

Chapter 1

~~They had set out from Canterbury well before Michaelmas, the early fall weather pleasant for traveling.~~ A company of forty strong including a retinue of the king's soldiers, ~~set out from Canterbury well before Michaelmas, the early fall weather pleasant for travelling.~~ They had spent several days at Glastonbury, the shining city, so that Lady Imma could accomplish her mission and fulfill the final request of her dead husband [AU: What is the final request?].

The abbot's gratitude for the books made her uncomfortable. After all, it was King Edward who supported the copying of religious works and Geoffrey had followed his lord in all things; and in her turn, Imma had followed her lord. It was not as if she had initiated the program herself; she was merely doing her duty. Imma always knew her duty, and did it, and did not complain – to other people at least [AU: I suggest you reword without the commas and dash so that it is easier to digest]. She had frequently expounded at length to her cat on the subject of the iniquities of the English, her husband and even her spindle – ~~Imma liked to weave but the spindle was intractable sometimes – but Prys (the cat) had remained behind at Canterbury in the care of Lady Helen's cook.~~

Now her duty to Geoffrey was done. She had not failed him in this task at least and that, she supposed, was a comfort. Though it did not make her heart feel less full of dread.

“Won't Elizabeth be delighted?” Lady Helen trilled as Griselda, her lady's maid, brushed her hair out. Griselda, ancient and wrinkled, had insisted on accompanying Lady Helen to Glastonbury. Now in her late sixties, Lady Helen, plump and elderly, could never believe her good fortune. Everything was a delight – Imma and her Welsh accent; the mission King Edward had sent Lady Helen's husband on; the fact that she had been able to accompany her husband on said mission; Glastonbury itself, tucked in its cluster of hills; the abbot and his long stories about

Comment [ER1]: I struggled with the intro just a little. It left me wondering did they set out for Canterbury before Glastonbury or after. I suggest moving around some of the sentences here. I moved some sentences around without changing your wording so that it flows more naturally.

Comment [ER2]: The sentence here slows down the flow and coherence of the paragraph. I had to read it more than once to understand what was happening. Consider smoothing out as suggested.

Comment [ER3]: Move this sentence up. The mention of the cat and its name appears to have little relevance to the scene. I suggest cutting so that you may stay focused on the tale you are telling.

Comment [ER4]: Here we have a head hopping transition. It seems we went from Imma's POV to Lady Helen's POV. It is best to keep a consistent POV when possible. Consider revising so this is from Imma's perspective as she witnesses this.

the founding of the monastery by Joseph of Arimathea, who had brought the holy grail here before it had gone to its final resting place. And now she was thrilled that she would be spending time with her sister, Lady Elizabeth.

Imma had never met Lady Elizabeth, but she had heard a great deal about her, mostly from Helen's lips. Elizabeth had practically reared the Earl of Wessex and his younger brother, though she, like Helen, was merely an aunt to the men. Elizabeth had a formidable reputation but Imma did not quail to meet formidable old ladies. There were plenty in her own clan. Back home in Cymru, which these English called Wales.

Upon reaching Glastonbury, they had discovered that Lady Elizabeth had moved to the island keep of Athelney for the winter, accomplishing the household's move from Glastonbury for her nephew Robert while he was fighting the Welsh. October was battle month; the English sensibly kept fighting to a minimum during sowing, growing and reaping seasons, but once the harvest was in, the blood-let began.

Yet it was November they called blood month, for that was when the animals were butchered and their meat preserved for the winter. Imma found the English most curious. She rarely found herself at ease among them – Helen being the exception because Helen could make anyone feel loved and wanted.

Unsurprisingly, Helen had been delighted at the good fortune they had achieved when her husband, Lord Harold, had been tasked by Lord Edward to demand an accounting of his stewardship of Wessex from Robert the Steward. It meant Helen could spend time with her sister, Elizabeth, and her nephew, Robert. Imma privately wondered what Robert would think of their mission, and if they would be welcomed by him. Elizabeth would surely welcome Helen,

Comment [ER5]: It appears we have moved back to Imma's POV here. Let's try to keep the whole scene from Imma's POV.

Comment [ER6]: I notice you use a lot of the passive voice "had" or "have" before verbs, etc. You can simply cut these out for stronger sentences and sharper writing.

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Comment [ER7]: I am already slowed down, confused, and rereading this page to keep up with who is who. In this passage you name 6-7 people in 1 paragraph. You could, if really needed, give information about Helen's husband without referring to the names of others. Such as "Lord Harold had been tasked to demand...". Ask yourself if the reader really needs to know who tasked him or the names of nephews that are watched over, etc.

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and by virtue of her relationship to Harold, him as well, but how Imma would be greeted remained to be seen.

“Isn’t it true that Lord Robert fights the Welsh even now?” Imma asked. Imma was under no illusion that Elizabeth would not hold her race against her [AU: when you say her “race” I instantly imagined her with a different skin color. Considering revising if this is not the visual you want the reader to have of her appearance throughout the book.]. And Lord Robert would be not better pleased upon his return from battle. If he returned. Imma’s uncle, the king of ~~a united~~ Wales, had managed what her own father had not during his brief tenure as king of Gwynedd. ~~Graffuydd ap Llewelyn had~~ He managed it by hiring Viking mercenaries from Dublin; a more war-mongering people did not exist anywhere in the known world.

Comment [ER8]: I gave some suggested deletions of wording that slowed down your paragraph, felt too hard to read or pronounce, or chopped up the sentence.

“Lord Robert won’t even notice you’re there,” Helen said reassuringly, which did nothing to ease Imma’s concerns. Lord Robert would certainly be well aware of each and every inhabitant and guest of his household; from what the abbot had said, the keep wasn’t that large. Imma certainly wasn’t going to stay in quarters in the inner bailey amidst all of the soldiers. Robert might overlook her there, but the soldiers certainly wouldn’t. Although if a fair one caught her attention, she would not be completely averse to a mild flirtation. She had suffered one marriage to a cold-blooded English; King Edward had promised he would arrange another for her by spring. She had made him promise not to betroth her during the winter; she wanted a reprieve from the demands of men. She did not say so to Edward, but told him she needed time to grieve her dead husband.

Comment [ER9]: Here we have a good example of info-dumping which I cover in myletter. Let’s keep the story moving along with what’s currently happening in the scene without pushing in so much backstory. You can squeeze in facts about her terrible marriage when it’s more relevant, say the first time she considers a new suitor or when she meets the hero of the book and they have their first interaction. You can even keep this an unknown fact until her first intimate encounter with the hero of the book where you can interject some anxiety she has due to an abusive past marriage.

But she had nothing to grieve. When she had buried Geoffrey, her tears had been ~~shed~~ she shed tears in relief. God in his mercy had delivered her from her marriage-bond. Had

Comment [ER10]: Passive voice again

she been braver, she would have taken her morning-gift from Geoffrey and run off, never to marry again. But where would she go? And what would she do when she got there?

Helen dismissed the maid with a word, then turned to Imma and said, “Surely it is not so dreadful as that?”

“What?” Imma asked, startled from her reverie.

“A meal with the abbot,” Helen replied with a smile. “You look quite fierce, dear Imma.”

Imma smoothed the expression from her face as the years of her marriage had taught her to do. Helen knew full well she had not been thinking about a meal with the abbot, but one of the ways Helen remained cheerful and ever-delighted was not to allow the grimmer truths of the world to intrude upon her. And Imma would never tell the truth about her marriage, save to the cat Prys when she was alone and unlikely to be overheard.

~~“I’m beginning to long for joint of beef,” Imma said, matching Helen’s light tone. “Or even a piece of mutton.” The abbot of Glastonbury monastery did not serve meat at his tables, not even for an atheling.~~

~~“I would pledge my manor house at Sandwich for a meal of venison and duck,” Helen admitted. “Or even trout and lamprey—”~~

~~“Stop!” Imma held up a hand, laughing. “You’re making my stomach growl and no doubt tonight we will dine on bilberries and beans.”~~

Helen leaned forward and touched her cheek. “It is good to hear you laugh. Oh, Imma. If only you could be as happy as I am.”

“That is your gift, my lady,” Imma said, her heart sinking with the knowledge that happiness was not a state she herself would likely ever reach. ~~As a young girl she had been~~

Comment [ER11]: Here we transition from the backstory info-dumping narrative to what’s happening in the scene. So far there is so much info dumping of past events and people that I have forgotten who is in the scene and what they are doing.

Comment [ER12]:

Comment [ER13]: Excellent. This says a lot about her miserable past marriage. You can just keep this and omit the full backstory of the man above.

Comment [ER14]: Here I detect you are trying to make things sound more historical since this is a historical romance. However, it would be more effective to avoid “telling” she is thinking about the beef, and instead “show her” eating it. What does it taste like? What is the texture? What does it make her think of? Show the reader what life is like during these times as the characters experience it. Otherwise, there is not point mentioning food in dialogue, which has no purpose.

Comment [ER15]: Consider saving all of this talk about food for a scene later that shows them dining in the Medieval hall actually eating and experiencing it. Make the food relevant to a scene that moves your story forward.

Comment [ER16]: I suggest cutting this out since it is too much information cramming of backstory. I feel as if the chapter still hasn’t really started. You can squeeze in relevant bits of info as the story progresses, with less detail.

~~raised by her uncle after her father had died in battle and her mother in childbirth. She could still remember that burial, the infant in its shroud, placed in her mother's arms, and her mother in her shroud, confined to the dark earth for all eternity.~~

~~—That was not what the priest said but it was what she believed as a little girl. Then the ferocious King Gruffydd ap Llewelyn had fostered her, not knowing what to do with a tiny girl among his tall sons, so perhaps he had not reared her as gently as some but he had loved her with all his heart. His female relatives tried their best to teach her, and as she grew older, her uncle provided lessons and companions. There had been happy moments: the laughter of Gruffydd when his female bard, Efa, told a story; a blossoming in her heart at a young male friend's kiss; moments like the gift of a ring, not often received but treasured when given.~~

Lately there had been no times of happiness, only a bleak emptiness that Imma did not know how to fight. She grasped Helen's hand; Helen had offered the only bright minutes in her days. But even as she clasped the older woman's hand, tears blurred Imma's sight. She would not have a kind husband like Lord Harold, who loved his Helen and indulged her whims and sacrificed his own wants and comforts so she would not lack. No, Imma would be married off to a stranger in want of a fortune. It would be an older man, with sons grown or nearly so, impatient with the young wife who came with the treasure, just as Geoffrey had been. She had wanted to rail against him when he complained of her untried youth; her youth would disappear in time, and he had known her age when he had decided upon marrying her.

~~She knew what her destiny was. Why could she not embrace it with the peaceful resignation that other women did? Perhaps if she'd had children to occupy her mind and her heart, it would have been different.~~

Comment [ER17]: This is another opportunity where you can insert the pain of her bad past marriage and keep it shorter and relevant to the passage.

Comment [ER18]: I suggest cutting this excess narrative. If this ties into one of her deep desires or goals, let's put it in somewhere more relevant to the action or things happening in the scene instead of a feeling of waxing and waning over her plight.

“Come, Imma,” Helen said with another of her sweet smiles. “It is a whole long winter to get through before spring. Who knows what will happen before then?”

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The following morning, Harold, Helen, Imma and all their company set out for Athelney.

The sun cast a weak light through the low clouds and the wind had turned sharp and bitter.

Bending her head into her cloak and pulling her scarf more tightly across her face, Imma hoped the journey to Athelney would be short.

They entered the forest beyond Glastonbury, the king’s soldiers more alert now on this dangerous ground. Imma got out of the cart – despite the padded leather seats, every jolt on the road was transmitted directly to her buttocks and she needed the relief of walking. Catching a flash of white through the trees, she was sure she’d spotted a large crane. A gift like that might make her more welcome at Athelney. With a word to Helen, she took up her bow and stepped off the track into the trees.

The forest must screen a lake or a pond, she thought as she crept deeper among the trees, bow held at ready; cranes usually nested near water [AU: Suggest rewording previous sentence. I am unclear what “screen a lake” means and the semi-colon makes it choppy]. She moved slowly and carefully, watching where she set her feet; she was patient and a good hunter. There!

She lifted her bow and sighted on the bird as it rose into the air not far from where she stood. And then she heard the hoarse guttural cries of thiefmen on the road. Instinctively, she dropped the bow and threw herself to the ground, rolling into the underbrush. She lay there, holding her breath quietly and checking her movements so that the sound of dry leaves cracking would not give her location away.

Comment [ER19]: I feel as if this is a good place for the chapter to begin with everything above it information dumping and backstory. You could move this up all the way to page 1 and remove everything in between. It is always best to start your first chapter where all of the action is happening.

~~It had been summer the day the English slavers came to North Wales with their hoarse guttural cries so like these thiefmen. That day, her uncle had driven the slavers off, but not before they had taken many captives. Imma had barely escaped being one of them.~~

~~But today~~Today she had no fierce warrior uncle to protect her as he once did. From her hiding place under the brush, she could not see the road. But she could hear the terrified screams of the women and the shrill cries of the horses that rose over the sounds of the forest. At the laughter of the thiefmen, she curled into a tight ball, praying they would not discover her. She could feel the thunder of the fighting and the ring of steel blade on blade, the crunch of spear against flesh as the king's company strove desperately to defeat the thiefmen.

Imma squeezed her eyes closed and put her palms over her ears. She prayed, silently and incoherently, over and over, as the Celtic priests in Wales had taught her. But the words did not give her comfort.

Fear and anger tore at her and she had to force herself not to grab her bow and join the fight. She was no warrior; she would only be cut down. Frantic to control herself, she began reciting in her mind the tales she had learned to tell from her uncle's favorite bard, the woman Efa. Imma calmed as she went over the familiar stories, focusing on finding the right details to describe King Pryderi, stolen from his home on the night of his birth – he had lived to have many adventures. Although in the end he was killed over a disagreement concerning a pig. She did not want to think of King Pryderi dying over a pig when she could still hear what was happening out there on the road.

She stuffed her hand in her mouth as the hysteria returned; perhaps she should focus on more spiritual matters.

Comment [ER20]: Again unnecessary memory and backstory into the past.

Comment [ER21]: Due to how frightened she is on her own with bad guys coming, would she really let her mind wander nostalgically to the past? This feels like a way to force in more backstory. Try to stay in the moment with what she is experiencing. Most likely she would be plotting a way to escape or save herself if she is found. You could show her breaking out in a sweat with her heart ready to explode in her chest. Maybe she even tunes her ears in sharper to the woods to listen for footsteps.

She did not dare leave the shelter of the forest, not even after the noise of the fighting had died down and the forest sounds returned. She had seen enough of war to know that when men became outlaws, and their treasure lust rose, they would stop at nothing to satisfy themselves.

She knew the thiefmen had won because the screams of the women lasted far into the night.

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When the sun rose the following morning, Imma crept from her shelter and found the shattered remains of the company. Her stomach heaved at the sight of the bloody, torn bodies and she could not stop vomiting even after her stomach was empty. The thiefmen had left none alive. They had misused the women viciously, even old Griselda. Imma could not keep back the whimpers, small cries like a frightened animal. She forced her hand into her mouth, biting hard on her knuckles as her chest heaved and she fought for breath.

The trunks had been torn open and the finery trampled into the dirt and the blood.

Anything valuable had been stolen, ~~of course~~, including the horses. She could do nothing for the dead, except make sure that none had survived. When she found Helen, she began to cry. Helen had been so excited to see her Elizabeth, childlike in her delight at surprising her older sister. How in God's name could such a gentle-natured woman have been forced to suffer this horror?

Next to Helen's mutilated body was Harold, run through with a spear that still protruded from his chest, a grimace frozen on his face; no doubt he had fallen trying to protect his wife. Harold, who had been charged with providing an accounting of the work of Robert the Steward of Wessex.

Comment [ER22]: This sounds terrifying. If she is listening to women as they are raped or tortured, wouldn't that cause more terror effects in this character? She may be having a panic attack, crying as quietly as she can, mind scrambling all over the place trying to figure out where to go or what to do. Show her rise up and try to get her way out of there instead of cower and hide if you want her to appear like a strong character. Keep the action moving. I would far prefer to see her creep through the woods trying to find her way out while dodging the thieves and screams, praying nobody hears or sees her.

Comment [ER23]: There is a lot of telling here. Can you show us what this mutilated body looks like? What are the smells, sounds, and textures in this scene? Wouldn't she drop down next to Helen and check if she is alive, maybe touch her arm or have a moment of solace or prayer even? I am having a hard time feeling pulled into the scene despite you telling us it is graphic. Also, where is her display of fear? Wouldn't she be terrified that these bad guys are still out there and now she is all alone?

Looking at the devastation, Imma wondered if this Robert had not wanted to be called to account. Did he think destroying the company would prevent the accounting? The English were prideful and boastful; they did not suffer insults lightly and Harold's purpose could have been considered as such. But how would Robert have known that such an accounting was due? Imma doubted he had been informed ahead of time. Still, she did not trust the English. Or, rather, she trusted that the English were capable of anything.

Kneeling beside Helen, Imma realized her own precarious situation. She pushed thoughts of blame from her mind and turned her attention to the matter of saving herself. Daughter to Dafyd, niece to Gruffydd, she had long ago learned the even Welsh princesses must sometimes rely only upon themselves.

As she rose to her feet, the fact that she was far from her native shores struck her forcibly. In this England, Helen had been kind to her, teaching her the English ways, counseling her how to adapt to her cold English husband. Disoriented and alone, Imma had held to the friendship Helen had offered with gratitude. She had had no female companions of her own; Geoffrey had not allowed her to bring her Welsh lady friends to Kent; he despised the Welsh. When elderly Geoffrey had died, Helen and Harold had continued their kindnesses to her. They had not been kind to her only out of duty to Geoffrey but because they genuinely liked and cared for her. Harold had been the one to suggest that she accompany Helen and him on the journey to Athelney, stopping first to do her duty at Glastonbury, giving her time to cope with the rapid changes in her life. ~~And look what had happened.~~ [AU: If this is a question, it needs a question mark, yet I suggest omitting it due to no purpose.]

Lost and alone. Imma slowly rose to her feet. Hearing a sound behind her, she whirled, dagger drawn. For a heart-stopping moment, she thought the thiefmen had returned. Then she

Comment [ER24]: Ah ha! Now she does what I suggested above. Maybe bring this up when she first sees Helen.

Comment [ER25]: Passive voice again

Comment [ER26]: Passive voice. Take out the 'had' in these.

Comment [ER27]: Perhaps this information about Helen would be better earlier in the chapter when you first introduce her as a character. This hardly seems like the time for more backstory. It is beginning to feel draining just to keep up with the background as you entwine it with the present.

saw one of the horses, a gray palfrey, limping along the road toward her. Taking a shaky breath, she slipped her dagger back up her sleeve and caught the gray's reins. The thieftmen had no use for a limping horse, but to her experienced eye there was nothing seriously wrong with the mare. Imma bent, running her hands over the tender leg. The palfrey submitted patiently to her touch; old Griselda had ridden it and it was accustomed to being patient. Imma could find no sign of swelling or visible bruising or blood. She turned the horse's hoof back and spotted a small stone in the shoe. That was easily remedied.

With her dagger, she worked the stone free, dropping it to the path, then encouraged the mare to walk. She nodded in satisfaction as the horse moved freely. Taking up the reins, Imma patted the horse's neck. Focusing on the horse had helped her stop thinking of what had happened here. Now she needed to get to safety; when she had found protection, then she could grieve. A Welsh woman in an unfriendly land, she had learned to discipline herself to do what needed to be done.

Salvaging what food she could from the overturned cart, she stowed it in the horse's saddlebags, then mounted the horse and rode for the island of Athelney and its lonely stone keep.

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The fog descended as Imma on her palfrey crossed the valley of Sedgemoor. She pulled up at the sight of the stone keep rising on the hill, surrounded by a dense thicket of alders. Athelney stood at the juncture where the River Parret met the river Tone; the rivers converged not far north at the Celtic Sea.

Across the Celtic Sea was home.

She drove the thought from her mind and urged the palfrey forward. The palfrey picked its way across the unstable land to the causeway that would bring them across to the island of Athelney.

As she and the horse approached the keep, a porter stepped from the gatehouse. The watchmen held spears at ready but seemed relaxed; a lone woman on horseback was little threat to them. They, however, were a greater threat to her. Her knees trembled against the palfrey, but she lifted her chin and said in a low but firm voice, “Lady Imma, widow of Lord Geoffrey of Kent, seeks an audience with Lady Elizabeth of Wessex.”

The porter opened the small door to let her ride through. In the interior courtyard, a young boy came up to take her horse’s reins. She dismounted and handed the palfrey over, feeling a slight qualm as she looked at the tower rising above her. The porter showed her into the keep. A young woman was summoned to bring her to Lady Elizabeth. Wishing she had a moment to brush the dirt from her cloak, she squared her shoulders and prepared to tell Lady Elizabeth the most unwelcome news.

Comment [ER28]: Nice ending paragraph.

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Note to Author - Historical Genre:

I understand that this love story falls under the historical romance genre. You do an excellent job of pulling the reader into that world and enlivening it for them. It can be very tricky writing this form of fiction. You want it to feel and sound authentic without too much historical clutter inserted which slows things down. First-time authors naturally feel a tendency to over-use historical language, such as references to titles of characters, historical locations, religious references, old English, etc. In a way, this represents more telling than it does showing. Your goal will always be to **show us** the historical world instead of **telling us** about it with simply historical words or references. For example, paint a picture of their clothing, the food they eat and what it tastes like, the tools or weapons they use, and what daily life is like where they live. You did do this here and there by showing Imma using the bow or the request to eat mutton, etc.

Note to Author: Characters/Names:

I feel it is essential to reflect upon your introduction of so many different characters in the first chapter. These not only include characters, but also names or references to others. I actually had to read the chapter a few times to really feel I could get a sense of who is who and follow along. Please note the quantity of characters or name references I have identified in your first chapter. I may not have even caught them all here:

The abbot
Imma
King Edward
Prys
Lady' Helen's husband
Joseph of Arimathea
Geoffrey
Lady Helen
Griselda
Lady Elizabeth
Earl of WEssex
Lord Harold
Lord Edward
Robert of Seward
The King of a United Wales
Gruffuyyd ap Llewelyn
Female bard – Efa
Husband Harold
King Pryderi
The thiefman

As you can see from a bigger context, this is numerous for one chapter. This many names can be quite difficult for a reader to follow. The fact that this is historical romance makes it even more challenging since there are titles with some names and they are not overtly simple. If a reader feels that it is too much work to get through a chapter of follow along, she will immediately abandon the book. Readers want to absorb into a romance novel and feel it as if they are there watching it happen. I suggest you try to keep your character or name references to only those essential to the story. Consider cutting many of the references to others for ease and clarity. A beginning chapter should introduce one to two main characters. Additional characters should appear by chapter two. Overall in your story, it helps to narrow down key players to those you can count on one hand. The feeling I took from reading this chapter is that you may have been trying too hard to develop a Medieval world in one fell swoop instead of letting the setting and time period unveil naturally. From your list, choose a few essential characters to focus on.

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