

The Anti-Mage

By

S. W. Ellenwood

Copyright © 2017 S. W. Ellenwood

The business of an anti-mage is similar to that of a garbage man. They do the job no one wants to talk about but someone has to do. Just like a garbage man, they have daily routines of going to the same place every week, filling out the same paperwork, and taking out the 'trash'. In the early years of this business, it had an influx of new employees seeking riches and glory as they brought down 'evil wizards' and 'whorish witches'. However, it lost its shine promptly as magic sensitive humans learned to make quick work of new and inexperienced anti-mages. As the years grew the anti-mage bubble slowly deflated as more and more magicians either gave in and registered or hid their talents from the world. As the bubble finally died, the workforce progressed to the next money making project, leaving only the few that knew nothing else but the hunt of mages.

Elba King was one of these few workers that stayed in the business after the media, the politicians, and the public moved on. He didn't think much about why as he sat outside a run-down cafe in the late evening. Dirty streams and muddy pools littered the street from the fresh rain that stopped moments earlier. He took a sip of his water-downed coffee as he read the news on his phone about the election. Elba wore a gray trench coat with spots of bleach on the end. His button-up had tiny anchors that went well with the dark red tie in his pocket. He kept it on hand in case he needed a more 'professional' look.

His phone alerted him that his B.O.B. sensed movement. He looked up at the old apartment complex on the corner and saw a light come on at the far end. He unhooked his phone from his augmented hand with his flesh hand and placed it in his coat pocket. He walked across the street under the bright purple and pink neon lights. The Rail flew in between the buildings above him with passengers heading to various locations across the city, dreading the work they were going to or too tired to think. A few electric bikes hummed down the street as Elba entered the building he received the tip about just earlier that day.

"The old apartment complex on Sunny and South Fifth," Fred told Elba outside of a Your-Burgers on one of the many second tiers built to make foot travel easier and faster. Fred took another bite of his triple-decker burger as Elba took a sip of his soda. Elba didn't write the address down since he knew that area well.

"No surprise there. I caught a mage there about two years ago. It went well, that guy was old, though," responded Elba. He leaned against the railing that surrounded one of the massive metal rods that jetted up to support the third tier fifteen meters above them.

"Yeah, well this chap isn't old. What trouble did this one get into?" ketchup collected at the corner of Fred's mouth on his lip piercing.

"I can't tell you that Fred. You know the rules," Elba observed the people twenty meters below them on the ground floor. Going about their daily routine of sleeping, eating, working, earning, and spending. Rinsing and repeating till death.

"What rules?" Fred wadded up his trash and threw it into the open trash can to the side of them, but missed.

"There are rules. The public just doesn't care to know them because they don't care at all anymore." Fred nodded as he wiped his mouth on his purple sleeve.

"Fair point. Shoot, I need to get going," Fred said as he glanced at his phone. He bent down and tied his orange shoes and turned on his hoverboard. "So, will it always be Your-Burger?"

"Well, that depends on what kind of mage I get from you," Elba said throwing his drink toward the same trash can as Fred did but actually made it.

"What kind of mage would I need to find for me to get a meal on Sky Five?" asked Fred as he placed his stickered helmet over his small head.

"A double-digit serial killer or cult leader."

Fred nodded as he stepped on his hoverboard. The sound of raindrops echoed down the tiers to them.

"I would join a cult for that," Fred threw up a peace sign and was off, speeding through the crowded a few centimeters off the ground as Elba snickered at his favorite informant.

Dull yellow walls surrounded the lobby of the apartment complex. A metal gate stood guard at the closed front desk. An unwatered plant stood in the corner next to the pizza vending machine. The doors to the elevator shined with a strange newness to it, but Elba still took the stairs out of habit. He walked up them as casually as if he lived there for twenty years. The wood steps creaked under his thick unequally sized shoes, his left shoe a half size smaller than his right since there were no augmented feet his size when he lost his leg from the knee down. He could have it switched but his insurance wouldn't cover it, so he just bought single size shoes at his local pawn shop. His shoes probably had another six months in them before he would replace them again as he does every year.

He met no one coming up the fifteen flights of stairs. Most of the apartments were empty due to a host of unique reasons. The fifteenth floor was completely empty when he reached it. Dust hung in the air like a fog. Mustard yellow paint covered the top half of the walls while peeling floral wallpaper covered the bottom. Elba drew his Reaper V70 from its holster and checked its ammo. The Reaper V70 was an older model that still collected ridicule at the office sometimes.

"Seriously, the Reaper XL is the best," said Brick, one of the three Anti-Mages in Elba's precinct, also the youngest.

"Nope, the Reaper L100 is the best. It doesn't have the failure rate of all the new ones that come out," said Jim, Brick's best friend. They both joined the same time two years ago. Jim was older but both were still double digits younger than Elba.

"You're both wrong. It's the Reaper V70 and you all both know it."

Brick and Jim peeked around the corner into Elba's office as he sat there playing solitaire with physical cards. His gray coat hung on his coat rack in the corner next to his hard drive filing cabinets. The blinds behind him were partially open, letting only a few rays of the morning sun in as it reflected off the buildings.

"Here we go. It's an outdated piece of junk," Brick said as they walked in and sat down in Elba's cushioned black chairs across from him.

"It doesn't even have the combo load that the L100 has," commented Jim.

Brick fired back.

"And that is why the XL is better! It has the plasma injected into the bullets so you don't even have to worry about the bulky combo loading."

"Both are still bulky," Elba commented, not even looking up from his game.

"False," interjected Brick, "the side by side comparison shows that the XL magazine is still smaller than the L100 one."

"But the L100 still has a lot more power than the XL," said Jim.

"Guys," Elba paused his game to reel them back in. "They both still have the same problem. The plasma source location. The L100 placement puts it way too close to the actual firing mechanics. If it burst while firing you're in trouble. XL is still extremely faulty and they had to tone down not just the power but also the plasma percentage which puts you at a massive disadvantage because you end up with not enough plasma and still run the same risk as the L100. The V70..."

Elba's phone rang as he was about to get into his speech about the V70 again. He answered it. Martha, the secretary, had a walk-in client for him. Elba told her to send them in. He hung up and pointed at Brick and Jim as they walked out. "V70. Greatest gun ever."

"Fanboy," they said in unison as they left. Elba shook his head and cleaned up his game as his newest client walked in.

"Mr. King?" said the client, a man in his forties, dressed in expensive attire. Elba could smell the rich oils on him from the higher levels.

"That's me, what can I do you for mister?" Elba stood and extended his metal hand.

"Laghari, Vin Laghari." The client said as he stared at Elba's hand a second too long before shaking it. Elba was neither surprised nor bothered by that anymore.

"Nice to meet you. Please, have a seat." Laghari sat down and as Elba asked how he could help him. Laghari started to speak but stopped. He looked at the floor like many clients who sat there before, stepping into a new world they knew nothing about. After a few seconds of silence, Laghari finally spoke.

"To be blunt, my wife and I think our daughter, Aruna, is seeing a magic sensitive boy and we don't know what to do."

"Why do you all think that?" Elba asked.

Laghari proceeded to tell his story on how Aruna met this man at the university, the class they had together, and as the weeks progress how out of the blue he asked her on a date. Being the nice girl she is she said yes, though she said didn't seem much impressed by him.

"Then, she had this huge change," Laghari pointed out. "Almost like a light. Before the date, she thought he was just ok, a little odd. And then afterward, she's head over heels for him. I found it odd and it caused a lot of stress for my wife because she has never acted like this before. She's almost done with school and now she's thinking about dropping out so the two of them can get married. It's like she's under a spell or in a trance. She won't stop talking about him."

Elba cracked a smile.

"It sounds like she's just a girl in love." Elba was mentally going through the signs of someone being under a love potion, and Laghari's daughter was only hitting a few of the requirements.

"But over one date? And she's had boyfriends before. Really great guys and she never acted this way with them. Great guys from great families."

Elba could tell Laghari was getting heated up over this and Elba didn't want to get into a fight, so he changed the subject.

"Ok, you know her better than I. But, why come here? The university is out of my area and I assume you don't live around here." Though that was a lie, Anti-Mages specialize in certain areas but they aren't regulated to only one, mainly because of the lack of manpower.

Laghari nodded in embarrassment.

"From what I got out of her he lives in this area and I have some friends that work at the police station where I live."

Elba raised his hand to stop him, Elba knew where this was going and didn't want Laghari to waste his breath.

"Understood. Do you have any information on the boy?"

Laghari pulled out his phone and swiped over the folder he created onto Elba's desk. Elba opened the virtual file. He was impressed by the effort put in by Laghari, though the file didn't contain much: only a name, some interests (hoverboarding, smoking, and reading), and a photo of the boy. He looked like any normal guy in his twenties, just not from the same level as Laghari.

"I know it isn't much but that's all I could get."

"No worries, this will do. I'll let you know what I learn once I find him."

Laghari thanked him and shook his hand again seemingly not put off by the metal hand in his. Elba repeated his charge not to worry as Laghari left his office. Elba sat back down in his chair, tossed the virtual file from his desk into the hard drive connected to his desk. He turned his old brown chair around and looked out his window and said under his breath, "Rich prick."

The sound of the apartment complex's elevator rising echoed up the floors. Elba stepped back into the staircase and peeked out of the corner till the elevator zoomed past. He looked back down at his Reaper, the magazine loaded and the vials clean. The wood handle had tiny designs which he carved in when he was bored at the office. The designs themselves improving over time. He exited the staircase and turned the safety off. He held his gun behind his coat as he stood in front of apartment room 1515. A light peered out from under the locked door, Elba knocked on the door with his human hand. The light under the door disappeared as someone stepped in front of it. Elba looked at the peephole, forced a smile, and waved. The sound of steps faded away from the door as the light came back only to leave completely. Elba sighed and took a step to the side as he called to the client.

"Mr. Smith, my name is Elba King and..."

The door flew off the hinges and slammed into the door across the hall. Elba raised his gun and waited as smoke rose from the room. He heard a soft step and a pause. He held his breath till the pause stopped and the frantic movement began. Drawers opening and closing, doors shutting, a zipper being zipped. Elba stood patiently, taking a single step away from the open door and aiming his Reaper at it. Mr. Smith emerged not a few seconds later with a rolling bag in one hand and a backpack in the other. He stared at the smoking door when Elba made himself known.

"Fireball?" Elba asked, his Reaper trained on Mr. Smith's chest. Mr. Smith looked at Elba like a startled cat. He's knees were bent and eyes wide. "Now, let's start again, Mr. Smith."

But he didn't get to start again as Mr. Smith kicked his rolling bag up and spoke a spell that caused the bag to hurdle towards Elba, hitting him in the shoulder. Elba fired off a single shot that only grazed the backpack. Six shots left. Mr. Smith ran down the stairs in leaps, not looking back once, clutching his backpack with both arms against his chest, filled with dread as the Elevator zoom past him. Mr. Smith rushed down one more flight to the ninth floor where he exited the stairs but was met by Elba with his Reaper in hand. The sound of the elevator door closing came from behind him as Elba spoke.

"I am with the M.S.S. Task Force and..." Mr. Smith twirled both his pointer fingers around each other in a small motion and spoke a single syllable spell ending it by flinging his fingers toward Elba and

sending a flying white disc at him. Elba blocked it with his augmented arm, the disc shattering all over him as it rip through his coat. He quickly re-aimed at Mr. Smith and opened fire. A dark blue bolt shot from his Reaper and exploded as it tore through the edge of the door frame Mr. Smith dove through. Five left. Mr. Smith crawled down the stairs, his leg smoking from the plasma that burned through the flesh tunnel the copper bullet created. He pulled himself up onto the railing and sneered with pain as he prepared a teleport spell. Once the proper usage was said to the Fling in his bag (a teleport artifact), he threw his backpack up but it didn't get far as Elba shot it. Four left. Half the contents flung out as the rest of it was swirled into itself and disappeared. Mr. Smith looked back at Elba, books of magic littered around him.

"If you want to live, please don't say or..." Elba was interrupted as Mr. Smith moved his hand toward Elba and started to move his lips but Elba shot him before any curse could be cast. Three left. Elba frowned as he thought about better jobs where he didn't use any shots or just one. "They always want to say something, nitwit." Elba walked over to the dead body to observe the books that spilled out from the backpack. Most were basic illegal magic books. One was a visual dictionary of magical artifacts, tabbed, basic spells volume one and two, which Elba thought odd since the mage seemed a level two or three instead of a one, and the final book was on potions, tabbed as well. Elba picked up the potion book and flipped through the tabbed pages till he found the proof Laghari wanted, a love potion recipe. Elba messaged Marty the location of the body and gathered up the books to be disposed of.

As he waited for Marty he sat down on one of the steps and flipped through the books. None had publishing or copyright text but all were bound well and looked professional. He was studying the design of the covers when an elderly woman walked into the doorway of the staircase. She looked at the dead mage, his face burnt black from his nose up with a bullet hole above his left eye. With his augmented hand Elba pulled out his badge from his coat. She clutched her purse, nodded, and went back to her apartment to wait it out again. Elba went back to the books, the design all showing similar handiwork, and had a recurring image of a snake with one eye, which didn't comfort him. He looked back at Mr. Smith's corpse. He always seemed to kill the ones he needed to question. Mr. Smith's phone beeped. Elba stood up and searched the corpse's pockets for the phone. Once found he opened it and saw it had one missed video message. Elba opened that too. Aruna's face appeared. She smiled at the camera as she walked across the campus of the university. Her eyes bright, her smile big, her voice happy as it started to rain. She talked about how she missed him, her excitement to get out of the school her parents told her to go to and to follow her dreams with the love of her life. Elba cursed under his breath as he closed it to see a picture of Smith giving Aruna a kiss on the cheek as Smith's wallpaper for his phone. Elba called Mr. Laghari on his phone.

"Mr. Laghari, Elba King here,"

Laghari tried to ask Elba something but Elba didn't let him. "Listen, some of your assumptions were true. The boy was a mage and had a book of potions but I don't think he used a spell on Aruna. She sent him a video message and she isn't showing any signs of being under the influence of a love potion."

"He had a book on love potions?" Laghari said with hope in his voice.

Elba rubbed his eyes as Marty showed up wearing a white jumpsuit that hadn't been cleaned in a while and toting a brown duffle bag and a stretcher hovering above the ground at waist level.

"What is the best way to get it out of her system?" Laghari continued, "Go to the doctor? Tell her the truth? Have him tell her?"

Elba sighed.

"Sure, but those options won't help a broken heart."

"But she's not really in love with him, like you said."

"I said she isn't showing signs of being under any potion."

"Then is it a spell? a curse?"

Elba tightened his fist as his voice grew sharp.

"Sir, it's him. I think your daughter is legitimately in love with him."

Mr. Laghari said nothing for a few moments as Marty bagged up the last book in a plastic bag and strapped them together.

"No, that can't be it. It isn't right."

Elba rolled his eyes over Mr. Laghari's denial and answered,

"Can or can't, it is what it is."

Mr. Laghari's voice grew louder.

"I won't accept this! You're misreading things. She can't be in love with a low-life like him. She deserves a man from a better level. I should have gone to my friends. They would have told me the truth."

Elba laughed as he reached the end of his rope.

"Sir, I wish you had, but you didn't and now you are going to have to tell your daughter that the love of her life is dead because you didn't want her marrying into that social level. If you want the tiniest chance for her not to hate you for the rest of her life, you will beg for her forgiveness. Goodbye Mr. Laghari." Elba hung up and shook his head while clenching his teeth.

"You good?" inputted Marty as he placed the bagged up the magic books in his duffle bag.

"I will be, just another day as an anti-mage," said Elba as he gained control of himself.

"Do you think they will tell her?" Elba shook his head.

"I don't know. I doubt it." Mr. Smith's phone rang. Elba stared at it as he held it, Aruna's face smiling. It rung again.

Marty walked over to the body and asked,

"What do you want to do?"

Elba's eyes looked up at Marty as the phone rang again. Elba shook his head, declined the call, and gave the phone to Marty.

"She's going to call again," Marty pointed out.

"I know," said Elba, "and she will talk to her parents about it and they are going to have to deal with it."

Elba helped Marty place the body on the stretcher. Marty zipped the bag over the body and they took the elevator to the lobby. They said nothing as the doors opened and they pushed the stretcher into Marty's black hovercar with the words 'Marty Morgue' in white stripping off.

After the body was in the back with the books Elba made the comment, "Those books are a good sign that we have another illegal publisher on our hands."

Marty nodded as he closed the trunk up.

"You're right, I'll drop them off tomorrow for you and the boys." Elba's B.O.B. flew down into his hand, the small drone folded its propellers and sticky feet in on itself, making it all fit in the palm of Elba's hand. Out of his pocket, Elba took a plastic box with foam covering inside and placed the B.O.B. in it.

"Thanks," Elba said, he followed Marty around to the front of the car.

"You want a ride home?"

"Yeah, I don't want to deal with people on the Rail tonight."

Marty nodded and they both got in the car. Marty flipped some switches and the car made a light rumble as it floated up to the first driving lane above the third level. His two little bobble heads of his favorite stand-up comedians shook wildly till he leveled out in the lane. Elba gazed out at the tall structures surrounding them as they drove through the night. The change in building design always seemed strange to him, like a child had placed them on top of each other instead of construction teams expanding the city upward every ten years.

"You know, I find it ironic," Marty said as he turned down the mellow electronic music on the radio, "that you are telling him to ask for forgiveness and all when you were the one who pulled the trigger."

"Self defense," Elba was quick to respond, not even looking at him.

“So, that excuses you from saying you're sorry that it happened?”

Elba didn't respond as he tried to think about the books and where the backpack went instead of what Marty brought up.

Marty shrugged his shoulders as he made a wide turn onto Elba's home street. “Wouldn't it be nice if that 'mage' had told you sorry. But I'm just thinking out loud.” Marty made a U-turn and descended a level to place Elba right up against the second level sidewalk.

“With that logic, I should I say sorry to all the loved ones of all the mages I've killed?” Elba a little annoyed at this talk.

“Maybe, maybe just some, maybe none. All I'm saying is you can understand the pain this girl is going through and it wouldn't hurt to at least give her your condolences.”

“You suck,” Elba said as he got out of the car.

Marty chuckled and said goodbye. Elba watched as Marty flew away into the busy traffic of flying lights. He walked into his apartment complex and down two flights of stairs to his home. A small one bedroom, one bathroom, with a kitchen he hardly used. He took off his coat and hung it up in his closet. He made a note to himself to get the sleeve repaired. He placed his wallet, gun, and phone on the table located in the corner of his living room deemed the 'dining area'. He stared at his phone for a full minute, thinking about what Marty said. He sighed, sat down at the table, and typed out a message to Aruna. A message telling her all that happened and his apology. Half of himself felt bad for not calling her and telling her in person while the other half didn't want to tell her anything. At least both sides were in agreement of being unhappy at him. Once he finished typing the note, he sent it and felt some relief. He walked over to the refrigerator and took out his dinner, a frozen meal, and did nothing. He just sat and ate in silence. While chewing his Salisbury steak, he felt a little better about himself. Throwing his trash away, he wished, for just a moment that Smith didn't assault him, but he stopped himself from wishing further as wishing didn't change anything. After he finished eating he went through his nightly routine: Showering, brushing his teeth and placing a velvet bag over his augmented arm and leg to help him sleep and not be in discomfort of the metal attached to him. As he lay in his twin bed that was too small for him, he wondered if Aruna would forgive her parents or if she would forgive him some day. Deep down, part of him was rooting for her to have mercy and grace, at least for them. Because if Aruna could, maybe there's a chance for him. A chance that he would have the strength to give forgiveness to that mage. The chances of that happening were slim, but that didn't stop him from slowly slipping into sleep as he practiced saying it in his mind, *I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you.*