

Eric stood up and calmly walked out of the theater. Once outside, he broke into a run. He ran across the village of elves; all of them pawns of Chaos. His path took him to the Sage Tree, on whose fruit the first elf was raised. He made a right angle turn away from it. He wanted to grab his stuff and leave the village, but it would mean going to his girlfriend's house, an elf who became a priestess for Chaos.

“AAAAHHHHH!”

Again, he made a sharp turn and decided to run straight out of the village. The tree sentinels saluted him as he burst through their line and the Chaotic Curtain washed over him without issue. He had been manipulated into becoming one of them; his best friend, his girlfriend, and now that he thought about it, his mentors. All of them were pushing him down this path.

“HYPOCRITE!” In an empty field, he shouted to the winter skies. “HOW IS IT FREE WILL IF I AM MANIPULATED INTO...”

His high emotions returned him to his true form. Yes, that was another thing Chaos did to him. His humanity was gone. All that remained were his memories of it. While he had come to terms with that and recognized that he was still fundamentally himself, there was no denying that he had also fundamentally changed.

He began to hum the nursery rhyme that would calm himself, but instead it angered him further. He learned it from Kallen, who learned it from Nunnal, who was a more pious devotee of Lady Chaos than anyone in this village, second only to the goddess' own clergy. Instead, he stomped about, venting his anger on the ground. It cracked.

It rumbled. Out of it jumped creatures bonded to it. Made of rocks and dirt melded together by the planet's will and animated through its spirit, they were earth's foot soldiers. Teeth gnashing and eyes flaring, they directed this wrath towards Eric.

“I was wondering when proper gnomes would show up! Come on!”

They swarmed him and he punted them into the distance. The impact shattered them, but when they fell to the ground, they reformed and charged again.

“World breaker!” they shouted. “Vein Splitter!”

Eric cast Air Disk to float above them and cast more air spells to batter them. They chortled at his attempts. They simply crouched to anchor themselves to their mother ground. Then they retaliated with earth spears.

Eric dodged and weaved around their projectiles. Though they fired ten spears, all of them failed to hit him. Three collided with his back. Their impact knocked him to his knees on his Air Disk. Again, the gnomes sniggered and formed two new spears from their mother ground. This time, they nailed his chest and knocked him backwards. Two more spears hit him from above.

Eric spun in midair to deflect them with a gust of wind. Then the remaining five earth spears floating in the sky all dived for him at once. He held out his hands and sped through a moderate level wind spell to catch and throw them back. Twenty more replaced them.

Eric found himself surrounded by them. From earth comes gravity and these creatures of earth selectively controlled it to direct their “misses” back to him.

“Winds that blow and gusts that gale,” Eric chanted while dodging and deflecting, “become an army and fire on my command!” Eric pointed his staff at the army of earth beneath him. “Stratos Lance!”

One lance of air struck a gnome. Then two more found their mark. Then four, then eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two, and finally, sixty-four at once. None of them reformed. Eric caught his breath. Then the ground rumbled again.

A large stretch of ground broke free from the earth and stood up. This gnome looked exactly like the others, except it was sixteen times bigger. It raised its mighty hand to swat him from the sky.

“You gotta be kidding me!”

Invoking his wind avatarcraft, Eric flew away from the giant creature. It followed with large and swift strides. Projectiles flew from its chest while its hands continued their attempts to swat him. Eric deflected the former and dodged around the latter. Only a minute of this was enough to make him short of breath.

Turning on his back, he searched the rock titan for a weakness. Dodging more spears and giant hands, he directed two equally big bars of wind at it. One struck the back of its head from behind, while the other struck the lower chest from the front. The two together stole its balance and it went down. It fell flat on a sheet of air. Screaming a battle cry, Eric plunged his chaos spear into its head. He fractured the gnome’s skull and shattered it.

Abruptly, the wind avatarcraft cut off and Eric plummeted to the ground. Thanks to his grendel form, he survived the fall without injury, but the ground swallowed his limbs. He was now lying face down in the dirt and unable to move.

*Remember the Omnipresent Mana Principle. The ground is mana and I am mana. I can slip through by...why can't I slip through?!*

It was then that he realized that his limbs were more than buried. Gnomes were holding them beneath the surface. Mana Enlightenment doesn’t work on spirits and certainly not on mana breeds like gnomes. More of them jumped up and smiled viciously at the immobilized and exhausted grendel.

“Good luck breaking through my metal...skin...”

Behind the gnomes was a floating mass of brown energy, an elemental. Unlike the gnomes, who were earth *spirits*, this was a true manifestation of divine power. It was a fragment of the raw energy from the Aggregate Sentience of Earth; the entity that was behind Eaol’s status and power; what he was the avatar of. This creature easily surpassed greater mages and could only be matched by a *sage*. Even if he were free and at full strength, defeating it would be a long shot for someone like Eric.

“Tasio, Tasio, Tasio!”

The Trickster appeared over the elemental. He held up a finger to forestall Eric’s protests.

“Wait for it...”

The elemental shimmered. Beneath Eric's heart, lungs, and forehead, four earth lances emerged from the ground. Their points shimmered as the elemental forged them into obsidian.

"Tasio..."

"Wait for it!"

The lances sprang. Eric flinched and four arrows dissolved them. They were fired from a girl far to Eric's left. She was semi-solid and stood with one foot on the ground and other halfway in another world entirely. She wore a priestess habit that was altered to look halfway like a princess-style gown with its petticoats, ribbons, and lace. Over her face was a transparent veil instead of a hood. She pulled at the foot on the other side, but it was stuck. Instead, she pointed her bow at the elemental and said, "Attack!"

A golden-brown wolf appeared at her side and tried to lunge, but she too was stuck. Her hind legs refused to cross over. She looked at her mistress and whined. The girl groaned and nocked another arrow to her bow. The elemental struck first.

It impaled her with four spears of elemental earth energy. She screamed and her body flickered. When the attack ended, her body was fully solid, but her leg was still stuck. The elemental followed the attack with four spears of solid earth. Though they made her cough up blood, the cleric didn't scream again. She extended her arms to draw the bow around the four spears and released her own projectile.

Soaring through defenses both physical and magical, it struck the mana breed dead center. Chaotic energy sparked and then it exploded, showering magical debris all over the field. This generated more gnomes and smaller elementals.

The cleric loosed an arrow into the sky and it split into dozens. These rained down on the field and vanquished every hostile spirit. Then she placed her hands together and intoned a prayer of exorcism. It charged the ground around her with holy power and transformed the field of battle into a field of peace. Only then did the attack stop, but her leg was still stuck.

She tugged once more, transformed her right hand into a cleaver, and cut it off. She bit her lip. A new one replaced it moments later and she was free to run to Eric. Over her shoulder, she gave the command "Come!" and the wolf nodded. With its mistress fully in the world, she was able to wedge herself clear. Together, they dug Eric out of the earth.

"Please don't leave the village! It's the only place you'll be safe."

Eric knew she was scowling at him despite the veil obscuring her face. It was transparent but still concealed her identity. Any personifying features were generalized enough to be any teenaged female elf.

"Arf!" The wolf smacked him in the face with her forepaw.

"That's how she shows she likes you!" the cleric said quickly.

"Really?" Eric asked skeptically.

"No. Anyway, I'm sorry I'm late. I was in another world fruit and I had a plan to get back here in time, but I got lost. It's hard to navigate Noitearc because it doesn't do what you would call...directions: 'Go fifty miles and turn right onto firestone road.' No, nothing like that!"

By now, the girl and the wolf had released both his arms and one of his legs. Then they stopped and stared at him.

“As soon as we leave, Gruffle the reaper is going to attack you. That’s why we’re going to escort you back to Dnnac Ledo. You must stay there until we say it’s safe to come out.”

“I’ll look out for him and stay away from highly spiritual places and... ow!”

“Don’t do that,” the girl told her wolf halfheartedly. “You don’t see me doing that, do you? Back to the point, I was told by a reliable source that I can’t trust your word to stay safe. So you can either stay in the village or die.”

“Is that a threat?”

Her veil swayed as she shook her head. “Of course not! I would never threaten you! It’s a warning. *Mortals* never last long when Death puts a bull’s eye on their back. I can’t be here every time you need me and you know how helpful Tasio is,” she turned a stink eye on The Trickster himself, who was still floating nearby, “even when he desperately needs you.”