

## Victor BK3: Ch17

Book 3: Chapter 17: Bitterpaw and Teil

Victor burst into a clearing with wide, open skies and dozens of wooden cabin-type structures, many with smoke billowing from chimneys. He heard shouting and roars and knew the bear had made an appearance, but he didn't see any carnage, didn't see any smashed doors or homes. The shouts seemed to come from the far side of the clearing, past the little cluster of buildings, and Victor turned, leaping onto Thistle's back. Thistle felt his urgency and immediately started sprinting up the dirt path that led through the center of the settlement.

When he cleared the last pair of log homes, he saw an open meadow—a place where people had cleared the trees and planted rows of gardens—and saw the bear he'd been hunting for the first time. It was roaring and swiping, held at bay by a handful of nimble, spear-wielding people, while a larger crowd stood at a distance, some of them shooting arrows at the great beast. Victor saw spells flash in the air, felt the signature pulse of Energy gathering and releasing, and knew that these people weren't rolling over; they were fighting to defend their place in this world.

Bitterpaw wasn't like any bear on Earth, but neither was he as huge or intimidating as the great spirit, Thunderbite. He was big, bigger than a grizzly—more the size of a hippo, probably a couple of thousand pounds. His fur was dark, matted, and patchy, and Victor could see the scars of a hundred wounds on his flanks, back, and snout. The bear had the bony spines of his species, sticking up around his shoulders and down the center of his back, and as he roared and slashed, Victor saw his massive canines and sword-like claws.

Victor jumped off Thistle, hefted Lifedrinker, and charged down the slight incline through a garden with neat rows plowed into the soft, dark soil and cast Inspiring Presence. He felt his Energy respond, felt the spell take effect, but noticed, immediately, how it felt more sluggish than usual, how the result didn't seem as significant. He didn't care. Here was the monster he was meant to fight, and he couldn't stop to contemplate or complain that he wasn't at his strongest—people needed his help!

As he drew within a few dozen bounding strides, and he was sure the people around had begun to benefit from his Inspiring Presence, Victor cast Channel Spirit, flooding Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy. He cast Sovereign Will, making his muscles stretch, harden, and bunch with strength.

Victor almost cast Manifest Spirit, summoning his coyotes, but he saw the villagers and how they harried the bear's flanks, and he doubted his canine companions would be much more effective. More than that, though, he was worried about his lower reserves of Energy and the considerable cost of the spell. He decided that his spirit totems would sit this one out.

Still, Victor didn't plan to hold any punches; as he charged closer, he cast Berserk, and, as his body erupted with power, Victor roared a challenge that echoed over the clearing, startling the people who hadn't noticed him yet. Bitterpaw responded, as he'd hoped, turning to him and standing on his hind legs, returning the roar, jaws wide, foamy, blood-speckled saliva stringing out from his massive teeth.

Victor's rage had taken him, had flooded his body with its red, hot Energy, and his Titanic Rage ability had done its job, engorging his muscles and pushing his body to surge toward the shape of

one of his ancient ancestors. Still, it felt different than usual—the heat was less a furnace and more a fire, and his mind, while still seeking the furious release of combat, was cooler, and he was more himself than a titan of destruction.

Regardless, Victor roared again, and leaped at the bear, Lifedrinker in his right hand, held outstretched, but whistling through the air, as he swung her around in a devastating arc, aiming for the bear's exposed ribs. Bitterpaw brought his massive right claw down in a swipe characteristic of his kind, smashing the heavy paw into Victor's armored forearm, and, for the first time that he could remember, his enraged form was overpowered.

Victor felt something tear in his elbow, and then the enormous paw drove his arm down, and the huge claws raked across his armored chest, sliding along his scales but catching here and there and ripping them free. Simultaneously, Victor's chop landed, and Lifedrinker bit deep between two ribs. Victor roared in pain, surprise, and fury as the bear's swipe knocked him back, and he lost his grip on the axe.

Victor flexed his arm, felt the pain and feebleness fade away as his rage slowly knit back whatever tissue had torn, and he circled the bear, watching as it roared and pawed at the axe haft jutting from its side. Even in his rage, Victor knew he couldn't grapple a beast so large, and the Quinametzin in him roared and seethed at the feebleness of his body.

With his vision red-tinted, Victor saw the corpse of an Ardeni man and saw the bronze-tipped spear by his side. He leaped toward it, snatched it up, and as the bear ripped Lifedrinker free, sending her sprawling into the dirt, he threw the spear like a bolt of lightning.

Throwing a spear isn't something that one can do without finesse, without some modicum of skill, but when you have a properly weighted spear made for throwing and a target the size of a small vehicle, success is possible. Victor was lucky that day, having picked up a decent weapon and having enough strength to launch it with the force of a ballista, sending it streaking through the air faster than the eye could follow. Bitterpaw had just dropped to all fours to charge Victor, and the spear took him in the shoulder, burying its shaft three solid feet into the massive creature's torso.

The crowd of villagers hadn't stopped their attempts to wound the bear, and when the spear impaled the monster, they redoubled their efforts, piling arrows and spear stabs into its flanks. The beast had stumbled at the impact of Victor's throw, sliding through the dark soil, digging a furrow in its passage, but it was far from dead. It roared and raged, staggering to stand on three legs, its wounded shoulder unable to hold any weight.

Bitterpaw coughed a gout of blood, screamed in fury as more spears and arrows pierced his hide, and leaped toward Victor. Or, he would have if Victor had stood still. Victor had run for his dear companion, though, picking Lifedrinker up from the soil. The bear, blind in its rage and pain, lumbered toward an unlucky villager who'd been standing behind Victor's previous position. Victor charged forward, screaming his own fury as he hacked Lifedrinker into Bitterpaw's haunches.

Lifedrinker didn't bite as deeply as a spear might have, but she was sharp and hungry, and she tore long deep wounds, carving through thick hide and biting into muscle and sinew. Bitterpaw felt those quick, hacking blows as the injuries piled up, and he turned, trying to roll and swipe his massive claws at the same time.

Aware that a swipe was coming but seeing the bear's soft belly exposed, Victor stood tall, bringing Lifedrinker down with a two-handed chop that buried her deep in the bear's underside. At the same

time, saber-like claws raked his forehead, face, and chest, sending him sprawling in a shower of blood.

Victor blinked away the blood that had sheeted into his eyes, its red tint adding to the already crimson haze of his rage, and he stood up. What was this beast that dared to challenge him? He felt the heat from his Core surge, felt the vestiges of his rage-attuned Energy pour like hot flood waters into his pathways, and Victor roared, leaping to his feet. He saw the bear, rolling and grunting, coughing gouts of blood, its rage-filled eyes growing dim, and he screamed, charging it like a bull with his tormentor in his sights.

Victor smashed into Bitterpaw's side with a thunderous, wet crunch, and, as they rolled through the dark, rich soil, he managed to grab hold of the spear that protruded from the bear's shoulder and with a heroic effort and his last vestiges of rage-stoked strength, he drove it deeper still, until the bear, realizing it was dead, finally heaved its last breath and ceased its struggles.

Sprawled atop his vanquished foe, Victor breathed deep, exhausted breaths, watching as thick rivulets of blood trickled off his brow to mingle with the bear's in the soil. As his rage continued to fade, he became aware of the terrible burning pains and aches in his body. His reduced Energy affinity had taken a toll, apparently reducing the regenerative effects of his rage. He groaned, stiffly lifting his head to try to take in the aftermath of his battle, his ears aware of people speaking, but his brain unable to filter the various voices in a way that made sense.

Victor saw darkness begin to creep in around the edges of his vision and realized he was about to pass out. He shook his head, willing himself to hold on, and then a reprieve came in the form of a flood of Energy from the carcass of the great, dead bear. He didn't see it form, likely because he was still lying atop the dead beast, but he felt it hit him with a mighty surge, physically lifting him into the air. His wounds closed, his Core sucked up the Energy, and Victor took a deep breath, allowing his euphoria to show with a loud, barbaric shout of victory.

His Quinametzin nature had faded with his rage, but still, Victor remembered the sound of his roars and challenges when he'd been enraged, and he copied one of them. His lungs were smaller, and his voice less rough and loud, but it came naturally. As the System sent him a message while he stood atop his downed foe, he repeated the shout, roaring at the skies, and when his gaze fell, he saw the crowd looking at him with awe and wonder and not a little bit of fear, and he forced himself to calm down and smile.

He glanced at the System messages before swiping them away:

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 33 Spirit Carver, gained 10 will, 10 vitality, and have 8 attribute points to allocate.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Manifest Spirit - Improved.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Shape Spirit - Improved.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Congratulations! Your chosen Class and your mastery of your spirit have allowed you to gain a second totem. Only one totem may be active at a time.\*\*\*

“Victor! Are you all right? Your face . . .” He recognized Teil’s voice and turned to the woman, taking note of her broken bow and the dirt and blood streaking her face—he hadn’t been the only one rolling around during that fight.

“I’m good,” he said, reaching to feel his face. It was caked with blood, sure, but he also felt tender scars on his forehead, over the bridge of his nose, and along his cheek. “Ugh,” he grunted. “There go my good looks.” He jumped down from the bear, and when he saw the clusters of villagers tending to their fallen defenders, he stopped grinning, realizing that many people had suffered much worse than a few scars that day.

Gef approached him and held out a hand. Victor took it, and the older man said, “I doubted you. I thought we were likely on a quest that would end with our deaths, but I didn’t care. Now that this beast is dead, I can at least face my ancestors with pride, having helped to avenge my kin. Thank you, Victor.” Some people nearby had crowded forward, and many were echoing Gef’s thanks, including Teil, who wore a smile for the first time in Victor’s experience.

“You were a giant,” she said. “I can’t believe you wrestled with this thing.” She gestured to the body, and Victor saw that many people had gathered around it, and he suddenly felt alarmed.

“Stand back!” he yelled. He strode forward, and as the crowd backed away, he tried to push the bear onto its side, but it wouldn’t budge. He cast Sovereign Will, boosting his strength, and tried again. This time it started to turn, and he grunted, “Help me turn it!”

Gef, Teil, and a dozen others grabbed the bear’s fur or shoved against its side, and they managed to roll it over. There, protruding from the bear’s gut, was Lifedrinker’s haft—she was more than half buried in the monster’s innards. “There you are, beautiful.” Victor grabbed her haft, felt her vibrate at the touch, and yanked her free, pulling a loop of slick, gray intestine with her.

Victor smiled savagely when he saw the new vein of bright Heart Silver snaking through Lifedrinker’s dark axehead. “She had a big long drink from that pendejo.”

He walked around to the front of the corpse, and people scurried to get out of his way. He was coated in blood, and so was Lifedrinker, and his mad ramblings about his axe probably didn’t help people feel comfortable; they seemed eager to give him space. He examined the bear’s claws, and there, buried in the thick, blood-matted fur of its right paw, Victor saw the talisman that Thunderbite had said he needed to destroy.

The necklace was difficult to cut free, and Victor had to put Lifedrinker into the loop on his belt so he could cut away the fur with a sharp knife. While he worked, he looked up at the villagers and said, “I need a hot fire, something like a forge. We need to destroy this amulet—it’s what drove this bear insane.”

“We have a smithy,” one of the villagers said, a Shadeni woman with curly black hair wearing leather armor and wielding a long spear.

“You were one of the heroes that held the bear at bay?” Victor asked.

“Aye, but I’m no hero. I couldn’t hurt the thing enough to get its attention,” she said.

“Nonsense!” an older woman exclaimed. “Any who would face this beast down is a hero! Thank you, too, stranger!” she said, directing the last words to Victor.

“I’m glad I could help, and you’re right: everyone who didn’t run from this big bastard is a hero today. I’m sorry for the losses you’ve all suffered, but everyone here should be proud.” Victor grunted as he finally pulled the necklace of teeth from the bear’s fur, and then he stood up, holding it away from everyone, keeping it at arm’s length from himself, even. He doubted it would affect him with his high will and without him trying to bond with it, but still, he didn’t like the looks of it.

The teeth weren’t fangs like you might collect from predators. They looked, to him, more like the teeth of people—small, mostly flat—and he could feel the sickly, cloying aura bleeding off the necklace. “Show me to the forge, please. Get the fire hot!” He followed the woman with the spear, and most of the people in the field marched behind him, though a few, probably family members, hung back, collecting the corpses of the fallen.

The woman led him to a nearby building, and he saw that there was, indeed, a workshop affixed to the side of it with an anvil, a quenching barrel, and a forge. It was a small affair, built from mud bricks, but it had actual bellows and a coal fire, and the woman used some sort of Energy ability to start the coals burning much more quickly than would have been possible otherwise. A man who introduced himself as the woman’s husband pumped the bellows, and when the coals were a bright yellow-orange, and Victor could feel the heat from several feet away, he tossed the necklace into them.

The necklace sat in the coals for a moment, seemingly unharmed, but then, with a sizzling pop and flash of smokey, gray Energy, it burst into flames. Victor felt an icy grip, one that he’d grown accustomed to and nearly forgotten, release its hold on his Core, and he breathed a deep sigh as his Core expanded and started to pull at the ambient Energy, slowly replenishing itself.

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have completed a Quest: Hunt down the bear known as Bitterpaw, best him in combat, and destroy the toothed amulet that has corrupted his spirit. Seek out Thunderbite to claim your reward.\*\*\*

“It’s done,” he said. “The curse is dead, and this thing won’t corrupt any more people or beasts.” Murmurs of approval and even a few ragged cheers rose up from the crowd of people that had gathered around the blacksmithy.

The woman who’d shown Victor the forge and helped him stoke it turned to him and said, “What’s your name, hero? I’ve heard your companions call you Victor. Is that right?”

“That’s right. Just call me Victor, not hero, all right? What’s your name? What’s the name of this place?” he asked, turning to the crowd with his last question.

“I’m Genna, and this village is Leaf Watch. Where do you hail from, Victor?”

“I’m from far away—another world. Recently, though, I’ve been living with the Shadeni on the plains. Tellen’s clan. Do you know them?”

“Aye, and now we owe Tellen and his people a debt. If they’ve opened their homes to you, then we can do no less. Consider yourself welcome here anytime, Victor, and that goes for you as well, Teil and Gef.” Victor didn’t know when Teil and Gef had introduced themselves to the woman, but he supposed he’d been somewhat preoccupied.

“Thank you, Genna. I appreciate your hospitality, and I’d stick around to help further, but I have friends I’m worried about, and I want to head back.”

“I can imagine it would ease your worry to see your friends again,” Teil said, reaching up to take hold of Victor’s shoulder, “but you should rest a night here. You need to clean yourself, and it will be dark soon in any case. If your friends saw you looking like this, they’d probably have a fright that would take years from their lives.”

“I have guest accommodations,” an older man said. He was Ardeni, with white hair and bright yellow eyes, and he smiled genuinely, and Victor was impressed to see he held a spear streaked with blood. “Room for two, at least.”

“I’ll be leaving,” Gef said. “I have kin in Twilight Home and am eager to be on my way. Thank you anyway, friends.”

“You sure, Gef?” Victor asked.

“Absolutely. Don’t worry about me—I’m no stranger to sleeping in the woods. Thank you again, Victor. Teil, please look out for yourself, all right?”

“I will, Gef. Thank you.”

“Gef, can we offer you some supplies?” Genna asked as the crowd began to disperse, people going about cleaning the mess left by the battle with the bear, helping the families of the few hunters who’d died as they tried to fend it off. While Gef spoke to Genna, Victor found himself being pulled aside by Teil and the older man.

“Would you two like to stay with me tonight? I’ll give you plenty of peace, and my guest room has a tub. You could sure use it, warrior.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Teil said, and she nodded to Victor. He vacillated for a moment, but then he nodded.

“All right. I could use a night to rest. I honestly haven’t had a relaxing sleep in weeks.” As he spoke, he saw Gef walking away toward the dirt road that had led

them to the village, and he called out, “Gef! Take care, man. Thanks for your help!”

“Bye, Victor! Spend some time hunting!” He chuckled and turned, walking toward the forest’s edge and the setting sun.

“He’s a good man. He’ll be all right,” Teil said.

“My name’s Norl,” the older man said. “Come, I’ll show you to my place.” He started walking toward the southern edge of the clearing, but Victor held up a hand.

“A minute, Norl. I need to find my mount.”

“Oh, the great horned beast? It wandered there, away from the battle. I saw it grazing by Shim’s cabin.” Norl pointed off to the right, past the building where the forge sat, smoking. Victor nodded and jogged over there and saw a narrow grassy meadow between the cabins and the trees, and there was Thistle, his head dangling, calmly munching on the grass.

“Hey, boy,” Victor said, walking toward him. The animal lifted his big black nose and snuffled, looking for a treat, and Victor obliged, handing him a rather bitter-tasting apple that he’d found growing on the edge of the forest when Gef first led him in. He’d been surprised when Gef acknowledged the fruit was called an apple—so far, every fruit Victor had eaten on Fanwath had a strange name, but he figured this fruit was similar enough to the ones on Earth that the System translated the word for him.

Leading Thistle, he walked back to Norl and Teil and followed the man toward his home. The older man spoke as they went, “I built my home bigger than I needed because my sister was supposed to come live with me out here. Her husband had died, you see, but after I made the move and built my place, I sent word for her to come, and she replied with some news: she’d remarried. Now I’m out here in the wilderness all by myself. Alone where family is concerned, I mean—I’ve plenty of friends here in the village. It’s a great place to study plants and cultivate nature Energy, though, so I won’t complain.”

“Nature Energy?” Victor asked as they approached a good-sized cabin with a well-kept garden.

“Oh, yes. I’m quite good with plants and animals. I tried to calm that bear, but, as you said, it was cursed—all of my attempts seemed to enrage it further.” He stepped up to the door and pulled it open, motioning for Teil and Victor to precede him. “Here we are! Tie your mount there on that garden post, and I’ll see to him. I’d love the chance to get to know him.”

“All right, if you’re sure,” Victor said, unloading a barrel of water and a bag of feed for Thistle. Thinking twice, he took out his brush and took a minute to

unbuckle Thistle's saddle, slipping it into his storage ring. He patted the big animal, scratching the fur on his long, muscular neck, and said, "See you soon, buddy."

Victor stooped under the lintel, walking into a warm, neat space that reminded him of the typical fishing cabin you might see in a VR. An open kitchen with a wooden butcher-block island took up the left half of the front room, while some comfortable couches and chairs, some bookcases, and a small table filled the rest. A hallway led further into the dwelling, and Norl pointed that way.

"My extra room is the one on the left down there. It's plenty big, and, as I said, there's a tub within. Go make yourselves comfortable, and I'll get some dinner started!"

"Oh, you don't have to do that, Norl," Teil said, but Victor held up his hand.

"What kind of food are we talking about, Norl? I'm hungry as a bear," he chuckled, but when he saw their faces and remembered Teil's husband, Victor's heart nearly stopped, and he slapped his palm to his forehead. "Oh, bad choice of words! I'm sorry!"

"Nothing to worry about, Victor," the man said, wrinkling his bright yellow eyes in sympathy and stroking his thin, white beard. "I've a pultii, fresh from a hunt, and need to cook it. How's that sound? Should be enough bird for even a man your size!"

"Oh! I love pultii!" Teil said, ignoring Victor's bad humor. "I haven't had one since last fall . . ." she trailed off, and her face fell, and Victor imagined she was remembering a happier time.

"Great," Victor said, clearing his throat. "Let's go see our room, Teil. You can have the bath first."

"No, Victor. You need it more," she said, following him down the hallway.

"Yeah, I'm pretty ripe," Victor said, lifting his scale-armored arm and adding, "At least this armor is self-cleaning. I wasn't sure it would be because it has some sort of 'comfort' enchantment. I wasn't sure that was anything more than resizing."

"It's nice armor, true enough," Teil said as he opened the doorway on the left side of the hall. "I saw that bear hit you solidly a couple of times, not to mention the troll that tried to dig through your back."

Victor stepped into the room and saw it was good-sized, as promised, with a separate door that probably led to the bath. Two small beds were arranged on the far wall with a nightstand between them. A woven, round rug occupied the center of the floor, and a dresser with a mirror sat against the wall opposite the bed. "Not bad," he said.

“I’d hoped for a bigger bed,” Teil said, pushing under his arm to get into the room.

“Uh,” Victor said, not sure what she meant. “I mean, at least we don’t have to share.” He watched her as she walked toward the little beds, turning on the rug, and then she looked over her shoulder at him and smiled.

“Victor, my husband is dead, and I need to feel like I’m not dead too. Three days ago, I tried to follow him into the spirit realm, and now I feel a weight has been removed from my soul. He’s gone, probably starting his next life in a new world. Me? I want to live! I want to savor this life while I can! Can we just be together tonight and then go our separate ways?”

Victor closed the door and stepped closer to her, looking at her differently than he’d allowed himself to thus far. She was beautiful in her way. He liked how her eyes reflected the glow lamp's yellow light, catching it, deepening it, and turning it back to him like hot little embers. “I . . .” he started. He wanted to protest that his heart was taken by someone else, but was it? He thought he should say he didn’t know if it was wise for her to be with him so soon after her loss. He wanted to suggest that he was the wrong guy to be with at a time like this in her life. A million protests fought for space on his tongue, but what came out was, “Yeah, Teil. That would be nice.”