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COMICS

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MetaZoo™ CRYPTID NATION 

CH. 6 Book #1

APPROVED BY THE
UNITY CITY
AUTHORITY

MetaZoo

**Michael
Waddell**

**Sebastian
Botello
EggsEggsEggs
PONCHO**

**Mitch
Borgstrom**



**NOT HIS
★ WAR?**



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Sam stood at the doorway and let the night's cool air bite deep into his skin, the Squatch Poncho that rendered him invisible doing very little in the way of keeping him warm.

Spreading out in front of him lay a vast marsh that sank into the side of the Loveland Castle, likely fed from the river that protected the grounds from the Spirit Storm raging just outside of it. A fog rested on the marsh and spiderwebs of ice could be seen forming on the water's surface as it fought against the coming winter season. Pale moonlight mixed with the faint pinks and purples of the Spirit Storm that crested like an alien sunrise just past the treeline on Sam's right.

Despite the severity of the situation, Sam found himself almost hypnotized by the eerie beauty of his surroundings and became lost in thought.

Was it really the same night that they fought the Mothman Golem? It seemed like days ago that he and the ragtag army of misfit Casters lined up outside the castle, preparing for battle. Would their plan really work, and if it didn't, what would become of him? Surely destiny didn't exist; surely there was no greater movement of the world and its history that precluded him from dying right there, tonight - Sam's story cut short before it even began. This wasn't some legend from days past, and Sam became all too aware of his mortality.

Sam was just a kid, and he was scared.

These thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a small falling stone that hit Sam on the top of his head. Wincing in pain and rubbing the spot that was sprouting a fresh bruise, Sam looked up.

A monster was coiled around the tallest tower of Loveland Castle.



Almost 50 feet long and covered in deep green scales, the Beastie looked almost like a dragon out of a fairytale. The moonlight and Spirit Storm's Aura danced brilliantly on the Beastie's scaled hide, stopping just short of a sharper orange spilling out of its forehead. Squinting to get a better look despite his mounting fear, Sam recognized a sigil embedded - no, cut - shallowly into the Beastie's flesh that sat in between two melon sized, glazed-over eyes. It had been Contracted by someone or... something, and given the strength of the pulsing orange Aura, the Caster had to be nearby.

Above it, the same Mothman Golem Sam had fought earlier flapped its wings and screeched to no avail, a mere shadow of the terror it had created before that night — before Sam and the other Casters shattered its illusion. The Beastie, no longer fearing it, ignored the false Mothman.

After a brief moment, Sam finally recognized the Beastie wrapped around the castle's tower — it was the Crosswick Monster, native to the swamps of Ohio. If only he had brought his CryptidCam with him!

On second thought, maybe a flashing camera wouldn't be the best thing right now... Sam thought with a disappointed curiosity that somewhat mismatched the current danger he was in.

The Crosswick Monster had made the news in Unity City's *The Caster Corner* several years after the Veil had shattered for scaring more than a few unknowing tourists before suddenly disappearing roughly 3 years ago. It hadn't been seen since, but Beastie experts at Lexington's Tower believed with certainty that it had been Contracted by a mysterious Caster — quite the feat given how powerful the Beastie was assumed to be. After all, there were many failed attempts by decorated Casters to bring it under Contract.

The Crosswick Monster dug its claws deep into stone and cropped the base of the entryway where Sam stood with another flurry of stones and dust.

The dust will make me visible! Sam thought in a panic, and let out a slight *eep!* as he quickly shook loose the rubble from the Squanch Poncho and his hair.

Looking up, Sam saw to his horror that the Crosswick Monster was gazing down at him with its blind, milky eyes. It bathed Sam in orange light that radiated from its sigil like a grotesque, third, evil eye. Had Sam been too loud shaking off the dust, or maybe it was when he opened the door? It was impossible to tell if the damned Beastie actually saw him because of how unfocused its eyes appeared in its Contracted state, but Sam was paralyzed by fear nonetheless. The inside of the Castle, just a foot away through the opened oaken door, beckoned to him. He almost took one hesitant step in its direction before stopping short.

A shadowy figure emerged on the castle's second highest tower, just below where the Crosswick Monster was curled.

The shadow lifted an object that had the outline of a staff, and a golden light began to shine from an orb just above it. The Mothman Golem distorted in midair — in a manner not too dissimilar from the black hole Spell that had destroyed it earlier that evening — before being sucked downward into the glowing orb, reabsorbed by the Caster that had Contracted it. In the glowing

warmth of the orb, Sam saw Love look down at the door where Sam was standing, not seeing but seeing. Love smiled his amphibian smile.

That was the signal. Sam had to move.



The Crosswick Monster roared and reared its way down toward Love just as Sam began to slowly move into the marsh. The water came up to his knees and he immediately began to shiver. Behind him he heard several explosions and continuous roaring as Love shot off a series of fireworks that distracted the now dumbstruck Crosswick Monster.

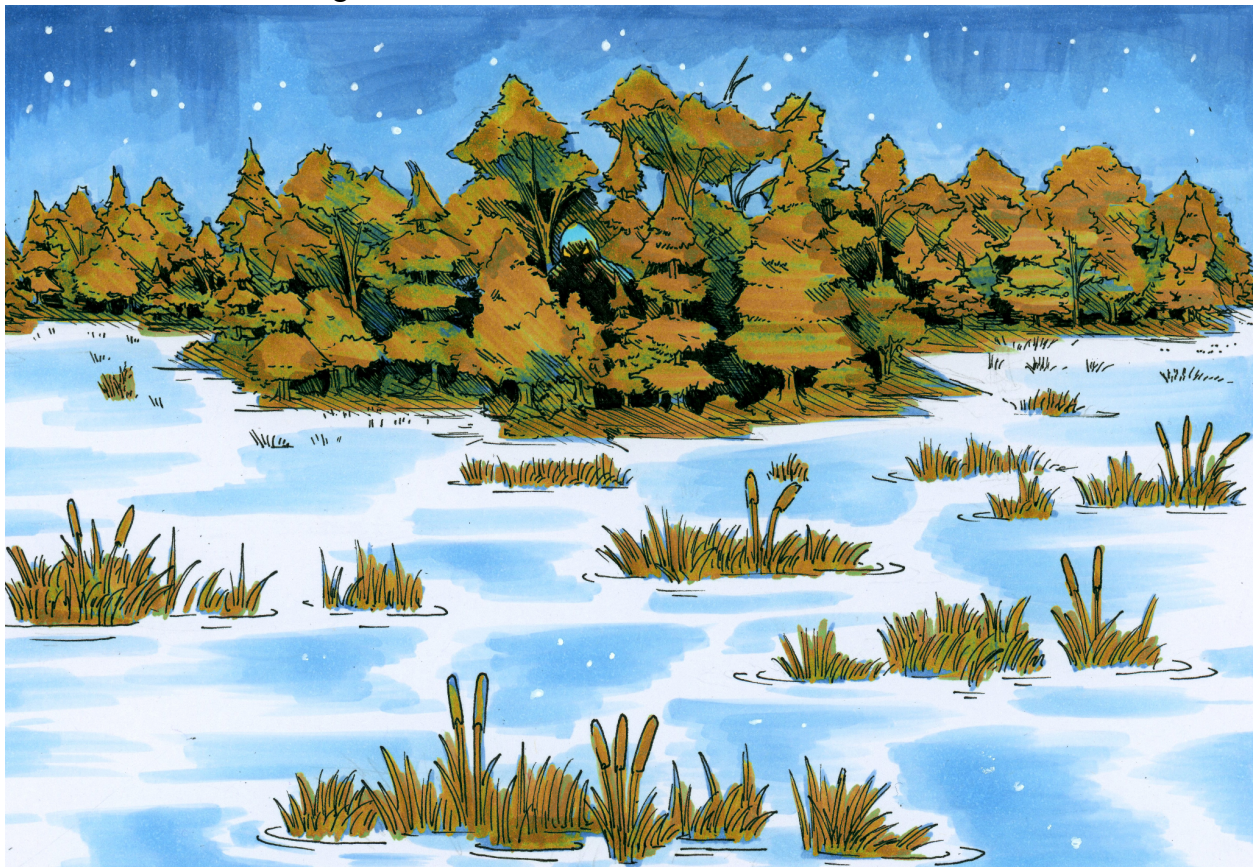
Love couldn't directly attack another Beastie, but he could certainly keep it busy long enough for Sam to execute his part of the plan.

As the firework display added their wild colors to the light reflecting on the marsh's water, Sam moved as carefully as he could. It didn't matter if he was rendered invisible by Solomon's Spell and the Squanch Poncho if he was heard sloshing through the water. Watching his steps would be of utmost importance. As he carefully maneuvered through the marsh, he vaguely noticed the checkered markings of an old parking lot. Its asphalt was cracked and living things poured out of it. Whatever cars had parked there must have been washed away long ago as the lot became flooded. Had people once visited Loveland Castle as some sort of tourist attraction? Even the concept of a tourist attraction seemed foreign to Sam now. A strange custom from a forgotten time.

Such thoughts fled Sam's mind as the treeline opposite of the castle came into view. That treeline was Sam's destination.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was looking for, but Love had given him a vague idea. Sam was to look for a Caster, but not just any Caster. Love told Sam to be prepared to see something very odd.

And what Sam saw lurking in the treeline was odd indeed.



He couldn't be certain, but as Sam got closer, what appeared to be a hulking mass swayed slightly just where marsh ended and forest began. It was at least 10 feet tall, and covered in large mats of fur. But it still wasn't entirely invisible. It almost looked as though some sort of Spell made the Beastie fade in and out of visibility. Sitting atop this large creature were two glowing

orbs the size of teacups, gently washing the marsh's fog with orange light. *Orange Eyes, I'll call him Orange Eyes.* Sam concluded.

Those orange eyes did not see Sam, thankfully.

Instead, they intently watched the colorful battle of exploding light and fire happening not two hundred feet from where the Beastie stood. The focus in those strange, orange eyes reminded Sam of the way his coaches used to watch a player go up to bat from the dugout.

Is this really a Beastie? Sam pondered as he closed in on the treeline. *There's too much intelligence behind those eyes - way too much.* This train of thought did little to convince Sam, though, as he had just spent the better part of the evening talking to a giant frog with more intelligence than 99% of the people he knew in Point Pleasant.

Hell, even Mrs. Barrett — his calculus teacher — had the tendency to... Sam paused. Despite being knee deep in swampy water, despite a storybook's epic battle between a frog wizard and a dragon happening just behind him, and despite the 10-foot tall, half-invisible Sasquatch standing just a few feet in front of him, Sam felt a deep sadness wash over him.

That's right... Mrs. Barrett, M, hell even Stefan are all gone... There is no more Point Pleasant. There is no more M. There is no home.

It took everything inside of Sam not to collapse then and there and surrender himself to despair. But then that sadness somehow turned to anger.

Mothman's destruction of Point Pleasant, of Sam's *home*, was — according to Love — part of some bigger, evil plan. It sounded like hogwash to Sam. It certainly had nothing to do with him, and he *certainly* didn't see why everything he knew had to go up in flames because monsters wanted to set the world on fire.

Monsters like Mothman. Monsters like the one standing in front of him.

Anger turned to action, and Sam moved to follow through with the next step of the plan. Veering left, Sam quietly entered into the treeline just to the side of Orange Eyes, who was still focused on the lightshow in front of him. As soon as he passed the treeline, Sam saw a shimmer distorting the air in front of Orange Eyes that stood just a few feet ahead of him, like a semipermeable wall.

It's a Veil! Sam realized with astonishment. Orange Eyes was powerful enough not just to make himself invisible with this magical wall, but it likely shielded him from any oncoming attack. Much more powerful magic than the Squatch Poncho he had wrapped around his shoulders.

Now effectively behind the treeline and the Veil Shield, Sam took just a moment to fully absorb what Orange Eyes truly looked like. The invisibility granted by the Veil Shield had done a remarkable job at hiding just how hideous — and smelly — this Beastie was. Towering over Sam, the smell radiating off of its black, matted fur made Sam's eyes sting. The stench moved

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through the air like a liquid, and Sam found himself instinctively holding his breath to avoid its taste.



Sam barely had a chance to process this before something strange caught his eye.

Orange Eyes was holding an open, tree bark bound Spellbook in a right hand the size of a frying pan. The Spellbook's pages were made of leaves flaking at their edges, and written on them were arcane symbols in a language Sam had never before seen. That wasn't the worst part, though; the worst part was that Sam could also hear deep, guttural words coming from the Beastie as it Cast its Spells. It sounded almost like bubbling tar, and try as he might, Sam couldn't understand a word of it. But yes, the damned thing was speaking!

Love had been right, the assault on his castle was perpetrated by a Beastie *Caster*; and that was why Love had been unable to find a way to directly attack Orange Eyes. It was either a stroke of bad luck for Love, or someone knew enough about him to orchestrate such a coordinated attack.

As Sam digested this, he only peripherally noticed that Orange Eyes' voice had shifted tone before going completely silent.



“*Can no... see...*” the Beastie spat out, clearly struggling with a foreign language. Curiosity getting the better of his instincts, Sam leaned in to hear more. Was this some sort of new Spell that Orange Eyes had to say in English in order to Cast?

The battle across the marsh continued to rage as more fireworks and roars from the Crosswick Monster filled the evening air.

“... *but...*”

Sam leaned in even more closely still, straining his eyes and ears to fight the darkness of the forest, ready to see the magic happen. He was close enough now that the Beastie's smell was a

physical thing, a Veil in and of itself. If Sam wanted to, he could reach out and touch Orange Eyes with the tips of his fingers, or give it a good *thwack* with his baseball bat. He knew he had precious time before he had to trigger the next step of the plan, but Sam couldn't resist.

“*but... can SMELL!*” Orange Eyes roared, swinging an arm thicker than most of the trees surrounding them directly in Sam’s direction.

Sam’s face dropped in confusion and a split second later his upper body exploded in pain as Orange Eyes’ bowling ball fist collided with his chest.

So great was the momentum of the punch that Sam was lifted off his feet and propelled into a tree behind him, knocking out what little air remained inside him.

As the pain coursed through Sam’s body like electricity, his mind filled with only burning white light. For what seemed like an eternity, it was impossible for Sam to form a cohesive thought. As the light faded and he slowly came to his senses, the first complete word to take sensible form was:

CRAP!

This wasn’t part of the plan at all. His curiosity had gotten the better of him, and now he was in so much pain and shock he could hardly move.

...crap. CRAP!

Love was going to be eaten by the Crosswick Monster, and then Orange Eyes was going to finish Sam off. This is how it ended. A boy lost



in the woods, crushed to death and left for the marsh bugs. And it was all Sam's fault.

The white light paralyzing his mind began to be replaced by a darkness creeping in from the corners. Sam was about to pass out.

Good... that's fine. I don't want to be awake for this anyways. Let me sleep. I'm very tired, so let me sleep...

GET MOVING!

The words cut through both the light and dark clouding Sam's mind and his eyes snapped into focus. Sam had only heard Love's voice in his head once before, earlier that night in fact, and it had saved Sam from being overcome by the Spirit Storm still raging nearby.

Deep inside Sam's chest something sharp was making it painful to breathe. He didn't know if the blood on his tongue came from his mouth or something from within. Sam groaned as he tried to assess the situation through the aching.

Towering above him stood the Beastie, with the glow of its eyes bathing Sam in a sickly orange light. And it was speaking to Sam. Or rather, it was trying to. Sam apparently regained consciousness halfway through its speech, because he only heard the tailend of a final sentence:

"... smell... of a traitor!"

Sam didn't have time to muse over what this meant, nor did he really care. For a split second, Sam looked past Orange Eyes and caught a glimpse of Love narrowly dodging the snapping jaws of the Crosswick Monster.

HURRY SAM!

To Sam's surprise, Orange Eyes then turned around and walked back to the treeline where it immediately recommenced its chanting.

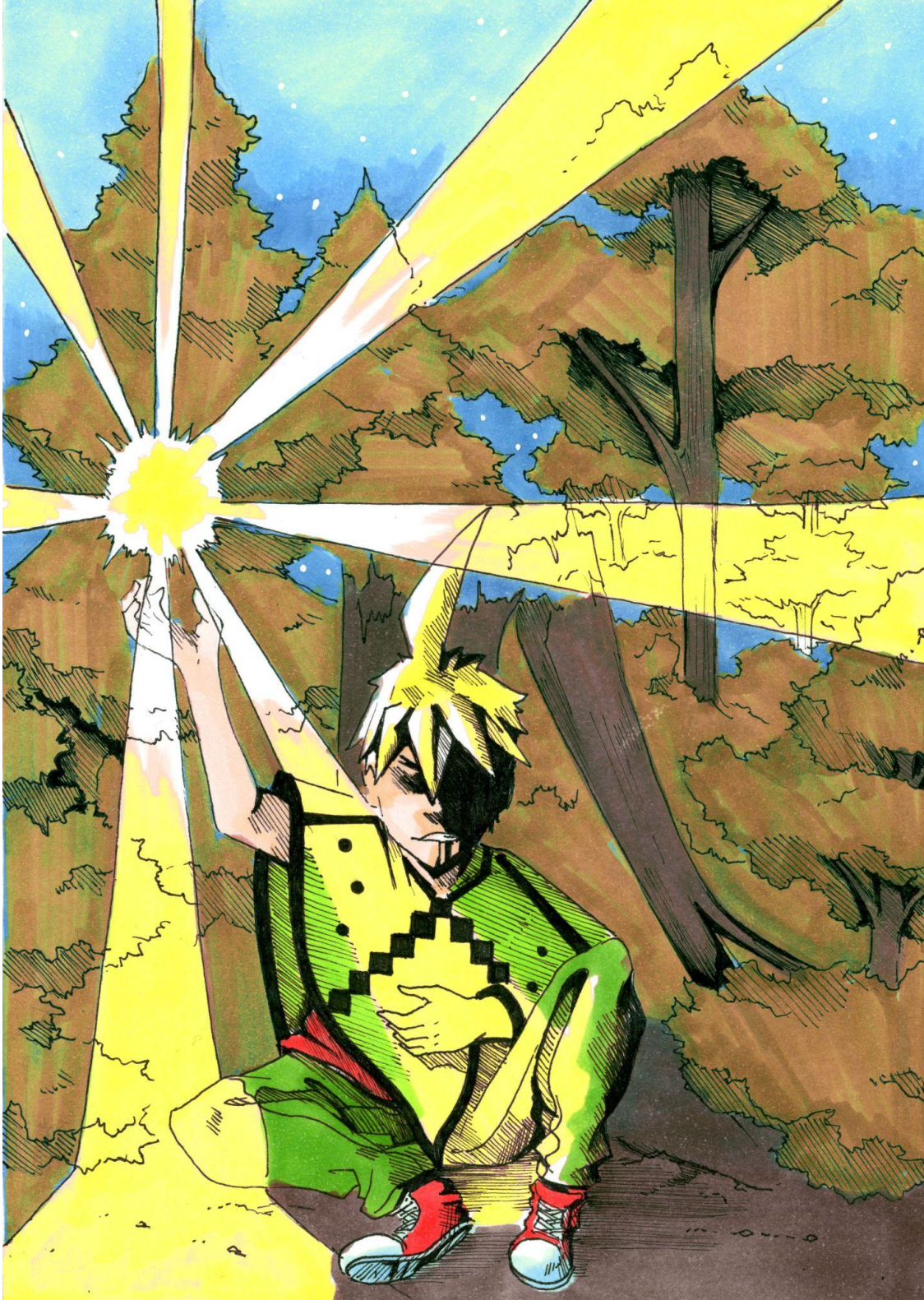
Bastard thinks I'm dead! Or... or at least too incapacitated to do anything.

While this wasn't too far from the truth, it struck a chord with Sam. The pain flooding his body mixed in equal parts with an indignant anger. And embarrassment. It was the third time in a single night that his weakness left him utterly exposed in front of an enemy.

Right there, stuck in the frozen mud, bark digging into his back, and in more pain than he had ever been in his life, Sam made a promise to himself that he would never lose another battle for being too weak to fight back. Hell, losing was fine, but only after he had spent the whole of his strength in the effort to win. It was the sort of personal promise people rarely make to themselves. It was the sort of promise that, once made, triggers an almost physical shift in one's body, like a lightswitch turning on... or off, for that matter.

Or maybe the shift Sam felt was his ribs finally breaking after the night's abuse!

Gritting his teeth against the sharpness in his chest, Sam managed to lift his right arm above him, as though he were raising his hand in class.



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Faint in the beginning but then building in intensity, a light began to form in the air just above the center of Sam's outstretched palm. At first it was just a pinpoint, but in mere seconds it had grown to the size of a baseball. The warmth of the Aura pouring out of Sam's upper body warmed him against the air's chill and — even if temporarily — eased the stinging in his chest. It was the Luz exercise on steroids, and its light was powerful enough to illuminate the forest 10 feet in every direction around Sam - and Orange Eyes.

That was the cue.



Love, who had been waiting for exactly this moment, zeroed in on the light's source. He had known the devilish Beastie was Casting from the treeline, but he didn't know exactly where from. Even if Love could pinpoint the Beastie, there was little that he could have done, hence the Mothman Golem ruse.

With enough Aura to ripple the air surrounding the castle's parapets of stone, and to temporarily stop the Crosswick Monster in its tracks, Love launched the night's largest firework directly at Sam's light.

Now comes the hardest part... good luck, boy.

Only three seconds had passed between the moment Sam performed the Luz exercise and Love shot the firework blast.

The chain of events was so fast that Orange Eyes

chose to ignore the sudden, brilliant light that appeared behind him so that he could prioritize dodging the incoming attack. The Veil Shield Orange Eyes had Cast was powerful, but not powerful enough to stop that amount of Aura packed into a single missile.

Orange Eyes would dodge the attack, and then turn around to eat the weak Caster that had somehow survived his punch. At least that was what it planned.

Orange Eyes could sense that the old Caster in the tower was weakening. Once his belly was full, Orange Eyes *himself* would descend upon the castle to finish off the old Caster. And then after so many nights wasted, he would return triumphant. He would deliver all the castle's magical Spellbooks to...



His orange eyes widened with the sudden realization that the powerful Spell was off target and would hit the treeline to his right, most likely killing the weaker Caster in the process. Good, he liked cooked meat better.

Unnoticed by the Beastie, the light illuminating the forest behind him disappeared.

Orange Eyes let out a bubbling chuckle as the magical projectile soared past him, setting his fur on edge as its Aura tore through the air. He turned with it so that he could see it hit its mark... and maybe catch a glimpse of the weaker Caster screaming before being completely blown away.

What he saw instead was a half invisible Sam Sinclair, bloodied and tattered, with his bat at the ready.

The stunned Beastie lifted the Forest Spellbook in front him as an impromptu shield, more out of reflex than anything practical. He wore a stupefied face that looked unpracticed and almost comical with his features, as though he had never once been surprised before in his life.

Sam swung with all of his might into the oncoming firework. The collision was so tremendous that the subsequent shockwave knocked more than a few fall leaves from their branches. For a

brief moment, the dense ball of Aura that Love had generated stood still in the air, almost resting on Sam's bat.

But then it *exploded*.

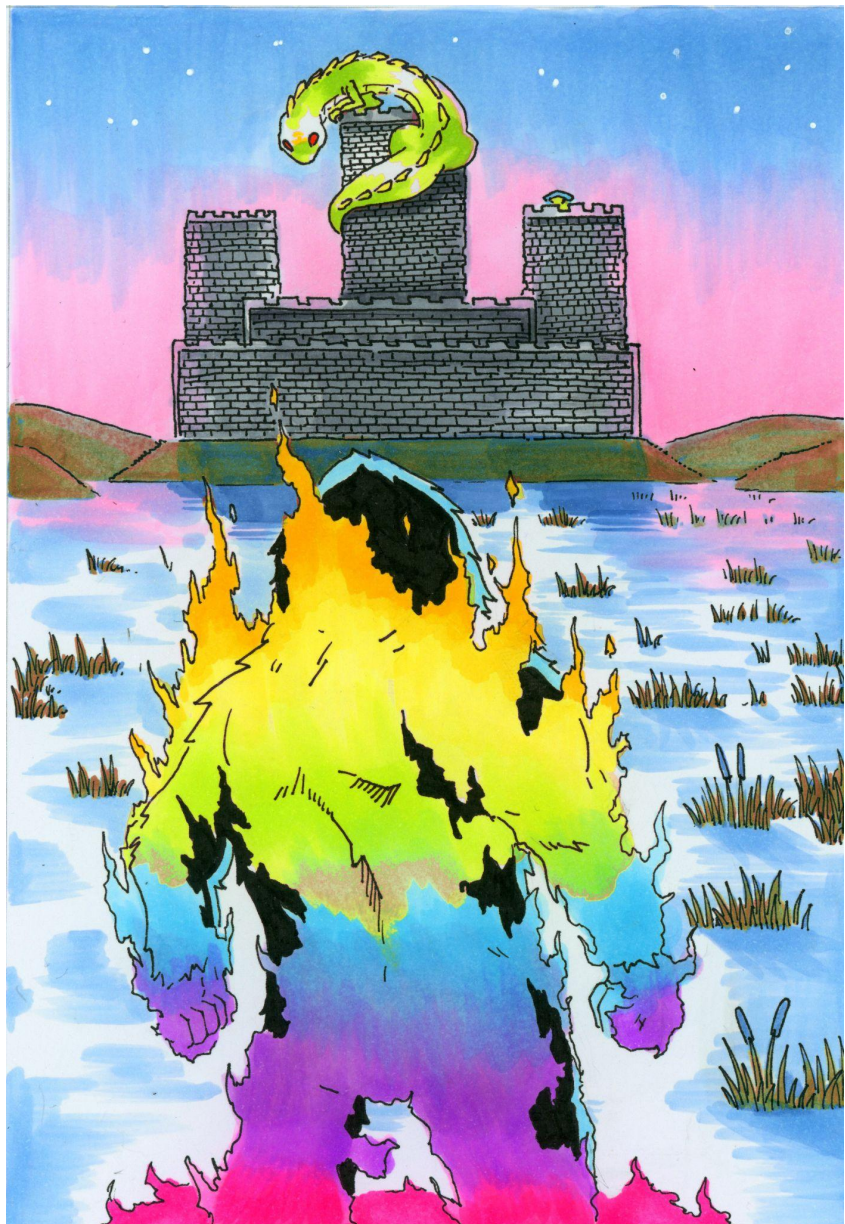
The single firework transformed into a rainbow shower of light and fire that poured into Orange Eyes like a rushing river, setting him ablaze. The fire that engulfed him contained as many colors as the fireworks themselves.

At first, the only sound Sam heard was his own gasps for air and the pounding of his heart in his ears.

But then the screaming began.

Orange Eyes thrashed about, smashing through his Veil Shield in an attempt to douse the flames in the marsh's water. The fire, however, was not composed of ordinary flames, and instead almost seemed to absorb the Aura of the Veil Shield, growing larger as it was fed.

Driven mad from the pain, Orange Eyes walked farther out into the marsh in the



direction of the castle. Sam followed behind at a safe distance, his baseball bat ready to swing once more if needed.

No longer attempting to extinguish the flames that were consuming him, Orange Eyes stopped screaming, and that was somehow worse. The Beastie made it three quarters of the way across the marsh before stopping. Sitting down in the water with a *plop*, it pathetically attempted to wipe the flames off of its skin and looked confused when this remedy didn't work.

Sam's heart sank.

He had been so focused on his own pain and carrying out the plan that he didn't consider the ramifications of seeing the whole thing through. Standing before him, in front of his very own eyes, was a dying Beastie. It was going to die *because of him*. Because of him, Sam Sinclair. The boy that had always protected Beasties from other people. The boy who only ever wanted to photograph them and add their trading cards to his collection.

Sam took a step forward, not knowing what he could do to try and save the Beastie. Or if he should. Maybe all he needed to do was ease its suffering? But how? He took another step forward.

"Sam... stop." This time, Love's voice wasn't in Sam's head. They had moved close enough to the Castle that the air could carry his voice to Sam. Looking up, Sam saw the Crosswick Monster frozen in place, the orange Sigil still present but flickering weakly. Love was looking over the parapet at the scene unfolding the marsh. Sam found no pity on Love's face for Orange Eyes.

"But, Love! Wha-" Sam began to negotiate.

"Enough, it's over. Look." Love responded stoically.

To Sam's horror, Orange Eyes was almost completely gone, his body consumed in the flames. All that remained was a mass of indistinguishable parts that floated on the marsh's surface. Hovering above it was a ball of fire of every color of the rainbow that remained unaffected by the murky water's touch.

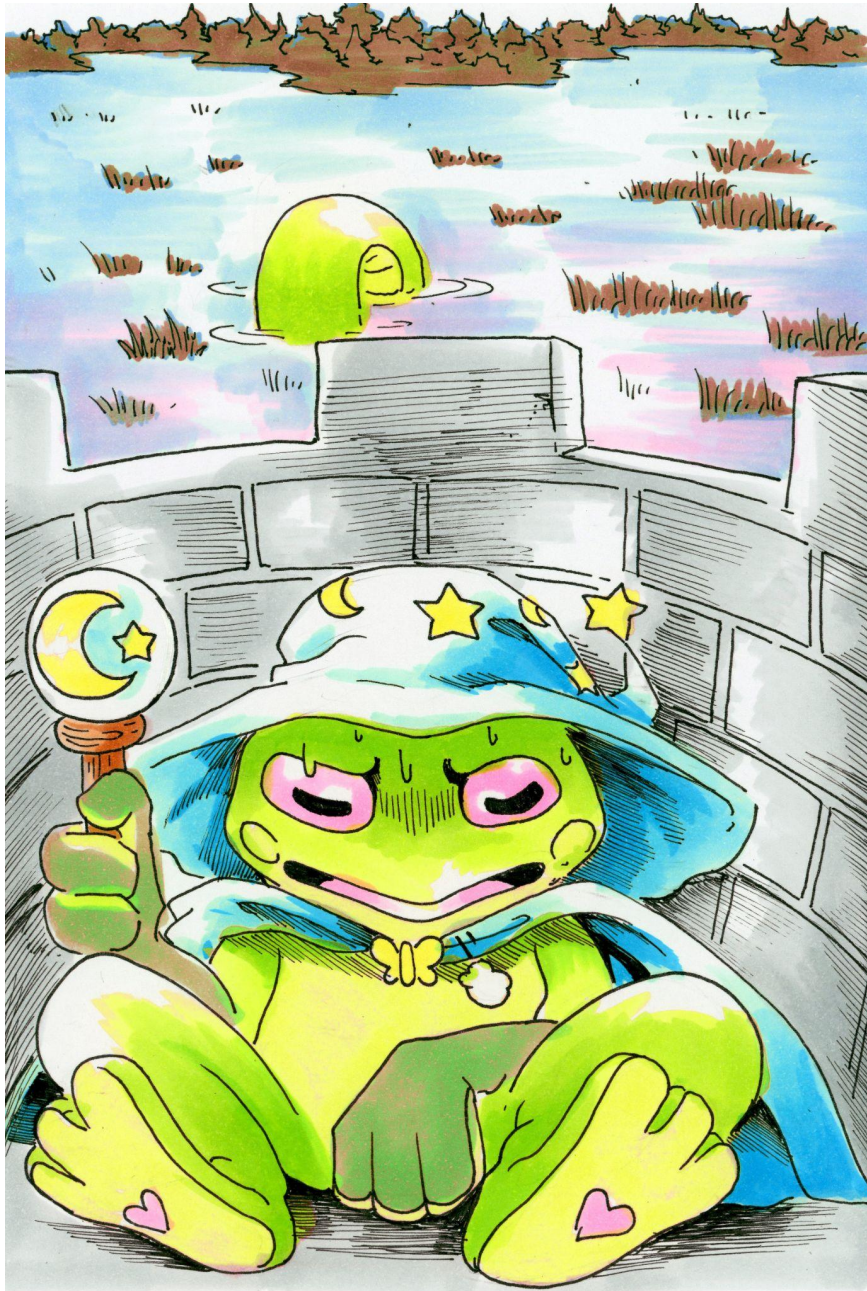
"We... I killed it?" Sam whispered in disbelief.

"Hmm," Love mused, "not necessarily. A Beastie never truly dies — not so long as you humans remember it."

Never die? Sam would have to question Love more deeply about that sometime in the near future. For now, all Sam could do was double over in pain and try not to fall face first into the flaming mass that was once Orange Eyes.

"Come on in, Sam. We have a lot of work to do. The night's not over yet," Love said, turning his attention to the Crosswick Monster. The Sigil carved into the Beastie's forehead glowed no more, and its milky eyes were slowly regaining their color and sharpness.

Sam navigated his way around the still burning Beastie and reached the door leading into the base of the castle. Sam could have sworn he heard Love mutter the words, “I release you from your Contract, old friend,” before he slammed the oaken door shut with a final *thud*.



By Sam’s guess, an hour had passed since they defeated Orange Eyes and the Crosswick Monster in the marsh. Sam was once again resting on the divan, his fresh wounds wrapped in ice cold bandages, dripping with Love’s saliva. No, Sam would never get used to this remedy, no matter how effective it was.

Love was rummaging around the room, picking up spectacular and no-doubt magical items that Sam didn’t even remotely recognize, and putting them into a pile on the floor between Sam and the fireplace. Love was ignoring Sam’s most recent question.

“But, *why* do we have to leave tonight? Didn’t we just kick ass? Aren’t we safe here?” Sam repeated, remembering the Spirit Storm raging outside the castle’s walls.

“Safe?!” Love half laughed, half croaked, “No, boy, we are *not* safe in the slightest. Whatever or *whoever* sent

those Beasties will be here by sunrise.”

Sam wasn't convinced. “Okay...” Sam began, “but then what about all your things? I thought this is the junk they were after in the first place. Are we just going to leave it?”

Love stopped in his tracks with a huff, “Not *junk*, and no, of course we aren't going to leave it.” Hoisting a large wooden box with handles each shaped like a bundle of grapes onto the end of the divan, Love continued, “We are taking everything with us. Were you ever taught how to Contract an Artifact?”

Contract an Artifact? Sam asked himself with a laugh. *I don't even know how to Contract a Beastie without it being completely on accident!*

Possibly reading Sam's mind, Love continued, “It's a bit more complicated than Contracting a Beastie, because most objects don't have Aura signatures. Those that do, we call Artifacts. Take this old box, for example. I won't spoil the surprise, but in a week's time you're going to hate this box,” Love gave out a lighthearted chuckle that sent chills down Sam's spine. “We can actually Contract it into the Page of any old Spellbook.”

Love brought his staff down onto the marble floor with a light *thwack!* and a water-blue Spellbook emerged from a distant bookcase and fluttered into Love's outstretched hand. It was decorated with silver inlay in the shape of waterlilies and shimmering dragonflies.

So, Love *did* have a Spellbook! Although, he apparently didn't need to use it very often, even in battle. *Just how powerful is he?* Sam wondered.

Opening it, Love flipped through his Spellbook until he landed on an empty page. Placing one slimy hand on the page and his other on the wooden box, Love closed his eyes in concentration. To Sam's astonishment, the wooden box started to become transparent! As it became less and less solid, its form appeared drawn in silver ink on the previously empty page. After just a few seconds, the wooden box had entirely disappeared. Despite himself, Sam was gawking.

“Ah!” Love exclaimed, “You see? Not a problem. Now, if you would be so kind as to gather as many Artifacts you find into that pile there...”

“What about the Spellbooks?” Sam interrupted, realizing the flaw in this plan. “Surely we can't Contract someone else's Spellbook... into your own?”

“Quite right, boy,” Love said with just a pinch of pride in his voice, “Good intuition. No, for that we will need something more powerful. For that, we will need to *steal* the Spells!”

“Steal? What do you mean-” Sam began, but before he could finish his question, Love had already Bookmarked a Page in his Spellbook and began an incantation. It was a series of low croaks, so fast that it almost sounded to Sam like Love was humming a song.

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The Spellbooks that had fallen to the castle floor during the assault, and the few that remained on the bookshelves, immediately began to rustle as though they were waking up after a long night's sleep. Then, one by one, they sprung to life and flapped their way over to the divan. Stopping just short of hitting their heads, the Spellbooks circled above Love and Sam and began shooting what Sam could only imagine were Spells from their Pages. Each Spell from the whirlwind of

Spellbooks above them varied in size and color. They slammed into Love's opened Spellbook, each one leaving a unique, shining imprint on the Page.

This continued for some time, until the outpouring of Spells slowed to a crawl before finally stopping. The whirlwind of books was spent, and each book fluttered silently and weakly back to its original resting place. All was still in the room.

Love looked down at the Page with a mixture of reverence and sadness. "I never dreamed I would need to use that Spell."

"Why the long face?" Sam asked in confusion. "That was awesome!"

"Yes... it's a powerful Spell. But it's also a tragedy that each of those Spellbooks is now empty, destroyed forever. Each one held the life's work of a Caster who is no longer with us. Tremendous power, yes, but also tremendous life. A Spellbook is the soul of its Caster."

Sam thought back to Orange Eyes, and with the care that he held his own ragged Spellbook, bound from the living things in the forest.



“But now,” Love continued with more hope in his voice, “whatever monsters that come seeking this power won’t find it here, and that’s a worthy sacrifice. Come, Sam, let’s finish up in here.”



Another hour passed, and Sam and Love found themselves hurrying across the castle’s courtyard. It was early enough in the morning that a thin blanket of stars remained hanging in the sky, but morning was undoubtedly on the horizon.

Sam’s physical wounds from earlier in the night were, quite remarkably, almost fully healed thanks to Love’s help. However, there was a deeper exhaustion that was quietly setting in—the type of exhaustion that Sam felt after escaping from Quimblys and Unity City. The type of exhaustion that couldn’t be remedied with a good night’s rest.

How many nights like that could someone live through before their energy, their soul, was spent?

Sam supposed he was going to find out.

“Love,” Sam whispered, “how are we going to get to Lucy? She’s all the way on the other end of the Spirit Storm.”

Love raised an eyebrow. “Lucy?”

“My car!”

“Right. Don’t worry about... *Lucy*. I’ve already had Dingbelle bring her up front.”

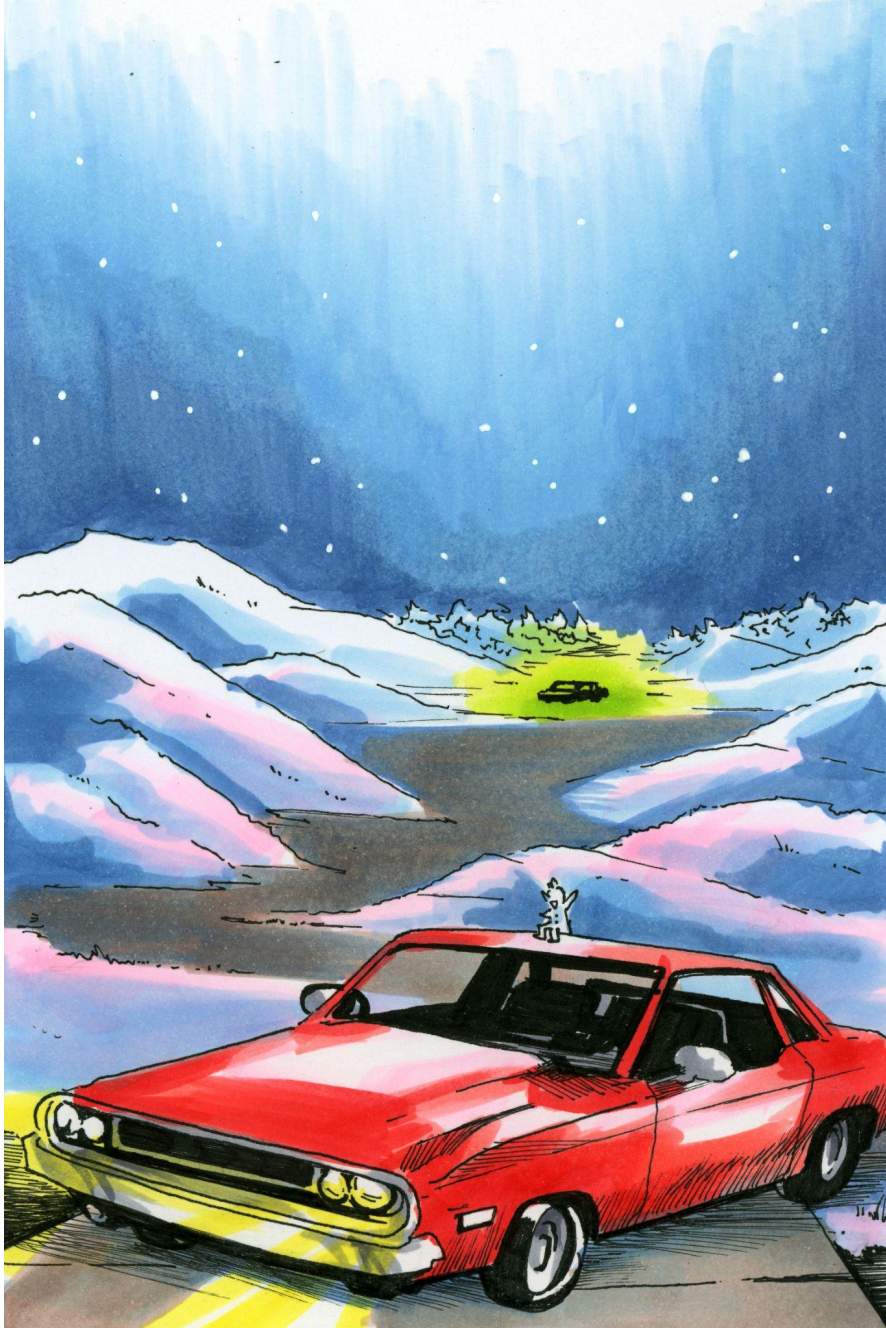
Right as Sam was going to ask Love to clarify what he meant, they exited the courtyard and came upon the bridge that had saved Sam’s life from the Spirit Storm only hours before.

Not a Spirit was in sight, and parked at the opposite end of the bridge sat Lucy, her engine idling with a peaceful rumble. On her hood sat a smug - and surprisingly well-rested - Dingbelle. Dingbelle waved at the pair of Casters as they began to cross the river.

“About an hour ago it became light enough for the Spirit Storm to dissipate,” Love explained, effecting his now iconic lecturing tone. “With their interference removed, I was able to *reach out* to Dingbelle and have it bring the car around.”

Ah, so that really was Love’s voice I was hearing in my head, Sam realized.

Sam hastily shoved a protesting Dingbelle into the trunk and made his way over to the driver’s side, swinging his backpack off and throwing it into the back seat.



“Sorry, Love, but only I drive Lucy. Can you even drive in the first place? Maybe if we got you a few Spellbooks to sit on...,” Sam teased. Love didn’t respond. He stood immobile on the passenger’s side, his back to Sam. Love was looking out over the field where the Spirit Storm raged not more than an hour ago.

Opening the driver’s side door, Sam said, “Come on, Love, it was just a joke... Love?”

“*Quiet, boy!*” Loveland hissed in a panicked voice that made Sam’s hair stand on end.

Sam looked up and over Lucy in the direction Love was staring... and felt the blood drain from his face.

“What... what is that?” Sam whispered.

Across the field and in the exact place where Sam had parked Lucy, there sat another car.

It was jet black and looked to be of a vintage model and make, but strangely enough, Sam couldn’t quite pinpoint what type of car it was. It was almost like somebody was asked to draw what a vintage car *should* look like, and then only etched the shadow of it. And in this shadow of a car sat two more shadows, shadows the shape of men. Maybe it was the early morning light playing tricks on Sam’s weary eyes, but he couldn’t discern any other features of the two men. Just shadows.

But that wasn’t the strangest part. That wasn’t what made Sam’s face ghost-white.

A lime green light surrounded the car, twenty feet in all directions, as though it brought with it a strange mist.

Sam's throat made an audible *click* as he finally mustered the courage to speak in a voice lower than a whisper. "Are those the Casters responsible for the attack?"

"No...", Love said in a measured tone, his own voice barely above a whisper, "those are something entirely different."

"Something different?" Sam said, panic beginning to seep into his voice. "Do we fight them? Are they here for the Spellbooks? What do we do?" Sam wasn't sure he had any strength left in him to fight, but surely Love was powerful enough to wipe the floor with any Caster they came across, right?

"They are on a different level. If I were to go toe to toe with them as I am right now, we would likely kill each other." Love stated matter-of-factly, never once taking his eyes off the strange car.

Casters strong enough to scare even Love? Just what were they up against?

"So, what the hell do we do?!" Sam squeaked, now in full panic-mode despite his efforts to hide his fear.

"We run."



The midmorning sun baked the asphalt of Loveland Madeira Road, creating an uncharacteristic heat following one of the coldest fall nights on record. Sam's plan was to drive Lucy on the backroads along Little Miami River on the outskirts of Cincinnati until they hit the Ohio River. From there they could ride along the Ohio River Scenic Byway all the way back to Point Pleasant.

The strange car never moved to follow them, and after an hour on the road the whole strange encounter seemed almost like a dream to Sam.

Love spoke, making Sam jump a little in his seat. He had almost forgotten the frog was sitting right next to him! "We have to be careful in these outskirts. Cincinnati must be a dead city by now. How else can a Spirit Storm of that size be explained?"

Sam did think it was odd that Cincinnati, the city closest to Loveland Castle, didn't send its Caster Militia to investigate Mothman's appearance. Earlier that morning Sam fiddled with Lucy's radio dials, but was met with only static. No matter, Sam had other things on his mind.

“Why?” Sam questioned, “Why are you helping me? Do you want me to drop you off at the nearest gas station, or something?”



Love, who was busy rummaging through Sam’s backpack, looked at Sam from the corner of his eye. “Sam, I’m afraid you’re in this now.”

Keeping his eyes on the road, Sam grabbed his backpack out of Love’s hands and threw it into the backseat. “I already told you, I don’t have any food in there! Look, I almost died *multiple times* last night in a fight that had nothing to do with me.”

“It’s all the same fight, boy...,” Love quietly interrupted.

Ignoring this, Sam continued, “The best I can do is drop you off somewhere, and then continue on my way. I need to get back to Point Pleasant and find my friends.”

There’s nothing there for you, and you know this, Love wanted to say, but he instead made an offer.

“Very well, but humor me for a moment. The way you are right now, you’re liable to die from exposure.”

Love paused for dramatic effect before continuing, “Allow me to train you. Give me one month to toughen you up so you don’t perish the instant we part ways. From a breeze, or a slight cold, or a papercut...”

“I get it, I get it!”

Sam stared at the road ahead of him, contemplating this. He had planned to train along the way to Point Pleasant by himself regardless, but he had not considered the possibility that Love would mentor him. Sam wanted to become stronger... no, Sam *needed* to become stronger.

A month was a long time, though. A lot could happen in a month.

“As long as I don’t have to carry you on my back and do somersaults through a bog.” Sam said, only half joking.

“What does that mean?”

“Nevermind,” Sam chuckled, shaking his head. Then, with a more serious tone, “Why now? Why help out now, after so many years hiding in that castle?”

There was a long pause where Love said nothing and only looked out the window.

“I... I’ve rested long enough. Too long, in fact. The time has come for me to join the battle.” The words Love spoke were soft, but there was steel behind them.

Sam knew there was more to Love’s story, but now was not the time to dig. He allowed for the silence between them to pass. It was a deep, comfortable silence interrupted only once when several Blue Manta Rays broke through the river’s water to glide just above its surface.

After several minutes, a thought occurred to Sam, causing him to break the spell. “Wait! Damn, what am I going to do about a Spellbook? Don’t I need a Spellbook to begin my training?”

Love let out his amphibian laugh that sounded more like a croak than anything else, and exclaimed, “You have one!”

Looking over, Sam saw that Love was holding M’s red Spellbook. He must have gotten it out of Sam’s backpack when he went rummaging through it.

“That’s M’s,” Sam said, hesitating, “I could never...”

“M’s?” Love cooed, “Then, how do you explain this?”

Love turned the Spellbook over so that its cover was facing Sam. Pressed deeply into the top center of the Spellbook’s crimson leather were two, golden words.