

Hnefatafl

It was the beginning of the end: the point of battle when the combatants pause to lean on notched and twisted weapons and can only stare at each other across the mist-shrouded field. Grimacing, the warriors shook their helmeted heads, their shoulders rising and falling heavily with the effort of breathing, the air thick with the iron reek of blood. In the centre of the plain the remnants of the King's army had clustered: tattered, weary, barely a tenth of their original number. They had been betrayed, but honour was still theirs. The clamour of steel and iron still rang in their ears, the taste of blood on their lips. Beards of red and gold were matted and their tortured breath hung heavily in the air. They stood their ground and waited.

Silence smothered the field, save for the slow breathing of the warriors and the occasional tap of a blade on mail. Leaning against a solitary and ancient Yew in the centre of the field the King shifted his grip on his great steel-headed axe, almost too heavy for another man to lift. Grinding his teeth he snarled to his men:

"Hold fast. Ready your steel to fight and die. This day Valhalla's glory is ours."

The warriors formed a circle around their chieftain and the muffled tattoo of chain mail became audible through the mist. In the distance vague, black shapes moved. Slowly closing with a single intention: to slay. To stain the frozen ground with the blood of their enemies, to honour the name of Odin, to earn the right to be carried by the Valkyries to His smoking board in Valhalla. First two, then four: ten, twelve. More and more dark shadows loomed distant in the mist as if they were shades unable to rest. Finally the rattle of mail coats ceased and all was deathly silent once more. A pair of Ravens looked up from where they perched atop pasty white flesh of dead men as they pecked the choicest parts. They cocked their heads with a curious knowing and then with a rapid slapping of their wings the birds took flight as the single note of a horn echoed across the field shattering the silence. And then the dark army charged.

Surging forwards as the raging foam of the sea against the shore they crashed against the shield-wall of the King's men: shields interlocked to form a potent defence, that they might push forwards and gain ground. Sword and axe rose and fell with butchers' rhythms and sounds, the shrieks of the dying mingling with the war cries of those very much alive. The King's Men marched solidly forward again and again, blades flickering in the red light seeking some breach in the wall of attackers that might let their King escape. Time and again they were driven back towards the tree until a small band of attackers made an unwary charge: the King's Men, instead of receiving with shields braced split apart dodged to the side of their opponents before cutting them down: so much chaff before the wind, shouting for the king to run to the gap. Already more dark warriors ran to fill the breach, murder in their eyes, but the damage was done. The first of the King's Men fell but not before a ferocious melee, that kept the breach open until the king arrived his huge two-handed axe a whirlwind of slaughter that sundered heads and severed limbs wherever it fell. There seemed no end to the overwhelming wave of attackers but the King's Men pushed on, none able to tell to whom the day's victory would fall.