

Crimson Knight

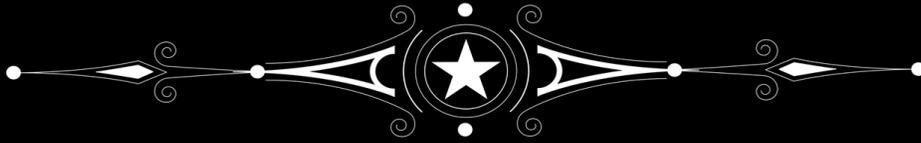
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Crimson Knight

A crowdfunded story

By

Desmond Fallout



Chapter 1: A Knight's Hunt

They had walked right into a trap.

Ulric Jenkins kept his expression flat with the trained focus of a stoic knight. Best not to vocally express the tirade of self-deprecation taking place in his head. The forty-three men behind him were already battered and exhausted from five months of fighting. Seeing the man that was supposed to be their captain brake down in a fit of childish outbursts might be the rock that shatters whatever morale was left.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

Unfortunately, it wasn't as easy to hide such things from a beast-man. Ulric's second crouching in the underbrush happened to be a Siberian tiger and, while much younger in years to the black-haired human, had a talent for observation and prowess that was impressive even among his species. During their short time together, Ulric predicted they had a very promising career in the Kingdom's military.

Not that one needed much prowess when they had a nose capable of picking up Ulric's slight change to his scent.

"We're about to be attacked. Argeno, have our mages start preparing barriers against projectiles. We're going into formation four immediately."

He could sense the cat man's desire to ask the obvious without looking at them. A few seconds of silence followed before Argeno seemed to think better of it, slinking off back to the ranks with amazing silence for wearing half-plate armor. Even with their short time working together they'd learned when it was time to shut up and follow orders.

"How the hell can bandits be this smart?" Ulric chastised himself aloud when he was confident those round feline ears could no longer hear him.

His campaign that'd been decreed directly by the king himself was supposed to have been one of liberation for the western provenances. To that end they'd been chasing the Chaos Corps, an army of outlaws with a disturbing affinity for death magic, from one hide out to the next. Every last skirmish had ended with his scoring a victory, but with a steep price in casualties. When they'd left the Capital fortress city it'd been with ninety-five good knights. Over half his current company.

After clearing out their last known hide out in an abandoned copper mine two days ago, even Ulric had let himself get swallowed up in the rush of excitement. The idea that their enemy had finally run out of places to hide was enough to put a second wind in everyone's sails. Everyone was eager to chase them into the hills and go home before the fall season set in.

It wasn't that they were smart. It was that Ulric let himself get stupid. A cold fact he simply had to accept if there was going to be a chance anyone got out of this forest alive. No one else seemed to have picked up on the subtle changes in the way nature acted around them. The enemy was already surrounding them using the very hills they thought were for cover as high ground for a deadly ambush.

All that time in his younger days adventuring still gave Ulric an advantage over the average knight that way. He couldn't help smiling as the notion brought back a slew of fond memories involving similar life or death situations. It made him long to have his old partner by his side now. The mages currently under his command were still worth their weight in gold, but if she had been here the last thing anyone would have had to worry about was a ranged siege.

Crap. This wasn't a time to get nostalgic. Ulric shook himself back to the present with something else to criticize himself over. His best friend was stuck back in the capital doing their own share of important duties for the kingdom. Might as well make sure he had a good war story to tell them over a beer next time they saw each other.

"Sir!" Argeno jumped to attention upon spotting his captains return to camp. "The men are equipping as fast as they can, but the mages will be in position in a few minutes."

Hardly the report Ulric had hoped to hear. All around them men and women were dragging their heels in various states of dress, eventually working towards defensive formations around their camps center fire pit. In a way he admired that cat for having any enthusiasm left for this job. Perhaps being a sub-human in a position of command motivated Argeno to set a precedent. Ulric made a note to treat them to try getting to know them better over a mug as well. Preferably under less critical circumstances.

"Get the batteries we found and distribute them among the mages. Tell them not to hold back, but only take shots they can hit. Have the archers ready their ash cloud arrows."

The tiger's ears flatten, though he kept his posture neutral. "Is it that bad, sir?"

Ulric couldn't help smirking, eyes darting back toward a particular hill visible through a gap in the eastern tree line. A lot more shadows were dancing than a few minutes ago. "Don't tell me you couldn't pick up something unusual going on around us with that sharp nose of yours. This is probably their last desperate attempt to push us back. Bastards are going to hit us with anything they have left."

"Aye, sir!" Argeno took his leave with increased urgency in his steps.

Some of the knights closest to them must have been eavesdropping as Ulric noted they were putting more agency into securing their armor. He really wanted to kick the dirt in frustration, but stilled his boot. Acting like he knew what he was doing was still almost as important as having a plan. Creating cover with their ash arrows, projectiles with flash powder bombs at their heads, might at least buy them time.

"Captain Jenkins?" one of the six mages still alive in the company was trudging toward him. A half-elf of brown skin and raven black hair. Held out before her in one hand was a gemstone the size of an orange giving off an unnatural green glow. The natural beauty of her face was twisted into a scowl as she made it a point of holding the object up before her commanding officer. "I must protest against using these things. We haven't had a chance to fully rest and perform the proper appraisal on their stability. One wrong cast could endanger the entire camp."

"We're well past the point of being in danger," Ulric said. His brows furrowed to match her glare. "And your life may very well depend on using every resource we have in the next ten minutes. So, I suggest..."

It was faint, but the sound Ulric had been dreading had come. A snap. No. Several snaps going off at once. Ignoring the irate mage before him, the man's gaze shot upward, spotting several objects taking flight from the hilltops. They flew in an arch that looked defiant enough to reach the sun, only to curve into a sharp plummet toward their camp.

"Scratch that!" he shouted with all the strength his lungs could still muster so everyone could hear over the clanking of equipment. "All mages better be in position. I want us under a box now!"

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The battle went better than Ulric expected, given that he was still alive to complain about it. Shame he couldn't say the same for about twenty bandits and six brave knights. An irritation in his lower molars caused him to spit out a mix of blood and saliva. Some lucky mage among the enemy ranks nearly took his jaw off with a daring rock throwing spell so it'd be a few hours before the pains in his right side healed. Restoration magic was a double-edged sword in that while it reconnected all his broken bones and sinew, he also had to endure the strain months of recovery would have required naturally.

"Another crushing victory, sir!" Argeno congratulated his captain from a neighboring cot. "I think it's safe to say we finally routed the Chaos Corps from this region. That'll be a welcome relief to the counts."

The tiger had his right arm in a sling and a band of gauze over the same eye, but would also be fully recovered with a few days of recovery. Mages under the kingdoms schools truly had talents that could not be understated. If that arrow had struck another inch off course Argeno probably wouldn't have been sitting there wagging his tail with such a wide smile.

Ulric almost hated that bottomless spirit of theirs.

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

Argeno's shoulders slumped a little, though he didn't lose his brightness entirely. He'd expected the captain's dismissive comment a mile away. It was the weight of defeat in their tone that threw him off. "Sir?"

"Half a year playing hide and seek and this necromancer warlord wasn't even with this group. Add in that a third of their forces were undead and I can't even make an accurate report on what numbers remain." Ulric placed a hand over his eyes, ribs aching with the long breath he drew in and out. "We've lost too many good people to keep on their heels, so they're just going to come back if given enough time. My only option is to seek the nearest count for recovery aid and hope the king can re-enforce us before winter."

"Don't sell it short, sir. Your famous formation four saved us from a very bad pinch. The population can feel safe enough for a while, at least."

"If you say so."

Formation four wasn't actually something Ulric invented, more like adjusted to his personal tastes. The original idea had come from his predecessor during a fortress raid with very similar siege tactics. Its general function was to have mages stationed along the outside of a company to erect barriers against physical attacks. This would allow them to either move within range to render projectiles less effective, or endure until the enemy ran out of ammo.

In Ulric's case they'd been lucky enough for it to have been the latter. Utilizing a stash of batteries, gems infused with magic energy, allowed even his battle fatigued casters the power to withstand cannon fire. The real irony being these stashed stones were stolen goods his men had found during the many hideout raids of their campaign. He never expected to expend them dealing the finishing blow and subsequent medical efforts.

"May I speak something candidly, Captain Jenkins?"

The sudden use of his name was enough to jolt Ulric out of his thoughts and leave him curious. His shifted on its pillow enough to see the tiger looking at him in a rare stern manner. "Okay."

"This glass half-full attitude isn't good for your mental health. If you let yourself keep brooding every time, we fail to get through a fight without a scratch it'll kill you worse than an acid blast to the face."

"That's a fine image to keep me up tonight, lieutenant."

"Really now. Everyone here knew what we were signing up for. I think we're all proud that we bought these lands another year of peace and safety, if not longer. The

king and the other captains back at the capitol are bound to come up with a strategy to capitalize on your success."

Ulric kept his eyes locked with Argeno's for a few seconds, but said nothing before laying back to admire the roof of their medical tent. "Is that all?"

The tiger's ears fell flat. "Yes, sir."

"Great. Then let me get back to my brooding."

It felt like the tiger might have had something else to add after all. He couldn't even get his muzzle open when they both heard an alert horn from the scouts outside. Thankfully, it wasn't the shrill wail of an attack signal, just the deep base of riders approaching. Either way, that was news that got Ulric hoisting out of bed amid groans of annoyance.

"Maybe that's the king already coming to congratulate us?" he shot Argeno a wry smile on his way out.

What knights that still had the energy left for it were scrambling to form whatever half-assed ranks they could manage. Ulric could instantly see why after spotting the four riders entering their camp. They weren't nobility, yet still a procession of flag bearers for a blond-haired man clad in platinum cast armor. One of many people he'd made a point to recognize during his knighthood training.

"Captain Les," Ulric said with a solute once the horses came to a stop near him. "I was not expecting reinforcements from his majesty, much less another of us being sent on a bandit pruning duty."

"As well you shouldn't, Captain Jenkins." Les waiting for his escorts to dismount and secure his own horses reigns before sliding off its saddle. "It is welcome news to see you in good health, though. I've been dispatched to relieve you of command."

The breath Ulric had struggled to take got lost in his throat. An emotion of surprise that broke out in a wave among the battered knights around him. Even Argeno could be heard making a distressful mewling noise overhearing the news from inside the medical tent.

Still, he was a man of the military and this stuff tends to happen from time to time. Ulric regained his composure after only a moment of wandering 'what-if' thoughts. "Any particular reason why?"

Les had a smirk that just begged to be slapped right off his clean-shaven face. Especially after the mess Ulric had just trudged through hours ago. Yet his hands remained still at his sides while the fellow captain drew out an envelope to pass over. "I wasn't privy to the finer details. Just that it was urgent you return to the capitol as soon as possible. Your remaining company will join with mine once they get fully mobilized in a few weeks. Not to worry. We'll finish off those necro bastards for you."

Ulric couldn't keep the disapproval from showing on his face. That necromancer had all the time in the world to regroup now. With no resources, fresh troops a month out, and now a commander with no grasp of the situation all the pressure on the chaos corps was effectively gone. All that hard work and his only reward was to be stripped of the men he had left. What the hell was so important it required a change of command now?

Of course, Ulric knew better than to express his doubts about Captain Les directly to their face. The annoying blonde was a good two decades his senior and served in a conflict much worse than this campaign. Ulric probably wouldn't come out of a challenge unscathed even if he was in a fit state for it.

"Argeno," he barked over his shoulder, prompting the feline to come dashing out of the medical tent. "Get my horse ready with traveling supplies. You'll remain here and make sure Captain Les is brought up to speed on our progress."

"Yes, sir!" Argeno hesitated on his salute and hurried off to the stable area.

"Good man. Don't worry, I'll take good care of your pet cat." Les gave Ulric a single slap on the shoulder before striding past him. The other three knights followed, diligently matching every stride. "Hope you still have some decent rations left. I'm starving."

Ulric rolled his eyes, carrying on to his personal tent. The number of personal affects he had to gather were minuscule. He just wanted a few minutes of privacy for venting his frustration over it all. Hopefully, Les will enjoy sleeping on a cot with one broken leg and ripped blankets.

Argeno was already waiting outside with freshly stabled horse when Ulric had finished preparations. No escort volunteers looked set to ride with him, making the situation all the more confusing. Granted their numbers were dangerously thinned already. Les would need all the help he could get if an attack came before his own knights arrived.

"Safe travels, sir," the tiger said while Ulric mounted his ride. "I dare say this doesn't feel right."

"The fact you're worried about something for once is really saying something." Ulric chuckled, but it only got a small grin from Argeno.

"I worry about a lot of things. The trick is not to make it all I ever think about."

"I'll consider that advice on my way back home." He offered a hand, which Argeno shook after a moments surprise. "Don't die until we meet again."

"I'd say the same for you, sir."

Ulric clicked the reigns, sending his horse into a trot down the trail Les had arrived from. Dozens of questions spun in his thoughts that were going to take days of

lonesome travel before they were answered. The only silver lining was that meeting back with the royal court meant he had a good chance of finally seeing his friend again. Seeing them again for a round of drinks could almost be considered a small vacation.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Afterward

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