

Renegade's Crown

As I waited, the first drops of rain splattered against the cobblestones. I pulled my red hood lower over my eyes, grateful for the excuse. Though the black pants and blood red jacket of a Weapon's Master wasn't unusual in the marketplace, wearing it at my age was.

"What's it looking like, Emmaline?" I whispered.

Her voice came back through my earpiece. "It's getting tougher to see through the rain, but they should be broadcasting soon." As a gifted eagle-eye, she was positioned on a tower for guard duty, intentionally scouting inward rather than outward with her enhanced vision. "Yes, there they go..."

True to her word, the apparatus glowed to life; an enormous projection above the heads of the shoppers, broadcasting live a man few of them knew. He was young, blonde, and held himself with confidence that belied the difficulty of his task.

"Put your hands together for Gideon Emmers, the 223rd competitor for the crown!" The announcer's voice rang too cheerfully through the square, and the crowd hushed as they watched Gideon, a smattering of unenthusiastic applause falling as a flat response.

They used to cheer. They used to research all the competitors, place bets, hang on to every word of the announcer. But ever since my sister Ambrose had failed over a year ago, they had given up hope that anyone would ever get through the impossible obstacles and take the crown. I almost had, too. But I made a plan instead.

"This young man has been preparing for this day for four years!" The announcer continued. "He's proved his prowess with a sword. Who knows, but this might be the man to take it!"

"Yeah, that's what they *always* say!" a man jeered loudly.

A murmur of agreement rippled through the bitter crowd. A second man hefted a rock and threw it at the apparatus. It sailed right through the announcer's beaming face and landed with a crack on the wet cobblestones.

"Last chance, Alethea," a male voice intoned in my ear. "Last chance to call this off. Even if you make it to the throne room, the Chancellor could kill you for cheating his system."

"I know the risks, Baylock." I snapped quietly.

"I don't want to have a hand in your death."

"You're going to back out *now*?" I whispered incredulously. "We've been through this. Maybe the people will make the Chancellor crown me. Or, more likely, I'll be killed or imprisoned, but the people will finally revolt."

"And what if they don't?"

"Aren't you seeing this?" I glanced around the square again. "They're angry. They're ready."

“We have to try, Baylock.” To my surprise, Emmaline’s voice came through my earpiece, backing me up. “Alethea is our best shot. The people know her through Ambrose, and Ambrose should have made it. I think they’ll revolt. And I don’t know anyone with a better chance of getting in than Alethea.”

Baylock didn’t answer, but my heart swelled.

“It’s now or never. Are you with me or not?” I asked.

More silence. Then, “I’m with you.”

“Then let’s go.” I turned and strode away from the marketplace and the broadcast, down the road that was beginning to pool with water, but instead of taking the left fork into town I took the right, toward the west gates to the bastion.

Within a minute, Baylock fell into step beside me. He was dressed modestly, with khaki pants and a white shirt — the very image of a town intern. The hilts of two daggers could be seen protruding from the top of the leather bag slung over his shoulder.

Two guards stood at attention by the west gates, watching us as we approached. My heart pounded, but I reached out tentatively with my mind, reaching for theirs. Their consciousnesses pulsed gently and I drove forward, giving a mental *push* to penetrate their minds. I was met with more resistance than expected, like a thin wall surrounding their thoughts. Taking a breath, I pushed harder, slightly slowing my stride and tugging my hood forward as I did so. I had to break through before they got a good look at my youthful face.

A familiar headache flared to life behind my eyelids as I pulled upon my magic, but I felt their defenses waver and broke through to their minds. *I’m an older Weapons Master*, I directed. *You recognize me.*

Recognition crossed their faces as we came to a stop in front of them.

“I’m Gideon’s Weapons Master. We would have been here earlier with his back up weapons, but my intern...” I sighed, gesturing to Baylock, who lowered his head demurely.

The guards glanced at each other. “Gideon’s Weapons Master entered with him this morning.”

Time to turn up the heat. “You must be mistaken,” I said coolly, crossing my arms to hide my trembling hands. My eyes burned as I fixed on theirs. For a moment they stared, the silence filled only with the sound of rain on the cobblestones, but with another fierce mental push, they relaxed.

“You better hurry,” the ginger one said as he stepped to the side and flagged the guard on the tower to open the gate. “You don’t know how soon Gideon will need those extra weapons.”

“Or how long he will last,” the other grumbled.

I inclined my head in acknowledgement, then moved forward as the gate swung inward. Baylock trailed on my heels... we were almost through...

Ginger snarled. “Wait a minute,” I turned slightly, just enough to see his hand grab the back of Baylock’s shirt, stopping him in his tracks. “What did you say your name was?”

Baylock tensed. “I didn’t.”

“Yeah? Well, you look awfully familiar...”

I turned fully around and looked him in the eye. The thin wall in his mind had been raised again, and it started inching me back. I gritted my teeth and focused, trying to push through. “Sir. Let go of my intern.”

Indecision flashed across his face, then suspicion. With a sudden heave from his mental wall, I lost my grip and he slammed me out of his head. His eyes widened as he saw me as a seventeen-year-old for the first time.

He shouted. Baylock dropped, spinning his leg around to swipe the guard’s legs out from under him. As he crashed to the ground the other guard yanked his sword free, but the daggers were already in Baylock’s hands and he dove, rolling under the swing of the sword to come up and drive at the guard’s middle. The daggers bit into the protective armor, and the guard grunted, toppling backward.

Baylock ripped his weapons free and swung up, slamming the hilt of his dagger against the guard’s head. He didn’t even watch him slump unconscious before turning back to the first guard, who was back on his feet, leveling his sword at Baylock, face twisted in a snarl.

Baylock hesitated.

“Hey!” I shouted. In the second of distraction that the guard glanced toward me, Baylock leapt into range. He twisted the guard’s arm backwards until he dropped the sword, kned him hard in the ribs, then clocked him on the back of the head with the metal hilt of the dagger.

The second guard collapsed.

Baylock stepped back, observing his quick work. “Maybe you should have left me,” he said shakily. “He knew me.”

I swallowed. “It was going to come to a fight anyway.”

There was a cry above us as one of the guards noticed the disturbance below. “Back up! I need back up at the west gate!”

“Come on!” Baylock followed as I broke into a run, the hood falling to my shoulders, rain pelting at my face. My heart pounded with my feet as I veered from the path and took off into the wet grasses that stretched before the bastion.

“Alethea, what happened?” Emmaline’s panicked voice sounded in my ear. “They raised the alarm at the west gate! Where are you?”

“Running your way!” I gasped, counting the towers in my head. The fourth from the west gate was blocked from my line of sight by the dark walls of the bastion.

“Well, hurry!”

I didn’t bother replying, just willed my legs to run faster, trying not to think about how quickly backup would be on the scene. Baylock thundered by my side, then drew slightly ahead of me as we rounded the wall of the bastion and the fourth tower came into view.

“I see you!” She called. I could vaguely see her, too, a figure with long hair up in the tower. “Wait, I’m getting orders.”

There was a hiss through the air, and I threw myself to the ground, rolling twice before stumbling to my feet again. Imbedded in the ground behind me were two hand-length, silver darts. There was another whizz and Baylock ducked.

“Alethea! We’ve opened fire!” Emmaline shouted.

“I noticed!” Another one hit at my feet, and I kept running. “What are those?”

“They won’t kill you, but they’ll definitely take you out! I’ll take down the other shooters.”

“No! Stick to the plan—I need the wall cleared!”

“Alethea, *move!*”

I obeyed, tumbling to the ground again as three more darts shot by.

With a bang, the side entrance double doors exploded open in front of us, and about ten men came rushing out, charging in our direction.

Baylock accelerated. I chased after his heels, heart pounding, every training session I’d ever had whirling through my head at lightning speed.

Before we even reached the men, two of them dropped, each with a dagger in their abdomen. Baylock snatched one free of his foe and plunged into furious battle.

I ran straight at a guard. He didn’t hold a weapon, but reached out, leveling to tackle me. I jumped, kicking off his chest and throwing us apart from each other. He landed hard, but I rolled over backwards, flipping back to my feet.

Two more men rushed me, trying to trap me from either side. I paused, then dropped to my knee and raised my arms as one man ran into me. Using his momentum, I took part of his weight and threw him over my head. He crashed into the feet of the other man, and I took off running again, easily outstripping the next man as I headed toward the north wall.

“Is the wall clear?” I asked frantically. “Emmaline?”

Emmaline didn’t answer. There was a war cry, and as I looked, Baylock tackled the man in my pursuit.

“Bay-Baylock!” I fought to breathe. “Can you handle all this?”

“This is what I came for, Alethea!” He was fighting three men at once, and he looked nothing less than in his element.

“Alethea!” Emmaline’s voice screamed. “Alethea, listen! You’re being—” she cut out.

“What?” I yelled back, stumbling to a halt. “I’m being *what?* Emmaline, is the wall clear?”

“They cut our connection!” this shout didn’t come straight to my ear, but I heard Baylock bellowing it toward me. “You have to risk it! Go now!”

He was right. Plunging my hand into my pocket, I pulled out a small, silver gun with a long handle, aimed with both hands, and shot it at the top of the wall. Rope trailed behind the missile as it launched and buried itself in the stone near the top edge. My fingers sank into the handle, and then the material hardened, keeping my hands steady as the rope began to retract.

The missile held tight in the wall, and as the gun lifted, I rose too, using my feet to keep myself from hitting the wall. *Oh man, I really hope you cleared the wall, Emmaline.*

It was a long way up. I kept my gaze steady on the wall in front of me, bouncing off it with my toes, muscles in my arm tight as I moved. I was nearly to the top when my gun jerked hard, and I swung out from the wall and back in, hitting it on my side.

I cursed and looked up. Sure enough, a guard stood at the top of the wall, one hand clenching my life line, the other hacking at it with a knife. I jerked again, then, gritting my teeth, took one hand off the gun and felt at the slick wall for any possible handhold. No sooner had my fingers curled over the wet, rough edges of the bricks and my toes found some purchase than my rope was cut.

I swung precariously, dropping the gun and slapping my free hand against the bricks for another handhold. I stayed there for a moment, body trembling with the effort of suspending myself with minimal purchase on the wall. I had a good head for heights, but even this was enough to make me dizzy. With colossal effort, I moved my foot to a higher, rough brick and pushed up.

Slowly, I climbed. My arms ached and shook, but adrenaline kept me going. I was getting close... then one arm's length away from the top, my right leg slipped, and my screaming arms took the hit. Panic swept over me as my fingers started to slip back. I was going to fall, and I knew it, unless...

I sucked in a breath, then launched myself upwards with everything I had. My forearms smacked down on the top of the wall, and I heaved, throwing myself over and tumbling the ground.

A single guard shouted in surprise, but before he even swung his knife at me, I rolled toward him and kicked hard at his legs. He stumbled, dropping his weapon, and I kicked it across the walkway, scrambling to my feet. Along the wall were four unconscious guards, each with a dart burrowed in their skin. Emmaline had cleared *most* of the wall. Beside one of them was a small black gun. I launched myself at it, then flipped around and pointed it at the guard, breathing heavily.

He lowered his sword. "What do you want?"

I took a step toward him, the better to see his dark eyes.

"Where is the throne room?" I asked sharply, feeling the uncomfortable itch of burrowing into someone's head burn behind my eyes again.

He blinked. "That's just a stunner. You can't make me talk."

"Show me where the throne room is!" my hands were still trembling, but my gaze was steady. Force was a much harder way to get someone's mind to do what you wanted, but it was why I had a chance. His mind was unprotected, and though he tried to resist, I broke through.

Needles seemed to bury into my scalp, but I could see it. Tall, golden double doors stood in the center of a great hall. The image zoomed out, we raced backwards down a hall with enormous, framed pictures, through an archway...

The guard growled, then started shouting. “INTRUDER! HELP! INTRU—”

I shot him. The tiny dart burrowed into his shoulder, and he slumped, stunned.

At least I have a lead, I thought grimly, stripping off my red Weapon’s Master jacket. I wore a black blouse underneath, and my dark hair was plaited down my back. With any luck, I would first be mistaken as a servant. I left my jacket, checked my surroundings, and started running again.

The bastion was dark and gloomy with endless, repetitive corridors. I was able to get in through a tower, and moved quickly down the stairs. I dropped another guard who was on his way up with the stunner, then kept to the shadows.

The few, rare guards were either patrolling the halls or dashing to obey orders superiors said in their ears. They saluted as priests and scholars strolled past, engaged in hefty conversations and books. I could usually hear or sense their approach, giving me adequate time to dash down hallways or slip into empty rooms and nooks. Still, the hunt for the archway that would lead to the throne room was tedious, terrifying, and disheartening.

I sensed another mind up ahead and jogged into a room to my left, peeping through the crack. The man waddled into sight. He was short and pudgy; a scholar wandering the halls alone. More importantly, he had an exceedingly weak mind. I made a snap decision and ran back out into the hall.

He jumped at my sudden appearance, but I grabbed the front of his scholar’s robes, boring my eyes into his. It was too easy; I didn’t even have to say anything. An archway blossomed into my consciousness — an image of his recent memories.

My heart leapt. *It’s close. I’m almost there.*

“You never saw me.” I hissed. The fear vanished from his eyes as I let go of him, and he continued on his way without a worry. I moved quickly in the direction he came from, swinging around the corner.

The deserted hallway stretched for a short distance before breaking off into five separate passageways at various distances from me. My heart sank as quickly as it had leapt. *I’ll never find it.*

As soon as I took a step forward, a high-pitched whistle shrieked through the air, repeating itself in short, sharp blasts. My gut clenched, and abandoning all pretense, I broke into a run.

Come on, come on... I have to be close. One of these hallways!

I hadn’t made up my mind which one to try when I approached the first one. I hesitated, but the sudden appearance of guards at the end of it made up my mind for me. “It’s the intruder!” they shouted, pointing at me and charging in my direction.

Next one. I tore down the hall to the next passageway, skidding to stare down it. It led maybe twenty feet, right into a dead end. *What?*

So I kept running. The guards were fast — their feet slapped loudly on the stone as they ran, but I ran faster. *It’s gotta be this next one. Let it be this one!* I prayed silently, but as I ran,

more guards came streaming out of that third passageway until seven of them stood, blocking my path and leveling stunner guns at me.

Just as the weight of despair began to crush me, as I was about to slow down, I had one wild, crazy idea. I looked into their cold eyes and *pushed* with everything I had. Desperation and determination fueled my power, and pain erupted behind my eyes.

“What are you doing?” I screamed, staggering as I flooded into their heads, convinced my own was going to split in two. “She’s headed to the throne room!” I pointed beyond them, toward the other two chambers, tears flooding my vision at the pain.

They paused for only an instant, then most of them turned, charging away. One called to the guards behind me. “Hurry, we have to catch her!”

“*What?*” some guard shouted behind me.

“Come on!” I cast a look over my shoulder as I beckoned to them, nearly screaming as my mind went barreling into the lead guard’s head. “She’s getting away!”

“To throne room!” another bellowed. “We have to stop her!”

There was a pounding of mad feet, and I was caught up in the midst of them, barreling toward the final and fifth chamber. Dazed that it had worked, I wiped my eyes on my sleeve as I ran on, following the guards.

Midway down the hall was a tall, marble archway. The hall opened wider beyond it, enormous portraits of past rulers lining the walls. We hurtled past them. My breath was coming in gasps, but the hallway ended, opening up into a pristine hall.

Elaborate chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling. The floor was made of marble, as were the pillars that stood sentry, lining the way to the enormous, golden, double door entrance to the throne room.

“Where did she go?”

“She must be hiding!”

“You lot, backtrack to where we were! You, search the other entrance. And the five of you, stay here in case she tries to get into the throne room.” the Captain turned his eyes on me. “And you, get back to the servant’s quarters. This is no place for you.”

I didn’t move, and the guards hurried to obey their captain, until there were only six of us left. One of the guards standing between me and the doors scowled at me.

“You heard the Captain. Git.”

In one strong movement, I leapt, spinning and kicking him in the chest. He went down, and the spell was broken. The other guards lunged at me, calling for backup again, but it was too late. I was running, running as I never had before, between the pillars to the golden double doors. I half-expected it to be locked, but as I slammed my shoulder into them, I tumbled into the room.

The sound behind me was cut short as the doors closed smoothly behind me. No one followed. My eyes travelled across the room. There was a rich red carpet under my feet that rolled forward the length of the room, up a few stairs, and came to rest at the foot of a simple, yet

elegant chair. To the right of the chair stood a man; tall, bald, dressed in a sharp champagne suit. He looked at me without a trace of surprise, without even a trace of expression.

I caught my breath. It was the Chancellor.

This is it. I've been waiting for this moment. “My name is Alethea Davenport.” I started, staring up at him. “And I speak for the people when I say we’ve had enough.” I took a few steps toward him, feeling the familiar anger rise in my chest. “You are not our ruler. And still you sit here in the bastion, keeping worthy competitors out of reach of the throne with your impossible tasks so you can remain on top.” I reached out with my mind, pushing against his, but hit a powerful presence that pushed back. Still, his face remained impassive.

“I defy your rules, the impossible competition for the throne, and your jurisdiction!” My voice was raising. “I am Alethea Davenport, and I command you to stand down, or the people will finally revolt!”

And finally, a small smile twisted his lips. He raised his hand. I tensed, but he merely clicked a button on the remote he held.

A roar of tumultuous noise hit my ears, and I whirled. Behind me the enormous screen of an apparatus solidified, stretching from floor to vaulted ceiling, broadcasting the jam-packed marketplace. They were screaming, stamping their feet, applauding, whistling, *crying*.

A voice roared above them all. “Ladies and gentlemen, she’s done it! Contestant #224 Alethea Davenport has made it to the throne room! We have a victor! ... Or should I say, a *queen!*”

The sounds of the cheers continued as the image changed, and suddenly I was on the screen, magnified, a white-faced girl in all black, standing in the throne room, watching myself broadcasted to the whole city.

I jerked my head around to stare at the Chancellor. “What is this?”

He didn’t respond.

“What a girl of serious grit and talent!” the magnified announcer’s voice continued. “The way she convinced those guards to lead her *right* to her goal! Let’s rewind to the highlights, shall we?” images of me flashed across the screen; me dangling from the side of the bastion, me shooting the guard with the stun gun, me sprinting between tall, marble pillars...

The whole city watched me break in.

“Congratulations, Your Majesty.” It was first thing the Chancellor said.

“Your *Majesty?*” I choked out.

“You’ve done what others couldn’t.”

“Stop messing with me.” I whirled on him. “I broke your rules. I wanted a revolt against you!”

“What rules?” the Chancellor raised an eyebrow. “The only rule I placed was to get to the throne room.”

I don’t believe it. I pushed against his mind again, wanting the truth.

He seemed to know what I was thinking. I watched warily as he moved down the stairs, coming closer until I could see the details in his light brown eyes. Then he lowered the powerful defenses around his mind, and I rushed in.

I'm not the bad guy you've always thought I was, Alethea. His thoughts were shrouded in sincerity. *We need a ruler who can think out of the box, who has unrivaled determination, and who fights to overcome adversity for her people.*

I couldn't speak. The roar of the crowd was in my ears.

You, Alethea, were exactly what we were waiting for.