10th August 2012.

Imperial Campsite, Eighty Miles from Kontia.

Tanya, Queen of the Tanaoi.

The fact of the matter was that my bronze cannons had a major issue. Despite being very nice to look at and the perfect size to be carried across the battlefield in the hands of a single Lepus, while others would carry ammunition for the weapon, the weapons themselves were rather primitive. My productive capacity was very limited, and the expertise I had at my disposal even more so.

It had taken dozens of moulds and castings to get even this far, and once out of the cast, I had needed days for slaves to slowly deburr and polish the outside to offer structural strength. This had blunted countless files in cleaning and preparing the bore of the cannon, all before it could even be test fired once.

When I had test fired the weapon, I had found the range was less than six hundred feet across relatively flat ground. More experimentation with powder charges and stone ammunition had allowed me to have a consistent range of almost eight hundred, but that cannon had burst after half a dozen shots, killing one of the few Goblins the Tanaoi had who had a firm grasp on metallurgy.

The next few cannons had not fared much better, and accuracy was incredibly limited. It was a requirement then, with the prospect of fighting aerial combatants, for me to find ways to improve the chances of this weapon striking an approaching aerial target.

Canister shot, when tested, caused the next two cannons to explode. The charges being smaller, or using lead or stone round shot made no difference. The use of smaller ammunition in order to have a spread pattern seemed to be beyond my capabilities at the moment, which meant the cannon could not be employed against aerial targets at all. At least not on its own.

That was why I was carrying and using the damn thing personally.

I cleared my mind of anything but a dizzyingly complex formula, willing my influence to seep into the shiny bronze in my hands and touch upon the lead cannonball within. One of the few I had. Without a computational orb, I was forced to simply disregard any accuracy in the formula, I was not directing a tiny bullet traveling well beyond the speed of sound to dart across dozens of kilometres to strike at the weak point of an aerial mage's shield.

No, such magical duels were well beyond me now. From my perspective, it had been almost thirty five years since I last fought an aerial duel. I doubted this world would see the like for hundreds of years at least. I was rusty and could hardly remember many formulas that had once come as naturally as breathing, feeling some amusement at how a slight human girl a lifetime ago would be more than a match for me and my growing army.

I was just giving a cannonball a little kick so it would impact into the Imperial army at a good enough angle to bounce through the men. The first three shots had been somewhat effective. My forces were advancing in good order, with the company-sized spear blocks on the wings of my army turning. The Imperials flowed down the valley towards them, spurred on by the realization I had the capacity to strike at them well before they could strike at me.

It was the best choice, honestly, at least given the formation the Imperials had chosen to array themselves within. As it stood now, the vast majority of their army was over ten minutes of hard riding away from mine and they would exhaust their mounts before they even reached anything they could attack. Reaching the very back of my army to attack my rear directly would take them at least half an hour, and by the time they did that, I should have just about reached their camp.

I watched as the Imperials closest to my army began to slow, realising they would be charging into walls of spears no matter what they did. Confusion and hesitation rippled along their lines as they approached like an uncertain wave.

My own baggage and army support was directly in the middle of my army and was therefore very protected from attacks by anything except Wyverns. While in truth I did not have any assets that could force a battle with cavalry, I also did not have any weak points in my formation, save for the very far back of the marching column I had established. Save, of course, the sky. As if on cue, a defiant roar sounded out across the battlefield.

I quickly abandoned the formulation I was working on and lifted the cannon so it would fire up into the air while I worked on a similar, but altogether different spell. Accuracy would always be a problem and, while I could get lucky, expecting my cannon to impact something as small... relatively small as a Wyvern was foolish. I had to change the odds to deprive the Saderans of their air support, or the battle was lost.

In my second life, there had been countless experiments into casting more than a single spell at once. The countries of the world had discovered this mostly required the application of computation devices that could process and store the formula a mage was formulating in order to allow them to perform multiple spells at once.

But in practical terms, this was incorrect. In fact, many mages could cast several spells at once without a computational device at all. It was just a matter of what you defined as a spell. If you employed a flight formula and wanted to travel forwards, you would adjust your position by applying force in several directions at once. While considered a single spell in a practical sense, this was in reality a battery of spells applied in a memorized sequence with adjustments made as the sequence was being applied to account for unexpected environmental factors. Incredibly difficult and dangerous to do without an operational device, but not impossible.

Some might accuse me of being a pedant for making the distinction, but fundamentally you did not need a computation orb to apply two distinct spells at once so long as these spells were relatively simple, quick to cast, and you had them memorized.

I focused on the approaching Wyverns, three of them. One was in front, the other two quite far behind the lead approaching from the front, likely with the intent to work their flame across my entire army in a strafing run.

The Wyvern Knights were an exceptional military asset. Able to travel at roughly a hundred miles an hour for days at a time, with the ability to breath fire for short periods of time at a short distance. As well, the Wyverns themselves were huge and deadly animals, able to crush and bludgeon soldiers with their powerful legs and wings, covered in scales strong enough to deflect or absorb missiles directed at them.

It was hardly a surprise the Knightly Wyvern Order was at the core of the Imperial state, acting as both a rapid means of communication and of quickly quelling rebellions. Having a messenger be able to fly from a remote place like Kontia to Sadera Central and back in less than 2 days was invaluable, so how exactly their loyalty was maintained by the Empire was a well-guarded secret, as were the traditions and structure of the Knights themselves.

The Wyvern Knights approached in a smooth and unbothered formation. No attempt was made to confound ground-based air defences, because for hundreds of years, nothing had been able to challenge them in the air save for other dragons or Wyvern Knights. They were as close to invincible as a soldier could be in the Imperial era, a time that stretched into myth.

But this was a new era.

I lit the fuse on the cannon with a stray thought that could hardly be considered a spell, more an instinct to turn mana to heat, then concluded a simple two spell sequence by flooding the lead ball with as much mana as I could. With a thundering boom the weapon discharged, the neck of the cannon bulging obscenely as the ball, bright with unstable magic, was cast into the sky.

The lead Wyvern Knight must have seen the glowing orb flying at him, because his mount tried to pull away as the first spell I had imparted into the projectile drew the cannonball closer to the Wyvern than it would have otherwise. A tracking spell, not potent enough to ensure the cannonball would strike the great beast, but enough that it would approach close enough so the second spell could do its deadly work.

I felt a wave of fatigue pass over me from the mental strain of the spell sequence and the amount of mana I had imparted into it, but I steadied myself and cast the ruined cannon to the ground. The burning-white orb passed close enough to the Wyvern to engage.

It was a simple spell: a shield spell. All it had to do was contain the unstable mana I had pumped into the cannonball until it passed close to another living being. When it reached within a dozen or so feet of the Wyvern, the spell was no more and the mana was free to pull apart.

There was an odd silence as reality rebelled against my violation of the natural order, as almost my entire mana pool was returned to the world and reality quickly sought a way to rapidly disperse such power. The thrum of magic was casting light and sound into distorted

mockeries of what should be for but a moment. The lead ball surrounding the magic was a petty impediment for the diffusion of the mana and thus was blasted apart with terrible force.

I blinked away the unreality as fundamental laws reestablished themselves.

With a thundering boom that put the sound of my cannon to shame, thousands of shards of red-hot lead were thrown outwards in a rough circle. Wyvern scale was little more than paper before this might, so the wing and body of the majestic flying beast were pulped in an instant. One of the Wyverns flying in the rear was not spared as a dozen fist-sized holes were torn in its wings. The great beast fell from the sky with a panicked roar.

I winced as one of the Wyverns fell into my lines and crushed a dozen or so Lepus. Despite the deaths, a cheer went over the women. Spears were pounded into the ground, and soldiers who should have been marching forwards bounced in place to scream their adulation to the sky.

I watched with horror as my formation began to destabilise. Lepus who felt the mental contagion of bloodlust decided they would rather listen to it than their commanders. With the death of two Wyverns and the last surviving Wyvern Knight seemingly deciding he would rather not fight this battle, the Lepus just broke into a run at the confused and disordered Imperial Cavalry.

The Saderans surrendered to madness, too. Confused shouts and destabilisation flowed across their line as not a single man would not have seen the magic I had wrought.

I could do little but grit my teeth as my army flowed forwards like a dam breaking, eager to stab at horsemen and with no regard to my orders. I even spotted several Lieutenants and Majors rushing forwards, laughing all the while. It could have been a disaster, but it seemed like the Imperials did not fancy their chances in this battle and turned their mounts about to flee. This was not an organised rout, and many of the Imperials continued to charge into the Lepus, driving lances forwards into the mass of crazed battle maniacs now that the spear walls had melted.

I turned away in disgust as what was a battle turned into a senseless brawl, spiraling far out of my control. There was nothing that could be done except lead what forces I could onward to secure the Imperial camp and hope I could reorganise the army after the battle was won.

The battle had dragged on for hours. I led a few companies I was able to organise through the disintegrating Imperial lines, but not before many hundreds of Imperials fled to the camp, collecting whatever they could and disappearing into the steppe. All the while, thousands of my forces skirmished with skittish cavalry dispersing over the landscape.

A rout was never a clean thing, and, with my forces able to move very rapidly and the entire enemy force being on horseback, the battle had extended more than half a dozen miles around with small skirmishes happening well into the day.

I had sent out many runners to slowly bring my forces back together at the Imperial camp. At the very least, they should be starving and tired from the battle. It should hopefully overrule the mania that overtook the Lepus in battle.

When I had brought the more organised elements of the 3rd battalion to the Imperial camp, we had approached the neatly-arrayed encampment with little resistance. Scattered Imperials fled with horses loaded with whatever they could carry. We marched into the well-adorned and gridlike temporary settlement, and I found my fellow Lepus stunned and horrified with what I considered a rather obvious logistical necessity for moving such a large force so quickly.

Thousands of Lepus slaves were chained together in long lines. Starving and barely cognisant, used as a logistical element for the Imperial Cavalry force replacing mules or horses so the mounts of the Imperials could travel lightly and thus save their energy for a rapid march. The Imperial commander had made use of the resources he had at his disposal in order to attempt strategic outmanoeuvring of my own forces.

He would have succeeded, too, if his aerial patrol had not given away his attempt to bypass my army and reach Kontia first. But perhaps that was a ploy to draw away my army from the city and the migratory camp, and do battle on a field of the forces' commanders choosing. With the enemy commander nowhere to be found, I simply had no way of knowing.

I joined my subjects in outwardly displaying utter horror and contempt for the Imperials. I broke the chains of a dozen tribes, and the Lepus wept with joy as they were supplied meat and biscuits from the Imperial supplies. I was carefully considering the mind that would come up with the strategic manoeuvre. If not Zorzal, then one of his officers had devised a logically sound plan here that I had, by the skin of my teeth, confounded.

My appreciation of the strategic sense of the utilisation of Lepus slaves was greatly diminished when I actually took the time to speak with them and assess their moral and general disposition. I was unfortunately reminded the Saderans were not a civilised people despite their wealth and knowledge.

The slaves were taken from eleven of the twelve Lepus tribes, with only the Tanaoi not represented among their number. They had been selected for their height and strength, thus when I had regarded them from afar, I had assumed these were selected from the surrendered warriors of the Lepus tribes. I had been grossly mistaken! They were merely tall and healthy children, some as young as just nine years old with the oldest being roughly fifteen. It was the fruit of an entire generation, selected at such a young age so they would be easier to control most likely.

In addition to the expected indignities suffered on the march by the Imperial men, each of them had the tip of their left ear clipped in what some of the slaves explained was a display of submission. Any who did not willingly mutilate themselves were killed by the Saderans rather than being taken as slaves.

I could not hide the disgust at such a needless violation on my face, nor did I push aside the boiling rage that caused my limbs to shake with barely-controlled tension. I allowed the

bloodthirsty rabbit within to rage as I stood before thousands of abused children, condemned the Saderans and swore I would make them pay. Not a lie left my lips and not for the first time I felt resolved in my decision to engage in a campaign of resistance against the Empire rather than submit to them.

It did not matter they were an Empire that stood hegemonic on the world stage, nor did it matter they possessed magic, technology, and social organisation that far outstripped my own people's capabilities. I would fight them, I would fight them with every asset at my disposal! Surrender was not an option, I would seek an impossible victory or a death that would haunt the Saderans forevermore.

I felt my teeth nash as I raved against the Imperial state, the Soldier and the Salaryman subordinating themselves to the Barbarian as she swore she would shatter the legions and make them pay a thousandfold for the indignities suffered by the Lepus.

My madness was not met with caution, it was not tempered with reason. No, slaves and soldiers all about me became animated, jubilant despite the evil they had suffered and the toll endless marching had wrecked upon their bodies. And as the corpses of the Wyverns were carried over the hill and into the camp, the future of the lepus tribes began to chant as one.

"High Queen! High Queen!"

"No!" A voice came from the crowd and a young girl stepped forwards, fearless and without heed to the danger of the crowd. "Not just High Queen of the Lepus! Ruler of the Saderans too! Of everyone!" It was a sanity that dawned upon me too late that set a cold grip on my belly as the crowd did not turn upon the girl.

No, instead the horde cried out as one. With their bellies full of meat and bread and wine passed freely between them, my army and the equal number of children in the camp began to chant.

"Queen of all! Empress! Queen of the Universe! Wyvernbane! Dragonslayer!" Their insanity was boundless as everyone had a new title to throw upon me.

As the Barbarian with me settled down, I felt a familiar frailty, fatigue, so I leaned against the closest stable object. It just so happened to be the decapitated head of a Wyvern, thus the cheers of the crowd grew louder still.

I was faced with the terrible truth: The control I had was an illusion. Just as I could merely direct my forces in battle, so too was my fate dictated by the whim of my uncivilised people. As I directed them, so too did they have the power to direct me.

I could not temper the crowd as their proclamations of the reckoning I would bring upon the Imperials became grander and grander still. I did not argue as tiredness overwhelmed me, mostly from the extreme mana depletion of the battle, and my Majors carried me to a resplendent tent, fed me, and placed me in a cot to rest.

I did not dream after sleep took me, but felt fathomless eyes turn to where I laid.

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

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