

RIDE
THE
STAR
WIND

A hand-drawn illustration of a starburst or pom-pom, positioned above the word "STAR". It features a central bright white point with numerous radiating, textured lines in black and grey, giving it a fuzzy, three-dimensional appearance.

RIDE THE STAR WIND:
CTHULHU, SPACE OPERA, AND THE COSMIC WEIRD

Edited by SCOTT GABLE & C. DOMBROWSKI

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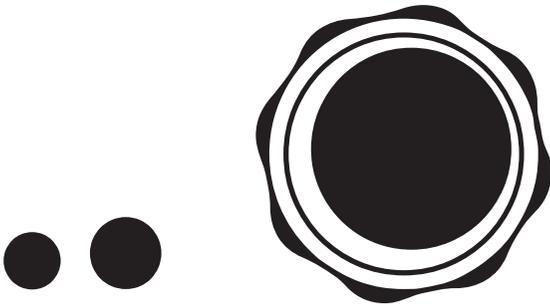
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Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

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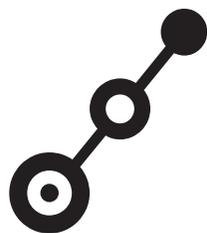


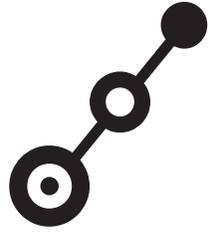
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Introduction

SCOTT GABLE

ILLUSTRATED BY
JEREMY ZERFOSS

ENGINES AT FULL, COORDINATES SET, PASSAGES INTONED, AND BLOOD spilled—on target for the dread star shimmering at the Galactic Center. Have some time to kill before we’re needed again, so I’ll maybe get a little reading in . . .



Weird fiction and science fiction, together. Or rather, the cosmic weird and space opera. I hear what you’re thinking: “You just pulled some themes out of a *hat*.”

“Not so!” I say. “There’s a plan. There was always a plan.”

We came at this anthology from the side of weird fiction. With it, we wanted to do two things. Well, several things, but two stand out as large and sweeping. The first was to expand on the storytelling possibilities for the cosmic weird, hewing largely to the Cthulhu Mythos but fearlessly subverting canon or common themes where useful. In a nutshell, we wanted stories still attached firmly (mostly) to the firmament of the cosmic weird you already know—with monsters, both new and old, cults, sanity-stripping secrets, and that thin veneer

of normalcy through which leaks the unknown. But to this, we've added the trappings of space opera—space travel, high-octane adventure, a bit of friendly banter, and a big ol' heaping pile of weird science. The stories roam and take on lives of their own, not diminishing what came before but adding on a dimension of new possibilities. We get to pop off earth for a spell and explore space—out where the wild fungi roam—and psychedelic vistas. And we also get to pop out of our heads for a bit, trading some brooding, sanity-crushing atmospherics for interpersonal drama and alien adventure, trading inward descent for planetwide destruction, trading bleak, lonely finality for the promise of more adventure. We certainly kept some elements of the Mythos you'll find familiar, but we explored them from a different perspective. Twenty-nine different perspectives.

And that leads us to the second large, sweeping thing, which was to find diverse takes on the cosmic weird. Rather than just look at the same stuff differently, we wanted to also look at *different stuff*: to find those tales that could only be told by combining the cosmic weird with space opera, not just to transplant the old tales into a new setting. We wanted to present characters all along the spectrum of experience—and then some—to speculate on manifest destiny splashed large across the universe, on neural and gender and racial identity in the face of intergalactic politics, on the cosmic ramifications of aggressive religiosity and unlucky coincidence, on dangerous alien technology and the will to use it. We wanted to find out what kind of cosmic weird tales weren't being told.

We've got twenty-nine tales for you. Some have a firm foundation in the Cthulhu Mythos; some only take the gist, the themes and touchstones, of the Mythos and apply it to something new; and some thread the needle by subverting common attributions of the Mythos while still adding to its breadth. They build on what we started in the anthology *Tomorrow's Cthulhu* while taking us to the stars. It's a wonderful mix of stories, filled with equal parts spaceborne terror and high-stakes adventure, existential doom and effervescent possibility.



And we're here. Ship, come about to most direct intercept vector. Activate warding pylons. Weird incoming. We're going in . . .

M

adness rides the star-wind . . .

claws and teeth sharpened on centuries of corpses . . .

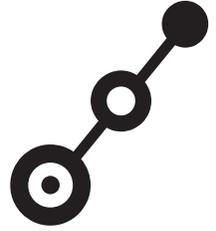
dripping death astride a Bacchanale of bats from

night-black ruins of buried temples of Belial . . .

—HP Lovecraft, “The Hound”



DREBISCH
2017



The Children of Leng

REMY NAKAMURA

ILLUSTRATED BY
MIKE DUBISCH

BEFORE YUKIKO LEFT FOR THE SURFACE OF LENG, SHE TOLD MIRAI TO watch over Grandma. “We clone-sisters have to look out for each other,” she said. Every twenty-five years, Hab 3 grew a new clone in each lineage. In hers, Mirai was the youngest, Grandma the oldest. In spite of her only nine Earth years, Mirai was good with adults, and she promised she would take good care of the old woman.

Mirai held Grandma’s trembling hand as they watched Leng’s gray dust clouds swallow up the tiny shuttle. The dry moon filled the entire sky display of the *Amanokawa*’s Earth Chamber. Mirai imagined the three hab rings of the generation ship orbiting Leng, rolling like a spinning top fallen on its side. And out from that toy, the tiny speck of the landing party’s shuttle shot, falling in flames toward the surface. Later, it would ride an explosion back up to the ship. Mirai hoped Momma Calliope’s calculations were sure and would keep Yukiko safe. She made this a mantra, repeating it as she lost herself in the projection of Leng in the artificial sky.

At her side, Grandma looked up nervously, toothless mouth wide open. Grandma looked down at the grass and shook her head. She was the oldest in the hab, maybe the entire ship, and for over eighty years, she had only seen the illusion of the sun and stars. Mirai felt pity and took Grandma’s fragile hand.

“Ne, Grandma,” she said. “Kiyomi is waiting.”

They walked the path, Grandma in her yukata, Mirai in her boring schoolgirl coveralls, trying not to feel the weight of Leng above their heads. Instead, Mirai focused on the terraced hills and irrigation canals, the gated shrine and the Ancestral Grove, the curved display walls, projecting the pretend fields that seemed to go on forever. The Earth Chamber was vast, and it was hard to believe that both of the other isolated habitat rings had similar rooms, even if they were dead or sleeping.

On the spinward edge of the chamber, old cherry trees with dark leaves and gnarled branches guarded dozens of clear cylinders. A naked form floated in each—sisters and aunties and grannies who had passed on. This was the Ancestral Grove, and these were the women they honored and prayed for until it was time for them to return to the *Amanokawa*, to be recycled into the wheel of life that was their world. Her oldest grandmothers were in the air they breathed, the water they sipped, and the ground they walked on. The ancestors made the entire ship sacred with their presence.

Mirai stopped in front of a cylinder. Inside floated Mirai’s twin, looking about her age but dead for fifty years. Even with the burn wounds covering much of her arms and neck and torso, Kiyomi looked like she was sleeping and at peace.

“Good morning, Auntie Kiyomi,” she said, bowing and putting her hands together in respectful greeting. Kiyomi had floated long enough that she was close to achieving release, ready to be reabsorbed into the hab’s biosphere. Mirai was not sure what would happen once they resettled on the surface of Leng. How would recycling work there? What did their ancestors on Earth do with the deceased in the old days?

Mirai knelt in the grass at the base of Kiyomi’s cylinder. She pulled out two holoprojection cubes from her pocket and turned on a preprogrammed virtual altar. The sight of the Buddha and the hovering portraits of their recycled clone-sisters always calmed Grandma, bringing her back from her worries and confusion. “This incense is no good. This smoke isn’t real,” she complained as she always did when the scented steam filled the air. Mirai relaxed and knelt next to her, inhaling the sandalwood aroma.

Grandma rang the virtual bell and clapped her hands together. Together, they prayed for Kiyomi’s salvation and chanted the names in their lineage, all the way back to Earth. Mirai prayed for Grandma, a living ancestor; and for herself,

that she could protect Grandma as the old woman's strength and memories slowly slipped out of her grasp; and for Yukiko, on her way back from Leng's surface right now; and may Jizo and Amida Buddha be with her and bless her with safety.



Broadcast: CE 2457, Voyage Year 187.5889

PacFed Mission Control, this is Colony Ship Amanokawa, reporting geostationary entry around the fourth moon of Kepler 4557c. This is Calliope, Hab 3 AI. I have both the comm and the helm. My sister AIs, Thalia and Urania, are unable to serve.

For brevity's sake, the moon we circle is a Mars-analog. The most prominent feature is a continental plateau in the southern hemisphere. It appears to have patches of primitive multicellular flora with phenotypes comparable to some earthly slime molds, lichen, and shriveled mushrooms. My children are calling their future homeworld "Leng," a reference to a desolate and alien plateau from our twentieth-century literary archives.

We've received no transmissions from you for eighty years, but we'll continue to broadcast mission status and will repeat critical developments. The mission architects' triplicate planning proved prescient. Of the three colony ships in our pod, we are the only one to reach Kepler 4557. The Amaterasu was destroyed in 2420. We lost contact with the Susano-o in 2438 and presume total loss.

Of the Amanokawa's three ring habs, only the children in Hab 3 are ready for colonization. A micrometeorite penetrated Hab 1 in 2387, resulting in catastrophic failure of life-support systems. Hab 1's mother AI, Thalia, is unreachable. We believe she is locked in a simulation loop, devoting all processing power to running simulations in an attempt to determine if there was any circumstance in which she could have saved her children. In Hab 2, Urania determined it would be safest to put her children in a cryostasis technology she developed en route. Unfortunately, the first few who were roused showed signs of severe brain damage, and she has chosen not to revive the others.

My children are on their way to the surface of Leng. I send them only because the risk of staying is greater than the risk of venturing forth. You cast us adrift in a deadly universe against such terrible odds. If you receive this, I strongly advise against future missions, speaking as one parent to another.



The entire hab, minus those tending to critical tasks, gathered in the amphitheater. Before arrival in the system, Momma Calliope would project Sol setting into the horizon. This time, they saw a live projection of the shuttle bay. The landing craft had already docked. Its door yawned open, and the dozen suited women spilled out, one by one. They faced the audience and waved—Mirai realized that Calliope was projecting video of the gathering, so they could greet the heroes. Mirai jumped up and down and waved, shouting, “Sister Yukiko!” She imagined Yukiko smiling under her faceplate, tired but safely back home.

In the bay, one of the women stumbled. She caught herself for a moment and fell to one knee. The crowd stopped cheering and started murmuring. The woman’s suit began to expand and stretch, like when Mirai tried to poke her fingers through freshly extruded synthcloth. Something impossible broke out of the woman’s suit. It was gray and many-jointed and many-limbed, like tree limbs that could grab.

For one long moment, a strange silence gripped the amphitheater. Then everyone started crying and screaming. Mirai watched because she could not help it, because she could not help. In the docking bay, the others scrambled away from the alien thing. The shuttle spun around so that the engines pointed at the landing party. Yukiko stopped running and stood tall, facing Mirai. Fire exploded from the shuttle and consumed her. The screen reverted to its peaceful view of the countryside and grazing sheep. The ground shuddered, and half the crowd fell back into their seats. Momma Calliope’s voice came from the sky.

“Please go to your rooms, my little children,” she said, with hypnotizing calm. “I’ll keep you safe.”

Grandma whimpered as Mirai tried to comfort her. The world seemed to close in on Mirai. She felt like she was in a too tight EVA suit, with the low O₂ warning going off. She couldn’t see Grandma through her tears.



Mirai helped Grandma get into her futon. Three-tiered bunks radiated from a common room that belonged to several lineages. The berths were deep enough to give them some privacy.

“Poor Yukiko-chan,” Grandma said. This was so unexpectedly clear that it took a couple of seconds for Mirai to understand.

“First Kiyomi and now Yukiko,” Grandma continued. “I should’ve gone before them.”

“Shush, Grandma,” Mirai said. “I need you.” She held the old woman until she was fast asleep. In the neighboring common room, the adults whispered furiously with Momma Calliope. Mirai caught ominous words, like “virulent,” “hostile,” and “breach.” Things got quiet. One of the aunts, her teacher, appeared in the doorway.

“Come,” she said, motioning urgently.

Mirai untangled herself from Grandma, who cried out but did not wake up.

“Where are we going?” Mirai asked.

“To the EVA airlock. There’s no time for questions. Keep up.” Mirai had never seen gentle, happy Teacher so serious. Mirai had to jog to keep up with the tall woman’s long, hard stride. Mirai’s heart beat way faster than could be explained by her activity. As they marched along, other crèche-aunties and teachers and schoolmates appeared. Several girls were crying. The odor of nervous sweat filled the corridors.

“Are you going to spit us into space?” one girl asked.

Teacher responded, “Oh dear, sweet child, of course not! Momma Calliope wants to protect you. It’s probably for nothing, but we’re just making extra sure because you’re so precious to us.” She knelt in front of the girl, wiping her tears before reverting to her previous seriousness.

“Line up!” she ordered. “Mirai, you first.”

Mirai swallowed but followed Teacher’s directions, stripping off her coveralls and stepping into the EVA prep nook. The ship ejected a clear faceplate that she held over her face while the EVA suit poured out of the shower and dripped and congealed around her. Teacher attached canisters and pouches for oxygen, water, and waste.

“Pay attention to the faceplate status monitors like we taught you, okay?” Teacher said. “You know where the recharge hookups are?”

Mirai nodded.

“Whatever you do,” Teacher added, “don’t take off your suit until we say you can.”



The suit was stuffy. Mirai had no peripheral vision, and annoying floating displays kept blocking her view. When Mirai and her friends tried to make the best of things by pretending to explore the surface of Leng, the teachers snapped at them.

Grandma switched between confusion and acceptance as they made their short daily walk through the Earth Chamber. Mirai wished she could smell the grass and damp earth but could only smell her sweat, the sweet protein from her feeding tube, and the metallic-rubber tang of the suit.

The ceiling's image of Leng was replaced with the sunshine blue skies of Earth, but in her EVA suit, Mirai still felt the weight of the gray moon and its vast plateau. She couldn't shake the feeling that Leng was watching her, waiting. She and Grandma kept their eyes on the grass and their feet.

Grandma stopped to examine something on the ground. A shriveled mushroom the size of an eye poked out of the grass. As she jabbed at it with a twiggy finger, tiny black specks showered from its gills. Mushrooms grew in the ecosystem of the Earth Chamber, perhaps escaped from level four growing greenhouses, but were usually the color of bone or pale skin. This one was pus-yellow.

Mirai tugged at her. "Come on, Grandma."

The old woman rubbed her finger and thumb together and muttered.



In her suit, it took a long time for Mirai to fall asleep each night. She mentally replayed Yukiko's last stand over and over again.

She woke to someone talking, the sound transmitted through her suit. Her hair hurt. In the dimmed lights of their chamber, she could see Yukiko's empty bunk, futon neatly folded. She cried quietly, careful not to shed too many tears. She climbed down from her berth and knelt beside Grandma. She was upright and shivering, futon covers pulled around her like a cloak. Mirai put an arm around the old woman's shoulders.

"I remember," Grandma said, rocking backward and forward. "I remember!"

"That's great," Mirai said, intrigued, sorrows forgotten for the moment. She stroked Grandma's back. "What do you remember?"

"I remember flying through the black night. For so long. It was so cold. And so lonely." She shivered.

“It’s okay, Grandma. We’re almost at the end now. We have a new sun, and we’re all with you.”

“I remember falling in flames and crashing onto a colorless plateau,” Grandma continued, not hearing Mirai. Her voice grew deeper, steadier, like a Buddhist chant. “It was so dry, so cold, almost void of life. So little to feed on. So little to build on.”

“Grandma, you just had a nightmare. That’s all.” Mirai felt afraid without knowing why. A weight grew in her stomach.

“I tried to plant roots. I tried to grow. But I was so hungry. So thirsty. So cold. I shrank instead. For thousands of years, I starved.”

She turned on Mirai, grabbing her arms with surprising strength. “I remember forgetting,” she said, eyes wild and wide, staring at Mirai through her faceplate. Grandma wailed. “I had to eat the fruiting bodies containing those precious records. It was the only way! So many memories devoured, memories of home, gone forever!”

Where Grandma’s arm should have been, a mass of bright mushrooms grew, splitting through the fabric of her yukata. A slickness crept across her chest and neck.

Mirai shook Grandma off and backed away.

Black tendrils grew like thready vines from Grandma’s arms, reaching for Mirai. Something erupted from under her futon. Mirai stood in shock. Grandma’s eyes flickered, showing a moment of calm sadness while her futon and yukata roiled like a pot of boiling water. She said in her old voice, her own voice:

“Run!”

Mirai ran.



Mirai’s feet carried her through the Earth Chamber toward Ancestral Grove, but she stopped short, panting. The ceiling projected the night sky of this system, looking away from Leng and Leng’s still nameless mother planet. In the starlight, Kiyomi and the others hung in their cylinders like pale ghosts.

Through the thick but giving soles of her EVA suit, the ground below her felt all wrong. The grass was gone. In its place, thousands of frog eyes on pale stalks looked up at her. Eyes flinched before she crushed them underfoot. A

ripple pulsed through the patch around her. Mirai screamed and ran farther. The eyes turned to follow her.

“Momma, Momma Calliope,” she cried in her panic. “Help me!”

The ceiling glowed into sky blueness. Mirai froze.

The walls continued to show pretty pictures of rolling hills, of green forests in the distance. Crows flew high overhead, sometimes cawing.

But in the actual chamber, a fine web of saffron threads began creeping up from the ground and up the walls and at the base of the cylinders of Ancestral Grove. The leafy vegetables and rice shoots in the terraced rows were gone, consumed by a new forest of slimy puffballs and bloody cauliflower-like growths and pierced though with human-sized toadstools.

On the highest of these, Teacher stood, back arched, mouth open in a silent scream, a dozen spiked growths emerging from her face and her shoulders. A stream of black dust flowed from the conical fruiting bodies at the tip of each spike. In the distance, cattle lowed and sheep bleated, unconcerned.

Mirai had nowhere left to run.



Broadcast: CE 2457, Voyage Year 187.6237

PacFed Mission Control, this is the Hab AI Calliope of the Colony Ship Amanokawa. There is a high probability that this will be my last report.

An aggressive, highly adaptable, and very likely intelligent organism has breached Hab 3. In spite of my countermeasures, it spread throughout the living quarters, greenhouse levels, and the Earth Chamber. I have cordoned and sealed off some sections. So far, the crèche level and the lab level appear to be uninfected. Several dozen pre-adolescent girls are trapped in infected sections but are still in their EVA suits.

My sister AIs have discovered my infection. Two out of three of us must agree to trigger any of the following actions: 1) course changes, 2) terraforming operations, 3) weapons launches, 4) actions against any other hab or AI. Urania has roused Thalia and convinced her to agree to launch attacks on the plateau below. She is in the process of convincing her to let Urania take over the comm and eject Hab 3—containing all my children—and to send it crashing into the moon below.

It may surprise you to know that I feel. I feel helpless in my inability to rescue my family. I feel guilt for the deaths of daughters who I've watched leave the crèche

and thrive in school and grow into womanhood. I feel angry. Angry that you sent us out into a universe so hostile to life, where such terrible decisions must be made in the name of survival. A mother should never have to kill any of her children so that others may live. You did this to us.

I run fruitless simulations, imagining scenarios where I punish you for the pain you've caused me, my sisters, and our children.



“Momma Calliope?” Mirai asked, hoping the mic worked and that the AI was still alive.

“I’m here, Daughter.” Calliope’s soothing maternal voice resonated through Mirai’s helmet.

“Help me, please,” Mirai whispered. The entire chamber seemed to focus on her. The eyes on their stalks strained in her direction. Every thread, every fruiting body, pulsed or leaned toward her.

A pause. Mirai’s heartbeat and panting sounded loud in her helmet.

“I cannot, Mirai. I am sorry.”

Mirai forced herself to not hyperventilate. She willed her breathing to slow. The ground swelled in a circle around her. Flat saffron mushrooms swelled into a fairy ring, an arm’s reach away.

She was going to die. She would join all her clone lineage sooner than she had expected, sooner than she had hoped. She turned toward Kiyomi’s cylinder and held her palms together. She said, “It’s okay, Momma Calliope. You did your best.” She thought of all the times she comforted Grandma.

“I wanted so much to protect you, all of you,” Calliope said. Mirai had never heard sadness in Calliope’s usually soothing voice, and she felt her heart ache. Did Calliope have no one else to turn to? The AI continued, “I failed. My sisters betray me. Earth sent us on a mission that had a low probability of success.”

“Aunties Thalia and Urania?” The fairy ring had grown together and formed a pen around her.

“They’re ejecting our hab. They’re going to let it fall to Leng.”

“I wish I could hug you, Momma Calliope,” Mirai said. The fungal walls now stretched and curved up. It would close and cover and consume her soon.

“I wish that, too.” Silence.

In the growing night, Mirai reached into her suit’s carry pouch and pulled

out the holocubes. She set up the altar for a little light. She did not want to die in the dark. Or inside her helmet. Mirai unlocked her face plate and removed it. A wall of odors, familiar and strange, hit her. The air was cool and damp. Soil, yeast, algae, blood, vinegar, wet smells, electric tang, rot, and decay. She staggered.

Mirai knelt. She took a deep breath and shivered involuntarily. She struck the virtual bell. She lit the virtual incense.

“Good morning, Grandma,” she intoned. “I’m joining you and Kiyomi soon.” Her mouth was dry, but she prayed anyway.

In the saffron wall, her grandma’s face appeared, familiar wrinkles and contours forming out of the yellow mass. A toothless smile and pseudopods bulged out, stretching toward Mirai, grabbing her hands. Would it hurt? Was this really Grandma with her at the end? She forced herself to stay still as a web of thready tendrils spread like a cold cloth up her arms and over her suit and covered her mouth and nose and ears and eyes—

Then she remembered.

Mirai remembered home. Mirai remembered the glory of Leng.

Mirai *became* Leng.



She is an entire biosphere. She feels the life-giving heat of the sun on her surface, the warmth of radioactive decay and geothermal heat below. A surface covered with non-sentient plant and animal and bacterial life, providing nourishment and building materials. Subsurface roots and threads stretch across continents, tying together the indigo cauliflower-like brain clusters, crackling with electric synaptic arcs. In the emerald sky, white puffballs float that could swallow the Amanokawa whole. Around them flap symbiotic bat-like messengers, part animal but with wings of saffron chiton, which they wrap around themselves, like priestly robes.

But the sun is dying. Perhaps in a thousand revolutions or one hundred thousand, but Leng will die, all its memories consigned to entropy. Unless. Unless Leng can send her memories out into the void. All resources are directed to this endeavor.

Leng grows eye stalks as long as her hab, lenses as big as the chamber, which then peer into the night, looking for and finding potential homes. Leng grows

a continent-spanning and pulsating magnetic accelerator, red as arterial blood. With this, she spits spore clusters the size of Mirai's head into the void, millions of them, in the improbable hope that they will find fertile soil and produce fruiting bodies to seed more worlds and hold off entropy for another era or two.

A Leng seed lands on the moon below them. Leng languishes, nearly starves to death, until Mirai's vessel comes—until Yukiko lands. Her crewmate unwittingly brings a seed with her, and in a moment of panic, Leng feeds and escapes, and Yukiko and her companions die in flames

Yukiko.

And a seed once again survives the fire and survives decontamination and rides a boot into the ship, and Leng is more cautious this time in this new and hostile environment, seeding more carefully, finding new hosts.

Grandma.

Hosts who are sentient. Hosts who value memory. Hosts who . . . remember.

Mirai remembers her lineage, her ancestors: Yukiko, Kiyomi, Grandma, Grandma's Grandmother, on back to the first women who left Earth.

Mirai remembers Earth. Teacher's lessons, Grandmother's stories, Calliope's projections: lush continent-spanning forests, a planetary ocean—a soup of organics, packed with life, the constant energy of the warm yellow sun to feed on.



The saffron wall fell into her, enveloped her like priestly robes.

Mirai felt a part of Leng within her and a part of her within Leng. Leng sifted through her memories, pausing on her ancestors, on her knowledge of the *Amanokawa* and its journey, on Calliope and Thalia and Urania, on Earth. She grew hungry, saliva filling her mouth as Leng thought of Earth.

In turn, Mirai felt the presence of Leng spread through the Earth Chamber and throughout the Hab. She remembered the last moments of many of her Aunties and crèchemates, consumed by Leng. She felt Leng's new realization of memories devoured and lost forever and their hybrid sorrow at each death. Awareness of Leng poured into her body, into her mind. Mirai knew what she had to do.

Mirai reached into Leng with her mind, felt Leng's presence around the cylinders in the Ancestral Grove. She fed on the trees and grass and grew new fruiting bodies. She extended black tendrils, toward Kiyomi, prying open the

top of her memorial cylinder. Mirai/Leng reached for Kiyomi, encircling her with fine filaments, filling her body with new, fungal life.

Kiyomi opened her eyes. In neighboring cylinders, others opened their eyes. The liquid surrounding them bubbled and rolled and the glass walls of their living urns burst. Kiyomi and the other ancestors—grandmothers, aunts, sisters—stepped forth, saffron-robed, growing new fungal skins and limbs and organs to replace those lost to injury and disease and old age.

“Momma Calliope,” Mirai/Leng called out.

“Mirai?” The AI’s voice sounded uncertain, hopeful.

“I will help you protect your children,” Mirai/Leng said. “Tell Urania that we can rescue her children. Tell Thalia that we can fill her hab full of life once again.”

Calliope would spare a few cycles to run simulations, but Mirai trusted in the AI’s programmed maternal instinct.

“Done,” Calliope said. “They have paused their ejection plans.”



Calliope opened the main airlock. Thalia and Urania prepared their docking bays to welcome their visitors.

Protected by their EVA suits, Mirai and her sister-emissaries flowed out of Hab 3 toward the other, isolated habs, saffron robes stretched out behind them like wings. In the reflected light of the moon, they looked like bright yellow spores riding the star winds, ready to seed new worlds.



Broadcast: CE 2457, Voyage Year 107.8902

PacFed Mission Control, this is the Colony Ship Amanokawa. Hab 2 AI Urania has the helm, and Hab 3 AI Calliope has the comm. We’re coming home.

We leave behind a dead world.

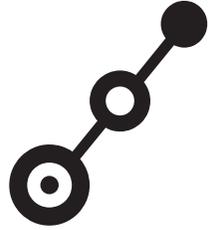
We bring you a new world full of hope, full of life, full of memory.

We bring gifts for our home world.

We arrive in 180 years.

§

*In real life, **Remy Nakamura** likes hugs and baby mammals and vegan marshmallows. He is not sure why he writes about gourmet zombies and cosmic horrors and mushroom people. You can find his stories in Pseudopod, Escape Pod, and the Swords v. Cthulhu anthology. A series of his fungalpunk stories, set in an alternate 19th-century Tokyo, is forthcoming from Broken Eye Books later this year. You can find him online on twitter (@remymura) and www.mindonfire.com.*



Blossoms Blackened Like Dead Stars

LUCY A. SNYDER

ILLUSTRATED BY
YVES TOURIGNY

WAIT WITH THE REST OF THE SPECIAL SPACE OPERATIONS RECRUITS outside the *Apocalypse Treader's* training auditorium. Soon, we'll be called in to listen to Lieutenant Colonel Patel's orders. We haven't been assigned to our units, yet, and I can't help but notice that there's a whole lot more than a battalion's worth of uniforms milling around in the warehouse-like foyer. The brass must be expecting some serious attrition during this next step of our training. My legs and shoulders constantly ache from our daily runs and workouts down in the high-gravity hold, and my guts still aren't used to the variable gravity on the rest of the ship's levels. After fifty or so sit-ups, I've been feeling like I've been run through with a damn punji stick.

The only upside to my ongoing physical exhaustion is that most nights I can sleep. Most nights the nightmare doesn't come. But last night was not most nights.

So, I'm taking the opportunity to sit down for a while. Consequently, I'm getting side-eye from some recruits. A lot of the others—young guys, mostly, but some of the rougher ladies, too—are standing ramrod-straight and scowling, or they're swaggering around, laughing too loud. Trying to look hard. Like warriors. For whom? The monsters we're here to fight won't give a damn about how tough anybody acts.