

THE SURVIVORS



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To all those fighting climate change, to
prevent the catastrophic consequences
depicted in this book.

Chapter One

Low, dark clouds obscure the moon and stars as I step into one of our flat-bottomed wooden boats. A warm, salty breeze from the northeast whips the wide black waters, rocking the boat, but too feebly to capsize it. For now, anyway. A storm is coming.

Angelica calls to me from the floating walkway surrounding our seven-floor tower home. “It looks a little rough out there, Lucy.”

“Boat’s not taking on water,” I tell her. “Just don’t stand once we’re away.”

Angelica is young and attractive, with dark eyes, braided hair, and smooth, honey-colored skin. She is bulging with her first child and probably shouldn’t be out here, but my aunt Irma says it’s easy work and she’ll be fine. Maybe Irma’s right. I lost my first child, but I wasn’t born in the tower like Angelica, with plenty to eat and no nearby enemies.

I reach out my arms and help my friend on board. She settles onto the back bench and eyes the clouds with worry on her face.

“We’ll head back before the storm arrives,” I say. We have plenty of time, especially if we stick close to the tower instead of foraging up side creeks, our usual task. Cattails and other plants have edible or medicinal parts, and supply fiber and lining for clothes, mats, and baskets. One good thing about the breeze—it keeps away ’skeetos and biting flies, which gave me the shaking chills last year and killed Irma’s newborn. When the bugs are bad, we have to daub mud or allium oil on our skin to keep them off.

“Where are the others?” Angelica asks.

“Rod and Griff are checking the fish traps.” Irma’s teenage sons are arrogant and a little frightening, but they’re fast rowers. I point to the east. “Irma and Thal are over there.” Their boat is about a hundred yards from the tower, barely visible in the dark. They’ve stopped rowing, and the boat rocks slightly in the waves. Thal stands up with his net, then stumbles. Irma grabs his arm and says something I can’t make out—probably telling him not to be so clumsy. Thal turns and casts his net into the water.

“Let’s stay close and catch crabs,” I say.

Near the tower, the bottom is covered with tangled metal. Fish nets take

days to make, and we can't afford to snag or rip one. On cloudless days, when the wind is calm, the blinding sun illuminates the shattered remains of buildings, fences, and wheeled machines beneath the surface. Closer to the marshy shore lies the remnants of a giant flying machine, its wings and tail broken off. Further offshore, where Irma and Thal are fishing, the bottom is flat, with wide roads that end abruptly.

We paddle a short distance from the tower, tie rank-smelling fish heads on our crab lines, and lower them into the water. I hold a finger against my line and wait to feel the vibration of a feeding crab. We haven't crabbed this spot for a while, so I hope we'll get lucky.

"Puya!" Angelica squeals behind me. She speaks my language as well as I do, but knows her ancestors' also.

I turn my head toward her. "Got one already?"

"No, it's my baby. I feel it kicking and punching, like it wants to get out."

It's better off staying inside, I think. But I don't tell Angelica this.

"I think it's a muchacho," she says, "the way it kicks so hard."

“Girls kick hard too.” Mary, my oldest child, certainly did, although she’s been a darling since she emerged.

I suspect Irma was especially ferocious in the womb. Thal has never hit me, but Aunt Irma has beaten me a dozen times since we fled our birth territory. Irma is bigger and more savage than me, and doesn’t stop until her opponent is on the ground or dead. My free hand touches the ragged stump of my left ear, a gift from Irma the last time we fought.

Angelica fingers the totem around her neck, a metal cross from the ancient times. “Ángeles del Mundo Desaparecido, Spirits of the Vanished World, please give us lots of crabs today.”

Her birth group, she’d told me, prayed to the Vanished Ones every day. It didn’t help them. “If there are spirits here,” I say, “they don’t respond.”

Angelica frowns at me. “That’s not true. They’re giving me a healthy baby. And they gave me Thal.”

“Thal’s attention drifts with the winds,” I say.

Angelica sniffs at me. “Thal saved me from Irma’s blade. He adores me and makes me happy.”

“When Irma and I captured Thal,” I say, “I was only nine and he focused his

attentions on Irma. But once I was old enough, he lay mostly with me. Like you, I thought he loved me more than Irma. But love is beyond him. He just likes sex and you're newer." And once Angelica began bulging, I don't add, Thal turned his attention back to me and Irma.

Angelica pouts. "You're the new ones, *chera*. My group was here before any of you were born."

I hate arguing with my only friend—*chera* in her people's language. Angelica hasn't lost all her anger, though. Maybe remnants will always cling deep inside.

Most of her group had died from the pox before we arrived. We were desperate and Irma had plotted to take the tower and its waters by ambushing their remaining adults while they foraged. I'd argued that we should merge with their group instead, and work together. Irma had insisted the world didn't work that way, and everyone else had agreed.

"I'm sorry about what happened," I tell Angelica. Fourteen at the time, she'd begged for her life and Thal had happily granted it. "But we're all family now," I continue. "I love you like I love my children."

“I love you too.” She twirls her salt-scented braids, one of those cute things she does when she’s happy. She’s the only one in our group with long hair, and needs my help to periodically wash and braid it. In return, she tattooed Vanished World flying machines on my arms—a painful process, but permanent reminders that it’s possible to build such things.

I feel a faint tug on my line. “Net,” I tell Angelica.

She pulls up her line and grabs the hand net.

I bring my line in slowly. Too quick, and fear will overcome the crab’s hunger. The bait breaks the surface. An adult blue crab grips the fish head, still stuffing pieces into its mouth.

Angelica thrusts the hand net beneath and we have our first crab. Judging by the narrow hinge on its belly, a male. We need a lot more for a filling meal, but something is always better than nothing.

Angelica rubs her totem. “Muchas gracias, Espíritus.”

I wonder why the people of the Vanished World created totems. They were like gods themselves. They built the tower and millions of other things. They had wheeled machines—their remains are everywhere—that sped down the roads.

According to stories passed down in my birth village, their flying machines crisscrossed the sky, taking people wherever they wanted to go. My one dream is to recover enough of their ancient knowledge to make life easier for my children.

The sun should be glowing on the eastern horizon by now. But it's still dark. "Have you seen a storm come from the east?" I ask Angelica. Normally, they come from the west.

"Almost never. But when it happens, they're bad."

I paddle the boat a little closer to the tower but we can't go in yet. It hasn't started raining and we only have one crab.

We catch five more crabs worth keeping, then the wind picks up and it starts to rain. Dark clouds obscure the east. Time to go in, whether Irma likes it or not.

I paddle back to the tower and tie the boat to the big metal hooks Angelica's group had pounded into the wall. I push open the hand-carved wooden door covering the old window frame—we'd left it unlatched—and climb inside with the bucket of crabs.

Torches cut from hardwood saplings rest in metal stands around the concrete room. The upper ends have been split four ways, with resin-soaked balls of bark fiber stuffed in between. I grab a flint and steel from one of the supply shelves against the furthest wall, and hold the flint against one of the torch ends. I strike the steel against the flint edge, throwing sparks against the fuel. After about ten times—I'm not the best at this—it finally lights. I place the lit torch against two others—we'll need at least three.

Irma and Thal enter. Thal carries a basket of fish. He's tall and strong, with a short beard he trims once a month with a knife. He wears a "luck-bringing" necklace made from crow feathers, mouse skulls, and fish bones. Irma, our leader, is in her mid-thirties, sturdy, and shaves her head to keep lice off. She wears see-far glasses around her neck, two joined black tubes with glass ends that make distant objects seem close—an incredibly useful Vanished World tool we found in the top floor of the tower.

Rod and Griff are still out there. Irma returns to the doorway and looks through her see-far glasses. She lowers them and barks, "Hurry, you dirt-brains!"

The rain and wind have grown stronger by the time Irma's sons arrive with

more fish from the traps. Rod is adult-sized, but with only wisps of facial hair. Griff is almost Rod's height, but still growing.

"Big catch," Griff says.

Irma slaps the side of his head, then does the same to Rod. "You should have come in earlier."

Rod glares at her. "We had to finish checking the traps."

Irma slaps him again. "What good is that if you drown in a storm? Now go clean those fish."

It's a bad idea to be around Irma when her temper's aflame. I take one of the torches and lead Angelica up the zig-zagging concrete stairs. The children aren't in the sleeping rooms, so they must have gone up to the top, where we cook and eat.

We climb another set of stairs and emerge onto the top floor, high above the water. It's a little smaller than the lower floors, a five-pointed room ringed with big glass windows that slant outward. Below the circle of windows, at waist height, runs a thick shelf with old machines angled up against the bottom edge of the glass. None of them work, but it's fun guessing what they were for. The black rectangles with rows of letters and numbers must have been for writing. And the half-disintegrated

headpieces might have been used for speaking to people outside the room.

From the windows, you can see practically the whole estuario—Angelica's word for the wide river mouth—although not all the way to the ocean. The ground is mostly flat, with some low hills to the west. Because of the slant, rain almost never hits the windows, but this time the wind is dashing it against the panes facing the storm.

My four-year-old daughter, Mary, sees me. She's holding Isaac, still short of his first year.

"Mama!" Mary shouts, a big smile on her face.

I give the crabs to Irma's daughters—Bree, who's ten, and Tash, who's seven. They do most of the cooking. A long-gone former resident had placed an iron stove against one window and fed a pipe through the ceiling to get rid of the smoke. Irma's daughters have already lugged pails of brackish water up the stairs and started a fire inside the stove. Bree fills a pot with water and dumps in the wriggling crabs, along with the rest of the plant leaves we'd gathered yesterday.

I lift Mary and Isaac up in the air. They squeal in delight.

"You are such a joy, you two!"

“I love you, Mama!” Mary says. She’s such a darling.

I put Mary down, sit in a tattered plastic chair with wheels on the bottom, and breast-feed Isaac.

Thal, Rod, and Griff bring up the fish fillets, give some to Bree to fry on the stove, and start salting the rest to preserve them. We eat the crabs, fish, and greens as soon as they’re cooked, sitting on woven floor mats in a big circle. Tash passes out hardtack squares made from ground roots, seeds, and evaporated salt. They have to be soaked in bowls of warm water or they’re impossible to chew.

Mary smashes a crab claw with her grinding stone and a shell fragment flies out of the bowl and hits me in the cheek. Her eyes widen. “Oops.”

I laugh so she won’t worry. “Don’t hit it so hard.”

Next to us, Thal laughs too and rubs her head. “You’ll make a good warrior someday.”

She grins at him. “I want to be smart like mama!”

I cringe, but Thal just laughs again.

Outside, the wind grows stronger, driving the rain horizontally. Air screeches between the window panes. Isaac starts to

cry and I have to hold him. “Don’t worry, this is the safest place in the world.”

Our tower has stood since before the fall of the Vanished World. Even the glass is intact. It’s the most defensible home we’ve ever had, and it’s surrounded by food and water.

Angelica scoots close to me. She looks scared. “I never saw wind like this.”

“We’ll be alright.” I fetch the small pile of ancient books from beneath the window counter. “Shall we read?”

She grins. “Yes.”

According to Angelica, the books had been in the tower since before she was born, possibly brought by whoever installed the stove. No one in her group had ever bothered with them. The original binding glue had disintegrated, but I’d made new glue by mixing pine sap, charcoal powder, ground bark, and a little muskrat fat. Thal had laughed at my efforts, saying I could just tie the pages together, but I’d told him the closer we follow the ways of the Vanished Ones, the better off we’ll be.

Between the guide books and picture books written for young children, I’ve taught myself a lot of words, although the only ones I’m sure how to pronounce are from *The Word Book* and *First 200 Words*, like “tree” and “dog.”

I open the plant guide. I show Mary the pages showing different kinds of leaves and flowers. “If you learn to identify plants and mushrooms, you’ll know which ones are useful and which are bad.”

In the plant guide, I’ve used a charcoal stick to circle the edible plants and draw X’s next to the poisonous ones. I flip to white snakeroot, which has an X next to the picture. “This could kill you. It has opposite toothed leaves and clusters of small white flowers on top.”

Mary is only four—although nearly five—but she’s much smarter than any of Irma’s children when they were her age. She learns quickly, and remembers what I tell her.

I point to some of the words I’ve figured out. “Lower leaves stalked.” I’ve taught the alphabet to everyone but Thal, who considers it a waste of time. Irma admits the guide books are useful, but most of the others—the ones with only words—she gave to her daughters to light the stove with. As soon as Isaac’s weaned, I hope to search the shore for more books, especially ones that can teach how to read. We can learn what’s been forgotten, pass down the knowledge, and make our lives easier and

more pleasant. Assuming the books haven't all disintegrated or been used to start fires.

Mary loses interest in the plant guide. "Let's try fixing the machines again."

"They need power," I say, "and we don't have any."

She turns to Angelica. "Can you call the Vanished Ones to come fix the machines?"

Angelica pats her shoulder. "I've tried. They don't always listen."

Not for the first time, I wonder if Vanished Ones still exist far away, and if they might return someday and fix the broken world.

The tower begins to creak and groan. Everyone looks up, fear on their faces. The sky is black and furious, rain hammering against the glass. My muscles clench with every new noise.

"Look!" Bree shouts. She points out the southeast windows.

Everyone crowds to the window. A churning wall of water speeds toward us, many times higher than any waves I've seen before. Knees shaking, I grip my daughter and infant and back away.

Angelica grips her talisman and challenges the approaching waves. "Por favor, deténganse, Espíritus! Los adoraremos mejor!"

The tower shudders and shakes. Spray slaps up the windows, like the water's trying to pull us down.

The window in front of Angelica cracks, jagged lines marching across its surface. It shatters inward. Shards of glass fly into the room, along with howling wind and spray strong enough to knock everyone off their feet—even Thal. Lengths of grass tear away from my woven vest and skirt.

Angelica screams, a high-pitched shriek that sounds like an animal being ripped apart.

I try to get up, but the wind is too strong. More windows break. Pieces of the ceiling fall.

“Downstairs!” Irma shouts. Everyone scrambles for the stairs.

Mary and Isaac are my main concern. I crawl along the floor with them and shout to Thal, “Help Angelica!”

The stairs are slick with rainwater. I carry Isaac in one arm and grip the metal railing with the other. Mary follows, holding my waist and whimpering.

As we enter our sleeping room, Thal arrives, half-carrying Angelica. Bright red blood streams from her left eye. A shard of glass is lodged in her pupil, protruding out

almost an inch. She gasps and wails, arms flailing.

Thal lays Angelica on her bed mat of woven grass and feather down. This is her sleeping room too. Blood oozes down her cheek. Thal reaches a hand toward her eye. “Stay still.”

Angelica is anything but still, head and arms shaking as she cries out. Thal’s hand stops short of the glass like he’s not sure what to do.

“Hold her head still,” I say. He grips her temples with his big hands. Irma comes in and holds her body down.

“Anyone else hurt?” I ask Irma.

“Some cuts and bruises,” she says. “Nothing serious.”

Thal looks at me. “You can get the glass out?”

I’m not sure. I reach a thumb and forefinger toward the glass shard. Angelica’s eyebrows climb her forehead, and her good eye widens in terror. “Por favor, ayúdame.” *Help me.*

I grip the end of the shard, trying not to slice my fingertips in the process. Slowly, I pull it out of her eye. Angelica moans and wails but Thal and Irma keep her from thrashing. I feel like vomiting but keep pulling.