

## Pyrrhic Victory

Rowan kept a firm hand on his reigns as one last volley of fire pots streaked across the sky. Their black tails joined the blanket of smoke rising from the besieged city. Battle horns heralded their arrival like the deep tolls of the great belltowers of High Arichis. The Crusaders of the Church of Valor had finally joined the fray.

The engineers cheered them forward with raised fists from their hastily constructed siege engines. Rowan and his brethren charged down the final stretch of open field towards Lunatas. The most senior of Paladins led the charge of the heavy cavalry straight towards the pulverised city gates. It was unfortunate that the once great city from the days of the First Empire had to be destroyed, but there would be no stopping the wrath of Setonia's armies.

Horns sounded above the thunderous charge as the light cavalry peeled away from the main column. Rowan had to fight the urge to stay with the main column into the depths of the viper's nest. Fortunately, his steed had better sense than he and followed the rest of his company.

As they rode, regulars from the army formed up to the sound of beating drums, ready and waiting to follow them into the city. Rowan brandished his spear high into the air. His captain led them through a sizeable breach in the walls masonry. The riders closed ranks to four abreast to pass through the rubble.

Rowan found himself screaming at the top of his lungs in a rising chorus of voices as they passed the threshold of the crumbling walls. The stench of burning pitch assaulted his senses. It felt like someone had shoved his face into the heart of a smith's furnace. His eyes watered as he fought to keep them open against the acrid smoke. Burning wooden barricades were everywhere and Rowan could do nothing but follow the riders ahead of him. A voice cut through the cacophony of thunderous hooves, jangling mail and battle cries.

‘Incoming!’

An arcing ball of fire struck a mere two ranks in front of Rowan into a waist high wooden barricade. Rowan pulled hard on the reigns to wheel his horse around and raised his shield against the flaming explosion. Rowan couldn't hear his own primal shout as searing heat washed over him.

Rowan's horse reared on its hind legs as a horse galloped into the mass of riders behind him, its mane awash with fire. Caught in the stirrups, its rider writhed in flames as he was dragged across the cobbled street. The inferno around Rowan was nothing compared to the unlucky rider's chilling screams of agony – never mind the stench of burning flesh.

Rowan could hear the sound of battle and death cries of man and beast ahead. What was supposed to be an unstoppable charge had ground to a halt as the burning barricade churned a dark suffocating blanket of pitch over them.

Rowan saw the same look in the eyes of his brothers around him as they came face to face with their own mortalities. Icy hands reached their way for Rowan's heart. He knew his enemy and he would not bow to it.

'For Valor!' Rowan screamed at the top of his lungs and spurred his horse forward into the flames. He prayed to Valor for courage – for strength – for glory. He would show his instructors that their faith in him was not misplaced, that he did indeed possess a spark of Valor's spirit.

Rowan took a deep breath before his horse lurched up into the air. As he felt the jolt of his horse landing, the saddle fell out from underneath him. Ground and sky tumbled to become one before he landed on hard cobblestone. One look was all it took for him to recognise the killing ground before him. Wooden stakes and obstacles scattered the wide street. Felled mounts and riders alike were a scattered mess as more barricades and burning buildings funnelled them into the missile storm from the far end of the street.

Rowan rolled towards the buildings as the riders who had followed him charged unwittingly into the chaos. He watched in horror as they too became trapped in the maze of bodies. Unwilling to ride down their own brothers, the build-up of riders made them sitting targets.

Rowan saw a ball of flame materialise at the end of the street. 'No!' he screamed, leaping to his feet. There was nothing he could do as the streaking comet consumed a dozen men and their mounts before his eyes.

Rowan clenched his jaw and his eyes steeled at the distant figure. By Valor, that sorcerer was going to pay.

An arrow ricocheted off the ground nearby and Rowan raised his shield, looking for some sort of cover. Not far away, men huddled behind the obstructions littering the street. Rowan ran over and nudged one in the leg. 'We have to move!'

'It's suicide!' the man replied, his voice breaking.

'Listen to me! Sons of Valor!' Rowan said as loud as he could to draw their attention away from the carnage ahead. 'Upon this day, we have been called to confront the Betrayer's corruption. Many have prayed for a calling such as this, yet it is us who have been given this divine task. Find the spark of Valor within yourselves and show the world that we are the light that will drive out this darkness!'

Rowan's eyes met with as many as he could. With a glance, he knew who were with him and who were not. 'We have to clear that fortification. Those that stay, get our brothers to dismount and find a way around. The rest of you follow me and Valor be witness to your deeds this day!' Rowan charged towards the entrance of a burning building.

*Valor protect me and give me strength.*

Putting all his weight behind his shield, he rammed it against the door. Weakened by the flames, the door's barricades failed. He was virtually blind as he rushed his way through the burning building. A break in the smoke gave him vision of a door leading outside.

'This way! Quick as you can!' Rowan choked as searing air scorched his throat and nostrils. His spirits were lifted to hear other voices behind him.

The heat subsided as he reached the back door. Finding himself in a narrow alleyway, he breathed a sigh of relief and turned around. A dozen soot covered faces looked to him. Their white and red tunics almost scorched beyond recognition.

He gave them a nod and began weaving through the cramped alleyway towards their goal. While muffled by the buildings, he could still hear the cries of his brothers' overhead which drove him to move even faster.

Turning a corner, he came face to face with a Marauder armed with a sword. Rowan cursed as he tried to bring his spear to bear, only for it to get trapped against the confines of the alley's walls.

It was all the time the Marauder needed to raise his horn and blast a single note before Rowan ran his spear through the Marauder's chest. It proved to be a mistake as it lodged itself in the Marauder's ribcage. Rowan let the spear go with the Marauder; it was poorly suited for such confined spaces.

'Stay alert!' Rowan said and drew his sword. They had barely gone a hundred feet before they ran into a patrolling band of Marauders. Alarm horns sounded as Rowan rushed to close the gap. A stout Marauder met him with a raised axe. They clashed violently, both unable to use their weapons effectively as the press of bodies forced them into a shoving match.

'Archers above!' someone called behind him.

Rowan could do nothing as several figures appeared on the rooftops, arrows already nocked to their bowstrings. He abandoned his shield and pressed himself against the wall, letting shield and Marauder fall past.

With his now free hand, Rowan gripped his sword halfway down its blade. He whipped his pommel up and drove his sword's hilt into the face of the second Marauder and stabbed his blade's point into a third. Rowan kept moving forward, pressing his advantage in the

chaos of close combat where he used every inch of his blade to maim, injure and kill. He entrusted his brothers to finish off the Marauders who didn't die outright.

The final Marauder, armed with a knife, tried to tackle Rowan to the ground. Rowan pivoted and held the Marauder for his brother to stab in the back. Rowan saw two of his brothers still with spears launch them towards the archers, driving them away.

'Keep moving forward!' Rowan said. How these petty bandits had managed to occupy Lunatas for over three centuries was beyond him.

They wound their way through a series of empty buildings and found themselves in an open square. All four streets leading in were barricaded. None of the Marauder's manning the fortifications appeared to have noticed them. Rowan signalled half his brothers to take the eastern side while the rest would follow him to the northern side.

They moved in a fast jog across the open ground, hastening into a sprint as they were spotted. With no shield to protect him, Rowan led the charge into the ranks of Marauders with only his armour to protect him. An arrow pierced his mail shirt but was stopped by his gambeson beneath. Another glanced off his helmet as he turned his head. Then, he and his fellow Crusaders were upon them. A short and vicious melee ensued as the Marauders were criminally unprepared for close quarter combat with little in terms of arms and armour. Some of them had nothing but their bows and slings, yet they resisted. Their perseverance paid off, managing to swarm one of his brothers before they too joined the ranks of the dead.

Rowan felt reinvigorated as he mete out justice for his fallen brother, yet there was no sorcerer to be found here. Likewise, his brothers to the east appeared to have no trouble dispatching the Marauders.

It was to the west that Rowan spotted a shirtless man ushering the remaining Marauders to the safety of the southern barricade. 'Tell Vala I did all I could, now go!'

'Don't let them get away!' Rowan said, pointing his sword to the fleeing Marauders.

The shirtless man's skin radiated an unnatural light as he intercepted Rowan and his Crusaders at the centre of the square. There was only one explanation.

*Sorcerer.*

Flames seeped out of the man's pores and covered him like a living coat of armour. Even his face was encased in a seemingly solid helm of shifting fire. A small ball of fire shot out the sorcerer's outstretched palm, leaving a smoking hole in the back of Rowan's brothers pursuing the retreating Marauders. The rest of the Crusaders turned to face the true threat.

A Crusader moved in to attack the sorcerer's exposed back. Flames violently unleashed from the sorcerer's back, leaving the Crusader clutching his blackened face. A halberd of living flame formed in the sorcerer's hands, ending the Crusader's misery.

Each of the Crusader's tried to exploit an opening but it was a fatal gamble every time. Another Crusader fell as he learned the hard way that their wooden shield meant nothing against the sorcerer's elemental weapon. Not only did they have to contend with the weapon's physical shape but also the flames it would conjure out. Rowan himself was barely able to parry a thrust and avoid the stream of fire from its tip. His sword was left glowing red hot from the encounter.

Rowan didn't know what game the sorcerer was playing at, knowing full well his destructive capabilities. Were they being toyed with? The sorcerer had thwarted their attacks and had slowly whittled them down to five. The four times they had managed to land a glancing blow, they were rebuked by fire and only one of them had survived the feat.

'Reinforcements are coming!' one of his brothers said.

The sorcerer's head eerily tilted to the side. The sorcerer burst into an embodiment of living fire as more heat washed over Rowan's numb face.

'He's going rampant!' one of the Crusader's said and ran for his life. The other three were only a step behind as they scattered in all directions. Everyone knew the tales of rampant sorcerers, capable of wiping out entire villages in their last suicidal act of pure madness. The dread of knowing what could happen spurred him into action. Rowan had sworn by Valor that he would stop the sorcerer – even if it was the last thing he did.

'FOR VALOR!' Rowan yelled, entering one last charge against the sorcerer. His shout turned to a scream of pain as he drew near. The sorcerer raised his arms as like a bird flexing its wings before Rowan lowered his eyes away from the intense heat and thrust his sword.

Light and sound overwhelmed his senses. A peaceful stillness took him. An unknowable freedom as all mortal concerns left his mind. He was unshackled and unburdened here. It lasted for an instant, but time was different here. Then, he felt himself falling.

Rowan jolted awake to find himself being held down. He fought against his restraints and a great weight on his body.

'By Valor, he's still alive – he's alive!' someone shouted painfully in his ear.

It took Rowan several long moments to get his bearings. Unknown faces slowly began to make sense. Crusaders. They were his brothers.

'Are you hurt? Can you stand?' a Crusader said.

Rowan nodded and they helped get him on his feet – an act which caused a cheer from what must have been a hundred men around him. There was a sudden hush as the crowd of men parted to make way for someone.

Rowan couldn't believe his eyes as a Bishop made his way forward for *him*.

'What is your name, young Crusader?' the Bishop asked.

'Rowan, Your Excellency,' Rowan said lowering his head.

'Well, Crusader Rowan, I do believe you have a bright future ahead amongst the Paladin ranks. Only a true follower of Valor could have accomplished a feat such as yours.'

'I'm – I'm honoured, Your Excellency,' Rowan said, not quite able to comprehend the fact. Had his years of hard work, study and prayers finally been heard? Most spent their entire lives without ever being graced with Valor's light.

The Bishop smiled warmly and patted his shoulder. 'He needs time to rest. See him to the healers.' The Bishop turned and moved towards the row of burning buildings. 'The rest of you, find a way through this damned thing and let nothing stop your righteous path.'

Rowan was certain he fainted several times as two of his brothers supported him all the way to the rear. He declined to ride or use a stretcher as there were likely more of his brothers in worse conditions than he. They left him in the capable hands of the healers from the Church of Aria who tended to his injuries and burns.

'I'm sorry if this stings,' the young healer said as she applied an ointment to his skin.

Rowan couldn't feel a thing. The healer moved on to other patients soon enough, leaving him to watch smoke rise from deeper within the city. Every so often, there was a burst or flash of light that punctuated itself against the dark smoke.

'Just how many sorcerers are in there?' a passing soldier from the army said to his injured compatriot. They stopped as there was another flash of light from the city. 'Look, there goes another.'

'Good riddance the lot of them,' the injured soldier said and spat a thick wad of saliva into the ground. 'There'd be even more holed up in there if we didn't torch the Midlands and force them out.'

'You were in the first wave?'

'Yeah, Second Light Cavalry Regiment or what's left of it. Easier to fight those bastards in open ground. Best is when you catch them with the fleeing peasants. Kill two birds with one stone. You see, they don't cut loose those dead weights nor can they fight proper with them around.'

'That's a bit harsh. I mean, they live in the Borderlands and all that, but...'

‘Have you ever *seen* the Marauders fight? And I don’t mean a random peasant with a knife. I mean the ones in actual armour as good as yours and mine with axes, maces and halberds! They pulverised our infantry ranks like they were nothing. Nothing!’

‘Still, it doesn’t look like they’ll last the night, especially when the Storm Riders of Atlanta get here.’

‘They’ve mobilised? Hah! It’s done then! Let them all burn. The Marauders are finished and Lunatas back to a ruin with them.’

A growing wave of nausea ebbed against the corner of Rowan’s thoughts. The heat of battle no longer clouded his mind. Peace and quiet brought an all too damning mirror of clarity against him. Just who exactly had he defeated this day?

Rowan put his head in his hands.

*What have I done?*