

# THANKSGIVING MOON

A  
VAMPIRE FOR HIRE  
STORY



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*A Vampire for Hire Story*

*by*

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## **Thanksgiving Moon**

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# *Thanksgiving Moon*

## 1.

Family has always been important to me, even if I haven't been important to them in equal measure.

No, I don't mean my kids. I'm mostly talking there about Danny and his parents... and well, my parents, too. It's getting close to Thanksgiving again and this time of year always hits me right in the feels. Admittedly, I don't really miss my parents much. No, they're not dead, though both have been kind of 'dead' to me (and all of my siblings) for a long time now. Dad didn't really have the patience or time for children. Mom is... distracted. Given all the craziness going on in my life, it wouldn't surprise me if someone told me my mother always seemed 'absent' because she'd been halfway into another dimension talking to bizarre aliens all the time.

Fortunately for my brothers and I, we had Mary Lou. Not fortunate for her. No child should ever have to become 'mom' to her siblings, but there we were. Sometimes I wonder if she truly enjoyed that role or adapted to it out of necessity. Mary Lou, or ML, didn't really get much of a chance to have a childhood of her own. I have no idea who or what makes decisions of this nature, but I really hope her next life is full of innocence and joy, where she can have a great childhood.

If karma is a thing, she really deserves that.

Anyway...

Family is what I make of it now. Tammy is so different from how she was in her mid-teens. That surly 'I hate the world' teenager is gone. Now she totes adores having her mom around. Anthony is happy to be with us, though I can't help but get the feeling from him that he's keenly aware he's on

borrowed time. He's enjoying the time he's got to be with us until his other paranormal obligations pull him away. It's anyone's guess how long that will be. If he got permission to 'protect his siblings' for as long as they live, that might be a lot longer than the angels expected... or maybe they knew this would happen all along.

Whatever. I'll take having my kids around for as long as I can.

Yes, I am that clingy mom.

Immortality has certain disadvantages. Namely, knowing that my family is not going to be around forever. Granted, Anthony's already got his proverbial golden ticket. Whatever happens to him, he'll end up as an angel someday. As for Tammy, who knows what all that nature-slash-faerie magic is going to do? Allison likes to go on and on about how the faeries love to take pity on humans for having such a tragically short lifespan, and sometimes intervene. Turns out, the little critters can't bestow *true* immortality, merely the absence of aging. So if it's happened to Tammy, she won't grow any older but she wouldn't get back up from any violent situation that would kill an ordinary person.

The sad case is Paxton. Well, sad as in 'merely normal.' Kiddo's got some mild psychic talents but is otherwise an ordinary person. It's kind of bizarre to think that a normal human lifespan feels tragically short. Speaking of family, she is overjoyed to finally have one. She's been buzzing about like the president of the school social club getting ready for homecoming, trying to make sure everything is good and ready for Thanksgiving.

Tammy made a semi-serious joke about Paxton being like a cat. We took her in knowing she'll grow old and we'll lose her at some point... then we get another cat.

Sigh. The crazy part is, that might just be my fate. I am definitely still overprotective of my kids. Not sure I'd know what to do with myself if I didn't have a kid to look after. Maybe there's more of Mary Lou in me than I thought.

So, yeah. It's Thanksgiving in a few days, and we have big plans. We're all going to Mary Lou's place since her house is huge, way bigger than mine. No, they're not rich. Rick grew up in that place. His parents bought it many years ago when the cost of housing wasn't insane.

Anyway, my whole brood, plus Kingsley and Allison—we invited her because I won't let her spend a holiday home alone—are going there for a giant dinner. We're going to need a turkey the size of an ostrich, and that's just for Kingsley. Also, I'm not letting Mary Lou do all the work. Pax is totally into helping out in the kitchen and stuff. Tammy is less thrilled about that, but willing to contribute. I'll be elbow deep in stuffing myself. Allison as well. So, yeah, we'll be a bunch of kitchen witches.

No, I'm not complaining at all. The number of times we'll be able to have such a big gathering are finite. Time is heartless, after all. Need to enjoy these moments as often as they're available—even if it means hours working in a kitchen.

With no pressing cases, I find myself laying on my couch smiling at the ceiling while memories of my kids being small dance around my mind. It's tempting to think about my 'next cat' being small when I adopt them. They're a lot of work but I do miss having a four-year-old around. Oh, come on, Sam. Get a grip.

And that's when my doorbell rings.

## 2.

It's unusual for that to happen without me already expecting someone is on the way.

People don't do the door-to-door sales thing much anymore. Unexpected doorbell ringing only happens on Halloween these days. That means this is likely a Jehovah's Witness, Mormons, or someone doing political canvassing. Back when I'd been a blood vampire, it had been super tempting to greet those sorts of unwanted guests with a fangs-out glowing-eye hiss. Not like anyone would believe them if they told anyone what they saw.

The thought of scaring the hell out of a pushy door knocker makes me smile.

Before I can summon the urge to move, Tammy and Paxton have a near collision in the dining room behind the couch. Pax running in from the kitchen, Tammy running down the hall from her room. My older daughter might be eighteen now, but she's still got that childlike urge to be the first one to get the door when the bell rings. It's cute.

The girls have a Wild West stare-down, then seemingly decide without a word to share the opportunity and get the door together. They walk over and open it enough to peer out.

"Hi there," says a youngish sounding man outside, seeming a bit unsure of himself. "Is there a Samantha Chase here?"

I blink. Wow. No one has called me that in decades.

"Umm," says Tammy. "I think you've got the wrong house."

Paxton peers out the door for a long few seconds, then turns her head to look at me. "Mom, there's an elf outside."

The male voice chuckles.



“He’s not an elf.” Tammy sets her hands on her hips, then whispers, “But he’s not normal.”

Chuckling from outside. “I’ve heard that before.”

Dammit. His voice is kinda familiar but I can’t put my finger on why it is.

“He looks like mischief in human form,” mumbles Tammy.

I blink again. No way... I’ve heard someone described that way once before. The odds of Tammy using the exact same phrase are astronomical. Unless she picked up on it somehow psychically.

“He kinda does.” Pax snickers. “But umm, there’s no one here named Samantha Chase.”

“Hold on.” I sit up. “There kinda is. That was my name before I married their father.”

“You got married?” blurts the guy outside. “Sam?”

I wave at the girls to invite the man in. Not like I’ve got any reason to be afraid of a single guy. He also doesn’t sound dangerous; plus, my inner alarm is silent. Tammy and Paxton take a step back, pulling the door fully open.

A man steps in, offering them a nod of thanks and a big—as Dad would say, ‘shit-eating grin.’

I nearly fall off the sofa, unable to believe my eyes.

It’s my brother, Clayton.

The crazy part isn’t that he found me or that he’s bothered to come to visit... it’s that he still looks exactly the same as the last time I saw him. He *should* be a couple years short of turning fifty but this guy standing in my living room looks like he’s not even twenty-one yet. My brain struggles to conjure up the memory of when I’d last seen Clay. I’d still been in high school. He’s two years older than me, though now *looks* younger. Of all my siblings, he’d been the most ‘hippie’ of our family, just like our parents. Sure, we all had the innocent ‘clothes are merely an option’ days of summer during our childhood. Clay really hated clothes. I swear if he could’ve

gone to school naked, he would have. He'd always been a carefree sort of kid. Most normal people would've called him lazy. The last time I saw him, he'd decided to go wander the world and 'see stuff'. One day, he just packed up a bag and headed out. And that was it.

Fortunately, he seems to have finally outgrown his hatred of fabric. He looks a bit like a ranch hand, honestly. Flannel shirt, jeans, cowboy boots. His eyes are a little different than I remember, and his nose is a tiny bit sharper. And yeah, he really hadn't aged a single day.

"Clay?" I ask in a semi-hesitant tone while standing. "Is that really you?"

"Sam! You look amazing." He walks over, arms wide.

Every sense I have goes on full blast looking for any trace of demonic trickery. Clay always was roguishly cute. He got away with *so* much stuff as a kid because of how adorable he looked and acted. This cuteness has evolved into handsome charm. Somehow, there's nothing about him that's setting off any alarm bells in my head. As impossible as this is to believe, it really feels like it's him.

I approach and hug him. "Speak for yourself there, Clay." I lean back and look him over again. "Did you find the Fountain of Youth?"

Before he an answer, Paxton leans forward and closes the door. "He's not a vampire."

Clayton chuckles. "Of course not." A moment later, his smile fades and he gives me a weird sideways stare. "Wait. Are you a vampire? Is that why you look so young?"

I give him a half-shrug. Since my brother is clearly affected by magic of some sort, I decide it's safe to come clean. "It's complicated. Technically, yes. But I'm not undead." Oh, and he's sporting a full aura, which I'm sure Tammy can see as well. Whatever's happened to him, he's not immortal.

"Faeries," says Paxton suddenly.

“Oh, yeah.” Tammy goes wide-eyed. “Of course. It’s all over him. More than the weed.”

Clayton laughs.

I stare at the youngest of my three brothers. “Did faeries whisk you off into their realm for another childhood, too?”

“No, well, not for another childhood, anyway.” He grins.

“That was me.” Tammy raises her hand.

“Seriously?” Clay leans forward to peer around me at her. “Sam, she looks just like you.” he smiles and bows slightly. “You must be my niece.”

Tammy and I chuckle. People mistake us for sisters all the time now. But thanks to faerie magic, it’s now kind of an unknown if it’s ever going to change to someday people thinking she’s my mother. If Clayton is any indication there, Tammy’s going to stay young forever. Though, she might start to take on some elvish features. Nothing so obvious as pointed ears. Just... a tweak of eye shape, thinner nose, that sort of thing. Probably a side effect of the faerie’s magic.

“So, what happened to you?” I ask.

“Spent a lot of time with the fey.” Clay picks at his jeans. “Remember how Mary Lou would freak out when I’d sometimes disappear for most of a day?”

“Yeah.” Realization hits me almost as hard as a slap. “You were visiting the faerie world as a kid?”

“Yep.” He grins. “Our family line’s got connections to some kind of ancestral magic.”

I nod. “Yeah. I know.”

“They found me wandering out by Stilson’s Pond one day.” He gazes wistfully off into nowhere. “Think I was about seven.”

“You went all the way to Stilson’s Pond alone at seven?” I gasp. “Mary Lou would’ve lost her mind. That’s like a three-mile hike into the woods behind the house.”

Clayton shrugs at me like it's no big deal for a little boy to go into the woods alone. "So what? Kids were left to their devices back in those days. Besides, it's not like anyone would've abducted me out there."

"Creeps are only one problem." I give an exasperated sigh, as if I'm worrying about someone who is still a child. "Wild animals, falling into a hole... Bigfoot..."

He chuckles. "Hey, I'm still here, ain't I?"

Tammy seems to be studying his face. "Did the faeries teach you magic?"

"A little." He tilts his hand in a so-so manner. "They mostly taught me how to not get older. Oh, and how to see and hear better than most people."

Meanwhile, Anthony seems to have finally noticed there's someone in the house he's never seen before. Takes quite a bit to peel him off his games sometimes. Wonder how the angels will deal with that? 'Go forth and slay this demon' and he's like 'yeah, one sec. Almost done with this level.'

Anthony walks in. "Hey, ma. What's up?"

"Oh, damn." Clayton peers up at him. "I really have been away for a while. This is your son?"

"He is." I give Anthony's shoulder a squeeze while beaming with pride.

Clayton gives Ant a once-over with his eyes. "Something crazy going on with him, too. His aura is seriously intense."

Anthony flashes a mild grin. "Our family is kinda special. So, who is this guy?"

"My brother, Clayton." I say. "Clay, this is Anthony."

"Cool." Ant shakes hands with him.

Clayton turns to me. "So, Sam... what happened to you?"

### 3.

We sit there for a while exchanging stories.

Paxton and Tammy join us on the sofa. Pax sits next to him. I don't go into *too* much detail about my crazy life, but I do tell him some things I wouldn't share with just anyone. Obviously, if he's aware of the existence of vampires already and eyeball deep in faerie stuff, it's not like I'm spilling anything secret to someone who doesn't already know.

Apparently, after he left home that day, he spent a few years in the faerie realm before popping back and forth to explore pretty much the entire world, except for the Arctic and Antarctica. He hasn't exactly been absolutely everywhere, though it sounds like he's visited every country at least once.

"Well, as wonderful as it is to see you again—" I nudge him. "I suspect you didn't drop by only to catch up with family."

He looks a tiny bit guilty. "I didn't come here to ask for money, if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't, but I am now."

"Curse!" blurts Tammy out of nowhere.

Clayton winces.

"Huh?" asks Paxton. "No one said a bad word."

"That's what's been bugging me about him." She stares at my brother. "You've got a curse on you."

Clayton holds his hands up like a caught thief. "Yeah. I was kinda hoping Sam would be able to help."

Okay. So, he didn't just come here to visit family. He needs help. That doesn't bother me. Some people look down on family that only shows up when they need something from you. I know Clayton. He hasn't actively been avoiding me or anyone else. The guy is simply a slave to his own whims. He's

the human equivalent of a goldfish: three second memory. Whatever is fun in the moment is what he chases, with the caveat it won't hurt anyone. He's a nice dude, just a bit thoughtless and careless sometimes. Also, something of a prankster. He used to love planting dead lizards or whatever around the place to scare me and Mary Lou.

Yes, I am ashamed to admit it, but I used to be one of those little girls who'd scream at stuff like that. Crazy how much life can change a person, right?

"Mom's not really an expert on curses." Tammy examines her fingernails. "Course, I'm not an expert either but probably better at dealing with them than she is."

"If the faerie like you, why did they curse you?" Paxton tilts her head at him.

"Because of the *truagh*." Clayton's expression momentarily darkens, almost to the point of becoming scary, as if he could easily kill someone.

Tammy scowls, as if she's heard that word before. Her reaction is almost like watching a World War II veteran hear someone mention Nazis.

"What the heck is a 'truagh'?" I ask. Whatever they are, they must be quite bad if they can motivate Clayton to a near murderous rage.

"They're a kind of faerie." He swipes at his longish blond hair, pulling it away from his eyes. "It basically means 'the wretched.'"

"Evil faeries?" Paxton gasps.

"Wickedly evil," adds Tammy, frowning.

Clayton nods. "Yeah. They're definitely not the cute little Barbie-dolls-with-wings faeries. In fact, these little bastards aren't pretty at all. Some of 'em basically look like goblins. Others are small and can fly, but they've got oversized heads and nasty teeth."

"Are you saying the *truagh* cursed you?" Tammy raises an eyebrow. "That's kind of odd for them. They usually prefer

more immediate violence.”

“Not quite. I said I was cursed *because* of the truagh.” Clayton fidgets the same way he did whenever he had to tell Mary Lou he got in trouble at school. “You see, I sorta ‘work for’ the faeries. It’s like a deal we made in exchange for the whole eternal youth thing. Basically, I messed up a job and they cursed me.”

“Cursed you how, exactly?” asks Tammy.

“The curse makes me itch like crazy whenever I try to relax and do nothing.” He twitches.

My eldest daughter purses her lips. “Annoying, but that doesn’t sound *too* horrible.”

Clayton grimaces. “I haven’t slept in three days.”

“Oof. Yeah, okay. That’s awful.”

Clayton looks at me. “Wasn’t really sure how to fix this until I got some advice that you, my youngest sister of all people, might be able to help me. Sorry about not being around much.”

“It’s okay. I get it.” I squeeze him. “You’ve always been easily distracted, and you probably figured I’d freak out at you still being young. Most people can’t handle supernatural craziness.”

He nods. “Yeah, bit of that, too.”

I put an arm around his shoulders. “If it’s possible for me to do anything to help, I will. But first... out with it. What did you mess up, Clay?”

He gives me this ‘don’t hate me’ face. “I was supposed to be staking out this house and watching for truagh. I, uhh, might’ve dozed off and slept right through them kidnapping a baby.”

Tammy and Paxton gasp.

#### 4.

“So the faeries punished you for failing your mission with an itch curse?” Anthony idly drums his fingers on his knee. “That’s getting off light, especially with a baby involved.”

“He was lazy, so they made him itch if he’s lazy.” Paxton fidgets.

“Except, if he can’t sleep at all, he’s going to go insane eventually.” I exhale hard. “And please tell me this baby wasn’t hurt.”

Clayton nods, and now I see the weight of guilt and exhaustion on his young face. “There still should be some time left.”

“Should be?” I fight the urge to jump to my feet. “What’s going to happen to the baby?”

“They are likely already in the midst of a ritual to transform it into a trugh,” says Tammy. “It takes about a week. Sometimes less.”

“And we’ve already lost three days?” I snap at Clayton, not really meaning to.

He holds up his hands in surrender. “Sorry. I didn’t know you could help right away, or I’d have been here sooner. Spent a while trying to fix it myself and I can’t.”

“Recover the baby, break the curse,” says Tammy.

“Good guess.” He nods.

“I know how faeries think.” She frowns at him. Wow, she looks so much like Mary Lou being disappointed in him.

“Okay.” I stand. “Let’s go get this baby.”

“It’s not quite as easy as it sounds.” Clayton also stands. “There’s an ogre, too.”

Anthony lightly punches a fist into his other hand. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”



“This is probably going to require a trip to the faerie realm.” Tammy sighs. “Anthony can’t go there.”

My son grumbles. He’s frustrated at not being able to help. It does kinda suck sometimes that being an immortal creature of power comes with certain restrictions and rules. I recall my journey into the underworld. Only the dead or fallen could venture into such a place. That worked out for me... and for Ishmael, my fallen ex-guardian angel. According to Tammy, angelic beings can’t traverse the fey realm. Seems my son is enough of an angel now to smash into that law of the universe face first.

“Darn.” Paxton snaps her fingers in disappointment. “I bet he’d have kicked an ogre’s butt.”

“Don’t ignore Mom.” Tammy nods sideways at me. “Pretty sure she can beat an ogre.”

I glance back and forth between them. “Is someone going to tell me exactly how dangerous this ogre is?”

“It’s huge. It’s strong.” Clayton pantomimes swinging a giant club. “Amazingly fast. Much more than you’d expect from looking at it. Also, damn good eyesight. I tried to sneak past it and it caught me every time.”

“So, we have to kill it?” Tammy drags herself off the couch to stand.

“Not necessarily.” Clayton paces. “All we really *need* to do is get past it into the portal it’s guarding... and then get past him again on the way out. Obviously, killing it will make going through the portal much easier. However, killing it isn’t easy.”

“Is this thing evil or just a creature?” I ask. “If it’s truly evil, I suppose killing it is an option.”

“Well, it defends the truagh, which are evil.” Clayton stops pacing. “But the ogre itself is just kinda dumb and loyal.”

My doorbell rings again.

What the hell?

## 5.

Tammy, being closest, rushes over to answer. She opens the door, peeks out, then pulls the door all the way open. “Hey, Allie. Good timing!”

Allison—her arms loaded with grocery bags—makes her way in. “Good timing? Did you guys forget we’re baking today?”

“Crap!” I blurt. “It totally slipped my mind.”

Allison stares over the bundle of bags at me. “How could you forget our Thanksgiving pie bake-a-thon?”

“Evil faerie kidnapped an infant and we’re about to go after them,” I say.

Allison blinks, then keeps staring. “Are you messing with me?” She blinks again at my brother. “Ooh, who is that?”

“Clayton.”

“No way.” Allie starts for the kitchen. “He’s way too young to be your brother.”

Clayton laughs.

“Faerie stuff,” says Tammy. “Long story. You wanna help with this?”

“What about the pies?” Allison stops amid a rustle of grocery bags.

“I can get started on those.” Anthony walks over to her, reaching as if to take the bags from her. “Shouldn’t take you guys too long.”

“That works,” I say to Anthony. “You can keep an eye on Pax.”

“I’m not a little kid,” Paxton fake grumbles. She’s trying to be brave. Truth is the kiddo hates being alone.

Anthony twists back to face us, pauses half a second, then makes eye contact with me. “You should bring her with you, ma.”

“What?” Paxton and I blurt simultaneously.

“Trust me. Just bring her,” says Anthony.

Allison hands over the bags. “Oh, I hope this doesn’t take too long. I really enjoy baking.”

“Allie, there’s a baby’s life at stake.” I flail my arms. “How can you even be worried about baking?”

“Sarcasm fail.” Allison shakes her head at me. “Can’t you tell by now when I’m kidding?”

Paxton clasps her hands at her chest, staring up at me with this ‘wait, are you serious’ expression. She’s wearing a plain pink dress and a fabric anklet, no shoes... which is pretty normal for her inside the house.

As much as I am uneasy at the idea of bringing her on something potentially dangerous, Anthony seemed quite confident in his intuition. I’ll trust him.

“Pax, go put your sneakers on. Dark faerie forests are full of thorns and stuff,” I say.

Allison goes with Anthony into the kitchen while Tammy runs down the hall to her room to get ready. Pax darts after her, no doubt heading to her own room to get sneakers.

The girls return together. Tammy’s barefoot, now wearing a dress of leaves and vines. Paxton’s got her sneakers on, the ones with pink blinking lights in the soles. One kid looks like she’s ready to go to the mall, the other one’s dressed for a Renaissance festival.

“How come she doesn’t have to wear shoes?” asks Paxton.

“As soon as you’re proficient in faerie magic, you can go barefoot in the evil forest too,” I say... not entirely sure how much is serious or sarcasm.

Clayton finds this all hilarious.

After a quick trip to my room to change out of my lazy-at-home outfit of a T-shirt and sweat pants for proper outdoor clothing, I rejoin everyone in the living room. Anthony is alone in the kitchen sorting the baking supplies Allie brought.

“Okay, so where to?” I ask.

“Do you have a car?” Clayton flashes a hopeful smile. “I had to hitchhike down here.”

“Yes, but... where do we need to go?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

“A bit past Stilson’s Pond.” He kicks the toe of his boot at the rug.

Tammy groans. “It’ll take us hours to drive to Northern Cali.”

“Tam...” I roll my eyes. “You know better than that. Who said anything about driving?”

She laughs. “Wow, ma. Your sarcasm detector is not working today.”

“Seriously,” mutters Allison.

My turn to sigh. “There’s an infant in danger. I’m anxious.”

“Mom mode activate,” says Tammy in a robotic voice.

I hold my hands out. Tammy and Pax grab hold on either side of me. Allison takes hold of Paxton’s hand and reaches for Clayton, as does Tammy.

“What’s up?” Clayton peers at their hands in confusion. “Hand holding? Not sure a friendship circle is going to matter here.”

“Just do it,” I say.

And so he does...

## 6.

Hmm. Stilson's Pond. It's been years since I visited that place. Not since I was a kid.

Modern children would find it insanely boring. With all sorts of electronic toys, video games, and phones to play on now, just 'going outside to play' seems a foreign concept. Heck, my entire childhood would probably have gotten my parents thrown in jail and us put into foster care with today's mindset. Five kids under twelve going by themselves miles into the woods without an adult, then swimming in a pond unsupervised? I can hear the internet parents freaking out already.

It isn't too difficult for me to conjure up a mental image of the place. A vision of the woods near our parents' house comes into view in my mind. I have no idea if the place looks the same as I remember, but it shouldn't matter. In seconds, the dancing flame appears, growing taller, brighter, and wider.

Soon it's as big as a doorway. A hollow appears amid the fire, revealing forest and a large pond with dark grey rocks on both sides. I mentally step through the gateway, and instantly, the air around me changes, becoming colder and damper. The soft continuous burbling of flowing water fills my ears along with the hiss of a light breeze in the trees and the intermittent chirping of birds.

"Holy crap!" blurts Clayton. "What the hell?"

"Mom's got some tricks," says Paxton.

I open my eyes and have an instant nostalgia hit. We might have lived poor, but things had been much, much simpler back then. My greatest worries had been if we'd have enough food... or trying not to get made fun of at school for wearing the same clothes too often... not trying to stop Elizabeth from destroying the world.

Ahh, innocence. Simpler times indeed.

“This way...” Clayton starts off.

Stilson’s Pond is generally large enough for swimming, though it’s not massive. A good running start is enough for a reasonably athletic person to jump entirely across it. It doesn’t get much more than three feet deep.

I pause to glance back over my shoulder in the general direction of my parents’ house... the place I grew up. It’s been years since I even saw Mom or Dad. There’s no animosity, really, even though Dad was *not* happy about my decision to go to college. He believed girls should stop after high school and just be wives and mothers. Should I make an effort to visit them again before they die? It is Thanksgiving, after all. Though, my parents didn’t really pay much attention to holidays. Could they handle seeing me still looking like I’m in my later twenties? Would it be worth trying to explain anything to them?

Meh. I don’t have time for these questions now. Really ought to confront them at some point, though. Just not while a baby’s life is at stake.

We follow Clayton past the pond.

“Whoa,” whispers Paxton. “The forest here feels mad.”

“Mad?” I ask.

Paxton looks around. “Yeah. It’s like the trees are all folding their arms and glaring at us like we did something bad.”

I look around. Don’t see anything out of the ordinary; however, I certainly do feel watched. Gotta be faeries. Pax is picking up on their mood. Damn. I think the same faeries that made contact with Clayton when we were kids tried to approach me, too. I didn’t believe they were real. Mary Lou told me to ignore them so I didn’t get labeled insane and put in a hospital for crazy people. Clayton never talked about seeing them, so he never had ML scare him into ignoring them.

“Here we are.” Clayton stops at a particularly large tree. He looks around much like a teenager about to spray paint a wall at school, then knocks three times on the trunk.

A portal of dark emerald green light swirls into existence.

Whatever anxiety Paxton had at this trip evaporates. She oohs and ahhs at the beautiful shimmering energy.

“Go on.” Clayton waves us past him. “It will close as soon as I go in, so I need to be last.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have any powers except not getting older?” Paxton approaches the portal.

“Opening doors isn’t that big a deal.” Clayton winks. “The door is already here. I just know how to knock.”

We step through...

7.

It feels like walking into a dense mass of cobwebs.

For a second, all I can see are various shades of green swirling around... then forest. Gone is the ordinary Northern California woods. Now, we're surrounded by immense trees covered in verdant moss. Vines laden with multicolored fruiting pods are everywhere. The undergrowth is knee high and copious. This entire place *smells* like nature. It's honestly invigorating. If corporate America could bottle and sell this scent, someone would be rich beyond anyone's imagining.

Clayton hurries into the fey forest with a mission.

It's rare to see him move with such determination and speed. Usually, he only did that when school ended and he headed for the door.

Paxton gets easily distracted by the sight of faeries flying around in the distance. They are so far away they resemble fireflies in various pastel colors. I keep hold of her hand to guide her from walking into trees or getting lost. Time works in strange ways here, apparently. Sometimes being here for a little while can skip years in the normal world. Other times, years can pass here and only minutes go by in the normal world. I don't understand how that works, nor do I really want to.

After what feels like almost an hour of hiking, Clayton stops and gets down behind a tree as if hiding from something. The rest of us take the cue and get low.

I move up beside him. "What's up?"

He points around the tree.

I look in that direction.

And... wow. Okay. Yeah, that's an ogre. It kinda resembles a caveman with a somewhat oversized, bald head, fat nose, potbelly, and tons of body hair. The creature's eyes



are comparatively small for its head. Were it standing, the ogre would likely be about twelve feet tall. It's presently sitting on the ground and it's still taller than us. The creature appears to be wearing a skirt made of animal pelts, probably deer or something similar. Near it on the ground is a dead tree. No, wait, that's a giant club.

A huge wreath of dead, thorny vines forms a massive ring a dozen feet behind the ogre. I can't help but think it looks like a portal from one of Anthony's video games. A faint haze of dark energy swirls inside the ring, giving off a palpable sense of evil. Whatever it is, the negative energy coming from that thorn ring is enough to push away the faerie forest, creating a clearing of flat ground about thirty feet in all directions where nothing green lives.

Bones of various kinds litter the ground beside the ogre. Thankfully, most appear to be animal.

"So, that's an ogre," says Paxton in a too-calm voice.

"It is." Clayton nods once.

Yeah, Pax is terrified. It's so bizarre how she reacts to something like this ogre with so much self-control... but if it's a tiny, harmless spider, she screams and freaks out.

"Okay. Basically we just need to go through that portal, right?" asks Tammy.

"Correct." Clayton taps his foot. "I've tried sneaking past it, throwing rocks to distract it... even circling around and going at the portal from behind. The damn thing stopped me every time."

"And he didn't kill you?" Paxton blinks.

Clayton examines his fingernails. "Oh, he tried. I'm just faster than him."

That's a nice way to say he's a bit too chicken to get close enough to be in real danger, I suspect. Yeah, Clay isn't the bravest fellow in the world. Though, given that he tried multiple times to get past that thing, he's clearly committed to protecting that baby. Maybe there is some hope for him. Could

be this faerie curse will teach him some responsibility for once in his life.

“Gonna try to lure it off.” Tammy drops to all fours... and shapeshifts into a panther.

Clayton nearly falls on his butt, staring in awe at her. “Whoa. Sam could get catty sometimes, but that’s taking it a bit far, no?”

Paxton covers her mouth to hold in the laugh.

Panther-Tammy gives Clayton an unimpressed glance before darting out from cover. She charges at the ogre like a giant housecat with the zoomies. With perfect accuracy—like any cat would have—she jumps into his lap, planting her weight in the most sensitive of spots. The ogre lets out a heaving groan of shock and pain as she jumps away from him and tears off into the woods.

Clayton grimaces in sympathetic male pain.

Geez, Tam. If you wanted the ogre to chase you, why did you hit it there? Now, he can’t move. I think it’s a cat thing. I dated this guy Mark in high school. He had a fat black and white tuxedo cat that did the same thing. Would always jump off the table beside the couch into his lap and nail him in the groin.

The ogre grumbles and glares after her, but doesn’t even bother to stand.

A moment later, she comes running back out of the weeds and scrambles over him. Like *really* over him. She starts on one shoulder, leaps onto his head, then back over to his other shoulder. The ogre tries to grab her, missing by inches, which is pretty shocking. Clayton’s right. This thing is fast, or at least it’s got good reflexes that totally don’t match its bulky appearance.

Again and again, Tammy makes crazy kitty strafing runs past the ogre—sometimes in front of it, sometimes across its lap, and sometimes leaping over the big guy. Unfortunate, the ogre remains firmly committed to sitting on its butt by the portal and not moving. Finally, she gives up and pads back

over to where we are and sits, giving off a huff of annoyance. Seconds later, she shapeshifts back to human form in her forest dress.

“Damn.” She scowls. “Stupid ogre.”

“He’s faster than he looks,” says Clay.

“Yeah. I noticed.” Tammy rubs her backside. “He got my tail twice.”

“Now what?” whispers Paxton.

“Unfortunately, I can’t summon my angel wings,” I say.

“No surprise there, ma,” says Tammy. “No angel magic here.”

I nod. “And he’s blocking the space in front of the portal,” I say. “I can’t see a landing space, though I suppose I could teleport us in the air above the portal and we could drop down...”

Tammy shakes her head. “Maybe as a last resort.” She glances at Allison. “That portal is tall. Maybe you could shrink us all and I’ll turn into a bird. Might be able to fly out of his reach.”

“Did you notice the giant club beside him?” Clayton nudges Tammy on the shoulder. “Birdie baseball does not sound fun.”

Paxton holds up one finger. “I hereby request that we not go splat.”

“Ooh!” Allison rubs her hands, grinning like a cartoon villain. “Idea.”

“Uh oh.” I pretend to lean away from her in fear. “I don’t like that look in your eye.”

Allison pats Tammy on the head and steps out from behind the tree. “She gave me an idea.”

“Is this going to be terrifying?” asks Paxton.

“Maybe.” Allison stretches her arms like she’s about to do Tai Chi. “Get ready to run.”

“Away, or to the portal?” asks Clayton.

Allie leans her head side to side, cracking her neck.  
“Depends on what happens.”

“I love her confidence.” Clay smiles at me.

Allison focuses her concentration on the ogre. She slowly raises her hands out on either side as if lifting energy out of the earth around her. After a few seconds, she thrusts one hand forward at the creature.

The ogre abruptly shrinks to the size of a human toddler... and it doesn't even seem to notice. It just keeps on snoozing.

“Now's our chance!” Clayton sprints out from cover, heading for the portal.

## 8.

As we follow, I can't help my overprotective nature, so I pull Paxton up on my back and carry her.

She's all too happy to cling to me instead of running for herself. Helps that I can move a lot faster than a mortal. I zoom past Clayton and charge at the giant thorny ring. It's really huge. The ogre could've walked through it at full size and still had a few feet of head room.

Speaking of the ogre, it sees me coming—and screams as if he doesn't understand he shrank. He thinks we're massive. Still, he tries to grab at me, playing goalie. This thing might be fast, but he's not prepared for vampire reflexes. His fingertips brush the back of my left calf, missing by a hair. The instant I pass through the root ring, the forest turns black and foreboding.

I skid to a stop a short distance away from the thorn ring.

Clayton appears behind me, followed by Allison three seconds later.

No sign of Tammy. I turn in place, starting to get worried. "Tam?"

"Here," chirps a tiny voice beside me.

I peer down at a sparrow... that promptly erupts upward and, spinning, turns into my daughter. She drops lightly to the ground.

Suddenly, Paxton breaks down, sobbing.

"Pax?" asks Tammy. "What's wrong?"

"It's this place." Paxton sniffles. "It's full of sadness. I can't help it."

"Grr." Tammy exhales. "Why did Ant insist we bring her? Being here is cruel for an empath."

Paxton shudders under the weight of her emotions. “I’ll be okay. Just have to concentrate on knowing it’s not really my emotions.”

She clings to me like a backpack for a moment or two more while reining in her sobbing.

“We’re almost there. C’mon.” Clayton waves for us to follow him and trots off into the evil forest.

The trees are black. The ground is black. The beautiful chirping of birds is gone, replaced with this bizarre clacking noise that makes me imagine skeletal ravens. While I don’t see any birds, or any creature responsible for that unearthly ‘chirping,’ my brain imagines dead things doing it.

Maybe I’ve watched too many Tim Burton films.

Clayton leads us into the creepy woods. He’s not exactly hurrying along, though he appears to know where he’s going. This is a side of him I’ve never seen before. He’s clearly scared. Of all my siblings, he’s always been the most chicken. It’s hard to believe he’s found the courage to do this. Maybe these truagh aren’t really that dangerous... or perhaps he really does have it in him to put a helpless infant over his own self-preservation.

“Mom, I have a bad thought,” says Tammy.

“What bad thought?” I ask.

She gives me side eye. “Are you sure that’s really your brother and this isn’t all some strange plot by the truagh to kidnap all of us?”

Clayton laughs. “Fair question. But if you know about the truagh, you’d also know that’s far, far too much effort and planning for them.”

Tammy purses her lips. “True... Though, it is kinda weird that you come out of nowhere after so long and look so young.”

Clayton smiles. “Don’t worry. The truagh wouldn’t have any reason to lure any of you here. They’ve no interest in Sam. The rest of you are way too old for them to abduct. Once a

child reaches a year old, their ritual can't work anymore. They only want babies.”

“How did you end up being responsible for protecting a baby?” I ask.

“It's the price of eternal youth. I kinda have to work for the faerie now.” Clayton offers a ‘no big deal’ shrug. “Think of me like a faerie park ranger or something. Run around doing stuff like this sometimes.”

“The next time you get sent to watch over a baby, don't nap.” Tammy frowns at him.

He holds up a hand as if swearing in to court. “Oh, I won't. Lesson learned.”

“They're not gonna want to kidnap us because we're too old?” Paxton fake wipes sweat from her forehead.

“That doesn't mean they won't want to kill us,” deadpans Tammy.

“Fair.” Clayton nods. “But they're not going to set up some elaborate ruse to lure all of you, specifically, here. I am really who I say I am.”

“What do you think, Mom?” Tammy peers over at me, arms crossed. “Pax?” She glances at her little sister.

“I'm inclined to believe him.” I stare at him long and intently. Neither my intuition nor whatever psychic abilities I have are screaming alarms at me. Sure, there's steady, mild ringing from my internal alarm... but I am in an evil forest. If this *is* a trick, whatever's doing it is really, really good. *Too* good for this to make any sense. I believe my bro: the trugh wouldn't have any interest in us.

“He's really guilty and worried about the baby,” says Paxton. “Also kinda scared. Okay, make that a *lot* scared.”

“Yeah, that's Clay.” I chuckle.

“Well, this is dangerous,” says Clayton in a low voice. “I'd rather get this done and get out of here as fast as possible, if you ladies don't mind. C'mon, this way!”

## 9.

The seemingly endless forest goes on and on.

All sorts of noises come from every direction. The cacophony is intense enough for Tammy to summon a wellspring of water for me. Taking her hint, I conjure my ice blade. Clayton doesn't show much reaction to this other than an eyebrow lift as if to say 'whoa, you can do that, too?' He's probably seen similar things before. One doesn't associate with faeries and not see magic happen.

We continue walking for... I dunno. Not quite an hour before my brother stops for no particular reason.

"Right up ahead. Stay quiet," he whispers.

Everyone nods.

Yeah, good thing we have shoes, because the ground here is absolutely covered in thorns. Some are the size of cat claws, others are dagger sized. Despite being barefoot, Tammy hasn't hit any of them. Must be some sort of magic making them move out of her way. Now, if only faerie magic could conjure up a cell phone made out of roots, she'd be set for life.

Clay edges forward like he's trying to sneak up on a sleeping guard.

At this point I notice the trees we're approaching are really close together... almost as if they'd been grown on purpose in the shape of a rounded wall. There's enough space between them—barely—for a person to shimmy through. Honestly, I don't think Anthony could've fit. Kingsley is *definitely* too beefy to make it through these gaps, even in wolf form. Clay's never been a big guy... and still isn't.

I approach the tree wall and peer through a gap.

Inside is a clearing covered in roots running back and forth across the black dirt. At the center of a circular space about three times the size of my living room sits a cradle-



shaped tangle of vines and roots. Inside, a small infant fusses and fidgets. The boy's wrapped in a blue blanket, likely taken from the crib he'd been in at home.

There's nothing else in sight.

"They just left him out here alone?" asks Tammy.

"It's a ritual." Clayton says.

"I can see that," Tammy huffs. "Still, that's a little tiny baby. He shouldn't be alone."

"Aww." Paxton bites her lip. "He's confused and a bit angry. What are they doing to him?"

"The darkness of this forest is gradually infusing into him, draining his innocence and filling him with hatred, wickedness, and the desire to destroy all that's good and pure." Clayton grumbles.

"Great," says Allison. "They're turning him into a politician?"

"Heh. Not exactly." Clayton winks at her. "The truagh aren't greedy."

"Okay, enough... how do we get that baby out of there?" I point. "I'm going to assume it's not so simple as walking over and picking him up."

Clayton smiles. "Oh, it really is that simple. The hard part is getting back out alive."

Pax whimpers.

"Cover me. I'll be right back." Clayton slips through the tree gap and scurries toward the cradle.

"Stay here," I say, mostly to Paxton, then follow him, shimmying sideways to scoot between the trees.

Clay spins to give me a 'what are you doing?' look, though he doesn't voice any objection to not being alone in here. Tammy jumps through after me... as does Allie.

"No way am I staying out here by myself!" Paxton darts through.

Grr. Dammit.

We make it about halfway to the cradle before the ground erupts in a sea of rolling blackness.

## 10.

Hundreds of creatures manifest out of the earth, surrounding the cradle.

The smallest of them are not much bigger than Barbie dolls, though they are far from cute. Oval rounded heads with huge gremlin ears leer at us with mouths of razor-sharp teeth. Their various shades of purple, violet, or blue skin shimmer in the nonlight of this walled-off clearing. Each one of the tiny creatures wields a spear the size of an enormous pencil. While they don't look like they'd be much of a threat, there are so many of them... and who knows what kind of magic might be infused in those little weapons.

The larger creatures are roughly two or three feet tall, fat, and look like goblins covered in black fabric. Some have hoods, some don't. Most point daggers or tiny swords at us; some hold their clawed hands up at the ready.

I can't help but feel like a cow staring at a massive swarm of piranha right before having all its meat ripped off its bones.

"This is a complication." Clayton fidgets. "A handful, I can take on... this many, we might have a problem."

"Pax," I whisper. "Get behind me."

She does. "Why the heck am I even here, ma?"

Tammy smacks herself in the forehead, then spins to grab Paxton's hand and whispers into her ear. I can't quite make out what she says over all the chattering and growling coming from the evil faerie creatures.

"Umm. Okay," says Paxton, her voice shaky. She steps up beside me and looks up at me. "Mom?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too, sweetie. But now isn't—"

“I just want to thank you again for being my mom.”

I reach down and wrap an arm around her little shoulders, pulling her into me. Paxton stops shivering, smiles, then closes her eyes and leans against me.

The trugh stop chattering. For a few seconds, the forest is perfectly quiet. Then, the little bastards all start making noise again. Only, they're not being menacing anymore. Some are wailing in agony. Some make noises like they're going to throw up. One or two even scream.

“Uhh, Pax?” asks Allison. “What are you doing? Are you telepathically sending Justin Bieber music into their heads?”

“No.” Paxton smiles wider. “Happiness.”

Oh... she's concentrating on how happy she is that I am her... Mom...

I choke up a little and squeeze her tighter. As if in response, the trugh all scream in absolute disgust and rapidly dive back into the earth to escape our presence.

Clayton darts forward as fast as he can sprint, grabs the baby from the cradle, and rushes back to us. “Now would be an amazing time to get the heck out of here. Those were just the rank and file. Now that I broke the ritual, the really dangerous ones are going to come to investigate... and they won't run away from an empath projecting happiness.”

“You underestimate how happy I am.” Paxton wipes a tear.

“Get out in a hurry? I can do that.” I reach my hands out.

We form another circle, and I hurriedly call the dancing flame. Inter-planar teleportation is a bit above my pay grade, but it's easy enough to put us right back by the giant wreath of thorns.

Unfortunately, the ogre is no longer miniscule. He's also not very happy to see us. Thankfully, he's stupid. Us coming out of nowhere behind him startles him so much he screams in rage. That buys us enough time to run like hell before he either tries to grab us or goes for his club. Seems he's far more

dedicated to keeping people away from the portal than chasing after anything that runs from him. That's likely why he didn't chase panther Tammy.

Whew.

"Awesome." Clayton faces me and bows. "I owe you one, Sam."

Weird. He's holding the baby quite capably, as if it's not his first time doing so. The little guy appears quite exhausted by the ordeal and has already fallen asleep.

"You need to visit more often, now that you know you don't have to hide the weird stuff from us." I hug him.

"Sure, I can do that." He winks. "Could always use a place to crash sometimes."

"You're coming to Thanksgiving dinner!" announces Paxton.

"Umm." Clay shrugs. "Okay. Sure. I just gotta get the little man back to his family first."

"Where are they?"

"Belfast," says Clayton.

Allison whistles. "That's a hike."

"Eh, I know a shortcut." Clayton pats a nearby tree.

"Yet you hitchhiked down from Northern Cali?" Tammy blinks in confusion.

"Had to," he says, shrugging. "The faerie transit authority infrastructure in California was going through some repairs."

His straight face and straight tone leave me confused as to how serious he's being right now.

Pax and Tammy think he's making a joke and burst out laughing.

Allison appears as confused as me.

Whatever. The baby is safe and, perhaps, my brother's curse is broken.

Time to go home.

## 11.

With an armload of pies, I approach the door to Mary Lou's place.

It's eleven in the morning on Thanksgiving Day. She's expecting us. We're going to be cooking for hours. None of us bother with dressing 'nice.' Our family isn't that formal. We dress for comfort. Oh, Clayton's with us, too. He slept for a full day after his return from Belfast. Can't really blame him. That itching curse knocked him for a loop.

Ellie Mae, my sister's oldest, answers the door. I'm still not used to her being all grown up. She's twenty now, has a job of her own, though I can't quite remember what she does. Only Ruby Grace is headed for college. She's sixteen now and a damn genius. Not calling my sister or her husband dumb or anything, but I have no idea how they produced Ruby Grace.

"Hey guys," says Ellie Mae. "Mom! Auntie Sam is here with her menagerie."

"Me-nag-a-what?" calls Billy Joe from the living room. "That's a big word for you."

"Bite me." Ellie rolls her eyes at her brother.

We file into a house that already smells like roasting turkey. Rick and his brother Jim are on the sofa already watching football with Billy Joe. Mary Lou appears out of the hallway leading to the kitchen. She beams a smile at us, then pauses to peer quizzically at Clayton.

"Oh, hi... Mom," says Clayton, winking at us.

Tammy laughs.

I want to laugh, but hold it back.

"That's Mary Lou, not Grandma," says Anthony.

"I know." Clay strides over and hugs his sister.

I lean toward Anthony and semi-whisper. “We all used to call her Mom as a sort of joke when we were little.”

“What on Earth?” Mary Lou returns the hug, then pushes him out to arm’s length to look him over. “Clayton? You look... so young.”

“It’s the weed.” He winks.

“Clay, you can tell her. She knows all about everything else.” I pat him on the shoulder. “Well, most everything else.” I definitely don’t tell Mary Lou *everything*.

“What’s going on?” asks Mary Lou, looking at me.

“Nothing bad. Family time today.” I hug her and whisper in her ear, “Turns out, the faeries like him, too.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.”

“Oh, come on!” yells Jim. “Why do they keep throwing that bum the ball? He couldn’t catch a cold!”

Billy Joe groans in agreement.

“Ahh, family.” Allison overacts sweetness. “Nothing like coming together for football and turkey.”

“And pies,” says Anthony behind us.

As Clayton pulls Mary Lou aside, talking with her in earnest, I stand back and watch the scene unfold before me. Allie is unpacking our haul in the kitchen. Anthony just discretely stuck his finger in one of the pies. Tammy, Paxton, and their cousins just rushed upstairs for something. I might have heard about a new lipstick.

Behind me, two massive arms reach around my waist and pull me close. The mother of all hairy beards nuzzles my neck. I giggle at the sensation as Kingsley spins me around. “Happy Thanksgiving, Sammie.”

“Same to you.”

“You look happy, Sam.”



“I am,” I say, turning back around and taking in the cheerful scene before me. I lean my head against his chest. “I really am.”

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### 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.

He is also fond of cats.

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