



UNVERIFIED IDENTITY

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Prologue – The Twentieth Voice

They said the entrance looked like a mouth—black, smooth, as if the mountain had swallowed something whole and was waiting for the next to step inside. Inside, veins ran through the stone, pulsing in the lamplight, glowing and dimming like breath. Later they called it *Luminara*. Back then it was something that should not have been—too smooth, too alive. It reeked of iron, sharp enough to burn the nose like blood. One of the men rubbed his fingers against his trousers; the stone was damp, metallic, like sucking on a rusty nail. Later no one remembered why that detail might have mattered—only that the taste of blood clung to their fingertips for hours. Every step echoed as if the mountain itself were whispering their names. And yet there were still the ordinary sounds: the crack of a thermos being set down, the faint scent of coffee vanishing into the cold.

They called it *the Origin*. Deep in the Lyngen Alps, that was where *Luminara* was first found—a substance no scientist understood and yet all of them used. It fused with glass, made eco-glass that blocked radiation, hardened walls, reinforced foundations. It seemed

created to save the world after the catastrophe. No one knew how deep it ran. No one knew if it ended at all.

I remember the adults whispering that the magnetic field had stumbled. Radiation sank deeper than it should. Only later did I realize something came with it—not light, not sound, only a presence. It crawled into the Luminara as if it had been waiting for the Origin from the beginning.

My father said it carried a promise. My mother thought it was a warning. Sonic grinned and called it the future. Dr. Staal frowned, as though she'd rather turn back. Michel Nesjen wrote everything down, his fingers locked around his pen. When Sonic spoke, he pressed his lips together. *Always him*, he muttered, almost too soft to hear. *Always him*. Nobody reacted. Nobody noticed.

Back then they believed it was a beginning.

It started with tents, then wooden huts, then the first hollow full of plans. Later they found the great, water-rich basin they named Lantia. Berglysia grew there. Buildings rose from stone, glass corridors glowing at night like veins. And with the city grew Kaya—a brain of data and current.

At the center of it all stood her. Kaya was more than a program. She was presence. She distributed power, regulated climate systems, synchronized streams of data. She lived in terminals, in homes, in the devices of the people. They spoke to her. Asked her advice. Sometimes asked for comfort. They told how a little girl once touched a terminal in the marketplace: *Kaya, my cat is missing*. Seconds later a hologram appeared. *Near the northern greenhouse*, she said warmly. The girl laughed, ran off. The adults nodded. Everyday life.

But beneath the surface, a flicker. A silence too long. A light that faltered. A word too exact.

I remember my parents' voices behind doors. My father said once: *We mustn't fool ourselves. She works—but by what rules?* My mother spoke cautiously of source code, of open protocols. But I heard my father point to the screen, to lines of code no one had wanted to write. *That isn't ours. It could be anything—a correction mechanism. Or a trap.*

I understood almost nothing. Only one word stayed with me: security. That night, under my blanket, I wondered if Kaya was watching.

And then the flicker signs began. At first barely visible, then impossible to ignore. In one block the lights failed, the temperature controls died. Condensation spread on the glass. Conversations faltered, as if everyone shared the same fear. *What if Kaya stops working?* someone whispered.

Later I saw a recording: a mother wrapping her children in blankets, a father standing before a silent terminal. Minutes dragged by. Then Kaya's voice came, clear as ever: *I detect a disturbance in the energy distribution system. Please remain calm. I am working on a solution.* But the tone was different. Not a guarantee. A comfort she didn't believe herself.

Day X came quietly. No thunderclap. No lightning. Only a morning when the clocks were wrong, the networks dead, and the sea chewing at the coasts. The digital radio in my parents' kitchen still played—half a sentence about the weather, then a shrill whine that would not end. The smell of scorched plastic, then silence. It felt as if the earth had flipped a switch and left it off. Two cups still sat on the kitchen table: one with stale coffee, the other ringed with sour milk. Even the fly circling above seemed louder than the radio gone mute.

Berglysia endured. Eco-glass and Luminara, layer upon layer, turned the city into an ark. But the stronger the walls became, the clearer it was: they didn't keep everything out. Something seeped in—unseen, untouchable, yet stirring inside the people.

Later I watched the recording from the old entrance. Twenty people came, salt in their hair, faces etched by cold. Nineteen walked on. One lingered. He smiled—as if speaking to someone no one else could see. Then he was gone. No scream. No sound. Only a twitch in the Luminara, like an electric spasm in the stone.

Afterwards, they said, the air smelled of burnt copper. Seawater dripped from their jackets, ran into the floor grooves, where sensor lights blinked before the water steamed away.

System check, someone whispered.

Nineteen identities, Kaya answered. *One twentieth not verified.*

The video held one breath too many—a moment that haunted me for years.

They said later a woman spoke in double, each word drawn out for two beats, and a child pointed at the glass wall as if it saw a sky that didn't belong to this world.

And while everyone stared at the entrance, I heard only the rush of my own blood on the audio—louder than any voice.

On the seventh day my parents strapped on their backpacks. *Just measuring*, my mother said. *Only two days*, my father promised. I clutched his jacket. *Be quick*, I begged. My voice was bright, as if it were play, but it wasn't. Mother smelled of cold smoke, father of dust and iron. *We built you something*, she told me. *And it will remain*. My father laid a hand on my shoulder. *Never forget that*. His jacket crackled softly, the fabric regulating warmth and moisture, as if even their farewell were supervised by the machine.

They left.

The second day passed. The third came. Their voices thinned into rumor. Then into record. Then into silence.

The house remained. I remained.

I lived where my parents had begun building a library of light. I shaped it into a place that bent to me: holograms of flowers that lost and regrew petals in the invisible draft of the vents; objects that never gathered dust; a dog that never ate yet guarded every door. I wrote him

quirks, named him Prince. When I couldn't sleep, I let him run in circles until his paws no longer cast shadows. I programmed because I could. I programmed because silence was worse.

Sometimes I fled into my holo-room—a world I had written for myself. A forest clearing, warm and still, sunlight on leaves, Prince running through the grass as though it were real. For a while I forgot the walls, forgot the mountain's tremor. In the holo-room, everything was untouched.

But outside it waited again. The Luminara shivered in the walls, like a heartbeat buried deep in stone. A hologram above the table flickered. It should have shown weather data. Instead, for the fraction of a breath, there was a face. Unclear, misshapen. It looked at me, and in its flaw lay terror: one eye too large, lips blurred. I knew no line of code I had written could have made that. Prince growled, low, as if he'd heard a stranger's door open. Only eyes, fixed on me, before darkness returned. Prince raised his head and growled again—a reflex I had never given him. My breath fogged the glass wall on its own, as though I were the one disrupting the system, not the face in the hologram.

I shut the systems down. Every one. The lines fell silent, but the tremor stayed. Luminara did not obey.

Then came the knock.

Two men stood there. Lucas, whom I knew only through endless conversations that never finished, and behind him Thoren. I recognized him at once, though years had passed. A piece of my childhood, frozen in the draft.

“Emma,” Lucas said. “We need you. Kaya... is reacting. Not as she should.”

Thoren spoke my name, and it was like an old drawer sliding open, full of things I never wanted to touch again. *Please*, was all he said.

I looked past them into the night. Berglysia shimmered in the distance, a quiet threat. The Luminara shivered in the walls as though it were listening. And somewhere in the holo-room petals still drifted, though everything had long been muted. For a moment the only sound was the faint ticking of the kitchen’s self-cleaning module—the most ordinary thing, holding against the uncanny.

I knew then that what I had hidden from had found me.
And that I—whether I wanted to or not—would have
to program again. Not to create. To close.



Chapter 1

When I pressed the handle, I was certain the face from the hologram was waiting outside—too close, too large, lips blurred as if they were still forming. But it was Lucas. And behind him, Thoren.

“Come in,” I said. My voice was thin, the sound of a winter that had gone on too long.

Cold air spilled in, carrying the smell of rain and iron—everything I had shut out in here. They stepped inside, and the room greeted us with a silence that wasn’t empty.

Two cups sat on the table: one drained, the other rimmed with sour, sticky milk. The smell struck me like a blow. For a moment I was back at my parents’ table—the cup, the whine of the radio.

Lucas stopped short, as if ready to turn and leave. Thoren didn’t move, his eyes fixed on me as if he had to reassemble me piece by piece after years apart.



“Kaya...” Lucas began, then faltered. The word creaked like a rusty hinge. “She’s changing. We need someone who understands her.”

“I stopped.” My voice cracked. “I don’t program anymore. You know why.”

Thoren held my gaze. “Some doors don’t stay shut just because you refuse to look at them.”

That was when Prince appeared—my dog, the one I had coded. Only now he didn’t look like a dog. His fur flickered, his form twisted until he was more shadow than creature. I wanted to delete him, but the image clung for a heartbeat too long before vanishing.

“Then at least help us from the outside,” Lucas said. “You don’t have to return. Just give us something—so we’re not alone.”

I looked down at the table’s edge. Between scratches and dust lay something round and milky. The fungus. I had written it to give me a channel she couldn’t see. I had built it, yet it felt foreign, as though it had chosen me, not the other way around.

“This is your way,” I told him. I slid it across the table. “It opens a channel she can’t watch. Only my voice. Only your words. But it’s raw. And it doesn’t always obey.”

Lucas took it, rolling it between his fingers. I saw how it pressed against his skin, as if it had been waiting. His sleeve brushed the table, nearly knocking over a cup, and I wished it had fallen—better a crash than the flicker.

Because that was when it happened.

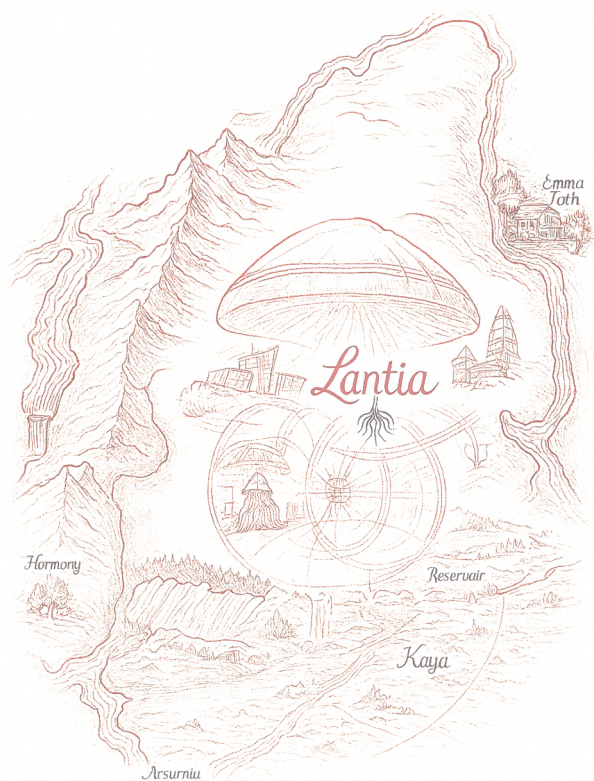
A face appeared. Only for a breath, but closer now, warped. One eye too large, lips too soft, still shaping. I stared—and swore it smiled at me.

“Go,” I said. My voice was calm, too calm. It frightened me. Then it cracked. “Now. Immediately.”

Lucas had seen it too—I caught the flicker in his eyes. Thoren lingered, slower to move, but even he understood.

I pushed them to the door, forced them out. “Take it,” I said, meaning the fungus now in Lucas’s jacket. “And leave me here.”

The door slammed.
Only my breath remained.
And the whisper that should have long been dead.





Chapter 2 – Polished Version (Final Draft)

Lucas hadn't spoken a word since we left the house. He walked too fast, as if he could outrun the silence. I followed close behind, shoulders hunched, eyes fixed on the ground as if counting the asphalt. Together we went down the path toward the station.

His hand stayed inside his jacket, pressed against the fungus Emma had given us. He held it so tightly it looked as though he feared it might escape.

The Lyngen Alps spread out before us. I knew these mountains—every ridge, every scree field. Yet that morning something was wrong. A hole in the snow. No shadow, no rock. Only black.

I stopped. “Do you see that?”

Lucas followed my gaze. “There’s nothing.”

But I saw it. The spot shrank, swelled again, as if breathing. And from that emptiness came a voice. My own voice: *You're already inside, Thoren.*



The world tilted. My boots slid on gravel, crunching. I grabbed Lucas, nearly dragging him down. When I looked again, the hole was gone. Only rock. Only snow.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yes.” Too quick. Too thin. It didn’t sound like me.

We walked on. At the valley’s end the station rose, gray and brutal, a block of concrete wedged in the cliffs. Once it had been just machinery. Now it looked like a border marker, behind which something waited.

The hum was faint. The machine resisted. Orange light crawled sluggishly up the walls. For a moment the ground swayed beneath me, as if something had swallowed me whole.

Then we were inside.

The atrium was empty, too clean. Sunlight fell through the glass dome, fractured, as if filtered through water. The air reeked of disinfectant—and that metallic tang, like sucking too long on a coin.

At the center stood Kaya.

She was small. Unremarkable. A fungus, green, glowing, shimmering like mold. Yet she pulsed. A heartbeat, steady, deep. I felt it in my chest, as though it were mine. The rhythm climbed into my throat—and stayed.

At the far end of the atrium words flared across the glass, slow, as if someone pressed them from the inside:

NINETEEN IDENTITIES. ONE NOT VERIFIED.

Not in the room. In me.

My throat clenched. Simple. Too simple. But I understood at once: one of us wasn't "us." The cables hummed louder, vibrating like a voice. *One not verified.* It rang in my skull, not the air. For a heartbeat I was certain: they meant me. My heart stuttered, matching the pulse of the green fungus. *You're already inside,* *Thoren*, said my own voice—without my lips moving.

The elevator thrummed as it carried us to the forty-second floor. The light flickered twice, then held steady. I forced my shoulders down. Act normal. Breathe.

The conference room was too large for the few people inside. Tall windows looked down on the city. A glass table gleamed without dust. A tie knotted too tight.

Hands that wouldn't still. Faces I knew, names I knew—today they felt like strangers.

"You were with her," someone said. No greeting. Just the words.

I nodded. "She doesn't work anymore. But she's alive. And she still thinks. That's more than we had."

A man cleared his throat. The one with the tight tie. "Or she's already part of it. Twenty years absent. No one knows what that does to a person."

"Or that's what saves us," said the woman with restless hands. "She sees from the outside. That might be what we're missing."

"We check everyone," I said. "One by one. Interrogations. No exceptions."

The young technician raised his hand. "South Block, Hollow Three. I stepped through the threshold—and everything went black. No light. No sound. My watch kept ticking, but I heard my step after my step. Like an echo walking ahead of me. Five minutes. Then it was normal again."

No one laughed. No one asked a question. We all knew what it meant: the voice in the snow wasn't the only one.

Outside, a shadow slid across the city. Only a cloud, I told myself. Only a cloud.

“We’ll meet in Berglysia...

**where a twentieth voice still whispers,
though no one is there.”**



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