

# The Last Warrior

by SFX Fantasy

Slanting needles of rain watered the land, as the men lowered the oak coffin into the ground.

“Goodbye old friend,” mumbled Joey.

A slender hand rested on his shoulder, offering unspoken words of comfort.

Joey's shaking hand held those pale fingers in gratitude. “He's gone. The last of the warriors that protected our town. We're in trouble now.”

I bit my lip as I watched my best friend comfort my cousin. He still believed in those warriors. Fairy folk or super-powered beings who look human, but are not like us. He was so sure old Brun was one of those mythical heroes. The way he lapped up the old man's stories was shocking. It was hard to accept that a sensible guy regards fairy tales as facts. Sure, old Brun's the best story teller in town, but I would think only kids believe such creatures exist.

Lily waved at me. “Sarah! Joey and I are going for some drinks. Care to join us?”

My cue. I'm her chaperone. Not that she needs one. She's unsure about her feelings for Joey. Both of them confide in me. I feel like a lamp post sometimes, but I guess that's what friends, and cousins are for.

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“Soda for me, coffee for him and apple juice for her,” said Lily to the waitress that sauntered past our table.

Joey finally spoke up. He hadn't said a word since we left the graveyard. “He was murdered. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Look Joey. Brun was ninety-three. He died of old age,” I said.

“Warriors can live up to a hundred. Brun was still very strong... like all retired warriors,” said Joey resolutely.

“Joey, you are three years older than me but no wiser. All those stories about warriors are just that. Stories. They do NOT exist. Brun was getting senile. Just because he believed he was a warrior doesn't mean he was one.” I regretted those words as they came out of my mouth.

Joey's face was red. He was visibly shaking.

“Calm down. Sarah didn't mean it,” said Lily, resting her porcelain hand on his shoulder. Lily looks exactly the way her name suggests. Lily-white skin and as slender as a reed. Deceptively so. Sweet looking Lily throws a mean punch. As for her kicks, you wouldn't want to know what they're like. She

put the town bully in hospital for months last year.

“He was murdered. Poisoned, most likely, with black venom,” muttered Joey. His eyes had that all too familiar vacant look, as if he were lost in another world.

I opened my mouth to speak when Lily placed her finger on my lips. “Enough already. An old friend just passed away. Let's not fight over this.”

Days turned to weeks. Life in our town went on as usual. Then it began. A woman wandered off in the woods and never returned. A man found dead in his sleep, with dried black blood on his neck.

The only beneficiaries of this change of pace were the reporters. Sensational headlines splashed the front pages of our town's newspapers every week.

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Lily and I were going through our latest book on Kodokan Judo. We'd gotten it from a second hand bookstore and wanted to try some of the more interesting throws.

Joey strode into the room waving the afternoon edition of Central Times. “This is proof Brun was murdered,” he said as he tossed the paper at me. I caught it. The headlines were more fitting for a tabloid than a respectable newspaper.

“Man-Snake Mutation Spotted In The Swamp.”

The story featured an interview with a six-year old girl who said she'd witnessed a half man, half snake creature strangle a young man.

“Here's another,” said Joey flashing a newspaper cutting at me. “Man found dead in a swamp. Police believe he was strangled by a python..”

I looked straight into Joey's eyes. “So?”

“That wasn't a python. He was killed by a Ven'eelg. One of those dark beasts Brun told us about. They're here. They know Brun's dead and there are no warriors left to defend us. This town is doomed. Let's warn our folks and get out of here,” said Joey.

Joey was really trying my patience. “Based on a story by a six year old kid you expect the entire community to leave this town? What does a little girl know? Besides, that guy was strangled by a python in the swamp and everyone knows there are pythons in the woods.”

Lily put down her book. “All these things are happening in the swamp. You say that snake-like creatures from the swamp poisoned Brun and are going to kill us all. A visit to the swamp should settle matters once and for all. Let's visit that swamp first thing tomorrow morning.”

I shouldn't be shocked by her suggestion, knowing her so well, yet this suggestion took me by surprise. “There are pythons there. We might not meet a Ven'eelg, but we could get killed by pythons for goodness sake.”

“If you're too scared to come with us, Joey and I can go alone. I want to prove to him there are no such things as Ven'eelgs,” chortled Lily.

The stage was set. Joey, Lily and I were to meet in our secret cave, a stone's throw away from the wretched swamp.

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“Thought you weren't coming,” said Joey as he glanced at me.

I was soaked in sweat. Ran all the way to the cave as I'd forgotten the time. From the look on his face, I could tell he hoped I wouldn't show up. He and Lily were making gooey eyes at each other. Lily's cheeks were pink. “And miss the ghost hunt? You've got to be joking,” I retorted.

Armed with daggers, we left the cave. No guns were allowed in our town, so daggers and our knife throwing skills were our best bet against lurking pythons, should they attack.

The cloying smell of serpents made my hair bristle. I hated that place. Joey laughed at my expression. “Hey kid, if you can't handle it, you can go home.” I knew he was trying to get rid of me, which made me more determined to stick to them. Lily asked me to chaperone her as she wanted to go slow with Joey.

I could hear the serpents hiss. *Leave them alone and they wouldn't bother you*, my dad used to say. I plodded on, trailing behind Joey and Lily. Maybe I should have stayed behind. It would have been their first real date if I'd taken the hint.

I tripped. Something bound my legs together. My heart jolted. A python. I could barely breathe as it constricted its tail around my body.

Four daggers hit the python. The serpent went limp as it released me. Joey and Lily used that thing for target practice. I felt like the kid in that William Tell story. Boy was I glad those two were the best marksmen in town. They never miss.

“You okay?” asked Lily as she stretched out her hand.

I took her hand gratefully. “Yeah. Thanks to you two.”

Joey insisted on covering the entire swamp. Lily and I tagged along. “See. There aren't any Ven'eelgs. That man was killed by a python. Like the one that almost had me for lunch.”

A hideous scream pierced my ears. Joey was off, with Lily hot on his heels. I followed them around the corner and to my horror, I saw a young man on the ground, writhing in pain, his face contorting in a ghastly expression.

Joey's face was grim as he examined the man. “He's been bitten by a Bate'evon.”

There he goes again, ranting about the dark beasts in old Brun's stories. “You mean he'll turn into a vampire soon?”

“Yes, unless a warrior gets to him with a cure.”

Warriors again. Won't Joey ever grow up? "So where do you think we can find these magical warriors," I said, playing along.

"Brun had some warrior friends still in active duty. A visit to his home might uncover some clues as to how to contact them," Joey replied.

I put down my dagger and examined the poor guy. There were two pin pricks on his neck. Blood trickled from them.

It happened so quickly. The man grabbed my dagger and stabbed it through his heart. "Let me die or I'd turn," were his last words.

My heart almost leaped out of my chest.

Swiftly, Joey picked up the dying man and whisked him out of the swamp, to the winding road. Lily and I rushed ahead to hail a cab.

We got to the hospital with the dying man. By then, it was too late. He was gone. None of us knew CPR. A fact all three of us sorely regretted. The poor soul will be this week's sensational headline. I could imagine the ravenous reporters all over us, digging information they could sensationalize for a special edition of Central Times.

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"We've got to tell the mayor to evacuate the entire town. The Bate'evons are here. An invasion is looming," ranted Joey.

"What Bate'evons?" I asked.

"Vampire bats."

"So? Vampire bats are so named because they feed on the blood of mammals but they rarely bite humans. People bitten by these bats might develop rabies but they don't become vampires themselves," I rattled on.

"The vampire bats you are talking about attack at night. This man was attacked in broad daylight by a dark beast. A real vampire that is half human, half bat," explained Joey.

"You really believe those fairy tales?" I said, when Lily tapped my shoulder.

"I think he has a point. Things happening here seem to fit in with Brun's tales. Maybe Joey and I should investigate again," she said. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled at him.

I don't think she really believed him but something was going on between them. It sounded like a real date in the making, initiated by Lily. I got the hint. "You guys go ahead. I've got better things to do than hunt for Ven'eelgs whatever."

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I was in the cafe, sipping a glass of apple juice as I watched the world go by. Joey and Lily were on their ghost hunting date. Good for them.

The door swung open. In strode that gorgeous gothic hunk, Johnny. Black hair slicked artistically, that eternally broody, pale expression and a dangerously sexy piercing on his tongue. He wore more eyeliner than all the girls in the room put together, but who cares?

His tattooed bicep flexed as he opened the door again. A stilettoed boot emerged with a leg that seemed endlessly long. Diane, his latest squeeze sashayed into the room.

“Hey Freckles, get me and Diane some beer,” said Johnny as he flashed that irresistible smile.

Light-headed, I went straight for the bar. Lily would have frowned on me being a door mat, but that Diane is a man eater -- known to go through guys like a pile of used underwear. If I play my cards right, I might get her cast offs... Who knows? Broken hearted Johnny might need Freckles to cheer him up once that man eater's done with him?

“Here you go,” I said, smiling as sweetly as I could while I placed both mugs of beer in front of them.

“Thanks Freckles. You're sweet,” he said as he pecked my cheek. My heart danced. If Lily were to see this, she'd give me a long lecture about self respect. It's different for her. I don't have her assets, so I have to work a lot harder to compensate.

I sat at my table, sipping my juice, watching Johnny and Diane twine themselves around each other. It hurt but I just had to look. Finally, they left the cafe.

Minutes later, I heard a scream. I dashed out of the cafe to take a look. Diane was on the ground, gasping for breath. My former crush, Johnny leaned against the wall as pale as a ghost, unable to lift a finger to help. Instead, I saw Joey bent over Diane. Drops of black liquid trailed between Diane and the woods.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Just got back from the swamp. I drove away the Ven'eelg that attacked Diane. Wounded it and it ran off into the woods,” said Joey. The dagger in his hand was covered with that black liquid.

I looked at Johnny still cowering against the wall. The sight of his cowardice disgusted me. That was the end of my short-lived crush. “Did you see a Ven'eelg?”

Johnny did not say a word. He was still quaking as if he had a nervous breakdown or something. Diane was unconscious, so I couldn't get anything out of her either. We sent the gothic pair to the hospital and prepared ourselves for the onslaught of reporters that would follow.

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I was out berry picking with my sister. Things are so boring now that Lily and Joey have hooked up. Rather than feel sorry for myself, I kept busy with chores around the farm. I heard a grating sound coming from above. Looking up, I saw, to my horror, a black hole growing in the clear blue sky. Out of the hole came what looked like a fire breathing dragon, except that the fire that came out wasn't yellow

or orange, but black. Its flames hit Brun's home, setting the entire place on fire.

As I looked on, more dragons emerged.

My cheeks felt like ice. Joey was right.

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The chilly wind cut into my bones. Sandra and I huddled together for comfort and warmth. In minutes, our entire town was destroyed by a group of dragons. Sounds crazy. I wouldn't have believed it either had I not seen them reduce our home to ashes. My kid sister sobbed as she wiped her face on my top. I had no words of comfort for her.

I peered through a crack in the wall. "They're gone."  
"You sure?" Sandra's eyes were wide and watery.

Our secret cave was but a five minute walk away. Sandra had never been there before. It was known only to Joey, Lily and me.

"You made it!" Lily gave me a bear hug as I entered the cave.

Joey stood behind her. His face was solemn. "This is just the beginning. The Bate'evon and Ven'eelg are scouts. The dragons come next to destroy any resistance. Then the rest of the dark beasts take the survivors as hostages. That's how they work. We'll have to leave this place."

"My sisters? Simon? Gwen?" My voice trembled as the words left my mouth.

"It's too late for them. We'll have to assume they're all dead," said Joey softly.

I choked on my tears. "Where do we go?"

"To find the warriors." Joey looked at me, waiting for my trademark snide comments.

After what I had seen, I had nothing left to say. If dragons existed, then warriors and the dark beasts Joey talked about were probably real too. "Let's go," I replied.

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I cringed as I walked through the ashes that once was a lush forest. It was littered with skeletons, some of which were human. "How do you know they are here?" I asked Joey.

Joey put his arm around my shoulder. "Brun told me he'd hang out in that underground tunnel with his warrior pals once in a while. The entrance is covered by a giant stone that only the warriors can lift."

"If only warriors can lift that stone, how can we get in?" I asked.

"We knock," he said patiently.

I heard a sound. Something moved behind the rubble. I jumped back, knees bent, with my dagger in my hand, ready for a confrontation.

“Easy girl,” came a familiar voice.

“Simon!” My heart leaped with joy. Another pal escaped. “Where's Gwen?” His face was lined with worry. “I was hoping she'd be with you.

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The five of us trudged through the ashes, lighting the way with the hurricane lamp that Lily had the sense to bring along.

Joey beamed widely as he pointed to a giant rock. “Over there.”

Some rock. It looked more like a small hill.

We waited as Joey knocked on the rock. At first, our hearts were full of hope, but after what seemed like hours, it was clear that there was no one there. Joey looked silly banging his fist against that rocky hill. I felt like an idiot for believing everything he said about the warriors.

Finally, he slumped down on the ground. “I was a fool. Of course they're gone. If they still hung out here, those beasts would not have come.” He buried his face in his hands.

“You wouldn't have known. At least you tried.” Lily's slender hand was on his shoulder.

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A screech pierced through my ears. Turning around, I saw Simon in the clutches of a half human, half bat creature. My stomach turned over as I watched that thing sink its teeth into Simon's exposed neck.

A succession of daggers hit the Bate'evon, driving it away. Those daggers would have killed any natural creature but that monster was able to fly away, leaving a trail of black blood as it soared over us.

Joey's face was white. “He'll turn. We have to get away from him.”

“Are you crazy? He's our friend,” I sputtered.

Joey shook his head resolutely. “Not for long. Soon, he'll be one of them -- a blood thirsty vampire.”

“Enough of this nonsense.” In spite of Joey's protests, Sandra and I supported Simon as we walked.

Strangely enough, carrying Simon became more difficult with every step. He seemed to be getting heavier. I stared at him as we walked. His skin seemed more gray than tan. Soon, he was writhing, as though in pain.

“Help me,” he groaned. Tears streamed from his eyes.

His pleas for help turned into screams. He flung his arms, tossing us aside in his agony. Simon had become unbelievably strong.

“Run!” yelled Joey as he and Lily grabbed both Sandra and myself, pulling us towards a nearby lake. “Bate'evon are afraid of water.”

I turned back for a final glance. Simon was no longer human. His face was more like that of a giant bat. Though he still had arms and legs, his skin was gray and huge bat wings sprouted from his back. I gasped in shock.

Simon spread out his wings and soared after us. He seemed to be trying to tell us something, but only screeches came out of his mouth. I tried to return to him, but Joey yanked me away. "Don't be stupid. He's a vampire now."

Lily, Sandra and Joey were submerged in the water. I was still a few feet away from the lake. Simon swooped at me and grabbed my arm. His fangs gleamed in the moonlight.

I screamed.

A dagger hit his face.

Simon let go of me and faced the attacker.

Lily emerged from the water with her daggers in hand, throwing them at his torso.

That grating screech pierced my ears. Lily's daggers struck his chest. Gingerly, the monster pulled them out and tossed them on the ground.

I dived deep into the lake, holding my breath for as long as I could.

Surfacing for air, I saw that the creature was gone.

Lily surfaced beside me. "I chased him away. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Thanks to you. What is going to happen to him?"

Joey glared at me. "Now, listen to me. Simon will live on as a vampire until a warrior gets to him. Our only hope is to find the warriors. Only they can cure the victims and free the captives from those beasts."

"Where do we go now?" I asked as we left the lake.

Joey's shoulders slumped forward. He looked like a broken man. "I really don't know. Brun's gone. No one's at the underground tunnel. Have they abandoned us? Was Brun the last warrior assigned to defend our town?"

"There must be a way. Who are the warriors anyway? According to Brun, they are humans like us. The legend says that long before they received their powers, these warriors defended their homes against dark beasts with weapons they'd set on fire," Lily replied.

"Then we need fire," I said. Hope sprung up in my heart.

"Yeah. What do we burn? Everything here's been burnt to the ground," mumbled Joey as he sat on the ground, staring into the lake.

Sandra spoke up in a small voice. "I got a lighter for my cigarettes."

"Your what?" My heart beat angrily. My baby sister had been smoking behind my back.

"Cool it you two. Her bad habit could save our lives." Lily rummaged through her backpack which she had the sense to dump on the ground before plunging into the lake. Her face lit up as she pulled out a dozen wooden sticks. "I knew these would come in handy."

"Great. Light two at a time as we need to conserve firewood until we get to those hills." Joey smiled as he pointed at the green hills that lay ahead.

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With a pair of burning sticks stuck in the ground, the four of us rested as we ate the bread that Lily brought along. Joey and Lily were intimate as usual. His arm was around her. She giggled as he whispered into her ear. His lips pressed against hers, as if Sandra and I were not around. Those love birds were just too much.

Sandra and I used Sandra's back pack as our pillow. Mine was still wet as I had jumped into the water wearing my back pack. I dozed off from pure exhaustion.

Sandra's scream jolted me awake. A Ven'eelg held her in its coils.

I felt the blood drain from my cheeks. Leaping to my feet, I crouched warily as I faced the creature.

It hissed as it lunged at me.

I jumped aside and stabbed its torso with my dagger.

The monster shrieked. It released Sandra. Then it lashed its tail at me.

A flurry of daggers drove it away. The screams had woken up Joey and Lily and they'd come to my rescue as usual.

"It's dawn. Time to move on before the rest of the Ven'eelgs come after us," said Joey as he handed me a fiery torch.

With fire for protection, we made our way to the hills unchallenged.

"See. It wasn't that bad after all," said Joey as we stepped on the lush green grass.

"Ven'eelgs!" Lily spun around and tossed a creature that lunged at her to the ground. Two more jumped out from the trees behind her.

Joey threw a dagger at one of Lily's attackers.

Another Ven'eelg slipped up behind him and held him down. In spite of Joey's strength, that Ven'eelg overpowered him easily.

My dagger throwing skills are not that great but I threw a dagger at Joey's attacker, hitting the creature

squarely on its head.

It happened so quickly. A massive reptilian tail coiled around my chest. I could barely breathe. My head was spinning. I passed out.

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I awoke to the overpowering smell of incense. My head throbbed like it would burst. Sick in the stomach, I coughed and spat out blood.

“You'll get over it,” said a nasal voice. A raven-haired woman in a white gown handed me gown similar to what she was wearing. “Wear this. We all do. We're the chosen ones,” she said grimly.

The gray walls of the crowded cell stared back at me. Dozens of young women, dressed in white were trembling as they huddled on the cold stone ground.

While the other cells contained prisoners chained tightly to the walls, we in white had the privilege of roaming freely within the confines of the steel bars and the padlocked door.

“Where are we?” I asked my benefactor.

“In a dragon's lair. We were spared so that we can face a fate worse than death.” Her sad eyes looked away.

Across the room sat Lily. She leaned against the wall as she looked intently at the guards that paced up and down the corridor.

I walked up to her and tapped her shoulder. “Lily...”

She pressed her finger against her lips and gestured at me to bend over. “I've got a plan.”

I smiled as she whispered into my ear.

--- The End ---

Read on about Sarah's plight in *Warrior Girl*, by Sfx Fantasy ISBN 1847286542  
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