

Ch 1

Era could hear the kerramutti snarling and snapping before she reached the heavy pearl-encrusted door to the outer walls. She paused with her hand on the iron ring handle, listening to them. Their growls seeped through the cracks in the door, eerie sibilant echoes filling her ears. No one was sure exactly how the dog-shaped beasts with lizard-like tails were related to dragons, but there was no mistaking the kinship.

She considered turning back, but even if she weren't their caretaker, she'd take angry kerramutti over the princess any day. She shook her head at her thoughts. As if she had a choice between the two. Once she finished feeding the kerramutti, she'd have to return to the princess's uncertain temper and pray to uncaring gods that she'd come out.

She dragged open the door and stepped out onto the wall walk that wrapped around the edge of the cliff projecting out into the ocean. Only one side of the castle connected to the wall walk and that was built right into the cliff itself. Legend said that the dragon kings of old used to launch themselves into the water from the castle when they hunted. But that was long before the wall was built. Before the kings were driven mad by their dragon-taint.

Somewhere far below her, the waves crashed against the rocky tunnels that led to the cavernous harbor where the king's ships were protected from the elements. A frigid ocean breeze whipped her skin. She shivered and uselessly tried to pull her rough cotton sleeves further down her arms. Giving up, she tucked her hands into her armpits.

She passed the central watch tower and tensed as a figure stepped out of the shadows. As the dim morning light revealed his identity, she quickly bowed. "Good morning, Vice Admiral."

He gave a curt nod in response. His presence unnerved her, but she was grateful for it nevertheless. None of the other soldiers or the overseers would dare bother her with him

Commented [CS1]: Intriguing

Commented [CS2]: Oooh this is a tell when I'd love to SEE them

Commented [CS3]: Nice.

But...why is she hesitant if she's used to then?

Commented [CS4]: Nice world building. Ditto with the princess and building up who this girl is and where her place is in the world.

Commented [CS5]: Oh, now I'm really confused about if we're dealing with a human MC or not.

Dragon taint is one thing—I can get on board with that. But diving into the ocean says DRAGON with significantly dragonish features? Room for that not to be the case, but that's my takeaway so far.

Commented [CS6]: Nice hints here too

Commented [CS7]: eek

around. While he'd never given any indication that he meant to harm her, or any of the other slaves for that matter, no one survived being a vice admiral as long as he had without being dangerous. And anyone who was part of the court never did anything without expecting payment or a favor in exchange. Whatever form he wanted that payment, she would never be able to pay it or evade it.

She stayed a full step behind him as they turned the sharp corner from the ocean-side to the bay-side of the wall, where a soldier exited the guard house and saluted the vice admiral. The kerramutti's cages were half-hidden from this angle, but she could see a scaly tail lashing from side to side.

"Report," the vice admiral said, his voice low and his hands casually clasped behind his back.

Era carefully kept slightly behind him and off to the side, her head meekly bowed. She'd made the mistake of staying next to the vice admiral only once, back when she was first sent to work with the kerramutti over three years ago. He hadn't said anything, but her legs still bore the scars from his soldiers' offense at her presumption.

"The ocean front's been quiet, as always, Lord Shinabar," The soldier said, stepping in front of the kerramutti's cages.

A large, gray-furred kerramutti lunged toward him and smashed into the iron bars with a ringing thud and landed in a heap with its scaly underbelly showing. The other kerramutti jumped on it. The fight quickly became a rolling mass of fangs, growls, and unearthly screeches.

The soldier paled, but to his credit, he stayed where he was. "The swamp has more fog coming out of it than I've ever seen. The kerramutti are practically unmanageable."

Commented [CS8]: also eek

Commented [CS9]: oof.

I don't have anything in particular to say here other than there has been a lot of unhappiness about depictions of enslaved people in YA books of late. Slavery is something that has been practiced across the globe and in many different forms for...ever? But because of the US's specific history with enslaved people, there are some pretty strong feelings about the subject in the US book community, so that's something to be aware of when navigating this as a topic in your story.

Commented [CS10]: nice

Commented [CS11]: wait...so the fact that he hasn't actively harassed or accosted her means...he's going to exact some kind of payment from her? Also "she would never be able to pay or evade it" threw me a little. She wouldn't be able to pay and she wouldn't be able to avoid paying are sort of opposed, but there isn't enough attention being brought to this sentence to make me think that contrast/hopeless feel to it is on purpose?

I could be wrong. I like being hit over the head, but others in the group like subtlety, so we'll see what they say 😊

Commented [CS12]: Oh, is he actively leading her in? I didn't realize that. Is THAT the favor?

Commented [CS13]: Like...I like the idea of these people being afraid of the creatures, but it seems like all these people are used to working with them. So are they really so easily made uneasy?

“Are they ever manageable?” Era muttered under her breath. The vice admiral glanced at her and she froze. She hadn’t meant for him to overhear. He turned back to the soldier.

“Report received. Dismissed.”

The soldier saluted once more, then disappeared into the guard house.

She held her breath, waiting for the reprimand or beating that was surely coming. It had been almost two years since she lost control of her tongue like that.

“Come,” he said, headed toward the swamp.

Era blinked in disbelief, then scurried after him, eyeing the kerramutti as she passed their kennels. One of them stared at her, its serpentine eyes glowing icy blue. It lowered its head onto its giant scaly paws. Its shadow remained upright and watchful. She shivered and averted her eyes. Even though she was one of the few who had any semblance of control over the beasts, she’d always feel uneasy around them.

The vice admiral was looking over the wall when she caught up.

Her breath caught in her chest at the sight.

The cloud of swamp fog was halfway across the half-circle bay. She couldn’t recall ever seeing it this dense or widespread. In the haze, shadows of creatures reflected on the surface of the water and vanished. It was no wonder the kerramutti were so worked up.

She heard a screech and instinctively ducked. The vice admiral’s osprey swooped past her head and landed on his fist. The mottled skin on his hand rippled, the movement looking like the distant silvery waves on the ocean’s horizon before the mottling stilled and faded until it was barely noticeable. She looked down at her own hand. Her own mottling, red and brown instead of silvery blue, was even darker. She clenched her hand, trying to hide the mark of the princess’s

Commented [CS14]: Woah, if she’s usually so in control then what on earth is different today??

Commented [CS15]: Oooh very cool

Commented [CS16]: Why is that? They’re not animals that can be domesticated, I’m guessing...but if that’s the case then why are they being held at all? What’s the benefit?

Commented [CS17]: Like...things flying over the water? Then why can’t she see them?

madness. She knew not to stare at the markings. That was how other, more incautious, people lost their minds.

But she couldn't avoid it. The mottling snaked around her hand and up her wrist in a way that she'd never seen before. The undulating colors were mesmerizing. She stared and uncurled her fingers to study them better, twisting her hand with the moving colors.

A kerramutti hissed.

She started and dropped her hand to her side where it was out of view.

Any of the Islanders with sufficient royal lineage had at least some mottling, thanks to the magic in their blood. As a slave from the desert-lands, Era didn't have any Islander blood. Her mottling started to develop shortly after the princess's. Her best guess was that it had something to do with being around both the kerramutti and the princess as much as she was. None of the free-born wanted to be around Her Highness for an extended period for fear of also becoming dragon-tainted, so that had become Era's other duty, in addition to the kerramutti. Either one of those duties would have ostracized her from the other slaves, but combined, nobody dared get too close.

You know better, she scolded herself. *You've survived this long. Don't be stupid now.*

She looked back out at the fog. If she stared hard enough, she thought she could make out shapes on the water.

"Don't look too hard," Lord Shinabar commented, still looking out over the harbor. "It seems to have the same effect as the mottling." He started back toward the guardhouse, his osprey still on his fist.

She chewed on her bottom lip as she followed him. He seemed to know everything that went through her mind, even when he wasn't looking directly at her.

Commented [CS18]: Dragon taint?

Commented [CS19]: This phrasing threw me a little.

So mottling is blood-related? Except not? Does anyone wonder about this?

Commented [CS20]: Oh, so it's contagious.

Commented [CS21]: Wait, who?

I went back to see if you'd used it before and it is there once, but I didn't remember. I'm not great at remembering, so I'll ask the others. SHE doesn't call him that in her head, so I didn't know who she was talking about.

Commented [CS22]: Why did he bring her out onto the wall?

Some of the soldiers came back out, saluting the vice admiral.

“We’ll need to keep a close eye on the kerramutti today. No one is to get within 15 yards of their cages, with the exception of myself and this slave,” he said, his voice still soft. Era was fascinated with how he managed to exude so much control and respect without the blustering of some of the other vice-admirals or nobility. Even Admiral Batsuen couldn’t get a rise out of him.

He turned toward one of the soldiers. “Inform the overseers that she will be with the kerramutti for **the unforeseeable future**. Someone else will need to be assigned to take on her normal duties with Her Highness. Then, inform the afternoon shift that everyone is on double watch-duty and to report immediately. Dismissed.”

Era waited behind him, kneading the fleshy part of her hand between her thumb and fingers. She didn’t particularly mind the extra kerramutti duty—**despite their irritability, they were more predictable than serving Her Highness**—but in all of her memory, she couldn’t remember when both morning and afternoon shifts were on double-duty, and that made her uneasy. **What was the vice admiral expecting to happen?**

She turned just enough to look at the fog. There was a flicker of light in the distance, almost like flames, and she thought she heard a faint booming. She looked up. The morning sky was clear. No sign of a storm coming in. She shuddered.

There were enough rumors about all the dangerous creatures in the swamp. Other than the mad dragon-king, there hadn’t been even a whisper of a creature powerful enough to produce a light visible across the bay like that. But the dragon-king had **disappeared over a hundred years ago and the swamp had been more or less inactive since then. Until today, at least.**

Something brown appeared in her peripheral view.

She looked up, startled.

Commented [CS23]: ? isn’t she...always? Was she expecting this? I don’t understand how this is different from usual.

Commented [CS24]: nice

Commented [CS25]: Yes, we have no context to understand what the options are...? She gasped when she saw the fog, so she has more information than we do.

Commented [CS26]: Oh, so this is hugely different. How is it normally? She didn’t have a huge emotional reaction, she wasn’t scared really, I don’t think.

I love the way this is being set up, world building interspersed with the scene, it’s awesome. I will say, however, that I’m not sure what’s going on in Era’s head. She’s low-key frightened of everything due to her position in society which makes it difficult to see variations of “oh, this is new and bad and I’m now way more scared than usual” in her emotional responses.

Lord Shinabar held out a thick pair of leather gloves and a heavy coat. “Put them on,” he said, then nodded toward her hands.

She gasped. Her mottling was moving again. Normally it only moved when she’d been in extended contact with the princess or occasionally if a kerramutti got too close. With the kerramutti and the swamp acting up as much as they were, they couldn’t afford for her mottling to drive any of the soldiers insane. She took the clothes, her frozen fingers fumbling in her haste as she pulled them on.

The coat was lined with some unidentifiable fur and, with the exception of the princess’s dresses, was the softest thing Era had ever touched. She immediately relaxed into its warmth. She was oddly grateful for her mottling at that moment because without it, she wouldn’t have a good reason to wear the warmer clothing.

Lord Shinabar beckoned her over.

“Keep an eye on the kerramutti and on the fog. I want to know about any patterns or inconsistencies and how or if the kerramutti react,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” she said, tendrils of anxiety curling in her belly much like the kerramutti’s snake-like tails. She’d have to look carefully at the fog to see anything that he would be looking for. Perhaps if she could keep herself focused on some of the sounds here, she wouldn’t get too absorbed. She’d managed to avoid being driven mad by either the kerramutti or the princess, so she might stand a chance against the fog.

Lord Shinabar held out his fist with his osprey. “Take Muru. She’ll keep an eye on you.”

Tentatively, she held her arm next to the vice admiral’s. She’d never seen anyone else hold the bird. What if the watching soldiers took offense at her presumption again?

Commented [CS27]: Why do they have kerramutti if they can’t even touch them? (Including the person who cares for them)

Commented [CS28]: Reader response
...SO...

So it’s quick, then? Contagious and you go super fast? By looking at it?

So why wasn’t she covered before?

Commented [CS29]: While...she does what? Is everyone leaving her out there alone? Why?

The bird stepped onto Era's fist and moved up to her forearm. Muru was heavier than she'd been expecting. Her golden eyes focused on Era's face. Era held her breath. This was the closest to the osprey she'd ever been and she had the distinct impression that she was being tested in some way.

Muru chirped and ruffled her feathers, then settled in. Apparently she'd earned the bird's approval.

Commented [CS30]: nice

Era looked up in time to see a ghost of a smile on the vice admiral's face. It was gone in an instant though, so she wasn't convinced she'd actually seen him smiling.

He nodded once, then left.

She pulled Muru closer to her body and found a spot against the wall where she could keep an eye on both the kerramutti and the fog.

Commented [CS31]: what for and why her?

And keeping an eye on them literally means watching them?
Why are they there?

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the fog stayed. There were a few more bright flashes and quiet booms, but by the time the courtiers and servants were stirring far below in the courtyards, any hint of unrest from the swamp stopped, except for the fog. That stayed, with its accompanying shadow creatures.

Most of the kerramutti were still snapping at each other. A couple of the beasts lay on the stone, their scaly tails lashing from side-to-side in their agitation.

The soldiers quietly murmured to each other as they passed each other on the wall-walk. They eyed Era and the kerramutti suspiciously.

"Dragon-tainted," they said, not caring that she could hear them.

She pulled the leather gloves higher up her arms, making sure that her mottling was completely covered.

The morning dragged on. She could hear faint noises rising from the courtyards and barracks below, but they were muffled by the fog. Occasionally she shifted the osprey from one arm to the other or shook her legs to keep them from falling asleep where she stood. But for the most part, she watched the swirling mists.

By midmorning, the soldiers were beginning to relax but Era couldn't. She watched the kerramutti almost as much as she watched the fog. Whatever was happening across the bay in the swamps kept them tense and aggressive and that frightened her.

Muru ruffled her feathers, tickling Era's face. She wrinkled her nose, trying not to sneeze, then froze.

One of the kerramutti was elongating. Not its shadow, but the actual beast was changing shape. Its body was slowly stretching as if it were an undercooked tentacle. The change was slow enough that if she weren't watching it, she wouldn't have noticed an immediate difference.

Cautiously, she moved the osprey to her shoulder and readied herself to run. She'd never even heard of a kerramutti shape-shifting. Lord Shinabar needed to know what was happening. But she wasn't sure what she would even tell him.

By now, the kerramutti's snout was rounding out to a more serpentine-shape and losing patches of fur and its pupils dilated to thin slits as it unblinkingly watched a pair of unsuspecting soldiers walk between the wall and the cage. Even its shadow was focused on the soldiers.

Era's throat was dry. She couldn't drag her eyes away, as much as she wanted to. She didn't know what to do.

If only the cage bars could keep it contained. If not, the soldiers wouldn't stand a chance and as the next closest target, neither did she.

Commented [CS32]: Oh, so she's not alone.

So why do they need her?

And why is the osprey helpful?

Commented [CS33]: Nice description

Commented [CS34]: scary

By now, the elongated kerramutti had squeezed partially between the bars and bore the unmistakable look of a beast stalking its prey.

Muru took off, her giant wings knocking against Era's face. She flinched at the unexpected movement and knocked her elbow against the edge of the wall. A zing of pain flashed up her arm into her shoulder, clearing her thoughts.

She looked back at the soldiers. The glazed expressions in their eyes told Era that they'd fallen victim to the fog's effect. She found herself moving toward the soldiers before she had time to think.

She collided into the pair and the trio fell to the floor of the wall. Her chin scraped against the sand-covered stone and her hand was tangled up in the straps of one of the soldier's scabbard. The other soldier threw her legs off himself and scrambled to stand up.

"I should throw you to the kerramutti," he glared at her as he reached for his spear.

Her heart pounding in her throat, she rolled off the soldier still on the ground and frantically pulled her hand away. Instead of sliding free, the strap tightened over her wrist. She clawed at the leather, scratching her wrist in the process.

Where was the kerramutti? Had it managed to get completely free yet?

She looked back and blanched.

It had now gotten its front shoulders and legs through the bars. Even as she watched, its back limbs were retracting into its body. Its shadow now reflected its current physical appearance but it had added another figure that looked disturbing like her in her current position.

Worst of all, the kerramutti was staring unblinkingly at her.

There was no doubt in her mind that the kerramutti had chosen her as its target.

Commented [CS35]: Unclear antecedent

Commented [CS36]: Which are...what?

Commented [CS37]: This might be a little confusing

Commented [CS38]: What is her value add here? Why IS she there and would throwing her to the kerramutti matter?

Commented [CS39]: Eek!

Commented [CS40]: Eek again!!!

Things we like:

- Neat, spooky ambience. I'm a sucker for magic and scary fog, and I think you built a good aesthetic here.
- Lots of cool little worldbuilding details, and (with a caveat I will include later), I like the vice admiral/Era's relationship.
- I like world building I can dig my teeth into!
- The idea of dragon-taint driving the kings mad is very interesting. And so creepy that the mottling moves.
- There is some really great integrated world building so nothing feels super infodumpy. Lots of really fun details, Kerramuti sound cool! Especially the shadow not doing the same things as the animal details.
- Very very creepy ending to the scene where one of them is squeezing out of its cage when it shouldn't be able to and obviously about to eat her is very cool
- I like the mottled hands dragon taint contagious madness idea
- The comparisons between the kerramutti and the princess were nice

Things that might need a second look:

- I'm super confused by the vice admiral. When we first meet him, Era is thinking to herself that she's worried that he's expecting her to repay him, but we don't have the sense that he's done anything for her at all other than share a street with her. Then much later (not until page 6!) he like, gifts her his bird as protection and has a conversation with her that set off all my "IT'S HER DAD" alarms at once. But because we don't find out he's nice to her until *long* after she worries she'll have to repay him for something, it feels out of character and odd.
- Actually, in general, my concern is that we find out about details long after we need to know them. We're in a classic state of "something unusual is happening but because I don't know what normal looks like in this world, I don't know how worried I should be about it." For instance, the kerramutti changing shape. It didn't worry me because I know *nothing* about kerramutti and for all I know shapeshifting is normal. Era doesn't really react at first until she goes "wait that's weird," and I think it could help if she has a much more emotional reaction to this. If it's world-changing, I need to know! I had a similar reaction to the mottling on the hands--we first see mottling in a sense where it's normal because lots of people have it, but for some reason Era's is weird and bad? In order to disrupt "normal" in a way that really rings true for readers, we *have* to know what that normal is. It's hard to feel tension or stakes when we're not clear on what the world is supposed to look like. I feel like this is consistent throughout. Era is so low-key terrified by everything that I'm not sure what **I** should be terrified by. Not sure what the norm is so I can see what is not normal.
- I had a hard time understanding why Era is the way she is. Based on what we know about her, some of her actions didn't really ring true for me. For instance, on page 2, she mutters something like "Are they ever manageable" under her breath where the vice admiral and soldiers can hear her. But we've literally just been told she got whipped for something as simple as standing in the wrong spot! It didn't feel like a smart decision to backtalk at that moment and I didn't buy that she'd do that. YES I was like, what is different about today so that slipped out?

- Similar issue when later she leaps for the guards to save their lives and they start yelling at her and she isn't like "HEY YOU'RE IN DANGER" same
- On a technical level, watch the connections between paragraphs. Sometimes I had a hard time seeing how one thought flowed into the next and it pulled me out of the story a little.
- Watch the triangle of abstraction on sentences like "they couldn't afford for her mottling to drive any of the soldiers insane." Drive them insane how? Mottling how? Mottling bad how?
- We get a lot of neat world building details on the first page, but I would almost prefer to have that space used to get a sense of who Era is as a character.
- There is a LOT going on in this chapter. Era is facing a Kerramutti, wondering at all the strange fog, and thinking through dragon taint. Each of these things are very cool, but because they come all at once, I ended up feeling like I was hopping from one problem to another.
- I was really confused about a few things:
 - a) if kerramutti are so dangerous that even their keeper can't get anywhere near them...then why do they keep them? What's the benefit?
 - b) why did the vice admiral take her over to the wall to see the fog?
 - c) why is she there at all? At first I thought she was going to be the ONLY one out there, so she had to, like, call out an alarm if something happened, but there are guards there with her. What's her value add to the situation out there? What does she do? What does she NORMALLY do and why is today different?