

Victor BK3: Ch24

Book 3: Chapter 24: Yund

“We’ll take ‘im, m’lady,” Victor heard one of the guards say to Valla, but she looked at him with a frown and shook her head.

“No. I’ll be bringing him to lady ap’Yensha.”

“No, ma’am, I’m sorry, but he’s coming with us,” the other guard said. Victor stepped out of the bathroom, now clad in his armored shirt and holding Lifedrinker, and stepped up next to Valla.

“No, men. We’ll take him from here. If you feel that’s a problem, have a magistrate collect him from the ap’Yensha estate.” Valla stared at the two guardsmen, brow furrowed, eyes brooking no argument.

The two guards looked at each other, clearly conflicted, and Victor noted their better-than-average fitting uniforms, shiny mail, and polished boots. These guys either took their job more seriously than most or got paid better than most. Both were Ardeni and young. They looked fit, and their hands rested on their weapons comfortably.

“What clan are you two from?” Victor asked on impulse.

“Yes. What are your names, guardsmen?” Valla asked, her sword still naked in her hands.

Sergeant Hine backed away from the two guards and held up his hands, “Now, now, guards. I appreciate you coming to investigate, but I think Lady ap’Yensha will be within her rights to look into this matter. As she said, seek a magistrate’s order if you’d like to pursue things.”

“Right,” the taller guard said; he had perfectly coiffed red hair, curly and glistening—a sign that Victor had come to understand meant he’d advanced his race a time or two. “We’ll be on our way.” He tugged at his friend’s elbow, a dark-haired fellow with bright yellow eyes, and the two of them made a hasty exit.

“They didn’t want to give us their clan name,” Victor said.

“Correct. I wish I had the staff here to follow them,” Valla said. She glanced at Sergeant Hine. “Do you have someone to spare?”

“Not anyone that wouldn’t make a fool of themselves. I’m sorry.”

“Did you fetch those guardsmen?” Valla pressed.

“No! They came into the common room—said they’d heard a clash while standing out front.”

“That’s bullshit,” Victor said.

“Aye,” Valla grunted as she knelt to inspect the “thief” again. He was breathing, but some of his bones were clearly bent in the wrong places. “Ancestors! Do me a favor and never tackle me, Victor.”

“I’ll get this room sorted. Just give me an hour, please?” Hine said, glancing at Victor as he surveyed the damage.

“Yeah, I’ve got somewhere to go, anyway,” he turned to Valla, “You gonna take this guy to Rellia? I’d like to know what was going on. Was he targeting my axe, or was he just lucky?”

“Rellia has people that will get the information from him,” she glanced at Victor and then at Hine, “Don’t worry. I’m talking about an imperial, licensed mind caster.”

“Mind caster?”

“Aye,” Hine grunted, “someone with a mind affinity. Damn rare, and damn illegal if you don’t register with the empire.”

“Fuck that,” Victor grunted on instinct. He didn’t like the idea of the empire or anyone requiring someone to register so they could keep tabs on their magic.

“What do you mean?” Valla asked, producing a small amber vial and holding it to the thief’s lips.

“I mean, I don’t like the idea of some imperial agency in charge of my magic. I’m not a mind caster or whatever, but I wouldn’t do it.”

“You don’t understand how dangerous they are. They can make suggestions that, if you heard them, you’d struggle to resist. I could spend the afternoon telling you the horror stories I’ve heard.”

“I’ve seen it,” Hine said quietly.

“Oh?” Victor looked at the man while the thief gasped, and his bones began to click and crack back into the correct positions.

“Aye. We was on duty out near the World Breakers. Me and the rest of the Red Slayer Company. Captain came ‘round and told us to head to a village up in the foothills; I still remember its name—Misty Hollow. When we got there, me and four other hard men and women, we found a man sitting by the village well, just weeping into his hands. In a circle, all ‘round him were the people of the village. Every one of them was slumped over like they’d been sitting on their knees, and their throats were cut. Only one of them held a knife, though, and that’s when

shit went weird.” He glanced at Valla and nervously added, “Pardon my language, Captain.”

“What?” Victor asked as Valla shrugged and shook her head. Not only was the story interesting, but the man was only the second or third native he’d heard say the word “shit.” The sergeant looked down at the thief, and Valla took the hint, flipped him over on his stomach, to his protestations, and tied his hands behind his back. Then the sergeant continued.

“The weeping man took his hands away from his face and looked at us. He said, ‘Stand still,’ and we did. Not one of us took another step. Then he said, to my mate Yorfil, ‘Pick up the knife.’ Ancestors be damned if he didn’t step forward and pick up the knife. Then the weeping man said, tears still falling from his cheeks, ‘Why don’t you cut your throat?’”

“What the fuck?” Victor asked.

“Aye. The others of us, we stood like dummies, unable to move while Yorfil lifted that knife to his throat. I thought he was a goner, and I strained with everything I had to move, but I couldn’t do it! Luckily, I wasn’t the strongest among us, and Batha, the hardest, meanest legionnaire you ever saw, suddenly broke into a charge and drove her spear right through the weepin’ man’s eye. Yorfil dropped the knife, and all was well. At least for us.”

“That’s not the worst, though,” Valla added, “It’s the subtle suggestions that can cause real havoc. The wrong word in a mayor’s ear, a seductive whisper to an attractive man or woman, the hint that a price should be changed on an expensive item—an unregistered mind caster can do a lot of damage.”

“Damn, Valla, sounds like you’ve got more than a few good stories to tell,” Victor said, surprised the woman had said so much.

“On that note,” Valla said, grabbing hold of the thief’s shoulder, “up you go, lad. Come with me; time to tell your tale.” The boy grunted and mumbled something about things not being fair, but Valla hauled him up, then turned to Victor, “You don’t need me for this thing you’ve got to do?”

“No, I’ll be all right. See you here in a few hours. Hey, remember what I said about not wanting people to know where I am.”

“That bird’s flown free, I’m afraid. Still, I’ll let people know you don’t want to be bothered.”

“I’ll be sure no one comes knocking, Victor. I don’t know how this one got in here. Maybe he hid in here after the maids finished last.” He looked at the thief and said, “Well? At least tell us that much! How’d you get in here, boy?”

The young thief winced as Valla squeezed his arm, then he said, “My cloak. I slipped past all three of you, and the lock was no trouble. I came in while you all stood chatting at the landing.”

“Old uncle’s bones!” Hine said, “I thought those locks were good!”

“Not for someone with the right talent,” the kid said; this time, he sounded almost cocky.

“Don’t get too smug,” Valla said. “You’ve got an unpleasant few hours ahead of you.” She turned to Victor as she strode for the door, the thief in tow. “Later, then.”

“Later,” he said, then she was gone. Victor turned to Hine and added, “Sorry about the room. I wasn’t aiming for the bed.”

“I’m embarrassed that this happened to you in my inn. Is there anything I can do to help you with your business?”

Victor thought about it for a minute as he put Lifedrinker into her loop on his belt, then said, “I could use directions. I’m not sure how to get to a place called the Wagon Wheel from here. It’s a, uh, pit fighting place.”

“Aye, I’ve heard of it. I know the way. Would you like me to write out the directions?”

“Nah,” Victor said over his shoulder as he collected his helmet from the bathroom counter. “Just tell me—I won’t forget.” He grinned as he patted his chest where Gorz hung, long-neglected. “I have a memory trick.”

Not long after that, Victor was wending his way through the streets of Persi Gables, glad to have most of his belongings tucked away in his storage rings. People pressed close in the narrower alley-like roads, and though he was big and people hurried out of his way, he still was bumped into constantly. Victor didn’t know much about pickpocketing, but he’d heard of it and figured this was the perfect place for such an activity.

Gorz spoke up from time to time to tell him where to turn, and Victor mentally resolved to talk to the amulet that night—he wanted to show him the new pattern Oynalla had made for him before he made an effort to study and use it. Thinking of Oynalla, Victor smiled—two nights ago, he’d met with her and Thayla again, and they’d given him an update on Deyni. The little girl was already riding around on Starlight, with Chandri leading the animal.

Apparently, she’d gained her Animal Handling skill almost immediately. The clan was excited because they saw great promise in her ability—they hoped she’d advance the skill much further than most hunter folk usually did. Oynalla had groused that the girl should be focusing on her spirit cultivation, but Thayla had retorted, “She can do both!” Victor laughed at the memory as he rounded a corner in the tight, debris-strewn alley, and a familiar sight opened up before his eyes, bringing him back to the present.

“God, it’s so fucking small,” he said, looking at the front of the warehouse with the big, dried-out, warped wagon wheel nailed above the doors. In his memories, the warehouse had loomed large, big as any gym back in Tucson, but that wasn’t the case. Looking through the open doors, he saw a few fighters sparring on the sawdust, and to him, it looked like a hovel—nothing close to the practice facilities back at Rellia’s estate. A burly Shadeni stood near the doors, arms crossed, glaring at the people practicing, and Victor knew he was Yund’s employee, not one he recognized, but the guard was clearly keeping the fighters from leaving.

“How to do this,” Victor muttered as he started striding forward through the alley, kicking an old crate out of his way with this steel-toed boot. It clattered and skidded over the debris-strewn cobbles, and the guard lazily turned toward him. His eyes bulged open, and he straightened up when he saw Victor stomping his way. For lack of a better, more thoughtful plan, Victor had decided to go with muscle and intimidation.

Before he was close enough to talk, he cast Manifest Spirit, and, on an impulsive whim, he fueled it with fear-attuned Energy. His spectral pack of coyotes shimmered into existence, and they were dark, like purple-black shadows. They followed along at his heels, yipping, growling, and looking around with menacing violet, smoky eyes.

“Hold up,” the Shadeni said, putting his hand on a knobby wooden cudgel he wore at his belt.

“Ah-ah,” Victor replied, resting his hand on Lifedrinker. The man was tall, probably over six feet, and had long, twisted black horns, so Victor knew he wasn’t a baseline Shadeni. Still, whatever aura he could project was swallowed by his, and Victor could see the fear in his eyes as they darted around, taking in his weird, yipping companions. Victor dug deep for his most stern voice, allowing some rage to flood his pathways, and said, “I’m not here to kill everyone, but I can if you guys want to push me.”

“What do you want?” the guard asked, his hand falling away from his cudgel.

“Is Yund here? Ponda?”

“Yes, in his office, but he doesn’t want . . .” Victor brushed past the man, and with a mental nudge, one of his coyotes sat down in the doorway, staring at him, a low growl in its chest, and black, smoky fur standing up on its back in a ridge.

“Don’t move around, or that hound will rip out your throat.” Victor didn’t know if the coyote could really take the man, but he didn’t think the guard did either. He stood there, mouth open, and watched as Victor and his other four companions stalked onto the practice floor.

Victor glared around at the eight or so fighters, all dressed in rags of cloth or scraps of leather. Not one of them looked like they'd seen a good meal in the last week, and they were universally filthy. "Be calm!" Victor called out, and he cast Inspiring Presence.

The dingy, straw and sand-covered hall grew brighter, and the fighters stood up a little straighter, nodding at Victor, and he saw something light up in their eyes, something bright, and it took him a minute to understand—he was seeing hope born. "Wait here." He looked at them each and settled on an older man, a lean Ardeni with violet hair and eyes, and he added, "If Ponda comes around, come and knock on the door. I'm going to talk to Yund."

"Aye," the man said, not missing a beat, staring at Victor with that gleam in his eyes. Victor nodded and, not wanting to pin everything on a stranger, willed one of his coyotes to sit in the center of the practice hall, alert for any other of Yund's thugs that might wander in. Then he walked up to Yund's office door and yanked it open, ripping the bolt through the wooden doorframe.

"What in the hells?" Yund yowled, standing up from behind his desk and reaching for a twin-bladed axe that hung on the wall next to his chair. He was the same old guy Victor used to know, but he seemed puny, which really threw Victor for a loop. Sure, he expected the Wagon Wheel to appear different. He knew places you experience in one phase of your life could seem smaller or emptier, minus the people and feelings you had while there.

Yund, though, he'd been a giant in Victor's mind, a terrifying menace that could swat him like a fly. Someone with immense power and wealth that held Victor's life in the palm of his hand. Here he was, though, not so tall, quite fat, slow, with jiggling jowls and cheap clothes. Even his axe looked like something Victor would leave lying on the battlefield. "Hey, Yund, you old asshole."

"Wha . . ."

Victor stepped through the doorway, ducking to avoid hitting his head on the lintel, and his three yipping, growling shadows slinked in around him, taking up various dark corners of the room. Yund began to sweat, and his words died in his throat as his eyes bulged and his hands began to tremble. "Sit down," Victor said, and Yund practically collapsed into his chair.

"Do I know you, sir? Is this about the money I owe Tharjis?" Yund looked from Victor to Lifedrinker, then let his eyes dart around at the shadowy hounds emanating their dark aura, and Victor actually saw him gulp. That gave him pause, and as he took in a deep breath, he realized he was channeling a lot of rage-attuned Energy into his pathways, more than he'd intended.

Looming there, over Yund's desk, Victor saw a red, flickering light reflected on the shiny, brass shield hanging behind Yund, and he knew he was starting to glow with a red aura. Not only that, but he had, at some point, lifted Lifedrinker free from his belt, and the fact that she was in his hands, humming for action, almost drove him into a frenzy. It was with a monumental effort of will that he reeled in his rage and slowly forced in and out another long, slow breath.

“You don’t recognize me, asshole?” Victor asked, leaning closer.

“No, um, is it you that I owe?” Yund stammered, his jowls shaking with the way his head darted left and right, searching for answers in the corners of the room.

“How I’ve changed, eh? So much that you can’t see it in my eyes. Isn’t my skin enough? Sure, I’ve seen some sun, but I’m still the only tan-colored mother fucker in this city with no wings. Come on, asshole. Look into my eyes.” Victor leaned in close, and that’s when the light ignited in Yund’s panicked face.

“V . . . V . . . Victor? Ancestors, boy! You can’t blame me for what that noble did! My hands were tied . . .”

“No, pendejo, my fucking hands were tied!” Victor growled, and suddenly all his rage was back, and he smashed Yund’s desk with Lifedrinker, utterly reducing it to kindling with the rage-fueled swing. He pushed through the ruined furnishing and grabbed Yund’s leather collar, lifting the man from his feet and pressing him against the rear wall of the office, crumpling the cheap shield hanging there.

“God, I want to fucking squeeze your head off,” he hissed, pushing his face an inch from Yund’s.

“Wa . . . wait, Victor!” Yund wheezed.

“Where are your fucking contracts?” Victor growled, and he knew he was glowing again. He knew his hand was hot where it pressed into Yund’s chest, and Lifedrinker buzzed in his other hand, begging him to let go, to Berserk and lay waste to the entire place.

“In my ring . . .”

“Right, if you want to live . . .” Just then, a bang on the door sounded while his coyote howled from the practice floor. “Sit down!” He pushed Yund into his chair and gestured to his coyotes, “They’re watching you.” Then he gripped Lifedrinker and, with a kick that finished off the door, sending it flying off its hinges, strode back onto the practice floor.

Ponda, the door guy, and two other thugs were standing in the center of the hall, cudgels and even shields equipped. The two coyotes Victor had left on watch were stalking them, walking in slow circles around the four henchmen, and when Victor exploded from the office, they broke off and came to stand on either side of him. Victor stared at Ponda, and it only took a moment for the light of recognition to shine in the big Vodkin’s eyes.

Victor grinned, staring at Ponda. At one time, he’d almost thought of the Vodkin in friendly terms—he’d seemed sort of cool the way he spoke with the fighters and talked shit about Yund behind his back. He’d seemed a giant to Victor back then, and he was a huge man, close to Victor’s size, though that would be a different story if Victor lost himself to rage, and he felt damn close. “You fucking stupid, Ponda? The game’s over. Time to go find a new job.”

“Victor? Little runt with an anger problem? Why’d you come back, kid? Yund ain’t worth your time, especially if you got free.”

“You’re right about that much, Ponda. He’s not worth my time, but they are,” Victor gestured with his axe at the fighters standing around.

“Come on, Victor! There’re hundreds, thousands of people like them in the city. How about Gelica? Or a dozen other cities I could name. You think killing Yund and taking a handful of fighters will make a difference?”

“It’ll make a difference to them,” Victor growled, pointing at a woman sitting against the wall, head in her hands. He stepped forward, desperately wanting to project his fear Energy, wanting to see the panic in their eyes, wanting to hear their screams as he ran behind them and cut them down with merciless cleaves. His fear Core pulsed and throbbed, begging him to release it, and then Oynalla’s words came to him, bouncing around in his skull, warning him to hold back from overusing that attunement. He stopped and sucked in a deep breath, and said, “Fuck off, Ponda. I don’t want to wake up at night thinking about how I cut you to pieces.”

“C’mon, Victor, I know you, kid. Sure, you’ve put on some muscle, but it hasn’t been that long. I’m tier three, and these whoresons aren’t far behind. Just take off, huh? I’ll tell Yund we beat you up and sent you packing.” He glanced at his wide-eyed companions, and they seemed to take heart in his words. In fact, they appeared bolstered, and Victor wondered if Ponda was using some kind of ability.

Victor decided it was time to put an end to the talking; he reached into his Core and reversed the pressure of his will on his rage-attuned Core. He cast Berserk as the heat of his Energy flooded him, and he screamed his titanic fury at the sky. His body doubled in mass, maybe more, and tremendous corded muscles shot up around his shoulders, neck, and arms. His legs became like tree trunks, and his terrible shriek grew in volume until the people standing around clapped their hands to their ears and backed away, wide-eyed, as Victor lifted Lifedrinker, one-handed, into the air.

“I said, fucking leave, Ponda!” he roared, his voice like a monster’s, hoarse, deep, grinding. It rolled out of his throat like an avalanche. So effective were his words and actions that Ponda and his three cronies turned and, without a second glance, bolted from the warehouse. Victor’s instinct was to give chase, to cut them down, and his coyotes looked at him, whining, prancing toward the door and back again, shaking with the urge to run after the fleeing enemies.

“Hold,” he rumbled, and Victor realized he was still himself. He’d pushed his rage out, cast berserk, but he wasn’t truly angry; the fury of his scream had come from a deeper part of himself, and his waking mind didn’t resonate with it—not that day. He turned—a giant, limned in red, glowing Energy, eyes bloody

with harnessed murder—and growled at the people standing around, “Don’t flee. I’m getting your contracts.”

Victor turned and, still berserk, stomped toward the office. He didn’t fit in the doorway, so he smashed a shoulder into the wall next to the door, widening it. Stooped over, he advanced on Yund and growled, his breath coming out like a bellows, “Ring.”

Yund fumbled with his hand, trying to slide the ring from his left pointer finger, but it was tight, and didn’t want to come off. Victor reached out and snatched the man’s hand, tiny, like a child’s, and a part of Victor’s mind wanted to bite it off—who was this puny man to stand in his presence? He clamped down on that thought, though, and with his thumb and the meat of his pointer finger, he grabbed Yund’s ring and pulled. It slid off easily, though Yund screamed, and Victor realized he’d pulled off a long strip of the man’s skin.

He shook the ring, so the bloody skin fell off, then he grunted, “Unbond.” Yund’s face, red by nature, had faded to a wan pink, and his eyes widened further still at the command.

“Victor, all my contracts, much of my wealth is in that . . .”

“Unbond,” Victor growled again and, already stooping over, leaned closer, so his huge, blood-red eyes were staring into Yund’s. The man gingerly reached out with his non-bloodied hand and touched the ring. He held his finger there for a brief moment, and then he pulled it away, a crestfallen, ruined look on his face.

Victor felt his rage cooling and knew he’d lose his Berserk any moment, so he took Yund by the neck and dragged him out of the office. He threw him, tumbling through the sand and filthy hay, to slide up to a group of three fighters lingering closer to the exit than Victor had last seen them. “Hold,” he grunted, then he put his hands on his knees and breathed, allowing his anger to fade and his rage-attuned Energy to seep back into his Core.

Yund groaned and writhed, clearly further injured by his long slide over the rough floor, but the three fighters pounced on him. One slid his practice sword under Yund’s chin and braced his knees against his back, forcing the much larger man to gasp, and struggle for breath. Victor, back to his usual self, cleared his throat and said, “Someone come here. I’ll give you the key to the cells, and I want everyone out here. Tell them I’m giving you all your contracts and a share of Yund’s wealth.”