

Despite the rugs and tapestries spread throughout the hall, Rhea's footsteps echoed as she paced, chainmail shifting underneath her deep green tunic to make small rings whenever she turned. Beautiful light began to color the morning sky as dawn approached, but the torches illuminating the walls still allowed her to see her own reflection in the window. Soon, the sun would rise above the horizon and signal a start to the day, the beginning of war-room meetings and audiences from civilians around the kingdom. Rhea gripped the handle of the sword strapped alongside her waist as she went over her report for the hundredth time, trying to explain it to the reflection in the window as though it would calm her pounding heart.

"Our main problem in Hinothe is the unskilled laborers who are interfering with trade routes from t-the- from Oldwood," she whispered to herself. "The captains have been tasked with preparing soldiers to interact more peacefully... yes, that's good. You can do this... you can—" Suddenly, she was cut off as another head popped into the window's reflection.

"Talking to the window again?" the head asked from beside her. Rhea flinched back, instinct making her grip the handle of her sword as though to attack at a moment's notice. Fortunately, she recognized the head and the teasing voice.

"Len- I-I mean, your highness!" Rhea bowed quickly, her head low before snapping back up to see if anyone else caught her mistake. The hall, however, was empty of people except for a royal guard on the other end facing away from them. He must have been the one to accompany Len here so early. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had come up behind me. I was just..." she trailed off with a vague gesture around the corner, where grand wooden doors separated the decorated halls from the throne room.

“Practicing your report with the window, I know.” Len said amusedly, but her expression softened as she reached out to adjust Rhea’s hair, shorn close to the scalp and left to grow out a few inches over the last few months. “You are going to do great in there. Just breathe,” She smoothed out a fold in her tunic to show the royal family’s crest, gold thread embroidered into the shape of a dragon. “And remember, it’s not the end of the world if you make a mistake, just try to keep on going.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re the princess; no one is going to fire you.” Len pulled back with a frown.

“Maybe not, but there’s a lot of other things they could do to me if I stepped out of line, or offended an important dignitary, or even simply went somewhere without a guard to protect me.” Rhea averted her eyes guiltily. She may not know exactly what would happen to royalty whom the people decided shouldn’t be on the throne, but it wasn’t difficult to imagine.

“That reminds me, I’m sorry I had to leave Lieutenant Tennison with you this morning.” Most days, Rhea would wake and accompany Len to breakfast and then each lesson and appointment, but the thought of today’s added responsibility still made her gut churn. “He owed me for covering his shift a week ago, and it was so last minute...”

“It’s alright,” Len reassured her. “You’re not my handmaiden, I know you needed to practice for the meeting. Besides, Tennison is always diligent, except when one of the maids pass by.” She shook her head, then lowered her voice, smiling conspiratorially. “Thank goodness I had Elizabeth to distract me or I would have slapped him before I

even finished getting dressed.” Rhea relaxed, the familiar feeling lightening her shoulders. Len always seemed to know exactly what to say to make her feel better.

“Elizabeth did very well, then. You look lovely *and* there were no injuries.” She gave Len a small, sincere smile. Her handmaid had chosen a light pink dress that complimented Len’s blonde hair, curled and adorned with small jewels, not a strand out of place. Resisting the urge to smooth a hand over her own hair, Rhea imagined for a moment how soft and silky the dress must feel, made for a true lady. Somehow, it made her armor feel heavier than usual.

Sunlight glinted off the jewels around Len’s neck, blinding Rhea for a moment, and she turned to look out the window. The orange sun painted the clouds above in pink and yellow, but such a beautiful sight could not calm her. She glanced at Len, like there was some way she could turn back time, but Len simply took Rhea’s shoulder, firmly guiding her to the throne room.

“You’ll do fine, Rhea.” Len said with firm assurance, jaw confidently set. “Command their attention. Act like you deserve to be up there, because you do.” Rhea squared her shoulders and took a deep breath, then opened the door for Len, slipping through after her.

Despite the early hour, advisors lined the walls of the throne room, a low murmur from their soft chattering spread across the room. The members of the royal family had already arrived, their thrones were settled in a line with Len taking her seat on the far right, next to the queen. It wasn’t the first time Rhea had observed them and found almost no resemblance. While Len sat daintily, her pink dress and blonde hair fluttering

as if a fairy had shed its wings to attend this meeting, the queen's presence seemed to take up the whole room, likely due in part to the sheer size of her dress, which fell over the sides of the armrests and reached to brush against the thrones on either side. Her gaze pierced through Rhea's entire being, like she could read all of her thoughts and feelings with a simple glance.

Left of the queen sat the king, though it felt almost wrong to say he was sitting on anything. His place in the center of the room and the way most people had to look up at him conveyed his importance, but he seemed to quietly emanate power. Back straight and sturdy as the oak mast of a ship, his head and the top of his throne reached up higher than any of the others. The picture of stoicism, his mouth was set in a straight line even as one of the advisors whispered in his ear. He didn't look at Rhea as she bowed to him, but the queen finally shifted her unsettling stare elsewhere around the room.

"Ser Immodel," a soft voice rose from the far left throne. The prince, Kaye, waved her over with a slight gesture and a small smile. Sitting beside the king, he seemed almost hidden in an alcove made solely by the throne, though he stood when she bowed to him, clasping his hands behind his back. "...How are you?" he asked after a moment.

"I am well, your highness." Rhea bowed her head in respect for his concern. "I hope your morning has been pleasant so far."

"Yes..." Kaye's gaze darted around the room before landing back on her. "I'm looking forward to your report, as well as its conclusion. My sister has been restless without you by her side these past few days."

“Truly?” At his nod, she continued, “I will be sure to keep her in better spirits, then.” He smiled again, a spark of gratefulness or joy or something else Rhea couldn’t define lighting in his eyes. She looked down, unable to meet that gaze. Quietly, so only he could hear, she said, “Truthfully, my prince, I cannot wait for its conclusion as well.” Kaye frowned then, eyebrows coming together as he opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the chattering room quieted to silence as the king stood.

“Let us begin.” He said simply, his low voice reaching each corner of the room. “Ser Immodel, your report.”

[Rhea presents her observations about protests and turmoil around the kingdom.

- Queen is constantly turning the conversation to ask what Kaye thinks
 - Kaye doesn’t do much, listens quietly, but pays close attention.
- When Len perks up to suggest something, she is dismissed by the queen and they get into an argument, which is facilitated by her frustration at Kaye being prioritized in the conversation when she “has good ideas too!”
- Kaye tries to stand up for Len, but she tells him to stop,
 - “I don’t need your help.” She said, as though it was the most obvious truth in the world.]

With each word spoken, each raised voice, Rhea felt like she was growing more and more deaf, like she was holding a pillow over her ears and had to puzzle out what was being said. She couldn’t seem to look at Len and the queen arguing, and so her gaze averted to the other side of the room, where Kaye had backed up and almost shrunk into

the back of his throne. He wasn't looking at them, instead staring at the wall behind Rhea then at her.

"I should have a voice here too!" Len's face had morphed into a scowl, strands of hair falling from their place as she emphasized her statements. "The kingdom doesn't need a careful approach; these protests and disturbances need to be clipped in the bud! Why can't you see that?"

Despite their shifting glances, there were times that Rhea and Kaye would share a look, one she recognized as the shared experience of watching an argument you weren't a part of and yet had no choice but to witness. It was a look the two of them had shared before in moments such as these, where the manners drilled into Len were deemed unimportant and fell away.

"It's not about the solution to this issue." The queen, though quieter than Len, would not stand down. Strangely, they shared matching scowls, seeming to resemble each other far more closely than when peace still reigned. "[rest of argument cut off]"

"That's enough." The king spoke sharply and quietly, yet the cacophony in the room went silent, everyone's attention turned to him. "We will investigate this matter further. The leaders of these groups will be found and we will discuss a compromise."

"Father," Len stood suddenly, talking to him over the queen's head. A part of Rhea wanted to go up and quiet Len. They both knew how this would turn out; it was always the same, but she never seemed to learn her argument was no match for the king's ability to dismiss her. "You can't be serious. With our current resources it's more strategic to take out the leader of this group and then—"

“Sit down, Quelenna. I have made my decision.” His tone made it clear there was no room for argument, and, slowly, Len sat back down, turning away to glare at the wall.

“Ser Immodel, you are dismissed.” The king said firmly, yet watching Len as though she would burst if he didn’t keep an eye on her. “Take the princess with you. I’m in no mood for loud interruptions today.”

Mouth half-agape, Rhea glanced from the king to Len, who still stared daggers into the wall, to the queen between them, a small smile on her painted lips. Averting her eyes before they could glare at the queen, Len stood up and managed to storm gracefully out the door, slamming it with a bang. Her eyes flicked to Kaye, who was looking at her sympathetically. There was some comfort in that, she decided as she quickly bowed and hurried out of the room.

Catching sight of Len from down the hall, Rhea rushed to catch up, finally slowing to a walk once there was about three feet between them. Neither said a word as they trekked silently from the central area of the castle and towards the west wing, though Rhea could hear Len taking deep breaths over and over, forcibly relaxing her shoulders and holding her head up high. No matter how much she may want to, that same etiquette that kept Len from defying the king also kept Rhea from speaking before Len addressed her, from comforting her until asked.

Plot:

- After Len tells Rhea to leave her alone(with some cryptic “protect Kaye if anything happens to me”), Rhea stays at Len’s door until the end of her shift. Someone replaces her post at lunchtime and Rhea goes about her normal routine.

That may entail:

- Sharpening/polishing her sword
 - Midday prayers
 - Lunch, during which we meet some of the other knights, including Kaye’s private guard who she’s pretty good friends with since they end up spending time together when Len and Kaye do.
- Her break is interrupted by screams outside and the castle suddenly shaking. Both Rhea and Roderigo run to their respective charges, but when Rhea gets to Len’s room, the window shatters inwards and Len is essentially plucked out by a large dragon claw. Rhea stabs the dragon(or tries) and is tossed away, earning her a dislocated shoulder at the least.
- Len tries to subtly keep Rhea away from the dragon before it grabs her.
- Rhea is trying to find a way to the roof where the dragon is, but runs into Kaye and Roderigo first, who are on their way to a safe room. Roderigo sees Rhea injured, she tells them haltingly about Len, and he tells her to take Kaye. Her injuries mean she could defend Kaye from humans, but she couldn’t do much against the dragon, which is where Roderigo goes.

- Rhea hates the idea of not rescuing(or at the least avenging) Len, but Len had asked her to protect Kaye and her injuries are pretty bad, so she reluctantly takes Kaye and heads to the safe room. When they arrive, the king is there, but he commands them to go down the escape route while he stays.
- They make their way to Oldwood, where Rhea gets patched up. Along the way, we get a glimpse of where Rhea and Kaye stand with each other: Rhea will protect Kaye no matter what, fighting against bandits or monsters even with her injuries while Kaye is frozen in fear, unable to run even when the attacker charges him, but ends up stabbing the guy well enough for Rhea to finish him off.
- After Oldwood, the villagers recommend they go see an oracle in the woods.

Character mapping:

Rhea :

- Protagonist and point of view character, the only female knight in the kingdom of Rinpitas.
- Rhea wants to be softer, more feminine, like Len. She wants to be strong at the same time as being vulnerable and wants to be taken care of sometimes, but she thinks no one will respect her or she'll lose the life and career she loves, since she's the only female knight in the castle. She doesn't feel like she can have both sides of herself. The masculine "knightly" side is stoic and guarded(no pun intended), an incredible fighter, not afraid to stand up for herself... The feminine "ladylike" side of her is more of a wish, where she wants to open up about her hopes and doubts and fears, wants to wear dresses and be protected and fall in love. Only Len knows about that side of her and seemingly accepted her.

Kaye

- Secondary protagonist, the prince of Rinpitas and first heir to the throne. Doesn't want to be king, but doesn't feel as though he has a choice. Tries to be like Len and his father, but never quite succeeds, for better and for worse.
- Likely the softest and most timid character in the story, and must learn to stand up for himself and the people he cares about. Wears glasses.

Len

- The villain of our story, working with the dragon to take over the kingdom. The princess of Rinpitas and technically second heir to the throne.
- Len wants to be queen more than anything, with Kaye's well-being being her secondary priority. She loves him though she doesn't actually know him.

Rhea and Kaye

- Rhea, while stubborn, is eventually able to see Kaye prove himself, believing that he would make a good king from how he's able to lead, however gently he does it, and sees he has his own way of defending himself. She still has the urge to step in front of him, and does at times, but I want them to trust each other entirely by the end of their journey.

Rhea and Len:

- Fails as best as I can do. Kaye is someone they unconditionally protect, but in different ways. They both want to be the idealized versions of themselves, but feel as though they can't eat their cake and have it too; feel like they need to choose.
- As much as she loves Rhea, Len doesn't believe Rhea can protect Kaye, since she couldn't protect Len from the dragon. It's contradictory, but at this point Len is too stuck in her ways to see differently

Kaye and Len:

- Kaye looks up to Len since she's his older sister. He wants to be like her and doesn't believe that she took over the kingdom at first, eventually seeing her for who she really is, the good and the bad.

- Len is fiercely protective of Kaye, but believes he wants to be king or that it's an intrinsic part of him that is destined to be king, and so believes she has to keep him away from the throne, like a greek tragedy where her actions are precisely what leads to what she hopes won't happen. She "knows" he would be awful at it, but she also doesn't want him to be a target.

