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Stephen Baxter

Bronze  
Summer

THE NORTHLAND TRILOGY

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# Bronze Summer

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Stephen Baxter

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Bronze  
Summer

THE NORTHLAND TRILOGY



A ROC BOOK



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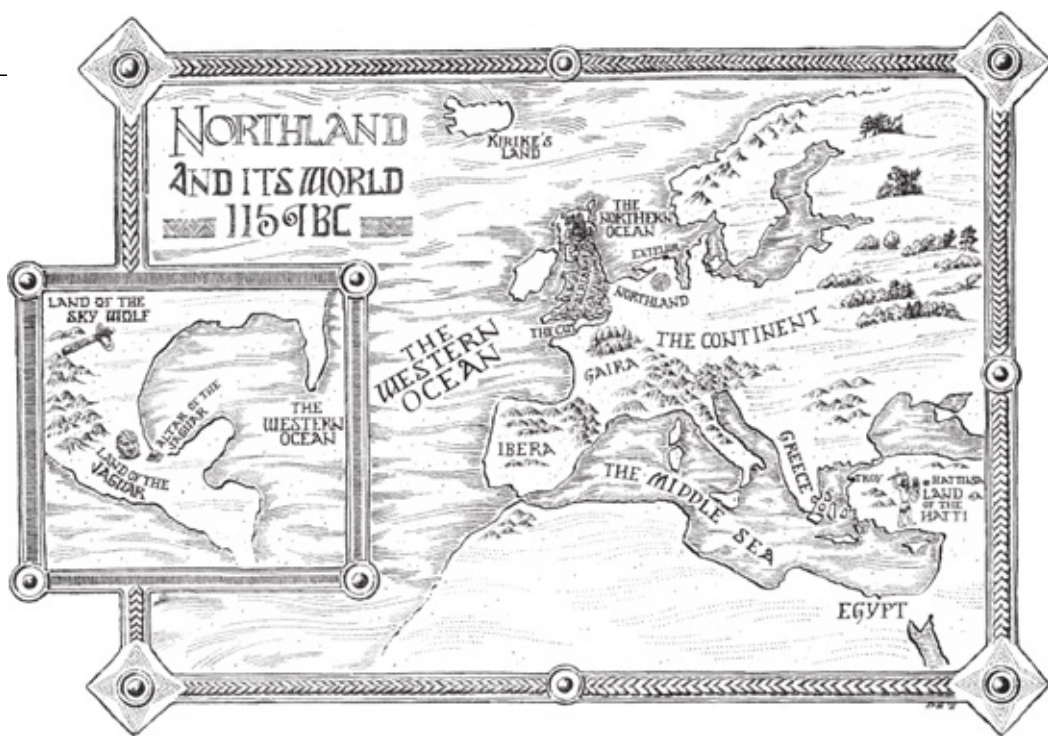
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*For Brian Aldiss*



# Table of Contents

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## One

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24

## Two

- 25
- 26
- 27
- 28
- 29
- 30
- 31
- 32
- 33
- 34



35

---

36

37

38

39

40

41

42

Three

43

44

45

46

47

48

49

50

51

52

53

54

55

56

57

58

59

60

61

62

63

64

Four

65

66

Afterword





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nce the ice had covered continents. The silence of the world had been profound.

Eventually, grudgingly, the ice retreated to its fastnesses in the mountains and at the poles. Humans spread northward, colonizing the recovering land. They lived sparsely, their lives brief. Soon the ice was remembered only in myth.

Yet the world around them continued to endure significant changes. The land rose and flexed as it was relieved of the burden of the weight of the ice, and meltwater flowed into the oceans and pooled in hollows on the land. Rising seas bit at the coastlines of Northland, the great neck of land that still connected the peninsula called Albia to the Continent. Perhaps that neck would have been severed altogether—if not for the defiance of Northland's people, who, tentatively at first, with crude flood-resistant mounds, drainage ditches scratched in the ground, and heaped-up dykes of stone and earth, resisted the ocean's slow assaults.

Meanwhile, far to the east, other new ideas were emerging. People had long tracked wild sheep and goats and encouraged the more nutritious cereal plants. Now, as people sought more reliable food supplies, that practice intensified. Herds were corralled, fields planted. Populations bloomed.

But the ice was not done with mankind. A remnant ice cap over the western continent collapsed, and chill waters poured down the river valleys to the ocean. Sea levels rose in a great pulse. Northland survived this too, its already ancient network of sea walls and dykes and soakaways resilient. But the drastic injection of chill meltwater caused ocean currents to fail, and the world suffered a cold snap that lasted centuries. The eastern farmers, driven out of their homes by climate collapse and overexploitation, spread west along the river valleys and ocean coasts, taking their animals and seeds with them. In a slow wave that rolled across the Continent, forest was cleared, and threads of smoke rose from new farming communities.

After two thousand years the farmers' culture reached the shore of the Western Ocean—but here the wave broke. If the Northlanders had not existed, perhaps the farmers and their culture would have colonized the shore lands and islands of the ocean fringe. But Northland, though still a culture living off the produce of the wild earth, was literate, technically advanced, strong, self-confident. The Northlanders traded and learned, but farming held no interest for them.

Again the climate shifted, with a spasm of drought heralding a new age of warm, dry conditions; again humanity's fragile cultures flowed and changed in response. In the east the farming communities coalesced into a new phenomenon: towns and cities, major gatherings of population, centrally controlled, dedicated to the great task of maintaining complex nets of irrigation channels in increasingly dry landscapes. Empires bloomed like fungi on a log. Soon trading routes spanned the Continent, carrying amber from the north, silver from the south, timber from the west, tin and lapis lazuli from the east. Bronze was everywhere, in cups and ornaments and statuary, in the body armor and swords of the new warrior kings. The traders and warriors probed west and north, seeking profit and conquest. But again the old Northlander culture stood strong, and older ways were preserved.

And still the earth would not rest. Over an ocean on the far side of the world, elaborate cycles of heat and moisture collapsed, resumed—changed. The consequences rippled across the continents, in more waves of flood and drought, famine and disaster.

And under a mountain on an island in the Western Ocean, molten rock surged, seeking escape.



Milaqa climbed the staircase cut into the face of the Wall. She took big deliberate strides, reluctant to think about her dead mother, whose rotting corpse lay out in the open on the roof. The growstone surface by the staircase was covered in scratched graffiti, swirls of circles and arcs in flowing Etxelur script: “HARA LOVES MEK.” “GAGO OF THE HOUSE OF THE VOLE OWES ME A DEER HAUNCH. DO NOT TRUST HIM . . .” Here, she was intrigued to see, was a line scraped in the angular alphabet of the Greeks. She knew the language and picked out the words with ease: “I PALLAS CLIMBED THIS WALL AND DEFIED THE NORTHERN SEA, IN THE NINTH YEAR AFTER THE STORM.” A sightseeing trader or princeling, she supposed, and boastful like all of his kind.

Her steps were slowing, her attention too easily snagged by these scribbles. She forced herself on. As she reached the roof, under a gray sky, her view of Old Etxelur opened up, the earthworks and flood mounds, the houses clustered over the lump of Flint Island. Beyond, the flat, misty expanse of Northland stretched to the southern horizon, the gray-green landscape cut into a neat patchwork by the tremendous straight lines of tracks, canals, dykes, holloways and gullies. A cloud of birds, redwings perhaps, descended on a distant swathe of grassland. When she looked to the north the Wall’s own sharp horizon hid the sea from her sight. The Wall, it was said, was as tall as thirty adults standing on top of the other, and about half as thick. But she heard the growl of the sea, and felt cold spray on her brow.

The wind shifted, and there was a reek of rot, of decay, of death. She wrapped her cloak closer around her body. She longed to run back to the warmth and light of the galleries of the Scambles, the bright chatter of her friends. But she could not.

She walked along the spine of the Wall, following the sparse line of monuments that dominated this tremendous roof. The oldest were slim monoliths, slabs of granite and basalt, gifts from the austere sky-watching communities of Gaira. And then there were the more recent Annid heads, images of Etxelur’s leaders carved by sculptors from across the Western Ocean: blocky faces as tall as Milaqa, defiantly facing the rage of the waters, just as the Wall itself had for hundreds of generations. Her own mother’s face would soon be joining that row of bleak, sightless watchers. A memory surfaced like an air bubble from a still pond: a summer’s day when Kuma had lifted her up, Milaqa had been only five or six, and whirled her in the summer sunlight. Milaqa was now sixteen years old. She pushed the memory away.

And she approached her mother’s lying-out platform. It was a simple wooden frame surrounded by busy, swooping gulls that scattered, cawing their irritation. Her mother’s corpse was just one of a row of prone bodies on the frame, many of them small, the crop of children taken by the recent winter, just as every year. The bodies lay under worn-out thatch nets that kept their bones from being scattered by the birds. Kuma, Milaqa’s mother, still wore her bronze breastplate, gleaming in the watery daylight, the ceremonial armor of the Annid of Annids yet to be removed, to be given to her successor. The breastplate was damaged, Milaqa noticed, with a neat slit punched in its front.

And a man stood beyond the lying-out frame. Bulky, wrapped in a featureless cloak, silhouetted against the northern sky, this was her uncle Teel—come to make her face her mother’s death, and, she supposed, other unwelcome realities.



Milaqa walked forward. The Northern Ocean was revealed to her now, big muscular waves flecked with foam. The gray water was only a few paces below the lip of the Wall; the level of the sea was higher than the dry land behind her. Seabirds rode the ocean swell, and further out she saw a litter of fishing boats.

“An eagle,” Teel said.

“What?”

“I saw an eagle—a sea eagle, I think—wheeling away over there.” He pointed out to sea. Teel was not a tall man but he was bulky, given to fat, and he habitually shaved his head to the scalp. Milaqa knew he was around thirty years old, but he looked younger, his face oddly round, like a baby’s.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” she said. “The eagles nest in crevices in the Wall’s outer face. Lots of birds do. And on the inner face too.”

“Wearing away the Wall bit by bit, with each peck of a curious chick, each streak of guano on the growstone. Well. We can leave it to the Beavers to fret about that.” His blue eyes were running in the cold breeze. “Thank you for coming up.”

“Did I have a choice?”

“Well, I didn’t drag you here, so yes, you had a choice. I know how difficult this is for you. To lose your mother in your sixteenth year, the year of your House choice—you’ll have to face the whole family at the equinox gathering—”

“Don’t give me advice about my feelings, you ball-less old man.”

He laughed, unperturbed. “Ball-less, yes, I grant you. But not that old, surely.”

“Let’s get this over.” She walked deliberately to the sky burial platform. A couple of gulls had landed again; they fled into the air. Milaqa lifted her cloak so it covered her mouth. Teel had a linen scarf, grimy from use, that he pulled over his mouth and nose. And Milaqa looked closely at her mother’s body for the first time.

It had only been a month since Kuma had been brought home from the Albian forest where she had met her death. A fall from her horse had killed her, her companions had told the family, an aurochs chase that went wrong, the back of her skull smashed on a rock—an accident, it happened all the time; there would be no point hunting the great cattle in their tall forests if it wasn’t dangerous. Only a month. Yet Kuma’s head had already been emptied of its eyes, her gaping mouth cleansed of tongue and palate. Scraps of flesh and wisps of hair still clung, but enough bone had been exposed for Milaqa to be able to see the craterlike indentation in the back of the skull, the result of that fatal fall. *This is my mother*. Milaqa probed for feeling, deep in her heart. She had not cried when she had heard her mother was dead. Now all she seemed to feel was a deep and savage relief that it wasn’t her lying on this platform, her flesh rotting from her broken frame. Did everybody feel this way?

“It works so quickly,” Teel said, marveling. “The processes of death. Look, of the body’s soft parts there’s not much left save the big core muscles.” He pointed to masses of dull red meat beneath Kuma’s ribs. “The birds and the insects and the rats, all those little mouths pecking and chewing—”

“Is this some kind of test? I know what you’re like. I grew up with you setting me tricky challenges, uncle.”

“All for your own good. I wanted to show you something.” He pointed to the flaw in the bronze breastplate. “Look at that.”

The breastplate, supposedly a gift from the tin miners of Albia to some Annid many generations back, was finely worked, incised with the rings and cup marks of the old Etxelur script. The damage was obvious close up. She inspected the rough slit, the flanges of metal folded back to either side. “What of it? When the next Annid takes the plate, this will be easily fixed.”

“Perhaps so. But how do you imagine it got there?”

Milaqa shrugged. “During the accident. She fell from her horse, when it bucked before the

charging aurochs.”

He nodded, and mimed a fall, tipping forward. “So she landed hard, and—what? A bit of rock punctured her breastplate?”

“It’s possible.” But she doubted it even as she spoke.

“*But she fell backward.* That’s what we were told—that’s how she got her skull stove in. You can see the wound, at the back of the head. So how, then, was the plate on her *chest* punctured?”

“Come on, uncle. You never ask a question if you don’t already know the answer.”

He lifted his cloak back over his shoulder, revealing a mittened hand holding a bronze knife, and he began sawing at the net strands over Kuma’s torso. “Actually I don’t know the answer—not for sure. But I have a theory.”

He quickly cut enough strands to be able to peel back the netting, itself sticky, from Kuma’s chest. Then he reached under the breastplate to cut into its leather ties. Carefully, respectfully, he lifted the plate off Kuma’s body. It came away with a sucking sound, to reveal a grimy linen tunic. He slit through the rotting cloth and peeled that back to reveal Kuma’s chest, scraps of flesh and fat and muscle over ribs that gleamed white. Flies buzzed into the air, and there was a fresh stench, sharp and rotten.

Teel pulled off his deerskin mittens and handed them to Milaqa. “Hold these for me. This is going to be messy.”

And he dug his fingers into Kuma’s chest, in the gap between the racks of her ribs. Bone cracked. He pushed and probed, spreading his fingers into the soft mass beneath. He was looking for something. His expression was grim; Milaqa knew he had his squeamish side. Then his hand closed. He looked at Milaqa. He withdrew his hand, and held out his fist; black fluid and bits of flesh clung to his skin. He opened his hand to reveal a small object, flat, three-sided, evidently heavy and sharp, coated in ichor. He rubbed it on his cloak, and held the object up to his eye.

“It’s an arrowhead,” Milaqa said slowly.

He nodded. “*Somebody shot your mother*—right in the heart. That’s how she died. The head injury surely happened as she fell from her horse, or was maybe faked later.”

“But it must have gone right through her armor, her breastplate.” Milaqa seemed to be thinking slowly, plodding from one conclusion to the next. “What arrowhead can pierce bronze?”

“One like this,” he said, holding out the point to her. “Iron.”



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*F*ar to the east, a generation-long drought gripped the land. People abandoned their failing farms and wandered in search of succor, or turned to raiding the rich trade caravans and ships. But the collapse of trade only worsened the crisis, when there were no more caravans to rob. Eventually whole populations were on the move, by land and sea. And ancient empires crumbled.

**Qirum heard the approach** of the column long before it arrived at the city walls. The neighing of horses, the rattling of wagon wheels, a distant crowd murmur—all these disturbed his sleep, as did the bear-like snoring of Praxo in the next room. But it was the blare of bronze war trumpets that finally penetrated his ale-sodden head. The Hatti, of course, the great power of Anatolia, it was the Hatti who would be coming with mobs of captives from the cities they sacked, the countries they emptied.

And when booty flowed through Troy, and booty people, there was opportunity for a man like Qirum.

Qirum guessed it was close to noon. The room was windowless, and stank of farts, stale wine, piss and sex, but the walls of packed mud were cracked—nobody had bothered to repair them since the great fire set by the Greeks—and they admitted slabs of bright daylight. He sat up, pushing the thin linen blanket off his torso. The whore lay sleeping beside him, or feigning sleep at least. He found a pouch of wine, and one of water; he took draughts from one and then the other, and poked at the whore's backside with his foot. "Get up and get out."

She stirred reluctantly and sat up, rubbing her eyes. "I need sleep." She was dark, with tousled black hair and brown eyes. She was only about fourteen; though her body was full, her face was small and round, like a child's, and her mouth, bruised around the lips, had an habitual pout.

He thought she was a Kaskan, from the north. He didn't know her name, or care. "You've been asleep since dawn." The last time he'd managed it. "Now it's noon. Up and out with you. Praxo! Wake up, you fat slug." He rummaged for his clothes on the floor, amid the stale, half-eaten loaves, a spilled cup of wine.

The girl pulled the blanket over her small breasts. "You want me tonight?" She forced a smile, but her eyes were like a hunted animal's.

He'd seen that look before in his women; they wanted his money, but feared the strength of his lust. This girl hadn't satisfied him but he supposed it wasn't her fault. He needed an athlete, to match him. A Spartan maid! Rummaging in the heap of stuff he found a tiny goblet, a miniature as you might make for a baby prince. It had lost its base and was badly dented, but it was silver, and it would keep this girl fed for a week or more—and her family, her babies, whoever controlled her, whatever shadowy figures lay behind the child-woman he had taken a fancy to in the street last night. "No. I won't want you again. Here." He threw the cup over to her.

She grabbed it, sniffed it, tucked it under the blanket out of his sight, gone in a flash. She smiled again. "You were strong. Like bull of legend—"

He swept the back of his hand toward her, and she flinched. "You won't get any more out of me. Out. Now. Oh, and empty the night soil bowls on your way." He turned his back and pulled on loincloth, tunic, boots. He heard her move around, finding her clothes. Then she was gone, and he knew he would never think of her again.

He stood, fully dressed. The sudden movement brought a sharp pain to the base of his skull, a relief of the lousy wine which was all you could find in this town these days. He stretched and bent, tensing his muscles. He felt familiar twinges, the scar tissue on his back, the broken cheekbone that had never

quite healed right, the burned patch on his arm—each a souvenir of a fight fought, and won. He found his bronze sword and swung it a couple of times, and he let out a roar. Blood pumping, lungs drawing in the foul air, he could feel the day's recovery starting. It never took long. He was no bull, no war god, he wasn't prone to flattery of that sort. But he thought of himself as a healthy animal in his prime, and if the Storm God favored him he would stay that way until a decent death spared him the humiliation of illness and age. Refreshed, he slipped his sword into its scabbard and picked up the rest of his gear, his bronze dagger, his leather belt with its pouches.

Still Praxo's snore rattled the walls, despite the gathering din of the approaching caravan. "Praxo! Qirum raised a boot and started to slam his heel into the wall. It smashed in a shower of laths, dried mud, wicker and plaster, and there was a faint smell of soot and smoke. Before the fire this had probably been quite a grand house, even though it was a long way out from the Pergamos. Now it was a crumbling wreck. He kept kicking the wall until he had made a hole big enough to step through.

He loomed over Praxo, who lay on his belly under a scrunched-up blanket that barely covered his hairy backside, his head tipped sideways, his mouth open, his big fleshy nose squashed, his snoring like an earthquake. Qirum's closest companion was only a couple of years older than Qirum himself, only twenty-five, but the jowls and folds of his fleshy face made him look a good deal older than that. Praxo's own whores—he preferred two at a time if he could afford them—had long gone, though at first glance it didn't look as if they had had the nerve to rob the sleeping sailor.

Qirum picked up a slat from the walls, and laid about Praxo's back and arse with vigorous blows. "Up! Up, you beached whale. The day's half gone, and there's booty coming to town."

Praxo stirred, snorted, coughed, and rolled onto his back, leaving a puddle of snot where his nose had been. He had a monstrous waking erection that stuck up like a ship's mast. He opened one eye. "Clear off, I need a piss." But then the martial trumpets sounded again, and a broad grin spread over Praxo's grimy face.

"Do what you have to do, my friend, but get on with it." Qirum pushed through the remains of a doorway and emerged onto the mud track outside. Once this had been a fair-sized street. But now it was greened over by weeds, and cluttered by huts, shacks and lean-tos, smoke trailing through their roofs. If you stood still for too long the kids came swarming out with their little hands out toward you, chattering, begging for food. Living like rats on a midden.

Behind him he heard Praxo swear and strain at his stool.

Qirum walked away up a low rise. From here he looked out over the ruined lower town toward the Pergamos, the citadel, with its ring of cracked walls, the palace with its fallen towers and smashed-in roof. Once this view would have been cluttered by crowding buildings, winding alleyways; now it was all but clear. This was Troy. Qirum had been born here—he had been conceived during the disastrous night of the fire that had ended the Greek siege—this was his home city, and always would be. But he had traveled widely; he had seen Mycenae and Hattusa and Ashur, he had seen what a city should be. Maybe Troy would recover some day, maybe it would get back to the greatness it had enjoyed. But now while drought and famine stalked the land, and populations fled and princes toppled everywhere. And he, Qirum, was meant for better than this. He dug a leather pouch from his belt, and absently sprinkled himself with scent, of lilies, roses, saffron crocuses. In a stinking world, a stinking city, smelling good was a sign of wealth, of prosperity. Troy was the past, the place he had begun his journey in life, not the place he would end it.

Praxo emerged at last, dressed in a tunic that looked more stain than cloth, with his weapons on his back, his battle-axe and heavy sword. He carried a sack with the bits of booty they carried to pay their way around the city. "That last stool was a beauty. I feel like I gave birth to a tree."

"Of all your revolting habits, your boasting about your bowel movements is the worst."

"I try to please."

The trumpets pealed again. Looking east over the outer city's walls Qirum glimpsed movement, a river of people, the glitter of bronze, banners fluttering in the languid air. Hatti! He felt as if he could smell the gold. "Come on."

Praxo said, "You have an admirer."

Qirum glanced down. A boy, skinny, naked, no older than eight, turned and bent, showing his bare arse. Qirum turned away, disgusted.

But Praxo lingered. "Oh, aren't you going to give this little one a ride? Just for old times' sake. After all he's got to start somewhere in the world. Selling the only thing he's got, just like you did. Come on, be a sport!"

Qirum stalked away from the boy, from Praxo, emptied his head of the goading, and focused his gaze on the glitter of Hatti bronze.





---

On the day of her mother's interment Milaqa woke early in her cell, deep in the belly of the Wall, in the District known as Great Etxelur. It had been an uneasy night, of dreams of dead iron punching through rib cages. It was a relief when the flickering torch glow around the door of her room was at last dimmed by the cold gray of dawn.

She clambered off her bed, a pallet of soft deerskin on a growstone platform heaped with blankets of aurochs wool and cloth. Moving quickly in the cold, she stripped off yesterday's tunic and loincloth. She drank water from the bowl she had brought in last night, and emptied her bladder into a channel that led her urine away to the fullers' tanks somewhere deep in the fabric of the Wall. She voided her bowels into her night bowl, cleaned herself with a handful of dried moss, and pulled on fresh clothes, leggings and boots. She took her cloak, picked up the night bowl, and pulled back the heavy linen door flap.

And for a heartbeat she paused, and looked back at her room in the glow from the passage torches. This was a new apartment, freshly cut into impossibly ancient growstone. The bed, table, shelves were all made of the original growstone too, lumps of it left unremoved by the artisans who had carved out these rooms. Such apartments, brand-new, exclusive and very expensive, were owned by the House of the Owl, the Annids, and were really meant for clerks and other officers of the Annid order, or were used in a pinch by guests of the government of Northland. Milaqa had been loaned it as a favor by her mother, the Annid of Annids, and her stuff, her clothes, the little pouch with mementos of her mother sat in the alcoves chipped into the walls. Well, Kuma was dead now, and once the interment was done Milaqa would have to give up the apartment. But when the Annids came to throw her out, at least they would find the place tidy and clean, dignified. She let the door flap fall closed.

She walked out along the passage toward its open end, and the gathering light of the spring sky. She passed other doors on the way, and heard human sounds, people softly moving about their morning business, a baby crying. The corridor gave onto a gallery cut into the Wall's growstone face. She made her way a few paces along to a vertical gutter incised into the face, where she dumped her night soil. The ordure slithered down the gutter, heading for a heap at the Wall's base, where it would be collected by workers of the House of the Beetle to be dug into the soil far from the Wall.

The waking world below the Wall was a plain stretching off to the far distance, punctuated by sheets of water and soft low hills. From here you could make out the artifice of the whole world, from the flood mounds on which the big communal houses sat, to the dead-straight lines of the main tracks and the great diagonal canals, a framework which contained patches of forest and marsh in its tidy quilted pattern. Fires sparked everywhere, and smoke rose up through the morning mist. Already people were making their way toward the Wall along the main tracks, bringing fish, meat, eel, wildfowl—the fruit of the marshlands brought to feed the communities of the great growstone heap. Along the canal banks people were out too, throwing offerings of broken bronze tools or pottery or scraps of food into the water, praying for the beneficence of the little mothers.

And over all this loomed the face of the Wall, within which she stood. It curved inward, subtly, a tremendous concave flank to match the stout belly of its sea-facing side. Thanks to the curve Milaqa could make out much of the detail of its nearby face: the etching of the galleries where lamps flickered and people walked, the ladders and netting hanging from the balconies, and a huge, rickety scaffolding of wood where workers were already out fixing a deep crack in the face with fresh growstone. Up above, on the Wall's roof, she could make out great frames with sails that turned languidly in the breeze; day and night the invisible muscles of the wind lifted pallets of excess water

from the foot of the Wall and dumped it into the ocean. There were birds too, a few early arrivals already colonizing cracks and crevices in this huge human-built cliff. Later in the year the boys would be climbing across the Wall's face, clinging to crevices with fingers and bare toes—searching for eggs, just as she and Hadhe, her cousin and closest friend, used to when they were a few years younger.

This was Great Etxelur, the District that was the very heart of the Wall, looming over the huddle Old Etxelur below. But beyond the nearby clutter the Wall went on and on, to east and west, until it became a pale line in the misty air that stretched to the horizon, inhabited all along its length, the Districts strung out like shells on a bracelet. Children often grew up believing the Wall went on forever. The truth was almost as staggering: the Wall had its limits, it did come to an end, but not until it had spanned the whole of the northern shore of Northland, a reach of very many days' travel.

And all along that length, and across hundreds of human generations, it kept the ocean at bay. It was deliciously scary, if you were snuggled up safe in your bed at night deep inside the Wall, to think that the sea level was far above your head.

The day was growing lighter while she stood here. The time of her mother's interment, at noon, was not far away. She ought to go to the great meeting chamber known as the Vestibule, the entrance to the deeper warrens that led to the Hall of Interment. She ought to be talking gravely about her dead mother to aunts and nieces, to her mother's colleagues in the House of the Owl.

Or she could run off and see if Hadhe was up yet. Hadhe, Milaqa's cousin, had children, two of her own and one adopted, and her little one was ill, which was why she was spending the winter in the shelter of the Wall, on the outskirts of the neighboring District, the Scambles. Her own home, a house in a place called Sunflower down by the Brother River, would have been too damp for a sickly little boy.

The kids would have got Hadhe up by now.

Impulsively Milaqa turned to her left, to the east, away from the Vestibule, and began to run lightly along the galleries, the roughened growstone secure under her feet. She greeted people she knew, and nodded to strangers, and grinned at the children who were already swarming everywhere, even so early on a cold day. On the big scaffolding platform the workers stirred their huge ceramic pots of growstone, pouring in crushed rock and lime and water. These members of the House of the Beaver, mostly men, called out to her as she passed, every word obscene, and she made fist-pumping gestures back at them.

She ducked inward, into the body of the Wall. She climbed staircases and hurried along torchlit corridors cut through the growstone itself. As she ran on, the nature of the galleries and passages subtly changed. Here, for instance, marigolds from the marshland, early bloomers, had been gathered and stuck in pots cut into the walls. The Wall was not the same everywhere, and nor were the people living in it, its Districts as different as the villages of the plain, each unique if only in small ways. And the further you went, the more different the people became, even in the way they dressed and spoke. Milaqa, who had a talent for languages as much as for anything, knew that a Wall dweller from the western end, near the Albia coast, could not communicate with an inhabitant from the eastern end, near the estuary of the World River. And yet they all inhabited the same Wall, the one immense building; and they all worked together to maintain the Wall and the lands it depended on.

She loved this place, the crowded communities, the corridors and galleries, the taverns—even the graffiti on the walls, layers of it, the sharp-cut recent additions obliterating the older marks beneath, some in forgotten languages. It was probably the nearest she was ever going to come to the cities of the east that the traders and travelers told of, where people lived in great heaped-up stone piles. Northland, her homeland, with its canals and landscapes and its smattering of people, with its emptiness and austerity and duty, wasn't enough for her. But the Wall itself was something else.

She soon came to where Hadhe was staying, in a chalet in the growstone loaned her by a fisher family who were wintering on Kirike's Land. Milaqa was greeted by the sight of a ten-year-old boy calmly standing by a waste duct with his tunic pulled up, urinating into the air. His young bladder was strong, and the pale liquid arced far out into the void.

"Jaro, stop that," she said, stalking up. "Use the gutters like everybody else. How would you like if you woke up to find somebody peeing on your head?"

He turned to face her, his penis in his hand still dribbling. "Are you looking at my cock, Aunt Milaqa?"

"Looking for it, maybe, little boy. Put it away before I throw you over too."

"All right, all right." He tied up his loincloth, dropped his tunic and ran off, disappearing into the maze of galleries.

"Hello, Milaqa." Her cousin Hadhe came out along the passage, carrying a double armful of bowls of soil. One was full of vomit.

"Let me help you with that." Milaqa took the vomit-filled bowl. "Little Blane, is it?"

"Poor mite's not been right all winter. The priests can't do anything for him. Coughing all night, and he keeps Jaro and Keli awake too, and what he does eat he throws back up. I'm surprised we've not had to put him up on the roof already . . ." Side by side the cousins tipped the bowls of soil into the waste gullies cut into the Wall face. "As for Jaro, a right pest he's turning out to be, and as randy as his father, from what I remember of him, even if he doesn't know what to do with his little man yet. He shows it to *me* the whole time, and I'm the nearest thing he's got to a mother." Hadhe sighed, and brushed a lock of dirty hair back from her face.

Milaqa saw how tired her cousin looked, how ill, her face slack and gray, her shoulders stooped, her breasts heavy with milk. She was fifteen, a year younger than Milaqa. "It was good of you to take in Jaro. You already had your hands full after you lost Jac."

Jac, Hadhe's husband, had been a fisherman, whose first wife had died when Jaro was small. Then Jac had got himself caught in a storm and killed just after getting Hadhe pregnant with little Blane, her own second child.

Hadhe shrugged. "Everybody has kids. Half the kids die, or if they don't their parents do, and you have to take in the orphans. This is the way we live our lives, isn't it? Except *you*, up to now, anyway. Even *you'll* have to settle down sometime."

"And be like you?" Milaqa snapped. Hadhe recoiled, and Milaqa reached out her hands. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did. Oh, forget it. You're not yourself; I've seen that since your mother died. Speaking of which—when is her interment? Oh, it's today, isn't it? So why are you here?"

"I . . ." Milaqa didn't really know.

From along the gallery, a child started crying.

Hadhe sighed. "That's Blane. He needs me. And your mother needs you. Go, Milaqa." And she picked up her bowls and turned away.

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