

Summons from The Edge of the World

His mare died as soon as he arrived at the garden's edge. For three months, she had dutifully pulled him and a small wooden caravan through the desert, the journey consisting of nothing but featureless grey dust and rock under an iron sky; day and night spent heading towards the mansion that was a black speck on the horizon.

When the horse collapsed into the earth with a final groan, W. watched mutely, huddling into his coat against the wind. Then, he stepped over her and reached into the toppled caravan to retrieve a leather rucksack and the letter of summons, which he placed gently in his breast pocket. Just as he turned to enter the garden, a small white trace of something caught his eye.

The object stuck out of the dirt near to where the mare's head lay. With the dead horse's glazed eye observing, W. crouched down and brushed the earth away until it was exposed. He lifted out a horse's skull. It was old, picked clean by whatever lived in the barren soil. Placing the skull down and feeling the wind's chill start to bite, W. curled his collar up and left the caravan and horse behind him, carrying only his rucksack.

A cracked stone path led W. through the garden that might have once been very beautiful but now looked only hollow and sad. The flower beds were filled with pale weeds that drooped to the ground. Busts and statues of serious faces were strewn around chaotically, their scowls and beards crumbling into the dust. W. failed to recognize a single one of them.

The mansion stood at the very end of the path, balanced on the edge of a cliff: a building of dark brick topped with three triangular towers. The faces of the gargoyles and angels that hung upon it had long since been eroded by the wind. Layers of filth masked the painted glass windows, which were the only glimpse of colour in the landscape. One

tower stood out, far higher than the other two. An oval window in its centre glinted in the weak sun.

W. approached and, holding his head high, rapped loudly on the door. The sound echoed through the garden and out into the desert. While he waited for an answer, a spider in the doorframe caught W.'s eye. He watched as it gingerly spun its web, circle after circle, despite the fact that there were no flies to be seen.

A lock slid back, sending the spider scurrying. The door creaked ajar and a pale face appeared in the crack. So white was her skin and so pinpoint and black her eyes that, at first, W. thought it must be a doll.

"I've watched your approach since last night. What business brings you to the house?" she said.

W. struggled for his voice, his hands rushing to the letter in his pocket. "A summons, from the General."

She reached out a thin hand and took the envelope from him. He watched her eyes move along the page, the words forming lightly on her lips.

"Summons, of course," she said, beckoning W. inside. "You may refer to me as the Matron, if you wish." She said this as he entered before locking the door behind him.

The musty hallway stretched deep into the house. Cool and lit dimly by candle, it was lined with a red carpet that muffled their footsteps.

"If you would just follow me," the Matron said.

Door after door passed along the winding corridor and soon the entrance could no longer be seen. The ceiling was far above them and the towering walls made W. feel as if he had shrunk. The caws of a bird echoed from somewhere deep within the house. Portraits of solemn-faced people glared down on W., each subject identical in clothing and pose.

"You must forgive me for asking, but in your summons they do not dictate why the General wishes to see you," the Matron spoke without turning.

Although he hadn't noticed before, the Matron's bizarre height became clear to him now. She stood almost twice W.'s size, held her posture straight, and walked in long brisk strides that W. almost had to chase after.

"They do not, that's true."

"Still, you make the journey and arrive at our door, clueless."

W. struggled for an answer so kept quiet instead.

"Do not get me wrong," she continued, "the General is a man worthy of such haste. Just as I came immediately upon my summons, I do not doubt you made the correct choice. I only wonder what he has planned for you."

More corridors stretched out before them as they continued deeper into the mansion. Only muted noises indicated any sign of life as they walked in silence: the occasional grunt, scratching pen, or lonely chord which pricked W.'s ears. These all came from behind identical locked doors. A layer of fear formed like sweat on his back as it dawned on W. that without the Matron, he would most certainly be lost. Yet he didn't dare ask her where she was taking him.

They stopped in front of an unremarkable door, which the Matron opened and, once W. had stepped inside it, shut and locked behind him. The feeling that he'd been caged was unmistakable and W. pressed a nervous hand against the wood. It refused to budge.

"You will be called to dinner shortly. Until then, please make yourself comfortable," she said from beyond the door.

Then, her footsteps faded away until W. was alone. His chamber was a cramped little room, fit for a maid. A bed had been pushed into the corner and a faded picture hung on the adjacent wall. W. placed his rucksack on the floor and lay down on the bed where his feet dangled awkwardly over the edge. For a moment, he longed to be home in the comelier accommodations of his bedroom, but W. quickly dismissed the idea as absurd. He couldn't have just ignored his summons, after all. Nerves had to be pushed aside if he were to fulfill his duty, he reminded himself half-heartedly.

He shifted to a comfortable position and then the weight of his journey was smoothed away by the hard mattress. As his eyelids began to shut, the caws of the bird began outside his door.

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A sharp rap on the door brought him out of bed. With her face illuminated by a pale lantern, the Matron stood outside his room.

"Dinner will begin shortly."

He nodded and tried to shut the door, which she blocked with her foot.

"I'd like to prepare myself," he explained.

"There is no need, it will only be the two of you. Besides, his sight is failing and he surely won't mind."

W. felt like objecting, pointing out that he was underdressed for even a casual dinner, but something about the Matron's dull gaze made him step outside compliantly.

The candles had been snuffed out in the corridor and she led him through near-darkness.

"The General is suffering from exhaustion as of late but news of your arrival seems to have awakened him. Still, you must forgive him if he appears lethargic."

"Of course," replied W., his own tiredness causing his words to tumble aimlessly out his mouth.

A figure passed by them in the murk, brushing a pale arm against his.

"Another one of the General's summons; one less savory in task than yours." The Matron said this as she opened a large set of double doors.

"So you now have some idea of my task?" W. asked.

Without answering, she nudged him into a large room where the smells of a feast—roast meat and sour wine—made him forget his query.

The dining room that stretched out before him was incredibly long and narrow. A single table took up the majority of the space. As he quietly stepped in, the Matron's feet at his back, he noticed that although the table overflowed with food, only two plates were set; one at the very front for the seat nearest him, and one at the very end, where a large figure sat slumped in a regal chair. Perhaps out of tiredness, his mind entertained the idea of sitting at an unset place for a moment. But the Matron's pale hand gestured to the front seat and he meekly sat down. Once he was placed, the Matron bowed to the figure and left the room through a far smaller door in the back.

The figure in the chair then waved a hand and a small man who must have been hidden behind him strode over to W. Dressed immaculately and his head barely reaching above the height of the table, the small man introduced himself as the waiter. He poured wine into a dusty glass and filled W.'s plate.

"Are you another of the summons?" W. whispered from the corner of his mouth, keeping his eyes on the chair.

The waiter didn't answer, giving only a small nod. When he'd finished serving, he announced loudly: "I will bring more candles for the General," and hurried away from the table.

It wasn't until he'd placed several more lights in the room that W. could make out the figure in the chair. Smaller than his silhouette suggested and more sunken into the chair than sitting in it, his yellowish skin, each inch of it wrinkled, drooped loosely from his skull. His pebble-like eyes seemed unfocused and W. feared to meet his gaze. Instead, his own sight was drawn down to a green ring forced onto the General's finger which gently glowed, like a fishing lure, W. thought.

He snapped back to attention when the General shifted in his seat.

"The Matron has told me much of you," his voice began, husky and low.

W. lifted his head and felt his drowsiness fade.

"Yes, even before you arrived, when I was penning the summons, I knew you were an interesting one, Lieutenant W. You have already been acquainted with the Matron, she tells me. A young girl she was when she first came to the house; barely eight years old with a letter summons in hand.

W. drank from his glass, the wine unexpectedly sweet on his tongue. He couldn't imagine the withered Matron as having ever been a young girl.

"Your journey must have been long. Arduous as well, I suppose, Lieutenant?" The General thought for a second and then added: "Excuse me if I omit your name, but now that you're here, it doesn't carry much importance. Neither does mine, in truth, and so you are welcome to address me simply as General, just as they do."

"If you prefer to call me by rank then I can't object. But do you mind me asking who *they* are?"

"The rest of my house," he said, waving his short arm at the waiter, who bowed low in response. The General continued: "As I was saying, your journey?"

"Yes sir, very long."

"Ah, but there is a certain beauty in that desert. I remember my own crossing very well. Although, of course, I was younger than you. I'd wish to see what lies beyond the house one more time, I think." The General smiled, his worm-like lips stretching across the length of his face.

For a moment they focused on their food, W. not daring to speak first.

"You arrived without knowing why you were summoned, didn't you?"

W. felt as if the General was observing his reaction closely.

"Did I have any other choice, sir?"

The General considered his response for a second.

"Perhaps. However, I certainly knew I had no other choice but to arrive when my own letter came".

"You were summoned here too?"

He nodded his head. "Yes, of course... by an important man, however. You've surely seen his portrait on the walls, or his bust in the garden. As will one day your portrait and bust find their place there, and how soon mine will too."

At this, the waiter raised his voice: "But you're not an unimportant man, Sir General."

The General glared at him with surprising ferocity.

"Do not lie to the lieutenant!"

"Sir, why am I here?" W. asked quietly.

The General looked into his plate and, without answer, tore a leg off his chicken.

"I apologize if the question is too bold, Sir, but so far, I have not had any word from the Matron or from you, Sir. If my task was so urgent that it required immediate summons, I would feel better knowing how I may set out to perform it. Likewise, if the task was merely a small favour, it would lift a great weight off my mind."

"Of course the Matron would not tell you, for she herself does not know," the General said with another smile and then, seeing worry spread across W.'s face, added, "but there is no need for concern, it will be explained to you in time. In fact, I will have you summoned to my office at dawn. Earlier than planned, but still. Meanwhile, enjoy the feast, surely you are hungry?"

W. realized that he was in fact starving and that he had scarcely touched the plate. For the meantime, appetite ruled over curiosity.

The dinner lasted even after all the food had vanished and several bottles of wine had been emptied. The waiter spent the night rushing back and forth between them tirelessly. W. spoke little and the few sentences he managed, the General ignored amongst his own rants.

The General described the wars he'd fought in, the cities he'd seen, and the world he'd known. W. thought that he spoke as though it'd been years since his last conversation. Only partially listening, he rested his face in his hand and sipped his wine.

He must have fallen asleep again for his eyes suddenly opened and the waiter was tugging at his sleeve. The General was still in his seat.

"You'll enjoy your time here I think, Lieutenant," he said with a smile. "The waiter will show you back to your room now."

W. stood and attempted to bow but his legs had grown stiff and he stumbled. He couldn't understand how he was once again so tired. As the waiter opened the doors and led him out, pulling at his sleeve, W. decided it must be the dust in the air, and that soon he would become used to it.

"How long was I asleep?" he mumbled.

The waiter didn't respond.

The corridor had grown impenetrably dark and the waiter, gripping a candle without a holder, offered to lead W. back to his room, which he accepted, unsure whether it would have even been possible to decline. As they walked along, all W. could see was the light of the candle bobbing up and down in the waiter's hand, leaving drops of milky wax behind them.

When they arrived at his chamber door, the waiter opened it for him and, bowing, closed it again once W. was inside. His small feet then continued down the corridor.

W. realized that the lock hadn't been turned and after waiting a moment, quietly opened it again and peered out. Nothing but darkness. A gust of wind ruffled his hair, the air cold and damp. He retreated back into the light of his room.

After dismissing the idea of unpacking (nothing in the rucksack would be of much use to him after all), he lay down on the bed. None of the food at the feast had been particularly good and the wine had been weak and far too sweet. Still, if he'd been asked his opinion, W. was sure he would have lied to the General. Such a frail man, it seemed. But the cold manner with which he had disciplined the waiter troubled W. as he snuffed out his light and was pulled into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, the room had become cold. Shivering, W. pushed himself out of bed and tried the door. The knob rattled but remained shut. Someone must have locked it while he was sleeping.

He felt a sudden urge to know the time and, after scouring the tiny room and finding nothing, he remembered that there was a small pocket-watch in his rucksack. Although he found it quickly in the neat stacks of clothes, it sat silently in his palm. The hands were stuck and there was a small crack on its glass face, broken during the journey no doubt. Before he could do anything else, a knock on the door made W. jump and toss the watch under his blanket as if it were contraband.

"The General would like your audience, Lieutenant," came the Matron's dry voice.

He dressed quickly in the same clothes he'd strewn on the floor earlier. The Matron, too, hadn't seemed to have changed.

Again he was lead through the house in silence, something he was now accustomed to. The mansion was draped in grey. Only a few candles had been lit and he was unsure whether it was day or night. Asking the Matron would expose his ignorance, so W. kept quiet.

They crossed through a series of doors and went up a variety of staircases. Some grand and winding, others narrow and steep. He saw no other person.

"This is the General's tower," she explained after they stopped at a steel door. "He has forbidden me entry."

W. nodded and, thanking her, continued alone through the doorway and up the stairs that followed.

At the very top was a small room, which was filled to the brim with stacks and stacks of paper. Most of the pages were yellowed and their corners gnawed by rats. A small path led through them and W. squeezed himself gently along it, as if traversing some makeshift labyrinth.

When W. emerged from the paper stacks, he found the General hunched over a wooden desk that was far larger than him. An oval window was directly in front of him, looking out onto the desolate landscape. *Had the desert always been so vast?* W. asked himself, looking at how it seemed to run on infinitely.

He cleared his throat and stood at attention out of some old force of habit.

"Ah, Lieutenant!" the General smiled, turning around in his chair.

W. must have recoiled in shock for the General merely waved his hand and said, "Oh do not worry about me, I'm simply close to death after all."

It had been the General's face which had shocked W. so much. It had lost all colour and his skin was corpse-like. His eyes were dull and his teeth on display, as if his gums no longer had the will to hold to his mouth. W. couldn't recall him looking so moribund just hours ago at the dinner.

When W. noticed that the General's finger was bare, his eyes greedily moved onto a small wooden box on the desk, where the green ring sat on a pillow. He had tried to glance at it discreetly but the General chuckled.

"It is good the ring has your eye. Fitting, even."

"Sir?"

The General lifted the box and passed it to W.

"Try it on, it should fit, of course. I had the Matron find your measurements years ago."

W. held the ring in his fingers and rolled it over slowly, then slid it on. It fit perfectly.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

"It was when you bought those gloves, leather black if I remember correctly, that I knew you'd be a great candidate. Wait just a moment in fact," the General stood and shouted.

"Elaine! Bring me the Lieutenant's measurements please".

When no answer came from the stacks of pages, he shook his head. "Removing that girl from the house should be your first move, Lieutenant."

"The ring...why is it being given to me?"

"Oh, it simply comes with the house," the General said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"The house?"

"It is why you were summoned after all. My time is passing and the house needs someone to run it. It's a great responsibility but I'm sure you're fit for it".

"What if I don't want the house?"

"I am offended you would even dare to suggest so. You have travelled this far and wasted so many nights simply to shrink away from your duty? Surely you don't underestimate the importance of all that is done here. The weight of what happens in these rooms is far greater than that of any parliament." Anger crept into his voice now. "I would ask that you refrain from such joking, Lieutenant." He attempted to smile, but it came across fractured.

He then got up and disappeared amongst the piles of paperwork. When he returned, it was with a piece of paper, noticeably fresher than the others. He placed it down on the desk and pressed a pen into W.'s hand.

W. read the title of the document: *Summons*.

"It is better to take care of this now, in truth. It only requires your signature and the Matron will ensure it arrives to the candidate."

The pen seemed to weigh a pound as W. gently held it. The white sheet of paper stared at him from the desk. From the side of his view he saw the General, breathing heavily and not moving his eyes from the pen. A sudden violent protest rose up within him and for a second he wanted nothing more than to fling the pen away. Fleeing into the desert seemed like such a pleasant idea now. But his horse was dead, his duty was unmistakable. Even if he had no clue what that duty was. The house needed him, that was clear.

W. signed. The General smiled wider than he had yet before and it seemed a weight had been removed from him. He grabbed W.'s hand and shook it vigorously, nodding his head frantically. Without a word and with small grunts of glee, he started for the door. Hurrying as if he knew W. would soon realize what he had just done.

"Wait!" W. cried.

But he did not stop and W. watched helplessly as the man vanished from sight. Then he took his place at the desk. The leather of the chair

wrapped itself around him. He watched the ring's light on his finger. It was more smoothed glass than emerald, he realized.

Scattered thoughts flew around his mind. He would need a map of the house, need to read all the documents that were piled up around him. No longer would he be able to act simply as an observer, this is what was most undercut with regret. But for now, he made no movements. He simply sat in the chair and watched the now distant figure of the General hobble eagerly across the garden and into the dusty landscape.

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Several hours later, the Matron entered silently and bowed as he watched the sunset.

"A bust and portrait have been nearly completed." She slid a document in front of him. "Your signature is all that's required."

He nodded, signed the paper, and dismissed her.

"Hopefully your reign will be shorter, Lieutenant," she said, bowing again as she exited the tower.

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The Lieutenant sat, as he always did at sundown, in his office, gazing out into the desert. It had become ritual ever since the morning the summons had been sent out.

Every evening he would settle into the leather chair and watch the horizon. Even when it became a struggle to force himself up the tower stairs, he did not stop. Sometimes he would catch a glimpse of his reflection in the oval window but he scarcely recognized the grey old man who looked back at him.

It was this evening that he noticed the dust clouds far away being kicked up by a caravan and heard the Matron's footsteps coming up to inform him of what he already knew. That his replacement was arriving.

—G. W. Musko, 18, Warsaw