

The logo for Warhammer Age of Sigmar, featuring the word "WARHAMMER" in large, gold, serif letters with a blue background, and "AGE OF SIGMAR" in smaller, gold, serif letters below it. The text is set within a gold, ornate banner with pointed ends.

WARHAMMER
AGE OF SIGMAR

BROKEN REALMS

The title "THE JOUST OF KINGS" is written in a white, serif font, centered on a dark green background. The background features faint, stylized illustrations of various creatures and warriors in a jousting scene.

THE JOUST OF KINGS

THE JOUST OF KINGS

‘Click.

Clack.

Click.

Clack.

Surrounded by flickering wychflame candles, Vokmortian watched the grandfather clock chime in the heart of his sanctum. The Master of the Bone-tithe had always possessed an appreciation for timepieces. In each necropolis raised by his legions, nestled amidst shelves packed with scrolls and ledgers of conquest, Vokmortian made room for their reliable, ticking serenade. This was one of his newer acquisitions, wrought from thick ogor bone. Vokmortian owned many such osseous devices, and many of more traditional make also, if only to prove the superior, crisp precision of the former over the latter.

Few Bonereapers understood his fascination. Zandtos did, but then the old general was as much a stickler for precision as the tithemaster himself. The Great Necromancer had never demanded his herald dispose of the affectation. Had it been ordered, Vokmortian would have done so in a moment, but even being crafted to serve as the vessel of a god’s will was no reason to abandon every quirk out of hand.

As armoured feet thumped upon flagstones, Vokmortian turned to watch the doors to his sanctum grind open. Though his face was, as ever, a mask of sculpted bone, the tightness in Horrek Venzai’s posture indicated he wished to be anywhere but here. Striding across the floor of the scroll-chamber, hand resting upon the pommel of a sheathed blade, the Liege-Kavalos attempted to disguise how lost he seemed without his steed through prideful swagger. Still, the nod of acknowledgement he gave was genuine enough.

‘High Emissary.’

‘I thought we might play a game.’

When he was not booming out ultimatums, Vokmortian’s voice was an abyssal, but not entirely unpleasant, whisper. Katakros had once described him as sounding “miserly”, though the Mortarch had likely meant it as a compliment. As he spoke, the emissary gestured to the ivory table beside him, and the chair pulled in close.

Venzai stared for a moment, before giving a grunt. The Liege circled the table and the board set upon it, before sinking into the seat. The heavy sarcophagus eternally bound to Vokmortian’s frame prevented him from doing likewise. Instead he moved to stand across from his opponent, as Venzai picked up a crystalline playing piece.

‘You have a new set.’

‘Originating from Oultra, so I am told. Zandtos sent them to me. The Hyshians’ craftsmanship is exquisite.’ The emissary nodded, pleased to share the knowledge. Annoyance flickered within him as Venzai merely grunted again and set the piece down.

‘I have never had much aptitude for Kingsgame.’

It came as a surprise to some that the Ossiarchs played games. Yet as Vokmortian saw it, his people were no mindless revenants; they were a culture, and a culture must have its pastimes. Of course, every such game was based around principles of strategy and logic. Even through their distractions, Katakros sought to hone his armies.

Kingsgame was one such distraction. At its core lay elements taken from piece-capturing games found across the realms, discarding anything considered superfluous or overly reliant on chance. It was played over a tiled, two-tiered board – what occurred on one impacted the other, and pieces could move between either at points, just as with the realms and the underworlds. Different tiles possessed different attributes, representing forests, mountains or likewise. Most notably, Kingsgame used a third, neutral set of pieces that either player could employ to disrupt their opponent. Yet while this faction remained in play, neither

side could claim victory. It was a matter of risk and reward, and knowing when to alter one's plans. Only the best could time it just right.

'You will be in good company, then,' Vokmortian said. Once, he had aspired to be a commander to rival the Mortarch, yet had quickly discovered that it was neither his talent nor his passion. Still, he hoped Venzai would not go easy on him. As Nagash himself knew, though would never admit, one learned more from a well-fought defeat than they ever could from an easy victory

The emissary took the opening moves. Vokmortian could sense Venzai's surprise as he advanced his pieces upon the bottom board in complete neglect of the upper. Though most players of Kingsgame espoused decisiveness as key to victory, Vokmortian's early motions were circumspect; he probed the extremities of Venzai's territory, testing where he could stand and where he could not, committing nowhere yet slowly closing off regions of the upper board through his positioning upon the lower. As he did so, the tithemaster murmured.

'Are your defences ready?'

'Emissary?'

'In Praetoris.' Vokmortian clarified, as he finished opening another cautious assault. As Venzai began his next turn, the emissary saw he need not have worried about a simple game; the Liege's plays were those of a soldier, but not without flair. Even as he launched a steady advance upon the upper board, the Ossiarch expertly organised the majority of his pieces to deal with the lower. A tight wedge of controlled aggression soon bore down on Vokmortian's more scattered resources, removing them one by one or sending them into retreat.

'You still think the counter-attack will come.'

Even as he snorted derisively, Venzai's agitation deepened. Try as he might, he could not bring enough force to bear against Vokmortian in any single location to break him. The intricate wheeling manoeuvres and frontal assaults he mounted were exemplary, yet in that lay the problem. Vokmortian's pieces flowed around Venzai's like the shrieking night-winds of Dolorum. He did not seek blunt engagement, instead closing off paths to the upper board when it was advantageous to do so and employing them himself where it was not, changing the tempo and the centre of the conflict in time with his own whims. When he surrendered board control, it was to gain in the fracturing of Venzai's slab-like formations, and the steady dwindling of his rival's patience.

'You are too aggressive, Horrek,' Vokmortian chuckled, as he assembled a knot of his pieces now gathered on the upper board into a defense. Predictably, Venzai's vanguard moved to swamp them, even as the tithemaster shook his head and slipped more forces behind his enemy's advance. 'The Mortarch of Grief's armies already move on Settler's Gain. Whatever the result, we would be fools to presume there will not be retaliation. Better to stand in readiness.'

'Let the aelves try it, if they like,' Venzai snarled, his attention entirely upon the twin boards as he commenced his next turn. 'These are our strongholds. And you have bigger things to fret over.'

Too late, Vokmortian saw the ploy. By surrendering the lower board prematurely, he had allowed Venzai room to prepare an initiative-stealing reversal. Pieces he had considered scattered and meandering suddenly moved as one to pass through to the upper plane, spreading their influence across tiles that the tithemaster's calculations had erroneously deemed irrelevant.

Losing ground in the face of this coordinated, intractable assault, Vokmortian's hand at last strayed towards the neutral pieces, thus far untouched. Even as he sacrificed these outliers in an effort to slow Venzai, the tithemaster saw himself play into his opponent's hands once again. Unable to concentrate his resources in any one location, forced to fight on multiple fronts, he could only watch as Venzai swept the remainders of the unaligned forces round to bolster his already-strengthened centre. It was all Vokmortian could do to stifle choice angles of advance, and watch as Venzai's pieces punched through his stretched defences.

'Impressive, Liege-Kavalos,' Vokmortian nodded, as he repositioned and attempted to regain some control. 'I see why you and your Dread Lance have earned your reputation.' Venzai's reply was silence, his advance subsiding as he continued to regard the uppermost board. Long seconds dragged by, punctuated by the predictable ticking of the bone clock. Vokmortian's finger moved to tap on his staff in time with the slow noises. If there was one thing he could not stand, it was a deadline being missed.

'Has your nerve failed you?'

‘You play a strange game, emissary,’ Venzai muttered, gaze not lifting. ‘Even now, your pieces are clustered about the mountains, here. Had you abandoned it and retreated to the lower board, returned to your lockdown strategy, you could perhaps have stymied me enough to force a stalemate. That is what I would have done.’

The Liege-Kavalos was right. Vokmortian had not even realised it. Yet in the back of his mind, where the whispers of the Great Necromancer rasped against his own thoughts, the tithemaster suspected it had not been coincidental. Part of being a god’s vessel was that it became difficult to tell where you ended and they began.

‘I suppose I have.’ He said at last, giving a nod. ‘They will counter, and seek to humble us, so we will turn it back upon them. It will come down to the mountain, in the end.’

‘The mountain?’

‘Do not be obtuse. The mountain. Some say the stoneheart of Ymetrica was the first thing in creation. Endless, in its way. You know the master will take umbrage at such a claim. Hysh will suffer for it.’

‘If you say so, emissary. I welcome it,’ Venzai shrugged. ‘Either way, your strategies have proven inadequate. I have opened you up and put you to flight. Above and below, all dances to my tune.’

‘Does it?’

Vokmortian’s query was not rhetorical. Nagash’s herald stared at the plain grey piece standing just a few tiles from where his crystalline hosts clashed against his rival’s. Earlier, he had moved the thing up in a desperate attempt to slow Venzai, and had discounted it as lost. Yet now, through some quirk of fate, this one piece was poised to threaten the core of both forces. One decisive move either way, and the balance could swing. It was Kingsgame at its finest, yet something about the sight sat poorly with the emissary.

A sliver of information, recorded in one of his countless ledgers, boiled up unbidden.

‘There are mordants, in Ymetrica,’ Vokmortian supposed, lifting the piece. ‘One of them names himself an emperor.’

‘If that is all, then I do not see how there is anything for us to worry about.’

‘Perhaps.’ Vokmortian nodded. It seemed an ill-fitting explanation, but then what else was there? Try as he might, the emissary could not grasp it. Murmuring wordlessly, he set the piece down again. After a few long moments of staring, Vokmortian moved to reset the board. Contemplation only went so far. Eventually, everything simply had to be tested for true.

‘A draw, we shall call it. Let us go again.’

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