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Excerpt from *Endgame: The Calling*
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“It’s time,” I said to Kat.
We double-checked our guns, made sure they were loaded, flicked off the
safeties, and headed down the hall. We stopped at room 412. It was five in
the morning.
*Ready?* Kat mouthed.
I nodded.
I knocked on the door.
This was it—what we had been preparing for all summer. We—just Kat and I
—we were knocking on the door of a Player. Raakel, the Minoan. Last week, Kat
and I had planted a bomb next to her house in Istanbul, “inviting” her to
come to Zero line’s fake Calling. We thought she might have died in the
explosion—the bomb was supposed to imitate a sign from the heavens, a
message from the alien Makers.
And now we were supposed to reason with her, with this Player who was
trained to be a killing machine. That’s what a Calling was meant to be: the
starting point of a bloodbath in which twelve killing machines,
representatives of their civilizations, would each try to be the last one
standing in a global fight that would decide the fate of the world.
And we needed to stop it.
My M1911 pistol was tucked into the back of my pants, covered by a long
Munich Olympics T-shirt. Kat was carrying a Beretta in the front pocket of
her sweatshirt. I had my backpack for our walkie-talkie and a few other
supplies we might need.
There was the sound of the deadbolt being unlocked, and I tensed up, wishing
my gun were in my hand. But no. We were here to talk to her, not to kill her.
Kat and I already had blood on our hands, and we didn’t want more.
The door opened.
Raakel stood there, fully dressed in a pair of jeans and a loose blouse. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail. There was a smirk on her face. Despite the early hour, she looked fully awake and ready for the Calling.
“I was wondering when you would show up,” she said with very little accent. “You followed me with all the stealth of stampeding bulls. You’re staying in a house with sixteen or seventeen others?”
I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. We were supposed to be surprising her, not the other way around.
“We’re here to talk to you,” Kat said.
“How do you know who I am?” Raakel asked. “For that matter, who do you think I am?”
Kat answered. “You’re the Player for the Minoans.”
“How do you know this?” she asked. “What line are you from?”
“Zero line,” I said, finally getting my voice back. “We have important things to talk to you about.”
“There is no such line.” She opened the door an inch or two wider, just enough to let us pass. With her eyes trained carefully on us the whole time, she motioned us into her room. I caught a flash of metal at her side, and I realized she was carrying a blade that looked like a sword of some kind. My pulse was pounding so loud I was sure she could hear it.
“Consider us a group of concerned citizens,” Kat said. I noticed the shake in her voice, and I wondered if Raakel could tell how nervous we were.
Raakel laughed as she closed the door. I walked to the table in the corner of the room, and when we sat, I got a better look at the weapon she was holding: a long, skinny machete. My heart jumped into my throat at the look of the sword.
“Oh, this?” she said with a cold smile, sitting on the foot of the bed and laying the sword across her lap. “It’s called a yatağan. I assume you’re both armed. I wanted to even things out. Now: talk.”
Kat and I gave each other a look. Her tanned face was pale, or maybe it was just an effect of the lamplight. She was scared. I wondered if she could see the same fear on me.
I turned to Raakel. “We’re here to tell you to give this up. Our group is talking to all twelve lines this morning. We want you to ignore the Calling, and to stop Playing.”
Raakel laughed. “I am a Player. I’ve trained for this for seventeen years. My
whole life. It’s not just something I do; it’s who I am. Why on earth would I give it up just because two strangers ask me to?”

“The Makers shouldn’t be running the world. They shouldn’t be toying with humanity like this. It’s just a game they’re playing.”

“It’s a game I’m Playing,” she said.

Kat and I exchanged glances. We knew we were right, but I don’t think either of us felt fully prepared to convince someone to give up everything that made them who they were.

“You have to give it up. All of you do—all of the Players from all of the lines. Listen: if you don’t Play—if we can keep everyone from Playing—then there can be no Endgame. We can save the world.” Raakel narrowed her eyes.

Kat jumped in. “The best way things can work out right now is that one of you wins and only your line will survive, and the other eleven lines on Earth get destroyed. Right? That’s the best-case scenario if you Play Endgame. Millions of people will still die.”

“And you two think that my not Playing will save those lives?” Raakel tightened her grip on the machete. “I don’t know what you believe you understand about Endgame, but this entire world rests on the game. The history of the human race rests on the game. That’s why we Play. It’s always been this way.”

“But,” I said, “what happens if no one Plays? If there’s no winner, there will be no losers.”

She shook her head. “If there’s no winner, we all become the losers. If we defy the Makers, what’s to stop them from killing all of us as punishment? Just wiping us off the face of the Earth and starting over?”

“Here,” I said. I reached to pull several papers from my back pocket.

Raakel jumped up, her sword ready in her hand.

“Sorry,” I said, freezing. “I have something for you to read. Can I just pull it out of my pocket?”

“You read it to me,” she said.

I had spent a year as a furniture salesman, and I knew when I was losing a customer. Usually they didn’t threaten me with swords, though.

With trembling fingers, I unfolded the Xeroxed pages. “This is from an ancient document that we acquired from trusted sources on the inside.

“This is the lie, the one that has fueled your life and the lives of all who have...
come before you. I have risked everything to remove the veil of mystery that
shrouds the Annunaki. . . . It will all be for nothing. . . .
“The Mu had a choice. You have a choice.
“To Play the game is to lose the game . . .
“Prove to the Annunaki that you are not mindless animals, that you can
think. . . . We, all of us, deserve a chance to live.
“Choose to question what you have been taught.
“Choose to be free, that we might all be free.
“Choose not to Play.’”
Kat spoke. “That’s from the Brotherhood of the Snake. We know at least two
lines had this document in their archives. Maybe you recognize it?”
“The Brotherhood of the Snake?” Raakel scoffed. “Who are they to tell me
how I should be Playing? I’ve never even heard of them.”
“Just think about it,” Kat said. “I totally understand what you’re feeling right
now. You’re being confronted by two people you don’t know, and you’re
being told to give up everything that you’ve ever been trained to believe. But
this is real. It doesn’t get more important than this.”
I watched Raakel watch Kat, her eyes narrowing. Now that we were sitting
there, facing a real Player, I couldn’t help but see the cracks in our plan.
We’d been thinking about this as a question of reason, that the Players would
discuss it rationally. But I didn’t realize until now what an emotional decision
we were asking them to make. What did it feel like to be asked to give up
your entire belief system? I remembered how hard it had been for me to
believe in what Zero line was doing. It took having my hand forced—
realizing I had nothing left—for me to join them. I wondered: If I’d had a real
choice, would I have left Berkeley to go on this crazy mission?
Raakel shifted the sword to her left hand.
“So what if I don’t Play, and you can’t convince every other line? I will have
to Play, or my line will perish.”
“We’re out this morning to stop every other line,” I said. “That’s our goal.”
“Why should I trust you? Maybe you’re working for another line, trying to
remove some of the Players.”
“Look at me,” I said, raising my voice slightly. “My name is Michael
Stavros. I’m Greek. Odds are I’m a Minoan, just like you. If I believed that
stopping you would cause the death of me and all my family, do you really
think I’d be doing it?”
“What is this word you use? Stop? What is that supposed to mean?”
Kat’s voice was pleading now. “It means that we want you to turn around and get on a plane back to Istanbul. Don’t Play the game.”
“Just ‘don’t Play the game’?”
“That’s right,” she said. “Don’t Play the game.”
“And what do I tell my family? My line? Their hopes are pinned on me. The lives of millions rest on my shoulders. And I should just turn my back on my responsibility?”
“You tell them just what we’re telling you. That you don’t believe in it. That you’re walking away.”
Raakel stood up. For what felt like several minutes she paced the room. The machete never left her hand.
“And if you can’t convince me to do that, how are you supposed to stop me? Does your Zero line have a plan for that?”
Damn it. For a minute I’d thought we had her.
“We’re supposed to stop you,” Kat said. “That’s all. Stop.”
“You think it will be that easy? You underestimate me. I know some of the other lines,” Raakel said. “We watch each other. The Harappan. You will not ‘stop’ him. And the Mu. And probably many others. You will fail. And then what will you do?”
“We will stop them,” I said. “We will.”
My heart rate was skyrocketing, and I felt sick to my stomach. We were going to have to kill her. One of us had to draw our gun and fire it before Raakel could swing her vicious sword.
I hadn’t shot anyone since I killed the sheriff back in California. That seemed so long ago, but so present. I still saw that man’s face down the sights of a gun, no matter how many rounds I had fired down the shooting range.
“Stop us how?”
Neither Kat nor I said anything. We sat, tense, staring at Raakel and the sword in her hand. This was not how this discussion was supposed to go. She was supposed to see reason. She was supposed to know that the game didn’t have to be Played. But I saw now how naïve we were being.
One of us is going to die.
Raakel was going to swing her sword and kill one of us, and if we were lucky, the other one would draw their gun and shoot before she turned on them. And that was the best case. The worst was that neither Kat nor I would
make it out of here alive. We were going up against people who had been trained by mentors like Walter. The Players were too good for us. And they had been indoctrinated from birth. They weren’t going to be convinced in a 20-minute conversation. They weren’t going to give up on everything they’d been raised to believe.

“There’s more to this book from the Brotherhood of the Snake,” I said, trying to get Raakel to think about something other than killing us, and the meaning of “stop.”

“What else is in there?” she said, but she was smiling, toying with us. This was the start of the game for her. She was enjoying it. Two easy kills before moving on to the real Calling.

“It gives the history of the game,” I said. “It explains how the Makers started Endgame as just that: a game.”

Kat jumped in. “You don’t have to fight. The Makers started all of this as sport for themselves—initially they just hunted us themselves. Then they turned us on each other.”

As I sat there and watched her, I realized something: this was real. I had had my doubts all summer, while we were at the ranch and hearing John and Walter talk to us every night about the Players, the Calling, Endgame itself. Even while we were delivering invitations, there was a voice in the back of my mind that said that Agatha, Walter, and all the others were delusional. That aliens weren’t real. But now I had to face the facts. There really were Players. They really had responded to our bizarre invitations. They didn’t just have to Play. They were eager to.

Raakel stood up, and we did the same. I felt the gun heavy and cold against my back.

“We are done,” she said.

“Here,” I begged. “Read the pages.” I pushed the papers to her. If she took them and looked down, we could get the jump on her.

She glanced down at the papers, laughing. “I don’t care what your book says. I don’t know where it came from, and there’s no reason I should believe it. Like I said: maybe you’re from another line? Maybe you’re trying to get rid of your competition.”

“Just read the pages,” I said again. “Please.”

She laughed and took them from me, and immediately Kat and I both grabbed our guns.
There was a flash of movement, the papers dropping from her hands. She changed the sword back to her right hand—she wasn’t ready; she had been too cocky.

I saw the Beretta in Kat’s hand before I could draw my gun. Raakel swung the sword just as Kat fired.

The sword hit Kat in the arm, and she screamed. Raakel grunted loudly, reminding me of a tennis player whose racket had just connected with a hard serve.

My gun was out and I fired. We were too close for me to miss her, but I was scared, trembling, and my shots were off target: my first hit her in the thigh; then I hit her stomach three times.

Kat dropped the Beretta from her injured hand, and Raakel dropped the sword.

“Aman tanr m,” Raakel said, as she stumbled back and sat on the bed.

There was blood everywhere—spatters all across the blankets, a sure sign that the bullets I’d fired had exited her back. She had her hands on her abdomen.

“Aman tanr m,” she said again, sucking in air as the blood flowed. “Bok. What did you do?”

“We had to stop you,” I said.

Next to me, Kat ran for the bathroom.

“Kat?” I called.

“I need a towel,” she said. There was a trail of her blood on the carpet.

“We have to get out of here!”

“You’re fools,” Raakel said with a wince. “You can’t stop everyone. You can’t stop the Makers.”

“You should have listened,” I said.

“Someone will take my place.” Raakel’s voice was weak. “Don’t you know that? And someone will take their place. And it will continue. There’s no way to stop us.”

“We’re going to stop everyone,” I said.

She grimaced, hunching over. “Kill me,” she said. “You want to stop me, so just do it. I’m going to bleed out.”

I held the gun to her head.

There was the sheriff. There was Tommy. Staring back at me with lifeless eyes over the barrel of my gun.
Kat came back. “We have to get out of here.” She had a white hand towel wrapped around her arm. “I need you to tie this.”

“Just do it,” Raakel repeated.

I couldn’t force myself to look at her.

“Do it,” Kat said.

I closed my eyes and fired two bullets into Raakel’s head. When I looked again, Raakel was slumped over, sliding off the bed and onto the floor in front of me.

“You tried, Mike,” Kat said, gritting her own teeth against the pain. “We both tried as hard as we could.”

“Did we? Well, it wasn’t good enough.” I felt tears welling up in my throat, hot and painful. “Kat, I don’t know if we’re going to convince any of them.”

“I need you to tie this,” she said again, her voice shaking. I turned and looked at her. She was pale and scared.

“Come on,” she said. “We’re going to have police on us any minute now. We probably woke up everyone in this whole hotel.”

I put my gun back in my waistband and took the ends of the towel in my hands. “How is it?” I asked, as I tied it into a makeshift bandage.

“It’s the back of my arm,” she said. “So no arteries or anything like that. But it went down to the bone. I need stitches.”

I tightened it and then reached down to pick up her fallen gun. She took it with her left hand.

“There’s a back stairway,” she said.

“Okay.”

She took a robe from the closet and pulled it on, putting the Beretta into a pocket. As we got outside into the hall, we saw a dozen other guests, most of them in pajamas or bathrobes; they all looked tired and bewildered, wondering where the noise had come from. Rumors of whatever was going on in the Olympic apartments had to be passing around. Kat and I played it cool, trying to take on the same look that the others had.

An employee of the hotel made an announcement in German that I didn’t understand, but Kat did.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said.

“The back?” I asked.

“No, the lobby.”

At the front desk Kat asked the clerk a question in German, and he nodded.
He opened a drawer, neatly organized with all kinds of toiletries: toothbrushes, shower caps, fingernail clippers. He pulled out a little packet and a book of matches and handed them to Kat.

“Danke,” she said.

“Bitte.”

We slipped out the front door and crossed the street to a park. It was still dark out, but the eastern sky was beginning to lighten.

“What’s that?” I asked, as she led me to a picnic table.

“A sewing kit,” she said, sitting down and opening the small packet, revealing thread, needles, and a couple of buttons. “You’re going to stitch me up.”
CHAPTER TWO

We had a first aid kit in the backpack and she opened it and took two painkillers. I opened an alcohol swab and wiped the vicious gouge. The Turkish blade had cut cleanly—a straight cut through the sweatshirt, skin, muscle, down to the bone. I lit a match to sterilize the needle and then tried to follow Kat’s instructions to stitch the wound up cleanly. It took me a few minutes to get the hang of it—I was timid at first, knowing how much pain she had to be in—but I soon figured it out. It was going to be an awful-looking scar, but she said it had to be done.

While I worked, she got on the walkie-talkie and called to report in.

She had the earphone in, so I couldn’t follow most of the conversation.

“We had to kill her,” Kat said. “Yes . . . No, there was no other choice. . . . No. No. At least I don’t think so. . . . Yes. Mike is stitching me up, but I’m not going to be able to use my right hand. It severed the muscle and tendons I think. I need a hospital. . . . We’re in a park across from the hotel. . . . Okay. We’ll see you.”

There was a long pause, and she looked down at the slash. She was far more comfortable with blood and being stitched up than I was. I didn’t know what kind of pain pills she’d taken, but they must have been strong. She’d been the one to make the first aid kits, and I’d have been willing to bet that she’d taken the pills from the clinic where she worked—these weren’t over-the-counter medications.

“How are we going to explain this to a hospital?” I asked. “People don’t normally stitch themselves up.”

“You’d be surprised what people do,” she said. “Lots of patients self-medicate, and do crazy things like try to remove teeth with pliers or try to close a wound with superglue. That one’s not so crazy. It works pretty well for small stuff. Medics use it in Vietnam. I don’t know if it’s been studied for
toxicity, though.”
“You’re not going to be able to use your hand?”
“No, since you’re not suturing the tendons. That’s going to need a hospital.”
“Then what good is stitching?”
She smiled through her pain. “It stops the bleeding.”
“What did John have to say?” I asked, gesturing to the walkie-talkie.
“Mary and Tyson had to kill their Player too. The Koori. Tyson took a bullet, and they’re in the hospital. Walter is off meeting with the Cahokian. He thinks he’ll be able to reason with him, since they know each other.”
I concentrated on the last little bit of the wound, as Kat instructed me how to close it and tie the thread off. When I finished, I took her injured hand in mine. She moved her fingers a little, just to see what they could still do.
“I’m sorry,” I said. “I thought that I could draw my gun faster than she could attack.”
“It’s okay,” Kat said.
“You know what, though? I honestly thought she’d be a lot harder to kill. I thought she had some kind of trick up her sleeve. Walter and Agatha really made these guys out to be worse than they are.”
“I don’t know. You’re not the one who got hacked with a sword.”
I laughed a little. “Fair point. You know what’s weird? No police are going to the hotel. We fired, what, five shots? Six? And nobody is there to investigate.”
“Maybe they came and they just don’t have their sirens on. I can’t see the entrance to the hotel from here.”
I nodded. They could be going room to room with a SWAT team, searching for bullet holes, looking for bodies. They’d find Raakel and her sword and that would be that. It would be a puzzle that they never solved. At least I hoped they’d never solve it. No police department would ever believe in Endgame, would they? Not even when they found Raakel and the Koori.
“What are we supposed to do about the Aksumite?” I asked, suddenly worried about everybody. “Rodney and Jim and Julia never came back from Ethiopia. Agatha never spotted the Aksumite Player. I think we have to assume he killed them?”
“Maybe the bomb went off too soon and killed them.”
“Either way, that’s a loose end we need to tie up.”
“Maybe.” Then she stopped. Her face grew even paler than it already was. “Wait. Mike. Did you get the pages off the floor—the Brotherhood of the Snake stuff?”

My heart dropped. “No. And that’s my only copy.”

“That’s our only copy,” she said. “But that’s not what I’m worried about. Our fingerprints are all over that thing.”

“They’ll be all over the table and chairs too,” I said.

“Yeah, but there will be a thousand fingerprints on the table, from everyone who has stayed in that room. But those papers lead directly back to us—just our prints and Raakel’s. We’ll get put into a database from Interpol or something.”

“But they can’t connect us to anything,” I said. “Right?”

“What about the gun store robbery? The bank robbery? Both our prints were at the bank.”

“There’d be no reason why a shooting at the Olympics in Munich would ever be connected to a bank robbery in California. No one would make the connection. No one would compare the prints.”

She pulled the robe closer around herself, as if she was cold. “Except that there’s some kind of terrorist attack going on at the same time we’re killing people in their hotel rooms. And how many witnesses saw us come out of that door?”

“We can’t just go back there,” I said. “There’s no way we can get them back. We’re screwed, Kat.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “We need to talk to John and Walter. They’re all coming here, after Mary gets done with Tyson.”

“Why here?”

“It’s kind of a central location. We’re all going to meet up and try some new tactics.”

I nodded. “Good. Because Raakel was totally unswayed by our arguments.”

Kat stood, but she was a little unsteady on her feet. “You okay?” I asked. Kat was stronger than most people I knew, but everyone had a limit. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t reached mine yet.

“Let’s get to a more concealed part of the park.”

“Right. And you need to get out of that bathrobe.”

“Everyone else is in robes,” she said, gesturing to the hotel guests who had filled the street after the alarms went off. “You wear it.”
“But we don’t want to look like we came out of that place.”
Kat set her face in a grimace. “You need to get in there, fast,” Kat said, with a slight slur. “Go now, while everyone is outside and the police haven’t arrived yet. I’d go with you, but I think I’m not fit for service right now.”
I helped her down on a park bench, farther from the street now that it was getting light.
“Stay here,” I said.
I took another look at the slice in her arm and my poor, uneven stitching. She was definitely going to have a scar—but hopefully she’d regain the use of her fingers. At least the bleeding had stopped.
She took a pouch of something out of the first aid kid—some kind of antibacterial something—and squirted it all along the cut.
“Can you help me with the bandage?” she said, pulling two-inch squares of gauze from the first aid kit.
She held the cotton down with her left hand, and I taped it on. I was no surgeon—I wrapped a strip of tape all the way around her arm twice.
I took the robe from her and put it on myself. I left her gun with her, in the backpack. The robe was snug, but no one else looked particularly well dressed. They’d been awakened by a fire alarm early in the morning. The fact that my robe had blood on it seemed to go unnoticed by anyone in the crowd. There was a lot, but it mostly stained the inside of the fluffy material, not soaking through.
Despite the fire alarm and the noise of bullets, there were only two fire trucks—no police at all yet.
“Absurd,” a man next to me said in a proper English accent. “To be awakened at this hour is absurd. They don’t even know what they’re looking for. I don’t see any smoke. Do you?”
“No,” I said. “And I have to get inside. If there is a fire, I have documents in there that can’t be destroyed.”
“Good luck. The concierge is turning everyone away at the door.”
I hadn’t had a good look at the entrance, so I bade good morning to the man, and walked around a fire truck, the word FEUERWEHR emblazoned on the front. There was a single man at the top of the stairs—a balding man in a suit and tie, who was giving his assurances in English and German to the guests that everything would be fine. He said it was likely a false alarm.
“Wait to go in,” a voice behind me said.
I startled and looked back. It was John.
“How did you get here so fast?”
“I was only down the street at the Staatlich hotel. Say good-bye to the La Tène.”
“I thought that Agatha was going after the La Tène?”
“Agatha talked to the La Tène last night. But he wouldn’t get on board. Agatha left him for us—he wouldn’t agree to stop Playing, and she said she wasn’t going to kill anyone.”
“You had to kill?”
He nodded, his lips forming a thin line. “I think we’re going to have to kill more today.”
“I knew what you meant. Where is she?”
“In the park. I stitched her up, but she won’t be using her right hand anytime soon.”
“Damn.”
“Yeah. And I left evidence in the room. I’ve got to get in there.”
“What did you leave?”
“The Brotherhood of the Snake papers.”
“Some good they did, right?”
“Yeah,” I said, annoyed by how casual John was. He was always like this. Walter was the one who barked orders. John just talked like a normal person. He talked like a peacenik half the time, and I’d rarely seen someone get a rise out of him.
“Who says you need to go back inside and get them?”
“Our fingerprints are all over them.”
“It’s a risk we have to take. You can’t go back in there.”
“But they’re what’s supposed to convince them to join us,” I said, my panic rising. “We only have so many copies.”
“Mike,” John said, “I think it’s time that you face the facts. Negotiation hasn’t worked. We need to just get in there, eliminate them, and get out.”
“We can keep trying,” I said.
“Mike,” John said, grabbing my arm. “You didn’t really ever expect that to work, did you? These Players are trained killers. Their whole lives have been built on the idea that Endgame is real and they’re saving their entire line—
that everyone they know and love will be killed if they don’t win. Negotiation was idealistic, and it’s not working.”

“They’re not that good,” I said. “You made them out to be half kung-fu master and half gunslinger. And so far we’ve killed the Minoan, the Koori, the La Tène, and the Cahokian. These Players aren’t what we expected them to be.”

“We haven’t heard from Walter on the Cahokian yet. Barbara and Douglas haven’t called in yet from the Olmec, either. Tyson took a bullet. We haven’t heard from Larry, Lee, and Lin, either, or Molly, Henry, and Phyllis. Bakr too. Don’t make the mistake that this is going to be easy.”

“Mary’s okay?” I asked.

“She’s fine. Cuts and bruises.”

“We need to rethink this. We’re not getting any of the results that we set out to get. This is going to turn into a bloodbath.”

“Yes we are, and it already is,” John said, with a fierceness in his eyes that I hadn’t seen before. “Tell me you never thought that this was going to end peacefully. We warned you: the Players are trained killers, not diplomats. They’re here to do one thing: kill everyone who stands in their way. We need to move to Plan Charlie.”

“Plan Charlie? Go in guns blazing? What about Bravo? What about talking to them?”

“We’re losing,” he said. “We’ve killed three or four of them, and they may have killed as many as half of us. And it’s barely even dawn.”

My head was swimming. I couldn’t think straight through the panic. “Just let me get back inside and get those papers. John, please. My prints are all over them. I can’t be connected to this. I can’t.” Kat had reached her limit; maybe I was reaching mine.

John grabbed my shoulders and looked me dead in the eye. “Mike, have you been following what’s going on here today?”

“What do you mean? The shooting at the Olympic hotel?”

“It’s not just a shooting. It’s terrorists. Black September, a faction of the PLO. You know the PLO, right? Blowing up buses in Jerusalem and hijacking planes. Do you remember two years ago—the big hostage crisis when those airliners were held full of passengers? Three hundred and ten people on four jets, out in the desert?”

“Yeah, I remember.” My vision was blurring. I couldn’t take in all this
information right now. This was getting so far out of control. “It’s those guys. This morning a number of them—some say as many as twenty; nobody’s sure—they barged into the Israeli hotel rooms. One guy, a wrestling coach, was able to escape through a window, but that’s all we know so far. There have been gunshots.” “They’re going after the athletes?” “They are. And it’s going to be a huge disaster. It might derail the whole Olympics. And you have to think about it: these guys didn’t come to Munich because they thought they were going to escape. This is a suicide mission, and they have the whole Israeli team. This could be the start of a war.” “But what does that have to do with us?” “You haven’t seen police response like we’re going to have here. It’s going to make the protests at People’s Park look like a picnic.” “Then all the more reason for me to get up into the hotel and get those papers. They’re the only clue we left in the room, and when the police find them, they’re going to dust them for fingerprints.” “Are your fingerprints on file?” he asked, looking over my shoulder at the concierge at the entrance to the building. “Yes. It was part of becoming a park ranger.” “But you’re not on some national fingerprint list, are you? Who is going to compare those papers to fingerprints in southern California? You’re panicking, and you’re not thinking straight.” I ran my hand through my hair. “The more time we talk, the less likely I am to get safely into the room.” “You’re not going back in there, Mike. I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do that.” “You can’t let me?” He pulled back his jacket a little, flashing just enough of his gun for me to get the idea. “I can’t let you,” he repeated. I couldn’t believe what was happening. Peaceful, hippie John was threatening me. Maybe he wasn’t really into peace and love and all that. Maybe that was just a ruse, and this was his real personality. It was like half the training we’d gone through had been a bluff to trick us into thinking we were more than just assassins. “I’m going in,” I said. His hand grabbed my arm, but I wrenched free and ran inside.
CHAPTER THREE

At the top of the stairs, the concierge stopped me. “You can’t enter,” he said in heavily accented English. “Sie können hier nicht reinkommen.”
“I will only be a minute,” I said.
“But sir, it’s not safe. Sie sind in Gefahr. Achtung!”
“I’ll be right back,” I said, pushing past him.
“Sir!” he called after me. “Sir!”
I turned a corner and raced up the stairs. There were still no police here, only firemen. Even so, I switched my gun from the back of my pants to the large pocket of the robe. It was heavy and made the bathrobe sag. I moved quietly and swiftly up the steps until I reached the fourth floor. We had done so many runs up the mountains at Mary’s ranch that I wasn’t even winded when I got to the right door. I knew the room was down the hall about forty yards. I didn’t relish seeing Raakel again. Her face was stained into my memory now too. Her brains and blood were sprayed across the blankets. I would never be able to unsee that.
I could see the door. It wasn’t closed all the way, but there were no firefighters, no crime-scene tape. I pulled out my M1911 and moved quietly to the door.
I shouldn’t have felt so afraid. Kat and I had gone head-to-head with a trained killer, and we’d won. It was a complete victory, with the exception of Kat’s arm injury. But stepping into the dim room made it look like a disaster. There was blood everywhere. It wasn’t like a shooting in the movies, not a simple hole in the forehead and a pool of blood under her body. No, she had slumped down, her face turned toward the floor, and I could see the enormous holes in the back of her head. There were tufts of hair and scalp on the bed, and the blood had spilled onto the blanket, soaking and spreading into a wide patch.
I could see the sheriff, but this was worse than the sheriff. He’d been a
middle-aged fat guy carrying a gun. Raakel was a 17-year-old elite athlete. Sexy. Armed only with a Turkish sword. And I’d talked to her. I’d pleaded with her. This hadn’t been a simple execution. It had been a negotiation. I hadn’t realized how quickly it would escalate, but it had, and there was nothing I could do about it now. I should have been less hopeful. It had been my hope to be able to talk her into a peaceful resolution, and I’d stuck to that so firmly that I hadn’t realized I had lost. It was my fault that Kat got injured. The papers were lying on the floor, with only a spot or two of blood. I bent down to pick them up. “Don’t move.” An American accent. I heard the sound of a gun cocking. My heart sank. I hadn’t heard the door, hadn’t seen a shadow. But the voice was close behind me. I raised my hands. I still had the M1911 in my hand. “What do you want?” “Take a guess.” “I just got here. I didn’t do anything.” “Look in front of you,” he said. “You wonder what I want?” “I don’t know anything about this.” “Right.” He moved closer to me and took my gun. I heard him pull back the slide and eject the round. “Look,” I said. “I’m not who you’re looking for.” “Why are you carrying a gun?” “Look at this room. Why do you think I’m carrying a gun? We’re all in danger.” “Danger from who?” I started to turn around, to find out who I was talking to. Maybe a Player? He was American. Maybe a partner with the La Tène? Maybe a Minoan with a really good accent? “Keep your face to the front.” I stopped. “Who are you?” “I’m the one asking the questions.” He grabbed my hand and twisted it down to the hollow of my back. I felt the steel of a handcuff snapping into place. I had to get away. I couldn’t have him stop me here and take me away to a jail cell. I had to get back to Kat and John. I yanked away from his grip and spun around, the cuff flying out of his hand.
But as I made a motion toward him, his revolver pointed solidly into my chest. He had both hands on it now, finger on the trigger.

“Stop,” he said, “or you’ll end up dead on the floor next to your Player.”

I stared back at him. The room was dark, with the only light coming from the hallway, making him a silhouette. I gazed into his face and fell silent, knowing he could squeeze off a shot faster than I could move.

“How do you know about Players?” I asked.

“Put the other handcuff on your own wrist.”

“Tell me how you know about this. If you know, and you’re stopping me, you’ll be as guilty as the Players themselves.”

“Put the handcuff on.”

I did as he ordered. I was restrained, my hands in front of me.

“Let’s get to another room,” he said. “Somewhere we can talk.” He took the Brotherhood of the Snake papers and stuffed them into his suit pocket. He directed me out the door. Instead of going downstairs, we went up. No one was around, not the fire department, not housekeeping—nobody.

“Who are you?” I asked as we walked, me in front, him telling me where to go.

“I work for the American government. Security for the Olympians. They sent me over to find you.”

“Shouldn’t you be protecting the Olympians, then?”

“Just walk.”

“If you know about the Players,” I said, “you have to understand why we’re doing this.”

“All I understand is that too many people are dying today. Are you a part of this? Are you killing Israelis too? Are you Black September?”

“I have no idea about that. You probably know more about them than I do.”

He opened the door to a hotel room and pushed me inside.

He sat me in a chair at a small circular table, handcuffing one of my hands to the armrest, then sat on the bed to use the phone, his eyes still on me. He was on for a long time—maybe an hour, maybe more. I tried to catch parts of his conversation, but it was hard to follow only one side of it, and the person on the other end was doing more talking than he was. He was listening or waiting on hold or something.

At long last he hung up and walked over to the window.

“I know you killed a sheriff in Redding, California. I know that you’ve been
part of a militant terrorist group called Zero line. I know that you’ve spent the summer practicing to kill twelve kids—like that girl back there.”
“She’s a trained killer.”
“She was. So are you.”
“Listen,” I said. “You seem to know a lot about this. You have to know the danger we’re in if we don’t get to all the Players.”
“If you don’t kill all the Players, you mean.”
“No, I don’t. You have to understand: we’re trying to talk to them. Our goal is not to kill a bunch of people. We’re trying to get them to stop. To stop Playing.”
He smirked. “Because that’s how to stop the aliens, right?”
“Yes,” I said angrily. “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true.”
“Prove it.”
My mind raced. I had no idea how to talk my way out of this. He had that gun trained on my chest.
“We faked a Calling,” I said. “Do you know what a Calling is?”
“It’s when they all get together—the twelve Players.”
“Yes, but it’s when Endgame starts. When they all try to kill each other, to fight for survival. The fact that they’re here, that they’re prepared to kill, that should be plenty of proof that this is real.”
“Nice try,” he said. “So maybe they’re as delusional as you are. Two sides of the same cult. What I want to know, Michael—”
“My name’s Frank Finn.”
“That will come as a surprise to your parents in Pasadena. Come now, you don’t think I haven’t done my homework? We’ve talked to your parents. They know about the cult. They know about killing the sheriff. Now just talk to me. Tell me about him.”
“The sheriff? He wasn’t supposed to be there.”
“So that was your first murder?”
“No. It was my first kill,” I responded, pissed off. “It wasn’t planned. I’m not a murderer. I killed him, but I’m not . . . it’s not what you think.”
The American sat down across from me at the table in the corner by the hotel window. My left wrist was handcuffed to the armrest, but it was an old wooden chair, and when I leaned back, the arm came out of joint. I thought that I could get the handcuffs loose if he looked away. I had to be ready to move when I did that. I only had one shot at escape.
“How is that not murder?” he asked, his face a mask. “Tell me what I’m misunderstanding.”

“It was self-defense.” My heart was pounding in my chest. I couldn’t even tell if I was bluffing anymore, or if it was the truth.

“You had just killed two other men. Was that self-defense, too?”

“I didn’t kill two men.”

“Your friends did.” The agent—was he CIA, FBI maybe?—stood up from his chair and paced the room. I had no idea how he had tied me to anything in California. The papers from the Brotherhood of the Snake were on the table—no one had even run prints, and now the man’s fingerprints were on them as well.

I didn’t know what to say to him. All I knew was that I had to get out of there, fast. The team was counting on me. Kat was counting on me. We didn’t have much time.

She was probably already gone. I’d been in the hotel far too long. She couldn’t just be waiting in the park, like I’d left her. John had been there. The two of them might have written me off as captured, a lost cause. John had shown his true colors. He was ruthless. He didn’t care about any of us.

Kat wouldn’t abandon me. And she knew I wouldn’t abandon her. She had to know that something had stopped me from getting back to her. She’d wait.

No, Kat needed to get to a hospital. Would someone still be waiting for me? The fire department was likely gone. It was up to the Munich police to worry about Raakel’s body, and they were so busy with the Olympics that they might not come for hours. John said we would all be meeting at the park, but they would have had to leave without me. They couldn’t wait this long.

“The cop,” I said, thinking fast, “had just shot my friend in the chest.”

“Your friend was shot in the chest while you were robbing a store at gunpoint. You face charges of grand larceny, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder, and that doesn’t begin to address what you’re doing here in Germany.”

He was the only agent there—alone and stupid. Maybe he was just from the US Consulate. He clearly had no idea who he was dealing with. He thought I was just a run-of-the-mill terrorist. But I wasn’t. I was Zero line. What we were doing was so much bigger than one California sheriff’s life. So much bigger than an FBI or CIA agent. So much bigger than me. He was wasting my time, and time was the one thing we needed on our side.
“Listen,” I said. “Can I use the bathroom?” I’d scanned the place for anything I could use to escape. It was no prison—it was just a hotel. Someone had slept in the bed last night. It wasn’t made. “We’ve been sitting in here for hours.”

He stared at me through narrowed eyes. “I’ll let you get up when you’re finished answering my questions.” He leaned forward, trying to intimidate me. “Why are you in Munich? What’s your plan here?”

“I want a lawyer.”

“We’re not in the United States,” he said. “Different rules.”


“Here’s the passenger manifest from your flight out of Reno. I’m going to read through the names, and you’re going to tell me who else is in your group.”

“Seriously?” I said, and laughed. “I thought you already had all the answers. You obviously have no idea what is going on. No idea.”

While the agent talked, I leaned back in my chair. The armrest wasn’t moving enough. The joint was loose, but the back of the chair hit the wall, and I wasn’t able to squeeze the handcuff out through the gap. I gripped the armrest, trying to guess its weight.

He sat again, his chair scooted all the way in to the table. “I know you’re not here alone. Who else from the plane is working with you? I’ve heard about Katherine McKnight—Kat.”

“You’re wasting my time,” I said. “I need to get out of here. I don’t have time.”

I gripped the arm of the chair with my handcuffed left hand. “If it’s so important, why won’t you tell me what it is?”

And then it hit me.

“Eugene,” I said, looking at him. “You’ve been talking to Eugene. That’s how you know about all this stuff.”

He smugly straightened his tie. “Eugene West. We were told to watch for you. I knew you’d start your killing today, but I didn’t know the magnitude. Tell me: How did you get involved with Black September?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, shaking my head. “We’re not with Black September.”

He leaned toward me, our faces only inches apart. “Then explain it to me.”
I shoved the table with my right hand, tipping it into the agent’s stomach. I leaped to my feet, yanked up the chair, and smashed it into him. It lost some of its momentum as it scraped against the wall, but I was still able to bring it down on him hard. The chair broke as it hit his shoulder and the table, but the armrest was still in my hand. I beat him across the face with it until he went down. He was dazed, and I scrambled out from behind the table and pieces of the broken chair.

He went for his gun, slowly pushing the broken chair away. He was bleeding from his head—a lot. I hit him again with the armrest and then gave him a right hook. He wasn’t struggling anymore, and I grabbed his pistol from his holster.

I pulled the broken armrest out of the handcuff and knelt down next to him to find his keys. I grabbed them just as he tried to throw a weak punch. It caught me off guard, and I stumbled back slightly. But I had his keys and gun, and I held the pistol in my left hand while I unlocked the cuffs.
CHAPTER FOUR

I put a handcuff on his left wrist and locked him to the radiator. Then I grabbed a hand towel from the bathroom and used it to gag him.

“You want to know what we’re doing here?” I asked as I rummaged through the closet. There was a suit there, but I didn’t want that. All I needed was a shirt that wasn’t covered with Kat’s blood. I knelt down and unzipped a gym bag.

“We’re saving the world,” I said. “You probably thought Eugene was crazy, or maybe he told you that we’re crazy, but all of it’s true. If it wasn’t true, then why would Raakel—the girl in the other room—why would she be here? We sent out invitations, and she understood what we were doing, and she came here. Because of this goddamned Endgame. I hate it just as much—no, I hate it more than you do. Because I know what it is. The Players fighting for the end of the world. They’re fighting for survival, and we have to stop them before they come after each other.”

I found a plain gray sweatshirt and pulled it from the bag.

“If we don’t do this, the entire population of the world could be wiped out. Well, maybe a twelfth will live. But billions will die. Billions. Can you even comprehend that? We don’t know how it will happen—disease, nukes, maybe just hunting us down like animals—but it will happen. That was the contract signed thousands of years ago. By killing Raakel, I just stopped the Minoan line from Playing. Now we have to stop the rest of them, if we want to stop Endgame from happening.”

I pulled the sweatshirt on and checked the agent’s Colt Lawman revolver. I opened the cylinder to see if it was fully loaded. It was, and I put the safety on and tucked it into my belt.

“When this is all over, you can hunt me down. I know I’ve done a lot of illegal things in the last four months. But you’ll have to wait, because there’s
a job to be done. Who knows—maybe I’ll die and you won’t need to look for me.”
I gave him one last look, took the papers from the table, and then exited the room. I put the **DO NOT DISTURB** placard on the door.
The corridor was empty, and I looked for the nearest stairs. I wanted to find a back way out of this place and stay as far from Raakel’s room as I could. From what I was able to pick up from the one-sided phone conversation, the agent hadn’t informed the Germans about Raakel yet. He only spoke on the phone to other Americans.
That could mean backup was coming. Or maybe there was no one to send. Maybe the agent was bluffing, and he was alone. I looked at my watch. I’d been in this damn hotel for more than two hours. I needed to get out and find Kat or John. Or Mary.
I ran down the stairs, as fast as I could.
I was flooded with confidence. Not only had I killed a Player, but I had successfully escaped from an agent. Of what agency, I didn’t know, but he was some kind of cop. State Department, maybe. From the consulate, perhaps.
At the bottom of the stairs there were two doors, one to the hotel’s main floor and another to the back of the hotel. I cautiously stepped out a side door. It was lighter now; the sun had risen. There were still people in the street and in the park, but no sign of Kat or John or anyone else. I was going to have to go back to the safe house if I was ever going to find them. Odds were the safe house would be empty by now, and I’d have to call on the walkie-talkie. We hadn’t made contingency plans for if we got separated.
I made a beeline for the closest train platform and started jogging. They’d be at the next targets now—other hotel rooms somewhere. Or would the Players all have gone to the plaza already? That’s where we had talked about eventually meeting them—we’d talked of getting snipers up on the roof of the buildings surrounding the spiral sunburst. But could we do that now? I was seeing cops all over the place, in cars with flashing lights or on street corners trying to do crowd control.
There were clinics everywhere—or pharmacies, maybe. They were small, with neon crosses glowing. I wondered if Kat could be in one of them, getting better stitches than my uneven, crooked attempt. She’d need major surgery eventually. She’d told me that. Raakel’s sword had cut through at
least some tendons—Kat couldn’t move her fingers more than a little painful twitching.
The train stop was crowded, with Olympic guests everywhere. They were all speaking in different languages, and I could only catch a little. Terrorism seemed to be the same in every language, and I heard variations of Israel a lot.
I waited in the warm morning air for several minutes before the lights of a train appeared down the line.
“Have you heard?” a woman behind me said. “At the Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten. They found two people dead. There were others there too. A Japanese girl, they said, and an American.”
“What?” another woman replied. “That’s just down the street from us.”
“I know. I talked with a policeman and he said that there was a tremendous gunfight. A young woman managed to evade capture and is at large.”
Mary, maybe? John had said that Tyson had gone down. And the Japanese girl—was she Mu? What could have been happening in the last two hours?
“Is it part of the dreadful attacks on the Israelis?”
“He didn’t know,” she said. “Or perhaps he just wasn’t going to tell me. No one has made an official statement about any of this yet.”
“If they don’t have the terrorists contained, one would think they should issue a warning to the public.”
“I do wonder if it’s something else entirely,” the first woman said. “The hostage situation would seem to have nothing to do with the Japanese or the Americans.”
As the train drew closer, their conversation moved to a discussion of whether events would be canceled and if it would disrupt the schedule of the games.
We had to cram inside the crowded train, and I stood in the center, clutching a strap to keep my balance. I listened for more news, but no one had anything solid to say. A few people griped about having been awakened by sirens, and someone else said there’d been a rumor of a man running through the plaza carrying a rifle. But officials were still being tight-lipped and didn’t know the extent of what was going on.
Most people got off the train before I did, and when we finally reached my stop, only a handful of people were left.
“Geht es dir gut?” an old woman asked me, and tapped my hand.
I looked down. There was dried blood on the back of my hand and fingers.
Kat’s blood, from while I was stitching her up.
“I’m okay,” I said, and smiled.
She gave me a suspicious look, but she turned her head, and I got off the train.

I climbed the stairs up to the front door of our safe house. There was no secret knock or even keys. I just let myself in and saw Mary sitting across the room, pointing a pistol at me.
“Oh my God,” she said. “What are you doing here?” She jumped up and gave me a long hug. I hugged her back, but things weren’t the same as they’d been. I’d changed. Maybe it was planting the invitations with Kat at my side. Maybe it was the train ride to Baghdad. But somewhere along the line, I had changed, and I wanted to see Kat in front of me, not Mary.
“I got caught at the hotel. Someone in the government—the American government. I don’t know who it was, but I had to sit there for two hours while he interrogated me.” I let go of her and slumped down into a chair.
“What did you tell him?” she asked, sitting across from me.
“There was nothing to say that he didn’t already know. Eugene ratted us out. He spilled everything. This guy knew about Endgame and the Players, and he knew our plans to meet at the plaza.”
“How did he find you?”
“He found the Minoan—I don’t know how. Maybe Eugene still had the dossier on her. He was supposed to go with me and Kat.” I looked around the room, frustrated, and then stood up and walked to the kitchen sink to wash Kat’s blood off my hand.
“Well, everything has gone to hell here,” she said. Her voice was ragged, and she didn’t look much better. “John was supposed to find you—”
“He did.”
“So you know about Tyson?”
“Yeah. Someone on the train heard about you and Tyson. You’re wanted.”
She seemed shaken, not her calm, happy self. “Lee died too. That was just now—well, maybe an hour ago. Tyson died at the hospital after getting shot while we went after the Koori, and then Lee went with me and died fighting the Mu.”
“You’ve killed two Players?” I said. “Wow.”
“Yeah,” she said. “The Mu was staying at a hostel next to one of those small
neighborhood police stations. She got Lee right in the head. He didn’t have a change. It was just the blink of an eye and she got him. I got this.” She pulled up her shirt to show me her stomach. There was a white bandage with a red spot in the middle.

“You got shot?”

“Grazed. And then I killed her, and had to escape past the police. I killed the cop, too. He never saw it coming. He thought I was just one of the kids staying at the hostel.”

“You just shot a cop?” I asked, my stomach turning and visions of the sheriff coming back to me.

“Of course,” she said. “I was fighting for my life. She killed Lee.”

“But you said the cop thought you were just one of the kids at the hostel. Innocent.”

“But he saw my face,” she said. “What was I supposed to do? Bruce and I learned in Mexico that you don’t leave witnesses.”

“But you said he didn’t witness you.”

She stood up and came over to me. “Mike, what is this all for? You knew we were going to war with these guys. You can’t have imagined that we were just going to talk our way out of anything.”

“Couldn’t I?” I yelled. “You kept emphasizing that this was not about killing Players; it was about stopping them. John had me write up the sales pitches. Did you even try that with the Mu? What about the Koori? Or did you just go in shooting first and asking questions later?”

“Come on, Mike,” she said. “Grow up. We did target shooting every single day. We practiced stacking up at a door and making a hostile entry. We ran the mountains. We did obstacle courses. Did you really think all of that was so that we would be in better shape to talk?”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I did think that we were going to talk, because that’s what we said we were going to do. That’s what John said, and it’s what Walter said, and it’s what you said. And you know what? It’s what Kat and I did with the Minoan.”

“And how did that go for you?”

“We ended up having to kill her,” I said, turning off the water and drying my hands. “But we gave her a fair chance. She knew why we were there, and she had a choice. We didn’t just ambush her.”

“And now Kat is at the emergency room,” Mary said. “And we still have
seven Players to kill. Still no word from Barbara and Douglas—they were
going for the Olmec—or Molly, Henry, and Phyllis—they were going for the
Harappan. We’re getting murdered out there, so maybe you’d better start to
act like this is the war that it is.”
“You lied to me.”
“Lied? Mike, you are such a—”
“What? Such a what?”
“A child. I used to think that you joined Zero line for me, but I was wrong.
You joined because you’re a Boy Scout. You really thought we were going to
to end this all peacefully, and you could go back home like nothing had
happened.”
“I didn’t think that. I killed that sheriff. I robbed that bank.”
“Then what? You thought that you were going to retire on some remote farm
somewhere and live the quiet, peaceful life of a hero? You probably imagined
me right there beside you.”
“Mary,” I said through gritted teeth, “you’re old news. Kat and I are together
now. I don’t need—I don’t want you.”
“Oh,” she said, and then stopped without saying anything else.
“Yeah.”
Her voice was quieter now. “What did I ever do to you?”
“You left me. When I thought I needed you most. And . . .” I looked out the
window and then moved back to the chair by the door. “And then I realized
that I didn’t really need you. You did your job. You got me into this mess.
You got me to believe, and you were right—Endgame is real. But we have
very different ideas about what to do about it.”
“The Players are killing us,” she said, still standing where she was, not
turning to look at me. “I wish we really could talk our way out of this.”
“You weren’t expecting that?” I asked. “You thought that going in like
cowboys, shooting everyone we see, was going to work? At least Kat and I
had realistic expectations. We knew that we were going up against killers.
Assassins. We knew we were outmatched. You had too much faith in a
couple of ex–Green Berets.”
“Bruce was a vet. He wouldn’t tell me how many he killed, but he said he
could remember every face.”
“I always see the sheriff.”
“The Mu didn’t look like a killer. She looked like a kid.” Mary turned to face
me. “We thought it would be easy. I had a clean shot and I didn’t take it. I didn’t want to shoot so close to the other people in the hostel. I thought I was being kind.”

“What hospital is Kat in?”

“I don’t know the name of it,” she said. “Walter found it on the map. He said it was just a mile north. John took her there in a cab.”

“Is John still with her?”

“No,” she said, and crossed the room to pick up the walkie-talkie. “They’re trying to kill the others. Walter and John are. I was supposed to wait here and alert them if anyone came back.”

“Where did they go?”

“John is after the Olmec, and seeing if he can find out what happened to Barbara and Douglas. Walter is going for the Shang. I was supposed to tell the next group back to go to the Nabataean.”

“Call them and tell them I’m going for Kat. I’ll call you when I know more.”

I picked up someone’s backpack and dumped out its contents onto the floor, and then I put one of the spare walkie-talkies inside.

“Okay.”
“Mike!” Kat said, sitting up on her hospital bed. “I thought . . . We thought you’d been caught.”
“I was,” I said. “Eugene ratted on us. There was somebody waiting for me. He knew everything.”
“If he knew everything, why did he let you go?”
“He didn’t. I escaped.” I sat down on the stool next to her bed. “How are you?”
Her arm was splinted and wrapped in an Ace bandage.
“They say I’ll need surgery. I still can’t move my fingers very well, but I was afraid all the tendons were cut. They’re not. Well, not all of them. And either way, I’m not supposed to try to move them. That’s the reason for the splint.”
“Where are the others? Mary told me that John had been here with you.”
“He brought me in, but we have to get to all the Players. We might have missed some already. What time is it?”
I checked my watch. “A little before ten.”
She shook her head. “We still have so many Players to stop. We can’t be sitting around here.”
“You need to heal.”
“I’m done here,” she said. “I’ve already been stitched up, and now all I’m waiting for is to be discharged.”
“What did they say about my stitches?” I asked with a little laugh. “Do I have a second career as a nurse?”
She rolled her eyes. “They weren’t happy. They didn’t know what to make of it. They asked why I would have you do that instead of coming to the hospital.”
“Were they suspicious?”
“No,” she said with a little shrug. “I think they just thought I was a stupid
American. I pretended not to speak any German, or even understand much of their English, blaming it on their accents. And you know John—he can lie his way through anything. He made up something about being foreigners and not understanding the German health-care system. He took the blame on himself, and they believed every word.”
“What did you tell them about how you got hurt?”
“Kitchen accident. He was holding a knife and turned quickly and didn’t know I was standing there. Again, they just thought we were dumb.”
“Well, can you go?”
“I want to, but I need the pain meds that they’re going to bring me when I get discharged. Then we can get back into the action. According to John, things aren’t going too well.”
“They’re not,” I said. “We’re being taken apart piece by piece. But we’ve got five, maybe six—John and Walter are out again. We’re still waiting for the others to report in, but I don’t have high hopes. Douglas and Barbara are out together, and they haven’t had as much training as the rest of us. John went out after them. They were the business managers and forgers. I don’t think they’re as prepared. Molly and her team haven’t come back either.”
“Damn,” she said. “Barbara and I were close. She’s not going to make it; I can feel it.”
“Don’t think about that. I’ve got a walkie-talkie in my backpack. I don’t want to pull it out right now, but when you get discharged, we’re supposed to check in and get our next assignment. My next assignment, I mean. You’re going back to the safe house.”
“No way,” she said. “We started this insanity. We’re going to get it done. I don’t want to let all of our efforts go to waste.”
“You can’t even hold your gun.”
“I’m coming with you,” she said. “We’ll figure out what we’re supposed to do, and we’ll make a plan, and I’ll do what I have to do.”
I looked at her arm and her pale skin. She didn’t look well.
“Hey,” she said, gesturing to the TV. “Turn on the sound.”
There was a news anchor sitting at a desk, the words MÜNCHEN GEISELKRISE on the screen next to him.
I turned on the sound, but he was speaking in German and I couldn’t understand anything.
Kat was watching intently, and she began to translate for me as we watched.
“They’re saying anywhere between three and twelve Israeli athletes are being held hostage. The terrorists are members of the group Black September—Palestinians from Jordan. The body of Moshe Weinberg was found naked in a hallway. He was shot to death. He was a coach. Another person—ringer? I don’t know that word. He was also shot. Black September demanded the release of two hundred and something Palestinian prisoners. They gave the deadline of nine o’clock, but that time has passed, and this is still going on.”

“What about our attacks on the Players?” I asked. “Have they said anything about that?”

“Not yet,” she said.

“It won’t be long.”

As we waited, I told her everything that had happened to me this morning—told her everything that I knew about the agent who’d detained me, and told her about meeting Mary back at the safe house. She told me about how she and John had decided to leave the park and go to the safe house. After he unwrapped the gauze on her arm to wash it, he saw how bad it was and made her go to the hospital.

“I wanted to wait for you,” she said. “I wasn’t going anywhere, but I started to get really dizzy, and John said he thought I was losing too much blood. I don’t know if that was it. It might have been shock.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m glad you came here. I’m glad you’re getting help.”

A few minutes later the doctor came back in. The two of them talked for a while in English, and she sat up and smiled. She didn’t look nearly as sick as she had when I’d first gotten there. He gave her a bottle of pills and told us we were free to go.

Outside, we stopped on a park bench, and I pulled out the walkie-talkie and called in. Mary answered almost immediately.

“Kat’s out of the hospital,” I said. “Where do we stand?”

“John couldn’t find the Olmec,” she said. “No word from Walter. Bakr is gone. He wasn’t assigned to any team yet, but I get the feeling he skipped town. Molly came back.” There was a pause. “Henry and Phyllis are dead, and they weren’t able to kill their Player.”

“Who were they after?” I asked.

“The Harappan,” she said. “He’s still at large.”

Kat took the radio from me. “Mary, this is Kat. Any word from Barbara?”

There was a moment of heavy static, and then Mary spoke. “Barbara and
Douglas haven’t reported in yet. John was going to look for them when he went after the Olmec, but he hasn’t found any trace.”

“We’ll go to the plaza,” Kat said. “See if we can find them.”

“John told me to send the next group after the Nabataeans.”

“Don’t you think the Players are going to be at the plaza?” Kat asked. “That’s where the invitations told them to go. It’s a little late in the morning for them to be still waiting in their hotel rooms.”

“You can go for it,” Mary said. “But be aware that there will likely be a heavy police presence there.”

There was more static, and then we heard John’s voice. “Just off the plaza is a café called Siegfried’s. Come here, Mike, Kat.”

“Ten-four,” Kat said.

She handed the walkie-talkie back to me, and I collapsed the antenna and turned it off.

“If we’re just going to the plaza to wait for Players to show up, this is going to get violent and dangerous. I don’t even know where the sniper rifles are—probably back at the safe house.”

“I left my gun there,” Kat said.

“Here.”

I looked around to see if there was anyone watching us. No one was. I took out the Colt revolver I swiped from the agent and handed the gun to her.

“I haven’t ever practiced shooting with my left hand,” she said.

“Neither have I,” I said. “But this is just in case. Don’t plan on being the one who needs to shoot.”

She put the gun in the large pocket of her jacket. It wasn’t a great option—the gun was heavy, and it was obvious that she was carrying something in there—but at least it was concealed.

Kat stopped someone on the street and asked the fastest route to the plaza. We followed the directions to a bus stop and waited about fifteen minutes. By noon we were being dropped off at the Olympic center. It was eerily quiet, and a sign posted at an information kiosk said that the games were being delayed due to the ongoing crisis.

There were still a couple dozen tourists walking around, and some were even sitting at the concrete sunburst.

“Who’s that?” I asked Kat, taking her good hand in mine. “The kid in the red hat.”
“It could be the Harappan,” she said.
He was just sitting there. Not moving. Not reading. Just observing. Our eyes met for a minute, and it was all I could do not to look away. But I kept my eyes on him for a few lingering seconds, trying not to appear suspicious.
“What do we know about the Harappan?” I asked.
“That’s where Molly, Henry, and Phyllis went. I haven’t read his dossier. He killed Henry and Phyllis.”
There was another possible Player sitting on a patch of grass beneath a large pine. She didn’t appear to be paying any attention to us, or to the Harappan. She was just reading a book casually and calmly.
“Who’s left?” I asked.
“Well,” Kat said, thinking. “The Harappan. The Donghu. Nabataean. Sumerian. John was supposed to take the Olmec and Walter was going after the Shang. Agatha didn’t spot the Aksumite at all yesterday; Rodney, Jim, and Julia are likely dead. They never came back. Who am I forgetting?”
“We got the Minoan, and we know the Mu, Cahokian, Koori, and La Tène are dead. That’s everybody.”
“And we’re cut in half. We don’t know where most of our group is.”
A door to a café—a café that was closed—opened and we saw John. He waved to us, and we turned and went toward him, leaving the possible Players in the plaza.
“Hey, guys,” he said as we got close. He looked awful. Exhausted, sweating, and covered with little droplets of blood.
“What’s going on?”
“We tried to get you on the radio. We have the Aksumite.”
I frowned. “I thought the Aksumite didn’t come.”
“That’s what we thought,” he said, closing the door behind us. He was out of breath. “But he showed up. Looking for us too. He knows all about Zero line. He must have killed Rodney, Jim, and Julia, and then came after the rest of us.”
“Did you kill him?” Kat asked.
“Not yet,” John said. “We want to know what he knows.”
“You’re interrogating him,” I said.
John led the way to the kitchen of the café. The Aksumite was there, bleeding from his head. He was young—younger than Raakel. I guessed maybe 15. Hands and feet both tied. But he was wiry and looked tough. And he was
smiling at us as we entered. Walter had his sleeves rolled up, showing the Green Beret tattoos on his arms.

“I’m going to ask you again,” Walter said, perfectly calm. “What happened to the three people that came to see you in Ethiopia?”

The kid grinned. “You are all fools. Interfering in Endgame. You will all perish in the fire of the gods.”

Walter turned to the counter and picked up a meat tenderizer. Kat grabbed my hand.

He smacked a pane of glass with the mallet and it shattered into pieces.

“What do you want me to say?” the Aksumite said. “That your friends are alive and waiting for you somewhere? You sent them to me to kill the people of my line and bring me to this counterfeit Calling. My people are not the kind to sit idly by.”

John spoke. “So you killed them?”

“We have eyes everywhere.”

Walter grabbed the kid’s laughing face and picked up a piece of glass a little bit smaller than a playing card. He shoved it into the boy’s mouth, slicing the edges of his lips. The boy began to choke, and John swung a fist into the kid’s chin. Walter let go of him, and the Aksumite spewed out glass shards and blood. He struggled for breath, and moaned at the broken glass in his mouth and throat. He hacked and coughed, and then began to vomit.

“You . . .,” he panted. “You will burn.” Blood was pouring from his mouth.

“You won’t be around to see it, kid,” Walter said, and punched him.

“John,” Kat said. “John, we don’t need to do this.”

The boy spit again, and I could see the tiny slivers of glass in the blood on the floor.

“He doesn’t have any information,” I said.

“Stay out of this, Mike,” John said.

“You can’t just torture a kid,” I said back.

John jumped up and grabbed me by the shirt. “He’s not a kid. When are you going to get that? These people do not deserve our pity. They deserve pain and death. And when he has experienced enough pain, I’ll give him death.”

“This is not what I signed up for,” I said.

“Me either,” Kat said.

“You wanted to stop Endgame, didn’t you? Wasn’t that what you signed up
“And what about Rodney, and Jim, and Julia?” John said. “They were my friends.”

The Aksumite spit again, and formed as much of a smile as his torn face allowed him to. “They were p-p-poisoned before they ever . . . before they got off the plane.”

Walter grabbed another piece of glass, but I didn’t give him time. I pulled the Colt Lawman from my belt and fired two rounds into the young boy’s chest. John pushed the gun away and shoved me backward. I slipped on the tile floor and landed on my tailbone, pain shooting up my spine.

“Are you trying to make the other Players run away?” John shouted. “The Harappan’s been sitting out there for an hour. The others will be coming!”

Kat answered for me. “Then shouldn’t you be focusing on them instead of torturing him? We were supposed to be stopping these guys, not even killing them. Just stopping them. And you’re torturing him for information you already knew? Tell me that you had any doubt Jim and Julia and Rodney were dead.”

John stepped toward her, and I raised my gun again. “You do not threaten her.”

“Keep it up, Mike,” John said. “Keep thinking with your dick. First Mary and now Kat. Is that the only thing that motivates you?”

“Back off,” I said.

We stared at each other for a long, silent minute. John could make any assumptions he wanted to, but I was here to save the world. Sure, I’d gotten into Zero line because of Mary, but now Kat and I had found something special. I was determined that, no matter what happened here in Munich, Kat and I were going to survive. We were going to stop the Players, and we were going to live.

Just then a little bell jingled. The door to the café had opened.

I turned my gun away from John and moved to the kitchen door. It was Mary.
“Harappan, Nabataean, Donghu, Sumerian, Shang, Olmec. We’ve killed half of them,” I said. “The rest are all out there, waiting for whatever is supposed to happen at a Calling.”

We were still in the café, the place still heavy with anger and the smell of blood and gun smoke. Through the big glass windows, we could see the six remaining Players. A few were looking in our direction. They must have heard the gun.

But, instead of coming toward us, they all moved toward the sunburst, forming a circle around it. I moved to the window and opened it, hoping I could hear what was happening.

“So this is it?” the Sumerian asked. He was a short kid, maybe 16. He wore a red tunic and pants that reminded me of the clothes I’d seen people wear in martial arts classes. In fact, almost everyone appeared to be in fighting clothes, as if this were the Olympic judo trials. Most of them appeared to have a weapon of some kind—concealed, so as not to draw attention, but I knew what I was looking for.

There were four boys: the Sumerian, the Harappan, the Shang, and the Nabataean. The Olmec and the Donghu were girls. The Donghu was bouncing from foot to foot as if she were preparing for a boxing match. The Olmec was gorgeous—a tall, tanned girl with long, black, curly hair. She looked about my age—19, maybe.

She had a confused and angry look on her face.

“Who is that?” she said, speaking to the other five Players but pointing over at our café. She had virtually no accent. “The girl who just went into the restaurant. Who is that?”

“What are you talking about?” the Nabataean asked. He had a low voice, and he spoke perfect English, but with a British accent, and he stood as still as a
tree, his arms folded. “This is about us.”
“Have you noticed there are only six of us here?” the Olmec said. “That girl
who just went into the café was in Mexico. She was there right before the
sign from Huitzilopochtli. The explosion.”
“Someone has already started Playing,” the Harappan said calmly. “And I
don’t think that it’s Player versus Player. I think someone—one of you—has
brought assassins from your line. They’re watching right now. Maybe they
have us in their crosshairs. This is not in the rules. The Makers are watching
us, and they know who is a Player and who is not. They will not tolerate
cheating.”
“I didn’t do this,” the Shang said. “I don’t need help to defeat the rest of
you.”
“Perhaps should go see who in the café,” the Donghu said in broken English.
“Perhaps you should,” the Harappan said.
The Olmec girl pulled an obsidian knife from her belt. “One of you is lying.
But it won’t help you win. Let’s get this started.”
“Do we wait for another sign?” the Shang said. “Or has the game begun?”
The Harappan spoke. “Someone thinks the game has begun. I do not know
what the Makers will rule about this breach, but I do know that you will not
need to wait long.”
The Shang, barely five feet tall, pulled a saber from his belt, eyeing the
Olmec on his left and the Nabataean on his right. “Your lives will end on my
blade.” The Harappan was directly across the circle from him. The Nabataean
held out the walking staff he was holding and removed a leather cover that
hid a spearhead. In response, the Harappan drew his sword—short, with a
wicked curve.
The Donghu laughed. “What is this? Middle Ages?” She reached into the
folds of her clothes and pulled out a pistol. “Sorry. I prepared.” She aimed at
the Shang.
Next to me in the café windows, both John and Walter pointed rifles out the
window, waiting for the action to start.
The Sumerian was the only one who didn’t draw a weapon, but he was still
smiling.
“Wait for them to kill each other,” Mary said. “We don’t need to shoot if
they’re going to settle this here themselves.”
“We have clear lines of sight,” John said, “and there aren’t many tourists
right now.”
I heard a whistle, and then a Munich police officer came running over, pulling out his pistol.
“Halt! Nicht bewegen!”
Before I even got a look at the cop, the Sumerian flicked his hand and a knife buried itself into the policeman’s chest.
To my side I heard glass break, and for a split second I thought John and Walter were firing, but it was the opposite: Walter fell back, a bullet in his forehead.
“No!” Mary shouted, and I grabbed Kat and pulled her down, out of sight.
John fired his gun—a fully automatic AK-47. He had dropped low and was firing in long bursts, barely looking out the window.
“Who shot Walter?” Mary cried, on her knees next to him.
John ducked down and swapped out the magazine. “Shit. I think it was a sniper. Or it was that Donghu girl with the Sig Sauer.” He was scared. I’d never seen that look on John’s face before. He was the one who was supposed to keep the rest of us calm. “But it couldn’t have been the Donghu. Or it was just a really lucky shot.”
“Why would there be a sniper?” Kat asked.
John shook his head. “It’s like they said. Maybe one of their lines really did send someone with them.”
“Isn’t that cheating?”
“I . . . I don’t know. Walter would know.”
“We’re going to lose them,” I said. When no one responded, I peeked out the window.
“Don’t!” Kat said, grabbing my arm. But I stayed where I was.
“I don’t see anyone on the roofs,” I said. “No snipers. And we’re safe.” The Donghu with the pistol was dead, lying in a crumpled heap, the Harappan standing above her, sword fighting with the Shang. The Olmec was running, no knife in her hand anymore—I didn’t know where it had gone. She leaped for the Donghu’s gun, but it was knocked away from her at the last minute by the back end of the Nabataean’s spear. She turned the leap into a roll and was up on her feet in an instant, dodging the sharp end of the spear and trying for the gun again. The Sumerian was all alone, hunched over the dead cop’s body.
The Olmec ran for the gun again, but the Nabataean was too fast and hit her
in the face with the spear shaft. She fell to the ground, unconscious. The Nabataean looked at the fighting all around him, spotted the Sumerian, and threw his spear.

He had good aim, but, it seemed by luck, the Sumerian turned at the last minute, the blade slicing his clothes and skittering to a stop several yards away.

“We have to get out there,” John said. “We have to kill them all.”

Mary grabbed up Walter’s rifle—an M14. That was what I’d trained on all summer. I knew the gun inside and out, but so did she. I grabbed for the pistol at Walter’s side—a Beretta. I gave it to Kat, and took back my M1911. I kept the Colt Lawman with me, too, tucked in the back of my pants. It only had four rounds left.

John opened the door, ran into the square, dropped to one knee, and—didn’t fire. He was searching for the sniper, if there even was one. Mary ran out and crouched behind a cement planter full of yellow and red flowers. She too looked for the sniper.

The Sumerian was up from the cop, holding his pistol. I aimed at him with mine, but he was at least fifty yards away, farther than I ever trained for.

I fired twice, from a standing position, both hands on the gun. But I missed. He ducked back into a crouch and shot back at me. I dove down next to Mary, trying to catch my breath. We had them vastly outgunned, but they were moving with the skill and grace of Players, not wasting a motion, not ever unfocused.

I could hear the rat-a-tat of John’s gun. He was taking short bursts now, but shooting up into an empty window.

“Shoot the Players!” I called to him.

“There has to be a sniper. That’s the only open window.”

“You can’t see a sniper,” I said. “And we need to kill the Players.”

“I will,” Mary said, taking a deep breath and then peering up over the planter to shoot through the flowers. Petals exploded into the air as she fired the semiautomatic rifle. I dared to look out to see what she was hitting.

Nothing. She couldn’t see anything through those flowers. She was firing blind.

“Mary!” I shouted. “Give me the gun.”

“No,” she said, ducking back down.

“You’re not hitting anything. You can’t see.”
“It’s suppressing fire,” she said, as she tremblingly fumbled with loading a new magazine—the last magazine we had with us, unless there was more ammunition on Walter’s body I hadn’t seen. “I’m fine. You shoot.” Kat was using an upturned outdoor table as cover and was firing at the Sumerian, but because of her injury she was forced to use her left hand, and she wasn’t hitting anything.

I took aim at the Harappan, who was still struggling against the Shang, their swords swinging and clashing, parrying and lunging. I squeezed the trigger and the gun jumped up. I wasn’t good at these distances. I fired again and hit the Shang in the leg. He stumbled, and immediately the Harappan swung at his neck and practically beheaded him. The Shang fell to the ground, blood spurting out of his severed arteries. The Harappan was close to the unconscious Olmec, and he ran over to her and stabbed her in the chest.

The Nabataean was running to the Sumerian, or to retrieve his spear—I wasn’t sure. I didn’t even try wasting bullets on him while he ran. Instead I focused on the Sumerian. I tried to follow all my training—sight the target, pull the trigger, don’t squeeze it, and let out a long slow breath—but by the time I had let out the breath, the Sumerian was on his feet, running. I fired one shot at him and missed.

“Sniper!” John called, and started firing again.

I looked all around for him, trying to see what John was shooting at.

“Where?” I asked.

But he couldn’t hear me over the noise of his gun. I turned to Mary.

“Mary.”

She was lying next to me, still bent at the knees but lying on her back. She’d been shot in the eye, and there was a spray of blood out the back of her head, splattered across the cobblestones.

“Mary,” I said, tears immediately springing to my eyes. I reached a hand out to touch her cheek, but then recoiled. Her face was distorted and broken. The bullet hadn’t gone cleanly through her eye but had hit her cheekbone and torn a hole through her face, fracturing the bones. It was too much, too horrible to see, too horrible to remember. But I knew I was going to remember this every day of my life. It was burning into my mind, searing my eyes like a cattle brand.

“I got him,” John said, letting out a long breath. “I got the bastard.”

“Where?”
He pointed up at the roofline. “Behind that chimney.”
“Are you sure?”
Kat answered. “I saw him fall. He’s over there. By the Olmec.”
“Where did they go?” I asked, numbly noticing that the Players were gone.
Mary was dead.
“The Sumerian ran, and the Nabataean followed. The Harappan, calm son of
a bitch, stabbed an extra time into all of the bodies. Made sure they were
dead.”
“I’m sorry,” Kat said, eyes wet. “I tried to shoot him. I really tried. But my
hand. I couldn’t hold the gun steady. I’m so sorry.”
“It’s okay,” I said.
“We don’t outnumber them anymore,” John said, dropping his gun. “We
need to move, and fast.”
“Don’t we have to follow them?” I said.
“Of course,” John said, visibly shaken. “Who has bullets?”
“I have some,” Kat said, standing. “I wasn’t counting my shots.”
“I’ve got three or four,” I said.
“Hide your guns,” John said. “I’ve got a Walther. One full magazine.”
“Then we’re going to have to figure this out. But first we need to follow
them. Hopefully they’ll kill each other.”
I took Mary’s hand and squeezed it one last time. I didn’t care what she had
done to me at that point. She didn’t deserve to die, and not like this. And she
deserved more than my just leaving her on the side of the road for some
paramedics to find.
But like so many things in my life lately, I had no choice.
We ran after the Players.
CHAPTER SEVEN

I helped Kat check her magazine and saw she had four bullets left. She was bleeding through the bandage on her arm—it was dribbling down her wrist and hand—but there was nothing we could do about it. We needed to follow the Players, and we needed to stay away from the cops. All of us concealed our pistols.

“Will they split up?” Kat asked.

“No,” John said, speaking softly. “They were expecting the beginning of the game. But they didn’t get any direction, any puzzle to solve, any answer to look for. So all they have as an objective is to kill each other. They have to do it now, today, because there’s nothing else.”

“And we can’t let them get away because we’ll never track them down again,” I said.

“And they’ll stick together, because there’s nowhere else to go.”

We heard a whistle, and John stopped running. Kat and I did too. I took her good hand in mine. Moments later two policemen jogged past us toward the plaza.

“Are we still in this?” I asked. “I mean, do we even have a chance anymore? We’ve lost everybody. Kat can’t shoot because of her hand. We are almost out of bullets, and we’re going up against these guys? Did you see how they fight?”

“It was unbelievable,” Kat said. “Who can move like that?”

“And what if they have more backup, like that sniper?”

John took a deep breath. “We knew it was going to be hard.”

“What?” I asked, incredulous. “We knew it was going to be hard. We didn’t know that it was going to kill us all.”

“Walter and I tried to prepare you,” he said, but the words sounded hollow. “We’re trying to save the world, remember? We trained all summer. Were
“You expecting this to be easy?”
“We trained all summer as a group. We were hunting as a team, in everything we did.”
“We’re still a group.”
I rolled my eyes. “I meant we practiced as if we were outnumbering them. Like there were going to be more of us, like this morning when Kat and I went after Raakel. We only beat her because there were two of us.”
“Guys,” Kat said. “How do we even know we’re going in the right direction?”
“Blood,” John said simply, and pointed at the roadway. “The Sumerian is bleeding.”
I hadn’t noticed, but now that I was looking for it, I could spot it on the street. Not a constant trail, but every ten steps or so there was a drop. As we went farther, the drops got bigger, more the size of smallish puddles. And then they turned into small, patterned impressions, like the blood was now on the bottom of his shoe. He would have to stop somewhere soon and wrap the wound, but—
Mary’s face came back to me, unexpectedly, filling my mind—just that image of her broken face, a face that I had kissed so many times. A girl who I once thought was mine. I’d been wrong. She’d played me for a fool, but I had still loved her. And now all I could see was her lifeless body, the gaping hole in her cheek.
I looked over at Kat, who glanced back at me and gave a weary smile.
The trail took us out of the Olympic Village and into the streets of downtown Munich.
“Look,” Kat said, pointing down a side street to where an ambulance was parked, surrounded by paramedics and one police officer. There was the Sumerian, sitting up, his back against the stone foundation of an old government building.
“Damn it,” John said. “Shit.”
“What?” I asked.
“The trail only leads to him. We don’t know where the others are.”
“Is he alive?” Kat asked.
We looked down at him, waiting for some movement. The Sumerian lifted a hand wearily. He seemed to be desperately signaling for help.
John immediately started walking toward the emergency team, and Kat and I
followed.
“What are we doing, John?” I asked. “There’s a cop there.”
“We have to kill all the Players,” he said, anger in his voice.
“Yeah,” I said, “but won’t it be easier to track him down at the hospital? Besides, look at him—he’s not going to make it much longer anyway. We should go after the others.”
“Don’t talk,” he said, and put a finger to his lips.
I exchanged a look with Kat and let go of her hand, getting ready in case I needed to pull the gun from my waistband.
“The Nabataean and the Harappan can’t be far. They’re trying to kill the Sumerian too, remember.”
I nodded. The two of them seemed the calmest under pressure. I didn’t imagine one of them would run from the other. They’d face off, sword versus spear, somewhere nearby. An alley, maybe, or a parking garage—somewhere out of the way, out of sight.
I didn’t know what John expected to do here. Kat’s hand was red with blood and the paramedics would likely want to treat her too. And the cop would be suspicious of the three of us.
If there was anything helping us today, it was the hostage crisis with the Palestinians and Israelis. The police probably had a lot of manpower surrounding the Olympians’ apartments, which would take a lot of cops off the streets. They were overwhelmed and couldn’t chase Players across the city.
“Where are we going after this?” Kat asked.
“We’re going to find the other two,” I said.
“That’s not what I meant. I mean when we’re done today. Where are we going? Not back home.”
“You speak German,” I said. “We could stay here.”
“How about England?” she said. “Forge some forms and get student visas.”
“If we’re going to forge papers anyway, let’s just get our citizenship.”
John again told us to be quiet. “Kat, talk in German. Pretend to be tourists.”
We were only twenty yards from the cop, and he turned to look up at us.
“Geh weg,” he said. “Dies ist ein Tatort.”
“Wir suchen für den Olympic plaza,” Kat replied.
“Gehen Sie weg; oder werden Sie verhaftet.”
The cop turned his back to us to speak to the paramedics, and John pulled out
his gun.
“No!” I cried out, but my voice was covered by the sound of three gunshots. One for each paramedic and one for the cop.
“What are you doing?” Kat screamed.
“I’m finishing Endgame,” he said, walking up to the bodies. The Sumerian watched us through droopy eyes. John took the cop’s gun—a Sig Sauer—and held it out to me.
“Where are the others?” John asked the Sumerian.
“Fighting,” he said. “I have lost.”
I noticed now that he had a new injury—there was a half-bandaged wound on his torso.
“Where did they go?” John insisted.
The Sumerian shook his head, coughing up blood. He raised his hand slowly and pointed. “That way. They will be close. Neither is wounded, and they want to fight. Are you the pacifists?”
John stood up, shaking his head. He walked to the end of the narrow street.
“What do you mean?” Kat asked.
“Three Americans visited me this morning. They told me to stop fighting. They said all I had to do was walk away and never Play.”
Kat nodded emphatically. “Yes. That’s us.”
“I will walk away.”
Kat stretched the bandage around his side. “It’s deep,” she said. “I think you’ve got a punctured lung.”
“Move,” John said, returning. “I think they’re just a few blocks away. You can hear a crowd to the west.”
Kat stood up and reached into the ambulance for a box of bandages. I helped her, since she couldn’t use her right hand.
BANG!
I spun around to see John pointing a smoking gun at the Sumerian. There was a bullet hole in the kid’s forehead, and he began slumping over onto his side.
“What the hell was that for?” I shouted.
John looked back toward the cross street. “We’re killing all the Players. No mistakes.”
Kat threw the box onto the road. “He said he was going to walk away. He said he was going to stop.”
I pointed my gun—the cop’s gun—at John. “What happened to all of our
rules? What happened to trying to talk to the Players?”
“Of course he would say he was going to stop. We had him defenseless and injured. He was saying what he needed to say to survive.”
“You’ve made me a murderer, John,” I said. “I was just a college kid. I just wanted to make a difference. I wanted to protest the war. I wanted to get out from under my dad’s thumb. And this is where we end up? Shooting a wounded teenager in the street?”
“You’ve known what we were about since day one,” he said, tucking his gun into the back of his pants. “You just pretended that we could do this without killing.”
“I pretended? I pretended? You asked me to write the dialogues. You had me train the others on how to sell, how to build a relationship of trust with the Players. You told me to do that, and now you’re saying I was pretending?”
“We have to stop them all,” John said, looking back over his shoulder. “They’ve killed enough of us. They killed Mary—didn’t you see that? And now we outnumber them again. Three on two, and soon it may be three on one, if the Harappan and the Nabataean are really trying to kill each other.”
“We don’t know what they’re trying to do,” Kat said. “We don’t know where they are.”
“Follow the sirens. Speaking of which, we need to get out of here.”
I was fuming. “Yeah, because of your gunshot.”
“Yes,” he said, turning back to face me. “Yes, because of my gunshot. We’re killing them all. Every Player. And if you don’t like that, then you should have damn well said it three months ago. When you killed that sheriff, you knew what you were in for. Every time you sighted down your gun at the range, you knew that you were preparing for war. You could have left at any time, but you didn’t. You stayed, and you trained right along with the rest of us. You delivered the invitations, and you killed the Minoan. You’re a part of this, Mike, whether you like it or not, so don’t act like you’re morally superior. Do what you need to do to get your head straight, but do it now, because we’re going to end this game.”
I kept my gun on him for a long ten seconds.
“It’s okay,” Kat said, putting her hand gently on my back. “Let’s get it over with. When we’re done, we won’t have to see John ever again. We won’t have to think about this ever again. For all we know, the Players are killing each other right now anyway. We can do this, and get it over with, and leave.
You and me. Together.”
I let out a long breath and then lowered the gun.
“Come on, then,” John said. “I think they went this way.”
We ran to the left down the cross street. I was getting lost, not knowing which way was north or south, east or west. I just followed John and held Kat’s hand.
How were we supposed to stay in this country? We’d spoken easily about forging papers, but it was Barbara and Douglas who had done all of that, and they hadn’t come back from their mission to kill the Olmec Player.
As we walked behind John, I pulled the walkie-talkie out of my backpack. I sent a call out on our channel.
“Anyone listening, this is Mike. Does anyone copy?”
There was static.
“This is Mike,” I said again. “Anyone listening?”
Nothing.
“Maybe their walkie-talkie is turned off,” Kat said. “Or in a backpack, like ours was. We need to get back to the safe house.”
We walked on, hearing sirens here and there but not seeing anything. These streets were so narrow that I wondered if John was actually following a real sound or just echoes.
“Do we know who that sniper was working for?” I asked John.
“I couldn’t tell. His face was dark, but I don’t know if that was because of his skin color or because of camouflage paint. He was doing a really good job of hiding on that roof.”
“So he could be either Nabataean or Harappan, right?”
“Or none of the above,” Kat said. “Besides, he’s dead. Or she’s dead. I thought she looked like a girl when she fell.”
“But if she was, say, Nabataean, that would mean that the Nabataeans are cheating by bringing along extra combatants. There could be another up here somewhere, ready to take us down.”
“Could be,” John said, and then he held up his hand and made a fist—the sign to stop.
Kat and I froze, watching and waiting while John moved forward to look around the end of a building. He stopped, and his hand went to his gun. I grabbed mine, and Kat awkwardly took hers in her left hand. We slowly moved around the edge of the building, following John’s lead.
I could hear the fight now, the scrape of metal on wood, the heavy breathing and grunting of exhausted combatants. And then I saw them.
It was a wide avenue, with a wide island in the middle of the street. Among the trees, benches, and flowers, the Nabataean and Harappan were locked in an epic battle.
We weren’t the only ones watching the fight. I could see faces in the windows up and down the street. And outside, there were onlookers watching from what they must have considered was a safe distance—but as soon as they saw our guns, they began to clear out. There was a siren coming from somewhere down the road, out of sight behind buildings and trees.

The Harappan was whirling, a blur with his curved sword. The Nabataean was standing mostly still, parrying each strike with his spear—about two inches in diameter, and made of some very hard wood, it was hardly getting nicked by the sword. But the Nabataean was on the defensive, backing up as the Harappan was advancing.

John fired, hitting the Harappan in the chest—he fell back onto the stone. The Nabataean turned back to see us, and he ran for the cover of a newsstand. John and I fired at him as he ran, but he was fast and out of view almost immediately. A motorcycle cop appeared at the end of the road—John took a couple of shots in his direction, and the bike slid out from underneath him. The cop crawled for the cover of a parked car.

I couldn’t see anyone from where I was—the Harappan had disappeared under the shrubbery, and the Nabataean was well hidden.

“Both of you,” John said, “go to the far side and work your way up.”

“The Nabataean’s the last,” I said, and nodded. That side was where the newsstand was.

“I don’t know,” John said. “Did you hear the ping? The Harappan’s wearing a barrier vest. Bulletproof, I think.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. We’d never practiced shooting at targets with bulletproof vests.

“It means I wish I still had my Kalashnikov. Pistols at this range won’t penetrate. Either get closer, or shoot for the head.”
“Okay,” I said.
“What about the cop?” Kat asked.
“Will you just get going?”
Kat glanced at my face, and our eyes met for a moment; then we crossed the street, running in a low crouch. The road was lined with shops with large front windows. I kept my shoulder against the glass as I moved up, looking for a sign of either Player.
The cop shouted something in German that I didn’t understand.
“Do I have to know what that was?” I asked Kat without turning to look at her.
“‘Stop’ and ‘surrender,’ I think. High school German didn’t cover this kind of vocabulary.”
John was opposite us, on the other side of the street, moving cautiously, his gun in a solid two-hand grip. He moved with confidence. He looked like a soldier. I imagined I looked like an idiot. I looked like a target.
Suddenly the Harappan was on his feet again, throwing something at John. John fired back at him, and glass on our side of the street exploded into a million little pieces. I ducked and scrambled to take cover by a lamppost. I lined up my sights on the Harappan—John was downrange, but not in my sight line, and I decided to take the shot.
Without a noise I was smashed to the ground.
The Nabataean had swung his heavy spear like a seven-foot-long baseball bat, and it had knocked me to the sidewalk.
Dazed, I saw Kat fire wildly with her pistol—her left hand shook despite trying to hold it steady with her wounded arm. But as I lay on the ground, I saw the big man pause and reach for his chest. Blood was dribbling down from his sternum, soaking his shirt.
He raised the spear one last time, threw it, and fell to his knees. He said something in a foreign language and then collapsed to the street.
The cop was up, gun out, yelling at the Harappan and John.
I turned back to Kat.
CHAPTER NINE

The spear had buried itself deep into Kat’s chest, exiting through her back so that she was halfway sitting up. Blood was everywhere. So fast, it was pouring from her body. So much blood. “Kat,” I called, and scrambled through the broken glass to get to her. “Kat, no.”

She was gone. There was no life in her eyes, and I grabbed her throat to feel for a pulse, but there was nothing. The spear had gone straight through her heart, piercing her like she was a piece of paper. No last words. No good-byes. She had killed him and he had killed her. And there was nothing left of me.
CHAPTER TEN

I could hear shooting, distant and unimportant.
I touched Kat’s face. She was so pale, all color rushing out of her as she bled.
“Kat,” I said again, wanting to put my arms around her, but blocked by the mammoth spear. She shouldn’t have come. When her arm got cut, she should have stayed in the hospital. She should have stayed at the safe house. She shouldn’t have been here, backing me up.
Somehow I had lost track of the Nabataean. Stupid. I’d been so stupid. I’d known where he’d gone, where he was hiding, but I’d focused on the Harappan. Shooting at the Player who was threatening John, not the one who was only a few yards from me. It had been stupid, and Kat had paid for my stupidity. She’d killed him, her last act on Earth, but it hadn’t been enough. If I’d kept my eyes on the edge of the newsstand, I could have shot as soon as he’d come out of hiding.
But I hadn’t. I’d kept my eyes on everything but that.
I looked back at John, but he was gone. The Harappan was gone. The policeman lay dead in the bushes. I wondered who had killed him. It didn’t matter, I guessed. Someone had done it, and John and the Harappan were continuing their battle elsewhere. I wasn’t going to chase them down and find out. John was a Green Beret. He could handle the Harappan. We’d have won: all the Players were dead.
I looked at Kat. Her eyes were open, and I reached out to close them, but I couldn’t bring myself to touch her again. I turned away and tried to think of my other memories of her—of her smile, of her laughter, of her kisses.
But all I saw was her contorted face. Her dead eyes. Her blood on the sidewalk.
More sirens.
I dropped my gun on the ground and stood up. I half expected to see John’s
body lying across the way, but there was only the cop’s. The windows were filled with faces, and as I turned around, searching for a sign of John, they all just focused on me, perhaps unafraid, maybe foolish. Maybe they’d seen me drop my gun. Maybe they could see into my heart and know that I wasn’t going to fight again. That I was done. That my part in the Endgame legends was coming to an end.

I started to jog away, then broke into a full sprint. I didn’t know where I was, so I couldn’t know where I was going, but I tried to pick the least-busy streets and alleys. I tried to run in the opposite direction of the sirens, but there were sirens everywhere. It sounded like it was going to be an impossible task to avoid them, but I would do what I could.

I was going for the safe house. Maybe there would be someone there. I didn’t really care. I was going for the money we had stashed in a communal fund. I was going to take what was left and get on a train and get out of Munich—out of Germany altogether. Maybe, I thought, I’d go back to Turkey. We hadn’t encountered any notable security while we were there, and the cost of living was low—the money at the safe house could easily support me for a year, maybe more. I didn’t even try to think of anything further away than a year. In the last hour I’d just seen people I cared about die in horrible ways. I didn’t need anyone new in my life right now. I’d be a hermit. Maybe I’d get a job on a fishing boat, or in a café. I’d learn more of the language. I’d fade into the background.

Seven blocks away from the street where I’d left Kat, I stopped running, and I walked until I found a gift shop. I bought a white Olympics T-shirt—one with the sunburst logo on the chest—and pulled it on over my blood-spattered shirt. I also bought a map, and I asked the cashier, who spoke a little English, where we were. He pointed the intersection out to me, and I was able to figure out a path to get back to the safe house. I could have hailed a cab, but I wanted to walk. There was too much going on in my head, and, to tell the truth, I wasn’t in a hurry to get back to the house. I wanted to freeze time. I didn’t want to get on with my life. I wanted to go back in time, not forward.

I couldn’t believe that I had left Kat there on the road. Was there something I could have done for her?

What about Mary? I had just left her too. They were dead, and I’d just moved on, leaving them on the street for the birds.
I got sick to my stomach, remembering their wounds. Both had been brutal, hateful injuries. Both had devastated their bodies, killing them instantly. If there was a good thing, that was it. There’d been no suffering.

I put my hand to my face. I’d started sweating heavily. I still had Kat’s blood on my shirt.

I bent at the waist and puked in the gutter. And as I did, I thought about what had become of this entire mission. John was the only hope now—he had to kill the Harappan. If he did that, we would have won. Zero line would have killed all the Players. The Makers—the Annunaki, the Sky Gods, whatever they were called—had no more game to play. They had no more Players. No more Endgame.

Or did they? Was Raakel right? Would the next generation of Players take their place? Would it continue, forever?

That was the thing that hurt the worst—that all of this might have been for nothing.

Were the Makers watching all of this from above? Some kind of alien satellite that monitored the Players?

Would they punish humanity for ruining their fun? I wouldn’t bet against it. Maybe they were on their way right now. Maybe they’d punish me and John for trying to stop Endgame.

I walked the final blocks to the safe house. I continued to hear sirens, but they never came close to me. I never saw flashing lights or police cars or motorcycles.

The safe house was just as I’d left it. I’d hoped I’d find John there, but I didn’t. No one was there. I went into the dining room, where all our gear had been laid out—all the pistols were gone, but there were a dozen long guns there. Shotguns, AK-47s, an M21 sniper rifle, two HK33s, and several guns I couldn’t name. They’d all been smuggled into town by Lee and Lin, both of whom were dead now.

I picked up an Uzi, testing its weight in my hand. I should have taken that to the plaza, not a lousy revolver.

My fingerprints were on it now. They were on everything in this house. Should I bother trying to wipe the place down? Now that Eugene had talked, I was connected to all of this.

I set the Uzi back in its place and moved to the bag with all the forged papers. My Frank Finn passport was in there, along with everyone else’s fake IDs. I
took mine and put it in my back pocket, then emptied the rest of the bag into the fireplace. I found a bottle of vodka on an end table and splashed it on the passports. I struck a match and the whole pile went up in blue flame.
I put a few logs on top of the IDs and then sat down in a leather high-backed chair. I took a sip of the vodka straight from the bottle and got too much, and my eyes started to water.
"Who are you?" a voice behind me asked.
I was too despondent to bother turning around. Or answering. I took another swig and rolled it around my mouth for a minute.
"Who are you?" the male voice repeated. The accent was Indian.
"Frank," I said. "Finn."
"That's not what I mean," he said, moving into my view. He was holding a small pistol I didn’t recognize. It looked Russian, maybe.
"I am Pravheet."
"I’m walking away," I said.
"You are La Tène?" he asked, sitting down in the chair opposite me. Aside from his pistol pointing at me, we looked like two old friends sitting by a fire.
"Me? No."
"Your friend," he said calmly. "The one I just killed. He was not a Player."
"No," I said. "Neither am I."
"Then who was? The girl killed by the Nabataean?"
"No."
"Fine," he said. "Don’t tell me. She died, and he died, and now you will die."
"You don’t have to do this," I said. "I’m not a Player."
"You’re American, aren’t you? I know the Cahokian Player by sight, but I don’t know La Tène. I assume it’s you. Or are you something else? Minoan?"
"Something like that," I said, taking another hit off the bottle. I wasn’t a drinker, and the vodka burned.
"When there is a Calling, only the Player is supposed to come. The Makers will show their displeasure on you and your line."
"It doesn’t matter," I said. "We failed."
"You have."
"You don’t have to kill anymore," I said. "You can stop Playing."
He smiled. "Surrender? To you?"
"No, I don’t mean that. I mean that you don’t have to Play. There are no other Players. They’re all dead. You can refuse to Play the game."
“There will be a test,” he said. “There is more to Endgame than simply defeating the other Players.”

I screwed the cap on the bottle and set it on the table next to my chair. “This wasn’t a real Calling,” I said. “I’m with a group called Zero line. We are not Players. Our goal was not to kill, but to persuade. Let me guess: your invitation to the Calling was an explosion and the symbol of these Olympics burning.”

“Yes,” he said, his brow furrowed. “The same as all of the lines. A sign from the Makers.”

“It was a couple bricks of C4 and a thermite stencil,” I said. “Look around this room—there’s clothes and gear for twenty people. In the next room you’ll find a table full of guns. We, Zero line, invited you here. Our goal was to try to talk you out of fighting. What would happen if you quit? Walked away?”

“My entire line would be destroyed in flame and ruin.”

“No, because all of the lines would walk away.”

“Then all of the lines would perish,” he said. “The Makers do not tolerate disobedience. We are their servants, and all they ask of us is to prepare for Endgame.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” I said. “You’re the only Player left. When there’s a real Calling, there will be no one else to Play against. We have won. Humanity—Zero line—has won.” But even as I spoke, the words felt hollow. I had no idea anymore if that was true. It didn’t feel like we’d won. This didn’t feel like any kind of victory I wanted.

He put a finger to his chin. We stared at each other for several seconds. I turned my attention back to the fire. The passports were all destroyed.

“If what you say is true,” the Harappan said slowly, “if this was a sham Calling, then you are all fools and have died for nothing. How many of you were killed?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “There were once twenty of us. Some never made it here.”

“Then twenty have died for nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“There will always be Players. If you were to kill me, and it was not during a true Endgame, then someone from my line would immediately take my place as Player. There will always be Players. There could be a true Calling today,
and twelve new Players would be brought forward.”
I continued to stare at the fire. I couldn’t believe it. I wouldn’t believe it.
Walter had known about Endgame. He’d known it from personal experience.
He would have known if all this was worthless.
“But I don’t believe that you’re so ignorant. You are the La Tène Player. And
all of this is a ruse to get me to give up so you can shoot me in the back.
You’re a poor Player. All of your line was working with you, and you
couldn’t even kill everyone.”
“And that’s easier for you to believe than that this is all phony?”
He stood up. “You are a disgrace to the game. I come from a proud lineage.
You rely on cheap deceptions and a La Tène army.”
“You’re wrong,” I said. He still had his gun pointed at me, and I had nothing
to defend myself with. Except the bottle. I picked it up and opened it. My gun
was in the other room, so I couldn’t shoot Pravheet, but I could light him on
fire. Maybe it would give me time to get in the weapons room.
“I will kill you, and with this kill I will have won Endgame.”
With all my strength I threw the bottle at the floor between him and the
fireplace. The glass shattered, and the clear liquid sprayed across the room.
At that same instant I felt a searing pain in my chest, and my whole body
seized.
Blackness started to close in. All around me was flame, but as the fire spread,
it dimmed.
I was wet—my shirt was wet.
Pravheet pulled a blanket from the floor and tamped out the flames on his leg.
I tried to get up, but my body wouldn’t respond. I could feel my muscles
firing, tightening and releasing, but I wasn’t in control of any of it.
“No one can stop Endgame. Endgame will come, and Players will Play. What
will be will be,” Pravheet said, and I felt the barrel of his gun against the back
of my head.
All went to black.
Excerpt from *ENDGAME: THE CALLING*

SEE HOW ENDGAME BEGINS:
Endgame has begun. Our future is unwritten. Our future is your future. What will be will be.

We each believe some version of how we got here. God made us. Aliens beamed us. Lightning split us, or portals delivered us. In the end, the *how* doesn’t matter. We have this planet, this world, this Earth. We came here, we have been here, and we are here now. You, me, us, the whole of humanity. Whatever you believe happened in the beginning is not important. The end, however. The end is. This is Endgame.

We are 12 in number. Young in body, but of ancient people. Our lines were chosen thousands of years ago. We have been preparing every day since. Once the game begins, we must deliberate and decipher, move and murder. Some of us are less ready than others, and the lessers will be the first to die. Endgame is simple this way. What is not simple is that when one of us dies, it will mean the deaths of countless others. The Event, and what comes after, will see to that. You are the unwitting billions. You are the innocent bystanders. You are the lucky losers and the unlucky winners. You are the audience at a play that will determine your fate.

We are the Players. Your Players. We have to Play. We must be older than 13 and younger than 20. It is the rule, and it has always been this way. We are not supernatural. None of us can fly, or turn lead to gold, or heal ourselves. When death comes, it comes. We are mortal. Human. We are the inheritors of the Earth. The Great Puzzle of Salvation is ours to solve, and one of us must do it, or we will all be lost. Together we are everything: strong, kind, ruthless, loyal, smart, stupid, ugly, lustful, mean, fickle, beautiful, calculating, lazy, exuberant, weak.

We are good and evil.

Like you.
Like all.
But we are not together. We are not friends. We do not call one another, and we do not text one another. We do not chat on the internet or meet for coffee. We are separated and scattered, spread around the world. We have been raised and trained since birth to be wary and wise, cunning and
deceptive, ruthless and merciless. We will stop at nothing to find the keys to the Great Puzzle. We cannot fail. Failure is death. Failure is the End of All, the End of Everything.
Will exuberance beat strength? Stupidity top kindness? Laziness thwart beauty? Will the winner be good or evil? There is only one way to find out.
Play.
Survive.
Solve.
Our future is unwritten. Our future is your future. What will be will be.
So listen.
Follow.
Cheer.
Hope.
Pray.
Pray hard if that is what you believe.
We are the Players. Your Players. We Play for you.
Come Play with us.
People of Earth.
Endgame has begun.
Marcus Loxias Megalos is bored. He cannot remember a time before the boredom. School is boring. Girls are boring. Football is boring. Especially when his team, his favorite team, Fenerbahçe, is losing, as they are now, to Manisaspor.

Marcus sneers at the TV in his small, undecorated room. He is slouched in a plush black leather chair that sticks to his skin whenever he sits up. It is night, but Marcus keeps the lights in his room off. The window is open. Heat passes through it like an oppressive ghost as the sounds of the Bosporus—the long, low calls of ships, the bells of buoys—groan and tinkle over Istanbul.

Marcus wears baggy black gym shorts and is shirtless. His 24 ribs show through his tanned skin. His arms are sinewy and hard. His breathing is easy. His stomach is taut and his hair is close-cropped and black and his eyes are green. A bead of sweat rolls down the tip of his nose. All of Istanbul simmers on this night, and Marcus is no different.

A book lies open in his lap, ancient and leather-bound. The words on its pages are Greek. Marcus has handwritten something in English on a scrap of paper that lies across the open page: *From broad Crete I declare that I am come by lineage, the son of a wealthy man.* He has read the old book over and over. It’s a tale of war, exploration, betrayal, love, and death. It always makes him smile.

What Marcus wouldn’t give to take a journey of his own, to escape the oppressive heat of this dull city. He imagines an endless sea spread out before him, the wind cool against his skin, adventures and enemies arrayed on the horizon.

Marcus sighs and touches the scrap of paper. In his other hand he holds a
9,000-year-old knife, made of a single piece of bronze forged in the fires of Knossos. He brings the blade across his body and lets its edge rest against his right forearm. He pushes it into the skin, but not all the way. He knows the limits of this blade. He has trained with it since he could hold it. He has slept with it under his pillow since he was six. He has killed chickens, rats, dogs, cats, pigs, horses, hawks, and lambs with it. He has killed 11 people with it. He is 16, in his prime for Playing. If he turns 20, he will be ineligible. He wants to Play. He would rather die than be ineligible. The odds are almost nil that he will get his chance, though, and he knows it. Unlike Odysseus, war will never find Marcus. There will be no grand journey. His line has been waiting for 9,000 years. Since the day the knife was forged. For all Marcus knows, his line will wait for another 9,000 years, long after Marcus is gone and the pages of his book have disintegrated. So Marcus is bored. The crowd on the TV cheers, and Marcus looks up from the knife. The Fenerbahçe goalie has cleared a rainbow up the right sideline, the ball finding the head of a burly midfielder. The ball bounces forward, over a line of defenders, near the last two men before the Manisaspor keeper. The players rush for the ball, and the forward comes away with it, 20 meters from the goal, free and clear of the defender. The keeper gets ready. Marcus leans forward. Match time is 83:34. Fenerbahçe has yet to score, and doing so in such a dramatic way would save some face. The old book slides to the floor. The scrap of paper drifts free of the page and slips through the air like a falling leaf. The crowd begins to rise. The sky suddenly brightens, as if the gods, the Gods of the Sky themselves, are coming down to offer help. The keeper backpedals. The forward collects himself and takes the shot, and the ball blasts off. As it punches the back of the net, the stadium lights up and the crowd screams, first in exaltation for the goal, but immediately afterward in terror and confusion—deep, true, and profound terror and confusion. A massive fireball, a giant burning meteor, explodes above the crowd and tears across the field, obliterating the Fenerbahçe defense and blasting a hole through the end of the stadium grandstand. Marcus’s eyes widen. He is looking at total carnage. It is butchery on the scale of those American disaster movies. Half the stadium, tens of thousands
of people dead, burning, lit up, on fire.
It is the most beautiful thing Marcus has ever seen.
He breathes hard. Sweat pours off his brow. People outside are yelling, screaming. A woman wails from the café below. Sirens ring out across the ancient city on the Bosporus, between the Marmara and the Black.
On TV, the stadium is awash in flames. Players, police, spectators, coaches run around, burning like crazed matchsticks. The commentators cry for help, for God, because they don’t understand. Those not dead or on their way to being dead trample one another as they try to escape. There’s another explosion and the screen goes black.
Marcus’s heart wants out of his chest. Marcus’s brain is as hot as the football pitch. Marcus’s stomach is full of rocks and acid. His palms feel hot and sticky. He looks down and sees that he has dug the ancient blade into his forearm, and a rivulet of blood is trickling off his hand, onto the chair, onto his book. The book is ruined, but it doesn’t matter; he won’t need it anymore. Because now, Marcus will have his Odyssey.
Marcus looks back to the darkened TV. He knows there’s something waiting for him there amidst the wreckage. He must find it.
A single piece.
For himself, for his line.
He smiles. Marcus has trained all of his life for this moment. When he wasn’t training, he was dreaming of the Calling. All the visions of destruction that his teenage mind concocted could not touch what Marcus has witnessed tonight. A meteor destroying a football stadium and killing 38,676 people. The legends said it would be a grand announcement. For once, the legends have become a beautiful reality.
Marcus has wanted, waited, and prepared for Endgame his entire life. He is no longer bored, and he won’t be again until he either wins or dies.
This is it.
He knows it.
This is it.
Three chimes of a small pewter bell awake Chiyoko Takeda. Her head lolls to the side. The time on her digital clock: 5:24. She makes a note of it. These are heavy numbers now. Significant. She imagines it is the same for those who ascribe meaning to numbers like 11:03 or 9:11 or 7:07. For the rest of her life she will see these numbers, 5:24, and for the rest of her life they will carry weight, meaning, significance.

Chiyoko turns from the clock on her side table and stares into the darkness. She lies naked on top of the sheets. She licks her thin lips. She scrutinizes the shadows on her ceiling as if some message will appear there.

The bell should not have rung. Not for her.

All her life she has been told of Endgame and her peculiar and fantastical ancestry. Before the bell rang, she was 17 years old, a homeschooled outcast, a master sailor and navigator, an able gardener, a limber climber. Skilled at symbols, languages, and words. An interpreter of signs. An assassin able to wield the wakizashi, the hojo, and the shuriken. Now that the bell has rung, she feels 100. She feels 1,000. She feels 10,000, and getting older by the second. The heavy burden of the centuries presses down upon her.

Chiyoko closes her eyes. Darkness returns. She wants to be somewhere else. A cave. Underwater. In the oldest forest on Earth. But she is here, and she must get used to it. Darkness will be everywhere soon, and everyone will know it. She must master it. Befriend it. Love it. She has prepared for 17 years and she’s ready, even if she never wanted it or expected it. The darkness. It will be like a loving silence, which for Chiyoko is easy. The silence is part of who she is.

For she can hear, but she has never spoken.
She looks out her open window, breathes. It rained during the night, and she can feel the humidity in her nose and throat and chest. The air smells good. There is a gentle rapping on the sliding door leading to her room. Chiyoko sits in her Western-style bed, her slight back facing the door. She stamps her foot twice. Twice means *Come in.*

The sound of wood sliding across wood. The quiet of the screen stopping. The faint shuffle of feet.

“I rang the bell,” her uncle says, his head bowed low to the ground, according the young Player the highest level of respect, as is the custom, the rule. “I had to,” he says. “They’re coming. All of them.”

Chiyoko nods.

He keeps his gaze lowered. “I am sorry,” he says. “It is time.”

Chiyoko stamps five arrhythmic times with her foot. *Okay. Glass of water.*

“Yes, of course.” Her uncle backs out of the doorway and quietly moves away.

Chiyoko stands, smells the air again, and moves to the window. The faint glow from the city’s lights blankets her pale skin. She looks out over Naha. There is the park. The hospital. The harbor. There is the sea, black, broad, and calm. There is the soft breeze. The palm trees below her window whisper. The low gray clouds begin to light up, as if a spaceship is coming to visit. *Old people must be awake,* Chiyoko thinks. *Old people get up early.* They are having tea and rice and radish pickles. Eggs and fish and warm milk. Some will remember the war. The fire from the sky that destroyed and decimated everything. And allowed for a rebirth. What is about to happen will remind them of those days. But a rebirth? Their survival and their future depend entirely on Chiyoko.

A dog begins to bark frantically.

Birds trill.

A car alarm goes off.

The sky gets very bright, and the clouds break downward as a massive fireball bursts over the edge of town. It screams, burns, and crashes into the marina. A great explosion and a billow of scalding steam illuminate the early morning. Rain made of dust and rock and plastic and metal hurls upward over Naha. Trees die. Fish die. Children, dreams, and fortunes die. The lucky ones are snuffed out in their slumber. The unlucky are burned or maimed.

Initially it will be mistaken for an earthquake.
But they will see.
It is just the beginning.
The debris falls all over town. Chiyoko senses her piece coming for her. She takes a large step away from her window, and a bright ember shaped like a mackerel falls onto her floor, burning a hole in the tatami mat.
Her uncle knocks on the door again. Chiyoko stomps her foot twice. *Come in.*
The door is still open. Her uncle keeps his gaze lowered as he stops at her side and hands her first a simple blue silk kimono, which she steps into, and, after she’s in the kimono, a glass of very cold water.
She pours the water over the ember. It sizzles, spurts, and steams, the water immediately boiling. What is left is a shiny, black, jagged rock.
She looks at her uncle. He looks back at her, sadness in his eyes. It is the sadness of many centuries, of lifetimes coming to an end. She gives him a slight bow of thanks. He tries to smile. He used to be like her, waiting for Endgame to begin, but it passed him over, like it did countless others, for thousands and thousands of years.
Not so for Chiyoko.
“I am sorry,” he says. “For you, for all of us. What will be will be.”
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About the Author

JAMES FREY is originally from Cleveland. All four of his books, *A Million Little Pieces*, *My Friend Leonard*, *Bright Shiny Morning*, and *The Final Testament of the Holy Bible*, were international bestsellers.

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