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Opening extract from **The Calling**

Written by
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This book is a puzzle.ⁱ
Within its pages lie clues that lead to a key hidden somewhere on Earth.
Decipher, decode, and interpret.
Search and seek.
The first to find the key and deliver it to its proper home
will be rewarded with gold.ⁱⁱ
Stacks and stacks of gold.ⁱⁱⁱ
\$\$\$ Εκατοντάδες χιλιάδες δολάρια την αξία του χρυσού. \$.^{iv}



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Endgame: The Calling

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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

Hafız Alipaşa Sk, Aziz Mahmut Hüdayi Mb, Istanbul, Turkey



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 Bosphorus—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 Bosphorus, 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.