

End-Game

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An endless prairie. I stood by the track. A long, long freight train slowed as it passed, for some reason I'm not attentive to. Maybe a crossing-point beyond. In the distance was a lonely switch-tower. Happenstance can fix a moment. One boxcar had a door part-open. I leapt at the opportunity. Then I was aboard. I looked around me.

I saw the Red King. He was asleep amidst agricultural machinery packed with straw.

How do you suppose I knew he was the Red King? Well, that you don't know. I just knew he was the Red King. Possibly I was mistaken: but I was convinced he was the Red King. And even if he wasn't: I thought him the Red King. And thought's the thing. But actually, he was the Red King. At any rate he answered to that name. I had been looking for him. For months I had been searching for him.

The train began to move. Slowly it crossed the landscape. Monotonous maybe, but pleasurable. The sense of motion. The prairie, or the interior lowlands. Wind-strewn loess. Silty and friable. Treeless in the rain-shadow.

The Red King woke: then the world moved another frame. As he awoke the landscape changed; we were entering a bur-oak savannah.

The Red King stood up and stretched himself. He was very tall and thin; he looked like a man who is on the run. He looked like he needed a wash, and he was unshaven.

'You the Red King?' I asked.

'So they say.' He looked at me. 'Where are you going?' he asked me.

'Where the train takes me,' I replied.

'That's as good an answer as any,' said the Red King. 'The bitch and her crew are after me,' he said. 'She won't be happy until she's witnessed my final breath of freedom.'

'The bitch?'

'Yeah. Alba Regina. AKA *La Reine Blanche*. You'll know her if you see her. I pray you don't. Control freaks run in that family.' He looked at me. 'What are you?'

'Do you mean who?'

'What. I mean what. Your name is unimportant. Your powers are identical to any such another. One rook is as good as the next, they say. You could substitute one for another and no-one would ever know. It's the position and value which count. And value depends on position. Any pawn about to be promoted knows that.'

'I'm a sprite. My name is Ariel,' I said.

'A sprite. That's a new one to me.' He looked gloomily out at the passing savannah beneath the cloudless sky. 'King-side or Queen-side?'

'How do you mean?'

'Are you a King-side sprite or a Queen-side sprite?'

'Never thought about it.'

'Well, think of yourself as a Red King-side sprite, and keep me company.' The Red King tapped me on the chest with his long forefinger. 'Stick with me, kid, and we'll go places.'

And so we travelled on, through the vast savannah. Little did we know that *La Reine Blanche* was looking deeply into her ball of rock crystal. Little did we know the images which were broadcast onto her impassive, powdered face. Little did we know the information which entered the dark caves of her pupils. Little did we know the patterns of her darkening mind. For an instant I beheld the image of Saint Ignatius in Ordsall, windswept beneath the lowering November sky, apparently her momentary field headquarters. That's Saint Ignatius of Antioch, not the other one. As to *La Reine's* real home, that white isle towards the base of the board, known telegraphically as Q1, that I never knew. I had met travellers who had claimed to have seen its cliffs of white chalk; at least, they said

they had, but I doubted them. I always doubt travellers' tales. It pays to stay within the realm of the real world, on one's travels, so I have found. But at the back of my mind I could always picture La Reine Blanche pacing up and down the nave of Saint Ignatius, and hear her clipped footfall. La Reine's boots were certainly made for walking, *La Reine a les bottines des sept ligués*. So I drew myself back to the present, and looked out of the boxcar door.

It is axiomatic that kings travel slowly, and the Red King was no exception to this. In fact he demonstrated the truth of the axiom. In that all thought is of necessity a framework of accepted axioms, his way of travel was exemplary: one square at a time. No seven league boots for him.

'Tell me something of yourself, King-side sprite. Where's your contemporary and co-equal?' asked the Red King.

[This is a preview. The full text contains 2,000 words.]