

3rd September 2012

Kontia.

Tanya, Queen of the Tanaoi.

Hundreds were felled as sling stones were cast out to shatter imperial bones and punch holes in their lines. But just as quickly, the pace of the Saderan advance slowed and they lifted their shields into a wall. The men at the front were holding them firm, the men at the rear placing the squared shields overhead into a testudo formation.

With the distance involved, the death toll inflicted by the slingers slowed as the shields protected many of the human men marching upon us, but here and there, a sling stone found a gap to maim or kill. But for every death, there was another Saderan to take the place of their comrades.

Each strike from the slingers had an impressive force behind it, as even now, shields were splintering, cracking, and would ultimately fail. The question was how much distance the shields could buy the Imperials, how close they could get, and how much of our ammunition would be exhausted before the melee was joined.

I had thousands of slingstones here, but not tens of thousands. As I watched the battle, I reached out to grasp the shoulder of one of the runners and gave her orders to call up more ammunition: for the guns, for the slingers, for everyone. Because, as I turned to the advancing Saderans, it occurred to me that, with the formation as deep as it was, it would be a gargantuan task to break them.

Every century had a dozen behind them, and there were even more Legionaries in reserve. There was nowhere for a terrified man to run but into men who would be incentivized to turn him around and back into the battle.

I searched dispassionately for a solution as the guns beside me thundered out, spitting orbs of death that cascaded through dozens of men. The shelling hardly impacted the sea of soldiers arrayed before me. They were not going to break, not so soon, because despite the cannons and the stones taking hundreds of lives as they advanced, advance they did.

These were men trained to fight giants and monsters in a deadly world. If I wanted to win here, I needed to do more than just nudge them into retreat. Major Lucia had still not returned with some of my Guard companies, and it would take time for the runners to give word I was looking for her once she returned from the forest valley several miles to the east of the Saderan Camp.

While I was waiting, I sent the remaining Guard companies to the left flank. It was only along the sides of the Saderan formation that any of the humans had any hope of retreating from the battle. It was there that any rout would happen. Fighting here, at the center of the Imperial lines, would merely be a question of attrition. With the sheer weight of the Legion, I had no interest in slowly grinding away at the Saderans. It would cost me too much.

But, some sacrifices do need to be made.

I watched, giving orders now and then for forces to shift, focus to be given to particular areas of the line. In the relatively short time since the battle had begun, despite countless slingstones and cannonballs being set upon the Imperials, it was difficult to see any difference except the wave of men approaching more slowly than they would otherwise as Testudo formations had to be constantly reformed and refreshed.

They were close enough now to pick out individual people, to see how behind the front line were men with ladders, picks, and shovels. This was not an unthinking human wave but indeed a strategy, even if it was a truly harsh and calculating move to treat blocks of human beings as ablative armour to approach the trench line. I had to admit, the strategy had been manifestly effective.

"Pick up the cannons!" I ordered, turning about as Rory looked at me with interest. "Pick them up and take them out! Grab everything you can! Spearwomen hold the walls for as long as you can, give them time to evacuate the fort!"

I drew my sword as women rushed to carry out my orders and turned about, clicking my tongue in frustration as I watched the flurry of slung stones slowing because many women no doubt began to run out of ammunition. Even improvised stones would soon run out with thousands of women sending the missiles into grimly determined centuries.

The rate of death inflicted upon the enemy would slow to the rate I could bring more ammunition along the line. Many of the women I had called up here from the rest of the defence would be carrying more ammunition for the slings, and I quickly ordered a runner to begin the distribution of any slingstones brought forward.

It was best to use the ammo now, before this became a melee.

There were many dozens of shouts that echoed across the battlefield, beyond the cries of agony, death, and fury. I watched as Testudos broke apart neatly into squares as thousands of humans readied their weapons and threw themselves forwards to throw the deadly implements over our defences.

I flinched as a javelin, or more accurately a variant of the Pilum, was thrown over the fort's wall to dig into the rough log floor as a Saderan with an impressive throw made himself known. Many more of the thrown weapons were directed over the earthen mounds on the other side of the trench line.

For most it was too early: the Legionaries having grown used to using their Pilum on Lepus charging into their lines meant many thousands of the weapons were sent flying uselessly into the ground. But I could see only a small part of the battlefield and even here, many did make their way over the mound wall, causing women to grow cautious and dart back to avoid the javelins.

The expenditure of slingstones slowed considerably, which seemed to galvanise the Saderans. I watched as they took their second Pilums and ran forwards to throw their next

wave of missiles, many impacting Lepus who had chosen the wrong moment to push forwards to the enfilade again or were simply too slow to dodge.

I could do nothing as what must have been many hundreds of women under my command were struck by the Saderan Pilum barrage and became casualties of war. Corpses or liabilities, it did not matter. In some places, the thrown weapons were utterly ineffective, but in others it paralysed the women defending the trench line and gave the Saderans room to advance.

A ladder slammed down upon the improvised battlement of the wooden fort as the Saderan second line legionaries seemingly grew comfortable enough to attempt breaching our defences rather than merely hide behind their marginally effective Testudo formations. I made no move to push the ladder away and merely strode forwards as a young man thundered up the crude ladder, only to lose his head for his trouble.

None could say the Legionaries were not courageous. I watched as the thin and haggard-looking body of a young man slumped and fell to the ground before the fort, only for him to be replaced by another, face gaunt and eyes blazing in fear and madness as he kept his sword held before him as if to ward me off.

Reason abandoned, he and I both knew he had no choice: he could not surrender, could not retreat with so many men behind him driving him onwards. I avoided his clumsy strike as he drew close enough to the wall and took his life with an artless jab.

Then he was gone, and another replaced him.

More ladders and many more men tried to push up on top of the fort, to no avail. The men sent to the ladder had a truly hopeless task, as no Lepus in this fort would be slow or weak enough to be overcome by a man trying to climb a ladder and fight at the same time. But even as my attention was taken by the utterly endless procession of men giving their lives in this assault, I could hear the thudding of axes upon wood.

"Take over!" I demanded as another man fell before me. Quickly, a dusky-skinned Dorinni woman took my place, giving me a chance to assess the battlefield. I saw that, despite the weight of their numbers, the Saderans were struggling to cross the trench, dying in droves as women stood atop the enfilade to jab at them with spears or to send slingstones into men at point-blank ranges.

In some places, a Saderan Century would attempt to pin down part of the trench line with Pila, but with each man having so few, all the Lepus defenders could fend off the Century attempting to scale the defences in short order.

At this point, there were no discrete Saderan units, just a vast mass of men with nowhere to go but forward. Due to their sheer momentum, they would eventually cross the trench as the tens of thousands of humans simply refused to break, refused to run.

It was frustrating, *maddening* how wasteful this assault was. It astounded me how much I had misjudged Zorzal. If he had been trained in strategy and warcraft, it had done little for

the man to engage in such an artless battle. I would have to shock the Imperials out of their grim advance.

"Fall back!" I called out, seeing that the fort had been evacuated. "We are lea- what are you doing?!" I shouted out as I watched Rory squirming around on the floor, biting her lip so hard that blood was running down her chin in rivets.

"Help!" She squeaked out, flopping onto her front as she shuddered. "Carry me!"

I could not see where she had been injured, but could not afford to leave an Apostle behind, either! I thought they were deadly combatants, but I suppose in the chaos of a battlefield with so many missiles flying all over the place, even potent fighters could have their luck run out.

I grabbed Rory by the middle and threw her over my shoulder like a sack of grain. She let out an undignified 'ugh' when her stomach impacted my shoulder. I must have aggravated wherever she was hurt, because she kept groaning and squirming in my grip as I carried her down to the ground floor of the fort and out the back.

With both the Saderan and many of the Lepus having exhausted their missiles, much of the front line of the battle was now slowed to a human walking pace. We were not so much chased out of the fort by Saderans, as they cut their way through the walls with axes and climbed over the walls on the ladders. Distantly, exhausted-looking men watched us back away as they edged closer, swords and shields at the ready.

I carried Rory, sword outstretched as I stood at the back door to the wooden fort, letting my women leave behind me as the growing Saderan occupiers called out to each other and slowly inched forwards. Having done their duty to take the fort, none wished to die merely to hurry us along.

I simply walked backwards as Rory began to shudder, her hands flowing over my back as she seemed to be attempting to steady herself in my grasp. I adjusted her for a moment before I darted backwards and began ordering women away from the fort.

With the fort secured, the Saderans gathered. Hundreds of men were flowing through as I pulled back the companies into a wide semi-circle around the lost fort. The trench line was also being abandoned as I let the Saderans have the structure. Here, in the centre of the battle, this caused a lull in the fighting as the Centurions came to grips with their accomplishment and sent runners back to get new orders of what to do.

I watched as the cannons were being set up pointed at the fort, but quickly ordered the women to keep the guns mobile for now. To the east, I saw a long line of fresh companies advancing towards my position. A look to the west showed another long column.

It was time.

I felt Rory groan as I dropped my sword to the grass and fumbled with a copper plate in one of my pockets, drawing the remote detonator and sending a trivial amount of mana into the rather simple device.

It was only then when I considered how far some shrapnel could travel, so I quickly directed a voice enhancement formula to my throat and called out.

"Cover your eyes!" My voice echoed out across the battlefield. Many women looked confused, others quickly followed my orders as thunder sounded out. What followed was a wave of dust, smoke, and screams of agony dominating the battle.

Rory screamed, legs shuddering as I struggled to keep from dropping her. A plume of black smoke trailed up to the sky from the pile of rubble and dead men where the fort overlooking the road used to be... And I was suddenly reminded I had just blown up part of a perfectly good road. *Fuck!* I was going to have to repair that.

"Wh-What did you just do?" Rory asked, her body limp and her voice shaky.

"I had gunpowder charges in the fort in case the Saderans captured it," I explained, feeling rather proud of myself at how well the evacuation had gone.

"Y-You blew it up!?" I felt her shift on my back, trying to look back at the rubble before she let out a frustrated squeal and started to beat her fists into my back without much effect. "You blew it up! You blew it up and never let me see it!" She shouted with genuine anger even while I set her down and looked over her body.

She glared up at me and crossed her arms, turning her head away from me with a huff.

"Are you okay?" I asked, ignoring her outburst, gently taking her chin in my hand and turning her face towards me so I could check for any injuries. Despite the blood running down her front, I could not find any wounds on her. This gave credence to rumours I had heard about Apostles having the ability to heal quickly from any wounds.

"I'm fine," she said at last, still pouting but not pulling away as I cupped her chin in my palm.

"Good. I am afraid I must leave you now, Miss Mercury. I have a battle to win," I told the representative of Emroy. Having her being injured while effectively in my care would look terrible. I pulled out a handkerchief to wipe away the blood on her face so none of my subordinates would worry about her condition. "I will attend to you when I am victorious, if that is alright with you?"

She seemed to blink for a while before she took the bloodstained handkerchief in her hands and nodded with a smile. "You better win this!"

I chuckled as I picked up my sword before standing to my full height. "I fully intend to." With the VIP secured, I turned around as confused and wounded Saderans tried to crawl from the ruins of the destroyed fort. Around the ruins were Saderan centuries, who had advanced past the trench line under the impression they had secured a beachhead, but now found nothing except death and smoke at their back.

The companies under my command had been slowly giving ground as planned, but with the Saderans walking into our trap, it was now time to advance. It was not slow and careful, no, the battle had become too chaotic for that. It was time to push hard and forcefully. It was time to send shockwaves through the entire Imperial line!

I tested my grip on my blade as I heard cannons sounding out far in the distance. My Artillery company must finally be in position and would be offering withering fire to the left flank of the Saderan advance. I charged forward, casting a dozen petty formulas to make my reflexes sharper, oxygenate my blood, and sharpen my vision.

Thousands of women joined me as we charged into the disciplined Imperial men. But for all of their training they moved slowly, weakly, and despite holding together, the confusion over the fort exploding was paralysing them. In minutes, they were cut down and it was only now, after many thousands must have died, that I saw the first Saderan man turn to flee for his life.

None could argue that the Saderans were not brave.

A battle on this scale, tens of thousands of Lepus defending a vast trenchline, and many more humans assaulting... It was impossible to keep track of everything. I could only see so much, only divine the state of the battle from the reports of tired runners carrying what information they could. The truth was I had no way of knowing how the vast majority of the battle was going.

So it was quite a shock that, when I cut down the last Legionary still holding the fort I had turned to rubble and splinters, I saw the Saderan army withdrawing. *All of it*. I looked to the east and west, but the Saderans were being called back away from my defences at the behest of several horns and men riding about.

It would be perfect, if not for the fact that this was not a rout. The Saderans had not broken. They had been called back to their camp. Even as the women around me cheered and mocked the Imperials, it was abundantly clear to me this battle was far from won.

Even as I looked at the thousands of dead men left scattered across the horizon, I knew: this would only grow worse.

Edited by: Shirojacky, Y1

I want to give a special thank you to my supporters:

Winhkong Hua, William Patton, Nope, W C Purdy, Luis Ortiz, Lawngnome, Leo Jiang, Skulldragon7, Stephen Chong, Pemmil, Tylenea Simmonds, Legion_13, chris kris, KaldortheGreat, Gremlin Jack, Sgt. Rock, João Alexandre, Wolfe Fang, Aifer, Marcelo Antonio Barria barrera, Dustin Tran, MagicDownUnder (MDU), bakkysak, Comics, Europa, Bohmej, test20201, Martin Brandel, Gryfonides, Mango_tequila, ----, Greenie Boi, David

Zhao, TurkeyBlock, TheChaoticTaco, Frightful6_7, SevereMaisJuste, Hamers, Loket, Raymond, Berik Bekenov, Defective Worst, Drill to the Sky, Jared, Phillip Rosten, ReleaseTheKrakan, Kornelius Idland, Hornet, Random Information, Pinky95, Psody Begley, Rocolo Yopo, zorb25, Lurker, xerixo, Tyrant615, Karene, Sweetlaxer, CATATAU11MIL, Carvor, Ballin, Corey Barber, Christian E. Y., DonPacific Bobcat9er, Robolo42, Karl, Lino, Accbar, Cameron Youngman, SneeringImperialist, Joshua Bittel, Sean, Lapiver, Dave Steele, Rakkis157, Børkness Of Amazingness, Ernesto Aviles, Rykia, Narani, Inirlan, Michael Zalesny, Sarasana, INVRZ, Sir Baka, Aaron, Verified Mustelid, Fabriz Gauthier, Jason Langford, Mrn00b, Nashk, Boghog123, matthew Hungerford, TheBlueBananaPig, Nakahok, Lothspell, Hello7d, Fei Fan Choi, Vanguard_D, Mulchmeat, Vyushia, Master Brave, Dickevin, Spade_Slick, Fouve, Mega Elite, Ty2bp, Mysterious89, Nicholas Hammond, Tony, Isaac Rodriguez, Rouslan Fectchenko, Logan Petersen, Varisis, Mackenzie Buckle, BloodDraconius, Afforess, CommanderBrunch, Dr.D, D3ad0s, Unknown B, Lictor Magnus, DatCameraMON, Arcman, Andres Franco, Nathan White, Va, Ziyad, Endymion2314, DrkShdow, Dwayne Parker, Issac Norman, Ryan Ontiveros, bertucchi, namadnega, Aceter, Mortaldude, Hex, SerenaBlackburn, StrikebackXIII, Tinfoilmecha 11719, bkmy, JustAUser, Emdee Kay, Mossytiger, Drain, Reese Apperson, ZD Lawson, atreids5, Amerdism, wawabi, Guerinology, dark king, Old Hammer, Xodarap4,

You can read ahead of the publicly released chapters on my [Patreon](#).

I also have a public [discord](#).