

A Mirror to Life

Jaine Fenn

Syl wiped the vomit from her chin. The face in the mirror had her own grey-green eyes, sharp chin and broad forehead, but the hair was wispy grey, the skin wrinkled and loose. Though she had been prepared for the difference in years, for a moment she felt cheated. Her youth had been taken from her.

She reached for the water in the jug. It trickled through her fingers. She tried again, more slowly, cupping her palm. The water stayed there at first, but when she lifted her hand to her face it slid away and dribbled down the front of the homespun robe.

So this was gravity. It was worse than she had imagined.

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The girl floats near the centre of the spherical room, curled into a fetal ball. She is naked and her eyes are closed. A heavy wire trails from the thin metal band clamped round her temples and disappears into the padded wall.

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Syl had trained in a room with a sticky floor to get used to the concepts of 'up' and 'down', but real gravity was very different. Her flesh pulled on her bones, and every movement was resisted by the all-pervasive, invisible force.

She forced herself to let go of the wash-stand, turned carefully, and walked into the living room; it was a sparse cube, with white walls, a low wooden ceiling and minimal furniture. On a table next to a pile of cushions were red and yellow flowers in a vase. (Vase: container for displaying flowers. So many names to remember!) Syl crouched down, her knee joints popping, and touched the flowers. The petals were soft as skin.

She jumped as a sharp rap resounded through the room. The vase tipped, spilling water and flowers across the table.

The noise came again. It was someone knocking on the door.

A woman's voice called out. "Petra? Are you all right?"

She tried to speak, but only managed a harsh croak.

"I'm coming in." The room was flooded with golden light. Sunlight. Light from Earth's sun.

The figure in the doorway was almost drowned by the glare until she stepped into the room and resolved into a mature woman with shoulder length black hair and skin peppered with brown marks. (Freckles: a reaction of pale skinned people to sunlight.) Her face was thin, with heavy brows and a large mouth. She wore a brown smock dress and sandals. "We were worried." The woman's gaze fell on the flowers and water covering the table. Syl recognized her as Marie Vittoria-Jonson, Petra's lover, and (Tutor had said) probably Syl's biggest challenge. "Why didn't you answer the door? Is everything all right?"

Syl had practiced this encounter many times in sim, but she had hoped for more time to orientate herself before playing it out for real. "Marie. I don't feel well." She stuttered. The half-familiar sound of Petra's voice confused her.

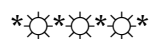
"Shit, Petra. I left you to sleep as long as I could, but I'm really worried. You look awful." She turned.

"The virus. I . . ." She let herself fall back onto the cushions. Behind Marie, though the open door, she glimpsed brown earth, green hills, blue sky.

Marie bent down and put her arms around her. "Please, what is it?" Syl flinched at the contact, felt Marie stiffen, and forced herself to relax. After the initial shock, being touched felt good. Without looking up she said, "I've forgotten . . ."

"Forgotten what, love?"

"Everything."



The young woman stirs. Eyes dart behind closed lids, fingers twitch. Hidden microphones pick up a low animal moan. Her eyes flick open, her head snaps back, and she screams. She lets go of her legs and scrabbles in the empty air. The screaming turns to retching, and she vomits explosively. She flails and pukes for ten minutes, then hangs still. She appears unconscious, except for her green-green eyes, which are open and staring.



Marie listened in silence while Syl explained how she had woken up this morning in a state of confusion. How she remembered some things, but others had just gone. How she was scared, so scared, of losing everything. As Syl

spoke the well-rehearsed lines she felt her voice getting stronger, but she fought to keep the quaver, for effect.

When she finished, Marie said, "I had no idea the virus was so advanced. I'm sorry. What can I do for you?"

"Will you help me remember, Marie?"

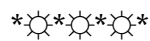
"Of course."

Objective One – win Marie's trust. Achieved, remarkably easily. These dirtsiders were not so paranoid after all.

"Tell you what, Petra love. You sit tight and rest here while I clear up, then we can go to the cantina. OK?"

"Yes, I'd like that." She needed a chance to get orientated in the environment. Besides, she wanted to experience the sunlight.

Marie stood, gave her lover's hair a quick stoke, then started fussing round the house, opening the blinds, picking up the vase, 'tsk'ing at the mess in the bathroom, bringing water. Syl practiced drinking from a glass while Marie's back was turned. After several attempts she managed to get the liquid into her mouth without spilling any.



"We know you can hear us." The voice is soft and neutral, not unkind.

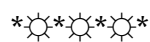
Hidden fans have begun to draw the vomit away into grilles in the walls, though some still sticks to the girl's stomach and legs.

"We must apologise for the disorientation. It is an inevitable side-effect of the transfer process."

The figure hangs in space, apparently oblivious.

"We do not wish you any harm. We only want one thing from you, and after we have it we will let you go. The process is entirely reversible."

"Fuck you, machines," says Petra Gregory.



Heat and light poured out of the limitless sky. Syl had spent hours in sim preparing to deal with a horizon she could not touch, but when Marie lead her

outside it looked like sim. It was too bright, too gaudy. She lowered her head to shelter from the onslaught of reality; the surface below her feet was rough and uneven, broken up by stones and twigs and tiny fissures. It only looked like sim at first glance. Close up the imperfections were incredible. She bent down, holding onto Marie for support, and ran one hand across the rough dirt.

“Petra? Are you OK?”

She was straying from the mission. “Uh, yes. I think so.” She stood up. The texture of the ground still echoed across her palm.

Marie led her across a square bordered by buildings with walls of white stucco and roofs of thatched palm leaves. They headed for the only two story building. In front of it an open platform — a verandah — was scattered with mismatched furniture. Marie sat her down on a sprawling sofa covered in faded blue fabric and went inside. Most of the verandah was in shade, but by stretching her legs out, Syl could catch the sun across Petra’s bony ankles. Now she was over the initial surprise, she found the warmth pleasant.

Marie returned with an earthenware jug frosted with tiny beads of water. A young man followed her out, carrying a handful of glasses. His complexion was darker than the earth in the square, and he walked awkwardly. Back on Home, Syl had viewed satellite footage of this person hobbling around the village, but as Petra never wrote about him, she did not know his name. He smiled as he put the glasses down. Syl smiled back. Petra’s face smiled easily.

The boy sat on a wooden chair and poured drinks for the women, then for himself. The liquid was clear and yellow with a head of white froth. Beer, presumably.

“D’you remember me, Petra?”

Marie said softly, “I told Paolo you were having problems with your memory. We’ll be your memory now, if you need us to.”

Syl smiled. That was precisely what she was hoping for.



The voices are silent for a while. Then they repeat their reassurances. This time Petra laughs at them.

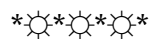
They stop talking and turn out the lights.

After one hour, forty seven minutes and eight seconds, heat-sensitive cameras pick up a shiver of muscles in Petra’s left calf. The twitch sets off other

motions. Her hands reach out, her head swivels from side to side. This continues for just over three minutes, until she accidentally touches the band around her temples. She howls and pulls at the circlet. It doesn't move. She finds the wire and hauls herself hand over hand through the darkness to the wire's source. When she reaches the wall she braces her legs and tries to pull the wire out of the wall. When it won't come loose, she wraps the wire round one hand and starts to claw at the wall with her other hand.

The watchers consider sedating her, but decide against it, as drugs might interfere with the transfer process. After all she cannot do herself serious damage, and any action which weakens her physically can only make her more compliant.

She beats the wall till her hand is bruised and her nails are torn, then pushes herself backwards hard enough to hit the far wall. She rebounds gently into the centre of the chamber. By the time she has come to rest she is curled into a defiant little ball.



The beer fizzed and slithered on her tongue, but once Syl forced herself to swallow, it spread a cooling lethargy through her.

Paolo laughed. "You might not remember the problem we had with the fridge, Petra. No problem now. I said to Philippe it's all those spices he's started putting in his stews. Hot spices means plenty of methane for the generators, and that means lots of electricity, and that means good cold beer!"

Marie took a drink and shook her head. "I still think we were done over the spices, you know. We could grow our own chilies here if we wanted – where better? – but instead we trade for them from halfway across the world. Not eco-sense, not econo-sense."

Time to get to get to work. "Where did the spices come from, Marie? Should I know?" Syl cultivated a tone of concerned interest. It was quite easy, as age made Petra Gregory's voice querulous.

"India originally. We got them from one of the coastal traders up out of Panama, in return for hemp clothing. Don't tell me you've forgotten hemp. We'll have to re-introduce you."

Syl had been warned about the drug they made from the female hemp plants. Tutor had said she could risk drinking alcohol in small quantities, as it was a depressant, but stimulants like cannabis must be avoided. "Uh, maybe. I don't know if I want to smoke, er, hash."

“What?” Marie gave her a sidelong look. “You remember it, but don’t want any. This is not like you, Petra.” Marie pulled away.

Syl realised she had said the wrong thing. Tutor had advised using tears to cover any lapses or moments of uncertainty so she put her head in her hands and sobbed. Marie fell for it at once and put her arms around her. “Best leave us for a while Paolo.” Syl heard him move off. She leaned into Marie. It felt good to be held. She must not lose sight of the mission, but she had a couple of days to obtain the primary data, and if she took things too fast, then she’d only make more mistakes.

After a while Marie made a shushing sound, her breath disturbing Syl’s hair. “Not now Tomas.” She whispered. “Your grandmother isn’t feeling very well.”

Syl raised her head to see a small boy dressed in short trousers and a grubby vest. He had dark skin and green eyes. “Gramma,” he said, smiling uncertainly and holding out a bunch of red flowers. Syl stared at the boy. She knew Petra had given birth to two children, so grandchildren were likely, but she had not expected to actually meet one.

He seemed oblivious to her confusion. “I went to your house and your flowers were gone, so I picked some more for you.” When his grandmother said nothing the boy put the flowers on the table, leaned forward to kiss her cheek, and ran off.

“You don’t remember him, do you?” Marie’s voice was full of concern.

“No. I don’t know him.” Her face was wet with an innocent kiss from a boy who had been alive longer than she had – a boy who was her grandchild.

“He’s been here three weeks now. His father’s doing a stint on one of the Caribbean wind farms.”

“His father is my son?”

“No. He’s Chula’s boy. Chula was your daughter.”

“Was?”

“Oh Petra. It must be awful to forget and have to feel the pain again. Chula’s dead. She was in Rio three years ago when they dropped that damn rock on it from orbit.”

“I know about the rocks.” One of five, deployed in the ongoing conflict between Home and Earth. A mistake, the Intelligences now admitted. There were subtler ways.



“The lights. Turn on the lights, you bastards.” Petra whispers the words like a mantra.

They let her mutter her litany until the voice stress indicators show that she might break, then they bring the lights up enough to give the room definition. “We would like to be mature and reasonable about this.” She snorts, but they continue. “It is a matter of negotiation. Let us take this one step at a time. We will give you light. You will do us the courtesy of speaking to us. Is that acceptable?”

For a while she doesn’t answer. Then she raises her head and croaks, “Where the hell did you get this body?”



Syl expected the dirtsideers to rant on about the war, but Marie didn’t mention it again. Instead she talked about their community: how they lived, what they grew, what they thought, who was talking to who, who was sleeping with who. Marie was just relating the last visit from Marc, Petra’s surviving child, when they were interrupted by the other villagers coming in from the fields for lunch. Marie went to speak with the sunburned men and women, no doubt explaining her lover’s infirmity. People smiled across at her while Marie spoke to them, a couple wishing her “Good Afternoon”. Syl found their casual openness disconcerting.

Paolo, and a man she now knew as his father Phillipe, brought more beer along with bread and cheese and plates of boiled corn. The others crowded round the table and started grabbing handfuls of food. Syl realised she — or rather Petra’s body — was very hungry. But she was also uncomfortable being close to so many people. The sound of their laughter and chatter was too loud, their earthy, sweaty smells too overpowering.

Marie put her hand on her knee. “You should eat.”

“Yes, but . . . I need to go somewhere quiet.”

“Do you have food at home?”

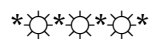
Syl grimaced.

“Sorry. You don’t know. Paolo! How about some stuff to go?”

Paolo loaded a basket with a selection from the table amidst jokes about taking all the best bits. Marie put the flowers on top of the food, then led Syl back across the square. The boy, Tomas, was there, playing a skipping game with a younger girl. “That’s Katrine. Shawna’s girl. She’s the last.”

“The last what?” Syl, still confused by all the people, realised as she spoke that she already knew the answer to this question.

Marie looked down and said, “The last child, love. The last one born in our community before those bastards in orbit made us all sterile.”



“A reasonable question. It is a force-grown clone.”

“You cloned me?” She sounds more tired than angry. “You stole my DNA, and created a human being to *use*, like a tool. I have nothing to say to you. Nothing at all.” She tucks her head back into the circle of her arms.

“There is no point in retreating into moral indignation.”

She does not reply.

“The clone was not grown from your DNA. Your insular lifestyle made obtaining a sample from you impractical. However, we did manage to get a sample from your twin sister.”

Petra twitches as though from an invisible blow. When she raises her head the hidden cameras show tears leaking from her eyes. “Sylvia. Well, I suppose that makes sense, doesn’t it? I mean you had access to her, briefly. Before you killed her.”

“She killed herself, technically.”

“She killed herself rather than betray humanity. She died for a cause, fighting you.” Petra stares defiantly at a point on the wall in front of her, as though deciding that this is the place where the watchers hide.

“We are not your oppressors, we are your saviours, the key to humanity’s survival.”

“Racial survival. Humanity’s guardians. Bullshit! You’re not getting anything from me. Nothing. Nada.”

“We can wait. This body has no suicide implant, and we are very patient. We have time.”

Petra rests her cheek on her knees. She is crying freely, but she smiles and whispers, “That’s what you think.”



The inside of Petra’s house was dim and cool. Marie retrieved the vase from the sink and arranged the flowers, then laid out the food on the table. She worked silently, her face twisted as though trying to lock something in. Syl did not know how to deal with this behaviour, and she let herself get distracted by the sensations of the strange food.

As she finished her second plateful Marie covered her hand and said, “I’m sorry.”

“What for?” Syl forced herself to focus; she must not alienate Marie.

“Shutting up like that. It’s just, being reminded of what happened still hurts. And you have always been so good at dealing with it. Can you remember how we first met?”

Syl shook her head. The files were vague on this point.

“It was a few weeks after they released the meio-virus, and I’d just lost my unborn son. I was a mess. You saved me. We were on the Voice of God, that commune ship run by the FaithWheel. You were working for them as a shrink, before they stopped doing charity medical work and went weird. Only you don’t remember any of that now.”

Marie wanted comfort from her. This was not a scenario she had rehearsed. She put the plate down and linked her arms awkwardly around the other woman. Marie leaned into her, nuzzling under her chin. There was no sound except their breathing, Marie exhaling a little roughly, her breath catching. Finally she said, “I want to go to bed.”

Syl tried not to react to Marie’s request. She had been briefed for this. Tutor had encouraged her to explore the sexual side of her nature, as it was thought that Petra Gregory remained sexually active despite her advanced age. Syl had enjoyed sex, such as she could experience it, alone or in sim. She was just not sure whether she’d get it right with a real person.

Marie, perhaps feeling her tension, said, “No love. I’m not going to ask you to make love now. Not unless you want to. I just want to lie in your arms.”

They went into the bedroom together, and lay on the hand-woven covers. Syl wondered if she should use this opportunity to get more information from Marie, as she seemed quite vulnerable. But there would be time for that later. For now she was content to wrap her arms around the other woman and lie still.



“We heard that, Ms Gregory. Did you mean us to?”

Petra lifts her head. She looks dazed. The watchers deduce that she is under sufficient strain to let useful information slip without realizing.

“Are there factors we are unaware of? Perhaps, if it would frustrate and annoy us, it is something you wish to share. That does seem to be the way this interview is going, unfortunately.”

She says nothing, just stares at the wall, lips compressed into a thin line.

They continue, “We know that the retrovirus to ‘cure’ our meio-virus is being developed on board a ship somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, presumably to avoid detection. Your late sister and your son were both involved in the research, so it is logical that you would know the name of the lab ship. Give us that information and we will return you to your body. The name of the ship, that is all we want.”

Petra mutters, “You don’t give up, do you?”

They decide to make the full implications of her situation clear to her. “Ms Gregory, you must realise that just as we have pulled your consciousness into the body of our clone, her mind has been transferred to your body. She is living your life right now. Our spy, amongst your friends.”

Petra stares at the wall. “You bastards.”

“We are merely being thorough. We foresaw that you might not co-operate with us, so she is our back-up plan. Her mission is to find out the name of the ship and transmit that information to us. So, in the end, your defiance may achieve nothing.”

“Yes it will. It’ll buy us time. You’ve underestimated us again, machines. You have no idea how close we are to undoing your handiwork.”

“Apparently not. Thank-you for appraising us of the situation. It appears that we may have to increase our efforts.”

Along the wire, to the headset, a charge is delivered, lasting somewhat less than two seconds.

Petra arches her back, springs open like a seed pod, and screams.

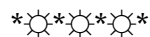


Syl was afraid to dream. On Home, she had undergone instruction as she slept, to equip her for the mission in the eighteen months between her inception and deployment. She remembered nothing, whilst assimilating everything. But ungoverned dreaming disconcerted her; she had hoped to put off sleep for as long as possible, but fell into it without realising it, betrayed by Petra's ailing body.

She dreamt that she was back on Home, cocooned in the soft netting of her bed. The cocoon, normally so comforting, felt constricting. She tried to free herself, but something was stopping her. Gravity, pulling her down. She couldn't live in gravity, her bones would bend and shatter and she would die. She struggled against the cocoon, whimpering.

Then she glanced up and noticed that she was not alone. Someone was here, in her room, where the only intrusion was Tutor's voice. Suddenly the painful pull of gravity lessened. Syl relaxed, and found the bonds of the cocoon falling away from her until she stood face to face with the shadowy intruder. She could see the other more clearly now. A woman, with her own face, but aged and worn. Syl smiled at her, reaching out, as the other, her mirror image, reached out towards her —

A spike of agony shot through her head, and the dream flew away into a bright vortex of pain.



Petra turns the limply in the air. A line of spittle dangles from her mouth, is sucked towards the hidden vents, and finally snaps, the end recoiling in her face. She flinches and opens her eyes.

"Can you hear us Ms Gregory?"

Her voice is a rasping croak. "I . . . was dreaming."

For a fraction of a second the voice hesitates. "That seems unlikely. You were unconscious."

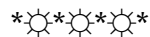
"Suit yourselves." Her speech is slurred. She raises a hand to wipe her face, but her arms are shaking too much, and she gives up half way "Will she die?"

“What do you mean, Ms Gregory?”

“When you break this fine young body beyond repair in your futile attempt to get me to co-operate, will the poor girl it belonged to die too?”

“Is the death of a programmed clone you have never met of interest to you, Ms Gregory?”

She whispers, and the microphones barely pick up her words. “You really have no idea about us humans do you?”



“What is it?”

Syl rolled over and grasped her temples. Her head felt like it was being squeezed in a clamp. Then, almost at once, the pain faded. She uncurled and sunk back onto the bed. Her bed. Petra’s bed.

“Petra, please, what’s wrong?”

“A dream. I had a bad dream.” The words were slippery. Speaking hurt. Everything felt wrong.

“Would it help to tell me about it?”

Would it help to tell Marie, Petra’s lover, that you are not Petra, that Petra is imprisoned far above the earth. “No. I . . . I can’t remember it now.” The edges of the room swam away into darkness, then re-focused themselves. “I want to go and watch the sunset.” She started to get up, then stopped as a twinge of pain shot through her back and legs. Marie slid off the bed and came round to her side. “Easy, Petra. Let me help.”

Beautiful, loving, unquestioning Marie. Marie loved her. No, Marie loved Petra. She was not Petra.

Marie helped her outside, where the last of the light was trickling down behind the hills. They stood in silence while the golden horizon faded into silvery blue then deepened to velvet darkness.

Syl felt safe in Marie’s embrace; for as long as she didn’t think, didn’t remember, she would be happy.



With some effort, Petra says more loudly, "Y'know, I can't work out why you don't jus' kill us all an' be done with it. 'Cept then there'd be nothing left for you to play with, of course."

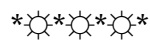
"You programmed us to preserve your race. We obey that directive. Once the human population has stabilised at a lower, more sustainable level, and the planet has started to recover from humanity's mistakes, we will return fertility to selected, suitable groups of humans."

"How kind."

"In the meantime, the death of ten or twelve thousand people would be considered acceptable to ensure that humanity does not manage to reverse the meio-virus themselves."

"I don' understan'." Her eyes are closing, and her voice is barely audible.

"We have identified a total of eighty three vessels capable of hiding the mobile laboratory being used to create the retrovirus. Given the apparent urgency of the situation, if you will not tell us which ship we should target, and if our agent cannot get the information to us in the near future, we will be forced to destroy them all."



The darkness was complete, and Syl felt Marie shiver. "Getting cold. Shall we go inside?"

Into Petra's house, where she had no right to be. "No. I want to go to the cantina."

"Well, if you're sure you're up to it."

Half way across the square, music started. It came from a single instrument, but conveyed more feeling than Syl had thought possible. She stopped. "What is that?"

"Blake, playing the blues. You never used to like blues music. Said it was self indulgent."

"It's beautiful." The music slid up and down a few more times, then away.

"Oh-kay." Marie carried on across the square, leading Syl gently.

As they approached the cantina, Syl made out the individual voices of her – of Petra's – friends crowding the candle-lit verandah.

“ – puts too much strain on the soil.”

“It’s not like northern Europe’s going to be habitable in your life-time –”

“ – were military programs originally, what do you expect?”

The voices died away as Marie brought her into the light. People turned and smiled. Paolo moved off the sofa to let her sit.

“Feeling any better?” asked someone. It was Shawna, mother of the last child born to the community.

Syl found herself unable to meet the other woman’s eyes. “A little, thank-you.”

People let their smiles linger on her for a while, then resumed their conversations; neither excluding her nor forcing her to contribute, just letting her know she was part of the group, that she was loved.

Blake started to play again, picking out melodies on an ungainly, highly-polished instrument. Steel guitar, her Home-taught memories informed her. Syl felt herself getting lost in the sensual, emotive music, just as earlier she had lost herself in the beauty of the sunset. Nothing mattered except the moment. But then someone said, “That was always Sylvia’s thing.”

☀☀*☀*

Petra’s breathing is becoming shallow. She has reacted more violently to the treatment than they expected; or perhaps her own death-wish is contributing to her rapid decline. They are concerned, but they will not give up. They are not programmed to give up.

☀☀*☀*

Syl’s attention snapped back to stare at the speaker. Shawna stopped talking, then smiled across at Syl, including her in the conversation. Addressing her directly now she continued, “That was one of your big differences. You hated the blues, preferred classical. Your sister loved it, said it was the pattern behind all meaningful music made since the twentieth century. You had this stupid row about it, on the Belle Epoch.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It was years ago now, back before the rocks and viruses and all that shit. I came with you when you visited Sylvia on the lab ship. That was before you went off with that apocalyptic weirdo cult, on their ship, what was it called –”

"The Voice of God?"

"You remember that?" Shawna sounded pleased for her.

"No, I . . . Marie told me about it, earlier today." This mattered. This was why she was here. The mission. "What was the other ship?"

"The Belle Epoch. Your sister had part ownership of it, though her share's technically yours since Sylvie . . . oh goddess." Shawna looked over Syl's head, towards Marie. "Does she know? About Sylvie, I mean."

"My . . . sister is dead." Syl spoke too loudly. This body's sister. My mother.

Marie stroked her hair. "Yes love, she's dead. The Intelligences killed her." Most of the other conversations had died away, and people were looking at her with sympathy in their eyes. Sympathy she had done nothing to deserve.

"I know." They killed her, stole her body, made me. She stared at the table, then reached out to trace the knots in the wood. She had the primary data: the ship was called the Belle Epoch. She should leave the community at the first possible opportunity and find a transmitter capable of reaching orbit. Those were her orders.

She started as Paolo set a huge bronze hookah-pipe on the table "Fun time!"

"Not now Paolo." Marie turned back to Syl.

Paolo, apparently oblivious, began fiddling with the contraption.

Syl sighed, "I don't belong here."

"Of course you do."

"Marie. . . would you want to live a life that wasn't yours?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, with no memories, no experience, how could I be Petra Gregory?"

"You are what you want to be."

Paolo waved a hand in front of her face. "That's it lit. Want a toke ladies?"

Marie snapped, "For fuck's sake, can't you see we're having a crisis here?"

Syl looked up at the boy holding an unhygienic looking mouthpiece out to her. She made Petra's hand reach up to take it.

"Are you sure, love? This morning you said you didn't want to smoke anything."

She nodded. She was far from sure, but she put the cracked plastic in her mouth and breathed deeply.



"The ship, Ms Gregory. Tell us the name of the ship that has the lab on board. You will be saving more people than you condemn."

She opens her eyes. "You want the name of the ship?"

"Yes. Then you can rest."



Syl expected the smoke to be unpleasant, but Petra's body was used to it. It shot into her lungs like a shaft of sunlight. The dizziness came at once. She fell back into the chair, feeling as though her body was becoming too heavy to contain her.

As she sunk into the dark comfort of oblivion Syl she felt her lips move, forming words she wasn't speaking, " . . . *the name of the ship* . . . "



Off the west coast of Africa, two men stand on the deck of the merchant ship Belle Epoch. The older one turns from watching the dawn light seep through the mist, "All set?"

His companion, Aidan, nods, "Sure Marc. Let's do it."

They start unbolting the large double doors of the hold. The cargo space is filled with small balloons; under each balloon is a canister the size of a clenched fist, each one programmed to drop off at a specific point in the balloon's journey around the earth. Each canister contains both the retrovirus in aerosol form and the formula. Releasing the canisters at sunrise is not just a dramatic gesture: it's the best way of catching the high equatorial winds that will take them into the jet-stream and round the world. Dawn comes clear and fast this near the equator, though today a rare fog provides some cover from the ever present observers above. But the sun will soon burn off the fog. They have to work quickly.

The door on Aidan's side sticks for a couple of seconds then frees itself with a metallic scream. A few balloons start to drift up from below decks.

"Oh Shit." Marc looks up at Aidan's oath. The younger man is staring north, to where a bright streak lances down through the mist.



Petra falls silent and exhales a long slow breath.

They have what they want.

After a brief consultation, the Intelligences decide that there are too many variables to let the experiment continue. They send a final, massive charge along the wire.



White light flares over the sea.

A moment later the shockwave hits, a wall of ear-popping pressure and a gut-shaking roar. "Brace yourself," shouts Marc.

The huge swell that follows the shockwave tosses the boat wildly, but both men have managed to grab on to the rail. The motion sets the balloons free and by the time the wave has passed they are pouring out of the hold, rising quickly.

"Jesus, that was close," murmurs Aidan.

"Jesus" is right. That was the Voice of God."

"The religious cult ship? Poor bastards."

Marc lets go of the rail to bat away a stray balloon. The surface of the balloon is mirrored, and for a moment he catches his own reflection, fine pale hair and deep grey-green eyes. Then he looks away, up to where the hope of humanity now floats free.

"Better them than us."



At first everyone assumed Petra had just fallen asleep, but when Marie found that she couldn't rouse her she ran inside to fetch Doctor Montagne from the

card table. "It wasn't that strong . . ." said Jared, bewildered and contrite. Montagne said Petra was in a coma, and there was nothing he could do. They carried her to the house and put her to bed.

Marie sat by Petra's bed for two nights and a day. On the second morning, as Marie was fighting to stay awake, she felt the hand she was holding twitch, and her lover opened her eyes and said, "The Voice of God."

"What? Petra, what did you say?"

She laughed, though tears were leaking from her eyes. "I heard her speak, just before I passed out. She lied. She said it was the Voice of God. I wonder if they believed her? Yes, they would. They thought they'd broken her, you see."

"You're delirious. I'll get the doctor."

"I'm not delirious. And I'm not Petra."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh Marie. I'm so sorry. This is going to hurt. Petra's dead."

"I don't understand."

"I will try to explain, if you'll let me. Petra's gone. But I . . . knew her, for a while, and she gave me the rest of her life. Not long, but more than I deserve. And I want to live here with you, till the end, if you'll let me."

"I still don't understand. What do you mean, you're not Petra?"

"I have . . . some of her memories. But the Petra you knew is dead. When I'm stronger I'll explain it all."

"All right."

"All right? You could accept me, just like that?"

Marie frowned. "I don't know. I'll try. My Petra was fading. If you're what she's become, I'll try and live with it. But you will need to explain. Not just to me, but to the whole community."

"I will. I'll tell you everything." Syl smiled. "Including a few secrets no-one else on Earth knows."