

“Kaye,” Rhea turned back to see Kaye gazing down the dark tunnel, back towards the castle. She shook her head, driving away the thoughts as best she could. There was no time to think about what happened back there. Calling Kaye’s name again, he finally turned as she pointed up at a wooden square in the tunnel roof. “We’re here.” Rhea got down on one knee directly underneath it, guiding Kaye to step on her right hand and boosting him up to unlatch the door. Her other hand tried to support his foot as Kaye braced himself against the wall, but sharp stings seemed to pierce it all the way to her shoulder. It had to be broken; no other injury had ever felt like this.

She grunted, squeezing her eyes shut until light shone into the passageway, then boosting him up higher. Finally, the pressure disappeared, and Rhea practically staggered back in relief, rubbing her shoulder where she still felt a dull pulsing. Goodness, how was she going to do any of this herself? If she couldn’t even lift her arm without pain then how could she keep them alive? Would she still be able to hunt? Maybe they could hitch a ride with someone on the nearest road, or maybe they could hire someone to protect them. Did either of them have any money?

“Rhea?” Kaye’s quiet voice, so small she almost didn’t hear it, snapped her out of her thoughts. “How are you going to get up here?”

Rhea looked up at him, considering their options. If she knew the door would be this high up, she would have grabbed a rope from the safe room before they left. “Is there a rope or a long branch nearby?”

“No,” Kaye started to get up. “I can go look for one.”

Rhea's arms shot up, hands waving to stop him. "Wait, wait! Don't go anywhere." She couldn't risk him getting lost or attacked or anything while she was still stuck down here. "I'll find a way out of here."

Dirt seemed to make up the tunnel roof just under the trapdoor, roughly two feet above her. If it wasn't too dense... Rhea took out her sword and ran at the wall, able to find purchase on its slightly curved walls as she stabbed the blade into the dirt just under Kaye's kneeling form. Using it as leverage, she managed to reach the grassy surface and Kaye leaned down to help, pulling on her left arm as it fought to hold onto the strands of grass. Rhea clenched her jaw, her arm feeling like it was separating from her shoulder. In the pain and panic, she kicked herself up the wall, the momentum allowing her to swing a leg up and tumble over the ledge. For a moment, she laid on her back, catching her breath.

All of a sudden, Rhea heard herself laugh. What in the world was she doing? The thought applied to both her laughter and her current situation, and it only made her start laughing harder. She couldn't do this; she could barely pull herself up, couldn't seem to think when her arm met any kind of force... The idea that she could keep anyone safe now was ridiculous. Even when her arm was intact she still couldn't save Len. That dragon took everything.

Tears pricked at her eyes just as she heard another sound: the soft *crunch* of leaves and twigs. In a flash, she was up, glancing around to see a man in the shadow of a tree approaching them. Rhea didn't dare glance back at Kaye, terrified this thin, yet lumbering man would take the opening and lunge at her. He was small enough not to

pose a threat under normal circumstances, but the smile on his face and the sword at his side made Rhea throw up her hands to keep him from coming closer, yelling “stay back!”

The man stopped and put his hands up in surrender, though it didn’t make him look any less menacing. “Hey, I don’t want any trouble.” He wouldn’t meet Rhea’s eyes, instead following Kaye as he moved behind her. “I just saw two people pop out of the ground in the middle of the woods.” He eyed them up and down.

“There’s no need to be concerned. We’ll just be on our way.” Rhea said firmly, but he seemed to simply ignore her.

“You know,” he mused with a sneer growing on his face. “Those are some nice clothes for people who just barely crawled out of a hole. If you give me some of them, maybe some of that armor, then we can both just walk away.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be happening.”

- The man recognizes Kaye as the prince and attacks Rhea, using her arm to distract her. Rhea tackles the man, freeing Kaye to pull the sword out of the dirt wall.
- She manages to wrestle the man under her until he hits her arm. He escapes her hold and runs for Kaye.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, Rhea flipped herself over and lunged in the man’s direction. She caught a split second scene of Kaye, finally pulling her sword out, eyes closed in concentration, and then the man leaping across the tunnel entrance towards him.

“Stay away from him!” Rhea cried out, grasping the man’s ankle tightly and pulled on it. The man, balance and trajectory interrupted, fell short of Kaye and straight into the tunnel. For a minute, there was silence as all three registered what just happened.

She looked up at Kaye, shaking and barely holding her sword. He was safe, but adrenaline still coursed through her veins, forcing her to remember the man in the tunnel. Taking her sword back, she grabbed Kaye’s shoulder, but he continued watching the dark hole.

“Hey,” Rhea frowned, then reached to the trapdoor and slammed it shut, making Kaye snap out of his frozen state with a jump. “We have to leave here before that guy climbs out.” She pulled on his arm, practically dragging him to stand and run out through the trees.

They followed the light of the setting sun, Rhea shifting her hold to his wrist instead of his arm. They wound through the trees and bushes toward the road. It had to be in this direction, west and traveling away from the castle. Kaye was beginning to slow, fatigue from the day catching up with him. Truthfully, she could feel her steps becoming more and more leaden, but she could have celebrated all night when she saw a merchant’s wagon in the distance.

- For now, Kaye and Rhea will have found a way to hitch a ride with the merchant. They are riding in the back of his wagon, to the south and away from the castle.

Rhea looked in the direction of the castle, though the darkening sky hid any of its high spires. How could she have begun the day there, right in the heart of royalty, only to have no clue when she would return? There was no one to help her now, no other soldiers or guards, no king or queen to defer to.

Shifting to sit next to her, Kaye gazed out, watching as the castle and the town disappeared in the distance. Right, he had lost his home, his family, too. How terrified must he be, to have to rely on an injured soldier with no idea where they would go or how they would make it there? Rhea gazed at him for a moment, stuck with the urge to say something, anything, to reassure him he wasn't alone.

Plot mapping

Act 1

- We begin the story with Rhea about to give a big speech to the royal family. She's practicing in the reflection of a window before the sun comes up when we meet Len, who gives her some friendly advice. Rhea also talks with Kaye before the meeting begins, showing their distant but unique connection.
- Debate within the royal family, ending with Len having to go to her room. When Rhea reaches her afternoon break, she goes about her normal routine, seeing some friends, like fellow guard Roderigo as well as Kaye.
- Dragon attacks the Castle, injuring Rhea and seemingly killing Len. Rhea has to take Kay down to the safe room where the King tells them to leave the Castle and the kingdom.
- Concern for her and Kaye's lives eventually forces her to leave and drag him along the tunnel, but once they get out, she's worried she won't be good enough or strong enough or smart enough to keep them alive. However, someone recognizes Kaye and Rhea must fight them off, soon realizing she is the only person who can and will protect Kaye now. There are no higher officials to refer to or orders to follow, but she understands that it's her duty to Len and the kingdom's future to do her best to protect Kaye.
- Rhea and Kaye decide to go to a village in the Oldwoods, farthest from the Castle and the Castle Town where no one should recognize Kaye. On their way, they find

a society of Gnomes who help them and lead them to the Oldwoods village. They don't trust Rhea, and Kaye must convince Rhea to give up her sword to the Gnomes.

- A villager from the Oldwoods finds them and helps them heal Rhea's injury from the dragon attack. The Oldwoods villagers are shown to be a peaceful mixed-species society. Though they aren't very technologically advanced, when an Owlbear crashes through the village their quick response and dispatch of the creature impresses Rhea. She has more respect for their philosophies(trusting in others, the ability to be open and still be a warrior).
 - As much as Rhea likes the village, she still feels duty-bound to Len and wants to leave Kaye to be protected by the people in the village while she finds out the state of the kingdom and Len. Kaye knows now that he has a responsibility to learn what happened to the kingdom in his absence and possibly take it back, and so refuses to stay. Since the dragon is driving more and more beasts into the Oldwoods, the villager who originally found them, Solana, wants to leave and kill the dragon to keep her family and home safe, and so accompanies them.

Act 2

- The three of them go down a river to a large lake and travel across it, docking at the next town, which is having a dragon-themed festival. Most people are celebrating, which horrifies our group who have only seen the destruction the dragon has wreaked on their homes. Here, they find Roderigo, Rhea's friend from

the Castle, who has been searching for them. He tells them that the queen called upon the dragon, and the official statement is that the other members of the royal family are still in the castle, but in actuality she killed the King and Len in order to take the throne. He offers to help them complete their journey and take them straight to the queen, which they(eventually) accept.

- The protagonists infiltrate the castle, but before they can do much of anything, they are captured seemingly out of nowhere and brought to the queen. This is when they find out Len is the new queen, having called the dragon to the castle in the first place, killing the king and queen, immediately assuming the throne, and sending Roderigo out to find Kaye and bring him back.
- Rhea and Sol are taken to the Castle prison while Kaye is being taken and imprisoned in his room. In the castle prison, Len has a conversation with Rhea, mirroring their earlier friendship and how it has devolved, picking apart her insecurities. Len then expresses how impressed she was that Sol nearly killed the dragon, asking if she wanted to work for her, and amusedly dismissing both of them when Sol refuses.

Act 3

- Rhea and Sol must work together in order to escape from the Castle prison. They go to rescue Kaye as well, but he has escaped before they reach his room. Rhea must fight through guards to get to him, using the skills she learned throughout her journey to escape and rally others around the Castle to help them and take down Len's terrible rule.

- Final boss battle: the brave allies around the Castle hold back guards and Len's supporters as Rhea tries to make her way to Len. Finally, she reaches the dragon, pulling Len down. I want Rhea to be knocked down, where it looks like Len will take the upper hand and use it to kill Rhea, but Kaye steps in front of her, bravely protecting Rhea. As the two of them fight Len together, Sol takes down the dragon(or some other, more thematic combination of people), and Len's power, the fear she held the kingdom under, is gone.
- Kaye and Rhea work together to make reparations for Len's actions. Kaye will become king, accepting responsibility to his people despite the difficulties and trying to be benevolent. Rhea has become Kaye's chief advisor and protector, but also is shown to have grown her hair out long, be less stoic, and has become the person she was once too afraid to be.

Relationships and Character Development in Act 2

Rhea

- Wants to seem capable and strong because she's the only female knight in the kingdom and has to hide parts of herself in order to be accepted and deemed qualified for her job; doesn't speak up or out against others. She needs to learn she's worth more than being a sword and shield.
- Feels she has a duty to Len and the kingdom to protect Kaye, but that motivation soon becomes true devotion to his safety and well-being.

Kaye

- While Kaye has been soft and passive throughout the first arc and beginning of the second, he is meant to learn more about his strengths: connecting with others...

Sol

- Skilled warrior from the Oldwoods village. Prioritizes her village's safety and cares deeply for all the people there, enough that she's willing to leave to take on an outside threat with no certainty of returning.
- Has a connection and appreciation for all creatures, even the dragon she's setting out to defeat.
- I want her to be a friend to both Rhea and Kaye, though their exact relationship and dynamic is still under consideration.

Len

- Don't hear much about her until the end of the second act, where essentially all her flaws and values mix together to make someone who will do anything to keep the throne. She is also in denial about her morality and battling with the grief of having killed her own parents and driving away her brother.

Rhea and Kaye

- Throughout the middle of the story, the relationship between Rhea and Kaye is meant to develop as they become someone the other can rely on. Rhea teaches Kaye to fight as her arm continues to heal.
- She learns to trust Kaye and opens up to him, telling him how she wants to be taken seriously but also be herself.
- In the same vein, Kaye tells Rhea how he always hid from the responsibility of becoming king, those high expectations everyone always put on him, but now that he left behind the kingdom he doesn't know who or what he's supposed to be.