

Kraky — cover page by Hetty Symes

FROM THE EDITOR

Hello again, fellow nerds, to another edition of the Picocon Fanzine! This year, we have tales of magic and monsters, and wonderful artwork of Lovecraftian horrors. One might call it a bona fide *menagerie*¹! Thanks again to our incredibly talented (and busy!) friends at Imperial who made something to keep this collection alive, and special thanks to Hetty Symes for the amazing cover page. This literally could not have happened without all of your help.

As always, be sure to check out the Picocon *Wyrmtongue* to find out what's happening, and remember, ENJOY! **YO**

— Clifford Chan - Lord of Words March 2024

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¹Honestly who made this guy editor

Leave No Trace

by Juairiyah Raqib

Specimen 18. A large arthropod-like creature, twenty metres in length and two and a half metres in width. It raised several hundred pairs of clawed appendages, and guttural screeching filled the air. A single nod and the restraints were thrown over the brute, cutting off its war cry as it flailed in vain on the forest floor.

"Excellent work, men," the scientist called out, taking meticulous notes on the creature's physiology. Chances were low that it would survive the journey back, so a detailed record of the creature's appearance and behaviour was integral.

"Dr Kirkland."

Clearly, not everyone on the team recognised his dedication to scientific pursuit.

Rolling his eyes, Dr Arthur Kirkland continued his note-taking. "Yes, Mr Jones?"

Jones immediately launched into his latest delusion. "There's something underground, I just know it. I've been hearing these noises-"

"Ah, yes." Clicking his pen shut and lowering his clipboard, Arthur offered his most condescending smile. "I'm familiar with this Hollow Earth Theory of yours. But you see, this is not Earth. Humanity's new home will have no place for these inane theories."

Humanity's new home. Underfoot, black grass formed an organic cushion, crunching slightly as Jones shifted his position. Above them, violet foliage hung from slender branches of lofty trees, occasionally scattering a purple leaf or azure blossom with every whisper of the breeze. Beyond the trees, hazy white clouds did little to cool down the warmth of two suns in a blushing sky. The grey smog of despair and paranoia they'd called home seemed a hazy memory in this utopia, and Arthur intended to keep it that way.

A flurry of activity by the truck broke his rapture, and he tucked his clipboard to his chest with a small sneer. "Run along, Jones. You wouldn't want to miss our chef's latest creations. I hear he's rehydrated a new type of pasta!" Not waiting for a response, he marched away, eager to hide in his makeshift study where he would feast like a king on his own rations of equally miserable slop. Lead scientist he may be, but all suffered equally through pioneer gruel.

The study was little more than a small table around the corner, hidden from view of the crewmates at the canteen. After Jones had hurried to join the throng, they had set out two large folding tables and surrounded them with metal chairs to languish on while congratulating themselves and stuffing food into their faces. Unimpressed by their display, Arthur sat delicately at his own table and began to eat, pretending to be unaware of the loud conversation a few metres away.

"Rejected by Dr S again, Alfie?" someone piped up, and Arthur rolled his eyes.

Jones had managed to slip up before they had even left Earth's orbit, and still remained the butt of every joke. It wouldn't be so bad if the young man had enough wit for a riposte, but instead he would always stand there, red-faced and tongue-tied.

"Leave the boy alone," a stern tone chimed in, and Arthur winced slightly. Beilschmidt was a very serious man, and his defences were never kind. "It's not his fault he believes

in such silly stories."

Scattered jeering met his words, and Arthur allowed himself a dignified snort before continuing his food. It was uncivilised to eavesdrop, but who didn't like a show with a good meal? Or, looking at the congealed rations, maybe just any meal at all. Scraping the plastic fork against the paper bowl, he managed to scoop out the remains and tip them into his mouth. Now to dispose of the kitchenware... After a few moments of inspecting his surroundings, he walked over to an inconspicuous bush and gently pushed the bowl and fork through its foliage until they were barely visible. They were adventurers, after all, and the first rule of exploration: leave no trace.

Behind him, there was a loud slapping of skin. "Damn bugs!" Bonnefoy exclaimed, to Arthur's amusement. The Frenchman had been miserable from the start of the journey, and if he weren't so entertaining when upset, Arthur would have long been sick of his antics. "I hate this planet!" he continued, clearly preparing to launch into another tirade, famous for being so irritating to listen to that it raised team morale.

"I'll never understand why you came here, Francis," Beilschmidt's weary voice cut him off.

A haughty sniff. "For the money. When we return, I plan to kick back with the finest wine the institution can afford."

Arthur could get behind that, and so could their colleagues. Mutters of agreement and "I'll drink to that!" accompanied the scraping of disposable cutlery on bowls, and Arthur took the chance to make himself scarce. Anyway, he brought up a good point. Insect populations had been all but decimated back home, but they still knew very little about the minifauna populations. Now wary, he glanced back at the bush, shaking his hands slightly. Who knew what kinds of alien ticks and parasites could be lurking in this habitat? The scientist shook his head. It was time to find a new location. The truck was easily reloaded, and the crew were eager to explore new horizons. Before the closest sun set, they had already driven away leaving no clue of their presence other than trampled tyre tracks, lingering petrol fumes, and scattered piles of disposable goods poorly concealed among the trampled plants.

Location 13. Just beyond the boundaries of the vast alien forest, a carbon-black meadow stretched out to distant horizons, accompanied by a great lake mirroring the now darkening reddish sky. The crew stifled yawns as they set about observing living conditions: Arthur ran a tight ship, and insisted on air conditions, water quality, and soil nutrient levels being recorded before anyone could finally return to their bunks for the night. He, of course, sat wrapped in a throw while watching his crewmates struggle with their little measuring tools and write with spasming fingers, and felt just as satisfied as any of the shivering men when heading off to bed.

Arthur's dreams that night were strange. A rumbling noise reverberated in his ears, growing louder as a giant alien tick reared onto its hind legs and bared venomous fangs. Jones popped into view, whispering, "There's something underground, I just know it," until the tick fell forward and burrowed into the soil. A giant hand slapped down on where it had been, and Bonnefoy shouted, "Damn bugs!" as Arthur was thrown off his feet from the force. Instead of hitting the ground, he continued falling, into darkness as the roar grew until-

Awake now, he forced himself to breathe evenly. It was a few moments before he could

manage to sit up in his bunk and wipe the cold sweat off his forehead with his damp pyjama sleeve. Even now, he seemed to hear the noise, fading into the distance along with the dream itself. A few bunks down, Williams snored loudly, and Arthur shook his head. He'd let the others weaken his resolve, and that had manifested as a paranoid dream. Flipping his pillow over, he laid back down and let himself drift off again. He'd need sufficient rest for the next day's work.

Unaware of any strange events in the previous night, the rest of the crew awoke with surprising energy to begin the day. The threat of rations potentially running out had hung over their heads, and Arthur was amused to see the crew's excitement at a source of both potable water and potential food. All the fauna they had encountered had been captured for science, but the contract hadn't said anything about aquatic creatures, so he said nothing as they took advantage of this loophole. The native fish were strange with their dozens of fins and moss-covered hides, but arguably not more unappetising than monkfish or hake, or even the lab-grown protein slabs that Arthur had grown up on in his upper-middle-lower-upper-upper-lower-upper-middle class family. Still, Vargas the chef did not have the same allowances; faced with Beilschmidt and Williams clutching massive nets loaded with wriggling finned alien fish, he looked offended at the poor quality of meat chosen for him to work with. An artisan could only work with the very best, so more than a few cadavers were tossed back into the lake after only having a few slices of meat removed for consumption.

Arthur was detached while watching the crimson blood streaks spread in the golden water. It was wasteful, but there would always be more. In fact, judging by the now frothing surface of the water, the local wildlife seemed to appreciate their input. The men were enjoying the scene too, dangling corpses over the water to encourage the aquatic carnivores to jump for their food. The fun was cut short when Bonnefoy – of course – hollered, clutching a bleeding stump where his arm had been. As the closest they had to a medical professional, Arthur had to leap into action, ushering his traumatised crewmate into the truck for treatment.

It took some time, but eventually he'd managed to stem the blood flow. Bonnefoy had, for once, remained stoic during treatment, to Arthur's relief. He was ready to remonstrate the Frenchman for his carelessness, but Bonnefoy gripped his arm with his remaining hand.

"Will I be okay?" he asked in a low tone.

Arthur hesitated, eyeing the bandages. Bonnefoy was pale, but unusually calm as he waited for a response. Maybe it was the absence of his usual melodramatic moaning that unsettled the scientist, but a twinge of compassion finally won out, and he gingerly sat on the edge of his crewmate's bunk.

"This won't last as long as you think," he said sincerely. "Just rest for now, and it'll all be over soon."

Reassured, Bonnefoy remained recuperating in his bunk as Arthur exited the truck again. He considered giving a speech to his crewmates on the dangers of carelessness, but his sense won out. When he re-emerged from treating the invalid, Jones was busy skipping rocks on the lake as various aquatic beasts snapped at the ripples on the water surface. He doubted that any of them would take such a warning seriously, if their colleague being injured seemed to worry them so little.

Perhaps the decrease in morale was tempered by the absence of Bonnefoy's regular complaints. In the early afternoon, Arthur confirmed his patient's worsening condition, and was almost relieved when Williams suggested an excursion back into the forest. Perhaps Bonnefoy would be gone by the time they returned, and at least Vargas would no longer complain about not having access to meat. The thought was revolting, but he had to be detached, rational, objective about their survival. The effort of staying upright made his head spin, and he could barely follow his crewmates as they hacked a path through the undergrowth. Why were they doing so, anyway? Surely there were clearer paths. Maybe it just seemed like the right thing for explorers to do.

"Over there!"

Beilschmidt's bark drew his attention, but he only turned his head in time to see a dark blur escaping. The men gave chase, Arthur stumbling behind the others. His ears rang with adrenaline, but beneath the high-pitched whistling stirred something low, something deep. Ignoring it, he sped up, reaching the group as Jones held out a net gun, sending the strange creature sprawling to the ground, thrashing and screaming. For a while, the men all stood in silence, observing the alien as it howled. Arthur slowly stepped forward, regretting that he'd forgotten his clipboard. The creature descended into hissing as he approached, glaring up at him with wide amber eyes set in a curved reptilian face. But—most importantly—it sat on two legs, with two hand-like appendages struggling to lift the rope. It was humanoid.

"We're not here to hurt you," he offered, holding out a hand palm-up in a gesture of friendliness. He'd read somewhere that it worked on cats.

Liar, shot into his head. You have hurt us enough.

It was as though the creature had spoken directly inside Arthur's skull, and he shook his head. Obviously just more guilt manifesting. He needed to get a hold of himself. Standing up, he brushed off his legs, dimly aware of a growing noise in the background, like the crashing of waves on a beach.

"Take it back to the truck, men," he called over his shoulder. When there was no response, he turned around fully, his feet trudging on muddy ground. Muddy? Looking down confirmed what couldn't possibly be true. What had been dry soil was now clay-like sludge, and his feet were sinking further with every step.

Gone, the voice in his head told him. And you will be too.

A golden glint in the ground caught his eye, and he squelched over to it. A pair of glasses, slightly bent from when Jones had fallen asleep on them. If they were gone...

He forced his way back to the creature, which was still and silently watching him.

"Where are they?" he managed to ask. "What did you do?"

No response, not even in his head. A trembling hand reached into his coat, pulling out a pistol.

"I'll kill you," he choked out.

Images flashed in his head – a pale corpse with rotting flesh still staring at the ceiling of his bunk, three carcasses screaming silently underwater as hungry creatures flayed them for food, a blinded cadaver preserved in boggy soil, eternally staring up at him reproachingly, "*There's something underground*," – and he leaned forward and vomited.

The alien watched steadily, and Arthur finally became aware of distant rumbling. It was coming closer, vibrating the soles of his boots, and if he weren't so drained from guilt and regret, he would be flooded with terror. Instead, he was determined to not go down without a fight. Somehow, he managed to aim and squeeze the trigger, but the gunshot was drowned out by the ascending roar and the creature didn't flinch as golden blood flowed from the wound between its eyes. The ground fell out from under him, and rows of teeth blocked out the sight before he could wonder why. **YD**

Kingmaker

by Aditi Mehendale

The Spider creeps beneath the door, unseen By watching guard or sleeping Queen and King. She bears her sigil into muscle lean – A crimson seal of death, still blossoming.

Her Venom slowly seeps beneath the skin, As heavy snores give way to shaky breath. And neither shall his Virtue, nor his Sin, Prevent the moon from witnessing this death.

Come morning light, his Lady Wife does rise; Cold mourning gloom to shroud the Land by noon. At day's end meet the Witan, under guise, To mark a Royal Family Tree well-hewn.

Her purpose served, she lets time pass her by. So too does Regibus Factorem die. $\Psi\Phi$



The Lady of Bloom — by Rebecca Allday

The League of Femmes Fatales

by Clifford Chan

The full moon slid across the night sky as the League of Femmes Fatales gathered for their centennial meeting. Lilith drummed her fingers on the marble table, eyeing the oversized clock that hung above an even bigger pair of double doors that connected Calypso's island to the mortal plane. The other ladies busied themselves with conversation, but she caught Medusa, her right-hand woman and the face of tranquillity, sneaking a glance at the time herself. Those two were late. Again. Eve was going to be soo mad. The Mother of Humanity would say something along the lines of "the importance of work-life balance" and refuse to help with her hair the next morning. The feeling of impending doom looked her in the eyes and gave a little giggle. Lilith shivered.

The doors creaked open with the energy of a slumbering snail. Lilith glared at the pale goth who squeezed through the gap and hopped towards her seat, crimson dress shimmering at the hems. A fox followed suit, who strutted around the circular table as her fur melted into a silken robe, and the *huli jing*, in her human form, took her place at the table with the regality of an empress. The room quieted.

"Finally, we can start," said Medusa. "What held you up this time, Carmilla?"

The goth batted her eyes. "You've got really pretty eyes, Dusa. Are those new eyeliners?"

"Answer the question, honey. But yes, they're from Egypt. Cleopatra was very generous. The men never seem to notice though."

"Why do you never ask Daji? I sat down first this time!"

"I'm an empress," said the fox spirit. "Being late comes with the title. You have no excuses."

"It's not my fault you set the meeting up so early!"

Lilith cleared her throat. "As has been said before, this is the latest we can push the meeting before half our members get too tired to function. This is a very reasonable time."

The Skogsrå raised her hand. "I'm already feeling tired."

"Try out instant coffee. Best invention Adam's progeny came up with. My wife hates it though. Anyway, enough sidetracking. We need to get to the point. How is our progress towards world domination?"

"Truly horrible," said the Skogsrå, "Our stocks are so low nobody even wants to blow our backs out."

"But, honey, you don't have one."

Carmilla leapt up from her seat. "It's going great! There was this book series that came out at the start of the century that was realllyyy popular. Then it got turned into a movie franchise and got even bigger! People have churned out so much fanfiction since then I couldn't keep up with all of it. They got a lot of things wrong about us vampires, but change with the times I guess. At least we were hot in that one. It's progress!"

A furry paw went up. Wolf-Alice. "Speaking of fanfiction, that same franchise gave our men a strong foothold in this thing called the Omegaverse. It wasn't entirely to our benefit."

Lilith nodded. "Good work, both of you. How about yourself, Daji?"

"The internet is a truly wonderful thing. Back in the Shang dynasty, my then-husband King Zhou had to come up with all sorts of entertainment to indulge ourselves in, yet nowadays, all that needs to be done is the click of a button. Have you heard of video games, my esteemed chairwoman? They have a powerful influence on the young, and we are rather popular in some spheres. Also, there is another aspect of the internet worthy of exploit. Our porn makes so much silver, even the top courtesans of old would grow envious. Their indulgence shall make us queens."

"Okay...Good job, Daji? Anyone else?"

The siren beside Carmilla rubbed her chin in thought. "It's not going so well for us either, but perhaps our strategy of luring seamen to their deaths is an outdated one. I would like to hear some suggestions."

Carmilla almost jumped onto the table. "Oh! Me me me! You live out in the sea, so you must not get a lot of internet. Listen to this." The vampire tapped on her phone a few times, then turned the speaker towards them.

"... belong with me \sim "

Silence fell around the table. Not a few faces had tears in their eyes. The Skogsrå wept.

"That was...so relatable..." said the Skogsrå, and started bawling again. Medusa handed the nymph some napkins.

The siren rubbed her eyes. "What was that?"

"Taylor Swift's You Belong With Me."

"She is a muse. What genius..."

"You and your sisters got good voices right? Study the trends, change up your style, or even start a band! You don't need fanfiction or whatever Daji is doing. You girls can be superstars!"

The siren reached forward and took the vampire's hand. "Thank you. You are the greatest vampire ever known to mortalkind. How ever can I repay you?"

Carmilla reached down, a picture of benevolence. "I ask for nothing but this. Join my fanfiction club. Every Tuesday at my place."

"It shall be done."

The sight filled Lilith with warmth. "Great job, Carmilla. Is there anything else we need to discuss?"

"One last thing," said Medusa, "It has come to my attention that this council does not fully represent the femmes fatales across the globe. It is time to expand our league. What better time than the 21st century?"

It was true. This council was small, and much of their knowledge was dated. If not for Carmilla, the siren would have continued singing to an empty sea, with no one to hear her songs. How many opportunities for growth – both personal and for their shared goal of world domination – have they missed in the past century?

"We shall vote on this motion. Any objections to this proposition?"

Not a single hand or paw went up. "All in favour then?" Every hand shot up, and paws punched the air. Lilith grinned.

"Motion passed."

Cheers and roars filled the room, but Medusa held up her hand, and the room quieted.

"Before this meeting ends, there is something I wish to say. We are busy women, and seldom get the chance to meet each other in the span of a century. The only reason we all came together is because of our chairwoman. Calypso!"

Plates and glasses floated down from above, and bottles popped open, filling the glasses set before them. Calypso herself burst into the room, carrying a great cake no doubt filled with nectar, and her invisible servants followed in her wake with trays of ambrosia. Medusa turned towards Lilith, who fixed her with eyes that turned men to stone, gemstones that the very ocean once sought after, and raised her glass.

"To the first woman! The one who did not yield to Adam! Tonight, we feast!"

Lilith turned to the great clock on the wall, and sighed. Eve was going to chew her ears off. $\Psi\Phi$

Real Wizards FM

by Lucas S Schuck

A small, fluffy pair of 20-sided dice bounced up and down from the rear-view mirror, as Arantius' three decade-old jeep dashed through the highway.

His mind entered a deep state of focus whilst driving. Almost becoming one with the car, he barely even had to move his well-trained eyes whilst swiftly overtaking others on the road. He looked out to the blazing sun facing west, pondering on the unknown realms of arcane.

The radio suddenly went quiet, and amidst all the brief static, thunder roared from the panel.

"Thou art now listening to..." a voice announced, followed by the sound of a fireball being cast, "102.3, The Real Wizards FM!"

"What!?" An out of tune note played from the passenger seat, where Merrylin the bard sat adjusting his guitar. "Oh hell no..." He reached out for the controls on the panel.

"Do not dare change stations!" Arantius warned him.

"This is garbage, Archie!" The bard curled his fingers and shook his hands in frustration. "How can you be so old and have not developed a good taste in music!?"

"Silence!" his deep voice echoed. "This is what the best of the best listen to."

As the host's overenthusiastic announcement came to an end, a slow mediaeval song began to play.

Merrylin glanced back and forth between the radio and the wizard. "Were you told that by a deaf person!?" he whined, quickly grasping the rotating radio button. "I'll show you some real music-"

"No you don't!" Arantius began slapping the bard and pushing him away as he shifted stations.

"On other news, the princess has once again been turned into a frog by-" The newsman was interrupted as the wizard changed back to his favourite station.

"The driver's word is the only one that matters when it comes to the radio." He raised his chin and shook his index finger.

"Yeah, sure man, whatever." Merrylin leaned back on the passenger seat, going back to tuning his guitar. "Maybe listening to this shit is what's keeping all the witches away."

Arantius growled, but figured giving his friend the attention he craved would simply make him angrier. He rolled his eyes and sighed, shifting his focus back on the road.

After a few turns leaving the highway, their jeep was forced to halt beyond the sight of a red light. Aiming for the first exit to the left, the wizard stopped his car behind a green van, covered with goblins' symbols and scriptures.

Merrylin raised his eyes to the road. "Not this again! Don't tell me we'll end up stuck behind those idiots."

"Never judge a book by its cover," Arantius reminded him as the traffic light turned green. "In this world, all creatures opt for concealing their true intentions."

"But they ain't moving! The light's green!" He pointed at the van. "How the hell did they get a carriage licence?"

"It must be a mistake on their part, I'm sure they'll quickly-"

"MOVE, IDIOT!" Merrylin shouted, pushing Arantius back to press the horn in the steering wheel.

"Enough, you-" The wizard fought back, though his attempts to prevent the bard from honking proved to be fruitless.

It wasn't until the van's driver door opened that their childish fisticuffs ceased. A green, short creature walked out into the road, shaking his fist and swearing at the two.

Both of them fell back on their seats for a moment. Arantius rubbed his forehead in frustration while Merrylin tried to make out what the goblin was saying. Seeing all the creature did was to keep cursing and moving in, the bard was quick to respond.

"DID YOU NOT YOU HEAR ME, YOU FAILED GREEN ABERRATION? GET OFF THE FUCKING ROAD, BEFORE I PAINT THE ASPHALT GREEN WITH YOUR FACE!"

Baffled, the goblin turned to his van and opened the back doors.

"Oh no..." Both the wizard and the bard's eyes widened.

As if a portal had opened inside that tiny van, a green swarm of gremlins armed to the teeth came rushing out. With knives, spears and even flails, the goblins charged at the jeep, ready to take both it and the people within it apart.

Seeing the situation get dire, Arantius wasted no time changing to reverse gear and fully pushing the gas to perform a tactical J-turn. He flipped the car in the other direction whilst speeding, and flew away from the horde.

He couldn't prevent one or two of their pursuers from holding onto the car. But driving at almost 240 kilometres per hour with the assistance of his magically-enhanced engine would ensure they'd fly off before trying anything funny.

"Hahah! Nice work, Archie!" Merrylin laughed as he slammed his guitar into a goblin who'd made the foolish decision to stick his head close to his window. A few notes played as the creature's skull was crushed by the mahogany instrument.

"This is why you should always keep your driver content!" the wizard laughed, launching the last few goblins off the car as he reached over 300 kilometres an hour.

As an inverse testament of its appearance, the jeep's engine roared, blitzing the vehicle through the streets. The party's joy was a short-lived one, however. From the rear view window, Arantius spotted the hybrid species which combined the brilliance of a human with the physique of a horse - a centaur.

"Pull over!" the centaur screamed at the top of his lungs.

The wizard sighed, but complied.

"Whaat?" Merrylin's wide eyes turned to his companion as he slowed down the car. "Are you kidding me? We can't afford another one!"

"Give me my staff, Merry," Arantius said calmly, before bringing the vehicle to a halt.

The quadruped trotted around the car, moving closer to the driver's window. "Do you know why I pulled you over-" His voice was interrupted by the wizard's furious chant.

"DISCIDIUM EXTREMUM!" The words thundered out of his throat, resonating into the crystal in his staff's edge. In a mere instant, it built up an incredulous amount of magical power, which was immediately channelled into the poor centaur beyond them.

A blinding light engulfed their surroundings for a few seconds. When the dust had settled, Arantius and Merrylin both looked out to face the product of their defiance. Standing on the ground just beside the car, a clueless man looked around to shriek in horror as his eyes came across a body which used to be his, now a horse on its own.

Merrylin's jaw almost went loose. The man screamed in sheer desperation, but before anyone could think of anything to do next, Arantius pushed the gas pedal and left the scene as fast as they came in.

"What did you do to him?" The bard slowly turned at the driver.

"Let's focus on the road, yeah?" The wizard broke his accent for the first time.

A crystal ball encased within the cupholder of the driver's seat suddenly began glowing a teal blue tone.

"Someone's calling ya, Archie."

"I've got this." He grasped his fingers around the sphere, "Shit-" and dropped it on the floor.

"BAHAHAHA!"

"SILENCE!" Arantius shouted. "Ugh, we must acquire another one if we're to access myquest.co again."

"Let's just go old fashioned." Merrylin's eyes followed a sign on the side of the road. "There! We've got a tavern over there, I'm sure someone's got something for us."

The wizard sighed, making the turn. "So be it."

The jeep was stationed on the unpaved parking lot in front of the tavern. A crowd of bystanders stopped to watch as the two of them walked out, exchanging caustic glances with the local populace.

Halting their step by the 'NO WEAPONS' sign at the front entrance, Arantius handed his staff to Merrylin. "Leave it in the back seat," he ordered as he walked in.

"Psh. Fine."

The bard returned to the car, carelessly opening its back door to allow a skeleton leaning onto it to fall down and shatter on the ground.

"FUCK! BOB, NO!" He curled his fingers, kneeling on the ground and staring in anguish at the bones sprawled all over the soil.

Disregarding his friends' cries of misery, Arantius continued his search inside for a quest which could pay for a new crystal ball.

'I hope it wasn't that witch I met the other day calling,' He thought to himself, bumping into a lady with a comically large exclamation mark floating above her head.

"I must know how to do this-" He looked up to the floating object.

"Hello, traveller," she started. "Have you ever heard of the tale-"

"I don't care!" Merrylin shouted as he walked into the tavern. "How much is in it for us?"

The woman rolled her eyes. "Five hundred gold, including taxes."

"Archie, that's a shit ton of money..." the bard uttered in the wizard's ear.

"I know.," he uttered back, and turned to the lady. "What shall we do?"

"A bunch of crooks took over the enclosure where a railway crosses the closest river we got. It's bad for business and makes the cost of everything here expensive. Wipe them out."

"You got it, ma'am." Merrylin immediately turned 180 degrees and left.

"Have our reward ready," Arantius instructed, soon following his friend.

Walking outside with determined looks, they gazed up to the setting sun. Nodding and keeping a stiff upper lip to all the ones around them, they got the message across that they would get the job done.

"The enclosure is five kilometres uphill, Merrylin," the wizard said. "Start the car."

The bard's expression fell. "About that. We've got a flat tire." **\PP**

A Ball of Midnight

by Anand Doshi

The Kingdom of Lucis was absolutely fucked. The Imperials had taken over the castle, and their influence had become apparent even in the furthest reaches of the land. Even in Cleigne, the soldiers had laid chaos to their once peaceful life.

The monsters at night started showing up in the day. Or maybe they just stopped disappearing at night. Who knew? Thankfully, L'eive didn't have to deal with the direct aftermath of this apocalypse. His parents' farm was far enough away from anyone important to attract attention from the Imperial soldiers, and the monsters didn't really care about them if they stayed around the farm.

And L'eive was lucky to not suffer from solitude either. Not when his best friend lived with him.

Dielën was always there for him, with him. And he was everything he could ask for in a companion. Dark navy feathers covered his body, and he was dark as midnight except for his beak which was bright orange. He was almost 5 years old now, and he had grown to tower over L'eive, standing at an impressive six feet. His neck was long and graceful, making for a surprisingly sturdy handhold when going on rides. L'eive hadn't had the heart to put a rein on Dielën yet. He deemed he was still too young.

But what L'eive loved the most about his pet chocobo was his soul. He had eyes of hazel, and L'eive could always tell how they brightened when he brought him greens to feast on, or how they seemed to follow along his pacing late at night at the stables as L'eive ranted about something or the other. Or how they held in them an immense and inexplicable understanding of the bond between them.

Dielën was the best flightless bird in all of Lucis, as far as L'eive was concerned.

He still remembered the day he had hatched. It was a lovely spring day, and the blue egg had cracked first. Slowly it had grown, growing larger and larger till it covered the circumference, and then - pop! A black mass of feathers and indescribably adorableness had entered his vision.

Their vision. Eveilün had still been around back then - her family still had a farm in Cleigne.

L'eive shook his head, coming back to the present, to the night under the stars, waddled up in the comfy hug of a chocobo.

They went on their usual morning ride the next day, with Dielën trotting over the plains, avoiding all the monsters by experience. They never ventured out too far, at most making it to the lake and stopping for Dielën to rehydrate while L'eive stretched away his lethargy.

But something about that morning made him nostalgic.

"Drink up, buddy," L'eive said to Dielën, patting his back. He laughed, "I remember when you had just hatched, you wouldn't drink or eat anything that wasn't from Eveilün."

Dielën only flicked his eyes to him and gave a soft squawk. He did not stop drinking from the lake. L'eive smiled. "I miss those days, you know?"

Dielën lifted his head and gave L'eive a comforting nudge with his still wet beak.

"Of course you know."

Dielën dropped his beak back into the lake only to bring it out again with speed, splashing the cool, refreshing water all over L'eive.

"Hey - " But Dielën was already running across the field, back towards their farm, squawking in what could only be characterised as mocking glee.

"Come back here, you little pecker!"

L'eive chased after him, even though he knew he wouldn't catch up. But at least the pain from his past was forgotten.

Dielën had a way of expressing himself that put many humans to shame. He had a honk for when he was excited about something, usually accompanied by that ridiculous dance he'd picked up from a travelling flock of Chocobos. It was hardly a dance - all he would do was spin around flapping his wings without any rhyme or rhythm.

He did it everytime L'eive got him a special, tasty Green. He did it sometimes when it rained. He didn't do it at all when his legs couldn't move and pain wracked his fragile, majestic body.

On days like those, his honk was replaced by an almost silent whimper, and the moisture around his eyes was from clouds within rather than the ones above. It happened at least once a month, and it was L'eive's understanding that it was normal and healthy.

Still, he didn't like seeing his best friend in pain. When he was younger, his uncle had explained to him that Dielën went through this ordeal as a trial from Bahamut himself. The astral didn't want Chocobos to be so happy all the time that they forgot about others' suffering. It made them grounded and flightless.

A silly folktale to shield L'eive from some complicated avian biology. But L'eive still remembered it, and he made it a point to be by Dielën's side to remind him that he wasn't alone.

Sometimes - most times - L'eive would hold his own shoulders with his palms and flail around, spinning and stomping his feet. Dielën squawked at him every time - whether to get him to stop, or keep going, L'eive didn't know.

In the fifteen years in which Lucis cowered before the darkness of the Imperials, L'eive and Dielën got up to quite a few adventures. Along the way, they earned scratches and wrinkles and scars that didn't always heal.

L'eive's parents had been lost when he was twelve, and his uncle was gone soon after. The farm and its responsibilities fell on their shoulders, and they carried it together.

For so long, it was just the two of them, in the wet plains of Cleigne, toiling and working and laughing and dancing. Until one day, it wasn't.

Lucis had finally been liberated after the Prince had awoken from his slumber. A Regis sat on the throne once more, and the evil in the sky and the ground disappeared overnight.

Lady Lunafreya and the Prince - King now - had a lavish wedding and celebrations reached even the remotest parts of Lucis. Tenebrae and Lucis were allies once again. The darkness was finally gone. The day was bright and birds chirped without fear of being hunted.

L'eive should have been happy, but he felt a distinct void in his chest. Usually he would have just sought out Dielën and cuddled with him a little bit, but the bird was woefully missing. He sat there on the front porch of his old house, looking into the horizon, trying to figure out what he would do next.

But he heard that familiar honk of happiness and a natural smile came over his features. He got up from his chair and walked around the side of the building to the patch of Greens behind his house. It had been there since before he was born, and it was Dielën's favourite place in the whole world. His enthusiastic honking made it very clear.

As he rounded the corner and saw Dielën's midnight feathers ruffling in the breeze, he immediately noticed the body hugging his best friend. Dielën squawked once more, calling him closer.

But L'eive stood still, his legs unwilling to move. Eveilün was there, cuddling into Dielën's side, scratching that spot under his beak and laughing and talking to the bird. She slowly turned her head his way and noticed him. Despite the longer nose and laugh lines around her mouth, she still looked as he remembered her. That same mirth in her eyes, and that same gleam in her smile.

She beckoned him over wordlessly, and he floated towards her.

She flashed him a dazzling smile, and it transported him back to twenty years ago, in that same path of Greens. To a moment when his heart was full.

To the moment of them kneeling into the dirt, holding between their tiny hands a freshly hatched egg and little ball of midnight. $\Psi\Phi$

The Spiders that Eat You

by Kai Lam

Every year, spiders eat thousands of people. Don't worry, you're perfectly safe, spiders only eat a little bit of anyone, unless you're unlucky, or they've eaten your luck.

It's best not to write about the spiders, as they will read it, but considering my circumstances...

I have a few fellow researchers; there used to be more of us, but the spiders ate them. And they died.

Virgil died a month ago. The spiders ate his sleep. It sounds wonderful at first, not having to sleep, but what the spiders ate was not his need to sleep, but his ability to do so. He died overdosed on sleeping pills, bloodshot eyes wide awake.

Do not write the names of anyone alive while thinking of the spiders. It will call them. More than one quarrel has ended with all parties involved eaten by the spiders. It has been taboo for us to write the names of anyone alive ever since.

Being eaten by spiders isn't necessarily fatal. Someone whose name I forget had some of their memories eaten. Sometimes they would walk into a room and forget why they had, or forget to eat, until the hunger was overwhelming. At first, the rest of us didn't think much of it, until we saw the spider on their head. I don't remember what it looked like.

There were some, I think foremost being Celia, who thought we could use the spiders to our benefit. She managed to get the spiders to eat her past and was scarily gleeful. Problems arose after she tried to have the spiders eat someone else's bad feelings for her. She knows better now.

That incident led to our other rule of "Don't encourage spiders to eat someone else" Some spiders are harmless. I admit to sometimes feeding my inhibitions to the spiders. It's cheaper than alcohol and doesn't leave a hangover. Sometimes I regret what I do, however.

Once you are aware of the spiders, you can influence them with their silk, in a process too complicated and gross to describe here. It is not precise, unless you spend a lot of time getting into the minds of the spiders.

Now there are some breeds you can't do this with, like the spiders that physically eat you. I forget our proper name for them. These spiders don't make silk. They do lay eggs though.

Phoebe had her fear eaten, and is surprisingly still alive. She does still have an instinct for self-preservation, but maybe the spiders will eat that too.

You are unlikely to be eaten by most spiders, unless you know about them, but there are some exceptions. These result in so many deaths that they are anomalous and should not be counted. Spider George is one notable example. It tricked one of us into working for the spiders, feeding them our trust. The few of us left will never meet again.

Then, having divided us, it started hunting each of us down. The spiders ate Julia's health, and she withered away. They ate Danny's weight. His tether broke and he floated

into the cold sky. We don't know what they did to Meryl, but one day, he just disappeared. The spiders ate Joel's eyes.

The few left of course have their suspicions that someone has turned, but there is no way of knowing who. The survivors have all gotten close to the spiders.

There is a consolation though, we know the spiders will eat the traitor last. $\Psi\Phi$

