

DROWNING LANDS

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Though Dzung had never seen the sea before, his baby sister loved it.

The way Tischa played in the surf she might have been born in it. Her true birthplace was up in the hills of her homeland, which they had fled last year. Likely neither would ever see the old country again: which upset Dzung but he could have borne the loss for Tischa's sake were it not likely that she, he, and all the rest of his family, would die on the island.

Lhame watched over Tischa, her long legs holding her storklike above the shallow surf. She was the middle child and far too old for play. She looked her age when she smiled for the benefit of the happy Tischa, but at rest her face was careworn and her eyes ancient. Dzung had those eyes as well, as did most of the island's odd-hundred inhabitants. On Lhame's once radiant face they looked alien in their grief.

Eyes were the problem. Were it not for them, Dzung could have slipped away with Lhame and Tischa – and whoever else could be smuggled onto a boat – and mingled with the Outsiders in their strange, muddy country. He and his family shared their dark skin and spoke a tongue so much like theirs – but then, perhaps not alike enough. With their eyes and strange speech they would be caught, and if lucky, sent back to the island. There were still worse fates in the world – especially for Lhame.

Garbage and the spent shells of the island's few coconut trees swirled around the two girls. The seawater moulded Lhame's sari to her trim form, showing her to be lovely in a way that in the homeland would have promised her a line of suitors and a future secured. Perhaps,

Dzung mused, if Lhame was very lucky she might catch the eye of one of the Outsider seamen who infrequently stopped by the island. That man could be persuaded to take her away – away to a bad life, most likely, but a life all the same. An option for survival she would be foolish not to pursue, denied as it was to all else in the family.

The crows cawed on the trees over him, and their kin scabbled in the rubbish heaps and the brackish puddles that made up so much of the island. Sewage pooled. Dzung's people walked between rows of once-white tents. The unlucky ones were at the water's edge and their homes were sinking rapidly into the salty earth while they themselves tried to catch fish from the shore. Some of the islanders plied trades as they could, eager to stave off the inevitable; others accepted their fate and lay in lethargy on the ground.

Eyes open and waiting, staring at the sun.

Dzung heard a shriek from the shoreline and stood up in alarm. Lhame was holding up a drenched Tischa, who was soaked entirely and giggling. Refuse bobbed in the waves, as yet another rose up to swallow the two girls. Lhame began to walk back to the shack, then stopped suddenly. Her gaze was northwards.

The afternoon horizon produced a speedboat. Dzung frowned, wondering what the Outsiders wanted now. Lhame approached him, their little sister on her shoulders. "It will be bad," she whispered in her voice so deep.

Interest was spreading through the camp as the mountain-dwellers-turned-islanders saw the approaching vessel. Even the sun-drunk were rousing themselves and swatting

away the flies: this was possibly the first event of note – bar deaths – in over a week.

The boat drew close and tied up at the makeshift jetty the Outsiders used for their aid boats. Dzung recognized the letters on the side of the boat, though he couldn't read in any language. The resettlement board. Sent from the great Outsider city of Daukar. Those who had sentenced his fleeing people to drown.

He joined the crowd at the jetty, silently waiting for the Outsiders to speak their business. There were seven of them, and five held rifles. Their bearded faces showed only contempt for the scrawny, filthy masses emerging from the tents.

One wore a suit and spectacles and cleared his throat before using a stained loudspeaker. He spoke Dzung's language, with the uncaring incompetence of someone too arrogant to learn it.

The message did not deserve clear diction. The government at Daukar had consented to shelter more of his people as they fled from the slaughter in their homeland. These new refugees were being rounded up at the border all the time, just as they all had been, and next week there would be another shipment of them to the island: six hundred more. The Outsider asked them to prepare themselves and their supplies accordingly.

Dzung drew away as the crowd began to screech and protest. They had done this before. They would do it again and again until there were no more of them left. He resumed his place outside the family's tent, watching the ocean. He looked again at the Outsiders at the jetty, and their boat with the strange script.

An age ago Dzung's people had feared the written word. Script was the last magic – the binding magic – known only to the priests who made the high laws. What was written was fixed and certain, a promise that this is what is and what would be.

Time had cheapened magic and made it common – his sisters could both write. Literacy had lost its mystique. Dzung privately thought that the ancestors had it right: for only sorcery could explain their fate. To have their doom sealed by a document, a single order drafted by some faceless clerk in Daukar to the north. Pen-strokes as another functionary ratified the document, then stamped it with cheap ink. Result: an entire nation sentenced to death by drowning. So easily done, it could only have been magic.

Dry Daukar. Dusty Daukar. Dzung had heard stories of it; a city brimming with souls numbering in the millions choking in their own air. There the skin dried and cracked during the winter, instead of forever stinging under the lash of a sea growing ever bolder. Daukar's inhabitants tasted air rich with dust and burning fuel: but never salt. Dzung wondered if they ever thought themselves lucky.

Back home – the old home – when Lhame could still go to school, she'd told him once that the world was drowning. He didn't understand how or why, because his language didn't have a word for 'ice'. The lands of the Outsiders would be one the first places to be taken by the ocean.

So what if they sentenced him and his people to drown first? Salt would claim them all soon enough. That had been written in Lhame's textbooks, and so fate was a certainty sealed and signed.

