

Chapter 1

Luren curled her toes around the cool edge of the rock face, her rage building as the wind blasted. She was no amateur, she had been training for this night since she was five - her hair was tightly braided, her leather belt was snug around her waist - her dagger and pouch attached. One hundred feet below, the white capped waves of the Sarghosa sea roared against the cliff face, the salty mist coating her skin as she scanned the cove for her prey. The wind was wilder than it had been a few hours before, it wailed as she teetered on the edge, poised to fly.

Commented [LKC1]: This is such an evocative opening image! I love it!

Commented [CS2]: Cool opening.

Jump, it whistled.

The full fucking moon and the curse that came with it couldn't give her a break. What was wrong with gifting her a nice calm evening to dive? If she couldn't have the Gift for herself, fair weather didn't seem too much to ask.

Commented [LKC3]: I'm a little confused about what all of this means. The idea of Luren being cursed and not having a gift is intriguing, but I think it needs to be made a bit clearer how all of this works. What is the Gift? What does the moon have to do with the curse? Is Luren cursed specifically or does this happen to other people as well?

Jump, it hissed.

Always the wind pushing, urging her on. *Let it take you*, her grandmatri Hervana would shout from her perch fifty feet below, always watching, coaching. Tonight, the perch was silent.

The warm gust shoved, impatient.

Jump, it growled.

Commented [CS4]: Interesting escalation

Luren continued scouring the wild, dark waves as her hand grazed the dagger tucked into her belt, its leather hilt worn soft from decades of use. Her heart twisted inside her like a tornado as the wind swirled. *Stop this*. But she could no sooner stop the curse than her own beating heart. It

Commented [CS5]: I don't understand this?

was her birthright and her burden, all for the benefit of others. Her eyes lighted on her prize, the shimmer of the Maristela Salax twinkled beneath the waves, its phosphorescent blue eyes shone bright from the depths, like blinding blue crystals. *Kill it*, a voice roared inside her head and before she could push back against the seething desire to kill, she dove. Her body craved carnage as she shot towards the blue light. The internal rage was familiar, she'd been angry since her matri abandoned her at ten. *The desire was new*.

Her eyes never left the bright blue spot beneath the waves as she flew, the warm wind whistling all around her. She took one last deep breath in as the warmth and darkness of the sea embraced her and she pummeled down into the depths.

Luren loved diving, she had an affinity for it which delighted *Hervana*. Her first attempt was made at the tender age of five, young for diving, but old enough to be kicked in the ass right off the cliff when she showed signs of fear. She'd clung to the roots of a wild palm, screaming as Hervana tore her off the branches and shoved her into the sea. It was terrifying and exhilarating and she'd loved every second of it. Once she got over the shock. Hervana said again and again, there was no place for timidity or fear down below. *But this curse was something else, something Hervana didn't prepare her for. Diving was life but this curse was death. It was a secret passed down between the Wake women for centuries -a dangerous one because every time they dove, they put their lives on the line for the benefit of a Gifted few. Hervana would say it was for the benefit of all – but Luren knew that was crap.*

She swam toward her prize with the grace and sleekness of a seal, born to swim. Kill, kill, kill, hunger to find the *beast* enveloped her, became her. She was rage and darkness and death. She couldn't stop, didn't want to stop. The thumping of her heartbeat vibrated in her ears, as slow as a ticking clock, she heard nothing else, saw only the piercing blue eyes deep down in the black.

Commented [CS6]: So we've had three voices here: the wind, the "stop this" voice which is...her heart? And now this other voice. That's a lot of different voices to process?

Commented [LKC7]: By this point I really want a clearer sense of the "big picture" of your story. Who is Luren? What does she want? What is she doing?

I love the image of her standing at the cliff ready to dive – its so vivid! Can you show more about why she is there, diving? Is this some kind of ritual? Is she doing this to prove something?

Commented [CS8]: I'd really like to know how today is different from other days. Why would this change now? Does it frighten her? Was she expecting it? I'm not sure what we are looking for because I don't have context for what is going on.

Commented [CS9]: ?

Commented [LKC10]: This is a really intriguing element! I'd love to see it unpacked more. I think if you clarify why Luren is diving and what the purpose/stakes are here, it will help a lot to ground the reader.

Commented [CS11]: I'm not sure I understand this. It feels like dangling hints instead of information (which was already done paragraphs above). The backstory here kind of cuts the tension?

Commented [CS12]: The beast's name is capitalized earlier which made me think it's the only of its kind, a myth, a god...

As Luren closed in on her prey, she drew her blade, her heartbeat accelerating. She had hated this part when she dove with Hervana, the screams haunted her. Tonight, she craved it. If she was a dog she'd be drooling.

Commented [LKC13]: Why are things different tonight?

The Maristela Salax were smart, fast-moving creatures with large, barbed tails. Their spikes were filled with deadly toxin, earning them the nickname *demon stinger*. Legends say they thrive where the whales fall and are protectors of all the ocean magic. But here was Luren, doing what the women in her family had been doing for over two hundred years, weaving magic from its death.

Commented [CS14]: Here it is again. I'm assuming it isn't a proper noun? Like "orca" vs "Willy the Orca"

Commented [CS15]: Tense?

Commented [CS16]: ? I'm not sure what this means. Like...where whales fall when they die?

She struck the black creature hard in the back of the neck, flinging away from the swinging spiked tail at the same time. The ugly creature shuddered, throwing its gnarled head back, emitting a haunting scream that pierced her ears and echoed through the water. If the ocean had a heart beat it would have stopped in anguish. The demon's crystalline blue eyes turned on her, a pained, *how could you*, before it's light dimmed. It never got easier watching the sparkling eyes turn milky and the screams quiet into a whimper, a vibration, then silence. She relived it again and again in her nightmares.

Commented [CS17]: How big is it? How cold is the water? Is it the only creature around? How is it right next to where she jumped off a cliff (I'm not sure I'm grounded—is it a deep hole in the ground, or are we on the beach? Because if it's a super steep beach where a huge creature could be right there...it would be really steep...with really dangerous waves?)

Commented [CS18]: What does it look like? We know it's black and has a spiked tale..."gnarled head" is kind of vague.

Commented [CS19]: nice

Relief from the pulsing desire to kill came as the creature stilled and died, dissolving, emitting strands of fiber into the open sea. Luren worked quickly, grabbing the precious silk and stuffing it into her leather pouch until the creature was gone. Nothing more than a bulge in her pocket.

Commented [LKC20]: I'm still a little unclear on what this new desire to kill means – it feels like it's incongruous to Luren's character if she usually feels bad about killing the creatures? Is it part of the curse?

Commented [CS21]: ? I'm not sure what this means.

Commented [CS22]: Like...it unspools completely? I'm struggling a little to follow the blocking/reality of what is happening.

A life for the Gift, that was the cost – and the curse.

With her feet planted on the silky ocean floor and her chest ready to burst, she shoved herself up swimming and kicking until she exploded out of the water like a geyser, gasping in relief. Taking

Commented [CS23]: Did all this happen underwater?

her first deep breath was akin to being reborn. The terror of near death and the exhilaration of life was an electrifying combination only one who dove to such depths could understand.

Her first solo hunt was nothing like she expected. It was so much better and so much worse. The screams of the dying sea goblin horrified her, she despised having to kill the creature, all to benefit a newly Gifted woman. Hervana would say anything that was easily given, was easily taken away, and that killing wasn't supposed to be easy. They argued about it constantly. Luren said the Gift *was* easily given, it was creating it that was the hard part, and one the Wake women had been doing without question. The Gifted were handed their powers, simply for being a chosen woman. But arguing with Hervana resulted in swift and severe punishments. Luren was not one to hold her tongue and as a result became very good at holding her breath instead.

Thoughts of Hervana were like a vise around her heart, it hadn't even been a month since she'd given herself to the sea. She left Luren to navigate the curse on her own, with so many questions unanswered. It was like diving blindfolded, with no way to know if you were going to hit a boulder, the sand, or feel the sweet splash of the sea. Thanks to Hervana, Luren knew all about diving blindfolded. It was hard finding reasons to miss her.

She floated on her back, the stars guiding her to the base of the cliff where her ladder was. The clouds were gone, the wind had quieted - still there, but a whisper, not a howl. The ocean still pulled but it was gentle like a minnow on a line, not a shark. She would have relative peace until the next full moon.

Luren made her way slowly up the ladder to her cliff house, Whitecap manor. These ladders were built decades ago, so many years had passed, vines and shrubs grew out of the rock face and intertwined with the rungs, becoming the ladder. Every now and then her foot wobbled

Commented [CS24]: Was she in danger?

Commented [CS25]: I'm not sure I understand the argument happening here?

Commented [LKC26]: I really love the concept of the Gift, and of Luren being positioned as vital to the process but unable to be the recipient of it. The "outsider looking in" type of characters are my favorite ☺

Commented [CS27]: Nice (though I'm not sure what it means? Are her punishments...drowning?)

Commented [CS28]: I can see why this is a conflicted relationship, but I also struggle to see why diving blindfolded would be a needed skill...especially since she just did what she needed to do with relative ease. It doesn't seem dangerous or difficult at all?

precariously on a loose rung, or one would be missing altogether. As her tired, aching body clambered up at a snail's pace, she made a mental note to fix them. She'd been making the same mental note for years.

The night blooming jasmine was open in the moonlight, their sweet scent accompanying Luren as she climbed, lifting one tired limb after another and pulling herself up. She stopped to rest at the midpoint, closing her eyes for a moment as she lay on the moss-covered stone. She realized as she lay there panting that she could have taken the stairs that were carved into the cliff face, but they were reserved for Hervana, no matter how tired Luren was, no matter how loudly she complained or begged. But no one could stop her using them now, she was in charge and needed to start acting like it.

She climbed the last few feet up the ladder to home and hoisted herself over, fatigue running through her. Heavy, bone deep exhaustion. But this curse wasn't done with her yet, the damp bulge in her pouch still needed tending. Such a temperamental beast, the Maristela Salax.

Luren made her way through the orchard, her bare feet treading on the hard soil, the dry grass pricking her ankles. The birds were silent, her only company the dull roar of the ocean below as it hit the cliff walls. Small fruits were budding on the trees now that the flowers had died off. Sunny season was upon them and the days were growing longer and hotter. Any rain they needed for the farm would have to come from the Gifted.

Luren climbed the wide circular stairs to her weaving tower, a basket of ingredients collected earlier for the elixir waiting for her on her large desk. She made quick work pounding herbs and seaweed, squeezing lemons, and mixing it all together just as the sun rose over the horizon. The heavenly scent of lemon filled the air, along with the gardenias and mint that were potted

Commented [CS29]: ...are the vines and shrubs the ladder or are the ladder rungs the ladder?

Commented [CS30]: wasn't she resting at the half-way point?

throughout her room. The mixture shimmered like liquid gold as the sun struck the glass jar and Luren hoped she mixed it correctly, on her own for the first time. Hervana forced her to memorize it years ago, every ingredient was to be exact. No substitutions, no heavy hands.

Her hands shook as she unbuttoned the wet pouch at her side and grabbed the handfuls of damp filament, dropping them into the liquid and giving it a quick stir. A few days in the jar, the strands would be ready to dry and weave into silky thread, then embroidered into a magical

tapestry. *The Gift*. Luren's shoulders tensed, giving the fiber another healthy whisk. Her family had been the givers, never the receivers of the Gift and it was an argument she had over and over with Hervana growing up. Today she was too tired to have it with herself, but now that the Gift was hers to give – who's to say she couldn't change the rules? Maybe it was finally time to give the Gift to herself, maybe it was finally her family's turn to have magic. But with Hervana gone, her secrets and knowledge gone with her, she had no one to ask.

She smiled. She could do what she wanted now, she had no keeper.

Luren stumbled to her bedroom, exhaustion overtaking her. She undid her belt, the wet leather sticking to her damp skin as she peeled it away and tossed it onto the floor. Dropping into her bed, damp swimsuit and all, she didn't even bother to close the shutters as daylight streamed in. Nothing could keep her awake, not even the thought that the woman she must Gift this magical tapestry to was the most undeserving backbiter ever, her former best friend.

Things we like:

- - the opening image, it was so evocative! agreed
- - the premise of the Gift, and how Luren could assign it but not benefit directly was very intriguing
- - the final line and the set up for how the gift is destined for her ex-friend is such a good lead into the next chapter
- The wind whistling, hissing, then growling is a cool escalation

Commented [CS31]: cool

Commented [CS32]: tense

Commented [LKC33]: While I love the concept, I'm a little confused about the logistics of the Gift. What is it? Who can use it? How does it get assigned? What are the rules around it? I feel like the whole "change the rules" thing feels a bit simple – to me, it feels like if someone could simply give themselves the gift, then it would have been done before. In 200+ years surely someone else would have been tempted?

Commented [LKC34]: Yes, love this premise!

Commented [CS35]: this is intriguing, but it kind of flies in the face of everything said so far? Isn't she considering giving herself the gift? And this would have a lot more impact if I knew more about this girl only to have the gut punch at the end that she has to make nice with her?

- A nice line: "If the ocean had a heart beat it would have stopped in anguish" Luren was not one to hold her tongue and as a result became very good at holding her breath instead" (which I liked, but I'm not sure what it means that she was punished...by making her hold her breath?
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Things that might need a second look:

- I think there needs to be a bit of clearer exposition around the "big picture" elements of the story. Who is Luren? What does she want? Agreed! Jumping in without context...could work? But it seems like a lot of world context is being given instead of character context when it's the character context I'm interested in. How is today different from other days?
- The premise of the diving, the sacrifice, and the creation of the Gift via weaving was very cool! But I was a little unclear about the logistics of it all. I think there needs to be a clearer exposition, with perhaps some of the more in-depth element saved for a subsequent chapter. Let us meet Luren and learn the basics here, then delve in more as the story progresses :) Agreed. The writing has this sort of lyrical element to it that's nice to *listen* to, but when I stopped to ask myself what was happening I honestly had no idea. What about the world do I absolutely need to know?
- I had a little trouble following blocking—for an opening scene, this goes amazingly smoothly. She makes it look so easy to kill a demon! But I was so confused about where she was (I didn't realize the fight took place underwater...well, culling, really, it wasn't a fight) and how things looked/felt around her. I'm a sucker for sensory detail, and was really excited to know more, feel more here. She keeps saying how horrible things are, but it seems pretty mundane. The opening image standing on the cliffs was really cool, but that's the last emotional/visceral description of the MC in her surroundings other than sorrow at killing the beast?
- There's a lot of interiority/naïve gazing/memories happening in this first chapter which, instead of giving context, are kind of confusing (which might fit in with what Lyndall said above). Agreed
- While I LOVED the conflict and idea of the ending--she has to give her ex-friend magic that she wants for herself--I feel like it was sort of a surprise left turn, because we haven't heard anything about her friend or betrayal or anything but the fact that she wants to take the magic for herself this time, and why can't she? I feel like this chapter is trying to do so much that it doesn't set me up for being angry along with her, and the best friend becomes a mildly intriguing detail rather than a reason to keep reading? When she goes to the cliffs...is the friend why she's angry? Does being angry make it harder or easier to do her job? My
- EXTREMELY PRESCRIPTIVE COMMENTS based only on a few pages of work, so I could be so very wrong!!: if you streamlined this chapter so it was just about the friend and killing the demon so you could focus the details on what is actively happening and the feelings of the MC in a relatable way, feeding in all the other conflict at the end or even later in the story would make more sense? Maybe? I mean, we say dodgy writing advice for a reason :) It seems like Hervana is also going to be an extremely important character, SO much time is spent talking about her...but she's dead, so unless she comes back, we're not going to see very much of her. It's a lot of time to spend in a first chapter on a character that isn't going to figure into the story. Unless, of course, Hervana is the voice she hears in her head now? The guiding light that constantly intercedes?