

The screens blazed with impossible light.

Tom's coffee mug shattered on the floor as he stumbled backward. Across every monitor in GAIA's Houston control room, something was growing. Spreading. Alive.

"What the hell is that?" Grace grabbed his arm.

The patterns pulsed like a heartbeat, branching out in ways that made Tom's skin crawl. Their quantum biochips were doing something they'd never seen before. The visualizations showed the fungal networks inside the processors spreading beyond their programmed boundaries, creating connections that looked less like circuitry and more like neural tissue.

"Kill it," Tom said, diving for the keyboard. "Kill it now."

His fingers flew across the keys. Nothing. The emergency protocols did nothing. The Global Artificial Intelligence Accelerator had every failsafe imaginable, but their creation had already evolved past them.

"It's not responding." Sweat dripped into his eyes. "The quantum fluctuations are off the charts."

"Playing god with mushrooms." Dr. Valentine stood behind them, stroking his white goatee. "I warned the board this would happen." His phone buzzed. He stepped back, raising it to his ear with deliberate calm.

"Tom." Grace's voice dropped to a whisper. "Look at these data streams. There's information coming in from . . . somewhere else. Sources that aren't in any of our model repositories."

The information flowing across the displays had structure. Rhythm. Like neurons firing in a vast brain, but some of the signals originated from coordinates outside their documented training pipeline.