

Chapter 15

THE HERO OF AMBRIA

For the third time in a single night, Raven had climbed into a tree to figure out a plan for his approach, but the longer he kept observing the situation, the more fruitless this whole endeavor seemed to become. The Redmane Mansion was already under heavy siege by the time he arrived. What could he possibly hope to accomplish on his own? It felt surreal just being there, never having witnessed anything quite like that before in person. Of course, he had read about sieges in the books he used to love so much as a kid. Through the magic of words and the power of imagination, he once believed he had already experienced many legendary events of the Great War that made most boys his age wish they were born in more interesting times.

Such naivety . . .

He always loved reading tales of valiant heroism such as ‘The Battle of the Bowels’, where a horde of Kyoguni and Ludori invaders were ambushed and annihilated in the Cold Vein by the ‘Saviors of Selivos’, a militia of volunteers under the command of Fox Silverfang who had since become a legend of the realm. Another book he loved to read was called ‘The Snake and the Mongoose’, which told the story leading up to a duel between the Meralysian commander, River Blackfeather, and the Kyoguni marshal, Anso Norita. The duel lasted from dusk until dawn and ultimately ended with the death of Lord River, but the Kyoguni marshal was said to have been so moved by his rival’s valor and tenacity, that he decided to retire from the military then and there out of sheer respect for his fallen foe.

But Raven’s favorite book had to be ‘The Hero of Ambria’, in which Ash Redmane — Lord Wolfe’s father and Lord Leonid’s grandfather — defended the whole town from Rakonian invaders by keeping every single citizen safe inside the sturdy walls of his fortified mansion. Unfortunately, Lord Ash was gravely wounded during the siege and tragically passed away inside his family home, but not before he made sure the townsfolk of Ambria would survive the onslaught. That book was the sole reason why Raven had always looked up to the Redmane family, the sole reason why he wanted to work for them, the sole reason why he — despite being a perpetual outsider — was proud to call himself Ambrian, the sole reason why he himself strived to become a hero.

Too bad heroism isn’t an inheritable trait. I think it’s safe to say that a certain proverbial apple fell off far from the tree, rolled down a steep fucking hill, and sprouted its rotten seed in a cold valley where the sun never shone.

But despite having the family name desecrated by descendants of the clan, Ash Redmane would always occupy a special place in Raven’s heart. ‘The Hero of Ambria’ was a story that taught him about the sacrifice of oneself in order to protect the lives of many. It also taught him that it would take more than an army to bring down the Redmane Mansion. Its reputation of being unconquerable held true in the days of the Great War and it might very well still be able to claim that title after today. But it certainly wasn’t for the lack of trying from the bandits. They were throwing just about anything they could at the impenetrable walls.

One group of bandits was collectively weaving a technique that lifted a bunch of tiles from the ground, meshed them together to form an enormous ball of stone, and flung it into the air like some kind of auric trebuchet. The ball smashed into the mansion with a deafening bang, but crumbled to a million tiny pieces without putting so much as a dent in the building’s rigid exterior.

A second group of bandits bombarded the main entrance with a variety of auric techniques that did next to nothing to the steel-reinforced doors except leaving behind a few superficial scratches.

And when the ranged attacks proved to be futile, a third group of bandits began to make an attempt at infiltrating the mansion. But as soon as they entered a certain range, a handful of archers and crossbowmen who were taking cover behind the parapet of the building’s flat roof sprang up from their hiding position and peppered the besiegers with bolts and arrows. One bandit went down during the first

salvo and two more dropped to the ground after the second, but then, half a dozen more began to scale the wall.

Three archers immediately leaned over the parapet and released their arrows in a straight line to the ground. One climber got struck between the eyes. A second climber shrugged off an arrow to his shoulder, but then lost his grip and tumbled all the way down. If the arrow didn't kill him, then the fall surely did. A third climber deflected the final arrow with an auric slap and was able to place a hand on top of the parapet.

The soldiers tossed their ranged weapons to the side and drew blades from their hips instead. As soon as the bandits climbed onto the roof, a chaotic dance of aura and steel ensued. The soldiers had the advantage in numbers and seemed to get the better of the initial exchange, but as the skirmish went on, more bandits from below began charging for the mansion.

A fourth group, consisting of twenty bandits, was busy cramming a big cart with crates of explosives they must have found somewhere in the warehouse. It looked like they just finished their preparations and started pushing the heavy cart toward the main entrance.

After calculating what an amount of explosives large enough to punch a hole in a mountain could do to a five-inch-thick door, the first signs of uncertainty snuck into Raven's thoughts like an approaching storm on a clear horizon. *This is bad . . .*

All windows from the mansion's third floor swung open. A salvo of flaming arrows immediately flew in an arc toward the slowly advancing cart, but the bandits were smart enough to protect its front and top with barriers of rock. The archers weren't ready to call it quits and readied their bows for a second salvo, but by then, a fifth group of bandits already began countering from the side with arrows of their own.

So many things were happening all at once and Raven had difficulty keeping up with the chaos. His eyes darted from side to side as if he were reading one of the war stories from his books and he was too captivated to stop reading now, but no amount of words could possibly convey the full scale of anarchy he was presented with. The sound of violence and aggression, the smell of fire and dirt, the sight of destruction and terror, the taste of cold sweat and fresh blood, the sense of anticipation and impatience; everything felt too real and he wasn't able to stop the story from being written.

Come on, people! You can do this! All he could do was to send encouragement with his thoughts, but the defenders inside the mansion needed much more than that. He was thinking of Ash Redmane's story, but 'the Hero of Ambria' had a full company of soldiers and mercenaries under his command back then. This time, the mansion was only defended by a handful of soldiers and a bunch of untrained civilians. He refused to believe it when he first arrived, but then, there it finally was; acceptance, a full surrender to his helplessness. *No . . . There are too many bandits! They won't survive the assault! I need to do something, but what can I do on my own? I won't stand a chance . . .*

Feeling that the momentum was shifting in their favor, every single bandit started storming the mansion from all sides, confidently screaming and shouting as if victory was already set in stone. And they had every reason to be optimistic about their chances. They vastly outnumbered the soldiers and had far more experience shedding blood. Once the cart reached the main entrance, everything would be over. The Redmane Mansion would fall. Ambria would be lost.

But then, right before the sun began to kiss the horizon, a white light that seemed to be as bright as every star in the universe combined descended from the sky in a volatile line like a mighty lightning strike. Immediately after the landing, it expelled another streak of light that passed by everyone so fast, some might have mistaken it for a trick of the mind or a mere fragment of an overstimulated imagination. But it was very real and it was blazing hot. So hot, in fact, that it left behind a trail of flames as it tore through numerous bandits and crashed into the cart with a big bang.

A huge ball of fire and soot belched into the sky. The deafening roar of a monstrous explosion shook up the entire courtyard. Everything seemed to get swallowed by a blinding luminance that turned the entirety of Ambria pristine white for a short moment. One bandit already started cheering like a dim-witted fool who wasn't used to letting such brightness into his upper chamber, but fell silent when he noticed he was the only one. "Huh . . . What?" he muttered, too dumbstruck to understand what he was looking at.

Everyone — soldiers and bandits alike — stopped doing whatever they were doing once the realization sank in that the blast didn't happen anywhere near the mansion's entrance. Their heads turned to a spot

where only a few seconds ago, a group of twenty bandits were pushing and escorting a heavy cart full of explosives, but now became littered with blood, guts and random body parts that were charring to black debris in a sea of raging flames. They then shifted their eyes to a lone figure who had emerged near the gate of the courtyard.

Raven stood there motionless with a wide grin on his face. Not because he wore the self-esteem of some invincible hero, but simply because that had always been his default expression whenever he was being stared at by a large group of people. He could only hope he came across as someone who was well within his comfort zone and knew exactly what he was doing. The first step of his plan proved to be a resounding success, even more so than he had dared to hope. The explosion took out a considerable chunk of the enemy's forces, but then what? He figured he would simply 'go with the flow' once he arrived at this point, but the flow seemed to have stopped altogether and he wasn't prepared for that. Everybody just gaped at him expectantly like an orchestra waiting for their conductor to start waving his hands. Seeing so many eyes cast on him made him feel more than just a bit anxious. This was like his childhood all over again.

So, now what? He couldn't just keep standing there like a statue and do nothing. Wasn't he supposed to introduce himself or something? The heroes from his books always had some memorable one-liners in situations like this and he spent far too long thinking of something witty to say. Was he supposed to make the first move? There were about thirty bandits left, but he was still too preoccupied thinking of a catchy one-liner to decide who he should go for first. Even if he did make the first move, could he count on the Meralysian soldiers to back him up? What if they thought he was allied with Jackdaw Blackshaw? Just as the thirty-or-so bandits, the people inside the mansion were all frozen in anticipation; unable to tell whether they were staring at a friend or foe. No, he had to introduce himself and make his intentions known, but he still wasn't able to think of a one-liner that would make his heroic entrance a legendary one, and that bothered him more than he cared to admit.

He took one step forward and everyone in the courtyard automatically responded with one step in reverse as if he were carrying some kind of contagious disease. "My name is Raven Knight. I am here to liberate my hometown." The words were delivered with confidence, loud and clear for everyone to hear. He expected his announcement to be met with roaring laughter, but they all remained eerily silent like an audience witnessing an accident on stage and not knowing whether or not it was part of the act. Was it because they were completely muted by fear or was it the sheer idiocy of his introduction that had them still waiting for a punchline? He placed his bet on the former and decided to double down on it. He had nothing to lose now.

"Do you wish to die one at a time or should I kill you all at once?" That wasn't half bad. Maybe not on the same level of something his heroes would have said, but as far as improvisation went, this should be counted as peak inspiration. If he was lucky enough to reach an old age, he would definitely make sure to put that line in his memoirs and let his readers be the judge.

The Ambrians certainly seemed inspired by it, judging from the loud roar that spontaneously erupted from the mansion. It was a beautiful chant of newfound belief, expressed through hundreds of voices who all sang as one. "ATTACK!" someone yelled at the top of his lungs like a cockcrow at dawn just as the first rays of sunlight began to paint the sky red. Dozens of arrows and bolts rained down from the mansion like a colony of gannets diving into an ocean.

The bandits were completely caught off guard by the sudden attack and barely had the time to scream, let alone react in a more self-preservative manner. Many dropped to the ground looking like human pincushions, and those who managed to survive the salvo, fled back to a safer distance near the center of the courtyard, but were subsequently showered with another downpour of arrows that came from the opposite direction. The handful of bandits who remained standing after that started cursing through gritted teeth and realized they had somehow lost the battle.

Many of the Ambrians who had freed themselves at the warehouse were now gathered behind Raven. They were clothed, armed, and hungry — absolutely famished as fuck — for a healthy dose of reckoning. "For Ambria!" someone from the angry mob shouted, feeling empowered by the presence of his savior. "You will die here, dogs!" another one yelled, carried by the confidence of victory, but he cowered back into

the crowd with his tail tucked between his legs when the last remaining female bandit stepped forward. In fact, everyone with the exception of Raven bounced back a couple of feet.

"I challenge you to a duel," the female bandit said, directing her words at the dark-skinned man who somehow managed to change the fortune of her and her comrades on his own.

Raven raised an eyebrow and folded his arms. He recognized her as the bandit who cut through that poor sucker at the warehouse with her bladeless sword. His eyes lowered to the scabbard at her waist that sheathed only a hilt. "You wield a legendary weapon that doesn't belong to you."

"True," she said with a humorless chuckle, "but it would have been a shame if such a work of art faded from existence along with its former master. Don't you agree?"

"Amira Zahiranok was a dear friend of my brother."

"My condolences. The warden was an admirable woman. Rest assured that she died with her honor intact. Not many people can say that they managed to wound the great Selena Celestine, even if it was a mere husk of her."

Raven frowned and didn't understand what that was supposed to mean. Aesha's mother died before he was even born. According to the stories he read as a kid, she was betrayed and killed by an ally near the end of the Great War. "What reason do I have to accept your challenge? Surely you realize that you and your comrades have already lost."

"Oh, I know." She paused and rolled her eyes to the sky as if wondering where it all went wrong in her life. "But you strike me as a man of honor. The manner of my death is yet to be decided. I would rather die a warrior's death than to be torn apart by a pack of feral beasts. As for my *comrades* . . ." She glanced over her shoulder and scoffed. "Consider this my apology to the people of Ambria." In a single fluid motion, she reached for her hilt, spun on her heel, and unleashed a strike that seemed to distort the air in a trajectory toward her comrades.

Three bandits instantly flopped to the ground with their heads cut off. The fourth bandit dropped on his knees and bent over in agony. All kinds of red spilled from his face and dribbled on the ground through the cracks of his fingers, but miraculously enough, he was still alive.

"You'll probably want to have a talk with that one. He is—" Her words were interrupted by a shrill gasp. She coughed and splattered her chin with a splash of blood.

"Only show honor to those who understand the meaning," Raven whispered in her ear, quoting a line from the former Kyoguni marshall called Anso Norita he had once read in a book as a kid. "You murdered innocent people. You murdered your own comrades. Someone like you doesn't get to dictate the manner of your own death." He slowly retracted his sword from her chest and wiped the blood on his sleeve before sheathing the blade back into the scabbard.

The woman chuckled and directed a few soundless words at the blood-red sky like a prayer. She shakily turned around to face her killer, but collapsed to the ground before her eyes were able to catch a glimpse of him.

Raven hunched down beside her and wriggled the hilt out of her lifeless hand. Such a weapon deserved a better master. He hadn't decided if he should be the one to claim the ownership, but the hilt sure felt comfortable in his grip; natural, almost like an extension of his own hand. Even without a blade, the sword was much heavier than he expected. It wasn't so much the physical weight he felt inside his hand, but rather a strange and indescribable sensation that seemed to press onto his skin as if the gravity around the hilt was pulling a few times stronger than usual. He felt an urge to let his aura surge through his palm and pour into the cold metal, but an explosive uproar behind his back snapped him out of his reverie.

He dropped the hilt on the ground and quickly turned around, fully expecting to be met with some kind of threat. He reached for his own sword that dangled from his waist, but was too late and felt a pair of strong, hairy arms wrap around him like a steel coil. Then another pair of arms entangled him from the other side. More and more people latched on to this sudden madness and he felt as though he got caught inside a giant net of flesh. He didn't understand what was happening and his thoughts kept terrorizing him with traumatic images from the past.

The mass hysteria reminded him of the mindless ghouls in Doriva that swirled around him like a whirlwind, reminded him of Wolfe Redmane's guards who chained him to the obelisk, and reminded him of his former classmates who ganged up to bully him after school. He felt a panic rising like an intense heat

that started to scorch him from within. His aura was about to burst and manifest itself in the form of white flames, but then — to his own surprise — the belligerence was getting drowned out by an even stronger force of confusion.

“The hero of Ambria!” a woman screamed in his ear and he couldn’t figure out what she meant or why that information should even matter to him, although he did fully agree it was a phenomenal book that deserved more recognition. He wildly spun his head from side to side, somehow expecting to see Ash Redmane somewhere among the sea of people he found himself in, but it was so chaotic and he could barely make out what he was even looking at. He saw eyes, so *many* eyes, and they were all cast on him like fish in a pond waiting to be fed. He exposed his teeth with a wide grin because how else was he supposed to react? “The hero of Ambria!” some guy shouted in his other ear and he felt two arms clutching him between his legs.

“No, please . . .” he muttered as he got hoisted on the shoulders of two strong men. Looking over the crowd, he saw the door of the mansion swing open. Hundreds of people came running out to join the madness in the courtyard; screaming and shouting, hugging and celebrating. He saw Hawke — the kid he had promised to reunite with his sister — running toward a young woman who came out of the mansion. He could almost see her face, but then he felt hands, so *many* hands, touching just about every imaginable part of his body. It tickled and not necessarily in a good way. “What the—” he shrieked as he got tossed into the air a couple of feet. “—Fuuuuck?!” he shrieked again when he kissed the sky for the second time.

“The hero of Ambria!” many more people began to shout as he kept bouncing up and down on top of them. “The hero of Ambria!” even more people joined in with the strange ritual that was beginning to take the shape of some kind of cultish worship. And then he finally began to ask himself the correct question.

“Am I . . . the hero of Ambria?”