

THEY'd been on the castle roof when Locke told Edgar about what had happened in Kohlingen. He'd stood there pressing shaking fingers to the corners of his eyes, and Edgar had turned away, pretending he was thinking about how the tower fortifications worked. Guys didn't get involved in each other's emotions. And Edgar, a king after all, had been thoroughly taught the complicated roles of etiquette: above all, one did not acknowledge the personal struggles of one's military allies. Even if the ally in question was one's best friend.

As a courtesy to Locke, Edgar had tried to suppress the memory since then. Personal attachments weren't his business. He rewrote the occasion in his head: they'd had a few drinks, they'd discussed the Returners, Locke had mentioned his past, and his principal emotion had been ... anger. Yes, he was angry about what the Empire had done to a town he'd known well, and rightly so. Men got angry and they took revenge, in a disinterested way, using the occasion as an opportunity to test their own strength and support the cause of what they considered objectively good. An eye for an eye. It was the game of war, and a vague sense of general morality, that spurred on people like Locke and Edgar. There was nothing as trivial as personal affections and regrets that could affect them: that would be a weakness in battle.

But Edgar couldn't fool himself. At unexpected moments he recalled how Locke had covered his face and how his voice had cracked as he shared his greatest vulnerability. He might

have been able to ignore the memories if it had been anyone else, but Locke was his best friend, the only person who talked to him without tossing in a “your majesty” every other sentence, who treated Edgar like a real human being. They never spoke about how much they cared for each other, but Edgar always felt a real joy when Locke visited the castle, quite unlike the indifferent politeness that revealed itself in response to any other emissary. So despite Locke’s obvious desire to keep his struggle to himself, and Edgar’s reluctance to wade into any matter that wasn’t at least loosely connected with an official charter of some kind, the king wanted to help his friend.

Edgar knew the following: Locke was looking for something that could revive the dead. He’d heard such a thing was hidden somewhere; whatever it was, it would certainly be connected with magic. Gestahl was using magic in his campaigns – the details were vague, but that was proof that it had not entirely vanished from the world, even if it largely had to be harnessed through artificial means. There had never been any trace of magic in Figaro that Edgar knew of, but it wasn’t as if he’d sought it out before becoming aware of Locke’s troubles.

Edgar had easy access to a place that Locke normally did not: the Figaro castle library. As king, he spent plenty of time there already, although he admittedly usually didn’t stray far from the engineering section if he could help it. But some of the older volumes were bound to have information on the sort

of magic that Locke was looking for. All Edgar would have to do was locate the books of interest and then invite Locke to consult them: that way, he could hardly be accused of meddling in Locke's affairs, but would still be able to help his friend in a way that wouldn't compromise the dignity of either of them. Edgar would satisfy his need to provide some assistance in the matter, while Locke would be able to continue his quest without feeling like somebody else was doing it on his behalf.



When Locke next visited, he was as light-hearted and devilish as he ever was, and Edgar felt a twinge of regret at the fact that he was about to reintroduce a topic that had previously caused his friend such discomfort. At least he would stay away from getting personally invested as much as he could: he would merely direct Locke to the library and then take no further part in it. That way, they would both be spared the embarrassment of having Edgar intrude on Locke's private grief.

"By the way," Edgar said casually, as Locke was about to retire to the guest chambers. "You should think about visiting the library tonight."

Locke's eyes narrowed. "The library? Why?" He bore a look of amusement, as if he suspected Edgar was playing a trick on him.

Edgar was unable to match Locke's expression. "I found a

book that you may be interested in,” he explained. “I left it on a desk for you. You might want to have a look.”

“A book.” Locke snorted. “Edgar ... I can’t read.”

Edgar gaped.

“Well, I can work out the sounds of the letters, if there’s time,” Locke clarified. “But I never learnt how to put them together properly. I can’t just pick something up and tell what it says.”

Edgar was still silent, trying to absorb the reality of not being able to read. It was a skill he’d always taken for granted – was that not the case for ordinary people? But how could a man live his life without being able to read? It would be like missing a limb.

“I ... I don’t mean to sound condescending,” he eventually stuttered, “but how do you –”

“Don’t worry, you don’t,” Locke interrupted, although Edgar suspected he was lying. “Look, all I’ve ever known is travelling. I can count the number of places I’ve spent more than two weeks in on one hand. I never went to school, obviously, and I’ve never had much use or time for books. My trade isn’t the kind you learn from manuals.” He sounded defensive.

Edgar’s instinct was to apologise, but he managed to stop himself. “This book,” he said instead. “It’s important that you see it. I ... I’ll have to come down and show it to you.”

“Important,” Locke echoed, in a tone of disbelief. He looked as if he might have been about to make a joke, but Edgar’s expression must have been too serious, as he merely shrugged.

Edgar led Locke to the library in private frustration. This had derailed his intention to involve himself as little as possible in the matter. But Locke really had to see this book, and if he couldn’t read, Edgar was going to have to show it to him.

He’d really never seen this coming. Edgar had grown up surrounded by books, and had learnt to read almost as soon as he’d learnt to talk; it was a skill he considered nearly as fundamental as breathing. He’d never seen himself as a great scholar – he was much better with his hands, and once he’d entered his teenage years, the only books that ever truly interested him had been about machines, despite his tutors’ efforts to make him interested in the history of Figaro. But not being able to read at all – now that was unthinkable.

The only people he knew of who couldn’t read were among his domestic staff, the ones he rarely saw because they only communicated with the king through some higher-ranked intermediary. People he wasn’t supposed to know existed, for his own convenience, despite the fact that they lived in the same castle as him. Their illiteracy meant they’d remain the lowest-ranked members of his household, not having the skills to take more lucrative positions in the running of the castle: they were a permanent underclass. He hoped they were treated well enough, but really, he had no say in it.

Locke's footsteps echoed on the stairs behind Edgar, and he almost cursed out loud: what was he thinking? This was his friend, not some nobody condemned to a life of servitude. Things were different out in the further towns; getting an education would hardly be anyone's first priority, and especially not the kind of education Edgar had had. People like Locke had had to work out how to survive: they didn't get their every whim indulged by a team of sycophants.

His mood had turned sour by the time they approached the shelves, the old feelings of resentment and guilt about his position stirred up again. If it weren't for the damned royal upbringing, maybe he'd have known how to deal with people who didn't have the same privileges he did without viewing them as charity cases. He did his best to consider the common people to be of no less worth than himself, but it was bloody hard to do that after the way he'd been raised. If he wasn't king, he probably could have figured out how to help a friend without instinctively wanting to detach himself from the process as much as possible. He might even have understood emotions.

They came to where he'd left the book. "It's old," Locke remarked, touching the marks on the spine where it had once been chained to the shelf.

"Yes."

"Before the War of the Magi, you think?"

Edgar forced away his irritation. "It is. Based on what's inside, definitely." He gently flipped open the front cover.

Locke studied the title page, and slowly sounded out the letters of the principal word of the title, which was set in capitals. “E-S-P-E – is it espers?”

“Yes. *A compendium of espers, their roles and duties, and a hypothesis on the nature of their species* – well, anyway, it’s about espers.”

Edgar turned to the section of interest, and Locke leant closer.

“Phoenix,” Edgar supplied, to save him the trouble. Without meeting Locke’s eyes, he went on. “*The esper known as the Phoenix is one of the most powerful magical beings on this earth, for he hath power over life and death, beyond that of any other esper or any tool devised by the human race.*” He frowned at the verbose, old-fashioned prose, and skipped a few paragraphs. “*Whoever possesseth the power of the Phoenix may restore life to his fallen allies. Not merely by curing superficial battle wounds in the manner of the Phoenix Down, which is but a crude imitation of its namesake, but by truly resuscitating the afflicted, even those who have passed beyond. Any creature touched by the magic of the esper will live once more. Many once thought dead, both human and esper, have been restored to life by the touch of the Phoenix.*” As he spoke the final words, his voice faltered and he allowed himself a glance at Locke.

His friend had turned away; Edgar couldn’t see his face. “I’m sorry,” he continued hastily. “I didn’t want to get involved in this. But I couldn’t keep this information from you when it

was right here.” His words echoed weakly.

Locke had a hand pressed to his face, and his shoulders heaved.

“I’ll leave you,” said Edgar. He’d at least afford Locke the dignity of being alone to grieve. Then they would never speak of this again, and continue to be comrades in arms, two blokes who fought together and joked around when the going got tough. That would spare Locke the embarrassment of having his best friend see him like this, even if they hadn’t managed to avoid the embarrassment of him being led into the castle library like a mule and having the king of Figaro read some clue to the next steps of his quest out of a book, as if they were both characters in a terrible play.

But Locke ceased to hide himself, and turned to face Edgar. The king saw the tears flowing freely from his best friend’s eyes and onto the hand that was still pressed against his face. He saw how Locke used his other arm to steady himself against the bookshelf, like an old man; his fingers trembled as they held on.

“Don’t go,” said Locke eventually.

Edgar was unsure, but he moved closer to Locke, and placed a hand on his shoulder. Immediately, Locke let go of the bookshelf and gripped Edgar’s back instead. Edgar steadied him with his other hand, and Locke let his head fall forward onto Edgar’s shoulder.

Edgar could feel his neck growing wet from Locke’s tears.



He held him close.

“Thank you,” Locke murmured, and they stood, pressed tightly together as Edgar rubbed Locke’s back. Protocol could go and do one, he decided. As king, as a man even, he was supposed to be strong and detached, but to hell with that. This was what his friend needed, and despite his fears, providing it had turned out to be so easy and natural.

Locke lifted his head. “Can you read the next bit?” he asked softly.

“Of course,” Edgar replied.