

MetaZoo  
COMICS

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PRINT

MetaZoo™ CRYPTID NATION



CH. 5  
Book #1



# MetaZoo

Michael  
Waddell

Sebastian  
Botello  
Kris  
Kampmann  
Michael  
Peckham  
PONCHO

Mitch  
Borgstrom



POWER...  
UNLOCKED!

“Easy kid, easy...!” Love said in a soothing voice. “Like I said, it’s not the *real* Mothman.”

Sam’s vision, which has become increasingly dark and tunneled since the moment his neck snapped upward to behold the Mothman-but-not-Mothman, began to clear. He realized that in the interim three seconds since first seeing the horrid Beastie, he had somehow maximized his distance from it by attaching himself to the farthest, darkest corner in the room. Try as he might, he wasn’t able to phase through the wall to further hide himself.

“N-not...,” Sam stuttered, “...not the real Mothman?”

“That’s right,” Love answered as he walked over to Sam’s tense form and closely checked the bandages that were doing their best to keep Sam’s wounds healing. “It’s just an illusion. A damn good illusion, but an illusion nonetheless. Wait – did you think you really destroyed *the* Mothman tonight?” Love let out an honest laugh, deep and long, that actually eased some of the tension in the room for just a moment.

Sam remained glued to the corner, eyes wild and fixed on Mothman as though at any moment it might descend into the room.

“An illusion Sam, look-” Love said, gesturing to a table that was cluttered in a way Sam supposed only a Wizard’s desk could be. Parchment with strange symbols written on it littered a cherry wood desk that was further splattered by splotches of ink – both dry and wet – of almost every color imaginable. Nestled between this parchment stood little figurines of dense clay, all shaped like various Beasties, some of which Sam recognized and others that were foreign to him. Embedded in the head of each figure shined small gemstones, each as varied and beautiful as the Beasties they crowned.

“These are Veil Golems,” Love continued, once again affecting a lecturing tone, “mere copies of the Beasties they represent. All you need to do is get your hands on some Creation Clay-”

“Creation Clay?” Sam interrupted.

“Yes, Creation Clay,” Love answered, “clay gathered from atop an area where a Beastie was laid to rest. You shape it in the



form of your Beastie of choice, plop in a Veil Shard – which is just a fragment of the Veil that shattered 10 years ago now – and *et voila*, you have a Veil Golem.”

“Just like that,” Sam scoffed sarcastically.

“Correct,” Love responded, either not noticing Sam’s tone or choosing to ignore it. “Of course you have to then infuse it with enough Aura to take flight, so to speak.”

“So...” Sam began, still with a voice lowered to a whisper and still instilled with instinctual terror as he gazed upon Mothman, Golem or not, “... that thing up there is made of clay? Why do I still feel so...”

“So scared?” Love finished for him. “You feel terror because despite just being clay, each Veil Golem takes on the attributes of the Beastie they mimic. I will say that this Golem, while only having about 1/100<sup>th</sup> of the Aura of the actual Mothman, was certainly sufficient enough to keep *them* at bay.”

“Them?” Sam whispered, still not convinced that the Mothman Golem was harmless, but curious despite his fear.

Love then groaned (which was more croak than groan), and put his slimy hands over his eyes as he remembered their current predicament.

“THEM – those Casters and Beasties that have been attacking my castle for the last three nights. Those Casters and Beasties that the Veil Golem was meant to ward off before your merry band came and ruined everything. Now there’s no way they’ll be convinced that the Mothman is actually being Contracted by me.”

“Who and why?” Sam questioned. “Why would anyone attack this old castle?” *Maybe an old grudge*, Sam thought to himself. *This old frog seems like the kind of person... or thing... that gets mixed in with the wrong crowd.*

Love gave out a brief snort of a laugh that contained none of the mirth of his previous bellow, and then fell silent.

“Sam,” Love began, quieter now than he was before, “I don’t know how much of the world you’ve seen at such a young age – what are you, 10? Very hard to tell with you normal humans – but dark forces are amassing in the North along the border.”

This wasn’t news to Sam. Ever since the Veil shattered, dark forces were always on the move. The Beasties that seeped into the world were just as complex in nature as the humans that ran from them, and in their ranks good and evil stood in strong contrast. The Casters that sought to control them had just as many varied intentions, and in the past 10 years the Cryptid Nation had been lit aflame by more than a dozen wars, crusades, raids, and Dark Marches by the ambitious. And then there were the Evergreen Casters.



War was war, just like from before the Veil shattered. War was a machine, one of the few that remained functional since the shattering, and Magic kept it well oiled.

“Dark forces are always ‘amassing’. There are always wars. Unity City always squashes them.” Sam said, reflecting his internal thoughts and trying not to look up.

“No...” Love whispered, gazing into the flames which were licking the top of the fireplace, “no not like this. Never like this. Not for many years. I suspect more than one Evergreen Caster is at play here, and the world is about to change.”

“Great, so dark masses are amassing, and that has to do with an old castle and a frogman Caster in Ohio how, exactly?” Sam asked.

Love gestured to the oaken shelves. “There’s power in these Spellbooks,” Love began, “old power. Whatever or whoever is responsible for the gathering darkness has put out the word: Collect as many Spellbooks as possible. Collect as much *power* as possible.”

Sam, still too paralyzed to move much, stood gawking at the strange Caster, waiting for him to continue.

“Those attacking my castle are after the secrets contained within these halls, and they intend to bend these powers to whatever dark will is driving them,” Love concluded matter-of-factly.

“So you’re pretty powerful as well, right?” Sam asked. “Why not just wipe the floor with these guys?”

“**Daingead!**” Love exclaimed, projecting enough force with the word to rattle the bookshelves that contained the sought-after power. “You don’t think I didn’t try that before?!”

Love, now looking more defeated and sore than Sam felt, deflated onto the divan with a sigh. “My boy,” Love continued quietly, “I’ve tried everything. If this were a normal Caster, my Spells would have worked. But whoever sent them must have done their research, because I believe the Caster is a Beastie...”

The fact that a Beastie could also be a Caster stopped being strange to Sam the moment he got his butt handed to him by a large frog dressed up as a wizard. No, what was strange was that the Caster being a Beastie somehow *prevented* Love from attacking it.

“So, what?” Sam responded, his eyes occasionally flickering upward to the Mothman Golem. “Just wipe the floor with this magical Beastie, who cares?”

“I can’t,” Love explained.

“You can’t?” Sam questioned.

“I can’t,” Love repeated, followed by another croaking sigh. Sam could tell, despite his current panicked state, that Love himself was beginning to get antsy. Just what was going to happen? Why would such a powerful Caster be scared? Who was outside the castle walls? “I can’t because whatever curse transformed me into the handsome frogman you see before you also prevents me from directly attacking any Beastie.”

“What- ” Sam began, more confused than ever.

“Look, boy, suffice it to say, I can’t attack Beasties. It’s a long story and we don’t have time for a storybook tale by the fireplace.”

A silence fell in the room then, interrupted only by a crackling from the fireplace’s flame.

“In any event,” Love said more gently, “I don’t believe the Mothman Golem will be sufficiently convincing. Loveland Castle will come under attack for the second time in a single night! Sam, I will need – Sam?”



Love finally noticed that Sam was still fused to the corner of the room and hidden within its shadows, terrified despite his attempts to hide it. Looking upward toward the flying Mothman Golem, Love cursed once again in a foreign language.

“Sorry, kid.” Love said soothingly, “Please forgive me. You clearly have some painful history with the Mothman – who doesn’t these days – that you will have to tell me about when we aren’t pressed for time. While I wouldn’t dream of releasing the Golem’s Contract, I can remove the window.”

*Remove the... window?* Sam thought, perplexed.

Love gave a brief tap of his staff onto the marble floor, and the window (or what Sam thought was a window until just a moment ago) turned into a blanket that slowly fell onto the divan like a falling leaf. Its dark green color was decorated with designs that were simultaneously chaotic and yet somehow organized and beautiful.

“A Squatch Poncho,” Love said, amused. “Woven from the fur of a Sasquatch Beastie that turns invisible when in close proximity to a forest. Very rare. Very useful for when you want to create impromptu, magical windows.”

While Sam could still *feel* the Mothman Golem outside like a sharp ringing in the back of his head, the effect had been dramatically reduced with the removal of the Squatch Poncho. Sam slid down the wall and collapsed into an exhausted puddle, trying to catch his breath.

“Sam...,” Love said once he saw that Sam had finally relaxed, “I’m going to need your help.”

“My help?” Sam panted. “What the hell do you think I can do? Not to mention, this isn’t my fight!” Sam had to continue on his way. He had to find Adam and Rose. He had to find and stop the *real* Mothman.

“Well kid, to be honest, this all happened because your merry band of misfit Casters attacked my castle earlier tonight. You’re in this now. Even if you wanted to leave, that Spirit storm outside would consume you.”

Sam’s face blushed and he lowered his gaze from Love’s face to trace the cracks on the marble floor.

“This isn’t a fight you can escape. This war won’t be fought on some distant field or foreign shore. It will be in our streets, in our homes. And no Veil wrought to protect the innocent will be enough to stop it.”

A log, its fuel exhausted, collapsed in the fireplace and sent up a flurry of embers.

“Okay,” Sam conceded, “assuming I did want to help, what could I possibly do?” If Sam were stuck in the castle until daybreak, and if they were indeed going to be attacked regardless of his protest, he was going to fight.

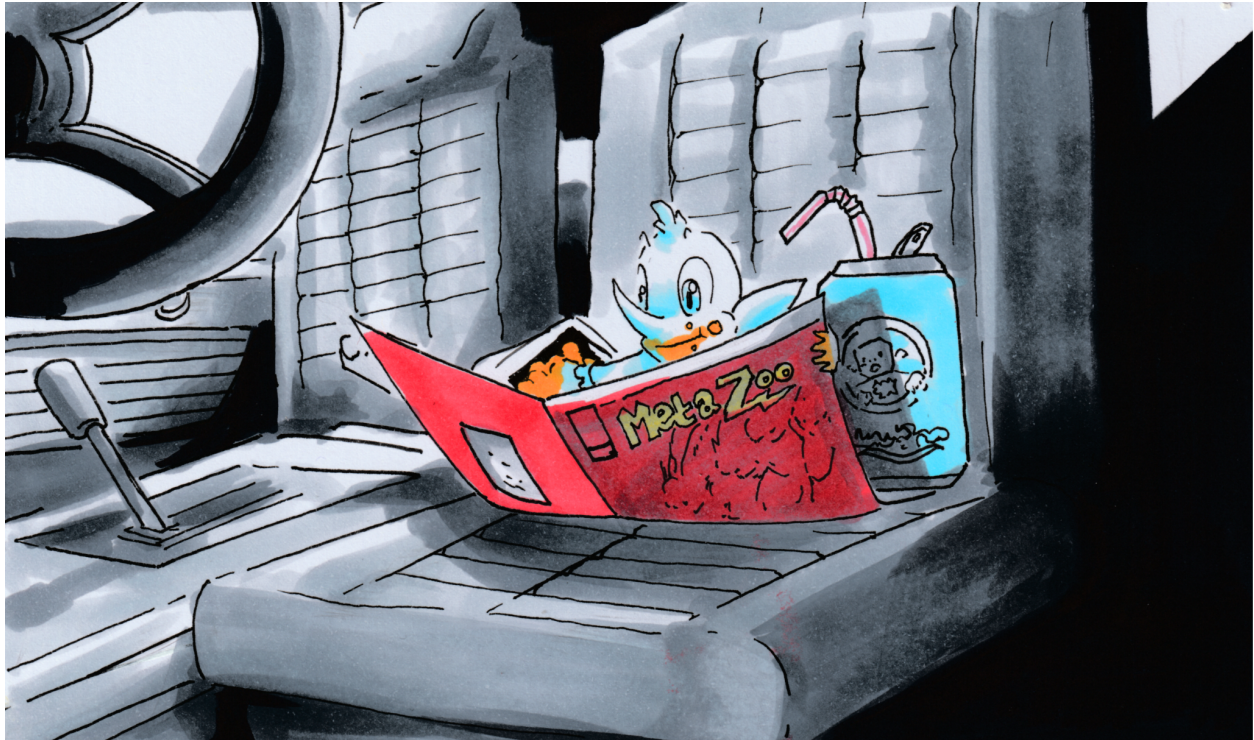
Love jumped off the divan, landed with a moist plop, and began leafing through M’s Spellbook. “Well, it doesn’t look like you have much in the way of Spells. Or rather,” he continued, looking at Sam in a most bewildering way, “any spells you can access just yet.” Love put the Spellbook on the divan, almost with reverence.

The tone in Love’s voice during the latter part of that statement made Sam perk up. But before he could ask what he meant by “access,” Love continued, “What about Beasties? Contracted any strong Beasties we could use?”

Sam felt the memory of electricity coursing through his body – “Dingbelle!” he almost shouted.

“Ah, a Dingbelle is quite a powerful ally – tricky and often devious, but always loyal. Go ahead and Contract him so we can begin our preparations!” Love commanded.

“He-,” Sam said, before pausing sheepishly, “err... the Dingbelle is stuck in my car outside.”



Love stared with wide eyes at the young man huddled in the corner.

“He’s going to be ok- ” Sam said as he began mustering up an explanation.

“He’s going to be okay.” Love interrupted. “Lightning Beasties have natural defenses against Spirit Beasties, so you need not worry.”

While taking a closer look at Sam, Love noticed that the damage he dealt only hours before in their quick battle had only been surface level. Sam was in the process of grieving and hurting from something deeper, something more fundamental. You couldn’t see it on Sam’s skin, but you could see it *through* his eyes.

*He’s likely been through it these past few days - perhaps he even comes from one of the cities devastated by Mothman, Love pondered. You will need to find your courage, boy. The trials have only begun. And against the rising tide, it’s always good to have friends.*

Just as Love finished this thought, an earthquake shook the castle at its roots. Sam half expected the earth to open up into a great maw, swallowing the castle whole. Spellbooks fell from their resting places, smacking onto the marble and setting off sparks, bellows of smoke, and sprays of water as their magics spilled from their pages. A Veil Golem in the shape of Piasa Bird fell from its perch and shattered, igniting the table’s surface for a brief moment.

The attack had begun.



And Love could see the panic setting in Sam's eyes.

Love had been hardened by hundreds of battles. He had seen countless friends perish at the hands of things unimaginable, and been himself the cause of the loss of loved ones. The panic he saw growing in Sam's heart was all too common in those who are fresh to the battlefield. Love realized just how green Sam really was, and what he would have to do.

"Very well, this is what we are going to do," Love said in a commanding tone. "Listen closely

to me, Sam - your life depends on it. The Caster and his Beastie are attacking the castle with what appears to be powerful magic. The wards I have in place will only keep them at bay for another half hour or so. And then, if we don't go out there and stop them, they are going to raid these halls and likely kill us both."

Sam's eyes were wild and looking all around, and his throat clicked as he attempted to swallow his fear. Beneath the sweat and fatigue though, Love could see steel.

"I'm ready," Sam said with strength that even he found surprising.

"I know you are," Love responded, "and that's why we are going to go through the first lesson I used to teach my neophytes at the Tower many, many years ago."

"What?" Sam almost shouted in spite of himself. "You used to be a Headcaster?"

"Like I said," Love continued, "it was a very long time ago,



before even the Veil, and I was a very different kind of Caster. ”

Waddling over to Sam, Love grabbed hold of his hands and steadied them. Sam was taken aback by how gentle the grip was. “Now,” Love continued, “you need to pay attention. I’m going to describe to you the very essence of Casting - not the buffoonery that’s taught in the modern curriculum.

“Magic is real, and real magic is everywhere. What that means won’t truly reveal itself until much later, but for now it is sufficient to brand this onto your very brain. Many Towers and their many Headcasters will teach you tha-”

A massive *THWACK* caused the castle to shake once more, this time twice as powerful as the first attack. Dust fell from the buttresses of the highest tower and almost extinguished the fireplace’s flame.

“-that these magics are somehow tied to Spellbooks and the words that bind them.” Love continued as he let go of Sam’s hand and wagged a slimy finger back and forth. “Not so, my boy. These are merely aids. The Spellbook is no different from the wand or even a beautiful artisan staff topped with Forest God Amber.”

Love could see the impatience on Sam’s face.

“Oh?” Love questioned. “Seems like you’ve already seen something like this?”

“Yes,” Sam responded quickly, eyeing the loosening stones on the castle walls. “The Caster that took out the Golem thing earlier used a Caster Gun.”

“Ah, right, so...” Love continued, “the ability to wield magic, to Cast, is all tied to the willpower of the Caster. Observe.”

With an outstretched hand, Love closed his eyes, and after a moment of intense concentration, produced a series of colorful sparks that exploded in slow motion like delayed fireworks.

“No Spell, no Spellbook, and certainly no Staff. All me, and *just* me. All of these objects of supposed power are merely aids, conduits, focal points.” Love concluded.

“Then why use Spellbooks at all?” Sam interjected.

Focusing again, but this time Casting through his staff, Love produced the same delayed fireworks, but this time many times greater in magnitude. A smoke accompanied the sparks and reflected their color, creating a ceiling of rainbow light as the billows floated to the top of the tower.

“That’s why.”

*I got it, Sam thought, so you can do Casting without a Spellbook, but a conduit greatly increases your power... or something like that.*

“Now,” Love said in a lecturing tone, “it’s your turn. Tell me, boy, have you ever Cast a Spell before?” Love knew Sam was green, but just how green, he wondered.

“I think so - from that Spellbook you found on me... but then the Spells disappeared from the Pages.”

Ignoring that last part, Love proceeded, “Excellent, then you no doubt remember a warmth that spread throughout your body as you did the Casting, eh? The very first exercise a neophyte Caster must learn is called the Luz Exercise.”

Placing his staff gently on the floor, Love cupped both of his hands together, leaving just enough space in between to hold a baseball.

“The Luz Exercise is very simple,” Love lectured, “First, you have to produce that warm sensation at the center of your chest. Don’t think about how it’s produced, merely produce it. Will it into being. Then, once that warmth is a physical entity, move it like liquid to your shoulders, and then through your shoulders to your arms. Once it’s pooled at your elbows, surge it to the palms of your hands like a river’s rapids and out into the void!”

Slowly at first, but then with building ferocity, a light began to pulse in the space between Love’s palms. From that central point, an orb of light grew and grew. Love moved his hands outward until it was the size of a basketball. The light emanating from the ball was so bright that the room looked like its ceiling had been removed and they were standing in high noon’s daylight.



Sam shielded his eyes until the light was gone and they were once again shrouded in the flickering shadows produced by the fireplace's dying light.

“Now,” Love said, showing no signs of exhaustion, “it’s your turn.”

Sam stood from his hiding place in the corner and cupped his palms in the same way Love had shown him. Although he thought it slightly silly, he imagined a flame being lit inside his chest. To his utmost surprise, he was immediately met with the sensation of a burning heat right where his heart was. It felt exactly like the moments he triggered those Spells from M’s Spellbook several nights ago at Quimblys.

Sam closed his eyes and concentrated.

Following through with the exercise, Sam felt the rush of warmth course through his shoulders. But it wasn’t a river he imagined, it was instead a game of baseball. When he was younger, every time he stepped up to bat, his whole body would be placed on high alert. There would be a buildup of energy as he *felt* the path the pitch would take, and then an explosion as he released the bat and hit the ball with everything he had. That’s what Sam imagined as the Aura built in his chest and moved through his arm.



Sam heard a gasp.

Opening his eyes ever so slightly, Sam was met with a tiny, glowing dot of light at the center of his palms. His eyes widened. It was the size of a pinhole, but just enough to add his own flickering shadows to the wall.

“Ah, crap,” Sam said with a groan. “It’s barely even there!”

Sam made a vexed sound as the light disappeared with a whimper. He walked over to the divan and plopped down onto it with a defeated look.

Love had known it was a long shot, and failing the Luz Exercise would have simply meant that Sam would have sheltered in the castle as Love focused on plan B. But Love was, for the first time in many years, in awe.

“Don’t be so foolish, boy,” Love said with feigned harshness as he tried to hide his excitement. “It takes almost half a year for your average Caster to do what you just accomplished on your first try.”

This news seemed to lift Sam’s spirits, if ever so slightly.

*The plan could work, Love thought... it could work!*

The castle rumbled, and Sam heard glass and porcelain shatter in a farther room.

“They’ve almost broken through my wards. Sam, listen very closely, I have a plan.”

Sam found his courage and his baseball bat beside the divan. He gripped it hard enough to whiten his knuckles.

“Let’s hear it.”

As the duo, now master and neophyte, discussed their plans by the dying light of the fireplace, monsters moved outside the castle walls.



“It is essential that you remember each part of the plan, boy. If anything is missed or forgotten, that’s the end of it,” Love said with a firm seriousness.

“I understand,” Sam said, his fear mixing in equal parts with his excitement.

With a flourish, Love yanked the Squatch Poncho from the divan (making sure not to cast M’s Spellbook onto the floor in the process), and draped it over Sam’s shoulders. It was like velvet to the touch, and Sam could see the microfibers of the fur that composed it. It smelled pleasant, like

Spring's trees. Putting the hood up completed whatever strange spell the poncho had, and Sam blinked out of existence - or so it seemed to the untrained eye.

“You’re almost completely invisible now,” Love said, walking over to a series of Spellbooks that had fallen onto the stone floor in the most recent rumbling attack. “But not completely invisible. Those with sufficient Aura concentrated within their eyes will still be able to see your faint outline, especially with the forest nearby being so small.”

Love picked up an azure Spellbook and blew the dust off of its cover. “Ah!” Love exclaimed with respect as he walked back toward Sam’s transparent form. “An early copy of Solomon’s Spellbook. His invisibility Spell should do the trick. One of the most powerful Casters to ever live, and an expert at trapping even the darkest of Beasties. Although, he did have a soft spot for dark Chibis in his later years.”

“Why Spells?” Sam said, with a modicum of frustration in his voice, “Can’t I just *will* myself to become more invisible? I don’t understand.”

“We aren’t gods, boy.” Love responded, now with his own frustration seeping into his tone, “Powerful magic still requires powerful Spells.”

“Got it,” Sam said dismissively, and slammed his open palm onto the page while a now flabbergasted Love watched on in horror.

The arcane runes glowed a fearsome yellow and Sam sensed a heat rise in his chest that felt like it would burst out and consume him in flames at any moment.

“You fool!” Love shouted, voice thick with panic. “I was going to aid your Aura! If you don’t have enough Aura to Cast a Spell, you’ll flare out!” But even as he said this, his gaze which was fixed on Sam lost its focus altogether, and Sam was rendered completely invisible.

Sam almost collapsed to the floor, but caught himself at the last second.

“Holy sh-....!” Sam huffed and puffed and felt as though he could almost breathe fire if he really wanted to. “Got it... don’t activate random Spells...”

Love, still looking blindly at the empty space that had contained



Sam's ghostly body just moments before, was about to reprimand Sam further before the largest attack yet quaked the castle so hard that both he and Sam fell flat onto the marble floor.

Wincing in shared pain, they both scrambled to stand up.

“Move, boy, get into position!” Love bellowed as he leapt away in the opposite direction. In spite of himself, Sam couldn't help but gawk at the strangeness of seeing a five foot tall frogman leap away like that. Another rumble brought him to his senses and he rushed to find the spiraled staircase that Love had told him about. Sequestered just to the side of a bookcase on the opposite side of the room, the staircase descended into darkness.

Sam took the steps four at a time, blindly trusting that the stairs were intact despite the recent attacks and that he wasn't rapidly descending to his death. After what felt like eons, he finally reached the bottom. The marble was replaced with rougher cobblestone, and the cracks between each brick were filled with moss. To his immediate right stood a solid wooden door with a crescent moon carved into it.

Putting all of his weight into it, Sam pushed the door open and stepped out into the cold night.