

WHITE DUST

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WHITE DUST

Margery tapped her fingers against the wall screen, waiting for it to engage. Blobs of color burped up from the deep, floated to the surface, and faded. They were large at first—single shapes of gray, lavender, pink—but shrank as their frequency increased. They became fast, numerous: hundreds of blobs, then thousands, resolving into larger shapes and colors. The image sharpened, and a familiar room appeared, its walls a triangular tessellation, the concave interior of a dome. Silver tubing snaked across the floor, cabinets disgorged tools and machined parts confused every open surface.

Margery sighed. She would have to run a dedicated “pick up and put away” operation soon—not the most glamorous suicide mission.

Corporal Sam Britten lay on a matte black slab toward the rear of the room, naked and rubbing the side of his head. He should be up and moving by now: the screen would have engaged after sensing his motion, and the image took several seconds to render. Plenty of time.

“Corporal,” Margery said, speaking to him through the screen. “Shielding is just behind you, to your left. Patch zone is on the other side.”

Sam pivoted and slid off the slab; he stumbled and leaned back against the structure for balance. He straightened, walked to the supply case, and laid his hand on a pile of the shielding material—quilted gold squares edged with solder. He drew a finger through the white dust that had settled on the stack, then gathered a load of squares under his arm.

“The heat guns are right there too,” she said. She wasn’t telling him anything new. He had just trained in a room arranged as a mockup of the remote location. But he was slow, hesitant: not his usual efficient self. They had only minutes to complete this run.

He wrapped his fingers around a heat gun, cradled the molded plastic, but then let go and drew back. He turned to the screen. “Doctor Alee?”

"Yes, Corporal?"

"There's been a mistake."

Her eyes scanned the room—equipment, patch area, slab device—but failed to see anything out of the ordinary. "I'm sorry?"

He walked toward the screen. His speed effervesced the display image; the blobs became visible and frenetic again until they caught up with his motion. The image recrystallized and he stood in front of her, uncertain green eyes meeting her own. She could already see the blush of radiation burn edging its way across his skin.

"Corporal, everything looks fine. Please report."

"It's—not, no—just, there's a mistake." He ran spread fingers through his hair. His hand stopped at the top of his head and held on, as though he were a ball he didn't want to drop.

"I don't understand."

"I'm supposed to go see Sissy—you know, Clara's daughter—*our* daughter—she's performing tomorrow. I promised."

"Corporal, you need to get working righ—"

"I booked a car for tonight. But I won't even be there." Tears welled in his eyes. "They'll be so disappointed." The radiation burns were deepening, some of his skin curling and peeling.

"Corporal Britten, we trained for this." She allowed rising anger to harden her expression. "Remember your training." Her Directorate was going to be suspicious if she bungled this; there was an institutional nervousness with situations they couldn't monitor. They had been especially on edge since reports that the Brazilians and Chinese had secured their own presence in the far remote.

"I'm not supposed to be here." Sam's hand slid to the back of his neck and tightened there. "I'm sorry. I should have told you as soon as I woke up. There's some mistake."

She jumped at a clanking of metal on metal. It was followed by a whoosh of air, and she realized it was on her side of the screen—just the climate control activating. Her local room was converted office space, unlike the lattice of fused ceramics that protected Corporal Britten from vacuum in the far remote, where he stared at her image on his own screen. His head tilted as she collected herself.

"Sam, mindfulness." Perhaps anger was not the best approach. Getting things back under her control required dispassionate thinking; this was an interesting challenge. A thrill tingled along her skin as cooler air rolled into the room. "Remember mindfulness. Recognize that you're having these thoughts, but let them float away, evaporate."

Britten's brow furrowed. She knew he was trying to comply, struggling to clear his mind as they had practiced.

"That's right, good. Now focus on what I'm saying. The repair shielding needs to go up. Focus on that. Do it now, soldier."

He nodded, and the muscles around his jaw tightened. He swung back into motion, the picture fuzzing again as he walked away. She put her index finger on the screen, over the small of his back, and traced down to his sinewy thighs. He was a well-built soldier, durable and athletic; she had been smart to select him for the repairs. The picture came into tighter focus as he paused, and she saw a rivulet of brown and red running down the inside of his leg. She pulled her finger away.

"Corporal, let whatever you're thinking go. Only the shielding." She clenched her hand. "Do it now."

He nodded again, still facing away, and picked up the heat gun. He walked to the patch area. That whole section of the enclosure was hot, probably from a breach further inside the structure. He got his first square up and held a corner of a second against the wall, pressing into it with the heat gun until it adhered. They needed to finish this tactical shielding, make the area around the slab survivable, before they

could start working toward the interior. The previous runs had finished most of the work—lines of overlapping gold squares stretched across a wall shaped by triangles—and she had expected this run would complete it. But after Britten finished his fourth square, he turned and vomited, expelled thin mucus cut with strings of blood.

After his sixth, he collapsed, gun clattering to the floor.

“Sam, that’s good work. Can you do one more? Do one more, Sam.”

He pulled himself up and, bracing against the skeleton of tessellated triangles, adhered one corner of a seventh square. Then slid back into a heap. She inhaled as she saw the lesions on his back and recognized the slackness in his form. He would be unconscious shortly, leaving another half dozen squares undone.

She blew a raspberry softly to herself, and then stood at salute. “Thank you, Corporal.” She wasn’t sure if he could hear her, at first, but his head lolled back, and bloodshot eyes found the screen. Found her. “You will be remembered as a patriot and a hero.” His eyelids sank until each eye was just a thin crescent of red, and she broke her salute.

* * *

She exited the control room, leaving the collapsed Sam and his dome behind on the screen, and entered the converted conference room that served as the local prep area. The center table had been shoved to the wall to make space for a matte black slab, identical to its remote twin. An IV pole stood next to it, its shadow flickering along with one of the fluorescent tubes overhead.

Sam Britten was propped up on the slab, in his hospital gown, flipping through the pages of a comic. The anesthesia had worn off. She walked up to him and slid the IV needle out of his arm.

“Doctor Alee, is everything all right?”

She looked away.

She wasn’t technically a doctor, of course; that pretense was for its calming effect on the subject. Even the anesthesia was not technically necessary—drugs didn’t carry over with the transfer, nor clothes, not even bruises or tattoos—but it helped with the psychology. If a replica of a soldier was going to appear millions of miles away, she had found, it was less jarring when his previous mental state had been unconsciousness.

“Doctor, how did I do?” The worry in his voice reminded her of his confusion in the dome, his slow start to the run. That delay had already put her at risk.

“Well.” She wanted to slap him. “You were looking forward to seeing Sissy perform.”

“Sissy? I didn’t—oh, shit. Shit.” His lips pinched.

“You were worried about your social life. You didn’t complete the job. We could lose the whole far remote if you don’t pull it together.” If one of the other nations realized that their location was not secure, they would launch a deniable attack: the site would have some sort of unexplained catastrophic failure, and they’d be done. She’d be done.

“Fuck.” He looked at his hands.

“I don’t get it.” She shook her head. “You functioned so well the last few times. You drilled fine today.”

She liked that the unique nature of this assignment allowed her to operate without supervision. She liked being in total control for once—even though it made her higher-ups paranoid. She existed so deep within the bowels of the clandestine services that she was monitored at all times when away from the facility, she was sure. Still, she wouldn’t mind one of her organization’s actual psychologists hovering over her right now, offering advice.

“I must lack focus,” Sam finally responded. “I’ll work on that.”

“But what changed? Are you putting family before country? Please be honest, those feelings would be natural.” She relaxed the muscles around her eyes, tried to appear sympathetic.

"No, Doctor, I'm committed to country. I'd give my life for the cause. You know that." Sam was Special Ops. He had worked on secret projects before, proven his dedication and discretion. It was unusual to clear any soldier for something as sensitive as this assignment, of course, but here it was a necessity. These remote transfers were not a job for a covert service agent like herself. Agents were trained to examine and manipulate a situation, not to patch walls in fatal conditions. She thought of her own director, imagined him and his flabby paunch naked on that remote slab, barking orders at her as ionizing radiation flowed over him like sunburn. A smile crept across her face.

"I know you're committed, Sam. And you've been laying your life down for your country, up there. You have." She tapped her lips as she thought. "But . . . something's changed."

"Maybe it's not me? You know, it's not really me up there, is it?"

She frowned and locked eyes with him. "It is you. It is exactly you."

"But it's just a copy, really. We train, I lie down here, and then I go home. Whatever is up there can't be me."

"The copy is exact. He thinks like you. In practice, he *is* you at the moment of transfer. You—Corporal Sam Britten—you need to perform in that environment. You yourself. If you feel like you won't have to do it, then the copy of you will fuck up every time . . . his thoughts are your thoughts, so he'll feel like he doesn't have to go through with it either." She clasped her hands together, interlocking fingers. "That must be our problem."

"Okay, makes sense. I will focus."

She tilted her head forward. It seemed unlikely that he would make progress outside her direction.

"Focus on what, Sam?"

Sam swallowed and glanced down. He held his comic rolled in his lap.

The responsibility to guide fell to her indeed. She smiled.

"We need to get your head clear so you can personally perform. You." She slapped her hand on her leg. "Let's do some mindfulness exercises and give this another try."

* * *

The *négociants-manipulants* who provided alien technologies like the slab were fiercely protective of intellectual property, trade secrets, and proprietary manufacturing techniques. Sublicensing agreements and redistribution covenants spelled out these requirements, they claimed, and were altogether outside their control. So whenever a device came to the conclusion that it was being reverse engineered, tampered with, recorded, subjected to excessive scrutiny, or operated a hair beyond negotiated terms of service, it would respond by zapping itself and any human operators into a haze of ozone.

Corporal Britten had just gone under, his eyes peaceful and vacant. Margery squatted beside him, positioning herself in front of the featureless silver panel that broke the slab's otherwise uniform black. She touched it and felt her hand *catch*, as though invisible fingers had just wrapped around her own. Pushing against the force, she traced out a password of gestures with her fingers: she swirled, stroked, and prodded her way through the memorized designs. The patterns felt strange and obscene to her, as if they were engineered for the touch of tentacles, pseudopods, or, perhaps, for the slither of some appendage that had not been given a name.

After losing a number of astronomically expensive devices like the slab to self-destruction, the Directorate had finally conceded to a policy of good faith compliance. That included no monitoring or recording of relevant facilities. The devices' tendency to vaporize agents along with themselves also kept teams small, especially for assignments like this one: there were only a handful of agents with the experience,

clearance, and temperament to run something as ethically nuanced as a project like this one, and the Directorate tended to avoid concentrated risk. So she was alone, just her and the soldier.

She drew the final curlicue of the password with its mandatory flourish, and the panel released her hand. It would snapshot in a few seconds, transmitting Sam's information to the remote location. She returned to the control room, and the connection was still engaged; the old Sam must have flopped around for long enough to keep it from blinking off. He was just a peeling mess now, though, and not moving at all.

Sam's crumpled figure vanished in a familiar puff of white dust as the new Sam appeared on the slab. The slab did not permit local duplicates, but disposing of the older copy was part of its operational specifications: as soon as a new Sam appeared, the older one was powderized. A thin layer of the dust had carpeted the dome, a reminder of missions past.

The new Sam sat up and swung himself toward the monitor immediately. "Doctor, this isn't right."

Her shoulders slumped. "Please, Sam, don't make me go through this again."

"So this is what we were just talking about, right? The same thing as went wrong with the last transfer?"

"Nothing went wrong." She rolled her eyes. "We need to get to work."

"But I was just there meditating with you."

Sam stood and started to walk toward the screen.

Margery shook her head, held up her palm flat to stop him—they did not have time for this. "That wasn't you." She thought for a moment, calculated. "You know the real Sam is in the room next to me."

He froze.

"You don't need to worry about Clara or Sissy or anything, it's covered, it's good. We just need to get the job done."

"I'm a copy?"

"Mindfulness, Sam. Just acknowledge the thought and let it go."

"But we . . . we were just in prep talking about the copy."

She took a deep breath and pressed her hands to her temples. "Sam, I don't get it. You're willing to die for our country. You know you're being copied for a critical mission." She squinted at him. "Nothing is a surprise here. I don't get your problem—I honestly don't."

He shivered. "We train, I lie down on the slab, and then I go home. Every time."

She laid her palms flat against the screen at shoulder width, and leaned in until her face was almost touching the panel.

"Corporal Britten, you are Special Ops. A goddamn hero. We need you to man up, to do your job. You signed up for this."

He looked down at his palms. "Stop talking to me like I'm . . . me." He turned his hands over and examined the backs.

She felt herself redden; no soldier had the right to talk back to her like that. Her rank was just one level below director. But he held all the leverage here; she had to adapt.

"Sam, I let you get complacent, that's on me. But we have to get this done." She failed to hide the tremble in her voice. This would look to her bosses like intentional stalling. "Please. I'm on the line too."

"I'm sorry, Margery." He sat down, cross-legged, and let his face fall into his hands. He had never used her first name before.

She continued to command and cajole him, but he just sat there, holding his face. She pleaded as his shoulders reddened, but he never once looked up. Then, for lack of sufficient motion, the screen flicked off.

Margery shrieked. She slammed the display with her fist, twice, and fell against it; she rested her forehead against the blank screen. This was a disaster. Whatever excuses she made about her lack of progress, her superiors would be convinced she was double-crossing them: she could be a saboteur on the Chinese payroll, or playing to control the technology for herself. Neither of those would be unprecedented. The Directorate was smart enough to know that its most trusted assets were also the ones that needed its closest scrutiny, and she was trusted deeply.

She pushed herself upright and stormed back into the prep room where the corporal lay, still groggy from anesthesia; he winced as she yanked the IV from his arm. She started shoving to get him off the slab. He held up his hands to placate her, blinking, and slid his legs over the opposite edge.

"Get out," she said, "we're done for now."

"Can I ask—" He was sobering up quickly.

"No."

He stood and faced her from across the slab. "Doctor Alee, please. I was thinking, maybe not knowing is part of my problem. Maybe I'd do better if I understood, you know, what was going on out there?"

"Sam, you failed. You probably cost us the zone. If we lose the remote slab, we can only get back with conventional propulsion. Years—that'll take years. Think the territory will still be open then? Go home."

He straightened to full attention. "I stand ready to take any action necessary. I'll step into a hail of bullets, if that's what's needed."

She glanced up, eyes catching the flicker of the fluorescent tube above, and then back at Sam. "All you need to do is leave, soldier. Now."

His face went slack. "Yes ma'am." He glanced at the door to the control room. "I just have to change."

"What, do you want privacy? I've seen you naked a dozen times."

"No, no, that's fine." He rose and began to untie his gown.

She stared at him. "Had you not figured that out? Did you think we were sending you to distant space in a hospital gown?"

He swallowed. "No, I—"

"Just get out. I need to think."

Sam slipped out of his gown, folding it onto the conference table next to his pile of clothes. He grabbed his boxers and pressed khakis from the pile, bobbling under Margery's gaze as he pulled them on. She remained silent as he slid on his belt, yanked up his socks, buttoned his linen shirt, and shoved his feet into the hiking boots. She followed him to the door and swung it shut as he exited; he double-stepped to avoid being struck, one shirttail still dangling over the back of his belt.

Margery pulled herself onto the slab and sat, legs hanging over the edge. She had to work out a solution; she couldn't report back as things stood. The psychological situation almost made sense—after a number of runs, a subject would become complacent and used to the routine, making it more jarring for his copy: he would be, after all, the copy of a person who had gone through the exercise multiple times without incident. But her attempt to help the replica understand the situation was a disaster: why had that backfired? She needed to better tease out the psychology, and quickly.

She wrapped one hand around the edge of the slab. A tingle ran through her as she thought of one possibility to push her understanding ahead—though it was a little outside mission parameters.

Margery thought of Sam, confused and awash in radiation, and had a panicked flash of the same thing happening to her. The fear was irrational; still, she looked at her hand for a moment, and then put her thumb in her mouth. She bit down. Wincing, she forced herself to bite harder, until she tasted the metallic tang of blood. She

took her thumb out and watched blood ooze to the surface, dribble over the knuckle. Ten seconds ago could have been a memory, could have been copied from somewhere; hell, the Universe might have been created ten seconds ago. How could she tell? But *this* was her present; she was here now, definite, living this sensation. She had not even operated the device yet; she would never be a copy. A replica might remember this moment, but she was the one living it, right now—tasting the blood of her thumb. A transfer posed no risk to her real self.

She slid off the slab and prepped the device, contorting her hand through those alien swirls, and then laid herself flat on its black surface. She felt a tickle underneath her skin, something like the brush of moth wings: something delicate inside her, trying to escape. She held back nausea and waited for the fluttering to subside, then made her way to the control room. By the time she entered, the screen had already activated. A replica of her was sitting there in the dome, head lowered, legs dangling off the edge of the remote slab.

Her copy slouched forward in a position that was unflattering to her nakedness, rolls of skin bunched up under her breasts and over her belly. She was staring at her thumb.

Margery cleared her throat. “So, what is it like?”

Her copy looked up, eyes wide, bordering on manic. “I know the transfer was safe. I proved it wasn’t a risk. I proved it.” She lifted her hand. “I just bit down on my thumb. I just experienced it, the pain.”

Margery shook her head and looked at her nude likeness with a tight smile. “No, I’m sorry. You didn’t experience that, I did. You just remember it.” Her remote’s eyes were blank, baffled. “How is the thumb?”

The copy rotated her hand, still in front of her. “It’s healed. It just healed.”

“You were never hurt.” Margery raised her own hand, bringing her thumb to the screen and wiping her index finger across the drying blood. “That was me. You might also notice that you’re naked. And in a dome, another clue for you.”

Her copy sat up straight and looked at her, eyes focusing.

Margery recognized the intelligence in those eyes. She leaned in closer to the screen. “So . . . what’s it like out there?”

“You fucker,” the copy said.

“Oh, come on. You wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for me. Enough dramatics.”

“You rationalizing piece of shit.” Her copy slid off the slab and stood.

“You know this is necessary as much as I do. We’re working for a greater good.”

Her copy’s eyes narrowed. “Oh? Can you reconcile that with your enthusiasm?” She crossed her arms. “I know how you feel when you send Sam up here. I know you love the control, the ownership.”

“I don’t have to listen to this.” Margery felt her chest pounding.

“You’re a sadist.” The copy leaned back, holding her chin up. “You gravitated to where you could indulge your sickness. You wrap yourself in a cause, flush with your own virtue. It’s disgusting. It’s false.”

Margery’s stomach clenched. “You can’t pretend this mission isn’t vital. Want to waste your remaining time having a tantrum?”

“Vital? The whole struggle is a sham, idiots like Britten dying for corrupt countries. You know that, at some level, but you’re happy to leave it unexamined. The funny thing, it actually holds your career back. Think your directors don’t know it’s all a fraud? But you—you’re just happy as long as you’re exerting control.” She gestured at her own nude form. “I’m proof enough of that.” The copy turned and shoved one of the cabinets; it toppled in a noisy explosion of metal on metal, tools sliding across the floor. She fanned away the dust raised by the impact, coughing into her hand, and moved toward the patching.

"Stop it," Margery shouted, "you need to calm down." She couldn't let her doppelgänger go on a rampage up there, there was too much she could damage; too much that it would be impossible to explain.

"And what are you going to do about it?" The copy grabbed the partially adhered gold patch and ripped it off the wall, but then yelped and dropped the square. Margery could see that her fingers had been burned—there must be thermal heat leakage there as well.

"Okay," she called to her copy's back, "let's talk about why you believe I'm such a terrible person. I'll listen." She needed to buy time until radiation slowed the woman down.

Her copy turned and glared.

"Good, you're doing better now," Margery said. "Bet it's hard to keep your perspective up there."

Her copy looked down at her burned hand, shook it out, cradled it in her other hand. After a moment she jerked up, alert. A grin twitched at the edge of her mouth. "Maybe not so hard as you think."

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

The copy walked back to the slab and squatted behind it, head and shoulders visible. From the motion of her shoulders, it was clear she was tracing something out on the slab's panel.

"Are you crazy? What are you doing?" Sweat broke out on Margery's brow. "That's not going to work. And it can't save you—it can only make another copy." She clapped her hands twice, trying to draw her replica's attention. "It just copies!"

Her duplicate stood up, holding out her fists—one badly burned—and extended both middle fingers. Then she pulled herself onto the slab and pressed her body flat against it.

Margery rushed back to the prep room, beads of cold sweat running down her temples. She had no idea if the slabs could even copy in reverse, but she needed to snapshot again and wipe out her rogue duplicate. She strained against the invisible fingers, tracing out the patterns as fast as they would let her, and felt her hand release. She breathed relief as she prepared to climb onto the surface; maybe there was still enough time.

* * *

Margery appeared in the prep room, bathed in cool light and the flicker of a fluorescent tube. The slab was cold against her naked back. She let out a sigh—it had worked. She was back from the dome. She lifted her hand: the unbearable burning was gone, her skin smooth and unblemished.

A cloud of white dust hung over the slab. It smelled of roast pork, but also of something like clover—a familiar scent that she couldn't quite place. As she slid off the slab she saw her clothes in a jumble alongside the device: the scrubs she had put on that morning, her white sneakers, her security badge lying to the side. As she pulled the pieces of her doctor identity back on, dust settling on her shoulders like dandruff, she recognized the other scent hanging in the air and laughed. It was her shampoo.

Margery walked back into the control room and up to the screen. She saw herself in the remote room, slumped and reddening. She held up her thumb to the screen, clear of any burns or bite marks. "Hey," she called to her other self. "We got her."

Her remote self looked up, cracked lips spreading into a grin. "Good for you . . . me . . . us." Her voice was tight with pain, but the tension around her eyes smoothed as she regained her posture. "My own copy." Head shaking, she stood up. She gave Margery a wave with her uninjured hand before walking through the exit on the far wall, stretching her shoulders as she slipped beyond the screen's range.

Margery waved back.

Outside the limited protection of the dome, radiation would strip the life from her remote self within seconds. Margery remembered considering that option, up there, moments before she technically existed: it would have been better than dying slowly.

She paced between the control room and prep area, then sat against the slab and began the same mindfulness exercises she had gone through with Sam, collecting her own thoughts. She reflected on how much easier it was to accept being a copy—the third instance, even—when no mortal danger was bearing down on her. But it wasn't just that, she realized. She had accepted her rightful place: she was the honest continuation of Margery. It was as though she had gone up to the dome, and come back; she had experienced it all.

She was not, however, the original Margery that had sent her up to the dome.

And she didn't want to be. She looked at her thumb, remembered again the metallic taste of blood she had never drawn: the dawning realization, up on that slab, that the reality of her experience—the memory of experience—proved nothing. The source of the experience should have been irrelevant. The moment was gone and the memory was equally vivid for both . . . but one of them had not existed seconds before. She. She had not existed. That awareness had yawned open like a chasm: a darkness, a hand working its fingers into her entrails, pulling down, down, down. All while the original just stood on the other side of the screen with her smug, shit-eating grin. No, she could never subject an innocent version of herself to that terror.

She would never do that to anyone.

She still had to deal with the far remote location, or she would be over, even after all this. She doubted the higher-ups would take being a copy as any kind of defense. In one way, original Margery's plan had worked: she understood now why Sam had been breaking down. It wasn't that he was complacent with an assignment that never seemed to demand anything of the original. Sam himself would always make the ultimate sacrifice for his country, would never get soft. But his patriotism was tied up in his sense of self: when he started to think of himself as a just-created anonymous copy, as *not Sam*, it all fell apart. Her own patriotism had evaporated up there as well—there was liberty in the destruction of identity.

A feeling of lightness came over her as she completed her meditations. She knew how she could push the productivity of this assignment to the next level: an innovation that was going to put her in very good stead with the Directorate. She paged Corporal Britten to return to the lab.

Sam arrived half an hour later, looking pensive.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Sam, Sam, Sam. I'm sorry about how I acted today, I was stressed out. You were right—I wasn't sharing enough information." She leaned in and put a hand on his shoulder. She needed his unconditional belief in the fiction she was about to deliver. "It's just . . . I knew there was a better technology they weren't letting us use. It was frustrating."

Sam relaxed. "That's all right, Doctor, just part of the job."

"So I talked to my superiors. They finally authorized the purchase, an upgrade to the slab device." Building this story for Sam brought her an immediate sense of peace. She was making things so much easier on him—was doing more than he would ever appreciate.

"Ma'am?"

"It was honorable of you to volunteer for lethal missions, but it was taking a toll. The new solution is much better." She moistened her lips: this had to be absolutely convincing. "We now have genuine teleportation."

"Teleportation? You're serious?"

"Yes, we'll teleport you up, and I'll show you how to teleport back. It's dangerous, but survivable. And it'll always be you."

He would be following her example, in a sense, but framed in a way that would make him extremely effective. They would be able to run at least twice as many missions now, and probably more. The Directorate loved results—results won out over suspicions, every time. She folded her hands and smiled at Sam.

"That's . . . amazing." He squinted, not appearing entirely convinced.

"It is. I just tried it myself."

His eyes widened. "Wait, Doctor Alee, *you* went into space?"

"That's right." That part almost felt like the truth; she had the memory. Even though the version of her still in space was probably liquefying. "I won't kid you, the radiation hurts."

"So are you the first human to ever make a round trip to far space?" He stepped back a little and shook his head. "Sorry, Doctor, I'm sure that's classified."

"No, no, that's okay, we need to be more open. And, to the best of my knowledge, I may well be." She brushed her shoulder, wiping away residue from her original version.

"So I could be the first man to ever do it!"

"Well, let's say the first male."

"Oh yes, of course, sure." He was beaming now, all white teeth and excitement.

She had him, she could tell, and his performance was going to improve immediately. He would remember the room layouts; there would be no more tedious arranging of the mockup area. And no nervous breakdowns. She wouldn't be sending any more copies to die in existential terror, not like the original Margery. And the old Margery's career really had been limited by her acceptance that the Directorate was less corrupt than its competition: she had known that was a lie, at some level, but was too weak to accept the truth.

This Margery was not weak.

"Sam, you can't say a word about this technology, nobody else knows we've acquired it. It came at substantial cost." She lowered her voice and leaned back in. "Not ever, not to anyone. If they are cleared to know, they'll already know."

If she kept it private, the advantage gained through this fiction might be enough to get her elevated to director status herself.

He nodded. "I never talk."

"Also, the teleportation can result in a bit of smoke over the slab, sort of a white powder, but that's expected behavior."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

She squeezed his shoulder. "No, it's not. Let's get started."