

## The Club of the Bombastic Few

“Beau! Just the man I need to help me with this.” Barely slipping off his coat off Brad swept him into the middle of the main lounge of the Club of the Bombastic Few.

“Help you with what?” Beau asked. Shadows danced around the walls in the flickering light of the gas lamps.

“Help me to get these lazy butts motivated.” Brad waved a hand around the room.

“Humph!” Chauncey readjusted his pipe. His portly frame sat in an armchair near the fire.

“Motivated for what?” Beau looked around the room.

“To run off on some ridiculous scheme Brad’s cooked up.” Albert leaned an elbow on the mantle of the fireplace. He was tall enough to make it a relaxed stance. His dark hair and sharp features gave him an intense look.

“It’s not ridiculous. It’s the ultimate challenge.” Brad turned back towards Beau.

“A hunt?” Beau’s face perked up.

“A hunt.” Punk spoke it as if it was a sacred word. At 26 he was the youngest member of the Club of the Bombastic Few. With his close cut blonde hair and boyish looks he looked even younger.

“It is not a hunt.” Chauncey puffed a couple of times. His face was momentarily obscured by smoke.

“It sounds like a waste of time to me.” Albert said as he made his way over to the bar for another drink. Jersey Joe, the Club’s bartender wiped the bar once and slid a drink across to Albert.

Beau stared at Brad. “You found something new?”

The Club of the Bombastic Few were hunters, explorers, and adventurers. The more exotic the adventure, the better. The more dangerous the adventure, better yet. They were the Club of the Bombastic Few and they feared nothing.

“Yes! Well, sort of. In all of our previous exploits we have always sought a specific objective, the Temple of Singh-Fari, the Serpent of Lake Kampaula, the Walking Dead of Timbali, the...”

“Yeah, yeah, Brad. I get it. What are you saying, you want hunt something we can’t find?”

“No. I’m saying we should try something a little different.”

“Like?”

“Like directly confronting Death.”

“Thanks Brad. I’ve already done that. If you remember correctly that was *me* hanging off the Temple of Singh-Fari. And I don’t know what you were thinking at Kampaula, but I nearly got my butt...”

“Yeah, yeah. No, nothing like that. This is different. There is a tribe of primitives in Central Africa in which, tales tell, once every 100 years through some witchcraft ritual Death takes the form of a man.”

Beau was silent for a moment. “Brad, that’s ridiculous.”

Brad shrugged. “Maybe. But don’t forget that most all legends are based upon a kernel of truth.”

“Alright, for the sake of argument let’s say there’s some truth to it and there before us stands Mr. Reaper. We would then do...what?”

“Ask him how it’s hangin’” Punk laughed.

“How long is it going to keep hanging.” Albert added.

“Very funny, guys. I don’t know, Beau, but as we all have seen in the past some of these primitive rituals can be rather fascinating. Besides it sounds far more interesting than anything anyone else has come up with lately.” The moment he said it Brad regretted his words, but they hung in the air nonetheless.

Beau looked around the room and the looks returned all carried the same edge. Except Old Martindale who sat as usual in the far corner of the room by the window. For a moment Beau thought he caught a sparkle in the old man’s eyes before they returned to the ancient book on his lap.

There had been an unspoken pervading feeling growing in the Club that there simply wasn’t anything left that they hadn’t seen or done. That their storied adventures were coming to an end.

“I suppose not.” Beau said with a shrug.

“You know it’s just bullshit, Beau.” Albert said.

“Maybe, but I’m getting tired of sitting around here.” With a slight wave of the hand Beau encompassed the whole of the club. He glanced over at Chauncey who just shrugged. Punk returned his usual one shoulder shrug.

“Humph.” Albert said as he tossed back the last of his drink. It was as much of an approval as they were going to get out of him.

“Wait. A pronouncement.” Beau’s words stopped a general migration towards the bar. He was correct. It was tradition. Before any great adventure the eldest member always made a pronouncement. Without a pronouncement it could not be an officially sanctioned undertaking of the Club of the Bombastic Few.

All eyes turned towards Old Martindale, typically decked out in his Victorian era tuxedo. He looked as ancient as the Pyramids and there were those that claimed he was, but not openly,

and...never in mixed company. He was one of the Old Ones. A member of the Club of the Bombastic Few from...well, from further back than anyone could remember.

As was typical, Old Martindale sat with a decrepit tome in his hands, the binding so worn with age that its contents could not be determined. As everyone's focus turned on him he seemed almost to resign himself to something only he knew. After a moment he appeared to perk up a bit, at least the drumming of his fingers on the cover of the book gave that impression.

"A pronouncement." He said it as a sigh. After a moment more of silence he wheezed in a breath and began with a slow raspy voice.

"In the steady flow, a syncopated beat

It is the backdrop

It is the returning crop

You the earthy treasure, the golden wheat

It is the wind, the rain

It is the rich fiber of the plain

Upon this quest together you now band

The cycle spins, the harvest is at hand."

For a moment silence reigned. Typically the pronouncement was a pithy philosophical statement occasionally in reference to the impending quest. This was different and whatever meaning Old Martindale intended to convey was lost upon the assembled crew. They feared nothing for they were the Club of the Bombastic Few.

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With blatant optimism and a certain amount of pageantry, amidst the swirling chaos of people and animals, they disembarked at Tunisia and caught the first train south. Through Beja, El Kef, through the Atlas Mountains, and down into the desert sands of El Oued. Further to Touggourt, Ouargla, and then due south along the western edge of the Great Eastern Erg to the foothills of the Ahaggar Mountains and Aïn Selah. Plunging into the mountains: Tadjemout, Arak, Silet, to the southern border of Algiers at Tinzaouatene. Along the rugged east end of Mali, Tenekert, and down into the steamy jungles of the Niger valley, Ménaka. From Mali to Niger and finally to the banks of the mighty Niger river, where sat the capital city, Niamey. A change of trains and direction. East to Sokoto, Gusau, to Kano, a provincial capital of northern Nigeria. On to Maiduguri where the train had to be abandoned in favor of boats up river. Then overland through the hills and finally to Garoua nestled in the Cameroon jungle along the Benue river...

There along the banks of the slow moving dark Benue the crew negotiated in a blunt and civilized manner with the Gimbabu, a people still living in a world of miracle and wonder, for the right to observe their sacred ritual, some three days away. With the successful completion of an understanding that the crew must remain silent throughout the ceremony and beyond the Circle of Life there was time for rest and listening, with amusement, to the endless rumors from the locals concerning a “man-eating” leopard.

The Gimbabu continued to dance and sing in spite of a general fear-tainted excitement that ran through everything. To them the world around them was gathering itself for a great event. This excitement did not, however, extend to the Gimbabu’s guests as they made plans and waited for the festivities to ensue. After all, were they not the Club of the Bombastic Few?

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The fire hissed at the new young branches offered it. They were still damp and green, but in the jungle nearly everything was. The crew sat around the fire. Tents, dark foliage filled with the constant sounds of life, and dancing shadows made up an enchanting backdrop. While Brad was off going over last minute details with the Gimbabu the crew sat quietly staring into the flames and ignoring the constant mindless babble from Teu Geola, the guide, who was insane.

“Any second thoughts?” Beau threw out the question for the sake of conversation and to drown out the mumbling gibberish of Teu Geola. But the crazed guide was difficult to ignore. His voice rose and fell depending on the significance of what he thought he was saying. His appearance was equally difficult to overlook. His clothes and wild black hair were disheveled and he had a face where expressions were steadily blowing in and out from moment to moment. He was the only known survivor of a tribe that had once lived in the mountains to the east. What had become of the rest of his tribe no one could say, but it was rumored that they had inexplicably scattered into the jungle.

The drums started again. They had been beating on and off day and night for a week now. This time, though, they would not stop until they reached a staggering crescendo tomorrow night. They were distinct and clear from just over the hill---not more than a half mile away. The sounds of the night took on a subtly different quality as if they moved into the same steady syncopated beat of the drums.

None of the crew answered Beau. They seemed lost in their own thoughts, but as if on cue Teu Geola’s voice rose to nearly a shout as he leaped forward to his feet, almost on top of the fire:

“Up the airy mountain,  
Down the rushy glen,  
We daren’t go a-hunting  
For fear of little men...”

His voice trailed off and he collapsed backwards rolling back and forth cackling hysterically. Though at first surprised by the sudden outburst the crew quickly shifted to irritated glances amongst themselves. For Teu Geola this kind of behavior was nothing new. It was merely an irritation to the Club of the Bombastic Few.

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The night was warm, the clearing oblong. The dirt center of the clearing was well worn by a millennia of devoted believers. Along two opposing sides in long rows sat cross-legged a great number of people from many different tribes. Most were from the lands immediately around that of the Gimbabu, but some were from very distant lands. They were drawn here by traditions dating back further than the collective memory.

Torches along the perimeter lit the dark night and filled the still air with a smoky haze. At the far end of the clearing a dozen torches were arranged in a semi-circle. Beautifully woven mats had been laid within the arc of fire and light. Many in the surrounding crowd wore elaborate costumes and the mass of people as a whole seemed to sway in a rhythmic chant.

The members of the Club of the Bombastic Few sat on the fringes of the gathering at the opposite end from the semi-circle of light and attention. They were restless and uncomfortable in part from the pounding beat of so many believers echoing the strength of their faith in a song that the Club of the Bombastic Few could not feel. And partially from the quite heated exchange between members of the Club the night before. There were elements within the Club that, having come to know the Gimbabu over the last few days, were reluctant to betray their trust for an as yet unclear purpose. In addition, in the past, occasionally, the Club had deemed it necessary to use violence to resolve some situations. On those occasions, of course, it was inevitable that some innocent bystanders were caught in the crossfire. These things happened.

The ceremony bore on. The heat and humidity of the night closed in on the Club. A sleepy stupor seemed to grip them. Probably brought on in part by a taste of liquor earlier to “ease the monotony”. Several members of the Club were seen to drop off while the others stared at the ceremony with bored glassy eyes in spite of the introduction of multiple dancers and an incremental increase in the rhythm of the drums.

Defying all literary conventions the moon was not full and it was well past midnight when a scream from the center of the ceremony jolted the members of the Club into shaken attentiveness.

The man wore a mask and his body shook violently. He was kneeling in the center of the clearing and the drums had dropped to a quiet, respectfully murmuring beat. A moment later he was on his feet sweeping from one side of the clearing to the other. With each pass of the masked man the spectators swayed back in fear. Suddenly the man’s head snapped around towards the members of the Club and words shot out at them with a fierce and angry tone.

With jerky deliberate strides the masked man stalked towards where the members of the Club, already on the edge of their nerves, sat. Several hands slowly crept inside their shirts to touch the handle of a revolver.

The masked man came closer. Then, with astounding quickness he leaped forward directly in front of Brad. The suddenness of it caught Brad by surprise and he reacted. His arm flung out from under his shirt and the gun fired. The shot was wild and struck the man in the shoulder. Brad surprised himself. He was as much shocked by how bad his aim had been at close range as he was that he had just shot an unarmed man.

The masked man took a shaky step backwards. The tension in the air was palpable. The masked man screamed something at Brad and reached under his huge mask. In a flash he swung something out from under the mask towards Brad. Without hesitation Chauncey and Albert each fired knocking the masked man flat backwards where he lay quivering. His body jerked twice more and there was dead silence in the clearing.

The members of the Club looked at one another for a quiet moment. Then all Hell broke loose. With what seemed like a collective wail the gathering of spectators began scrambling in all directions. Some charged the members of the Club threateningly, but were driven off with shots in the air---not before Punk inadvertently shot one man down in his tracks. In a scant few moments the members of the Club stood alone in the clearing with a couple of fresh corpses.

“Well...” Brad said hesitantly, “That didn’t quite go as planned.”

Chauncey knelt next to the corpse of the masked man. “Yes, well, in the process you can scratch one pious native.” He stuffed his pipe between his teeth and reached for the mask.

“No!” Punk skipped several paces backwards in an odd little dance. The jungle had become completely still, no sound, no movement. A trace of ground fog was creeping into the clearing and the temperature seemed to have dropped.

Everyone stared at Punk.

“What’s wrong?” Beau’s voice was short.

“I...I...I don’t know, but just don’t...”

“Bullshit.” Albert kicked the ground.

Beau shivered slightly. “Yeah, maybe you should just leave it alone.”

“Bah.” With a wave of dismissal Chauncey lifted the masked.

It shot out from under the mask the moment the head was revealed and caught Chauncey by the throat. He rolled over on to his back more from reaction than from the creature’s impact. The rest of the crew stood motionless in shock.

“Aaargh!” Chauncey pawed at it frantically until he got a good enough grip on its head to pull it off. It left two bleeding holes in the side of his neck.

The snake was black and quick. It disappeared in the ground fog as Brad futilely shot at its wispy wake.

Beau pulled out a handkerchief and held it to the wound, but it was increasingly harder as Chauncey's body began to tremble and thrash about.

"Poisonous." Brad spit the word out.

"We've got to do something for him." Beau looked around, but no one offered up anything.

Chauncey tried to scream, but it came out of his paralyzed lungs like a hoarse screech. It would be the last sound he ever made. His lungs refused to draw in any more air. His eyes opened wide, his lips and mouth worked frantically, but to no avail. A couple of spasms ran through him and he was suddenly still. His hair somehow remained neatly combed.

"That's it? He's dead? Just like that? What kind of snake was it? It hasn't even been two minutes. What's going on here?" Beau looked around at the rest of the crew.

No one spoke. Without a word they picked up Chauncey's body and carried it away. It was strangely stiff and contorted. Mouth gaping, teeth bare, and eyes frozen. The body was heavy, but they all helped---all that was left of the crew. One less person to hold the distinguished honor of a membership to the Club of the Bombastic Few.

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The early morning was bright and clear, but as the sun climbed over the hills it was not a cheerful sight to the crew. The light didn't sparkle, it glared off the moisture of the freshly turned dirt at their feet. Silence prevailed around the grave. What could be said? Chauncey was dead.

"Let's get out of here." Brad turned away and climbed into one of the jeeps. The others followed and the jeeps began their trek back through the jungle.

Not far down the trail they came upon Teu Geola sitting cross-legged babbling to himself as usual. He screamed and ran off up the trail when he saw them, but they quickly caught up and calmed him down.

Around midday they halted some ten miles from Garoua. They sat around the jeeps quietly passing around a flask with Teu Geola mumbling to himself. A bird screamed in the tree above and as if it were a cue Teu Geola began to laugh hysterically.

"Somebody shut him up." Albert was prepared to use his revolver if necessary.

Beau leaned over and shook Teu Geola by the shoulders. He stopped laughing and stared wide-eyed with a beaming smile. He spoke with whispery excitement:

"The road is cut,

The lines are down,

We hide in our hut,

But we will be found.  
We run fast,  
We drink hard,  
We are the last,  
And we are scarred.  
We won't need the sun,  
We won't see the moon,  
Don't need a gun,  
We die soon."

Beau released him and slowly looked over at Brad who shook his head and walked away.

It took Albert an hour to admit that he had no idea why neither one of the jeeps would start. Frustration ran through the crew. While everyone else began unloading the equipment Brad went on ahead up the trail a short distance to scout out the terrain.

A loud crack from behind startled Brad, but before he could turn around something struck him driving him to the ground in an instant. An ancient rotting tree was pinning him face down. One arm was pinned under him, the other was only partially free. He could only manage a half-hearted yell, but it was good enough to bring the rest of the crew running.

"Shit." Beau straddled the tree on one side of Brad. "Grab down there." He nodded his head for Punk. Albert knelt to help pull Brad out. The tree was moldy-moist and heavy. They heaved once, then a second time. It was quickly apparent they were not going to move the tree.

"Brad?" Albert leaned closer.

"I'm alright. Nothing feels broken. Just get this off...what's that?"

"Try again. I'll pull from here." Albert said.

Beau and Punk exchanged skeptical glances, but reached around the trunk for another go at it. Suddenly Punk jumped up off the trunk.

"Ah! What the..." He was wildly brushing at his arms.

"What's wrong with...ahh!" Beau leaped off the tree flailing his arms and beating at his pants.

"What?" Albert looked back and forth at them.

"Ahhhh. Get 'em off!" Brad screamed hoarsely.

"Soldier ants!" Punk was still beating them off. There were millions of them now pouring out of the tree.

"Ahh!" Albert rolled backwards as they swarmed over his legs.



“Get ‘em off! Get ‘em off!” Brad’s voice continued on until it became unintelligible. The ants were covering his head and back.

They kicked at the tree, grabbed hold of branches as close to Brad’s position as possible and pulled, but nothing would budge the tree. Twice they tried to jump in close and pull Brad, but the ants were on them in seconds and they stumbled away beating ants off and cursing madly. Brad screamed for about a quarter of the hour it took the ants to clean him to the bone. The others were forced to sit a dozen yards away and listen, staring blankly at one another.

Albert made the mistake of momentarily focusing on the corpse. It made him jump up and stagger some yards further away and vomit. He was crouching near a small pool and when he was finished he splashed some water on his face. He washed the taste of vomit out of his mouth and even though the water was nasty tasting it was still better than acid taste.

They returned to the jeeps, carefully avoiding the place where Brad’s bones lay. Their heads were hung and there was sick feeling hanging in the air.

“Let’s go.” Albert picked up a couple bags unloaded from the jeeps. No one wanted to hang around here and Albert was embarrassed about getting sick.

Beau hesitated for a moment. He glanced in the direction of Brad’s body and seemed to want to say something, but nothing came. Punk blindly grabbed a bag and trudged after Albert as if he were sleepwalking. Teu Geola had run off again and they would have to find their way through the jungle without a guide.

Beau slowly nodded his head. Albert was right. There was nothing left to do. There were only three surviving members of the Club of the Bombastic Few.

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“Bah!” Albert kicked a tree.

“What’s wrong?” Beau spoke almost without emotion.

“I know I’ve seen this tree at least twice now.”

Beau stared at it. “I don’t know about that tree, but those vines,” he waved off to his left, “seem pretty familiar.”

Punk stared at both, but said nothing. He didn’t seem to recognize anything---trees, vines, people, anything.

With a scream Teu Geola broke through the brush. He ran full speed past them blindly and into the dense jungle beyond them disappearing. For a moment no one moved. Beau and Albert exchanged surprised expressions. Then Beau took off after Teu Geola. Albert followed his lead. Punk straggled behind at a trot.

Beau had only gone a short distance when he heard Punk's voice call out to him. He stopped hesitated for a moment then turned and crashed back through the vegetation almost stumbling over Albert and into Punk. Albert lay crumpled on the ground rolling in pain.

"What happened?" Beau knelt at Albert's side, but looked up at Punk.

"I don't know. He just..." Punk shrugged.

"Albert, what's wrong?" Beau yelled into Albert's contorted face.

"My...guts..." Albert convulsed, gasped and a trickle of blood ran down from the side of his mouth.

"What the...?" Beau looked up again at Punk who insisted on shrugging again.

With a gargled yelp Albert spit a trace of blood. He rolled on to his back. His eyes were open, his mouth was open, but he was no longer breathing.

"I don't understand this. Any of it. It doesn't make any sense." Beau shook his head slowly and stared at Albert.

"No." Punk slumped down with his back to a tree. "It does."

"What are you talking about?"

"We asked for this."

"What do you mean?"

Punk looked as if he would cry. "We didn't believe anything could stop us." He shook his head. "But we're easy to kill. It's proving it."

"What's 'proving' it?"

Punk lifted his arms up and indicated everything around them.

"I don't understand what you're talking about. You're just being ridiculous."

Punk stared down at Albert's body. "Doesn't seem that ridiculous at the moment." Flies were starting to buzz around.

"Shut up." Beau stood up and walked several paces away. Teu Geola had run off again. He couldn't even be heard crashing or screaming through the brush. They couldn't bury Albert's body since they were traveling light and had nothing with which to dig.

Beau picked up a pack. "Help me with these."

"We won't need them."

Beau shot an angry glance over at Punk. "Fine." He threw the pack down. "Which way then?"

"It doesn't matter."

Beau started to say something, but, instead, turned and headed off into the jungle in a random direction. Slowly Punk got to his feet and followed. And then there were two. Raggedly they marched on through the jungle as the surviving members of the Club of the Bombastic Few.

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They knew they were now headed in the right direction because the terrain grew a bit more rugged. Hills and swamps began to appear and they recognized this as the lands just south of the Benue and Garoua. Without Teu Geola they couldn't be certain how far east or west of Garoua they might be. At least, though they knew Garoua was out this way somewhere.

They reached the bottom of one hill through prickly thickets that ripped and pulled at them.

"These thorns are tearing me up." Beau said as he yanked his arm past another one opening up yet more small wounds.

Punk said nothing. He was like a walking zombie now.

"Punk, you just can't quit. That's not an option." Beau stopped to look back at Punk, but nothing had changed. "Well I'm not going to just give up and die." Beau surged up the next hill. His anger temporarily numbing him to the abuse the surrounding vegetation hurled at him.

Punk trudged on. His resignation was unabated.

Beau reached the top of the hill and cursed. Punk joined him there and the two of them stared down the nearly sheer embankment at the swamp below. The water was clear and shallow, but the mud beneath was visibly thick and soft.

With a sigh Beau turned to the east and began following along the ridge seeking a way around. They had gone only a short distance when Beau held up a hand.

"I thought I heard something." He whispered.

They stood silently for a moment. Then it came. From down the hill, opposite from the swamp, there was a crashing of brush and a babbling voice. Though the jungle still obscured their view both Beau and Punk knew who and what it was. Beau for the first time since their trek started was pleased at the sound of Teu Geola's mad ravings.

Even Punk was moved sufficiently to attempt to catch sight of their guide. He leaned to his left and in an instant he disappeared.

Beau had to stare at the spot where Punk had been for a moment before the realization set in that Punk wasn't there. There was a minor splash of water somewhere. He hustled back to where Punk had been just a moment before. Obscured by the brush the edge of the embankment was right there. Beau caught himself before he too plummeted down the embankment. Below Punk's lower legs stuck out of the mud and stiffly kicked. Beau quickly looked around for a way to get down to where Punk's ankles were quietly sliding beneath the still water. A minute more and there was just a swirl of muddy stagnant water to mark Punk's passing. It struck Beau suddenly that Punk had not made a sound when he slipped. He just went.

Beau realized Teu Geola was squatting next him also staring down at the splash of brown on the water's surface. Beau and Teu Geola exchanged looks. Beau's a resignation to his pain. Teu Geola's amused confusion.

With a ragged hop Teu Geola was over the back of Beau and scampering further along the ridge. Beau scrambled after him. He really needed Teu Geola now. The swamp was blocking his way. Of the path back to civilization, he did not have a clue. He was the last remaining member of the Club of the Bombastic Few.

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Despite insanity Teu Geola proved once again that he knew the terrain. They were now moving along a recognizable trail. In addition, the surroundings were beginning to become familiar to Beau. He was certain they couldn't be more than a couple of miles from Garoua.

Teu Geola was several paces in front of Beau when he came to a stop. He stared straight ahead, motionless.

Beau came up next to him. "What's the problem?"

Teu Geola shook his head. He babbled for a moment in some obscure language and pointed ahead.

"In English. What is it?"

Teu Geola pointed again. "The end."

Beau stared ahead trying to see through the vegetation. "Garoua?"

Teu Geola said nothing.

Beau was anxious to get to some kind of civilization. The jungle had claimed all of his comrades. His only desire now was to put the jungle behind him. Even if it meant having to face the Gimbabu again. He looked down at Teu Geola again, but he remained motionless. Sometimes it was impossible to tell if Teu Geola actually sensed something or if he was just giving in once again to some insane impulse.

"Well, I'm not going to just stand here all day. I'm going on to Garoua. Come if you want." Beau went on ahead. A few short steps ahead the ground disappeared beneath him. Before he knew what was happening he landed hard. As the moment of surprise passed he heard Teu Geola standing at the edge of the pit laughing insanely.

He was wedged between loosely placed sharpened stakes that stood upright around the floor of the pit. An animal trap of some kind. He had been lucky enough to land sideways in between several stakes, though somehow, he didn't feel all that lucky.

Teu Geola circled the pit and stood on the far side. He stared down at Beau for a moment longer then, cackling, took off somewhere on down the trail.

“You...” Beau thought of numerous things to call Teu Geola, instead he tried to throw one of the dislodged stakes up at Teu Geola, but it was a futile gesture. Besides that his ribs hurt. He rolled over on to his back knocking over more stakes with every movement. He lay there for some time realizing that the air was stagnant and stifling. Consciousness slipped away from him.

When Beau awoke he had no idea how much time had passed. He was covered by a layer of sweat and there was a faint strange clattering sound. He had heard this before, but he wasn't quite sure when or where. It grew slightly louder and it came to him. He had seen natives beating sticks together to drive animals out of the brush. It was this sound he heard.

Suddenly there was another sound. A crashing of brush, wild scratching sounds, then a flurry of dirt and debris falling down into the hole. Beau rolled to his right to avoid the avalanche---plowing over more stakes. There was thump behind him and he rolled around to get a view. The spot where he had been laying was now occupied by a very disgruntled black leopard.

Beau and the leopard exchanged unfriendly looks.

“Uh-oh.”

The leopard had nothing to say, he just charged.

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*The Hamlet Mysteries series...*

## To Not Be In Hamlet

Sam MacNeil, part time mystery writer, has returned to his hometown to house sit for his parents as they start a lengthy vacation. What Sam has forgotten while away is the quirky weirdness of the little town of Hamlet. With expectations that he would quietly do his time in Hamlet the discovery of a dead body, clearly murdered, changes everything. Now Sam finds, much to his chagrin, the residents of Hamlet are expecting him to solve the murder. Not only does Sam not want to be involved in it, but the authorities have made it clear his help is not wanted. Was it the angry businessman from Detroit? Was it the shifty handyman the victim worked with? Sam doesn't know, but when killers from Detroit show up the situation is taking a serious and deadly turn. And then there's Becky. An old friend who clearly has more than friendship on her mind. Murder, killers and romance...this is not how this brief stay in Hamlet was supposed to go.

## The Art of Hamlet

An old family friend asks Sam to look into a break in at her house. She is an art collector and critic, but nothing has been stolen and the only thing disturbed are some small statues. While it is a puzzling incident Sam doesn't think it is a serious issue, but when a neighbor is murdered and found bobbing in a nearby lake the story is once again taking a dark turn. As usual Sam is not inclined to get involved in a murder investigation, but somehow he seems to be sliding in that direction anyway. In addition, the County Detective seems to have recognized that Sam might be of some use---regardless of the consequences for Sam. And what of Sam's old classmate, who is now a seemingly crazy hermit, ranting on about terrorists in Hamlet? Is that actually possible? To complicate things even further something is happening between Sam and Becky. Love and Death seem to be chasing Sam through the wacky streets of Hamlet.

## Ophelia's Hunt

Sam's women troubles have seemingly tripled. There is Becky and the relationship that Sam has found himself in with her. However, suddenly, there is Callie. Sam's wealthy and wild ex-fiance who has appeared in Hamlet. Is she here to get Sam back? Everyone thinks so---

including Becky. Then there's the beautiful woman named Misty. She seems to have a particular interest in Sam as well. And, of course, there's murder in Hamlet once again. Questions abound. Is the lovely Misty a suspect or a new love interest? Who are the men stalking Callie? How is Sam going explain all of this to an increasingly angry Becky? Why is the County Detective actually soliciting Sam's help? Should Sam be flattered or very careful? With love and murder swirling around Sam how is he going to survive this?

## The Ghosts of Hamlet

Sam MacNeil, part time writer, is house sitting for his parents in his hometown of Hamlet. The people of Hamlet are far more quirky than Sam remembers from his childhood and he is keen on leaving them behind and getting his life back, but it's those dead bodies that are the real problem. They just keep showing up. Murder in the small town of Hamlet has taken a noticeable uptick since Sam has returned and the residents have taken notice. Sam claims it has nothing to do with him and yet...Now, even worse, the residents are seeing ghosts and they blame Sam for that as well.

Sam may get his chance to escape Hamlet now that his parents are heading home, but can he really walk away without solving the mystery of the ghosts? Will he get away before the "gangsters" from Detroit catch up with him and turn him into a ghost? And what about Becky? He really wasn't planning on a romantic entanglement to muddle things up.

So what do ghosts, gangsters, girlfriends, musk ox and talking cans of beans all have in common? Sam MacNeil and the quirky town of Hamlet, of course.

## The Play of Hamlet

It is finally here. The Founder's Day festival in Hamlet. A gala event highlighted by a play depicting the bizarre founding of Hamlet. Sam is not only the star of the play, but also a target for Scanlon and his killers from Detroit. They are determined to finish him off once and for all. But Sam knows they are coming and, with the help of the quirky residents of Hamlet, he has his own plans in the works. What Sam doesn't know is that Scanlon isn't the only killer from Sam's past that is out to get him. Could the biggest day of the year in Hamlet be Sam's last?

# The King of Hamlet

The sixth story in the Hamlet Mystery series starts out where most of the stories end up...with a dead body. The trouble is Sam is found standing over the dead body and refusing to explain what has happened. He seems willing to take the fall for the guy's murder, but he is clearly hiding something. His friends are sure he didn't commit murder, but who is he protecting and why? What Sam is not telling anyone is that he is playing a more dangerous game than any of them can imagine. As bodies begin piling up around Sam he is increasingly wondering if he has a guardian angel or has become an unwilling accomplice to the Angel of Death. Once again women and murder are causing headaches for Sam.

# The Graves of Hamlet

As if the town of Hamlet didn't have enough trouble with dead bodies now, it appears, someone is digging them up in the cemetery. The quirky residents of Hamlet are sure this has something to do with Sam. As usual Sam doesn't really want anything to do with whatever is going on, but when someone tries to make the cemetery Sam's permanent home one dark night it would seem that Sam will need to sort this out---if only to save himself. To add to the confusion, with Becky out of town, Sam must also figure out who the half naked woman is that keeps showing up on his deck sun bathing. Oh, and who are these other guys that just showed up in Hamlet? The grandson of the recently deceased retired cop who is lying about his real identity and the suspicious looking guy casually asking questions around town about the same dead cop...?

# Polonius' Plight

Here's a surprise...there's been a murder in Hamlet---again. This time, however, Sam is very much intentionally involved. It's the suspects. The guy was found with a gaping shotgun blast to the chest. Like the one in the trunk of Renee's car. Of course the last person to be seen with the murder victim was Jen---and she seems to have disappeared. And why is Reese, the County Detective looking for Becky and her grandfather's .38? Sam is sure none of his friends are murderers, but to keep any and all of them out of jail he needs to find out who the killer is and fast. To make matters worse, while Sam is trying to solve a murder and hide his friends the Town Council of Hamlet has had enough of Sam and the murders that seem to follow him



around. They passed yet another of their many bizarre ordinances. Sam has been ordered to leave Hamlet.

## The Office of Scientific Operations

With the conclusion of the traumatic events in 1933 surrounding the shocking affair involving the city of New York and a beast commonly referred to as "King Kong", the president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, established the Office of Scientific Operations (OSO). The purpose of the OSO was to monitor and evaluate the level of risk and assist in any manner the mitigation of danger of any and all scientific operations and anomalies. With the rapid pace of scientific discovery this office was given the highest priority and clearance to investigate any potential threats or consequences to the interests of the United States of America.

What follows are the real stories behind the cinematic cover-ups presented to the general public...

### Release #1

## from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

#### **From 1953...**

File #153 (commonly referred to by the public as "The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms")

OSO agents Elliot Simms and Robbie Regan, while observing an atomic test in the Arctic, are unwittingly caught up in the release of prehistoric beasts from millions of years of suspended animation in the ice. Now they must help in stopping this new terror as it moves steadily down the east coast destroying anything in it's path.

## Release #2

# from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

**From 1954...**

File #159 (commonly referred to by the public as "Terror in the Jungle")

OSO agent Jonathon Wyatt is pulled off vacation to an island in Indonesia to investigate sightings of pteranodons. The island is not far from the island known infamously as Z Land. It was once the headquarters of Dr. Zeitner whose experiments in genetically manipulating prehistoric monsters terrorized the world in the 1930s before the OSO put a stop to it. Wyatt's job is to determine if these are indeed Dr. Zeitner's creatures, but what he finds is much more deadly. This is no way to spend a vacation---trying not to get eaten.

## Release #3

# from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

**From 1954...**

File #161 (commonly referred to by the public as "Revenge of the Creature")

After the capture of an unknown species of half man half fish is brought back to a Florida marine institute, OSO agents Wayne and Wyatt must determine the risk to the American people it poses. When the creature escapes and begins terrorizing the citizens of Florida the risk becomes all too real. Now they must hunt it down and stop it's killing spree, if they can.

**From 1955...**

File #165 (commonly referred to by the public as "It Came From Beneath the Sea")

OSO agents Simms and Regan are sent out to Pearl Harbor to investigate damage to one of the Navy's most advanced atomic submarines by some kind of giant creature. While the Navy has a hard time believing it, the OSO knows such creatures are real. It soon becomes apparent by the large number of ships being lost that something dangerous is hunting throughout the Pacific. Now, with the creature openly attacking the west coast of the United States Simms and Regan join the fight to stop this thing before the entire Pacific is destroyed by it.

## Release #4

### from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

**From 1954...**

File #163 (commonly referred to by the public as "The DC Creeper")

On a break from hunting monsters for the Office of Scientific Operations, OSO Agent Wyatt is trying to adjust to a more crowded domestic life. As brutally murdered bodies begin showing up in the nation's capitol, though, this doesn't seem like it is going to be much of a break. The newspapers have dubbed the hulking killer "The Creeper" and it looks like Wyatt is going to have to hunt him down and stop him before Wyatt becomes the next victim.

## Release #5

### from the declassified files of the Office of Scientific Operations...

**From 1956...**

File #166 (commonly referred to by the public as "Tarantula")

Agents Simms and Regan from the Office of Scientific Operations, the OSO, returning from the Pacific Coast having just finished dealing with yet another monster threatening the United States are redirected to a small town in Arizona to verify that a large tarantula that has been

terrorizing the local inhabitants has been destroyed by the Air Force. With Beka, a woman who insists on tagging along with the intrepid agents---a clear violation of official regulations---in tow, they quickly discover that the threat of the giant spiders in the Arizona desert are not over just yet.

### **From 1956...**

File #171 (commonly referred to by the public as "Invasion of the Body Snatchers")

The Office of Scientific Operations, the OSO, has sent agents Wayne and Wyatt out to the small California city of Santa Mira to locate a missing Air Force major, sent to investigate the impact of some meteors, and to understand the meaning of his last cryptic message to Washington. What they find is that, while the city of Santa Mira may look like a quaint place to visit it soon becomes apparent that a missing Air Force major is the least of Wayne and Wyatt's problems. There is something very strange and deadly going on in Santa Mira. Something that seems...alien?

## **The New Sheriff**

Travis Ames, somehow, has developed super powers. Exactly what these powers entail he's not sure. He's still learning how to control his powers, but he's already decided that he should use this new found power to fight crime. And...if he made a little profit along the way, well, that wouldn't be so bad either. But reality has a way of altering the best laid plans. He has quickly figured out he has no idea how to go about crime fighting. And, to make matters worse, he has learned the hard way, his new powers won't protect him from getting hurt or, quite possibly, killed. Can he survive long enough to learn how to use his powers? Can he get an aging detective to teach him how to fight crime? Can he prevent Aubrey, the new girl, and everyone else at work from figuring out what he can do? How long can he keep this up before he makes that one small mistake and ends up dead?