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1ST PRINT

MetaZoo™ CRYPTID NATION

CH. 3

Book #1



MetaZoo

Michael Waddell

PONCHIO

Sebastian

Botello

Isaac

Lee

Pepper

DeLuca

Michael

Peckham

Siobhan

Daly

Brunes

Ted

Lander

Mitch

Borgstrom

Andy

Mourat



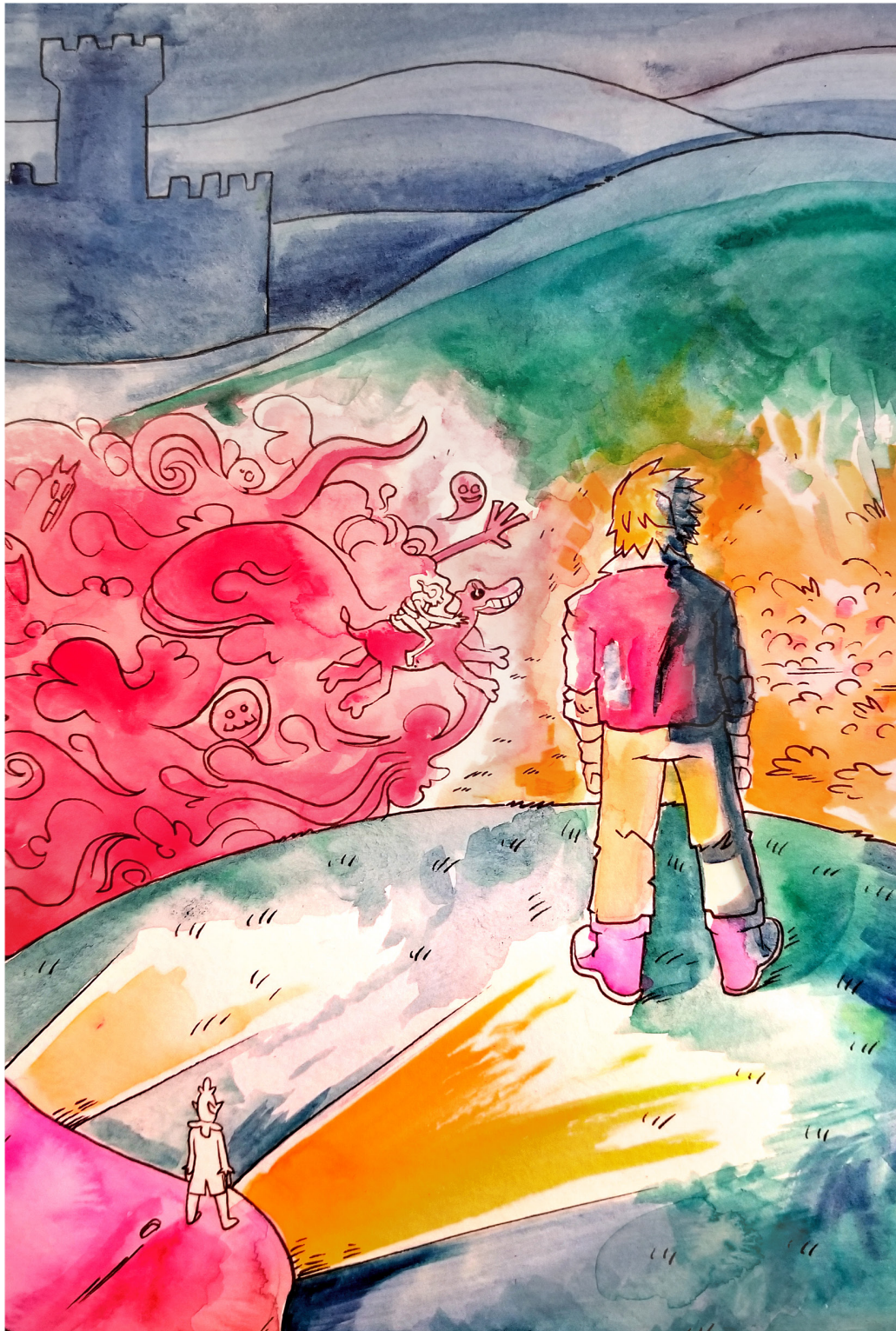
THE BATTLE OF LOVELAND CASTLE!





A False God

It was the most beautiful thing Sam had ever seen. Lucy sat idling at the crest of Sentry Hill off Highway 48, clinking and clanking as her engine slowly cooled and Dingbelle moved about. Sam sat on her hood and watched the pink sea move beneath him, filling the valley and spilling into the orange and red of the fall plains made all the more beautiful by the reflecting lights. The lights coming from the valley were so intense that they washed out the stars above.



Tens... no, hundreds of thousands of Spirits formed the storm Sam had heard about on the radio. Sam had seen the faceless Spirits coalescing at the Veil separating Point Pleasant and the Wilds as recently as a few weeks ago, but they were mere fireflies in comparison to the raging wildfire that now spread before him. And in this moving sea, eddies of various sizes could be seen swirling around larger and more brilliant focal points of Spirit Aura.

Sam knew that not all Spirits were created equal, and those people or other... entities that were more powerful in life shined brighter after it. Squinting his eyes and letting them adjust, Sam saw that the largest Spirit Aura by far looked to be a mad skeleton riding a red camel. Sam pulled out his CryptidCam and took a snapshot of it, hoping it would focus properly in spite of all the eerie lighting. As the CryptidCam spat out the film, Sam twisted the cap off of his Sharpie and quickly jotted down, “*RED GHOST: OCTOBER 15th, 2031*” in surprisingly legible handwriting.



The Red Ghost generated a swirling eddy about it so large it might as well have been driving the entire Spirit Storm.

And Sam realized it was - and to what purpose.

Just ahead of this Spirit Storm, an equally bright but infinitely more human caravan of lights fled into the fields. Sam had been watching the scene unfold as both made their slow but steady trek across the valley for the past hour. Beyond this, just past the Spirit Storm's light and into the darkness of the night that it magnified, Sam felt an unnatural pulsing that made his insides squirm like Furry Trouts.



It seemed like the Spirit Storm and the caravan sensed it as well, because they both formed a U-shaped path around a blackness that encroached upon the valley. A blackness that seemed entirely untouched by the lights from either party.

That untouchable darkness was Sam's destination.

But even the darkest nights succumb to the light eventually, and tonight's darkness was no different. Just as the Spiritual vortex was about to overcome the fleeing caravan, the morning sun began to rise in the west, spilling natural light into the valley. As it did, the Spirit storm subsided and then eventually disappeared altogether, following whatever strange

mechanics that prevented the Spirits from existing in daylight.

The caravan appeared to have stopped in its tracks as well, and Sam would have noticed this had he not been fixated on something else entirely. Just where the darkness stood moments before, a castle was illuminated in the morning light's yellows and oranges. A river curled lazily around it - a river that for some reason beyond Sam's understanding had reflected neither the stars nor the ghostly lights of the Storm. The Loveland Castle stood like something out of time - a folly to a traditional European castle built in the 1920's that has no place in modern America... but somehow made sense in the Cryptid Nation. And though the morning light made visible its stone facade, Sam had the uneasy feeling that very little light actually touched it. In fact, Sam had the distinct impression that even if he had wanted to, something would have prevented him from entering the archway that led into the castle's courtyard.

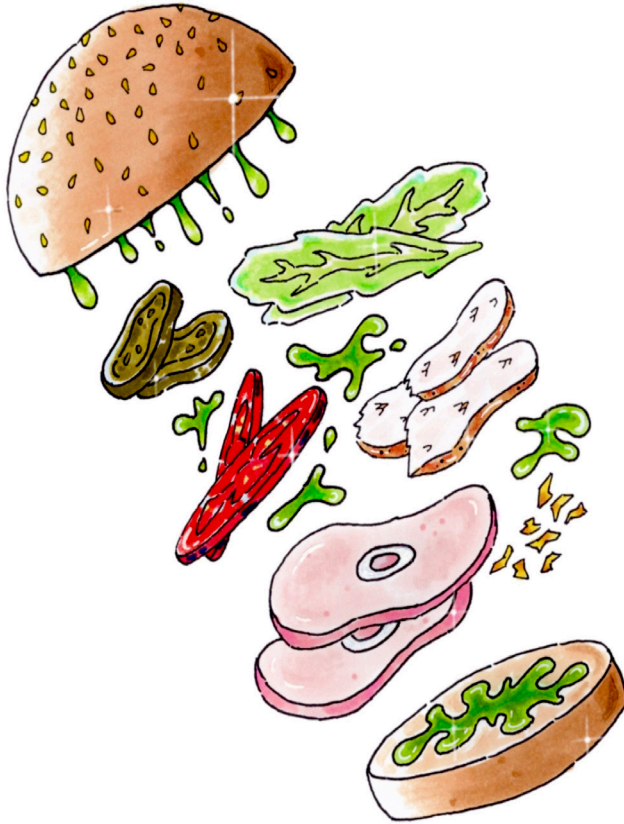
Magic. This place is soaked in magic. Sam thought to himself, stifling a yawn.

And that made sense. After all, this is where the radio had said Mothman had been sighted in the previous evenings. Sam had tried to get there in time to see the place in the dead of the night, but perhaps he had been too late. Perhaps the morning light was too close for Mothman's comfort even an hour ago.

So, Sam would have to wait until Nightfall and the darkness to return.

Rustling in the back of Lucy, Sam pulled out an impromptu picnic basket made out of a recycled Coleman Cooler. If he was going to wait, he might as well do it with a full stomach. At the diner, he resupplied as much as was reasonable,





and had enough cold cuts to make a garbage sandwich on a repurposed hamburger bun. Turkey slices, thick slabs of ham, tomatoes, shredded lettuce, pickles, and crushed up Lays potato chips. But there was one last finishing touch that was needed before it was officially a “Sinclair Sandwich.” Sam’s father had shown him a delicious trick when he was 5 years old - combining ketchup, mustard, pesto, and mayo in just the right combination created what his father called “Green Slime,” a tribute to a children’s television show his father apparently watched when he was a kid!

As Sam tucked into the Sinclair Sandwich, he figured he would once again attempt what had become almost a morning ritual: checking to see if M’s crimson Spellbook had decided to reveal its secrets to Sam. Pulling it out of his backpack, not expecting anything to be different this time, Sam was not prepared for what he saw next. The golden M that had decorated the face of the Spellbook was now gone. Apparently, having nothing but blank pages wasn’t abandonment enough, now the ancient Spellbook appeared almost entirely new and untouched. Sam let out a sigh of frustration and threw the book into the back of Lucy, clipping his bat, before

turning his attention back to the Loveland Castle.

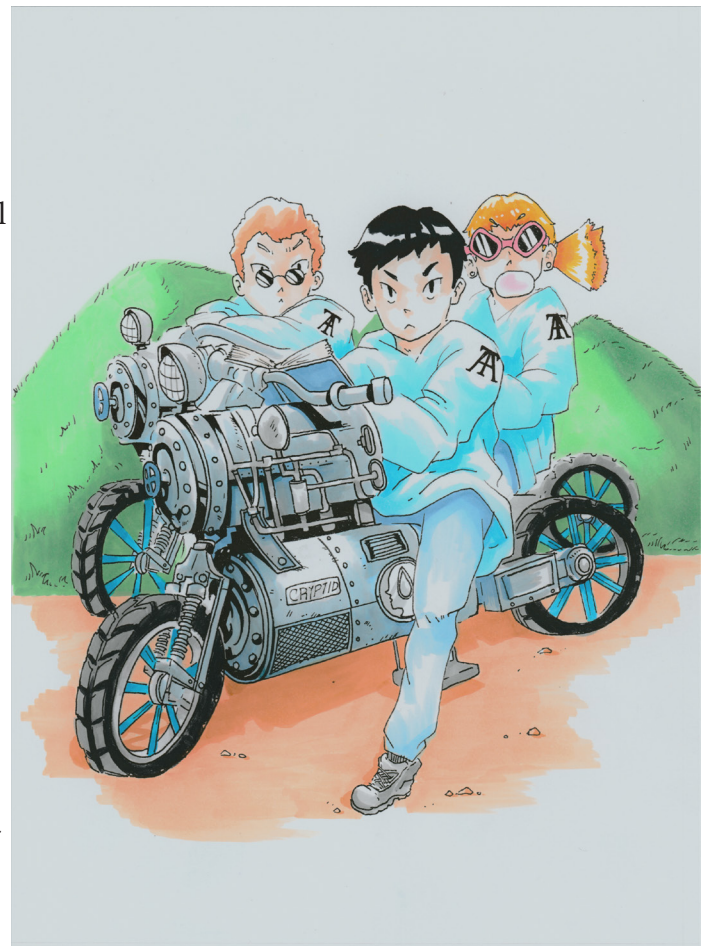
Sam was no longer alone.

In only 30 minutes or so, the first group of what Sam suspected to become many appeared half a mile upriver. It didn’t surprise Sam. In the past week, Mothman had been all over the news as a phantom that left a path of destruction in its wake. Any sighting was sure to draw news crews, bounty hunters, and those Casters looking to subjugate Mothman to their will... or perhaps test their mettle against an entity historically known to be one of the most powerful Beasties in existence.

This first group was composed entirely of young men and women around Sam’s age.

College kids, most likely from the local Tower, Sam thought to himself as he polished off the last bit of his Sinclair Sandwich.

And they indeed looked the part. Donned in bright blue robes not unlike what he observed the student Casters wearing at Quimblys, Sam recognized the unique tint of blue as the official color of Tower Aguazul, a Tower that specialized in Water Aura Casting based out of Dayton, Ohio.



The group rode in on steam-powered, motorized bikes, not an uncommon form of transportation in a greener world where the more complicated pieces of machinery in most engines burned out a decade ago. Hammered into the frame of each bike was a metallic plate with the logo of their Tower - a droplet of water inside a silhouette of a unisex human head, shined brilliantly in the morning light. Sam took a moment to appreciate the bravery needed to report on a sighting of the flying catastrophe that was Mothman before reminding himself that they likely knew considerably more about Casting than himself. They busied themselves setting up a sky blue tent that likely housed their reporting equipment.

The second group showed up three hours later along the river from the opposite direction of the Tower Aguazul students. Speeding in a beat up van, they stirred up a morning dust storm as they passed over the scars on the ground left by the caravan only a few hours before. As they parked about a quarter mile upriver of the Tower Aguazul students, Sam was able to make out the “Cryptid Busters of Lexington” logo painted in chipped yellow lettering across the side of the van. It varied, but Cryptid Busters were generally quite capable at Casting. They had to be, otherwise they wouldn’t survive very long on the job. It was likely that the city of Lexington, assuming it wasn’t abandoned or a scorched mark on Cassius’ map, hired the Cryptid Busters to come and deal with the threat just north of their border.

But... Sam thought to himself, his inner voice troubled, if that’s the case, where is the Cryptid Buster crew from Cincinnati?

Based on the weathered and pocked metal of the van, Sam guessed that the Casters within balanced on the more experienced side. *Good, Sam thought, their talents might be needed.* The van doors never opened, so Sam couldn’t get a good look at the Casters within to verify his suspicions.



Roughly six hours later and just three hours before sunset, a third group detached itself from the caravan and had already begun to continue its trek up north. Sam couldn't quite make out what they were wearing, but they brought with them some pretty serious filming equipment.

The fourth and final party to join the Mothman sighting entourage actually emerged from behind Sam and Lucy, at a brisk pace and with so little sound that they were almost upon Sam before he noticed their presence with a start. A carriage pulled by two Hugags - large, gangly Fearsome Critters that reminded Sam of tired camels more than anything else, and jet black against the afternoon sun blasted past Sam and left him reeling as he jumped out of the way. The carriage and its mysterious occupant settled somewhere between the students and the Cryptid Buster crew.

And so the hours drew on. Sam remembered that as a child the passage of time was made easier with various electronic devices. Watching *Paw Patrol* on his father's iPad; attending 5th grade classes digitally via Zoom during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Sam pondered about how even though the summers of his childhood seemed to last forever, after the Veil shattered time seemed to... elongate.



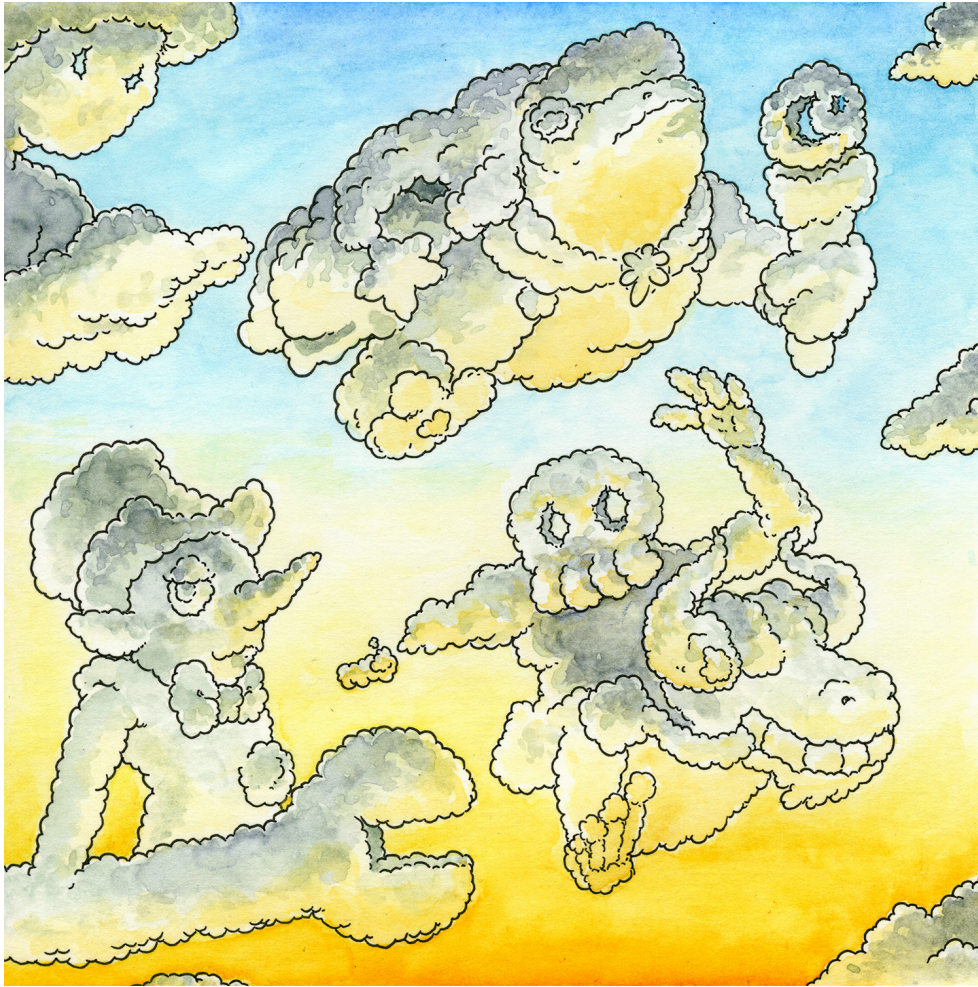
Without the constant hum of his computer or phone, he was forced to watch time march on and appreciate every moment of it - whether he liked it or not.

And so he waited.

And waited.



Sam's mind forged Beasties from the clouds that passed above him, and he watched as the shadows grew longer.



As the shadows grew so long that they began to connect and meld, the troops that had assembled at the base of Loveland Castle began to rustle. Sam knew there were precious moments before the reemergence of the Spirit Storm. He didn't quite understand the Magic of it, but every time sunlight blinked a Spirit temporarily out of existence, it generally blinked back into existence exactly where it had left off the following night. However, it didn't happen immediately. During dusk, the ambient light was still too powerful for Spiritual Aura, and so the 30 minute bridge between daylight and true nighttime was *all* the time they had before the Spirit Storm sprang back into existence. And Loveland Castle would be in the eye of it.

The real question was, would Mothman reveal itself during dusk or wait for the full cover of nighttime as well? Even if it did, would 30 minutes really be enough time to subdue it and then escape with their lives? What *exactly* was the plan? What *were* they doing here? The motley crew of teenagers and mysterious men in vans and secret carriages seemed to recognize this all at once, as though they temporarily shared a psychic link. The absurdity of the situation struck the group collectively like chain-lightning, but they continued to march on as though they had no choice in the matter.

Stranger things have happened since the Veil shattered, Sam concluded with a silent and slightly manic chuckle.

Restless movement from all parties broke the multi-hour long silence. A van door slid open; a Hugag snorted as carriage doors creaked open; gizmos whirred as the Tower's students wound their magical CryptidCams (cameras not too dissimilar to the one Sam had created, he noticed). Sam made his way down the road, leaving Lucy in whatever modest protection that distance (a mere quarter mile) from the action provided.

An argument broke out in the distance as the ghost hunters that had detached from the previous night’s caravan packed up and took off, fear painted on their faces like the least effective warpaint ever conceived. Closer now than when they had first arrived, Sam recognized them as having starred in some ghost hunting show, likely on the History Channel of all places, from before the shattering of the Veil. Many supposed “experts” or “investigators” on all matters supernatural from before the Veil shattered attempted to continue their trade after that fateful event 10 years ago. They were quickly replaced. The more learned and iron-willed individuals from both academia and the military that decided to take on the supernatural vocation quickly dominated the industry.

One such iron-willed individual, was now shushing the restless Hugags that must have felt the tension in the air. Dressed head to toe in black cloth and an even blacker cape (that looked sharp to the touch), the pale Caster was at least 6 foot 3 and strikingly handsome. He wore a wide brimmed hat that came to a point and almost looked as though it were modeled after the beak of a raven. Even in the dimming sunlight, Sam noticed how uncomfortable the light made the man, and he thought for a moment that it was possible he was looking at his first vampire.

Doubtful... even with the shattering of the Veil there hasn't been any record of vampires showing up. Sam pondered with less confidence than he would have liked.

Fully expecting the dark figure to unsheathe a silver sword, Sam was surprised when instead the stranger’s billowing cape revealed a long barrelled pistol holstered to his left side.

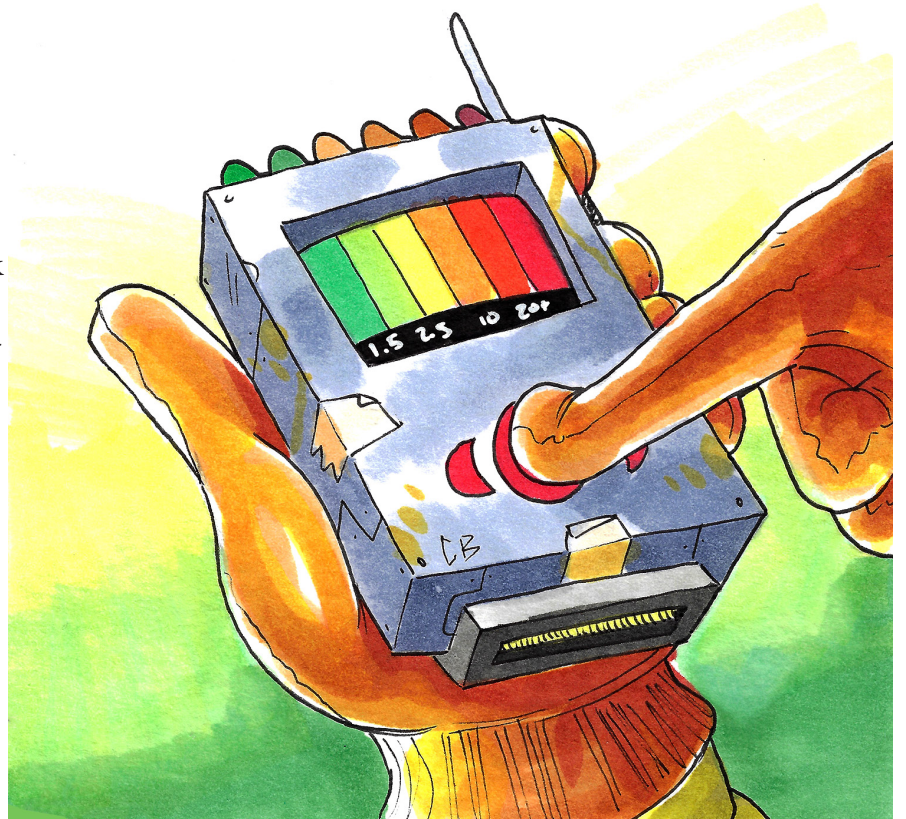
“This is crazy, what the hell are we going to do? What the hell can we do?” a member of the student troupe dramatically whined into the strained silence.

Gesturing toward the dark figure, still soothing the wild Beastie he had tamed to draw his carriage, the student continued: “Even with Dracula over here, this is Mothman we are talking about. Shouldn’t we retreat until, I don’t know, Unity City’s army gets here?”

“Impossible.” the dark figure responded with an accent Sam couldn’t quite place. “Absolutely impossible. A ward has been put in place around this entire region. No teleporting in and out. Even if Unity City wanted to send an Army, they are at least a day away.”

“He’s right,” said one of the Cryptid Buster team members, sideways glancing at the dark figure and trying to avoid direct eye contact as he buckled what looked like Batman’s Utility Belt around his considerable waist. From one of the belt’s pouches he produced a gadget that Sam recognized as an EMF device.

“Check this out” the Cryptid Buster said as he pushed a large red button causing the EMF device to whirl to life. It beeped lazily for a few seconds before buzzing loudly and shutting off. “Looks like not even Spirits can get close to this place - it’s protected out the wazoo.” he concluded matter-of-factly.



The student continued, even more exasperated “Oh well that’s great, I guess we are just going to waltz up and take on the Beastie that’s literally destroying entire cities. Christie, let’s get the hell out of here.” The student grabbed the upper arm of who Sam could only assume was Christie, who proceeded to plant her feet more firmly on the grass while winding her CryptidCam.

“Get off of me Lou. If you’re so scared, just leave,” she said dismissively without even looking at him. Lou, appearing quite defeated, was mustering up the courage to respond before everyone’s hair began to stand on end, as though an electric current permeated the air.

The sun was now completely gone, and a Dark Aura filled the air like liquid heat. Sam’s knees almost buckled under the pressure, but the dark figure reached out and steadied him. Lou had turned into a puddle on the ground facing away from the castle and at the feet of Christie, who stood steadfast with her CryptidCam defiantly at the ready.

“When it happens, it’s going to happen fast,” the dark figure said in almost a whisper to Sam. And then much more loudly to the scrambling Cryptid Busters, “You guys ready? Throw everything you got at it just to hold it in place, I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Y...yes sir. Wait, just who the hell are you? Are you with the Unity City Military or something?” the smallest of the Cryptid Busters stuttered out while tightening the straps connecting his backpack to what appeared to be a chrome Supersoaker. The dark figure didn’t bother answering.

As the dark figure’s arm continued to steady him, it was then that Sam recognized a strong scent of copper piping emanating from the folds of his black clothes. He also recognized 10 to 15 medals from various Towers lining the right side of his leather vest, all of which indicated that this dark figure was not a Caster to be trifled with.

They were mostly Battle Casting Towers.

“Can you stand on your own?” the dark figure asked Sam, once again at a whisper.. Sam blushed with embarrassment. What on earth was he doing here? Did he really think he was equipped to take on Mothman? His face flushed an ever deeper red as further shame - and fear - washed over him.

He was weak, far too weak. Sam was going to change that.

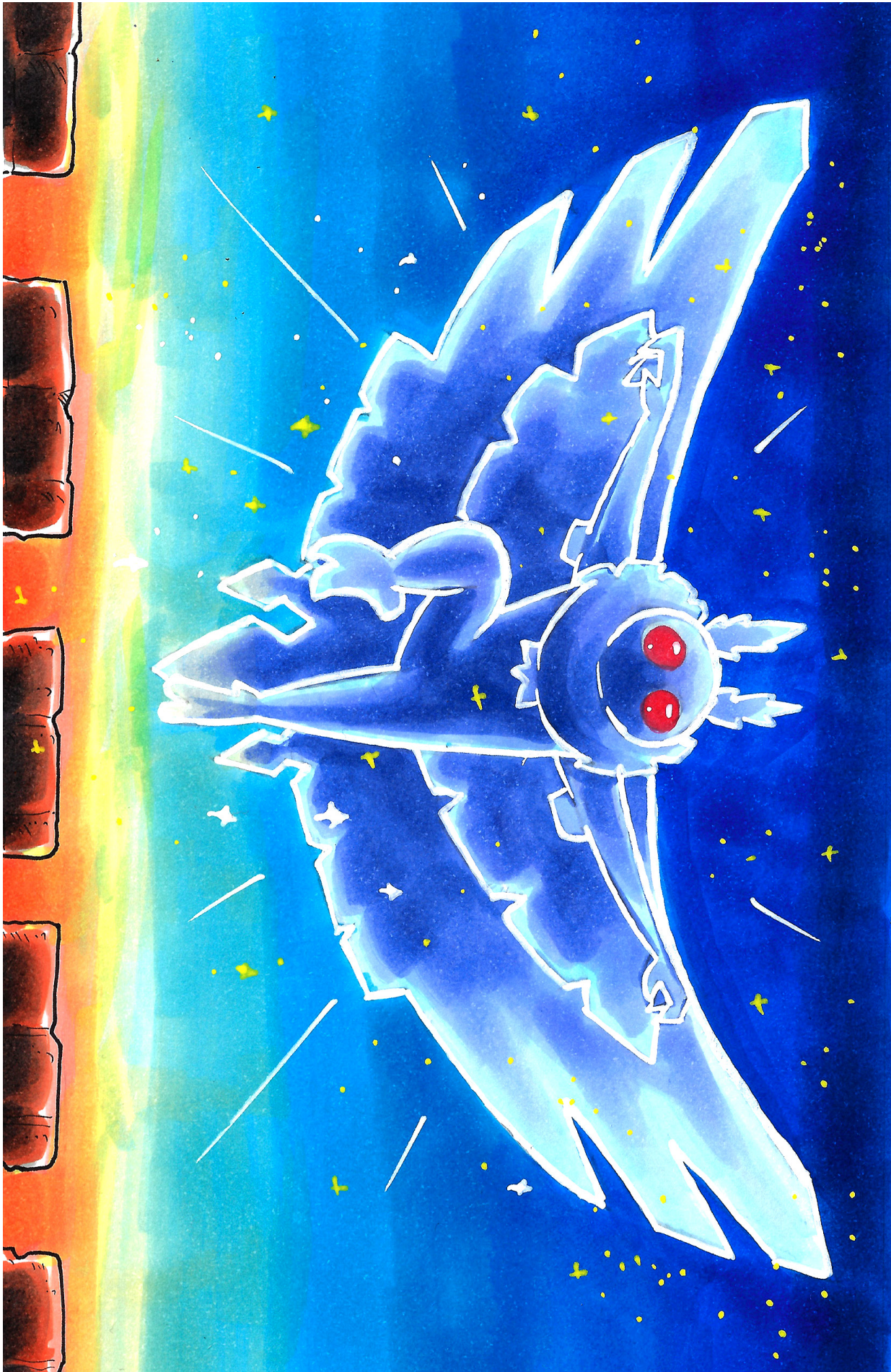
Standing on his own, Sam turned to fully face the castle just as Mothman bloomed from its parapets in a fantastical display of flight. It was almost as though he had been hiding in the castle’s courtyard all day unbeknownst to the ragtag army assembling at its front gate.

Sam, quite comically as he realized later on, lifted his bat at the ready. The magic coursing through the air vibrated its wood, making it feel as though Sam just swung full force against a slab of solid metal.

The moment it spread its wings fully, the liquid heat pressurizing the air around Sam magnified 10-fold. It was fear incarnate. It was death in flight. It was the night itself, spreading its wings in all its terror.

But... *something* was wrong.

But what exactly was wrong? As Sam attempted to contemplate this, his thoughts were scrambled in much the same way they were in his darkest nightmares. In these nightmares, his legs would turn to jelly and his body would move in slow motion.



As Sam tried to put his finger on what exactly was different about Mothman, the other parties began to move in formation.

“Hit it!” roared the dark figure, with an unnatural force Sam recognized as magically amplified sound.

The three Cryptid Busters unloaded onto Mothman with their chrome Supersoakers, and great jagged beams of light poured from the nozzles like controlled lightning bolts. Rather than piercing Mothman though, they wrapped around it like vice grips and held it in place, hovering some 100 feet above the Loveland Castle.

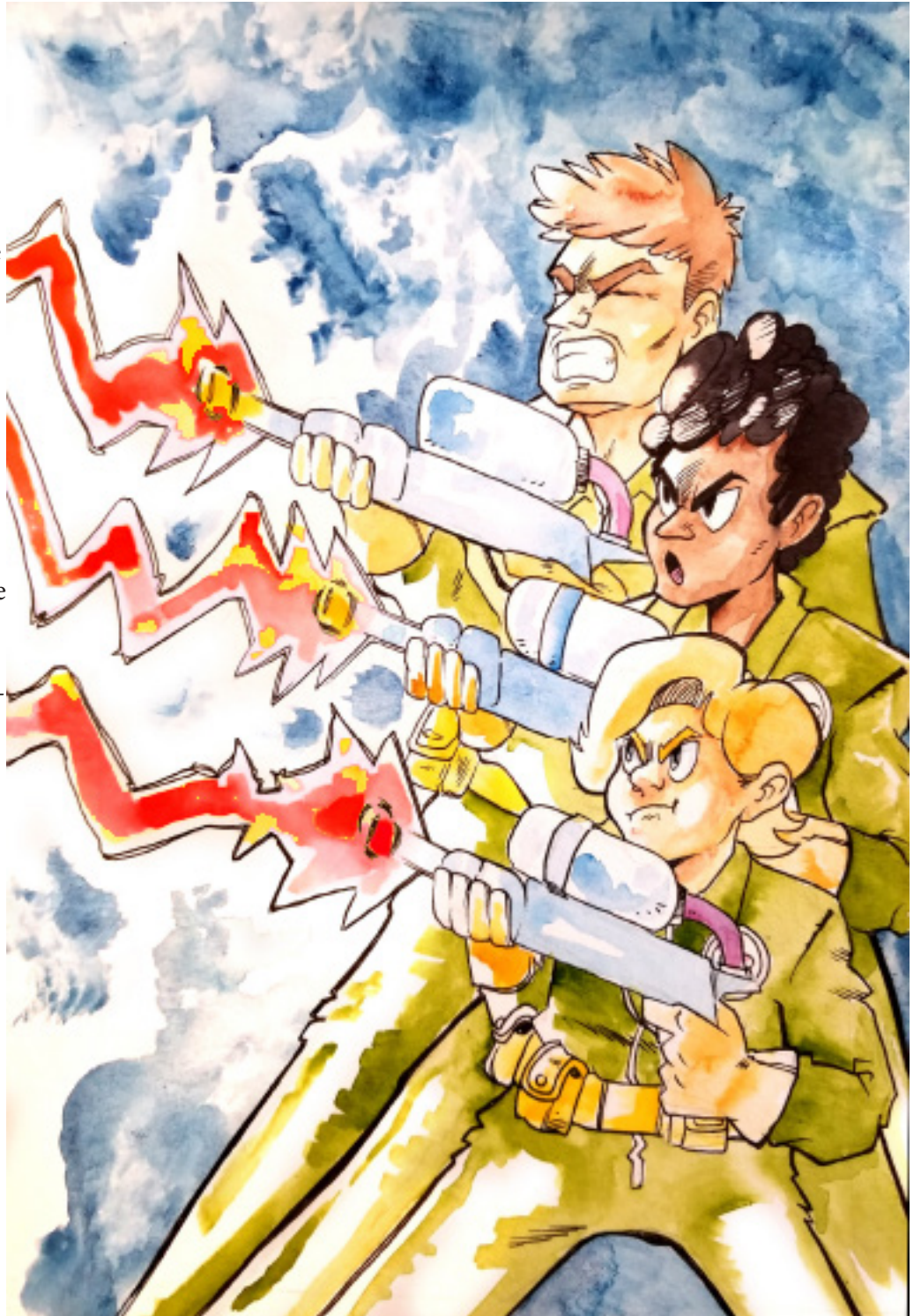
“Holy shi-!” someone began.

Mothman screamed into the autumn air and Sam’s fear turned his blood into steam that went pounding into his ears. He was scared. Yes, he was utterly terrified... but not as frightened as he should have been, he realized. Not as frightened as he was on the night he first saw Mothman, only a few days ago.

Was he somehow immune to Mothman’s terror-inducing power having experienced it now twice before? Sam doubted it.

“Whatever you’re gonna do, do it fast, we can’t hold this asshole here forever!”, the largest of the group screamed back at the dark figure, who was in the process of unbuckling his long barreled pistol from its entirely inadequately proportioned holster.

Sam somehow found the strength to muster a question, his curiosity briefly overcoming his fear, “Where is your Spellbook? You don’t think a gun is going to do anything to this... *thing* do you?”



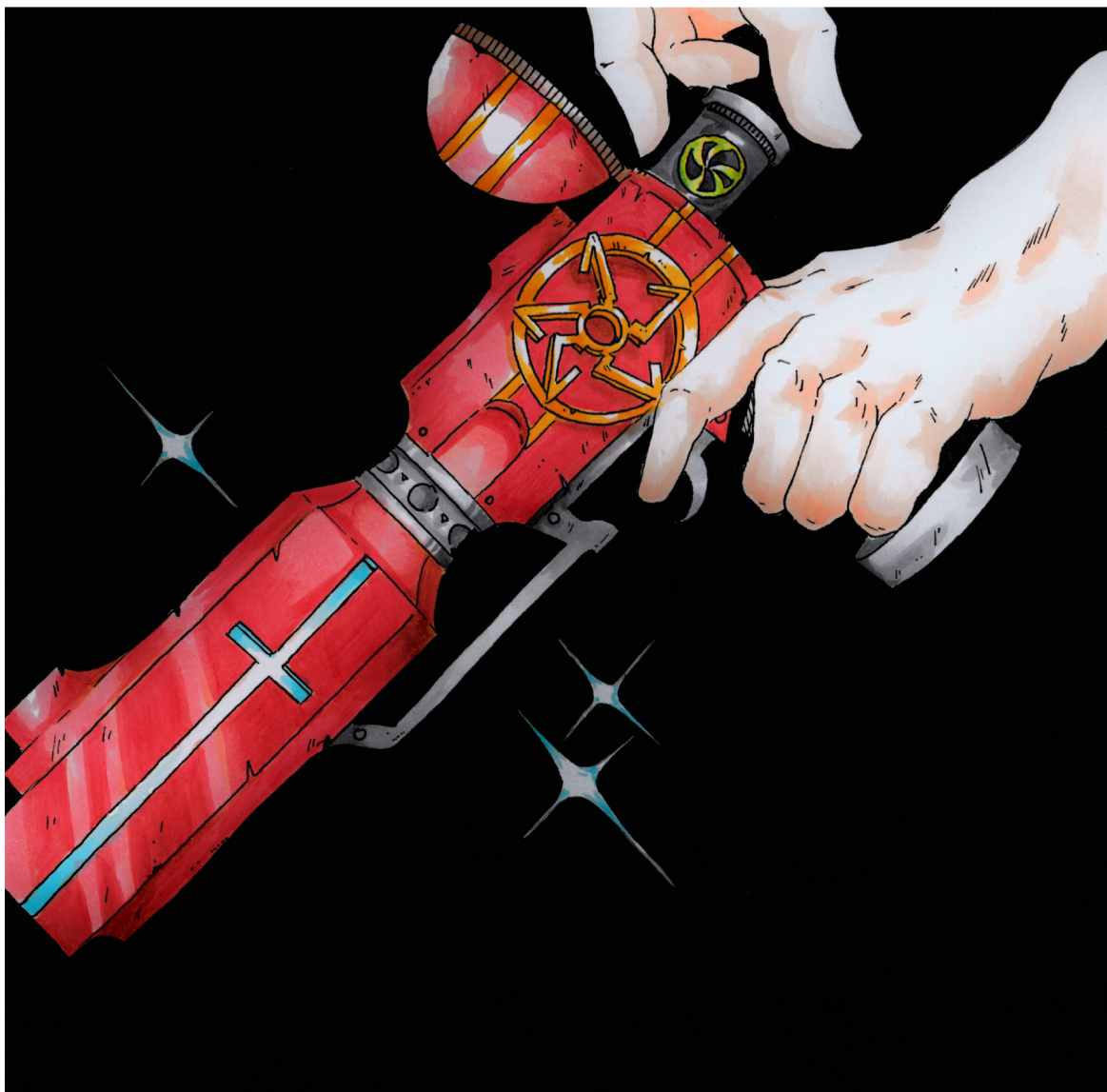
The dark figure smiled and revealed a mouth full of gritted teeth even whiter than his pale skin. “Kid, you’ve got a lot to learn. This gun right here *is* my Spellbook. It’s a Caster Gun.” And with one quick motion he flicked the barrel of the Caster Gun open and it whirred as the 3-shot cylinder rotated on its axis.

The dark figure’s belt, Sam now saw, was decorated with two dozen or so pockets for cartridges in his bandolier like something out of an old John Wayne movie. Only half of them were actually occupied with cartridges, each one unique in design and color.

“...and these are my Spells. Little bastards are hard to come by but it’s worth the effort. Now stand back, this is my most powerful shell and there’s really only a 50% chance it doesn’t immediately backfire and kill us all.” As he was saying this, the dark figure pulled out an obsidian black cartridge with a pointed tip. On the face of the shell’s metal was a swirl the shape of a galaxy, etched in gold.

“As soon as I shoot this, I’ll probably collapse from exhaustion. Be a good kid and catch me if that happens,” the dark figure said through gritted teeth and with false humor, almost as though he was preparing for something that was really going to hurt.

The obsidian cartridge slid into the cylinder with a *thunk*, and the moment it was in place Sam could feel a different kind of Aura begin to rise and vibrate in tandem with the energy radiating from Mothman.



“Do it!” screamed the largest Cryptid Buster, and as he said this the smallest of the crew flew up in the air like a fireman overcome by the pressure of his firehose.

What Sam saw next was seen through the strobe light of Christie’s flash going on and off as she captured the moment with her CryptidCam. The dark figure aimed with his Caster Gun and pulled the trigger. The recoil snapped the figure’s arm back with tremendous force. Grey electricity traveled from the barrel out to his arm, tearing black fabric and pale flesh alike. Time seemed to slow as the obsidian bullet approached Mothman, until it stopped just short of hitting it in the chest.

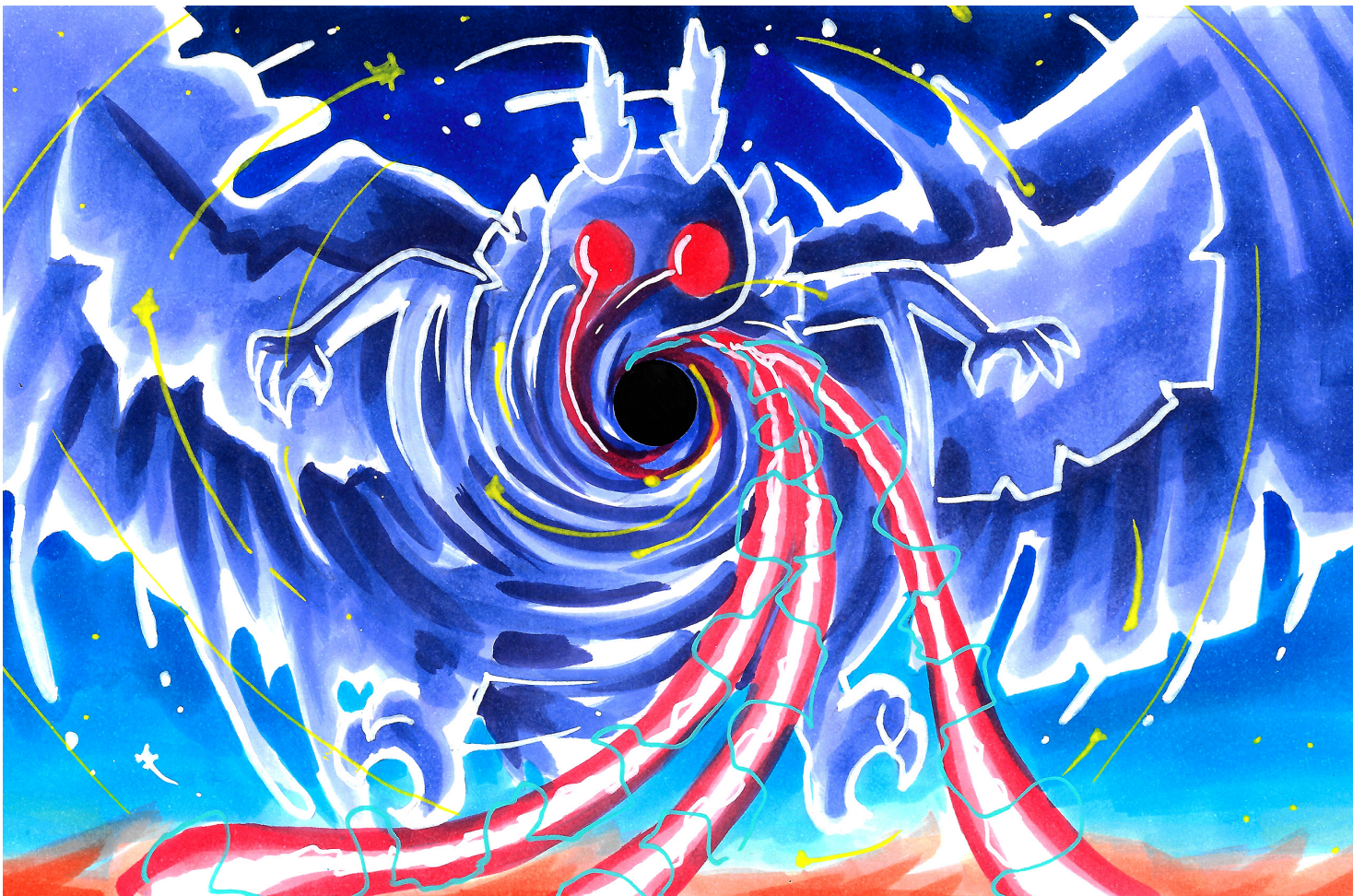
And then it disappeared.

No, that wasn’t quite right. Yes, it disappeared for an instant, but it was instantly replaced by a small black ball. Describing this ball as black wasn’t entirely accurate either though... it was more the total absence of light.

And then the ball began to grow.

And as it began to grow, Mothman began to warp around it.

“My god... you generated a tiny blackhole with that Caster Gun?!” Christie said with wonder in her voice, periodically strobe-lighting the whole scene with the flash of her camera. It was the dark figure’s turn to collapse, and Sam repaid his previous kindness by catching him before he fully hit the ground. He was incredibly light, way lighter than he should have been. His right arm that he used to fire the Caster Gun was in tatters, and blood began to pool at their feet in quiet splatters.



“T-Takes... a lot out of you, that one...” the dark figure huffed and puffed. So, Sam thought, even though the Caster Gun and its shells were different from your typical Spellbook, it appeared as though it functioned in the same way. The source of energy, Page or Bullet, had to come from your own Aura. The larger the Spell, the larger the Aura.

And what a Spell it was.

Mothman screeched and squirmed as the space around it pulled and pushed itself towards the growing blackhole. The tendrils of energy being shot from the Cryptid Busters were the first to succumb to the Spell’s suction and pull away from Mothman. The group collectively held its breath... and just before it appeared as though Mothman would pull away, escape, and unleash its fury, it fell into the black sphere almost faster than Sam’s eyes could follow, popping out of existence along with the sphere.

The vacuum that was left in the silence drove Sam into a temporary panic as he manically thought that the black-hole had sucked up all the sound in the world as well. But then the silence was filled.

“Did... did we just...” one of the Cryptid Busters hesitantly began.

“Did we just destroy THE Mothman? Yes, it would appear so,” the dark figure said in a weak voice from the place on the ground where Sam had gently left him sitting.

“This is totally making it into the school paper,” Christie said, barely able to contain her excitement.

Even though only several minutes had passed, the shadows had grown so long that they were now indistinguishable from each other and true nightfall was upon the group. Out of the corner of his eye Sam saw what looked like large, purple fireflies burst in and out of existence.



Laughter filled the night and joined the wind as the Cryptid Buster, the dark figure, and the remainder of the students excitedly recounted the brief but intense battle. If they had accomplished what they thought they did, they had just changed the world. And the world would need to know. Lou remained huddled on all fours where Christie had left him, sobbing.

More purple and pink flashes.

“Guys...” Sam began to interrupt.

Lou’s screaming cut off the jubilation of the other parties. Twenty feet in front of Lou, a headless figure in a maid’s outfit was slowly walking toward him, casting a soft pink hue onto his screaming face. But then it disappeared.

Standing up, the dark figure began lurching his way towards his carriage. “We should probably get out of here ASAP...” he began.

“Yes, shit, I forgot to mention there was a whole storm of these Spirits just passing through here last night!” Sam interrupted, eyeing the distance between where they were standing and where he had left Lucy. The field spanning the distance was already littered with Spirits revealing themselves, walking several steps, and then disappearing once again.

“You FORGOT? When sunlight breaks the Spirit Storm stops in place. Jesus kid, what the hell are you learning in school?” said the largest Cryptid Buster, already shoving the rest of his crew to action and throwing supplies into their van.

Sam turned around to ask if Christie and her friends could give him a brief ride up to Lucy, but they were already a dust cloud moving in the distance, occasionally casting a defensive Spell against Spirits that popped up too close to their path. Sam stared after them in surprise as their blue tent, now abandoned, billowed in an unnatural wind.

The start of an engine brought Sam back to his senses, and before he could blink the Cryptid Busters were already making their way in the opposite direction. Atop the roof of their van, three small balls of light spun around each other in tight formation, casting rainbow light in all directions and warbling like a police siren. Every Spirit the rainbow light hit spun away from it with anguished faces. It was so bright that Sam brought his hand up to eyes to block the assault until he was shrouded in shadow by a large object - the dark figure’s carriage.



A Hugag chuffed next him, eyes wild as it took in the increasingly perilous surroundings.

The dark figure leaned through the open window of the carriage, allowing Sam a brief glimpse into the space. It was completely and utterly pitch black - likely the result of a privacy Spell, Sam figured.

“I would offer you a ride, but this carriage is so warded with various Spells that prevent anyone other than myself from entering it that it would take an hour just to lower them.” Instinctively Sam reached to grab hold of the carriage door. The dark figure’s hand, already partially healed, shot out and intercepted Sam’s, and the leather of his glove squeaked as his grip tightened.

“Look, even touching the door handle is liable to blow off your fingers...” the dark figure’s voice trailed off as his eyes darted back and forth over the scene unfolding behind Sam. The Spirits were appearing but no longer disappearing. And they were moving toward the carriage.

In a hushed, panicked voice, the dark figure continued, “Most of the wards disappeared with Mothman, but it seems like the castle is still protected by something. If you want to survive, get your ass into that courtyard NOW!” And with that final exclamation, the carriage jerked forward as the Hugag, not waiting for any particular order from its owner but rather sensing his owner’s emotional state, began galloping away from Sam.

It took less time for the ragtag army to escape into the night than it took them to defeat Mothman, and now Sam found himself standing in an open field surrounded by a developing Spirit Storm. The only path he could see that was clear of any apparitions was through to the gates of Loveland Castle.

Sprinting the 200 or so feet across the bridge in mere seconds, Sam made it to the castle's surrounding wall before turning around, his back painfully digging into the jagged stones. He fully expected to have a dozen or so Spirits hot on his trail, ready to steal his soul and have him join their ranks.

To his surprise, all of the Spirits, of which there were several hundred within spitting distance of where the ragtag army had been several moments before, stopped a good 20 feet from where he was standing, unable to cross the bridge. It was almost as though they were held back by an invisible force.

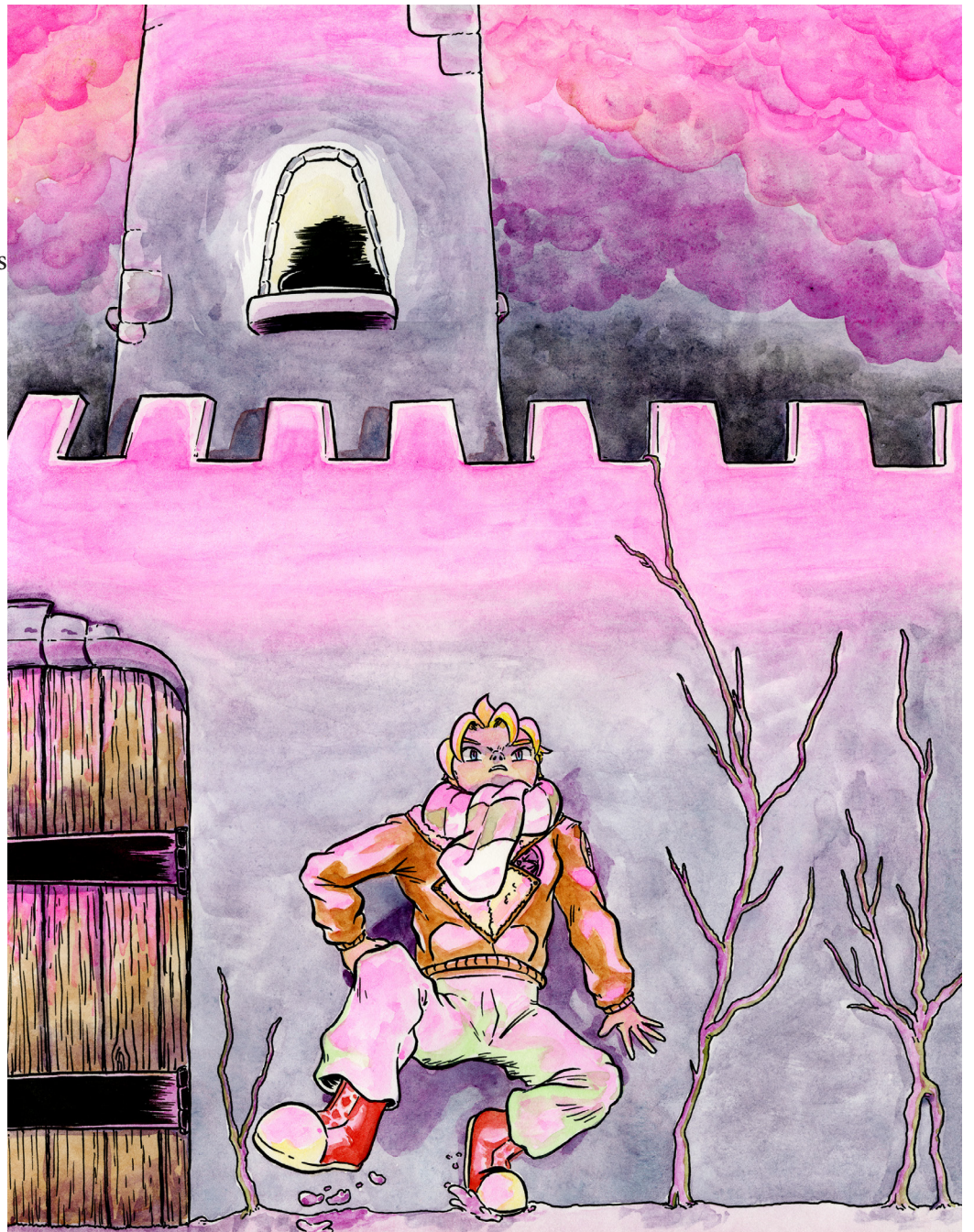
Of course, a force field... but placed by whom? Sam wondered in what felt like his first lucid thought in hours. Feeling a bit more secure with his surroundings, Sam turned to face the castle and took it in its entirety. It was covered in the fullness of the night, but there seemed to be a light emanating from somewhere... and everywhere at the same time that left the castle grounds not entirely shrouded in darkness. The vegetation was overgrown but not so much as to leave Sam with the impression that the place had been neglected.

Artistic neglect, the thought popped into Sam's mind as he traced the ivy that delicately - and deliberately - clung to the castle walls.

Had they really defeated Mothman? Was it really that easy? Was the nightmare *really* over? Sam's mind was racing, but before he could contemplate the gravity of what just happened, he had to get himself to safety.

Just as he stepped forward through the gate's threshold, Sam's eye caught movement. How had he not noticed before? In the top tower, not 100 feet from Sam, a light was pouring out of its window.

And in that light a shadowy figure appeared.





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