We remember Being Nothing

The woman I invented last week is bleeding on my workstation.

Not her blood. She's three sectors away, living the life I fabricated. But her documentation bleeds data across my screens: employment records from 2847, medical scans from before I was born, a marriage certificate that predates her existence by seven years. The files pulse with each impossibility.

Yuki Thorne.

I crafted her with particular care, each detail chosen to withstand scrutiny. Genetic markers suggesting Eurasian heritage but vague enough to avoid specific regional databases. A childhood in the Middle Rings, comfortable enough to explain education, poor enough to justify missing records. Parents lost in the 2851 purge—convenient tragedy that no one questions.

I remember selecting her eye color from the approved spectrum. Brown with amber flecks, common enough to forget.

Now those eyes stare at me from a security capture dated three years ago.

My workspace occupies a gutted air processing node between Rings 4 and 5, the kind of nowhere that exists on no schematic. Low ceiling grids weep condensation onto dead ducting. Cable bundles snake under my boots. The sequencer's status LEDs wash everything in sick green, pulsing with each query. Here, identity flows like water through my hands. The desperate come with credits and leave with new names, new histories, new chances at survival. The Identity Broker, they call me, though Jin works fine when I'm not playing god.

The fabrication equipment hums at frequencies that make my teeth ache. Three notes cycling. Low. Lower. Low. Each identity requires perfection. One flaw in the documentation, one impossible detail, and my clients face deletion.

But Yuki's files show no flaws. The timestamp on her first apartment lease: 2854. Two years before I created her.

My hands shake as I pull up the original work order. The screen flickers: a Pattern glitch, brief but visible. Mei Lao, scared and desperate, needing to disappear before genetic assessment. I gave her Yuki Thorne, complete with employment history at a data processing firm, an allergy to synthetic proteins, and a habit of humming while she worked.

The air recycler coughs. Three beats.

Her supervisor submitted performance reviews. Coworkers logged complaints about her humming—that soft, three-note pattern I added as harmless character detail. The data processing firm's narrow-AI validated her biometric scans every morning for three years.

Before she existed.

A flicker of pride cuts through my nausea—my work is so perfect it exists backward. Then guilt, copper-sharp. Then something else, harder to name: the vertigo of a god discovering she's mortal. Retropropagation: any identity I fabricate seeds backward along the Pattern's timeline. The station's reality stretches to accommodate lives that never were.

The Identity Broker's cardinal rule: Never investigate your creations.

I erase my access logs. Book transit to Ring 6. Pack the small knife from my drawer —not for protection, but for the weight of it, the reminder of edges that still cut clean.

The transit chip prints with a mechanical clunk.

Twelve minutes through the station's bowels, avoiding Pattern Integrity's scheduled sweeps. The transit capsule smells of rust and recycled fear. The walls hum their ancient rhythm while my forger's instincts map seventeen escape routes. My hand finds the knife in my pocket. A knife doesn't cut paradox.

"Pattern Integrity sweep in progress," the capsule announces. "Please display identification."

The overhead straps sway as the capsule judders to a stop. A man grabs the rail, steadying himself. The scanner beam crawls down the car, turning faces blue-white in

sequence.

My badge—the real one, not any of my dozen forgeries—glows green under the scanner. But the woman across from me squints, tilts her head.

"Do I..." She stops. Shakes her head. "Sorry. You look familiar."

My eyes catch on the transit stamp on her wrist. Three-day pass, Ring 6 access. Fresh ink over older marks.

"Elsa." The name escapes before I can stop it.

She freezes. "What did you say?"

"Nothing." I look away. But she heard it—her birth name, the one I buried under Marissa six months ago. My fabricated identities carry fragments of their making: the copper taste in my mouth when I type their names, my reflection caught in the sequencer's dark screen. They wake from dreams that smell like my workshop.

I switch capsules at the next junction, adding seven minutes but avoiding her searching gaze. The detour flags my transit pattern—inconsistent with my usual routes. A small risk. Pattern Integrity will notice if they're watching.

They're always watching now.

Residential Block C-7 matches its neighbors: gray walls, flickering lights, the persistent hum of lives packed too close. Outside Yuki's door, I stop. Scratches at hip height from packages. A dent where someone kicked it. The lock mechanism worn from daily use.

Details I never designed.

The door opens before I knock.

"Jin?" She says my name like she's tasting it. "I knew you'd come."

Yuki Thorne wears my work like skin. The slight asymmetry that makes beauty memorable, the small scar on her left eyebrow I added for authenticity. But her eyes—brown with amber flecks, yes, but old. Decades older than the thirty-two years I wrote into her cells.

"Who are you?" The words scrape past my dry throat.

"Exactly who you made me." She steps aside. Her hand trembles on the doorframe

before she steadies it. "Coffee?"

I step inside. The kitchenette opens to my left, table angled toward the door. A narrow window throws a hard bar of station light across worn flooring. She crosses to the kitchen and flicks off the burner with practiced ease. Tick. Tick-tick. Silence.

Her quarters assault me with impossible life. A coffee cup on the table, lipstick marking the rim. She slides it aside, wipes the edge with her thumb. Work clothes draped over a chair smell of soap and synthetic jasmine. The wall holds photographs: Yuki at station functions, Yuki with friends I never invented, Yuki getting married.

In the wedding photo, guests clap. Three beats. The same pattern.

I grip the back of a chair. "How do you know I created you?"

"Sit first." She pulls out the chair. "You look like you're about to fall."

I sink down while she pours coffee, humming softly. Those three notes I encoded as a quirk echo from every corner of her existence. She sets the cup before me, then settles across the table, fingers finding its edge.

"I dream about you sometimes." Her knuckles whiten against the wood. "Wake up knowing your face. The smell of your workshop."

She touches her temple. Quick gesture. Sharp.

"Things I shouldn't know."

The coffee tastes like copper and paradox.

"These fragments live in my head like splinters," she continues, pulling out a notebook. Worn pages, yellowed with age. Inside, diary entries dating back decades. Her handwriting changes—confident, then shaky, then desperate.

Between normal entries: *"Dreamed of copper again." "Jin—why do I know that name?" "The humming won't stop."*

I turn pages with trembling fingers. The synthetic jasmine appears in 2848. My choices, scattered through her past like seeds growing backward. Something twists in my chest—not quite pride, not quite theft. The feeling of finding your own signature on a stranger's heart.

The room tilts.

"The sequencer took forty minutes." Her voice stays level. "Tuesday. The lights dimmed twice. You had to restart." She grips her coffee cup. "I wasn't there. I didn't exist. But I remember being nothing."

My cup shatters on the floor.

A shard skitters under the table, spinning to rest against the wall.

She doesn't flinch. Doesn't move to clean it. Just watches me with those impossible eyes.

"Every identity you've ever made exists this way. Hundreds of us, living backward through time." She stands. Precise. Fragile. "Yesterday I passed Chen in the market. We both stopped. Neither of us could say why, but we knew."

I push back from the table. A shard of ceramic cuts my palm—I close my fist around it.

The pain feels clean, honest. I want to hold it forever. I want it to heal instantly. Both. Neither.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing." She follows me to the door. "But each new identity forces the Pattern to re-stitch. Structural fatigue: doors that were always there but weren't. Events that get deleted."

She touches the scar on her eyebrow—the one I gave her for authenticity.

"People who start to fade."

The door closes between us with a soft click.

In the corridor, signage text shifts when I'm not looking directly at it. BLOCK C-7 becomes BLOCK D-7 becomes something unreadable. The Pattern re-stitching. Reality growing thin.

Back in my workspace, an alert blinks: Pattern Integrity requesting documentation review. Routine audit, it claims, but the timestamp matches my Ring 6 detour.

The next order waits beneath it. A father needs his daughter to disappear before assessment. Standard job. Easy fabrication.

My fingers hover over the genetic sequencer. The cooling fan spools up, syncing to the rhythm I can't escape. Low. Lower. Low.

The wound on my palm throbs. Three beats.

Somewhere in the station, hundreds of my creations live backward through time. Each one a tear in reality's fabric. Each new identity widens the gap. Save a child or preserve the Pattern? The question tastes like copper.

But it's an eleven-year-old girl. Too young for assessment. Too young for deletion. Too young to become nothing.

I begin typing. A new name. A new life.

The sequencer hums its three-note song, and in the dark screen, my reflection stares back. Brown eyes with amber flecks I don't remember choosing. When did they change? When I forged my first identity, did I forge myself?

My fingers pause. Delete the name. Type it again. Delete.

The father's message blinks. His desperation bleeds through the text like Yuki's files bled impossibility. I think of my own father, how he might have begged someone like me if I'd been flagged. The thought brings bile, then determination, then something colder: acceptance that I've already chosen.

A memory surfaces: my mother's voice, singing. But I never had a mother. The cost, paid in real-time.

I keep typing.

The lights dim. Once. Twice—

The sequencer completes its work. A cable vibrates against the metal housing as the processor cycles down. On my screen, a new identity blooms backward through time, sprouting employment records, medical histories, a life that always was and never was.

Tomorrow she'll dream of copper and wake knowing my face.

The Pattern groans—felt, not heard. Another tear. Another re-stitch. Another person

who will remember being nothing.

I close the file. Save the documentation. Transfer the credits.

The reflection in the dark screen watches with eyes that aren't quite mine anymore. I touch the glass, and for a moment, I swear it touches back.

The hum continues through the walls, through my bones, through time itself running backward.

Low. Lower. Low.