

# The Last Warrior

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The sky was blue silk crumpled into a fist; more gray silk flowered up from every direction. Kladius, the Last Warrior made steady time. Straw stubble punctured his bare feet. The ground still smoldered where a purging fire had suffocated itself. Kladius the Last Warrior fled, but knew no fear; behind him a troop of fifty raised black, powdered silk with cloven footed beasts.

He kept the Begotten Seraph next to his flesh; four times the triple wings brushed his skin; four times he felt it flutter next to his belly, yet, he was unaware of the pain of the straw piercing the soles of his bare feet.

It spoke; he heard.

It said: "Deliver me from this world, friend, and I shall sing your name as brother among my brothers -- they that dwell between the stars and the earth."

He replied, not in words, for the language of the Begotten Seraph was not one of words, or even music, but sensations of the flesh and spirit. In this way they communicated, for he was not an ignorant warrior. He did not battle for Glory; nor had he been trained to battle for Politics or Blood. He was a warrior of sight and vision.

The steady pounding of the earth grew closer and Kladius said onto the Begotten Seraph, "My song for a lake, I will trade my song in heaven for a lake on earth so I may deliver you." To this the Begotten Seraph did not reply. So Kladius took the silence as a reprimand, for Seraphs are not of man's logic or reasoning.

The troops came closer, and closer yet. Kladius stumbled, once, and then twice. The discipline of his teachers, all his teachers, both

Human and Begotten, left him and he sprinted forward, seeing nothing but wastelands of silk. It was in this way fear worked itself into his mind. He stumbled a third time, and a fourth, and finally lay still with stinging embers pressed against his cheek.

They were upon him.

The Saddle Witches riding their centaurs surrounded him on all sides, and sat waiting. Silence, total, all encompassing, huge eyes blinked and tails whisked nervously. They were strange, lethal creatures. The Witches kept their hair oiled and tied into straight twisted ropes. They kept their breasts bare in defiance of ancient law. Their scent was of well-cured herbs and secret powdered minerals.

The Begotten Seraph wiggled against Kladius' flesh, and pulled part of his soul from the darkness of supposed defeat. The Begotten Seraph whispered. Kladius found it in himself to rise.

A Saddle Witch came forth, guiding a centaur by its mane of braided man's hair. She spoke in the badly accented hisses of the Saddle Witches

"Where is the angel?"

Kladius raised his head, and spit to his left (a term of disrespect in his land), and blasphemed the Saddle Witch's gods. Seemingly without forethought she sent a whip streaming out like serpent striking. His mouth became fiery and torturous as blood rolled down his chin, and he choked on splinters of his teeth.

"Where is the angel?" she repeated.

The Begotten Seraph fluttered. A centaur squealed laughter.

"Crush his head! Break his bones! Uproot his teeth! Break him Struga! Break him! Then he will speak!"

"Silence abomination!" she shrieked.

"There is no Seraph," Kladius said.

"Liar! Thief!"

The whip cracked again. His vision turned to a harvest lighting storm. His right eye disappeared like a ripe cherry fruit flung from a slingshot into the trunk of a tree, but curiously there was no pain. This was the Begotten Seraph's work, no doubt. Yet, the Begotten Seraph was gone. It did not flutter. It did not lie dormant against his body. It was not within his garments.

"If it was in your power," he whispered in his mind, "to come and go, then what did you need me for? Now that I am useless, you leave me alone with the barbarians I freed you from?"

Of course, there was no reply, only Struga's shrieks as she lapsed into her native tongue.

"Shave his beard! Sever his toes! Notch his ears!" Struga silenced the unruly centaur with her whip. She dismounted, her breasts sagging, her mouth in a grimace.

"You will give us the angel!"

Kladius knelt before her, his head hung low, his eye began to throb.

"Kill me, for only in death will I surrender to savages."

"Fool," she said, "tiresome, idiot warrior."

Kladius begged for intervention from the now departed Seraph. His hand went longingly to the place where it had once nested. Still, it was gone, nor had he expected it be there. He could not lament, but only rejoice in the fact it had found freedom. He lowered his head and spoke his death words to Struga once again.

She came closer; her hands calloused, her fingernails like crystal sheaths. She tore his shirt scoring his flesh in four neat furrows that filled with blood. He looked down at the final proof of the Seraph's absence.

"Where is it hidden?"

"It abandoned me," he said, "when I had nothing more to offer."

"Liar," she said, "that's not the way of angels."

He shrugged and allowed himself a grin, for he knew the way of Begotten. He blasphemed her gods once more. Struga turned her back to him, taking the satisfaction of the insult from him.

"The stake! He will speak after the stake!" cried a centaur. A Saddle Witch pulled a carved stake from the back of a centaur, and passed it forward, hand over hand. Struga herself pounded the stake into the blackened ground. They crucified Kladius, the Last Warrior upon the stake, with his hands bound over his head.

"Let him suffer for the moment, perhaps he will find that the dawn will loosen his tongue," she said to her troops, excluding Kladius from understanding with a slur of hisses, which he likened to the voice of a deadly serpent man he had once slain.

Dusk came.

They made camp with supplies that had been carried for uncounted days on the backs of centaurs. They lit fires close to the Last Warrior, and roasted meats, and herbs. His hair melted, his skin blistered, and he cried out several times. As they ate, he agonized, and as he agonized the Saddle Witches rutted with the centaurs, and as they rutted, the Witches shrieked with pleasure and the centaurs howled like wolves.

Finally, when they were spent they collapsed, and the fires went low, Kladius hung, burnt and defeated, until the Begotten Seraph spoke to him: "I am here, hidden in your belly. You have proven strong, and worthy, and now you must find the strength to set us free."

Through the haze of pain, defeat and humiliation Kladius roused himself.

"Pull the ropes, the fire has weakened them. The fire has set us free," the Seraph said. With strength that could have only come from the Seraph he pulled and twisted his charred arms until his wrists were free. He collapsed into the dying embers and pulled himself up after he realized that he knew pain, just as before. His body was broken, burned and disfigured. This he told to the hidden Seraph as it wiggled in his belly like an unborn child.

"Stand tall, brother," it replied, "stand tall in the fires of our enemy. We will escape."

He stood. The pain drifted away as he felt himself change. Soon he knew pleasure as the Seraph grew inside him, filling him with peace.

"What is this!" The Last Warrior said. His head twisted to see tiny buds breaking through the flesh of his back.

"Wings!" the Seraph said, "Not one pair, but three!"

His wings, like tiny shoots, grew a season in an instant. The pain was gone now. He rose up as effortlessly as centaurs run, as angels fly. "I will sing your name as my brother among my brothers," the Seraph promised. Kladius watched the beasts below him fade to a silky blur as he rode his wings into the sky.

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At dawn they flew with a flock of geese, who accepted them unconditionally into their ranks. During these morning hours, when the sunlight was at a delicate and perfect balance, he saw that his country was not the wasteland that was supposed, for few had ventured from the Kingdom walls in recent years. He saw that perhaps it could be restored to what he remembered before the Dark Age had come.

At noon, he felt a peculiar thirst, and they touched down by an old lake. The Begotten Seraph spoke from the depths of his belly, "Here is the lake you begged of me. Look into it and see." Kladius saw himself as he was to be in a future and fleshless time. "Savor it," the Seraph said, "for it will be years before you can truly call it yours."

He did not reply, to do so would have profaned the lake, the image and his honor. He drank from the lake, physically and then with his eyes. He did not know how much time passed before he rose up into the sky.

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Just outside the city gates the Seraph withdrew. Kladius lay naked, burnt, but in a place above pain. Clapsed in his peeling hands was the Seraph as naked and vulnerable as him. The guards came and stared unbelieving at Kladius. The Last Warrior of the Last Warriors had finally come home. His people were more beautiful than he

remembered, and now disfigured, he felt awkward being among them once again.

The priests met him at the temple doors. They bathed him in blessed waters, and the young priests said prayers. The Old Gods were thanked, and the scribes began a new chapter in history.

The Begotten Seraph never left his hands. Later, on the temple top with the King himself bowing before it, the Begotten Seraph was set free. It flew from Kladius' hands into the clockwork of stars. And indeed it sang the name Kladius, the Last Warrior in the heavens.

