

The Veingel
by Jeremy James

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Chapter 1

2:00 AM. New York City.

“Jequon. Shoot.”

“My name is Uri Kolenkov. Five-hundred-thousand dollars. Cash.” The Russian speaks heavily accented English. Not the language anyone who should have this number would use. ‘Dollars’ is rendered *dole-irs*. ‘Cash,’ *cawsh*. “You bring the money to Sarajevo and I’ll guard the body a little longer,” he says.

“Guard who?”

“His name is Lucian... a few hundred years old perhaps? Young for your kind.”

“Understood.” I’ve never met this twice-removed cousin of mine, but I am very close to his father, the Council member, Samsaveel.

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“Twenty-four hours. Then I leave him here,” he says.

“I’ll be there.”

Now I’m starting to worry.

23 Hours Later. Sarajevo Train Depot.

You know that bass-heavy techno beat they play whenever the badass motherfucker first appears onscreen in a Hollywood blockbuster? Where they slow down their trench coat, dark-shades-strut until it’s choppy and lethal? You wouldn’t believe how accurate that is—almost verbatim the soundtrack cranking in my head right now. And I’ve gotta tell you, it pisses me off I had to wait the better part of 9,000 years to enjoy a synthesizer, or the adrenaline boost from an electric guitar. Tribal drums, the harp, the lyre—it’s just not the same.

Off the train, briefcase in hand, I step out of the way of my fellow travelers and let them pass, eager as they must be to reach their destination before sunset. Aside from the deadly instrumental in my head, my whole world is three things: don’t quit, don’t die, get answers. Most importantly, find out how these fundamentalist fuck-stains have quadrupled their kill-rate after centuries of merely sporadic success murdering my people.

I remain on the platform for a beat, soaking in every possible avenue of attack available to the enemy. So far, no obvious threats. Ordinarily I might stand here another ten minutes pretending to smoke, just to be sure. But the clock’s ticking.

Clear enough. I hustle through the station and out front to the cab line. The streets are loud with honking and revving engines as people navigate their way through the logjam of suitcase toting pedestrians. I stick to the curb and try to get the attention of a taxi. At six-foot-three-inches, and two-hundred-thirty-pounds, I'm no giant—at least not by today's standards—but in this country, where much of the populace grew up malnourished, I'm a muscled blonde tower.

A young, stern-faced mother stands beside me, clutching her little girl's hand even harder than I grip my five-hundred G's. The pig-tailed princess smiles up at me, maybe proud of her tiny painted fingernails, before returning her attention to the other side of the street.

“Grandma!” she exclaims, waving frantically at an elegantly dressed older woman who smiles and waves back to her. She wriggles free of her mother's hand, and darts triumphantly away toward the oncoming traffic, not a worry in the world.

I reach out for her before she's pattered more than two steps. I might have made a good father if not for—

The first bullet hisses as it passes harmlessly over my head—a curb higher than my temple—close enough to tousle my hair. The second bullet slices cleanly through the triangular wedge of muscle above my collarbone and beside the neck. A chest shot if I hadn't tried to save Pig Tails.

Now it's nothing but screeching brakes and a blaring horn, and mom shrieking *no-ooo!* behind me, frozen as her pride and joy prances into certain death.

But she's safe. She's in the crook of my arm, gaping up at me with wide eyes. So far, no one notices the little rivulets of blood streaming out of the exit wound and down the same arm I clutch her with. People applaud, cheering my "heroic" act. I turn and hand off Pig Tails to her mother who's too stunned to say anything. She's aware of nothing except her precious Sabine as she repeats the girl's name over and over and kisses her hair. Now I'm starting to feel it.

I turn back to the street and practically fall into the backseat of the waiting cab; the little girl had risked everything to hail it for me.

"Drive," I say, more of a grunt than a request. The pain is intense even though it's masked by endorphins.

"Where to?"

"I'll tell you in a minute." I lie down across the length of the backseat, trying to get my head lower than the windows. I'm pretty sure the cabbie sees the mushroom of blood wicking through the leather of my overcoat.

"Is everything alright sir?" He sounds very alarmed. Hasn't even remembered to start the meter.

"Fine," I say. "Just give me a minute. Drive wherever." I fish the address Uri gave me out of my pocket and hand it up to him with a shaky hand. "There," I say. "Go there. Quickly."

I force my mind to focus on the last sixty seconds.

The bullets came from opposite directions. Two gunmen. Suppressed rifles, both; no sound except the turbulence as the first bullet whooshed past. The one that hit me

punched right through, which means it was a jacketed round, the kind snipers use to protect their precision barrels. Normally a sniper wouldn't bother silencing their weapon, because the extra hardware impedes accuracy, and they're usually so far away from their target that no one can pinpoint their location anyway. They must've been close then, ready to finish me off in case I didn't drop—or in case I *did* drop, and they needed to kill the part of me that won't die so easily.

The cabbie calls out to me from the front seat, "Sir! You are bleeding, sir!"

There's no hiding it now. My right sleeve is saturated, and droplets fall from the cuff onto my pant leg. My undershirt clings to my spine as it channels the blood from the entry wound down into the groove between my spinal erectors, and then past my tailbone and into my ass crack.

I lie, "I'm fine, keep driving."

"I will take you to a hospital. There is one ahead."

"No," I say. "Keep driving."

"Then you will have to get out of my cab, sir. You will ruin my seats. This is my livelihood. I am sorry sir."

The cabbie slows and pulls to the side of the road, his unblinking eyes fixed on me in the rearview. I can't blame him. And I'm in no condition to argue. I have to save my energy. I nod to the mirror and say alright. I crack the lid on the briefcase and grab a bound stack of crisp hundreds. Ten-grand worth—no time to fiddle with loosing one from the bundle. I hand it up to him and get out.

"Go get your seats cleaned," I say. "And you never saw me."

He nods and speeds off. I start walking. Here the road parallels the banks of the Milijacka river. From what I remember of the city, the address is not far. For the time being, another ambush is unlikely. The shooters only saw the direction I'm traveling, and that's obviously no secret. But getting dropped here was pure happenstance, and they'd have no way to know in advance where best to position another sniper. Instead, they'll wait until I get closer.

Don't quit, don't die, get answers.

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