MetaZoo COMICS

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MetaZoo™ CRYPTID NATION CH. 2 Book #1

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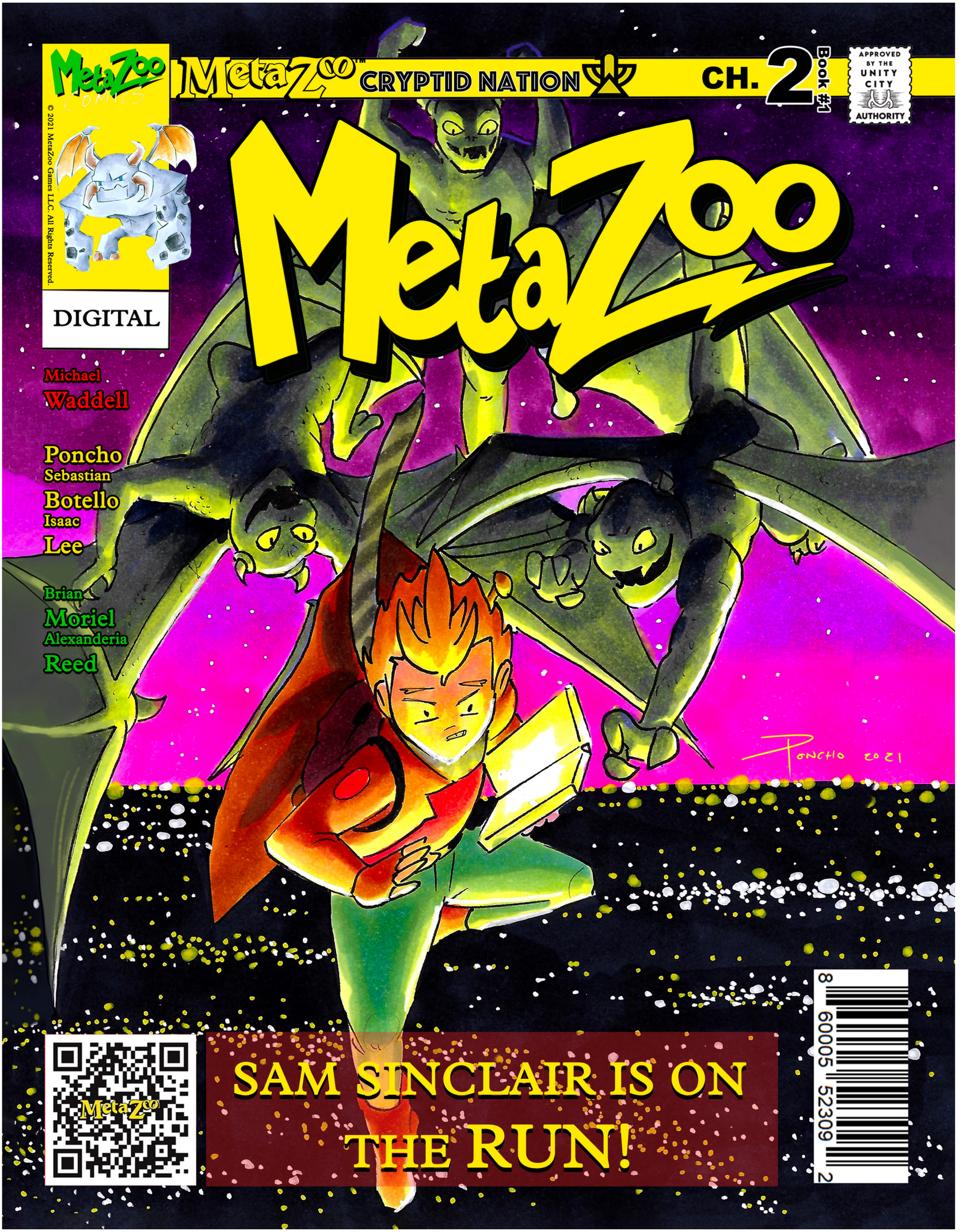
MetaZoo

DIGITAL

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SAM SINCLAIR IS ON THE RUN!

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Through the Barrier

A shining light, and then darkness followed. Sam floated in that darkness with no sense of up or down, and Sam screamed.

The afterimage of M's silhouette against the door's light was still burned into his retinas as he fought to hold back tears and then lost that fight. Sam cried in a way he hadn't cried in years. It was the type of crying that we only do in our most private moments. It was a personal crying that shook Sam to his core.

And then Sam felt something move in the distance.

Move — that was the only way to describe it. A vast darkness surrounded Sam on all sides, but that didn't mean the darkness was empty. Sam could feel all manner of things just out of sight even though they produced no sound and took no shape. Sam knew if someone were to turn on the lights in all of this darkness, what would be revealed would be enough to drive him insane with their impossibility. Sam also knew that if he were to look into the abyss, the horrors lurking there might look back at him.

Eyes forward, don't look, don't look… Sam thought to himself, almost as though in a fever dream.

As Sam tumbled through this abyss — confused and sad and frightened all at once — a road appeared beneath him. It was an old road and uncomfortably familiar. Its asphalt was cracked by years of growth that seeped out of it like vines. A vibrant purple flower littered the sides of the road — Sam recognized it as the West Virginia state flower, although he couldn't for the life of him remember its name. Hell, he couldn't remember his own name at that moment.

The impossibility of this road and its familiarity dug up something deep in Sam's mind — a core memory of Sam and his father walking along a similar road. His father explained the old US Highway network and the transition away from it. He believed the roads to be a "magical" part of the United States' history — forgotten but ever-present, if you only just looked for them.

"Evergreen roads, Sam."

And on this impossible road, an impossible figure was walking, almost skipping. In the vast darkness the only sound produced was a distinct *click-clack* of this dark figure's dress shoes. The ancient road he walked on extended into the void one hundred or so feet ahead and behind him, as though it flowed from the dark figure himself.

Sam had no idea who this man was, but he knew that much like the unknown masses moving in the distance, this man brought only madness.

And then the man stopped.

Sam was silently floating, tumbling above the road and in the opposite direction of the figure. He was still being pushed forward by the momentum of M's farewell and the explosion that brought it. But something, maybe Sam's silent screams that may not have been all that silent, had given the dark figure cause to stop skipping.

The dark figure slowly — almost as though he had all the time in the world — began to turn his head, searching for whatever had caught his attention. The dark figure's gaze pierced through the nothingness like a black searchlight, never blinking, somehow making the shadows even darker. One thing was instantly clear to Sam — if the figure's gaze were to fall upon him, he *would* turn mad from the fear.

Just as the dark figure's dark gaze began to turn upward, upward to where Sam and the last tendrils of his sanity were floating, a door opened into the void and Sam fell through it.

M

The darkness was replaced by sunlight, and the smell of week-old garbage. Sam had fallen out of… wherever the hell he just was and was now lying in what must have been a dumpster given the smell. The shock of what he had just experienced was enough to exhaust him to the point where he must have passed out because, the next time Sam opened his eyes, the sunlight had been replaced by the soft hues of dusk.



In a moment of panic, Sam rustled about in the dumpster looking for the Spellbook M had given him in his last moments. He found it, held it tight, took a shaky breath, and then let the sadness fully take hold of him. He didn't cry this time. How long had he been out? What news was there of Point Pleasant? Where in God's name was he?!

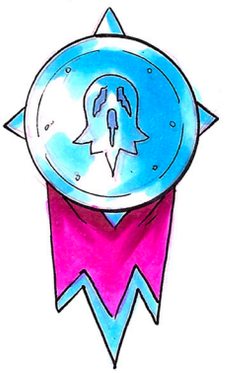
Through the haze of his contemplation, Sam was met with the sound of a city and what must have been a busy street.



He had to tell someone. Someone in Unity City could help him figure out what had happened in Point Pleasant… and if anyone had survived.

Hopping out of the dumpster and trying not to ding the abandoned red Challenger parked next to the dumpster, Sam left the alleyway and crossed the threshold into Unity City.

When Sam was younger he had obsessed over the construction and grand opening of Unity City. It was a supposed utopia for people like him who believed that Beasties, Casters, and unpowered humans could live together peacefully. Built on the crumbled remains of a destroyed Washington DC, Unity City housed Quimblys, the premiere Caster university and of course the remains of what was once known as the US Federal Government. Sam dreamed that one day he would be able to travel there and find like-minded people.



Unity City was meant to be a sanctuary of every sort — it was meant to *feel* and *be* safe. It certainly didn't feel that way now.

Despite nightfall looming, the darkness that enveloped M Street was more spiritual in nature. Posters of an all too familiar man cast in shadows littered the street.

WANTED: INDRID COLD
IF YOU SEE THIS MAN, FIRST SEEK SAFETY!
THEN CALL 911!

The building flanking the alleyway, Sam emerged from what was topped with a golden dome and was aptly named The Golden Dome Bank. The clock decorating its face sang its music as the hour hand struck 6pm. People hurried past Sam speaking in hushed voices, dark attitudes contrasting the colorful clothes and pins they wore. Somewhere in the back of Sam's mind he recognized these pins as Tower Medals, each one symbolizing a specialty in a different type of casting. He had always wanted to see one up close, but that was the last thing on his mind. For in these hushed whispers a string of words emerged as a pattern, and Sam's heart sunk even further.

"....*Mothman*…"
"*Indrid Cold*…"
"...Point Pleasant."

But how? Had news already reached the world at large about Point Pleasant's destruction? Sure, he has been passed out in the dumpster for several hours, but with the internet being a relic of the past and the only radio station within miles being vaporized before his very eyes, Sam was rightfully confused.

Stumbling through the street, Sam was quite the spectacle — not to mention a smelly one — so people readily parted before him.

M STREET MAP



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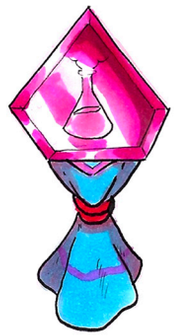
CRYPTID NATION

CRYPTID NATION

"Please… you have to help. Point Pleasant is under attack." Sam said in a voice that sounded as though it was coming from very far away.

A soft sob came from someone in the moving crowd, but there was no response.

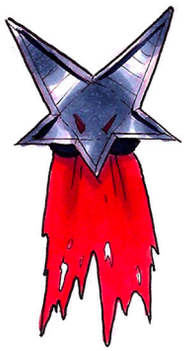
"We have to report this to the police, you have to send help. Mothman has attacked Point Pleasant!" This last sentence escaped Sam's body as more of a crackling whimper than the forceful declaration he had intended it to be.



From behind him, the small voice of a girl no older than 10 years said, "Again? But mommy, that already happened last week…" In a craze,Sam turned around to the girl, but she was already moving past him; her mother shushing her along the way.

A newspaper! The thought burst into Sam's mind like an exploding lightbulb.

Many of the stores lining M Street were closed for the evening, almost as though a curfew had been put in place. Sewer Alligator's Pizzeria, Leviathan Bakery, Thunderbird Burger, and many other Beastie-related restaurants were shuttered for the evening — maybe for good. With the exception of a vendor selling fried Oklahoma Octopus tentacles on a stick, it seemed like most of the street trolleys were also packing up for the night.



In the dusky sky above Sam, an arched Sigil hundreds of feet across shimmered just below the cloud line. It glowed a dull pink before shifting to a burning red and then to a steel blue and then into every other color imaginable. The clouds just beyond this Sigil appeared to be covered by a greasy film.

Sam finally came to a breathless stop in front of one of the few stores still open. The Caster's Corner, Unity City's official newspaper, lined its window like an advertisement to Sam's very own nightmare:

WAR!
MOTHMAN STRIKES 7TH CITY IN AS MANY DAYS!
TRAGEDY IN FRESNO, CALIFORNIA.

Sam stared at today's newspaper for what felt like an eternity. Except that it wasn't today's newspaper. The paper was dated October 13th, 2031 — a full seven days into the future from when M pushed him through that dark door.

M

A soft bell at the top of the door announced Sam's entrance into Georgetown Tobacco. Sam was met with a wave of exotic smells that reminded him both of home and of things very far away from it. It reminded him of things he had never seen.

Even in Sam's panicked stupor, even in his rush to tear the newspaper from the window and give it a proper read, he took notice of the even more exotic magical items that lined the walls and glass cases of curios. Masks of various Cryptid faces contorted in either hysterical laughter or hysterical anguish looked back at him from dark corners. Or at least he hoped they were masks.





Blinking orbs with various marks of Forests, Flames, and Frost glowed in the top shelves like premium liquor. Sam had read about these as well — Terra Orbs.

Huh, could have sworn those were illegal… Sam thought to himself before being forced back to reality.

"Boy, you smell like shit."

Sam came to with a start. In the back of the store a small group of grizzled men and younger robed students were enveloped in a haze of cigar smoke of every conceivable color. They sat in wooden chairs huddled around a radio that played soft jazz. The playful (and accurate) insult came from the largest of the men, a man so hairy that he looked strikingly similar to a meatball rolled around on the floor of a barber shop.

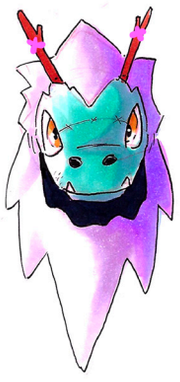
Letting out a burst of manic laughter at the thought, Sam quickly covered his mouth with both hands.

"Jesus, John, can't you see he needs help? Probably has the hangover of a century." Another gentleman, not quite as hairy as the last, stood up and ushered Sam to one of the chairs. Sam collapsed with a thunk and the chair creaked beneath him. As the gentleman that had helped him disappeared into the back, Sam became aware that all eyes were on him.

"You do smell like shit, though." The meatball of a man repeated, and one of the students burst into laughter. Colorful smoke indeed.

Newspaper...

"Newspaper… I need to see that newspaper." A copy of the newspaper that had lined the window was rolled up and placed on a stool next to Sam. Sam pointed at it before a student snatched it up.





"Ah. We were just discussing that, man." Said a blond kid with a bright green medal shaped like a hedge pinned to his black robe. He was waving the rolled up newspaper like a baton to emphasize his words.

"Can you believe the Federal Gov is already talking about war? And war against who -"

"War against the Beasties, war against Mothman. Don't act dumb, Jacob. This isn't your freshman World History 101 class", another man softly interrupted from one of the corner chairs, arms crossed and brow furrowed.

"Easy for you to say, old man. It's going to be kids like me that are asked to fight, not old bats like you." He turned to Sam. "Can you believe this bullshit, man? Like you and I should fight and die because some ancient Caster pissed off Mothman and now he's going around blowing shit up again?" Jacob said with a scoff.

The man with the furrowed brow continued, "Not 'shit', Jacob. People. Cities."

"Well, maybe we shouldn't have disturbed him then. Maybe we deserved it. Maybe if the folks in podunk towns like Point Pleasant weren't a bunch of *cryptophobics*, their city wouldn't be a giant piece of glass right now — "

The conversation continued, but no sound reached Sam. He saw the anger and the fear and the mouths communicating those emotions, but no sound reached him. There it was. Confirmed. Point Pleasant was gone, and so was his past life. Sam had seen his hometown wiped from existence with his very eyes, but somewhere deep down he had hoped...

Just as the original gentleman who had led Sam to the chair emerged from the back with a bottle filled with an orange concoction Sam recognized as a Soothing Potion, the door's welcoming bell rang once again.

Three robed men, each around the age of 25, lined up at the entrance of the shop and stood patiently, looking at the wares offered before locking eyes with Sam.



Yes, it was weird that they all looked the same, but triplets existed well before the Veil shattered. What was weirder is that they all looked like exact copies of a younger M. Sam felt a chill crawl down his spine.

“He’s the one,” said #1 in a monotone voice.

“Yes, he has the residue all over him,” said #2, and with a snap of his fingers, a black ooze materialized all over Sam, which glowed faintly. Sam had a hunch that he hadn’t picked it up in the dumpster. He stood up in a panic and tried to rub it off like a spider web caught in his hair. It fell to the floor with a squishy smack but much of it still stuck to his skin and clothes like motor oil.

“He reeks of the Pathways,” said #2.

“Yes, but that’s impossible, #2,” said #3.

“Quite, #3. An unsanctioned door to the Pathways hasn’t been opened in Unity City in almost ten years,” said #2.

“Indeed, 9 years and 247 days, to be exact,” said #1.

And then in unison: “Sir, you’ll need to come with us.”

The man holding the Soothing Potion approached the trio with pleading arms, “Okay now, settle down. This is my establishment. What seems to be the problem he—” With another flick from #2’s finger, a mask depicting a laughing Piasa Bird flew from its place on the wall and slammed into place over the man’s face, muffling his words. Tiny spouts of fire shot from the mouth of the mask in almost comical fashion every time he tried to speak.

Everyone who had remained sitting stood up in shock and protest.

“Oh come on, what the fu—” the blond student began. More Beastie masks flew from the wall and lodged themselves to the faces of the Georgetown Tobacco regulars. The blond student struggled with a Cumberland Dragon mask as it grew flowers on its wooden horns. The hairy man who had insulted Sam became even hairier as the Bigfoot mask on his face sprouted whiskers.

“Actually, I don’t think we will require any assistance, thank you,” #1 said as he turned his attention back to Sam.

Sam stood dumbstruck as he watched what looked like the strangest play in existence as the men he was calmly sitting with just moments before seemed to dance as they struggled to remove the magical Beastie masks.

“Seems to be quite a bit of illegal items in here, wouldn’t you agree #1?”, said #3 eyeballing the Terra Orbs.

“Quite.” Said #1, nodding in agreement.

Sam turned to face the trio and reached for the baseball bat that he had slid into the side sleeve of his backpack, but then stopped.

“Look, I’m having a pretty rough day… but I have a feeling that you can bring me to a police officer or someone in authority so I can figure out what in the hell is going on. I don’t know what this black ooze is, or why you’re looking for me, but we can figure that out.”

The trio of younger looking M’s stared at Sam for several seconds in complete silence.

"Do you trust him when he says he'll come quietly, #2?" said #3.

"Not at all, #3," and before Sam could unsheathe his bat, #2 wagged his finger once more and a Mothman mask flew from the darkest corner of the shop and slammed into Sam's face. He was once again met with darkness.

Sam sensed his body lift from the ground, heard the ringing of a bell, and then felt the fresh rush of air from an autumn night.

M

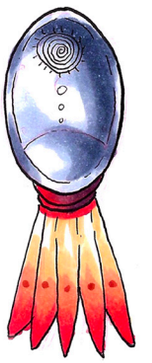


Sam had no idea how long he had been floating, or how far they had traveled. He did know that any attempt to shout or talk was met with confusion, as though he had forgotten how to do either. Moving was also an impossibility. What pissed Sam off the most was he wasn't lying when he said he would have joined them peacefully. So Sam was patient and waited… and floated.

The sense that hadn't abandoned him entirely was his ability to hear the hum of the city around him. The buzz of M Street —interrupted by the occasional gasp from a passerby who saw him in his current state— was replaced quickly with the quieter sounds of rustling leaves and the faint smell of wet brick.

With enough focus and calm, Sam began to be able to see through the red eyes of the Mothman mask he wore, and what he saw astonished him. Gone was not only the hustle and bustle of M Street and the quiet of the side streets they were traveling on. What had replaced it was groups of what appeared to be students studying, Casting, and talking by moonlight.

Sam had arrived at Quimblys.



Each student wore robes and many of them had twinkling Medals adorning them, each Medal specifying specialties in different fields of Casting. Sam knew it was no small feat to acquire these Medals. Each one required a series of tests and examinations at so-called Towers. Some of the students, many no older than him and some indeed *younger* than Sam, had multiple Medals pinned to their robes. In much of the world, even other Casters looked down on the use of robes and wands as cliché — Sam had a feeling that no one here suffered that insecurity or scorn. This was Quimblys, and they only accepted the finest. This was Quimblys, and this was where Adam and Rose were.

Some of the students stopped in their tracks to gawk at the trio of younger looking Ms and a floating boy in a Mothman mask passing by. Others, perhaps those a bit older and more worldly, played it cool and acted like they saw similar things on a daily basis. And as far as what Sam knew about Quimblys and who ran it, perhaps they did.

Growing up, Sam had heard rumors of the great Rainbow Wizard who was Headcaster at Quimblys. Sam had heard rumors of his immense magic, and that he was perhaps the most powerful Caster on the side of the Federal Government. He was also one of the few known Evergreens — the name granted to Casters and Entities who had been alive before the Veil was put in place over 1000 years ago.

For the first time in what felt like days (and, according to the newspaper, it *had* been days), Sam felt a lightness in his heart. Everything was going to be okay. The Rainbow Wizard would hear him out and explain what on earth had happened. And then he would be reunited with Adam and Rose and then all three of them could begin the healing process. He and Adam had lived through it before, but that had been with M's help and guidance and care…

Yeah, but you're not a kid anymore, Sam. he thought to himself. No… no he certainly wasn't. In fact his childhood had ended one day long ago on a baseball field.

Lost in his thoughts, the last thing Sam saw through his red tinted mask was an older student Contract a Sinkhole Sam. The Cryptid burst through the mud of Quimblys Square like it was water, flinging dirt and filth over every student, faculty member, and Cryptid within a 100 foot radius. A large chunk hit the trio and Sam, and carpeted the stone Gargoyles decorating the large doors they were passing through. Not even the floating golden statue of Hero went unscathed.

It was then that Sam realized something that made his heart heavy once more. These students weren't studying.

They were training.

M

It was a throne room.

That was the only way Sam could describe it.



It was a throne room.

That was the only way Sam could describe it.

Covered in mud, garbage, and apparently a week of wear, Sam floated into Quimblys' Riggs Library. For reasons never completely explained, they decided not to rename it despite the rebranding of the rest of the university. It was a grand hall, like something out of a fairytale.

Or at least Sam thought it was. With the mud obscuring his already limited vision, Sam wasn't too sure of anything he was seeing.

And then, a voice.

"Ah, Sam Sinclair!" an old but strong voice shouted and reached Sam as an echo.

"#1, #2, #3 — this isn't any way to treat our guest, now is it?", the voice continued in a lightly chastising manner.

In an instant, the Mothman mask that had imprisoned his senses flew off his face and Sam watched as it disappeared into the bookshelves above him. The true grandeur of the library was revealed. Ceilings that reached up into darkness, and books — *Spellbooks* — covered the walls as far as the eye could see. They moved and floated in organized lines, off to whomever magically summoned them from whatever table in whatever distance room. It was as beautiful as it was eerie, because not a sound was heard from this entire Spellbook march. It was a library, after all.

And beneath this floating traffic there was a throne of gold. And in this throne of gold sat an old Caster in a rainbow colored robe. Flanking either side of this golden throne and performing various clerical tasks out and about the room were more of M's young lookalikes.

So not triplets… octuplets? Sam thought to himself with confused amusement. Looking closer, Sam was more sure of their resemblance to M, although he had his doubts that M had ever *actually* been young.

As Sam's eyes adjusted to the light and the scene unfolded before him, he finally got a good glance at the Rainbow Wizard. A long white beard, neatly trimmed, flowed from his face and to the floor. Hidden beneath snow-white caterpillar eyebrows, two jade green eyes peered at Sam with an animalistic fierceness. Decorating his rainbow robe, nearly 50 unique Medals added validity to the rumors about this strange Caster and his powers.

Sam gently floated to the ground and found that he could once again move. His body groaned with pain.

"Sam… it's such an honor to finally meet you —", the Rainbow Wizard began to say, but then his gaze wandered to the trio that had brought Sam before him.

"You three are disgusting! Look at how filthy you are. Go to the bathhouse immediately!" and then he turned back to Sam, and said much more gently, "I do so apologize for how they treated you, Sam. We had no idea that it was you who opened the door to the Pathways. You see, *my* Sigil protects Unity City… I am what people call the Rainbow Wizard, or Cassius Cane in another life, but I like to think of myself more as the humble Headcaster of Quimblys. "

The old Caster let this sentence trail off into silence as he stared at Sam — as he stared through him.

"Ah! Of course! You still can't speak. Let me remove that pesky Spell for you." And without a single gesture from the Headcaster, Sam felt a pressure surge across the 20 foot distance between him and the throne and what felt like fingers gently touch his throat and remove something hidden.

With a gasp and a cough, Sam fell to his hands and knees. In a hoarse voice, the questions he had began to flow through him.

"Point Pleasant—" **cough** "—was destroyed by Mothman—" **cough* *cough**—

"Yes, we already know." The Headcaster broke eye contact with Sam and what appeared to be real pain distorted his face.

"We already know, Sam."

"How?—" **cough** "—And how the hell do you know my name?"

With this question, the old Caster looked back to Sam and Sam saw a flash of anger cross his features that lasted only a fraction of a second. But Sam *did* see it.

"Sam, Mothman destroyed Point Pleasant over a week ago."

Sam had suspected as much based on what he learned in Georgetown Tobacco, but hearing it didn't help alleviate his confusion. From his perspective, M had pushed him through the door a mere 8 to 12 hours ago. Even though (now that Sam thought more deeply about it) it had been nighttime when Mothman appeared at the radio station, and *daytime* when he emerged in Unity City. Something wasn't adding up.

"I… I don't understand." Sam pleaded to the Headcaster.

Just tell me everything I need to know, dammit. Can't you tell I'm a little messed up right now?!

"No, no of course you don't. The Pathways are quite tricky. They are… an old type of magic that even I must admit to having a difficult time understanding. Everything has a cost, you see. You travelled a very long distance, but it was quite short in the Pathways, right? That short distance has a cost, and the cost is time. It's not quite that simple, but time and space never are!" and with this the Headcaster let out a dry chuckle, the kind of laugh one has after telling the same joke many times. The laugh was more of a tick than an expression of joy.

"Tell me Sam, was it you who opened the door to the Pathways?" the Headcaster repeated more firmly.

Tears sprang to life and Sam tried to hold them back.

"It was my father, M. He's dead. He died protecting me from Mothman," Sam said, his voice shaking.

This confession was met with silence. Sam was busy using his jacket's sleeve to wipe the tears from his face when every hair on his body began to stand on end, as though a lightning bolt were about to strike nearby.

When Sam's vision cleared and he looked at the Headcaster, the old Caster's face was shrouded in shadow. Sam debated internally whether or not he should tell this strange man everything that had happened. The radio tower, Mothman, M flinging him through the impossible door, and the strange man in black that he had seen skipping down the Pathways' road. But something told him (call it a gut feeling) that perhaps this man hadn't earned Sam's secrets. That perhaps telling him would be *dangerous*.

To fill the silence that had extended, and with not a small amount of wariness in his voice, Sam repeated:

“Excuse me, sir… but how exactly do you know my name?”

A thoughtful glance was followed by another dry chuckle. It was the kind of laughter that didn’t touch his eyes. The Headcaster was clearly thinking about something else, something deeper and far away.

“Oh, Sam — that’s such a long story. For now, would it be sufficient to tell you that Adam and Rose both spoke of you frequently?”

No, not really, Sam thought. *Not really at all.*

“Thanks, that’s actually my next question. Are they here? Please, I need to speak to them about what happened in Point Pleasant,” Sam said respectfully yet sternly.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible, Sam. Rose has been out in the field doing important research for well over a month.”

For the first time, the Headcaster stood up from his golden throne. He was strikingly tall — why on earth were all these old Casters 6’5 or taller? — and his straight back and powerful shoulders betrayed his otherwise aging appearance.

He strode forth, almost appearing to float, two strides that covered half the distance to Sam. A flourish of his hand brought forth a Spellbook bound in what appeared to be opal. The pages turned themselves slowly and deliberately while the Headcaster tsked impatiently. It seemed every Spellbook had a little bit of personality.

It finally stopped and the Headcaster *ahhed* as he tapped the page. It immediately began to unfold itself over and over again an impossible number of times, until a massive map of the United States was revealed, suspended in the air between the Headcaster and Sam.

“Where is our Rose… ah yes”, and then on this floating map a faint pink light began to blink somewhere over Wisconsin.

“Rose takes her field research very seriously, as you can imagine. Uncovering the origin of Cryptids is no small task. And yes, before you say anything she’s well aware of what happened in Point Pleasant and has opted to stay where she is.”

Sam honestly couldn’t believe that. Rose had family in Point Pleasant, not to mention M and himself. If she knew about their supposed deaths, would she really have stayed out in the field? Had she not returned home (well, what was left of it) to bury her parents? Sure, Sam hadn’t physically seen her in person in years. But the letters they had shared. The emotions they had shared.

Regardless of what the truth was, Sam recognized he likely wouldn’t extract it from the cunning Caster in front of him.

Clearing his throat, Sam asked, “And what about Adam, where is he?” Sam said. He could hear the caution in his voice, and he vowed to hide it better next time he spoke.

The Headcaster made a vexed sound, placed his entire open palm over the map and muttered an incantation that sounded almost Nordic. Several hundred green lights exploded onto the map’s canvas, reflecting brilliantly on the Caster’s own emerald eyes.

"I… don't understand. How can Adam be in all of these places at once?" Sam said, bewildered.

"He's not. Despite my best efforts, every time I use a Searching or Navigation Spell to track Adam's whereabouts, I inevitably track…"

"You track what, sir?"

"Gumberoos."

"Gumberoos?!"

"Yes, Gumberoos. Filthy Beasties. Adam's idea of a joke, I would imagine," the Headcaster said with very little mirth.

Except Sam didn't really know Adam to make jokes like that, especially on a man that was the Headcaster of his university.

With a gesture, the map folded into itself an impossible number of times before the Spellbook containing it snapped shut and disappeared into the Headcaster's sleeve. Sam could have sworn that just as it folded out of sight, he saw scorch marks roughly the size of small cities pocking the back of the map. Why hadn't he seen them before? How was Adam able to throw off the tracing Spells of an Evergreen Caster? Why did he want to? Before he could ask any of this, the old man interrupted his thoughts.

"Adam was actually here when the news about Point Pleasant broke. He left only six days ago," the Headcaster said nonchalantly, almost as an afterthought.

"Adam was here! Where did he go? When will he be back? When can I see hi—" Sam had taken several steps forward following the Headcaster back to his throne. The Headcaster turned around and extended his arm as a barrier. His face was scrunched up and Sam was reminded of his own smell.

"Now, now. Neither I nor Quimblys sanctioned his journey, so where he went I can only imagine. And as you can clearly see, I can't find him," the Headcaster said, hand still extended.

The Headcaster then once again sat in his golden throne and peered at Sam through steepled fingers before finally continuing.

"Adam has spent the last several years here training for one purpose and one purpose alone: destroying The Mothman."

The way the Headcaster said, "The Mothman," stirred a memory inside of Sam, a familiarity that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"In fact, he was quite key to our pending war efforts with that exact same end goal."
War. That was the second time he heard someone say that word, and this time it wasn't coming from a bunch of men and boys inhaling colorful smoke. It was coming straight from the Headcaster of Quimblys, and the strongest Caster the "good guys" had to offer.

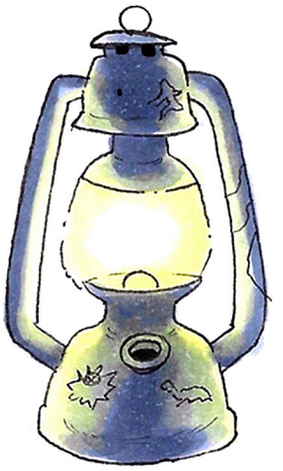
"Well thank you so much for explain all of this to me, sir—"

"Please, Headcaster is sufficient."

"Uhh… Headcaster. Thanks so much for everything but I think what I need to do next is head back to Point Pleasant and find Adam." Still through the steepled fingers, the Headcaster stared through Sam.

"You know, Sam… M wasn't just looking out for Adam. I have a hunch that he might have been there for you as well…" the Headcaster trailed off while searching the folds of his robe for something.

Looking out? M wasn't looking out for us, he was RAISING us. In many ways he was our father.



The Headcaster took advantage of Sam's confusion to once again stand up. From his sleeve he produced a small silver lantern very similar to the ones Sam saw miners use in old children's books. Except this one had what appeared to be hundreds of intricate Beasties carved onto its surface.

"Sam, if you would allow me, this is called a Gauging Lantern. It's very old, maybe even older than me. We use it to —"

"Sort people into Houses here at Quimblys?" Sam quickly interrupted, perhaps a little too harshly. He was hungry and tired, and he didn't feel as though the Headcaster was being entirely forthcoming with him. And he had to find Adam.

"Ha! I've never heard that one before… No, it's quite different. It shines an incredibly peculiar light, and when that light hits your body, your body scatters it onto those doors just behind you. Kind of like a prism. We can tell all sorts of things about your magical abilities and potential with this nifty lamp," the Headcaster said with a slight smirk.

And before Sam could protest, before he could tell the Headcaster that he didn't have time let alone give two licks about his magical potential, Sam was bathed in a warm light. Behind Sam, the two colossal doors that he and the trio had entered through became a kaleidoscope of color. Looking back at it, Sam had no way to interpret what he was seeing, although the closest thing he could compare it to was a rainbow spiderweb.

The Headcaster studied the light for several minutes as Sam felt his consciousness slip away in the warmth of the light.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk… that's very disappointing, Sam. Very disappointing. You haven't trained at all, have you? No bother. We can get started tomorrow. I will be training you personally." The Headcaster said matter of factly.

"What… no." Sam's speech was slurred. What else had the Gauging Lantern done? He felt as though he were swimming through thick water. The Headcaster turned from him and strolled casually back to his throne.

And then summoning his strength, Sam snapped out of whatever Spell he had been put under, "No. I need to leave tonight and find Adam. And if I'm going to learn any Spells, which *really* doesn't interest me in the first place, it's going to be from the Spellbook M gave me."

October 13th, 2031

The destined meeting with Sam Sinclair went... better than I expected! M kept him locked away for so long, I never suspected that I would get a chance to meet the third of his CLASSIFIED THREE. Unlike Adam and Rose, his skills are unrefined - much more like an uncut diamond than the polished emerald and sapphire I see in Adam and Rose.

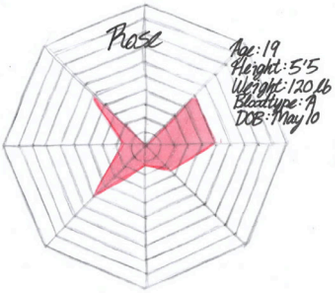
Still, the Gauging Lantern showed the same results for Sam - on a scale of "potential out of 10,000 people," the Classified Three are all off the scale. I suspect, like myself, there are only two or three Gauging Devices that can accurately determine their true potential. Only Caster I know this side of the Atlantic with one of those is Love.

It will take many years - yes many years - for them to reach their full potential, but I MUST have them for the war effort. With M gone and the other Evergreens cast to the wind, I fear the entire might of Unity City might not be enough to stand against I.C. Oh how I fear him... Please. Please return to the shadows before all is lost.

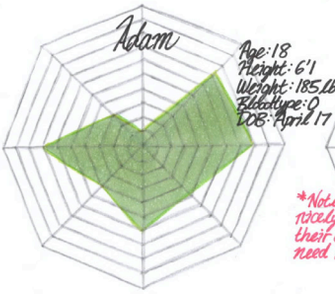


What a disappointment. I have no idea what M was thinking letting this work of art go unrefined. Starting tomorrow morning I will have to beat Sam into shape.

Age: 18
Height: 6'3
Weight: 210 lb
Bloodtype: O-
DOB: August 12



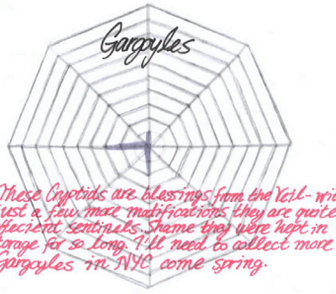
Age: 19
Height: 5'5
Weight: 120 lb
Bloodtype: A
DOB: May 10



Age: 18
Height: 6'1
Weight: 185 lb
Bloodtype: O
DOB: April 17

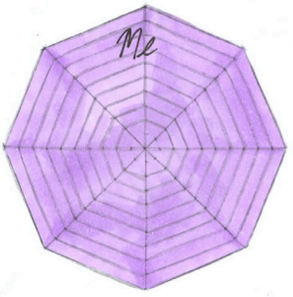


*Note to self: The GoleMs are coming along nicely, although they are only a fraction of their original in terms of power and looks. Will need to do more thorough studies.



These Cryptids are blessings from the Veil - with just a few more modifications they are quite the efficient sentinels. Shame they were kept in storage for so long. I'll need to collect more Gargoyles in NYC come spring.







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The Rainbow Wizard stopped in his tracks for just a moment before once again sitting down.

"M's Spellbook? It wouldn't happen to be a blood red book, would it? May I see it?"

Absolutely not. A voice screamed inside of him to get away, and get away soon. Despite The Headcaster's pleasant demeanor and kind tone, there was something primal and twisted in the way he was looking at Sam. Sam began to back away slowly like an animal cornered.

The Headcaster began to comically search his robes for something. "Oh, you know what? Actually I think I have it right here," and with a flourish and a smile the Headcaster revealed M's Spellbook from within the sleeve of his robe.

In a panic, Sam ripped off his backpack and tore it open. M's Spellbook was nowhere to be found and all that remained was his homemade CryptidCamera and some other tools.

Crafty son-of-a-bitch! Sam wanted to say, but before he could the air around him became charged. Slowly turning his gaze back to the Headcaster, he saw the old Caster extend his hand above M's open Spellbook and mutter incantations that made the throne room vibrate with their power. The Spellbooks that had been diligently floating through the air above them began to scramble, bump into each other, and explode into great showers of magical confetti.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Sam could hardly move. He had only felt this level of Casting the moment after M pushed him through that impossible door.

And then it was over.

M's Spellbook slammed shut and the Headcaster snatched it out of the air.

"Completely blank. Always one step ahead, aren't you M?" And though a smile peeled across the Headcaster's face, he was certainly not pleased.

"#43, take this Spellbook to my personal study. #16, escort Sam to a Tower suite. My hunch is that only Sam can reveal its secrets. You aren't going anywhere, young man. This Spellbook will win us the war," the Headcaster ordered, like a General commanding an army.

As more of M's younger lookalikes poured into the room like the Headcaster's personal army of Oompa Loompas, Sam was only able to utter one last question before being ushered away through a side door he hadn't noticed before:

"Headcaster… Cane! How exactly do you know M?"

A last wistful smile was immediately hardened by darker thoughts as the Headcaster ran his fingers over the cover of the crimson Spellbook before handing it to #43 and then whispered:

"I was his student, a long time ago. Yes, a very long time ago."

M

It didn't make sense. None of it did.

How on earth could M have trained the Rainbow Wizard? Sam thought as he paced the 12 foot by 12 foot stone room #16 had caged him in. His first several dozen attempts to leave the room were met with immediate failure. He could open the door, yes; he could see #16 standing guard to the right of it, yes—the last dozen or so times, the bastard was actually sleeping on the job!—but the moment Sam attempted to leave he would simply appear at the end of the room opposite of the door, and the door would once again be shut.

The window also wasn't an option. Not only was the Tower several hundred feet tall, but a series of iron wrought bars were so densely packed that Unity City's lights barely twinkled through. Straining to see out the sides, Sam spotted a pair of grotesque stone Gargoyles chiseled into the Tower's face like two of the world's most unnecessary guard dogs.

He was perhaps the ugliest damsel in distress to ever be hidden away in a tower.

It doesn't make sense. Sam repeated the Headcaster's last words to himself again and again. And yet, the Headcaster had said them, and Sam believed him. Like everyone else, Sam had studied the Evergreen Casters in school. There were thirteen Casters based here in the US from before the Veil was put in place. Evergreen Casters were supposedly so powerful that, despite the Veil obscuring their magics, they were able to maintain their immortality throughout the millennium.

When the Veil shattered, they revealed themselves in spectacular fashion and helped restore order… or at least redefine it. Many went on to establish schools like Quimblys. Others disappeared into the world. Others, like Indrid Cold, had blacker reputations.

Sam and every kid above the age of six knew the names of each Evergreen Caster by heart.

M was not on that list.

An idea! Perhaps the Spell keeping him inside was somehow connected to the door itself. If Sam could only bust through it with his baseball bat…

THWACK!

The vibration from his first hit shook his bones. The door stood, immaculate.

THWACK!

His second hit made his teeth sting. Still, the door stood.

THWACK! THWACK!

Throughout Sam's life, short though it had been up until then, he had swung that baseball bat several thousand times. Every time he did he would hear his father's voice, not M's, echoing, "Sam, you have to hit through the target, through the ball. Swing through it, Sam."

THWACK! THWACK! TWunk.

That last one was different. That last hit didn't set his bones on edge. Sam stared at what appeared to be his bat partially going *through* the door. Not *in* the door as though the door finally succumbed to his battering, but *through* it.

And now it was stuck.

"Goddamn magic…" Sam muttered through clenched teeth as he tried his hardest to pull the bat from the place it had somehow phased — or merged with — with the door.

Accepting that it had somehow merged with the door through magic seemed to do the trick, and with a final heave Sam and the bat came loose. Falling backward with the momentum, Sam hit the ground of his cell hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

Gasping and catching his breath, Sam lied there, and contemplated his situation as the cold stones soothed some of his aches from the previous day. It was much more comfortable than a dumpster, at least.

Sam knew he had to leave this place and find Adam and Rose… but then what? And how? And why was Sam so angry?

And then it hit him.

Mothman. Sam had been somewhat of an eccentric individual in Point Pleasant. On the day the Veil shattered, most survivors came out of the destruction wrought by Mothman positively hating Cryptids. Sam had always been in love with them. It was his understanding that Mothman's presence there was merely a coincidence. He believed that it was magic that was somehow to blame.

The second appearance of Mothman made something painfully clear to Sam, something that Adam must have figured out long ago, something that forced Adam to dedicate himself entirely to the perfection of his Casting.

It's Mothman. It's always been Mothman.

Clearly magic still had something to do with what happened, but so long as instruments as powerful as Mothman existed, humanity couldn't possibly be safe.

While Sam could stay at Quimblys to join whatever war effort seemed to be brewing, the other part of his plan made that an impossible consideration.

It's not enough to stop Mothman. I have to put an end to this whole damn thing. I have to put the Veil back in place. If it has been done before, it can be done again. Screw all this magic shit. The world has had enough. I've had enough. I can do it. Somehow. Somehow...

Somehow, Sam didn't think people like the Headcaster would be in support of the Veil returning.

The cold stones at his back were definitely comfortable. Way more comfortable than any bed Sam had ever slept on. Comfortable enough not to make it worth his while to hoist himself off the floor and onto the bed immediately to his right. He felt his consciousness begin to fade as the weariness of the past day crept into his bones.

And on the fringe of consciousness, right before his mind turned to the creative roads it always took before he began to dream, Sam had one last sober thought. If the past day had shown him anything, it was that Sam was woefully out of his league when it came to the powers that he had to deal with.

Fine. I guess I'll actually have to learn magic then.

And with the tail end of that thought leaving his mind, Sam's eyes that were fixed just under the bed began to close.

That is, until they saw a book.

A crimson Spellbook.

Sam's eyes snapped open and with a groan he reached under the bed and unearthed M's Spellbook. How it had gotten there from the Headcaster's study would forever mystify Sam, for it certainly would have been under any number of powerful anti-theft Spells placed by the Rainbow Wizard himself. Sam guessed two tricky old Casters cancelled each other out.

Running his fingers over the binding, for the first time Sam gave the Spellbook a hard look for the first time. Blood red was certainly a more accurate way of describing its color, and beyond a single "M" pressed in gold on the top of the cover, the supple leather was bare.

Opening it and fingering through the pages, Sam began to wonder. Why had M given him an empty Spellbook? The several times he had seen it throughout his childhood, the book was filled to the brim with all things arcane. Sam tried to capture a glimpse more than once but only ever came away with a headache and a soft chuckle from M. So at some point, as recently as the previous evening when M used it to create that eldritch flame, the book had not been empty.

But now, flipping through the pages, Sam saw the book was completely empty just as the Headcaster had reported it.

Except that it wasn't. On perhaps the 20th page that Sam turned to, images began to stain the parchment as though somebody were spilling an invisible inkwell. At first they started off indiscernible, but after several seconds they took shape. There were three distinct illustrations drawn in what Sam recognized to be M's hand. No words, just doodles on a page.

The first illustration, which appeared to be five or so vertical lines bowing outward from the center, began to faintly glow.

Now, Sam had never intentionally Cast a Spell in his life and certainly not from a Spellbook, but he had seen it done enough times that intuition drove him. As he placed his right hand hovering over the glowing bars, Sam felt a magnetic attraction that pulled his palm inward and onto the page. What followed was a sensation Sam had felt only once before when M had given him a sip of his Christmas brandy several years ago. A warm sensation that started in his chest moved upward to his neck like hot smoke. Down his arm it went like steam through pipes and spilled into the page.



The bars on the page pulsed fiercely for a brief moment before releasing themselves from the parchment in small wisps of midnight black smoke.

And as this happened, the bars that covered Sam's window bowed outward with a screech and a groan, leaving just enough space for his body to squeeze through.

Grabbing his bag and sheathing his bat, Sam ran to the window, breathed in the fresh air, and gazed at the twinkling city lights beneath him. Quimblys was asleep at this late hour. Beyond his Tower's light and several more in the dorms, the university was cast in shadow. It appeared that he and the two stone Gargoyles flanking his window were the only souls left watching the city… from hundreds of feet above it.

"Okay, now what?" Sam almost laughed. He certainly didn't have enough bedspread to make a rope, and his hair was several decades away from successfully pulling off a "Rapunzel".

Just then, the second illustration which appeared to be a crudely drawn feather began to pulse a cold teal and produce a sound like two boulders rubbing against each other. No, that wasn't quite right. The sound of scraping rock was coming directly from his left and right...

...from the two Gargoyles who were now looking at him, stone no more, and eyes glowing red.

"Ah shit, I guess that makes sense." Sam said aloud, actually laughing now.

Of course the Headcaster would put guards on his Tower, but Sam didn't quite imagine that they would be more creative than the (hopefully still) snoozing #16 outside his cell's door.

"Every Tower needs its dragon, right boys?" Sam said a bit more nervously as more Gargoyles crawled from around the opposite side of the Tower.

Okay, okay I get it. Let's hope this works. And with the greatest leap of faith in his life, Sam jumped out of the window while pressing firmly onto the pulsing feather… and promptly plummeted like a stone into the darkness below him.

Summoning every ounce of courage in his soul not to scream, Sam closed his eyes as the warmth flowed through him once again as his hand pressed harder and harder into the page. And like hot air filling a balloon, Sam began to float. Except "float" wasn't quite right, it was as if he was able to redirect his falling momentum and almost surf on the air.

"Haha!" Sam cheered as he squinted his eyes against the cold fall wind biting into his face. He was free! He was going to glide down to M Street and find a way out of the city. Hell, he might even glide right out of the city! He was going to —

Sam felt something tug at his backpack. With a look of horror, Sam glanced back at the Tower and was face-to-face with one of the Gargoyles. Six of his friends followed closely behind. The Gargoyles could fly, which, of course they could.

The closest one grabbing onto his backpack screeched into Sam's face as it was illuminated by a crimson light, temporarily blinding it. It was the third illustration on his page pulsing a frantic red. Sam realized immediately what it was and punched his fist down onto the page. The pulsing sketch of a red rock exploded off the parchment in a blizzard of hot embers, and then what felt like a bonfire was lit inside of Sam's chest.

Sam let out a cry of surprise as the heat coursed through his body. The pursuing platoon of Gargoyles screeched as they turned back into stone mid-flight and fell into the dark sea of trees that separated Quimblys from the rest of Unity City.

Sam sighed in relief, creating a billowing cloud from his hot breath on the crisp air. He continued gliding down to M Street and watched the stars.



Standing atop Golden Dome Bank, adjacent to the alleyway he had emerged from earlier that evening, Sam surveyed the mostly dead M Street beneath him. The occasional person ran past on their journey to someplace hopefully safer, and at least one or two cars crept down the road at any given time. Sam was surprised to see so many functional cars, but he supposed anything was possible in the big city. Perhaps magic helped drive some of the machinery.

In any event, the hot red Challenger hidden away in his alleyway wouldn't look *too* odd on M Street at this hour. Closing M's Spellbook and tucking it away in his backpack, Sam prepared to glide down to the roof of the car. Just as he jumped, the clock decorating the face of the golden dome struck 1am and filled the air with deafening chimes. And thank goodness it did… because the Spell that had allowed Sam to walk on air had lost its potency and he slammed into the dumpster at full speed with a clammer.

Not again, he thought as he heaved himself out of the garbage and then fumbled with the car's door handle. It was unlocked. It had been quite a day, but thank goodness for small miracles. Sam had always been handy with machines, and the red Challenger bent to his will with just a little bit of coaxing and old fashioned hotwiring. Throwing his backpack into the backseat, Sam made one final adjustment and the car roared to life. A full tank of gas, baby.

"I think… I think I'll call you Lucy, yeah." Sam said through a tired grin. The name had just popped into his head, and names like that just feel right.

The dashboard was more modern than the chassis of the Challenger, which probably dated back to the 60's. Still, Lucy had seen better days. Neither the AC nor heater worked, and any attempt to tune into one of Unity City's various late night radio shows was met with harsh static.

Sam and Lucy rolled out of the alleyway and into the night.



In order to actually leave Unity City, Sam had to drive Lucy over a darkened bridge at Quimblys' base. Looking back at it through his rearview mirror, Sam found himself admiring just how beautiful it was basked in the starlight. The soft shimmer effect the Rainbow Wizard's Sigil had on it didn't lessen the starlight's beauty; if anything it enhanced it.

That was until the spotlights appeared and tore open the sky.

From the forests of Quimblys, great beams of light illuminated the underside of the clouds that had gathered at the tip of the Tower he had escaped from not half an hour before. And in these beams, dark figures flew and cast their own shadows on the clouds' underbelly.

Gargoyles. Dozens of them. And other things, Sam realized. Other things he didn't recognize, or dare to. They poured into the night and the stars began to blink.



Sam put his foot hard on the gas, and Lucy roared once more.

It didn't even occur to Sam to think about how odd it was that sentries weren't placed on the outskirts of the city, especially given the importance of what Unity City and Quimblys represented to all of humanity. The truth of the matter was that the Headcaster was quite right. There were very few creatures in all of existence who could get past the Veil he put over the city. The power of his Sigil was something to be reckoned with throughout the ages.

Sam passed through the Rainbow Wizard's Veil without noticing, and the blood red Spellbook in his backpack glowed blood red once more before going quiet for a very long time.



Several miles outside of the city, as the darkness of the outskirts began to close in around Lucy, the full gravity of what Sam had done and where he was began to settle in. He had never been outside of Point Pleasant until earlier today. And within a short 12 hours he had traveled through several magical portals and been kept captive at Quimblys in the heart of Unity City, a city he just finished escaping.

And now he was… well he didn't know where he was. He knew that he was traveling through what was popularly called the Wilds —unsanctioned areas between cities and towns. Cities and towns that were properly protected by Veils.

Or least, that was theory. Sam wasn't too sold on the idea of Veils and Sigils and the old Casters that created them, not after he saw two supposedly impenetrable Veils popped like magical piñatas in the span of several hours.

Sam didn't know where he was, but he knew where he was going.

Back to Point Pleasant. To find Adam. It was the closest thing to a plan he could come up with while thinking through the cloud of exhaustion that weighed on him.

"Maybe I'll just pull over to the side here and rest my eyes..." Sam said, although without the heater working he doubted he would be able to comfortably sleep even in his exhausted state. But then a blinking indicator showed that he was out of gas which drew his attention and caused him to release an irritated groan.

"Aw what the hell, it was a full tank like an hour ago," he sighed.

Nonetheless, he pulled over to the side of the road, which began kicking up bits of gravel and making him wince at the thought of dinging Lucy's paint job.

"Sorry about that, Lucy." he said before being interrupted by more warning lights springing up on his dashboard. Apparently the issue was with the engine.

Popping the hood, Sam slid out of the front seat and into the evening air.

Something was moving inside of the engine.

Quietly opening the backdoor, Sam unsheathed his bat from his backpack and cautiously approached the front of Lucy, ready to swing.

“AHA!” screamed Sam, leaping in front of the opened hood. Inside was a very, very pissed off Dingbelle with a 12 inch wrench poised in the exact same position as Sam and his bat.

With a crazy, unintelligible war cry, the Dingbelle swung its wrench at the dumbfounded Sam, connecting steel with skull and simultaneously shooting a powerful enough lightning bolt through Sam’s head down to his toes that his heart skipped a beat.

“AHA!” screamed Sam, leaping in front of the opened hood. Inside was a very, *very* pissed off Dingbelle with a 12 inch wrench poised in the exact same position as Sam and his bat.

With a crazy, unintelligible war cry, the Dingbelle swung its wrench at the dumbfounded Sam, connecting steel with skull and simultaneously shooting a powerful enough lightning bolt through Sam’s head down to his toes that his heart skipped a beat.

Stupefied by both the wrench and the electricity coursing through his body, Sam stumbled back and fell onto the gravel butt first. On the brightside, Sam was definitely awake now —it was better than any cup of coffee he had ever had.

“Son-of-a-” Sam began, before the Dingbelle jumped onto the ledge of the front trunk teeing up once again to send more bolts flying.

As the Dingbelle swung, time appeared to slow down for Sam. He saw the lightning bolt leave the tip of the wrench, but then something strange yet familiar happened. Sam saw it multiply into every possible path it could have taken. It was exactly the type of “possible pathways” he used to see when playing baseball except 100 times more powerful. Each pathway varied in transparency, the most solid ones being the most likely path the bolt would travel.



And, arching just above his head, Sam saw the most solid path.

Batterup Sam thought as he swung.

Sam's bat perfectly connected with the bolt, but instead of simply reflecting off of the swing like a baseball would, the bolt somehow multiplied into 20 separate bolts. They traveled backwards through every possible pathway they could have taken and connected once again with the Dingbelle's wrench.

Even for a Lightning Beastie, the 20 bolts produced enough electricity to knock the Dingbelle out of commission and it fell back into the engine block with a clatter.

Sam hopped back up and cautiously approached the open trunk. Inside he saw the Dingbelle, freshly singed but breathing. But then Sam saw a small cot made of used oily rags, and trinkets stored in the bottom halves of broken Coca Cola bottles. The Dingbelle had been living in the engine block.

The Dingbelle woke up with a start and in a panic positioned itself between Sam and its home. Sam slowly stepped back and put his bat onto the gravel.

"You — you live in there don't you?" Sam said in softer tones. He knew the Dingbelle couldn't speak—very few Cryptids could—but he also knew that the Dingbelle could understand his intention.

Dingbelles were notorious for messing with electronics and other mechanical devices. Even with the Veil in place they wreaked havoc in the Second World War. With the Veil shattered and working machinery coming at a premium due to interference from Spirits, Dingbelles were regularly hunted. In the past year or two, it had been reported by Unity City officials that Dingbelles had been placed on the Protected Endangered Cryptid List.

But… Sam knew something else. Being somewhat of a mechanical savant himself, he understood that Dingbelles could also make machinery work in ways that could only be described as magical. Their knack for destroying machines was sourced from the same gift that allowed Dingbelles to make them work.

Taking another glance into the engine block, Sam noticed something that made his heart almost stop for the second time in the past 5 minutes. The engine block was almost entirely gone.

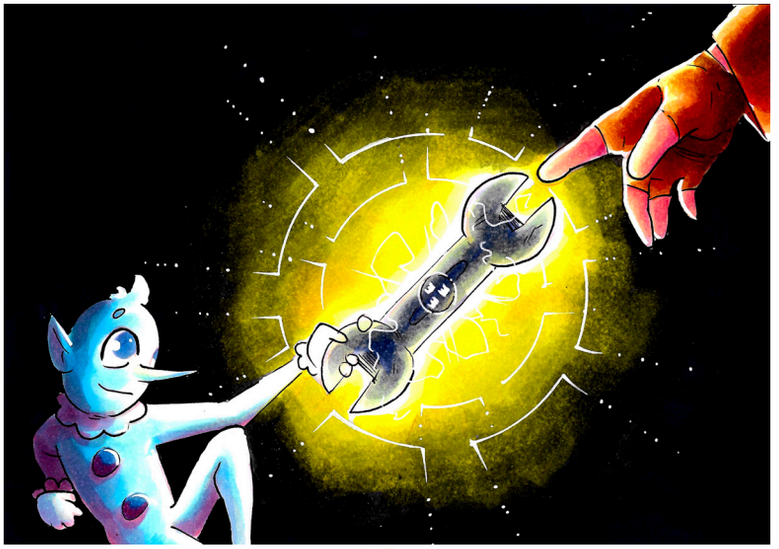
The Dingbelle is Lucy's damn engine… Sam thought in wonderment, and it wasn't an entirely crazy notion either. There were theories floating around that entire towns and even cities had their electrical power grids powered in one way or another by Cryptids —a car is small change by comparison.

"Ok- listen…" began Sam in an even calmer voice, opening hands as a peace offering. "You gotta live and I need Lucy here to be functional."

The Dingbelle tilted its head to the side as though trying to understand exactly what Sam was offering.

"What do you say? Friends? I'll let you stay here in the engine so long as you keep Lucy happy and running." Sam said with the weariness creeping back into his voice. He could certainly use an ally right now… maybe even a friend.

Now just a foot away from the Dingbelle, it could have done some serious damage to Sam had it wanted to. Instead, it extended its wrench.



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"Ah," Sam chuckled, understanding the universal gesture. "Yes, let's shake on it." Sam said cautiously as he extended his own hand.

As flesh touched steel once again, Sam felt that now recognizable warmth grow in his chest. It was accompanied by a brief electrical surge that moved through him, the Dingbelle, and the body of Lucy. Unseen to Sam, a small symbol — the *same* symbol that was patched onto his jacket — etched itself onto the Dingbelle's wrench.

Completely unintentionally and unbeknownst to Sam, he had formed a Contract with his first Beastie.

There was a moment of awkward silence as the warmth subsided.

"So…" began Sam while hesitantly eyeing Dingbelle, "How exactly do we get start—" before the hood of the car slammed shut, almost clipping his fingers. Lucy roared back to life.

Jumping back into the front seat, Sam closed his door and was met with a blast of warm air. The heater was working, and working well.

"Cheeky bastard," Sam said under his breath, almost afraid that Dingbelle would understand him. "Look at that, a full tank of gas as well." Just for kicks, Sam tried the radio and had the soft tunes of some unknown Classical song wash over him.

Sam sat there for a moment, thinking about what his next steps would be. He could drive west, that was for sure, to Point Pleasant to find Adam and maybe even Rose, but all of that would have to wait. With the warm air and the warmer music, the only thing Sam did that night was sleep on the side of US-50E.

M

The map of the US had changed with the shattering of the Veil. What was now known as the Cryptid Nation was more of a nostalgic puzzle with certain pieces missing and others rearranged. Had Sam left out of Georgetown with Point Pleasant as his destination 10 years ago, the journey would have taken him at most a day. However, with the roads the way they were now, Sam had to diverge all the way north to the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio before hooking it back down south to Point Pleasant.

He parked on the side of the road and leaned up against the passenger side of Lucy. In one hand he held a hotdog covered in relish and mustard, and in the other a somewhat updated map of the Cryptid Nation — both of which he bought from the aluminum trailer restaurant that had set up shop not 20 feet from the old highway. Columbus, Ohio had been abandoned nearly 10 years ago, but on the outskirts of the city there were still signs of civilization; little bits of humanity that sprouted just about anywhere like dandelions through concrete. As far as Sam was concerned, restaurants and hotdogs were about as close to civilization as one could get in the Wilds.

M's Spellbook hadn't revealed any further secrets to Sam since his encounter with the Gargoyles — in fact it was as blank to him as it had been for the Rainbow Wizard. Sam tried not to take it too personally.

"What the hell do you eat by the way?" Sam asked through a mouthful of relish, slamming his fist on Lucy's hood. He had tried to feed the Cryptid any number of things in the three days they had been on the road together, but nothing took.



Sam suspected the damn thing *ate* electricity. Dingbelle responded in kind by turning on the radio to Sam's least favorite frequency, a Polka radio station that seemed to persist no matter how far Sam thought he moved away from its source (perhaps he was moving towards it?).

Sam leaned in through the passenger window and changed the station to CryptidStorm FM, a station that broadcasted nationwide, straight out of Unity City. CryptidStorm FM spoke about sightings of Cryptids, Spirits, and anything else that slipped through the Veil as though they were storms or weather fronts.


"-that's right, Jim. We have a cold front of Spirits moving west of Nashville, Tennessee, source unknown," the broadcaster said in his all-too-smooth voice.


"This one's a doozy folks, avoid it if you can. Reports show that this cold front is several miles long and just as many miles deep." Jim played off his partner's upbeat tone.


"WOW! That's got to be several hundred thousand people, all moving together. What do you think, Jim? Could the source of this Spirit storm be coming from Nashville itself?"


"Hard to say, Lawrence. These Spirit storms sure do love to move. And when they move…"

And then in practice-perfect unison:


"THEY MOVE!"

Spirit storms were something Sam had, until recently, only read about, but in the past three nights alone he had seen their lights on the horizon half a dozen times. They were huge, rambling crowds of lost spirits wandering the countryside and plains of the Cryptid Nation. No one knew where they originated, but the main theory was that they poured out of the cities with the shattering of the Veil. Sam never got too close to them if he could avoid it, and their storm fronts were part of the reason he had to diverge off his course to Point Pleasant.

Just as Sam was finishing his hotdog and about to wipe his hands on his jeans, the CryptidStorm FM reporter's voice took on a deeper, almost scared tone.


"Uhh… Lawrence, this just in…" Jim's silence was deafening.


"What? What is it, Jim?" Lawrence said over the air, almost sounding more frightened at his partner's tone than whatever was scaring Jim.


"Oh no, we are very sorry to report this folks, but there's been another sighting of Mothman…"

The butt-end of the hotdog hit the pavement with a splatter.


"Folks, as you know, Mothman has been responsible for wiping out eight different Cryptid Nation cities in the past week." Jim sputtered out reluctantly, almost as though even saying Mothman's name out loud might summon him.

A car door slammed shut.

"Jim... where Jim?" his voice almost skipping.

"Moth-..Mothman has been sighted flying above a castle of all places! A castle in Ohio," Jim said, matching his partner's panicked pace.

Lucy roared to life as electricity coursed through her.

"A castle?!"

"That's right, Law. The Loveland Castle."

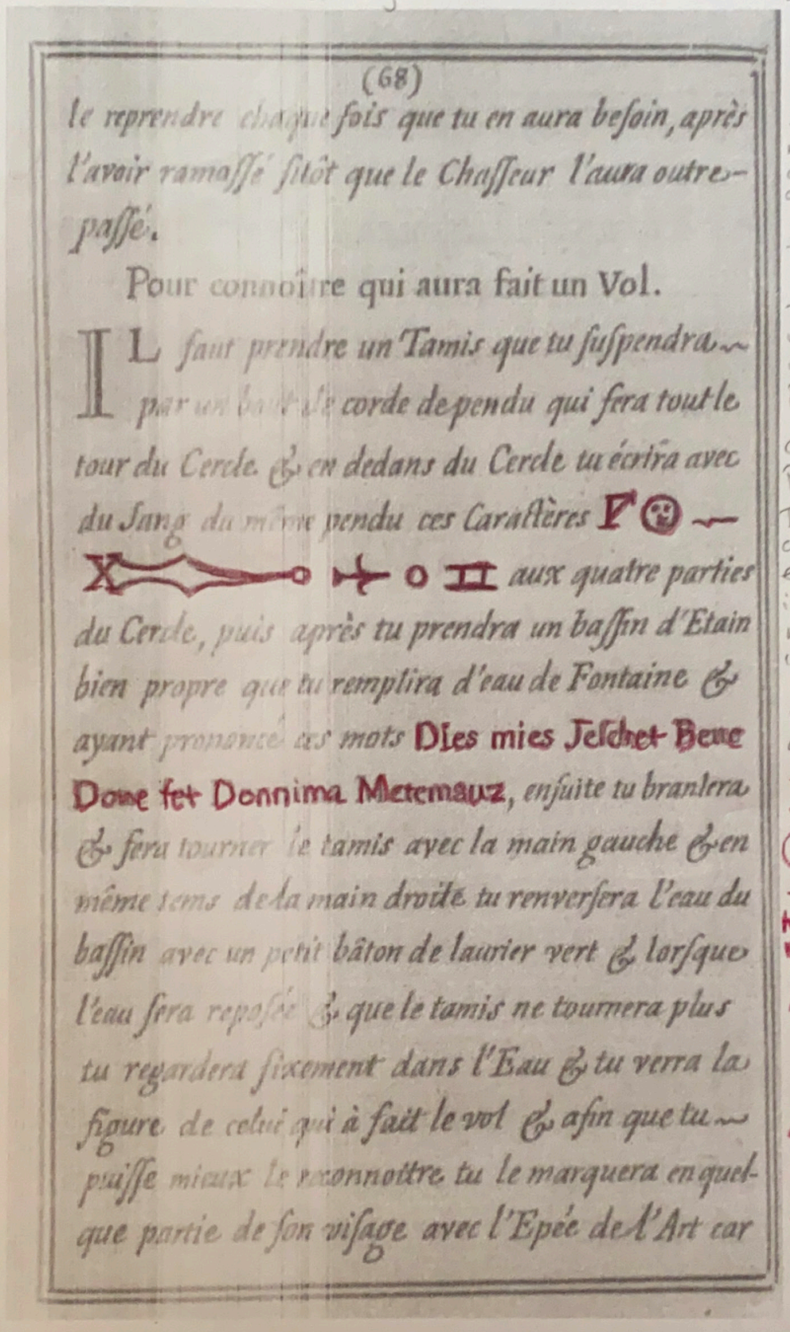


Les Véritables Clavicules De Salomon - I must prefer this French translation to the original Hebrew and Latin. Rabbin was a talented caster, but his handwriting was worse than mine. 1203 Lansdowne MSS or The Veritable Keys of Solomon. It has some potent spells in it, but most of the ceremony and circumstance are mere methods of seeping magic through the Veil.

As always, it is the symbols that matter most, and their reflection of will power.

These post-Veil casters actually got pretty close.

The spell helps find a thief. Simple, yet elegant. I will modify it slightly to return my spellbook to its rightful owner (which will hopefully remain me for at least a while longer)

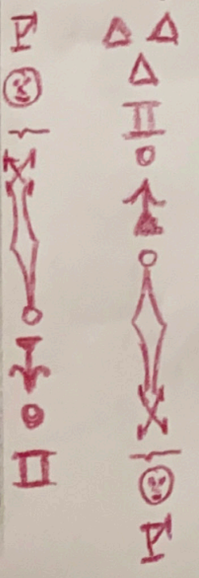


(68)

le reprendre chaque fois que tu en aura besoin, après l'avoir ramassé sitôt que le Chasseur l'aura outrepassé.

Pour connoître qui aura fait un Vol.

IL faut prendre un Tamis que tu suspendra par un bout de corde dependu qui fera tout le tour du Cercle & en dedans du Cercle tu écrira avec du Sang du même pendu ces Caractères [symbols] aux quatre parties du Cercle, puis après tu prendra un bassin d'Etain bien propre que tu remplira d'eau de Fontaine & ayant prononcé ces mots Dies mies Jelchet Beue Doue fet Donnima Metemauz, ensuite tu branlera & fera tourner le tamis avec la main gauche & en même tems de la main droite tu renverfera l'eau du bassin avec un petit bâton de laurier vert & lorsque l'eau sera reposée & que le tamis ne tournera plus tu regardera fixement dans l'Eau & tu verra la figure de celui qui à fait le vol & afin que tu puisse mieux le reconnoître tu le marquera en quelque partie de son visage avec l'Epée de l'Art car



So... clearly things have changed since the first chapter was published. TO SAY THE LEAST! MetaZoo has seen growth that is truly remarkable and to be honest, very much unexpected. Now, it's important that you all know that I hoped that MetaZoo would eventually grow to this point, and I certainly worked very hard to make it so (and the staff and volunteers worked their butts off as well!). Still, you never really expect it to turn out the way that it has. All that being said, we still have a lot of work to do. The partnerships with ChannelFireball, Rudy from Alpha Investments, eBay, Universal Distribution, PHD, Steve Aoki, Whatnot (need I go on?!), are all just the beginning. I have big, big plans for MetaZoo.

Now, for the story, things are progressing nicely I think. It was important to show that no Hogwarts or Dumbledore exist in the Cryptid Nation - or at least not yet. The real world is complicated, and so are people. That doesn't necessary make the Rainbow Wizard bad, per se, but rather just a person.

Sam is also complicated. He's clearly heartbroken but determined to move forward. He wants to end magic, but he needs to learn how to Cast in order to do what is necessary.

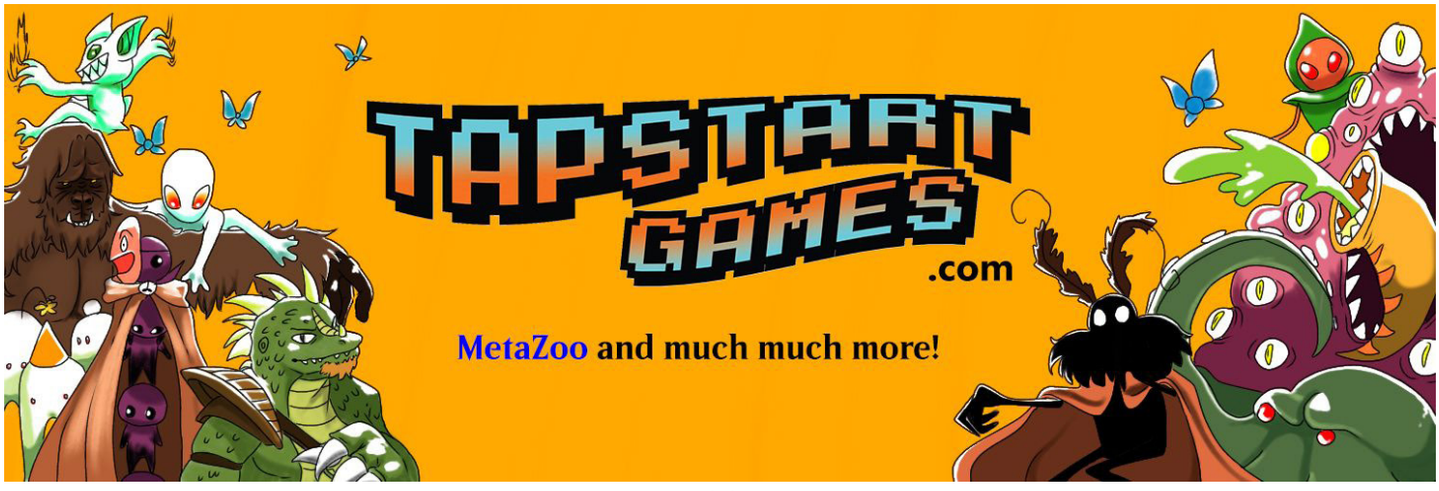
This real-world-twist to all things magical is integral to the MetaZoo world. Remember, this is supposed to be our world! The difficulty and the fun is going to be balancing this need to have real people and real-life events with still keeping things fantastical and appealing. Reality is important, but so is having fun.

I know the past two chapters have been dark, but don't let that color the whole story for you. Yes, there will be loss, but that pain will be balanced by happy, funny, and lighthearted moments. Just like life. Until next time, dear reader!

Sincerely and happily yours,




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