

Chronicles of the Clandestine Knights

# CURSE OF THE VALKYRIE

by Tony Nunes

## Prologue



“SWORD! SWORD!” SCORPYUS’S weapon flew, spiraling from his hand and landed in a patch of grass near the trail. Scorpyus, now defenseless, cried out for assistance. There was a throbbing sensation in his hand caused by the explosive dislodging of his weapon. His burly opponent could hit as hard as Novak. His attacker relentlessly hacked away with his blade in a bloodthirsty search for flesh. The menacing man’s sword tore chunks from the earth near Scorpyus’s feet and whistled through the air about his face and body. Frantically the stout man tried to carve a limb from his flighty foe. Scorpyus ducked and dodged, barely keeping a half second ahead of death. Much to the stout man’s dismay, Scorpyus was too agile to land a hit on. It was worse than trying to catch a fish with your bare hands.

Zephyr craned her neck toward the sound of her friend’s plea for help. She saw Scorpyus fling his arms up and jerk his torso back just as a blade swung by his mid-section. Scorpyus didn’t wear armor. He instead relied on lightning speed for his protection, and his stout opponent was taxing every bit of it.

“Scorpyus, here!” She pulled her own sword and flung it through the air, over the head of his attacker toward Scorpyus. It sailed end over end clattering to rest on the trail. Her aim was off by ten feet. She contemplated loosing an arrow at the man but feared she might hit Scorpyus as he was circling and sidestepping in a most unpredictable manner. Behind her Cad and Novak were busy with two other opponents.

Scorpyus dove for the sword, sliding supine for a few feet and quickly rolling to his back. He sprang to his feet in time to block his attacker’s downward blow. Now the fight was back on an even field. Scorpyus moved in on his burly, brown-toothed foe, his tabard flapping about with his motions. He brought his long sword into his opponent from every imaginable angle only to have it blocked. His attacker, relying heavily on his large shield and armor, proved to be a formidable adversary with better fighting skills than expected. What he lacked in oral hygiene, he made up for in stamina. Scorpyus usually tired out his opponents rather quickly by keeping them swinging wildly at places he once stood. The brute he now faced was up to the task.

Cad locked swords with his attacker and pushed the short, stubby man back. The man braced his sword with both hands keeping Cad’s blade inches from his face. Cad

pushed his way in close; so close he could feel the man's hot panting breath on his brow. A fishy garlic stench assaulted his nostrils. Cad tried to force his blade into the short man's neck but they were locked in a gritty stalemate for the moment.

The stout man's pudgy face protruded from his chain mail hood, and Cad couldn't help but notice how ugly the man was. Perhaps obscenely hideous was a better description. The man was obviously a rough sort, and had much combat experience. He looked like the type one would expect to find camped out at a tavern near the docks. With several grotesque scars on his cheeks and chin, it looked as if he had taken a few blows to the face. But most gruesome of all was that the man lost the front half of his nose. Two black holes stared Cad in the eye filling him with nausea. The flesh around his nose was jagged. It looked as if rats chewed it off instead of it being cleanly severed in combat.

"Bloody aye mate, you're a freak." Cad repulsed, tried to push the man away. The enraged man braced himself vehemently. Furious from Cad's insult he was determined not to move.

"What's the matter? Is momma's pretty boy fearing me?" The man growled with a gravely voice.

Cad brought his knee hard into his opponent's belly causing the short man to let out a guttural grunt and step back. A thick mist sprayed from the two black holes in the man's face, showering Cad.

"Get a mask for those, mate. Did your face catch fire and some bloke put it out with a rake?" Cad wiped his mouth and goatee with his sleeve as he raised his shield to block his opponent's retaliatory blow. Snorting like a bull, the man swung violently at Cad. He didn't like smart mouths, and besides, Cad was wearing a cuirass and greaves that would go well with the short man's chain mail.

Novak was fighting a man who kept circling around like a sheep dog. Each time Novak took a swing, the agile man would run around to the side just out of sword range and poke at Novak with his spear, all the while hooting and hollering. The man was jittery and jumpy like a nervous cat, but very fast. Whether he was trying to attack from behind, or just stay out of the way of Novak's two-handed sword was not known. Either way, Novak was getting impatient with the run and hide game. If the agile man thought his wooden shield was going to protect him forever he was mistaken. It already showed signs of being damaged, and running in circles was not a fighting technique that led to victory. Novak decided to take his time and study his opponent in case it was a ruse.

Zephyr took in the late afternoon scene not having an opponent to fight. She watched, confident her friends would have this latest threat dispatched shortly. With her forest green cap and short cape, and her brown tunic and boots she looked at home in the wilderness. Minutes earlier she and her friends had been walking the wooded trail to Sage when three highwaymen looking for an easy heist jumped them. Thievery had seen a sharp increase following the recent change of power in Xylor. Many thugs were emboldened by the temporarily unorganized new government. Unfortunately for the would-be-robbers they unknowingly picked the Clandestine Knights as their next victims.

Zephyr watched intently as her friends fought with their attackers. Even though the fight seemed to be going well, she felt uneasy in the pit of her stomach and she didn't know what to make of it. As usual, there was a cool breeze on the island of Xylor but Zephyr felt warm and flushed. She hoped she wasn't coming down with an illness.

There was a slight rustle in the bushes twenty feet to the left of the trail. Zephyr

eyed the area where the noise came expecting to see a chipmunk scurry about. Nothing appeared so she turned her attention back toward the fight. Then she heard it again and this time it sounded a little farther away. Just north of the trail amidst the trees was a thick patch of manzanita brush. Something was definitely there, and this time it sounded bigger than a chipmunk.

Zephyr moved a little closer to get a better look. A bead of sweat ran down her cheek and she ran the back of her hand across her brow. Her forehead felt warm and moist and her shoulder ached when she moved her arm. In fact, all of her joints ached a bit. Her neck felt stiff, and the discomfort seemed to travel down her spine to her hips. Putting the pain aside she peered into the brush trying to discover what was making the noise. To her side she still heard the clanking of swords and she took a quick glance to make sure her friends were doing all right. All was going fine. It looked as if her friends were wearing down their attackers.

She took two more steps closer to the brush then froze when she saw a branch move; whatever it was had to be the size of a deer. Her heart pounded in her chest as she glared into the bush.

Then there was another noise! It was the faintest sound of metal scraping against brush. Zephyr's eyes grew wide with a sick realization. There was no deer in the bushes. With a curse, a man suddenly sprang from between the branches of manzanita with a bow drawn. His clothes were filthy and he had a wild growth of hair on his head and face. Leaves and twigs protruded from his tangled locks. The man looked right at Scorpyus.

The world suddenly ground to a halt, and everything became slow motion. The sounds of the forest were replaced by a dull thumping sound echoing in Zephyr's ears. Zephyr felt like she was neck deep in thick mud. Her arms and legs seemed to weigh a ton, and to move required great effort. She turned to warn her friends of the danger as yet another man with a battle ax emerged from the undergrowth. He bounded agonizingly slow toward the melee. Something was wrong. Her friends and their opponents were fighting in slow deliberate motions as if they were underwater. Zephyr drew in a deep breath and shouted a warning. It took an eternity to get it out, and when her voice left her throat it sounded low and distorted.

Zephyr saw an arrow glide slowly through the air and burry itself deep in Scorpyus's back. Scorpyus gritted his teeth and arched backwards before he toppled heavily to the ground.

"No!" Zephyr's voice came out in a deep groan. Her peripheral vision washed out, and everything seemed to be tainted in a brownish hue. The sound of a bell chiming rang through her head. The bell was clear and crisp, unlike the dull thudding of swords clashing and muted footsteps. It struck Zephyr as peculiar that there would be a bell chiming in the forest.

Cad's gaze shifted towards the manzanita. Zephyr felt sick. She saw Cad's noseless attacker raise his sword and bring it down. Cad's attention diverted to the new attackers coming from the brush. Though the man's action seemed painstakingly slow, she could do nothing to warn Cad. A quarter time nightmare unfolded before her eyes and a feeling of complete helplessness came over her.

Cad let out an agonizing groan when his arm was severed. The limb floated through the air and bounced off the ground, a sword still clenched in its fist. Zephyr panicked. She tried to run to her friend's assistance but her legs were paralyzed. Her

heartbeat throbbed in her ears and she could hear herself breathe. Her breath sounded like a blacksmith's bellows, deep and throaty. Her eyes screamed out to God for the nightmare to end.

Zephyr watched helplessly as the two men from the bushes and the ones that had been attacking Scorpyus and Cad, now all turned their attention on Novak. In a lumbering slow motion they bounded toward the hulking Novak and surrounded him. Her friend braced himself for an attack from all sides.

Zephyr felt faint and wanted to vomit. Tears welled up in her eyes and began cascading down her cheeks. Her knees became wobbly, and she could feel herself trembling like a leaf. She sank slowly to the ground; the atmosphere felt thick and heavy. She tried to go help Novak, but her feet were heavy and her strength sapped. In agonizing despair she could only watch as Novak was lost in the swarm of swinging arms that slowly engulfed him. Was this how it was going to end? Something was terribly wrong here. None of this made sense. This wasn't supposed to happen. Abnormalities abounded for which Zephyr was powerless to overcome. Darkness swallowed up her vision. The circle of light shrank and shrank until it became a pinpoint and then eventually disappeared.

Zephyr felt a stab in her side, and didn't care. She could do nothing to defend herself. Her body was paralyzed. Slowly she closed her eyes and resigned herself to her fate. She didn't want to live knowing she did nothing to help her friends. With them gone she had no desire to live. She may as well join them.

Zephyr felt another stab at her side and sank further and further into a murky unconsciousness. There was another jab and she could feel herself weeping, her chest heaving in small quick breaths. All of a sudden a pinhole of light formed in the middle of the blackness and grew larger and larger. Soon the light was so bright she had to squint, its rays radiating out in all directions. It was so incredibly bright she wanted to shield her eyes with her hand but couldn't move.

A peace came over Zephyr; a peace she never felt before. Was the light heaven? She felt another poke in the side. It didn't hurt. In fact she could barely feel it. Nothing mattered anymore. Soon she would be with her friends in a better place.

Zephyr heard a voice. It was calling her name! It was calling her from the light. No it was trying to call her away from the light. She didn't want to go back to the forest and fought it with all her might. The voice was insistent but Zephyr didn't want to listen. She didn't want to leave the light, especially now with her friends gone.