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# *Mirrors and Burnstone*

*by Nicola Griffith*

**J**ink brushed a fingertip over the wall before her. It was smooth and smelled strange. A cloud unwound itself from the spring moon and silver light pinned her to the turf.

Motionless, she breathed slow and deep. This was unexpected. Just after dawn that day she and Oriyest had studied the clouds, decided they would stay heavy the whole night.

Cloud slid over the moon's face once more and Jink gauged their denseness and speed, judging the time it would take to sing open the warehouse doors.

It should be safe.

She waited ten heartbeats until the night was once more thick and black, then ghosted along the smooth wall until she reached the glass doors. The floor hummed beneath her feet. To one side, the square of press-panel gleamed. She ignored it. Word had spread through the journeywomen: to press at random in the hope of opening the doors sent a signal to Port, that Outlandar centre of noise and light that had appeared on their world this season. She would sing the doors open.

She composed herself, back straight and legs slightly spread. She sang softly and listened with attention reflected vibration, adjusting here, compensating there. She stopped to test her work.

Almost. Four more fluting notes and the doors hissed open.

At her tread, lights clicked on automatically, making her blink. The doors slid closed. Under her bare feet, the foamplast was hard and cold. She hardly noticed, amidst the alien sights and smells: containers, sacks and crates; mechanisms standing free under thick coats of lubricant. She scented this way and that, laid a hand in wonder on a bulging sack. There was enough food here to feed herself and Oriyest for seasons...

Jink was thoughtful. What did the Outlandar intend with such stores? The building was on grazing lands accorded seasons ago to Oriyest and herself. By that token, they were due a small portion of the goods stored. But what did the Outlandar know of such things? She looked at the largest store of food she had seen in her life. They would not miss a pouchful.

She squatted to examine a sack. It was not tied but sealed in some way unknown to her. She slipped her knife from her neck sheath and hefted it. It would be a shame to spoil such fine material, but there was no other way. She slid the blade down the side of the sack.

“Stop right there.”

Jink froze, then looked slowly over her shoulder. Mirrors. She had heard of such.

The figure in the slick, impact-resistant suit was pointing something at her. A weapon. It motioned her away from the sack.

“Move very slowly,” the voice said, “lie down on your belly, hands above your head.” The figure also mimed the instructions.

Jink could not tell if the voice was female or male. It came flat and filtered through the mirror-visored helmet. Nor did the suit give any indication. She did as she was told. The Mirror relaxed a little and holstered the weapon. A second Mirror stepped into view, lever-

ing up his visor. He looked down at Jink. “Hardly worth the bother, Day,” he said and spat on the floor. Day, the first Mirror, shrugged and unclipped her helmet.

“You know what they said: every, repeat, every intruder on Company property to be apprehended and brought to Port. We let this one go and some hard-nosed lieutenant hears of it, bang goes all that accumulated R&R. Or worse.”

Jink listened hard, understanding most of the words but making little sense of the whole. She held herself still when Day squatted down by her head.

“Don’t be scared. You’ll come to no harm from us.”

Jink said nothing. She sensed no violence in the Mirror but would take no risks.

“She doesn’t understand a word, Day. Just get her on her feet and I’ll call a pickup.”

He raised her left wrist to his mouth and spoke into the com strapped there. Jink heard the indifference, the boredom in his voice as he recited a string of numbers to Port Central. Day leaned and casually hauled jink to her feet.

Jink breathed slowly, stayed calm. Day’s gloved fingers were still curled loosely round her elbow. The Mirror turned to her partner. “All okay?”

“Yeah. Be ten, fifteen minutes.”

“Want to wait outside?”

“No.” He stamped his boots on the floor. “It’s cold enough in here. We’d freeze out there.”

Jink wondered at that. Cold? It was spring.

The Mirror eyed Jink, in her shift. “Skinny thing, isn’t she?”

“They all look the same,” Day said. “Like wisps of straw.”

Jink held her silence but thought privately that the Mirrors were

as graceful as boulders.

She felt a faint disturbance, a wrongness in the foamplast beneath her feet. She tried to listen, stiffening with effort.

Day must have felt her captive's muscles tense and tightened her grip. "Don't try anything, skinny. The doors are locked good this time." She tapped the key box on her hip. "Besides, now we've reported you, we'd have to hunt you down even if you did escape. Which isn't really likely. No," she said easily, "you just keep quiet and behave and in a few days you'll be back with your family. Or whatever."

Jink was not listening. Did the Mirrors not feel it? Burnstone, going unstable beneath their feet. When she spoke, her voice was harsh with fear. "Leave. Now."

Day looked at her. "Well, it speaks. You're a sly one." She did not seem perturbed. "The pickup'll be a few minutes yet. There's no rush."

"No. We have to leave now." She did not pull free of the tight hand around her arm but turned slowly to Day, then the other Mirror. "We stand on burnstone. We must be very, very careful. Tread like flies on an eggshell."

"What's she talking about, Day?"

"Don't know. Sounds..." She looked hard at Jink's strained face. "What's burnstone?"

"Beneath the soil. A stone that burns. If you hit it too hard, or dig near it, you let—"

She heard a noise from the other Mirror. She turned. He was lighting a cigarillo.

"No!"

But it was too late. The match strip, still alight, was already falling from his fingers. Jink moved.

While the Mirrors were still hearing her shout, she pushed away Day's grip with a strength they did not know she possessed. Even before the tiny spark hit the ground, she was running. Straight towards the glass doors.

"Hey! Stop! You'll..." Day fumbled for the key box.

Jink crossed her arms over her head and dived through the glass.

Day cursed and ran towards the shattered door. There was blood everywhere.

Jink knew she was hurt but she had no thought in her mind but running. She ran with all her strength. She heard the soft whump of the erupting fireball just before the edge of expanding air caught her and tumbled her head over heels. She rolled but the force of the explosion drove her straight into an outcrop of rock. Her thoughts went runny and red. Pain all over. She hung on to consciousness, forced herself to her feet. After the fireball, there were always a few minutes before the burn really took hold. She stumbled back towards the remains of the warehouse.

A quick glance told her that the other Mirror was dead. She stepped over shards of glass and pieces of smouldering plastic to where Day lay; she was unconscious but breathing. Jink could not see much wrong with her. Hissing against the pain, she bent and grasped the Mirror's suit at the neck seal, hauled Day across the grass. Her hands ached with the effort. She dragged the unconscious Mirror behind the same rocks she had crashed into earlier. There was shelter enough only for one. Day would have to stay here and Jink would run for it.

She rolled Day close to the rock as she could, tucking the flopping arms away. Day's wristcom blinked green. Jink hesitated, then squatted. She unfastened the strap and the com dropped into

her palm. Despite her dizziness, she took three quick breaths and looked back into her memory, forcing it to be clear. Once again, she watched the Mirror touch two buttons, then speak. She opened her eyes. Pressed the buttons.

“PORT CENTRAL.” The voice was flat, tinny. Jink held the com close to her mouth, as she had seen the Mirror do.

“Burnstone,” she croaked. The flames had caught at her throat.

“PORT CENTRAL,” the voice repeated.

“Burnstone,” Jink said, fighting spinning nausea, “your Mirrors have started a burn!”

“WHO IS THIS. NAME AND NUMBER.”

Jink looked at it. The voice tried another tack.

“WHERE ARE YOU.”

“I’m—a building. A store building.”

“WHERE. COORDINATES.”

“It—I know nothing of your numbers.” Blood dripped down her back from between her shoulderblades. She blinked, focussed. “The storehouse lies beneath the moon’s path as she travels across the sky from your Port to the horizon. The wind blows from my left as I face...as I face...”

“PLEASE GIVE DIRECTIONS.”

A great wave of pain swept over her.

“The clouds above are thick and soft. One holds the shape of a woman’s face. One yet to pass overhead is a tree, the trunk short and strong.”

“REPEAT. PLEASE GIVE DIRECTIONS.”

Jink fought the urge to shout at the stupid voice. She was giving the best directions she knew. One had only to look at the sky and follow. She tried again.

“The grass here is...”

“GET OFF THE AIR YOU LUNATIC. WE ARE TRACING THIS CALL AND GOD HELP YOU WHEN YOU SOBER UP IN THE LOCKHOUSE. WE’RE SENDING A PICKUP TO—”

“But one is already coming,” Jink said, trying to remember if she had already said that. “It must not land. Its weight will only make the burn worse. You must tell it not to land.”

The voice shouted something but Jink ignored it.

“It must not land,” she repeated. She was feeling very ill.

The ground was hot to the touch. There was danger of an extrusion. Port would not listen. Day was as safe as possible. She had to get away.

She dropped the wristcom and started walking. Vaguely, she realized that her arms and legs were red with her own blood. She kept moving. A walk, a shambling trot, a walk again. Every step counted.

She fell. The slight jar was enough to send her drifting off into nothingness.

When she woke it was dawn. She was sick and cold but her mind was clearer. The gaping cut that ran from between her shoulder to midway down her back had stopped bleeding. Her skin felt raw. From behind the hummock of grass where she lay she could hear Mirrors shouting, the rumble and clank of heavy machinery. Company had sent people to fight the burn.

Jink eased herself into squatting position and watched for a while.

They were doing it all wrong. The machine was tearing at the soil, lifting it out in huge chunks and dumping them in piles. Figures in suits and masks walked in a line, spraying foam. Jink found it difficult to understand their stupidity. Had no one told them that the only way to deal with burnstone was to leave well alone? All

this walking and digging aggravated the burn.

She ran towards a black suit, grabbed the arm. “Stop,” she shouted, “you must stop.”

The man turned. A Mirror Captain. Jink’s hair was singed and she was crusted with dried blood. The Mirror turned his head slightly, and called to another black-suited figure.

“Lieutenant!”

“Sir?”

“Take this native to the medic. Find out what she’s doing here, how on god’s earth this thing started.”

“Sir.” She looked at Jink. “Can you walk?”

“Yes. But there is no time.”

She swayed and the lieutenant reached out, intending to steady her. Jink backed away.

The lieutenant flipped up her visor. Perhaps the native would be reassured at the sight of her face. She reached out again, but hesitated. There was so much blood. How could she tell where was safe to touch?

Jink closed her eyes, listened with her whole body. She could feel the burnpaths now. One heading north, one slightly eastwards, downslope, towards Oriyest. Nearby, an extrusion of hot rock bubbled from the ground. She heard the Captain yelling for his Mirrors to smother it. She opened her eyes, caught the lieutenant’s arm.

“Listen to me. Your...foam. It keeps the heat in. It feeds the burn. You must not. The digging it—” She did not know the outland word. “It...angers the burn, prods it to greater ferocity. You must not. Leave it.”

“Lieutenant!” the Captain snapped. The lieutenant spun round guiltily. “I told you to take the native to the medic.”

“Sir.” She hesitated. “Sir, she was speaking of the burn. The



fire, sir. Maybe we should listen. She seemed most certain that—”

“Lieutenant, the girl has a lump on her head the size of an egg. She is concussed, suffering from shock and weak from loss of blood. Even if she were talking sense, which I very much doubt, would it be fair to keep her here in this condition?”

“I...no, sir.”

“The medic, lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jink did not stay to listen further. She had tried, but now there was Oriyest to think of. She ran.

The captain bit back an oath. “No, lieutenant. Let her go. We’ve enough to worry about here.”

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Midmorning. Jink jogged over the familiar rise.

Where was the flock? Neither sight nor smell gave any clue. She cupped her hands around her mouth.

“Oriyest!”

The call echoed and was still. She ran on. She came to a great outcrop of rock that towered above her like a bank of stormcloud.

“Oriyest!”

The rocks echoed back her shout, and something else. The herd bird flapped heavily overhead.

“Clan!”

The herd bird hesitated, made another overpass. Jink smothered her impatience, forced herself to sink slowly into a crouch on the grass. She knew she smelled of burnstone and blood. Clan would be nervous. She waited.

The herd bird spread his leathery wings and sculled air, landing an arm’s length away. He did not fold his wings and his crest stayed erect. Jink made no move.

Slowly, cautiously, he sidled nearer. Jink watched his beak slits flaring as he sampled the air. He hopped closer. Jink spat in her palm, rubbed it against the grass to wash away blood and burn smells. She reached out an inch at a time. Clan lowered his head but did not hop away. Her fingertips brushed his pectorals. He huffed. She scratched at the soft down around his keelbone. He began to croon.

“Where’s the flock, Clan? And Oriyest?”

He grumbled in his throat, then flapped and hopped a few paces towards the rocks. Jink levered herself to her feet and followed slowly.

Oriyest had left her a message, a satchel of food and a water-skin. Jink read the message first, picking up the pebbles one by one and dropping them in her pouch. The message stones, rounded and smooth from generations of use, were one of Oriyest’s treasures.

She ate cautiously, uncertain of her stomach, and thought hard. The message said that Oriyest had felt the burn and had taken the flock to their safeplace. Jink was to join her there as soon as possible. If Jink was injured, then she was to send Clan to the flock and Oriyest would come to her. If neither Jink nor Clan came to the flock within three days, Oriyest would journey to the store building and then if necessary to Port Central itself in search of her.

Message stones did not allow for subtlety of tone but Jink could well imagine Oriyest’s grim face as she placed those particular pebbles. She sighed, wishing Oriyest was beside her now.

She shook nuts and dried fruit into one hand and clucked encouragingly at Clan. He sidled over on stiff legs and neatly picked up the offering. When he had finished, Jink pulled him to her. She pointed his head in the direction of the safeplace and scratched at his keelbone.

“Find Oriyest, Clan. Oriyest.” She pressed her cheek onto his skull and hummed the findflock command twice, feeling the bone vibrate. She pushed him. In an ungraceful clutter of legs and wings he hauled himself into the air. Jink watched him flap northward, then lay down on her stomach. She was very tired.

It was afternoon and she could not expect Oriyest before nightfall, some time before the burnpath crept its soft, dangerous way here. She thought of the Outlandar store building; anger at their stupidity stirred sluggishly at the back of her mind. She had heard rumours of their ignorance but to be faced with its enormity was something else. Outlandar ignorance would cost them vast areas of pastureland, destroyed in the burn. Even if a good portion survived, the area would be unstable for seasons. Burnstone was like that. She had heard of one seam that had smouldered for generations before sighing into ash.

The Outlandar respected nothing. According to the last journeywoman teller to share a fire with herself and Oriyest, the strangers had triggered a handful of burns already. Still they did not learn. Were they capable of it?

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Jink stretched, grimacing as the new scar on her back tugged awkwardly. It was healing well but strength was slow to return.

She hunkered down again. The youngling on the grass before her would not live: the flock was birthing before time. The long run from the rock to the safeplace ahead of the burn had shocked the young from their mothers’ wombs before they were grown enough to live. Jink looked at it sadly. Even as she watched, it stopped breathing.

On the way down the hill she caught the echoes of Oriyest’s singsong commands to Clan as they herded the flock into the gully

for the evening. They met at the bottom. Oriyest, stripped to the waist, looked at Jink.

“The little one died?”

“Yes.”

Oriyest sighed. “Flenk dropped two. Both dead. I buried them by the creek.”

Jink did not know what to say. Flenk was their best producer. If she dropped badly... “The others?”

“I don’t know.” They began walking back to the shaly overhang where they had been camping since their flight from the burn. “They seem sound. If only one or two drop tomorrow then we’ll be over the worst. And we will have been lucky.”

Her voice was not bitter, now was not the time for such things. The flock must be seen to first. After that there would time to think. Then they would send out the message cord.

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T’orre Na found them five days after they sent the cord. The three women sat around their fire, dipping hard dry bread into the stew-pot. The sky was clear, bright with stars and the moon’s shining three-quarters face. T’orre Na ate the last mouthful and settled back expectantly. This time, the journeywoman was here not to tell but to listen.

The fire popped. Jink added another stick.

“I worry, T’orre Na,” she said.

The journeywoman looked from Jink’s smooth brow to Oriyest’s calm eyes. “Not about your flock.”

“No. And yes. We were lucky. We lost less than two handfuls. This time.”

“Ah.” T’orre Na nodded to herself. She stripped the bark from a twig and began to pick her teeth, waiting for Jink to continue.

“The Outlandar understand nothing. Much of our grazing is destroyed and will take seasons to re-grow. Do they take heed? No. Their hearts and minds are closed to us. Closed to our land, to what eases it, what angers it.”

Oriyest looked at T’orre Na. “Perhaps they have not been taught to listen to the right things.”

“Is that what you wish, Oriyest? Jink?” The journeywoman tossed her stick into the fire. “You want the Outlandar to learn to hear?”

“Something must be done.”

“Indeed.” She paused. “It would not be easy.”

“Nor impossible, T’orre Na.” Jink leaned forward. “I have spoken of the two Mirrors—Day and Lieutenant—who would have listened. And Captain, too, was not unkind, just...”

“Over filled with small things.”

“Yes,” Jink said, surprised. That was it exactly. His mind had been heaving with little things that meant nothing to her: numbers and quotas, money, promotion, service record... She shook her head to free it from those hard, incomprehensible thoughts.

“They are all the same,” T’orre Na said softly. “I have been to their Port and I have seen.”

Jink and Oriyest said nothing. Not far away they heard one of the flock shifting over the rocky ground, sending pebbles scattering along the gully. There was an enquiring low from another, then silence.

“They should be made to hear,” Jink said finally. T’orre Na looked at Oriyest who looked right back. The journeywoman sighed.

“Very well. What will you ask for?”

Jink pondered. The usual penalty for triggering a burn was

double the amount of destroyed land from the wrongdoer's holdings. But the Outlandar had no land to give.

"We will ask a hearing. As our reparation price we will demand that the Outlandar listen to us. Listen and hear. We will teach about burnstone. We will demand to learn what it is they want from us, why they came here and put their store buildings on our grazing lands. And when we know more, we will ask more."

Oriyest looked at the journeywoman. "Will you help us?"

T'orre Na looked from Oriyest's steady gaze to Jink. They would do it anyway, without her. "I'll help."

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Day was startled when she saw them. Natives were a very rare sight inside Port, and here were two of them, making straight for where she sat at the bar. She recognized one of them as her skinny captive. As they approached, she marvelled at how such a frail-looking thing could have dragged her, in full armour, all the way to the shelter of that rock. But she must have done. There was no other explanation.

"Greetings, Mirror."

"Hello." She lifted her helmet off the stool next to her. "Uh, sit down."

Oriyest nodded. They sat. Day cleared her throat.

"You shouldn't be here. Technically, you're an escapee." She felt awkward.

"Will you help us?" Jink asked.

"Well, sure. But all you have to do is lose yourself. Leave Port. No one'll think to chase you up."

The other one seemed amused. "You mistake us, Mirror."

The skinny captive, Jink, laid a hand on her arm. "Listen to us," she said. "If you can help, we would thank you. It costs nothing to

listen, Mirror Day.” Day blinked. “Will you hear us?”

“Go ahead.”

The other one spoke. “I am Oriyest. Jink and I tend our flock. Some seasons are good, some are not so good, but we expect this and we survive. This would have been a good season but for the burn you and your companion started.” Her brown eyes were intent on Day’s. “When you built your store place on our land, we thought: it is not good grazing land they have chosen; perhaps the Outlandar do not know of our custom of permission and barter; we will not make complaint. This has changed.”

“Now wait a minute. That land is Company land.”

“No.”

“Yes. God above, the whole planet is Company land!”

“No.” Oriyest’s eyes glittered like hard glass beads. “Listen to me, Mirror Day, and hear. Seven seasons ago we petitioned the journeywomen. The land between the two hills of Yelland and K’tan-rise, between the river that runs to the sea and the rocks known as Lother’s Finger, was deemed to be ours to use until we no longer have need of it.”

Day had never thought about natives owning things. “Do you have any of that recorded?”

Jink frowned. “Recorded?”

“Yes. Recorded on a disc or in a— No, I don’t suppose you would. Anything written down?” She looked at their blank faces. “Here.” She pulled a pad and stylus from her belt. Wrote briefly. “See?”

Jink looked at the marks on the pad thoughtfully. “This is a message?”

“Of sorts. Do you have any, uh, messages saying the land is yours?”

“Our messages last long enough to be understood. Then...”  
Jink shrugged.

Day drummed her fingers on the bar. There must be some way they recorded things. She tried again.

“How would you settle a dispute?” She groped for words. “What would happen if another herder moved onto your land and claimed it?”

“They would not do that. Everyone knows that land is for our use. If they need more land, they have only to ask.”

“But how would they know the land is yours? You could be lying.”

Day caught Oriyest looking at her as though she were stupid. “If a herder thought that through some madness I spoke an untruth,” she said, slowly, distinctly, “a journeywoman would be summoned. She would speak the right of it.”

“But how would she know?”

Jink gestured impatiently. “How does anyone know anything? We remember.”

“But what if a journeywoman forgot?”

“Journeywomen do not forget.” Her voice was suddenly flat, cold. She leaned towards the Mirror and Day found herself afraid of the alien presence before her.

“There is a life between us, Mirror Day. I ask you once again: will you aid us?”

Day was afraid. She was made more afraid by the fact that she did not understand what she was afraid of. She licked her lips. “If a journeywoman will speak for you...” She hesitated but neither Jink nor Oriyest stirred. “If that’s your law then I’ll see what I can do.” Day wished she had another drink. “Look, I can’t do much. I’m only a Mirror. But I’ll find out who can help you. I can’t guarantee



anything. You understand?"

"We understand." Oriyest nodded once. "I will bring the journeywoman." She slid from her stool and was gone.

"Will she be long?"

"Not very long."

"Long enough for a drink," Day muttered to herself. She raised a finger to the bartender, who poured her another beer. She stared into her glass, refusing to look at Jink. The minutes passed. Now and then she raised her head to glance at her helmet on the bar. The doorway was reflected in its mirror visor. Men and women came and went, mostly Mirrors snatching an hour's relaxation between shifts.

Maybe she should just cut and run. She couldn't afford to get mixed up in a natives' rights campaign. Her promotion to sergeant was due in about eight months. Maybe even a transfer. But if Company got wind of all this... Then she remembered the look in Jink's eyes, the way she had said: There is a life between us. Day shuddered, thinking of her own reply: I'll see what I can do. In some way she did not fully understand, she realized that she was committed. But to what? She sipped her beer and brooded.

When Oriyest entered with the cloaked journeywoman, Day deliberately took her time to swing her stool round to face the natives.

The woman standing next to Oriyest seemed unremarkable. Day had expected someone more imposing. She did not even have the kind of solemn dignity which Day, over the years and on various tours of duty, had come to associate with those of local importance.

The journeywoman slipped her hood from her head, smiled and held out her hand earth-style. "I am named T'orre Na, a viajera, or journeywoman."

Automatically, Day drew herself upright.

“Officer Day, ma’am.” She had to stop herself from saluting. She broke into a sweat. She would never have been able to live that down. Saluting a native...

T’orre Na gestured slightly at their surroundings. “Can you speak freely here?”

“Yes.” Day glanced at the time display on her wristcom. Most of the Mirrors would be back on shift in a few minutes and the main damage, being seen with the natives in the first place, was already done. They sat in a corner booth. Day wanted another beer but wondered if alcohol would offend the journeywoman. To hell with it. “I’m having another beer. Anything I can get any of you?”

T’orre Na nodded. “A beer for myself, Officer Day.” T’orre Na turned to Jink and Oriyest. “Have you sampled Terrene beer? No? It’s good.” She laughed. “Not as strong as feast macha but pleasant all the same.”

The beer came. All four drank; T’orre Na licked the foam from her lips with evident enjoyment.

Day spoke first. “As I’ve already said, to Jink and Oriyest, I can’t do much to help.”

“Officer Day, I believe that you can. Tell me, what is the normal complaints procedure?”

“There isn’t one. Not for n— the indigenous population.”

“What procedure, then, would you yourself use if you had cause for complaint?”

“Officially, all complaints from lower grades get passed to their immediate superiors, but,” Day leaned back in her chair and shrugged, “usually the complaints are about senior officers. Company doesn’t have much time for complaints.”

T’orre Na pushed her glass of beer around thoughtfully. “Not

all Outlandar are Company,” she said.

Day frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The Settlement and Education Councils’ representative.”

“Courtivron, the SEC rep? You’re mad,” Day said. “Look, you just don’t know how things work around here.”

“Explain it to us then, Mirror,” said Oriyest.

“It’s too complicated.”

Oriyest’s voice remained even. “You insult us, Mirror.”

That brought Day up short. Insult them?

T’orre Na leaned forward. “Officer Day,” she said softly, you are not the first Outlandar with whom I have had speech. Nor will you be the last. We are aware that we need more knowledge, that is why we ask for your help. Do not assume that ignorance is stupidity. And do not assume that my ignorance is total. I understand your...hierarchies. You have merely confirmed my guesses so far.”

Day did not know what to think.

“The information we need is simple. Jink met a lieutenant she thinks would help us. We need to find her.”

“What’s her name?”

“We don’t know. We have her description.” T’orre Na nodded at Jink.

“Tall, a handwidth taller than yourself, Mirror Day. Eyes light brown with darker circles round the rim of the iris. Thin face. Pale skin with too many lines for her seasons.” Jink looked at Day. “I judge her to be younger than yourself. Square chin, medium lips with a tilt in the left corner. Her hair is this colour,” she pointed to the wood-effect table top, “and is not straight. It’s longer than yours. She has no holes in her ears for jewellery. You know such a one?”

Day nodded. Lieutenant Danner. The one on accelerated promotion. By the time Day made staff sergeant, or the heady heights

of lieutenant, Danner would be a commander. At least.

T'orre Na was watching her. "Will this lieutenant listen?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Danner will listen to anyone."

"You do not approve."

"No. She's too young, too unprofessional."

"Too willing to listen."

Day opened her mouth then shut it again. The journeywoman's tone had said: what is wrong with listening? Just as Jink had said earlier. Day felt her world tilting. These crazy natives were confusing her, never reacting the way they should. The sooner she got rid of them the better.

"I'll find the lieutenant."

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They were all crowded into Lieutenant Danner's living mod. Jink shifted uncomfortably. The space was too small for two, let alone five. T'orre Na and the lieutenant sat cross-legged on the bed, Oriyest sat on the floor, and Day stood at parade rest by the doorport. Jink herself perched on the sink in the bathroom niche, the only place left. She felt like a spare limb. Day had made the introductions but it was mainly the journeywoman and the lieutenant who spoke.

"What point, then, shall I put forward to the SEC rep, T'orre Na? The necessity for concrete reparation, or the implementation of an education programme regarding burnstone?"

Oriyest answered. "Both," she said.

Annoyingly, the lieutenant looked to T'orre Na for confirmation. T'orre Na did not oblige. The lieutenant was forced to respond to Oriyest.

"I'm not really sure that both matters should be raised at the same time."

“Why?”

“Because of the way bureaucracy works.”

“Is your bureaucracy so stupid it can only think upon one thing at a time?”

Jink watched Day carefully school her expression to hide her amusement. The lieutenant grimaced.

“Not precisely. If, only if, the SEC rep decides to pass on your complaint, things will be made difficult if the complaint encompasses more than one area. That will mean the involvement of more than one sub-committee, which will lead to delays.”

“The difficulty, then, is one of time?” Oriyest asked.

“Yes, exactly.”

Oriyest smiled. “Well then. There is no rush. Speak of both.”

“I don’t believe you understand the kind of timescales involved here.” She turned to face T’orre Na. “Even supposing I went out that door now, this minute, and that Courtivron decided without pause for thought to continue with this action, and even supposing his superiors on Earth agreed to back us, which is by no mean certain, that would just be the beginning. Evidence would have to be assembled, shipped out—it might even mean going off-planet for these two,” she nodded at Oriyest and Jink. “After that there’ll be delays for feasibility reports and if, at long last, it’s all agreed, then there are advisory bodies to be formed, supervisory employees to be selected... And during all this, Company will be blocking and fighting everything. They have planetsful of lawyers.”

Neither T’orre Na nor Oriyest seemed perturbed. Jink was barely listening; the small space felt as though it was crowding in on her. Day’s expression was politely attentive but Jink had a feeling that the Mirror’s thoughts were elsewhere.

“At the minimum,” the lieutenant was saying, “we are talking

of three or four years. At the maximum... who knows. Ten years? Twelve?"

When T'orre Na merely nodded, the lieutenant looked exasperated.

"Do you know how long a year is?"

"We are familiar with your reckoning. Are you familiar with ours? No," she waved a hand to dismiss the lieutenant's nod, "I don't speak of how many of our seasons there are in one of your years. I speak of deeper things. You think of us as passive creatures. We are not. We have been learning, watching. I know your customs, your attitudes, your food. Your beer." She grinned at Day, who seemed startled but grinned back. "How much do you know of us?"

"Much." The lieutenant's cheeks were flushed. "I know you all came originally from Earth, a long time ago. I've read articles on your culture, your art, the structure of your society—"

"And dismissed it. Look at me, Hannah. How do you see me? As a child? A primitive you wish to study for your amusement? Look at my hand." T'orre Na held out her hand and Hannah did as she was ordered. "This hand can birth children, this hand can weave, sow crops and harvest them. This hand can make music, build a dwelling. This hand could kill you." T'orre Na spoke quietly. "Look well at this hand, Outlandar. Do you truly believe that the owner of this hand would allow herself to be treated as nothing?"

The journeywoman's eyes were deep and black.

ζ

Day stared at T'orre Na, realizing she had never seen so much strength in a person before. Her breath whistled fast and rhythmic as in combat alert; the lieutenant might take exception to what could

be a threat. Once, on Earth, she had seen a spire of red rock towering up over a desert. From a distance, it had seemed fragile but up close its massiveness, the strength of its stone roots had been awe-inspiring.

Gradually, her breathing slowed and relaxed: there would be no violence. A child kicking a mountain was not violence, merely futility.

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The lieutenant was pale but kept her voice steady. “What are you going to do?”

T’orre Na smiled slightly. “What we are doing now. Seek ways to educate you. Will you help us?”

“Yes.”

Jink stood up. “I have to leave,” she said. “It’s too small in here. I can’t breathe.”

“We can speak somewhere bigger if you prefer.”

“No, Oriyest. You know what I know. Speak for us both.”

Danner cleared her throat. “Officer Day.”

Day straightened to attention. “Ma’am?”

“Escort Jink wherever she wishes to go. Be back here within two hours. You will be needed to escort the journeywoman and her companions to the perimeter of the camp.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

She palmed the door plate and they stepped over the raised sill.

“I need no escort,” Jink said as soon as the door hissed closed behind them.

“I know. Neither of us has any choice.” She hesitated. “If you want, I’ll leave you, meet you here again in a couple of hours.” She waited while Jink considered it. “But I’d rather show you something of Port. I...” She hesitated again. “I still haven’t thanked you

for...coming back. When the burnstone went.”

Jink waited.

“Thank you,” Day said. “You saved my life.”

Jink just smiled and touched her on the arm. They walked in silence past the canteens and kitchen.

“What would you like to see first?”

“The place where you heal the sick. If you have one.”

Day raised her eyebrows. “The hospital?” She had expected Jink to ask to see the space shuttles.

“Have I said something wrong?”

“No. You just surprised me. Again.” Jink nodded. “You’re so... different.”

“But of course. Come. Show me the hospital.”

ζ

Clan snorted and butted Jink as she pulled the flatbread from the cooking stone. She tossed him a piece. He huffed in disgust; it was too hot to eat. Oriyest and T’orre Na were already spooning beans into their bread.

“When will you move?” the journeywoman asked.

“When the younglings are sturdy enough to keep up with the rest of the flock,” Jink said over her shoulder. “Ten days, maybe less.”

“We’ll journey to Jink’s clan land,” Oriyest said, “they have spare grazing. After the hot season we’ll hear of other land we can use?”

“Yes.” T’orre Na nodded. “We will be swift.”

They were silent a while, eating.

“The burn could have been worse,” Oriyest said at last. “We went to see it, yesterday. Three seasons, no more, and we can return.”



“So. Good news.”

“Yes.” Jink stretched, watching her long evening shadow. “We took Day to see.” She looked sideways at T’orre Na. “She is learning to think of larger things, that Mirror.”

The journeywoman nodded approvingly. “Learn from each other. It will be needed.”

Oriyest put down her bread, plucked idly at the grass. “She would like to help us move the flock. When the time comes. We told her yes.”

T’orre Na looked thoughtfully at Jink, smiled as she saw the flush creeping up the herder’s cheeks.

“Ah, so that’s how it is.” She laughed, touched Jink’s hair. “Such friendships are good, but stay mindful of your differences. Both of you.”

They nodded. T’orre Na yawned. “Now, I must sleep.”

“A song before dreaming?” Jink held her pipe out to the journeywoman. T’orre Na gestured for her to keep it.

“Play something soft. I will sing.”

So Jink played, a low quiet melody, and T’orre Na sang of hills, of air, of patience. Oriyest, banking the fire before they slept, joined in to harmonize.

# Mirrors and Burnstone

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*This story, like “Down the Path of the Sun,” grew from a dream: fireball; slight, skinny person rescuing someone in armour; running across an overcast plain. When I woke up I wanted to know who the skinny person was, and what happened next. I started writing.*

*At this point (1986 or thereabouts) I was still writing on lined paper with a fountain pen, but once I had written “Mirrors and Burnstone” I thought, Oh, this is a real story, I want to send it out for publication, I’ll have to learn to type. So I begged for, and got, the money for a used typewriter for my birthday and bought an old IBM Selectric, and taught myself to type. Or tried to. I bought a book about it, and was annoyed when, two days later, I still couldn’t touchtype flawlessly. “M&B” is ten thousand words long; no matter how many hours I banged at that keyboard, I couldn’t produce a decent-looking typescript. Finally a friend couldn’t stand it anymore and offered to type it out for me. She did such a fine job (thanks, Maggie, wherever you are) that when I sold the story a few months later to **Interzone**, the typesetter sent me a letter telling me it was the cleanest piece of fiction he had ever seen. My first sale, my first fan letter. I grinned a lot.*

*In 1989, not long after the story was published, I was invited to my first convention and sat on my first panel, the portrayal of women in science fiction as Other, interchangeable with aliens (typecasting begins early). Everything was proceeding smoothly until the moderator, Sherry Coldsmith, turned to me and*

*(continued)*

## *Story notes, continued*

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*asked me about the aliens in "Mirrors and Burnstone." I opened my mouth to reply and was struck dumb by the realisation that the aliens--Jink and Oriyest and T'orre Na--were women. And the whole plot of a novel dropped into my head and started scrolling like a screen menu. I thought my eyes were going to burst and my teeth fly out. I sat mute. A year later, when I had moved to the US, I started writing the rest of the story, and it turned into **Ammonite**.*

*First published in **Interzone** #25, 1988*

*Reprinted in **Interzone: The Fourth Anthology**, ed. David Pringle (Simon and Shuster, 1989; NEL, 1990)*

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