

THE GILT LIST

FIRST CHAPTER CRITIQUE · TIER 3: FIRST 20 PAGES & REVISION PLAN

Thank You

Hello Jean,

Thank you so much for trusting me with the first chapter of *Imprisoned to a Witch*, it was such a pleasure reading through this story and I can't wait to see where this project goes.

This letter looks very carefully at how the opening is functioning as a reader-engagement experience, where it is placed in its genre, how the voice feels editorially, where it is already pulling the reader in, where it is creating friction, and what would make it much harder to put down and ultimately make this story one to remember. Which with the right touch, it absolutely could be.

Chapter Snapshot

Title	
	Imprisoned to a Witch

Author	Jean Lane
Genre / Subgenre	New Adult Urban Fantasy / Paranormal Romance
Age Category	New Adult
Pages Reviewed	Chapter One
Current Chapter Promise	That Blake will go on an internal and external journey to reclaim her identity and her right to choose the life she wants... even when the cost is her survival

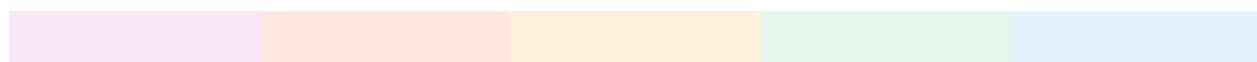
What's on the Page



As currently written, this opening follows Blake. Blake is a human woman who married into a secret witch coven, escaped to the human world for a year, and has been dragged back against her will by her estranged husband Damien. The chapter is aiming for new adult paranormal romance territory, with coming-of-age identity themes running underneath. It's about a woman fighting for the right to simply be ordinary. A twist to the usual trope of a FMC who dreams of being special or having adventures.

If I were to describe what this opening is trying to make the reader feel, I would say; trapped, frustrated, and quietly hopeful for adventure.

What I Loved



The thing that excited me most in this opening is the marriage-as-prison metaphor. The external prison and the internal one are clearly mirrors of each other, which gives the

chapter a thematic shape that already feels more deliberate than a lot of early drafts. It's an easy sell to agents, and readers alike, who may have their own internal fears of being tied down to something that doesn't feel like it belongs to them. The reader understands this without being explicitly told, thanks to your strong ability to show not tell.

There is a lot here that is already working:

- Blake has flashes of a genuinely distinct voice, especially when her dry humour is allowed onto the page.
- Brian arrives with instant personality and makes the chapter feel brighter and more alive almost immediately.
- The death warrant is a strong story turn with clear danger and real dramatic usefulness.
- The premise has a genuine hook, i.e. a woman fighting to stay ordinary in a magical world that won't let her go is fresh and emotionally fun, and makes most readers say "what, why?" immediately.
- The chapter already knows the emotional weather it wants. Bitter, snipey, dry humor, and there's hints of quirk, which is great for paranormal romance.

Core Cast...The Intent vs. On the Page



Blake

Planned role: Human protagonist, caught between the witch world she married into and the life she built for herself in the human world. She is meant to want freedom, self-determination, and the right to choose her own identity and future.

On-page impression: On the page, Blake reads as angry, bruised, stubborn, and occasionally very funny. The bones are really strong and delightful, but her want is still more abstract than actually spelled out on the page. The internal want is there, the external want needs work.

Quick note on improvement: We are close to the intent, but she needs more specificity and more interiority. A couple of concrete details from her human life, plus stronger internal thought at high emotion based moments, would make her much easier to love.

Damien

Planned role: Estranged husband and primary romantic lead. A leader with a job to do, who is hopelessly in love with Blake and caught between desire and duty. He appears designed to be morally complicated rather than purely cruel.

On-page impression: In Chapter 1, Damien mostly reads as a stoic kidnapper. He moves the plot and gets us going, but he is not yet romantically or emotionally compelling. There's no "moments" on the page that make you feel something. Be it sadness, want, desire, or anger. Frustration pops up there, but frustration alongside the confusion of the world around us in the moment muddies the water. A stronger emotional beat will really drive this home. I will go more into this later with some ideas.

Quick note on improvement: This is the biggest character alignment gap in the chapter. If we can nail this, we'll get the story right. Give him a contradiction, does he hesitate? Does he lie? What does Blake read in him that only Blake can? More on this later.

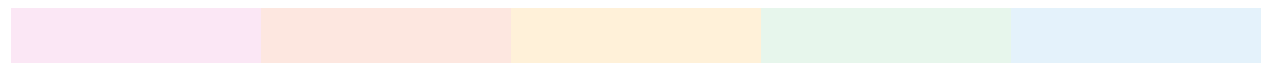
Brian

Planned role: Friend and ally. This is the fun friend here to give us some levity, and it works.

On-page impression: Brian absolutely shines. He is warm, funny, specific, and instantly readable. He is the easiest character in the chapter to like.

Quick note on improvement: This is working very well. The only caution is that he currently outshines Damien so much that we start to wonder if he's the romantic lead. We need more internal longing from Blake, more complexity from Damien, to match Brian.

What's Already Pulling the Reader In



The strongest thing working for this opening right now is the marriage-as-prison metaphor. The physical cage and the marital one are quite clearly the same thing, and the reader understands this without being explicitly told, thanks to your strong ability to show not tell.

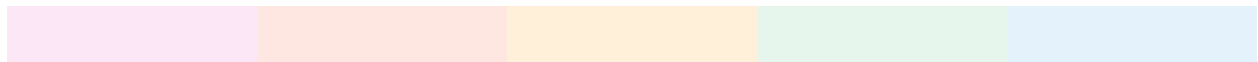
There is already real pull in the characterisation and premise, which gives the chapter something worth protecting as you revise.

A few things already helping the chapter:

- Brian arrives with instant personality, he's warm, funny, and a little quirky, and immediately makes the chapter feel alive

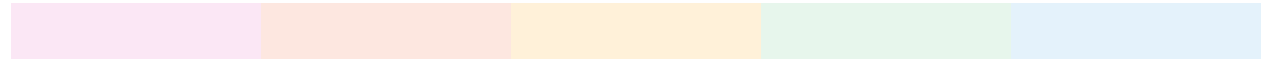
- The stakes are real and genuinely dangerous. A death warrant will certainly get the momentum going.
- Blake reads as a modern woman with legible, relatable wants that we have all dreamed of. Namely, the right to choose life.
- The drip, drip motif is doing some structural work, with a ticking clock feel that's counting down to some kind of doom.
- "I'd go with human" sums up who Blake is in four words and what we're in for

Engagement Scan



Engagement Bucket	What This Means Here	Score /5	Example from the Chapter
Ease of Entry/Threat Level	How inviting or effortful the first pages feel	2/5	The opening drops the reader into a prison cell mid-conflict with no before-world. This could be high threat but the worldbuilding pulls the reader out of the threat.
Cognitive Load	How much the reader is asked to juggle at once	3/5	The witch council, marriage rules, and coven politics arrive in dialogue before the reader is emotionally invested
Transportation/SPELL-Breaking Moments	How often the reading spell breaks because the reader has to stop and parse	3/5	The Damien confrontation dialogue feels like a world dump before we emotionally need it
Brain Grip/Mind-Wandering Risk	Whether the chapter gives the brain something active to hold onto	3/5	"How could I escape if he just brought me back?" is the real crutch but it comes emotionally later
Person-Want-Stakes Clarity	How clearly the reader can see who this is about, what they want, and what is at risk	2/5	Blake wants freedom, but freedom is abstract, there is no concrete before-Imprisoned to make the loss feel real. What is freedom to Blake?
Page-Turn Pull / Painful-to-Put-Down Factor	How strong the urge is to keep reading	3/5	The death warrant is a strong turn, as is a prison, Brian also makes those pages turn but it all lands without the emotional build it needs to hit as hard as it should

The Main Engagement Issue



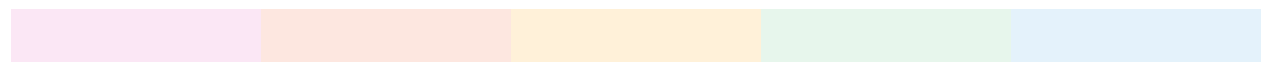
The crux of the issue is that the reader is being asked to care about characters and a world that they don't quite care about yet. Instead of that world unfolding naturally, Blake loses the thing we should care about before the reader is dropped in.

This shows up most through Person-Want-Stakes clarity. This is affecting emotional investment, which then bleeds into urgency, and ultimately weakens your Ease of Entry, Brain Grip, and Page-Turn Pull.

Blake's desperation is quite clear, and the place she finds herself in feels, looks, and sounds bleak. But there is no current under it holding the reader to the book. Luckily, this is a fairly simple fix. And if you fix this first, you will likely improve several things at once:

- The death warrant lands with genuine devastation rather than as a plot event
- Blake's resistance becomes emotionally legible, not just narratively reasonable
- The reader enters the chapter with a reason to root for her before the conflict begins

Areas to Build From Here



1. Goal, Motivation, Conflict in the Opening

What is happening now

Blake's broad conflict is clear: she wants out and the coven will not let her go. But her goal is still functioning at a distance. We know she wants freedom, but we do not yet know what freedom looks like in practical, emotional terms.

Why it matters

When a protagonist's goal is too abstract, the reader can understand the mood of the story without fully immersing themselves inside of it. In Chapter One, that weakens attachment and makes the opening feel less inevitable than it could.

What to try

- Give Blake one or two concrete anchors that she must have from her human life, a dream she's building, a person, even a pet.
- Make sure the chapter gives us both an external want (leave, survive, escape) and an internal want (belong to herself, remain whole, keep the life she chose).
- Let her think more specifically about what she is trying to return to, not just what she is trying to flee.

2. Scene Handling: Beats, Hooks, Transitions

What is happening now

The raw scene material is strong, it has great bones, but it is not yet arranged for maximum reader grip. We start with a genuine question, where are we, and it's answered with an emotional problem. This whirlwinds into worldbuilding through dialogue, and ends with a death threat, but that is followed by more worldbuilding. The cause/effect cycle needs a little work.

Why it matters

Each opening scene needs to advance story, reveal character, and make the reader keep going. When the biggest beats are present but not yet sequenced for best effect, the chapter can feel slower than its actual content really is.

What to try

- Consider whether a brief before-world or kidnapping scene belongs before the cell scene.
- Treat the death warrant as the chapter's goal. Shape everything around it from start to finish.
- Revisit each scene ending and ask whether it creates closure, escalation, or a hook. You do a pretty good job of this, but pointing it out anyway.

3. Worldbuilding Clarity vs. Cognitive Load

What is happening now

The council, coven rules, human-versus-witch divide, and social logic all arrive early, often through dialogue. First impressions, with the potions, and wedding treaties? This seems like it's going to be a very interesting world. But how it's currently laid out could be stronger.

Why it matters

Readers will absorb a great deal of worldbuilding once they care. Before that, even good information can feel like trying to piece a puzzle together.

What to try

- Delay any world information the reader does not actively need to follow the current emotional beat.
- Give us emotional beats and “borrowed engagement” first, through familiar things the reader already knows (maybe Blake’s before life).
- Let Blake’s reactions carry more of the worldbuilding load where possible. Is she afraid? More angry? Why?
- Keep asking what the reader must know right now, right this second. Hold off where possible in the first few scenes.

4. POV and Narrative Voice

What is happening now

Blake’s voice has real, actual, promise, especially when her dry humour cuts through. But the first-person POV is not yet being used to its full advantage. First person is a great way for the reader to move through the MC, see through their eyes, move along with them, feel and see what they do. But to do that, we need to hear the inner thoughts, see what that character is seeing, and feel her heart beat with her.

Why it matters

Close POV is one of the fastest routes to attachment, tonal coherence, and reader trust, so it’s a great choice in a story like this. Blake’s inner world is part of your hook.

What to try

- At the highest-emotion moments, add Blake’s internal thought before moving back to action. Emotional beat - Blake’s thoughts - physical reaction or movement - next emotional beat.
- Protect the dry, contemporary edge in her voice, it’s brilliant, especially for this genre, and it is part of what makes her readable.
- Use interiority to make each choice feel like Blake’s choice, even when all her options are bad. We need to always know why she is doing what she is doing.

5. Tension, Foreshadowing, and Genre Promise

What is happening now

The chapter has danger, conflict, and a central relationship problem. This is great! What is less clear early on is how deliberately the story wants us to invest in Damien as a romantic interest. Is he there as the big bad evil? Or should we as the reader feel a pull to him?

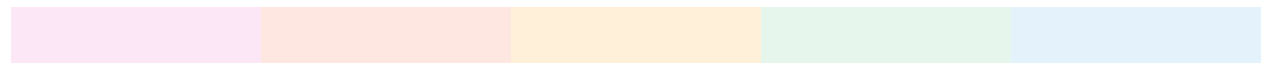
Why it matters

Genre readers want to know what kind of story they are in. If this is paranormal romance with a messy, charged ex-husband dynamic, the opening needs to signal that deliberately so we know what the ending will be before we even get to the bottom of the first page. It's ok to be opaque about what we're in for. You don't need to hide the will they won't they, you just need to set up the obstacles so we ask "how do they get past that?" instead of will they won't they.

What to try

- Give Damien a visible contradiction that creates intrigue around his character. Have the reader ask, what secret is he clearly holding back?
- Plant one moment early that suggests Blake's feelings are more complicated. The spark should still be there, even if she's angry about it.
- Make sure the reader knows where to place their anticipation. Which way is this going? Let us know.

Story Promise & Genre Positioning Guidance



Right now, the opening reads like it wants to sit between urban fantasy and paranormal romance. However, this story would work best as New Adult paranormal romance with strong urban fantasy elements. The real hook is not just "can Blake escape the coven again?" but "is the life she built as a human worth dying for, and is Damien really the villain she needs him to be to get what she wants?"

The promise that you need to set up is essentially this –

A human woman who fled the witch coven she married into is dragged back, kicking and screaming, handed a death warrant, and forced to choose between the life she dreams of and the husband she can't seem to stop loving, despite

herself. Is Blake's husband really the villain she desperately wants him to be, or is there a way for love and life to win?

First Fixes



If this were my chapter to revise first, I would start here:

Build the before-world — where is Blake before the prison? What does she love about this life? Does she love this life or is she just stubbornly holding on to the choices she's made? Start us there in that before world, and show us the moment she is taken...and therefore the choices are taken from her. Show us the fear she has of being caught, how much freedom means to Blake. Give her a couple of anchors in this world that she wants to stay for. A friend, a career, a degree, a hobby.

Give Damien one contradiction — currently Damien needs more layers. He's just a stoic, kidnapper right now. This could make him unlikeable later. We need to know he has layers right away. Give him a contradiction. What two choices are pulling him apart inside? Is it his love for Blake, but also his love for his people? Is he secretly on Blake's side but can't tell her? Was he planning her demise and he held back once he laid eyes on her? What is going on under it all for Damien? Now, let some of that slip in his dialogue, and body language. What would someone like that say and do when first laying eyes on his ex-wife.

Move the interiority in — at the two or three highest-stakes moments in the chapter, add Blake's genuine internal response. We need a lot more inner dialogue to balance out the external.

Let the death warrant be the turn — cut the backstory block that follows the letter reveal and redistribute that material through action. Once we find out this devastating news, we should not be whiplashed to worldbuilding. This should simmer. How does Blake feel? What is she thinking? What does she do?

Foreshadow — Finally, take all of that momentum and build up to the death warrant. The scene with the death warrant should revolve around it. Add foreshadowing, maybe in Blake's "before world" she receives an eviction letter, how does that letter make her feel compared to the death warrant? Maybe Blake remembers the kinds of letters she used to receive and how this eviction letter isn't nearly as bad. Maybe before she opens this letter she is terrified it is the witches. Hold on emotionally to the death warrant in the scene, feel

all of it, and keep Blake's thoughts there for a few beats so the reader understands the stakes.

Does The Opening Match the Book You've Written?

On the page right now, Imprisoned to a Witch opens as a New Adult paranormal romance about a human woman dragged back into the witch coven she escaped, handed a death warrant, and forced to choose between captivity with her ex-husband and death. In chap 1 she wants out, and will do almost anything not to belong to you or this world.

That gives the reader a promise of:

- high personal stakes (life or death)
- a messy marriage conflict
- an institutional villain (the council / coven)
- and a faint hint that Brian might be the safer emotional centre

What you say you've written

In your note, you describe a bigger arc for Blake. She chooses between her human life and being prey because of it, her coven life and being controlled and looked down on, or becoming a witch who will never be seen as equal and will lose standing as a human. So it's not really about escaping the coven, but claiming power.

- The core questions do match as in, "Is this life worth dying for?" and "What do you do with a love that hurt you and kept you alive?" are present in Chapter One.
- The marriage-as-prison metaphor is already doing good work, mirroring the cell and the relationship.
- The council as the real bad guy is hinted at in the death warrant setup.
- Blake's voice has the right emotional weather within the story being tired, sharp, angry, and still attached.

Where they're out of sync

- Chapter One currently promises a story about escape, and taking back womanly power. There isn't much foreshadowing that Blake isn't getting the point yet. That Damien really is for her, and they belong together, and she's choosing between the wrong things.

- Damien, in the opening, reads far more like kidnapper husband than morally complicated endgame MMC, which undercuts the romance promise you actually want. There is no hint that Damien has a secret, or that he loves Blake.
- The werewolf/pack conflict and the secret magic that drive the back half aren't threaded yet, so the later war and turn me into a witch choice feel bigger and more systemic than what the reader is primed for in Chapter One. What could you foreshadow from the start to help the reader start to feel into this? Just a hint.

The job of your revision is to bring the book you think you wrote (love vs power vs safety, Blake choosing witch power at the end) into clearer focus in the opening you've actually written.

Suggested Revision Plan (By Pass, Not Scene)



Pass 1 – Before-World & Stakes Clarity

Your Goal: Make the reader feel what Blake is losing, not just understand it.

- Add one or two short before-world scenes before the cell. Give us two things Blake really cares about. Be sure to thread this throughout the rest of the story. It may become a substory as a result, how would that look and tie everything together? Bigger question, how would that substory mirror Blake's final choice and help make her choice easier?
- Focus on specific, tangible anchors like a job, a ritual, a dream, a person, a pet. Bonus points if that thing ultimately represents the freedom she thinks she is losing. For instance, she loves a certain job, but that job shrinks some of her talents just so she can fit in, maybe talents she builds over the course of the story.

You're done when:

A stranger can read Chapter One and answer, in one sentence, What exactly did Blake give up when she ran, and what does she want back? And if revising further, what did that thing turn into?

Pass 2 – Damien Layering & Romance Engine

Goal: Turn Damien from functional kidnapper into complicated love interest from page one.

- Add at least one visible contradiction in the opening confrontation (hesitation, cost, softness he can't quite hide, something about him doesn't match up, etc).
- Give Blake one internal beat where she registers something other than pure hatred, like a memory, a physical reaction, a hint that it hurts because she loved him.
- Soften one line of his current dialogue into something that shows he's scared for her, not just annoyed at her. He wants her alive, he knows what is coming. This also foreshadows the letter.

You're done when:

A romance reader can tell, in Chapter One, Oh, he's the MMC, even if I want to punch him, rather than assuming he's just the villain. If revising further, go through every interaction they have, lay them out in front of you, how is he complex in each, how can he show softness in each, how can you ramp up the emotional beats that draw them together?

Pass 3 – Interiority & POV Depth

Goal: Let the reader live inside Blake instead of watching her from outside.

- At each major beat in the first 20 pages, add 2–3 lines of internal thought like what she's scared of, what she wants, what memory she's fighting.
- Use a simple pattern at high-emotion moments: external beat > thought > physical reaction > next beat.

You're done when:

You can flip through the first 20 pages and see Blake's thoughts on the page at every key decision, not just in the quieter moments. You can continue this throughout the story as well.

Pass 4 – Worldbuilding vs Cognitive Load

Goal: Keep the opening story-first and emotion-first, with worldbuilding supporting rather than interrupting.

- Cut or move any piece of lore (council rules, history, deep politics) the reader does not absolutely need.
- Where you keep information, tuck it into conflict and reaction instead of stand-alone explanation.
- Seed one early hint that other supernatural factions are interested in this coven, so the later werewolf plot feels like a payoff, not a surprise.

You're done when:

You can read Chapter One out loud and never feel like you're pausing the story to explain the world. If revising further, you can continue by looking for worldbuilding throughout the rest of the story and asking the same question. And add more foreshadowing for the werewolves and upcoming conflicts throughout.

Pass 5 – Tension, Hooks, & Genre Promise

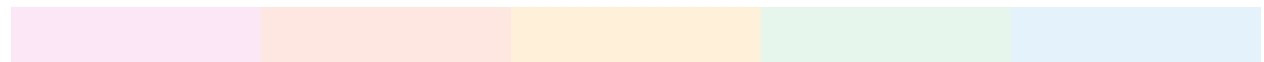
Goal: Make the ending of the opening sequence feel like I must turn the page:

- Treat the death warrant as the central turn of the opening. It's your big big you build toward.
- Look at the last paragraph of the chapter so it clearly speaks to the kind of story this is...Blake wrestling with life vs love vs magic, not just "I want to run."
- Add one line of internal or external tension that nods towards bigger threats. Shows this world is bigger than just humans and witches.

You're done when:

The last page of Chapter One makes a romance-leaning paranormal reader think Okay, I need to know which way she jumps and what happens when the bigger monsters show up. Am I going to get my "he saves the day" moment.

After This Round

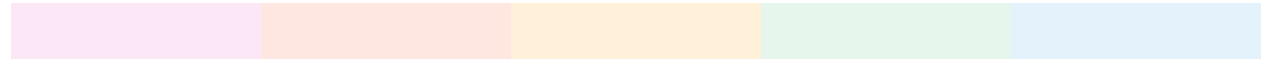


Once you've completed these passes on the first 20 pages and are happy with how they read, the next logical steps for the whole book would be:

- Run a Damien check across later chapters to make sure his complexity and contradictions stay consistent with the revised opening since it will likely change.
- Mirror the before-world and stakes work at your midpoint and climax. Basically, Blake should choose one way at the middle and another at the end, so it feels inevitable.

- Do a final cause-and-effect pass on the coven/pack politics so the death of the werewolf alpha, the treaty fallout, and the council's moves all read as a clean chain of consequences, not random escalations.

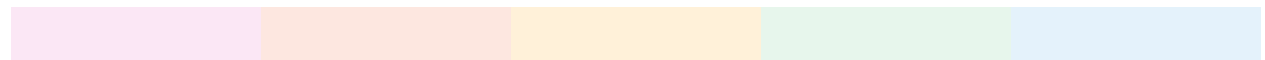
Final Read



The version of this chapter I can see underneath the current draft is one where the reader enters quickly, understands what matters, emotionally catches on to the right thing, and keeps reading because the story is their story. The reader knows what it's like to have their choices taken from them, to fight for whatever dream they have in their day to day life, be it their job, a promotion, or an apartment on the beach. We all have dreams we fight for, that someone is standing in the way of. Let the reader live through Blake, put Blake in positions that the reader recognizes.

Right now, the ingredients are there, this is a great first draft and premise. Don't change the heart of what you have. Just tweak the opening, give Damien more layers, and Blake more internal dialogue. After this you should have a really workable draft that's ready for the line edits.

Resources



If you want to deepen the specific craft areas that came up in this chapter, these are the three most relevant:

- **Goal, Motivation, Conflict (GMC):** Save the Cat! Writes a Novel by Jessica Brody – especially the sections on the opening image, set-up, and internal vs external wants.
- **Character agency & interiority:** "On Character Agency" by Tiffany Yates Martin – a clear breakdown of how to keep your protagonist driving the story even when they're trapped.

→ **Tension & story promise in genre fiction:** Writing the Breakout Novel by Donald Maass – useful for raising stakes around the death warrant and sharpening the romantic/identity engine in Chapter One.

From The Gilt List:

- [An Editor's Guide to Essential Elements for Your First Chapter](#)
- [Why Readers DNF Fantasy Novels: The First-Chapter Mistake Most Writers Make](#)
- [Worldbuilding in Your First Chapter | Don't Put It In The Wrong Place](#)
- [Does Your Main Character Actually Need to Be Likeable?](#)
- [How to Create Character Desire in...](#)

You don't need to read any of these before revising. They're just there if you want outside language for the exact issues we've already named: clarifying Blake's goal, sharpening her agency, and getting the tension between love and survival to do more work on the page.