



The Wall

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Introduction

This story, my very first short piece of fiction, was written back in the summer of 1979. I had spent a couple of years working on a fantasy novel and as I let that sit fallow for a time, I turned my thoughts to writing some short fiction. There was a bit of a boom in the SF field back in those days (largely because of STAR WARS), and I thought I'd try my hand at cranking out something for the market.

The concept for the story came out of reading an article about the Iron Curtain, which back in those days was still an overarching presence in the world. The Cold War was still hot. Germany was still divided. And there was still a Soviet Union, which, in the immortal words of Ronald Reagan, was regarded as an "evil empire." At least by many in the West.

How much of what we believed back then was truth and how much myth remains in question, but the world was certainly a different place compared with what it is now—and we, I suppose, we're quite different people. The enemy, too, is a different breed now, and far more elusive than the monolith of Communism that scared the bejeezus out of so many of us. But in many ways the game played remains the same: it's about the culture of fear, of societies living in a constant state of apprehension, ever awaiting the next strike from an enemy who lacks all moral probity.

Back in the seventies we had a wall between us and them, largely built upon the foundation of mutually assured nuclear annihilation. Now the wall is different, and it's built more upon a foundation of ever evaporating rights and freedoms that has given the enemy the sort of victory over us for which we were once willing to risk nuclear war. There is certainly an irony to be found in that.

The war on Communism was a war about a way of life; but the war on terrorism has become more about life itself. We now find ourselves sacrificing things we were once willing to die for in order to gain a sense of security. But at what point does that price become too high? At what point do we become the very image of our enemy?

In a way I think *The Wall* applies as much to the present as it did to the day when it was written, despite the changing face of the conflict in which we find ourselves embroiled. The story is a simple metaphor and can be interpreted as you see fit.

Anyway, here, for your edification, is *The Wall*. As with *Zero-Option* (also available freely on the Internet) I encourage you to distribute this work. Feel free to put it on your websites (as long as proper attribution is

made) and to post it elsewhere. If you enjoy this story be sure to check out my website at www.freewebs.com/lindsaybrambles for information on my novel *In Darkness Bound* (ISBN: 1-4241-6560-1) now widely available at online book retailers. Also check out manybooks.net for *Zero-Option*, downloadable for free in a multitude of formats from this excellent website.

The Wall

"Sometimes," he said, squatting down by the fire and holding his hands to the open flame, "I think that I hear voices from the other side."

"Voices, Sartas?" someone laughed. "And what do these voices say to you, lad?"

"Were they women's voices?" asked another, his leering face looming up out of the darkness and into the sallow glow of the firelight. "Perhaps some fair-haired temptress willing to relieve you of the weighty burden of your virginity." More laughter, lecherous in tone, and quickly joined by a chorus of rough and lustful glee, which in the closeness of the dark seemed almost feral and far less than mere jest and honest teasing.

"I can't speak as to whether they were male or female," said Sartas, trying hard to keep the tremor of embarrassment from his voice. "But it did sound at times like laughter. Of the sort that good men share about a fire and over a meal." He assayed a grin as he cast his gaze over his colleagues.

"No doubt a fiction of the sun," offered Tavarius in a commiserating tone. He sat across from the young guard, idly poking at food on the beaten metal plate that was set at his feet. He skewered a square of meat with the tip of his long knife and lifted it to his lips, holding it poised before his mouth a moment before finally clamping square, yellowed teeth about it and pulling it free with a jerk.

"It wasn't the sun," Sartas retorted petulantly.

Tavarius shrugged, then wiped a trail of juice from his chin with the back of one hand and said, "Be careful, lad." He wagged the blade of his knife back and forth in the young man's direction, frowning with intense sagacity. "You'd be wise to consider spending less time out there in the heat of day, tramping back and forth as though you were guarding the King's own jewels. All that sweating and panting. And for what?" He snorted and shook his head. "Such devotion may well be admirable in some quarters, boy, but you'll curry no favor here with that sort of attitude."

"But it's why we're here!" Sartas protested.

There was laughter again from the company of guards, and muted chatter that didn't carry as far as the flame.

"We're here at the King's pleasure," said Tavarius, making no attempt to disguise his contempt. He grunted and made a face. "We're here for that and because the citizens of Cysteria don't believe themselves safe from a myth. They imagine barbarian hordes waiting on the other side of

yon wall, just waiting to pour across were we not here to ensure that such a thing doesn't occur." He leaned back on his haunches, rested his elbows on his knees and stared listlessly into the fire. "In truth," he concluded, "we're nothing more than a sop to the unreasoned fears of an ignorant people."

Sartas frowned and regarded the old guard with some bafflement. "You talk as though you don't believe," he said.

"Believe what?" Tavarius demanded scornfully. "That what we do here has any meaning?" He gestured broadly, theatrically, a certain degree of anger and impatience in the sweep of his arm. "What meaning is there to marching six days across the dry and choking dust of the desert to walk the ramparts of a wall whose purpose scholars have debated for centuries?" he continued. "What purpose is there in spending six months out here, in the middle of nowhere, away from our families, from the warm beds of our wives and the laughing faces of our children because our king chooses to subscribe to myth and legend?"

"My father was a guard on the Wall," said Sartas with much hubris, as though that somehow spoke to all these issues raised.

But Tavarius merely nodded and said, "As was mine. As were the fathers of all who are accorded the 'honor' of being guardians of the Wall. You wouldn't be here if your father hadn't once walked the wall."

"Then you don't think it an honor?" said Sartas.

"Once," the old guard lamented, "I dreamed with boyish exuberance of the day when I would take my place as one of the guardians of the Wall, when I would serve as my father had served, and as his father before him. In the cities they revere the guardians of the Wall, and think it a great sacrifice that men would risk themselves as first line in the defense of the realm. And once, when I was young, I took pride in their admiration. I thought I deserved it. I thought I had earned it. But one can only stomach so much undeserved praise, until, like milk soured by the summer storm, it begins to have a bitter, unpalatable taste."

"My father was never ashamed of what he did," Sartas proclaimed loftily.

"Perhaps not," Tavarius agreed. "But he'd be rare among those who have walked this wall if he hadn't felt some dissatisfaction for having wasted a good part of his life waiting for ghosts to arise and threaten the great lands of Cysteria."

"Your notions are all well and good," said Sartas, "but surely they ignore the fact of the Wall itself. If there's no threat, Tavarius, then what purpose has the Wall? Surely it wasn't built simply to exist."

"And can you say that it wasn't?" the old man challenged. "Perhaps, indeed, it was. But if there was a purpose, then it's long forgotten; and it might well be other than what myth and legend have assigned it."

"Clearly it's here to protect us," Sartas said with conviction; but Tavarius merely stared across the open flames at him and slowly shook his head.

"Clearly, eh? There's nothing clear about it, boy. In time you'll become disabused of such fancy," the old guard assured him. "The Wall is here as might be a mountain or a river. Who are we, that we might so arrogantly presume to understand the intentions of its builders? Perhaps they intended nothing more than to separate the here from the there."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Is it now? And what purpose has the moon, which in its cycles vanishes from the sky to leave darkness cut only by the flames of a fire and the feeble glow of the myriad stars? And is such a notion any more unreasoned than the whims of a king who would have us trek through the heat of desert sands to walk these lonely ramparts, marching mindlessly back and forth, waiting for the attack of an enemy we've neither seen nor heard in all the many years the guard have walked?" Tavarius snorted loudly and kicked aside his plate in disgust.

"Centuries, lad," his voice boomed. "For thousands of years this wall has stood beneath sun and sky, watching the turn of the years, unscarred by wind and sand. Countless kings have come and gone. Ten times a thousand men have tread upon its stone. And ten times a thousand have gone to their graves, wondering what it was they were doing when they stood here and wielded shield and spear.

"Think of it, Sartas: thousands of years; and in that time men like you and I have been engaged in a war of nerves with an enemy no more substantial than the ether of spirits. Ghosts. It's no small wonder the King pays good coin for those who would venture so far from home for such foolishness, because he couldn't keep a man doing it again and again, year after year if the money weren't good."

"I don't need money to persuade me of the value of defending our lands and our people," Sartas said boldly as he jumped to his feet and stood towering above the scattered company of guards. "Perhaps it's you have been too long for the sun, Tavarius." And with that he turned and stalked off along the broad ledge that ran the length of the Wall, quickly swallowed by the darkness.

"They're all the same," said Karn as he settled down beside Tavarius. "Bursting with the pride of being the first born of a guardian and

becoming one themselves. Full of the misguided idealism of youth." He hawked and spat into the fire, the gob of spittle making a brief hiss against the hot embers. "They're so sure of themselves. They think they know everything before they've had time to learn anything."

Tavarius grinned. "As did we, when we first came to serve upon this stone," he reminded his friend.

Karn laughed ruefully. "It seems so long ago."

"It was, my friend. We're old; and perhaps our impatience with the likes of Sartas is merely resentment of his youth and all the many years that he has before him. The years in which he'll learn the mistakes we've now forgotten."

"Aye. We've grown old together on this blighted rock, you and I," Karn observed. He scratched his beard and sniffed loudly. "But he'll not be long for this cursed place if someone doesn't knock some sense into that thick skull of his."

Tavarius gave his friend a sober look, then smiled thinly. He turned and looked out through the darkness that Sartas had disappeared into and said, "The Wall will soon break his spirit, my friend. It always does. And when it has done with him, he'll come back to the fires and we'll all talk and drink and dream of home. As did our fathers, and their fathers before them, since the first days men walked upon these cursed stones."

"And if he doesn't come back?"

"Then he'll live lonely with his voices."

It had been a week, and Tavarius had watched Sartas, unbroken, dutifully striding the Wall, spear and shield in hand, armor always polished bright enough for royal inspection. A week of such scorching temperatures that the seasoned members of the guard no longer camped on the hot gray-black stone of the Wall's wide ledge, but sat, instead, sprawled in the shade of their open-aired tents, sleeping and drinking and doing little else. They seldom ventured forth onto the searing desert sands, except to fetch water from one of the deep wells; and their duties to the King had been consigned to the occasional foray up onto the Wall, where they took much delight in deriding and teasing the handful of new recruits. The latter, like Sartas, still took seriously the task of protecting the lands of Cysteria. The veterans would laugh and jeer, mocking their younger colleagues, and proclaiming loudly that only fools would wear such hot and heavy armor and bear the stifling heat of the Wall's burning stone to guard against the unknown, the unseen, and the unlikely.

"He's a stubborn one, that one," said Karn, gesturing with his goblet of watered wine. He glanced over at Tavarius, who sat at the edge of the shade cast by their tent, staring up at the Wall and the tiny figures of the few foolhardy young men who walked there. They moved purposefully back and forth, strutting in a precise manner, as though on parade, each one covering a few dozen meters of the ledge that jutted out from the sheer face of smooth stone.

It was Sartas, though, who was clearly the most committed. The others would occasionally falter, pausing every now and then to look down onto the desert where the company's tents lay pitched. Through his spy-glass Tavarius could see their faces, and the longing in their eyes, and knew they weren't long for the Wall. Soon they'd give in to the seductive shade of the tents, enticed by prospects of a respite from the oven heat of the Wall. But in Sartas there was no such yearning. He remained stoic, marching endlessly back and forth over his small section of the Wall, stamping his feet loud and strong at each turn, and ignoring the sweat that rolled down from beneath his tight metal helm.

"It makes me hot and tired just looking at him," Karn complained. He drank deeply of his wine, then thumped his chest to elicit a noisy belch. "There should be a law against it."

"He does the King's bidding, my friend," Tavarius chortled.

"And are we not doing the King's bidding?" Karn demanded with mock indignation. "Do we not suffer this wretched watered wine, and the grit of sand in our food for the whim of a king? Do we not endure this unbearable heat simply to assuage the fears of the public?"

"There's the coin and the honor," Tavarius reminded him.

"Ah, yes! Such honor. And the coin!" Karn snorted and made a face. "One gold sovereign at the end of six months."

"Better pay than any ship hand or common sentry."

"But a ship hand has a regular port, and the sentry returns home each day to wife and hot food. No watered wines for him. No sand filled stew for his delicate palate."

"Think of the prestige," Tavarius said.

Karn's face brightened. "There's that," he agreed. "Many's the time I've lifted a free pint of the ale in the taverns. And it's certain that a walker of the Wall can have his choice of women to warm his bed, should he so fancy."

"Which is no doubt why I see your ugly face out here year after year," Tavarius grumped good-naturedly.

"Well, it ain't the scenery." Karn looked out towards the Wall. "The Gods only know that I tire of seeing that cursed blight of stone. I grow weary of wondering what's beyond, and why it is that we sit here waiting for something that may never come."

"Perhaps there are others on the other side wondering much the same," Tavarius suggested.

"You think so?" Karn looked doubtful. He scratched his beard and studied the Wall with a shrewd eye. "I wonder that no one has ever tried going over," he mused.

"Because you know as well as I that none would dare tempt the fates. Legend and myth forbid it. Those who would hazard to cross the wall shall bring down upon the lands of Cysteria the wrath of the Gods," Tavarius pronounced, without a great deal of conviction.

"Whatever that might be," Karn muttered irreverently.

"I fear the Wall has made you cynical and rebellious, my friend."

"The wall has made me something," Karn growled in a surly manner. "But it's the King who sends me here to spend six months without good food or drink or women."

"He's the King, and he can do as he sees fit."

"Perhaps were he to spend a tour of duty out here he'd change his view of things."

"It's not our place to judge the likes of the King," Tavarius said sarcastically.

"Of course," Karn agreed, rolling his eyes. "And heaven forbid that he should ever be wrong."

"His word is god, so long as he sits upon the throne."

"Perhaps, then, it's time for someone else to sit upon it."

Tavarius feigned shock. "Such blasphemy."

"None that you haven't heard before." Karn poured himself more wine. "And none you won't hear again, I venture." He lifted his goblet and pointed with it to the Wall. "They'll soon weary of this nonsense and join us."

"Perhaps," said Tavarius. He raised his spyglass to his eye again and peered towards the Wall. He knew it so well after all these years — each inch of its perfection. And yet, he didn't really know it at all; for it remained as much a mystery to him now as it had when he'd been the age of Sartas. No doubt it would remain thus, until he no longer walked the Wall.

By the second week the first of the new recruits had abandoned principle for the comfort of the shade. He was greeted in the camp with much cheer from the veterans, who plied him with wine and food, and treated him as though he were a hero. Tavarius watched all this with amusement, as he had time and time before. But when he looked up to the Wall he saw Sartas there, marching back and forth, ramrod straight, and showing all the discipline that would have made him a favorite of the King's. Tavarius didn't know why, but it unsettled him to see this. He didn't want to admit that it was guilt, but there was a nagging sense in the back of his mind that it was.

Others quickly followed the first, and by the beginning of the third week there was but one lonely soul walking the Wall. One man to stand between the unknown, the unseen, and the unlikely. One man protecting all of Cysteria from whatever evils might await beyond that towering barrier.

"A fool," Tavarius sighed as he lowered his spyglass and sat back in the cool shade. But there wasn't as much conviction in his voice as usual; and in his dark eyes and sun-lined face there were signs of grudging respect.

Karn chuckled softly. "Reminds me of you, when you first came to the Wall. You were eager then, Tav. So full of enthusiasm, so determined that you'd serve your king well. You believed then."

"In many things," Tavarius agreed quietly. "But I was young and naive. And I wasn't long for the Wall."

"We're all the same," Karn observed. "Back home they make us believe it's such a great honor. They make us believe there's purpose in what's done out here in the eternal loneliness of this forsaken desert." He shook his head. "Had I known back then what I know now, I'd have never accepted the 'honor' of being one of the walkers."

Tavarius laughed. "You make it sound as though you were betrayed."

"And wasn't I?" Karn slapped a hand against the sand. "Didn't I hear the guardians of the Wall spin their tales of wonder as they sat drinking in the taverns? Didn't I listen at the door as my father regaled all with stories of great daring? And didn't he leave me in awe of him after relating some great adventure that took place here?" He grabbed a fistful of sand and flung it angrily into the air. "Here, Tav! Here, in this hell of dust and boredom."

"My father, too, told such tales," Tavarius confessed. "And no doubt his father before him did the same. And I, when I'm at home with wife and children, am given to some embellishment when relating the months

spent whiling away the time in this desert. Perhaps I'm just ashamed to admit there's no threat. Perhaps, when I see the wonder in their eyes and the glowing admiration, I can't help myself. And though I tell myself time and time again that it's wrong and that I must end the lies, I can't. Because somehow I feel that I'd be betraying them. Betraying their belief in me as husband and father."

Karn nodded sympathetically. "It's the truth," he sighed. "For it's no different for me. It's too easy to accept the accolades, even as the guilt gnaws at my conscience and I find myself wishing desperately to tell them all the truth. But sometimes, when I see my son look to me with such admiration, I want to cry. I want so desperately to tell him the truth, because one day he'll know it for himself. And then, Tav, what will he think of me?"

"Perhaps as you think of your father."

"With anger at first. And then pity. And understanding. More so as the years pass. I am he, in ways that I could never have imagined."

"As are we all." Tavarius raised his spyglass to his eye and peered at the Wall.

"And him?" asked Karn.

"Sartas, too, wishes only to be like his father. And because he can't yet accept the truth of it, he stands up there, vigilant against the embroidered myths that have led a succession of kings to send good men north and south to waste in the heat of a merciless desert sun." Tavarius lowered the glass and was silent for a moment.

"It's difficult to accept the humanity of one's idols," he said at length. "In our early years as sons we look upon our fathers as gods. They can do no wrong; they're always right. Until we grow old enough to see their feet of clay."

"Ah," said Karn, nodding his head. "Sartas doesn't walk the Wall for the King, then."

"No. He walks the Wall because he doesn't wish to see his father's feet of the clay."

It had been a month, now. A month of searing heat and the ceaseless monotony of days spent camped out in the shade, with little to occupy the minds of the guard save the perpetual cycle of gaming and the downing of liberal quantities of libation. Occasionally a fight would break out and the men would gather about the two combatants and cheer them on. But such confrontations seldom required the intervention of the officers, because they usually ended a few blows after they had

started. Indeed, there was little energy for much more than this; and nobody wanted to risk six months wages because of some meaningless dispute.

Tavarius had seen it all time and time before. And like the Wall and the desert, he'd grown rather tired of it. He could well understand the few who reached a point where they could bear it no more. On every tour there was at least one such individual. Men who would go racing to the Wall and try to scale the unscalable. Some would fall to their deaths; others would fall upon their swords.

But in all his years of service, Tavarius had never seen anything like Sartas.

"It's inhuman," Karn growled, eyes flashing with indignation. He stood outside their tent in the early morning hours, shielding his eyes with an upraised hand as he looked towards the Wall. "A month he's been there. He's like an infernal machine. Back and forth. Back and forth. Never faltering, even in the worst of the sun. He's driving me to drink, I tell you."

"It wouldn't take much to do that," said Tavarius.

Karn ignored this remark and said, "Just look at him. It ain't human."

"I wager there's never been his like before," Tavarius agreed. "The King would be proud of that one."

Karn grunted noisily. "He's as mad as those idiots who try to climb the bloody thing," he stated.

"Or perhaps just dedicated."

"Is there a difference?"

"We forget our youth, my friend. Once we, too, were dedicated enough to stand long hours on that Wall."

"But never so long as this!" Karn exclaimed. "We soon enough saw the truth and came to our senses. But him—" He sniffed disapprovingly.

"That doesn't make for insanity. Perhaps just for a man with deeper convictions than we ever had."

"Such convictions will as like get him killed," Karn muttered. "He takes his food and water from line and bucket, despite our constant entreaties that he come down. He hasn't spoken to a soul since the last of the new recruits came down. The last save himself, that is."

Tavarius drew a breath, let it out in a long sigh. "If he won't come down, then perhaps it behooves one of us to go up there and talk to him."

"Any volunteers?" Karn chortled. "There's not likely a man in this camp who cares what happens to him, Tav. 'Cepting maybe you."

Tavarius shrugged. "Then it must be me," he said, forcing a grin.

Because there'd never been a desire to give potential assailants an easy route over the Wall to Cysterian lands, there had never been any stairs made to the ledge. In the same manner that food and water were hoisted by rope and pulley to the ledge far above the desert plain, Tavarius was hauled upwards to his meeting with Sartas. And although it was a trip he'd made many times in his life, he found himself somewhat apprehensive this time as the thick line ran through the block with much creaking and squeaking, and the smooth wall slipped by in fits and starts as the men below hauled the rope in, hand over hand.

At length he reached the wood derrick that leaned out from the ledge and swung himself inwards, alighting with practiced ease on the stone. He was a good kilometer from where Sartas maintained his vigil, so he started off at an easy pace, not especially eager for this encounter. As he walked he kept going over in his mind the things he would say, but he knew that once he was there he'd probably forget them all.

He found Sartas seated near a fire, nursing a cup of hot cha as he stared resolutely out across the desert. The sun was low in the west, so the shadows of everything down on the plain were long and thin daggers of black pointed towards the heart of the east. The scattered clouds flamed with color near the sun, but were a steely gray on the opposite horizon. In the spaces between them a few stars shone, the harbingers of the thousands that would later fill the night like the lights of a city seen from afar.

Tavarius squatted down by the fire, across from Sartas, the steaming pot of cha between them. "Mind?" he asked, indicating the pot.

"We're all brothers here," Sartas replied evenly.

Tavarius took a metal cup from his belt and held it towards the pot. He used his knife to tilt the pot, letting the hot brew slosh into his cup. "A beautiful evening," he remarked casually as he brought the cha to his lips and blew on it. The steam bent and fluttered under the impetus of his breath, then rose straight again in the windless air. He could feel the heat of it against his face; and he wondered what he was doing sitting up here drinking hot cha in the sweltering heat of the desert when he should have been down there enjoying wine and the companionship of his fellow guards.

"They think me a fool," said Sartas abruptly. He didn't lift his gaze as he spoke.

"Yes," Tavarius agreed. He glanced at the younger man, an apologetic look in his eye. "They don't understand why you remain up here, when it's so obvious there's no threat."

"Is it so obvious, Tavarius?" Now Sartas turned and stared at the old guard. "Is what we do here really so empty of meaning?"

Tavarius considered this for a moment. "The Wall has stood for longer than recorded time," he said at length. "In all those centuries there has never been one reported case of attack."

"Then you believe the threat for which it was built no longer exists?"

"Perhaps there was never a threat to begin with, lad."

Sartas snorted dismissively. "You talk nonsense," he growled. "What king would order the construction of such a thing if it were to serve no purpose?"

"I never said it was built for no reason."

"Walls are meant to keep things out," Sartas pronounced with finality.

"Or keep things in."

"Cysteria is not a prison!"

"Perhaps not now—though there are many definitions of prison."

Sartas shook his head vigorously. "The Wall is here to protect, as are we."

"I agree the Wall is here to protect," said Tavarius soberly. "But to protect what? The people? The land? Or perhaps the King and his minions."

"Some would brand your words as treason," Sartas said with a frown of reproach.

"We've lived in fear for centuries," Tavarius observed. "Centuries of rule by kings, who have preyed on that fear to maintain control of the land and its people."

"I don't believe it," Sartas said, a dark scowl across his face. "The Wall was built to protect us from a great evil."

"Which never came. Which never has, lad. And we've walked this stone for centuries in anticipation. Perhaps the only evil was the evil of anarchy. Perhaps the Wall brought order where none had been before. Perhaps the Wall, merely in its existence, brought purpose. It made people believe in the need for kings and armies at a time when they needed to. And now they can't stop believing."

"What if you're wrong, Tavarius? What if there's an army awaiting beyond, even as we speak?"

"Then will a wall and a handful of guards really stop them, Sartas?" Tavarius chuckled softly and shook his head. "We're here to maintain the

illusion. The King is strong so long as there is a perceived threat and he is seen to be doing something about it."

"And what of the voices?" Sartas grinned triumphantly, believing that he'd won a point.

"We've all heard them at one time or another," Tavarius admitted. "But they could as like be the wind as not. The conversations of other guardians carried from other outposts."

"They weren't the wind!" Sartas declared. "And they weren't the Sun," he added.

Tavarius stared at him pityingly.

"You're too cynical and distrusting," Sartas insisted, simmering with rage.

"Age will do that to a man," said Tavarius. "Age and the Wall. But I don't actively seek to be these things. I know only that I've walked these walls for years, as did my father, and his father, and his father's father, down through the centuries, to ancestors whose names I don't even know. I would wish my son a better fate than this." He threw the last of his cha into the fire with an angry motion of disdain.

"We must be vigilant," Sartas insisted.

"Yes, we must. But not here, lad. Not on this wall. We must be vigilant against those who would use us, who would play us like puppets on strings, manipulating us for their own ends."

"If you believe these things you say, then why do you come?"

"Because I have family, lad. A wife and children who must be cared for."

"For coin, then."

"For coin."

"You have no doubts."

Tavarius grinned wanly. "There are always doubts," he said. "As I said: I, too, have heard the voices."

Sartas blinked. "You hear the evidence," he said, "and yet still you claim there's no threat."

"They're only voices, lad." Tavarius sighed and shook his head. "But as like as not they're the imaginings of lonely men."

"Or armies massing to launch an assault."

"And waiting so long to do it?" Tavarius scoffed. He chuckled dryly, mocking this notion. "I first heard them more than twenty years ago, Sartas. And before that, my father had heard them. And his father. Men have stood on this stone and heard them for as long as I've known. No army would wait centuries to launch an assault."

"They're not the wind," Sartas insisted angrily. "And they're not the imaginings of a lonely man."

It was dark now, and Tavarius stared into the fire, his face illumined by the yellow-orange flames, eyes deep with shadows. "Your words may well be true, young Sartas," he said gently. "Perhaps no wind speaks thus; and I'll admit the imaginings of the lonely man tend to the pleasures of the flesh more often than not."

"Then tell me what it is we've hear," said Sartas eagerly.

Tavarius turned about and looked towards the Wall. He stared at it, then lifted his gaze to the summit that seemed to merge with the sky. Only the stars distinguished stone from night.

"Perhaps," he said, "those voices belong to the mirror of ourselves. Perhaps beyond that wall there are other men like us, doing the bidding of their king. Old men, like myself, who come for coin; and young men, like you, Sartas," —and he glanced at the younger guard— "who come out of some misguided sense of duty, honestly believing in the task they've been assigned. Perhaps these reflections of ourselves also drink watered wine and wallow half drunk in the cool shade of tents, whiling away the six months of an onerous tour. Perhaps they, too, have wives and children and homes they long for in their daily dreams. It's possible they even sit about fires, as we do, pondering voices they've heard and the senselessness of this wall that divides the here from the there."

"If what you say is true, wouldn't they have ventured over to see the truth?"

Tavarius favored him with an amused look. "Have we?" he asked.

"Perhaps it's time we did."

"That is for our King and the people to decide," said Tavarius more seriously.

"But all that you've said—"

"I come for coin, Sartas. I come because of a wife and children whom I wish to see enjoy life as life should be enjoyed. It isn't my place to answer the questions scholars have pondered for years and for which kings have had neither the courage nor the inclination to resolve for centuries."

"Aren't you even curious to know the truth?"

"The truth?" Tavarius laughed. "Does it matter what the truth is? Would any believe us if they knew it?" He shook his head. "No, it serves the purposes of all that things remain as they are. The King maintains control of the realm. The citizens remain at peace, knowing they're protected against the evil that is beyond. And we, who have walked this

stone for as long as recorded time, get our coin and our glory, however undeserved."

"But what about them?" Sartas demanded, pointing down to the camp. "I've heard them, grumbling and complaining and wanting nothing more than to be done with this. And you yourself have said that few if any believe and take pride in what they do."

"But we do it, Sartas. And for all our words, we'll continue to do it. Because it's what we do. It's the purpose in our lives, however much we may wish it otherwise. Without the Wall what would we be? We were raised for this. From the time we were but boys barely able to carry a spear we've constructed our lives to serve this one thing."

"Then without the Wall we're nothing," whispered Sartas.

Tavarius nodded, grim-faced. "And they all know it too, in their hearts," he said, gesturing towards the camp. "Our world wouldn't be the same without the Wall. It has made Cysteria what it is today. Perhaps that's what it's builders intended."

"Then it's as simple as all that," said Sartas, lifting his arms wide in frustration.

"Need it be more complicated?"

"But there'll never be an end to it!"

Tavarius smiled and pushed himself erect, until he was standing looking down upon the young guard. "In the entire world I know of but two certainties, lad. One is death. The other is the Wall."

"You've given me much to think about," said Sartas.

The old guard nodded. "I leave now," he said; and he turned and went the way he'd come, guided only by the feeble starlight and the many years of walking the Wall.

Sartas watched him go with a look of longing.

The next day Sartas came down from the Wall. He was greeted with much cheer and plied with wine and food. Tavarius watched all this from afar, grimacing with regret.

"You look as though you've lost something," said Karn.

Tavarius regarded his friend ruefully. "Perhaps I have," he said.

"You should be joyous," insisted Karn. He clapped his friend heartily on the back. "You've saved the boy."

"Have I?" Tavarius stared up at the Wall. "He was like no other, Karn. Now he's simply one of us."

"I don't see him complaining."

But Tavarius wasn't listening. He was gathering shield and spear and packing provisions. When he was done he started out the tent, striding with a determination he hadn't felt in years.

"Where are you going?" asked Karn, confused.

"To walk the Wall," Tavarius called back. "To listen to voices that have no faces. And to guard against our greatest enemy."

"Our greatest enemy? What's that?"

"Apathy, my friend. Apathy."

Afterword

Please feel free to distribute this story. If you know of suitable sites to which it can be posted, I would be most grateful if you would do so. If you wish to write to me the old-fashioned way to tell me what you thought of the story or to send a donation (to help keep the series going), you can mail to:

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