

Viv sighed. In her mind, the three problems added themselves to her original purpose, turning the refugee camp into a viable caravan. Her mind had been altered by the magic of Nyil with all mental stats in the high thirties. Concretely, she could process things faster and more clearly. Parameters like the distrust of the various factions and the state of the weakest link turned into conditions then into first steps of a simple, yet achievable plan. The swirl of thoughts gracefully resolved itself into a list of questions that would need answering before she could start giving orders.

The errant consideration lodged itself into her brain, begging for her attention. The clarity of her felt intoxicating, somehow. So easy. It would take deep mental training and some specific chemicals to reach that level of serene purpose back on earth, and then other aspects would be neglected. She wondered what would happen if she went back now. Would she lose her progress immediately? Gradually? Would she regret it? Hell yeah, she would.

Did it affect her mind in unexpected ways?

How much was it changing her?

Could she improve herself even more by... optimizing how she used her brain? Had to ask Solfis later. For now, it was time to focus on the problem at hand.

"First thing first. The raiders. Explain."

Reigan the temple guard explained. He had a measured diction that made his report clear and sober.

"First things first. This is the end point of a caravan that started around the capital. We joined up with Amahe's merchant caravan on the path and picked up the starving folks just yesterday. Many of them are survivors of the village. On the way, we were beset by a group of marauders and deserters led by a young man who introduced himself as Elix."

"That's a fake name by the way," Amehe interrupted. Both Reignar and Viv glared at her.

"Elix was an Enorian rogue turned noble. Not important. Sorry, go on."

"Right, Elix and his men asked for half of our food in exchange for safe passage. I agreed. The reason why I agreed was that we had not met the starving people and we were outnumbered five to one when it happened."

"And you think that they are still after you?"

"Most likely. You see, the people on the ground are Anelton survivors. The village was put to the sword for acts of treachery by a great patriot."

"Elix?"

"In the flesh. Supposedly, Anelton dealt with 'traitors to the throne', you of course. It was just an excuse of course. With most regulars and all the levies dead to the north, entire baronies

are ripe for the taking. I heard that entire families were wiped out. We stand on Elix' hunting ground and his kind is never sated. He will come back to finish us off. You can imagine why."

Reigan threw a disparaging look at the jewellery the merchants were wearing.

"You could not use those to buy food?" Viv asked out of curiosity.

"People are scared. They would not open their gates to travelers, much less sell to some. You could not purchase a bucket of wheat for the king's crown right now," Amehe explained with a bitter smile.

She was trying very hard to please Viv. Viv could feel the effects of a skill tracking her emotions just as the trader herself was nervously watching every last of her reactions. It felt weird and a little bit invasive but the woman was trying to survive and Viv thought a little bit of terror might grease the wheels of productivity.

"Any idea where they are right now?" she asked.

"No, sorry," Reigan answered a bit sheepishly, "it shames me to say so, but we don't have the food to send scouting parties right now."

"Right."

She didn't have Hadal scouts right now. A pain.

"Squee?"

Fly

Track

Return!

"You would?"

Three

Silver

Talents

"Ugh you mercenary. Yes please, anything for the assistance of the mighty Arthur. it's a deal."

"Squee!"

The dragonette took off with a happy 'skra', a bit deeper than normal. Her departure was witnessed with a mix of fear and apathy.

“Right. We’ll get back to that later. Now the aberrations.”

“We see them at night moving through the woods. Several that look like each other.”

//Every aberrant is different, Your Grace.

//This is probably a cluster type.

//They are much weaker than their counterparts.

//However, they can easily swarm unprepared fighters.

“Any chance that it could suddenly attack?”

//Unlikely.

//I shall elaborate later.

“We’ll have to lure it out. Next, the disappearances.”

“Right. We arrived three days ago and found the town devastated as expected from what the survivors told us. The lads and I, we put the bodies on a pyre... some of them were starting to reanimate...”

His eyes grew clouded by the memory. For the first time, his deep anguish pierced through the veil of professionalism. Viv beheld a man at the end of his wit trying to keep things together.

“None of us are far enough on the path to bless an entire fucking town. Even then we could not have dug enough graves. Too exhausting.”

He searched Viv’s expression, looking for condemnation, perhaps? Viv didn’t care. Even if that man had fucked up, he had done it protecting his people against impossible odds. That deserved some recognition in her book, especially on Nyil.

“And you used the houses to protect everyone at night?”

“That was the idea. Obviously some of the buildings were destroyed but there was still room for everyone. We spent the entire day taking bodies out. Men, women and children. Dogs. Who the fuck does that?”

“Reigan, look at me,” Viv said, and she felt something shift in her mind, the parts of her that the interface called ‘leadership’.

“You have done a great job keeping everything together so far, yeah? We are here to help now. The worst is behind you, but I still need you to hang on for a little bit longer. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah, of course ma’am. Won’t happen again. The disappearances. We made sure the village was decently secured before nightfall. We put everyone near the east gate and

repaired it as best we could. We put a lot of debris in front of the west one and had two sentries keep an eye on it. I thought it would be enough.”

“We didn’t expect anything,” Amehe adds, “the whole village was deserted.”

“The next morning, an entire house had been cleaned of its inhabitants. We didn’t hear anything. There were no traces of struggle. They were just... gone.”

“You didn’t see anything?”

“I... Neriad forgive me. I was one of the two sentries near the main gate. We fell asleep.”

He looked horrified. Viv resisted the urge to frown. It wasn’t abnormal for sentries to fall asleep, especially after a long and difficult day. Starvation also made people drowsy. It could be nothing.

“I doubled the sentries the next day but we still had a couple disappear during the night. Same as before, no one saw anything not heard anything. After that, we decided to camp in the open with lit fires and a circle of guards. Nobody disappeared last night.”

“I see. Anything else?”

“No... nothing that I can think of for now... Please, sorry to ask but... do you happen to have extra food?”

“Yes. Here is what we’re gonna do. Kazaran troops will form a perimeter and watch over the camp while cooks prepare a broth. Nothing solid or those people will die, understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” Ban answered.

“Make sure everyone lines up in an orderly fashion. Nobody gets near the forest. While people eat I’ll take First Squad and clear the town. Reigan will guide us. Solfis comes with me as well. Amehe and the rest, make sure your people are packed up and ready to move long before nightfall. Is everyone in agreement?”

Nods all along. Ban and Reigan left immediately to get things started but Amehe stayed behind always with that large smile and slightly panicked eyes.

“Excuse me, are you perhaps the, ahem, the person in charge of Kazar?”

“The Great Black Whore you mean?”

The woman blushed.

“I am sorry, this is how you have been painted. Trust me, I have faced defamation as well. I know how it can be.”

“You are an Enorian trader?”

“Yes, born not too far from here actually. Life has been difficult for those of us who refuse to conform. Goodmother this, goodmother that. The merchants have thankfully resisted better than most and success erases every sin. Ah, but we are not here to talk about me, sorry. Am I correct in assuming that you can negotiate an agreement with us?”

“I can say yes, doesn’t mean I will, and we have much to do that is urgent...” Viv said.

“Oh it’s going to be fast. We just want to join you across the forest.”

That made sense to Viv. The grass always looked greener on the other side, especially if the people living there looked healthy.

“Tentative yes.”

“We can pay our way across, of course. Prove that we can contribute.”

“Tentative yes,” Viv insisted. “We can discuss more later.”

Viv felt another shift in the world’s mana, something subtle and invisible that she associated with intimidation. The merchant was doing something but it didn’t feel intrusive. More like... receptive. In truth, she knew she would most likely say yes but it was good practice not to immediately agree with a consummate negotiator.

Viv moved aside while men and women removed cauldrons from the wagons. As Amehe left, she felt a little bit of emptiness as if the merchant brought warmth with herself. Again, nothing intrusive. Perhaps the path of the merchant had more depth than Viv had first assumed.

Ban and his subordinates had things well in hand. Viv could also tell that Solfis had something in mind. Or in his processor, whatever. It was the way he loomed a bit more than usual.

“You know, I always wonder why people who’ve never met you don’t run screaming when you appear.”

//Herd instinct.

Viv blinked, not expecting the equivalent of a horror movie antagonist’s final form to have contemplated his own aura.

“How do you figure?”

//If I appear and the majority of humans present act unaffected,

//then the rest will not react either.

//Because the herd does not acknowledge me as an immediate danger.

“Oh. Ok.”

//The same applies to Arthur.

//Although, at stable growth, she will grow too large to pass as a marsh drake by the end of next year.

“A problem for another time. Any advice in that large database of yours?”

//Camp management best practice includes entire paragraphs on the dangers of unclear hierarchies in a camp.

//Due to the small nature of this one, expected issues are few.

//However, you may still clarify who may give order to whom.

//And who is in charge of what.

“Right.”

Viv did just that while her troops set up a cordon and started moving people in line. Some of the refugees were so skeletal that they had to be placed in a row on the ground. They would have to be fed by hand. Volunteers among her soldiers organized an improvised infirmary in an act of mercy that gave her some measure of hope. Very soon, Ban came at the head of the First Squad, the elite of the elite of the Kazaran forces. All of them were already on the third step of the path.

Apparently, one could sacrifice their progress in their current step to change to another one. In their case, the sacrifice had allowed them to progress faster.

[Harrakan Heavy Infantryman, dangerous, one who follows the path of the empire’s core forces. Expert close quarter fighter]

“We’re ready,” Ban said as he came closer. “Lead on.”

Viv thought he would stay to monitor his troops but she saw that things were moving smoothly and she wasn’t about to question him in public. She took Reigan and herself at the center of a protective circle with Solfis by her side.

They walked along the simple palissade surrounding the corpse of the town that had once been named Anelton. She had not died easily, Viv realized. Now that she was paying attention, the signs of battle were clear as day on her pockmarked skin. Guard towers still stood above the edge of the wall, showing traces of impact and, sometimes, the rusty stains of arterial blood sprays. Broken arrow shafts covered them like bristly ornaments. It was when they reached the gates that Viv felt it clearly.

“A lot of people died here,” she said.

Errant strands of black mana remained. It was thicker here than any place she had seen since leaving Kazar. The strands permeated the air like old regret permeates a mind. The bodies had been cleaned but the earth was cracked and rancid. The large wood panes stood open with clear signs of abuse hastily repaired. As they were, they would not withstand a determined attack.

“This is where Elix’ troops broke through the militia. Elix found horses somewhere, that bastard. Some even had barding,” Reigan said.

“Wait. They have heavy cavalry?”

“No, of course not,” Reigan huffed. “Only nobles do. They probably stole it from some keep that lost all their male fighters. Doesn’t matter though. Try stopping a charging warhorse with wooden sticks.”

He glared then, to Viv amusement, remembered himself.

“Beg your pardon, ma’am.”

“That’s fine.”

The gates led to a main road that crossed the town from one end to another. The wood buildings all showed signs of damage. Many doors hung from their hinges, if they were still attached at all. Blood stains and broken windows remained as mute witnesses to the carnage. Even now, the air smelled of iron and corpses, with the stench of burnt meat carried by a light wind that came from the forest. Viv could follow the events from how thrashed the place was. The barracks by the entrance had been smashed and set on fire. Some of the logs that made it up showed deep gouges, probably made by a skill.

Shops lining the main path had been ransacked. Farther up, only doors and windows showed much damage but the blood, the blood was everywhere. Brown and rusted now, pecked by crows, washed out by rain, it did not matter. The tide of crimson liquid shed here possessed a terrible weight that settled on Viv’s shoulders like a wet cape. The most curious thing was that it also empowered her. The black mana in her conduits stirred, uncoiling like a waking snake. Viv resisted the urge to sniff too deeply, lest she unsettled her companions.

“You will show us where the disappearances occurred then we will search the place,” she said calmly. Reigan moved them to a nearby structure, the nicest around. It even had a porch. A hanging sign announced ‘The Last Drop’ in flowing letters above an upturned tankard.

“This was here. Three families, or what was left of them anyway.”

Viv kept her eyes open but there was nothing to feel or see. Her danger sense remained quiet. It was only when they entered the inn’s dark interior that she felt something.

The previous occupants had removed the tables and replaced them with beds, some of which still had remnants of torn covers on them. The place smelled terrible and she was suddenly grateful that the refugee camp was in open air. What attracted her attention, however, was the black mana.

Something had touched it.

And it annoyed her.

Black mana was such an exquisite and versatile power, despite what the few books she had on the matter said. It was a quiet and sharp thing akin to a scalpel. It was not a vulgar branch to be smashed and yet that is exactly what had happened here. The fabric of the world was still twisted by the attempt. Viv's first thought was of the way Irao camouflaged himself.

"There was a lot of black-mana based magic thrown around here. It could explain why no one heard anything. It doesn't explain what happened to the bodies. Reagan, what have you tried to find the missing?"

"Not much," the man replied, increasingly ashamed. "I gathered the other crippled, I mean, the other combatants with me. We scoured the village, found nothing. We asked everyone to stay put the next night and all stayed awake. The other warriors and I, I mean. We had torches. It didn't help."

"Let's have a look around."

They walked around the inn. Those people were dead or captive, Viv thought. There was no way that someone would leave in the middle of the night, in a war-torn land, and without stealing food. It made no sense at all. They had been taken away for food or for other reasons she didn't know. It was likely that the point of egress would be the back. They found an inner court with a small well and a vegetable patch. Viv checked the well but there were no bodies there.

"Right. Solfis, could I get some help with the tracking?"

//Yes.

//The bodies were not dragged out.

//However, the amount of recent footsteps is not consistent with the reported activity.

"Wait, are you saying that they walked out by themselves?"

//You will have to draw your own conclusions.

Viv engaged in a staring contest with Solfis for exactly one second before she remembered who she was dealing with. How could a featureless bone mask look so smug? It made no sense.

"Is it part of training?"

//Yes.

//You drawing conclusions by yourself will be extremely valuable.

"Whatever. About those tracks..."

//They join the nearby backstreet.

Viv followed and found a line of fresh prints in the mud, moving in a single line. It angled back towards the main gate.

“Okay. Now this is weird.”

She had an idea, but it would require some verifications. They checked on the house of the disappeared couple and found discarded clothes in a nearby shed. No bodies though.

“They decided to isolate themselves for some intimacy,” Viv realized.

It was incredibly stupid. It’s like they’d never seen a slasher movie before. Ah wait, they probably hadn’t. It still surprised her how a lack of common sense could get people killed so easily, especially in a world as dangerous as Nyil. Guess humans were the same everywhere, which was a little strange come to think of it. How did they have humans here?

Convergent evolution?

Some nasty god decided to punish an entire planet by importing the only invasive species capable of bureaucracy?

She had to ask about the local cosmogony at some point. Right now her religious knowledge extended to ‘Neriad is a swell guy and Gomogog can suck it’. She had to remedy this. It would distract her from the skeletal survivors and the blood-stained childrens’ toys lying in the streets.

Viv led her merry band of muscle men on a circular inspection of the town, but decided to stop after an hour of search. There were no anomalies in mana or anything else anyone could spot. They did find one hidden, intact cellar with food, wine, and a smokable leaf which they confiscated for later. Everything else had been thoroughly looted. Reigan looked ashamed after all the questions and for having missed food and he now walked with his back bent. Viv considered that it might switch the balance of power in favor of the merchants and decided that it was suboptimal. She dragged the man aside before they left the palissade.

“Look, you made mistakes. We can both agree on that.”

He hung his head dejectedly.

“How many refugee caravans have you handled before?”

“What? Hmm, none. After I lost my leg, I was mostly in charge of supplying iron for the temple armories. I did my best to keep fit, of course, but I wasn’t ready for... what we’ve done.”

She nodded.

“Right. Here is a lesson I’ve been teaching quite a bit since I arrived in Kazar. There are external and internal reasons why someone would fail a task. Some of the stuff is not their

fault, some of it is. People tend to either focus completely on blaming themselves or completely on blaming circumstances. I think, sometimes, it's also good to realize that the mission was problematic to begin with. Suppose you're supposed to source iron from an Yries tribe. You decide to send a trainee with no experience to do so. They fail. Who is to blame?"

"I would never take such a ridiculous decision."

"Because it would be your mistake, right? You would be at fault."

Reigan scratched his stubble.

"You understand what I'm getting at," Viv continued. "You are way in over your head, but you did your best and never gave up. There will be a time to reflect on your own errors later but this isn't it. For now, I need you to straighten your back and pretend like everything is under control. When those people look at their leaders, they should only see confidence."

"Of course. As the scriptures say, a guard showing fear is a sword aimed inward. I will not fail you again."

"I will be relying on it. Let's go."

Viv returned to the camp with a much reinvigorated Reigan and marveled at the progress made in such a short time. Both merchants and handicapped guards had packed up efficiently, then a few had started to help the starving survivors who now made a noticeable third group.

On a hunch, she walked to them and stopped when she got harangued.

"It's all your fault, you bitch!"

She turned to see a spindly man with a dirty long beard gesticulating. Two guards immediately moved to intercept him but Viv held a fist to signal them to stand down.

"If you hadn't rebelled, we would still be well and alive."

"Oh? Did I attack you?" Viv countered immediately.

"You might as well have," he grumbled. Viv ignored that.

"Did my men ram through the gates? Was it us that stole your food and killed your people? Do you think the raiders would have just gone to your village and said 'oh well those are law-abiding citizens, we'll leave them alone unlike every other place we've raided so far'? Or are you just full of shit?"

Viv did not let the irate man reply. Instead, she nudged the part of her that linked to intimidation and smirked. The man recoiled, though she felt a strong resistance. He was too weak, starving, and isolated to oppose her.

“If you are displeased you can stay behind with the raiders and the aberrants when we leave.”

The unknown man retreated into sullen silence. That was fine, she had no patience for him.

“Make sure he’s at the end of the line for food. Same for everyone who thinks they’re too good for us,” she ordered a nearby corporal.

“As you say, Lady Viv.”

She could get used to that shit. Oh yeah. Wait no. Bad Viv. No bullying the starving sad folks.

She turned just in time to see Solfis glare at her latest victim. Each of his knuckles extended then retracted his claws in a gesture that should have sounded like ‘schwing’ but regrettably didn’t because physics didn’t work like that. She gave the go ahead for everyone to get in town for the night.

“I want two thirds of the soldiers to be in armor and ready at all times. Those that are off shift can have one glass of the wine we found each, no more. Make sure you move in groups of no less than seven.”

“You are not coming?” Ban asked.

“I want to see if I can handle the aberrants today while there is still light. It would be bad if they come down on us while we’re evacuating.”

“Fair enough, I’m coming with you then. Ma’am.” Ban said with a face that plainly said that he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Well...” Viv hesitated.

//The Heir must have an honor guard.

//An honor guard must have an heir.

//You must send the right signals to your future minions, Your Grace.

//Of course, they will stand at the edge while you hunt the aberrant alone.

A shiver went up Viv’s spine.

“While I what?”

//Naturally, Your Grace.

//Two of our past exercises were cancelled due to scaly, flame-spitting intervention.

//It is time for you to learn how to fight by yourself.

Viv stopped and thought.

Had she ever fought alone before?

At all?

“Hey I killed that dark baby dr—”

//Finishing that sentence would be inadvisable.

“Oh yeah.”

//According to the description given by Reigan, I estimate that the aberrant presents an excellent opportunity to give you experience facing multiple dangerous opponents while alone.

//It will exert your ability to move, delay, and disengage.

//I will be monitoring your performance of course.

//I will not allow you to die.

The subtext was clear. He would let her get hurt. It annoyed her a bit that he would insist on an escort for the sake of appearance but not mind her getting hit. A leader who got wounded fighting alone sounded bad, right?

Except, it was Solfis' advice. He had never led her astray when it came to training. She was just nervous because aberrants were horrible, smelled bad, and were fundamentally fucky to her senses.

She had to do it.

Her reluctance and fear were all the reasons she needed. She had to face her demons head on or the fear would drill deeper into her heart. She was a trained soldier. Her weapons literally disintegrated stuff. No excuses.

“Alright, let's do it.”

The late afternoon sun cast its pale rays through the deserted woods. Snow-covered leaves littered the ground and squelched underfoot. Only the creaks of branches broke the silence of the moment. No birds, no animal cries broke the peace of the woods, because this was the territory of an aberrant and they suffered no company.

Viv breathed in from her circle and took a last look behind her where twisted walls of changed earth stood higher than her. Only a single passage had been left in its middle, gates of hell in a wall of reaching limbs. She was ready. The construct under her activated and she settled in the relaxed mood that meditative trance brought.

Pulse after pulse spread throughout the empty air, a bait that her mana-hungry quarry would never fail to follow. In order to make her trap, Viv resorted to the most logical measure she could think of.

She had taken an alarm spell and reversed it. Now instead of a trigger that sent a signal to her, she was the trigger sending the signal, well, everywhere. It took all of her focus to manipulate the colorless mana but that was fine. She only needed to maintain it until the first of the aberrants arrived. They were one. If a single creature found her, they all would. Viv forced herself to keep breathing deeply. The air was crisp and cold, for now. It would change very soon.

There was a crash in front of her and slightly to her left. A thin trunk fell to the side, brought down by something heavy. She caught a glimpse of red. The foul stench of spoiled meat and twisted mana warned her long before her target came into view. It was a chittering, skittering mass of insectile legs under the ovoid body of a tick. Barbed lances emerged from the creature's front around a cluster of mismatched, cancerous eyes. It moved front and side at the same speed with its multitude of appendages, some too short to even reach the ground. The abomination zeroed on her with rabid focus. She shivered when she spotted a single brown human eye the size of an apple. It was crying.

“Blast.”

Black mana roared in her veins but whispered in the air. The artillery spell took the creature cleanly in the middle. At this range and with this power, even the aberrant's mana-sucking power could not offset her refined construct. Hard work and talent had turned the spell into a leg-thick javelin as black as a cave at night.

The eye disappeared, consigned to oblivion but Viv did not rejoice. Another was following, this one to her right. It spotted her and dove into one of the many depressions that made the rough terrain in front of her. Viv waited for it to emerge again. She could feel in her soul where the vile being gnawed on the world by its very existence. It jumped over a stump and she caught it mid-flight, her spell bending to cleave it in two. Gore splattered the rotten wood. Two more showed up. She cycled the blast again. It was easy with the circle, and this variation sacrificed a lot of range. She could keep going. She had to.

Two of the ticks slowed down. One of them was abnormally large. Perhaps it was smarter? No, Solfis had said that they shared one mind. They knew what she was capable of.

They were also creatures of instinct.

With a supreme effort, Viv forced the beacon to pulse one last time while keeping the blast ready. The things greedily launched themselves forward but they also moved unpredictably to the sides to stop her from aiming clearly. They were fast. She was smarter.

Viv turned to the larger tick and spent her spell flying at the other as it eagerly rushed her. It took the creature by surprise. It lost its body and crumpled with a nauseating sound of squished entrails.

The last one was very close now but it was alone.

“Blast.”

Again, the spell took the monster dead center and shredded through it. The circle was running dry though, and the rapid casting was taking its toll. She could already feel a bit of tension when reaching for more mana. It would be fine. Probably. Had to force at least one last spell.

She spotted three distant clusters of red eyes shimmering in the distance. The rest of them then. Solfis had reported seven different creatures. His only concession.

The carcass of the large tick twitched.

With a ghastly sound, the upper carapace split in two and the surviving half of the tick uncoupled from the dead one in a shower of blood and pus.

“Oh fuck that,” Viv said, with feeling.

The blast fizzled with her fear and she immediately ran to the gap in the eldritch wall behind her, horrors in tow. She unsheathed her knife and channelled the Excalibur spell. Despite the urgency of her situation, she could not help a tiny smile of excitement. After all, it wasn't every day that one could splatter abominations with the fantasy equivalent of a lightsaber.

With her heart pounding in her chest, she turned.

Time slowed. The aberrant tried to jump at her. She saw a nightmarish collection of razor-sharp broken things under the creature, ready to mince her on contact. No spell could save her because it took a critical mass of mana to break through the aberrant's all-encompassing hunger. No spell except this one.

Excalibur was a simple spell. It sacrificed all of the good range the artillery spell had for one thing and one thing only.

Might.

A void blade only slightly shorter than herself surged from her knife with a distinct hiss. Where the focused beam of destructive black mana existed, nothing else could. It felt like handling a living, enthusiastic thunderbolt. Viv sneered and swung down. Angle didn't matter. Martial prowess didn't matter. The spell slid through the creature with deceptive ease. Viv dodged to the side and let gravity carry what was left of the carcass forward. Three to go. They were almost on her with two clambering over the wall and the last sprinting. She grabbed her roundshield in her hand and cast again. The tick on her right collapsed with the wall it thought would support it. The other two jumped on her in quick succession.

Time slowed.

Viv used her burst of strength to smash through the wall on her right, killing yet another tick with the spell. She rolled on herself and brought the roundshield up, stopping a lunge through the wall. A stinger and two separate serrated legs smashed against it. The shield held.

Her arms didn't.

Viv grunted when her own defensive equipment hit her on the side of the jaw. She rolled back to absorb the shock and readied her next spell. The aberrant had scrambled through the wall to try and follow her but it had hit a snag. Viv had picked a place where she knew, thanks to her perception, that the wall was paper-thin and already crumbling. The aberrant was struggling through what amounted to concrete. It was almost through.

Three different sets of teary brown eyes met hers. The thing wailed and retreated. She let it. She knew what would come next.

Her danger sense screamed and she slowed down her time perception again, diving backwards. Her spell triggered just as the last tick, the one that had fallen down, smashed through the wall right in front of her. Things wracked against her shield with a shriek of tortured metal while one caught on her enchanted robe and pulled. Viv was almost carried by the sheer, absurd strength behind the creature's limbs.

Her excalibur cut it in two.

Only one tick was left. It galred balefully through the wall, dodging away when Viv noticed it.

For one moment, Viv thought that the creature would retreat to fight another day. It could obviously duplicate its bodies to replenish its numbers like a nightmarish amoeba. With stingers. It would make sense for it to retreat. But it didn't. It was an aberrant. It existed to consume, and Viv was strong and filled with mana. It jumped over.

Viv closed her eyes when the thing clawed the wall and threw sand in her face. She didn't need sight. She could feel its presence against her soul.

It died.

Viv held her breath and retreated out of the maze she had created, away from the steaming guts of the ticks. She climbed the path back towards the village where her escort was waiting.

//New option, shield training.

"Hey it worked."

//Your shield is supposed to protect your face, not hit it, Your Grace.

"You were waving that sword all around," Ban said. He looked... offended.

“That wasn’t a sword.”

“No form at all!”

“I’ll show you form,” Viv retorted, not thinking clearly. She frowned and focused. It took a few moments for her to shape black mana into the Kazaran word for ‘twat’. Ban blinked.

“How about now?” she sneered.

“Your Grace, I can’t read.”

Goddammit.