

## Victor BK3: Ch19

Book 3: Chapter 19: Corruption

Victor tried to saddle Thistle without bothering anyone, but Norl came out of his front door, sipping a steaming mug, and said, “Leaving before dawn, hmm? The beds that bad?”

“No, your place is great, Norl. I’m just eager to be on my way back to Tellen’s camp. I’m worried about my friends, and I miss them.” Victor grunted as he cinched the buckles tight on his saddle.

“Understandable, young man. What about your friend? She staying a while?” Norl glanced toward his home as though he could see Teil sleeping in the guest room through the walls.

“Yeah, she was soundly sleeping, but she knows I’m leaving, don’t worry.” Victor buckled the bridle around Thistle’s ears and down under his neck. “I mean, I’m not dipping out on her if you’re worried about that.”

“No, no. I was wondering, though—she lost her loved ones? Her village was destroyed? Do you think she’d want to stay with us for a while?” He took another sip from his mug and sighed loudly in pleasure, smacking his lips after he swallowed.

“Maybe. It won’t offend her if you ask; I’m sure of that.” Victor stepped into his stirrup, hoisting himself onto Thistle’s back. “Well, that’s it for me, Norl. I’m off. Thanks for everything, and I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“Oh, you didn’t. I don’t sleep much these days. Victor, by the way, you’ll find a path on the north edge of the village that leads directly to the plains.” Norl gestured toward Victor’s left with this mug. “Wasn’t sure you knew that.”

“Well, I didn’t! Thank you, Norl; I was going to backtrack the way I came.”

“Thank you, warrior. Thank you. That bear woulda done us just as it had your lady friend’s village. We owe you a debt; you’re welcome in my home anytime.”

Victor looked into the older man’s eyes and gave him a nod, then he clicked his tongue and started Thistle moving through the village. When he got to the path and saw that it was wide and clear of obstructions, he pushed the vidanii into a cantor and made quick progress through the woods toward the plains. He had a lot to think about and allowed his mind to wander while Thistle did most of the work.

He thought about his time on the Spirit Plane with Thunderbite and everything he’d learned about himself. He was feeling a lot better about his new affinity now that he’d already managed to build a fear construct and do some cultivating. He reasoned that if he’d improved himself by dealing with the memories that caused him to feel anger, he’d only continue to do so by facing his fears.

It was unpleasant and difficult stuff for Victor to admit to being scared, to look at a time in his life when he'd describe his feelings by saying, "I was pissed off," only to really analyze it and say, "I lashed out because I was afraid of someone leaving me again."

Several times while riding between the tall, beautifully colorful trees, he turned his vision inward and looked at his Core, admiring the three orbs of attuned Energy and how they balanced each other in appearance. He felt the dark, shadowy purple orb of his fear affinity was a good counterpoint to his inspiration Energy while his rage smoldered, ready to add raw power to either one. "I wonder if I can find a weave to mix that fear with my rage." He figured he'd ask Gorz and Oynalla for ideas when he got back.

Victor looked up as the sky began to grow light and admired the height of the trees. True, he'd hardly seen any sort of forest, living in southern Arizona, but he felt these trees were truly immense. They soared many times higher than telephone poles, some of their trunks wider than his tio's pickup truck.

"Heck, that one's bigger than my abuela's house!" He said to Thistle, patting the vidanii's rough, red shoulder. The tree was a good fifty yards from the trail, but its enormous black-barked trunk was easy to see with the wide clearing around it. Victor figured its canopy made it hard for smaller trees to grow very close to it.

"Let's check it out," he said to Thistle and steered him off the trail toward the clearing and the forest giant. Thistle's steps were loud and the only noise in the area, the birds and animals either holding still or having fled. His big hooves pressed into the mulch of fallen leaves, and when he stepped into the clearing around the tree, Thistle balked. Even when he'd been hunting the "demon" that terrorized Tellen's hunting party, Thistle hadn't acted spooked—this was new.

"You all right, boy?"

The vidanii snorted, steam pluming from his nose, and stamped a front foot, but he wouldn't move closer to the tree. "All right," Victor said, sliding out of the saddle. He stood next to Thistle, one hand on his neck, the other on Lifedrinker's head, and studied the great tree.

It was almost like looking at a tall building, standing this close. Victor couldn't see around the trunk to either side, so vast it was. The bark was gnarled and dark, all blacks and grays, and the first branches didn't start for nearly a hundred feet. Looking up at those branches, though, Victor marveled at the amount of wood suspended in the air over his head—hundreds, no, thousands, or tens of thousands of tree-sized boughs hung from the great trunk, their long, silver-blue needles blocking out the sky.

"Wait here," he said to Thistle, and still resting a hand on Lifedrinker, he approached the colossal trunk. He wasn't sure why he wanted to, but Victor's palm almost itched with the desire to rest it on that rough bark. He didn't have any sense in his gut about why Thistle was spooked—he felt like he'd know it if he had some fear tickling the back of his neck. There was nothing, though; all

Victor felt was curiosity and a desire to feel the enormous life of that tree beneath his hand.

As he drew near, within a few feet, Victor began to experience the tree's aura—thick, vibrant, a life so strong it could snuff out lesser plants before they took their first sips of the rich air or soil. He outstretched his arm and, slowly, like a man reaching out to pet a crocodile, placed his palm against the dark, mossy bark.

Victor's vision went dim, and then his mind was filled with a series of vivid images. He saw a sapling growing out of rich, dark soil, its trunk was supple and silvery, and it grew toward a bright, blue sky. He saw it grow over a hundred, then a thousand years, ever larger, stretching above the nearby forest canopy until it stood like a skyscraper among smaller buildings. All the while, its trunk shone silver-white, and its silver-tipped, blue needles hung like a massive, beautiful umbrella over the expansive clearing.

People, Ghelli with their shimmering dragonfly wings, and their cousins, the Naghelli, visited the tree, day and night, performing their strange rituals. Then something happened, the sky shifted, the stars moved, and the forest was pulled away from its world and smashed into a new one—the System had come and merged the planets. The tree continued to thrive, but then something came, something it wasn't familiar with, a dark, slithering presence that presented itself in supplication, touching the great tree's bark.

Rather than pay its respects and leave, though, this new creature began to worm its way into the tree, pressing into a hairline crack, widening it, and slowly corrupting the tree's flesh as it sank into its heart. The silvery bark began to crack and harden, turning gray and black.

The Ghelli and Naghelli stopped their visits, and the plants and smaller trees began to shrink away from their great cousin, avoiding the soil tainted by its roots. As a final image, Victor saw himself approaching, reaching out to touch the tree. Then his vision returned to normal, and he saw a System message:

\*\*\*The Silverbark Monarch has offered you a Quest: Descend to the great tree's roots and cut out the corruption that has plagued it for nearly two centuries. Reward: A rare natural treasure. Accept? Yes/No.\*\*\*

Victor paused to consider things, reigning in his impulse to touch the “yes” response. “Why do I want to say yes,” he asked the forest, looking over his shoulder at Thistle, still lingering at the edge of the clearing. “Because I'm an adventurer?” Victor studied his motivations, making sure he wasn't acting out of some kind of hidden fear, like he was trying to prove something to some bogie man that lived in his memories, but he didn't think that was the case.

The truth was, while he used to dread fighting, even harbor fears about it and the expectations people had for him, he'd been forced to fight so much that he was starting to enjoy it, especially when no one was watching, no friends were on the line—it was just Victor and the tree, and it felt right.

“A rare natural treasure, huh?” He supposed he didn't mind getting magical rewards, either. He accepted the quest and stepped back as the rough bark near him loudly cracked as it split, opening a jagged hole in the enormous trunk. Victor lifted Lifedrinker from his belt and peered into the new-formed hollow in

the tree to see a narrow tunnel leading down, through loose soil and dark wood into the depths beneath the tree. Victor cast Globe of Inspiration and, in its white-gold glow, he stepped into the opening.

The tunnel the tree had made was narrow, and Victor had to stoop to keep from banging his head on the low ceiling, but as he descended, it began to grow wider, and the walls were made up more and more of hard, dark soil. Victor began to notice that he was constantly curving to the right, and he realized he was descending into the ground beneath the tree in a spiral. Thick roots, some the size of his arms, some so wide he could take two steps to walk over them, crossed the tunnel, always near the floor or the ceiling, leaving room for him to pass through.

It smelled of damp, rich earth, and Victor didn't feel any hint of the "corruption" he was supposed to find. He felt his nerves begin to settle as he grew used to the gently sloping tunnel, lit with his bright, powerful light. That changed when he came upon the first skeleton—ragged, rotten clothing clung to the white, brittle bones and its bony fingers still held a rusted axe.

Victor knelt to examine the body, concluding that the person had died a long time ago. He saw that it had bones resembling a human with many sharp teeth. "Probably an Ardeni or Shadeni. So, I'm not the first one you've offered this quest to, hmm?" he asked a nearby root.

Victor cast Sovereign Will, enhancing his agility, and then he cast Inspiring Presence. If he was seeing dead questors, then danger was probably near, and he wanted to be ready. He wanted to conserve his rage, so he channeled some fear-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker, wondering if the smoky, black-purple Energy that infused her would be as effective as his other affinities.

Finally, before he stepped further into the tunnel, Victor cast Manifest Spirit, summoning his coyotes with rage Energy. His red, angry companions sprang forth, growling and yipping, and Victor sent them forward, pacing in front of him, sniffing and scanning the shadows for trouble.

The tunnel was brightly lit with his orb, his glowing hounds, and his inspiring presence, and Victor held Lifedrinker ready, scanning left to right, waiting for his coyotes to alert him to anything. They did so several times as they passed by more bones, more dead adventurers, and then the air shifted, and Victor smelled the corruption for the first time. It reminded him of battle, of spilled guts and hot, coppery blood. It reminded him of rotting things and shit, and he felt his rage start to slip out of his Core into his pathways.

"Not yet," he hissed and, for the first time, realized that it had happened because he was scared. "Goddammit, I don't need to self-analyze right now!" He pushed his rage back into his Core and lifted Lifedrinker, dark and steaming with purple fumes. "Ready to share my fear with something, chica?" Then his coyotes erupted in howls and yelps, snapping barks and growls, and Victor charged forward, his bright orb following close behind.

He burst into a great, open space, a deep, oblong cavern bordered by enormous roots and hard-packed soil. His coyotes surrounded a dark shape that clung to a massive knot of roots near the chamber's center. It hissed and coiled, writhing around the roots like a multi-headed serpent made of

shadow and rot. Long, looping tendrils shot forth, swiping at his companions, and they danced back, yipping and snapping.

Victor couldn't get a good idea of what exactly he was looking at, so wrapped in shadows was it. He pushed his orb of inspiration-attuned Energy in front of himself, sending it streaking toward the dark corruption, and as it drew near, it shrank down from a ball of bright light to a glimmering mote, then to nothing, snuffed out by the shadows. Victor felt irrationally angry at the destruction of his orb, and he immediately cast Dauntless Radiance, centering the stationary spell near the cavern's ceiling where the thick knot of roots emerged.

A brilliant crack of red-gold light erupted at the top of the cavern and shone down upon the writhing mass of shadowy tendrils, and, like mist before the morning sun, they evaporated. Victor recoiled at what was left in their wake—pale, twisting tubes of flesh, balled up at their center around the huge roots, pulsing as they drank from the tree. They fanned out from their central knot into dozens of long, wriggling, worm-like tendrils with sucking, sphincter-like mouths ringed with rows of triangular, hooked teeth.

They lashed out at Victor's coyotes, keeping them at bay, and as he watched, one of them made contact. It hooked its sucker mouth onto the coyote's haunch, lifting it from the ground, and thrashing it back and forth as it sucked the red Energy out of it. A heartbeat later, the yelping coyote dispersed in a cloud of red mist. Seeing his companion destroyed like that ignited something in Victor, and he launched forward, eyes tracking the many writhing tubes, calculating a truly inspired swing of Lifedrinker as he leaped into the fray.

Five or six of the enormous worms squirmed toward him as he approached, and Victor grinned, dodging among their uncoordinated attacks, and cleaving not one but three in half with a whistling, snapping cut. Thick gouts of green and yellow fluid sprayed from the cut tentacle things, sluicing over the cavern floor and onto Victor, and it sizzled where it hit his armor.

Suddenly a thought pierced his mind; words formed in his perception without the need for sound, and he knew the tree was speaking to him, "Do not sever the roots!" Though he didn't hear the words, they reverberated in his consciousness, and he understood that he needed to avoid cutting through or drenching that massive central root with acid.

Close as he now was, Victor could see that the things really were worms, and they might act together, but they weren't part of the same organism. Inspiration struck him, and, dodging their swinging, wriggling advances, he put Lifedrinker away in her loop and cast Berserk. His vision went red, but he kept, firmly in his mind, the need to rip and smash those worms, and he waded into them, his enormous hands seizing them near the root and yanking them, one by one, out of tree's flesh.

Victor roared and screamed as the worms sank their teeth into his hands and legs, even his neck. Some of them bit into him with both of their tooth-ringed ends, pulling at his blood and Energy. The vast majority fruitlessly bit into his armor, hanging from it while he went around the massive taproot, pulling the worms free, flinging many of them with tremendous force against the hard-packed wall of the cavern. Soon, a pile of dazed, partially smashed worms throbbed and wriggled there, the least harmed ones inching over the ground, back toward Victor.

He roared again; this time, his coyotes caught Victor's meaning, wrangling the loose worms, dragging them back toward the pile, and delivering bites that bled away the worms' vitality in the process. In his rage, enhanced by the horrible itching and sucking bites, Victor began to lose sight of what he was doing. He stumbled away from the roots and the remaining worms and began to roar, breathing heavily and choking on the gouts of blood and spittle in his throat.

Why was he so tired? What was this horrible itch? He began to yank the worms out of himself, and as he saw them, his rage was stoked to new heights—he veritably steamed with it. Victor lifted his arms up and out, looked at the cavern ceiling, and screamed with such horrible ferocity that it would have deafened a bystander. He arched his back, and with all his being, he screamed again and flooded his pathways with the last of his rage. The worms clinging to his flesh burst apart, shredded by the violence of his fury.

Bereft of rage but cleared of the parasites, Victor looked around the cavern, gasping with effort. The ground near him was drenched with green and yellow ichor, littered with the shredded flesh of the worms. His coyotes were corralling a pile of worms near one of the cavern walls, biting and tearing at them as they tried to separate from the ball.

The plucky canines seemed only mildly bothered by the acidic ichor released with each of their bites, and Victor felt they could contain that squirming mass near the wall. Finally, at the center of the cavern, a dozen or so fat, long worms still clung to the enormous taproot of the tree.

Victor pulled Lifedrinker off his belt again and strode toward the root. As he got near, he cast Project Spirit, and a wave of black and purple Energy surged out of him, drenching the worms in fear made manifest.

In the past, when he'd cast Project Spirit and directed sickly, twisted inspiration at his foes, he'd struck doubt into their hearts. This was something far more visceral—Victor knew at a fundamental level that he'd just inundated those worms with terror incarnate, and some primal instinct in their parasitic brains caused them to panic.

Every single long, thick tube of toothy flesh released the enormous root and began to flap spastically along the cavern floor away from Victor. He laughed and charged after them, cleaving them into chunks of ruined, acidic flesh with Lifedrinker. She arced through the air and flesh alike, not slowing as she sheared through them. The acidic blood seemed to bother her not at all, and Victor saw her silvery veins pulse and throb with the Energy she pulled away from each severed worm. "Fuck yes! Run, fuckers!" Victor laughed, hacking them to bits as they retreated.

When the last of the fleeing worms was shredded, Victor turned back to the pile his Coyotes had been working on and saw that he was down to just two beleaguered companions. Most of the worms were dead, shredded and torn, but a few still struggled to work their way back to the root, and Victor charged forward, helping his coyotes to finish them off. When the last one lay twitching at his feet, Victor stood and, lungs heaving for breath, howled his victory, laughing as his two coyotes joined in.

The air was foul, and his eyes stung from the vapors of the acid in the soil, so Victor started walking back toward the tunnel that led away from the cavern. That's when he saw the thousands of golden motes of Energy beginning to form along the cavern floor, and he braced himself for the impact.

A few heartbeats later, Victor saw the motes stream together and then surge toward him, and he was transfixed by the effect. His aches and itchy scabs faded away, and his Core instantly recharged.

Victor howled again, and his two companions, stubbornly clinging to this plane of existence, joined in again, their high, yelping voices mingling with his deeper, madder sound.

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have completed a Quest: Descend to the great tree's roots and cut out the corruption that has plagued it for nearly two centuries. Approach the Silverbark Monarch's taproot to claim your reward.\*\*\*

As Victor swiped away the message, he noticed that the air was already more clear—he didn't smell the corruption so heavily anymore, and his eyes weren't burning. Looking around, he saw hundreds of tiny roots probing out of the hard-packed soil, wrapping around the bits of torn worm flesh and dragging it under.

He turned to the massive knot of roots at the cavern's center, pleased to see it wasn't as dark as before. The ragged holes where the worms had been burrowing were already healed over, and the flesh of the root was lighter; Victor thought he saw a shimmer of golden Energy pulse through it, but it might have been a trick of the light—his Dauntless Radiance still shone down upon the center of the cavern. Walking toward it, Victor saw the ground shift, and then a distinctly blue root wriggled out of the soil and coiled upon itself to form a kind of basin.

Again, a soundless voice filled his mind, this time not shouting, but clear, almost soothing, "The sap of my heart, hero. For you or your companion—only one may drink." As he watched, the coiled, blue root bowl filled with a shimmering, silvery liquid. Even from a few feet away, Victor could feel the Energy within that sap, and his body yearned for it like a man seeing pizza after a ten-day fast.

"Me or my companion?" At first, Victor thought the tree had meant his coyotes, but as he looked around, he realized they were gone. Then it clicked—it meant Lifedrinker. "Oh, of course. You're definitely up, chica. Don't even doubt it," he said, lifting the axe free of his belt. He knelt over the coiled root and very gently dipped her blade into the sap. She throbbed and vibrated in his hand, and then he saw the thick fluid slowly start to drain, and he knew she was drinking it.

Lifedrinker had already regained two of her long, silvery veins, but now they thickened, grew branches, and spread out through the dark metal. Victor felt his cheeks start to ache and realized he was smiling broadly, his eyes filling with tears as he watched Lifedrinker not only restored but pushed further. Her axehead pulsed with silvery light, and when it faded, he saw the sap was gone, but she was radiant, her Heart Silver edge and veins glowing from within, only slowly fading back to their usual luster.

Victor stood and hefted Lifedrinker, and she felt different, somehow. When he moved her, it almost felt like she was moving with him, like the difference between lifting an unconscious person and helping someone to stand. "Are you there, beautiful?" he asked, wondering if he should touch his head to her metal again.

He felt the axe vibrate so rapidly in his hand that it was practically humming. He lifted her, looking into the bright silvery veins, and then he heard her voice, undeniably feminine, rich, like crystal, chiming over placid waters, "I'm here, Victor." With those simple words, a flood of emotion surged into him through Lifedrinker's living handle—love, pride, satisfaction. She'd known she could count on him to restore her, and she was exceedingly proud of him and herself for being right.

“That’s it. That’s it,” he said, lifting her to rest on his shoulder. Victor, still beaming ear to ear, turned and began his journey out of the tree, wondering at his luck. Had he stumbled upon something rare and impossibly fortuitous, or was this world just filled with opportunity, ripe for the taking for an enterprising adventurer?