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FUTURE GLASGOW: Clutha 2525 by SJ Ward

6 April 2024

Amfie dragged a finger along the side of the burrow, clogging her nail with dirt. The sound pleased her, a light scuff barely discernible beyond the daily clamour of life in the tunnels. At night, she listened out for sounds like these. Tiny creatures scratching through the mud, surrounding her with original life.

How could it be that the Emperor controlled everything except the tiniest of creatures? L-level had come to rely on oxygen from the originals; the thousands of thread-like tunnels they made as they navigated their route from Clutha Base to the surface. They brought damp as well.

Since the flood, the entire Clutha basin had been underwater and only the most durable creatures could make their way to the higher ground. Amfie was charged with checking on their daily activity by tracking clusters of beetles and earthworms across the dark corners of burrow ceilings. She swiped a cluster into the fold of her cloak before the guard could order fumigation.

Father entered the burrow head with Uncle Secora. Amfie shrank back to let them pass to the inner room. She lingered in the doorway, pretending to search for bugs.

Uncle spoke in a low voice. "I've just come from the market hall. The word is that the new Emperor is looking for chimaera."

Father paced the room, his face pale. "He's already demanded the marine portals be sealed tonight due to the Cetacean threat. But I thought the risk for chimaeras had passed now that he has taken over the Puremind."

Uncle seated himself at the table opposite Father. "The Puremind's neural receptors are unsurpassable for surveillance on

land. But the plan to redeploy the Vanguard nuclear fleet means he needs hypersonic marine accuracy as well. There's talk of the Emperor's battalion seeking out the remaining chimaeras as soon as tonight. Those that pass the test will be uploaded."

"We need to move fast", Father said, inputting the code to the safe. "Amfie, you heard your Uncle. Go and find your sister, quick as you can."

She was glad of some distraction from the churn of dread in her stomach. Father had protected her and Neptha but they'd always known that things could change. It was easier for her but Neptha's developed jaw was more difficult to conceal. She dodged a trail of low-levels heading to their shift. The guards must still be on the upper levels.

She kept to a low frequency and sent a series of whistles bouncing along the burrow wall. She paused, then darted out into the stream of oncoming civilians that staggered under the weight of sandbags. The Emperor had ordered tonnes of ballast to bolster the Glennifer and Kilpatrick perimeters so that Clutha Base could retain access to what little land remained once the marine portals were sealed.

Amfie held her hand to the sensor, passed through the inner gate and stepped onto the travelator. Since the young Emperor had taken power, the screens displayed a constant stream of images of the Vanguard fleet, nuclear monsters from the ancient world. He planned to redeploy these vessels to regain control of the Clutha estuary.

Footage of the new leader talked of peace, but he announced to the population that this could only be achieved by Cetacean suppression. It didn't make any sense. The Cetaceans were known for marine regeneration. The old Emperor had been happy to accept their efforts to clean up the river while it was a toxic dumping ground, but now the Clutha leaders wanted to reclaim the space for agricultural production to support their expanding armies.

Father often talked about how the Great War had obliterated the advancements made in previous generations. Only a race intent on self-destruction could regress to nuclear weapons. Back to

ancient Vanguard technology and a desire to destroy all that was left of this fragile galaxy.

A sonar ripple suggested that Neptha was in the vicinity. Amfie stared into the oncoming crowd and caught a flash of her sister's long dark hair. Before she could reach her, a group of armed guards pushed through, barring civilian passage. Neptha's high-frequency cry cut through her.

She slipped through the civilians towards her sister, but the group had already disembarked the travelator for the central elevator. As she reached the doors, they slid shut and the elevator flashed away to the upper floors.

Father's face fell when he saw that she was alone.

"They've taken her. They'll be at the inner chamber already."

Uncle checked his watch. "I'll do my best to short-circuit the system. Aim for 16:00. That gives you three hours."

The air vent angled up and to the right, barely allowing enough space for the upward crawl. The metal was so cold, it burned their skin. By the time they had reached Level A, Amfie's knees and hands were blistered and raw. They lay exhausted in the vent, trying to recover from the climb. The hubbub from the inner chamber drifted towards them in waves, the amplified voice of the Emperor and the responses of the assembly.

She felt Father's hand on her shoulder. "We should have a little time before blackout." He cleared his throat, "you know I can't come with you beyond the docking portal, Amfie. You and Neptha will evolve once you're in water."

Her chest was leaden. She couldn't move another centimetre, let alone to the docking hatch. "How can we go without you?"

"Don't worry about me. Maybe we'll find a way to send thought messages."

She smiled wryly. This had always been her dream but they both knew it was impossible. Technology had never been able to project beyond the body, not even in the progressive days before

the war. "I can't even transmit to Neptha", she said. "What if we make things worse for her by trying to get her back? At least if she's uploaded, she won't be afraid."

Father squeezed her hand. "It's worth the risk. If you can get out, you'll have a chance to resist the Clutha regime. It's 15:30 now. We need to move."

They peered down on the inner chamber. Rows of heads were seated below the Emperor, and above him, the deep storage of Puremind where thousands of the best brains were kept at optimum temperature. Amfie sent out sound ripples, but they revealed nothing of Neptha's location. Twenty-five minutes had passed, and they were no closer.

"The last vent." Father nodded towards the end of the tunnel, where a dim light spilled onto the metal wall. They dragged themselves along the final section, terrified to make a sound that could be heard below. At last, the vent came into view, and below it, a single security chamber.

Neptha's body floated at the top of the tank. Her head was connected to a cluster of wires that extended from the tank to a monitor in the corner, her dark hair spread across the water. A burst of sonar activity sent her body twitching.

Father spoke in Amfie's ear. "If your Uncle's plan works, we can disengage the monitor and remove the electrodes. Then we hoist her out. I won't administer the anti-sedative until we have her in the tunnel because she's liable to panic."

A guard entered the room, and they shrank back from the vent. Amfie's breath roared in her ears. The guard watched the monitor for some minutes, then circled the room, checking the electrodes and wiring. He spoke into a transmitter.

"Chimaera X249 is ready for transfer. She has passed the Puremind premium examination."

The transmitter crackled an affirmative response. The guard flicked a switch on the monitor and gave a final sweep of the room before leaving.

They watched time tick past. 15:58, 15:59. 16:00 came and went.

Father unscrewed the vent and he took the anti-sedative from the pouch at his waist.

At 16:03, blackout came, thick and silent. Only a pinprick of light was visible at the emergency exit. They lowered themselves through the hatch, working quickly to detach the wires, then looped the cradle around Neptha to winch her out. Her skin was thick and sleek to Amfie's touch. She was already evolving.

Father carried her to the shaft and they guided her body inside. Amfie climbed after her and pressed the needle to Neptha's neck. She shuddered in a wave of sonar convulsions while Amfie held her writhing body, whispering reassurances.

As Father secured the vent, the door below wrenched open and a swarm of guards could be heard shouting. He scooped Neptha up and ran along the tunnel towards the dock.

Neptha called out. "My legs! Father, what's happened?" All around them, alarms were blaring.

Amfie had the porthole open and clambered into the airlock, pulling Neptha after her. They held hands for a moment without speaking, then Father slammed the porthole window. Her face blurred as the lock filled with water. Amfie released the lock with a blast of sound and they were swept into the flow.

The river was a riot of colour. Shoals of brightly coloured fish darted and swarmed above them. Shafts of sunlight shimmered through the water, dappling their bodies with turquoise and emerald. Neptha smiled at her, a stream of bubbles bursting from her mouth. Already, her limbs were long and sleek. Amfie glanced at her fingers, where the skin had begun to fuse.

They swam above reefs of pink and orange coral, whose tentacles branched like forest canopies across the seabed. Amfie tasted salt as they joined the estuary. They flipped and soared in the warm current, sending out squeals and whistles.

The ocean returned its thought picture, wide and bright and teeming with life. They sensed the dark presence of the Vanguard

vessels, crouching in the loch. But from the open sea, the pod called, carrying them out on the waves.

About the author



[SJ Ward](#) is a writer and academic who uses creative writing approaches in research. She has had stories published in [New Writing Scotland](#), [The middle of a sentence](#) and Words about Whiteinch, and non-fiction published in the Journals of Youth Studies and Community Development. She won the [Lucy Cavendish Fiction Award](#) in 2017 and was longlisted for the [Caledonia Novel award](#) in 2020.