

## Victor BK2: Ch11

### Book 2: Chapter 11: An Evening Out

The woodworker's shop smelled like sawdust and varnish, and Victor was struck by memories of his abuelo when he stepped through the door. He remembered his grandpa's bald, wrinkled head bent over his table saw, carefully cutting through planks to make a bookcase or a box to hold his tools. He'd treated Victor like his shop assistant, showing him how to sweep up sawdust, asking him to fetch tools, and, most meaningfully, letting him help with the nailing or sanding.

"Hello, warrior. Here for a new rocking chair?" Victor jerked out of his reverie and met eyes with the man sitting on a stool to his left. He was short for a Shadeni and wore a spotted apron over a bare chest. His exposed skin was alive with wild, colorful tattoos—some were strange glyphs or letters that Victor couldn't read, but others were exotic animals, beautiful women's faces, or images of stars and moons. His black hair was long and wispy, and so were his mustache and beard. He favored Victor with a sardonic grin and raised an eyebrow as if to indicate he was waiting for an answer.

Victor didn't answer right away; instead, he took a slow, deliberate look around the shop. Furniture took up most of the space—chairs of all types, bureaus, trunks, shelves. If you looked, though, other objects spoke to broader areas of expertise—carved animals and busts of people, a rack of beautiful composite bows, another stand stuffed with staves of all kinds, and a display case overflowing with wooden curios. Victor brought his gaze back to the man whom he presumed was Teng-dak. "Hello, sir. I was told you're the man to talk to about getting my axe fixed up."

"An axe, eh? I'm assuming you mean the handle, not the blade?"

"Right," Victor pulled Lifedrinker's broad, dark blade from his belt, her gleaming edge winking in the bright Energy sconces lining the walls.

"Oh, now that's a lovely piece of work!" Teng-dak set down the varnish rag he'd been rubbing along the length of a table leg. "Let me get a closer look. Come on over; pull up a stool." He gestured to one of the other stools scattered around his broad workbench. Victor nodded, strode over to the man, gently set Lifedrinker onto his table, and sat down facing the woodworker, the axe between them.

"First of all, she's alive, so treat her like it," he said, nodding to the axe, eyes steady on Teng-dak's face.

"Oh? A conscious weapon, hmm? Well, now I'm even more intrigued. What's... she, was it? What's she made of?" Teng-dak gingerly picked up Lifedrinker, turning her around, and snorting as he took in the splintered haft sticking out of the axehead's eye.

"I'm not sure about the black metal, but the bright blade and those veins are heartsilver."

“My, my. Sharp, too, isn’t she?” He held Lifedrinker up and eyed along her cutting edge.

“Very.” Victor retrieved the piece of her old cherry-colored haft and set it on the workbench. “This was her handle when I first got her. I’m not sure what wood it is, but it held up pretty well until I fell down a deep stone pit.”

“Oh, aye, that’s Tevellian mahogany. See the darker veins in the red-toned wood? It’s quite distinctive and a very lovely hardwood. I’m not surprised it was sturdy to the point of shattering. I’m not feeling any enchantments, either. I’d bet this handle was a replacement—why would someone go to the trouble of making an intelligent, enchanted axe and not artifice the handle?”

“I’m not sure. The previous owner had it for a long time. Maybe she meant to get the new handle enchanted and never did?” Victor shrugged.

“Well, what’s her name?” Teng-dak stood up and moved to rummage through a wooden tool rack.

“Lifedrinker.” Victor imagined he might have been chagrined to say his axe was named Lifedrinker back in his old life, but he’d seen what she could do and wasn’t embarrassed in the least about her somewhat edgy name.

“Oh, my, my. Has she lived up to the name? No, don’t tell me. I can see you’re a warrior forged by mortal contests. I’m not one to judge, but I’m not eager to learn of her dark history if there is one.”

“What do you mean? Oh, are you implying that the axe and I go around killing everyone we meet? No, man, she’s a killer, but she and I mostly fight monsters. Any person Lifedrinker kills will have it coming.”

“Fair enough,” the woodworker said, stepping back to the workbench with a slender wood chisel and a hammer. “Let’s get this old wood out first. While I’m working, talk to me about your budget. I have some wood for special projects, but some are costly.”

“Well,” Victor knew better than to reveal how much money he had. He didn’t know exactly how much his Energy beads were worth, but he had a better idea after buying his boots. He also had plenty of other goods—gems, gold, silver, even a big chunk of amber ore. “How about this: tell me about your best three options from least expensive to most expensive.”

“Ahh, not a bad idea,” Teng-dak lifted Lifedrinker into a large metal vise attached to his workbench. The vise’s teeth were padded with leather, and he carefully tightened them along Lifedrinker’s blade so he could chisel out the old haft. “By the way, I know your axe’s name, but not yours. I’m Teng-dak.”

“Victor.” Victor nodded, leaning against the workbench and watching Teng-dak work.

“Well, Victor, for thirty standard Energy beads, I could fit a lovely oak handle to Lifedrinker, and I could artifice it for strength, making it incredibly durable. That would be my good but affordable option.”

“Oh, you do your own enchanting?”

“I do! I’m tier two, and my first class was Woodworker, but I was offered Artificer on my refinement. I’m looking forward to tier three.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Um, that’s interesting; I don’t know much about crafting classes and whatnot.”

“Well, I’ve learned quite a few nice enchantments to compliment my woodworking. You’re in good hands. Want to hear about option two?”

“Yeah, of course.” Victor tapped the table absently while the pieces of the old mace handle fell away from Lifedrinker.

“Well, I have a few pieces of Umbrilak Tree. Umbrilak can hold more than one enchantment, and I’d be able to enchant it for durability and self-repair.”

“How much?”

“Well, Umbrilak is difficult to obtain and hard to work. I’d need two hundred standard beads.” The woodworker pulled the last bit of wood from Lifedrinker’s eye and worked on removing the roll pin from the old wood.

“Hmm, alright, and your third option?”

“Well, the final option is, of course, some sort of living hardwood.” Teng-dak shrugged like he was stating the obvious.

“Living?”

“Yes, I’ve learned to coax specially prepared, living wood into a shape, provided I’m making something small enough for my meager Energy levels. I think I could pull off an axe haft.”

“Will it still be alive when you’re done?”

“Yes, though not conscious. It will become dependent on Energy after I’m done working it. Provided you never enter some sort of Energy void, like the inside of a dimensional container, it will stay healthy. I’ll work it and enchant it to bond with the axe. It’ll be able to heal and grow to suit Lifedrinker.” He patted the darkly glinting metal in his vise.

“Well, I like the idea of giving her a living handle. What kinda money are we talking about?”

“This is where things get complicated, Victor. You see, the preparations you have to go through to make wood ready to convert to an Energy subsistence are time-consuming and expensive. I’ve made a bit of a name for myself and have some clients in Gelica; otherwise, I wouldn’t have any wood ready for such a project. The wood I do have, though, isn’t cheap. No one wants to do this sort of work with a piece of oak or mahogany. No, I have a piece of Star Birch—too soft and flexible for your axe—and a length of hickory from the Coruscating Vale. Now, if I were going to make the haft for myself, that’s what I’d use. It’s absolutely perfect for what you need. It’s harder than any other wood I have; it’s beautiful, with dark, rich grain and the tell-tale glitters from its environment, and capable of containing several enchantments.”

“Well, you’ve got my interest. What’s the catch?”

“The catch is that it’s the most expensive piece of wood I own, and I’d have to charge you nearly two-thousand standard Energy beads for it.”

“Mmhhh, and do you ever do any trades? You know, take payment other than Energy beads?” Victor drummed his fingers on the workbench again, gazing into his storage space and trying to appear unperturbed.

“Well, what did you have in mind?”

“I have this,” Victor produced his large ingot of amber ore. He knew it was a lot purer than the alloy he and Thayla had found for Captain Lam. Lam had been excited about the idea of amber ore, so he knew it was valuable. He set it on the workbench with a thud.

“Is that amber ore?” Teng-dak picked up the ore with a grunt. “Heavier than it looks! My, this is very pure, isn’t it? I can feel the Energy thrumming within. You’re making me wish I was a metal worker!” Teng-dak contemplated the ore for a few moments, then set it down. “You know, a weaponsmith would probably pay you to let them craft a weapon from that ore—a new axe that might be sharper and harder than your Lifedrinker, here. Not to mention capable of holding powerful enchantments.”

“Sure, but I’m kind of attached to Lifedrinker. She and I have been through a lot, and I wouldn’t trust another axe to fucking fight like she does. Um, excuse my language. She, well, she has spirit. You know what I mean?”

“Oh, sure. I know exactly what you mean. I have tools that could be replaced, but I’ve grown used to their feel and their quirks. Well, Victor, this much pure

amber ore would fetch a tidy price in a city like Gelica. I don't think any of the smiths here in Steampool could afford it. I'll tell you what, since I'll need to broker its sale if I take it from you, and I don't know exactly how much it's worth, I'll give you fifteen-hundred in credit for it. Can you work with that?"

"Sure. How about the ore and, oh, two hundred fifty attuned Energy beads?" Victor did his best to seem bored.

"Sounds perfect! I'll be going to Gelica next week anyway. This'll give me an excuse to visit an old friend—Teya ap'Horl, by the way, if you ever need an expert metalworker."

"Alright, good to know. Hey, that brings up a good question: how far is Gelica from here?"

"Oh, if you follow the western road, you'll be there in a week by foot."

"And Greatbone mine?"

"The mine's about a day to the west and then half a day to the north. Are you going there?"

"Nah, I don't think so. I just heard about it and was curious. I heard it stretches underground for miles and miles. That true?"

"Yes, it sure is. I think they hire adventurers to protect their crews—might be a good job for you and your axe."

"Maybe, but I'm pretty busy right now. So, how about this: I'll give you the beads up front and the ore when you're done. How long will it take?"

"Ahh, straight to business. Hmm, that sounds fair, but I'll hold onto the axe until you pay up! The great thing about working with living wood is that I just need to write out the correct spell pattern and then apply the runes. Once that's done, the shaping takes mere moments. I should have it ready in a couple of hours. Of course, I'm supposed to be refinishing this table for old Indrol..." he trailed off, looking at the table leg he'd been staining.

"How much was he paying you?"

"Ten beads."

"Yeah, alright, I'll toss in another ten beads to cover his job. Tell him it'll be late but free. That okay?"

"Yes, I think he'll go for that."

"Deal, then." Victor counted out the Energy beads, then stowed his ingot of amber ore. He nodded to the axe and said, "I'll be back for her in a couple of hours."

“See you then,” Teng-dak said, moving to the door with Victor. “I’m going to close up while I work—don’t want any interruptions.”

“Right,” Victor waved, then turned back to the main street. He figured he had just enough time for a relaxed dinner with the old man and his kid, and then he could head back and pick up Lifedrinker. He felt good; the handle was expensive, but it sounded like the perfect match for Lifedrinker, and as far as he was concerned, she deserved it. The way he saw it, she did as much to earn that ingot as he had—without her drawing that skeleton snake’s Energy for the whole battle, things might have gone very differently.

While he strolled through town, the shadows starting to grow long as the sun descended in the west, he nodded and smiled at the people that met his gaze. A lot of the citizens of Steampool seemed busy and preoccupied, but many were openly cheery, waving and saying things like, “Hello, stranger!” or “Welcome to Steampool!” A few shopkeepers invited him in as he walked by, but he just smiled and said he was on his way to meet someone. He was tempted by the barber, who shook his head and tsked when he saw Victor, simply saying, “You need a haircut.”

“I sure do,” Victor shrugged but kept walking. On a whim, he turned and added, “If I have time after dinner, I’ll come by. Or are you closing soon?”

“Naw, I live here. Just ring the bell, and I’ll let ya in.”

“Thanks!” Victor turned and hurried down the street. It didn’t take long to find the tavern. When he rounded the corner and started toward the distant southern gate, he saw the lights and activity around the long, single-story building and knew it was his destination. When he walked up the wood-plank sidewalk, drawing near the small crowd of laughing, talking people standing outside, he saw Uld immediately. He stood to the left of the door, talking to a stocky, young Ardeni man with bright red hair and eyes.

“Victor! You came!” Uld said as he approached.

“Hey, sure I did.” Victor nodded, stepping close.

“This is my grandson, Kenno. Kenno, meet Victor, the adventurer I told you about.”

“Oh, hi, Victor! Thanks for coming to meet us!” Kenno had an exuberance to his voice, sounding both awed and excited, even though Victor hadn’t done anything impressive.

“Hey, Kenno. Good to meet you. So, we waiting for a table or something?” He looked around at the other people standing on the wooden planks outside the tavern.

“Oh, no, we’re early still. We can go sit down. I just didn’t want you to have to find us inside.”

“What’s with all these people?” Victor nodded to the crowd.

“Well, the weather’s nice, and people are getting done with work, so they’re just catching up. I’m sure they’ll come in soon.” Uld turned and pulled the door to the tavern open, and Victor followed him in, Kenno close behind. He instantly started to salivate as the aromas of cooking meat and baked bread filled his nostrils. He suddenly realized that he’d never been to an eating establishment in this world, and the meals he’d been served weren’t exactly fine dining.

“Chingado, that smells good!” He glanced around to see if anyone had heard his outburst, but the tavern was noisy, and there were a lot of people laughing and drinking, and he realized he was probably safe to relax his tongue. He followed Uld to a round wooden table near the window on the left, and he saw some people setting up instruments on a small stage. “Music?” he asked as he sat down.

“Yes! Ynaila will be singing tonight! She’s a popular Bard in Steampool,” Kenno said, also sitting so he could see the stage. Victor nodded and looked around at the tavern. It was an impressive building, boasting a few dozen tables, the stage, and a long wooden bar running along the far wall. A large stone mantle and fireplace dominated the opposite side of the room, but it wasn’t alight; the weather wasn’t cool enough, apparently. Only about half the tables were occupied, but still, the buzz of conversation and laughter filled the air, and Victor started to truly relax as he sat back in his comfortable wooden chair.

“Three of Barstrum’s honey ales!” Uld called to the Shadeni youth wearing an apron that walked by. He glanced at Uld, then nodded, hustling back behind the bar. “You’re going to love it, Victor! Best ale of the season!”

“Alright, I’ll take your word for it.”

“Victor, have you ever been in a dungeon?” Kenno asked suddenly.

“Kenno! Relax! Let Victor get his drink before you start to pester him.”

“It’s alright. Yeah, Kenno, I have.”

“What’s it like? What kind of monsters did you fight? Did the System give you treasures? I heard dungeons could reset, and monsters could appear out of nowhere. Is that true?”

“Woah, easy,” Victor said, taking a big breath. How old was this kid? He didn’t seem much younger than Victor, but he acted like he’d never spoken to an adult before. Is this how people saw him? Was he like this when he first came here? Nah, he’d never been an eager type of person. While he considered his answer,

the Shadeni kid returned with three large mugs of dark, foamy ale. Victor took a deep drink of his and sighed heavily in satisfaction after swallowing. It was crisp, smooth, and had a slightly sweet aftertaste. Best of all, it was chilled. “Man, that’s good!”

“I told you!” Uld said, licking the foam off his upper lip.

“Alright, let’s see here. The dungeon I was in was full of undead. Yes, I got some treasure, and no, it never reset on me.”

“Do you think I could handle it?” Kenno asked.

“Well, it was filled with ghouls and other monsters around tier three. I think the boss was higher—closer to tier four. You ever done any fighting?” Victor eyed Kenno, whose face had grown more sober as Victor spoke. He slumped down in his chair a bit.

“Kenno’s still tier one, Victor.”

“Then you don’t want to go to the dungeon I’m talking about, Kenno. Not for a while. How about my other question?”

“I’ve done plenty of sparring with people here in town,” Kenno said eagerly.

“Ever had your life on the line?”

“No, not really,” Kenno said, his frown deepening. “How could I? Steampool’s too safe!”

“Imagine! Complaining that your town is too safe?” Uld scoffed. Victor took another long pull of his ale, savoring the cool, crisp liquid. Just then, a strummed chord caught his attention, and he looked to the stage. Two musicians had sat down, one with a sizeable stringed instrument braced on the floor, the other with a smaller one shaped like a fiddle. A third woman was pacing back and forth on the little stage, clearly getting herself pumped up for the show. When Kenno saw Victor watching, he relented and looked at the stage, eyes eager.

After another minute or two, the two instrument players started with a lively tune that reminded Victor of something he might consider folk music. The slender, small, Shadeni woman began to sing then, and her high soprano seemed to fill the room’s air, bringing chills to Victor’s neck and sending his mind wandering over imagined valleys and through wooded dales. He felt so relaxed and happy from the music that he forgot about Kenno and Uld for a long while.

When the woman stopped singing to take a break, Victor finally returned to himself and smiled when he saw similar looks of glassy daydreaming on his companions’ faces. He laughed and cleared his throat. “Kenno, I wouldn’t start with a dungeon. You know, actually, I might have an idea for you, but I don’t want your grandpa to get mad at me.” Victor glanced at Uld and raised an eyebrow in question.

“Go ahead, Victor—Kenno’s been threatening to run away for two summers now. I’d rather he had a good idea from you than some half-baked scheme of his own.”

“Well, you’re pretty close to Greatbone Mine here, right? Why not go there and volunteer to protect miners for a while? I’ve heard they even have a place called ‘the well’ where you can fight waves of monsters with other fighters. I think they let people volunteer there, but I’m not certain.”

“Oh, the mine is always hiring,” Uld said, nodding. “Do you think he’d be safe, Victor? Have you worked there?”

“Well, not exactly,” Victor decided he’d already said more about himself than he wanted. “I was thinking about checking it out, but something came up, and I need to go somewhere else to help a friend.”

“What do you say, Grandfather? Can I have your blessing?” Kenno’s smile had grown the whole time Victor spoke about the mine.

“I’d feel better if Victor evaluated your fighting skills a little,” Uld said, then drank from his mug.

“Uh, I’m not looking to spar right now. Just tell me about yourself, Kenno. What kind of skills do you have? What’s your Class?” Just then, a different tavern worker approached. She was a thin Ardeni woman with short yellow hair and a much cleaner apron with embroidered flowers along its hem.

“You three having dinner?” She asked, eyeing Uld.

“Yes, Glinna, what’s on the menu?”

“Uncle Tam’s pot roast, fresh sourdough, and rillberry pies.”

“Sounds good,” Victor said, his tongue loosened by the ale and music. “Another ale for us all too, please!”

“Yes, yes,” Uld said, nodding along with Victor.

“Right, be back in a minute,” Glinna said, moving to another table.

“Anyway, tell me what you’ve got, Kenno,” Victor said, draining the last drops of his ale.

“I’m a Fighter. I have basic melee weapon mastery, but my spear mastery is up to improved.”

“Any Energy attacks? Can you channel Energy into your weapon?”

“I have Bolstered Charge. I can close distance with it, and it boosts my vitality for a short while.”

“Anything else?”

“No, not yet.” Kenno looked down, clearly crestfallen that Victor didn’t seem impressed.

“I think you have what it takes to fight at the well, but only at the top with plenty of other fighters. Do you understand me? I’ve heard some people try to go deeper into the well, but lots of people die that way. I think you should concentrate on fighting at the top until you get some more levels and some more Energy abilities.” Victor nodded like he’d just explained a complicated equation and smiled as he saw Glinna returning with their drinks.

“Are you sure he’ll be alright, Victor?” Uld asked.

“Uld, I can’t be sure, no. What if some asshole pushes him into the well? What if a swarm of something really nasty comes up, and he doesn’t flee? There aren’t any guarantees, but I can tell you something a person I sort of admire told me: Everyone has challenges in their lives, and if you don’t let them fight them, they’ll never grow. Well, it was something like that—it sounded smarter coming from her.”

Uld nodded and drank his ale solemnly, studying his grandson. As the music started again, Kenno pestered Victor with more questions about fighting and dungeons, and soon their food arrived. Victor couldn’t hold back and dug in like a starved man. The pot roast was delicious, and the root vegetables were hot and flavorful. When he bit into the thick hunk of buttery bread, he felt like he was in heaven, and he used the crust to mop up every last drop of the juices in his bowl.

“If you like that, wait until you taste the pie,” Kenno said, also wolfing down his food. It turned out that Kenno knew what he was talking about. The pie was delicious—fresh-baked and served in a bowl with a drizzle of cream on top, and Victor found the berries tasted much like blueberries. When he finished, he sat back and rubbed his belly.

“I haven’t eaten that well in a long time, Uld. Thanks for talking me into coming to dinner. I hate eating and running, but I’ve gotta get my axe.”

“That’s fine, Victor! Thank you for talking to Kenno; you’ve given us a lot to talk about.”

“Well, at least let me pay for our drinks before I go,” Victor said, fishing in his ring for his Energy beads.

“No, no! I wouldn’t hear of it. You see that, Kenno? That’s the way a man acts.” Uld looked at Kenno with a scowl, and Victor realized there was more going on between the two than just Kenno wanting to be an adventurer.

“Grandfather, how can I offer to pay when I’m not allowed to go into the world and make my fortune?”

“There’s money to be made in town without challenging monsters, boy!” Uld’s face had lost its cheery demeanor, and his cheeks were flushed from the ale.

“Alright, well, I’m sorry, but I do need to be going,” Victor said, scooting his chair back. “I’ll see you again, I’m sure. You have a nice town here, Uld. Nice to meet you, Kenno!” Victor pushed his chair in and turned to go.

“Thank you again, Victor!” Uld called. Kenno didn’t say anything; he’d slumped into his chair, scowling so profoundly that the line between his eyes looked like a canyon. Victor brushed past the people crowding near the door and pushed his way into the cool night air. Uld was a nice old guy, but Victor felt he’d been privy to more of Kenno and Uld’s business than he wanted.

He turned back toward the town center and made his way toward Teng-dak’s shop. On his way, though, he passed by the barber’s shop and saw that the old barber had left the light on. “How long could a haircut take?” Victor said, then walked up to the door and pulled the chain hanging next to the door. A bell rang inside the door, and a few moments later, Victor saw the barber descending the steps at the back of the shop. He smiled as he opened the door.

“You came back after all!”

“I did! Think you could give me a haircut?”

“Of course! Come in, come in.” He gestured to the wooden barber’s chair, and Victor sat himself down. The barber shook out a pale blue sheet and wrapped it around Victor’s neck, then, humming to himself, proceeded to get to work with his scissors.

Victor had had plenty of haircuts, but this was a new experience. He could feel the warm pulse of Energy coming out of the man’s fingers as he snipped the scissors through his hair, and it was only a few minutes later when the barber put the scissors down on the counter and picked up a straight razor. He didn’t ask for permission or if Victor wanted a shave; he just reached into a jar on his counter, withdrew a handful of cream, and rubbed the warm, citrus-smelling lather all over Victor’s face and neck. Then, he smoothly, quickly, and with a hint of Energy, shaved Victor without a single nick.

“Do you have a barber class or something?”

“Course I do! You think I’m a charlatan or something?” The old guy asked, setting down his razor and pulling a steaming cloth out of a little basket next to the counter. He rubbed the warm, damp fabric on Victor’s face, neck and ears, wiping away the cream and all the grime he’d accumulated. “I’ll need to burn this cloth! Good Ancestors, man! What’ve you been up to?”

“Sorry! I’ve been adventuring.” Victor shrugged.

“Well, you’re looking a lot better. Hope you have someone to appreciate it,” the barber said with a wink. Then he held up a mirror, and Victor saw himself clearly for the first time in a long while. His hair was nicely trimmed and combed back. His face was clean and free of any sparse whiskers he might have grown—he’d never really had to shave in his old life. Those facts aside, Victor didn’t recognize himself. His head looked too big, his brows too dark and heavy, his eyes too bright and angry. His lips were too full, and his jaw and cheekbones too pronounced. He looked like a professional athlete—a man grown. “You alright? Don’t like something?”

“I’m alright. You did a good job; I just haven’t seen myself in a while.”

“Aye, time in the wilderness will change a man.”

“Well, thanks, sir. What do I owe you?” Victor stood up from the chair and rummaged in his ring for his Energy beads.

“Just five seeds.”

“Seeds? You mean beads?”

“Hah, no. Just seeds.”

“Gorz, what’s he talking about?” Victor thought.

“People can make tiny beads that are used for small transactions. They take about one-tenth the Energy of a normal bead. I think he’s referring to those.”

“Oh, right, seeds,” Victor said aloud. “I appreciate you staying open. Here.” Victor handed him one of the attuned beads from the dungeon.

“Good lad! Thank you!” The barber moved over to his door and pulled it open, apparently ready to call it a night.

“Yep. See you around,” Victor said, stepping back into the cool evening air. Not sure how long he’d been, mostly because he kept forgetting to look at his watch and had no idea what time he left the woodworker’s shop, Victor jogged the rest of the way. He was pleased to see the light still on in the window, and when he knocked on the door, Teng-dak was quick to open up for him.

“I’m glad you made it back! I was starting to wonder if I should go look for you.”

“You finished?”

“Aye, a little while ago. What a beauty she turned out to be!” Teng-dak moved over to his workbench, where a leather-wrapped bundle sat waiting.

“Is that her?”

“Yes, sir! Let me take this leather off,” he said, reaching forward and unwrapping the axe. Victor caught his breath. There she was, her black and silvery head freshly oiled and gleaming. The new haft was dark and elegant, and when Teng-dak picked it up, Victor saw flecks of something glittering in the wood. He couldn’t tell if it reflected the light or came from within the grain. Best of all, the handle was elegantly curved and properly designed for an axe, not a clumsy old ball mace.

“Oh God, Lifedrinker, you’re beautiful,” Victor said, stepping closer.

“Ahem, yes, she is, but there’s the matter of payment?” Teng-dak said, stepping back with the axe.

“Oh, yeah, of course. Don’t worry,” Victor couldn’t help glowering a little at the implication, but he reached into his ring and pulled out the amber ore. He set it on the workbench with a thud.

“Excellent! Take note:” Teng-dak showed Victor the top of Lifedrinker’s head where the wood was flush with the metal, “there’s no pin—it’s not necessary with the living wood; the handle won’t let go of the head. It would take enormous power to separate them. And look here,” the woodworker pointed to a line of runes along the back of the handle, “these are the enchantments worked into the living wood. It won’t break easily; it heals from damage and will be tough to remove from your hands by force.” He held out the handle to Victor.

“Thanks, Teng-dak,” Victor said, taking Lifedrinker and hefting her in both hands. “How do you feel, beautiful? You ready to hunt down a runaway asshole?”