

Victor BK3: Ch6

Book 3: Chapter 6: Camping in Style

Victor sat in Lam's kitchens, Edeya, Thayla, and Captain Lam on the bench across from him, and, between huge bites of food, explained what he'd done while Spirit Walking. He mentioned meeting Oynalla, his hunt, and finished with a brief description of how he surprised Belikot and killed him before he could hardly retaliate.

"So, I don't need to gather my old friends? We don't need to go and confront this Belikot fellow?" Lam asked after chewing on a bite of bacon thoughtfully for a few moments.

"No, Oynalla was pretty damn sure I killed him." Victor shrugged and drank down a full glass of milk.

"What about the phylactery? His soul shards? He's not so easy to kill, Victor," Thayla said. She'd been frowning for most of his retelling, and now he realized why.

"Look, the only other shard we know of is in my dimensional bag. As far as the phylactery goes, we know it increased his strength, and maybe it was a way to help him jump his soul around, but, Thayla, I had his fucking soul on the Spirit Plane. I watch Lifedrinker drain it away!" He lifted the axe and showed them the Heart Silver veins that had started to spread through the dark, cobalt axe head. "I don't know how he could recover from that, and if he did, if some piece of him is still out there, then it's a shadow of what he was."

"A shadow with a grudge," Edeya said, nodding to Thayla.

"Oh, God." Victor sighed and rubbed his temples. He knew they were right, in a way, to still be wary of Belikot, but couldn't they take a fucking win when he handed it to them? "The point is, if he's pissed at anyone, it's me. If he tries to mess with me on the Spirit Plane, I'll whip his ass again, and if he comes at me in the real world, then I'll deal with it. This isn't a problem for 'us' anymore, all right? You all can let it go." He couldn't help the growl that had entered his voice or the scowl on his face as he roughly wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"I'm not trying to downplay what you did, Victor," Thayla said and opened her mouth to continue, but Victor shook his head and held up a hand.

"It's not that! It's just . . . well, it's just that I'm sick of having to run my plans and actions through some kind of fucking committee. I just want to, you know, live for a while."

"Victor, people are depending on you . . ." Lam started, but, again, Victor spoke over her.

“Yeah, I know, Lam. I know you have a lot riding on the campaign in the Marches, and I know Rellia’s life depends on it. I’m not backing out of that. I’ll meet you guys in Persi Gables in the spring, and we’ll get shit going, all right? For now, though, I want to escort Thayla and Deyni to Tellen’s camp, spend some time visiting with Oynalla, and from there, I’ll see what grabs my interest. Is that all right with everyone?” He glared around the table, scowling down at everyone but Captain Lam, who met his eyes with a strangely open expression.

“That’s good, Victor. I can respect those sentiments.” She glanced around the table, her face pensive like she was trying to decide if she would continue, but she pressed her lips into a firm line and gave a short nod as though giving herself permission. “My family made a lot of demands of me. They paid for schooling and expected me to stay in Twilight Home and continue forging my father’s business empire. I ran away.” She said the last part quietly, and her eyes fell.

“You just ran?” Edeya asked, her voice soft and her eyes wide with awe.

“Yes. I didn’t want to face my parents. I didn’t want to make my wishes clear like Victor just did. To me, it was easier just to erase my past from my mind and move toward my goal, so I went to Tharcray and joined the Legions.”

“Damn,” Victor said. “And your family? Did you ever let them know what you got up to? I bet they’re proud of what you’ve done now, huh?”

“I wrote to them a few times. My mother wrote back and told me to stop. She said my father had disowned me and that it was too painful to hear from the ‘ghost’ of their daughter.” Lam dug at the wooden table with her thumbnail while she spoke, perhaps unaware of the action, and Victor had the urge to reach out and take her hand. He didn’t, though, and he inwardly railed at his cowardice.

“Lam, that sucks. Thanks for sharing that with me, though.” Victor looked around the table and said, “I mean us. It means a lot.”

“Well!” Lam said, shaking her head and thumping her palms flat on the table.

“When will you two be leaving?”

Victor glanced at Thayla, saw her slight shrug, and said, “Soon, I guess. Maybe today.”

Lam nodded, quick and informal, and said, “I have a map for you. I had one of my secretaries do a little research into Tellen’s clan. He mapped out the shortest routes to their fall and winter camps. You’ve got money now, Victor.” She turned to include Thayla in the discussion. “Buy yourselves some mounts or a coach or something. You don’t want Deyni walking all that way, do you?”

“No, that’s a good point, Captain,” Victor said, nodding.

“Also, let’s invest in a proper pair of Far Scribe books.” Lam nodded to Edeya, adding, “Will you give Victor two thousand beads from the campaign account?”

That should cover much of the expense, but you can cover the rest, Victor. It's good for you to have some stake in the operation, too."

"Yeah, no problem. Those are books that let us see what the other writes?" He was sort of guessing, but he vaguely remembered someone describing the process to him. He couldn't remember who. Unsure if it had been someone in the mine or the pits or if it was one of the three women sitting with him now, he decided not to act completely clueless.

"That's right. Edeya will shop with you and bring me back my copy. I suppose this is farewell, then. I pray the Trees and Roots watch you, Victor. I pray they guide you to Persi Gables in the spring, for all our sakes." She stood and reached out a long, slender hand, and Victor stood up to shake it. As always, he liked the feel of her grip, the way her fingers closed on his meaty hands like bands of warm iron. He gripped her back and smiled, pulling her, so she leaned over the table and clasped her into a partial hug with his other arm. He was surprised when she pulled him in tight with her free arm, returning the gesture.

"I'll be there, Lam," he said as they hugged, then he let her go. "Well, Thayla, how about getting that runt of yours out of bed, and we can do some shopping!"

Thayla smiled and said, "Watch this." Then she pulled on the silver chain at her neck, lifting out the crystal pendant Victor had bought her. Holding it tightly in her hand, she said, "Deyni! Get dressed; Victor is taking us shopping for animals!" Her eyes squinting from her broad smile, Thayla let go and held the amulet up in the palm of her hand, watching it expectantly.

"Okay, mom!" a high, tinny version of Deyni's voice piped up out of the amulet as it flashed pink very briefly.

"Neat!" Edeya laughed. "Well, go get her, Thayla. Victor and I will meet you at the gate."

Not long after that, Victor, Thayla, Edeya, and Deyni walked into town. Three guards in Lam's livery kept pace a short way behind them. Victor turned, frowned at their escort, and said, "What's with the guards, Edeya?"

"Captain Lam's just being overcautious. You ruffled a lot of feathers with your duel, and word is spreading about your agreement with Rellia. She has her own set of enemies that might want to mess with you. Things will be better when you're out of the city and moving swiftly."

"This place is like a rattlesnake nest," Victor said, shaking his head.

"Gelica is worse than a lot of cities. It's on the edge of the empire, and many families conduct things past the line of what you'd call 'legal' out here. Persi Gables is nicer, in some regards, because it's an independent city, but they have some rules and laws that don't sit well with me," Edeya said.

“Oh, you mean like allowing creepy wizards to kidnap people from other worlds and force them to fight in a pit?” Victor scoffed.

“Well, technically, I don’t think that’s legal,” Edeya laughed. “Let’s say the laws are loosely enforced in that city, but at least it’s not directly under the influence of the empire.”

“Right,” Victor said, kicking a loose stone over the cobbles. Once again, his thoughts drifted back to his time at the Wagon Wheel and his dissatisfied feelings of betrayal, anger, horror, and injustice. He thought of Vullu and wondered if he’d ever see him again. His steps grew slow, and his sensations of the world around him dimmed as he thought about Yrella. So many times, the memory of her death had come to haunt him, but now he thought about her life—her beauty, laughter, and kindness.

“Victor?” Thayla said, and her tone indicated it wasn’t the first time.

“Yeah,” he asked, rubbing his head as if to rub away his thoughts.

“Edeya wants to know if you have an Artificer you prefer. I told her you seemed to like Ganjoon.”

“Yeah, Ganjoon’s cool. Let’s go there.” Victor reached down, hoisted Deyni to his shoulders, and picked up the pace. “C’mon, slowpokes!” he said, causing Deyni to giggle and look back at Thayla and Edeya.

“Yeah! Slow pokers!” the little girl said, and Victor laughed.

Ganjoon was happy to see them, and when Edeya told him they needed a Far Scribe book with a lot of pages, he was delighted to provide some options. Each of his books was handsomely bound in leather, though they varied in size considerably. The least expensive was only fifty beads, but it had a mere ten small pages. His most costly book was large, something like an old-school encyclopedia or dictionary, and had five hundred pages. “This one will cost you thirty-five hundred beads,” he said with a self-satisfied pat on the heavy tome.

“Really, Ganjoon?” Victor asked, “No discount for friends?”

“Friends, hmm?” he let his eyes shift down toward Lifedrinker, and they widened in surprise, “Your lady axe looks better already! What did you do, Victor?”

“He’ll tell you about it for a discount,” Thayla said, grinning as she put her hand on Victor’s shoulder.

“Well, are you going to buy anything else?” Ganjoon asked, a calculating look on his face.

“Yeah, we’re leaving town and need to pick up a few things. Hey! Do you happen to have any kind of magical chariots? You know, like Captain Lam has?”

He gestured vaguely in the direction of Lam's estate. "Something that folds up or drives itself or some other cool shit?"

Thayla slapped him on the back of the head and said, "He means he's open to hearing about any sort of magical transport you have."

"Now you're talking about truly expensive items. Expensive to buy and to maintain, at least as far as the object I have for sale goes." He gave Victor another appraising look, and then his eyes moved to Thayla, Edeya, and even little Deyni, who sat on a stool playing with a set of enchanted dice at the front counter. "I'll show you something, but I fear it's beyond your means. I've been unable to sell it since I won it from an imperial contract nearly eight years ago." He stepped behind his counter and into his back room.

"What's this, you reckon?" Thayla asked.

"No idea. Maybe a coach like the captain's," Edeya said.

Victor just shrugged, and then Ganjoon returned, carrying a heavy-looking carpet roll. He unfurled it in front of the counter on the show space floor, and Victor caught his breath at its beauty. It was about five feet by eight and shimmered in the shop's lighting. It was spun from two different colors of thread in an intricate pattern of interlocking squares and rectangles. The threads glimmered metallically, one a luminescent orange-yellow and the other a shimmering silver.

"This carpet can fly faster than a roladii can run. It's spun from pure Amber Ore and Star Steel. It could hold the weight of four people and fly for a day. If you have the personal Energy for it, you could recharge it in a few hours or let it sit in the sun for a day, and it will be ready to go again."

"A fucking flying carpet?" Victor asked, reaching down to feel the heavy, rich weave.

"That's right. I'm afraid I couldn't let it go for less than a hundred thousand beads."

"Any wiggle room?" Victor asked, standing up and shaking his head ruefully. "Nah, never mind. Even if you'd take half that much, I wouldn't want to spend that amount. Maybe someday, Ganjoon. Maybe someday."

"Thanks for showing it to us, though," Thayla added, and Victor realized she was right—Ganjoon was showing a lot of faith, putting an item this expensive on display for them.

"When you've made your fortune come back! I'm sure I'll still have it," Ganjoon said, rolling up the carpet with a laugh. "I'm sorry I don't carry many transport items, but I have a friend who can surely help you out. How about I give you his name? He'll treat you right if you say I sent you."

“Fair enough, Ganjoon. We’ll buy that book. I’ll pay fifteen hundred, and Edeya will cover the rest. Don’t worry—she’s paying with Lam’s money.” Victor chuckled and started fishing through his ring for one of the heavy sacks of beads Thayla had given him from their winnings.

While Edeya doled out her portion, Victor said, “Anyway, Lifedrinker had a big night. She and I did a little Spirit Walk, and I ran into a Death Caster that I had some history with. Lifedrinker got a good, long drink from him.”

“He must have had quite a powerful Core. It looks like she drew a lot of Energy in! One of those Heart Silver veins is almost fully regrown, and the others have started out from her edge as well!”

“Yep! I’m looking forward to seeing her continue to advance,” Victor said and noticed Thayla leaning against the counter, staring at the two of them as they talked with Lifedrinker on the counter between them. “What?” he asked.

“You know ‘she’s’ an axe, right?”

“Oh, God, not this again!” Victor sighed and slipped Lifedrinker into the loop on his belt. “At least Ganjoon knows how to respect her properly!”

“Yes, she’s developing quite a spirit,” Ganjoon nodded. “Don’t get on her bad side with prejudice, Thayla!”

“Prejudice?” Thayla’s voice was high in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Victor nodded. “You’re anti-axe!”

“I’m not anti-axe! I’m sorry I said anything! Fawn over her all you want!” Thayla violently crossed her arms in front of her chest and turned to regard her daughter.

“Here you go,” Edeya said, pushing a pile of glittering Energy beads toward Ganjoon.

“Right! Here’s your copy, Victor, and the one for Captain Lam, I presume,” he said, holding out a thick volume to Edeya and shoving the other toward Victor. When they’d each stowed their books away, he said, “Now, go see my friend Bernale. He sells transport animals and vehicles near the south gate. His business is easy to spot, ‘Bernale’s Beasts.’ It’s a large wooden structure with an enormous attached barn. It takes up nearly a block on Vine Street.”

“All right, Ganjoon. Thanks for your help—I’m sure we’ll see you again, but it might be a while. We’re heading out today.” He turned toward Thayla, still staring dourly at the counter where Deyni was tossing the dice, her thoughts clearly far away. “Come on, Thayla. Quit sulking,” Victor said, then hurried toward the door as she made to smack him.

“Safe travels,” Ganjoon said, “May the Father of Winds bless your skies.” The serious tone and the formality of his words made Victor stop messing with Thayla for a minute, and he turned to regard Ganjoon again.

“Thank you, Ganjoon. That means a lot.” He nodded his head, trying to show respect to the strange-looking, gray-skinned man and then stepped out of his shop.

When Thayla, carrying Deyni, and Edeya joined him on the sidewalk, Thayla said, “Do you have to make me look bad like that? I wasn’t trying to insult your axe!”

“I was teasing, Thayla; relax. Ganjoon knows you didn’t mean anything.” He reached out his hands for Deyni and said, “Come here, monkey. I’ll put you on my shoulders again.”

“Monkey!” Deyni echoed and allowed Victor to lift her away from her mom.

“Well? Edeya, you don’t have to come with us; I know you probably have stuff to do back at Lam’s.”

“Actually, Edeya, could you do me a favor?” Thayla asked.

“Um, sure,” Edeya said.

“We left in kind of a hurry. Could you tell Rhessa to get her things and meet us by the south gate?” Thayla reached out a hand to Edeya’s slender shoulder.

“I can, sure. I guess that means you guys are really leaving today? It feels sudden. I’d thought Victor and the captain would go hunting that Death Caster, and I’d get some more time with you all. I’m going to miss you—I hope I see you again soon!” She lunged forward, wrapping her arms around Thayla.

“Oh, hush,” Thayla said softly, stroking the girl’s hair. “We’ll see each other again soon. You know where Deyni and I will be! Tellen’s clan stops by Gelica a few times a year, and if I want, I can always come here on my own,” she glanced at her daughter, “with Deyni, of course.”

“Yeah, and I’ll probably see you in the spring. I have a feeling Captain Lam will bring you along to Persi Gables,” Victor added.

“Come here, you thunderak,” Edeya said, letting go of Thayla and grabbing Victor around his midriff, burying her head in his chest.

“Thunderak?” Victor asked.

“Big lizard,” Deyni said with a giggle.

“Oh, nice,” Victor laughed and gently patted Edeya’s back, avoiding her fragile-looking wings while Deyni reworked her grip in his thick, black hair.

After a few more exchanges of hugs and promises to visit each other soon, Edeya hurried off toward Lam's estate, promising to send Rhessa to the south gate. Victor watched her leave, noting her confident pose, with straight shoulders and the way her boots glinted in the morning light, and he almost couldn't picture the scrawny, dirty waif whom he'd met back in the mines. "Come on," he said to Thayla, nudging her in the direction of the south gate. She looked up at him and Deyni and smiled, and the three of them made their way through town.

When they came to Vine Street, they both had their eyes peeled for Bernale's place of business. It was Deyni, still perched on Victor's shoulders, who bounced up and down, pointing ahead to the left, and said, "Look at those animals!"

"That's it!" Thayla said and led the way across the street. Victor followed her, eyes on the line of sectioned-off pens that hugged the city wall for, just as Ganjoon had said, more than a city block. He could smell the animal dung and the hay-like scent of feed. The various noises of the creatures reminded him more of a zoo than a stable.

He saw animals that had to be the living versions of the elephant-like thing on Thayla's pendant, swaying their big heads and trumpeting. Before he could think about going over to see the fantastic creatures up close, Victor's attention was stolen by a lizard nearly as large, flopping around in the dust of its pen and flicking out a tongue as big as Victor's arm. Thayla tugged him toward the office building on the far side of the lot, and they passed by pens with huge birds, horse-sized, antlered creatures, roladii, and some animals that looked very much like horses but with brightly colored fur and feathered manes.

When they entered the office, Victor was surprised by how clean and well-appointed it was. A Cadwalli man sat at a polished desk speaking quietly to an Ardeni couple, and when Victor and Thayla stepped onto the plush rug, and the heavy door clicked shut behind them, he looked up and said, "Please wait there," he gestured to a sitting area off to the side. "I'll be with you soon. In the meantime, please have some tea."

"Thank you," Thayla said, pulling Victor over to one of the couches. He'd taken Deyni off his shoulders to get through the doorway, and now he set her on the couch next to her mom. Before he sat down, Victor went over to the sideboard and poured himself a cup of tea, and picked up the tray of thin sugar cookies he found next to the kettle. When he sat down next to Deyni, he put the cookies on the coffee table in front of the couch and winked at her.

"Have a snack," he said.

"You're spoiling her," Thayla said, but she reached down, faster than Deyni, and snatched a cookie.

They didn't have to wait long before the Ardeni man and woman stood up with the Cadwalli, and they all shook hands. As the Cadwalli led them to the door, Victor heard him say, "I'll have that wagon ready for you in just a few days. I've got my top man, Ornuf, applying the lacquer tomorrow!" After he'd closed the door behind his customers, he turned to Victor and Thayla and

said, with a strange, goat-faced smile, “I’m Bernale! Welcome to my shop. Would you come sit by my desk? The little one is welcome to stay there and eat more cookies.”

Victor stood up and walked to the desk while Thayla spoke quietly to Deyni. “It’s good to meet you, Bernale. Ganjoon sent us your way. I’m Victor, and that’s Thayla.” The chair was comfortable, if a bit narrow for Victor’s frame. He wiggled back and forth to get settled, and the wood squeaked alarmingly.

“Oh? Ganjoon? What a great man, a great man! I’ll be sure to thank him at our next thrampo game,” the stocky little man said as he moved behind his desk. Victor knew it wasn’t cool to laugh at a person for how they looked, but something about seeing a pudgy little goat man in a tight, gray, and maroon-striped suit almost pulled a giggle out of him, especially as the man sat down and the buttons on his suit strained and tufts of fur poked out through the gaps.

“Thrampo?” Victor asked, clearing his throat to cover his amused expression.

“It’s a dice game, Victor,” Thayla said, sitting beside him.

“Well, what can I do for you today, fine folks? If Ganjoon sent you, I can only assume you’re looking for something special!”

“We’ll be traveling over the plains for a week or so, and, at some point, he’ll be going further still.” Thayla gestured to Victor, then continued, “We’d like sturdy conveyance that’s comfortable for a child.” Thayla nodded toward Deyni, then added, “But we’d like it to be swift. Ganjoon said your prices were reasonable and that you wouldn’t try to cheat friends of his.” Victor was glad Thayla had spoken up and just nodded his agreement.

Bernale leaned forward, gripping his two hairy hands together before him, and said, “Dear me! That implies that I might cheat someone who wasn’t a friend! I would never! I’m as honest as they come. Why, just ask any of my former clients, of which there are many. Many!”

“I didn’t mean to imply . . .” Thayla started.

“No, no. Nothing to worry about. No offense taken. Let’s see here. I have quite a few vehicles that might suit you, and as you saw when you approached my office, I have the beasts to pull them! Would you mind answering a few questions so that I might narrow down my recommendations?”

“Sure,” Victor said.

“Excellent! Firstly, will the three of you want to sleep within? Would you like the interior to be equipped with some necessities of comfort? I mean things such as a stovetop, cupboards, or a cold-cabinet? Why, I even have wagons with bathing facilities!”

Thayla looked at Victor and raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t even think of all that,” she said. “I think you need to make these decisions because, when you leave, you’ll be taking it with you.”

“Why are you so sure of that? You’ll need a way to move with the clan when they go from camp to camp.” Victor leaned back and studied Thayla’s face. Was she acting strange about him leaving, or was it in his head?

“Well, that’s true, but I’m sure we’ll have a tent, and they rely on roladii, and I don’t want Deyni and me to stand out.” Thayla frowned, and Victor noticed she’d painted her lips black. He knew she’d done that back in the mines, but it seemed like a while since he’d noticed it.

Looking at her face, a strange memory came to him from when he’d first met her, and he’d thought the angle of her eyes made her look angry all the time. Looking at her now, he felt her eyes made her look clever and inquisitive. Her irises, deep red, almost purple, were full of mystery and depth, and he found himself looking away quickly, like he’d been caught staring at something he shouldn’t.

Victor cleared his throat and said, “Well, uh, Mr. Berlane . . .”

“Bernale, if you please,” the little Cadwalli corrected.

“Oh, right, sorry about that. Well, I think we’d like something with those sorts of comforts, and of course, if it needs animals to pull it, we’ll need those too. Can you give us an idea of the cost? Could you show us something without those, um, features and then something with all the cool shit?” Victor grimaced and said, “I mean all the extra stuff like stovetops and bathrooms.”

“Naturally, naturally,” Bernale said, then turned and lifted an empty picture from the shelf behind his chair. He placed it on his desk, facing Victor and Thayla, and said, “Look here at this frame, and I’ll show you some of the conveyances I have in my warehouse.” Victor felt a soft pulse of Energy, and then an image began to take shape in the picture frame. It was like looking through a window with a very faint tint of sepia. Nonetheless, a clear image of a classic black coach with big wheels and a bench for a driver appeared in the frame.

“This is a basic but very high-end coach. It’s sturdy, self-repairing, and has Energy–driven compression pads between the axle and the passenger compartment, ensuring a smooth, comfortable ride. This coach will cost you an even two thousand beads. For a pair of roladii to pull it, add another two hundred beads.” Victor watched as the image in the frame panned around the coach, showing all the angles, and then an image of the coach’s interior appeared, showing off the two comfortable bench seats covered in plush, red upholstery.

“All right. What else do you have?” Victor prompted, and then he and Thayla, and Deyni, who came to sit on Thayla’s lap, watched as the little salesman went through a series of ever-increasingly expensive coaches and wagons that appeared in the frame. Victor started to get bored after the third or fourth coach

that was only slightly more ornate or had a few more minor enchantments, but when they got to larger wagons, he started to perk up. As Bernale began to show them wagons enchanted with dimensional magic to be bigger on the inside than the outside, his eyes began to bug out as he saw house-sized interiors for wagons that were just a bit larger than the first coach.

“What about dimensional containers? Can I go inside those wagons with my ring?” He gestured to one of his storage rings.

“Naturally! That’s part of the expense. If we weren’t trying to avoid such conflicts, we could make wagons with interiors the size of a royal palace!” Bernale said with an excited grin.

“All right,” Victor said, glancing at Thayla and seeing some eagerness in her eyes. “You’ve got our interest. Show us a wagon like that, with most of the things you’d need to live comfortably on the road, but leave out all the extra ornate materials, filigrees, and shit.”

“Things,” Thayla said. “He means and ‘things.’”

“I think I know just what you’re looking for, Victor,” Bernale said and channeled a bit of Energy into the frame. The view resolved into the shape of a wagon just a bit larger than a regular coach but more rectangular and painted in two-tone lacquer—the top half was royal blue which gradually darkened to black on the bottom half. “Beautiful, isn’t it? It’s very sturdy, too. Just like the coaches we sell, it’s enchanted to self-repair and has Energy driven compression pads. You’ll hardly notice the bumps in the road! The interior has just what you’re looking for, I think.”

The image changed to the wagon's interior, and Victor smiled when he saw an ample space with two big beds on one end, separated by a curtain from a bathing area, complete with a brass bathtub and a nearby toilet. The center of the space held a long wooden table with two matching benches, and on the other side of that was a kitchen, complete with a long wooden counter lined with cupboards, an oven and stove, and a large cold-cabinet.

“Where does the toilet flush? What about the bath? Where’s the water?”

“You’ll love this, Victor,” Bernale said. “The water is stored in a dimensional container attached outside the living space. It’s very densely enchanted and can hold many thousands of gallons. The toilet flushes into a similar, smaller space with an outlet into an incineration chamber. All waste is dispersed as smoke, but only when the wagon travels at speed.”

“That is fucking cool,” Victor said softly, leaning forward to admire the image in the frame again. “All right, Bernale. What’s this going to cost?”

“This wagon, with the barebones interior and the simple two-tone lacquer exterior, costs thirteen thousand beads,” Bernale said, his voice quiet and his eyes slightly downcast as though he didn’t expect his customers to be excited about the price.

“Hmm,” Victor said, rubbing at his chin. “All right, and what about some animals to pull it? I know roladii are two hundred, right? Isn’t that what he said, Thayla?” She nodded, and Bernale did as well. “How about something faster than roladii? Lam has some kind of antelope pulling her coach.”

“Those are vidanii, Victor,” Thayla said, shaking her head.

“Right! Anything like that, Bernale?”

“Well, yes, and they are fabulous animals, quite pleasant in demeanor and fast. I’d happily sell you a pair of them for only two thousand beads!” Bernale leaned forward, clearly starting to feel like he was about to make a big sale.

“Ten times as much as a roladii?” Thayla asked, shaking her head.

“It does seem like a big jump,” Victor added.

“The vidanii cannot be bred in captivity! Each one has to be taken in the wild, and they don’t run anywhere near here. I’m sorry, but the price is fair.”

“You have this ready to go now?” Victor asked.

“Victor! That’s a lot of money,” Thayla said.

“I certainly do,” Bernale said at the same time.

“Give us a minute alone, please, Bernale,” Thayla said, shifting Deyni in her lap. The little girl was sitting there, staring into the crystal of her necklace, either bored or tired. Victor couldn’t tell.

“Oh, yes. Of course, of course.” Bernale stood up and started to move around his desk toward the door, but he glanced nervously at Thayla and said, “If I might ask, did you mention that you know Captain Lam?”

“That’s right,” Victor said.

“Well, I sold her those vidanii, and, well, if you’re friends with the captain, I’d love to offer you a ten percent discount. Please keep that in mind while you deliberate,” he sketched a bow, and Victor almost lost his cool again, seeing the pudgy little goat-like man bend and imagining the strain on his tight, striped slacks. When he’d stepped out of the office, Thayla started to speak at the same time as Victor.

“I think that wagon is cool as hell . . .” he said.

“I hope you’re not buying this to prove something . . .” Thayla said.

“Prove what?” he asked with a frown.

“I don’t know,” Thayla said. “I guess that was stupid.”

“I really do just think it’s cool. That room in the wagon is as big as my abuela’s house! How cool would it be to just cruise along in our wagon, and when we decide to call it a day, we just go inside, and we’re in there?” He pointed at the image still in the picture frame.

“I think it’s very nice, Victor, but do you really need something like that? Or are you, I don’t know, doing it for Deyni and me?”

“Nah, relax, Thayla. I don’t have some kind of hidden motive here. I just think it’ll be nice to go camping in style for a change.”

Thayla looked into Victor’s eyes for a long moment, and he enjoyed the opportunity to look in the depths of hers, noting all the interesting patterns and colors within. Then she sighed and said, “Well, I guess we’re going to have a fun trip out to the Shadeni camp, Deyni.” Thayla grinned and kissed the top of her daughter’s head.

“That’s the spirit,” Victor said, smiling. “Hey, Bernale!” he called. “Come in here! Let’s talk about that discount . . .”