

Loveday wondered how her brothers would react. Would they think she did not love them anymore? Would they think she had gone mad? Would they think she had been cursed? She did not know, and she could not tell them. From the moment she had accepted the witch's task, she had sworn to keep her lips sealed. It would be hard. She would miss talking to her brothers. But it was all for their sake.

Seven years, the witch had warned. She had seven years to complete her task. It seemed like a long time. Why, she would be nineteen years old by that point. Still, doubts crept into her mind as she tried once more to produce thistledown from the plant. She had never fully learned to sew or weave. Her mother had died before she could complete her education.

The chime of the bedside clock Bertram had wound for her broke into her thoughts and stilled her fumbling fingers. It was seven on the hour.

A dull thud came from downstairs. Loveday's heart beat a frantic rhythm in her breast. The manor house had not seen its master in years. Many of its halls and rooms remained untouched and empty of furnishing. That vagrants and mercenaries might intrude on their habitation was a great fear of Loveday and her brothers. Although, they too were intruders in this home. They were not welcome in these walls any longer. But they had nowhere else to stay.

At last, she could hear voices, and they were voices so dear to her heart, her eyes filled this time with tears of joy. She had not heard them for many a month. Relief coursed through her, and she made to rise when she heard her eldest brother in the utmost euphoria call her name. The witch had spoken the truth!

The relief was short lived, however. For, she could not answer the call. Loveday inhaled a fortifying breath but when she released it, it shook in her chest. Putting down the limp remains of the thistle, she rose and went to meet her brothers.

**Commented [CT1]:** It might be a good idea to enlighten the readers about what the witch's task entails and what Loveday has to keep her lips sealed about – as in, literally not speak for 7 years, or keep the witch a secret?

Also, readers may also wonder what would happen if Loveday opened her mouth during the 7 years, if she's able to at all?

**Commented [CT2]:** Some readers will likely want to know how Loveday is physically going about getting the thistledown from the plant. For example, is she cutting it? Slicing it? Squeezing it? Using a special tool? Or simply pricking herself with the thorns?

**Commented [CT3]:** I like how you have subtly added this into the narration naturally without info-dumping! 😊 Though, it would be great if you could link this sentence to the previous one. For example: **Her mother died before she could complete her education, so she had no one to teach her.** The last part of this example links back to the fact that Loveday never fully learned to sew or weave, therefore making the link between the two sentences even stronger.

**Commented [CT4]:** I love this line! 😊

**Commented [CT5]:** Some readers may question why they're not welcome anymore, so this would be a good place to explain that. For example: **They were not welcome in these walls any longer for [insert reason], but they had nowhere else to stay.**

**Commented [CT6]:** After this line, it would be great if you could add a brief sentence that explains why they had nowhere else to stay, unless you're actively trying to make it a mystery for your audience.

However, readers might want to know what happened to their previous home (whether they had to leave when their mother died), or whether something happened which meant they had to flee, so this would be a good opportunity to explain that if you wish to.

**Commented [CT7]:** I would show that one of her brothers called her name through dialogue rather than telling the reader through narration. Your writing will instantly become more immersive for the reader, and it will appear active rather than passive.

**Commented [CT8]:** Readers obviously haven't been given the conversation between the witch and Loveday, so they may wonder what the witch had been truthful about here. Unless you're actively keeping it a secret to create suspense, I would explain this to your audience.

For example: **The witch had been truthful about...**

If you'd rather not reveal anything here in this sentence like in the example above, again, if you're hoping to create suspense, it might be an idea to give your readers an insight into what the witch said to Loveday. You could do this in the form of an entire scene that directly shows the conversation between the two, or just add snippets naturally through your narration. ...

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No longer would she be able to talk to them about her dreams and her fears. No longer would she be able to speak to friends. No longer would she be able to sing. She would be Loveday, the mute. Her fingers would every day be stung and burned by the prickly thistle. But she would not cry because seeing the daily transformation of her brothers into their cursed forms was enough to make her troubles seem insignificant. She would do it for them.

**Commented [CT9]:** So your readers know exactly what happened, I would clarify **how** the thistle has muted her and how it's affected her. For instance, has the thistledown cast a spell or enchantment on her? Has she been cursed? Or is she actually able to speak, but will suffer severe pain if she does?

**Commented [CT10]:** I really like how you have shown just how much Loveday cares for her brothers in this prologue. Quite often, writers **tell** the reader that one character loves or cares for another, but you've shown Loveday's adoration for her siblings in such a beautiful way! 😊

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## **Chapter One**

### *Thistlewood*

Simon was regretting his decision to ride to Newberry. The alternative had been to share the same carriage as his sister, who had the habit of talking his brains out of his ears. In sooth, he might have been able to bear it if it were just her, but Claire had brought along her dearest friend of one week, a pompous courtier by the name of Eloise. Together they could pick apart every article of clothing a particular courtier had worn in an instant, catalog it for future conversations, and regale them to an audience with as much accuracy as though the poor soul were standing on display before them. There was only so much talk about fine garments and courtier gossip he could take, and therefore had decided to keep his brains in his head by riding alongside the carriage.

He had not taken into consideration that his good fortune only ran so far. Not ten miles away from the inn, a great rainfall had appeared out of thin air and was soaking him to his bones. The moor the road cut through offered no protection from the elements. Low lying clouds smothered the land, obscuring the rolling hills and distant mountains.

Pulling his cloak tighter around him and lowering his cap so as to cocoon himself, Simon peeked out at his greyhound, Argus, who was trotting laps around the procession of carriages and horses. He was a handsome creature. His blue-gray coat and fine confirmation had been what had drawn Simon to him when he had been looking for a puppy. An excess of energy made him a study of perpetual motion. The dog was not particularly affectionate, but he was absurdly loyal to Simon.

With his nose low to the ground, he trampled through the coarse shrubbery of the moor, undoubtedly hoping to find a rabbit or two. His circuits occasionally brought him too near Simon's gelding, who was already irritable over the never ending rain, and Simon had to ward

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him away lest he get kicked. Simon could not be angry with the dog, but he was envious that Argus could find entertainment where he could not. It was a dreadfully tedious journey.

Removing his feet from his stirrups, he stretched out his legs in an effort to restore feeling to his toes and knees. His bay gelding was not pleased with his master's inability to stay still. Ares flattened his ears and shook his body violently, as though Simon were a large, pestering fly. The jarring movement nearly unseated Simon, and he speedily returned his feet into the stirrups. The carriage was really starting to seem to be a better option.

As though his thoughts had been expressed aloud, the door of the carriage opened a mere crack, and the voice of his sister broke through the unrelenting rainfall. "Simon, how close are we to Thistlewood?"

"We should arrive in an hour or so," he replied, looking to the coachman for confirmation.

"I say, look at this rain!" she exclaimed, still hiding behind the protection of the door.

Feeling cynical, he responded, "Rain? What rain? Oh, is that what you call this water pouring down upon my head?"

"Do not be so impertinent with me. I was about to invite you inside the carriage, but now I think I would rather invite John. He would not behave so poorly."

John, a groom nearing his fifteenth year, jerked out of his own thoughts from his perch behind the carriage at the mention of him. The young lad looked at Simon in confusion. In a tone he knew would carry to his sister, Simon said, "Believe you me, John, you had much better stay out here than inside. At least out here a man may retain some hold on his sanity."

Claire let out a grunt of frustration and slammed the carriage door shut. Poor John seemed entirely unsure as to how he should behave. He muttered a low, "Yes, m'lord," and returned to the shelter of his cloak.

**Commented [CT11]:** Who's Ares? The readers haven't yet been introduced to Ares, so they may get confused by this sentence. Do you mean Argus?

**Commented [CT12]:** Assuming that you *do* mean Argus they Greyhound and not Ares, some readers may question why the dog does this if he's incredibly loyal to Simon, which is stated on a previous line.

**Commented [CT13]:** It's important for the development of the characters to **show** feelings and emotions such as confusion instead of **telling** the reader that a character is confused.

For example, think about how a different character would instantly know that John is confused without him stating so. Did he frown/dip his brow? Did he scratch his head in though? Raise an eyebrow?

**Commented [CT14]:** Whenever you find yourself writing "seemed", it's a sure-fire way to tell that you're **telling**, not **showing**, which does nothing for the development of your characters.

For instance, how did John **seem** unsure of how to behave? What did he physically do to **display** that? Did he shift in his seat with awkwardness. Did he remain wide-eyed, blank and silent?

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*M'lord*. It was still hard for Simon to accept that title. It created a gulf between him and those he had once called friends. He was far better suited to his old title, Goodman Simon. The effects of his new moniker, Simon Halfdan, Baron Ramsey, had been immediate.

His friends and business partners had begun treating him differently. Some mere acquaintances had suddenly found that they had always treasured a dear friendship with him, and felt that their bond was such that it deserved closer ties. Daughters were pushed at him from all quarters of the middle class. Some of these young women were unwilling to leave their various beaux but others fancied the title as a pretty gem to set them apart from their compatriots and therefore pursued him relentlessly.

Simon's truer friends had in one way or another distanced themselves from him. How many evenings had been spent laughing at the ridiculousness of the nobility and wallowing in the victory that came from their own success as business men? He and his friends had been proud of the hard work that they had put into rising from the dregs of society. They had done it through their own merit. Those pompous, titled peacocks knew nothing of hard work. But Simon had inherited a title, nevertheless. And his close friends turned away from him with feelings stemming from awkwardness or envy.

It was not as though Simon had much of a choice. Only a fool would pass up a barony with a vast fortune and an estate attached to it, even if the house was reported to be in poor repair. When he tallied the revenue earned from his share in the *Arabella*, a merchant ship ported on the channel, it did not remotely equal the amount that would be got from the tenant farms of County Ramsey. In fact, with his new fortune, he could and intended to purchase the *Arabella* in full.

~~He had his sister to thank for their recently acquired fortune. Without her flaunting his good reputation and credit before the eyes of everyone who would listen, the Ramsey title may~~

**Commented [CT15]:** This information contradicts how Simon felt about his sister earlier when he refused to enter the carriage with her – to avoid readers getting confused about their relationship, it would be an idea to mention their bond. For example, here you could write something like: ***Despite how annoying Claire could be, Simon had her to thank...***

~~have remained under the king's possession. Prior to Simon's coming of age, it had been stripped from the old baron, along with the estate and the fortune.~~

~~His estranged father, the former Lord Ramsey, had lived the last couple of years of his life in excess and frivolity. An ill timed slew of drunken, treasonous expletives had seen his father thrown in prison, where he succumbed to a sick liver.~~

~~Shortly after Simon's birth, the old baron had never lived at Thistlewood, choosing instead to make the taverns of Town his home. The estate suffered great neglect under his incapable hands. When it had been repossessed by the crown, the royal family had lived there for some years before abandoning it as well.~~

~~This was the purpose of Simon's removing from his apartment in Town: to assess the disrepair and remedy it so that he might better manage the tenant farms. After purchasing the Arabella, he could oversee its affairs from his country seat. It seemed a capital plan, but he did hope that the manor was not too poorly kept, else he might find his party and himself living in an inn for the next few weeks. He had refrained from giving voice to his worries, however. Claire would not be pleased with the delay. Ever since they had learned of the inheritance and the estate, visions of grandeur and fashion had polluted her mind. A run down estate, no matter how large, would surely send her into a fit of fretting.~~

Simon's imagination continued to conjure up various images of decaying buildings as they plodded along through the moor. The rain never eased, and the road transformed into a slippery bog. Ares, who could compose himself well on wet cobblestone, struggled with the mud, even falling to his knees at one point and nearly sending Simon headlong into the sludge.

**Commented [CT16]:** Consider cutting this part about Claire as it's mentioned later on when they meet the king and queen.

**Commented [CT17]:** Although this lengthy section gives important backstory and context, it's very much an "info-dump", which is when a writer dumps a large section of backstory, context and information on the reader in this form.

It's entirely up to you whether you remove some of this information or keep it as it is, but "info-dumping" can be quite problematic for many readers, especially at the beginning of a novel, because it's just too much information – new information – to absorb in one go. As a result, some readers may switch off without meaning to, others may skip it to get back to the present action, and others may get bored and close the book.

So, I would certainly go through this section I've highlighted and assess what absolutely needs to stay, which parts can be woven into the rest of the story naturally (in future dialogue, narration or action), and which sentences can be removed.

I'll also go through and see which parts can be added later on.

**Commented [CT18]:** This section about Simon's father isn't needed here – it may be important for the reader to know, but if it's that crucial to the story and Simon's backstory, it can be woven in naturally throughout the story.

For example, on page 173, you mention that their father abandoned them; their father is mentioned again on page 204 when Claire speaks to the queen, and again on 234 when Simon and Claire speak about his demise.

Family seems to be quite a prevalent theme throughout, and all characters appear to have damaged family lives, so I have no doubt that more will be revealed about their father as the story goes on as well, therefore, this section isn't needed here in the form of an info-dump.

**Commented [CT19]:** Ares still hasn't been introduced as a character, so readers will definitely be confused by this point and they'll probably question whether you mean Argus. Make sure you remain consistent with the names or introduce your characters.