

Registry of the Ruined

PART I

I hate kids. Claire thought, crouching below the broken window of a grocery store. She peeked outside to watch a parade of parole vehicles roll along the street. The vehicles were electrically-powered, sleek. Before humots took over the world, millionaire humans owned these cars to show off their riches. Now, humots claimed that the cars were the ancestors that led the way of humot technology. They may have been right, but Claire never paid enough attention to scientists to know for sure.

That wasn't strictly true. Claire had paid attention, more and more, as scientists gave advice to society: there are too many people on the planet; people are living longer; people say they need what they want; the planet is getting sick, and if *we* don't work together, we won't have a planet that can sustain the future of mankind. Society asked *how* we could work together. Recycle more, use less water, grow and buy organic, use less fuel, cut fewer trees, grow more gardens. *What else?* Too many curable diseases, humans live longer, too many people, too many people, too many children.

To Claire, this had meant birth control. To her boyfriend, this had meant convincing Claire to adopt. To humots, this had meant getting rid of the surplus of humans. This would conclude in less waste, less violence, fewer people. Children were the more selfish, so why not start with them?

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The humots passed, leaving Claire with white knuckles around her backpack straps. The idea of setting up shelter in the back of the store ached in her mind, but she dismissed the thought and started walking back to the church. The children she had saved would be there.

Rounding the corner to the street of the church, Claire didn't notice any difference to the setting. She pushed on the doors to the church entrance and they swung open. Looking around, she didn't see the children.

“Guys!” Claire’s voice echoed inside the vast church.

When there was no response, she rushed to the back room. Empty. Going along the middle aisle, she looked down each pew, trying to spot some small bundle of human hiding under the seats. She started to getting worried, but then a small creak came from above her head. She looked up. The eldest child was peeking down at her from the choir balcony.

“What are you doing up there?” Claire felt relief and her usual annoyance.

“We thought it would be safer up here.” The girl said. “And there are blankets to sleep on.”

Making her way up the hidden stairs, Claire was held back from running by the backpack that was heavy with rations. At the top, many of the children were sleeping, wrapped up in the blankets. Those awake tore through the blueberry-flavored tarts she produced from her backpack. One of them passed his half of the package to Claire, but she refused with a smile.

“Are we going to stay here?”

Claire nodded and took a gulp of water.

“I like it here.”

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“Yeah, my mommy used to make me dress up for Mass.”

“Mine, too!”

“The shoes I had to wear hurt my feet.”

Claire listened to this conversation, thinking back to her elementary education at a Catholic school. She hadn't liked the company of children back then, either.

“My parents are dead.” One boy whispered, as if trying to get the words out through a tight throat.

“Mine were taken by the robot-things.” A girl said, crumbs lining her mouth. “Do you know what they do to them? Or do they just die?”

When she realized the question was for her, Claire redirected her gaze from the stained glass window to the girl.

“I'm not sure.” She said. “They either die or are put to work.”

“Where are your parents?”

“... My parents went missing right *before*...” Claire hadn't talked to anyone about this since shit went sideways, not even to herself, “my uncle went into slavery, taken while he was working at his law firm. I heard stories from coworkers who got out, saying he immediately gave up, but I knew he just wanted to live.”

“We can't do that.” The eldest said. “We won't be spared or enslaved.”

“I know.” Claire felt a heaviness in her chest and a knot in her throat.

“Why haven't you given up, like your uncle?”

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Staring into the girl's eyes, she saw a loss of innocence and happiness. This girl, soon to hit puberty, had probably seen more death than Claire. All Claire had seen were brains of her boyfriend laid out on a wall. This girl had probably seen her parents killed. Claire had been the one to pull her out from the pile of discarded bodies of children where the girl had been hiding.

"I'm not sure," Claire hated saying those words again, "I just haven't. And I don't think I want to."

The girl grabbed a bottle of water, and lay down in a corner far from the rest of the group. Claire looked back up at the stained glass window, trying to remember which number of the station of the cross it was. This one was when Simon helps Jesus carry the cross. The colorful glass showed the blood and mud on a weak Jesus. Simon could've continued watching, but he didn't.

Before Claire allowed herself to feel self-righteous, she looked away, finished her dinner, and took a much-needed nap.

The nap didn't take long, as Claire couldn't lie still for longer than fifteen minutes before needing to check outside the window. She got up, laid back down, sat up to drink water, laid back down. This occurred for most of the night. Finally, sleep held her for about two hours before she heard rustling near her feet.

Frightened, Claire kicked her leg out violently and sat up. Then she heard a child crying. When she looked, she saw one of the little boys hold his shoulder. All the other children stared at Claire.

"Sorry," Claire grumbled, not moving toward the boy, "Did I kick you?"

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The boy nodded, rubbing his arm. “I... I’m okay. I was waking you up to tell you that Jodie left.”

“Jodie?” Looking around, she counted the children. Yes, she was one short, but she couldn’t tell which one.

“She grabbed some food and water,” the boy continued, “Told us she was leaving to find someone else to take care of us.”

“Oh,” Claire realised that it was the eldest child that was missing. “Well, I’m sure she will come back.”

“She’s been gone since you went to sleep last.”

“... Fine, I’ll go look for her.” Claire stretched a bit. “What direction did she go?”

The boy shrugged. “She said she was going out to the river.”

“What river?”

Another shrug.

“Outside the city?” Claire grabbed some supplies. “What is wrong with her?”

“She said the robots don’t like water, so they won’t patrol the area as much.”

“Whatever,” Claire ran a hand through her hair, and headed toward the staircase to leave. “Stay here. Don’t leave.”

Humot patrols on the edge of the city were thick before the grass began leading to the water’s edge. The children would be fine without her, as long as they didn’t leave the balcony or church.

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Heading into a warzone of an old humot neighborhood, patrols increased. Claire relied on shadows, timing, and silence.

As the daylight dawned, the situation Claire had put herself in became clearer, but she didn't allow herself to think about it just yet. The outline of a small house by the river could be seen from the urban edge. There weren't places to conceal her anymore. Trees studded the grass randomly, some close together while others were far apart. To get to the closest bush, Claire would need to move *now!*

Bolting to the bush, Claire stayed low to the ground, trying not to crunch the grass loudly. At the bush, she looked back at the city streets to see something shine or hear the hum. When there was nothing, she took a breath and ran to the closest tree. Her sweat weighed down her skin and clothes.

Along the river was a wooden house. Inside would be two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a basement. The walls of every room would be lined with wallpaper made from old 1940's, 50's and 60's car ads. An outhouse was positioned further down the river. In the yard would be an overgrown garden. Traveling directly down the river, one would stumble upon a small, personal graveyard. Claire didn't have to explore the area to know these things.

The front door of the house was open, which wasn't how she'd left it as she and her boyfriend had left many months ago. Perhaps scavengers went through the house, only to find it empty to begin with. Through a non-curtained window, Claire saw the familiar silhouette of Jodie's single-braided head.

Stupid kid's gonna get caught.

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Heading up the river, Claire tried not to get distracted by the noise of the rushing river. It used to feel nice, listening to the water hitting the rocks and sides of the bank. Now, it covered the hum, forcing Claire to use only her eyes. The water also blocked out the sound of her rapid heart and shoes crunching on the grass.

She walked into the house.

“Jod--”

The wooden floor rushed toward her and Claire realized she had been hit in the head. The pain spread through her neck. Turning onto her back, she saw a familiar face, but it wasn't Jodie's.

PART II

“Mom?”

“Oh, my God, baby!” Claire's mother's single braid fell over her shoulder as she bent down to help Claire up. “I thought you were a robot.”

“This hurts bad.” Claire held her head, her fingertips feeling the lump growing, but still wrapped her other arm around her mother. “I thought they took you.”

“No,” Mom examined the lump and put something cold to it. “Your father and I went on a trip with his friend, the one who has that boat. We thought we wouldn't tell anyone, to make it more exciting. When we came back, it was like this. I've been living here for... a few weeks, maybe two or three.”

“I haven't been here since it started.” Claire glanced out a window at the hidden graveyard.

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Following Claire's attention, Mom caught the sad note in Claire's voice. "Your father didn't make it, either."

Having already accepted both her parents' deaths, Claire nodded and hugged her mom for a very long time. They told each other of the fights they've been in with the humots, and how they scavenged for food.

"So how many children are with you?"

"Oh, I think fifteen. One of them left, so I've been searching for her."

"You left a whole bunch for one who left on purpose? You know she's probably going through a rebellious phase. Let her go and if she wants to come back, she will."

Red-faced, Claire took some canned food from the cupboard and spooned the mush into her mouth.

"What do you plan on doing with the children?"

"Keep them alive." Claire spoke through a mouth full of food, staring at the floor in an exhaustive daze.

"No plan?"

"What would you do?" Claire tried to hide her irritation.

"Well, keeping them in the middle," Mom had her fists on her hips, "of a city of robots that want to kill them doesn't top my list."

"I'm trying to get them out." Claire looked at her mother. "But where would I take them?"

“Here.” Mom didn’t let a robot apocalypse get in the way of criticizing her daughter’s decisions. “You easily slipped out of the city. Bring them out with you.”

“Then we all would get caught, *very easily*. They cry and whine all the time.”

“You’ve always been so negative towards children!” Mom was furious, now. “Why do you help them if you despise them so much?”

“I don’t hate them!” Claire stood up and peered outside. “It’s just going to be very difficult making sure they stay alive when they aren’t making it easy for themselves.”

“It’s never been easy.” Mom laughed with her frustration. “Children have never been easy. You weren’t easy for us. I wasn’t easy with my parents. It’s how having children is. It’s a challenge.”

“I never wanted kids!”

“Then why?” Mom exclaimed. “Why do you have fifteen or so children waiting for you in a church, bundled up in blankets you got them, and food you found for them?”

“I tried turning away.” Claire sighed. “I saw the first one, thought I would just keep walking. I started walking. To be honest...I *did* walk away. He was sobbing, hiding under a car. Before he could see me, I turned in the other direction. After about ten minutes, I saw another kid standing out in the open. I couldn’t hide then. Bastard came running straight up to me and wrapped her arms around me. Told me she couldn’t find her brother. I wanted to push her away, but when I looked down at her, I saw that she looked like the boy under the car. So I brought her to the boy, and the two stayed with me for a few nights. Watching them die of hunger wouldn’t

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have been a pretty sight, so I shared my food. After the past few months, the rest of the children just... happened.”

“Where were you going before you had the kids?”

There was a moment of silence before Claire shrugged. “Just staying alive, I guess.”

More silence. Mom ate her can of mush while Claire looked at the fields through the windows. Passing by the windows, looking out onto the river, she saw the endless fields of grass beyond it, somehow untouched by man. A small child could easily hide in the grass.

“We need a plan.” Mom collected all the recent trash and put it in a trash bag, which she put in the trash bin in the kitchen. Then she began organizing dishes. “Would you have enough energy to get all the children here with multiple trips?”

“There weren’t many humots the closer I got to the edge,” Claire continued staring out the window. “But before that, they are everywhere. At least I don’t have to pass through a humot suburb.”

“Stupid robot rights.” Mom had finished with the kitchen and was searching for something else to clean. “I can’t believe you supported that.”

“Yes, Mom,” Claire rolled her eyes and changed her view to the window with the cityscape. “One of the many mistakes I have made. Giving toasters human rights. Anyways...”

“If I come with you, the children will get out faster. We can take two or three at a time.”

“Are you sure you want to go in there?”

“Yeah, what else am I supposed to do?” Mom looked at Claire. “Clean?”

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They both smiled a little.

“What do we do about Jodie?” Claire asked. “The girl that ran away.”

“Like I said,” Mom sat on the couch. “Let her go. It isn’t worth looking for her if she doesn’t want to be found.”

“You didn’t see a girl come into this direction?”

“If I had, I’d tell you by now.” Mom looked at the front door, crossing her arms over her chest.

“At dark, we can go.” Claire spoke while she lay on the wood floor, stretching her back and legs.

“Do you think they will be okay this long?”

“Yeah.”

“... Are you sure?”

“Yes. If we wait until dark, we are less likely to get caught.”

“But you came here during the daytime and didn’t get caught.”

“Luck, Mom.”

Mom stared at her daughter, who stayed spread out on the floor with her eyes closed. Claire felt like this was the first time she could relax since before she took the children into her care. If she fell asleep, she could stay asleep and not worry about anything. A pounding sound came through the floor, and Claire recognized it as the blood pounding through her head. A headache was arriving.

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“I can’t believe you are just lying there!” Mom’s stern voice made Claire open her eyes. Mom was standing, glaring down at her. “Those children need us and you’re resting.”

“Mom, please.” Claire couldn’t believe her relationship with her mother hadn’t been altered for the better by the present situation. It simply gave her mother another opportunity to micromanage Claire’s life. “I’m so tired.”

“So am I!” Mom grabbed a bag she had been packing while Claire was lying on the floor. “Those children need us! My knees hurt, but who cares! Stop thinking about yourself! You’ve always been so selfish!”

Getting up off the floor, Claire grabbed her bag and threw it on. Mom was ready to leave, at the door, hand about to turn the knob. Claire could feel a small vibration running through her shoes, coming from under the wooden floor.

“What’s that?”

Mom opened the door. “What?”

“That sound?” Claire walked towards Mom but kept her eyes on the floor.

“I only hear the river, hun.” Mom walked out, and Claire followed.

It took the two about the same amount of time to get to the church as it had for Claire to get to the cabin. To Claire, the city looked completely different with the sun going down instead of up. Mom kept up, acting as if her knees didn’t hurt at all. She was never one to complain.

At the church, the children were still huddled together in the balcony. When they saw Mom, they stepped back, hesitant.

“Where’s Jodie?” one of them asked.

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“I couldn’t find her.” Claire said, mentally counting the kids. “We all need to leave the city.”

“How?”

“What?”

“I want to stay here!”

“I understand you are afraid.” Once Mom spoke, the children quieted. “We all need to work together to survive. My daughter and I are going to bring you to a safe house, outside of the city.”

“That’s your mom?”

“I thought you said she died.”

“No,” Claire spoke quickly. “I said I didn’t know where she was. But I found her.”

“Do you think I’ll find my mom?”

Mom hugged that child and said, “You may. But if you want to find her, you need to stay alive. Can we do that?”

The child nodded.

“Let’s pack up our things. We are not going all at once. Claire is going to take two kids; same as me. We will keep coming back until we are all together again, like a family.”

These words sounded strange to Claire. Growing up, Mom would say the phrase, “like a family,” in strange situations. If Claire asked what Mom meant, Mom would chastise Claire and say Claire would understand when she was a mother.

The trips were difficult with a couple kids each time. Mom took the louder children while Claire took the easier ones. On a few occasions, Claire almost ran into humot patrols.

On one trip, Claire had to wait with two children, hiding in a porta potty while a small group of humots explored the ruins of a natural human neighborhood. After three hours and no humming was heard, Claire shoved the children and herself out of the shit box, and into the fresh smell of decaying bodies that still lay on the street.

Each time Claire came back to the city, a part of her just wanted to lie down in the grass like she did on the wooden floor of the cabin. She didn't want to hear her mom yell at her. She didn't want to hear the children whine. She didn't want to hear the humming. A field of green grass lay open for her, though she never veered her path from the pavement.

PART III

When she reached the cabin with the last three children, Claire felt a muscle in her leg threatening to burst. It had been bothering her since the second trip back to the city, but she didn't want to hear Mom's criticism again.

Despite all the children inside, the cabin was quiet. When they reached the river, one of the kids next to Claire started dragging behind. When Claire paused to look at the child, though, she realized that there was fear holding her back.

"What's wrong?" Claire asked, squatting down to eye level.

"That house seems weird." The girl said, and the other nodded.

"What do you mean?" Claire smiled, looking at the cabin. "Everyone is there, safe. We got food there, and I think my mom is going to get some board games out."

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“Look at it,” the other girl whispered. “I don’t see anyone inside.”

Claire looked at the windows, and saw no movement. The lights weren’t on since there was no power, but she should have seen shadows moving as the sun came through the windows on the other side of the house. These kids were right. No one was inside.

“Stay here.” Claire motioned for them to lie down in the wet reeds, where they would be completely hidden.

Peeking through the front-door window, she didn’t see any kids or her mother. She opened the door and looked inside the empty cabin. The basement door suddenly opened, and Mom came out.

“Where are the children?” Claire asked.

“Why do you have a gun out?” Mom dismissed Claire’s question.

Claire looked down at the gun and held onto it, feeling better with it in her grip. “*Where* are the kids?”

Mom pressed her hands together and smiled. “I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Tell me?” Claire waited.

“You know how I’ve always kept the family together?”

“... What are you talking about?”

“Hear me out, Claire!” Mom let out a frustrated groan. “You never listen! I know you won’t understand, but you will.”

“Understand what?”

Gabrielle Rupert

“Where are the last of the children?” Mom looked over Claire’s shoulder.

“They weren’t at the church.” For some reason, lying felt necessary “I looked around the block of the church and I couldn’t find them.”

“What a shame!” Mom kicked a chair. “We could have used them. We have enough, though.”

“Mom!” Claire shouted. “Where are the children, Mom?”

“I made a deal with those robots.”

The words didn’t sound natural, though they were coming from a natural human. Claire felt as if Mom had hit her on the head again. But Mom was across the room, leaning against the table.

“What is the deal?”

“They only want the children.” Mom spoke as if making a deal at a market. “They don’t want adults.”

“They want everyone, Mom!” Claire was trying to keep her head level. “They killed Will. They killed Dad.”

“That was because they were resisting.” Mom smiled. “We won’t resist. The humots don’t want a fight; they want cooperation, just like us humans.”

“They will kill us eventually.”

“No.” Mom laughed. “They said they would let us live in this cabin together until the end of our days. We can revive the garden and fish from the river.”

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“And you believed them? What about the children?” Tears were in Claire’s eyes. “There won’t be a future.”

“I’ve only wanted a future with you, Claire.” Mom walked over and reached out to take Claire’s arm, but Claire stepped away. “Even if you *can* be difficult.”

“What if we just... cross the river with the children?” Claire tried to think of a solution. “Or I can take the children, find them a good place, and come back?”

“I don’t want you to stress out about them, anymore.” Mom sighed. “Like you said, you never wanted to be a mother.”

Shaking her head, Claire glanced at the basement door. “Where are they?”

“They are downstairs. The robots should be here soon.”

As Claire began to go for the basement door, she heard the hum of the humots. Mom went to the front door. Claire ran down the basement steps, wishing there was a way to lock the basement door behind her.

The walls were damp and the air smelled like mildew. The children Mom and Claire had already transported were chained to the cement floor.

Where in the hell did Mom get chains?

Claire was so bewildered by the situation that she just stood staring with an open mouth.

“Hey!” a familiar voice shouted from the chained clump. “I knew we couldn’t trust you!”

It was Jodie. Her braid was barely intact and her eyes shot lasers in Claire’s direction. Immediately, Claire came over to figure out how to break the chains.

“Is there a key to these?” Claire asked.

“If there is,” Jodie said, “*Your* mom has them. I thought she was dead.”

“No,” Claire looked around for a bolt clipper. “I didn’t know where she was.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Jodie. “Course not!”

Claire yanked Jodie’s chain to get her attention. “Do you want to live? Then help me.”

The chains around each kid was one, long chain that connected and looped. If Claire could cut Jodie’s chain, all the kids would be free. Then, maybe escape through the window leading to the river? Though, footsteps from above meant they all were out of time. They would all die.

“What are you going to do?” Jodie questioned Claire, who had suddenly frozen in place.

Staring at the window, Claire felt overwhelmed with the situation. Her mother’s words clouded her head. All she could see was the blue sky through the window. Then, all she could feel was the broken glass from the window on her hands as she pulled herself through it, clawing at the short grass outside. Jodie’s insulting words tried to reach Claire’s ears, but all Claire could hear was the river.

Like a child herself, Claire rolled down the short bit of yard until she reached the edge of the river and the water splashed her face. When she looked up from the bank, she could only see the roof the cabin. Next to her, the two hiding children lay in the reeds, watching her. Claire grabbed them, concealing herself with them.

Looking across the water to the other side, Claire debated how much energy she would need to pull these two children over the large rocks. Her eyes watched the water whip over those

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rocks, creating fast currents, white in some spots. The sun reflected and hit her eyes. She kept her eyes closed for a while and kept her body still, listening to the pounding of her head, fourteen gunshots, one of those accompanied with a pained shout from Mom, and the rushing of the river.