenty-third design was the culmination of a month of learning and abuse. The design had been reduced to its most fundamental components, oceans away from his lofty dreams of flaming swords and invisible daggers. The gnome had made clear Kai had no business setting his sight on the stars if he couldn't make a proper knife, and so he did.

The dagger would cut *really* well and last for a lifetime without losing its edge. Simple and effective. What else did you need from a knife?

Each enchantment had been fitted for the three-palm crystal fang and its mana capacity. The stroke of each rune arranged according to the essence composition of the material.

Edgar's bushy white eyebrows rose and fell as he examined the sheet of paper. The runesmith could judge the designs with a glance but enjoyed the torment of drawing out his verdict.

Stop being an ass and tell me.

With no small effort, Kai smoothed his features and commanded his hands to stay put at his sides. He wouldn't give the gnome the satisfaction of seeing him squirm.

"Mhmm..." The bulging eyes left the schematics to land on him. "I see you've finally listened and simplified your enchantment. Using a yellow-grade material is still beyond foolish, but I've learned to temper my expectations. You can't beat sense into a rockhog, it will always gorge itself to death if given a choice."

Is this the best you can do? Try again, he watched him unbothered.

Edgar plucked another eight-shaped donut and chewed with excruciating slowness. His six fingers hovered over the pink box of sweets before cleaning the hand on his robe and turning back to the paper.

“You could have made it without these linkage segments. And it’s always better to hide the core runes beneath the handle...” He pointed out with a disapproving look. “But I suppose this might be considered an acceptable try, for a novice.”

Kai couldn’t stop himself from exhaling in relief, though he cursed himself when he noticed the satisfaction that crossed the gnome’s gaze.

It doesn’t matter. I did it!

He wouldn’t let the gnome sour his achievement. The sweet wave of triumph swept through him, melting the headache for skill strain. “Maybe I should try inscribing it myself...” He wondered out loud.

General Skills:

- **Inspect (lv63>68)**
- **Runes (lv47>55)**

While he had refused to specialize Runes for a particular task, his skills had improved greatly. Engraving enchantments on a weapon had looked like a risky task, but after his recent progress, it was just another step to create his own weapons. He had a few ideas on how to do it, and a runesmith ready to offer his reluctant help.

How hard can it be?

“Broken gods,” Edgar pulled on his jeweled ear with a groan. “Just as I was thinking I had managed to squeeze some sense into your tiny human skull, you prove me wrong. Listen to me, kid. You’re not gonna touch a red turd without a proper engraving skill and equipment, understood?”

Always so dramatic. I’ve got more than enough spares even if I fail my first attempt.

“Yes, teacher.” Kai respectfully bobbed his head. He had learned to carefully word his answers to work around the gnome’s lie-detection earring.

“Don’t yes-teacher me, and bring me that fang!”

Damn, distrustful gremlin.

“I read there are inks that allow you to draw on bone like you would on paper.” He said with the reasonable tone borrowed from Lou. “I could make some replicas of the fang to practice before trying the real thing.”

Directly from Dora’s alchemy book, *N.42: Kai’s Unforgettable Signature*. The first time he saw it, he couldn’t figure out why he would need ink that could seep into stone, bone and metal. It was one of the most complex recipes since it had to be adapted to the material. He should be able to make it with the extra attributes from Mana Child.

From his disdainful scowl, Edgar wasn’t impressed by the idea. “Let’s assume you get your hands on something like that. Those inks are notoriously fickle to use and never last as much as a proper job. You’d have a better chance drawing runes with a scalpel.”

“I’d still like to—” Kai was silenced with an imperious finger.

“We could try to crack your head on a book and see if you gain years of crafting experience. I heard it worked with my cousin Eugenie. Well... right till he jumped off the walls of the Zon’Kerloi, believing he could fly.” The gnome pulled a thick volume with an iron spine from his pockets. “Wanna try?”

Fine. He threw an annoyed glance at the gremlin.

“Pity.” Edgar extended his bony hand. “The fang. Now.”

Kai weighed his chances to make it out of the underground hall with the tooth, somewhere in the realm of one in a million or two. With a sulky frown, he went to fetch the fang from the corner of the desk he was allowed to use, and reluctantly surrendered it.

“Was that so hard?” In a flash of mana, two thin slices separated from the yellow-grade fang where the handle would be placed. Edgar wiped the scraps off the desk, though Kai knew better than to believe his nonchalant attitude. The gnome was a show-off.

“Now, let me show you why you’re a fool. To inscribe an essence-rich material, the right ink and drawing perfect runes are not enough.” He pulled out a strange tool with a needle and a vial containing a midnight-blue liquid. When he pushed mana into it, the pointy end moved up and down, drawing on the ink like a tattoo needle.

“Pay attention, kid.” The runesmith began working with a steady hand to engrave the tooth. The lines were tiny and precise as if they had been drawn by a sharp pencil.

Despite the time spent in the lab, Edgar had never let him witness the actual process. Kai didn’t waste time and focused on Mana Sense. The world burst alight with color and swirling notes.

While there were a thousand shiny distractions in the underground hall, his eyes were firmly on his teacher’s work. The engraving needle glowed with hundreds of runes, distorted to protect its secrets. And the ink shone brighter still, leaving behind incandescent lines that bent the mana of the fang.

Huh, is he...?

Amidst the spectacle of light, it took some tuning to notice a more subtle display: a hundred delicate filaments melting into the fang. Kai thought it was part of the tool function before he retraced them to the gnome's hand. His attention immediately sharpened, he stared intently to not miss a fraction of the process.

"There are many ways to enchant a weapon. I'd advise using one that leaves a physical mark for a novice, but that's not the most important aspect." Edgar talked without diverting his eyes from his work. "The only way to ensure an enchantment will hold is to shape the runes directly into the mana of the material. So the structure won't crumble if the runes get damaged."

"You only get one chance at this when you are inscribing. You can do without a skill for the physical etching, but you need one to engrave the mana of the substrate." The runesmith molded the essence of the fang before the ink arrived to fix it in place. "Depending on your skill, the runes will be able to endure more damage before cracking. You can still break mine with a scalpel, but won't have to worry about them getting chipped in battle."

I suppose I can let him do it...

"I don't think I've seen many enchantments made like this." The difference became obvious as the work proceeded. Instead of simply linking them, the runes and the essence of the fang fused to become one.

"You can only do it with mana-rich materials, and it's a lot of extra work. If the runes are safe inside the walls of your house, or on a self-heating pillow, most don't think it's worth the effort." Edgar said with disdain. "They always laugh right till something breaks. Can you imagine having an itchy back when your favorite automated backscratcher stops working? Absolutely dreadful."

"I can't imagine the horror," Kai agreed. Even red-graded materials were rare in the archipelago. And if his heating mug broke, he could just fix it. "Most weapons I saw weren't made like this either."

In his wanderings through the stores of Highharbor, he could hardly remember any sword engraved that way, and those always came for three times the price.

"Why make a weapon that will last a lifetime when you can have it break after a year and sell it again? Especially if your customers can't tell the difference," Edgar sneered. "Listen to me, kid. The world is full of people with no integrity who will sell you garbage if you let them get away with it. Not everyone is a virtuous gnome like me."

More like prideful, though I guess it works the same.

"I'll remember your advice." Kai painted his face with sincerity. Whether for pride or honesty, Edgard would never sell something half-baked.

“You should. This is done.” The gnome wiped the excess ink off the fang to reveal a network of dark runes, the lines so fine they looked braided from threads of spider silk. “Admire, this is how a proper enchantment is made.”

The blade shone with a dangerous blue light. The mana of the fang had grown stronger, and Kai had no idea how that was possible.

Edgard relished in his awe, grinning gleefully. He pulled a piece of carved wood and a leather string from his pockets. His fingers moved in a blur and fastened the handle with incredible Dexterity. “Here, keep it away from strong mana sources for a day to give the runes time to settle.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now scam, and see if you can avoid stabbing yourself while you’re out of my house. I don’t want any blood on my carpet.”

“I’ll do my best,” Kai said dryly. He left without complaining that the gnome had hardly given him half an hour of his time. It didn’t matter, not when he gained something so much more valuable.

The day was bright and chilly outside. He greeted every passerby with a smile on the way home. It had been a close call, but Mana Echo had managed to create a copy of the inscribing skill.

It was a rough cumbersome thing that occupied more than half the space in his mind, but Kai would give it up for nothing in the world. The gnome had never seen him copy anything but runes and presumed that was the extent of his ability.

Indeed, it was much harder to copy skills, his echoes a shadow of the real thing. That was unless he had time to refine them. With two dozen other fangs and a teacher who loved to show off, Kai couldn’t wait to finish his next design.

My evil schemes are coming to fruition!

The bells of Higharbor filled the streets with their festive *clangs* as if to celebrate his success. He didn’t mind their clamor. The sounds continued past the fifteen rings for the hour, though he didn’t worry since they didn’t follow any of the warning rhythms.

Probably they are just testing something, or someone is pulling a joke.

“Did you hear?” a girl loudly whispered to her friends. “The temple of the Seven announced the Moons are going to align in seven days.”