The Pinocchios are starting to rot. Really, this shouldn't be a surprise to anyone. They're just doing what corpses do best. Even artificially-preserved and florally-animated ones. Even the ones you know.

They shuffle around the corridors of our homelab in their hermetically-sealed hazmat suits, using whatever's left of their fine motor functioning. Mainly they get in the way. We've learned to walk around them when they get stuck. You can get used to anything. But I avoid looking at their faces behind the glass. I don't want to recognize Rousseau.

They're supposed to be confined to one of the specimen storage units. But a month ago, a Pinocchio pulled down a cabinet of freeze-dried specimens. So now Inatec management lets them wander around. They seem happier being free-range. If you can say that about a corpse jerked around by alien slime mould like a zombie puppet.

They've become part of the scenery. Less than ghosts. They're as banal a part of life on this dog-forsaken planet as the nutritionally-fortified lab-grown oats they serve up in the cafeteria three times a day.

We're supposed to keep out of their way. No harvester should touch, obstruct or otherwise interfere with the OPPs, the notice from Inatec management read, finished off with a smiley face and posted on the bulletin board in the cafeteria. On paper, because we're not allowed personal communications technology in homelab. Too much of a security risk.

Organically Preserved Personnel. It's an experimental technique to use the indigenous flora to maintain soldiers' bodies in wartime to get them back to their loved ones intact. The irony is that we're so busy doing experiments on the corpses of our deceased crew that we don't send them back at all. And if we did, it would have to be in a flask. Because after they rot—average "life-span" is 29 days—they liquefy. And the slime mould has to be reintegrated into the colony they've been growing in Lab Three.

It's not really slime mould, of course. Nothing on this damn planet is anything you'd recognize, which is exactly why Inatec have us working the jungle in armored suits along with four thousand other corporates planet-side, all scrambling to find new alien flora with commercial applications so they can patent the shit out of all of it.

Slime mould is the closest equivalent the labtechs have come up with. Self-organizing

cellular amoebites that ooze around on their own until one of them finds a very recently dead thing to grow on. Then it lays down signals, chemical or hormonal or some other system we don't understand yet, and all the other amoebites congeal together to form a colony that sets down deep roots like a wart into whatever's left of the nervous system of the animal… and then take it over.

We've had several military contractors express major interest in seeing the results. Inatec has promised us all big bonuses if we manage to land a military deal—and not just the labtechs either. After all, it's us lowly harvesters who go out there in our GMP suits to find the stuff.

Inatec's got mining rights to six territories in four quadrants on this world. Two sub-tropical, one arid/mountainous, and three tropical, which is where the big bucks are. Officially, we're working RCZ-8 Tropical 14: 27° 32' S / 49° 38' W. We call it The Green.

We were green ourselves when we arrived on planet. The worst kind of naïve, know-nothing city hicks. It was all anyone could talk about as we crammed round the windows—how fucking amazing it all looked as the dropship descended over our quadrant. We weren't used to nature. We didn't know how hungry it was.

The sky was rippled in oranges and golds from the pollen in the air, turning the spike slate pinnacles of the mountains a powder pink. The jungle was a million shades of green. Greens like you couldn't imagine. Greens to make you mad. Or kill you dead.

Homelab squats in the middle of all that green like a fat concrete spider with too many legs radiating outwards. Uglier even than the Caxton Projects apartment blocks back home. Most of us are from what you'd call underprivileged backgrounds. The Caxton stats when I left were 89% adult unemployment, 73% adult illiteracy, 65% chance of dying before the age of 40 due to communicable disease or an act of violence. Who wouldn't want a ticket out of there? Even if it was one-way.

Besides, our work is a privilege. We're getting to work at the forefront of xenoflora biotech. At least that's what it says on the "Welcome To Inatec" pack all employees are handed when they've dotted the Is and crossed the Ts on the contract. Or maybe just made an X where you're supposed to sign. You don't need to be literate to pick flowers. Even in a GMP.

Of course, by forefront, they mean frontline. And by harvesting they mean strip-mining. Except everything we strip away grows back, faster than we can keep up. Whole new species we've never seen before spring up overnight. Whole new ways to die.

You got to suffer for progress, baby, Rousseau would have said (if he was still alive).

And boy do we suffer out there.

The first thing they do when you land is strip you, shave you, put you through the ultraviolet steriliser and then surgically remove your fingernails. It's a biologically sensitive operation. You can't be bringing in contaminants from other worlds. And there was that microscopic snail parasite incident that killed off two full crews before the labtechs figured it out.

That's why we don't have those ultra-sensitive contact pads on our gloves any more, even though it makes harvesting harder. Because the snail would burrow right through them and get under the cuticle, working its way through your body to lay its eggs in your lungs. When the larvae hatch, they eat their way out, which doesn't kill you, it just gives you a nasty case of terminal snail-induced emphysema. It took the infected weeks to die, hacking up bloody chunks of lung writhing with larvae. And we got new gloves.

Diamond miners used to stick gems up their arses to get them past security. With flora, you can get enough genetic material to sell to a rival with a fingernail scraping. "Do we have any proof there was ever a snail infestation?" Ro would ask over breakfast. "Apart from the company newsletter?" he'd add before practical, feisty, educated Lurie could get a word in and contradict him. He was big into his conspiracy theories and our medtech, Shapshak, only encouraged him. They'd huddle deep into the night, getting all serious over gin made from nutri-oats that Hoffmann used to distil in secret in his room. It seemed to make Shapshak more gloomy than ever, but Ro bounced back from it invigorated and extra-jokey.

Ro was the only one who could get away with calling me Coco, and him only because we were sleeping together. Dumbfuck name, I know. Coco Yengko. Mom wanted me to be a model. Or a ballerina. Or a movie star. All those careers that get you out of the ghettosprawl. Shouldn't have had an ugly kid, then, ma. Shouldn't have been poor. Shouldn't have let the Inatec recruiter into our apartment. And hey, while we're at it, Ro shouldn't have died.

Green is the wrong word for it. You'd only make that mistake from the outside. When you're in the thick of it, it's black. The tangle of the canopy blocks out the sunlight. It's the murky gloom after twilight, before real dark sets in. Visibility is five meters, fifteen with headlights, although the light attracts moths, which get into the vents. Pollen spores swirl around you, big as your head. Sulfur candy floss. And everything is moist and sticky and fertile. Like the whole jungle is rutting around us.

The humidity smacks you, even through the suit, thick as +8 gravity, so that you're slick as greased ratpig with sweat the moment you step out. It pools in your jock strap, chafes when you walk, until it forms blisters big as testicles (a new experience for the girls on the crew). Although walking's not what we do. More like wading against a

sucking tide of heat and flora.

The rotting mulch suffocates our big clanking mechanical footsteps. Some of the harvesters play music on their private channels. Ro used to play opera, loud, letting it spill into The Green, until it started attracting insects the size of my head. I put a stop to it after that. I prefer to listen to the servo motors grinding in protest. I have this fantasy that I'll be able to hear it when my suit gets compromised. The shhht of air that lets through a flood of spores like fibrous threads that burrow into metal and flesh. The faint suck of algae congealing on the plastic surfaces, seeping into the seams of the electronics, corroding the boards so the nanoconnections can't fire. The hum of plankton slipping between the joints of my GMP between the spine and pelvic plates, to bite and sting.

The base model Galvanic Mecha Primaries aren't built for these conditions. The heat is a problem. The servo motors get clogged. The armor corrodes. The nanotronics can't sustain. Every joint is a weak point. The damn flora develops immunity to every vegicide we try. Assuming they're actually using vegicides, Ro would point out. Why risk the harvest when harvesters are replaceable?

Management has determined that the optimum number for a harvesting team is five. I'm the team leader. It helps that Shapshak sometimes slips me amphetamines which all the medtechs get under the counter from the labtechs (along with other pharmaceuticals he doesn't share). Look, ma, leadership material, but it's not like management don't know. They're happy if we're productive and sometimes you need a little extra something to get through out there.

Lurie is our am-bot. A high school education and eight weeks of training in amateur botany specimen collection puts her a full pay scale above the rest of us plebs, plus she gets the most sophisticated suit—a TCD, with neuro-feedback tentacle fingers that aren't suspectible to snail-invasion built into the hands for snagging delicate samples. Rousseau and Waverley were our clearers—manual labour, their GMPs suitably equipped with bayonet progsaws that'll cut through rock, thermo-machetes for underbrush, and extra armor plating for bludgeoning your way through the jungle with brute force when everything else has failed.

In retrospect, we could have done with less brute force. Could have done with me spotting the damn stingstrings before we blundered into the middle of a migration. Could have done with being less wired on the under-the-counter stuff. One minute Waverley and Ro are plowing through dense foliage ahead, the next there are a thousand mucusy tendrils unfurling from the canopy above us.

This wouldn't have been a problem usually. Sure, the venom might corrode your paintwork, leave some ugly pockmarks that'll get the maintenance guys all worked up, but they're not hectic enough to compromise a GMP.

Unless, say, someone panics and trips and topples forward, accidentally ripping a hole in Rousseau's suit with the razor edge of the machete, half-severing his arm. Waverley swore blind it wasn't his fault. He tripped. But GMPs have balance/pace adjustors built-in. You have to be pretty damn incompetent to fall over in one. If Ro wasn't a roaming brain-dead corpse puppet right now, he might have been suspicious, might have thought it was a conspiracy to recruit more guinea pigs for the OPP program. We know better. We know Waverley's just a fucking moron.

There was a lot of screaming. Mainly from Ro, until Shapshak shot him up with morphine, but also from Lurie threatening to kill Waverley for being so damn stupid. It took us ninety minutes to get back to homelab, me and Shapshak dragging Ro on the portable stretcher from his field kit, which is only really useful for transporting people—not armored suits—but it was too dangerous to take him out. Waverley cut through the undergrowth ahead of us—the only place where we would trust him, leaving traces of Ro's blood painted across broken branches.

When we got to homebase, Lurie still had to file the specimens and we all had to go through decontam, no matter how much I swore at security over the intercom to just let us back in right fucking now.

We had to sit in the cafeteria, the only communal space in homelab, listening to Rousseau die, pretending not to. It should have been easy. The drone of the air-conditioner and the filters and the sterilizer systems all fighting The Green is the first thing you acclimatize to here. But Ro's voice somehow broke through, a shrill shriek between clenched teeth. We hadn't known anyone who'd ever died from stingstrings. The labtechs must have been thrilled.

Shapshak spooned oats into his face, drifting away from it all on some drug he wasn't sharing. Lurie couldn't touch her food. She put on her old-school security-approved headphones, bopped her head fiercely to the music. Made like she wasn't crying. I restrained myself from hitting Waverley, who kept whining, "It wasn't my fault, okay?" I took deep breaths against the urge to bash his big bald head on the steel table until his brains oozed out. If Ro was here and not twisting around on a gurney while the labtechs prepared the killing dose of morphephedrine, he would have cracked the tension with a joke. About crappy last meals maybe.

The other crews were making bets on exactly what would kill him. Marking up the odds on the back of a cigarette packet. Black humor and wise-cracking is just how you deal. We'd have been doing the same if it wasn't one of ours. Yellow Choke 3:1 Threadworms 12:7. The Tars 15:4. New & Horrible: 1:2.

Ro's voice changed in pitch, from scream-your-throat-raw to a low groaning—the kind that comes from your intestines plasticinating. The spores must have got in to the rip

in his gut through the tear in his armor.

OhgodohgodohgodeuggghgodOHpleasefuckgodOH

Across from us, Hoffmann from F-Crew leapt to his feet, whooping in delight and making gimme gestures. “Tars! I fucking knew it! Oh yeah! Hand over the cashmoney, baby!”

Ro’s screaming tapered off. Which meant either he was dead or just sub-auditory under the concert of laboring machinery. Waverley tried to say something encouraging, “At least we know it’s the fast-kind of fatal” and I punched him in the face, knocking porridge out of his mouth in a gray splatter tinged with blood—along with two teeth. I got a warning, but no demerit, “Under the circumstances,” human resources said. They declined my request to have Waverley reassigned to another unit.

“It’s for the best,” human resources had also said. Which was the same line my mom spun me when she took me to the sterilization clinic in Caxton, mainly for the incentive kickback the government provided, but also to make sure I didn’t end up like her: pregnant and homeless at twelve, working double shifts at the seam factory when she was thirteen to keep the pair of us alive. Which only makes me feel more guilty, for all the sacrifices she made so I could get out of Caxton. And here I am, letting my sometime-lover die on my watch. Sorry, ma, I think, but you don’t know what it’s like out here.

Within forty-eight hours, Ro’s replacement arrived. Joseph Mukuku. Another ghettosprawl kid, sprayed, shaved, irradiated, de-nailed and ready to go. We had three whole days to mourn while Joseph ran through the simconditioning and then we were back out there in the thick of it, harvesting. I found a request for stingstrings in my order log. The results of Ro’s venom burns were, according to the labtechs, “fascinating.” The note attached to the order read: Lash-wounds were cauterized. Unclear whether this is common to stingstrings or whether it was reacting with other flora or spores. Living specimens (ideal) required for further study. Deceased specimens okay.

We couldn’t get them. That’s what I reported anyway. Threatened to peel the skin off Mukuku if he said different. The kid learned quick, didn’t cause any shit and we made Waverley walk five meters up front where he’d only take out flora if he tripped again. Shapshak offered me chemical assistance from his stash of pharmaceuticals, but by then I was already contemplating other strategies and I knew drugs would only get in the way.

I didn’t want to get better. I wanted out.

It was my encounter with Rousseau that cemented it.

I'd managed to avoid him for twelve whole days after he died. Every time I spotted a Pinocchio shuffling down the corridor or standing spookily still, facing a wall, I did a 180 in the other direction. Didn't make a big deal about it, just managed to spend more time in the gym or doing routine maintenance on my GMP. Anything to keep busy. It's the thinking about it that kills me. I try to leave no space for thinking, or the weight of The Green just outside the doors crushing down on me.

I was doing leg-presses when he found me. It was the automatic door that tipped me off. It kept opening and closing, opening and closing, like someone didn't have enough brains to get out of the way of the sensors. I knew it was him even before I saw the limp, sagging sleeve where his left arm should have been.

"What do you want?" I said, standing up and moving over to rest my hand casually on the 10kg barbells. Ready to club him to death. Re-death. Whatever. Not expecting an answer.

Through the faceplate, I could see a caul of teeming, squirming green over his face. You could still make out his features, still tell it was Ro under there. I thought about his cells starting to break down under his new slime mould skin, his organs collapsing, nerves firing sluggishly through sagging connections in dead tissue.

He opened his mouth, his tongue flopping uselessly inside. He worked his jaw mechanically. Individual amoebites, attracted by the motion, started sliding into the cavity, triggering others, oozing past his lips—coating his teeth, his tongue, with the seething furry growth. Inside the suit, Ro tipped his head back, his mouth open in something like a scream as more and more amoebites flooded in to colonize his mouth, soft furry spores spilling down his chin.

"Misfiring neurons," human resources had assured us when they first let the Pinocchios out. "Nothing to worry about," they said. Neither, it turns out, was the GMP progsaw I put to my forehead, positioning it right against my temple for maximum damage before I flicked the on-switch.

I have a dream about my mom, back when she still had the seam job. I am scampering over the factory floor, dodging the electric looms to collect scraps of fabric that she will sew into dishcloths and dolls and maybe a dress, to sell to the neighbors, illegally. We are not allowed to remove company property. They incinerate leftovers every evening, specifically to prevent this. Be careful, she whispers, her breath hot against my cheek.

But I'm not careful in the dream. As I duck under the grinding, whirling loom, the teeth catch my ear and shear down my face. My skin tears all the way down to my belly button and unfurls, flopping about obscenely, like wings, before the flaps stiffen

and wrap around me like a cocoon. It ought to be a nightmare, but it feels like I am falling into myself. It feels safe.

I wake up in a hospital bed, with my right arm cuffed to the rail. There is a woman sitting on the edge of the bed wearing a pinstripe skirt and matching blazer. She is blandly pretty with blonde-streaked hair and wide blue eyes. Big, friendly teeth in a big, friendly mouth. The mom in a vitamin-enriched living commercial. Not someone I've seen in homelab before. Too neatly groomed.

I sit up and automatically reach up to touch my head, to the place where the progsaw had started ripping in to my temple, only to find layers of bandage mummifying my skull.

"We do pay attention, Coco." The woman says, chidingly, and then adds, more softly, "I'm very sorry about what happened to Malan."

"Who?" My cheek is burning. I try to rub the pain away and find a row of fibrous stitches running from my temple down to my jaw.

"Malan Rousseau? Your coworker? It's quaint how you call each other by surnames. This isn't the army you know. You're not at war."

"Tell that to The Green," I mutter. I am angry to be alive.

"Yes, well. We installed new safety measures into the GMPs after the accident. Chemical agents that would clog up the blades of your weaponry with fibrous threads if it came into contact with human pheromones. It's based on threadworm-bio. One of the technologies you've helped make possible, Coco. Saved your life."

"Didn't want to be saved." My throat feels raw, like it's been sandblasted from the inside.

"Pity about your face," she says, not expressing any pity at all behind the words.

"Never going to be a model now." I try to laugh. It comes out as a brittle bark.

"Unless it's for a specialist scar porn, no, probably not." Her casual offensiveness is way preferable, actually. "Do you want some water? It's the painkillers making you so thirsty. Even with our new safety measures, you still managed to do quite a bit of ruin to yourself. No brain damage though."

"Damn." I deadpan, but the water is cold and sweet down my throat.

"My name is Catherine, I'm from head office. They sent me here especially to see you,

and do you know why? It’s because you’ve made us reevaluate some things, Coco, how we work around here.” Now she just sounds patronising. And every time she says my name, it feels like someone punching me in the chest. A reminder of Ro.

“Don’t call me that. It’s Yengko. Please.”

“As you prefer,” her mouth twists impatiently, “Ms. Yengko. You’ll be pleased to know, I think, that after your incident, Inatec has elected to relocate the OPPs—what do you call them?”

“Zombie puppets.” But I’m thinking Living prison cells.

She looks down to her hands folded in her lap, at her perfect manicure and smiles a little tolerant smile. But what I’m thinking is That bitch still has her fingernails, which also means she has no intention of sticking around. “Pinocchios, right? Isn't that it? That’s cute. But we’ve come to realize, well, you made us realize, that having them in homelab puts undue stress on our employees. I guess we were so busy focusing on this huge medical breakthrough—”

“Profit, you mean.”

She ignores me. “—that we didn’t think about how it was affecting you guys on a personal level. So, I’m sorry. Inatec is sorry. We’ve moved the OPPs to another facility. We’ve already paid stress compensation into everyone’s accounts, and we’re implementing mandatory counseling sessions.”

“He was trying to talk.”

“No. He’s dead, Coc—Ms. Yengko,” she corrects herself. “It must have been very upsetting, but he can’t talk. The OPP symbiote sometimes hooks into the wrong nerves. We’re still learning, still figuring each other out.”

“How buddy-buddy of you. Didn’t get that this was a partnership.”

“We’re a bio-sensitive operation. It’s about finding a balance with nature, no matter how foreign it is.”

“So what happens now?”

“We’d like you to stay on, if you’re willing. Under the circumstances, Inatec is willing to retrench you with two week’s payout for every year you’ve worked, plus stress bonus, plus full pension. Which is, I’m sure you’ll appreciate, very generous, considering your attempt to damage Inatec property and injure personnel, which would normally be grounds for instant dismissal. Your non-disclosure still applies

either way, of course."

"Wait. You're blaming me for Ro's death?"

"By injuring personnel, we mean your attempted suicide. You're a valuable asset to the company. Which is why I'd encourage you to hear my alternate proposition."

"Does it involve letting me fucking die, like I wanted?"

"As I said, you're a valuable asset. How long have you been here? Two years?"

"Twenty months."

"That's a lot of experience. We've invested in you, Ms. Yengko. We want to see you achieve your potential. I want you to walk away from this… challenge in your life, stronger, more capable. You've got a second chance. Do you know how rare that is? It's a unique personal growth opportunity."

"Double pay."

"One and half times."

"Plus my pension payout. You wire it to my mom in the meantime."

"You don't want to hear about the alternative?"

"More of the same, isn't it?"

"It's better. We're running a pilot program. New suits. We want you to head it up. We've learned from our mistakes. We're ready to move on. It's a new day around here. What do you say?"

She thinks I don't know. She thinks I'm an idiot.

Homelab has been renovated in the time I've been out. A week and a half according to Shapshak, who is strangely reproachful. He follows me around, as if trying to make sure I don't try to off myself again. He can't look at my face—at the puckered scar that runs from my ear to the corner of my mouth, twisting my upper lip into a permanent sneer. He's more stoned than ever, and so are most of the other crews. Whatever else Catherine's proposed "new day" involves, obviously restricting access to recreational pharmaceuticals isn't part of it. Or maybe it's the mandatory counseling sessions, which involve a lot of anti-depressants that Mukuku says leave him feeling blank and hollow. I wouldn't know. I felt that way for a while.

The Pinocchios are, true to Catherine's word, gone. Along with some of the staff. Lurie has been shipped out, together with Hoffmann, Ujlaki, and Murad—all the A-level am-bots—plus half the other team leaders and sixty percent of the labtechs. Leaving a shoddy bunch of misfits, like me, unsuitable for anything except manual labor.

Or guinea pigging.

Labs one to three have been cleared to accommodate the new suits, ornate husks floating in nutrient soup in big glass tanks. Like soft-shelled crabs without the crab. The plating is striated with a thick fibrous grain that resembles muscle. The teaser sheet posted on the bulletin board promises Biological Solutions for Biological Challenges. There is grumbling about what that means. But underneath all that is the buzz of excitement.

The operations brochure talks about how the suit will harden on binding, how the shell will protect us from anything a hostile environment can throw at us, how it will process the outside air through a unique filtration system to be perfectly breathable without the risk and inconvenience of carrying compressed gas tanks around. We'll be lighter, more flexible, more efficient—and it's totally self-sufficient, provided we take up the new nutritionally fortified diet. "No more fucking oats!" Mukuku rejoices. He's not Ro, but he's not an asshole and that's about all we can ask around here.

Lab four is still cranking. The reduced complement of labtechs are busier than ever, scurrying about like bugs. They wear hazmat suits these days. They've always been offish, always above us, but now they don't talk to us at all.

Inatec management send in a state-of-the-art camera swarm to record the new suit trials—for a morale video, Catherine explains. Exactly the kind of camera swarm they supposedly can't afford to send out into The Green to scout ahead of us to avoid some of the dangers. "You won't have to worry about that any more," she says. I believe her.

Harvest operations are called off while they do the final preparations, leaving us with too much leisure time, too much time to think. Or maybe it's just me. But it allows me to make my decision. Not to blow it wide open (as if they wouldn't just hold us down and do it to us anyway). Because I'm thinking that a cell doesn't have to be a bad thing. It doesn't have to be a prison. It could be more like a monk's cell, a haven from the world, somewhere you can lock yourself away from everything and never have to think again.

On Tuesday, we're summoned to lab three. "You ready?" Catherine says.

"Is my pension paid out?" I snipe. There is nervous laughter.

"Why can't we use our old suits?" Waverley whines. "Why we gotta change a good

thing?”

“Shut up, Waverley.” Shapshak snaps, but only half-heartedly. And then, because everyone is jittery—even us uneducated slum hicks can have suspicions—I volunteer. Like I said, ma: leadership material.

I step forward and shrug out of my grays, letting them drop to the floor. Two of the labtechs haul a suit out of the tank and sort-of hunker forward with it, folding it around me like origami. It is clammy and brittle at the same time. As they layer one piece over another, it binds together and darkens to an opaque green. The color of slime mould.

The labtechs assist the others into their suits, carefully wrapping everyone up like presents, leaving only the hoods and a dangling bioconnector like a scorpion tail. The tip has a pad of microneedles that will fasten on to my nervous system. Nothing unusual here. The GMPs use the same technology to monitor vital signs. Nothing unusual at all.

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt,” Catherine says, telling us nothing we don't already know. “It injects anesthetic at the same time. Like a mosquito.”

“Not the ones on this planet, lady,” Waverley snickers, looking around for approval, as they start folding him into his suit.

“Can we hurry this along?” I ask, impatient.

“Of course,” Catherine says. And maybe that’s a glimmer of respect in her blue eyes, or maybe it’s just the reflection of the neon lighting, but I feel like we understand each other in these last moments.

A labtech slips the hood over my face, and in the dark gauze I remember how, back in Caxton, I tried converting to the Neo-Adventists for a time. They promised that the golden glow of God’s love that would transform us utterly, then they covered our faces and dipped us back, waterboarding us to salvation. But I still felt the same after my baptism—still dirty, still broken, still poor.

She presses the bioconnector up against the hollow at the base of my skull, and clicks the switch that makes the needles leap forward. Suddenly the armor clamps down on me like a muscle. I fight down a jolt of claustrophobia so strong it raises the taste of bile in my mouth. I have to catch myself from falling to my knees and retching.

“You okay, Yengko?” Shapshak says, his voice suddenly sharp through the glaze of drugs he’s on. He must really care, I think. But I am beyond caring. Beyond anything. I pull the hood away so they can be reassured that all is well.

I wondered what it would feel like. The soft furriness of the amoebites flooding through the bioconnector, the prickle as they flower through my skin. What's better than a dead zombie? A live one. And maybe God's glow is green, not golden.

"Yes," I say, and close my eyes against the light, against the sight of the others being parceled up in the suits, at Waverley starting to scream, tugging pointlessly at the hood as he realizes what's going on, what's in there with him. "I'm fine." And maybe for the first time, I actually am.