

ON A PALE HORSE

BOOK ONE OF INCARNATIONS
ON IMMORTALITY

PIERS ANTHONY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

ENTER THE FOURTH HORSEMAN ...

Zane lifted the gun. Why not? He had been cheated out of both love and wealth. His life might as well end efficiently, instead of being dragged out in the gutter. Now was the time. He pointed the gun at his head.

As his finger tensed, Zane saw the door open. He froze in place, uncertain whether to pull the trigger now, before being interrupted, or to hope for some amazing reprieve.

The figure that appeared was garbed in nonreflective black, with a hood shrouding its head. It closed the door behind it silently, then turned to face Zane full on.

A bald, bony skull looked eyelessly at him.

This was Death, come to collect him!

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Book One of Incarnations on Immortality

PIERS ANTHONY



A Del Rey® Book
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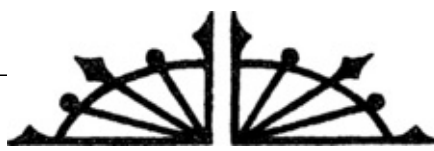
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TO BUY A STONE

“Death,” the proprietor said clearly, showing the stone. It was a bright red rubi-
multifaceted, set in a plain gold ring. It was a full carat—large for this quality.

Zane shook his head, experiencing a chill. “I don’t want that one!”

The man smiled, an obviously perfunctory and practiced expression reserved for wavering
marks. He was well dressed, but somewhat sallow, in the manner of those who remained
the shade too long. “You misunderstand, sir. This fine gem does not bring you death. It does
the opposite.”

Zane was hardly reassured. “Then why call it—?”

“The Deathstone.” Again that annoyingly patronizing shaping of the face, as the proprietor
eased the ignorant concern of the balky customer. “It merely advises the wearer of the
proximity of termination, by darkening. The speed and intensity of the change notifies you of
the potential circumstance of your demise—in plenty of time for you to avoid it.”

“But isn’t that paradox?” Zane had seen such stones advertised, usually at prohibitive
prices, but discounted the claims as marketing hyperbole. “A prophecy isn’t valid, if—”

“No paradox,” the proprietor said with professional certainty. “Merely adequate warning.
You could hardly obtain a better service, sir. After all, what is more precious than life?”

“That presumes a person’s life is worth living,” Zane said sourly. He was a young man of
no particular stature or distinction of feature, with acne scars that neither medication nor
spot-spell had been able to eradicate entirely. His hair was dishwater brown and somewhat
unkempt, and his teeth were unfashionably irregular. He was obviously a depressive type.
“So it darkens, and you change your course, and you don’t die. You figure the warning saved
you. But it could be a random turning of the stone. Color-spells are a dime a dozen. No way
to prove the prophecy was valid. On the other hand, if it fails to darken, and you die, how
can you complain? You’ll be *dead!*” He scratched distractedly at a scar. “If it’s wrong, how
do you get a refund?”

“You don’t believe?” the proprietor asked, frowning expertly. Apart from his complexion
he was a moderately handsome man of early middle age whose hair was enchanted to carry
permanent chestnut wave. “I run a respectable shop. I assure you, all my spellstones are
genuine.”

“According to the Apocalypse, Death rides a pale horse,” Zane said, warming to his
melancholy. He evidently had some education in this area. “I question whether an inanimate
object, a chunk of colored corundum, can stay that dread horseman so simply. Given the
uncertainties of the situation, such a stone is of no practical use to the owner. He can only
test it by seeing it turn, then refusing to change his course. If it is a valid prophecy, he

doomed. If it is not, he has been cheated. It's a no-win game. I have played enough of the type."

"I will provide you a demonstration," the proprietor said, perceiving a morbid streak that could make this customer vulnerable to an aggressive and properly slanted sales pitch. "Skepticism is healthy, sir, and you are obviously too intelligent to be deceived by defective merchandise. The value of the stone can be proved."

Zane shrugged, affecting indifference. "A free demonstration? Can it be worth more than pay for it?"

The proprietor smiled more genuinely, knowing that his fish, despite evasive maneuverings, was halfway hooked. Truly uninterested persons did not linger to argue cases. He took the stone from the magically theft-proofed glass display case and proffered it.

Zane smiled quirkily and accepted the ring, putting it on the tip of his thumb. "Unless there's some immediate and obvious threat for the stone to point out—"

Then he was silent, for already the ring was turning. The bright red deepened to dark red and then to opaque.

Zane's mind began to numb around the edges. Death—he had a deep guilt there. He looked at his left arm, feeling a spot of blood burning into the skin. He pictured the face of his mother as she died. How could he ever exonerate that memory?

"Death—within hours, suddenly!" the proprietor said, aghast. "The stone is absolutely black! I've never seen it turn so fast!"

Zane shook off his private specter. No, he could not afford to believe in this! "If I am to die within hours, I'll have no need of this stone."

"But you *do* need it, sir!" the proprietor insisted. "With the Deathstone you can change your fate. Hold it and decide on a new course, and if the color returns, you know it's right. You can save your life! But you have to have this fine magical ruby to guide you. To steer you away from death. Otherwise you will surely perish before the day is out. That warning is emphatic!"

Zane hesitated. The Deathstone was an impressive item now. It had, as it were, not minced words. But he had been thinking about death while holding the stone, and that could have made the color turn. Emotion-indicator spells were simple and cheap, hardly deserving the name of magic. There could be many things like that to give false readings. Still—

"How much?" he asked

"How much is life worth?" the proprietor asked in return, with a certain predatory gleam in his eyes.

"About two cents, if this stone is right," Zane said grimly. Yet his heart was beating with nervous power.

"Two cents—per minute," the proprietor said, going into the closing spiel. "But this phenomenal and beautiful stone is available presently at a discount of fifty percent. I will sell it to you for a mere one cent per minute, including principal, interest, servicing, insurance—"

"How much per month?" Zane demanded, seeing himself getting reeled in.

The proprietor brought out a pocket calculator and punched buttons dexterously. "Four hundred and thirty-two dollars."

Zane stiffened. He had anticipated a high price, but this was impossible. A family could buy a good house for a similar figure! "How long?"

“Only fifteen years or less.”

“Or less?”

“In case the gem should miscarry, the insurance will pay off the balance owing, of course.”

“Of course,” Zane agreed with a wry quirk of his mouth. A miscarriage meant death, which meant a bum enchantment. They planned to collect their money regardless of the effectiveness of the Deathstone in protecting its owner. He performed a quick mental calculation and concluded he was being charged a little over seventy-five thousand in total. About two-thirds of that would be interest and other peripherals; still, it was a lot of money. A great lot! More, probably, than his life was worth. Literally.

He handed back the ruby. Its color returned rapidly as the proprietor took it. In moments its special, deep shade of red glowed beautifully in the lighting of the shop. A ruby was indeed a lovely gemstone, even when it wasn't magic.

“What else?” Zane asked. He was shaken, but still wanted to find something that would help him.

“Love,” the proprietor said immediately, bringing out a cloudy blue sapphire mounted on another gold ring.

Zane looked at the stone. “Love, as in romance? A woman? Marriage?”

“Or whatever.” The proprietor's smile was not quite as warm as it had been, perhaps because of the misstep on the prior stone. He did not enjoy seeing fish slip the hook. The gem was probably less expensive, meaning a smaller profit. “This fine stone brightens at the prospect of romance of any kind. Sapphire, as you know, is chemically the same stone as a ruby; both are corundum, but because the colors of sapphire are not as rare as those of ruby, the value is less. This is therefore a bargain. It will tune in to your romance; all you have to do is follow its signal until you score.”

Zane remained skeptical. “You can't find romance by zeroing in as if it's a target! There are social aspects, complex nuances of compatibility—”

“The Lovestone takes account of all that, sir. It orients on the right one, taking all factors into consideration. Left to your own devices, you are very likely to make a mistake, and suffer an unfortunate liaison, perhaps one that will become a grief to you. With this stone that will never happen.”

“But there could be many excellent combinations,” Zane protested. “Many right women. How can a mere gem select among them?”

“Circumstances alter cases, sir. Some women are ideal for any man, with qualities of beauty, talent, and loyalty that make them highly desirable regardless of the variations in the males. But most of them are already married, as these qualities are readily perceived by the boy next door, lucky fellow. Others may be destined for some devaluing development, like disfiguring illness or serious problems among their relatives. The Lovestone knows; it orients on the most suitable, most reliable, most available individual. It is unerring. Simply turn it on to obtain the brightest glow and follow where it leads. You will not be disappointed.” He held forth the blue sapphire. “One demonstration trial, sir.”

“I don't know. If it's like the last one—”

“This is romance! How can you lose?”

Zane sighed and took the stone. It was certainly pretty and twice the size of the Deathstone, and its theoretical power intrigued him strongly. A really good romance—wh

more could a man ask for?

As the ring touched his hand, the stone brightened, turning a lighter blue, becoming translucent. Again his mind faded to memory. Love—it was a second leg of his guilt. There had been a woman, nice enough, pretty enough, and she had wanted to marry him. But she had lacked the one thing he had to have. He had liked her, perhaps loved her, and she had certainly loved him—too much.

“The perfect romance—within the hour!” the proprietor exclaimed, seeming genuinely amazed. His voice snapped Zane out of his reverie. “You are a remarkably fortunate man, sir. I have never seen the Lovestone so bright! So clearly directional!”

The perfect romance. He had, really, had that before. How could the stone know his particular needs? He returned it to the proprietor. “I can’t afford it.”

“You can’t afford love within the hour?” the man affected astonishment.

“Romance won’t pay my rent.”

The proprietor nodded with sudden understanding. Something unscrupulous passed fleetingly through his expression. “So it is finance you lack!”

Zane took a deep breath. “Yes. I suppose I’ve been wasting my time here—and yours.” He turned to go.

The proprietor grabbed his arm, in his eagerness forgetting his savoir-faire. “Wait, sir! I do have a stone for you!”

“How can I pay for it?” Zane demanded sourly.

“You can pay for it, sir!”

Zane shrugged him off. “You know why the Deathstone turned black for me? Because I soon starve to death! I have no money. I don’t know why I came in here; it was a completely irrational act. I can’t afford the least of your magic gems. I apologize for deceiving you.”

“On the contrary, sir! I have a Salestone set above my door; it glowed when you entered. You will purchase something here!” He snatched a stone from the display. “This is the one you want.”

“Don’t you understand? I’m broke!”

“This is a Wealthstone!”

Zane paused. “A what?”

The proprietor held it out. “It brings money! Try it!”

“But—” Zane’s protest was cut off by the thrust of the stone into his hand. This one was not set into a ring. It was an enormous star sapphire, well over a hundred carats, but of very poor quality. The color varied from cloudy gray to muddy brown, and there were concentric rings crossing the material and several black inclusions or imperfections. But the star was impressive; its six rays reached right around the polished hemisphere, and their intersection floated just above the surface. Zane blinked, but the effect remained; the star was not *in*, but *above* the stone. There was magic here, certainly!

“Not pretty, I admit, but my stones aren’t marketed primarily for their appearance,” the proprietor said. “They are valued for their magic. This is as potent a spellstone as the others, but of a different nature. This is the one you want. It is virtually priceless.”

“I keep trying to tell you! I can’t—”

“Priceless, I said. You can not purchase this jewel for money.”

“Not if it generates wealth!” Zane agreed, intrigued.

“That’s right, sir. It produces wealth—all you’ll ever need. Potentially thousands of dollars at a time.”

“But this is paradox again! How can you afford to sell such a stone? You should keep it for yourself!”

The proprietor frowned. “I confess the temptation. But there would be a prohibitive penalty. If I were to use any of these fine spellstones myself, none of the other stones would work for me. Not reliably. Their enchantments tend to cancel one another out. So I use very little of the magic, apart from the Salestone, which actually facilitates business. I earn my living on commissions, using no other magic gems myself.”

Zane considered. The man could be concealing the fact that his stones were enchanted by black magic, helping to damn the person who used them. Drug dealers often did not use the drugs themselves, lest they be destroyed by their own product, and black magic was more insidious than drugs. Still, it was an answer. There were sellers, and there were users. “The what price?”

“Note the clarity of the star,” the proprietor said. “When you invoke the magic, the star floats right off the stone and does not return until the spell is complete. That way you know exactly when it is operating.”

This person was being evasive. “Assuming that it works,” Zane said.

“A demonstration!” the proprietor said, sensing a sale that would hold. “Gaze on the Wealthstone and concentrate on money. That is all it takes to invoke it.”

Zane held the stone and looked and concentrated. In a moment the star floated right off the stone, its rays dangling like legs, and cruised slowly through the air. It was working!

Then Zane’s awareness faded to a dismal memory—the gaming table, compulsive gambling, the losses mounting—he had been such a fool with money! No wonder he was broke! If only it had stopped there ...

The star dropped low, going toward Zane’s foot. He stepped back, but it followed as if pursuing him. “Watch wherever it leads,” the proprietor said.

“Suppose it leads me to someone else’s wallet? To a bank vault?”

“No, it only discovers legitimate, available wealth. Never anything illegal. That’s part of the spell. There are laws about enchantment, after all. The Federal Bureau of Enchantment investigates complaints about abuse.”

“Complaints about the practice of black magic?” Zane asked alertly.

The proprietor affected shock. “Sir, I would not handle black magic! All my spells are genuine white magic.”

“Black magic knows no law except its own,” Zane muttered.

“White magic!” the proprietor insisted. “My wares are certified genuine white.”

But such certificates, Zane knew, were only as good as the person who made them. White magic was always honest, for it stemmed from God, but black magic often masqueraded as white. Naturally Satan, the Father of Lies, sought to deceive people about his wares. It was hard for an amateur to distinguish reliably between magics. Of course, he could have the stone separately appraised, and the appraisal would include a determination of its magical status—but that would be expensive, and he would have to buy it first. If the verdict turned out negative, he would still be stuck.

The star hovered at Zane’s shoe. “Lift your foot, sir,” the proprietor suggested. Zane raised

his foot, and the star slipped under like a scurrying insect.

Surprised, Zane angled his foot so he could see the worn sole. There was a penny stuck in it. The star had settled on this, clasping it.

Zane pried the penny off. Immediately the star returned to the big sapphire.

The spell had worked. The star had led him to money no one had known about. Not a lot of it, but of course there would not be much loose change in a shop like this. It was the principle that counted, not the particular amount.

The horizons opened out before him. A Wealthstone—what would that do for his situation? Money coming in, abating his debts, making him comfortable, and maybe more than comfortable. It could save him from starvation and bring romance, for that was easy for a rich man to come by. To be free at last of the burden of poverty!

“How much?” he asked, afraid of the answer. “I know the price isn’t money.”

The proprietor smiled, at last assured of his sale. “No, not money, of course. Something of equivalent value.”

Zane had a suspicion he wouldn’t like this. But he did want the Wealthstone. The prospects were dazzling! He hardly cared that it might be an illicit black-magic item. Who else would know? “What equivalent value?”

“Romance.”

“What?”

The man licked his lips, showing an unprofessional nervousness. “The Lovestone shows you have romance commencing within the hour.”

“But I’m not buying the Lovestone. I won’t be zeroing in on that romance.”

“But someone else could.”

Zane looked at him tolerantly, recognizing the man’s lust for an ideal woman. “You own the stone. You could do it. You don’t need anything from me.”

“I do need you,” the proprietor explained, speaking rapidly. “I told you I don’t use the stones myself. It would ruin my business if I did. But even if I did—in my own near future there is no romance. I am well established in my profession and I have a long life ahead, but my social life is strictly indifferent. I would give a great deal to have a meaningful relationship with a good woman. One who was not a gold digger or desperate. One I could trust. A woman such as the one you are fated to encounter—were fated, had you purchased the Lovestone and used it properly.”

“You claim you have not used the gems yourself?” Zane asked skeptically. “You seem to know a lot about your own future.”

“There are other avenues of information besides my gems,” the proprietor said, a trifle stiffly. “I have had horoscopes and divinations and readings of many types. All show I am destined for success in business, not in love.”

“Then how can my romance do you any good? You already know you can’t have it.”

“On the contrary! I can’t have *my* romance, but I can have *yours*—if you permit it. In that manner I can bypass this one aspect of my fate. The woman is destined for you, but would settle for me. I can tell by the way the stone reacted for you that she would do for a number of men, of whom I am one. Her appeal is very broad. It would not be as good for me as for you, since I am not reduced to your straits, but it remains highly worthwhile. Even a match not quite made in Heaven can be excellent.”

“It’s your stone,” Zane said stubbornly. “You can zero in on her yourself. So maybe this will ruin the rest of your business; if you want romance that badly, it should be worth it to you.” He was uncomfortable, suspecting that he was losing out on something important. Perhaps he should change his mind about trying to buy the Lovestone. If what awaited him was that good ...

Of course, that was what the proprietor wanted him to think, so he would be compelled to make the purchase of the expensive stone and sign himself and maybe his future wife into debt for the rest of his life. Realizing that, he resisted the devious sales pitch, overtly playing along with the proprietor’s supposed need for romance. Zane did have a certain affinity for intellectual games; he was much more of a thinker than an actor. He had had a decent education, before things soured, and enjoyed art and poetry. However, he had largely wasted his education, and his thoughts seemed generally to get him into trouble.

“My stone, but your romance,” the proprietor said with every evidence of sincerity. “Even if I were willing to sacrifice my business for romance, which I am not, I could not use the stone to tune in on an encounter fated for you. It simply would not register for me. The solid lines of fate are not readily reconnected. So I would hurt my business for nothing. Literal nothing.”

“That is unfortunate,” Zane replied noncommittally. His sympathy for those who had money and wanted romance as well was slight. Everybody wanted both, of course!

“But *you* could orient on it, using this stone. Once it is evident who the woman is—”

“But I can’t afford the Lovestone!” Zane was not going to be trapped into any such commitment!

“You misunderstand, sir. You will not purchase the stone. You will use it only to point out the woman. Then I will proceed to the encounter. I will have your romance.”

“Oh.” Zane assimilated that. Could the man be serious, after all? He was inclined to play this out and discover the catch. “I suppose that would work. But why should I do any such great favor for you?”

“For the Wealthstone,” the proprietor said, gently taking it from Zane’s hand.

Now at last Zane understood. He had been sidetracking himself, misunderstanding the thrust of the sales pitch. “You will sell me this money-gem—for an experience! I want wealth; you want romance. I can see that it would be a fair exchange—” He paused, as a piece of the puzzle failed to mesh. “But will the Lovestone work that well for me, if I don’t actually own it?”

“It works for the holder. It knows nothing of ownership; that is a convention among people. In any event, none of this can have legal binding. But I assure you, I will give you a bill of sale for the Wealthstone, if you turn over the potential experience. This is not something money can bring. It is an opportunity that may occur for me only once in this life. The man scribbled out a sales slip.

It seemed like a bargain to Zane, if everything were as represented. He could have the Wealthstone in trade for a romance he had already turned down. He had an impulsive—some would say volatile—nature. “Agreed.”

In a moment the sale was signed—one Wealthstone for private consideration, delivery after receipt of that consideration. Zane pocketed the sales slip, then took the Lovestone, watched it glow within its blueness, and followed the brightest spot out of the shop and onto the

street.

Zane stood for a moment, blinking his eyes in the dazzling sunlight. In a moment his vision adjusted, and he found himself focusing on the store's sign: MESS O' POTTAGE.

He rechecked the gem, turned it about until the glow was brightest, and walked north as indicated. The proprietor followed. But then the stone faded. Zane turned about, but the gem only glimmered. "I think the scent is cold."

The proprietor was unalarmed. "This is not a purely directional thing. It is situational. You have to do what you have to do to make the intersection. As you do, it guides you."

"But if it doesn't *tell* me what to do—"

"Start walking. Watch the stone for reaction. There are only so many options available. The man's voice was controlled, but there seemed to be a slight edge of concern. The whole deal would fall through, of course, if the woman could not be located.

Zane turned right and walked. He passed a penny arcade, where teenagers cranked old-fashioned movie-machines as they peered in the scopes, chuckling evilly. Zane judged from their reactions that it was no Dimwit Dick comic they were viewing. The arcade's name was TWO TO TWAIN, theoretically a pretension to literacy but actually a code name for earthy humor. There was a drawing of a little train puffing along, sending up cute balls of smoke, and Zane realized there was another pun in the title, when pronounced aloud.

"Try another direction," the proprietor said. "The stone is not responding." Yes, he was nervous now.

Zane reversed again, retracing his steps. He passed the Mess o' Pottage shop and the one beyond: a paperback bookstore. "It's still not glowing," he reported.

"Let me consider," the proprietor said, pausing in front of a display of SCIENTIFIC MAGAZINE texts. "Where were you going?"

"Nowhere but up and down this street," Zane said wryly. "Trying to get a glimmer from this inert stone of yours."

"That's the problem. You need to be going somewhere. Your romance is not in this street. She is wherever you intended to go when you first held the Lovestone."

"I was going home," Zane said, bemused. "I doubt romance awaits me there. I live alone in a slum."

"Then go home."

"With your precious stone?"

"Certainly—on loan. I'll be with you. We shall exchange the Wealthstone for the Lovestone when the contact is made."

Zane shrugged. "As you wish." He now doubted that anything would come of this, but his curiosity remained engaged, and of course he did want the Wealthstone. He reversed direction again and walked down the street toward the agency where he had left his rented carpet after flying up to this shopping mall, which was magically suspended high above Kilvarough.

The stone glowed.

So it was true! He was headed for romance!

The proprietor lingered for a moment by the bookstore window, where he pretended to be interested in the current issue of the Satanistic journal BRIMSTONE QUARTERLY, then followed.

They passed the arcade again, where the kids were now playing sexy space-fiction records. Zane had once had an offer to do photography for the dust jacket illustration of such items, but had turned it down, though he needed the money. He simply had not wanted to prostitute what little genuine talent he had.

Now they moved by a sweet-smelling bakery shop. Sudden hunger caught Zane, for he had not eaten in some time. Being broke had that effect. He glanced in the window of the MELLO PASTRIES shop, noting its mascot of a voluptuous woman made of candy, with sugared melon in the appropriate place, covered by decorative pastry pasties. Displayed inside were doughnuts, cakes, eclairs, breads, cookies, pies, cream horns, Danish pastries, and pastry and confections in the shapes and colors of leaves, flowers, human figures, cars, and ships. All of it looked and smelled more than good enough to eat.

"Keep moving," the proprietor murmured, coming up behind him.

Zane tore himself away from the window and its stomach-luring odors. Once he had the Wealthstone, he would return here and buy out the place and gorge himself sick as a dog!

Now a bank of fog rolled in. The mall was camouflaged as a cumulus cloud, anchored high above the city of Kilvarough. The fog generators were aimed outward, but playful breezes wafted some mist inward. It had a pleasant flower scent.

They reached the carpet agency, flying its carpet-shaped banner with the motto YOU ARE THERE NOW. Zane showed his round-trip ticket to the bored agent, and the man hauled down his carpet from a storage cubby. It was worn and faded, and dust squeezed out of its pores, but it was all he could afford. The Mess o' Pottage proprietor rented another carpet, much larger, newer, brighter one, with comfortable anchored cushions. They carried the rolls to the exit bay, spread out the carpets, sat down on them cross-legged, fastened their seat belts, and gave the go-signals.

The carpets took off. The proprietor's moved smoothly, cushioned by air, but Zane's jerked a bit before getting into the hang of its propulsive spell. He hated that; suppose it pooped out in mid-air? He controlled its flight by minute shifts of his body; a tilt to right or left sent the carpet flying that way, while a lean forward or back sent it diving or ascending. Verbal commands caused it to change velocity, but he settled for the standard gear, afraid the speed would not be reliable if he pushed it. Anyway, there was other traffic, and it was easiest to keep the going pace.

Zane had always enjoyed carpeting, but could not afford to maintain his own carpet, or even to rent one often. It cost a lot to maintain a good carpet, and the expense-per-mile kept rising. Inflation affected everyone uncomfortably, as it was intended to; it was, of course, the work of Satan, who campaigned perpetually and often halfway successfully to make Hell seem better than Earth.

Sure enough, the thought brought the reality: a Satanic roadsign series, each sign staked to a small, stationary cloud: SEE THIS OUTFIT? DON'T YOU SCOFF! YOU KNOW WHERE SHE TAKES IT OFF! What followed was a life-size billboard painting of a truly statuesque young woman in the process of disrobing. In the corner were the two little red devil trademark figures, Dee & Dee, male and female, complete with cute miniature pitchforks. The male was peeking up under the model's skirt and remarking in small print, "You can't touch *that* Heaven!" Then came the final sign, the signature, HELLFIRE, written in lifelike flames.

Zane shook his head. Satan had the most proficient publicity department extant, but only

fool would believe the advertising. Anyone who went to Hell would feel the flames for real and the devils and pitchforks would not be cute. Yet the media campaign was so pervasive, intense, and clever—and appealed so aptly to man's baser instincts—that it was hard to keep the true nature of Hell in mind. Zane himself would have liked to see the remainder of the disrobing and knew it would never occur in pristine Heaven, where all thoughts were pure. Hell did have something going for it.

The carpets cleared the environs of the cloud-mall, following the buoyed channel that spiraled down toward Kilvarough. A number of other carpets were traveling the channel, and the day was getting late. Several helicopters were flying in their own channel to the side, and farther away a lucky person was riding a winged horse.

Well, when he had control of the Wealthstone, Zane might see about purchasing his own horse. He had ridden horses many times, but only the mundane kind that ran on land. He understood that the principle of riding was similar for the winged variety, except that there were additional commands to direct them in flight. But while a good landbound horse could be had for under a thousand dollars, and a sea-horse for perhaps five thousand, air-horses began at ten thousand and required special maintenance, since no ordinary paddock could hold them. In fact, they—

The carpet ahead of him faltered. At the same time, the Lovestone flashed brilliantly. Zane had to brake suddenly to prevent his carpet from rear-ending the one ahead. "Hey, what the—?" he grunted.

He saw that a young woman was riding the other carpet and he did not think much of female riders. They tended to change their minds without adequate warning, as in this case, and that was dangerous in mid-air.

The woman's carpet wrinkled, sagging under her weight. It began to drop. She screamed in terror. Suddenly Zane realized what was the matter: the spell had failed! It shouldn't have, and this was a truly elegant, expensive carpet, but quality control had been deteriorating everywhere recently.

His eye was momentarily distracted by the blue light before him. The Lovestone was shining like a miniature star.

"Mine!" the Pottage proprietor cried. His carpet launched forward as the girl's carpet collapsed. The man reached out and caught the girl neatly by her slender waist, wrestling her aboard his own vehicle.

Zane, half-stunned by the event, followed the other carpet. Now he saw how comely the girl was, with flowing fair hair and a remarkable figure. She could almost have posed for the Hellfire ad, except that there was no trace of salaciousness in her aspect. He saw how she clung to her rescuer, her maidenly bosom heaving as she sobbed with reaction. He saw how elegant her apparel was; she wore an expensive magic-mink coat, and a diamond necklace sparkled about her creamy neck.

And he saw how the Lovestone faded to dull-dark blue. That girl had been his prospective romance—and was no longer. He had traded her away for the Wealthstone.

The two carpets continued down the spiral channel to the carpetport in the center of the city. There Zane and the proprietor turned in their carpets, and faced each other. "Meet Angelica," the proprietor said proudly, showing off the lovely girl. Obviously the acquaintance had blossomed during the brief flight down. The man had saved her life, and

she was the kind to be duly grateful. “She is the heiress to the Twinklestar fortune. She has invited me to her downtown penthouse for a snack of caviar and nectar. So we’d better exchange stones now and call it even.” He held out the Wealthstone.

There was nothing Zane could do except trade stones. The deal had been honored. The Lovestone glowed brightly again as the other man took it; he had found his romance outwitting fate. The Wealthstone, in contrast, was huge and dull and ugly, with the stone hardly showing.

Zane could not repress the feeling that he had made a colossal error. He should have mortgaged his whole life to buy the Lovestone—for evidently this heiress-girl Angelica had the resources and willingness to pay off such a debt offhandedly, and was a very fine creature in her own right. Love *and* wealth: he could have had it all.

The girl was drawing with loving possessiveness on the proprietor’s arm, and she was as soft and eager in her new emotion. “Must go,” the Mess o’ Pottage man said, delivering Zane a kind of salute. Then they were gone, walking toward the chauffeured limousine that awaited them.

Zane stood watching the elegant contours of the girl’s backside, experiencing an awful helpless regret. What kind of fool had he been, to throw away romance untried? Somehow he knew he would never again have an opportunity like this. Such things occurred only once in a lifetime, if that often, and he had thrown his chance away. A kind of grief suffused him, like that for a cruelly dead lover.

Well, it was hardly the first time he had blundered disastrously! His soul was weighted with evil he should have avoided, and his life blighted with foolish error. At least he possessed the Wealthstone, and with proper management he would soon be a rich man, able to attract and hold whatever type of woman he craved, or to buy a compliant female android or a luscious magical nymph. He didn’t need Angelica! He had to believe that, for it was his only present buffer against overwhelming despair.

Zane knew himself to be a headstrong young idiot with delusions of artistry and literature, whose good impulses were too often mismanaged into liabilities. Thus he had lost his dear mother, and his loving girlfriend long ago, and had sunk himself in debt. Good intentions were not enough; they had to be rationally implemented.

He could not even afford the fare for the subway home. He had the penny from his shoe, but that was not enough. He had the Wealthstone, but he refused to use it here on the darkening street; some criminal would mug him for it. Zane stuck his hands deep in his pockets, clasping the stone out of sight, and walked toward the dingy quarter where his sleazy apartment lurked.

Walking was a good time for thinking; it took a person’s mind off the drudgery of the feet. But Zane’s thoughts were not uplifting. Here he was, in the ultimate age of magic and science, where jet planes vied with flying carpets, and he was traveling afoot, without the benefit of either.

Magic had always existed, of course, as had science, however limited the benefits of either might be for those who were broke. But it hadn’t been until the time of Newton that the basic principles of the twin disciplines had been seriously explored. Newton had made great strides in formulating the fundamental laws of science in his early years, contributing more than perhaps any other man. In his later years he had performed similarly for magic.

But for reasons not clear to Zane—he had never been an apt scholar—greater progress had been made at first in science. Only recently had the enormous explosion in applied magic come. Of course, neither science nor magic had affected history much until the past century, as there had been a popular prejudice against both, but science had broken out first. Now, however, the rapidly increasing sophistication of magic had brought back supposedly extinct monsters of many types, especially dragons. Whether science or magic would win out in the end was anybody's guess.

A fine drizzle developed, perhaps condensation from the cloud-mall above: not enough moisture to clean air or street, just enough to turn the dust to grease and make his footing treacherous. Cars skidded through stoplights, narrowly avoiding collisions; probably only the mandatory anti-wreck charms saved their fenders from harm.

Now it was dusk. The street had gradually become deserted. No one walked through this section of town at this hour if he could avoid it. The buildings were old, and age had weathered them from their original technicolor to their present monochrome. This region had come to be known as Ghosttown, and at twilight sometimes the ghost appeared. But it was best not to look, because—

In fact, there she was now. Zane heard the wooden wheel of the wheelbarrow first, and stepped into a grimy doorway alcove so as not to disturb the apparition. A person could see the ghost, and even photograph her, but if the ghost saw the person—

Molly Malone came down the street, her wheelbarrow piled with shellfish. She was a sweet-faced young woman, pretty despite her ragged garments and heavy clogs. Women thought spiked heels and nylon stockings made their legs pretty, but legs like Molly's needed no such enhancements. "Cockles and mussels!" she cried sweetly. "Alive! Alive O!"

Zane smiled, his black mood lightening somewhat. The shellfish might be alive, but surely Molly was not. Her ghost had been conjured from Ireland a century ago to honor Kilvarough, though this city had no seacoast. It had been a publicity stunt that soon palled; ghosts were dime a dozen. The city fathers had not then been aware of this ghost's special property. But the conjuration-spell had never been canceled, so Molly still wheeled her wheelbarrow through the streets of Kilvarough when conditions were right.

"This is a stickup," a gruff voice called.

Molly emitted a faint little shriek of surprise and dismay. "Do not molest me, kind sir," she said.

"Naw, I just want your wheelbarrow," the holdup man said. "It'll fetch a few dollars on the antique market. Enough to buy me a two-day happiness-spell." He used one boot to shove the wheelbarrow over, so that its shellfish fell into the grimy gutter.

"But, sir!" she protested. "Those cockles and mussels are my sole sustenance, and without my wheelbarrow to carry them, I will surely perish!" Molly's quaint Irish accent had faded during the past century as she picked up the contemporary idiom; but for her costume, one would hardly know her from a local lass.

"You've already perished, you stinking slut!" the man snapped, shoving her rudely out of his way.

This was too much for Zane. He had no special feelings about ghosts and he was slightly wary of this particular one, but he did not like to see any woman abused. He strode out of the alcove. "Leave Molly alone!" he cried.

The robber swung about, bringing his pistol to bear on Zane. Zane reacted automatically, striking at the gun. It was not that he was especially brave or skilled in combat, but that once he was caught in such a situation he knew he had little choice but to carry through with sufficient dispatch to extricate himself. His hotheadedness substituted nicely for courage.

One shot was fired, and Molly screamed. Then Zane got his hands on the weapon and wrenched it away from the robber.

“Pick up that wheelbarrow,” Zane ordered, aiming the gun at the man. He marveled at himself, for this was not in character for him; he should now be feeling weak with reaction. Yet the outrage he felt at the man’s attempted robbery of the city’s mascot drove him on. “Load the shellfish back on it.”

“What the hell—” the man said. But when he looked into Zane’s crazy-wild face, he decided to get on with the job. Clumsily he packed the damp, sloppy creatures in their places.

“Now get out of here,” Zane said.

The man started to protest. Zane’s finger tightened on the trigger. The robber turned and shuffled away.

Only then did Zane notice that the man had been shot. Fresh blood stained his jacket. He would need medical attention soon, or he could bleed to death. But of course such a criminal would not seek that sort of help; it would attract the attention of the police. He would probably die, and Zane could not bring himself to feel much regret.

He jammed the gun into a pocket. He had never fired one of these things, but presumed it would not go off unless he pulled the trigger. Now he was suffering his letdown, for his violence came on him only in fits, and departed swiftly. “I’m sorry this happened,” he told Molly. “This is a good city, but it has some bad apples.”

“I know not how to reward you, sir,” the ghost said gratefully. “You are so gallant.”

“Me? No. I just got mad to see a woman mistreated, especially one as lovely and historic as you. If I’d thought about it, I probably wouldn’t have gotten involved.” But Zane suspected he had been motivated in part by his loss of his romance with Angelica. He had had to relate to a woman somehow, so he had done it.

“Perhaps if you should find my body appealing—” Molly said. She opened her motley jacket and took a deep breath. “I am a ghost, ’tis true, but I am reasonably solid when I go abroad at dusk.”

Zane was amazed. She certainly had an appealing body! She had been young and full when she died, so had remained that way since. But the bitter and fresh memory of his never-acquired love balked him, and the suspicion that whatever had been decent in his action in dealing with the robber would be nullified if he accepted any such reward. “Thank you, Molly, and I do find you appealing, but I would not care to impose on you in that way. Surely you have a home and husband to return to in your realm.”

“No husband yet,” she said sadly. “There are few good men in the neverland of—”

Then a car turned the corner. The bright headlights speared the length of the street—and the ghost vanished. Too much modern technology was hard on ghosts.

The car passed, splashing thin gook on Zane. Darkness closed again, but Molly Malone did not return. Ghosts were erratic, and the shock of the sudden light had probably disinclined her to risk this region again this night. Feeling let down, Zane resumed his walk home.

There was an eviction notice posted on his door. He had not paid his rent, and the landlord

had taken action. This was not a lockout, as the landlord was actually a halfway decent specimen of his breed. Zane had twenty-four hours to get out.

Well, the Wealthstone would take care of that. It would soon generate enough money to catch up the rent, and then would proceed from there. He brought out the stone.

The star did not show up well in the artificial light, but he could make it out. "Find!" he directed the stone, focusing his mind on overflowing coffers of golden coins.

The star detached itself and floated upward like the flowing ghost of an arachnid. It traveled to the dilapidated dresser against the wall and squeezed in behind it.

Zane took hold of the heavy piece of furniture and hauled it protestingly out from the wall. The star dropped down to the floor. Zane stretched one arm into the crevice between dresser and wall, reaching to the star—and his questing forefinger found a cold coin. He scooted across the floor toward him, awkwardly.

It was a worn nickel. Good enough; the magic stone was performing as specified. The nickel happened to be closest, so was spotted first.

The star returned to the Wealthstone. "Find," Zane ordered it, envisioning a bank vault bursting with silver.

The star lifted more slowly than before, as if tired from its prior effort. It floated in a leisurely fashion across the room, then descended to a crack in the floor. There, embedded edgewise, was a dime. Zane used a kitchen knife to pry it out. The thing was caked with grime; it must have been there for years. The star hovered until he actually got the coin in his hand, then snapped back to its home-stone. That meant he couldn't afford to give up on the job; he could not invoke the Wealthstone again until he cleared its last entry. That would be an inconvenience if there happened to be a fabulous forgotten buried cache a few feet beyond a dozen minor coins, but he could live with it.

He tried again. "Find. Something better this time, like a gold doubloon or a fantastical rare and valuable coin. Enough of this nickel-and-dime stuff."

The star pulled itself slowly from the stone and drifted toward the door to the apartment. There was no doubt about it: the star lost energy with each use. Probably it needed a set time to recharge its magic, like several hours or a day. That, too, was inconvenient—but of course all he needed was to find one real treasure. That would be worth a week of slow questing. Then the gem could have as long a rest as it needed.

The star drifted up against the door and hesitated. Zane opened the door and let it out. At least the six-legged light-bug didn't zoom away, out of sight; that could have made it useless for it would be as lost as the coin it identified. But the spell did seem to be underpowered. He had now been at it twenty minutes, and had only fifteen cents to show for it. Plus the penny he had found at the shop. That would hardly make a dent in his overdue rent.

The star sank to the floor of the hall. There, embedded in the packed dirt, was a battered and weathered penny. Zane pried it up, and the star wended its way tiredly to the stone Zane carried. Some fortune!

Zane returned to his apartment and considered. The Wealthstone performed—but so far strictly penny-ante level. At the present rate, he could labor all night for a mere dollar or two in change—and the star was obviously too tired to go the night.

The Wealthstone worked—but now he perceived certain inherent limits. It always went to the nearest unattached money, of whatever denomination, and the vast majority of lo

money was of the picayune category. No doubt if there were a five-thousand-dollar gold piece near, the star would find it—but none was near, while there were endless pennies. People simply did not let a heavy gold piece fall into a crack and be lost, though they did let pennies go. So while it was true that the Wealthstone could find thousands of dollars, this was like the gold in sea water; it cost more in time and effort to recover that one part per million than it was worth.

Zane's eye traveled around the room. It was cluttered with his photographic equipment. He had artistic aspirations and the nefarious artistic temperament, but lacked the talent to make it as a painter or sculptor, so had gone into photography instead. He could appreciate a scene when he saw it, and the camera enabled him to capture the incidental art of the environment. The trouble was, there was not much in the city of Kilvarough that was worthwhile that hadn't already been photographed. Even the ghost Molly Malone had been pictured many times; it was not true that a ghost could not be photographed, and she loved to pose if she happened to perceive the camera. She could even be heard on occasion, singing her traditional song, especially the line, "Where the girls are so pretty." But she was not as popular a subject as she might have been, owing to her special property.

Zane had discovered a photographic variant, however, that had enabled him to eke out a living for a while. This was the Kirlian technique, magically augmented. But certain problems in the market had turned him off this, and recently his luck had expired. Without expensive new equipment, he was out of business. That was part of what had sent him aloft to the cloud-mall, using his last dollar to rent the flying carpet. One had to visit these floaters when they anchored near, because they were liable to drift away without notice if the local police got too snoopy.

Now he was hungry, without food in the apartment, and required to move out within a day. He had nowhere to go. He had to have money—and he greatly feared he couldn't get enough.

He tried the Wealthstone again. "Go!" he urged it. "Find me wealth beyond my fondest dreams!"

The star heaved itself up, faltered, and collapsed back onto the stone. It was too pooped to perform.

And what would it find if it did get moving? Probably more pennies. Zane faced the fact that he had thrown away the chance of a lifetime, for wonderful and rich romance, for the mess o' pottage. He had in fact been cheated, though the gem had not technically been misrepresented, so he had no recourse. The shop's proprietor had used him for his own profit, taking Zane's one chance away forever. After all, even without the Lovestone, he might have encountered Angelica ...

Fool! Fool! he chided himself savagely.

He paced around the room, tasting ashes, seeking some way out of his situation. He found none. Once he had made his deep blunder of passing up the Lovestone, his ruinous course had been fixed. If only he hadn't been so set on wealth, to the exclusion of all else. But he had always been an impulsive, wrongheaded idiot, doing what he thought was right at the time and regretting it too late. His whole life had been grinding inexorably to this dead end; he saw that now. If he somehow found enough loose change to pay his back rent, he still would lack the resources to make a decent living and still would not have a lovely girl to love.

That was the crux of it! Angelica—slated for him, but squandered away. In retrospect he found himself scrambling into love with her, his emotion based on wrongheaded hopes and wishes—and knew she was the type who only loved once, and that her gift had been bestowed irrevocably on another man. Zane might live on, but he would never have Angelica, not even if the conniving shop proprietor were to drop dead this moment. So what point was there in going on?

He looked at the defunct stone again. Now it seemed drab indeed, its colors muddy, its imperfections gross. It was, he realized abruptly, as ugly as his conscience. It was virtually worthless—and so was he.

Zane slapped his open hand against his thigh as if trying to punish himself—and felt the pistol in his pocket, the one he had taken from the robber.

He drew it out. He was not conversant with firearms, but this one seemed simple enough. It had a clip of several bullets in the handle, and one of them had been fired from the chamber. An automatic mechanism had set a new bullet in the chamber; he had no doubt that a pull on the trigger would make the weapon fire again. He could put the muzzle to his head and—

Now he remembered the first gem he had considered—the Deathstone. It had signaled his demise in a few hours. Those hours had passed. The Lovestone had proved itself, so he had no further reason to doubt the Deathstone. Even the Wealthstone worked, in its fashion. He was fated soon to depart this life.

Zane lifted the gun. Why not? His life might as well end efficiently, instead of being dragged out in the gutters of the city. Some considered a meeting with ghost Molly to be a signal of doom. Certainly it would have been, had he accepted her offer and made love to her. It was, of course, death to love the dead. Sweet Molly herself might not be aware of that, but she did want a husband, and if he had become a ghost in her arms ...

The truth about Molly was that, while any person could see her with impunity, she herself could perceive only those who were approaching her condition. So if Molly saw a person, that person would soon be dead. She was not the cause, merely the signal. If a person was afraid he was destined to die soon, perhaps suffering from a mysterious illness, he could show himself to Molly and, if she passed him by without notice, he could relax. This aspect of her nature had somehow escaped Zane's consciousness at the time, but it was true. Probably he had censured it out emotionally. Yet of course the robber, who had certainly been seen by the ghost, had almost certainly taken a fatal wound.

Oh, yes, there had been omens enough! Why not accept his fate with greater grace than he had accepted his life and do it now, before his natural cowardice overcame him? Make it quick and clean ... well, quick, anyway.

Overwhelmed by the lightness of it, Zane pointed the gun at his head. He oriented the muzzle on the cavity of his right ear, somehow diffident about spoiling his head by puncturing it in a messy place. Now was indeed the time!

As his finger tensed, somewhat reluctant to move rapidly, Zane saw the door to his apartment open. He froze in place, uncertain whether to pull the trigger now, before being interrupted, or to hope for some amazing reprieve. Could Angelica have changed her mind and sought him out? Foolish notion! Or was it merely his landlord?

It was neither. The figure that appeared was garbed in nonreflective black, with a hood

shrouding its head. It closed the door behind it silently, then turned to face Zane full on.

A bald, bony skull looked eyelessly at him.

This was Death, come to collect him.

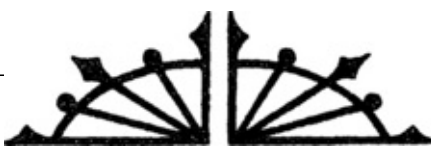
Zane tried to cry out in pointless protest, but his throat locked. He tried to loosen his trigger finger, but it was already obeying the squeeze message and would accept no countermand. Time seemed to slow, and Zane could do nothing to abort the suicide he had set up. Yet the shock of seeing the visage of Death himself had abruptly banished any desire. Zane had to kill himself.

His finger muscles would not obey him, but his larger arm muscles did. Zane wrenched the pistol around. The muzzle came to bear on Death's head as the trigger tripped. The gun seemed to explode, kicking back against his hand.

The bullet smashed into the center of Death's face.

A hole opened. Blood flowed. Death fell heavily to the floor.

Zane stood aghast. He had killed Death.



HOUSE CALLS

The door opened again. This time a woman of middle age entered. Zane had never seen her before. She glanced approvingly at the fallen figure. "Excellent," she murmured.

Zane wrenched his horrified gaze to her. "I killed Death!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed you did. You shall now assume his office."

"I—what?" Zane was having trouble regaining mental equilibrium.

"You are the new Death," she said patiently. "This is the way it is done. He who kills Death becomes Death."

"Punishment ..." Zane said, trying to make sense of this.

"Not at all. This is not murder in the normal sense. After all, it was him or you. Self-defense. But you are committed to take his place and to do the best job you can."

"But I don't know how to—"

"You will learn on the job. We all do. Certain enchantments will imbue you, to facilitate your performance and stabilize you, but the real motivation must be yours." She stooped and stripped Death's black cloak from his body. "Help me, please; we do not have excessive time and we don't want to get blood on the uniform."

"Who are you?" Zane demanded, getting half a grip on himself despite the overwhelming unreality of the scene.

"At the moment I am Lachesis. You can see I am of middle age without much sex appeal. She was quite correct; her face had the lines of solid maturity, and her hair was nondescript under a tight bun. She was comfortably overweight, but moved efficiently. "I determine the length of the threads. Now lift his body; I don't want to tear the cloak."

Distastefully, Zane put his hands on Death's corpse and lifted. "Who is Lachesis? What threads? What are you doing here?"

She sighed as she worked the cloak off the body. "I suppose you do deserve some minimal explanation. Very well; you keep working, and I will tell you some of what you need to know. Not all of it, for some secrets are reserved to me, just as some, you will discover, are reserved to you. Lachesis is the middle aspect of Fate. She—"

"Fate?"

"You will not learn very much if you insist on interrupting," she said with some asperity.

"Sorry," Zane mumbled. This felt unreal!

"Now get his shoes. They're invulnerable to heat, cold, penetration, radiation, et cetera, just as is the cloak. You must always be properly garbed when making a collection, or you become vulnerable. It is essential that you not be vulnerable. Your predecessor here was careless; had he closed his hood across his face, the bullet would not have harmed him. So

that you are more careful; you will have greater need to be on guard than he did.”

“But—”

“I believe that interjection constitutes an interruption.”

Zane was silent. There was an eerie power about this woman that had nothing to do with her appearance. She could be the mother of any rebellious teenager.

“I am Fate, with three aspects,” she continued after just enough of a pause to verify her command of the situation. “I determine the threads of the tapestry of life. I am here to ensure that you change roles expeditiously. It is very important that you perform better as Death than you have as a living person, and I believe you do have the potential. Now stand up so I can fit the cloak to you.”

Zane stood, and she set the cloak on his shoulders. It was not heavy, but it carried a peculiar mass. She had spoken of magic; this item of apparel reeked of it. “Yes, it is close enough. Go ahead and don the shoes; and don’t forget the gloves. The shoes will, among other things, enable you to walk on water. Your rounds must not be balked by mundane trifles.”

“But this is preposterous!” Zane protested. “I was about to kill myself and now I’m a murderer!”

“Certainly. I had to measure your thread very carefully. Technically, your life just ended, see, Death’s body will be taken for yours.” She turned over the body, and Zane saw that it looked uncomfortably familiar. It now resembled his own—with a bullet hole in the face. “You will fill the office until you, too, grow careless and permit a client to turn on you.”

“Or until I die of old age,” Zane said, not really believing any of this.

“Old age will never come to you. Neither will death, if you perform well. If you ask the average person what he most desires, he will answer, ‘Never to die.’ That is, of course, an absolutely foolish wish; in due time you will be better able to appreciate the importance of dying. It is not the right to *live*, but the right to *die* that is most important.”

“I don’t see—”

“What is life, except an ongoing instinct for survival? Nature uses that instinct to make us perform; otherwise we would all relax, and the species would disappear. Nature is a cruel green mother. The survival instinct is a goad, not a privilege.”

“But if I don’t age—”

“Time holds all supernatural agents, especially the several Incarnations, in abeyance. You will live until you die, however many days, years, or centuries that may be, but you will never change from your present physical age.” She guided him to his wall mirror.

“Supernatural agents?” Zane was grasping at peripherals, being as yet unable to get to the nucleus of this situation. “Incarnations?”

“Death, Time, Fate, War, Nature,” she said. “The major field agents operating between God and Satan, answerable to neither. If any of us were scheduled to die like mortal folk, we would have to be concerned for the disposition of our souls, and that’s a conflict of interest. No, we are immortal, as we have to be, accountable to neither superpower. But we do have to do our jobs, or things become complicated.”

“Our jobs,” Zane repeated weakly. “I’m no killer. At least I wasn’t, until this—”

Fate glanced at him penetratingly, and suddenly he knew she knew about his mother. He felt cold, and the guilt rose up in him again. But Fate did not raise that matter. “Of course

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