

Pandora's Box

A short story by Richard Holliday, published on richardholliday.co.uk in December 2019.

© Richard Holliday, all rights reserved.

CHAPTER 1

Sirens called out in the distance, but they were not for him. He ran, quickly, through the alleyways that led between buildings. Forgotten thoroughfares of filth between decrepit buildings of the old world.

The crick in Bray's neck would take a while to subside, he thought to himself. He rounded another corner in the maze of passageways, continually looking over his shoulder. Every turn, every jump, he looked. Flecks of artificial light seemed to follow him, but they never caught up. The quick glances didn't give time for analysis; they were from the barrel-light of a trooper's armament or from the perpetual twilight elicited from the deck lighting.

Rounding one of the smooth metal supports that held up an artificial sky made of steel that punctured the old brick and cement buildings like a giant's hammer, Bray looked up. He stopped for a moment, bending to collect his breath. He'd never seen real night. That was for the new world, not this old one.

Voices came, and they were close. They sounded restless. Fighting the stitch in his abdomen, Bray ran again, around an upset dumpster and its occupants.

"Hey, man, quit it!" the addicts wheezed. Bray ignored them. They had no idea what was going on. Bray stopped again. Every noise these silent and deserted alleyways made pricked his ears. He looked up again, through a gap in the buildings that had been so densely packed together. He was in the industrial district of the city.

"Perfect," Bray mused wryly. "Just perfect."

His pocket vibrated. Quickly, Bray fished out a phone and put it to his ear. He hummed only, the communication warranting no more, then put it away. Then he started looking for the entrance. They knew where he was. He moved quickly, to the right, down some cement steps. They crumbled underfoot with age.

Stepping quickly into the fluorescent night, Bray found the street was deserted. He breathed heavily, emerging from the darkness of the alley. He took a furtive glance over his shoulder. No lights behind him, the alley remaining cold and dark. A good start, he thought, smiling. Looking up, toward the floodlights suspended from the decking that covered the street, he let his lungs refill a couple of times. Maybe he'd lost them, he thought, sighing heavily.

Deep in his heavy jacket he felt a ping and a vibration. A hand delved in, retrieving a phone. No battery. The screen was cracked and broken into shards held together with plastic film. *Not tonight*, Bray thought, and he finally walked into the wide, empty avenue, lined with

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

metallic trees that shone more artificial light to dispel the darkness. He walked along, rolling his shoulders. The light-posts stood at juxtaposition to the tired, brown brick of the shopfronts, all closed and dark, shutters down, dormant. The crowds that had so often jostled down this thoroughfare were here no longer.

“Hello? Pick up, Christ!” Bray absent-mindedly hissed into his dead phone. He pulled it away from his face and saw the screen was now completely black under the spider-web of cracks that festooned it. No battery. No good, he thought.

Mindlessly, he thumbed the data chip from the dead phone, discarding the body to the gutter below. The plexiglass front shattered with a quiet tinkle that managed to fill the space, from the worn stones of the street to the walls of the shops to the decking above that blotted out the sky. His gaze rose to the darkened shopfronts and he bared his teeth in a wry smile as he stopped outside one.

Silicon Dreams, the darkened lettering said. Bray looked around, but the streets had been cleared, the rubbish taken away, almost fearful to return. A static feeling in the air pickled the hairs on the back of the Bray's neck. There was no-one here, which was odd considering the date; regardless, as a force of habit, Bray gave a look over his shoulder. Cracking his knuckles, he squared up to the door, and rattled the handle. It was loose-fitting. Helpful. He wouldn't take long, glancing back along the street. The discarded phone in the gutter glimmered with the motion of his head, and he winced. Not tonight. It was like losing a limb at the best of times but... *not tonight*. Turning back to the door, Bray examined it. Flimsy. Cheap. Two panes of plexiglass in a wooden frame that was once white, now just a mess of ancient handprints. Easy.

The glass shattered with one kick, shattering the unnatural silence of the street. Quickly the slender man slinked through the shattered pane at the bottom of the door and into the shop. His eyes winced, but after a second they opened again, adjusting to the gloom. No alarm. No surprise. Made life easier. He walked to the back of the shop, his face falling. The place was threadbare, stripped almost back to the fixtures. Business was hard in times like this. His face fell, pitying the owner. A life's work, this would've been, Bray knew, looking in the darkness at the shelves. All assembled by hand, with the hallmarks of craftsmanship that imbued the sense that it was done personally by whoever owned it, not out of a catalogue, or by a robotic servant of a faceless corporation. Brushstrokes in the worn paint that shouted *mom and pop*. Along the fronts of the particleboard shelves. Walking along, taking furtive and slow steps, Bray drew a finger along, feeling the unique imperfections that came with do-it-yourself finishings.

Behind the counter was a doorway. It formed a portal into a darkness behind that no light, even the artificial moonlight outside, could penetrate. Bray stepped forward, tapping the inside wall for a light switch, finding it and pressing it. With a hum and flicker a feeble imitation of the fluorescent vista outside lit up the back room.

Quickly Bray summed up the contents. A pair of locked cabinets, detritus and a broken stool. He nodded his head and walked back into the main room of the shop. He found one of the shelves, and carefully rubbed his finger across the worn, love-soaked woodwork. He smiled wistfully before his hand quickly moved to the metal arm and pulled it with a thud and a clatter from the wall. It would make a perfunctory equal of a crowbar, Bray thought. The

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

shop fixture made short work of the soft metal of the cabinet door before clanging on the backroom linoleum, discarded, its new use transient and fleeting.

The cupboards were locked for good reason. Bray grinned and put his hand into the Aladdin's cave, pulling out one of the wrapped boxes.

"Be something good," he hummed, his fingers ripping the grey plastic wrap. Underneath there was a white, glossy box. Bray's eyes widened as the wrapper fell away. The colourful ink of the box was iridescent, even under the fluorescent light. The light glinted on Bray's teeth as he smiled. "Fucking Christ! A Candysoft!"

He held up the box containing and examined the holographic seal. It was real. He took a deep breath, hardly daring to breathe. Looking back to the cupboard, he counted two dozen. Then a pang of guilt passed over him. This was a nest egg he was helping himself to. Bray looked down, feeling strangely dirty, but the feeling passed as he slid his data-chip into the phone and it began to glow instantly. Notifications popped up in an instant, the handset buzzing.

"Hey, hey stop!" a cry came from outside, cutting through the miasma of silence like a shotgun shell. Then the sound of a struggle. Bray leapt to his feet and toward the front door of the shop. He saw the young woman – a vagrant, a drifter, her shawl fluttering with the motion and the breeze, stagger out in front of the shop. Bray ducked behind the low window ledge just as three clad troopers, their armour dark and angular, stepped into view. One brandished what looked like a weapon at the woman, who fell to the floor in a pile of rags.

Bray knew it was worse than a weapon and saw the beams of iridescent light spray from the tip of the device, illuminating the woman's face. She squinted and held her hand up to block the light, but this just provoked one of the troops who span her round, grabbing her arms.

"We said resistance was futile and we meant it!" the trooper with the device growled. "Now let me ask you again, and think about your answer carefully this time: *do you submit for scanning?*"

The woman was sobbing at this point, her voice staccato and the words almost intelligible. "Please tell me what to say to make this all go away, please!"

"Do. You. Submit. For. Scanning?" he asked again, emphasising each word. Bray thought back, realising the wording had changed. Consent for submit, as if there was any real choice.

Bray breathed, hardly daring to move. He peered sneakily around the back door of the storeroom. The woman he had heard was pinned inside the alcove containing the storefront door... which he saw moved subtly.

"Hey, is that..." he breathed virtually silently. The woman gave a fleeting glance as she was wrestled by the troopers, her eyes meeting Bray's with just a flicker of an eyelid. It was enough; the connection was made.

Bray took an involuntary breath again, seeing the two troopers outside flashing lights around the alcove. They were close, the beams of light shaking with organic motion until they stopped, solidly, on the broken piece of glass in the door.

No. Freaking. Way. Bray thought. He held his arms close to his sides. He reached down into his pocket for his phone but stopped. He'd have to get out before he said anything.

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

One of the troopers gestured to his comrade. "Take her away, I'll investigate this," the trooper said. His voice crackled through a radio affixed to the faceplate of the all-encompassing helmet he wore. The shadow of the doorway enveloped the moulded eye-pieces, the glossy plexi material turning matte as it went undercover. A gloved hand moved toward the broken glass, the flashlight following inquisitively. It illuminated the scuffed glass of the lower panel, then the painted wood of the doorframe, then the broken patch in the glass. The helmeted head turned. A gloved hand touched the headpiece's temple.

Bray moved back, hoping his motion had gone undetected.

"Report, we've a possible heat signature inside the store," the voice crackled again.

Bray held his breath and rolled back around into the storeroom and breathed out. Then he looked up.

The light.

His eyes widened with horror.

The storeroom light. The glowing fluorescent strip that shone photons from its recess onto the concrete floor.

It was still switched on.

He reached for the light switch but pulled his hand back. It didn't matter. Bray recalled the fragment of speech he'd just heard. Heat-signatures. Standard issue body-scanners... of course, they registered body heat. Bray cursed. *Schoolboy error.*

The wall he was hiding behind might as well have been made of translucent film.

Glass crunched underfoot very close. Then the voice returned. "Suspected breaking and entering on the old side of the city," it rasped electronically. A popper undid, breaking the silence. The door clicked and quickly fell away.

The bootsteps approached Bray's position tucked inside the doorway to the storeroom. Inside, he counted in his head the bootsteps. Not many needed to traverse the shop, walk around the counter, perhaps less if the trooper decided to vault it.

Make no sudden movements, Bray thought but corrected the statement on his second mental recitation: *make no sudden movements unless they're the ones you plan to make.*

The bootsteps were coming closer now, but slowly. Bray breathed steadily and noiselessly. The trooper was investigating the shop, he knew without looking. Hopefully he'd notice that nothing was untoward or disturbed, maybe he'd write off the light as a forgetful proprietor, not a clumsy intruder...

He didn't.

The steps got closer. Bray's breaths got closer. The moment got closer.

He saw the gloved hand, black and dark against the light of the storeroom come around the door. Then the head followed, the light reflecting off the once-matte-now-shiny eyepiece.

"Hey! You're not supposed to be—"

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

Bray forced the door closed with all his might and the hollow wood quickly caved in around the trooper. The trooper fell back, dazed, but quickly recovered. The light extinguished as a burst of gunfire shattered the fluorescent tube, and sparks of ricochet pinged in the instant darkness.

“Intruder alert!” the trooper called loudly. Frantically. With panic under the electronic filtering.

Noise came from upstairs. The disoriented trooper faced the wraparound stairwell.

“Hey, whoever’s... hey!”

Bray darted around and plunged through the window, spraying glass everywhere with a crash. A burst of gunfire followed.

“Shit, shit, shit!” he swore, feeling a bruise in his leg from the fall. The alleyway outside the shop was slightly recessed into the ground. Picking himself up, he ran, looking over his shoulder with a wince.

A burst of yellow gunfire filled the window. Ducking, Bray ran. He felt impacts but hoped it was just his heartbeat, and that it wasn’t pumping the lifeforce out of him as he ran.

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

CHAPTER 2

Over his shoulder he heard the gunfire ring out in the constrained dimensions of the alleyway. Bray ducked quickly around a corner, hiding against another of the great gunmetal columns that reached skyward to recover his breath.

He felt down the side of his longcoat. The synthetic fabric felt loose. Trailing a hand down, he felt the fabric in tatters around a bullet hole.

Too close, he thought. Too close for comfort.

He moved swiftly down the alleyway. Footsteps approached briskly. Bray looked around, puzzled, but his eyes fixed on the silent, grey structure of the fire escape that led up one of the adjacent warehouses. He climbed, quickly, the wind flapping his ruined coat behind him.

Emerging onto the rooftop he ducked behind the brick parapet on top of the warehouse. Bray looked carefully over, into the alleyway.

Far from quiet, the alleyway was now teeming with troopers.

“Did anyone see where he went, the intruder?”

“No, no, he’s... he’s not here.”

“Sweep around. We can’t afford to have snoopers. Not now, anyway.”

Another one of the troopers came from the window at the back of the shop that Bray had escaped from. The lead trooper turned and nodded. “Is it done?”

“Ready for transit.”

“Did she consent to scanning?”

“Consent was...” the trooper began, trailing off. The lead trooper’s head cocked. “We acquired a form of consent to scan.”

A moment of silence. Then the lead trooper nodded. “Very well. Fall out. You two,” he indicated to two of the troopers, “keep an eye out for wanderers. Neutralise on sight. Dispose... use your imagination.” He gave the alleyway a final derisory look. “This place is filthy, a body’d fit right in here. Don’t waste too much time.”

The rest of the troopers fell out and proceeded to clamber back into the storeroom of the shop. Bray fell back and let the phone, which he had held in his hand, observing the entire exchange, fall back into his lap. He pressed the stop button and the display shimmered. Then a text message appeared on the screen in ominous, large font: *Get back here now. Work to do.*

“Okay,” he whispered to himself. He moved to the corner of the roof, pausing when he heard an unexpected clatter from the fire escape. He froze, but it was just the wind. He looked up, past the other rooftops and the pylons that supported the deck a couple of hundred feet above. There was one in the middle of the roof of the warehouse upon which Bray was standing. He moved toward it, and felt a hum coming from it in his ears.

Approaching it he saw the smooth gunmetal body of the pylon was formed of panels, and one was loose. Coming up next to it, the loose panel soon fell with a few tugs from Bray’s hands and he peered into the internals of the pylon. It was nearly four metres in diameter and

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

mostly comprised of an organic, almost honeycomb structure of metal. Running in between and around this were thick, rubber-coated cables that pulsed with ethereal lights at regular intervals.

Bray held up his phone. "You getting this?" he whispered hoarsely.

The voice on the other end of the VOIP call was agitated. "Yes, I know where you are, too. Now shut up and get here! We need you alive for the next part, Bray."

"Know where I..." Bray begun, pocketing the Candysoft again. He looked up above and saw, high on the pylon, round, circumferential garland of security and surveillance cameras. He looked at the cabling inside the access panel. The pulses ran up as well as down. He stepped away, back toward the fire escape. Bray gave a quick look down. No-one there. He slid down the metalwork, jumping back to the alley floor.

He took out the Candysoft again for a moment, consulting it. He ran down, away from the warehouse, around a corner and by another dumpster. It was empty of people but filled with trash and refuse. The shadows of the looming warehouses either side came in, blocking even the halogen sun that the underside of the deck was festooned with.

Bray stopped dead before he careened around the next corner. Out of the shadow loomed the back of one of the troopers left on guard. Bray held his breath and turned.

"Over here! Over here, quick!" a voice called. He turned and out of a doorway stood Aven, the skinny, petite girl he had been VOIPing with. She beckoned him into a doorway. Bray followed.

The doorway banged shut and the interior space of the building was cloaked in absolute pitch darkness.

"Any lights?" Bray wheezed.

"Are you sure you want to see?"

"What's that smell?" Bray asked curtly, his nose contorting.

"Don't worry," Aven said. She handed him a flashlight. "Focus it on the floor and follow my movements."

Bray did so. He held the torch toward the cement ground which gave way to a metal platform which rattled against a sea of dank emptiness. Bray grabbed the loose, makeshift handrail fashioned of metal poles. "What is this place? It stinks like... like shit."

"Look around," Aven said briskly. Bray could tell from the way she spoke that she was hurrying with her breath. "You'll see why."

Bray did so. He noticed the silhouettes of dark, metal objects. Pumping machinery, long since dormant and deserted. A relic of the past. Then he pointed the flashlight downwards, through the metal platform, which was formed of a gauze-like grille. Dank liquid.

"Why are you taking me through an old sewage plant, of all places?"

Aven stopped and turned. She looked sardonically at Bray. "Some places even the guards would rather not tread. And those that do are just the bottom-rungs. We," she said with a haughty smile, "can deal with those."

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

She continued walking and Bray looked over the railing again. Perhaps, he thought, it wasn't just sewage festering in the pit of this building, after all.

Aven opened a door that was concealed around a wall. Bray felt the metal platform give way onto solid cement floor again. He sighed, reassured. "This way," she called with a hush.

The doorway opened back out onto the outside, but not the public alleyway from before. The yard was bathed in the artificial moonlight and it cast down on Aven's features. She turned to Bray as he emerged, and he acknowledged her. She had a squat frame, almost diminutive, topped with black hair and glasses perched on her slender nose. Her face was slender, like the rest of her. By default, Aven's face seemed to fall into an unimpressed half-glare. Bray was almost used to it.

"What?" Bray protested theatrically. There was nothing theatrical about Aven's admonishment.

"Quit looking at me like you'd never seen me before. And follow, quickly," Aven hissed, falling to the floor. She heaved at the heavy metal panel. Bray came over to help but she hissed again. "I can do it. Get the flashlight, you'll see."

Aven gave another heave and the panel slid away into a recess in the pavement. She indicated down. Bray shone the flashlight into the hole but gestured cheekily.

"Ladies first."

"Shut up, alright, you've wasted enough time," Aven said, but still proceeded down the steps into the gloom.

"I hope this isn't the sewers," Bray said nervously. Aven didn't stop walking.

"I forgot, this is your first time down below, isn't it? Well, you're in luck, in that you didn't get killed, or worse, *caught by PANDORA*, but we're still in the shit. You did well, by the way, I forgot to tell you."

"No you didn't," Bray said wryly. In front of him, Aven smiled.

"You're right, I didn't."

A light flickered and the gloom was instantly replaced by the dazzle of bright incandescence. So too was the claustrophobia of the dark replaced with the cosiness of the underground space revealing itself. The brick walls showed their age, contrasting with the electronic gear that festooned workbenches lining them.

There was a bank of dusty monitors on the wall. One showed a map of the lower levels of the city, pulses racing around the streets like cars on a track. Another, smaller panel showed the rooftops, cycling through the pylon-mounted cameras. And finally, on one of the biggest screens around which the others were clustered was the street outside Silicon Dreams. Bray leaned in closer.

"Looks familiar," he mused.

"Yes, it does," Aven said, following Bray over. "And you know the most curious thing?" She tapped a few keys. The image dissected itself across the screen, with a still of the woman's face now freeze-framed over the majority of it. "This woman. You know her?"

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

Bray leaned in close, examining the pixelized-representation of the woman. He'd only gotten a fleeting glance at her from his vantage point before having to make his escape. He narrowed his eyes, focusing. A name seemed on the tip of his tongue, but it was almost too incredulous to say it aloud. In this context, anyway.

"You can say it," Aven nodded, her hands poised over the keyboard. "Go on."

"That's Genevieve Auletta," Bray said, shocked. "But no-one's seen her since..."

"For three hundred and sixty-four days, Bray. Since... the Great Nationalisation."

Bray nodded, recalling. Genevieve Auletta had disappeared the same day that PANDORA had wrested control of the gene-customisation industry she was the figurehead and mastermind behind. When a group of revolutionaries seized the cogs of government and promised a 'better future for humanity'. He snorted with derision even recalling that. Those that better humanity by force are tyrants by another, more marketable name. Still, Auletta had indeed disappeared, presumably taking flight to the New Americas.

Still, he examined the screen and his recollection of her likeness and he couldn't pull himself away. It was her, alright. Barely fifty feet away from him and now. "She picked a fine time to re-appear, she did. And a lot of good that did."

Aven looked coolly at him. "You weren't in the loop were you? You missed out on some realtime comms."

"Phone was broken," Bray said apologetically. Then he put a hand in his pocket, looking like a guilty schoolboy. "But I did walk out with one of these."

Aven gave a nonchalant look until her hand fell onto the Candysoft. "You're kidding. That real?"

"As real as right now," Bray said with pride.

Aven gave the device a reverent look. "I thought your metadata was spoofing it, but..."

"But what?"

"It doesn't matter. Where'd you get it?"

"Silicon Dreams," Bray replied. "I found it, needed it, and took it. I would've paid for it but then again, I didn't have any access to my wallet."

Aven nodded. Bray was referring to his cryptocurrency wallet, stored on his phone profile. "No matter," she nodded, turning to face a hastily-assembled bank of games consoles slaved together. She flicked a switch. The whirr and hum of current was palpable. "We'll mine enough crypto overnight to make adequate... recompense." She met his sceptical glance. "His bail, Bray."

"Now," Bray said, "the real question is why Auletta is out and about. Though now captured. And at the hands of PANDORA."

Aven laughed. "Don't worry, we'll get her out. She's a useful asset to us." Bray gave her a confused look. "Think about it, she's the perfect way for us to track her and find where PANDORA processes those it deems... flawed. They find out Auletta's resurfaced and you bet they'll want her right in front of the big boss. And I know where that'll be!"

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

“Where’s that then?”

“You remember that first clinic that opened?”

Bray did. It was a marvel of architecture and science. And it had mysteriously disappeared, its site now a barren patch of wasteland. What was seen as a historical milestone in the development of science and industry, combined with the auspices of art, had simply vanished.

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

Chapter 3

“Any sign of them?” the trooper called into thin air, a gloved hand touching a shiny grey patch that was fused to the side of his head. He’d removed his helmet and held it underarm as his colleagues swarmed the alleyway. Bootsteps and clattering weaponry filled the alleyway with irregular raucousness.

“Negative, Commander Syren,” another called. He kept his helmet on, tight. He subtly adjusted it with his free hand. It was parallel to the seam down the exact centre of his uniform. Syren’s lips twitched very subtly in assent. “Sweep of the area comes up no results.”

“Damn,” Syren sighed. He paced back along the alley toward the back entrance to Silicon Dreams. The shadows in the alleyway had been dispelled under powerful halogen lamps, tied with umbilical cables through the back window of the shop. The PANDORA troopers had placed a metal frame at the base of the window, allowing armoured men easy access to the shop.

“Sir,” a trooper called from the window. “Your attention, please.”

Syren shook his head. He ascended the ladder quickly, leaping the final step back into the back room. Inside he saw, at the base of the stairwell, an old man was being held by two PANDORA troopers, both looking as anonymous and identikit as the others.

“This is Hirem Chang, owner of the establishment, he’s unco-operative...” the restraining trooper began.

Chang cut him off. “Are you grunts done ransacking my shop?!” he protested. He tried to take a step forward. The PANDORA trooper gave a slight squeeze on his shoulder. Chang winced and his knees bucked. The commander walked past, wordlessly. “Yes, you, skin!”

The term skin made Syren stop dead. He shivered, expressing a rare glint of emotion. Hatred. Anger. Disgust. The LEDs on his implant blinked furtively, this time red. He turned, the grey augmentations to his face glinting in the fluorescent light as he pivoted easelessly on his heels.

“What did you say?”

The old man stood defiant. He winced as the PANDORA trooper tightened his gloved grip on his hand. “You heard.”

“No,” the commander said quietly. “I’d like you to repeat that. Now.” He nodded to his trooper colleague. The shopkeeper winced again.

“Er...” the old man croaked. His lip trembled. “My shop...”

Syren took a step closer. “You used a racial slur. You called me a skin. Didn’t you?”

The shopkeeper met the commander’s gaze. He closed his eyes in resignation. “Yes. Sir.”

“You know what that means?” Syren tapped his implant. The lights on it fluttered. “You consider... the uplifted... less than human.”

Chang grimaced. He knew, alright.

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

Syren paced around Chang for a moment. His free hand formed a fist, subtly, one digit at a time. He continued pacing for a pregnant moment until a glint of the halogen light outside reflected on his dewy, grey eyeballs. Then he pounced, punching Chang straight in the kidney. The old man fell to the floor with a clatter, the consciousness seemingly knocked straight from him.

Syren took a look around. He saw another trooper examining the cabinet. "Your misdemeanour will not go unpunished. These," he took one of the CandySofts, "are yours I believe."

Chang looked up with effort from the floor. His mouth agape, the shopkeeper gasped. "No, please, those are..."

"Seized," the commander smiled wickedly. "Remittance for your crimes, earthworm. Though one thing puzzles me. How many were in there last night?"

"Sixteen."

"And how many now?"

"Sixteen."

"Wrong!" the commander roared, almost euphoric with delight. "You're wrong, and you are harbouring criminals and subversives. Your marker has been amended."

"So?" Chang spat with effort, defiantly. "I don't want access to your... degenerate utopia up there. I'll stay here on the real ground."

"As I said, you are an earthworm. Someone has taken one of these devices. Your sales records are incomplete. I have to say, your list of misdemeanours is becoming lengthy. Shall we negotiate?" He nodded to the restraining trooper. He squeezed. The shopkeeper audibly yelped. There was a subtle but perceptible sound of bone fracturing, crunching and parting. Chang grunted but didn't move. Syren stepped over his prone form, nodding to another trooper, who hauled the motionless form of Chang outside. Syren stepped out of the shop back into the night, and a thud emanated from the alleyway, as trash rattled against the metal sides of a now-occupied dumpster.

"Sir!" one of the troopers called. "We have an update from PANDORA control!"

Syren's eyes glinted wickedly. "Good. What's the report?"

"SweepNet search has localised the NEXUS cell to this locality. We're sitting on top of them."

"Any results from triangulating the data transfer?" Syren hummed. He knew the system well. "We know from prior experience NEXUS has liked to snoop in on the network?"

The other trooper tapped at the grey, mottled implant on his left temple. A few LEDs flickered fluorescent green. "We've an open pylon nearby."

Syren sighed and smiled contentedly. "Scum never change." He vaulted out of the backroom, onto the metal ladder that wobbled under his heavy feet.

"What about him?" the restraining trooper asked." The commander didn't turn back.

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

“Neutralise and process. And confiscate the stock. We’ll put that to good use. Happy new year to the entire of Bravo Unit.”

The commander jumped down, back into the alleyway. He gestured to two of the troopers that stood idly by. “With me.”

“Where to, sir?”

“Let’s flush ‘em out,” the commander hummed and rounded the corner. He looked up, his neck craning, and tapped his implant a couple of times. Motors very subtly whirred in his augmented eyeballs, his eyelids narrowing. “Yeah, that’s the one we want. Up, now!”

The two troopers burst into action and up the fire escape. The commander waited, dusting his jacket expectantly. Subconsciously his feet tapped on the loose gravel of the alleyway, and a breeze wrapped a discarded food wrapper around it. Irritated, the commander flicked it away with a quick motion of his ankle. Just then his implant chirped and he focused intently, one finger holding down the haptic zone around his temple. He nodded silently then smiled.

Aven looked severely at her display. “We have to move.”

“Where?” Bray called. “Now?”

“Yes, now. Unless you finally do want to have that boot up your ass.”

“What about all this?” Bray said, gesturing to the displays and computer equipment that festooned the NEXUS lair.

Aven had already moved quickly to an area behind the workbench. She wrenched at another iron hatch that was so rusted and ancient-looking it blended into the brickwork around it. It gave a loud, piercing squeal. On the other side was pure gloom and a damp smell.

“What is that?” Bray coughed.

“Inspection capsule. Repurposed by us,” Aven explained briskly, not looking at Bray. “Alright,” she said to him. “This time we’re going into the sewers.” She saw his face contort with disgust. “But it’s not *the* actual sewer. It’s a service duct. You’ll see. If anything...” she began, climbing into the hatch, “it expedites our plan a good bit.”

“How’d you make that out?”

She gave a glinting smile. “Time for that later. Come on, in!”

Bray gave a wary look over his shoulder. No sound but the constant hum of a distant air purifier, the steady motion of the air disturbing ancient plastic wrapping on pipes in the ceiling. He turned back and climbed into the metal can, closing the hatch with a squeal. Then the can shuddered and dropped into the darkness.

PANDORA troopers surrounded the entrance to the sewage works. The commander sidled up to the door. One of the troopers nodded in assent and, with a heave, lifted the ram from the floor, where it had rested. The metal scraped on the rough cement floor.

The commander held out three fingers. Then two. Then one.

Pandora's Box by Richard Holliday

The door parted in a flurry of rending metal. The ancient steel wailed as it crumbled into rusty fragments.

“Freeze! Hands in the air! Don’t move!” came a flurry of voices from the troopers as they careened down the stairs.

Nothing. The air purifier hummed, and underneath that was the sound of the troopers breathing heavily.

Slow, calculated footsteps now came down the ladder. The light glinted on the exposed implant. Syren emerged, and the group of troopers parted before him.

The service room was deserted.

Syren approached the large bank of screens against the wall. He held a hand up. They were still warm. His touch activated one, and he smiled expectantly. They’d been too quick to allow NEXUS to wipe their system. This could be the motherlode.

Four words flashed on the screen in great white glyphs.

Better.

Luck.

Next.

Time.

Syren stared, his wry smile dissipating into a furious aspect. He took a long breath and roared, punching the screen, which erupted in a flurry of sparks.

A few blocks away, a doorway opened. Two forms emerged into the shadows. A man and a woman.

The woman’s face was illuminated by the rectangle of light from her phone.

“The night begins,” she whispered, and disappeared into the ether.

THE END..?