

A LATIN MOON STORY

# INCAN MOON



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*A Vampire for Hire Story*

*by*

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## **Incan Moon**

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# *Incan Moon*

## 1.

Fun hasn't exactly been at the tip of my brain very often for the past fourteen years.

It's difficult to stop worrying about the future when you're single-handedly holding back Armageddon. Of course, I had a lot of practice to get ready for that job. Anyone who's successfully survived raising two toddlers is probably capable of managing an ancient dark master hellbent on destruction.

And sure, maybe Elizabeth played me and the consequences weren't as dire as she led me to believe. There's no real reason for me to worry about the semantics now. Whatever her motivations were, wherever the lies began and ended, it doesn't matter anymore. Point being, her scheme to make me think myself responsible for holding her back from destroying the entire world worked. I fell for it back then. Bear in mind, this was Elizabeth. I can't trust anything she ever said. Maybe I really did stop her from doing horrible things. It's more of an ego boost to think that way than accept she manipulated me into doing exactly what she needed.

Anyway...

That particular albatross is no longer around my neck. Ever since my life went way off the deep end that night in Hillcrest Park, there hasn't been much time for me to unwind, let go, have fun. I've always had something to worry about lurking right around the corner. And, sometimes the 'around the corner' thing ended up being far more literal than a metaphor.

It's finally happened. One of the things I've dreaded most has come to pass. My daughter has graduated from high

school. Is it strange for me to find this event more rattling than being turned into a vampire? Yeah, it's kinda selfish of me. I want her to stay little forever, want my family to just always be as I remember them.

Tammy's quite done with being a child, however. Heck, she did it twice—even if her second childhood was a weird sort of semi-real dream. Or time compression. I'm still not entirely sure if Queen Maple actually turned my daughter back into an eight-year-old and she grew up all over again, or if it all happened in her head. A sufficiently real (and long) dream is indistinguishable from reality for the purpose of training her how to use magic. Then again, it doesn't make a difference either way.

Yes, I'm trying to come to terms with my kids growing up. Most parents would be like 'yay, I have the house to myself at last' but not me. I'm unusually sad that my kids aren't little anymore. Adopting Paxton has given me a few more years of feeling like a mom to a child who needs a parent, but even she will eventually become an adult. Argh. Is my fate to constantly collect orphans like Pokemon? There sure are worse things for an immortal to do.

Thanks to helping a couple of Sasquatches in the Pacific Northwest—creatures whose blood is magically powerful—I could potentially get pregnant again. But would I want to? With my luck, getting knocked up by Kingsley would give me a whole litter of kiddos. I adore being a mom and I have superhuman energy, but wrangling six to eight infants at the same time would be rough.

If I had to guess, my hunch is the unusual sadness I feel around my kids getting older has got something to do with the trauma of being turned into a vamp. At the time it happened, Tammy was four, Anthony two, and Danny hadn't yet become a giant asshole. Though, they say people never truly change. Maybe he'd always been kind of a dick, just not to me—until that point.

Whenever I think about 'my family,' that's the mental picture my brain comes up with before my conscious mind says 'hey, wake up. Time has passed' and I realize my kids are

basically grown up. Sure, Anthony isn't eighteen yet, but no one could tell by looking at him. He could easily pass for twenty-four. Lucky me he's not the sort of person to take advantage of his looks to buy alcohol before he's legally allowed to. Come to think of it, I don't really see him having much interest in booze at all... at least not to the degree where he wakes up on the floor of some strange girl's bathroom not knowing how he got there.

So, back to fun...

One random comment about our vacation to Europe set off a conversation which led to me being in Peru right now. Well, me, Tammy, Paxton, and Allison, that is. We're taking the concept of a girls' night out and pushing it to the extreme. Anthony would have come along if we asked him to, but I suspect he wanted to stay home. Though on the path to becoming an angel, deep down inside, he's still a teenager... and he can have his moody moments. For him, stuffing his hands in his pockets and seeming unenthused about a trip to South America is about as moody as it gets lately. Pretty sure he didn't want to be away from a girl he'd been talking to these past few weeks. Girlfriend? Maybe.

And yes, I trust my almost-seventeen-year-old to be home alone.

My son's a nearly perfect angel.

While I've still got a decent bit of money left from the sale of the mansion, no reason to waste it where I don't have to. Sure, airfare isn't the largest expense involved with going out of the country, but it's an expense I can sidestep. Also, who wants to be cooped up in a plane for hours on end? I did get the passport situation done correctly, though. Not that I'm expecting a run-in with local authorities. Kinda pointless to be honest since we skipped right past the whole customs thing. Yeah, not exactly legal, but... no one's getting harmed. Why be a supernatural being if I can't enjoy the fringe benefits?

Hmm. I haven't been a vampire for very long in the grand scheme of things. Compared to some other vampires out there, I'm still a baby. Kinda odd for me to be so blasé about

breaking international laws. I hear that whole ‘feeling above mortal laws’ thing isn’t supposed to kick in for at least a century. Maybe for the next country, I’ll teleport us to the international airport so we can pretend to have gotten off a plane? Nah. I wouldn’t know the flight number or have any ticket stubs. Trying to obey the law would require me to come up with more lies that will just complicate everything.

We are doing the hotel thing. Now that we’re in-country, it’s time to act like normal tourists. No, I’m not going hog-wild with the mind control powers. I am paying for our hotel rooms and food and whatever. Sure, I could command the hotel manager to comp me a room for free, but... yeah, no. That’s stealing. Quite a bit worse than simply bypassing customs and airfare.

That, I do not feel guilty about.



## 2.

For the past three days, we've been going on guided tours around the Sacred Valley, checking out various Inca sites.

It's fascinating as hell, really. Does that make me a nerd? I half expected Paxton to be bored, though she's really into it. Kid likes history, apparently. The only reason she's not absolutely thrilled is all the walking. I don't get tired. Everyone else here is perfectly mortal still. Though, Tammy's nature is debatable. She absorbed a lot of faerie magic in Maple's realm. Maybe the faerie queen zapped her with some sort of life energy as a gift to me or some such thing. There's a chance my daughter's lifespan might be... abnormally long now. Works for me. The absolute worst part of being an immortal is knowing my children are not.

Well, *weren't*. I guess time will tell.

Anyway, vacation time. Not going to think morbid thoughts.

Tammy and Paxton got into a long discussion last night in the hotel room about human sacrifice in the Inca civilization. Paxton commented on how sad and tragic it was. Tammy read somewhere online about how the whole sacrifice thing didn't really happen. Some article she randomly stumbled across claimed it had been basically a slander campaign by the invading Spanish to make people fear the 'primitive' Inca or Aztecs. She even Googled a study that said they never found the remains of sacrifice victims except for some cases where servants of the nobility were killed so they could continue to attend them in the afterlife. Allison thinks if there had been any genuine ritual human sacrifice going on, it would've been fringe cults and not society as a whole.

Makes sense to me. It's not unheard of for a conquering or antagonistic force to make up all sorts of lies about their victims to make them sound subhuman, savage, and worthy of

being destroyed in the minds of their ordinary citizens. History is full of that sort of thing.

According to Paxton (who looked this stuff up online), the Inca frequently made sacrifices of animals, liquor, and even dirt to their gods at a place called the Altar of the Condor. Not to be too judgmental here, but how can one sacrifice dirt? It's everywhere. Had to be something more than simple dirt. Maybe enchanted soil left in the moonlight for a month or some such thing.

On day five, we made the trip up to Machu Picchu. No surprise there since it's like the most popular tourist attraction in Peru. It's a heck of a ride up into the mountains... high enough that the Peruvian heat lessens to a noticeably tamer climate. Figured we'd go 'full tourist,' so we went with a guided tour group in a bus. We cross a bridge over the Urubamba River and begin going up this long, winding back-and-forth mountain road that's kinda scary. This is one of those roads where two buses would really struggle to find room to pass each other going in opposite directions. Good thing I'm not afraid of falling.

It's so beautiful here. As we ascend the mountain higher and higher, a morning mist floats by outside. Talk about weird. The air goes from hot to not-so-hot to almost a little chilly. It's like someone turned on the Earth's air conditioner.

I dunno, there's something about these tours that makes me feel like a kid on a field trip again even though I'm almost fifty now. Well, I look late-twenties, but I have almost fifty years of memories. I also have the energy levels and general attitude of someone around thirty. Even though I remember almost five decades passing, I still feel more or less the same mentally as I did the night I was ambushed and joined the ranks of the supernatural. Everything seems to be frozen in time. Huh. Maybe that's why vampire society really, really frowns on turning children. How much would it suck to go through eternity thinking Justin Bieber is cool?

The tour guide stands at the front of the bus talking the whole way up the mountain. Evidently, the location of the city used to be a 'military secret' for the Incas. The guide, a late-

thirties man in a blue shirt, white ball cap, tells us about how the terrain here provided all sorts of natural defenses... from deep precipices to the Incan Army having a secret entrance via a rope bridge. Not to mention, an impassable mountain provides protection from the rear, and multiple springs offer a source of water that invading enemies couldn't block off.

Machu Picchu was apparently built right on top of an earthquake fault line. According to the guide, the Incans likely chose the site due to the ease with which they could obtain building materials from all the fractured rocks in the fissure. I mean, if you're going to build a giant city in a time before heavy machinery, might as well make it easier on yourselves.

Our bus arrives at the entrance to the ruined city. From there, we disembark and follow the tour guide in on foot. Luck is with us. None of the other tourists are stereotypical loud, obnoxious Americans. Honestly, I think my brood are the only people from the US in this group. Accent wise, there are six Brits, a French couple, two from Canada, and one older guy who looks like he might be a local Peruvian.

We're not too far into the ruins yet, right by the Inka Trail; Inka with a k instead of a c. No, I don't know why they spell it that way. That's what's on the sign. Anyway... here I stand near the back of the tour group while they're gazing out over the stepped terraces where the Incans used to practice agriculture... and this eerie feeling falls over me.

Allison's picking up on it too. She gives me a 'here we go again' sideways glance.

Tammy's gone tense, like she's walking alone through a bad part of the city at two in the morning... except she's throwing off a note of 'try it, jackass.' She's not terrified, more like bracing for imminent badness. Go figure, learning how to shapeshift into a panther gave her some confidence.

Right up until the three of us become anxious, Paxton, a natural empath, appears completely oblivious to the unusual charge saturating these ruins. Once our emotions go wild, she gets nervous and stares at me.

“Mom?” whispers Paxton while grasping my hand. “Why are you all freaking out?” She rapidly looks around. Nothing appears the least bit threatening or dangerous. “What’s going on?”

“I am not freaking out,” I say in a calm, quiet tone to avoid anyone in the tour group from hearing too much. “Just sensing something strange. This place is full of energy.”

Tammy spins around in a 360 while continuing to walk after the group. She appears to be focusing most of her attention on a cluster of former buildings to our right at the southwest end of the terraces. “It might only be like negative energy or something that soaked into the rocks from long ago.”

“Getting that sense, too,” adds Allison while also scanning the area. “Whatever this is, it’s old.”

Paxton fidgets. “Are we or are we not in danger?”

The three of us keep our heads on a swivel as the tour guide leads the group among the terraces. I’m not quite as in tune to whatever Allie and Tammy are picking up. I’m more on the lookout for any physical accompaniment to the unusual sensation in the ruins... like demons. Luckily, I also have my inner alarm to help alert me.

Tammy and Allison don’t remain noticeably anxious for long. It really does seem as if we’re only picking up on latent power or some such thing. Paxton calms enough to direct her attention to our guide explaining how the Incans made these stepped terraces for farming up in the mountains.

For now, the feeling fades. Thank god.

Here’s hoping it won’t return...

### 3.

Over the next several hours, we meander around Machu Picchu, checking out the various parts of the ancient city.

Since it's right by the entrance, we started at the cemetery—where the energy making Tammy and Allison nervous seemed to be strongest. From there we went to a guard house, then across the vast expanse of terraced farm to the city gate and into the ruins proper.

Paxton forgot all about the earlier anxiety she inherited from us, evidently responding to the tour guide's enthusiasm as he talked about Nusta's Bedroom, the Sun Temple, and the Royal Tomb. This place even had a prison area.

Makes me wonder about our modern perception of people from that long ago. Looking at this place, it certainly appears that they functioned in a highly sophisticated civilization not too much different from our own—just without the technology.

It's so crazy to think about how I'm standing in a place that used to be a thriving city almost 2,000 years ago. How many events, emotions, and conflicts did this place witness that are forever lost to anyone's knowing? It really is true what they say. There is vastly more of human history forever lost to our collective awareness than what we know.

Things get even weirder if you believe some of those crazy stories about prior advanced civilizations wiping themselves out. Even if that's all just flights of fancy, we don't really know that much about, say, life in 'caveman' days or how modern humans walked across the Earth back when all the continents had been joined by land bridges. Or if there truly were highly advanced civilizations lost to time.

The group stops at a giant rock the guide refers to as *Intihuatana*. It kinda looks like someone tried to carve either a car or a sofa out of a boulder, but had no idea what either one should look like. The boulder has a broad, flat bottom section

and a more squared-off middle with a giant notch cut out of one end that makes it look a bit like a chair. Note to future builders: stone is not a good choice of material for a loveseat. A small (by comparison) squarish vertical section sticks up at the top.

Our tour guide tells us about the stone being some sort of astronomic clock or calendar. Its name roughly translates to 'the hitching post of the sun.' I'm guessing it's some sort of sundial type thing, though don't ask me how to make sense of it. I don't even think the tour guide understands how it used to work. Well... 'work' is relative. It's a rock. It just sits there while the sun casts shadows on it. Suppose it would make more sense to say 'I don't know how to interpret it.'

Anyway... we continue on exploring the site until the daylight starts to get weaker. Then it's time for a bus ride back to the nearest modern city, which is also called Machu Picchu. Allison's pretty worn out from all the walking. Tammy weathered it fairly well. She's trying to act like she's not exhausted, but I can tell she's tired. Paxton, on the other hand, looks like she could spend another four hours sightseeing.

It's later at the hotel restaurant when I sense something nefarious brewing in Tammy's head.

Yes, nefarious...

#### 4.

Call it a mother's intuition. Or a psychic vampire's sixth sense.

Either way, she often peers over at me in between her conversation with Paxton about the Incan ruins. Weirdly, she looks at me in ways that make it seem like she's trying to summon the courage to ask me for something big. Like to buy her a car. Or to ask me if she can go with some friends to break into a place and rob it. Not that she'd do anything like that. Just saying... there's a definite note of 'I'm probably going to get in trouble if I open my mouth' going on in her eyes. I know, weird. But that's what I'm sensing.

The furtive glances and nervous fidgeting continue throughout our meal.

Paxton's such a ball of energy she appears to be making Allison even more tired. Swear that girl took so many pictures with her phone she could get a job with an archaeological society. Something tells me Allie's heading straight to bed after dinner. Or at least, she intends to flop on something soft and not move again until morning, even if she doesn't fall asleep right away. One nice thing about not having any guys on this trip with us: we don't have to keep up appearances. If we want to loaf around the hotel room with our hair wild and sweat pants on, we can.

As soon as we're back in our room, Tammy's hesitation evaporates. She stops half a step inside the door, letting it close behind her. "Ma..."

I set my bag on the little table, then peer at her. "Whatever it is you're about to ask, you've been sitting on it all through dinner."

"We have to go back there." Tammy folds her arms, glancing off to the side to avoid looking me in the eye. "If we don't, something bad is going to happen."

I purse my lips, exhale a bit, then glance down at my tapping foot. “How sure are you? I mean... that place has been there for a long time and nothing’s happened yet.”

“That’s a really bad argument,” chimes Paxton from the sofa by the TV. “Saying that ‘Mount Saint Helens was there for a really long time and nothing happened yet’ didn’t stop it from blowing up way back in the 1980s.”

Way back, she says. Sigh. Guess I should go get fitted for a cane already. Technically, I am old enough to start looking into iron supplements. Don’t need them, though. It’s good to be a vampire. Even better to be a psychic one free of the ickiness of blood. Don’t judge. Yeah, yeah... a vampire who hates the whole blood thing. Tammy already teased me about being a vampiric equivalent of a vegan.

“Kid’s got a point.” Allison lets out a sleepy chuckle.

“Ma.” Tammy walks up to me, letting her arms hang loose. “There’s something there, and it reacted to us. Uhh, more like it reacted to you.”

I blink. “I didn’t touch anything.”

“You didn’t have to.” Tammy half smiles and gives me a quick hug. “You’re an immortal being full of mystical power. Just your presence there woke something up.”

I rub the bridge of my nose. “Ugh. Again? Really? Can’t we have a simple vacation?”

“Nope,” says Tammy, Allison, and Paxton at the same time.

“Any idea what it is?” I lower my hand from my face. “What are we dealing with?”

Tammy scrunches her nose. “The faster we move, the less we’ll have to deal with. Meaning, right now, it’s only swirling magical energy tainted by darkness. If we let it gather for too long, something bigger and nastier is going to cross over. If I had to guess, it would probably go directly to this city here and start feeding on people... whatever it is.”



“Eww. Like literally? Or like the way Mom ‘eats’ people?” asks Paxton, making air quotes around the word eats.

“Uhh.” Tammy shrugs. “I don’t have enough information to tell. Could just be energy eating. Could be real eating. Might even be like soul devouring and leaving the withered husks in the street type stuff.”

Paxton hides her face behind a pillow.

“Great. You’re going to give her nightmares,” I mutter.

“I’m not a little kid.” Paxton frowns.

“No, you’re not.” Tammy chuckles. “But you are really easy to scare.”

Pax rolls her eyes and sighs the word, “Guilty.”

Allie mumbles something in a half-awake voice I can’t even understand with the help of our mental connection. Wow, she’s exhausted. Suppose that works out for the best. She can stay in the hotel with Pax while I go with Tammy and create the next local ghost story. Someone’s going to catch us sneaking around the ruins at night when it’s closed... and I’m going to teleport back here before the cops catch us... so stories of ‘ghostly women’ will begin circulating.

Probably not the first time. Considering all the occasions in which I’ve narrowly avoided being caught, there have got to be a handful of people out there who thought they saw something and told their friends about the paranormal experience. Or maybe they’re like that one guy who was out fishing on Lake Elsinore when he saw me turn into Talos. Poor guy just ‘noped’ straight out and decided he imagined it. Didn’t tell a soul as far as I know. Oops. Felt bad for him, but what could I have done there? Find him and admit the truth? Nah, that would’ve messed him up even more. Hopefully, he’ll dismiss it as a boredom induced hallucination.

Anyway...

I nudge Tammy. “So, what are you expecting out there?”

“Kinda hard to tell during the day with the entire tour group around us.” She fidgets. “It felt a lot like an ethereally

anchored curse.”

Allison wakes up a little more. “A what?”

Paxton points at Allie. “What she said.”

“Oh.” Tammy laughs. “Sometimes I forget you guys didn’t all spend almost ten years in faerie magic school.”

She’s being obviously sarcastic, but it’s funny enough that we all have a chuckle.

“Basically, there are two types of anchored curses,” begins Tammy.

“What the heck is an anchored curse?” Paxton flops on the sofa and wraps her arms around a pillow. “Like writing a bad word on a boat?”

Tammy sighs. “Trying to be quick here. Okay. You can curse a specific thing—like a person or an object. Those curses can be conditional, as in they self-dispel if the subject of the curse does some specific action. For example, a cheating boyfriend’s man-bits will itch like crazy until he confesses what he did. Or instead of a condition, they can be persistent for a set amount of time. The jerk who cut me off will keep tripping over his own feet for two days. An ‘anchored’ curse is one that’s placed on an area rather than a specific single thing. Those curses can either affect the environment or anyone who goes there. Anchors can be physical, like fetishes or talismans or carvings... or they can be ethereal.”

“Doesn’t that mean like ghostly or something?” Paxton scrunches up her nose.

“Basically, yeah.” Tammy nods. “Those types of curses are usually created with someone’s dying breath and the energy released at the moment of death.”

“Could also be a residual aftereffect of powerful magic.” Allison yawns. “Couple of times in those ruins I got the feeling that someone did something really bad there a long time ago.”

I scratch at my arm. “Didn’t we learn the human sacrifice thing was Spanish propaganda or something to that effect?”

“I don’t mean human sacrifice bad.” Allison yawns again, harder. “I mean like a magic war or summoning demons. Negative energy got thrown around there at some point and it left a mark on the stones. It’s even harder to scrub away than dried egg.”

“What?” Paxton giggles. “Where did dried eggs come from?”

“You never egged a house the night before Halloween?” asks Allison.

“Uhh. No.” Paxton seems horrified. “Who would do that? Not only is it mean, it’s a waste of eggs!”

Allison snickers. “That’s why you only throw the ones that have already spoiled.”

“Gross,” deadpans Paxton.

Tammy claps. “Okay. Let’s do this. I’d rather not be up all night.”

Allison groans.

“Allie, why don’t you stay here with Paxton?” I set my hands on my hips. “If we run into trouble and need help, I can pop back here and grab you.”

“Oh. Okay,” says Allison through a mini-yawn.

Her complete lack of protest confirms she’s tired as heck. Either that or she doesn’t think whatever’s going on at the ruins is terribly dangerous. If she worried at all, she’d push past her fatigue and insist on joining us.

Either way, I take Tammy’s hand and call the dancing flame...

## 5.

I decide on a secluded spot among the walls in an area the tour guide referred to as the ‘industrial zone.’

Pretty sure they don’t have security guards walking patrols through the ruins at night. Given the design of the ancient city, all they’d need to do is watch the road leading up to the place to catch anyone trying to go inside without a helicopter.

Within the single flame, I see the walls of the ruins—only this time, glowing transparent people peer out at me from behind the tumbling stonework. It’s enough of a shock that I stumble forward and almost bang my face against the ancient wall. The instant I’m seeing the ruins of Machu Picchu with my actual eyes, instead of my mind’s eye via the teleportation gate, the astral figures are gone.

“Whoa,” I whisper.

Tammy, still holding my hand, shifts her gaze to me. “What?”

“I saw a bunch of ghosts or something watching me through the flame.”

My daughter blinks at this and glances around as if looking for spirits. I don’t see anything unusual, but the air is definitely charged. This whole complex feels like one of those severely haunted houses that gives off a sense of not being alone all the time. Ordinary mortals being here would probably get the urge to leave quickly. I’m waiting for some disembodied voice to yell ‘get out’ like in a low budget ghost movie. To me, the sensation is beyond simple unease. I think my daughter’s right. Something does seem to be building up power here. If whatever it is reacted to my presence, it’s only right that I help stop it.

“Think me coming back here was a bad idea?” I whisper.

“Can’t make it any worse.” Tammy climbs over a waist-high wall and makes her way along the ghost of a street.

I groan. “Gee, thanks.”

“The energy here wasn’t stable.” She holds her arms out to either side and closes her eyes. “It just needed a catalyst. Any vamp, shifter, or something like that would’ve done the same thing. It’s not you personally.”

“That makes me feel a little better.” I look around at the ruins of a once-great city. “Still, I would prefer not to be responsible for the destruction of... whatever this thing is going to destroy if it wakes up.”

A few seconds later, bluish light shimmers over the entire ruin, gathering most brightly upon the stones or remnants of buildings. Structure by structure, the buildings around us grow to their former grandeur. Of course, it’s all like an illusion. The stone isn’t actually expanding. Only the ruins themselves are still solid matter. Everything else is like a transparent hologram. I can only assume Tammy is doing something. We are basically seeing the city like it was in its heyday... just kinda ghostly.

“Subtle... someone’s definitely going to see this,” I whisper. “The whole city is glowing.”

“It’s only us seeing it, Ma.” Tammy smiles, then opens her eyes. “It’s a seeing spell. No one else can see this light but the two of us. Should make it easier for me to find what I need to find.”

Spirits walk everywhere among the ancient city. None of them appear to notice our existence. I can’t tell if they are real ghosts that we’re now able to see thanks to Tammy’s spell or simple psychic impressions on the land. Not all hauntings are the work of actual intelligent ghosts. Some are basically like spirit movies playing in an endless loop thanks to an emotionally powerful event. I’ve got a feeling the spirits that looked at me through the teleport were *actual* ghosts. The citizens around us now have to be a memory of what once was and not ‘real’ ghosts.

Tammy walks down the street past the oblivious apparitions.

I jog to catch up. “What is it you need to find?”

“The anchors for the curse.”

“Oh, obvious. Should’ve known that.” I chuckle. I’m being facetious. I had no idea. “What do they look like?”

“No clue. Could be just about anything. Probably going to be glowy and weird. If you see anything strange, point it out.”

I smirk, gazing around at an entire ancient city glowing blue, full of ghosts going about their once ordinary lives. “Right. Anything weird. Gotcha.”

Tammy heads along the old street to the royal palace area. Here, the mundanity of the apparitions takes a dark turn. The ghost-holograms in this part of the city aren’t behaving like it’s any other day. Some lay dead in the courtyard in various states of appearance, from looking simply asleep to being burned to a crisp. Others cower behind cover as if afraid of something terrible nearby. I’m thankful Tammy’s spell didn’t provide sound effects. Judging by everyone’s faces, this part of the city would be filled with agonizing screams.

“There!” Tammy points at the palace wall.

A few feet to the left of the door, a strange glowing mark floats above the solid rocks that remain. It’s on the illusionary part of the wall that no longer exists in reality. Three semi-vertical lines, the middle one longer than the others, resemble a claw strike from a three-fingered creature. A bundle of swirling energy hovers at the midpoint of the gouges. Everything’s blue thanks to the seeing spell. Not liking the three scratches thing at all. That’s usually a sign of demons. I’m guessing this is one of those curse anchors.

Tammy holds her hand out toward the anchor and makes a face like she’s concentrating really hard.

A sharp snap comes from the rubble to our left. Not sure if it’s motherly instinct or my alarm sense going off, but something sets off my combat reflexes. I don’t even have the time to mentally process that I went into fight mode before spotting a fist-sized rock zooming at Tammy’s head.

I lunge past her and grab it out of the air. The smack of my hand hitting the stone less than an arm's length from Tammy's ear startles her out of her concentration.

"Gah!" She ducks and scrambles to her right, staring at me as if I just pranked her with a jump scare. "What the heck?"

"Rock." I hold it up. "Something doesn't want you doing whatever it is you're doing."

Any trace of accusation in her stare fades away. She knows I wouldn't prank her, but she also had no idea what the heck just happened until I showed her the potato-sized stone. Don't blame her. It's human nature to make assumptions.

Tammy refocuses on the mark.

I pop my wings out and hold them up as a barrier around her, in case anything else comes flying.

After about a minute of intense staring, a loud crackling, popping fizzle emanates from the spirit anchor. The swirling energy mass at the center of the three vertical lines explodes in a brilliant flash—along with giving me a sense of vertigo. Feels as if I've been shoved out the door of an airplane, left to fall for a few seconds, then pulled back to safety.

Tammy wobbles, waving her arms for balance.

"Is that normal?" I ask.

"Umm. Could be." She offers a sheepish smile. "I've never done this before... for real, anyway. Just practice. Each one's a little different."

I nod. "So, I'm going to guess fixing this problem isn't this easy. We're not done here, are we?"

"Nope." She sighs. "You still feel the crazy energy in the air?"

"Yeah."

"There are more anchors." Tammy turns in place, looking around and feeling out the magical energies. "Have to dispel all of them before the thing comes through."

Ugh. "What thing?"

Tammy heads off to the right toward the ‘main square.’ “I have no idea. Something from the spirit world. It’s not nice and it’s pretty powerful. Think of it like a Godzilla-sized cat scratching at the patio door trying to come inside... but we can’t let it in.”

I hurry after her. “This thing’s not trying to bring us a dead mouse as a gift, is it?”

“Umm, no. We’re the mice. And it’s hungry.” She exhales hard. “By the way, it’s not a cat. Just a metaphor for how it’s scratching at the interdimensional boundary, trying to cross over.”

Ancient Incan spirits come running by us, fleeing from the area we’re going to. They’re unarmed, mostly women, kids, and older people. The closer we get to the city square, the more spirits litter the ground. It’s difficult to tell what killed them; however, the position of the bodies suggests they’d been killed while fleeing. All of this happened long, long ago, of course. I can’t do anything to change it or help them. Knowing that doesn’t make it any easier to see this.

We find another anchor on a wall to the right on the last building before the big open square. Again, I shield Tammy with my wings while she concentrates. Something in the blue-tinged darkness around us makes angry noises. I twist around to look as best I can without exposing my daughter to flying rocks. Whatever it is that’s upset with us is either invisible or an illusion of sound. I don’t see anything. Normally, that would reassure me. Except... my other senses tell me there is something watching us and it’s not happy.

“Be careful,” I say. “Feels like something is gathering enough strength to come after us.”

“Yeah, I get that feeling, too.” Tammy waves in an ‘away with you’ gesture at the anchor mark, which promptly explodes in a flash of light. We’re both hit with a momentary bit of disorientation and weightlessness.

We find another anchor at the far end of the square, at the base of the trail leading to the spot the tour guide called the ‘sacred rock.’ This area has even more ghostly bodies strewn



about. None of them look visibly wounded, though. Maybe they aren't dead as much as out cold? Could some sort of magic have drawn in energy from everyone in the city, knocking them out? Usually, ghosts of murder victims bear the wounds of how they died. Then again, these aren't really ghosts. Tammy's spell is showing us a moment in time from hundreds of years ago. We are looking at a re-creation of a past event painted in magical holograms.

"Going to go out on a limb here and say there's probably going to be an anchor mark on or near the sacred rock," I say.

"Yeah. Probably is," says Tammy, her voice strained from concentration.

A faint whooshing sound from my left makes me pivot and hold a wing higher, blocking Tammy's head from an incoming projectile. Next thing I know, there's a flat, sharpened chip of rock about as big around as my hand stuck through my wing. Something threw it like a giant stone ninja star. Yes, it hurts, but I'm too angry at the attempt on my daughter's life to really pay attention to the pain. How much does it hurt? Know that little stretchy bit of skin between your thumb and your hand? Put a staple through that. Then, magnify that ouch by about ten times.

Tammy barely flinches at a spritz of my blood on her face. Mostly because she doesn't realize it's my blood that hit her. She'd be more upset that I got hurt than something tried to kill her. Fortunately, my wings aren't a normal body part. This will only hurt until I put them away. Next time I summon them, they'll be fine. Probably a bit sore, but the hole will be gone.

Speaking of which...

## 6.

I grab the stone chip and pull it loose.

Takes a lot of willpower to stifle a gasp of pain. Not that I'm a vengeful sort of person, but I drop the chip and stomp on it until it breaks apart into small fragments. Really, I'm not punishing an inanimate object for hurting me. I don't want whatever did this to pick it back up and throw it again.

"Ma, you okay?" Tammy bites her lip, staring at my wing.

Thankfully, it's really hard to see blood on black feathers.

"Yeah. Fine. Just pain. Something's really getting annoyed with us."

Tammy gazes around. "I don't see it, but I feel it. Maybe if we move fast enough, we can break the curse before it gathers the strength to manifest itself and try to rip our heads off."

"Good plan." I scan our surroundings. Still nothing but 'ghost recordings' running for their lives or laying still on the ground. "Think we'll make it?"

"Maybe..." Tammy crouches and holds her hands out over a spot of ground.

"What are you doing?"

"Just in case..." She pokes a finger into the dirt. Water begins to well up out of the earth.

"Thirsty?" I ask.

"No, dork." Tammy smiles up at me. She's a little bolder in her name-calling now that she's graduated. "Calling some water to the surface so you can make your sword."

For a moment, I feel a little dumb. Then again, I'm in pain... and more worried about keeping her safe, perhaps excessively so. After all, she's not helpless, nor is she a child anymore. Still, she's my daughter, so I'm always going to be overprotective. However, my kid's got a damn good point.

I reach toward the bubbling faerie spring and tap into the bit of magic the frost nymph taught me a while back. Ice crystals rapidly form into the shape of a glimmering crystalline longsword. Here, surrounded by all this glowing blue magical light from Tammy's seeing spell, the sword almost appears ordinary. However, unlike the apparitions and partial buildings, my sword is really here. The light radiating from the ice blade is visible to anyone else who might be close by. It's not super bright, certainly less than a common flashlight. Still, in the complete darkness of a remote Peruvian mountain, any light is going to stand out. To mortals without paranormal eyes, this place has got to be pretty much pitch black.

At least having the sword in my hand works like a security blanket. It's a far cry from the Devil Killer—not going to be slaying any house-sized demons in one hit—but it's still a formidable weapon against the paranormal, especially having trained with the immortal swordmaster, Sebastian.

Tammy dispels this anchor and then heads up the trail to the sacred stone, called Intihuatana.

As expected, there's another anchor on the stone itself. Nine glowing men, bare-chested, ghostly, and wearing what I can only assume is Incan warrior garb, stand between us and the rock. Grass skirts or something like that hang around their waists. All of them have stylized wooden animal masks on. They're really abstract. I can't even begin to tell what kind of animal they're supposed to be. The men are armed with an assortment of clubs, bronze-tipped spears, and primitive-looking small axes. Unlike the other spirit echoes filling Machu Picchu, these nine dudes are staring straight at me. Well, mostly Tammy. There's no real way for me to know this other than a psychic imprint, but I can't shake the sense these guys are not from Machu Picchu. They are invaders, perhaps a small cult or some such thing that attacked the city.

Also, pretty sure they do not want us breaking *this* anchor.

"Ma... we got a problem." Tammy stops short. "Umm, make that nine problems."

7.

“I see them.” I raise my sword. “They’re not echoes, are they?”

“Nope. They’re only ghosts, though.” Tammy steels herself and resumes walking forward.

One of the warriors raises a bow and shoots an arrow at Tammy. I react on instinct, slashing the arrow out of the air before it can hit her. Or at least, that’s what I tried to do. My ice blade wiffs through the arrow like I tried to chop a hologram. Tammy, evidently not feeling threatened by a ghost arrow, doesn’t slow down.

The arrow strikes her in the chest and seems to absorb into her body, vanishing instead of coming out her back. She stops in her tracks with a gasp and clutches her chest, making the same face she does whenever she jams her bare toes into a piece of hard furniture.

“Tam?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

She wheezes, her breath fogging on the air as if we’re in Alaska, even though it’s pretty darn warm here. She coughs, then rasps, “Bad mojo. Don’t let them hit you.”

The other eight warriors charge at us. Five go for Tammy, three head my way.

I assume it will be useless to attempt parrying their strikes with my sword, since it passed ineffectually through the arrow. One nice thing about having inhuman strength is I can jump quite high. My body still weighs the same as any other mortal, so I’m basically a cat now, able to jump like six times my height straight up.

I grab my daughter and leap over the swarm of onrushing ghosts, avoiding their weapons. The instant we land on our feet, Tammy holds her right hand out and discharges a bright flash from her palm. Whatever she did is enough to make the spirits cringe and hesitate.

Not waiting to see what happens next, I spin around and lunge toward the Intihuatana stone, going for the ninth warrior—the one with a bow who shot Tammy. He tries to jump out of the way of my sword, but can't move fast enough. Ghost or not, he's still no faster than a mortal human.

Unfortunately, slashing my blade into his chest doesn't appear to do much. His incorporeal body offers almost no resistance. I say 'almost' because I did feel something, like slicing a knife through a bowl of pudding. Not too much more resistance than hitting air. He hesitates, seemingly confused for half a second—and pulls a crude knife from a sheath.

I think he's shocked my weapon wasn't completely useless. Dude is probably used to being totally immune to everything. Of course, it doesn't look like attacking him did anything more severe than make him angrier. At least he's upset at me now rather than Tammy.

Meanwhile, the other spirits seem focused on Tammy. She is, after all, the only one of us who is a threat to this curse. I can't get rid of it.

A bolt of green lightning appears in an instant, connecting Tammy's fingertips to the ground behind one of the ghosts. Crackling arcs of emerald light flicker inside the spirit's torso for half a second and disappear. The ghost seems more stunned than hurt.

Tammy makes an 'oh shit' face, then jumps out of the way of a club going for her head. I slash at the man who just tried to kill her. My sword passes without noticeable effect through his face and chest. Tammy backpedals from the ghosts, steps on a rock, and lands on her butt with ghosts closing in around her.

I throw myself at them, both my body and sword going through their ethereal forms. It feels like I've jumped into the arctic sea—with ice chunks. Weirdly, their blades and axes feel like semi-solid bits of sharpened ice. It's painful but I've had worse. For damn sure, anything they do to me will be significantly worse for Tammy. Best to keep them on me as much as I can.

Tammy rolls over onto her front. A second later, her body seems to collapse flat. A small furry critter zooms out of her deflated clothes and into the ruins. The ancient Incan (or whatever they are) warriors are evidently unprepared for the sudden change. Only one of them even tries to swing at her chipmunk form, missing by a comically wide margin. The bow guy shoots at her an instant before she disappears into a crack in the rocks. His arrow came within inches. Wow, an archer has to be scary good to hit a zooming chipmunk—or even miss it that closely.

There's not much I can do here. These ghosts are cheating. They're not solid to me except when they want to be. My ice sword is great and all, but if it is having any effect on them, it's so slight, I'll be here for hours before destroying even one of them.

I need some help. As much as I don't want to disappear and leave my daughter here, I have to trust she can keep herself safe for at least two minutes.

Again, I leap into the air to avoid the ghosts, throwing myself about fifteen feet straight up. This time, I extend my wings and hover out of their reach—well except for the one guy with the bow. He is distracted hunting for a small furry creature at the moment and doesn't try to shoot me.

I summon the dancing flame.

## 8.

I appear back in our hotel room.

Paxton's on the sofa watching TV. Or at least, she was watching TV before she fell asleep there. Allison's in bed. Sorry, Allie. I grab her shoulder and shake her while simultaneously summoning the dancing flame again.

Allie wakes up a second after we appear in the ruins of Machu Picchu. I aimed for the main square, which should be far enough away from the Intihuatana stone that we won't be under immediate attack.

"Sam?" Allison blinks up at me.

I haul her to her feet. "Sorry. Emergency. Ghosts—or something like them—are trying to kill us. Nothing I'm doing is bothering them. Tammy made some kind of green lightning and it didn't seem to hurt them much, either."

Allison yawns, then stretches, then sighs down at herself. "This is the first time I've battled the forces of evil in my pajamas. How did these ghosts get here?"

"I dunno. Maybe they took Spirit Airlines." I sigh.

Allison stares at me.

"No time to explain, and I really don't know. Something about my presence here stirred up a bunch of badness."

"You're not wearing pajamas," says Tammy from behind us. "That's a big T-shirt."

I twist around.

Tammy, in her conjured dress of leaves, moss, and vines—her attire when she loses her clothing after shifting—and creeps out the doorway of a ruined building.

"I sleep in it," says Allison. "So, it qualifies as pajamas."

Tammy walks up to stand by us. "We have to get back to the stone and deal with those spirits."

“Right, to lift the curse.” I exhale.

“Ma, they have my damn cell phone.” Tammy folds her arms. “It’s in my pocket.”

Allison takes a few rapid breaths, trying to wake up. “You don’t have pockets.”

“My regular clothes are up there.” Tammy points. “Had to make a rapid—and furry—retreat.”

One might think she’s kidding about saving her iPhone from the ghosts. Anyone who does never had a teenage daughter. She protects that thing almost as much as I protect her. Then again, most adults treat their phones nearly the same way these days.

Allison frowns. “Tam, isn’t that life energy spell supposed to incapacitate spirits?”

She must be talking about the bolt of emerald light Tammy summoned.

“Yeah.” My daughter shrugs. “It didn’t really do much to them.”

“Because they’re not ghosts.” I say. “Could they be something else?”

“What?” chorus Allie and Tammy simultaneously.

I gesture at my kid. “If that green lightning spell you used is supposed to wreck the undead but it barely did anything to them... wouldn’t that imply they’re *not* undead?”

Allison raises her eyebrows. “Yeah. You’d think. Maybe they’re just magical simulacrums or something. Like ghosts but not made of actual spirit material. Did you try dispelling them?”

Yeah, I’m a bit lost, too, with all this hocus pocus talk.

“Umm.” Tammy fidgets. “No. Was a bit preoccupied trying not to have my head caved in.”

The nine Incan ghost things glide into view on the trail, heading toward us.



“Here they come,” I say.

“Oh, wow.” Allison stares. “They’re ripped as hell.”

“Focus, Allie.”

“Right.” She hurls one of her amber energy bolts, perhaps as a test. Her bolt nails a club-toting warrior spirit in the chest, causing the entire apparition to disintegrate into a luminous cloud for a second or so before reforming back to the man, at which point, he shrieks a war cry...

And runs directly at my witchy friend.

## 9.

Allison backpedals from the spirit charging her.

Can't fault her. That's a fairly ordinary reaction for any woman to have at a big, muscular man trying to kill her with a stone-headed club. At least she's not screaming and sprinting away at full speed. My bestie girl has some nerve.

I run at the man attacking Allie, flinging myself at the club in his hand. He jerks to a halt, his body yanked around by his grip on the club that refuses to pass through me. It takes the spirit half a second to realize what happened, then the club goes incorporeal and slips away from me.

Dammit.

Allie shoves her hands at the spirit. Right as he turns to attack her again, he explodes in a flash of light. "Yes! It's working, Sam. They aren't ghosts. They must be conjurations. It's a spell, not entities."

"I don't care what you call them. They're seriously annoying."

Tammy yells a word that would normally get her grounded for two weeks. It rhymes with truck. I don't have time to be upset that she is now old enough to say that without being grounded. A spirit just walloped her in the gut with an ax. My daughter might have faerie magic, but she's still only as fast as a normal teenager. She also doesn't have any combat training. Suffice to say, Incan warriors are going to kick her ass six ways from Sunday if they get close to her.

Problem is, four of them have already gotten close to her.

I let out a mama bear roar and charge. The only reason my sanity is still holding on is their weapons aren't fully real. That ax did not slice my daughter open. It's doing 'cold' damage or something like that. I dunno. Spirit stuff. Tammy's reacting more like she got punched than smacked with a hatchet.

Even if my ice blade isn't doing very much actual harm to these things, the fury with which I throw myself at them drives them back from Tammy. I'm also putting myself in the way.

A flash comes from behind me and to the left. Allison got another one.

I deliver a near perfect slash that should have decapitated the guy with the ax. Doesn't do a damn thing to him.

He explodes in a flicker of light.

Or did it?

"Hah!" Tammy cackles. "Eat that!"

Oh, nope. Wasn't me. She got him.

A bit of scurrying around in circles later, the final Incan apparition disappears in a flash as Allison and Tammy both dispel it at the same time. I ache all over. Everywhere on my body that one of those weapons made contact with me pulses in time with my heartbeat. Not going to complain. I've been in way more pain than this before. This is merely annoying, like I fell down the stairs. As some of my former colleagues at HUD would say, this is a 'one-Advil' problem. We used to use an Advil scale for how much of a headache something was.

"Are you okay, Tam?"

"Yeah." She rubs her stomach. "Might have a bruise later, though."

True to her age, she reclaims her phone first, then proceeds to dispel the final curse anchor. I'm not prepared for what happens next. All the previous anchors disappeared with a flash and a sense of severe vertigo. This one, however, releases a shockwave that knocks all three of us to the ground, plus a thunderclap so damn loud I think they heard it back in California.

I swear for a few seconds, the sky above me turned bright neon purple with black stars. Oh, and something roared. It sounded far away, a shriek with a definitely avian twang mixed in with something much deeper. Kinda reminds me of

the angry T-Rex screaming in *Jurassic Park*. Whatever spirit beast had been trying to cross over is angry.

Still flat on my back, I stare up at the night sky—which is once again normal looking. “Was that supposed to happen?”

“No idea,” says Tammy.

“This is comfy.” Allison yawns. “Tempted to just sleep right here in the grass.”

“But is it over?” I ask.

Tammy sits up, looks around. “Yeah. I think so. All the energy in the curse just dissipated.”

“Any clue what happened here?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Umm. Not really sure. If I had to guess, I think the city got attacked by some outside force. Is anyone sure why the Incans abandoned the city when they did? Maybe this had something to do with it.”

“Right... probably not worth worrying about at this point. It was done and over with a really long time ago.” I sit up and glance at Allison, who’s closed her eyes. “Are you really going to sleep here?”

“Yes.” She smiles. “Unless you’re going to carry me back to our hotel.”

I chuckle. “Least I can do for dragging you out of bed.”

Tammy hastily gathers up her clothes like she’s the mistress in some other man’s house and the wife just came home. That makes me raise an eyebrow. Can’t say she’s being lazy and not changing here since she’s going to bed anyway once we’re back at the hotel. Nope. She’s got an ‘oh crap’ look on her face, which means we need to get out of here in a hurry.

“Someone’s coming,” whispers Tammy while pointing west.

I glance that way. Sure enough, flashlights. Two of them. Looks like security is coming. Yeah, that thunderclap was loud as hell... and the flash. Oh, hey. That illusion from Tammy’s spell making all the buildings look ‘whole’ and ghostly has

stopped. Probably a good idea to get out of here before the security team sees us.

Speaking of not being seen, I dispel the ice sword. No light. It would lead them right to us. And yeah, I could always command them to stop, but sometimes it's fun to play along.

Allison and Tammy take my hands.

I call the dancing flame, concentrating on our hotel room and some nice, warm beds.

Our surroundings change in an instant. No one shouted, so maybe I won't be responsible for any new ghost stories. Tammy heads to the bathroom to change. I set Allison back in bed, then go scoop Paxton up and transplant her from the sofa to the second bed. The kids are sharing one bed, Allie and I in the other.

Well, so much for a quiet vacation. I'd say let's hope that was the most exciting thing to happen on this trip... but somehow, I doubt it will be.

My luck.

*The End*



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# *Moon Impossible*

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(read on for a sample)

## 1.

Hanging on for dear life has been something of a metaphor for me ever since that night in Hillcrest Park. At the moment, though... hanging on is a bit more literal. I'm clinging to the landing gear of a helicopter that's hauling ass out to sea.

It's a pretty nice one, to be honest. I don't know much about helicopters, so I can't tell if it's like a Chevy or a Ford, so to speak. Looks like one of those things the corporate bigwigs use to skip city traffic. This one's got wheels instead of skids. The wheel I ended up clinging to has folded up into a pod on the side of the helicopter. Thankfully, there's no door, or this would have been an extremely tight squeeze.

So, yeah. I'm dangling by a grip on a metal shaft, itself too fat to get my whole hands around. It's insanely loud and there's a bit of wind. Okay, more than a bit. There's a crap-ton of wind. It's only thanks to my superhuman strength I haven't fallen yet. Might be leaving some finger indentations in this metal. Someone's going to have fun explaining that when they take this bird in for maintenance.

A black bag falls from above, obviously thrown out from the helicopter, and careens down toward the ground, heading for the coastal highway. Ack! Hope it doesn't hit a car. Huh... what the heck would the people inside be ditching? Weird. Not going to worry about that now. I'm too busy trying not to lose my grip.

Not all that worried, though. I have been known to flagrantly break the law before. The law of gravity, to be precise. If I fall, I'll just pop my wings and deal with it. Sometimes, it really is quite inconvenient having to keep the supernatural stuff quiet. My current problem would've been so much easier if I didn't have to pretend to be normal.

When I took this case, the last thing I ever expected was to end up dangling off a helicopter. I mean, that's not the sort of thing you expect when you're hired to tail a suspected cheating spouse. Well, in this case, fiance.

Yeah, I know. So stereotypical. But people really do that. And hey, it's money. My kids need to eat. Well, at least two of them. Anthony loves to eat, though it's kinda debatable to me now if he *has* to.

And I suppose Tammy could always go run down a deer if she got desperate. Hmm. I wonder. If she eats something while shapeshifted into a panther, how would that work? I mean, a big cat has a larger stomach than my relatively petite daughter. Would the amount of food shrink magically? Would she make a mess? Get sick? Or... have to stay as a cat until it digested?

Bleh. I'm distracting myself.

The helicopter turns, heading for a boat in the distance. Oh, good grief. Seriously? I thought the bank robbery was 'action movie' already. This is getting ridiculous. Bank robbery, you say? How did I go from tailing a guy to hanging on a helicopter?

Let's just say I've got the most Monday case of the Mondays to have ever Mondayed.

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## *About the Authors:*

**J.R. Rain** is the international bestselling author of over ninety novels, including his popular Samantha Moon and Jim Knighthorse series. His books are published in five languages in twelve countries, and he has sold more than 3 million copies worldwide.

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Originally from South Amboy NJ, **Matthew S. Cox** has been creating science fiction and fantasy worlds for most of his reasoning life. Since 1996, he has developed the “Divergent Fates” world, in which Division Zero, Virtual Immortality, The Awakened Series, The Harmony Paradox, and the Daughter of Mars series take place.

Matthew is an avid gamer, a recovered WoW addict, Gamemaster for two custom systems, and a fan of anime, British humour, and intellectual science fiction that questions the nature of reality, life, and what happens after it.

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