

THE KEPT WATCH

At first light the faithful stand to the parapet, and the Lord counts them standing. — Office of the Line, said at dawn.

The replacement came up with the rations, one boy among the bread, and the corporal of the carrying party handed his papers across with the ration sheet. Sobótka, Janek. Polish-Lithuanian drafts, posted in at Tyre, no prior action. Vatatzes read the sheet at the dugout mouth by candle while the boy stood in the sap with his kit squared and his chin up and his hands held at his sides too carefully.

Stand-to was at ten to five. Vatatzes wound his watch, set the boy on the step between himself and Tornikes, and the line stood in the grey while the wire came up out of the dark a picket at a time. The watch had been bought in Antioch by a man four years in the ground, and it kept good time. Nothing came over. At the all-clear the section stood down by files, and the day's work began with the boy, because that was how a day on the line began.

The warding came first. The boy had a saint from home on a cord, tin, the face worn to weather, and Vatatzes checked the cord at the neck and the knot of it, said the warding versicle over him, and waited for the response.

"The Lord is my rampart," the boy said. "I shall stand."

He gave it word-perfect and a half-breath early. Tornikes looked at the wire. Vatatzes had heard the response given badly by better soldiers and given well by men dead the same week, so he put no reading on it at all. He squared the boy's helmet with two fingers and went down the catechism: gas drill, posts, the listening watch, the Grail across the wire and what it sends.

"And when the wind changes?"

"Mask first, sir. Then pass it up the line."

Where the boy answered short, Vatatzes gave him the line again and had it back twice, and then took him down to the chapel, where Sebastianus kept the ledger of indulgences under the unopened reliquary. The section owed pages of it, and nobody argued the count. The chaplain's hands were slow with the book. The round came out of the chest wrapped, stamped at the base with the arsenal-chapel's seal, and the boy signed where the day's grace was entered against his name.

Doctrine on the sanctified round was short. It was issued one to a man. Its blessing was spent in the firing, on the target or on the air, no difference. A man did not waste it on what rifle-fire could answer, and he did not hold it past the minute it was for — and which minute that was, doctrine left to the man. Vatatzes had the boy say it back. Then he showed him the loading: the blessed round last, on top, where the thumb finds it without the eye, and the cutoff plate thumbed across to hold it under while ball did the day's work. His own magazine was loaded the same way, and had been since the spring.

The rifle they had sent up with the boy was from stores, the sights set to no one. The armoury's inspection round would come at the relief, and it was always coming at the relief.

"The armourer counts proofing shots," Tornikes said, and said it once, and stood there with the count already in his face.

Vatatzes took the boy to the bay anyway. Two shots on a quiet sector told the line opposite that a post here was working, and he spent them. The wire-picket mark stood at two hundred yards, white paint gone grey. He put the boy on the sandbags, and the first shot fell low and left in the still air, with the section's name against it in a ledger somewhere behind the line. He read the strike, gave the sight drum a half-turn, and had the boy fire again. Closer, low by a hand. He took the second half-turn on the read alone, and the rifle was Sobótka's after that and no other man's.

Breakfast came up while the light hardened. Kohl ran the crown-and-anchor debts down the step, collected in tobacco from the men who owed him, and stacked it unsmoked by the dixie, and nobody asked why. The tea was the colour of sap-water and the boy drank it without comment.

The all's-well came down the line at six, low, mouth to mouth, each man taking it from his right and giving it to his left as flatly as he would pass a tin. Tornikes stopped it at the boy, stood him at his place on the step, and gave him the cry to carry.

"All's well," the boy said, low, at the height it had come to him, and Kohl took it from him without looking and gave it on down the traverse, and the cry went out of the bay at the same height it came in.

The dusk roster went up on the board by the dugout: first watch, Sobótka, J., with the lieutenant. The boy read it twice. Then he went back to folding his kit, and over the folding his mouth moved once more, privately, through the rampart and the standing, like a man counting money he means to keep.

Vatatzes let it stand.

* * *

The fire came at half past nine, as it came most mornings, a traverse-length of it walking up from the south. The section went down by drill. Sobótka went down with them, half a beat behind Tornikes and flat to the boards by the second burst, and he stayed down through the lull. A bag on the parados took a round and bled sand onto Tesfaye's neck until it emptied. When the fire moved off north the section stood up by files, and Vatatzes walked the bay and found nothing to show for it but the bag.

It was the boy's first time under fire, and he had done it right. He stood refilling the bag after, his hands a little quick, and Vatatzes said nothing about the hands.

The quiet after was the ordinary quiet, and then it was not. Sobótka straightened over the half-filled bag with his face turned to the wire.

"Sir. What is the smell?"

Vatatzes drew the air in through his nose, slow, and worked through what was in it. Cordite. The lime they limed the sap floor with. The sour-water rot of the sump that was the trench's own and had been the trench's own since before his time. Under it, nothing.

"Rot, sir," the boy said, and looked at the sump, and looked back to the wire.

Vatatzes had stood on this step most mornings of four commissions and his nose had died into the line's air a commission ago.

Tornikes had his face to the wire and kept it there one count longer than the question needed.

"It's the line," Tornikes said. "It is what the line smells like."

The boy took it and bent back to the bag. Tesfaye, who had carried the smell of his own neck-sand all morning, said something low in his own language and did not offer it to anyone.

Doctrine said nothing about smell. The listening watch was doctrine, and the seals were doctrine, and doctrine had given him both already. He used both.

The meal came up at eleven, early, because a doubled watch eats in shifts. Vatatzes kept both listening posts manned through it and took the seals himself, walking the bay man by man while the tea went cold in the dixies: respirator, valve, the cord at each neck, the knots. Tesfaye sat with his food balanced on his knees, his watch-shift gone, and ate with his eyes on the wall. The man who relieved Kohl came off the doubled post late and angry about it. "The post went long, sir," he said, to the lieutenant's face. Vatatzes took the word standing, answered none of it, and

gave the section back its quiet at the half-hour, still owing them the lost half-shift of rest.

At noon the forward post passed back a sound on the wire. A drone, low, riding the dead ground from the south, the pitch of it level. It travelled north along the pickets at a walking rate. Both listening posts had it. The boy had it standing in the open bay without leaning to it. Vatatzes put his ear to the angle of the traverse and took it for himself: a thick sound, even, unhurried, level at the far edge of hearing, neither gun nor wire-hum nor wind, with a grain in it that the ear kept trying to place among the engines it knew and could not. It went by them the whole length of the sector and away.

It passed. The posts reported it gone in the same minute. Nothing came over, and nothing rose at the wire, and the afternoon air stood empty of everything but the line's own smell, which was cordite and lime and the sump.

He could not confirm the morning and he could not dismiss it, and he carried it under the day.

The watch changed at half past twelve. The bay settled into the long afternoon the line called quiet, which was the same word it used for the thing it gave the dead. Sobótka worked his bag-fill down the parados, squaring the new bags against the old where the fire had opened them, and the wall came back to grade under his hands.

* * *

At twenty to one the order came down from battalion: the gap the forward post had reported at the watch change would be closed before dark. Kohl read it over the runner's shoulder.

"Battalion keeps its dark in a different time zone," he said, to the lieutenant's face.

Vatatzes told him to draw the staples. There was no arguing the hour. A gap stood open; the Grail across the wire did not keep to dark; before dark meant now.

He took the party out himself through the sally at one, six men under the lip of the old crater spoil. Tesfaye had the muffled maul. Sobótka carried the screw-pickets, because the new man carried the iron. The gap was eight feet of dragged and flat-tened apron where the traversing fire had cut the top wires and the bottom had gone with them. The work was prone work, mauls muffled with sacking, the pickets screwed into the clay by hand a quarter-turn at a time, the cut strands drawn back

singly and married to the new under a sky with nothing in it. The afternoon stood quiet around the sound of it. Sweat ran in the cold. The boy turned his picket and watched the wire to his front between turns, and his turning was slow and his watching was not.

The fire came when the second picket stood. A machine gun off the flank traversed the old gap on its fixed line, a gun firing on a map reference at a working party it had heard and could not see. The party went flat among the wire and took it. Lead came through the apron at knee height with the sound of the pickets being struck somewhere down the line, twice, a dull iron note each time.

Then the gun stopped.

The book had a line for a working party under observed fire: it could be thinned. A first pair would go back with the empty sacks, and the order of going was the new man first. Tornikes had the sacks rolled already and his chin toward the sally. The boy lay flat with his picket half home, waiting to be sent. Going back was the book's answer. It would teach him the wire got on without him, and the way back ran through the gap the gun was registered on.

He kept him on the wire. The gun had the gap's range to the foot.

In the lull something stood up at the Grail wire across the dead ground and began to walk a slow line abreast of them, south to north, the gait wrong, the arms not swinging.

Rifles took it from the step behind them, three rounds, four. It did not go down. It did not turn. It walked its line and went into the mist at the wire's end, and the dead ground stood empty again.

Vatatzes had watched the boy through it. At the first rifle-crack the boy had the cutoff plate back and his thumb on the bolt, stopped there, on the top round, the blessed one, the shape out at the wire standing plainly in his sights. He had taken the thumb away. He had thumbed the cutoff across as the lieutenant had shown him at the chapel, fed ball loose into the chamber by hand, and fired with the others, twice, into a thing that did not mind. The blessed round stayed under the cutoff where the thumb could find it. It was not his minute.

The party finished the gap by three. New apron stood over old, the screw-pickets bedded, the loose ends stapled down and dressed. Vatatzes sent the men back through the sally in pairs and came in last himself behind the boy. The boy went through the gap in the parapet with the picket wire singing over him where a strand had run long, and ducked it without being told.

"Six out, six in," Tornikes said, and stood the party down.

Kohl counted his staples back and came up two short and said nothing about it. Nobody spoke of the walker. The afternoon cry came down the parapet at the hour, low, taken and passed, and went on down the traverse at the height it was given, under a sky that had been quiet since noon and stayed quiet.

The dusk roster stood as posted. First watch, Sobótka, J., with the lieutenant.

* * *

Dusk stand-to began at twenty to seven. The section stood to the parapet in the failing light, the wire fading from sight a picket at a time, the morning's ritual in reverse. On the hour the evening all's-well set off from the north end — "All's well," low, taken and handed on, Kohl to Tesfaye, Tesfaye to the boy.

The rot arrived while the cry was still walking. It rode the wind out of the forward dark, under the cordite and the lime and the sump and through all of it, a smell with a body to it, the smell of meat the sun has had and left. The cry went on down the traverse, voice to voice, because that was its office. Vatatzes heard it pass from bay to bay, each voice giving it at the height it came.

The drone lifted out of the south, off the ground the walker had crossed into the mist at three.

It was the sound the forward post had passed back at noon, nearer, the grain in it still, the engine the ear could not place. It travelled the pickets toward them like the good news of the season coming to a parish, ahead of the man who brings it. Vatatzes tracked the pitch of it past the south post and across the open at a walking rate, and under it, faint, the pickets themselves began to sing.

The section went down.

No order was given and the book held nothing for it. Between one breath and the next the step emptied, Tornikes into the angle of the traverse, Kohl and Tesfaye under the lip of the parados with their shoulders in the sandbags, every man with seasons behind him flat in the mud with his rifle held to his chest, and not one of them had said a word. The buzz-interval, the old hands' minute. Doctrine called it a breach of stand-to.

Sobótka stood as drilled.

He kept his place with his rifle on the sandbags and his face to the front, and his mouth was moving through the versicle, the rampart and the standing. The ward held. He was the only man on the firing step the whole length of the bay, one helmet

against the last of the light, standing as taught. Vatatzes had gone down with the rest, body ahead of any thought, and from his knee he could have had the boy's belt and put him in the mud among the seasoned men. The boy was standing as a wounded man stands. Vatatzes rose and stood beside him at the parapet, and the thing came up out of the dead ground at the wire.

It advanced upright, the sound walking before it. The wings lay along its back, folded, the fold wrong, and what it wore had been vestments. It stopped where the new apron crossed the old and waited there, making no trial of the entanglement, in no hurry about anything, and the drone poured off it in a pitch that took the will out of the arms that had mended the apron that afternoon.

The boy fired. By the book: the cutoff back, the blessed round chambered with intent, the minute called his own, aimed, squeezed, the whole drill of it clean, and the round took the thing below the throat where the vestments crossed. Vatatzes saw it strike home — the seal-stamped round the boy had signed for at dawn, going into the body it was consecrated against — and the thing took one half-step rearward.

The answer came back through the same air inside the same second. One round, unhurried, the sound of the shot arriving after the strike, and the boy was off the step and into the lieutenant's arms with a hole under his collarbone the size of the round that had made it, and no blood to speak of, and his helmet rolling on the boards with its cord still done.

The thing at the wire was gone. The forward ground lay empty to the mist, and the drone had stayed behind.

The drone was in the bay. Low, idling, the pitch of it settled and small, and Vatatzes, holding the boy, his hand flat over the wound, heard it through his palm. It came from under his hand.

Tornikes was up. "Chaplain," Vatatzes said, and a runner was already going. The alarm went the line both ways, regulation, bay to bay, and somewhere north of the sap the hour's cry, still on its circuit, stopped in a man's mouth and came back as the alarm. The veterans rose around the lieutenant and the boy, one by one, in the order the flinch had taken them down.

* * *

Let the oils be laid while the name still answers. — Rubric of the Last Rites, field usage.

They took him into the fire bay and laid him on the boards with a folded greatcoat under his head.

“Masks,” Tornikes called — the standing order when the Grail had worked the line — and the men put them on, and the bay by lamplight became a row of glass and rubber. The boy’s respirator went on him quickly, before his hands could go to the wound again. His face went behind the glass and stayed there.

He said something then. “Water, sir. By your leave.” The right words, and they came a half-beat behind his mouth, the sound arriving after the shapes the lips made, as the shot had arrived after the strike. Then he said nothing more. After that the only news of him was his hands.

The wound did not bleed. It hummed.

Under the dressing and under the hand Vatatzes kept on it, level and small, the drone ran like an engine at idle in another room. The dressing was warm, and the warmth moved.

Sebastianus came up the sap bent under his box and knelt at the boy’s left side with the lamp between them. He set out the oils in their order, nearest to farthest. His hands on the stoppers had the tremor in them, and the cough took him twice before the first word, the dry cough that lived in the censer-men, the price of the Holy Smoke the chaplains breathed to keep working, carried up the line to be spent here.

He was where the sacrament was owed when it was owed. He had come at the alarm, before the runner.

The boy’s right hand rose off the boards.

It went to the brow, to the breast, to the left shoulder and the right, slow, full, the whole sign made entire. The hand came down. The drone stepped up under the dressing.

Sebastianus began the unction and his thumb would not hold the line of it. The oil went on crooked over the rubber, forehead to cheekbone, and the rubric did not own a crooked cross, and he wiped it with the wool and began the prayer again from the opening, **Per istam sanctam unctionem**, the Latin going out small under the drone.

The hand rose again. Brow, breast, the left shoulder, and not the right. The arm came down on the rhythm of the whole, exact, the shape one station short. The drone stepped up again.

A frightened man’s cross goes short. The drill said so; the instructors of the line had seen ten thousand crosses and said a man under fear drops the far station first and never knows he has dropped it. The boy was fourteen hours off the ration col-

umn. Fear could own everything the sign was doing, and there was no proving it owned this. Doctrine named a correct minute for the mercy, and gave no sign by which the minute declares itself. It gave the blade's distance and the words to say after, and the rest it left to the man, as it left the round to him, one to a man, his minute his own.

Tornikes was holding the rifle out to him. He had been holding it out for some time, stock first, the cutoff plate already back, and he held it without a word and looked at the wall over the boy, and there was no reading in his face at all.

Vatatzes took the rifle.

He thumbed the round up out of the magazine, the round he had carried since the spring, the seal at its base dark in the lamplight, and chambered it, and the bolt going home was the loudest thing in the bay. He knelt at the boy's right side, inside the blade's distance, where the rubric of the misericordia put a man, and set the muzzle's weight against his own knee to keep it off the boy. He watched the right hand where it lay on the boards.

He would fire at the mark the doctrine named and not a breath before it. The mark would have to come up out of the sign itself, out of the next rising of the hand or the one after. He waited for it with the round chambered and the grace in it already paid for, spent whether it struck or not.

The hand rose. Brow, and breast, and the breast again, the second station made twice, the rhythm holding, the stations doubling on themselves. The drone went up under it, glad, and Sebastianus, on the second opening of the prayer, dropped the vial against the boy's collar and caught it and could not make his thumb meet the forehead, and the Latin and the drone stood in the bay together, and the drone was the louder.

* * *

The hand rose once more and it was not a cross. It was a twitch with the rhythm of one, brow and nothing and nothing, kept entire, the shape gone out of it.

That was the mark. Doctrine had it that past the shape's last failing the minute was over and the mercy paid only the body. The drill gave a man the failing to watch for and the distance to fire from, and Vatatzes was at the distance, and the failing was on the boards in front of him.

He fired into the boy's heart at the place the drill named, and the round he had carried since the spring was spent, on the target or on the air, no difference.

The hand stopped. The drone did not.

Sobótka, Janek. Posted in at Tyre. One day on the line.

Sebastianus went forward on his knees with the wool and the vial, the third opening of the prayer already in his mouth, and the wound in the boy's chest unmade itself as he came. It opened outward.

What came out was flies, slow at first and then a column of them, off the dead boy and into the lamp and through it and up, over the parados, out toward the wire, a black seam unstitching itself from a man, and the drone went with them by inches, unhurried.

The chaplain's thumb was at the vial's mouth. Vatatzes put his hand over both of the chaplain's and closed them, and held them closed.

Anti-contagion standing orders were short. What the Grail had occupied was not handled bare, was not oiled, was not kept. Lime, a groundsheet, the step cleared before the relief came round. He gave them in the order the standing orders set, and the section did the work in masks and gloves by the one lamp, and Tornikes folded the sheet over the boy's face last, glass and all, and Sebastianus stood against the traverse wall with the vial stoppered in his fist and said nothing over the work. The oils went back into the box, nearest to farthest, unspent. The Church had words for the dead and words for the dying, and none for a thing carried down the sap in a groundsheet with lime on it, and what the Church has no words for, the line does not say.

They carried him down the communication sap feet first, two men and the lieutenant walking behind, and the bay stood to the rest of the night one man short on the step, rifles on the parapet, the wire silent the whole length of the sector.

The flies did not come back. The drone faded off the dead ground south, level the whole way, and by the second hour of the new watch there was no part of the dark that held it.

The line stood to. Nothing else came. Two rounds had been spent and a boy was gone, and the night did not remark it.

* * *

Stand-to came at ten to five and the section stood it one bay south, the night's bay closed off with a gas-curtain while the lime did its work. The wire came up out of the dark a picket at a time, the same wire, seen from forty feet along. Nothing came over.

The light hardened on a quiet sector, and the section stood down by files, and the rum went round. A man at the parados re-pegged a curtain hook that had worked loose and tapped it home with the flat of an entrenching tool.

The grave row lay behind the parados, six markers and now seven, the new wood white as a tooth against the grey the weather had made of the others. The burial had gone in before first light, the chaplain at the row's edge with his box closed, the marker set after. The rolls were squared before breakfast. None of it took long, and all of it went in the order the forms set. When it was done the day had the boy's name in three places and no other part of him anywhere.

Vatatzes copied the family's address out of the paybook at the dugout table, a street in a town he could not have found on a map, in a language the censor would have to take on faith. The form gave him the sentences the army owned. The rest of the page he left as it was. The letter went under his kit for the bag, and that was the writing done.

Sebastianus came down the step at six giving the morning blessing along the line, and his hands were level doing it. The Smoke he had taken in the night was in his voice, set lower than the day before, and would be in his lungs at the Hospice one day. The line took the blessing the same as the rum. At the dugout he stopped by the table where the letter lay under the kit, a breath longer than the blessing took anywhere else. Vatatzes did not look up. The chaplain went on down the sap.

Tornikes brought the rifle at the stand-easy. It had been cleaned and the bolt drawn, and the stores chit was on the trigger guard, and the sights were still the boy's.

"Wanted at standard for reissue," Tornikes said, and left it with him. Vatatzes took it to the bay with three rounds from his own pouch. The picket mark stood at two hundred yards where it had stood the day before. He fired, and the strike sat low and left of his point of aim, the breadth of two hands.

Low and left.

The fall of a round through a dead boy's sights, off a live man's eye. The rifle answered a seeing that was in the grave row behind the parados, and it would answer it for as long as the drum stayed where the lieutenant's own thumb had set it the day before, proofing a green man's first rifle on a quiet morning.

He could keep it back. Stores would take a written deficiency and the line would carry one rifle short and the steel would hold the boy's eye in it, sighted-in, mute, a relic the rubric had no shelf for. Doctrine had its word for the kept things of the dead, and the word was idolatry.

He set his thumb to the drum and gave it a half-turn, and fired, and read the fall. Another half-turn. The third shot cut the picket mark, dead on a standard eye, and the drum stood at the armoury's zero.

The rifle was no one's.

He carried it back and racked it with the section's spares, third slot, for an eye somewhere behind Tyre that had not seen the line yet. The papers had come up with the rations: one replacement, allotted, to follow with the next column up.

The grave row held seven. The wire held its pickets. At the hour the all's-well set off from the north end and came down the parapet, low, taken and passed, a new voice in the old place, "All's well," the same words at the same height, and it went by them and on down the line, the whole length of the sector, out.