

A Gorgeous Mistake

By Mhairi McIntyre

Even the air was golden. Slants of sunlight caught a shimmering golden dust that danced in the atmosphere. Like fine curtains that shifted on the breeze it was barely visible, hanging at the edge of sight. The veins on a leaf, particles of soil on the ground, all were illuminated by the touch of light.

India stood in the glade, letting the light burn her skin. She inhaled deeply, but each breath was not enough to fill her lungs with air. She felt suffocated, a weight on her shoulders pushing her into the soft soil beneath her feet. She clasped a hand over the thick, black braid that fell across her shoulder. She tugged at it, as she always did when she was feeling afraid or angry.

On the ground lay a discarded bottle with tiny white pills strewn around it like a halo. India's blurred vision tried to survey the mess as she collapsed to her knees and lethargically gathered them up. She selected one and shoved it into her mouth. She crushed the powder with her teeth, waited a moment and felt the compression lift from her lungs, allowing her to take a deep, welcoming breath. India wiped her mouth with her sleeve and gagged at the horrible taste. She couldn't bear to take her Oxygen Pills. She couldn't live without them.

A single painted totem pole stood on the well-worn trail, a marker for the village close by. It seemed miniature beneath the towering Parasol trees. Ten metres wide, the thick trunks speared upward and opened in a shower of glossy leaves and sweet-scented blossom. India traced the surface of the trunk and felt cool moss against her fingertips. A rivulet of water meandered between the thick grooves of the bark. She craned her neck upwards and saw brown clouds scudding across the sky. The arms of the trees were so high in the atmosphere they caught water vapour that condensed on the leaves, which rained down in droplets of moisture.

As India approached the post, grotesque faces leered at her of bear, goat and fox. The base was a marmoset, whose wooden claws cupped into a bowl shape. India removed the pack bag from her shoulder, slipped off her velvet slippers and knelt at the statue's open palms. She dipped her hand into the left side of the bowl and let cool water slide over her skin. She then placed her hand into the right half and pinched grains of rice, which she pressed into her forehead. This was a sign of respect to the forest and a custom for visitors to the village.

She left her shoes off, instead letting the cool soil soothe her blistered heels. Since the last town she

had left behind her, at the last volcano range, she was feeling the distance. To remind her, each kilometre seemed to cause a new blister or callus. India never stopped long at each place, always on the move since the day she had left her home city.

India pulled a faded parchment from her tunic's inner pocket. She uncurled the delicate material and perused the hand painted drawings. Large cities, minor towns, volcanic mountain ranges, immeasurable valleys and ancient forests looked back at her. The metallic colours were bright against the skin of the parchment and swirls of grey moved slowly over some areas, marking passages of weather. Tiny black dots blinked, indicating where she had travelled. India pressed a finger against the closest red dot that was the upcoming village. Words flashed across the square in bold font – TOWN OF GARGAROTH: .25 LENGTHS, she read, and the letters faded. Not far.

She squinted closer at the map, to the ochre-tinged drawing of a tower. It was situated just beyond the village. She pressed her forefinger to this one. MONUMENT: 30 LENGTHS. Very far.

She hid the map out of sight and continued on her way. Bracing herself for more stares and whispers, India eventually padded into the sleepy village. The trees thinned out to vast meadows, with gentle rolling hills and a patchwork of farms. The main village was clustered near to the skirts of the forest. Some houses were half buried beneath grassy knolls, others were built against the massive trees and appeared to melt into their trunks.

India picked her way through clusters of chickens that scratched on the dusty road, clucking in harmony with the twinkle of wind chimes. She saw a man at the doorway of a mud brick cottage, his dark face wrinkled like bark as he squinted and his hair was weaved with bright ribbons and eagle feathers. She smiled to him but he did not change his stance or say a word.

A young man, not much older than India appeared at the doorway. His wide-eyed stare made India stop in her tracks. There was something about him that caught her attention. It was as if time had slowed and India, standing in the middle, felt the ebb of hours slide around her motionless body. His stare was so intense that it seemed to burn in India's vision. He looked calm on the outside but she could tell by his trembling lip that he was nervous as he looked upon her. She knew it was impossible, but somehow, she knew what he was feeling. Or maybe it was what she was feeling. Her heart skipped a beat and she felt her cheeks flush with red. The young man's face broke into a smile and he went to raise his arm in a wave, but the old man muttered something inaudible and the boy scampered back inside the house. India shook her head and clicked her tongue in dismay.

As India made her way further into the heart of the village, a group of children scurried in front of

her, laughing and kicking a ball between one another. One small girl stopped to stare. Her inquisitive nose twitched. A mother's worried voice called from afar and the child scampered off.

"Words travel far by the wind." A voice broke India's wandering thoughts. A plump, olive-skinned woman leaned against the doorway of a building. The sign above her head creaked gently in the wind. Cub and Lantern. The Meeting Hall. India bowed her head to the woman in the caftan, assuming her to be one of the town's Priestess'.

"You knew I was coming?" India asked.

"The leaves of the forest told us," the woman replied, beckoning India closer. "My name is Peach." The woman smelled faintly of cinnamon.

"Come, come. You must have been walking very fast. The Priestess in Sunset City told us you left two weeks ago, we didn't expect you to be here so soon."

The circular entrance room was thick with incense haze and light from a hanging crystal flashed in India's eye.

"So my wanderings have become gossip, then?" India mused, as she settled onto a cushioned bench.

"Far from it. We Elders feel a protective spirit for the Last Earth Treader."

India cringed. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped a handful of her silk pants. Peach noticed and swiftly changed the subject.

"I will get you some Jasmine tea." The woman sashayed into a remote room. The hallway ran warren-like deeper into the earth and India felt a cool breeze kiss her cheek.

A moment later, in a clatter of bangles and beads, Peach returned. She set the drinks on the low table in front of them.

India tentatively curled her fingers around the handle of a cup and lifted the sweet-scented tea to her lips.

"It's a little cold," India noted. Peach touched her forefinger to the cup. A fresh coil of steam floated into the air. India's cup began to tremble in her grip.

"Thank you." India murmured, slightly embarrassed.

"I don't mean to make you uncomfortable," Peach said as she settled into the opposite chair.

"It comes with the nature of being ... me."

"Being the Last Earth Treader is nothing to be ashamed of."

India slammed her tea onto the tabletop and liquid splashed over the rim, forming a moat around the cup.

“Is that all I am? Labeled. I don’t believe I can be the last of my kind,” India said through clenched teeth. Peach was taken aback and she paused as she found the words to reply.

“Legends tell of Earth and word spread quickly of your arrival to Venus. Being descendants of your people, we naturally feel a connection to you. I just meant—“

“When I came here I was alone and I will be forever. I know. I’ve been told time and time again! I have to accept it!” India leapt to her feet, her voice shaking with rage.

“But you don’t.” Peach remained calm in front of India’s wild outburst and she smoothed her features.

“Stop reading my mind,” India muttered and folded her arms over her chest.

“Don’t use your ability against me.”

“I wouldn’t do anything against you, dear. You know our ancestors were once human, but this planet changed them over the centuries. All human thought is open to a deeper power. We have found ours. You must find yours.”

“If we’re so similar, why do I feel so different?” India rubbed a hand over her face. The crow of a rooster sounded in the distance, marking the sun’s setting.

“There is no good dwelling on what you don’t have. Use your energy to make use of what you do.”

“The only hope I hold to is that I might find other survivors.”

Peach sighed deeply and closed her eyes. A slant of light shone through the windowpane and she let dark and light flecks dance on the back of her eyelids. When Peach spoke, India fancied that her voice became softer and more melodic. It was like a presence entered the recess of India’s mind, nestling into her thoughts and steering them in a different direction. India let her arms fall by her sides to hang loosely.

Peach spoke in lyrical tones. “Who have you left behind to do this?”

“The only family I’ve ever known.”

“Are they not enough to satiate your desire for understanding?”

“But they’re not mine,” India said, resuming her seat. Her heart ached when she thought of the family she had left behind – the brothers and sisters she would never have known on her home planet. A one-child policy on Earth had brought her lonesome, quiet days and here she was happier. But something was missing, a piece of her heart that would never fill. And she thought she knew how to mend it.

“How do you intend to find them, these ... others?”

Unconsciously, India’s hand rose to the breast of her tunic where the map was hidden.

“I was blessed to be taken into the home of a prosperous family. I had access to ancient libraries, full

of history and knowledge. I sought to find relics of old and it has led me to take this journey. I'm looking for a certain site."

"You seek other humans because you need to understand who you are, as human."

"No, I want to find other survivors because I want to talk to them, connect with them about things you can't understand. I need to visit this place. To find them!" India felt Peach's mind lose its spell and she grabbed her long braid, giving it a severe tug. It made her wince.

"You don't need to find anything. You need to find yourself."

"I'm just waiting for my life to start! You don't get it at all." India grunted, giving up on the argument, "It's getting late. Do you know where I can lodge tonight?"

"You may stay in one of the guest rooms here. Come with me." Peach rose from her seat and made her way down the hallway. India followed reluctantly. After passing many doorways, Peach stopped outside an ornately carved teak door. India bowed her head in thanks and pushed it open. As she turned to close the door behind her, Peach had already disappeared.

The room was circular, like the rest of the building and was adorned with tapestries and the intoxicating smell of herbs. India sunk slowly into the feather-down bed and smoothed her fingers over the sheets, feeling each thread in the hand-woven material. Cool air hugged India's aching body and she drifted into sleep.

WHOOH WHOOP WHOOP. The warning siren echoes over a sea of concrete rooves. In each building below, family members stir out of restless, sultry sleep. The city is deathly quiet and not even an engine noise can be heard. The grey haze of atmosphere is thick and seems to hang heavy in the sky.

A three-year old girl is pulled out of her bed by her father's rough hand as he says, "Come, Mira."

Mira's feet step onto the cool floorboards and she follows her father into the lounge room. She wipes her eyes and the gold bangles around her thin wrists jingle. The TV is on and her mother stares at it intensely, on the edge of the couch. Mira doesn't understand what is happening. Her mother holds out her arms and Mira hides in the folds of the silk sari. Her mother strokes Mira's hair in comfort.

The TV shows images of Parliament officials piling into hovercrafts. The news broadcaster's voice blasts:

"Stage Three has been called. I repeat: Stage Three has been initiated. We have reached global critical mass and by the actions of our Government, we can see there is no hope. For those issued with Yellow Cards they must immediately make their way to the Escape Pods. For those who will be left behind,

may Brahma have mercy on our souls.”

Mira looks up to see tears streaming down her mother’s face. The words have no affect on her young ears.

“Quickly, now. We must go.” Her father insists.

“Where? We have no Yellow Card. We are not important.” Her mother replies hopelessly.

“We must try.”

“Trying will not get us anywhere! There are billions upon billions of people who will be doing just that! The world does not want to save us!”

“But I must try to save you.” Her father takes her mother’s hand.

**

Mira’s feet pad silently along the alleyway, each tiny step causing a swirl of dust to rise about her ankles. Mira can see the end of the alley, to the main road where strings of people hurry past, children and possessions bundled under their arms.

“Where are you going, Bankim?” A voice calls from an apartment upstairs. Mira’s father looks up.

“We are going to the Escape Pod at the edge of the city.”

“No use, Bankim. Everybody will go there. You will not get through the crush of people. Your little girl ...” He leaves the thought unfinished.

“We will be crushed by the Wall!” Mira’s mother screams and points her slender finger to the sky. Mira notices the red lacquer that covers her mother’s nails.

“Good luck to you, but me and my wife, we are staying here.” The man’s head disappears from the window.

**

Mira’s feet race along the road. Hordes of desperate people run in one direction, a unified throng scrambling to be the first to the Escape Pod. The noise is deafening and the press is suffocating. Mira clings to her mother’s skirt as she runs, her lips firmly shut and her wide eyes open. They come to a drop and Mira clammers over the edge, slipping and sliding down the dusty sides of the Ganges River Bed. She sees her mother stumble and fly head first into the crowd below. She gives a cry and tumbles head over heels. Her father shouts to the man who steps on her mother’s hand. The man keeps running. Mira’s father pulls her mother to her feet. Mira grips her mother’s hand firmly.

“Don’t go away.” Her tiny voice is carried away on the wind.

The Launch Pad is on the outskirts of the city. Originally built for space exploration, it now houses the three escape pods that will carry the selected people to safety. The first Pod has already been launched with the King and his family. Massive laser fences bar entry to the public, but crowds of people already bang at the iron gates. The guards at the post look terrified and point tasers at the reaching hands.

Mira doesn’t want to enter the crazed mob, but her father picks her up and holds her tightly.

“I will get her to the front.” He tells her worried mother.

“But the people...”

Mira’s father pushes and kicks people out of the way. Mira buries her face into her father’s wide chest and tries to ignore the horrible scenes of desperation. It seems to her to take hours, but her father finally manages to surge to the head of the crowd and he pushes against the gates. He holds Mira up to the guards.

“Take her, please! Take her!” He yells over and over. Other parents hold their children up, pleading fruitlessly.

Mira bursts into tears and kicks her legs.

“No, daddy I don’t want to go! Don’t make me leave you!” She tries to claw at her father. She wants to be let down. She wants to go back to the safety and warmth of her mother’s arms. She tries to scan the crowd of people for her mother’s face but the sea of heads is endless. Unfamiliar faces stare at her, screaming and crying. What was her mother wearing? How did she have her hair? Mira can’t remember. She shakes with fear.

The force of the waves of people that push and beat at the gate begins to weaken the iron bolts. The gate begins to creak ominously. A guard takes a step back.

“The Wall!” A high-pitched voice wails and everybody looks up. Mira raises her eyes to the sky and her heart leaps into her throat.

The clear dome that covers the sky and holds back tons of pollution is cracking. The screams of the people below is not enough to cover the moan of the Wall as it yields to the pressure of atmospheric pollution. Grey and brown clouds swirl like angry pools and weigh down the roof in the sky. A giant crack directly above begins to get wider and a second later the people can hear the noise. It is a deafening roar that fills their ears until they can hear nothing else. A brown mist begins to seep through the newly formed fracture. It sends the crowd into a renewed frenzy.

A surge in people pushes Mira’s father to the ground and in one fluid motion he throws Mira up. She

is hurled into the gate, which at that precise moment is rammed over. The bolts rip from their hinges and the iron posts fall with a crash.

Mira's feet carry her toward the Escape Pod. She doesn't look back but she can hear the crowd behind her like a collective giant dog nipping at her heels. The guards are crushed and the people pour in.

The escapees are taken by surprise when they are about to board the Pod, as the mass of people come down upon them. Mira weaves her way through knees and bags, all the while looking for an escape, back to her parents. She finds a door. It is heavy and almost impossible to open, but maybe her mother is behind it. If only she could open it. She heaves with all her tiny might. It suddenly swings open. She looks to see a young man as he pushes his way into the Pod. There is a loud bang and blood dots Mira's dress. The man falls to the ground. An engine noise rumbles to life and the handle that Mira holds begins to shudder.

Mira's head is knocked with the butt of a rifle and stars appear in front of her eyes. She feels sick and about to vomit, when she stumbles forward. She reaches out her arms to catch herself, but her hands clutch only at air. Her head makes contact with carpeted floor.

India woke with a start as she heard a loud bang. Her hands flew to her head, clutching at the throbbing sensation at the back of her eyes. Names floated just out of reach. Names she knew were important, but the more she grabbed at them, the more they faded. She growled in frustration. Her lungs contracted and her breath came in short rasps. A noise brought her attention to the door. It was open. There, silhouetted against the light loomed a dark figure. She jumped to her feet, her heart pounding like hoof beats.

A deep, throaty voice broke the silence.

"You must leave. We don't want you here."

"Who are you?" India asked the figure.

"I am trying to protect my people. You must leave." The voice was insistent.

"Protect them from what?"

"Your presence taints the purity of the town. You are not whole."

"You mean because I'm human."

There was an uneasy silence. Sweat formed on India's top lip, but she was too frightened to move. She stood, rooted to the floor, tensed and ready to defend herself if the figure came any closer. She tried to control her laboured breathing. The figure sighed.

“You are not whole in yourself.”

India frowned in confusion.

“Look, sir? I think –“ She stopped when the figure backed a step away. She wasn’t scared any longer, more interested to know what the man wanted and what he meant by his words. She took a step towards him. “Wait, show yourself!”

The figure turned and as he left, light from the hallway flashed on a glossy rainbow feather sticking from his hair.

India paused as she let what had happened sink in. Then she felt her throat closing tighter and she hastened to where her pack bag was dumped on the floor. She rummaged around inside and felt for her Oxygen Pills. She needed them more frequently. Her fingers closed around the bottle, lifting it out. The lid popped open easily. She wrapped her tongue around the smooth white pill and dry swallowed. It took less than a minute and her lungs began to relax. She once again felt the sweet rush of cold air. She threw the bottle at the bag.

At dawn, India made ready to leave. Slinging her pack bag over her shoulder, she felt the bulging weight had grown with clothes, food and utensils that Peach had offered. India had not told the Priestess of her midnight intruder, but she assumed Peach would know in some measure. They parted with little words.

The sun was bright that morning and India could feel the heat already radiating. She tugged at the silk scarf around her shoulders, trying to cover her bronzed skin. She walked with her head down, watching each step swallow more of the grassy path that carried her closer to the monument. Thoughts swirled like dark clouds in her mind. She tried not to imagine what she would find there. It might be nothing at all. Like all the other monuments she had found on her searches.

Not halfway through the afternoon, she heard pounding footsteps.

“Wait! Wait! I’m coming with you!”

India twisted her neck to look behind her. It was the young man with the burning stare. Her heart leaped. She didn’t know whether to stop. Her feet made the decision for her.

The young man came to halt in front of her, resting his palms on his knees and gasping for breath. India’s eyes were wide and her jaw worked soundlessly. She couldn’t find words to respond. He laughed when he saw her contorted expression.

“Ki-an. Ki.” He held out a hand. India hesitantly placed her hand over the back of his. She pulled it

away.

“India.”

“That’s interesting.”

“It’s the name of my birth country. On Earth. I can’t remember my real name.”

“You’re looking for it, aren’t you?”

“My name?”

“The part of yourself that’s missing. You’re going to the monument?”

India was silent. Ki averted his eyes, saying:

“The visitor you had last night. My grandfather—”

“Your grandfather!” India was indignant, but Ki raised his hands in placation.

“He believes bad spirits bring bad luck to the village. See, he’s the local Healer. He thinks you have a restless spirit.”

“That’s bad?” India asked.

“I don’t share his view. That’s why I’m coming with you.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

“I feel ... a connection ... That moment – yesterday – I ...” Ki stumbled with his thoughts and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, “I want to help you.”

India bowed her head so Ki didn’t see the red in her cheeks. He laughed. The sound was like the soft ring of bells. It made India’s heart lift and she smiled in response. The two continued walking, side by side.

Farms turned to pastures, which gave way to open wilderness. Isolated rocks jutted from the earth, dotting the hills like bare headstones. Amongst the soft rustle of grass and distant birdsong, the two figures travelled mutely. An hour, two – India couldn’t tell – passed by in slow, deliberate paces. They mounted a rise and there, sitting next to a copse of trees, was the monument. A rough-hewn stone structure, it pointed like a giant finger to the sky. There were no surviving pod remains. All that was left was locked inside a clear cabinet that stood in front of the stone pillar. India approached the case and stared in shock. A few words were chiseled into a brass plaque. India read slowly. This was the one. This was where she landed.

“India?” Ki went to touch India’s shoulder, but she shrugged him away, entranced with what she saw. Ki backed off.

Inside the case sat three items, labeled and dated. The melted remains of a wire. A tin with its label worn away. The pod’s security footage device. Without thinking, India picked up the closest thing to her on

the ground. She swung the rock above her head and before Ki could shout in caution, she smashed the weight down with all her might. The casing shattered.

She picked out the security device and cradled it in her palms, as if it were a precious jewel.

“How do you activate it? It won’t work with thought control.” Ki appeared by India’s side. She felt the warmth of his body and heard his steady breathing. She felt relaxed by his presence.

“It uses buttons.”

India pressed a large round key on the front of the device. She heard a click and a whirr. Then it died.

“Try again,” Ki insisted.

“The battery must be flat.”

Ki furrowed his brows, staring at the device. India pushed the key again, harder. Nothing happened. She concentrated her gaze at the machine, pushing again and again, trying other buttons, turning it over in her hands. It hiccupped into life and a flickering image was projected above the centre of the device. India dropped it in surprise.

“What is it?” Ki asked in awe.

The holographic image danced like a blue flame. India knelt on the ground to take a closer look. She watched the silent footage of an empty compartment. Suddenly, the door swung open and a little girl peeked inside. A man’s head appeared, before he fell to the ground. The little girl was pushed inside the compartment and the door shut. The pod began to shake and the holographic image flickered with it. In an instant, the device swallowed the image and sat in contented silence.

“That was me.” Her voice was hoarse and she swallowed back tears.

“On the spaceship?” Ki said, “You were the only one in there.”

India rose to her feet in a trance.

“All my life I wondered why me? Who was I that I got saved? Out of everyone on Earth. But I wasn’t special. I should never have been on that Escape Pod. I should’ve died on Earth. With my parents!” India’s wail rose high in the still air. Ki reached out his arms to take India close into him. Her muscles relaxed and she slumped into his embrace.

“It was good, though. Because it brought you to me.”

“It was a mistake. I shouldn’t have been saved. I was a mistake.” India sobbed through falling tears. Ki smiled sympathetically and squeezed her shoulders.

“If that is true, then you are a gorgeous mistake.”

India pushed away from him and rubbed her nose. “What do I do now?”

“You will go on with your life.”

“But who am I?”

There was a pause, then Ki said, “Come back with me.”

“I have to go. Keep walking. I can’t go back,” India murmured.

They stared at each other as silent moments slipped by. India’s heart ached to return with him to the village. She desperately wanted things to be normal, to have her existence uncomplicated and without questions. But she knew it would always be different. She would always be different. And alone. But free. India took a step back. Ki dipped his head. He knew. India drew a deep, unconstrained breath and felt an invisible weight lift from her chest. She turned her back and walked away.

It was the moment her life started.

© 2011 Mhairi McIntyre