

The Game of Kings

A Space 1889 sketch by Anders Blixt

The Martian winds never cease – complete silence is unknown here. The local nomad tribes tie the bodies of their dead to the tree branches in the few copses available and proclaim these to be sacred ground. The belief is that the spirits of the dead are free to roam with the winds. As time passes the ground between the trees is littered with remains of bodies. We humans abstain, too, from entering these copses, though not for reasons of piety.

My eyes wandered across the arid steppe. We had chosen the burial site that would be visible from a distance. The knoll would stand when the relentless winds had torn down the wooden cross and obliterated all signs of the grave; it would stand till the end of this world.

Lieutenant Hård's body lay on the ground in front of me. I had ordered him to be buried in his field uniform; there is no need to waste our sole tarpaulin because the dead will not care. However, Dr Laurell had kindly covered the head with a piece of cloth. A large-caliber revolver bullet leaves grisly marks when doing its gruesome business and there is no reason to be reminded of that during the burial ceremony.

I am no believer, putting my trust only in Man and Nature, so I had charged Dr Laurell with carrying out the ceremony according to the military manual. Lieutenant Nordenskiöld held our banner aloft, the sun-coloured cross on cornflower blue. This was supposed to connect us with home and hearth, but the flag's flapping in the wind was just an empty noise, like king Oscar's patriotic ranting at our departure from Sweden a long time ago. For this piece of cloth we are expected to sacrifice ourselves, or so those in high places say. But they will not have to face the terror, the loneliness and the death in the wilderness.

Our pack animals brayed behind us as sergeant-major Warg tried to keep them still. The doctor commenced reading from the Bible. I ignored it and lifted my eyes to the darkening evening sky. There it was, a bright double evening-star, our home in this dark vastness, this cosmos.

Major Stenkvist tugged my arm gently. It was my time to say something.

"Hård was a man of action, a man of adventure. He was a good man – and those often die first. He dealt with the traitor in our midst and died as a consequence. His death seems meaningless. It is up to us to make it meaningful. How? I have no easy answer to that. I am as bereaved as you are. We have a long struggle ahead before we can see the walls of Parhoon and the British flag again. We just have to go on – that is what Hård would have done and he would have been disappointed if we would not."

I closed my eyes and heard the faint sounds when my men lowered the body into the shallow grave. In the Game of Kings, the common people will only be losers.