

**THEODORE
JUDSON**



**HELL CAN
WAIT**



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**A novel by
Theodore Judson**



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Hell Can Wait
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“The negligence of the public administration was betrayed soon afterwards [in 186 A.D.] by a new disorder which arose from the smallest beginnings. A spirit of desertion began to prevail among the troops; and the deserters, instead of seeking their flight in safety or concealment, infested the highways. Maternus, a private soldier, of a daring boldness above his station, collected those bands of robbers into a little army, set open the prisons, invited the slaves to assert their freedom, and plundered with impunity the rich and defenseless cities of Gaul and Spain. The governors of the provinces, who had long been spectators, and perhaps the partners of his depredations, were, at length, roused from their supine indolence by the threatening commands of the emperor. Maternus found that he was encompassed, and foresaw that he must be overpowered. A great effort of despair was his last resource. He ordered his followers to disperse, to pass the Alps in small parties and various disguises, and to assemble at Rome, during the licentious tumult of the festival of Cybele. To murder Commodus [the emperor], and to ascend the vacant throne, was the ambition of no vulgar robber. His measures were so ably concerted, that his concealed troops already filled the streets of Rome. The envy of an accomplice discovered and ruined this singular enterprise, in the moment when it was ripe for execution.”

—From Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, book one, chapter 4.





The Sons of Pride

He had not fully roused himself from the profound depression he had known during his centuries inside his darkened cell on Level 7A when the attendant demons who had taken off his chains brought Maternus into the eye-aching brightness of the fully illuminated chamber. Wonders are appreciated only by those with the capacity to wonder, and his capacity was great after so much deprivation and so much pain. A twenty-first century man would have immediately recognized the lines of desks and cubicles and delivery boys scurrying about, and would have identified the scene as a modern office—albeit one manned by horned devils dressed in blue and brown business suits. To the veteran Roman soldier, everything his senses drew in—even the instrumental version of “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head” blasting over the office’s sound system—was a miracle.

“Have a chair, Mr. Maternus,” said the demon sitting behind the desk. “Hot enough for you? I know. I know. They tell us all to use cornball stuff like that during our morning meetings. ‘Sure,’ says the boss, ‘of course we use clichés. You’ll find worse things down here, you know.’ Sit, sit, take a load off.”

“What is that tongue you speak?” asked Maternus, and reflectively touched his mouth when he heard himself. “What is *this* I speak?” he asked. “Why do I understand it?”

"It's English, old sport," said the demon, as he busily searched through the scattered piles of papers for something he could not find. "Nobody uses Latin any more. This is what has, so to speak, taken Latin's place. The language of the new empire. Not even a current scholar of said dead tongue could decipher the legionnaire's lingo you spoke among your mates, old sport. Here we are," he said upon locating the file he wanted.

"It sounds like something spoken beyond the Rhine," said Maternus and sat heavily in the chair the demon had indicated.

He looked down at the bloodstained tunic and the knee-high trousers he was wearing; they were the same clothes he had been wearing when he died in the Circus Maximus. Other lost souls, dressed in the costumes of their eras, were filing through the large office to meet with other demons at other desks. Maternus was momentarily distracted by a Mongol warrior, an arrow still in his back, who took his place at the station immediately to his left. A beautiful blonde woman in a gold lamé dress, whom Maternus would have recognized as a famous Hollywood star of the 1930s, had he lived at that time, was seated in front of the desk to his right and stroking a lap dog while she chatted up the minion of Lucifer who was handling her case.

"Grrr," said Maternus's demon in regard to the blonde woman the ancient warrior was eyeing, "I'd love to get her in my own private hell. Heh, heh. Well, don't laugh, then. After a fella who has heard ten thousand 'private hell' jokes down here, I guess they're not that funny to you anymore."

The active, yet amused and nearly ebullient manner of the demon in the strange blue suit jacket and the long cravat was unnerving to Maternus. The other demons he had encountered during his eighteen centuries in the afterlife had beaten him with scourges or tossed him into pools of burning camphor while they mocked him in his agony. This cheeriness, this lightness this demon showed was something quite new and somehow inappropriate.

"You don't know the trouble we had finding your records," said the smiling demon, still fussing with the

various mounds of paper in front of him. "They were, of course, in the old filing cabinets, and those babies are bigger than Utah! Just big mountains full of boxes of paper these days. Not that you'd know anything about Utah. Or would want to. We're finally getting computers in here—they'll be analog for the first five thousand years or so, of course—but we haven't entered any data on you in them yet. Had to send a whole squadron of former telemarketers just to ferret out your papers. Your records are so old they're on vellum. Hello, can you say antiquated? You're a tough audience, Matty. Don't laugh much, do you? Okay, let's start from the beginning, as my old cosmogony professor used to say. Heh, heh. I kill myself. Get it? Cosmogony... beginnings...?"

He hesitated for a moment and playfully bounced his eyebrows up and down, but got no response from the stolid Maternus.

"Moving right along then," said the demon and coughed into his hand. "What exactly is your full name, Matty?"

"Maternus," said the soldier.

"No, no," said the demon and shook his head. "I've handled enough of you Roman chaps to know you each had three names: a *praenomen*—your regular first name, what your friends call you; a *nomen*—your family name, which in your case would be Maternus; and a *cognomen*—your clan name or your family connection or, in some cases, a nickname."

The demon rolled his hand as he narrated this, as though he were explaining this to Maternus for the first time.

"Decimus Maternus Celer," said the soldier.

"That's a name?" said the demon. "Forgive me for not keeping up on my Latin—like I'd want to become a priest or something—but your name would translate as something like 'Tenth Maternal the Quick.'"

"I was born to a woman living outside the military station at Argentoratum," said Maternus. "My father was a soldier; I don't know which one. My mother was a local woman, and had no *nomen*, not like a Roman woman would. She was simply Lydia. When I turned nineteen and went into the ranks, the town magistrate told my centurion

I was 'from the mother.' There was nothing more to say. I was the tenth of my mother's children, so she called me that, and I was quick in battle, so my comrades called me Celer."

"My, my, my," chirped the demon, "your whole life, from the very beginning on, was nothing but brutality and rough handling. You never even had a proper name." He pretended to play an imaginary violin. "It's so sad and all of that pathetic nonsense," he said and for a split second acted as though he were weeping. "But you see, we had such a hard time finding your file because we had only the handle 'Maternus' to work with. When we got the news of your appellate hearing, we didn't know whether we were looking for Curiatius Maternus—he was a poet, a little before your time, and we of course have him down here, but then we have nearly all the writers; or for General Julius Maternus—he was a chap who made an expedition across the Sahara in your lifetime, but he's up in the Elysian Fields, on Level One; or we thought we might be looking for the sophist Maternus, a fellow Domitian had killed—we have *all* the sophists, of course. Then there was this damned Maternus, the first bishop of Cologne, who was..." He glanced about to see if anyone in the office was listening to him. "He was a *saint!*" whispered the demon, and gave another little cough into his hand. "Some of the lads I put on the case in recent years thought you might be Julius Firmicus Maternus, who was an astrologer in the fourth century. We should have gotten our hands on him, dabbling in black magic as he did, but *that* Maternus wrote some damned religious book to please Emperor Constantine. It's an angry, stupid little tome, but apparently it saved some souls, and so he's..." The demon pointed upward and at the same time rolled his eyes in that direction. "So with all the confusion, and with the necessary paperwork every step of the inquiry demanded, we've actually been looking for you for the last one thousand eight hundred and nineteen years."

"I don't understand," said Maternus. "I have been dead for at least that long."

"Technically," said the demon, "your hearing was supposed to take place the day after you got here. But, hey, you're in Hell, pal. You've got to learn to deal with some delays in this neighborhood."

The demon opened the manila folder marked "Maternus," and put on his reading glasses so he could focus on the contents for a few moments.

"My name is Absinthe," said the demon as he read. "Not that it matters. You and I are hardly going to be hanging out together, if you get my drift. Now, to your file: you were, as you say, a bastard from a military station, an illiterate, and for twenty-two years a heaving brute in the Eighth Legion, the so-called 'Augusta,'" said the demon, putting quotation marks around the word Augusta with his fingers. "Oh, this is good: it says here that you killed many, many men in the service of the Antonine Emperors. You killed many, many more when you led a rebellion in Gaul—we call that France nowadays, not that name changes necessarily improve anything—a rebellion against Emperor Commodus, who, by the by, was to have a permanent place down on the tenth level, a spot we reserve for those who were both willfully evil *and* willfully stupid. Back when Dante made his famous tour of the place, the tenth level was so small he didn't even pause to look at it. In the last few centuries we've really had to expand the place. The True Believer suites down there are *bigger* than Utah. Three cheers for modern ideology, I say. Commodus himself was declared insane by the higher powers and has been in Limbo nearly as long as you were on 7A. I read here you died in a fit of characteristic rage when you failed to assassinate the emperor in Rome. Went down fighting, sword in hand. Frankly, I don't see anything here that would keep you from joining our team on a permanent basis. Had you gotten the right sort of education, you could even have been managerial material."

The demon read on and for the first time during the meeting, he frowned.

"Here it is," he muttered. "You spared women and children when you could. Spared the 'innocent' in general.

Killed only those you deemed 'unjust' and 'too powerful.'" He put his finger quotation marks around the words 'innocent,' 'unjust' and 'too powerful,' as they were terms he rarely included in his every day vocabulary and had only contempt for them. "You freed slaves, protected small land owners from the tax farmers, you made 'friends,' genuine 'friends' among your comrades in arms. Then there is this—this is why you're getting a hearing," said Absinthe as he read a particularly offensive passage. "On the second of September, in the first year of the reign of Lucius Anthony, the year we now call 182 A.D., you and your squadron stopped to rest at a villa near the city of Mogontiacum in the province of Germania Superior. You asked the owner of the place for water, and he sent out his slave girl, one Maria—we have no other names for her in our records, and you didn't even know that much about her. A pretty young slave she was, though she limped when she brought the ewer of cold water out to you, because she had a twisted foot. Brute that you are, you ogled the maiden's prime cuts, made some stupid remark about her breasts to impress your cloddish mates, but she—the minx—she wasn't afraid of you. 'My mother told me,' she said, looking you straight into the eye, 'only a man who has never touched a woman would let his first words to me be so vulgar.' Your face reddened, you got tongue-tied, and your comrades mocked you as she smiled at you triumphantly and poured water into your iron cups. It gets worse. As she waited upon you, rather than crush her like a rotten gourd, as you would have done to a man who insulted you, you looked upon Maria with... a combination of..." Absinthe's breathing became more labored, and perspiration ran off his previously undisturbed visage. "I mean to say, you felt... *kindness*..." said the demon and once more coughed into his fist. "You felt that... and *sympathy*... even *admiration*..."

The demon had to pause and coughed loudly several times as he struggled to clear his throat, for it pained him to pronounce these terms that were so seldom used in Hades. He inhaled a great, wheezing breath to discharge in rapid fire the things he had to say next. "You thought

she was brave for how well she bore up in spite of her condition and her station. The image of the garden and her in it have ever since brought you great consolation and feelings of peace. You wanted to be with her, to know everything about her, to hear her voice and see her face again during your long and bloody career. You, in short, looked up to her with l—, l—, l—,” said the demon, nearly gagging on the ‘l’ sound he was making.

“I looked upon her with lust?” suggested Maternus.

“No, you fat-headed ape!” spat Absinthe, grasping his throat. “You may have felt that, but it was mixed up with these other feelings. You felt...” He took another deep breath. “You felt... *love*... for her.”

Seconds after he had spoken the forbidden word, Absinthe went into convulsions and hacked up an enormous blood clot. Other demons stationed at the other desks fell silent and looked at the commotion Absinthe was causing as he struggled to cease coughing. A particularly tall demon, one dressed in a crested blazer and sporting a class ring from a prestigious school of demonic management, approached Absinthe from behind and asked what was transpiring at this station.

“You know we have company rules regarding language,” said the tall demon and rapped his class ring on Absinthe’s desk top. “The subject is clearly spelled out in the 1823 upgrade of rule #536-1679R, sub—clause 18. The standards are as obvious as the tail on your backside... or does someone need to attend another motivational seminar, one with live ammunition to go with the usual concertina wire?”

“Absolutely not, Mr. Archevil,” said Absinthe and struggled to put a smile over his distress. “I was so angry at this mortal blockhead I let some bad words slip.”

“Anger is commendable,” nodded Archevil. “So is maintaining control. Here in the company, we, above all else, want our people to exhibit control over themselves and others. If they do not, their behavior indicates they are thinking things *we* do not think, and you know, Abby, how we in the front office feel about that sort of thing.”

"Yes, Mr. Archevil," said Absinthe and cringed. "Where, by the by, did you get that beautiful blazer?"

"From someplace you could not afford to go," said the office manager and abruptly turned on his cloven heels, leaving the demon and Maternus alone once more.

"I'm done here," said Absinthe and closed Maternus's file. "I'm sending you up to your hearing before you cause me any more trouble with your ancient sentiments. Just sign these forms. Make a mark with this," he said and handed Maternus a ballpoint pen and a reef of pages. "It's like a stylus. Make your mark on all three forms. We do everything in triplicate—at least."

Absinthe then led Maternus out a side door to a towering circular stairwell, on which a long single-file line of souls was already standing; each of the souls was holding a manila-colored file similar to the one Maternus had gotten from his demon. There were so many individuals waiting the line extended beyond the point Maternus could see.

"Not too many waiting for a hearing today," said Absinthe, also gazing upward to where the line was supposed to end. "You may be in line here only a decade or two."

He slapped Maternus on the back and left him behind a gaggle of recent arrivals from the American Solipsist Society, who had recently gone to Vegas on the cheapest charter plane their organization could find, and who were now having trouble with the notion that there were so many others sharing the afterlife with them.

"I didn't even like having anyone in the society other than myself," one of them was saying. "Now do I have to recognize everyone in front of me?"

One of his associates decided he did not; he proclaimed that these lost souls in line could have no more existence than did the people back on earth. The first solipsist agreed with his associate, although he added he still refused to acknowledge the other man's existence, regardless of how perceptive his thinking was. The group of them then proceeded up the stairs, where they were quickly confronted

by several thousand Chinese men who were dressed in quilted coats and had been standing in line ahead of the solipsists, each reading from a small, red book. In the melee that followed, the Chinese beat the solipsists unconscious and tossed them down the stairs once more. When the latter group regained consciousness, they argued among themselves whether or not the universe had ceased to be during the space of time they had been unable to think of it.

Before this debate was concluded, everyone on the stairwell, Maternus included, became aware of a new presence among the countless host. Whatever it was, it emanated from a point high above the lost souls and seemed to drift downward until it came among them, growing more powerful as it approached. Maternus first saw it as a light floating toward him. When it was nearly upon him, the soldier could discern a human face within the circle of light, then the outline of a body, and finally the light faded, leaving Maternus standing face to face with someone who appeared to be a middle-aged man dressed in a white robe. He was not large, or in any way imposing, or even particularly handsome, yet his was the first face the soldier had seen in eighteen centuries that awoke a serenity in Maternus that the battle-scarred veteran had only felt in the garden with Maria on that warm September day he still held in his memory.

"Come with me, friend," the being said to Maternus and, by touching the soldier's hand, they both rose as lightly as petals carried aloft by a summer wind and together they soared over the heads of the astonished host waiting in line. "You have suffered enough delay," the being said to Maternus as they glided along. His words were in the same language the demon Absinthe had used, but now the tongue sounded far less coarse.

Seconds later Maternus found himself standing in a peculiar location that seemed to be vaguely white in every direction, yet did not have a definite outline to its floor, ceiling, or walls. The spot resembled the interior of a cloud, except that Maternus could walk there and not fall to earth. In this place there was a single desk that was larger and

less cluttered than the desks in the lower office had been. A solitary demon was seated at the desk, stylishly dressed in a black tie and tails—two of which were attached to his top coat—and sporting a tidy goatee. The white being took his place beside the demon, and Maternus found his place in the vacant chair in front of the desk.

“Your file, please,” said the demon, and took the folder from Maternus. “Odd weather we’ve been having, isn’t it? Rather clammy. I can’t bear to wear linen when it gets like this.”

“What a foolish thing to say to a man who has not seen daylight in nearly two millennia,” said the white being. “I am Mr. Worthy,” he said to Maternus. “I am, as you might guess, not from around here. People commonly refer to my type as angels; among ourselves, we have no name other than messengers.”

“I myself was also an angel once,” said the natty demon at the desk as he scanned the loose pages in Maternus’s file.

“And the universe was once a single cell of hydrogen, Mr. Banewill,” said Mr. Worthy. “Tell me, my friend,” he said to Maternus, “did the priests of your religion teach you what an angel is?”

“My religion was that of the divine Mithra,” said Maternus. “I know only of the great egg of creation and the hero’s sacrifice of the white bull.”

“Well, all right,” snickered Mr. Banewill. “We did so used to love Mithraism! All those baptisms in blood, and the ritual violence. The whole religion was one big, never-ending frat party—with swords!”

“The Roman soldiers only adhered to the Mithra nonsense because their emperors imposed it upon them,” said Mr. Worthy. “The caesars built temples to that false god in every military station and told the soldiers they would be rewarded if they joined in its ceremonies. The cult’s priests stuck initiates in dark rooms, deprived them of food and drink, drugged them, made them stare into barrels of water until their senses became undone, and finally played some sleight of hand on them or stuck them under an iron

grate and sacrificed a bull over their discombobulated persons. The poor soldiers, if they did not go insane, became devotees for life, simply because they did not know any better. The martial cult provided but another excuse for the ghastly life the legions were already living.”

“Before you measure soldier boy here for a halo,” said Mr. Banewill, “I suggest you take a better look at him. He didn’t get those scars he has all over his body by nicking himself while shaving. Like other Roman troopers, our boy spent the first five years of his enlistment just learning how to fight hand to hand. Think of it: five years totally dedicated to mastering the two combat skills every legionary had to know: how to hurl his two *pila* and how to thrust with his short sword—his *gladis*—while he protected himself with his shield. He got good at what he did. He was a killing machine, our great hulking lout was. When we take into account the limited technology of his day, we have to judge that he and his chums were damned near the most effective killing machines, relatively speaking, ever to burden the earth. Look at how big he is! He’s well over six feet tall and built like a slab of concrete; he was a monster for his time. And when I say he was good, I’m not saying the half of it: he was *really* good at his bloody work, and yes, he enjoyed it.”

“He was beaten, humiliated, starved, knew only hardships, only denial,” said the angel. “What else could he have become other than the beast he was? Time and again his commanders led him onto a dusty battlefield and told him he either had to kill or be killed. No, he merely did what he had to do, as terrible as his actions were.”

“Your side was not so forgiving of his commanders.” said Banewill.

“They *chose* to do what they did,” said Mr. Worthy. “What’s more, a just code of morality, you may recall, is like good comedy—it holds the powerful to a higher standard than it does the weak. War was not where our man’s heart was. Tell us, friend, for the record: where would you be, if you could be anywhere in creation?”

Maternus did not ponder his response for long.

“In that garden,” he murmured.

"Yes, with gentle Maria," said the angel and smiled. "That was where you would have been, if you could have. We know you felt true love for her. Not even the devils can dispute that. It makes me glad to hear you say that is what you want, my friend."

He touched Maternus on the shoulder, and for a few seconds the soldier could see her face again, as if she were there with him and looking up into his eyes.

"Makes you glad to hear him," repeated the demon in a mocking tone. "That's another one of your holy conjuror's tricks, Worthy. You knew before he answered what he was going to say. You're an angel. You think I've forgotten you can read minds?"

"That I knew beforehand what he would say does not make what he said untrue," said Mr. Worthy. "Of course, I also knew beforehand that you would object, but that doesn't matter either."

"Which is another thing that makes you damned hard to argue with, Worthy. To level things out, you should let me read your thoughts sometimes."

"Contests between good and evil are not meant to be equal," said the angel. "That's one of the many concepts your side understands but does not accept."

"Are you reading my mind right now?" asked the demon and flashed a wicked smile at his rival.

"No, when I anticipate you are about to think something particularly vile, I shut you out, which means I shut out your thoughts most of the time," explained Mr. Worthy. "Why don't you go ahead and play the video?"

"What video?" asked Banewill, taking care to keep a straight face.

"The one of our friend fighting German tribesmen," said the angel. "You intended to play it to make me think worse of him."

"I thought you weren't reading my mind."

"I'm not," said Mr. Worthy. "I was looking into the future. That's something else altogether. Now play the video."

The demon touched a button on his desk that caused a large rectangular screen to rise from the opaque whiteness

that was the enclosure's floor.

"High definition," said Banewill proudly. "What do you upstairs boys have?"

"You know there is no television in Heaven," said the angel. "We don't need it, as we never get bored."

"There's a fine bit of holy rationalization," the demon pointed out to Maternus. "They don't have it, because they can't have it. But I'm sure they still love the rules as much as I did in my time up there."

"Don't play that," said Mr. Worthy of a disc Banewill was about to put in the player. "That's one of your pornographic videos."

The demon shrugged and got another disc from his desk, and the angel shook his head at this one as well.

"More porn," he said. "You really should get better organized, sir. At least separate your personal things from business items."

"Thank you for the housekeeping advice," said Banewill, searching through the open drawer. "And 'pornography' is such a pejorative word, don't you think? I prefer to call it 'erotica.' Anyway, I think this is it."

He popped a third disc into the machine, and soon the screen displayed a horrific ancient battle on the banks of the Rhine between the compact legions of Rome and some howling, frantic, but badly organized German tribesmen.

"The Alemanni," said Maternus in recognition of the ferocious bearded men in wool kilts.

"That's right, ape boy, the Alemanni," said the demon. "What magnificent, unthinking savages they were. Pity your type killed most of them. Look, Worthy, here's our bundle of joy, right in the front ranks of his century, the hundred men he led to glory that day."

He pointed to a section of the wide screen where a young Maternus in full battle armor was hacking away at the hairy men.

"Oh my," gloated Banewill. "That was a father of seven our boy cut in half there. Watch this: see this beardless youth he's about to wack in the skull? He was a poet among his people, loved sunsets and spring rains. Didn't he have a soul, too? There he is, in his final throes. Such lovely

thrashing about and screaming. You were proud of this, weren't you?" he asked the soldier.

Maternus had been forbidden to express many feelings during his violent lifetime. Pride in martial skills, however, was something his commanders had not merely allowed, they had encouraged it.

"The Eighth was the best there ever was," said the soldier. "None dared stand before us." His remark brought a contented grin to the demon's face and caused the angel to shake his head in sorrow.

"Turn that infernal thing off," said Mr. Worthy, who had never taken his eyes off Maternus. "Do you think I did not already know what warfare looked like then? I know everything he did, and I accept him nonetheless."

The demon made the screen go blank and sent it back into the unusual floor.

"You will also know, then," said the demon as he returned to his desk, "that he is surprisingly smart. Granted, he's uneducated and his years of hard service made him cruder than he was born to be, but he did, I admit, have first-class brains. Had he really been the grunting, insensate thug he appears to be, he never would have been able to persuade other men to accept his leadership, nor could he have planned the difficult stratagems he did. Were we to give him an IQ test today, I dare say he would score right off the charts. Now, Mr. Worthy, you combine his innate intelligence with that magnified sense of pride he had, and you have a man who all his life knew he was being forced to live below his rightful station. The resentment he felt for his betters, especially for his chuckle-headed, puffed-up commanders, impresses even me, and we in Hell know a thing or two about injured pride. That resentment of his all too often blossomed into rage, an anger so great this admittedly crafty chap sometimes did indeed become the thoughtless, uncontrollable machine of death he looks to be. Granted, he did feel something for the downtrodden; he did have a primitive sense of justice, but it wasn't that sense of justice that made him rebel against the empire as much as his deep, abiding resentment of how he had been

treated since the day he was born. Isn't that so, Mr. Muscle-Bound?"

"There's no need to taunt him," said Worthy. "I've made up my mind. There is nothing you say that will dissuade me."

"Then it won't matter," said Banewill, "if I point out he has no patience. Women are a mystery to him, and children absolutely terrify our soldier boy, as he has rarely been around them. He's unfamiliar with those who come from different races or speak different languages; he's only seen such people from afar or on the other end of his sword. He's provincial with a capital P. Put him in a modern city, let him mingle among the varied types he is certain to meet there, and Mr. Maternus is highly likely to explode. The first time this angry Roman trooper tries to walk against the light and some big-city hot-shot on a Honda nearly runs him over and flips our centurion the bird as he drives away, our boy is likely to hunt him down and beat him to death with his own motorcycle. He's not in the least prepared to handle the hundreds of little indignities a modern person has to endure every day. How is he going to react when he's stood in line at the supermarket for five minutes, and then has some gum-popping check-out girl tell him he has eleven items and she can only accept ten at her register? What happens if some barroom dolt with six months of karate classes who thinks he's tough makes the fatal mistake of picking a fight with our boy? What is a good angel like yourself going to say to that poor dolt's grieving widow? I would think a sensitive sort like yourself should be at least a little worried about what Ares' faithful servant here might do to several of the still living once he goes off his leash."

"Every life, even the quietest, entails a certain amount of danger," said the angel. "Yes, he will have to learn to contain his temper. He has other qualities that will serve him well. Like all men, he is a risk we are willing to take. We are willing to wager the good in him will overcome his other inclinations."

Both the angel and demon were now looking directly at the soldier. Banewill stroked his tidy beard and was lost

in thought for a few silent moments.

"I shouldn't let you talk me into this," said the demon from his desk. "Whenever you are this confident about an individual soul, it is usually because you have looked into the future and know he will succeed in his trials."

"Yet there remains the possibility you might win this time," said the angel, and for once he smirked as the demon had done repeatedly.

"We are weak in the face of any temptation," sighed the demon, and was again silent while he further studied Maternus.

When he spoke again he pronounced: "He has to be among the unfamiliar, in some nation that could not have existed in his lifetime. There have to be independent women who are able to stand up to him, and lots of bothersome children to distress him. Put him in an affluent place, somewhere that would not know or pardon his type of violence."

The demon took a slip of paper from a drawer and on the page wrote three sentences.

"You are thinking of California?" asked the angel.

"The once Golden State has gotten to be a dicier proposition in recent years," replied the demon as he continued to write. "There are too many possibilities there. A really tough guy such as he might prosper in the right neighborhood. I want him to be somewhere the natives haven't seen anyone as scary as him, someplace that is not spoiled by either too much poverty or too much affluence."

"Western Australia?" suggested Mr. Worthy.

"Not quite diverse enough," said Banewill. "He will have a harder time of it if he occasionally has to interact with those who seem strange to him. How about Colorado?"

"Wonderful," said the angel. "We could set him on a ranch, let him be a cowboy, or he might be a roughneck in the oil fields, or perhaps a coal miner on the Western Slope."

"Absolutely not!" said Banewill. "Maternus would be comfortable anywhere there is physical work to be done

or where he might be surrounded by other rough men. We can't let him be anywhere rural. I had in mind the Front Range, say suburban Denver. Specifically Aurora."

"Why?"

"Because Adam and Eve do not live there any more," said the demon. "The town's citizens come from elsewhere and cherish no memories of whence they arose. They have no history, no connection to the land or to any particular culture; like the economic man of theory, they want what they want and think the best and most righteous outcome of every situation is getting what they desire. Yet they have the pretensions of those self-deluded folk the world used to call bohemians. Notions of Good and Evil and of Original Sin are as far removed from Aurora as they are from any place on earth—excluding, of course, college towns and capital cities, but I know you would never agree to send him to one of those latter spots. Maternus will find no truly bad people in Aurora. In moral terms, what he will find is a mountain of glass, a grand and hazardous surface on which he will struggle to find his footing. Mere intelligence or courage won't help him much there; he will need subtlety, and subtle he ain't."

"You underestimate him, as you do humanity in general," said Mr. Worthy. "Before I agree to your three trials, we need to give him an ability."

"Certainly, that's standard practice, but nothing fancy in his case. I want him to remain in a decidedly humble station."

"I want him to be literate," said the angel. "He has yearned to read and write throughout his long career in arms. Maternus used to sleep with his head on the letters he took from the body of a fallen comrade; he vainly hoped the words would somehow seep into his mind."

"How touching," said Banewill. "But reading can lead to books, and while some books are our best friends, others have been more implacable enemies to our side than the loyal angels themselves."

"Another risk you have to take. If he remains illiterate in his new life, people will wonder why. You've already

given him an American accent; others in suburbia may accept a recent immigrant as being illiterate in English, but not one who already talks as they do. As he is, Maternus would attract unwanted attention, even special assistance. 'Surely,' his neighbors would think, 'surely such a peculiar man must have an interesting life story.'

"For once being ignorant would give him a leg up," conceded Banewill. "All right, he can read. He still has to do something menial to make his living. I don't want him enjoying himself up there."

"There's nobility in any sort of honest work," said the angel and took the page from the demon so he could read it more closely. "He can do these," he said of the items on the paper. "I see no reason to delay him here. It is time to begin," he said to Maternus. "Say good-bye to all this."

The angel waved his right hand through the air in a wide arc, and everything around Maternus passed into a dense darkness.