

Mycelium

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Mycelium

by [spacedogfromspace](#)

Summary

Something is wrong with Jim Kirk. Mushrooms are growing in him, and nobody can figure out why.

Notes

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CW for Bones being vaguely space racist.

Oh yeah this is the one where I wrote 95% of it in one day to hit deadlines.

It started with the sensation of something invisible pressing down on his chest. And for a while, that was all it was. Just a tightness around the lungs, and slight lack in his lung capacity. He thought nothing of it, assuming that he had just pulled a muscle in his torso on a rough away mission. It didn't hurt, so he didn't bother getting it checked out by Doctor McCoy, and he soon forgot about it, growing accustomed to the sensations after a few short days.

That was how it started. It began to change one day when Jim was on duty up on the bridge, finding himself with the compulsive need to clear his throat. There was a tickle there that had been plaguing him all morning, low in his throat, feeling like it was in his chest.

"Are you alright, Captain?" Spock asked after a few hours of excessive throat-clearing from Jim.

"Yeah," Jim said, clearing his throat again. "I'm fine. Probably just allergic to something."

"Perhaps you should pay Doctor McCoy a visit," Spock suggested. He knew that Jim had an aversion to sickbay, but if Spock had to listen to Jim's obsessive throat-clearing for another minute, he was going to have to come up with an excuse to spend the rest of alpha shift in the science labs just to get away from it.

Surprisingly, though, Jim nodded in agreement. "You're right," he said, standing up. "No sense toughing it out when a quick hypo will clear it right up. Mr Spock, you have the conn. I won't be long."

When the turbo-lift doors closed, Jim allowed an aggressive coughing fit to take him over. It felt painful, like his lungs were tearing, and despite the congestion he felt in his chest, he didn't cough up any mucous like he expected he would. Pressing a hand to his chest and grimacing at the burning sensation brought on by the coughing, Jim sighed. He had hoped that the fit would have brought him some relief, if temporary, but the only relief he was granted was from not having to hold it in any longer. And all of that relief vanished as the turbo-lift stopped at G deck, doors sliding open for him to proceed towards sickbay.

Only, he didn't actually want to go to sickbay. He had just wanted the excuse to get away from the crew to have a good cough without anyone becoming needlessly worried about him. If this were allergies, sure, he would be trotting off to sickbay for a hypo. But Jim knew this wasn't allergies. He was very familiar with what allergies felt like, and this wasn't it. It felt more like something was in his lungs. He had no idea what that something was, maybe he had inhaled something accidentally, or perhaps it was some sort of tumour. But, he wasn't about to go out of his way to find out, as it would undoubtedly lead to uncomfortable and invasive medical procedures. He didn't need that kind of stress and anxiety in his life if he could help it. And whatever it was only caused an uncomfortable tickle and a bit of a cough. Not serious enough to warrant getting poked and prodded in sickbay about it. So, after lingering around on G deck for a few minutes, Jim returned to the bridge without visiting sickbay, and tried very, very hard to neither cough nor clear his throat for the rest of alpha shift.

That night, when he was unable to sleep due to the coughing, it got worse. Whatever it was in or near his lungs felt like it had grown over just a couple of hours, and the pain it caused in his chest was impossible to ignore. With no memory of his transit from the bed to the floor, Jim found himself on his hands and knees next to his bed, struck by an uncontrollable bout of hacking and coughing. It was so intense that Jim started to wonder if perhaps his body was rejecting his lungs and trying to cough *them* out.

He was feeling light-headed and wondering when, or if, this attack would stop, when suddenly, he felt something dislodge from somewhere in his chest. His coughing stopped, and a moment of relief washed over him. But only a moment, because he then realized that whatever it was was now low in his windpipe, choking him.

Survival instinct kicked him into high gear. He leapt to his feet - ignoring the rush of dizziness - and threw himself over the back of one of the chairs near his desk, in an attempt to expel the object from his windpipe. It took a few tries, coupled with coordinated coughs, but eventually the object crested the top of his throat and flew from his mouth, bouncing across the desk before disappearing from sight. Chest heaving as he caught his breath, Jim slumped down in the chair, placing his forearms on the desk and resting his head atop them, feeling exhausted from the exertion.

He hadn't yet recovered when a knock sounded at his door, forcing him to peel himself off his desk. "Enter," he called hoarsely, using a sleeve to wipe the spit from around his mouth and smoothing his hair down with his opposite hand.

The door hissed open, and Spock stepped into the room, allowing the door to close behind him. "Captain, are you alright?" He asked. The fact that he crossed the room to kneel beside Jim rather than making his inquiries from the doorway betrayed Spock's worry.

"I'm fine, Spock," Jim said between deep breaths. A warm and fuzzy feeling snuck up on him. It was sweet of Spock to come check on him. "Just choked on some water, that's all. I'm sorry if I woke you."

Spock eyed him skeptically. "Are you sure you aren't ill? I could fetch Doctor McCoy-"

"No," Jim said quickly. "Really, Spock, I'm fine now. Don't worry." He offered a grin as if to emphasize that he really was fine. When Spock raised a doubtful eyebrow at him, Jim sighed, adding, "If it comes back I'll go see Bones, okay?"

Spock didn't look very convinced, but deferred to Jim's judgement anyway. "Get some rest, Jim," he said as he stood up and made to leave the room. He stopped in the doorway briefly to throw a worried glance back at Jim, who smiled and waved him off gently.

Jim dropped his smile and sprang to his feet the moment the door closed behind Spock. "Lights, sixty-percent," he ordered, and light filled the room. He stepped around the desk, scanning the floor for whatever it was that he had just coughed up. Spotting it under the desk, he knelt down and reached for it, snatching it with the tips of his fingers and bringing it close for inspection.

Coin-sized and rounded, the object was white under the sticky layer of blood that covered it. Jim frowned and walked it over to the bathroom, running it under the sink to get a better look. With most of the blood washed away, he could see a porous texture on the surface of the white object. It was smooth and slippery when wet, though the texture wasn't uniform throughout. The underside had a wide and jagged circular stump, nearly flush with the rest of the ovaloid object, almost like a stem, or some kind of root. Small pieces of what he assumed were his own tissues were still attached.

Jim squinted at it for a long moment, realizing that he recognized the object. He had found and collected many during his childhood on Earth, though they were typically much larger than this. It was a puffball mushroom.

"What the fuck," he breathed, staring at the mushroom. How did it get in his lungs? He certainly didn't inhale it, it was much too big for him to have accidentally breathed it in without noticing. It must have grown there, inside him. But how? Did he breathe in spores that somehow survived and thrived inside his lungs? It seemed unlikely. Not wanting to look at it any longer, Jim incinerated it.

Jim made it through the next day with little more than a soreness in his chest. He relaxed, thinking that the previous night's mushroom was a weird fluke, and now that it was gone, he would be right as rain. Even Spock's concern seemed to diminish as he saw Jim go about his duties without so much as a cough.

The trouble returned in the evening, when the tightness in Jim's chest returned. He made an attempt to sleep it off, and while he was partly successful, he was woken in the early hours of the morning with difficulty breathing and a bout of reflexive coughing.

To his relief, this attack was far less violent than the previous one. He coughed up a cluster of small greyish mushrooms with tiny caps and long, stringy stems. His chest didn't burn as it did the night before, and he guessed that perhaps this cluster wasn't trapped in his lungs, but somewhere in his throat, making it easier to dislodge and expel. Once again, he incinerated the evidence.

Despite the less-violent attack, Jim did not escape scrutiny the next day. Spock cornered him in the turbo-lift on the way to the bridge and inquired about it.

"Trouble sleeping again, Captain?" He asked, raising a stern and knowing eyebrow at Jim.

"Call me Jim when it's just us," Jim said, partly to change the subject, and partly because he really did wish Spock would stop being quite so formal with him all the time.

Stopping the turbo-lift, Spock crossed his arms and gave Jim a pointed look. "Have you gone to see Doctor McCoy, as you promised you would if your coughing attacks returned?" He asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Jim shrunk under Spock's accusatory stare, wishing that he was trapped in an elevator with his first officer under different circumstances. Specifically, circumstances where Jim could gaze into Spock's beautiful eyes without feeling like he was about to get lectured to death.

"Jim?" Spock asked, when Jim didn't answer.

Realizing that he had been zoning out and daydreaming about Spock while standing *right in front of him*, Jim shook his head, bringing himself back into reality. "Uh, yeah, yeah. I went and saw him this morning. Just allergies." He stammered, grinning nervously as he instructed the turbo-lift to continue to the bridge.

Spock squinted at him skeptically. "So if I were to comm Doctor McCoy and ask if he had seen you this morning, he would confirm that you had made an appearance in sickbay?"

"Yes," Jim said, but he didn't sound convincing. He knew Spock wasn't bluffing. He sighed. "Okay, fine. I didn't go to sickbay this morning," he admitted, just as the turbo-lift doors opened, revealing the bridge.

Spock grabbed Jim's arm, stopping him from leaving the turbo-lift. "Mr Sulu," Spock called out. "You have the conn," he said, commanding the turbo-lift to G deck, offering no explanation to the bridge crew. He only let go of Jim's arm once the doors had closed, rightly predicting that Jim would bolt if he were given the opportunity.

"Where are we going?" Jim asked dumbly, his brain apparently fried by Spock's touch.

"Sickbay," Spock answered flatly. "To make sure you fulfill your promises."

Jim groaned. "Really, Spock. I'm *fine*," he insisted, but only halfheartedly. Spock was too stubborn to be swayed once his mind was made up. On the bright side, Jim got a few extra minutes alone with Spock.

Spock lead him through G deck. Jim assumed that he would be escorted to the doors of sickbay and left there, but apparently Spock had very little trust in him, because he stepped into sickbay with Jim. Doctor McCoy seemed surprised to see the two of them there, and he glanced between them questioningly.

"Jim needs to be examined," Spock said. "He has some sort of illness that he will neither admit nor acknowledge. Likely respiratory."

Jim pouted. He had hoped that he could pass off this sickbay visit as a social one, but Spock just *had* to lay it all out in the open.

"Oh *really*," Doctor McCoy said, giving Jim a look that clearly meant, '*you motherfucker*.'

Jim grimaced and looked to Spock for help, but Spock was already on his way out the door, presumably to return to his bridge duties. "See you later, Spock," Jim called out quickly, just before the doors closed, trapping him alone with Doctor McCoy. His voice was much too chipper in the face of his impending lecture, not to mention the poking and prodding.

Doctor McCoy scoffed, attracting Jim's attention in time for him to witness a classic Bones eye-roll.

"What?" Jim snapped.

"Jim, you've been acting like a school-girl with her first crush for over a month, now. I get it, but one of these days you're going to make me sick with your..." he waved a hand nebulously at Jim. "Sappiness."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jim said quickly, pretending to be interested in the wall to avoid McCoy's eyes.

"You've got a thing for Spock," McCoy said flatly.

Jim flinched. "Is it really that obvious?"

"Obvious enough that the whole ship has probably caught on by now," McCoy answered, eliciting a grimace from Jim. A flush crept up his neck.

"Does Spock know, then?" He asked, looking like he wanted to die.

McCoy thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Nah, he's the only one on this ship more oblivious than you are. Spock wouldn't catch on if you slapped him in the face with your feelings," he said confidently. Then with a thoughtful frown, he added, "Which you're practically doing already... Anyways, hop on up," he patted a bio-bed. "Let's see what's wrong with you that you don't want me knowing about."

Jim complied, reluctantly, and tried to hold still as he was poked and prodded. McCoy asked him a slew of questions: 'What are your symptoms, when did this start, why the fuck didn't you come to me sooner?' And Jim answered as best he could: 'A cough, tightness in the chest, that kind of thing. Started maybe a month ago. Didn't come sooner because I didn't feel like getting yelled at.' He omitted the part about the mushrooms.

"That's cold," Jim hissed as McCoy pressed a cold, metal device to Jim's chest, moving it about to get a thorough image of his lungs.

"You'll live," Doctor McCoy said, before frowning at the image that appeared on screen.

Jim noticed McCoy's expression and sat up, twisting around to look at the screen. To his medically untrained eye, Jim saw what looked like a normal set of lungs. "What is it?" he asked McCoy, wondering what he saw that Jim didn't.

"Something weird," McCoy answered absently, and zoomed in close on a tiny part of the image. "Look at this," he said, adjusting the exposure. "Your lung tissue looks like this all across the board."

Jim saw a pattern of lines running through his lung tissue, a sprawling network of tiny filaments that appeared stark white in the grey-scale image. "Aren't those just blood vessels? Or nerves?" He asked, skeptical of McCoy's concern.

McCoy shook his head. "No. I don't know what these are," he admitted. The fact that McCoy didn't make fun of Jim's poor understanding of the circulatory and nervous systems signalled that this was something to be worried about. "I'm gonna need a biopsy," he decided, finally tearing his eyes from the screen and stepping away to gather instruments.

"Okay," Jim said, before thinking about it further, and frowning. "Wait, how are you going to get a biopsy of my lungs? They're like, inside me."

"Good observation, Jim," McCoy said sarcastically, returning with what looked like a long, narrow hose.

Jim leapt to his feet, putting the bio-bed between him and McCoy as a shield. "*Oh* no. No," he said, pointing an accusatory finger at McCoy. "You are *not* putting that down my throat."

McCoy scoffed. "Oh, don't be such a child- Hey! Get back here!" He snapped as Jim made a run for the door.

Jim had almost made it to the door when he felt the sharp stab of a hypo in the side of his neck, and a strong hand clamp down around his forearm, halting him. The fast-acting hypo relaxed him, his knees nearly buckling beneath him, and his brain fogged over in disorientation.

"Well done, Christine," McCoy said as Nurse Chapel lead Jim back to the bio-bed, supporting Jim's weight so he wouldn't topple over. "This is why you're head nurse."

Nurse Chapel smiled. "I was the top patient-wrangler of my year," she joked.

Jim looked over at her. "You're strong," he slurred.

"I know," she winked, and deposited him back on the bio-bed.

Jim was complacent as Doctor McCoy and Nurse Chapel performed the bronchoscopy, collecting a biopsy sample from Jim's lungs. He was conscious, but he didn't feel a thing, and in fact didn't even remember the procedure when the effects of the hypo wore off an hour later.

There was nothing else to be done for at least the rest of the day, until the sample was analyzed by pathology, so Jim was cleared to return to his usual duties on the bridge. This gave Jim some comfort. If he was being let out of sickbay, whatever was wrong with him couldn't have been *that* bad, right?

Jim woke up in the middle of the night with a pain in his chest. That was nothing new, the bronchoscopy had left him with a pain there all afternoon. But this was different. Like there was something in there.

Here we go again, Jim thought glumly, as the coughing fit began. Once he started it was hard to stop. Whenever he paused in his coughing to take a breath, he couldn't get enough air, which just triggered more coughing.

He jumped slightly as a gentle hand landed on his shoulder. The shock paused his coughing long enough for him to look over his shoulder. "Spock," he wheezed, feeling dazed. "How did you get in here?"

"Doctor McCoy gave me his medical override code," Spock said softly. "Captain, we must get you to sickbay," he said as Jim's coughing fit resumed.

"Call me Jim," Jim said between coughs.

Spock nodded, leading him by the elbow out into the hall. "Jim."

Doctor McCoy had been sleeping in his office until the sound of Jim coughing up a lung in sickbay woke him. He got up to investigate, opening the door to his office just as Spock was about to knock.

"Jesus," McCoy said under his breath as he jumped back in surprise. "Don't sneak up on me like that." He turned his attention to Jim before Spock could tell him that he hadn't done any sneaking. "What's wrong with you?"

Jim couldn't answer because he was too busy keeling over with an aggressive coughing fit, but he managed to shoot a '*what do you think*' glare up at him.

McCoy rolled his eyes and dragged Jim over to a bio-bed. "Let's get another picture of those lungs. See what's going on that's agitating you so much," he said, pulling on a pair of gloves and reaching for the imaging device. "Can you try not to cough for thirty seconds?" He asked.

"No promises," Jim choked out. He ended up holding his breath for the duration of the imaging, since breathing seemed to trigger fits. Once the scan was complete, he inhaled, then rolled onto his side, coughing violently.

McCoy grimaced, patting Jim on the back. "Easy there," he said idly, before looking up at the screen. His jaw dropped. "What the *hell* is that? That wasn't there this morning!" The image of Jim's lungs was exactly identical to the one taken in the morning, with the exception of a large growth that had sprouted near the top of his right lung. Jim didn't have to look at the screen to know what it was.

"How could a tumour of that size have appeared in less than twenty-four hours?" Spock asked from behind the doctor.

McCoy jumped and spun around. "Jesus, Spock! Don't do that!" He scolded, as if Spock had been creeping around scaring the bajeezus out of him on purpose. "What are you still doing here?" He asked, then shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Make yourself useful and hold him down so he doesn't bolt," he ordered.

"I hardly think that's necessary," Spock said, as Jim continued to be wracked with coughs so vicious that it was unlikely he could go anywhere

even if he wanted to. Nonetheless, Spock stood beside Jim's bio-bed. Just in case.

One hypo later, and Jim's coughing became less aggressive and less frequent as the anaesthetic kicked in. McCoy prepared the bronchoscope and started coaxing it down Jim's throat.

"He's still conscious," Spock warned.

"He's supposed to be," McCoy snapped. He gentled his voice when he realized that Spock was just concerned for Jim, and not trying to be a backseat surgeon. "He won't feel a thing. Probably won't remember it if it goes anything like last time."

McCoy and Spock watched the bronchoscope's progress on the screen, transmitted by a tiny camera with a tiny light. Something out of the ordinary appeared, bright white in the sharp light.

McCoy frowned. "The hell is this? We aren't even at the lungs yet," he said under his breath, cursing himself. He wished that he had thought to take some images of Jim's windpipe, because apparently the problem wasn't contained to the lungs. There was a cluster of small, white masses attached to Jim's throat. "Well, I guess we'll start here," McCoy grumbled.

It took a while to dislodge the masses, which were firmly rooted. After cauterizing the bleeding area and pulling the masses out one at a time and setting them on a sterile tray, McCoy readied himself for the extraction of the mass in Jim's lung. He resisted the urge to examine the masses that were already removed, that would come later. Spock, however, was hovering over the tray, studying them.

At least the mass in Jim's lung had no friends. It was larger than the previous ones, but not so big that McCoy wouldn't be able to pull it back up. Dislodging it caused a lot of bleeding, which was difficult to cauterize, but McCoy managed. He busied himself finishing the procedure, ensuring that Jim wasn't bleeding and that nothing was left behind that shouldn't be, when he felt eyes on him. He turned to see Spock looking at him, concerned. "What?" McCoy asked.

Spock opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again, thinking better of it. It would be better for Doctor McCoy to see for himself. Spock just gestured to the tray.

McCoy leaned over the tray, examining the white objects, which were now less white and more of an orange-red due to a thin coating of blood. He turned them over with a gloved hand, squeezing them slightly. He looked up at Spock, his face writ with confusion. "Are these mushrooms?" He asked, feeling ridiculous just asking.

Spock nodded. "I believe so, Doctor."

McCoy looked back down at the mushrooms on the tray. "But they were attached! They couldn't have just.... *grown* out of him!" Spock had nothing to say to that. This was beyond the both of them. "No wonder pathology couldn't identify those filaments," McCoy said under his breath.

Jim was beginning to come to his senses. "What's going on?" He asked, groggily.

McCoy frowned sympathetically. "Sorry kid. I'm going to need to keep you here until we have this figured out."

"Oh," Jim said, sounding disappointed and resigned.

McCoy didn't sleep that night, staying up to keep an eye on Jim and take hourly imaging scans of Jim's lungs and throat, watching for any new growths. Spock tried to stay, too, but McCoy chased him out, arguing that he'd need to get some rest if he was going to replace Jim on the bridge the next day.

Jim didn't get much sleep either, on account of McCoy accidentally waking him up with the freezing cold imaging device every hour. Eventually Jim mentioned that he knew about the mushrooms, and had coughed them up a couple nights in a row. McCoy exploded with anger and frustration at him for not saying anything about it, shouting loudly enough that a security officer poked his head into sickbay to make sure everything was okay. By morning, Jim and McCoy were exhausted.

The doors whooshed open twenty minutes before alpha shift began, and Spock walked in, Sulu in tow. "Doctor," Spock nodded at McCoy politely before turning his attention to Jim, frowning at the bags under his eyes. "How are you this morning, Jim?"

"Well, Bones kept me up all night, and I have mushrooms growing in me," Jim answered in a hoarse voice, offering a light shrug. Spock raised an eyebrow at McCoy.

"He hasn't grown any new ones yet," McCoy sighed. "Believe me, I've been watching."

Spock nodded, slightly relieved. He gestured to Sulu. "I've informed Mr Sulu of the situation. As our resident botanist, he may be able to give us some insight into Jim's affliction."

McCoy's eyebrows shot up, impressed. "That's a great idea," he admitted. "Thanks for being on top of that, Spock." He turned to Sulu. "So, what have you looked at so far?"

"Well, I've been down to pathology to take a look at the mushrooms, I did an analysis on the biopsy sample with the 'strange unidentified filaments,' and I've examined all the images you've taken," he listed.

"All that already?" McCoy asked, surprised.

Sulu nodded tiredly. "Mr Spock woke me up early."

McCoy shot a look at Spock, but decided to forgo lecturing him about not sleeping, not to mention interfering with the sleep schedules of other crew members. This was important enough to warrant some lost sleep. "What do you make of it? Have you seen anything like this before?" He asked Sulu.

Sulu shook his head. "Definitely not," he said. "None of this makes any real sense, but Jim's got mushrooms growing in him. And they probably aren't going to stop on their own. That network of fibres in his tissues are mycelium. Basically the main 'plant' of the fungus. The mushrooms are just its blooms. So as long as the mycelium is in there, the mushrooms will continue to bloom. I don't know how, but it's thriving in there. And spreading, which you can see if you compare the images from yesterday morning and the most recent ones."

McCoy just blinked in disbelief. This was all insane. "So... if we can kill the mycelium, he'll be cured?" He asked.

Sulu nodded grimly. "Yes, but I don't think you'll be able to kill it. This stuff has been known to absorb heavy metals from contaminated soil and be just fine after. I'm not doctor but I feel like anything that will kill it will kill Jim, too." Sulu grimaced. He didn't like bearing bad news. "Maybe you could remove it surgically?" He offered.

McCoy sighed. "You've seen the images. It's just too integrated with the tissues to be able to remove it." There was a long silence. Jim had fallen asleep, but McCoy, Sulu, and Spock were trying to think of any other solutions, coming up with nothing.

Checking the time, McCoy broke the silence. "You two are going to be late for alpha shift. I'll do some research, see what I can dig up. Thank you, Mr Sulu. This is helpful."

"One more thing, Doc," Sulu said. "I know there's only two days of data and that this might not end up being the pattern, but mushrooms tend to crop up at night or in the early morning. You should check in the evenings. Nip them in the bud, as they say."

McCoy nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate having a timeline. Now hopefully these weird mushrooms follow it."

McCoy spent hours upon hours over the next week trying to find any record of similar cases in medical journals and databases, but so far he had found nothing. He sent queries out to all the medical researchers he knew, and none of them had any ideas either. He was starting to worry that Jim was patient zero of whatever this was. He cringed at the choice of words. Hopefully whatever it was wouldn't turn out to be contagious.

Sulu's insights had been more helpful than McCoy had first thought. He took images every hour, which proved Sulu's hypothesis that the growths would begin to appear in the late evening or around the midnight hours. Because of this pattern, McCoy was able to keep Jim's lungs and throat clear of mushrooms with only one bronchoscopy per day, removing them while the budding mushrooms were small, which caused less damage to the surrounding tissues as well as being easier to remove. One per day was still *far* too many procedures, but it could have been worse.

Not only had Spock taken over Jim's duties as commanding officer of the *Enterprise*, but he also found the time to help Doctor McCoy with his research *and* spent at least a couple hours keeping Jim company each day. He often dropped in before alpha shift for a few minutes and spent more time with him in the afternoons, when he caught Jim up on the ship's operations. It wasn't unusual for McCoy to step out of his office to find Jim and Spock talking, or playing a game of chess, Jim's voice beyond hoarse. Normally, McCoy would kick Spock out to let Jim get some rest, but the only time Jim smiled these days was when Spock was around, so McCoy let it go. He knew Spock was worried, too, and felt like he would only grow more worried if McCoy started putting restrictions on visiting hours. McCoy even made an effort not to get snippy when Spock called him multiple times each alpha shift to ask how Jim was doing.

Unfortunately, as the days went by with no answers or breakthroughs, the fungal invasion worsened. Not only had the mycelium in his lungs and throat thickened, showing up as a nearly solid object on the scans rather than a network of thin strands, but it was spreading to other parts of his body too. Namely the dermal layers of the neck.

One night, McCoy performed the now-routine mushroom removing procedure and thought that-was-that for another day, just like all the previous nights. He didn't realize anything was different until the next morning when Spock knocked on the door to his office.

"Doctor, I think you should see this," he said, looking more concerned than McCoy had ever seen him.

"What is it?" McCoy asked, following Spock into sickbay proper, over to Jim's bio-bed.

"Look," Spock said, gesturing to the side of Jim's neck. McCoy just stared for a long moment, trying to comprehend the growths protruding from Jim's neck. They were like nothing he had ever seen before. Flat, roughly disk shaped objects stuck out of his neck like shelves. There were many of them, all closely overlapping each other in a huge cluster. Each of the disks featured concentric rings in different shades of brown that would have been pretty if they weren't sticking out of a man's neck.

"What the fuck is this?" McCoy said finally.

"Fungus of some sort, I suppose," Spock answered. "Perhaps mushrooms?"

McCoy grumbled. "These look nothing like mushrooms. Especially nothing like *Jim's* mushrooms." He paused, then started towards the comm pad on the wall. "I'm gonna call Sulu down here," he said.

"No need, Doctor," Spock said. "He should be here any moment."

McCoy grunted. "Always on top of things," he said, mostly to himself. He turned to Jim. "Your neck hurt?" He asked, gesturing to the large cluster of growths.

Jim shrugged one shoulder, as the other shoulder was blocked by the growths. "No. They're just awkward and bulky."

"Why didn't you call me earlier?"

Jim glared at him. "Oh no, you don't get to lecture me this time. I woke up like this, like 5 minutes ago!"

"Alright, alright," McCoy rolled his eyes, throwing his hands up in surrender. He poked at the mushrooms, tugging at them gently. "Does this hurt?"

"No," Jim answered. "There's an uncomfortable tugging though. Like, from *under* my skin, not just the surface."

The doors whooshed open and Sulu walked hurriedly into sickbay. "I hear there's been a develop- whoa," he said, stopping in his tracks when he saw Jim's neck. "Nice bunch of turkey tails you've got there," he said once he recovered from the shock.

"Turkey tails?" Jim asked weakly.

"Kind of mushroom," Sulu said, waving a hand dismissively and leaning in closer to get a better look. He studied the mushrooms for a moment, then reached over and broke one of the disks off from its base before anyone could stop him. "These would make a great dinner if they hadn't grow out of a person," Sulu said regretfully.

"Did you feel anything there, Jim?" McCoy asked. He assumed it hadn't hurt, because Jim didn't so much as flinch.

"Nope. Just a tug is all," Jim said. "Can you get these off me now? It's weird."

McCoy set to removing the turkey tail cluster, breaking the disks off one by one then digging the embedded base out of Jim's skin with a scalpel - after applying a local anaesthetic, of course. It left behind a long open sore on his neck, too wide to close up. Fuzzy white filaments poked out of it. He disinfected it and used a dermal re-generator to give the healing skin a boost, then bandaged it to keep it sterile.

McCoy was in his office, skimming through article after article when there was a knock at his door. "Enter," he said tiredly, rubbing his eyes. He'd been at this for a while and it was wearing on him. He looked up. "Spock. Come in," he said, gesturing to a chair.

Spock sat down. Never one for pleasantries, he cut to the case. "Doctor, I think we should go to the Collectors. They may be the only ones who can help Jim."

McCoy grimaced. He hated the Collectors. The Collectors were a secretive species, long lived and few in number. They lived in the deep underground of their home planet, which is where they kept their vast archive of specimens. Their specimens are all victims of rare and mysterious diseases. Deceased, thankfully, but preserved and put on display like a museum piece, with no regard to the dignity of the body or the person who once occupied it. Due to the controversial nature of their species' work, the Collectors hadn't let anyone visit their planet in well over one hundred years. "I hate the Collectors," McCoy said.

Spock sighed. "If anyone has seen any ailment like this before, it'll be them," Spock pointed out. "Jim is only getting worse. I don't think you can keep him alive too much longer."

That stung. It shouldn't have, because it was true and McCoy knew it, but it stung nonetheless. "What makes you think they'll even let us see them?" He snapped. "They don't let anyone into their stupid archives anymore because they can't take any criticism regarding their ethics. They aren't going to help us. They aren't in it for the science or contributing to medical knowledge, they're just interested in these diseases for the *novelty* of it," he spat, disgusted. "Hell, if we go to them, they'll probably just try to collect Jim."

Spock waited patiently for McCoy to finish his angry tirade. "I know that the Collectors aren't the most cooperative of species, and they may very well turn us away," he said. "But there's a chance that they'll help Jim. I think we should take that chance. The only other option is to continue making Jim as comfortable as possible until he dies."

McCoy sighed and dropped his head into his hands. Spock was right. Jim was dying. He hated the Collectors, but they were Jim's only hope. There was nothing left to lose. "Alright," McCoy agreed. "Fine. Let's go see the Collectors. How fast can we get to their stupid planet?" He asked.

"A few hours," Spock answered.

McCoy furrowed his brow. That didn't seem right. "How-"

"I set a course for their planet a few days ago," Spock explained. As McCoy tried to speak again, he interrupted, saying, "Call it a contingency plan."

"Isn't that breaking some sort of rule?" McCoy asked, wondering how much trouble they would get in for travelling hundreds of light years off course without permission.

"Does it matter?"

McCoy thought about Jim and the mushroom-based horrors he had been going through for the past few weeks. He sighed. "No, I suppose it doesn't."

"We have seen this before," said one of the three Collectors on the view-screen.

Jim was on the bridge, flanked by Spock and Doctor McCoy. Sulu was nearby, having helped with explaining Jim's condition to the Collectors. That the Collectors answered Uhura's hail and agreed to talk to them was a miracle in and of itself. That they had knowledge about Jim's condition was incredible.

"What is it?" Jim asked, a spark of hope flashing in his eyes for the first time in weeks.

"How do we cure it?" Doctor McCoy asked, also hopeful.

The three Collectors looked at one another, conferring silently. The one who spoke before - their leader, perhaps, they hadn't introduced themselves - returned their attention to the *Enterprise* crew. "We will not discuss the nature of the disease nor its cure through ship-to-shore communications."

McCoy rolled his eyes. Thankfully it was Jim who did the talking. "Of course," he said, diplomacy voice fully activated. "We'd be more than happy to beam you onto our ship and discuss this in person."

"We will not be joining you on your ship," the Collector said.

Getting impatient, McCoy asked, "Are you going to let us onto your planet, then?"

"No," the Collector said in the same level voice. "We will allow James T Kirk to visit us and our archive. *Only* James T Kirk," they added pointedly when it looked like McCoy was about to argue.

He was going to argue anyway. "Are you kidding me? We're not just gonna- Ow!" He yelped as Jim stomped on his foot.

Jim smiled at the Collectors. "One moment, please," he said politely, then looked to Uhura and made a sharp gesture under his chin. The Collectors vanished from the view-screen.

"What was that for?" McCoy hissed, favouring his stomped foot.

"You were about to insult them to their faces," Jim said. "Do you *want* them to change their minds about helping me?"

"Jim, they don't want to help you, they're just trying to collect you! Why else would they allow *just* you down there?" McCoy argued, flinging his hands about for emphasis.

"You don't know that," Jim pointed out.

"Jim's right," Spock said. "The possibility that their intentions aren't benign shouldn't be the deciding factor. They are the only ones with the knowledge we need."

Jim flashed Spock a grateful smile. "Exactly. I think I should go."

McCoy glared at Spock for choosing sides. "Yeah? And what if they collect you? Then what?"

Jim shrugged. "Then I die," he said casually. "But if I *don't* go, I'm almost certainly dead anyways, so I might as well take my chances."

He had a point, not that McCoy wanted to admit it. "I don't like it," he grumbled, then did a double take at Jim. He grabbed a chunk of Jim's hair and fussed with it a moment.

"Bones, what the hell?" Jim protested.

"You've got a mushroom growing out of your head," he said, confirming that he really had spotted a small mushroom among the locks of blond hair. "Alright. You should take their offer. I won't yell at them."

Jim relaxed. "Thanks, Bones," he said, then nodded at Uhura. He smiled as the Collectors reappeared on the view-screen. "Where do I beam down?"

The Collectors were taller than Jim thought they would be. Towering at twice his height, they walked on short legs and the knuckles of long arms, giving their backs a dramatic slope that they decorated with ornately patterned robes. Atop of their long, thick necks were smooth grey faces with large, glossy black eyes and a cobra-like hood extending down their necks from the crest of their heads. Three of them greeted Jim at their agreed beam-down location, but only one escorted him into the archives. It was the same one that did the talking earlier. They introduced themselves as Collector Xhun.

The archives were not what Jim expected. From the things Doctor McCoy had told him about the Collector archives on the walk from the bridge to the transporter room, he expected to see thousands of corpses everywhere, frozen in agony, trapped in the death throes of whatever awful disease they had. The archives were actually a series of long, dim hallways with high ceilings - well, high for Jim at least. The hallways were flanked on both sides with floor to ceiling windows, each three metres wide. These were the specimen rooms, Collector Xhun explained. Jim couldn't see inside any of them because they weren't lit up, the dim lighting of the hallway not enough to illuminate whatever was inside. At first he thought maybe it was because the dark rooms were empty, but every single window was dark.

He hoped it wasn't rude to ask about it. "Why aren't any of the specimen rooms lit up?"

Collector Xhun looked down at Jim. "We found that keeping lights on the specimens all the time wasn't very dignifying," they explained. "So we only turn the lights on when we need to view them. It's kinder to let the dead sleep."

"Oh," Jim said, disguising his surprise. He thought that perhaps McCoy was full of shit about the Collectors and their ethics. They continued walking in silence for a long time, Jim at the Collector's shoulder. Apparently the specimen they were looking for was a long way into the archive.

"Your affliction is very rare," Collector Xhun said as they walked, breaking the silence. "There hasn't been a recorded case in over a thousand

years. Until you." Their large black eyes regarded Jim curiously.

Jim started to feel a bit nervous. If his problem was that rare and that few and far between, maybe the Collectors really *did* intend to keep him for themselves after all. He tried not to let the thought get to him. "No wonder Bones couldn't find anything about it," he remarked casually.

Collector Xhun hummed in agreement, a deep, sonorous sound. "Indeed," they said. "It has a most unique cause, too. And most curious."

"What causes it?" Jim asked, ears pricking up at the prospect of finally getting some answers.

They gave him a knowing look. "There is someone in your life, special to you. A person of your heart that you have been unable to confess your feelings to."

Jim blinked in surprise. "Uh... yeah," he said awkwardly. "But what does my.... 'person of my heart'?" He looked at Collector Xhun questioningly.

"The term doesn't translate well into Standard," Collector Xhun said, apologetically.

"Right," Jim said. "So what does that have to do with the... the mushroom thing?"

"That's the cause of the disease," Collector Xhun said gently.

Jim frowned in thought. "The cause of mushrooms growing in my lungs is... unrequited love? Seems kind of cliché."

"Unrequited and unconfessed love," the Collector clarified, then added after a pause, "Yes, I suppose it is like something out of a fairy tale."

"So, I'm being invaded by fungus because I'm in love with someone, but I haven't told him, and he doesn't reciprocate those feelings?" He asked, feeling a squeeze in his heart over his last few words.

The Collector hummed, thinking. "Perhaps. Do you *know* that your feelings aren't reciprocated?"

"Well, no..." Jim admitted. "But probably. I mean, we're good friends, but... I don't think he feels that way about me, you know?" He flushed, catching himself at the beginning of a ramble. "There's a cure for this, right?" He asked, changing the subject.

"There is," the Collector said hesitantly, as if they knew Jim wouldn't like the answer. "Were you to confess your feelings to this person of your heart, and he returned your feelings, your affliction would resolve itself over a couple of days."

Jim groaned. "Please tell me there's another way," he begged.

The Collector shook their head. "Unfortunately, not."

"So, you're saying I'm screwed," Jim said, shoulders slumping in defeat.

Collector Xhun hummed in contemplation. "I never said that you were... '*screwed*.' Perhaps this person of your heart feels for you what you feel for him. In which case, your cure comes with your confession."

Jim sighed. If only. "What happens if he doesn't have feelings for me?"

"If you confess and he doesn't return your feelings?" They asked, clarifying his question. Jim nodded. "The disease will not go away. But it will be far less severe than it is now. It's easily managed, you will live."

"What if I just... don't confess?" Jim ventured.

Collector Xhun stopped, gesturing with large knuckles to one of the dark windows. "This," he said quietly, and the lights of the room went up. It was dim, but bright enough to see clearly. A corpse lay in the room, arranged peacefully on a wide dais. They were near skeletal, but well preserved, as if mummified. Mushrooms of all shapes and sizes protruded from their chest and throat, splitting through their skull, poking out through an eye-socket. Jim might have thought the scene was beautiful - in a morbid sort of way - if he wasn't looking into his immediate future.

"Death is inevitable if a cure is never attempted," Collector Xhun said. They sounded regretful, sympathizing with Jim's plight. "You are not far from death, as you are now."

Jim shivered, and wrapped his arms around himself. He didn't want to look at the corpse anymore, so he stared down at his feet. "God, this sucks," he said, letting out a huff of resignation. "I mean... he's my best friend. I don't want to risk damaging that relationship. If I tell him I'm in love with him and he doesn't feel that way about me, that's just going to make everything awkward and nothing will ever be the same again. I won't be able to look him in the eye. I think I'd rather die," he said, spilling it all out in front of this alien stranger. It felt good to explain this hangup to someone, but he didn't gain any magical insight from saying it all out loud.

"James T Kirk, despite how 'awkward' your relationship may be in that scenario, I believe that the best choice for all parties involved is to confess your feelings, and *live*. Certainly this person of your heart would prefer that you live," the Collector reasoned.

Jim groaned. "Yeah, but I think even if the mushrooms didn't kill me I'd die of embarrassment. I just can't risk it." He leaned against the darkened glass opposite the lit room with the petrified mushroom corpse, sliding down to sit on the floor. He put his face in his hands, trying to sort out his feelings, barely noticing as the Collector sat down beside him in solidarity, waiting patiently.

Long minutes passed before Jim threw his hands down and looked up into the dark ceiling above him. He sighed heavily. "What if I tell him and he doesn't love me?" He asked, rhetorically.

Collector Xhun hummed. "But James T Kirk, what if you don't tell him and he *does* love you?" They posed. When Jim was silent, they said, "I was not going to show you this specimen, but I believe it may be necessary. Look," they said, gesturing to the window next to the one already lit. As the dark window lit up, it revealed another corpse. She was curled up at the base of the glass wall she shared with the mushroom corpse. She was equally old and mummified as they were, but she wasn't infested with fungus. She had a hand pressed to the glass.

Jim looked at her for a long moment. "What disease killed her?" He asked, in the hope that the answer wouldn't be what he thought it was.

"Heartbreak," Collector Xhun hummed sadly. "She was the person of their heart. She loved them as much as they loved her, but they never told her. She wasted away in grief."

Jim swallowed hard, closing his eyes. He couldn't look at the corpses anymore.

When Jim returned from the ship, he was practically jumped in the transporter room by his friends - Doctor McCoy and Spock first and foremost. McCoy celebrated that Jim hadn't been collected, while Spock badgered him for information about his disease. Jim had to shout to get everyone to back off, and the mood sobered when he retreated to sickbay without saying anything about his trip down to the Collector archives, merely explaining that he was tired and needed some rest.

Surprisingly, nobody followed on his heels, demanding answers, nor was he ambushed in sickbay. He slept for a few long, uninterrupted hours, which was even more surprising. He had thought for certain that Doctor McCoy would get impatient and wake him, eager to interrogate him. For the first time in weeks, he woke up naturally and feeling well rested. His heart fluttered when he noticed Spock perched in a chair at his bedside.

"Jim," Spock said softly, noticing that he was awake. "How are you feeling?"

Jim smiled. "Better than I have been."

"Did the Collectors treat you?" Spock asked. The hope in his voice broke Jim's heart.

He shook his head, flinching as Spock's face fell. "No, they didn't. I just got a good sleep for once, that's all."

"What did they tell you?" Spock asked. "Is there a cure?"

Jim bit his lip, hesitating. Tears prickled in his eyes. "No," he whispered. It wasn't a lie. Spock didn't love him, so he was as good as dead. It was better to tell Spock that there was no cure rather than getting his hopes up. Or worse, let Spock bear guilt over his impending death.

Spock blinked rapidly a few times, taking a deep breath. He looked down at his tightly clasped hands, unable to look at Jim. "I'm sorry," he managed.

Jim's condition worsened by scores over the next few days. It was apparent that he was on death's door. The mycelium had taken a tight hold on his body. Mushrooms were sprouting in his lungs faster than they could be removed, and they were blooming out of his neck, his scalp, the sides of his face, even his chest and shoulders. There were so many that they couldn't be removed, not without leaving dangerous amounts of exposed flesh in their wake.

Spock hadn't left Jim's bedside since he returned from the Collector's archives. He hadn't even slept, keeping careful watch over Jim's ailing body. Doctor McCoy was there often, doing whatever he could to keep Jim alive and comfortable for as long as possible. But most of the time he just sat down and talked to Jim. The others - Uhura, Sulu, Scotty, and Chekov - cycled in and out, each visiting multiple times a day. Nobody knew exactly how much longer Jim had, but they knew it wasn't long. Maybe a few days, maybe only a few hours. They tried to spend as much time with him as they could - while they still could - as much as their duties would allow, anyway.

"You should sleep, Bones," Jim said late one night. McCoy was sitting in the chair opposite Spock, barely able to keep his eyes open. "You need the rest. I'll be fine for a few hours," he insisted, flashing a smile. "I promise."

"I'll wake you if anything changes," Spock said reassuringly when McCoy hesitated. Eventually the Doctor gave in, after making Spock promise - multiple times - to wake him up if Jim needed anything, and went to his office to crash on the couch.

"You should get some sleep too, Spock," Jim said once McCoy was out of earshot. "You've been awake for days."

"You just heard me promise seven times to Doctor McCoy that I would monitor you while he slept," Spock said.

"Yeah, but he's a worry wart. I'll be fine for a couple hours. I promise."

Spock sighed. "I'm staying here, Jim," he said tiredly. "I won't leave you. I'll stay with you until the end."

Jim blinked back tears. *Until the end*. So much finality packed into so few words. It started to feel real, now. He was going to die. For real. For good. Forever. Because he apparently would rather die than risk harming his friendship with Spock. He glanced at Spock, and his heart clenched when he realized that Spock was crying. Collector Xhun was right, Jim realized. He was being dramatic and stupid. Of course living was the right choice, even if it changed his relationship with Spock irreversibly. An awkward relationship was better than no relationship, after all. And he couldn't stop thinking of that corpse, curled up, her hand pressed to the glass and dead of grief.

"Spock," Jim whispered.

"Yes, Jim?" Spock answered, quickly wiping at his eyes with a sleeve.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said. "It's important."

"Of course," Spock said. He leaned forward, picked up one of Jim's hands and held it in both of his own, causing Jim's heart to skip a beat. "What is it?"

Jim took a breath, allowing himself to be soothed by Spock's touch. "I just... I need you to know that... you mean a lot to me, Spock," he started. It wasn't what he wanted to say, but baby steps, he figured. "Like, *a lot*, a lot. You're my best friend. I trust you more than anyone. There's nobody I'd rather have by my side commanding the *Enterprise*, or on some dangerous away mission, or... or while I'm dying in sickbay," his voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. "And the truth is, Spock, that... I love you. I'm in love with you. You're just... you're everything to me. I thought you should know."

There was a long silence. Jim had his eyes closed. He couldn't bear to look at Spock. He felt relief that it was over. That he wouldn't die. But that didn't mean he was ready to deal with the inevitable rejection.

"Jim," Spock said, finally. He held tightly to Jim's hand, as if it were the only thing anchoring him. "I wish you would have told me sooner," he said, his voice breaking. Through his hands, Jim could feel Spock shivering. "I wish *I* had told you sooner," Spock continued, even as he was breaking down. "You're... you're my everything, too. I should have told you."

"Spock," Jim breathed, finally bringing himself to look at him. He felt as if time had stopped. He hadn't known. He hadn't thought. He'd been so sure that Spock didn't- *but he did,* the Collector's voice said in his head.

Spock was a mess. He was falling apart. His chin was tucked to his chest, tears slipping down his face despite how tightly his eyes were screwed shut. He shook violently, trying desperately to hold back sobs, and failing. "I wish we had more time," he breathed.

Jim sat up on the bio-bed, leaning towards Spock, placing his free hand on his shoulder. "Spock," he whispered. "Spock, look at me," he said. It took a deal of effort, but Spock eventually was able to meet Jim's eyes, even as tears still spilled from his own. Jim was crying too, but he had a smile on his face, one of happiness. "We have all the time in the world," he said, radiant. "There *was* a cure, Spock. I didn't tell you because I didn't think it would work, but... It's going to be okay now, I'm going to get better now." He laughed. "We have all the time in the world!"

Spock stared at him in disbelief, his body still wracked in grief. "Are you sure?" He breathed. Jim nodded, and Spock threw himself at him, holding him tightly to his chest, seeming like he intended never to let go. Jim pushed away from him just enough to take Spock's face in his hands and kiss him deeply.

They shared their relief and happiness in silence, clinging to one another, brushing fingers, touching lips, until a deep calm befell them. Spock broke their silence. He had a question that he needed an answer to. "What was the cure?"

Jim beamed at him. "You, Spock," he said. "It was you."

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