

## **The Legend of Black Knight**

Campfire's reflections were dancing in the eyes of the old priest. An elderly man gazed upon the sky: lead-coloured clouds were even blacker than usual. A snowstorm was approaching... yet not too fast. Time was still aplenty. Shaman-priest slowly raised his shaking, age spots covered hand. The pack of the tribe's young, chattering at the opposite side of the campfire, instantly went quiet. Respectful silence fell there, at the foot of the Grey Tower. Boys and girls, cloaked in their ancestors' capes, were shivering from cold, but it could not have be helped. Listening to the legend inside the comfy shelter of the Tower was simply not proper; the tale's meaning could only be truly understood while feeling the biting frost of the endless winter and hearing the harrowing growls of the man-beasts echoing from afar. The old priest coughed; his toothless mouth formed something akin to a smile. The soothsayer began his tale, told from one generation to the next as long as the tribe remembered:

„A long time ago, when the world was young, the fields were green and the skies were blue, these lands were ruled by the mighty kingdoms of men. No force of nature nor the wild beast of night frightened our ancestors – the only thing they could not manage to overcome was the greed in their own hearts. Every man and woman craved for more than they had; after acquiring it they would start to desire something else... and so on, and so on, and so on... until there were no more lands, riches or power that could have been shared between themselves. Not peacefully.

The war began, cruel and horrific. The great armies of the East and the West clashed their swords in the endless battles; the green fields of the old world turned crimson. The unquenchable greed had to be stopped. Thus, the gods cursed mankind and all the things it craved. For a single moment the world was engulfed by the heavenly fire, which levelled

cities, turned the walls of the mighty castles into ashes; and then the sun blackened and the darkness fell. The blue sky was covered by the grey clouds; the winter had come, more destructive than the fire of the gods. Whoever did not freeze to death was touched by the strange black snow falling from the skies. Its frost burned men alive from the inside out, or even worse... changed them into those howling beasts that roam the lands to this day. All the things the great armies were fighting for were lost.

Yet the war was not done. Far from it. Here, in these forsaken barrens, the last hopeless battles were being waged: our ancestors' hatred for each other was too great. However, neither side managed to achieve the final victory. The chief general of the West army was running out of patience. Seeing no other means to finish off their restless enemies, general send out his best warrior – the Black Knight – to the very heart of winter frost. There, in the no man's land, feared by the leaders of both armies, the Knight had to find a ruined city, now inhabited only by beasts. In the middle of those ruins stood the Grey Tower, the very top of it holding the secret weapon, built by the city's priests and alchemists. General was convinced that only the magical weapon could tip the scales of war.

Upon receiving his commander's order the Knight had no hesitations: he sharpened his swiftest sword, loaded the deadliest crossbow and, donning the magical, spell-infused cape, ventured out into the wilderness. The warrior was named "Black" for a reason – not for the colour of his cape or the perpetually frowned mouth, but for the blackness of his heart. The Knight never had any doubts – the only thing that mattered to him was victory. To achieve it the warrior was prepared to march through hell itself. Luckily for him, his road was leading straight to it. The Black Knight's dark cloak matched the desolate landscape, covered by the tar-shade snow. Invisible as a spectre the warrior swiftly travelled down the path showed by the general... Until whilst traversing the delta of the dead river he stumbled upon an enormous war-camp of the East army.

Rows and rows of tents, donned with the blood-red flags, were drowning in agonized cries of those touched by the dark snow. The curse of gods was as devastating for the easterners as it was for the western folk. Hundreds of soldiers still managing to walk were crowding near the pedestal located right at the centre of the camp; the martial trial was taking place there. The Black Knight was befuddled – the unlucky man who was about to be executed wore the too-familiar blue doublet. He was a Western-army serving shaman-priest. True to be told, the Knight was not confused for long. A whirlpool of steel hit the battalions of the East – it was the Black Knight, cutting and slicing dozens of men to rescue his fellow comrade. Taking the priest into his protection, the seasoned warrior took no time to escape back into the wastes; the actual storm was approaching, roaring and unforgiving. The Knight hoped to hide inside it. The priest was overjoyed with gratitude, alas, the Knight did not care. Not from the goodness of his soul did he rescue the poor fellow; if the shaman was not wearing blue, the Black one would not have lifted a finger to save him.

Day turned to night, night into day, yet the most merciless of the East battalions relentlessly chased the duo through the barren lands. It turned out, that their meeting was not coincidental; the priest knew the exact location of the Grey Tower. West General feared, that he may have fallen into captivity, that's why the Knight was ordered to travel down this particular path; the lords of the West hoped they would bump into each other. While the men were conversing, the wind became unbearable; the storm has reached them.

What a hurricane that was; a devastating force of nature, in face of which rare could survive. The earth around them was broken apart by the twisters of ice and snow; soon even deadlier rain of lightning bolts followed. Yet the wrath of nature could not compete with the curse from the gods. Protected by the spells of the magical cape our heroes took a meagre shelter between the shaking rocks. There they witnessed their pursuers' fate. The enemy

battalion was led by the White Knight – an Eastern killer, as fearless and cruel as the Black one. Without hesitation he ordered his men to march forward, right into the eye of the storm.

None of them had the spell-infused capes. The ones that miraculously survived the hurricane soon perished from the curse. The Black Knight saw, how the teeth fell from the mouth of the White one, how all of his hair were scattered in the wind like the leaves in autumn; how the blood was pouring out from every pore in his body... What is autumn? I am not sure, child. That is what my father told me. I doubt he knew either. At any case... The Black Knight felt sadness. Maybe a long time ago, before the war, the White Knight had friends, family... a life – and now he dies here, in the wastes abandoned by the gods themselves... on the mission. A mission which would have caused two more deaths, as pointless as his own. Heeding no protests from the priest, the Black warrior took the whole night to properly bury the mutilated men of the Eastern army. When the dim morning came, the duo continued their journey towards the ruined city.

The cold has reached the travellers bones, thus, seeing the shadowy walls of the city they naïvely rejoiced – the ruins must have had a safe shelter from the snowstorms. Their hopes were not met. Within the labyrinths of the old kingdom's greatness the howling of the wind changed into that of the man-beasts. It was a shelter alright – just not for them, but for those, from whom the gods saw fit to take away their very souls. These things were men no more. No wonder that the commanders of both armies feared to approach the city.

Many days the Knight and the priest crawled through that war-torn ruins fearing to build a fire or alert the beasts of their presence in any other way. Yet the warrior's provisions were running low and the distance to the Grey Tower was still great. Death at the man-beasts' claws was enticing compared to the sufferings of starvation. Accepting the hopelessness of their situation the travellers gained reckless courage: upon hearing some queer sound in one

of the buildings that were still standing, our heroes decided to face the monsters honourably. To their greatest surprise, the commotion was being caused not by the beast at all, but by the tiny group of survivors! These ragged, dirty townsfolk were overcome with joy upon meeting the duo, offering them food and shelter for a price of any news from the outside world. Their joy quickly turned to despair – the news were not to their liking at all. The war was still being waged? Even in the face of all that transpired? Survivors did not care for the victory or defeat in the first place, even less now, when there was nothing left to fight for. No rescue was coming from the remnants of the mighty armies; none at all.

The Knight, on the other hand, was terrified by some of the townsfolk's looks; the curse of gods has marked them especially brutally. The black snow twisted those people's bodies, covered them with abominable lumps and the unnatural limbs. World and its people – all were broken by the curse. Yet the time for reflecting it was not: sniffing out the foreign scent of the priest and the Knight the man-beasts have finally come. The soulless hordes descended upon the building, their claws and teeth hungry for blood. The Black Knight did his utmost to protect those, who provided him with the much needed shelter, yet his trusty sword soon returned to its sheath – the beasts were too numerous. Suffering the first time experienced sense of deep shame the Knight, accompanied by the priest, abandoned his rescuers and ran. Yet fear was biting him even more than shame; the Black Knight was scared not by the beasts' twisted visages, but by the strikingly red and blue uniforms they wore. The frost blurred the lines even between the mortal enemies.

At long last the journey reached its end: the Knight and his companion have reached their destination. Even though most of the city's walls and castles were destroyed, the Grey Tower was standing strong and proud – true testament to the ancestors' ingenuity. But as it is the case with all the magical places, the Tower was guarded. A gargantuan god-fire-breathing dragon was lying at the structures foot – yet, curiously, the animal was sleeping. There was

no other way in – the travellers had to go through it or die trying. Even more curiously the creature did not wake – not even when the priest clumsily stepped on its enormous tail. Why it did not wake? The mystery could wait though – the duo passed the Towers gates and made it inside. The fortress interior was made as if the wizards who ruled over it had expected the curse: the walls were covered with layers upon layers of protective spells and talismans; the frost of the endless winter could not get in. Furthermore, the Towers dungeons were bursting with the food provisions great enough to feed entire generations.

The Knight took no time to find the “weapon” that was desired so by the general. At the top of the tower it was, as the priest and the commander have said; just one simple spell written on the dusty scroll. Next to it there was a magical seeing glass. The Black Knight remembered, how before the winter such magical crystals were used by the priests and wizards to communicate between themselves and those, who have paid homage to them. It turned out, that the Knight’s own priest knew more than he initially led to believe: the soothsayer confessed knowing, that this particular crystal could be used to contact the general, but doing so will definitely wake up the Tower’s guard. The dragon would not rest till either them or the Tower be gone forever. On the other hand, the priest knew another spell – one that the general had no use from, but which could instantly demolish the entire tower leaving the dragon with nothing to protect. The priest was tired of putting his life on the line. The war had no meaning anymore – why would not he and the warrior stay here until the end of winter? The food was aplenty – let the rest of the mankind tend to themselves.

The Black Knight quietly gazed down upon the ruined city: its monsters, corpses and the hopeless survivors. In the far distance the quit rumble of the armies’ artillery could still have been heard. The Knight sighted. Then, despite the priest’s protestations, he touched the magic crystal and send out the message. The message was not for the general. The Knight

talked to all who could still listen; he spoke of the Tower, its wonderful treasures: safety and food. The tired warrior threw down his cape: the colours of black and white, so perfect in their stark simplicity, held no beauty to him anymore. The crystal started shining... and the Tower shook to its core as the dragon awoke. The Knight unsheathed his swiftest sword and prepared for battle.

Unrelenting and cruel that fight was. The ground was shaking, the wings flapping, the blood flowing. The cowardly priest hit deep within the dungeons of the fortress and did not see how the dragon's tail cut off the Tower's top as a sharpened axe would cut wood; nor how the warrior, being crushed by the animal's jaws, managed to momentarily free himself and push his trusty blade down the beast's throat. At the end of it all both of them – man and the beast – lay down at the foot of the Tower. No longer the Black and not even a Knight (the man chose to disobey his greatest of orders) the tired warrior was looking upwards, watching the lead-shade clouds that covered the sky. For one little moment a tiniest crack between the clouds appeared, revealing the cold ray of light shining from the evening sun. The dying warrior haven't seen such pretty sight his entire life. Nor did the dragon.

A week passed, then another and one by one people started gathering at the Tower. Braving the terrible dangers to reach the promised treasures they have formed a tribe. After a few years a daughter was born for the cowardly priest and his new wife. That daughter told the story of the Knight to her own son, as he did to his girl. Many generations have born and died until my father spoke the words of the legend to me and me – to you. “

The campfire's embers were dying out. The wind was getting stronger and stronger; strange sounds were coming out of the shaman-priest's ancient talisman. The storm was

almost upon them. The respectful silence following the legend was abruptly broken by the oldest of the children – the boy called shaman a liar. His dad told him, that the priest’s ancestors got to the Tower along with all the others; his elder did not exist, nor did the Black Knight. The legend’s spell was broken: children started joking and chattering again. Paying no attention to the old man they hurried back into the shelter of Grey Tower. The soothsayer-priest remained at its foot. He scratched the back of his head. The last chunk of the priest’s hair remained in his hand. Yes, of course. Most of the legend is pure fantasy. But it does tell some important truths. Quite recently the Tower folk found out about another tribe, living down the far south. Allegedly, that tribe’s lands started to sprout healthy plants and animals – no longer twisted by the curse. A true miracle. And what was the first decision made by the Tower’s council upon hearing of it? To march there. As a war party. Luck would have it, at least one of these kids has heard and understood what the priest’s story was all about.

Grey snowflakes started to land all around him; every year snow was a little bit brighter than during one before it. That inspired hope. The shaman priest closed his eyes for the last time. „Maybe it’s not that bad after all“- contemplated the elderly man - „I am almost thirty. Neither my father nor his mother have managed to reach such an old age. “

The storm finally hit. The columns of swirling dark snow almost covered the large, metal sign above the Tower’s gates. No one understood it, as there was no one left who knew how to read. „Vilnius Television Tower. An Atomic Shelter“, said the crude, rusty letters. An ancient Geiger counter in priest’s palm was beeping like crazy, yet the shaman could not hear it anymore. The nuclear winter raged on.