



MUNIMENT
ELEVATION

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by *Orra White Hitchcock* (1828–1840) from
<https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/hitchcock-illustrations>

The Future Archive Institute is one of four glass buildings looming over the oceanside city. On a lower floor, in the processing department, Kiera pulls a lollipop out of a pocket in her grey uniform and looks around at her coworkers. They are dressed in the same drab, department issue coveralls. Next to her, flakes of earwax fall from Herbert's ears into a tiny pile on his shoulder. She collects another package from the pallet near the door and sets it on the table. From inside, she lifts out a large glass jar that looks like a small aquarium. Herbert glances up at the unusual container. The water seems to be tinted green, and attached to the jar is what looks like a small oxygen filter. A few rounded stones and some billowing algae sit atop a layer of white pebbles at the bottom. She looks again at the information slip. *Cephalopod*. In the jar she sees a brownish lump between the algae that she guesses is a camouflaged octopus.

Everybody knows about cephalopods. When the Expansion had begun into the water to install wind turbines and deep-sea data centres, octopuses—understood to be agile and intelligent—had been brought in to assist with marine development. That





was when the rumours had begun circulating about the octopus rebellions. Cephalopods are incredibly solitary creatures, not used to living or travelling in groups, or even pairs. The experience of collectivity had been new for them. It was learning to work together that had led to the formation of a solidarity, a united front, against the coercive conditions of work. Some simply left, swam away, but others refused to leave unless they all left together.

Leading up to the Expansion, generations of relentless mining had resulted in a partial collapse of the earth's upper crust near the outer rim of the continent. To the north, the desert had completely rearranged itself. Cities had been swallowed as the dunes had fallen, and now the horizon was completely flat for thousands of miles. Along the ocean coast, the water from the sea had pooled in the mine holes, creating a new network of saltwater lakes. The ocean life had adapted and moved inland to populate these pools.

The governments of the countries on this part of the continent had convened in the immediate emergency and joined together to form a new super

government. Their policies were heavy-handed and included revisionist approaches to culture, history, management and planning. They formed departments, each called 'Institute', to carry out the government's will: Markets and Territories, Media Communications, Health and Environment. They turned these cities on the water into silos, evicting anyone who would not work for the new vision.

Here at the Future Archive Institute, the processing department is the first stop for the incoming artefacts. There are dozens of similar rooms on this floor alone. These work rooms, or 'Intake', as they are collectively called, are housed at the bottom levels of the building, which was once a bunker. The upper levels have been specially constructed atop the concrete base, to house and preserve the artefacts. The archive contains the guarded History of society. Everything available for preservation. Increasingly the artefacts coming in are less static, less material. Desert singing from the north coast, a lexicon of dance gestures, ocean winds. This is why Kiera had applied for the transfer. There are things she knows should not be here.





Her grandma had told her stories when she was a child. When it had all started. She had told her about Before, talked of the winds and the sands and the deserts and how creatures lived in them and communicated. Her parents had died when the mines fell, and so she had lived with her grandma until she was taken away to the Communal Living Facilities, and her grandmother had gone underground.

Like most young people in the Communal Living Facilities, Kiera had been taught the basics of education in preparation for Emancipation, but the History parts were always skimmed over. She had hoped that working in the archive might give her a different insight into how the world had been, but so far all she's managed to do is get reprimanded for lingering too much with the artefacts. As if reading her mind, Herbert looks over at her. His magnified eyeballs roll around behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

Kiera pulls out her Device. Linked to dot-like pads on her wrists and behind her ears, the Device facilitates communication, when necessary, with some of the artefacts that come in for processing. In her hand, the Device's black screen pulses and turns a

bright green, then purple, then white. She closes her eyes to better receive. Something jolts through her with such intensity that she reaches out to steady herself on the table with her fingertips.


SOS SOS SOS.

It is the creature, she is sure of it, using the Device to communicate. She has never felt anything with the Device this strongly before.

There is no protocol for this.

She knows that to really talk she will have to leave the room. *Bathroom break*, she says out loud, to no one in particular. Of everything she just felt, one thing is clear: she must go somewhere hidden to receive this message. Herbert is looking at her again. He, like everyone here, dopedily follows all protocols, alert to any deviations. In the few weeks she's been here a distance has established itself between her and her coworkers. She is too curious. It's not something explicit, but she knows they can sense it. Herbert will report her in a second if he thinks she is up to something. She turns slowly and walks





out of the room into the hallway, and then down to the elevator. To the right are the bathrooms, but to the left is another door. She pushes it open and descends into the staircase. The two-way stair design from the original bunker remains. As she goes down one set of stairs, she can see another inaccessible set ascending in the opposite direction. She walks down several flights and crouches in a corner.

Her back against the cement wall, she leans into the Device. The screen glitches and then glows in a bright succession of colours. She can feel the surge and calms her breathing, as they've been instructed to do, to better receive the message. She knows SOS is a very conventional message in its universality, and prepares herself for how this creature might communicate in a more complex way.

Do you want my help? She says to the Device, which is connected to the creature. *Are you a labourer?* She remembers to force a mind-image and a feeling to go along with her questions. The Device takes Kiera's pulse and reads her mind and body diagnostics. Her body is sending and receiving at the same time. The cephalopod in the jar was captured on a nearby shore, beyond the city limits. It was alone,

looking for food, far away from the forced labour. It does not understand what this capture and containment is, what it will lead to. She projects back: *How can I help?* The octopus describes the network of sewers below the building. If she can find a way to access those waterways, and let it free, it can find its way back to the ocean.

She understands what she must do. She gets up, brushes off her uniform and begins climbing the stairs. Back in the room, she returns to her assigned place and picks up her pen, glancing briefly at the jar before she resumes filling out the form. *Is there even something in there?* Herbert says, watching as she takes notes. *Actually, I think this may have been a mistake. That the water, not something in the water, is what needs to be processed. I am amending the form. I will bring it to Loading straightaway for verification.* He seems skeptical, but then shrugs. No one else seems to notice their exchange. She finishes her notes, then tears the top white sheet off the yellow and black carbon copy. She gently picks up the jar, and heads once again for the door, where she knows a bathroom, connected to the sewer grid, is situated at the end of the corridor.

