

Every Archmage, An Asshole

So there Erin was, sitting in her rented room at the Lazy Turnip Inn, slurping her bowl of spicy ramen when a bird knocked on her window. Halfhill was known for creepy little creatures like that who always happen to be watching when you least want them to, so she opened the window and prepared to shoo it off but when she did it collapsed in on itself and reappeared on her desk holding a letter in its mouth.

With a slightly concerned glance, Erin snatched the letter from the bird's mouth and saw the Unblinking Eye cast in melted wax to bind it.

"The fuck's a Katie want with me again?" Erin mumbled, having already been in a bad mood but this took it to the next level.

That dumb bird hopped around and chattered like a parrot. "Open the letter, open the letter!" And Erin had half a mind to drop a book on its head but she wasn't sure that destroying the familiar wouldn't piss off the wizard who evidently had an interest in something from her. Who knew? If she didn't play nice maybe she'd be muted or vaporised, though the latter honestly sounded better.

Erin conjured an icy knife to shred through the mail letterhead and unfurled a long scroll from within she couldn't even be half-arsed to read.

"Dear Ms. Langley

Bla bla bla

Interest in your recent work,

Bla bla bla

Report on Secret of Eki,

Bla bla bla

Would you like to discuss it?

Not really, no, but I don't have a choice.

So on and so forth,

My tower in Tirisfal,

Archmagus Keliborial Var Zanthrancicus of the Kirin Tor."

I have better things to be doing than entertaining some bigwig gigawizard, Erin thought, but she knew what it was like to piss off someone with that much power. She blinked on some clothes, then blinked off.

'Every archmage is an asshole' was a philosophy that served Erin pretty damn well, all things considered, and it was almost never wrong.

What did you need to become good at magic? Well, you have either natural talent, effort, and resources. Natural talent tended to come from those of prominent bloodlines, usually at least with a bit of elven ancestry somewhere down the line, which is probably why northern mages were a lot more common than in backwaters like Redridge where she was born.

Then there was effort, and while she couldn't deny that played a pretty massive part in it Erin knew that what effort brought you was at the end of the day limited by the other two. A Tauren, who both culturally and physiologically were famous for not being skilled in the Arcane, would get a lot less mileage out of their effort than the son of a Highborne who grew up sucking the juices of any particular Well they felt like.

The biggest contributor though? By far it was cold, hard coin. It could buy tutors, lesson materials, grimoires with pre-written spells, it bought reagents and materials, it bought clerics for when you blow yourself up and it bought you maids and cleaners and other minions to save you more time to put towards magic.

You had to wonder just what someone did to get promoted to archmage, 'cause a position like that doesn't come for free, and it definitely doesn't come with being a good little girl. Who did they pay off? Who did they exploit? Who did they bend over for? You don't get that rich, that powerful without fucking someone else over. What were those four rules? Magic is powerful, corrupting, addictive? Oh yeah, and it attracts demons. In the end that wasn't just literal. In the end, Arcane's just a Fel that lets you keep your pretty face.

Of course, they teach you about mages who come from nothing but one who manages to make it doesn't count for the hundreds who don't.

Magic, the great equaliser? Fuck no, magic just further entrenched those class barriers, and it always made sense when the council of six or the sunreavers were stacked with people kissing their sisters or kissing the boot of their king so they could keep their inheritances.

All of that and more, years of fury and burning hearts from her and her friends who had been beaten down time and time again by archmages, was what Erin went into that meeting with. It didn't affect her personally anymore, by blind luck Erin could escape the KT and live her life her way, but for those she grew up alongside they didn't always get that choice. And she'd sooner die than ignore the struggles she saw firsthand.

In some enchanted forest deep in the woods of Tirisfal, with giant plump toadstools and trees with smiling faces, glowing fireflies that lead her down the trail and old mossy stones that were slippery to walk on, Erin found the tower the Archmage had talked about. She'd heard about it for sure but always assumed it would be prettier, and didn't realise she'd soon be visiting the man who owned it. With a name like "*The Astral Sanctum of Evergrove*" you'd be forgiven for thinking it was actually the hang-out spot for a herd of roaming Archdruids, let alone magi, and you'd be right for thinking it would be this grand spire reaching up into the heavens... but you'd be wrong.

It was ramshackle, falling apart, half the tower was crooked and propped up precariously by large wooden pillars and the farther up it grew it almost seemed like it bent back into pointing vertically. Of muted hues, purple, burgundy and kaitoke it was painted (a colour which almost no one has ever described by using that word) and one singular warm candlelight lit the single window at its peak.

Erin came up and rapped on the door lightly with her knuckles, fearing to do so too vigorously would bring the whole thing down.

"Hey! It's Langley. You wanted to talk?"

The tower seemed to shudder at her call. Erin took a precautionary step back and looked at the window, and saw a shadow walk in front of the candlelight, and then disappear again.

Step step step step step.

Don't tell me this guy can't just teleport himself down?

Erin stood with her arms folded, and five minutes later he came to the door and opened the eyeslit.

"Who's that?" He grumbled.

"Erin Langley." She summoned the scroll into her hand and held it out. "You called?"

"What for?"

"You wanted to speak to me about some research?"

"I did?" The voice asked.

"Uhhh... yeah, it's in the letter."

"Why do you want to speak to me about your research?" He asked.

Erin rubbed her eyes red. "Seriously? Buddy, just open the door and I'll show you the damn letter."

Erin rolled her eyes as she heard frantic incanting and decanting of an enchanted lock, three, six, then eighteen different runes dispelled until the door finally swung open.

She looked up at a man nearly nine feet tall draped in a deep blue robe, though it almost looked more like a blanket that had been tied by string around his neck. His beard was white and full and long, probably rivalling old Antonidas', and his pointy wizard hat was just a shade too red to match his cloak, and was patterned by little gold star stickers.

Erin sighed.

She wasn't just dealing with an archmage.

She was dealing with an idiot.

He opened up the door and with his gross, gnarly little fingers he took the scroll he sent and raised it, giving it a big huff with his nose that looked like it took a hairpin turn on a goblin raceway. Seemingly satisfied, he tore the letter in twain.

"I suppose I did. Come in?"

It was quite shit in there. The first room was scattered with spiders and cobwebs, an old rug unwashed for centuries, stained portraits and mugs and all that sort of thing.

Erin wished she had worn something a little more suited for dungeon delving than the wide-brim cropped slacks and sneakers she came with. "You don't come down here much?"

She asked, and the Archmage said "Oh no, no. I don't like to disturb the old residents."

Erin decided to not inquire further.

She passed more rooms on the way up the tower. By her judgement, each space was younger than the last, and it was as if rather than renovating a single area when more was needed, they simply built above it and left the last to linger. There were many of note, a small library, a kitchen, a walk-in shower which she gagged seeing the black mold on the walls and other unmentionable stains, and then she saw one that broke her heart.

A children's room, with one of those dangly things they play with above their cot.

The archmage flicked it to get it moving, then moved on.

Finally they came to a place they could sit down, and Erin crossed her legs and kept a close eye on him. He turned a cauldron with a big spoon in the back as it bubbled over the fire and cast a spell that caused the smoke to go high, then dredged a measure of slop onto a bowl he handed to Erin. "Have some tea."

Erin lifted her mug and saw the tea stare back at her, and grimaced so much she gagged.

"You wanted to hear about my research, right? It's on one condition." She asked, changing the subject swiftly. Erin wasn't about to let his faux-crazy attitude fool her. It was a trick, a ploy obviously, he played the doddering old idiot so he could deceive her into letting her guard down. Tale as old as time. Every archmage is an asshole and he's no different, no matter what he's called, and she'd never let politics pollute something pure.

You'd have to have read the reports to understand it, but long story short Erin had recently taken part in an expedition privately organised by her with some trusted colleagues (that included her best friend, of course) which uncovered a ruin by their reckoning older than the arrival of the titans. By some means the citizens had been made aware of a flood which would have obliterated their city, and by other but presumably connected means they were able to levitate the entire colony above the clouds.

Archaeological bodies like the Explorer's League and Reliquary were aware of the legends and a general location as to where it might have been found, but its position and the sheer logistics of getting up onto the island proved it too costly to bother. Erin had succeeded though, and with the help of her allies (or rather, she fuffed around with magic while they did the real historical investigations) they were able to glean some knowledge about the origins of the civilisation.

Her report on such was public and clearly others were starting to take an interest. Erin could think of nothing worse than such a unique historical site being taken over by private interests, or worse, being turned into another flying fortress for the KT, but she came prepared.

Erin snapped her own scroll onto the table, something she'd made knowing that a time like this would come, something which would maintain her leverage.

"So. You're an archmage of the Kirin Tor?"

"I am?" The archmage asked, checking nonexistent pockets on his chest and under his hat too. "Imagine that. Archmage."

"Yeah it..." Erin held her breath and again showed him, pointing at the signature with her fingertip that he wrote on his letter. "It says right here! It had an official Kirin Tor seal!"

“Ohh! I didn’t write that.” The archmage said, deluded as usual, reclining in his creaky chair and slurping a slurp of his awful concoction before going ‘ahh’. “Its Clement who handles the paperwork.”

“Clement?”

Again the bird familiar appeared by him and caww’d, clearly not so wordy now, and he tapped his finger on his chin. “Now you mention it, that does sound familiar...”

Erin took it as a yes. Her research was important. What she found should be studied and understood, but maybe some of why Erin was willing to entertain this meeting at all was to make sure it was in safe hands... a feeling that was soon running dry.

“What’s your specialisation?” Erin asked, then thought to make herself clear this time and hoped he’d give a clear answer too. “Evocation, Conjunction, Divination...”

“All of them.”

“You’re telling me you’re specialised in... all parts of the arcane. All of it?”

“You don’t grow to be two-hundred and fifty without putting some work in!” He boasted.

“Alright.” Erin folded her arms. “Prove it. Summon a portal for me right now to Outland.”

With his wormlike fingers, the archmage turned and contorted, squinted his eye, wheezed, threw out his back, coughed, and then... “SHAZAMABLAM!”

Erin knew those weren’t the words for any spell at all, let alone interplanar travel, but she still sat before a whirring portal that spun. She could see the Dark Portal, closed for years now, standing silently on the edge of the peninsula. And to see it was no illusion, Erin carefully stuck in her head, and felt the rumble as a terrible Infernal meteor rushed past her, singing the hairs on her head, and collided with the earthen shelf as it broke off deeper into the nether.

That was all she needed to know.

“So you’re telling me... you have two hundred and fifty years of experience... you’re specialised in all forms of magic... you can effortlessly open a portal to Outland without any help, you can make up spellwords on the fly completely ignoring any magical theory... and all you do is sit here in a tower all day? What the hell have you been doing? Where the hell have you been? We’ve had wars, we had demons, we had the fucking void come after us and you, Mr. Archmage, just spend it fucking around in your tower inviting people over for tea?”

The archmage looked at her clueless, genuinely clueless, so much so Erin couldn’t even continue her diatribe. It wasn’t the first time she’d flipped out, and it surely wouldn’t be the last, but anyone else would have bitten back, anyone else would have defended themselves, or looked offended, or shuddered, or cried or screamed back or sat there with a smug expression as they drank in the salty tears of someone lesser than them.

But not him.

He just carried on drinking his tea.

“Are you even hearing me?” Erin asked, a question deeper maybe than she intended. But the archmage saw her, and said “Would you like to see a magic trick?”

“Fine, go ahead. I don’t care.”

The archmage took a piece of paper and mushed it in his hands, before letting it explode out. His paper took the shape of a rabbit, hopping and jumping in animation. It was kind of cool. Erin hadn’t seen anything like that before.

She sighed and pushed her hair up past her eyes. “Why did you want to hear about my research?”

The archmage laid the paper rabbit on his lap and fed it some paper carrots, before giving her a straight answer for the first time. “It sounded interesting.”

“But why though?”

“Because magic is interesting.”

Erin bit the inside of her mouth. “What about the other archmages, aren’t you going to tell them about it? They’ll try take it if they can.”

“And why can’t they take it?”

“Because I don’t want them to... I don’t want them to control it.”

Erin turned away. “There deserves to be at least one interesting thing in the world that isn’t under someone’s thumb.”

“Everyone has two thumbs,,” the Archmage said holding them up, “and I can think of a million things that aren’t under them.”

“Yeah, I bet you probably could.” She said.

The other scroll Erin bought, the other one that she brought out for the archmage, it was a ruse really. It was meant to force someone into a magical promise, a binding vow. Signing it wouldn’t mean much for someone as powerful as him. He could find some way, some trick out of it, break it by force. Anyone who tried hard enough could. But Erin needed to know. She needed to trust, that things would be different this time, so she could let go.

When she looked back over, the archmage was signing it.

“Now was it Zanthrancicus with two c’s or one...”

Erin pouted. “Hey. Zan, was it?”

He looked up.

“Did you even read the terms and conditions?”

“Does anyone?”

She came back and joined him at the table.

“Those locks you had on the front. You don’t get visitors often, do you.”

“I don’t like visitors.”

“Why not?”

“Because they never want to talk about magic.”

Erin nodded. “I’m sorry. I ended up being one of them.”

She looked at him, and Zan was maybe someone she always hoped could exist. Foolish, idiotic, chaotic even... but by the stars, if he didn't love magic... drink in it... let it consume him; everything down to his identity, he never wanted to talk about anything else.

They were too different. Old and young, someone who fought to ignore all the politics and someone who needed to make that politics good, crazy and calm. But they did have one thing in common.

Erin held her hands out and summoned a faint illusory image, and layered texture, colour, depth and detail onto it. It was an island, craggy and rough of sandstone hewn from the cliffs below and eroded by millennia of roaring storms.

"This is Eki. As good as I remember it, at least. You can find it off the coast of Desolace if you look up due west on a cloudy day, but someone as tall as you might need to lay back to see it. One of the people we brought with, a Tauren called Chenoa, couldn't see it at all until we basically flipped her upside down." She chuckled, and let the image drift and spin, and Zan there looked nearly mesmerised by it. "Is it enchanted by Arcane?"

Erin said it was. "Records tell of a grand ritual they used to keep it afloat, so strong that the magic is erratic yet stable so long later. In their religion, they had a festival where they would sing the Hymn of the Heavens, which was supposedly taught to them by a god who wanted to save them from a flood... but I heard the Hymn, and my theory is that it was the spell they used to lift and keep the island afloat. The entire city would sing it, and make it manifest together."

Erin closed her eyes and conducted with her finger the tune of the hymn, ancient mystery, and heard the long-forgotten words of magic that once graced sunkissed sands.

You're alright, Zan.

Every archmage is an asshole.

But maybe you're not so bad.