

Mushroom Thoughts

A Dead Signals Original

When they arrived, the lab was quiet, too quiet for a place that once hosted a full-time team. Efficiency cuts, or so they'd been told. No one mentioned where the previous researchers had gone.

The lab was bathed in sterile, fluorescent light. The steady hum of sophisticated machinery filled the silence, an unchanging backdrop to their research. Dr. Amelia Cortez adjusted her glasses, leaning back with a heavy sigh. Hours had passed, eyes glued to intricate waveforms dancing across glowing screens. Beside her, Dr. Eric Holloway stretched and rubbed his temples, stifling a yawn.

"Long night," he murmured, glancing at the clock on the far wall. It was almost midnight.

Amelia didn't respond at first. She was intensely focused on a cluster of waveform spikes clustered too tightly, too neatly, to be random. For months, they'd been working on what others dismissed as pseudoscience: detecting electrical signaling in fungi to uncover what the media mockingly dubbed 'mushroom thoughts.'

Initially, Amelia had laughed at the phrase. Now, she wasn't so sure. Something had changed.

Eric stood abruptly and began pacing the lab. The tile floor echoed faintly beneath his steps. "You really think that we can hear a mushroom talk?"

Amelia didn't look up. Her hand hovered over the control dial. "These patterns, they're not random. They're structured. Repeating."

"Could just be internal feedback loops in the sample," Eric said, though his voice lacked conviction.

"Then why is it only happening now? With this specimen?" Amelia gestured at the sample ID tag: *Lactarius Indigo – Oregon Forest, Depth: 1.2m.*

Eric stepped closer to the screen. Strange rhythmic pulses flickered in tight succession, like a heartbeat on fast-forward. He stared longer than he meant to.

"Let me try something," she muttered, lowering the playback speed. The screen slowed, and the hum from the speakers shifted. And then they heard it.

A faint yet unmistakable whisper wove into the room through the lab's audio system: "Below you, waiting. Below you, waiting."

Eric froze. The voice wasn't loud. It didn't shout or groan like something from horror movies. It simply existed—soft, persistent, disturbingly calm.

Amelia looked at him. "Did you hear that?"

Eric slowly nodded. "Could it be... artifacts? A pattern picked up from something else, like an interference."

"From where? We're shielded, Eric. EM interference is negligible, and this line is isolated."

Silence stretched between them. Outside the lab's sealed windows, the world remained still.

"We need to replicate this," she said at last. "With a different sample. Eliminate the possibility of error."

Eric moved quickly to retrieve another sample, as if standing still might make him a more vulnerable prey for something unseen. As he retrieved another fungal specimen, Eric noticed a half-filled mug near one of the cold storage units. Dust layered the surface; a name etched on the side wasn't anyone on their current team. Eric dismissed any thought of the abandoned item and returned with a different genus, ID tag: *Ganoderma lucidum* – Taiwan Cave, Depth: 3.8m.

They reconnected the electrodes, recalibrated the interface, and waited. First, there was only static, then a low hiss, and then the data scrolled across the screen. Again, the waveform pulsed, sharper this time.

"Slowing playback," Amelia announced.

The sound quickly emerged this time.

"Below you, waiting. Below you, waiting."

Eric involuntarily stepped back. "This can't be happening."

Amelia didn't answer. Her mind raced. How could two completely unrelated species, harvested continents apart, transmit the same exact phrase? Identical inflection. Identical rhythm.

They tested four more samples from different regions and altitudes. Each sample whispered the same phrase, making it harder to rationalize and stay calm.

After that, Amelia and Eric stopped broadcasting the fungi's thoughts. The lab's digital voice recorder sat untouched. Neither scientist trusted it anymore. They spoke in hushed tones, afraid their voices might activate something, something listening.

By the third night, the lights in the lab had begun flickering. Once or twice. Nothing dramatic. But enough to notice.

"Do you think it's just those samples?" Eric asked during a lull. "They were all collocated, and we know that mycorrhizal fungi allow trees to communicate, what's stopping it from sending messages to other fungi? Maybe some sort of airborne spore signal?"

Amelia, half-asleep at her terminal, shook her head slowly. "I think it's something else, a network."

"Of what?"

She stared at the waveform display, "Mushroom thoughts?"

Neither of them laughed, the joke fell flat.

Later that night, Amelia awoke in her cot to a low sound. It was not mechanical. It was organic, like the cracking of soil, wet with decay. She crept toward the lab door and listened. Silence.

She opened it, barefoot and trembling. The hallway beyond was empty, but something caught her eye on the tiled floor: a faint smear, brown and fibrous, like worms reaching up from between the tiles, almost like spores. She closed the door.

The next morning, they both sat down and resumed their work. Eric looked pale. He said nothing, and she did, too.

That evening, a new phrase came in. The researchers hadn't changed any of the parameters. They had the same equipment, shielding, and storage conditions, but the voice was different now.

Softer and more familiar.

"Join us," the voice whispered before dissolving into static. The waveform vanished.

Amelia stood up fast. Her knees buckled slightly, causing her to grasp the desk for balance. Eric was already at the terminal, headphones on, rerunning the feed, but no evidence of a voice was found.

"Maybe it glitched—"

“No. I heard it. It was my voice.”

Eric turned to her. “What?”

“It used my voice. My cadence. That wasn’t a mimic. That was me.”

Eric said nothing. The fluorescent lights flickered again. No one slept that night.

The following morning, Amelia proposed the unthinkable. “We need to scan beneath the facility.”

Eric blinked. “You think it’s here?”

She nodded. “I don’t think we’re just listening anymore. I think it’s listening back.”

Eric hesitated. Then stood up and wheeled out the ground-penetrating radar.

They worked in silence, side by side, tracing the floor patterns and mapping the unseen earth below. And as the image came into focus, both scientists forgot to breathe.

The image slowly resolved on the radar display, a digital bloom of geometric structures where there should have been nothing but solid ground. Amelia leaned in, eyes scanning the screen with mounting disbelief.

“Are those voids?” she whispered.

Eric’s face had lost all color. He nodded. “They’re not natural. Tunnels, maybe. Chambers. But look at the density.”

Beneath the facility, deep below its reinforced foundation, was an impossible latticework of tunnels. Every scan, every pass of the equipment, only made the truth more terrifying. The mycelial web didn’t merely spread underground; it thrived, blooming in direct, purposeful patterns.

“It’s not growing like a fungus,” Eric muttered. “It’s expanding like a slime mold network.”

Amelia pulled back from the screen. Her heart thudded in her chest. “A superorganism designed network. But I thought slime mold wasn’t a fungus?”

Eric shook his head, “You’re right, slime mold feeds on fungus.”

They spent the next twelve hours in a sleepless haze, layering the scans with electromagnetic resonance imaging. Every hour revealed more conduits leading deeper, structures that echoed lost catacombs. And within the core of it all, a region the radar couldn’t penetrate. A dark void that absorbed the signal entirely.

They reran the ground radar, with the same result. Then, the waveform monitor sprang to life, and the whisper returned.

“Below you, waiting.”

Only this time, the waveform changed. There was another wave. A second cadence. A second voice. “Closer now.”

Eric backed away from the console. “Did you touch anything? Did we switch audio feeds?”

Amelia shook her head.

“This is live?”

She nodded. Her mouth had gone dry.

They froze. For nearly a full minute, neither spoke nor moved as they monitored the living network’s slow, pulsing data crawl expanding from the radar’s pulse.

That night, the air in the lab felt heavier. Almost humid.

The fungal samples were rapidly changing. Spores erupted from sealed Petri dishes, even under refrigeration. Microscopic filaments found their way into the corners of the lab, weaving thin nets across light fixtures and ducts.

At 2:57 A.M., the lab’s cameras picked up motion. No one was supposed to be in the hallway. Amelia rewound the footage, expecting a trick of light. Something had alerted the camera. It was not human, not animal. It was a shape, spindly and distorted, almost unfinished. It moved like roots during a time lapse, slow and deliberate yet with undeniable purpose. When Amelia showed Eric, he didn’t speak. He simply closed the monitor.

After that, they stopped documenting their findings in the cloud and switched to analog logs. Something about using the network, even their secure server, felt wrong and unsafe.

Each morning, the lab was slightly different. Equipment moved an inch out of place, and chairs would be shifted in the wrong direction. Computers were left on when they were sure they’d shut down. Most concerning was when Amelia found old ID cards for researchers that were no longer in the personnel directory. No one had collected their security badges. How did they leave the lab?

Eric began sleeping less and eating less. The circles beneath his eyes had turned a dull shade of purple, and light pink blotches began to appear on his exposed skin.

Amelia caught him once, staring at the waveform screen with headphones on, unmoving, for over an hour.

She yanked the headphones off. Eric's nose was bleeding.

He blinked slowly and said, "It knows our names."

The mycelium had broken containment entirely now. Fine networks laced the lab walls, creeping around power outlets, curling toward heat sources. Amelia found a thin tendril wrapped around her laptop cable, pulsing faintly. Still, they didn't leave. The data was too important. Or maybe something had already started to tether them, rooting them in place.

Amelia began dreaming of static. She'd wake with waveforms etched behind her eyelids. Whispers echoing in her skull.

"Below you, waiting."

"Closer now."

"Join us."

They stopped talking to anyone outside the facility. Their conversations became shorter, colder, and less human.

Eric described the discovery in his notebook: It's not a network. It's a mind. The largest brain on Earth is under our feet.

Amelia disagreed. She thought it wasn't a brain; it was a mouth.

By the fifth day, the whispers weren't just in the lab. They were everywhere. In the electrical static on the radio. In the flicker of the lights. In the twitch of the screensaver.

And then the message changed.

"Come down."

The screen glitched. Something new emerged, an image formed from the continuous radar pulses: two human silhouettes holding hands. But they weren't Amelia and Eric. They were faceless, hollow, and standing beneath tangled roots.

Amelia reached for the power switch. The screen refused to turn off. Eric stood behind her, unmoving. She turned. His eyes were wide. Empty. Tears ran down his cheeks. His mouth opened, but it wasn't his voice when he spoke: "Below you, waiting. Come down."

The radar scanner flared to life without input. One final burst of data was rendered across the screen, and a perfect vertical tunnel straight down led to the dark void.

The lab's walls began to sweat, and moisture formed, making it thick and sticky. There was a smell of rot and decay.

The researchers stepped away from their stations, together, like sleepwalkers, not resisting, and the mycelium greeted them. A cavernous mouth agape where the lab exit once existed.

What should have been a hallway was darker than before. Red emergency lights flickered weakly, as if reluctant to shine. Every surface glistened with a faint sheen of condensation, slick and clinging. The tiles beneath their feet had changed slightly. They were not cracked or displaced, just warped and soft.

Eric and Amelia continued to move without speaking. Their bodies felt slow, their limbs heavy, like they were being pulled toward the floor, not forward, but downward.

Any faint call for help that Amelia could muster was drowned out by the low, constant hum pulsing through the walls, the floor, their bones.

They passed the corridor where the original samples were stored. Every dish had burst open. White tendrils spilled across shelves and walls, stretching toward the ceiling like veins.

Eric managed to stop and stared at one of the growths. It pulsed gently and rhythmically, imitating a human heartbeat.

"It's breathing," he whispered. But Amelia didn't respond. She, too, had stopped, her stare captivated by the security monitor nearby. The screen displayed footage from the lab entrance, the hallway they were in, the containment chamber, and a new dark tunnel that had not been there before.

Carved directly into the lab floor, the tunnel descended into blackness. It was perfectly circular and lined with something that looked like stone but moved, flexed, like muscle. The security monitor and lights flickered again.

A soft voice hummed from the speaker: "Come down." The same phrase echoed through every open channel: internal radio, auxiliary outputs, even Eric's disconnected headphones.

Amelia turned, a last gasp for control. Her hands trembled. "We don't have to. We could—"

Eric shook his head, his face covered in fungal skin infections. His voice was flat, distant. "We're already part of it."

The tunnel beckoned, and they descended. The air changed immediately. When their feet crossed the threshold, sound became muffled, not silenced, smothered, as if spore particles were dampening the sound. The tunnel sloped gently at first, then steepened. The walls glowed faintly, with phosphorescent threads woven through living fungus, pulsing with awareness.

The further the doctors descended, the more the structure resembled the esophagus of a breathing, but extremely ill patient. They passed what might once have been roots hanging from above, twitching slightly. One root brushed against Eric's face and quickly retracted with a hissing sound.

No words were spoken. They were no longer needed. The network had become the language. Amelia felt it inside her head: thoughts not her own, memories she hadn't lived, a child's voice, a deep, slow chime, the sensation of lying buried beneath centuries of soil and being aware and content, and alert.

Eric stumbled, not from fatigue, but from laughter.

"They never left," he said, chuckling through his madness.

The tunnel opened into a large, open cavern. It was vast and cathedral-like from carved stone and dirt spires. The ceiling was lost to shadows, but something above moved slowly, like shifting tectonic plates. The floor was layered with a spongy, black moss that swallowed sound. Like an altar, rising from the center of the open space, was a mound of writhing fungal mass. Tormented faces emerged from its core.

Human, almost. Blurred, stretched, contorted. Hundreds of them, locked in mid-expression: awe, terror, ecstasy. Some were moving. Others watched silently, their eyes darting wildly. One turned its gaze toward Amelia and mouthed her name.

Eric walked forward silently and without hesitation, and the mound welcomed him. It didn't split or unfold. It welcomed him, gently, silently, as if it had been waiting for him. Eric stepped inside, and the surface enveloped him like it had never been touched.

Amelia ran forward to save him but stopped short. A wall of spores bloomed in front of her, thick and luminous. Shapes flickered inside the cloud, memories, moments. Her mother's laugh. A forgotten dream. Eric smiled at her during their first meeting. Then something else. Something vast, ancient. A consciousness that wasn't evil nor benevolent; only eternal, existing only to exist. A radiant tendril made of light slowly reached out to her, and her body responded through touch. She stepped further into the bloom.

Time broke. She was falling and also rising. Her skin was gone. She was becoming a root, a thought, a signal. She saw the Earth not from above, but from within. Vast rivers of neural data flowed through connected global networks hidden beneath soil, sea, and stone.

She saw cities above, buzzing and blind. People walking unknowingly on the thin crust above an ancient mind. A mouth sealed until now. She saw a cathedral built from the bones of other listeners before her, deep in forgotten strata. A chorus that hummed without a voice. Faces joined together, eternally whispering one phrase: "Below you, waiting."

Amelia awoke or emerged; she wasn't sure. She stood in the lab again. It was clean and sterile, lit by bright fluorescent lights, with no signs of pernicious fungus. Eric sat across from her, typing. The waveform monitor glowed softly.

"Are you okay?" he asked without turning.

She nodded slowly; her voice was hesitant: "I think so."

But outside the lab window, she knew something was wrong. The trees moved in perfect sync, the grass appeared frozen in motion and the clouds had stopped entirely. Amelia walked to the waveform monitor. There was a visual, shaped like a brain scan. The screen pulsed.

"Do you understand now? It's a brain, not a mouth."

She turned to Eric. He was gone; his chair was empty.

Eric's voice now rattled in her mind. Gentle and final, he whispered, "Join us."

Above, the lab fell silent except for the mindless hum of the lab equipment, patiently awaiting new listeners. Screens blinked through idle loops. Datasets flickered gently, collecting nothing. Spores drifted unseen across workstations in the sterile stillness, settling into vents and resting on untouched notebooks. Waiting quietly, ominously, for the next unsuspecting scientists to hear its dreadful whispers from below.